

WESTERN TANAGER

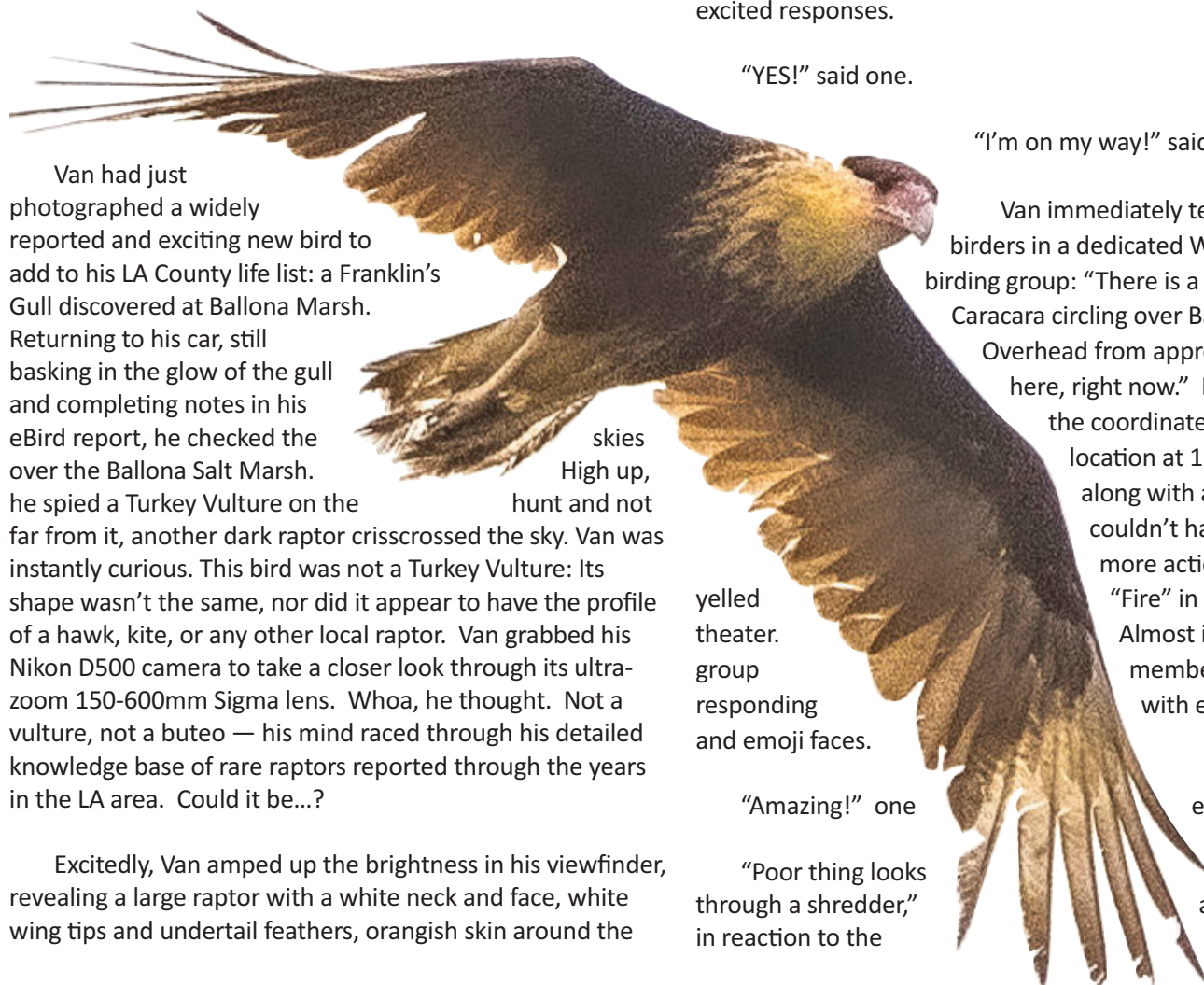
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Crested Caracara Soars into the Spotlight, Setting New State Record at Ballona Wetlands

by Robbie Lisa Freeman

For Van Pierszalowski, Sunday June 4 was just another day doing what he loves to do: chasing down rare birds across Southern California. He wasn't expecting to become a part of California birding lore.

beak, and a black cap — all key characteristics of a Crested Caracara! Not quite believing the possibility, Van quickly sent a screenshot from his viewfinder to several friends and local experts and with shaky hands fired off more shots of the bird. Within moments, his friends confirmed with excited responses.



