

THE SANDERLING



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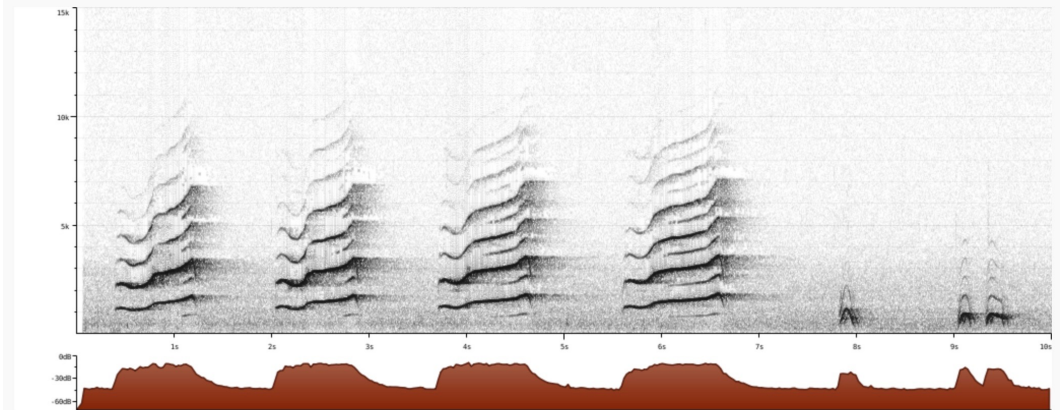
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The call of a female spotted owl, freely available online from Xeno-canto, and easily broadcast from a smart phone.

“LEAVE THE BIRD SINGING”

The use and misuse of tapes at home and abroad

by Michael Montgomery

Dusk falls in Robinson Canyon. For a long time, the only sound is the chirping of crickets. A robin begins to sing. And then there is a series of low hoots. To the man and woman with binoculars around their necks leaning against the trunk of their car, the hoots are unmistakably those of a spotted owl. Maybe we'll get lucky, they think; maybe one of Monterey County's most elusive residents will make an appearance.

But something isn't right: an owl would be in the redwoods below, not the oak tree up the road, as the hoots seem to suggest. Walking that direction, the couple soon encounters another parked car, and the truth becomes apparent: the sound they heard didn't come from an owl. It came from somebody's iPhone.

This kind of prerecorded audio playback, or “taping,” has become increasingly ubiquitous in birdwatching circles. For some, it is a painless and reliable way to elicit vocal responses from birds that would otherwise be hard to encounter; for others, it is a disappointing anticlimax and a misleading intrusion. But when all you need is a smartphone to do it, and there is little scientific consensus telling you not to, the urge to use tapes can be hard to resist.

Just this January, for instance, longtime local bird cataloguer and Monterey Audubon member Don Roberson and his wife were walking in Monterey's Laguna Grande Regional Park when they were surprised to hear yellow-breasted chat vocalizations.

The surprising thing wasn't the chat; the same individual who wintered at the lake last year was reported to have returned (breaking the record twice for northern California).

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The surprising thing was the vocalization: male chats don't vocalize during the winter. Roberson and his wife knew this, and were understandably puzzled...until they encountered someone playing tapes.

Beyond being annoyed at such behavior, Roberson worries about its impact. Having traveled and birded the world, he has seen all too many instances of local specialties being "taped out." "[S]o many field trips have gone there, so many private birders have gone there and played tapes at them, [that] you never see [them] again," Roberson explains.



*The yellow-breasted chat who wintered at Laguna Grande.
Photo by Don Roberson.*

The problem with taping—and the reason it works—is that it tricks birds into thinking that a conspecific individual (one from their same species) has entered their territory. The real bird will then respond to the perceived invader, especially if the real bird is a male.

In moderation, this is relatively harmless. But once a bird has been cowed into silence by excessive taping—instigated, perhaps, by an impatient birdwatcher who didn't get a good enough look the first time—it may quit responding to tapes in the future. Worse, it could move to another area entirely, where it might struggle to get by in less suitable habitat.

