

**THE BIRDS' SIDE OF MARIN**

**2013 YEARLY**

**RETROSPECTIVE**

*RICHARD R. PAVEK*

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PHOTOS © RICHARD PAVEK

## Nature's Flying Jewels



Ever wonder why the brilliant colors of a hummingbird flash on and off and shift as they do? The hummingbird's colors do not come from pigments, like those in paints and crayons. Their iridescent hues are interference colors, much like those at the edges of oil films on water and in soap bubbles. These colors change when the angle of light falling on the feathers' special refractive materials shift.

These two images of an Anna's Hummingbird were taken less than a second apart. In

the first, the sunlight refracted, producing the iridescent colors. In the second, the bird turned just a bit and the angle of the light changed, revealing the natural matte black pigment of the bird's neck feathers.

You can see more about the Hummingbird's iridescent colors in my blog at: [www.RichardsBirdBlog.com](http://www.RichardsBirdBlog.com).

Every weekend I email a special bird photo to *Express* readers. If you'd like something nice amidst the junk in your inbox, just ask me at [SHENmaker@MSN.com](mailto:SHENmaker@MSN.com).♦

*'Til next month, Richard*



PHOTOS © RICHARD PAVEK

*A gull flies over Half Moon Bay on its northward migration*

## Bird Migration



It's January and most of my little birds have left for sunnier climes. It wasn't for lack of food in my feeders; they were as tired of the cold rain as I was. Migration is a much studied but little understood activity. The longest migration we know of is not that of the Bar-tailed Godwit that flies between New Zealand and Alaska by way of Harbin China. It is the Arctic Tern that flies from the North Pole 12,000 miles to Antarctica and back, exploring both sides of the Atlantic as it does. Their Siberian cousins migrate along the Western Pacific.

But if you factor in the size of the bird, it would be the little Ruby-throated Hummingbird that flies from as far as New Brunswick, Canada down the eastern seaboard, across the United

States to Texas, and on down to Costa Rica. Some have been sighted flying low across the Caribbean – but how they do this without in-flight refueling to quench their voracious need for nectar is a question. (My hummingbirds tank up on sugar water and are back 10 minutes later for more!)

How do birds navigate and how do they know where they are going? By the stars some speculate. Embedded magnetic particles in the brain or 'genetic memory' say others. What I wonder is, "How did the first bird that migrated know where it was going?"

Even Big Bird on PBS can't tell you that.

Every weekend I email a special bird photo to Express readers. Email me at SHENmaker@MSN.com if you'd like one.♦

*'Til next month, Richard*

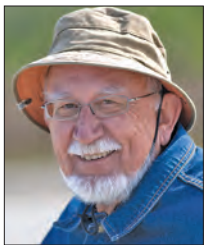
## The Bird's Side OF MARIN by RICHARD PAVEK



PHOTOS © RICHARD PAVEK



### Klick! Klack! Klick!



We know very little about how birds communicate. There are hundreds of meager languages and dialects, some with minimal “word” combinations, others with many. Beyond vocalizations such as predator warnings, demands to be fed, and cries of lost chicks, we understand few. We have little inkling as to the content of the constant chatter of cheeps and chirps at their early morning gatherings. Are they sharing their dreams, commenting on the weather or on who is nesting with whom? Whatever, we are at a loss.

But not all bird talk is vocal – produced by a voice box. Species lacking vocal apparatus resort

to dance displays, posturing, stomping, wing beating, and occasionally, beak clapping.

The large, slow moving Jabiru Stork of Belize and the Mexican Yucatan is one such. The Jabiru “speaks” by klick-klacking its huge bill. This particular male communicated to his mate by standing atop her head, stepping about in various positions for several minutes. I don’t know if he was urging her to sit down on their egg or was merely trying for a better view of the terrain. He articulated few klacks but his mate uttered several. I have no idea whether her klick-klacks were endearing comments of love or if she was telling him to get his stupid feet off her head! He stood unperturbed and I remained uneducated.♦

*‘Til next month, Richard*



PHOTOS © RICHARD PAVEK

## Mockingbirds, Virtuoso Songsters



Actually, I think Mockingbirds are misnamed; they should be called “Mimicbirds” because they do not mock other birds or sounds, they mimic them. And they are great mimics, rapidly learning to copy almost any call of any songbird they hear. Some learn as many as 200 calls. And not only bird sounds; they have been known to mimic cell phone rings, ambulance sirens, squeaky gates, car horns, penny whistles and other musical instruments.

