

Fourth Annual Chautauqua Draws Flocks

Birds and Birders Brave Chilly Spring

by Bartshé Miller

What is three days long, packed with science, birds, and music, and dodges winter storms? It can only be the Fourth Annual Mono Basin Bird Chautauqua. After all, this is not your ordinary bird festival, is it?

A particularly long winter made for an unsettled spring in the Mono Basin this year, and the last gasp came just before the Chautauqua weekend. Yet another Gulf of Alaska low brought fierce winds and cooler temperatures threatening the field trips and workshops. By some small, bird-like miracle the winds calmed by Friday afternoon, temperatures warmed and pleasant weather prevailed. Tioga Pass remained closed for the weekend, a casualty of a bigger-than-normal winter, but this didn't stop over 220 registrants from enjoying a weekend of fascinating science, birds, good food, music, and friends.

And what about the birds? No doubt many had been rattled by the final blow of winter, but with the nesting season well underway and late migrants finding their way north, there were birds aplenty. One hundred and fifty species were identified in a variety of habitats during the weekend's field trips. One of the highlights included a male Prairie Warbler singing at County Park—only a few records of this bird exist in Mono County. This warbler made an encore appearance during Sunday's concert and picnic, and many concert-goers wandered over to catch a glimpse of the bird and to hear its ascending song. Not to be outdone, Sunday's musical guest Ciúnas dazzled the crowd with traditional and contemporary Celtic music—an elegant ending to a packed weekend of birding, storytelling, and scientific presentations.

And how were the crowds? Chautauqua participants are a dedicated lot, and there were only a couple of cancellations due to the late-season road closure through Yosemite. One of the joys of the Mono Basin Bird Chautauqua is that you often see children and adults of all ages and backgrounds in attendance. Old friends of Mono Lake, scientists, hard-core birders, beginning birders, locals, and an assortment of children from all of the above were in attendance. As much as the Chautauqua is a venue for birding and other naturalist activities, it's also a chance to catch up with friends and meet new ones. For those who could afford to miss some sleep before an early morning of birding, the Bear Flag Republic Band played at the Mono Inn on Saturday night. Rowdy



Lesser Goldfinches spotted by Chautauqua presenter Chris McCreedy.

birders (they do exist in the right habitat) danced and reveled into the late evening.

A dedicated group of leaders and presenters have been with us since the first Chautauqua, and they joined us again in 2005: Jon Dunn, Sacha Heath, Justin Hite, Peter Metropulos, Mike Prather, Kristie Nelson, and Dr. David Winkler. Others leaders returned for a second or third time: Sue Abbott, Don Banta, Susan Colletta, Debbie House, Ann Howald, Cindy Kamler, Jack Laws, Burleigh Lockwood, David Lukas, Jeff Maurer, Chris McCreedy, Paul McFarland, Ane

Carla Rovetta, Rich Stallcup, Chris Tonra, Simone Whitecloud, David Wimpfheimer, and Tim & Leslie Willoughby. Joining the Chautauqua family this year were Steve Howell, Rena McCullough, Dr. Scott Stine, Dr. Steve Rothstein, Ron Silver, and Alison Young. We extend our sympathies to Dave Shuford who had hoped to join us in 2005, but had to abruptly change his plans in order to attend to a family emergency.

The weekend would not have sounded so sweet if it were not for the musical contribution of the Bear Flag Republic Band, and Sunday's special musical guest, Ciúnas. Taste is also part of the Chautauqua, and the Friday night dinner was brimming with it, thanks to local chef Linda Dore.

The Mono Lake Committee hosted its second annual Wine Flight fundraiser with many thanks to Randy Arnold of Barefoot Winery for organizing a great silent auction and inviting and E.J. Gallo, Barefoot Cellars, Henry Wine Group, J.Lohr, and Muir-Hanna Vineyards to pour at the tasting. The Committee also honored the science and senior scientists who helped save Mono Lake: David Winkler, Scott Stine, Peter Vorster, Dave Shuford, and Dave Herbst.

This coming season when the nights are long and you're wondering when the winter rain and snow might end, remind yourself that summer is just around the corner, and that the Fifth Annual Mono Basin Bird Chautauqua will be the perfect way to start it all off. Mark your calendars now for June 16–18, 2006. Registration begins April 15, 2006. Check out www.birdchautauqua.org for more information. ❖

Bartshé Miller is the Committee's Education Director. He has been enjoying the fall colors appearing on his 7-mile bike ride to work.