



## BIRDS OF THE SEASON — April 2021 | By Jon Fisher

**W**ith the onset of spring, rainfall remained sparse, though this was hardly unexpected. With precipitation at about twenty-five percent of normal, we are now past any chance to make up the deficit. Much of the western United States is in the same situation, or worse. Thankfully, plants and animals are fairly well-adapted to deal with these conditions- at least in the short term. Humans, with their voracious appetite for water, are less so.

Despite the lack of rain, things were looking spring-like by March, perennial streams were full of water and the landscape generally looked green. The stage was set for passerines arriving from the south.

Birds have sacrificed a lot to be able to fly and migrate long distances. Teeth and solid bones have been lost through evolution, ultra-light feathers have replaced fur and scales and many other physiological adaptations have been adopted. Yet despite all this, their abilities remain incredible. Most migratory songbirds weigh a few pennies or less, yet they are capable of persevering through inclement weather, over large bodies of water and manage to travel hundreds or even thousands of miles each spring and fall.

These migrations are one of the main attractions of birding, as they offer the seasonal changing of birds and the excitement of vagrants. It is clearly an advantage for the birds too, giving them the chance to exploit temporary resources on breeding grounds and retreat to more hospitable climates in winter.

Following the early arriving swallows, other migrants began to move through in March,

with Western Kingbirds, Pacific-slope Flycatchers, Warbling Vireos, Bullock's and Hooded Orioles and others making an appearance. By the first half April, activity ramped up considerably.

Late April is the peak of spring migration and while there are many good places to see birds, there is none better than Bear Divide in the western San Gabriel Mountains. This relatively recently discovered location is already well known to birders. It is one of the top locations in the state to observe migrating songbirds.

Through a geographical happenstance, this location funnels northbound migrants up a long canyon and ultimately through a narrow divide that offers easy access by vehicle. Peak days last spring offered 10,000 migrants in a single morning, with numbers plummeting three to four hours after sunrise. Since a majority of these birds continue on their flight path rather than alighting, this does make for a great opportunity to see large numbers of birds and to sharpen skills identifying these birds in flight.

This spring at the divide, a bird-banding station has been active here in addition to a bird census and thus far results have been excellent. As good as Bear Divide may be, migrants will be moving throughout the county and nearly any location can be worth covering.

As always there was a nice mix of birds to be found in the county in March and April. Here is a look at what was around.

The returning “**Eurasian**” **Green-winged Teal** continued at the San Gabriel Coastal Basin Spreading Grounds in Pico Rivera through March 25.

Late **Common Goldeneyes** were at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas from March 31–April 9 (Keith Condon), on the Los Angeles River in Glendale from March 31–April 6 (Andrew Birch), at the Piute Ponds on March 31 (Dessi Sieburth, Susan Gilliland) and on the California Aqueduct in the west Antelope Valley on April 10 (Kerry Ross).

A few **Spotted Doves** persist in Compton south of downtown Los Angeles, with up to two reported there through April 3. **Inca Doves** continued in Lake Los Angeles, with two being reported there through February 21. **Common Ground Doves** were reported in Cerritos through April 4, with up to four observed there. Lastly, a **White-winged Dove** was in San Dimas from March 16–22 (Marcus England).

Scarce in winter were single **Vaux’s Swifts** in Glendale through February 19 and over Glendora on February 20 (Michael Peralez).

A half dozen **American Oystercatchers** were noted coastally over the period, with probably fewer than that number involved in these records. Muddying the waters is the fact that the purity of these birds is in question; as many of them carry at least some Black Oystercatcher genes. This makes for a complex identification challenge with a mix of obvious hybrids and less obvious intergrades, with a few pure Americans thrown in for good measure.

The returning wintering **Pacific Golden-Plover** along lower Ballona Creek in Marina del Rey was reported through March 17. Over two dozen **Mountain Plovers** continued at the A&G Sod Farm in Palmdale through March 3 and a half dozen were northeast of there through February 21.

Rare in the county as spring migrants were three **Red Knots** at Del Rey Lagoon in Playa Del Rey on April 15 (Johnny Ivanov).

Also quite scarce in the county was a **Franklin’s Gull** along lower Ballona Creek on March 15 (Gregory Gladkov).

