Palos Verdes/South Bay Audubon Society

Vol. XLII #4 June/July 2020

# **Talking Points, Turning Points**

by Jess Morton

any moons ago, I drove out to Pomona to attend a lecture by classical composer and radical thinker John Cage. I expected to hear him talk about the state of contemporary music. Instead, I got something far more enlightening. The title of his talk was two questions, "Where Are We Going? and What Are We Doing?" Answering those two fundamental questions of life has occupied me ever since. Today, they must be addressed by all of us.

Cage, of course, made no attempt to answer them directly. While he spoke to a script of anecdotes about mushrooms, amusing observations and Zen quotes, he operated three tape decks, turning them on and off in predetermined patterns, each with Cage's recorded voice telling other stories, quotations and thoughts. The result, as you may imagine, was a chaos of competing lines of information with from none to four voices speaking to us at once. In a sense, Cage gave us not an answer, but a microcosm of life as it is. Somewhere in the cacophony of everyday doings, each of us has to dig out answers that give a reason to look forward to tomorrow.

So, where do the birds fit in? This is, after all, an Audubon editorial. The short answer: the Peregrine Falcons nesting

Point Fermin are feeding three chicks I write

this.

They would not there be without decades hard work by and others who and won, a cluster tions that have made

Audubon members have advocated for, of essential proteclife possible for those birds in particular, and better for all of us in general.

Unfortunately, and as predicted in these pages nearly four years ago, the present federal administration has been busy shredding those protections as fast as it can. Even worse, a substantial part of our body politic, when not actively complicit, is turning a blind eye to this desecration of their own conservative traditions. All of this skullduggery is buried under not just four voice tracks, as in Cage's lecture, but subsumed by the endless talking points coming from hundreds of talking heads, each one demanding our attention.

The result of it all was that we have not paid more than fleeting attention to any of it. Business as usual. Until March, that is, when the onset of the covid-19 pandemic put our world on pause. Suddenly, we were paying attention. Nothing was as it had been days before, and it was clear that whatever the new normal, the future was not going to look the same. There will, of course, be attempts to get the genie back into the bottle of the past. However, it would be a grave mistake to let that happen. Rather, it is now time to sift the wreckage left behind by this pandemic and resurrect only the beneficial

social elements, and then plan anew.

One of the things that must be brought into being is a recommitment to dealing with climate change. It is a problem with consequences far more dire than those posed by any corona virus. and far more difficult to solve. As a nation, we have frittered away years which should have been devoted to creating the framework by which solutions to the many attendant difficulties might be reached. Indeed, we have backtracked these last three and a half years. Let's seize on the current crisis, dire as it is, and make of its resolution also a turning point toward building a livable future for the generations that follow us. Then, when historians look back at our time and ask what did they do, and where did they go? The answers will be that we did the necessary things and that we arrived at a destination as full of promise for the future as the skies the Peregrine fledglings will be exploring at about the time you read this.

## From the President



# **Birds and Conservation**

**By David Quadhamer** 

I hope everyone is staying safe. Unfortunately, as you probably know, we have canceled our bird walks and presentations because of Covid-19. Hopefully, we will be able to start the bird walks again soon. It may be quite a while, however, before we are able to meet in person again for our monthly meetings. We are looking into using Zoom for our monthly presentations.

Palos Verdes Blue Butterfly at the Chandler Preserve. Photo: Vincent Lloyd

When we can safely do so, we will meet again in person for our monthly presentations. Please check our website for updates.

Four students earned Audubon YES awards this vear. Caitlin Lee, Jesse Lee. Cooper Powers and Jiwoo Yoon qualified for awards by volunteering for at least fifty hours. Caitlin and Jesse spent a lot of time at the Linden Chandler Preserve helping to restore habitat for the Palos Verdes Blue Butterfly. Cooper and Jiwoo volunteered with the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy and helped restore habitat at some of the preserves that it manages.

Have you been spending more time birding in your backyard, neighborhood, or local park? Perhaps you have started to notice the birds in your backyard or neighborhood. The pandemic has

> affected also researchers and scientists who study birds during the critical spring migration and breeding season. In some cases. field study has been put off to help prevent the spread of Covid-19 in remote areas.

