

Slews in slough view new smew

by Marion Softky
Birdwatchers from all over California are converging on Foster City to view a rare Arctic bird — a smew — which has decided to spend the winter in the lagoon.

Discovery of the new smew highlighted this year's Crystal Springs bird count. Some 55 dedicated bird-watchers who braved the winds and rain Dec 19 to count number and species of birds from the Bay marshes of Foster City to the bluffs of the Pacific Ocean.

Once the news of the smew was passed on to other participants in the Audubon Society's annual winter ritual, the telephones began to hum, recalls Frank Allen of Burlingame, who coordinated bird counts for the Sequoia Audubon Society.

By next day, people from Palo Alto and Alameda and Bolinas arrived to see the new smew. By the day after the birdwatchers' grapevine had drawn enthusiasts from all over California. One of the west's top experts flew in from Los Angeles to peer through binoculars across the Foster City lagoon where the smew is making its home.

The smew is an "extremely rare Eurasian Arctic bird never before seen south of British Columbia in winter," explains Allen, for whom the smew is a "life bird" — that is, a bird he has never seen before. Hopeful observers should look for a white bird about the size of a pigeon with a teardrop of black over each eye which join into a "V" on its head. A water bird, the smew dives for its food.

Observers in the Crystal Springs bird count tallied some 167 different species of bird that rainy Saturday. This count was down from the 185 observed a year ago because of the weather. On the coastal bluffs where watchers usually get good counts, "the wind and rain were blowing horizontally so they couldn't see," Allen says.

The Crystal Springs count was just one of some 1,360 Christmas bird counts held all over the country during the last three weeks of the year. And this year the birders are continuing a tradition begun 82 years ago and carried out every year since then.

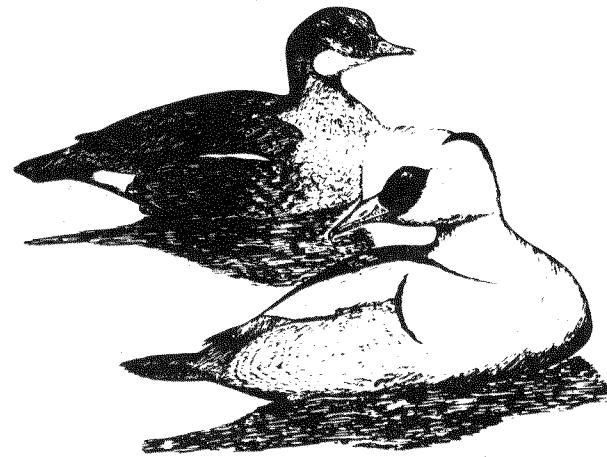
Actually three bird counts are held in the Mid peninsula. Each covers a circle with a diameter of 15 miles. Thus the Crystal Springs count extends from the Ocean to the Bay and south to Huddart Park and the northern fringe of Woodside and Redwood City.

The Sequoia Audubon Society also carries out the Ano Nuevo bird count, set this year for Sunday, Jan. 3. This count is centered on the Coastside near Butano park. It includes redwood forests and canyons as well as coastal terraces and the edge of the ocean.

Ano Nuevo is a completely different habitat, Allen notes. Most of the birds are on the shoreline with relatively few in the dense forests, except there are "nice birds in the canyons and valley."

Counters in the Palo Alto bird count, which was held Dec. 22 turned in 157 species, reports Bob Wallace of Portola Valley. The Palo Alto circle is centered near Junipero Serra and Page Mill Road. It extends north into Portola Valley west to Skyline, east to the other end of the Dumbarton Bridge, and south to Moffett Field. Much of Menlo Park, Atherton and Redwood City are in the gap and have no bird count at all.

Wallace, who just completed his 23rd count, reports more Nuttall's woodpeckers and also more crows and ravens moving into the Valley. He and about a dozen other Portola Valley residents tramped the fields and hills on a glorious Tuesday. They also observed a Laurence gold-



Drawing of a smew female and male from a book of rare birds. Smew is believed to mean "small duck."

finch, "a lot of nice hawks," and some white pelicans. The widespread spraying of malathion does not appear to have caused any "dramatic change" in bird populations, Wallace says, although he hastens to caution that the final results have not yet been obtained. "We won't know for a couple of weeks. The weather makes more difference in the count than almost anything," Wallace notes.

Warmer areas of California traditionally turn in high bird counts, Allen reports, partly because the cold parts of the country have been abandoned by birds going south for warmer weather, Allen notes. Last year the Crystal Springs count was 11th nationally and the Ano Nuevo count was 25th out of the 1359 counts carried out nationally.

What is the use of bird counts? The 81 years worth of information on birds from annual bird counts in the Audubon computer provides a source of information on bird populations and — indirectly

— a measure of the health of the environment, Allen explains.

