

# WESTERN TANAGER



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Los Angeles Audubon Society

## Audubon Begins Plans for Urban Nature Center

by Melanie Ingalls



Debs Park from Southwest Museum

Photo by Herb Clarke

**F**ifty years ago, the National Audubon Society was in the forefront of developing regional nature centers, combining the concept of wildlife sanctuaries with natural history education for children and families. Hundreds of thousands of children, as well as their teachers and parents, were exposed to the wonder and complexity of the natural world through these centers, which became the model for many thousands of non-Audubon nature centers in existence today.

The nature center approach — which has always concentrated on nurturing children's inherent joyful interest in wild plants and animals — is just as relevant today as it was in the 1940s. The changing face of California provides exciting opportunities to help new audiences enjoy, understand and appreciate

California's unparalleled natural resources. Using the nature center both as a resource base and a symbol, Audubon-California is taking its programs into new communities, integrating its resources with public programs and agencies, and focusing on places where limited access to the out-of-doors and low environmental awareness go hand-in-hand.

In Los Angeles, Audubon-California is working with the City of Los Angeles and community leaders to launch a nature center and sanctuary on the east side of the Los Angeles River to reach some of the city's most underserved neighborhoods. We have identified a potential site —

Ernest Debs Park in Highland Park — and have begun an 18-month planning process to build community and financial support for the project. We are getting enthusiastic response from neighborhood associations, civic leaders, law enforcement agencies, schools, elected officials, Audubon members, and grassroots community groups.

The major challenge to placing a nature center close to dense urban communities is simply finding enough nature. Los Angeles, and the east side of the city in particular, has less open space per person than any other major city in the country. Natural areas that have been preserved for wildlife and the enjoyment of the community (such as portions of the Santa Monica Mountains) are largely on the west side, inaccessible to most of the city's residents.

Ernest Debs (Montecito Regional) Park, is a unique asset of the east side of Los Angeles. It is a surprisingly natural, 195-acre park on the south side of the Pasadena Freeway, a few miles northeast of downtown Los Angeles. The Park is owned by the City of Los Angeles



Photo by Herb Clarke

and managed by the Recreation and Parks Department. Within two miles of the Park there are more than 25,000 children, mostly Latino, attending school. Rising above some of the City's densest urban neighborhoods (Cypress Park, Highland Park, El Sereno, and Lincoln Heights), the brushy slopes and grassy hills of Debs Park are an



Looking west from Debs Park.

Photo by Herb Clarke

urban miracle. With good wildlife habitat and excellent opportunities for hiking and enjoying nature, the park provides an invigorating escape from urban pressures and lots of open space for children to discover.

Debs Park is one of the most natural parks in the City's Recreation and Parks Department. Too hilly for organized sports such as baseball or golf, the park offers good passive recreational opportunities, such as picnicking, hiking and birding. A short distance off Monterey Road there is a parking area and a shaded, grassy lawn with water fountains, picnic tables and restrooms. Beyond that, all access to the park is on foot. A paved road (closed to all except park maintenance personnel) curves up from the parking lot to the top of the hill where there is a manmade pond, a grassy knoll, a few benches, and a remarkable, 360-degree view of Los Angeles. The paved road extends along the hilltop to the tip of the ridge, where it joins unpaved fire roads which wind down through the western slope of the park offering good hiking and opportunities to view wildlife.

Audubon is proposing to build a nature center in the developed part of the park to provide a focus for educational and recreational activities for the community. While community input will help shape the final design and programs, the nature center will house interpretive exhibits, classroom space, and offices for interpretive staff. Landscaping around the center will provide habitat for hummingbirds and butterflies and an amphitheater will provide an outdoor community meeting space and a place for cultural programs. The existing trail system will be expanded and enhanced with discreet signage, benches and wildlife viewing areas.

In partnership with Recreation and Parks Department, we will offer a range of outdoor activities for people of all ages. School science programs, ecology workshops for educators, after-school nature hikes, weekend family bird walks and summer camp for kids and adults are just a few of the things which could be offered for community members. The goal is to provide a safe and welcoming place where children and their families can experience the out-of-doors and learn about nature in their neighborhood.

In addition, we believe there are exciting opportunities to involve the community in restoration, enhancement and monitoring of wildlife and wildlife habitat on the site. We would like to work closely with park officials to develop an overall natural land management program for the site and then mobilize volunteers to help reestablish native grasslands and woodlands to make Debs Park the natural jewel of the City's park system.

Because Audubon is not yet a household word in eastside communities, our first step will be to engage Audubon members in neighborhoods

surrounding the Park, building the beginnings of a volunteer corps and getting to know the community. This fall, Audubon-California will implement Project Pigeon Watch, a citizen science project designed by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, in local elementary and middle schools. Audubon-California will also publish a bilingual guide to watchable wildlife of the park for young people and their families to help them get to know the wildlife there.

The Los Angeles nature center has enormous potential to provide meaningful opportunities for a whole new audience to learn about, enjoy and appreciate the birds and other wildlife with which they share the city. With the center as its base, Audubon-California will be able to address a whole range of urban wildlife issues and help raise a new generation of environmental stewards. We welcome your involvement.

For more information, please contact Melanie Ingalls, Director of Audubon's Los Angeles Education Center at (310) 574-2799.



Hilltop Pond

Photo by Reed Tolleson

# Birding from Cancún

by Gene Anderson

**A**ll right, you're in Cancún. You've spent 20 minutes exhausting all that the city has to offer. Now what?

Now, of course, you rent a car and go birding. Car rentals are expensive, but worth it. Not far from Cancún are wonderful wild areas, preserving a vast variety of habitats: dune scrub, mangroves, marshes, thorny short-tree forest, deciduous forest, and high rain forest. These hold hundreds of species of birds, both local and migrant. Many are endemic to the Yucatán Peninsula, the large limestone shelf whose northeast corner is occupied by the urban sprawl of Cancún. The Mexican portion of the peninsula is divided into three states: Quintana Roo (in which Cancún lies), Yucatán (to the west) and Campeche (too far to be within reasonable operating range from Cancún).