Much of the Mockingbird’s singing is to attract a mate, and the males do it while perform-

ing a little aerial dance. Typically the male will perch on a tree top, then jump up and fly vertically for several feet, then fly level for a few feet and finally return at an angle to the tree top. All in the space of three or four seconds, and while singing its little heart out!

To catch these birds in the air I had to aim at a blank space where I hoped they would jump and trigger the shot as soon as they jumped. I got more misses than hits but here are a few.

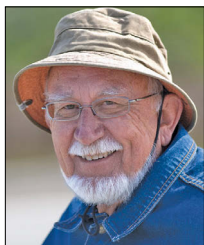
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*‘Til next month, Richard*



PHOTOS © RICHARD PAVEK

## Seeing Great Blue Herons



**S**adly, the population of Great Blue Herons in Richardson's Bay, where I live, and at Stowe Lake in Golden Gate Park has been diminishing year by year. Only two nests at Stowe Lake this year; there were seven four years ago.

Nest building was just getting underway when I checked in late March. There were no baby chicks in sight; however, by the time this issue is on the street, the young chicks will be raucously demanding food from both Mom and Dad.

Stowe Lake is the best spot in the Bay area to see them nesting. For those of you who wish to drive over and observe them, the nests are high in the tall cypress trees by the paddle boat

dock at the north end of the lake. The best view is from the lower path on an island just across from the trees. I would suggest between 9:30 and 11am on any sunny day. (On dark days it is difficult to see the beautiful coloring on these great birds.) You can get a better view of the nesting birds from a slightly higher path, but the spaces between trees is smaller, so you won't see the graceful birds in flight, as you can from the lower path. Loud as they are, you will hear the chicks from either vantage point. Bring binoculars if you have them.

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*'Til next month, Richard*



*Great Egret, largest of the Egrets*



*Black-billed, yellow-footed Snowy Egret*

PHOTOS © RICHARD PAVEK

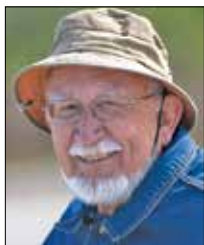


*Night Heron*



*Cattle Egret, with pale orange face and crown*

## The Rookery in Santa Rosa



**I**n mid-April I visited the Ninth Street Rookery in Santa Rosa where I was within a few feet of upwards of 50 nesting Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, Cattle Egrets, and Night Herons. All species were in mating colors, with the Snowy Egrets' bright red lores and the Great Egrets' paler green lores being the most colorful. Everybody was busy building nests, branch after branch being lifted from the ground below the trees or from far away, as the morning wore on.

By the time you read this, young ones will be hopping from branch to branch, demanding food from their tired parents and furiously flapping their wings, strengthening their muscles. Mom

and Dad will be chattering with each other and the neighbors in their strange gargling speech.

Load up the kids; it's time to drive up and visit. Anytime in June or early July should provide a spectacular sight.

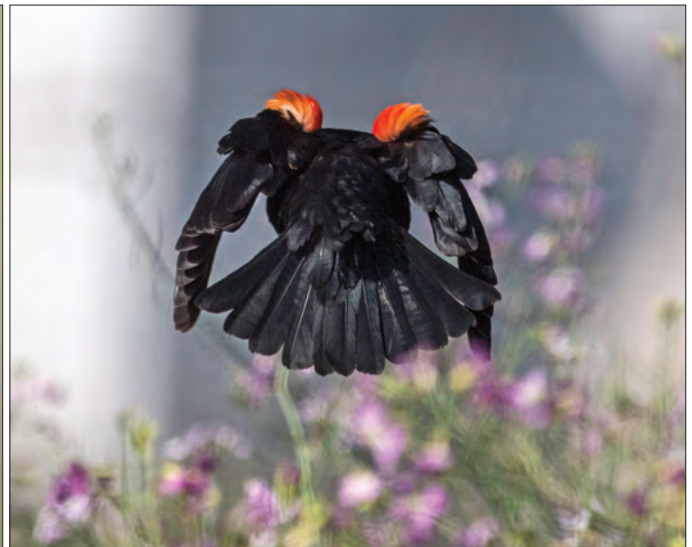
Take 101 to Santa Rosa, turn left on Highway 12 towards Sebastopol, go one mile to Stony Point Road and turn right. Go north to West Ninth Street and turn right, go three blocks to an island in the street. The birds nest in the two large trees on the island plus two others nearby. There is a good viewing from the public lawn on the south side.

