

the wren tit

PASADENA AUDUBON SOCIETY, FOUNDED 1904 | VOLUME 74 · NO. 2 | NOVEMBER 2025-JANUARY 2026



Ferruginous Hawk © Luke Tiller

president's perch 

Desert Winter Magic

By Luke Tiller

For those who have been members of Pasadena Audubon Society (PAS) for a while, you have probably heard me extoll the virtues of the **Christmas Bird Count (CBC)** quite enough over the years. If you are new, just know that it's the oldest community science project in the country, a key part of the Audubon winter calendar, and one that welcomes participants of all birding levels. If you haven't joined the Pasadena CBC yet, it's time to make it your (early) New Year's resolution. I'm already looking forward to seeing everyone at the post-count dinner and sharing stories from a day of birding adventures (more about CBC on page 3).

It's been a tough year for the community here in Altadena, and moments outside enjoying nature have felt even more precious for me this year. A real highlight of the fall season for me was our **all-day pelagic boat trip** (check out photos on page 10). Being on a boat away from the distractions of cell coverage was, for a few hours, just what the doctor ordered, and the **Red-footed Booby** we found on the day was a real treat too. As well as the somewhat regular trips to the Channel Islands, we hope to have more offshore offerings in the coming year, so keep your eyes peeled for those.

The two things I like most about birding in Los Angeles are the mountains and the deserts. When I grew up in England we didn't have either. And as much as I loved birding during my years on the US East Coast, it's basically a pretty homogenous set of habitats there unlike the wonderful diversity of the West.

Winter birding in the desert is a favorite, and the Antelope Valley is world class when it comes to its variety of wintering raptors. **Ferruginous Hawks** are one of my most loved species of birds of prey, and "**Prairie**" **Merlin** one of my top subspecies. There's plenty else to enjoy out in Lancaster and Palmdale in winter, including a couple of other specialties: **Mountain Plover** and **Mountain Bluebird**.

Confusingly, of the four birds with Mountain in their names found in Los Angeles County, only two are typically found in the mountains: the **Quail** and the **Chickadee**, with the other two aforementioned species typically found mostly in the High Desert. Both desert winterers are charismatic birds and, though not always easy to find, are always worth seeking out.

For the last couple of years, my winters have been involved in running some of the trips at the **Salton Sea Birding Festival (January**

17, 2026). The sea is perhaps one of the most weird and oddly wonderful places in southern California, and winter is one of the few times when birding there is physically comfortable. The place boasts all my favored wintering species I mentioned above as well as lots of adorable **Burrowing Owls**. The tour that I lead starts at the north end of the sea in the morning and finishes at the south end at dusk for the spectacular fly-in of **Sandhill Cranes**, **Ross's** and **Snow Geese**. A truly spectacular sight.

When I lived in Connecticut, we had to invent a birding game called "The Big January" to encourage people to go out birding at that time of year. We are blessed with wonderful weather for almost 365 days of the year here in SoCal, so make sure you take full advantage of it!



Mountain Bluebird © Luke Tiller

November Chapter Meeting

► WEDNESDAY, 11/19 In Person, location TBD

Flashy Feathers to Microscopic Mechanisms:

How and Why Birds are Colorful



Join Allison Schultz, Associate Curator of Ornithology at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, as she delves into the world of feathers and their colors. She will discuss how different forces have shaped the multitude of colors and patterns that we observe today,

including some that humans can't see. Some of her current work describes the mechanisms underlying the great diversity of colors in birds, including how environmental pollution impacts bird feathers. (Schultz is also on page 14 talking about another birdy topic.)

Chapter Meetings Updates on <https://www.pasadenaudubon.org/meetings>

Free Bird Walks

All ages and birding levels are welcome. PAS members also enjoy free monthly bird walks at The Huntington and Los Angeles County Arboretum.

Check dates, places, and sign up at: www.pasadenaudubon.org/fieldtrips



Social

► WEDNESDAYS, DECEMBER 17, JANUARY 28, 5:00-8:00pm

Birds & Beers Holiday Edition

Wild Parrot Brewing Co., 2302 E. Colorado Blvd., Pasadena

We'll take a break from Birds & Beers in November for Thanksgiving, but in December we will be back for a cup of good cheer and our 2nd Annual Snowy Albatross Gift Exchange! Bring 0-2 charming, chintzy, but not extravagant avian-themed items (no need to wrap them). And don't forget: Wild Parrot donates \$1 per pint to PAS!

Upcoming PAS Board Meetings

► NOVEMBER 11, DECEMBER 9, AND JANUARY 13, 7:00-8:30pm

Contact pasadenaudubon@gmail.com if you would like the Zoom link to attend.

Christmas Bird Count

Join Pasadena Audubon for the 80th annual community bird count, part of the nation's oldest Citizen Science project. All experience levels are welcome. The orientation meeting will explain the history, the methods, and assign count areas for those who wish to count alone or with others. Read all about it on page 3.

SAVE THE DATES:

- ORIENTATION MEETING Wednesday, Dec. 17, 7pm
In person and via Zoom, location TBD
- COUNT DAY Saturday, Dec. 20, from 12:01am to 11:59pm
- POST-COUNT DINNER Saturday, Dec. 20, 6-8pm
At Pinnocchio's Pizza on Lake Ave., Altadena

chapter news

TAKING BIRDING TO THE PLAYGROUND

PAS is supplying 63 new pairs of Vortex binoculars to Pasadena school libraries

Jodhan Fine, our Community Engagement Liaison, has begun weekly activity sessions at Washington Elementary STEM Magnet School to help students connect science and birds with fun and play. The goal is to inspire them to make birding part of their own lives.

The new program, Birding at Recess, was launched in October 2025 with students from 3rd to 5th grade. The birding table set in the playground



Jared Nigro and Jodhan Fine with the brand new binoculars

allows students the choice to interact with binoculars and other materials, such as taxidermy and microscopes, providing different activities on a weekly basis.

Birding at Recess is an extension of students' playground rather than a classroom lesson or field trip like PAS' Bird Science Program, an education initiative we started in 2019 and today serves more than 800 students.

We also launched another exciting program called Bins to Schools. Birds are everywhere, waiting to be discovered. But for many students and community members, the simple joy of birding feels out of reach without one essential tool: binoculars.