Van had just photographed a widely reported and exciting new bird to add to his LA County life list: a Franklin's Gull discovered at Ballona Marsh. Returning to his car, still basking in the glow of the gull and completing notes in his eBird report, he checked the skies over the Ballona Salt Marsh. High up, he spied a Turkey Vulture on the hunt and not far from it, another dark raptor crisscrossed the sky. Van was instantly curious. This bird was not a Turkey Vulture: Its shape wasn't the same, nor did it appear to have the profile of a hawk, kite, or any other local raptor. Van grabbed his Nikon D500 camera to take a closer look through its ultra-zoom 150-600mm Sigma lens. Whoa, he thought. Not a vulture, not a buteo — his mind raced through his detailed knowledge base of rare raptors reported through the years in the LA area. Could it be...?

Excitedly, Van amped up the brightness in his viewfinder, revealing a large raptor with a white neck and face, white wing tips and undertail feathers, orangish skin around the

"YES!" said one.

"I'm on my way!" said another.

Van immediately texted local birders in a dedicated WhatsApp birding group: "There is a Crested Caracara circling over Ballona! Overhead from approximately here, right now." He entered the coordinates of the bird's location at 11:23 AM, along with a photo. Van couldn't have gotten more action if he'd "Fire" in a crowded Almost instantly, members began with exclamations

yelled theater. group responding and emoji faces.

"Amazing!" one

exclaimed.

"Poor thing looks through a shredder," in reaction to the

like it flew another said photo.

Then, “I lost it...,” Van reported.

Then, “It’s back...!” he exclaimed.

“Where’s the best viewing spot?” asked someone.

The texts flew back and forth as flocks of birders from across LA converged onto the scene, armed with cameras, spotting scopes, and binoculars.

For the lucky handful of folks (including me) who happened to be onsite at 11:30 a.m., the caracara did one low mesmerizing aerial maneuver over the marsh before soaring south to the Del Rey Bluffs to settle in a secluded tree. For the rest of the birders, the caracara had no intention of making it easy. Some set out to hike the trail along the bluffs for a better view. Others entered the path between Ballona Creek and the salt pan.

“From the top of the Bluff we could see it for quite a long time,” texted one birder.

“Moving east getting progressively smaller...” the birder added.

For many, that view of the bird receding in the distance was the best they got. Still, folks continued to gather, many whooping it up and chatting excitedly. And with good reason: This was the first reported sighting of the Crested Caracara in the state of California since 2016.

“I was unbelievably stoked,” said Van. “I’m really into learning about the status and distribution of birds throughout California. I keep a spreadsheet of every bird species recorded in the state, so I knew from my research

how rare this was, and that I’d be making the first report of one in seven years.”

Crested Caracaras reside predominantly in Central and South America, Mexico, and in a few U.S. states, including Texas, Arizona, Louisiana, and Florida. There have only been three records of them in LA County, according to eBird reports, with the last on Catalina Island in 2016 and one reported at Ballona in 2012.

Asked how he would rate his excitement level about seeing this bird on a scale of 1 to 10, Van responded: “17 million! I haven’t been this excited about a bird in a while. It’s my number 1 bird ever! The only thing that even comes close was the Brown Thrasher I found in San Luis Obispo that was the 3rd or 4th record in the area.”

To help celebrate the caracara sighting, Van telegraphed the news broadly to allow more local birders to see it.

“I love birds and fully believe that being near them in their environment is vital to my wellbeing,” he said. “But in the bigger picture, a birder’s goal should be to help educate as many people as possible about the wonder of birds, because the more people get excited about them, the more they love them — and the more they love them, the more they want to protect them. It’s the whole trickledown effect of engaging and exciting people about the birds around them. It’s one of the most important things that birders can do because people won’t fight to protect something they don’t know. But they’ll stand up for the things they fall in love with.”

There was lots of love for the visiting caracara that day at Ballona Marsh. Hopeful birders continued to search for it and post about it into the evening, and then into the next day. But the bird had moved on.

“A CRCA was just reported on the Orange County listserv... wonder if it was our bird,” texted one birder.