Since you will be under or close to the trees, I strongly advise that you wear a hat. ♦

*'Til next month, Richard*



PHOTOS © RICHARD PAVEK



### Red-winged Blackbirds at my Feeders



**W**e know springtime is here when we hear the joyous songs of the Red-winged Blackbirds singing to mark the edges of their feeding territories, normally areas large enough to feed themselves and their wives. Standing in my kitchen one recent morning, I heard the territorial song of a Red-winged Blackbird emanating from my bird feeders. What was this? I grabbed my camera and rushed to a nearby window.

At the center feeder, a Red-wing had fluffed

his epaulets and was singing loudly, warning a second Red-wing that was trying to land on his 'territory.' The Red-wing wasn't having it; vocally he chased the intruder over to another feeder, at which point the singer went back to eating. For several days, Red-wings came to feed four feet away at the other feeders, carefully avoiding his 'feeder-territory.'

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*'Til next month, Richard*

## Encounter with a Butterfly



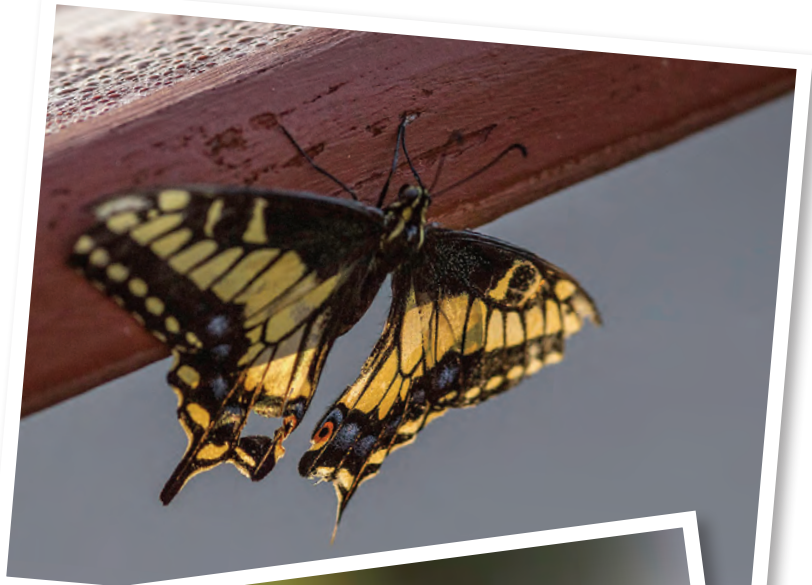
**A**s I was hosing down the deck of my floating home on Saturday, I noticed two ripe blueberries lying there. Uh oh, I thought!

The pigeons are after my ripening berries. I began searching through the branches of my two blueberry bushes. I noticed something yellow off to the side, embedded in the black mesh protective netting I'd thrown over the bushes to discourage the pesky pigeons. Strange, the netting was extended out as if a yellow spear point was pushing it. I looked closer. My gosh! It was a butterfly; a yellow-form Anise Swallowtail had gotten herself entangled in the netting. Every struggle forward to get out had collapsed the netting around her body and wings, trapping her ever more tightly.

It took several minutes of delicate maneuvering to unlock the snarled netting without tearing off a leg or wing, but finally she was loose, tumbling onto my hand where she barely moved. Gently I carried her to a nearby railing and tilting my hand, slid her onto it. Immediately she moved over the edge until she was hanging upside down, as butterflies often do. There was not much more I could do, so I left her to rest and recover.

