

# THE FOOTHILL ADVOCATE

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SIERRA·FOOTHILL



· CONSERVANCY ·

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Conservation  
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training report



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management helps  
contain  
Mariposa fire



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preserve



We are working  
toward land trust  
accreditation

## Spring Training at the McKenzie Table Mountain Preserve

Upon arriving at the McKenzie Preserve on April 15<sup>th</sup>, Dan Lipp and I were immediately surprised by the din of American Goldfinches singing in the blue oaks nearby. These birds are typically found in the Central Valley, rarely ranging into the foothills, so perhaps the dry winter conditions pushed them up in elevation in search of food. Walking upslope towards the goldfinches, we heard many of the typical bird species of the foothills, such as Western Bluebirds, Oak Titmice, Acorn Woodpeckers, White-breasted Nuthatches, and several Gambel's White-crowned Sparrows; the latter winter visitors yet to embark on their journey north to breeding grounds in the Arctic.

The purpose of our visit to the McKenzie Preserve was to train our ears for incoming spring migrants that might be heard during the 29<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of bird surveys at the US Forest Service's San Joaquin Experimental Range (SJER). SJER is a 4,497 acre parcel of land straddling Highway 41 between Fresno and Coarsegold purchased in 1934 for the purposes of research and education. Beginning in 1985, Dr. Jerry Verner established 210 avian point count stations throughout SJER, and each station has been visited at least three times during late March and April ever since. A point count lasts exactly five minutes and the number of each species detected is recorded on a datasheet. The vast majority of detections are made by identifying the unique vocalizations of different bird species. Learning to identify the myriad songs and calls from over a hundred species that could be heard on a point count at SJER requires a keen ear and lots of training.

In 2011, Point Blue Conservation Science began collaborating with the US Forest Service's avian monitoring project at SJER. Point Blue's mission is to conserve wildlife populations and their ecosystems through innovative scientific research, restoration, outreach, and partnerships. Through this collaboration, Point Blue and USFS biologist Kathryn Purcell are hoping to accomplish just these goals. Using the bird survey data from the last 29 years, we can detect population changes for the bird species that we encounter during our surveys. Long-term studies are rare and invaluable to understanding the effects of climate change on wildlife populations, many of which are likely to manifest over decades or longer. By working with land managers, we can apply these scientific findings in order to create climate smart conservation plans for birds and other wildlife in this time of unprecedented environmental change.

The early spring timing of SJER surveys was designed to coincide with the peak season of singing for the majority of the breeding bird species in the foothills. In addition, these oak woodlands are an important habitat for insectivorous migrant birds heading north to their breeding grounds. Although we do several days of training in late March when the local breeding birds begin singing, this is before many of the migrants have begun passing through the foothills. Therefore a mid-season training is important for us to familiarize ourselves with the songs and calls of these long-distance travelers.

After listening to the goldfinches and typical resident birds, we hiked towards the mesa. Along the way, we began encountering migrant birds, such as the striking orange



Prairie Falcon by Dan Lipp

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and black Bullock's Oriole, with its bright, bouncy song and chattering call; a few yellow-bellied Western Kingbirds sallied from fence posts for a morning snack. Deciding this was a good place to conduct a practice point count, we stopped for five minutes and recorded the birds we detected and then compared our results. We both quickly added the most common and vociferous species such as Oak Titmouse, California Quail, and Acorn Woodpecker, but key to being a good point-counter is the ability to listen beyond or through the loudest birds to quieter or more distant species. Tuning our ears to these more subtle sounds allowed us to record the descending "chip-chip-chip-chip" song of the Wilson's Warbler and the jumbled song of the Black-throated Gray Warbler, both species having just arrived from their winter grounds in central Mexico. A real treat, though, was hearing the song of the Greater Roadrunner, suggesting a sad puppy whimpering. Although this species is typically found in the foothills, they are not especially common. After the survey, we compared our data to ensure that the species composition and the abundance of common species were similar. We detected 25 bird species; high diversity for just five minutes of standing at a single spot!



