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Snowy Owl | Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman

Pelagic Birding: A Birder's Box of Chocolates

by Robbie Lisa Freeman

It's 4:50 AM when my alarm shocks me to life. For a moment, clarity eludes me, then a little thrill of excitement shoots through me. I'm off for my first pelagic trip, where I hope to see birds that we landlubbers rarely think about – the pelagic birds of the Pacific. Pelagic birds are seabirds that spend most of their lives soaring above the ocean, or bobbing on the waves. They rarely come to land except during breeding season, when they construct nests on cliffsides, islands, rocky berms, or beaches.

There's something audacious about a bird that dares to spend its life soaring the open seas. They're the stuff of myths and legends, often lauded in literature for their gravity-defying prowess and ability to survive squalls, starvation, and often solitary sojourns great distances around the world. Even their names sound seaworthy – think storm-petrels, shearwaters, skuas and tropicbirds...

As I watch the sun rise over the 405 freeway on my hour-long drive to the port at Dana Point, I think of the distances these seabirds blithely travel. The Grey-headed Albatross has been tracked flying distances up to 10,000 miles in a single journey and can circumnavigate the earth in 46 days, according to a survey published in Science magazine. The tiny Artic

Tern, which weighs only 3.3-4.2 ounces, annually makes one of the longest migrations of any animal on earth. Hatching during summer in the Arctic Circle, it then flies south to the other side of the earth: the Antarctic Circle. The distance covered each year is more than 18,600 miles from point to point. Though we likely won't be seeing these species, the skuas, shearwaters, and storm-petrels are no slouches. Migrating Sooty Shearwaters can cover more than 1,000 miles in a single day, while Leach's Storm-Petrels often travel more than 1,200 miles during a single foraging trip to feed over deep-water shelves. With this perspective, my hour's drive to the boat seems laughably insignificant.

At the dock, I'm greeted by a trip organizer from Sea and Sage Audubon and efficiently ushered over to our group, which has gathered for a quick briefing. Then we're shepherded aboard the Sea Explorer, a 65-foot marine educational vessel owned by The Ocean Institute. The institute is a Dana Point jewel, offering marine education and maritime experiences for more than 100,000 children and other visitors annually. The ship itself is a sophisticated floating lab equipped with underwater cameras, an acoustic hydrophone, onboard computers, video microscopes, and more.



The 65-foot Sea Explorer is the perfect sized boat for pelagics, offering an upper and lower deck, and an indoor lounge area to escape wind, sun, or stormy weather. | Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman.

I stow my gear then dash to the upper deck, where our trip leader Tom Benson is prepping his microphone and other gear for the day. Benson has been leading pelagics for 12 years, sharing his passion with thousands of birders. On the lower deck, most of my shipmates are gathered at the bow of the boat, cheerfully chatting with co-leader Bruce Aird, who's been leading Sea and Sage Audubon pelagics since 2016. Both men can wax eloquent about the wonders of pelagics.

"I think the biggest factor that attracts birders to pelagics is the chance to see an entire set of birds that are rarely, if ever, seen from land," says Aird. "A Manx Shearwater was one of the rarer Sea and Sage Pelagic birds recorded, but I've seen a Black-legged Kittiwake, and in years past we've had Arctic Terns, which is always cool. On other pelagic trips, I've seen a Nazca Booby, and Guadalupe Murrelets. I've had Flesh-footed Shearwaters on a trip out of Long Beach, and Tufted Puffins on a Santa Barbara-based trip. I once had a Wilson's Warbler perch on my hat and my shoulder, and then I watched it fight winds that blew it offshore, where it landed in the ocean and died. It isn't always pretty. But, these things are fascinating, and you never know what you're going to see.

"Secondarily," Aird continued, "you never know what else you might get to encounter. I've seen



Black-vented Shearwaters forage close to the surface of the water with shallow dives, or by scooping food near the water's surface while swimming. | Photo courtesy of Bruce Aird.

countless whales and dolphins, seals and sea lions, and a handful of sharks, including a 12-foot thresher shark. And I watched a Minke Whale charge the boat, go blasting underneath, and then breach six times on the far side! Additionally, I've seen Blue Whales, Fin Whales, Humpback Whales, Gray Whales, and Orcas, and that's just in Orange County waters. I've seen Pacific White-sided, Common, Bottlenose, and Risso's Dolphins. It's the whole box of chocolates thing - you never know what you'll get!"

Benson's experiences echo Aird's: "A few years ago, on a winter pelagic trip heading up the coast from Dana Point, we were in rough seas when someone spotted an albatross — at the back of the boat! It turned out to be a Laysan Albatross, the first record for Orange County. And if that wasn't enough, we later spotted three Black-footed Albatrosses, which was a new county bird for everyone on board!"

With these experienced and passionate trip leaders, plus the ship's expert captain, I know I'm in capable hands, and I'm excited to see what my first ocean birding expedition will bring us. Our target destination for the day, Crespi Knoll, is an underwater sea shelf 26.5 miles southwest. It's known for attracting a vast variety of fish, birds, and cetaceans, as well as divers, anglers, and bird watchers. As Benson later explained, "It's basically an underwater mountain, and as the current hits it, cold, nutrient-rich water is pushed up toward the surface, making it an ideal feeding area for marine life."



About four dozen birders joined Sea and Sage Audubon's August 13th pelagic, an 8-hour expedition that would cover approximately 55 miles around the Orange County Pacific Ocean region. | Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman.

