

# WESTERN TANAGER



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Los Angeles Audubon Society

## RARITIES

**A**lthough the birds seen once or twice over the 19 years of the Lancaster Christmas Bird Count are the ones that add the excitement, these birds usually don't add a great deal to our understanding of the local population dynamics and certainly one or two records obviously can't show any kind of trend information. Fifty species (or additional subspecies and forms) fall into this category, which is one quarter of the species seen on the 19 counts.

Some of these species are those that, in the Mojave Desert, are seemingly out of their normal habitat. These are such species as Common and Pacific loon, Horned Grebe, Wood Duck, Greater Scaup, Willet, Bonaparte's and Mew gull, Caspian Tern, Costa's Hummingbird, Hairy Woodpecker, Oak Titmouse (which was Plain Titmouse when we recorded it), and Hutton's Vireo. Others are rare or unusual in the winter, such as Pectoral Sandpiper, Hammond's Flycatcher, White-throated Swift, and Northern Oriole. Others are rare in southern California at any time of year like Bendire's Thrasher, Sprague's Pipit, and Harris' Sparrow.

A number of the rarely recorded species are montane species that may be involved in periodic winter invasions to our lowlands. Although the native habitat in the Antelope Valley would normally preclude these species from being found there, the planting of conifers on golf courses, in parks, and around homes seems to occasionally hold

these species for the count. The species in this category include Pygmy Nuthatch (two birds in one year), Red-breasted Nuthatch (recorded on four counts), Brown

seem to be the favorite regularly occurring species for a number of folks to chase.

The first highlight was in 1983. Jon Dunn's party reported a Harlan's Hawk

in the little community behind Glendale Auto Parts (which, needless to say, is nowhere near Glendale).

Although Harlan's Hawk is "only" a subspecies of Red-tailed Hawk, it is



Killdeer — Lancaster CBC's most common shorebird

Creeper (a single record), Golden-crowned Kinglet (four counts), Cassin's Finch (a single record), Pine Siskin (three counts), and finally Red Crossbill for which a single individual was our only record until we recorded 41 birds during the great 1996 invasion.

Of all the sightings of rare birds that have been made on the Lancaster CBC, two stand out in my mind as being the highlights of the 19 years. The count has a tradition of meeting for lunch at Jane Reynolds Park in Lancaster. There we tally up the count, decide what missing birds we should keep an eye out for, and find out if there are any rarities or other birds that might be nice to see while we are out in the Antelope Valley. Mountain Bluebird and Mountain Plover

unusual enough that most of the count participants decided to go take a look. I still can picture two dozen birders chasing this hawk around the outskirts of this area trying to get a soul-satisfying view of the poor bird. As it turned out, the bird hung around for that entire winter and returned to the same spot for four more years.

The second highlight was in 1991, when McCown's, Lapland, and Chestnut-collared Longspur were all found together in a single field allowing fairly close comparison. Each longspur found on the Lancaster CBC is usually an event in itself as they very seldom hang around late enough for our count. We've had Lapland in six years, Chestnut-collared in four and McCown's in three. Only twice have

we had all three and 1991 was the first time it happened. However, for me, the best was yet to come. Hank and Priscilla Brodkin had found our first and only count Sandhill Crane earlier in the day near the longspur field. Although that would have been a bird to chase, the longspur convention was too much to pass up. As we were noting the finer



Photo by K.L. Garrett  
Lancaster CBC "big guns" discussing Harlan's Hawk shots in 1983.

points of longspur ID, a large flock of Common Ravens began circling overhead. Then someone noticed that one of the "ravens" looked a little skinny. It was the Sandhill Crane! They landed several miles away and having our fill of longspurs, some of us decided to see where this raven flock had landed. There in a fallow field, eating some unknown invertebrates, were maybe a hundred ravens and the lone Sandhill Crane acting for all the world like he was just one of the boys.

#### REGULARS

On the other end of the spectrum from the rarities are those birds that turn up year after year. 52 species have been noted on all 19 counts. Eight of these came within one bird of being missed. For three of those eight, it is a minor miracle that we have managed to find at least one over the 19 years because they are not numerous and usually average about four individuals per year. These three are Cooper's Hawk (maximum seven), Prairie Falcon (maximum nine), and Sora (maximum nine).

Regularly occurring birds are the ones for which trends can most

easily be noted. When looking for trends in the data, one must be careful to not to leap to conclusions based simply on the numbers of a particular species. This is because the number of observers is somewhat low and varies from year to year (10 to 31), with coverage of some areas suffering more than others. Even using such measurements as birds per party hour may not work well for this count. Conversely, because some areas are covered well every year regardless of the numbers of observers, changes in numbers may accurately reflect real population variations rather than simply observer number variations.

As an example, most of the American Wigeon on the Lancaster CBC are found around a pond on the Antelope Valley Country Club golf course. This area has been covered religiously in each of the 19 years. The count of wigeon averaged over 200 in the first ten years of the count. We have not had over 100 birds recorded since 1990. The bushes which sheltered this pond from both the wind and the majority of the golfers were removed or trimmed back around that time, thus we are seeing a change in a single place rather than a general decline in wigeon. Similarly, most of the Ring-necked Duck counted are found on a single pond in a trailer park. Over the years, the numbers of this duck on the pond have varied from zero (in the one year we missed it) to over 100. They seem to vary in cycles of roughly six years and they were close to their low two years ago. Does this reflect a variation in western Ring-necked Duck populations or conditions further north, or is it changes to the pond itself, such as periodic fish stocking?

