WESTERN TANAGER

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FOXES

Article and Photography by Lee Jones

I had the feeling I was being followed. I had been hiking for nearly three hours along a well used trail and I was sure there was no one else around. A chill ran up my back. Ridiculous, I thought. Who would want to follow *me?* Slowly, I turned my head, apprehensive that there just *might* be someone or some thing lurking in the bushes. I was also more than a little concerned that there would be nothing there and I would feel foolish! Much to my surprise however, I was being followed. No, not a human bent on evil doings—not even a large, ferocious animal. There in the middle of the trail no more than fifty feet behind me was a fox, hardly any larger or more ferocious than a cocker spaniel! The fox stood motionless, as did I, staring straight at me. After studying it for a few moments I turned and resumed walking. About a hundred yards up the trail I once again turned to look behind me. And once again, there was the fox. Still fifty feet behind. Still standing motionless. I repeated this procedure (or was it a game) several more times before it occurred to me that I had never seen the critter move. Not once!

I decided to play a trick on it. This time I walked backwards in the same direction I had been heading. The fox immediately came trotting (not "stealthily slipping" but "gamefully trotting") up the trail, just keeping pace. When I stopped it stopped. I was about to laugh out loud when I tripped over an exposed rootstock. In a flash the fox was gone. Alas, I did feel quite foolish as I sat there on my derriere looking back at an empty trail. Lesson learned—never try to outfox a fox!

Kit Fox *Vulpes macrotis*

Island Fox *Urocyon littoralis* "stalking" a beetle.

Perhaps you've had a similar experience. If not with a fox, perhaps a coyote. Foxes do have an inquisitive nature about them. It wasn't the first time I had been followed by a fox. Nor would it be the last.

Let's take a look at the foxes of California. We have four species (the Coyote being a wolf, not a fox), three of which can be found near Los Angeles. The **Gray Fox** (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*) is the most widespread, being found virtually throughout the state in most brushy and forested habitats. It is chiefly nocturnal, but like my friend on the trail that day, will sometimes belie its reputation for the night life and make its appearance in broad daylight. Most Gray Foxes are encountered in the headlights of a car as they dash across the road in pursuit of mice. They do not adapt as well as coyotes to encroaching civilization and are, thus, not frequently encountered in populated areas. Their presence is often indicated by their distinctive yips and yelps heard at night around the campfire, or by their scats left on the trail for all to see. Of course, if our sense of smell were as acute as that of a fox we would have no trouble detecting their presence. Foxes have a distinctive musky odor (their own built-in perfume), but of course we, with our myopic noses, must practically crawl into an active den before getting so much as a whiff.

The similar **Island Fox** (*Urocyon littoralis*) is confined to the Channel Islands where it may have arrived, as one theory has it, many thousands of years ago as pets of the local Chumash Indians. After thousands of years of isolation on these islands the original Gray Fox stock evolved into a diminutive form barely half the size of its mainland counterpart, but otherwise quite similar.

Island Foxes are much more active during the day than Gray Foxes, though still primarily nocturnal. Their diet, seemingly unfoxlike, consists of beetles, grubs, berries, seeds and an occasional bird egg or two in season. As suggested by the photograph above they squint a lot. This trait has been variously regarded as the result of a chronic eye disease and to nothing more than poor day time vision, among other less plausible explanations (e.g.. "maybe they're just sleepy after stalking berries all night").

Island Foxes are at the same time timid yet insatiably inquisitive. I have had them follow me around while conducting my field studies and have even had them on occasion run up to me all squinty-eyed, take a sniff, then dash off into the brush only to stop and look back a few meters away before dashing off

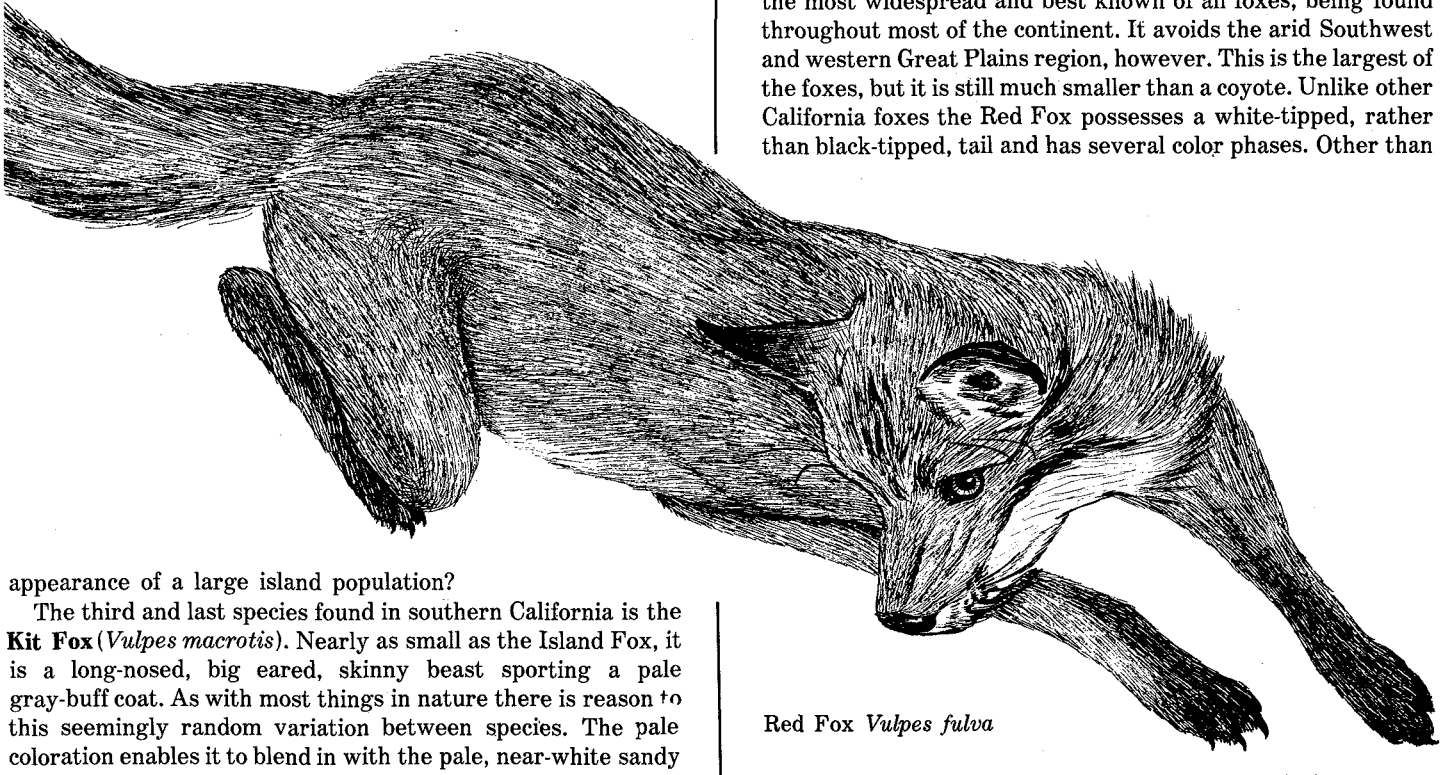
again. Island Foxes are plentiful on the northern Channel Islands and rather plentiful as well on San Clemente Island—I've counted as many as 28 in a single day on Santa Rosa—but much less common on Santa Catalina and San Nicolas. Anacapa and Santa Barbara islands are too small to support fox populations. In hundreds of hours wandering the back roads of Catalina I have never seen a fox and only occasionally encountered any signs of them. They were formerly common on San Nicolas Island, or at least they *appeared* to be common. Navy personnel stationed on the island had grown accustomed to feeding handouts to these irresistable little creatures. Every evening at precisely 6:45 p.m. I would watch as dozens of foxes converged on the mess hall from all directions to feast on the garbage put out for them by the cooks. However, many diseased and crippled animals were being sustained on this ample, but less than nutritious food supply. Fearing a spread of disease to other parts of the island, the California Department of Fish and Game put a stop to all feeding practices and the foxes soon disappeared. Many died, as this inflated population was left to fend for itself. As Charles Darwin would have said, only the fittest survived. Now foxes are seldom seen on this island. Did most of them die? Or did the prevalence of tame foxes around the barracks merely give the appearance of a large island population?

