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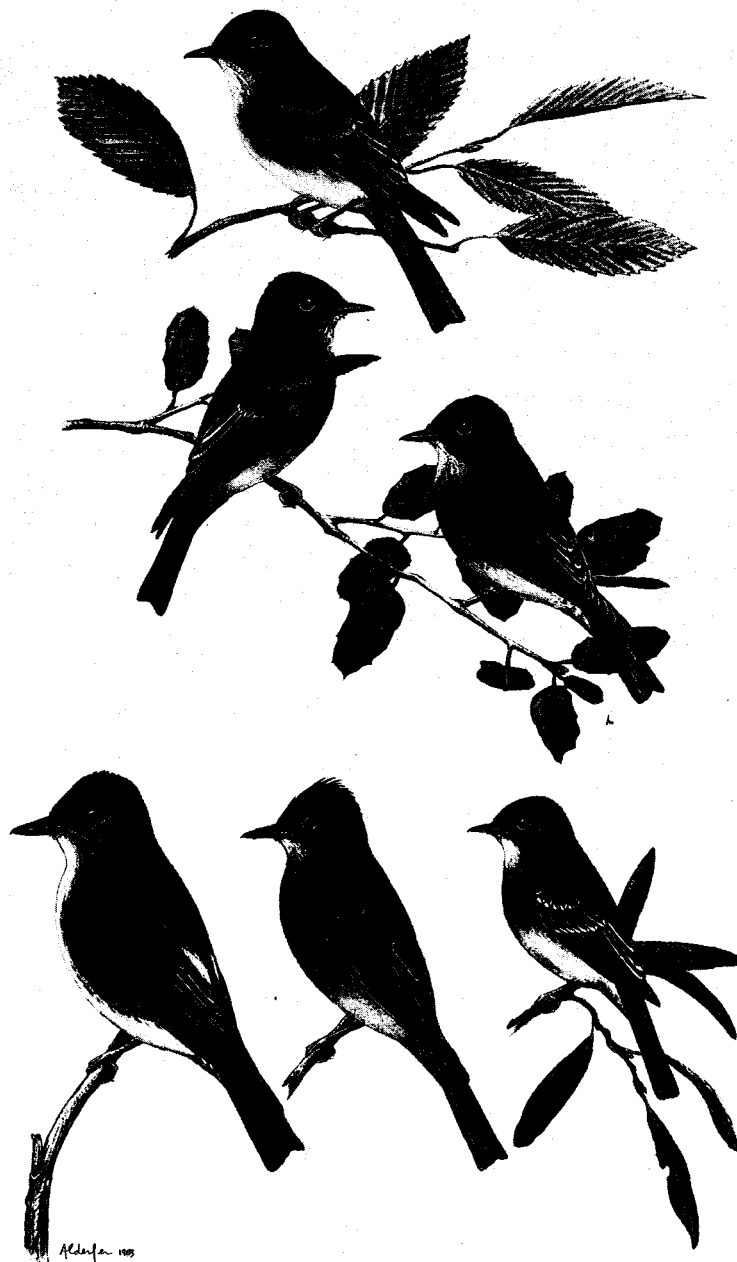
## The Identification of Wood-Pewees

By John L. Dunn and  
Kimball L. Garrett



he visual separation of the wood-pewees is perhaps the most notoriously perplexing problem in North American field ornithology. Indeed, an experienced and eminently qualified set of authors once remarked that "Except for the two forms of Traill's Flycatchers, the Eastern and Western Wood-Pewees are easily the most difficult North American birds to distinguish with morphological characters alone" (Phillips, Howe, and Lanyon, 1966). The Eastern Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*) and the Western Wood-Pewee (*C. sordidulus*) form a closely-related species pair (or "superspecies"). The breeding ranges are largely separate, although there may be some marginal overlap in the area around northwestern Minnesota and southern Manitoba. However, as both species are highly migratory, vagrants might occasionally be expected within the migratory range of the counterpart species. In this paper we will discuss the various visual characters which have been advanced as possible "field marks" aiding in the separation of these species. We will emphasize, however, the vocal characters which, at this point, seem to provide the only certain means of identification in the field. Clearly, there is much more to be learned about the identification and vagrant status of our wood-pewees; it is in part our purpose here to point out the inadvisability of field identification of out-of-range wood-pewees under all but exceptional circumstances.

Depending on which taxonomist one chooses to believe, the genus *Contopus* contains ten or twelve species, four of which occur in North America north of Mexico. The northernmost, highly migratory forms include the Olive-sided Flycatcher (*C. borealis*, formerly placed in the monotypic genus *Nuttallornis*) and the two-wood-pewees. The Greater Pewee, or Coues' Flycatcher, (*C. pertinax*) is the northernmost and palest example of a superspecies complex which



top: *Contopus virens* - Eastern Wood-Pewee  
center: *C. sordidulus* - Western Wood-Pewee  
left - adult, right - immature  
bottom: (left to right)  
*C. borealis* - Olive-sided Flycatcher  
*C. pertinax* - Greater Pewee  
*Empidonax traillii* - Willow Flycatcher

Illustration by Jonathan Alderfer

Continued next page

extends into South America and includes the species *C. lugubris* and *C. fumigatus*. In the northern part of its range (including northern Mexico and, locally, the mountains of the extreme southwestern United States) the Greater Pewee also is migratory. Additionally, several more tropical pewee species occur from the West Indies and southern Mexico south well into South America.