> Some of these researchers will be able to accommodate a gap in their data. For others who work with

declining species, the gap in data may hamper their ability to determine how conservation measures are working. Cal Poly Pomona Professor Andrea Bonisoli-Alquati had planned to study Turkey Vultures to figure out if California's ban on lead ammunition has reduced lead levels in the vultures' bodies. He said, "the stop this year risks creating a gap for the year precisely when data are most needed to provide an early test of the efficacy of the ban." Research that can be done alone has also been affected by closures of public land and parks. If there is a bright side, the current situation presents a unique opportunity to study how birds are adapting to quieter habitats that are also less-polluted and less-populated. Closed beaches present an opportunity to study how coastal birds are adapting to the absence of people.

As for our own community science projects, we plan on having our summer butterfly count on Saturday, July 11th. We will abide by any restrictions in place, so there may be solo efforts or small, socially distanced groups. If you would like to participate, please contact Vincent Lloyd who is organizing the count. Our restoration of the Palos Verdes Blue Butterfly habitat at Rolling Hills Prep will restart when we are able to do so. Also, you can mark your calendars for the Christmas Bird Count on Sunday, December 27th.

# Nothing Happened Here by Jess Morton

Just west of the Wigwam, IORM Sequoia Lodge #140, is an old house. Both were built in the Craftsman Style and overlook the ocean. They have been around a long time, one hundred years or so. Set in the house's driveway, and back from the sidewalk, is a small memorial plague with the humorous sentiment, "on this site in 1897 nothing happened." I've walked by many times, but it was only the other day that I stopped to look at it and think about what it meant. How is that nothing could have happened there, even for a single day, let alone a full year?

It's meant, of course, as a spoof on the thousands of historical markers commemorating greater or lesser events in human history. But those markers only lay claim to the place marked for a particular time and aspect of that place.

They don't make any broader claim than that, and indeed are an invitation to further exploration of the event commemorated. I know that some of them have gotten my attention and led to fascinating tours through records enlivening and widening my understanding of them. So why not this one, too?

Think about it. What is the "nothing" that could have happened at that spot. First off is to understand what the spot might have looked like as the 19th Century came to a close. The right-of-way existed, providing access to the lighthouse on Point Fermin, but would not have been paved.

The house and driveway were still in the future. This was rural countryside back then, a patchwork of fields and coastal sage scrub inhabited by quail, roadrunners (both long gone), sparrows and house finches (still with us). If we were to select a single date from 1897, today, for instance, there would have been grasses or perhaps sagebrush or covote brush growing on the spot. The specific insects, rodents, birds and, possibly even humans, to stop right there would have been dependent on which of those three (or other) plants was there. The same goes for things living in the soil below. Perhaps, too, a spring migrant coming in off the sea would have chosen this spot to land for a moment before going on. Was that a fox or coyote sniffing the ground a very long moment ago?

Then think of the clouds overhead, the sunshine or rain on that one day. The sound of the sea crashing into the cliff face below. Stretch that over the full year. No, the marker was correct. Nothing happened there.

And yet everything did, anyway.

## From the Editor



The Evergreen

**By Jess Morton** 

sually, in this column, I discuss conservation matters, the state of our environment and issues that we in Audubon need to address. This time, I am going to step a little to the side to talk about another subject close to my heart, music. Not that music and environment are in any way unconnected, of course. We need only hear a thrush sing on a May morning to weld the two indelibly in memory. However. this column about a place birds will be at this moment, and the human music describing that place.

Caroline Shaw is one of the many talented young people I have met who gives hope for the future. She is a musician of many talents, but more importantly she looks forward to what she can contribute to make the world better for us all. She is attractive, well-spoken and full of enthusiasm for life, making her performances enjoyable to everyone

in the audience. A composer, Caroline was commissioned to write a string quartet by Coretet and others. The resulting composition, "The Evergreen", was performed for the first time in Portland, Oregon, in March this year.

I was fortunate enough to attend both the premiere of "The Evergreen", and a second performance the next evening, where I represented Coretet, of which I am a cofounder. I was also fortunate enough to get back home before the nation went into freeze mode in its first response to the covid-19 pandemic. My eponymous poem is based on what I heard in Caroline's music.

