

WESTERN TANAGER



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Los Angeles Audubon Society

After Alaska and Texas, California is the largest state in the United States, but its present population exceeds 30 million, affording it the dubious honor of being the most populous state. Most of this population explosion followed World War II and forever altered many of the state's rich and varied natural environments. In addition to being a very large state, California's climate, geography and physiography resulted in a greater variety of habitats for birds and other wildlife than are found in any of the other states and, indeed, in most countries of the world.

Twenty-nine natural plant communities have been described, and this array includes a number of types such as Giant Sequoia groves, humid Coastal Redwood forest, coastal sage scrub and chaparral which are found virtually nowhere else on earth. California has some of the hottest, coldest, wettest, snowiest and driest areas found on the North American continent, and in altitude it extends from 282 feet below sea level (at Badwater in Death Valley) to 14,495 feet at the top of the highest mountain in the contiguous United States (Mt. Whitney).

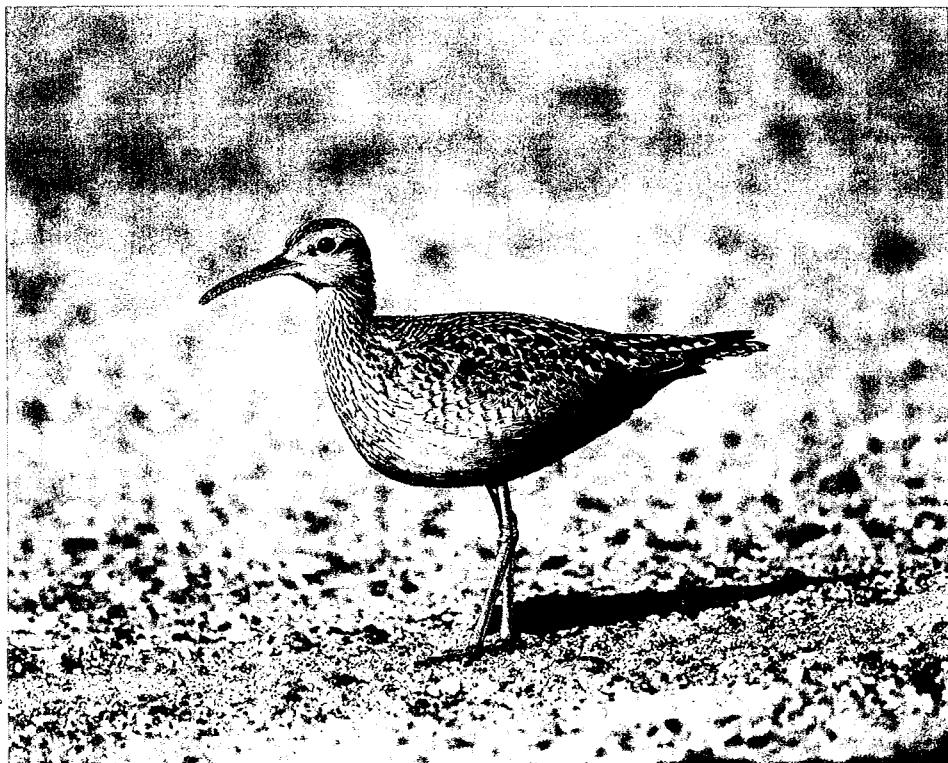
At least 591 species of birds have been recorded in California since 1,900, of which 329 have bred at one time or another. Four species are recent successful breeding colonizers — Cattle Egret, Elegant Tern, Black Skimmer and Great-tailed Grackle. Three species — California Condor (which formerly bred in the wild), Santa Cruz I. Jay

California's Birds

50 YEARS OF CHANGE

by Arnold Small

Little Curlew



Photos by Arnold Small

and Yellow-billed Magpie — are not known to breed anywhere else. Indeed, the Santa Cruz I. Jay and Yellow-billed Magpie are the only birds in the continental United States that have never been recorded anywhere but in their native state — true endemics. Two subspecies — the San Clemente I. Bewick's Wren and the Santa Barbara I. Song Sparrow — are extinct, other subspecies are approaching extinction, and Harris' Hawks and Sharp-tailed Grouse have been extirpated as breeders from the state.

