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Guest Commentary: Get to know Swainson's hawk

- Published 12:00 am PDT Thursday, October 4, 2007

Elk Grove has Swainson's hawks at its doorstep.

A few years ago, scientists counted more than 25 nests inside the city limits, and a recent study found more than 180 in the south area outside the city limits. Drive from Galt to Elk Grove on a summer day, and I will guarantee that you will see Swainson's hawks soaring above the highway.

But six months later, you will not see any. They have flown south, mostly to Mexico, or to Central America or to northern South America. They do not winter with the rest of the Swainson's hawk population, which goes to Argentina.

Come March, our Swainson's hawks will be back, to establish their territory, often at the same nest or close to where they nested the previous season.

The Swainson's hawk is a buteo, or soaring hawk, that hunts small mammals and insects in farmlands and grasslands. It is typically 19 inches long with a wingspan of 51 inches and a weight of almost 2 pounds. It is the most slender of the buteos.

I was told by the Foundation for Birds of Prey in Rocklin that Swainson's are the most gentle of the buteos.

The Swainson's hawk also is known for its aerodynamics. It soars with wings slightly raised at the end and flies thousands of miles each year.

There are light and dark plumage versions of Swainson's hawk, and variations in between. Look for the leading edge of the wings to be lighter than the trailing edge (a contrast to the red-tailed hawk).

In our region, Swainson's hawks can be confused with other, similar hawks. The red-tailed hawk, our most common buteo, is about the same size but stockier. Red-tailed hawks are seen soaring but are most familiar as the hawks sitting on posts by the highways in winter.

Swainson's hawks are listed under the California Endangered Species Act as a threatened species, and state law provides some protections. Although they are scarce, our region is

the heartland for their survival as a species in California.

The biggest threat to this species is the paving over of working farms and ranches that provide rich foraging habitat for them. In turn, both here and in Mexico, Swainson's hawks help farmers control agricultural pests such as rodents and insects. Some crops are not good for Swainson's hawks, however. Vineyards and orchards do not provide the foraging habitat they need for survival. Corn is another product that has few benefits for raptors. These kinds of crops also provide cover that protects prey.

A recent study of nesting activity in the south county found that a mixture of irrigated cropland and irrigated pasture provides the highest density of nesting activity in the rural area outside Elk Grove.

Scientists tell us that we must save local farmland to save this dwindling species. But to do that effectively, cities have to decide to remain inside their present boundaries.

Friends of the Swainson's Hawk was formed in 1994 when several Sacramento birdwatchers realized that this species would likely get paved out of the region if an advocate did not emerge. Our objectives have been to make sure that the state and cities implement legal protections for the Swainson's hawk, and to educate the public about this wonderful natural resource and what we have to do to keep it in our region.

Friends of the Swainson's Hawk is a true grass-roots organization, with a small volunteer board, committed to conservation. Our donors are residents who want to make a difference in their community. Quite a few of them volunteer at the Stone Lakes Wildlife Refuge or the Cosumnes Preserve.

In 2003, Elk Grove got our attention in a big way. A biologist called us to report that Elk Grove home builders were bulldozing too close to active Swainson's hawks' nests, a violation of their permit conditions. We complained to the city and state to bring them into compliance.

We were aware that the city of Elk Grove -- in its early years -- had collected fees for the acquisition of Swainson's hawk mitigation land but had never purchased any. For several years we petitioned the city to fix the mitigation program. Elk Grove residents helped convince the council to be a leader in Swainson's hawk mitigation. In 2004, a new and improved policy was adopted. The backlog in fees was used to acquire a large vineyard that is being converted to uses beneficial to the Swainson's hawk.

On Sept. 24, Friends of the Swainson's Hawk hosted a workshop for Elk Grove residents interested in learning more about the Swainson's hawk. An excellent panel of experts spoke. We learned that people are very curious about their local hawk and interested in its protection.

We are eager to meet with more residents of Elk Grove who care about wildlife and habitat in their area. Please e-mail me directly at judelam@sbcglobal.net or call me at (916) 447-4956, if you would like to be invited to our next workshop in Elk Grove.

You can also visit our Web site at www.swainsonshawk.org to learn more about Friends of the Swainson's Hawk and the inspiring raptor that is so important to our region's natural world.

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