Saging the World with Deborah Small, MFA, Wednesday, April 19
Social: 6:45 p.m., Program: 7:00 p.m.

Sage smudging has become a viral trend and common in movies, TV shows, social media, and cleansing rituals. People burn sage bundles in the hope of purifying space and clearing bad energy. Instead of healing, the appropriated use of saging in popular culture is having a harmful effect.

Indigenous communities have tended a relationship with white sage for thousands of generations. White sage (Salvia apiana) only occurs in southern California and northern Baja California, Mexico. Today, poachers are stealing metric tons of this plant from the wild to supply international demand.

The short film, Saging the World, spotlights the ecological and cultural issues intertwined with white sage, centering the voices of Native advocates who have long protected and cherished this plant. The documentary was produced by Rose Ramirez, Deborah Small, and the California Native Plant Society to foster awareness and inspire action for white sage. Join us for a screening of the film and then stay for the Q&A afterwards with Deborah.

Deborah is an artist, photographer, writer, and Professor Emerita in the School of Arts at California State University, San Marcos. In addition to Saging the World, she co-authored a book with Rose Ramirez entitled The Ethnobotany Project: Contemporary Uses of Native Plants.

Please RSVP to Bob Crowell at bva3ruddyducks@att.net if you would like to join us on Zoom. The Zoom link will be emailed to you on the day of the lecture.
One summer evening, my dog and I were walking through the woods when I noticed her racing around the corner ahead, her nose held high in the air like a cartoon dog following a cartoon scent. As I hurried after her, I began to smell a truly foul odor. Was there any chance that she hadn’t rolled in whatever that was? I rounded the corner and spotted her standing in the middle of the trail, craning her neck toward the top of a group of trees, twitching her nose eagerly like a rabbit. I followed her gaze to a pair of Turkey Vultures side by side about 15 feet above us. They simply reeked of whatever had been the day’s fare and neither one seemed to notice or care. As the pair took off a minute or so later—and really stirred up the stench—I felt an appreciation of these ecologically critical, yet incredibly smelly, garbage processors of Nature. As my dog and I ambled on, I thought, “Well, as long as you and your date both order the onions and garlic, neither one is offended.”

The western hemisphere’s scavenger in the skies, the Turkey Vulture is a large, dark bird with a seemingly shrunken, featherless red head. (Males and females are tough to tell apart, unless you’re a Turkey Vulture.) When perched, it appears rather hunchbacked, giving the bird a brooding look—think of Snoopy, keeping a scowling lookout from the roof of his dog house. A consummate soaring bird, the Turkey Vulture rarely flaps, once aloft; when it does, its wingbeats are slow and deep, seeming a bit begrudging. Gliding overhead, its wings show a distinctive, thin, dark leading edge (the edge of wing toward the front of the bird) followed by a broad silvery band outlining the remainder of the wings. The bird holds its wings in a deep V (called a “dihedral”) and travels in an often wildly teetering manner, maximizing its ability to use small-scale air disturbances to glide at lower altitudes, where it hunts for food.

A vulture’s menu features primarily one entrée—carrion. Roadkill, livestock dead in a field, dead fish washed up on a lake shore all can attract a group of vultures. (On a walk at Los Jilgueros Park in Fallbrook, we spotted a vulture on the ground by a rather recently dead skunk. Within the next 5 minutes, we counted 11 vultures circling overhead. Skunk—it’s what’s for dinner.) But not just any old carrion. They appear to prefer fresher carrion over seriously putrid carrion. Unusual among birds, Turkey Vultures actually have extremely good senses of smell and can locate meals by scent even when soaring. Their rather unattractive featherless heads provide a real bonus for birds that spend much of their dining experiences with their heads stuck inside rotting carcasses. (The lack of feathers on their heads helps a bit with sanitation—less rotting meat stuck on head feathers.) On the ground, they look clumsy, almost oafish, walking with a waddling gait. But they can also run, hop, and canter, if necessary. They eat carcasses only on the ground since they can’t carry prey in their weak talons.

