

WESTERN TANAGER



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Los Angeles Audubon Society

LAAS Year in Review

The Los Angeles Audubon Society's fiscal year ends on June 30, so the middle of the calendar year is the time to look back at the year's accomplishments and look forward to the coming year. *Tanager* readers see in every issue the full schedule of field trips and pelagic trips sponsored by LAAS; this issue gives the opportunity to review other projects important to our mission of education and conservation. Activities are funded from four major sources: dues from our 2,300 members, profits from the Bookstore, interest on our dwindling savings, and donations given through Earth Share of California, a payroll deduction environmental charity.

Education

LAAS is committed to helping young people understand, appreciate and care for the natural world. Our educational efforts focus on children in areas of the city where limited access to nature and low environmental awareness sadly go hand-in-hand. Each year we use chapter funds and the proceeds from the Birdathon to support classroom curriculum materials, teacher training and field trip programs for thousands of urban youngsters.

During the past year, we distributed bilingual *Audubon Adventures* classroom kits valued at \$35 each to

Continued on Page 2



1st Place: Brian Small—Western Meadowlark

1997 Photo Contest Winners

At February's evening meeting, judges selected the winners of the annual LAAS members' photo contest. In front of an enthusiastic gathering, six entrants competed for bragging rights and gift certificates from the LAAS Bookstore. Brian Small's dazzling shot of a singing Western Meadowlark was an early favorite with the crowd and took home top honors.

The playful symmetry and clarity of Phyllis Barry's "Twin Beaks" (two Brown Pelicans) earned it second place. Another Brian Small photo, which captured a Mountain Bluebird with an arthropod dinner, was awarded third place. Thanks to all who entered and to judges Jay Fuhrman, Nick Freeman and Sandy Wohlgemuth. 🐦

210 fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade classes in the Los Angeles Unified School District, provided ongoing financial support (\$25,000 over five years) for the National Audubon Society's outdoor classroom at the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Area, sent two teachers to Audubon's week-long Ecology Workshop for Educators in Greenwich, Connecticut, and awarded binoculars, bird guides and LAAS memberships to two high school students for exemplary environmental projects at the Los Angeles County Science Fair.

If you would like to volunteer for the LAAS education program, please leave a message for Pat Little at Audubon House.

Conservation

As part of LAAS' commitment to the preservation of birds and their habitats, the Society took many strong positions during the past year. Conservation Chair Sandy Wohlgemuth continued his work supporting the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Area (see "Conservation Conversation," this issue) and opposing environmentally damaging development projects like Newhall Ranch and the proposed golf course in the Big Tujunga Wash (see "Conservation Conversation," March/April 1997).

President Catherine Rich led LAAS' efforts to protect habitats along the coast by testifying before the California Coastal Commission on several occasions. Catherine also represented LAAS as a member of the Environmental Leadership Forum coordinated by the California League of Conservation Voters, voicing concerns for wildlife and habitat with such political leaders as House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, Senator Jay Rockefeller, Council on Environmental Quality Chair Katie McGinty and California Resources Secretary Douglas Wheeler. LAAS also reiterated its opposition to the proposed expansion of LAX onto the El Segundo dunes and commented on a variety of state and national issues including the California Environmental

Quality Act, the California Endangered Species Act and the federal Endangered Species Act.

LAAS gives financial support to other local, national and foreign environmental organizations, including Endangered Habitats League, Pacific Wildlife Project, Bolsa Chica Land Trust, California Wilderness Coalition, Point Reyes Bird Observatory, National Audubon Society, Natural Resources Defense Council, Pro Esteros and others.

LAAS often writes letters in support of other organizations' efforts to preserve natural lands. This past year, LAAS supported the acquisition of the desert riparian area of Sentenac Canyon by the Anza-Borrego Foundation and the purchase of the rolling oak woodlands of the Sedgewick Ranch by The Land Trust for Santa Barbara County. Both efforts were successful.

Grants

Each year, LAAS awards grants of up to \$1,000 from a designated fund to deserving ornithological research projects proposed by students and others in southern California. For 1996-97, two awards were given. The first, a grant of \$1,000, was given to Laura Ellen Molles, a graduate student at University of California, San Diego. Laura's proposal was entitled "Singing Behavior in the Banded Wren (*Thryothorus pleurostictus*): Using Interactive Playback To Explore Complexity." Another award of \$200 was presented to Jan Wasserman of Camarillo to support her ongoing re-

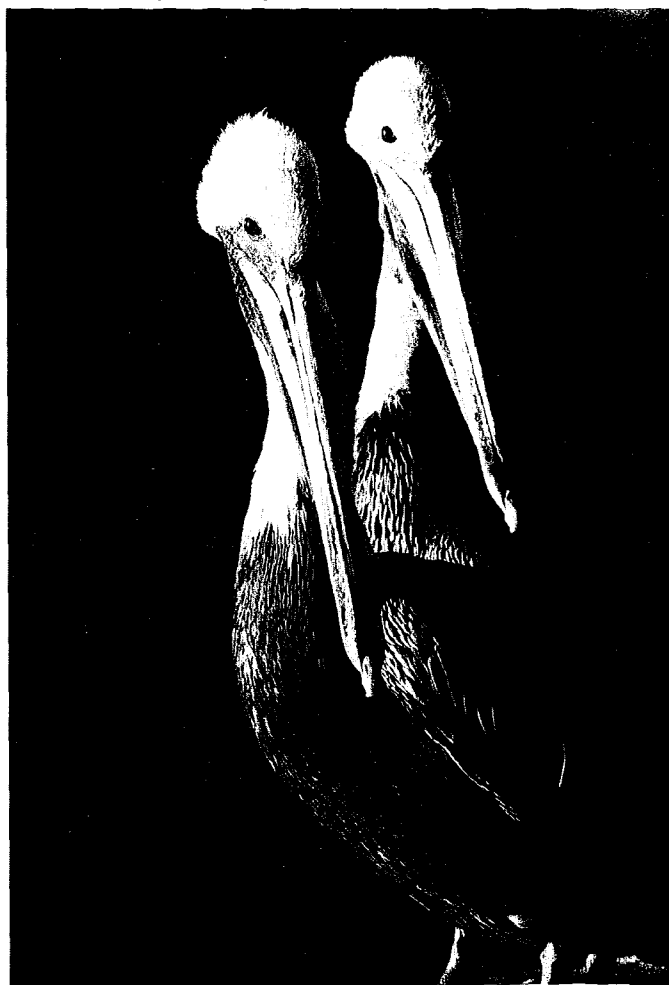
search and efforts to re-establish Tree Swallows as breeding species in Ventura County. Jan's proposal is excerpted as "A Closer Look" in this issue. All grant proposals are peer-reviewed by an expert panel of professional ornithologists. The deadline for application is November 30 of each year, and awards are made the following February. Interested applicants should contact Sharon Milder at Audubon House.

