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# WESTERN Tanager





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**ON THE COVER**

*A swarm of bees, Long Beach CA, Oct. 12, 2020 | Photograph by Carol Babeli. Story on Page 19*

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**LAAS FIELD TRIPS SUSPENDED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE DUE TO CORVID-19**

*Visit us online at [www.laaudubon.org](http://www.laaudubon.org) for updates on ALL LAAS events, meetings, bird walks, lectures and more.*



## Statement Opposing Aerial Tram in Griffith Park

Griffith Park is one of the premier natural open spaces of Los Angeles, and indeed, of any major city. At 4,000 acres and dominated by rugged chaparral-covered slopes, it is one of the wildest urban parks in the world. It is used extensively for recreation and hiking and has been enjoyed by generations of Los Angeles residents.

We watched with concern as a feasibility analysis was commissioned for an aerial tram that would cut across undeveloped canyons and up to the top of Griffith Park. Now that the feasibility study has put lines of potential routes on a map, it is obvious that the proposed aerial tram could not be constructed without significantly and irreversibly damaging the natural character of Griffith Park and its biological diversity.

Almost 300 species of birds have been recorded in Griffith Park, ranking it as one of the most avian biodiverse urban parks in the world. The native, undisturbed habitat of the park makes it an important breeding location for many bird species. These include species found almost exclusively in California, such as California Thrasher, Nuttall's Woodpecker, and Oak Titmouse, and species with wider distributions that are locally uncommon, such as California Quail, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, and Wrentit.

An aerial tram cutting across two miles through the middle of the park, with a viewing platform on Mount Lee, will without question irreversibly degrade unique native habitat that many of these bird species require to persist.

An aerial tram would represent a commercialization and intensification of use in a landscape that cannot accommodate such development without significant adverse impacts. We suggest that investments instead be made in ground-based transportation that serves the residents of Los Angeles and protects its environment.

October 15, 2020

Contact: Travis Longcore, Ph.D., President, (310) 247-9719

# THIS IS WHAT I THINK WHEN CONSIDERING THE STATE'S PLAN FOR THE BALLONA WETLANDS

By Margot Griswold, Ph.D., Habitat Restoration Ecologist and Past-President of Los Angeles Audubon Society



*Ponded freshwater at the Ballona Wetlands | Photo by Jonathan Coffin (2019)*

The Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve (BWER) is the last coastal wetland in Los Angeles. It is sandwiched generally between Marina del Rey to the north, Playa Vista to the east, bluffs to the south, and the double dune system to the west, separating it from the Pacific Ocean. The wetlands are bisected by the Ballona Flood Control Channel, which carries rainwater and dry season urban flow from the upper Ballona Creek Watershed through the urban core to the ocean. The BWER is owned and managed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), a State resource agency.

Los Angeles Audubon Society (LAAS), with the help of 30+ volunteer docents, has conducted free environmental educational field trips at the BWER for over 25 years. The students served are generally from Title 1 schools from various local school districts, and until Covid-19, we served on average 2,100 students annually. Additionally, for the past 6 years, LAAS has sponsored Open Wetlands at BWER on the first Saturday of the month. Open Wetlands is the only opportunity for the public to stop by unannounced and take a tour with our dedicated and knowledgeable volunteer docents.

CDFW began a top-down planning process for the 'restoration' of BWER that ignores the unique aspects of this coastal wetland. CDFW's subsequent Environmental Impact Report (EIR) set forth three alternatives that were so similar as to be indistinguishable, as well as the no-project alternative. LAAS supports the missing alternative, that is, a coherent alternative for the restoration, rehabilitation and re-establishment of the historic and currently existing habitats at BWER. The current alternatives are not focused on, and appear unlikely to provide, optimal benefit to the range of wildlife and

plants historically present and/or wildlife currently of concern. They are still there!

Specifically, the alternatives currently proposed for the BWER represent an approach to create a generic coastal, full tidal wetland that was not historically present, as documented in research of the Historical Ecology of the Ballona Creek Watershed (see Dark et al. 2011). All the current project alternatives will convert the historically varied and dynamic/seasonal system into a perennially open tidal system. The Ballona Wetlands were not perennially open to the ocean but were isolated from the Pacific by the double dune system that was breached only in heavy rainfall years, closing again soon after (Jacobs et al. 2011). This relevant science has been brought to the attention of the project proponent, CDFW, many times over the years.

The current project alternatives do not focus on the heterogenous nature of the wetlands with its fresh to brackish water, representing the seasonally variable habitats historically and currently present in these wetlands. An alternative design should work with the existing landscape to avoid the currently proposed and unnecessary engineering that will remove landscape and soil features that have been present for over 150 years. Soil is an ecosystem unto itself and is of crucial importance to any restoration project. When a project describes removing soil as a 'restoration' it should be scrutinized carefully because it takes a long time to develop productive soil once the subsoil has been exposed. In the case of the current Ballona project description, it is proposed to dig up 3 million cubic yards of productive soil and use it to create tall upland berms on current wetlands, apparently as flood protection for private



*White-tailed Kite roosting with Mourning Doves at the Ballona Wetlands | Photo by Jonathan Coffin (2020)*

## Historic and Contemporary Acres of Coastal Wetland Habitats

	Historical (acres)	Contemporary (acres)	% Change
Salt marsh	1,330	1,170	-12%
Salt flat (seasonally flooded)	1,230	120	-90%
Open Water/mud flat	140	980	615%
Freshwater/brackish wetland	1,650	760	-54%
Developed		1,440	

From: Northern San Diego County Lagoons Historical Ecology Investigation: Regional Patterns, Local Diversity, And Landscape Trajectories. San Francisco Estuary Institute, 2014.

housing projects. This approach is ecologically inefficient and unsustainable. We cannot afford to discard soil and create uplands out of wetlands.

Nor has CDFW considered the regional context of the Ballona Wetlands. The approach in pursuing a full tidal design will result in the further homogenization of the coastal wetlands found regionally rather than re-establishing and enhancing the ecological function of habitats that currently exist within this coastal wetland. The Ballona Wetlands project should be designed in the context of the region where loss of fresh/brackish marsh, salt flats, and saltmarsh is far greater than open water/tidal mudflat. The above table from a study of north San Diego County coastal wetlands illustrates this greater loss of salt flats and freshwater/brackish wetlands compared with salt marsh, and studies of Orange County and Ventura County (Bolsa Chica and Ormond Beach) have similar findings. Coastal wetlands include more than full tidal wetlands.

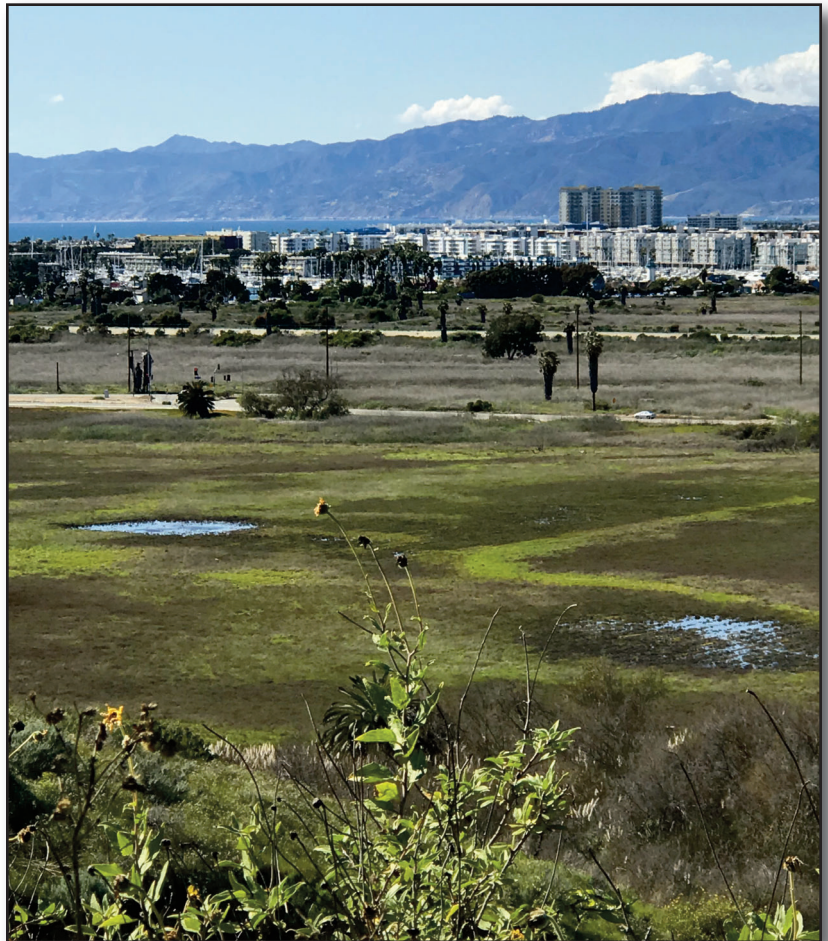
BWER is also designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by Audubon California, and the varied habitats should be treated as such to protect the year-round residents as well as migrating avian species.