The third and last species found in southern California is the **Kit Fox** (*Vulpes macrotis*). Nearly as small as the Island Fox, it is a long-nosed, big eared, skinny beast sporting a pale gray-buff coat. As with most things in nature there is reason to this seemingly random variation between species. The pale coloration enables it to blend in with the pale, near-white sandy and alkaline soils in the deserts and arid San Joaquin Valley where this animal occurs. The large ears, long nose and slim body have to do with something called thermoregulation. Simply put, that's the ability to stay cool when it's hot and, conversely, to stay warm when it's cold. Heat is constantly being generated as a by-product of metabolism. This internally generated heat escapes through our skin; if it didn't we'd burn ourselves up—literally. In cold weather heat tends to escape faster than it can be produced and in hot weather it doesn't escape fast enough. The more surface area exposed to the air the more places where heat can escape. Thus, a large surface area is advantageous to animals living in warm climates. Imagine a ball of yarn as a living, heat-producing organism. As a tightly wound sphere it would lose the least amount of heat (least surface area) for its size (volume). After your cat has finished with it, spinning a web of yarn over the entire house, it would lose heat very rapidly as it now has many more times the surface exposed to the air for the same volume. Similary, the Kit Fox, with its elongate proportions, is able to lose body heat more rapidly than, say, an Arctic Fox with its short snout, small ears and stout body.

Like many animals, the Kit Fox has suffered greatly at the hands of man, largely as an innocent victim. The Kit Fox is an excellent "mouser" and therefore highly beneficial to the rancher, whose livestock suffer on rangeland riddled with rodent burrows. However, many ranchers, fearing substantial losses of livestock from coyotes, eagles, bobcats and other predators, have baited their pastures with poisoned meat. The Kit Fox, usually an unintended victim, has suffered the most from this practice and is now so scarce that the San Joaquin Valley subspecies has been placed on the Endangered Species List.

The only other species of fox occurring in California is the **Red Fox** (*Vulpes fulva*) of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade Range of northern California. In North America as a whole, it is the most widespread and best known of all foxes, being found throughout most of the continent. It avoids the arid Southwest and western Great Plains region, however. This is the largest of the foxes, but it is still much smaller than a coyote. Unlike other California foxes the Red Fox possesses a white-tipped, rather than black-tipped, tail and has several color phases. Other than the red phase, there is a rare black phase (actually dark slate-gray) and an equally rare silver phase. Most common in the Sierras is an intermediate or cross between the black and the red—a rather unimpressive dirt-brown phase. Because of their beauty and relative rareness, Red Fox furs of all the pure color phases are highly sought among fur traders. Of course, with continued trapping these pure color phases will become increasingly scarce, increasingly valuable and less frequently experienced in the flesh.

In light of the above, perhaps the next time you're tracking (or being tracked by) a fox you can share a little more camaraderie. □



Red Fox *Vulpes fulva*

illustration by Lee Jones

Kimball Garrett

A CLOSER LOOK

In this issue, we'll take a closing look at variation in southern California's birds, and zero in with a strigid analysis of one of the most unique creatures in the region—the birdwatcher.

A unique attribute of the science of ornithology—the study of birds—is the degree to which the amateur, untrained in the disciplines of biology, can contribute to empiricism and theory alike. Many landmark studies and guides have been authored by persons with little or no formal training in ornithology. Massive date collection efforts, such as Christmas Bird Counts, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Breeding Bird Surveys, Audubon Breeding Bird and Winter Bird Plot Censuses, the Cornell Nest Record Program, and the *American Birds* Regional Distributional Reports, depend almost completely on the efforts of volunteer amateurs. This heroic contribution is possible because proficiency at bird identification requires little academic training, and this proficiency is the cornerstone of bird data gathering.

While field marks and behavior patterns of individual birdwatchers vary to an astonishing degree, all are united by a common potential to contribute to an advancement of our knowledge of birds. Motivations and goals of birdwatchers are about as varied as the facial patterns of alternate plumaged Ruddy Turnstones or the songs of Bewick's Wrens. Some birders might be likened to a sallying Olive-sided Flycatcher, actively darting after a prey item (in the birder's case, an interesting bird) within easy reach of the home perch. Others recall a sandgrouse, with regular long-distance flights for a fix of a vital resource (for the sandgrouse, water; for the birder, some lost warbler in Death Valley on Memorial Day weekend). There are the birding jaegers who wait for another birder to locate an interesting species and then close in for their share. And, happily, there are the gleaning creepers who search every nook and cranny on their home territory to turn up whatever they can. Some birders, like waxwings, are highly social; others resemble the most solitary raptors. There are storm-petrels among birders who come ashore only when conditions or urges dictate; and in contrast, there are the birders who are as comfortable on the open ocean as a roadrunner.

This variation in birdwatchers is a simple consequence of human nature. But any birder, from loon to bunting, enjoys that potential position of contributing knowledge to further the state of the art and the science. Previous "Closer Look" articles have summarized our knowledge of some field challenges below the species level, while posing a few questions along the way. Let me conclude this series by suggesting a few additional challenges for the birder. No lone birder will master any of these challenges, but light can be shed on each of them. Birdwatchers particularly interested in any field problem should consult their local museum, university, ornithological club, or Audubon society for advice on investigating the problem and publishing the results. Here are a few hastily thought-up examples:

1. A certain proportion ot adult Heerman's Gulls show conspicuous white patches formed by the primary coverts of the wing; what is the frequency of this trait?
2. The Fox Sparrow has several well-defined subspecies groups occurring in southern California: gray, swollen-billed local breeders; gray, small-billed northern montane breeders; brown north coastal breeders; and rusty boreal/eastern breeders. What is the relative seasonal abundance of these forms? Remember that only large series of museum specimens can answer some of these questions.
3. Phalaropes employ a foraging method which involves

