

WESTERN TANAGER



Volume 66 Number 1 September/October 1999

Los Angeles Audubon Society

For wildlife, and birds in particular, urban parks are like oases in the desert. Depending upon the size of the park and whether it is designated as greenspace or a recreational playground, a park may provide various levels of food, shelter, and breeding sites – in essence, everything some animals need to live healthy lives and produce new generations. For birds, old, neglected parks with overgrown shrubs, large trees, preferably with a few dead or dying limbs, and a less-than-manicured condition are ideal. Such parks, if you



All Photos by Ken Campbell

Viewed across the west end of the Lake Pit, the Mutual Benefit Life building has provided a home for Peregrine Falcons for many years.

ignore the planting of exotic trees and shrubs, are the closest thing to natural habitats that many urban birds see. Such a park was Hancock Park, home of the world-famous La Brea Tar Pits. No, the park has not disappeared, but it definitely has changed!

A Walk In The Park

by

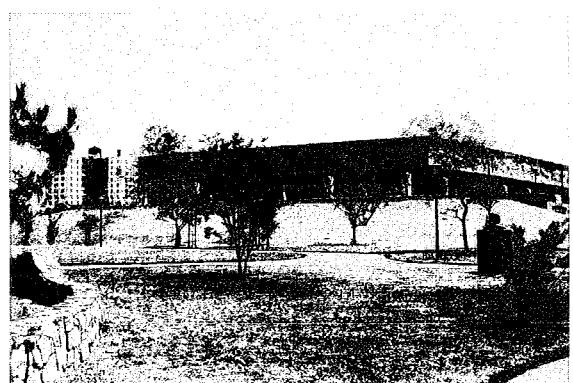
Kenneth E. Campbell

As a bit of history, Hancock Park consists of approximately 23 acres in the middle of the Miracle Mile of the Wilshire District, roughly seven miles west of downtown Los Angeles. Bordered on the south by the high-rise office buildings along Wilshire Boulevard and to the north by the mega-apartment complex, Park LaBrea, the park is truly an urban park. But it is not your typical urban park – it is a National Natural Landmark, as designated by the National Park Service. This distinction is a direct result of the park being the home of the Rancho La Brea Tar Pits, a scientific treasure-trove of Ice Age fossils. These fossils, most of which are between 10,000 to 40,000 years old, represent the remains of animals that were trapped in asphalt seeps on the surface of the ground. Through the scientific study of these fossils we have been able to learn a great deal about what the Los Angeles Basin was like during the last Ice Age.

It has been nearly a century since the first scientific investigations were conducted on the fossils from the tar pits. Today, the number of fossils from the tar pits number well over one million specimens. In 1916, Captain G. Allan Hancock, the visionary owner of the 23 acres comprising the Rancho La Brea site, gave the land to the County of Los Angeles

to preserve its scientific heritage for posterity. The park is administered by the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County through its on-site branch facility, the George C. Page Museum of La Brea Discoveries. The Page Museum houses the fossils from the tar pits and presents exhibitions of images of Ice Age Los Angeles. The Observation Pit, a small, round building in the west end of the park now overshadowed by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art complex, displays a typical suite of fossil bones as they would have been exposed during their excavation, just before removal and placement into the collections of the Natural History Museum.

Following almost two years of renovations, the “new” Hancock Park opened to the public in mid-July, an occasion marked by official dedication ceremonies and family fun-days. Nearly a half-century



The George C. Page Museum is surrounded by new trees and shrubs that will provide refuge for birds in the future.

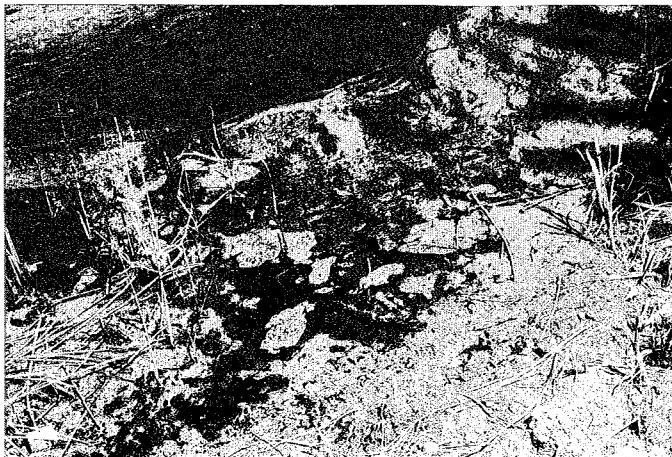
after the park we have known was designed and planted, a newly refurbished park has appeared. The massive \$10 million renovation was sponsored in part by Proposition "A" funds approved by Los Angeles voters and in part by a generous grant from LACMA Trustee Dorothy Collins Brown. LACMA oversaw the renovation project in cooperation with officials of the Natural History Museum. New facilities for the paleontological sites, walkways, fencing, lighting, signage and an outdoor amphitheater designed for acoustical cultural presentations have all put a new face on the park. There is even a new "nature walk" around the Lake Pit.

Unfortunately for the birds, the renovation has meant the removal

of a number of the larger, older trees and shrubs, a special attraction for so many species because of the special microhabitats found amongst their branches. They have been replaced with small, young plants. To be exact, more or less, 300 new trees and 60,000 new shrubs have been planted, along with acres of sweeping new grass lawns over a newly contoured landscape. The initial overall visual effect has been to open up the park to its urban surroundings, so it is more difficult to escape the clutter of the city scape. In a few years, however, the new plantings will begin to obscure the city views and the park will return to being a quiet oasis where birds will find a place to prosper.

