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West Mexico: The Tropical Connection

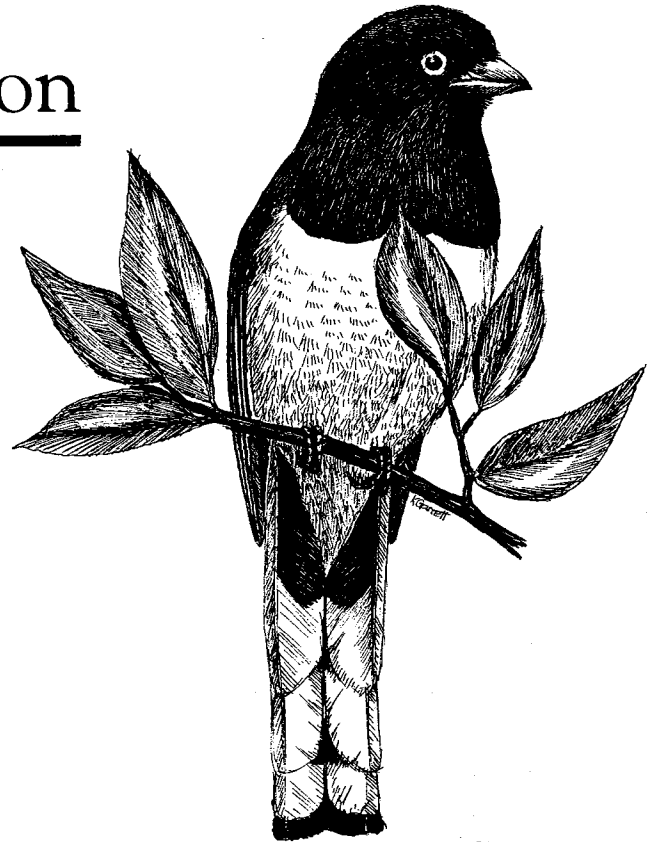


by Kimball Garrett

Most California birdwatchers find themselves introduced to the birdlife of Mexico long before they venture south of the border. The wanderings of Mexican birds, whether a consequence of strategies of adaptive migration, or the result of fatal miscalculation, provide California with some of its most interesting and sought-after species. Most of the State's summer and fall Brown Pelicans and Elegant Terns are Mexico hatched and raised, as are all of its Heermann's Gulls. This seemingly peculiar "reverse" migration is an evolved strategy that permits optimal exploitation of safe nesting grounds, while assuring rich food resources for the nestlings and fledged young.

Offshore, an analogous movement brings us Least and Black Storm-Petrels (the latter also breeding rarely on the Southern California islands), Red-billed Tropicbirds, and Craveri's Murrelets—all prime objectives of the popular September pelagic trips. It is, in addition, essentially for Mexican visitors that some of us trek religiously to the Salton Sea in late summer and fall, braving heat, humidity, mud, and stench to study such birds as Blue-footed and Brown Boobies, Magnificent Frigatebirds, Wood Storks, Roseate Spoonbills, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, and Yellow-footed Gulls—all of regular or casual occurrence. But even among the landbirds there are signs of a counter-current migration: Tropical Kingbirds regularly disperse northward in fall, and such southern species as Thick-billed Kingbird and Groove-billed Ani are occasionally uncovered.

Thus tantalized by Mexican visitors and vagrants, the attentions of the California birder turn inevitably toward the south—to culminate, sooner or later, in a journey to that colorful and fascinating country. Even a brief visit below the border may prove rewarding, introducing the birder to a new avifauna, while providing an impressive lesson in the geography of birds.



Citreoline Trogon

Frequently birders—their sights set on distant horizons—jet direct to the heart of the tropics, emerging at last in such places as Nairobi, Bogota, or Lima, having cleanly bypassed that subtle but rewarding region where the temperate zone gives way to the tropics. West Mexico is such a transition zone, and for the Californian it provides a convenient steppingstone, a key region along a continuum of species distributions which link the arctic to the equator. In the Mexican states of Sonora, Sinaloa, and Nayarit, temperate lowland species characteristic of our deserts are replaced by tropical lowland forms, the changes coinciding with a striking increase in the amount and duration of summer rainfall—and a corresponding increase in the lushness of the vegetation. Simultaneously, as one moves south, similar transitions occur among montane forms and waterbirds—the tropical representatives of the latter group making their appearance with the mangrove swamps, in central Sonora.

For the birder, as for the ornithologist, an alluring feature of West Mexico is the high incidence of endemism—the occurrence of unique forms not found elsewhere. Nearly one tenth of the approximately 1000 bird species recorded in Mexico breed in no other country, and of these “Mexican endemics,” almost one third (some 30 species) are confined to the Pacific slope and adjacent highlands of Mexico, from Sonora to Oaxaca. Perhaps the best known of these birds is the Tufted (or “Dickey”) Jay, but the long list includes such enticing names as Elegant Quail, Eared Poorwill, Eared Trogon (this is “eary” country), Gray-crowned Woodpecker, Beechey and San Blas Jays, Bar-vented Wren, Golden Vireo, Red-headed Tanager, and Green-striped Brush Finch.

Fortunately, birders planning a trip to West Mexico now have at their disposal a number of valuable publications: field guides by Peterson (reviewed in *Auk* 91: 865-867), Edwards, Davis (these two reviewed in *Auk* 90: 211-216), and Blake; distributional surveys by Freidmann, Griscom, Moore, et al, and by Van Rossem (Sonora only); plus the indispensable bird-finding guide by Peter Alden. As for travel in the area, apprehension is largely unwarranted, provided sensible precautions are taken. Nighttime driving is ill-advised, as slow vehicles and livestock present frequent and dangerous obstacles; and it's well to have at hand a cogent explanation to prove that you are, in fact, a birder. We spent the better part of one muggy Sinaloa evening attempting to convince what seemed like a significant body of the Mexican militia (which had surrounded our car) that our interests were in birds rather than in contraband (Sinaloa provides excellent opportunities for both pursuits).

