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This painting of Short-tailed Shearwaters was created by illustrator and WFO board member Bryce Robinson. He’s studied this marine bird in Alaska waters, where oceanic conditions there and elsewhere appear to be leading to serious population declines. Inside, Steve Howell provides a broader perspective on these transoceanic migrants.
Cover artist Bryce Robinson writes this about himself...

Over the years, I’ve had the opportunity to observe many Short-tailed Shearwaters, primarily in the Gulf of Alaska, throughout the Aleutians, and the Bering Sea. My cover illustration first appeared in a paper I published with colleagues in the journal Marine Ornithology. A blog post on my website describes this paper and also features a video that highlights our very unusual observations of foraging behavior by Fork-tailed Storm-petrels and Short-tailed Shearwaters.


I’m currently a PhD student in the Ecology and Evolutionary Biology (EEB) program at Cornell University. I’m also a Cornell Lab of Ornithology (CLO) graduate student, since my advisor Irby J. Lovette has a joint appointment at EEB and CLO. Irby’s research focus has long been taxonomy and systematics, as well as the genomics of coloration in birds. Another note of interest is that he sits on the North American Classification Committee along with Jon Dunn.

My dissertation is focused on the phylogenomics and genomics of plumage polymorphism in the Red-tailed Hawk. I plan to provide more clarity to the evolutionary history of the species, and resolve the relationships between subspecies. I also plan to look into the genomic underpinnings of plumage polymorphism in this species as a first step towards better understanding the evolution of this trait in raptors.

I’m also working on the genomics of plumage polymorphism in the Eastern Screech-Owl. From the genomic insights we gain from our work on owls and hawks, we hope to develop a better understanding of why we see plumage polymorphism across the avian tree of life, how it developed and is maintained, and in some instances, how it has been or may be a precursor for speciation.

I find myself fortunate to be at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology under Irby because he and the lab community value ornithological illustration. My goal is to further develop this aspect of my work as an integral tool in my research. Because of this, I’m encouraged to continue illustrating while completing my PhD. Currently, I’m finishing a revision of illustrations in the Zona Tropical and Cornell University Press guidebook, Birds of Costa Rica, among other projects.

Shearwaters and changing oceanic conditions: a global perspective is needed

By Steve N.G. Howell

(Inspired by Bryce’s painting, I wanted to learn more about Short-tailed Shearwaters. I asked Steve to share his thoughts. Chris Swarth, editor).

The Short-tailed Shearwater Ardenna (formerly Puffinus) tenuirostris breeds in southern Australia and migrates to spend its “winter” (our boreal summer) in the Bering Sea and adjacent regions, where adults undergo a complete molt before heading back south in September; small numbers of the species are regular off the US West Coast, mainly in late fall and winter. Despite being a locally abundant species, where and when first-year Short-tailed Shearwaters undergo their wing molt remains unknown, despite claims to the contrary in some literature—testament to how much basic biology we have yet to learn about many oceanic birds.

At least historically, vast flocks of Short-tails—at times estimated in the millions—have been seen feeding in Alaskan waters among Humpback Whales, where both species take advantage of summer blooms of krill and other prey. However, with recent temperature anomalies in the North Pacific, and associated food web disruption, large but unknown numbers of Short-tailed Shearwaters have died of starvation in recent boreal summers; return to the Australian breeding grounds has been notably delayed...
the last two years; breeding has been compromised at colonies; and, as I sadly witnessed first-hand in
March 2020, counts of a few hundred birds rather than many thousands were typical for pelagic trips out
of southern Australia. How hard the population was hit remains to be seen, but this population crash
emphasizes that conservation of oceanic birds involves far more than simply protecting their breeding
colonies.

Recent events with Short-tailed Shearwater also highlight that even common birds, especially if reliant on
localized food resources for important biological processes such as molt, are susceptible to climate
change, which might also lead to changing distribution patterns. For example, ice loss and opening up of
the Northwest Passage in late summer is probably allowing some Short-tailed Shearwaters to reach the
North Atlantic. In fall 2017, I found one such bird off Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and there have since
been several other North Atlantic records, including from western Europe. I suspect more will follow. Who
knows, maybe in 50 years you’ll have a better chance of seeing a Short-tailed Shearwater in the Lower
48 in New England than in California!

This seemingly tongue-in-cheek conjecture might not be as far-fetched as it first appears. If there are
more prey available across the Arctic Ocean and into the North Atlantic than currently exists down the
West Coast, then the logical progression might be a shift in distribution, with Atlantic birds surviving and
passing on their new migration route to offspring. Evidence from the fossil record reveals many examples
of how bird distributions have changed dramatically over time. For example, fossil bones identified as
those of Short-tailed Shearwater and Parkinson’s Petrel, another Pacific Ocean tubenose, were
discovered at the Lee Creek Mine site in North Carolina by Storrs Olson and Pam Rasmussen. Those
remains indicate that both species were “common” off the Carolinas (well, what we now call the
Carolinas) some 3 to 20 million years ago, prior to the formation of the Central American land bridge.

Given how humans are relentlessly messing up the planet we share with millions of other species, long-
term monitoring projects that help track changes in bird populations and distributions are more important
than ever. And that’s something all of us at WFO can be involved with, whether for fun or
professionally—or both!

