

WESTERN TANAGER



Volume 63 Number 4 December 1996

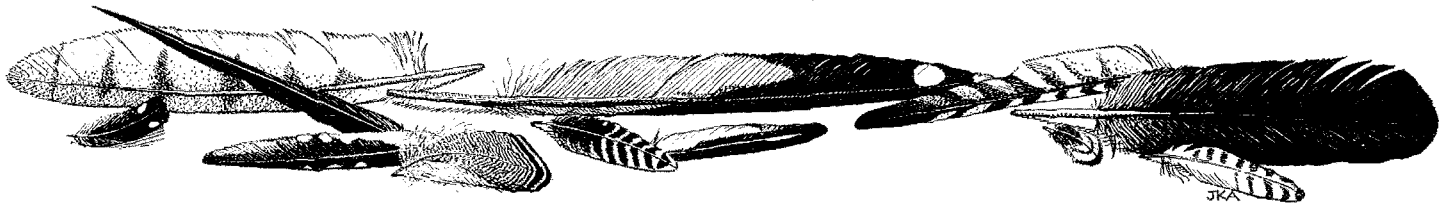
Los Angeles Audubon Society

We would like to wish you all . . .



MERRY CHRISTMAS
BIRD COUNTS

—see page 7 for details



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

by Kimball L. Garrett

Winter birding seems to involve endless scanning through flocks of gulls and other beach and estuary-dwelling birds, looking for that “something different.” One can’t deny the thrill of happening upon a Little Gull in a flock of Bonaparte’s, an unseasonal Common Tern in with the usual Forster’s, or finally nailing that “second-winter Thayer’s” that somebody had reported at Malibu Lagoon or the Santa Clara River Estuary. The winter birder works methodically through a gull, tern or shorebird flock, checking size, shape, mantle color, bill size and color, and wingtips. Leg characters can be important, too, and each limb is Kowaed or Bausch and Lombed to check color and length, or perhaps even to count the toes. Inevitably, the flock scanner will come across a leg adorned by one or more metal or plastic rings, and this is where things really get interesting. By carefully recording and reporting such bands, the birder graduates from birdwatcher to active participant in the study of

Ring-legged Gull *Larus patuxent* and Band-legged Skimmer *Rynchops cinctipes*

bird biology.

Bird banding and other forms of auxiliary marking have been conducted formally in North America since the early 1920s. The identification of individual birds through uniquely numbered bands issued by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, often supplemented by unique combinations of color bands, has been fundamental to countless studies of avian behavior, movements, and population biology (including longevity, reproductive success and mate fidelity).

Most banded birds wear only a single metal band bearing a unique number. Normally one must recapture the bird to read the band number, but bands on terns, gulls and other larger sized birds can sometimes be read with a spotting scope if they are loafing in the open with the band-bearing leg extended. Gulls can often be enticed into band-reading distance with some strategically tossed food scraps. Band numbers should always be read with great care and ideally independently checked by two or more observers. For certain studies; birds are given more readily visible identifying markers. Some gulls, for example, have been marked with patagial (wing) tags bearing some

combination of easily read numbers, letters or symbols.

A common technique is to place a combination of colored bands on one or both legs (in addition to the metal USFWS band). Color bands may identify a bird’s natal locality, age (if a different color is applied to each annual cohort), or even individual identity (if a combination of three or four bands is used). Some color markers may have a short flag extending rearward which may bear an alphanumeric code. Still other color bands are tall enough to bear letters, numbers and/or symbols to identify the individuals.

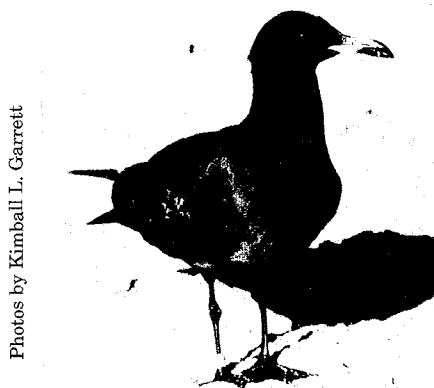


Patagial tag on the wing of a California Gull, Magdalena Bay, Baja California.

All reports of bird bands and marked birds should be directed to the:

Bird Banding Laboratory
12100 Beech Forest Rd.
Laurel, MD 20708-4037
(or by e-mail to: bbl@nbs.gov).