The notorious flycatcher genus *Empidonax* is not too distantly related to *Contopus* and contains species which might be mistaken for wood-pewees. The Willow Flycatcher, especially, might be confused with wood-pewees in the southwest, and will be discussed briefly below.

The Olive-sided Flycatcher may be distinguished from wood-pewees by its larger size and stockier shape. In particular, it appears more "bull-headed" and, perhaps, relatively slightly shorter-tailed. Resting Olive-sideds frequently show the distinct white feather tufts on the lower sides of the back, but these tufts are by no means always evident. In all plumages Olive-sideds are strongly "vested" below, and, unlike wood-pewees, the olive sides are indistinctly streaked (wood-pewees lack streaks). Olive-sided Flycatchers tend to perch more openly than wood-pewees, frequently choosing the highest part of the highest available tree; their aerial foraging sallies are generally at or above treetop level and in very open air space. The frequent and distinctive "quick-three-beers" song of this species quickly clinches its identification on the breeding grounds (and sometimes in migration). At all times of the year the common call note is a sharp "pip-pip" or "pilp-pilp" (often given as a triple-note as well).

The Greater Pewee bears a close resemblance to both the wood-pewees and the Olive-sided Flycatcher. In size, foraging behavior, and vocalizations it closely resembles the Olive-sided. However, it exceeds even the wood-pewees in uniformity of plumage (and, therefore, the lack of a "vested" effect). Greater Pewees appear somewhat longer-tailed and more slender than an Olive-sided, and the head, while less massive, is adorned with a sharp, thin crest (often difficult to see). All Greater Pewees show a completely orange lower mandible, usually quite conspicuous in the field (and accentuated by a vivid orange mouth lining). The uniform olive-gray underparts (paler on the belly) take on a greenish-yellow tint in fresh-plumaged birds. The plaintive, whistled "ho-say-ma-RI-a" song is occasionally heard away from the breeding grounds. The common call is a repeated "pip" or "peep" note.

Before discussing our two wood-pewees, we should also point out that *Empidonax* flycatchers are frequently mistaken for wood-pewees. The problem lies primarily with the

larger, more olive species (especially the Willow Flycatcher, *E. traillii*, in California). *Empidonax* species in general tend to forage within the canopy, usually at lower heights and in more closed air space than do members of the genus *Contopus*. Nearly all of our *Empidonax*, including the Willow Flycatcher, vigorously flick their tails when perched (or at least upon alighting). Most species also exhibit a regular flick of the wings while perched. By contrast, wood-pewees usually give a strong shudder of the wings upon alighting (or at infrequent, irregular intervals while perched). They do not flick their tails at all, and give no regular wing-flicks while perched. The wings of wood-pewees are considerably more pointed than those of *Empidonax*, and reacher closer to the tail tip when folded (see figure). Finally, call notes of *Empidonax* and wood-pewees are easily distinguished. The common call note of the Willow Flycatcher, a sharp "whit" or "pweet", would not easily be mistaken for the typical notes of wood-pewees.

The Western Wood-Pewee is a common summer resident in woodlands through much of California (and the western part of North America). Spring migrant Westerns are only rarely noted before the third week of April, and any sighting before about 10 April should be extensively documented. Fall transients have been noted casually as late as the end of October. (For a more detailed treatment of southern California status, see Garrett and Dunn, 1981). It is important to realize that no wood-pewee has been reliably recorded in North America during the winter season; both wood-pewees winter in South America, and occasionally as far north as Costa Rica. Any claim of a winter wood-pewee in North America would clearly require extensive documentation. It appears, in fact, that the Greater Pewee is the most likely member of its genus to be found in winter in the southwest (there are over a dozen records for southern California). The Olive-sided Flycatcher, which, like the wood-pewees, normally winters in South America, has been recorded casually in winter in southern California (about five records).

The status of the Eastern Wood-Pewee in California is in doubt. The only record which the authors feel is unassailable is that of a singing bird present near Stockton during the summer of 1983. A bird captured and photographed on Southeast Farallon Island on 15 June 1975 showed some of the purported morphological characters of Eastern, and was accepted for the California list by the records committee. Because no vocal characters were noted, and because a specimen was not saved, we remain somewhat skeptical of this record. Calling birds at Big Sycamore Canyon, Ventura Co., 18-19 Octo-

ber 1974, at Pt. Loma, San Diego Co., in May 1982 were felt to be Eastern Wood-Pewees by some observers; again, however, we are hesitant to accept these records, as the calls heard may not have been diagnostic (and might even have pointed to Western). It seems likely that vagrant Eastern Wood-Pewees must occasionally stray to California. Our abilities to detect non-singing birds remains limited, however.

As noted by Phillips *et al* (1966), "visual differences between pewees are usually due to age, plumage, wear and fading, rather than to the species involved." The following notes about plumages pertain to both species. The annual complete molt of adults takes place on the winter grounds. Therefore, from our perspective, spring adults are in fresher plumage than fall adults. Most plumage characters which supposedly aid in identification are not considered applicable to fall birds. After July juvenile wood-pewees are frequent. They differ from adults of their respective species in being somewhat darker throughout (especially on the sides of the chest) and in having noticeable and distinctly buffy wingbars. Fresh wingbars and obvious whitish edges to the tertials will easily distinguish juveniles from adults in the fall. As a general rule, mandible color is darker in fall adults than in spring adults, and is darker still in juveniles; at any season and within any age class there is always a great deal of variation in mandible color.

