

# The Two Towhees of the Elfin Forest

By Rosemary Flamion

The two species of towhees commonly seen in the Elfin Forest, the plainer brown California Towhee (*Pipilio crissalis*) and the more distinctively marked Spotted Towhee (*Pipilio maculatus*) are both members of the Sparrow Family. Both are mainly sedentary, completing their life cycle in one area. Ground feeders, the California and the Spotted Towhees can frequently be seen using a "double-scratch" method. A bird will hop forward and then pull debris backward, kicking up and uncovering food, and then return to a normal standing position. Their diet consists of 70% nuts, seeds, and fruit and 30% insects. They may snack on blackberry (*Rubus*), gooseberry (*Ribes*), snowberry (*Symphoricarpos*), and even acorns (*Quercus*), all found in the Elfin Forest.

"Chewink," chirps the spotted bird, according to one source. Another reports this bird saying "Tow-HEEEE." Actually, the Spotted Towhee (*Pipilio maculatus*) has regional accents. In the Elfin Forest the call sounds like a loud, dry buzz. Listen for the sound and then it may be easy to spot. It will be a medium-sized sparrow (7-9 inches in length) with a black head, neck, shoulders, and tail, a white chest, rufous or rusty sides, and white wing bars and spots on the dark back and wings. If you look closely, you'll see the red-brown eyes. Spotted Towhees are shy.

When you approach them, they will fly off to another bush. You will usually see the male calling from the top of a bush. The female will be foraging on the ground in the leaves.

The male Spotted Towhee, with its black head, white chest and rust-colored sides can often be seen calling from the top of a bush. Drawing by Rosemary Flamion.

## Eagle Scout Candidates Improve Boardwalk Entrances

By Jean Wheeler

Russell Hunter, Cary Reents, and Matt Rees are engaged in service projects for their Eagle Scout programs, in which they are greatly improving the entrances to the Elfin Forest Boardwalk at 11th through 17th streets. The three young men are members of Old Mission Church Troop 6, and are working toward their Eagle Scout Rank.

Russell Hunter and Cary Reents are each building and installing habitat fencing, and installing a new entry sign at the 14th Street and 13th Street Boardwalk entrances, respectively. Split rail habitat fencing will guide Elfin Forest visitors from the street end onto a designated trail which leads to the boardwalk loop. This will protect vegetation around the entrance from more

**Eagle Scouts** continued on page 2

### **National Geographic Visits**

During a visit to the California Central Coast, a National Geographic three-person film crew made a tour of the Elfin Forest at the end of January. Besides seeing Morro Bay and the local heron rookery, the crew came to visit and film the unique and wonderful pygmy oak groves here. Pete Sarafian led the film team on a tour of the Forest that included walks along the boardwalk with views of Morro Bay, the native plants of the area and the oak groves. A highlight of the tour was a flyby of an immature bald eagle. While too sudden to be caught on film, the sight of the majestic bird thrilled the viewers. The film of the Elfin Forest will be aired nationally on the National Geographic TV Network at a future date not known at this time. It is hoped that a video tape copy of the film will be made available to SWAP as well.

## Eagle Scouts cont. from page 1



Eagle Scout candidates Russell Hunter, Cary Reents and Matt Rees at work on their project in the Elfin Forest. Photo by Mary Reents.

widespread foot traffic. Each young man will also construct a framework to hold the illustrated sign recently completed for the entrance and will then install that sign at the trail entrance for which he has assumed responsibility. Matt Rees will construct similar frameworks for five new entry signs and install them at the entrances of 11th, 12th, 15th, 16th, and 17th Streets; those streets will not receive habitat fencing at this time.

Each of the Scouts has been responsible for obtaining a Letter of Concurrence from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for his project, detailing exactly what he will do and showing that there will be no adverse impacts on the native wildlife of special concern, such as the Morro Shoulderband Dune Snail. Each young man has successfully accomplished this step. In planning their projects, the Scouts have worked with officers of Morro Group, Inc. (a local environmental consulting firm) and San Luis Obispo County Parks. Morro Group will donate the monitoring of all the projects for compliance with County Parks and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service requirements. Each Scout has also taken responsibility in arranging to obtain materials for his project either through donations or at the lowest possible cost. They have also been assisted in planning the construction and building of the habitat fences and sign mountings by several employees of Hunter Construction.

