



Chaparral Naturalist

A Publication of
Pomona Valley Audubon Society

www.pomonavalleyaudubon.org

DECEMBER 2024 - FEBRUARY 2025

A Big Win for Little Owls

By Sam Atwood, *Chaparral Naturalist* Editor

Since 2017, PVAS members have fought an uphill battle to protect the western Burrowing Owl and its habitat in the Inland Empire. In October, a state commission granted the owls provisional statewide protection under the California Endangered Species Act.

The California Fish and Game Commission voted unanimously on Oct. 10 to list the small owls as a “candidate” species while the California Department of Fish and Wildlife conducts a 12-month review of the owl’s status. As a candidate species, Burrowing Owls will temporarily be afforded the same protection as a state-listed endangered or threatened species. At the conclusion of the review period, the commission will vote on whether to permanently list the owls as threatened or endangered.

If Burrowing Owls ultimately receive state threatened or endangered status, it could require more robust mitigation for habitat loss.

During the past nearly eight years, under the tireless leadership of Burrowing Owl Committee chair Suzanne Thompson, more than 100 individuals have worked as Burrowing Owl monitors, habitat restorers, artificial burrow installers, outreach volunteers, burrow camera technicians and expert consultants.

Recently, their efforts were showcased in a short documentary film by Emmy-Award winning filmmaker Ann Kaneko (see accompanying article.)

Locally, PVAS members’ conservation efforts suffered a setback last year when a 200-acre undeveloped site east of Ontario International Airport that once supported as many as 11 active burrows was slated by the City of Ontario for development of nine distribution warehouses.

Four of the owls -- three adults and one juvenile -- were captured by the developer’s biologist and will be relocated to a site in western Riverside County. The fate of the other eight to nine juvenile owls is not known.

Despite this loss, a lawsuit filed by Inland Valley Advocates for the Environment (IVAE) opposing the warehouse development reached

a settlement agreement of about \$500,000 that will be used to enhance or purchase habitat for Burrowing Owls in Southern California.

Meanwhile, the fight for the owls is continuing at the College Park Burrowing Owl Preserve, the Chaffey College fields, Chino Airport, and on land adjacent to the California Institute for Men in Chino.

Populations of Burrowing Owls (*Athene cunicularia*) have declined precipitously statewide as their habitat has been gobbled up by development. They have vanished from one-third of their former range in California.



The diminutive owls, not much bigger than robins, use underground burrows for sleeping, nesting, and protection from predators. In the western states, they don’t dig their own burrows but instead appropriate an underground nest from another burrowing animal such as a ground squirrel, rabbit, or badger. The owls will often sit partly underground in the entrance to their burrow to check out their surroundings. One of the delights of looking for these little owls is scanning a large field and spotting a round head with large yellow eyes popping up out of a burrow or seeing the owls looking directly at you and realizing that they saw you long before you spotted them!

In addition to habitat destruction from development, owls are also under threat from collisions with wind turbines and cars, rodenticides and the killing and removal of ground squirrels, whose burrows are used by Burrowing Owls.

Many thanks are due to PVAS’s dedicated Burrowing Owl Committee members including Paul Clarke, Carol Coy, Kim Dillbeck, Robin Ikeda, Kim Romich, April Schwass and Jeff Strogen as well as PVAS members who monitored Burrowing Owls at the Ontario airport and four other sites. Seth Thompson provided extensive technology and transportation support.

Much gratitude also goes to our partners in fighting for the creation of a Burrowing Owl preserve on some of that land: Professor Susan Phillips, Director of the Robert Redford Conservancy for Southern California Sustainability, and IVAE led by Lois Sicking Dieter.

Suzanne Thompson contributed to this article.

Using eBird to Probe the Mystery of Disappearing Phainopeplas in Claremont

By Scott Marnoy, M.D.