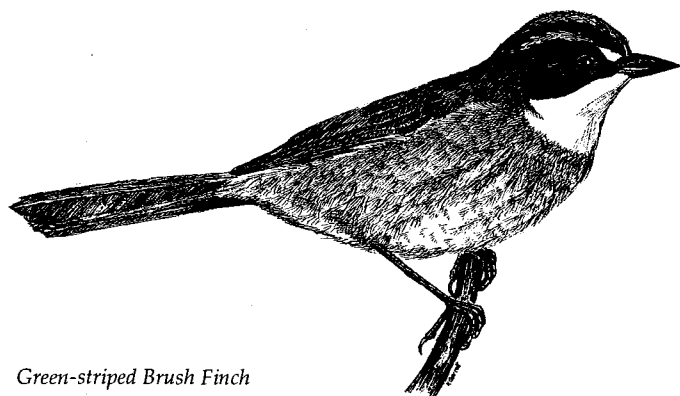
Nogales, at the northern terminus of Mexico's Hwy. 15, is a logical place to enter the country. A five to six hour traverse of the Sonoran desert will bring you to Guaymas, on the Gulf of California. Up to here, the ornithological landscape does not differ greatly from that of the Sonoran desert of southern Arizona. But boobies, frigatebirds, a number of “southern” herons, and Yellow-footed (Western) Gulls are clear signs that subtropical waters have been reached. From Guaymas to the Sonora-Sinaloa state line you will record your first true Mexican birds, for here you reach the northern limit of the thorn-scrub habitat; and here you cross the first major river systems flowing west out of the Sierra Madre Occidental. We encountered four White-fronted Parrots some 80 km south of Guaymas, and soon afterward found the tiny, high-voiced Sinaloa Crow, the Social Flycatcher (in cottonwoods at a Navajoa Pemex

station), and a bird with a confusing array of names and plumages, the Streak-backed (or Scarlet-headed, or Flame-headed) Oriole, first glimpsed as brilliant flash of orange in a roadside thicket.

Travelling southward from Guaymas into Sinaloa, one is struck by the abundance of black-plumaged birds: White-necked Ravens, Sinaloa Crows, Groove-billed Anis, cowbirds, blackbirds, and the everpresent hordes of Great-tailed Grackles. The paradox of black-plumaged birds thriving under intense solar radiation on the desert has stimulated recent investigations by biologists. Glenn Walsberg, a former graduate student in Ornithology at UCLA, has now shown that black plumage may actually *reduce* heat gain from solar radiation, when a moderate breeze is available for convective cooling.

To the observer sweltering in the humid West Mexico summer it may be little consolation to know that the birds are comfortable, but the judicious restriction of birding activity to the cooler hours, and a mid-day retreat into an air-conditioned cantina makes for effective thermoregulation. A summer visit to the region is recommended, primarily because of the coincident rains—which have a tremendous revitalizing effect upon the thorn scrub and tropical deciduous habitats of the lowlands and foothills. The breeding season of many species is geared to the onset of these summer rains, which transform a gray, leafless environment into a dense jungle of greenery. The winter season, however, can also prove productive, as an influx of migrant land and waterbirds from the north augments an essentially resident assemblage of tropical birds. Though in winter birdsong is reduced, in the dry season the birds may be more easily found amid the bare branches of the trees.

Highway 15, as it approaches Culiacan and Mazatlan, is bordered by lush tropical deciduous forest. A stop along one of the small, paved “Microondas” (Microwave Station) roads can yield a number of interesting species, including the spectacular Magpie-Jay, the Beechey (or Purplish-backed) Jay, Bar-vented Wrens, Golden-cheeked Woodpeckers, and (in summer) abundant Yellow-green Vireos—whose chirping calls are remarkably suggestive of House Sparrows. The birdwatcher unfamiliar with the tropics will be frustrated by the difficulty of seeing birds in this habitat, but patience and a series of Ferruginous Pygmy Owl “toots” will often bring birds into view. We found the tropical deciduous forest on the northwest edge of Mazatlan (less than 12 hours driving time from Guaymas) alive with birds in the early morning: Orange-fronted Parakeet, White-fronted Parrot, Mangrove Cuckoo, Fork-tailed Emerald, Cinnamon Hummingbird, Plain-capped Starthroat, Citreoline Trogon, Bright-rumped Attila, Beechey Jay, Happy Wren, Yellow-winged Cacique (look for their pendulous nests), Scrub Euphonia, Yellow Grosbeak, and many others. Nearby lagoons bordered by mangroves are equally productive, with numerous herons, ibis, spoonbills, the everpresent frigatebirds wheeling overhead, Least Grebes, Neotropical Cormorants, the little Collared Plover, and the colorful polyandrous Jacana. The unique Boat-billed Heron is often seen in these haunts as well. Elegant Quail and White-collared Seedeaters frequent the brushy borders of the lagoons, while Blue-black Grassquits accentuate their buzzy songs with energetic vaults into the air.



Green-striped Brush Finch

A drive up Route 40, the Durango Highway, is a must—for this is *barranca* country, where great canyons carve a spectacular landscape along the western fringe of the Sierra Madre Occidental. Here tropical woodland intermingles with oaks and pines, and the birds of the lowlands meet those of the montane forests. The birds, seemingly in different assemblages at every kilometer post, more than offset the annoyance of slow trucks, "peligrociuous" curves, and occasional rockslides. In fact, certain of these kilometer posts (note that they have been renumbered since Alden's book, with "Km 0" at Durango) will be vividly remembered by us. Km 259, the Piedra Blanca stream-crossing near La Concordia, yielded Blue-rumped Parrotlets, Russet-crowned Motmots, Blue Buntings, and others. The broken woodland at Km 247 harbored Black-capped Gnatcatchers, Olive Sparrows, Berylline Hummingbirds, the ubiquitous Grayish Saltator (with its mellow upslurred whistle), a "singing" Lesser Roadrunner, and huge White-naped Swifts—recalling shearwaters as they flew high over the hillsides. Km 240, at La Guyanera, offered Lilac-crowned Parrots, Rusty-crowned Ground Sparrows, an elusive Fan-tailed Warbler, and the striking Masked Tityra. Up higher, at Km 223, we encountered the Golden Vireo, Blue Mockingbird, Rufous-capped Warbler, Black-headed Siskin, the abundant Red-headed Tanager, the familiar Eastern Bluebird, and a slightly out-of-range Greenish Elaenia. The pine-oak woodland near Km 212 yielded species not encountered at lower elevations, such as the Tufted Flycatcher, White-striped Woodhewer, Flame-colored Tanager, Blue-hooded Euphonia, Gray Silky-Flycatcher, and a number of species familiar to those who have visited the mountains of southeastern Arizona.

