



## Birds Abound at the Botanic Garden in Winter

By Steve Wolfe

To some people, winter at the South Coast Botanic Garden may conjure up images of both flora and fauna lying in wait with trees and plants brown and leafless, conserving energy until a renewal of life and color come spring. Not so! Southern California's Mediterranean climate, combined with botanical species gathered from around the world, means flowers can yet be found in bloom and certain trees and plants are still green. A good indicator of this Palos Verdes garden's perennial appeal is the number and variety of birds to be found here during the winter months.

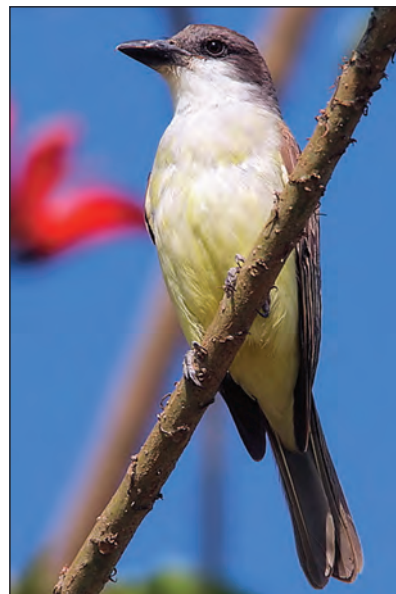
Year-round residents such as Spotted and California Towhees can be seen on the ground looking for food, kicking both feet back simultaneously to expose insects or seeds. Hummingbirds such as Allen's (rufous-colored with greenish back) and Anna's (green) feed on tiny insects and nectar from flowers.

While hummingbirds at the garden are attracted to purple Mexican Sage (*Salvia leucantha*) and Bottlebrush shrubs and are most noticeable on these plants; wintertime also sees them at the Emu Bush near the water fountain in the Garden for the



Winter residents of the Botanic Garden are, clockwise from top, the Orange-crowned Warbler in Japanese cherry blossom, Thick-billed Kingbird and Nutmeg Mannikin.

*Photos by Steve Wolfe*



Senses. Its tubular yellow flowers that bloom from fall to spring attract insects as well as hummingbirds.

Birds bathing in the water fountain use the nearby Karoo Kuni-bush, an evergreen shrub from South Africa, as a perch on which to fluff and preen afterwards. Wintering Warblers such as Townsend's and Orange-crowned glean insects and seeds from trees such as Flaxleaf paperbark, also known as "snow in summer" for its cover of fluffy white flower clusters. Toyon, a perennial shrub known as "Christmasberry" for its red berries even in winter, attracts Northern Mockingbirds, American Robins and Northern Flickers (a type of Woodpecker). The reeds and cattails along the creek are home to Song Sparrow, and the flowering parts at the top of the cattails provide food for Nutmeg Mannikin, an exotic Finch from Asia introduced to southern California in the early

1980s. Red-winged Blackbird can be seen here on occasion, too.

When the Japanese Cherry Blossom trees bloom in late February, species such as House Finch and Orange-crowned Warbler either feed on the cherry bloom flowers or glean insects from them. Winter at the Garden may also see lengthy

*See Winter Garden, Page 2*

## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

## Unusual Discovery Adds Wonder to Walk



By John Nieto

**B**irding is an enjoyable sport. We walk at an easy pace stalking birds, feeling only a little baffled if they do not show themselves, then move on to explore the next habitat down the path.

As I sit to write this, I am thinking of my witnessing a unique event in local birding history. It was just three days ago, the first week of November, that I helped lead a bird tour at the Seal Beach National Wildlife Refuge. The 20-plus members of our group were mostly from the Los Angeles Chapter of Audubon. There were a couple of us from the Palos Verdes/South Bay and El Dorado Chapters as well. We were out to find a vagrant Sparrow on Hog Island at the extreme high tide (6.9 feet). This sparrow has not let us down for quite a few years. The literature says that the bird is supposed to be on the East Coast this time of year, coming from breeding grounds in central Canada and Hudson's Bay and that it would be "very rare" to find it in California.

After some searching and some pishing, there they were, two nice specimens—golden heads glistening in the sun moving from stalk to stalk on the fading poison oak. No doubt about it, they were Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows. After some movement of birds and birders, back and forth, it was time to leave for other habitats; we had captured one Light-footed Clapper Rail, some Ruddy Ducks, Western and Pie-billed Grebes, Large-billed Savannah and the Nelson's Sparrows at this location. On we went to an area down the road that we had passed in our rush to meet the tide.

**W**e stopped at an opening in the cord grass that exposed a large pool and a sandy island covered with hundreds of shore birds. There were Red Knots, Dunlins, Western Sandpipers, Black-bellied Plovers and more. There we were in a long line on the dirt road, scopes focused, binoculars steadied and sweeping the mixed flock, left and right. There was a stirring in the crowd, and excitement rolled through our group like a wave, from west to east. Since I had figured this group of birds would probably only give us the usual shore birds, I had not taken my new camera out of the truck I was driving.

I focused my binoculars on the bird that was causing the stir in our group. We saw a blotchy brick-red breast, white flanks and dark wings with flecks of white and black legs. As it moved around, we noticed white around the base of its black downward curving bill. A Curlew Sandpiper, another vagrant, it should be heading to Africa or Asia now after breeding in Siberia.

Wow! This was great; a few of those present knew this bird from trips to Asia. Someone in the group said it was only the third time this bird was sighted here in the western U.S., outside of some vagrants breeding in Northern Alaska.

