Assembling a bird list by locale is a good way to understand a place—its landscape, weather, and life cycles. To run up a big year list anywhere, one must seek (chase) all rarities at both ends of winter; scour the land (and ocean) during both spring and fall migrations; and be sure to track down all the nesting birds, no matter how remote.

A lot was learned about bird diversity in Marin County in 1998, when an astounding 372 bird species were documented. One person (me) connected with 362—37 more than in any previous year. The county’s bird list total is high at 470 species (more than that of any comparable area in North America and even of 40+ states), but nearly half of these birds have been far-flung vagrants, many seen but once. The number occurring in any given year averages only around 300.

What made 1998 different (huge for rarities)? El Niño weather through June certainly helped: we enjoyed torrential rains (good for ducks), extreme high tides, warm water offshore, a turbulent spring, and an unusually calm and overcast June. June and September, the big months for surprises, were outrageous, with new migrants raining on the headlands nearly every day.

January through March produced the usual unusual ducks, geese, hawks, and owls, but truly rare were a Yellow Rail (with many Blacks), American Dipper, Dusky-capped and Least Flycatchers, and Eastern Phoebe. I was greeting a birding group at Limantour on January 10th when a Laughing Gull blew in from the southwest and began scarfing homeless earthworms virtually at our feet. I took this as a positive sign for the year.

Punctuating the regular spring migration (always hard to quantify), violent storms in mid-May in the tropical Pacific blew Bristle-thighed Curlews, migrating nonstop from equatorial isles to Alaska, far to the west. At least 21 were found between Tatoosh, Washington, and Point Reyes. One stayed at Keohoe Beach May 16–24, to the delight of many humans who traveled to see it. On the 25th, a Gray-tailed (Polynesian) Tattler made a quick appearance at the same place, doubtless due to the same monsoons far away.

By late May, some of the scarce and irregular nesters like Poorwill, Yellow-browed Chat, Lawrence’s Goldfinch, and Black-chinned Sparrow were on their secluded territories in the interior.

In a “normal” year, the late-spring vagrant window is blown shut by northwest winds, but 1998 was not a normal year. The wind was blocked, and high overcast predominated—perfect weather for rarities. From the last few days of May through June, directionally deficient migrants generously crowded the year list. Spring highlights included 15 warbler and vireo species (Bay-breasted, Cape May, Yellow-throated, Worm-eating, and Hooded Warblers and Yellow-throated Vireo among them) plus Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Scarlet Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, and Green-tailed Towhee. There were also many more common rare birds.

On 7 June, an adult male Brown Booby (a tropical seabird) was sitting on a rock just north of the lighthouse precisely where we have been waiting for one for three decades.

We were astounded to see an adult male Least Bittern crouched in tules at the edge of Olema Marsh on 25 July. I thought this species extirpated from Marin since the mid-1970s, but they probably nested here in 1998, as a minimum of five were present in August with three fledglings!

The outrageous fall vagrant season began on 26 August with a Ruby-throated Hummingbird at the lighthouse (perhaps the same individual captured by PRBO biologists on the Farallones the previous day). It contined with wave after wave of lost birds on the outer Point through September and a couple of migration transamis late in the month. One of these washed over the Marin County team in PRBO’s Bird-A-Thon: Painted Redstart, Red-eyed Vireo, Painted Bunting, Clay-colored Sparrow, Yellow-headed Blackbird, and more—we had 184 species in a 24-hour period!

El Niño-driven birds were not present offshore as hoped (though greater than usual numbers of Least and Black Storm-petrels and Xantus’ and Craveri’s Murrelets were present at Cordell Bank). A Short-tailed Albatross, a Manx Shearwater, the aforementioned Brown Booby, and a Magnificent Frigatebird (over the coast) were the only stunners.

El Niño gone, October was its typical weak shadow of September. Through November and December, we found Ross’ Goose, Mountain Plover, Sage and Sharp-tailed Sparrows, but little else. In mid-December, a Common Grackle showed up in “downtown” Point Reyes Station, and nearby on the 15th, 36 Evening Grosbeaks were chewing on box elder seedpods.

