

WESTERN TANAGER



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Los Angeles Audubon Society

Mexican Birds in California: A Brief Overview

by Robb Hamilton

The unexpected wintering of a Blue Mockingbird at El Dorado Nature Center in Long Beach has sparked anew the perpetual dialogue among California birders regarding the means by which such fanciful creatures reach us. Specifically, we wonder whether these birds underwent a remarkably messed up migration or fantastically ambitious dispersal, or whether they simply fell victim to a trap within their normal range and persevered long enough to eventually regain freedom in or near the Golden State. The California Bird Records Committee (CBRC), an arm of Western Field Ornithologists, is charged with hashing out such matters for the purposes of maintaining California's 'official' bird list.

While the difference between an escapee and natural vagrant may seem hopelessly esoteric even to many birders, and the truth often remains veiled, the ten members of the CBRC (of which I am one) see value in distinguishing between birds that seem likely to have reached California naturally and those that probably got here some other way. In essence, we do not feel that direct human transport of birds should be conflated with migration, nomadic wandering and other forms of dispersal – natural processes by which species exploit and sometimes colonize lands outside their normal ranges. California's border with Mexico, where the illegal trade in wild-caught birds is fairly widespread, yields a bottomless reservoir of 'natural occurrence' debates. This paper provides

some views on these slippery issues, with my acknowledgment that a complete and balanced treatment (not to mention the many sources of controversy outside of Mexico) would occupy a much larger space and give voice to the considerable spectrum of viewpoints in the birding community.

As a starting point, it's important to establish the basic existence of an illegal trade in wild-caught birds just south of the border. The following table includes the

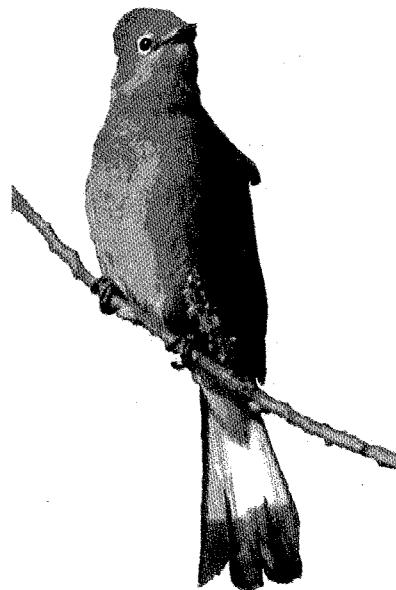


Figure 1: Gray Silky-Flycatcher at Poway, San Diego County, 10-12 March 1994. One or more damaged body feathers on the left upper breast and the outer rectrix shaved off on the left side suggest (to me) prior caging.

presumably wild-caught species (excluding parrots and parakeets) that I observed during four 1999 visits to pet stores in northwestern Baja California (mostly in Rosarito and Ensenada):

SPECIES	HIGH DAILY COUNT
Gambel's Quail	35
Black-throated Magpie-Jay	20
Green Jay	6
Purplish-backed Jay	2
Brown-backed Solitaire	5
Slate-colored Solitaire	9
Northern Mockingbird	3
European Starling	2
Cedar Waxwing	16
Gray Silky-Flycatcher	1
California Thrasher	1
White-collared Seedeater	20
Green-tailed Towhee	1
Lark Sparrow	1
Northern Cardinal	14
Pyrrhuloxia	5
Lazuli Bunting	15
Indigo Bunting	25
Varied Bunting	42
Orange-breasted Bunting	25
Painted Bunting	58
House Finch	28
Lesser Goldfinch	3

Many of these birds were in bleak plumage, and a disturbing proportion of them appeared sickly. Of course, good-looking specimens are likely to sell better than ugly ones, and any bird can appear normal once it's gone through a molt (so long as its dietary needs are met). The bottom line is that the trade in wild-caught birds, including frugivores from mainland Mexico, is active in northwestern Baja California, and this potential source of birds must be taken seriously in cases where a bird's natural occurrence seems questionable.

Over the years, Painted Buntings have doubtlessly sparked more ‘natural occurrence’ debates among CBRC members than any other species. This little emberizid nests across the southeastern U.S. and winters in Mexico, and, as indicated previously, I have seen as many as 58 of them for sale in Baja California during a single day — more than double the number I’ve seen of almost any other species.



Photos by author

Figure 2: Brown-backed Solitaire at a pet shop in Rosarito, 13 February 1999.

The CBRC has accepted over 54 fall Painted Bunting records since 1962, over 70% of these occurring in August and September, and over 90% of the ‘known age’ birds being immature. By contrast, adult males (which attain their colorful plumage in the second prebasic molt) account for eight of ten records between 7 December and 9 April; the two records of females (both felt to be adults) were alongside adult males at spots relatively close to the Mexican border. In part, because of this highly atypical demography (immatures normally predominate among naturally occurring vagrant songbirds during any season), the CBRC has not accepted any wintering Painted Buntings. Finally, considering only birds that the CBRC has endorsed as being correctly identified, seven of eight spring and summer records have been of adult males, the final record being of a singing second-year bird collected in Sonoma County 24 June 1966; this bird and two adult males (both at desert oases in May) have been accepted by the CBRC.

Without getting caught up in the details of any one record, birders should understand that the striking predominance of adult male Painted Buntings outside of fall migration, along with the known trade in this species, combine to cast a considerable shadow of doubt upon many Painted Bunting sightings. I nonetheless urge birders to closely study and carefully document any Painted Buntings they run across (even

pretty ones!), and to follow through by submitting them for CBRC review. For one thing, the record may not be as doomed as it seems — an adult male with faded plumage in the East Mojave National Scenic Area 2-5 September 1993 was recently accepted by the CBRC, and just as important, unreported birds compromise our ability to analyze the complicated dynamics of the species’ natural and unnatural occurrence in California.

I am equally intrigued by the occurrence of tropical species that are largely sedentary but that may periodically wander or disperse long distances. Such dispersal is often thought to be caused by a shortage of food in the species’ home range, which may be related to unfavorable weather conditions such as freezing weather and droughts. In Texas, hard winter freezes send birders into the Lower Rio Grande Valley in search of birds that may be driven there from the Mexican highlands; for example, a particularly brutal freeze in 1990 is believed responsible for remarkable Texas records of the Masked Tityra, White-throated Robin and Yellow-faced Grassquit (Carmona 1999). While the link between bad weather and the appearance of Mexican vagrants is less well established elsewhere in the U.S., such a connection may help explain the sporadic occurrence of such species as the Eared Trogon and Aztec Thrush in southeast Arizona (Paul Lehman pers. comm.).