Now we needed to record this sighting. We had just two cameras in hand; since this trip was on the Navy base, no one is allowed to have cameras except those with camera passes. There was a small point-and-shoot that our U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service representative had and my big, brand-new, first-time-out-of-the-box, digital, single-lens reflex camera with a zoom lens. They were both utilized and, between the blurry, not-so-sharp focus shots my camera took without a tripod and the through-the-spotting-scope shots the small camera took, there was enough to officially identify the bird for the record. The Curlew Sandpiper has been listed on LACo-Birds (a discussion group), E-bird, CALBIRDS and so on.

**T**his sort of discovery happens a few times a season; there are birds that appear here in our location and in others that should not be found there. There was that Mississippi Kite that made the South Coast Botanic Garden its home for a week or two. Then there was that King Eider at Cabrillo Beach this year. Last year we had an Asian bird, a Bar-headed Goose, at the Seal Beach Refuge that most thought was an escapee from some captive collection because it is only found in Asia between India and China or flying over the Himalayas.

We have available several resources that identify rare bird sightings such as the three mentioned above as well as web sites of the various Audubon Society chapters. If you are traveling, take a peek at some of these resources and take in some unusual and rare birds. Even if you stay around home base, use the lists and experience some of the rare bird excitement. Good luck!

*Winter Garden, from Page 1*

stays by rare-to-the-area birds; a Thick-billed Kingbird, usually only found at a few locations in southeastern Arizona, entertained onlookers from December 2008 to late March 2009, and a Least Bell's Vireo banded along the San Luis Rey River northeast of Oceanside spent January and February 2009 in habitat along the south side of the lake similar to its home grounds.

So, through all the supposed barren winter months, rebirth and renewal is never far away; a female Anna's Hummingbird was spotted building a nest in a Southern Magnolia tree at the beginning of February. When all is said and done, winter at the South Coast Botanic Garden is a season filled with life and color.

## This Unknown Peninsula

By Jess Morton

**S**cratch. One thing you don't have to think about when the back of your neck itches is whether to lift your foot over your shoulder to scratch with your toes or not. But if you were a hummingbird, that is exactly what you would do: Bring that tiny leg up over your wing to let those neat little claws rake so satisfyingly into the head feathers, where a mite or some other unwanted citizen is asking to be removed. A hawk or heron, on the other hand, will reach under the wing and then up to scratch. And, oh, such a relief it is!

When you consider it, itching really does have its function: Relieving annoyance, to be exact. It's a call to action, isn't it? And if you are a bird, you may well have a great deal to scratch about. Mites and fleas, to name a couple. Some, like feather mites, which feed on the debris of dead skin cells or feather, are not a threat to the bird unless in unusually large number. But many of the others feed on blood or, like nasal mites, live in odd places, certainly pests worthy of a thorough cleaning out. Scratch! Scratch!

The life cycles of these parasites can be quite complex, sometimes so much so as to be adapted to a single bird species or a small group of closely related birds. Bird lice in the suborder Mallophaga may be so specialized that they draw their sustenance only from developing feathers and even lay their eggs within the host's feather shafts. There are even cases where taxonomic relationships between birds have been suggested by looking at the species of bird lice parasitizing them. Oh, yes! Scratch right there.

One of the oddest creatures that lives on birds is the louse fly. Such a lovely name, isn't it? These moderately sized flies are flattened so that they can slide rapidly through a bird's plumage to avoid those scratching claws. Louse flies feed on blood, but their main threat to the bird is through diseases they may carry between birds. They have a life cycle quite unusual for an insect in that



Itching away are a Harris' hawk (top) and snowy egret.

*Photos by Jess Morton*



the female fly carries a single developing larva inside itself, finally giving birth to a fully formed fly before letting another egg begin development.

Fortunately, most birds are healthy enough that their preening can keep this nasty plethora of parasites under control. So whether they reach over or under the wing to scratch—while a matter of curiosity to us inquiring birders—is only a matter of convenience to the bird itself. It's got an itch and a pretty good idea of just what to do about it.

Scrrrraatch!

### Audubon YES! Update

With the holiday season around the corner, please keep Audubon YES! in mind. There will be plenty of opportunities to give back to the community—and some great events to close out the year in December, like the Christmas Bird Count. To start the New Year, we will have tree plantings all over the South Bay.

If anyone is interested in more opportunities to earn some YES! service credit, please contact Marcos Trinidad. The PV/South Bay Audubon would like to get several years' worth of data added to an online program called eBird. This is an extremely useful program in the birding community, and it would be great to have our information included. No experience is necessary as we will train all volunteers.

Also, if any Audubon YES! members are attending the 2011 San Diego Bird Festival/Audubon California Assembly March 3–6, 2011 in Mission Bay, some of these workshops and outings will qualify for YES! credit; please visit [www.sandiegoaudubon.org/birdfest.htm](http://www.sandiegoaudubon.org/birdfest.htm).

Audubon YES! is open to all student Audubon members and their families. If you know of organizations or areas in need of volunteers, contact Marcos at [marcos@pvsb-audubon.org](mailto:marcos@pvsb-audubon.org) or (323) 945-4346.

# Water—We Need It! But What Is the Best Plan?



By Diane Wallace  
Guest Columnist

**W**ater is an issue for people and all living things around the world. It is linked to health,

belief systems, transportation, beauty, energy and wealth, to mention a few. The issues include water rights, water regulations, ground water, surface water, water conservation, water quality, agribusiness use of water, water security, bottled water and desalination.

Access to water is essential but can be difficult. Water can contain microorganisms, chemicals, prescription drugs, fertilizers and pesticides. Privatization of water supplies has prevented people from accessing their water.

Climate change is causing changes in precipitation. Some areas are experiencing record floods—most recently in Pakistan—yet other areas, like Australia and Africa, have drought and water shortages.

Throughout the world water bottling companies extract water for free or purchase water rights, bottle it and sell it. The people in Fiji do not have access to their water because the Resnicks (Beverly Hills) bought up their water rights and now sell their water—“Fiji Water.”

