Turkey Vultures: Fascinating Scavengers and Nature’s Cleanup Crew
with Bill Clark, Wednesday, June 21
Social: 5:45 p.m., Program: 6:00 p.m.

The Turkey Vulture is a New World Vulture that occurs widely in the Americas. Although they have had a bad reputation in the past, they now have an expanding group of fans and devotees. During this informative talk, we will learn about the Turkey Vulture’s feeding and scavenging behavior, night roosts, nesting, migration, and other interesting aspects of the life of this common widespread scavenger. We will also cover the various plumages of Turkey Vultures, how to identify them compared to other New World vultures, and why they are sometimes called buzzards.

Bill Clark is a photographer, author, researcher, and lecturer and has over 50 years of experience working with birds of prey, including five years as Director of the National Wildlife Federation’s Raptor Information Center. He has published numerous articles on raptor subjects; has traveled extensively world-wide studying, observing, and photographing raptors; and has regularly led raptor and birding tours and workshops, both at home and abroad, with Raptours. He often teaches evening and weekend courses on raptor field identification and biology.

Bill has written a raptor field guide for Europe, another for Mexico and Central America, and yet another for Africa. He is a coauthor of the *Photographic Guide to North American Raptors* and the completely revised Peterson series guide, *Hawks*.

Join us via Zoom at the special time of 6 p.m., to hear more about these fascinating birds!

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.
Life on the Wing – White-throated Swifts
by Tina Mitchell

Luckily, nestling White-throated Swifts don’t come into wildlife rehab very often, in large part because humans rarely come across their nests. When these babies do show up, you’ve got your work cut out for you. Some are easy to feed; they gape (open their mouths) when you offer food and you just drop in the mealworm or whatever is the food du jour. But occasionally, one doesn’t gape and you have to “force feed” it by hand to keep it alive until it starts gaping. Baby swifts present a number of challenges, the biggest of which is that they don’t perch like songbirds do. They only cling to vertical surfaces with claws like very sticky Velcro. So you toss a cloth over your shoulder and let the nestling attach itself. The upper beak curves just enough to make it quite a challenge for a human to get it open and put some food in there. (Having three hands might make the job easier. Maybe even four.) Lather, rinse, repeat—every half hour.

As North America’s only boldly patterned swift, the White-throated Swift rather resembles a trim, slender-winged, needle-tailed, black-and-white dart. (Other swift species, such as Black and Vaux’s swifts, are more uniformly dark with short, blunt tails.) White “saddlebags” along the sides of the rump stand out when the bird passes at eye level (which doesn’t happen all that often—these are high-flyers, to be sure). The eponymous white stripe running from the throat to the belly distinguishes the bird when viewed from below, (a much more common view). Also, the white tips of the secondaries produce a flash of white on the trailing edges of the wings next to the body.

White-throated Swifts are among the most skilled North American avian fliers, seeming to defy physics as they dive, twist, and turn at incredible speeds, pursuing insects aloft. A rapid series of stiff wingbeats is followed by a protracted, somewhat unsteady and tipsy glide. Almost always seen in flight, usually in flocks of 10–50 birds, White-throated Swifts sometimes feed with swallows and other swift species. As highly social creatures, they also sleep in roosts of hundreds of conspecifics, typically in deep cracks or niches in cliffs and large rocks. Swifts are easiest to see on overcast days, when they have to forage below the clouds. On warm clear days, the birds may forage so high they are out of sight. But even if you can’t see them clearly, you can often hear their twittering calls: https://xeno-canto.org/613903. The White-throated Swift is migratory over much of its North American range; but in San Diego County its abundance by season shows no clear variation.

These swifts spend their days on the wing, foraging on “aerial plankton.” White-throated Swifts eat air-borne spiders and insects: e.g., many types of flies, beetles, stinkbugs, leafhoppers, bees, wasps, and flying ants. Pretty much any flying insects and other arthropods that are carried aloft by air currents are fair game for a swift on the prowl. As noted earlier, their flight is dizzyingly rapid, twisting, and acrobatic; and they often turn sharply to sweep back through a particularly insect-rich part of an air column.