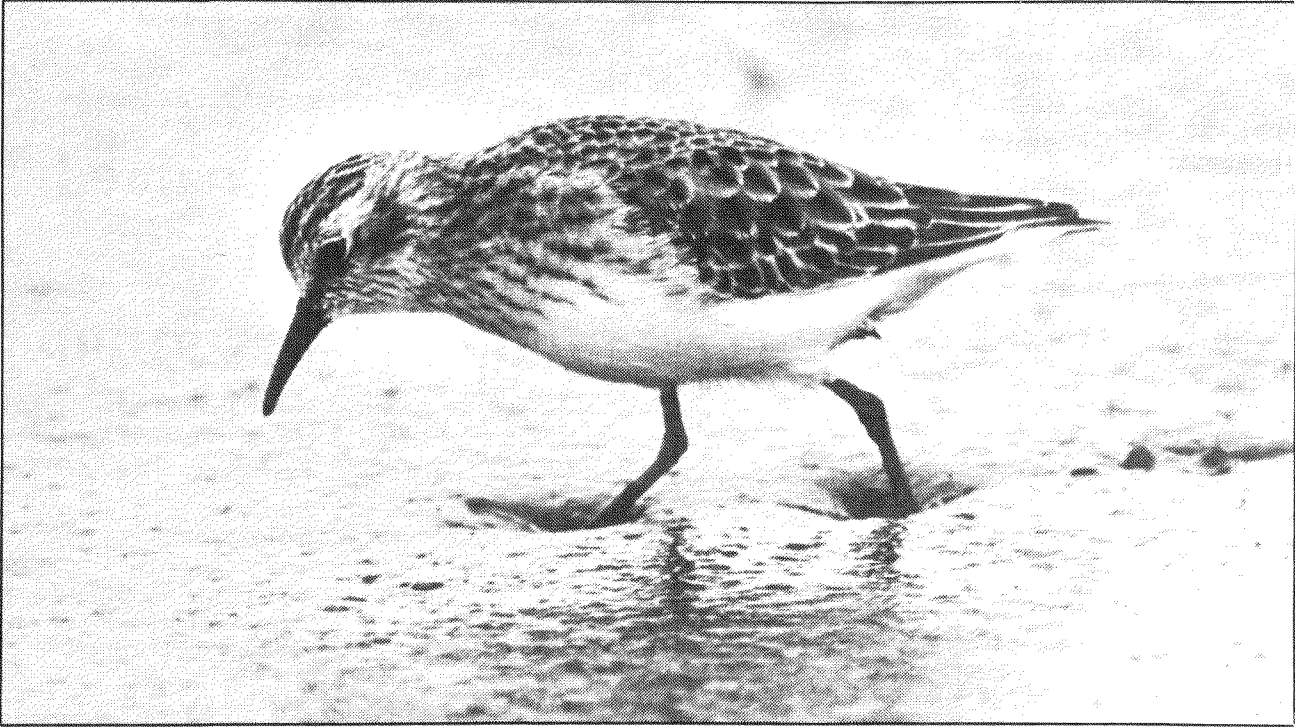
"We are trying to find out what's really happening," Allen says, "if species are expanding or declining or changing their habits."

Allen compares the knowledge of bird populations obtained from bird counts to the proverbial canary that miners used to carry into mines to warn them when the air became unsafe. He cites a chilling figure from the official report of last year's bird count:

● The 49 million birds counted last year were down 60 million — or less than half — from the number counted the previous year.

● In California 2.1 million fewer birds were counted.

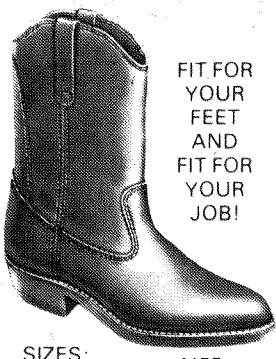
Allen hopes that more people will join the Audubon Society and help with future bird counts. "The more people know about birds, the more rare birds are seen," he says. For information on membership call Jean Allen at 344-9339.



A least sandpiper sinks into the muck as it searches the shoreline for food. Ken Gardiner photo.



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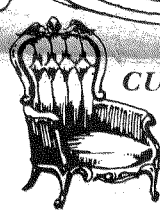
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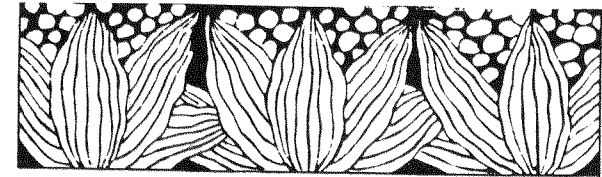
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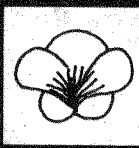
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