Steve N. G. Howell, is author of Oceanic Birds of the World (2019, co-authored with Kirk Zufelt) and
Petrels, Albatrosses, and Storm-Petrels of North America (2012), both published by Princeton University
Press. Steve is a Research Associate with Point Blue Conservation Science and a Senior Field Leader
with WINGS.
Announcements

Year-end Appeal a Huge Success

As many members know, at the end of 2020 we made a special year-end appeal for donations to offset a serious loss of expected revenue because we were forced to cancel the 2020 Reno conference. We’re now very pleased to report to you that this special appeal was a smashing success! We offer an enthusiastic ‘thank you’ to all who helped meet this challenge by providing their support for WFO. Eighty-nine donors, including the entire Board of Directors, gave a total of $51,110, an incredible outpouring of support and encouragement. Twelve individuals and couples each gave $1,500 or more, and have joined our growing list of Patrons. All contributions, no matter the amount, are greatly appreciated; this campaign has put us in a strong position financially as we move toward normal activities again in the near future.

We are also excited to report that membership has remained stable in 2020 even without our annual conference and our usual slate of field tours. Members are crucial to the success and future of WFO. We continued to have robust sales of our publications. WFO Special Publications author and WFO member Jay M. Sheppard (Biology of a Desert Apparition: LeConte’s Thrasher) gave an online presentation on his research on this enigmatic species hosted by the Maryland Ornithological Society.

Unfortunately, we have not been able to support any student scholars at our conferences, but their participation in our virtual programming has been strong. Zoom programs will remain an element of our programs going forward. Many of us have become Zoom-adept and this new approach to communication will be with us for some time. For our virtual conference in August 2021, we’re planning an exciting set of workshops, lectures, and other activities, and we hope to begin offering small-scale field trips later in the fall. As we begin to resume our usual activities, we’ve learned a lot from the challenges of the past year and will incorporate these ‘lessons learned’ into future events.

On behalf of the entire Board, we sincerely thank members for their support during this challenging year.

Jon Dunn, President
John Harris, Vice President

Hold the dates! WFO Conference Goes Virtual for 2021

WFO’s 2021 virtual Conference will be held from August 25-29. More information about how to register and the conference agenda will be sent to members via WFO News email messages and future newsletters. Some of that information will include guidelines to help you make certain that your computer (tablet, phone, etc.) is set up well with current software applications so that you can enjoy this conference.

As in past years, we will offer a great line up of speakers, excellent online workshops, science sessions, and both photo and bird sound identification events. And much more… You’ll be able to log in for as many or as few events/talks as you like, and you can come and go as you please. Stay tuned!

Thank You Sierra Foothills Audubon!

We wish to sincerely thank Sierra Foothills Audubon Society, their board of directors, and their president, Rudy Darling, for again offering a generous gift to our Student Programs Committee. Since 2015, Sierra Foothills has sent gifts on four occasions. In recent years, this Audubon chapter has been the most loyal supporter of our student program. We are very grateful.
Announcements

Coming in September--The Inaugural WFO Birdathon!

In a year of new beginnings and reimagined operations, WFO has decided to hold its first-ever Birdathon. The Birdathon will take place during the month of September, fresh on the heels of the late August 2021 WFO Virtual Conference, another first-ever event for us.

Most WFO members are familiar with the Birdathon concept. Maybe you have previously led or sponsored teams to support the other birding or conservation groups you belong to. This Birdathon will be organized and operated in a similar fashion. This will be a way for WFO members to get into the field, count the number of bird species you observe, and raise funds to support the wide range of important WFO programs. The Board also envisions this as an opportunity for members to record, note, and reflect on the scientific significance of all the observations made across the West, reflective of our mission to study and support the science of ornithology. More details on the WFO Birdathon will be revealed as we get closer to the event.

Mark your calendar! The entire month of September will constitute the window for the WFO Birdathon. Individuals and team leaders will be able to choose a single, 24-hour, calendar day within September to conduct their Birdathon. We invite you to become a charter participant in this inaugural Birdathon. More information will be forthcoming in this newsletter and on the website in the coming months.

California Bird Records Committee News

At the January 15-16, 2021, meeting of the California Bird Records Committee (CBRC), new members Rob Fowler, Chris Howard, and Justyn Stahl were elected to replace James Pike, Peter Pyle, and Dan Singer, who were termed out. Justyn was elected as Chair and Ryan Terrill as Vice Chair, and Tom Benson was re-elected as Secretary. Also, at the meeting, the CBRC voted to remove Broad-billed Hummingbird (Cynanthus latirostris) from its review list, as the number of records accepted by the Committee (both overall and in recent years) has shown that it is a regular, albeit scarce, visitor to the state. The CBRC is soliciting documentation for any Mexican Ducks (Anas diazi) observed in California, as this recently-split species will be added to the state list and the review list once the Committee has accepted a record for the state.

