

Spring 2013 Birdathon: The Jack Sparrows



A four-hour tour
Supporting the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society

by Barry & Ginger Langdon-Lassagne
April 12, 2013

This is the first year we limited ourselves to a four-hour birdathon. In previous years we had participated in the 24-hour variety, starting our birding adventures as early as 4am and ending well after dark. But this year Barry's back was an issue: he had gone through several month's of physical therapy and didn't want to undo the good that that had done. Opting for the shorter birdathon meant we had to budget our time wisely. And to maximize our species count, we wanted to start when the birds would be most active. Birds, especially forest birds, tend to be active in the morning and the evening. So, we started in the forest, at ten minutes before 8am, to catch the morning shift.

We began on the shore of **Stevens Creek Reservoir**, picking this spot because it had forest, lake, shore and sky, all of which are grand places to find birds. We unloaded from the car all that we would need: binoculars, daypack, jackets, water bottles and a spotting scope. We each set a timer to keep track of our progress: Barry set a stopwatch so we could make sure we stayed inside our four-hour window; Ginger set

What is a Birdathon?

The Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society's annual spring birdathon is a fundraiser and contest to support science education programs.

Teams compete to identify as many species of birds as possible while staying within the county's boundaries. Prizes are awarded for the most species seen, most money raised, rarest bird, best photograph and other categories.

Teams can choose either a 4-hour or 24-hour time slot. The competition runs from March 23 to April 21.

And who are The Jack Sparrows?

Every team that competes picks a name. The name is often a pun or a silly variant of a bird species name.

We chose "The Jack Sparrows" as the name for Team Ginger & Barry back in 2006 because the main character in the movie "Pirates of the Caribbean" is Captain Jack Sparrow, and we were fans. And because it's a fun name.

her interval timer to beep every half hour, to keep us aware of the passage of time. We even wrote down our start time, in case of utter electronics failure.

Once the timer started, we began counting birds: A Common Merganser swimming near the shoreline. Canada Geese sitting on the bank by the boat launch. A Pied-billed Grebe diving in the middle of the lake. And on it went. Barry frantically wrote each bird name on a piece of paper, also recording the time and the location. Once it appeared that we had seen most of what there was to see, we hurriedly jumped in the car and drove to the next stop.



Ginger looking for waterbirds on Stevens Creek Reservoir

The rules of the Birdathon are simple: You can count any wild and free bird that you see, or any that you hear, but you have to be really certain of your identification. Escapees, such as parrots, cannot be counted, but birds that only migrate through the county can. All birding has to happen within the county, so if you are on the edge of the county and a bird is perched or flying across that invisible geographic boundary, you can't count it...unless it flies onto your side. This is actually an issue, for example, at San Francisquito Creek in Palo Alto Baylands. The creek is the boundary between San Mateo

and Santa Clara counties, and often hosts interesting birds that stubbornly refuse to cross the water over to “our” side of the bank.

Santa Clara County has recorded 399 different species of birds over the years, but some are only here in the winter, some only in summer, and some are one-time rarities blown in by a storm or other unusual event. The most ever seen in a year by a single birder is 291 species. The county record for most species seen by any group of birders in a single day is 177, set in 2007. Up until this year, the record for a 24-hour Audubon Birdathon in this county was 170 species, set last year by the “Varied Twitchers.” However, this year, that record has already been broken -- a team lead by Rob Furrow found 176 species, birding **entirely by bicycle**! Not all the teams have competed yet. The “Varied Twitchers” -- who invariably win the contest for greatest number of species seen -- go out on April 20. This is an interesting and exciting year!

Our goals were much more modest, given Barry’s recovering back and the fact that four hours is a very short amount of time. We were hoping to get 90 species.

One bit of good news starting out was that Barry’s back had been improving every day, and he felt confident carrying binoculars, a daypack and his heavy camera for the four-hour stint. Also, the weather was in our favor. It was sunny, warming up and windless when our timers started at 7:50am on the lakeshore.

Our second stop was at a trailhead leading up into **Picchetti Ranch Open Space Preserve**. Before hiking into the forest we stopped to take another look down at the lake, which netted us three new



Ginger on the Bear Meadow Trail in Picchetti Ranch Open Space Preserve

species: Double-crested Cormorant, Black-crowned Night-Heron and Killdeer.