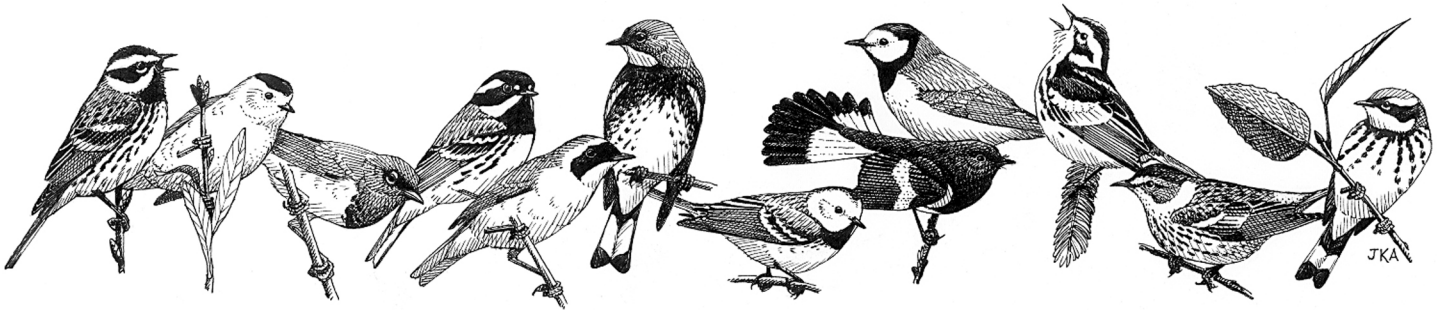
“Crested Caracara flew directly over Least Tern Colony in Seal Beach at 10:50 AM. It flew directly east and southerly, leaving the area,” reported another.

Though leaving LA behind, the majestic bird no doubt created small tsunamis of excitement in skies throughout Southern California as it continued its mysterious journey.

Robbie Lisa Freeman is an avid birder, traveler, travel writer, photographer, and contributing writer for The Western Tanager and other publications. Follow her on Instagram @freebird2020lf.



Photo courtesy of Scott Logan



BIRDS OF THE SEASON

June 2023

by Jon Fisher

After peaking in late April, spring migration continued for the next two months at a reduced pace. This period managed to produce a satisfying number of vagrants which were found on offshore islands, the coastal slope and on the desert and were recorded into the third week of June.

We expect a significant marine influence along the coast and valleys in May and June, but this year it was especially persistent, delivering not only extended overcast but a fair amount of drizzle and light rain. Accordingly, temperatures remained below normal for much of the spring. This pattern undoubtedly influenced observed movements of migrants, likely resulting in lower numbers of birds recorded.

The signs of a very wet winter remained conspicuous throughout the county. Both seasonal and normally dry streams flowed into June and a massive bloom of insects, rodents and lagomorphs was obvious. Although our ubiquitous non-native grasses turned brown early, lush vegetation remained everywhere. All of this undoubtedly helped contribute to a successful breeding season for birds.

Much of the Angeles Crest Highway continued to be closed as a result of excessive rain and resulting

rock and mudslides. It is expected to remain so through the summer. Access to most mountain birding in the county is thus severely limited at a time when many birders head to these higher elevations.

The **Tundra Bean-Goose**, apparently with a wing injury, continued through June 21 in the Lancaster area, finally ending up at Apollo Park after splitting its time between the Piute Ponds and Lancaster Water Treatment Plant. Like the Snow Geese that have taken up residence at the park, it doesn't appear to be going anywhere soon.

A **Cackling Goose** was at the Ballona Freshwater Marsh on May 21 (Michael Busse) and a late **Lesser Scaup** was along the lower Los Angeles River in Long Beach on May 26 (Richard Barth).

Other interesting waterfowl included a **White-winged Scoter** at Polliwog Park in Manhattan Beach on April 30 (Adam Johnson), a **Long-tailed Duck** at the Ballona Creek mouth that continued through May 13, a late **Hooded Merganser** at Ken Malloy Harbor Regional Park in Harbor City on June 2 and seven **Red-breasted Mergansers** at Quail Lake on May 10 (Daniel Irons).

At least one **Inca Dove** continued in Lake Los Angeles through May 7

where a tiny population persists (Tom Miko, Mark & Janet Scheel). **White-winged Doves** were at Kenneth Hahn SRA in Baldwin Hills on April 23 (Randy Ehler), along Gorman Post Road on April 30 (Daniel Irons), in Chatsworth on May 31 (Alana Vista, Greg Homel) and at the Piute Ponds on June 2 (Kimball Garrett).

