

Odes in the Mist

Sandra Hunt-von Arb (pnwb@suddenlink.net) and Kathy Biggs (bigsnest@sonic.net)

Eighth Annual California Blitz 2012 - Del Norte County (August 2-6, 14, 2012)

Participants in alphabetical order (not all in photograph below): Kathy & Dave Biggs, Leslie Flint, Chris Heavilin, Sandra Hunt-von Arb, Tony "the Younger" Kurz, Ken Mierzwa, Stephan Telm, and Tony "the Elder" Westkamper



Del Norte County, located in the far north-western corner of California, was chosen for our annual CalOdes/DSA Blitz this year as it was a very under-censused county. Members of the Blitz group arrived from two different directions, planning to meet on Day Two. Our new county records are in bold text.

Ah, but for a match! The Inland Approach Group had known it would be primitive camping as we headed the last 17 miles of gravel road to Sanger Lake. And when we'd arrived, it was primitive indeed: not only was there no running water, nor an outhouse, but also there was no picnic table. But we'd planned ahead: we had water, hand spades, tents, camp stove, etc. Then we realized that we had no matches! Oops!! We thought we were still okay as we could eat cold food for dinner and breakfast, but when we thought of no coffee, THAT was the deal breaker! We decided not to stay the night there but to head instead towards the coast and join up with the Coastal Approach Group a night earlier than planned. However we did see some beautiful scenery and Odes while there.

We found three *Darlingtonia* seeps right along the road, each adorned with Tiger Lilies and Five-finger Ferns. At 1pm we watched a male Black Petaltail (*Tanypteryx hageni*) in a face-to-face duel with a male Pacific Spiketail (*Cordulegaster dorsalis*). They circled each other for nearly a full minute before the Spiketail gave it up and moved on. Was this territorial, or was someone hungry? At a tiny pond, barely the size of three standard picnic tables, we risked broken bones getting down the scree slope. There we found three species of "Emeralds": American, Mountain and Spreadwing (*Cordulia shurtleffii*, *Somatochlora semicircularis* and *Lestes dryas*)! A fourth species at this site was the Northern Spreadwing (*L. disjunctus*). We named the pond, which was surrounded by tall sedges, "Emerald Pond". Sanger Lake (5,100'), the highest point on the entire blitz, hosted plentiful Chalk-fronted Corporals (*Ladona julia*), many Boreal Bluets (*Enallagma boreale*) and a few Crimson-ringed Whitefaces (*Leucorrhinia glacialis*). But, no darners would enter our nets, which was maddening because we were quite certain they were Variable Darners (*Aeshna interrupta*), which would be a first record for the county.

We needed to move on fairly quickly though, if we were to join the "Coastal Approach" group at their campsite before dark. We vowed to return on "Clean-up Day" as our return would again take us by this area. We had looked forward to camping in such a primitive area, with no other humans around for miles and miles, and especially to seeing the lake at dawn and accessing the few other lakes and wet areas that Sandra (our organizer) had found on topo maps and by assessing maps and terrain via Google Earth. Little did we know then that our van would have been unable to make even another a mile or two beyond Sanger Lake anyway.

In the meantime, the coastal group was well on its way. Tony the Elder, as he would come to be known, had started a couple days early and saved campsites for us at the Ruby Van Deventer County Park, our "Blitz Operation Command Center". Before the rest of us had even arrived, Tony had documented two species, including **Flame Skimmer** (*Libellula saturata*), for the Del Norte list. This county is unusual in that it has more public land than private land (USFS, BLM, State Parks, State Wildlife Reserve, National Parks, etc.). Although that means access, it also means permits were needed if we were going to handle dragonflies and have permission to go off trail. One of the advantages of going through the tedious process of getting permits was that Parks representatives had made many suggestions of where to go and they were all looking forward to our report!

Sandra and Tony the Younger of the Coastal Approach Group arrived at the county line at ~11:00. The forecast was fog in the morning with partly sunny skies late in the afternoon — not ideal. We started at Mill Creek Pond just inside Del Norte County near the mouth of the Klamath River where we were rewarded with sunny skies! Although the pond was beautiful, access to the shores was not easy because of all the brush and trees. We did get our first new county record quite quickly with a blurry photo of a distant **Common Whitetail** (*Plathemis lydia*) and we also upgraded **Western Pondhawk** (*Erythemis collocata*) from a "sight only" record.