Our hike up the Bear Meadow Trail into Picchetti took us through beautiful Oak-Bay forest with many wildflowers blooming alongside the trail. Our ears were pricked for any sounds, and we called out bird species to each other as Barry wrote down our sightings. Anna's Hummingbird...Nuttall's Woodpecker... Lesser Goldfinch... this early in the trek, the birds get checked off rapidly. We were thrilled to discover, very early in our hike, our favorite bird of the day: a Wilson's Warbler. Wilson's Warblers are tiny bright yellow birds with a black cap on their heads. The bird posed for us in a patch of poison oak.



Wilson's Warbler on Poison Oak



Brown Creeper climbing an oak

We may have spent too long observing this one individual, but it was so delightful to watch.

Soon after the warbler, Ginger heard a Brown Creeper call from the trunk of a nearby oak tree; Barry quickly took a series of photos as it worked its way up the tree, hunting for bugs with its long, curved bill. This was one of the more elusive birds and a great catch for the day. We were caught up in the awe of birdwatching when: Beep, beep, beep! The thirty-minute timer went off seemingly way too early. We had only 23 species so far. We

quickened our pace, heading up the hill until we got to the chaparral and coyote bush habitat where we found Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, only recently arrived from its Spring migration. We tallied a few more birds as we headed back down the hill. The one-hour timer beeped ominously before we made it back to the car.

We quickly drove to our next planned stop at the headwaters of the reservoir. We briefly debated whether to take the time when a Warbling Vireo called from the top of a



Bewick's Wren on a bay tree branch



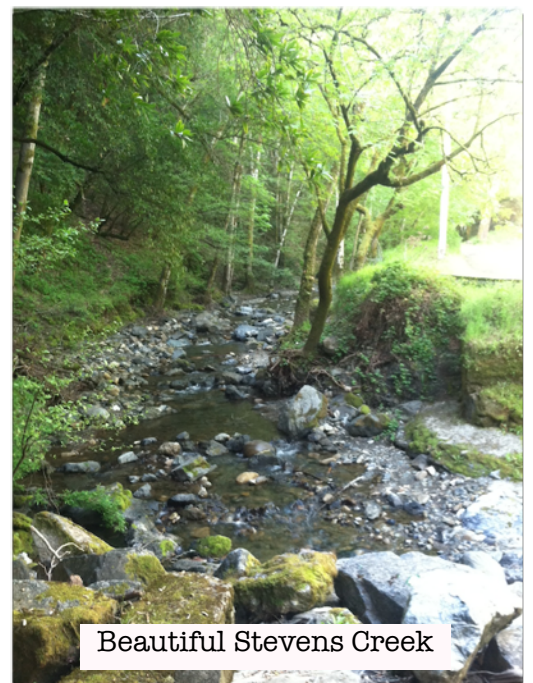
Townsend's Warbler in the willows

sycamore, and a cacophany of responding birdsong began in the willow thicket below us. We chose to stay, if only for a few minutes, and picked up several more warbler sightings for our trouble.

Again, we debated stopping when we hit

the **Canyon Picnic Area**, where we hoped, but failed, to see a Western Tanager. Instead, we found **Bob Power** leading a group of birders who were practicing birding by ear. Bob Power is the Executive Director of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society. He was happy to see us out birding and wished us all the best. We left him to guide his class and not tempt him to tell us what they had heard. Oh, yeah! Another rule of Birdathons is that you aren't supposed to ask fellow birders for assistance.

We drove up **Stevens Canyon Road** following Stevens Creek, which uphill from the reservoir is a quickly-rushing stream, until we got to the spot where we were hoping to find an American Dipper. Barry had seen and photographed dippers here only a few days before; we knew exactly where to look. We were targeting this