In California we need regulations governing the use of ground and surface water. Chico, Calif., uses ground water from underground aquifers. Two water-bottling companies have just built water extraction and bottling plants outside of Chico. They pull out the water from the aquifer for free, bottle it and sell it!

Throughout California, since growers use over 70% of our water, it's essential to encourage conservation. The California State Water Project, which transports water from northern California to southern California, is very costly. This system is dependent on the system of levees and canals in the Sacramento Bay Delta that are aging. For 11 years, we have been experiencing a drought the Southwest. Lake Mead, which stores water from the Col-

orado River to transport to Southern California, dropped to its lowest level in 75 years. In a drought, it is logical to employ efforts to sustain the water supply.

## Conservation

Southern California has really done an amazing job of conserving water. For example, local and state agencies confirm that though our population has increased over time, residents of southern California still use the same amount of water. Strategies to reduce our water consumption vary, including replacing lawns with drought-tolerant plants, installing low-flow faucets and capturing rain water and runoff in barrels or underground cisterns.

Water engineers, researchers, government agencies and nonprofit organizations agree that conservation is the most economical way to protect the supply.

## Recycled Water

Using recycled water for landscaping saves potable or drinking water. The Edward C. Little Water Recycling Facility in El Segundo offers public tours on Saturdays. We have recycled water being used by cities and large corporations for landscaping and areas like golf courses.

## Desalination

At first glance, desalination might appear to be a reasonable way to increase our water supply. There is a new desal demonstration plant in the Redondo Beach Harbor, but a closer look enables us to see that this is not needed and can harm the ecology of coastal waters.

The desalination process pulls water out of the ocean, puts the salt water through a process to remove the salt and finishes with water that you can drink and a brine discharge that is dumped back into the ocean.

Here are some issues to consider:

### *Environmental concerns*

- Current desal technology causes harm to the ocean from brine discharge.
- Intake systems were developed decades ago and harm living sea organisms.

### *Health concerns*

- E-coli has been found in desal water from plants close to a sewage outflow from a sanitation plant: A report from the *Australian* (11/9/10) confirmed infectious diseases, including e-coli bacteria, in the desalinated water from the Kurnell Plant in Sydney.

### *Excessive energy consumption and carbon footprint expansion*

- Desalination is a huge, energy-intensive process. Qatar is using all solar to generate the power for its desalination plant. The plans for the desal demo project in Redondo Beach and the actual desal plant only show a small use of solar—perhaps 10% of energy needs.

### *Cost*

- The energy needed to run a desalination plant is significant. This cost will be embedded in everyone's water bill.
- While engineers like to build desalination plants, they are very costly. When they find the system is not efficient, they close it. Recent examples are Santa Barbara and Tampa.

## Get involved with local desal project

If you have the chance to visit the desal plant in Redondo, which opens on December 4 or attend a meeting to hear a presentation, ask these questions:

1. In other places, the brine discharge changes the ecology of the ocean. What are you doing to prevent that?
2. Considering that Australia has confirmed the existence of infectious diseases, including e-coli, in water coming from one of their plants, why is this plant proposed for Redondo or Hermosa?
3. The process to desalinate is very energy intensive. What are you doing to offset the carbon footprint?
4. If you build a large desal facility...
  - how big would it be and where would it be built?
  - how much would it cost to build?
  - how much would it cost to desalinate the water?
  - how much water would it produce?
  - what percentage of our water supply would that be?

# Your Backyard Habitat



By Dr. Constance M. Vadheim  
CSU Dominguez Hills

## Common Snowberry *Symphoricarpos albus*

**B**erry-eating birds have it tough in many of our neighborhoods. Berry bushes—native and nonnative—have gone out of style. For berry-eating birds, this means slim pickings. Toyon and other large native fruiting shrubs are simply too big for many gardens. Smaller alternatives include the currants and gooseberries (discussed in a previous issue) and the Snowberries (*Symphoricarpos*) species. These provide the habitat value of the larger berry shrubs in a size more appropriate for urban gardens.

Common Snowberry grows in western North America



1920s often feature Snowberry as a foundation plant (planted around the house to hide the foundation), along walkways or as a lawn shrub. Its smaller size (3 to 6 feet tall and wide) makes it useful even in modern gardens.

Snowberry does best in shady areas under trees or on the north side of buildings. This makes it very useful in mature gardens that have lots of shade. The plant provides a woody look if allowed to grow informally. But this versatile plant can be pruned into a fairly formal hedge or shrub—the choice is up to you.

Snowberry has small, urn-like pink and white flowers in late spring. The flowers are reminiscent of Manzanita and, like Manzanitas, are loved by hummingbirds. The berries are snow white and quite showy, even during winter. Snowberry loses its leaves briefly in winter. It

looks best with occasional to regular summer water and would be fine next to, or even within, a lawn or rain garden. It grows in any local soil and likes an organic mulch such as bark chips. Prune or shear during the winter dormant period and remove unwanted suckers.



For more information on growing and purchasing this plant, visit the Madrona Marsh Nature Center. You can also learn about local native plants at the “Out of the Wilds and Into Your Garden” series on the first Saturday of each month at the center.

from Canada to California. Locally, it can be found in the San Gabriel Mountains and on Catalina Island. It grows in moist or seasonally wet areas like stream banks, moist openings in woodlands and along roads. It actually is quite drought tolerant once established as long as it gets deep water in winter/spring. The berries of Common Snowberry remain on the plant throughout the winter—at least until birds eat them. So it can be an important source of food for migrant and resident berry-eaters alike.