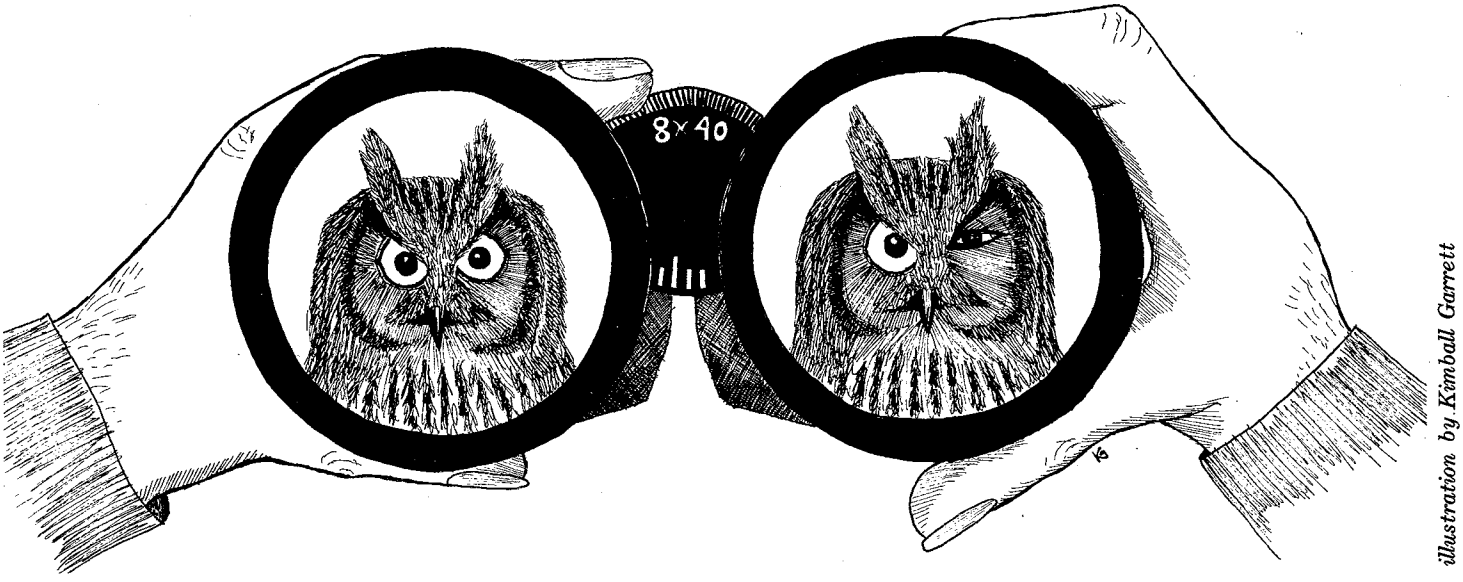


illustration by Kimball Garrett

"spinning" on the surface of the water in order to stir up food particles. Do individuals spin clockwise, counter-clockwise, or both? Does this depend on whether the individual is "right-footed" or "left-footed?" Does the direction of spinning change when the migrating phalarope moves to the southern hemisphere? (Pardon the tongue-in-cheek questions). One might concoct a host of other such questions.

4. Barn Owls have recognizably different color morphs, one quite white below and buffy above, and the other buffy below and deep gray and cinnamon above. What is the frequency of the darker morph? Are there any noticeable geographical patterns in its occurrence?
5. The songs of Rufous-sided Towhees are simple, but quite variable geographically (*a la* Mountain Chickadee, see June 1980 *Western Tanager*). What are the salient geographical patterns of such dialects?
6. Many passerines, such as most orioles, grosbeaks, tanagers, goldfinches, and *Carpodacus* finches, have distinct male and female plumages, with year-old males either resembling females or at least being noticeably duller than fully adult males. How often do these "immature" males successfully breed, or at least attempt to breed?
7. Swainson's Hawks have easily distinguishable light and dark morphs (with many birds being intermediate). Do like birds tend to pair? What is the geographical pattern of occurrence of the two forms and their intermediates?

Clearly, the number of problems to be tackled is infinite. Try, as a personal exercise, picking a small, easily definable problem. Sorting out the facts, and the underlying evolutionary bases, will be rewarding, challenging, and very stimulating. □

BIRDS OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

by Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett

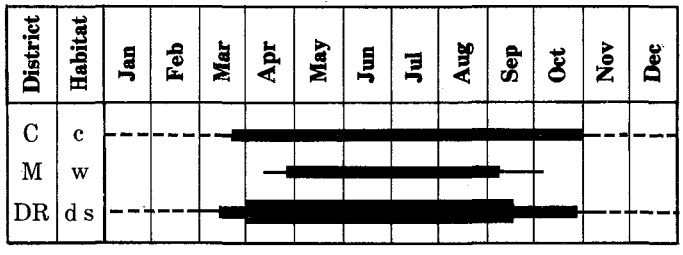
This is the third in a series of excerpts from the soon to be published *Birds of Southern California* by Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett.

COMMON POORWILL *Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*

Fairly common to common breeder in desert scrub, brushlands, and open woodlands throughout much of the region. There is probably considerable withdrawal in winter, but winter status imperfectly known.

Poorwills are absent as breeders only on the Channel Is., in agricultural areas of Districts S and R, and in the highest and most heavily-forested portions of District M. Most numerous in the arid scrub of District D, from sagebrush regions of Mono and Inyo Co. south through the Mohave and Colorado Deserts. In District C found in hills and foothills, being locally rather common in open chaparral.

Winter status is complex and imperfectly known. There are many winter records for District D (particularly in the southern portion), and numerous records for the length of the coast in District C. Undoubtedly present in some numbers in both areas (perhaps even rather commonly), but the tendency to be inactive and the ability to undergo prolonged torpor in cooler weather makes this species difficult to find in winter. Note that the bar graphs indicate detectibility through the year, indicating an increase in vocalizing by late March. In an absolute sense this species is probably not rare in winter in District C—it is only rarely detected. In District D there is a clear gradient in the timing of the onset of spring vocalizing (it may be up to a month later in the extreme northern portions). There is undoubtedly some movement of breeding birds out of the region in winter (particularly of birds from the mountains and the northern interior). Transients have been recorded away from known breeding areas in District S, along the immediate coast, and on the Channel Is. (mainly in fall in these areas). Small numbers winter on the larger Channel Is. □



■ = common
▬ = fairly common
— = uncommon
--- = rare but regular
C = coastal and ocean
M = mountains
DR = deserts/Colorado River
c = chaparral/brush
w = woodland
d = desert scrub
s = sagebrush

illustration by Lee Jones

Shum Suffel

BIRDS of the SEASON

Mid-summer promises few surprises—nesting, except in the high mountains, is over, and fall migration has not begun. But we've said this before and been wrong, and hopefully we'll be wrong again. The Salton Sea, despite the heat, is a must in mid-August, as **Wood Storks, Black Skimmers, Laughing Gulls,** and **Gull-billed Terns** are regular there in late summer; to be hoped for are **Roseate Spoonbills,** southern **herons, frigatebirds,** and possibly **Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks.** An invasion of **boobies** seems long overdue. Single boobies, or none at all, have been our fate since 1977 when eight or more boobies were at the Sea; we must go back to 1972 for a real invasion, when some forty Blue-foots were there, or to the record year, 1971, when not only did some 100 Blue-foots reach the Sea, but forty or more flew on to the coast where they were seen from the Mexican border to Monterey Bay. Unfortunately, the field guides are less than adequate on the identification of immature boobies An observer's attention should be focused on the color of the soft parts (legs and bill) and on the pattern of the upperparts (mantle and rump); immature Blue-foots often have a dark breast and light belly, similar to the Brown Booby, so this mark may be unreliable.