Shape and size differences between the two species are negligible. One character of potential usefulness *in the hand* involves the amount of extension of the rectrices (tail feathers) past the longest upper tail coverts (this tail extension is greater, on average, in the Eastern, but the character only has validity for young males—see Phillips *et al*, 1966).

For the record, we will briefly outline the plumage differences between typical spring adult wood-pewees. No single character is diagnostic; even several characters, taken in sum, can only suggest the identity of the bird. A special effort should be made to record the calls of a wood-pewee suspected through plumage characters of being an Eastern in the west (or a Western in the east). Eastern Wood-Pewees average paler on the underparts than Westerns. The sides of the breast are not as sooty-brown as those of the Western, and the pale belly color often extends through the center of the breast to be continuous with the pale throat. Spring adult Easterns may be tinted gray-green on the back (again, less sooty-brown than the Western). The feathers of the underside of the bend of the wing and of the undertail coverts tend to be mottled or washed with dusky in the Western Wood-Pewee, while they are a clearer whitish in the Eastern. There is considerable overlap, however, in

at least the undertail covert character. Phillips *et al* (1966) suggest an additional character for juvenile wood-pewees: In the Eastern, the anterior and posterior wing bars are a similar buff in color (or the anterior may be a deeper buff), in the Western the anterior wing bar tends to be narrower and duller (grayer) than the posterior wing bar. It is doubtful that this wing bar character is of much use in the field.

Perhaps the best average character in separating spring wood-pewees is the color of the lower mandible. Easterns tend to have an orange-yellow mandible with a varying amount of dusky at the very tip. In many spring Easterns the entire mandible appears orange-yellow. The mandible of the Western is usually extensively tipped with dusky; however, the orange-yellow color at the base of the mandible may extend at least two-thirds of the way out the mandible in some birds. Only very rarely do Westerns show a nearly entirely orange-yellow mandible; conversely, spring Easterns probably seldom show extensive dusky on the mandible. Bear in mind that fall immature pewees average darker-billed than spring adults; at this age both species may have mandibles that are extensively or entirely dusky.

#### VOCALIZATIONS

The various vocalizations of wood-pewees are given with different frequencies over different parts of the annual cycle; many are heard primarily on the breeding grounds. The well-known song of the Eastern Wood-Pewee is a clear "pee-a-weee", of a clear whistled quality and with the middle note slightly lower and the last note definitely upslurred. Additionally, a clear and sharply downslurred "pee-ur" phrase is occasionally inserted after the "pee-a-weee" portion of the song. From our experience, this sharply downslurred "pee-ur" note is only given in the context of the full song. Full song is apparently given only rarely away from the breeding grounds, although it appears that migrants will sometimes sing in late spring. As in many tyrannids, full song is given most frequently at dawn and dusk; the Eastern Wood-Pewee, however, appears more inclined to sing through much of the day than does the Western (whose full song is rarely heard other than at dawn and dusk).

Migrant Eastern Wood-Pewees give two different notes which may prove to be diagnostic (although additional study is certainly needed). One is a sharply upslurred "pee-ye" or "pwee-ee". This note rises strongly and is not strongly disyllabic. Also given is a sharp "chip" or "chick" note. This call suggests a wood warbler chip note; we have, at various times, likened it to the call of a Palm Warbler or to that of a Yellow Warbler. It is often given alone or in series, but may also be given as a preface to the upslurred "pee-ye" note.

The standard note of the Western Wood-Pewee is a rather harsh and buzzy, slightly descending "peeer". This note is utterly different from the analogous notes of the Eastern (which are far clearer and more protracted and sharply slurred). The "dawn" (and dusk) song alternates this buzzy "peeer" note with a variable series of "pit" notes and a clearer "pee-ee" or "pee-willy" note. We've never heard this full dawn song away from the breeding grounds. The various "pit" notes suggest the sharp "chip" of the Eastern, but we are not certain if they are heard away from the breeding grounds.

It is important for observers to realize that Western Wood-Pewees in migration may give a clear, whistled note that might be written as "pee-ur". This slightly downslurred note is very different from the standard buzzy "peeer" call and can be a source of confusion to birders who were under the impression that only the Eastern could give clear notes. This descending call is not as sharply downslurred as the "pee-ur" note that is part of the song of the Eastern Wood-Pewee; it might be likened somewhat to the common call note of the Say's Phoebe.

#### SUMMARY

The full song of the Eastern Wood-Pewee provides its surest means of identification, but this song is not likely to be heard from out-of-range migrants. We believe that two common call notes of the Eastern, the clear and sharply ascending "pee-ye" and the sharp "chip" note may ultimately prove to be a reliable means of field identification, provided that the observer has extensive experience with the vocalizations of both species. There is much more to be learned about the context and the variability of these calls.

Visual characters separating the wood-pewees are simply not diagnostic. Our accompanying illustrations show the extremes:

a relatively dark Western with much dark on the mandible and a relatively pale Eastern with a largely pale mandible. In fact, most birds of both species will fall between these extremes, and it is important to reiterate that there is overlap between the species in all morphological/plumage characters.

Readers are urged to pay very close attention to all vocalizations of wood-pewees, especially where the identity of the calling bird can be reasonably ascertained from range, complete song, or both. Only as we build up an extensive "mental catalogue" of such calls (supported, of course, by recordings whenever possible) may we begin to test whether certain call notes are diagnostic species-specific characters. In the meantime, many "suspicious" wood-pewees may have to be left unidentified.