The comings and goings of birds have fired the imagination since ancient times. I recall vividly hearing geese honking at night while I lay in bed as they arrived on the Charles River during fall migration, near my hometown of Lexington, Mass.

Today we have a powerful tool to document a bird's presence anywhere in the world that people make observations: the eBird app for Android and iPhones. With the benefit of pooled observations in eBird, data can be acquired for any species and as observations accumulate over years, the data becomes ever so much more accurate and valuable.

Bar charts showing the relative abundance of a species can be found in eBird under the Explore tab and then specifying a Hotspot under Explore Hotspots. When the Hotspot comes up, scroll to the bottom to find the bar charts.

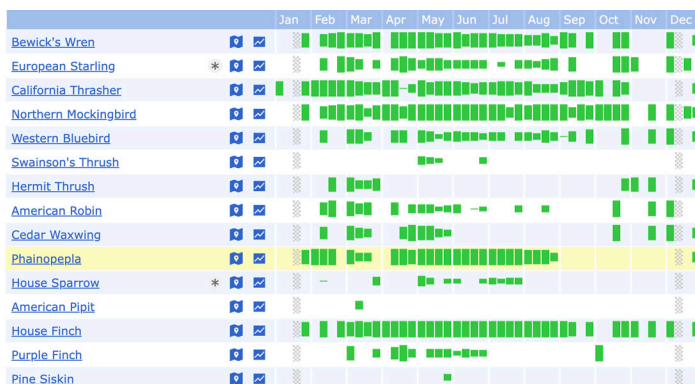
A glance at the bar charts for our own local Claremont Hills Wilderness Park shows that many species conform to just a handful of patterns. White-crowned Sparrows, Yellow-rumped Warblers and Ruby-crowned Kinglets appear in October and disappear in mid-April. Others, such as Northern Ravens, Bushtits, and Wrentits are present in much the same numbers year-round. A few, such as Wilson's Warblers and Swainson's Thrush, appear briefly during spring or fall migration and then move on to their breeding or wintering grounds.

What jumps out of the bar charts is the pattern of the Phainopepla. Phainopeplas, present in the park for much of the year, disappear in late summer with numbers beginning to taper in mid-August and then returning in early winter. No other bird in our area has this pattern of dispersal.

What is happening to Phainopeplas in the fall? The answer is not entirely clear, but it does introduce a fascinating aspect of their biology and the efforts to elucidate it.

To begin, Phainopeplas are intimately connected to mistletoe; so much so that in years where the mistletoe berry crop fails, Phainopeplas may not breed. They actively propagate mistletoe, a plant parasite, as they consume the berries and then defecate the mistletoe seeds on tree limbs where the seeds take root and form new masses of the plant. One bird may process up to 1,100 berries per day.¹ Some of their movements are clearly related to

Bar charts on eBird show Phainopeplas disappearing from Claremont in the fall.



Right:
Phainopeplas mysteriously disappear from Claremont in the fall.

Below:
Phainopeplas consume large quantities of mistletoe berries.



PHOTO BY SCOTT MARNOY



PHOTO BY SCOTT MARNOY

the availability of mistletoe fruits. They also catch flying insects.

It has been observed that Phainopeplas are among the very few birds that breed twice in a season in different locations. Are these the same individuals breeding first in one spot and later in another? That was long a bone of contention. It was known that breeding in the desert and coastal woodlands did not occur simultaneously but rather in different months: March and June respectively. In 2019, Baldassarre et al. sampled the genomes of woodland and desert populations of Phainopepla. In addition, they used GPS tags on selected individuals to document where they went.² They showed that the genomes of both populations were essentially the same;

these were not distinct populations living in reproductive isolation. Their GPS data showed that Phainopeplas did move from desert breeding grounds in the spring to woodland breeding sites in the summer.

What explains the apparent absence of Phainopeplas here in the fall? Is the observed absence simply a sampling error from too few observations? The Wilderness Park is intensively birded, and other species are documented to be present at the times that the Phainopeplas are absent, so this seems less likely. Are insects or berries exhausted by the end of the summer here in Claremont? The black flies seem to do just fine!