The Rancho Liebre *barranca*, near Km 201 (Alden's Km 1164) boasts an almost overwhelming assemblage of pine-oak woodland and tropical forest birds. Species such as the Rufous-sided Towhee, Acorn Woodpecker, and Steller's Jay link the tropical with the temperate zone, the unfamiliar with the familiar. There are unfamiliar members of familiar California genera: Red-headed Tanager (*Piranga*), Crescent-chested Warbler (*Vermivora*), White-throated Robin (*Turdus*), Orange-billed and Russet Nightingale-Thrushes (*Catharus*), and the Brown-backed Solitaire (*Myadestes*), with its incredible cescendo song. There are exotics: Red Warbler, Mountain Trogon, and, inside the *barranca*, Golden-browed Warblers and Green-striped Brush Finches. The Eared Trogon has occurred here, and is often found farther up Route 40, at El Salto (8500')—as are the rare Thick-billed Parrots. And, somewhere in these mountains, the world's largest woodpecker, the Imperial Ivorybill, may still survive.

Tufted Jays visited us as we began our hike to the edge of the *barranca*. They slipped in through mist-laden, epiphyte-draped pines, flashing white and blue-black, and giving their two-and three-noted scolding calls. These striking jays, among Mexico's rarest and most localized birds, and true denizens of the *barranca* country, lingered briefly, then silently moved away, not to be seen again. Their memory faded temporarily as we reached the rocky outcropping that marked the brink of the majestic, mist-enshrouded *barranca*. Here, out of the white mist and into the sunlight high over the tropical greenery of the valley floor, sailed seven Military Macaws, approaching with ear-splitting screams and a beautiful display of pastel



Tufted Jay

blues and greens. Two of the macaws landed on the dead top of a nearby pine, underscoring—in that exciting moment before they were enveloped once again by the swirling mist—the communion of the tropical and temperate elements of the *barranca*.

In order to sample all of the many habitats of West Mexico, repeated excursions are necessary. The tropical character of the flora and fauna grows even more pronounced as one approaches Nayarit, and its well-known birding center, San Blas. In this region of extensive wetlands, the tropical evergreen forest appears, and here may be found such exotic birds as the Bare-throated Tiger Heron, Rufous-necked Wood Rail, Common Potoo, San Blas Jay, and Red-crowned Ant-Tanager.

Visits to West Mexico in the dry season (winter and spring), as well as the wet season (summer and fall) are certain to reveal enlightening contrasts; and since, on a first excursion to the region, one cannot hope to discover all of the fancy, elusive species (Red-breasted Chat, Rosy Thrush-Tanager, Eared Trogon, etc.) encore visits should continue to prove rewarding.

But the initial encounter with this stimulating zone of transition is bound to qualify, not only as a great birding adventure, but as an unforgettable lesson in the distribution and ecology of birds. ☛

Kimball Garrett is a Ph. D. candidate in Ornithology at UCLA. The article is illustrated with his sketches of Mexican birds.

Jean Brandt/BIRDING at Switzer Picnic Area

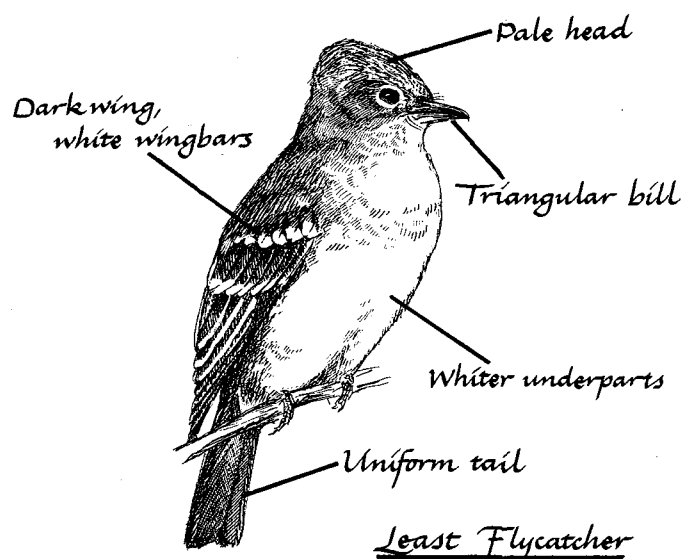
Long bypassed by birders on their way to the higher mountain "hotspots," Switzer Picnic Area quickly became everyone's favorite this March with the discovery there of a pair of Spotted Owls. Situated along the Arroyo Seco streambed at 3,000' elevation, this is a prime example of riparian habitat in the Upper Sonoran Zone, hosting both chaparral and mountain birds in season. In normal years the stream flows year-round, and an easy one mile walk downstream will bring you to one of the most dramatic waterfalls in the San Gabriel Mountains. Unfortunately the spot is a popular picnic site, and too many people can present a problem—but the birds are worth the trouble.

