



# Phainopepla

Published by the  
**San Fernando Valley Audubon Society**  
A Chapter of National Audubon Society  
For Nature Education and the Conservation of Wildlife

Vol. 71 No. 4

August / September 2020

*Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic (and our normal summer hiatus) there will be No General Membership Meetings in August or September. Stay-tuned to our website, [www.sfvaudubon.org](http://www.sfvaudubon.org) for updates.*

## General Membership Meetings

Sadly, the San Fernando Valley Arts & Cultural Center has fallen victim to Covid-19 and has permanently closed. For the foreseeable future, our General Membership Meetings have been placed on hold. We look forward to the day we can gather safely together at a new location and share our love of birds.

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*Stay Safe*

&

*Happy Birding!*

## Birdathon 2020 by Richard Davis

A big "Thank you!" to our 2020 Birdathon Donors who gave generously to support our Sepulveda Basin Environmental Education Program (SBEEP). Together we raised **\$8,454!** While we cannot currently host students in the Basin, we will use the funds to create online virtual classrooms for all students and teachers to access and learn about the wildlife in the Sepulveda Basin.



Thanks to:

Patricia Avery  
Wendy Barsh  
Richard Barth  
Rodney Bennett  
Gary Boehm  
Robert Brown  
David Campbell  
Tracy Carpenter  
Patty Chalupa  
Rose Claunch  
Paul Cooley  
Richard & Marianne  
Davis  
Penny Elia  
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Robert Hamilton  
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## The Art of Specimen Preservation

—Article and photos by Natalie Beckman-Smith, SFVAS Board Member

When I was a little girl, two of my favorite places to visit were the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County and the Children's Museum at La Habra. While the two are quite different from each other, one thing that they have in common is an impressive collection of taxidermied mammal and bird specimens. I would spend hours staring in awe at species from the far reaches of Earth posed in such a realistic manner that it only took a little bit of imagination to convince myself that they were still alive. Since my childhood, I have always dreamed of being able to create such amazing displays.

This past year, I finally found the opportunity to do taxidermy and specimen preservation after transferring to CSUN. At orientation, we were shown the collection rooms and I immediately fell in love. There were rows and rows of cabinets full of beautifully preserved birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians, many of them much older than I am. Not long after that, I was seated at a lab bench with collection manager Dr. Jim Hogue doing my first specimen ever, a Black-throated Magpie-Jay native to Mexico. This particular bird was not from Mexico, however. It was from a private aviary. The exotic birds CSUN receives come from all sorts of places, including private pet owners, zoos, and rescues. We also receive native birds, usually found on the ground after window strikes or killed by cats.



Mourning Dove

The preservation process is not for the faint of heart and can get pretty messy. Birds that have died from rat poison can be particularly bloody. The basic goal is to skin the animal as cleanly and quickly as possible before filling it up again with cotton and sewing it closed. Borax is also added to deter insect infestations. All bird specimens are put into a uniform pose on their backs with legs crossed and wings tucked in. After being stuffed, a well-kept mount can last for decades or even centuries. Sometimes a body will be too badly injured or decomposed for us to save its skin. In that case we either save and mount individual parts that can be salvaged, such as wings or feet, or clean the bones using our colony of flesh-eating dermestid beetles before adding the skeleton to the collection.



Left-right: Crested Partridge, Red-lored Parrot, Black-throated Magpie-jay

We record where the specimen is from, when it died, how much it weighed, its sex (which often times can only be determined by dissection), and any other information of interest. This data can be used in the future by researchers. We often find surprising things during the preservation process, such as broken bones, extra fat, or puncture wounds. These details give us insight into what kind of life the bird lived and how it died. Each specimen is given a collection number and is tagged. The specimens in CSUN's collection are regularly used to teach students in biology classes and by researchers such as Dr. Fritz Hertel and his lab studying bird morphology.

