

Show Time

HOW BETTER TO STUDY the behavior of wild animals than the cozy confines of one's own home. And the animals don't come much wilder than the flocks of white-crowned sparrows that have chosen local backyard foraging territories in their southward migration from nesting grounds along the edge of the Alaska tundra.

The white-crown is a true dandy among the three dozen or so species of sparrows that make their homes in the West. Its pearl-gray breast, chestnut back and pink bill are topped by broad black and white head stripes, giving it a harlequin-like look.

The white-crowns create a warm mutual admiration society with residential hosts who install a feeder or simply scatter supermarket wild birdseed on the ground. The sparrows enjoy a bountiful repast and we watch bemusedly as they bob their heads in a nonstop feeding fervor, establish pecking orders, and dart into nearby shrubbery when a burly jay takes over.

The White-crowned Sparrow is a true dandy among the wintering sparrows.

After eating their fill, the white-crowns find a perch and sound off with a series of wheezy but cheerful trills. Bird experts note that white-crowns are unusual for having song dialects. Just as a drawling Texan talks differently compared to a twangy New Englander, a Sacramento white-crown doesn't sound at all like its Bay Area brethren.

Along about April the white-crowns will start north, with the males being the first to arrive to stake out a territory. About a week later the females will arrive and they'll pair up. The female starts the nest, a lined cup on the ground or in a bush, and sometimes lays the first egg before the home is complete. She lays 3-5 pale blue-green spotted eggs.

By September the sparrow family will be ready to start the long journey south. Very likely the birds will wind up back in the same backyard that the parents previously called home, and provide another winter animal show for house-bound observers.

Animal engineers

WE DON'T OFTEN SEE the largest of rodents in daylight, but we know it's been around. A white alder lies flat next to the river, and around its chiseled stump lie piles of wood chips. In the nearby shallows is a dome-shaped structure made of twigs and mud. It's the comfortable lodge of the beaver, the workaholic of the animal kingdom.

It's said to be the only animal that changes its environment, thanks to large front teeth that keep growing even as they wear down. The beaver uses its teeth to cut trees and branches for its lodge, to throw up a dam to impound water, to strip the inner bark of trees for its food.

And when there are no longer trees near the water's edge, this animal engineer digs canals in which to float food and building materials to river or lake.

The breed is a descendant of animals that played a key role in the opening of the West. Their lush brown fur was the magnet that attracted hardy mountain men such as Jedediah Smith to

the American River and other hunting grounds in the 1820s in quest of the rich pelts destined to become fashionable hats for men.

February is the mating season for beavers, most of which are believed to stay together for life. Most litters are born in April or May, averaging four kits to the litter. They will be raised in the upper chamber of their lodge, accessible via an underwater entrance out of reach of predators. As the young near their second year, their parents nudge them out of the lodge in a not-so-gentle hint to go start their own new colonies of eager beavers.

*Along the riverbank
the beaver uses its
chisel teeth to fell
trees and branches.*





Winter forms

ALONG THE RIVER the cottonwood trees described by John Charles Fremont fork near the base into several trunks and lean toward the water. Their heart-shaped leaves have long since fallen, exposing a thick whitish bark on stout branches, and a tracery of twigs against a cold gray sky. Also exposed are sickly green clumps of mistletoe.

We glory in the firs, pines and other evergreens that brighten the winter landscape. But as any easterner will tell you, there is something to be said for the transitory nature of deciduous trees and their bare-boned silhouettes.

When Fremont first noticed the cottonwood that was to bear the U.S. Army explorer's name, on January 6, 1844, near Pyramid Lake in present-day Nevada, it proclaimed the presence of welcome springs in an arid land. He wrote that he, Kit Carson and others in his party regarded them as harbingers

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of a better country, and today we view them as harbingers of spring.

There also are smaller but more shrubby willows lining the watercourses. With their leafless gray stems, often red toward the ends, they suggest a line of smoky flame between land and water.

Serving as accent to the naked willows are symmetrical, white-barked alders adorned with dangling catkins, those pencil-like clusters of yellow flowers that precede spring's leafing out. Then there are the native sycamores, with thick, gnarled branches, some virtually sprawling on the ground. Frosty bark flakes off the limbs of this "brotherhood of venerable trees" that soon will display leaves like those of a maple and big as a man's hand.

But no discussion of native deciduous trees in winter is complete without calling up the vision of the valley oak, highest form of vegetation in our area. It may reach 100 feet in height, and its wide-angled limbs stretch 100 feet across. It is the monarch dominating the valley landscape, as much in winter as in summer.

Roll one

THE RUDDY DUCKS, the goldeneyes and the Canada geese are among the thousands of waterfowl loafing through the winter on valley ponds, rivers and lakes. Paddling among them is a slate-gray little bird we'd be tempted to call an odd duck, except it isn't a duck but a funny old coot.

People can't help laughing at the American coot, its head and white bill bobbing backward and forward as it chugs across a pond. Its croaking call has been compared to an ungreased wooden axle. And when it takes flight, its enormous feet skitter across the water and its stubby wings flap frantically before it staggers into the air, recalling the line from World War I air combat movies: "You're not going to send a kid up in a crate like that, are you?"

The coot is a member of the rail family that is usually found in marshy areas. It's also called a mud hen and, if one wants to get fancy, an ivory-billed mudpecker.