A **Black Swift** was at the Piute Ponds on May 2 (John Birsner) and five late **Vaux's Swifts** were above Dodger Stadium on May 31 (Kelsey Reckling). Two *Chaetura* swifts over the Palos Verdes Peninsula on June 6 (David Moody) and one in Pasadena on June 9 (Mickey Long) were late enough to have possibly been **Chimney Swifts**. An **American Oystercatcher** was in the Los Angeles Harbor from April 16-23 (Caleb Villar) and a **Pacific Golden-Plover** was at the Piute Ponds on Edwards AFB from April 28-May 2 (Kimball Garrett). Also at the Piute Ponds were a **Baird's Sandpiper** on May 21 and a **Semipalmated Sandpiper** on May 27 (both Daniel Irons).

Four **Craveri's Murrelets** were in the San Pedro Channel on May 21 and two out of season **Ancient Murrelets** were southwest of the Palos Verdes Peninsula on May 21.

Gulls of note included a **Franklin's Gull** at the Ballona Freshwater Marsh

from June 3-4, a late **Herring Gull** at MacArthur Park in Los Angeles from May 8-12 and a **Lesser Black-backed Gull** along the Los Angeles River in Maywood on April 30 (both Andrew Birch).

Scarce but not unexpected inland were two **Common Loons** at Quail Lake on May 5 (Daniel Irons). Others were at the Hollywood Reservoir from May 18-25 (Andrew Birch), at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas on May 23 (Keith Condon) and at the Piute Ponds on May 27 (Sona Conlin).

A dozen **Cook's Petrels** were well offshore west of San Diego- but still in Los Angeles County waters- on June 3 (Paul Lehman).

A **Red-footed Booby** was near Santa Catalina Island on April 23 (Ted Cable) and again on April 30 (Laura Vandezande, Mitchell Bailey) and another was west of Tijuana, but still in Los Angeles County waters, on April 24 (multiple observers).

About two dozen **Neotropic Cormorants** were recorded. As always, it's likely some of these records pertain to the same birds moving around the area, but clearly this species continues to strengthen its foothold in the county, with nesting confirmed at Legg Lake and the Sepulveda Basin.

At the Piute Ponds a **Least Bittern**, surprisingly scarce that that locale, was present from June 9-11 (John Birsner). **Yellow-crowned Night-Herons** included up to six at the Ballona Lagoon in Marina del Rey through June 16 and up to three at Sims Bio Pond in Long Beach from May 9-27 (Nancy Salem). **Cattle Egrets** included one at Quail Lake on April 28 (Naresh Satyan) and three at Malibu Lagoon on May 12 (Candice Byers).

Rare in spring were **Broad-winged**

Hawks along Gorman Post Road on April 20 (Daniel Irons) and at Bear Divide near Santa Clarita on May 14 (Luke Tiller, Raphael Nussbaumer). A **Zone-tailed Hawk** continued in Monrovia through June 7 and one was in Glendora on June 19 (Tom Miko).

Very rare in the county was a **Crested Caracara** at the Ballona Freshwater Marsh on June 4. Caracaras in the county always present a conundrum; are they naturally occurring birds or possible escapees? The true provenance of this particular bird may never be known.

Flycatchers of interest included a **Dusky-capped Flycatcher** continuing at Peck Park in San Pedro through May 4, a **Tropical Kingbird** continuing along the Los Angeles River in Long Beach through May 4 and another at Cabrillo Beach on May 20 (David Ellsworth) and very rare in spring **Least Flycatcher** at the Piute Ponds on May 22 (William Tyrer).

Also especially rare was a **White-eyed Vireo** in west Palmdale on June 13 (Becky Kitto). Even less expected was the **Blue-headed Vireo** continuing at Rolling Hills Landfill Loop in Rolling Hills Estates through April 25. A **Plumbeous Vireo** at Vina Vieja Park in Pasadena on April 26 was also of interest (Luke Tiller).

A late **Bank Swallow** was at the Piute Ponds on June 1 (William Tyrer) while sixteen **Purple Martins** were recorded over the period.

Late **Hermit Thrushes** were at Bob's Gap near Valyermo on May 28 (David Bailey, Mitchell Bailey) and at the South Coast Botanic Garden in Palos Verdes Estates on June 2.