Breeding species include: Mountain Quail, Great Horned and Spotted Owls, White-throated Swift, Anna's Hummingbird, Red-shafted Flicker, Nuttall's, Acorn, Hairy, and Downy Woodpeckers, Ash-throated and Western Flycatchers, Violet-green Swallow, both Steller's and Scrub Jays, Plain Titmouse, Wrentit, White-breasted Nuthatch, House, Bewick's, Rock, and Canyon Wrens, California Thrasher, Solitary, Hutton's, and Warbling Vireos, Yellow and Wilson's Warblers, Bullock's Oriole, Black-headed Grosbeak, Lazuli Bunting, Purple Finch, Lawrence's Goldfinch, and Black-chinned Sparrow. Poorwills may also nest, and in addition, Golden Eagles, Cooper's Hawks, Band-tailed Pigeons, Mountain Chickadees, and Golden-crowned Kinglets are often found.

Walk upstream along the nature trail, beyond the check dam. The habitat here is more open than the narrow canyon below the picnic grounds, and this is the best place to look for the Mountain Quail and the swallows. But both areas should be thoroughly explored.

If you have only a short time to show a visiting birder our Southern California specialties, Switzer's just might offer the most variety. During migration all of the regular western migrants are reported, and, especially on weekdays, it can be a lovely, peaceful trip. To reach the site, take Angeles Crest Hwy. (State Hwy. 2) about twelve miles north from the intersection with Foothill Blvd. in La Canada. Watch for the turnoff on your right, and drive down the steep, windy, paved road one quarter of a mile into the picnic parking area. Bring supplies. There are tables, restrooms, and good mountain water, but no other facilities. Be on the lookout for poison oak, and in summer, for rattlesnakes. Good birding! ♡

Jon Dunn/FIELD NOTES The Genus Empidonax



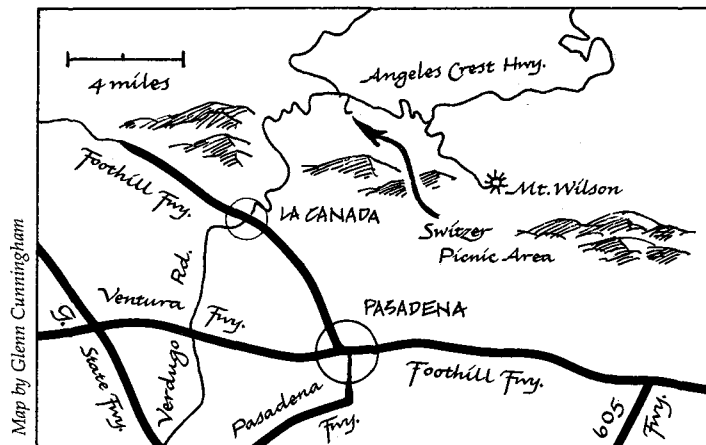
Least Flycatcher

Illustration by Mary Ellen Pereyra

The Least Flycatcher has recently been detected as a scarce but regular vagrant from the east, and, as is the pattern with other eastern vagrants, the majority of records are from late May to mid-June (3 records since 1974), and during the fall (5 records). No doubt the scarcity of records reflects the fact that very few birders are acquainted with its field marks.

The Least most closely resembles the Hammond's—for both are big-headed and short-tailed. The best mark in differentiating the two, however, is the much *whiter appearance* of the underparts of the Least. The bird has only a slight grayish cast to the sides of the breast, giving it only a *faint horizontal band*, in contrast to the "vested" appearance of the Hammond's. The lower belly and undertail coverts of the Least are of a very pale yellow (often appearing almost white on some birds), while the head is of a slightly *paler gray shade* than that of the Hammond's. Like the Hammond's, the Least has a bold white eyering, and a slight greenish cast to the back, but the Least displays *bolder white wingbars, tertials, and edgings to the wings*. The background color of the wing is of a darker shade than that of the Hammond's, further emphasizing the contrast. (Alan Phillips has pointed out that the bolder edgings are a characteristic of the eastern species of *Empidonax*). The tail of the Least is of a *uniform shade*, lacking the pale grayish edge of the Hammond's; and the bill, while short like the Hammond's, reveals a wider base, when viewed from underneath—giving it an almost *triangular shape*.

Behavior may also help in separating the two species in the field. Though the Least vigorously flips its tail upward, it *seldom flicks its wings*—while the Hammond's actively flicks its wings while flipping its tail upwards. The call of the Least is a loud *whit*, resembling the call of the Audubon's Warbler. ♡



Les Wood

Planting for the Birds

Here we will examine some of the many plants which are of food value for Southern California birds.

The official flower of Los Angeles, *Strelitzia reginae*, (the "Bird of Paradise") and its taller sister, *Strelitzia nicotii* (the "Tree" or "Giant Bird of Paradise") are from South Africa. These members of the Banana family do very well in our mild coastal climate, as well as inland to the desert, if protected from the cold. Since *S. reginae* thrives as a tubbed or boxed plant, it should attract hummingbirds to a balcony, roof garden, or patio. Blooming during the winter months, it supplies nectar at a time when many of the nectar-producing plants are out of bloom. It requires a moist but not soggy soil, with bi-weekly fertilizing during the growing period.



The Giant Bird of Paradise is of garden value because of its dramatic display of banana-like leaves, arranged in fan-like fashion similar to the "Traveler's Palm" of Madagascar. The blooms are huge, producing such a copious flow of nectar that it seeps from the bloom, runs down the stalk, and falls to the ground. Plant it at a distance from the house, or in a large garden. Orioles, finches, Mockingbirds, and hummingbirds will feast daily and continuously.

Ochna serrulata (*O. multiflora*)—the "Mickey Mouse Plant" is a bush 4 to 8 feet high, and as wide, though it can be kept much smaller by pruning or training. The yellow flowers appear in early summer, and as the petals fall, the brilliant scarlet sepals are exposed. From the center of this receptacle 3 to 5 small, round, green fruits appear, which later turn a shining black, resembling Mickey Mouse ears. The Mockingbirds and doves relish these fruits—and the plants make excellent transplants for gifts, potted for topiary treatment, or for vacant spots in the garden.

