

# THE SANDERLING



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## **“To Dance with Your Own Ideas”**

Naturalist and educator John Muir Laws on the power of nature journaling  
and the joy of science

*by Michael Montgomery*



*John Muir Laws nature journaling in the Sierra Nevada's Humphrey's Basin.*

The summer before my freshman year of high school, I took a week-long class about drawing birds at San Francisco State University's Sierra Nevada Field Campus.

After five days in the field, binoculars and sketchbook in hand, I knew I'd experienced more than just an art class. Now, six years later, I finally understand why: the instructor, John Muir Laws, is much more than just an artist.

A wildlife biologist by training and a science educator by trade, John Muir Laws, or Jack, as he likes to be known, has devoted himself to teaching the skills of field observation, both as a leader of various workshops and classes and as the author of multiple books about natural history and scientific illustration.

He is unusual in today's professional scientific community for being equally well-versed in the worlds of ecology and watercolor. In the pages of his many nature journals, the two are inseparable.

“It used to be that *all* the scientists drew pictures,” Laws said when I met him in his San Mateo home. “From Da Vinci to Darwin, they were all drawing what they saw.”

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By teaching people how to jot down their observations in a nature journal, Laws is promoting a return to science's original creative framework, and, in the process, improving his students' ability to notice things in the world around them.

Instead of just passively recording what we see, nature journaling allows us to interact with our observations in real time, Laws explained. For both the professional scientist and amateur naturalist alike, he said, it can be a great way to gain familiarity with a subject and pinpoint questions for future study.

To illustrate this, Laws showed me a sequence of sketches from his recent trip to Mexico, each depicting a bird called a black-throated magpie jay. Scribbled next to the images are notes about the birds' behavior, vocalizations, and flight patterns.



*A section of Laws' journal entries from Mexico. The page on the left depicts two magpie jays. The page on the right shows an oriole (center) and two views of a flycatcher (bottom).*



*John Muir Laws in his front yard, watercolors and pen in hand.*

Far from being just pretty pictures with labels, these journal entries are a valuable scientific record of what the jays were doing when and where Laws saw them. They also reveal characteristics, such as gathering in small groups or fanning their tails when landing, that could one day be the subject of a more formal scientific analysis.

During graduate school at the University of Montana, Laws even used his nature journal to hone in on a topic for his master's thesis.

He noticed he had been repeatedly commenting in his journal about intense confrontations between male lazuli buntings. That got him thinking: since the males assemble their songs by sampling from ones they hear around them, perhaps all the fights and chases he had witnessed were influencing the songs they eventually crafted.

Over the two years that followed, Laws spent countless hours watching the buntings through a spotting scope, nature journal by his side.

It was an experience that reaffirmed for him how much he loved fieldwork. It also reminded him how much he loved teaching, which he had been doing in one form or another since high school, and which he was then doing as an instructor for the university.

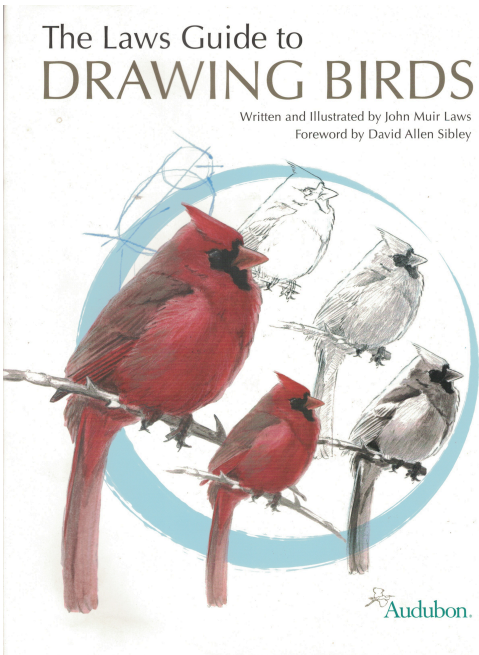
"For a while, I actually saw myself as [another] Farley Mowatt [...] running around out there in the bush, living with the wolves, putting some radio collar on the back of some bear," Laws said.