Through the Bird Science Program and now Birding at Recess, hundreds of students each year are introduced to the excitement of watching birds. But, too often, that spark ends once the program is over. Without binoculars of their own, many students simply can't continue exploring this new world on their own time.

In an effort to change that, PAS is supplying each Title I school in the Pasadena Unified School District with three binoculars for their school libraries, totaling 63 new pairs. This gives students the chance to pick up where they left off after PAS programming, checking out binoculars just like they would a book.

The support of our amazing community and membership is vital for projects like these. Helping the next generation find the birder within themselves is integral to PAS' mission, and we're thrilled to take these steps to make the journey to birding easier and more equitable.

Many thanks to Board member Deborah Tammearu and the Georgina-Fredrick Children's Foundation for their generous contributions to help make this program possible.

JOIN PASADENA'S 80-YEAR BIRDING TRADITION

From first-timers to seasoned birders, everyone's welcome
in the biggest count of the year in December By Jon Fisher

As another birding year is nearing an end, many birders start thinking about Christmas Bird Counts. CBCs are my favorite birding events of the year. Our own Pasadena-San Gabriel Valley count began in 1946, and this year will mark its 80th anniversary. This count is especially close to me as I've been coordinating the event and compiling the results for over 30 years and been a participant for even longer.

The 2025 count will take place on **Saturday, December 20**. If you're new to birding or just new to Christmas Bird Counts, this is a great opportunity to learn more about the winter avifauna of the greater San Gabriel Valley area and to meet others who share an interest in birds. You'll also be engaging in a very worthwhile Citizen Science project.

The center of the Pasadena count is the intersection of San Gabriel Boulevard and Duarte Road. The count circle itself extends 7.5 miles in every direction from that point to create the standard 15-mile diameter count area. We're fortunate to have great habitat diversity in the circle, and this is one reason we regularly record over 160 species on the CBC. Another reason is the number of dedicated volunteers that census birds year after year.

Over time, some bird populations have remained stable, some have been increasing in number and others have declined. Introduced species, range expansions and habitat loss are just a few of the factors driving these changes.

If you're familiar with **Eurasian Collared-Doves**, **Neotropic Cormorants** and **Scaly-breasted Munias** (increasing), **Spotted Doves** (extirpated), **Loggerhead Shrikes** (declining), and our non-native **parrots** and **parakeets** (many now well-established), you're already aware of some of these trends.

On count day, we'll record every bird that participants can identify by sight or sound within the circle. The Pasadena CBC produces a snapshot of early winter birdlife in the San Gabriel Valley and adjacent areas, with over 280 different species recorded during its history. Over many decades, we've generated a lot of useful data.

We'll hold the usual pre-count meeting on Wednesday, December 17, in person and via

Zoom (details will be soon on <https://pasadenaaudubon.org/cbc>). At this meeting, we'll present an overview of the CBC, its history and discuss procedures. We'll also assign count areas for those who wish to count alone or with others.

If you're new to the count and want to join other participants, this meeting is a great place to meet and decide on a place to go.

And be sure not to miss the traditional post-count dinner and wrap-up on count night at Pinnocchio's Pizza on Lake Ave. in Altadena. Not only will we have a good meal after a

► The Christmas Bird Count began as a kinder alternative to the old Christmas "side hunts," when people competed to shoot as many birds as they could. Today, birders spread out across designated areas to identify and tally every bird they see or hear.

long day in the field, but we'll be among the first to find out what good birds were found. We'll also have a slide show from count day featuring photos of participants and birds both common and rare.

Any questions, contact count coordinator Jon Fisher at JonF60@hotmail.com.

MOST WANTED BIRDS

OVER THE YEARS, SOME SPECIES HAVE STAYED STEADY, OTHERS DECLINED, AND A FEW ARE NOW RARE. SEE IF YOU CAN SPOT ONE DURING YOUR CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT!

CANVASBACK

LESSER SCAUP

WESTERN GREBE

LAST SEEN: LEGG LAKE, LIVINGSTON-GRAHAM PITS

WANTED WHITE-TAILED KITE

LAST SEEN: SANTA FE DAM

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS BIRD? JOIN US AT THE CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT, DECEMBER 20

How Eaton Canyon is Recovering After Fire—With a Little Help From Friends

The natural area remains closed to the public but shows positive signs of regrowth

Words and photos by Helin Jung

On a cool and cloudy Friday morning in September, a dozen people gathered at the edge of the Eaton Canyon Nature Center parking lot. They picked up work gloves, trash bags, buckets, tarps, and shears before setting out to remove the acres of invasive mustard that had proliferated during the months after fire and two floods had disturbed the canyon at the start of this year.

This select group—members of the Eaton Canyon Nature Center Associates (ECNCA) and the Los Angeles County parks staff—had been permitted into the still-closed park in order to do what is being called habitat care, a term borrowed from the California Native Plant Society San Gabriel Mountains chapter's **Gabi McLean**.

McLean, alongside LA County natural areas biologist **Cristhian Mace** and ECNCA docent **Susan Hopkins**, explained to the group that there were different types of mustard at the site, including the native tansy mustard (*Descurainia pinnata*), which would be better off left undisturbed in the ground. The invasive shortpod mustard (*Hirschfeldia incana*) would be the day's main target.

Because the mustard plants had gone to seed, extra care had to be taken to keep the pods from breaking open and spilling potentially hundreds of their seeds from a single stem onto the ground—hence the tarps.

Some used shears to carefully cut down the mustard, which can reach more than 4 feet off the ground. Others took several many-branched plants and stood over garbage drums, rolling the mustard into more compact cylindrical tumbleweeds.

Elsewhere, a special operation was dispatched to chop down castor bean (*Ricinus communis*), its spiky, poisonous fruit bagged for disposal. Over 10 weeding sessions, the crew worked through more than 12 acres of land.

While the encroachment of non-natives had been a “bummer,” according to Mace, and appeared to have fully taken over the area, they weren't as outsize a presence as it might have seemed to an observer at this moment just before fall.

“You have to look closer,” Mace said. “The dead, brown mustard obscures the story that all the natives that sprouted up earlier have just died back. All the shrubs are coming back gloriously. There are now crown sprouts that are as tall as me, if not taller.”