Within the city, there is little to see. On the Hotel strip are small archeological sites, protected along with their dune scrub vegetation, and here one can become acquainted with some of the typical coastal specialties, such as Black Catbird, Caribbean Elaenia, and Caribbean Dove.

At the edge of the city, the forest begins. Birding the Quintana Roo forest is difficult in most places because few roads enter it, and it presents a blank green wall to drivers on the main highways. Moreover, once you are away from the tourist zones, no one speaks English. This article is meant to guide you to some particularly good spots, and suggest some strategies. I also have a second motive which I will coyly leave to the end. First some practicalities: The bird guide to take is *A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America* by Steve Howell and Sophie Webb (Oxford Univ. Press 1995). It supersedes the English edition of R. T. Peterson and E. Chalif's *Field Guide to Mexican*

*Birds* (1973). However, neither Howell and Webb nor the English Peterson have pictures of the North American migrant birds. The Spanish edition of the Peterson guide does. Therefore, if you read any Spanish at all, promptly equip yourself with *Aves de Mexico: Guía de Campo* (Diana, 1989; any good Mexican bookstore will have it). Carrying all the North American guides is enough to drive you crazy, so get the Howell and Webb as well as the Spanish Peterson or one North American guide.

Second, don't worry about crime, wild animals, etc. Quintana Roo is one of Mexico's safest states — far safer than California — in these regards. In urban areas, carry cash, credit cards and (above all) passport in a money belt (and most certainly *not* in a shoulder bag — easily grabbed off your arm). Snakes are the only real menace, and they are avoided easily: just watch where you're going, and don't go crashing around in grass and brush at night or late evening. (The danger of snakes is, shall we say, exaggerated somewhat by certain entertaining local residents. I was often told of a snake that bites your shadow, killing you. I never saw one — also, everyone who told me about it was laughing!)

When parking on a small forest road, park OFF the highway. All roads have little turnouts for parking, just after you get into the screening tree-cover. Break off a green branch and put it on your car. This is the standard local way to show you're in the area and haven't left the car for long.

The best times to visit are (of course) in migration, especially late April when birds are in spring plumage. The down side of a late April visit is that this is the driest, hottest and sunniest time of the year. Yucatán sun can be deadly; heat stroke is far ahead of snakes in any catalog of real risks to visitors. For comfort, visit the peninsula in midwinter.

The best birding spot in Quintana Roo is Cozumel Island. In fact, if you are a dedicated birder, you

should take your vacation on Cozumel instead of Cancún. (For one thing, the town is smaller and friendlier). This island has two endemic species: the Cozumel Vireo (easy to find everywhere — it stays low in the scrub) and the Cozumel Thrasher (almost exterminated by recent hurricanes, but occasionally findable in gardens). There are also well marked subspecies (full species?) of the Fork-tailed Emerald and the Tropical House Wren. Both are very common in gardens.

The Rose-throated Tanager, a Yucatán endemic that is genuinely rare and almost impossible to find, occurs around flowering and fruiting trees on Cozumel (and very rarely on the mainland, especially near Bacalar). Cozumel is also as good a place as any to find the Yucatán Parrot, an endemic that is similar to the much commoner White-fronted Parrot.

Cozumel is also the only really good place in Mexico to find Caribbean island specialties like the Northern Stripe-headed Tanager (look for fruiting trees with many birds feeding at them) and White-crowned Pigeon (mangroves). Cozumel has a vast marsh area, in which Ruddy Crakes and other unlikely creatures abound and may even be seen as well as heard. Take the main hotel-strip road north till it turns into a dirt track a few miles north of town park, and walk past the awful-smelling sewage treatment plant.

The other super-good place in Cozumel is the botanic garden, several miles south of town. This is particularly good in migration, when it seems as if half the birds of the eastern United States and Canada are in the trees. Locally rare species like the Louisiana Waterthrush and Cape May Warbler may turn up. Cozumel is also, of course, excellent for water birds and the common Yucatán forest species.

On the mainland, the best strategy is to go to archaeological sites. Cobá is the closest major site to Cancún, and a superb birding spot. Chichen Itza is more famous and only slightly less birdy. Near Mérida, Dzibilchaltún affords good bird-

farther away. At these, everybody's favorite endemic is the Turquoise-browed Motmot, locally called "Toh" from its low, throaty call. This spectacularly beautiful bird perches alertly on wires or indulges in aerial acrobatics in search of insects. It loves ruins, nesting in crevices among the pyramids. Another endemic you will soon find is the noisy Yucatán Jay.

Another endemic, common but confusing and hard to spot, is the Yucatán Flycatcher. This is virtually identical to our Ash-throated Flycatcher (thankfully, the ranges don't overlap), except for the call, a mournful thin whistle. The Oliveaceous and Brown-crested flycatchers are very similar and occur in the same places. Another endemic that requires work is the Orange Oriole. It is fairly common around the sites, but hard to tell from the many other oriole species. The Yucatán Bobwhite, similar in call but very different in pattern from the Eastern U.S. one, is usually seen flying up from untraveled road edges.

You will also find a vast range of other, more widespread species. The Masked Tityra, Green Jay, Altamira Oriole, Couch's Kingbird, and Tropical Mockingbird are among the first birds you will meet.