#### WATERFOWL

On the subject of ducks, of the 24 species of ducks and geese found on the count, nine have been found every year and another four have only been missed once or twice. In general because the places where

waterfowl are found (Piute Ponds on Edwards Air Force Base, the Lancaster sewage ponds, Lake Buzz Aldrin in Apollo Park, etc) are covered every year and don't change a lot, it is not surprising that for the most part there are no significant trends for most waterfowl. There are a handful of exceptions. Although the numbers of Northern Pintail fluctuate somewhat from year to year, there is a definite downward trend. Are milder winters causing the pintail to stay further north? Mallards, on the other hand, have shown an increase over the years of the count which can probably be accounted for by the Mallards that are raised on one of the local gun clubs at the Kern County line.

People are always surprised to learn that Snow Goose is a regular bird on the Lancaster count having missed it only twice in the 19 years. Even more surprising, we also get Ross' Goose fairly regularly (11 of 19 years), including the last six years in a row. Several years ago a new regional count editor sent me a note that I should have more details for Ross' Goose because it is "rare" away from the Central Valley and Salton Sea. Common Merganser is regular on some of the large lakes and reservoirs in the San Gabriel Mountains and is noted on almost every Grass Mountain CBC (the nearest count to Lancaster). However, it never fails to surprise me when we find one or more in the local ponds especially at Apollo Park. We've found them in nine years and also managed to find a single Hooded Merganser in three years and Red-breasted Merganser in two.

#### OTHER WATERBIRDS

Pied-billed Grebe, which we've found on every count, seem to be trending upward, while Eared Grebe, which we also have found in all 19 years, has no discernible trend. Double-crested Cormorant which was absent in the first six counts, turned up on our seventh count and has been with us more

often than not since then. American Bittern has shown almost the opposite pattern. Although in small numbers (one to nine), we counted them every year in the first 10 years. In the last nine years we only had a single individual in each of three years. White-faced Ibis was only seen in 1983 when two birds were found. What is somewhat surprising about the lack of more recent records is that ibis started breeding at the Piute Ponds in 1988 and is now a common breeder there. The fact that we don't see it on the count suggests that our local breeders head south for the winter.

Of the five species of gulls found on the count only the California and Ring-billed are regular and both have shown increases paralleling the growth in numbers of fast food establishments in the count circle. Ring-billed especially like those McDonald's french fries! Mew and Bonaparte's gull have each been recorded once; Herring, which has been seen only in five years, has managed to be recorded in the last three in a row. Do the increasing numbers of Ring-billed and California attract the Herring Gull?

## SHOREBIRDS

Killdeer and Least Sandpiper are the only species of shorebirds that we've managed to find in every one of the 19 years, while Mountain Plover and Common Snipe were only missed once. Both Killdeer and Least Sandpiper vary in numbers from year to year with no discernible long-term trends. Unfortunately, Mountain Plover seems to be showing a definite downward trend and is consistent with recent the recent leaning towards listing this as an endangered species. Common Snipe numbers show an interesting population oscillation over the 19 years. For the first six years we averaged two birds (one to three), then slowly the average crept up to reach an average of 31 birds (20-38) from 1989-1993, then a sudden drop back to two birds per year (zero to five) over the last five years. It would be interesting

to see if a similar oscillation occurred throughout southern California or on the breeding grounds.

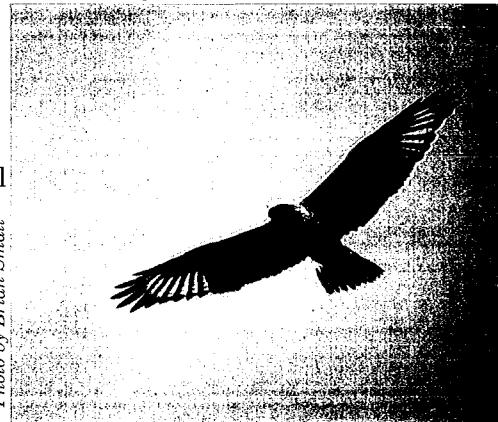
In the year 1983, we had our highest species count of shorebirds with 14 recorded, compared to the more normal nine to ten species. Firsts for the count that year were Black-bellied Plover (never recorded again), Semipalmated Plover (recorded one more time), and Marbled Godwit (seen twice more). The Killdeer count of 688 was the highest ever. Interestingly, 1983 was also a strong El Niño year. This past year, also with strong El Niño influence, we found only eight species of shorebirds. However, we had only 12 observers compared to 31 in 1983. Even so, we recorded our second largest Killdeer count at 442 and found a new shorebird for the count, Spotted Sandpiper. It stands to reason that with extended shorebird habitat brought about by the increased El Niño induced rains, the shorebird population might be expected to increase.

