Field Trip Report - Gray Lodge and Sacramento National Wildlife Refuges
January 5th and 6th 2013
Trip Leader: Bruce Deuel

It was a rainy day in Marin but overcast and dry at the Gray Lodge refuge where we joined Bruce Deuel to start our weekend. The heavy rains of December resulted in lots of water so the waterfowl were more spread out than in previous years, but the birding was fabulous. Several of the participants were new to birding and were awed by number and diversity of birds. On the drive up along Hwy 113 many of us stopped to admire the huge flocks of snow geese in the rice fields and circling in the air. At Gray Lodge, we started our morning with good views of Blue-winged Teal and a variety of waterfowl from our parking lot meeting place. We then walked to the viewing platform. A kinglet in a willow thicket flashed his rosy crown for all to see. At the viewing platform we saw White-fronted Goose, Snow Goose, Ross’s Goose, Northern Pintail, Ring-necked Duck, American and Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Cinnamon Teal, Bufflehead and many more. We then walked the two-mile path through the refuge, stopping at the blinds for even better looks at the waterfowl. In the trees along the path we saw many finches, sparrows and warblers, including Orange-crowned Warbler and the ever present Yellow-rumped. Woodpeckers included Acorn, Northern Flicker, Nuttall’s, and Downy. As dusk approached, we caravanned out through the rice fields to see the Sandhill Crane. Our day ended with a group dinner in old town Oroville. We presented Bruce with a print of the woodpecker plate from Keith Hansen’s upcoming book, Birds of the Sierra Nevada, to commemorate 40 years of leading the Gray Lodge trip for Marin Audubon.

Sunday morning under blue skies we met for a walk along the Feather River in Oroville where we saw our first Western Bluebird and then a Phainopepla. Side-by-side views of hen Common and Barrow’s Goldeneye in the scopes helped us learn the field marks. We also enjoyed watching Belted Kingfishers and Common Mergansers. We then spotted a Merlin in a tree above us, plucking and eating what looked like a junco. The feathers floated down around us as we watched the spectacle. An Osprey circled low over our heads. We then started our drive
along the State Water Project impoundments and rice fields on the way to the Sacramento Wildlife Refuge. At the Thermolito Afterbay we saw several Bald Eagles and then in a flooded rice field we saw what Bruce estimated were 1600 White-faced Ibis. Part of Bruce’s job with the California Fish and Game was to count waterfowl, so we believed him. We also saw a large group of Long-billed Curlew and then fields filled with Tundra Swan. A Bald Eagle flew over the swans and they took to the air. At the Sacramento Refuge we enjoyed the many ducks, geese and swans and were able to study the Ross’s and Snow Goose side-by-side. Our day ended with close up looks of a Loggerhead Shrike, Ring-necked Pheasant, and then a perched Peregrine Falcon just overhead. The raptors for the weekend were impressive. We counted at least 60 Red-tailed Hawk and saw many Northern Harrier, White-tailed Kite, Red-shouldered, and Cooper’s Hawk. Our species tally for the weekend was just over 100. Thank you to Bruce for 40 years of leading this trip and we hope he will agree to take us out again next year.

Report by Vicki Van Meter
Photo by Dave Herrema