Here in California, the connection between poor weather conditions and/or food supplies in Mexico and the appearance of southerly vagrants is even more tenuous, though one might imagine that hummingbirds such as Broad-billed, Xantus’s, Violet-crowned and even Blue-throated are occasionally drawn to us when a sudden shortage of nectar sends some of these voracious imbibers northward along an evanescent trail of blooms. Other primarily Mexican landbirds that have occurred here without arousing much suspicion of prior captivity include the Common Black-Hawk, Zone-tailed Hawk, Groove-billed Ani, Buff-collared Nightjar, White-collared Swift, Greater Pewee, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Couch’s Kingbird, Thick-billed Kingbird, Rufous-backed Robin, Varied Bunting (but note that they are offered for sale in northwest Baja California) and Streak-backed Oriole. A particularly

remarkable record, and one that should give pause to those of us who feel we understand ‘resident’ species’ potential for long-distance vagrancy to California, occurred in the barren hills of northwest Baja California, where a Fan-tailed Warbler was collected on 31 December 1925 (Grinnell and Lamb 1927).

Phillips (1991) provided information on winter movements of Gray Silky-Flycatchers from their highland breeding grounds into the lowlands of mainland Mexico, likening these irruptive peregrinations to those of waxwings. Some have postulated that widespread failure of natural berry crops in Mexico could send Gray Silky-Flycatchers wandering as far north as California, thus accounting for the perky individual that last winter thrilled birders in the Santa Ana Mountains of southern Orange County. Of course, Phillips himself (1991 p. 4) dismissed sightings of this species near the U.S. border, and one at Acapulco, as being “doubtless of releases or escapes.”

I was hesitant to vote against Orange County’s Gray Silky-Flycatcher in the CBRC’s first round of tallies due mainly to the fine condition of its plumage and its mountain location. This bird looked absolutely perfect perched in a giant oak, nibbling mistletoe berries with Phainopeplas and Townsend’s Solitaires. Ultimately, however, I considered this record to be undermined by 1) reports from Kurt Rademaker of this species being offered for sale in Baja California; 2) California’s three previous records and a subsequent record in spring 1999, at least one of which (a female at Poway 10-12 March 1994, Figure 1) showed feather wear that suggested prior caging; and 3) a lack of documented Arizona records. Some might look upon the relative abundance of records from California as evidence that the species irrupts far northward with some regularity, but with no Arizona records and only two from Texas (within 100-150 km of the species’ normal range), it seems to me that California’s five records, plus one from northwestern Baja California (30 km south of Rosarito on 7 October 1994, Cota-Campbell and Ruiz-Campos 1995), were likely refugees from Baja California’s trade in wild-caught birds.

The Blue Mockingbird is endemic to Mexico, occurring from Sonora south nearly to Guatemala. The individual at El

Dorado Nature Center was first identified on 8 December 1999, having been initially sighted by Nature Center staffers some time in November 1999. Most observers consider the bird to likely be an adult due to the existence of fairly extensive streaking on the breast, an eye that is said to be red in rare good light, pale blue coloration on the crown, and its extensive catalog of sounds (perhaps more than would be expected of a youngster). Conclusive ageing of this bird would be useful, since young birds are generally more prone to long distance wandering than are adults.

The Blue Mockingbird is considered to be an altitudinal migrant, with some proportion of birds moving from highland breeding grounds to lowland riparian habitats when nesting is through (Russell and Monson 1998, Rosenberg and Witzeman 1999). Birding the lowlands around San Blas, Nayarit, in January 2000, Steve Howell (pers. comm.) found Blue Mockers to be more widespread than they had been during the previous three Januaries. Greg Lasley (in litt.) reports that, during winter in northeast Mexico:

... it is not unusual to find montane species such as White-throated Robin and Blue Mockingbird which have descended to lower elevations than normal. . . some of these birds can easily follow riparian corridors to Texas (there are several that flow north to near Falcon Lake from deep in Mexico), perhaps wander across the border, and find a spot to their liking. Whether or not all return in the spring is unknown. Certainly most do.

While such a mechanism would not explain the occurrence of non-migratory Mexican birds in coastal California, there is evidence that some 'resident' birds, including various rails, occasionally blast across the landscape more in the mode of migratory species, reaching distant lands without apparent regard to such geographic features as riparian corridors. The Curve-billed Thrasher, a large mimid resident in mainland Mexico and the southwestern U.S., may be prone to such explosive wandering, having wintered as far north as Alberta and Manitoba (one each in 1998-99), Wisconsin (two records, including one found in October 1971 that stayed four years), South Dakota (1966-67), and Minnesota (three records, including one this winter), with additional records scat-

tered across the central and southeastern U.S. In this light, dispersal from Sonora to Long Beach seems less preposterous.

The first two accepted Blue Mockingbird records in the U.S. were of individuals wintering in southeast Arizona during the early 1990s (Rosenberg and Witzeman 1999), and subsequent records include one in southwest New Mexico 7-8 August 1995 and one present in the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas since May 1999. Our bird's occurrence in a coastal megalopolis raises immediate red flags regarding the potential for human mischief, but of course El Dorado Park is a massive 'semi-natural' open space that each year attracts an impressive volume and variety of birds, including numerous vagrants from points east.



Figure 3: Northern Cardinals at a pet shop in Rosarito 13 February 1999.

I have not seen Blue Mockingbirds held or offered for sale in Mexico, and the general consensus is that they are rarely caged, though their amazing vocal repertoire and striking appearance would seem to make them attractive candidates for it. Perhaps they are simply difficult to capture. I am uncertain of the feather tract that produced an apparently twisted white feather that stands out conspicuously on the Long Beach bird's left side, but John Schmitt (pers. comm.) has seen two caged birds (as well as wild birds) grow white and/or twisted feathers to adventitiously replace ones shed due to physical trauma.

These are some of the factors that CBRC members will weigh in assessing the likelihood of natural vagrancy in this case, along with additional information that is likely to come to light through further observations and via discussions with birders on other state committees that have reviewed Blue Mockingbird records. Though we may never ken the true nature of this bird's long, strange trip with satisfying certainty, we will at least consider the evidence with reasonably open minds. If conservatism reigns (as is often the case) and the record is not accepted, birders should bear in mind that their own bird lists are truly personal and need not follow the CBRC or any other authority. And, of course, rejected records can be revived if additional relevant information is uncovered: for example, if a more definitive pattern of long-distance wandering emerges for the species. Whatever the case, I heartily encourage birders to see and hear this brilliant outlander while it remains among us.

