

# El Tecolote

NEWSLETTER OF THE SANTA BARBARA AUDUBON SOCIETY



October/November 1994

Vol. 33, No. 2

Coastal Sage Scrub

## California's Most Endangered Habitat

► B. "Moose" Peterson

**T**HE coastal sage scrub communities are home to approximately fifty species of plants and animals presently considered threatened or endangered (two of these are probably extinct; they were never listed). This is directly related to massive habitat loss and degradation. This vastly misunderstood, drab gray carpet of sagebrush is a critical piece of California's landscape puzzle.

The entire worldwide distribution of coastal sage scrub is here; it extends from the San Francisco Bay region to Baja California. The composition of plant species changes from the north to the south as climatic conditions become drier, so the scrub is divided into two types — northern and southern — with Santa Barbara as the arbitrary dividing line.

The plant species that give the coastal sage scrub its character are the California sagebrush and California buckwheat. Manzanita grows only in the northern coastal sage scrub and prickly pear cactus is found only in the south. The southern coastal sage scrub extends further inland than the northern, but both have suffered the same devastating losses from land conversion.

### Southern Coastal Sage Scrub

This lonely habitat was ignored for decades, but is now very much at the front of the stage. Once covering 2.5 million acres from northern Ventura County to Baja California, the southern coastal sage scrub has been reduced in just the last thirty years to only 250,000 acres. This horrendous and tragic loss has made the coastal sage scrub the most endangered habitat in the world!

This ecosystem is characterized by a diversity and variability that resists being pigeonholed. Three geographic associations have been identified within the southern coastal sage scrub — Venturan, Riversidian and Diegan. Of course, these do not come with boundary lines; their association reflects a north-south and coastal-inland gradient of increasingly drier conditions. The scrub's character is also affected by other factors, such as changes in

(See **Habitat** on page 3)

### October Program

Friday, October 28, 1994

Farrand Hall, S.B. Museum of Natural History  
7:45 p.m. Refreshments / 8:00 p.m. Program

#### *"Madonnas of the Feathered World"*

"Moose" Peterson is like Santa Claus to Santa Barbara Audubon: he comes once a year, bearing great and wonderful gifts and treats for us all. We enjoy him immensely, and look forward to each visit. This year he is bringing a special surprise: a study of the breeding biology of three separate species — the peregrine falcon, the killdeer and Anna's hummingbird. That is a bagful. Moose's resumé and credits get longer every year, his photographic techniques more varied and adventurous, and his message more enthralling. Join us for an evening of delight and wonder.

### December Program

(There will be no November program)

Friday, December 9, 1994

Farrand Hall, S.B. Museum of Natural History  
7:45 p.m. Refreshments / 8:00 p.m. Program

#### *"Backyard Birder"*

Most of us, in our pursuit and passion for birds, wander like albatrosses over the latitudes of the earth, forever seeking the next elusive new species. A stubborn few have taken a different path — they let the birds come to them, in their own backyards. A member of this latter group is **Dr. Hugh P. Smith, Jr.** Using all the tricks-of-the-trade: feeders, bird baths, a variety of plantings and a "peanut-butter tree," he and his wife Sue have turned their backyard into a bird photographer's paradise. So now he brings to us, in our backyard, the world that he fostered in his. Especially brilliant are his photographs of the many hummingbird species that visit his plants and feeders.

## FIELD TRIPS

### Saturday, October 15: Lake Los Carneros and San Pedro Creek.

Join trip leader **Karen Bridgers** as she expertly guides us through her favorite bird-stomping grounds (that is, grounds for birding; not stomping on the birds!). Meet at 8:00 a.m. in the Stow House parking lot, 304 North Los Carneros Road, Goleta. Focus will be on migrants and vagrants. Back in time for lunch. Call Karen (964-1316) for info and rain update. No charge.

### Saturday, October 29: Devereux Slough.

Meet trip leader **Rob Lindsay** at 7:30 a.m. at the west end of Del Playa Drive, Isla Vista. We'll look for water birds, shore birds, wintering migrants. Back in time for lunch. Call Rob (964-9514) for info and rain update. No charge.