Indeed, just on the other side of the work area stood a blue elderberry (*Sambucus mexicana*) and a Western sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*), both clearly blackened by fire, but both wearing sleeves of green that had newly leafed out from the trunk.

As more and more mustard got removed, small shoots of laurel sumac (*Malosma laurina*),

the familiar shrub of the foothills, were suddenly visible.

Nina Raj, an ECNCA docent and founder of the Altadena Seed Library, knelt over one such shoot, clearing away debris and surrounding the tiny plant with a perimeter of rocks. She crumbled a burned piece of wood and rubbed it into the soil around the laurel sumac to provide the plant with more nutrients, before wetting the surface with water from her water bottle. There was something almost devotional in it, as there was in the occasional hush that fell over the group in moments of collective focus.

For some, like Hopkins—who lives a mile south of Eaton Canyon and had, prior to the fire, made the canyon a part of her daily life for decades—being able to see it recover has been a cause of hope instead of mourning.

“There is a part of me that's missing,” Hopkins admitted. “Certain places aren't there anymore, but I know they're going to come back. That's nature.”

As was the case in January, the same was true nearly a year later: The canyon would need time to recover, and that would mean it would continue to stay closed to the public.

“This is a sensitive environment,” Mace said. “We don't want to just go ripping through this delicate, recovering space.”

The wildlife certainly didn't seem to be



Pulled weeds get bagged over barrels and tarps to capture as many seeds as possible. County meteorologist Edgar McGregor rolls up dried mustard plants over a garbage barrel.

complaining. Signs of animal activity are everywhere. Snakes are going across the trails. The deer have been grazing on poison oak. These days, instead of bits of plastic trash, Hopkins sees mostly seeds in the bear scat.

“The wildlife has rebounded gorgeously,” Mace said. “When you take away the people factor, the noise factor, the birds have never been louder. It’s just a constant, glorious chorus.”



ECNCA docent Nina Raj tends to a small laurel sumac plant.

More Action Plans

In addition to invasive species removal, other projects have started taking place at Eaton Canyon

Landscape Recovery Center

The county plans to raise a structure that will be a landing pad for parks staff as well as a native plant nursery. Plants will be propagated from seeds collected at Eaton Canyon over the years by the Theodore Payne Foundation and others.

According to Mace, oaks will be grown at the nursery and distributed to other parks that sustained fire damage, in addition to being planted throughout Altadena. “We need to shade Altadena again,” Mace says.

Ecological Survey

In May, the county allowed Hopkins and former county natural areas supervisor and PAS member Mickey Long to conduct a monthly ecological survey of the canyon, which they have been recording on iNaturalist via a private project. “We’ve been able to start documenting the plants, how they’re coming back,” Hopkins says.

They have so far located 11 species that have never before been seen at Eaton Canyon. “Mickey has documentation of what’s been found in the canyon going back over 100 years,” Hopkins says. “When he says it’s the first time in the canyon, it’s the first time in modern history.” They hope to continue the project for the next several years.



With invasive plants cleared away, newly emerging laurel sumac shoots get a chance to thrive (left).

A single mustard plant can produce thousands of seeds (right).

chapter news

A Surprise Art Show at Birds & Beers

Traditional Chinese bird paintings bring together generations of women

by Helin Jung

The usual conviviality of the monthly Birds & Beers gatherings at Wild Parrot Brewing Co. took on an artful air in August when PAS member Jieyu Zheng arrived with her mother, Susan Sun, who was visiting from Yantai, a coastal city in eastern China.

Susan had brought with her a series of her bird paintings, done using traditional Chinese styles and materials. She was encouraged to display the petite works, each 13 inches square, on a counter by the brewing tanks.

As there was a sale of PAS merchandise happening at the same time, several attendees inquired about purchasing Susan’s art. Though it was not her intention to do so, Susan ended up making her first-ever sale to Paloma Strong, a taxidermist who paid \$50 for a painting of a Mourning Dove to give to her mother.

“My mom has always loved [Mourning Doves], since they remind her of her own mother,” Paloma says. “When I pulled it out of the plastic, she actually teared up. She’s done so much to support me. I knew it would mean a lot to get her something special and beautiful.”

The gesture also had deep meaning for Susan. Though she has been practicing painting and calligraphy since childhood, she only recently started painting birds thanks to the influence of her own daughter, Jieyu. In 2024, Susan joined Jieyu on birding trips with PAS, and “was touched by everyone’s passion for birds,” she wrote in an e-mail translated with Jieyu’s help.

Using Jieyu’s bird photographs as reference images, Susan developed the series, titled “Little Spirits,” that she showed at Birds & Beers. Each hyper-realistic painting features a single bird, chosen for its pose or expression,



Susan Sun and Paloma Strong at Wild Parrot Brewing Co.

© Helin Jung

and takes about five hours to complete with Chinese ink blocks and mineral pigments.

“My goal is to portray the birds as small, delicate, and endearing,” Susan says. She pays particular attention to the feathers and the eyes to render them “as if the bird’s eyes could speak for themselves.”

Painting birds has enhanced Susan’s growing appreciation for these “little spirits.” “When I get tired from painting or calligraphy, I look up at the birds in the sky and admire their freedom in flight,” Susan says. “I have grown to cherish the Chinese saying: ‘The vast sky is free for birds to soar.’”

GARDEN INTERRUPTED: Hope Blooms in a New Space

Lead contamination forced the garden to close,
but students have a new outdoor classroom by Alexi Bolton, PAS Garden Educator

School is back in session, and so are garden classes at Washington Elementary STEM Magnet (WESM). This year, however, classes look a little different.

Last spring, soil testing revealed high lead levels in a portion of the garden, forcing its closure. Over the summer, follow-up testing confirmed these results, and we were told that our beloved habitat garden would remain closed for the foreseeable future.

Without the significant funds needed to remediate the soil, the garden has been blocked off and no one is currently able to utilize or even maintain the space. In spite of this setback, our programs remain deeply valued by the school, and administrators were quick to provide us with an alternative outdoor space. So this year our work is to create a new classroom.

Though I am hopeful and excited to see what this new chapter will bring, it is a small heartbreak each time I walk by our old garden.

Entry is prohibited, but the early scent of sage and the cheerful red California Fuchsia will not be stopped by the temporary plastic fencing. The plants are a little rough around the edges, but most are surviving, trying to make the best of the new paradigm they find themselves in.

