RRAS Feature on:
Women Birders “Spark”

By Sarah Hobart

How are birders created? Are they hatched with binoculars and Sibley in hand? Or is there a pivotal moment in time that sparks a passion for everything feathered? It’s that age-old question of nature versus nurture. I don’t have the answer, but I do remember the exact moment I became a birder. I was eight years old, the youngest of four kids growing up in Keene, New Hampshire, and my two sisters and I were standing by the window watching a chipmunk in our back yard. With no family pets of our own due to a strict anti-dander policy, we were obsessed with animals, particularly those of the cute and furry variety. And this little critter was adorable, bright-eyed, soft, and stripped, busily stuffing seeds into her cheek pouches to prepare for the long winter ahead. We pressed our faces against the glass, entranced.

Without warning, a bird swooped down and snatched the chipmunk right off her haunches. With a few flaps, s/he carried her prize to the top of our swing set and began to eat it.

“Chippie!” shrieked one sister, and ran to her room crying.

My father, never one to let a teachable moment pass, brought out a pair of heat-up Bushnell’s and a field guide. I picked up the binoculars and with a few adjustments was able to bring the bird into focus. S/he had a rust-red back and bluish wings. There was a black mark like a mustache on her/his face. It was about the size of the robins I’d seen pulling worms from our lawn, but with a longer tail and a hooked bill from which a strand of pink tissue dangled.

“I’m gonna throw up,” the other sister said, and off she went too.

Dad and I opened the field guide to the raptor section, and I ran a stubby finger down the illustrations until I reached the falcons. And there was our bird: A Sparrow Hawk, or American Kestrel to you youngsters.

“Neat,” I said. And that was it. The Moment.

Fast-forward 20 (okay, 30) years: I was busy raising my own little family in Humboldt County when the local rare bird hotline reported a Burrowing Owl at the Arcata Marsh oxidation ponds. I’d never seen one before, and owls, of course, are extra special cool. For some reason I decided to bring my youngest, who was a toddler at the time. I drove us to the sanctuary and loaded him into a backpack for the trip to the treatment ponds. It was a long walk, and he was a chunky little guy, so my feathers were drooping by the time I got to the rock pile where the owl had been spotted.

And . . . nothing. So it goes in birding.

But just as I was about to start the long trudge back, a round head with big yellow eyes popped out of a crevice – and I had my Burrowing Owl.

My boys are mostly out of the nest now, and the story of how I lugged my young son along on the owl quest has become part of our family lore. But whether I’ve succeeded in fostering a love of birding remains to be seen: there was a lot of competition from Pokémon, and later girls and cars, and girls. The other day, though, my youngest confided rather diffidently that he’d started a life list. It’s in a little spiral-bound notebook, and I confess that I’m dying to take a peek. Because I really want to see if that Burrowing Owl is on it.

Above top left: Sarah Hobart, courtesy of Sarah. Above: Burrowing Owl, courtesy of iStock Photos.

NEW! Monthly Birdwatching Trips for Women & Girls – Led by Women Birders!

Starting Sunday, June 6th – RRAS begins a 6-month series of monthly birdwatching trips on the first Sunday of the month* (June through November), for women and girls; focused on creating inclusive, collaborative spaces for both novice and experienced female birders.

See our website at rras.org or contact our Field Trips Chair, Janelle, at janelle.choj@gmail.com, for more details.

Advance registration is required; sign up for any month with Janelle, who will lead the first walk in the Blue Lake Cottonwoods on June 6th, 8:30-11am.

(*July’s walk is on the 2nd Sunday, due to the 4th.)
Above: Marbled Murrelet on her egg. Photo by Brett Lovelace, Oregon State University.

In this second year of Covid-19 shutdowns, students ramped up their participation to exceed 90 poems and essays; the second highest total entered since the contest began in 2006. RRAS awarded $100 in prizes to the following schoolchildren who explored the topic. (A booklet containing all nature writing winners is available for downloading at rras.org.)

First Place Winner, Junior Division:

On Hummingbird Wings
By Bony McKnight, Grade 4, Coastal Grove Charter

I am going for a walk with my family. We’re visiting Berkeley, and it’s raining, and it’s been raining the whole time we’ve been here. I’m feeling grumpy because my mom insisted that we go out and get exercise, even though it’s soaking wet. We were walking on a path in between houses. The path was made of cobblestones and the rain made them slippery. I feel so grumpy I think I hate nature.

I wish I could’ve been inside, reading a book and drinking tea or hot chocolate. But I’m not. My raingear is wet on the inside, and I can’t take it off because it’s clinging to my skin.