SWAP members greatly appreciate the valuable services Russell, Cary and Matt are providing in upgrading these entrances to our Elfin Forest.

#### Where To Call, Where To Write

If you have questions about SWAP activities or want to volunteer, please call 528-0392 and leave a message.

A recorded message will have information about our 3rd Saturday Walks, Work Saturdays, and other events.

If you have questions, concerns or comments about anything that's happening in the Elfin Forest, call or write: Pete Jenny, SLO County Parks Facilities Manager, 1087 Santa Rosa Street, SLO, CA 93408, (805) 781-5930.

## Towhees continued from page 1

You may know this towhee as the Rufous-sided Towhee (*P. erythrophthalmus*), but close studies have separated the Western Spotted Towhee from the Eastern Rufous-sided Towhee.

Another closely related bird is the California Towhee (*Pipilio crissalis*). It is a little larger than the Spotted Tow-

House cats and feral cats probably cause more deaths to California

hee, medium brown with a long rounded tail but with cinnamon feathers under the tail, the area known as the "crissum." It was once known as the Brown Towhee (P. fuscus) but has been split from the Canyon Towhee recently because of close studies. The common California Towhee is seen mainly on the ground under shrubs foraging in the Elfin Forest. You may also see it in your yard or in parks. Although it is shy, it will also approach humans if they are quiet. If you see and hear a California Towhee calling from a bush, it is usually a non-paired male looking for a mate. Most California Towhees are quiet, except when pairs are performing a "squeal duet." Male and female California Towhees form a very strong bond. As they forage, they might become separated. Then one flies to the top of a shrub followed by its mate. The two face each other, posturing and bobbing heads and both explode into loud squeals of affection. When this display is finished, both resume their foraging on the ground. They may repeat this display several times during the day; otherwise they are quiet.

If both of these towhee species are found in the Elfin Forest, have they ever interbred? No. The Spotted Towhee has interbred with other species in Mexico and with the Rufous-sided Towhee to the east, but not with the California Towhee. Both species live in the Elfin Forest without conflict or interbreeding. Both may not occur in the same habitat patch at the same moment in time. They both occupy about the same niche, although the Spotted Towhee can usually be seen higher in shrubs or trees. The California Towhee is a near endemic to California, expanding briefly into Oregon but also covering most of Baja California. Habitats include riparian; stream-side thickets and woodlands, woodlands, chaparral and coastal sage scrub, and even sagebrush. This species is most happy in the Elfin Forest. Each pair requires about 1/4 acre for a territory, depending upon the richness of the habitat. On the other hand, the Spotted Towhee ranges throughout most of the Western States, with some altitudinal migration winter and spring. Habitats include riparian, woodlands, chaparral and coastal sage scrub. Depending upon the wealth of foods, a Spotted Towhee requires at least 1/2 acre for a territory.

The California Towhee has a strong territorial aggression when nesting. It will chase away any intruders, even those "suspected" intruders that they may see in a window (themselves). Both species are ground feeders and usually nest low in thick shrubs. Because of this niche, unleashed dogs and people wandering off-trail in the Elfin Forest can disturb their nests or even disrupt their breeding cycle. House cats and feral cats probably cause more deaths to California Towhees than anything else. To protect these interesting species, always keep your dogs on leashes, don't let them wander through the thickets, and keep your house cats in the house.



## **Elfin Forest Sightings**

In January an immature bald eagle was spotted flying over the Elfin Forest bluffs above Morro Bay. The eagle caused a huge commotion among the migratory and resident waterfowl as it glided along on its hunt. Later, it was spotted on the shore of an inlet near South Bay Boulevard, eating prey that it had managed to kill. Eventually, the eagle flew off upstream along Los Osos Creek.

In February signs of wild pigs were found in the oak groves along Morro Bay. A deeply tracked trail was found along the bay with hoof prints that had splayed-out toes visible. The trail passed under low hanging branches that would be too low for larger animals like deer. There also was evidence that the pigs had rooted in the leaf litter for mushrooms, roots, bulbs or other edibles.

