

# WESTERN TANAGER

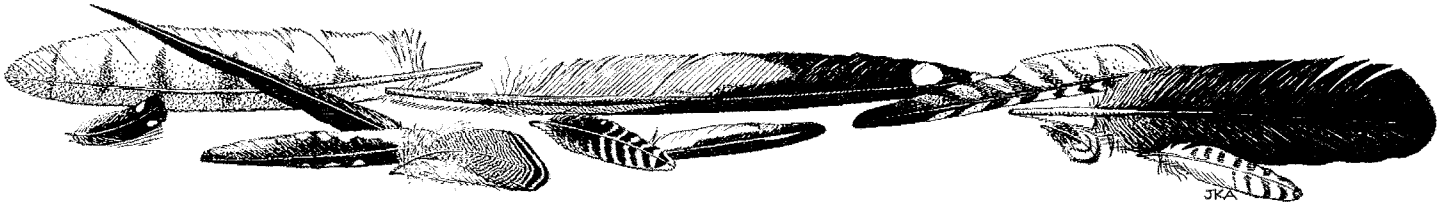


Volume 63 Number 2 October 1996

Los Angeles Audubon Society



*Adult Barn Swallow, Malibu Lagoon, May 1987.  
Photo by Kimball L. Garrett*



# A C C L O S E R L O O K

by Kimball L. Garrett

**T**he Barn Swallow is one of the more ubiquitous birds in North America. It is a widespread breeder and abundant transient over much of the continent. In Southern California, a few migrants are still passing southward in November, and northbound “spring” migrants may appear as early as late January. Only in mid-winter (December and early January) is this species generally absent from our region, and even then a few are noted annually. I would wager there isn’t a square mile of land anywhere in California (including the islands) that hasn’t had a Barn Swallow fly over at least once.

This swallow certainly fits within that set of species to which most of us pay little attention. Barn Swallows are birds we look *through* — often while fixated on pulling a Bank Swallow, a martin, or perhaps something even less common out of the flock. But like any bird species, they’re also worth looking *at* as often as possible. Eurasian Barn Swallows have been the subjects of fascinating studies on mate selection — in essence, studies which tease out those factors which make an individual swallow particularly “sexy.” And, once mates are selected, Barn Swallows are also shown to practice “mate-guarding,” in which a male aggressively ensures that other males don’t steal a copulation from his mate. Revealing studies on many other aspects of Barn Swallow biology have been published.

I’ll focus on only two aspects of Barn Swallow biology in this essay: nest site adaptability and sub-

## The Barn Swallow

*Hirundo rustica*



Three juvenile Barn Swallows, Prairie Creek, Humboldt Co., CA, 31 August 1989.  
Photo by Kimball L. Garrett

species variation. Assuming you were atlasing in Los Angeles County or otherwise busy birding through this past spring and summer, think about where you might have seen nesting Barn Swallows. Then reflect back on the nesting status of this species as reported in Joseph Grinnell’s 1898 *Birds of the Pacific Slope of Los Angeles County* (Pasadena Academy of Sciences Publication No. 11). Grinnell writes: “a few remain through the summer and nest on the bluffs along the coast in the neighborhood of Santa Monica.” Fourteen years later, George Willett (*Birds of the Pacific Slope of Southern California*, Pacific Coast Avifauna No. 7) writes “a few remain through the summer and nest under bridges

or in caves along the coast...”. Aha! Somewhere early this century, our Barn Swallows learned about bridges! (More to the point, of course, bridges and other human-built structures became more abundant around this time.) By 1944, Joseph Grinnell and Alden Miller’s *The Distribution of the Birds of California* (Pacific Coast Avifauna No. 27) described the nesting habitat of Barn Swallows with words that ring true today. I quote:

“If birds are to settle in a locality for breeding... there must be nest sites of a special sort: “natural,” overhung hollows in banks of streams or lakes (these if not of rock must be almost as solid, to make possible firm fixation of the mud nests), and sea caves. Simulating these in essential character are now “artificial” sites (even more accept-

