

CACHUMA FLYER

ISSUE NUMBER 34

OCTOBER 1999

FALLING SKIES AT CACHUMA LAKE

By Liz Mason, Assistant Park Naturalist
Cachuma Lake Recreation Area

The common appellation for this season, fall, describes perfectly what's going on in the air above Cachuma Lake. Birds are beginning their annual descent from the skies to spangle the lake's bays, mud flats, log lines and open channels. Cachuma is along the Pacific Flyway migratory route, and several dozen species of waterbirds arrive beginning in late August to overwinter. In his book, *Birds of Santa Barbara County*, ornithologist Paul Lehman calls Cachuma "... by far the most significant inland area for waterbirds. . ."

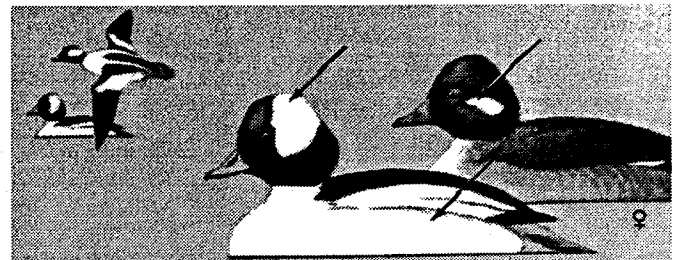
Every year the first hint of the feathered winter festival comes from a bird whose silly demeanor belies its honorary first-place-arrival status. The American Coot may not get much respect because it is so common in number and looks and because of its clownish antics. But, in fact, staff at Cachuma have a nickname for Coots that conveys their importance: Eagle Food. Yes, it is true that the overwintering Bald Eagles prefer fish, but Coots provide an important—and ample—supplement.



Like all diving birds, coots skitter across the water before taking flight.

Other early arrivals include Pintails, elegant birds in the duck family that forage in bays throughout the lake. Because these dabbling ducks have a more general diet than many other ducks, they don't have to spend a lot of time protecting valuable foraging grounds. For the males, this can mean more time spent philandering.

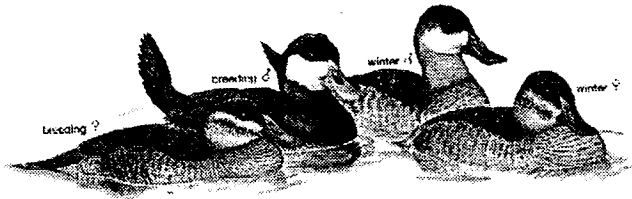
Buffleheads, among the many diving ducks, show up on the heels (?) of the pintails. Why the name Bufflehead?—steep forehead, like a buffalo. Though they are among the smallest ducks in North America, the males can be spotted from a good distance by the unmistakable white patch covering the entire back of their crown.



Though few species of waterfowl stay for the summer to breed at Cachuma, courtship can be in full swing in winter, as many birds form a pair bond—or at least engage in serious strutting—before migrating to summer breeding grounds. Such displays not only work on the intended, but keep bird watchers—and everyone else—enthralled. Typically at Cachuma, you can see male Buffleheads give a show of vigorous head bobbing. Hooded Mergansers, up to six at a time, can be seen displaying in a line, headdresses fully fanned, steaming to the left 20 feet, and then all at once, turning 180 and steaming to the right, back

and forth in arresting pageantry. A boat's not needed to see these gorgeous birds at Cachuma, just head over to the bay by the Mohawk area.

Out of breeding plumage, male ruddy ducks are not visibly flamboyant. However, Ralph Hoffmann, in the 1927 edition of his book *Birds of the Pacific States* makes their breeding habits compelling indeed: "Suddenly he begins to strike his breast vigorously and with increasing speed with his bill, at the same time making a succession of rattling sounds, *beb, beb, beb*, and ending with a gulping *cloop*." All this from a male bird whose bill turns sky blue in breeding season.



Perhaps the most beautiful ducks in North America, Wood Ducks are among the species that can be seen at the lake all year and breed here. As dabblers, they can be seen this time of year along the north shore muddy flats that have been exposed by the easing water levels.