The possibility of one or two rare vagrants in August cannot be overlooked, Vagrant chasers will not soon forget the **Wood Thrush** in Verdugo Hills (August 1968), California's only live **Red-headed Woodpecker** at the Wister Unit near the Salton Sea (July-August 1971), or the **Thick-billed Kingbird** along the Colorado River above Blythe (August 1978).

May and early June saw the migration of western Passerines climax then wane. Flycatchers were particularly conspicuous with **Ash-throated** and **Western Flycatchers** being early, and **Olive-sideds, wood-pewees,** and **Willow Flycatchers** coming later. Of special interest were two pairs of **Wied's Crested Flycatchers** at Morongo Valley after mid-May; this is their most westerly nesting area. Warblers, too, came through in numbers, with the Wilson's Warbler, as usual, being the one most often seen.

The rarest birds of the late spring were two shorebirds. A **Hudsonian Godwit** (third California record) at the Edwards Air Force Base marsh was found by Jon Dunn and the Spears on 9 May, staying until the 19th. California's first two Hudsonians were photographed by their finders, but not seen again. Almost as rare was an **Upland Sandpiper** at Furnace Creek Ranch 23-24 May; it had left by the 25th, when several local birders who made the long trip were disappointed.

The San Pedro to Osborne Banks pelagic trip on 4 May found the expected thousands of **Sooty** and **Pink-footed Shearwaters;** the highlight was a **Black-footed Albatross** which lit beside the Vantuna. Eight **Black Oystercatchers** were studied on the isolated breakwater at Los Angeles Harbor from the boat. A highly-plumaged **Arctic Loon** at Harbor Lake on 31 May (Mitch Heindel) was unusual at this slightly inland location. A report of a **Magnificent Frigatebird** at King Harbor on 25 May could not be confirmed, as frigatebirds seldom stay to be admired. Twenty **Brant** on the settling ponds near Whitewater, Riverside Co. (David Koeppel, 2 May), undoubtedly had come north of the Gulf of California. **Fulvous Whistling-Ducks** formerly nested in the San Joaquin Valley and, less commonly, along the coast, but today they are rarely seen except around the Salton Sea. Thus two coastal reports are significant (although they may pertain to escapees): While doing Least Tern surveys at McGrath State Beach on the evening of 8 June, Ed Navojosky watched a whistling-duck as it dropped into the nearby sewage ponds; another was at the mouth of the Santa Marina River (along with a **Laughing Gull**) on 17 May (Paul Lehman). Among the nesting ducks in the Antelope Valley was a **Redhead** with five ducklings on 5 May at the Edwards Air Force Base marsh (Lloyd Kiff).

Good news was the return of a pair of **Zone-tailed Hawks** to the Santa Rosa Mountains this spring; we hope for successful nesting this summer. The only **Broad-winged Hawk** was found by Russ and Marion Wilson on 2 May, during one of their daily surveys at Morongo Valley. A report of an adult **Northern Goshawk** near Seven Oaks in the San Bernardino Mtns. (Mitch Heindel, 1 June) should make us aware of possible nesting in our mountains.

A **Red Knot** in alternate plumage stopped briefly at Malibu Lagoon on 8 May (Hal Baxter), and three were at the unusual inland location of the Edwards Air Force Base marsh on 9 May (Jon Dunn). A **Stilt Sandpiper** was at Furnace Creek Ranch 23-26 May (Donna Dittmann). A **Franklin's Gull** in full plumage was found at dawn on 16 May at the Edwards Air Force Base marsh by David Markley. It or another adult was there on 27 May (Jon Dunn).Two **Arctic Terns** at tiny Lake Los Angeles in the Antelope Valley (Kimball Garrett, Fred Heath, et al, 1-3 June) were the first ever to be found inland in the county.

A **Common Ground-Dove** at Lloyd Kiff's feeder in Pacific Palisades on 8 May was one of the few ever found in Los Angeles County. The reservoir below Camp Angelus in the San Bernardino Mtns. is the most reliable place to find **Whip-poor-wills** now that they are no longer being reported from the San Jacinto Mtns. **Black Swifts** were seen in upper Santa Anita Canyon above Arcadia and along the north fork of the San Jacinto River in the San Jacinto Mtns. A few **Chimney Swifts** were observed over the Forest Lawn Drive settling ponds on 3 and 5 June (Jon Dunn, Kurt Campbell); fifty were at the nearby Burbank Studios in summer 1978. Two incurable birders were entertained by **Cassin's Kingbirds** catching insects near the light standards at Dodger Stadium as late as 10:00 p.m. on 3 June (Jon Dunn, Kimball Garrett; the Dodgers beat Cincinnati 5-1 by the way). Very disturbing is the news that no **Vermilion Flycatchers** or **Bell's Vireos** were seen on the L.A.A.S. trip to Morongo Valley on 17 May; this is one of the few nesting outposts for either species in the state.

Warblers seldom suffer from lack of attention, and certainly never during late spring. **Black-and-Whites** were widely seen, with a male in Tuna Cyn. (Phil Sayre, 8 May), a female at Morongo Valley (David Koeppel, 14 May), and another female at Scotty's Castle in Death Valley (Barry and Terry Clark, 14 May). At least two

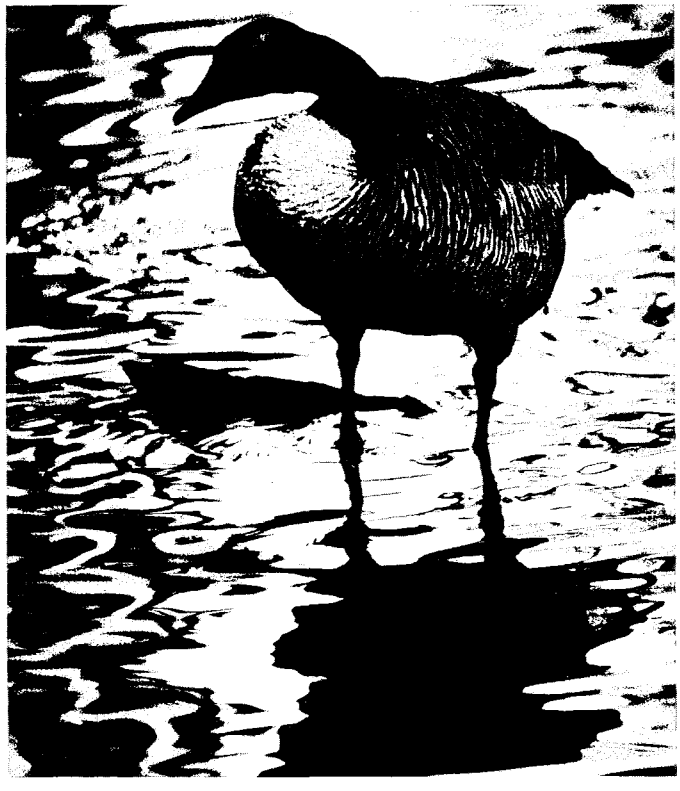
pairs of **Lucy's** were at Morongo Valley, presumably to nest. **Northern Parulas** are more numerous in spring than in fall, and several were found this year: One near Palm Springs (David Koeppel, 12 May), a male in Orange Co. (Doug Willick), a male in the Antelope Valley (Kimball Garrett and the Cupples, 26 May), another male at Mohave Narrows (Peggy Van Essen, 29 May), and a singing male at Harbor Lake (Terry Clark and Donna Dittmann, 3 June). Others were noted on the northern desert oases. The only **Magnolia** was at Scotty's Castle on 24 May, and the only **Cape May** was at Deep Springs about the same time. **Yellow-throated Warblers** are rare even in the Inyo/Mono region where many vagrants are routing; two were found there this spring, one by Starr Saphir (23 May), and another at Oasis by Richard Webster (30 May-1 June). A singing male **Bay-breasted Warbler** stayed at a ranch pond in the Antelope Valley for one day only (Jon Dunn, 2 June). **Blackpolls** are usually found in fall, and only on the coast; thus a male at Oasis (Richard Webster, 26 May) was of interest. **Ovenbirds** were found at Scotty's Castle on 23 May and at Deep Springs on the 26th. Only two **Northern Waterthrushes** were reported—one at Morongo Valley on 17 May (Brian Daniels), and another at Furnace Creek Ranch on the 24th. Female **Hooded Warblers** were found at Big Pine Creek, Inyo Co. (Jon Dunn, 26 May) and at Furnace Creek Ranch (Richard Webster, 29 May). A **Canada Warbler,** rare any time, but particularly in spring, was found at Oasis (Brian Daniels, 26 May).