You will also hear, on every side, a loud, cheerful, whistled song, and after a long, hot, sweaty, thorn-pricked, mosquito-bitten search, you will trace it to a beautiful wren, resembling a Canyon Wren that splattered his throat and breast with black ink. This is the Spot-breasted Wren, the authentic voice of the southeast Mexican bush. No amount of blazing heat or hurricane rain can stop his song.

Some of Yucatán's endemics are confined to the dune scrub of the northern tip of the peninsula. The best place I know to find these is north of Mérida, in Yucatán state, and east of Chicxulub (the place where the meteorite fell that is accused of wiping out the dinosaurs). You drive to Progreso, and then east, past Chicxulub. The road goes along the north side of a lagoon which,

except in the height of summer, is thronged with egrets, herons, ibises, spoonbills, ducks, shore birds, terns, and gulls, including many rare species. At some point near Chicxulub you will start picking up flamingos — Mexico's only population of them. Some 5000 nest in the lagoon near Chicxulub. They scatter out to other areas to feed, but a well-marked ecological reserve just east of Chicxulub is currently the best spot to find them. With luck, you can see the whole bunch at once—as spectacular a sight as any birdwatcher could hope for.

At the 19-20 kilometer marker posts, there is some remaining undisturbed scrub. Here you look for the Yucatán Wren and the Mexican Sheartail. The wren — virtually identical to our Cactus Wren — is easy to find (just listen for a Cactus Wren that doesn't sound quite right). The hummingbird is almost impossible. It is a genuinely rare bird; there are only a few pairs in the world. Look for flowering agaves, and hope. Also found in this habitat is a strange and isolated population of Botteri's Sparrow, otherwise a desert-grassland species. South of Cancún, on the coast, is a pleasant ecological theme park, Xcaret. This large but crowded park possesses a zoo with many native animals and birds, as well as a good botanic garden and aquarium. It is worth a visit, especially if you have non-birders in the party and want to "hook" them on the tropical environment. On south, past Tulum, lies the vast Sian Ka'an Ecological Reserve. This is perhaps your only hope for the last Yucatán endemic: the huge and beautiful, but now almost extinct, Ocellated Turkey. This reserve is not for the unprepared. You can't go there without a permit, and you can't find anything without a guide. Seek out Amigos de Sian Ka'an (Friends of Sian Ka'an) in Cancún (Ap. Postal 770, Cancún 77500). Better still, look up Adriana de Castro and Arturo Bayona, Ap. Postal 23, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, QR 77200. They know the reserve; they are first-rate naturalists and guides; and they

speak English.

The deep interior and southwest of Quintana Roo are perhaps the most exotic and fascinating destinations. Here one can find rainforest birds and mammals. Birding this area is a real adventure. It's remote. No English is spoken. And you have to get off the main roads. Yet the rewards are spectacular: King Vultures, Black and Ornate hawk-eagles, Great Curassows, Blue-crowned Motmots, various parrots, countless species of orioles and hummingbirds.

Finding small roads that lead into the forest is always possible. My favorite is some 7.8 miles south of the center of Chunuhub, a small town in western central Q.R. Watch for red tracks on the southbound main road, where trucks have been turning from this (eastbound) road onto the main highway. Bird this road as early in the day as possible. Some of the weirder things to look for are: Ant-tanagers of two species, Black-faced Ant-thrush, Rufous-breasted Spinetail, Tawny-crowned Greenlet, and the very rare and hard-to-find Golden-crowned Warbler. In winter, the area swarms with eastern North American birds: American Redstarts, Black-throated Green Warblers, etc. With luck, you can find Worm-eating and Swainson's Warblers.

Further south, watch for signs to Nueva Loria. Turn west off the main road, go through the tiny village of Nueva Loria, and proceed about two miles. There, watch for turnoff roads into the deep forest hung with Spanish moss, lying between Nueva Loria and Altamirano. In this forest lies a huge and unexplored Classic Maya site — the ruins of a city that once held thousands of people. This site is protected by the government, and with it is protected the northernmost tract of tall old-growth forest in this part of Q.R. In this forest are White-breasted Wood-wrens, Little Hermit, Eye-ringed Flatbills, and other birds that are otherwise gone from such northern stations. It is well to pick up a local young person to guide you through this forest; any kid in town will be more than happy to pick up a couple of pesos

this way.

Finally, if you want real adventure, the extremely remote and isolated village of Tres Garantias, in the far southwest corner of Q.R., has set up an ecotourism resort — of sorts. It consists of a couple of traditional Maya houses, at the end of a 20 mile rut (barely passable to the toughest 4wd vehicles) through ancient tall rainforest. The houses have electricity and showers, but not much else. You're out there alone with the jaguars, jaguarundis, crocodiles, tapirs, monkeys, snakes, and probably 300 species of birds (no one has a full count yet). Obviously, you won't see all of these, because the forest is almost trackless and impenetrable. You have to go with a group (at least four people and preferably six) and arrange in advance so that guide and transportation service is available. Arrangements are made through the

Plan Forestall office in Chetumal. Get an able and sympathetic travel agent to do this. The Plan Forestal office is a forestry office staffed by busy professional foresters, and is not set up to handle tourists who just wander in. But, if you can arrange it, this just could be the experience of your life.

Now, my second motive.

Quintana Roo needs all the help it can get in saving its resources. Realistically, the only current hope lies in proving to the relevant governments, at local, state, and federal levels, that thousands of people are eager to spend lots and lots of hard currency to see the animals and plants. Whatever you may think of ecotourism in general, the choice here is ecotourism, or conversion to cattle ranches, or worse.

Thus, I am trying my best to publicize the delights of the Yucatán

Peninsula, so that you who read this will all go there and make a point of telling everyone you are spending all this money just to see the birds (and whatever else you fancy). I have been working in Quintana Roo, trying to find out about conservation options and trying to talk local people into saving wildlife. They want to save it; they have to make a living; they see ecotourism as the great hope for accommodating those two goals.