Reports should include the **date**, exact **location** (including mileage and direction from nearest town), **band number** (if a band is read) or **marker type, color(s), code(s)**, and **code color** if a **color marker**, and the **name** and **street address** of the person who found the bird and **your name** (if you aren’t the



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service metal band on an immature Heermann’s Gull, Malibu Lagoon, Los Angeles Co.

Photos by Kimball L. Garrett

person that found it). The Bird Banding Laboratory authorizes and oversees all native bird marking projects in North America and will ensure that the information gets to the appropriate researcher.

Perhaps the most frequently encountered bird bands are those on Rock Doves; these are generally on lost or discarded captive birds rather than on feral, free-living pigeons. In nearly all cases, these are *not* USFWS bands, but rather bands made and distributed by pigeon fanciers. These bands should not be reported to the Bird Banding Laboratory, but may be reported to the:

Avian Service Center
Box 18327
Oklahoma City, OK
73154-0327.

Several western bird species have been the subject of intensive banding studies, and many of these involve color banding and other readily visible unique marking techniques. Requests for assistance



Black Skimmer flock in Long Beach, Los Angeles Co. The bird in the foreground has a USFWS band on its right leg and a green-over-white color combination on its left leg; it had been banded in 1994 at the Salton Sea, CA.

with sightings of marked birds are regularly published in the *Ornithological Newsletter* (sent to members of the major North American ornithological societies) and are on file at Audubon House and the Natural History Museum.

You might especially keep an eye out for bands on the following species in Southern California: Brown Pelican, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Snowy Plover, American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Sanderling, Dunlin, gulls (e.g. Heermann's, Ring-billed, California and

Western), terns (Gull-billed, Caspian and Elegant), and Black Skimmer. Many of the species on this list are marked with unique color band combinations or highly visible alphanumeric codes. Any sighting of such a marked bird should be reported to the Bird Banding Laboratory. If you call Audubon House, (213) 876-0202 or the Natural History Museum, (213) 744-3368 we might be able to alert researchers more quickly. Of course, many other species have been marked with bands. Should you find a dead bird with a USFWS band, record all of the pertinent information and send that information (and the band) to the Bird Banding Laboratory. If the bird is salvageable as a specimen, contact your local natural history museum or university biology department.

Your cooperation in reporting bird bands is critical to the success of banding research projects and illustrates yet another way that the scientific study of birds relies on the contributions of birders. 🐦

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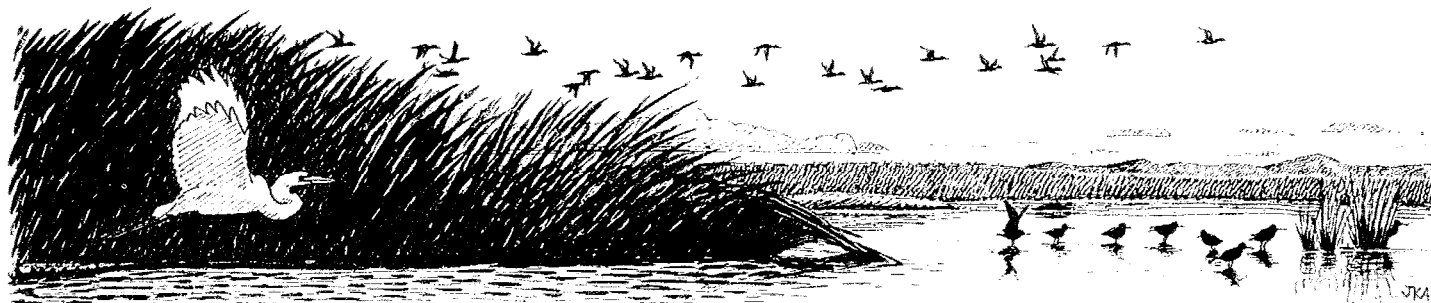
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CONSERVATION CONVERSATION

by Sandy Wohlgemuth

It's *deja vu* all over again, folks. Cosmo World is making another stab at building a golf course in Big Tujunga Wash. The wash, flood plain of the Big Tujunga River, is a desert-like alluvial fan scrub community that is home to a large variety of plants and animals including the state and federally endangered Slender-horned Spineflower. Cactus Wrens nest in the cholla, roadrunners and coyotes hunt for their dinner, nighthawks take wing at dusk. The wash is 1,500 acres of the only extensive remnant alluvial scrub in Southern California, a rare habitat in its own right. It is what we mean when we speak of open space.

