Fall 2026
Vol 26, Issue 2

Magpie Calls

Newsletter of the Santa Ynez Valley Natural History Society
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Dedicated to the study, exploration, and appreciation of natural history in the Santa Ynez Valley region

Tracking Tarantulas at Sedgwick Reserve

Field trip with Marion Schlinger and Nikki Evans
Thursday, September 17, 2026, 4:30 to 6:30 p.m.

Aphonopelma species tarantula at Sedgwick Reserve. Nikki Evans photo.

Back by popular demand! It will soon be that time again as fall is mating season for tarantulas here in the Santa Ynez Valley. This is the best time to observe these amazing spiders. Join Marion and Nikki as we unravel the mystery of the tarantulas (*Aphonopelma* species) that wander about our roads, yards, and fields. Of the ten species of tarantula in California, at least three are located at Sedgwick Reserve.

During this program, we will walk no more than a mile on level ground as we search for tarantulas. We will examine a tarantula or two up close and search for their burrows out in the fields. We will also address their biology, distribution, defenses, identifying characteristics, and their predators.

Nikki Evans. Courtesy photo.

Those who wish to may have the chance to handle a tarantula. Perhaps we will even catch a glimpse of a tarantula hawk, a large wasp that preys on tarantulas. In any case, you are sure to come away with an appreciation for these fascinating creatures who make the Santa Ynez Valley their home.

Marion Schlinger. Courtesy photo.

Marion Schlinger is a naturalist/entomologist and loves being out in nature enjoying the plants, birds, and critters, including insects, that she finds either in her garden or on long walks with her labrador, Max. She also had a 'pet' tarantula named Knucklehead in graduate school.

Nikki Evans received her PhD in Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She is currently Outreach and Communications Specialist at Sedgwick Reserve. She fell in love with tarantulas during her first fall at

(Continued on next page)

Upcoming Society Programs

Sept. 17	Tarantulas at Sedgwick: Field trip
Sept. 23	Wildlife Care Network and Wild Rescue: Lecture & film
Oct. 14	Birds of California's Channel Islands: Lecture & book signing
Oct. 20	SBMNH Geology/Paleontology: Behind-the-scenes tour
Nov. 12	Mammals Magnified: Lecture
Nov. 21	In Search of Fall Color: Field trip
Dec. 2	Gibraltar Road Geology: Field trip
Dec. 10	Climate Change and Preparation: Lecture

Pop-Up events will be posted on the website and emailed to members and friends.

Gallery stands of Fremont cottonwoods and sycamores, along the Little Pine Fault zone, upper Santa Ynez River. Photo by John Evarts.

(Continued from page 1)
Sedgwick, seeing dozens of tarantulas wandering the Reserve looking for love. She promptly fell down a rabbit hole learning everything she could about them. Nothing says fall like tarantulas! Nikki loves birding, botanizing, photographing wildlife, and sharing nature with her three-year-old daughter.

How to Register
Event date: Thursday, September 17, 4:30 to 6:30 p.m.
Participation is limited to 20.
Registration opens at 9:00 a.m. on August 19 for members and September 5 for nonmembers at syvnhs@syvnature.org or 805/693-5683.
Members $15 / Nonmembers $30 / Children $5
Directions and meet-up location will be emailed to registered participants.

Santa Barbara Wildlife Care Network: Giving injured animals a second chance at a wild life

Free live lecture (no Zoom) with staff from the Santa Barbara Wildlife Care Network
Wednesday, September 23, 2026, 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.

One of a barn owl's vocalizations is a screech that is often mistaken for a screech owl's. Courtesy photo.

Santa Barbara Wildlife Care Network (SBWCN) is an almost 40-year-old nonprofit organization that rescues, rehabilitates, and returns to the wild sick, injured, orphaned, or oil-impaired wild birds, reptiles, amphibians, and small mammals in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties. In addition, as this evening illustrates, SBWCN also educates the public about living in harmony with wildlife.

