

Finding Common Ground

Bird enthusiast and rancher shares conservation goals

by Ed Pandolfino, conservation chair, Sierra Foothills Audubon Society



Jack Ferrante ©

We are all guilty of making assumptions about other people based on limited information. Sometimes those assumptions turn out to be right, sometimes not.

For example, if I told you that I am the conservation chair of the Sierra Foothills Audubon Society and was on the executive committee of the local chapter of the Sierra Club you would probably assume certain things about what I believe.

You might assume that I think that the needs of wildlife should be considered equal to the needs of humans and that the Endangered Species Act is one of the most valuable pieces of legislation in American history... and you would be right!

You might also assume that I think that grazing in general and cattle ranching in particular are scourges upon the landscape. There, you would be absolutely mistaken.

In fact, most of us involved with conservation of native wildlife and plants in California recognize that, in many of our grasslands, grazing is required to maintain habitat quality. In particular, the rangelands of the Central Valley and its foothills and the interior Coast Ranges quickly become dominated by aggressive, invasive

species, like star thistle and medusa head, if grazing is removed.

My particular passion is birds, a stunning variety and abundance of which thrive in California's rangelands. However, one of the issues I constantly struggle with is getting the public in general, and even other conservation-minded folks, to recognize how important these areas are as wildlife habitat.

It's pretty easy to get people worked up about saving majestic stands of old growth forest or wetlands teeming with ducks and geese. Show them a vast expanse of open grassland (especially in summer when everything is brown) and too many may think, "That looks a great place to build another golf course."

The under-appreciated fact is that California's rangelands support more bird species of conservation concern than any of those other, more popular habitats. Combine that with accelerating conversion of grasslands to urban or more intense agricultural uses and one can make a solid argument that our rangelands are the most crucial conservation priority in the state.

Winter is probably the easiest time to demonstrate just how important

these rangelands are for birds. Raptors from all over North America migrate to California's grasslands for the winter. No place on the continent supports the numbers and variety of hawks that we have in winter. Seeing 10 to 12 species of hawks and owls in a single day is not at all unusual.

Red-tailed Hawks and American Kestrels, birds that live here year-round, see their numbers swell with visitors from further north. Close cousins of the Red-tail, like the Rough-legged Hawk, leave their breeding grounds inside the Arctic Circle to spend the winter hunting rodents in our rangelands. Ferruginous Hawks, arguably one of the most beautiful raptors in North America, fly from the Great Plains to winter in California.

Swift and powerful Prairie Falcons arrive to terrorize small birds and rodents alike in our open grasslands. You can sometimes detect the approach of a Golden Eagle by listening for the string of panic calls from the ground squirrels.

All day, Northern Harriers cruise low over the ground hoping to surprise a mouse and, as the daylight fades, Short-eared Owls take over from the harriers using the same

hunting style in the increasing darkness.

In spring and summer, the bird life may be less conspicuous, but just as vibrant. Western Meadowlarks sing enthusiastically from any perch they can find. The handsome black, gray and white Loggerhead Shrike will go after grasshoppers, lizards and even songbirds nearly as large as itself to feed a hungry brood.

Western Kingbirds, having flown to our area from their wintering grounds in Mexico, perch along fence lines showing off their lemon-yellow bellies and sallying out to grab insects on the fly. Burrowing Owls comically bob up and down as they stand next to an old ground squirrel burrow. A White-tailed Kite hovers in place waiting to plunge feet first on an unsuspecting mouse.

Recent reviews of more than three decades of monitoring studies in the breeding season and in winter show that more grassland-dependent bird species are in serious decline than any other group. Even abundant and widespread species like Western Meadowlarks and American Kestrels show alarming long-term downward population trends.

Over this period, we have lost hundreds of thousands of acres of

California rangeland to vineyards, orchards and housing developments and the birds that use this habitat are feeling the impact.

The importance of cattle ranching to protecting this habitat goes beyond simply preventing conversion to other uses. In general, when grazers are taken off the land, grassland birds suffer. Bird species of particular conservation concern like Burrowing Owls, Mountain Plovers and Horned Larks, all prefer habitats where the grasses are kept very short.

Wintering raptors cannot find their rodent prey in lands dominated by thick mats of invasive grasses or dense stands of thistle. Much recent research also supports the value of grazing to maintaining many native plant species and, no doubt, these plants species are important to maintenance of the quality of the habitat for many bird species, as well.