Many thanks to Shawneen Finnegan for expert research of vagrant Curve-billed Thrasher records, to Greg Lasley for providing a Texan's perspective on Mexican strays, to Steve Howell for sharing current news from west Mexico along with his thoughts on long-distance dispersal, to John Schmitt for enlightening discussion of strange white feathers, to Richard Erickson, Sally Im and William Hayes for timely reviews, and to Karen Gilbert for helping to find the bird marts of northwest Baja California and the Blue Mockingbird of El Dorado.

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Ralph W. Schreiber Ornithology Research Awards

Call for Awards Applications

The Los Angeles Audubon Society Ralph W. Schreiber Ornithology Research Award, to support research relevant to the biology of birds, is awarded to students, amateurs and others with limited or no access to major granting agencies.

Recipients must reside in southern California (San Luis Obispo, Kern and San Bernardino Counties south) or be currently enrolled in a southern California academic institution. There is no geographical restriction on the research area.

One or more awards may be given this year, with a total of approximately \$2000 available for awards.

The application deadline for the year 2000 Research Award is March 31; grants will be disbursed in June, 2000.

Interested applicants can obtain further details regarding this award, and application procedures, by e-mailing a request to:

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Chas Cowell, Grants
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Los Angeles Audubon Society
7377 Santa Monica Blvd.
West Hollywood, CA 90046

Thank You, Sharon!

In 1984, Sharon Milder, who was then our Education Chairperson, had a vision. She hoped to establish a fund of \$10,000.00, invest it, and award the earnings each year as a research grant to an ornithology student in, or from, Southern California.

Sharon, with the help of other members, raised the initial \$10,000.00 by printing and selling Los Angeles Audubon Society T-shirts. The first grant was given in 1985.

Since then, the Ralph W. Schreiber Ornithology Research Award Grant Fund has grown by investment and contributions to over \$75,000.00.

The number and dollar amount of the grants varies depending on the amount requested and the quality of the applications received. Past years have seen no grants at all or as many as three in a single year.

After 15 years as Grant Chair, Sharon has announced her retirement from the position.

The Board of Los Angeles Audubon Society would like to thank Sharon for establishing this Grant Program and her continued leadership of the committee in the years since.

Thank you, Sharon,
and good gardening!

Part-time Position Available in Bookstore

As this issue of the Tanager goes to press, the bookstore is seeking an additional part-time staff member to work Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. Responsibilities will include, but are not limited to, answering phones, helping with sales and packing of orders for shipping.

Knowledge of birding is helpful, but not essential.

If you are interested in the position call Audubon House at (323) 876-0202 for application information.

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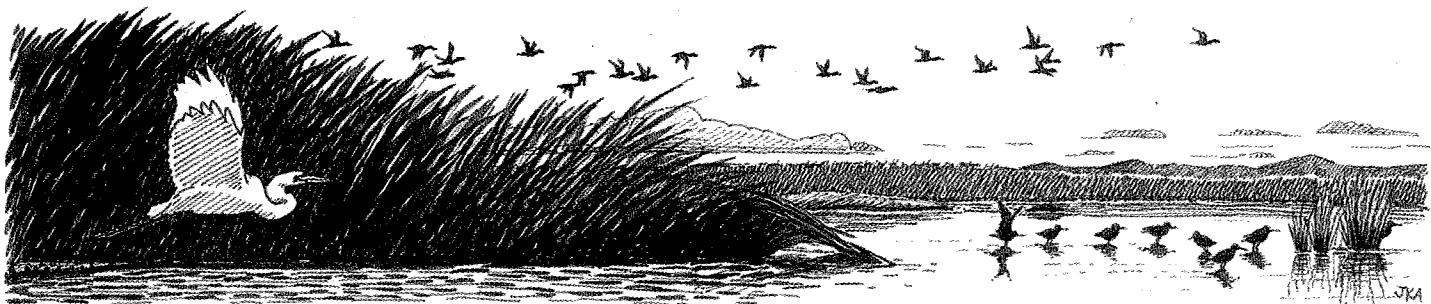
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CONSERVATION CONVERSATION

by Sandy Wohlgemuth

The Gray Whales are migrating this winter as they have for millennia. Hugging the Pacific coast from their Alaska waters, they navigate an amazing 5000-mile journey to Baja California yearly. Despite their formidable size, these 40-ton mammals are gentle creatures, nuzzling up to small boats where children can stroke their barnacle-covered backs.

In Baja, the Gray Whales are seeking the warm waters of lagoons where they can mate and safely give birth to their calves. But some of these placid lagoons are already under stress from unseemly development. In 1997 and 1998, two lagoons where salt was being extracted from seawater were subjected to brine waste. High concentrations of toxic chemicals in brine waste killed fish and shellfish and, in Laguna Ojo Liebre, 94 sea turtles. Both saltworks were operated by ESSA, a joint venture of Mitsubishi Corporation and the Mexican Government.

Some hundred miles south of Ojo Liebre is Laguna San Ignacio, an unspoiled nursery for Gray Whales, the only remaining lagoon free from shipping traffic, pollution and deadly predators. It has long been treasured as a wildlife sanctuary, so declared by the Mexican government itself in 1976. In 1988, it was included in the largest biosphere reserve in Latin America, the Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve. And in 1993, UNESCO designated it a prestigious World Heritage Site.

Unimpressed by the international appreciation of San Ignacio Lagoon, Mitsubishi has pressed forward in its goal to create the largest saltworks in the world. It

plans to excavate evaporation ponds in 116 square miles of the lagoon's tidal flats and put 17 pumps into the lagoon that will move 6600 gallons of water per second into the ponds. This industrial monster will include a 1.25-mile long pier with conveyor belts that will bring the salt to sea-going ships, ships which will become hazardous obstacles to migrating whales. In addition to the projected one billion gallons of poisonous brine waste generated yearly, there will be the usual pollution from pumps, trucks, bulldozers and other equipment.

Close to a million people around the world have sent letters of protest to Mitsubishi. Last July, 34 prominent scientists, including nine Nobel laureates, sent a powerful letter to Mitsubishi. (Some familiar names: James Watson, Edward O. Wilson, Paul Ehrlich, Stephen Jay Gould, Jared Diamond).

