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Adventures in Ecuador

On the Trail of
Endemics,
Eco-Heroes, and a
Taste of Eden

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Great Egret on the Ballona Wetlands during the rainy season. Story on page 11. Photo courtesy of Jonathan Coffin



Los Angeles Audubon Society
P.O. Box 411301
Los Angeles, CA 90041-8301
www.laaudubon.org
(323) 876-0202
LAAS@laaudubon.org

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Education — Margot Griswold
mgriswold@natureexusinstitute.org

Rare Bird Alert — Jon Fisher JonF60@hotmail.com

Scientific Advisor — Kimball Garrett kgarrett@nhm.org

Staff — Susan Castor membership@laaudubon.org

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Editor — Linda Oberholtzer editorwtanager@gmail.com

Layout — Susan Castor susancastor@laaudubon.org

On the Cover

About 45 minutes from Quito on the western slopes of Volcano Pichincha lies Yanacocha reserve, situated at 10,500+ feet in elevation. This high-altitude cloud forest is home to 120+ species of birds and serves to protect the habitat for globally endangered and threatened bird species such as the Black-breasted Puffleg, Andean Condor, Imperial Snipe, and Giant Conebill. Photo courtesy of Randy Freeman.

Adventures in Ecuador—On the Trail of Endemics, Eco-Heroes, and a Taste of Eden

by Robbie Lisa Freeman

Not long ago, I travelled to Ecuador on a mythic quest to see as much of the country, its natural wonders, and its 1,600+ species of birds as possible over a 28-day trip. In short, to find my Shangri-La, my Utopia, my Garden of Eden!

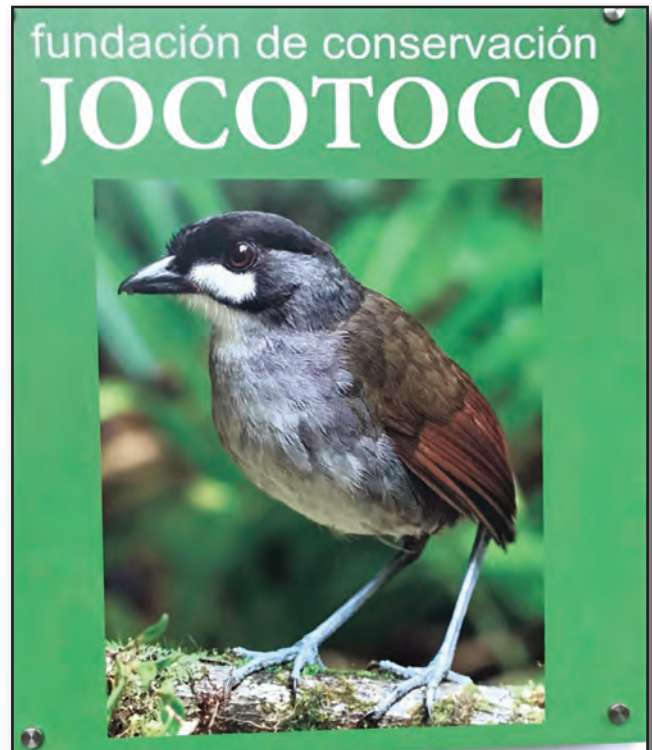
But where to start? Although the country is only about the size of Colorado, it's ranked as one of the most important biodiversity hotspots on the planet, with a plethora of prime birding regions: Along its eastern border lies the vast and lush Amazon Rainforest; bisecting the country is the towering Andean Mountain Range, with its verdant cloud forests; and to the west is the Pacific Coastal Region, home to tropical forests and other significant ecosystems. As if that's not enough, the iconic and mysterious Galapagos Islands lie 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador. With so many diverse and complex biomes, it's no wonder 23,000+ taxonomic species of animals and plants are found here. That's more than 6 percent of species worldwide! And it's

no wonder I'd felt challenged to map out the perfect trip that would maximize my adventures, bird life list, and insights into what makes this tiny country a paradise to so many people.

After a day of exploring and acclimating to the 9,350-foot altitude in Quito, the second highest capital city in the world, I was excited to do some serious birding. I was in luck. Just over an hour northwest of Quito lies an important birding area: Yanacocha Biological Reserve. Yanacocha is known for protecting the Black-breasted Puffleg, a critically endangered hummingbird with a very limited range of distribution — and with only about 250 individuals left in the wild. What a thrill it would be to see one! But the reserve also plays an important role in protecting habitat for other globally threatened birds, including the Andean Condor, Imperial Snipe, and Giant Conebill. With 120 species of birds on the Yanacocha bird checklist, it seemed like a fine place to kick off my Ecuador birding adventures. But first I had to get there!



The critically endangered Black-breasted Puffleg, for which Yanacocha reserve was founded, is rarely seen by visitors, as only 19 individual birds have been found in the area, with only one registered in the last bird count. But with continued protection, it's hoped those numbers will increase. Photo courtesy of Patricio Mena.