## Boardwalk Trail Guide Now Available

by Pat Brown

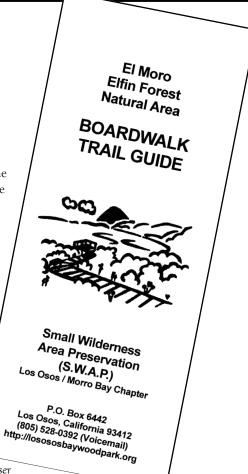
Through the joint efforts of a hard working committee composed of Mary Mitchell, Jean Wheeler, Pat Sarafian, and Pat Brown with advice from Yolanda Waddell, a guide with nineteen points of interest has been prepared. Katy Budge did a terrific job with the graphic design and it is beautifully illustrated with line drawings by Bonnie Walters. The cover graphic is by Suzanne Mulay of Mulé Design. The guide includes a map of the boardwalk and general information about S.W.A.P. It was produced in cooperation with San Luis Obispo County Parks, funded by the county's Environmental Fund, and was printed at Spotlight Publishing in Los Osos.

The intent of the trail guide is to help educate Elfin Forest visitors about this wonderful, rare environment and increase their sensitivity to the importance of respecting and protecting this natural area. The fragile nature of the oak groves is discussed along with S.W.A.P.'s revegetation efforts.

Stenciled numbers on the boardwalk rail mark the points of interest. The guide highlights three native plant communities that are traversed by the boardwalk, starting with Coastal Dune Scrub and progressing through Pygmy Oak Woodland and Maritime Chaparral. Many plants of the Elfin Forest are featured in the guide, as well as some of the fauna.

You can pick up a copy of the Trail Guide from a dispenser located at the intersection of the main boardwalk with the 16th street boardwalk, where it can be returned when you are done.

The Boardwalk Trail Guide is available for use and can be picked up from a dispenser located at the intersection of the main boardwalk and the 16th Street boardwalk.



#### SWAP BOARD MEETINGS

april 8

The SWAP Board of Directors
meets on the 2nd Monday of each month at 7 p.m.
at the Coast National Bank,
1193 Los Osos Valley Road on
Monday, April 8, and Monday, May 13.
All Board meetings are
open to the public.
To confirm the date,
time and location
(which are subject to change),
phone 528-0392.

#### SWAP BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The Board of Directors of Small Wilderness Area Preservation (SWAP) consists of the following members:

Jim Weldon, Chair Pete Sarafian, Vice Chair Bob McDougle, Treasurer Yolanda Waddell, Secretary Pat Sarafian, Member at Large



Josh Carmichael, SWAP's Habitat Restoration Contractor, is often seen in the Elfin Forest planting, watering, installing erosion control materials and repairing fencing. Photo by Pat Sarafian.

#### Message From the Chair

Here is information for all users of the Elfin Forest: Please leave the dead wood in the Forest. The plants and animals need it. The decomposition of dead wood feeds the living. If it's taken out of the forest, the ecology of the Elfin Forest is destroyed.

Those who attended our February walk, "The Fungus Foray," learned that mushrooms help break down plant material, including dead wood, which returns nutrients to the soil.

So if you see anyone taking plant material out of the Forest, please tell them that it's important to leave it there.

Jim Weldon, SWAP Board Chair

## Let's All Pull Together!

SWAP First Saturday work parties are held at 9 a.m. to noon on the first Saturday of each month. Volunteers should meet at the north end of 15th Street. Dress for sun and wind and bring work gloves if you can. Some work gloves, tools and drinking water are provided. Call 528-0392.

by Pete Sarafian, Conservation Chair

In order to take advantage of the (rainy?) season, SWAP began four new erosion control/ revegetation projects in February and March. The two projects in February consisted of cleaning up old fencing at overlooks off the Eleventh Street trail and at Bush Lupine Point. Parts of old, deteriorated fencing previously installed for

revegetation were removed and reconstituted to thwart traffic down the bluffs. This traffic had worn scars in the hillsides that are subject to severe erosion.