Coretet and its work with Caroline had a history going back five years to its founding and first commission. That, too, was a string quartet from Caroline. She wrote it for the Calidore String Quartet, the cellist of which had been in a string quartet with her a few years before during their student days at Yale. Calidore had wanted to have a work from Caroline for some time, but the financial assistance to make it possible had not been available until Coretet stepped in. The result was "First Essay: Nimrod," a very listenable string quartet that explored a wide range of soundscapes and that Calidore premiered in late 2016. We followed this up, commissioning two more "essays" from her. Calidore gave their premieres while performing all three essays at the London Proms in 2018. If you get the impression that both Caroline and I like string quartets, you would be spot on.

Until she won the Pulitzer Prize, in 2013, Caroline Shaw thought of herself primarily as a violinist. True, she did



occasionally write ad hoc scores for whatever ensemble she happened to be working with, and, true, she sang in churches and with an experimental vocal group called Roomful of Teeth, but the violin was her first love, that and string quartets. The Pulitzer Prize was almost an accident, if you can believe that! She had written "Partita for Voices" for Roomful of Teeth to supplement the material they were singing. It went over well, and Caroline was persuaded to send it in to the competition. No one was more amazed than she was to win, the youngest ever recipient of a Pulitzer Prize for Music.

That Pulitzer was like watering a seedbed ofmarvelous flowers, I'd say. Since then, Caroline's many talents have been pushed into full bloom. While the notoriety associated with the prize has not gone to her head, it has presented her with chances to explore a wide range of her instrumental, vocal and compositional abilities and ideas. However, all this had had her going full out until she paused long enough to take a winter walk in the wooded Northwest. It was something she badly needed. The silence was what she heard, the air still and neither bird nor animal stirred as she walked. She knew then, that it was time to slow down. Time simply to breathe. Easily.

On that walk, she came upon a lone evergreen tree,

# The Evergreen

for Caroline Shaw

The Evergreen -- Deep in the forest the silence of a lone tree offers its green song

**Moss** -- Winter's splintered sun chanted amid the fir trees moss-solemn chorales

**Stem** – A tree rose, twisting by stem song and reaching leaf up from summer soil

Water – Spring and its rains sang with the tears of creation a refrain of trees

Root -- Fall's sweetness ran deep where forest roots interwove slow passacaglias

**Quartet** – Bows bending to strings rainfall and flowing seasons a lone tree's music

its narrow trunk twisted by wind and snowfall. The tree reached toward the forest canopy overhead with scarcely a twig or needle visible until far above. She took a cellphone photo of it. This image and the silence surrounding it became the inspiration of her new string quartet, The Evergreen.

The gnarled tree's photo was projected on the back wall of the stage as the quartet sat ready to play. Caroline introduced the four musicians, then sat down, becoming part of an audience now seated in silence, waiting to hear how she had given that lone tree a voice with which to sing.

# **ASK ALLEN**

by Vincent Lloyd



Part I

Vincent: Allen, help me identify this little green flycatcher!

Allen: I'm a little green flycatcher, and way prettier. Look at me instead!

Vincent: Of course you're prettier! But honestly, Allen, I need help. These little Tyrannid flycatchers all look alike to me!

Allen: The world is awash in little plain flycatchers. They perch out in the open, so I guess they need to be somewhat inconspicuous. It works for them, but does make life difficult for birders. I'll see if I can help.

Vincent: I have learned that the passerine flycatchers in America belong to the family Tyrannidae, which contains more than 400 species belonging to 104 genera. They say it is the largest bird family in the world.

Allen: Good for you that only about fifteen of them occur in California!

Vincent: OK, I guess I'm glad I'm not in Brazil. Many of the California tyrannids I can recognize easily: the kingbirds, the Ash-throated Flycatcher, the Black and Say's Phoebe — plus the Vermillion Flycatcher. It's the pewees and empids that drive me crazy!

Allen: Ah yes, the pewees and empids. Well, here's an idea. Only one of them breeds in the South Bay, the Pacific-slope Flycatcher. The others just migrate through in spring and



fall. So why don't you just not see them except in summer?

Vincent: Allen! You're not being helpful!

Somehow I need to distinguish the two pewees (the Western Wood Pewee and the Olive-sided Flycatcher) from each other and from the

five empids (the Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Willow Flycatcher, Hammond's Flycatcher, Dusky Flycatcher, and Grey Flycatcher).