Bookstore

The Bookstore began in 1960 with Gene Rose offering about six titles. Shortly afterwards, Grace Nixon assumed management for about two years. Since 1967, Olga Clarke has volunteered to direct this program.

In addition to a fine selection of optics, the Bookstore now stocks about 2,000 titles of field guides to birds and other related natural his-

2nd Place: Phyllis Barry—*Twin Beaks*





3rd Place: Brian Small—Mountain Bluebird

tory subjects covering most parts of the world. It doesn't matter where you plan to go, check with the Bookstore first. You can even peruse the 1997 catalog on the world wide web at <http://www.netcom.com/~laas>.

The Bookstore has two full-time paid employees, Carol "Kiwi" Donovan, Bookstore Manager, and Anne Eggleston, Sales Assistant, and one part-time employee, Karen Johnson. The staff is aided by the many volunteers who have given their time to help in the day-to-day operations: Nellie Gryk, Carol Hoelle, Pearl Lynch, Peggy Miller, Pat Nelson, Marion Pickett, Jean Pickus and Laura Lou Vance. Cheryl Ash does an excellent job of bookkeeping along with handling inventory records.

The Bookstore supplies books and optics to customers around the world. All this outstanding service is by birders for birders, and all

profit helps support the conservation and education projects of the Society. Volunteers are still needed—join this exciting and rewarding endeavor, no experience necessary. Call 213-876-0202 for more information on how you can give your time and skills to the Bookstore.

Breeding Bird Atlas

As you read this, Atlas volunteers are in the field gathering breeding bird evidence for the Los Angeles County Breeding Bird Atlas. Atlas volunteers are in their third year (out of five) of field work to map the breeding ranges of over 200 bird species nesting in the county. The data being gathered already are providing useful information to biologists studying our locally breeding avifauna.

The Atlas Project currently has

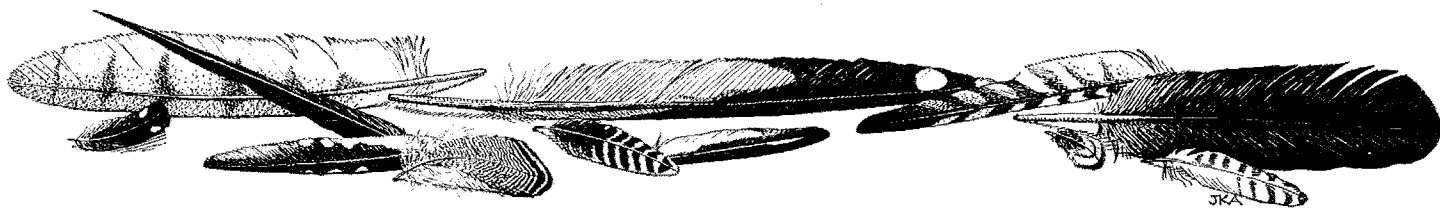
100 volunteers, affectionately called "blockheads," who have taken responsibility for over half of the 412 Atlas blocks in the county. Another 150 volunteers are helping with blocks and sending in their breeding bird Casual Observation Forms. Volunteer opportunities abound with the Atlas; contact Atlas Central at 213-745-BIRD (2473) or email Atlas Coordinator Mark Wimer at wimer@bcf.usc.edu. The Atlas Project can also be found on the world wide web at <http://www.lam.mus.ca.us/~lacbba>.

Christmas Bird Counts

LAAS sponsored three separate day-long counts as part of the 97th Annual Christmas Bird Count: Los Angeles, Malibu and Antelope Valley. The counts are carried out during one calendar day in a 15-mile diameter circle and serve to track yearly variation in wintering bird populations. Participation in the 1996 count was good, but volunteers are always needed for these important counts, scheduled for three different days during a three-week window at the end of each year. Birders of all skill levels are welcome, watch the *Tanager* for announcements this fall.

Newsletter

Of practical concern, the *Tanager* has changed to a bimonthly publication schedule. The Society has run at substantial deficit for the past several years, and the *Tanager* has cost three times that of any other program. Reducing the number of issues allows LAAS to maintain the high production quality of the newsletter and avoid running out of money. For subscribers to the *Tanager*, subscription costs have been adjusted to reflect this change. A third class subscription for nonmembers will now cost \$9 while a first class subscription will be \$15. LAAS members can receive the *Tanager* via first class mail for an additional \$5.



A C C L O S E R L O O K

by Jan Wasserman

Ornithologists have long thought that the Tree Swallow no longer nests in southern California, mostly due to habitat loss. The riparian habitat that is ideal for Tree Swallow nesting has been systematically destroyed by development and agriculture. The once plentiful habitat is down to 5% of its original extent.

The Tree Swallow is a secondary cavity nester, which necessitates that there be old growth trees with holes already excavated, usually by woodpeckers. Most of the old growth is gone, cut down for urban development and agriculture. Homeowners also cut down dead trees, and even botanical and zoological gardens are liable to remove valuable snags. Dead trees present a danger to people and property and are considered an eyesore to many. As a consequence, all cavity nesters are having difficulties finding breeding territories. Fortunately, the Tree Swallow, like many other cavity nesting birds, has been found to adapt well to nest boxes, and I have observed that in many instances Tree Swallows will choose a box over a natural cavity.