Birders waited many years for the first confirmed record of a **Common Grackle** in California (24 May 1975), but since then one or more have been seen every year. Richard Webster found one, possibly two, at Deep Springs, and another was at Furnace Creek Ranch on 24-25 May. A singing male **Hepatic Tanager** was at Brock Ranch, Imperial Co., on 23 May (Shum Suffel). **Summer Tanagers** were widespread along the Colorado River, and were also found at Brock Ranch, Morongo Valley, Whitewater Fish Hatchery, Mohave Narrows, and as far north as Tecopa (Jan Tarle) and Furnace Creek Ranch (the Clarks, 14 May). **Indigo Buntings** are among the "eastern" species that are being seen more frequently in recent years. Two May reports are of a male at Morongo Valley on the 17th (John Hamilton), and another male at Furnace Creek Ranch on the 24th. Five **Cassin's Finches** at Scotty's Castle (the Clarks, 14 May) were undoubtedly spring migrants bound for the higher mountains. Lloyd Kiff had a singing male **Lark Bunting** at the north end of the Kelso Valley in Kern Co. on 3 May.

And what did the vagrant chasers say about the Memorial Day hejira to Inyo and Mono Counties? "Disappointing" was the word. A review of the above records makes this seem impossible, but we should realize that many of these rare birds were seen by only one or two observers, and missed by dozens.

While the Salton Sea is a must in late summer, the mountains are much more comfortable. The Baldwin Lake, Arrastre Creek, Rose Mine trip promises nesting Eared Grebes at Baldwin Lake, with Common Nighthawks in the early morning and evening; Solitary Vireos (*plumbeus race*); Calliope Hummingbirds; and Gray Flycatchers and Gray Vireos in the pinyon-juniper habitat between Arrastre Creek and Rose Mine. On the way home, by way of Onyx Summit, have a picnic at South Fork Campground and then plan to be below Camp Angeles to hear the Whip-poor-will (no tapes please) by 7:30 p.m. In the San Jacinto Mtns. area, try Pinyon Jays at Hurkey Creek Camp, Purple Martins across the road near Lake Hemet, Black Swifts just below the road where it crosses the north fork of the San Jacinto River just before Lake Fulmor, and Saw-Whet Owls around Lake Fulmor in the evening. I'll see you in the mountains this July. □

Send any interesting bird observations you may have to Shum Suffel, 1105 No. Hollister Ave., Pasadena, CA 91104.



New Editor for Western Tanager

Mary Test will be taking over the duties of editor with the September issue of the *Western Tanager*. Mary has been an active member of the chapter's conservation committee and, as an employee of the advertising firm Baxter, Gurian and Mazzei, she already has valuable experience in the editing and graphic design fields.

It is with mixed emotions that the present editor steps down after only one year. Certainly serving as editor of the *Western Tanager* has been one of my most gratifying endeavors. Upholding the high standards that have made the *Western Tanager* a leading newsletter has proven both challenging and consuming. It is the "consuming" aspect that forced me in the end to relinquish my duties after such a short term.

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to those who made Volume 46 possible—the contributors, those selfless individuals who were somehow able to produce a lead article on a moment's notice; the columnists who never missed a deadline; Mary Colvig, my typesetter, who spent many evenings and Saturdays producing last minute copy changes; Artisan Press who always came through when I insisted that the *Tanager* be printed by "yesterday"; and the many, many unsung heroes working behind the scenes.

Sandy Wohlgemuth

CONSERVATION

What is more thrilling than the first sighting of a **California Condor?** There is little in the natural world to compare with the imperturbable flight of this magnificent bird. It is not only the dramatic black-and-white underwing pattern and the orange head of the adult that makes a condor, it is the sheer size of the bird, the size that makes a Red-tailed Hawk seem as small as a Kestrel. How long will we be able to experience the excitement of condor discovery? How long will we marvel at the breathtaking, effortless glide, the serenity of total control of the ethereal environment?

There are only 20 to 30 birds left in a population that used to range from Baja to British Columbia. Even their meager contemporary habitat is shrinking. Their eggshells have been thinned by pesticides. They feed on animals poisoned by compound 1080. They lay one egg every two years—and that's when times are good. Ignorant and misguided hunters can't resist a potshot at a big bird suddenly skimming over a ridge. If ever a creature appeared doomed to extinction, it is the condor that seems to have all the cards stacked against it.

A distinguished group of independent scientists was commissioned to study the problem and in 1978 this Advisory Panel on the California Condor concluded: 1. That the condor is indeed on the brink of extinction; 2. It cannot survive without management and protection of its environment; 3. The only reasonable hope for increasing the wild population is a long-term commitment to a program of captive propagation; and 4. All free-living condors should be trapped, marked, equipped with radio transmitters, then released and studied in the field. National Audubon and the American Ornithological Union strongly approved the recommendation of the Advisory Panel. The Cooperative California Condor Conservation Program was officially announced in December 1979 under the joint auspices of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Audubon Society. Congress appropriated $500,000 (with more to follow) and National Audubon pledged $500,000 from its own resources.

Then, an unexpected event occurred: the Sierra Club and the Friends of the Earth came out against captive breeding. And this spring Golden Gate Audubon, the largest National Audubon chapter in the country, joined the opposition.

