



# **WEST MARIN WILD**

**By Jeff Miller**

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## **Autumnal Musings**

George Carlin wondered: "do leaves fall....or are they *pushed*?" All good things must end and there's no denying that the glorious summer of 2007 is coming to a close. The best evidence is the profusion of gorgeous burgundy-red leaves on the poison oak vines draped copiously and festively along Highway One on the way down from Olema.

I have learned to love poison oak, and not just because I am not allergic. It keeps nature-phobic urbanites in the city where they belong, renders entire hillsides off-limits to *Homo sapiens*, offers browse to black-tailed deer, and rewards many native birds with cover and tasty berries.

This last week brought the first tentative rain showers as well as the fall heat wave signaling the final hurrah of the dog days of summer. I knew it was autumn when I glimpsed the Farallones for the first time in six months. I swear the Park Service has been busy winching those islands closer to shore under the cover of the summer fog. Some other random observations on the approaching harvest season:

The **golden-crowned sparrows** (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*) are back, a sure sign of fall. They faithfully return to west Marin when day and night are in balance, arriving on cue within one or two days of the autumnal equinox (September 22<sup>nd</sup> this year). I missed it this year, but last fall attended the Point Reyes Bird Observatory's annual *Welcome Back Golden-Crowned Sparrow* fall equinox party. It was a wonderfully pagan celebration of the season and an exaltation of the diminutive sparrow. I was tickled to find myself at a dinner party where everyone was decorated with a golden crown of some sort (including an impressive yellow mohawk) and even the potluck food was golden-themed (think squash, yams, yellow tomatoes, and polenta).

The **belted kingfishers** (*Megaceryle alcyon*) are back at their usual perches on the power lines and poles along the east side of the Bolinas Lagoon. The three or four kingfishers I had been accustomed to seeing along Highway One were missing in action for months, but I spied three of these dashing birds waiting patiently for fish last week. The monarch butterflies are also back, flitting around Mesa gardens before they must hunker down in the eucalyptus groves to survive the rainy season.

What a great fall for raptors! In the last three weeks in Marin I have seen multiple osprey, white-tailed kites, northern harriers, sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks, red-shouldered, red-tailed and ferruginous hawks, kestrels and peregrine falcons, one close-up Swainson's hawk, and one far-off golden eagle. I also wandered among over 100 kites roosting in fields at Wavecrest near Half Moon Bay!

If fall has truly arrived, we should start seeing **varied thrushes** (*Ixoreus naevius*) soon. Last fall was a banner year for "Hollywood robins" in west Marin. Male varied thrushes are unmistakable, decked out as they are in fall colors that include bright orange wing bars, throat, lateral head stripe and underparts, with a black breast band and facemask.

We have a lot to be thankful for in west Marin. Aside from all the yummy, locally-grown, organic produce, the autumn harvest season provides some of the finest wild foods in the world, all out there for the picking or collecting. This fall I am especially looking forward to huckleberry pancakes, golden chinquapin nuts, homemade acorn bread, manzanita berry tea, and savory wild mushrooms for my omelets (directions to prime chanterelle patches gratefully accepted).

*West Marin Wild* is a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Contact me at P.O. Box 111, Bolinas.