

WESTERN TANAGER



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Los Angeles Audubon Society



Re-discovering the Lower Arroyo Seco

by Daniel S. Cooper

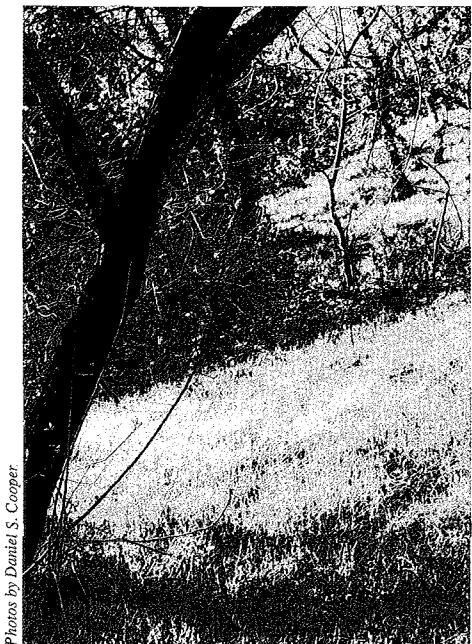
H ave you ever seen a Ringneck Snake? I hadn't until this past May, when I caught one in a reptile trap. As an Audubon biologist, I'm conducting a survey of herptiles (reptiles and amphibians) in Ernest E. Debs Regional Park, a Los Angeles city park located along the lower Arroyo Seco, a major tributary of the Los Angeles River. Straddling Highland Park, El Sereno and South Pasadena, Debs is the only big patch of open space along the Pasadena Freeway, protecting one of the several large, undeveloped hills that characterize northeast Los Angeles. National Audubon Society is currently working with the City of Los Angeles and the communities of northeast L.A. to build a

family-oriented nature center in the park, and I am coordinating the baseline ecological monitoring on the site. The herptile study is being done in conjunction with a larger effort by the United States Geological Survey to map the current distribution of these animals across southern California, with Debs Park one of the few sites in the Los Angeles Basin.

So why would Audubon care about a Ringneck Snake? For one thing, it's something of an "indicator species", characteristic of a particular habitat type. Through a process known as "ecological relaxation", patches of native habitat in urban areas tend to lose these indicator species and eventually can only support the same ubiquitous species found throughout cities.

Most birders that live in urban areas already take this for granted. Mockingbirds replace California Thrashers, starlings replace Ash-throated Flycatchers, etc. Over time, the avifauna of California's residential areas have much more in common with each other than with the diverse natural communities they replaced.

This relaxation happens in groups of organisms other than birds. For example, folks living in San Gabriel or Canoga Park (areas with virtually no native vegetation) may only ever see one or maybe two species of snake or lizard around their homes. Residents of northern Whittier or folks in the Hollywood Hills may see up to ten species, particularly in neighbor-



Photos by Daniel S. Cooper

Walnut understory in late winter.

hoods where patches of chaparral and native walnut woodland are interspersed among homes.

My job at Audubon has been one of exploring what's left in this last large parcel of open space along the Lower Arroyo Seco. Since Debs Park is the patch farthest from the San Gabriel Mountains, an Oak Titmouse dispersing out of the foothills, or a Western Toad floating down the cobblestone channel of the Arroyo, would have to travel a long distance before finding a home in the park. The capture of Ringneck Snake came as a surprise since it prefers moist, intact oak woodland in this part of its range, a habitat type now reduced to isolated patches. Apparently, the remnant amount at Debs was large enough to support this animal.

Among indicator birds, Debs supports breeding populations of Ash-throated Flycatcher, House and Bewick's wrens, Phainopepla, Lazuli Bunting and Black-headed Grosbeak – all essentially absent as nesters in L.A.'s urban sprawl. I'm only beginning to explore the invertebrate situation at Debs Park, but it appears that although some insect indicators have fared well, many conspicuous species are missing. Trapdoor spiders and Burrowing Scorpions are still in the system, while tarantulas and most native butterflies appear to be gone. In fact, I finally recorded my first butterfly not listed as a "garden" species in Rudi Mattoni's excellent guide "Butterflies of the

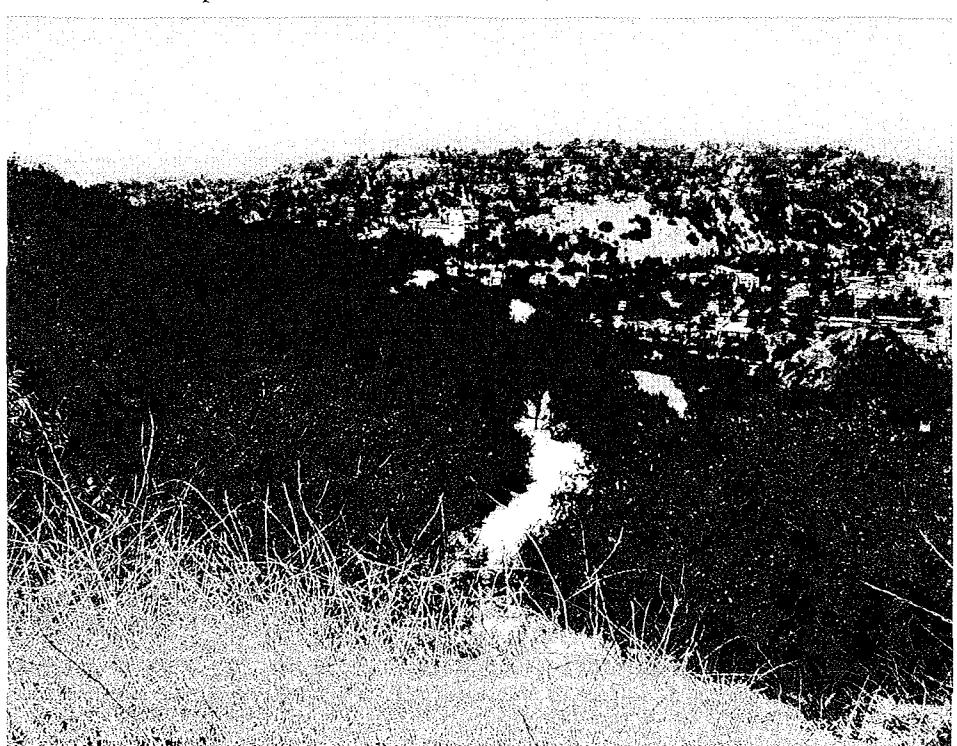
Los Angeles Basin". It was the Acmon Blue, a tiny sparkle of lavender and orange encountered in July 2000 on a high ridge on Mt. Washington.

