

The California Condor

Ventura Audubon Society
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A Chapter of the National Audubon Society
venturaaudubon.org



Happy Holidays 2020



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White pelicans - Ormond Lagoon, November 2020 Photo credit: Joan Tharp

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Call Notes

by Cynthia Hartley
Ventura Audubon Society, Executive Director



We hope everyone had a safe and wonderful Thanksgiving! We have received several inquiries about the annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC), asking if we will still be holding it this year because of the pandemic. The answer is yes! Our CBC is scheduled for Jan 2, 2021. We have collected CBC data in the Ventura County Circle continuously for 40 years. We have persisted through storms, floods and fires, and it is a top priority to keep the continuity

of this data going. That said, as we have learned again and again this year, the pandemic is an evolving situation that can change week to week. So this will be a fluid situation. As the date approaches we will carefully monitor the situation and adjust our methods based on county and state health orders to hold a safe CBC.

For anyone not familiar with the CBC, or who has never participated, see the article about it in this newsletter. I thought it would be informative to provide background, some links to more in-depth information and an explanation of how the count works. I have also provided details on how we plan to take COVID precautions to keep our count participants safe.

Although we prioritize the CBC work, we regret that in December we will be suspending field trips. Since our county has moved back to the most restrictive purple tier and because things may get worse as we enter the holiday season, we feel the safest thing to do is to pause this form of regular group activity. We will re-address our policy in mid-December as things evolve.

To get your mind off of the pandemic, consider joining us for our virtual December program on the Florida Scrub Jay presented by David Sherer, one of our local USFWS biologists. I have also included links to some interesting lecture topics for birders presented by VAS board member Frank DeMartino. This month we also have an update about wild California Condors, our chapter mascot. Author Jan Stevens is one of our conservation committee members and one of her rolls on the committee is to keep our chapter updated on the status of CA condors. Photographer Chris Trent has provided some of his wonderful condor photos to go with Jan's article. Thank you Chris and Jan!

**We wish everyone a very safe and wonderful
Christmas!**



121st Christmas Bird Count

How the count is organized

The first Christmas Bird Count (CBC) was held on Christmas Day 1900, to count birds during the holidays rather than hunt and kill them, which was the tradition of the day. Today the CBC has grown into our nation's longest-running community science bird project. Visit this [link](#) to explore nationwide data. Among other things, the CBC has enabled Audubon scientists to develop the [National Audubon 2014 Climate Change Report](#). It predicts how climate change could affect the ranges of 588 North American birds. This is why it is so critical to continue collecting data each year, as annual changes to bird counts and locations help scientists further build and fine tune their predictions.

Currently, the United States is divided into many established "count circles", which are 15-mile wide diameter circles, each one is overseen and organized by a count compiler. The count must be held within 2 weeks of Christmas, either before or after. Volunteers count every single bird they see or hear all day inside the count circle, so not just the number of species. The same exact circle is counted annually to keep the data consistent from year to year. To learn more about the national CBC and to explore this fascinating data, visit this [National Audubon Society CBC webpage](#).

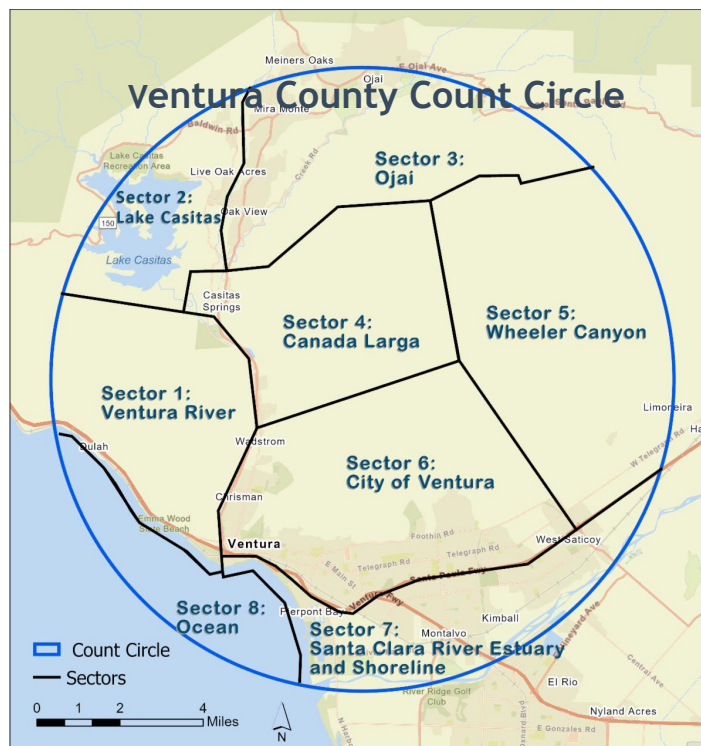
Local Audubon chapters typically take responsibility for count circles in their area, and determine which day they will hold their count. In our area we try to organize such that close-by circles are not all counted on the same day, thus allowing volunteers to help with more than one count circle. For more information about the various count circles in our area, explore this online [map](#). The map has contact information for the compilers of each count circle.