Into this unique natural area within the boundaries of a major city come the planners, the contractors, the bulldozers of a developer who lost his first go-round with the agencies and the public three years ago. The layout of his current golf course differs only slightly from the previous blueprint. A substantial club house and a parking lot are still to be placed in the flood plain, there are dubious plans for diverting the river from the course itself, and the endangered spineflower has no guarantee of survival.

Cosmo World has a somewhat clouded history. It purchased the renowned Pebble Beach course in Carmel and defaulted on \$340 million worth of loans it took to acquire the property. Affiliates of Cosmo have gone into bankruptcy and abandoned partially built golf

courses in Hawaii and Nevada, destroying environmentally sensitive sites. There are persistent stories of unsavory connections with the underworld in courses in golf-addicted Japan. They owe \$500,000 in taxes on their Tujunga holdings. The 1993 attempt was to have been a world-class private course with memberships as high as \$75,000. This year's course would be open to the public, but green's fees of \$100 a round have been quoted, hardly serving the average golfer.

In June of 1994, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers denied the permit on the grounds that the existence of the spineflower would be jeopardized by the golf course which "would eliminate at least 120 acres of alluvial fan sage scrub habitat. . ." "We have determined that, on balance, your proposal is contrary to the public interest." Both California Fish and Game and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had opposed the development. A year before, on the advice of attorney Hugh Hewitt (conservative commentator on Channel 28's "Life and

Times"), Cosmo had arrogantly given USFWS ten days to remove the spineflowers from their property or they would be plowed under. This unwise action stirred up the public and the agencies, and Cosmo backed down.

In the Environmental Impact Report on the current project, the USFWS has commented at length and with considerable acumen on the proposal. Their remarks do not indicate any more acceptance of the golf course today than in 1993. Both the Corps and the Service show great concern about the effect of the project on the hydrology of the wash and the possible consequences of a powerful flood. In 1969, a flood destroyed two main bridges across the wash and took out huge pieces of Wentworth Street.


On October 9 of this year, the first hearing on the wash took place at a high school in Tujunga. Environmentalists were there, as they were four years ago, to testify against the golf course. Most of the audience were local residents who seemed to be solidly in favor of it. They were talking about jobs and a possible increase in their property values. There was a palpable hostility to the outsiders who they felt were trying to tell them how to run their own neighborhood. The provincialism took the form of booing the opposition and demanding where you were from, followed by shaking heads and loud murmurs



of "Aha!" – meaning we were dilettante elitists invading their territory. One of the environmentalists gently chided the crowd, saying Big Tujunga is in the city of Los Angeles and belongs to everyone and we all should care about it.

A quote from a perceptive letter to *The Foothill Leader* in 1992 expresses the feelings of those of us opposed to the golf course.

"Many social problems in the Sunland-Tujunga area cry desperately for attention, but it is shortsighted and foolish to accomplish this by selling out the area's natural heritage to a questionable foreign developer who promises an eagle but can deliver only the permanent scars of a double bogey."

It is said that in 1916 the last California Grizzly was shot in Big Tujunga Wash. Is it conceivable that 80 years later we will sit by and watched the extinction of Big Tujunga Wash – by a **GOLF COURSE?** 



Norm Mellor, an old friend of Los Angeles Audubon, sent us a check for \$100 and suggested that we set up a Century Club for those birders who treasure Bolsa Chica.

LAAS is strongly behind the Bolsa Chica Land Trust in its courageous fight to defeat the intrusion of 3,300 homes into this marvelous sanctuary. Rather than handling the money ourselves, our Board thought we should announce this new rescue fund and ask people to send it directly to the Trust.

Those of us who can join the Century Club are urged to do so. If \$100 is too steep, send what you can, with the thought of how much pleasure you have received there and how terrible it would be to lose Bolsa Chica.

Bolsa Chica Land Trust
207 21st Street
Huntington Beach, CA 92648

FIELD TRIPS

Continued from page 8

Sunday, January 12 – Whittier Narrows. Leader **Ray Jillson.** Meet at 8:00 A.M. See December 8 write-up for details.

Sunday, January 12 – Ballona Wetlands. **Bob Shanman** will lead this trip to our nearest wetland. Wintering shorebirds, sea ducks and gulls are 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 to Pacific Ave., then right to the lot on the right. Lot or street parking is usually available. Three hour walk. Scopes helpful.