Since Mitsubishi so far has shown no sign of being affected by the rising cries of protest over its goal in San Ignacio, a

consumer boycott is under way. Natural Resources Defense Council and the International Fund for Animal Welfare have launched the drive to convince the Corporation that it will suffer if it does not abandon this project.

Letters to Motohiko Numaguchi, president of Mitsubishi International Corp., 520 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10022 (no e-mail known), will help. Also: letters to Herminio Blanco Mendoza, Secretary of Commerce and Industrial Development, c/o The Embassy of Mexico, 1911 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington D.C. 20006.

You are asked not to buy Mitsubishi cars, consumer products such as TVs, other electronic products and Nikon cameras, etc. Union Bank of California is also a Mitsubishi-owned business.

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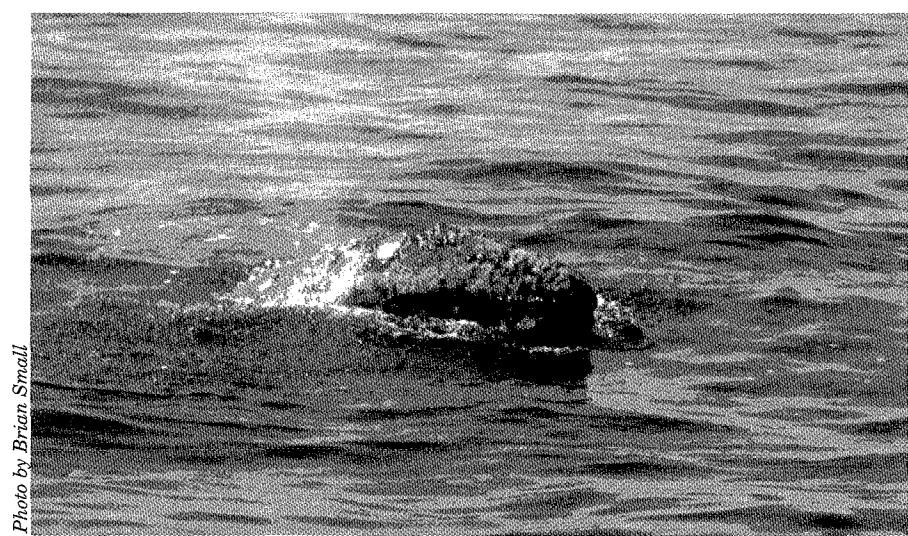


Photo by Brian Small



OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

by Michael J. San Miguel, Jr.

Spring Seabird Watching

What if someone were to tell you that by standing in one spot for just a few hours on any given early spring day you could witness thousands of birds migrating before your very eyes? I know I would say: "I'm there!!!" One of the most exciting spectacles in nature is arguably the northward migration of seabirds off the Pacific Coast. In southern California we have the unique opportunity to witness this remarkable event every spring, from late February through late April, from shore at any coastal promontory, whether it is a pier or a vista point. A newcomer to 'seabird watching' will be floored by the thousands of loons, scoters, brant and gulls that stream by in a seemingly endless line. The only things you really need are some warm clothes, binoculars and a spotting 'scope. It is often best to bird the first few hours of the morning, though anytime of the day can be rewarding.

For most birdwatchers, observing from the shore is the most convenient way to look at pelagic and seabirds. Furthermore, for those who are prone to seasickness, it is often the only way to add pelagic birds to your list without losing your lunch. Most birdwatchers are fairly reluctant when it comes to sea watching for many reasons. First of all, spending long periods at the end of a pier bumping elbows with fisherman, or at the edge of a cold windswept point, can be disconcerting to say the least. A good onshore wind caused by bad weather is necessary for birds to get in close and who likes birding in the rain and wind? Moreover,

the birds are usually just too far out for simple identification by plumage.

Often, determination of certain species is based on flight style or by silhouette which is gained only by personal experience. A suggestion I have if you

Possible Spring Seabird List

Red-throated Loon (through mid-April)
Pacific Loon (mid-April through late-May)
Common Loon (through late April)
Western Grebe
Northern Fulmar (irregular)
Pink-footed Shearwater (rare)
Sooty Shearwater
Black-vented Shearwater (early spring)
Brown Pelican
Double-crested Cormorant
Brandt's Cormorant
Pelagic Cormorant
Brant
Black Scoter (rare)
White-winged Scoter (rare)
Surf Scoter
Black Oystercatcher
Willet
Whimbrel
Red-necked Phalarope (irregular)
Red Phalarope
Pomarine Jaeger
Parasitic Jaeger
Bonaparte's Gull
Heermann's Gull
Western Gull
Black-legged Kittiwake (irregular)
Sabine's Gull (May)
Caspian Tern
Elegant Tern (after March)
Common Tern (mid April)
Forster's Tern
Cassin's Auklet
Rhinoceros Auklet

are new to seabird watching: spend some time with an experienced seabird watcher who can help point out the various characteristics of identifying these birds from a great distance. Not only will this aid novice seabird watchers on future trips, it will greatly improve their overall field identification skills. More than anything, seabird watching takes a great deal of time and patience, so hang in there. It is practically essential that a 'scope be used to identify birds and to get closer looks. It is best to scan the horizon with binoculars, then use your 'scope to get satisfying looks of a particular bird.

If you are with another birder and see a bird which is causing you some problems, it is essential to give accurate directions to the bird. This is not easy since you are staring out at the open sea with no reference points. What one needs to establish first is what is 'straight out' and make that point 12:00. That way, if you have a jaeger, for instance, all you need to say is "jaeger at 1:00 flying from left to right below the horizon fairly close to shore." If you follow these simple rules of thumb, you are well on your way to a new and exciting aspect of birding.

Regardless of any shortcomings birding from shore may have, seabird watching is one of the most rewarding activities a birder can experience, especially during spring migration. Seabird watching is an excellent way to improve your identification skills and can provide hours of enjoyment to anyone who is ready to take the challenge. And who knows, the winds could blow some pretty unusual stuff your way!

SUGGESTED SEABIRD LOOKOUTS

San Diego County

La Jolla Cove is a favorite spot for local birders.

Any of the well marked vista points along I-5 between San Onofre and San Diego are great spots to check.

Orange County

Newport Pier in Newport Beach, is my personal favorite, though parking can be a bit tricky and the crowd of fishermen at the end of the pier can be quite excessive.

Huntington Beach Pier in Huntington Beach, just to the north of Newport Pier can be just as good. Again, parking can be a nightmare so get there early.

Los Angeles County

Point Fermin Park at the north end of L.A. harbor can be worth checking.

Royal Palms State Beach just north of Whites Point is good because of the rocky shoreline and can be excellent for diving birds.