With spring, most of the ducks, geese and swans will have headed back to the north country to raise their families. Not the coots. Most of them will hang around the valley, build

nests of shallow baskets among the reeds and produce baby coots that are even funnier-looking than the parents. A bald crown surrounded by a muff of orange-tipped feathers, an even brighter shawl over the neck and shoulders, a reddish bill and those snowshoe feet add up to what seems a Walt Disney creation.

The gregarious coot may not have the grace of a swan, the rainbow hues of a wood duck, or the flying skill of a pintail. Nor is it popular with farmers. But give it high marks for its ability to adapt and its entertainment value.

American coots' rubber-ducky routines are worth a laugh and a half.



Mystery voices

A ROLLING, MUSICAL “c-r-o-n-n-k” signals the presence of one of the more distinguished wildlife visitors to the delta these winter days. Like all cranes, the sandhill crane has a long windpipe that amplifies its voice a mile or more. From a thousand feet, from behind a levee, the sound of a bird that is heard but not seen is carried on the blustery January wind.

Then they come into view, a half-dozen ash-gray birds flying flat out, their long necks not kinked like a heron's. One of the six, obviously a young hot-pilot type, goes into a partial wingover just as they reach out with long black legs for a field of rice stubble. There they keep up their rippling call, inviting other cranes in the neighborhood to come on over, pickings are good.

The 4-foot-tall sandhill crane may not have the p.r. of its endangered cousin, the snowy-white whooping crane. But it does have its fine points, such as a red cap above a white face and a bulge of long feathers drooping from its lower back like a ballerina's tutu.

Indeed, the crane is something of a dancer itself. During the upcoming mating season, the big birds will flap their wings and hop, skip and jump as much as 10 feet in the air in their courtship ritual.

The cranes have been here since October, using long, sharp bills to feed on roots, bulbs and large insects in the grasslands. About mid-March, they'll start out for their breeding grounds in eastern Oregon and northeastern California. If you hear what sounds like the musical croak of a long-winded frog, look up. It may be sandhill cranes on their way home.

*Its long neck extended,
the Sandhill Crane flies
into view.*



It's the berries



NOW WE BECOME conscious of the stirrings of spring, thanks to full days of sunshine following on the heels of soaking rains. Lushly green grass covers soggy river banks, a reminder that lawn-mowing time is approaching. And from a tangle of bare brown branches, tender shoots of leaves sprout forth. The blue elderberry is one of the first of deciduous plants to awaken from a winter's sleep.

Little leafy green candelabras no bigger than a baby's thumb rise from the long branches of this member of the honeysuckle family. As the weeks go by, these sprigs will unfold into compound leaves with finely-toothed leaflets, food factories for an all-purpose native plant.

Blue elderberry shrubs offer a bountiful table for riverside wildlife.

In April, the elderberry will send forth clusters of flat-topped, creamy white flowers. Then come the blue-black berries, usually covered with a waxy coating and relished by songbirds and band-tailed pigeons, along with rabbits, mice and chipmunks. Deer browse on the leaves.

Native Americans called the elderberry the tree of music because they made flutes from sections of the branches. They used hot sticks to push out the soft pith, leaving a thin woody shell. The ancient Greeks also knew how to make a musical instrument from the elderberry. They called it a sambuke, from which the shrub derived its Latin name, *sambucus*.

It should be pointed out that except for the blossoms and berries, the elderberry is poisonous. And even the berries must be cooked. Then, rich in Vitamin A and protein, they make quite acceptable pies, jellies and jams. Countless folks will testify to the merits of elderberry wine, for medicinal purposes, of course.

Success story

IT HOVERS 70 feet over the valley grassland, a graceful white bird with pointed wings that beat steadily. By its color and contour it resembles a gull—but a gull doesn't hover like that, does it?

Its kite-like silhouette and its long white tail are clues to its identity. It is a white-tailed kite, whose classic whiteness belies the fact it is a bird of prey. This handsome member of the hawk family is making an encouraging comeback after having dwindled to an estimated 50 pairs early in the last century.

Kites threatened to follow the dodo into extinction as the result of the old-time human hobby of collecting their eggs (whitish, spotted red and blackish brown) and the bad reputation, often unwarranted, that all hawks were "chicken hawks." The kite's distinctive color and hovering, trusting behavior made it an easy target for marksmen.

Full protection under state law and greatly increased irrigation and cultivation of farmland reversed the kite's trend of diminishing numbers. The birds have returned the favor and are now considered good friends of farmers, especially grain-growers.

Hovering over a field, the kite spots a meadow mouse moving along a runway between entrances to its underground burrow. The hawk sideslips to the ground feet first, seizes the mouse in its talons, and soars upward. Since a meadow mouse eats the equivalent of its weight in vegetation each day, and if left alone would multiply at a prodigious pace, the white-tailed kite makes a key contribution to the balance of nature.

After a day of hunting, the kite returns at dusk to a communal roost in a tree, where 40 or more will spend the night. Later in the spring they will pair up and build nests high in the trees. They do not migrate.

Fortunate is Sacramento to be one of the centers of California's kite population, an all-too-rare success story of a wildlife species that graduated from the rare and endangered list.

The white-tailed kite has made a comeback after threatening to follow the fate of the dodo.

