

Cuckoo

gone, not forgotten



Though she hasn't been seen since Tuesday, hundreds of visitors came to Watsonville in the past week to see a common cuckoo, making an extremely rare visit to the West Coast.

PETE SOLE/
CONTRIBUTED



PETE SOLE/CONTRIBUTED

The common cuckoo, off course by thousands of miles from a range in Europe, Asia and Africa, spent at least five days resting and refueling in Watsonville Slough.

Rare avian visitor boosts Watsonville's birding reputation

By DONNA JONES

djones@santacruzsentinel.com

BIRDING

WATSONVILLE — She's gone.

The common cuckoo — a bird rare in this part of the world — created a huge commotion in the birding community when she was first spotted at Watsonville Slough a week ago. But she hasn't been seen since Tuesday evening, and appears to have resumed her off-course migration.

During her visit, hundreds of birders flocked to town from across the region, as well as from nearly every state and from Canada, almost certainly giving a

little bump to the local economy and maybe more importantly for the future, helping put Watsonville on the birding map.

"They stayed in our hotels, ate in our restaurants and enjoyed our beautiful scenery," said Nancy Lockwood, the city's environmental project manager. "It's a big positive for Watsonville. I'm grateful to that bird."

It's hard to quantify how many dollars flowed into the area. In calls to several hotels and restaurants, no one said they noticed a significant increase in customers. But Katie Mahan, Pajaro

Valley Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture chairperson, said the excitement over the cuckoo undoubtedly brought some spending, if nothing else on items like gas or fast food. She said the chamber received "quite a few calls" from people planning trips.

"Just to have them actually come here, come here to see what there is" was good for the city, Mahan said. "Many people were impressed with our slough birding situation."

Lockwood was staffing the Watsonville Nature Center at

SEE CUCKOO ON C4

CUCKOO

Continued from C1

Ramsay Park on Friday. The city decided to keep open the center beyond its usual weekend hours due to the unprecedented interest in the cuckoo. She said many visitors live in the region, but told her they hadn't known about the city's wetlands and trails or its wealth of birds.

The city's hardly tried to keep it a secret. The county's agricultural powerhouse would like a share of the regional tourist market as well, and, with its bird-filled sloughs and habitats ranging from coastal shores and lagoons to chaparral covered hills and woodlands nearby, attracting birders is one of its strategies.

The city plays host to the annual Monterey Bay Birding Festival, which was held less than a month ago. Festival volunteer Dobie Jenkins said organizers already have met to talk about how to capitalize on the rare cuckoo sighting for next year.

Jenkins also said Watsonville can expect to get some attention in birding magazines and guides in coming months.

With so many experts watching, other surprising birds also were spotted here this week, including a Blackburnian warbler, a



PETE SOLE/CONTRIBUTED

Hundreds of visitors came to Watsonville this week to see a common cuckoo, making an extremely rare visit to the West Coast.

bird that normally makes its home in the Eastern United States, and a green-tailed towhee, more generally found in the north and eastern part of California. Birders were pleased with those sightings as well. But it was the cuckoo they came to see.

Veteran Santa Cruz County birder Lois Goldfrank spotted the cuckoo first near Ford and Kearney streets while on a Santa Cruz Bird Club walk on Sept. 28. She and bird club president Steve Gerow identified her as a common cuckoo, a bird

anything but common in the United States. The cuckoo has been reported only once in the lower 48, and that was more than 30 years ago in Massachusetts. The cuckoo breeds in Europe and Asia and migrates to Africa. That makes Watsonville's famous avian visitor a vagrant, a migrating bird off course.

Early on some birders speculated the cuckoo might stick around for a while, perhaps even winter here. She seemed content, sheltering in willow thickets and munching on caterpillars.

But her departure was not a surprise.

The cuckoo is in the midst of migration, said David Suddjian, a longtime leader in the bird club. Stays of one day, several days or even longer are common, and may be affected by factors like fat reserves, habitat quality and weather.

"I would suggest it refueled adequately and moved on," Suddjian said.

Follow Sentinel reporter Donna Jones on Twitter at [Twitter.com/DonnaJonesSCS](https://twitter.com/DonnaJonesSCS)