#### Acknowledgements

*The authors were greatly aided by the examination of specimens at the United States National Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History. The latter institution made specimens available to our artist, Jonathan Alderfer. Material from the files of the California Bird Records Committee of the Western Field Ornithologists was useful in preparing this article. Years of conversation and argument with other birders helped us formulate our ideas, and we particularly thank Van Remsen for information he provided.*

#### Literature Cited

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- Phillips, A. R., M. A. Howe, and W. E. Lanyon. 1966. "Identification of the Flycatchers of Eastern North America, with Special Emphasis on the Genus *Empidonax*." *Bird-Banding* 37:153-171.

## Second Annual Membership Slide Contest

Because of the success of last year's inaugural slide contest, we will once again devote our January evening meeting to this entertaining event. Members and guests are invited to bring their favorite bird slides to our evening meeting on **TUESDAY, 10 January 1984**. Show off your best work in the spirit of fun and art. Or just come and appreciate the work of our closet, amateur, and professional bird photographers.

All slides must be received in the meeting room by 7:45 p.m. Please label each slide with your name (though all slides will be judged anonymously).

We can accommodate up to five slides per individual. Judging will be by three non-participating members, but the audience is encouraged to vocally guide the judges!

Slides are to be judged on the basis of originality and composition; EVERYBODY is encouraged to participate, regardless of experience.

No entry fee or notice required.

The winners will be chosen through a sequential elimination process. PRIZES to be awarded!!!

Questions? Call Program Chairman Kimball Garrett at (213) 455-2903 (eves.).

# Conservation Conversation

by Sandy Wohlgemuth

**T**he mythical hero Sisyphus angered the gods, and was punished by being ordered to push a huge boulder up a rugged hill. Just as he neared the top the boulder would roll back to the bottom of the hill, and Sisyphus had to trudge down the hill and start to push the same big rock up again. Never to reach the summit, he was condemned to keep on trying through all eternity. Sometimes that's the way we feel about Ronald Reagan and his environmental policy. Trying to push it in a new direction is a truly Sisyphean task for environmentalists.

Anne Gorsuch Burford, after nearly destroying the Environmental Protection Agency, was forced to leave. William Ruckelshaus,

purportedly "Mr. Clean," took over EPA, but already there is some question as to whether he is his own man. James Watt—the man we loved to hate—will almost certainly be replaced by William Clark. Mr. Clark has been a live-in National Security Advisor to the President and is rumored to know as little about the environment as he does about international affairs. Since the days of the California governorship he has been closer than anyone to the President, and philosophically they are said to be two peas in a pod. Mr. Reagan has never admitted that Watt's policies had anything to do with his departure from the cabinet. In fact, as he reluctantly accepted the resignation, he said Watt had done "an outstanding job . . . in his stewardship of the natural resources of the nation. He has initiated a careful balance between the needs of people and the importance of protecting the environment."

Is black truly white? That whirring sound

you hear is Teddy Roosevelt spinning in his grave. Editorials and letters-to-the-editor seem to indicate that at least part of the public is beginning to grasp what conservationists have been saying all along: Watt and Burford were stand-ins for Reagan himself.

And now we consider a rather overlooked member of Reagan's Raiders. John B. Crowell is Assistant Secretary for Agriculture for Natural Resources and Environment in charge of the U.S. Forest Service. Now the Forest Service has never been a model environmental agency. It was never intended to be. The Forest Service and the National Park System grew out of the dawning realization that the American frontier had reached the Pacific Ocean and that the inexhaustible bounty of the great continent indeed had its finite limits. Although Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot were giants of conservation, they looked upon the forests—in TR's words—as "a means to increase and sustain the resources of the country and the industries which depend upon them." It was not yet time for John Muir's ecstatic vision of forests as "... fountains of life . . . where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength of body and soul alike . . ."

The national forest became a "Land of Many Uses": grazing, mining, oil-drilling, recreation, wildlife protection and, of course, logging. Pinchot and others understood a vital element in forest preservation: watersheds. Trees and meadows on the highest slopes catch the snow and rain and hold it so it runs off in streams and rivers. When the forest is clear-cut or abused with heavy equipment and logging roads there is nothing left to hold the water and it pours off the mountainsides. The residues of this flooding are a morass of mud, and streams clogged with acid debris and kills fish and other riparian wildlife.

Until the end of World War II timber cutting was conservatively managed. Since the war, logging has sharply increased and the concept of multiple use has become decidedly unbalanced. In 1981, John Turner, a Republican state senator in Wyoming, said, "... we have witnessed timber programs render many areas in this region . . . into almost single-use land units. We have seen scenic values decline, recreational opportunities whittled away, resident wildlife populations pushed out, big game migration routes destroyed (and) watersheds impacted . . . Considering that this region possesses some of the finest outdoor resources left in North America, such management programs must change or these unsurpassed values will be lost forever."

Despite legislation like the 1960 Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act and the 1976 National Forest Management Act, there has been a widespread disregard of guidelines for long-term conservation goals and an emphasis on short-term harvesting. Commercial lumber

## President's Corner

by Bob Shanman

After several months absence from this space due to the pressures of work, it feels good to be writing my column this month. What makes it really nice is that we have a new editor for the TANAGER—Dexter Kelly. We are as excited to have him in this position as he is to be taking it on. As a writer, good birder and strong conservationist, Dexter will do an excellent job. Welcome to your new position Dexter, and don't worry about the treasury. We'll soon fill your old position. Our thanks for an excellent job you've done as treasurer these past 1½ years.

