Trip Report: WFO’s Central Sierra Field Trip June 2016

The Group: Wendy Beers, John Birsner, Diego Blanco (Youth Scholarship recipient), Andy Brumbaugh, Gordon Cameron, Linda Easter, Carolyn Greene, John Harris, Mark Holmgren, Helen McKinley, Barbara Reber, and Pamela Stones

The Leaders: Jon Dunn, Lena Hayashi, Ed Pandolfino, Dave Quady

TRIP HIGHLIGHTS

We enjoyed excellent weather and found 162 species (see full list below) in the course of a week in the Central Sierra visiting the California counties of Placer, Nevada, El Dorado, Alpine, Lassen, Plumas, and Sierra as well as Douglas, Washoe, and Carson City counties in Nevada.

June 21
Following a great meal and good night’s sleep, we were up early to bird our way up Mosquito Ridge Road in Placer County, a route that would take us from as low as 1200 feet to nearly 6000 feet through most of the west side Sierra habitats. Along the way we stopped to hear and intermittently see a Canyon Wren singing from the steep cliffs. An adult Peregrine Falcon streaked by as we were listening to the wren. The Big Trees trail (northernmost Giant Sequoias in the state) rang with songs of the expected west side species and we enjoyed great looks at Hermit Warbler, Pacific Wren, Cassin’s Vireo, and a very cooperative Hammond’s Flycatcher. On the drive to the Grouse Falls overlook trail we encountered singing MacGillivray’s Warblers, Cassin’s Vireos among others. The hoped-for Black Swifts did not put in a showing, but we all got killer looks at an adult male Western Tanager from the platform.
We returned to the hotel in mid-afternoon and, while some napped in preparation for the evening’s owling, others visited Traylor Ranch in Penryn to find Hooded Orioles and other foothill/valley species.

We worked our way back up Mosquito Ridge Road owling along the way. Dave Q was able to pull in a Northern Saw-whet Owl for close, though brief spotlight views. Later we had a Flammulated Owl calling continuously nearby, though remaining well hidden from view, as is common with this most secretive owl.

![Diego working on his drawing of the Northern Saw-whet Owl. Photo J. Harris](image)

**June 22:**
After allowing folks to sleep in a bit, we worked our way up to Truckee stopping at the old Yuba Gap burn where Fox Sparrows of the “thick-billed” subspecies (*P. i. megarhyncha*) sang from the tops of the short pines. Green-tailed Towhees also sang, providing a nice comparison of these very similar songs. A MacGillivray’s Warbler was persuaded to pop up for good views while some calling Mountain Quail, though close, remained unseen. A flyover Osprey was a nice treat.
One of Lena’s wonderful lunches at the Sierra Discovery PG&E site was followed by stunning views of a singing Lazuli Bunting.

![Lazuli Bunting singing. Photo W. Beers](image)

A short stop at the Castle Peak trailhead yielded Evening Grosbeaks and other higher-elevation species.

Jon led a group in the evening to Martis Peak getting nice looks at foraging Common Nighthawks and hearing a Common Poorwill.

**June 23:**
We started at Martis Lake/Valley where Green-tailed Towhee and Vesper and Brewer’s Sparrows sang and briefly perched up from the sagebrush. A gorgeous male Mountain Bluebird gave us great views as he perched above a nest box.

![Mountain Bluebird. Photo L. Hayashi](image)
The lake had a good variety of waterbirds including American White Pelicans and Gadwall and Cinnamon Teal with ducklings. Both Virginia Rail and Sora were heard, the latter uncommon during the breeding season at this site. The willow habitat at the north end was full of singing Yellow Warblers, Song Sparrows, and “mountain” White-crowned Sparrows (subspecies Z. l. oriantha) while Horned Larks worked the open areas. This subspecies of White-crowned winters primarily in western Mexico.

A perched adult Bald Eagle south of the lake was spotted by Lena and we all enjoyed nice scope views.

