

WESTERN Tanager



An Urban Forest for the Birds

Travis Longcore

A fact that has stuck with me from the research for the Los Angeles County Breeding Bird Atlas in the 1990s is that there was not a single neighborhood in the county that did not have at least ten breeding bird species. Residents can enjoy birds wherever they live. But beyond that minimum, the number of birds that are found in developed neighborhoods across the region depends on the number of trees, their size, species, and diversity, and associated landscaping. Most of Los Angeles Audubon Society’s territory is developed, so the urban forest is critically important to the diversity and number of birds to be seen and enjoyed by our members. This article discusses the attributes of urban trees necessary to support birds, some of the conservation work that we have done to protect trees for birds in the City of Los Angeles, and reflects on the changes in approach needed to create a more biodiverse urban forest.

What do our native birds need in terms of trees in our developed neighborhoods? They need places to forage. Cal State LA Professor and LA Audubon Board Member Eric Wood and his student Sevan Esaian researched what trees wintering and resident birds used in residential neighborhoods (Wood and Esaian 2020). The trees that had the most value to wintering birds were two natives, Coast Live Oak and California Sycamore, along with some nonnatives, Chinese

Elm, Carrotwood, Southern Live Oak, Mexican Fan Palm, and Holly Oak. Of these, the native trees were far better for wintering birds. For resident birds, American Sweetgum (also known as Liquidambar) and Ash species were also used disproportionately to their prevalence. This research suggests some general rules: native trees are superior for birds: if not using locally native species, California natives are good, then North American natives (e.g., Southern Live Oak), and then selected global trees, mostly from the northern hemisphere and related to trees native to North America and California (e.g., oaks, ash, elms).

Resident and migratory birds in neighborhoods need space. The greater the volume (width and height) of tree canopy, the better. Professor Wood’s research shows this as well, and that the amount of tree cover correlates with neighborhood income. This is a common theme in urban forestry research, where it is well known that “trees grow on money” (Schwarz et al. 2015). State and local initiatives are designed to remedy this discrepancy, although focused primarily on the benefits of trees in terms of shade, with any bird habitat a side benefit if done well.

Shifting attention from street trees, which are often the focus of planting efforts, to private properties, research also

shows that landscapes with more cover of native plants support greater numbers of birds, and particularly important plants are native oaks, Toyon, manzanitas, and sages (Smallwood and Wood 2023).

A connected landscape is also a benefit for resident birds. Older research from the Mediterranean region shows that the urban forest, in forms as simple as a tree-lined street, helps to connect habitats for birds across the landscape (Fernández-Juricic 2000), so the maximum number of resident bird species will be found if the urban tree canopy (or other shrub habitats) is more continuous. Migratory birds, in contrast, are quite good at finding habitat patches wherever they occur. Anyone who has reviewed the impressive bird list for Esperanza Elementary School near MacArthur Park can see this to be true. Migrants will find and use trees and shrubs in the densest of neighborhoods (if we protect and restore those habitats!).

Los Angeles Audubon Society regularly advocates on behalf of the urban forest as bird habitat and for its many benefits. As individual issues arise, we often provide formal comments to jurisdictions.

As an example, in 2019 the City of Los Angeles proposed to remove 15,000 trees as part of its Sidewalk Repair Program. In the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the project the City argued that this would not be a significant impact because they calculated that even though canopy would decline initially, by the end of the 30-year project period it would recover to what it was at the outset. LA Audubon submitted a detailed comment letter in 2020, which emphasized two key points:

- The City was proposing to remove tree species that were used more by birds and replace them with species used less by birds, which would result in significant impacts; and
- The City was proposing to replace trees that were taller and had larger canopy coverage with trees that would be shorter with smaller canopy coverage, thereby downsizing the urban forest significantly, which would also result in significant impacts.