New Book on Purple Martins

Dan Ariola, WFO member and editor of the journal Central Valley Birds, has recently published his long-anticipated book on freeway-nesting Purple Martins, titled, *Life Under the Fast Lane: The Ecology and Conservation of the Bridge-Nesting Purple Martins in Sacramento*. Published by the Central Valley Bird Club, the book is a thorough history of Sacramento's Purple Martins and their unique adaptation to urbanization. A full review of the book is scheduled for *Western Birds* in the near future, but for those who can't wait, the book is available through Central Valley Bird Club's website.
Artist John Schmitt Honored with Life Membership
By Jon Dunn

At the 27 January board meeting, the board presented an honorary Life membership to N. John Schmitt. John has long been a WFO supporter and has created several of the illustrations for our conference t-shirts, most recently the Island Scrub-Jay for the Ventura conference in 2018. John has also painted going-away gifts for past WFO presidents, such as the Coachella Valley Fringe-toed Lizard (\textit{Uma inornata}) for Kurt Leuschner.

John paints all types of wildlife! He has been a key illustrator for all recent editions of the Field Guide to the Birds of North America by the National Geographic Society. While his expertise is raptors (all new raptor paintings have been done by John) his illustrations cover many families. He is a close collaborator and friend of mine. At WFO, John will be our go-to guy for illustrations as needed. John was honored to receive the honorary life membership and is excited to further help and contribute to WFO.

Jon asked John to tell us more about himself:
Except for a brief stint in the U.S. Army, I’ve been a life-long resident of California with a life-long passion for natural history and especially for birds. As a co-leader in an ecotourism company and while participating in a number of bird surveys, I’ve been able to work and enjoy birds in Colombia, Argentina, Mexico, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Spain, East Malaysia (Borneo), as well as many localities in the United States. I’ve also devoted several years to the Peregrine Falcon and California Condor recovery programs.

Always interested in bird illustration, I developed my skill sets and contributed illustrations to numerous publications, including Western Birds; \textit{The Natural History of the White-Inyo Range}; \textit{Birds Asleep}; \textit{The Cornell Handbook to Bird Biology}; \textit{Birds of South Asia—The Ripley Guide}; \textit{A Field Guide to Raptors of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa}; \textit{Birds of Prey of the Indian Subcontinent}; \textit{Birds of Peru}; \textit{A Field Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago}; \textit{Raptors of Mexico and Central America}; the 3\textsuperscript{rd}, 4\textsuperscript{th}, 5\textsuperscript{th}, 6\textsuperscript{th}, and 7\textsuperscript{th} editions of the \textit{National Geographic Guide to the Birds of North America}; \textit{The Behavior of the Golden Eagle—an illustrated ethogram}; and \textit{How to Know the Birds}.

I live in California’s Kern River Valley where I enjoy birdwatching, hiking, and building and installing nest boxes for small owls and American Kestrels.
Meet Matt Baumann: WFO Board Member

I’m a life-long resident of the New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment, where I became interested in the natural world, especially birds, at a young age. In third grade, I remember seeing a Cooper’s Hawk fly over the playground at my elementary school. It piqued my interest so much that I went to the school library and checked out a book on birds of the world and kept it for the rest of the year. After that encounter, I confidently identified most Cooper’s Hawks as buzzards for a while, but I had to start somewhere, right? I was lucky enough to have parents and family members, including my late grandfather, who fostered my growing interest in the outdoors. My parents and sister – much to her chagrin – have “fond” memories of getting up far too early to look for birds on family trips.

My interest in birds grew steadily through middle and high school, although if you asked my friends, I was always just “camping” on the weekends (birding wasn’t exactly the coolest thing to do at that age). After my senior year of high school, I went on a trip to Costa Rica with close friends, where we worked at a biological station on the Caribbean coast as part of an AP Biology course extension. That trip cemented my desire to pursue a career in biology.

I attended the University of New Mexico (UNM) for both my bachelor’s and master’s degrees and birded all over the state throughout. In my early years at UNM, I volunteered in the Division of Birds at the Museum of Southwestern Biology and quickly became immersed in museum studies and specimen-based ornithology. I was mentored by the late professor Bob Dickerman, and by Blair Wolf, Chris Witt, and Andy Johnson, to name a few, all of whom are integral members of the WFO and ornithological community. After I completed my bachelor’s degree, I pursued master’s degree research at studying elevational movements in birds and small mammals by examining stable hydrogen isotope values in various tissues such as feathers and fur. Most of my work took place in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of northern New Mexico. I earned my master’s in 2014 and was lucky to have an opportunity to join a research expedition in Australia for nearly three months almost immediately after graduating. My colleagues and I worked at a remote field site in the Outback where we sweated it out, heat wave after heat wave, while testing the thermal tolerance of the desert-adapted birds. Shortly after returning, I started working as a contractor for the USFWS surveying for Bendire’s Thrasher across southwestern New Mexico to better grasp the species’ distribution in the state.

I’m currently a professional wildlife biologist and a Research Associate at the Museum of Southwestern Biology. I’ve been on several expeditions to Peru and Chile with the Museum and continue to work locally in New Mexico. For example, UNM PhD student Jessie Williamson and I recently published an article in Western Birds about an observation of an Olive Warbler feeding a fledgling Brown-headed Cowbird in the Burro Mountains of southwestern New Mexico. This observation led us to explore these species’ range-wide overlap. Working on this project was a nice reminder that there are still plenty of questions to be answered even in our own backyards. I enjoy exploring all areas of New Mexico to better understand the state’s avifauna.
During the pandemic, my wife and I have had the pleasure of wrangling our 1-year-old daughter while working mostly from home, which has been fun in many respects. I’ve been lucky enough to sneak away to go birding often and chase some birds as well, like New Mexico’s first European Golden-Plover and pair of Eared Quetzals.