Next we worked our way up Martis Peak where Jon, in the lead van, spotted a juvenile (second year) Northern Goshawk carrying prey and heading uphill. The bird stopped for dinner a fair distance up the hill and, amazingly, Jon managed to get EVERYONE on the bird! What a treat!
Further up we were able to hear the haunting song of Hermit Thrushes and got excellent looks at a Dusky Flycatcher.

We moved on to the north shore of Lake Tahoe where we found a Marbled Godwit on the beach (likely Placer’s first June record) and all watched a pair of Pygmy Nuthatches feeding young at a nest hole about four feet off the ground in a small aspen.

The group at Lake Tahoe. Photo P. Stones

Pygmy Nuthatch removing fecal sac. Photo W. Beers
June 24:
We spent the morning birding Blackwood Canyon where we heard one call and bit of song from a Swainson’s Thrush and were treated to nice views of a male Pileated Woodpecker near an active nest hole.

![Pileated Woodpecker. Photo W. Beers](image)

There was a small group of _lutescens_ Orange-crowned Warblers here, part of the usual post-breeding upslope movements that this species is known to make.

At a small meadow along Barker Pass Road a male Calliope Hummingbird put on an extended show just a few feet over our heads, calling and giving repeated dive displays. Further up that road an Olive-sided Flycatcher gave us good views and an opportunity to enjoy his “quick, THREE-BEERs” song. This species is declining continent wide, including in the mountain West.
We then took the tram up to High Camp above Squaw Valley where, after a gourmet lunch, we walked up the slopes hoping (in vain) for Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches.

As consolation we found Mountain Bluebirds, Cassin’s Finches, and Clark’s Nutcrackers.

**June 25:**
After spending the night in Minden, we headed up to Leviathan Mine Road, which winds its way from Hwy 395 in Nevada into Alpine County, CA and takes us from open sagebrush habitats into classic pinyon/juniper woodlands interspersed with lush riparian canyons.
We found singing territorial Lark Sparrows in the sagebrush near the junction with US 395 as well as Mountain Bluebirds, a singing Sage Thrasher, and an adult Cassin’s Finch feeding young (surprising in this open country habitat). Lark Sparrows are an uncommon species east of the Sierra with very few known breeding locations (perhaps none in Inyo County). We heard and got distant looks at Pinyon Jay in Nevada, a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Black-headed Grosbeaks, and a silent Gray Flycatcher that, frustratingly for the CA county birders, was less than a quarter mile from being in Alpine County. Further along (now in CA) a walk down into the canyon produced Plumbeous Vireo, Lazuli Buntings, MacGillivray’s Warbler, and much more. We enjoyed yet another outstanding Lena-lunch with an active Western Wood-Pewee nest nearby.

![Western Wood-Pewee on nest. Photo W. Beers](image)

After a break back at the hotel, we drove back into northern Alpine County, locating a Great Horned Owl in a barn. In the same barn was a Say’s Phoebe, a very rare June record for this county and a likely breeding record as well, given the date and location. The owl flushed from the barn and flew to some nearby trees where the continuous complaining wails of a Cooper’s Hawk suggested it was nesting in those trees and did NOT appreciate a visit from a Great Horned Owl. Along Chambers Lane we found an active Western Kingbird nest, Bullock’s Orioles, and got good scope looks at Anna’s, Rufous, and an adult male Black-chinned Hummingbird at a feeder. We continued up to Indian Creek Reservoir where we found a cooperative Lewis’s Woodpecker (two others seen nearby) and added a number of ducks and other waterbirds to our trip list.
June 26:
We stopped on Vicky Lane north of Minden, NV and found singing Black-throated and Sagebrush Sparrows, then drove on to Mt. Rose.

![Black-throated Sparrow. Photo L. Hayashi](image)

The high elevation Tahoe Meadow just past the Mt. Rose summit was spectacular with the willows freshly leafed out and White-crowned and Lincoln sparrows lustily singing and Cassin’s Finches all around. During lunch at Galena Creek Park we were visited by a small group of “interior” White-breasted Nuthatches (subspecies *S. c. tenuissima*) giving their distinctive calls and song.

