

Fowl play

Birders flock to Santa Cruz for a glimpse of the rare Nutting's Flycatcher



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

The Nutting's Flycatcher that dropped by the Laurel Street neighborhood and caused quite a stir among birders takes flight.

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Birds SANTA CRUZ

You've never seen a group of middle-class suburbanites move so fast.

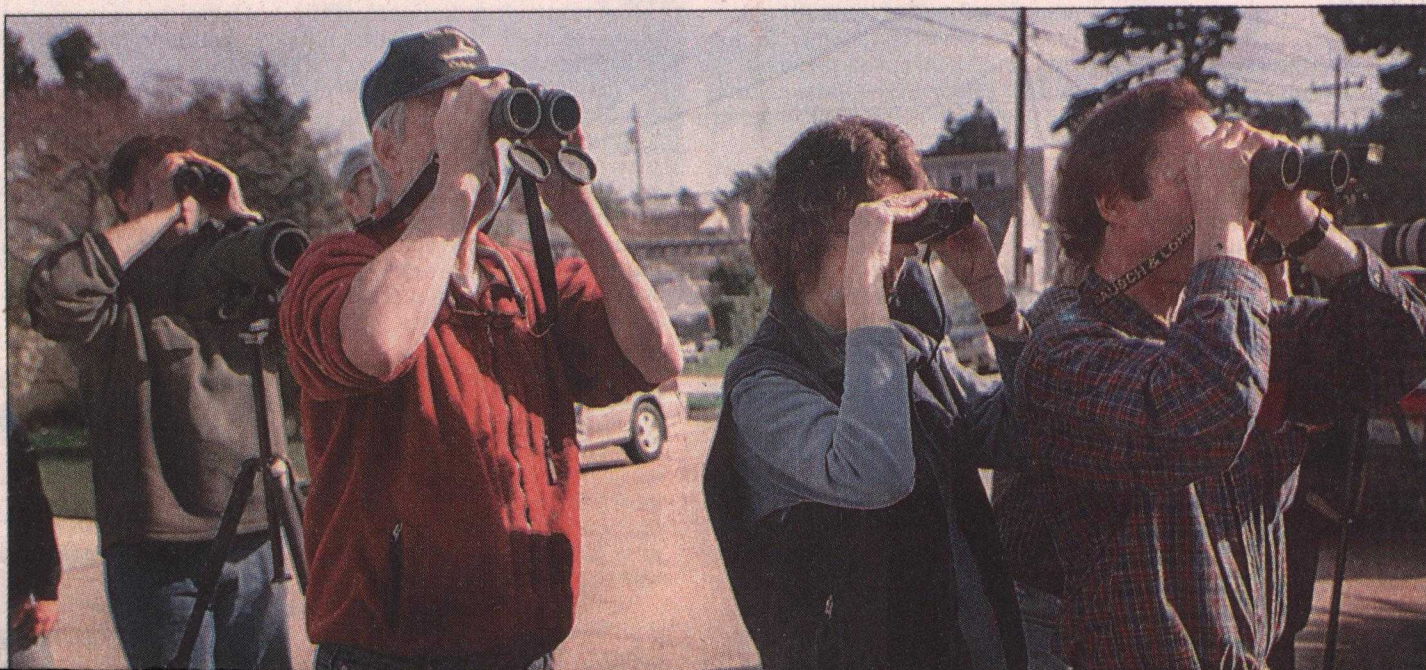
One holler and they were off, rushing down the street in a tangled mess of tripods and guidebooks, sling-ing scopes across their backs with a steely look in their eyes. The rare bird had been spotted.

They arrived at a bush near Laurel and King streets, breathless. But in a second they were off again, racing back up the street, the bird in flight.

"Ohhh, Ohhhh! Across the road, across the road!" one bird watcher cried, pointing frantically as the bird crossed to the other side.

"It's being chased by a Merlin!" yelled another.

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It must have eyed the birders below with some amusement. At least a dozen faces peered intently up, binoculars trained.

"Oh, beautiful," said one.

"There it is! There's the yellow on the secondaries," exclaimed another happily, relieved to have spotted the bird's distinguishing mark. The species could now be added to his list of first-sightings, a major coup.

Bird watchers from as far as Dublin, Mountain View, Hayward and more descended upon Santa Cruz Saturday to see a Nutting's Flycatcher, a rare bird from Southern Mexico spotted on Laurel Street on New Year's Day. Michelle Scott, a birdwatcher and niece of Rick and Barbara Linzer, who live at 1425 Laurel St., discovered the bird.

The entourage only marks the beginning of a pilgrimage expected to attract birders from throughout the nation, and possibly the world, as word spreads. Already, the flycatcher has drawn a well-known bird photographer from Los Altos and an ornithologist from San Francisco State University.

