Audubon’s Vaux’s Happenings—
15 Million and Counting
with Larry Schwitters

An aerialist of western forests, Vaux’s Swifts spend most of the day in the air, taking insects and spiders in rapid, twisting flight. Nature’s exterminator, a nesting pair can harvest nearly 12 thousand insects per day. But a single pair is a rare sighting indeed with up to 35 thousand individuals roosting in the same site.

Unlike its eastern counterpart, the Chimney Swift, Vaux’s Swifts more often make their communal nests in hollow trees in mature evergreen forests. But it’s a chimney that brought Larry Schwitters and the Audubon Society of Portland to the birds’ rescue. The 1925 brick chimney at Chapman Elementary School was one of the largest roosting sites in Washington State. And to save the birds, the children were forgoing use of the attached heating system and bundling up during the roosting season. Sixty-thousand dollars and a new chimney-free heating system later, Schwitters and Audubon expanded the project to tirelessly locate, raise awareness of, and preserve important roost sites all along the swifts’ migratory path, from the Yukon to Guatemala. These sites have been used by over 15 million swifts in the last 26 migrations.

Everything about this swift, the Vaux’s Happening Project, and Project Director Larry “Dr. Swift” Schwitters is fascinating. Join us for a Zoom presentation by the preeminent expert on Vaux’s Swifts as he shares the stories, images, and recordings of this notable species.

No need to bundle up.
Remarkably Unremarkable—

The Orange-crowned Warbler

In the world of warblers, an Orange-crowned Warbler deserves notice not so much for what its plumage features but rather what it lacks. None of the bright colors often noted in other warblers, just drab gray or faintly yellowish green with shadowy streaks on the underparts. The eponymous orange crown is unfortunately rarely seen—primarily when the bird raises its head feathers in agitation. In general, this warbler is so blandly garbed that you have to look for the tiniest traits: a spiky, slightly down-turned beak; a compact body; a modestly long tail. Warmer yellow under the tail (the undertail coverts) may be the most striking feature. Tiny pale eye-arcs or broken spectacles and an eyelash-thin dark eye-line accent the eyes. A low, flat, unmusical, unremarkable trill that seems to lose its oomph and drops in pitch at the end rounds out the plainness of the Orange-crowned Warbler.

Another unusual aspect of the Orange-crowned—it is one of the few warblers that's more common in the West than the East. In San Diego County, it ranks second only to the Yellow-rumped Warbler as San Diego County’s commonest warbler. Another fun fact—Orange-crowns buck the warbler trend by typically nesting on the ground, screened behind dense undergrowth and the rim flush with the ground. One last point of contrast. Most warblers are dedicated insectivores, foraging high in trees (giving rise to the birder’s complaint of “warbler neck”). Orange-crowns busily scour low shrubs, often between a birder’s knees and waist. In fact, they may actually forage among leaves on the ground more like a towhee or other native sparrow than a warbler. In winter, Orange-crowned Warblers add fruit, berries, and seeds to their diet. They can show up at backyard feeders that provide suet or peanut butter, and they may even feed at hummingbird feeders.

So in the coming months, crank your ears “down” to catch the very un-warbler-like dry trill. And point your eyes, well, down as well to catch a glimpse of this very non-warbler-y Orange-crowned Warbler.

To learn more about this warbler, go to https://bvaudubon.org/news.
Since the situation with COVID-19 is ongoing and uncertain, we are canceling all birding opportunities for March. Please enjoy the birds and nature on your own, whenever possible. The places where our guided tours are normally held are generally open to visitors.

BIRDING LEO CARRILLO (Carlsbad)
Leo Carrillo Ranch Historic Park is now open every day. In addition, the 4-mile Rancho Carrillo Loop Trail that encircles Leo Carrillo Ranch Historic Park has at least six trailheads that provide access to the trail. Google for the trailhead nearest you.

WHELAN LAKE BIRD SANCTUARY (Oceanside)
3850 N. River Road
For access, contact Greg Kackstetter (760) 722-4887.

EL CORAZON GARRISON CREEK (Oceanside)  
From the intersection of El Camino Real and Oceanside Blvd., go east on Oceanside Blvd., turn left (north) into the first gate. Park to the left.

COASTAL 101 BIRDING (Oceanside)
2202 S Coast Highway
Go birding around the Buena Vista Lagoon's 0.25-mile loop trail at the Nature Center, then go south along the 101 to look for waterfowl.

SAN DIEGUITO RIVER PARK (Del Mar)
Directions for San Andres Drive— From I-5, take Via de la Valle east; go right on San Andres Drive to end of road.

ADAPTATIONS— WILDLY WEIRD FEET OF THE RALLIDS
Rallids (Family Rallidae) include the Rails, Gallinules, and Coots. All three representatives can be found at our local lagoons, including Buena Vista Lagoon. Rails, such as Ridgway's Rails, are the most secretive and typically forage by walking through dense reeds and other vegetation or along edges between marshes and mudflats. As is typical in other wading birds, long toes assist in maintaining balance while walking through vegetation and mud.

