

WESTERN Tanager

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A Splendidly Spooky Avian Encounter

by Robbie Lisa Freeman

Recently, at my home in Mar Vista, I began noticing some unusual sounds. As dusk fell and darkness drew its blanket across the sky, I'd hear intermittent hissing, cries, and croaking sounds. At times, the eerie sounds would increase with such intensity that I'd walk outside to listen. It seemed to be coming from the unlit alley behind our house. Was it some kind of cicada? A rare type of tree frog? Frightful spirits rising up from the dead for Halloween? One night around 11 PM, I heard a bloodcurdling shriek and felt a chill go down my spine! What was going on in Mar Vista?

I began asking neighbors, who all admitted to hearing eerie cries and croaks of unknown origin. Finally, I ran into a man who had answers. "It's a Barn Owl with babies," he said nonchalantly. "We heard them often where I grew up in Mexico." He pointed out a tall palm tree on the street behind my house. "There are babies in the top of that tree."

At first, I was skeptical. In my 30 years in Mar Vista, I had only once seen an owl in the area. Although California Audubon lists Barn Owls as "common" throughout the state, when I searched eBird for Barn Owl reports in Los Angeles, a map overlay showed the "frequency of sightings" as 0%-2% over the last 10 years.

Determined to solve the mystery, the next day I was up before dawn, standing near the foot of the palm tree, peering up into the dark fronds through binoculars. And there she was -- the most angelic-looking Barn Owl to ever haunt Mar Vista. She stared down at me from her high perch on the edge of a pruned palm frond. Her white, heart-shaped face fairly gleamed against the dark fronds. As morning broke and I was finally getting a good glimpse of her spotted white breast, tawny brown feathers, and coal black eyes, she began clambering higher into the palm ... then she vanished like a ghost.



Female Barn Owls can be identified by the speckling on the breast. Add to that the iridescent-looking spots on her wings and she almost looks as if she just was showered with confetti. | Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman.

Anxious to see owlets, I returned at dusk with two other birders to observe and shoot more photos. Neighbors walking by stopped to ask questions and began to hang around. Other neighbors came out into their front yards and set up chairs and brought snacks. Before I knew it, an animated, impromptu owl party had "irrupted", with everyone exchanging stories about the spooky shrieks that had haunted their evenings and their various sightings of the two owlets.

Over the next few days, I witnessed a veritable *abbondanza* of owls: two owlets begging in the treetop and practicing short flights, and two adults on the hunt in the dead of night. What had started as a spooky mystery ended as a joyful discovery for me and our Mar Vista neighbors.



Barn Owls are 12 to 16 inches in length and typically weigh between one and 1.5 pounds, with a wingspan of 3 to 5 feet. They can lift prey up to about 5 pounds. The white beneath the wings adds to their appearance as a ghostly apparition flying through the night skies. | Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman.

Though her head tilt makes her seem curious about us, more than likely she's just trying to get a better look. Owls have fixed eye sockets, so they must move their heads to see their surroundings. Owls can turn their necks 135 degrees in either direction, for a 270-degree total range of vision. | Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman.

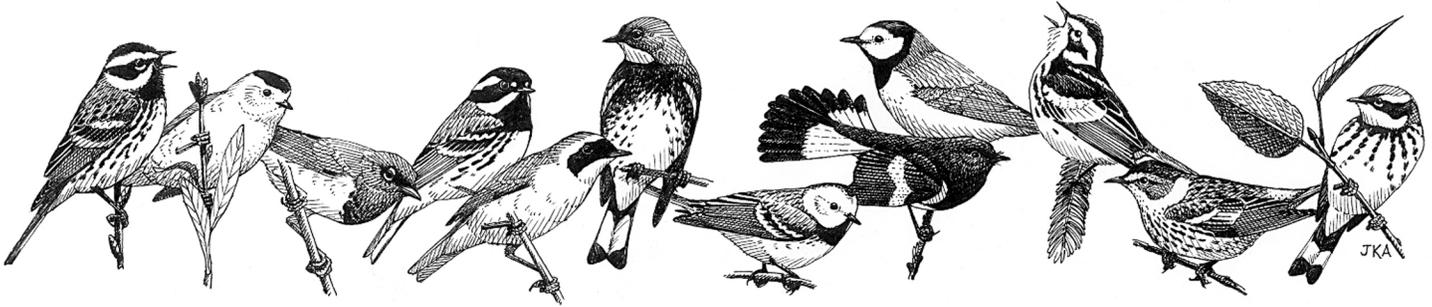
Not only do we get to see these regal spirits soaring through the skies but we get to reap other benefits. Barn owls raising a brood have been reported to catch up to 70 pounds of rodents during the breeding and feeding season. Talk about an abbondanza!