We wrote in the letter:

Our Conservation Committee reviewed the tree removal and replacement notices from the Bureau of Street Services and compiled those related to sidewalk repair from September 2017 to April 2020. We categorized them by species and by tree stature (small, <30 ft, medium, 30–70 ft, large, >70 ft). Of the 301 tree removals and 272 tree replacements, there was a loss of 101 large-stature trees (127 large tree removals, 26 large tree replacements), an increase of 98 small-stature trees (8 small tree removals, 106 small tree replacements), and a loss of 33 medium-stature trees (166 medium tree removals, 133 medium replacement trees). These trends show that the City is installing shorter trees as part of the [Sidewalk Replacement Program] and consequently the volume of habitat, biomass, and environmental benefits of these trees will be lower even at the same canopy cover. It is not possible to

make up for the loss of height, form, and leaf density of large trees like American Sweetgum by replacing them with small-stature trees such as Crape Myrtle. Even if the canopy cover were replaced, the total benefits to wildlife would be reduced.

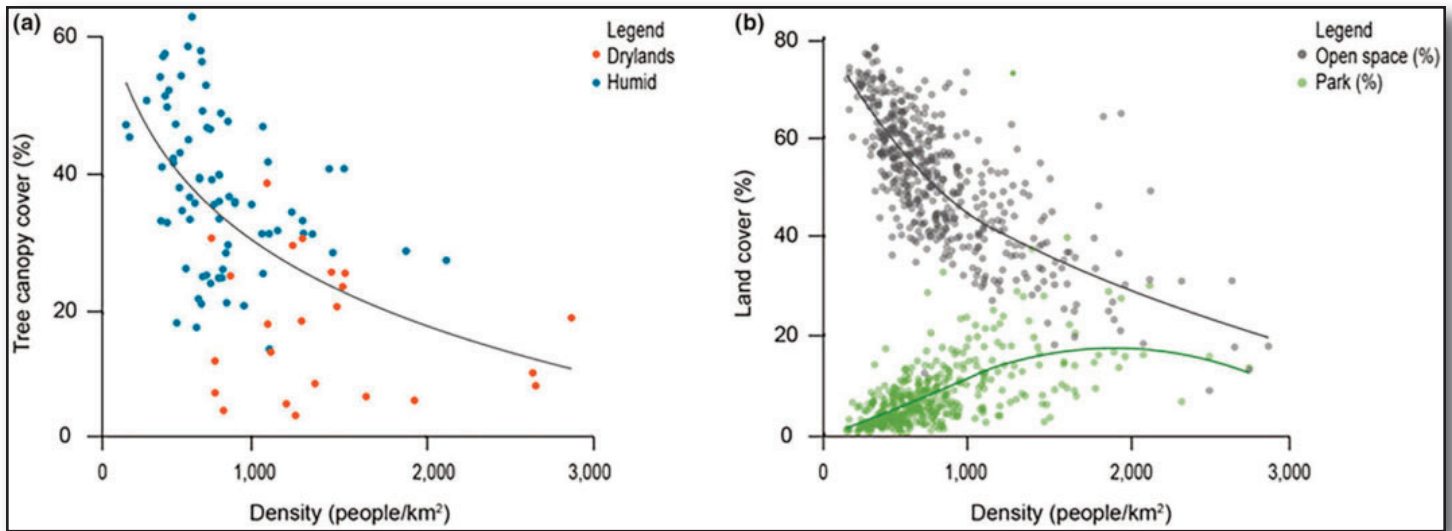
The City approved the EIR anyway and two tree advocacy organizations sued to have the EIR set aside. As has been reported in the media, the case was recently decided and the judge ruled that the City had erred, based in large part on the arguments and evidence that LA Audubon had put forth in the record.

Even though there was a victory in that case, the City of Los Angeles has a replanting palette that removes natives, does not take birds into consideration, and dramatically downsizes the urban forest. The Los Angeles region has a long way to go if it is to maintain, let alone increase, the tree canopy within neighborhoods.

Two problematic trends in urban forestry are working against us. Urban foresters are recommending smaller and smaller trees to avoid future perceived potential conflicts with infrastructure and to reduce the costs of maintenance such as pruning and watering. Give any tree long enough and it will need to be managed; avoiding large trees is not going to be the maintenance-free future they imagine. Urban foresters also often promote trees from all over the world to increase the number of different species planted in a city on the belief this will protect against disease or a pest knocking out a lot of trees at once. Although this technically increases the number of species, it is terrible for birds, butterflies, and native insects that are part of a healthy ecosystem.

