

# Pushed out by development, birds are taking flight — permanently

By CHRIS WATSON  
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**I**N BYGONE DAYS, the flight of birds — and their breeding, mating and flocking — punctuated the human calendar with regularity. The lives of birds caused us to write songs about them, to hold festivals in their honor and to plan our daily lives around their annual appearances and departures.

But things have changed.

Now, Santa Cruz residents can no longer visit the Pajaro River wetlands during the Christmas holidays and see the sky blackened by geese and ducks as they did in years past.

■ *Birds that have adapted to the environment — Page D2*

And while we may still sing about the red-red robin or fold thousands of paper cranes for peace, our

once vital relationship with the bird world has lessened as development and loss of habitat have pushed birds out of the area.

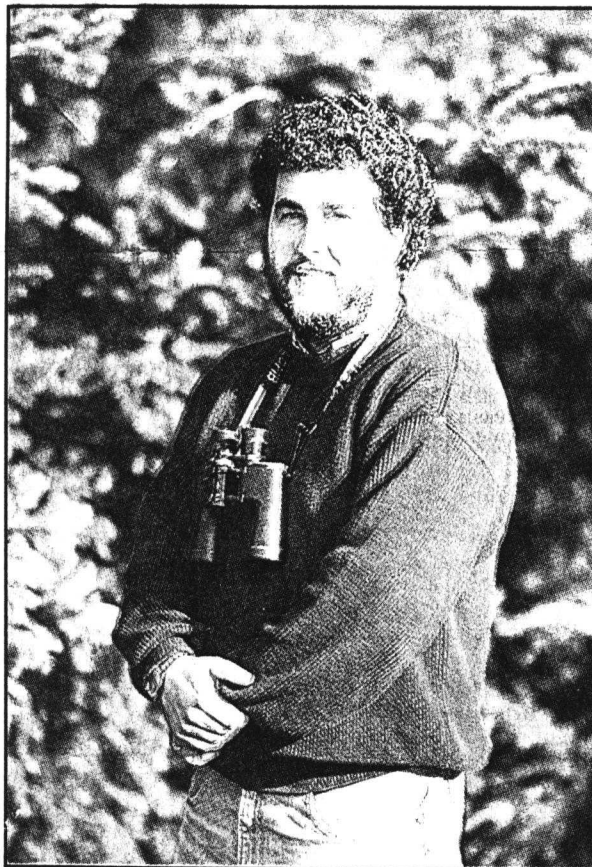
Yet, intrepid bird-watchers persist undaunted.

Every December, bird-watchers around the country and in Central America and the West Indies spend one day, from dawn to dusk, counting birds. Their findings are then published in Audubon's magazine "American Birds" and from that, scientists, enthusiasts and students alike study species distribution, the rise and fall of bird populations, unusual vagrants and indications of environmental change.

While the good news is that Christmas bird counts have been successful at diverting hordes of bird hunters to their cause by being "an instructive and pleasant way to hunt birds without killing," (according to Frank Chapman, Audubon Society editor in 1900), habitat destruction has taken on the mantle as the more virulent menace to bird life over the last 100 years.

Some bird populations have actually increased because they were able to adapt to changes in the environment, according to David Suddjian, record keeper for the Santa Cruz Bird Club. But for the most part, Suddjian said, bird populations have suffered the consequences of urban development and the disappearance of wetlands, grasslands and riparian woodland areas.

"There are around 403 bird species in Santa Cruz



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

David Suddjian of the Santa Cruz Bird Club, says 102 species of local birds have declined over the 125-year history of record-keeping.

County, with 310 of them regularly occurring and the others only occasional visitors," Suddjian said.

"At any one time, there are hundreds of thousands of birds here and that's discounting the birds of the ocean which can, at times, number in the millions."

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# Birds take flight as area changes

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But Suddjian, said, major land use changes in the county have disturbed many bird habitats. Records show that about 102 species of local birds have declined over the 125-year recorded history while only 22 species have increased.

Habitat loss accounts for 81 percent of the bird decline, Suddjian said, with riparian (river woodland) habitats statewide being depleted 89 percent over the last 130 years.

"Once upon a time, the Yellow-billed cuckoo nested along the Pajaro River. The river had a nice flood plain and riparian forests. But when it was developed for agricultural and urban use and the river was constrained between levees, the riparian habitat was reduced to a strip too small to sustain the cuckoos."

Successful bird habitats, Suddjian says, must provide places to find food, cover and places to nest. Each species differs in its requirements.

The Yellow rail, a wetland bird that used to winter here, also has disappeared from Santa Cruz skies.

"This small four- to five-inch bird, a relative of the coot, used to be found in Scotts Valley in the Camp Evers area near Mount Hermon Road and Scotts Valley Drive when that area was a wetland," Suddjian said.

The loss of grasslands, Suddjian said, has resulted in major changes in bird habitat.

"In the Santa Cruz-Capitola-Soquel area, once predominantly grassland, the bank swallow used

## Adapting to the environment

**D**ESPITE THE GENERAL, worldwide decline in bird populations, there have been some local success stories.

But birds sometime thrive where man has altered the environment.