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Mowatt lived with wolves in the Canadian Arctic and wrote about his experiences in the book *Never Cry Wolf*. While Laws' fieldwork in Montana was hardly that immersive, it gave him a taste of the life of a full-time researcher—and steered him away from it.

Today, he is the author of six books, including *The Laws Field Guide to the Sierra Nevada*, *The Laws Guide to Drawing Birds* and, most recently, *The Laws Guide to Nature Drawing and Journaling*.

When not spending time with his wife and two daughters or doing his best to stay connected with the San Francisco Boy Scout troop he grew up with, Laws leads monthly field trips with the Bay-Area-based Nature Journaling Club, which he founded. This summer he will be teaching a class in field sketching at the Sierra Nevada Field Campus.



None of this, however, means he is no longer doing science.

As Laws emphasized during our discussion, nature journaling (his primary passion) can and should play an important role in the scientific process, helping naturalists to notice more, ask questions and be unafraid to propose explanations for what they are seeing.

“A lot of people, when they think of a nature journal [...] think of an artist’s sketchbook,” Laws said.

“And that’s not what it is. [...] [T]his book”—he pointed to his own journal on the couch before him—“this is your brain on paper.”

What he’s saying is that putting thoughts down on paper actually frees up room in our brains to recognize patterns and tackle complex concepts. “[T]o dance with your own ideas,” he called it.

People who do this in a nature journal, he told me, are doing real science, even if they don’t realize it. By the simple virtue of being observant, journaling allows them to be both a scientist and an artist at the same time.

This is the key to Laws’ unique blend of education, natural history and art. I won’t call it his secret, because it isn’t one. Laws’ message is meant to be shared. And like a lazuli bunting, he broadcasts it far and wide.

## FALL CALENDAR OF EVENTS

### Guest lectures, second Tuesday of each month, TBA

Events begin at 7:30 p.m. at the Pacific Grove Natural Museum of History. Doors open to the public at 7 with refreshments and socializing. Our monthly board meetings are held from 6-7 beforehand. Please visit Monterey Audubon’s [website](#) and [Facebook](#) page for updates and program details.

### Sat., September 22 - Carmel River State Beach

Long considered one of the Peninsula’s premier birding hotspots, this area offers panoramic views of surrounding Point Lobos, Palo Corona Regional Park, and Pebble Beach, as well as excellent shorebirds, waterfowl, and seabirds. Sightings of

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peregrine falcons and ospreys are also possible. **Meet at 8 a.m.** at the Crossroads Starbucks for carpooling to various entry points to the area. **Leader:** Robert Horn, (831) 372-4608, or [rhorn@montereybay.com](mailto:rhorn@montereybay.com).



*Black phoebes are one of the most conspicuous and widespread sights on field trips throughout California's Central Coast. Photo by Blake Matheson.*

**First Saturday of each month (October 6, November 3, and December 1) – Elkhorn Slough Reserve**

Start out the first weekend of every month with a bird walk around the Elkhorn Slough watershed. Depending on timing and conditions, we'll explore one or several areas within the watershed, such as the Reserve proper, Kirby Park, Moonglow Dairy, Moss Landing State Beach and Harbor, and Zmudowski State Beach. We'll traverse these areas looking for resident and migrant birds that utilize this dynamic ecosystem. **Meet** at the Elkhorn Slough Visitors Center, [1700 Elkhorn Road, Castroville, CA 95076](#). The walk starts at **8:30 a.m.** sharp. **No RSVP** needed. **Contact** Rick Fournier, [831-633-0572](tel:831-633-0572), or the reserve office ([831-728-2822](tel:831-728-2822)), with questions.