The efforts in March included fencing off eroded areas, native seed dispersal, installing matting made of natural materials to stabilize the sand, and planting of the remaining stock of native seedlings from last year. The sites include a trail to the bay below Bush Lupine Point and the area surrounding Siena's View (which is beginning to look like a sandbox for children). Both areas contribute to the rapid siltation of Morro Bay and need to be stabilized.

## Weeding Starts 2002 with a Bang

by Pete Sarafian, Conservation Chair

In a roaring show of support, SWAP's Wonderful Weekend Weed Warriors made a strong appearance in the Elfin Forest in January through March. A dozen members joined Pete in January and February and eight showed up in March for the monthly gala weed fest. The Warriors weeded the newly fenced revegetation site and conducted the usual search and destroy missions along the boardwalk and in the Forest.

The corps of volunteers included Steven Ames, Tim Ames, Susan Bertrand, Jay Bonestell, Dalton Burger, Ann Calhoun, Josh Carmichael, TJ Carsey, Kathy Dugan, Rosemary Flamion, Carol Marble, Aaron and Susan McTaggert, Bob and Sharon Meyer, Mike Miller, Ron Rasmussen, Alec Rodden, Pat Sarafian, Yolanda Waddell, Jean Wheeler and Linda Young. The victims included various grasses, narrow-leaved iceplant and Italian thistle.

A winsome trio of warriorettes even paid a visit to the Morro Bay State Park portion of the Forest to yank away at a hidden infestation of Italian thistle.

## WALKS in the ELFIN FOREST

#### Third Saturday Walks

#### April 20 - 9:30 a.m.

Pat Brown will take you on a butterfly walk. One of Pat's hobbies is taking photos of butterflies and collecting information about them. She has a shelf full of books on butterflies, and before the walk will display some of the books and all kinds of butterfly-related materials. Pat knows what plants attract certain butterflies, and how they use the plants to complete their life cycle. Join her to see Variable Checkerspot caterpillars munching on Monkeyflower plants and endangered Morro Blue Butterflies flitting around Silver Bush Lupines hoping to find a mate. She recommends that you bring a hand lens and a pair of close focusing (5-10 ft.) binoculars.

#### May 18 - 9:30 a.m.

Dr. Dirk Walters, Cal Poly botanist and author of a botany text, will take us on a wildflower walk during just about the best month for Spring wildflowers in the Elfin Forest. Come along and enjoy the bright yellows of Fiddleneck and Rush rose, the blue of Silver bush lupine, the whites of Popcorn flower and Pearly everlasting, and many more, complete with a choice piece of information about each from one of the best plant raconteurs on the Central Coast. Dirk writes columns on native plants for SWAP's Oakleaves as well as the California Native Plant Society newsletter. Don't miss this one!

Walks in the Elfin Forest begin at 9:30 a.m. (unless otherwise noted) at the north end of 15th Street off Santa Ysabel in Los Osos. Wear comfortable shoes, long sleeves and pants to avoid poison oak. Please park carefully, avoiding driveways



Rosemary Flamion, wearing her green apron "uniform," controls dog droppings in the Elfin Forest the old fashioned way, but hopes the new mutt mitt station, at her right, and the 6 other stations at each street end will make her work unnecessary. Until that time, she will continue to do her "doody." Photo by Pat Sarafian.

#### Mutt Mitt Stations Ready for Use

by Yolanda Waddell

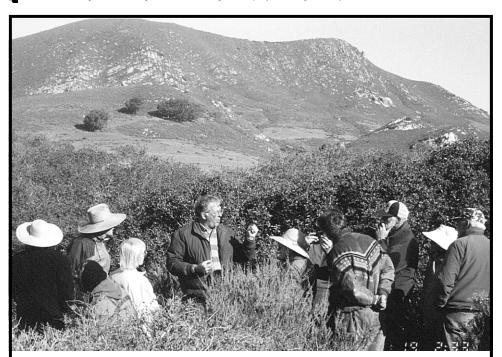
SWAP sends a thousand thanks to Sandra and Curt Beebe, the two people who made it possible for seven Mutt Mitt stations to be installed at each street entrance of the Elfin Forest, from 11th Street through 17th Street. The mutt mitt stations will have been in use for two months as of the printing of this Oakleaves issue, and positive results can be seen (actually, not seen) in the Elfin Forest.