Finally, one plea: All you readers, please send me a brief note telling me what you would like to see in an ecotouristic resort. Eventually, I want to do a questionnaire survey of what facilities birders might want. Please contact me at Dept. of Anthropology, University of California, Riverside, CA 92521, or by e-mail: gene@citrus.ucr.edu.

Thanks very much! The birds you save may be your own — to list. 

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# CONSERVATION CONVERSATION

by Sandy Wohlgemuth

The saga of Big Tujunga Wash continues. In the previous episode the City Attorney asked the City Council to reconsider its vote to deny a permit for an 18-hole golf course in the rare alluvial sage scrub of the Big Tujunga River in the northeast San Fernando Valley. The threat of a \$215 million lawsuit by the owner of the property was enough to force the Council to reverse its vote and apparently open the path to destruction of a unique habitat in the heart of the city. But all may not be lost. The towering floods of winter have carved deeply into the portion of the wash that would be included in the golf course. The Army Corps of Engineers, the custodian of the "waters of the United States," has already expressed its concern about the possible intrusion of the course into the wash. If the Corps reevaluates the terrain and finds that the project will indeed violate those waters, the golf course may never be built.

While we await the concluding episode of this stirring drama, let's turn to a more pacific locale, the wildlife reserve in the Sepulveda Basin Recreation Area. This has been a most successful development from the initial planning in the late 70s to its completion ten years later. The 60 acres north of Burbank Blvd. has been the principal focus of activity with the creation of the 11 acre lake and the generous native plantings, including the

splendid line of cottonwoods along the creek on the western edge. It has become a genuine refuge for people who simply enjoy a pleasant stroll through the greenery with the lake nearby and the mountains in the background.

Birding has been excellent. In the winter there may be 125 Great Egrets and 50 Snowies there the same day, as well as 400 or 500 Canada Geese foraging in the grassy fields. As many as four Ospreys might be fishing. In the spring, Blue Grosbeaks and Bullock's Orioles, Song Sparrows and Bushtits raise their young. Occasional visitors pop up unexpectedly: White Pelican, Western Grebe, Swamp Sparrow, Mountain Bluebird, Yellow-breasted Chat, Bell's Vireo, American Bittern. Palm Warblers several times have spent an entire winter in the basin. Perhaps the most exalted visitor was this winter's Bald Eagle that stayed for over two months, catching fish from the surface of the lake without getting wet.

The Corps of Engineers owns Sepulveda's 2100 acres as it does most of the flood control basins in the country. The baseball fields, the model plane area, the three golf courses, the cricket fields, Lake Balboa (fishing and boating) and the wildlife reserve are leased to the city Department of Recreation and Parks which is responsible for maintenance of all the facilities. When the reserve was being built a Sepulveda Wildlife Area Committee was formed with members of LA

Audubon, San Fernando Valley Audubon, California Native Plant Society, the Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains and the Sierra Club. Representatives of the Corps and city Rec and Parks come to all the monthly meetings. It has been a rewarding relationship. The two agencies have been very open with the environmental folks, discussing their plans, listening to our criticism and accepting legitimate suggestions. The committee, with money from mitigation for illegal toxic spills in the creek, has created "Hummingbird Hill" on the north slope of Burbank Blvd. at the south edge of the reserve. Trees and a wide variety of flowering plants — all natives — have been put in the ground and are doing well. The unusual rainfall this winter has produced a jungle of weeds which committee volunteers are vigorously chopping down.

Rec and Parks people have been exceptionally helpful. Every year they have cleared the east side of the lake of weeds and planted grass that attracts the Canada Geese in substantial numbers. In a time when the Pierce College farm and Chatsworth reservoir land have relatively few geese, the food source in the basin may be keeping these popular, spectacular birds in Los Angeles. They have helped the committee with plantings on Hummingbird Hill, monitoring the drip irrigation system and lending a hand with the weeding. Some department members have taken a

lively interest in birds and occasionally notify us of unusual sightings.

Several years ago National Audubon's Education Center in Playa del Rey established a splendid environmental education program for elementary school kids (grades 4 to 6) in the reserve.

Docents are trained by the staff of the Conservation District who also train the teachers. The teachers are given material, including subscriptions to "Audubon Adventures," to show the kids what to expect when they arrive at the reserve. About 60 children are bussed in at a time, divided into small groups and given binoculars. They learn about the different kinds of birds and their preferred habitats. Microscopes are set out on benches and the invisible world of plankton is revealed to the kids, most of whom had no idea it existed. Docents talk about the importance of water in our lives and the use of reclaimed water in the wildlife lake. The children take samples of the lake water and run simple tests for oxygen content and pH with discussion of their meaning and the effect of water quality on the organisms. The conservation of habitat and the interdependence of plants and animals are explored. Many of the kids come from low-income families and the field trip is their first adventure into a natural environment.

The direction of this important program has been turned over to Muriel Kotin of San Fernando Valley Audubon who is doing an excellent job. The program is funded by the two Audubon societies and the California Native Plant Society.