The current alternatives do not incorporate the most recent science about southern California estuary formation, such as Jacobs et al. 2011, and the specific historic ecology of BWER found in Dark et al. 2011. Science is necessary to inform a project of this magnitude, especially when the project is going against the natural processes of the Pacific Ocean and historic estuary closure patterns.

The current project description does not list maintenance of, or restoration of, native biodiversity as a goal, and rather describes only increasing a generic

biodiversity and generic tidal wetland function. There are no specific wildlife species, including birds, and no plant species, listed as targets for the proposed habitat creation.

A project alternative with the goal of conserving the existing biodiversity that also attempts to restore some of the historic biodiversity should be developed and considered. Such an alternative could include habitat reestablishment and rehabilitation designs that do not remove the Ballona Stormwater Channel levees since these levees now serve the role of the barrier dune that historically separated the Ballona Wetland system from the ocean. Such an alternative might look at using the existing Playa Vista Freshwater Marsh (where water is currently being dumped directly into the Ballona Stormwater Channel from the recently constructed Freshwater Marsh) and the existing



*Ponded Freshwater at Ballona Wetlands, March 2020 | Photo by Margot Griswold*



*Ponded freshwater at the Ballona Wetlands, March 2020 | Photo by Margot Griswold*

Centinela Creek for seasonal freshwater inputs.

The 2020 spring rainfall this year showed what the Ballona Wetlands can do with freshwater inputs. Photos from the adjacent West Bluffs trail stand in testimony that the Ballona Wetlands thrive with seasonal freshwater input.

The proposed removal of the Ballona Stormwater Channel levees will allow permanent tidal flow to the wetland areas and likely allow saltwater intrusion into the freshwater aquifers found below the Ballona Wetlands. These potential impacts are not discussed adequately in the DEIR/EIS nor the Final EIR. There was no adequate hydrology study conducted for the project to determine the impacts to the freshwater aquifers, only a hydraulics study on the flows of the Ballona Stormwater Channel. Removal of the channel levees in the last mile would introduce pollution from the entire Ballona Creek Watershed into the Ballona Wetlands, which is far too small to clean all the pollution that comes down the waterway. Perhaps it might be better to start at the Upper Ballona Creek Watershed and treat the water as it passes through the communities that the project fails to consider. Without pre-treatment, allowing polluted water from the Ballona Stormwater Channel into the wetlands may cause more harm to the existing wetlands, including the soil and flora/fauna. An alternative should be developed to include brackish and freshwater marsh with muted tidal influence using tidal gates and active management. Such a plan would result in the diverse coastal wetland conditions to support rare and endangered species that are present and were historically present in this wetlands system. Such a design with appropriately placed tidal gates could be engineered to produce managed flushing flows to avoid siltation. The design should also strive to reconnect the currently disconnected areas of the

Ballona Wetlands by addressing Culver Blvd and Jefferson, potentially connecting through special culverts or put roadways on a causeway.

We call for a re-assessment of the current plan alternatives by convening habitat planning workshops with an unbiased facilitator, and ‘stakeholders’ that include a voice for the birds, the plants, soil, and the water as well as flood control and public access. This type of working group will provide a transparent process to consider the science concerning the Ballona Wetlands. The habitats that currently exist support many coastal wetland and upland species of wildlife, including several that are sensitive, rare, and/or threatened/endangered. It is objectionable to consider destroying the habitat that supports these species simply because of a misguided ‘restoration’ plan devised without

adequate public input, and that disregards the science that shows the ecological flaws of the plan.

Consensus must be reached to find the most ecologically efficient plan to increase the functional integrity of the existing wetlands. True public input and consensus has been missing from the process. It can be done with some planning and open discussion.

Please join LAAS, to express your concerns and ask for a transparent process to provide a real alternative to the proposed project. Email us to join our campaign and get on the Ballona Wetlands mailing list. Send email to: [carolbabeli@laaudubon.org](mailto:carolbabeli@laaudubon.org)

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# INTERPRETING NATURE

## BIRDING BIKERS AND BIKING BIRDERS: AN INTERSECTION OF TWO INTERESTS

By Robert Jeffers, Los Angeles Audubon — Board Member Secretary



*A Birding Biker's Bike on the bike trail*

**W**HATEVER THE WORLD POST-COVID LOOKS LIKE — FOR ME, I hope it includes more birding and more biking. Living in a world that has had and continues to have so much taken by Covid, it has also drawn into relief those things which matter a lot, and for me, I can confidently list: being outside and being active. These are the two no-brainer actions that make my “matter-most” list. Whenever anyone asks me if I want to do an outside activity I answer, “Let’s go!” Under my breath daily I offer thanks into the universe for my family and my job. Yes, I have lost people, but I don’t take for granted that my immediate family has not been directly impacted despite some working in health care. And, knock on wood, my job and family are intact, because I have many students whose families have been ravaged. Virtual work in education is still work, but in the long term is staring at a screen and not actively going outside healthy?

Languishing in front of a computer with an ever-present electrical hum can’t be healthy. Sure, 5k, 27 “Retina” inches, and more than 14 million pixels provides a glorious digital palate from which to craft emails, Zoom with colleagues, and graze on YouTube for hours, but is it healthy over the long term? I don’t think so. My Covid-19 forced daily digital grind from Google Drive to Microsoft Office to Name-Your-Server has exponentially added to my logged screen hours and after more than 7 months I am almost absolutely convinced – this much screen and computer time can’t be healthy. These forced circumstances have not only generated a vocalized, daily

appreciation for both my job and my privileges, which includes my former in-person, car-confined commute of an unholy 405-10-110 Freeway Trifecta. And, even this merciless commute, I think, may be healthier than unbound screen time. That I used to be able to see the world by being in the world, and critically, not through a virtual window, was a realization that made me look closer at those things I miss most about my B.C. (Before Covid) life: time in nature and exercise in the world.

As a birder and nature lover, I find myself hungry for nature – all day. Almost hourly, I physically wander up from the screen and step outside blankly staring at nature like one wanders to the refrigerator staring for something to snack. When I peer outside it’s like I’m peering in the fridge, I’m kinda looking for anything – house sparrow? Great! Eastern fox squirrel? I’ll take it. My near hourly constitutional outside (i.e. away from glowing panels) has only affirmed my belief in Richard Louv’s Nature Deficit Disorder and the need for interaction time with nature. Working from home has been a new experience for me – I’m a school administrator at a multi-site continuation school, so 5-days a week I would normally find myself traveling from San Pedro to San Fernando or from Venice to Boyle Heights. My job used to force me outside, to log north of 20,000 car miles a year, and to see a lot of the city, quickly. Now, I see a lot of my neighborhood, slowly. Getting deeply familiar with my neighborhood and yard has activated a renewed appreciation of what I do have and what I can access. And, I am so glad that I read



*Great Birding along the Ballona bike path adjacent to the Ballona Creek Channel*



*A possible raft of Coots on the channel at sunrise*

Elizabeth Tova Bailey's *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* (Algonquin Books, 2016) prior to Covid, because it provided a powerful guide to seeing and observing what is right in front of me, and appreciating the magic of what is within reach. That said, Bailey's book also helped me appreciate that I have the health and fitness to access nature – I'm not physically bound. This brings to me to the second opportunity I've missed since the start of Covid: outside exercise.