Rare in spring **Gray Catbirds** were at the Piute Ponds on Edwards AFB on May 21 (Daniel Irons) and on June 8 (Chris Dean).

American Dippers continued along the Barret-Stoddard Truck Trail in San Antonio Canyon through June 20, with breeding confirmed there. This species is increasingly difficult to locate in the county. There are few recent county records.

In the Antelope Valley, **Red Crossbills** were confirmed breeding Rancho Sierra Golf Course on May 21 and at Apollo Park near Lancaster on May 31.

A **White-crowned Sparrow** of undetermined subspecies was at Pt. Fermin in San Pedro on June 5 (Catherine Steinberg). Another nearby at White Point Nature Preserve on June 14 (Adam Johnson) was one of the two the coastal subspecies, likely *pugetensis*; typically an uncommon winter visitor to Los Angeles County.

Wintering **Harris's Sparrows** continued in Beverly Hills through April 25 and in West Los Angeles through April 27 and late **White-throated Sparrows** were near Gorman on May 7 (Daniel Irons) and on San Clemente Island on May 17 (Joyce Brady).

A single **Swamp Sparrow**, one of up to four present this winter, continued at Frank R. Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas through April 28. Another was along Gorman Post Road near Gorman on May 14 (Daniel Irons).

Baltimore Orioles were in Signal Hill on April 26 (Keith Quinlivan), on San Clemente Island on May 19 (Ben Stalheim) and at El Dorado Park in Long Beach on June 11 (Jon LaRose).

Turning to Wood-Warblers, a **Northern Waterthrush** was at Ken Malloy Harbor Regional Park in Harbor City on May 5 (Bobby Trusela) and **Black-and-white Warblers** were

in Signal Hills from April 24-25 (Chezy Yusuf) and on Santa Catalina Island on May 7 (Mitchell Bailey).

Tennessee Warblers were in Signal Hill on April 23 (Becky Turley, Kim Moore), in Griffith Park through April 24, at Polliwog Park in Manhattan Beach on May 3 (Leslie Loomis), at Wheeler Park in Claremont on May 14 (Tm Miko) and in Hacienda Heights on May 19 (Ashley Hopkins).

Palm Warblers were at Ralph Dills Park in Paramount on April 24 (Joyce Brady) and at the Sepulveda Basin in Van Nuys from April 29-May3 (Chris McCreedy), while **Hooded Warblers** were in Signal Hill from April 23-25 (March Scheel, Naresh Satyan) and on San Clemente Island on April 27 (Melissa Booker).

An **American Redstart** was at Piute Ponds on June 11 (Mark Scheel, Kimball Garrett). Eight **Northern Parulas** found in May were notable and reflected above average


numbers throughout the region. Nice spring finds on San Clemente Island were a **Yellow-throated Warbler** and a **Black-throated Green Warbler** on June 18 (Ben Stalheim, Kandace Glanville, Nicole Desnoyers).

Eight **Summer Tanagers** were detected and eleven **Rose-breasted Grosbeaks** were recorded in May and June, with four of those on San Clemente Island.

Indigo Buntings were on San Clemente Island on April 22 (Kandace Glanville, Ben Stalheim) and from May 19-June 5 (Ben Stalheim, Nicole Desnoyers, Kandace Glanville), in Signal Hill on May 14 (Becky Turley, Kim Moore). Less expected was a **Painted Bunting** on San Clemente Island from May 18-20 (Nicole Desnoyers)

Though spring migration is barely over, the movements of fall migrants are already at hand. A few **Wilson's Phalaropes** have already

been recorded and by early July small numbers of other shorebirds will be moving south. The Los Angeles River, Piute Ponds, Malibu Lagoon and the Ballona Wetlands will be worth checking as will any other wetland areas. Later in the month early fall migrant passerines will appear.

Though access to the much of higher San Gabriel Mountains may be curtailed, some locations are still accessible. Crystal Lake, Big Pines, Blue Ridge, Jackson Lake and Big Rock Creek all offer potentially rewarding birding. The front range is also largely open to access. Highway 39 to Crystal Lake, the San Gabriel River's West Fork and numerous foothill canyons typically offer good birding. In addition to resident and summering birds, the higher mountains can be good in August and September for southbound migrants. 

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Crested Caracara, photo courtesy of Van Pierszalowski

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