What the park designers have been unable to do, however, is to tame the natural forces that made Hancock Park a scientific treasure. Yes, thick oil continues to seep up from deep below the surface. To date, over 20 seeps of various sizes have been identified, poking their way up through the new plantings. Accumulating in small mounds around the park, most of the new asphalt poses less of a threat to wildlife than to inquisitive children, who often find themselves uncomfortably coated with the sticky, unforgiving asphalt. For visitor safety,

the larger, more permanent seeps within the park are placed behind new fencing. These areas, and the Lake Pit, do form natural hazards to wildlife, primarily birdlife. Unknown to many visitors to the park, the Lake Pit is a man-made artifact resulting from the mining of the asphalt from the park grounds during the last



Along the shore of the Lake Pit, floating globs of oil and dust drift in amongst the vegetation.

century. It cannot really be called a "natural" hazard. There is no evidence that anything like the Lake Pit existed in the past in or around Hancock Park.

As a note to trivia buffs, the tar of the "tar pits" is technically asphalt, a derivative of natural petroleum. Asphalt results when the lighter components of the oil escape into the air, leaving behind the heavier, stickier components. The term "tar pits" is so ingrained in general usage, however, that in this instance the terms tar and asphalt are nearly synonymous.

If the asphalt seeps that are active today were in a natural setting, they would probably be at least as great a threat to wildlife as they were during the last Ice Age. But, because the park is not now a "natural" park, the types of animals and the reasons they become stuck in the asphalt seeps is a bit different from what it was during the Ice Ages.

The "stickiness" of the asphalt is a direct function of the temperature. During the winter, when daytime temperatures are usually lower than in the summer, the asphalt is fairly hard. Only the freshest of the seeping ooze poses a threat to any animal. In the hot summer months, however, the asphalt can warm up to a depth of several inches and it

tends to flow farther, particularly if the black asphalt is hit by direct sunlight. This gives a much larger area that can serve as a trap. But even during the summer, nighttime temperatures may drop considerably, which causes the formation of a thin, hard crust over the warm asphalt below. Under these conditions a small animal might scurry across the seep without a problem, but a large animal might break through the crust. If the asphalt below the crust is sticky enough, the feet of the larger animal could be stuck in place.

Another type of crust that can hide very sticky ooze below is formed by falling leaves and blowing dust. With enough leaves and dust a large seep of asphalt may be completely covered over, as if with natural camouflage. During days of low temperatures such a seep would pose no threat to animals. During hot periods, however, unsuspecting animals walking across the seep can break through the camouflaging cover of debris and get stuck in the ooze below.

Today, birds become stuck in the "tar" primarily because of its association with water. With the spray irrigation within the park, small pools of water tend to collect on and around the seeps. During the hottest of the summer days, just when the asphalt is most sticky, thirsty birds are most likely to be drawn to these pools of water and in the process they may become caught in the surrounding asphalt.

Birds are also often fooled by the crude oil seeping out of the ground, mistaking it for water. From a distance, a flat pool of oil gives a reflection similar to that of water, which can lead birds to land in or near it. This can be a fatal mistake!

The Lake Pit poses a different type of threat to birds. This small pond is kept filled with water by winter rains, nearby irrigation systems and ground water flow. Its depth is artificially regulated. The Lake Pit is popular among visitors to the park because there is an ongoing, very active display of methane gas bubbling up from the depths and bursting forth upon the surface of the water as large bubbles. By itself, the gas does not pose a great threat to wildlife, but large amounts of crude oil also bubble up from below. Forming large slicks on the sur-

face, the oil moves around from one side of the pond to another, blown by the wind. Leaves, dust and other debris accumulate on the oil, often in sufficient quantities to camouflage its true nature. When blown against the shoreline, this floating debris can appear to be a continuation of the shoreline. Any bird landing on the flotsam will simply find itself dropping through into the oily water. As in any oil slick situation, natural or man-made, once a bird's feathers become coated with oil its survival is in doubt. If seen in time, birds that find themselves in this sorry situation are rescued by Page Museum personnel.

It is often thought that the fossilized bones from the tar pits came from animals that stumbled into a deep pool of tar and sank. In fact, this interpretation is wrong on two accounts. First, it is virtually impossible for an animal to sink in a pool of thick oil, or oil bordering on transformation into pure asphalt. This is primarily because the density of living animals is not too different from that of thick oil. And for birds, oil coated feathers with trapped pockets of air provide a buoyant surrounding that would keep a dead bird afloat. Second, it is unlikely that deep pools of tar that could swallow up large animals ever existed in Hancock Park. No scientific evidence for such deep pools has ever been uncovered in almost a century of research at Rancho La Brea.

Perhaps the most effective way of visualizing the process of animals getting stuck in the tar pits is to envision the "flypaper" effect. Once a foot is stuck in the tar to the degree that an animal cannot readily free itself, struggling will often only cause another limb to be stuck. If a bird begins thrashing its wings to free itself, it can easily find its wing feathers coated with tar, if not actually stuck in the sticky goo. Death in a tar seep is not by the relatively quick process of drowning in a pool of liquid, but rather a slow, painful death by thirst or starvation. Most animals would struggle to escape until they were too weak or too mired in the tar to persist.

This model of entrapment readily explains why the fossil avifauna of the tar pits is so heavily skewed toward birds of prey. Imagine a rodent, its feet stuck in place in a tar seep, struggling to free

itself. From high above, a hawk sees its prey and immediately stoops. But what happens when the hawk's talons sink into the rodent and the bird strains to streak skyward again – and the rodent does not come free? The hawk dies of a broken neck, a consequence of sudden impact. There is no learning curve from this type of experience.

The tar pits are often pictured as the last way station in life for those unfortunate enough to get stuck. Trees and the sky above are filled with vultures, waiting for trapped animals to die. Or, large groups of vultures are seen feasting on the carcass of a large animal, with an occasional member of the group being inadvertently pushed into the tar by its companions. Vultures get prime billing in this scenario. In fact, there are more owls found as fossils at the La Brea Tar Pits than there are vultures.