Allen: OK. Here are three tips:

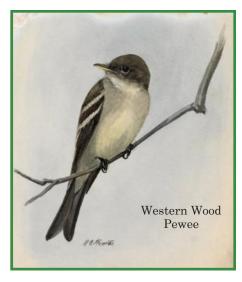
1. Notice where the bird is.

Pewees like to perch out in the open. The Olive-sided, in particular, is often seen right at the top of a tree. Both pewees have an erect posture.

Empids generally prefer to hang out in the woods or at forest edges and are a bit more relaxed in their posture.

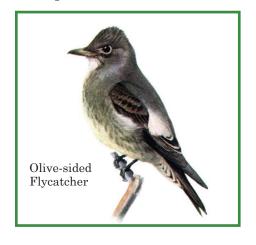
### 2. Check out that profile!

Pewees are a little bigger than empids. Their head appears peaked, as they like to raise their crests. Pewees have



thick necks. Their tails are medium-long. Their wings are comparatively long. Vincent: I read that the "primary extension" is something I should pay attention to. What does that mean?

Allen: A long primary extension means that the wings are long: the primaries are so long that they stick out well beyond the secondaries. In the Olive-sided in particular, the distance from the secondaries to the primary tips is about the same as the distance from the primaries to the tip of the tail.



Empids are smaller and stockier. They may have a small crest, but in general have rounder heads. Their wings are shorter.

### 3. Listen.

Tyrannids don't have pretty songs like sparrows or finches, but their calls are distinctive. The problem is that they don't call much until they get to their breeding grounds.

The pewees do sometimes call during spring migration.

The Olive-sided Flycatcher has a loud, unforgettable call that sounds like "Quick, three beers!" The forelorn pee of the Western Wood Pewee is a common sound of the Sierra. www.allaboutbirds.org has good examples of both calls.

The Pacific-slope Flycatcher breeds in the canvons on the Palos Verdes Peninsula where its rising call is often heard in spring. Nathan Pieplow, in his excellent Field Guide to Bird Songs of Western North America, renders it as pseweet! To me, it sounds like a sliding whistle. A few PSFs spend the winter here and occasionally will call just to remind us they're still around. The other empids are seldom heard in migration, but their calls are helpful in identifying them on their breeding grounds.

Vincent: Thanks, that helps. How about some tips on similar species?

Allen: OK.

Western Wood Pewee vs. Olive-sided Flycatcher

The Olive-sided is bigger. It has a peaked head and a pronounced "vest" on its chest; a vertical white line separating the olive sides. The pewee has a weaker vest.

Western Wood Pewee vs. Empids The pewee is plain, with weak wing bars and no eye-ring. Empids have both wing bars and eye-rings. The Willow Flycatcher, however, can be confused with the pewee in the fall because it has only a weak eye ring. Here location, shape, and behavior help. Pewees often flutter their wings when they alight. Empids often twitch their tails when they land.

The Existential Crisis of Empidonax

The fifteen species of the genus Empidonax are a notorious identification challenge. They all look pretty much the same. Just look in any field guide. Many cannot be positively identified away from the breeding grounds. Habitat and voice are the best clues.

Fortunately, the most common empid in the South Bay is one of the easiest to identify: the Pacific-slope Flycatcher. Compared with the others, it is vellower below, including the throat. Its eye-ring is extended in the back into a teardrop shape and it is broken above the eye. It calls pretty often, too. If you want to undertake the challenge of learning to identify the empids (warning: it is a lifetime project!), the place to start is with this friendly little bird. George F Canyon is a good place to see and hear it.

Ask Allen is continued on p.9

### BIRDS OF THE PENINSULA

# March/April 2020

by Vincent Lloyd

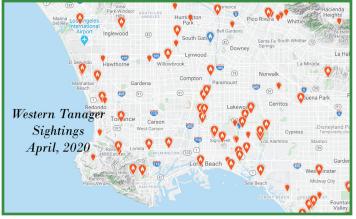
After a dry January and February, March brought a much-needed two inches of rain. Another two inches in April helped to produce a glorious spring.

Bob Schallman, bird biologist for the Navy, found a rare **Neotropic Cormorant** at Harbor Park on March 14. Among passerines, perhaps most outstanding was the **Blue-headed Vireo** spotted by Bobby Trusela at Harbor Park on



March 4; at the same time there was a **Cassin's Vireo** (another member of the **Solitary Vireo** superspecies) conveniently in the area for comparison.