In the early 1980s, a small project to re-establish a breeding population of Tree Swallows was started by Jesse Grantham (National Audubon Society) by installing nest boxes at the Ventura sewage ponds at the mouth of the Santa Clara River. When Jesse was transferred by Audubon in late 1990, he asked if I would continue with the project. At that time, there were many Tree Swallows stopping at the United Water Conservation District's spreading ponds in Saticoy, also on the Santa Clara River, seven miles inland so I approached the District and re-

The Tree Swallow Nesting Projects

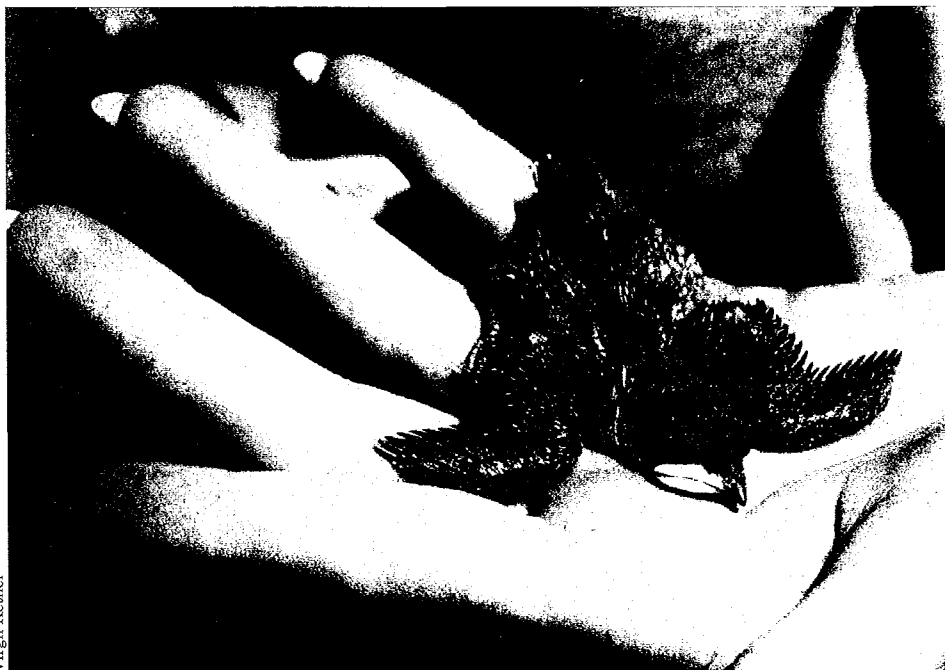
quested permission to place boxes at those ponds. As an experiment, I was allowed to place three boxes to see if there would be any activity, which there was. One successful nest fledged all four young. Arrangements were then made with the District to add additional boxes. The second year, 1992, 12 boxes were in place and 18 successful nests fledging 135 young resulted. The following years (1992–95), numbers of boxes at the ponds were increased annually to a current total of 60.

In 1995, the District approached me to ask if I would be willing to put up more boxes at another one of their sites, a working gravel pit used for storage of excess water and located near the Santa Clara River, about half a mile south of the spreading grounds. County residents had complained of massive numbers of mosquitoes, and the County ordered the District to eradicate the mosquitoes. The District did not want to use pesticides and, because they had noticed a dramatic decrease in the numbers of insects at the spreading ponds, which they rightly attributed to the swallows, they wanted swallows at the gravel pits. In mid season (June 1995), I placed 20 boxes at the pits. I did not really expect much activity so late in the season, so it was encouraging that many birds were inspecting the area as soon as the boxes were placed, and one successful nest was built. This gave the incentive to install more boxes in

time for the 1996 season, bringing the total to 50.

Also late in 1995, I was fortunate to meet Sanger Hedrick who owns 700+ acres in Santa Paula on the banks of the Santa Clara River, approximately 8–10 miles inland from the mouth of the river. Half of his property is devoted to orange groves, as part of a co-op. The other half, which he would like to turn into a wildlife conservation area, has been left relatively undisturbed. Consequently, there are many old cavities and much riparian habitat. In conversation with Mr. Hedrick, I learned that Tree Swallows had never been completely extirpated from Ventura County, but in fact had been nesting on his property for as long as he could remember. On my first visit to Hedrick Ranch, I was extremely excited to see a swallow that I had banded two years earlier at the Saticoy ponds. For the nesting season of 1996, there were 15 boxes placed on the Hedrick Ranch property with seven boxes used by Tree Swallows. There was some mortality, but enough success to warrant continuing in the area and augmenting the number of boxes for the 1997 season.

The first three sites have been unusual in that they attract *only* Tree Swallows. In the six years that I have been monitoring these sites, only once has another species tried to nest in one of the boxes. It was, of course, a House Sparrow, which was



Jan Wasserman holds a young Tree Swallow from one of her nest boxes.

was summarily evicted. At the Hedrick property, other species (mostly House Wrens) compete for the boxes.

From the onset of the nesting season, usually early March, until the birds migrate back to Central and South America, I visit each site at least once per week. Each box is checked and notes are taken on current activity (e.g., stage of nest building, numbers of eggs, numbers of hatchlings). When nestlings are the right age and size, approximately ten days old, they are banded with a numbered U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service band on one leg and a colored band on the other

leg. The numbered bands are used for identification of the individual bird, and the colored bands indicate the year banded. Nests are checked after the nestlings are banded to keep track of growth, health, size, mite infestation and mortality. If there are mites, the boxes are dusted with Sevin®, which causes no harm to the birds.

At the end of the season, the data are sent to the Bird Banding Laboratory in Washington, D.C. In event of a "recovery," the person reporting the band number will be given data on the bird—where, when and by whom it was banded. The bander is also notified of the

recovery. For my project, the banding data are used to track returns to the sites, dispersal upon return and longevity. They are also useful to determine where birds go after leaving the breeding area.

As a result of this project, the breeding population of the Tree Swallow has increased in Ventura County. For the 1996 season, over 200 broods were produced, and since the beginning of the project in 1991 over 1,150 young have fledged.