We’re finally walking back, and I’m feeling even grumpier, because I’m even wetter. And wetter. And wetter. Suddenly a hummingbird zips out of a nearby loquat tree and hovers a few feet away. “That’s suspicious,” my mom says. She walks over to the loquat tree and pulls down a branch, lifting up the leaves. Everyone comes over and gasps when we see what’s underneath the leaves: a perfect nest, constructed of lichens and lined with soft feathers.

Inside are three pure white eggs, smaller than marbles.

I’m so amazed I just stare at them for a while. Everyone does. I’ve never seen a hummingbird nest before. It’s so small and perfect. It’s amazing it doesn’t get blown away by the wind. I feel so awed by how one hummingbird could build that and lay her eggs and care for the eggs and then the young hummingbirds as they grow, without ever letting the world know. Being able to hide them so well in places that people would never normally think to look.

And I think about what I thought before about how much I hated nature when it was so dripping and wet. But now I feel glad to be outside in the rain. I’m glad to have found the nest. And I’m not even feeling how wet my rain gear is anymore.

And so I realize that even if I’m not happy about the rain, I can find something I love about nature in whatever I’m not liking about nature. I don’t feel like reading a book anymore. I feel like being outside and enjoying nature. With the hummingbirds.

First Place Winner, Senior Division:

Moonlight Escapade
By Naomi Harrison, Grade 9, Academy of the Redwoods

I bathe
In the moonlight, I bathe
The light flows down around me like a pool of water
I am still
Silently my wings rise
I tip forward, at the very edge – !
Glide into flight
A dark shape swishing through the trees

My eyes peer into the darkness
Searching
I need no light to guide me
I can see
A rustle catches my ear
The wind?
Or something more?
I swoop around just in case

Twitching
The sound of soil
Nervous chatter vibrates through the forest
I can hear

Shadows fall
Rise
The distant crickets chirp sadly to an unknown pattern
I circle around the area

The wind changes
Scents shift
There it is, what I am looking for, my very purpose
I can smell

Wings, hovering
Air pushes me up
The cool night air has no effect on my warm feathers
I make sure of its place

There
I swoop, fast and silent
Crushing through the hiding place my claws meet fur
I can feel

A short battle
Desperate tiny claws
The place is too cramped to fully spread my wings
My teeth and talons do the work

I prepare myself
C-r-a-c-k
My beak comes back stained with blood
I can taste

I see the bright moonlight
It is quieter now
The smell of death is pungent in the air
My claws clamp
My tongue still stained

Floating silent
Through
The
Air.

RRAS Seeks Volunteer for Liaison to Tolowa Dee-ni’

Redwood Region Audubon Society (RRAS) has recently allied with the Tolowa Dee-ni’ Nation in Del Norte County. The primary purpose of forming this relationship is to assist in the repatriation/rematriation of what is currently known as the Reservation Ranch, back to the Tolowa Dee-ni’.

In order to facilitate communication between the Tolowa Dee-ni’ and RRAS, it would be helpful to establish a liaison that is a resident of their territory (Del Norte County) and a member of our RRAS Chapter. Please contact our President, Gail Kenny, if you are interested.

You can find out more about the Tolowa Dee-ni’ efforts to regain their land at www.arcsis.com/apps/Cascade/ and www.tolowa-nsn.gov/REZRANCH_StoryMap.

RRAS Field Trips in June!

Sat. June 5th – 8:30-11am Arcata Marsh with Gary Friedrichsen.

Sun. June 6th – 8:30-11 am Blue Lake Cottonwoods with Janelle Chojnacki. This is the first of our monthly Women & Girls Birdwatching Walks series!


View rras.org for more details and how to register for all walks.

COVID protocols will be in place.
Edited and summarized by Lynnika Butler, Linguist for the Wiyot Tribe; reprinted courtesy of the Wiyot Tribe’s Cultural Department.

The following is a Wiyot story told by Della Prince, published in Teeter, Karl V. and John D. Nichols. 1993. Wiyot Handbook. Memoir 10, Algonquian and Iroquoian Linguistics. Winnipeg: Department of Linguistics, University of Manitoba, pp. 9-12. Spellings have been converted to the approved Wiyot writing system and English translations have been edited for clarity.

This story tells how, long ago, Pitsou’laksh (Great Horned Owl) did not provide for his family, but hoarded all the food he hunted for himself. His wife discovered his secret and banished him to live alone in a dark place far from other people.

Please enjoy this story in the original Soulatluk (Wiyot language), with English translation, with a few key words and phrases in bold type along with their English equivalents:

Gouqe gou dali’, *pitsou’laksh* hi wisubuli. Long ago, where he used to live, *Great Horned Owl* was married.

Hou dula gish dawikuvuq’ul, *viwi’,* wanaqh, hou dali’qul. He looked around in vain for food when he went hunting.

Hou *mabu’ililh* da vulh, gi youtwilh. He never brought anything in his fishing net.

Galu wulou’ *jejach.* There was no meat.