It will take more than simply changing planting requirements to increase tree cover and bird habitat. Focus needs to be on more than tree planting, which is the feel-good, easy part. We need to design and redesign public spaces and infrastructure so that they provide good growing conditions for trees, rather than accepting poor conditions of tiny tree wells and compacted soils and only planting trees that will tolerate them. That means developing mechanisms to ensure that trees are watered as needed, even during drought conditions. The water investment is worth it. Tree roots also need oxygen, so providing a large enough volume of uncompacted soil is essential. It is insufficient to dig a hole and hope for the best, especially for street trees, because the soil under roads and sidewalks is intentionally compacted and therefore can be impenetrable to tree roots. We need bigger tree wells, which means retrofitting existing sidewalks for this reason wherever it is possible. It could also mean using engineering approaches to extend tree root zones under pavement whenever hardscape work is done. This can be accomplished by using what are called “structural soils,” which have sufficient supporting structure to allow pavement on top of them but maintain spaces within the soil to allow roots to grow. Durable resin systems known as “silva cells” can accomplish this as well, providing large areas for root growth even with sidewalks or heavily used plazas above.

The future of the urban forest cannot be considered separately from the rampant construction and redevelopment in existing neighborhoods in Los Angeles. My colleagues and I have shown that the urban forest in Los



Effects of population density on tree canopy cover in the 100 largest urbanized areas in the United States (a) and on the amount of open space and park space (b). Reprinted from McDonald et al. (2023) under a Creative Commons license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Angeles County is being rapidly depleted in lower density residential areas as owners cut down trees to add building area and hardscape (Lee et al. 2017). This takes the form of mansionization, construction of accessory dwelling units, and even paving front yards for parking to accommodate the additional residents. Research on urban areas around the world shows that tree canopy and open space decline with increased residential population density (McDonald et al. 2023). Housing density advocates point to some cities with high density and relatively high tree cover as examples of how density and environmental quality do not have to be contradictory. But this decoupling of housing density and tree cover is not what is happening in Los Angeles and the Los Angeles region is already the densest urbanized area in the nation.

The design and construction of human-scale, high-density housing with substantial associated greenspace is nowhere to be found in any of the current efforts to construct more housing in Los Angeles. That kind of transformation would take the purchase and massing of many lots to be able to spare larger areas from development and use them for trees and bird-friendly landscaping. What we have currently is simply the upzoning of small lots without taking care to ensure that there is any space left for trees and other vegetation, and the landscape and our urban nature is paying the price. In the City of Los Angeles specifically, officials are proposing to take affordable mid-density courtyard apartment neighborhoods and convert them into lot line to lot line apartment blocks. In other places they are proposing to upzone whole lower density neighborhoods with no means, or even idea of how, to protect or increase greenspace and habitat. No thought is being given to the livability of the future city and the open space element of the General Plan has not been updated since being written in 1973.

Los Angeles Audubon Society focuses on these issues because even though many people travel from their residence to watch birds, the most contact we have with birds is where we live. The pleasure and enrichment that birds can bring to everyday life should not be an afterthought (at best) in urban

planning. Having the political fortitude to protect and enhance urban nature is not easy, but it is our aspiration to push elected officials in this direction, for the benefit of everyone and for the birds. 🐦

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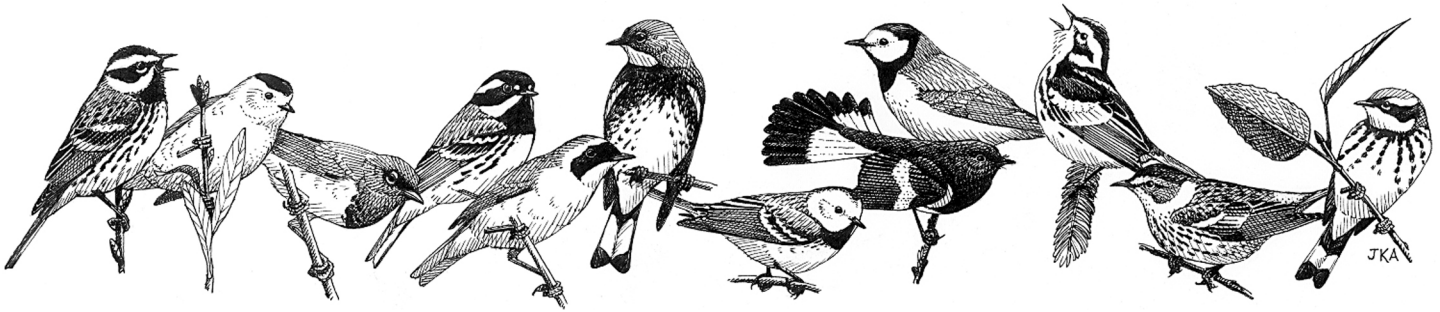
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BIRDS OF THE SEASON