![The group waiting like a pack of wolves to pounce on another amazing Lena Lunch. Photo W. Beers](image)
We drove on to Loyalton in Sierra Valley and as soon as we emerged from the vans we found two adult Say’s Phoebes feeding two freshly-fledged young, thus documenting the first breeding record for this species in Sierra County.

![Say’s Phoebe fledglings waiting to be fed. Photo W. Beers](image)

Two likely first county breeding records for this species in two days (Alpine and Sierra) provides important status and distribution data for this species and is indicative that there is a strong scientific research component to these trips. After a short rest, we spent the afternoon birding along Antelope Valley Road and documented (audio recording and views) a singing Plumbeous Vireo in this location, well north of the California breeding range shown in most sources.

**June 27:**
We headed out early for Yuba Pass and the SF State University Sierra Nevada Field Campus. Evening Grosbeaks were along Hwy 49 gathering roadside grit and coastal *ustulatus* Swainson’s Thrushes were singing away at the Field Station. We had good looks at a preening American Dipper from the bridge into the Field Campus and eye-level views of Hermit Warblers.

![American Dipper preening. Photo W. Beers](image)
The hummingbird feeders at Bassett’s Station had Anna’s, Rufous, and Calliope Hummers.

We dropped back down into Sierra Valley and enjoyed the songs of Vesper, Brewer’s, and Savannah Sparrows (at least those whose range of hearing still includes the high, thin Savannah’s song...).

An adult Bald Eagle was perched along Marble Hot Springs Road and then chased a fish-carrying Osprey. The birds flew out of sight before we could see if the eagle succeeded in stealing the fish. Male Wilson’s Phalaropes were visible only as they flushed from the wetlands but Yellow-headed Blackbirds permitted nearly arm’s length views as they sang from the fenceline.
We had distant but satisfying looks at Sandhill Cranes. Barn Swallows swooped around and the Cliff Swallows were present in dense clouds of many dozens over the Steel Bridge. A few Black-crowned Night-Herons constituted an uncommonly good showing for this species in Sierra Valley.

![Black-crowned Night-Heron. Photo L. Hayashi](image)

White-faced Ibis (with WHITE faces!) were all over.

Along Dyson Lane we found both Barn Owl and American Kestrels in a large pole barn and a Swainson’s Hawk nest with three downy white chicks.

![Swainson’s Hawk with three young. Photo L. Hayashi](image)
After an excellent Mexican dinner in Sierraville, we headed back up to Yuba Pass to do some owling. On the way we were briefly distracted by a Wilson’s Snipe perched on a roadside fence post.

Beside hearing Common Poorwills, one fluttered over our heads and landed briefly just in front of us. A female Spotted Owl came in very close and engaged us in a long conversation where she went through at least three distinct vocalization types, but never ventured into view. From the Sierra Valley overlook we heard a distant Flammulated Owl calling continuously and a much closer Northern Saw-whet Owl hooted and gave other calls.

**June 28:**
Following a hearty breakfast in Sierraville, we said our goodbyes and headed back to Auburn and the 100-plus temps of the Central Valley.
First number is number of days recorded, second number is maximum number recorded on any one day. H = heard only. N = nest. Y = dependent young.