And to Fred Heath, our retiring editor, what can I say? Sometimes controversial, but always concerned, Fred did his job well. Thanks to you too, and we will always remember KNOT THE WESTERN TANAGER!

Just about two years ago, we sent out a special mailing—Audubon House had burned and we lost almost everything. You responded with over \$14,000 in donations to be used toward getting us going again. Well, if you haven't been by the House lately, you've a surprise in store. The County has remodeled the office, installing new walls, electrical service, heating, air conditioning, and a kitchenette, at no cost to us. Your donations are being used for new cabinetry, a new museum display and office equipment. The front room and bookstore should be ready about now, so come in and see us. From the entire board, thanks to everyone for being there when LAAS needed you most.

The Condor Fund Drive is well underway, and this year, your support is needed more than ever. The recovery project has a lot of momentum, but there are still major threats to the part of the budget normally funded through the US Fish and Wildlife Service. A new, privately funded program is being organized to help supplement their budget, especially that portion which supports the nest-watching/ data-gathering activities. LAAS is considering supporting this group, since we will have more control over how our donations are used. But we, and the birds, need your help. Please give to the Condor Program today.

In July, the Board decided to actively encourage input from the general membership regarding LAAS' activities, and to seek out new volunteers. In this TANAGER, you will find a short, postage paid questionnaire, which will also be your entry in a free drawing. Please take a minute to complete and mail this questionnaire back to LAAS so we can find out how you think we are doing.

As we move into the Holiday Season, the Christmas Bird Counts are upon us again. We hope you will participate in these fun days of good birding (we sponsor 3 counts). And then in February, we will again have the General Meeting (Feb. 14) and the Annual Banquet (Feb. 28). In the meantime, we wish everyone a Happy, Healthy and Prosperous Holiday Season. Good Birding to everyone in 1984!

companies with their own private holdings are out for profit pure and simple and have little interest in wildlife habitat or water quality or the esthetics of their domain. The federal government—acting for all the people—should be expected to care. The Forest Service came into existence as the steward and conservator, not the exploiter of forests. Forestry experts Barlow and Reisner have said, "Subtly, quietly—but quickly—the Forest Service began to change from a custodial agency into one which acted like a giant timber corporation . . . . With the timber industry pushing hard for more logging at the expense of other forest values, the foresters were caught in a crucible. Those within the agency who were happy to serve the interests of the timber companies seemed to be gaining influence over those who held to the principles of wise forest management."

Onto this fertile soil, like hungry bark beetles, descended John Crowell and the Reagan Administration. Here was an agency after one's own heart: damn the regulations, full speed ahead. Literally. In 1980, the national forests were selling 11 billion board feet and the Forest Service asked Congress to authorize 13.7 billion board feet by the year 2000. Crowell brushed this aside with, "I think before the turn of the century we've got to be managing the national forests for 20 to 25 billion." And with intensive management he claims the yield could be 40 to 45 billion board feet. Veteran Forest Service experts in the field (requesting anonymity) are shocked. Crowell is talking tree farms, not forests: an endless procession of precisely-spaced, tall, straight, identical trees. The magnificent variety of a balanced ecosystem would be demolished. The forests would be no more.

John Crowell was General Counsel for the Louisiana-Pacific Corp. for 25 years, and his company is the largest single purchaser of national forest timber. The pricing system devised by the Forest Service results in a net loss to the government and, in effect, is a taxpayer subsidy to the industry. It is hardly surprising then that companies like Louisiana-Pacific are enthusiastic about the booming yields Crowell is encouraging. Mr. Crowell is no shrinking violet. He says the Forest Service should be run like a business and that's exactly what he has been trying to do. At the 1981 National Audubon convention in Estes Park he was a guest speaker and began by insulting his hosts, accusing them of attacking the Administration "for the purpose of raising money from a . . . largely unquestioning membership." Among other things he emphasized the need for accelerated liquidation of old-growth forests, especially Douglas fir in the Pacific Northwest. Old-growth forests, he said, grow slowly and take up vast areas that ought to be utilized for fast-growing trees to increase the productivity of the land. The Secretary is aware of the necessity of old-growth trees for the northern spotted owl. He says that maintaining

the old trees is too expensive and "if preservation . . . proves to be the only way to preserve existing populations (of the owl) a reduction in population may have to occur." Addressing an audience of birders this was top-drawer chutzpah. After Crowell finished his speech, Charles Callison of the Public Lands Institute said, "Mr. Crowell, do you realize you are advocating a return to the boom-and-bust, cut-out and get-out policies that brought disgrace to the timber industry less than a century ago?"

Most of the areas to be considered for wilderness designation lie within the national forests. Crowell is adamantly opposed to any wilderness designation. It has been the litany of the mining, grazing and logging industries that wilderness "locks-up" our national resources and sorely injures the economy. As the natural spokesman for these interests, John Crowell, the "public servant", calls wilderness a "single interest." This is a fine example of Ecospeak. The very people who have been making logging the *primary*, single interest in the national forests take this bad label and pin it on wilderness advocates who favor many uses, accusing them of violating the multiple-use ideal of the Forest Service. Again, at the Audubon convention, Charles Callison responded, ". . . the first and foremost purpose of setting aside the national forest preserves was watershed protection . . . . The public uses and public values of wilderness include watershed protection, recreation, scenic preservation, the conservation of wildlife . . . and scientific research."