Earth Day saw a major influx of migrants through the region. Large numbers of **Western Tanagers** were seen all over the L.A. basin.



Dick Barth found 15 in Ralph Dills Park on April 28. One is sputtering outside my window as I write this. (The map at left, below, shows eBird sightings of Western Tanagers in April, this year.) Jim Hecht found tanagers, orioles, Black-headed Grosbeaks, and Lazuli Buntings while looking through the fence at Sand Dune Park in late April. Nashville Warblers were noticeably abundant this year (there was even one in my yard!).

The lower L.A. River was a hotbed of activity in April, where 100-200 **Black Skimmers** hung out. The indefatigable team of Dick Barth and Jeff Boyd came upon an apparent hybrid **Oystercatcher** at 7th Street on March 15. On



April 19 they chanced upon 14 Whimbrels, 6 Blue Grosbeaks and 21 Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Meanwhile, Meryl Edelstein found 60 Surfbirds at Golden Shores Preserve in Long Beach on April 5.

David Quadhamer spotted two female **Red-necked Phalaropes** at Harbor Park on March 28. A **Belted Kingfisher** made an unexpected appearance at Henrietta Basin on April 11 (Bob Pope). Jan Gardner has been keeping track of the easily-seen pair of **Great Horned** 



**Owls** at Sand Dune Park. Outstanding was the **Prairie Merlin** Adam Johnson saw at Entradero Park on March 15.

Unusual passerines included the Summer Tanagers that popped up at DeForest Park on March 22 and Madrona Marsh on the following day (AJ). Also at Madrona, the wintering Claycolored Sparrow continued thru April 19. Other continuing winter birds included the Harris's Sparrow and the White-throated **Sparrow** at a home in Rolling Hills. The Eurovision (AKA Eurasian) Tree Sparrow at Wilmington Marina was seen again on March 7, while the Ash-throated Flycatcher continued at Madrona Marsh. The pair of Vermillion Flycatchers remained at Columbia Park and a female was espied at Madrona in March (Bob Shanman). Tropical Kingbirds continued at Harbor Park and Entradero Park. Sara Boscoe found a late wintering Pink-sided Junco at Hilltop Park in El Segundo on March 3.



The author seeks reports from readers about unusual birds you see in our area (the area west of the Los Angeles River and south of I-105.) Send reports to: <stephenvincentlloyd@gmail.com>.

Ask Allen continued from p.7

Vincent: Thanks. By the way, there is one flycatcher I've had no problem with.

A few years ago I went to Florida for the first time, where I saw a flycatcher



that was plain, without wing bars, eye-rings, or other identifying markings. Yet there was no doubt that it was a phoebe, simply because it perched like a phoebe, dipped its tail like a phoebe, and hunted like a phoebe. It was the Eastern Phoebe.

Allen: Occasionally, Eastern Phoebes will take a wrong turn in fall and end up wintering in California. For anyone familiar with the Black Phoebe, there is no problem identifying them — a nice example of how shape and behavior is as important or more important in bird identification than color and field marks.



Here's a challenge: can your readers identify the Mystery Bird above? If not, tell them they can always go back to hummingbirds!

MEET, LEARN, RESTORE, ENJOY

# **Chapter Calendar**

Please note that all events will be subject to the restrictions in place at the time due to covid-19.

Visit our website at pvsb-audubon.org for cancellations, meeting location, or live streaming instructions.

### SCHEDULED EVENTS



Tuesday, June 16th, scheduled for 7PM at the Madrona Marsh Nature Center. Montrose Settlements Restoration Program (MSRP) Director Jennifer Bovce presents: "Bald Eagles of the Channel Islands." She will give us the latest information on the recovery

program. Jennifer says, "The most rewarding experience to me is seeing the restoration concepts we developed during the writing of the MSRP Restoration Plan evolve into full-fledged projects that are making measurable impacts. I will never forget that day we first saw a little Bald Eagle chick in the nest at Pelican Harbor on the webcam—seeing the pair of eagles on Santa Cruz Island hatching a chick without human intervention was the moment I knew we were making a real impact."

Saturday, July 11th, is the date for our 40th annual summer butterfly count. See sidebar, opposite, for details.