SPECIES LIST:
Canada Goose *Branta canadensis moffitti* 7/75 Y
Gadwall *Anas strepera* 6/16 Y
Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* 1/16 Y
Cinnamon Teal *Anas cyanoptera* 4/10 Y
Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* 1/1
Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* 3/4
Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca* 2/1
Redhead *Aythya americana* 2/3
Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris* 1/1
Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis* 1/2
Common Merganser *Mergus merganser americanus* 1/11
Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis* 4/4
Mountain Quail *Oreortyx pictus* 1/2 H
California Quail *Callipepla californica* 4/15 Y
Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps* 6/3
Eared Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis californicus* 1/3
Western Grebe *Aechmophorus occidentalis* 1/3
Clark's Grebe *Aechmophorus clarkii* 1/1
Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus* 1/3
American White Pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos* 6/7
Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias* 2/1
Great Egret *Ardea alba egretta* 1/2
Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* 1/4
White-faced Ibis *Plegadis chihi* 1/75
Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura* 5/10
Osprey *Pandion haliaetus carolinensis* 3/1
White-tailed Kite *Elanus leucurus* 1/1
Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* 3/1
Northern Harrier *Circus cyaneus hudsonicus* 3/3
Cooper's Hawk *Accipiter cooperii* 2/1
Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis atricapillus* 1/1
Red-shouldered Hawk *Buteo lineatus elegans* 1/1 H
Swainson's Hawk *Buteo swainsoni* 3/4 N, Y
Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis calurus* 7/4
Virginia Rail *Rallus limicola* 2/5
Sora *Porzana carolina* 1/1 H
American Coot *Fulica americana* 6/25 Y
Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis tabida* 1/5 Y
Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus* 2/10 Y
American Avocet *Recurvirostra americana* 1/2
Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus* 4/4
Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularius* 1/1 H
Willet *Tringa semipalmata inornata* 1/5 Y
Marbled Godwit *Limosa fedoa* 1/1
Wilson's Snipe *Gallinago delicata* 4/3
Wilson's Phalarope *Phalaropus tricolor* 1/5
Rock Pigeon *Columba livia* 4/40
Band-tailed Pigeon *Patagioenas fasciata* 2/12
Eurasian Collared-Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* 4/10
Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura* 4/4
Barn Owl *Tyto alba* 1/1
Flammulated Owl *Psiloscops flammeolus* 2/1 H
Great Horned Owl *Bubo virginianus* 1/1
Spotted Owl *Strix occidentalis occidentalis* 1/1 H
Northern Saw-whet Owl *Aegolius acadicus acadicus* 2/1 H
Common Nighthawk *Chordeiles minor hesperis* 5/15
Common Poorwill *Phalaenoptilus nuttallii* 4/3
Black-chinned Hummingbird *Archilochus alexandri* 1/2
Anna's Hummingbird *Calypte anna* 3/5
Rufous Hummingbird *Selasphorus rufus* 2/1
Calliope Hummingbird *Selasphorus calliope* 2/5
Lewis's Woodpecker *Melanerpes lewis* 1/3
Acorn Woodpecker *Melanerpes formicivorus* 1/2
Red-breasted Sapsucker *Sphyrapicus ruber* 5/3
Nuttall's Woodpecker *Picoides nuttallii* 1/2
Hairy Woodpecker *Picoides villosus* 5/3
White-headed Woodpecker *Picoides albolarvatus* 4/2
Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus colaris* 8/5
Pileated Woodpecker *Dryocopus pileatus* 2/1
American Kestrel *Falco sparverius* 8/4
Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus anatum* 1/1
Olive-sided Flycatcher *Contopus cooperi* 3/1
Western Wood-Pewee *Contopus sordidulus* 6/4
Hammond's Flycatcher *Empidonax hammondii* 1/1
Gray Flycatcher *Empidonax wrightii* 1/1
Dusky Flycatcher *Empidonax oberholseri* 5/3
Black Phoebe *Sayornis nigricans* 2/2
Say's Phoebe *Sayornis saya* 3/4 Y
Ash-throated Flycatcher *Myiarchus cinerascens* 1/1
Western Kingbird *Tyrannus verticalis* 6/2
Plumbeous Vireo *Vireo plumbeus* 2/2
Cassin's Vireo *Vireo cassinii* 3/3