We headed up the highway to Lagoon Pond where everything seemed fine until the last curve in the road: The dreaded Fog. Tony was still upbeat and said that our next destination, Mill Creek Acquisition (State Parks Land), had its own weather and was often sunny just behind the first set of hills. Tony, who works for State Parks, had just recently joined CalOdes and couldn't wait for others to be able to see this gem of a pond. It was not grand in size, but the diversity of odes in this location was amazing — we found no less than four new county records there including **California Spreadwing** (*Archilestes californicus*), **Blue Dasher** (*Pachydiplax longipennis*) and **Black Saddlebags** (*Tramea lacerata*). The area was an old gravel pit, just across the dirt road from Mill Creek (maybe ¼ acre total) with a small area that stays wet, and a larger area that was ephemeral. This location tied for the most species sighted overall, but was the most diverse for its size. Several small puddles on the verge of drying were full of Spreadwing larvae hoping to emerge before it dried, reminiscent of the tadpole cycle, which were surprisingly absent from this location. As we enthusiastically netted and photographed (state parks permit only allowed catch and release), Sandra saw something quite spectacular — three teneral female **Autumn Meadowhawks** (*Sympetrum vicinum*)! Tony wasn't quite sure why Sandra was so excited, until she explained that we hadn't expected to get this county record because it was too early in the season for them. They were about a month earlier than ever seen in California before and of course the first to be sighted this year! A quick walk down in the Creek yielded some brightly colored older Grappletails (*Octogomphus specularis*). Soon it was time to head towards camp so we could join the others that were going to be part of the coastal group. Tony the Elder was there with his camp all set up and Chris had just arrived. And as it was, it was only a few minutes after our arrival before the inland group joined us a day early!



The campground nestled in the Redwoods along the Smith River made for a picturesque "command center". We discussed the morning schedule because it had to be loose, as we knew fog could be a problem in this north coastal county. Some of us awoke to the kerring calls of Marbled Murrelets (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*) which nest in old growth redwoods. It was a beautiful yet cold and foggy Saturday. Ken drove over to join us and was ready to go, but the fog made it hard for the campers to get motivated. The plan: squeeze into two vehicles, hit some inland lakes and then move to the coast in the afternoon. We started by stopping at Sand Camp on the SF Smith River to look for Gray Sanddragons (*Progomphus borealis*). They did not grace us with their presence, but the Bison Snaketails (*Ophiogomphus bison*) were a delight. Sandra's vehicle was in the lead as we drove towards Dry Lake, on the curvy road with four names depending on which map you look at (not unusual in Del Norte County as it turns out). Sandra

was just saying how these serpentine cliffs we were driving by looked a lot like Black Petaltail (*Tanypteryx hageni*) habitat in Humboldt County, minus the water, when all of a sudden there was a spring. Brakes were quickly depressed — and there, *Darlingtonia*! The first little pullout was seized (good thing Dave doesn't tailgate!) No adults were found here, but a Spiketail exuvia was located.



Back in the truck and off to Dry Lake, which did not disappoint and tied Mill Creek Acquisition Gravel Pit for the most species in one location (17 species). On the way out, we stopped at an unnamed pond along the road — it was hard to pry people away — but Sandra wanted to make sure to get to the coast that day. There were so many dragons to look at, we were lingering. A roundup ensued and then we were off via a VERY windy and steep dirt road to Rattlesnake Lake—The Biggses' 2WD "Green Cruiser" Dragonfly Van never knew this road required 4WD — "shhhh, don't tell!" The most common species of that Lake was the Chalk-fronted Corporal (*Ladona julia*), a lifer for several folks. Another roundup and we were off to Tolowa Dunes, or is it Talawa Dunes...maps and guides spell it both ways! We found many dragonflies foraging in the fields, but were frustrated trying to find access to "the ponds" as they were surrounded by dense brush; yet we were able to add **Striped Meadowhawk** (*Sympetrum pallipes*) to the Del Norte County List. We oded there until the fog came back in and then headed to town (Crescent City) for both a hot meal and warm water for washing. We said goodbye to Ken and then headed back to camp.

Tony the elder, also a relatively new CalOdes member, didn't know about OdonataCentral. Kathy, the teacher and always keeping up with technology, got out her MiFi, and, voila — the internet! Hard to believe there was only dialup available to the vast majority of people just a short decade ago. A quick tutorial and our first county record, found by Tony, an **Emma's Dancer** (*Argia emma*), was up and vetted! How's that for service?



Day three began with a bang! It seems all of us were trying to deny that it was thunder we were hearing rolling in the distance, but it came ever closer until it became undeniable. We ate breakfast in a somber mood, hoping there would be some sun inland — at least partial sun, please! After a few raindrops, we headed out to hit any river access we could find. Smith River runs East-West, so we left the coastal bad weather behind and headed east! We first stopped by *Darlingtonia* Trail, which was adorned by a couple of Dancers and an absolutely HUGE Alligator

Lizard (*Elgaria multicarinata*). Sandra pounced to catch it: Got It! Panther Flat was next, which yielded a new species for the trip, the Sooty Dancer (*Argia lugens*) among other Odes. The Scarlet Monkeyflower (*Mimulus cardinalis*) and Stream Orchids (*Epipactis gigantean*) were also a treat. Another stop yielded a Pacific Giant Salamander (*Dicamptodon ensatus*) and Foothill Yellow-legged Frogs (*Rana boylei*) along with the seemingly ever present Vivid Dancers (*Argia vivida*). All the while, clouds loomed westward and the winds finally blew us off the river. We wouldn't get to ode on the coast that day nor for the rest of the blitz; what a shame, such a unique and beautiful area would not get surveyed. We used up extra time by stopping at a couple touristy shops along the road and then headed to Crescent City for a fish dinner. Can't go to a fishing community without eating some fresh fish! We drowned our disappointments with a song, surprising Sandra with a "Happy Birthday" and some dangly dragonfly earrings. One of Sandra's best birthdays ever — odeing for four days with a wonderful group of Dragonerds (yup, Sandra's new word, and she's quite fond of it!).