The various Aloes are excellent garden plants, and are very satisfactory as potted or tubbed plants on a sunny balcony, terrace, or patio. Most of them are very attractive to hummers, and bloom during fall and winter when little else is in bloom. In their native habitat of south and east Africa, the blooms supply food for nectar-eating sugarbirds and sunbirds. A number of species are of especial interest and can be found in the local nurseries, or are available from catalogue sales. Or, better yet, trade plants with a friend so both may benefit.

Arbutus unedo, the "Strawberry Tree," is a true Heath, native to Southern Europe. It does remarkably well in desert areas with some shade, and equally well in coastal locations with full sun. The fruits, which somewhat resemble strawberries in appearance, are relished by Mockingbirds and Band-tailed Pigeons. A new dwarf variety, "Elfin King," considered a natural Bonsai, can be readily grown as a tub plant, and responds well to pruning—but due to difficult propagation it is quite rare.

A plant of especial attraction to Band-tailed Pigeons is the "Coffee-berry" or "Pigeon-berry"—a native to California

and a member of the Buckthorn family. As a native, it does best with good drainage and dryness during the summer months. It will be short-lived if planted in an area requiring frequent summer watering. Among the birds which will take the fruit are Scrub Jays, California Thrashers, Mockingbirds, Robins, and Cedar Waxwings.

To attract goldfinches to your garden, try planting a few seeds of *Primula florindae*, the "Yellow-flowering Primrose" from Tibet. Some seed catalogues list the species, but it's better to obtain a few seeds from a friend. Plant it during August or early September; keep moist until young plants appear, which will probably coincide with the early rains. Allow a 3-foot circle for each plant, as they grow quite large. Very fragrant clusters of deep yellow flowers are borne on 3-foot stems, to be followed by seed pods, which will be discovered by goldfinches, juncos, and House Finches.

Pyracantha species, commonly known as "Firethorn," is usually grown for its bright red fruits, used for Christmas decorations. However, *Pyracantha duvalii*, which has large red berries in very dense clusters, is preferred by Cedar Waxwings, Mockingbirds, Band-tailed Pigeons, Robins, Thrashers, and certainly the Starling. All *Pyracanthas* are fast-growing and vigorous. They need full sun, and should be kept on the dry side for production of berries.

A number of genera of the Myrtle family, known botanically as *Calistemon*, *Calothamnus*, *Kunzia*, and *Melaleuca*, are all commonly called "Bottlebrushes." All are native to Australia and New Zealand. As a result of similar climatic conditions, all do well in Southern California. Good drainage and moderate watering are the usual requirements. In their native habitat, the flowers, which are rich in nectar, furnish food for honeyeaters, spinebills, friar birds, miners, wattlebirds, and silvereyes. Among our local birds attracted to these plants are hummingbirds, orioles, finches, and some of the warblers.

Also included in the Myrtle family are the many species of *Eucalyptus*, the blooms of which are attractive to hummingbirds. Many of the Mallee type and other shrub-like Eucalypts are becoming increasingly available in the local area. All do quite well in milder climates, and many are spectacular in bloom. Two species of exceptional beauty are the Red Cap Gum, and *E. x Helen Ayers*, a hybrid developed in a private nursery. All Eucalypts will attract hummingbirds, orioles, finches, and warblers.

Abutilon species, commonly known as "Chinese Lantern" or "Flowering Maple," is a plant which was formerly very popular in gardens. It is surely deserving of a place for the birds—mainly orioles and hummingbirds—which it attracts. The plant is easily grown, not being too particular as to soil or location, so long as a sufficient supply of water is present. Some of the newer varieties make good hanging basket plants; or they may be trained on a low trellis. The drooping bell-like flowers of white, yellow, pink, red, and bronze bloom from April through June, and sporadically throughout the year. *Abutilon megapotamicum* is a vine-like shrub, excellent for hanging basket use. It is of vigorous growth and will decorate itself with red or yellow lanterns from May to September, and sporadically during the remaining months of the year, depending on location. Give it some shade inland; full sun along the coast. A hummingbird feeder could be placed within the foliage, and the presence of the small birds will reward you for your troubles. ♡

Kimball Garrett

BIRDS of the Season



Spring birding in Southern California is a crescendo affair, with the March and early April trickle of migrants intensifying to a minor torrent by late April and early May. The diminishing passage of western migrants later in May is countered by the now-predictable flood of vagrants from eastern North America, the search for which is climaxed by the annual Memorial Day birding extravaganza, enacted at the desert oases in the eastern part of the State.

Our regular migrants gave us few surprises this season; arrival dates were generally within normal ranges. Coastally, a major push of **Western Tanagers** around May 10 was commented on by many observers, and an influx of migrant swifts and swallows accompanied overcast conditions late in the second week of May.

Spring pelagic trips yielded a **Black-footed Albatross**, en route to Santa Barbara Is. on May 15 (Keith Axelson), a **South Polar Skua** on the LAAS trip to Santa Barbara Is. on May 22, plus 5 skuas and a **Flesh-footed Shearwater** on the LAAS trip there on June 5.

On the mainland, wood warblers were the star attractions, with at least 32 species recorded during the spring. Early was a **Hooded Warbler** in Kelso on April 14 (Steve Cardiff). Three more Hoodeds were found on the desert around Memorial Day weekend. A **Worm-eating** remained at Yucca Valley Golf Course May 14-16 (Gene Makashima et al). Van Remsen found a **Golden-winged** at Oasis, Mono Co. on May 31, after seeing a **Blue-winged** (California's sixth—found by Terry Clark) at Ft. Piute, northwest of Needles, on May 28. **Lucy's** were nesting at Morongo Valley, Furnace Creek Ranch (FCR), and at Afton Canyon, between Barstow and Baker (Mike Weinstein). The last locality, along the Mojave River, is a lush riparian oasis, rapidly falling victim to off-road vehicles. A male **Cape May** was at FCR on May 30, with another on Pt. Loma at the beginning of June. Santa Barbara Is. had a female **Bay-breasted** on June 5 (LAAS pelagic trip). A male **Black-throated Green** was at Deep Springs, Inyo Co. on May 29 (Guy McCaskie). Numerous **Black-and-White Warblers**, **Tennessee Warblers**, **Ovenbirds**, and **Northern Waterthrushes** occurred on the desert, coast, and islands. The grueling trek up Clark Mountain on May 21 yielded California's 6th **Grace's Warbler** (Van Remsen, et al). Van also found a rare **Kentucky Warbler** at Ft. Piute on May 27. Two **Red-faced Warblers** turned up: one on Pt. Loma, May 21-24 (Elizabeth Copper, et al), and one at Morongo Valley in early June (Doug Morton). Closer to home was a singing male **Northern Parula** at Pt. Fermin on May 21.