Through the weeks, we've all adjusted to the nightly backdrop of shrieking and hissing sounds that are eerily perfect for the Halloween season. In fact, I fear we'll miss these creature calls once the owlets fledge and are dispersed from their nests. Typically, owlets will begin to venture off at around 12 weeks, testing their hunting skills, and by 14 weeks, will have left the nest to find their own territories. Luckily, breeding pairs are known to return to their nest cavities year after year, which means we may be welcoming these mystical creatures back to Mar Vista next year for more "Owloween" adventures. Fingers crossed!



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Rather than flying up into the crown of the palm tree, the owl actually scampered up the side of the tree to disappear into the fronds. | Photo courtesy of Randy Freeman.



BIRDS OF THE SEASON

October 2023

by Jon Fisher

September is typically one of the warmest months in southern California, with temperatures often soaring into triple digits. This year was an anomaly however, with the final month of summer feeling more like May.

Following a wet winter and unexpectedly abundant precipitation from tropical Storm Hilary in August, fire season was almost non-existent. This was continuing welcome relief, as catastrophic fires in the county have scorched over half a million acres in the last fifteen years.

Where birds were concerned, some observers felt that fall passerine migration got off to a slow start and expected western migrants were encountered in below average numbers.

The same could not be said of vagrants however, which were at times ubiquitous- relatively speaking at least. As I've noted in the past, increasing numbers of birders are at least in part responsible for the numbers of rare birds found. By late October things had calmed considerably, though good birds were still being reported.

Well above average rainfall over much of California and dry conditions with major summer fires in western Canada may have had some effect on observed numbers of birds.

Also possible is that with so much water and verdant habitat locally, migrants don't need to concentrate in prime patches, which are the locations birders tend to go. This "patch" effect can be especially true in fall when the region is typically very dry.

The **Tundra Bean-Goose** remained at the Earvin Magic Johnson Recreation Area in Willowbrook through October 24. This bird could soon be marking its one-year anniversary in the county, having first been found in the Antelope Valley on March 6. As with the handful of other "wild" geese at local parks, it's possible this bird may never leave.

White-winged Doves are expected in small numbers in fall on the coastal slope and five were recorded during September and October.

Unusual in fall was a **Calliope Hummingbird** in La Canada on September 21 (David Bell). This species is most often observed as a spring migrant, though numbers vary from year to year.

Shorebirds of interest included an **American Oystercatcher** at the Los Angeles Harbor from September 16-19 and again on October 22, and a returning **Pacific Golden-Plover** along lower Ballona Creek from September 5-October 25 (Kevin

Lapp). The latter bird is back for at least its sixth consecutive winter.

Seven **Red Knots**, quite scarce in the county, were at the Ballona Salt Pan in Playa del Rey from September 3-6 (Andrew Birch). **Semipalmated Sandpipers** were at the Ballona Salt Pan in Playa del Rey on August 26 (Andrew Birch) and along the lower Los Angeles River in Long Beach on September 2 (Jon Fisher). Also of note was a rather late **Solitary Sandpiper** in the Sepulveda Basin from October 7-8 (Daniel Tinoco).

Seven **Craveri's Murrelets**, post-breeding birds moving north from Baja California, were in Santa Monica Bay on October 3 (Jon Feenstra) and two more were east of Santa Catalina Island on October 7 (multiple observers).

Rare except well offshore, up to three **Sabine's Gulls** were at the Piute Ponds on Edwards AFB from September 23-27 (Mickey Dyke, Sona Conlin). A **Lesser Black-backed Gull** was at the San Gabriel Coastal Basin Spreading Grounds in Pico Rivera on October 1 (Steven Kurniawidjaja).

A half dozen **Black Terns** were recorded this fall, split between the coastal slope and the Piute Ponds. Small numbers of **Common Terns** were at the Piute Ponds in September, and one was at Bonelli

Regional Park in San Dimas from September 12-25 (Keith Condon).

Rare in California waters was a **Manx Shearwater** spotted offshore above Redondo Canyon from October 12-15 (Jon Feenstra).

Red-billed Tropicbirds were off Avalon near Santa Catalina Island on October 7 (Laura Vandezande) and well east of San Clemente Island on October 13 (Naresh Satyan). A **Nazca Booby** was southwest of San Clemente Island- though still in Los Angeles County waters- on October 13 (Naresh Satyan).