Common Snowberry was once a popular shrub in home gardens. Garden photographs from the 1880s through the

# Birds of the Peninsula

## September & October 2010

By Tracy Drake and Bob Shanman

Welcome to “Birds of the Peninsula,” under new authorship for the first time in nearly 7 years. We would like to start by thanking Kevin Larson for the awesome job he has done with this column for almost a decade. We volunteered to take this on, thinking we knew how big a job it would be. Oh, how wrong we were! It’s twice as big as we thought, so our apologies to Nancy Feagans for being late. We would really appreciate any and all suggestions from our readers.

To do this properly, we will rely on all the birders in the area. Please report sightings directly to us by e-mailing reports to [bobsbirdreports@gmail.com](mailto:bobsbirdreports@gmail.com), calling one of us (Tracy at 562-244-8767; Bob at 310-357-9210) or posting sightings on L.A. County Birds, which we will check daily. If you send photos, let us know whether we can use them in the article. The species account will be presented in taxonomic order per the “Official California Checklist” by the California Bird Records Committee (as of 9/18/10).

What a strange summer and early fall this has been. A long, mild summer with several small heat waves has been followed by an early fall with rain and Santa Ana winds. Interesting, too, has been the lack of any major storm activity to the north to drive migrants south, so it has felt like a slow, lazy migration. In spite of this, there were many good sightings to report.

A Greater White-fronted Goose was found at Harbor Park on 10/11 by Martin Byhower. It was still being seen on 10/18. There appears to be a minor eruption of Cackling Geese throughout the region. Two reports from the South Bay were at Harbor Park on 10/16 (MB) and Polliwog Park on 10/31 (Bob Shanman). The Polliwog bird was last seen on 11/7.

Some early ducks were reported by

MB at Harbor Park on 10/6. They included two Blue-winged Teal, two Cinnamon Teal and eight Northern Pintail. Martin reports that the eight Pintail may be the most seen on Machado Lake in recent years. They were last reported on 10/12. The first report of a Black Scoter was at Cabrillo Beach on 10/22–10/23 by David Ellsworth; late reports indicate they are also in Scoter flocks off Dockweiler (Richard Barth).

A very surprising report came on 9/13. A California Quail was spotted in a backyard behind the Walgreen’s at Crenshaw Blvd. and Pacific Coast Hwy. (Liesel Droesch). A bird once common in and near South Coast Botanic Garden was the Ring-necked Pheasant. Steve Wolf reported a female mixing with the Mallards at the lake in the Garden on 10/12. Two early Red-throated Loons were found at the mouth of Ballona Creek on 10/17 (BS). Only a few grebes were seen at this location on that date. However, MB reported both a Western Grebe and a Clark’s Grebe at Harbor Park on 10/18; both are unusual for Lake Machado. Five-eared Grebes were seen the same day.

One of the more spectacular sightings of the early fall were the estimated 135 Great Egrets at Harbor Park on 10/11 (MB). They were seen on the water primrose (*Ludwigia*) islands in the lake and on the shoreline. Always unusual in the area are White-faced Ibis. Two sightings were reported for the period. SW found one on 9/24 at Harbor Park. More unusual was a report from Joyce Waterman of one at the edge of the water on the beach among crows off Windward Avenue in Venice on 10/19. Turkey Vultures are not common in the South Bay. SW had one over South Coast Botanic Garden on 9/26.



Red-breasted nuthatch

Photo by Steve Wolfe

It’s always good to have reports of White-tailed Kites. An adult was seen in the Ballona Wetlands area from 9/26 to 9/28 (Jonathan Coffin, Roy Van de Hoek). It was reported again on 10/11 (RV). Over the years, the Kite has been sporadic in the fall and winter in this area. Bob has seen as many as six and can recall winters when they have not been present at all.

A Northern Harrier was reported at Ballona on 9/28 (RV) and 10/11 (JC). This species has also been regular in the past at Ballona but has been seen less frequently over the last 10 to 15 years. Both the kite and harrier can range widely over the salt marsh, the freshwater marsh and the undeveloped land north of Ballona Creek.

Osprey were reported both at Harbor Park on 9/26 (Eric and Ann Brooks) and 10/18 (MB); and at the Ballona Wetlands on 10/15 (Walter Lamb), and two on 10/24 (Roberta Shanman). The pair of Peregrine Falcons returned to their usual place near the Del Amo Mall, and were seen by Ron Melin on 10/1. They have been spotted on and off all month. When birding at Madrona Marsh, watch for the birds on top of the California Bank building. Please let Tracy know if you spot the birds.

Two Rail family sightings from the South Bay included a Sora (SW) on 10/26 in the pond at South Coast Botanic Garden; and a Common

Moorhen (MB) at Harbor Park. Both of these species should also be looked for when birding the freshwater marsh at Ballona.

**T**his fall has been excellent for seeing large numbers of shorebirds at Ballona. Thousands of Willets, and hundreds of Black-bellied Plovers, Marbled Godwits, Whimbrels and other birds have been seen along the creek and del Rey Lagoon. As a note, when birding along Ballona Creek, walk up past the eastern channel. Large shorebird flocks are roosting on the banks further east than in the past. Also, the “modern” tide gates in this channel are having a positive effect. The channel is widening, the banks are slowly laying back (more mudflat at low tides), and some of the side channels are working their way eastward to the point that the saltpan just south of the bank is now permanently wet. In time, more shorebirds should be expected to use this area.

On the 10/17 Audubon Walk at Ballona, nine Semi-palmated Plovers were seen in the Lagoon (BS). Bob says this is one of the highest numbers of this bird he has seen at Ballona in 33 years. Also of interest is the increasing number of Black Oystercatchers being seen. Ten were seen on this walk. This bird was once difficult to find at Ballona but now is found often.