Warbling Vireo *Vireo gilvus* 6/6
Pinyon Jay *Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus* 1/2 H
Steller's Jay *Cyanocitta stelleri* 8/8
Western Scrub-Jay *Aphelocoma californica superciliosa* 3/2
Clark's Nutcracker *Nucifraga columbiana* 2/4
Black-billed Magpie *Pica hudsonia* 4/20
American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos* 5/15
Common Raven *Corvus corax* 8/2
Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris* 3/8
Tree Swallow *Tachycineta bicolor* 5/8 N
Violet-green Swallow *Tachycineta thalassina* 3/3
Bank Swallow *Riparia riparia* 1/1
Cliff Swallow *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota* 7/600
Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* 5/10
Mountain Chickadee *Poecile gambeli* 7/6
Oak Titmouse *Baeolophus inornatus* 1/1
Bushtit *Psaltriparus minimus californicus* 1/15
  *Psaltriparus minimus plumbeus* 1/15 N
Red-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta canadensis* 4/10
White-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta carolinensis tenuissima* 2/3
Pygmy Nuthatch *Sitta pygmaea melanotis* 2/2 N
Brown Creeper *Certhia americana zelotes* 3/8
Rock Wren *Salpinctes obsoletus* 1/2
Canyon Wren *Catherpes mexicanus* 1/2
House Wren *Troglodytes aedon parkmani* 4/7
Pacific Wren *Troglodytes pacificus* 1/2
Marsh Wren *Cistothorus palustris plesius* 2/4
Bewick's Wren *Thryomanes bewickii*
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher *Polioptila caerulea amoenissima* 1/1
American Dipper *Cinclus mexicanus* 2/1
Golden-crowned Kinglet *Regulus satrapa* 4/6
Western Bluebird *Sialia mexicana* 3/10
Mountain Bluebird *Sialia currucoides* 4/6 N
Townsend's Solitaire *Myadestes townsendi* 1/1
Swainson's Thrush *Catharus ustulatus ustulatus* 2/2
Hermit Thrush *Catharus guttatus sequoiiensis* 5/4
American Robin *Turdus migratorius* 7/10
Sage Thrasher *Oreoscoptes montanus* 4/6
Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos* 1/2
European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* 5/30
Orange-crowned Warbler *Oreothlypis celata lutescens* 2/6
Nashville Warbler *Oreothlypis ruficapilla ridgwayi* 3/4
MacGillivray's Warbler *Geothlypis tolmiei* 5/3
Yellow Warbler *Setophaga petechia* 6/5
Yellow-rumped Warbler *Setophaga coronata auduboni* 7/4
Black-throated Gray Warbler *Setophaga nigrescens* 1/2 H
Hermit Warbler *Setophaga occidentalis* 3/7
Wilson's Warbler *Cardellina pusilla chryseola* 2/6
Green-tailed Towhee *Pipilo chlorurus* 5/4
Spotted Towhee *Pipilo maculatus* 4/5
Chipping Sparrow *Spizella passerina* 1/6
Brewer's Sparrow *Spizella breweri breweri* 3/4
Vesper Sparrow *Poecetes gramineus* 2/4
Lark Sparrow *Chondestes grammacus* 1/5
Black-throated Sparrow *Amphispiza bilineata* 1/1
Sagebrush Sparrow *Artemisiospiza nevadensis* 1/2
Savannah Sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis nevadensis* 1/6
Fox Sparrow *Passerella iliaca megarhyncha* (includes *monoensis*) 5/6
Song Sparrow *Melospiza melodia* 5/5
Lincoln's Sparrow *Melospiza lincolnii* 1/4
White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys oriantha* 3/10
Dark-eyed Junco *Junco hyemalis thurberi* 7/14
Western Tanager *Piranga ludoviciana* 8/7
Black-headed Grosbeak *Pheucticus melanocephalus* 2/8
Lazuli Bunting *Passerina amoena* 3/2
Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus* 7/25
Western Meadowlark *Sturnella neglecta* 5/4
Yellow-headed Blackbird *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus* 4/50 Y
Brewer's Blackbird *Euphagus cyanocephalus* 9/25
Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater* 4/4
Hooded Oriole *Icterus cucullatus* 1/2
Bullock's Oriole *Icterus bullockii* 2/3
Pine Grosbeak *Pinicola enucleator californica* 1/1H
House Finch *Haemorhous mexicanus* 5/10
Purple Finch *Haemorhous purpureus californicus* 1/1 H
Cassin's Finch *Haemorhous cassinii* 6/15
Red Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra* 1/3
Pine Siskin *Spinus pinus* 4/8
Lesser Goldfinch *Spinus psaltria* 5/20
Evening Grosbeak *Coccothraustes vespertinus* 3/20
House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* 5/15