At this in-person evening event, you will learn about the work and patients of SBWCN and what you can do to help if you encounter an injured animal in your neighborhood. The program includes a showing of *Wild Rescue*, a forty-minute award-winning film focusing on interactions between people and wildlife and the role of SBWCN. The film has been shown internationally, and it won this year's prestigious Best Film for Lifelong Learning award at the Giant Screen Cinema Association Awards. *Wild Rescue* was nominated for five other awards as well.
A Q&A session and light refreshments will follow the screening. Bring your questions!

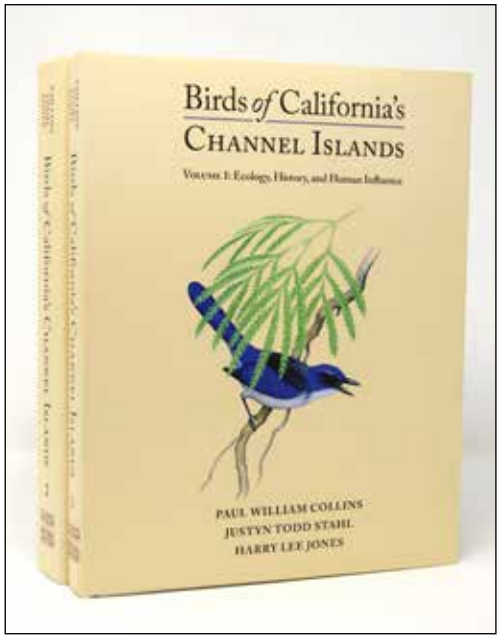
A female skunk can give birth to up to seven kits. Courtesy photo.

The bobcat kitten is handled with fur-like mittens. Courtesy photo.

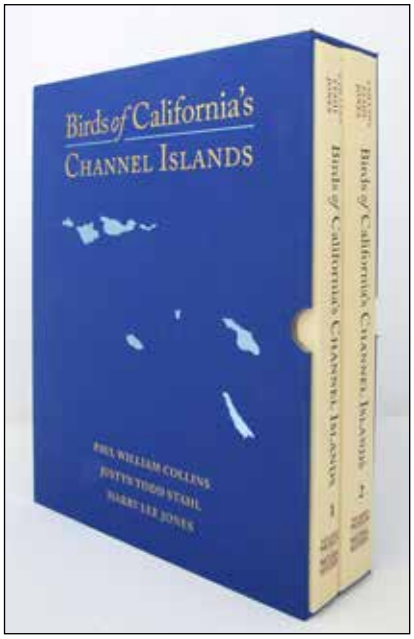
How to Attend
Event date: Wednesday, September 23, 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.
Live lecture location: Stacy Hall, St. Mark's in the Valley Episcopal Church, 2901 Nojoqui Ave., Los Olivos
Please note there will be no attendance via Zoom, as a film will be screened during the event.
A Q&A session and light refreshments will follow the event.

Birds of California's Channel Islands

Free live lecture, Zoom webinar, and book signing with Paul W. Collins, MA, Wednesday, October 14, 2026, 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.



Birds of California's Channel Islands comes in two volumes. Terri Wright photo.