Sandra and Curt Beebe are active members of Morro Bay Beautiful. They obtained funding for and installed twelve mutt mitt stations in Cloisters Park and other locations in Morro Bay. Mike Multari, director of the Morro Bay National Estuary Program, encouraged Sandra to apply for funds to install mutt mitt stations in Los Osos. NEP is concerned about the increase of nitrates in the Morro Bay Estuary, and sees the use

of mutt mitts as one method of reducing nitrate-filled runoff into the bay.

Sandra approached SWAP last summer to ask if we would support the mutt mitt stations, once they were installed. The SWAP Board agreed to provide support, and Sandra applied for a \$5000 grant from MBNEP. The grant was approved and funds were provided in October, 2001. Sandra then ordered mutt mitt dispensers, trash cans and boxes of mutt mitts. When they arrived, Curt and Sandra installed the dispensers, trash cans and leash signs on posts placed at the end of each street by County Parks.

SWAP's Pat Sarafian found caretakers to keep the mutt mitt dispensers filled on each street; County Parks will empty the mutt mitt trash receptacles. Rosemary Flamion, an active SWAP member, has agreed to chair the Mutt Mitt Committee. Through the combined efforts of the Beebes, Morro Bay National Estuary Program, County Parks and SWAP, the problems of unsightly dog droppings in the Elfin Forest and nitrate-filled runoff into the south end of the estuary are under control.



Entomologist Richard Little, North County Supervisor for the County Ag Department, expounds on the fascinating insect life in the Elfin Forest during SWAP's January 3rd Saturday Walk. His walk title was "The Little Things Count." Photo by Pat Sarafian.

#### Twenty-Fifth in a Series

## California Poppy

By Dirk Walters, Ph.D.; Drawings by Bonnie Walters

I suspect that the plant under discussion for this issue needs no introduction. I am sure that everyone already knows that it is a California poppy or Eschscholzia californica. Bonnie drew the illustrations used for this column in the early 1970s. The one on the left was done for the first edition of Dr. David Keil's and my plant taxonomy textbook and the other was used for the local CNPS chapter's newsletter in March of 1974. In fact, it may have been Bonnie's first plant drawing. A few individuals of this species can be found blooming every month of the year in the Elfin Forest. However, at this time of the year it can be seen blooming in abundance any place there are open areas. Elfin forest plants, like most individuals growing along the immediate coast, will tend to have flowers that bear yellow petals with orange bases. Further inland, the California poppy tends toward pure orange flowers. California poppies are stated to be annuals in the books, but along the coast some individuals will live from 1-1/2 to 2 years. This makes them a short-lived perennial.

Most would agree that this species is the California state flower. However, the statutes designating the California state flower are rather vague. With poetic language they describe a species of poppy that is common enough to turn the hillsides "golden." Therefore the state flower is simply referred to as the "golden poppy." They do not designate a scientific name. Native plant enthusiasts do not use the name "golden poppy" because it can be applied to any number of the yellow to yellow-orange poppies. Each of the 12 or so species in the genus Eschscholzia could be, and was been referred to as "golden poppies." Of these, E. californica is certainly the most widespread and the only one that is common on the coast. The other species in the genus are plants of the drier interior where several become numerous enough the "turn the hillsides golden." So, is one wrong calling our poppy the California state flower? No, but on the other hand you may not be right either.

The California poppy is named in honor of Johann Friedrick Eschscholz (1793-1831) of Estonia. He accompanied Otto von Kotzebue on his first round-the-world expedition (1815-1818). The species is a member of the Poppy Family or Papaveraceae. Members of the Papaveraceae usually have 4 petals but only 2-3 sepals. Eschscholzia is unusual in that the sepals are fused into a duncecapped shaped structure. Since the sepals usually fall off as the flower opens, one can see the opening flower pushing the pointed fused sepals off in Bonnie's drawing. Two other characteristics common in the poppy family are sap that is colored when it exudes from a broken stem or leaf and petals that look like they are need of ironing (crumpled). The California poppy appears to have neither of these. E. californica's petals are definitely not rumpled and if one breaks off a leaf, the plant will bleed clear sap. The petals are somewhat unusual, but the colored sap can be found in the orange-colored roots.