What are the objections? Carl Koford, the pioneer condor biologist who studied the bird intensively in 1939 has said: Condors should be "forever free." Trapping, even if achieved with great care, will produce psychological and physiological stress and, inevitably, some physical injury. Transporting them and then holding them for sexing will expose them to avian diseases. After release, even small injuries to wings may impede their flight. Confinement may result in loss of social rank and may induce conflict with uncaptured birds; released birds may be driven off or killed. Birds that have escaped capture in baited traps may become so frightened that they will avoid other food and lose it to competitors. If condors are not surviving well in the wild, why should we expect released, cage-raised birds to do better? They will be at a disadvantage competing with free-born condors and Golden Eagles that are familiar with the terrain and the weather and have the learned skills of a lifetime. The decline in the condor population could have been caused by shooting, nest area disturbance, poisoned food and seasonal food shortage. These are conditions that can all be corrected, so why risk capture? Here is Kenneth Brower of Friends of the Earth:

> "I knew what I felt about the bold USFWS plan for condors before meeting Dr. Koford, before hearing his wishful alternatives, his emotion-charged views on the bird with which he spent his youth. I knew he was right. The line, "All free-living condors should be trapped...and fitted with radio transmitters," was enough for me. I did not have to read further, to the part about laparotomies and the other indignities that would be performed on the birds.
>
> Something seems to happen, often, to men for whom wildlife becomes a profession. The USFWS and Audubon people have become so concerned with the problem of the bird that they have lost sight of what a *bird* is. What use to us is a great soarer that has been handled, marked, laparotomized, popcorned by zoo crowds, and radio-tagged? A flying Pleistocene radio station. Having dreamed up a neat bit of technology with an application to biology—a miniature transmitter—we are compelled to try it out. It *is* neat, but it will never tell us as much about condors as the human eye, with a patient brain behind it. (Those were the instruments Koford used, back in 1939.)
>
> And what if nothing can bring the birds back? What if Gymnogyps, watching Los Angeles sprawl toward its last hills, has simply decided it is time to go? Perhaps feeding on ground squirrels, for a bird that once fed on mastodonts, is too steep a fall from glory. If it is time for the condor to follow Teratornis, it should go out unburdened by radio transmitters."

Says Golden Gate Audubon: "We feel that the death of even a single California Condor caused by the Recovery Program would do irreparable harm not only to the condor as a species but in general to wildlife preservation, and to the National Audubon Society and its chapters. Therefore, we urge that consideration be given to all alternatives to the breeding program." What are these alternatives?

1. Increased and expanded habitat protection. Assess historical and present habitat needs of the California Condor. Assure preservation, by any means necessary, including land purchase and protective zoning.
2. A Golden Eagle non-lethal control program within the condor range, as eagles compete and dominate condors at food sources.
3. Increased research into effects of chemicals on the condor, especially on the use of 1080 to kill ground squirrels. Herbicides and pesticides should be stringently controlled by Federal and State agencies.
4. Increased research into the ecology of the California Condor. Present data are inadequate. A more firm base of information seems necessary before an intrusion into or disruption of the

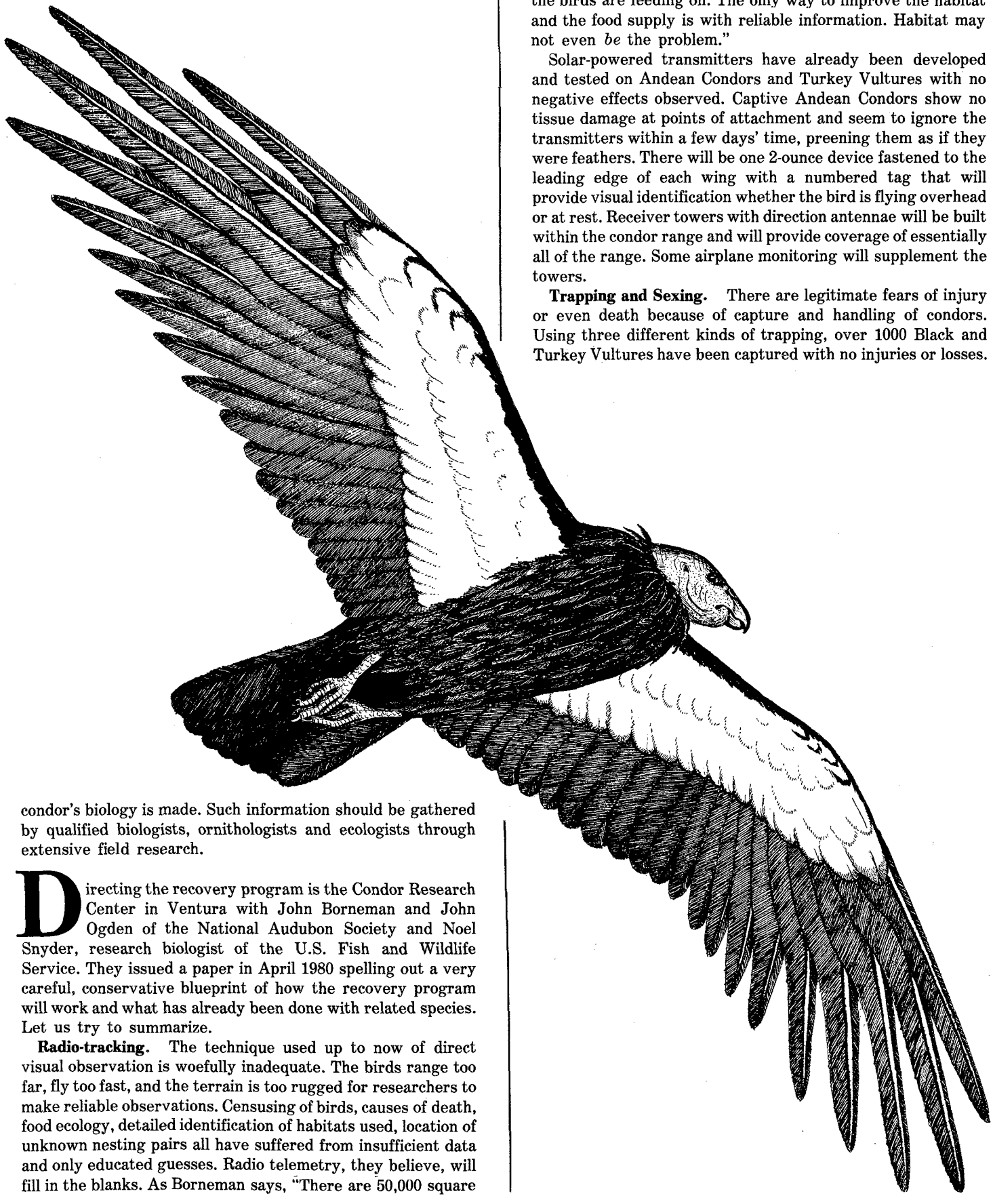


illustration by Lee Jones

condor's biology is made. Such information should be gathered by qualified biologists, ornithologists and ecologists through extensive field research.

Directing the recovery program is the Condor Research Center in Ventura with John Borneman and John Ogden of the National Audubon Society and Noel Snyder, research biologist of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. They issued a paper in April 1980 spelling out a very careful, conservative blueprint of how the recovery program will work and what has already been done with related species. Let us try to summarize.