The White-throated Swift stops flying only when it has vertical surfaces to cling to. Perching birds have three toes that point
White-throated Swifts – Continued from page 2

forward and one that points back ("anisodactyl"), an arrangement that facilitates sitting securely on branches. A swift, though, has all four toes pointing forward ("pamprodactyl"), allowing them to cling to sheer vertical surfaces (the “Velcro toes” noted earlier), although the two outer toes (first and fourth digits) can rotate to point backward as well. Cliffs, bluffs, and desert badlands offer crevices for both roosting and nesting. In addition to these traditional habitats, White-throated Swifts now also take advantage of crevices and holes in buildings and bridges.

The White-throated is the only swift that breeds in San Diego County; it is locally common year-round. Hidden in crevices in cliffs, White-throated Swift nests are almost impossible for a person standing safely on the ground to see. As a result, details of the breeding behavior and developmental stages of the White-throated Swift are remarkably unknown. The species exhibits a high degree of site tenacity; some sites have been attended by flocks for over 50 years.

In the scientific world, the White-throated Swift goes by a poetic name: Aeronautes saxatalis. Aeronautes means “air sailor,” from Greek aer, “air” and nautes, “sailor”; saxatalis, Latin for “living among rocks.” So it is an air sailor/rock-dweller. Sounds about right. Its common name is much more pedestrian: “White-throated” describes how this swift differs from other swifts; “swift” arises from its speedy flight.

Swifts and swallows may look similar and exploit a similar ecological niche, but they’re not related at all. (In fact, based on DNA analyses, the closest relatives to the swifts are the hummingbirds.) They only resemble each other because of convergent evolution—the development of physical traits to adapt to their shared environment. But they can be pretty easy to tell apart. First, check the color. Splashes of blue, green, orange, or iridescence are characteristics of swallows. (Exceptions—Northern Rough-winged and Bank swallows are brown.) Swifts are mostly soft gray, with some exceptions (e.g., the White-throated Swift’s white belly). Swifts fly and hunt in the upper part of the air column; swallows pursue insects closer to the ground or water. Finally, if you see a bird perched on a nestbox, power line, or branch, that’s almost certainly a swallow, since only swallows can sit upright. Swifts are just Class-A, five-star, 100% clingers.

And baby swallows are infinitely easier for wildlife rehab workers to hand feed than baby swifts are. No contest.
LET’S GO BIRDING!

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

EL CORAZON GARRISON CREEK (Oceanside)
Wednesday, Jun 14, Jul 12, Aug 9 — 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 GUIDED BIRDING
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)

BIRDING WITH BARBARA
Saturday, Jun 17, Jul 15, Aug 19 — 7:30 a.m.
Jun 17 — Sun Vista Park in Encinitas.
Location: Meet by the playground. There is street parking and entrances along Avenida La Posta.
Jul 15 — Buddy Todd Park in Oceanside.
Location: Meet in the parking lot by the restrooms off of Mesa Drive.
Aug 19 — San Elijo Lagoon just west of the tracks and the Pole trail.
Location: Meet at the tunnel under the railroad tracks (“West of tracks” eBird hotspot). The closest entry is from the Harbaugh Seaside Trails, with street parking on Hwy 101 and nearby side streets.
Leader: Barbara Swanson (baswanson100@hotmail.com)

COASTAL 101 BIRDING (Oceanside)
2202 S Coast Highway
Tom is taking the summer off. He will be back in September!
Preschool Nature Storytime at the Nature Center

Monday, June 26, 10:00 a.m.
Our theme this month is “WHO LIVES AT THE POND?” We will read and sing about ducks, frogs, and other pond dwellers and walk the trail to the lagoon pond. Come and join us!

Monday, August 29, 10:00 a.m.
This month’s theme will be “WHO LIVES IN THE OCEAN?” We will learn about fish and other sea creatures through stories, songs, and a simple craft. We look forward to seeing you! Questions? Call Sally, 760-525-2351

Note: Storytime will not be held in July.

Sonya and Phoebe’s Clubhouse

Bring your school-aged children to the Nature Center to create a nature-themed craft!

Sunday, June 11, 10:00 a.m.
In June we will make origami jumping frogs.

Sunday, August 13, 10:00 a.m.
In August we will make a Nature Mándala.

Note: Clubhouse will not be held in July.

Check it Out

"Commit yourself to lifelong learning. The most valuable asset you will ever have is your mind and what you put into it." ~ Albert Einstein

What is your preferred learning style? The Nature Center can satisfy every type of curiosity and the library can fill in the blanks for the questions you pick up along the way. Stop in and browse this summer, check out a book, and begin a whole new learning venture!