## RAPTORS

The Antelope Valley continues to be an excellent place to find raptors in the winter. Of the 15 species of diurnal raptors which have been found on the count, seven have been found every year. Red-tailed Hawk is, of course, our most common (average 65 per year), with Northern Harrier a distant second (34 per year). The American Kestrel was the second most common raptor in the early years, but it has been slowly declining. Northern Harrier numbers have remained fairly constant and is now our third most common raptor (28 per year). There is no better place locally to find Ferruginous Hawk than the Antelope Valley and this is reflected in the fact that it is one of the raptors we have seen every year. Every once in a while (three times in 19 years), a dark phase Ferruginous Hawk will turn up to add to the excitement to the day. Golden Eagle is fairly regular (14 years), usually hanging around Edwards Air Force Base to enjoy

waterfowl meals. And we've even been graced with Bald Eagle on three occasions.

Amazingly we've also had six species of owls on the count. Most people can figure out what five species we've recorded, but the sixth might be tricky. They would be in order of average numbers seen: Great Horned, Common Barn, Burrowing, Long-eared, and Short-eared. The sixth species was a Northern Saw-whet found dead outside the window of a hunting lodge. We've only missed Great Horned once and while we miss Long-eared more years than not, when we find them, it is usually a small group of maybe four to eight birds. Burrowing Owl has definitely declined in the count circle. We recorded it the first seven years of the count with numbers up to ten. Since then we've only managed to find single individuals in three years and two birds in another year. In the late 80's and early 90's the drought probably took its toll. However, increased development and decreasing agricultural activity in the count circle has been the culprit recently. A Snowy Owl was totally missed by me one count evening as it sat at the end of the parking lot at the restaurant where



Ferruginous Hawk.

we met to compile the count. This was especially disconcerting to Kimball Garrett who had borrowed this stuffed creature to add a little zest to a long day of counting. He was still trying to get even for the live Ringed Turtle-Dove I brought to a lunchtime meeting of the Malibu CBC when he was co-compiler!

## BAD NEWS

In order not end this article on a completely down note, I thought it might be helpful to lump the various species which seem to be losing ground in the Antelope Valley into this one section now. If you don't like bad news, you can just skip these next few paragraphs.

The 76,224 Horned Lark counted in 1981 is the highest count we've had of a single species on the Lancaster count. In fact, it is a higher number than all of the birds tallied in all but two years (1981, of course being one of those years). We also had the highest count of Horned Lark in the nation that year. But as the agricultural areas have shrunk, so has the Horned Lark population shrunk, and in the last few years we can only find a few thousand, with last year reaching an all time low of 731 birds. The American Pipit which requires a similar winter habitat to the Horned Lark has also shown a decline with average counts around 2000 in the early half of the count years compared with averages around 500 birds recently.

We've found five species of wren on the Lancaster CBC with Cactus and Marsh Wren found each year. Bewick's Wren we've missed only once and Rock Wren was missed in three years. None of these four species show any real trends either up or down. The fifth species, House Wren, is the reason wrens are in the Bad News section. Although never common and in some years missed altogether, we used to average around three birds per year. In the last decade, we count ourselves lucky if we see one every three years. These were usually found around ranch yards with those big, old Fremont Cottonwoods. As these ranch yards are declining and these large trees turned to firewood, so goes the House Wren. However, as some of the older residential neighborhoods mature along with their trees, the House Wren may yet make a comeback.

Mountain Bluebird (in my opinion, probably the best reason to go to the Antelope Valley in winter), although still found every year, has shown a drastic decline during the 19 years of the count. In the early years, we could always depend on finding hundreds and counted 1401 in 1981. 1989 is the last year in which we saw over 100 birds (131 that year). Again, the disappearance of agricultural land in the Antelope Valley is the major reason for this downturn.

The Common Raven is the official bird of the Lancaster CBC. Its numbers from the count which always exceeded 1000, were usually the highest in North America and in fact, the count of 1869 birds during the 1986 count is still the most ever seen on any count, anywhere! Counts in the last ten years have rarely reached 1000 and the lowest count ever, of 653 birds, was recorded just last year. To rub salt in the wounds, in the last few years a count in Canada has been recording the yearly high count of raven in North America. It's hard to believe that the increase in people is leading to the demise of the raven in the Antelope Valley, especially when you note during the Breeding Bird Atlas (You are participating in the Atlas, aren't you?) that they are nesting on billboards, telephone poles, and road signs throughout the valley. Maybe the raven population control measures taken on further east on behalf of the threatened Desert Tortoise is having its effect.

The LeConte's Thrasher is one of those birds that many people come to the Antelope Valley for their "lifer." It is a true native to the salt scrub habitat. It has never been common, but we only missed it four times and our maximum is eight birds. However, in the last few years we've been averaging less than two birds per count as its salt scrub habitat slowly gets developed. In time, the only substantial acreage of this habitat will be protected on Edwards Air Force Base and the LeConte's Thrasher will

become that much harder to find.

The Yellow-rumped Warbler count has declined drastically over the years. Early on, we regularly recorded over 1000 birds. Recently, we haven't recorded 100 since 1993. The reason for this is unclear to me. Since coverage of the residential areas has been less because of the lower number of counters, it is possible that this drop is simply a result of our coverage. Interestingly, other than Common Yellowthroat which is found in low numbers in the Piute Ponds marshes, we have recorded no other species of warbler on the Lancaster CBC.