Because of the growth of California's chief industry — agriculture (especially in the Central Valley) — and urban sprawl (along the seacoast), more than 90% of California's natural wetlands have disappeared. This staggering loss of vital habitat has been reflected in reduced migrant, breeding and wintering water bird populations during the past 50 years. Other critical habitats also diminished are ripar-

extirpated, and the Elf Owl is approaching that status in California as well.

Urban and industrial development as well as recent devastating forest fires in southern California's coastal sage scrub have threatened the survival of the California Gnatcatcher and the southern coastal subspecies of Cactus Wren. From another direction has emerged the threat of brood-parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds whose numbers escalated after they invaded newly fragmented habitats previously unattainable by them. Among those birds most seriously impacted by these depredations are Willow Flycatchers, California Gnatcatchers, Least Bell's Vireos, Yellow Warblers and Blue Grosbeaks.

Virgin valley grasslands succumbed to the state's largest industry — agriculture — and its concomitant pesticides, fertilizers, drainage ditches and cement-lined irrigation canals. Recent serious depletion of wintering populations of Mountain Plovers and breeding Swainson's Hawks and Burrowing Owls have been documented. Paradoxically, the highly migratory Swainson's Hawks, which

normally winter on the grasslands of South America, have recently been found wintering in substantial numbers in the Delta region of central California. This may be due to altered agricultural crops and increased rodent populations in that area. Inexplicable are the previously unknown large nocturnal mid-winter roosts of Ferruginous Hawks recently found in southern Monterey County.

Human disturbance to, and alteration and destruction of, much of coastal sea beaches and sand dunes have eliminated essential breeding

habitat for the endangered Snowy Plovers and Least Terns. Also imperiled have been local and sensitive dune plants and butterflies.

The last wild California Condor was captured 19 April 1987 at the Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge in Kern County. Since then, captive breeding programs at the Greater Los Angeles Zoo, the San Diego Wild Animal Park and the World Center for Birds of Prey near Boise, Idaho, have increased the population to at least 90. Releases of captive-bred condors may eventually restore a wild population in California and perhaps elsewhere. Brought to the brink of extinction by shooting, lead poisoning, pesticides, collisions with power lines, predator poisoning, competition with Golden Eagles and black bears for carcasses, egg predation by Common Ravens and human encroachment, this greatest of all the American vultures still faces an uncertain future in the wild as several deaths have already occurred among the few newly released young birds.

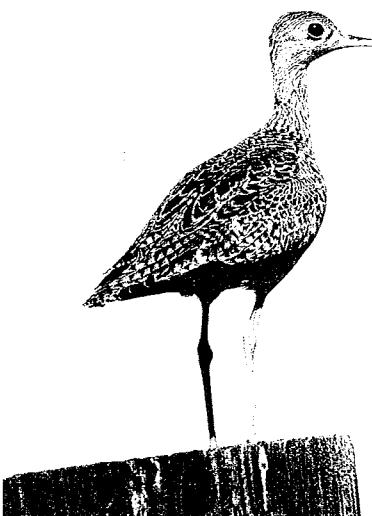
Despite these and other environmental losses, since 1944 the number of species known to breed in California has increased from 274 to 329, and the total number of birds on the state list has risen from 427 to 591 (now including Gilded Flicker, Santa Cruz I. Jay and Baltimore Oriole). Initially this may appear to have been a steady increase in newly found species at a rate of about 3+ per year during the past 50 years. In actuality, real landmark incursions did occur among several new birds, notably Little Blue Herons, Cattle Egrets, Elegant Terns, Black Skimmers and Great-tailed Grackles, and they eventually firmly established themselves as components of California's breeding avifauna. Tenuous breeding footholds were established among Ferruginous and Zone-tailed hawks, Franklin's Gulls, Royal Terns, Barred Owls, "Plumbeous" Solitary Vireos, Hepatic Tanagers, Indigo Buntings and Bronzed Cowbirds. However, the most significant changes in the state list began to