Abalone Cove at Portuguese Bend can have some diving birds and can be good during a good onshore wind.

Point Vicente Park as well as **Point Vicente Public Fishing Access Lot** to the south are excellent places to view pelagic species and are another personal favorite.

A few miles to the west of Malibu is **Point Dume** which is another excellent site.

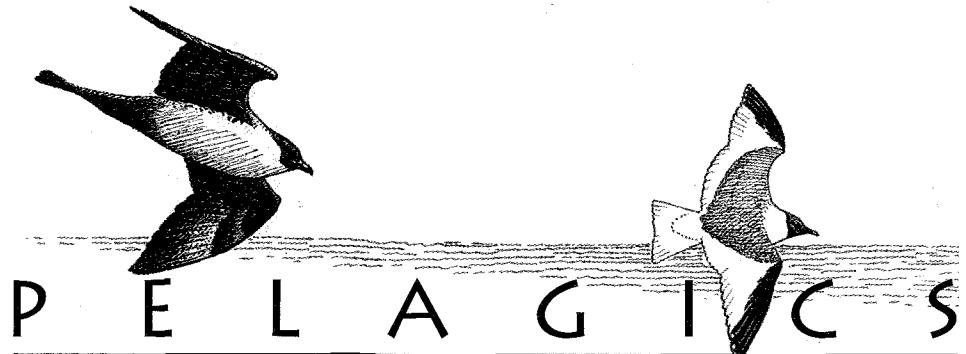
Ventura County

Point Mugu is a favorite of local birders and has hosted its share of rarities.

Santa Barbara County

Finally, **Goleta Point** on the campus of the University of California Santa Barbara is one of southern California's most famous promontories for watching seabirds.

Michael and Mike San Miguel will lead a L.A. 'seabird watching' field trip on Saturday, April 15th. Participation is limited to the first ten people who sign up. See Reservation Policy (pg. 11) to sign up. Participants **must** be registered in advance and have their own 'scopes. Cost: \$10 per person. The total amount collected (\$100) will sponsor a seabird in the Bird Atlas.



Saturday, May 20 –

San Pedro Channel and out to sea.

12-hour trip departs from Marina del Rey at 6:00 A.M. on the R/V UCLA Sea World. Birds seen in prior years: Northern Fulmar; Black-vented, Sooty and Pink-footed shearwaters; Sabine's Gull; terns (up to six); Pomarine Jaeger; rocky shorebirds (4-5); Common Murre; Pigeon Guillemot; Xantus's Murrelet; Cassin's and Rhinoceros auklets. Leaders: Kimball Garrett and Barney Schlinger. \$45

Saturday, June 10 –

Island Scrub-Jay Trip! Santa Cruz Island, landing at Prisoners' Cove.

10-hour trip departs from the Ventura Marina at 8:00 A.M. on the M/V Jeffrey Arvid. This beautiful island is the largest and most varied of the Channel Islands. We will take a short walk with a naturalist from the Nature Conservancy to see the flora and fauna as we search for the endemic Island Scrub-Jay. We will then cruise off the island for pelagic species. Birds seen in prior years: Northern Fulmar; Pink-footed, Sooty and Flesh-footed (rare) shearwaters; Black Storm-Petrel; Sabine's Gull; Pigeon Guillemot; Xantus's Murrelet; Island Scrub-Jay; island races of the Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Horned Lark, Spotted Towhee and Song Sparrow. Rarities: Buller's Shearwater and Saw-whet Owl.

Leaders: Mike San Miguel and Mitch Heindel \$60 – bring food and drink.

Saturday, August 26 –

Red-billed Tropicbird Trip!

18-hour trip departs from San Pedro at 5:00 A.M. on the R/V Yellowfin. Early morning departure, past Santa Catalina Island to the deeper waters south of San Nicolas Island.

Birds seen in prior years: Red-billed Tropicbird (seen on every trip); Leach's Storm-Petrel; Long-tailed Jaeger; South Polar Skua. (Blue Whales have been seen on this trip). Leaders: Kimball Garrett and Mitch Heindel. \$130 – 3 meals included in the price.

Sunday, September 10 –

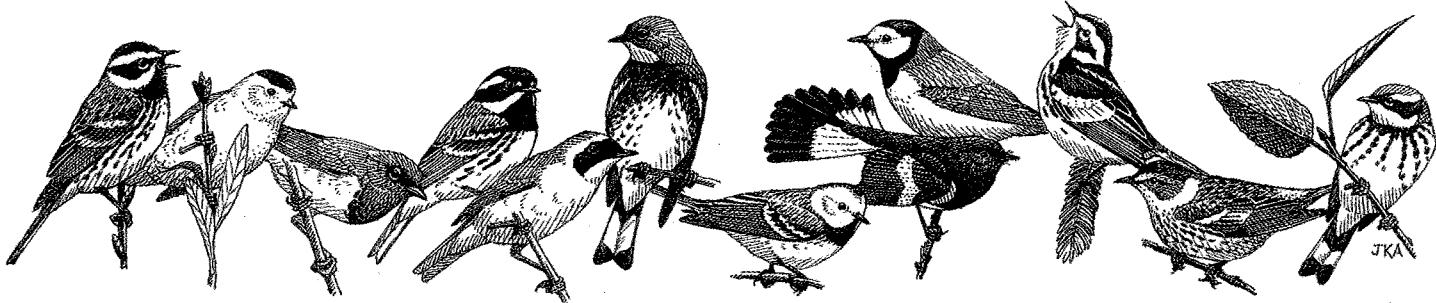
Anacapa Island to Santa Rosa Island through the Santa Rosa Passage to Santa Cruz Island. 12-hour trip departs from the Ventura Marina at 7:00 A.M. on the M/V Vanguard.

Birds seen on prior trips: Northern Fulmar; Pink-footed, Sooty and Black-vented shearwaters; Black, Least and Ashy storm-petrels; cormorants (3); Sabine's Gull; Arctic Tern; rocky shorebirds (up to five); Common Murre; Craveri's and Xantus's murrelets; Cassin's Auklet. Rarities: Buller's Shearwater; South Polar Skua; Long-tailed Jaeger. Leaders: David Koeppl and Michael J. San Miguel. \$70 – galley on board.

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.

All pelagic trips must be filled 35 days prior to sailing. Please make your reservations early.