I discussed this with Kimball Garrett from the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. There are places in Los Angeles County where Phainopeplas are present all year such as at Placerita Canyon at the western end of the San Gabriel Mountains. At Malibu Creek on the coast, the population dips in February and March and peaks from May to October. At St. Andrew's Abbey on the desert slope of the San Gabriels, they are present year-round but less common from May to July. A simple desert-to-coast-to-desert model doesn't explain all these variations. Some condition in the Wilderness Park impels the Phainopepla to leave until early winter when conditions once again are favorable for these birds. It's clear that Phainopepla movements are even more complicated than once thought and still a good subject for a budding ornithologist.

1. <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Phainopepla>

2. Daniel T Baldassarre, Leonardo Campagna, Henri A Thomassen, Jonathan W Atwell, Miyoko Chu, Lisa H Crampton, Robert C Fleischer, Christina Riehl, GPS tracking and population genomics suggest itinerant breeding across drastically different habitats in the Phainopepla, *The Auk*, Volume 136, Issue 4, 1 October 2019, ukz058, <https://doi.org/10.1093/auk/ukz058>

My Best Day Birding: A Condor Dream Fulfilled

By *Patty Nueva Espana*

When I was a young girl growing up in California in the 1970s, there were two things I thought I might never see: Bald Eagles and California Condors. That was an overwhelmingly sad thought for me. At that time there were only about 400 nesting pairs of Bald Eagles in the lower 48 states and the population of California Condors had dwindled to just 22 individuals.

Luckily, with the knowledge of the causes of the birds' demise and the hard work of many, several decades later, the populations of both birds have increased. Bald Eagles are now a species of Least Concern, and I have had the pleasure to see a good number of them in the last decade. The thrill of it never gets old! Unfortunately, the California Condor is still Critically Endangered, but the good news is that their populations are increasing, and their range is expanding.



PHOTO BY PATTY NUEVA ESPANA

I recently had the opportunity to fulfill my childhood dream and set my eyes on a California Condor thanks to the Friends of California Condors Wild and Free, (friendsofcondors.org) an organization whose mission is to enhance public awareness of the endangered California Condor and ensure they are protected, healthy and free. They work in partnership with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service at the Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge, about 25 miles west of Grapevine, an area with a healthy population of condors.

It was such an amazing experience seeing not one but several condors soaring around me, circling overhead, close enough to see their tags. On the refuge, I was able to view a flight pen where they had just placed 12 captive-bred juveniles from the San Diego Zoo to eventually release into the wild. Since condors are social birds, several adults were hanging around to welcome the youngsters and show them the ropes. At one point there were 11 wild birds sitting on top of the flight pen. That's a total of 23 Condors in one spot at one time! More than the entire population that was wild and free when I was that young girl, wondering if I would get to see just one.

Chaparral Naturalist invites you to submit your first-person story of up to 350 words about your best day birding in one season, a year, or a lifetime!

PVAS Participates in “Whiskers and Wings” Catio Tour in Pasadena

By *PVAS President Tina Stoner*

The second annual Los Angeles Catio Tour launched from the Pasadena Humane Society on Saturday, Oct. 5. The term “catio” combines the words cat and patio and refers to an outdoor enclosure that allows cats to enjoy the outdoors while preventing them from killing birds and other wildlife. It also keeps them safe from dangers such as coyotes and cars.

The tour included an educational component where participants received information about the three bird species most frequently killed by cats: House Finches, House Sparrows and Mourning Doves. Three sites, out of a total of 10 on the tour, included a welcome table in the driveway of the home or apartment plus a full-color poster on the bird species being featured at that site.