On 9/20, MB found a juvenile Red Knot on the Los Angeles River. The location was a several hundred yards downstream of Wardlow. Further reports of this bird were not found. On 10/1, Barbara Johnson reported a Stilt Sandpiper in Ballona Creek. On 10/18, MB found two Greater Yellowlegs at Harbor Park, an unusual bird for the park. On 10/15, four Dunlin were found along Ballona Creek; three more were found in del Rey Lagoon (Walter Lamb). There were two reports of Ruff: Bob Pann saw an adult on 9/4 at Ballona and RB saw another Ruff on the L.A. River on 9/20.

Last of the shorebirds was a report by Bill Cullen on 10/21 of Wilson’s Snipe in Highridge Park in Rolling Hills Estates. According to Bill, they were

“comfortably resting” in a muddy corner of the westernmost of the two soccer fields. The only report of an interesting gull or tern for the region came on 9/26 when a Common Tern was reported at Harbor Park (EAB). It is not often that members of the dove family are of interest. However, MB found a Spotted Dove at Harbor Park on 10/11. He estimates that it has been about a decade since one was seen there. On 10/25, DE reported three White-winged Doves at his feeders off and on since 8/22.



**Cackling Goose**

*Photo by Bob Shanman*

Many reports were made of the Burrowing Owl returning to its winter roost at the Ballona Wetlands. JC first reported the bird on 9/27 on a bare patch of dirt surrounded by ice plant just east of the eastern channel into the wetlands. The patch is on a mound 50 to 100 feet east of the channel. The bird can usually be observed from the creek bank, looking south along the channel about halfway to the trestle. The bird was seen as late as 10/24.

Winter is on its way when sapsuckers and flickers return. On 10/16, MB reported the first Red-naped Sapsucker of the season at Harbor Park, followed on 10/18 by a Red-breasted Sapsucker. Look for the birds in the red willows near the boathouse overlook. SW reported the first Northern Flickers on 10/12 at the Botanic Garden.

On 10/21 a Loggerhead Shrike was present north of the Ballona Creek (JC). Plumbeous Vireos are being reported throughout the region. On 10/11, MB found one at the north end of the willows, and just south of the Wilmington Drain at Harbor Park. He found another on 10/18.

**R**ussell Stone reported Oak Titmouse on 10/10 on the Loyola Marymount campus. In over 14 years of birding the area, this was his first sighting of the bird in the area. The following weekend, on 10/17, he found two more at the Playa Vista riparian corridor below the Westchester Bluffs. As the 1.5-mile-long riparian corridor matures, it should become a hot spot for resident and migratory birds. Two other birds found in the area this year have been the Least Bell’s Vireo and the California Gnatcatcher.

It is starting out to be a good season for Red-breasted Nuthatches. The earliest report was from SW at Highridge Park (9/24). EAB reported one at Chadwick School on 9/26. Other locations and dates include Wilderness Park on 10/3 (Tom Miko), near Pacific Ave. Bridge at Ballona on 10/9, South Coast Botanic Garden (Tracy Drake), on 10/15 (WL), Highridge on 10/21 and 10/24 (SW), on 10/29 (EG) and two at Chadwick on 10/29 (MB).

A very surprising find was a Wrentit (JC) on 10/24 at Ballona. The bird was heard, but not seen. It called from a dense stand of Seep Willow on the southwest corner of the ecological reserve. Western Bluebirds continue to be seen in the South Bay. MB reported “a flock” at Harbor Park on 10/11. EG reported five individuals at Highridge Park on 10/29. At the end of November, It will be eight years since the first birds were reported at Highridge. Other areas where they have been seen include Ernie Howlett Park, Alondra Park, and a yard in Hawthorne where a pair nested in 2009.

On 10/24 LMC reported a female Varied Thrush at Sand Dune Park in Manhattan Beach. There were also

*See Bird Sightings, Page 9*

## Ssssnakes Alive! Native, Invasive Species Mix at Harbor Park

By Martin Byhower

Let me introduce you to *Nerodia fasciata*—a.k.a., the Eastern banded watersnake. After all, I spent some interesting days last summer with them, and even got paid a whopping \$75 for each of those days! Wading up to my chest or paddling a kayak, amid the water primrose, tules, muck and mosquitoes, I emptied trap after trap. Most of the metal or plastic traps were full of some combination of bullfrogs, mosquitofish, giant apple snails and angry snapping crayfish, but occasionally, one contained my intended stealthy, black, biting quarry.

Actually, I never got bit, and if I had, it probably would not have hurt much. Far worse was the snakes' fetid fecal discharge, which is intended to discourage predators. There were, however, some more significant perils that went along with the job. At times, the swarms of mosquitoes were a bit intimidating; the 100% DEET repellent I slathered on before and during each visit may have taken its own toll, but since I am allergic to mosquito bites, I figured it was better than coming home swollen and pink, or worse, taking a chance with some imaginatively incurable form of mosquito-borne disease.

The only really painful experiences that accompanied the job were the pinches by the large male crayfish that frequently inhabited the traps (how do the Pied-billed Grebes catch them, not to mention swallow them, without injury?!). The leeches in the lake don't seem to mess with people, and fortunately, I hadn't yet heard about the reputed 15-foot reticulated python that a fisherman swears he saw recently (he also told me he has seen some young alligator snapping turtles, which are more dangerous than the common snappers I have removed from the lake from time to time). I wore my official waders to insulate me from foot to chest from the bacteria- and chemical-laden lake waters, and since I didn't have any open sores on my hands, I avoided infection when water got into my gloves.

The last time I inadvertently went into the water occurred when I was doing a bird survey on a kayak with my wife Eileen: I got so excited when I saw a Green Heron nest that I stood up and capsized the vessel. We both went into the water, along with cameras, binoculars, wallets, cell phones, etc. Eileen got a rash and I got a respiratory infection. She won't kayak with me at the lake any more.