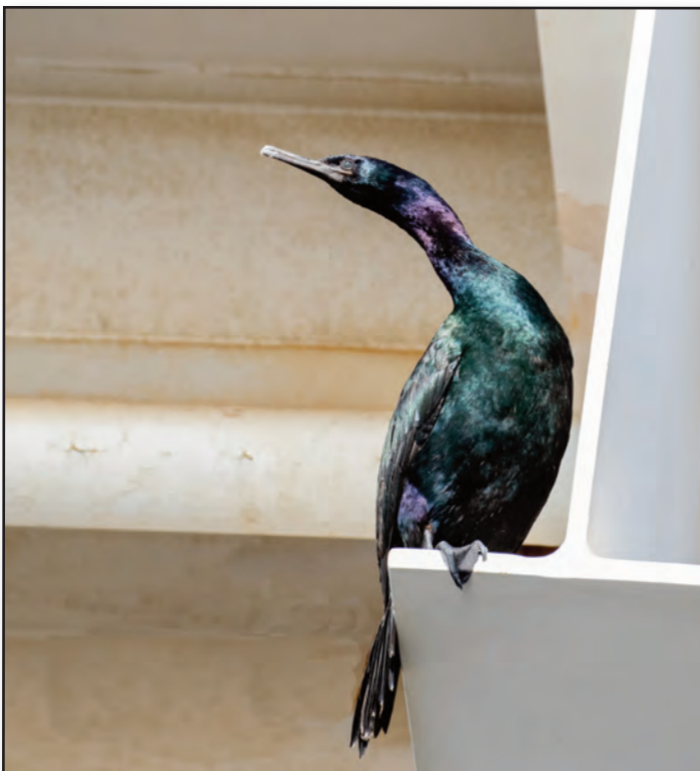
At 7:00 AM the boat's engines rumble to life, and by 7:05 AM, we're on the move. Motoring alongside the cove's rocky jetty, we encounter pelicans, gulls, tattlers, terns, herons, egrets, Black Oystercatchers, Black Turnstones, and varieties of cormorants, including my first two lifers, the Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants. In profile, you can distinguish the Brandt's by its larger body, thicker bill and neck, and more rounded head. In the right light, these birds are more easily identified by their coloration: The Brandt's feathers appear jet black, while the Pelagic Cormorant wears glossy, jewel-toned purple and blue green feathers.

In addition to the many birds perched on the jetty, flocks of seabirds soar over or trail us, hoping for chum. Our trip leaders have brought freshly cut fish, fish oil, and enormous bags of popcorn to attract birds. Aird later explained the chumming strategy: "Chum foods that work best are those that have oil, or strong fish scents. True seabirds, like shearwaters and storm-petrels, can smell these and will congregate around them. Fish oil or macerated fish works best. Buttered popcorn is a cheap substitute, since the butter acts like an oil. I don't like it as well because it has little nutritional value for the birds, but it's effective for keeping a following of gulls behind the boat, and the gulls themselves attract other birds, notably jaegers."

True to Aird's observations, an hour and a half later, as we bob on the gently rolling swells near 279 Fathom

Bank, the inquisitive jaegers did appear. I happily viewed my first Long-tailed and Pomarine Jaegers. Jaegers, from the German Jäger, meaning hunter, have been known to travel from their breeding grounds in the Canadian Arctic to the far north Siberian coast, as well as to the coast of Africa and the Cape Verde islands, according to researchers who tracked them. Who knows how far these birds have flown over the past days, weeks and months? And how do they survive at sea? Though they forage on berries, rodents, and small birds at their breeding grounds in the arctic, for most of their lives over water, jaegers are "kleptoparasites" – the swashbuckling pirates of the seas – bullying other seabirds to steal their food.

As we journey farther out, I keep close to Benson on the upper deck, who has been spotting and pointing out the various identities of birds over the ship's microphone. "Left side, 10 o'clock, three Black Storm Petrels, heading right. Right side, 1 o'clock two Sooty Shearwaters. Left side, 11 o'clock, one Pomarine Jaeger." At each command I lurch my head, squint, scan... and fail to see the bird! I clean my binoculars. I change positions. I try to mimic Tom's direction. The distant birds he's IDing with ease are just specks to me, even with my high powered 12 x 50 binoculars. At one point, I laugh out loud, partly in frustration but mostly in awe. This guy has the eyes of an eagle! Tom later confides that through his 24 years of birding, he's learned to recognize shearwaters, albatrosses, petrels, alcids, terns, gulls, and others by their flight patterns. Shearwaters, for example, fly low over the ocean, essentially "shearing" the surface with their powerful



The Pelagic Cormorant is a small cormorant that, in contrast to its name, is rarely seen more than a few miles from land. Nevertheless, Pelagic Cormorants are expert divers that can hold their breath for two minutes and dive as deep as 138 feet to catch fish. | Photo courtesy of Bruce Aird (from a previous pelagic.)



Long-tailed Jaegers are distinguished by their long, pointed wings, pointed tail feathers, and short, stout bill. During breeding season, adults have long streamers on their tails. | Photo courtesy of Bruce Aird.



The Pomarine Jaeger is the biggest and burliest of the three jaeger species, according to descriptions from The Cornell Labs. Their speed and agility make them formidable in stealing food from other seabirds. During breeding season, they survive almost entirely on lemmings, small rodents found in the Arctic tundra. | Photo courtesy of Bruce Aird.



Sabine's Gull, this small hooded gull is a happy sighting for birders, as it nests in the high Arctic and typically migrates far offshore. To feed at sea, the Sabine's Gull floats low over the water, often dipping down to take food from the surface without landing. | Photo courtesy of Bruce Aird.

stiff wingbeats and using the wind to glide long distances. In contrast, the flight of the Leach's Storm-Petrel is described as "veering and zig-zagging on stiff, bent wings with quick, deep, double-flaps, followed by brief glides with wings held slightly above the horizontal."

Fortunately for me and others not so quick-sighted, the chumming strategy draws many birds in close to the boat. They fly overhead, dive around us, or sit on the water, scooping up the treats thrown over the side. The Sooty Shearwaters are especially gifted divers, and during normal foraging can pursue underwater fish to depths of 220 feet!

The most entertaining feeders are the storm-petrels, which sometimes forage by dancing or pattering on the surface of the water to attract larval fish and crustaceans. This aquatic feat is even reflected in their scientific name, *Hydrobates*, which translates to 'water walker.'

The skies around 279 Fathom Bank also produce one of my favorite new birds of the day, a Sabine's Gull. Though I'm not typically a gull fan, there's something about hooded gulls, like the Black-headed, Sabine's, Bonaparte's, and Laughing Gull, that lights a little spark in my heart, and I happily add the Sabine's to my life list.

Around 10 AM, we reach our ultimate destination – Crespi Knoll. No announcement is needed. The location is evident from the number of fishing boats dotting the area. Here we view storm-petrels of all shapes and colors: Ashy, Black, Least, and Leach's Storm-Petrels. We also spot Craveri's and Scripps's Murrelets, Pink-footed and Sooty Shearwaters, and Western, Heermann's, and California Gulls, including an unusual snowy white albino gull that is presumed to be either a California or

Heermann's Gull. Other birds we spot include Red-necked Phalaropes, Elegant Terns, and Brown Pelicans. All in all, Crespi Knoll brings us 55 birds of 14 varieties.