PVAS president Tina Stoner was invited to be one of the educators and was assigned to a home featuring the Mourning Dove and a modest but clever catio designed by “the Catio Guy,” Alan Breslau. Her meet-greet-and-educate speech featured information about the origin of the Mourning Dove’s name, a brief listen to the call and wing whir, and fun facts about little-known crop milk produced by both parents to feed their young. Visitors were then escorted to the backyard where the homeowners showed them their catio and answered questions. About 50 visitors came to this site.



PHOTO BY TINA STONER

The after party was at the Gottleib Native Garden (thegottleibnativegarden.com/) featuring a talk by Alan Breslau and a tour of the property conducted by their naturalist Scott Logan. In addition to an amazing catio and the beauty of the California native plants, the garden is the site of education, scientific research and collaboration among a wide range of environmental organizations and projects. You may remember hearing about the garden in 2021 when our October guest speaker was Dr. Lisa Tell, DVM from UC Davis, who is the principal hummingbird investigator at the garden.

The Los Angeles Catio tour is presented by Teranga Ranch and partners.

Meetings

PVAS meetings take place at 7 p.m. in the Padua Room of the Alexander Hughes Center at 1700 Danbury Dr. in Claremont, generally on the first Thursday of each month from September through June.



Thursday, December 5, at 7 pm

Charlotte Chang – Do Nature-Based Climate Solutions Deliver Benefits to People and Wildlife?

Natural Climate Solutions help fight climate change by protecting and restoring natural environments like forests and wetlands. While helping the climate, these projects can also affect wildlife and human communities. Currently, we don't know if these impacts tend to be positive or negative. Chang's work, which used machine learning to review more than 2 million research papers, makes it easier for stakeholders and organizations to choose climate projects that will have the most positive effects while avoiding unintended negative consequences.

Charlotte Chang is an assistant Professor of Biology and Environmental Analysis at Pomona College.



Thursday, January 2, at 7 p.m.

Brian Elliott – A Winter Birding Trip through Japan, from the Winter Snows of Hokkaido to the Sub-tropical Island of Okinawa

PVAS Conservation Director, Brian Elliott, will give a presentation on his two-week birding trip with two friends and guide Gunnar Engblom in March 2022 to Japan. The trip took them from the winter snows of the northernmost island of Hokkaido to the subtropical warmth of Okinawa. On Hokkaido they encountered wintering cranes, including one of the rarest cranes in the world, the Red-crowned Crane.

Brian worked as a geologist before a long career teaching high school physics and environmental science. Retirement has allowed him to travel the globe on many birding trips.



Thursday, February 6 at 7 p.m.

Elise Ferree – Wintering White-crowned Sparrows at the Bernard Field Station and Beyond

Elise Ferree is currently investigating the behavior of migratory White-crowned Sparrows that migrate from Alaska to overwinter in Southern California. Her talk will highlight findings based on the past seven years of observations that examine how these sparrows return to and utilize the Bernard Field Station as an overwintering site. She will also share some preliminary data comparing the return rates and behavior of White-crowned Sparrows overwintering in Claremont suburban neighborhoods.

Dr. Elise Ferree teaches biology at the Department of Natural Sciences of Scripps and Pitzer Colleges.

See www.pomonavalleyaudubon.org for full details of presentations and presenter bios.

NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY (NAS) AND POMONA VALLEY AUDUBON (PVAS) MEMBERSHIP

We invite you to become a member of both NAS and PVAS. You also have the option of joining just PVAS. For either option, a yearly individual or family membership is \$20.

Check one:

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NAS mailing address: **NAS, PO Box 97194, Washington DC 20090**

PVAS mailing address: **PVAS, 2058 N. Mills, PMB 426, Claremont, CA 91711**

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Field Trips

See website for important information on field trip basics.

Saturday, January 11

Whittier Narrows (750 S. Santa Anita Ave., South El Monte) and the **San Gabriel Spreading Grounds** (Off Mines Avenue, Pico Rivera)

Difficulty: Easy to Moderate (up to 4 miles.)

