

Birders on quest to document all Tahoe species



Jenny and Bob Sweatt look for shorebirds Aug. 26 near the Upper Truckee Marsh. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

It's quiet except for the sounds of birds. To the untrained ear the songs they sing all sound the same. For birders it's like they can communicate with these feathered friends.



American coot with baby.
Photo/Jenny Sweatt

Even without seeing the animal, experienced birders know what lurks above or is hiding in the brush. It's not uncommon that birds are heard before they are seen.

This is part of the wonder of birding.

With scopes, binoculars, cameras and guidebooks in hand, several birders were out last Wednesday in the Upper Truckee Marsh. This locale, to many in the know, is the birding paradise of the Lake Tahoe Basin.



American kestrel
Photo/Jenny Sweatt

Within two hours one day last week Jenny and Bob Sweatt saw a black Phoebe, yellow-rumped warblers, kildeer, spotted sandpipers, plover, Northern harrier, coots, white faced ibis, Caspian terns, least sandpiper, sora, peregrine falcon and a few more.

The South Lake Tahoe couple is atop the leader board in the Tahoe Big Year competition being put on by the Tahoe Institute for Natural Science. The goal is to identify as many birds as possible in the basin this calendar year. She is at 204 and he is at 203, with Lori Alessio the next closest at 198. This is the inaugural year for the Tahoe Big Year.

There are more than 300 species in the basin.



Avocet

Photo/Jenny Sweatt

“We call it an adrenaline rush when we see a bird for the first time. It’s really exciting,” Jenny Sweatt told *Lake Tahoe News*.

They go out every day for four to six hours a day. They admit it helps to be retired. But they also aren’t bored by it.

“We used to be those people laughing at birders. And now we are one of them,” Bob Sweatt told *Lake Tahoe News*.



Dowitcher

Photo/Jenny Sweatt

They take their binoculars wherever they go. They say birding is addicting. Until this year it’s not something they did.

While they don’t know all the calls of the birds, apps on

their phones help identify the animals.

The duo has taken pictures of every bird they've seen. Sending them in to TINS helps with identification.

They took a picture of a juvenile Caspian tern with bands on its legs. This means a research group is tracking it. They've submitted the band codes to the organization's website in hopes of learning where the tern has been so far.

Birding every day allows the couple the opportunity to see the landscape change – the water level fluctuate, flowers bloom and die, migratory birds come and go, people frolicking.



Bald eagle

Photo/Jenny Sweatt

Camaraderie exists among the birders. They discuss what they've seen and what they think they've seen. Last Wednesday the Sweatts ran into Don and Lynn Harriman. The South Tahoe couple lead free bird watching excursions from the end of San Francisco Avenue every Wednesday at 8am. TINS has been leading bird walks this summer, too.



Yellow headed blackbird
Photo/Jenny Sweatt

“We see a lot of migrating shorebirds, resting and refueling here before heading on to Mexico or South America. We see dogs flushing out and chasing shorebirds, scaring them down the beach, only to have another dog scare them back again,” Jenny Sweatt told *Lake Tahoe News*. “There are also some airplanes and touring companies who drop down and buzz the shoreline, scattering birds in all directions. People should give some consideration to birds and their amazing but stressful journey. Let them rest.”

Mostly, though, there is a sense of serenity in the morning. It’s the birds and their watchers.

“Every bird has something amazing about them,” Bob Sweatt said.