

THE FOOTHILL ADVOCATE

Winter 2009

Vol. 13 No.2

SIERRA • FOOTHILL



• CONSERVANCY •

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Meet our tiny golden foothill residents

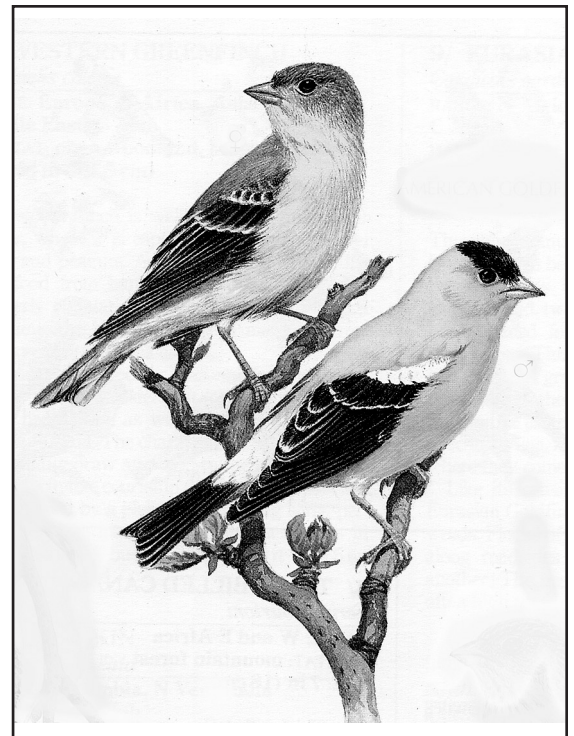
Three different kinds of goldfinches inhabit the southern Sierra Nevada foothills. These tiny birds are especially beautiful at this time of year when they are changing into their breeding plumage-and all of them are well worth the effort involved in seeking them out. Here are the three local goldfinches that you might see on an outing in the hills:

American Goldfinches, (*Carduelis tristis*), are the largest of the three goldfinch types. They measure five inches from tip of beak to tip of tail and are clearly the most "golden." Except for black wings, black cap, and black tail feathers, the males of this species during the breeding season are a bright golden yellow all over. They are dazzling. Male American Goldfinches probably use their good looks to attract mates, but they're also apt to attract unwanted attention from predators. The females, as you might expect of birds that must remain inconspicuous as they incubate their eggs, are duller. Both males and females have stout, conical bills that they use for cracking the seeds on which they live.

American Goldfinches are regular winter residents of the foothills where they prefer streamside habitats. In about April, when they are ready to breed, they move downhill and can be found along the Kings River below Pine Flat Dam, the San Joaquin River below Millerton, and, I have been told, along the other rivers that flow out of the mountains and into the lower San Joaquin.

Lawrence's Goldfinches (*Carduelis lawrencei*) are smaller than the Americans and are considerably less golden. Their bodies are mostly gray except for a yellow chest and rump and a few yellow feathers in the wings. The males of this species have a black cap and a black chin. Again, females are a lot less golden.

Lawrence's Goldfinches are birds of arid areas. Their movements are rather unpredictable, but good places to look for them are the grasslands and weedy fields of the valley and low foothills. They can range upward to three thousand feet or so if the habitat is right. I remember seeing a large flock of these goldfinches in a field of fading fiddleneck near the end of one long-ago wildflower season. The birds were systematically picking off seed after seed along the withered stems. Of course the plants bent under their weight so that the birds were hanging upside down, but this seemed not to bother them one bit.



American goldfinches

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The Foothill Advocate is published quarterly by the Sierra Foothill Conservancy, Box 529, Prather, CA 93651.
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Articles on natural history, photos and letters to the editor are welcome. Send them to 30922 Auberry Rd. Auberry, CA, or call 559-855-2908.

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A letter to Sierra Foothill Conservancy members from Chuck Peck

It is a time for change both nationally and at Sierra Foothill Conservancy. Fortunately here at SFC the change wasn't brought on by an annoyed electorate but by some careful decisions on the part of the board and staff. It all started with discussions between SFC Associate Director Jeannette Tuitele and me last summer. Jeannette had come to SFC as a volunteer about three years previously and had quickly become so valuable that we hired her to direct our education program. From there Jeannette added public outreach and fundraising to her duties. These were important parts of SFC's mission that I had been neglecting because of the overwhelming amount of work I had with SFC's ambitious land protection program.