Dan Gregory will lead us in search of wintering waterfowl, sparrows, flycatchers and more. Both locations are great places to find winter vagrants. Meet at 7:00 a.m. at Memorial Park in Claremont. Bring snacks, water, and lunch for a full day trip. Est. driving 70 miles. Contact Trip Leader: Dan Gregory (909) 456-4994 or DanRCRenee@verizon.net

Saturday and Sunday, January 18-19

Birding Weekend Trip to the Salton Sea

Salton Sea State Park Headquarters 100225 State Park Rd, Mecca and multiple locations. Difficulty: Easy to Moderate. Driving on good gravel roads with minimal walking, including some on uneven gravel roads.

The Salton Sea is a major wintering ground for shorebirds, ducks, geese, and Sandhill Cranes. It is also great for desert specialties such as Abert's Towhee, Verdin, Black-tailed Gnatcatchers and more with nearly 100 species expected. The trip begins at the headquarters at 8:00 a.m. From there we will caravan (carpooling recommended) along the east shore to multiple sites, ending at Unit 1 of the Sonny Bono National Wildlife Refuge at sunset to see the spectacular flights of geese and cranes. Lodging is available in the Brawley area and recommendations will be forthcoming. An optional second day of birding begins at dawn on Sunday at Unit 1 or other sites to be specified, with the trip winding up by 1:30 p.m. Contact trip leader Brian Elliott brianelli@aol.com or 909-241-8036 to RSVP and for last minute details.

Thursday, January 23

Birding the Newport Back Bay by Pontoon Boat

931 W Coast Hwy, Newport Beach - Difficulty: Easy

This is our Pelagic Trip for Landlubbers with excellent opportunities to see and photograph shorebirds, waterfowl, herons, ospreys and more from a covered pontoon boat. Meet at Memorial Park in Claremont by 8:30 a.m. or be at the Newport Sea Base by 10:00 a.m. Anticipate 2-2 1/2 hour trip. Attendance limited to 17 participants with sign-up no later than January 8. Cost \$15.00 per participant (Nonrefundable) via check made out to Pomona

Valley Audubon Society or via PayPal or Venmo. Mileage: 86 miles roundtrip. Contact trip leader Scott Marnoy at gopherus2@gmail.com BEFORE sending payment to reserve a spot.

Tuesday, February 11

Santa Fe Dam Recreation Area

15501 E. Arrow Highway, Irwindale - Difficulty: Moderate (walking up to 3 miles)

Patrick Gavit will lead us on this mid-week two-hour trip for year-round as well as over-wintering species including a variety of sparrows and water birds. Carpool from Memorial Park in Claremont at 7:00 a.m. or meet at Parking Lot #6 at 7:30 a.m. Bring snacks, water, and lunch if you'd like to stay in the park to eat after birding. No vehicle entry fee on weekdays this time of year. Est. driving 31 miles. Contact Trip Leader: Patrick Gavit ebiner.gavit@gmail.com or 626.214.6905.

Friday, February 21

San Jacinto Wildlife Area

17050 Davis Road, Lakeview -- Difficulty: Easy to Moderate (walking up to 3 miles)

An excellent site for waterfowl, Golden Eagles, shorebirds and more. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife requires all visitors to purchase a Lands Pass for admission unless one is in possession of a fishing or hunting license. Day passes can be obtained for \$5.66 (for 2024) online at <https://wildlife.ca.gov/licensing> or by calling (800) 565-1458, or in-person wherever fishing and hunting licenses are sold. Meet at 7:00 a.m. at Memorial Park in Claremont. Bring snacks, water, and lunch. Est. driving 110 miles. Contact Trip Leader: Dan Gregory (909) 456-4994 or DanRCRenee@verizon.net

Saturday, February 22, 2025

Lake Perris

Lake Perris 17801 Lake Perris Dr., Perris -- Difficulty: Easy to Moderate (walking up to 3 miles)