Much remains to be done. My first long-term goal for the project is to teach teenagers, preparing them to take over the project in the future or to start their own nest box projects. Second, I would like to encourage other conservation groups in southern California to create similar projects so that the Tree Swallow and other threatened cavity nesters can recover as common breeding birds throughout their former breeding areas. 🐦



This column was excerpted with permission from Jan's grant application to LAAS, for which she was awarded \$200. However, the award only begins to cover the costs of box materials, color bands and other supplies. If you would like to support her work, donations for the Tree Swallow Nesting Projects would be gratefully accepted by Jan Wasserman, 1158 Beechwood Street, Camarillo, CA 93010.

Army Imperils Wilderness

The U.S. Army National Training Center at Ft. Irwin (near Barstow) proposes to acquire 310,296 acres of public lands and 20,921 acres of State and private lands—197,000 acres of which are in Wilderness Study Areas! The "preferred" expansion lies east of Ft. Irwin in San Bernardino County and will impact Death Valley National Park and the Hollow Hills, Kingston Range and Saddle Peak Wilderness Areas as well as

the Avawatz Ranges Wilderness Study Areas.

The proposed expansion lies across the Baker/Death Valley Road and all of Silurian Valley, and will impact wilderness values, public access, riparian habitat, 30 natural springs, at least six sensitive plants and six sensitive animals including the Desert Tortoise, Bighorn Sheep, several bat species, Gila Woodpecker and American Badger.

Your comments can make a difference. Use the information here to write a letter or call the BLM at 619-255-8730 for the draft EIR/EIS and appendices. Ask for a full public hearing in Los Angeles. Comments are due by June 4, 1997. Write to:

Barstow Resource Area
Bureau of Land Management
150 Coolwater Lane
Barstow, CA 92311

Att'n: Mike DeKeyel

For more information on how to become involved in this issue, call Dan Patterson at 619-222-4691.



CONSERVATION CONVERSATION

by Sandy Wohlgemuth

In this era of vanishing habitats, one of the most satisfying additions to our meager store of birding places in the city is the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Area in Van Nuys. Only 10 years old, it has become a delightful green refuge from the clatter of traffic and the solid geometry of office buildings. The six-foot cottonwoods are now 35 or 40 feet tall, and other native plants are prospering. With the mild winter and the light rains some, like the beautiful golden cur-rant, have bloomed early.

The 11-acre lake looks good, its edges lined with water-loving greenery where an occasional Sora can be seen prowling and, with luck and a sharp eye, one may see an American Bittern emerge from the rushes. One day in January over a hundred white egrets were counted in and around the lake, 300 Double-crested Cormorants and 500 Canada Geese with a few Snow and White-fronted geese thrown in.

Uncommon birds in recent months have been a Merlin, a dozen spectacular White Pelicans and a Harris' Sparrow. A lone Burrowing Owl makes a mysterious appearance about once a year in the grass-land east of the lake, is seen for a few days, then vanishes. Blue Grosbeaks have nested in the Basin for decades along the Los Angeles River and have expanded their range to the lake and Haskell Creek just west of the lake. Missing this winter has been the Palm Warbler that arrives in the fall and remains for months. A varying assortment of exotics adds a bit of spice to the mix including Red and Yellow bishop, Nutmeg Mannikin, Masked

Weaver and Abdim's Stork.

There has been an unaccountable scarcity of ducks. Other than Mallards, Gadwall, a handful of American Wigeons and Cinnamon Teal, there have been only occasional Bufflehead, Shovelers and Green-winged Teal. Ruddy Ducks, that previously seemed to be in the lake all year long, were absent for months at a time. Are plankton-eating fish consuming duck food? Has the reclaimed water gone bad? Though there have been reports that duck populations elsewhere in southern California were down this winter, the wildlife lake problem (if any) bears watching.

Ospreys took over the spotlight this winter with as many as three doing their high-diving-foot-first act in the lake. Birders and nonbirders alike were treated to the impressive sight of the big hawks plunging into the water, grabbing a good-sized fish and flying off to eat it. The Sepulveda Wildlife Committee (Audubon, Sierra Club, California Native Plant Society and others) is trying to get a nesting platform for the Ospreys near the lake. Like the Peregrine Falcon, the Osprey was decimated by DDT in the Dark Age Of The Environment, but the use of elevated platforms helped it survive. After DDT was banned in the '70s, the bird came back strongly, and nesting platforms continue to be set up by wildlife agencies and Osprey-lovers. A successful Osprey nest would be an exciting addition to the Basin, especially to the school children who are bused in and receive a fine taste of the natural history of the ecosystem.

The Wildlife Area at present con-

sists of 108 acres including about 40 relatively undeveloped acres south of Burbank Boulevard. The second Proposition A passed last November, providing funding that will add over 100 acres of wildlife habitat west of the existing preserve north of Burbank that was formerly a sod farm. Current plans for the new area are to create an oak savanna with native grasses and scattered Valley and Coast Live oaks. Haskell Creek is to be widened and planted with willows, mule fat and elderberries, thus creating productive riparian habitat.

A year ago the Wildlife Committee established "Hummingbird Hill" on the north slope of Burbank Boulevard just beyond the south end of the lake. An entirely native plant community came into being with a wide variety of flowering plants that have indeed attracted hummingbirds. Several species of penstemons and sages, monkey flowers, bladderpods and California fuchsias have made the rather drab incline a delightful arena of color.

With tender loving care, an abandoned corn field has become a splendid oasis in the heart of a great metropolis. The future looks bright. Dedication and enthusiasm of volunteers, cooperation of the City and an enlightened and understanding public will assure the success of the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Area for many years to come.

Weeding of Hummingbird Hill will take place every fourth Saturday of the month from 9:00 A.M. to 12:00 P.M. except the hot months of July and August. Enterprising gardeners are invited. Bring trowels, shovels, gloves, water and audacity.

NEW AT THE BOOKSTORE

The Los Angeles Audubon Society Bookstore is open 10:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M., Tuesday through Saturday. Visit the Bookstore in Plummer Park in West Hollywood or call 213-876-0202. Visa/MasterCard accepted.