Lhe gou shvi *youwilh.* *He came back with nothing.*

Juwa vulh daghurru’l da klhe *vadagh.* That’s why [his family] eventually was starving.

Dalhda hou danughhurruk, gauv *svitwamihl,* gauw bubouchguqurrilh. Some time later, [his wife] started thinking about it; she started to get sores.

“Shuwa yulh da gida rruqi’lak?” “What’s wrong with me?” she wondered.

“Svawi *viwurrilh* rrou gouru’il.” “My husband is very fat.”

“Wugilh gitga dawilham.” “Now I’m going to watch him.”

“Hou duruwulhari’, *diqhilh* gitga.” *Tomorrow I’ll lie down.*

“Gawitw.” “I’ll start to close my eyes.”

“Lhe *gaqou’m,* hou ra’rhu’liliqul.” “Then I’ll know when he gets up.”

Hi tighudalilh. Then he went out.

“Gurra lu viutsuru.” “I’m not asleep,” [she thought.]

“Dalu vi’shaqh vulh.” “I’m still awake.”

“Hi wulu hou gou guduwiqu’ul, *vus* hidouwughurrilh.” “I see him coming back in, he’s building a fire.”

Da nitwilh. She kept her eyes closed.

20. Hi vaswatsoudilh, hi gawouluwilh, hi gauw *lutululiv.* *He carried it and set it on the fire, and it burned her.*
22. “Hi wulu vulh *hou damuqiqul’*.” “I see him sitting there.”
23. Gauw’ shanadi’milh *vutseshura’wulh* gou dali’m. He started to reach for the stone mortar that lay there.
24. Jya gauw’ shanadi’milh, gourv vutseshura’wulh gou dali’m. *He reached for the mortar lying there.*
25. Gauw’ shanadi’milh, hi *noulunuvih viwi’.* He started to reach for it, and he lifted out food.
26. Gauw vulh *the’*n, wouur vulh hululviwi’viwi’. He took out all kinds of food.
27. Gauw *bouwilh.* *He started to cook.*
28. *Vutsu’n,* simi’ gaphouy. *He started to eat dried food and fresh food.*
30. Hi gou gauw *dali’silh,* hi gou shab lamul’silh. *He put it back down again just like it was before.*
32. Huruwulhari’, gou rathamihl. The next morning she saw him leave again.
33. Wanaqh ya *gou lauliilh.* *He went hunting again.*
34. Wa ga nou gurrwuwilh, hi na’luluhiilh daqoun, *tsek* daqoun. *The children got up not long after it got light.*
35. *Ralhu’li*, va gajevelhururrusi, valhduh gigta, gauw *bou gigta.* [Their mother told them.] *Get up, go wash your faces, we’re going to feast, I’m going to start cooking!*
36. “Lhu *wulu* viwi’ gou dali’m.” “I saw where the food lies.”
37. Hi *lungilh.* *Then she went.*
38. Hi nadouluwilh gourv vutseshura’wulh. *She lifted up that stone mortar.*
39. Duwayulhagi, viwi’. “Just look at the food!” [she cried.]
40. “Juwa *dali’*m.” “That’s where it lies.”
41. “Yiul da gihl vadagh.” “I’m starving!”
42. “Gauw *bou’.*” “I’ll start to cook.”
43. Hi valhilh. Then she feasted.
44. Tsek hi dou *valhilh.* Then the children feasted.
45. Biju lu wula lhuhhilh daqoun, tsek. *The children had enough to eat.*
46. Hi rou tighudaliilh, gauw *ra’rughurarrilh* daqoun. *Then they all went out and started playing.*
47. *Shabayuq* wulh vulh hi gau valhilh. *At noon they feasted again.*
48. Svawi *vouyughurruk,* tsek gultahul. *Late in the afternoon, the children were outside.*
49. Juwa *gou loutilh.* *That’s when he came home.*
50. Ya ga nughhurruk, ya *qi tulimin.* *When he arrived, he spoke harshly to them.*
51. Shuwa dou ruqi’ daqoun? “What’s the matter with them?” *he asked.*
52. Dali’ da gou loutilh. *He came back inside the house.*
53. Gou lourushshvedarilh. *Again he brought nothing with him.*
54. “Gauw tulis, gigta *qalhwa* ji vulh hulaqi’lum?” [His wife said.] “I’m going to talk to you. Why do you treat me this way?”
55. “Wugilh juwa da gauqou’m qalhwa, juwa vulh hulaqi’lum.” “Now I know why you do that to me.”
56. “Da dourwilhilut.” “You burn me.”
57. “Da’gh da giilh vadagh.” “We are starving.”
60. “Da sisvulou’neck, juwa gitga du dalit.” “You must go where it is *pitch dark.*”
61. “Juwa hi da da’lut.” “There you can talk.”