Since 1998, Fundación Jocotoco has preserved 15 land parcels totaling more than 74,000 acres across Ecuador, protecting more than 900 species of birds. Of those, 50 are critically endangered or critically threatened, and 100 are endemic to Ecuador. Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman, courtesy of Fundación Jocotoco.

When I googled Yanacocha for an address, a map popped up listing its location: VCQ8+832, *Unnamed Road*, Quito.... Hmm. I typically favor roads *with* names. Equally concerning was the map view of the road: Its perfectly straight line near Quito soon morphed into a tangle of twists, hairpin turns, zigs, zags, crooks, curls, and other squiggles as it headed up to a high-altitude cloud forest on the slopes of the Pichincha Volcano. Getting there had seemed like a daunting challenge for my second day in Ecuador, so I was thrilled when Verónica Enríquez-Ruiz, program director and legal representative at Fundación Jocotoco, offered to take me under her wing to not only see some striking birds of the reserve, but to get a glimpse into some of the important conservation efforts happening at the foundation's Yanacocha Biological Reserve and across Ecuador.

The next morning, I found myself piling into a large van at Fundación Jocotoco headquarters in the La Floresta district of Quito with Verónica and an entourage of her associates: destination Yanacocha reserve. As our driver traversed farther from the city and pavement gave way to rough, rutted roads, I was happy to be in a sturdy, high-profile vehicle accompanied by this team of eco-heroes. Deep, muddy potholes did their best to ensnare us, but our experienced driver eluded the worst of them.

Along the way, Verónica filled me in on Yanacocha reserve. Acquired in 2001 with the goal of protecting the Black-breasted Puffleg, the reserve had been expanded through the years to roughly 2,668 acres of high Andean Forest, Elfin Forest, and paramo (plateaus above the forest line).

"We constructed eight trails, an interpretation center, restaurant, and some feeding stations," she said. "Reforestation to further increase habitat has been a big goal. Our current project is focused on planting native tree species like *Polylepis pauta*, which is one of the most critically threatened tree species in the world. Six thousand *Polylepis* trees were planted by our field team already; Our goal is to plant 10,000 trees overall. The *Polylepis* forest is an important ecosystem for many bird species. For example, the rare Giant Conebill exclusively lives in this kind of high-elevation forest."

But it's not just birds that the reserve protects. Mammals found at Yanacocha include the Spectacled Bear, Andean Wolf, Western Andean Coati, Red Brocket Deer, and even the Puma. As we neared the reserve, I glanced out at miles of cleared farmland on one side of the dirt road, imagining it had once been precious forest and home to these magical and increasingly rare species.



The Sapphire-vented Puffleg is a large green hummingbird with a blue undertail, blue forehead, and fluffy, white leg cuffs that resemble cotton balls. Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman.



The main trail of Yanacocha Biological Reserve leads visitors to the beautiful Jardín de Colibrís, or Hummingbird Garden, where birders can delight in observing roughly 20 species of hummingbirds, including the female Great Sapphirewing depicted here.

After arriving at Yanacocha in a light rain, we set out along a path to the reserve's Café del Zamarrito, named for the Black-breasted Puffleg (Zamarrito Pechinegro in Spanish), where we were treated to a delightful breakfast of empanadas and hot chocolate. The timing was perfect. The rain had dissipated while we ate, allowing us to begin our trek in relative dryness.

The main trail of the reserve is the short 1.4-mile Inca Trocha trail. I appreciated the relative flatness of the trail, given the altitude. Along the path, we stopped occasionally to glimpse down into a wide valley of dense, verdant forest shrouded in clouds and fog. Exotic bromeliads, orchids, fuchsias, and other flowering plants punctuated the mist in bright bursts of oranges, reds, and yellows. Gigantic leaves as large as my body seemed from another time. Then, the path opened up to the Jardín de Colibrís, or Hummingbird Garden, where dozens of bejeweled hummers dazzled us as they hovered, darted, and danced around bright sugar feeders, and large colorful birds flashed through the tree-tops, whistling, singing and chirping. Eden found!

I excitedly set up my tripod and camera to capture the scene as hummers zoomed past my ears, vibrating with the enormous energy of roughly 70 wing beats per second (4,000 per minute!) Our watchful guide and Yanacocha Park Ranger Manager Luis Hipo kept us busy, pointing out some of the birds: Sapphire-vented Pufflegs, Great Sapphire-wings, Buff-winged Starfrontlets, and Shining Sunbeams. The names alone evoked exotica! I was thrilled to see my

first puff-legged hummingbird, distinguished by their fluffy white "cuffs" around the leg.

The hummingbirds weren't the only visitors. Luis pointed out our first Ecuadorian tanager, a Blue-capped Tanager. A larger red flash caught my eye as a Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager touched down on a branch. A blue and bright yellow beauty approached: the Hooded Mountain Tanager. Glossy Flowerpiercers in mostly black plumage were a sharp contrast to the deep sapphire blue colors of the Masked Flowerpiercer, whose red eyes gleamed from its black mask.