Throughout my life physical activity has always been a part of who I was and am. For sure I liked video games such as *The Legend of Zelda*, but I loved sports – team or individual. I've played basketball and tennis, trained in jiu jitsu and swam in college. Though I never thought of myself as especially active, evidence suggests that all the sports I gravitated toward involved near constant movement. At the beginning of Covid I stayed in place, but when I could run – I ran. And, the absence of cars on the road during Covid helped renew my interest in cycling. During high school and college, I loved mountain biking. A



*Great Blue Heron perches on a Sea Curtain Trash Net Barrier in the Ballona Channel*

ride off road was entirely freeing – I wasn't bound by asphalt and I could venture into a forest or on to a dirt path away from cars and people. Post college for a few years my interest in biking waned, but when I settled in Los Angeles as a teacher, I became fascinated with bikes again and had a strong interest in road bikes – I loved getting to places faster and farther away in less time. The road bike itch has been with me for several years now and has grown as has my interest in birding. And, it's been the Covid inspired reframing of priorities and spotlighting of what I like and miss that made me realize that biking and birding fit.

It's been in front of me for years, but I never connected it – birding and biking work well together in part because they appeal to a similar sensibility, share a familiar ethos, and existing in similar spheres. Birding is an outside activity that really only requires looking, seeing, and listening. It celebrates nature. Sure, one can fabulously bird Bhutan, but one can fabulously bird the Ballona Creek Channel as well. I did that this very morning



*Possibly a Red Shouldered Hawk resting on a branch near the Ballona Ecological Preserve*





*October sun rising over the Ballona Channel*

and encountered a fellow biking birder or birding biker. We talked owls and we may have spotted a Red-Shouldered Hawk. We chatted about commuting the city and birding the city, which further confirmed these to activities work very well together. Most biking takes place outside, can be enjoyed locally or far away, and even appeals to a similar obsessiveness on tools. Birding can invite preoccupation with fancy Swarovski binoculars, but can be enjoyed just as much with a second-hand pair of old binoculars handed down from a beloved uncle. Likewise, bikers can opt for a custom fitted, hand-made carbon fiber Italian road race frame like Sarto, but conversely one can have just as much fun on a cousin's generation old, single gear, steel Schwinn if that's what's available. Essentially, I suspect it's the activity in nature that draws people in and it's partially why birding and biking work well together.

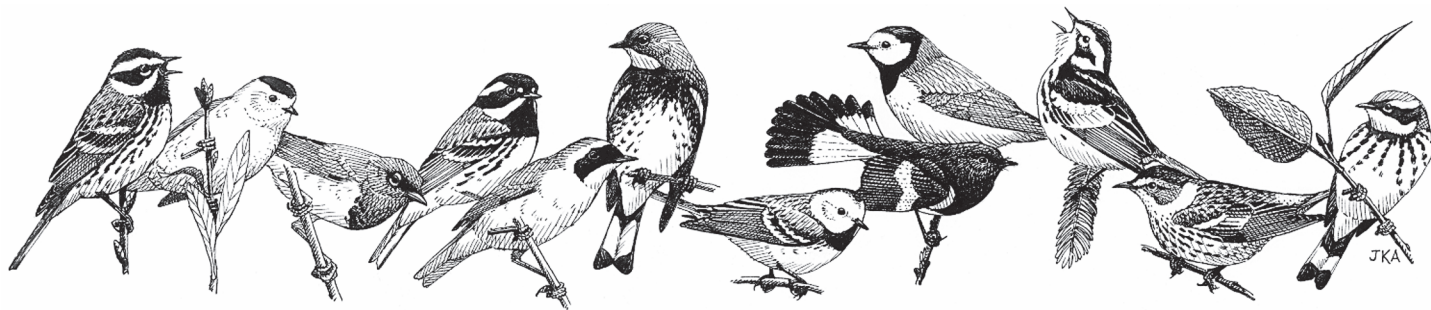
For me, bicycling and birding provide healthy, quiet, environmentally conscious activities that keep me outside, largely honors nature, and in the case of biking, can get me to nature quickly. Importantly, biking facilitates birding. All I need to do is hop on my bike, ride and within 10 minutes I can watch the sunrise over the Ballona Creek Channel and bird the Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve. From the bike I can quickly stop, reach into a backpack or handlebar bag, grab a camera or binoculars and bird away. For the birding aficionado who is willing to do a little more, bring a gravel bike or mountain bike to your favorite

away from the city nature destination and in most cases, you'll go farther, faster than any hiker on a trail. YouTube offers near countless "how-to" videos about bikepacking and while it's not often connected, adding a trusted pair of binoculars to your gear seems about space consuming as a GoPro set up, and you'll be birding in places that most couldn't reach out of sheer logistics. Combining biking and birding offers opportunities to interact with nature doing two things I love, and they complement each other nicely.

So, am I more of a birding biker or a biking birder? Normally, I struggle to accept labels that pigeon-hole me as something because the fit is never entirely clean. But, I would say at this point in my life I am a birding biker. I use my bike to commute to work, but I'll stop to identify a Great Blue Heron stoically fishing. In the coming months I plan to bring binoculars on a bikepacking trip with an old friend, and who knows maybe I'll introduce birding to someone uninitiated to the pastime. Regardless, we'll be outside, in nature, biking and birding. 🐦

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*Robert Jeffers is a Los Angeles Audubon Board member, high school assistant principal, and avid biking birder ... or is it birding biker?*



## BIRDS OF THE SEASON — October 2020 | By Jon Fisher

2020 BROUGHT US A FALL SEASON UNLIKE ANY OTHER. While birding was only modestly disrupted by it, we continued to deal with the effects of a global pandemic. We also contended with record high temperatures and a fire season for the record books. In California, over four million acres has already burned this summer and fall. Fire in California is not the issue, as this is a natural occurrence. It is their extent and intensity and unnatural causes that are truly wreaking havoc.

Starting with the 2009 Station Fire, over 350,000 acres of the Angeles National Forest have burned, though this includes some areas that have burned twice. The entire ANF covers less than twice that area. Decades of fire suppression and decreasing precipitation have resulted in a buildup of highly flammable vegetation in our local mountains and throughout the state. This is the future we will need to come to grips with; a drying climate, more destructive fires and changing habitats and avifauna.

In Los Angeles County, with the Lake Fire behind us, the Bobcat Fire soon followed. It began on September 6 near Cogswell Reservoir and it soon became apparent that this would be no ordinary wildfire. It ended up scorching over 115,000 acres, blazing its way from the foothills just above Arcadia all the way to the high desert. Along the way, it not only cut a wide path of destruction through the heart of the San Gabriels, but also burned many well-known and popular birding areas, not to mention tens of thousands of acres of native chaparral, oak and pine.

Among the locations affected were Buckhorn Campground and environs, the San Gabriel River's West Fork, Big Santa Anita Canyon, part of Charlton Flat, Big Rock Creek, Little Rock Creek, and Devil's Punchbowl and many lesser known spots.

Since the burn area remains closed indefinitely, the true extent of the damage may not be known for some time. Riparian areas where vegetation is relatively well-watered should have fared better than dry slopes. There will be patches of woodland, forest and chaparral that remain at least somewhat intact throughout the burn area.

That aside, the loss can hardly be minimized and is truly hard to fathom at this point. The West Fork of the San Gabriel River contained until now the most impressive and relatively undisturbed riparian forest in the county.

The other downside to fire in southern California is the very real potential for mudslides, debris flows and flooding that are likely to occur this winter. These too can alter and degrade habitats for birds.

There are at least some silver linings amongst the carnage. Aside from the aforementioned patches that will have survived, the eastern high country was spared. Throop Peak, Mt. Baden-Powell, Blue Ridge and Table Mountain were all left unscathed. As any active birder will know, this part of the San Gabriels is home to a number of specialty birds in the county. Williamson's Sapsuckers, Clark's Nutcrackers, Cassin's Finches and Red Crossbills call this high country home and are rarely found elsewhere.

Some more positive news; as of the second week of October, most of the Angeles National Forest has reopened, with the exception of the burn area. Barring any new conflagrations, it should remain so.