Dan Lipp at Table Mt. Preserve by Jim Tietz

Approaching the top of the steep trail up the Table Mountain mesa, we heard the repetitive "deej-deej-deej-deej" song of the Rock Wren and the bubbly, jumbled song of a Rufous-crowned Sparrow. A Belted Kingfisher surprised us as it flew over our heads, probably flying from Millerton Lake to a nearby farm pond. Atop the mesa, a spectacular vista greeted us, with the majestic Sierra Nevada rising from our feet to the east and the Central Valley laid out to the west. The flat top of Table Mountain creates a prairie-type habitat that is quite a contrast in vegetation and wildlife from the rolling hills below. New bird species we detected here included Western Meadowlark, Horned Lark, and Savannah Sparrow, all species that you would expect to find in open grasslands. During a normal winter, rainfall fills slight depressions on the mesa to create lush vernal pools rimmed with wildflowers; however, drought conditions this year rendered them bone dry even this early in spring. After enjoying close views of a snake called a Striped Racer, we again turned our focus to the sky where White-throated Swifts streaked about in the strong updraft along a mesa wall. Like little fighter jets with narrow swept-back wings, they flew acrobatically up into crevices to nest under an overhang on the cliff wall. Moments later, a Prairie Falcon screamed past, an act it repeated several times suggesting its aerie (falcon nest) was also nearby on the cliff wall. Upon returning to our car, our list for the day included 71 bird species. The McKenzie Preserve is an extraordinarily rich habitat, where you can find most of the oak woodland bird species and many northward migrants in a single location in spring.

Nature preserves, such as the ones owned by the Sierra Foothill Conservancy, are important because they provide intact patches of habitat that help buffer wildlife populations from the effects of habitat destruction due to urbanization and climate change. They are also wonderful places to shut out the noise of the city and tune up your ears to the songs and calls of the newly arriving spring migrants. If you would like to see a full list of the birds we encountered on this outing, please visit the following webpage in eBird: <http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S13768322>.

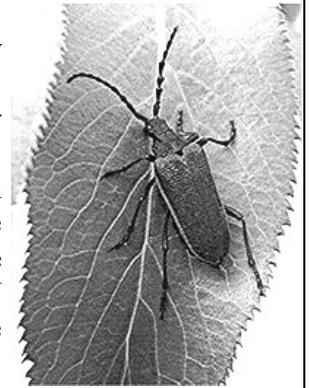
Jim Tietz, Point Blue Conservation Science

## Tivy Mountain VELB Preserve

What's that funny looking red beetle with the long antennas?! It's a Valley Elderberry Longhorn Beetle!

The beetle is a relative of the Longhorn Beetle, but endemic to the Central Valley and lower Sierra foothills where they make their homes by burrowing into elderberry shrubs.

This summer SFC completed The Tivy Mountain VELB preserve in partnership with PG&E and the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW). The preserve provides habitat for the Beetle and is set aside and managed for the continued existence of this species as well as the other native plants and animals that call Tivy Mountain home. SFC sends our thanks to DFW and PG&E for their work to create the VELB Preserve. SFC members and guests can visit the Tivy Mountain Preserve on one of our guided hikes.



Kristen Boysen

## Fuel reduction limited Carsten's blaze damage



About 20 acres of Al's forest was decimated by the high temperature fire before it dropped from the canopy.

On Father's Day, a wildfire started a few miles outside of Mariposa. It quickly spread upslope, and over the ridge into Snow Creek and Clark's Valley Ranch, an 800-acre property that has been under easement with SFC since 2003. Fortunately for the fire crews and the surrounding forest, landowners Al and Carliene have continually worked to maintain the healthy forest ecosystem on this property.

"Clearly the firefighting efforts of the Forest Service really saved the day. I can't emphasize enough how all of the actions they and CalFire undertook reduced the size and intensity of the fire," said Anderson. "I believe that the management practices I have undertaken in the past helped them in that effort."

Twenty-five years ago, Al and Carliene Anderson fell in love with Clark's Valley Ranch in Jerseydale and made it their retreat. They soon learned that owning a forested property came with significant responsibility. He has used handwork, mastication, pruning, managed grazing, and logging to reduce fire fuels and support native species.