*This storm-petrel demonstrated its pattering method of attracting prey to the surface. It hovers and dances on the water in an aquatic ballet that earned it the scientific name, *Hydrobate*, or 'water walker.' Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman.*



By early afternoon, our boat is heading home. As I gaze out to the horizon, I'm hypnotized by the rolling water and humming sound of the engine, and it dawns on me that I now sort of "get" this whole "birding at sea" thing. Besides the many new species of birds I've seen and the wondrous encounters with Risso's Dolphins and the Swordfish, there's some other intangible quality that is contagious. Certainly there's the adrenaline rush of adventure. But there's also a feeling of freedom. With the wind in our faces and nothing but sea and sky surrounding us, one can almost imagine we're soaring – at one with these intrepid, globetrotting gypsies.

My reverie melts away as we re-enter Dana Point Harbor. The last of the chum is thrown out to a gleeful group of gulls, terns, and other hungry birds, and our boatload of birders prepares to disembark. It's been a day of lifers, elation, and learning, with our expert spotters recording more than 40 species and a total of over 1,300 birds. That's a record birding day by most any birder's count – and a delightful box of chocolates indeed.

For information about future Sea and Sage Pelagics, visit www.seaandsageaudubon.org. Very special thanks to Sea and Sage Pelagic Trip leaders Tom Benson and Bruce Aird and to the crew of the Sea Explorer. 

The Scripps's Murrelet is one of the few birds in the auk family that favors warmer water, nesting on islands off Baja and southern California. In 2002, accounts of Scripps's and Guadeloupe Murrelets were so low due to predation that they were almost added to the Endangered Species list. Thanks to a dedicated alliance of environmental groups, key breeding islands were cleared of invasive predators, bringing these birds back from the brink of danger. | Photo courtesy of Bruce Aird.

But this pelagic is not just about birds. As I'm shooting photos on one side of the boat, I hear gasps and exclamations from the other side. I carefully slip around toward the excitement and experience a magical moment: a small pod of odd-looking creatures is passing close by our boat. "What are they?" I ask. "Risso's Dolphins," one shipmate exclaims. I hold my breath as the pod approaches and then surfaces. There's a small calf sticking close to its mother. I swoon, then raise my camera to try to capture the moment. After shooting, I ponder the pod. They look nothing like typical dolphins with bottle noses and beaks. These are large snub-faced dolphins and look more like whales to me. I later learn why: These cetaceans are most closely related to Pilot Whales, Pygmy Killer Whales, Melon-headed Whales, and such. And they're not as rare as I would have thought. With 13,000 - 30,000 estimated to roam the waters around central and northern California, they're fairly frequent sightings on pelagics.

Besides the Risso's Dolphins we see Common Dolphins and even a Swordfish, identified by its protruding front dorsal and back caudal fins. It undulates in the water near the boat, then disappears to carry on with its business.



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TEN TIPS TO PREPARE FOR YOUR FIRST PELAGIC


by Robbie Lisa Freeman



Leach's Storm Petrel | Photo courtesy of Larry Sansone

If you're excited about taking your first pelagic, here are some key tips for making it a fun and positive experience.

1. Bring your "sea legs." Probably the most important advice in preparing for your first pelagic is to "know your seaworthiness." If you've ever been prone to motion or sea sickness, take sea sickness pills or apply a motion sickness patch well in advance of boarding the boat. It'll help prevent any potentially awkward events and ensure an enjoyable trip for both you and your mates. If you're unsure of your sea legs, opt for a shorter pelagic. You can find trips that run for 3-4 hours rather than 8 hours.
2. Bring a good pair of binoculars. The farther the distance, the greater your chances of seeing the flyover birds early or at all. Avoid bringing a spotting scope, as the moving deck doesn't make for practical use of a scope.
3. Bring sun-protective gear. A high SPF sunscreen, a long-sleeve sun shirt, sun-protective gloves, and a broad brimmed sunhat with a chin strap or super snug baseball cap will help ensure you can spend the maximum time on deck birding without burning. Don't forget the sunglasses!

4. Bring snacks & water. Most pelagics don't provide food or beverages.
5. Bring clothing layers. Pelagics embark very early and mornings can be cold on the Pacific. A lightweight sun shirt and light shorts can serve as a base layer upon which you can add a wool shirt, wool pants or hiking slacks, wool socks, a fleece sweatshirt or vest, warm gloves, and a rain slicker. Pack all gear in a small backpack to stow onboard. Athletic shoes or hiking sandals are good footwear choices.
6. Bring a camera. Most birders today are also photographers, so bring your longest lens and a dry bag in case of unexpected weather.
7. Batten down the hatches. Make sure your gear is securely leashed to a camera harness or that your camera strap is around your neck or body, as you'll potentially need to be able to grab a railing or edge with both hands if there are unexpected waves.
8. Do your homework: Get to know the spotters. Study up on pelagic birds and have an idea of what lifers you're seeking or the markings of birds you want to recognize. If you're a total novice, stay close to the pelagic trip leader or other spotters so they can help you see and recognize the various birds by their flight patterns or markings.
9. Keep your eyes peeled for marine sightings. Most pelagics come with an exciting bonus: incredible sightings of Common, Bottlenose, and Risso's dolphins, as well as Blue, Minke, or Fin Whales, Mola mola (ocean sunfish), sea lions and seals, sharks, and even an occasional Swordfish.
10. Bring an "attitude of gratitude." According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), hundreds of marine species and sea birds across the world are vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered, including many species of albatrosses, murrelets, whales, sea turtles, sea otters, sharks and more. Savor every sighting and walk lightly upon the earth and sea. 

SNOWY OWL IN SAN PEDRO


by Andy Dowdell, adowdell@gmail.com

Shortly after sunrise on Saturday, November 12, 2022, a beautiful white Snowy Owl perched on our back patio wall for several minutes. My wife and I were alerted to the event by the noise of four crows that were cackling about on the power lines above the owl, as she looked down towards my neighbors yard and occasionally looked back at us as we took pictures and videos with our phones.

Although I am not a bonafide bird watcher, I have encountered some professionals with their huge cameras here in San Pedro in Point Fermin park, pointing their cameras at a family of Peregrine Falcons. I often peered up at these bird-watchers from my Stand Up Paddleboard and one day after returning to Cabrillo Beach, I packed up my board and drove to Pt. Fermin. I asked one of the photographers if he ever had taken any pictures of paddle boarders down in the bay. He replied, "Not unless they have wings".

But enough about my SUP obsession, back to the Snowy Owl. Thirty minutes after the visit in our backyard, my wife was doing her normal hike up the hills through the nearby Bogdanovich Friendship Park and the same owl flew over her. Both my wife and I have had our fathers pass in the last few years and we believe that when we encounter a beautiful falcon, hawk, or even an owl, that just might be a connection with the afterworld. Who knows?

