

# Birds and Mammals

The McLaughlin Reserve's chaparral, woodland, grassland, and aquatic communities are home to numerous birds and mammals, including both habitat generalists and specialists. The 1982 pre-mine survey by D'Appolonia and the ongoing sighting records kept by Homestake since 1984 provide reasonably complete lists of bird and mammal species. The majority of mammal records have been from automobile sightings and from UC Davis scientist Dr. Darrell Slotton, during his work on mercury at the Davis Creek Reservoir. The bird list was improved and updated by UC Davis ornithologist Dr. Sid England in 1999.

Good field guides to use are the *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* by the National Geographic Society (1999), and *California Mammals* by Jameson and Peeters (1988). Once you have identified a species, you can learn more about it by consulting the account of bird ecology by Ehrlich, Dobkin and Wheye (1988), and the description of the natural history of Californian birds and mammals by Schoenherr (1992).

## Birds

A total of 187 bird species in 53 families have been sighted at the reserve (Appendix 7). Of these, 20 species were seen prior to 1984 but have not been recorded on the reserve since then. An additional 16 species have only been recorded once in the past 15 years. The number of species sighted at the reserve has increased since the construction of the Davis Creek Reservoir, which has provided habitat for at least 36 species of water birds and shorebirds.

Birds that have seldom been seen at the reserve, or whose status in the area is poorly understood, are indicated by an asterisk (\*) in the list. If you see any of these species on or near the reserve, please take detailed notes on the birds location, behavior, the habitat it is using, how you identified it, whether it is in a mixed flock with other species, etc.; report such sightings to the reserve manager to add to the records.

Two rare bird species have each been sighted only once at the reserve. The Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) was once common in California, but has declined as its nesting habitat, dense riparian woodlands, have been lost to farming, water diversions and development. The Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*), the largest woodpecker in North America, is uncommon everywhere except the southeastern United States. It prefers dense, mature forests for excavating nest holes.

Two species at the reserve were Federally listed as threatened or endangered because of eggshell thinning caused by DDT. The Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) and Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) suffered heavy declines from the late 1950's to

early 1970's. With the ban of DDT in the US in 1972, these and other species have begun to recover, and the Peregrine was delisted in 1999. Peregrines have been seen soaring over the mine pit and a nesting pair of Bald Eagles resides at the Davis Creek Reservoir. Fledged eaglets were seen there in 2003.

### *Chaparral birds*

Birds that are chaparral specialists often have relatively short wings and a long tail, which gives them maneuverability through the dense brush, and a drab brown color, which makes them inconspicuous as they forage in the bushes and on the ground. Although their drab plumage may make them inconspicuous as they forage, it may pose problems in mate finding; to compensate for this, many chaparral species have melodic songs that enable them to communicate without being seen. Most chaparral species are dietary generalists, taking advantage of the wide array of foods that become available throughout the year.



Peregrine Falcon

The California Thrasher (*Toxostoma redivivium*) typifies chaparral birds in all respects. Although its melodious song is a common sound in the spring, these large brown birds are seldom seen due to their cryptic color and secretive foraging behavior. The Wrentit (*Chaemaea fasciata*) has been called the voice of the chaparral; its distinctive song, sung year round, is an accelerated series of *pit* notes, speeding up like a bouncing ping-pong ball. Wrentits, although common residents, are seldom seen as they move through the vegetation gleaning insects. They rarely venture into open areas, fire roads or wide trails.

The two species of towhee found at the reserve are common resident chaparral birds. These large sparrow-like birds are ground-feeders with large, conical bills typical of seedeaters, yet they are both omnivorous. The California Towhee (*Pipilo crissalis*) does not have a melodious song, but an unmusical, sharp *chink* note that is often repeated between members of a pair. The Spotted Towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*) (formerly the Rufous-sided Towhee) has bold black and white markings on its wings and back, a black head, and rufous sides. Although its color may seem conspicuous, it is actually ideally colored for the patchy light of the chaparral understory where its broken color pattern prevents it from having a clear silhouette.

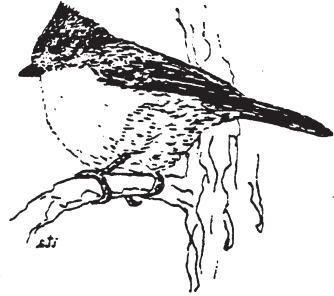
The common chaparral hummingbird is the Anna's Hummingbird (*Calypte anna*), which can be seen visiting a variety of flowers throughout the year. The male has deep rose red head and throat, green back and grayish ventral surface. The female only has a hint of red on the throat, and none at all on the head. The male's song is a jumble of high squeaks and raspy notes, and can often be heard sung from a perch near a flowering plant.