As a relatively new member of the WFO board, it has been very rewarding to work alongside the likes of experienced members like Jon Dunn, Kimball Garrett, and Dan Gibson. I have enjoyed getting to know the rest of the board, who have impressed me with their dedication to our society. WFO has a remarkable contingent of young birders who attend conferences and engage with their local communities. It’s truly a highlight of the organization and I hope we can continue to inspire younger generations. I look forward to continuing on with my next term as a board member and hope to meet more of the WFO community in Reno in 2022.

Meet Susan Gilliland: WFO Board Member and Scholarship Committee Member

I grew up in rural west central Minnesota on the edge of the prairie and woodlands. I knew some of our local birds and calls: Common Loon, Red-winged Blackbird, American Robin, Wood Duck, Eastern Whip-poor-will, Great Horned Owl and one winter, my neighbors had a Snowy Owl in their backyard.

My family had a simple log cabin for weekends, without running water or electricity, on a small lake on 80 acres in northern Minnesota. I enjoyed many summer mornings and evenings listening to Common Loons calling on the lake and seeing the loon pairs raise their young.

Through these experiences I had a lifelong interest in birds. We always had bird feeders and bird baths, but I never knew that one could go looking for birds, until I moved to, of all places, Los Angeles.

It turns out that Los Angeles is the birdiest county in America and has a very active birding community. In Los Angeles I learned about birding. A friend invited us on a bird walk. The leader pointed out a bird scratching in the leaf litter, partially hidden by the bushes. She said it was a Spotted Towhee, a type of sparrow. I was dumbfounded that I had missed this beautiful bird. I decided that I needed to improve my skills to see these birds that are not necessarily easy to see. Well, the rest is history as they say.

I’ve served on several non-profit boards over the years and in 2019, I started volunteering on the WFO Scholarship Committee. Today I sit on the WFO Board and the Student Programs Committee. I especially love sharing my enthusiasm for birds and the natural world and working with young people who have a passion for birds and providing them with opportunities to experience and learn about birds through in-person and on-line meetings and special birding field trips and workshops.

I spent my early working career as an RN, then later earning a Master’s in Public Health, and a PhD in Epidemiology focusing on Type 2 diabetes in American Indian and Alaska Native communities. I retired in the spring of 2020, and now have more time to improve my birding skills and to volunteer.

My husband, Frank, and I became Life members in 2013 and are now Patrons of WFO (2020). We are also founding members of a new non-profit organization, Los Angeles Birders, https://www.losangelesbirders.org. Frank and I are inspired to share our knowledge and enthusiasm with the next generation of birders. We also enjoy bird photography and world travel.
Meet Kimball Garrett: WFO Board Member

A lifelong southern Californian, I joined the Western Field Ornithologists Board of Directors in 1992 and served as the organization’s President from 1995 to 1999. I’m currently completing another term as director and will rotate off the board in 2022. WFO has been a part of my life since its inception (as California Field Ornithologists) in 1970, but let’s step back a bit.

Growing up in the Hollywood Hills just outside Griffith Park, there must have been some bird – miscellaneous and unknown – that caught my eye and set me on an irreversible birding path. I was drawing birds in my school notebooks in elementary school (my artistic talents probably peaked then), and I was fascinated by a couple of bird books we had on the shelf at home. My father had a broad range of interests, from Gilbert and Sullivan and Sherlock Holmes to track and field, Pacific Coast League baseball, post office covers, and his ham radio, so I could find books about most anything in the house. I was especially struck by T. Gilbert Pearson’s *Birds of America* (with plates by Louis Agassiz Fuertes and others and dating back to the first half of the 20th century). But that was a frustrating volume, as most western North American bird species were relegated to a small print paragraph at the end of accounts for the more “important” eastern birds! I felt aggrieved, and I rejoiced when we first added Peterson’s 1961 Western guide to the library, and then, in 1966, the “Golden Guide.” Now some of the birds were starting to make sense!

Perhaps the first rare bird I chased was a Coues’ Flycatcher (only California’s third record of a species we now know as the Greater Pewee, *Contopus pertinax*) that had spent the winter of 1967-1968 in Griffith Park’s Brush Canyon – a mere ten-minute hike from my house. Though I had joined the Los Angeles Audubon Society in 1966 and began to go on some of their field trips, I was mostly consumed by the normal backyard and chaparral birds, from Cedar Waxwings and Band-tailed Pigeons to Rufous-crowned Sparrows and Common Poorwills, and the concept of actually looking for an individual “staked-out” bird seemed foreign to me. Not being keyed into the primitive rare bird reporting networks of the time, I didn’t even hear about the Coues’ until late in the winter. So it wasn’t until March 30th that I made the short trek down into the canyon to see the wayward tyrannid, and that experience broadened my biogeographical consciousness considerably. Later that year I would find a male Baltimore Oriole in the same spot, and a Brown Thrasher a year later.