**Lesser Black-backed Gulls** included a continuing bird at the San Gabriel Coastal Basin Spreading Grounds in Pico Rivera through February 27, one at Peck Road Park in Arcadia through February 20 and one at Malibu Lagoon on March 22 (Becky Turley).

**Neotropic Cormorants** were present in relatively high numbers for such a recent colonizer of the county. Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas hosted varying numbers through April 16, with a maximum of seventeen present there (Keith Condon). Others were reported from at least ten locations on the coastal slope of the county.

A continuing **American Bittern** was at the Piute Ponds on Edwards AFB through March 24 and the **Little Blue Heron** at Cabrillo Beach in San Pedro was seen through March 6.

Up to three **Yellow-crowned Night-Herons** continued at Alamitos Bay through March 4, while up to five were at Sims Bio Pond in Long Beach through April 13. Another was at the Ballona Freshwater Marsh through April 3.

At least two **California Condors** continued to be seen in the Gorman and Quail Lake area through March 5.

A rare find in spring was a **Broad-winged Hawk** over the San Gabriel Mountains near Cedar Spring on April 6 (Loren Wright).

**Swainson’s Hawks** were much in evidence, with the greatest numbers moving along the south facing slopes of the San Gabriel Mountains in March. The highlight was a flock of 400 seen on March 13 (Lance Benner).

**Zone-tailed Hawks** were in Monrovia through April 5, in Pomona on March 2 (Robert Talmadge), above Glendora on March 5 (Johnny Ivanov), in Duarte from March 8–20 (David Hurst), in Altadena on March 20 (Luke Tiller) and in Arcadia on April 12 (Steven Kurniawidjaja). These records may represent as many as four individuals.

A wintering **Rough-legged Hawk** continuing near Gorman through March 5 was enjoyed by many birders. It has been a long wait as this species was last recorded in the county in 2012.

Three **Long-eared Owls** in Wildwood Canyon in Santa Clarita on February 19 were of interest (Colleen Lee). More expected were small numbers in the Antelope Valley at the Piute Ponds, Apollo Park and elsewhere.

**Northern “Yellow-shafted” Flickers** were in Manhattan Beach on February 20 (Michael Renicke), at Angelus Rosedale Cemetery on February 21 (Brad Rumble) and continuing at the Village Green Condominiums in Los Angeles through March 28 and at Bonelli Regional park in San Dimas through March 9.

A wintering **Dusky-capped Flycatcher** continued at Heartwell Park in Long Beach through April 16. New birds were found at Lake Balboa in the San Fernando Valley on March 20 (Jane Stavert, Amy Worrell) and at Runnymede Park in Winnetka from March 22-23 (Richard Barth).

The wintering **Ash-throated Flycatcher** at Madrona Marsh continued through February 25 as did one at Willow Springs Park in Long Beach through March 21.

The returning wintering **Brown-crested Flycatcher** at the South Coast Botanic Garden in Rolling Hills remained through February 21 as did one at Michigan Park in Whittier through February 23.

**Tropical Kingbirds** continued at El Dorado Park in Long Beach through February 17 and at Entradero Park in Torrance through April 10 and in the Ballona area through March 2. Others were at Whaley Park in Long Beach from February 26-28 (Brian Daniels) and at the DeForest Wetlands in Long Beach through March 12.

An early **Olive-sided Flycatcher** was at El Dorado Park in Long Beach on April 1 (Derek Hameister) and the wintering **Greater Pewee** at Lacy Park in San Marino was reported through March 26.

**Hammond’s Flycatchers** were at Whaley Park in Long Beach from February 24-March 12 (Chris Dean), continuing at Alondra Park Reservoir through March 1, at Pan American Park in Lakewood through March 24 and at Carr Park in Glendale through March 27. Another was found at Lake Balboa in the San Fernando Valley on March 5 (Larry Schmahl). A **Dusky Flycatcher** continued at Willow Springs Park in Long Beach through April 2.

**Pacific-slope Flycatchers** continued at Lacy Park in San Marino through February 19, at the South Coast Botanic Garden in Rolling Hills through February 19 and at Descanso Gardens in La Canada on February 21.

The returning wintering **Eastern Phoebe** along the Los Angeles River in Glendale continued through March 27 at the Glendale Narrows Riverwalk.

A **Cassin’s Vireo** was at the Village Green Condominiums in Los Angeles on March 14 (Don Sterba). Remarkably early was a singing **Bell’s Vireo** at Rio de Los Angeles State Park in Los Angeles on February 24 (Marcos Trinidad).

