

Birdwatching In Santa Cruz

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Drive down almost any country road in Santa Cruz County on a weekend morning, and you're likely to run into a mixed group of men and women, old and young peering and pointing in every which direction.

Or notice, next time you go for a hike in the nearby redwood forests at Big Basin or Nisene Marks, how many people are carrying binoculars. The continuing search for UFOs? Bigfoot? A visiting celebrity? No, nothing more unusual than birdwatching.

Long the victims of little old lady and henpecked husband stereotypes, birdwatchers are coming into their own these days. While a few short years ago the Santa Cruz Bird Club listed but 65 members, today over 350 names fill its rolls.

And the stereotypes are gone. Long-time member and former Bird Club president Dorothy Lilly exclaims, "They're a wonderful group—and so many of them are young! Lots of them are teachers or students of ecology or environmental stuff, and some of them are wonderful birders." And I must say, I'm proud to count myself among this new breed of birdwatcher—getting up with the sun, wading through ankle-deep mud, peering into underbrush, trying to figure out what made that blasted

tweep—despite the fact that I am not little, old, nor a lady.

Like many of my peers, I used to dismiss all but the most impressive bird songs as background music to a higher search. The Secret of Existence! Oneness with Nature! The Sacred Hiding Place of the Buddha! But all I ever found were a few nice landscapes and these flitty little feathered things that kept distracting me with an occasional piece of unidentified scat singing.

Then two years ago, on a rafting trip through the Mexican rain forests, a handful of birders joined our trip. While the rest of us dully contemplated the impermanence of all things human among the Mayan ruins, day after sweltering day, the birdwatchers kept making new discoveries. Wondering what all the fuss was about, I took a look through a pair of borrowed binoculars—and the striking colors, patterns and behaviors revealed told me more secrets about the natural world than a hundred landscapes.

As I became more involved, I discovered that not only was I ignorant of some of the more common birds I assumed I knew, but there were literally hundreds of species all around I had never even noticed. Ravens, warblers, starlings and sapsuckers were not just words in romantic poetry, but creatures I might find in my own backyard.

Before long, I even began to plan vacations with ornithology in mind. Birdwatching is both the most exotic and the most mundane of sports—cheap, harmless, and intellectually satisfying.

If duck-watching seems too lightweight, surely you can get interested in raptors, can't you? You know—falcons, hawks and eagles. On a field trip to Harkins Slough outside of Watsonville, we saw not only the common red-tailed hawks, but a Cooper's hawk, a rough-legged hawk, several white-tailed kites and a distant, majestic golden eagle. The relatively rare kites were the most abundant and striking; hovering a few feet over the grasslands to drop silently on unsuspecting rodents, they exemplify "Death from Above," the macho motto of their human counterparts in the Air Cavalry.

You can study people from now till Doomsday and never have the faintest idea what it's all about, but you have a



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certain objectivity with birds. It fits in with the increased sensitivity toward the natural world so popular today, as seen by the new experts in geology, whales and mushrooms sprouting up all over. You can appreciate through these subjects how the natural world works, how it all fits together, and what a gut-wrenching shame it is for one species of clever monkey to destroy it. And perhaps you'll catch a glimpse of what lies behind the veil, into those secrets I mentioned earlier.

I confess, however, to one insoluble puzzle in ornithology that continues to baffle me, no matter how diligent my study. Gulls. There's herring and Heermann's gulls, California and Western gulls, to say nothing of kittiwakes, shearwaters and terns, which are often mistaken for gulls though they're not. Gulls all seem to be slate grey on top and white-bellied when full grown, and just sort of dirty looking when immature. So unless you spend a lot of time comparing bill spots and foot color, you'll never become an expert. Frankly—to paraphrase another famous birdwatcher—I wish they all could be California gulls. •



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