The **SKIMMER**

Volume 26, Number 9—September 1999

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Monthly Meeting

Thursday, September 16, at 7:00 p.m., at Tecolote Canyon Nature Center, at the east end of Tecolote Road, off I-5.

Program: President Pete Ginsburg will deliver a stimulating address on the topic "Parts Is Parts." No, I don't know what he means either, but better come early, or you may be left with the gizzard.

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

Identification Workshop in Huntington Beach

Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett will present a three-part identification workshop on terns, vireos and sparrows on Thursday, September 23 from 6 to 9 p.m. at the Huntington Beach City Council Chambers. A donation of $25.00 is requested. Contact Nancy Kenyon at (949) 786-3160 for information. Jon will be available to sign the new National Geographic field guide where he was Chief Consultant. We'll try to arrange carpools from San Diego for those wishing to attend.

CHANGES TO THE SAN DIEGO RARE BIRD ALERT

As most of you already know, the Rare Bird Alert has undergone some recent changes. First, Mike Evans has graciously volunteered to take over duties as the RBA administrator. Second, the number has been changed to (619) 688-2473 [619-NUT-BIRD].

There are no changes to reporting and verification procedures; that is, you should call in reports as soon as practicable, giving the specifics: species (and I.D. characteristics if necessary), time, exact location, and your name and phone number, etc. (To make reporting more streamlined and consistent, we do intend in the near future to draw up some guidelines for reporters as well as for the administrator.) As before, reporters should not be surprised if they receive a return call asking for additional details. Also, please do not feel slighted to hear your sightings appear on the tape accompanied by a word such as "possible"; this is no reflection on your abilities as a birder, but a standard way for RBAs to indicate that the sighting, especially if it is a difficult one, has not been confirmed by a second independent observer. As before, there will be reports that will not make it to the tape for a variety of reasons; again, this is no reflection on the abilities of the reporter. Every effort will be made to make the tape as clear, concise, and accurate as possible.

One fact is paramount: no tape will ever be better than the inputs provided. If we, as reporters and users, want to see improvements in the Rare Bird Alert, it is up to us to provide sufficient, accurate, and timely data to the administrator. It is hoped that the changes will lead to a "kinder, gentler" rare bird alert, but it is up to *us* to make it a *better* one.

DOUG AGUILLARD: AN APPRECIATION

by Peter Ginsburg

For nearly eight years, Doug Aguillard has served as administrator of the San Diego Rare Bird Alert. Why anyone would want or have the endurance to do it for that long is astonishing, but Doug did. In my judgment, our "system" is still the best means for the dissemination of accurate rare bird reports, but it is also *by far* the most labor-intensive and demanding on the part of the administrator, and often a thankless task. Over these past years, Doug has made several thousand bird alert updates, and no matter what one's personal opinion of him may be, that's a tremendous amount of time and effort expended on our behalf.

On the occasion of the transition to a new administrator, I would like to offer, on behalf of the club, our thanks and appreciation to Doug for a record of longevity that will perhaps never be surpassed.

SKIMMINGS FROM THE LITERATURE

Yellow House Finches Sing the Blues

Sherie N. Zahn and Stephen I. Rothstein (1999). Recent increase in male House Finch plumage variation and its possible relationship to avian pox disease. *The Auk* 116 (1): 35-44.

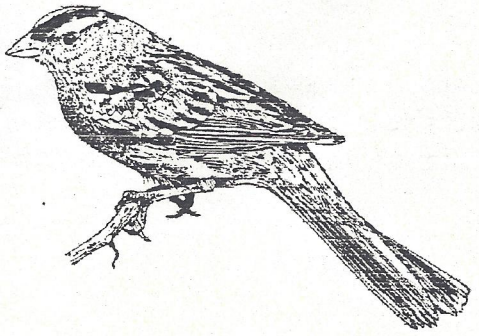
Male House Finches are streaky brown birds with patches of red on the head, breast, and rump. The red pigment is derived from carotenoid pigments in their food (these are the pigments that make carrots orange and tomatoes red). Most birders have run into male House Finches where the red pigment is orange or even yellow; these odd-colored birds can be young or several years old, and the color can even change from year to year. Zahn and Rothstein examined museum specimens dating back to the 1880s and discovered an interesting pattern: birds before 1960 were almost all red, but since then, the proportion of orange and yellow individuals has increased markedly. Coincidentally or not, this is also around the time that avian pox, a viral disease spread by mosquitoes, began appearing in House Finches. The authors note that introduced House Finches in lowland areas of Hawaii have a very high incidence of both fowl pox and orange or yellow males; in the mountains where mosquitoes are rare or absent, the males are nearly all red. They suggest that infection with fowl pox, or other environmental stresses such as feather mites, interferes with the metabolic processes that convert carotenoids in the diet to the red pigment in the House Finch's feathers.

Egg Thieves Caught in the Act

Kathryn L. Purcell and Jared Verner (1999). Nest predators of open and cavity nesting birds in oak woodlands. *The Wilson Bulletin* 111(2): 251-256.

In a study of nest predation in the oak woodland of the Sierra Nevada foothills north of Fresno, Purcell and Verner constructed artificial nests and rigged a flash camera to photograph predators as they removed the eggs. Some of the felons were unsurprising: the Western Scrub Jay was the biggest offender, at 12 of the 29 nests. Rodents including deer mouse, ground squirrel, and chipmunk pilfered four nests. The big surprise was Bullock's Oriole, which burgled seven nests. Other avian vandals included Acorn Woodpecker, Western Kingbird, and California Towhee (one each). A few other perps pecked or chewed eggs in the nest but didn't remove them: Brown-headed Cowbird, a pair of Oak Titmice, and either a dusky-footed wood rat or a scrub jay (both were in the picture, looking equally guilty).

So keep your eyes peeled for Western Scrub Jays and the odd rodent, but don't be taken in by those guys in orange, either.



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Rare Bird Hotline
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[NUT-BIRD]