Black Skimmer

ian (riverine) forests of willows and cottonwoods, coastal sage scrub, valley grasslands and undisturbed coastal beaches and sand dunes. Much of the riverine forest was lost to logging, river channelization, riverbank stabilization and agriculture. Key riparian-obligate species deprived of essential breeding habitat are Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Willow Flycatcher and Least Bell's Vireo. All are now classified as endangered species. Harris' Hawks, which formerly sustained a small breeding population in the riverine forests along the lower Colorado River, are

occur in the late 1950s and the 1960s when the quality of field ornithology took a quantum leap forward under the tutelage of Guy McCaskie and other expert birders. Birding as a national hobby and sport underwent substantial growth and continues unabated, and Cali-



Upland Sandpiper

fornia leads the nation in this area.

The net was cast wide as new species after new species were added to the state list by more knowledgeable and skillful birders armed with better optics, modern field guides and tape recorders and recordings. They explored California as never before. New "vagrant traps," hawk migration ridges, seabird-watching promontories, offshore islands (especially the Farallon Is.), remote and little-known wilderness areas, and sea mounts and ocean "deeps" up to 200 nautical miles offshore were found and investigated. In birding, it is axiomatic that "rare birds are only where the birders are; we know of no others." And at present, birders seem to be everywhere all the time. For example, on 5 November 1994, had it not been for a knowledgeable birder on the faculty of Biola University in La Mirada, Los Angeles County (an area then virtually unknown to the birding community in California), the immature Northern

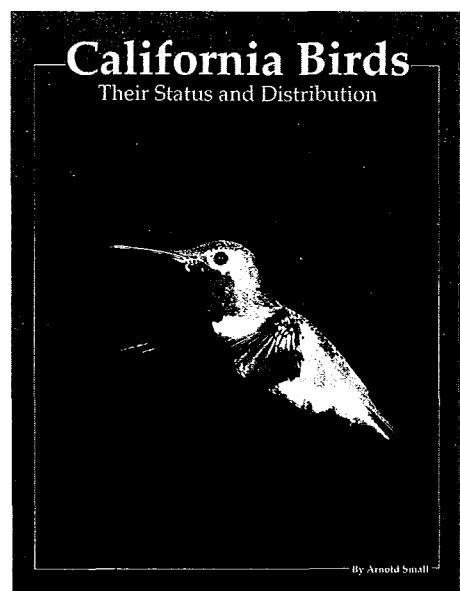
Wheatear present there that day would never have been found. Birding "hotlines," computer "links," mobile phones and CB radios made it possible for others to enjoy it on that same day.

More than one-third of California's birds may be designated as "vagrants" of varying degrees — from *rare* to *very rare* to *extremely rare* (the latter two designations are usually referred to as "casual") to *exceedingly rare* (usually referred to as "accidental"). They are species not of the state's "normal" avifauna inasmuch as their breeding ranges, winter ranges and expected migration routes lie well outside the borders of California or barely so. In reality, California may just be situated at the fringes of the normal migration routes of some and receives a spill-over marginal population that may be referred to as "rare." Most of the 164 new species discovered in the state in the past 50 years have been vagrants.

It is now apparent that California is being visited by vagrants from Asia (Mongolian Plover, Little Curlew, Brown Shrike, Red-flanked Bluetail, etc.), the central and western Pacific Ocean (Murphy's Petrel, Streaked Shearwater, Red-tailed Tropicbird, Great Frigatebird, etc.), Mexico and southeast Arizona (Blue-footed Booby, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Rufous-backed Robin, Streak-backed Oriole, etc.), Alaska and Canada (Yellow-billed Loon, Steller's Eider, Snowy Owl, White-winged Crossbill, etc.), North America east of the Great Plains (Upland Sandpiper, Little Gull, Yellow-throated Warbler, Scarlet Tanager, etc.), the Atlantic Ocean (Greater Shearwater, Lesser Black-backed Gull) and even the Antarctic (Wilson's Storm-Petrel, Wandering and Light-mantled albatrosses). Add to this group eight species of successfully established feral exotics (from Chukar to House Sparrow) plus numerous semi-successful escaped exotics from about ten species of parrots to various mannikins, waxbills and bishops from Africa and Asia.