But most owls feed at night, when the "stickiness" level of the asphalt would be lowest. That being the case, why are there so many owls? Because an owl seizes its prey on the wing, a mouse



New fencing protects park visitors from large surface flows of oil at the site of old paleontological excavations within Hancock Park. Partially debris covered asphalt and partially open, clear pools of oil, this environment is a potential trap for unwary animals.

struggling to free itself from the tar poses as big a threat to an owl as it did to the hawk. Swiftly swooping down to seize the mouse, it meets the same fate as the hawk – death on impact.

Unfortunately there is no way to prove this scenario. The bones of all but an extreme few of the fossil birds from Rancho La Brea are disarticulated, and it is unlikely that any damage caused to the neck vertebrate on impact could be identified. Nonetheless, the numbers of predatory birds are far greater than all

but one other species of fossil bird from the tar pits. That bird is the California Turkey, and it had its own reason for getting caught in the tar so often.

Sadly, there are not many birds of prey that frequent Hancock Park today. The most notable in recent times has been a nesting pair of Peregrine Falcons that reside on the top of the Mutual Benefit Life building, south side, opposite the LACMA. Great Horned Owls were once fairly common, but that was when the Pit 91 Excavation Site was a favored drop-off site for unwanted pet rabbits. So, were a sample of fossils ever available that represented the species of birds being trapped in the tar today, those who stopped over in the park for a bit of water would probably be far more common than birds of prey.

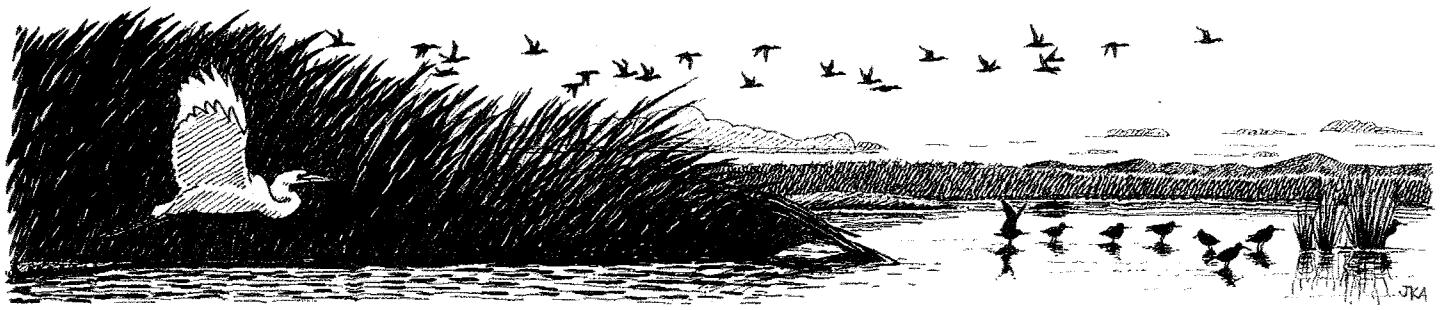
According to Kimball Garrett, Hancock Park is located with the "Hollywood 3" Breeding Bird Atlas block. The 24 possible/probable/confirmed breeding species in this block nearly all occur in the park and include predictable urban species such as Killdeer, Yellow-

chevroned Parakeet, Anna's and Allen's hummingbirds, Black Phoebe, Cliff and Northern Rough-winged swallows, Bushtit, American Robin and Brewer's Blackbird. A variety of migrants use the park in spring and fall.

In contrast, approximately 135 species of birds have been reported as fossils from Rancho La Brea, and more continue to be discovered as

research continues. Of this number, 20 species are extinct. The most recently discovered extinct species was a small cousin of the Sandhill Crane, which I named *Grus pagei* in honor of the man who gave the George C. Page Museum to the people of Los Angeles. With only a few exceptions, we really cannot tell whether a species from the tar pits was breeding in the area or just passing through.

With new planting still being placed into the ground, it will be some time



CONSERVATION CONVERSATION

by Sandy Wohlgemuth

This column is reprinted with minor changes from the October, 1986 edition of the Western Tanager.

When the talk drifts around the environmental campfire, one of the chestnuts that is likely to be pulled out is The Quality of Life. For perhaps 60 or 70% of the nearly six billion inhabitants of this shrinking planet, the quality of life is unspeakably low. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse – war, famine, disease and death – are at full gallop. Poverty, war, drought and disease give these unfortunate world citizens a choice between a life of dismal quality or no life at all. The next meal is somewhat more important than global warming. The rest of us, with a modicum of education and leisure, may examine the world around us and think about stuff like this.

Most of us live in cities. Years ago a city was fairly well defined; there were city limits with a sign that told you so. Beyond the city limits was a smattering of homes and then you were in the “country” where there were farms and undeveloped land. The rich folks lived in their mansions in the center of town, close to the shops, the restaurants and theaters. The poor lived on the wrong side of the tracks, the middle class somewhere in between.

With time and population increase the distribution of classes underwent a significant transformation. The once-elegant homes downtown declined and were replaced by small flats that were taken

over by the poor, usually minorities of assorted colors. The wealthy found their own privileged enclaves elsewhere in what became the secure, exclusive part of town. The middle class reached for the outskirts – and the suburbs were born. Dozens of “Golden Valley Estates” materialized, tract homes snuggled close together with a backyard and a dog. Important old-line business and city government remained downtown.

As suburbs began to fill up, the shopping mall was created, a born-again village green. Mom-and-Pop stores were replaced by national chains, while downtown business sent out branches in all directions. Before we knew it, the branches coalesced into a newer entity – the Business Park. Formerly limited to their downtown habitat, the skyscrapers (extending their range like starlings) slipped out of the central core of the city and turned up in the new Parks. But now they were brighter and shinier slabs of glass and stainless steel. The rationale for these huge developments was to bring the offices closer to the employees. But the employees can't afford to live near their jobs anymore so they find themselves moving to the outback where the housing is cheaper and again commuting long distances to work. On the freeways.