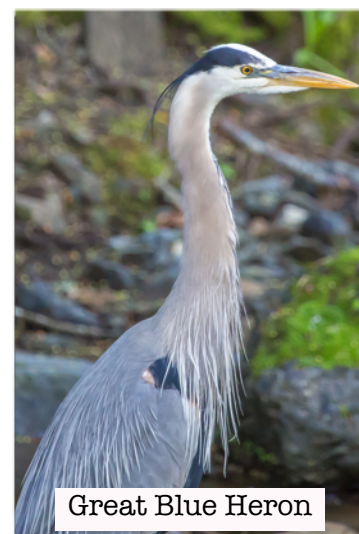
Beautiful Stevens Creek



Barry scouting Stevens Creek in search of the elusive Dipper

specific bird, fairly rare in the county, and very local. Dippers live exclusively adjacent to cold, swiftly-running streams where they feed by walking underwater along the streambed; there are only a couple places in all of Santa Clara County to see one. We really wanted to see one. We spent every precious minute from 9:17am to 9:44am trying, without success, to find this bird. We did get a great view of a Great Blue Heron standing on a rock in the middle of the creek, and we saw a flock of Band-tailed Pigeons, so it wasn't a complete waste of time. However, we learned a lesson in time management, and next time we won't spend 27 minutes looking for a single species of bird, no matter how beloved.

We rushed down the canyon, wondering what we could skip to make up time. We decided that we would stop at the **Villa Maria Picnic Area**, but for much less time than planned. We were rewarded by the melodious tones of a singing Black-headed Grosbeak as we pulled into the parking lot. A pair of Common Ravens were canoodling on the split-rail fence; a White-breasted Nuthatch gave its "yank-yank" call from an enormous white oak, just leafing out for



Great Blue Heron

springtime. Now it was after 10am; we had less than two hours to go, and we had to make it down to the bay.



Barry looking for shorebirds at Charleston Slough

The bayland habitat is completely different from the forest and lake habitat where we had spent our first two hours, and thus the birds are also completely different. For number of species, the bay can be richer than the forest, and because the mud flats, sloughs, tidal pools and brackish lakes are wide open, you can see a lot farther and cover more territory more quickly.

We had spent more than half our time in the forest, where the birds are elusive and trees block the view. Our species total was only 47. Our goal of 90 seemed far off, and to make matters worse, we hit a traffic jam as Highway 85 merged into 101. We consulted maps looking for some form of alternate route, some backroad, but crawling on the freeway was pretty much our only choice. We watched the seconds disappear as we finally pulled off for **Palo Alto Baylands** at 10:32am. 1 hour, 18 minutes to go.

Luckily, the Baylands were rich with birds, and our strategy of birding on a weekday paid off in fewer people (and fewer dogs. Sorry,

dog-lovers -- canines definitely spook the birds!) We tallied up species fairly quickly, running from the parking lot near the visitor center to the duck pond down the road, then back along the mud flats. Ducks, egrets, a Northern Harrier (a kind of hawk), some shorebirds, and very little time left.



Great Egret at Palo Alto Baylands

We knew we had to get to Charleston Slough, because of its rich variety of bayside habitats. Shoreline Lake attracts many interesting birds, and the marshes and salt flats nearby are all famous birding hotspots. Unfortunately, the way from Palo Alto Baylands to Charleston Slough was blocked by construction

along the frontage road. At 11:03am we were cursing under our breath as we crawled past the tractors, dump trucks and orange cones, hoping to get free quickly.

A quick stop at the **Emily Renzel Wetlands** pullout netted us American White Pelican and a few other birds.

We made it to our final destination, **Charleston Slough**, with 23 minutes left on our



Greater Yellowlegs at Shoreline Lake

clock. Barry grabbed the spotting scope out of the car and we ran to **Shoreline Lake**. We were in such a rush that Barry forgot to record some of the species on our paper list. We saw Black Skimmers, Eared Grebe, Greater Yellowlegs and other hoped-for birds. We saw Tree Swallows in a nest box, and a Savannah Sparrow posed for us at the topmost of a branch of mustard plant. We picked out “peeps” (tiny shorebirds that are difficult to distinguish from one another, except by leg-color) in our last few minutes, then sprinted to the creek channel in hopes of a Common Gallinule... but Ginger’s watch beeped an end to our adventure.



We caught our breath, relieved that no new, uncounted species appeared as we walked slowly, a little crestfallen, back to the car. We were feeling good, but we also believed our count was probably pretty shy of our goal. Barry had only recorded 83 species on the paper list, but he was pretty sure he’d forgotten a few at the end there. So we got out the county list and we walked through it, looking for birds that Barry had neglected to write down. Sure enough the Skimmer, the Grebe, the Yellowlegs had all failed to be recorded, as well as several others. When we were done checking, we were delighted to discover that we had 92 species. We beat our goal!!!! We felt elated.