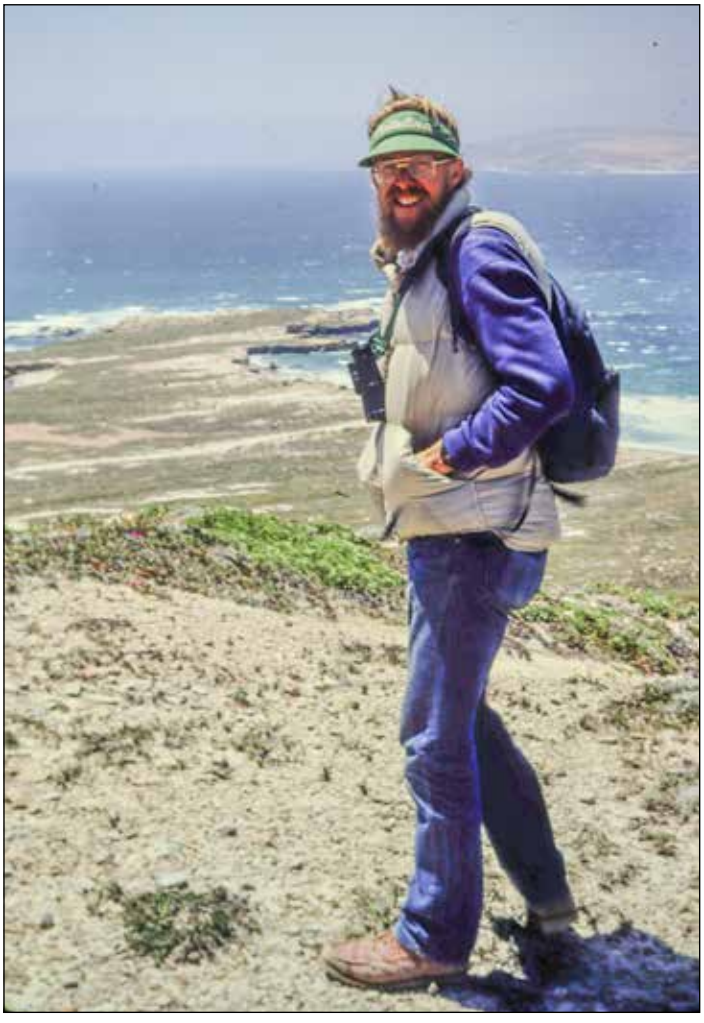


Terri Wright photo.

Join us for a lively and memorable lecture and book signing event with the primary author of *Birds of California's Channel Islands*, Paul Collins. Along with his two co-authors, Justyn T. Stahl and H. Lee Jones, Collins has put together the first comprehensive guide to the unique avifauna of the Channel Islands. His presentation will provide a sweeping overview of the changing status and distribution of Channel Island birds, from prehistoric times through the present. Drawing on a breadth of data sources from museums and collections all over the country, and 50 years of personal fieldwork on the islands, he will share key takeaways about how biogeography and the effects of humans on the landscape have shaped bird populations and diversity.

Paul W. Collins, MA, is the Curator Emeritus of Vertebrate Zoology at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, and he used the museum's Vertebrate Zoology Collection, which is strong in Channel Islands specimens, as a foundation for extensive fieldwork across all eight of the California Channel Islands. Collins has studied and published research about Channel Islands wildlife, especially avifauna, in cooperation with Channel Islands National Park, the Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Navy, and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Collins's work on historic eagle diets helped inform restoration and recovery plans for island foxes. He earned his master's degree from the University of California, Santa Barbara and has been a resident of Santa Barbara county for 54 years.

If you would like to buy the book *before the lecture*, it can ONLY be purchased from the SB Museum of Natural History's shop, or purchased online at the following link: SBMNH bookstore Birds of California's Channel Islands.



Paul Collins on Santa Rosa Island. John Storrer photo.

How to Attend

Event date: Wednesday, October 14, 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.
Live lecture location: Stacy Hall, St Mark's in the Valley Episcopal Church, 2901 Nojoqui Ave., Los Olivos
Zoom webinar registration link: Birds of California's Channel Islands. or at www.syvnhs.org
A Q&A session and refreshments follow the lecture.
The Zoom recording will be posted online after the event.

Dr. Johnathan Hoffman displays a specimen from the museum's vertebrate fossil collection. Owen Duncan photo.

The tours with Dr. Johnathan Hoffman and docent Bob Harbaugh this fall are an opportune time to appreciate the Earth Science specimens. Owen Duncan photo.

Gems, Minerals & Fossils: A closer look at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History's Earth Science Collections

Collection tour with Jonathan Hoffman, PhD and Robert Harbaugh
Tuesday, October 20, 2026, 1:30 to 3:30 p.m.
Co-sponsored by the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History

Since the 2017 arrival of Jonathan M. Hoffman, PhD, as the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History Dibblee Curator of Earth Science, the Museum has been upgrading its collections of vertebrate fossils, rocks, and minerals. A multi-year effort to modernize the collections will include a refresh of the Earth Sciences Hall in 2027, making this fall an opportune time to appreciate the Earth Science specimens.