I absolutely love being able to do taxidermy. It gives me an up-close and personal experience with birds that I would not have been able to get otherwise. Through taxidermy, I have an even greater admiration for the beauty and form of these amazing creatures. It feels good to be able to honor them and give their bodies new life and purpose after death. I am so thankful to CSUN and Dr. Hogue for this opportunity to contribute to science and natural history. I hope to continue doing taxidermy and specimen preservation for the rest of my life. I want to improve my skills and eventually do the same kind of life-like posed mounts that inspired me as a kid. 🐦

## Xerces Pollinator Habitat Project in the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Area

This article describes a planting project done by our group intended to support pollinating insects, particularly Monarch Butterflies. The project was made possible by the Xerces Society.

We are a group of volunteers, members of the Los Angeles/Santa Monica Mountains Chapter of the California Native Plant Society (CNPS). Led by Steven Hartman we have removed invasive plants from parts of the Wildlife Area of the Sepulveda Basin for the past ten years. During that time we have gradually expanded the areas dominated by native plants and greatly reduced the recurrence of non-natives in those areas. We work twice a week starting at dawn for about three hours. (contact us through <https://sepulvedabasinwildlife.org> )

In the four years I've been involved with this group I've been amazed by the number of birders who pass by. Some we see daily, others are one-time visitors to LA who find the place online, listed as a world-class diversity hotspot. While we work, focused on the ground, around us is constant bird activity.

Unfortunately, for birds and other organisms, much of the Wildlife Area is a desert. Agriculture has left behind its imported weeds, which host few insects, have low diversity and in the case of mustard chemically alter the soil to limit the growth of native competitors. These invasives are generally distasteful or even poisonous to rodents and rabbits, thus providing less food for raptors.

We are native plant folks, which can seem to be a bit priggish to some, but by helping native plants we know that we are helping birds. Only native plants support insects that breeding and migrating birds must consume in order to survive. Recently Acorn Woodpeckers have moved into the Basin, because the oaks that were planted twenty years ago are now large enough to provide the habitat they need.

In my opinion, the best thing a birder can do to help birds is to spend some time helping plants. After all, what fraction of a bird's life is spent sitting on, hiding in, gleaning from, eating the seeds of, or eating the insects that eat the plants? Birds identify habitat they can use. If that habitat is present they use it, if not they move somewhere else.



1--Undeveloped planting area—Photo: G. Waddell

The Sepulveda Basin had been heavily farmed for more than one hundred years, so virtually all native vegetation had been eradicated allowing for the introduction of many “weeds” associated with agriculture. The San Fernando Valley suburbs of Los Angeles grew up in the surrounding area cutting off contact with wild areas of the Santa Monica and San Gabriel Mountains. The US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) took control of the area in the 1930s to build a dry land reservoir for flood control of the Los Angeles River which necessitated removing 2000+ acres of the San Fernando Valley from development. One-hundred twenty acres of that is designated as the Wildlife Reserve. Various projects since the 1980s have introduced a Wildlife Lake and a base structure of native shrubs and trees, but unfortunately more than 80% of the Wildlife Area is still dominated by annual fields of mustard, horehound, poison hemlock, fennel, thistle and other invasive plants. More information about the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Area can be found at <https://sepulvedabasinwildlife.org> and CNPS publication *Fremontia* Vol 46 No. 1.

The area selected for the Xerces Pollinator Project planting was an open space surrounded by dense thickets of California rose, coyote bush, golden currant, and elderberry. To the North is a large lawn used for soccer and picnicking (and gopher hunting by Great Blue Herons). To the South is the Wildlife Lake and to the West is Haskell Creek (which flows from the San Gabriel Mountains in the North but also drains many square miles of suburbs). Haskell Creek feeds the Los Angeles River which is about one mile to the south.

The native shrubs had been prevented from expanding into our open area by the long term presence of mustard. We have found that removing mustard for at least three consecutive years allows the native shrubs to compete effectively against the (continued)



recurrence of the mustard. A volunteer effort by 25 people one day the year before had allowed us to expand our efforts into this particular area.

The soil is a very heavy and impermeable clay—actually the Wildlife Lake owes its existence to the removal of a large amount of this clay to line the bottom of a reservoir.