The phrase is getting rather shopworn since Mr. Reagan moved into the White House, but *the fox is still in charge of the henhouse*. Until some sunny day when a fresh wind blows once again through the corridors of power, those of us who care will have to keep a sharp eye on the henhouse.

## From the Editor

by Dexter Kelly

Greetings and Merry Christmas! Fred Heath has finally been relieved of his duties and I have already received my biggest Christmas present—the editorship of the Western Tanager. Of course, to take over the Tanager I had to give up the job of Treasurer. At this writing, that critically important position has not been filled.

I relish the change. For me, writing and editing articles about nature is a lot more fun than writing checks and deposit slips. But the implications for our Society are ominous. Filling a position from within the board is like bulb-snatching; a bad habit and potentially dangerous. Sooner or later we will run out of talent if our volunteers "burn out" and no new people can be recruited to replace them. We need new ideas, new energy, new people.

I believe that the National Audubon Society is the most experienced and effective environmental organization in the country, and in recent years the Los Angeles Audubon has been one of the most active chapters. Our membership is over four thousand and growing, and our expanding responsibilities and activities should not be left to an ever shrinking "elite" of volunteers. How come so few of you step forward to help even when asked? Obviously, there is a communications gap between the board and the membership. The enclosed questionnaire should help bridge the gap. I hope you all will fill it out and send it in in time for the drawing.

Audubon work is a learning experience, both relevant and fun. There's plenty to do for anyone who wants to get involved. Like writing for the Tanager, for instance. More about that in the next issue.

Reserve Now for

### Los Angeles Audubon Society's 1984 Annual Banquet

February 28, 1984

at Andre's, in Beverly Hills

Cocktails 6:30 PM

Dinner 7:30 PM

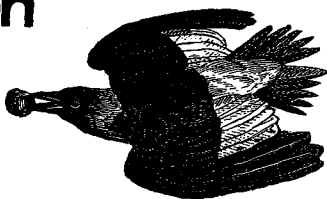
Guest Speaker: Arnold Small

\$15.50 per person

(Note: Parking is \$1.00 per car, payable at the restaurant.)

# Birds of the Season

by Hal Baxter  
and Kimball Garrett



The fall season of 1983 will not be remembered by southern California bird watchers as a banner year, either for quality or quantity of birds. The peak "vagrant season" of late September and October produced only three outstanding records of rarities: a **Blue-winged Warbler** on 2 October at Morongo Valley (found by Larry Sansone for only the seventh record for the region); a **Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher** which was seen briefly by Don Sterba at the north end of Harbor Lake on 8 October (only the fifth California record); and a dull female **Pine Warbler** at the Pt. Loma Cemetery briefly on 13 October (Richard Webster). Many observers commented on the scarcity of migrants at traditional bird "traps". The desert oases remained especially unproductive as of this writing—a trip by Guy McCaskie and company to the standard northern desert oases in Inyo and San Bernardino Counties during the traditionally productive third weekend in October yielded a rather grim tie for dubious "Best Bird" honors between White-throated Sparrow and Vermil-

ion Flycatcher!

But birders always manage to find a silver lining in any cloudy birding venture. As October progressed it became clear that we were in for a bumper crop of certain montane or boreal species this year. **Cedar Waxwings** were widely seen in small to large flocks through the coastal lowlands after early October; they were abundant in many areas (e.g. Exposition Park in downtown Los Angeles) where they were virtually absent last fall. Christmas Count compilers will surely breathe a little easier this winter. **Pine Siskins** were also present in many areas of the coastal and desert lowlands. Some 50 were noted, for example, in the Sepulveda Recreation Area in Encino on 16 October (Kimball Garrett) and small flocks were also reported in Anaheim and Huntington Beach (Doug Willick) and in the Antelope Valley (Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett). Small numbers of **Red-breasted Nuthatches** and **Mountain Chickadees** were reported in the coastal lowlands (but, surprisingly, not in the Antelope Valley); while no major "invasion" of

these species is in store for this winter, they are at least better represented this fall than during the previous two falls. Finally, **Golden-Kinglets** were very well represented in the coastal lowlands after early October, with small flocks reported at Tapia Park, Bonsall Drive, Topanga Canyon, West Los Angeles, and many other areas. The arboreal habits and very high-pitched, thin calls of these kinglets probably combine to render them undetected in many areas (so practice up for Christmas Count time!).

The various boat trips off Monterey and San Pedro in late September and October yielded little that was extraordinary, although there were some interesting variations from a "typical" year. Many **Craveri's Murrelets** were noted north to Monterey Bay, as was also the case with **Least Storm-Petrels**. Unusual were up to 25 **Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels** in Monterey Bay from late September through at least mid-October. Although this species breeds on rocky islets off the coast of extreme northern California, it is rarely detected in any numbers on pelagic bird-watching trips. At least one **Wilson's Storm-Petrel** was in with the great storm-petrel rafts in Monterey Bay on 9 October. Exceptional was the sighting of a **Red-billed Tropicbird** (apparently an immature) off Broad Beach Road up the coast from Malibu on 25 September (Matt Dinsmore).

**Least Bitterns** continued to be seen at Harbor Lake (Barbara Elliott *et al*, 21 September). A **Cattle Egret** at the Santa Clara



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River estuary on 4 October (Andrew Starrett) was one of the few local reports received. Andy also saw three small white herons which may have been immature Little Blue Herons on the same visit. But beware; immature Snowy Egrets may show grayish bills and rather dull legs. Of the sixteen **White-faced Ibis** noted at Piute Ponds near Lancaster on the L.A.A.S. field trip on 17 September, at least five remained to 10 October (Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett). Two **Wood Ducks**, a male and a female-plumaged bird, were seen at Malibu Lagoon, where they are rare, on 19 September (Sandy Wohlgemuth, Dorothy Dimsdale, Barbara Elliott).

