

RVOEP Birds: An Annual Cycle

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The open meadows and mixed conifer and hardwood woodland of the RVOEP, with its layered canopy and dense understory, provide varied habitats for a great diversity of birds. A number of these are year-around residents. Walk through the woods at any time of year and you are greeted by the chatter of the Oak Titmouse, or the constant, soft “location” calls of Chestnut-backed Chickadees and Bushtits as they forage through the trees in loose flocks. Several woodpeckers are resident in these woods, including the raucous and very social Acorn, the quieter and more solitary Nuttall’s and Downy, and our largest woodpecker, the Pileated. White-breasted Nuthatches and Brown Creepers are endlessly gleaning bark surfaces for insects. Along the forest edges you might see Spotted Towhees scratching in the litter, and Steller’s and Western Scrub-Jays going noisily about their business. In the more open areas you can see California Quail and California Towhees scratching through the grass looking for seeds and insects, and Western Bluebirds hawking from open perches.

During the fall and winter many other species of birds, which have migrated away from the harsh weather to the north, move into the woods and meadows at the RVOEP to join the residents. Large numbers of American Robins, Cedar Waxwings, and Purple Finches are attracted by the abundant berry crops of madrone, toyon, and even poison oak. Hermit and Varied Thrushes join in the berry feast, and also scratch for insects in the woodland floor. Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Yellow-rumped Warblers feed on insects in the leaves of the evergreen trees in the woods. Winter Wrens move secretively through the tangled, dark understory looking for insects. The more open meadows are visited by Golden-crowned and White-crowned Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos which

have come south to feed on the abundance of small seeds which grew in these grasslands during the summer.

As days lengthen and the weather warms, the winter visitors fly back north and a new suite of birds migrating from the south visits the RVOEP woodlands. These are the so-called neotropical migrants, which spend their winters from Mexico to South America, returning north to breed in the spring and summer. The woods are full of color and song as an array of bird species claim nesting and feeding territories. It is during this time that the RVOEP hosts the greatest diversity of birds. Cassin’s and Warbling Vireos, Pacific-slope Flycatchers, Tree and Violet-green Swallows, Orange-crowned Warblers, Western Tanagers, Black-headed Grosbeaks and Bullock’s Orioles are among the more vocal and abundant. These birds are almost all insect eaters, and their return north is timed to coincide with the emergence of new leaves from the trees in the woodlands. The fresh vegetation is food for a myriad of insects and their larvae, and these provide nutritious capsules of fat and protein for the breeding birds and their young. All summer the birds feed and the young mature. When fall approaches, they begin to fly back south and the northern winter visitors gradually reappear at RVOEP.

The annual movement of these birds is not random. It is a wonderful part of their timeless and harmonic cycle of life; a pattern that has evolved over eons to increase reproductive success by more efficiently using food resources and minimizing the effects of unfavorable climates. Local children given the opportunity to visit, and experience the bird programs at the RVOEP, are introduced to these concepts by becoming migrating birds. They learn first-hand the fascinating and unique behaviors that have made birds so successful in adapting to the environment.