The SKIMMER

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SPECIAL EDITION: SAN DIEGO COUNTY 2024 CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT REPORTS

SAN DIEGO by Philip Unitt

I'm glad now to be able to share now the final tally on the San Diego CBC: 230 species! (It pays to triple-check your work.)

The most notable species in terms of being recorded on the fewest previous San Diego CBCs: Ovenbird (no previous count), Gray Catbird (1 previous count), Scott's Oriole (2 previous counts), Lucy's Warbler (3 previous counts), Grace's Warbler (4 previous counts—albeit of just 2 returnees), and Little Stint (5 previous counts—albeit of one returnee).

Species hitting all-time highs were Allen's Hummingbird, American White Pelican (even after subtraction of possible duplications in two areas), Great Egret, Red-shouldered Hawk, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Vermilion Flycatcher (biggest spike of any native species on a percentage basis), Common Raven, Wrentit, Phainopepla, Orange-crowned Warbler, Lucy's Warbler, Nashville Warbler, and perhaps least surprisingly, Swinhoe's White-eye. While not quite breaking records, Vaux's Swift, Long-billed Curlew, Royal Tern, Say's Phoebe, Tropical Kingbird, House Wren, Scaly-breasted Munia, and Townsend's Warbler were in high numbers for those species. Most of these reflect long-term increases. The Wrentit numbers benefited from intensified coverage of urban canyons but attest that this species is coping with habitat fragmentation.

Mountain Bluebird in Imperial Beach. Photo by Paul Lehman

None of the resident species that have been on the decline disappeared this year, thankfully, though with a single individual in Rice Canyon the California Quail hit a record low and barely escaped being missed for the first time in the San Diego CBC's history. No irregular winter visitors staged an invasion this year, and numbers of several winter visitors were considerably below average, most notably Lesser Scaup, Surf Scoter, American Coot, Short-billed Dowitcher, Heermann's Gull (the last presumably reflecting 4 consecutive years of nesting failure on Isla Rasa), and Northern Flicker. The Ring-necked Duck, Ring-billed Gull,

Bonaparte's Gull, Forster's Tern, Sharp-shinned Hawk, European Starling, Golden-crowned Sparrow, and Brewer's Blackbird, while not hitting record lows, were in low numbers by historical standards and reflect long-term declines in San Diego.

None of these comparisons is adjusted for the variations in participation over the years, as we're still awaiting the last of the effort data. Since the mid-1980s effort on the San Diego CBC has approximately doubled, something that needs to be taken into account in a more careful analysis.

The number of species of which just one individual was recorded: 41, implying the importance of getting every bird staked out ahead of time, and implying how luck and chance can swing the totals widely.

Anza-Borrego

No report received.

Lake Henshaw by Chris Staurovsky

"Lake Henshaw CBC-ers, the few, the proud, the best!

Cheers! And deep appreciation for the 34 outstanding volunteers who brought home the Count!!

We reached 134 species with a total of 11,143 individual birds counted!! These are excellent, and above average, results for this 45th year of the CALH, as National Audubon calls our Circle. That species total is the highest in 7 years and the 3rd highest since 2006. The individual bird numbers counted was also highest since 2017 and well above totals in recent years.

Several "rarities" were seen and documented including 2 completely new species to this Count Circle, HERMIT Warbler and BLACK-THROATED GRAY Warbler (1 each); and a 3rd newbie was just missed when an *Empidonax* flycatcher (likely a Western) was seen, but not identifiable to the species level.

As is typical with this CBC all the rarities were observed on private, restricted access properties, and included a record 8 Long-billed Curlews, Downy Woodpeckers, White-throated Swifts, Gray Flycatchers, Violet-green Swallows, and Brewer's Sparrows. Additionally the nearly 500 Double-crested Cormorants counted is believed to be an all-time record high for inland/mountain waters in winter in San Diego County.

Well done all! And a deeply heartfelt thank you from me for all of your stellar efforts, including submitting all your data and reports quickly and completely!! Again, Cheers to you! And I'll see you next year! Best wishes for 2025!