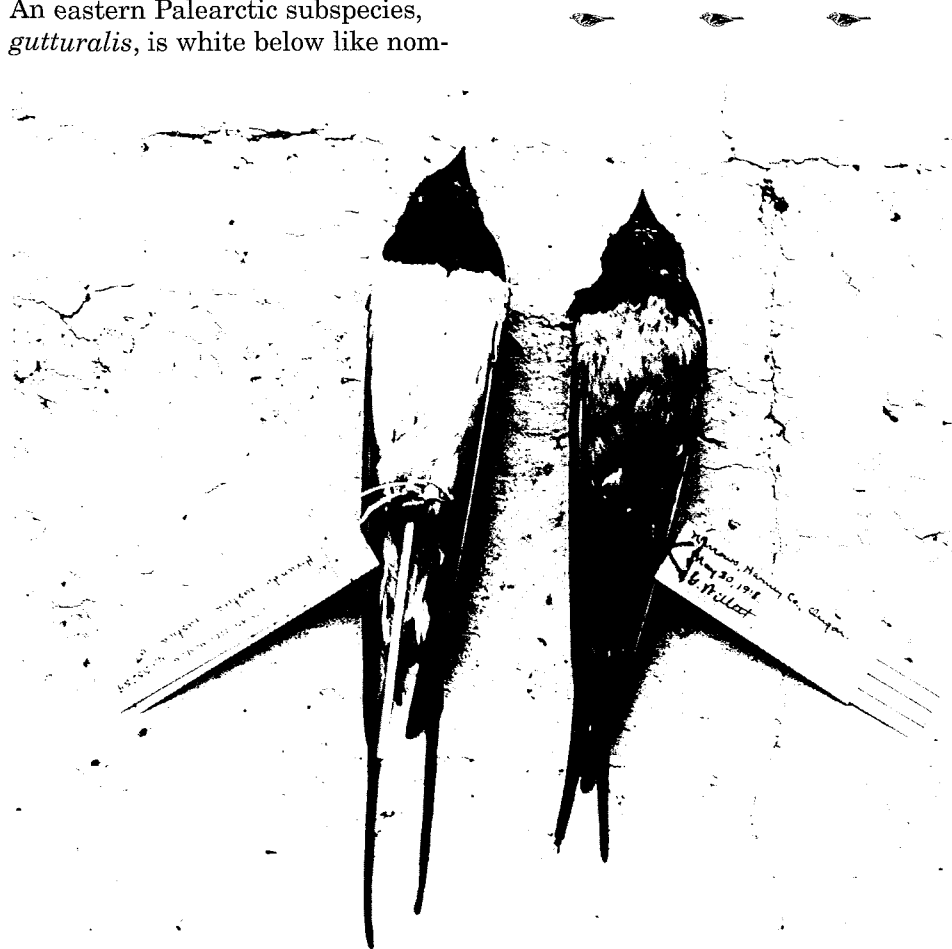
able, perhaps) in the form of bridges over streams, canals, and irrigation ditches, and buildings such as barns or garages. The critical necessity to the Barn Swallow in this special kind of nesting site is proven by the quick extension of the breeding occurrence of the species to new areas (watered, also, of course) where man's activities have supplied it."

Grinnell and Miller didn't practice the sort of word economy in vogue among today's ornithologists (I guess I don't either... sorry). But they sure were accurate, their spectacular work being compromised only by the changes wrought by humans (and naturally) in the fifty years since its publication. Their description of Barn Swallow nesting habitat applies well to Los Angeles County today. I would augment it by noting that Barn Swallows are especially common around pier pilings, nesting abundantly throughout Los Angeles and Long Beach harbors and Marina del Rey, for example. Also, they have adapted well to the concrete-lined portions of the Los Angeles River, nesting in culverts that empty into the main river channel. Along the Los Angeles River they are most numerous where there is a soft bottom or other ready source of mud for the nest. Just yesterday (28 August), Atlas coordinator Mark Wimer and I watched a Barn Swallow feeding two nearly fledged young in a river culvert just above Rosecrans Blvd. in Paramount, certainly not an area that would have hosted breeding Barn Swallows before human modification of the landscape. Barn Swallows even nest these days under bridges over ditches and in outbuildings in the Antelope Valley, clearly extending their breeding range from that of more pristine times.