"The fuels management work Al has done on his property over the last 20 years was pivotal for being able to stop the fire," said Mark Smith, USFS Battalion Chief for the Carsten's fire. Smith complimented the Anderson's for their forest management and the part it played in aiding USFS's ability to control the fire. "The ladder fuel reduction on Clark's Valley, including thinning conifers, masticating chaparral, and reducing lower limbs on conifers, helped keep the fire on the ground and out of the canopy."

Since the fire, Al has invited several groups out to see the damage on his property, and to assess what will be done in the future. Al has been working with Patrick Emmert, a forester, for the last 5 years on various forest health projects. Emmert was glad to see how their work helped contain the forest.

"When the fire burned into Clark's Valley, it was burning throughout the tree crowns with complete tree mortality," said Emmert. "The heat and intensity of this fire sustained its devastation onto the northern portion of the Anderson property for several hundred feet before the intensity lessened due to the tree spacing and the fire dropped to the ground."

The fire crews used Clark's Valley as a base to contain and control Carsten's fire. It was a week before the Anderson's were allowed back on their property to see the damage. The crews saved all the buildings on the property. In fact, there were no houses destroyed in the entirety of the 1,700 acres burnt by the Carsten's Fire.

SFC encourages everyone to investigate the available resources to help manage your properties. Both CalFire and the National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) offer cost-sharing programs that can help you keep your forested land healthy, and lower the risk of fire damage.

Thanks to Al and Carliene for being such exemplary land managers. SFC is honored to work with you.



Most of these trees will recover from the fire. The cleared ground will provide space for new plants this spring.

Kristen Boysen and Bridget Fithian

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The grasslands, foothills, and forests between Yosemite and Kings Canyon National Parks provide land for farms and ranches, a home for native plants and wildlife, and a source of clean water. The Sierra Foothill Conservancy honors our natural and cultural heritage by protecting these resources and ensuring that present and future generations will continue to experience and enjoy the land in this region.

### **SFC Applies for Accreditation**

The Land Trust Accreditation program recognizes land conservation organizations that meet national quality standards for protecting important natural places and working lands forever. Sierra Foothill Conservancy is pleased to announce it is applying for accreditation. A public comment period is now open.

The Land Trust Accreditation Commission, an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance, conducts an extensive review of each applicant's policies and programs. SFC is applying for accreditation to demonstrate our commitment to upholding best practices and high standards for how we carry out our land conservation mission.

The Commission invites public input and accepts signed, written comments on pending applications. Comments must relate to how Sierra Foothill Conservancy complies with national quality standards. These standards address the ethical and technical operation of a land trust. For the full list of standards see <http://www.landtrustaccreditation.org/tips-and-tools/indicator-practices>.

To learn more about the accreditation program and to submit a comment, visit [www.landtrustaccreditation.org](http://www.landtrustaccreditation.org), or email your comment to [info@landtrustaccreditation.org](mailto:info@landtrustaccreditation.org). Comments may also be faxed or mailed to the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, Attn: Public Comments: (fax) 518-587-3183; (mail) 36 Phila Street, Suite 2, Saratoga Springs, NY 12866. Comments on Sierra Foothill Conservancy's application will be most useful by October 28, 2013.

### **Volunteer Opportunity - Events Ambassador**

Do you like to spend time outdoors on some of the most beautiful foothill lands while interacting with some great outdoor loving people? SFC is looking for members to help hold our preserves open during the 2013-14 season. We need help directing the efficient parking of vehicles, greeting people at the sign-in/information table, explaining the trails and answering general questions. These volunteer positions will be working alongside SFC board members to help the visitors to our preserves have an enjoyable experience. Training will be provided.

Volunteer dates are as follows:

McKenzie Preserve: Sat - Jan 11th, Sat - Feb 8th, Sat - Mar 8, Sat - Apr 12th, Sun - Apr 13th

Fine Gold Creek: Sat - Mar 22nd                      Black Mountain: Sat - May 10th (Mother's Day Weekend)

Sign up as an **Events Ambassador** by visiting [sierrafoothill.org](http://sierrafoothill.org) and clicking on the Explore tab. Choose the SFC Events Calendar and go to the date(s) you are interested in. You can also contact the main SFC office at 559-855-3473.