The tour will be guided by Dr. Hoffman and docent Bob Harbaugh. The tour participants will be split into two groups to provide a more intimate learning experience. There will be two alternating 50-minute tours for each group, which will focus on the extant displays of minerals, rocks, and fossils. We'll also view the collections held in storage, many of which are of equal quality to the displays accessible to the public.

Bob Harbaugh and his family have a long affiliation with the Museum. After retiring from his medical practice, he felt committed to learning more about our local natural history, especially geology. He has been an active volunteer supporting Jonathan Hoffman in modernizing the collections for several years.

Dr. Jonathan Hoffman oversees paleontological resource management across the greater Santa Barbara region. He works collaboratively with public agencies to develop the Museum's Earth Science Collection and repository, documenting its geological and fossil history. His research explores the paleoecology and taxonomy of extinct mammals, including the Channel Islands pygmy mammoth and Santa Rosa Island dugongid.

How to Register
Event Date: Tuesday, October 20, 1:30 to 3:30 p.m.
Participation is limited to 25.
Registration opens at 9:00 a.m. on September 20 for members and October 1 for nonmembers at syvnhs@syvnature.org or 805/693-5683.
Members $15 / Nonmembers $30 / Children $5
Directions and meet-up location will be emailed to registered participants.

Mammals Magnified: The appreciation of collections-based research in the 21st century

Free live lecture and Zoom webinar with Ally Coconis
Thursday, November 12, 2026, 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.
Co-sponsored by the Solvang Library

Research collections in natural history museums are important repositories of biological specimens, providing vast datasets for studies of ecological shifts across space and time. More recently, there has been a great expansion in the use of collections through both increased digitization efforts and the growth of molecular and chemical techniques in ecology. This has led to the concept of the extended specimen, which views specimens as potentially unlimited sources of physical and digital resources, allowing new discoveries with old specimens. Dr. Ally Coconis will describe mammal specimen curation in the 21st century, highlighting her own experience with collections-based research as well as other contemporary research using Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History mammal collections. Finally, she will discuss plans for using and building collections to document small mammalian responses to wildfires in Southern California.

Ally Coconis is the Curator of Mammalogy at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, focusing her research on terrestrial small mammals. She received her PhD from the University of Nevada, Reno in Ecology, Evolution and Conservation Biology where she studied the niche differences between woodrat species in the Great Basin. In addition to her research interests, she is a member of various collection management societies and groups that advocate for increased FAIR data principles (FAIR ensures data are Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable).

Curator of Mammology Dr. Ally Coconis. Owen Duncan photo.

How to Attend

Event date: Thursday, November 12, 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.
Live lecture location: Solvang Library: The courtroom adjacent, 1745 Mission Drive (CA HWY 246)
Zoom: Register for the webinar at our website, www.syvnature.org.
A Q&A session and refreshments follow the lecture.
The Zoom recording will be posted online after the event.

Ally Cononis with mammal collections at SBMNH. Owen Duncan photo.

Woodrat collected. Ally Coconis photo.

Arroyo Hondo Creek in December. Photo by John Evarts.

Upper Santa Ynez River swimming hole in November. Photo by John Evarts.

In Search of Fall Color

Field Trip with Margie Popper and John Evarts
Saturday, November 21, 2026 , 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.
Location TBA

When it comes to autumn foliage, no one will confuse Santa Barbara County with New England. But with the right timing and location, one can find trees and shrubs in our region that put on nice displays as their leaves turn golden in late fall. We've selected a date for this field trip, and as it gets close, we will choose a hiking route where we can enjoy some of our more colorful native deciduous trees.

The area's best fall color is associated with woodlands that border our larger streams and the Santa Ynez River. California sycamore, big-leaf maple, Fremont cottonwood and several willow species are the primary contributors to this seasonal display. On this hike we'll discuss the natural history and distribution of these trees and other riparian species. Depending on our location, we may touch on other topics, such as geology or geomorphology.

Participants should expect a moderate to moderately strenuous trip of at least 3 to 4 miles with an elevation gain of 500 feet. There will be time for a lunch break. Participants need to be fit hikers and comfortable with uneven terrain or the occasional stream crossing. Trekking poles are recommended.