Beachcomber's Guide to California Marine Life; covers common marine fauna and flora from San Francisco to San Diego; Niesen, 1991 16.95

Underwater Guide to Hawaiian Reef Fishes; identifies 177 species with 204 full-color photos; waterproof; Randall, 1981 14.95

Wildlife Viewing Guide for Arizona, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Montana, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Utah, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin, and British Columbia; 1992-95 5.95-10.95 ea

Birding Minnesota; directions to birding hotspots, detailed species information, distribution and seasonal maps; Strangis, 1994 16.95

Peterson Flashguides: Western Trailside Birds, Backyard Birds, and Pacific Coastal Birds; laminated fast and easy reference; Peterson, 1996 7.95 ea

Watching Birds in Ireland; Harris, 1986 15.95

Guide to Belize; from pristine rainforests to indigenous villages of the Maya Mountains to the depths of Cousteau's Blue Hole; Bradbury, 1994 15.95

New Key Guide to Guatemala; history and culture, outdoor and recreational opportunities, maps, travel and accommodations; Harris, 1996 15.95

Where To Watch Birds in Britain & Europe (also Spain & Portugal; Scandinavia; Eastern Europe; and Turkey, Greece & Cyprus); 1997 20.00-25.00 ea

Voices of New World Rails or Voices of Toucans; cassettes; Hardy, 1996 12.95 ea

Oriole-fest Leak Proof Feeder; holds 12 oz. sugar water, slices of oranges and jelly cups, built-in ant guard . 15.95

Birdathon '97

Birdathon is Audubon's annual fund-raising drive. Unlike other conservation organizations, Audubon does not continuously solicit funds through direct mail. Just once a year, Audubon chapters across North America participate in the Birdathon to raise money for chapter activities and specific projects of the National Audubon Society and to educate friends and neighbors about birds, birding and bird conservation. At LAAS, half of the proceeds from the Birdathon is earmarked for our education program and the other half is sent to support National Audubon Society education programs. A \$10 donation provides a full-color poster on bird migration, \$35 brings environmental educational material to one grade school classroom for one year, \$250 provides a 2-hour hands-on outdoor discovery program for 65 children at the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Area. If you would like to contribute to Birdathon '97, please send your check payable to Los Angeles Audubon Society, 7377 Santa Monica Boulevard, West Hollywood, CA 90046.

WESTERN Tanager

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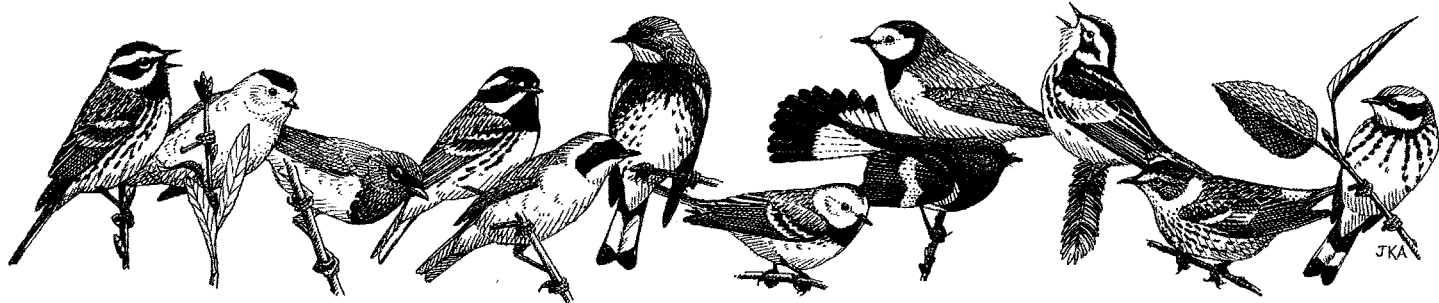
Annual membership in both societies is \$35 per year and \$20 for new members for their first year. Members receive the *Western Tanager* newsletter and *Audubon* magazine, a national publication. Renewals of membership are computerized by National Audubon and should not be sent to LAAS; however, new memberships may be sent directly to LAAS. Make check payable to the National Audubon Society.

Western Tanager subscription rates for nonmembers are \$9 per year for third class delivery or \$15 per year for first class delivery. LAAS members may receive first class delivery by paying an additional \$5. Make check payable to Los Angeles Audubon Society.

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BIRDS OF THE SEASON

by Kimball L. Garrett

I received my first *Western Tanager* in early 1966. As an eager young birder, I naturally turned first to the "Birds of the Season" (at that time "Southern California Birds") column as each month's *Tanager* arrived. Over the decades, four names stand out prominently as authors of this column, and I am indebted to each of these persons (three of whom, sadly, are no longer with us) for constantly reminding us of the rewards of birding and for all they have taught us.

The late David Gaines was "Southern California Birds" author back in 1966, but by October 1967 David's college career took precedence. In his all-too-brief life, David was one of the finest conservation biologists California has known (though that term didn't exist then). October 1967 marked the first "Birds of the Season" column by G. Shumway Suffel, and Shum was a much-loved fixture at the helm of this cornerstone of the *Tanager* until his last column appeared in the July-August 1983 issue. Under Shum the column grew in length and detail, paralleling the phenomenal growth of birding and bird conservation awareness in the 1970s and 1980s. Hal Baxter stepped in to fill the void left by Shum's passing, and Hal and I were keepers of the column through the fall of 1987; I gave it a go as sole author until Hank Brodtkin mercifully began his tenure in the September-October 1988 *Western Tanager*. Hank ably authored "Birds of the Season" until this year's March-April issue, and we trust he and Priscilla will regularly send a sighting or two our way

from southern Arizona for the column.

You will notice a slightly different emphasis in my "Birds of the Season" columns. I intend to highlight many things other than vagrants (the so-called "rarities") and pose some problems which readers might be able to help solve with their field work. This column is not intended to be an exhaustive summary of interesting sightings. I implore all of you to keep good records and submit interesting sightings to the appropriate county coordinators for *National Audubon Society Field Notes* (formerly *American Birds*). [Los Angeles County sightings should come to me.] For species reviewed by the California Bird Records Committee, all pertinent documentation (including photos and tapes) should be sent to the committee's new secretary:

David V. Blue
California Bird Records Committee
1013 Heritage Drive
Ridgecrest, CA 93555-5509.