South End Salton Sea by Chris McCreedy

Happy New Year, Salton Sea lovers. The South End of the Salton Sea Christmas Bird Count (SESSCBC) was held on December 17, 2024. Thank you to Raz Shafique-Sabir, Chandler Self, and the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge for hosting our count. I want to also thank Clarissa Diaz and Kiewit, as well as Barbara Barry of the CDFW for providing access and to Clarissa for escorting us to the still under-construction Species Conservation Habitat project so that we could count birds there. The SCH is still not open to the public, and I am grateful that we had the chance to include the birds that are now using the SCH in our count. I am looking forward to seeing the SCH at its full potential for next year's count and beyond.

Conditions were pleasant for the count, with clear skies and hardly any wind throughout the day. Imperial County is in the midst of a moderate to severe drought, but conditions like that bring a mixed bag for our count totals, potentially trapping birds in irrigated habitats but losing birds in the natural habitats that remain within our count circle.

I apologize that it took me some time to work through and proof and summarize our count data. An eBird trip report is available at https://ebird.org/tripreport/306992. Twenty-five observers took part in the SESSCBC this year. We totaled 147 species for the 3rd year in a row; 145 on count day, and **Pectoral Sandpiper** and American Barn Owl during count week. The Pectoral Sandpiper was found the day before the count by Lehman and were only the 3rd report ever for the count circle.

As I wrote last year, the total number of species found on the count has dramatically declined over the past decades, largely due to the shrinking Salton Sea, its lost fish population, and the increasing difficulty in accessing the Sea. I drew up a simple regression of species and year from past counts, and we again managed to beat the trendline of around -0.91 species/year that predicted we would have finished with 145 species this year.

Handa, Pencek, Billot, Logan, Turlea, and Fisk had an excellent day, finding the SESS circle's apparent first-ever **Tricolored Heron** and the circle's 4th **Reddish Egret.** Many of us twitched the heron after the count. Heaton relocated the heron, the heron was edgy and left, then Lehman found it yet again so that more of us could tick this beauty. The Jehls reported the circle's first two **Swainson's Hawks**. There have been several winter reports in the Imperial Valley this year, and I found 16 kettling above a power plant near the NWR HQ on December 16.

Mulrooney also returned a great day, finding a **Short-billed Gull** in a flooded ag field and a **Wood Duck** at the Imperial Irrigation Wetland Project. Keffer reported **four Wood Ducks** at the Pound Road hunt club. This is only the 4th year with Wood Ducks reported for the count. They seem to be in the midst of a good regional showing this winter as well, with multiple reports of up to 4 individuals in Yuma, Borrego Springs, and Palm Springs.

It was a poor year for shorebirds, Pectoral Sandpiper withstanding. We missed Snowy Plover (second miss in 25 years), and we reported our second lowest totals for Black-bellied Plover and Willet over the past 25 years. The Jehls helped us save shorebird face by finding 26 **Mountain Plovers** southeast of Calipatria.

Martin found the circle's first **jaeger** of any species at Moreton Bay. It was too distant and brief for a species call. Checking eBird, the last inland December jaeger sighting was at Lake Havasu and the Bill Williams delta in 2011.

It seemed to be a good year for waders. We tallied the highest Snowy Egret count since 1993, with Self and Damski recording 465 on the Refuge. We recorded our highest Green Heron count since 2011 and highest White-faced Ibis count since 2012, with Handa et al. reporting 1350 ibis in Sections 7/8.

I found the circle's first **Red-naped Sapsucker** since 2017 near Niland, while staking out a previously reported Tropical Kingbird with Gibson. We never saw the kingbird, but found 13 **Western Bluebirds** and a **Sage Thrasher**, as well the count's only American Robins and Dark-eyed Juncos.

It was a good year for frugivores in general, with our second highest Phainopepla count ever, our best Western Bluebird count since 2009, and only the 6th instance of Sage Thrasher recorded on the circle, with Heaton also recording an individual in eastern Section 2.

It was heartening to record our highest ever Vermilion Flycatcher count, our highest Say's Phoebe count since 2018, the second-best American Kestrel total in the past 25 years, our best Blue-gray Gnatcatcher count since 2005, and our 3rd highest Lesser Goldfinch count (and best since 1982), driven by a big flock that Heaton found in Section 2. We recorded our 3rd highest Western Meadowlark count over the past 25 years thanks to 331 meadowlarks found by Polichar and Brauner in section 2. Lehman found the circle's first-ever **dark-lored White-crowned Sparrow** amidst high White-crowned Sparrow numbers around Calipatria.

