

## In Search of Swainson's Hawks!

*Summer birding, August 25, 2009*

For 2009 *Let's Go Birding* has partnered with other organizations to provide exciting opportunities to take people birding. This trip was inspired by Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society's Executive Director Bob Power. He came up with a fantastic idea to take eager birders into California's Central Valley to look for summering Swainson's Hawks. On this day I partnered with the Los Gatos Wild Bird Center and we did the same thing! Swainson's Hawks simply do not often venture into Silicon Valley so we have to go find them. Leaving the South Bay we headed to the open space lands above the Yolo Bypass Wildlife areas located west of Sacramento. We worked our way around the farm routes 104 & 105 when we saw our first Swainsons fly over the road and land.

We all got out of the cars and found a juvenile bird sitting in an old pepper tree. The bird sat for quite some time and afforded us all fantastic views. We were soon met by a nice man driving past in his truck. He asking us at what we were looking and when we told him he eagerly shared that a pair of Swainson's Hawks had been nesting in the tree out front of his dad's house for the past five years. He then gave us the address of the old homestead located in the area. We decided we'd check it out later!

In this area we also found several **LOGGERHEAD SHRIKES**, **RED TAILED HAWKS** and **AMERICAN KESTRELS**. **YELLOW BILLED MAGPIES**, many **NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRDS** and **TREE SWALLOWS** were also in the area. Soon a flock of roughly 14 Swainson's Hawks lifted off a near by field and flew directly overhead. We saw many of the different plumage variations that this buteo exhibits.

We also found a bright "GOLDENROD" yellow spider crossing the road so we helped moved it out of harms way.

We then continued on to find oxidation ponds from the water treatment plant located off 105. Here we found the usual suspects - **AMERICAN AVOCETS**, **BLACK NECKED STILTS**, **GADWALLS** and **KILLDEER**, **WILSON'S** and **RED NECKED PHALAROPES**.

With the local's great tip on a nest location we headed home via the route that would take us by his dad's farmhouse with the nesting Swainson's Hawks. For the privacy of both the residents and the hawks I do not wish to give the exact location. We followed the map around many orchards and soon found the house, the tree and three juvenile Swainson's Hawks. One of those youngsters is pictures below. The group set up scopes and got up close and personal with each bird. The birds appeared used to being observed and in fact, we found garden chairs set up out front in a way that indicated the homeowners enjoy watching their birds. The adults Swainson's never appeared but we assumed they were not far away.

After a few waves by John Deer tractor drivers and some tomato haulers we headed home.

### **Swainson's Hawks Cool Facts!**

- Swainson's Hawks were named after naturalist William Swainson (1789 -1855)
- This hawk is one of the "buteos"
- Swainson's are long distant migrants who summer in North America
- Swainson's migrate back to South America to spend the winter
- They make a 11,000 -17,000 mile annual migration
- This buteo has long tapered wings common in long distant migrants
- Often observed migrating in large flocks of up to several hundred
- Majority of diet consists of insects and Swainson's often sit on ground when hunting
- Numbers are declining in California for reasons not totally understood
- DDT still used in southern latitudes impacts this species
- Swainson's do have several plumage variations of which birders need to be aware



One of the three juvenile Swainson's Hawks sitting near the nest taken by trip participant Richard Casserley