However, there is life after warblers... **Little Blue Herons** were at the north end of the Salton Sea (Doug Morton), Goleta (Paul Lehman), and way out of range at Oasis, Mono Co. **Reddish Egrets** were at Imperial Beach, San Diego Co. and, on May 21, at Pt. Mugu (Lew Hastings, et al). The **Yellow-crowned Night Heron** adult at San Joaquin Marsh, May 11-14 (Don Hoecklin, Linda Delaney, et al) was our rarest heron. Many observers chased the "**Black Duck**" at the south end of the Salton Sea (SESS) only to suspect that

it was "partly Mallard." Unusual inland was an **Oldsquaw** at Salton City on April 27 (Arnold Small).

Among the **Solitary Sandpipers** noted were three at the Ventura River mouth on April 17 (Larry Sansone), and the three found by Peppy Van Essen in the Lucerne Valley on May 1. Two **Semipalmated Sandpipers** were at the SESS on May 21-22 (Herb Clarke and Arnold Small) with up to 70 **Stilt Sandpipers** nearby. A **Stilt Sandpiper** at Goleta on April 14 (Paul Lehman) was unusual; but in its company was a much rarer immature **Little Gull** (also Paul L.). There was also a **Glaucous Gull** on April 7 at the South Coast Botanical Garden (Van Remsen and Linda Hale) and one at Marina del Rey on April 17 (Hank Brodtkin). **Black Skimmers** were nesting at the south end of San Diego Bay in May (Gil Grant) and were numerous in April and May at SESS. Unusual were three at King Harbor, Redondo Beach, on April 15 (Bob Becker).

Whip-poor-wills were on Clark Mtn. on May 21, and were also detected at Camp Angelus in the San Bernardino Mtns. (Doug Morton). **Flammulated Owls** were on Clark Mtn. and (as migrants) at Deep Springs on May 18 (Kimball Garrett, Cathy Jacobs, and Ronni Kayne), and nearby Cottonwood Cyn. on May 26 (catching insects around the campfire—Guy McCaskie, et al). **Chimney Swifts** were noted around Los Angeles in mid-May by Arnold Small and Hank Brodtkin. Arnold also found a **Least Flycatcher** at Yucca Valley on May 15. An **Eastern Kingbird** was seen by dozens of birders at FCR, May 27-28. A **Yellow-throated Vireo** found at Morongo Valley by Russ and Marion Wilson on April 30 was subsequently reported at least to May 14. **Great-tailed Grackles** continue to spread—they were noted regularly at SESS and FCR (where they are nesting!). A female was found in the Lucerne Valley on April 30 (Peppy Van Essen). California's 6th and 7th **Common Grackles** were at Scotty's Castle and Deep Springs over Memorial Day weekend. **Hepatic Tanagers** were at Morongo Valley (April 19—the Wilsons), Ft. Piute, FCR, and on their breeding grounds on Clark Mt. A male **Scarlet Tanager** was reported in Santa Anita Cyn. on May 2 (Bill Wedendorf). **Summer Tanagers** appeared to be nesting at Mojave Narrows (Ed Navojosky), near Tecopa, and near Valyermo (Jan Tarble), but were surprisingly absent from Morongo Valley in early May. A pair of **Cardinals** was at Earp along the Colorado River on April 30 (Shum Suffel)—truly wild Cardinals are hard to come by in California. **Rose-breasted Grosbeaks** and **Indigo Buntings** were at nearly every desert oasis in late May, as is usual. Very rare was the **Le Conte's Sparrow** at FCR on May 21 (Guy McCaskie, et al). A late **Harris' Sparrow** showed up for the LAAS field trip to Morongo Valley on May 7, and Rusty Scalf found an adult **Clay-colored Sparrow** at Long Beach Recreation Park on May 28. Clearly the art of vagrant hunting has advanced by quantum leaps in the past several years! ♡

Note: Kimball Garrett is filling in for Shum Suffel, who is birding in Alaska. All observations of noteworthy birds seen during June and July should be reported to Shum (797-2965) or to Jean Brandt (788-5188).

Of Snakes and Lizards . . .

By all measures, the first LAAS reptile-watching field trip was a success. The dozen intrepid members of the party who ventured down to Camp Pendleton on April 16th enjoyed a beautiful spring day seeking out the Base's abundant reptile life. The sharp-eyed group spotted 21 snakes (15 of them rattlesnakes) and many lizards in their rock-strewn, overgrown haunts.

Prior to the field trip, the group met at Audubon House for an evening orientation session. Leader Bill Turner reviewed what reptiles were likely to be seen, their habits, and methods for finding them. He showed slides taken of reptiles in the field trip area, and he passed around a California Kingsnake and a Rosy Boa to further acquaint participants with an animal group which some regarded with reserve.

The day of the trip dawned under overcast skies, but by mid-morning the sun was shining brightly, enticing snakes and lizards from their nocturnal retreats. The group proceeded through the Base to a dirt road, then headed toward a range of steep hills covered with boulders and brush—the site of the day's activities. There the party divided into three groups, led by herpetologists Turner, Russell Smith, and Jay Kilgore; then these groups scattered into the countryside—snake hooks at the ready—to seek their quarry.