In the morning, I looked out to discover that, surprisingly, she had made it through the night and was now on the side of the railing, slowly flexing her wings in the warmth of the early morning light! Wonderful! I noticed a tiny tear in the tail of her left wing, but decided it would not prevent her from flying. She would be okay.

About four hours later, I returned, expecting her to be gone, but she was still there, barely moving as I approached. Realizing that she was probably unable to fly because she was dehydrated – butterflies require a large amount of water – I brought a blossom from a still



blossoming patch of bright Red Clover. I moistened it with water and constructed a makeshift feeding station close to her face. Suddenly alert – she knew what that smell was – she crawled to the top of the flower and began siphoning fluid through her proboscis. A half hour later she was gone.

Now she may have fallen into the water below, but I saw no sign of her on the still surface. Or, she could have been eaten by a bird, but insect eating birds never come to my feeders – there is no ground around to harbor insects that would draw them. I prefer to think that she is off somewhere telling her mates about the monstrously huge creature that pried her free from the crushing net and the luscious wet red flower that miraculously appeared to save her. ♦

## California Quails

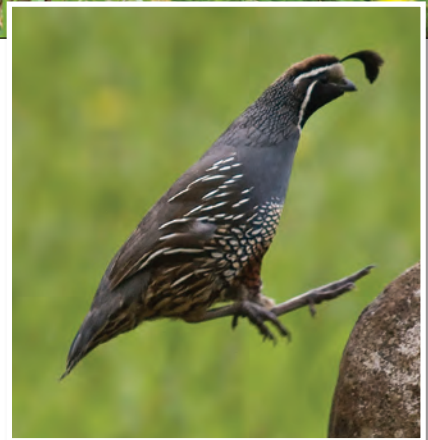


California Quails are common in Marin, but for years I never managed to see one. My first sighting was on North Island in New Zealand of all places! I learned that California Quails were brought to New Zealand as game birds in 1860 and rapidly spread over North Island and much of South Island, as well. As to Marin, I do see them occasionally, but they don't come around for the droppings from my bird feeders that hang out over the bay, where they attract Mallards, Coots and Geese.

California Quails are unusual birds in many ways; they nest on the ground, eat on the ground, take dust baths in loose dirt and prefer to walk rather than fly – and they look like fat, tasseled footballs!

Young males are the Big Brothers of the bird world. Once the female hatches a clutch of eggs, she is likely to hustle off, find a new mate and produce another clutch. When you see more than one adult watching over a covey of chicks, one may be the Daddy, but the others will be young, unmated males – elder brothers of the chicks they're guiding.

Every weekend I email a special bird photo to Express readers. It may be funny, unusual, or just simply beautiful. If you would like to be on the list, it's free. Ask me at [SHENmaker@MSN.com](mailto:SHENmaker@MSN.com) ♦



## Cattle Egrets, Explorers and Colonizers



**T**here are many migratory birds, such as the Bar-tailed Godwits, that fly between

New Zealand and Alaska every year and winter in one part of the world and summer in another. The orange-tinged Cattle Egrets are great travelers but are not migratory – they explore and colonize, but don't return.

Cattle Egrets are ancient; images of them were depicted 6,000 years ago on the Pharaohs' tomb walls, foraging beside oxen along the Nile River when they were called White Herons. For reasons unknown, they began colonizing the world in the late 1800s.

In 1933, they flew from Africa, probably the Cape Verde Islands, 2,300 miles across the Atlantic to Guiana, South America. In 1951, they emigrated to Columbia; from there a branch hopped up to Cuba around 1950 and Florida about 1960, where they established the largest number of colonies in the US. By 1970, small colonies had scattered over much of mid-America. Another branch reached Southern California in 1966 by way of Honduras and Baja, Mexico.

Cattle Egrets largely feed on insects, worms and frogs. They team up with grass munchers – cattle, oxen, zebras and buffalo – because grazing animals stir up the insects and worms, making them easy prey for the

Egrets. To thank their symbiotic feeding buddies, Egrets occasionally hop on top of their partner to pick off bothersome flies and ticks.

