

Birds in Our Watershed

by Barbara Salzman

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Spring and summer bring new voices to Corte Madera Creek, its creekside habitats and watershed. Waterfowl except for a few domesticated mallards and geese have gone north to breed, as have the shorebirds sometimes seen feeding on invertebrates in the mudflats adjacent to the creek. In spring and summer these habitats come alive with nesting birds, both our year-round resident species and migratory songbirds that spend the winter in South America return to breed here each year.

Populations of many migratory songbirds have declined, primarily due to loss of habitat in their breeding grounds. While urbanizing the Corte Madera Creek watershed has certainly reduced nesting habitat, we still have remnant pockets of native vegetation. The following migratory songbirds noted in the Riparian Bird Conservation Plan as target species of concern, nest in the Corte Madera Creek watershed.

Yellow warbler depends on willow and alder thickets building its nest in saplings one to fifteen feet above ground.

Wilson's warbler prefers dense understory willow and alder riparian habitat, mixed conifer or broad-leaved evergreen forests and conceals its nest in understory vine tangles, small bushes or ferns in late March through early October.

Warbling vireo breeds in moist, shaded evergreen forests dominated by coast live oak, California bay laurel, redwoods mixed with hardwoods, willow, and riparian groves.

Swainson's thrush prefers dense riparian groves, dense moist understory or shrub layer.

Black-headed grosbeak nests in willow and alder riparian thickets, or at the edge of conifer forests. I had one nesting in my neighborhood about 10 years ago and very much enjoyed the family coming to my feeder.

Song sparrow breeds in stream drainages specifically along Corte Madera Creek and other locations in both adjacent upland and saltmarsh habitats. Recognized by dark spot in the middle of its breast.

Other very noticeable migratory species in Marin are the five species of **swallow** that fly thousands of miles from South America to nest here, staying from early March through September. Tree, cliff, barn, violet-green, and northern rough winged swallows all nest in our area. Perhaps the best known are cliff and barn swallows that build mud nests on the sides of buildings, often under eaves near a source of mud. They use the undersides of bridges, and freeway overpasses. Because cliff swallows nest in large colonies, sometimes people complain about their droppings. Swallows eat bugs and are often seen catching insects in the air. Their acrobatics are admirable and fascinating to watch. All swallows eat insects, beetles, bugs, flies, moths, caterpillars, etc. and, therefore are very beneficial to people.

We have a number of year-round residents in the watershed. In addition to scrub and stellar's jays, mockingbirds and crows, look for the following:

Spotted towhee nests in bushy riparian thickets and on shrubby edges of woodlands. Its black back and wings with white spots, white belly, and rufous sides may serve as camouflage for a sun-dappled backdrop beneath shrubs. Forages on the ground.

California towhee is a back yard bird but has a range restricted to coastal California. It constructs a nest in bushes or trees, woodlands or chaparral. Towhees do well in developed suburban areas such as Ross Valley.

Wrentit nests in a wide variety of habitats: dense shrubs, mature chaparral, riparian thickets, along brushy borders of forested habitats and conifer habitats near sunny openings. The only place in this world this tiny brown bird lives is a narrow section of the west coast from Baja California to the Columbia River.

If you would like to help improve the habitat for native birds in your yard or community here are a few tips from California Partners in Flight and the Riparian Habitat Joint Venture. An individual can have a profound impact on the life of birds and likelihood of species breeding successfully.

- Protect and restore native riparian areas by planting species native to Marin County. In Marin, if you live next to the creek this means oak, bay, buckeye, willows, alders and a variety of shrubs. Birds need continuous vegetative habitat, with understory. Weedy, shrubby growth underneath trees is crucial to bird survival for cover and food. Urban landscaping, lawns and manicured areas favor only a few species that thrive in such environments. Introduced plants do not provide the same nutrition or nest site quality. Nesting requirements vary among species, from directly on the ground to the tops of trees. Shrubs and trees, tall grasses, dead trees or snags all provide important nest sites for different species.
- If you own a cat, help reduce the impact on cats of birds by keeping your cat indoors. Domestic cats kill hundreds of millions of native birds, reptiles and small mammals each year. Young inexperienced birds that have just fledged are particularly vulnerable. It is not true that well fed cats do not hunt, in fact a well-fed cat is a more effective predator. Neither do bells work, because birds do not know a bell means a cat is after them.
- If you feed birds, locate the feeder away from places that provide places for cats to ambush birds. Springtime feeding may encourage a lower quality diet for nestlings who need high-protein insects which are naturally abundant during the breeding season. When feeding birds in winter feed them constantly because they can become dependent on the supply.
- Be careful your actions do not disturb the natural predator-prey relationships. Feeders frequented by jays and crows should not be maintained during the breeding season because this gives an advantage to these species that prey on the young of smaller birds.

Birds enrich our lives, are a joy to observe, and a constant challenge to identify. Get a bird field guide and begin to investigate your neighborhood.

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