The news was posted on bird listserves and hotlines Friday.

The first sighting ever of a Nutting's this far north, the flycatcher's visit marks only the fourth time the bird's been seen in the United States. Two years ago, it was spotted in Orange County.

The pale brown bird with a yellow belly and white throat has been hanging out in trees along Laurel Street since Wednesday, calling out in a sharp, short "pwik, pwik!" when feeling verbose. About the size of an adult man's hand, the bird hasn't moved beyond the block



bound by King Street and Escalona Drive.

"There are people who, upon hearing this, will buy a ticket immediately to come and see it," said Greg Hunter, a longtime birder from Santa Cruz.

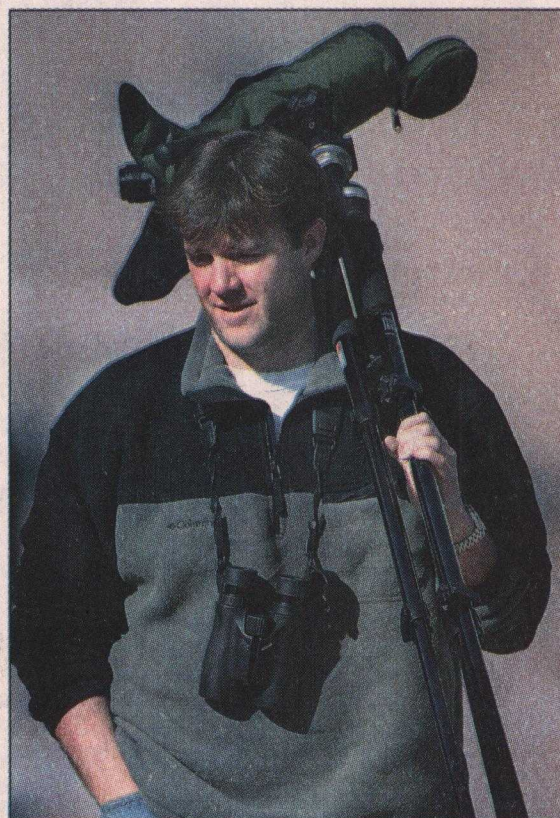
Bird watchers probably have El Niño to thank for the flycatcher, which was likely blown the wrong way in a storm, said Peter Grunow a 14-year-old birder from Hayward.

The second-most popular outdoor pastime next to gardening, bird watching boasts 70 million followers. Rare sightings often draw large crowds — two years ago, for example, a Greater Sandplover at Stinson Beach in San Francisco drew hundreds. It was the first time the Central Asian native had set wing in the Western Hemisphere. A tufted duck has also been seen in Westlake Park this winter.

Sightings are added to the personal bible of birding, one's "life list." Ratcheting up rare sightings on this list carries powerful prestige in bird worlds. Birders also travel distances to add sightings to regional lists — which track birds seen in specific areas. Having a state list, a county list, a life list and more is not uncommon among birdophiles.

It's a family affair for some. Take Grunow, for example, whose mother, brother and father all bird watch together.

While the allure of the sport may be mys-



TOP: Birders flock to the sighting of a Nutting's Flycatcher along Laurel Street Saturday.

LEFT: Craig Hunter comes equipped with some high-powered optics, looking for a chance to spot the rare Nutting's Flycatcher.

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terious to some, birders have ready explanations for their "obsession" — a word commonly heard and admitted to Saturday. The flycatcher made 395 sitings for Grunow's list.

"It taps into that deep human obsession with seeing all there is to see," said Hunter. "You can go out and see 100 species of birds in one day."

"It's the thrill of going after something you haven't seen before," agreed Michael Grunow, Peter's college-aged brother.

But the pastime is also uniquely democratic in its accessibility, birders said.

"You just get a cheap pair of binoculars and use your feet," said Marlene Grunow, Peter's mother.

Costs quickly escalate, however, with degree of obsession.

Avid birders aren't afraid to spend thousands on high-tech scopes and camcorders in their quest to conquer the fowl frontier. Hunter, for example, eyed the flycatcher through a sleek, \$1,700 Leica brand scope Saturday. The instrument's clarity, contrast and high-powered magnification make the money worth it, he said.

In fact, the bird industry is big business, bringing in some \$20 million annually to equipment, travel and seed stores throughout the country, according to the Northern American Bird Conservation Initiative.

With more than 10,000 species of birds to see in the world, it's not hard to see why.

"No matter how much time you spend (bird watching), there will always be a bunch of people better than you," said Hunter. "It's just a fascinating collection of organisms to study."

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