Most of California's characteristic grassland birds are still common. They persist not in spite of, but largely because of ranching. As more and more of this ranchland is converted to sprawling housing

developments or acres and acres of vineyards, we will see many of these species become uncommon.

While, in my wildest fantasy, I might like to see all of our state's grasslands preserved and managed primarily for the benefit of wildlife, I know that is never going to happen. The simple fact is that the only practical way we will retain sufficient habitat for the rangeland wildlife of this state is through the maintenance of viable cattle ranching operations.

I am spending a great deal of my time and energy trying to educate people about the critical importance of preserving of California's rangelands and the role cattle ranching must play if these habitats are to survive.

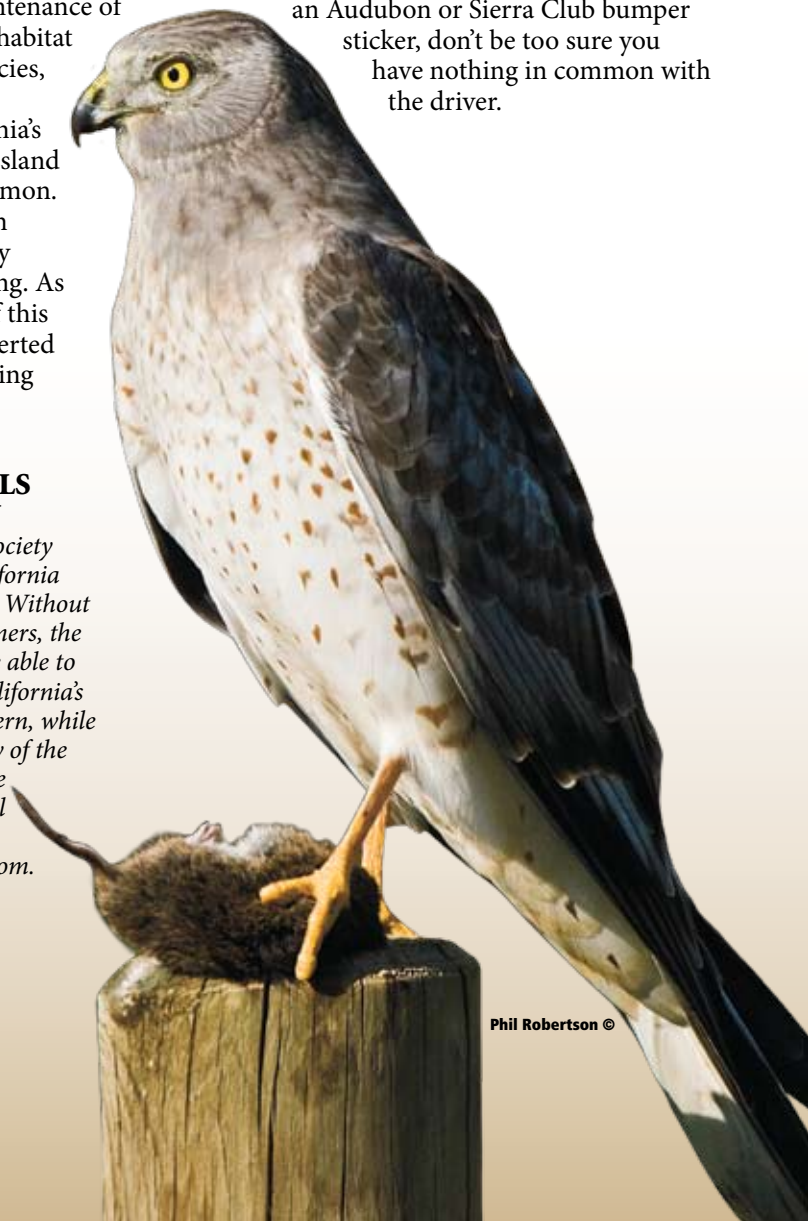
So, the next time you see a car with an Audubon or Sierra Club bumper sticker, don't be too sure you have nothing in common with the driver.



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THE SIERRA FOOTHILLS AUDUBON SOCIETY

The Sierra Foothills Audubon Society is a signatory partner of the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition. Without the efforts of its more than 90 partners, the Rangeland Coalition would not be able to succeed in its goal of enhancing California's rangeland for species of special concern, while supporting the long-term viability of the ranching industry. For more information about this local Audubon chapter, visit www.sierrafoothillsaudubon.com.



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