2--Anne Abramson watering holes for future plants—Photo: G. Waddell

In the summer of 2019 we laid out an 80' by 80' area for the planting. Because the soil is only slightly softer than concrete we used a 1" drill bit and electric drill to make 1600 3" deep holes at 2' centers. Anticipating continuation of the drought conditions that had dominated the previous years we brought water from the lake in buckets and filled each little hole repeatedly with water using a variety of improvised watering cans. The soil is so impermeable that it might take five minutes for a hole to absorb its sip of water. The idea was to build an underground store of moisture for each future little plant. Thanks to the assistance of LA Recreation and Parks we eventually got access to the irrigation for the lawn and using 200 feet of hose were able to get a break from carrying buckets.

In October the plants came. They were donated by the Xerces Society and grown by their partner producers Hedgerow Farms and S & S Seeds. Our group experimented with planting techniques. It was going to take a long time to plant so many plants and also keep them alive. Fall in Southern California can be very hot and dry and there was no promise of rain.

A call for assistance for a planting day brought what felt like a miracle. Thirty folks showed on November 2<sup>nd</sup> and we were able to plant and water 1300 plants.



3--Planting (note the dibble)—Photo: Nurit Katz



4--Watering and building watering reservoirs—Photo: Nurit Katz

Our method was to first water the holes so that the dibble could form the correctly shaped hole. Teams followed the waterers and dibblers (fun to say!) and planted the tiny plants. One team planted Black Sage around the perimeter. Another team planted blocks of thirty to forty milkweeds. The remaining Goldenrod and Pacific Aster were scattered randomly throughout the remaining space. One-hundred sixty of the Verbena were reserved to be planted elsewhere because that species was already in our area. Folks then worked to build watering reservoirs around each plant, and we watered them in.

When next we visited the spot the first thing we saw were rabbits. They were browsing enthusiastically on goldenrod and aster. They left the others alone, but they did have a disconcerting habit of snipping our little milkweeds off and leaving them lying as sad reminders. As dry weather continued we kept on with our hand watering, being greatly helped by a team of the Los Angeles Civilian Conservation Corps. Eventually we began to do overhead watering with an impact sprinkler. (continued)



5--Robert Grzesiak and the fenced planting area—  
Photo: G. Waddell

We tried a few methods of protection against rabbit herbivory. Sections of cardboard tubing surrounded some plants. One of us built rabbit “confusers,” sort of wire cages above and around individual plants. But the sheer number of plants made these methods impractical. In desperation we improvised a low (18”) fence made of bird netting around the planting area with a caution tape to warn pedestrians, but this was flimsy and barely slowed the rabbits down. Ultimately the coming of the rains provided the rabbits with alternative food.

The end of November and the month of December brought seven inches of rain (100% more than normal) so our watering duties ended. Hard rains brought sheet flows down from the lawn and flooding from Haskell Creek which washed away our watering reservoirs. March and April brought seven more inches of rain, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic which interrupted our volunteer efforts. During our hiatus an amazing variety of previously unseen plants have sprung up in our planting space. New natives include large patches of *Camissoniopsis* (new to the reserve) and fiddleneck along with elegant Clarkia, California poppy, and Hooker’s evening primrose. A small patch of coyote bush became a large patch, swallowing up our *Xerces* plants in the SW corner.

The floodwaters brought invasives as well—our old enemies mustard, tocalote, and horehound as well as new visitors such as curly dock, filaree, Russian thistle, and prickly lettuce. We restarted our weeding efforts at the end of May and now have the weed situation under control.

The results for our *Xerces* donated plants are mixed. Black sage are large, two feet tall and blooming already. Verbena are also large and blooming. Some of the milkweeds are a foot tall, blooming with multiple stems, while others are barely larger than when they were planted. Aster and goldenrod seem to have a low survival rate probably due to their tastiness to the rabbits.