Many of the sparrows that are associated with the open agricultural areas seem to be dwindling as the years go by. These are the Vesper and Savannah sparrows, both of which we get yearly, as well as the Lincoln's Sparrow which has never been really common. This decline matches that of birds mentioned previously such as Horned Lark and American Pipit. Sage Sparrow, which we also record yearly, as well as Lark Sparrow, have also shown declines, but not as steep as the previous three sparrow species. Sage Sparrow uses the same salt scrub habitat as the LeConte's Thrasher, while the Lark Sparrow seems to favor ranch yards, both of which are disappearing but at a slower rate than the agricultural fields. In my mind, White-crowned Sparrow which we get yearly and Sage Sparrow which we get most years in moderate numbers (averaging over eight birds per year) are associated and seem to wander all over the Antelope Valley's open areas in flocks of 25-50 birds. Both of these birds are declining slightly as these open areas decline. The Song Sparrow, another dependable yearly species, is the only regularly occurring sparrow for which an upward trend is noted (a little good news). Since they are associated with wet areas that have not increased in size or numbers, this increase is hard to explain.

*Continued on page 8 . . .*



# CONSERVATION CONVERSATION

by Sandy Wohlgemuth

**W**hen was the last time any of us plunged into the bounding main at Malibu or even delicately wet a toe in the frothy surf? For most of the outdoors crowd, the answer is: not recently. And why not? Because we've been aware of the periodic warnings of state, county and environmental monitors of our beaches: like cigarettes, they may be hazardous to our health. We've been told on good authority that the bays and the ocean are loaded with a revolting menu of bacteria, viruses, PCBs and other bracing pollutants. A 1996 study of Santa Monica Bay showed it to be contaminated with 160 toxic chemicals. A 1995 study of San Francisco Bay by state health officials warned residents against eating more than a sliver of bay fish a month. The health advisory is still in effect today.

California's rivers and streams are not spared from unconscionable pollution; in 1996, 74% of them were classified as unsafe.

One might well ask, "What about federal and state clean water acts, don't they protect us?" The laws are on the books but they are substantially ignored. It is shocking to learn that in the Los Angeles area alone 9000 clean-water violations were cited in a seven-year period but only 14 were fined.

There have been a number of bills in Sacramento the last few years to enforce and strengthen these laws, but the big polluters — particularly big oil companies — have lobbied against them and they were defeated. The corporations are saving money by their unlawful discharges and the state is allowing them to get away with it. Ironically, California advertises its gorgeous beaches and its splendid fishing opportunities to attract tourists and sportsmen but the state is jeopardizing a 17 billion-dollar industry by turning a blind eye to water pollution.

So what is to be done?

California Public Interest Research Group (CALPIRG) has introduced AB 1862 into the Assembly to put teeth into the existing laws. AB 1852 would:

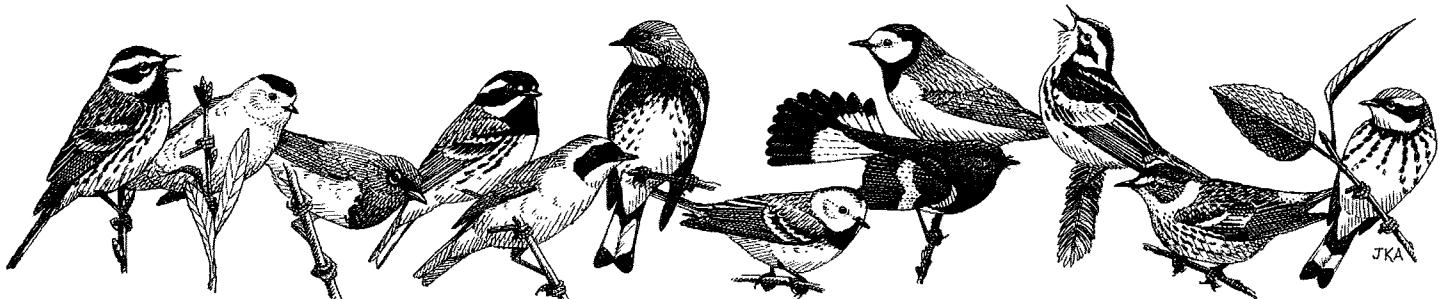
- Set minimum mandatory fines for serious and repeat violators.
- Set the fines high enough to outweigh any financial benefits of illegal pollution.
- Force major polluters to practice pollution prevention.
- Permit citizens to sue to enforce clean water standards if the state fails to do so.

- Make polluters pay for cleanup of their toxic discharges.

This is the sort of story that is rarely considered "news" by the media so the uninformed public does nothing while the polluting industries have a clear field with lawmakers. Let's not let that happen this time around. A letter to your assembly representative asking for support for AB 1852, the Clean Water Enforcement and Pollution Prevention Act, will go a long way to eliminating the scandalous abuse of our rivers and bays.

Most of us probably haven't the foggiest idea who our assembly-member is. In the front of your telephone book are Government pages. Under STATE the names of members are listed. If you're not sure what district you live in call the closest library or call one of the members listed and they can tell from your address which office you need.

Let's win this one!