Valley oak and sycamore on South Refugio Road in fall. Photo by John Evarts.

Margie Popper and John Evarts are docents for UC Sedgwick Reserve and NatureTrack and they are past trip leaders for the Society. They honed their skills as naturalists during a 30-year career of editing, writing, and publishing California natural history titles as owners of Cachuma Press.

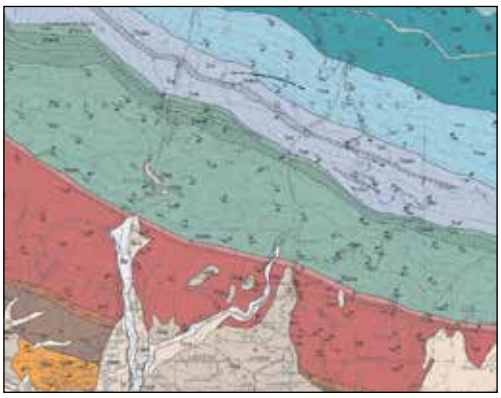
How to Register

Event Date: Saturday, November 21, 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.
Participation is limited to 20.
Registration opens at 9:00 a.m. on October 21 for members and November 1 for nonmembers at syvnhs@syvnature.org or 805/693-5683.
Hike difficulty is rated as moderate to moderately strenuous, depending on location.
Members $15 / Nonmembers $30 / Children $5
Directions and meet-up location will be emailed to registered participants.

Cottonwoods, sycamores, and willows along the Santa Ynez River in November. Photo by John Evarts.

La Cumbre Peak, Santa Ynez Mountains, with Juncal Shale formation in the foreground.
Antandrus photo, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA. 3.0.

View of three different rock formations during a stop at Gibraltar Road.
Sabina Thomas photo.



Excerpt of Dibblee Map DF-6, Dibblee Geological Foundation, SBMNH.

'Rocks' of Gibraltar Road: 50 million years in 10 miles

Field trip with Sabina Thomas
Wednesday, December 2, 2026, 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

During this trip we will make a number of stops along Gibraltar Road to examine outcrops of the six geologic formations in the geologic section. We will also see geologic structures and learn about the tectonic development of the area. The field trip includes short walks but are all on pavement, with the exception to the viewpoint at La Cumbre Peak which is reached via a short gravel path. Restrooms are only available at La Cumbre Peak.

Be prepared for changing weather—going up in elevation may mean increasing or decreasing temperature and possibly some wind. Bring sun protection, water, and some snacks and goodies for an optional picnic afterwards on top of La Cumbre Peak.

Sabina Thomas teaches at Santa Barbara City College and Ventura College and worked as a Nature Education Manager at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. She is a transplant from Germany who finally made it to California in 2010 and finds the geology and habitats of this state fascinating. Sabina also serves on the Board of SYVNHS.

How to Register
Event date: Wednesday, December 2,
10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.
Participation is limited to 20, aged 16 and up
Registration opens at 9:00 a.m. on November 4 for members and November 18 for nonmembers at syvnhs@syvnature.org or 805/693-5683.
Members $15 / Nonmembers $30 / Only children 16 and older $5
Directions and meet-up location will be emailed to registered participants.

California's Fifth Climate Change Assessment presents new findings about California's climate future. Felix Wong photo. FelixWong.com.

Climate Change on the Central Coast: Preparing for a resilient future

Free live lecture and Zoom webinar with Maren Farnum
Thursday, December 10, 2026, 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.

From historic wildfires and prolonged droughts to devastating floods, rising seas, and record-breaking heat, Californians are already experiencing the impacts of a changing climate. California's Climate Change Assessments are the state's scientific foundation for understanding future climate-related vulnerability across California's regions and systems. Building on decades of climate research and previous Assessments, the Fifth Assessment presents new findings about California's climate future, with a dedicated focus on Tribal partnerships, public engagement, and communities most vulnerable to climate impacts.

Speaker Maren Farnum. Courtesy photo.

This talk will explore how climate change is impacting the Central Coast region, and the strategies being planned and implemented to address the impacts at the state, regional, and local scales. It will focus especially on public lands within the coastal areas, and how we are working to adapt to sea level rise, stronger and more frequent storms, accelerated erosion, and changing ocean chemistry and temperature.

