



## SDFO NEWS

### Monthly Meeting

Tuesday, March 17, at 6:00 p.m., in the Hoffman Room of the San Diego Foundation Building, 2508 Historic Decatur Road. Going south on Rosecrans St. in the Midway area of town, turn left on Roosevelt Rd. into Liberty Station and proceed a couple of blocks to Decatur. Parking is available on the street or in the adjacent parking lots.

Program: “The coastal California Gnatcatcher controversy and how we determine distinctness of biological units,” by John McCormack, Director/Curator, Moore Laboratory of Zoology, Assistant Professor, Biology Department, Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA 90041.

If land developers and conservationists are to work together, they require objective scientific evidence upon which to base their actions. With situations involving threatened or endangered species, the question often revolves around whether or not a population is distinct in its appearance, genetics, or habitat. In these cases, all parties must determine how studies reporting negative results should be interpreted. What conclusions should be drawn when scientists fail to find evidence for distinctness? Not finding something does not mean it is not there. And the likelihood of an absence being a true absence increases with search effort.



What conclusions should be drawn when scientists fail to find evidence for distinctness? Not finding something does not mean it is not there. And the likelihood of an absence being a true absence increases with search effort.

This dilemma is highlighted by the recent petition to remove the coastal California Gnatcatcher from the Endangered Species list based on a recent study that failed to find evidence for its genetic and ecological distinctness. I discuss why the authors of the study’s choice of genetic markers was not well suited to the question of distinctness and how their negative results were over-interpreted in both the genetic and ecological analysis. Our reanalysis of their genetic data finds evidence that several DNA regions actually demonstrate distinctness of the federally listed gnatcatchers. Finally, I provide recommendations for best practices in determining distinctness in phenotype, genetics, and ecology for coastal California Gnatcatchers and other cases of conservation concern.

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## SDFO NEWS [cont.]

John McCormack is Director and Curator of the Bird and Mammal Collection at the Moore Laboratory of Zoology and an Assistant Professor of Biology at Occidental College. The Moore Lab holds the largest collection of Mexican birds in the world and over 65,000 specimens in total, which the McCormack Lab studies to understand the basic units of biodiversity and the processes that generate this biodiversity. The McCormack Lab has pioneered the use of new DNA sequencing technologies to better resolve the Tree of Life and is currently applying these advances to unlock the genomes of museum specimens dating back to the 1800s. Professor McCormack received his undergraduate degree in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology from the University of Arizona and his Ph.D. in the lab of Thomas B. Smith at UCLA. After postdoctoral research at the University of Michigan and Louisiana State University, he arrived at Occidental College as Moore Lab Director in 2011.

Next month's meeting: Tuesday, April 21, same time, same place. Program to be announced.

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## SAN DIEGO COUNTY BIRD OBSERVATIONS, FEBRUARY 2015

Compiled by Guy McCaskie

A blue-morph Snow Goose with two white birds in the horse pastures at Del Mar 26 Feb+ (SR, MS) is one of a very few "Blue Geese" to be found in San Diego County. Wintering Eurasian Wigeon were still present at the San Diego River mouth through 28 Feb (JP), at the El Camino Country Club in Oceanside through 13 Feb (JeJ), at San Dieguito Lagoon in Del Mar through 4 Feb (PEL) and at the Vineyard Golf Club in Escondido through 3 Feb (EH). The male Tufted Duck found by Matt Sadowski and Lea Squires at Upper Otay Lake on 24 Dec was last reported there on 8 Feb (PEL). Multiple Brown Boobies continue to be seen from shore at the Tijuana River mouth (GMcC), along with as many as 15 frequenting the buoys at the mouth of San Diego Bay (DWA). At least one Reddish Egret was still present on south San Diego Bay at the end of the month (GMcC). Four adult and one immature Yellow-crowned Night-Herons continued to roost at the Sports Park in Imperial Beach through the end of the month (GMcC). A Zone-tailed Hawk over Spring Valley on 8 Feb (PB) was the only one reported this month. A Pacific Golden-Plover at