The trend begun in the late 1950s continues as more of the state's secrets are revealed. Because of the unprecedented growth of birding (due in part to the founding and success of the American Birding Association), similar events are taking place everywhere in the United States. Joseph Grinnell and Alden Miller's classic book, *Distribution of the Birds of California*, was published in 1944. It took 50 years to bring it up to date with the publication in 1994 of *California Birds: Their Status and Distribution*. As exciting to birders as vagrants may be — adding spice to any outing — the real advances in our knowledge of California bird life have come about in the form of new information gained regarding breeding and wintering ranges, migration routes and chronology, oceanography and how it pertains to distribution and movements of seabirds, changes in bird populations and the effects of environmental alteration and pollution. California's state bird list may reach 600 (more than that of most countries in the world) by the year 2000, but more important is how much of our natural environment will be retained for future generations of wildlife and humans. ■

California Birds: Their Status and Distribution by Arnold Small was reviewed in *Western Tanager* November 1994.





Abigail A. King

PERSONAL HIGH

by Abigail King

When asked for my personal high in birding, I find myself looking back over a long life and remembering quite a few great, if brief, moments. The first occurred when I was about four and a half and was taken to see a Barn Owl roosting, well, in the barn. We stared at each other for quite a while, and I have had no problem identifying Barn Owls since then. A year or two later, on a bright sunny morning following a heavy snow storm, my mother and I carried cracked corn into the woods for the pheasants and Ruffed Grouse. I don't think we saw either of those birds, but my mother pointed out their tracks which we followed until we came to indentations in the snow where the birds had sheltered from the storm under low hanging branches. We left the corn on shingles nearby.

Skipping a few years, I arrive at a day in summer, walking with my oldest brother across a meadow to a pond at the edge of the woods. There were two hawks flying overhead and, after identifying them for me, my brother pointed out the differences in shape and flight pattern between the Red-shouldered Hawk and the Sharp-shinned Hawk. On the woodland side of the pond my brother rolled over a log uncovering a beautiful little spotted salamander, which I found just as interesting and more exciting than the hawks. We also discussed the living arrangements of the muskrats that had a winter home among the reeds on the edge of the pond. So with little effort on my part, I absorbed quite a lot of natural history during the morning.

Much later, with the acquisition of binoculars, I was amazed to find that those drab little birds flitting through the upper branches of the trees were quite likely to be brightly colored warblers and that it was possible to distinguish between sparrow species at a distance greater than ten feet. That moment changed my life, and I have hardly been out of the house without binoculars since then. The other plus was being able to attach songs to specific birds, instead of to some one of those flying objects in the tree-tops or deep in the thickets.

In the middle '60s my husband and I left New England and I was permanently transplanted to southern California. We had spent some time birding in the desert and other parts of the west coast where we happened to be at a given moment, but western birds were essentially new to us, and starting a new "house list" in an entirely new environment was an exciting adventure. After we had found a house and moved in, we learned that we could walk freely on the undeveloped hill behind us. That area is now the home of the new Getty Museum and sadly is no longer available to me.

Accompanied by my dogs, and my husband on weekends, I walked over the hill early every morning. During the more than 20 years that I was privileged to bird on the hill, I compiled a considerable list which included a Painted Redstart, (also seen from the swimming pool by my husband), a Brown Thrasher, a Tree Sparrow and occasional other unusual species. Once a small flock of Evening Grosbeaks flew over my head while I was on the hill and

were seen a few minutes later at the bird bath by my husband from his study window.