In his biographical sketch in a previous WFO newsletter Jon Dunn detailed our chance meeting in the Carrizo Plains in December 1967. Nowadays, with passionate and widespread participation in field ornithology by young birders, it is hard to imagine how different things were 50+ years ago. It never occurred to me there might be other young teen-aged birders out there, nor did it seem prudent for me to reveal my birding passion to my friends and schoolmates. My early birding mentors included Betty Lou Jenner, Otto Widmann (grandson of the well-known Missouri ornithologist), and the pillar of Los Angeles birding at the time, Shum Suffel, but they were all really old (though, ironically, much younger than I am now!). Meeting Jon was my first inkling I was part of a young birding cohort.

Birding was a passion, but I grew more slowly into ornithology as a pursuit. When I entered UCLA as an undergraduate in the fall of 1970 knew I wanted to take biology (and especially ornithology) classes, but struggled with the idea of majoring in biology – how was I to get through all the calculus, physics and chemistry? [Hardly with flying colors, it turns out!]. But the Biology of Vertebrates class team-taught by Tom Howell and George Bartholomew was a real eye-opener to such topics as functional morphology, environmental physiology, and biogeography and this solidified my interest in biology. Icing on the cake was Tom Howell’s Ornithology class in spring of 1973; this was my introduction to bird specimen collections and the global diversity of birds. I’m sure my classmates hated me, as I could identify all the birds on the weekly field trips, even by sound. Spending my senior year in 1973-1974 at U. C. Berkeley I
encountered a talented and driven group of undergraduate and graduate ornithology students, many of whom were or became field ornithology luminaries. I returned to UCLA for graduate work under Tom Howell, but eventually discovered that I lacked the discipline to devise and conduct dissertation-level research. A distraction was my work with Jon Dunn on *Birds of Southern California: Status and Distribution*. Intended as an update of Robert Pyle and Arnold Small’s booklet on southern California birds, the “Small Pyle” became a very large pile that was published in 1981 with great support from Jean Brandt, Fred Heath and others with Los Angeles Audubon.

In early 1982 I was doing some part-time work for the Western Foundation of Vertebrate zoology (Lloyd Kiff knew a starving student when he saw one!) when I heard about a one-year grant-supported collections position at the Los Angeles County Museum. My interview with curator Ralph Schreiber basically consisted of one question: “If a rare bird shows up, are you going to ditch work to go look for it?” I guess I must have dodged that bullet, because I was hired, the one-year position grew to three years, and then I was hired into a permanent County of Los Angeles position as Collection Manager – a position I still hold. During my tenure at the museum I have worked for three curators with very different research interests. Schreiber was best known for work on pelicans and tropical seabirds, and working with him and his wife and co-researcher Betty Anne netted me various trips from 1984 to 1988 including a sailboat journey from Panama to Polynesia, field work on Christmas Island and Johnston Atoll in the central Pacific, and a survey of Bikini Atoll in Micronesia. Ken Campbell, Ornithology curator from 1997 to 2017, was an avian paleontologist and functional morphologist and an expert on the Rancho La Brea avifauna; a career highlight for me occurred recently when Ken and co-author Zbigniew Bochenski christened a fossil woodpecker from Rancho La Brea *Breacopus garretti*. (Campbell, K. E. and Bockenski, Z. M. 2021. A review of the woodpeckers (Aves: Piciformes) from the asphalt deposits of Rancho La Brea, California, with the description of three new species. This was published in Paleobiodiversity and Paleoenvironments. [https://doi.org/10.1007/s12549-020-00444-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12549-020-00444-1)).

And Allison Shultz, arriving at the museum in the fall of 2018, works on a variety of questions on the evolution of avian coloration and on evolution at short time scales (such as the responses of native and introduced House Finches populations to diseases); her application of genomic methods will extend to research on various naturalized non-native bird species in California. To this end we have been amassing series of non-native species through field collecting and salvage – the Natural History Museum has nice series of various parrots, Northern Red Bishops, Scaly-breasted Munias, and Pin-tailed Whydahs – and we’re working on Swinhoe’s White-eyes. Through salvage programs, various field collecting efforts, and the great work of volunteers (their participation unfortunately on pause because of COVID) we’ve added some 22,000 bird specimens to our collections since I started at the museum in 1982.
One reason I connect with Western Field Ornithologists is through my interest in the permanent record of ornithology from simple note-taking to various project-oriented field work and writing. I have been the Los Angeles County sub-regional editor for *North American Birds* since 1979 and have co-edited the Southern California regional reports for *NAB* with Guy McCaskie since 2000. I was a California Bird Records Committee member for much of the period from 1978 to 2010 and have been an eBird reviewer for Los Angeles County since the inception of review. I’ve helped with Los Angeles County Breeding Bird Atlas, with Western Birds as an Associate Editor, and have done thousands of identifications for iNaturalist.

I’m delighted to have married fellow ornithologist Kathy Molina in 1992. Kathy spent much time as a specimen preparator at the Natural History Museum in the late 1980s and 1990s, and she curated UCLA-Dickey Bird and Mammal collection through much of the 2000s. Her field work at the Salton Sea on breeding larids (particularly Gull-billed Terns and Black Skimmers) since 1991 has given me the opportunity to spend far more time in the sweltering spring and summer at the Sea than I might otherwise have done!