Ah, the freeways. These billion-dollar, indispensable, maddening, ulcer-generating tributes to the automobile are primary factors when we consider the quality of life. Now we are members of the bumper-to-bumper club, burning up gallons of gasoline, inhaling diesel exhaust from the truck ahead of us, fuming as we

estimate how late we will be, blood pressure rising with the temperature. The rush hour has become omnipresent and preempts all civilized travel time.

Drowning in this morass of freeways, the suburbanite, if he has time to really look around, might make a startling observation: he no longer lives in the suburbs! He may have moved out to escape the noise and smog and crowding of the city, but the city has slithered out to reclaim him. The quiet residential tract he moved into ten or twenty years ago is under siege. The once-narrow streets have been widened, decked out in glaring floodlights, and transformed into busy arteries that pulse with traffic. City transportation planners frantically pursue the traffic dilemma with restriped streets, manipulated signals, additional lanes and ride-sharing programs. To no avail. Every new lane added to a busy street is more than compensated by a hundred residences going up nearby.

Where are the vacant lots of yesterday? As scarce as antelope in the Antelope Valley. The weedy untidy lots may have been eyesores to some but they were evidence that there was still some space out there, some wiggle-room. Like the plow that broke the plain and doomed the plains Indians and the buffalo, the bulldozer blade is once and for all erasing the suburbs. And more. Follow any freeway outward bound from the metropolitan center and the hills and woodlands echo to the whine of the chainsaw and the rumble of the earthmover. Megalopolis is upon us – giant supercities that extend from Boston to Washington, from San Francisco to San Diego.

As we watch the overgrowth of people and condos, business parks and mini-malls, we mourn the decline of the amenities that make up the quality of life. More automobiles, more air pollution. More people, more water shortages, more overflowing landfills and sewage plants. (Do we dump the stuff in the bay or incinerate it into the atmosphere?) More noise to jangle the nerves while soothing open space disappears. Parks offer a respite, places to re-create the spirit. But they are so few and becoming so crowded that a measure of quiet solitude is almost impossible to achieve. (More people, too many people. Old stuff, perhaps, but overpopulation remains the root cause of our troubles – the whole world's troubles. Do we wait for the Chinese solution: one child or else?) Perhaps the most subtle and devastating effect of urbanization is the feeling of being trapped in a monstrous cage with no escape. We haven't reached that nightmare yet but we can see the signs and portents along the way: our view of the mountains invaded by the sharp edges of office buildings. An incomparable valley with gentle hills, an oak savanna and winding stream, chewed up by construction equipment and spat out as sites for industry, business or identical homes.

What to do about it? Is there a magic formula for salvation? Enlightened planning may be the answer, limiting density and building heights, protecting open space, preserving farmland and wetlands, making it tough and expensive for developers to do as they please. Is it too late, have things gone too far? Perhaps. In large metropolitan areas there is precious little room left for improvement. If the city and county lawmakers and planning commissions were by some overnight miracle changed into incorruptible environmentalists could they do much to stop the momentum of development? Can you tear down Wall Street or Century City and build urban wilderness areas? In smaller communities that are just beginning to feel the pressure of Big Is Better there are some hopeful signs of revolt. Yet every ordinance attempting to control inordinate growth faces powerful opposition. Developers call on the Constitution and the sacred right to make a buck. Their opponents are labeled no-growth doom-

criers, selfish elitists whose private motto is "screw you, I've got mine!"

Men and women of good will are faced with the question of freedom in America. In the prevalent mythology, freedom is equated with free enterprise. This may become a license to be as greedy as you can get away with. Is this the true American Way? We sing "This land is your land, This land is my land", yet we permit someone to own a mountain and do with it as he pleases – as long as he gets a zone change. If we put our minds to it, we can keep him from getting that zone change, deciding that the best use for the mountain is to be there, to be loved rather than as a shaven platform for a hundred homes. The American Way also includes the right to oppose tyrants who would make our cities unlivable, debase our natural wonders and jeopardize our health. Up the Quality of Life! ■

before the new vegetation in the park, both native and exotic, matures. Until then, birding in Hancock Park will not be particularly exciting. What will be interesting to observe, however, is the change in the composition of the species as the new landscaping matures. And, of course, by stepping into the Page Museum you can step back in time and see representative skeletal mounts of many of the fascinating birds that once called Hancock Park home. ■

Additional reading:

Rancho La Brea: Treasures of the Tar Pits. J.M. Harris and G.T. Jefferson, eds. Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

Rancho La Brea. A Record of Pleistocene Life in California. Chester Stock. Seventh Edition, 1992. Science Series No. 37. Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

Flycatcher Workshop

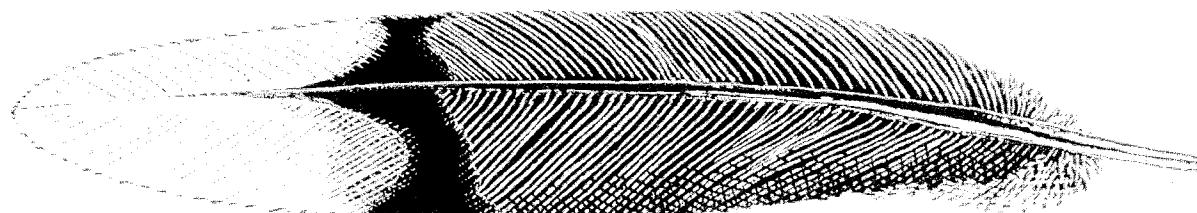
September 26, 1999

Flycatchers present some of the toughest ID problems in North America, and a host of neotropical species are actual or potential vagrants to the A.B.A. area. **Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett** will be discussing kingbirds, pewees, *Myiarchus*, other assorted groups and, of course, the infamous *Empidonax*. Some are colorful, most are not. Field marks, status and distribution, behavior, vocalizations, habitat preference, molt and variability will all be addressed in the more difficult ID's requiring a "holistic" approach. The workshop will begin at 3:00 P.M. and wrap up at 8:30 P.M., with a cookie break and a long dinner break. Venue is at Glendale Community College. Send a check for \$22 and a SASE to LAAS to reserve and receive more information. Don't end up on the waiting list like '97 and '98. Jon will be available to sign the new *National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, 3rd edition.