Saturday morning started with fog, Sunday with thunder, and Monday with the sound of rain. It wasn't until after a dour breakfast that it was discovered that it was only fog catching the redwood needles and dripping, but it didn't make breaking up camp any easier. Chris left us that morning, just after the group photo, and that left us with five for clean-up day. The coast was out of the question, so we decided to head back to Sanger Lake and check out the additional lake that the Inland Approach group missed out on for the lack of A MATCH! Again we went up the 17 miles of dirt road, stopping at the Petaltail sites that had been found a few days earlier. Sandra and Tony were looking for nymphs and were bound and determined to show Kathy. You see, somehow, she'd managed never to see one! Looking in all the pencil width sized holes in the moss and mud rewarded us and there, finally, was a nymph.



Onward we went past Sanger Lake (planning to backtrack to it later). Several miles further, we found Dave parked to the side. The Dragonfly Van just didn't have the clearance to make it over the rocks and humps without scraping. Just a

little rearranging and we all loaded into Sandra's big truck with Tony the Younger insisting he sit over the camping gear in the back!



We crawled down the rough dirt road and finally made it to Whiskey Lake. Kathy had talked all weekend about how she knew there would be **Variable Darners** (*Aeshna interrupta*) here and sure enough there were. Then Dave spotted a **Four-spotted Skimmer** (*Libellula quadrimaculata*) and got a photograph before it flew off for another county record. Northern Spreadwings (*Lestes disjunctus*) surrounded the lake, a few American Emeralds (*Cordulia shurtleffii*), and two record making **Twelve-spotted Skimmer** (*Libellula pulchella*) that had just finished emerging rounded out the morning. We left Whiskey Lake with our spirits renewed. Kathy, Dave, and Leslie had to leave after a brief stop at Sanger Lake. They said their goodbyes and left for their long trip eastward to McCloud. Sandra and Tony

stayed for a while longer, confirming the Darners that were there were, indeed, Variables. They also stopped at "Emerald Pond" (named by Kathy just a few days ago). Although no more than a large pothole surrounded by sedges, this pond was quite special. Not only were there three of the four species found in California with the word Emerald in their name, it also was full of a bright blue, large species of fairy shrimp (*Streptocephalus sealii*). Tony and Sandra then headed home, west, back toward the fog.



One might think the blitz was over, but really it's not over until it's over. The next few weeks, Kathy and Sandra compared notes, poured over pictures, voucher specimens, and tried to make sure all our *i*'s were dotted and *t*'s crossed. With much patience from Dennis Paulson, Tim Manolis, and Jim Johnson, we kept trying to find pictures of Tule Bluets (*Enallagma carunculatum*) only to have them all turn out to be Northern Bluets — huh what? They're supposed to be more blue than black — what's up with that! Well, Dennis kindly schooled us on the fact that he had found that north coastal male Northern Bluets had a dark form. Sure enough, we had all missed it; page 88 in his book had a picture of just such an individual. The voucher **Northern Bluets** (*Enallagma annexum*) from Rattlesnake Lake is indeed one of these dark forms (and it had been this darkness that prompted Sandra to net it) but she was not careful about the very coastal ones whose dorsal patterns looked



remarkably like Tule Bluet's (tsk tsk Sandra!). Then, as that drama settled, emails were sent to the group — "anyone with a specimen or photo of a **Western Forktail** (*Ischnura perparva*)? Nope, not a one! The record was begrudgingly downgraded to a sight only record. It had been relatively common, but such is what happens when a county is missing so many of the relatively common species from its list! Luck was to be on our side though, Stephan Telm to our rescue. As it turns out, he couldn't come to the blitz because he had a family camping trip planned the very next weekend in Humboldt County. He visited Del Norte County during that trip with a secondary goal of being the Blitz Sweep. We had all thought that he hadn't located any additional county records, but as it turns out, he is the **ONLY** one to have taken a picture of a Western Forktail. So with the upgrade, the final tally brought us to 14 new county species!

All in all, the 8th Annual CalOdes Blitz was a great success despite the weather. We saw a total of 37 species and even broke several records. No state records, but we did document 14 new county record species, more than twice any previous blitz (6 for Trinity County in 2010), which brought the county list up from 29 species to 43 and took the county from 4th lowest count in the state (58 counties) to a middling 44th status. We blew the California early flight date for Autumn Meadowhawks out of the sky, 23 days earlier than ever before, and we also broke a 1953 late flight date record by one day for the Chalk-fronted Corporal — that was a 59 year-old record! Fun times and good camaraderie were at the forefront.

For a list of all species found and places visited visit California's 2012 Sighting Site:

<<http://southwestdragonflies.net/caphotos/2012Sightings.html#blitz>>

Photo credits:

TK- group, SH- Autumn Meadowhawk, Spiketail exuvia, shrimp, LF- Alligator Lizard, DB- Whiskey Lake, ST- Western Forktail