The banded water snake population in Machado Lake is estimated (by the USGS and USFWS scientists for whom I worked) to be about 2,000 to 3,000, so the 300 or so we caught hardly made a dent. The snake-catching project was not intended to rid the lake of this highly invasive species, but to develop a methodology to use to control their numbers when the snakes get into more pristine habitats. Machado Lake, in fact, has not a single remaining resident native fish, reptile, or am-



Byhower sets out in his kayak to check the traps in Machado Lake.

Photo by Brad Graverson/Daily Breeze

phibian—nor, for that matter, with the exception of some dragonfly larvae, a native large invertebrate. The snakes, like the resident snapping and red-eared slider turtles, bullfrogs and occasional alligator (remember Reggie?) are all the result of people disposing of unwanted pets or live-trapped animals.

Animal dumping is illegal but rampant at the park, and I believe that it literally happens every day there. This summer I witnessed a group of Vietnamese Buddhists performing a ceremony at the lake, which culminated in the release of eight huge bags of small goldfish and koi, numbering (by my estimate) in the thousands. Most house pets and domestic animals dumped at the park—cats, dogs, guinea pigs, rabbits, ducks, geese, you name it—live a short and probably miserable life before they succumb to predators, parasites, pollution or starvation. Likewise, the well-meaning but misguided dumping of live-trapped eastern fox squirrels, raccoons, skunks, possums and other “wildlife” (actually, overpopulated species that are mostly not endemic to this region) usually results in the same fate for the hapless animals, who are disoriented upon arrival and then have to compete with crowded resident populations of their own kind.

Of course, some of the animals survive long enough that well-meaning folks start to feed them, which of course only amplifies the dumping. And thus the dumping, feeding, dumping cycle continues. Occasionally, however, a new inductee to the wilds of Harbor City survives, thrives and itself becomes a problem. The snakes at the lake are well fed, eating mostly the other non-native critters found in the traps (the free and accessible meal is why they enter the traps in the first place). The snakes, like other successful invaders, can separately or cumulatively permanently alter or eliminate entire ecosystems. Sometimes I wonder, half-seriously, whether releasing a few

See Snakes, Page 8



### Snakes, from Page 8

more hungry alligators into the lake might actually help us get some of the invasives under control. After all, if they finish their job, we can send the fat, sassy companions to join Reggie at the L.A. Zoo!

On a more serious and sobering note, the invasive species problem at the lake may be with us to stay. The benefits that will accompany the upcoming Proposition O improvements (yes, the project is slated to actually begin during the coming summer!) will include reduced pollution, trash control, habitat enhancement and more. The conditions that support overpopulation of some species will no longer exist. The less polluted, deeper, cooler and less nutrient-rich water will be clearer, allowing plant life to grow on the lake bottom, oxygenating the water. Fish life will be enhanced with the stocking of “catch and release” species, which although not native, will still pro-



More than two thousand snakes like this one inhabit the lake.

Photo by Brad Graverson/Daily Breeze

vide a food source for piscivorous birds. There is a “wildlife relocation plan” that will remove many feral animals and presumably decrease the likelihood of their reintroduction.

However, dredging of the lake will be phased in sections rather than by draining the entire lake and essentially “starting over.” This means that, although conditions favorable to the non-native turtles, snakes and bullfrogs will be dampened, we may never get rid of all of them. Perhaps some of the “new invaders” (the introduced catch-and-release fish) will eat some of the unwanted residents (if they don’t get eaten first!) But some species may not be able to come back no matter what measures are taken. For example, the resident invasive bullfrogs may be host to, but immune to, the chytrid fungus which is devastating native amphibian populations worldwide. If that is so, then those species don’t have a chance at KMHRP. Some of the animals that once occupied the lake, including Western pond turtles and California garter snakes, just don’t stand a chance against the pressures that will remain there.

Fortunately, we can certainly expect that, with improved water quality, some of the native populations of aquatic invertebrates and vertebrates will gain the upper hand/fin/flipper. In any case, the likely beneficiaries with the most to gain will include humans and birds. In fact, the northern waterway that feeds Machado Lake, known as the Wilmington Drain (I prefer to call it by its former name, *La Cañada de los Palos Verdes*) will be restored and specifically designated as Least Bell’s Vireo and Southwestern Willow Flycatcher habitat!

**Author’s Note:** Use these links to view the *Daily Breeze* article on the “snakes in the lake” and my interview with KTLA:

[-http://dailybreeze.mycapture.com/mycapture/folder.asp?event=1083134](http://dailybreeze.mycapture.com/mycapture/folder.asp?event=1083134)

[-http://www.ktla.com/videobeta/face2046-c109-4909-863d-](http://www.ktla.com/videobeta/face2046-c109-4909-863d-fd918560dd27/News/KTLA-Snakes-Invade-Machado-Lake-Dave-Malkoff-reports)

[fd918560dd27/News/KTLA-Snakes-Invade-Machado-Lake-Dave-Malkoff-reports](http://www.ktla.com/videobeta/face2046-c109-4909-863d-fd918560dd27/News/KTLA-Snakes-Invade-Machado-Lake-Dave-Malkoff-reports)

### Bird Sightings, from Page 7

several Hermit Thrushes. Returning to Ballona, JC found a singing California Thrasher on Coyote Brush north of the Ballona Creek on 10/21.

It felt like the Yellow-rump Warbler flock was late coming in this year, and when they did, they brought their friends! Breaking with taxonomic order, here is the order in which the warblers were found. It started on 9/19, when MB found a Macgil-livray’s Warbler at Pt. Vicente, followed by DS finding a Chestnut-sided Warbler and a Yellow-breasted Chat on 9/29. Both birds were found at the lower (west) end of the riparian corridor at Playa Vista (Ballona). The month ended when RM saw a Palm Warbler in Columbia Park.