Ken Campbell will present a three-part series on the Birds of Rancho La Brea at the George C. Page Museum on September 18, October 16 and November 20. The Ice Age bird life of Los Angeles will be brought back to life through special visits to the fossil bird collection, live bird demonstrations, informal conversations and walks through the newly renovated Hancock Park. Please contact the Education Department of the Natural History Museum at (213) 763-3534 for information on this informative series.

Dr. Ken Campbell is Curator of Ornithology at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. He has worked with the fossil birds from Rancho La Brea since the George C. Page Museum opened in 1977.



OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

by Michael J. San Miguel, Jr.

San Gabriel River

The San Gabriel River at the mouth of both Azusa Canyon and Fish Canyon just north of the 210 Freeway has long been an excellent spot for viewing a large variety of birds in the San Gabriel Valley. Because of diverse habitats such as chaparral, riparian and large expanses of water, the list of birds seen in this area is well over 200 and is growing continually. Virtually any time of the year is good, but as with most places, the widest variety of birds can be seen from March through late May and again from late August through November when migration is under way. Access to most areas is quite easy and can make for quite an enjoyable bird walk. A good morning in late April or mid-September can produce well over 75 species of birds! Species of special interest to visiting out of town birders include California Quail, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Lesser Nighthawk, Common Poorwill, Costa's Hummingbird, Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Cassin's and Western kingbirds, Cactus Wren, Wrentit, California Thrasher, Bell's Vireo, California Towhee, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Hooded Oriole and all three species of goldfinches.

From Interstate 210, exit at Irwindale Avenue just east of the I-605 interchange in Azusa. Go north on Irwindale Avenue to Foothill Avenue. Go left or west on Foothill, cross over the San Gabriel River and make an immediate right onto Encanto Parkway after crossing the bridge. Continue on Encanto Parkway for 1/2 mile and park at Encanto Park next to the Duarte Historical Museum and across from the San Gabriel River. The park itself is a fairly

decent place to bird since the planting of several native trees in recent years. It has the most variety in the wintertime where Western Bluebird, Black and Say's phoebe and American and Lesser goldfinch are regular. From the parking lot you have two choices for birding the river. If you are pressed for time, I suggest birding the west side of the river. This would require you to park at the extreme north end of the parking lot and walk north on Encanto Parkway to the opening in the fence on your right. Or, if you decide to do the "loop", which requires more time, you should park on the extreme south end of the parking lot and walk down to the old railroad bridge on your left.

If you decide to do the "loop", which consists of birding the east side and crossing over to the west side via a bridge, start by walking down to the old railroad bridge about one hundred yards south of the parking lot and walk across. This gives you an excellent view of the riparian area where Yellow Warbler, Bell's Vireo, Common Yellowthroat, Bullock's Oriole and Lesser Goldfinch have been seen. Check the water in winter for waterfowl such as Cinnamon Teal, Mallard, Gadwall, Bufflehead, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup and Wood Duck. Check the reeds for nesting Red-winged Blackbird, Great-tailed Grackle and for Nutmeg Mannikin and Orange Bishop. These exotic species have established themselves in recent years and can be quite numerous in the wet grassy edges of the river. After you cross the bridge, turn left or north on the well paved bicycle and footpath. Be sure to be aware of your surroundings, as this is a very popular path for bikes and joggers. Along the edges of the path you will find Bewick's Wren, Ash-throated Flycatcher

(migrant), Bushtit, Wrentit and Loggerhead Shrike. On your left is the first water impoundment. Here is a nice group of willows. During migration these trees can be full of songbirds including Olive-sided Flycatcher, Western Wood-Pewee, Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Western Kingbird, Cassin's Vireo, Warbling Vireo, Swainson's Thrush, Nashville, Black-throated Gray and Townsend's warblers, Western Tanager, Lazuli Bunting and Lawrence's Goldfinch. Check the bottom of the spillway for Spotted and Least sandpiper, Green Heron and Black-crowned Night Heron. Continue further up the bike path and scan the open areas for Lesser Nighthawk, White-tailed Kite, American Kestrel, Costa's Hummingbird and Western Kingbird. Always look up to the sky for Black Swift (summer), Vaux's Swift (migrant), swallows (six species) and the scarce Purple Martin. Be sure to walk out onto the water impoundments, as this will give you excellent views of the river. On your left, look for a bridge which will take you to the west side of the river and eventually back to the parking lot.

If you decide to bird the west side, (from the parking lot) walk north about 50 yards and look for an obvious break in the fence. Walk out onto the water impoundment to the service road. Walk north along the road or along the river's edge. During fall migration, the wet grassy areas along the edge of the river are loaded with seed eating birds including Lazuli Bunting, Indigo Bunting (rare), Bobolink (rare but regular) and White-crowned, Brewer's, Vesper, Song and Swamp (rare) sparrows. Be sure to check the exposed muddy areas of the river for shorebirds such as Greater Yellowlegs, Long-billed Dowitcher, Western and Least sandpiper and Killdeer. In late