**Sat., October 6 – Laguna Grande Park**

This city lake area is one of our best locations for seeing a variety of birds, from vagrant warblers in the willows and eucalyptus to marsh species like soras and Virginia rail. **Meet at 8 a.m.** in the Chili's parking lot by Embassy Suites. We will spend a couple hours around the park and Roberts Lake. Bring water and a snack. **No RSVP** required. Rain cancels. **Leader:** Paul Fenwick, [paulwfenwick@gmail.com](mailto:paulwfenwick@gmail.com).

**Sun., October 7 – San Lorenzo County Park**

After a fun (if hot) June trip to San Lorenzo County Park, Monterey Audubon trip leader Amanda Preece will lead a fall walk in the hopes of seeing more wonderful south-county species. While our flycatcher and swallow friends may have left the park for their wintering grounds, we have some wintering warblers and sparrows to look forward to, along with kinglets, some species of thrush, and hopefully (this time) a phainopepla! **RSVP:** Amanda Preece at [apreece24@gmail.com](mailto:apreece24@gmail.com), or by phone at (208) 520-8794. For carpooling from the Monterey area, **meet at 7 a.m.** at the Laureles Grade Park and Ride on Highway 68. Otherwise, meet us directly at the park at **8 a.m.** Birding will last until approximately noon. Call or email Amanda with questions.

**Sat., October 20 – Moonglow Dairy**

Moonglow Dairy and the surrounding estuary ecosystem remains the single most species-diverse locale in Monterey Bay. The working dairy, which has been open conditionally to responsible birders for many decades, has hosted innumerable "mega-rarities" over the years, and provides excellent views of Elkhorn Slough. The dairy, cattle pens, and adjacent eucalyptus stands hold vast numbers of blackbirds, including California's endemic tricolors, as well as other passerine notables. We'll **meet at 8 a.m.** near Steamin' Hot Coffee and Espresso. **Leader:** Blake Matheson. **RSVP** to [gypaetusbarbatus1@gmail.com](mailto:gypaetusbarbatus1@gmail.com).

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### **Sun., December 16 – Big Sur Christmas Bird Count**

From the heights of Pico Blanco to the alder-lined banks of the Big Sur River, few places on Earth are as replete with both beauty and birds as the Big Sur coast. For more than two decades, local birders have conducted an annual Big Sur Christmas Bird Survey from Palo Colorado in the north to the Coast Ridge Road in the south to support Audubon's centuries-old effort to measure annual changes in bird populations. If you'd like to help us count birds, please contact organizer and compiler, Blake Matheson: [gypaetusbarbatus1@gmail.com](mailto:gypaetusbarbatus1@gmail.com)

### **Thurs., December 27 – Monterey Peninsula Christmas Bird Count**

Every year, between 40 and 100 birders of all experience levels spread out over the Monterey Peninsula to tally every individual bird and every species of bird they can find. We usually record between 170 and 190 species, from the waters off Cypress Point in the west to the oak grasslands of Corral de Tierra in the east. Annual rarities discovered during count day always provide a lot of excitement. For information or to request a territory assignment please contact Rita Carratello at [merops@montereybay.com](mailto:merops@montereybay.com)

### **Sat., February 2 –Pinnacles National Park**

Updated to national park status in only 2013, Pinnacles has a rich diversity of avian species to match its scenic wonders. Bell's sparrows, greater roadrunners, Lawrence's goldfinch, California condors, and an array of other interesting birds all reside in the park and the surrounding sage chaparral and gray pine woodland. **Leader:** R.J. Adams. For more details and logistics, contact R.J. Adams at [rjadams55@yahoo.com](mailto:rjadams55@yahoo.com).