An **American Bittern**, rare in the county due to a lack of suitable wetland habitat, was at the Piute Ponds on September 27 (Kimball Garrett).

Two **Cattle Egrets** were at Santa Fe Dam in Irwindale from September 30-October 4 (Omar Alui) and one was there on October 22 (Mark & Janet Scheel). Another ten were in San Pedro on October 11 (Andy Birch).

Accurate numbers are difficult to assess, but between ten and fifteen **Yellow-crowned Night-Herons** were present during the period, most in the Ballona area near Playa del Rey. Notable was one at the Piute Ponds on September 8 (William Tyrer).

A **Broad-winged Hawk** was at Creek Park in La Mirada on October 11 (Jonathan Rowley). One or two **Zone-tailed Hawks** continued in Monrovia from October 1-18 (Ron Cyger), and at least one more was at the lower Arroyo Seco from October 8-9 (Darren Dowell, Maxwell Francioni, Sofie Shen).

Woodpeckers included a **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** on Santa Catalina Island on October 21 (Mitchell Bailey) and a **Northern "Yellow-**

shafted" Flicker in the east Antelope Valley on October 18 (Joseph Dunn).

An early **Merlin** was in Juniper Hills in the south Antelope Valley on September 2 (Kimball Garrett).

Two vagrant **Myiarchus** flycatchers were found, **both very rare** in the county. A **Brown-crested Flycatcher** was at Willow Springs Park in Long Beach on October 5 (Brad Dawson) and a **Great Crested Flycatcher** was at Loyola Marymount University in Westchester from September 23-34 (Henry Chiu).

Eleven **Tropical Kingbirds** were found, while **Eastern Kingbirds** were at the Sepulveda Basin in Van Nuys from September 7-19 (Jodhan Fine) and on San Clemente Island on September 8 (Ben Stalheim).

Returning for its second winter to the Los Angeles Zoo and environs was a **Thick-billed Kingbird**, first seen on October 23 (Mario Pineda).

A **Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher** at Golden Shore in Long Beach on September 10 (Jeff Boyd) established just the fourth county record. Including a September 2020 bird, this was only the second since 1991.

A **Yellow-throated Vireo** was at Satellite Park in Cerritos on September 30 (Thomas Lopez).

Ten **Pinyon Jays** were at the Piute Ponds on September 24 (Jon Feenstra), and another was seen there on October 20 (Kimball Garrett). This is a species to watch for on the desert and in the mountains this winter.

Ten **Purple Martins** were recorded in September, with eight of those being in a single group on the Palos Verdes Peninsula on September 11

(Jonathan Nakai, Naresh Satyan).

Red-breasted Nuthatches were literally everywhere on the coastal slope as well as on the deserts. Hundreds were detected, a stunning change from last fall when only about a dozen were found during the same period. The movements of this irruptive species are typically dictated by the presence or absence of food resources.

Another irruptive species, the **Varied Thrush**, has had a poor showing thus far, with just one bird at Griffith Park from October 11-13 (Joshua Mitchell). In fact, 2014 was that last good flight year for this enigmatic species.

A **Gray Catbird** was in the east Antelope Valley through October 20, apparently having been present for over a week prior to that date (Joseph Dunn). Rare as fall migrants on the coastal slope were two **Sage Thrashers** at Pt. Vicente on October 5 (Naresh Satyan).

A **Red-throated Pipit** was heard as it flew over Santa Fe Dam in Irwindale on September 24 (David Bell), while a **Lapland Longspur** was briefly along the Los Angeles River in Long Beach on October 6 (Jeff Boyd).

Lark Buntings were found at the Sepulveda Basin in Van Nuys on September 10 (Rebecca & Henry Marschall), along Ballona Creek near Playa del Rey on September 16 (Sara Boscoe) and on San Clemente Island on October 2 (Ben Stalheim).

Clay-colored Sparrows were at Hahamongna Watershed Park in Pasadena (Darren Dowell), in Pacoima (Naresh Satyan) on October 1, at Santa Fe Dam in Irwindale on October 9 (Jon Feenstra) and in Reseda from October 19-20 (Daniel Tinoco). An early **Vesper Sparrow** was at the Ballona Wetlands on September 2 (Walter Lamb).

A **Dark-eyed "Pink-sided" Junco** was back for another winter at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas as of October 24 (Keith Condon).