With each surprising find, there remain silent ecological voids in the Lower Arroyo. Arboreal Salamander, fairly common in woodlands on the edges of the L.A. Basin, seems to be absent on the site, as is Western Rattlesnake. While some may rejoice at the notion of an ecosystem devoid of rattlers, it more accurately suggests an injured ecosystem. They apparently no longer occur on Mt. Washington, either. What happened to them? Were they hunted out? Killed off by feral dogs? California Quail are also gone, though long-time Highland Park residents have told me of boyhoods spent shooting quail at Debs and across the Arroyo on Mt. Washington. Greater Roadrunner also once frequented the landscape, possibly because grazing kept the woodland from dominating the hillsides. While these birds could have been "harassed" from the park by human activity, this would not explain the lack of Oak Titmouse and Hutton's Vireo, both of which occur only as non-breeding visitors, as they do over much of the urbanized sections of the Los Angeles Basin.

During the past year, I've had the opportunity to scour the Lower Arroyo in search of the nearest populations of several indicator species. From this

exploration, I hoped to gain insight into what could be expected to occur at Debs Park in the future, particularly once Audubon's planned habitat restoration commences. Oak Titmouse resides nearby – about 1.5 miles upstream, just north of where the Pasadena Freeway crosses the Arroyo. California Thrasher defends territories about 2 miles upstream, as well as (at least until recently) on Mt. Washington, less than a mile to the west. I've detected only 1 or 2 thrashers at Debs, only in early spring when in full song. Hutton's Vireo and Western Screech-Owl summer sparingly in woodland remnants in nearby residential Pasadena. I found my first screech-owl in Debs Park this past July. Hutton's Vireo has occurred in the fall and winter, and even then only singly. That leaves Orange-crowned Warbler and Pacific-slope Flycatcher, among others, to pin down.

The distribution of mammals along the Arroyo exhibits a similar pattern of biodiversity loss. Mule deer, a near-daily sight in parts of the foothills, are occasional at best along the lower Arroyo. To my knowledge, they have not been reliably reported south of "Camel's Hump" (a wide spot in the Arroyo about 3 miles upstream of Debs Park). Bobcat has been reported in the same area by workers at the riding stables at San Pascual Ave. at the Pasadena/Los Angeles border, but alas, not in Debs. Black-tailed Jackrabbit



Walnut woodland, July 2000

may not have made it along the Arroyo Seco past the mid-1900's -- has anyone seen one lately?

No one knows for sure what the habitat at Debs Park was like "originally". Based on historical photos, the unchanneled Arroyo was filled with sycamores and alders, much as it looks above the Devil's Gate Dam in northwest Pasadena. The hills that include Debs Park probably supported a mix of woodland and sage scrub/grassland, though perhaps not in the same ratios as today. A herd of sheep grazed the slopes as recently as the 1950's, so some of the woodland species that currently reside may have moved in fairly recently. A series of bird specimens from "Highland Park", mainly collected by W.B. Judson around 1900 (housed at Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology), paints a fascinating picture of this lost landscape. While a few taxa in the collection are typical of woodland, including Varied and Hermit thrushes, Golden-crowned Sparrow and Phainopepla, the bulk of the collection suggests more xeric, open habitat: Burrowing Owl, Greater Roadrunner, California Gnatcatcher, Mountain Bluebird and Vesper Sparrow. Not only are these long gone from Highland Park, the nearest they all occur regularly is the San Jacinto Valley, 80 miles to the east!

So where to proceed? Obviously, the open, rural feel of the Lower Arroyo cannot be brought back -- the Pasadena Freeway is here to stay, and houses now fill a valley where flocks of Mountain Bluebirds once spent the winter. However,

certain threats to the current biota can and should be reduced, which could allow for the colonization of lost species. For example, the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks has agreed to cease "discing" (plowing) the slopes in the interior of Debs Park. Rather than reducing the risk of fire, this practice served only to sow the seeds of exotic mustard and other flammable annual weeds. This should see an increase of native plants back into the system, allowing coastal sage scrub species to regain a foothold. A riparian restoration area has already been completed upstream, just south of the Colorado St. Bridge in Pasadena, and a similar one could be attempted on a smaller scale in an appropriate spot in Debs Park.

But most importantly, Audubon's presence means that local families will increasingly view the park as a place to enjoy a few rejuvenating hours in nature, as many already do. This is part of a long-term process of allowing the park (along with the entire Lower Arroyo Seco) to be reclaimed as a place of extraordinary and unique beauty. National Audubon Society is committed to effecting these changes, and I look forward to continuing to explore the natural world in our own backyard. ■

*Daniel S. Cooper
Biologist, National Audubon Society
The Audubon Center
6042 Monte Vista St.
Los Angeles, CA 90042*

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

by Sandy Wohlgemuth

NOTES:

ALASKA GOVERNOR DECLARIES SALMON DISASTER. As everywhere else in the Pacific Northwest, salmon numbers are dwindling. Two of Alaska's largest watersheds now show evidence of serious losses. The Governor is calling for drastic measures including prevention of accidental catches by trawlers going after other fish, drastic reductions in competing hatchery salmon, and vigorous support of studies of pollution and other possible causes of the decline.

