

# The Jack Sparrows Spring 2015 Birdathon

April 23, 2015

*This is a journal of our Big Day Spring Birdathon, a fund-raiser to support the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society where teams compete to see the most species in the county in a single day. Our self-organized team is called "The Jack Sparrows" and consists of Ginger and me. We birded from 4:30am until sundown. I've included our day list, compiled from our notes taken along the way, interspersed with some stories of our adventure, my thoughts, and some of the pictures we took. The full set of pictures for our adventure can be found at [http://www.pbase.com/wilmot/birdathon\\_2015\\_spring](http://www.pbase.com/wilmot/birdathon_2015_spring).*

There's a moment, as I wake up just before the 3am alarm goes off, when I ask myself "can I do this?" Then I remember why I'm doing this: the excitement of the chase, connecting with Nature and supporting a cause I strongly believe in: environmental education. Then the alarm buzzes and I hit the snooze button: all of that can wait a few more minutes.

We're packed and out the door by 3:30am. We are nearly the only ones on the road, on the freeway, and definitely the only ones on Alpine Road as we wind up toward Monte Bello Open Space Preserve. Two-thirds of the way up the road, we were surprised by our first animal of the day — not a bird, but a native Gray Fox, that ran across the road, evaluated us and disappeared into the bushes. We hadn't seen a fox in years, so that got us excited!

4:13am Gray Fox! Foothill Park entrance

The night had been clear in the valley, but as we suspected, there was fog along the ridge top. As we started down the tree-lined trail we felt raindrops, but it wasn't raining. We quickly realized that the oak trees were catching the fog and condensing it with their leaves, which then dripped down onto us and the trail. Even in a drought, the oak trees find a way to water themselves. We thought about water a lot, and how California's wildlife has been through many droughts before and come out just fine. Certainly these oak trees, with their circles of self-made rain, would make it through.

## **Monte Bello Open Space Preserve**

4:29am 46°F at Monte Bello. Foggy and calm

4:53 western toad, western chorus frog

At first there was no sound on the trail but our footsteps and our breathing. The frog calls became clearer as we passed a marshy spot. And then we heard our first bird of the day: Western Screech-Owl. It was calling down in the canyon below us, faintly at first, but later came in louder and clearer. We heard at least two screech-owls as we hiked, as well as the distant booming of Great Horned Owls.

- 1      4:56 Western Screech-Owl!
- 2      4:59 Great horned Owl
- 3      5:17 Black-throated Gray Warbler
- 5:28 California newts on the trail

California newts, a native relative of salamanders, come out when it's wet outside. Apparently the fog and the dripping from the trees was enough for them, as we saw many newts along the trail as we hiked. We shone our headlamps along the trail in front of us to make sure that we did not tread on any of them.

- 4      Steller's Jay
- 5      Spotted Towhee
- 6      American Robin
- 7      Black-headed Grosbeak

We were about 1 1/2 miles in, up the Indian Creek Trail on the west side of Black Mountain where the oak, bay and douglas-fir trees give way to chaparral and California lilac bushes, when we decided to descend back into the forest for the greater diversity of birds.

- 8      5:58 Chestnut-backed Chickadee
- 9      California Quail
- 10     Bewick's Wren
- 11     California Towhee

Before 6am the "dawn chorus" had started up. We started counting birds by their call, most of which we would see later in the day. But identifying by call alone counts on a birdathon, so long as you can reliably identify the species. Unfortunately, there were a few birds we never could identify.

- 6:12 unknown caller "sweet" x 8
- 12     Orange-crowned Warbler
- 6:17am saw first bird American Robin

Dawn came slowly through the fog, but soon we were able to avoid the newts without needing flashlights.

- 13     Dark-eyed Junco
- 14     Mourning Dove
- 15     American Crow
- 16     6:34 Brown Creeper
- 17     Lego (Lesser Goldfinch)

Down the Skid Road Trail we connected with Stevens Creek and started to hear riparian birds such as the Pacific-slope Flycatcher and, one of our favorites, Pacific Wren. The creek was low, but running.

- 18 Pacific-slope Flycatcher
- 19 Pacific Wren
- 20 Downy Woodpecker 6:41
- 21 Acorn Woodpecker
- 22 Purple Finch
- 23 6:59 Band-tailed Pigeon
- 24 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 25 Pygmy Nuthatch
- 26 Warbling Vireo



*Fog at the top of Monte Bello Open Space Preserve*

Walking up the Stevens Creek Nature Trail, Stevens Creek was dry. It had been running last year, but last year we were hiking in the rain in this same spot. This part of the creek probably doesn't stay running for long after the rains stop, as this is where the creek starts its journey down toward Mountain View and the bay.

