Field Trip Report  
March 7, 2015  
Capay Valley, CA  
Trip Leader: Terry Colborn

On a clear, sunny day a group of 28 birders joined Terry Colborn, field trip leader, at Esparto Community Park, in Yolo County’s idyllic Capay Valley. In Spanish, “Esparto” means “feather grass.” Harbingers of spring were everywhere; Redbud was in full bloom throughout the valley, the Capay Hills and many agricultural fields were a lush green, almond and walnut orchards were in full blossom, and the birds were singing. Cache Creek flows through the valley, however, a fourth consecutive year of drought was evident in the creek’s relatively low water levels and wide, dry banks. Seasonal streams had some puddles but were mostly dried up.

Our first stop was at the historic Capay Cemetery, established in 1876. [http://www.capayvalley.com/histories/capay_cemetery_history.html](http://www.capayvalley.com/histories/capay_cemetery_history.html) Large Cork Oaks and Pine trees grace the cemetery that adjoins a stretch of riparian habitat. Many of the pioneer family members who settled in Capay Valley are buried here. Western Bluebirds welcomed us upon arrival - always a sight for sore eyes! A Varied Thrush called in the distance, but never showed itself. Acorn Woodpeckers and Northern Flickers worked a nearby orchard. Hutton’s Vireo, which nests in the cemetery, was heard but remained hidden. Northern Mockingbirds vocalized from berry bushes, while Oak Titmice were quite vocal and active. White-crowned and Golden-Crowned Sparrows foraged in a grassy area while Yellow-rumped Warblers chipped and White-breasted Nuthatches called while foraging high in the trees. A distant accipiter was spotted and Terry discussed the differences between Cooper’s and Sharp-shinned Hawks; Cooper’s has a flatter crown, while the Sharpie’s head is more rounded; the eyes of a Cooper’s appear a bit larger and are set closer to the bill; Sharpie’s eyes are more centered on the bird’s head; the Cooper’s has a darker nape, whereas the Sharpie’s nape is generally paler. Looking at the legs, Terry pointed out they weren’t long and “chicken-like” as a Sharpie’s would appear. We all agreed we were looking at a Cooper’s Hawk. It was a good lesson, especially for the many beginners in the group.

Our next destination was Capay Open Space Park on CR 85. We walked a short distance to the bridge where we found mostly Tree and Cliff Swallows and a single Rough-wing Swallow swooping over the creek, dining on insects. We had great views of a Hooded Merganser pair in the creek. We were surprised by an American Beaver that surfaced and glided by the mergansers and continued on his merry way! A Great Blue Heron was near a pair of Canada Geese tending a nest on a small island. Pacific Pond Turtles were hauled out and sunning on the large rocks. A male Belted Kingfisher called while flying over the creek to perch in the open, offering good scope looks.
Terry had a glimpse of a Wilson’s Snipe that landed on a small island and quickly disappeared! A single Lewis’s Woodpecker flew over the creek from one group of trees to another. It tapped away on an oak gall, offering excellent scope views of its feeding behavior and gorgeous plumage backlit by the sun! Terry pointed out that it’s been a banner winter for Lewis’s in Yolo County. As we enjoyed our lunch in the park, Western Meadowlarks sang from nearby perches, while a Say’s Phoebe was spotted flycatching its lunch.

Moving on to CR 81, we parked and walked about ½ mile along this lovely, quite county road, shaded by massive oaks and bordered by agricultural fields and olive orchards. White-crowned, Golden-crowned Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos foraged on the road and in the scrub. As we walked, a pair of Yellow-billed Magpie flew through the oaks; three Killdeer were foraging in an open field. Terry indicated they have nested in Capay Valley.

At the end of the road, Terry spotted a Rock Wren around an old metal water tank. We watched as it was perched and sang from atop a nearby wood pile. The wren repeatedly disappeared into nooks and crannies, reemerging for brief looks. Terry noted that during the two previous annual field trips, a Rock Wren has been found at this same location. On our return walk, a large, dark raptor was seen flying off in the distance by a couple of birders. The bird was a considerable distance away but its relatively large wingspan and small head “looked good for a Golden Eagle” as Dave Herrema pointed out. Golden Eagles nest in the nearby Vacca Mountain range, and are often seen from this road.

Our fourth and final stop at the Rumsey Bridge didn’t disappoint, as we added Common Merganser, Bewick’s Wren, while several Turkey Vultures and Red-tailed Hawks circled above Cache Creek. As we were wrapping up the day, Liz Onesto, one of the self-proclaimed “newbie’s” spotted a gorgeous Red-breasted Sapsucker low on a tree trunk, only a few feet from the road. It was oblivious of its large group of admirers as it worked numerous sap wells. A female Western Bluebird was flycatching from a nearby perch. Birders and photographers alike lingered, enjoying these beautiful birds in the optimal light, as the temperature reached a very comfortable 75 degrees! It was a lovely end to a satisfying and educational field trip. We tallied 47 species on the day.

Write-up compiled by Patricia Mahoney and Terry Colborn