February 2023

by Jon Fisher

AND THE RAINS CAME... LA NINA YEARS such as this are generally drier than normal, but this winter proved to be an exception. By the end of the January most areas were close to normal precipitation for the entire season. Another massive winter storm came at the end of February, putting us comfortably above normal. The sheer volume of water also altered many birding locales. To put things in perspective, this winter will be only the fourth to have above much average precipitation since the blockbuster winter of 2004-2005.

There is nothing like spring following a wet winter; and spring comes early to coastal southern California. In contrast to most of the country, signs of the season were noticeable by February. The landscape was lush and breeding activity was prevalent among resident birds well before most spring migrants start to arrive.

Though it was generally not a notable winter for irruptive species, American Robins were present in well above normal numbers throughout southern California. These events are most frequently caused by the presence or absence of food sources driving birds outside their regular ranges. Quite rare in comparison to robins, but also noted in above average numbers on the coastal slope were Townsend's Solitaires and Brown Creepers.

Of course, there were plenty of interesting birds to be found and chased; no surprise there. Los Angeles County is very productive for birding, with a wide variety of habitats promoting species diversity and a considerable number of birders ensuring fewer birds go undetected.

A **Tundra Swan** was briefly at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas on January 8 (Austin Gonzalez).

Diving ducks of interest included up to two **White-winged Scoters**, and, up to five **Black Scoters** off Dockweiler State Beach in El Segundo from January 21-25 (Richard Barth), and a **Long-tailed Duck** that ranged between the Ballona Creek mouth and Dockweiler from January 3-February 1 (Naresh Satyan, Chris Dean).

A **White-winged Dove** was in Duarte near Encanto Park from January 15-February 10 (Tracy Drake), with two there on January 19 (Tom Miko).

First seen on December 29 at the Rio Hondo Spreading Basins in Pico Rivera, a remarkably long-staying **Sandhill Crane** remained through February 14, sometimes moving to the San Gabriel Coastal Spreading Basins less than a mile away.

American Oystercatchers included

birds at the Los Angeles Harbor through January 15, at the Ballona Creek mouth in Playa del Rey from January 28-February 18 (Bob Packard) and at Malibu Lagoon on February 15 (Naresh Satyan). Several other likely hybrid American x Black Oystercatchers were also reported.

The returning wintering **Pacific Golden-Plover** along lower Ballona Creek was present through February 4. At least five **Mountain Plovers** continued near Palmdale in the Antelope Valley through January 5 and up to fifteen were in the east valley near 110th Street East and Ave. I from January 25-February 3. Also of note was a **Red Knot** at the Ballona Creek mouth reported through January 8.

Nine **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** were reported during the period, though some of these certainly represent repeat sightings of the same individuals.

Pelagic birds of note included a rare **Tufted Puffin** off the Palos Verdes Peninsula on December 26 (Jess Morton) and a **Brown Booby** off the Palos Verdes Peninsula on January 21 (Jon Feenstra, et al).

Seventeen **Neotropic Cormorants** were recorded in total, but since these birds move around, the total number of birds is somewhat lower.

Yellow-crowned Night-Herons numbered thirty-one, though these birds were concentrated at just two locations; Alamitos Bay and near the Ballona Creek mouth. Notably, eighteen were at Burton Chace County Park in Marina Del Rey on January 16 (Lynzie Flynn, Henry Witzken).

Small numbers of **California Condors**—with a high count of six—were reported from December 28-February 21 along the I-5 corridor between Castaic Lake and Frazier Park.

Forty-five **Swainson's Hawks** at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas on January 6 was a notable number so early in the season (Keith Condon). A half dozen **Zone-tailed Hawks** were reported over the period, with some of these sightings likely pertaining the same bird(s).