City of Ventura Christmas Bird Count Saturday January 2, 2021

Ventura Audubon has conducted a CBC count since 1980, when our chapter began. The City of Ventura count circle is divided into 8 sectors (see below). Each sector has a leader who organizes teams within their sector, and the entire circle is organized by our CBC compiler, Frank DeMartino.

Frank will report the data after the count is completed to the National Audubon Society database. We also have this wonderful [database](#) developed by Brad Sillasen using VAS data, which compiles the data from 1980 to 2019.



VAS - COVID Precautions for the 2020 CBC

As with everything else this year, pandemic safety will alter how we conduct this group activity. Each Audubon chapter will be taking precautions based on their regional considerations.

In past years VAS has hosted a pot-luck dinner the night of the Ventura CBC. Participants love hearing field stories from the day and getting a preview of rare sightings and preliminary species counts. Plus that, its just a fun and festive holiday gathering. However, this year we will have to do things differently due to COVID19. Instead of a group gathering, we plan to hold a virtual event via Zoom. We are still in the planning process and will give more information in the January newsletter which will be published just before this event. We hope next year we will be back to celebrate together in-person.

In order to limit group sizes of counting teams, we will be taking few new volunteers this year. Restrictions on group sizes mandated by health orders is one of the parameters we will be monitoring as count day approaches. For now our plan is to rely on small experienced teams, with an emphasis on household groups to conduct field counts in a COVID-safe manner. If you have participated in the CBC count before, group leaders will be reaching out soon to sort out who will cover what areas and sort out coverage shortfalls.

It is possible to count from your own yard if you live within the Ventura count circle. Although this has always been a component of the annual count, this method has been used more starting with the Thomas Fire in 2017, when much of the Ventura count circle was burned and closed to access. We have developed a protocol for collecting count data this way, so please contact us first if you want to participate from home.

Following are ways you can learn more local CBC info, or to reach out to us directly

- email Frank DeMartino at frank@colynx.com,
- email Cynthia Hartley at ed@venturaaudubon.org
- Visit (as health orders allow) or call the [Wild Birds Unlimited](#) store in Ventura
- Visit our [CBC page](#) on the VAS website (will be updated throughout December)

December Field Trips Suspended!

Due to increases COVID19 infections throughout our county and state as we are entering the holiday season, VAS will be suspending field trips in December. Even though our COVID safety policy is compliant with current Ventura County and California safety guidelines, we don't know if things will get worse. It is our highest priority to keep our field trip participants and leaders as safe as possible. We will continue to monitor Ventura County Health Department guidance and will bring back field trips again as soon as we can!

Bird Lists from our November Field Trips

Arroyo Verde: Nov 14, 2020 [bird list](#) & [ebird](#)

Field trip statistics: 3 hrs, 1 mile, 26 species, 133 individuals

Ormond Beach: Nov 29, 2020 [bird list](#) & [ebird](#)

Field trip stats: 6 hrs, 1.5 miles, 47 species. 1,887 individuals

December 2020 Speaker

Florida Scrub Jays

Speaker: David L. Sherer

**Title: Fish and Wildlife Biologist USFWS,
Ventura Office**

Time and Date: 7 PM - Tuesday Dec 8, 2020

[Zoom Meeting Link](#)

Meeting ID: 865 0075 9483

Passcode: 972660

[VAS website](#) - speaker page

photos provided by David Sherer



Florida Scrub-Jays (FLSJ; federally threatened) are non-migratory, cooperatively breeding birds that live in fire-maintained Florida scrub habitat. They are a relict species of fire dominated oak scrub habitat that occurs on peninsular Florida. They are extremely habitat-specific, sedentary, and territorial. Lifetime reproductive success is highest among individuals breeding in habitat that has burned within the last 10 years. However, such habitat is scarce and competition for it as breeding space is likely intense.

David investigated how an individual's behavioral phenotype (personality; bold vs. shy) and the quality of habitat in which they were raised (i.e., their natal territory) influenced exploratory behavior on a landscape consisting of habitat in various fire-history stages.



David Sherer holds a BS in Wildlife and Fisheries Science, Conservation Biology from Tennessee Tech University and an MS in Biology from the University of Central Florida. He joined the Ventura Office of USFWS in April and telecommutes from his home in Tennessee -- at least until the pandemic allows repopulating the office!

This program is an outgrowth of David's masters thesis:

Variation in Prospecting Behavior and Drivers of Post-Fire Habitat Preference Among Juvenile Florida Scrub-Jays.



Online Lectures for Birders

An Introduction To The Backyard Birds of Ventura County

Speaker: Frank DeMartino

[Wild Birds Unlimited, Ventura](#)

Time and Date: 2 PM - Saturday Dec 5, 2020

[Zoom Meeting Link](#)



Have you ever looked out your window and wondered what that strange looking bird was? Have you heard an unfamiliar bird song that brought joy to your heart? Ventura county hosts a wide variety of bird species and even gets more birds than most states! Frank DeMartino, local Audubon board member and owner of Wild Birds Unlimited, will introduce you to the most common birds that are likely to be visiting during this time of year. He'll talk about what they eat, when they are around, and how you can attract them to your backyard.