My birding these days? I guess it’s a case of thinking globally and birding locally; I start to tremble as I head outbound toward the Los Angeles County line. Long drives belching carbon just to see some stake-out rarity seem hard to justify. Even the most vagrant-rich areas of Los Angeles County (Long Beach, Palos Verdes and the San Gabriel River lowlands) seem mostly out-of-reach since we moved out to the desert foothills. So, my main birding mantra is “Where can I go today where there won’t be any other birders?” It’s not so much that I’m unsociable. I just don’t see the point in duplicating effort.
Alaska: Several Asian passerines were found during the winter in the state, including Siberian Accentors in both Homer (Dec-Jan) and Seward (Jan-Feb), an Eurasian Bullfinch at Unalaska (Mar), single Rustic Buntings in Cordova and Petersburg, and single Bramblings in both Seward and Sitka. There are now approximately a dozen Siberian Accentor records for mainland Alaska. (Nat Drumheller, Sulli Gibson, Matt Goff, Steve Heinl, Aaron Lang)

Yukon: A Hawfinch wintered at Haines Junction, 29 Dec-28 Feb+

British Columbia: The season’s three top provincial rarities all hailed from Vancouver Island. A female Common Pochard was found in Parksville on 23 Dec and then disappeared until 11 Feb, when it showed up again at the same pond, remaining until 16 Feb. This is BC’s second record. A Black Phoebe was in Saanich from 1 Dec-24 Feb. A Redwing was found in the Victoria area at Saanich from 10-27 Feb, some 8 km from where a returning Redwing was present in winter from 2013 to 2017. This current bird is being treated as “possibly the same” and it establishes BC’s fourth record. (Melissa Hafting)
Washington: Washington’s first, and overdue, Winter Wren was in Orting, Pierce County, from 8-27 Jan. A Black-throated Blue Warbler was on Vashon Island in Dec, and a Painted Bunting in Everett from 30 Nov-2 Dec was the sixth for the state. (Brad Waggoner)

Oregon: After one of the best falls in recent memory, the winter season was much quieter. Hot on the heels of Washington’s first record, Oregon’s first-ever Winter Wren was found in Benton County from 28 Feb+. Two Brandt’s Cormorants in Portland on 13-14 Jan provided a first inland record for the state. The state’s 7th Vermilion Flycatcher frequented manure piles east of Albany in Jan-Feb. An Orchard Oriole in Portland from Dec-Feb provided Oregon’s second winter record. An adult male Painted Bunting (ninth state record, third winter record) visited multiple feeders in Salem between Jan-Feb. (Shawneen Finnegan)
California: A second state record Purple Sandpiper was found not far from the site of the first state record, at the north end Salton Sea on 20 Dec and remained through at least 2 Feb. A Broad-billed Hummingbird was in northern California at Davis beginning on 31 Jan. Two separate “Black-backed” White Wagtails were found during the period, one in Santa Cruz and one near downtown Los Angeles.

Exceptional in California in winter, a Broad-tailed Hummingbird was at Desert Hot Springs, Riverside Co., beginning 1 Feb, and a very surprising three Brown-crested Flycatchers included two in Los Angeles County (South Coast Botanic Garden, Michigan Park) and one returning to Orange County (Mission Viejo). Exceptional anywhere in the United States in mid-winter, a Scarlet Tanager was in Ventura during early Jan. Continuing rarities from late fall included the Eurasian Skylark at Loleta Bottoms, Humboldt Co., and the Streak-backed Oriole at Montana de Oro State Park, San Luis Obispo Co. Other continuing birds, which also involve returning individuals for multiple winters, included a Garganey at north end Salton Sea and a Little Stint at South San Diego Bay. (Paul Lehman, Curtis Marantz)


Photographs of More California Rarities; Winter 2020-2021


Montana: Perhaps the result of a planet that continues to warm, four species were documented wintering in Montana for the first time: Bonaparte’s Gull (Flathead Lake), Say’s Phoebe (MPG Ranch, Missoula Co.), Lark Sparrow (Missoula), and Pine Warbler (Red Lodge, Carbon Co.). In addition, the White-winged Dove that was discovered in Bozeman on 16 Nov 2020 was seen daily through 16 Dec, when it was killed by a Sharp-shinned Hawk. Surely, it would have overwintered had it survived. (Jeff Marks)

Nevada: The long-awaited first properly documented Hutton’s Vireo in Nevada was in Reno from 19-23 Dec. Many/most previous reports from the east side of the Sierra Nevada are likely in error. (Martin Meyers)

Arizona: A Common Crane in Greenlee County from 13-15 Feb may have been the same bird that was at Willcox several months earlier. The Northern Jacana in Tucson since fall remained through the winter. An American Tree Sparrow at Badger Spring, north of Phoenix, from 12 Dec-21 Jan, was not only very rare in the state but also farther south than usual. Miscellaneous highlights included two Trumpeter Swans, Least Grebe, Red-necked Grebe, Streak-backed Oriole, Common Grackle, and three Black Rosy-Finches. Above-average numbers continued for Ruddy Ground-Dove, Rufous-backed Robin, and Purple Finch. (Gary Rosenberg)

New Mexico: An American Woodcock at Corrales, Sandoval Co., 20 Dec-1 Feb was the first known to successfully overwinter in the state, where it was previously known only as an occasional late fall and early spring transient. There are now 19 state records of American Woodcock. A Great Kiskadee overwintered at Leasburg State Park, Doña Ana Co., from Nov-Feb+. The more widespread invasion of Purple Finches in the Southwest brought two individuals to Percha State Park, Sierra Co., 25 Dec-2 Jan; they were of the expected (in New Mexico) nominate race. Adding to the surprising accumulation of Pine Warbler winter records, one was at Albuquerque 27 Nov-19 Dec and another was at Tularosa 31 Dec-6 Jan. (Sandy Williams)
Photos of Arizona Rarities; Winter 2020-2021

Trumpeter Swans (immature bird, the subject of some debate). Coon Bluff, AZ. December 2020. Photo by Gordon Karre.