My ultimate high came on a beautiful warm spring day in April, a year or two after we moved to California. The dogs and I started up the hill and even before we reached the gate at the end of the paved road I could hear warblers singing, almost drowning out the White-crowned and Golden-crowned sparrows. Stepping through the gate, a Yellow Warbler flew out of the weeds beside me, and suddenly I found myself surrounded by small birds. There were waves of Townsend and Hermit warblers, sometimes in mixed flocks and flocks of Black-throated Grays. The bushes were jumping with singing Nashvilles, and there were smaller pods of Yellow Warblers. A few Orange-crowned Warblers were present, some of them preparing to nest, and the last of the now-colorful wintering Yellow-rumped Warblers could be found. Warbling Vireos were in every bush, and a very few Solitary Vireos were either heard or seen. Lazuli Buntings flew past singly and in small groups, their arrival heralded by their distinctive buzzy call note.

The migration wave was not limited to warblers and buntings. Western Kingbirds flew overhead, and several Western Wood Pewees were flycatching along the fence line. Ash-throated Flycatchers swooped in and out of the chaparral making their typical call, and one noisy Olive-sided Flycatcher called from the top of the tallest tree. The resident birds were doing a me-too act so that Song Sparrows, a comparative

rarity in the area, Bewick's Wrens and the then-resident Rufous-crowned Sparrows were all out in the open and singing.

Black-headed Grosbeaks were singing on territory, and two or three Northern or Bullock's Orioles flashed by. The Hooded Orioles were busy with nesting activities closer to the houses. Summer resident Cliff Swallows were joined by a few Violet-greens and Northern Rough-winged swallows, both of the latter on their way to more suitable nesting grounds.

Occasionally, the bright plumage of Western Tanagers would catch my eye as they flew across the hill. The final count for the day included both the last of the wintering Her-

mit Thrushes and a migrating Swainson's Thrush. I have no idea how many individual birds went through that day, but the species count for those two hours came to about fifty. During those early years there were other good days in spring with waves of migrants, but never another one to equal that one.

I am grateful for the almost 25 years that I enjoyed birding on the hill. And now with a great new art museum, the hill will provide enjoyment of a different sort for many thousands. Perhaps because this home area is no longer available to me, that one day in April stands out forever as a very special birding moment for me. ▶

WESTERN TANAGER

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Los Angeles Audubon Society

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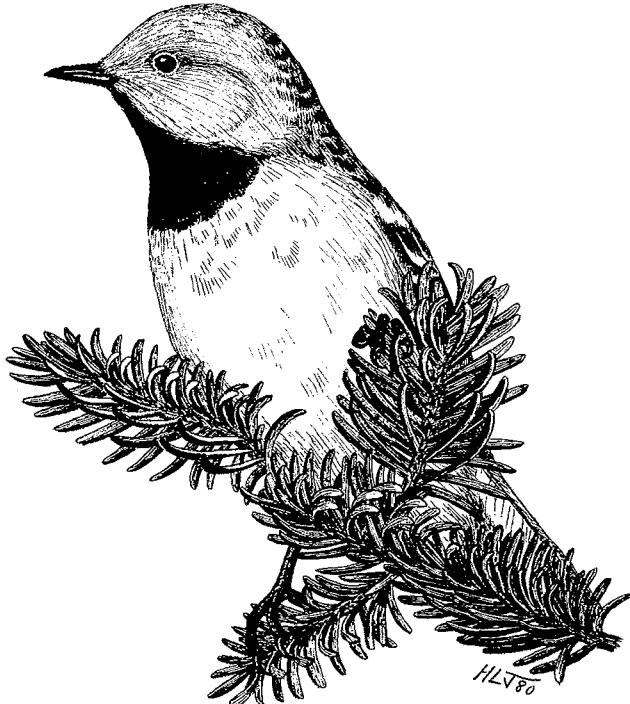
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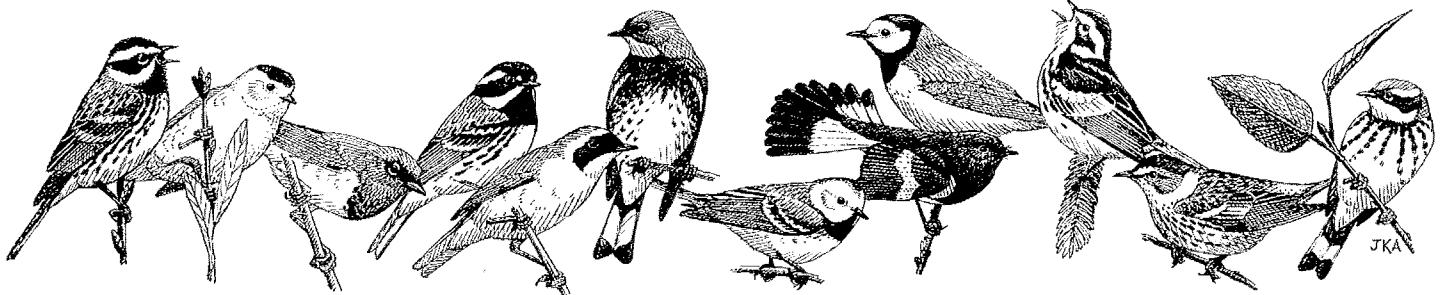
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BIRDS OF THE SEASON