In the experience of Dr. Bruce Miller, a conservation biologist who studied birds and bats for nearly 30 years in Belize, this can have some serious ramifications. For years, a seasonal population of ruddy crakes could reliably be heard calling from a roadside marsh near the town of Gallon Jug where Miller lived and worked. But once tour guides started guaranteeing their customers a quick and easy sighting of the birds by playing tapes, sometimes for longer than five minutes, all of that went away.

Initially, the guides' strategy worked marvelously: crakes would dash into the open in a vain effort to drive out the intruders that seemed to be challenging their territory. The "intruders," however, kept at it, and after two tourism seasons, the ruddy crakes gave up the perceived struggle and abandoned the marsh completely. In ten years of surveying, they never returned.

With outcomes like this in mind, Miller succeeded in convincing a local ecotourism lodge to forbid its guests from taping. Economics, not ecology, proved to be the winning argument: scaring away birds is bad business when your business is birdwatching. Within months, however, the lodge had reversed its policy. "[I]t was believed that...one or more 'high-end' US-based birding groups...[had] strongly suggested [that] if they were not allowed to use [tape] playback, they might take their tour groups elsewhere," Miller recalls. So scaring away birders is *also* bad business, it would seem.

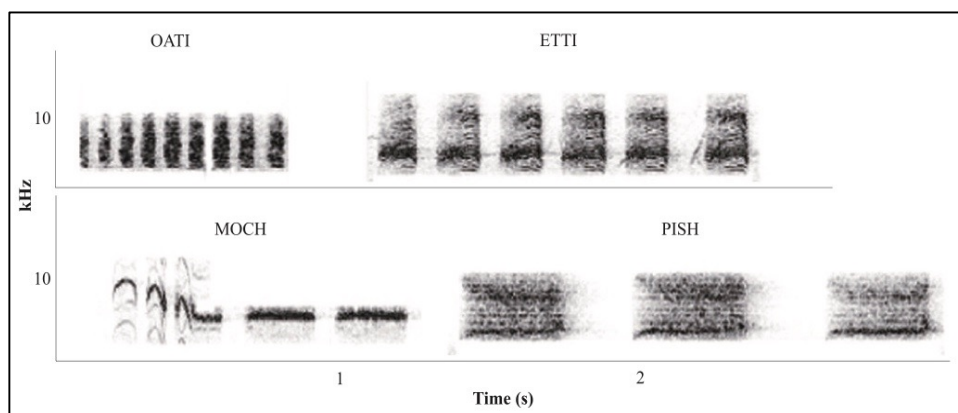
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As Miller goes on to point out, the American guiding services *chose* to use tapes; they didn't have to. The companies could just as easily have opted to work with local guides, whose familiarity with the area allows them to point out birds to visitors without recourse to tapes. Still another alternative would have been for the birders to imitate bird vocalizations themselves, rather than broadcast digital ones. In the US, this takes the form of "pishing"; in the Neotropics, Miller says, it usually involves ferruginous pygmy owl imitations.

Compared to taping, the latter approach has several advantages, even if it takes a bit more patience and effort on the part of the birder. "[Because its] techniques are generally short duration," Miller says, "they likely are not as invasive as digital playback." They also don't involve the same sense of conspecific invasion.

To appreciate the difference between pishing and taping, which ostensibly produce the same result, we have to understand a bit about pishing. Most of us on the Central Coast have direct experience with flocks of bushtits and chickadees chattering their way through the shrubbery. In the presence of a predator, these flocks will sound the alarm, with repetitive, individual notes. Now imagine you're a scrub jay or yellow-rumped warbler and you hear one of these warnings, which biologists call "scold calls." Your natural response would be to investigate and join with other members of your species for protection; inevitably, that makes you audible, visible, or both to outside observers.