Bird after bird appeared as we basked in delight. 40 minutes and 400 pictures later, our guides urged us on to another hummingbird garden, where we lingered, enjoying the sheer numbers and colors of birds, the diversity of flowers and foliage, and the mysterious, misty beauty of the cloud forest.

Verónica soon challenged us to a steeper path — the Andean Snipe Trail — to view birds at a banana feeding area. At the higher elevation, this station drew different birds. A Rufus-naped Brush-finch, with its cap of rusty



Buff-winged Starfrontlets primarily inhabit cloud forests, elfin forests, and nearby surrounds. Their key ID feature is the buffy wing patch. Males have a purple throat patch, while females have a buffy throat. Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman.




One of the world's largest hummingbirds, the Great Sapphirewing can be found in the high-altitude forests along the western mountains from Columbia and Ecuador down to Bolivia. Males have long, gorgeous sapphire-blue wings that shimmer in the light during flight. Females have greenish plumage with a brownish-cinnamon throat and breast. Photo courtesy of Randy Freeman.

brown, crept up to the banana, then indulged with delight. A flash of bright yellow produced an Orange-bellied Euphonia. This beauty has a bright yellow cap, dark blue neck and back, and a bright yellow or orange belly. At one point a Golden-rumped Euphonia made an exciting entrance, showing off its colors. What distinguishes this euphonia is its electric blue crown and nape, contrasting with a dark blue mask, throat, and back, and a bright yellow or orange belly. When it flew, I could see its other distinguishing feature: a yellow rump. As we were thinking of moving along, a Black-capped Tanager pounced onto the feeder log. This Andean species sported an aqua blue throat, topped by a black cap and nape, and overall streaked blue-grey plumage. I was hoping to spy a female – with its characteristic lime green plumage and pale bluish head and breast – but the bachelor remained solo.

Verónica cajoled us to continue up the slope with promises of snipes, conebills, or antpittas, but the path ahead was steep – and though my heart was in it, my lungs were laboring, and my limbs felt lumbering. The altitude of the Andean Snipe Trail can reach 11,485 feet, making it a challenge for even the fittest of folks who are not properly acclimatized. We were at a turning point

and Verónica wisely made the decision for us to turn back. I made a mental note: more acclimatization = greater birding success.

Back at the hummingbird area, we gave ourselves one last shot at seeing the Black-breasted Puffleg. We clicked off more pictures, but none captured this critically endangered bird. For now, the elusive puffleg would remain on our wish list.

But Yanacocha still had some surprises in store for us. As we headed back, loud thrashing in a far-off shrub caught our attention, followed by a plaintive, waddling call. Tucked into the foliage, I could make out a large, turkey-shaped body and reddish legs! An Andean Guan. Not even close to a Black-breasted Puffleg – but a lifer for my list just the same. 

To visit Yanacocha Reserve Monday through Friday, or to visit the restaurant for food, you must book reservations in advance. Call +593 997856954 or email ventas2@jocotoursecuador.com. No reservations required on weekends and holidays. Business hours: 7 am – 3 pm (last entry at 11:30 am) Entry fee: \$15 foreign/\$5 nationals.



The Scarlet-bellied Mountain Tanager is a standout in the forest, for obvious reasons: the bright red belly and cheek plumage instantly attract the eye. The electric blue wing epaulets are an extra feature that further distinguishes them. Fairly widespread in South America, they can be seen from the western fringes of Venezuela down to Bolivia. Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman.



Glossy Flowerpiercers feed on the nectar deep within many flowers by piercing the base with their upturned, silvery-gray, hooked beaks. Found at high altitudes, this small tanager is predominantly glossy black, with tiny, pale blueish patches on the shoulders. Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman.



One of the most striking tanagers of the high-altitude forests, the Masked Flowerpiercer has the characteristic hooked beak for feeding, a black mask and bright reddish eyes, and sapphire-blue overall plumage. Photo courtesy of Randy Freeman.



This immature female Orange-bellied Euphonia doesn't quite have the pizzazz of its male counterpart, which sports a bright yellow cap and underparts contrasted against a blueish-black mask, throat, and back. Regardless, we were delighted to see her enjoying a banana. Photo courtesy of Randy Freeman.



Along the higher-altitude Andean Snipe Trail at Yanacocha reserve, several Rufous-naped Brushfinches enjoyed a treat of banana. This bird has a striking cinnamon-colored crown and nape, contrasting with bright yellow underparts against primarily black overall plumage. Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman.



Fairly common throughout Ecuador, the Andean Guan roosts in tall trees or thick shrubs, making them difficult to spot for novices. Fortunately, its loud, repetitive clucking call helps in discovery. Other characteristics include a red dewlap, reddish legs, and reddish eyes. White edging on the breast feathers creates a handsome chevroned pattern. Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman.



Logo courtesy of Fundación Jocotoco.

Fundación Jocotoco: Championing Preservation through Private Reserves

by Robbie Lisa Freeman

Yanacocha reserve is just one of 15 Ecuadorian reserves established by Fundación Jocotoco over the last 20+ years. Each preserve protects critically endangered or threatened birds, animals, and plants. During my recent visit with Verónica Enríquez-Ruiz, program director and legal representative at Fundación Jocotoco, she shared some of the history and goals of the organization.