I apologize in advance for not including some sightings you might have sent to me. Because I will often only use sightings that illustrate a particular pattern or development, I'll have to leave out many interesting records. The important thing is that such records be submitted to *Field Notes* and (when applicable) the CBRC, and I'll leave it to the reader to do so.

The months of May and June will be dominated, at least in Los Angeles County and some other parts of California, by atlas-ing. A phenomenal amount of information on our county's breeding avifauna has been amassed in the first two

years of the Atlas Project, and the fascinating discoveries will continue. It has been customary in this column to extol the virtues of vagrant-hunting in May and early June, but the birder's real contribution at this season will be in his or her atlas-ing efforts. If you aren't already covering one or more Atlas blocks, give Atlas Central a call today! For those who still "just don't get it," there will be the annual late May pilgrimages to Death Valley and other desert oases to tally up yet another few vagrant warblers, vireos and the like.

The outstanding ornithological phenomenon of the first part of 1997 was the unprecedented irruption of **Cassin's Finches** into the southern California foothill regions. Many observers along the coastal base of the San Gabriel Mountains reported multiple Cassin's at their feeders, from Mike San Miguel in Arcadia and Bob Neuwirth in Pasadena to Gayle Hightower in La Cañada and KLG in La Crescenta. A few finches even appeared closer to the coast, such as at Robert Weissler's Agoura feeders and Wanda Dameron's Canoga Park yard. And this incursion was just the tip of the iceberg. Cassin's Finches were found in flocks of dozens through much of Kern County, in the creosote scrub of the Antelope Valley around Pearblossom, and around budding trees in Acton. Incursions of this species onto the desert slope in late winter and early spring to exploit budding deciduous trees are not rare events, but the magnitude of this year's flight, along with the presence of numbers on the coastal slope, is quite unusual.

Other holdovers from the winter's great flight of montane birds were evident into March, including flocks of **Red Crossbills** around planted Aleppo Pines over much of the region. Crossbills were in full song in Pearlblossom on 8 March (KLG), and atlasers should be aware that local nestings following a massive winter invasion are possible. **Red-breasted Nuthatches** were also widespread in small numbers throughout Los Angeles County in February and March.

Fox Sparrows have long been recognized as one of the most geographically variable of North American birds, and we are fortunate to live in a real "melting pot" of wintering Fox Sparrow subspecies. Recognition by some taxonomists of three or even four species of Fox Sparrows has stimulated new interest in this diversity. Tom Wurster and others have spent a good deal of time in the field this winter attempting to superimpose information on call notes and bill color on the extensive work by Swarth and others earlier this century. Although Fox Sparrows winter widely west of the deserts in southern California, they are phenomenally abundant in thick montane chaparral at the 4,000 to 5,000 foot level, such as along Glendora Ridge in the San Gabriel Mountains. Here, brown birds of the *unalasch-censis* group predominate, but grayer birds of both the large-billed *megarhyncha* group and the smaller-billed *schistacea* group also occur. Anyone wishing to learn Fox Sparrows would do well to spend some time in winter in such habitats. **White-crowned Sparrows** also show interesting geographical variation; the presence of a "Puget Sound" White-crown (*pugetensis*) this winter at Mike San Miguel's Arcadia feeder shows how far inland this normally coastal wintering subspecies can get.

When I began birding, **Merlins** were red-letter birds; an active birder might run into a couple each winter in the Los Angeles Basin and a few more in the Antelope Valley. It seems this species has increased al-

most yearly, and this winter one could hardly spend a day birding without seeing at least one Merlin. This species has increased in much of its North American range in recent years (see *Birds of North America* species account by N. S. Sodhi *et al.*), and observers are encouraged to help document trends of wintering Merlins in our region.

The subadult **Masked Booby** found at Pt. Mugu by the LAAS field trip on 18 January apparently departed by early March. A suggestion that this bird might have been a hybrid Masked x Brown Booby was based in a lack of understanding of subadult plumages of Masked Booby; the bird in question retained some brown color of immature plumage on the back, wing coverts and flanks. An unseasonal **Blue-footed Booby** was found in a large (and sensitive) nesting colony of Double-crested Cormorants at the south end of the Salton Sea on 14 February (Kathy Molina), and it or another bird was found moribund on 1 March (*fide* Stacy Peterson). A **Laysan Albatross** highlighted the LAAS pelagic trip to the waters well off Pt. Conception on 1 February (Mitch Heindel); another Laysan was found on the beach at San Pedro in January and released, apparently healthy, on the same pelagic trip. Two **Oldsquaws** were along the San Gabriel River in Pico Rivera on 9 March (Larry Schmah), but with ever-shifting water levels in the river (controlled by releases from upstream dams), the birds did not stick around. The widely seen "American" Oystercatcher at Royal Palms Beach in Palos Verdes in January and February proved to be an intergrade **American x Black Oystercatcher** (as have many white-bellied oystercatchers observed in southern California). Careful plumage analyses and good photographs helped solve this problem.

The perennially wintering **Thick-billed Kingbird** on the Cal Poly campus in Pomona (Christine Brady) was joined by a second individual this winter (and possibly last winter), though few observers were

lucky enough to see both birds together. As is increasingly necessary, these birds were not publicized on local "hotlines" because they spend most of their time on sensitive hillside habitats which are active study sites for Cal Poly students; the ground rules (bird only from the public parking lots) were broken by at least one birder this year, so don't expect to hear about the kingbirds' return in 1997-98.

Another popular winter kingbird, El Dorado Park's **Scissor-tailed Flycatcher**, remained into March. Wintering wood-warblers were not as diverse in the Los Angeles area as in 1995-96, but a **Prairie Warbler** along the Los Angeles River and adjacent Bette Davis Park in Burbank through most of March (Gerard Phillips) was of great interest. A few **Black-and-white Warblers**, **Palm Warblers** and **American Redstarts** were also found in the region. Orange County's **Streak-backed Oriole**, found at the end of December by Jim Pike, was still present in late March. Los Angeles County's first **Common Grackle** was found in Torrance in early March by Mitch Heindel; Mitch later found a female commuting along the same route—but as of 24 March nobody had found the feeding or roosting sites of these birds; they were visible for only a few seconds each early morning and late afternoon as they flew over Western Avenue near 213th Street! Anybody with documentation for this record—long ago predicted by columnist Jack Smith—is urged to submit details to the California Bird Records Committee. 🐦

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

Kimball Garrett
L.A. County Museum of Natural History
900 Exposition Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90007
Phone 213-744-3368
email: garrett@bcf.usc.edu

Or call **Jon Fisher** at 818-544-5009.

