

SCVAS Spring 2016 Birdathon — the "Wandering Kestrels"

23 April 2016 (the day after Earth Day)

Note: Higher-resolution pictures can be found on my [pbase website](#).

A Downy Woodpecker nibbled at the suet feeder in front of the Audubon Society headquarters at McClellan Ranch when I arrived at 7:30am. I pulled out my camera, attached the telephoto lens, and took his portrait as a way of testing out my equipment. In addition to the camera I had two pairs of binoculars (one of which I would loan to Bino, who was new to birdathons), my iPhone (for taking notes and referencing the *Sibley Guide to Birds* app) and a backpack full of unnecessary snacks that I never ate and a water bottle that I hardly touched.

Debbie Thompson and her husband Steve arrived very soon after me and we scanned the field together, enjoying a pair of Western Bluebirds by the native revegetation garden. The Thompsons were followed by my co-leader Melanie O'Brien who carpoled in with her friend Chris Finlayson. John Wills and Bino George each pulled in soon after and with time to spare Marion Krause appeared and we had our full team. Well, except we didn't quite: Ginger was home in bed, sick with a flu that derailed all of her weekend plans. We missed her.

We started a timer at 8am and began by birding the feeders, treeline, field and skies of McClellan Ranch Park. We quickly picked off the expected feeder-loving birds: Lesser Goldfinch, Dark-eyed Junco, House Finch and others, and we got spectacular looks at a shining yellow-and-black Hooded Oriole in the top of an evergreen.



Hooded Oriole at McClellan Ranch

Violet-green and Rough-winged Swallows swooped over the fields where we had seen the Western Bluebirds before. Birds like my Nuttall's Woodpecker and the Western Bluebirds didn't count yet, because we had seen them before our 4-hour timer started. Not to worry though, we saw both later on!

We took a short hike down the trail by the edge of the creek, where we watched a Chestnut-backed Chickadee popping in and out of a nest box and found an Oak Titmouse by following its song. On the opposite shore of the creek we heard then saw a flock of Cedar Waxwings taking off in twos and threes from a sycamore tree, to land further downstream.

Keeping to schedule, we piled the eight of us into two cars and headed uphill to the Cooley Picnic Area upstream from Stevens Creek Reservoir. The plan was to work down along the reservoir, picking up as many forest and lake birds as we could before heading to the baylands for ducks and shorebirds. Four hours is not very long for someone like me who's used to doing a "24-hour" birdathon, where we start well before dawn and end after dark. We would only have time for a limited number of stops, so we needed to make the most of each one. Melanie, Ginger and I had met the previous weekend to discuss route, timing and what birds to expect at each location. We had birded these areas before, so we had some idea what to expect, but birds don't keep to a schedule, so anything was possible.



Steller's Jay along Stevens Creek

We hiked together around the picnic area, listening intently and scanning the trees for any sign of movement. At one picnic table was a gathering of hikers standing and talking. We avoided the crowds and birded the edges along the creek, finding our Steller's Jay and a mother Mallard with two ducklings. We followed the sound of a Black-headed Grosbeak, worried that we would only hear this beautiful bird, as it can be hard to find when it calls from behind the broad leaves of the sycamore and maple trees by the water's edge. Of course, even if we only hear a bird, it counts for our total. Any wild (and unrestrained) bird that you hear or see counts, so long as most of the party observes the bird. But we love *seeing* the birds when we can, and two of our group were new to birding, so we also wanted them to have good chances to see. We weren't disappointed; the grosbeak was calling from the top of a willow tree, and everyone (including my camera) got as much chance to see him as they wanted.



Black-headed Grosbeak at Cooley Picnic Area

After the hikers left, more birds came out and we were able to find Bewick's Wren (heard only, but it still counts!), Bushtit and Spotted Towhee. We walked back toward the cars, but stopped when we heard an unfamiliar song. After a moment, Melanie suggested "Brown Creeper?" and I pulled my phone out, launched the Sibley app and played the song of the Brown Creeper. Sure enough, it sounded like a match. The creeper apparently was drawn closer by my playing his song — he flew to the oak tree right above us and hunted along its trunk as we all got good looks at this magical and secretive deep-forest bird.



Brown Creeper hunting upside-down

We then drove to a pullout at the top of the reservoir, hoping for a warbler. We were pleased to hear Orange-crowned Warblers calling the moment we got out of our cars. Only a couple of the team were able to see the bird, which mostly hid behind the leaves. On we went to the next stop, which was a picnic area halfway along the reservoir. There we were pleased to see three Common Mergansers swimming in the quieter corner of the lake — it being Saturday there were people fishing along the shoreline and a boat out on the water, and mergansers tend to be shy. Canada Geese along the shore were less shy as they casually watched us watching them.

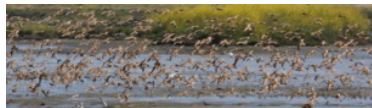


Canada Geese — who's watching whom?