BIRDS OF THE SEASON

by Kimball L. Garrett

Birders in the Los Angeles region seemed to be of the general opinion that there were relatively few birds around this winter, with most Christmas Bird Counts in the average to below-average range in species totals and well below average in total numbers of individuals. The low Christmas Count totals may be partly an artifact of coverage – there are simply too many competing demands for birders' time at this season and it is getting increasingly difficult to get good coverage for counts. But indeed some counts did quite well, with Santa Barbara, for example, producing about 212 species. Even if our crude metrics suggest that our 'normal' birds were fewer and farther between, it was still one of the most exciting winters in recent memory because of the presence of a number of unusual species. It's beginning to seem like winter is perhaps our best 'vagrant' season. Sure, the fall season (especially September through November) yields more records of vagrants, but few of those stick around for long. Winter, in contrast, is a time when birds often stay for long periods and are widely seen, contributing to our sense of a wealth of vagrants.

The mega-rarity of the winter was the **Blue Mockingbird**, glimpsed for several days at the El Dorado Nature Center in Long Beach by Karen Gilbert in early December, then confirmed by Robb Hamilton and Karen on 8 December and seen by hordes of birders since. In this day and age when humans transport birds around the globe, legally and illegally, for pleasure and profit (or even by accident), the 'mega-rarity' label is applied with misgivings. There is, at present, no proof that this member of a species that is largely resident in western and central Mexico did indeed arrive naturally (see Robb Hamilton's article in this issue). Nobody who looked at (or for) the bird at El Dorado Park will argue, however, with the conclusion that the bird was

acting as wild as it possibly could, skulking in the dimly lit underbrush and rarely giving good views. If accepted, this would be the first record of this species in California; two Arizona records have been accepted by that state's records committee.

El Dorado Park produced a number of other unusual birds this winter, largely through the thorough coverage of birders such as Karen Gilbert and Tom Wurster. Up to five **Common Grackles** with the 400+ **Great-tailed Grackles** at the park's northernmost lake established a high count for California and only the second record for Los Angeles County. A **Pine Warbler**, present since late November, was thought to be a different individual than the one in previous winters. A **Chestnut-sided Warbler** was found in January in the Nature Center, and a **'Red' Fox Sparrow** (*Passerella iliaca*

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:

Kimball L. Garrett
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900 Exposition Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90007 USA
e-mail: kgarrett@nhm.org

To report birds for the tape, call:

Raymond Schep (323) 874-1318
e-mail: yoohooray@cs.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

zaboria) was there in early December.

This was a banner year for wintering flycatchers in Los Angeles County. Besides the normal Black and Say's phoebe, Cassin's Kingbirds and scattering of Gray and Vermilion flycatchers, there were **'Western' Flycatchers** (undoubtedly Pacific-slope) in El Dorado Park (Kimball L. Garrett) and Huntington Gardens (Jon Fisher) and **Ash-throated Flycatchers** at Sepulveda Basin (Barbara Elliott et al.) and Santa Fe Dam Basin (Tom Wurster). A **Dusky-capped Flycatcher** was identified by Jean Brandt and Phil Sayre at Ole Hammer Park in Glendora in mid-December, and was widely seen through January. Ron Beck found a **Greater Pewee** in Chesebro Canyon, Agoura, on the 19 December Malibu Christmas Count, and it remained well into January (although it proved difficult to relocate). Add to this Cal Poly Pomona's perennial wintering **Thick-billed Kingbird** and our region really excelled tyrannically-speaking. On top of all this, a reported **Brown-crested Flycatcher** at Santa Fe Dam on 18 December (Jon Fisher) could not be refound for confirmation.

Jean Brandt and Phil Sayre found a **Hepatic Tanager** at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas on 16 January. A probable **Blue-headed Vireo** in Huntington Gardens on 18 December (Jon Fisher) could not be refound. Another wintering **Chestnut-sided Warbler** was in Elysian Park after early January (Dick Barth).

Coastally, Bruce Broadbooks found a **Red-necked Grebe** in the large Western Grebe flock off at El Segundo on 15 January. An immature **Little Blue Heron** was found at the freshly drained Del Rey Lagoon in Playa del Rey in mid-January (Bob Shanman); the bird appeared to lack dark pigment in the wingtips, suggesting at least the possibility of introgression with Snowy Egret, but was perhaps within the range of 'pure' Little Blues. The basic adult

Laughing Gull found near the Santa Monica Pier by Dharm Pellegrini on 3 November was rediscovered in early January and remained cooperative through the month.

The Antelope Valley was productive for raptors this winter, with two **Swainson's Hawks** just over the Kern County line northwest of Lancaster on 15-16 January (Tom Wurster) being the most unusual sighting. These birds could possibly have been early 'spring' migrants, since satellite tracking of Sacramento area birds has confirmed mid-winter movement of at least one bird from northern Mexico back to the Sacramento Delta area. A few **Rough-legged Hawks** were present this winter, along with several **Merlins** of the prairie subspecies *richardsoni*. Up to 15 **Short-eared Owls** were in a single field northwest of Lancaster in mid-January (Larry Sansone et al.). An adult **Bald Eagle** waited for the LAAS field trip to depart before performing a fly-over of Quail Lake on 23 January (KLG).

Few irruptive species were present in the region this winter, although **Mountain Chickadees** were rather widespread and **Western Bluebirds** moved toward (and to) the coast in unusual numbers. A **Red Crossbill** at Placerita Canyon Nature Center on 15 January (Ian Swift) was the only one reported. **McCown's Longspurs** were found in unprecedented numbers, with three in Palmdale on the Lancaster Christmas Bird Count on 18 December and six in a Horned Lark flock west of Lancaster on 16 January (Tom Wurster).

Evidence of spring migration in late January included flocks of **Tree Swallows** over Castaic and Quail Lakes (where none wintered) on 23 January, and a **Sage Thrasher** at Castaic Lake the same day (KLG). A flock of 70 migrant **Turkey Vultures** was over the western Antelope Valley on 16 January (Tom Wurster).

In March and April, observers will feel the painful void of post-Atlas depression, so will no doubt feel compelled to go look at spring migrants instead. Although L. A. County Breeding Bird Atlas field work has come to an end, we're still interested in noteworthy breeding records in the county for inclusion in the species accounts now being written for the atlas publication. Send these in to 'Atlas Central' at the Natural History Museum or to Audubon House. 