Fundación Jocotoco was launched in 1998 to protect a rare and endangered bird — the Jocotoco Antpitta or “*Grallaria ridgelyi*,” named after Dr. Robert Ridgely, an ornithologist and conservationist who discovered the bird in 1997 in the southern Ecuadorian province of Zamora Chinchipe. Ridgely, a proponent of private reserves as a species conservation strategy, helped guide the establishment of Fundación Jocotoco to conserve the bamboo and wet montane forests along the slopes of Cerro Tapichalaca in the eastern Andes. Working with the American Bird Conservancy (ABC) and the Ecuadorian government, in just ten months following the sighting, Fundación Jocotoco was founded and the Tapichalaca reserve created to protect the forest. Today, almost the entire known population of the Jocotoco Antpitta is protected on the 9,699-acre reserve, along with ten other endangered bird species.

Since then, Ridgely, the Jocotoco team, and a cross section of other dedicated conservationists and communities have worked to acquire and establish 15 reserves across Ecuador comprising more than 74,000 protected acres (30,000 hectares) of varying types, from tropical rainforests and cloud forests, to the

treeless plateaus above the mountain tree lines.

“Since 1998, Jocotoco has worked to protect more than 900 species of birds, of which more than 50 are critically endangered or critically threatened with global extinction,” says Verónica. “And more than 100 species are endemic to areas of Ecuador. What’s unique is that we’ve been able to expand and connect some of our reserves by purchasing contiguous properties to create corridors that allow for greater species cross-pollination and survival. For example, one of the newest reserves, Antisana reserve, connects with Chakana, a critical roosting site for endangered condors. That provides thousands of protected acres for the Andean Condor, Peregrine Falcon, caracaras, as well as other endangered or protected species like the Spectacled Bear and Puma.”

The remarkable expansion of the Fundación’s reserves has come about through many efforts, including organized and ongoing fundraising, ecotourism, grants, and through the support of larger conservation organizations like the ABC.

“ABC is one of our biggest partners, providing financial and technical support to manage Tapichalaca,” says Verónica. “These kinds of large supporting organizations are critical. But many of them are not Ecuadorian-based organizations, so it’s also important to grow our local supporters by working with communities and local agencies. In some cases where we cannot outright acquire a property for conservation, we work closely with communities to acquire the rights to the land. This allows us to establish a reserve, but keeps the deed in the hands of the community.”

But establishing reserves is not the foundation’s only job. “We’re working to educate more people that conservation has a cost,” says Verónica. “For each new reserve, we need park guards, drones, environmental services, and other strategies to help protect the reserve and its species. Reserves may need a visitor center, walking trails, or even reforestation.”

One of the reserves Verónica is most proud of is Reserva Buenventura, in El Oro province. “This has been one of the most devastated regions in Ecuador, with only about 10% of its original forest remaining. Mining and logging were two of the biggest threats,” says Verónica. “When we purchased the land, it had very few trees. Most of the forests had been cleared

for cows and grazing.” The Buenventura area was first deemed significant back in 1980 when Dr. Ridgely discovered the El Oro Parakeet roosting there. But the area now protects far more species than the parakeet. Through substantial reforestation and protection of a cloud forest, 330 species of birds, including 15 endangered species and 34 endemics, are protected. In fact, the Red-listed Ecuadorian Tapaculo, discovered here in 1985, has not been found in any other location in the world.

The foundation not only protects existing birds in a region, but has participated in reintroductions of birds to key areas. “In the Ayampe reserve, created to protect the critically endangered Esmeraldas Woodstar Hummingbird along the western Ecuadorian coast, we also became involved in the reintroduction of the Great Green Macaws,” Verónica explained. “These birds had been highly trafficked, with people capturing them for the pet trade, and many had ended up in a local rescue center. The center gave us those birds for a reintroduction effort at Ayampe. We helped them learn to fly again and readapted them to the wild, then released them at Ayampe. What was interesting was the birds ended up relocating themselves to our Las Balsas reserve a few hours south of Ayampe, where there were trees and other habitat better suited to their roosting needs.” The program has been successful, she adds. Since the original releases of 22 macaws, the reserve’s monitors have found several nests – a key step in any successful reintroduction.

In addition to working with large organizations, the Ecuadorian government, and the national park system, the foundation partners with other local organizations. “There are many locals that are driving sustainable businesses or have more of a connection to the land, like many of the small chocolate and coffee producers in Ecuador,” says Verónica. “Those kinds of partnerships are very important.”

Education about the land and nature is also key, especially in the smaller, rural communities where people are close to the land. “We want to educate the young children and teens so that they can become the conservation heroes of tomorrow, protecting the land where they were born,” says Verónica.

