

Local Bird Life - Nice To Know

By BARBARA BURKLO
Sentinel Staff Writer

There they are, flying around and living their busy lives, and most of us can identify only a few of them.

Many people wish they were better acquainted with our bird population - which in this area is prolific - but are overwhelmed by their many types.

Bob Ramer, member of the Santa Cruz Bird Club, has some good advice.

He says it's always helpful to know a bird expert who will take you out on a field trip and help you get started in bird identification. And of course the Bird Club is glad to have visitors.

But, if you want to work on your own, Bob suggests that first you narrow down your field of vision.

Basically, he says, there are two parts to the bird family - Passerine, including the songbirds, and Non-Passerine, including birds without true songs - ducks and other water birds, hummingbirds, woodpeckers, etc.

If you live along the ocean, you may want to study the Non-Passerines and if you're in a more urban environment you may choose the Passerines. The main thing is to concentrate on the birds nearest you, the birds you are seeing every day.

Study helps are the Santa Cruz Museum, meetings of the Bird Club, or two books that Bob especially recommends - BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA, by Robbins, Braun, Zim and Singer, from Golden Press; and the classic, BIRDS OF THE WESTERN UNITED STATES by Roger Troy Peterson.

"For the beginner," Bob says, "the subtle differences in different birds are overwhelming - it's the same as seeing the headlight of a car and telling what make it is - every bird has a field mark or combination of field marks that differentiates it from every other bird, even though to the novice they all look alike."

If you want to attract birds to your area or yard, Bob has several points to stress.

"As a rule, there is plenty of habitat for birds here, but wrens, for instance, might benefit from bird houses.

"The starling has taken over many of the natural nesting sites of the smaller woodpeckers, bluebirds and wrens, and will even drive them out of their nesting sites."

He cites the example of the kestrel or sparrow hawk, which will feed on other birds-though usually feeding on mice and insects, being driven away from their habitat by the aggressive starlings.

"Bluebirds are being decimated by them," Bob says. "...try to discourage starlings if you want other birds to come in."

He says that birds usually need water more than food - that water can be a critical factor for them. Thus, he believes more birds will be attracted by a bird bath than by a bird feeder.

For those who wish to maintain bird feeders, he warns that the more extravagant, fancy feeders sometimes actually scare birds away and it may take a long time for birds to realize that food is available in them.

"If you want to attract seed eaters, like song sparrows, towhees, juncos and goldfinches, put out sunflower seed, chicken scratch, etc.," Bob advises.

"If you want insectivorous birds like robins,

wrens, woodpeckers and chickadees, put out high protein food like suet and peanut butter.

"My own birds like crunchy peanut butter best - in fact, they've gone on welfare and prefer it to natural foods!"

He notes that people can make combination bird feeders that will attract both kinds of birds - with suet above and the seed containers below.

He speaks of the different personalities in the bird world.

"Birds that require specialized food, like the predators - hawks, owls - are loners," he says. "Most of the shore birds are gregarious and flock together."

"The hummingbird is pugnacious - will attack dogs, cats, humans in their territory during the breeding season. They consider you a threat to their nesting site."

Bob does volunteer work for the Point Reyes Bird Observatory, presently helping with a survey of the breeding biology of the snowy plover. It is a small shore bird that breeds along beaches along the California coast. Goal is to find out if increased human activity on beaches will disturb them. He works for a team. John and Ricky Warriner of Pajaro Dunes, who, March through September, spend 10 hours a day, seven days a week, watching the snowy plover. They band them and keep track of the fledglings.

"They are true scientists, in every sense of the word," Bob says.

The Santa Cruz Bird Club meets on the last Thursday evening of the month, September through May, usually on the lower floor of the Santa Cruz County Museum. Before field trips, they meet to view slides of birds they are likely to see.