One reason for the great diversity of waterfowl is the variety of habitat at Cachuma. With 42 miles of shoreline and a length of 7 miles, the lake has something for everyone. The depths of the main channel and the larger bays are ideal for such diving birds as Clark's and Western Grebes, which dive down to 60 feet for snacks of thread-fin shad. Northern Shovelers enjoy the quiet calm shallows, where they sieve small plants and animals from the water's surface. Least Bitterns live almost exclusively within shoreline thickets of tule.

The oak woodlands are a critical aspect of the lake landscape. Oaks provide the perches from which birds of prey survey their hunting grounds. During the eagle season from November through February, customary routes on the lake cruise include the eagles' favorite perching oaks, many of which look out over the bays thick with fish and fowl.

There are several resources available for birding at Cachuma. The Cachuma Lake Bird Checklist, compiled with the assistance of Paul

Lehman and Joan Lentz, covers the roughly 175 species of birds found at Cachuma all year, and includes seasonal occurrences of the species. It can be obtained at the Cachuma Nature Center. The Cachuma Lake Trails map, available at the main gate, indicates good birding spots accessible by land. To reach the north shore bays, take the Wildlife Cruise, or the Eagle Cruise (times below). Or, rent a boat from Cachuma Boat Rentals and go out on your own. To make an adventure out of your visit, stay in one of Cachuma's yurts and rise at the crack of dawn to birdwatch along the south shore bays, have breakfast at the Lakeside Grill, then take the Lake Cruise for a look at the north shore.

Wildlife Cruises run March through October, Fridays 3 to 5 p.m., Saturdays 10 to noon and 3 to 5 p.m., and Sundays 10 to noon. Eagle Cruises run November through February, Wednesdays through Sundays 10 am to noon and also Fridays and Saturdays 2 to 4 p.m. For cruise or yurt reservations, call 805-686-5050.

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NATURE CENTER NEWS

If you haven't visited the Center recently, please try to do so. You will be rewarded by many new exhibits, as well as some refurbished ones. A new heating and air-conditioning system has been installed, and we now have heat and cooling throughout the building.

A new mounted-animal display case is nearly complete. Soon it will house a young fawn, a ring-tail cat, a badger, and a fox that are currently being mounted. During the year a mounted coyote was donated to the Center and it will join the display.

To make space for the showcase, the children's room has been eliminated, and most items from it have been placed elsewhere in the building. Plant exhibits have been moved to the former children's room.

On the mundane side, carpets have been cleaned and a storage closet renovated after having been trashed by squirrels. Soon we hope to clear out the basement and make it animal-proof to prevent similar damage as well as the familiar skunk odors.

DISEASES IN MAMMALS AND BIRDS

An Educational Minute by Tommie P. Miller

Mammalian Diseases

Some diseases in wild mammals can be transmitted to humans and domestic animals. For this reason wild animals should be handled with care. Mammalian diseases common to wild animals and humans are rabies, plague, tularemia, and relapsing fever.

Rabies

Rabies is spread by a virus located in the saliva of an animal, and is generally transmitted through a bite from an infected animal, such as a skunk or fox. Rabies is also found in bats throughout California and may occur in rodents and deer, as well as domestic dogs and cats.

A wild animal with rabies is not afraid of humans and/or walks slowly around in circles. Any animal exhibiting these characteristics should be caught only by an animal control officer. Bats with rabies can be easily caught in broad daylight and should not be handled. Usually a bat bite does not break the skin, but the virus in its saliva can be transmitted through abrasions or cuts.