MASSIVE EXTINCTIONS. We've been made aware of the probability that the extinction of dinosaurs 65 million years ago was caused by the collision of a huge comet with the earth in northern South America. Research recently found evidence that a gigantic explosion of great stores of methane gas trapped under the ocean floor 183 million years ago was responsible for horrendous extinctions. Scientists note that this was during a period of global warming and wonder if the methane hydrate reservoirs on the ocean floor might respond to the present warming in a similar fashion.

CHINESE CRESTED TERN LIVES. *Sterna bernsteini*, thought to be extinct since 1930, has been discovered nesting on a small island in the South China Sea. Egg poaching, pollution and habitat loss were considered the cause of the apparent extinction. The location of the island is being kept secret.

YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO STILL UNLISTED. In 1996, the tenacious Center for Biological Diversity petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the cuckoo under the Endangered Species

Act. Since then, the cottonwood-willow habitat of the bird has further deteriorated with farming, fires, cattle grazing and the spread of invasive non-native plants. The Center is filing a second petition, which will probably be opposed by ranchers, water managers and developers.

SUDDEN OAK DEATH. From Big Sur to Sonoma County, along the central coast of California, thousands of oaks are dying. Called "Sudden Oak Death" syndrome, the disease affects black oak, tan oak and coast live oak and is believed to be caused by a microscopic two-tailed swimming fungus. It is not known whether it is a native or introduced parasite that is spread by spores in contaminated soil, water or firewood.

EVOLUTION AND GLOBAL WARMING. The Great Tit in Scotland lays large eggs that hatch early in synchrony with caterpillars and other insect delicacies. Research finds that the evolutionary advantages provided by natural selection may be upset by the rapid changes produced by global warming. Changes in weather patterns may affect the availability of the food sources necessary for the survival of the young birds.

PEREGRINE TAKE? The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing that falconers may take up to 5% of wild Peregrine nestlings in 11 Western states. Before peregrines were delisted in the summer of 1999, only captive-bred birds could be taken for falconry, though a few wild birds in Alaska were permitted to be taken. Environmentalists are concerned about the wisdom of delisting.

GOOD NEWS – FOR A CHANGE. The federal government announced the creation of a horseshoe crab sanctuary at the mouth of the Delaware Bay. A vital area for migrating shorebirds that feed on the eggs of the spawning crabs, commercial fishermen are considered responsible for the alarming decline in population of the animals. Federal authorities threaten to close down the horseshoe crab industry for failing to comply with established quotas. Conservationists cheered.

GERMANY NIXES NUKES. Germany announced that it will shut down 19 of its nuclear power plants over the next 32 years. In 1998, the coalition of Social Democrats and Greens won the election and pledged to phase out nuclear energy, a daring move as 30% of the country's energy is nuclear. Perhaps other nations will consider a similar course, reducing the odds for another Chernobyl.

OLD GROWTH FORESTS GET A BREAK. Kaufman and Broad, the second largest homebuilder in the country has agreed to eliminate the use of wood from old-growth forests and turn to certified sustainable harvested wood. Home Depot recently has also discontinued selling old-growth lumber.

AUTO RATINGS. The Union of Concerned Scientists has ranked the pollution emissions of car manufacturers. Isuzu got the worst score, followed by the Big Three – Ford, General Motors and DaimlerChrysler. Shortly afterward, all three auto giants said they were planning to mass-produce hybrid electric-gas vehicles within four years. 

LAAS Bookstore News

The LAAS bookstore will be closed for the Thanksgiving holiday on Thursday, November 23 and Friday, November 24. The bookstore will be open regular hours on Saturday, November 25.

During December, for those of you who would like to visit the bookstore after work, we will be open on Thursday, December 7, 14, and 21 until 8 P.M.

Is it the *Last* Malibu Christmas Count of the Millennium or the *First*?

This is not the place to argue the point, but now that I have your attention, I can confidently assert that there *will* be a Malibu Christmas Bird Count on the 17th of December, 2000. As always, we rely on a core of long-time participants to help cover the 177 square-mile count circle, but we need new participants as well. There always are a couple of good spots not birded on count day. If you are new to birding, or just unsure of your skills, you can be teamed with experienced birders.

To explore a part of the Santa Monica Mountains on the 17th (*and* be eligible for the *prize* for best bird of the day), contact Larry Allen: (323) 221-2022 (days and evenings), e-mail: larry.w.allen@paclink.net, or drop a letter to 4791 Huntington Drive North, Los Angeles, 90032.

Give a Bird as a Holiday Gift!

Now, I know you are thinking: "Why would I want to do that?" Pet birds are noisy, messy and expensive. Right! Giving a live bird is a bad idea.

However, for (probably) less money, you can give a bird in a different fashion. That's right, only \$100 sponsors a bird species account in the forthcoming *Atlas of Breeding Birds of Los Angeles County*. Your gift recipient's name will appear as "Sponsor" in the *Atlas* on the species page. Your gift will be as immortal as acid-free paper in climate-controlled libraries can make it!

Your gift honors the recipient and helps your Los Angeles Audubon Society as well. Publishing the *Atlas* involves substantial up-front expenditures; seeking donations via Species Sponsors is one of the few ways LAAS has of defraying these expenses. As added bonuses, you will receive an *Atlas* T-shirt, *and* your donation will be tax deductible to the extent permitted by law.

There are fewer than 125 Los Angeles County breeding birds without sponsors. For a list of available birds, or additional information, call:

Larry Allen, Atlas Project Coordinator, (323) 221-2022
e-mail: larry.w.allen@paclink.net
or: Los Angeles County Breeding Bird Atlas
Natural History Museum, 900 Exposition Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90007

Please make your check payable to Los Angeles Audubon Society.