California poppies of many shades will grow readily from seed which can be purchased at just about every store that sells seed. Poppy seeds scattered in the autumn can take advantage of winter rains to produce a "golden" spring bloom.



#### Last Chance for T-shirt Bargain Sale

by Pat Sarafian

We have final Clearance Sale Prices on the few remaining T-shirts in the original mural pattern. The original black mural shirts have the saying "Elfin Forest, Rexall Drug, Los Osos, CA" Those shirts are available on a first-come basis while they last. A few Short-sleeved T-Shirts remain in size Large and X Large, priced at \$5 each and Long-sleeved T-Shirts are available only in size Small, also for \$5 each. This is definitely a great deal.

You may contact SWAP at (805) 528-0392 for the sale shirts, and indeed for all items we sell. We provide immediate personal delivery within Los Osos, as well as prompt filling of mail orders. See the SWAP SHOPPERS ORDER FORM on page 7 for the Sale Items as well as our regular merchandise list, including our newer mural T-shirts and sweatshirts in all sizes. The Los Osos Chamber of Commerce also supports SWAP by having a limited inventory of our items for sale.

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Pat Brown, Wendy Brown, Rosemary Flamion, Pat Sarafian, Pete Sarafian, Yolanda Waddell, Dirk Walters, Jim Weldon, Jean Wheeler. Editing assistance by Pat Grimes

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Deadline for copy to Oak Leaves is the 1st Wednesday before the month of

#### Thank You to our New and Renewing Members

Compiled by Wendy Brown, SWAP Database Coordinator

New Members:

Pat Albertini\* Otto & Sue Davidson Jeane D'Urbano Fran & Marsh Harkins\* (Life Members)

Henrietta Lichtenbaum Barbara McGee\* Mr. & Mrs. George Miller Rosemary Wolter

#### Renewing Members:

Karl & Florence Appel C. Dawn Aulenbrock\* Steve Auslender Stan Autrey C.J. & Grace Beigle\*
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David & Cindie Weldon
Jim Weldon\* Newman & Judith Whitmire\* Norma & Peter Wightman\* H. Leabah Winter\*

\*Thanks to those listed above who donated more than the \$12 membership dues. The additional donations will be used for special projects in the Elfin Forest.

Welcome and a big THANK YOU to Fran and Marsh Harkins of Los Osos, new life members of SWAP.

Life members (donating \$1000 or more) receive the Oakleaves for life (or the life of Oakleaves).

Also, Pat Sarafian, our Property and Records Chair, will send or deliver in person a SWAP mural sweatshirt to each of them. Their donation provides additional needed funding for our Elfin Forest recovery projects.



## **SWAP Shoppers' Order form**

(Please *print* when filling order – and indicate **HOW MANY**)

Name		Phone (with Area code)	
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Make checks payable and mail to: SWAP,	P.O. Box 6442, Los C	Osos, CA 93412 - 6642. Prices include tax	
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Los Osos / Morro Bay Chapter



04/02 I

## **SWAP Needs Booth Workers!**

SWAP has an opportunity to set up our information booth at the Botanic Garden's Garden Festival in El Chorro Regional Park on May 4th and 5th. We will need 12 people to provide 6 pairs of booth workers, each pair taking a 2-hour shift during the two days of the festival. The hours of the Garden Festival are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

We greatly need volunteers for this event. Do you enjoy talking to people? Could you give us 2 hours of your time? Our booth is set up to be self explanatory, but we will give you a summary of the information you might need to answer questions. We will sell T-shirts and other items listed on page 7 of this newsletter. Also available will be copies of our brochure, newsletter and trail guide.

> Please give SWAP the gift of two hours! Call us at 528-0392 and leave a message.

<b>MEMBERSHIP FORM</b>
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☐ I want to help, please call me!
Have you renewed your membership on time?  Check the label on this newsletter  for your renewal due date.
EVERY membership counts!!
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