

THE SANDERLING



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Rarities, Mundanities, and the Beautiful Incongruities of Birding

by Michael P. Montgomery

Several years ago, while perusing the shelves of a used book store in Seattle's University District, I picked up a pocket-sized field guide to the birds of Borneo.

I had no practical reason for buying it, but bought it nonetheless; the bright red cover, striking photographs, and poetically exotic species names—chestnut-breasted malkoha, white-bellied yuhina, changeable hawk-eagle, dusky munia—had me hooked. Besides, ever since I was a little kid, I'd wanted to visit Southeast Asia. Maybe one day I could put this bird guide to use.

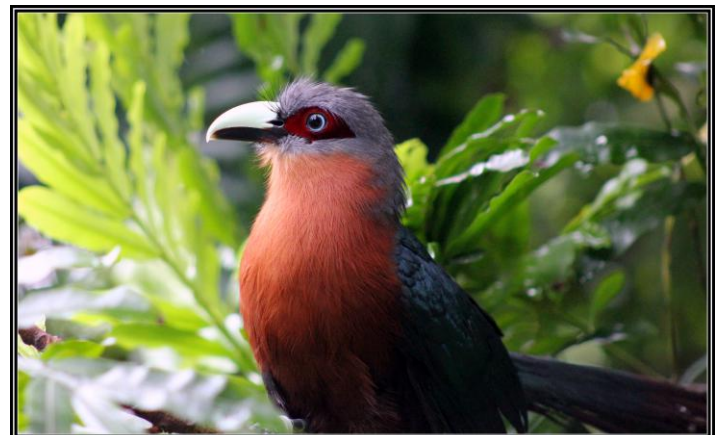
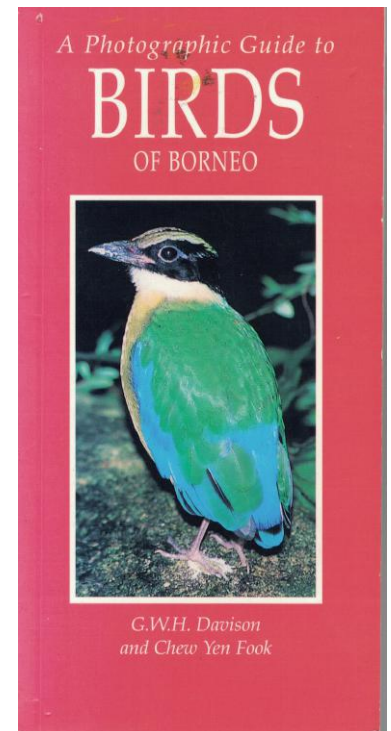
More recently, I discovered another resource with similarly intriguing, potentially practical info about Bornean birds: the Internet Bird Collection, or IBC (<https://www.hbw.com/ibc>), a free-of-charge, digital compendium of photos, videos, and sound recordings.

Users can search the database for individual species, whole families, and—my favorite—localities around the world. A search for Borneo pulls up a staggering variety and abundance of results: 873 videos, 1,401 photographs, 161 sound recordings.

As in my handy-dandy field guide, if the plumage doesn't amaze, the name will—banded bay cuckoo, Bonaparte's nightjar, Bornean crestless fireback.

Beyond the tropics, the IBC has everything from Andean condors to Dalmatian pelicans to the Monterey Peninsula's very own black oystercatchers. (I know because I've looked.)

Yet even in all that, it still seems something is missing: the birds themselves.



A chestnut-breasted malkoha, native to southeast Asia.
Photo by cuatrok77 on Flickr.

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A blue-throated bee-eater in Borneo.
Photo by Marcel Holyoak.

Pictures are great, but they're better when you've seen the real thing. To fully appreciate the IBC or my field guide to Bornean birds, I know I must get out there and see the species myself, in the same way I've come to cherish and respect my battered *Peterson Field Guide to Birds of Western North America*: by using it. In the meantime, I'll settle for pondering pittas, barbets, and drongos at a distance.

That brings me to a more general observation. Regardless of my Bornean field guide's ultimate utility, there was and still is something indefinitely exciting about the avifauna of faraway tropical places.

I can remember, for instance, a few days after purchasing the field guide in Seattle, flipping through its pages while riding a ferry across Puget Sound. The experience was completely random, but completely perfect, in one of those paradoxical pairings where something is so out-of-place it fits right in. Like seeing a Townsend's warbler in a Central American jungle. Or spotting a red-footed booby off Point Pinos, as Monterey Audubon's Brian Sullivan did in August.

If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say that is why we birders enjoy spotting and cataloguing rarities in the first place: their often accidental discovery can be completely random, but completely satisfying. By the very fact that rarities don't fit into the surrounding environment, they make us feel as though *we* do.

The same incongruity, I'd warrant, partly explains birding's widespread appeal. For us, birds' activity is the subject of a pastime, a scientific fascination. For the birds, it's everyday existence. As long as we don't impinge on that existence, this delightful mismatch between the non-necessity of a human hobby and the fundamental life patterns of the class Aves is what drives the dynamic of birding. We can romanticize birds all we want, buy field guides we may never use, and while away the day on the IBC. The birds won't know; they're too busy being birds.

