The SKIMMER

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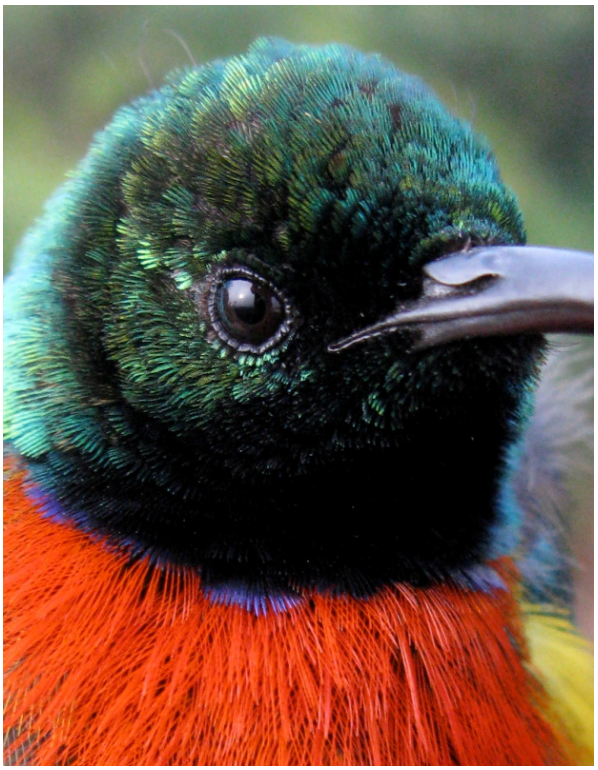
# SDFO NEWS

## Monthly Meeting

Tuesday, September 15, 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 Museum and the Cradle: Why East African Sky Islands Harbor So Many Endemic Birds," by Jay McEntee.



Certainly more famous for its open savannas and mammals than for its birds, East Africa nonetheless supports a fascinating forest avifauna spread across an archipelago-like arrangement of scattered sky islands. For ornithologists interested in Africa, these sky islands have presented a wealth of mysteries. Many sky island species are narrow endemics found in just one or a few sky island mountain blocks. Why is there such a concentration of endemics there? Jay will discuss how climate and geology have conspired to make East Africa's mountains such a unique place for bird diversity. The sky islands are museums of diversity where "old" species cling to existence and cradles of diversity where "new" species arise. Using photographs, sound recordings, and field stories, Jay will showcase the birds of East African sky islands while illuminating their evolutionary history.

Jay writes, "Growing up in New England, I was fascinated with its local birds, and spent a good deal of time chasing around piping plovers and pileated woodpeckers. I moved west to study biology at Berkeley, and subsequently lived, birded and did field work in California on and off over the next 15 years. Field work took me to the central California coast to catch Marbled Murrelets with salmon nets, and to the Hastings Natural History Reservation in Carmel Valley to study California Towhees and Acorn Woodpeckers. As an undergraduate, I traveled to Tanzania with the School for International Training. There I developed an interest in the biology of the Eastern Arc Mountains, which had recently yielded a new genus of forest-partridge and a new genus of pri-

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mate. This interest led to my dissertation work with Dr. Rauri Bowie, also at Berkeley, which focused on song evolution and speciation in sky island sunbirds. To date, I have made 8 trips to do field work in eastern Africa, totaling nearly 3 years of time. I learned Swahili along the way, collaborated with Kenyan, Tanzanian, and Mozambican biologists, and organized and co-taught a course at the University of Dar es Salaam. Together with co-authors, I have published papers on ecology, conservation, behavior, and evolution, covering a wide swath of organismal diversity. Currently, I am a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Florida, where I am studying diversification and the geography of speciation in birds. I am based in Tucson, Arizona, where I stay in touch with sky island systems by regularly exploring the nearby mountains. I hold a B.A. and a Ph.D., both from the Department of Integrative Biology at UC Berkeley."

Next month's meeting: Tuesday, October 20, same time, same place. Program: "Bald Eagle and Peregrine Falcon Restoration on the Channel Islands," by Dr. Peter Sharpe, Institute for Wildlife Studies. Raptor conservation biology in the California Channel Islands.