Soon after seeing the owl, I posted a photo and a video in a FaceBook group, Scenic San Pedro. Other residents in South Shores reported seeing the same owl and even a few posted pictures. Some theorized that it was an escaped bird from an animal handler; others claimed that that animal did not belong in southern California, that is must be a fake. Could it be climate change is modifying animal migration habits?

It's unclear but I am of the mind that a beautiful, rare bird visited us that day, reminding us of the wonders of the world around us. 



Snowy Owl — San Pedro | Photo by Andy Dowdell



Snowy Owl — leaving | Photo by Andy Dowdell



CONSERVATION CONVERSATION

by Travis Longcore

Wildness in Our City

Farewell, P-22

P-22's reign as the biggest cat in Griffith Park has come to an end. The news was front page, not just in Los Angeles but farther afield, to those who found inspiration in a mountain lion living in the midst of the second biggest city in the nation. To say he was loved would be an understatement. Even in his final months as his encounters with people and pets became more common, the community response was to let him be and find a way for him to survive.

Having a big cat in the middle of the city was important for more than just large mammal conservation, but also for perspectives on nature in the city as well. Beth Pratt of the National Wildlife Federation, P-22's "agent" and driving force behind the wildlife bridge over the 101 freeway now under construction in Agoura Hills, put it this way in a social media post following the release of the sad news about P-22:

"He changed us. He changed the way we look at LA. And his influencer status extended around the world, as he inspired millions of people to see wildlife as their neighbors. He made us more human, made us connect more to that wild place in ourselves. We are part of nature and he reminded us of that. Even in the city that gave us Carmageddon, where we thought wildness had been banished a long time ago, P-22 reminded us it's still here."

Indeed, it is that fact that there is still wildness here to connect with

that motivates our local conservation work. Even though they might not have the star power of a 125-pound puma killing mule deer under the Hollywood sign, our birds are also part of the wildness in this city, from a disoriented goose at a Dodgers game to a gang of Bushtits foraging through the foliage in just about any neighborhood with vegetation. It takes a little knowledge and an eye to see it, but birds are our wild and marvelous neighbors as well and connecting Angelenos to them and the conservation of their habitats, from natural areas to the urban forest, is our goal.

Seeing the Wild at Silver Lake Reservoir

As we have reported before in these pages, the City of Los Angeles has been developing a Master Plan for the reuse of the Silver Lake Reservoir Complex (Silver Lake and Ivanhoe reservoirs) as a public park now that it is no longer used to store drinking water. In 2017, Los Angeles Audubon set out some principles for this reuse back, highlighting the features that currently make the site important for birds: a large area of water where they could be undisturbed and retention of a perimeter fence that would be effective at controlling human access and associated disturbance by people and their pets. The City released a Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) analyzing the impacts of the proposed Master Plan. Los Angeles Audubon Society reviewed the DEIR in detail before the public comment period closed in mid-December

and found it to have missed the mark of preserving habitat for birds, let alone enhancing it.

The Master Plan proposes, among other features, to construct a large lawn down to the water's edge and to encourage access on the shoreline and kayak tours around the reservoirs. This is inconsistent with the uniquely important ecological value of the site. First, the site is a regionally important stopover site for migratory waterbirds. The Master Plan proposes introducing fish to the reservoirs, but the migratory birds that use the reservoirs the most do not need fish: Ruddy Duck (seeds, roots, and insects), Canada Goose (plants, insects, sometimes small fish), American Wigeon (plants), Northern Shoveler (seeds, tiny crustaceans), Ring-necked Duck (aquatic plants, insects), and Eared Grebe (insects, crustaceans, and sometimes small fish). The value to these birds is that they have a place of refuge with limited human disturbance in an otherwise highly disturbed urban landscape.

The site contains a rookery for Great Blue Heron and nest sites for raptors, which are vulnerable to disturbance. The DEIR fails to provide appropriate buffers, established in the scientific literature, to minimize impacts on these features.

The site is important for migrating passerine birds, which forage as they move through the vegetation around the reservoirs. Although the Master Plan describes what it calls "restoration" the species listed for these areas are a hodgepodge of native and non-

native species that do not reflect any native habitat. Worse, the DEIR assumes that a 3-foot fence and educational signage would keep people and pets out of these newly opened areas, which is not a reasonable assumption.

Many of the aspects of the Master Plan and DEIR appear not to have been reviewed by ornithologists or naturalists familiar with the ecology of the area. For example:

- The City claims that it will provide habitat for amphibians, but proposes to introduce predatory fish, which would virtually eliminate habitat for amphibians;
- People will be allowed down to the shore of the reservoir, but no consideration is made for avoiding the introduction of exotic species, such as the Channeled Apple Snail that was introduced to Echo Park Lake in the City's own enhancement project several years ago. This invasive snail wantonly consumes aquatic vegetation and is a vector of dangerous parasites;
- The Master Plan proposes to construct a lawn down to the water, which is a recipe for encouraging the development of nuisance populations of resident Canada Geese. We love migratory Canada Geese as they come through on migration, but acknowledge the challenges posed by over-abundant resident populations;
- The "restoration" areas would not include the rare native tree of the area, Southern California Black Walnut, while proposing to introduce a range of inappropriate plant species, and claiming credit for offsetting increased disturbance with these plantings. They even propose to cut down two of these trees, instead of designing around them;
- No consideration is made of the required vegetation clearance that would be forced in the "restoration" zones by construction of unnecessary buildings within the grounds;
- The entire perimeter and an expanded park area would be illuminated all night, with the added disturbance to birds that would ensue from activity, as well as impacts from the lights themselves, which would be 50 times brighter than natural levels.

Los Angeles Audubon has concluded that the adverse impacts of the increased development and activity proposed in the Master Plan would degrade the important value of the Silver Lake Reservoir Complex for birds. The wildness that birds bring to this feature can already be appreciated and any development should protect them. This one doesn't. Any marginal benefit from converting open water along the edges to wetlands would be small in comparison with the adverse impacts of removing the perimeter fence and promoting extensive human activities, including night lighting and amplified sound. The Master Plan and associated analysis evince little understanding of the biological values of the project site and miss the mark entirely if their intention was, as stated, to be beneficial for native biodiversity. We hope the City of Los Angeles reconsiders its plans.