During the entire day, the group saw a total of seven Speckled, five Red Diamond, and three Southern Pacific Rattlesnakes (the three species of rattlers found at Camp Pendleton), four Gopher Snakes, two Striped Racers, and many lizards, including Western Fence Lizards, Southern Alligator Lizards, Western Skinks, and a Horned Lizard. Much of the area was carpeted with wildflowers, and species such as sticky red monkey flowers, wild peonies, and lupine were among the most abundant. The highlight of the day bird-wise was a brilliant male Lazuli Bunting which attracted the group's attention just before lunch.

The members of the group were enthusiastic and energetic, and their conviviality added greatly to the enjoyment of a day in the field. Though none of those attending had previously gone out specifically to look for snakes, they cheerfully tramped up and down hills, wading through thick brush (and more than a little poison oak)—thoroughly getting into the experience. Everyone had a good time, and by day's end the weary naturalists had a greater knowledge and understanding of Southern California's scaly critters—gained through first-hand observation of them in their natural habitat.

Tanager Wins Award

At the Fifth International Conference of the Newsletter Association of America, held in New York in May, the WESTERN Tanager was granted an award for "overall excellence, appropriate design, typography, and printing quality." The award was the result of a national competition among organizational newsletters.

BOOKS

THE BIRDS OF NEPAL, with reference to Kashmir and Sikkim, by Robert L. Fleming, Sr., Robert L. Fleming, Jr., and Lain Singh Bangdel, (1976) \$19.50.

One of the best-arranged guides yet to come off the presses, this volume boasts colored plates of all the 800 birds recorded in Nepal within the past 100 years. The text, sensibly placed on the pages facing the plates, is very concise and complete, indicating, in meters and feet, the altitude at which each bird is found, the length of the bird in cm. and inches, its resident status, season of occurrence, abundance, and habitat.

Key marks are emphasized, as well as those marks which distinguish similar species. Behavior is well documented, and there are numerous remarks about voice. Where applicable, a sentence is included to indicate where to find the bird in the Kathmandu Valley—the most likely place for a visitor to go on a quick trip. However, the text also notes the status of the birds in the surrounding countries and states, including Kashmir, Garhwal, and Sikkim, thus expanding its useful range as a guide. Finally, it describes worldwide distribution of the birds, employing the numerical designation for each species used in the 10-volume *Ali-Ripley Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*.

While some of the shapes of the birds in the illustrations may appear a bit odd, and some of the colors are on the weird side, the book would have been worth many times its sizable price had it been available when we visited Nepal some five years ago.

—George W. Venatta



We regret to report that Shirley Wells died last month after a long struggle with cancer. Through the last couple of years, and even at the end, she maintained an astonishingly affirmative and vital interest in birds and conservation. Her achievements were formidable. She was a prime mover in the attempt to preserve Harbor Lake and Madrona Marsh as natural areas in a big city. She banded birds for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, helped plan the nature trails at Pt. Fermin, and for many years directed Breeding Bird Censuses for Southern California. She made an intensive study of Allen's Hummingbirds in Palos Verdes, and was the first person to prove that the wide-ranging migrants nested there. Those who knew her even casually—meeting her in the field or sharing one of her exciting field trips—came away impressed with a woman of great strength, modesty, and robust humor. She will be missed.

CALENDAR

Los Angeles Audubon Headquarters, Library, Bookstore, and Nature Museum are located at Audubon House, Plummer Park, 7377 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles 90046. Telephone: 876-0202. Hours: 10-3, Monday through Saturday.

Audubon Bird Report—call 874-1318

SUNDAY, JULY 17—Big Bear Lake and Vicinity. Meet at 8:00 a.m. at Boulder Bay Dam, at the west end of the Lake. Birds to be looked for are the Hepatic Tanager, Gray Vireo, Gray Flycatcher, and Virginia's Warbler. Take the San Bernardino Fwy. (Interstate 10) east, and then go north to San Bernardino. Take Hwy. 18 to Big Bear Lake. Leader: Kimball Garrett, 479-8667.

SATURDAY, JULY 23—Mt. Pinos. Meet at 9:00 a.m. at the intersection of Frazier Park Rd. and Cuddy Valley Rd. Birds to be looked for are Brewer's Sparrows, Lark Sparrows, Fox Sparrows, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Dusky Flycatcher, Calliope Hummingbird, White-headed Woodpecker, and, at the top, the Condor. Go north on Interstate 5 to Frazier Park off-ramp; go west past the town of Frazier Park to Cuddy Valley Rd. in Lake-of-the-Woods. Leader: Jean Brandt, 788-5188.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 25—Pelagic Trip to Santa Barbara Island. In addition to the pelagic species, the party will look for fall vagrants on the island. The *Paisano* will depart from the Channel Islands National Monument dock in the Ventura Marina at 6:00 a.m. You are requested to be at the dock 30 minutes before departure time. Price: \$18 per person. Make checks payable to the L.A. Audubon Society and send with a self-addressed, stamped envelope and your telephone number to Phil Sayre, 660 S. Garfield, Apt. 306, Monterey Park, Calif. 91754 (phone: 288-0545). No refunds or cancellations within 48 hours of departure. Take Hwy. 101 north to Ventura, exit at Victoria Ave., and follow the Channel Islands National Monument signs to the Marina.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 24—Pelagic Trip on Monterey Bay. The *Miss Monterey* will leave Fisherman's Wharf, Sam's Fishing Fleet Dock, at 7:30 a.m. You are requested to be at the dock thirty minutes before departure time. Price: \$15 per person. Make checks payable to L.A. Audubon Society and send with a self-addressed, stamped envelope and your telephone number to Phil Sayre, 660 So. Garfield, Apt. 306, Monterey Park, Calif. 91754 (phone: 288-0545). No refunds or cancellations within 48 hours of departure. Directions for finding the Wharf can be obtained in Monterey. Leader: Arnold Small, 275-8823.