That’s 372 species of birds in one small coastal California county in one year. If the environmental health of the Americas can be maintained or enhanced, this record may some year be surpassed...but you’re going to need another magical June, a lavish September, and just maybe a potent El Niño.

(Rich Stallcup, Rich Stallcup)

Summer Tanager
Outside, robins flock among bare-limbed trees in a half-acre orchard, while indoors Rigdon Currie and Trish Johnson pull up chairs to launch a discussion of PRBO’s new endowment fund. As our Board Treasurer (working with PRBO’s Development Director Valerie Snook), Rig set motion a process that culminated in late 1998, when our Board of Directors established an endowment fund for PRBO at Marin Community Foundation. I’m here to explore, with Rig and his wife Trish, what this means for Point Reyes Bird Observatory.

We settle down as the couple’s big yellow Labrador retriever, “Bubba,” sinks with a yawn on a cushion. First question: Why an endowment fund? Together Trish and Rig elicit the ways that such a fund extends the life of a gift to PRBO, essentially benefiting our programs in perpetuity. A bequest, for example — or a charitable remainder trust or an outright gift — resides safely in the fund while the earnings they generate are useful to PRBO over time. These revenues provide support for the work that PRBO deems crucial. Says Rig, “Giving money to the PRBO endowment is a way of making sure that something you care about will endure.”

Trish asks my next question (why give to PRBO?) for me, saying, “Rigdon, how did you once state your reason for getting involved with PRBO and supporting their work?” To which Rig replies, “The words I used were ‘responsible conservation,’ meaning that PRBO meets its goals through solid research. Our scientists give the people who implement land-use policies the hard facts they need.”

And more: “If PRBO were funded only by project grants,” says Rig, “we would be very thin on new endeavors and initiatives. An independent endowment fund gives the creative scientists at PRBO the wherewithal to come up with good new ideas and get them started.” For this reason, Rig believes that undesignated gifts will benefit our organization the most, providing PRBO with the flexibility to apply the earnings where most needed.

Rig then goes on to pose my next question for me (this is almost too easy): “And people will want to know, Why Marin Community Foundation?” He answers it, too, of course. “MCF is a great organization with tremendous expertise in these matters. They’ll invest and manage our funds in a fiduciarily responsible way, with the principal kept intact under their stewardship. Plus, the fees we pay them are very low—far less than it would cost us to do the job ourselves.

“Our endowment is what I call a triple-win situation: the donor wins, the Bird Observatory wins, and MCF wins as well.” A comment from Steve Jackson at MCF (see box at right) confirms this latter assessment of Rig’s.

I ask how a gift to PRBO’s endowment fund might work. Trish and Rig describe their own charitable remainder trust, set up some time ago with a gift of appreciated stock: they avoided capital gains taxes, secured a lifetime income, and have the satisfaction of knowing that, after they die, causes they care about will continue to be supported. Rig is currently redirecting a percentage of this trust to PRBO’s endowment.

“There are numerous ways to ensure that your assets will benefit PRBO,” he adds. “Besides an outright gift or a charitable remainder trust like ours, other forms of planned giving make a lot of sense. This can include wills, trusts, life insurance policies, and so forth.”

It’s almost time to wrap up with a quick look at the garden, but Rig makes a point of restating the importance of a strong endowment fund for PRBO. “This is the same kind of resource that has allowed PRBO lately to upgrade its staff capabilities and renew its education program,” he says. “The Board has made some brave commitments in these areas, which have proven to be very good investments.” Our new endowment fund represents an opportunity for all who care about PRBO to make sound investments in our future strength.

For information, contact Valerie Snook, PRBO Development Director, at (415) 868-1221, extension 12.

“MCF is enthusiastic about PRBO’s action to create an endowment because it sends that powerful signal to the broader community of PRBO’s desire to make sure it is around for a long time. It conveys the mature image of an organization that is planning for its future stability. PRBO has a proud and distinctive record. It gives MCF great pride to be associated with this treasure of Marin by holding an endowment for its benefit!”

Stephen M. Jackson
Vice President for Fund Development
Marin Community Foundation

Claire Peaslee