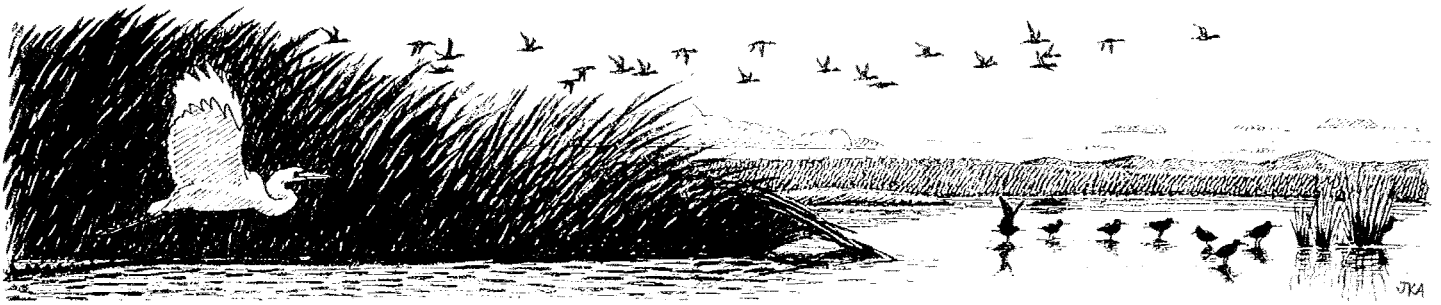
Have any of you recently seen Barn Swallow nesting activity in natural habitats around Los Angeles? Surely they still nest in sea cliffs, perhaps along the Palos Verdes Peninsula or at Pt. Dume. As always, such information (and, in fact, ALL nesting confirmation) is sought for the Breeding Bird Atlas.

For the hard core among you, there's yet another reason to look at Barn Swallows a little more carefully. A glance at any Eurasian field guide (or Turner and Rose's excellent *Swallows and Martins* identification guide published in North America by Houghton Mifflin Co.) reveals that Old World Barn Swallows are quite different in appearance from our familiar New World subspecies *erythrogaster*. The nominate subspecies of Europe usually has a thick, complete blue-black chest band separating the chestnut throat from the nearly white remaining underparts. Our *erythrogaster* are smaller in size and orangish through the underparts, with only an incomplete blue-black chest band (beware, however, juvenile *erythrogaster*, which are creamy white below). Adults, at least, of the two groups should be identifiable in the field. An eastern Palearctic subspecies, *gutturialis*, is white below like nom-

inate European birds, but even smaller than North American birds and usually with an incomplete chest band. What is intriguing is that both nominate *rustica* and *gutturialis* (especially the latter) have been recorded in Alaska; in fact, Old World "white-bellied" Barn Swallows have been recorded not only in the Aleutians, but in western, northern and even southeastern Alaska. It seems probable that an occasional Old World Barn Swallow must migrate down the west coast of North America in fall. Observers should be aware of this possibility, at the same time becoming thoroughly familiar with all plumages (especially pale-bellied juveniles) of our New World Barn Swallows. If you really want a swallow challenge, try Africa where there is a bewildering array of species very similar in general appearance to the Barn Swallow.



*Specimens of Old World rustica (left) and New World erythrogaster (right) Barn Swallows; courtesy of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. Photo by Kimball L. Garrett*



# CONSERVATION CONVERSATION

by Sandy Wohlgemuth

On August 9th, nine of the eleven scientific advisors to the South Coast Air Quality Management District (AQMD) resigned their positions. These were not political appointees of a conventional spoils system but a widely admired panel of experts. They were chemists, physicists, economists and physicians chosen from prestigious universities and consulting firms. Some had been advisors to the district for many years. They had chosen this dramatic stroke to call attention to the failure of the AQMD Board's latest smog control plan to protect public health.