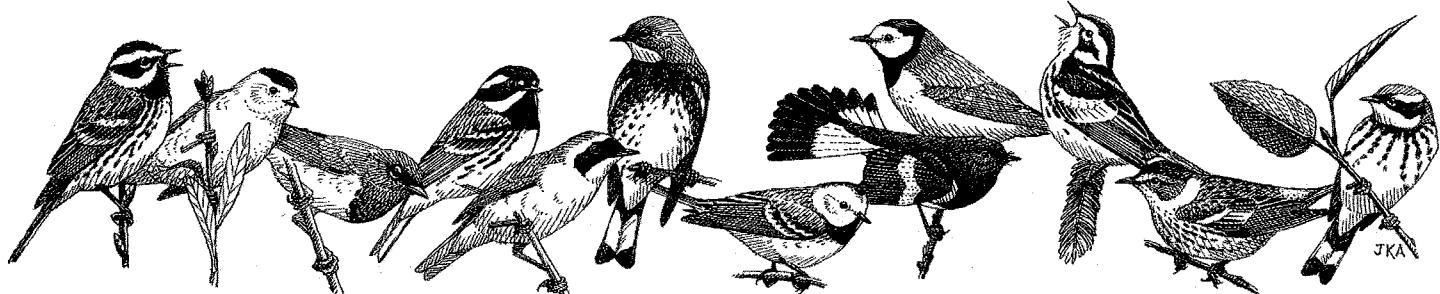
summer and fall, Pectoral, Solitary and Baird's sandpipers can be seen by the keen eyed observer. As you pass the second water impoundment, you will walk next to some extensive willows which have produced such rarities as American Redstart, Blackpoll and Palm warblers. These willows also can be quite productive during both spring and fall migration for passerines. Be sure to keep an eye out for Red-shouldered and Red-tailed hawks and an occasional Merlin (winter).

At the third drop structure, the mouth of Van Tassel Creek appears with willows on the left. These have produced Northern Waterthrush (up to four in any given fall), Tennessee Warbler (rare), Virginia's Warbler (rare) and most of the western passerine migrants. On your left is a small pond which has produced Least Bittern, Common Moorhen, Blue-winged Teal and Gadwall. On your right will be the bridge, which will take you to the east side of the river.

Fish Canyon

About one mile north of Encanto Park is the trailhead for Fish Canyon. This recently restored trail is another excellent birding spot and can produce some exciting birds. The riparian and chaparral area around the parking lot can be quite productive. Costa's Hummingbird, Rock, Canyon, House and Bewick's wrens, California Thrasher, California and Spotted towhee and Hooded Oriole (summer) are all easy to see. The endangered California Gnatcatcher formerly bred here but has long since been extirpated. Bell's Vireo, Yellow-breasted Chat and Southwestern Willow Flycatcher have all been seen here, but have not yet nested. Just south of the parking area is road to the Van Tassel Canyon and the Encanto Stables. Do not drive or park on this road. However, you can walk the road and look through the willows to the south, where one of Los Angeles County's first Dickcissels was found. Other birds seen here include Nuttall's Woodpecker, Black-headed Grosbeak, Western Tanager, Cooper's Hawk, Black-chinned and Anna's hummingbird, Nashville Warbler, California Quail, Black-chinned Sparrow (rare migrant), and Lesser, American and Lawrence's goldfinch.

This area can be very productive during spring after a good rain. During the winter, Yellow-rumped Warblers are abundant and be sure to check Van Tassel Creek for a wintering Northern Waterthrush. Several years ago, a MacGillivray's Warbler wintered here. Other birds in winter include Golden-crowned Sparrow, Orange-crowned Warbler and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. A few hundred yards up the road is an extensive patch of cactus where Cactus Wrens are resident. Scan the hillside for Phainopepla, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Western Scrub Jay, Ash-throated Flycatcher and the ever-present Bushtit. A trip after dark could produce Great Horned or Barn owl and Common Poorwill. As with any other places to bird, I highly recommend birding the early morning hours or late afternoon/early evening hours. The San Gabriel River and Fish Canyon are both good examples of the treasures found in the Los Angeles area for bird watching. 



BIRDS OF THE SEASON

Kimball L. Garrett

We in southern California are well aware how the end of spring can overlap the beginning of fall. Southbound Allen's Hummingbirds, Greater Yellowlegs and other early "fall" migrants are routine by about 25 June, yet the trickle of late spring migration that is so evident in mid-June (e.g. Western Wood-Pewees, Willow Flycatchers) actually extends through the rest of the month in the form of the occasional late northbound migrant. For example, Matt Heindel's saturated coverage of the Kern County deserts yielded dozens or even hundreds of migrants per day moving through places like Butterbreyt Canyon in early June, and a healthy trickle through the rest of the month. But how does one know that a given bird is on the move, as opposed to merely "settling into" suboptimal or inappropriate breeding habitat? When you have several **Wilson's Warblers** moving up Butterbreyt Canyon on (say) 10 June, it's pretty clear they're migrating. But what of a singing bird in a small willow patch in Hahn State Recreation Area in the Baldwin Hills on 11-23 June (KLG)? This is certainly not typical breeding habitat, yet the bird's lengthy stay contraindicated migrant status. In other words there is a point at which we have "non-breeders" (probably most year-old birds) wandering about or lingering in marginal habitat – these birds can't neatly be categorized as migrants or breeders.