LAAS Tours 2000

Conducted by Olga Clarke

SOUTH AFRICA – (main tour) September 4-18, 2000

Including Cape Town and environs, Durban, KwaZulu Natal's Dolphin Coast, Hluhluwe Game Reserve, Ndumo Game Reserve in Maputaland and Mala Mala. Although the main emphasis will be on the fabulous birdlife of these areas, including such endemics as Cape Sugarbird and African Jackass Penguin, found nowhere else in the world, we also will have ample opportunities to see numerous large and small animals along with other wildlife, and observe the colorful local people and their customs.

NAMIBIA – (post extension) September 17-25, 2000

Visit Windhoek, Ongava Game Reserve, Etosha National Park and Namib-Naukluft Park. Here you will find endless vistas across stark plains, ancient valleys, soaring peaks and the spectacular dunes of the Namib Desert, a photographer's dream. Some of the specialties we'll look for are Gray's Lark, Carp's Black Tit, Ludwig's Bustard, Ruppell's Parrot, Monteiro's Hornbill and Bare-cheeked Babbler.

EGYPT/KENYA – (main tour) November 18-December 5, 2000

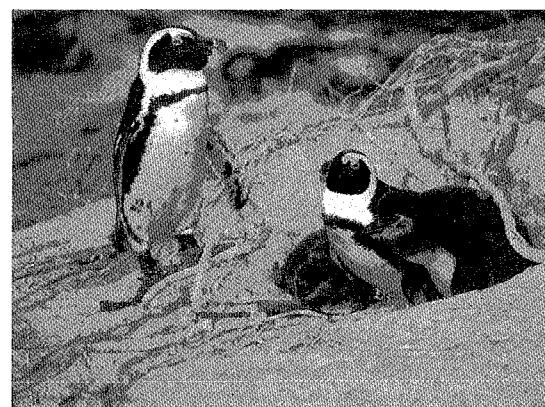
This unique trip combines birding with seeing the amazing antiquities. We will cruise down the Nile on a deluxe cruise ship, stopping to visit the various temples and ancient cities, and conclude with a safari to Kenya, exploring the heart of East Africa, its birds, big game and culture.

THE RED SEA and THE SINAI – (post extension) December 4-9, 2000

From Nairobi, return to Egypt to bird Sharm El Sheikh, visit the famous Ras Mohammed National Park where the Gulfs of Suez and Aqaba meet, and drive up into the mountains to St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mt. Sinai, where towering granite walls provide cover for Tristram's Grackles, Sinai Rosefinches and Hume's Tawny Owl.

For more information, contact:

Olga Clarke, Travel Director
2027 El Arbolita Drive
Glendale, CA 91208
Ph/fax: (818) 249-9511
e-mail: oclarketravel@earthlink.net
www.LAAudubon.org



Tiritiri Matangi - A Piece of New Zealand Restored

by John Montgomerie

My sister had told me about Tiritiri Matangi but I knew very little about the island before we took a 20 minute boat ride, with a group of school children, from Gulf Harbor just north of Auckland, New Zealand's largest city. Restoration of flora and fauna as a reality was first brought home to me on this island where I could see and hear it happening, and it was marvelous.

A lighthouse had been placed on this island in the 19th century, and like much of New Zealand, the trees had been cleared and the land used for grazing sheep and cattle. Tiritiri Matangi is approximately 196.5 hectares and lies 3.15 km from the nearest land, off the tip of the Whangaparaoa Peninsula. This sea gap is important, as none of the introduced predatory mammals in New Zealand are known to have colonized any island that far offshore. The only predatory mammal still present on Tiritiri, at the start of the restoration program, was the kiore (Polynesian) rat. There were probably cats on the island belonging to the lighthouse keepers in earlier times. However during the latter stages of the lighthouse service, there was a policy of no keepers' cats on the island stations such as Tiritiri to protect the bird life. Fortunately the Norwegian rat and the house mouse never became established.

The original plan of revegetation and translocation of birds came from John Craig and Neil Mitchell at Auckland University. Planning and execution included a collaboration of the Department of Conservation, the World Wildlife Fund (now called the Worldwide Fund for Nature), the Forest and Bird Society, but mainly a lot (thousands) of volunteers, including numerous parties of school children.

Restoration of this island started in 1980 when it was made into an open sanctuary. Only small areas of forest remained. It is a continuing story of the planting of trees (including pohutukawa, coprosma, kohekohe, cabbage trees, puriri and flax) raised in nurseries on the island, the removal of the kiore rats and the introduction of the birds, first the

Red-crowned Parakeets and later the North Island Saddleback then the Takahe. The Takahe (*Porphyrio mantelli*) is a gallinule that was rediscovered in 1948 after it was assumed to be extinct. It is a large ponderous bird, with a large bill, that looks something like an overgrown chicken. Their mating habits are written up in the quarterly newsletter of the 'Supporters of Tiritiri Matangi', a story that sounds like a soap opera: 'JJ had a fling with Kowhatu but decided he wasn't for her. She (JJ) then beat up Aroha and took over Kaitiaki'.

The list of birds introduced to Tiritiri includes: Stitchbird, Kokako, Whitehead, Little Spotted Kiwi, North Island Robin and Brown Teal. Many birds such as the Tuis and the New Zealand Bellbirds returned to the island. The island now has over 76 species of birds.

The kiore rats were not eradicated until about 1993, after many of these birds had been introduced and were breeding successfully. All of these species can coexist with kiore, but some (e.g. Saddleback, Stitchbird) cannot coexist with European rats, which fortunately never reached Tiritiri.

When we visited, Barbara Walter met us at the boat and looked after the children. Barbara and her husband, Ray, who was the last keeper of the lighthouse, have been the persons responsible for the day to day care of the island. By chance we were fortunate to join Karen Baird and John Kendrick who were guiding visitors from the Shetland Islands and Florida. As we left the boat landing on our way to the lighthouse, we saw and heard Red-crowned Parakeets, Whiteheads and Saddlebacks (that sound like a starter motor). We discovered the fragrance of cabbage trees and enjoyed the extensive flax flowers. Boardwalks in many areas protected the forest floor.

There are limited accommodations on the island and we were fortunate to be able to stay overnight. We had a chance to meet graduate students who, at the time of our visit (November 1998), were recording the nesting of North Island Robins (56 on the island), Stitchbirds (28),

Kokako (6) and Little Blue Penguins. That evening, we watched penguins moving from their boxes to the sea. It was the first time I had seen the nesting boxes close to the beach for the Little Blue Penguin.

Tim Lovgrove, who happened to be staying on the island, explained that restoration is part of New Zealand law. Ecological restoration appears in a sub-clause of the New Zealand Resource Management Act 1991, which recognizes the intrinsic values of ecosystems and the maintenance and enhancement of the quality of the environment. Tim, working for the Auckland Regional Authority, is now trying to introduce the robins to Wenderholm - another area close to Auckland on the mainland.

