

Wavecrest: The Long Battle Ends

On the morning of August 16, 2007, I received an email informing me that the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST) had reached agreement on the terms for purchase of the area in Half Moon Bay known as Wavecrest. I must admit that I was somewhat overcome with emotion. This undeveloped area between the Ocean Colony and Arleta Park neighborhoods has been the focus of development wars for years, and I have helped Sequoia Audubon Society (SAS) publicize the valuable natural resources of this area since I moved to Half Moon Bay in the summer of 1988. So what is so special about Wavecrest?

I first set foot on the Wavecrest property while participating in my first Christmas Bird Count (CBC) in December of 1987. I was overwhelmed by the number of hawks, kites and harriers observed in a short period of time. Short-eared Owls were even flying over the ocean bluffs at dawn! Little did I know that within months I would move to within a mile of this place, and that it would be a focus of my attention for years to come.

To a raptor flying along the coast, Wavecrest looks like a veritable smorgasbord. This area has everything a hawk could want: mature trees that provide perching and roosting sites, grasslands that provide foraging habitat, riparian corridors and coyote brush in fields that provide cover, and an abundance of voles that serve as a source of prey. SAS considers Wavecrest to be the most important habitat for wintering raptors in San Mateo County, as it supports a greater diversity of raptors and number of individuals than any other site.

In the late 1980s, Ocean Colony Partners proposed a massive 750-home, two golf course development at Wavecrest. Much controversy ended in 1995 with the 2:1 rejection of the development by voters in a citywide advisory measure. However, in 1999, the City approved a project for 217 homes, commercial and retail space, a new middle school and a Boys and Girls Club. This approval by the City was appealed to the California Coastal Commission, and SAS provided considerable written comment during review of this appeal.

CBC data and other observations by SAS members demonstrates extensive winter use at Wavecrest by Red-tailed Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, White-tailed Kite, Northern Harrier, and American Kestrel, and use also by Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Great Horned Owl, Barn Owl and Short-eared Owl. Many rare raptor species have also occurred (some noted on the CBCs), including Ferruginous Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, Golden Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Prairie Falcon, Merlin, Osprey and Swainson's Hawk (the first documented record of overwintering Swainson's Hawk ever in coastal Northern California).

During the 2000 CBC, a remarkable 65 raptor individuals were observed in this 450-acre area: 15 White-tailed Kites, 10 Northern Harriers, 1 Sharp-shinned Hawk, 4 Red-shouldered Hawks, 18 Red-tailed Hawks, 9 American Kestrels, 5 Short-eared Owls and 3 Barn Owls. For my son's middle school science fair project in 2004, I helped him

identify birds as he compared three sites, Pillar Point Harbor, Pescadero Marsh and Wavecrest, to see which had the largest bird populations and the greatest number of species. Several visits were made to each site, and timed bird counts were made along transects. After totaling the data for two hours of counts at each site, the number of raptors observed was surprising: 4 raptor individuals seen at Pillar Point Harbor, 12 at Pescadero Marsh, and 74 at Wavecrest!

Wavecrest is the most important wintering site for Short-eared Owl in San Mateo County (only Bair Island comes close). I have seen as many as eight individuals of this state-designated species of concern at one time, but the number of wintering individuals usually ranges between one and five. I am the leader for an annual SAS field trip to Wavecrest in January, commencing late in the day so we have a chance to see the Short-eared Owls at dusk. With as many as 40 people, this has become one of SAS's most popular field trips.

In September of 2007, an explosion of vole populations resulted in Wavecrest being overrun by roosting White-tailed Kites. The White-tailed Kite is a gregarious species that sometimes forms large roosts during late fall and winter, especially in California and Texas. One evening, I counted 65 White-tailed Kites while standing in one spot, and estimated about 100 kites roosting primarily in the row of cypress trees just north of the ballfields. About this same time, Alvaro Jaramillo counted 15 Barn Owls in a nearby Wavecrest field. It will be interesting to see if the population of voles sustains these birds into the winter.

Ecologically important wetlands are scattered throughout Wavecrest, and Virginia Rails can often be heard calling on winter mornings. Species of concern found here include nesting pairs of Saltmarsh Common Yellowthroat in the wetlands south of the baseball fields, and Loggerhead Shrikes which often winter. Rare birds that make the local rare bird alert have been seen as well, including rare species of sparrows, warblers and longspurs, not to mention species such as Thick-billed Kingbird, Red-throated Pipit, Snow Bunting and Bobolink. Once while I was helping coach my son's little league game, a flock of 20 White-faced Ibis flew over the ballfields! SAS has always been quick to point out that the many birders visiting this area also eat lunch, buy gas and maybe spend the night, pouring dollars into the local economy.

Wavecrest is also home to the federally-listed threatened California red-legged frog, documented at the site by a California Academy of Sciences biologist in 2004, and, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, serves as habitat for the federally-listed endangered San Francisco garter snake.

SAS wishes to thank POST and Bruce Russell, CEO of Kenmark Real Estate Group and representative of the land's sellers, for realizing the natural resource importance of this area and having the insight to reach agreement on preservation of this area for future generations of raptor lovers.