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# SAN DIEGO COUNTY BIRD OBSERVATIONS, AUGUST 2015

Compiled by Guy McCaskie

A **Gray Thrasher** *Taxostoma cinereum* at Famosa Slough on 2 August (LR) was certainly the highlight of the month, and a bird that generated much discussion as to its provenance. If endorsed as a genuine vagrant by both the California Bird Records Committee and the Checklist Committee of the American Birding Association, it will be an addition to the list of birds of California and the Continental United States and Canada. The Gray Thrasher is an endemic resident of much of Baja California. The northern subspecies *mearnsi* is now known north to the vicinity of Valle la Trinidad and Ejido Erendir, less than 100 miles south of the California/Baja California border (R. A. Erickson pers. comm. and P. Unitt *et al.* 1995), this being about 20 miles north of San Antonio del Mar, the historic northernmost point of the species' range (J. Grinnell 1928). The Famosa Slough thrasher was a brownish bird of the northern subspecies *mearnsi*, rather than grayish like the nominate birds. The Gray Thrasher is reported confined to areas with

Gray Thrasher at Famosa Slough. Photo by Tito Gonzalez.

candelabra cactus *Myrtillocactus cochal*. However, this cactus is absent from the area around Valle la Trinidad, with the first Gray Thrasher found there being in a tomato field (R. A. Erickson pers. comm.), and Erickson has seen this species in many habitats ranging from near open grassland and agricultural fields to towns and woodland. Both Kimball L. Garrett and Michael Evans (pers. comm.) have seen Gray Thrashers in cages at ranches and houses in Baja California, but there are very few songbirds in Mexico that are not sometimes found in cages. The fact that R. A. Hamilton (2001) did not find Gray Thrasher at northern Baja California pet shops between 1999 and 2001 suggests it is not regularly sold as a cage bird. The Famosa Slough thrasher was missing a claw on one toe, and showed minor damage at the base of the bill, but nothing that would be unexpected on any ground-foraging bird of this size. There was no evident excessive wear or damage to the plumage as might be present on a cage bird; in fact, to me, the plumage looked better than I might have expected on a thrasher in early August.

American Oystercatcher at La Jolla. Photo by Gary Nunn.

A Black-footed Albatross at the 9-Mile Bank was the highlight of the 23 August organized boat trip off San Diego (DP). An immature Magnificent Frigatebird was well photographed from a fishing boat off Pt. Loma on 25 August (JJ), this being at least the 4th in this county since 15 June. Brown Boobies continue to be seen off shore, with numbers up to 25 as on 23 August (DP), and from shore in La Jolla, with numbers up to 40 in a day as on 10 August (SW). The subadult Reddish Egret on south San Diego Bay, present since at least 19 February, remained through August (GMcC). Yellow-crowned Night-Herons continue to be seen around the Sports Park and adjacent marshes in Imperial Beach (GMcC), and along the lower San Diego River at Sea World (JB), both being locations where this heron nested; a hatch-year bird photographed at San Dieguito Lagoon on 21 August (TG) was somewhat more noteworthy. A Sharp-shinned Hawk at the Ramona Grasslands near Ramona on 31 August (JMcM) may be the earliest fall migrant known in San Diego County—Unitt (2004) lists 12 September as the earliest.

Pacific Golden-Plover at Border Field State Park. Photo by Jim Morris.

Black Swift at Lake Hodges. Photo by Alex Abela.

What appeared to be a "pure" American Oystercatcher was well photographed at Pt. La Jolla in La Jolla on 7 August (GN), and migrant Black Oystercatchers were at the Children's Pool in La Jolla on 17 August (ML) and along the Sunset Cliffs in Ocean Beach on 20 August (AB). A Pacific Golden-Plover at Border Field State Park on 27 August (RTP) was probably the same bird present in this area last winter. The only Solitary Sandpipers reported locally were a hatch-year bird that stopped briefly at the Dairy Mart Ponds in the Tijuana River Valley on 24 August (JB) and another, possibly the same bird, at the adjacent sod farm on 28 August (EC). A juvenile Baird's Sandpiper was at Lake Henshaw on 8 August (GN), two were at the salt works ponds at the South San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge on 19 August (RTP) and at least three were there 24-29 August (RTP). A juvenile Semipalmated Sandpiper at the salt works ponds 24-29 August (RTP) was the only one reported locally this month. A Laughing Gull, rare in San Diego County, was at the Scripps Pier in La Jolla on 3 August (BB). Two Black Terns were in the saltworks ponds at south San Diego Bay on 19 August (RTP) and at least two were seen over the open ocean off San Diego on 23 August (DP) —this species is much scarcer in San Diego County today than 20 years ago.