On the low side, we recorded the circle's all-time lowest Lincoln's Sparrow total, and the second lowest House Wren total found on the count over the past 25 years. Sad trombone music!

Escondido by Kenneth Weaver

Vermilion Flycatcher in Kit Carson Park, Escondido. Photo by Paul Lehman

Eighty observers on the Escondido Christmas Bird Count recorded 144 species on December 21. Our typical average on counts held in the past ten years is in the 150s. Lack of nearly any marshy habitat and the absence of "mountain" birds were at least part of the dip in numbers. We found three species that have fewer than ten previous records:

White-winged Dove observed nine straight years now with five individuals near Black Canyon Road in Ramona and another individual in the San Pasqual Valley; Barn Swallow, four noted in the San Pasqual Valley for a fourth count circle record; and Nashville Warbler, one at Kit Carson Park in Escondido also for a fourth count circle record.

In the rather rare column (fewer than 15 records) were Cackling Goose (one at the Safari Park) and Gray Flycatcher (one at the Maderas Golf Course in Poway).

It's also interesting to note that Scaly-breasted Munias are now spread spottily across much of the count circle and Swinhoe's White-eye (not countable yet) has reached Escondido and the San Pasqual Valley.

So how many total species will be recorded on San Diego County's six CBCs? The Escondido count can add to San Diego's amazing species list (but quite likely noted elsewhere): Wild Turkey, White-winged Dove, Zone-tailed Hawk, Ferruginous Hawk, Western Screech-Owl, Red-naped Sapsucker, Acorn Woodpecker, Canyon Wren, Purple Finch, and Bell's Sparrow.

We live in a dynamic area for birds. Let's hope it continues to be so. Good birding in 2025.

Oceanside by Patti Langen

The 2024 Oceanside CBC, sponsored by Buena Vista Audubon Society, was held on December 29 under foggy conditions in the morning. Nevertheless, our 134 participants recorded a final count of 186 species, which was higher than the 20 year average of 184 species, but lower than last year's count of 193 species.

Our pelagic team faced a last minute challenge, with their boat captain taking ill. Brennan Mulrooney and Jimmy McMorran deftly pivoted to a sea-watch before boarding a whale-watching boat out of Oceanside. Our coastal area teams, including Matt Sadowski, Jim Pawlicki, Nick Thorpe, and Charley Herzfeld, pitched in and devoted extra sea-watch time in their areas as well. The pelagic team's extra efforts paid off in rarities, recording four **Cassin's Auklets**, 32

Pink-footed Shearwater. Photo by Brennan Mulrooney

Rhinoceros Auklets. Photo by Brennan Mulrooney

Scripps's Murrelets. Photo by Brennan Mulrooney

Rhinoceros Auklets (including 8 seen by Sadowski and Pawlicki), four **Scripps's Murrelets**, and two **Pink-footed Shearwaters**.

Notable rarities include a **Dusky-capped Flycatcher** found in a Carlsbad business park (Gjon Hazard); **American Redstart** at Buccaneer Park in Oceanside (Nick Thorpe, Charley Herzfeld); **Vaux's Swift** in Camp Pendleton (Robert Patton); a returning **Solitary Sandpiper** at Whelan Lake (Sally Veach); **Palm Warbler** and **Hermit Warbler** (Tito Gonzalez); and a **Yellow-headed Blackbird** in Carlsbad (Patti Langen). Other rarities included **Cackling Goose** at Guajome Lake (Ken Weaver, Clark Mahrdt) and Libby Lake (Beth Pearson, Christina Kidd, Mary Jo Hayes), **Ruddy Turnstone** on Camp Pendleton (Lesley Handa, Brian Robinson), **Greater Scaup** (Ken Hartman) and **Yellow-Crowned Night Heron** (Paul Lehman) at Batiquitos Lagoon, **Western Flycatcher** in Vista (Fred Roberts, Carol Roberts), **Northern Rough-winged Swallow**, **Cactus Wren** (Robert Patton, Ryan Besser) and **Purple Finch** (Phil Unitt, William Raitter) on Camp Pendleton, **White-throated Sparrow** in Carlsbad (Paul Lehman) and Oceanside (Sally Veach), **Hooded Oriole** in south Carlsbad (Paul Lehman), **Nashville Warbler** in Oceanside (Brandon Stidum, Caleb Villar) and Carlsbad (Gjon Hazard), **Yellow Warbler** in Carlsbad (Tito Gonzalez, Gjon Hazard), and **Wilson's Warbler** in Carlsbad and Oceanside (multiple observers), **Summer Tanager** at Buddy Todd Park (Barbara Swanson, Gretchen Nell, Brendan Reed), and **Western Tanager** (multiple ob-

Dusky-capped Flycatcher. Photo by Gjon Hazard

Hermit Warbler. Photo by Tito Gonzalez

Grace's Warbler in Encinitas . Photo by Charlene Glacy

observers).