# BIRDS OF THE SEASON

Kimball L. Garrett

**A**s the last two months of the calendar year are upon us, we should by now know what kind of winter is shaping up. It's clear that we're not in for the kind of invasion of irruptive boreal and montane species that we saw two winters ago, and it's also unlikely we'll see the amount of rain experienced last winter. So far all indications are of an average winter for birds. **Cedar Waxwings** seem to have appeared a bit earlier and in larger numbers than in most recent winters; for example Mary Freeman reports a small flock in Pasadena on 13 September. Small numbers of **Red-breasted Nuthatches** appeared in the lowlands in September, more than last winter but well short of an "invasion". Reports of **Mountain Chickadees** from the coastal base of the San Gabriel Mountains were more numerous than in most falls, but the arrival time was typical: mid-August to early September. One might predict that last winter's rains generated a great seed crop for this winter's sparrows, but how this will translate to our daily birding is unclear (widespread good seed crops could lower sparrow densities at feeders and many favored birding areas).

In August, the fourth and penultimate field season for the Los Angeles County Breeding Bird Atlas was winding down and 1998 certainly provided its share of atlasing surprises. Already mentioned in this column was the

establishment of the large tern colony in Los Angeles Harbor; in August the **Black Skimmer** was added to the list of colonizers there when Kathy Keane found nine nests.

Seabirds were abundant off our shores during August and September. For example, over 10,000 **Black-vented Shearwaters** and five other species of tubenoses were seen off Point Vicente, Palos Verdes Peninsula, on 15 August (Mitch Heindel). Kevin Larson reported a **Brown**

**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  
Ornithology Collections Manager  
Natural History Museum of  
Los Angeles County  
900 Exposition Blvd.,  
Los Angeles, CA 90007 USA  
e-mail: kgarrett@nhm.org

or call:  
Raymond Schep (310) 278-6244  
e-mail: drschep@colonial-dames.com

The address for submissions to the California Bird Records Committee is:  
Michael M. Rogers, Secretary  
California Bird Records Committee  
P.O. Box 340  
Moffett Field, CA 94035-0340  
e-mail: mrogers@nas.nasa.gov

**Booby** there that same day. On 5 September there were at least 300 **Pink-footed Shearwaters** just off Pt. Dume (Kimball Garrett), so clearly a lot of pelagics are feeding relatively close to shore. The 22 August LAAS pelagic trip out of San Pedro had large numbers of pelagics, including several **South Polar Skuas**, an adult **Red-billed Tropicbird**, and over a dozen **Buller's Shearwaters**; most of the Buller's were near San Nicolas I., but at least one was southeast of Santa Barbara Island and therefore in Los Angeles County waters (see Lee Jones' article on county boundaries offshore in the July/August 1992 *Western Tanager*). The 20 September LAAS trip near the northern Channel Islands had again very large numbers of tubenoses, suggesting good food supplies in that area as well.

Interior "seabirds" included a dark morph **Parasitic Jaeger** at the Lancaster Sewage Ponds on 10 September (Mike San Miguel and Bruce Broadbooks), a juvenile **Sabine's Gull** there on 16 September and two more juveniles at Piute Ponds the same day (Mike San Miguel). A late **Magnificent Frigatebird** was at the south end of the Salton Sea on 12 September (Nick and Mary Freeman).

The most interesting aspect of fall migration is monitoring the daily ebbs and flows of transients at a well-worked locality — a local park, desert oasis, tamarisk row, or backyard. Unfortunately it is only

the "glamorous" species — the so-called "vagrants" — that get reported, so it is hard to come by information on the interesting vagaries of the commonplace. Certainly there were various waves of migrants with changing weather during September — for example, **Northern Flickers** seemed everywhere on 30 September in and north of the central Los Angeles area, indicating a good flight day for that species. But as usual, birders were obsessed more with lost birds, so the rest of this column reluctantly recounts some of those sightings.

A **Stilt Sandpiper** was reported along Los Angeles River at Wardlow on 13 September (Mitch Heindel). **Eastern Kingbirds** were reported at Harbor Park on 12-13 September (Jerry Johnson) and at Malibu Creek State Park in mid-September (Chris Tosdevin). A

**Philadelphia Vireo** was along Los Angeles River near Glendale on 26-27 September (Kimball Garrett, Kathy Molina). A possible **Gray-cheeked Thrush** at Sand Dune Park in Manhattan Beach on 21 September (Mitch Heindel) could not be refound. A possible **Alder Flycatcher** at Madrona Marsh on the same day revealed itself to be a **Willow Flycatcher** when heard calling on 23 September, but provided an interesting lesson in plumage variation in this difficult species.

**Black-and-white Warblers** were at Descanso Gardens on 19 September (Laurel Williams) and in Wilderness Park, Redondo Beach, on 8 and 21 September (Mitch Heindel). A **Prairie Warbler** was at El Dorado Park on 21 September (Karen Gilbert and Jim Pike) and a possible **Black-**

**burnian Warbler** was in Encino on 19 September (Jean Brandt). Two **Northern Waterthrushes** were netted and banded near the mouth of Zuma Creek on 12 September (Walt Sakai), and one was still present two weeks later. A **Hooded Warbler** was reported at Sand Dune Park 1-2 September (*fide* Mitch Heindel).