So, what’s next for the Fundación Jocotoco portfolio of reserves? There are no more planned acquisitions for now, says Verónica, but there are ongoing

expansions of existing reserves. “Our Canandé reserve, purchased in 2000 and comprising an area of 20,974 acres, is undergoing an expansion, and that alone is like having three new reserves,” she explains. “And three years ago, we created two reserves at the same time — Cerro de Arcos, in the Loja province down south, and Las Balsas reserve in the Santa Elena province. Those were our last acquisitions for a while, I think.” She gives me a wry smile, knowing perhaps that all could change with the discovery of one tiny new bird. After all, it was the 2017 discovery of the Blue-throated Hillstar that started a chain reaction leading to the rapid 2020 creation of the Cerro de Arcos. The hillstar is now known as one of the rarest hummingbirds in the world, with an estimated population of only 250 to 750 individuals – protected now... and hopefully for the future.

“I always say that working in conservation is an act of faith,” adds Verónica. “Change may not happen as quickly as you hope, but you have faith that if you plant the seeds, it will happen later.”

To learn more about the many birds being protected through the efforts of Fundación Jocotoco, visit <https://www.jocotoco.org.ec/wb#/EN/Reservas> and follow them on social media at @fundacion.jocotoco, on Instagram at fundacion.jocotoco, and on Twitter @jocotoco_org. 🐦

Robbie Lisa Freeman is a public relations professional in the health and fitness industry and an avid birder, traveler, photographer, travel writer, and contributing writer for Western Tanager newsletter and other publications. Follow her on Instagram @freebird2020lf.



Jocotoco Team with author Lisa Freeman (second from left).



CONSERVATION CONVERSATION

by Travis Longcore

CEQA Protects Birds

California's bedrock environmental law, the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), is always under attack, but the attacks have gotten worse of late, from both purportedly "progressive" anti-zoning advocates and the traditionally profit-driven construction and development industry. The current venue is the Little Hoover Commission, an independent State of California agency tasked with investigating and making recommendations to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and economy of California state government. In recent hearings the building industry has painted a picture of CEQA throwing the state into disarray and standing in the way of needed progress. In our view, CEQA works, and, if anything, it is not strong enough; the Little Hoover Commission should reject calls to further weaken it.

First, CEQA protects fundamental rights of people to participate in environmental protection when all else fails. It mandates public disclosure and the rights of people to appeal the decisions of elected officials and quite frankly that is sometimes necessary. It is especially necessary when monied interests, or the State itself, push forward projects that are not in the public interest. CEQA lets the people have their say through the public participation process that is required.

Second, CEQA is not the reason for unaffordable housing in California, as pro-development assert. Take the City of Los Angeles as an example, and some statistics published by environmental attorney Jamie Hall. During 2022 the City of Los Angeles exempted over 99.67% of all housing development from any review under CEQA at all. They conducted only 29 environmental reviews for a City of over 500 square miles. California as a whole has experienced multiple building boom and bust cycles since CEQA was made law, and those were on the fault of the law, but underlying economic conditions. More exemptions than ever are available to build in California; more are not needed.

Third, CEQA litigation is extremely rare and does not by itself stop projects. We see litigation in egregious cases, often in cases where elected officials or bureaucracies ignored impacts on communities and the environment to push forward projects that served their own purposes but not the public's. Even if a CEQA suit is won, the project is not stopped, but delayed until the correct environmental disclosures and considerations can be made. CEQA does require that significant adverse impacts on the environment be mitigated, that less damaging alternatives to projects be chosen when available, and that this analysis be done before a project is approved. It is not too much to ask, and a strong CEQA is critical for bird conservation.

Regulate Pesticide Seeds

Current California law, for some reason, does not clearly give the California Department of Pesticide Regulation (CDPR) the authority to regulate pesticide-treated seeds, even though such seeds are impregnated with the very pesticides that this department normally regulates.

Pesticide-coated seeds are astoundingly dangerous. A single seed can kill a songbird. It has enough active ingredient to kill 80,000 insects. And 95% of the coatings escape into the environment, persisting in the soil and killing local wildlife. They travel in the environment, killing invertebrates that would normally support local bird conservation. They are very, very bad for birds.

A study of Los Angeles County by the CDPR found that 93% of urban water samples had seed-coating pesticides that exceeded the thresholds for harm to aquatic ecosystems.

California Assemblymember Alex Lee has introduced a bill (AB 1042) that would clarify that CDPR has the authority to regulate pesticide-coated seeds just like all other pesticides. That is a good idea and deserves the support of bird conservationists everywhere.

Rain Illustrates How Ballona Habitats Work

The Ballona Wetlands are one of our most important local bird habitats. They are, in fact, identified as an Important Bird Area by National Audubon. The State of California has developed and is attempting to implement a project that they call a “restoration” that would remove the levees along the Ballona Flood Control Channel to create a “meander” in the channel that never existed and to dig a series of saltwater canals into areas that never had them either. We oppose the plan, because it is based on an incorrect understanding of how the Ballona Wetlands function ecologically. In short, the wetland areas in question were historically flooded, not by daily tides from the ocean, but by freshwater rain runoff in the wintertime. Because of this, during drought periods they are drier, leaving the ill-informed to believe that they do not have a water source (even though the high water table keeps the pickleweed vegetation healthy). But during wet years, their role as seasonally flooded freshwater wetlands is obvious to see.