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Turkey Vultures inhabit San Diego County year-round. They don’t reach sexual maturity until five years of age and may not breed every year even then. They form long-term monogamous pair bonds although they may pair again if a mate dies. Breeding among this species remains an enigma. The birds are basically silent; they carry no nesting material; they don’t carry food to the nest, feeding their young largely by regurgitation; they visit their nests infrequently—none of the easiest-to-observe aspects that can confirm possible or probable breeding. As a result, this species is one of the most difficult species to confirm nesting. As a result, their breeding distribution is really only an estimate. The usual nest is in a cave or in a crevice among granite boulders or on steep, rocky slopes—all features that San Diego County’s mountains can readily supply. Both the breeding and winter distributions have pulled back from heavily developed areas, basically eliminating the species along the coast.

Solitary nesters, Turkey Vultures primarily require a nest site isolated from humans and their many disturbances. Vultures lay eggs—usually two in a clutch—between April and June; the eggs hatch in 38–41 days. Unlike many other avian species, both parents incubate the clutch about equally. The young make their first forays out of the nest 70–80 days after hatching. Fledging is a protracted process, and the youngsters spend an additional one to three weeks after their first ventures out of the nest, hanging out at the nest site, being fed by parents, and gradually flying around the area to explore and practice their soaring skills. They typically leave the nest area by 12 weeks of age, often joining other Turkey Vultures at a communal roost if one is nearby.

The Turkey Vulture’s scientific name—Cathartes aura—reflects its importance to the environment as a heavy-duty scavenger. The genus name comes from kathartes (Greek), meaning “a cleanser or purifier” (an ironically honorable name for an often stinky bird, I’d say). The species name derives from auroá, an indigenous Mexican tribe’s word for this bird. Its common name refers to its resemblance to a turkey because of its bare red head and dark feathers. And “vulture,” from the Latin vulturus, means “one who tears”—referring to its feeding habits of ripping off hunks of carrion.

The American Ornithological Society (AOS, formerly the American Ornithologists Union), the determiner of all things about avian taxonomy in the Americas, had traditionally placed vultures in the same family as raptors (e.g., hawks, eagles). In a surprising move in 1998, based on DNA analyses, the AOS moved vultures to the stork family, bringing together the two birds most associated with the “bookends” of the life cycle. Unfortunately, this poetic and unusual pairing didn’t last. While the taxonomy of Turkey Vultures and other New World Vultures (e.g., Black Vulture, condors) is still being debated, these species are currently placed in their own family (Cathartidae). Research clarifying other relationships continues.

Even with all of the remaining questions and vagaries, science rules over delicious, symbolic symmetry. It was fun while it lasted.
LET’S GO BIRDING!

Grab your binoculars and join one or more of our free guided birding tours. New birders are always welcome!

SEEKING NEW BIRDERS!
Saturday, Apr 1 — 8:30 a.m.
Eve Martin is hosting a small, casual group to introduce newcomers to the world’s best hobby—birding! The class is designed for first-time birders. Binoculars will be available for your use.
Location: The group will meet in the Solana Beach area for a two-hour walk on an easy trail where we’ll enjoy the incredible array of birdlife in San Diego. Please email Eve to reserve a spot and get the exact location.
Leader: Eve Martin (wrennish@duck.com)

EL CORAZON GARRISON CREEK
(Oceanside)
Wednesday, Apr 12 — 7:30 a.m.
Directions: 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.
Leader: Denise Riddle (driddle1855@att.net)

STEVE BRAD’S TWO MONTHLY BIRDING TRIPS
Join Steve for these surprise-location offerings that include a good dose of education on bird identification. When and where we go is Steve’s choice! Starting times and days vary, so send Steve an email if you are interested in being on his notification list.
Leader: Steve Brad (stevanbrad@gmail.com)

WHelan LAKE BIRD SANCTUARY
(Oceanside)
Saturday, Apr 1 — 8 a.m.
Directions: From I-5, take Hwy 76 east; turn left at Douglas Drive; continue to the light at North River Road; go left on North River Road. Pass through entrance gate and follow signs to the lake.
Leaders: Denise Riddle (driddle1855@att.net) and Jane Mygatt

BIRDING WITH BARBARA
Saturday, Apr 15— 7:30 a.m.
Every third Saturday Barbara will guide us to a new area around San Diego County. This month we will explore Torrey Pines State Reserve-Flinkkote Avenue in Sorrento Valley.
Location: Meet by the corner of Flintkote Ave. and Estuary Way. Total distance on an easy trail will be less than two miles.
Leader: Barbara Swanson (baswanson100@hotmail.com)