by Hank Brodkin

July and August mark the beginnings of fall migration. Even as the Fox Sparrows and Green-tailed Towhees are feeding their young in our local mountains, southbound Rufous Hummingbirds are bickering over patches of paintbrush and penstemon in the meadows.

Not too many days into August, the first of migrating groups of our western warblers start drifting south along the timbered ridges. Many of us will be enjoying the cool mountain climate, studying birds and other creatures from Mt. Pinos in the west through Chilao, Buckhorn and Blue Ridge in the San Gabriels, to Bluff Lake and Arrastre Creek in the San Bernardinos. The first shorebirds — males and sequentially polyandrous females — begin to show up in July on the mud flats and shorelines both on the coast and in the hot interior. Many interesting birds are found at the Salton Sea in August, from Wood Storks and (rarely now unfortunately) Roseate Spoonbills and boobies, to pelagic species that get caught in the Gulf of California. Remember to come prepared for dangerously hot, humid weather that can exceed 110°F!

Thanks to the El Nino/Southern Oscillation, the cool wet weather this spring has produced one of the "slowest" migrations most of us can remember. Apparently, westerly air flow has blocked the easterly drift that usually brings us our spring vagrants. This weekend (May 20) seems to be a normal spring weekend — so hopefully sightings of the unusual will pick up.

A late **Ferruginous Hawk** was seen in the Antelope Valley on 23 April (Linda & Ned Harris), and a **Franklin's Gull** was on the Los Angeles River at the Willow Street crossing on 3 May (Mike San Miguel). A **Northern Pygmy-Owl** was calling at Mt. Pinos on 3 May (Richard Barth). **Lewis' Wood-peckers** extended their stay in the Agoura area through April (Robert Weissler).

County on 27 April (Rick Saval), at Sand Dune Park in Manhattan Beach on 11 May (RB), and at Butterbrett Springs — also in Kern County — on 18 May (Matt Heindel). Also at Butterbrett on that day was a singing **Northern Parula** (Richard Webster). A female **Hooded Warbler** was at Galileo Park on 14 May (RS), and a **Painted Redstart** was discovered at the Morongo Valley Preserve on 18 April (Alan Baldridge).

Great-tailed Grackle reports continue to proliferate. The latest comes from Chatsworth Reservoir on 22 April (Art Langton, et al.).

A roost of 150 amazon parrots in Temple City was reported on 11 May (Kimball Garrett). Kimball is keeping track of parrots and other species of exotic birds that are becoming established in the Los Angeles area. Please notify him of any sightings along with as many details as possible at:

The Natural History Museum
of Los Angeles County
900 Exposition Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90007
He would be especially interested
in any evidence of nesting. ■



Ferruginous Hawk

Two **Cave Swallows** were found at the south end of the Salton Sea this spring (Guy McCaskie and Michael Patten): there is only one previous California record of this bird.