As the chief of pulmonary and critical care medicine at UC Irvine Medical Center said, "To me, it's pretty scary." For the scientific experts to quit, he said, "is a pretty powerful statement. It must be serious for all of them to resign." Some business spokesmen and state politicians were highly critical of the resignations, emphasizing the crucial effect of more stringent regulations on industry's competitiveness and the loss of jobs. A state senator from Riverside deplored the action as "highly politicized interpretations of a political agenda" and the "misuse of so-called science in environmental management." A Riverside County supervisor said the advisors bring "an extraordinarily valid point of view" to the AQMD Board. "We need those scientists to be our con-

science." (Riverside County may have the worst smog problem in the nation.)

Why did they resign? The district had recently adopted a plan based on a new computer analysis of future expectations of air quality which was startlingly optimistic. Many anti-smog strategies were declared unnecessary and were dropped. The plan that permitted industry to buy and sell pollution credits was challenged by the experts for not achieving the goal of reducing smog. They deplored the reluctance of the district to pursue the particulate program. Particulates, unlike the ozone-producing gases, are the minute solid particles occurring principally in diesel exhaust and can be a serious lung problem. The advisors said, "The district is embarked on a course that will not lead to attainment of the Federal ozone and fine particle standards." Those standards were established in 1990, when the Senate overwhelmingly passed a revision of the Clean Air Act which tightened controls on the major sources of smog, acid rain and toxic air pollution. It mandated clean air for the nation by 2010. It seems clear that the AQMD Board has surrendered to industry and can no longer protect the public.

The South Coast Air Quality Management District was created in 1977 with the audacious mission of cleaning up the air in four counties: San Bernardino, Orange,

Riverside and Los Angeles. It got off to a difficult start with badly trained, understaffed inspectors and an executive board rather too friendly with local industry. In 1986, James Lents became director and initiated a 20-year program with teeth in it. It would keep diesel trucks off the freeways during rush hour, promote alternative fuels including hydrogen and electricity, tighten up inspections of industry, phase out 90% of nitrogen oxide emissions (a major smog ingredient) from utilities and oil refineries, and control solvent use in furniture and dry cleaning plants, and more – including researching electric lawn mowers!

The reaction to this bombshell can be imagined. Chambers of commerce and manufacturers screamed long and loud. AQMD dug in, but the pressure was too much and the last ten years have seen a slow retreat from its vigorous inception. Nitrogen oxides "are going to cost industry several hundred millions... the oil companies represent a sizable amount of the emissions, and we believe they should be part of the cleanup" (James Lents, circa 1988). Today the bold blueprint for clean air has been so shredded that nine out of eleven nonpolitical scientists could no longer be part of an impotent AQMD.

Is the vision of clean air attainable or do we simply give up the

struggle? Admittedly, the prevailing spirit of the time is not favorable. Environmentalists are on the defensive. Regulations – any kind of regulations – are the favorite targets of the Republican Congress, the California Assembly and the business PACs that helped elect them. Many of us have been persuaded that we need less government in our lives.

But we are talking about the health of millions of people. In a siege of heavy air pollution when the mountains disappear and smog alerts drive people indoors, eyes tear, noses run and breathing is impaired. Small children and the

elderly are particularly vulnerable. Carbon monoxide reduces blood oxygen for sufferers from heart disease, asthma and emphysema who may require hospitalization. Deaths have occurred. Without an empowered agency to control the pollution of our air space, things can only get worse. People continue to come to Southern California, colonizing the outskirts, replacing oxygen-producing greenery with tract homes. More slow-moving cars move on inadequate freeways to jobs in the cities: *Voila!* More smog.

A choice must be made. Unfettered pollution or strict controls?