A **Short-eared Owl** on San Clemente Island on December 29 was the only one reported (Kandace Glanville).

Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers were on Santa Catalina Island on January 8 (Laura Vandezande) and at Veteran's Park in Sylmar through February 20. A half dozen **Northern "Yellow-shafted" Flickers** were also present during the period.

A **Merlin** of the pale "Prairie" subspecies (*richardsonii*) was near the Rancho Sierra Golf Course in the east Antelope Valley on February 12 (David Bell).

Dusky-capped Flycatchers included a bird at Peck Park in San Pedro from December 28-January 14 (Brian Daniels) and a returning wintering bird at the Sepulveda Basin in Van Nuys from January 16-February 23 (Jon Fisher). Equally rare in winter was an **Ash-throated Flycatcher** at the Sepulveda Basin from January 6-29 (Nurit Katz, Adam Long). Rarer still was a wintering **Brown-crested Flycatcher** back at the South Coast

Botanic Garden in Palos Verdes Estates and reported from January 1-4 (Nancy Salem).

Six **Tropical Kingbirds** were present this winter. A particularly good county bird was a **Thick-billed Kingbird** first seen in Griffith Park on October 31 last year (Curtis Marantz) and spotted again at the Los Angeles Zoo on February 13 (Mario Pineda). Common as a migrant and summer visitor but still rare in winter was a **Western Kingbird** at Madrona Marsh in Torrance through February 23.

A returning wintering **Least Flycatcher** was at the West San Gabriel River Parkway Nature Trail in Lakewood from February 4-21 (Christine Jacobs). Six **Hammond's Flycatchers** were present over the period as were seven **Pacific-slope Flycatchers**.

Eastern Phoebes were at Scherer Park in Long Beach through January 19, at Lake Lindero in Agoura Hills through February 9, at Castaic Lagoon from December 25-February 21 (Joel Moser, Jeffrey Fenwick), and at Malibu Creek State Park on January 15 (Colin & Jo Drummond).

A **Bell's Vireo** was a Rio de Los Angeles Park in Los Angeles from January 25-26 (Mark Wilson) where one was present last February. It seems possible that this bird wintered locally.

Cassin's Vireos were at Alondra Park Reservoir on January 7 (Becky Turley, Merryl Edelstein, Christine Jacobs), at Birdcage Park in Long Beach on January 25 (Benjamin Ewing) and in the Sepulveda Basin from January 31-February 18 (Rebecca Marschall).

A very early spring migrant **Cliff Swallow** was at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas on January 26 (Keith Condon).

Pacific Wrens were at Little Santa Anita Canyon above Monrovia on

December 27 (Darren Dowell), continuing at Temescal Gateway Park in Pacific Palisades through January 5, below Switzer's Picnic Area in the San Gabriel Mountains on January 28 (David Wooley) and at La Mirada Park from February 23-24 (Jonathan Rowley). This last bird as initially thought to be a much rarer Winter Wren, but vocalizations ultimately appeared to be a better match for Pacific. Far rarer—and only the second found in the county—was a **Sedge Wren** continuing at the Piute Ponds on Edwards AFB through January 19.

Three **Lapland Longspurs** were in the east Antelope Valley on December 26 (Kimball Garrett), with up to five being reported there through February 12. Up to eleven were in the west valley near Neenach in early February (Richard Crossley) and as many as sixteen **Chestnut-collared Longspurs** were concurrently in the same area (Richard Crossley).

Possibly a continuing bird, a **Grasshopper Sparrow** was seen at Malibu Creek State Park on February 21 (William Buswell).

Clay-colored Sparrows were at the Rio Hondo Spreading Grounds in Pico Rivera from January 6-7 (John Rodgers), at Pierce Brothers Cemetery in Westlake Village on January 15 (Dan Cooper) and at the Westwood Recreation Center on February 21 (Richard Hayes).

Dark-eyed "Gray-headed" Juncos were at Hahamongna Watershed Park in Pasadena through January 31, at King Gillette Ranch in Calabasas through January 2, in Monrovia through December 27 and at Satellite Park in Cerritos on January 19 (Charles & Thomas Lopez). **Dark-eyed "Pink-sided" Juncos** were at Highridge Park in Rolling Hills Estates on December 28 (Lucas Stephenson), at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas through

February 22 and in Juniper Hills from February 25-26 (Kimball Garrett).