John Kendrick, who is an expert in New Zealand bird song, instructed us to be up at 5 A.M. for the 'dawn chorus' of Tuis and bellbirds. As I listened, I realized that this island has been restored to its pristine condition. John 'called' in the Kokako. This gangly bird, predominantly ash-gray with a black face-mask, blue wattles, long legs and limited flight, leapt from branch to branch, scrutinizing the intruders. Although they fly poorly, they are very agile on their long legs running through the branches and bounding across gaps between trees. They are very powerful melodious singers producing a rather organ-like song.

This visit provided a vision of a New Zealand, pre Maori, of a flora and fauna untouched by human hands. 'Environmental protection' and 'conservation' are only the precursors of 'restoration', which is a more exciting dream whether it is of the condors in California, the wolves in Yellowstone Park or an island in New Zealand. There are other protected offshore islands around New Zealand on which restoration of birds has taken place and there are many parts of New Zealand where it is still possible to hear the 'dawn chorus'. Tiritiri Matangi is special because it demonstrates that it is possible to restore forest and birds if the effort is made, and it has remained an open sanctuary easily accessible to visitors. Easy

FIELD TRIPS

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access, of course, provides continuing challenges, particularly at the present time, because it is very close to the venue of the America's Cup sailing.

Very little has been written about this magical place; but, recently Geoff and Lynette Moon published a book with excellent photographs, a simple story of the restoration of the island and a description of the birds: *The Singing Island*. David Bellamy, in a foreword to the book, may have summed up the restoration of Tiritiri Matangi: "The magical island points the way to put the whole world back into working order."

Information on visiting Tiritiri:

Weekends are booked two years ahead, but Thursday and Friday nights are available most of the year. The bunkhouse is well equipped with everything you need, but sleeping bags are appreciated if you have them.

The ferry departs Auckland and Gulf Harbour. In case the sea is rough it is better to drive north for about a one hour to Gulf Harbour. Booking is essential, e-mail: wendy@gulfharbourferries.co.nz

A day excursion is only \$30 from Auckland or \$25 from Gulf Harbour.

There is a very good Bed and Breakfast near Gulf Harbour – Bayview at Manly e-mail: bayviewmanly@xtra.co.nz Website: <http://babs.co.nz/bayview>

Further contacts.

e-mail: tiritrimatangifb@doc.govt.nz

Volunteers Needed in Bookstore

With the retirement of some of our long-time volunteers, the Los Angeles Audubon bookstore finds itself short of help once again and looking for new volunteers. Volunteers are especially needed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, but any help is appreciated. Volunteers will be trained: local birding knowledge is helpful but not a necessity. If you are able to volunteer, please contact Martha Balkan, Bookstore Manager at (323) 876-0202.

Saturday – Sunday, April 29-30 –
East Mojave Desert Trip with Larry Allen. We will be looking for thrashers, Juniper Titmouse, 'Woodhouse's' Scrub-Jay, Pinyon Jay and migrants. Meet at 8 A.M. in Baker at the Bun Boy coffee shop. We will be camping Saturday evening. Fee \$7, send SASE for directions and information on lodging options for Friday evening.

Saturday, May 6 – Morongo Valley with Raymond Schep. Meet in Big Morongo Canyon Preserve parking lot at 8:00 A.M. Take 10 Fwy E past Beaumont, turn N on State Rt. 62 to Morongo Valley. Turn right on East Dr. across from Rocky's Pizza. Take the first driveway left into the lot. About a 2 hr. drive from L.A. Bring fluids and lunch and anticipate heat.

Upcoming Event:

Friday – Sunday, June 30-July 1 –
Southern Sierras Trip with Bob Barnes.

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.

WESTERN TANAGER

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EVENING MEETINGS

Tuesday, March 14, 2000 Peter Knapp

Renowned photographer **Peter Knapp** will spotlight our region's most diverse and significant wetland with his slide presentation "**Bolsa Chica is More Than Birds!**" Join us and learn why thousands of terns nest at Bolsa Chica each year.

Tuesday, April 11, 2000 Call Bird Tape (323) 874-1318 for up-to-date information.

MEET AT:

West Hollywood Presbyterian Church
7350 Sunset Blvd.
(southwest corner of Sunset and Martel.)
Limited parking is available south of the church; enter from Martel.

The LAAS Bookstore will remain open until 7:30 P.M. on meeting night.

7:30 P.M. - Refreshments in the courtyard
8:00 P.M. - Program

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, March 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.

Sunday, March 12 – Whittier Narrows. Leader: **Ray Jillson**. Meet at 8:00 A.M. to view colorful resident and migrating birds, including Northern

Cardinal. Take Peck Dr. 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 to Whittier Narrows.

Sunday, March 19 – Ballona Wetlands. **Bob Shanman** will be leading this trip to our nearest wetland. Shorebird migration and early sea ducks are among the expected fare. Meet at 8:00 A.M. at the Del Rey Lagoon parking lot. Take the Marina Fwy (90W) 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.

Saturday, March 25 – Malibu Creek State Park. Join leader **Raymond Schep** to look for migrant, chaparral, riparian and still lingering wintering birds at this

choice Malibu location. Take 101 N to Las Virgenes Rd. and head West toward the ocean. Turn right at the State Park sign. \$5 parking fee. Meet 8:00 A.M. and bird until noon or 1:00 P.M.

Saturday – Sunday, April 1-2 – Owens Valley Grouse Trip with Mary Freeman. This is a road-intensive weekend and Rosy Finch, Blue and Sage grouse and raptors are expected. Limited to 20 participants. Send \$12 and SASE to LAAS for reservation and where to meet in Big Pine early Saturday.

Sunday, April 2 – Topanga State Park. Leader: **Gerry Haigh**. Meet at 8:00 A.M. See March 5 write-up.

Sunday, April 9 – Whittier Narrows. Leader: **Ray Jillson**. Meet at 8:00 A.M. See March 12 write-up.

Saturday, April 15 – Seabird Watching trip with Michael and Mike San Miguel. Read this *Western Tanager* for details.

Sunday, April 16 – Ballona Wetlands. Leader: **Bob Shanman**. Meet at 8:00 A.M. See March 19 write-up.

Saturday, April 22 – Atlaser Appreciation Day. Breeding Bird Atlas volunteers will receive details in the next issue of *Nest Notes*.

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