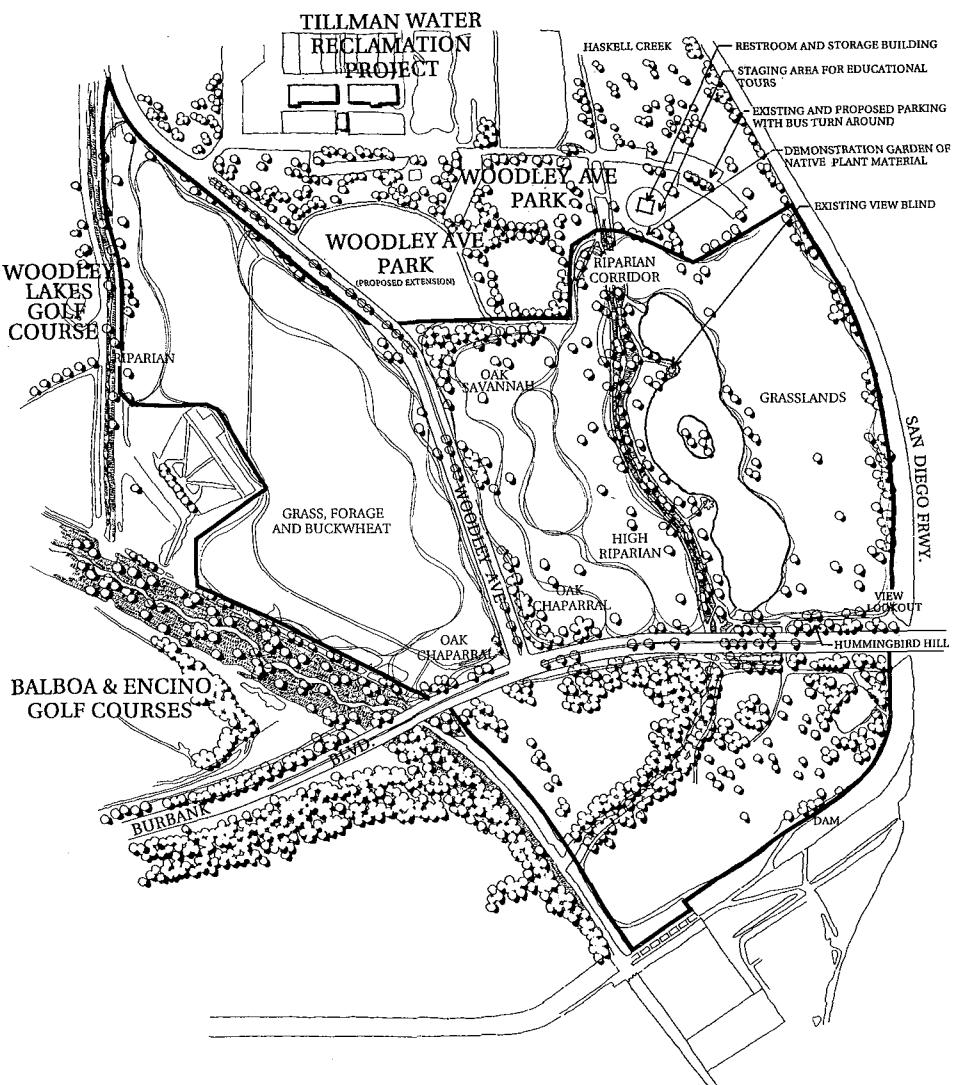
To our delight, the reserve is being expanded by the addition of about 100 acres made possible by bond issues approved by the voters. This sizeable chunk of land is west of the existing 60 acres, most of which was a sod farm. It will be planted in native oaks, willow, sycamore and elderberry. Two bridges over Haskell Creek will be built connecting the two areas and another bridge will cross the creek where it empties into the Los Angeles River. The 48 acre plot of land

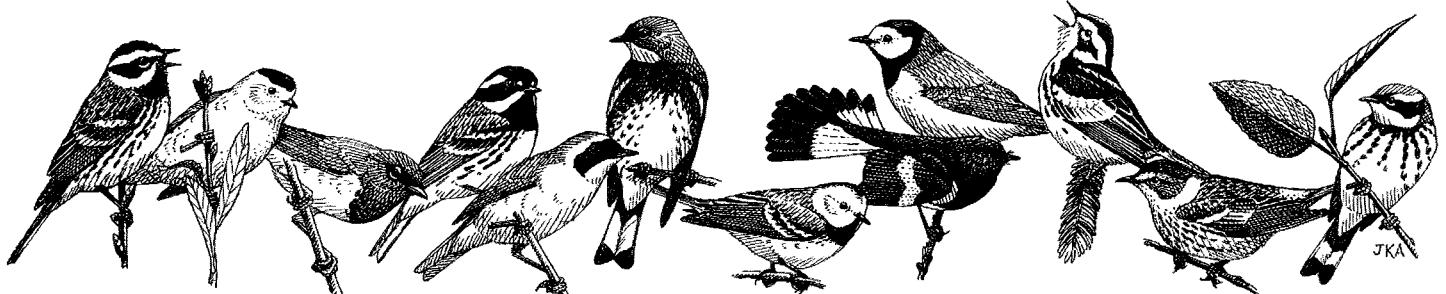
south of Burbank Blvd. is part of the reserve that the Corps of Engineers began developing about ten years ago but changed its mind and quit. The Corps had done a good deal of native planting, much of which survives, but the influx of flood and wind-borne seeds have produced a wild tangle of temperate jungle. We can hope that sometime in the future money will be available to restore and rebuild the south portion of the reserve.

The new construction will not only create a new habitat to the west but will bring changes to the established northern section. The two blinds along the lake will be eliminated and replaced by less intrusive structures. Willows and sycamores will be planted along the creek; together with the existing cottonwoods they will present an enhanced riparian ecosystem. The

main trail will be improved so that water will drain off. The cricket field and the parking lot north of the present entrance to the wildlife area have already been shaved to prepare for new parking lots, restrooms and a small amphitheater for educational use. An oak woodland will also be planted here which will be a pleasant introduction to the wildlife reserve.

In an era when we are losing open space and places for wildlife, Sepulveda is CREATING new habitat, a rare and wonderful thing. With the passage of time the trees and the shrubs will grow taller and may provide living and nesting places for species that rarely occur in the reserve: woodpeckers, grosbeaks, warblers — even a Wrentit. That'll be the day! Onward and upward. 