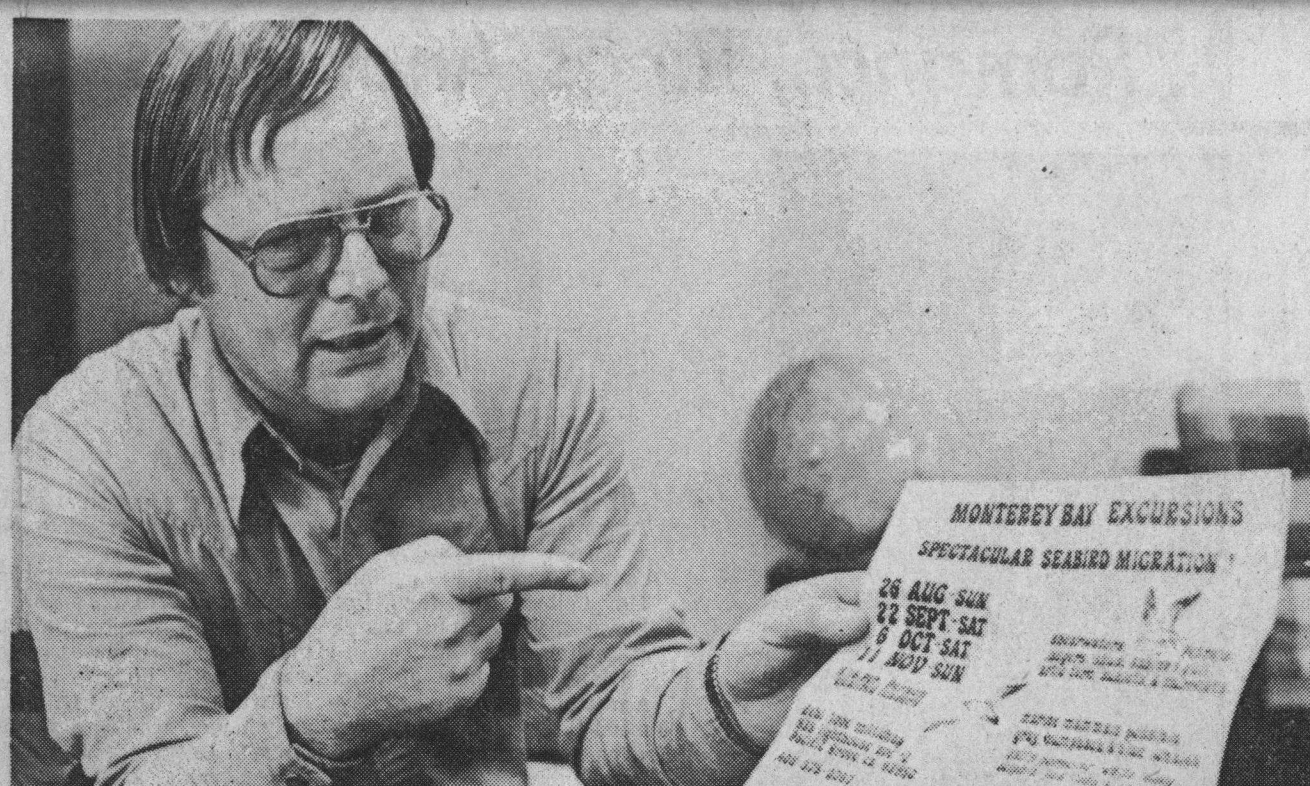
Their trips take them to Elkhorn Slough, Ana Nuevo, Natural Bridges, the mouth of the San Lorenzo River, Corcoran Lagoon, Pajaro Dunes and other locations.

First field trip of the fall will be August 26, when they will charter a boat and go out in Monterey Bay to view the pelagic birds - and no doubt many marine mammals as well.

Space is still available, and interested persons are invited to call Bob at 724-3747, or Dorothy Lilly, club president, 475-9455.

Birds Have Friends

Bob Hargis and Gary Stebins, members of the Santa Cruz Bird Club, spot birds from a marshy area on a club field trip. The some 300 club members range in age from teenagers to elderly persons, and usually stage three field trips a month.



"For the beginning bird watcher, the subtle differences in birds is overwhelming," says Bob Ramer, member of the Santa Cruz Bird Club, "Every type has a field mark or a combination of field marks that differentiates it from every other."