

Birders a-twitter over visitor

Asian warbler draws flock of watchers

By JASMINE FOX
Sentinel correspondent

SANTA CRUZ — A faulty inner compass brought a rare visit from the Siberian dusky warbler this week, and dozens of bird watchers from all over the state chased it to Santa Cruz to get a good glimpse.

"The navigational system in its brain got messed up, and it basically went the wrong direction," said David Suddjian, former president of the Santa Cruz Bird Club. According to Suddjian, many bird species, called "vagrants," have a pattern of showing up in the wrong locations.

But the dusky warbler, better suited to locales in northeast India and Southeast Asia, has been seen in California only five times before now, said Don Roberson, a member of the Monterey Bird Club who came out to Antonelli Pond by Natural Bridges State Beach Wednesday to verify the siting.

"When it first occurred 15 years ago, it blew people away," Roberson said. But he said the bird, a drab shade of dull brown, may not be very noticeable to the general public.

"It even took me about an hour to find it," Roberson said. "Unlike North American warblers, which come in very bright shades, Old World warblers from Asia come in very dull shades of brown and olive," Roberson said.

The dusky warbler's most dis-

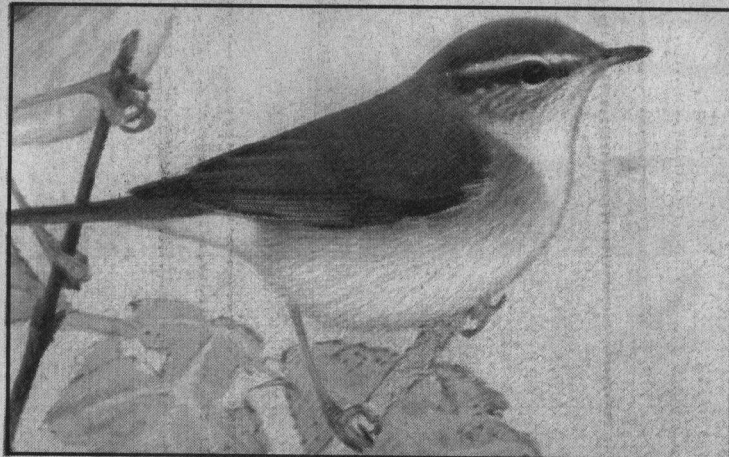


Dan Coyro/Sentinel

tinguishing feature, for those interested in finding it, is a white stripe down the front of its face, according to Roberson. But dusky warbler aficionados may have only a few more days to witness the bird, he said, because it is migrating to the equator.

That is why bird watchers flocked here quickly. According to bird enthusiasts at Antonelli Pond Thursday, the reason so many bird watchers knew of the siting was because it was posted on the Internet Wednesday evening.

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Birders from around the state came to Antonelli Pond to see the Siberian dusky warbler, shown at left.

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Asian visitor

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Sherry Howe, owner of the Santa Cruz bird store, The Bird Feeder, said she met many out-of-town bird watchers when she visited Antonelli Pond Thursday morning.

"I met one woman who had driven all night from Los Angeles, and a couple people from Hollister and San Francisco," Howe said. "People come from a long way, because they either see it here or in China."

The dusky warbler is not very skittish, according to local bird watcher Anna Kopitov.

"I was surprised," she said. "There were 30 people trying to

squeeze into this very small space this morning to see it, and making a lot of noise." But she said the high-profile bird just sat there preening and feeding on insects, while watchers clamored for a glance.

Bert McKee, a bird watcher from Pescadero, spent all day Wednesday and Thursday spying on the bird.

"My parents tell me that the first words I ever spoke were bird names," McKee said. "But my uncle's the one who got me serious about birds six years ago."

McKee said he has "chased a number of birds in California."

The furthest he traveled to see a rare bird was the Tijuana River in San Diego to see a Belcher's Gull.

But some bird experts, like Suddjian, are not too keen on driving all night to see a rare bird. "I did it at one time, but I don't see any point in it anymore," said Suddjian, who said he's more interested in adequately documenting and verifying rare bird sitings.

"People are coming from all over the state, and using up all this gas and money," he said. "Chasing birds around is just a wasteful sport."