The next few years and beyond will be an important time to bird the Bobcat Fire area. eBird will ultimately contain a large amount of data detailing the changes in avifauna immediately following the fire and during the subsequent recovery.

It's about time for better news, and there most certainly was some. It was a rather impressive fall for birds and birding in the county. As it often does, the latter half of September produced a marked spike in vagrants and this continued well into October. Not only were the expected eastern vagrants encountered, but reverse migrants from Mexico were represented and a few outstanding Siberian rarities also showed up.

This column, covering August through October, is typically the most lengthy of the year. And in 2020, the number and diversity of birds present plus the relative ubiquity of vagrants gave active birders a full plate of birds to find and chase.

A **Eurasian Wigeon** along the Lower Los Angeles River in Long Beach on September 30 (Johnny Ivanov) was the first one reported. An early fall **Hooded Merganser** was at Apollo Park near Lancaster from September 7–October 25 (Naresh Satyan) and a summering bird continued at Topanga lagoon through September 26.

An above average fifteen **White-winged Doves**, rare but regular visitors in late summer and fall, were present during the period.

Two **Black Swifts** were over Blue Ridge Road in the eastern San Gabriel Mountains on August 28 (Luke Tiller, Catherine Hamilton).

Six **Pacific Loons** at Quail Lake on October 17 was a notable number for this locale where they are rare though regular visitors (Luke Tiller, Catherine Hamilton).

An **American Oystercatcher** continued at Royal Palms Beach in San Pedro through September 8 and either the same bird or another was at Dockweiler State Beach in El Segundo on September 2.

A **Pacific Golden-Plover** had returned to lower Ballona Creek for its third year as of September 1 (Kevin Lapp) and was reported there through October 17. Another probable individual was along the Los Angeles River in the Sepulveda Basin on October 14 (Mike Stensvold).

Rare in the county was a **Red Knot** near the Ballona Creek mouth on September 16 (Chris Dean). Four **Stilt Sandpipers**—rare and irregular in occurrence—were along the Los Angeles River in Maywood from September 18–28 (Richard Barth).

The apparent last **Semipalmated Sandpipers** of the fall were along Ballona Creek near Baldwin Hills from August 31–September 3 (Kevin Lapp) and along the Los Angeles River in Maywood on September 6 (David Bell). Undoubtedly a few are missed once adults and juveniles transition to basic plumage. By that time they are no longer obvious among the many Western Sandpipers.

Rare inland was a **Red Phalarope** along the Los Angeles River in Glendale from August 29–31 (Andrew Birch).

At least one summering **Glaucous-winged Gull** continued along the Los Angeles River in Maywood through September 13 and a **Sabine's Gull** was at the Piute Ponds on Edwards AFB on September 23 (Jon Feenstra).

A **Red-throated Loon** was at Lake Balboa in the San Fernando Valley on October 21 (Mike Stensvold).

A **Nazca Booby** was rescued at Long Beach Harbor on August 26 and taken to rehabilitation and a **Blue-footed Booby** was seen flying up the Los Angeles River corridor on September 20 (Jeff Boyd). Given recent trends, this is a below average number of Sulids in the county.

One to two **Neotropic Cormorants** continued at the Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Reserve through August 29 and one to two more continued along the lower Los Angeles River in Long Beach through September 14. Another was at Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas from September 19–October 15 (Rod Higbie) where it was joined by a second on October 21 (Dan Stobel).

An **American Bittern** at the Piute Ponds on October 3 (Sona Conlin, Mickey Dyke) was the only one reported thus far.

**Yellow-crowned Night-Herons** continued in the Ballona area, with one to two birds reported regularly at the Ballona Freshwater Marsh through October 15. Another one or two continued at Sims Bio Pond in Long Beach through October 9.

**Broad-winged Hawks** appeared in above average numbers, which is to say there were still very few to be found. Single birds were at Ken Malloy Harbor Regional Park in Harbor City on September 26 (Jonathan Nakai), in Claremont on September 27 (Corey Husic), over Los Feliz on September 30 (Andrew Birch), on the Palos Verdes Peninsula on October 7 (Randy Harwood), in Lakewood on October 10 (Kim Moore, Christine Jacobs), at Wheeler Park in Claremont on October 12 (Tom Miko).

The long-staying **Zone-tailed Hawk** in Monrovia continued through October 21 in the vicinity of Grand Avenue Park, but a different individual was at Santa Fe Dam on October 10 (Naresh Satyan). Slightly early was a **Ferruginous Hawk** in the east Antelope Valley on September 20 (Luke Tiller).

A **Northern “Yellow-shafted” Flicker** was at the Piute Ponds from October 17–18 (Naresh Satyan) and one was at Santa Fe Dam in Irwindale on October 19 (Candice Byers).

A **Short-eared Owl** was at the Ballona Wetlands from September 30–October 1 (Rick Pine).

**Tropical Kingbirds**, scarce but regular in fall and winter, were at Ken Malloy Harbor Regional Park in Harbor City from September 26–October 14 (Manuel Duran, Alejandra Cedillo), at Colorado Lagoon in Long Beach from September 28–October 16 (Robert Hamilton), at Entradero Park in Torrance from September 29–October

12 (Charlie Keller), at Malibu Legacy Park in Malibu on October 2 (Steven Hunter, Viviana Wolinsky) and at Madrona Marsh in Torrance on October 20 (Bobby Trusela).

A fantastic find was a **Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher** spotted in a residential area of Long Beach and first confirmed on September 23 (Jeff Boyd). The bird had been heard calling a few days earlier and apparently was gone after September 24. This was the first county record of this tropical flycatcher since 1991. Though their normal U.S. range just reaches into southern Arizona, late fall strays have been recorded as far north as southern Canada.

A returning **Greater Pewee** was back to spend its fourth winter in Rustic Canyon in Pacific Palisades as of October 6 and reported through October 21 (Jon Feenstra). This is also quite a county rarity, with fewer than ten individuals ever recorded.

**Least Flycatchers** were photographed and tentatively identified at Rancho Sierra Golf Course in the Antelope Valley from September 14–16 (Chris Dean), in Avalon on Santa Catalina Island on September 26, at Del Rey Lagoon in Playa del Rey on October 2 (both Naresh Satyan).

A late **Bell's Vireo** lingered at the West San Gabriel River Parkway Nature Trail in Lakewood from September 26–October 22 (Joyce Brady).

Three **Purple Martins** were along the Los Angeles River in Glendale on August 31 (Andrew Birch) and another was there on September 14 (Matthew Schmah). Other single birds were at Avalon on Santa Catalina Island on September 20 (David Bell) and at the Piute Ponds on September 27 (Jim Moore).

And early **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** was at Stephen Sorenson Park in Lake Los Angeles on September 11 (Kimball Garrett).

Another spectacular find was a **Northern Wheatear** on San Clemente Island on October 3 (Nicole Desnoyers). This is just the third record of this Old World flycatcher in the county and the first for the island, which now boasts an amazing four species of Old World flycatchers; Red-flanked Bluetail, Stonechat and Bluethroat and Northern Wheatear.

Quite rare in the county was a **Gray Catbird** found at Malibu Bluffs Park on September 27 (Aaron Gomperts). As with most of the vagrants discovered there this fall, it was seen for one day only.

Most of the small numbers of **White Wagtails** that breed in Alaska typically migrate to southeast Asia for the winter, but a very few find their way to the lower 48. Such

was the case this fall, with a bird along the lower Los Angeles River from September 27–28 (Graham Montgomery) and one at Malibu Lagoon from October 5–7 (Ed Stonick).

Remarkably, a wagtail was again along the Los Angeles River in Long Beach on October 18 at the exact same spot as the previous one (David Moody). Obviously the likelihood that this was the same bird found there earlier seems very high. Assuming a total of two birds, these were just the fifth and sixth to be found in the county.

A **Red-throated Pipit** was on San Clemente Island on October 1 (Justyn Stahl, Nicole Desnoyers) and a **Lapland Longspur** was found there on October 16 (Justyn Stahl, Nicole Desnoyers)

Over ten **Grasshopper Sparrows** were recorded from September 7–October 20.

**Lark Buntings** were at Alta Vicente Preserve on the Palos Verdes Peninsula on September 7 (Jonathan Nakai) and at Malibu Lagoon on September 18 (Naresh Satyan).