PELAGIC TRIPS

Pelagic species often seen are Pink-footed, Sooty, Short-tailed and Black-vented shearwaters, Red Phalarope, Black Oystercatcher, Wandering Tattler, Surf-bird, Pomarine Jaeger, Arctic Tern, Common Murre, Pigeon Guillemot, Xantus' Murrelet, Cassin's and Rhinoceros auklets. Rarities include: Black-legged Kittiwake, South Polar Skua, Tufted or Horned puffins. Mammals include: Gray Whale, Dall's Porpoise, Pacific Bottle-nosed, Common and Risso's dolphins. Marine mammal expert Linda Lewis will be one of our leaders when her schedule permits.

Saturday, May 17 — Albatross Knoll via San Nicolas Island. 20-hour trip departs from San Pedro. Many of the same birds and mammals as local trips, with a greater chance for rarities. Possible Red-billed Tropicbird, Long-tailed Jaeger and South Polar Skua. \$123 includes three meals.

Saturday, June 14 — Santa Cruz Island with landing. 10-hour trip departs from Ventura. Fascinating walk with naturalist in search of Island Jay and island races. Uncommon birds seen on cruise to island include Flesh-footed Shearwater and Northern Fulmar. \$59, no galley. Bring food and **water**.

Saturday, September 13 — San Miguel Island with wet landing. 17-hour trip departs from Ventura. Hike features beautiful island flora and fauna as well as several races of birds and migrants. More uncommon birds seen on the way to the island include Buller's and Flesh-footed shearwaters and Sabine's Gull. \$95 includes dinner.

Saturday, September 27 — Palos Verdes Escarpment to Redondo Canyon. 8-hour trip departs from San Pedro. Birds of interest include Northern Fulmar, cormorants,

phalaropes and rocky shorebirds. \$28, no galley.

Sunday, October 19 — Channel Islands. 12-hour trip departs from Ventura, visits Anacapa, Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz islands. Birds of interest may include Black Least and Ashy storm-petrels, up to 5 cormorants, up to 10 gulls, up to 5 rocky shorebird species and Craveri's Murrelet. \$65, galley.

Friday and Saturday, October 24 and 25 — Continental Shelf. 24-hour trip departs from Santa Barbara. Rarities could include Laysan Albatross, Red-tailed Tropicbird, Red-footed Booby and Cook's Petrel. \$160 for single bunk and three meals.

Sunday, November 16 — Santa Barbara Island and Osborne Banks. 12-hour trip departs from San Pedro. \$44, no galley. ➤

Insufficient response to reservations cancels trips two Wednesdays prior to the scheduled date (four weeks for pelagics); you will be 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 provide information about field trips. Office staff is also available Tuesday through Saturday for most reservation services.

Reservation and Fee Events (Limited Participation) Policies and Procedures

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.

Last Call for Africa

The LAAS African Safari for September 1997 is almost sold out. This trip is a repeat of last year's very successful tour. Cost is \$4,195, complete from Los Angeles, with optional pre- and post- extensions. Most major wildlife areas in Kenya and Tanzania will be visited. Olga Clarke will be your escort throughout. She has traveled to East Africa many times and has arranged this trip to optimize seeing and photographing Africa's marvelous wildlife, scenery and people. For information call Olga at 818-249-9511 or write to her in care of the Los Angeles Audubon Society, 2027 El Arbolita Dr., Glendale, CA 91208.

Phainopepla Sightings Wanted

Iwould like to thank the LAAS members who sent me their observations of Phainopeplas in 1996. I am continuing my research at UC Berkeley to document the departure of Phainopeplas from early breeding areas in the desert and their arrival at late breeding areas in coastal riparian habitat to esti-

mate the possible overlap in timing. Any data you may have are welcome, whether you observe Phainopeplas regularly or sporadically in your area. Data sheets may be requested from Miyoko Chu, 319 Alcatraz Ave., Rear, Oakland, CA 94618; or email <coco@uclink.berkeley.edu>.

— Miyoko Chu

Continued from page 12

turn right on California City Blvd. Drive through town about a mile and turn left on 20 Mule Team Road just past the Central Park Golf Course. At the end of the pavement, turn left. Take the first right, first right again into the Silver Saddle Country Club, followed by two lefts into the lot. Park by the pond. Meet at 8:00 A.M. at the back of the main parking lot. About two hours' driving time from L.A. Limited sign-up of 15. Call LAAS to register. Bring lunch, sunblock.

Saturday, May 24 — Sierra Vista. Biologist, birder and former docent **Scott Harris** will be traipsing through the tussocks in search of the elusive Grasshopper Sparrow, Blue Grosbeak, Lazuli Bunting as well as other foothill and grassland species. This is one of the few spots in the southland vicinity that reports the sparrow on an annual basis. A visit to the Satwiwa Indian Cultural Center will follow, if it is open. Take the 101 Fwy N, exit at Wendy Ave. in Thousand Oaks, and continue S to the end. Turn right onto Potrero Rd., left at the first stop sign (still Potrero Rd.), and left at the next stop sign onto Pinehill Rd., which dead-ends into the parking lot. Meet at 7:30 A.M. and bird until noon.

Sunday, June 1 — Topanga State Park. Leader **Gerry Haigh**. Meet at 8:00 A.M. See May 4 write-up for details.

Sunday, June 8 — Whittier Narrows. Leader **Ray Jillson**. Meet at 8:00 A.M. See May 11 write-up for details.

Saturday and Sunday, June 14 and 15 — Yosemite. Leader **Louis Tucker**. Meet at the south entrance. Trip ends Sunday in Owens Valley. Limited to 14 participants. Reserve with SASE and \$20 to LAAS to receive info/motel flyer.

