

## Lessons from California

It takes all of, oh, five seconds to realize that the American Birding Association membership is a diverse bunch. Our Big Tent is big enough for raptor nuts and larophiles, for bird banders and bibliophiles. We count hunters and vegans, Democrats and Republicans, among our rank-and-file constituency. We even admit Californians into our membership.

Indeed, we eagerly welcome Californians into our fellowship.

Why is that? Beyond the surfboard-and-sushi stereotype, what is it that characterizes the California birder? And how is it that all the rest of us have come to be so importantly shaped by the California birding experience?

What better way to tackle those questions than to go straight to the source, to the birders themselves<sup>†</sup>, to their actual experiences and impressions, their inspirations and aspirations?



Any examination of the phenomenon of modern birding in California has to begin with an overview of the prodigious accomplishments of Guy McCaskie, who emigrated from Scotland to Tahoe City in June 1957 and then settled down for good in San Diego in September 1962. San Diego would prove to be an ideal base from which to demonstrate the remarkable vagrant potential of California, and in that first fall of 1962 McCaskie and his protégés documented three state firsts (Blackburnian Warbler, Prairie Warbler, and Painted Bunting) and a slew of other goodies (Broad-billed Hummingbird, Tropical Kingbird, and Orchard Oriole among them), all of them in the Tijuana River Valley. Meanwhile, McCaskie was expanding his coverage to include destinations such as the Salton Sea and the eastern desert oases—legendary birding hotspots now, but essen-

tially unknown to the California birder of the pre-McCaskie era. And now, almost fifty years later, McCaskie continues to contribute significantly to our knowledge of the avifauna of California. What has been the secret to his success? On the one hand, McCaskie has immersed himself in the historical literature and even in museum collections, pretty much from Day One. On the other hand, he has surrounded himself with excellent, real-live birders in the field (among them many youngsters and women). It goes without saying that McCaskie is an exemplar of birder *skill*, but it is his emphasis on birder *knowledge* that has been his enduring legacy.

Kathy Robertson, an administrative assistant with Alameda County Behavioral Healthcare Services, has been birding since the summer of 1999. Right from the get-go, she has endeavored to learn as much as she can about the when and where—about the status and distribution—of the birds of California. To do so, she has relied heavily on the internet—a resource that was unimagined, of course, in those early days of vagrant chasing in the 1960s. It was via the internet that Robertson learned of (and got to see) the third ABA-area record of Nutting's Flycatcher, in Orange County in January 2001; and it is via the internet that she has hooked up with bird clubs, nature centers, and birding classes. Times have changed, but the basic process, for both McCaskie and Robertson, has been the same: the direct application of knowledge to the business of finding birds.

All those terabytes of information on the internet didn't just sprout up on their own, as if by electronic spontaneous generation. Rather, they were put there by real people. And Catherine Waters, an ornamental horticulturist in Orange County, is quick to cite the influences of invaluable *human* resources on her development as a birder. Waters was introduced to the basics by Nancy Kenyon, she received immersion training in the fundamentals from Sylvia Gallagher, and she advanced to feather tracts and avian anatomy under the guidance of John Schmitt. Now a prized mentor herself, Waters has bequeathed to a generation of young birders the gift of vision, "to see the world, including my home state, through new and different eyes", as she puts it.

For many California birders, a large part of the

birding enterprise is to see as much of their home state as possible. There are 58 counties in California, and many Golden State birders maintain a cumulative, or “total tickie”, list of all species in all the counties. Mike San Miguel, a retired engineer who lives in Los Angeles, says matter-of-factly: “In spite of its beautiful scenery, the only reason many of us would ever bird in Alpine County is to have it on our county lists.” For the record, there is not a trace of cynicism in San Miguel’s assessment. Rather, it is a tribute to one of the most salutary consequences of being a birder, namely, seeing and doing so much that one wouldn’t otherwise.

What will things look like by the time Ryan Terrill, currently a sophomore at UC Santa Cruz, is Guy McCaskie’s age? The internet will be passé, no doubt. And the California list will have finally surpassed the Texas list. (At least, that is the hope of every California lister.) But Californians of the future will carry on the tradition of Memorial Day weekend excursions to Galileo Hill, where Terrill, then ten years old, saw his first Black-throated Blue Warbler. They will still make the long trek down to San Diego, as Terrill did two years ago for the state’s first Magnificent Hummingbird. And they will discover new hotspots, push the frontiers of identification, and advance our knowledge of status and distribution.



At one level, it can be said that any community, any culture, is the sum total—no more, no less—of its human capital. At another level, though, it is meaningful to inquire about the intellectual milieu in which a community has come into existence. What are the cultural forces and social factors, the key questions and central ideas, that have come to define the experiences and outlook of the California birding community?

Ironically, neglect and deficiency have played a major role in the recent and continuing successes of the Californians. To see where this analysis is headed, check out the most recent edition (1990) of the *Peterson Field Guide to the Birds of Western North America*. It reeks of an East Coast bias: The Willet

painting (p. 134) clearly refers to the eastern *semipalmatus* race; the White-breasted Nuthatch says *Yank* (p. 262), after the manner of blue-blooded Eastern Establishment nuthatches; and the White-crowned Sparrow treatment (pp. 316–317) is meaningless. And the warblers: The opening plate (p. 289) features a pair of decidedly non-western warblers (Magnolia and Canada), along with erratic orthography for the *auduboni* subspecies-group of the Yellow-rumped Warbler; the Black-throated Gray Warbler is termed “accidental”, but the Cerulean Warbler on the same plate (p. 293) is not; and the description of the Orange-crowned Warbler (p. 300) is of no help with the identification of the western *lutescens* and *orestera* subspecies.

What has been the Californians’ response? To discard faulty paradigms, to blaze new paths, yes; but not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. One of Guy McCaskie’s earliest insights was that it is possible—indeed desirable—to take current birding modes and mores with a grain of salt *and* to depend upon the historical record for real data and hard facts. It is a model that many of the rest of us have embraced. (It is a model, by the way, that poses a problem for the social historian: What we are seeing here is western innovation and rejection of eastern influences, à la Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis”; but a great deal of the pioneer spirit of the California birder actually derives from British sources.) It is a model that teaches us the following: The modern birder is inquisitive and skeptical; but

each birder, each birding community, is only as good as the one next door, in the next county, in the next state.

— TED FLOYD



Nutting’s Flycatcher. Orange County, California; January 2001. © Brian E. Small.

†Needless to say, the stories recorded here do not even scrape the tip of the iceberg of the total California birding experience. Many California birding legends (indeed, the great majority of them) could not be included in this brief overview. Besides, the objective here is to present a cross-section—albeit thinly stretched—of the modern California birding community.