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.

June Gloom may be giving us some extra fog/water so the plants last longer. By July the plants are still blooming and storing up for the long drought that can last until November. In August, the days get hotter and drier, the plants start to go dormant. The beautiful chocolate colored dried blooms of buckwheat carry the day.

Joan Bockman, BVAS Garden Crew
Intro to Merlin  
by Tina Mitchell

Created by Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Merlin is a free app for either Android (6 or newer) or iOS (15 or newer) devices. It first came out in 2014 to help you visually identify a bird; one of its most popular features was “Photo ID.” I’m a dreadful photographer, so I paid it little mind. But in 2021, Merlin added “Sound ID.” When birding, songs and sounds can be as important as visual cues. Some birders may find their hearing becoming less acute with age. For me, my eyes have gotten worse and I’ve become a much more ear-dependent birder. I’m pretty good at identifying common bird songs. But I was happy to take a little help, if it was good.

It’s good. Really good.

Here’s how to get started. Download the app (free) and the appropriate pack (free). For California, that would be the U.S.: West Coast—or, if you have room on your device, U.S. and Canada: Continental. (You don’t need to download a pack just to ID bird sounds. But you’ll get a lot more information if you do.) You’re now good to go. No need for an internet connection while you’re in the field.

Some suggestions from my experience might help get you started.

• If you’re walking, stop. I mean it. You’re noisy when you walk, especially if you’re on a natural surface. And don’t talk or you’ll be all your phone can hear. Get as close to the bird as you can. But if it’s not windy or otherwise noisy, you don’t have to be all that close. I rarely leave the trail I’m on. If I can hear it, much of the time Merlin can too.

• Open the app. Tap “Sound ID.” Tap the microphone icon. Point the phone’s microphone toward the sound. Watch the spectrogram as it moves across the screen to see if it’s picking up the sound(s) you’re hearing. (The spectrogram shows squiggly lines when it detects a sound. “Squiggly”—a technical avian-sound-recording term.)

• If Merlin identifies your sound, it will display the suggested name briefly highlighted in yellow. If it records it again, it will highlight the name in yellow again.

• When you’re done, tap the stop icon. If you replay the recording, you can touch a species name and it’ll skip to the first occurrence of that sound and play from there.

Merlin isn’t perfect, but odds are it’s better than you. If it suggests a bird that is rare or uncommon in your area or at that time of year, it will add a red dot (rare) or an orange semi-circle (uncommon) after the name. You should be initially skeptical and try to get more evidence. It also may not pick up what you’re hearing; watch the spectrogram for a squiggle when you hear the bird. If that’s not showing, it can’t “hear” it. Or it might “hear” the bird but be unable to match it. Again, the spectrogram gives you a clue: If a squiggly line shows but no name appears, Merlin can’t find a match it’s happy with.

Don’t abandon common sense and your bird guides, though. Merlin isn’t always right. I’ve had it ID barking dogs as Canada Geese. Nice try. Once, it claimed it heard a White-faced Ibis in my suburban neighborhood. Not really likely, Merlin. I heard what it was picking up. I still don’t know what it was, but I am pretty darn sure it wasn’t a White-faced Ibis in that habitat. Some things, you just don’t report to eBird.
Some practical pointers might help too. Merlin can use a lot of battery, so run it sparingly, especially if you’re birding for a while. Recording in short spurts seems to work best; Cornell suggests not longer than 10 minutes, but I usually do much shorter recordings. Be sure to stop recording before you put it back in your pocket. It’s easy to accidentally leave it running. You’ll end up with a long recording of your pocket noise and a dead battery. Also, Merlin saves all the audio files on your device by date and time. These are uncompressed files (.WAV files) and can be big. You can rename them to something more meaningful if you want to keep them or delete them if you don’t. Finally, use the app around your neighborhood at first. Get familiar with the local voices. Then when you hear something different, reach for Merlin.

And keep using it even when the singing slows down at the end of breeding season. Merlin isn’t quite as helpful at identifying calls as it is songs. (Who is?) But again, it’s probably way better than you. No matter the time of year, Merlin is like having Nathan Pieplow, Kenn Kaufman, and David Sibley tucked in your pocket. Although a lot less bulky.