Morro Bay Winter Bird Festival 2001 – January 12-15

Co-sponsored by the Morro Coast Audubon Society, this event presents the opportunity to join birding experts as they lead more than 35 field trips in this Globally Important Bird Area. The area's 200-plus bird species include Black Brant, Sandhill Crane, Golden and Bald eagles, shearwaters, jaegers, Ferruginous Hawk, owls, Peregrine Falcon, Surfbird, turnstones, Prairie Warbler, Eurasian Widgeon and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Last year, the pelagic trip yielded a Short-tailed Albatross sighting, and not just one, but five California Condors in the Los Padres National Forest! Workshops and evening programs will emphasize improving your birding I.D. skills. This year the festival's outstanding evening programs will feature presentations by Kenn Kaufman, George Lepp and Brad Schram. For more information or a brochure, sign onto our website: www.morro-bay.net/birds or call the Morro Bay Chamber of Commerce: (800) 231-0592.



OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

I am a total desert rat at any time of the year. I find the desert to offer challenging birding for several reasons: it is quite remote and desolate, which is great for migrant/vagrant traps; the geography is amongst the most beautiful in the state; and, besides the heat and occasional high winds, the weather is almost always clear and striking. The following four locations can easily be added to an eastern desert birding trip or can be visited on the way back from Las Vegas.

China Ranch, located in extreme southeastern Inyo County, is a lush desert oasis that is loaded with desert riparian breeding specialties as well as migrants and winter visitors. The ranch, which is actually a working date palm ranch, is located a few miles east of Tecopa Hot Springs and about 50 miles north of Baker. The owners of the ranch are very friendly and ask only that birders park their vehicles in the parking lot located adjacent to the gift shop. During the winter of 1999–2000, a Northern Cardinal was seen in the parking area – so keep an eye out. A short interpretive trail starts just to the south of the shop and winds its way through some beautiful riparian vegetation. Birding can also be done from the road that borders the riparian area north through the canyon. Be sure to check the trees and grassy area around the white house near the gift shop. Just southeast of the shop, there is a large riparian bordered open space which can be very productive. This area is currently being converted into date palm grove, so ask for permission before you begin to bird. The main date palm grove may be loaded with seed-eating birds during late fall and winter and is definitely worth checking. Again, ask for permission before entering. Further up the canyon is a healthy mesquite grove that

has Verdin, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Crissal Thrasher and Lucy's Warbler (late March–August), among others. Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Yellow-billed Cuckoo (June–August), Brown-crested Flycatcher (May–early September), Bell's Vireo (spring and summer), Canyon Wren, Yellow Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat and Summer Tanager can be seen along the road above the main date palm grove in the large willows and cottonwoods. Early spring and fall migrants might include Tree, Bank and Cliff swallows, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Western Kingbird, Nashville and MacGillivray's warblers, Blue Grosbeak, Lazuli and Indigo buntings and Lark Sparrow.

Tecopa, and nearby **Grimshaw Lake**, are two more areas that can be quite fun during the late summer months through the end of fall. These two places are located just west of China Ranch and south of Shoshone, roughly 50 miles north of Baker. Grimshaw Lake is located at the north end of Tecopa and is host to American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt and Northern Harrier. During mid-August, look for exposed mud flats that can hold loads of migrant shorebirds. Birding can be done from the road and a 'scope is essential for picking out shorebirds and waterfowl. During the late summer and fall following thunderstorms, large wet areas just to the north of Grimshaw Lake can hold Western, Least and Baird's sandpipers. Solitary Sandpiper and Willet may be seen along the edges of the lake. Just south of the main RV area at Tecopa Hot Springs is a fenced in sewage pond that can also be very productive for shorebirds. The town of Tecopa has some nice stands of tamarisk that can hold lots of migrants from late August through early November.

Shoshone is located approximately eight miles north of Tecopa and can be

very productive from late August–mid November and again from early April through mid June. This small desert community, which has full facilities including a gas station, general store, restaurant and lodging, is always worth checking for migrants as well as for the occasional vagrant. Birding spots in Shoshone include the cottonwoods and the lawn next to the Crowbar restaurant. Look for sparrows on the lawn during late fall and winter and for passerines and the occasional sapsucker in the cottonwoods. Across the street from Death Valley High School, which is on the west side of Highway 127, is a large pond that may hold lots of waterfowl during late fall and winter. Also check the willows and tamarisk next to the pool, which is across the street from the RV park at the extreme north end of town.

Death Valley Junction, which is located about thirty miles north of Shoshone and about twenty-five miles east of Furnace Creek, is a very small town with basically one birding spot. Across the street from the famed Amargosa Opera House, is a small sewage pond that has produced some fabulous birds throughout the years. Everything from waterfowl to shorebirds to passerines can be found in or around the sewage pond. During late summer, Spotted and Solitary sandpipers are almost always seen near the pond, as well as migrant flycatchers, swallows and warblers. The stables just north of the Opera House are also worth checking.

These four locations in the northeastern desert are perfect examples of desert oasis birding. Although there is no guarantee that large numbers of migrants or the occasional vagrant may be present, they offer the birder more than just birds, but a chance to see beautiful terrain and experience lovely weather.

CENTRAL VALLEY BIRDING SYMPOSIUM

Held at the Radisson Hotel
Stockton, CA

November 16-19, 2000

Workshops, Field Trips,
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Speakers Include:

Kenn Kaufman

Jon Dunn

Kimball Garrett

Kevin Karlson

Debi Shearwater

Joe Morlan

For Information Contact:

Frances Oliver
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Lodi, CA 95240
(209) 369-2010

ffoliver@ucdavis.edu or
hummer52@lodinet.com

www.geocities.com/aegolius/Birdingsymposium4.html

LAAS Tours 2001

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For further information, contact:

Olga Clarke, Travel Director
Ph/Fax: (818) 249-9511
e-mail: oclarke@earthlink.net
www: travel@LAAudubon.org