When Jeannette added board development to her duties and showed a flair for it, it became apparent to me that it was time for me to step back and concentrate on land protection and on representing SFC with other agencies and land trusts. It also seemed to me that Jeannette should have the title of Executive Director, since she was doing the work usually associated with that title. We went together to the board and suggested the change. Working with the board we established a timetable under which Jeannette would take over as Executive Director on February 1, 2009.

One of the bad things that can happen to good organizations is that founders can hang on when new leadership is needed. The time for me to step back, concentrate on land protection and let others lead had come exactly at the time when SFC had the best staff ever and the board was maturing into one of the best land trust boards in the Sierra Nevada. There couldn't be a better time. It was an easy decision for me, although it is tinged with the sadness that often comes with change.

I am not leaving SFC. With Jeannette administering the organization, I will concentrate on working with landowners who wish to keep their lands in open space and helping them find ways to make it financially possible. I intend also to work for the Sierra Cascade Land Trust Council, an assembly of some 17 land trusts throughout the Sierra and southern Cascades that have banded together to advocate for the Sierra in Sacramento.

Jeannette knows that she will have my full support and help when she asks for it. The past 13 years have been in many ways the best part of my life so far. I will always get a thrill walking on the preserves and spying a coyote pursuing a ground squirrel, a golden eagle flying overhead, or a bobcat ambling along. I get the same sense of joy driving past the ranches which are now protected with conservation easements. I want to thank all of you who took a chance on SFC in the early days when our success was not a sure thing, and all of you who continue to carry on our work. I hope you are as proud of the results as we are and will continue your support into the future.

It is a good thing that SFC is doing and all our members are a vital part of it. I can't thank you enough.

Sincerely, Chuck Peck

Winter and spring classes, hikes and events

SFC Classes require advance registration and cost \$10 per person or \$15 per family. Bring a sack lunch and water. For information and to sign up for **classes**, call Jeannette at 559-855-3473 or go to www.sierrafoothill.org and print out a registration form to send with your check. For Mariposa area classes, call 209-742-5556 for directions and details.

Saturday, March 21: Art and Science on the McKenzie Preserve. Enjoy the springtime with instruction in art techniques for drawing and watercolor, with time for exploration of the creek and its aquatic life. Megan and Ron Bohigian will lead this class. Bring your art materials if you prefer to use them, wading boots or extra shoes, and a pad to sit on if it's been wet. We will provide pencils, charcoal and watercolors. **9 a.m. to 2 p.m.**

Sunday, March 22: Geology of the Tivy Mountain Area. Join biologist Rodney Olsen and geologist Craig Poole to learn about the unusual geology, soils and plants in the lower Kings River area. Meet at the Tivy Mountain Preserve. **8 a.m. to 3 p.m.**

Saturday, March 28: Wildflowers on the McKenzie Preserve. This popular class will be taught by John Stebbins, botanist and local wildflower authority. A fairly strenuous hike will feature spring flowers, a vernal pool, and spectacular scenery on the top of the McKenzie Table. **9 a.m. to 3 p.m.**

Saturday, April 4: Wildflowers of the Merced River Canyon. Wildflower expert Wendy Fisher will lead this hike down the celebrated Hite's Cove trail along the South Fork of the Merced River. Enjoy beautiful views and some of the best wildflower displays in the foothills. Meet at Hite's Cove trailhead on Highway 140. **9 a.m. to 3 p.m.**

Saturday, April 18: Long Ranch Nature Walk: Naturalist, author and educator Michael Ross will lead a walk on the Mariposa Long Ranch Conservation Easement. A fine time for spring flowers on this beautiful oak woodland. Meet at Mariposa Fairgrounds parking lot off Highway 49.