A **Bank Swallow** was at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas on March 12 (Rod Higbie) and a **Purple Martin** was there on April 1 (Keith Condon). An influx of **Purple Martins** occurred in mid-April with four near Palmdale, thirteen in San Pedro, one in Harbor City and one at the Piute Ponds on April 14. Several of these were recorded through April 16. This species is now generally a very scarce spring transient in the county.

The **White Wagtail** along the Los Angeles River in Vernon continued through March 21.

A **Grasshopper Sparrow** at the San Gabriel Coastal Basin Spreading Grounds in Pico Rivera remained through February 26, a half dozen **Clay-colored Sparrows** were present during the period and a **“Red” Fox Sparrow** continued in Rolling Hills through February 25.

Six **Dark-eyed “Pink-sided” Juncos** were present, while **Dark-eyed “Gray-headed” Juncos** continued at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas through March 31, in Juniper Hills through April 14, in San Dimas Canyon through February 27.

At least eight **White-throated Sparrows** were in the county during the period.

A **Swamp Sparrow** continued along the Los Angeles River in Glendale through February 22 and another was found at Del Rey Lagoon in Playa Del Rey on March 12 (Michael Hilchey).

A half dozen **Green-tailed Towhees** were present, represented by both new and continuing birds.

**Yellow-headed Blackbirds** continued at the Ballona Freshwater Marsh through March 30 with up to ten reported there.

The wintering **Baltimore Oriole** at the South Coast Botanic Garden in Rolling Hills continued through February 21, a **Hooded Oriole** was at Los Altos Park in Long Beach on February 27 (David Ornellas) and a wintering **Scott's Oriole** continued in Llano through March 13, with two there on March 4.

A **Rusty Blackbird** first discovered on November 29 lingered on San Clemente Island through March 18.

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

A **Tennessee Warbler** was at Rotary Centennial Park in Long Beach from February 22-26 and a **Lucy's Warbler** was there from February 24-March 1 (Robb Hamilton).

Scarce in winter was a **Nashville Warbler** at the South Coast Botanic Garden in Rolling Hills from February 19-20 (Tracy Drake). Others were at El Dorado Park in Long Beach on February 20 (Keith Quinlivan) and at the Huntington Gardens in San Marino through March 11.

The wintering **American Redstart** at Polliwog Park in Manhattan Beach was seen through March 6. **Palm Warblers** continued at the San Gabriel Coastal Basin Spreading Grounds in Pico Rivera through April 4, at El Dorado Park in Long Beach through April 16 and at the West San Gabriel River Parkway Nature Trail in Lakewood through April 14.

Always a nice find, a **Black-throated Green Warbler** was at Col. Leon H. Washington Park in Los Angeles from April 3-9 (Richard Barth). The easy to find wintering **Painted Redstart** at Inglewood Park Cemetery continued through March 14.

A **Summer Tanager** continued at Wardlow Park in Long Beach through April 14. Others were at Pt. Dume in Malibu on March 8 (Justin MacMartin) and at the Village Green in Los Angeles through April 13.

A **Black-headed Grosbeak** that wintered in Pasadena was seen through March 10 and another continued in Glendora through February 18.

An **Indigo Bunting** was in Woodland Hills on April 11 (Craig Didden).

As we head into May and the end of spring migration, things should get more interesting. Migrant passerine numbers will slowly decrease, but mountain birding will become more productive and the possibility for vagrants increases.

While on the subject of mountain birding, we continue to feel the effects of last summer's disastrous Bobcat Fire. A few additional areas within the closure area have reopened, but others are slated to remain closed for another year. Impacts on favored birding areas have been mixed, with some surviving relatively intact and others severely burned.

Buckhorn Campground and Chilao Flat are in relatively good shape, but Charlton Flat, Santa Anita Canyon and the San Gabriel River's West Fork appear to have fared less well. Whatever areas are accessible will benefit from birder coverage to document both immediate changes in birdlife and those over a decades-long recovery.

Though this past winter's scant rainfall will have an impact, breeding activity will be pronounced through June. As always, it is a good practice to watch for any behavior indicating reproductive activity and enter that data on eBird lists. The more information these lists contain, the greater their value.

By the time the next column appears, southbound shorebirds will have done so as well. There is but the briefest of lulls between the spring and fall movements of birds. 🐦