Our next stop was the Villa Maria Picnic Area, below the reservoir's dam, where we met a flock of Wild Turkeys milling about the picnic tables. This was a good sign, I thought, because it meant that people hadn't come by yet to disturb the birds. And sure enough, there were plenty of birds to find: Ash-throated Flycatcher (only just back for the summer), Vaux's Swifts (the rarer swift around here, and yet we saw at least eight, and none of the commoner variety), Western Bluebirds (see, I told you we would see them later), Band-tailed Pigeons (flying too high to fully appreciate) and Acorn Woodpeckers (guarding their hole-ridden granary trees). We finally got a good look at a Nuttall's Woodpecker and a search along the creekside for Pacific-slope Flycatcher was successful, even if we did "only" hear them. Then our time in the forest was up!

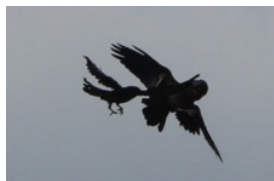
We piled into the cars and headed through suburbia, down the freeway and past the bayside tech companies to park at Charleston Slough. I had figured we would see more species in our 90 minutes by the bay than we had seen in two and a half hours in the forest. I was mistaken. We had done quite well up by Stevens Creek, seeing most of the birds that we set out to see in those habitats, and the bay just wasn't its usual copious self. Still, we got a lot of birds by the bay, starting with the California Towhee that popped up off the ground right when we got out of our cars.

Ducks, pelicans, egrets, swallows, gulls, terns, shorebirds — Charleston Slough can be a busy, birdy place and today was no exception. But no grebes, only a few ducks, and despite the huge number of shorebirds, only a few species in the flocks. We scanned the mud flats, but every bird it seemed was a Marbled Godwit, Western Sandpiper or Willet. We did get to see a pair of Black Skimmers on "Skimmer Island," and there was a lovely pair of Gadwall swimming in the slough. Also, a gorgeous Common Yellowthroat repeatedly popped up out of the reeds until everyone got a satisfying view.



Marbled Godwits, Western Sandpipers and a few Willets

Toward the end of our time we walked toward Shoreline Lake. Above us we saw an American Crow dive bomb and attack a Common Raven. It was a spectacular sight, and handy for anyone who wanted to compare crows to ravens.



Crow vs. Raven

Shoreline Lake had no new birds to offer. The timer was running out so we hurried back to the mud flats to scan with our scopes and see if we could pick up any more species for the day. We checked every Godwit for a hidden Whimbrel or Curlew, every Western Sandpiper to see if one was a Least Sandpiper or maybe a Dunlin. But no new birds appeared. The timer ended and we all thanked each other for a good time. We ended the day in high spirits and I was happy with 68 species of birds...after all, 17 birds/hour is a pretty decent pace.



The Wandering Kestrels (Bino is behind the lens)

My pictures from our adventure can be found at http://www.pbase.com/wilmot/birdathon_2016_spring. Bino has also [posted a nice set](#).

All the birds we saw:

Taxonomic Order		Time Order		Alphabetic Order	
Canada Goose	9:10	Chestnut-backed Chickadee	8:00	Acorn Woodpecker	10:06
Mallard	9:02	House Finch	8:00	American Avocet	11:05
Green-winged Teal	11:11	Lesser Goldfinch	8:00	American Coot	10:58
Northern Shoveler	11:30	Mourning Dove	8:01	American Crow	8:08
Gadwall	11:10	Black Phoebe	8:01	American Robin	8:40
Ruddy Duck	11:30	Northern Rough-winged Swallow	8:04	American White Pelican	11:20
Common Merganser	9:33	Violet-green Swallow	8:05	Anna's Hummingbird	8:09
Wild Turkey	9:57	Nuttall's Woodpecker	8:06	Ash-throated Flycatcher	10:02
American White Pelican	11:20	American Crow	8:08	Band-tailed Pigeon	10:20
Double-crested Cormorant	9:40	Dark-eyed Junco	8:08	Barn Swallow	11:07
Snowy Egret	11:10	Anna's Hummingbird	8:09	Bewick's Wren	8:40
Black-crowned Night Heron	11:50	Downy Woodpecker	8:10	Black Phoebe	8:01
Turkey Vulture	11:10	Hooded Oriole	8:12	Black Skimmer	11:15
Northern Harrier	11:25	Cedar Waxwing	8:15	Black-crowned Night Heron	11:50
Red-shouldered Hawk (h)	10:06	Oak Titmouse	8:20	Black-headed Grosbeak	8:50
Red-tailed Hawk	9:38	Spotted Towhee	8:36	Black-necked Stilt	11:05
American Coot	10:58	Bushtit	8:39	Brown Creeper	9:11
Killdeer	10:58	Bewick's Wren	8:40	Bushtit	8:39
Black-necked Stilt	11:05	American Robin	8:40	California Towhee	10:55
American Avocet	11:05	Steller's Jay	8:45	Canada Goose	9:10
Yellowlegs sp.	11:40	Black-headed Grosbeak	8:50	Cedar Waxwing	8:15
Willet	11:17	Mallard	9:02	Chestnut-backed Chickadee	8:00
Marbled Godwit	11:17	White-breasted Nuthatch	9:09	Cliff Swallow	11:07
Western Sandpiper	11:18	Canada Goose	9:10	Common Merganser	9:33
Ring-billed Gull	11:30	Brown Creeper	9:11	Common Raven	11:38
Forster's Tern	11:30	Orange-crowned Warbler	9:15	Common Yellowthroat	11:12
Black Skimmer	11:15	Song Sparrow	9:15	Dark-eyed Junco	8:08
Band-tailed Pigeon	10:20	Common Merganser	9:33	Double-crested Cormorant	9:40
Mourning Dove	8:01	Red-tailed Hawk	9:38	Downy Woodpecker	8:10
Vaux's Swift	10:10	Double-crested Cormorant	9:40	European Starling	10:00
Anna's Hummingbird	8:09	Wild Turkey	9:57	Forster's Tern	11:30
Acorn Woodpecker	10:06	Western Bluebird	10:00	Gadwall	11:10
Nuttall's Woodpecker	8:06	European Starling	10:00	Green-winged Teal	11:11
Downy Woodpecker (h)	8:10	Ash-throated Flycatcher	10:02	Hooded Oriole	8:12
Northern Flicker	10:20	Red-shouldered Hawk	10:06	House Finch	8:00
Pacific-slope Flycatcher (h)	10:25	Acorn Woodpecker	10:06	Killdeer	10:58
Black Phoebe	8:01	Vaux's Swift	10:10	Lesser Goldfinch	8:00
Ash-throated Flycatcher	10:02	Warbling Vireo	10:15	Mallard	9:02
Warbling Vireo	10:15	Band-tailed Pigeon	10:20	Marbled Godwit	11:17
Steller's Jay	8:45	Northern Flicker	10:20	Marsh Wren (h)	11:12
Western Scrub-Jay	10:20	Western Scrub-Jay	10:20	Mourning Dove	8:01
American Crow	8:08	Pacific-slope Flycatcher	10:25	Northern Flicker	10:20
Common Raven	11:38	California Towhee	10:55	Northern Harrier	11:25
Violet-green Swallow	8:05	American Coot	10:58	Northern Rough-winged Swallow	8:04
Northern Rough-winged Swallow	8:04	Killdeer	10:58	Northern Shoveler	11:30
Cliff Swallow	11:07	Black-necked Stilt	11:05	Nuttall's Woodpecker	8:06
Barn Swallow	11:07	American Avocet	11:05	Oak Titmouse	8:20

Chestnut-backed Chickadee	8:00	Cliff Swallow	11:07	Orange-crowned Warbler	9:15
Oak Titmouse	8:20	Barn Swallow	11:07	Pacific-slope Flycatcher	10:25
Bushtit	8:39	Gadwall	11:10	Red-shouldered Hawk	10:06
White-breasted Nuthatch	9:09	Snowy Egret	11:10	Red-tailed Hawk	9:38
Brown Creeper	9:11	Turkey Vulture	11:10	Ring-billed Gull	11:30
Bewick's Wren (h)	8:40	Green-winged Teal	11:11	Ruddy Duck	11:30
Marsh Wren (h)	11:12	Marsh Wren (h)	11:12	Snowy Egret	11:10
Western Bluebird	10:00	Common Yellowthroat	11:12	Song Sparrow	9:15
American Robin	8:40	Black Skimmer	11:15	Spotted Towhee	8:36
European Starling	10:00	Willet	11:17	Steller's Jay	8:45
Cedar Waxwing	8:15	Marbled Godwit	11:17	Turkey Vulture	11:10
Orange-crowned Warbler (h)	9:15	Western Sandpiper	11:18	Vaux's Swift	10:10
Common Yellowthroat	11:12	American White Pelican	11:20	Violet-green Swallow	8:05
Spotted Towhee	8:36	Northern Harrier	11:25	Warbling Vireo	10:15
California Towhee	10:55	Northern Shoveler	11:30	Western Bluebird	10:00
Song Sparrow	9:15	Ruddy Duck	11:30	Western Sandpiper	11:18
Dark-eyed Junco	8:08	Ring-billed Gull	11:30	Western Scrub-Jay	10:20
Black-headed Grosbeak	8:50	Forster's Tern	11:30	White-breasted Nuthatch	9:09
Hooded Oriole	8:12	Common Raven	11:38	Wild Turkey	9:57
House Finch	8:00	Yellowlegs sp.	11:40	Willet	11:17
Lesser Goldfinch	8:00	Black-crowned Night Heron	11:50	Yellowlegs sp.	11:40