October started with a Black-and-White Warbler on 10/3 at Wilderness

Park (TM). The next day (10/4) LMC reported a probable immature Painted Redstart in Sand Dune Park. Then on 10/11, MB found a late migrating Wilson’s Warbler at Harbor Park. A few days later (10/16), DE had a second Black-and-White Warbler. He had a Black Burnian Warbler in the yard 10/19 through 10/23. At about the same time, DS found a 1st year, dull-colored Tennessee Warbler at Sand Dune Park (10/21). (Did you know that the hill in Sand Dune was planted in 1972 to be a wildlife habitat?)

The warbler reports for the month ended with EG finding a Hermit Warbler on 10/29 in Highridge Park. Kevin Larson reported two Clay-colored Sparrow sightings in his yard in Westchester. The first was on 10/8; the second on 10/29. The fall’s first Black-throated Sparrow was reported on 9/22 at Shoreline Park

(SW). SW photographed the Thick-billed race of the Fox Sparrow on 10/9 at Shoreline Park. The photos were reviewed by Kimball Garrett and Jon Dunn, who confirmed the identification.

A late Western Tanager was found at Harbor Park on 10/11 (MB). A late, young Bullock’s Oriole was in Sand Dune on 10/21 (DS). DE also found a Common Grackle in his backyard and at his feeders. The first Dark-eyed Juncos of the fall were found on 9/24 at Highridge Park (SW). He found them again on 10/21. Pine Siskins were reported by KL flying over his yard in Westchester on 10/10. Another group were reported on 10/29 in Chadwick Canyon by MB.

Keep your eyes and ears alert as we move through November and December, and hopefully, winter storms will bring both moisture and more interesting birds to the area. Great birding, everyone!

# MEET, LEARN, ENJOY, RESTORE

## Calendar

### Events

**Wednesday, December 1, 7 p.m.:** **PV/South Bay Audubon board meeting and CBC planning meeting** at Madrona Marsh. All Audubon members and friends are welcome, and *all Christmas Bird Count team leaders are required to attend.*

**Saturday, December 4, 8 a.m.–12 p.m.:** **Natural history walk at Bixby Marsh.** Explore the new 17-acre Bixby Marshland after a half-hour introductory walk with Audubon leaders Jess Morton and John Nieto. Walks begin on the hour at the parking lot welcome table. Learn about how the marsh came into being, see the results of this successful restoration and view the many birds that have made the wetland home. Located in Carson, Bixby Marshland is on the west side of Figueroa Street just south of Sepulveda Blvd. (Trucks sometimes block the entrance.) The marsh is managed by the L.A. County Sanitation District; please go to: [www.lacsd.org/education/](http://www.lacsd.org/education/)

**Thursday December 9, 8:15–10:15 a.m.** **Bird survey on a habitat restoration site.** In collaboration with the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy (PVPLC), we will be monitoring the bird population on the Three Sisters restoration site as a long-term project (see Dalkey's article in the Aug./Sept. 2009 *Hummin'*). Volunteers are needed. They will be trained in identification and the survey methods. Please note that the survey will start promptly. To participate in this project, contact Ann Dalkey at [adalkey@pvplc.org](mailto:adalkey@pvplc.org) or 310-541-7613, ext. 208.

**Saturday, December 11, 9–11 a.m.:** **Second Saturday Habitat Restoration Project at Ken Malloy Harbor**

**Regional Park (KMHRP).** Come take part in Audubon's important partnership with the Chadwick Ecommunity and the City of Los Angeles to restore habitat in KMHRP. Led by Chadwick students Roderick Go, Lauren Stoneburner and teacher Martin Byhower, this is a hands-on opportunity to learn about invasives removal and native species planting. Students earn community service credits. Wear closed-toe shoes, long pants and a hat. Bring water, a snack, sunscreen, bug repellent and work gloves. The park is located at 25820 Vermont Ave., just west of the Harbor Fwy. Call Martin at 310-541-6763, ext. 4143.

**Saturday, December 18, 8:30–10:30 a.m.:** **Bird survey on a habitat restoration site.** See December 9 for details.

**Saturday, December 18, 8 a.m.:** **Training class for Christmas Bird Count** at Madrona Marsh. Learn all you need to know for the CBC from our very own Bob Shanman.



**Tuesday, December 21, 7 p.m.:** **PV/South Bay Audubon Holiday Party at Madrona Marsh.** All Audubon members and friends are invited to attend. *The party will replace the Third Tuesday Get-Together for December.* Our speaker will be Dick Purvis, who will talk about the Western Blue Project in Orange County.

**Sunday, December 26: Christmas Bird Count of PV/South Bay Audubon.** The CBC is a long-standing program of the National Audubon Society, where thousands of volunteers across the U.S., Canada and other countries go out over a 24-hour period to count birds. CBC participants are organized into field parties

December						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
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5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30		

January						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30						

by the organizer. Contact Dave Moody at [dswoods@verizon.net](mailto:dswoods@verizon.net).

**Saturday, January 1, 8 a.m.–12 p.m.:** **Bixby Marshland open to the public.** See December 4 for details.

**Saturday, January 8, 9–11 a.m.:** **Second Saturday Habitat Restoration Project at KMHRP.** See December 11 for details.

**Thursday, January 13, 8:30-10:30 a.m.:** **Bird survey on a habitat restoration site.** See December 9 for details.

**Saturday, January 15, 8:30–10:30 a.m.:** **Bird survey on a habitat restoration site.** See December 9 for details.

**Tuesday, January 18, 7 p.m.:** **Audubon Third Tuesday Get-Together.** Our speaker for the evening is not yet decided. Come to Madrona Marsh to socialize with friends and to enjoy the bird quiz, raffle and prizes from Wild Birds Unlimited.