COASTAL 101 BIRDING (Oceanside)
2202 S Coast Highway
Saturday, Apr 29 — 9:00 a.m.
We start along the Buena Vista Lagoon, visit Maxton Brown Park, travel to the ocean and weir, and return to the Nature Center along Coast Hwy.
Location: Buena Vista Nature Center, 2202 S. Coast Hwy., Oceanside. Meet in the parking lot.
Leader: Tom Troy (760-420-7328)

American x Black Oystercatcher at Point La Jolla. (B. Swanson)
Sharing the Shores with Snowy Plovers
by Patti Langen

Species should not be cherished just because they are cute or charismatic. We should conserve plants and animals because they have inherent value and a rightful place on the planet. Western Snowy Plovers (Charadrius nivosus nivosus) just happen to be downright adorable in addition to having intrinsic value. Worth and good looks—they just hatch from the egg with it. Unfortunately, their population has declined significantly over the past decades, and they are listed as “Threatened” by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and a “Species of Special Concern” by the State of California.

The Snowy Plover is a small shorebird with pale tan upperparts, dark bill and legs, and a white breast with an incomplete collar. In breeding plumage, it sports a distinctive dark ear patch. Snowy Plovers feed on invertebrates along the shore and kelp wrack in typical plover fashion, alternating quick spurts of running then stopping and standing motionless.

Snowy Plovers construct a nest that is a depression in the sand above the high-tide line along shorelines. They embellish their nests with pieces of shell, pebbles, or bits of plant material around the nest scrape. The average clutch size is three eggs, but females may lay from two to six eggs. Both parents take turns incubating the eggs; and if all goes well, chicks hatch after 26 to 31 days. Sometimes, however, the female will leave to find another mate after laying eggs, leaving the male to raise the chicks on his own—a behavior known as “polyandry.” Snowy Plover chicks are precocial, able to open their eyes and run around soon after hatching. Both eggs and chicks are masterfully camouflaged.

In North San Diego County, the main breeding location for Snowy Plovers is on Camp Pendleton, with 97 nests. In 2022, one pair also successfully fledged chicks from a nest in San Onofre, which was the first time since 1983. No nesting has been recorded at Batiquitos Lagoon since 2019. North County locations to potentially see Snowy Plovers in the winter include San Elijo Lagoon, South Cardiff State Beach, South Ponto, and South Carlsbad State Beach.

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Snowy Plover photos by P. Langen
In San Diego County, multiple factors have combined to negatively affect Western Snowy Plover populations, including habitat loss and degradation, disturbance by humans and pets, predation, and sea-level rise due to climate change. As California’s population has grown, so has our recreational use of beaches. These birds and other beach-dwelling organisms have suffered because of people’s affinity for living along the coast. The increased human population on beaches impacts plovers trying to forage and nest. Nesting season, which can occur from March through August in Southern California, unfortunately coincides with peak beach season.

What can we do to share our shores with Snowy Plovers and other shorebirds? Human disturbance is a major source of nest failure. Before the birds’ breeding season, biologists erect temporary or permanent fencing to designate Snowy Plover nesting areas and minimize disturbance. Please respect and avoid those designated nesting areas. Snowy Plover nests, eggs, and chicks are extremely well camouflaged, so even if you don’t see any birds in the protected area, they may be present. It may seem strange to us, but even flying kites around nesting areas can cause disturbance to plovers because they resemble flying predators. Snowy Plovers’ only defenses are camouflage, flight, and renesting if their original nest is disturbed or destroyed.

While dogs love to run on the sand or play in the ocean, just seeing a dog may cause a Snowy Plover to flush from its nest. Even a leashed dog on the beach can affect Snowy Plovers, decreasing the likelihood that a chick will hatch. Please take your dog to designated dog beaches, parks, and trails where dogs are allowed, so that shorebirds like Snowy Plovers have the habitat they need in order to survive. Participate in beach clean-ups, which will help not only Snowy Plovers but many other animals as well! In learning to share our shores and respect the wildlife that need this habitat, we are helping the survival of Snowy Plovers, giving them space to feed, rest, nest, and raise the next adorable and valuable generation.

Many thanks to Robert Patton for providing current Western Snowy Plover breeding data for San Diego County.
Preschool Nature Storytime at the Nature Center

Monday, April 24, 10:00 a.m.
Join us for a Nature-themed Storytime for preschoolers at the Nature Center. Our theme this month is “Let’s Garden!” We will read about how seeds grow, plant some seeds to take home, and explore the native plant gardens around the Nature Center.