Saturday, April 18: Writing about Nature in the Sierra Foothills. Explore writing about the natural world with John Hales, a teacher of creative nonfiction in the CSU Fresno MFA program, and author of many published essays on nature subjects. We will observe and record our impressions of the inspiring spring landscape of the McKenzie Preserve; beginners and more experienced writers are welcome. Bring writing materials and a few pages of your favorite published nature writing. **9 a.m. to 2 p.m.**

Sunday, April 19: Natural History of the McKenzie Preserve. Join anthropologist Allen Beck, biologist Rodney Olsen and geologist Craig Poole to explore the plants, animals, rocks and archeological sites on the preserve. This includes a moderately strenuous hike to the top of the table. **9 a.m. to 3 p.m.**

Conservancy Hikes: Reservations are now required, and we suggest a \$5 donation for non-members. Each hike will be limited to 25 people, so make reservations at 559-855-3473 or at www.sierrafoothill.org.

Hikes begin at 9 a.m., except for Tivy Mt. and Long Ranch. Call the SFC office at 855-3473 for meeting places and weather cancellations. Bring a lunch and water; hiking boots are a good idea. Table Top hikes are moderately strenuous; Table Mt. Loop and Smith Basin are strenuous. Black Mt., Tivy Wildflower, Fine Gold Creek and Long Ranch are easy. Long Ranch is off Highway 49 in Mariposa, and meets at 8:30 a.m.

Saturday February 28: Table Mt. Table Top

Sunday, March 1: Long Ranch~8:30 a.m.

Wednesday, March 4: Table Mt. Table Top

Saturday, March 7: Table Mt. Loop

Sunday, March 8: Black Mt. Summit

Sunday, March 22: Fine Gold Creek

Sunday, March 29: Tivy Mt.~8 a.m.

Wednesday, April 1: Black Mt. Summit

Saturday, April 4: Table Mt. Table Top

Sunday, April 5: Black Mt. Summit

Saturday, April 11: Tivy Mt.~8 a.m.

Special Events

March 14: McKenzie Open House. Enjoy the spring flowers, have a picnic, hike with your SFC friends. 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

March 15: A special Members Day Open House on McKenzie Preserve. 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

March 22: The Ben Ewell family will host an open house on the Ewell Fine Gold Creek Preserve from 10am-2pm. All are welcome! Bring a picnic lunch and enjoy a spring afternoon by Fine Gold Creek. For more details about this event, please contact the Black Mountain Office at 855-3473.

March 22: Spring Celebration for Mariposa members. 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. Call 209-742-5556 for details.

May 10: Open House on the Mary Elizabeth Preserve at Black Mountain. One of the best days of the year to see flowers and birds, and walk or picnic with your friends. 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

May 16: Mark your calendar for our annual dinner, Fiesta de la Terra, in the beautiful Dellavalle garden.

A letter to our members from Jeannette Tuitele

It is with deep appreciation and sheer excitement that I move into my new position as Executive Director of Sierra Foothill Conservancy. Over the past few years I have been impressed with the tremendous impact that SFC has had since its inception and the level of commitment from our members and volunteers. An effort started by a few individuals concerned about rapid development in the Sierra foothills is now an effective and nationally recognized organization whose board, staff and members share a conservation vision and have protected over 17,000 acres of important lands in our region. Much of the Conservancy's accomplishments can be attributed to its founder, Chuck Peck, and a handful of volunteers whose tireless efforts paved the way for a stable and growing organization.

I am grateful for the opportunity to help lead Sierra Foothill on its continuing path toward greater success. We are fortunate that Chuck will continue to work closely with us on land conservation projects and help ensure the continuity of the organization. Our amazing and hardworking staff and volunteers will help make the transition an easier process.

2009 will be another successful year for Sierra Foothill. Our members have shown that despite the economic challenges we are all facing, land conservation remains a pri-

ority. Whether we spend a lot of time hiking in the foothills and forests, appreciate the scenic and rural beauty of our lands, or simply enjoy watching birds from our windows, we know the sense of peace and hopefulness that comes from observing and immersing ourselves in nature. When we support our conservation values, we are protecting something that is beyond any short-term economic crisis; we are protecting that which can renew us and reconnect us to what is most important in our lives.