The authors of a 2006 study in the journal *Ecoscience* proposed that pishing works exactly the same way, by imitating the scold calls of titmice and other members of the family Paridae, which includes chickadees and bushtits. The resulting "anti-predator mobbing," as it is known in the scientific literature, is fairly routine, and it is a far cry from the stress and apparent territorial conflict that taping can evoke.



A figure from the 2006 study. Notice the similarity between a birder's pishing noises (bottom right) and the scold calls of three Parid species (clockwise from top left: oak titmouse, eastern tufted titmouse, and mountain chickadee). Courtesy of Kathryn Sieving, *Ecoscience*.

In the words of Dr. Kathryn Sieving, one of the authors of the 2006 study, "[R]esponses to playback are taxing on birds' time and energy"; pishing responses, in contrast, are not. And instead of being an *anti*-predation defense, as responses to pishing are, responses to tapes may actually expose birds to *more* predation.

Sieving noticed this while conducting field research in Chile in the early 2000s. On several occasions, she found that owls and hawks were taking advantage of her digital vocalization broadcasts to locate their dinner. (She was using the tapes to study bird communication.)

"I had the distinct impression that the owls keyed in on the territorial calls as much as the conspecific territory defenders did," she wrote in 2004, as part of an online discussion forum about tape playback. "One owl sat by my shoulder (within 3 feet) waiting with me."

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*Chucao tapaculos (above) were the subject of Dr. Sieving's work in southern Chile.
At right is an austral pygmy owl that tried using her tapes to locate a meal.
Photos courtesy of Kathryn Sieving.*



When I asked Sieving via email to estimate how much of a threat this kind of predation might pose on a larger scale, she had only this reply: “I can’t say without data.” Which made me realize something: when there truly is such a lack of data, generalizing about taping is premature.

It’s tempting to read off a litany of abuses. It’s tempting to condemn playback as the bane of birds everywhere, or as a symptom of chronic birdwatcher laziness. But the vast majority of peer-reviewed science is silent on the issue. And for the most part, its negative impacts are felt only when over-focused on localized species in particular hotspots, like the crakes in Belize, or the spotted owls in Robinson Canyon. In most areas and for most species, the occasional audio playback here and there is no big deal.

“The rule I always use around the world, or in any taping situation, is [that] the bird has to win the battle of the tape,” Roberson says. “Once it’s responding, stop your tape, and leave the bird singing, proving that he’s defended his territory against this invader.” The birding community would do well to listen—both to Roberson’s advice, and to the real-life, flesh-and-blood birds themselves. After all, isn’t that why we bird in the first place?

PROGRAMS

Second Tuesday of Each Month, TBA

Events begin at 7:30 p.m. at the Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History. Doors open to the public at 7 with refreshments and socializing. Our monthly board meetings are held from 6-7 beforehand. Please visit Monterey Audubon’s website and Facebook page for updates and program details.

FIELD TRIPS

Tue., February 27 – Toro Creek Trail

The trail is a flat fire road that parallels Toro Creek in Fort Ord National Monument. Since we’re nearing the end of winter, we’ll be looking for lingering winter species such as white- and golden-crowned sparrows, ruby-crowned kinglets, yellow-rumped warblers, perhaps a sapsucker or two, and maybe a surprise raptor, plus resident species of oak woodland.

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FIELD TRIPS (*cont'd*)

If there's water in the pond, there could also be some interesting ducks. The walk is 2 miles round-trip. Rain cancels.

Contact Rita Carratello, merops22@gmail.com or [831-277-2303](tel:831-277-2303), for meeting time and place.