Plan to room in Oakhurst on Friday night. If camping is available before June 1, LAAS will try to arrange sites for the group (paid out of fees). In case camping cannot be arranged, *have reservations in the valley or Oakhurst for June 13 and 14* until the final decision is made on June 1. Call LAAS for the decision; perhaps earlier on the LAAS tape. Anticipate jump in one-time vehicle fee (\$20?). Your name and phone number will be available to carpoolers, unless you request otherwise.

Saturday, June 21 — Mt. Pinos Vicinity. Leader **Doug Martin**. Calliope Hummingbird, mountain woodpeckers, Hermit Warbler, etc. Take Hwy 5 N past Tejon Pass to the Frazier Park offramp, turn left and follow Frazier Mountain Park Rd., bearing right onto Cuddy Valley Rd. Meet at the "Y" formed by the junction of Cuddy Valley Rd. and Mil Potrero Hwy. at 8:00 A.M. *promptly*. Park in the obvious dirt clearing. Anticipate the elements, and bring a lunch. Rain cancels.

Friday through Monday, June 27-30 — Southern Sierra Weekend with **Bob Barnes**. Likely: Goshawk, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Pileated Woodpecker and owls. Last year 148 species were seen. Limited participation. For information flyer, reserve with SASE. Fee: \$11 for each day attended (\$44 for 4 days). Reserve rooms early.

Sunday, July 6 — Topanga State Park. Leader **Gerry Haigh**. Meet at 8:00 A.M. See May 4 write-up for details.

Sunday, July 13 — Franklin Canyon. This morning walk will be led by **Steven Saffier**. Franklin Canyon is located between Sherman Oaks and Beverly Hills. Wood Ducks bred in the lake last year. Chaparral, lakeside and oak/pine woodland habitat. From the 101 Fwy, take Coldwater Canyon Ave. 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 to the Nature Center. Meet at 7:30 A.M. in the parking lot past a gated drive on the left.

Sunday, July 20 — Big Bear Lake Vicinity. Leaders **Nick and Mary Freeman**. Target birds include Williamson's Sapsucker, Calliope and Rufous hummingbirds, mountain finches and White-headed Woodpecker. Take Hwy 18 or 38 to Big Bear Lake. Proceed about halfway along the south side of the lake on Hwy 18 and turn S on Tulip Lane. Meet at 8:00 A.M. in the parking lot of Aspen Glen Picnic Area located on the SW side of this short street. It should be warm and there may be bugs, so come prepared. Bring lunch.

Saturday, August 2 — Dawson Saddle Bird Hike. **Mike San Miguel** will take us well off the highway (6 miles RT) and up to nearly 9,000 feet on the Mt. Baden-Powell trail approaching via Throop Peak. Elevation gain will be 1,000 feet. The trail is good, although the first mile is moderately difficult. Mike has spent much of his life studying the birds of the San Gabriels. Bring a light jacket, insect repellent, lunch, sunblock, hat, fluids and a day pack. Mountain breeders such as Cassin's Finch, Townsend's Solitaire, Williamson's Sapsucker, Dusky Flycatcher, White-headed Woodpecker and Clark's Nutcracker should be encountered. Drive an hour or more up Angeles Crest Hwy. out of La Cañada to the marked parking lot for the Mt. Baden-Powell trailhead at about 7,900 feet to meet at 7:30 A.M.

Sunday, August 3 — Topanga State Park. Leader **Gerry Haigh**. Meet at 8:00 A.M. See May 4 write-up for details. 🐦

EVENING

Meet at 7:30 P.M.
in Plummer Park

MEETINGS

TUESDAY, MAY 13

Safari leader **Olga Clarke**, Director of the Los Angeles Audubon Society Bookstore, will present a slide program about the Society's fabulously successful 1996 **East African Safari**. Olga will also preview the September 1997 tour to Kenya and Tanzania.

TUESDAY, JUNE 10

Fred Heath will present a program entitled **Beginning Butterflying**. Fred will introduce the new sport of butterfly watching, which is becoming increasingly popular among birders. This illustrated talk provides tips, ID help, field guide recommendations and the general idea of how to get started in this fascinating avocation.

No evening meetings are scheduled for July and August.

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.

Saturday, May 3 — Santa Clara River Estuary. Local talent **Steven Tucker** will lead us to one of our best mudflat sites in search of breeding-plumage phalaropes, peeps and other shorebirds. Bring a snack and mud-proof footwear for a half-day of birding. Take the 101 Fwy N to Victoria Ave., turn right on Olivas Park Dr. and left on Harbor Blvd. Meet at 8:00 A.M. at the north end of the bridge. Park on the right shoulder just before the bridge.

Saturday, May 3 — Big Morongo Wildlife Preserve. Leader **Irwin Woldman** will search for breeding desert and oasis birds such as Brown-crested and Vermilion flycatchers, Summer Tanager, Scott's and Hooded orioles, Yellow-breasted Chat and possible migrating *Empidonax* flycatchers. Take the 10 Fwy E about 17 miles past Banning to Hwy 62 N. Pass through the town of Morongo Valley, turn right on East Dr., then left into the preserve. Meet at 7:00 A.M. in the parking lot, or catch up later. Irwin will start birding next door in Covington Park. Bring lunch, water and sun block. Desert Hot Springs offers the nearest accommodations. Possible extension to nearby areas, depending on interest.

Sunday, May 4 — 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 Ventura Blvd. in the Valley, take Topanga Canyon Blvd. 7 miles S, then turn E (uphill) on Entrada Rd. (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, May 11 — Whittier Narrows Regional Park. Join ranger **Ray Jillson** to view colorful resident and migrating birds including Northern Cardinal. Take the Peck Dr. exit S off the 60 Fwy in South El Monte (just W of the 605 Fwy). Take the offramp onto Durfee Ave. heading W (right) and turn left into the Nature Center, 1000 Durfee Ave. \$2 voluntary donation suggested by the park.

Saturday, May 17 — Galileo Hills. Leader **Nick Freeman**. We will ogle brightly colored warblers and probably Chukar, but will give particular scrutiny to tyrant flycatchers which peak at this time. Take Hwy 14 past Mojave, continue N on Hwy 14 about 10 miles, then

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