### Sunday, November 6: Rancho Las Cruzitas and the Figueroa Mountain foothills.

(Note that this is a Sunday field trip). Join trip leader **Guy Tingos** for an exciting trip to the Santa Ynez Valley and access to a large private ranch encompassing several life-zones. Past trips have yielded eagles, sapsuckers and mountain lions. Meet at 7:30 a.m. at Carl's Jr. in the Five Points Shopping Center, 3925 State Street, for car-pooling. Bring a lunch and beverage, just in case things get good and we want to continue up the mountain. Otherwise, we should be back in the early afternoon. Call Guy (681-0026) for info and rain update. No charge.

### Saturday, November 19: Rancho Jococho.

Once again, the good folks at the ostrich farm on Lake Cachuma have given us permission to visit their ranch. Perhaps the finest accessible habitat bordering the lake, last year's trip yielded the highest species count for a single day of all the '93-'94 field trips. White pelicans, Lewis' woodpecker and peregrine falcons were among the favorites, plus many ducks, water birds and woodland specialties. Meet trip leader **Rob Lindsay** at the Carl's Jr. in the Five Points Shopping Center, 3925 State Street at 7:30 a.m. for car-pooling. Bring a snack and beverage. Should be back in time for a late lunch. Call Rob (964-9514) for info and rain update.

## Birding Guide Updated

The excellent guidebook by Henry E. Childs Jr., *Where Birders Go in Southern California*, has recently been released in a revised and updated version which includes 75 new listings and bar graphs on status and distribution. Published by the Los Angeles Audubon Society, this is the most complete and up-to-date guide to birding locations in the lower half of the state. Specific directions to places with a "track record" of known species allow birders to maximize their bird-finding time and still provide plenty of opportunity to explore on their own.

*Where Birders Go in Southern California* is available from the Los Angeles Audubon Society Bookstore, 7377 Santa Monica Blvd., West Hollywood, CA 90046, which is open 9-4, Tuesday through Saturday. Telephone: (213) 876-0202.

## CONSERVATION NOTES

### Pending Legislation in Sacramento:

Two excellent pieces of legislation, AB2444 and AB2463, were backed by Audubon throughout the year, and deserve the Governor's signature. Further information on the bills and the reasons for Audubon support are available from the SBAS office (964-1468).

Please take a few minutes to write a letter to the Governor expressing your support for these two important bills and urge him to sign them immediately. Address: Governor Pete Wilson  
State Capitol  
Sacramento, CA 95814

### AB 2444 (O'Connell): Coastal Sanctuary Protection

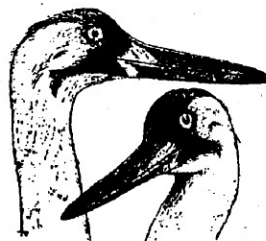
This bill will provide permanent protection to the entire California coast from offshore oil drilling in state waters.

### AB 2463 (Bronshvag): Protecting San Francisco Bay

Assemblywoman Bronshvag's bill would help Audubon's Richardson Bay Sanctuary and citizen groups to enforce environmental restrictions on land use in the San Francisco Bay under the McAteer-Petris Act.

— Ron Hirst

## 1994 Festival of the Cranes



*Whooping Crane*  
(*Grus americana*)

drawn by  
Sharon Fullingim.

**Bosque del Apache  
National Wildlife Refuge  
Socorro, New Mexico  
November 17 - 20**

Celebrate the annual return of thousands of sandhill cranes, snow geese, ducks, and rare whooping cranes to their wintering grounds at the 57,000-acre refuge alongside the Rio Grande River.

Keynote speakers will be Peter Dunne, Jim Bones, Steve West and Chandler Robbins. More than 100 scheduled events and activities are planned for participants. A total of 325 species of birds, many seen year-round, live and flourish in these wetlands, and they say once you have seen and heard the spectacle of a morning fly-out at Bosque del Apache, you will be hooked forever!

For an event catalog and more information write to:

Festival of the Cranes  
Bosque del Apache NWR  
P.O. Box 1246  
Socorro, NM 87801



**Habitat** (Continued from page 1)  
elevation, fire history, and whether the terrain faces north or south.

The plants that make up the sage scrub are a scraggly gathering of shrubs, characterized by sagebrush and prickly pear cactus. Other cactus, including the rare coast barrel cactus, and common plants such as buckwheat also comprise the sage scrub community. Sagebrush and prickly pear are visually the most dominant plants of the ecosystem. Their edge effect is crucial to many species.