## BIRDS AND MAMMALS

For the first few years after chaparral burns, the bird community changes. Fire-following annual herbs attract seedeaters such as Lesser Goldfinch and the Lark Sparrow. The Sage Sparrow can be the most abundant breeding bird for the first decade following a fire, until the canopy closes and the Wrentit once again predominates.

### *Oak Woodland Birds*

The blue oak woodland at the reserve provides both vegetative structure and an abundant food resource for birds. Western Scrub Jays (*Aphelocoma californica*), Wild Turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*), and Acorn Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes formicivorus*) forage heavily on the acorns, while Oak Titmice (*Parus inornatus*), Western Bluebirds (*Sialia mexicana*), American Kestrels (*Falco sparverius*) and Tree Swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*) nest in the cavities of older oaks.



**Oak Titmouse**

The Western Scrub-Jay is one of the most visible and vocal members of the oak woodland. Their loud call can often be heard as pairs or small family groups move through the trees and into the surrounding chaparral. They are well adapted for life in this arid environment, being able to derive all the water they need from their food, and extremely efficient in losing heat from their feet. During the hottest days they remain inactive in the shade. Like other corvids, jays cache food for later consumption. Each year, a single jay may cache several thousand acorns, often by burying them within the territory, and some germinate before being recovered. Thus Western Scrub-Jays may disperse and plant oaks.

Oak Titmice are abundant members of the oak woodland community. This small, grayish-brown crested bird prefers oak woodlands and is frequently heard before it is seen. One of its calls, a harsh *tschik-a-dee*, indicates that it is a close relative of the chickadees, and in fact they are in the same family. Oak Titmice are active and agile foragers that move through the upper canopy, gleaning small arthropods and seeds as they go.

Western Bluebirds also use the cavities in mature oaks for nest sites. These small blue birds have reddish breasts and sides, and are in the same family as thrushes. They eat a variety of foods, and can often be seen hawking from a low perch for flying insects. In the late summer and fall, large family groups of Western Bluebirds occur throughout the reserve, foraging on flighted insects and ripened seeds and fruits.

Raptors such as Red-tailed Hawk, Cooper's Hawk and American Kestrel use the oaks for nesting, roosting, and as perches while foraging. Cooper's Hawks and Sharp-shinned Hawks eat primarily other birds, and their short, broad wings and long tail give them speed and maneuverability as they fly through the trees in search of prey. Golden Eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*) may be seen in the winter as they perch in oaks adjacent

to grassland clearings, waiting for a jackrabbit or other medium-sized mammal to pass by.

### *Birding at the Reserve*

With the reserve's large size and diversity of terrain, it may be difficult to decide where to go birding. Of course, you will see birds wherever you go, and you won't be able to see all the birds recorded at McLaughlin regardless of where you go. The following section describes a route that will take you through the major vegetation communities at McLaughlin and highlights some of the better areas to view birds.

Starting at the core shed, a walk through the meadow and along the riparian section of Hunting Creek can be a rewarding area to begin. This is often a good area to see American Kestrel, Killdeer, Western Bluebirds, and a variety of warblers, vireos, swallows, and sparrows.

A short drive north on Knoxville/Berryessa road will take you to the Reiff Road. The dense chaparral along this road offers a good opportunity to view some of the chaparral specialist species. The ridge is also a good area to look for raptors and Turkey Vultures that may be riding the thermals.

The north side of Davis Creek Reservoir offers good views of the entire lake. In the winter, waterfowl tend to congregate in the west arm. Double-crested Cormorants, Common Mergansers, Belted Kingfishers, and Osprey can be seen here. Great Blue Heron, Green Heron, Black Phoebe, and Red-winged Blackbirds are found along the shoreline and in the emergent vegetation.

The mine road along the west side of Davis Creek Reservoir up to the mine pit traverses through a blue oak woodland and can be a rewarding area for specialists of this habitat type. Also, the lookout to the mine pit is a good area to scan for raptors. American Kestrel and Red-tailed Hawks can frequently be seen circling above the pit, and there has been a sighting of a Peregrine Falcon there also.