*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*
Our Native Buckwheats (*Eriogonum*)
by Barbara Swanson

In our local native ecosystem, there is a succession of blooming plants through the seasons. This series of blooms provides food for pollinators and seeds or berries for other animals for many months. It also benefits the plants because their flowers are not competing with as many other species’ flowers for visits from pollinating insects. Different insects specialize in certain types of flowers and may time their life cycles with their favorite blooming plants.

While spring in California often brings to mind the bright and showy annual plant bloom featuring plants like California Poppies (*Eschscholzia californica*), many perennials (plants that live for more than two years) bloom at different times of the year. Buckwheat is a good example of this because different buckwheat varieties bloom at different times of the year.

If you have walked in chaparral or sagebrush scrub ecosystems in southern California, you most likely have noticed California Buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*). This drought-tolerant evergreen plant grows about three feet wide and one to six feet tall, depending on location. It loves sun and, once established, it does not need summer water. The leaves are small, dark or bright green, and fuzzy underneath to help the plant retain moisture. Buds start to appear in March, growing on tall stalks above the plant mound, and burst into white flowers with a pink accent for a bloom season that can last several months. The small flowers are in clusters and produce nectar, making this plant particularly attractive to bees. The flowers slowly dry to a rusty color. These dried flowers and some of the leaves are dropped during the dry season, creating a natural mulch for the soil.

Many small butterflies use this plant as a host species for their caterpillars, including Acmon Blue, Lupine Blue and Bramble Hairstreak species. Birds like to feed caterpillars to their youngsters, making buckwheat an excellent and easy plant to add to any garden to support native birds and insects.

Four varieties of California Buckwheat are suited to coastal areas, the desert, or the mountains. Low-growing cultivars, including “Theodore Payne,” can be used as a ground cover. Other species of buckwheat are available at nurseries. In addition to a California Buckwheat plant that I grew from a cutting and the low-growing cultivar “Bruce Dickinson,” I also grow a species from the Channel Islands (Red-flowering Buckwheat, *Eriogonum grande* var. *rubescens*) that is less than a foot tall when not in bloom. It has wide leaves and stunning pink flowers that bloom in early summer.
Nelson’s Sparrow

One of the top Hot Spots for birding in North County is San Elijo Lagoon in Solana Beach. In late April a local birder spotted a rare Nelson’s Sparrow (*Ammospiza nelsoni*), first seen along a section of the trail called “Pole Road” that runs parallel to the railroad track. A few days later an out-of-town birder discovered a second Nelson’s. Quite the find because these sparrows spend much of their time on the ground in dense marshy vegetation. It’s a thrill to see such beautiful sparrows that normally range in the Eastern U.S.

Hudsonian Godwit

Another rare Spring sighting was this Hudsonian Godwit (*Limosa haemastica*) at Lake Hodges from late April through early May. Hudsonian Godwits migrate from the subarctic to the southern tip of South America, almost 10,000 miles. This bird was quietly feeding in the mudflats and along the shore for several weeks before it presumably continued on its way north.
SUMMER CAMP!

SUMMER CAMP

At the Buena Vista Nature Center

July 10th - 14th  9:00 a.m. - noon
Monday - Friday
Ages 6 - 10 years old Enrollment
Limited to 18

Nature Lessons
Arts and Crafts
Music and Games

Sign-up at the Nature Center
Cost - $125.00

Questions? Contact camp leader,
Howie Wilcox 415-743-0540
HAPPY SUMMER, SEE YOU IN SEPTEMBER!

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.

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/

Buena Vista Summer Camp!
This camp focuses on outdoor education and conservation. Campers will have fun participating in nature lessons, arts and crafts, music, and games. Sign up and register by June 26 at the Buena Vista Audubon Nature Center. Enrollment is limited.

July 10-14
Time: 9:00 - 12:00
Ages: 6-10 years
Class size: 18
Cost: $125
Questions? Call Howie Wilcox 415-743-0540

Nature Center Quick Calendar
Check carefully, some events are cancelled for the summer.

Birding – see page 4
Garden Crew – Mondays, 9 – 11 a.m.
Nature Guides – First Friday at 10 a.m.
Sonya and Phoebe’s Clubhouse – 2nd Sunday at 10 a.m.
Program on Zoom – 3rd Wednesday at 6 p.m. in June only.
BVAS Board Meeting – 3rd Friday at 10 a.m. (via Zoom)
Preschool Nature Storytime – 4th Monday at 10 a.m.
Summer Camp – July 10-14 (see flyer)

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