Do You Hear What I Hear?

Speaker: Frank DeMartino

[Wild Birds Unlimited, Ventura](#)

Time and Date: 2 PM - Sunday Dec 13, 2020

[Zoom Meeting Link](#)

Facebook event [link](#)



A bird? A bird! Who is singing in your yard now? Birds make a lot of noise and each sound conveys something different. People who have practiced listening to the birds are able to tell what birds are in an area, what they're doing, if there are any threats around, and much more! We're going to talk about some of the different bird sounds and get started learning some common bird songs!

2020 has been challenging for California Condors, too

by Jan Stevens, VAS Conservation Committee

Condor photo credits: Chris Trent

In the early 1980s, only 21 California Condors remained in the wild. As of last year, 337 of the critically endangered birds were flying free, and 200 of them made their home in California.



The numbers for 2020 may not be so encouraging. Helen Johnson, president of the [Friends of California Condors Wild and Free](#), said there are currently close to 90 condors in the SoCal flock, down from 99 in 2019. “They are centered in Ventura County, but also roam through Santa Barbara, Kern and other counties,” Johnson said.

he unofficial count does not include condors that may fledge or be released from captivity this year. (Two captive birds were released into Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge just before this newsletter went to press.)



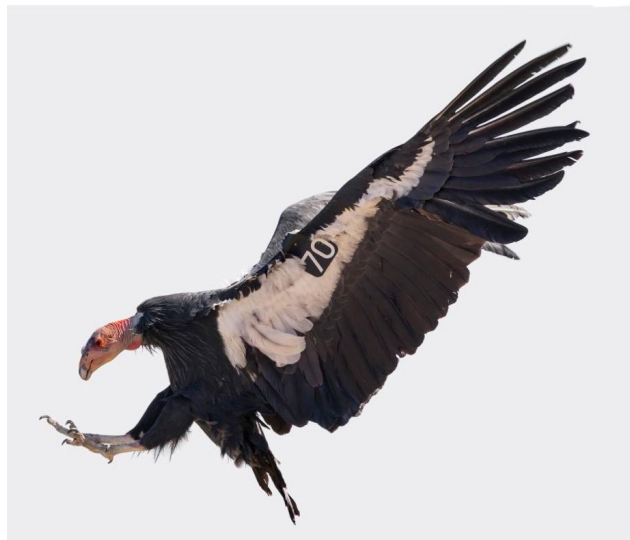
The official U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service numbers for 2020 probably won't be available until mid 2021.

Keeping the wild populations alive is a challenge. Condors die annually for reasons ranging from lead poisoning to power lines to ingesting microtrash, and the survival rate for chicks varies from year to year.

Lead poisoning is the top cause of death for adult birds. The California Legislature banned lead ammunition statewide last year, but the law is proving difficult to enforce. “Lead is absolutely still the number one threat to condors,” Johnson said. “Hopefully, as hunters fully adopt non-lead ammo, the remains that they leave in the woods will become a benefit to wildlife instead of a threat. ... If you know a hunter, please tell them about [huntingwithnonlead.org](#).”

The state's worsening wildfire problem is another worry. This year's Dolan fire near Big Sur impacted the Ventana Wilderness population, which had numbered 63 birds before the blaze. Ventana lost at least nine free flying birds and two chicks in the disaster, according to the Ventana Wilderness Society website <http://www.ventanaws.org/>.

In spite of these setbacks, the captive breeding efforts that brought these birds back from near-extinction continue to provide hope. As of 2019, there were 181 condors in captivity in field sites and zoos. Like the two released recently at Bitter Creek, they will gradually be introduced into the wild in areas of Arizona, California, Utah and Mexico. And there's more help on the way. According to a National Audubon story, (<https://www.audubon.org/news/an-indigenous-effort-return-condors-pacific-northwest-nears-its-goal>) the Yurok Tribe is awaiting final federal approval to begin building condor-release facilities in Redwood National Park, reintroducing the birds to an area where they haven't been seen for a century.



Thank you to our supporters!

Financial contributions to our chapter allow us to continue our work protecting birds and their habitat.

Grants

- California Department of Fish and Wildlife and United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Endangered Species Act Section 6 Grant
- National Foundation of Fish and Wildlife (NFWF)
- National Audubon Society, Audubon in Action Grant

October Bird-a-thon donations are still trickling in, thank you everyone for your generosity!

Support Ventura Audubon Society



This beautiful calendar features the shorebird photography of VAS board member Alecia Smith.

All proceeds benefit our Shorebird Recovery Program, AND these images were photographed on Ventura County beaches. This is a great way to support the VAS Shorebird Recovery Program, and enjoy Ventura County shorebirds year round.

Explore the rest of the calendar images or place your order on this [website](#)

Please consider VAS in your year end donations. Ventura Audubon Society is a registered tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization.

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