A count on June 9<sup>th</sup> found 164 narrowleaf milkweeds which is a 20% survival rate. Survival for black sage is at least 50% and represents an important introduction to the Wildlife Area. Verbena is now common in the area, and certainly some of these are from the forty that we planted there. Survival rates for the goldenrod and Pacific aster are difficult to determine but is probably less than 20%. These small plants are difficult to identify so we await their bloom.

—George Waddell. CNPS Volunteer



6--Planting area as of June 11, 2020—Photo: S. Hartman



## Calendar of Events

### August–September

At this time, all SF Valley Audubon walks and meetings have been cancelled for August and September.

If walks are made possible, they will be listed on our website.

Saturday, August 1 & September 5. Placerita Canyon Nature Center Docents' Bird Walk. 8:00 a.m. *Please call the Nature Center to confirm if walk will take place.* Directions: Take the 405 or 5 Freeway north to the 14 Freeway. Exit the 14 at Placerita Canyon. Turn right at the end of the off ramp and continue about 1.5 miles to the park entrance. Turn right and park at the Nature Center. Various leaders. For more information, call the Nature Center at (661) 259-7721.

Monday, September 28. ZOOM Board Meeting. 7:00 p.m.

### Audubon-at-Home by Alan Pollack

E-mail Alan Pollack, our Audubon-at-Home Chair, with any questions you have with regard to creating a wildlife-friendly garden that can be used for publication. Alan offers FREE consultation/landscape design to help you make your yard wildlife friendly. He also gives a FREE, PowerPoint slide show/lecture to community groups, high school, and college classes on attracting wildlife to your garden and sustainable gardening practices. He can be contacted at (818) 340-2347 or at [alan.pollack@sfaudubon.org](mailto:alan.pollack@sfaudubon.org).

#### A Minor Bird

I have wished a bird would fly away,  
And not sing by my house all day;

Have clapped my hands at him from the door  
When it seemed as if I could bear no more.

The fault must partly have been in me.  
The bird was not to blame for his key.

And of course there must be something wrong  
In wanting to silence any song. —Robert Frost



#### CoastalCleanupDay

Every Saturday in September! Beach cleanups start at our own front doors. Trash can travel through storm drains, creeks, and rivers to become beach pollution. This September, let's help clean the beach by cleaning up in our own neighborhoods and local natural areas.

For full guidance, [click here](#).

[coast4u@coastal.ca.gov](mailto:coast4u@coastal.ca.gov)

#### Hornworm Delicacy



In these days of staying close to home, many of us are tending food gardens in our yards or in balcony pots and taking up other traditional pursuits. A post in my local Nextdoor seems particularly apt, providing a way to control hornworms, a widely disliked and devastating pest to tomato plants, while feeding birds and avoiding pesticide use.

The posting reads: "[Tomato worms are a delicacy in the bird feeder - feed the birds!](#) I planted a lot of tomatoes this year and am dealing with the tying up and removal of the tomato worms. Don't use chemicals when you can deliver 'lobster' to the birds and provide them some very nutritious protein to supplement their diets. They aren't that nasty to deal with and the horn is no threat, I usually tear off the portion the big ones are on for their chewing and exposing the plant to disease. Then it's simple to put them on the feeder but if you can handle the ew factor and remove them from the stem or leaf it's gourmet level with no need for a BAM! flourish. The smaller ones hide in folded leaves and are easy to unfold to knock them into the feeder. Scrub Jays are delighted with the big juicy ones and the smaller worms get gobbled up by the smaller birds. Don't need chemicals this way and more bird life/activity in return. New friends too as they follow me around waiting for treats! Feed the birds...they are heading into the dry season and could use our attention in this way to supplement their diets."

Mari gave her permission to publish her post in the *Phainopepla* and provided a few more interesting thoughts. "... if it helps to get more people off application of chemicals and more birds given nutrition I'm very happy to have it used to further that goal! ... I've been feeding the birds since very young." —Submitted by Muriel Kotin, Photo: Wikipedia

## SAN FERNANDO VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

### EXECUTIVE OFFICERS

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For Chapter leaders' e-mail addresses, see our website:

[www.SFVAudubon.org](http://www.SFVAudubon.org)

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Found an injured animal? Call Wildlife Rescue Center at (818) 222-2658

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The *PHAINOPEPLA*, published six times a year, is the newsletter of the San Fernando Valley Audubon Society, P.O. Box 7769, Van Nuys, CA 91409. San Fernando Valley Audubon Society is a chapter of the National Audubon Society, a non-profit conservation/education organization, and is dedicated to "the conservation of wildlife and natural resources."