**Red-tailed Hawk**

## BIRDS AND MAMMALS

### Mammals

According to the D'Appolonia report and the Homestake sighting records, 38 mammals have been seen at the reserve, and 16 others are thought to potentially occur there (Appendix 8). There are three rare mammals, the ringtail, the tule elk, and the Townsend's big-eared bat. The ringtail, protected under California law, is often called a ring-tailed cat. Despite this name and a cat-like appearance, it is close relative of the raccoon. It prefers rocky canyons along streams near oak/pine woodlands. Due to its nocturnal and secretive habits, the ringtail is very rarely seen.



**Ringtail (*Bassariscus astutus*)**

The tule elk, often called the dwarf elk because of its small size relative to other elk, once lived in large numbers in California's San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys. Found only in California, Tule elk faced near extinction in the 1880's, were protected and now have growing populations in coastal areas. The elk herds introduced to the Cache Creek BLM lands to the east of the reserve are thriving, and individual elk from these herds have been sighted in Morgan Valley.

The Townsend's big-eared bat has been the major focus of protection and monitoring efforts at McLaughlin. It was recently proposed as a candidate for state endangered status in California, and is already considered endangered in Washington and a sensitive species in Oregon. Protected roost sites were established for the colonies on the reserve in 1988 and 1989; in passing old mercury mine tunnels you may see the large metal gates that protect bat roosts. In one Townsend's roost, an electronic monitoring system was installed to provide data on nightly and seasonal activity patterns and temperature and light levels. Research by UC Berkeley scientist Dixie Pierson, begun in 1988, has revealed a total of 16 bat species (Pierson 1989). Seeing bats can be challenging due to their nocturnal habits and fast flight, but watch for them by the Davis Creek Reservoir in the evening as they emerge to hunt.

### Wildlife Viewing at the Reserve

Most wildlife species will be more active during early morning, dusk, and evening hours. Many animals, such as the mountain lion, are most frequently seen by drivers at night. Most mammals do not specialize on one habitat type, but there are some general trends that make viewing some species in some habitats more likely. These species-habitat relationships may be seasonal, changing with water or food availability. In riparian woodland you may see raccoon, black bear, Sonoma chipmunk, and mule deer. In mixed oak/pine woodland, you may see brush rabbits, western grey squirrels,

and Townsend's chipmunk. Blue oak woodlands often host the black-tailed jackrabbit and the Botta's pocket gopher. In grasslands, the typical species include the brush rabbit and black-tailed jackrabbit. Typical species of chaparral are the brush rabbit, black-tailed jackrabbit, mule deer, bobcat, Sonoma chipmunk, Townsend's chipmunk, and coyote.

Indirect observations through tracks and scat provide the opportunity to study animals that are seldom seen. Mud, dust and sand are the best surfaces to register tracks. When trying to identify a track, look for a clear, individual track; see if you can find a trail or sequence of tracks; and use clues from other signs such as scat.

When looking at scat, look at its relative size and its shape; is it twisted or segmented? Look at its contents if possible. Often, you may be able to see seeds, small bones or hair. There are some general comparisons to keep in mind. Canid scats (coyotes, foxes) will tend to be a thick cord with a single pointed end, and may look twisted. Felids (bobcats, mountain lions) tend to have broken or segmented cords with both ends pointed. Canids tend to defecate in the middle of a trail or road, and felids sometimes will scratch near a scat and may cover or partially cover their scat with dirt or debris. For more information on tracks and scat, see the guides by Halfpenny, Murie, Rezendez and Stokes (see Appendix 1: References).

## FIGURE 7-1. TRACKS

*(shown approximately to relative scale)*

Mule deer Black Bear Mountain lion Bobcat Coyote Grey fox



Western Spotted Skunk



Dusky-footed woodrat



## FIGURE 7-2. SCAT

*(not shown in relative scales)*

Like most ungulates, deer leave clumps or clusters of elongated pellets.



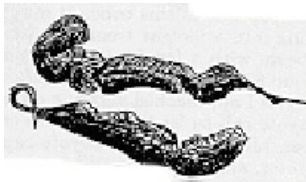
### Deer

This scat illustrates the segments and tapered, pointed ends typical of felid scat.



### Mountain lion

This coyote scat shows the cord shape and the point on one end of the scat.



### Coyote