At least twenty **Clay-colored Sparrows** were found between September 3 and October 6. It was quite a good fall for this species in the county.

**Dark-eyed "Gray-headed" Juncos** were at Jackson Lake near Big Pines on September 29 (Konshau Duman), at the Piute Ponds from September 30–October 3 (Chris Dean), at Stephen Sorenson Park in Lake Los Angeles on October 1 and at Rancho Sierra Golf Course in the Antelope Valley on October 3 (both Kimball Garrett).

An early **White-crowned Sparrow** at Apollo Park near Lancaster on September 9 (Konshau Duman), while the season's first **White-throated Sparrow** was at the Piute Ponds on September 29 (John Birsner).

Ten **Green-tailed Towhees**, most of these on the coastal slope, was an above average number for the period. It's possible some of these were displaced by the Bobcat Fire, though we can't know for sure.

Up to three **Bobolinks** at Santa Fe Dam from October 9–17 (Darren Dowell, Loren Wright) were the only ones reported.

Sixteen unusual species of wood-warblers were detected in addition to the nine expected western migrants. A rare **Ovenbird** was in Gardena on October 4 (Dinuk Magamana) and six **Northern Waterthrushes** were found between September 23 and October 9.

An early **Black-and-white Warbler** continued along the Los Angeles River in Atwater Village through September

5, while eight others were recorded through October 14. At least seven **Tennessee Warblers** were recorded between September 12 and October 14. A **Lucy's Warbler** was at Creek Park in La Mirada from August 24-29 (Jonathan Rowley) and another was at Peck Water Conservation Park in Arcadia on October 22 (Darren Dowell). **Virginia's Warblers** were at Madrona Marsh in Torrance from September 4-25 (Tracy Drake) and at Hahamongna Watershed Park in Pasadena on September 6 (Darren Dowell).

A **Hooded Warbler** was on the Loyola Marymount University campus on September 5 (Kevin Lapp) and eight **American Redstarts** were recorded from September 6-October 15, all but one on the coastal slope.

A **Northern Parula** was at Lower Arroyo Park in Pasadena on September 28 (Jon Fisher) and Madrona Marsh in Torrance hosted a **Blackburnian Warbler** from September 19-23.

**Chestnut-sided Warblers** were on San Clemente Island on September 8 (Nicole Desnoyers, Susan Meiman), at the San Gabriel Coastal Basin Spreading Grounds in Pico Rivera from October 10-11 (Darren Dowell), at the Piute Ponds on October 11 (Jack Wickel) and at Maywood Riverfront Park on October 15 (Richard Barth).

A **Blackpoll Warbler** at the Piute Ponds on Edwards AFB on September 28 was the only one reported (Becky Turley, Jim Moore). **Black-throated Blue Warblers** were at Hopkins Wilderness Park in Redondo Beach on October 12 (Mark Rubke) and at Oakdale Memorial Park in Glendora on October 17 (Rick Fisher). In addition, seven **Palm Warblers** were found between September 14 and October 12.

**Canada Warblers** were on San Clemente Island on September 8 (Nicole Desnoyers, Susan Meiman) and in Highland Park on September 21 (Ryan Terrill, Jessica Oswald).

**Painted Redstarts** were found on the UCLA Campus in Westwood on September 14 (Michelle Rensel) and near Crescenta Valley Park in La Crescenta on October 2 (Jeffrey Fenwick).

A **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** was at the West San Gabriel River Parkway Nature Trail in Lakewood from September 25-26 (Loren Wright).

An **Indigo Bunting**, possibly a continuing bird, was at Hahamongna Watershed Park in Pasadena on September 20 (Dessi Sieburth). Another was at the San Gabriel Coastal Basin Spreading Grounds in Pico Rivera from October 10-11 (David Bell, Luke Tiller)

Two **Summer Tanagers** continued at Pearblossom Park in the Antelope Valley through September 14. At least nine others were reported during the period.

What's to come? Precipitation we hope, and ideally not in large doses. This will accelerate recovery of the burn areas and is essential for all habitats, fire-affected or not. Although this is shaping up to be a La Niña year, usually meaning lower than average rainfall, these trends are often unpredictable. Climate change tends to increase this uncertainty. We can also hope for a calm end to our fire season, even as its length steadily increases.

As for the birds; November and December will see increasing numbers of waterfowl arriving. Birders will no doubt be checking Quail Lake and the Los Angeles Aqueduct for possible Barrow's Goldeneyes and other potential rarities. The Antelope Valley, always a popular destination in winter, will offer Ferruginous Hawks, Mountain Bluebirds, possible longspurs, Mountain Plovers and more.

Though shorebird migration is pretty much over, the lower Los Angeles River, Piute Ponds (by letter of permission only) and other wetland spots and river channels are always worth checking.

Any of the numerous city and county parks on the coastal slope can harbor a vagrant passerine or two. We can expect a wide variety of neotropical migrants to spend the winter, at least in small numbers. The ever-milder climate is one reason. Increasing ornamental plantings that provide flowers, fruit and attract insects also increasingly entice warblers, orioles, tanagers and others to forego migrating farther south.

With some good fortune, the entire Angeles National Forest will reopen sooner than later. While winter offers a lower diversity of species in the mountains, some interesting birds can be found. Most woodpeckers are residents and finches, juncos and Fox Sparrows abound. Evening Grosbeaks are possible, with notable numbers of these present last winter at Grassy Hollow west of Big Pines.

Birds have always been a welcome diversion from the various tedious and mundane aspects of life, but that has been especially true in this difficult year. As is obvious from the foregoing list or records, there were a great many diversions this fall. 🐦

# OUTDOOR EDUCATION

## Mentors

By Cindy Hardin, Director of Outdoor Education | Photos by Leslie Davidson



*White-crowned Sparrow, Adult. | Photo: Adam Wilson/Audubon Photography Awards*



*Lifelong learner, Barbara Courtois, Soaking up knowledge. I am her faithful sidekick to her right.*

**V**ISUAL REMINDERS THAT FALL HAS ARRIVED ARE IN ABUNDANCE right now. The low angle of the sun causes the ocean to look especially sparkly, daylight hours are diminishing, and bird species that have not been seen for months are returning for their winter residence in Southern California. Ballona Creek and its banks are populated with new arrivals.

Sighted on today's bike ride up the creek were wigeons bobbing at the confluence of Centinela and Ballona creeks. Western Grebes paddled placidly just west of the Lincoln Bridge. Black-bellied Plovers nestled on the banks of Ballona Creek amongst the rocks, closer to the ocean.

But there is one bird that has recently returned that always reminds me of a dear friend, and mentor, who literally changed the course of my life. Barbara Courtois was the coordinator of the Environmental Education Program at Ballona when I first became a volunteer at the wetlands, in 1999. She would proudly tell you that she was a "lifelong learner". It was my good fortune to know her and learn from her not only about birding, and what birds can teach us, but also a way of looking at and appreciating the natural world in a whole new way. One of Barbara's favorite birds was the White-crowned Sparrow. This species of sparrow is a true harbinger of Fall, and one of the last of migratory birds to arrive in our region, and Barbara loved them. I, on the other hand, responded to their arrival with some melancholy, as their presence meant that my favorite season, summer, was truly, truly over. Barbara and I would laugh at the disparity in our responses to the sighting of this very active, quite charismatic little bird. We never did share the same emotion regarding the return of the white-crowns, but we reached lots of common ground in our friendship.

I could not have asked for a better instructor to introduce me to the world of birding. She was never dismissive of any sighting—a commonly seen species like the Northern Mockingbird was never "just a Mockingbird" — it was an exciting sight. Barbara taught me about avian behavior, and its meaning. Those American Wigeons on the Creek are not just here to feast on aquatic vegetation during the winter months. The males are also displaying eye-catching courtship behaviors in hopes of partnering with a female before the trip north in the Spring. The Western Grebes are lurking in the coastal waters, looking for the topsmelt and anchovies that will soon be abundant due to seasonal upwelling of the nutrient rich, colder ocean currents that marks our winters. And the Black-bellied Plovers are patiently awaiting the winter rains that will flood the Ballona Salt Panne and activate their food source of invertebrates that have been encysted and dormant during the dry months. Barbara showed me that the presence of any particular wildlife or plant gave information about not only the time of year, but also the environment.