I saw my first Cattle Egret at the 'Rookery' on Ninth Street in Santa Rosa in 2005, when there were two or three nests. The colony has flourished. This season there were more than two dozen nesting Cattle Egrets that foraged in the pastures near Sebastopol.

For me, the big mystery is how the Cattle Egrets knew there was land across the Atlantic! They had no 'genetic memory' to guide them as is presumed necessary to guide long distance migratory birds and it is doubtful they knew about Columbus. So far, no one has a clue!

If you'd like to be on my special weekly email bird list, just ask [SHENmaker@MSN.com](mailto:SHENmaker@MSN.com). It's free.



## Sandhill Cranes



**A**s I write this, it's late September and the Sandhill Cranes are beginning to arrive at their

wintering grounds around Lodi. If you haven't been up to see them, I promise you they are worth the trip, as they are magnificent birds. It is a bit late for you to get to the Lodi Sandhill Crane Festival ([www.sandhill-cranes.com](http://www.sandhill-cranes.com)) as it starts the day after the Express is out on the newsstands, but the Cranes will be there through December and January as well. Since the Cranes summer up in Oregon, I don't expect much change over the next few years due to global warming, but you never can tell.

I recently was appalled to learn that Sandhill Cranes are legally hunted game birds in Tennessee and some other Eastern states. There is a movement to make it legal to hunt them in some parts of Texas as well. I sincerely hope that it does not pass the Texas legislature because the Sandhills flock with Whooping Cranes in Texas and the two are very hard to distinguish from a distance. The Whoopers are one of the most endangered birds in the U.S.

Frankly, I have been unable to understand why there isn't a push to add Canada Geese to the game bird list. These unsanitary birds are pests that fill our school athletic fields with their droppings and more than once have brought down air-



liners. Historically, they were game birds, meaning that they have been hunted as a food source. (Where did you think the goose on the Christmas table came from, not that many years ago?) So why don't we have an open season on Canada Geese?

On Saturday, November 16, I am planning to lead a small group of Express readers to the area near Lodi to view the

Cranes. If you are interested in joining up, please email me. Or, if you want to go at some other time, I will be happy to send you a detailed map of the Crane areas.

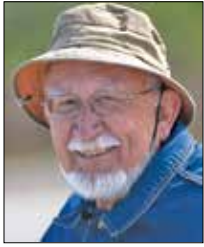
And remember that I email a special bird photo every weekend free. To get on the list, just ask: [shenmaker@msn.com](mailto:shenmaker@msn.com). ♦

Bye for now,  
*Richard*

## The Bird's Side OF MARIN

by RICHARD PAVEK

### Hummers Have Returned



**I**t is just past Pumpkin Eve and the garden on my floating home is brimming over with the violets and purples of my autumn flora. My long missed Anna's Hummingbirds have returned to visit for the season (and for the Agastache or Hummingbird

Mint). Where they are while away is a puzzle. Yesterday I drove past the pond just north of Nordstrom's and discovered that it is overfilled with Gulls and Avocets, as is the channel with the old railroad tracks just east of the shopping center. Young Snowy Egrets are in abundance throughout the area. In July I had a hip replaced. While in recovery I was given an Orchid, my first ever. Because I had been told they were hard to care for and expensive, I never considered growing any. Now, over three months later, my not-so-frail after all *Phalaenopsis* has fifteen delicate blossoms.

I've discovered that Orchids are just about perfect for seniors. No digging in the dirt, no bugs, and no hair shed all over the furniture – almost no care. Just bathe the roots once a week and fertilize every two. Best of all, no poop to pick up and no smelly cat boxes! *Warning, they do not like to be petted* – and there is some concern about *Orchid addiction*.

Most nurseries carry a few but the largest assortment is at the three Trader Joes in Marin. Since they are reasonably priced I now have six, *no*, seven, *whoops*, eight beautiful Orchids.

If you are in the doldrums about nothing new to do, try an Orchid.

If you would like an interesting bird photo in your inbox every weekend, just send your name and email address to me at [SHENmaker@MSN.com](mailto:SHENmaker@MSN.com). *It's free.*

Till next time,  
*Richard*