No one can be sure of the consequences of long-term exposure to these noxious substances. At best there will be more allergies and respiratory problems. The worst case scenario is a dismaying increase in life-threatening conditions and deaths. Thirteen million of us in the Los Angeles Basin have no choice: we are subjected to a colossal invasion of privacy. Business, industry and government will have to find a way out. The AQMD must be restored to its former stature and given a genuine mandate to clean the air. 🐦

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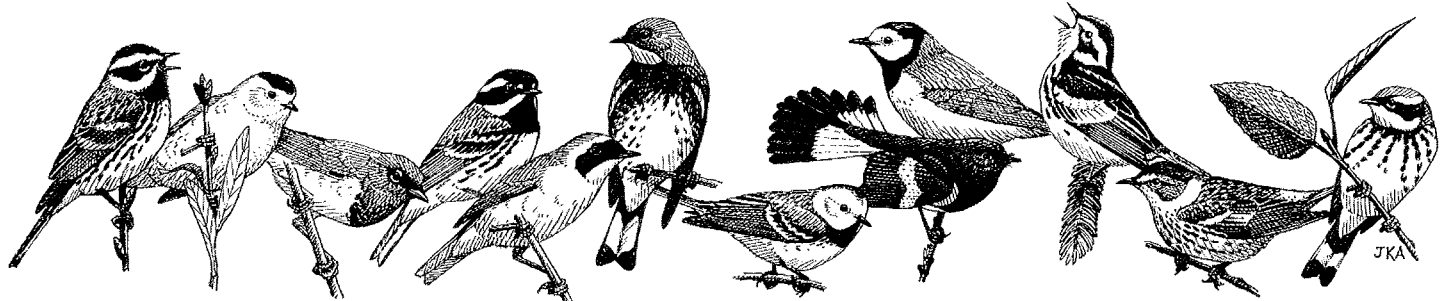
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# BIRDS OF THE SEASON

by Hank Brodtkin

October is the height of the fall vagrant season. Enthusiastic birders will spread out over the countryside looking for the unusual. As the deserts cool down, oases – manmade and natural – will be searched diligently, and the bird-boxes and hotlines will crackle with reports from the proud finders of these out-of-place birds. October will also be the month to start to piece together the more usual patterns of winter invaders – northern species like Red-breasted Nuthatch and Varied Thrush – that only show up in numbers every few years.

While some of the species found, like Mountain Chickadee and Golden-crowned Kinglet, also breed in our mountains – the chances are that these invaders, perhaps because of food shortages on their home ranges, come from the far north.

A bit of unpleasantness that occurred last month has led to the following policy being enforced. Sightings reported by observers who knowingly trespass on biological sensitive areas in such a way as to disturb these sites or harass either the species reported or other species will not be reported in this column. This necessarily has to be a subjective decision made by the *Tanager* Editor, the LAAS Ornithology Consultant or myself. The Los Angeles Audubon Society is, after all, a conservation organization and we must encourage conservationally ethical behavior by our readers.

There has been another major

die-off of birds of many species at the Salton Sea due to avian botulism. Especially hard hit were White and Brown Pelicans according to Nick and Mary Freeman who led the LAAS field trip there on 19 August. Wildlife workers are desperately trying to remove as many dead birds as possible as of this writing (August 26) so as to minimize infection of the millions of waterfowl due to arrive starting in September. Adding this to the die-off of Eared Grebes in past years

Records of rare and unusual bird sightings reported in this column should be considered tentative pending review by NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY FIELD NOTES regional editors or, if appropriate, by the California Birds Records Committee.

Send your bird observations with as many details as possible to:

Hank Brodtkin  
27 1/2 Mast Street, Marina Del Rey,  
CA 90292. Phone: 310 827-0407.  
E-Mail: hankb@kaiwan.com

or call Jon Fisher at 818 544-5009.

certainly does not bode well for this magnificent resource.

Two dead **Sooty Shearwaters** found at the north end of the Salton Sea on 24 August may have been part of this phenomenon (Stacey Peterson). This is part of an ongoing pattern of pelagic species undoubtedly making their way to the Sea through the Gulf of California. A **Black-footed Albatross** was reported off Santa Cruz

Island on 25 July (Edward Roote).