south San Diego Bay 4 Feb (RTP) may have been the same bird present at the Tijuana River mouth 26 Dec-31 Jan (GN, JB), and the other wintering in Del Mar remained through February (SB). At least 30 Scripps's Murrelets on the waters off San Diego 21 Feb (PAG) were no doubt birds returning to this area to nest on Los Coronados Islands. A first-winter Laughing Gull was seen moving about south San Diego Bay 1-7 Feb (PEL), and a first-winter Lesser Black-backed Gull, only the 7<sup>th</sup> to be found in this County, was photographed with other gulls off J Street in Chula Vista on 1 Feb (PEL). An Elegant Tern on south San Diego Bay 20 Feb (MS) and another photographed on the beach in Carlsbad on 23 Feb (SB) were exceptionally early spring migrants—until recently, the first Elegant Terns were not expected in California before early March, but in the last four years the first have arrived in late February, with one on 23 Feb 2012 being the previous earliest.

Inca Doves continue to be seen at the Roadrunner Club and Rams Hill in Borrego Springs through February (WTH), supporting the idea this species is

expanding its range westward into this area of San Diego County. An adult Rufous Hummingbird well photographed in Jacumba on 15 Feb (EGK) establishes the earliest date for a spring migrant in San Diego County this year. The wintering adult Yellow-bellied Sapsucker at Collier Park in Ramona was still present on 17 Feb (LR). A Red-breasted Sapsucker photographed near Lake O'Neill on Camp Pendleton 6-28 Feb+ (JMcM) appeared to be of the northern nominate subspecies *ruber*, most unusual in Southern California, with only one specimen from this County (Unitt 2004). A Pacific-slope Flycatcher at Lake Hodges on 27 Feb (JJa) was the earliest migrant reported this spring. The Eastern Phoebe found by visiting birder Cynthia Berg near the Bird & Butterfly Garden in the Tijuana River Valley on 1 January was still present 28 Feb (SR). The wintering Tropical Kingbird at Liberty Station on Pt. Loma since 18 Nov was still present 23 Feb (JB). The Thick-billed Kingbird spending its 5<sup>th</sup> winter at the lower end of Poggi Creek in Chula Vista was still present 21 Feb (TF-H) and can be expected to stay well into April based on its behavior in previous years. The Bell's Vireo found by Paul E. Lehman at Nestor Park in Nestor on 8 November remained through February (MS). Of extreme interest was the presence of 2-3 Gray Vireos amongst the Elephant Trees at the southern end of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park on 26 Feb (LH & PU), as this is the only location in California known to harbor Gray Vireos in winter (*Western Birds* 31;258-262, 2000). Wintering Plumbeous Vireos remained in San Diego's Greenwood Cemetery through 23 Feb (GB), in Villa La Jolla Park in La Jolla through 28 Feb (TG), along Holly Tree Ln. in Poway through 7 Feb (TH), and at Kate Sessions Park in La Jolla through 12 Feb (TH). A Pacific Wren, decidedly rare in the coastal lowlands of San Diego County, was present in Spruce Creek Canyon in San Diego 10-25 Feb (PU, MS). Varied Thrushes are still present throughout the mountains and coastal lowlands in this County after the major influx of these birds in October and November, as is evident for example by at least a dozen around Doane Pond on Palomar Mountain on 14 Feb (RA), seven

still at the San Diego Botanic Garden in Encinitas on 27 Feb (SES) and two remaining in Nestor Park in Nestor through at least 21 Feb (GMcC). A Gray Catbird discovered coming to roost in the yard of Paulette Ache in Borrego Springs in mid-January was still present 13 Feb (JCS), and a Brown Thrasher frequenting feeders at the home of Cynthia Burnham in Descanso since mid-November remained through February (CB).