Friday, January 17 – Gull Study Workshop. **Larry Allen** will take us beyond the standard plumage reviews of this oft-confusing collection of birds. The important skills of ageing and describing a gull by feather groupings will be addressed. Slides, skins and handouts will be used to demonstrate I.D. marks of many common and uncommon gulls of the west coast in their various plumages. Emphasis will differ somewhat from lecture of November general meeting. Meet at Audubon House in West Hollywood at 7:30 P.M. \$5 fee for lecture and field trip. Reservation with Audubon House by check required, as we only have room for 22 chairs. See field trip listing below.

Sunday, January 19 – Gull Study Field Trip. **Larry Allen** will make stops from Malibu Lagoon to McGrath State Beach looking for gulls to demonstrate points made during the Friday lecture (see above). Thayer's Gull likely. Meet at the Malibu Lagoon parking lot kiosk at 8:00 A.M. Free parking on Cross Creek Rd. located just west of the lagoon bridge. Trip will finish at McGrath State Park in Oxnard. Walk-ons O.K. for field

trip only. \$5 fee for both, \$3 for field trip only. Bring lunch, a National Geographic Society field guide and scope for a full day.

Saturday, January 25 – Point Mugu. **Irwin Woldman, Bart Lane** and a base biologist will lead in this limited access area. **Note revised date.** Peregrine Falcon and White-winged Scoter frequently seen. Rare birds like Tropical Kingbird, Oldsquaw, Black Scoter in recent years. Must be 16 years old. No cameras. Mail a SASE to LAAS by January 7, for required early, limited sign-up including citizenship status, phone number, social security number and a \$5 deposit (to be refunded at the gate) for each person in your party. Take the 101 Fwy west to Las Posas Rd. going south, to PCH go north onto Wood Rd. going west, then head south on the frontage road to the lot at the main (#2) gate. Meet at 7:45 A.M. 

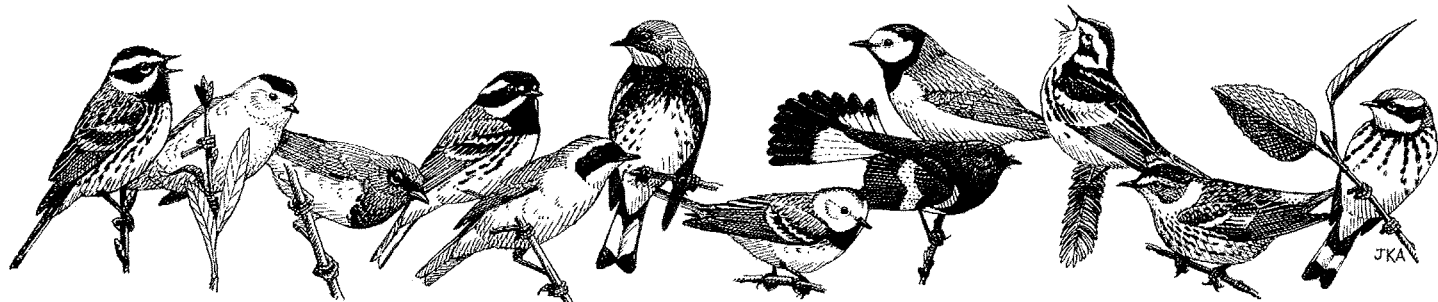
Reservation and Fee Events (Limited Participation) Policy and Procedure

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.



BIRDS OF THE SEASON

by Hank Brodtkin

December is the month of the Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count. The last count for which I have statistics, the ninety-fifth in 1994 (*NAS Field Notes*, Volume 49 No. 4), consisted of 1,692 areas censused – mostly in the U.S. and Canada – but also some in the rest of the Americas, the Caribbean and some of our Pacific territories: 45,000 participants counted some 61,300,000 individual birds representing 628 species.

Elsewhere in this *Tanager* is a list of the LAAS counts, so sign up early and try to get assigned to a definite area so you can scout before the day of the count.

The species counts may all be quite high this year. There has been a massive invasion of northern and montane species, not only into our area, but also all across the southwest (see below).

The most exciting bird in California these past few weeks was an **Arctic Warbler** found north of our area in Oceano, San Luis Obispo County on 29 September and identified by Brian Daniels, Curtis Marantz and Brad Schram. As you will see below this has been a very good fall for interesting birds.