I want to thank all of our members, especially our long time members, for your commitment to local land conservation and for helping make Sierra Foothill Conservancy what it is today. Your continued support is needed. As we transition into our next phase of growth, you can feel assured that the Conservancy's conservation mission, our vision of sustainability for the communities we work in, and our core values will remain unchanged. I look forward to continuing to work with our members and leading Sierra Foothill in my new capacity. I hope to see you at our great events this spring!

Sincerely, Jeannette Tuitele

The state budget crisis affects SFC

Land trusts, watershed groups and environmental nonprofits across the Sierra Nevada are laying off staff and delaying important projects because of the State's budget problems. Some of these projects have taken years to develop and now face uncertain futures. Important staff members will be forced to move on to other jobs, and the expertise they have developed may be permanently lost to the region. The staff of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (a state agency) is still working, although they have been forced to take off every other Friday. Wherever you sit on the political spectrum, this is a very sad state of affairs. Even when the state has a budget, it will take months for things to get back to normal and for everyone to get back to work.

Sierra Foothill Conservancy, while better off than many organizations, has been affected by the State's problems. The State owes SFC about \$30,000 for grant work completed last summer and fall. We will get paid eventually but must fill the gap in our budget until then with other moneys. Last fall SFC was awarded a grant to fence the riparian area on the Fine Gold Preserve and do some water development so we can better manage cattle grazing on the preserve to benefit native species. Stewardship Director Logan Page had planned to start work on the project this winter. Now it looks as if he won't be able to start until

next season. Because of fire danger it is unwise to work on fencing and many other projects in the foothills during dry summer months, and it is not likely that the state budget woes will be resolved soon.

We have been working on a new 3,000 acre conservation easement in Madera County that is also stalled. A grant to fund the project was due to go before the Wildlife Conservation Board for approval in early February. That meeting of the WCB board was cancelled. We believe this project will go forward once the state resolves the budget mess, but the delay is frustrating.

Because SFC has always been able to count on its members for a large part of its staff budget, SFC has managed not to lay off staff during this crisis. It is nevertheless painful to see important projects stalled. Thanks to you (our members) we still have our staff intact to continue working on non grant-related projects and to get ready for the time when the state gets itself in order again.

Chuck Peck

Editor's note: Nevertheless, if any of our readers have a contribution lying around, we could put it to good use!

Goldfinches

continued from page 1

These goldfinches are also very fond of sunflower seeds. In fact, all the goldfinches like to eat the seeds of plants in the sunflower family.

Lesser Goldfinches (*Carduelis psaltria*) are the true foothill birds. They hang around in the blue oak woodlands and chaparral, and if you provide an appropriate feeder, the chances are excellent that they will come to your house and put on a show, usually in small flocks of six to ten or so. These little guys are substantially smaller than the American Goldfinch, ranging in length from 3 ½ to 4 ¼ inches. The males show their golden color on their entire front sides—chins, chests, bellies—but their backs are a dark, dull greenish khaki color. Like their cousins the Americans, they have black caps. Again, the female coloration is more subdued. If you want to get the full impact of their golden bellies, you need to see them from the front, preferably sitting quietly on a twig in the sunshine.

To attract Lesser Goldfinches to your yard, you need to buy a special feeder, the kind that consists of a vertical tube with small holes along the side and with a perch near each hole. You fill the feeder with thistle seed—not ordinary birdseed mix—and you make sure that there is plenty of fresh water nearby, both for drinking and for bathing. Another thing you can do to enhance your chances of having Lesser Goldfinches in your garden is to plant some sunflowers in a conspicuous place. This will help the finches to spot the spread you have prepared for them. If you are successful and the Lesser Goldfinches start coming to your yard, I guarantee that you will find them so delightful you won't even faint when you discover the price of thistle seeds!



Lesser Goldfinches at feeder, with pine siskins

-Peg Smith

A letter from our AmeriCorps intern

There is a place near where I live in Mariposa where you can see the great San Joaquin Valley. If you pull off the road and take some time to watch and listen you will find the moment when the ripples of the foothills fade into a calm quiet ocean of grass. In the winter the Great Valley can be filled with fog so thick you wonder how the birds can fly. In the spring, when the sun is just right, the grass and wildflowers of the foothills resemble a dark green carpet where colorful gems have been scattered. During the summer months there is nothing better than joining a hawk perched on a blue oak to watch the copper penny sun fall into the ocean hidden by the Coast Range.