Southern California Christmas Bird Counts

Saturday, December 16, 2000

Lancaster

Nick Freeman – Phone: (818) 247-6172
e-mail – mnfreeman@earthlink.net

Bishop

Chris Howard
Phone: (760) 873-7422
e-mail – choward@telis.org

Butterbredt Spring

Chuck Bragg – Phone: (310) 454-9662
e-mail – cgbragg@loop.com

Pasadena

Jon Fisher – Phone: (818) 544-5009
e-mail – Jon.L.Fisher@disney.com

Pomona Valley

Neil Gilbert – Phone: (909) 626-0334
e-mail – nrgilbert@juno.com

San Diego

Claude Edwards – Phone: (619) 563-6695

San Fernando Valley

Art Langton – Phone: (818) 887-0973

Sunday, December 17, 2000

Malibu

Larry Allen – Phone: (323) 221-2022
e-mail – larry.w.allen@paclink.net

Anza Borrego Desert

Robert Theriault – Phone: (760) 767-3312

Bakersfield

Debbie Tenzer and John Wilson
Phone – (661) 336-0283
e-mail – jcwilson@lightspeed.net

Thousand Oaks

Walter Wehtje – Phone: (805) 491-3551
e-mail – wehtje@west.net

Lone Pine

Mike Prather
Phone: (760) 876-5807
e-mail – prather@qnet.com

Monday, December 18, 2000

Lake Henshaw

Royce Riggan – Phone: (858) 233-5454

Saturday, December 23, 2000

Oceanside/Vista/Carlsbad

Dennis Wysong – Phone: (760) 754-1264

Palos Verdes

Ross Landry – (714) 525-7701
e-mail – rosscoz@earthlink.net

Sunday, December 24, 2000

Rancho Santa Fe

Robert Patton – Phone: (858) 560-0923

Saturday, December 30, 2000

Los Angeles

Mari Johnson – Phone: (818) 541-1135
e-mail – mejohns@flash.net

Escondido

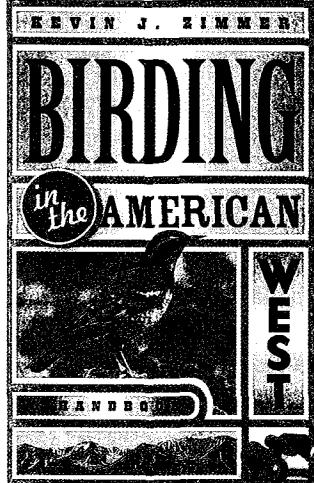
Ken Weaver – Phone: (760) 723-2448



Book Review: *Birding in the American West: a handbook*

Kevin J. Zimmer. Comstock/Cornell, 402 pp, \$25.00 through L.A. Audubon Bookstore.

Kevin Zimmer's new book, *Birding the American West* is hard to categorize. To some extent it is a bird-finding guide, but far different from O.S. Pettingill's *A Guide to Bird Finding West of the Mississippi* or the ABA series of state guides.



on how to look at a bird (shape, feathering, vocalization, behavior), directions to bird-finding resources (phone numbers for Rare Bird Alerts [RBAs] and pelagic trip sponsors), and discussion of birding techniques (importance of habitat, uses of tape recordings, birding ethics). The word "handbook" is far too modest to describe the author's accomplishment.

A fair description might be: "How and where to find each of the birds whose range is substantially restricted to the western United States, and how to identify it once you have found a candidate." The geographic area covered includes Alaska, but excludes western Canada (save for a few mentions of Vancouver Island).

The "how and where" occupy the first and last chapters respectively. Birding techniques and resources are covered in the first chapter; you may refer here for details when you see a comment in the last chapter about "the pelagic trip out of Westport" or "check the RBA."

The last chapter is "Finding the Western Specialties," and Zimmer pro-

vides directions for 280 of them. He considers a bird a "western specialty" if its normal range does *not* extend east to the Mississippi River Valley, or, if vagrant, the pattern of occurrence is essentially western. A west-coast birder might well be frustrated when looking for directions to the Mississippi Kites in Dudleyville, Arizona or Bachman's Sparrows in east Texas, since these species are excluded due to their wide distribution in the southeast. Perhaps a more appropriate subtitle for this book would be "a handbook for eastern birders," but it will still be of tremendous use to western birders wishing to find less-common species.

The purpose of the chapter is to provide specific directions to locations where one's chance of seeing a particular species is maximized. Species which are widespread and easy-to-find, such as California Gull and Black Phoebe, are (rightly, I think) not addressed. Widespread but slightly-harder-to-find birds, such as Wrentit and California Thrasher, are addressed by a discussion of range and habitat. The remaining entries attempt to offer directions to specific sites (often several per state) where each species may be encountered. It is clear that the author has visited many of these locations personally; for others he cites a published source.

The variabilities of avian distribution patterns and behavior almost mandate that directions to sites will range in helpfulness. For many species the author can be quite specific, e.g., "the levee" at Bentsen (sic) State Park for Hook-billed Kite. For other unusual species he mentions historic locations, and adds the comment "sure to be on the RBA if present." A few directions are less helpful. For example, he cites a long list of national parks for Blue Grouse; you will need a more traditional site guide to the park you visit to enhance your chance of finding this bird. In an undertaking of this magnitude, some good sites for particular species are invariably overlooked (e.g., the Crowley Lake Sage Grouse lek), and other formerly good locations (Upper Newport Bay for Black Rail) are no longer the best places to search. My overall impression of this section is that it will be very helpful in finding the targeted birds.

The second and fourth chapters

focus on identification, and to my mind are exceedingly valuable. Chapter 2 covers the basics: feather topography on shorebirds, gulls and passerines, the importance of learning molt sequences, the utility of shape and gestalt in bird identification, and a section on features in each bird family that help distinguish among its members.

Chapter 4, "Difficult Identifications: Beyond the Field Guides," at 200 pages, comprises half the book, and is a *tour de force*. The author addresses 47 sets of potentially confusing species and discusses difficulties imposed by immature plumages, effects of molt and its timing, and sub-specific variations. Readers who found Kaufman's *Advanced Birding* valuable will want to acquire this book as well, since 60 percent of the species complexes addressed here are not discussed by Kaufman.