# BIRDS OF THE SEASON

by Kimball L. Garrett

Impacts of major events such as the waning El Niño - Southern Oscillation can be difficult to predict, but one prediction seems safe: anomalous things will happen. Just as El Niño can't logically be implicated in every odd event of recent weeks (Mike Piazza a Marlin? a Met!!?), it may also have little or nothing to do with some of the bird oddities of the spring of 1998. But its hand is nevertheless evident in the fortunes and failures of many of our birds. As you read through the report below, try to resist the temptation to exclaim: "Aha, El Niño did it!" But, conversely, don't rule out this phenomenon's far-reaching implications in the biological world.

April and May storm tracks through the Pacific and western North America were indeed unusual, and this may be a direct result of El Niño conditions. The odd timing, track and severity of spring storms may well have been responsible for the "invasion" of **Bristle-thighed Curlews** to the pacific states. After an initial sighting in Oregon, and several subsequent Oregon and Washington birds in the first half of May, California recorded its first two Bristle-thigheds: one near Crescent City in Del Norte Co., and one at Pt. Reyes National Seashore in Marin Co.; both were seen by scores of observers. This Whimbrel look-alike is easily told by its clear cinnamon-buff rump and remarkably human-like "whee-o-wheat?" whistled call. Wintering on tropical Pacific atolls and breeding in west-

ernmost Alaska, Bristle-thighed Curlews normally take a more direct spring route between these areas; it is conceivable that strong early May storms pushed some birds much farther east than normal. Perhaps these storm systems also explain why Attu Island in Alaska's westernmost Aleutian Islands were inundated this May with hundreds of Olive-backed Pipits and up to a hundred Eyebrowed Thrushes (fide Dan Gibson).

Many observers recall the invasion of Hooded and Kentucky warblers, Northern Parulas, and Yel-

low-throated Vireos in the spring of 1992; that bonanza was perhaps also triggered by anomalous spring storm tracks (though different from this year's).

One down side of El Niño events is reduced breeding success in many seabirds, if not outright failures. Very few **Elegant Terns** attempted nesting this year at Bolsa Chica, and those that tried had failed as of late May. Strong spring rains and nest predators (mainly gulls and crows) seem to have been the problems, rather than a food shortage.

Dr. Charles Collins of Cal State Long Beach suggests another factor: the availability of an extensive and ideal nesting island in the middle of Los Angeles Harbor. By early May there were thousands of Elegant Terns on this new fill area, with hundreds of pairs evidently nesting. Caspian Terns nested here the past two years (Kathy Keane) but the Elegants discovered it this year. This is the first nesting record of Elegant Tern for Los Angeles County and (marginally) the northernmost ever; could Royal Terns and Black Skimmers be far behind? Unfortunately, this artificial island will be a busy container port and surely devoid of breeding birds within the next couple of years. Would a little bit of predator-free space for ground-nesting colonial birds be too much to ask? In Los Angeles, apparently so (unless you're an "Endangered" Least Tern). Several dozen **Black Skimmers** were

**R**ecords of rare and unusual bird sightings reported in this column should be considered tentative pending review by the regional editors of *American Birding Association FIELD NOTES* or, if appropriate, by the **California Birds Records Committee**.

Send your bird observations with as many details as possible to:

Kimball L. Garrett  
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hanging out in Los Angeles Harbor as of mid-May, and up to 42 were at Playa del Rey in April (Bob Shamm et al.).

The 9 May LAAS pelagic trip was highlighted by an absurdly fearless **Laysan Albatross** which spent half an hour gobbling popcorn as it rubbed up against the *Vantuna* midway between Santa Barbara Island and the NW tip of Santa Catalina Island (Kimball Garrett et al.). **Sabine's Gulls**, **Arctic Terns**, many cooperative **Xantus' Murrelets**, and an alternate-plumaged **Franklin's Gull** helped round out the trip. A city-slipping adult Franklin's was flying around the Rose Garden in Exposition Park near downtown Los Angeles on 11-12 May (Kathy Molina, Cassie Carter). The 19 April LAAS pelagic from Marina del Rey to north of Santa Barbara Island yielded lots of **Rhinoceros Auklets** and **Xantus' Murrelets**, along with an uncooperative tropicbird which was almost certainly a **Red-tailed Tropicbird** (Barney Schlinger).

A **Brant** was at Chatsworth Reservoir on 17 May (Art Langton, Stuart Wells), an unusual locality for this normally coastal species; ironically, Brant are more frequently recorded (though still quite rare) in the Antelope Valley, and this year three were at the Lancaster Sewage Ponds on 9 May (Steve Tucker). Three migrating **Swainson's Hawks** were over the junction of the 60 and 605 freeways in El Monte on 3 April (Larry Schmahl). A light-morph adult over Soledad Canyon near Agua Dulce on 17 May (KG) was quite late for a migrant. The usual nesting pair was once again present east of Lancaster in the Antelope Valley. A very late **Merlin** was well-studied at Bonelli Park (Puddingstone Reservoir) on 14 May (Mickey Long and Jim Jennings).

Two **Lewis' Woodpeckers** were still at Eaton Canyon on 20 April (Mickey Long), but none seems to be lingering as late as last winter's bird in La Cañada Flintridge. A **Red-breasted Nuthatch**

in La Crescenta on 7 May (KG) was something of a surprising considering the near-zero winter for this species. Two **Black Swifts** over the Los Angeles River near Elysian Park on 8 May (KG) were the first reported this spring, and the first local **Chimney Swift** was in Burbank on 22 May (KG).