There was a mass movement over the basin of **Swainson's Thrushes** on 11 May. Call notes of hundreds of these birds were heard that night over the La Crescenta area (Kimball Garrett). Warbler reports include **Tennessees** at Galileo Park in eastern Kern

Records of rare and unusual bird sightings reported in this column should be considered tentative pending review by the *FIELD NOTES* Regional Editors or, if appropriate, by the California Bird Records Committee. Send your bird observations with as many details as possible to:

Hank Brodkin
27½ Mast Street, Marina Del Rey, CA 90292.
310/827-0407 E-Mail: hankb@kaiwan.com

Or call **Thomas Miko** — 310/832-8204

FIELD TRIPS

Continued from page 8

Sunday, August 6 — Topanga State Park. Leader Gerry Haigh.

Meet at 8:00 A.M. See July 2 write-up for details.

Sunday, August 13 — Whittier Narrows Regional Park. Least Bittern possible. See July 9 write-up for details.

Saturday and Sunday, August 19 and 20 — Yosemite. Rescheduled from June 10 and 11. Leader **Louis Tucker** will concentrate on Goshawk, Pileated and Black-backed woodpeckers, Pine Grosbeak, Great Grey Owl, Blue Grouse and other local specialties. Trip ends Sunday afternoon in Owens Valley. Strict silence enforced during owl watch. Bring Saturday night sack dinner. Meet at 7:30 A.M. in the Mariposa Grove parking lot just beyond Yosemite's south entrance. Suggest staying in Oakhurst area south of park Friday night.

Reservation and Fee Events (Limited Participation) Policy and Procedure

Reservations will be accepted ONLY if ALL the following information is supplied:

- 1) Trip desired
- 2) Names of people in your party
- 3) Phone numbers (a) usual and (b) evening before event, in case of emergency cancellation
- 4) Separate check (no cash please) to LAAS for exact amount for each trip
- 5) Self-addressed stamped envelope for confirmation and associated trip information. Send to:

LAAS Reservations
7377 Santa Monica Blvd.
West Hollywood, CA 90046-6694.

If there is insufficient response, the trip will be cancelled two Wednesdays prior to the scheduled date (four weeks for pelagics), and you will be so notified and your fee returned. Your cancellation after that time will bring a refund only if there is a paid replacement. Millie Newton is available at Audubon House on Wednesdays from noon to 4:00 P.M. to answer questions about field trips. Our office staff is also available Tuesday through Saturday for most reservation services.

Call Mistix at 800/365-2267 to re-reserve Yosemite campsites. Trip limited to 14. Reserve with SASE and \$20 to LAAS for more information. Priority given to registrants of cancelled trip.

Sunday, September 3 — Edwards Air Force Base. Leader **Charles Hood** will poke around the base and environs looking for residents, late breeders and early migrants. Bank Swallow and Baird's and Pectoral sandpipers are occasionally seen this time of year. Take Hwy 138 N to Avenue D and meet just E of the Hwy across from the sewage facility (park on S side). Meet at 7:30 A.M. and bird until noonish. Call Audubon House to sign up. No fee.

Friday, September 29 and Sunday, October 1 — Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett. TENTATIVE. Lecture Friday night, field trip Sunday morning. Fee undetermined. Call Audubon House after August 1 for details and to sign up.

Sunday, September 17 —
12-hour trip on the *R.V. Vantuna* out of San Pedro to Santa Barbara Island and the Osborne Bank. \$37.

Saturday, September 30 —
17-hour trip out of Ventura on the *M.V. Vanguard*. Land on San Miguel Island after birding adjacent waters. Dinner included. \$90.

Saturday, October 7 —
12-hour trip out of Ventura to Anacapa Island, Santa Rosa Island and Santa Cruz Island. Full galley on board. \$60.

Saturday, October 21 —
12-hour trip on the *R.V. Vantuna* out of San Pedro to Santa Barbara Island and the Osborne Bank. \$37.