Particularly valuable to my mind is his emphasis on structural (size, shape) features when appropriate, since these may be less variable than plumage traits cited in field guides. He also goes out of his way to caution the reader in cases where a field guide may be incorrect, but the impact of this is diluted in that he does not say *which* particular guide is in error, so without a lot of page flipping, you will not know if it is *your* guide he is referring to. Equally valuable are the (numerous) reminders to look for as many features as possible when identifying a bird, as well as the injunction to refrain from attempting an identification in circumstances where age, sex, moult, or lack of vocalization make the separation of two species impossible in the field.

My impression of the identification accounts is that the author's distinctions, from broad to minutia, are grounded in solid research. Each discussion has citations from the relevant literature for those wishing to pursue it further. I could take no exception to the author's remarks on any of the species complexes I know well. His comments on the identification of species less familiar to me were consistent with my reading on those birds. Details I felt impelled to research all proved veridical. A minor quibble is that the "Hawks" section would have been improved by comparisons of dark-phase Hook-billed Kite with Common Black Hawk (even though they are allopatric),

and also of Zone-tailed Hawk with Turkey Vulture. Useful comparisons not included are Chihuahuan and Common raven, and the Fox Sparrow complex. These objections are minor, however; I cannot recommend this section too highly.

A short middle chapter on keeping field notes is perhaps the least satisfying part of the book. While fully developing the rationale for such notes, and explicating a method he attributes to Joseph Grinnell (1877-1939), the author makes

no mention of record keeping in electronic format. A discussion of the integration of field notes with the current generation of bird-sighting databases would have been particularly helpful.

Recommendations for a future edition of this book would include the indexing of place names mentioned in the text, and the inclusion of sites for eastern species that are rare in the west. The addition of sites in western Canada would also be appreciated by many bird-

ers based in the west.

The purchaser of Zimmer's book is really getting two books in one: a compendium of the current state of knowledge regarding the most difficult identification problems facing western birders, and a handy guide to where and how to chase species missing from your year or life-list. I recommend it highly for the library you keep in your birding vehicle.

Review by Larry Allen

Recipients of the Ralph W. Schreiber Award for 2000

Los Angeles Audubon Society is very pleased to announce this year's recipients of the Ralph W. Schreiber Ornithological Research Award. Each year the Society provides support through this award for one or more research projects relevant to the biology of birds. Award recipients are limited to students, amateurs and others with limited access to major granting agencies and who reside in southern California (from San Luis Obispo, Kern and San Bernardino Counties south), or are currently enrolled in a southern California academic institution. There is no geographical restriction on the research area. Research proposals received are reviewed by members of the LAAS Grants Committee and recommendations are made to the Executive Board for funding.

This year the Society is fortunate to be able to fund four separate research projects, ranging from genetic studies to applied fieldwork, and to recipients at schools from San Luis Obispo to San Diego. We are proud and pleased to announce awards for the following projects:

To Mary S. Adams, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, \$2000 in support of her project "Genetic Variation in Temporally Separated Populations of the California Condor (*Gymnogyps californicus*)". Ms. Adams's research is aimed at providing insight to the past, present, and future of the California Condor. Her study proposes to develop a temporal perspective by analyzing genetic variation in temporally separated populations using hypervariable microsatellite loci. These markers will provide quantitative information about the amount of genetic variation in

the existing population in comparison to that of a historical population, represented by museum specimens. This information will allow for the assessment of the amount of diversity that has been lost, serve as a baseline to measure future changes in diversity, and provide insights into the genetic effects of inbreeding.

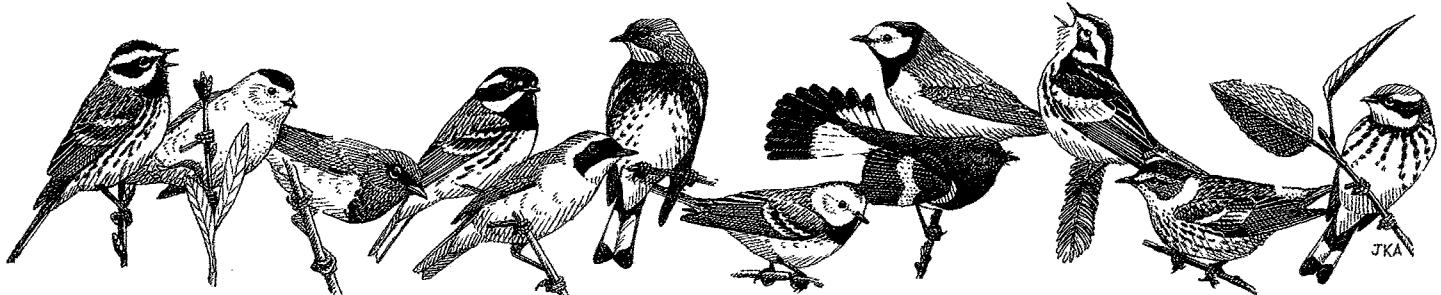
To Sharon Coe, University of California, Riverside, \$625 in support of her project "Does Water Availability Affect Reproductive Success in Desert Birds? A Test Using Water Supplementation in the Black-throated Sparrow (*Amphispiza bilineata deserticola*)". Birds that breed in hot, arid environments experience unique physiological demands resulting from efforts to maintain positive water balance when ambient temperatures are high but humidity and water availability are low. Ms. Coe's research examines whether the amount of water in the diet of desert birds during the breeding season influences their reproductive success. The results of this study are important for assessing whether the relative abundance of water in arid environments imposes limitations on populations of breeding birds, and whether the number of young produced may be reduced in years of low precipitation. No published studies have examined the direct role of water availability on bird reproduction in a field setting, despite the fact that the provision of water in structures such as troughs and guzzlers is used frequently as a wildlife management technique in the western United States.