**Bell's Vireos** slowly seem to be increasing in Los Angeles County; singing birds were once again at Hansen Dam in the NE San Fernando Valley in May. One singing on dry hillside at Bonelli Park on 30 April (Pete Bloom, Robb Hamilton) was away from typical habitat. **Gray Vireos** have disappeared from the traditional locality at Bob's Gap on the north slope of the San Gabriel Mountains, but for the second year in a row a singing bird was in similar habitat a few miles away (Mark Wimer); this is certainly one of the most critically endangered bird species in Los Angeles County. A **Northern Waterthrush** at Playa del Rey on 22 April (Robb Hamilton) was on the early side for a spring migrant and might possibly have wintered at this locality.

So was this a good spring migration? It's certainly too early to tell, and we still have that nasty old problem of not really knowing how to count birds in a way that is repeatable from year to year. The lush growth from the heavy late winter and spring rains has certainly allowed migrants to spread out, rather than concentrate at oases; excellent passages of songbird migrants were reported in early May over much of our deserts, including the Quail Lake area of the westernmost Antelope Valley, and in the easternmost Antelope Valley near El Mirage (just over the San Bernardino County line).

In July and August we'll see how predicted poor breeding seasons of seabirds (already shown to be a reality in the Gulf of California) might translate to summer dispersal, and we'll have a better idea if the abundance of water in our mountains and adjacent foothills have been a boon to breeding landbirds.

## WESTERN TANAGER

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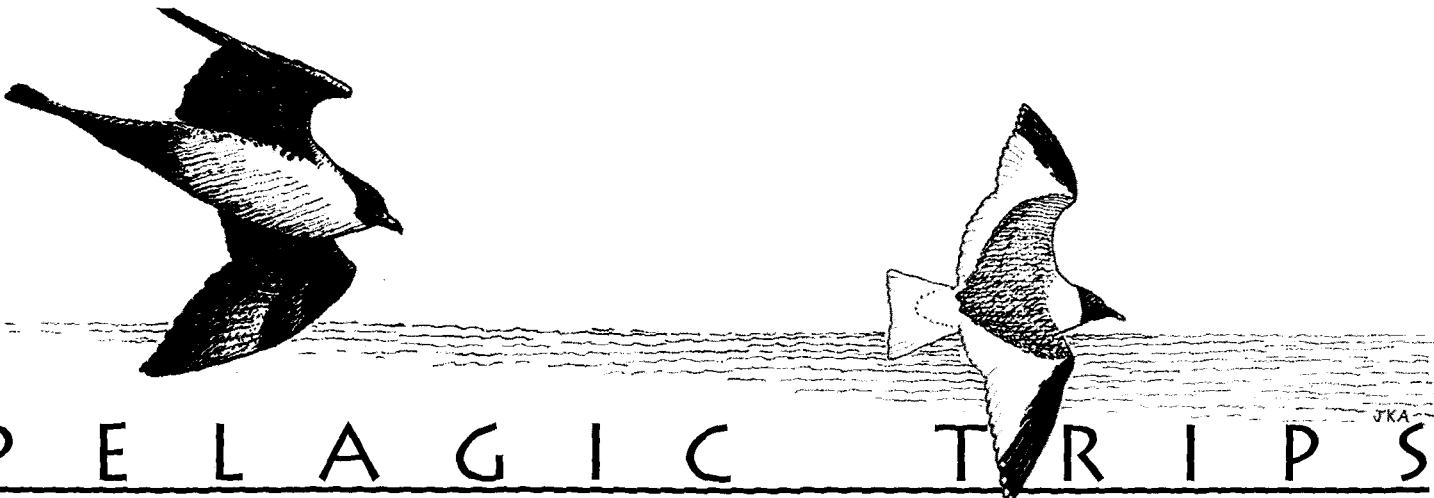
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# PELAGIC TRIPS

**P**elagic species often seen are Pink-footed, Sooty, Short-tailed, and Black-vented Shearwaters, Red Phalarope, Black Oystercatcher, Wandering Tattler, Surfbird, 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.

**Saturday, August 22 —**  
**Albatross Knoll via**  
**San Nicolas Island.** 20-hour trip departs from San Pedro. Early morning departure past San Nicolas Island to Potato Banks and Albatross Knoll. Exciting birds and sea mammals seen on previous August trips. Many of the same birds and mammals as local trips, with a greater chance for rarities. Possible Red-billed Tropicbird, Long-tailed Jaeger, South Polar Skua, and Blue Whales. Leaders: Kimball Garrett, Mike San Miguel and Mitch Heindel. \$130 includes 3 meals.

**Sunday, September 20 —**  
**Anacapa Island, Santa Rosa Island, and Santa Cruz Island.** 12-hour trip departs from Ventura. Birds all the way highlight this beautiful passage between the islands. Leaders: Mitch Heindel and Mike San Miguel. \$70, full galley.

**Saturday, October 17 —**  
**Santa Barbara Island and the Osborne Banks.** 12-hour trip departs from Marina del Rey. Joint trip with the UCLA Biology Department. We will head out to the open ocean toward Santa Barbara Island as we search for pelagic birds and marine life. Leaders: Arnold Small, Fritz Hertel, and Barney Schlinder. \$45 (\$40 students), microwave only.

**Saturday, November 14 —**  
**Palos Verdes Escarpment to Redondo Canyon.** 8-hour trip departs from San Pedro. This trip is tailored to novice pelagic birders and year-end listers. Leaders: Mitch Heindel, Kimball Garrett, and Kathy Molina. \$30 no galley.

*All pelagic trips must be filled 35 days prior to sailing, so please make your reservations early.*

## REFUND POLICY FOR PELAGIC TRIPS

If a participant cancels 31 days or more prior to departure, a \$5 service charge will be deducted from the refund. There is no participant refund if requested fewer than 30 days before departure, unless there is a paid replacement available. Call LAAS for a possible replacement. Please do not offer the trip to a friend as it would be unfair to those on the waiting list.