The Department of Fish and Wildlife does not yet have permission from the US Army Corps of Engineers, because the State neglected to plan for the right amount of stormwater runoff that comes down the Ballona Flood Control Channel

that they want to move. As a result of that mistake, they cannot go forward with that part of the project at this point. Instead, they are trying to move forward with construction of canals to bring tidal water into the area south of Jefferson Boulevard outside of the freshwater marsh that Playa Vista constructed. This area is, however, already a freshwater seasonal wetland, and is in no need of saltwater canals to introduce water.

A new tool developed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service to track wetlands important to migratory shorebirds provides near real-time monitoring of this type of shallow wetland so loved by wading birds (Figure 1). It shows that the whole area subject to the State’s dimwitted canal-building plan was, during the month of March 2023, a shallow wetland with emergent vegetation. That is primo bird habitat. Cutting canals into it will reduce this function by draining it faster after rains, and lowering the water table as well, harming the native pickleweed that is thriving there now. It makes no sense, but the process appears to have been driven by out-of-town consultants with little knowledge of the history and current function of the site, so we are left in a position of having to continue to advocate against the project and asking our elected officials to listen. 🐦

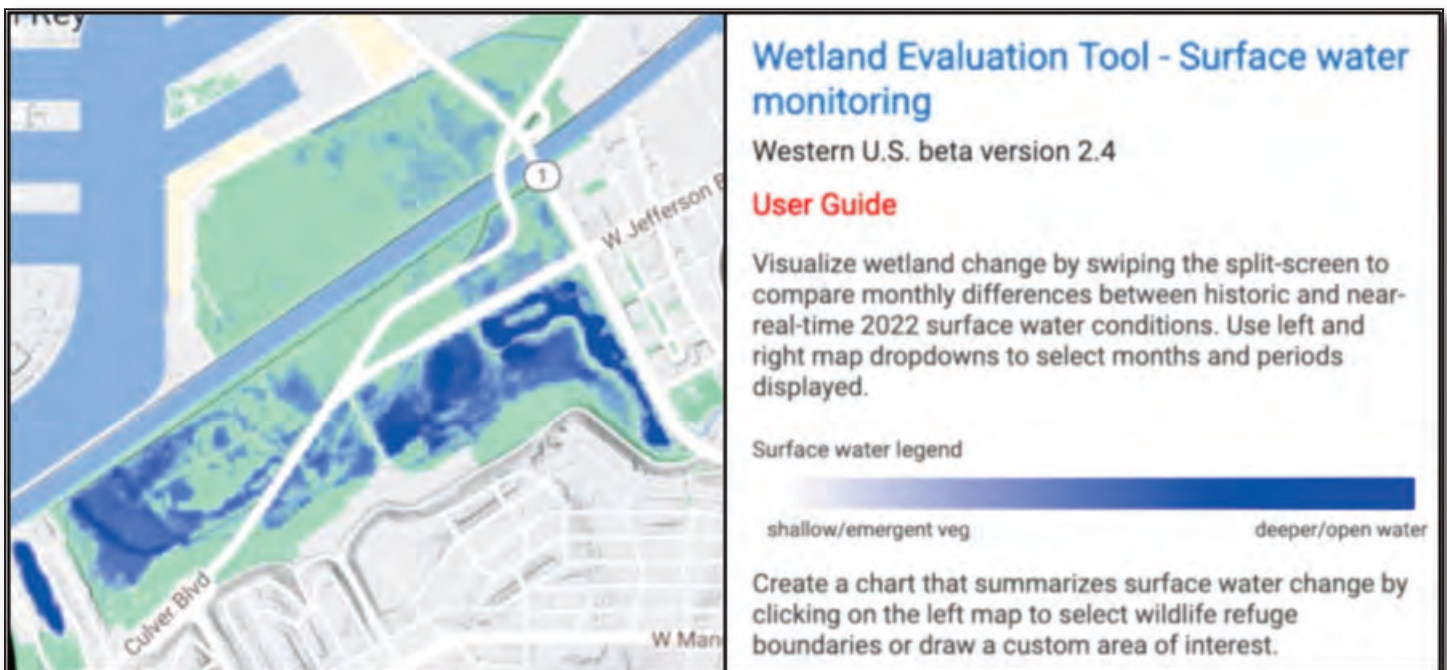


Figure 1. US Fish and Wildlife Service Wetland Evaluation Tool for surface water monitoring, showing surface water during March 2023.



BIRDS OF THE SEASON

by Jon Fisher

The remarkable wet winter of 2022-2023 continued, surpassing most annual precipitation records. The abundance of rain lifted ninety percent of California out of a persistent two-decade long drought. This year resident and migrant birds enjoyed a lush and bountiful landscape. As a bonus, forecasts predict El Niño conditions for the coming year, which suggests above average rainfall for a second consecutive winter.