A White-winged Dove at Ft. Rosecrans National Cemetery on Pt. Loma on 16 August (GN) was overshadowed by two together over the open ocean about 20 miles off San Diego on 23 August (DP). Unexpected were two Black Swifts with swallows over Lake Hodges on 22 August (AA)—fall records of this species in San Diego County are few and far between (P. Unitt 2004).

A Hammond's Flycatcher photographed on Palomar Mountain on 23 August (TG) establishes the earliest date for a fall migrant in San Diego County. A Yellow-throated Vireo at San Elijo Lagoon 10-17 August (SB) undoubtedly summered locally. A Purple Martin photographed over Ft. Rosecrans National Cemetery on 29 Aug (GN) was certainly unexpected, since this species is now known only as a rare summer visitor in the mountains of San Diego County, with no recent reports of migrants elsewhere. A Black-chinned Sparrow in Borrego Springs on 16 August (RT) was clearly a migrant, and a hatch-year Black-throated Sparrow near El Cajon on 21 August (JM) had wandered westward towards the coast as one or two do every fall. A green Painted Bunting, a casual straggler to California, photographed in Jacumba on 28 August (EGK) provides the first record in San Diego County away from the coast. Single Yellow-headed Blackbirds at the Community Gardens in the Tijuana River Valley on 26 August (MM) and at Ft. Rosecrans National Cemetery on 27 August (GN)

Painted Bunting at Jacumba. Photo by Eric Kallen.

were the first of an expected few that annually reach the coast in fall.

Observers: Alex Abela, Brad Biggerstaff, Allen Bond, Steve Brad, John Bruin, Elizabeth Copper, Tito Gonzalez, Joshua Jaeger, Eric G. Kallen, Max Leibowitz, John Martin, Marcie Mason, Guy McCaskie, Jimmy McMorran, Gary Nunn, Robert T. Patton, Dave Povey, Lisa Ruby, Robert Theriault, Stan Walens.

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Grinnell, J. 1928. *A Distributional Summation of the Ornithology of Lower California*. Univ. of Calif. Publ. Zool. 32:1-300.

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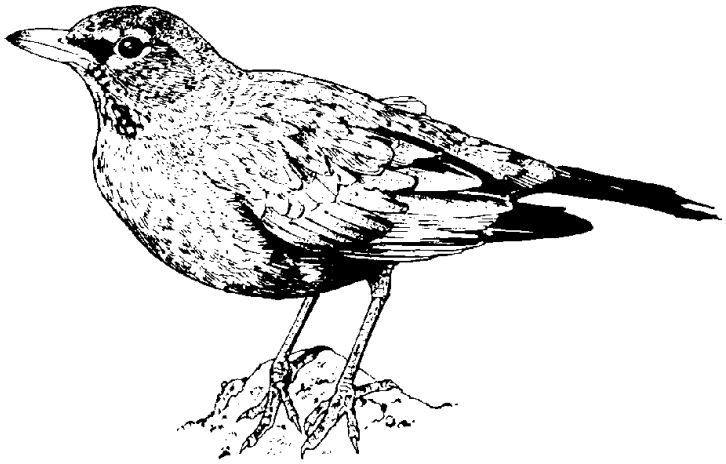

# SAN DIEGO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

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| President | Gary Nunn (650) 305-0029<br>garybnunn@gmail.com |
| Vice-president | Dave Povey (619) 972-3098<br>dpovey@nethere.com |
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| Skimmer Publishing Editor | John Walters (619) 267-1821<br>johnfwalters5552@gmail.com<br>Gary Nunn (650) 305-0029<br>garybnunn@gmail.com |

Your contributions to *The Skimmer* are appreciated. Submit articles and notices by the first of the month of publication by mail to John Walters, 5552 Horse Ridge Way, Bonita, CA 91902, or by e-mail to **johnfwalters5552@gmail.com**

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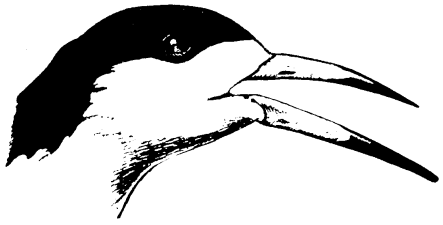
*San Diego Field Ornithologists*
*c/o Mike Goldhamer*
*1231 Myrtle Ave.*
*San Diego, CA 92103*