The **SKIMMER**

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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Monthly Meeting

Thursday, June 15, at 7:00 p.m., at Tecolote Canyon Nature Center, at the east end of Tecolote Road, off I-5.

Program: Our annual election bash. Come prepared to spend big money to keep your name off the election ballot. I haven't received an Official Slate of nominees, but as far as I know, all the current officers are energetically running for (from?) reelection except for our stalwart President, who is being kicked upstairs to become Official Pilot of the fabulous SDFO Corporate Jet. He has patriotically submitted an exordium to encourage new presidential candidates (see below). Wonderful opportunities!! If anyone is still conscious, Guy McCaskie will administer an identification quiz. Learn how to distinguish a Corresponding Secretary from a Skimmer Editor!

Next Month's Meeting: Thursday, July 20, same time, same place. Phil Unitt will give us an update on the San Diego County Breeding Bird Atlas project.

WHO WANTS TO BE PRESIDENT?

by Pete Ginsburg

No, it's not the latest television hit hosted by Regis Philbin. It is, however, the burning question all SDFO wants answered. We've reached the month of June and the time for the annual election of officers. The guy who's president now will not run again, so there will be at least one vacancy on the board.

Anyone who would like to run or to nominate somebody should contact Stan Walens [(858) 450-0258]. Want to solidify a friendship? Nominate your "newest, bestest buddy" and watch the smile on his/her face. Better yet, elect some lucky person *in absentia*—it worked last time (but won't work on the same guy this time).

The bylaws establish no criteria for holding office, but I would recommend that our esteemed president live up to the lofty standards of personal integrity set by the sitting president of the United States. My bet is that you still qualify. Yes, Uncle Sam Wants You!

If you'd like to participate in the festivities (and protect your personal interests!), attendance at the June meeting is advised.

THE BLACK-BACKED ORIOLE IN CALIFORNIA

by Guy McCaskie

The Black-backed Oriole *Icterus abeillei* found at Smuggler's Gulch in the Tijuana River Valley south of Imperial Beach, San Diego County, on 9 April 2000 (Gjon Hazard, pers. com.) was still present 14 May (Claude G. Edwards, pers. com.). Although most "local birders" have seen this bird, interest amongst other California and U.S. birders appears limited, in sharp contrast to the interest shown the recent Gray Silky-Flycatcher and Blue Mockingbird in Orange and Los Angeles Counties. When information on the range and movement of Black-backed Orioles is assembled, I am unable to explain this lack of interest.

When found on 9 April 2000, this stunning adult male Black-backed Oriole was associating with a "flock" of about 25 Bullock's Orioles *I. bullockii* attracted to flowering eucalyptus. This same "flock" also included an adult male Scott's Oriole *I. parisorum*, a casual straggler to the coast of California. On 14 May the Black-backed Oriole was still associating with a "flock" of Bullock's Orioles and an adult male Scott's Oriole at the same flowering eucalyptus. The Scott's Oriole is no doubt the same individual found on 9 April, so one can assume that at least some of the Bullock's Orioles are the same as those present in April. As such, the continued presence of the Black-backed Oriole at these flowering eucalyptus is no more unusual or indicative of it being an escapee than is the presence of the Bullock's and Scott's Orioles.

Although Howell and Webb (1995) treat the Black-backed Oriole as a race of Bullock's Oriole, the American Ornithologist's Union (1998) and Jaramillo and Burke (1999) both consider it a full species. The Black-backed Oriole at "Smuggler's Gulch" is an adult male in immaculate plumage, showing no indication of hybridization with Bullock's Oriole, and no visible signs of having been held in captivity.

Howell and Webb (1995) state the Black-backed Oriole breeds in the Central Highlands of Mexico north to the state of Durango, and withdraws southward in winter to the Central Volcanic Belt in the states of Michoacan, Guerrero, Cuernavaca and Puebla southward. The distribution map for the Black-backed Oriole in Jaramillo and Burke (1999) shows the same range as described by Howell and Webb (1995), with birds breeding at the northern limit of the summer range withdrawing southward at least 500 miles in winter; the authors describe the species as "a short distance migrant". The distance beween the northern limit of this species' range in Durango and "Smuggler's Gulch" is about 900 miles. If indeed the Black-backed Oriole at "Smuggler's Gulch" moved northward with migrant Bullock's Orioles (both species occupy the same areas in winter), it would not only have to travel the expected 500 miles from its winter range to the northern limit of its breeding range, but would also have to travel an additional 900 miles for a total of about 1,400 miles. This is about three times the expected distance for this bird to travel when migrating in spring. Could this be anticipated for "a short distance migrant" oriole?

The answer to the above question may be gleaned from a look at vagrancy in another "short distance migrant" oriole, the Streak-backed Oriole *I. pustulatus*. Howell

and Webb (1995) state the Streak-backed Oriole is mostly resident, but with the northern population, *microsticus*, partly migratory, and Jaramillo and Burke (1999) agree. The Streak-backed Oriole breeds in west Mexico north to near the United States border immediately south of southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico, with an isolated and very small breeding population in southeastern Arizona (near Winkelman). Although considered only "partly migratory", vagrant Streak-backed Orioles have been found once at Furnace Creek Ranch in Death Valley, California, a distance of about 600 miles from the closest location within the species' "normal" range; once at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, a distance of about 1,000 miles from the closest location within the species' "normal" range; and even once at Mercer in northern Wisconsin, a distance of about 1,500 miles from the closest location within the species' "normal" range. Clearly this "short distance migrant" has undertaken some extremely long flights. Could a Black-backed Oriole undertake a similar flight? I suspect it could.

Although the Scott's Oriole is a more migratory bird, vagrants have been found far outside this species' breeding range at such locations as Duluth, Minnesota (23 May 1974) and in the Thunder Bay district of Ontario, Canada (9 November 1975), the latter being about 1,200 miles from the area of closest expected occurrence.

It is true that "Smuggler's Gulch" is virtually within sight of cage-bird markets in Tijuana, Mexico, and a singing male Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis* at the same location no doubt originated from such a source. However, before summarily dismissing the "Smuggler's Gulch" Black-backed Oriole as an escapee, I feel it prudent to learn how common this species is in captivity, and its availability for purchase in northern Baja California. Even if Black-backed Orioles are rare or unknown in the local bird-markets, it would not assure us that the "Smuggler's Gulch" bird was a genuine vagrant that moved north with migrant Bullock's Orioles. However, the fact that Black-backed Orioles are partially migratory suggests the "Smuggler's Gulch" bird has the potential to reach that location unaided, particularly so when considering the movements of a similar partially migratory oriole, the Streak-backed Oriole.

954 Grove Avenue
Imperial Beach, CA 91932

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Skimmer Publishing	John Walters	(619) 267-1821
	Herb Young	(619) 281-6113
	Jim Smith	(858) 279-3664

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