

El Tecolote

NEWSLETTER OF THE SANTA BARBARA AUDUBON SOCIETY



March 1995

Vol. 33, No. 5

Eighteen Inches More Pigeon

► Jeff Chemnick

THE field guide to the birds of Papua New Guinea reads like an avian who's who of tropical fantasies. New Guinea, the second largest island in the world, is the epicenter of diversification for such remarkable groups as the cassowaries, fruit-doves, lorikeets, kingfishers, fantails, whistlers, bowerbirds, and, of course, the birds-of-paradise, just to name-drop a few. When I went with a buddy several years ago, we spent days searching for and finding many of the aforementioned goodies during the five weeks we spent there.

One of the most elusive, though much sought-after birds we hoped to see, is the subject of this story: the southern crowned pigeon. There are three species of crowned pigeon and each is confined to New Guinea. The southern crowned pigeon is the world's largest pigeon, and though common in zoos (they can be seen right here in Santa Barbara), hunting and feral animals have seriously depleted the population of wild birds to the point that one must travel far afield from human habitation to find one. And in New Guinea it is difficult to get very far away from people, since many folks still live in the bush — and rather fancy the taste of crowned pigeon. The fact that the feathers are favorite ornaments for headdresses and hats doesn't help the situation either.

The southern crowned pigeon is almost 30 inches in size. Consider that the ubiquitous rock dove (gutter eagle) averages a mere 12 inches and you can better appreciate this blue and maroon columbiform, with the Phyllis Diller hairdo, which offers 18 inches more pigeon for the viewing.

So we left the nearest town in a *tinny*, an aluminum rowboat with a small outboard, and motored all day upstream through pristine stands of lowland tropical rain forests. Eclectus parrots and palm cockatoos screeched overhead. Blythe's hornbills made occasional appearances and dollarbirds were conspicuously perched everywhere.

We were dropped off at one of those thatched-hut villages you thought only existed in the *National Geographic*. Kids came running over, wide-eyed and giggling, while the elders just stared and spat out the blood-red betel-nut juice that left their few remaining teeth stained permanently. We conveyed our wants and needs in Pigeon English (appropriately enough!) and were given permission to set up our tents on a bluff overlooking the river. A crowd of onlookers formed immediately and did not disperse until we climbed into our sleeping bags several hours later. Our every move was watched and studied with apparent fascination. Each camping item we produces caused intense discussion among the crowd. Many whispered in an attempt not to disturb us or betray their conversation (as if we could understand their language).

Over half the world's languages are spoken in New Guinea, and most are not understood only miles from the few villages where the endemic languages persist. I could sense the discussion and speculation as to the function and value of everything we had. The process of preparing dinner on our backpacking stove played to favorable reviews. But the hit of the

(See *Pigeon* on page 3)

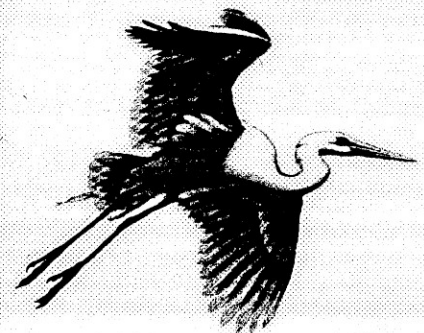
March Program

Friday, March 24, 1995

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

"A Condor's View of the Lady Audubon"

John Borneman has been circling and peering at and speculating about the Lady Audubon for 33 years, as a teacher/naturalist at an Audubon Center, as a condor naturalist, as a Western Regional representative, as an Audubon tour guide, and as a chapter motivator and facilitator. John has seen the front side and the back side of our grand old lady, but up to now has only told the official story. Now that he is retired, however, he has decided to bring her out of the closet before she is forever lost in the murk and blandness of another sanctioned biography. Come and get acquainted with the real Audubon Society — there may be some kick and laughs left in that old lady yet.



ACTIVITIES CALENDAR

Saturday, March 4:

Central Coast Council Meeting.

The first official Central Coast Council Meeting will be held at the Morro Bay Community Center. See comments in the President's Message.

Saturday, March 11:

International Center for Earth Concerns-Garden and Habitat Preserve.