Spring passerine migration really got underway in March when a number of expected early arrivals were recorded. Numbers can be expected to peak near the end of April, but many birds will be passing through for weeks to follow.

Increased coverage of the northwest county and continuing surveys at Bear Divide near Santa Clarita continued to provide insight into timing and abundance of birds in the county. The numbers of birds recorded passing through these areas have been surprising and occasionally stunning.

On April 17 over 20,000 birds were recorded at Bear Divide, virtually all of them migrants. April 21 was a numerically similar day near the Tejon Pass. Significant movements at both locations seem to be both predictable and unpredictable, demonstrating how much there still is to learn about what constitutes favorable conditions. The Bear Divide count has its own website-BearDivide.org- where much interesting data can be viewed. eBird is another

great resource for seeing what is happening bird-wise in this and other parts of the county.

In March and April, numerous wintering rarities continued and some new birds were discovered. As is typical during this period, the number of reported vagrants noticeably declined. By this time of year most wintering rarities have already been discovered or already departed, and the generally more vagrant productive late spring is still to come.

Remarkable was a **Tundra Bean-Goose** found at the Piute Ponds on Edwards AFB on March 6 (Jon Feenstra). This established the first county record and only the eighth for the state. This bird later spent its time at the nearby Lancaster Water Treatment Plant through April 18, finally ending up back at Piute on April 22. As with most major rarities in the county, this bird was seen by a couple hundred birders from near and far.

Scarce inland was a **Surf Scoter** at the Earvin Magic Johnson Recreation Area in Willowbrook on March 20 (Richard Barth). A **Long-tailed Duck** was at the Ballona Creek mouth on April 19 (Michael Pazzani).

Red-necked Grebes included one off Pt. Dume from March 3-5 (Jon Feenstra) and two there on March 22 (Robert Thoren).

An **Inca Dove** was at Lake Los Angeles in the east Antelope Valley on March

18 (Tom Miko) where a very small population persists and a **White-winged Dove** in Duarte continued through March 12.

The remarkably long-staying **Sandhill Crane** along the San Gabriel River in Pico Rivera was present through April 8.

An **American Oystercatcher** was at Topanga Lagoon from February 26-28 and what may have been the same bird was not far away at Malibu Lagoon on March 28.

Two **Ancient Murrelets** were offshore south of San Pedro on March 11 (Naresh Satyan, Mark Wilson).

The first of small numbers of **Franklin's Gulls** was one at the Lancaster Water Treatment Plant on April 1 (Richard Hasegawa). Up to four **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** were at Peck Road Water Conservation Park in Arcadia through February 26. Others were at MacArthur Park in Los Angeles through March 9 and at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas on March 6 (Keith Condon).

Increasing in numbers but averaging less than annual in county waters, was a **Manx Shearwater** off the Palos Verdes Peninsula on March 11 (Naresh Satyan, Chris Dean).

Brown Boobies were observed at Redondo Canyon off Palos Verdes on March 4 (Kimball Garrett) and in the Santa Catalina Channel on April 1 (Mark Scheel, Naresh Satyan, et al).

Over two dozen **Neotropic Cormorants** were recorded at various locations on the coastal slope of the county with a maximum of six at the Sepulveda Basin. Breeding was again confirmed at this location.

Cattle Egrets included one at Apollo Park near Lancaster on April 11 (Mark Harris), two at the Sepulveda Basin in Van Nuys on April 16 (Jon Fisher), one near Gorman on April 17 (Chris Dean) and another there on April 19 (Daniel Irons).

Yellow-crowned Night-Herons included up to four in the Ballona Lagoon area in Marina del Rey through April 17, one at the Ballona Freshwater Marsh through April 1 and up to three at Alamitos Bay through April 12.

Over 2,000 **Swainson's Hawks** were recorded this spring, many along the front range of the San Gabriel Mountains, but also in the northwest county. Up to six **Zone-tailed Hawks** were reported from various coastal slope locations during the period.

A **Short-eared Owl** was on San Clemente Island from February 26-28 (Nicole Rita).

Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers included a continuing bird at Veteran's Memorial Park in Sylmar through March 18 and one at Tournament Park in Pasadena from March 22-April 13 (Jack Wickel).

A rather interesting find was an apparent **Ladder-backed x Hairy Woodpecker** at Holiday Lake in the west Antelope Valley on April 9 (Naresh Satyan).

A pale "**Prairie**" **Merlin** was in the west Antelope Valley on March 17 (Daniel Irons) and a dark "**Black**"

Merlin was at Long Beach Recreation Park on March 19 (Robert Hamilton).

The **Dusky-capped Flycatcher** in the Sepulveda Basin continued near Lake Balboa through February 25. Less regular was a wintering **Brown-crested Flycatcher** continuing at the South Coast Botanic Garden in Palos Verdes Estates through February 26.

Tropical Kingbirds were at Golden Shore Marine Reserve in Long Beach through February 27, along the lower Los Angeles River in Long Beach through April 17 and at Colorado Lagoon- possibly a continuing bird- on April 13 (Nancy Salem).