First Saturday of each month (March 3, April 7, May 5, and June 2) – Elkhorn Slough Reserve

Start out the first weekend of every month with a bird walk around the Elkhorn Slough watershed. Depending on timing and conditions, we'll explore one or several areas within the watershed, such as the Elkhorn Slough Reserve, Kirby Park, Moonglow Dairy, Moss Landing State Beach and Harbor, and Zmudowski State Beach. We'll traverse these areas looking for resident and migrant birds that utilize this dynamic ecosystem. **Meet** at the Elkhorn Slough Visitors Center, [1700 Elkhorn Road, Castroville, CA 95076](https://www.elkhornslough.org/). The walk starts at **8:30 a.m.** sharp. No RSVP needed.

Contact Rick Fournier, [831-633-0572](tel:831-633-0572), or the reserve office ([831-728-2822](tel:831-728-2822)), with questions.

Sat-Sun., March 3-4: LeConte's Thrasher and Carrizo Plain National Monument

Monterey Audubon and the Ventana Wildlife Society are teaming up to lead an overnight trip searching for LeConte's thrasher and other specialties at Carrizo Plain National Monument. We'll carpool early on Saturday, March 3, starting in Salinas and stopping at Kern National Wildlife Refuge, where we'll enjoy a variety of ducks and other waterbirds. After lunch we'll get our first shot at LeConte's thrasher near the town of Taft, where we'll stay overnight in a hotel. The next morning, we'll head to Carrizo Plain, where we'll explore Soda Lake and various spots in its rich environment searching for LeConte's thrashers and other local specialties, including Bell's sparrows, prairie falcons, ferruginous hawks, and short-eared owls. If we're lucky, we might also find wintering mountain plovers. We'll bird our way back along Hwy 58 and return to Salinas in the late afternoon or early evening.

Recommended Equipment: Water, sunscreen, binoculars, camera, and snacks and lunch for both days. Since this is an overnight trip, be sure to pack accordingly.

Cost: Participants will be responsible for their own food and lodging. There are a few hotels to choose from in Taft, but please wait until you are confirmed and have received detailed trip information before booking one.

RSVP is required. Participants are limited to 8. Once your spot is reserved you'll receive detailed trip information.

Contact Shawn Wagoner at swagoner@csumb.edu.

Sat., March 17 – Carmel River State Beach

Many local birders consider this one of the premier birding spots on the entire West Coast. Plan to see a variety of shorebirds, passerines, raptors, and assorted waterfowl and marsh dwellers. **Meet at 8 a.m.** at the Crossroads Starbucks for carpooling. **Leader:** Robert Horn, [831-372-4608](tel:831-372-4608), rhorn@montereybay.com

Sat., March 24 – The Pajaro Dunes

The Pajaro Dunes Resort, situated just inland from the seashore, offers a wide variety of birding experiences. We'll be

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FIELD TRIPS (*cont'd*)

the Shorebirds condominium complex first, where we should find wintering waterfowl and shorebirds, as well as species such as a Say's phoebe, a variety of sparrows, winter warblers, and other passerines in the trees surrounding the pond. If time permits, we'll move on to the Pajaro Dunes South. The convergence of Watsonville Slough and Pajaro River at its mouth generally provides rich birding. The walking is easy. No pets allowed. Rain cancels. **Meet at 8:30 a.m.** just beyond the Chevron station on Lee Rd. Take the Riverside exit in Watsonville and turn right at the Chevron by the freeway. Park just beyond that station. Coming from the south, you'll need to cross back over the freeway to reach the Chevron.

Leader: Nanci Adams. **Reservations are appreciated:** nanciconchita@aol.com, or [831-728-5803](tel:831-728-5803). All are welcome.