**Solitary Sandpiper** reports include one on the Los Angeles River on 28 July (Richard Barth), one on Baldwin Lake on 22 August (Howard King) and one on the Rio Hondo on 24 August (Larry Schmah). **Semipalmated Sandpiper** reports include one on the L.A. River on 21 July (Mike San Miguel, Mike San Miguel, Jr. & Tom Wurster), one at Malibu Lagoon on 10 August (Kimball Garrett) and at least two at the Santa Clara River Estuary on 22 August (Brian Small, David Vander Pluym, *et al.*). The first of many **Baird's Sandpiper** reports came from the L.A. River on 21 July (MSM, MSMjr, & TW), and the first **Pectoral Sandpipers** were seen at the same location on 20 July (RB & TW).

Two **Black Terns** were in Long Beach on the L.A. River on 26 July, and another was at Bolsa Chica on 24 August (both RB). An adult **Sooty Tern** was observed well off Pt. Fermin on 18 August (Mitch and Kathy Heindel). A **Pigeon Guillemot** was spotted off Point Mugu on 21 July (RB) and an unseasonal **Marbled Murrelet** was reported in the Marina Del Rey Channel on 1 August (RB).

An **Eastern Kingbird** was in Big Bear on 22 July (Dori Myers), and a juvenile **Black-throated Sparrow** was seen at the San Joaquin Marsh on 17 August (Jon Fisher).

Good Birding! 

Continued from page 8



plains around Oxnard. Usually excellent for warblers, vireos and other migrants. Possible vagrant chasing. From Hwy 101, take Las Posas Rd. south, turn right on Pleasant Valley Rd. and left on Laguna Rd. If coming via Hwy 1, take Pleasant Valley Rd. inland to Laguna Rd. and turn right. Meet at the side of Laguna Rd. across from the big house at 8:00 A.M. Bring a lunch and bird into the afternoon.

### Saturday, October 26 — Sepulveda Basin Natural Area.

Leader **Steve Ducatman**. In past years, some good birds have shown up in this wild spot and adjacent parklands. Meet at Woodley Park at 8:00 A.M. Take Burbank Blvd. west from the 405 Fwy, turn right onto Woodley Ave. and continue to the Woodley Park entrance on the right. Meet in the first parking area.

### Reservation and Fee Events (Limited Participation) Policy and Procedure

Reservations will be accepted ONLY if ALL the following information is supplied:


- 1) Trip desired
- 2) Names of people in your party
- 3) Phone numbers
  - (a) usual and
  - (b) evening before event, in case of emergency cancellation
- 4) Separate check (no cash please) to LAAS for exact amount for each trip
- 5) Self-addressed stamped envelope for confirmation and associated trip information. Send to:

LAAS Reservations  
7377 Santa Monica Blvd.  
West Hollywood, CA 90046-6694.

If there is insufficient response, the trip will be cancelled two Wednesdays prior to the scheduled date (four weeks for pelagics), and you will be so notified and your fee returned. Your cancellation after that time will bring a refund only if there is a paid replacement. Millie Newton is available at Audubon House on Wednesdays from noon to 4:00 P.M. to answer questions about field trips. Our office staff is also available Tuesday through Saturday for most reservation services.

**Saturday, November 2 — Sketching Birds in the Field.** Renowned bird artist **John Schmitt** will show eight klutzes how to render useful bird sketches for field documentation. Spotting scope, folding chair (plastic bag at least), pencils and sketch pad a must. Bring a book illustrating bird plumage topography. Meet at Malibu kiosk at 8:00 A.M. Call LAAS for limited sign-up.

**Sunday, November 3 — Topanga State Park.** Leader **Gerry Haigh**. Meet at 8:00 A.M. See October 6 write-up for details.

**Sunday, November 10 — Whittier Narrows.** Leader **Ray Jillson**. Meet at 8:00 A.M. See October 13 write-up for details. 

## WESTERN Tanager

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EDITOR: Fred Heath  
ASSISTANT EDITOR: Tom Frillman  
CONSERVATION: Sandy Wohlgenuth  
CO-CONSERVATION: Catherine Rich  
ORNITHOLOGY CONSULTANT:  
Kimball Garrett  
FIELD TRIPS: Nick Freeman  
PELAGIC TRIPS: Phil Sayre  
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## BOAT TRIPS

 **Sunday, October 6** — (special one-day, three island trip) — 12-hours on the *M.V. Vanguard* to Anacapa and Santa Rosa Islands, and through the Santa Rosa Passage to Santa Cruz Island. \$65.