Migrant **Ospreys** were seen at Malibu Lagoon (Sandy Wohlgemuth, 13 September), Hermosa Beach (Nancy Spear, 21 September), and Lake Palmdale (Chuck Bernstein, 11 October). The only **Broad-winged Hawk** reported was an adult at Morongo Valley on 3 October (Richard Webster). Along the east coast a good day at a good locality (e.g. Cape May) will produce up to one hundred **Merlins**; by contrast, the species is quite scarce in southern California (where a two-figure Merlin day is unheard of). Among the few reports received were one at Carpinteria Creek on 2 October (Doug Willick) and another up the coast at Shell Beach on 10 October (Jean Brandt).

Shorebird migration tapered off in October, with most species settled in on their wintering grounds. Only the always-late **Dunlin** was moving through in full swing in mid-October. In the interior, a late transient **Sanderling** (1), **Bairds's Sandpiper** (1), and **Pectoral Sandpiper** (1) were noted at the Lancaster Sewage Ponds on 10 October (Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett). Phil Sayre and Bert Mull had two **Stilt Sandpipers** at the north end of the Salton Sea and six more at the Wister Unit at the south end on 25 September. A few **Solitary Sandpipers** were noted through the end of September. A **Ruff** was seen by Arnold Small and his class at the Santa Clara River estuary on 2 October. The **Common Black-headed Gull** reported from the Los Angeles River Channel in Long Beach last month was still present as of the

third week of October. An immature **Franklin's Gull** was noted along the Santa Ana River in Orange County on 23 September (Doug Willick), and two others were at Red Hill at the south end of the Salton Sea on 9 October (Henry Childs). Quite unusual were two reports of **Black Skimmers** away from standard localities. One was seen 15 miles inland up the Santa Ana River on 27 September (Doug Willick), and another was seen at the mouth of Ballona Creek on 8 October (Bob and Roberta Shanman).

A calling **Spotted Owl** was heard at the Baxter house in Arcadia at 2:00 a.m. on 28 September. This is below the usual altitudinal range of this species in Los Angeles County, but is not far from the small resident populations in the canyons north of the San Gabriel Valley. A call from Roberta Shanman told of a nightjar roosting on the corrugated metal roof of a low shed in the busy loading dock of the Rand Corporation building in Santa Monica on 17 October. The bird, which had been present on this shed for at least a week, turned out to be a very tame (and perhaps torpid?) **Common Poorwill**. According to Roberta, the bird opened its eyes once while being photographed, proving that it wasn't just another one of Fred Heath's pranks. It disappeared after 18 October.

A probable **Least Flycatcher** was at Huntington Beach Central Park on 8-9 October (Doug Willick). A **Tropical Kingbird** was also there after 24 September (Wayne and Virginia Gochenour). Two more **Tropical Kingbirds** were along San Diego Creek in Irvine on 8 October (Doug Willick; one still present on 10 October). **Violet-green Swallows** are our latest migrant hirundinids; several transients near Lancaster on 10 October (Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett) were part of a movement that extends through the month of October. A **North American Dipper** was seen along Carlisle Creek near Lake Sherwood on 17 October; this stream usually flows from December through July, but has continued to flow through this fall. There are only a handful of sightings of dippers in the Santa Monica Mountains.

Two "**Plumbeous**" **Solitary Vireos** were found in coastal Los Angeles County this fall. One was at the north end of Harbor Lake through the first half of October (John Ivanov, Don Sterba, *et al*), and another was at the mouth of Zuma Creek on 8 October (Kimball Garrett, Hank and Priscilla Brodtkin). A **Philadelphia Vireo** was reported from Morongo Valley on 2 October. The only local report of a **Tennessee Warbler** that has come to our attention was of one at Malibu Lagoon on 8 October (Hank and Priscilla

Brodtkin). A **Virginia's Warbler** at the Newport High Environmental Nature Center (Doug Willick, 21 September) was presumably the same bird that has wintered there for three years. An immature **Chestnut-sided Warbler** was at Carpinteria Creek on 25 September (Paul Lehman). The **Magnolia Warbler** reported from Harbor Lake last month was present to 1 October. A **Black-throated Blue Warbler** at Pt. Loma Cemetery on 12 October was one of the very few reports this fall. A **Blackburnian Warbler** was at the South Coast Botanic Garden on 1 October (*fide* Erick Brooks). At least two of the reported **Blackpoll Warblers** were still present at Harbor Lake on 1 October (Don Sterba). Kimball Garrett and Bruce Broadbooks observed a **Worm-eating Warbler** along Rainsford Drive in Zuma Canyon on 15 October. A very rare **Connecticut Warbler** was seen at Carpinteria Creek on 25 September (the Brodtkins, Paul Lehman). The plumage was not studied well, but the distinctive behavior (walking on the ground with a high-stepping, Ovenbird-like gait) seems to have clinched the identification. As usual, there were scattered reports of **American Redstarts** and **Northern Waterthrushes** from the coastal lowlands.