Maren Farnum is a senior environmental scientist at the State Lands Commission. She is on the Commission's Climate Adaptation and Special Initiatives team, which works on topics related to climate change, renewable energy, aquaculture, marine spatial planning, and the blue economy. She is a member of the interagency teams that have produced the Fourth and Fifth California Climate Change Assessments. Prior to joining the Commission as a staff member, she was a CA Sea Grant Fellow at the Commission. She earned her MA in International Environmental Policy at the Middlebury Institute for International Studies, Monterey in 2015 and her BS in Conservation and Resource Studies from the University of California, Berkeley in 2009.

Coastal Santa Barbara. John Wiley photo. CC by 3.0

How to Attend

Event date: Thursday, December 10, 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.
Live lecture location: Solvang Library: The courtroom adjacent, 1745 Mission Drive (CA Hwy 246)
Zoom: Register for the webinar at our website, www.syvnature.org.
A Q&A session and refreshments follow the lecture.
The Zoom recording will be posted online after the event.

NATURALIST'S NOTEBOOK

Fall is the Time to See Acorn Woodpeckers Engaged in Their Most Iconic Work

Text and photos by Nikki Evans

Acorn woodpeckers are also excellent flycatchers.

A burnished brown acorn hangs heavy on a valley oak branch. The large seed has loosened in its cap, so when a male acorn woodpecker *(Melanerpes formicivorus)* arrives and grasps it with his beak, it comes free easily. The woodpecker flies to a nearby oak where thousands of holes adorn the trunk and branches, some filled with carefully stored acorns. Around him, other woodpeckers move through the tree, their waka-waka calls filling the woodland. Holding the acorn, he chooses a hole and hammers the acorn into place. The acorn's naturally tapered shape allows it to wedge tightly into the wood. When finished, he flies off to repeat the process.

The thousands of holes that comprise an acorn woodpecker's granary are the product of generations. These woodpeckers are a communal species down to the granary hole, which has typically been worked at by multiple birds. Each stored acorn is a shared resource. Most acorns stored in a granary come from a small number of nearby oak trees. In one study, the granaries had acorns from just one to eight oaks all within fifty feet of their granaries.

An acorn woodpecker carefully placing an acorn in his clan's granary.

The outspread wings of these two acorn woodpeckers indicates a possible dispute.

Acorn woodpeckers live in clans of two to sixteen birds consisting of breeding females, breeding males, and non-breeding helpers. The presence of non-breeding helpers is one of the things I find most intriguing about acorn woodpeckers. These helpers are grown offspring who remain with their family, helping to feed young, defend the territory, and maintain resources. Helpers may wait for a chance to inherit a breeding position within their clan, or they may disperse and compete for opportunities elsewhere. Their presence as helpers raises a fundamental evolutionary question: Why help raise someone else's offspring instead of leaving to reproduce? Research suggests they often remain because being a non-breeding helper is an advantageous position until a breeding opportunity arises. They have the security of the clan. Plus, helping relatives provides an evolutionary benefit because relatives carry many of the same genes. For much of history, evolution was portrayed as a story of competition, but cooperation is a powerful strategy. Dependent on the famously unpredictable boom and bust cycles of acorns, acorn woodpeckers have evolved a complex society capable of remaining non-migratory.

The next time you encounter a group of acorn woodpeckers, choose one bird and see if you can follow him/her for a few minutes. Take notes. Ask questions. Often, we gain only the most fleeting of glimpses into the lives of wild animals—a fox disappearing into the brush, a hawk circling overhead, or the brief stare of an animal waiting for us to leave. But some species, like acorn woodpeckers, invite us to stay awhile. In just a few minutes, we can glimpse the daily work of a single acorn woodpecker and the multi-generational efforts of an entire clan. It is enough to awaken the naturalist in anyone.

Two male acorn woodpeckers. Males have solid red caps, while females have a black band on the forehead. The blue eyes of the bird on the right tell us this is a recently fledged juvenile while the yellow-eyed bird is an adult.