We will again visit this incredible 350-acre ranch and preserve in the Ojai foothills. The vicinity of the Foundation is remarkably landscaped in several themes, including an Australian and an African garden that should be in bloom. Director John Taft will be our host and guide. Meet at Andree Clark Bird Refuge at 7:30 a.m. and we'll carpool to Ojai. Bring a lunch and we will eat on the grounds following our tour. Return to SB early afternoon. Cost is \$5 per person. Please bring cash, or check payable to ICEC, with you. Call Jeff Chemnick (965-0895) for more information.

Saturday, March 25:

Santa Barbara Harbor and vicinity.

Join Rob Lindsay at Andree Clark Bird Refuge at 7:30 a.m. We'll explore the various coastal hot spots of the immediate area in search of gulls, terns, waders, shorebirds, divers, ducks and other fair fowl. Call Rob (964-9514) or Jeff Chemnick (965-0895) for rain update and info. No charge. Back before lunch.

Saturday, April 29 - Sunday, April 30:

Mojave Desert Overnighter.

Join Leader Ron Hirst as we scavenge the high desert and lower Sierras in search of migrants and wildflowers. We'll leave SB early Saturday, and bird our way to our accommodations in Mojave. Return late Sunday. Make your reservations now. Limited to 20 participants. Call Jeff Chemnick (965-0895). Cost is \$29 per person for shared occupancy and \$49 for single.

Wetlands Habitat Restoration Project

A little over a year ago, Ron Hirst and Jim Greaves began to look into the possibility of our local chapter initiating a wetlands habitat restoration project. They tramped up many creeks, talked to the experts, and discussed with other groups the efficacy of a joint venture.

Their solid preparation has paid off. The *WHERE* (Devereux Creek, at the end of Ellwood Beach Drive), the *WHO* (the Sierra Club, Save Ellwood Shores, and Audubon), the *WHAT* (we have several experts helping us make the decisions, including Wanda Michalenko and Katherine Rindlaub) have all been set. Only the *WHEN* remains to be determined (probably within 4 to 6 weeks).

If you would like to join with others to dig and plant and nurture the kind of habitat that will support a greater variety and number of birds, phone Dave Wass at 682-6962, get the details, and sign up.

CONSERVATION REPORT

Goleta Community Plan (GCP). It's almost too late to stop the trend towards complete build-out. In a very disappointing vote, our county supervisors voted 4-1 to change the Goleta Growth Management Ordinance (GGMO). A vote was necessary because a State housing department is withholding \$500,000 in affordable housing grant monies until the county changes the GGMO. The State does not like our community housing standards.

The GGMO is a foundation for the Goleta Community Plan (GCP). By voting to change the ordinance, the following will occur: The GCP will be dismantled and rebuilt through expensive public hearings and years of county staff work. The amount of new housing allowed to be built in Goleta by 2003 increases from an early high 2,000 homes up to 3,000 - 3,500 (half of which will be affordable housing). That much housing has the very real potential of filling every remaining open space in Goleta, including More Mesa and the Devereux area.

Your current property valuations are also affected by more housing. The economic principal of supply and demand would argue that an oversupply of housing in western Santa Barbara and Goleta will cause a net decrease in the value of homes there. If the 30,000 homeowners in the area experience a \$10,000 net decrease, it would equal a \$300 million loss to them, plus a loss to the county in property taxes. There is already an oversupply; homes are down an average of \$50,000 each (\$1.5 billion).

Help save birds and habitat, stop overdevelopment, and do your part to enhance the value of our exceptional community by calling your supervisor and emphasizing the value you put on birds, urban parks and open space. The alternative could be complete build-out.

Mobil Clearview. Audubon is evaluating the UCSB Academic Senate report on the proposed Clearview oil-drilling facility. In general, the report was negative. New information shows that Mobil plans to conduct periodic "burn-offs" of trapped gases.

Wetland Restoration. Dave Wass is organizing a project to restore degraded wetlands along Devereux Creek in Ellwood.

Snowy Plover Protection. The Audubon signs posted at the mouth of Devereux Slough have been effective in educating beachgoers to the plight of snowy plovers. Traffic through their favorite habitat has decreased and we have received many favorable comments about the signs. Ten feet of beach was excavated by the storms and one of the plover signs washed away. Dave Wass and I will replace it soon.