Far rarer was the **Thick-billed Kingbird** that continued at the Los Angeles Zoo through April 1. A wintering **Western Kingbird**, still unusual in winter, continued at Madrona Marsh in Torrance through February 28 and an early migrant was in Claremont on March 3.

The **Least Flycatcher** was in Lakewood at the West San Gabriel Parkway Nature Trail through March 4. At least a half dozen wintering **Hammond's Flycatchers** were recorded during the period and a **Pacific-slope Flycatcher** was at La Mirada Creek Park on February 28 (Jonathan Rowley). Rounding out the flycatchers was an **Eastern Phoebe** continuing at Lake Lindero in Agoura Hills through February 26.

Very rare was either a wintering or early spring migrant **Bell's Vireo** at the Huntington Gardens in San Marino on February 26 (Layton Pace). A great spring find was a **Blue-headed Vireo** in Rolling Hills Estates on April 21 (Bobby Trusella).

It was a fairly good spring for **Purple Martins** with eighteen recorded during the period. Now known locally only as a scarce migrant, this species once bred fairly commonly in the region. Nest site competition from European Starlings has been implicated as the primary cause of its

decline and eventual absence as a breeder.

The **Pacific Wren** continuing at La Mirada Community Park was reported through April 10.

An early **Swainson's Thrush** was at DeForest Park in Long Beach on April 19 (Robert Hamilton).

A smattering of **Red Crossbills** were recorded on the deserts, with ten at Apollo Park and up to fourteen at Pearblossom Park. Another was at Santa Fe Dam in Irwindale on April 1 (Jodhan Fine) and one was at Placerita Canyon on April 10 (Chef Ito).

Up to three **Lapland Longspurs** continued in the east Antelope Valley through March 17, while as many as seventeen **Chestnut-collared Longspurs** were in the west Antelope Valley on March 17 with varying numbers recorded between March 15 and 27 (Daniel Irons, Richard Crossley).

Clay-colored Sparrows were at Long Beach Recreation Park from March 9-April 16 (Robert Hamilton), at the West San Gabriel River Parkway Nature Trail in Lakewood on April 9 (Christine Jacobs) and along the lower Los Angeles River in Long Beach on April 18 (Richard Barth).

Dark-eyed "Gray-headed" Juncos were in Juniper Hills from February 25-26 (Kimball Garrett) and continuing at Hahamongna Watershed Park in Pasadena through March 3. A **Dark-eyed "Pink-sided" Junco** continued at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas through March 17.

A **Harris's Sparrow** in Beverly Hills continued through April 16 and another was found nearby in West Los Angeles on April 11.

Up to four **Swamp Sparrows** continued at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas through April 19. Another continued at Quail Lake near Gorman

through February 25 and one was at the South Coast Botanic Garden in Palos Verdes Estates on March 28 (Nance Salem).

The **Green-tailed Towhee** near Monte Verde Park in Lakewood was reported through April 2.

An **Orchard Oriole** was at Behringer Park in La Mirada from March 20-27 (Jonathan Rowley). The first spring **Hooded Oriole** was at the Piute Ponds on March 3 (Kimball Garrett). **Baltimore Orioles** were at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas from March 16-April 5 (Keith Condon) and at Satellite Park in Cerritos from April 9-11 (Thomas Lopez). The wintering **Scott's Oriole** at Crystallaire near Llano was reported through March 14.

A half dozen **Black-and-white Warblers** were recorded during the period, while a **Tennessee Warbler** continued in Long Beach through April 15 and another was in Griffith Park on April 7 (Timothy Aarons). A **Nashville Warbler** was at Wheeler

Park in Claremont on March 11 (Tom Miko).

Very rare in the county was a **Cape May Warbler** found at Veteran's Memorial Park in Sylmar on March 19 (Jon Fisher, Sarah Ngo, Joshua Mitchell). This bird presumably wintered locally, but despite good coverage of this area somehow went unnoticed. One would have been notable, but there were in fact two in the county this winter. The second was a continuing bird at Loyola Marymount University in Westchester seen through March 18.

Palm Warbler along the Los Angeles River in Long Beach continued through March 28, with another nearby at Seaside Park on April 6 (Manuel Duran). The **Painted Redstart** near Birdcage Park in Long Beach, one of several recorded this winter, was reported through March 26.

Migration will continue at a slowly diminishing pace as we head into May and even early June, but for species such as Willow Flycatcher,

Swainson's Thrush and Yellow Warbler late spring on the desert is prime time. At least a few vagrants are likely to turn up, perhaps something quite unexpected. While vagrants in fall tend to be much more numerous, spring has produced some very good birds.

Breeding activity for resident species and early migrants has been underway since February and March. Later spring arrivals will get their shot at procreation a bit later in the year. The San Gabriel Mountains should be alive with birds and breeding activity in May and June and conditions there should make for a productive breeding season.

Not to jump too far ahead, but fall migration will be underway in June before the next Birds of the Season column appears. Southern California's latitude is a great one for birders, with bird movements happening nearly year-round. 