Radio-tracking. The technique used up to now of direct visual observation is woefully inadequate. The birds range too far, fly too fast, and the terrain is too rugged for researchers to make reliable observations. Censusing of birds, causes of death, food ecology, detailed identification of habitats used, location of unknown nesting pairs all have suffered from insufficient data and only educated guesses. Radio telemetry, they believe, will fill in the blanks. As Borneman says, "There are 50,000 square miles of habitat. We don't know if all of it is being used or what the birds are feeding on. The only way to improve the habitat and the food supply is with reliable information. Habitat may not even *be* the problem."

Solar-powered transmitters have already been developed and tested on Andean Condors and Turkey Vultures with no negative effects observed. Captive Andean Condors show no tissue damage at points of attachment and seem to ignore the transmitters within a few days' time, preening them as if they were feathers. There will be one 2-ounce device fastened to the leading edge of each wing with a numbered tag that will provide visual identification whether the bird is flying overhead or at rest. Receiver towers with direction antennae will be built within the condor range and will provide coverage of essentially all of the range. Some airplane monitoring will supplement the towers.

Trapping and Sexing. There are legitimate fears of injury or even death because of capture and handling of condors. Using three different kinds of trapping, over 1000 Black and Turkey Vultures have been captured with no injuries or losses.

Nine hundred African vultures were taken in South Africa with only two losses, and those were caused by netting too many birds at one time. There have been no injuries or fatalities in the trapping of Andean Condors.

Though there are other sexing techniques, the fastest and most reliable is laparoscopy. A minute incision is made in the abdominal wall and direct inspection of the sex organs is made with a small optical telescope. To the layman this may seem demeaning, painful, over-manipulative and dangerous. In 1979 in Panama 600 Black Vultures were examined in this manner with no infection, injury or mortality. With captured Turkey Vultures it has become routine. The skills of researchers and veterinarians in this procedure is well established.

Testing. All captured condors will be sexed, fitted with radios and tested. A small sample of blood will be drawn to determine the presence of heavy metals and pesticides, to screen for viruses, bacteria and parasites, and for genetic studies. They will be checked for external parasites; fecal samples will be studied and each bird will be photographed in detail.

Transportation. Birds captured for captive breeding will be moved individually to the breeding facilities with a veterinarian in attendance. Ventilation and padding of cages will be provided. If the birds become agitated hoods will be available to calm them down but no medication is to be used.

Breeding Facilities. 1. The San Diego Zoo Wild Animal Park 30 miles from San Diego. Zoo personnel have extensive experience with captive propagation of Andean Condors. 2. Santa Cruz Predator Bird Research Group at UC Santa Cruz, now involved with captive breeding of Peregrines, Prairie Falcons and Harris' Hawks. 3. The Los Angeles Zoo. All three potential breeding localities will be modeled after the Andean Condor facility at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland. Paired birds will be outdoors in large cages that will permit limited flight. They will be free from "popcorn-tossing zoo crowds."

Specific Plan

1. In June and July 1980, wild Andean Condors will be trapped in Peru and all the procedures planned for the California Condor will be used. They will be released and followed for several months, then recaptured. Any problems that develop along the line will be studied and, if necessary, procedures will be revised. Close contact and consultation will be maintained with the California Fish and Game Department.

2. If there are no difficulties, two California Condors will be captured, fitted with radios, tested and released in August. They will be tracked and studied for one month. If, in this initial trapping, one of the birds is a sub-adult female, it will be kept in captivity as a possible mate for Topatopa, the adult male in the Los Angeles Zoo.

3. By February 1981 it is hoped to capture up to eight more birds, fit them with radios, test and release them. Trapping will then stop. The released birds will be tracked and studied in an attempt to recapture un-paired adults. (Radio signals will indicate sex, of course.) If these birds adapt well to captivity and do breed, more un-paired birds will be trapped. (Andean Condors, the California Condors' nearest relative, have easily bred for many years in thirteen zoos around the world.) Great care will be taken to avoid capturing breeding pairs from the wild. Again, every phase of the program must be approved by California Fish and Game.

4. The project is tentatively expected to last until the year 2015. Condors will be retained in captivity until a secure population is established in the wild. Procedures are now being developed for re-introduction of captive birds. For example, captive-reared Andean Condors of different ages will be released this year in Peru and monitored by radio. John Borneman reports that pen-raised Turkey Vultures released in experiments, rather than being dominated by free-born Turkey Vultures, actually were more agressive than the wild ones.

So there you are. If, by the time this *Tanager* is in print, the California Fish and Game Commission has granted permits for the capture of condors, the program will have been given the green light. (Friends of the Earth has threatened suit to delay implementation and we don't know what effect this will have.)

The crucial point to most observers is the undeniable fact that condor populations have plummeted—with no upturn in sight. We don't know why but we strongly suspect that *we* are responsible. There is no evidence that California Condors are a doomed species; there is no reason for us to "let them die with dignity." As Lloyd Kiff says, "Condor losses from natural causes are almost unknown within the species' recorded history."

Most of us don't like to see wildlife manhandled and "managed." No one relishes radios on so spectacular a creature as the California Condor. But most of us see all of this as the only chance to rescue a noble bird from oblivion.

Good luck, Gymnogyps!

References

"California Condors, Forever Free?" by Carl B. Koford, *Audubon Imprint*, April 1979.

"Night of the Condor" by Kenneth Brower, *Not Man Apart*, Feb. 1980.

Golden Gate Audubon Society California Condor Policy: communication to Audubon chapters et al, April 1980.

Permit application statement, Condor Research Center, April 11, 1980.

"How Few is Enough?" by Lloyd Kiff, *The Western Tanager*, October 1979. □

On May 30, 1980 the California Fish and Game Commission met in Santa Barbara with representatives of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Audubon Society. On hand were about 200 people representing many interest groups including many local Audubon chapters, museums, the Sierra Club, and Friends of the Earth. The merits of the permit application were debated for seven hours before the commission granted the permit with a few modifications. All captive condors including Topatopa currently housed at the L.A. Zoo, will be kept in the San Diego Wild Animal Park. Only walk-in traps will be used to catch wild birds. A clause was included to have the program terminated or suspended at any time, if necessary to assure the continued safety of the wild condor population.

The Los Angeles Audubon Society's board of directors has given its unanimous approval to the Condor Recovery Program.

Rona Parrot

SQUAWK TALK

Dear Rona,

We had just returned from a trip to Arizona when I read "Avian Misfits" and thought you might be interested in the following incident. It was just dark in Cave Creek Canyon, April 15th. I was doing the dinner dishes inside the trailer and not paying too much attention to the Great Horned Owls calling. Suddenly they were hooting loudly from the trees overhead. Then the breaking of branches alerted us to something heavy falling through the trees. We rushed outside. There on the ground about ten feet away flopped two very large and fierce-eyed Great Horned Owls! Our flashlight showed their feet to be locked, legs stretched straight out. The wings of both were spread wide. One owl was on its back facing the other owl on top. Both were hooting continuously and rather loudly. Their bills were clicking as each parried the thrusts of the other. Aside from a passing look they paid us no attention.

The owl on the bottom made sporadic efforts to rise but couldn't. The struggle continued for about ten minutes before the owl on the bottom was bloodied about the beak and, alas, gradually weakening. Perhaps we should have let nature take its course and witness the outcome. But it seemed cruel not to stop the increasingly unequal fight and we moved closer. When we were about four feet away the top owl stared at us for a moment, their feet disengaged and both owls flew off into the darkness.