To Bryan Sharp, San Diego State University, \$1000 in support of his project "Factors Influencing the Incidence of Brood Parasitism by Brown-headed

Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) on Least Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*)". Numbers of Least Bell's Vireos have declined with the destruction of native riparian habitat and increase of Brown-headed Cowbirds. Mr. Sharp's study will examine rates of brood parasitism on Least Bell's Vireo based on both nest concealment and the behavior of host parents. Results of the study will improve models describing brood parasitism and will provide information for the development of better management strategies for this sensitive vireo.

To Bonnie L. Peterson, San Diego State University, \$1000 for her project: "The Effects of Adjacent Land Use and Habitat Edge on Nest Predation of the Least Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*)". Nest predation is a major cause of nest failure in open nesting birds. Ms. Peterson's study focuses on an endangered subspecies, the Least Bell's Vireo, which breeds exclusively in southern willow riparian habitat. Riparian habitat is becoming increasingly fragmented and linear as human populations increase. This study examines certain aspects of this fragmented habitat to try to establish whether habitat design and mitigation efforts can decrease nest predation. Different land use types can cause fluctuations in both predators present and their abundance. The study will examine risks of nest predation in areas surrounded by various land use types, including urban development, agriculture and native landscapes, as well as nest predation as it relates to proximity to the edge of the riparian habitat.

Congratulations to our four award recipients for 2000!



BIRDS OF THE SEASON

by Kimball L. Garrett

As is often pointed out in this column, there is no time of the year in southern California when birds aren't on the move. To the non-birder, August is the middle of summer, but we know more correctly that it's a time of massive "fall" movements of shorebirds and many western landbirds. Birders who don't explore migrant traps on the desert and coast until September, when overly-coveted "vagrants" are more commonplace, are missing impressive southbound movements of flycatchers, buntings, grosbeaks, warblers, etc.

Weekly shorebird counts along the lower Los Angeles River organized by Dan Cooper have confirmed that this concrete-lined plumbing job constitutes one of the most important shorebird habitats in the region. A summer's growth of algae under the sheet of water that spans most of the channel's width has proven very attractive to shorebirds, as have the areas of mud built up by an annual growth of *Ludwigia* and other plants. This year's peak was reached on 23 August, when over 15,000 shorebirds were counted, including over 7,000 **Western Sandpipers** and over 4,000 **Black-necked Stilts**. Other counts from early August into September have been roughly in the 10,000 range. Notable birds here have been a small scattering of **Baird's** and **Pectoral sandpipers**, five juvenile **Semipalmated Sandpipers** on 16 August (Jon Dunn, Kimball Garrett), and a **Red Phalarope** on 30 August (Dan Cooper). The most productive stretches of the river have been between the 105 Freeway on the north and Willow Street on the south, though exploration by Richard Barth north to the Cudahy/Bell Gardens area shows that significant numbers of shorebirds

occur in that stretch as well. Portions of other river channels in the area can sometimes be productive as well – for example Larry Schmahl found three **Pectoral Sandpipers** along the Rio Hondo at Garvey Ave. on 4 September.

With the good numbers of shorebirds along the lower Los Angeles River, there comes disconcerting news from Los Angeles County's other prime shorebird area: Piute Ponds and adjacent Rosamond Lake on the Edwards Air Force Base. These ponds, maintained largely by treated effluent from the Lancaster Water Treatment Plant, may dry up entirely if the Department of Defense has its way. The Department is seeking approval to stop the transfer of treated water to Edwards AFB, citing impacts to its mission. Remind me to ask the Joint Chiefs of Staff someday how breeding White-faced Ibis, herons, rails, waterfowl, harriers, Snowy Plovers and Tricolored Blackbirds, along with migrant shorebirds, gulls, terns, ducks and raptors, are a threat to our national security! Stay tuned for more on this extremely important issue.

L.A. Audubon's annual long-range August pelagic trip was finally billed as a "Red-billed Tropicbird" trip this year, after multiples had been sighted on the previous three trips. This year, Mitch Heindel saved the day by finding a single bird at our farthest point from the mainland, Cherry Banks south of San Nicolas Island. Also of note were six **Black-footed Albatrosses** in that area and two **Craveri's Murrelets** near the northwest tip of Santa Catalina Island. Pelagic birding wasn't half bad from Leo Carrillo State Beach near Malibu on 12 August, with an estimated 2,500 **Pink-footed**

Shearwaters and 500 **Sooty Shearwaters** only about 1 km out (Kimball Garrett).

The **Large-billed Savannah Sparrow** returned for its third winter along the Ballona Creek Jetty on 15 August (Richard Barth). Other landbirds of note included a female-plumaged **Painted Bunting** along the Wilmington Drain near Harbor Regional Park on 2 September (Mitch Heindel), both **Virginia's** and **Black-and-white warblers** in the Hansen Dam basin in the northeast San Fernando Valley on 9 September (Kimball Garrett), and most notably a **Connecticut Warbler** at Galileo Hill Park in Kern County on 7 September (Karen Gilbert).

Among the hordes of **Nutmeg Mannikins** and groups of **Orange Bishops** that now infest many of our flood control channels and basins, increasing numbers of **Pin-tailed Whydahs** are being found (e.g. two males and several female-plumaged birds seen by Ray Jillson at Whittier Narrows on 20 August). Being brood parasites, the whydahs are perhaps parasitizing mannikins, if indeed they are reproducing in the wild. This interesting situation bears further study.

November and December bring some of the most exciting birding in coastal southern California. Well-planted parks, particularly El Dorado Park in Long Beach, but also places like Elysian Park, Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area, Bonelli Park and Harbor Regional Park, have proven to be magnets for a great diversity of late fall migrants/vagrants early and winter birds. The lerp psyllid infestations continue to affect many of our eucalyptus trees and infested trees can harbor an abundance and diversity of birds. Regular coverage of a nearby park or woodland will prove most rewarding at this exciting time of year.