More aquatic than the Ridgway's Rail, the Common Gallinule swims with ease and walks on top of floating vegetation with its large yellow-green feet and very long, slender toes. Coots, such as the American Coot, are the most aquatic member of the rail family. All rallids have very long toes, but none have more unusual-looking feet than coots. Coots have yellow-green feet that have two or three fleshy lobes mainly along the inside of each toe. The lobes are comparable to the webbed feet of a duck, making coots very adept swimmers. Coots are also nimble walking on a variety of surfaces. As a coot walks, the lobes fold back when the bird lifts its foot.

Ridgway's Rail
Photo: Rebecca Matsubara

Common Gallinule
Photo: Jane Mygatt

American Coot
Photo: Dana Sterner

Detail of an American Coot's lobed toes
Photo: Kevin Malo
Beauty on the Brink?  
The State of the Monarch Butterfly

Stunning in their cloaks of orange, black, and white, monarch butterflies (*Danaus plexippus*) are gorgeous, ethereal, and in serious trouble. In 2018, several organizations sued to force the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to act on a 2014 application for protections under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The distinctive yellow, black, and white monarch caterpillars (the larval stage of the butterflies) eat only milkweed, so the female butterflies lay eggs only on milkweed leaves. One caterpillar can eat more than 20 large milkweed leaves as it grows.

One monarch butterfly can lay $300-500$ eggs. Do the arithmetic. Milkweed needs to be healthy, tall, and very plentiful for the insects to thrive. But that’s only part of the challenge.

North America hosts two geographically distinct monarch subpopulations: a small one (1%) west of the Rocky Mountains and another (99%), east. Western monarchs winter in small groves of trees (primarily eucalyptus) along the coast of Southern California. Eastern monarchs winter in huge aggregations in Mexico.

The 2019–2020 winter count in Mexico found eastern monarchs occupying only 53% of their winter habitat from 2017–2018. In 2019, for the second year in a row, the western subpopulation numbered less than 29,000—down from 1.2 million two decades earlier. Alarmingly, this 2020 December count found only about 2,000 Monarchs in typical roosting areas—a mere 7% of the previous year’s count.

In December 2020, the USFWS announced that “…adding the monarch butterfly to the list of threatened and endangered species is warranted but precluded by work on higher-priority listing actions.”

So, what happens now? Meaningful protections for the eastern subpopulation must include not just habitat protection and restoration but also international agreements to protect wintering grounds. For the western subpopulation, the state of California often has the legal authority to set up its own protections under its ESA. However, a recent court decision found that insects do not fall under state protections.

It looks bleak for the western subpopulation. But recently, River Partners received a $1.2 million grant from the Wildlife Conservation Board to plant 595 acres of milkweed and nectar-rich plants along riparian areas from the northern Sacramento Valley to San Diego County.

Will it be enough? Is it too late? Only time will tell.

To read much more about monarch butterflies and restoration efforts in California, visit [http://bvaudubon.org/news](http://bvaudubon.org/news).
10 REASONS TO PLANT NATIVES

- Native plants maintain and restore California’s natural heritage.
- They provide food and habitat for native wildlife.
- They don’t require fertilizers and are pest-resistant.
- Most are drought-tolerant.
- They are beautiful and functional.
- They can help control soil erosion.
- Many are extremely fragrant.
- They are low-maintenance.
- Converting to natives can be done inexpensively.
- Being around nature and wildlife is good for human health and cognition.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR’S CORNER

Last December, a rare bird landed at the BVAS Nature Center—the ancient Archaeopteryx. This 10-foot tall metal sculpture replaced its predecessor, which was retired due to rusting. Both renditions were created and donated by local artist, Paul Weber (a.k.a. Dr. Duck). The Archaeopteryx joins other recent creative additions at the Nature Center—all courtesy of volunteers. The vibrant new kiosk signs, designed by volunteer and artist Jane Mygatt, highlight Buena Vista Lagoon’s natural history. Our new oak grove trail was created by a crew of volunteers who sawed, pulled, and dug vegetation to clear the trail. Volunteers planned and designed the new irrigation project. And the intrepid plant crew tackles activities daily to keep up the grounds—pruning, watering, weeding, as well as repairing the old fence.

Thank you, volunteers!

KIDS’ CORNER

Texture Scavenger Hunt
Go on a scavenger hunt to find various textures. Examples—
- Smooth
- Rough
- Hard
- Soft
- Fuzzy
- Pokey (or prickly)

Floating and Sinking
Explore what sinks and floats. Collect various objects in nature. Predict which will float. Test them in a pan of fresh water. Try the experiment again using ocean water. Or make your own salty water. Were there any surprises?
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Peter LaTourrette

The Vaux’s Swift will be the topic of our March Zoom presentation. We hope you’ll join us. See page 1 for details.

The Buena Vista Nature Center remains closed at this time. But please come enjoy our trail.

Happy Spring!

Learn about Orange-crowned Warblers on page 2.
Photo by Steve Brad.