Tuesday, July 21st, tentatively scheduled for 7PM at the Madrona Marsh Nature Center. Phil Barnes will show us "How Flies the Albatross" in a talk that considers the flight mechanics of dynamic soaring, a mode of maintaining or gaining altitude from horizontal wind gusts, something the albatross uses to fly huge distances searching for food for itself and its family. Phil's career in flight performance analysis and computer modeling at Northrop Grumman spans more than three decades, and he has made two Antarctica trips photographing

and studying the flight dynamics of

### FIELD TRIPS

these huge birds.

June 7th and 21st, and July 5th and 19th. First and third Sunday bird walks at 8 at Harbor Park. Meet in the parking lot above the ranger station, located between Anaheim Street and Vermont Avenue.

### June 10th and July 8th.

Second Wednesday bird walk at Madrona Marsh, led by Bob Shanman

### June 14th and July 12th.

Second Sunday bird walks at the South Coast Botanic Garden led by David Quadhamer. Meet in the parking lot at 8. There is an entrance fee to the garden for people who are not SCBG Foundation members.

### June 21st and July 19th.

Third Sunday bird walks at Ballona Wetlands led by Bob Shanman. See Bob's website <www.wbu.com/redondo beach> for details.

**Every Tuesday morning**: Tour de Torrance with Tommye Hite. Meet in the Madrona Marsh Nature Center parking lot at 8:30.

# 2020 JULY BUTTERFLY COUNT

The 40th annual Palos Verdes Butterfly Count is scheduled for Saturday, July 11th. As in the Christmas Bird Count, the aim is to count all the butterflies that are seen on the count day within the count circle. The count circle used for the butterfly count is the same circle used for the Palos Verdes Peninsula Christmas Bird Count, a circle which extends east to the Los Angeles River, north to Alondra Park, west to Santa Monica Bay, and south to the Catalina Channel.

Our count is one of about 450 "Fourth of July" Butterfly Counts in North America. The results are collated by the North American Butterfly Association. Their annual reports are an important record of the distribution and numbers of North American butterfly species. Comparisons of the results across years can be used to monitor changes in butterfly populations and study the effects of habitat degradation and climate change.

Last year we saw 30 butterfly species. Following some welcome spring rains, we hope to see as many this year.



If you would like to participate in this year's count, contact Vincent Lloyd at stephen-vincentlloyd@gmail.com. Volunteers are needed to survey parks and canyons in the count area (in small socially distant groups). We also welcome butterfly lovers who are willing just to count the butterflies in their yard on the count day.

The Palos Verdes/South Bay Audubon Society and the National Audubon Society, of which PV/SB Audubon is the local chapter, are dedicated to the understanding and preservation of our natural heritage. Within the framework of National Audubon Society policies, we seek and implement ways to preserve indigenous flora and fauna, especially that of our local area, and provide educational services to the region's communities with respect to birds, wildlife, ecology and conservation.

### **Executive Officers**

President: David Quadhamer, 310 833-3095

Vice-Pres.: Ann Dalkey

Treasurer: Jess Morton, jmorton@igc.org

Secretary: Vincent Lloyd, vincent@sabik.org

**Directors:** Paul Blieden, Tracy Drake,

### **Committees:**

Calendar: Evi Meyer, evimeyer@cox.net

CBC Vincent Lloyd, vincent@sabik.org

Field Trips: Ann and Eric Brooks, motmots@aol.com

Hospitality: Alene Gardner,

alene.gardner@sbcglobal.net

Hummin': Jess Morton, jmorton@igc.org

Mailing List: Bob Shanman, wildbirdbob@gmail.com
Programs: Jan Gardner, janet.gardner800@gmail.com

Paul Blieden, Bob Carr, Candy Groat

Snowy Plover Tommye Hite tommyehite@hotmail.com

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YES: David Quadhamer

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# These programs are subject to all covid -19 restrictions in place at the time

June 16th, at 7 PM, Montrose Settlements Retorations Program Director Jennifer Boyce will present a program on the "Bald Eagles of the Channel Islands"



July 21st, at 7 PM, flight scientist and bird photographer Phil Barnes, in a program titled "How Flies the Albatross," describes the physics and life hisory of these fabulous birds.



Palos Verdes/South Bay Audubon Society P.O. Box 2582 Palos Verdes Peninsula, CA 90274

Time-sensitive material Please deliver promptly