Sat., April 14 – Moonglow Dairy, Elkhorn Slough

Mid-April is an interesting time at Moonglow Dairy, as migrant shorebirds and waterfowl stage and push north to their breeding grounds. Early migrant passerines like Wilson's warbler and Pacific-slope flycatchers can also liven up a stroll through Moonglow's famous eucalyptus grove. **Meet** at Surf City Coffee in Moss Landing at **8 a.m.**

RSVP: Blake Matheson, gypaetusbarbatus1@gmail.com

Sat., April 21 – East Struve Slough

East Struve Slough in Watsonville is a birding favorite. We'll catch some of the late winter waterfowl as well as nesting resident birds. A variety of swallows will have returned, and surrounding trees and bushes could have anything from bushtits to red-shouldered hawks. **Meet at 8:30 a.m.** in the far back parking lot of West Marine on Westridge Drive in Watsonville. If coming from the south, take the Green Valley exit, turn right on Harkins Slough Road, and make an immediate right on Westridge Drive. Go straight to West Marine's back lot and meet at the trailhead. Easy walking. Rain cancels. No pets, please.

Leader: Nanci Adams. **Reservations are appreciated:** nanciconchita@aol.com, or [831-728-5803](tel:831-728-5803).

Sat., May 5 – Fort Ord National Monument

Fort Ord is a local treasure, with a rich natural and cultural history. Expert birder and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) volunteer David Styer will lead this driving/light hiking tour exploring BLM's portion of the Monument, searching for birds in habitats such as oak woodland, native grassland, and maritime chaparral. Former BLM botanist (and Marina's mayor) Bruce Delgado will help host the trip. **Meet at 7:30 a.m.** at the corner of 8th Avenue and Gigling Road in Seaside. Then carpool to locations. Late arrivals and early departures are not possible due to locked gates. The trip ends at noon.

Group size is limited to 15. **RSVP is required.**

Contact Shawn Wagoner: email (preferred) swagoner@csumb.edu, or [925-487-7335](tel:925-487-7335).

Research Spotlight

In this new section of the newsletter, Monterey Audubon will take a look at aspects of recently published scientific studies that local birders might find interesting or relevant.

California Condors and Meteorology

As any Big Sur condor-watcher will tell you, condors like rugged terrain. Why, you might ask? It helps them fly. A paper published in January in the journal *Ibis* gives this a more in-depth look. Its authors tracked the flight habits of 39 condors from four locations—Big Sur, Pinnacles National Park, Hopper Mountain Wildlife Refuge, and Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge—over a 3-year period. What they eventually found was a close link between the presence and timing of a region’s updrafts and a condor’s decision to fly.

At first, it might seem strange that there should be a decision involved at all. After all, landlubbers like us would give anything just to have the *option* of flying. But birds like condors—biologists call them “obligate soarers”—actually have an added worry: their wingspans are so large that landing and taking off can be hazardous. Flapping is done only when absolutely necessary. Once in flight, condors tend to stay in flight.

The Santa Lucias, it turns out, are a good place to do this. As air coming off the Pacific hits the mountains’ steep flanks, it has nowhere to go but up, and so it rises, creating a steady updraft of warming air that converges along ridgelines. If it is sunny out, with low-level ground absorbing enough heat to warm the adjacent air and get it moving upward, this process is only enhanced.

Like the cushion of air in an air hockey table, these updrafts can keep condors effortlessly aloft for hours at a time, where they scan the landscape below for food. (Paragliders make use of the same principal.)

So from a local perspective, the study’s final conclusion makes sense: condors prefer flying during warm, sunny, summer-like afternoons. After all, that’s probably when most of us see them.

But as the paper’s authors are quick to point out, this knowledge has applications beyond just planning your next condor-watching excursion. As climate change alters condors’ ranges, knowing when they are likely to fly, as well as the environmental conditions they are likely to fly *toward*, will only become more important in conservation plans.

So the next time you’re lucky enough to glimpse a condor over the Santa Lucias, don’t immediately whip out the camera. Take a moment to notice the environment: is it sunny? What time of day is it? Is there a breeze? Imagine the condor going through the same checklist, and making the potentially risky decision to take to the skies. And then snap the picture.



Because of their tremendous wingspan, perching in trees actually poses a risk for condors, and is done only in abnormal conditions. This one, photographed in the Carmel Highlands in 2015, was disoriented by a storm.

—Michael Montgomery, Monterey Audubon editor

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