Count week rarities included a Plumbeous Vireo along the San Luis Rey River, and a Bullock's Oriole in Vista. In addition, a male Orchard Oriole in North Carlsbad, which has consistently visited this compiler's yard since September 1, frustratingly skipped its visits for the CBC, but returned the following day.

Not included in the species count, this year's tally of 359 Swinhoe's White-eye reported by multiple groups represented a significant increase compared to 91 reported for 2023's Oceanside CBC.

We are very grateful to Paul Lehman for once again running the compilation and providing insights on the status and distribution of species. A huge thank you to Annette Schneider and kitchen team for providing lunch and refreshments, and to Buena Vista Audubon Society for hosting the compilation at the Nature Center. Sincere thanks as well to Joni Ciarletta and Jane Mygatt for their invaluable work of carefully checking and entering the data.

Rancho Santa Fe by Robert Patton

Thanks to at least 118 participants in 63 groups who contributed to a very successful Rancho Santa Fe area Christmas Bird Count on 4 January 2025. As of the date of this preliminary summary, several groups have yet to report their results, but at this point 190 species have been reported (previous average 174 species, range 145-202).

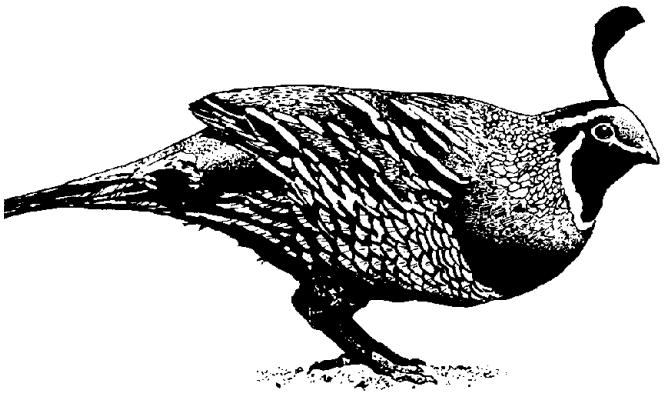
I apologize for any omissions or mistakes, particularly in the case if I missed multiple observers or misspelled names, but rarities included Snow Goose, Ross's Goose, and Cackling Goose in San Dieguito River Valley reported by Phil Unitt and Mel Senac; **Brant** at San Elijo Lagoon reported by Jay Desgrosellier, male **Eurasian Wigeon** at San Elijo Lagoon reported by Robert Patton, Hooded Mergansers at San Dieguito Park reported by Joni Ciarletta and Judy Doebke, **Common Goldeneye** at Lake Miramar reported by Bruce Rideout, **Common Ground Dove** in Harmony Grove reported by Maryanne Bache and Carol Manning, Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers off Torrey Pines and Swami's reported by Stan Walens and Jay Desgrosellier, Short-billed Gull on the beach and **Pink-footed Shearwater** offshore of Torrey Pines reported by Stan Walens, Least Bittern at San Dieguito Reservoir reported by Gjon Hazard; **Reddish Egret** at San Dieguito wetlands reported by Ameet Shah, Donna Mancuso, Jayne Lesley, Steve Perry, Rick Grove, Adam Weiner, Charlie Kelly, and Samantha Richter; **Yellow-crowned Night-herons** at Del Mar Public Works and off San Elijo Nature Center reported by Joni Ciarletta, Judy Doebke, Maryanne Bache, and Robert Patton; (**Zone-tailed Hawk** over San Dieguito River Valley reported count week by Charley Herzfeld); **Bald Eagle** over Del Dios reported by Jeanie Anderson, Aaron Polichar, and others; **"Black" Merlin** over San Dieguito River Valley reported by Phil Unitt.