Similarly, the students and staff are gradually recovering from the horror of last January's fires.

Some students were displaced and had to leave immediately following the fires. Over the summer, more moved away to find new housing or as a result of the political climate.

It is a time when the serenity of nature and the brightness of new discoveries play an even more important role in the lives of our students. That's what I strive to provide with our garden lessons, though there are logistical challenges to teaching in the new space. It has not yet been designed to demonstrate the richness of a native habitat.

Our previous garden was always alive with lessons on display—pollinators, life cycles,



Bolton teaching a class of 4th graders at WESM using taxidermy and skins. Below, the future home of the Native Plant Garden at the front of the school property, now visible to the entire community.

adaptations. Now to bring these topics to life I have to scavenge for seeds or flowers from other areas and bring them to the blank canvas of our new space.

That said, our conversations about how to transform our new classroom into a habitat garden have been rich.

The children would like to see more flowers, places for birds to live, drink and eat. Even a pond has been requested by the students. As we work behind the scenes to make their visions a reality, the kids have enjoyed lessons on scientific sketching, the parts of a plant, and dissecting flowers to uncover the ovary where future seeds will grow.

I am inspired daily by the resilience of the school community, and I am hopeful we will be able to give them a garden that will bring peace and inspiration for many years to come.



SAVING BIRDS ONE WINDOW AT A TIME

Pasadena Audubon teams up with the Audubon Center at Debs Park to reduce window collisions by Helin Jung

It would seem self-evident that a bird flying into a window would be startling to witness, but I couldn't have known just how intense it would be until earlier this year, when a young **Western Bluebird** collided against a pane of glass and landed on the ground with a thud right in front of me. It was a shock that lingered for days, and an acute reminder of the many ways in which human activity inadvertently causes harm to the species around us.

All that existential guilt eventually became motivation to do something about it, and I began pursuing opportunities to improve, however marginally, conditions for birds in the region—at least when it comes to their encounters with windows and doors.

I contacted **Denys Hemen**, the operations manager at Audubon Center at Debs Park. A former wildlife rehabilitator, Hemen had treated many birds after window collisions and had seen from experience that a bird's chances of survival are dismal even with medical attention. When we spoke, he reported that a **Mourning Dove** had recently hit a window near the Debs courtyard,

dying instantly. Hard to call it fortuitous, but the timing proved such that it wasn't long before a plan was in motion to treat the center's windows and doors.

Previously, the Debs staff, in response to the periodic bird strikes that have occurred at the campus, had put up hawk-shaped decals on one window. This particular window was doubly confusing for birds in that it could be very reflective, or appear to be totally open space given its position directly across from another window.

The proposed new treatment, sponsored by Pasadena Audubon, would cover most of the center exterior's glass surfaces—a combined 350 square feet—with window film from **Feather Friendly**, a Canada-based company whose product was used on Chicago's McCormick Place. That building's glass exterior had been notoriously lethal for birds; on one day in 2023, nearly 1,000 birds had collided with the building and died. After the application of Feather Friendly's window film, fatalities went down by about 95 percent.

We plan to apply the product ourselves to save on professional installation costs, as well as



Helin Jung measuring a Debs Park window for the application of Feather Friendly window treatments.

to show the community that a layperson could undertake a similar DIY project. The Audubon Center staff will provide educational signage to further communicate the message of bird conservation to visitors.

While the Debs Park numbers are nowhere near as bad as those of a glass skyscraper in the middle of a flyway, in the spirit of Pasadena Audubon's mission, it seems worthwhile nonetheless to try and prevent a handful of birds from mortal injury if we can.

FROM BIRDS TO BUTTERFLIES: PAS Helps Expand Motus Tracking in SoCal

It's been a busy few months for Pasadena Audubon Society's ongoing work with Motus, the global wildlife tracking network.

The network consists of tiny radio transmitters that are attached to migrating animals, and receiving stations around the world that detect the animals as they move past (more info at motus.org).

We started out the summer by supervising the installation of a brand new Motus station at the Audubon Center at Debs Park, the fourth one in the Los Angeles area that PAS either owns or helps maintain. Speaking of maintenance, we also funded and performed an upgrade to the LA Zoo's station in Griffith Park that will allow for a more reliable transmission of data to the Motus data repository run by Birds Canada in Ontario.

But the biggest project was still to come: the upgrade of all four of our stations to enable them

to detect not just migrating birds and bats, but insects as well.

Recently a new class of migration transmitters appeared on the market, small enough to be safely attached to migrating Monarch butterflies. Insect researchers here in California are hoping these new transmitters — which weigh just a few hundredths of a gram — will help uncover details about the Monarch's annual migration from the Pacific states to their wintering grounds in Mexico.

These ultra tiny transmitters require specialized antennas and electronics in order to be detected, so **Chris Spurgeon, PAS' Motus technician**, spent several days this summer climbing up and down ladders and clambering across rooftops to install the new equipment. It's all up and running now, waiting for transmitter-equipped Monarchs to flit past.



PAS continues to build out the Motus network in southern California. We have other potential sites for tracking stations under consideration, and we've been giving guidance and advice to several other Audubon groups that want to install stations of their own.

All of this great work is possible because of your membership support. Thank you!

PAS Grant Fuels Post-Fire Bird Research in Altadena's Foothills

Pasadena Audubon Society has a robust grants program focused on providing support to students (both undergraduate and graduate) and community organizations for important research related to birds, birding and conservation.

This year, our Grant Committee added an extra \$10,000 (bringing the total to \$20,000) in funding to support recipients more effectively.

The Chaney Trail Corridor Project was one of the chosen organizations awarded. Led by director Kristen Ochoa and biologists Joseph Curti and Carly Taylor, the project is using community science to track post-wildfire bird and bat recovery following the Eaton Fire. The corridor is a biodiversity hotspot in Altadena, considered a critical buffer between development and protected natural lands.

PAS Grant helped the group purchase two field devices: the portable nature recorder Birdweather PUC and a EcoFlow Portable Power Station. The project began recording birds in 2024, when they made 41,271 detections and registered

108 species. In 2025, they redeployed a PUC to understand the differences in bird populations before and after the Eaton Fire.

