About a dozen of us joined Marin County Parks naturalist David Herlocker on a walk through the blue oak woodlands of Bahia in northern Novato. The sky was bright blue and the grasses on the hillside were vivid emerald. The shooting stars were in bloom and David explained how these wildflowers are “buzz pollinated.” Bumblebees grab onto the flower and vibrate to dislodge the pollen. A pair of Anna’s Hummingbirds was engaged in courtship display. The blue oak woodlands of Bahia and the associated diked baylands and salt marshes were saved from development by a coalition of environmental and civic groups, spearheaded by Marin Audubon. Over 6,000 oaks and important habitat would have been lost. David explained that the blue oaks are actually Oregon/Valley/Blue Oak hybrids. Bahia has the only blue oak forest in California that extends down slope to the bay, creating a unique ecological system of plants and animals.

Ruby-crowned Kinglets, White-breasted Nuthatches, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Bewick’s Wren, Oak Titmouse, American Goldfinch, Bushtits, Dark-eyed Juncos, Northern Flicker, California and Spotted Towhee and others were heard and spotted. Many of the resident birds, such as the Bushtits and the cavity nesting White-Breasted Nuthatches, are early nesters, timing their nesting cycle before the arrival of migrants that compete for nesting sites and food resources. We enjoyed watching a pair of Nuttall’s Woodpeckers and a group of Acorn Woodpeckers. We saw Red-breasted Sapsuckers, which winter in the area, and spotted their characteristic holes in the tree bark. A brilliantly colored Red-shouldered Hawk flew low overhead several times and a Northern Harrier flew over the marsh.

After our walk we travelled to the western end of Bahia to see the restoration project underway. Phase 2 of the project is converting a large pond to tidal marsh. We enjoyed the vista of the marshes and the thousands of new plants that will eventually cover the upland areas. Here we saw Western Bluebirds, Says Phoebe and Meadowlarks. Among the birds on the water were Ruddy Ducks, Avocets, Canvasbacks, American Widgeon, one Eurasian Widgeon, and Forster’s Terns. The count for the enjoyable day was about 40 species.

By Vicky Van Meter and Dede Sabbag