Wild Under Threat at Ballona

At the Ballona Wetlands, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) and its partners have proposed a large dredging and filling project to completely reconfigure this coastal wetland in a manner inconsistent with its existing or historical ecology. An Environmental Impact Report has been prepared for this project and certified by CDFW. An associated Environmental Impact Statement, which is required under federal law because of the need for permits from the US Army Corps of Engineers, has not been certified because the State's plan did not use the right volume of stormwater in models to test whether a new system of constructed berms would keep residents safe. In an effort to move forward, CDFW has proposed to start implementing a part of its project, known as Sequences 1 and 2, which would construct drainage channels in an area south of Culver Boulevard where no channels were present historically and that is currently a healthy high marsh habitat dominated by native plants. CDFW recently re-

ceived permission from the California Coastal Commission to drive heavy equipment into this fragile habitat to conduct geotechnical borings, even though the Coastal Commission has not considered the restoration plan as a whole or its environmental review. Los Angeles Audubon opposes these developments.

The first problem is that CDFW and its supporters fail to recognize that the former agricultural fields that would be excavated to build (not restore!) tidal channels have recovered well and are now supporting thriving pickleweed populations, used by everything from Belding's Savannah Sparrows to Western Meadowlarks. Some people have gotten the notion that pickleweed requires tidal channels and tidal inundation, but this is not true. My colleagues and I wrote about this in a study of lagoons in northern San Diego (Beller et al. 2014). In particular, we documented, based on many sources, that the particular pickleweed species in question, called Parrish's Glasswort, is not a good indicator of tidal waters because it grows both in lower marshes with tidal flows and in high marsh areas that are subject to periodic flooding. We wrote, "Such flooding, however, may derive from either tidal flow or lagoonal ponding [of rainwater]." Anyone who has been at the Ballona Wetlands in recent weeks knows that there is lagoonal ponding of rainwater in the areas to the south of Culver Boulevard near the freshwater marsh. This is not because the soil is compacted from the agricultural era, or a symptom of disfunction, it is exactly how this area functioned historically and the robust and increasing native vegetation in this seasonally ponded area needs no "restoration." As we have also shown conclusively in previous studies (Dark et al. 2011, Jacobs et al. 2011), this area did not have tidal channels historically, at least for thousands of years, and there is no reason to destroy habitat to install them now.



Ponding in non-tidal pickleweed high marsh, as it has been for thousands of years, but would be destroyed by CDFW's dredge and fill project for the Ballona Wetlands (Photograph: Jonathan Coffin).

The only reason we have been able to figure out why the nonprofit that led the development of this dredge and fill plan decided to design tidal channels in this area is that these channels would build out the storm-water flood management plan proposed for the Playa Vista development when it owned this property. The channels of Sequences 1 and 2 are identical to the original Playa Vista proposal. But now this is public property, with a legal obligation to protect native species and habitats, not to implement a flood management scheme for a private development.

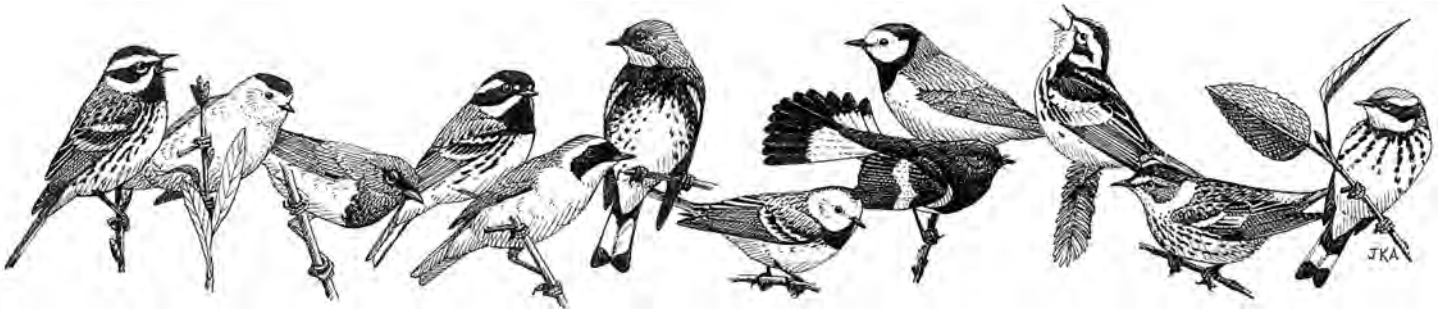
We wish that CDFW would take a new look at its outdated plans and understand that it would destroy an ex-

isting, healthy habitat that is right before our eyes. Once you understand the history and dispense with the myth that pickleweed requires tidal flows, the landscape comes into focus as it was before urbanization, and it can be appreciated for the place of wildness that it is. 🐦

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BIRDS OF THE SEASON

by Jon Fisher

Anyone paying attention to the birding world knows that the fall of 2022 was a remarkable one for vagrants in Los Angeles County. But the show wasn't over, with November and December turning in a very respectable performance in that regard.

The impact of technology meant that many of these vagrants became known to the birding community almost immediately and most were seen by at least a few birders, if not many. Another technological advantage is provided by ubiquitous digital cameras which mean nearly all vagrants are documented to a measure not possible only twenty years ago. Similarly, audio recordings made with smart phones have documented unusual birds. Lamentably, at the same time written documentation has languished, but few advances don't involve some tradeoff.

Despite continuing drought, the area destroyed by California wildfires has been in a precipitous decline recently, with 4.3 million acres burned in 2020, 2.6 million in 2021 and a "mere" 362,000 in 2022. Summer rains, fewer significant wind events and increased forest management have all played a role. We know this trend could be short-lived, but thankfully it translated into a mild fire 2022 season in Los Angeles County.

As far as precipitation, the winter of 2022-2023 is off to a promising start compared to typical drought years. Hopefully this trend continues to the benefit of both humans and birds. In

addition to improving habitat overall, rain also creates temporary habitat in the form of wetlands. This has proven to be very attractive to waterfowl, including our lead off bird for this column...

A **Tundra Swan** was along the San Gabriel River in Pico Rivera from November 23-December 9 (Benjamin Ewing). The substantial water initially present along this portion of the river gradually disappeared and thus did the swan.

Still very rare in the county was a **Barrow's Goldeneye** found along the Los Angeles Aqueduct in the Antelope Valley at 77th Street East on December 5 (Kimball Garrett). To date, all records have been near or along the California Aqueduct system in the Antelope Valley. Manmade lakes channels are a suitable substitute for the deep-water habitats preferred by this and other diving ducks.

