



Wandering & Wondering

John Maybury

WINTER OF MY DISCONTENT

Meteorologists say winter is about to begin this week after a historic dry spell from Thanksgiving until well into January. I have been wandering and wondering through the literature on climate and weather, trying to understand how a high-pressure system could just park on top of us and push away all our usual storms. Foul-looking and smoky-smelling air around the Bay Area, dry brown hills, lack of rain and snow – all have thrown me into a deep funk. My New England soul craves dramatic winter storms, so this past month and a half has been pure hell for me. It reminds me of when I lived in L.A., the land of eternal sunshine, where you get up in the morning and say, “Ho hum, just another sunny day in paradise.” So I have been studying the Coriolis effect, anticyclones, arctic oscillations, La Nina, jet streams, centrifugal forces, Rossby numbers, pressure gradients, and isobars. Phew. I am impressed that those happy-talking TV weather wonks have to learn all this arcane stuff. Apparently, weather is the result of many different natural and manmade factors, and the experts don’t all agree on what they are or how they interact. I might as well postulate that the obesity epidemic causes the earth to wobble on its axis, thereby creating climatic disruptions and freakish weather such as we are experiencing this year. Whether you are a climate change believer or denier, you have to admit that the past six weeks have felt ominous for us and for the planet, a perfect storm of zero precipitation, with nary a cloud in the sky. As the rain finally begins to fall this week (we fervently hope), the best thing is that I no longer will have to hear on the news that it’s another nice day in paradise.

WATERFOWL WONDERLAND

Winter is peak bird-watching time at Gray Lodge state wildlife refuge east of Colusa and north of the mighty Sutter Buttes. All over this Central Valley region, rice farmers used to burn the stubble after harvesting their crops. Now

they spare the air, flood their fields, and welcome migrating geese and ducks, which stop off to rest, feed on the leftover rice, and then move on, leaving behind their soil-enriching waste. It’s a win-win for farmers and birds. In another important way, it’s also a win-win for hunters and bird-watchers, who both benefit from the abundance of bird life in the refuge and surrounding area, including several nearby state and federal wildlife refuges. Duck hunters are restricted to designated areas of Gray Lodge on weekends and Wednesdays. Their license fees help pay for refuge management by California Fish and Game. Bird-watchers pay \$4 per person to drive into the viewing area, where there is a hiking trail on the levee around the refuge, a viewing platform with a telescope, and a separate loop road for viewing only from your car. On non-hunting days (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday) it is very quiet and peaceful. All you hear is the birds and the wind. At sundown, you may even see and hear a mass exodus of geese, as wave after wave of them head out in honking, squawking V formations (see Gray Lodge story with Leslie Davidson’s photos posted January 12 on my Pacifica Riptide blog). If you go, be sure to look up Gray Lodge online for further information. If you want a comfortable place to stay nearby, check out Feather Falls Resort south of Oroville (reasonably priced rooms, heated swimming pool, hot tub, sauna, exercise room, gambling casino, restaurant, campground). Bonus find: Doering’s Mandarins, Highway 99 at Highway 162 west of Oroville – most delicious Satsuma Mandarin oranges I have ever tasted, and the fruit stand also sells kiwis, persimmons, pomegranates, nuts, and local honey. Mail order: phone 530-882-4361 or email dmandarins@yahoo.com.

PENSION TSUNAMI

Sign of the times: Rising costs and floods of pension payouts have sunk Hostess Brands, Inc. as it enters a second round of bankruptcy restructuring. Hostess, for those of you unfamiliar with this great nation’s peculiar junk food habits, makes Twinkies, Ding Dongs, HoHos, Hostess Cup Cakes, Donettes, Drake’s Devil Dogs, and -- to cover all its bases -- Nature’s Pride bread.

GO SLOW

You know I love trains, but I am dead set against the California high-speed rail (HSR) boondoggle as currently configured. On January 13 the CEO resigned to spend more time with his family. Translation: HSR is a dead duck. Its

business plan is a joke. Hoped-for federal assistance is in jeopardy because of HSR’s disorganization and dysfunction. In several years of existence, HSR has spent millions of taxpayer dollars on meetings, consultants, publicity, and other phony-baloney without laying a single mile of track. The gerrymandered route of the train through the Central Valley reflects special-interest zigzags in favor of greedy land speculators and lawmakers on board just to profit from this scheme. This proposed “train to nowhere” would wipe out or endanger orchards, farm fields, wetlands, irrigation projects, and low-income neighborhoods. Since California voters approved HSR by 53 percent to 47 percent back in 2008 with passage of Proposition 1A, the price tag has tripled to almost \$100 billion. Now a California Field Poll has found that 64 percent of the state’s voters want to put Prop. 1A back on the ballot and would kill it off by a margin of 2-1. It’s time to stop this runaway train and get back to running a real railroad. Using even a small portion of HSR’s bloated budget could upgrade existing tracks and rolling stock to run good, solid passenger trains at 125 miles per hour all over the state -- and really make a difference. HSR was originally a great idea, but it has run right off the tracks. To learn more, visit Train Riders of California (TRAC) at calrailnews.com.

SPANISH AND FRENCH CLASSES

Spanish and French language classes for adults at Terra Nova High School (Jefferson Union High School District). \$60 for 12 Wednesday evening classes. February 1 through May 2, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Register at first class or through JUHSD (www.juhsd.net and click Adult Education, then Community Classes) or call 650-550-7871. Email Christine Guzman for Spanish at spanishwithchristine@gmail.com or Monique for French at moniquedubief@earthlink.net

SWAMI SEZ

“Republicans want to deregulate business but regulate sex between consenting adults? Should be the other way around.”
(Sherman Alexie, Native American author and comedian)

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