I also learned from Barbara to appreciate the beauty and value of native habitat. I must admit, that when I first returned to Los Angeles after a 10-year residence in cold, foggy San Francisco, I could not wait to fill my yard with introduced subtropical plants like the showy Hibiscus. My goal was to create a visual tropical paradise. Not surprisingly, my endeavors required a lot of maintenance and water! Through Barbara's eyes I gained appreciation for the more subtle beauty of our native coastal sage scrub habitat, and saw its value in providing forage and home for native birds and insects. As soon as I started to replace introduced plants with sagebrush, lupine and willow, my yard became much more alive with local birds and interesting butterflies and spiders.

As I became more informed about the unique attributes of specific habitats, I also was made aware of the importance of preserving and enhancing the intact ecosystems that are still present, even here in the second largest city in the nation. Controversy about the fate of Ballona has been part of this coastal wetland for decades, and continues to this very day. And of course, Barbara not only provided insight into these controversies for me; she introduced me to the act of attending meetings as an advocate for the wetlands. And that we did, on numerous occasions. Sometimes we would celebrate decisions that were made about Ballona, and other times commiserate about comments or approaches about which we did not agree. Her guidance and encouragement gave me the confidence to research positions and facts, and to speak up verbally and in writing to those who make decisions about environmental issues at Ballona and beyond.

I also have Barbara to thank for expanding my knowledge through the annual trainings that she organized as part of the Ballona program. The start of the school year was always accompanied by a six weeks of docent education, featuring speakers with deep knowledge of Southern California nature. Local experts would visit us at the wetlands, and through lecture and hands-on demonstrations we would learn about the unique wetland ecosystem, and its importance to the natural hydrology of the Los Angeles Basin. Post-training, the hands-on learning would continue throughout the year during our field trip program, hosting thousands of local students annually at Ballona.

It was my great honor, after being Barbara's ardent pupil for

six years, that she ceded her duties as Program Coordinator to me. She continued to be an active volunteer at Ballona, and I continued to look to her for guidance and companionship in the day to day challenges of overseeing a robust education program. It was a great loss to me and the world when she passed away in 2011.

In that same year my duties with LA Audubon expanded to include overseeing a similar field trip program at Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area. My new responsibilities included working with and mentoring college students that worked as interns at Kenneth Hahn. Coincidence? Maybe. At any rate, I now have the opportunity to set an example, encourage and guide young people as they make their way into adult life and a career path, much as Barbara did for me. It is a task that I do not take lightly. One of my great joys is to see former interns move forward, and many of them keep me apprised of their progress. Writing reference letters for our LAAS alumni is also part of my job as they seek professional positions post college, and I love that part of my work.

In fact, mentoring is a huge part of what we do at the Los Angeles Audubon Society. In addition to the field trips, we have a program for high school students that is now in its 12<sup>th</sup> year, known as the Greenhouse Program. Coordinators help to guide and teach the students who are enrolled, and they in turn teach elementary students at the school yard habitats LAAS has established at Leo Politi and Esperanza Elementary Schools. We have partnered with West LA College to create a semester long class that not only teaches environmental science to those enrolled; we also include skill building sessions on topics like how to write a resume and interview for a job. We have a

Summer Fellows work program that provides summer employment and more training, and is composed of young people who first became involved as interns or students of the West LA College Program. We practice what we preach. Our entire younger staff first came to know LA Audubon through the high school Greenhouse Program, and now, post-graduation from college, they are employees!

As I mentioned earlier, my mentor, Barbara, prided herself on being a lifelong learner. And no matter what your age, I feel we all need to keep learning, and often need guidance. To that end, in spite of the fact that we could not meet in person this year, we did create a Fall Docent Training Course using virtual technology. And we were lucky enough to be instructed by several local experts that generously shared their knowledge with us.

Ballona is always a hot topic amongst our group, as we are acutely aware its



*Lifelong teacher, Barbara Courtois, instilling knowledge to the next generation of naturalists during a Ballona tour.*



*Seasonal ponding and Freshwater Marsh habitat at Ballona, March 2020. Water remained for several months, and the Pacific Chorus Frogs sang out their hearts throughout the Spring.*

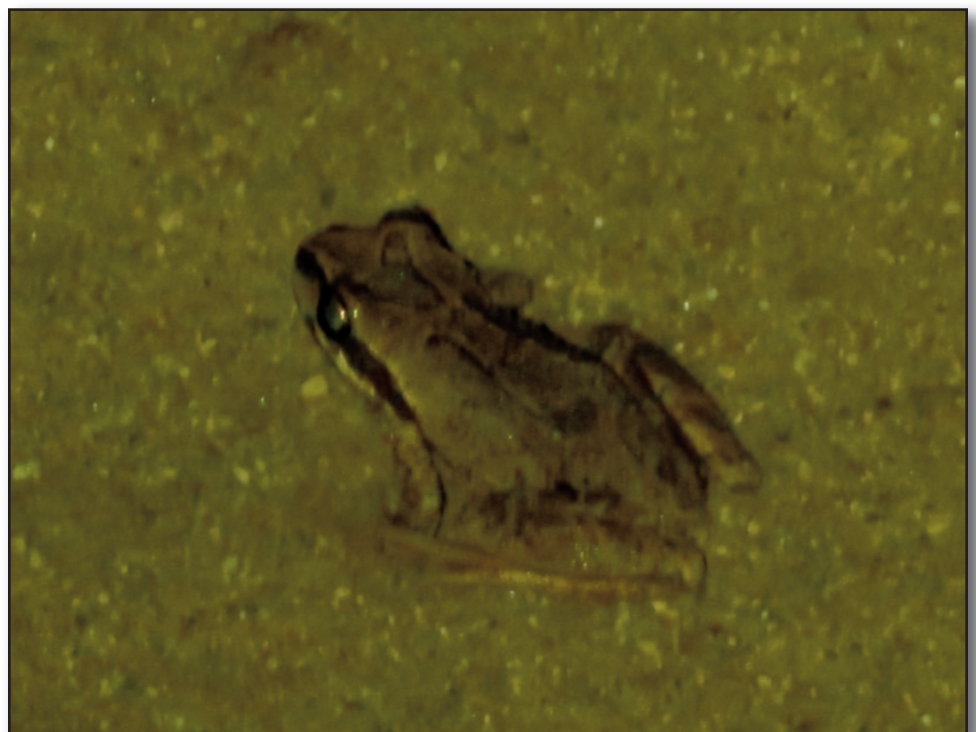
special qualities, due to time spent at the wetlands as volunteers. This year Dr. Margot Griswold, our Education Chair, spoke about Ballona and the State's misguided ideas regarding "restoration" of the wetlands. Dr. Griswold made it clear that she disagrees with what is planned and why, based on her decades of experience implementing her restoration ecology knowledge at various sites in Southern California. Margot is our Ballona mentor!

The State favors an alternative that would destroy rare, existing, functional habitat, and create new, subtidal habitat. The amount of sub-tidal habitat in Southern California wetlands has actually increased by over 600%, due to so-called restorations at other wetland locations. Existing habitat that is already providing home for myriad species will be lost forever in the flooding that is the main component of this type of "restoration". If this happens at Ballona, it would include much bulldozing and earth moving for the better part of a decade, and the destruction of functional habitats and ecosystems currently in place. New science and the fact that historically Ballona was primarily a closed estuary system has been ignored. A true hydrological study has never been done on the site, in spite of ample evidence that freshwater aquifers lay just

below the surface of the Reserve. The destruction that will occur if the State's plan goes forward will impact flow of fresh water, allow for saltwater incursion at increasingly rare freshwater seasonal wetlands found on the site, and negatively impact plants and animals at Ballona, some of which are federally recognized as endangered species.