We heard no more hooting and, strangely, on the succeeding nights we did not hear them. We must have witnessed a territorial struggle, but was the interloper chased way outside the territory before the flight took place? I speculate that they were both females because their hoots were on the same note and higher than a male's call.

Virginia Ulfeldt
La Canada

Wow!—Rona

WESTERN TANAGER

EDITOR Lee Jones

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PRESIDENT Jean Brandt
1st VICE-PRESIDENT Kimball Garrett
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Dear Rona Parrot,

Why can the National Audubon Society and the Sierra Club not agree on a plan to save the condor? *What* is the objection to placing carcasses on some accessible but secluded spot? Certainly *some* management is unavoidable. What has the establishment of a Sespe Wilderness to do with this problem?

U.M.
Glendale

See Sandy Wohlgemuth's article on the Condor Recovery Plan in this issue—Rona

Rona,

The article on the Salton Sea appearing in the April *Western Tanager* contained an error that could cause some disappointment to birders that attempt to visit the area during waterfowl season. The Wister Wildfowl Management Area is actually the Wister Unit of the Imperial Wildlife Area. It is not the inviolate sanctuary Ms. Test describes. In fact it is one of the most heavily hunted areas in southern California. While this error does not directly affect the Salton Sea NWR, I feel it is worth pointing out. Many birders coming to the Imperial Valley during the fall and winter are disappointed to discover that hunting is permitted at the Salton Sea NWR and Imperial Wildlife Areas. In addition, during the waterfowl season areas closed to hunting are set aside as complete sanctuaries and no entry of any sort is permitted. We even discourage our own personnel from entering the closed areas.

Plans are currently underway to improve birding opportunities during the hunting season. The Audubon Society will be provided with maps and leaflets as soon as they are completed.

Laurence N. Dean
Refuge Manager

Dear Rona:

We would like to discuss an overlooked aspect of amateur ornithology. After a long day in the field it is sometimes hard to face the setting sun and realize that there'll be no more life birds today. Go home, fill in our life lists, and then relax in front of the television. So how about birdwatching on T.V.? We've found that it can be quite productive and a real test of field skills.

Just as different habitats offer different attractions, so different programs yield varying birds, if you're quick enough to spot them. Westerns can usually be counted on for Turkey Vultures, while underwater specials are often unrewarding. Commercials produce some of the most common birds, such as Red-tailed Hawks and Sulphur-crested Cockatoos.

We need your help, Rona. We need reports of sightings so that we may assembly a complete record. Perhaps someday, with the help of both trained professionals and dedicated amateurs alike, we will be able to prepare and publish a practical *Field Guide To The Birds On Television.*

I.I.O.S.

I.I.O.S? Must be some idiotic, irrelevant ornithological society.

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, Tuesday through Saturday.

Audubon Bird Reports:

Los Angeles *213-874-1318*
Santa Barbara *805-964-8240*

Pelagic Trip Reservations

To make reservations for pelagic trips, send a check payable to LAAS plus a self addressed stamped envelope, your phone number and the names of all those in your party to the Reservations Chairman, Audubon House. No reservations will be accepted or refunds made within two weeks of departure. To guarantee your space make reservations as early as possible. Trips will be cancelled 30 days prior to departure if there is insufficient response. If you wish to carpool, please so indicate, and you will be contacted two weeks prior to the trip. There should be a separate check for each trip. **Important: Due to the rapidly rising cost of motor fuel all listed trip prices are subject to change. Please bring an extra $5 in $1 bills for possible fuel surcharge if such should prove necessary. The boats will not leave port until trips have been paid in full, including any surcharges.**

Coastal Protection Bills Near Vote

Appropriately for 1980, the Year of the Coast, Congress is planning to act this summer on two major pieces of coastal legislation. One is aimed specifically at protecting the barrier islands that stretch along much of the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. The other is reauthorization of the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, a law that applies to all coastal areas, including the shores of the Great Lakes.

A glaring weakness in the original bill was its opening statement of purpose: "to preserve, protect, develop, and enchance" coastal resources. Develop??? The wrong kind of development in the wrong places is the biggest single problem facing coastal resources. The CZMA reauthorization bills pending in both houses of Congress would stress the need for preservation of pristine coastal areas and restricting other areas to appropriate uses. These bills, however, would weaken the act by relaxing the requirements that states follow to qualify for grants; the federal government would have less power to see that money was used for worthwhile coastal zone management plans.

You are urged to write your Congressman (House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515) and your senators, S.I. Haykawa and Alan Cranston (U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C. 20510) and urge them to support strong versions of the CZMA and barrier island legislation.

SATURDAY, JULY 19—Mt. Pinos. The group will bird around Iris Meadows at the end of the paved road, and then walk or drive to the summit to look for condors. Meet at 7:30 a.m. at Iris Meadows, reached by I-5 to Frazier Park exit, then west to Lake of the Woods. From Lake of the Woods follow signs to Mt. Pinos. Leader: Ed Navojosky (213) 938-9766.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 17—Mt. Pinos. Another chance for condors and montane birds. Meet at Iris Meadows at the end of the paved road at 8:00 a.m. See the July 19th trip for driving directions. Leader: Jean Brandt (213) 788-5188.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 23—Antelope Valley. Migrant shorebirds, plus a variety of passerines and raptors. Meet at 7:00 a.m. at the Lamont-Odett Vista Point along Hwy. 14, a few miles south of Palmdale. Be prepared for hot weather. Leader: Fred Heath (213) 828-6524.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 6 to SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 7—Morro Bay. Departure at 9:00 p.m. Saturday aboard the *Princess* from Virgo's Landing, returning at 8:00 p.m. Sunday. Price approximately $35. There is a galley aboard. Leaders: Bruce Broadbooks and Jon Dunn.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9—Evening Meeting 8:00 p.m. Plummer Park. The 1980-1981 year will begin in style, as **Herb Clarke** challenges us with an all-new version of his *California Bird Quiz*. Beginners and hard-core birders alike will benefit from Herb's expertise and reknowned bird photographs.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 13—Beginners' trip to Ballona Wetlands, Playa del Rey. Meet at 8:00 a.m. at the Ballona Creek bridge at the north end of Pacific Ave. (reached off the west end of Culver Blvd.). Observing and identifying the common waterbirds, including migrant terns and shorebirds, will be stressed. Leaders: Bob and Roberta Shanman (213) 545-2867 (after 6:00 p.m.).

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 14—San Pedro to Osborne Bank. Depature at 6:00 a.m. aboard the *Vantuna* from the USC dock in San Pedro, returning at 6:00 p.m. Price: approximately $18. Leaders: Olga Clarke and Kimball Garrett.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 20—Monterey Bay. Departure at 8:00 a.m. aboard the *Miss Monterey* from Sam's Fishermans Wharf, returning at 3:00 p.m. Price: approximately $20. There is **no** galley. Leaders: Herb Clarke and Bruce Broadbooks.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 11—Monterey Bay. Same details as for September 20 trip. Leaders: Kimball Garrett and Arnold Small.

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