On the subject of diving ducks, **White-winged Scoters** were off Dockweiler State Beach in El Segundo on November 17 and 28 (Richard Barth) and near the Ballona Creek mouth from December 18-25 (Chase Carter). A Black Scoter was unusual inland at the Lake Hollywood from November 3-9 (Andrew Birch), while up to four were in the vicinity of Dockweiler State Beach from November 13-December 12 (Richard Barth).

A **White-winged Dove** in San Dimas on December 15 was the only report for the period (Connie Pearson).

A **Red-necked Grebe** in Malibu from November 11-13 was likewise the only one recorded (Rebecca & Henry Marschall).

A late **Lesser Nighthawk** was at the Piute Ponds on November 5 (Becky Kitto) and a lone **Vaux's Swift** along the Los Angeles River was in Atwater Village on December 18 (Andrew Birch).

Quite rare in the county was an **American Golden-Plover** at Malibu Lagoon on November 11 (Chris Tosdevin). A still rare but more expected **Pacific Golden-Plover** continued along lower Ballona Creek through December 11. This bird has now returned to this spot for six consecutive winters.

Up to fifteen **Mountain Plovers** were at the A&G Sod Farms in Palmdale from November 17-December 10 (Kimball Garrett) and seven were at 90th Street East and Avenue F in the Antelope Valley on December 17 (Joseph Dunn).

A **Red Knot** was at the Ballona Wetlands on December 11 (Mark & Janet Scheel) and a late **Red-necked Phalarope** was at Zuma Creek mouth on November 22 (Dan Cooper).

Rare away from the immediate coast was a **Heermann's Gull** at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas on November 3.

Lesser Black-backed Gulls continue to increase in the county. One was seen off and on along the lower Los Angeles

River at Willow Street through October 29. Two were farther upstream in Maywood on November 1, with one continuing through November 5 (Naresh Satyan). Another two were seen off and on at MacArthur Park in Los Angeles from November 4-December 23 (Andrew Birch), one was a Malibu Lagoon on December 18 (Naresh Satyan) and one was at Silverlake Reservoir on December 23 (Andrew Birch).

A good county rarity was a **Tufted Puffin** found off the Palos Verdes Peninsula on December 26.

Pacific Loons, always scarce inland, were at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas on November 2 (Keith Condon), at Lake Palmdale on November 20 (Kimball Garrett) and in Encino on December 17 (Otto Mayer).

Two Red-footed Boobies were in the Santa Catalina Channel on November 6 (Otto Mayer, Van Pierszalowski).

Well over a dozen **Neotropic Cormorants** were reported during the period, some of which may represent the same birds. They are now longer unusual at almost any river, lake or pond on the coastal slope of the county.

An **American Bittern** was at Ken Malloy Harbor Regional Park in Harbor City on November 18 (Johnny Ivanov) and a **Cattle Egret** was along the San Gabriel River in El Monte on November 25 (Jon Fisher). **Yellow-crowned Night-Herons** included up to eleven at Ballona Lagoon through December 22 and up to four at Alamitos Bay through December 17.

A **California Condor** was at Pyramid Lake on November 19 (Kelly Baker).

An intriguing report was that of a **Northern Goshawk** at Big Rock Creek on the north side of the San Gabriel Mountains on November 26 (Corey Husic). The observer was experienced with this species and the identification was very likely correct, but the views were perhaps a bit to ambiguous to

establish such an unusual record. The species has been unrecorded in the county forty-five years.

Late **Swainson's Hawks** included two at Littlerock in the Antelope Valley on November 1 (Tom Miko) and single birds at Sycamore Grove Park in Highland Park on November 3, in the Mt. Washington area on November 4 (Van Pierszalowski), in Pico Rivera on November 12 (Jon Fisher) and in the west Antelope Valley on November 14 (Chris Tosdevin).

A **Zone-tailed Hawk** continued in north Monrovia through December 21. Others were in Highland Park on November 16 (Van Pierszalowski), above Altadena on December 13 (Lance Benner) and at San Jose Creek in South El Monte on December 17 (Corey Husic).

Quite unexpected was a **Snowy Owl** found in San Pedro on November 15. This bird was reported only on iNaturalist and never seen by any avowed birder. The identification was obviously correct, but the provenance of this bird remains highly suspect. Being so close to a major port and with no substantiated records south of central California, it seems very possible that this bird was ship-assisted. In any case, it was never seen again... at least until what was probably the same bird turned up in Orange County on December 26.

Burrowing Owls were at Dockweiler State Beach on November 4 (Bill Lapp) and at the Burbank Airport on November 21 (John & Marianne Thompson).

Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers were found at Highridge Park in Rolling Hills Estates on November 13 (Naresh Satyan, Jonathan Nakai) and at Veteran's Park in Sylmar from December 4-17 (Jeffrey Fenwick).

Pure **Northern "Yellow-shafted" Flickers** were near Avalon on Santa Catalina Island on November 2 (Mitchell Bailey), along the lower Los Angeles River in Long Beach on November 19 (Naresh Satyan), at Ladera Park in Los Angeles on November 25 (Van Pierszalowski), at

Lancaster City Park in the Antelope Valley on December 13 (Kimball Garrett) and in Pasadena on December 15 (Darren Dowell).

Merlins of the *pale richardsonii* subspecies were at Vina Vieja Park in Pasadena on November 4 (Luke Tiller) and in the west Antelope Valley on November 5 (Richard Crossley) and a **"Black" Merlin** of the *dark suckleyi* subspecies was at Birdcage Park in Long Beach from December 10-11 (James Maley).

Ten **Tropical Kingbirds** were present over the period and late **Western Kingbirds** were at Peck Road Water Conservation Park in Arcadia on November 11 (Judy Hwa), in Redondo Beach on November 28 (David Moody) and at Madrona Marsh in Torrance from December 9-13. A **Scissor-tailed Flycatcher** was along the lower Los Angeles River in Long Beach on November 18 (Jeff Boyd).

A rather late **Western Wood-Pewee** was at Ken Malloy Harbor Regional Park in Harbor City on November 19 (Ken Burgdorff).

Late or wintering Empidonax included four **Hammond's Flycatchers** and five **Pacific-slope Flycatchers**. Somewhat surprisingly only three **Gray Flycatchers**, usually the most expected wintering Empid, were reported.

An **Eastern Phoebe** continued at Lake Lindero in Agoura Hills through December 18 and others were discovered at Malibu Creek State Park on December 17 (Femi Faminu) and at Scherer Park in Long Beach on December 24 (Dessi Sieburth).