*These unearthly volcanic rock formations are one of the hallmark features of Pinnacles National Park. Photo by Michael Montgomery.*

## **Monterey Audubon's Quarterly Conservation Update**

by Blake Matheson

### **Securing a home for the United States' only breeding Heermann's gulls**

Heermann's gulls (*Larus heermanni*) are a fabulously beautiful and unique species. Monterey Bay birders have likely noticed their striking, blood-red bills, set off by snowy white heads and charcoal-gray body plumage. Like several other local seabirds, including brown pelicans and elegant terns, Heermann's gulls are "reverse migrants" that breed in warm waters near Mexico and then disperse northward to forage and winter along the West Coast. That is, *almost* all Heermann's gulls are reverse migrants.

Beginning in the late 1990s, a small, pioneering group of birds began breeding on Roberts Lake, along Highway One in Seaside. For several years this resilient collective of couples raised multiple broods on an artificial island in the middle of the lake, until the land eroded and the island became submerged. Around 2010, local birders discovered the Heermann's gulls nesting on a gravelly roofed commercial building off Canyon Del Rey Boulevard. Since then, the birds have tried to secure their presence around Seaside, only to be balked by the activities of property owners and, more spectacularly, by the burning down of the Seaside McDonald's in June, which incinerated several active Heermann's gull nests.

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The challenges faced by our local nesters are of global significance. Over the past several years, the species has encountered a series of setbacks, as nesting attempts have failed at Isla Rasa in the Gulf of California, where 95% of the world population breeds. As sea levels rise and the Gulf's sea surface temperature continues to soar, the ecological balance *Larus heermanni* requires has become increasingly uncertain. In light of this, securing a hospitable nesting environment further north, in more temperate waters next to the biologically rich waters of Monterey Bay, is all the more important.

This year Monterey Audubon launched an ambitious initiative in partnership with the City of Seaside to rebuild the artificial islands on Roberts Lake and provide a safe, stable home for our local Heermann's gulls. The undertaking is unprecedented, and has attracted the attention of conservation biologists worldwide. Keep up to date on the fight to save Seaside's Heermann's gulls, and look for opportunities to donate to the initiative at

<https://www.facebook.com/SeasideHEEGs/>.

### **Toro Creek student citizen science initiative enters its second season**

The sycamore forest around Toro Creek in Fort Ord National Monument represents one of the most endangered habitats in Monterey County. Two hundred years ago, much of the greater Salinas Valley was defined by a wild hardwood riparian forest that hosted a fabulous assemblage of breeding birds, from yellow-billed cuckoos to Bell's vireos. Today, with much of the Valley urbanized or converted to agribusiness, inland riparian habitat is a precious commodity that needs to be protected and celebrated.



*Shawn Wagoner holding an oak titmouse at the Toro Creek banding site. Photo by Blake Matheson.*

For the second year in a row, Monterey Audubon, in partnership with the National Monument and with the Ventana Wildlife Society, is leading youth education outreach projects along Toro Creek. In addition to banding and studying the health of local birds, Monterey Audubon is facilitating field trips for local school children to Toro Creek to help inspire a new generation of conservation leaders. Many of these student birders have never seen songbirds up close, let alone held them in their hand. While Bell's vireos may have gone from the greater Salinas area, many spectacular local species still rely on Toro Creek, from the near-endemic Lawrence's goldfinch to the beautiful and declining yellow warbler.

### **Local birders excitedly await expanded Seawatch season**

For the fourth consecutive year, Monterey Audubon is sponsoring and coordinating round-the-clock seabird Seawatch data collection at Point Pinos, the outermost tip of the Monterey Peninsula. For several years, the effort has tracked variations in the migratory populations of millions of Pacific loons, surf scoters, and black-vented shearwaters, which are all visible from the Point. The 2017 count recorded sharp declines in the number of Pacific loons migrating south. Was the decline due to a collapse in the Alaskan nesting population? Or was it that heightened ocean temperatures led the birds to remain

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further north, wintering off California and Oregon instead of pushing south to Baja California as they did historically? It's the sort of question Monterey Audubon hopes to answer as we build our portfolio of data, year in and year out. Be sure to stop by the Point between October 20 and December 15 to see what's passing by!