— Ron Hirst

Hummer Help II

Last month we asked members to notify "Moose" Peterson if they knew of any hummingbird nests six feet or closer to the ground, for photographic purposes. Well, our good friend and hummer specialist in Solvang, Dr Hugh Smith, would *also* appreciate this information. If you saw his program in December, you know what a skilled photographer he is. His telephone number is 688-2889.

Pigeon (Continued from page 1)

evening undoubtedly came after dinner when we pulled out mysterious green string and began to draw it between our teeth. The whispering suddenly gave way to gasps and clicks of disbelief followed by loud, rapid volleys of conversation. Reason apparently returned to her throne in their collective interpretation of our actions when the toothpaste and brushes appeared and the whispering resumed. Moments later, as if by group consensus, everyone began to roll up and light the longest, smelliest, smokiest, nastiest cigarettes you've ever seen. Bed time!

The following morning several of the villagers invited us to accompany them into the forest in hopes of seeing special birds. One fellow spoke some English and promised to show us the crowned pigeon we had come so far to see. Our group loaded into twenty-foot long hand-built dugout canoes fitted with outboard motors; an example of how the Stone Age has met the 20th century in New Guinea. They took us upstream for several hours and pulled ashore where a particularly dense stand of forest began. Each man removed his sandals for the walk into the woods. They explained they could better sense their surroundings this way, and that they always walked barefoot in the forest. We quickly found out one good reason for doing so: land leeches! Every several paces produced a couple of the would-be ectoparasites inching their way up one's leg. Nearly impossible to grab, one needed constant vigilance and effort to find and remove the leeches. They would burrow through our socks and become an annoyance real fast. Left alone for even a few minutes, the inch-long worms would attach themselves and begin sucking out your life juices. One leech remained undetected on my leg for nearly an hour and swelled to a size and color that nearly caused me to faint when I felt that I had suddenly grown a new appendage and discovered it hanging on the back of my thigh.

But the downside of barefootin' in the forest soon became evident. The forest was very thick and visibility was limited to maybe a five-yard circle. We had been marching quickly through the brush with our escorts while they maintained voice contact with a remarkable assortment of clicks and whistles. Suddenly, screams

came from some members of the group that had chosen to search the bushes some fifty yards away. Our guides pulled on our arms to follow and we began to jog through the rain forest toward the screams. The clicks and whistles increased in intensity as our group homed in on the others. Moments later we were all reunited in a clearing staring at the source of the panic. A few leaves on the forest floor had been kicked aside to reveal a death adder; an extremely venomous viper-looking member of the cobra family. Death adders spend their days sleeping just below the leaf litter and only bite when disturbed. One bite guarantees almost certain death. Someone had apparently stepped right on top of this snake, but had not been bitten. I was told that virtually everyone in the village had lost a family member to a death adder; I could understand why. I suggested that shoes might be a good idea, but it seems tradition is very strong. New Guinea locals are extremely afraid of all snakes due to the high incidence of venomous varieties.

Once, we found an amethystine python while searching for cassowaries. The men we were with began to scream and cry in astonishment and fear as my friend Jim picked it up and handed it to me so he could photograph it. I wasn't particularly pleased either, but the python didn't seem to mind, except for the foul-smelling odor it exuded. Now, the death adder was creating justifiable fear, and several machetes were

raised to quickly dispatch it, but Jim stepped in to plead a stay of execution so he could photograph the snake. A new round of screams resulted as he squatted only inches from the lethal but lethargic reptile, and squeezed off several rounds on his camera. Satisfied, he stood; and immediately the villager exacted their toll on the hapless creature.

We continued our bird search through the afternoon. Being with locals who know the calls is of considerable value. Someone grabbed my shoulder and pointed toward a tree from which I could only just hear a soft whistling sound. Eventually the bird appeared — a king bird-of-paradise, perhaps one of the most exotic birds on Earth. As if a crimson head and back, metallic-green breast band, and immaculate white belly weren't enough, the king b-o-p comes complete with two ridiculously long wire tail feathers ending in shiny green discs. We were treated to several great views of this usually very shy bird.