Winter bird diversity is higher in southern and central coastal California than just about anywhere else in the country, so keep that fall season enthusiasm burning through the winter. And remember that New Year's Day 1999 marks the beginning of the fifth and final scheduled year of the Los Angeles County Breeding Bird Atlas — we need your help there more than ever! 

## FIELD TRIPS

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### **Saturday, November 21 —**

**Malibu Creek State Park.** Leader **Raymond Schep.** This state park is a good spot to observe wintering birds. In the past we have seen Sharp-shinned Hawk, the resident Golden Eagles, Lewis' Woodpecker, White-breasted Nuthatch and Red-breasted Sapsucker. Take 101 N to Las Virgenes off ramp. Go W to the park entrance on the right. \$5 parking fee.

### **Saturday, December 5 —**

**Newport Back Bay.** Leader **Mary Freeman.** We will look for rails flushed out by the winter high tide, as well as Royal Tern and

California Gnatcatcher. Take the 405 Fwy S to Jamboree Blvd., drive S over the channel past San Joaquin Hills Rd. to Back Bay Dr. on your right. If you hit PCH you've gone too far. Continue to the first pullout hugging the bay along Back Bay Dr., one half mile off Jamboree Rd. Meet here at 8:00 A.M. for a full day in the area.

### **Sunday, December 6 —**

**Topanga State Park.** Leader **Gerry Haigh.** Meet at 8:00 A.M. See November 1 for write-up.

### **Sunday, December 13 —**

**Whittier Narrows.** Leader **Ray Jillson.** Meet at 8:00 A.M. See November 8 for write-up.

### **Saturday, December 19 —**

**Lancaster Christmas Count.** Call compiler Fred Heath at (805) 389-3203 to sign up for an area or be hooked up with a team. Birders of every level come out of the woodwork to support these counts, and hobnob at lunch.

### **Sunday, December 20 —**

**Malibu Christmas Count.** Call compiler Larry Allen at (323) 221-2022 to participate. These two counts are steeped in LAAS tradition.

### **Early January 1999 —**

**Los Angeles Christmas Count ??** Call the Bird Tape at (323) 874-1318 for more information.

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Red-winged and Brewer's blackbird, which we record every year, seem to be holding their own with some heavy fluctuations from year to year. This might be explained by the presence or absence of early morning or evening coverage at the Piute Ponds, a large roosting area for the area's blackbirds. Numbers of the Tricolored Blackbird have been diminishing consistent with their population drops throughout the state. For the last seven years, I have been at the Piute Ponds until sunset on count day looking for that last Short-eared Owl or other missing species. Calls of the Tricolored are easy to pick out as they come in to roost with thousands of Red-winged and Brewer's Blackbirds. The Tricolored which also numbered in the thousands a few years ago are down into the hundreds more recently. The Yellow-headed Blackbird, never common (although we've only missed it twice) seems also to be declining on the count. Since they seem to be holding their own as breeders (remember the Breeding Bird Atlas) in the Piute Ponds, it is not clear why they are declining in the winter, unless the decrease in the number of feedlots is the answer. I'm not sure if this should be put under bad news, but the Brown-headed Cowbird has declined drastically in the last 19 years on the Lancaster CBC. Again this is more likely caused by the decline in feedlots rather than successful control programs or smarter Bell's Vireos. The last yearly occurring member of the blackbird family, the Western Meadowlark, like the Horned Lark, (and for the same reasons) is declining on the Lancaster counts. The average was 600 birds in the first decade and is now down to about 200 birds per year.

#### NEUTRAL NEWS

There are several species for which the news is neither good nor bad.

Both the Black and Say's

Phoebe have been counted every year. While the Say's Phoebe's numbers have slowly dwindled because of less open space, the numbers of Black Phoebe, which is more dependent on the number of wet areas (which have stayed pretty much the same), has remained fairly constant.

If we find any swallow on the Lancaster CBC, chances are good that it will be a Tree Swallow and we've managed to find them eight of 19 years, with numbers reaching

Photo by Brian Small



Anna's Hummingbird

as high as 50 individuals in one year. However, in the last five years we have managed to find one or two Barn Swallows on three counts. With global warming, we might just start to find them every year. Maybe this should be in the Bad News section.

Although Loggerhead Shrike is known to be widely in decline, this isn't reflected in the Lancaster CBC data. It shows a slight decline in recent counts, but the lower number of observers can explain most of that. Eventually as the open areas are developed, the decline should become more apparent and real.

#### PEOPLE LOVERS

Most of the species for which there is good news regarding populations are those which benefit from the existence of people with their exotic plantings, well watered yards and artificial bodies of water. In fact, many of the species which we get on the Lancaster CBC are waterfowl, shorebirds, and other waterbirds, who owe their existence

in the Antelope Valley to man-made bodies of water, places such as the Lancaster Sewage Ponds, Lake Buzz Aldrin in Apollo Park, and the Piute Ponds on Edwards Air Force Base. I discussed various waterbirds above, so what follows is the rest of the story.

California Quail has responded to the increased planting of non-native bushes and scrubs and has trended upward on the counts. In the early years, we would be lucky to find close to 100 birds and actually missed it altogether in 1987. In recent years we've averaged over 200 birds each year.

Mourning Dove, although found sparingly in the native salt scrub habitat, definitely thrives in suburban Lancaster and with the increased development, its numbers have trended upward.