"The new PUC setup is going strong, and since the fire, it recorded 81,192 detections of birds and 102 species," said Ochoa. She added that the devices are kept safe inside a small, waterproof tent designed for pet cats.

The top species registered? The Lazuli Bunting with 23,178 detections. "What a delight the buntings have been, once a rare sight and now the most predominant voice in our recovering Corridor," Ochoa said. "It brings hope to hear their beautiful calls and see their flashes of brilliant blue in the darkened branches of the burn area."

A Lazuli Bunting in the burned area of the Chaney Trail Corridor, one of the 2025 PAS Grant recipients. The project's sound recorder detected 814 observations of Lazuli Bunting calls and songs in 24 hours. These birds are "fire followers" and seek out recently burned areas, especially where low and shrubby vegetation has begun to regenerate.



© Shana Pallotta (Instagram @wildlifeofcottonwood)

Student Attends AOS event with grant support

Asophomore at Cornell University was another PAS Grant applicant awarded. Asher Perla, who studies at the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, received funding to attend the American Ornithological Society's 2025 Annual Meeting in St. Louis, MO. He wrote of his experience:

"I had an amazing time at the AOS Conference in St. Louis. I attended dozens of talks on topics including bird tracking technologies, bird-insect interactions, migration stopover ecology, speciation and river avulsion in the Amazon, song niche differentiation, and many more.

Additionally, I took advantage of student-professional mixers and the AOS mentorship program to get valuable advice on undergraduate research and career paths from professionals in every field of ornithology.

I made connections with ornithologists from Cornell, UIUC, UCSC, FGCU, and LSU, as well as researchers from Colombia, Costa Rica, and the UK. The knowledge and connections I took away from the conference inspired me to reach out to researchers at Cornell and join a lab, which I'm currently in the process of doing.

To cap it all off, I participated in the ornithology-themed Quiz Bowl, in which my team (me and two other undergraduate students from FGCU) won second place! It was also great fun to explore the city, watch a baseball game, go birding, and meet fellow students.

I am extremely grateful to Pasadena Audubon for your support in my visit to the AOS Conference, without which I would not have been able to go. It was a transformative experience, and I hope to return again next year!"



Asher Perla (left) and his friends after winning second place in the ornithology-themed quiz at the American Ornithological Association 2025 Conference.

Photo from personal archive

The next PAS Grant application season will start in the first quarter of 2026.

In addition to Chaney Trail Corridor Project and Asher Perla, the other three recipients were:

TITLE: A novel DNA methylation clock to assess the impact of avian malaria

GRANTEE: Wilmer Amaya-Mejia **AFFILIATION:** UCLA

TITLE: Emerald Necklace Peck Road Water Conservation Park Bird Habitat Reestablishment

GRANTEE: Claire Robinson **AFFILIATION:** Amigos de los Rios

TITLE: Population structure and breeding origins of two songbird species migrating through a Southern California mountain pass

GRANTEE: Lauren Hill

The Silver Lining to the Golden-winged

A vagrant warbler in Oxnard sparks awe and reflection by Alex Coffey

Every so often, an avian vagrant comes through Southern California that captivates legions of birders. This phenomenon is often a confluence of circumstances: Rarity. Accessibility. Consistency. Beauty. This October, it was a Golden-winged Warbler, or “the GWWA,” as it was affectionately dubbed in our digital birding spaces (in reference to banding code). It found itself stopping over off-course in an unassuming patch of roadside in a sleepy Oxnard neighborhood of Ventura County. Some years, fall migration really feels like Christmas has come early.

Like many birders with a gap in their checklists, I made the pilgrimage early on in the GWWA’s residency. Coming from East Coast origins, I was only partially embarrassed about it being a “lifer.” Even in the Eastern range where it’s supposed to be, the Golden-winged Warbler is an uncommon and tricky species. Though relatively unmistakable, its population has dwindled due to habitat loss and resultant competition with its closest relative, the Blue-winged Warbler. So much so that in certain pockets, hybrid population clusters known as “Brewster’s” Warblers outnumber individuals of either species.

As a teenager I used to band these hybrids for the University of Scranton (PA). Despite my hopes during that field season, I never netted a pure Golden-winged. I also encountered, years later, a “Lawrence’s” Warbler in Connecticut - the crossback variant with parentage of a Brewster’s and a Golden-winged - purportedly even more rare than the iconic full-blooded progenitor itself. But my search for a Golden-winged continued, and was eventually put on perennial hold when I relocated to Los Angeles.

Enter: Ventura GWWA 2025. As I arrived in shameless chase on a foggy Saturday morning, the enigmatic Curtis Marantz and a cohort of about 10 other birders had already located the bird high in a sycamore. I was more than happy to join in the gawking. This bird had everything. Bold colors. Male plumage. Showy movements. Even posing in decent light for photographers. Giving it an hour of my time was the bare minimum for something so special.



I birded my way home fulfilled but somber, knowing the potential that I may never see another. Our birding is a fleeting snapshot of so many species struggling to carry on in these environmentally fraught times. And while the GWWA may fuel valid discussions of wasting fuel just to see one beautiful bird, if we can translate that awe into action, it may kickstart our community to continue to grow and focus on protecting these magnificent creatures.

P.S. For parents looking for a new bedtime book for young ones, I recommend “Ruby’s Birds,” whose star is — you guessed it! A Golden-winged Warbler. Copies available at your local Vroman’s.



chapter news

We have a Podcast!

The Field Notes Podcast is Pasadena Audubon Society’s new show, hosted by avid birder and newest PAS Board member PAS volunteer Omar Alui, former Board member and longtime Bear Divide counter Kelsey Reckling, and Community Engagement Liaison Jodhan Fine.

The podcast aims to share stories and amplify the many voices that make our birding community thrive.

Whether we’re talking about birding, conservation, or ornithology, we want to spread the love of birds, highlight ways to protect their habitats, and make birding more welcoming and accessible.



In episode one, the hosts breakdown some of the U.S. State Birds, the species officially selected to represent each of the 50 states. While birds such as New Mexico’s Greater Roadrunner or Maryland’s Baltimore Oriole pass with flying colors, over represented species such as Northern Mockingbird (five different states) or South Dakota’s nonnative Ring-necked Pheasant need urgent replacing.