Photographs of New Mexico Rarities; Winter 2020-2021


Shrikes, Hummingbirds, and a Giraffe

by Kurt Leuschner

In the spring of 2008, my students and I came across a young and quite dead male Rufous Hummingbird impaled on a catclaw acacia thorn in the Cottonwood area of Joshua Tree National Park (see photo). I knew that shrikes captured lizards and dragonflies on a regular basis, but until that moment, I did not realize that hummingbirds were also on the menu. I’ve maintained an interest in “shrike victims” ever since, and have encouraged my students and others to send me photos and stories of other impaled prey. My “collection” now includes: spiders, centipedes, beetles, dragonflies, cicadas, mice, kangaroo rats, horned lizards, other lizards, hummingbirds, and the head of a White-crowned Sparrow. I’m sure that by writing this story I’ll hear of other shrike prey and I encourage you to send me a photo and/or description to, KLeuschner@collegeofthedesert.edu.

But first, about my hummingbirds….

I’ve been feeding hummingbirds at my Palm Desert house for over 25 years. Native plants are always in bloom including Chuparosa – the favorite flower of local hummingbirds. I also have a variety of sugar-water feeders scattered around the front, side, and back of the house. Costa’s Hummingbirds are always around as well as occasional Anna’s. In migration, a few Rufous stop by and in summer I had a Black-chinned visit twice and Allen’s once. Once I thought I heard a male Broad-tailed Hummingbird fly by, but could not confirm it (but I know what I heard!). I’m still waiting for Calliope, Broad-billed, and Xantus’s to stop by; all three have been seen in this area over the years!

In late summer 2016 something changed at my hummingbird feeders. All of a sudden one particular feeder, located on the corner of the front porch near the garage, was inundated - not by the usual two or three birds – but instead by swarms of Costa’s Hummingbirds - mostly males (young and old) but by many females, too. Dozens and dozens of birds all wanting to feed at this one feeder! All 8 feeding ports would be taken by seated hummingbirds and soon they started squeezing in 2 to a flower, with each bird politely taking turns dipping their beaks. Hummingbirds were actually sharing – not usual behavior! Some would even perch on my finger if I put it in front of a plastic yellow flower!

I thought this was some weird migratory phenomenon that would quickly pass, but after days, then weeks, it did not. Suddenly, I was running to the Smart and Final store to buy sugar in 50-pound bags, sometimes two at a time if there was a sale! What was going on? Why this one feeder and not the others with the same sugar-water mixture? A sugar fund donation tin was set out and members of the Desert Cities Bird Club started to arrive to see for themselves. I put out a hummingbird viewing bench for visitors. Some people made multiple visits and would bring their family and friends. Eventually, a local
TV news show (KMIR) showed up to do a human-interest story (some fun, good news for a change). My kids were excited to see themselves on TV, albeit in the background.

I still couldn’t figure out why 100 hummingbirds were congregating and why this one feeder (I call it “number one”) was so popular. Was climate change and the long drought finally kicking in? Had the word finally gotten out after decades of bird-friendly habitat improvements that my yard was the place to be if you’re a hummingbird? Was it the feeder’s location? This feeder is bordered by a large Pencil Euphorbia plant that has grown to over 8-feet tall over the years. Hummingbirds find refuge in this plant during the day and the stems are the perfect size for perching. They also seemed to prefer this particular style of Perky Pet feeder – wouldn’t you know (Murphy’s Law) that the model the hummers love and need is no longer being made! Luckily, I had a number of them still “in stock” in my bird feeding spare parts shed. I actually called the Perky Pet headquarters to explain the situation and to see if they could find or make (using the old mold) some of this discontinued model for me (no luck – and they also had no interest in “sponsoring” me!). I was desperate to keep the hummingbirds happy - Perky Pet’s supposed “new and improved” replacement model feeder was available at Ace Hardware so I bought one – but it was not accepted by the hummingbird crowd.