An immature male **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** was at the South Coast Botanic Gardens on 21 September. At the same locality, Ed Navojosky found an adult male **Painted Bunting** on 5 October; the bird was glimpsed by a lucky few over the next few days. It is impossible to ascertain the wild status of a Painted Bunting in coastal southern California, but one must always be suspicious that adult males might be escaped cage birds. On the other hand, there is a definite pattern of fall vagrancy to coastal southern California in this species. Doug Willick found a **Dickcissel** at Turtle Rock Nature Center on 5 October.

With a "good" winter for many species shaping up in southern California, it is time to turn our thoughts to Christmas Bird Counts. Nearly 40 such counts were conducted in the southern California region alone last winter. Pick your favorite count (or two, or five, or more) and vow to spend some time scouting in advance of count day. And on count day you owe it to the compilers and the other participants to cover your area as thoroughly as possible—ideally, every single individual bird in your area should be counted! Don't forget to brush up on the calls of winter birds; a large percentage of the birds you encounter will be only heard. Please contact your count compiler(s) as soon as possible to make arrangements for this fun and valuable census.



Send any interesting bird observations to:

**Hal Baxter**  
1821 Highland Oaks Drive  
Arcadia, CA 91006  
Phone # (213) 355-6300





# CALENDAR

**SATURDAY, DECEMBER 10 — Ballona Wetlands,** join **Bob and Roberta Shanman** (547-2867 after 6) for a morning of birding in this threatened wetland. Ducks, shorebirds, gulls, terns and other water related species will be in evidence. Meet at **8 a.m.** at the Pacific Ave. bridge. Take 90 West (Marina Fwy.) to its end at Culver Blvd. Continue west on Culver; turn north into Pacific Ave. and continue to bridge.

**SATURDAY, DECEMBER 10 — Whittier Narrows,** **David White** will lead a morning trip through this unique area alongside the San Gabriel River. Meet at the Nature Center at **8 a.m.**

**TUESDAY, DECEMBER 13 — 8:00 p.m. Evening Meeting.** This year's Christmas meeting will deal, appropriately, with **Christmas Island** in the central Pacific Ocean. **Dr. Ralph W. Schreiber**, Curator of Ornithology at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, will discuss the now famous El Nino event in relation to his studies of the breeding seabirds of the central Pacific in **"The World According to El Nino"**.

#### CHRISTMAS COUNTS

**SATURDAY, DECEMBER 17 — Antelope Valley.** **Fred Heath** is coordinating this trip. Call him for further information at **828-6524**.

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 18 — Malibu Count.** **Kimball Garrett (455-2903)** and **Jean Brandt (788-5188)** will coordinate this trip. Please call them for further information.

**MONDAY, JANUARY 2 — L.A. Count.** **Bob Shanman (547-2867)** and **Ian Austin (452-3318)** will coordinate this trip. Please call them for further information.

**TUESDAY, JANUARY 10, 1984 — 8:00 p.m. Evening Meeting.** Our **Second Annual Member's Slide Contest**. Start choosing your very best slides now. **Prizes** to be offered. See announcement elsewhere in this issue.

**SATURDAY, JANUARY 15 — Jim Huffman** will lead a trip to **Upper Newport Bay**. Please see January Tanager for further information regarding this trip.

**TUESDAY, 14 FEBRUARY 1984. EVENING MEETING.** Our annual general meeting of the L.A.S. membership, to discuss the present and future of the society. See details in next Western Tanager.

**TUESDAY, 28 FEBRUARY 1984. ANNUAL BANQUET.** See details elsewhere in this issue.



## Leaders Needed

We need people to lead field trips. Do you have a favorite birding locale? You don't have to be an "expert" to show other birders, especially beginners, a few nice looks at some of our common species. Your trip doesn't even have to be long . . . you can opt for a short morning excursion. Call our Field Trip Coordinator — **Ian Austin** to make arrangements (Day 683-1560, Evening 452-3318).

#### Audubon Bird Reports:

<i>Los Angeles</i>	<i>(213) 874-1318</i>
<i>Santa Barbara</i>	<i>(805) 964-8240</i>

Los Angeles Audubon Headquarters, Library, Bookstore and Nature Museum are located at Audubon House, Plummer Park, 7377 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90046. Telephone: (213) 876-0202. Hours: 10-3, Tuesday through Saturday.

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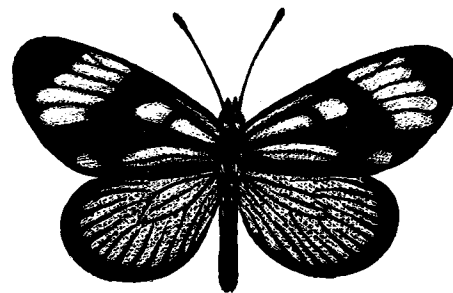
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Subscriptions to THE WESTERN TANAGER separately are \$8 per year (Bulk Rate) or \$13 (First Class, mailed in an envelope). To subscribe, make checks payable to Los Angeles Audubon Society.

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**Address Change** — Many members who move complain about missing an issue or two of the Tanager. To avoid this, subscribers should notify LAAS directly of their change of address. If you send your address change only to National Audubon, it will take several weeks for LAAS to be informed.



## Shearwater Trips



Debra Love Shearwater runs a series of regular pelagic trips out of Monterey and Morro Bay. The following is a list for the rest of the year.

Dec. 3	Monterey Bay	\$25
	Leader to be announced	

Reservations are made by sending a check payable to Debra, with a self-addressed, stamped envelope to:

Debra Love Shearwater  
362 Lee Street  
Santa Cruz, CA 95060  
(408) 425-8111

1984 Pelagic Trips will be listed in the January Tanager.

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