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.

LAAS Christmas Counts

See page 7 for contact information.

Saturday December 16
Lancaster

Sunday December 17
Malibu (also see page 5)

Saturday December 30
Los Angeles

Sunday, November 5 –

Topanga State Park. **Gerry Haigh** will lead participants through this diverse coastal mountain area. From Ventura Blvd., take Topanga Canyon Blvd. 7 miles south, turn east 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, November 12 –

Whittier Narrows. Leader: **Ray Jillson.** Meet at 8:00 A.M. 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 west (right) and turn left into the Nature Center, 1000 Durfee Ave. \$2 donation to Whittier Narrows.

Sunday November 19 – Ballona Wetlands.

Bob Shanman will lead this trip to our nearest wetland. 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.

Sunday December 3 – Topanga State Park.

Leader **Gerry Haigh.** Meet at 8:00 A.M. See November 5 for write-up.

Saturday December 9 –

El Dorado Park Leader Ray Schep. Meet at 8:00 A.M. From 605 Fwy, exit Spring St., go W to Park entrance. From 405, exit Studebaker Rd. Go N to Spring St. Turn E on Spring St. to Park entrance. Meet at Nature Center parking lot.

Sunday, December 10 –

Newport Back Bay. Join **Mary Freeman** to look for Clapper, Sora and Virginia rails at 7:00 A.M. with a 6.62 ft. high tide. Bring a lunch. We will bird San Joaquin Marsh afterwards. Meet at "the Sharp-tailed Sparrow Spot" on the NW side of the bay. Take 405 S to Jamboree offramp. Exit west toward the ocean, then take a right on Irvine Ave. Turn left on a small street called N. University Dr. Park at the end, walk down the hill, over the bridge, and to the end of the boardwalk.

Sunday December 10 –

Whittier Narrows. Leader **Ray Jillson.** Meet at 8:00 A.M. See November 12 for write-up.

Reservation and Fee Events (Limited Participation) Policy and Procedure

Reservations will be accepted ONLY if ALL the following information is supplied:

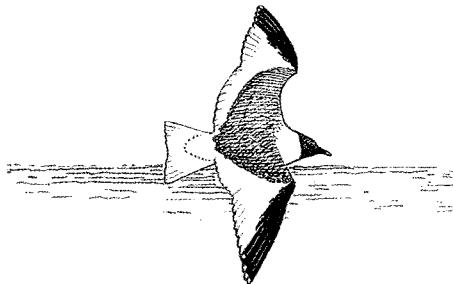
- 1) Trip desired
- 2) Names of people in your party
- 3) Phone numbers:
 - (a) usual and
 - (b) evening before event, in case of emergency cancellation
- 4) Separate check (no cash please) to LAAS for exact amount for each trip
- 5) Self-addressed stamped envelope for confirmation and associated trip 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.



PELAGICS

Sunday, November 12 –

San Pedro Channel along the coastal escarpment.

Eight hour trip departs from San Pedro at 7:30 A.M. on the R/V Vantuna. Birds seen on prior trips: Northern Fulmar, Black-vented, Sooty and Pink-footed shearwaters, Black Storm-Petrel, Pomarine Jaeger, rocky shorebirds (5), Cassin's and Rhinoceros auklets. Occasionally: Common Murre, Xantus's Murrelet, Flesh-footed and Buller's shearwaters.

Leader: Michael J. San Miguel.
\$30 – tea and coffee, no galley.

Saturday, February 17 –

Palos Verdes Escarpment to the Redondo Canyon.

Eight hour trip departs from San Pedro at 7:30 A.M. on the R/V Vantuna. Birds seen on prior trips: Northern Fulmar, Short-tailed, Black-vented, Sooty and Pink-footed shearwaters, Pomarine Jaeger, rocky shorebirds (5), Xantus's Murrelet, Cassin's and Rhinoceros auklets. Leaders: to be announced.

\$35 – tea and coffee, no galley.

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.

EVENING MEETINGS

MEETING LOCATION

The Los Angeles River Center and Gardens
570 W. Avenue 26
Los Angeles, CA 90065

Our new location is just off the 110 Freeway on Avenue 26. It is very accessible with lots of free parking. (This was formerly Lawry's California Center Restaurant.)

7:00 P.M. – Refreshments begin
7:30 P.M. – Program

Tuesday, November 14, 2000 Dan Cooper

“The Wild Side of Debs Park”

Dan Cooper is a native of the San Gabriel Valley, and has been an avid birder and nature enthusiast for most of his life. Dan is currently working full-time as a biologist for National Audubon and is involved in the planning of the new Nature Center in Debs Park.

This summer Dan launched an ecological research program in Debs Park and exciting discoveries abound. The studies focus on bird reproductive success and reptile/amphibian diversity in Debs Park. Audubon continues to investigate the role of Debs Park as a haven for plants and animals that cannot persist in the surrounding residential development. The studies will be continued in subsequent years, integrated with the education programs at the Center.

Join us to find out what they have learned, and get the latest news on the future Nature Center.

Tuesday, December 12, 2000 Dick Zembal

“Coastal Wetlands and the Light-footed Clapper Rail in Southern California.”

The Light-footed Clapper Rail is a southern California, northern Baja California wetland endemic and a critically endangered bird. Dick Zembal has monitored and studied this rail for over 20 years and he has published material on most aspects of the bird's life history. (WT, Vol. 57, No. 8.) The uniqueness of the efforts for the Clapper Rail perhaps lies in the management orientation of the studies and the hands-on involvement of the interested public.

Although this handsome rail and its bountiful habitat have been beaten up badly under human pressures, there is growing hope for major recovery. You will learn about rails, the role they and their habitat play in our southern California wildlife legacy, and hear the reasons for optimism concerning their eventual recovery.

Come join us for this informative and entertaining program.

Los Angeles Audubon Society
7377 Santa Monica Boulevard
West Hollywood, CA 90046-6694

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