### Field Trips

**Sunday, December 5, 7:30 a.m.:** **Eric and Ann Brooks fieldtrip to Upper Newport Bay and Bolsa**

**Chica.** Meet at the parking lot of the Muth Interpretive Center on University in Newport Beach. For details, call 310-913-2799 or 310-913-2798.

**Sunday, December 5, 8 a.m.: Bird walk at South Coast Botanic Garden.** Audubon leader Stephanie Bryan will lead this walk through the garden, at 26300 Crenshaw Blvd., Palos Verdes. There is a small charge for nonmembers of the SCBG Foundation, or join there.

**Tuesday, December 7, 8:30 a.m.: "Tour de Torrance."** Join Audubon leader Dave Moody and friends on a ramble around a great local birding area. Meet at Madrona Marsh Nature Center.

**Wednesday, December 8, 8 a.m.: Bird Walk at Madrona Marsh** with Audubon leader Bob Shanman. For details, go to Shanman's site: <http://www.torrance.wbu.com/>.

**Saturday, December 11, 9-11 a.m.: PVPLC Natural History Walk to Butcher Hill.** Follow the trail to the top of this prominent hill marking the entrance to the Peninsula while enjoying breathtaking views of the L.A. Basin. Return through the majestic Valmonte Canyon Trail. Moderate. For details, visit [www.pvplc.org](http://www.pvplc.org).

**Sunday, December 12, 8 a.m.: Second Sunday Walk at KMHRP.** Join Audubon leaders and explore this important natural area of the South Bay. See Dec. 11 event for directions.

**Wednesday, December 15, 8 a.m.: Bird Walk at South Coast Botanic Garden.** See December 5 for details.

**Saturday, December 18, 8 a.m.: Eric and Ann Brooks LAAS bird walk at Kenneth Hahn SRA.** Meet in the parking lot on the left after the kiosk. Entry fee is \$6 per car. Call 310-913-2799 or 310-913-2798.



This Allen's hummingbird is quite at home in the South Coast Botanic Garden.

*Photo by Evi Meyer*

**Sunday, December 18, 12:30 p.m.: Los Serenos de Point Vicente Natural History Walk to Abalone Cove Shoreline Park.** Tour the tidepools teeming with fascinating marine life. Moderate. For details, visit [www.losserenos.com/pvic.htm](http://www.losserenos.com/pvic.htm).

**Tuesday, December 21, 8:30 a.m.: "Tour de Torrance."** See December 7 for details.

**Sunday January 2, 8 a.m.: Bird Walk at South Coast Botanic Garden.** See December 5 for details.

**Tuesday, January 4, 8:30 a.m.: "Tour de Torrance."** See December 7 for details.

**Saturday January 8, 9-11 a.m.: PVPLC Natural History Walk to Malaga Cove.** Take a trail from the bluff below Malaga Cove leading to wide, sandy RAT beach (Right After Torrance), viewing the spectacular landscape along the way. Moderate. For details, visit [www.pvplc.org](http://www.pvplc.org).

**Sunday, January 9, 8 a.m.: Second Sunday Walk at KMHRP.** See December 12 for details.

**Wednesday, January 12, 8 a.m.: Bird Walk at Madrona Marsh.** See December 8 for details.

**Sunday, January 16, 8 a.m.: Bird walk at Ballona Wetlands** with Bob Shanman. Go to <http://www.torrance.wbu.com/>.

**Tuesday, January 18, 8:30 a.m.: "Tour de Torrance."** See December 7 for details.

**Wednesday, January 19, 8 a.m.: Bird Walk at South Coast Botanic Garden.** See December 5 for details.

**Sunday, January 23, 3 p.m.: Los Serenos de Point Vicente Natural History Walk to Ocean Trails.** Walk through coastal sage scrub habitat along the Eastern Bluff Preserve at Trump National Golf Course with possible gray whale sightings. Moderate. For details, visit [www.losserenos.com/pvic.htm](http://www.losserenos.com/pvic.htm).



*For more information on local events, please go to the Chapter web site at: [www.pvsb-audubon.org](http://www.pvsb-audubon.org). For a complete list of events at Madrona Marsh, go to: [www.southbaycalendar.org](http://www.southbaycalendar.org) and click on "Friends of Madrona Marsh." For a list of activities for Audubon's Youth Environmental Service program, go to: [www.AudubonYES.org](http://www.AudubonYES.org).*

## Calendar 4 Bird Lovers!

Steve Wolfe, Audubon member and wildlife photographer, is self-publishing a calendar for 2011, titled "Birds of the Palos Verdes Peninsula/South Bay Birds." In addition to his beautiful photographs, Steve has added habitat and range information for each species.

The calendars will be available for purchase at the Chapter's Holiday Party and through Wild Birds Unlimited. Steve is also lining up other sources for calendar sales, and a list of them will be available through our web site: [www.pvsb-audubon.org](http://www.pvsb-audubon.org).

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### **Watch Birdathon Video Online**

Check out the new, 10-minute video production on the PV/South Bay Audubon Green Birdathon Team, who pedaled and hiked across the South Bay, on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kITJzt2k48U&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kITJzt2k48U&feature=youtu.be). The BushWhackers found many wonderfully varied species of bird while raising funds for conservation and doing so in a precedent-setting, carbon-neutral manner. Two students and two adults demonstrated that wildlife watching in the 21st century can be fun *and* green, and professional videographer Steve Dexter caught it all on film. The short film also includes some truly remarkable photos of several species seen that day, taken by some of the finest local photographers.