In the early days of the count, Anna's Hummingbird was a difficult bird to find. I remember one particular feeder on the corner of Sugar and Spice Streets (I don't make this stuff up) which had its single male hummer for a few years. Now with the increased numbers of houses with feeders, we've managed to find an average of five Anna's Hummingbirds in each of the last ten years. Our first Costa's Hummingbird was discovered last year. Is this another harbinger of things to come?

We managed to find seven species of woodpeckers over the 19 years. While not necessarily people lovers, with the exception of the Ladder-backed Woodpecker, they have benefited from the planting of trees throughout the Antelope Valley and as some of the trees mature in the older neighborhoods, we can expect to see them more often. In fact, neither Nuttall's nor Downy woodpecker was found during the first six years of the count, but since then we have one or both on every count, with Nuttall's showing a definite trend upward. Northern Flicker is the one species which we get every year with a rare Yellow-shafted Flicker thrown into the mix on two and a half (we had a hybrid Red/Yellow-shafted that year)

counts. Ladder-backed Woodpecker, which is at home in the native Joshua Tree, averages about three birds and has been missed only four times.

As the area becomes more and more suburban, we would expect an increase in the Common Crow which was first found on the count in 1987. Kimball Garrett, who found two individuals in that year, wrote the description as "Just like a raven, only less so." We figured it wouldn't be long before they were all over the place, but since then we've only had the bird on three counts. As the Antelope Valley becomes "San Fernandized", I'll bet the Common Crow becomes a regular.

In ten of the 19 years, we have had one to four Western Scrub-Jays. These have been found in the southwest corner of the count circle, mostly in the town of Quartz Hill where the Pinyon Pine just reaches into the count circle. It surprises me that this bird hasn't turned up in Lancaster itself, but like the Common Crow, it is just a matter of time.

Northern Mockingbird, a species which trended up in the middle years of the count, has declined a slight bit in recent counts. Similar trends can be seen with European Starling, House Sparrow, and House Finch. Again, I think this is the decline of coverage in Lancaster itself during the count rather than a decline of these species which are found commonly in new neighborhoods which were salt scrub a only few years ago.

Great-tailed Grackle, is increasing throughout southern California and now nests at Piute Ponds and nearby Lake Palmdale. We found our first Lancaster CBC bird in 1986 and I figured this

species, like the crow and Western Scrub-Jay, would be all over Lancaster by now. Since we have not seen a single Great-tailed Grackle since that time, it's obvious, once again, that my skills as a prognosticator leave a lot to be desired. However, since they are definitely increasing as a breeder in the area, the reason that we don't see more on the count is that they migrate out of the cold Antelope Valley for the winter. Unlike the crow and the scrub-jay, the Great-tailed Grackle will probably never be a regular on the Lancaster CBC.

## SUMMARY

After many pages of statistics, unfounded theories, and confusing trends, you might ask, "How can he summarize this jumble?" The answer is, I can't. Each species has its own story; some have more to do with local conditions — development, rain, cold, etc; others with conditions further away — a pine cone crop disaster or frozen northern lakes; and still others which are affected by even wider happenings such as El Niño or global warming. In summary, I can say that specific counts done over a number of years, or better still a number of counts over a wider region, can provide the kind of data from which better biologists than I can answer some important questions, as well as raising others.

However, for you and me, the best thing about the count is the game we all play, trying to find that new count bird, beating the count in the next town or county, or finding more ravens than some count in far off Canada. To that end, I hope many of you will feel the urge to participate in this year's twentieth Lancaster Christmas Bird Count. And while the urge is strong, pick up that phone and call me at home (805) 389-3203 or work (805) 987-8741 to reserve your own personal little bit of heaven (you'll know by the temperature, it can't be hell) in Lancaster on Saturday, December 19th. 



Ladder-backed Woodpecker a true Antelope Valley native.

## WESTERN TANAGER

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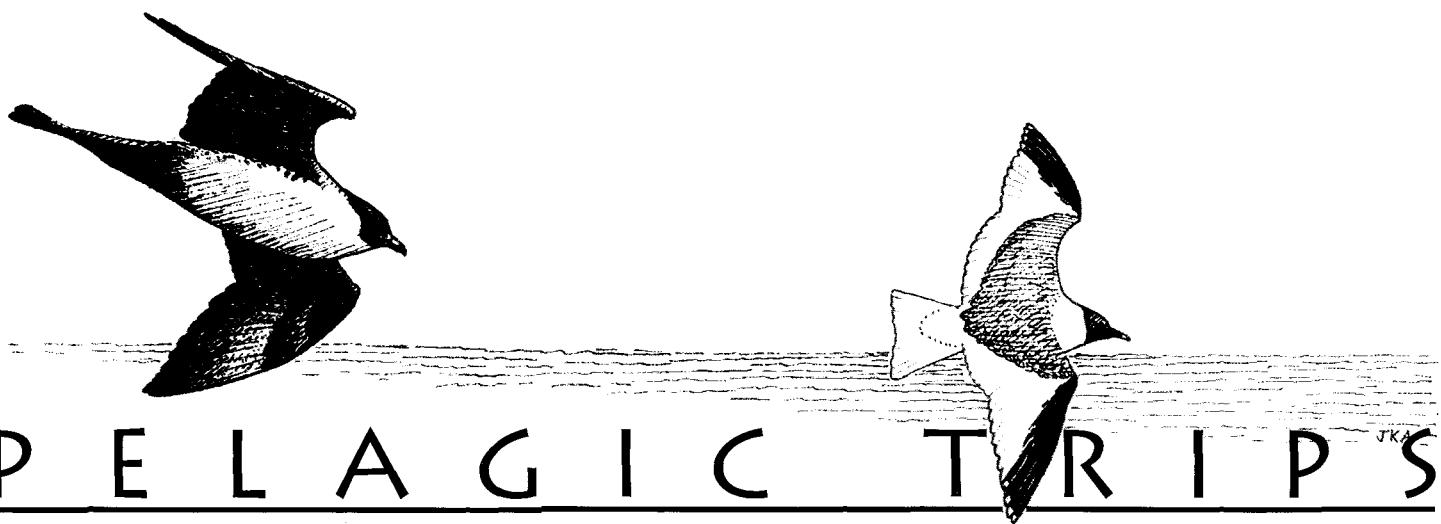
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# PELAGIC TRIPS