We look forward to seeing you! Questions? Call Sally Bickerton, 760-525-2351.

Phoebe and Sonya’s Clubhouse

**Sunday, April 23, 10:00 a.m. (Note different date this month due to Easter.)**

Bring your school-aged children to the Nature Center to create a nature-themed craft! This month we will make salt dough caterpillars and learn about the butterfly life cycle.

Check it Out

Spring has sprung! Time to get out and explore. The Nature Center library has a wide variety of books you can check out to inform you on your adventures or answer questions after you have explored.

Jean Booth, BVAS Librarian

Nature Center Garden Crew

Join the Garden Crew every Monday 9-11 a.m. to help out and learn about native plants.

Weeding ensures we can enjoy the native blooms! This is when Southern California really shines. All native gardens are pollinator gardens, so look for some of our 700 different types of native bees.

Joan Bockman, BVAS Garden Crew
If you are looking for the less common hawks and falcons, Rangeland Road in Ramona is a popular hotspot. But don’t wait too long. By the end of March and early April, Ferruginous Hawks and Merlins become scarce, and Prairie Falcons will have departed by mid- or late March.

In February, along Rangeland Road in Ramona, a rare subspecies of Merlin, called a "Prairie" Merlin was seen. Merlins and Prairie Falcons are closely related, both in the genus *Falco*. Merlins are the smaller of the two and sexually dimorphic—males and females differ in plumage color. There are three subspecies of Merlin in North America. The most common is the “Taiga” Merlin (*Falco columbarius columbarius*). The male’s upperparts are slaty-blue; females are dark drab brown. “Black” Merlins (*F. c. suckleyi*), from the Pacific Northwest, are darker overall with heavy, dark streaks; they lack the distinctive light tail bands. “Prairie” Merlins (*F. c. richardsonii*), by contrast, are paler overall. Males have a lighter shade of slate-blue on their upperparts; females are a lighter brown. By comparison, Prairie Falcon (*F. mexicanus*) males and females are similar in appearance. Female “Prairie” Merlins can be easily confused with Prairie Falcons. Below is a side-by-side look at the differences between these beautiful falcons.

The female “Prairie” Merlin has a faint, almost absent mustache stripe and thin white eyebrow; rufous brown streaks below; distinct tail bands; large eyes, and a rather cute face.

Prairie Falcons have a white cheek and eyebrow, thin dark mustache stripe, dark ear patch, and a white area between the eye and ear patch. The tail is barred. In flight they have distinctive dark axillaries (arm pits) and wing linings.
Bush Sunflower (*Encelia californica*)
by Barbara Swanson

Bush sunflower is a common plant in the southern California coastal sage scrub community. Found on the coast from Baja to around San Luis Obispo, and inland to the foothills of the mountains below 2,000 feet, this plant looks best in the winter and spring; it will partially die back in summer (“summer semi-deciduous”). It grows in full sun and is drought-tolerant but dies back with frost.

The plant grows 2-4 feet tall and 3-6 feet wide, with many bright green, long, rounded leaves that are 1-2 inches in length. It has yellow daisy-like flowers that appear between February and June. The flowers, which extend above the bush on long stems, are about 2 inches across with an open center. When a flower first opens, the center is dark but looks lighter as the flower ages and the yellow pollen-laden stamens emerge. The flowers attract pollinators including bees and butterflies, while birds including Lesser Goldfinches eat the seeds. Several butterfly species use the plant as a host for their caterpillar stages, making this a beneficial plant for wildlife since, for example, many birds feed caterpillars to their young.

Bush sunflower can be a good addition to a yard. It is very easy to grow and quickly reaches full size. Since it loses its large winter leaves and only has small, sparse leaves in summer, consider planting it with other plants that can help to fill in the area during our dry season. Occasional summer watering and some pruning can keep the plant looking tidy. The plant may reseed and spread but can be controlled by weeding, if desired. I have had one or two in my yard for several years and have not had any issue with their spreading. I enjoy the cheery yellow flowers and have noticed native insects utilizing the plant. The Kumeyaay called the plant *Nahekwi* or “it watches the sun.” Some sunflowers move their flowers to face the sun throughout the day; perhaps this is what was meant by the name.