In episode two, we bring nature and wildlife lover, veterinary specialist, and former seabird rehabilitator Naomi Mansfield to examine how we got interested in birding, what keeps us inspired, and how to grow as a community.

In the latest episode, wildlife biologist Bobby Figarotta explores why the Salton Sea became a birding haven, and what a weird desert sea can teach us about conservation, equity, and life.

You can listen to our podcast biweekly on all platforms (Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, etc.). We can’t wait to continue growing as a show and share our joy of birds with our PAS community and listeners everywhere.

SOCIAL BIRDERS

Words and photos by Sean Doorly

It's been an exciting few months for the Pasadena Audubon Society, with members exploring everything from the open ocean to local parks and young birder adventures.

Birders took to the sea aboard the Ocean Institute's R/V Sea Explorer out of Dana Point for a nine-hour pelagic trip on September 28. The group enjoyed calm seas, good company, and a spectacular range of sightings. Highlights included a

Red-footed Booby, Craveri's Murrelets, Common and Arctic Terns, along with pods of dolphins and a close encounter with a Humpback Whale.

The free monthly bird walk at the Los Angeles County Arboretum on October 12th was filled with surprises. A great turnout of members and newcomers enjoyed perfect fall weather while strolling among beautiful trees and the Arboretum's famous peafowl.

On October 18th, the Pasadena Audubon Young Birders Club headed east to the Santa Fe Dam Recreation Area in Irwindale, led by Jodhan Fine and Omar Alui. Both new and returning young birders arrived equipped with binoculars, field guides, and boundless curiosity. Highlights included sightings of a Cactus Wren, Vermilion Flycatcher, Rock Wren, Ross's Goose, and an Osprey soaring high above the reservoir.

Pelagic Adventure



Birders on the bow watch the waves, scanning for seabirds and surprises.



Binoculars up! Luke Tiller and Jonathan Feenstra watch for seabirds.



Young birder Oliver Huang crouches for the perfect angle.

Arboretum Bird Walk



Katy Mann (center, orange scarf) led the walk filled with Red-whiskered Bulbuls.



Jenny and Joshua Lam.



Siyuan Yin and Jieyu Zheng waiting for a hummingbird close up.

Young Birders Club



Young birders go low for the shot.



Birding buddies in a binocular standoff.



Young birders pose with Mt. Wilson in the distance.

HALLOWEEN BIRDERS

A Roadrunner, a Black-necked Stilt, and a pair of owls were spotted mingling with fellow bird lovers — and even Shrek made a surprise appearance — at our monthly Birds & Beers social at Wild Parrot Brewing Co. in Pasadena, on October 22. The theme was “Dress as Your Favorite Bird,” and creativity truly took flight! Laughter, conversation, and craft brews made for a perfect end to another month of birding and friendship.

October Birds & Beers



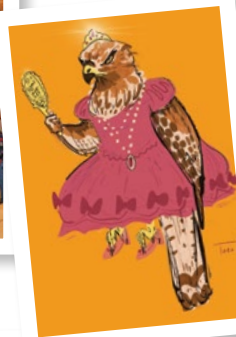
Michael, Marcy, Lauren, and Jess (left to right) at Wild Parrot Brewing.



Jodhan Fine and masked birder Taylor Paez.



Carl and Learden Matthies arrived as a pair of owls.



Proud new parents Jeff and Leeann Hale.



Newcomers Gloria and Eric pose as mysterious masked birds.



Costumed birders, Shrek and friends.



Omar Alui and Jodhan Fine take flight as a Black-necked Stilt and a Roadrunner.



Luke Tiller and Catherine Hamilton are all smiles.

Illustrations by Tara Hempstead
www.tarahempstead.com
 Instagram: @popt_art

Classroom Conversations on Climate Change

Teaching young people to understand—and advocate for—climate solutions by Dave Weeshoff, PAS Conservation Chair

Twice a year for the past ten years, I have spoken to four freshman English classes at Cal State L.A., explaining the causes and consequences of human-caused climate change. Students use that information in an essay to demonstrate their ability to take facts and opinions and turn them into convincing arguments.

To do that I keep current on the issues, including science, emerging technologies, regulations, as well as the attitudes of our nation's leaders and their followers.

While waiting for class to begin, I ask the students informally how many of them would feel comfortable sitting down with a few friends and discussing climate change and its impacts. I ask them their major, so I can incorporate their various areas of interest into my presentation and explain how environmental prevention and mitigation might provide career opportunities. And each year, I become a little more optimistic about young people and their interest, understanding and concern with the impacts of a warming planet.

I explain how life on earth has evolved over millions of years and that recently we have enjoyed what I call a Goldilocks Climate, not too hot nor cold. But that is changing rapidly. Globally, 2013 through 2024 have been the 11 hottest years ever recorded.

They learn that the greenhouse effect occurs when heat-trapping gases in our planet's

atmosphere (especially the 0.0420% of carbon dioxide) prevent the planet from releasing as much heat into outer space, thus raising the surface temperature of the land and especially the oceans. And by burning more fossil fuels—coal, oil, natural gas—we dramatically increase the percent of that CO₂.

There is overwhelming worldwide support for climate action, and most countries have committed to reduce their CO₂ emissions to the point that atmospheric levels remain stable. Fossil fuels can be phased out by conserving energy and switching to “green” energy sources that do not produce significant CO₂ pollution including wind (onshore and offshore), solar, hydro, geothermal, and nuclear power.

In virtually all countries around the world, scientists in the field of measuring the impacts of extreme weather events agree that human-caused climate change has increased the number of days of extreme heat events, draughts, wildfires, more powerful storms, flooding, and severe winds. And at an even greater cost in money and human suffering.

Yet one national leader used a speech at the recent U.N. General Assembly to call climate change efforts a “green energy scam,” attempting to counter the 97% of dedicated climate scientists that know it is an existential threat to all life on our planet (including the 11,500+ bird species we care so much about).

Recently, the United States has withdrawn

from all the international initiatives to address the science, causes, consequences, and mitigation opportunities, as well as encouraging an increase in the production of fossil fuels to catastrophic levels.

So, what can be done? Locally, Pasadena Audubon Society continues to be active in the “Pasadena 100” coalition to educate and convince the Pasadena City Council and the Department of Water and Power to commit to providing its customers with 100% carbon-free electricity by year-end 2030. They are well on the way to achieving that goal, already obtaining an 84% commitment. We are also advocating for a center in Pasadena to provide, among other things, climate change education for all communities.