After four years in college in Southern California I was glad to return to Mariposa. When I came back I noticed big changes. I wanted to learn more and in some way change the way that development was happening. So I applied for an AmeriCorps position serving the Sierra Foothill Conservancy. I hoped that this would give me the opportunity I was looking for.

On February 1st, I began my internship as the Stewardship and Education Assistant with SFC under the SNAP AmeriCorps Volunteer Program. With my help SFC will double its capacity in Mariposa, which will allow for greater community outreach and stewardship. Over

the next year to I hope to develop ways in which the people of Mariposa can get closer to their natural environments. My hope is that by building SFC's Mariposa Outreach Program, we can help inspire and cultivate a greater sense of place, especially among youth. Ultimately, the future of these lands will be in their hands, it will be their decisions to make.

SFC has been fortunate to have two outstanding interns over the past year. Sahara Saude of Tollhouse spent a summer volunteering with SFC while completing her graduate work at Monterey Bay Institute, and Mary Darcy of Mariposa volunteered in our Mariposa office this fall before starting a graduate program at Portland State. Both of the interns remain connected and committed to SFC's work. I assume that their desires to volunteer for SFC were driven by motivations similar to mine: to see development happen more responsibly and to conserve the land they call home.

I look forward to meeting SFC's members and volunteers that make this a great organization. We are developing some great ideas that will help us get to where we want to go; by the time the leaves begin to fall our hard work will surely have borne sweet fruit.

Santiago Palacio

Volunteers do some heavy lifting

On a recent Saturday morning 24 students from four different schools made their way to Sierra Foothill Conservancy's Black Mountain Preserve. They generously offered their time and effort with the motto, Service Before Self. Joined by a handful of SFC volunteers, they set out to clear and revive a newly acquired area of the Preserve.

Earlier this year, SFC purchased two properties which expanded Black Mountain Preserve by 419 acres. They are beautiful additions to the Preserve, with scenic views, ponds, and even a waterfall, but much work was needed before we could have hiking and picnic opportunities in the area. We had to restore the sites by tearing down old outbuildings, cleaning up leftover debris, and removing non-native trees and shrubs.

In June of 2008, Sierra Foothill Conservancy received a \$5,000 grant from REI which helped to pay for heavy rental equipment, supplies needed to clear large areas, and hauling expenses. REI also donated water bottles for the volunteer group and first aid kits for the work site.

In November, we teamed with HandsOn Central Valley as participants in the citywide one day event called Serving Fresno, offering the Preserve as a project site. Nicole Smaira, HandsOn's Volunteer Connections Director, paired SFC with a great group of students from Fresno State's InterVarsity Club. There were also enthusiastic volunteers from FCC's Sustainable Action Club, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, and KIPP Academy Fresno.

An extremely hard working group of people (ranging in age from 13 to 75!) spent their day picking up debris, loading trash, removing old fence posts and tearing down old buildings. As small tokens of appreciation for their selfless efforts, REI provided water bottles, HandsOn Central Valley gave everyone t-shirts, and SFC offered break-fast muffins and juice as well as a pizza lunch.

Over the course of the entire project, there have been more than 35 volunteers who have given of their time. When the work is finished, SFC plans to create a picnic area down near the pond. We look forward to opening the new properties for guided hikes and picnics in time for the full display of spring wildflowers.

We would like to thank all of our volunteers, REI, and HandsOn Central Valley for their efforts in this endeavor. This has been an amazing example of people from various backgrounds working together for the greater good. We applaud you!

Rosanna Ruiz

The grasslands, foothills and forests between Yosemite and Kings Canyon National Parks provide land for farms and ranches, a home for native plants and wildlife, and a source of clean water. The Sierra Foothill Conservancy honors our natural and cultural heritage by protecting these resources and ensuring that present and future generations will continue to experience and enjoy the land in this region.

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