 **Friday, November 29** — 30-hour trip on the *M.V. Vanguard* (10 P.M. Friday to 4 A.M. Sunday). NorthWest out of Ventura past Point Conception to Arguello Canyon and West to the California continental shelf with several daylight hours along the shelf. \$260/double bunk, \$150/single bunk, meals included.

 **Saturday, November 16** — 8-hour trip on the *R.V. Vantuna* to the Palos Verdes Escarpment and Redondo Canyon. \$25

**Note:** **Linda Lewis**, Marine Mammal expert will be one of our leaders when her schedule permits.



# EVENING MEETINGS

Meet at 8:00 P.M. in Plummer Park.  
Los Angeles Audubon Society  
7377 Santa Monica Boulevard  
West Hollywood, CA 90046-6694

Tuesday, October 8, 1996

## The Panda and Other Endangered Wildlife of the Suchan Province of China

**Dr. Jim Clements**, who has spent many months in the Suchan Province, will discuss the challenges of saving the Panda as well as many birds of this area, including a number of the rare and endemic pheasant species.

Tuesday, November 12, 1996

To Be Announced

# F I E L D T R I P S

Before setting out on any field trip, **please call the LAAS bird tape at (213) 874-1318** for special instructions or possible cancellations that may have occurred by the Thursday before the trip.

**Sunday, October 6 — Topanga State Park.** **Gerry Haigh** will lead participants through this diverse coastal mountain area. An ideal trip for a beginning birder or someone new in the area. A botanist is usually present. From where it crosses Ventura Blvd. in the Valley, take Topanga Canyon Blvd. 7 miles further south, then turn east uphill on Entrada Rd. (1 mile north of Topanga Village). Follow the signs and make a left into the park. Meet in the parking lot of Trippet Ranch at 8:00 A.M. \$5 parking fee.

**Sunday, October 13 — Whittier Narrows Regional Park.** Join ranger **Ray Jillson** at 8:00 A.M. to view colorful migrants and resident birds including Northern Cardinal. Meet at the Nature Center at 1000 Durfee Ave. Take the 60 Fwy to South El Monte, just west of the 605 Fwy, taking the Peck Drive exit south. Take the offramp onto Durfee Ave. heading west (right), and make a left into the Nature Center. \$2 voluntary donation suggested by the park.

**Sunday, October 13 — Ballona Wetlands.** **Bob Shanman** will lead this trip to our nearest wetland for the first time in six years! Late shorebird migration and early sea ducks among the expected fare. Meet at 8:00 A.M. at the Del Rey Lagoon parking lot. Take the Marina Fwy (90 West) to Culver Blvd.,

turn left for about a mile, then right on Pacific Ave. The lot is on the right. Lot or street parking is usually available. Three hour walk. Scopes helpful.

**Saturday, October 19 — Mojave Vicinity.** Leaders **Nick and Mary Freeman**. Meet at Galileo Hill, bird here for straggling and late migrants and early winter birds, then bird and picnic at California City Central Park. We may bird Butterbredd Springs, then finish up at Piute Ponds (pending permission). Come prepared for a possibly hot, dusty, fun day. Take Hwy 14 past Mojave, continue north on Hwy 14 about 6 miles to California City Blvd. Drive east through town, take a left just past the golf course on Randsburg Mojave Rd., and veer right at the fork. Turn left where the pavement turns to dirt, then make two rights, following the Silver Saddle Country Club signs. Turn left and left again into the main parking lot, but park away from the structure. We will meet at 8:00 A.M. About 2 hours driving time from Los Angeles. Call LAAS to register. Limited to 14.

**Sunday, October 20 — Oxnard Plains.** Leader **Fred Heath** will explore the windbreaks and thickets that criss-cross the agricultural

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