There are a number of indicator species telling us that the coastal sage scrub is endangered; two are birds, the very controversial California gnatcatcher and the overshadowed coastal cactus wren. The coastal cactus wren eats only insects that feed on the prickly pear. These same cacti support the wrens' bulky nests, which are used not only to raise young but also for year-round nighttime roosts. For these reasons, it is very likely the coastal cactus wren is more threatened with extinction than the gnatcatcher. Because the coastal cactus wren has not yet been recognized as a distinct subspecies, listing under the endangered species act is very difficult, so legal protection will be an uphill battle.

The orange-throated whiptail lizard is another colorful species of the coastal sage scrub. While most lizards lie in wait to ambush their prey, the orange-throated whiptail goes in search of its prey. Its flashy color makes its two- to three-inch body with its six-inch tail noticeable as it scurries through the scrub. The lizard's populations are scattered, so fragmenting the coastal sage scrub critically affects it.

The magnificent mountain lion still exists in southern California. The largest of our remaining predators depends on important corridors associated with coastal sage scrub; males travel from island to island of fragmented habitat to find mates. These corridors are already being lost at an alarming rate, severing important gene pools among these large cats.

On the other end of the mammal spectrum is the Stephens' kangaroo rat. This small, endangered species lives on the fringe of the coastal sage scrub, mostly on plateaus or in flat regions, and makes use of the open areas within the scrub. Its endangered status affords the coastal sage scrub it inhabits some protection under the endangered species act, but this does not

generally include the same habitat the California gnatcatcher occupies. The Stephens' kangaroo rat is the most recently listed of the five endangered kangaroo rats in California, and has the best chance of escaping extinction.

The loss of coastal sage scrub affects all things great and small; the Quino checker-spot butterfly is a good example. One of southern California's vanishing butterflies, it is currently a candidate for listing.

Many plants of the coastal sage scrub are already listed as endangered; others wait to be. One of the more unusual ones to be listed is the short-leaved dudleya, a specialized inhabitant of the coastal sage scrub. This two-inch-tall succulent lives in shallow sand pans, where it simulates the appearance of a small red pebble when it first emerges. It has lost fifty percent of its habitat in the last four years; proposed development will consume its largest population in the near future and no protection plan is being considered. With current trends, the dudleya most likely will become extinct.

One aspect that is often overlooked is the importance of the coastal sage scrub on species that are not inhabitants of it. The best examples are the birds of the Santa Margarita River riparian track. These birds, including the least Bell's vireo, often forage in the coastal sage scrub bordering their riparian home. The loss of any habitat affects not only its own inhabitants, but also those that live in the neighboring habitats.



"The most endangered habitat in the world" is a status no place should bear. Neither an inspirational landscape nor a home to glamorous species, the coastal sage scrub nevertheless is a vital and unique ecosystem that cannot be replaced. There is a very real possibility that it may not exist by the turn of the century. The fight over natural heritage versus money is a classic, and the newest habitat to see this fight is the coastal sage scrub. The question is, will the ending be written as a tragedy?

[Excerpted from *California, Vanishing Habitats and Wildlife* by B. "Moose" Peterson (Beautiful America Publishing Co., 1993). This beautiful book of Moose's perceptive observations and superb photographs is available at local bookstores.]

### A Dream Come True

A year of preparation has finally paid off. There is now a local TV program that explores all things environmental on the South Coast: issues, people, plans, politics, crises, ideas, controversies, books, events — you name it. Called **Environmentally Yours**, it is broadcast twice a week, Wednesdays at 6 p.m. and Thursdays at 3:30 p.m., on Public Access Channel 17, Cox Cable.

The first programs have dealt with such topics as the Southwest Diversified housing project on Ellwood Mesa, the Arco golf course, Harvey Molotch's rebuttal to the naysayers about Santa Barbara County's economic health, and the crisis on the trails of the Coast Range. Future programs will explicate the truth about "Clearview," the success of the Carpinteria Slough, the principles of Urban Planning, and the future of More Mesa.

The program staff is planning to add phone-in capability, an occasional debate format, and a needed dialogue between all sectors of the community on what is a good and sustainable balance between development and environment in our home town.