## Help Wanted

In the last issue of the *Western Tanager*, we mentioned that a number of key positions in the Los Angeles Audubon Society had been filled by some very capable people. However, you might have noticed on the back page of this issue of the *Tanager* that the programs for the September and October evening meetings are "to be announced." Part of the reason for this is that we still have not found a volunteer for the job of Program Chair. If you are interested in this rewarding position please contact us quickly. In the meantime, if any of our read-

ers know of a possible speaker — perhaps one you've heard at another Audubon Society meeting or if you can give one, please let us know. We promise not to push too hard to get you to permanently become the Program Chair.

We are also looking for someone to keep up our website. Tom Frillman has graciously been handling this for LAAS, but as he already does a few things for us, such as putting together each issue of the *Tanager*, he would be happy to relinquish this to an interested volunteer.

## FIELD TRIPS

*Continued from page 12*

breeders such as Cassin's Finch, Townsend's Solitaire, Williamson's Sapsucker, Dusky Flycatcher and White-headed Woodpecker. Bring a light jacket, insect repellent, lunch, sun block, hat and fluids. Drive an hour or so up Angeles Crest Hwy out of La Canada to the Islip Saddle parking area on the left side of the road. This is about a mile past Kratka Ridge Ski area (Thomas Guide 4649 F3). Meet at 7:30 A.M. You will need a National Forest Adventure Pass.

**Saturday, August 1 — Big Bear Vicinity.** Leaders **Nick and Mary Freeman.** Meet in the Aspen Glen Picnic Area parking lot in Big Bear at 8:00 A.M. Take Hwy 18 or 38 to Big Bear Lake, then proceed about half way along the south side of the lake on Hwy 18 and turn south on Tulip Lane. The lot will be on the SW side of this short street. Target birds include Williamson's Sapsucker, Calliope and Rufus hummers, mountain finches and White-headed Woodpecker. It should be warm and there may be bugs, so come prepared. Bring lunch.

**Sunday, August 2 —**  
**Topanga State Park with Gerry Haigh.** See July 5

**Sunday, August 2 — Mt. Pinos Vicinity with Raymond Schep.** We will look for mountain birds, migrants and possibly California Condor (seen at this site in the spring). Anticipate the elements and bring lunch. Take Hwy 5 N thru 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. Park in the obvious dirt clearing. You will need a National Forest Adventure Pass.

**Sunday, August 9 —**  
**Whittier Narrows with Ray Jillson.** See July 12

### 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), 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 PM to answer questions about field trips. Our office staff is also available Tuesday through Saturday for most reservation services.

## Upcoming Event:

**Sunday, September 27 — Sparrow Workshop.** **Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett.**

These two masters of field I.D. will make identification and appreciation of this large group of similar looking birds easier. Material will be balanced to address technical topics without alienating intermediate birders.

Change of venue:  
Kreider Hall, 2:00 - 8:30 P.M.  
Glendale Community College  
Located west of the Glendale (2)  
Fwy, between the 134 and the  
210 fwys.

*No admission without Reservation!*

Send \$25 and a SASE to:  
The Los Angeles Audubon Society  
Sparrow Workshop  
7377 Santa Monica Boulevard  
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# EVENING MEETINGS

Meet at 7:30 P.M. in Plummer Park.  
Los Angeles Audubon Society  
7377 Santa Monica Boulevard  
West Hollywood, CA 90046-6694

**There are no evening meetings in July and August.**

**Come join us on Tuesday, September 8, 1998 and Tuesday, October 12, 1998  
when our general membership meetings resume.**

**Call the Los Angeles Audubon Society Bird Tape (213) 874-1318 for program  
subjects and speakers.**

## F I E L D T R I P S

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

### **Saturday, July 4 —**

**High San Gabriel Mountains.**  
Dustin Alcala will lead us to different sites along the Angeles Crest Highway looking for mountain breeders such as Cassin's Finch, Dusky Flycatcher, White-headed Woodpecker and other montane species such as crossbills and nuthatches. Meet at 7:30 A.M. on Hwy 2 in La Canada, just north of the 210 Fwy. This will give people the opportunity to carpool. Bring jacket, hat, lunch, fluids and insect

repellent. The group will bird until lunch and then willing parties can continue until 3 P.M. You will need a National Forest Adventure Pass.

### **Sunday, July 5 —**

**Topanga State Park with Gerry Haigh.** This is a diverse coastal mountain area. An ideal trip for a beginning birder or someone new to the area. A botanist is often present. From Ventura Blvd., take Topanga Canyon Blvd., 7 miles S, turn E uphill on Entrada Rd. Follow the signs and turn left into the parking lot of Trippet Ranch. \$6 parking fee. Meet at 8:00 A.M.

### **Sunday, July 12 —**

**Whittier Narrows.** Leader: Ray Jillson. Meet at 8:00 A.M. to

view colorful resident and migrating birds including Northern Cardinal. Take 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 donation.

### **Saturday through Monday, July 18-20 — Yosemite and Mono Lake.** Leader David Yee.

Blue Grouse, Great Gray Owl, Black-backed Woodpecker, Pine Grosbeak, and Pinyon Jay are likely. Fee of \$22 for Saturday and Sunday, \$11 for optional day Monday to Owens Valley and Mono Lake. Have reservations in Oakhurst for Friday, July 17 and Saturday, July 18. Limited to 14 participants. Reserve with SASE and reservation fee to LAAS to receive info/motel flyer. Your name and phone number will be available to carpoolers unless you request otherwise. Reserve your motel rooms early.

**Saturday, July 25 —**  
**Little Jimmy Campground and Trail.** Mike San Miguel promises a slightly easier trip than last year through the San Gabriel Mountains. The group will look for mountain

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