A **Harris's Sparrow** was in Beverly Hills from January 29-February 22 (William Tyrer). A notable thirty **White-throated Sparrows** were also recorded.

Rarely documented in the county was a **Sagebrush Sparrow** in the west Antelope Valley in early February (Richard Crossley). Separating this species from the closely related Bell's Sparrow offers challenges, with some overlap in characteristics.

Swamp Sparrows included one at Colorado Lagoon through January 1, up to four at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas through February 23 and one along the Los Angeles River in Glendale through January 11.

Wintering **Green-tailed Towhees** were at the Dominguez Gap Wetlands in Long Beach from December 25-January 20 (Jack Wickel) and at the West San Gabriel River Parkway Nature Trail in Lakewood through February 22.

A **Scott's Oriole** continued in Crystallaire through February 18 and six Hooded Orioles—common in spring and summer but quite rare in winter—were found on the coastal slope of the county.

Baltimore Orioles were at the San Gabriel Coastal Basin Spreading Grounds in Pico Rivera from December 26-January 15 (Catherine Eldridge, John Drayer) and at the Los Angeles Country Club on January 1 (Kimball Garrett).

Five **Black-and-white Warblers** were recorded during the period, while **Tennessee Warblers** were at Colorado Lagoon in Long Beach on January 12 (Joyce Brady) and near Birdcage Park in Long Beach from January 25-February 23 (James Maley). A **Lucy's Warbler** was at Col. Leon H. Washington Park in Los Angeles on February 15 (Chris Dean) and an above average nine **Nashville Warblers** were found.

A true rarity in the county was a **Cape May Warbler** back for its second winter at Loyola Marymount University in Westchester from January 1-February 21 (Calvin Bonn). This very cooperative bird was enjoyed by many birders.


A **Northern Parula** was at Ken Malloy Harbor Regional Park in Harbor City through January 2 and a **Palm Warbler** continued along the lower Los Angeles River at Avila Park in Long Beach through February 21. A late season find was a **Pine Warbler** at La Mirada Regional Community Park in La Mirada from February 13-20 (Jonathan Rowley).

Painted Redstarts continued near Birdcage Park in Long Beach through February 23 and in Brentwood through January 25.

About sixteen **Summer Tanagers** were recorded over the period and **Black-headed Grosbeaks** were at the Los Angeles County Arboretum in Arcadia on December 27 (Peter Beck) and at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library in Los Angeles on January 25 (Rebecca Marschall).

January and February certainly had plenty to offer, but now that most

of winter is behind us, it's difficult to imagine any birder not anticipating the onset of spring migration. In fact, this has already begun, albeit slowly. The number and variety of migrants will increase in March and April and rewarding "first of spring" sightings, visiting migrant hotspots such as Bear Divide, and the occasional vagrant will all contribute to the enjoyment birders find in this season.

The southern foothills and canyons of the San Gabriel Mountains can offer great spring birding for Neotropical migrants, as can the deserts. Coastal promontories will also be worth checking, not for landbirds, but for loons, scoters, Brants and others heading to much more northerly breeding areas. Adding to that, surprises can turn up almost anytime and anywhere. 



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EVENING PROGRAM PRESENTATION
Shorebird migration in the Pacific Flyway—hops, skips, and trans-continental jumps
Wednesday, March 8, 2023
7:30 PM–8:30 PM

Shorebirds are the champions of migration: their flights span hemispheres and defy our preconceived notions about what is possible. The shorebirds of the Pacific Flyway exhibit the most extreme of these migrations, but also a wide variety of other migratory strategies. This talk will highlight how shorebirds of the Pacific Flyway are altering their migrations and responding to global change, as well as what we can do to help them along the way.

Dr. Nathan Senner is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Environmental Conservation at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Following his undergraduate studies at Carleton College, he was awarded a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship to follow Hudsonian Godwits on their epic migrations. He then received his PhD from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology at Cornell University. Now, his research group continues to follow godwits, but has also branched out to study long-distance migratory shorebirds wherever they occur.

The meeting will be presented online at:
<https://bluejeans.com/702950886/5412>

Photograph: Julian Garcia-Walther

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