A **Cassin's Vireo** was at Valley Park in Burbank on November 26 (Andrew Birch). Less expected were late **Warbling Vireos** at Sand Dune Park in Manhattan Beach on November 4 (Chris Dean), at La Mirada Creek Park in La Mirada on December 13 (Jonathan Rowley) and at the West San Gabriel River Parkway Nature Trail in Lakewood on December 17 (Joyce Brady).

A **Brown Thrasher** was at Little Harbor on Santa Catalina Island on October 31 (Michael Rigney).

Pacific Wrens included one at Charlton Flat in the San Gabriel Mountains from October 28-December 10 (Corey Husic), up to two continuing at Big Rock Creek through December 4 and one at Temescal Gateway Park in Pacific Palisades from December 15-23 (Geoff Tron).

A **Sedge Wren** found in Griffith Park on October 29 and seen through October 31 established the first county record for this species (Kevin Lapp). Remarkably, another was at the Piute Ponds from November 14-December 22 (Kimball Garrett).

Jackson Lake near Big Pine hosted a **Gray Catbird** from October 7-November 6 (Naresh Satyan, Jeffer Giang) and another was found on the Lancaster CBC at Tierra Bonita Park on December 17 (Alex Coffey).

Ever more difficult to find in our drying climate were **American Dippers** along the east fork of the San Gabriel River on October 21 (Naresh Satyan, Scott Marnoy) and at the south fork of Big Rock Creek near Valyermo October 23-November 5 (Corey Husic).

Varied Thrushes have been scarce thus far this fall and winter, with birds on San Clemente Island from November 4-11 (Kandace Glanville, Ben Stalheim), at the Piute Ponds on November 5 (Naresh Satyan) and at St. Andrews Abbey in Valyermo on November 19 (Kimball Garrett).

The **American Pipit** of the rare Asian subspecies japonicus was back for another winter at the Ferraro Soccer Fields in Glendale as of November 15 (Andrew Birch). It was reported there through December 13.

Red Crossbills away from the higher San Gabriel Mountains included one at Skytower Park in Lancaster on November 17 (Kimball Garrett), one to

two in Crystallaire in the south Antelope Valley from December 4-12 (Ruth Gravance) and two at Pearblossom Park on December 8 (Kimball Garrett, Naresh Satyan).

Longspurs included two **Lapland Longspurs** and four **Chestnut-collared Longspurs** and in the west Antelope Valley on November 5 (Richard Crossley). Another **Lapland Longspur** was in Griffith Park from November 6-20 (Andrew Birch) and three were on San Clemente Island on November 16 (Justyn Stahl, Nicole Desnoyers). Another **Chestnut-collared Longspur** was in the east Antelope Valley on December 23 (Mark Stephenson). Three **Lapland Longspurs** were at this location on December 26 (Kimball Garrett)

A **Grasshopper Sparrow** was at the Ballona Wetlands on October 30 (Kevin Lapp) and nine **Clay-colored Sparrows** were recorded.

Dark-eyed "Gray-headed" Juncos were at Hahamongna Watershed Park in Pasadena through December 24, at Lake Hollywood on December 9 (Andrew Birch) and at King Gillette Ranch in Calabasas on December 18 (Sarah Ngo, Jon Fisher).

Dark-eyed "Pink-sided" Juncos were at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas from November 23-December 23 (Keith Condon), at Brace Canyon Park in Burbank on November 26 (Andrew Birch) at Veteran's Park in Sylmar on December 4 (David Bell, Luke Tiller).

A good find was a **Harris's Sparrow** at Little Harbor on Santa Catalina Island on November 1 (Laura Vandezande). About thirty **White-throated Sparrows** during the period was an above average number and a likewise above average eleven **Swamp Sparrows** were present in the county.

A **Green-tailed Towhees** included one continuing in Lakewood at the West San Gabriel River Parkway Nature Trail through December 11, one at West Los Angeles College on November 20 (Kevin Lapp) and one in Torrance on November 26 (Brett Karley).

A **Rusty Blackbird** was at Ken Malloy Harbor Regional Park in Harbor City from November 12-16 (Johnny Ivanov).

Hooded Orioles were at the Huntington Gardens in San Marino on December 17 (John DeModena) and along the Los Angeles River in Atwater Village on December 21 (Andrew Birch).

Baltimore Orioles were at Ladera Park in Los Angeles from November 19-26 (Kevin Lapp) and in Elysian Park on November 19 (Adam Van Zutphen). A wintering **Scott's Oriole** was once again at Crystallaire in the south Antelope Valley from November 22-December 16 (Ruth Gravance).

Eight **Black-and-white Warblers** were present over the period.

A **Lucy's Warbler** was in Avalon on Santa Catalina Island on November 6 (Otto Mayer, Van Pierszalowski) and a dozen **Tennessee Warblers** were reported. Late **Nashville Warblers** were at Pelona Vista Park in Palmdale on November 20 (Kimball Garrett), at Ken Malloy Harbor Regional Park on November 25 (Bob & Julie Schallman), at Leon H. Washington Park in Los Angeles on December 2 (Chris Dean) and at Maywood Riverfront Park on December 22 (Jon Feenstra).

A late **MacGillivray's Warbler** was at Sand Dune Park in Manhattan Beach on November 4 (Chris Dean).

American Redstarts were on San Clemente Island from November 1-4 (Nicole Desnoyers) and at Pearblossom Park in the Antelope Valley from December 5-10 (multiple observers). Two more were at Reseda Park on December 17 (Patricia Bates) and one was at Rancho Los Alamitos in Long Beach on December 17 (Robert Hamilton).

Northern Parulas were at Neff Park in La Mirada from November 1-12 (Jonathan Rowley), at the Piute Ponds on Edwards AFB on November 4 (Kimball Garrett), at Harbor Regional Park from November 21-28 (Gregg Gentry).



Snowy Owl | Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman (see story on page 8 & page 12-BOTS)

A **Blackburnian Warbler** was at Alamitos Bay from November 10-18 (Rob Hamilton), while **Chestnut-sided Warblers** were along the San Gabriel River in Pico Rivera on December 10 (Otto Mayer) and at Peck Road Water Conservation Park in Arcadia on December 17 (Darren Dowell).

A **Black-throated Blue Warbler** continued through October 30 at Polliwog Park in Manhattan Beach and six **Palm Warblers** were recorded.