Noteworthy wood warblers include a known wintering Northern Waterthrush at Cottonwood Creek Park in Encinitas through 28 Feb (SB); three Black-and-white Warblers, with a known wintering bird in Balboa Park (near 28<sup>th</sup> & Beech) still present on 9 Feb (MA), another at Nestor Park known present through 28 Feb (CZ) and the third found at San Elijo Lagoon on 4 Feb (JM); and single wintering Palm Warblers in San Ysidro through 5 Feb (PEL) and at Greenwood Cemetery on 23 Feb (GB). In addition, a Northern Parula found in La Jolla (Arenas St. & Olivetas Ave.) on 2 Feb (PEL) was still present 28 Feb (MS), the Black-throated Green Warbler found on 29 October by Matt Sadowski spending its 2<sup>nd</sup> winter at Greenwood Cemetery was still present 21 Feb (TF-H), and another found in Del Mar (4<sup>th</sup> St. & Stratford Ct.) on 18 Feb (TG) remained through the end of the month (JR). The immature Harris's Sparrow found by Paul E. Lehman on 12 January along Leon Ave. in Nestor has remained with the same flock of White-crowned Sparrows through at least 22 Feb (GT). The elusive Hepatic Tanager known wintering near the Marston House in Balboa Park was still present at the end of February (MS). Only four Summer Tanagers were reported locally in February, though others were no doubt present. An adult male Hooded Oriole in San Diego near Balboa Park 17 Feb (ME) was the first of the summering birds this year. Only two Baltimore Orioles were known present in February, with the female found by Paul E. Lehman on 8 November in Nestor Park still there 21 Feb (GMcC) and the female found by Paul E. Lehman in Carlsbad on 23 December remaining through 26 Feb (SB). Adult male Scott's Orioles were at Hidden Meadows near Escondido 10-28 Feb (CW),

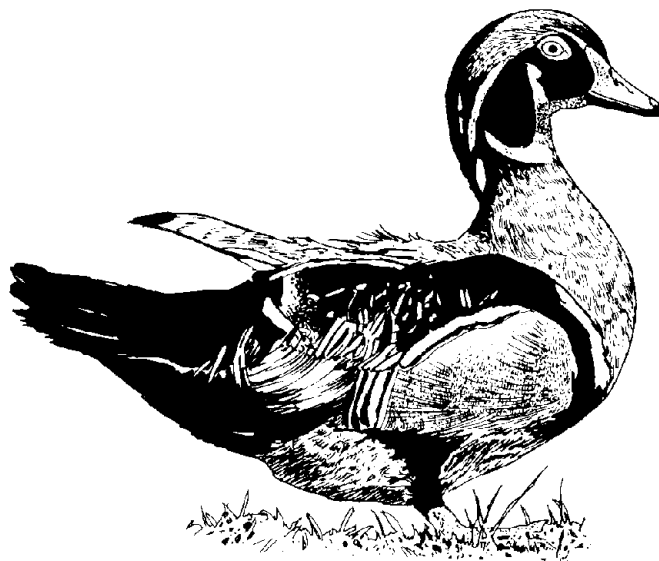
and another was in Jacumba 20 Feb (NC). Noteworthy was the presence of 2-3 Cassin's Finches in Jacumba after 20 Feb (NC, EGK) since this finch is somewhat erratic in its occurrences in this County. Two Evening Grosbeaks, rare and sporadic in San Diego County, were well photographed in Jacumba 16-25 Feb (EGK).

Listed observers: Douglas W. Aguillard, Ryan Andrews, Marc Arndt, Gail Berner, Steve Brad, Peter Brown, John Bruin, Cynthia Burnham, Nancy Christensen, Michael Evans, Thomas Ford-Hutchinson, Peter A. Ginsburg, Tito Gonzalez, Ed Hall, Lori Har-

grove, W. Terry Hunefeld, Theresa Hyde, Joshua Jaeger (JJa), Jennifer J. (JeJ), Eric G. Kallen, Paul E. Lehman, Guy McCaskie, Jimmy McMorrان, Jennifer Miller, Gary Nunn, Robert T. Patton, Jim Pea, Steve Ritt, Jim Roberts, Lisa Ruby, Matt Sadowski, Susan E. Smith, John C. Sterling, Greg Thomas, Philip Unitt, Claire Williams, Catherin Zinsky.

Literature Cited:

Unitt, Philip. 2004. *San Diego County Bird Atlas*. Proc. San Diego Soc. Nat. Hist. 39. San Diego Nat. Hist. Mus., San Diego.



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