Golden Trout Workshop

This year's Audubon workshop in the High Sierras will be conducted from July 23-Aug. 10, offering participants a memorable encounter with the high mountain flora and fauna, plus good meals and a stimulating series of guest lectures. Tents and meals provided. Fee: \$70-\$90 per adult. Write or call Mrs. Tomi Sollen, 825 No. Soledad, Santa Barbara 93103 (805-966-4836).



The Los Angeles Audubon



Sunday, August 7th

Will Rogers State Park

8:00 a.m. to dusk

Bring Your Family. Bring Your Friends.

Bring a Picnic Lunch.

Free Beer & Soft Drinks

Spend a day exploring this new addition to the Santa Monica Mountains Park system. To reach the Park, take Sunset Blvd. west from the San Diego Fwy. The entrance road is about six miles from the Fwy., on the right. The festivities will get underway with an 8:00 a.m. birdwalk, for those who arrive early.



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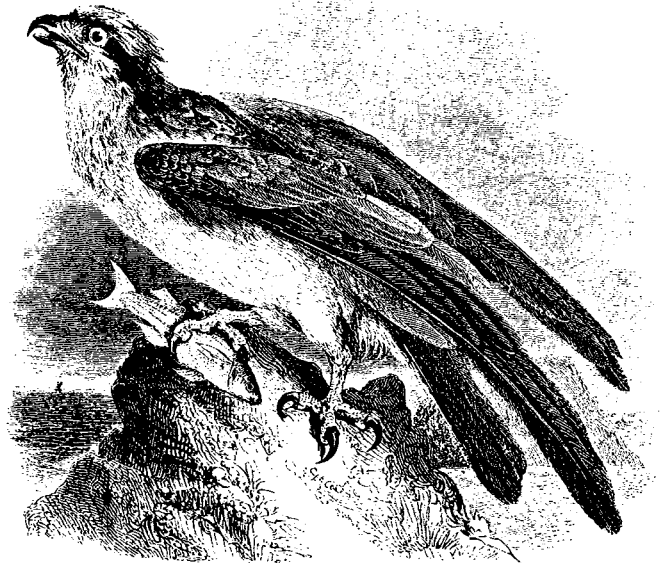
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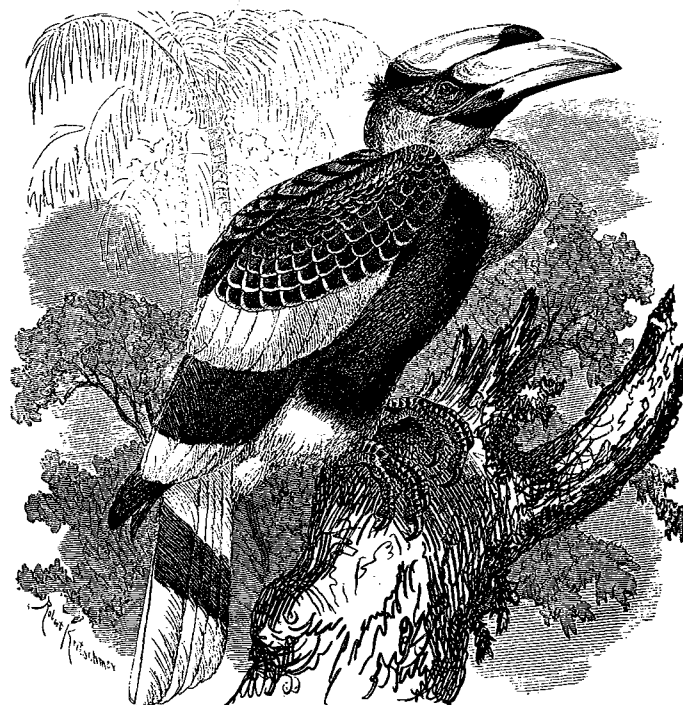
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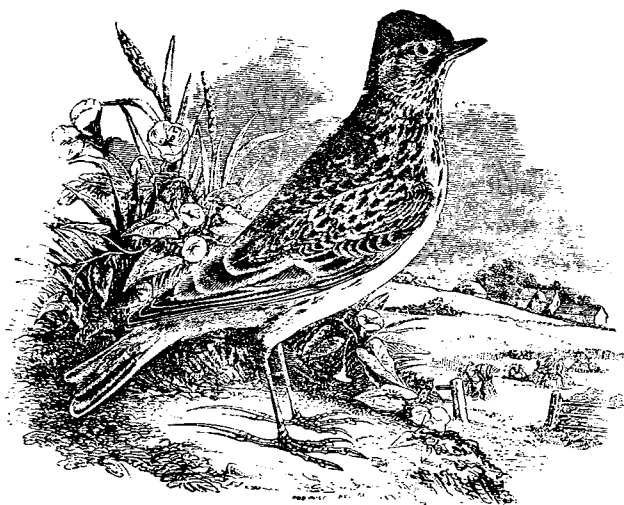
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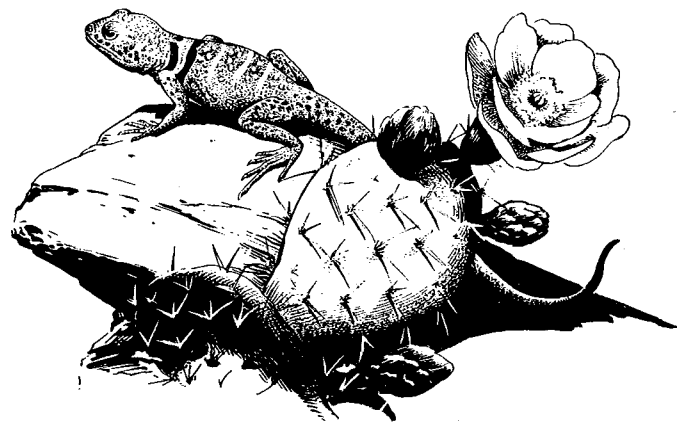
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