Articles, letters, drawings, and photographs concerning conservation, ecology, birding, chapter activities, and articles of interest to the membership are welcome for publication in the *PHAINOPEPLA*.

Material from other newsletters or newspapers should include the source and date. Copy for the *PHAINOPEPLA* should be in the hands of the editor by the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the month to be included in the following month's newsletter.

**Membership to National Audubon is separate and can be initiated on the website [www.Audubon.org](http://www.Audubon.org).**

If you have any questions about membership, renewals, change of address or any other membership concerns, please contact Lynn Maddox at (818) 845-4688 or e-mail her at [Lynn.Maddox@sfvaudubon.org](mailto:Lynn.Maddox@sfvaudubon.org).

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# Phainopepla

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## *Conservation Corner* by Dave Weeshoff, Conservation Chair

### **Plastic in the Ocean and Birds**

Can you say “ubiquitous”? (Being, or seeming to be, everywhere at the same time; omnipresent).

That describes plastic in our world today. Everywhere look I see plastic. In fact, my physical act of seeing requires looking through plastic (polycarbonate) lenses.

I became sensitive to the consequences of plastic pollution in the ocean about 15 years ago when I began volunteering with International Bird Rescue as well as a visit to Midway Atoll. Many seabirds (Albatrosses & Fulmars for example) ingest plastic particles since they look and smell like food, and they may feed those bits to their chicks, causing their death. Studies show that over 85% of seabirds have plastic in their bodies, causing disruption of various biological processes and death.

Almost all plastic, that is, “petrochemicals” (chemical polymers consisting of long chains of atoms bonded to each other), are made from crude oil and natural gas extracted through wells and fracking activities. The complex processes of creating the many types of plastic require both the raw materials and heat produced by burning natural gas. Various coloring, hardeners, and other substances are added to produce the desired chemistry to make pliable plastic bags (e.g. plastic films), water bottles, Formica, health-care articles, my eyeglass lenses, clothing, and millions of other items. We transform natural components (oil & natural gas) into unnatural products which do not biodegrade. While the plastic may photodegrade and break into small pieces (Microplastics), they remain in the oceans forever.

The amount of plastic produced each year staggers the imagination, and is growing at double-digit rates. A huge percentage (over 50%) of that plastic is single-use, with a useful life of mere minutes, yet the majority of plastic (85%+) ever produced remains on our planet, somewhere, and virtually forever. The amount of plastic waste driven into the ocean is proportionally huge, and susceptible to ingestion by virtually all life forms there, from zooplankton and birds to Blue Whales.

So, how does that plastic get into the ocean? Primarily through urban runoff; that is, from cities and towns via their rivers and, especially in the case of our West Coast, stormwater systems. It is our errant trash (litter), debris, automobile residue (tire rubber, etc.) and, sadly, deliberate disposal, that contributes the vast majority of the pollution.

The solution to our problem is two-fold. One, never let any plastic loose into the environment. Period. No cigarette butts, balloons (especially Mylar), straws, plastic bags, - nothing. And Two, reduce the total amount of plastic we use in total.

In prior missives I have written on Anthropogenic Climate Change and its effects on birds. In our next edition of the Phainopepla I'll relate our consumption of plastics with Climate Change and discuss how plastic production, use, and disposal contributes to Climate Change and its impact on the birds we love.

As usual, please call me at (818) 618-1652 or email [Dave.weeshoff@SFVAudubon.org](mailto:Dave.weeshoff@SFVAudubon.org) with questions, comments, criticism, or to enlist in our conservation activities on behalf of our feathered friends.