The first **Hooded Mergansers** of the season were reported from the Saticoy Spreading Ponds in Ventura County on 5 October (Gayle Hightower). A **Mississippi Kite** was seen over Huntington Gardens on 5 October (Sandy Wohlgemuth), and the first **Ferruginous Hawk** report of the sea-

son came from Grand Terrace, San Bernardino County, on 29 September (Dave Goodward). An immature **Bald Eagle** flew over Zuma Canyon, Malibu, on 19 October (Kimball Garrett).

Mountain Plovers showed up on the Oxnard Plain on 18 October (Bart Lane), and a **Ruff** was seen in Winchester, Riverside County, on 21 September (Bob McKernan). A **Sabine's Gull** was at the Tecopa Sewage Ponds, Inyo County, on 3 October (Ron Hewitt and John Sterling).

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.

Thirteen **Inca Doves** and one **Ruddy Ground Dove** were found at Furnace Creek on 15 October (Guy McCaskie et al). Approximately 10,000 **Vaux's Swifts** were at their traditional roosting site at the Broadway Trade Center in downtown L.A. on 30 September (KG). A **Broad-billed Hummingbird** turned up at Desert Center, Riverside County, on 20 October (Chet McGaugh).

Lewis' Woodpeckers are invading this year. Early reports include one in Agoura on 25 September (Bob McMillan) and one at Furnace Creek on 28 September (Andrew and Vernon Howe). Single **Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers** were at Galileo in eastern Kern County on 29 September (Dick Ashford and Steve Tucker) and at Veteran's Park, Sylmar, on 17 October (Doug Martin). A **White-Headed Woodpecker** was in Agoura on 12 October (Robert Weissler).

A **Least Flycatcher** was at Galileo on 2 October (RH & JS), a **Vermilion Flycatcher** showed up at the Sepulveda Basin on 13 October (Bob Pann), and two **Tropical Kingbirds** were found near Lake Isabella in Kern County on 22 September (Steve Laymon).

Invading **Clark's Nutcrackers** include two birds over the Mid Hills Campground in the Mojave National Preserve on 1 October and a single bird at Galileo on 2 October (both by RH & JS). Among the **Mountain Chickadee** reports was one in Bette Davis Park in Burbank on 16 October (Gerard Phillips). Far flung locations for this year's nuthatch invasion were **Red-breasted** at the Isthmus on Santa Catalina Island on 12 October (Tom Frillman) and lots on San Nicolas Island (Walter Wehtje). A **Gray Catbird** was found at Big Sycamore Canyon, Pt.. Mugu State Park, on 17 October (BL).

The **Black-backed Wagtail** (certainly the same bird as last year) was found at Doheny Beach State Park on 27 September (Barney Spandstra and

Pearl Sylvester). A very rare **Sprague's Pipit** was found with two of the season's first **Red-throated Pipits** at the San Joaquin Marsh in Orange County on 19 October (Brian Daniels and Doug Willick), and on the next day another **Sprague's** showed up at the China Lake Sewage Ponds (David Blue).

Vireo sightings include a **Gray** at Banning Park on 23 September (Jerry Johnson), a **Yellow-throated** at Banning Park on 28 September (Mike San Miguel and Tom Wurster), a **Philadelphia** at Galileo on 6 October (Jon Dunn), and a **Yellow-Green** at Banning Park on 26 October (Martin Byhower).

Interesting warbler sightings were a **Virginia's** at the Zuma Creek mouth on 16 to 19 October (Tim Kastle), a **Chestnut-sided** at Glen Helen Regional Park on 26 September (DG), a **Blackburnian** at Trona in northeastern Kern County on 2 October (RH & JS), a **Palm** at Zuma Creek on 16 October (TK), an **American Redstart** (again possibly a returning bird from last year) at the L.A. Civic Center on 3 October (KG), single **Prothonotaries** at Furnace Creek on 26 September (MSG *et al.*) and at China Ranch near Tecopa on 3 October (RH & JS), a **Worm-eating** at Banning Park on 29 September (JJ), and a **Mourning** at Hansen Dam on 24 September (DM).

Single **Dickcissels** were at Madrona Marsh on 21 September (Kevin Larson) and at Furnace Creek on 25 September (MSG *et al.*).

A very rare **Cassin's Sparrow** was reported from 29 Palms on 20 October (Gene Cardiff), and a **Black-throated Sparrow** was seen at Hansen Dam on 21 September (Dustin Alcalá).