More rarities included Red-breasted Sapsucker in Harmony Grove reported by Kathy Aldern, Maryanne Bache, Patti Koger, Jane Mygatt, and Carol Manning;W**estern Kingbird** in La Costa Valley reported by Jenna Asperslag and Kasia Obrzut, **Gray Flycatcher** in San Dieguito River Valley reported by Phil Unitt and Mel

Senac; **Empid sp.** in Poway reported by Lan Bao, Jack Daynes, and Kirsten Winter; **Vermilion Flycatchers** in Las Verdes Park, Olivenhain, San Dieguito River Valley, and Poway Community Park reported by Jeff Clingan, Gretchen Nell, Mel Senac, Phil Unitt, Lan Bao, Jack Daynes, and Kirsten Winter; **Plumbeous Vireo** at Solana Highlands School reported by Paul Lehman, Loggerhead Shrike in San Dieguito River Valley reported by Phil Unitt and Mel Senac; Mountain Chickadees reported at Questhaven and on Crest Dr. Encinitas by Kathy Aldern, Jane Mygatt, and Steve Cameron; Barn Swallows at Lake Hodges, San Elijo, and 4S Ranch reported by Beth Cobb, Clark Mahrdt, Ken Weaver, Dan Jehl, Marcie Mason, Mike McClintock, Jan Nordenberg, and Anne Reilly; Canyon Wren and Cactus Wren at Lake Hodges reported by Beth Cobb, Clark Mahrdt, and Ken Weaver; Purple Finch at Olivenhain and west Penasquitos Canyon reported by Suellen Lynn, John Martin, Betsy Miller, Crystal Spaulding, and Jeff Spaulding; Bell's Sparrow at Del Dios Highlands by Lea Squires; **Dark-eyed (Pink-sided) Junco** in Encinitas reported count week by Jim Determan); and Fox (Thick-billed) sparrow at Elfin Forest reported by Steve Brad and Natalia Reiach.

Additional rarities included **Yellow-headed Blackbirds** at Del Mar Public Works reported by Joni Ciarletta and Judy Doebke; **Hooded Oriole** and **Bullock's Oriole** at Sun Valley reported by Peter Ginsburg and Paul Lehman, **Louisiana Waterthrush** in Solana Beach reported by Jay Desgrosellier and then others, **Northern Waterthrush** and **American Redstart** at San Elijo nature center reported by Maryanne Bache and Robert Patton; **Black-and-white Warbler** at San Elijo Nature Center reported by Emmy Garnica, Don Geiger, Kathy Knight, and Tiffany Chatham Smith; **Nashville Warbler**, Yellow Warbler, and Black-throated Gray warbler in Sorrento Valley reported by Paul Lehman; **Palm Warbler** at San Dieguito Sports Complex reported by Jenna Asperslag and Kasia Obrzut; Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warbler in Olivenhain reported by Suellen Lynn, John Martin, and Betsy Miller; **Grace's Warbler** along Crest Dr. Encinitas reported by Sue Smith and Char Glacy, Hermit x Townsend's Warbler (hybrid) in Del Mar reported by Robert Patton; Wilson's Warblers in Olivenhain and Solana Beach reported by Suellen Lynn, John Martin, Betsy Miller, and Gjon Hazard; **Summer Tanagers** at San Dieguito Park and Solana Beach reported by Paul Lehman and Gjon Hazard; **Western Tanagers** at San Diego Botanic Garden, Olivenhain, Encinitas, and Del Mar reported by Jeff Clingan, Gretchen Nell, Suellen Lynn, John Martin, Betsy Miller, Jim Determan, and Robert Patton; and Swinhoe's White-eyes reported by multiple groups.

Species expected but missed so far include American Avocet, Ruddy Turnstone, Horned Lark, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and American Robin.



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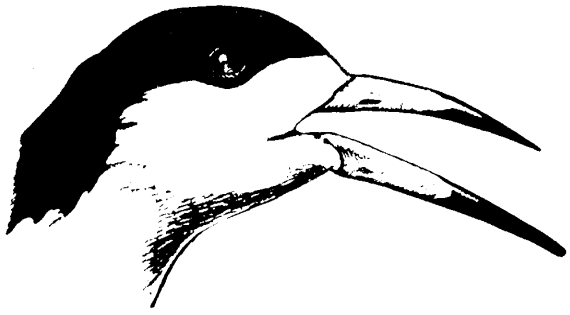
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