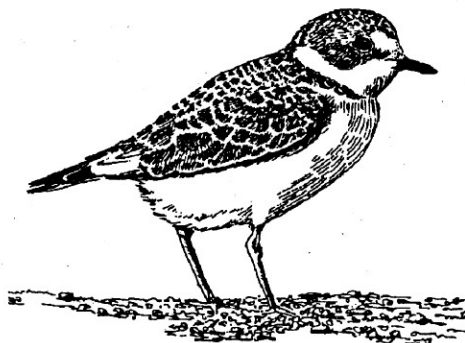
If, after viewing the program, you have any questions or suggestions, or you wish to inquire about becoming part of the program production team, please call Dave Wass at 682-6962.



## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The National Audubon Society was formed to protect birds and their habitats, to promote appreciation of America's scenic landscapes, and to bring a love of Nature to the widest range of people. Audubon today has expanded its mission, but I believe conservation and education are still its healthy tap roots.

To that end, S.B. Audubon is advancing its protection plan for the "threatened" snowy plover at Coal Oil Point via new educational warning signs. Inspired by longtime birder



*Snowy Plover by Shawneen Finnegan*

Helen Matelson, we are working with the City Parks Dept. to assure improved habitat management practices at the Andree Clark Bird Refuge. We are coordinating with landowners, civic groups and public agencies to preserve coastal agriculture, and enhance conservation in areas at risk. Our wetlands program continues, as does our active participation in the Goleta Slough Management Committee.

We undertake these projects now, but as the original Auduboners knew, the future is with our children. Last year, past-president Sally Walker challenged

Education Chair Don Rathbun to improve distribution of the prize-winning "Audubon Adventures" classroom Nature magazine for grades 3 to 6. I am proud to report that Don met that challenge. Teacher requests have gone from 45 last year to 86 this year (almost a 100% gain)! We need your help now, to make sure this doesn't become a Pyrrhic victory. Our recession-driven budget can't accommodate such remarkable gains, but I'm reluctant to give them up. We are applying for supplementary foundation grants; we are also asking you to adopt a classroom. One \$35 tax-deductible contribution will bring "Audubon Adventures" to a classroom of 30 students for an entire school year. Send contributions to: "Audubon Adventures," c/o SB Audubon, 5679 Hollister Ave, #5B, Goleta, CA 93117.

Special thanks go to: Dr. Laurence Dworet, who donated a more powerful computer to Audubon; Penny & Terry Davies (of the Earthling Bookstore), who donated several coffee-table books as gifts and awards last Spring; Marti Mangan, of UCSB, who organized and led this year's CoastWalk with such verve.

And very special thanks to State Senator Gary K. Hart and County Supervisor Tom Rogers, whose careers of public service — both distinguished by their support of conservation — temporarily pause at the end of this year.

Let me end with a nonscientific survey. Drop us a line, or call 964-1468.

Would you attend more Audubon functions if we met:

- ☐ at a different location?
- ☐ on a different day?
- ☐ at a different time?

— Lee Moldaver

### SANTA BARBARA AUDUBON SOCIETY

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Bird Refuge Census: Helen Matelson .....	966-3217
Rare Bird Reporter: Karen Bridgers .....	964-1316
Rare Bird Alert .....	(805) 964-8240

#### OFFICE HOURS

(Staffed by volunteer members)

Monday .....	11:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Tuesday .....	11:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Wednesday .....	11:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
Thursday .....	11:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Friday .....	11:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.
Office telephone .....	(805) 964-1468
Messages can be left at any time.	

#### MEMBERSHIP

Special new member rate .....	\$20
Individual .....	\$35

Please send *only* new member applications and *El Tecolote* subscriptions to: Santa Barbara Audubon Society, 5679 Hollister Ave., Suite 5B, Goleta, CA 93117. Non-member subscription is \$10 per year.

#### EL TECOLOTE

Editor: Dorin Mayes ..... (805) 683-1079

*El Tecolote* is published 7 times a year by the Santa Barbara Audubon Society. Members are invited to submit articles, announcements, letters, photos and drawings for publication consideration. Copy deadline is the 10th of the month prior to publication.

#### RARE BIRD ALERT NUMBERS

Los Angeles .....	(213) 874-1318
Monterey Bay .....	(408) 375-9122
Morro Bay .....	(415) 528-7128
San Bernardino .....	(714) 793-5599
San Diego .....	(619) 435-6761
San Francisco .....	(415) 528-0288
S Sierra/San Joaquin .....	(209) 782-1237

**Santa Barbara Audubon Society**  
5679 Hollister Avenue, Suite 5B  
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