Also, Barry managed to photograph 64 of them, which was 64 more species than he expected to be able to capture when his back was still recovering and we were planning our adventure.



Forster's Tern carrying away a fish -- Shoreline Lake

Link to all the photos:

http://www.pbase.com/wilmot/birdathon_2013_spring

Birding locations in order:

Lakeshore Picnic Area, Stevens Creek County Park

Mid-lake, Stevens Creek Reservoir

Bear Meadow Trail, Picchetti Ranch, parking on Stevens Canyon Road

Top of Stevens Creek Reservoir, where Stevens Creek enters the reservoir

Canyon Picnic Area, Stevens Creek County Park

"Dipper Spot," Stevens Canyon Road

Via Maria Picnic Area, Stevens Creek County Park

Highway 85, transit

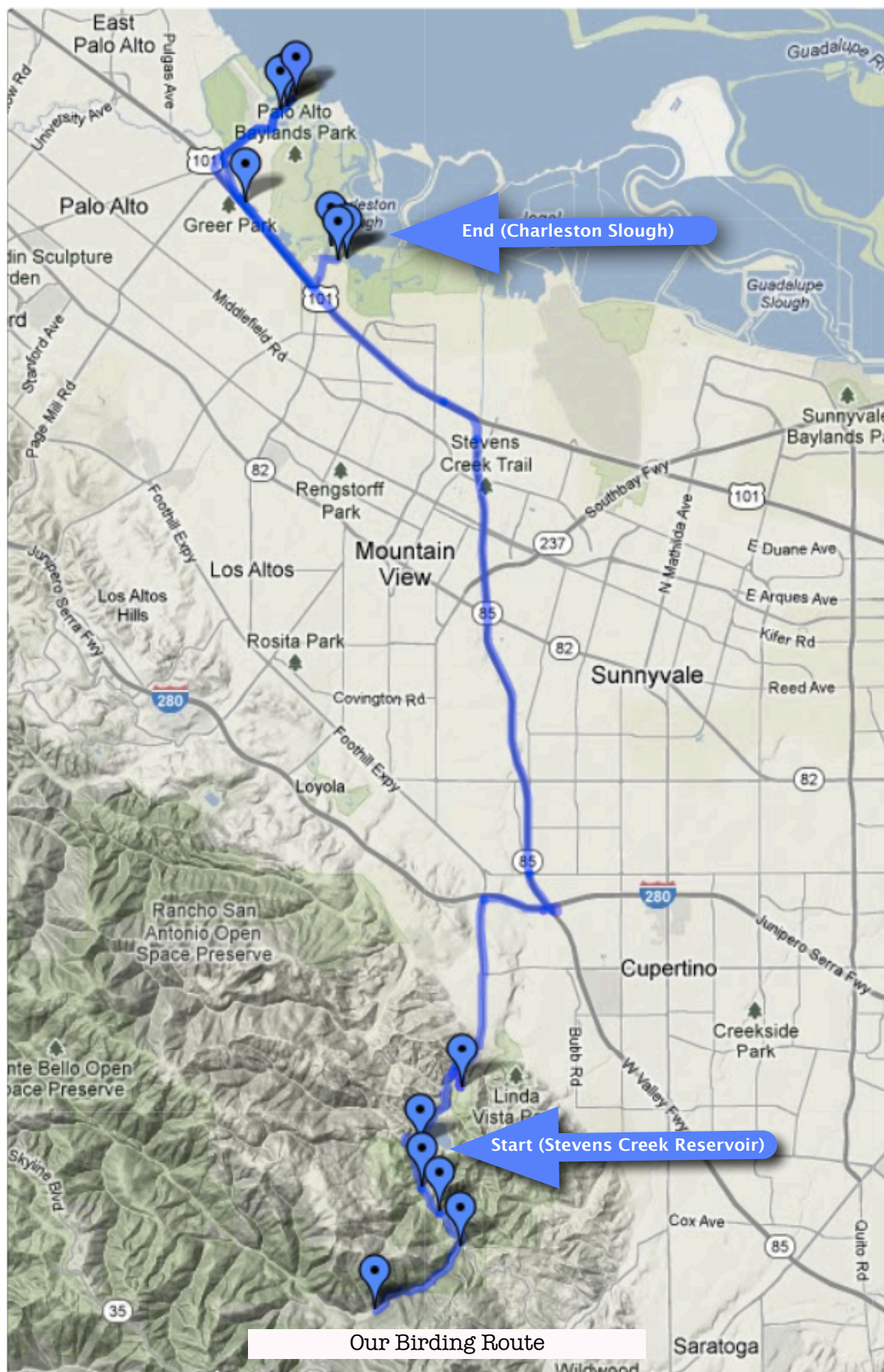
Palo Alto Baylands

Palo Alto Duck Pond

Shoreline Lake

Charleston Slough

Map of our Route:



Birds in order of sighting:

Key:

v = seen

h = heard (often seen later in the day)

h,v = found by call or song, seen soon afterwards

v, Common Merganser 7:50am -- Stevens Creek Reservoir, Lakeshore
Picnic Area

v, Mallard

v, Canada Goose

h, Wrentit (v 8:32am)

v, Pied-billed Grebe

h, Orange-crowned Warbler (v 8:14am)

v, Double-crested Cormorant -- Picchetti lower parking

h,v, Killdeer

v, Black-crowned Night-Heron

h, Oak Titmouse -- Hiking Picchetti, Bear Meadow Trail

v, American Crow 7:56am

h, Red-shouldered Hawk

v, Violet-green Swallow

v, Dark-eyed Junco 8:02am

h,v, Chestnut-backed Chickadee

h, Bushtit (v)

h, Lesser Goldfinch (v)

h, Nuttall's Woodpecker (v, "5:10am")

h, Northern Flicker

h, Anna's Hummingbird (v)

v, Wilson's Warbler (8:15am)

h,v, Bewick's Wren (8:15am)

h, Townsend's Warbler 8:26am (v 8:57am)