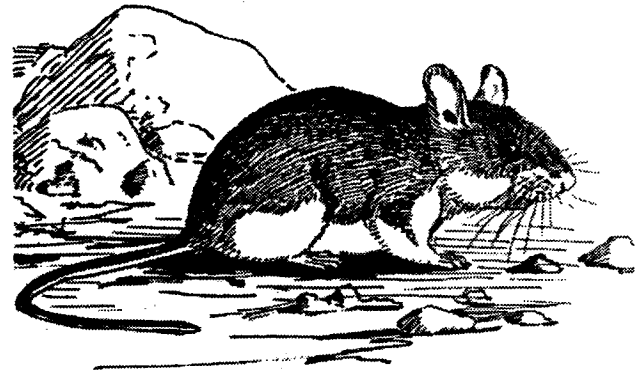
Plague

Plague is a bacterial disease that exists throughout the world and is carried by many wild animals, such as rats, ground squirrels, chipmunks, and wood rats. It is passed from one mammal to another by their fleas. When an animal dies from the plague, the fleas leave its body and attack other mammals. A person can become infected through flea bites, but can also contract plague by eating inadequately cooked meat of an animal that was infected with the disease.

Plague has been found in California in the Sierras in Golden-Mantled ground squirrels and chipmunks. Deer mice and voles are sometimes reservoirs of the plague bacterium. Public health representatives poison rodents around resort areas to lessen the likelihood of contracting the disease by vacationers. Infected areas have been found near Lake Tahoe and in the Lava Beds National Monument. Between 1970 and 1980 there were 13 cases of human plague in California, with 5 fatalities.

Hantavirus

In the United States, the deer mouse is the primary carrier of the virus that causes hantavirus pulmonary syndrome (HPS). Hantaviruses are spread through contact with the mouse droppings, and, when contracted, the infection is fatal nearly half of the time. The hantavirus can cause lung and kidney disease, and many infected die of shock. Symptoms include flue-like discomfort, headaches, and shortness of breath. The virus can become aerosolized and, therefore, cause infection when inhaled. No specific treatment is available, and researchers worldwide are working on a vaccine. An inactivated virus vaccine, developed in China, has shown promise in initial testing.



Infected droppings from the deer mouse are so virulent that safe cleanup can only be attempted if full Hazardous Materials (HazMet) gear is employed.

Avian Diseases

Many parasites causing diseases in birds are micro-organisms, such as protozoa, bacteria, fungi, and viruses. For instance, birds get a disease caused by a close relative of protozoa that cause human malaria and tuberculosis. Birds are also subject to several viral diseases, such as Newcastle disease, fowl plague, avian pox, and avian influenza, as well as hundreds of other infections.

Humans do not contract avian diseases, but birds can serve as hosts of pathogens that cause serious human illnesses.

CALENDAR

7 October, 3:30 p.m. First Trout Derby meeting for the Fifth Annual Derby, April 8, 9, 2000.

9 October, 10:00 a.m. Regular monthly Docent Meeting at the Nature Center. All are invited.

15 - 17 October Central Coast Birding Rally. Check out the La Purisima Audubon Site at: <http://homepages.infoseek.com/~lpas/lpas.html> One of the three birding sites is at Cachuma.

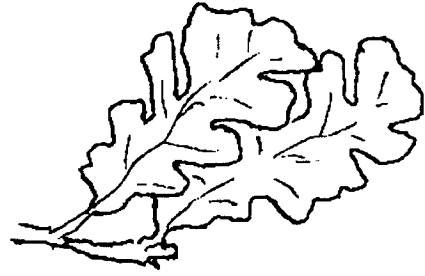
15 October, 8:00 Astronomy Night at the "Astro Bowl," located on the Dakota Plains.

21 October, 4:00 CLNC Board Meeting

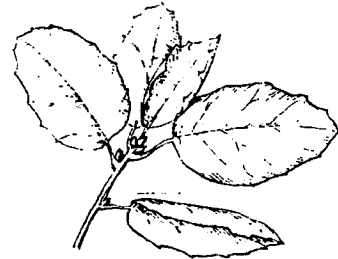
26 October, 7:00 Cachuma Lake slide show for Solvang Rotary.

31 October Combined Members, Docents, and Board Fall Party.

HI FOLKS! - KNOW YOUR OAKS



Leaf of the Valley Oak. Subject of much controversy in the Santa Ynez Valley, due to clearing of oaks for agriculture. Also, regeneration has been greatly reduced, due to harvesting by cattle.



Leaf of the Live Oak, a hearty and prolific species that is in no danger currently.



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