### **After decades of legal battles, proposed “eco-resort” in critical plover habitat is approved by Coastal Commission**

Since first floated in the 1980s by developer Ed Ghandour, the idea of a 300-unit condo and resort complex along the sandy shore of Monterey Bay has been a lightning rod for controversy. Pro-growth Sand City, a faithful supporter of the project and of the tax revenue it would bring, has long been pitted against local conservation groups like Monterey Audubon and the Ventana Chapter of the Sierra Club, who are concerned about its impacts on endangered dune species like the western snowy plover. Some years back, Ghandour restyled his project as an “eco-resort,” calling it Monterey Bay Shores and adding features like a green roof, as well as promising funds to address environmental concerns.



*Sand dunes like this provide critical habitat for the snowy plover (above), and are potentially put at risk by the proposed construction of the Monterey Bay Shores eco-resort in Sand City. See the full story below.*



*A migrating group of surf scoters, as seen from Point Pinos during Monterey Audubon's annual Seawatch Initiative. Photos by Blake Matheson.*

Earlier this year, the California Coastal Commission finally approved the start of construction, in spite of the US Fish and Wildlife Service's concerns over the project's legality. (The building site sits on federally designated Critical Habitat, where snowy plovers have been documented nesting.) Despite a “ground-breaking ceremony” covered by the local press in February, major construction was not yet apparent as this newsletter went to press.

### **A Message from the President**

Dear birders and wildlife lovers,

Happy fall migration to all! I hope you enjoy this once-annual print edition of *The Sanderling*. As you can see, it's been a busy year for the volunteer board of Monterey Audubon. From securing protections for rare seabirds to inspiring the next generation of environmental leaders, we are more engaged than ever on behalf of the birds we love, and with whom we share the spectacular environment of the Central Coast. Thank you to all who volunteer their time to our chapter, and to all those who have contributed with donations and dues to support our critical work. As Monterey Audubon pushes ever harder to secure the resources we cherish, we need your help and support. Please consider volunteering your time as a board member, or donate today at <https://www.montereyaudubon.org/support-audubon/>.

—Blake Matheson

## Attend the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Monterey Bay Birding Festival!

Be sure not to miss out on this year's Monterey Bay Birding Festival, held from **Friday, September 28, to Sunday, September 30**. The three-day program is chalk full of workshops, field trips, and speakers, all centered in historic downtown Watsonville.

Destinations include the Watsonville sloughs, the condor habitat of Big Sur, and the University of Santa Cruz (UCSC) Arboretum, while pelagic seabirding trips showcase Monterey Bay's amazing diversity of marine wildlife, from shearwaters to sea otters.

Events include wine tastings, family days put on by the city of Watsonville, and the Birder's Marketplace, where vendors sell bird-themed crafts, photography, and artwork. Headlining the list of guest speakers are **John Muir Laws** and **Jonathan Franzen**, as well as scientists from UCSC's Predatory Bird Research Group and Stanford's Hopkins Marine Station.

Laws, an artist, educator, and naturalist with a passion for drawing birds (see the full story on page 1 of this newsletter) will lead two workshops, and his presentation is titled "Thinking Like a Naturalist: Reclaiming the Art of Natural History." Franzen, an award-winning writer and novelist who has written about the importance of birds for National Geographic's Year of the Bird initiative, will present his talk, "Seabirds: Their Beauty, Their Amazingness, Their Plight."

In addition, the American Birding Association will present Debbie Shearwater, of Shearwater Tours, with the Ludlow Griscom Award for Outstanding Contributions in Regional Ornithology, on 7 p.m. on Saturday, September 29.

Online registration for the festival runs until **September 17**, but a limited number of spots will be available at the door. Participants can also purchase tickets for just the evening speaker series. The festival is headquartered at the Watsonville Civic Plaza on 275 Main Street. Contact **Debbie Diersch** at (888) 909-7829 with questions or for more information.



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