- 27 Ash-throated Flycatcher
- 28 European Starling
- 29 Western Bluebird
- 30 Common Raven 8:08am
- 31 Western Scrub-Jay
- 32 Bushtit
- 33 Wrentit
- 34 Anna's Hummingbird
- 35 Northern Flicker 8:19
- 36 Song Sparrow

Back at the car we broke out the thermos of coffee, changed out of our dew-soaked socks and I took the first bird photo of the day: Western Bluebird. Then we headed down the hill to Arastradero.

#### **Arastradero Preserve**

- 37 Red-shouldered Hawk

- 38 Golden-crowned Sparrow
- 39 White-crowned Sparrow
- 40 California Thrasher
- 41 White-tailed Kite
- 42 Cedar Waxwing
- 43 Nuttall's Woodpecker
- 44 Western Kingbird
- 45 BBB (Brewer's Blackbird)
- 46 Brown-headed Cowbird
- 47 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
- 48 Barn Swallow
- 49 House Wren
- 50 HOFI (House Finch)
- 51 Rock Pigeon 9am
- 52 House Sparrow

Arastradero turned out to have a bounty of birds, even though we didn't stay long. Several, such as the gnatcatcher and House Wren we saw here and nowhere else.

We stopped at home briefly, and for the first time birded our local suburban neighborhood as part of the birdathon. It was fun, although a lot of what we saw were repeats from earlier in the day. I did manage to photograph the Cedar Waxwings, which turned out to be one of the more common birds of the day — surprising to me, since years ago they used to be gone by this time of year, migrating back north to Canada. They've been staying longer and longer, as the years pass.

#### **Home Neighborhood**

- 53 Mallards over Lochinvar Ave. 9:20
- 54 Northern Mockingbird
- 55 Killdeer - Corn Palace field 9:42
- 56 Ring-billed Gull

We stopped at McClellan Ranch for a brief look at the bird feeders. There we got a White-breasted Nuthatch which we otherwise would have missed for the day.

#### **McClellan Ranch (Audubon headquarters)**

- 57 Black Phoebe
- 58 10:22 White-breasted Nuthatch
- 59 Northern Rough-winged Swallow
- 60 Violet-green Swallow
- 61 Oak Titmouse

We drove past Stevens Creek Reservoir, noting how full it was! Last year it was just a puddle; this year it looked like it was filled to capacity. I don't know whether the drought was the reason it had gotten low, or whether they had been doing work on it. But it was great to see the water level so high again! We parked at the upper end and hiked down

to a patch that was completely dry last year. This year we had to be careful not to fall in the lake.

**Stevens Creek Reservoir, upper end**

- 62 Hairy Woodpecker
- 63 Double-crested Cormorant
- 64 Western Tanager
- 65 TV (Turkey Vulture)
- Warbling Vireo (photographed)

On the drive back out of Stevens Creek Canyon, we stopped and scanned the lake for birds.

**Stevens Creek Reservoir**

- 66 Canada Goose
- 67 Red-tailed Hawk
- 68 American Coot
- 69 Pied-billed Grebe

Then we surged down the freeway toward the bay, munching on sandwiches and snacks in the closest thing we've had to a break so far in the day. It wasn't yet noon.

**Palo Alto Duck Pond (at Palo Alto Baylands)**

- 70 Bufflehead
- 71 Greater Scaup
- 72 California Gull
- 73 Cliff Swallow
- 74 BCNH (Black-crowned Night-Heron)
- 75 Greater Yellowlegs (and possibly Lesser Yellowlegs? We were never sure enough to add it to our numbers)
- 76 Ruddy Duck
- 77 Gadwall
- 78 Forster's Tern
- 79 Bullocks Oriole

As usual for the baylands, the bird species came so fast it was hard to write them all down in a timely manner. The variety of birdlife is just amazing at all of the places we stopped. If you ever want to see a lot of birds, go to any of the bay parks: Palo Alto Baylands, Charleston Slough, Alviso, etc. It was low tide, so there weren't many shorebirds in close, but we got a few.