The Final Environmental Impact Report has not yet been approved by the State. This means that there is still time for the public to push back on this so-called "restoration", and advocate for new, science based, environmentally sensitive enhancement of the habitat that already exists at Ballona. And how to do that? Make your voice heard. Write letters to those involved in the decision-making process, like state agencies and politicians. Attend meetings at which Ballona is the subject, and use the public comment periods to express your opinion. As Barbara taught me many years ago, the first step in making a difference is showing up and becoming informed. We have a chance right now to create positive change for our local wetlands, and leave a legacy

of a thriving habitat for future generations of plants, animals and people. Make some noise. The opportunity is now. 🐸



*Ballona Baja Chorus Frog beginning a journey in the night leaving the safety of the frog pond at Ballona.*



# FROM OUR READERS

## Wasp Puzzle

By Don Sterba



**A**S A PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER IN KENYA A FEW (OK, “many”) years ago, I taught physics at a rural secondary school and maintained a rear, prep area stocked with cabinets and shelves of paraphernalia for classroom demonstrations and laboratory assignments. Since the school was only about 8 miles north of the Equator, classrooms usually were open-air for natural ventilation.

Much of my time was devoted to class preparations, and one weekend afternoon, while poking around in the lab’s prep room, I was abruptly distracted by a wasp that buzzed near my head before landing upon a storage shelf where, wings flitting occasionally, it jerkily walked to the left, maneuvered around several small, shelved items and disappeared from view behind some larger items. After a short delay, it appeared in the air again and exited the prep room through an open, louvered window.

Several minutes later, this uninvited visitor reappeared and landed at the same spot where I saw it land earlier, and again it jerkily walked to the left around the same shelf items and disappeared from view. This time, after the wasp flew off, I slowly and carefully investigated the shelf and found a hidden mud nest that this wasp was constructing. As a young child, insects were my very first critters of in-

terest (yes, even before birds), and I now wondered just how clever a wasp might be. After noting exactly where the wasp touched down on the shelf, I moved one of the small shelf items to a new location directly upon the middle of the wasp’s “walking path” to her unfinished nest. I then waited to see how she negotiated this new obstruction.

A few minutes later, this busy-as-a-bee wasp buzzed by once again, landed upon her usual spot on the shelf, started walking and was ... Stymied!! She felt the obstacle a few times with her antennae, walked around a bit, re-encountered the obstacle, walked around some more, then flew up and circled in the air before landing once more at her accustomed spot only to walk again into the same obstruction. And again she examined the obstruction, walked around a bit, then took off and re-landed at the same spot... with the same result as before. She never made an attempt to simply walk around the obstacle, a task that cats and dogs (but not chickens, I’ve heard) can easily solve.

According to some wags, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Obviously, this definition should not apply to lesser life forms with far, far fewer neurons than we humans. Given more time to investigate the situation, this wasp eventually may have been able to reprogram her route to the nest, but I grew weary of the game and wary of her stinger, shoed her outside and quickly closed the louvers, wishing her well in finding an alternative location for her nest.

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*I grew up on a Wisconsin dairy farm of 133 acres where I first noticed interesting birds & bugs & a dark, Milky Way-blessed night sky. My rural primary school, a one-mile walk from home, was a one-room building with one teacher for all 8 grades. A few years later, grad school studies took me to California where I met my first birder mentors, Shum Suffel and Ralph Mancke. The Peace Corps sent me to Kenya to teach science & math (and a little English) — a perfect match for me & birding. Back in the US, I returned to CA and taught at private schools for a few years before working for an aerospace company until my retirement. I now play the low-carbon-footprint game by doing nearly all of my birding within a few miles of home. | email: DonSterba@gmail.com*

# FROM OUR READERS

## The Return of the White-crowned Sparrows

By Melissa Fitzpatrick Haylock



“WELCOME BACK!”

I say this under my breath. Writing in this space, I want to believe I am not the only one who occasionally speaks to the birds I see when out for a walk. Please humor me on this. I do try to be discreet. The kind of people who don't notice birds, well, you never know what they might think if they heard me. More importantly, though, I don't want to scare the birds off.

This first day of October, I am addressing a small flock of White-crowned sparrows. They are feasting at the toyon bushes at the edge of the Japanese garden at Kenneth Hahn park. They have migrated here from as far away as Alaska. No wonder they are hungry!

People who come to Southern California from more northern climes are fond of saying that we don't have seasons here. It's true that we don't have the spectacular autumn leaves of the northern forests. It's also true that we enjoy the sunshine in shorts and t-shirts well into October and beyond. Autumn's arrival is different here, but it does arrive. The evenings grow cooler; the light turns almost imperceptibly toward golden. And to me, more than pumpkin-spiced anything, nothing says Fall like the arrival of the White-crowned sparrows.

We are all living through a difficult, uncertain time. So much of what we had thought we could count on is endangered, or fading, or gone. The news about birds has not been good. Climate change, habitat loss, bird populations in decline. It can all seem pretty bleak at times. But still, the return of the White-crowned sparrows fills my heart with joy. It's not for nothing that Emily Dickinson called hope “the thing with feathers.”

You can hear the tuneful songs of the White-crowned sparrows from now through spring, when they will fly north again. Such pretty little birds, with such a pretty song. But dainty as they seem, they are tougher than they look. They flew 2,600 miles to get here! According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's website, a White-crowned sparrow was once tracked flying 300 miles in a single night during migration. What a feat of endurance has led them to their well-deserved toyon berry feast. Listen now for the lilting song of the White-crowned sparrows in your neighborhood, or favorite birding spot. When you hear it, may it fill you with hope, strength and courage for the journey ahead.



*Melissa Fitzpatrick is a mom, speech-language pathologist and bird-lover who lives in Culver City. You can find her bird photography on Instagram @melissahaylock*

# FROM OUR READERS

## A Swarm of Bees

By Carol Babeli



buzzing through the air may seem threatening, its only purpose is to establish a new home. A swarm will often find a place to rest, in the branch of a tree or other comfortable spot, for a day or two, and then it will usually move on. According to bee experts, if the swarm does not leave after 2-3 days, but instead stays and begins to build a nest, it is best to have it removed by a licensed beekeeper as soon as possible. Do not use pesticides!

According to the Planet Bee Foundation - Planting a pollinator garden helps honeybees immensely. Bees rely on the nectar and pollen from nearby flowers for their survival; when flowers are scarce, bees can starve. By planting a pollinator garden, you're ensuring that bees have a source of food year round — just be sure your garden is pesticide free. By buying local raw honey, you support local beekeepers and their bees, and therefore the environmental health of your own town or city, as well as your own health. Unlike pasteurized honey, raw honey comes straight from the hive and is unheated, unpasteurized and undiluted, which means it retains all the antioxidants, vitamins, minerals and delicious flavor.

**A** SWARM OF THOUSANDS OF BEES SWOOPED INTO OUR front yard on a recent hot afternoon in October. The sound was incredible, buzzing so loudly that it attracted the attention of my neighbors. The bees quickly formed a cluster about double the size of a large football, piling up one on top of another in our bracelet myrtle tree. Then the buzzing stopped and they were calm. I called a local beekeeper who manages several hives in the area. He arrived with his equipment and managed to get most of the bees into the bee box, which he left on our property overnight to collect the next day. However, the next morning all of the bees had left the box and moved into the adjacent tree in our yard. By the time the beekeeper returned, all of the bees had flown off looking for a new place to build a hive. While the beekeeper left empty-handed, I scored a jar of local honey that he had on his truck!

Both the European Honey Bees and Africanized Honey Bees swarm. They swarm when the original colony has become overcrowded and split off in order to establish a new home. While a large mass of bees



# FROM OUR READERS

## Coronavirus Opportunities

By Judith Deutsch

**W**HILE THE CORONAVIRUS RAISES HAVOC, it has also created an unprecedented opportunity for everyone to truly note, appreciate, and enjoy our surroundings, and experience nature from our own homes, gardens, and environments.

I have my own little ecosystem on a 4' x 10' balcony just outside my city condo, where nature's drama plays out every day. Most of my personal contact with the animal kingdom rests with dogs, cats, guppies, goldfish, and a mountain lion I met napping on the hood of my car! I have ridden hunter-jumper through Torrey Pines Park chasing ecstatic hounds posing as foxes. In grad school, there were red fox dens in our stone Civil War wall and a cardinal who made her nest against our dining room window. We left seeds for the birds and meat for the foxes in Winter.