A wonderful resource for our native plants is Calscape, found at [www.calscape.org](http://www.calscape.org). The website has a page for each native plant including a photo, map of where each species grows in the wild, a description of the plant, nurseries that carry each plant, ease of cultivation in a garden, and other information.

Bush Sunflower Photos: B. Swanson
BVAS Birdathon
by Barbara Swanson

A Birdathon fundraiser for Buena Vista Audubon Society, organized and led by Steve Brad, was held the morning of March 5. More than 15 participants searched for birds. We started at Buddy Todd Park in Oceanside, where the highlights included two mating Red-shouldered Hawks, Mountain Chickadees, warblers, and a flock of American Robins for a total of 31 species.

Our second stop was at nearby Whelan Lake Bird Sanctuary in Oceanside. We were treated to an aerial battle between a Red-tailed Hawk and a White-tailed Kite that was fiercely defending its breeding territory. Other highlights were a male Wood Duck sitting in a tree and a flock of more than 50 Cinnamon Teal. The group spotted 54 species, including 8 raptor species.

The species total for the morning was 64 birds. If you are interested in contributing to this fundraiser, you can donate any amount or base it on the number of species observed (for example, a dollar per bird species). This can be done by sending a check, payable to Buena Vista Audubon Society, to Buena Vista Audubon, PO Box 480, Oceanside CA 92049; please include “Birdathon” as a note. Our website includes information on how to donate by credit card. The money raised will go towards supporting our Nature Center and conservation goals.
California Native Plant Garden Tour

Sunday, April 23 at 2 p.m.

Come see over 18 Native Plant Gardens in the Historic Seaside Neighborhood of Downtown Oceanside!

Plant experts and neighborhood locals will lead a 1.5-mile walking tour to see these wonderful front-yard gardens. The guided walk is free.

Meet at the St. Mary School parking lot at 515 Wisconsin Ave. St. Mary School is one block east of the 101 Cafe near Coast Highway and Wisconsin St.

Kids will be selling lemonade and cookies along the route.

Sponsored by The Oceanside Coastal Neighborhood Association and Buena Vista Audubon Society.

Phone: 760-439-2473
BVAudubon.org or OCNA101.org

WITH THANKS
The newsletter continues to be a group effort. Thanks to all the contributors and proofreaders. A special thanks to Tina Mitchell, who meticulously edits every article.
Jane Mygatt, Newsletter Editor
SPRINGTIME WITH BVAS

19th Annual California Native Plant Garden Tour
Sunday, April 23 — 2 p.m.

Come see over 18 Native Plant Gardens in the Historic Seaside Neighborhood of Downtown Oceanside!

Sponsored by The Oceanside Coastal Neighborhood Association and Buena Vista Audubon Society.

Phone: 760-439-2473
Visit BVAudubon.org or OCNA101.org

Nature Center Quick Calendar

Birding – see page 4
Garden Crew – Mondays, 9 – 11 a.m.
Nature Guides – First Friday at 10 a.m.
Program on Zoom – 3rd Wednesday at 7 p.m.
BVAS Board Meeting – 3rd Friday at 10 a.m. (via Zoom)
Preschool Nature Storytime – 4th Monday at 10 a.m.
Phoebe and Sonya’s Clubhouse – Note different day Sunday, April 23 at 10 a.m.
Native Plant Garden Tour - Sunday, April 23 (see flyer on page 11)

Become a Member!

Help support our work and become a member of BVAS. All donations of $25/year or more qualify as membership dues. As a BVAS member, you will receive the chapter newsletter, have voting privileges at our Annual Meeting and other member meetings, and enjoy the satisfaction of belonging to a group that supports nature in North County. All donations are tax-deductible. BVAS is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation and will receive 100% of your contribution.

https://bvaudubon.org/donate/

Our Mission: Conservation through education, advocacy, land management, and monitoring.

Buena Vista Audubon Nature Center
2202 S. Coast Highway
Oceanside, CA 92054 (760-439-2473)

Nature Center Hours
Tuesday-Saturday: 10 a.m. – 1 p.m.
Sunday-Monday: Closed

BVAS honors and respectfully acknowledges the Payómkawichum (also known as the Luiseños), who are of the land on which the BVAS Nature Center stands. The Tribal Nations of San Diego County are the Payómkawichum, the Kumeyaay, the Cupeño, and the Cahuilla.