The final season of Breeding Bird Atlas work yielded lots of excellent data but few surprises. Confirmation of a nesting pair of **Prairie Falcons** on the north side of the Santa Susana Mountains near Santa Clarita (Jim Jennings) in June was encouraging, although one doubts they will last much longer in this

rapidly urbanizing area. The riparian forest in the Hansen Dam basin had 3-4 territorial **Bell's Vireos** (including a female feeding a recently fledged young on 3 July; KLG), 8-10 **Yellow-breasted Chats**, 12+ **Yellow Warblers**, two singing **Swainson's Thrushes** and numerous **Blue Grosbeaks**. Perhaps the most extensive riparian floodplain habitat remaining in Los Angeles County, the Hansen Dam basin is threatened by a plan to increase water storage behind the dam (flooding most of the current willow forest) and a Master Plan for the basin that emphasizes massive recreational facilities (including a proposal for a soccer stadium!). Add to this the obscene proposal for a golf course in the middle of Big Tujunga Wash, just upstream, and it seems clear that the Hansen Dam riparian habitat is in jeopardy. One encouraging development regarding riparian birds in the county was the presence of 3-4 territorial **Summer Tanagers** along Little Rock Creek both above and below Little Rock Reservoir (Michael U. Evans and Neil Bouscaren). Also of note were four male **Indigo Buntings**: one along the Prairie Fork of the San Gabriel River on 29 June (Mark Wimer and Larry Allen), one in the West Fork of the San Gabriel River in June (Tom Wurster), and two along Upper Big Tujunga Rd. on 5 July (Steve Myers); some of these birds appeared to be paired with female Lazuli Buntings. Even more unusual, but almost certainly just passing through, was a singing **Red-eyed Vireo** along the East Fork of the San Gabriel River on 11 June (David Koeppel). An apparent **Rose-breasted X Black-headed Grosbeak** hybrid male was in Debs Regional Park on 27 June (Dan Cooper). The "Porter Ranch" megadevelopment has unceremoniously consumed the

Grasshopper Sparrow habitat at the north end of the San Fernando Valley, but several sparrows remained in the Whittier Hills this June (Larry Schmahl).

An immature **Little Blue Heron** was reported at Malibu Lagoon on 10-18 July (Irwin Woldman). Incidentally, Malibu Lagoon had no outlet and was virtually birdless as of mid-July, underscoring (along with the "Ballona Drylands") our pathetic lack of viable coastal shorebird habitat in Los Angeles County. You know you're in trouble when the concrete Los Angeles River is the best coastal shorebird habitat in the county! **Least Terns** had a nightmare breeding season on most of the southern California coast, with **American Crows** thought to have been a significant culprit at some local colonies. "Crow control" may soon become as ingrained in our conservation psyches as cowbird control, though one wonders whether the various agencies will be able to outsmart these corvids.

Farther afield, the most significant discovery of the summer was that of one or two breeding pairs of **Semipalmated Plovers** at the mouth of the Santa Maria River in mid-July (Brad Hines, Jamie Chavez); this species breeds only casually south of northern British Columbia, and I am not aware of any breeding records south of Malheur Lake in Oregon. The most astonishing duo of unexpected birds, however, had to be the **Bridled Tern** and **Red-tailed Tropicbird** that "investigated" the tern colony at Bolsa Chica on 10 July (Jim Pike, John Ivanov, et al.); each soon flew back out to sea, not to be found again. The Bridled Tern repeats the performance put in by another (or the same?) bird last July. Red-tailed Tropicbirds nest on low islets, often near huge tern colonies, so it is perhaps not surprising that it was this species, rather than the locally more

numerous Red-billed Tropicbird (a cliff nester which doesn't normally breed near tern colonies), that paid a visit to Bolsa Chica.

We mustn't ignore the exotics! Richard Barth monitored Hahn State Recreation Area's **European Goldfinch** nest and confirmed the fledging of at least three young. Another sighting of European Goldfinch in the Arroyo in Pasadena on 5 July (Pat Adelman) suggests a trend! A male **Northern Cardinal** in Culver City in June (Don Sterba) was certainly an escapee. The **Black-billed Magpie** first found in March in Big Tujunga Wash was still present on 23 June (Art Evans).

September and October will present us with the usual whirlwind of migrants, lost and otherwise. With atlasing having ground to a near halt, I won't admonish readers to ignore the temptation to spend the fall vagrant-hunting – you're finally free to do so! But I do suggest that you carve out your own niche – a park or other "oasis" that you can cover on a regular basis to get a sense of the flow of the latter part of fall migration (which began in July and August). Remember, coverage is a bigger key to finding unusual migrants than geography. 

Records of rare and unusual birds reported in this column should be considered tentative pending review by the regional editors of **NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS** or, if appropriate, by the **California Birds Records Committee**.

For *Birds of the Season*, send observations with as many details as possible to:

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Los Angeles, CA 90007 USA
e-mail: kgarrett@nhm.org

To report birds for the tape, call:

Raymond Schep (323) 874-1318
e-mail: drschesp@colonial-dames.com

The address for submissions to the California Bird Records Committee is:

Michael M. Rogers, Secretary
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WESTERN TANAGER

Published by
Los Angeles Audubon Society,
a chapter of
National Audubon Society.

EDITOR: Jean Brandt
ASSISTANT EDITOR: Tom Frillman
CONSERVATION: Sandy Wohlgemuth
ORNITHOLOGY CONSULTANT:
Kimball Garrett
FIELD TRIPS: Mari Johnson
PELAGIC TRIPS: Phil Sayre
PRINTING: CP Graphics

Opinions expressed in articles or letters herein do not necessarily express the position of this publication or of LAAS.

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

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Los Angeles County
Breeding Bird Atlas
(213) 745-BIRD (2473)
<http://www.nhm.org/~lacbba>
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Atlas Update

Have you found a nesting bird in your yard or in your birding travels? If it was in Los Angeles County in the last five years, we want to hear about it. You only have a few more months to tell us, since the Los Angeles County Breeding Bird Atlas is winding down its fifth and final year of field work. Volunteers who have helped with this effort have a lot to be proud of! They have scoured every one of 410 Atlas blocks covering the county for nesting evidence and their efforts have yielded several new nesting species for the county and a comprehensive, up-to-date picture of all of our breeding birds.

But can we still use more information from YOU! Yes – you might have information we do not have! Most of the county has been well covered, but we are still missing birds here and there. Even in urban areas, birds like orioles and robins and jays (and especially owls) often nest only in backyards where our volunteers cannot go. Are you wondering whether your breeding species is "important enough" to report? European Starlings, House Finches and House Sparrows are among the only species for which we think we have a pretty complete picture. But if you send us nesting sightings of those three species we can use them! Information on nesters will not only be mapped, but will also be analyzed for timing of nesting and other patterns. So to repeat, it's all useful information to us.