My wife Candice smartly suggested that I add a second feeder of the same type nearby to alleviate the crowding. I did this and it helped a little but the hummingbird numbers continued to swell. I added a third feeder, then a fourth – each one about 3 feet apart along the front porch. A couple of times when changing/refilling the glass feeders they would drop and break – aargh!! With only a few of the old-style feeders left in my stock, and no more being made, it was worse than dropping an irreplaceable Ming vase! At the peak in early fall, there were easily 100+ Costa’s Hummingbirds buzzing around feeder number one (always their favorite) and also number two and three. Number four was farther from the action and was guarded by a single aggressive male (called the “bully”) who would often perch on the ear of a large metal giraffe yard sculpture. Would you believe that we actually bought that 7-foot tall metal giraffe in a San Luis Obispo antique shop on the first day of a 2-week car camping road trip to Yosemite? What were we thinking? I’ll never know how we fit that darn giraffe and all of our camping gear and kids into the car for 2 weeks. But I digress. The bully would aggressively chase away any male (and female) who dared to try to drink from “his” number four feeder. A single male Anna’s Hummingbird would sneak a drink from busy number one every 30 minutes or so. Otherwise it was all Costa’s all of the time in huge numbers most of the day. Rufous Hummingbirds are normally the most aggressive at feeders, but not under these circumstances. One or two show up in fall migration but they are no match for the sheer number of Costa’s and they don’t stay long.

The time frame for this phenomenon in the past 4 years seems to be from mid-September (lots of young birds are about) to the end of February. Like many desert birds, hummingbirds start nesting early and many leave my yard by February or March to find a place where they can get away from the crowds for a while (enough stay even in summer to keep me busy). I’ve never quite matched the record numbers of that first year (2016) but the numbers of Costa’s are always impressive each season (40-60 at a time).
and I’m still buying sugar in 50-pound bags and hiring hummingbird-sitters to keep the feeders filled if we leave for more than a night. And hummingbird-watchers still come by to check out the hummingbirds, even during Covid-19 times. You’re all welcome, too – just send an email first.

Back to the shrike…

Chris Swarth asked me to describe this hummingbird backstory to a serendipitous video of a Loggerhead Shrike catching a Costa’s Hummingbird at my house on January 27 of this year. During a break while painting our house, Luis Cazares took a moment to film the “bouquet” of hummingbirds with his cell phone. It just so happened that in those few seconds of filming, a shrike appeared out of nowhere, flew in, snatched a male Costa’s in its beak and flew off. This happened in the blink of an eye (see video attached with slo-mo features added; https://www.flickr.com/photos/49128782@N05/shares/i0Af92).

It was a great bit of filming and an incredibly lucky natural history moment both for Luis and the shrike, but not for the hummingbird! I now have my first yard record of a Loggerhead Shrike in 25 years, and an amazing story to go with it. The shrike has continued to hang around and will no doubt stay as long as the hummingbirds continue to swarm.

Sketch by Tim Manolis
The Migratory Bird Treaty Act is Back

By Kristie Nelson

Americans either cheered or sulked on President Biden’s inauguration day depending on their political leanings. But for migratory birds it was clearly a celebratory day. On his first day in office, Joe Biden halted the dramatic weakening of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) that the Trump administration had initiated. Had the Trump administration version been implemented, many industrial practices that save tens of millions of birds every year would have been eliminated.

Adopted in 1918, the MBTA makes it illegal for anyone to “pursue, hunt, take, capture, kill, or sell” migratory birds without a permit, a provision of this act that has provided a bedrock foundation for the protection of migratory birds ever since. In its early days, the MBTA slowed the decline of many wild bird populations that were commercially hunted for their feathers for use in ladies’ hats. Great Egrets, Wood Ducks, and other species benefited greatly. Today, hat fashion is of little threat to North American birds but the MBTA continues to provide many critical measures, some of which may not be fully appreciated.

The Trump administration changes to the act would have stripped the MBTA of much of its relevancy. It declared that “incidental take” (i.e. unintentional killing) would no longer be prohibited – a clear nod to industry protectionism. Until this proposed redefinition of incidental take, the liability involved in the incidental killing of birds has led to a wide variety of successful practices that protect bird populations. Many of these measures are relatively simple, have a high degree of public support, and are effective at reducing bird mortality. Specific ways in which the incidental take regulation has protected birds are provided in the following examples:

- Oil spill prevention and response. The threat of financial accountability for oil spill-related bird deaths encourages measures that prevent spills in the first place. In cases where a company is found responsible for an oil spill that harms birds, monetary fines and damages resulting from violating the MBTA help to fund clean-up and restoration efforts. Without the incidental take component of the MBTA, we’d expect more oil spills and fewer funds for restoration and rehabilitation.
• The MBTA requires that electric utilities install powerlines that are widely spaced so that large raptors are not electrocuted.
• Oil field waste pits are another leading cause of preventable bird deaths that the MBTA helps to curtail. Birds can mistake these pits for water. When they land or stop for a drink, they become mired in oil waste and die. These pits kill a surprising number of birds, and not only waterbirds. One study revealed the remains of 172 species from 44 families recovered from waste oil pits – the majority were passerines. Covering pits with netting or barriers prevents or reduces bird mortality.
• Blinking lights added to tall communication towers significantly reduce migratory bird strike mortality.
• Weights attached to fishery long-lines keep baited hooks deep and out of reach of albatrosses, petrels, and other seabirds that are inadvertently hooked and drowned, thus reducing mortality of these long-lived and vulnerable species.

There are many other examples of the importance of maintaining incidental take regulation in the MBTA. Losing these protections for migratory birds would have been a national tragedy. WFO supports the Biden administration in reinstating the full intent of the MBTA and we encourage our members to be watchful for any future attempts to deregulate these important policies.
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Sketch by Tim Manolis