A **Canada Warbler** was at Ken Malloy Harbor Regional Park in Harbor City from November 20-23 (Graham Hamby). As witnessed by birders, this vagrant met an unfortunate end at the hands- or more precisely talons- of a Merlin.

Painted Redstarts were in Pasadena from October 30-December 10 (Andrew Jacobson), in Brentwood through December 3 and near Birdcage Park in Long Beach from December 6-24 (James Maley).

A notable twenty plus **Summer Tanagers** were recorded during the period. **Rose-breasted Grosbeaks** were on Santa Catalina Island through October 29 and at the Virginia Country Club in Long Beach on November 11 (Merryl Edelstein), while a late **Black-headed Grosbeak** was at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas on November 19 (Cathy McFadden, Paul Clarke).


Indigo Buntings were on Santa Catalina Island on October 29 (Dessi Sieburth, Ethan Monk) and at Occidental College in Eagle Rock on November 5 (John McCormack).

Dickcissels were found along the lower Los Angeles River in Long Beach on October 30 (Jeff Boyd) and at Avalon on Santa Catalina Island also on October 30 (Andrew Howe).

The recounting above attests to how many good birds were in the county in November and December. Surely greater numbers of skilled birders

in the field get a lot of the credit for these finds, but the birds must be there to begin with.

As we continue to enjoy our winter birds, we're about to head into the beginning of spring migration. Some waterfowl, Turkey Vultures and Selasphorus hummingbirds will be on the move in January and February. Swallows will soon follow, being among our earliest passerine migrants.

Even in the short time that migration per se is not taking place, birds are still moving. In many places, a visit in the morning and afternoon can yield quite different results. Even locations that are well-birded can still turn up new vagrants. Between the changing seasons, birding hotspots and lesser-known locations to explore, there is no reason for birders to become bored in Los Angeles County. 

CHRISTMAS COUNT

by Linda Sheehan

She brought binos to her eyes in a flash.

“What is it?” I breathed.

‘Um”

“Where?” I asked

“Um, over in that bush...”

“What bush!?” I pleaded.

I scanned the area her binos seemed to be pointing.

“Shoot, it flew.” The binos came down and she grimaced.

“Any idea? I asked

“Maybe a scrub

I looked down at our Xmas Count spreadsheet. Four species. It was 10am. The sun warmed the air but in December couldn't shine into the steep walled canyon at this hour. I and my companion were having our first bird count ever in the desert of Southern California.

I had marshalled my courage to join the bird count expecting and hoping to be surrounded by experts, knowledge pouring from them and me, a willing empty vessel. But, alas, I and another newbie raised our hands when asked who wanted to or could do a moderate hike in the canyon. The old hands grinned and were visibly relieved. Barbara and I soon learned our expertise could fit on the top of a pin. Just the two of us, our binos and two of the same bird guides. Ironically, I felt ok. The pressure to perform was off. The previous bird list for the canyon was fairly small and we actually knew a lot of the flighty things. Surely we'd get some birds.

An hour and a half passed with few sightings. It was a cold and lonely hike. Common birds for the area took much discussion, constant back and forth with the guide. I'm sure the 30 or more white crown sparrows were smirking at our type A, oh so honest decision making process.

“Oh,” Barbara stopped and her binos shot up, “a ruby crowned kinglet, I think.”

“Where?” I wildly scanned with my binos.

“Halfway up that green bush.”

Oh no, I thought, not again.

“Which bush right or left of that snag?”

“Which snag?” Our ‘kinglet’ was no doubt halfway to LA.

Fortunately, a few ravens and lovely, highly visible and noisy scrub jays allowed us to count them. Another fruitless hour passed, and we realized it didn't matter what our level of expertise. The canyon, dry as a bone, had very few birds. The

sun was now overhead, and sweat was gathering in various places on our tired bodies. We talked about lots of things other than birding and were enjoying each other's company. Our search for shade overcame any eagerness to find existing avian. We guzzled water, we nibbled and wondered how many miles we'd gone. Perhaps we'd done our duty and could turn around and head back to await the pizza party and our walk of shame when everyone announced their total count.

I looked around for a place to relieve myself. Barbara announced she'd head back a bit and wait for me. Well aware of the ferocity of the desert flora, I slowly picked my way off the trail to a copse of mesquite. I squatted and let nature take its course. I was aware of the silence and grateful for the little bit of shade. My ears were still attuned to any bird song, grimly thinking now the rarity would come. I sensed something and turned my head. Only a few feet from me a lovely rust colored fox appeared. Neither of us were startled. There was a silent recognition, followed by the fox delicately stepping out of my view. My knees screamed a bit as I staggered upright. I felt so grateful and forgot about the birds until Jessica urgently called my name. Stumbling out of the bushes I saw her pointing to the sky with a huge smile on her face. Above us in languid circles were two unmistakable red-tailed hawks. Their tails caught the sun as we held our breaths looking up, binos glued to our eyes.


“Do you think they are a pair?” She was excited.

“Are they different sizes?” I spoke, now realizing I knew something about these magnificent birds. Yah for me!

Gleefully we entered the name on the spreadsheet. So happy and proud.

I mentioned my encounter with the fox to her as we headed back. She thought it was extremely cool.

Two more species were soon added to our list (thank goodness for hummingbirds and doves!).

But it was the red Gray Fox I brought home in my thoughts. The single quiet encounter reminded me birding can shine a light on all the natural wonders no matter what your level of expertise. 



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Scaring Birds for Science — Mario Díaz
Wednesday, January 11, 2023
7:30 PM — 8:30 PM

The distance at which birds flee when approached by a human observer is a measure of how they perceive predation risk. We are developing a large scale project to measure flight distances for as many individuals and species as possible in cities, and their nearby rural surroundings, along an elevational and latitudinal gradient along the west coast of the Americas—from California to Chile. Data will allow us to understand and predict how birds will respond to changes in climate, human disturbance and biological communities. We are requesting the help of local birders to collect data as part of this international initiative during the 2024 and 2025 breeding seasons.

Mario Díaz will coordinate the ‘American Gradients’ project. Mario is a full professor at the National Museum of Natural Sciences in Madrid, Spain, as well as an active birder and member of the Spanish ornithological society. He has analysed latitudinal trends on bird fear in Europe, together with a team of more than 20 ornithologists, each working in her/his own city, from Southern Spain to the Arctic Circle. Several highly cited scientific publications have shown the utility of these analyses to understand how birds deal with our increasingly humanized world.

The program will be presented online at:
<https://bluejeans.com/370150254/6854>