Sure, birdwatching distracts us from mundane worries and wants; but it does more than that. By showing us the artistry and innate beauty of a bird in its day-to-day routine—breeding and migrating, feeding and nesting—birding helps us see the same values, in even the most humdrum of pursuits, in ourselves.

WINTER/SPRING CALENDAR OF EVENTS

All lectures 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 (<https://www.montereyaudubon.org/calendar-of-events/>) and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/monterey.audubon/>) for updates and program details.

Tues., January 8 – California's Coast: Living on the Edge, with Kim Steinhardt

Join environmental writer and marine wildlife photographer **Kim Steinhardt** for an inspiring talk and photographic journey into the past, present, and probable future of the California coast. Part art, part science, part law, this unique evening's adventure will feature cautionary tales and colorful personal anecdotes based on a lifetime along the shoreline. You will also hear the latest news of threats to the endangered southern sea otter, the policy challenges posed by sea-level

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rise and proposals to do away with the Endangered Species Act, and more, drawn from Steinhardt's recent book exploring the complex relationship between humans and nature, *The Edge: The Pressured Past and Precarious Future of California's Coast*, which he co-authored with noted coastal science expert Dr. Gary Griggs.

Recognized as a "keen observer and a wonderful storyteller," Steinhardt has served as a photo contributor and advisor to *National Geographic's* "Explore My World" series; his work also appears in other books, publications, and on TV. A former administrative law judge who teaches courses on legislation with a special emphasis on ocean protection and advocacy, Steinhardt is president of UC Santa Cruz's Friends of the Seymour Marine Discovery Center.

Sat., February 2 – Field Trip to Pinnacles National Park

Updated to national park status in only 2013, Pinnacles has a rich diversity of avian species to match its scenic wonders. Bell's sparrows, greater roadrunners, Lawrence's goldfinch, California condors, and an array of other interesting birds all reside in the park and its surrounding sage chaparral and gray pine woodland. **Trip Leader:** R.J. Adams. For more details and logistics, contact R.J. Adams at rjadams55@yahoo.com.

Tues., February 12 – California Brown Pelicans: A Cause for Conservation Optimism or Concern? with Anna Weinstein

This past spring and summer, unusual numbers of young brown pelicans turned up in parking lots, college graduations ceremonies, and streets from Oregon to California. Could this mean our California subspecies (*Pelecanus occidentalis californicus*) is in trouble?

For several years, Audubon California, with the help of local chapters like Monterey Audubon, has been coordinating narrowly focused counts of brown pelicans to try to determine the real population demographics of this iconic and familiar species.

Join Audubon California's marine program director, **Anna Weinstein**, for an important overview of how these beloved birds are really faring in 2019.



A brown pelican in Pacific Grove. Photo by Blake Matheson.

Tues., March 12 – Birding Thailand: Specialties of Southeast Asia and the Spectacle of Asian Migration, with Brian Sullivan and/or Paul Fenwick

Known throughout the world for its beaches, cuisine, and hordes of tourists, Thailand also boasts an impressive roster of resident and migratory bird species. From pittas and cupwings in shady tropical forests to sprawling migratory flights of black bazas to wintering flocks of fast-disappearing shorebirds, Thailand has birds to satisfy the niche appetite of any traveling birder. In November of last year, Central Coast locals Brian Sullivan—of eBird and Cornell Lab fame—and Monterey Audubon's Paul Fenwick traveled to Thailand to witness its spectacular ornithological diversity. They succeeded beyond their expectations, and returned with plenty of stunning images and tales to tell.

Tues., April 9 – Bird Language, with Jeff Caplan

The expression "A little birdie told me..." is a familiar cultural idiom. But have you ever stopped to wonder what the "little birdies" are actually saying? Join special guest **Jeff Caplan** to find out! Weaving together 30 years as a naturalist and teacher of communication, Caplan's work promotes a common language for understanding and connecting more deeply to birds

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and to nature. His talk will focus on how birds build their families and keep themselves alive through songs, calls, and body language, which research now shows may actually contain the evolutionary roots of human language. By learning to interpret birds' songs, sounds, and movements, perhaps we can begin to develop a deeper connection with birds and what they see and know.

Message from the President

This fall witnessed an impressive, perhaps unprecedented abundance of vagrants. Local chapter members found and sought jaw-dropping rarities, from a blue-headed vireo on the lower Carmel River to a masked booby roosting on Point Pinos. It was truly an unforgettable fall.



A blue-headed vireo. Photo by Tom Benson.