h,v, Brown Creeper (8:30am)

h,v, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (8:35am)

h, Pacific-slope Flycatcher (v)

h,v, Steller's Jay

h, Spotted Towhee (v)

h,v, Yellow-rumped Warbler 8:39am
h, Acorn Woodpecker (v 9:09am)
h,v, Downy Woodpecker 8:48am
v, Western Scrub-Jay
v, European Starling 8:57am -- Laurel Flat area
h,v, Song Sparrow
h,v, Warbling Vireo
h,v, American Robin
h, California Towhee (v)
v, Mourning Dove -- Canyon Picnic Area
v, Band-tailed Pigeon -- Dipper area, upper Stevens Canyon Road 9:20am
v, Red-tailed Hawk
v, Great Blue Heron
v, Turkey Vulture 9:52am
h, California Quail 9:52 Villa Maria
v, Common Raven
h, Black-headed Grosbeak
h,v, Black Phoebe
h, White-breasted Nuthatch
h, Northern Mockingbird 10:11 driving (v at baylands)
v, Rock Pigeon 10:14 Highway 85
v, Cliff Swallow 10:27am
v, House Finch -- Palo Alto Baylands 10:32am
v, American Coot
v, Ruddy Duck
v, Black-necked Stilt
v, American Avocet
v, Barn Swallow
v, Willet
v, Dowitcher
v, Brown-headed Cowbird
v, Great Egret
v, Northern Harrier
v, California Gull
v, Northern Shoveler
v, Green-winged Teal

v, Red-winged Blackbird 10:41am
v, Bullock's Oriole
v, Golden-crowned Sparrow -- Palo Alto Baylands duck pond
v, Ring-billed Gull
v, Greater Scaup
v, Bufflehead
v, Horned Grebe
v, American Wigeon
v, Snowy Egret
v, Canvasback
v, American White Pelican -- Emily Renzel Wetlands
h, Common Yellowthroat
v, Cinnamon Teal
v, Gadwall
h, Marsh Wren (v)
h,v, Forster's Tern
h, House Sparrow
h, Cedar Waxwing
v, Surf Scoter -- Shoreline Lake
v, Greater Yellowlegs
v, Black Skimmer
v, Eared Grebe
v, Tree Swallow
v, Savannah Sparrow
v, White-crowned Sparrow
v, Marbled Godwit
v, Western Sandpiper
v, Least Sandpiper

92 species observed