And then a voice hissed in my ear, "crowned pigeon!" Excitedly, we followed our self-appointed guides, mimicking their quiet stalking movements through the forest. Our attention was silently directed to the trunk of a large bush and we saw a beautiful, motionless southern crowned pigeon roosting on a large nest of loose twigs.

We took a few pictures and suddenly the warmth and tranquillity of the forest was shattered by a nearly deafening, shrill whistling noise. Time to go! Our escorts explained that the position of the sun is difficult to tell under the heavy canopy of the forest, and since no one had a watch, they depended on the thousands of cicadas which had just come to life to indicate quitting time, like some factory whistle. We had just enough time to return to the boats and get back to the village as the sun set over the river.

The air was warm and humid. Noisy flocks of parrots raced overhead on their return commute to roost. We watched in silence as the sky tried on various hues of orange, red and purple. Moments later, the denizens of the night issued forth into the waning light: huge "flocks" of massive fruit bats, the size of winged jack-rabbits, searching for fruiting trees. Darkness fell and we turned our attentions toward dinner, and once again a crowd of onlookers gathered to sit and stare until bedtime.



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

We know regular burning reinvigorates forests; regular re-evaluation reinvigorates institutions too. National Audubon is reaching out to chapters and members this year to reaffirm Audubon's core values — birds and wildlife, conservation, education. Santa Barbara Audubon is helping National's strategic planning process. We appreciate their outreach; it bodes our group well.

However, we still "act" locally. Thus we're pleased by creation of a new regional council for chapters between Ventura and Monterey, since LA/Anaheim "problems" don't always have the same import here. We hosted the first such meeting earlier; now we journey to Morro Bay with high hopes for another.

By that time, Annie Woodard will be in Portland. Her modest, tireless work these last five years, building the Natural History Museum's nature education programs will be missed. She's been a good friend to Audubon, and to all children curious about the natural environment. I was proud to represent our chapter at her farewell party.

People at Annie's party asked me (as they have at various events recently) "what's wrong with the Board of Supervisors?" They usually mean the new crop

of politicians inviting more oil exploration, new development into "environmentally sensitive habitat" at Ellwood Shores, confusion over Mobil's massive PR campaign, and the possible "parting-out" of an historic 3,600-acre Valley ranch for spec housing.

Let me be frank. While I've rarely heard the Coastal Commission excoriate a local government in language as harsh as they leveled at our Board of Supervisors in February, I do *not* have a vote. Why not ask the key "swing" vote on the Board of Supervisors yourself? Write to Jeanne Graffy, 2nd District County Supervisor, County Administration Building, 123 East Anapamu Street, Santa Barbara, 93101. Or ring her up at 568-2191 and tell her.

Better yet, invite her to join you at our Earth Day booth at City College this April; invite her to join you for the 25th annual celebrations of UCSB Environmental Studies, and of the Community Environmental Council this March. When she sees you get excited about how marvelous our parks, open space, and conservation programs still are, maybe you can make her remember those times (as a city official and civic leader) when she was proud and excited too.

— Lee Moldaver

Condor Update

The California condor population continues its slow recovery in southern California in two zoos and in the wild. This past breeding season 12 pairs produced 21 eggs in captivity with 15 chicks surviving. Of these 15 chicks, 13 are candidates for release into the bird's historic former range in California.

Since the release of captive-reared California condors began in 1991, 13 young have been released to the wild. Four birds were returned to captivity after refusing to stay in the Santa Barbara back country, and six birds have been killed by collisions with power lines and ingestion of toxics. The remaining three will soon be joined by six new young birds.

— As reported in "Audubon Leader," February 1995

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Bird Refuge Census: Helen Matelson 966-3217
Rare Bird Reporter: Karen Bridgers 964-1316
Rare Bird Alert (805) 964-8240
SBAS Office (805) 964-1468

OFFICE HOURS

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.

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.

EL TECOLOTE

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RARE BIRD ALERT NUMBERS

Los Angeles (213) 874-1318
Monterey Bay (408) 375-9122
Morro Bay (805) 528-7182
No. Calif. (510) 524-5592
Orange County (714) 563-6516
Sacramento (916) 481-0118
San Bernadino (909) 793-5599
San Diego (619) 479-3400