As individuals, we can, and must, make a difference. We must conserve energy and water, reduce our use of plastic, and employ carbon-free transportation and household appliances. In other words, reduce our “carbon footprint.” Educate yourself. To amplify your message, join others in speaking out by finding an organization with a climate-action mission compatible with yours. And, most importantly, support and vote for local, state, and federal candidates who take climate change as seriously as we know it to be.

As usual, if you have any suggestions, questions or comments, please contact me, any time, any day. Dave Weeshoff, Conservation Chair 818-618-1652 or email at weeshoff@sbcglobal.net.

PAS Teams Up with AKA for Heal The Bay Coastal Cleanup

by Carl Matthies

As they have for more than three decades now, **Heal the Bay** held another massive Coastal Cleanup Day in September. And as we have for the last several years, Pasadena Audubon Society pitched in as site managers for the cleanup effort in the Arroyo Seco, based in Brookside Park.

This year, however, we were cast in a supporting role, as the altogether awesome women of the **Eta Lambda Omega Chapter** (photo) of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated took the lead. Let me just tell you, these ladies showed up, and not only in Pasadena. Site leader **Jerri Keyes** told me that AKA chapters were managing 15 Coastal Cleanup sites that day, including one in Hawai'i.

The event was a smashing success: 134 enthusiastic volunteers aging from six to 60 came out, rolled up their sleeves, and removed an estimated



1250 pounds of trash from around the Arroyo Seco rivulet, which eventually drains into the Pacific Ocean.

Volunteers were well-fortified with water and snacks, not to mention delicious homemade cookies from PAS' own **Eloise Kaeck** and her daughter. Whole Foods Market contributed buckets and trash grabbers to the endeavor. Throughout the morning, a spirit of goodwill, of people coming together to make a better tomorrow, was palpable and beautiful to witness. I can't wait until next year!



How I Became a Birder

by Jordan Cheng, 12 years old



I've always been fascinated by animals, especially marine life. For the longest time, I wanted to be a marine biologist. I love the ocean, and everything that lives beneath the waves, especially sharks. But that changed a little bit when my friend Bradley started talking about birds.

At first, I was surprised. But as he pointed them out, I began to realize how amazing they are. Birds are everywhere and so easy to observe compared to marine life, which is limited to the sea. Once I noticed that, my interest took a turn.

During recess and lunch at school, Bradley and I started birding together. I began researching and learning about native birds, and soon, I was fascinated by species from all around the world. Now, I want to be a marine biologist and also an ornithologist!

My favorite native bird is the **California Scrub Jay**. I love its bold color and distinctive call. My favorite place to go birding is Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve, especially during the fall and winter migration. I also love birding at the Huntington Library, the Arboretum, and Descanso Gardens, where my family has memberships. The best time to visit is during early morning member hours, when the birds are most active.

Books and TV nature shows helped me at first, but I wanted to learn from real experts and meet other people who loved birds as much as I did. That's how I found Pasadena Audubon Society in February of 2024, which led me to the Young Birders Club. After my first field trip, I was hooked.

What I love most about the YBC is exploring new places, learning from the amazing guides, and meeting other kids who share my passion. The Monthly Chapter Meetings are great too, as I always come away knowing something new.

These days, I almost never leave home without my binoculars. When we travel, every trip turns into a birding adventure. Every year we go to Hawaii, where I enjoy seeing the **Zebra Doves** and the **Nenes**, and also to Mexico, where my favorite birds are the **Tropical Mockingbird** and the **Magnificent Frigatebirds**.

My love for birds has inspired my whole family to appreciate nature more deeply. We notice native plants, talk about bird behavior,

and enjoy learning together. One of my favorite things is sharing this joy with my little cousin Emery, who's three years old now. When she was two, I showed her how to look through binoculars, and ever since, she's been hooked too.

Birds have changed the way I see the world. Every day brings a new discovery, and I can't wait to see where this passion takes me next.



Jordan with his cousin Emery at The Huntington Library, and feeding Zebra Doves at the Byodo-In Temple in O'ahu, HI.

Calling All Students!

If you're interested in birding, are a serious birder, or somewhere in between, try out the Young Birders Club. *We meet the first Wednesday of every month from 5:30-6:30pm, followed by a weekend morning bird walk later in the month.*

On December 20, PAS President Luke Tiller will lead a special YBC edition for the annual Christmas Bird Count (more on page 3). This 2.5-hour bird walk helps the ornithological community collect data on our local bird population and is a great way to dip your toes into the very fun activity of birding.

QUESTIONS? WOULD YOU LIKE TO SIGN UP?

Email YBC leaders Jodhan Fine jodhanf.pas@gmail.com and Carl Matthies carlhm.pas@gmail.com

HOW AFRICAN BIRDS TOOK FLIGHT IN L.A.

From the Pin-tailed Whydah to the Northern Red Bishop, here's how these exotic birds arrived and what might happen now

by Renée Fabian

Southern California is the stage for some spectacular avian performers, such as the feisty Pin-tailed Whydah with its charismatic courtship ritual, swinging and fanning its long tail feathers.

Native to Africa, Pin-tailed Whydahs have made themselves a comfortable home in Los Angeles County, as well as other showy birds from the far-away continent. The Northern Red Bishop's bright orange cloak is easy to spot in certain riparian habitats during the summer. Uncommon now, the Orange-cheeked Waxbill and Bronze Mannikin have also called SoCal home.

So where did these introduced African birds come from? And how are they settling in?

The first reports of the Pin-tailed Whydah in the area date back to the 1990s, the result of releases from the pet trade, according to authors John Garrett and Kimball Garrett. The birds were first found primarily in La Mirada in Los Angeles County to the Santa Ana River in Orange County.

Northern Red Bishops are also popular pets, and released birds started populations in SoCal, where they were first reported in the 1970s. By 1991, they were breeding along the Los Angeles River, and by 1998, an estimated 600 birds lived in the area.

Similarly, the Orange-cheeked Waxbill and Bronze Mannikin were pet escapees that once looked ready to settle in, but are now rarely seen.