**Palo Alto Baylands**

- 80 Black-necked Stilt
- 81 American Avocet
- 82 Marsh Wren
- 83 Snowy Egret

### **Emily Renzel Wetlands**

- 84 Northern Shoveler 12:50pm
- 85 Green Heron
- 86 Common Yellowthroat
- 87 Dowitcher (Long-billed or Short-billed)
- 88 American Wigeon
- 89 Great Egret
- 90 Willet



*American Avocets with chick at Shoreline Lake*

### **Charleston Slough**

- 91 Common Gallinule
- 92 Marbled Godwit
- 93 Black-bellied Plover!
- 94 Semipalmated Plover

A Black-bellied Plover, in full alternate plumage, was a welcome surprise. We had good looks of it through the spotting scope.

### **Shoreline Lake**

- 95 Surf Scoter 1:39pm

I don't think we expected to see much at the Alviso Marina. We were hoping to hear a rail calling in the reeds. That didn't happen, but we did find many great birds on the salt pond. I was most excited about the phalarope, as I thought they would have already migrated away by this time. The Eared Grebes in their fine alternate plumage were also a beautiful sight through our spotting scope.

**Alviso Marina County Park**

- 97 Eurasian Collared Dove
- 98 Eared Grebe
- 99 Western Sandpiper
- 100 Least Sandpiper
- 101 Dunlin
- 102 Wilson's Phalarope!



*Panorama of the boardwalk at Alviso's Environmental Education Center*

**EEC (Environmental Education Center at Alviso)**

- 103 Cackling Goose
- 104 Savannah Sparrow
- 105 Great Blue Heron

Sandy Wool Lake at Ed Levin County Park was basically empty, much to our surprise. That limited the water birds we might see, but we still got our Tree Swallow and a Spotted Sandpiper. What makes one reservoir empty while another is almost full? Where do the birds go when the lake dries up?

**Ed Levin County Park**

- 106 Wild Turkey - Ed Levin 3:50
- 107 RWBB (Red-winged Blackbird — FINALLY!! Very late in the day for such a common bird.)
- 108 Spotted Sandpiper
- 109 Tree Swallow

We drove out Calaveras Road looking for Yellow-billed Magpies and other east-hills birds. The magpies were there, which was nice, but we decided that scoping Calaveras Reservoir wasn't going to be worthwhile, so we turned around to try Marsh Road.



Calaveras Road is narrow and winding, and there were commuters heading to the East Bay all along the road. We were the only ones headed west, so we had to be extra cautious to not get in the way of the commuters.

### **Calaveras Road, Marsh Road**

110 Yellow-billed Magpie 5pm

Our last stop of the day was the top of Sierra Road. This is a regular spot for us and has often given us interesting birds. This year there was something very different from all the previous years: a paved parking area and newly-made hiking trails! Sierra Vista Open Space Preserve is, in my opinion, one of the most beautiful spots in the bay area. We were there as the sun was going down, so the lighting was especially beautiful. And it wasn't too windy today, nor was it pouring rain as it had been last year. We hiked on the Aquila Loop Trail, which was newly opened, along with the parking lot, last August. There we had stunning views of the hillsides with wildflowers and ancient oak trees, Mount Hamilton to the southeast, and the entire south bay to the west below us. On this trail we found a family of Rock Wrens, with one parent feeding two babies. Rock Wren is a fairly rare bird in our county, so seeing one feeding young was extra special.



*Adult Rock Wren at Sierra Vista Open Space Preserve*





*Rock Wren feeding young*



*Ginger and Barry on The Aquila Loop Trail*

**Sierra Road - Sierra Vista Open Space Preserve**

- 111 Western Meadowlark 5:23
- 112 American Kestrel



*American Kestrel*

- 113    Horned Lark! Sierra Azul Aquila Loop 5:48
- 114    Rock Wren family with parent feeding two young
- 115    Lark Sparrow!



*Lark Sparrow*

The Lark Sparrows, one of the more brightly colored sparrows in California, were sitting in the oak trees which also harbored Western Kingbirds (bright yellow) and Bullock's Orioles (stunningly bright orange and black).

We hiked the Sierra Vista Trail after completing the Aquila Loop Trail, but we saw no new birds after the Lark Sparrow. There was a haze in the air obscuring the city below, and the sun was going down toward the western hills where we had started our day. The sun had a pair of bright sun dogs glowing on either side, along with a faint ring and a pillar of light, all caused by ice crystals in the upper atmosphere: a harbinger of rains that would come the next day.



*Sunset with sun dogs and 22° halo*

Total species for the day: 115  
Hours birding: 4:30am to 8pm

Barry & Ginger  
The Jack Sparrows  
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