Saturday, November 18 —
8-hour trip on the *R.V. Vantuna* from San Pedro to the Palos Verdes Escarpment and Redondo Canyon. \$25.

Friday, November 24 —
30-hour trip (10 P.M. Friday to 4 A.M. Sunday) on Island Packer's *M.V. Vanguard NW* out of Ventura past Point Conception to Arquello Canyon and W to the California continental shelf with several daylight hours along the shelf. \$250/double bunk, \$145/single bunk.

The Los Angeles Audubon Society regularly supports other organizations in their work to preserve or restore habitat, educate the public about conservation or further ornithological research. The Board of Directors has contributed funds from the Conservation Budget to the following:

Amigos de Bolsa Chica	\$1,000
Environmental Defense Fund	\$500
Natural Resources Defense Council	\$1,000
Point Reyes Bird Observatory	\$500
California Nature Conservancy	\$1,000
Endangered Habitats League	\$1,500
Friends of Santa Margarita River	\$1,000
Anza-Borrego Foundation	\$500

LAAS also maintains memberships for 1995 in several conservation organizations which accounts for an additional \$1,000.

EVENING MEETING

There are

no evening meetings

during July or August.

Meet at 8:00 P.M. in Plummer Park.

ID Workshop may precede the meeting at 7:30 P.M.

Call the Bird Tape for information.

September 12, 1995 David Seay

**Fall Banding of Asian Shorebirds in
Northwest Australia**

Imagine joining a 30-member team to band and flag up to 6,000 shore birds over a period of a month in three locations. Well tonight it's possible. David Seay will illustrate the locations, various species (including Greenshank and Little Curlew), and give a general idea of what is involved should you be interested in joining a future expedition.

F I E L D T R I P S

Before setting out on any field trip, **please call the Audubon bird tape at (213) 874-1318** for special instructions or possible cancellations that may have occurred by the Thursday before the trip.

↓ Denotes Pelagic Trips

Sunday, July 2 — Topanga State Park. Gerry Haigh will lead participants through this diverse coastal mountain area. An ideal trip for a beginning birder or someone new in the area. A botanist is usually present. From Topanga Canyon Blvd. heading SW from the Valley, turn E (uphill) on Entrada Rd. (7

miles S of Ventura Blvd., 1 mile N of Topanga Village). Follow the signs and turn left into the park. Meet at 8:00 A.M. in the parking lot of Trippet Ranch. \$5 parking fee.

Sunday, July 9 — Whittier Narrows Regional Park. Join ranger **Ray Jillson** to view resident raptors, waterbirds and songbirds. Yellow-breasted Chat and Cardinal also possible. Take the Peck Dr. exit S off the 60 Fwy in South El Monte (just W of 605 Fwy). Take the offramp onto Durfee Ave. heading W (right), and turn left into the Nature Center, 1000 Durfee Ave. Meet at 8:00 A.M. \$2 voluntary donation suggested by park.

Sunday, July 16 — Big Bear Lake Vicinity. Leaders **Nick Freeman and Mary Carmona**.

Meet at 8:00 A.M. outside Coldbrook Campground in Big Bear. Take Hwy 18 or 38 to Big Bear Lake. Proceed about halfway along the south side of the lake on Hwy 18. Turn S on Tulip Lane. Campground is on the SW side as the road curves. Target birds include Williamson's Sapsucker, Calliope Hummingbird, mountain finches and White-headed Woodpecker. Come prepared for heat and bugs. Bring lunch.

Saturday, July 29 — Franklin Canyon Night Birds. Leader **Steven Saffier** will look and listen for possible Poorwill as well as Western Screech, Great Horned and Barn owls. Franklin Canyon is located between Sherman Oaks and Beverly Hills. From the 101 Fwy, take Coldwater Canyon S into the hills. Immediately after Mulholland Dr. merges from the west with Coldwater Canyon, make a 90° right turn onto Franklin Canyon Dr. and continue on to the Nature Center. Meet at 6:00 P.M. in the parking lot through the gated drive on the left and bird until 8:00 P.M.

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