Once pet birds get loose, "You really don't need very many individuals to start a population," said Allison Shultz, associate curator of ornithology at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. "Even a handful of individuals can establish and do pretty well."

Pin-tailed Whydahs are still popular pets, said Shultz, and it's very possible additional birds escape into the wild. Northern Red Bishops are also still available for sale, and for less than \$100.

But these two non-native birds may have different fates in SoCal. The Northern Red Bishop seems to be declining and is probably not doing as well, said Shultz. It's unclear exactly why, though it could be due to their habitat needs.

"Bishops ... need a certain riparian habitat that is hard to find in Southern California," Shultz said. They prefer marshy habitats or river bottoms with tall, seedy grasses.



© Renée Fabian

A Pin-tailed Whydah in all his breeding glory at Huntington Library & Gardens.

A Parasite Finds a Host

The Pin-tailed Whydah, on the other hand, is thriving. That's likely due to their relationship with the Scaly-breasted Munia. Munias came to SoCal from India and were also introduced through the pet trade, said Shultz. Whydahs parasitize Scaly-breasted Munias.

Pin-tailed Whydahs are obligate brood parasites, which means they don't raise their own young. The female lays her eggs in a host species' nest, and the host is left to do all the hard work of raising the Whydah's young. That means they needed a host in L.A. in order to survive.

Enter Scaly-breasted Munias, who build domed nests similar to the Pin-tailed Whydah's host species in Africa. Since the Munia population is "exploding," Whydahs "have quite a lot of breeding opportunities," Shultz said.

It's unclear if the Pin-tailed Whydah will stick with the Scaly-breasted Munia as their only host, but so far it doesn't parasitize native birds. Some researchers worried Pin-tailed Whydahs would parasitize native finches, although our finches don't build domed nests, perhaps making it less likely to happen.

Because the Pin-tailed Whydah is very adaptable to its new home and host species, we can't say for sure what will happen in the future. As of right now, Shultz expects they will continue to grow in number. "But they'll probably be constrained to the same region that the Munias live in," she said.

In the meantime, we need more information on introduced species, from genetics to population distribution. That's where you come in.

"When you're doing your eBird checklist, make sure to report introduced birds," Shultz said. "That's how we're tracking these populations, so they're equally as important [as native birds]."

HELPING LEAR'S MACAWS

How a rare bird with an English name united locals and scientists in the backlands of Brazil by Fernanda Ezabella

Between the hum of bumblebees and the clinking of cowbells, a laugh echoes through the red canyons of Bahia's dry hinterland, in the northeast of Brazil. It's Erica Pacifico, dangling from a rappel rope and chatting with her expedition partner, Máximo Cardoso de Macedo. The two descend a sandstone cliff riddled with holes, one of which she is about to explore.

She enters headfirst, crawling through the cavity, while Cardoso waits suspended outside.

A 44-year-old biologist, Pacifico has made this place her second home ever since she decided to study one of Brazil's rarest animals, the Lear's Macaw. In the 1980s, the bright blue bird was staggering toward extinction with fewer than 100 individuals left in the wild. Today, it thrives with more than 2,500 thanks to conservation efforts uniting scientists and *sertanejos*—the people of the arid backlands—funded by both local and international organizations.

The macaw's name came in honor of the English artist and poet Edward Lear, the first to draw the bird in 1832 based on individuals he encountered in captivity in London. It was officially described in 1856, but its natural habitat was unclear. They only knew it was from Brazil. For more than a century, its whereabouts was the great mystery of South American ornithology; until the last day of 1978, when scientists helped by the *sertanejos* finally spotted the birds flying free in a remote corner of Bahia state.

That site was Toca Velha, in the municipality of Canudos, exactly where Pacifico now crouches inside a cave on a sweltering June morning. The



region is part of the Canudos Biological Station, created by the Biodiversitas Foundation in 1993 with funds provided by the American doctor Judith Hart. The station includes simple lodging for visiting tourists (<https://biodiversitas.org.br/canudos/>).

Pacifico, a postdoctoral researcher and associate professor at the Campinas University (Unicamp) in São Paulo state, created the Lear's Macaw Research and Conservation Group in 2008. From inside the cave, she gently pulls out two Lear's Macaw chicks. She places them into cloth bags and then into a basket for transport.

Big cliff walls of Canudos Biological Station.



Erica Pacifico and João Carlos Nogueira with a 90-day macaw chick.

On the ground below, the basket slides down the rope into the hands of field assistant João Carlos Nogueira, a 70-year-old *sertanejo* who has worked with Pacifico since the beginning. He carries the basket to a yellow tarp laid in the shade over the reddish sand, where a small laboratory awaits: blood collection tubes, measuring tapes, rulers, scales.

Nogueira, a man of few words and lots of love for the macaws, kneels on the tarp, lays one chick on its back and holds its wings with both hands. With his left thumb, he strokes the bird's neck gently. Pacifico arrives from the rappel dripping with sweat, and begins her work: banding, measuring, weighing. Each chick also receives a collar with numbered tags, allowing researchers to identify individuals from afar during monitoring.

In 2012, Pacifico's team expanded its work to the Boqueirão da Onça Environmental Protection Area, about 200 miles from Canudos. There, a population of 30 individuals in the 1990s had dwindled to just two birds that were no longer breeding. With the arrival of a wind farm in the region, the team secured funding from the company for a reintroduction project. In 2019, the first six macaws (brought from Spain's Loro Parque Foundation) were released. Today, 31 Lear's Macaws fly free over Boqueirão.

Beyond its beauty and rarity, the Lear's Macaw plays a crucial ecological role. As a seed disperser, it helps regenerate the semi-arid vegetation called *caatinga*. So monitoring the bird also means monitoring the environment itself. Invasive bees, illegal wildlife trade, and food scarcity remain ongoing threats, now joined by newer dangers such as electrocution from power lines.

In the last decade, the electricity grid has spread into rural areas helping the communities, as the same time the species' population grew. At least 35 macaws have died from electrocution in 2025 alone, and 160 in total since 2022. The energy company has made changes to some 5,000 poles and infrastructure, and activists are desperately pushing for more.

Back in the red canyons of Canudos, the procedures take just over an hour. Before the chicks are returned to their nest, Pacifico pauses and whispers to them: "You're so beautiful," she says. "Go and be free. And please, stay far away from those electric poles. Deal?"

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