Being a southern Californian, I have run with wildlife from a fire that broke out in Malibu Canyon while hiking with friends, and have helped rescue horses from multiple brushfires. But my pride and joy are the Monarch butterflies in the milkweed, and bees in the lavender, of my neighborhood organic garden plot—about 144 square feet of lovely, fecund space to grow vegetables for myself and the inevitable insect and aviary kingdoms. Our gardeners built a perch for our visiting hawk and just completed a nesting box for our resident owl to the delight of everyone.

Back on my balcony, pigeons, doves, hummingbirds, crows, ravens, an assortment of little brown birds (I really do need to get an Audubon guide to birdwatching!), and an errant squirrel shower in my fountain and enjoy the bird houses, three trees, bushes, and flowers, that qualify my balcony as a bird sanctuary by the National Wildlife Federation.

My not-so-popular squirrel, Pesky, has been banned from co-existence since I found him frisking among multiple planter chards he had just created. This led to a little red pepper sauce painted on the balcony railing to discourage visits while my favorite guests—the hummingbirds—feast on two feeders and the flowers that survived Pesky. Since hummingbirds are territorial, I have two feeders on opposite ends of the balcony and love to watch my guests feed and chase around my small space. I placed plants in front of the windows to prevent collisions.

Adventures with my hummingbirds include two nestlings who sat on a feeder as I watched their bellies expand to the point of too much nectar for takeoff. I threw oranges to deter the crows who followed the oranges sailing over the balcony. I have replaced the perched feeders with flying-room-only ones to deter overindulgence. I love to watch hummingbird antics, which include pecking on the windows if I am too slow to refill the feeders, breaking the beak off a hummingbird whirly-gig, and buzzing any male joining me for brunch on the balcony. They have no fear of me, and it is comforting that in this time of unprecedented isolation, I have my winged friends to love. 🐦



*Judith Deutsch is a bit of a renaissance woman. She began her career in art conservation at the J. Paul Getty Museum, continued on to a career in fundraising for the arts, education and healthcare, is an artist, educator, historian, editor, ghostwriter, nature lover, bibliophile and world traveler, and is starting a personal chef business. She sails and is a hunter-jumper horsewoman.*

# FROM OUR READERS

## The Daily Commute of the Low-Flying Geese of Westchester California

By Tiffany Larsen

**T**HE WORLD-FAMOUS GEESE RESIDING IN WESTCHESTER, California, as everyone knows, love to hang out in the sunny green fields next to LAX airport during the day and watch the airplanes take off and land. They sit in amazement and discuss the size of the planes and try to distinguish between a Pratt & Whitney, Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, or Rolls Royce, etc. They spend hour upon hour pondering the cutting edge engineering and technology involved in running one of the busiest airports in the world.

After a full day of aviation appreciation and academic analysis they then like to fly down to the Ballona Wetlands in Marina del Rey, so that they can spend their nights squawking and honking with all of their waterfowl brethren. Most of the time it is all fun and frolic down there while they wade through the brackish water and mingle amongst the reeds. Sometimes, however, more important matters, like taxes, climate change, and the oddly fluctuating stock market are the main topics of conversation.

Like everyone else in Los Angeles, these geese have a daily commute. However, unlike the unfortunate local human population that are stuck inside of slow-moving, ground-hugging metal carriages, these geese get to fly fast and low, just over the houses, as they soar to and fro across their ancestral coastal habitat. Best of all, they never have to stop at traffic lights!

Just after sunrise, my neighbors and I can hear their cacophonous caravan arriving from the northwest. Their clarion calls of “get out of our way” and “here we come”, is a rough translation of their actual vociferations that include, “HONK!”, “HONK HONK!!”, and “HONK HONK HONK!”.

In the evening, just as the sun is setting, the process takes place in reverse. Arriving from the south and heading due northwest, the skies suddenly fill with multitudes of flying and flapping goose bodies. Sometimes they appear in impressive V-formations, while at other times disorganized clusters seems the best they can do. Occasionally a few stragglers follow behind the main flying bulwark of their web-footed troops and I often wonder why they didn't get the memo to leave on time with the others. I guess they must share one quality with humans: sometimes they get it right, and sometimes they couldn't organize happy hour in a brewery.

I have not personally met all of our Westchester geese cousins, but I have had the pleasure of meeting some of the leaders of Gaggle Chapter 277.3. I've signed an NDA that prohibits me listing all of their names, due to the fact that most of them are trying to live “off the grid”. These types are usually referred to as “The Millennials”. (FYI, they coined that term first.....humans just took the credit for it!). I digress. Sorry. Here, in order of rank, is a list of some of the Goose troop leaders that don't mind a little publicity.

*Brad, Shirley, Gwendolyn, Millicent, Scooter, Trudy, Clive, Sebastian, Roger, Colin, Hortensia, and Gilbert*

We are proud and delighted to share this part of Westchester and Marina del Rey with our goose and gander compatriots. The sweetly discordant sound of their daily commute is music to our ears. It acts as a reminder that we humans must embrace and respect the Earth and all of our fellow inhabitants. The Geese of Westchester, California expect us to give them some dignity and reverence as they go about their daily commute and engage in the pursuit of happy-geese-lives.

### The disturbing and disheartening news of July 2020

We have recently heard of a potential threat to our harmonious and balanced bird-human realm.

Apparently, there are some rapacious developers hoping to buy up the existing properties all along Manchester Avenue, and create an impenetrable 5-story concrete fortress that might as well be called Condo-Pocolypse.

Besides utterly ruining one of the sweetest neighborhoods in the whole wide world, this kind of development would most likely destroy the centuries old migration path of every goose, gander, and gosling in our area.

Please don't destroy their happy-geese world.

Please help us preserve the existing homes and delicate balance needed to maintain the corridor that enjoys the Daily Commute of the Low-Flying Geese of Westchester California!

## 2020 END-OF-YEAR MEMBERSHIP DRIVE & APPEAL

I want to express our gratitude for the support given by both our long time chapter members and by the newer generations who have just “discovered” L.A. Audubon. Volunteers and donor members are at the very heart of all our conservation, education and restoration efforts.

Many of you may have spoken with me over the years when you called Los Angeles Audubon Society (for whom I have worked since 2000.) I am the administrative ‘voice’ who answers phone calls at (323) 876-0202. I field *many, many* calls about various situations concerning birds and habitat —such as bird ID’s, rescue, tree cutting, bird behaviors, how to volunteer, what education programs are available to the public, who can help, etc .... Often enough, I don’t know the answers, but I certainly know which LAAS Volunteer or Board Member does.

I am also the person who manages our End-of-Year Appeal, a direct-mail campaign asking our supporters to renew their local chapter memberships and to donate to support this chapter\*. More and more folks are opting to make their renewals online, but, amazingly, in 2019 many preferred to use their personal checks, the provided remit envelope, and the U.S. Mail in response to our direct mail appeal. I ask that you renew your membership and support today.

I anticipate that this year’s direct mail campaign —like everything else in this COVID-19 pandemic and the current politicization of the USPS— is going to be affected. In previous election years, the timing of our mail-in campaign was adjusted so that our appeals did not get buried under or lost amongst all the political mail filling-up our U.S. Mailboxes and recycle bins.

Let me take a moment to sing the praises of the service the USPS has provided to this non-profit 501c3 organization over the years. Los Angeles Audubon has received timely deliveries of both packages and letter mail, and outstanding personal service whenever needed at the counters at our local (Eagle Rock) post office and commend them most highly!

I encourage all who read this letter to renew your support of LAAS by either visiting our website at [www.laaudubon.org/membership](http://www.laaudubon.org/membership) and renewing your support using your credit card or PayPal account. Or, mail your check or money order to us (*Payable to LAAS*) mail to: **Los Angeles Audubon Society, P.O. Box 411301, Los Angeles CA 90041-8301.**

Please call me or email for additional information, I am happy to help. and look forward to meeting you.

Susan Castor, Member Services Administrator  
Los Angeles Audubon Society  
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\*Note: Payments made to join National Audubon Society (NAS) at [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org), benefit national conservation efforts, with less money going to the local chapters. Many on our membership roster also support and are members of both National Audubon and multiple Audubon local chapters.