Vying in rarity with the above-mentioned **Arctic Warbler** in California was a **Smith's Longspur** found at Galileo on 10 October (DB, A&VH). Single **Bobolinks** showed up at the Santa Clara River mouth on 23 September (BL) and at Furnace Creek on 25 September (MSG *et al.*).

Joining winter invaders were **Evening Grosbeaks** seen at Galileo on 6 October (JD), at a

feeder in Porter Ranch on 8 October (Dick Branton), and three in the San Gabriel Mountains on 20 October (KG).

Good Birding! 🐦

FLASH! Hank Brodtkin, long time author of *Birds of the Season*, will be leaving California in early 1997. We will miss him greatly. We are in dire need of a new author for *Birds of the Season*. If you are interested please contact Fred Heath, (805) 389-3203.

A Request for Information

I am preparing species accounts on **California** and **Crisall Thrashers** for the new *Birds of North America*, and would welcome any input on ecology, behavior, distribution, breeding or other records. Please direct observations, information or obscure references, on either species to:

M. L. Cody
Department of Biology
University of California
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1606.
Voice (310) 825-1327
Fax: (310) 206-3987
e-mail: mlcody@ucla.edu

All cited data will of course be duly accredited to source.

LAAS Christmas Bird Counts

There is still time to sign up to participate in one or more of the Christmas Bird Counts sponsored by Los Angeles Audubon Society. Below are the dates and contact information.

Lancaster,
Saturday, December 21, -
Call Fred Heath at (805) 389-3203.

Malibu,
Sunday, December 22, -
Call Larry Allen at (213) 221-2022.

Los Angeles,
Sunday, December 29, -
Leave a message at LAAS for Travis Longcore, (213) 876-0202.

WESTERN TANAGER

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EVENING MEETINGS

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

Tuesday, December 10, 1996 Avoiding Embarrassment in the Field



What is it?

Arnold Small, bird photographer, natural history teacher, and author, presents this beautifully illustrated (as always) program which asks, "Why don't all members of the same species look alike?" Arnold will answer this question showing sex, age molt, feather wear, soiling, etc., as examples during this fun and informative evening.

Tuesday, January 14, 1997

Bruce Bartrug of the Maine Audubon Society will present "The Decline of Neotropical Migrants"

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, December 1 - 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 Ventura Blvd., take Topanga Canyon Blvd. 7 miles south, then turn east uphill on Entrada Rd. (1 mile north of Topanga Village). Follow the signs and turn left into the park. Meet in the parking lot of Trippet Ranch at 8:00 A.M. \$5 parking fee.

Sunday, December 8 - Whittier Narrows Regional Park. Join

ranger **Ray Jillson** at 8:00 A.M. to view colorful resident and wintering 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 take the Peck Drive exit south. Take the offramp onto Durfee Ave. heading west (right), and turn left into the nature center. \$2 voluntary donation suggested by the park.

Saturday, December 14 - Van Norman Reservoir. Leader **Karen Johnson**. The reservoir and small ponds dot the riparian and grassland habitat of the grounds. Hooded Merganser is probable, raptors should be good, and a decent selection of gulls is likely, due to a dump nearby. Take the 405 Fwy north to the Rinaldi offramp just south of the 5 Fwy interchange. Go

west on Rinaldi about a mile to the front gate on the right (north) side. Meet in the lot inside the gate on the left. We will carpool from here at 8:00 A.M., and stop about noon. Restrooms on-site.

Saturday and Sunday, January 4 and 5 - Carrizo Plain (revised listing). Leader **Roy Van de Hoek**, who has done considerable field research on the Plain. Meet at 8:00 A.M. in Maricopa. Hawks, falcons, eagles, and Mountain Plover for sure! Sandhill Crane, elk and pronghorn hopeful. If possible, please carpool or avail your vehicle to others. \$15 per person, \$5 surcharge for one-person vehicles. 10 car limit. Your phone number will be released for carpooling unless you request otherwise. Sign-up with Audubon House for exact directions and information. Reserve accommodations with a motel near Buttonwillow (I-5 & Hwy 58), such as Motel 6 at (805) 764-5207 or (805) 764-5153. No inns open on the Plain.

Sunday, January 5 - Topanga State Park. Leader **Gerry Haigh**. Meet at 8:00 A.M. See December 1 write-up for details.

Saturday, January 11 - Point Mugu. Rescheduled for January 25.

Los Angeles Audubon Society
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West Hollywood, CA 90046-6694

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