*Masked boobies in Long Beach, California.
Photo by Tom Benson.*

Beyond the pleasures of the chase, there were also some important developments in regional bird conservation. On November 15, the Seaside City Council agreed to allow Monterey Audubon to install a floating island in Roberts Lake to restore the former nesting ground of the United States' only nesting colony of Heermann's gulls. The lake's sandy, artificial islands eroded away in the mid-2000s, and the gulls were left without a place to raise their young. The pioneering birds began seeking out commercial rooftops around Seaside, with often disastrous results. One building owner put netting over an active nest site. Another batch of nests was incinerated when the McDonald's on Canyon Del Rey Boulevard burned down in a freak accident.

Looking to 2019, final administrative approvals and permit issuance for the construction of a floating island replacement are now imminent, with Monterey Audubon having earmarked matching funds to launch the project. We will be relying on public and member contributions to finish the job. To learn more and keep up to date on this crucial and exciting MAS project, visit <https://www.montereyaudubon.org/heermannsgulls> and <https://www.facebook.com/SeasideHEEGs/>.

Monterey Audubon's fourth annual Seabird Seawatch monitoring project ran from October 20 to December 15. With Karl Bardon of Minnesota as lead counter for the second season in a row, and with the support of Santa Cruz's Alex Rinkert, the season was full of surprises.

Mega-rare Nazca and masked boobies, visitors from the subtropics, dazzled counters, as did multiple observations of brown boobies.



A Heermann's gull on Roberts Lake. Photo by Blake Matheson.

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Even more surprising, and potentially alarming, was the continuing steep decline in observations of the project's two flagship target species, Pacific loon and surf scoter. Observations for both species this year fell precipitously below 2016 season highs, with a drop from approximately 280,000 loons and 60,000 scoters to 24,965 loons and 35,000 scoters this year.



Pacific loons taking off. Photo by Tony Morris.

This shocking result underscores the importance of our monitoring effort. With four years of data, Monterey Audubon can now begin to lay the foundation for deeper analysis. One question that warrants an answer is this: why, for two years, have we documented fewer and fewer birds passing Point Pinos en route to their traditional wintering grounds?

Are there fewer birds? Are they migrating later than they used to? Are they wintering further north? Furthermore, which ecological conditions most strongly correspond to the change? Increases in sea surface temperatures? In 2019, with institutional support, we will begin to analyze and leverage our data—and, of course, to count more birds!

The end of 2018 coincided with our annual Christmas Bird Count. This 119-year-old Audubon project is the oldest bird conservation dataset in existence. Regionally, counts occurred in the Monterey Peninsula, Santa Cruz, Big Sur, Moss Landing, and the Panoche Valley. Big Sur (110 species), Santa Cruz (165 species), and the Monterey Peninsula (169 species) all saw slightly depressed species diversity relative to previous years.

A smattering of rarities included a red-naped sapsucker in Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park, a yellow-bellied sapsucker in Capitola, and a sage Thrasher at Laguna Grande Regional Park. (Surprising “misses” in the Peninsula count included white-tailed kite, northern shoveler, and hermit warbler, all species we usually record.)

Over the span of decades, the change in species composition of Christmas Counts is breathtaking. From the comeback of California condors in Big Sur to the ubiquity of Eurasian collared-doves everywhere, Christmas Count data tell the story of humanity's influence, both positive and negative, on regional birds and ecology.



*A hermit warbler, normally a regular winter resident, in Jack's Peak Regional Park.
Photo by Blake Matheson.*

On behalf of Monterey Audubon's Board of Directors, Happy New Year and good birding!

—Blake Matheson

Olympic Peninsula April 12-14, 2019
BirdFest
 Come bird with us!

- ▣ San Juan Island Cruise
- ▣ Neah Bay Birding Excursion
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- ▣ Photography Workshop
- ▣ NAS Photography Exhibit
- ▣ Auction & Raffle
- ▣ Gala Banquet with Speaker:
John Marzluff

Located in Sequim, WA
 For more information:
www.olympicbirdfest.org
info@olympicbirdfest.org
 or 360-681-4076









For those interested in experiencing a quintessential part of Pacific Coast birdlife, make sure to check out the Olympic Peninsula BirdFest, held from **April 12-14** in the town of Sequim on the rugged northern shore of Washington's Olympic Peninsula.

With tidal wetlands, alpine slopes, temperate rainforest, and open-water environments all within driving or boating distance, the Olympic Peninsula is a beautiful introduction to the ecosystems and wildlife of the Northwest.

The event will feature guided tours of some of the region's best birding locales, as well as a talk by University of Washington professor John Marzluff, whose pioneering research has demonstrated crows' remarkable capacity for human facial recognition.

Those who arrive early (**April 9-11**) have the chance of participating in a birding cruise to the remote and historic San Juan Islands, with a stay in the resort at Roche Harbor. Those who stick around after the festival (**April 14-16**) can sign up for a trip to Neah Bay, which is close to being the most northwesterly point of the contiguous United States.

Monterey Audubon Society Membership

Monterey Audubon and National Audubon are separate but affiliated 501c3 charities. You can join either or both by clipping and mailing this membership card with your dues and any additional Monterey Audubon donation to our PO Box Below. You can also donate to MAS online at our website, montereyaudubon.org.

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