We'll take a walk at Lake Perris for wintering waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls, sparrows and raptors including Peregrine Falcon, osprey and Bald Eagle. Meet at 7:00 a.m. at Memorial Park in Claremont. Bring snacks, water, and lunch. There is a \$10 vehicle entry fee (\$9 if 62+ for 2023) at Lake Perris State Recreation Area. Est. driving 110 miles. Contact Trip Leader: Dan Gregory (909) 456-4994 or DanRCRenee@verizon.net

Bird Walks

First Sunday of the Month Family-Friendly Bird Walks at the California Botanic Garden

1500 N. College Ave. Claremont

Meet at the entrance at 8:00 a.m. for free admission. This family-friendly bird walk is approximately two hours long and is perfect for beginners and experienced birders alike. A limited number of loaner binoculars are available, and you will receive instructions on their use! PVAS volunteer Ken Burgdorff (gwrencaps@gmail.com) and others will lead the walks.

Dates: December 1, January 5 and February 2

Please RSVP with the botanic garden's reservation site (<https://www.calbg.org/events-programs/events>) by using the DATE SPECIFIC links for each month.

Fourth Sunday of the Month Bonelli Bird Walks

Frank G. Bonelli Regional Park in San Dimas

Difficulty: Moderate

Enjoy one of the richest birding sites in Southern California! We meet in the parking lot of Brackett Field Airport/Norm's Hangar Coffee Shop, at 1615 McKinley Ave., La Verne. Meet at 7:45 a.m. to caravan into the park for **free** entrance and an 8:00 a.m. walk lasting two to three hours. Don't forget your binoculars and comfortable shoes.

RSVP with leaders for desired date:

December 22: Brian Elliott brianelli@aol.com

January 26: Dan Stoebel dstoebel@mac.com

February 23: Leader TBD



PVAS will be hosting its 52nd annual Christmas Bird Count on Saturday, December 14th.

Anyone can join a counting team for this fun event. All levels of birding experience are welcome because the more eyes in the field the better! (And you'll be joined by experienced fellow members.) There is also an option to count from your home or nearby park on your own. For more information or to join a team, contact Seth Thompson at polpsych@gmail.com.



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PVAS Members' Efforts to Protect Burrowing Owl Featured in New Documentary

This fall, Emmy-Award winning filmmaker Ann Kaneko premiered her latest documentary film, "Operation Owl," about efforts by PVAS members and others to preserve local habitat for the Burrowing Owl.

"Operation Owl" features interviews with Burrowing Owl Committee chair Suzanne Thompson and members Paul Clarke and Robin Ikeda talking about the committee's campaign to save a parcel with several owl burrows located next to Ontario International Airport. Unfortunately, their efforts weren't successful due to the City of Ontario's decision to develop the land for distribution warehouses (see related story on Page 1.)

Kaneko, a visiting professor at Pitzer College's Intercollegiate Media Studies Department, showed her 18-minute film before

a large crowd at the Laemmle Claremont 5 theaters on Oct. 5 during a Clean Air Day film festival sponsored by Inland Valley Advocates for the Environment and other groups. The festival also included five short documentaries made by Claremont College students highlighting the loss of farmland and wildlife habitat due to recent and ongoing industrial development in the Inland Empire.

Kaneko's family personally experienced the plight of homeowners being pushed out of their homes by development forces.

In 1976, her parents moved her family from the Crenshaw area in Los Angeles to Chino to live the "country life" on a large plot. But her parents were ultimately pressured to sell their dream home to make way for business parks, Kaneko said.

Kaneko believes the continuing industrial development of the Inland Empire is an environmental justice issue – one with a strong nexus to bird and wildlife conservation.

"I am eager to use this film to bridge the nature conservancy and environmental justice communities together," Kaneko said in an email. "They should be allies in the climate struggle, and I feel like this film might help to forge those connections at least locally."



Filmmaker Ann Kaneko

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