Away from the mountains and deserts where they are expected, **Green-tailed Towhees** were at Skylinks Golf Course in Long Beach on September 17 (Loren Wright), at the West San Gabriel River Parkway Nature Trail in Lakewood from September 17-October 13 (Sarah Boscoe) and in Griffith Park on October 13 (Timothy Aarons).

A **Bobolink** at Santa Fe Dam in Irwindale from September 29-October 2 was the only one recorded (Van Pierszalowski).

Orchard Orioles were at Santa Fe Dam in Irwindale on September 24 (Jon Fisher) and at Two Harbors on Santa Catalina Island on October 1 (Andy Birch).

Eastern wood warblers put on a decent show, though not as spectacular as the fall of 2022. As some of our more expected vagrants, seven **Northern Waterthrushes** and eleven **Black-and-white Warblers** were found.

A nice find was a **Prothonotary Warbler** that stuck around in Silver Lake from October 6-14 (Andy Birch).

Lucy's Warblers were at Creek Park in La Mirada from September 1-October 1 (Jonathan Rowley) and in the Sepulveda Basin in Van Nuys on September 1 (Jon Fisher).

Seven **Virginia's Warblers** were reported during the period as were a dozen **Tennessee Warblers** and ten **American Redstarts**.

Another notable record was a **Cape May Warbler** at the South Coast Botanic Garden in Palos Verdes Estates from October 14-15 (Lloyd Prudhomme).

Northern Parulas were in Rancho Palos Verdes on October 1 (Tori Fay), at Bond Park in Atwater Village on October 5 (Andrew Birch) and at the Village Green Condominiums in Los Angeles on October 15 (Don Sterba). **Magnolia Warblers** were in Signal Hill from September 21-24 (Brad Dawson) and at the Piute Ponds on October 8 (Sona Conlin, Mickey Dyke).

Blackburnian Warblers were on San Clemente Island on September 7 (Kandace Glanville), in the east Antelope Valley on September 16 (Joseph Dunn) and at Jackson Lake on September 17 (Jon Fisher).

Six **Blackpoll Warblers** were found over the period, while **Chestnut-sided Warblers** were on San Clemente Island on September 6 (Kandace Glanville), at Elysian Park from September 18-October 2 (Andrew Birch), at Madrona Marsh in Torrance on September 22 (Cedric Duhalde) and at Bond Park in Atwater Village from October 5-18 (Andrew Birch).

Palm Warblers were at Santa Fe Dam on October 3 (Judy Hwa), in Silver Lake on October 6 (Mark Wilson), at Madrona Marsh in Torrance on October 19, on San Clemente Island on October 25 (Susan Meiman) and at Santa Fe Dam in Irwindale on October 27 (Van Pierszalowski).

A great find was a **Red-faced Warbler** at a residence in Palos Verdes on September 7 (Tori Fay). Remarkably a **Canada Warbler** was at the same productive location on September 9.

Painted Redstarts included a returning bird in Brentwood seen from October 11-14 (Mark Harris) and one at Hopkins Wilderness Park in Redondo Beach from October 13-14 (Mark Rubke).

Expected in small numbers in fall and winter, over a dozen **Summer**

Tanagers were found over the period.

In addition to two found in August, **Painted Buntings** were in Manhattan Beach on September 7 (Michele Reniche), at White Point Nature Preserve in San Pedro on September 15 (Brian Daniels) and at Ken Malloy Harbor Regional Park in Harbor City on September 24 (Johnny Ivanov).

Dickcissels were in the Sepulveda Basin in Van Nuys on September 18 (Dan Stoebel), at Santa Fe Dam in Irwindale on September 22 (Jon Feenstra), in Gardena on October 7 (Teresa Palos) and in Avalon on Santa Catalina Island from October 21-24 (Andy Birch).

The potential for late and lingering migrants and vagrants will continue through December and beyond. Climate change has not only induced the range expansion of warm weather species such as Yellow-crowned Night-Herons and Neotropical Cormorants, but it has created ever more attractive environments for migrant passerines that would normally winter well to our south.

Southbound waterfowl will continue to move into the area and wintering passerines are already present in good numbers. Though songbird migration may be over, southern California offers great birding at any time of the year.

A relatively strong El Niño pattern is in place over the Pacific Ocean, which could mean precipitation will be below to well above average locally. However, the odds favor a wetter than normal winter, for the second consecutive year. As it did last year, this could result in plenty of productive habitat for birds through the spring and into summer. 

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