If you do not have nesting sightings to report but still want to help, look for nesting evidence at the end of this year. We need more confirmations of Anna's and Allen's hummingbirds and it's not too late to turn some up: several hummers were confirmed nesting during last year's Christmas counts! These species, and some hawks or owls, might be found nesting before the end of 1999 near you.

You can submit sightings by mail, phone, e-mail or on the web. I hope to hear from you soon!

Mark Wimer, Project Coordinator
Los Angeles Co. Breeding Bird Atlas
900 Exposition Blvd.
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For more information, contact Olga Clarke, Travel Director, 2027 El Arbolita Drive, Glendale, CA 91208. ph/fax; (818) 249-9511 e-mail: laas@ix.netcom.com <http://www.netcom/~laas>

FIELD TRIPS

continued from page 12

Sunday, October 3 –

Topanga State Park.

Leader **Gerry Haigh**. Meet at 8:00 A.M.

See September 5 for write-up.

Sunday, October 10 –

Whittier Narrows. Leader **Ray Jillson**.

Meet at 8:00 A.M.

See September 12 for write-up.

Sunday, October 10 –

Pelagic Trip.

Santa Barbara Island and the Osborne Banks

Saturday, October 16 –

Sycamore Canyon with

Raymond Schep. Meet at 8:00 A.M. to hike through beautiful Santa Monica mountain chaparral. A good cross-section of resident, migrant and wintering species is expected. Take PCH up the coast to just past the Ventura County line. Park in the Sycamore Canyon lot. Parking fee \$5.00.

Sunday, October 17 –

Ballona Wetlands.

Leader **Bob Shanman**.

Meet at 8:00 A.M.

See September 19 write-up for details.

Sunday, October 31 –

San Gabriel Mountains.

Leader **Karen Johnson**. Enjoy the changing of the seasons and a crispness in the air during this autumn visit to the Angeles National Forest. Mountain Quail, White-headed Woodpecker, sapsuckers, Mountain Chickadee, Brown Creeper, nuthatches, Purple and Cassin's finches and other montane species will be sought at Charlton Flat, Chilao and Buckhorn campgrounds. Meet to carpool at 8:00 A.M. on Hwy 2 in La Cañada, just north of the 210 Fwy.

Wear layered clothing; bring lunch.

Drivers will need to display a National Forest Adventure Pass.



PELAGIC TRIPS

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: David Koeppl and Herb and Olga Clarke. \$70, full galley.

Sunday, October 10 –

Santa Barbara Island and the Osborne Banks.

12-hour trip departs from San Pedro on the Vantuna. We will head out to the open ocean toward Santa Barbara Island as we search for pelagic birds and marine life. Leaders: Arnold Small and David Koeppl. \$45, microwave only.

Saturday, November 13 –

Palos Verdes Escarpment to Redondo

Canyon. 8-hour trip departs from San Pedro on the Vantuna. This trip is tailored to novice pelagic birders and year-end listers. Leaders: Herb Clarke and Mike San Miguel. \$30, microwave only.

Saturday, February 19 –

San Pedro Channel along the coastal escarpment.

8-hour trip departs from San Pedro on the Vantuna. The trip is tailored to both beginning and experienced birders. A very pleasant way to add to your bird lists. At this time of year, alcids are in alternate plumage and Short-tailed Shearwaters can be seen. Leaders: TBA. \$30, microwave only.

All pelagic trips must be filled 35 days prior to sailing. 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.

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 P.M. to answer questions about field trips. Our office staff is also available Tuesday through Saturday for most reservation services.

EVENING MEETINGS

September 14, 1999

The Los Angeles Audubon Society is currently without a Program Chair. As we go to print, no program has been scheduled for the September meeting. Please call the Bird Tape at (323) 874-1318 for up-to-the-minute information. If you have a suggestion for a program or are interested in volunteering to be Program Chair, please call Audubon House at (323) 876-0202.

October 12, 1999 Herb Clarke **There's No Place Like Nome.**

This program will detail highlights of a birding and photographic trip to Nome in NW Alaska, including an excursion to Gambell on St. Lawrence Island.

E 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, September 5 –

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, September 11 –

Join naturalist **Roy van de Hoek** in visiting several **Ballona Wetlands** areas. We should see waterfowl, shorebirds, marsh birds, herons and others. We will look for all three species of lagoon crabs and learn about the ecology of all the environments that we visit. Bird till noon and have lunch. Those who choose, can continue to bird into the afternoon. Meet at 8:00 A.M. at the Del Rey Lagoon parking lot. Take the Marina Fwy. (90 W) to Culver Blvd. and turn left for about a mile, then right on Pacific Ave. The lot is on the right. Lot or street parking is usually not a problem. Three hour walk. 'Scopes helpful.

Sunday, September 12 –

Whittier Narrows. Leader: **Ray Jillson.** Meet at 8:00 A.M. to view colorful resident and migrating birds, including the introduced 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 September 19 –

Ballona Wetlands. **Bob Shanman** will be leading this trip to our nearest wetland. Shorebird migration and early sea ducks among the expected fare. Meet at 8:00 A.M. at the Del Rey Lagoon parking lot. Take the Marina Fwy. (90 W) to Culver Blvd. and turn left for about a mile, then right on Pacific Ave. The lot is on the right. Lot or street parking is usually not a problem. Three hour walk. 'Scopes helpful.

Sunday September 19 –

Pelagic trip to Anacapa, Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz Islands. See page 11 for details

Sunday, September 26 –

Flycatcher Workshop.
Jon Dunn and **Kimball Garrett**
See Page 7 for details.

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