Take the case of the hooded oriole, who owes its local population increase to urban development.

"The hooded oriole was first seen here around 1930," said David Suddjian, record-keeper for the Santa Cruz Bird Club.

"It's a species that nests in fan palm trees, the kind of tree you see a lot of in Southern California."

As developments like those along Morrissey Boulevard were built and palm trees came into vogue for front yard gardens, the hooded oriole population increased accordingly. Now, they're a fairly common sight.

to be common. Back in the '30s and '40s, they nested in holes they excavated along the bluffs and they foraged in the upland areas. The swallow nesting sites in Pajaro have been disturbed, too, and now the only bank swallows we have are rare migrants in the spring or fall," he said.

When it comes to discussing the habitats of birds, however, Sudd-

jian is adamant that the reduction in old-growth forests is the single biggest culprit in the reduction in bird species.

"Fragments of old-growth forests are all that's left. In Santa Cruz, the marbled murrelet nests in those forest fragments still found in Big Basin, Butano, Portola State Park and elsewhere, but with the

reduced area, the murrelet numbers are also reduced. Recently, the marbled murrelet was named a threatened species by the federal government."

Intervention by federal agencies in the form of protection and recovery programs are the only way — outside of drastic lifestyle changes by human populations — to stop the decline in bird populations, according to Suddjian.

"On the federal level, there is a project in the works to prepare a list over the next two years of all endangered animals and to develop a recovery plan for those species.

"But it's a complicated question. When you look at a single species, you can focus your concern; but when you look at bird communities as a whole, it becomes hard to come up with a single, blanket idea because of all the different habitat requirements and the different histories of the different populations."

Brian Walton, coordinator of UCSC's Predatory Bird Research Group, agrees with Suddjian's assessment of the difficulties involved. And Walton, too, places the blame for the decimation of bird species most decidedly in the lap of man.

"Man has made too great an impact on the environment for us ever to return to the way things were. Human populations have grown too large, everything is weighted towards man. There can be no balance..."

Suddjian added that man's alteration of the environment extends

while man and his enviro-tampering have resulted in the destruction of many bird habitats, man himself is the only species that can intervene and stop that destruction.

"It's not realistic to think we can return (the ecological balance) to the way it was in the past," Suddjian said, "but we are in a situation to maintain the habitats that still exist."

Walton added, however, "I'm realistic, not pessimistic, about the future. We need to change the economic situation first; any plan to reverse the ecological trend is dependent upon getting the funding."

— Chris Watson

# Bird count shows a changing habitat

**T**HE 35TH ANNUAL Christmas bird count in Santa Cruz yielded a count of 60,815 birds and 184 species. The numbers, however, can be misleading, according to David Suddjian of the Santa Cruz Bird Club.

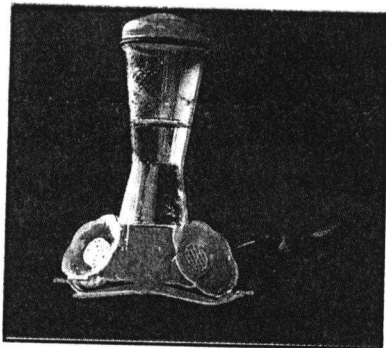
For instance, the high number of robins found this year — more than 8,000 — suggests that California is still a favorite wintering site for the bird. But Suddjian cautioned that robins are an “eruptive” species. “Like the red-breasted nuthatch, the red crossbill and the evening grosbeak, the robin can be numerous one year and scarce the next year,” he said.

“There is a natural variation for any species from year to year,” Suddjian said, also pointing out that any high numbers seen this year will have to be modified to reflect the higher than average number of people — 88 — helping count birds.

Still, some of the numbers gleaned during the Dec. 19 count seem to be solid evidence of changes in bird habitat.

- Western bluebird: only two were found, while there are usually closer to 20.

“They’ve declined as a species in general because of the loss of grassland and orchards and because starlings are competing for their nesting sites,” Suddjian said.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

Hummingbirds are finally recovering from the freeze of 1990.

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## The drought, freeze and loss of grasslands have taken a toll on some birds.

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- American bittern: none of these marsh birds, related to herons and egrets, were found this year or last. Suddjian sus-

pected that the drought is affecting their nesting sites.

- Ducks: populations of Green-wing teals, American wigeons and Ring-neck ducks were all down and nary a Greater scaup was found, although they usually find a few.

- Ravens, crows and jays: all are on the increase due to their omnivorous habitats and general adaptability.

- Anna’s hummingbirds: these birds are returning to normal numbers after being heavily affected by the freeze of December 1990.

“The freeze particularly affected those birds who eat insects or nectar. Last year, their numbers were below average, as were the Townsend’s warblers, another insect-eating bird,” Suddjian said.

After the freeze, some hummingbirds survived by sucking on manzanita flowers and by dipping into backyard birdfeeders.

But, said Suddjian, if your hummingbird feeder remains untouched, that doesn’t mean the flutterers aren’t around; it merely means they prefer to feast on the abundant flowers of the eucalyptus tree.

— Chris Watson