JKA

**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, 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.

**Saturday, February 20 —**  
**Palos Verdes Escarpment to the Redondo Canyon.** 8-hour trip departs from San Pedro. Tailored for both beginning and experienced birders. A pleasant way to add to your bird lists. At this time of year alcids are in alternate plumage, and Short-tailed Shearwaters may be seen. Leaders: TBA. \$30, no galley.

**Saturday, May 8 —**  
**Santa Barbara Island and the Osborne Banks.** 12-hour trip departs from San Pedro. Spring cruise with birding to the island to search for nesting Xantus' Murrelets, Pi-

geon Guillemots, Brown Pelicans, cormorants(3), and west coast gulls. Return by Osborne Banks. Leaders: TBA. \$45. Bring your own food. Coffee and tea supplied.

**Saturday, June 12 —**  
**Santa Cruz Island with landing at Prisoners Cove.** 10-hour trip departs from Ventura. This beautiful island is the largest and most varied of the Channel Islands. We will take a short walk with a Nature Conservancy naturalist to see the flora and fauna as we search for the Island Scrub-Jay. We will then cruise off the island for pelagic species. Leaders: TBA. \$60, full galley.

**Saturday, August 21 —**  
**Albatross Knoll via San Nicolas Island.** 20-hour trip departs from San Pedro. Early A.M. 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: TBA. \$130 includes 3 meals.

**Sunday, September 19 —**  
**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: TBA. \$70, full galley.

**Sunday, October 10 —**  
**Santa Barbara Island and the Osborne Banks.** 12-hour trip departs from Marina del Rey. We will head out to the open ocean toward Santa Barbara Island as we search for pelagic birds and marine life, Leaders: TBA. \$45, microwave only.

**Saturday, November 13 —**  
**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: TBA. \$80 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.

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# EVENING MEETINGS

Meet at 7:30 P.M. in Plummer Park.  
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**Tuesday, November 10, 1998** Raptor specialist and photographer **Ned Harris** will present **Raptors of California**. Ned will cover the 24 species of diurnal raptors found in California. He will concentrate on field identification including age, sex, color morph variations and California seasonal distribution. The program will appeal to birders at all levels.

**Tuesday, December 9, 1998** LAAS Travel Director, **Olga Clarke** will present **Egypt and the Nile**, a slide illustrated look at both the birds and antiquities of this fascinating country. This talk might just whet your appetite to join Olga for a tour to Egypt that she will be leading in April 1999.

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

*Before setting out on any field trip, please call the LAAS bird tape at (323) 874-1318 for special instructions or possible cancellations that may have occurred by the Thursday before the trip.*

**Sunday, November 1 — 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 biologist 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 or park on the road outside the park. Meet at 8:00 A.M.

**Saturday, November 7 — Join Kimball Garrett** to search for naturalized exotic species at several spots in the **San Gabriel Valley**. We'll look for bishops, nutmeg mannikins and several species of parrots. Meet at 2 P.M. Take the 60 Fwy E to San Gabriel Blvd. and go south. Go to Lincoln and turn right. Go about one half mile to the top of the hill. Park in the lot on the west side of the dam. (T.G. 636G7)

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**Sunday, November 8 — Whittier Narrows.** Leader: **Ray Jillson**. Meet at 8:00 A.M. to view colorful resident and migrating birds, including the Northern Cardinal. Take Peck Dr. off the 60 Fwy in South El Monte (just west of the 605 Fwy). Take the off ramp onto Durfee Ave. heading W (right) and turn left into the Nature Center, 1000 Durfee Ave. \$2 donation.

**Sunday, November 15 — Ballona Wetlands.** This trip will be led by **Bob Shanman** to our nearest wetland. Wintering shorebirds, sea ducks and gulls are among the expected fare. Meet at 8:00 A.M. at the Del Rey Lagoon parking lot. Take the Marina Fwy (90 West) to Culver Blvd., turn left to Pacific Ave., then right to the lot on the right. Lot or street parking is usually not a problem. Three hour walk. Scopes helpful.

*Continued on page 7 . . .*