

FURTHER RECORDS OF THE BIRDS OF THE KETTLEMAN HILLS AREA, CALIFORNIA

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In the four years since the publication of a report on the birds of the Kettleman Hills area (Wilson, Condor, 47, 1945:149-153), the number of species on the list for the area has increased from 66 to 103. Also continued observations have given a clearer idea of the status of some of the birds that occur here, and there has been opportunity to note some of the changes brought about by several unusually dry and cold seasons. During the winter of 1948-49 the hills were more barren of vegetation than at any time within the six and a half years covered by my records. This means that natural food is scarce, and there has been a consequent decrease in the numbers of birds and mammals seen. In the course of a drive through the hills several years ago we used to see quite a few ground squirrels, cottontails, jackrabbits, Ravens, Loggerhead Shrikes, California Quail, House Finches, Mourning Doves, Western Meadowlarks, and Red-tailed Hawks. Now we may see only one or two Ravens and Loggerhead Shrikes. In our yard we have noticed especially the decrease in numbers of Arkansas Goldfinches, Audubon Warblers, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and Mockingbirds.

The local population of game birds has been so greatly reduced in the past few years that the California Division of Fish and Game has not been able to carry out its plans to trap the annual surplus and use it to restock other areas (Glading, Enderlin, and Hjersman, Calif. Fish and Game, 31, 1945:139-156). Mr. Fred Ross, who is currently in charge of this game refuge, states in his letter of March 6, 1949, that the shortage of natural feed seems to be the ceiling factor. The watering devices are still being inspected twice a year, and some of the plantings for roost and escape cover are growing well. He also states: "Many birds were trapped, banded, tested for quail malaria and released again at trapping site in the years 1942-46 It would have been much better for hundreds of birds if we had been able to move them to areas containing better feed. Four check areas, 7Q, 2P, 27J, 19J, are censused twice annually in order that we may keep in touch with populations and perhaps have an opportunity to correlate fluctuations in Quail numbers with weather and climatic changes. No more Chukars are to be reared or released north of Tehachapi by State Pens, as plants made in this area have not made the desired progress."

Most of the species of birds we have added to our list since March, 1945, may be classed as vagrants or rare visitants. A few are kinds that are fairly common here, but we did not include them before because we had identified them only tentatively. We are including them now because the identifications have been confirmed.

Casmerodius albus. Common Egret. On October 23, 1945, one was standing on the flats just north of Avenal, near the edge of the Kettleman Hills (section 16P). It appeared to be resting, and it flew only short distances as I walked toward it. There are no ponds or other sources of water to attract a wader to the area, the ground being dry and cracked and covered sparsely with short grasses and very low bushes.

Branta canadensis. Canada Goose. The honking of flocks of geese was heard as they flew over Avenal going northwestward on the evenings of February 3, 1945, and February 2, 1946; a flock of about 75 was seen on the afternoon of January 23, 1947. A flock of about 50 geese of this species was seen on the ground on the Kettleman Plain near Avenal on January 20, 1946.

Elanus leucurus. White-tailed Kite. On May 10, 1945, we saw two of these hawks playing in the air over section 19J in the Kettleman Hills.

Accipiter striatus. Sharp-shinned Hawk. One was in an umbrella tree in our yard in Avenal on October 18, 1946, eating a sparrow-sized bird which it held in its claws. One also was seen in or

near our yard occasionally from November 10, 1946, until February 10, 1947, probably the same individual throughout the period.

Buteo swainsoni. Swainson Hawk. Hawks of this species were seen as follows: on the flats east of the Kettleman Hills on April 7, 1945; in Polvadero Gap on April 13, 1944; between Standard of California's 19B Plant and the Gujarral Hills on April 9, 1945 (two hawks) and on May 10, 1945; and on the Kettleman Plain between Avenal and Coalinga on May 24, 1945.

Falco columbarius. Pigeon Hawk. Seen in the Kettleman Hills on section 35J on March 19, 1945, and on section 3P on April 14, 1945; one was eating a small bird on the flats northeast of the Kettleman Hills on October 27, 1945.

Grus canadensis. Sandhill Crane. Notes of cranes were heard as irregular V-shaped flocks flew over the Kettleman Plain going northwestward on January 14, 1945 (over 100 birds) and on February 12, 1944 (about 40). Flocks going southeastward were heard and seen on October 25, 1947 (26 birds), October 30, 1947 (200 to 300), November 25, 1947 (about 20), December 9, 1948 (about 130), December 28, 1948 (72 or 73, circling), January 27, 1947 (about 5), and February 10, 1947 (about 32). Flocks were usually seen between 1:30 and 3:00 p.m.

Larus californicus. California Gull. On March 1, 1947, we saw an adult feeding on the carcass of a sheep on the flats just north and west of Kettleman City.

Columba fasciata. Band-tailed Pigeon. In a letter of March 6, 1949, Mr. Fred Ross states that a flock of 30 to 40 birds was seen on section 27J on January 10, 1949.

Otus asio. Screech Owl. George A. Wilson saw one on the night of August 4, 1947, by the lights of the change room at 11P Plant. For a few moments it stood on a handrail about six feet from him, looking around. Then it flew away into the darkness. The previous night Mr. Wilson had found an owl pellet near the rectifier in the plant.

Archilochus alexandri. Black-chinned Hummingbird. A female was in the Chinese elm in our yard on April 24, 1946. There were a few with other hummingbirds in a flowering locust tree in our neighbor's yard on April 19, 1948.

Selasphorus rufus. Rufous Hummingbird. One visited the flowers of vines and trees in and near our yard on March 3, 1947, March 11 and 12, 1945 and 1949, April 13, 1947, and on April 15, 20, and 27, 1948.

Balanosphyra formicivora. Acorn Woodpecker. One was seen moving around a telephone pole behind our yard on September 4, 1947, and on October 28, 1947. One flew over our yard on October 10, 1948.

Asyndesmus lewis. Lewis Woodpecker. One was seen near a house in 3P Camp in the Kettleman Hills on December 3, 1945. Another passed through our neighborhood in Avenal on September 13, 1948.

Sphyrapicus varius. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Mrs. H. A. Scharpenberg reported that one was pecking on the trees around her house in 3P Camp in the Kettleman Hills on October 9, 1945, and that it was fighting with a flicker on another day. I saw fresh holes on Chinese elm, Arizona ash, and arbor-vitae in her yard on October 26, 1945. I have seen sapsuckers of this species in or near our yard in Avenal on November 13, 1948, January 2, 1947, January 17, 1949, and January 25, 1948. On more than one occasion there have been fresh holes with sap running down the trunk of our pepper tree.

Empidonax difficilis. Western Flycatcher. Single birds were in the trees in our yard between April 20 and June 20 in 1944, 1945, 1946, 1947, and 1948, and between August 19 and October 20 in 1944, 1946, and 1947.

Nuttallornis borealis. Olive-sided Flycatcher. Seen in a yard in 3P Camp on September 6, 1945, and on the power lines behind our yard in Avenal on September 16, 1945, and between May 16 and July 25 in 1946, 1947, and 1948.

Tachycineta thalassina. Violet-green Swallow. On the afternoon of March 17, 1949, I saw a flock of 13 flying over the flats north of our house and several more flying over our yard. We have seen them several times recently flying over the fields near Coalinga.

Psaltriparus minimus. Bush-tit. In 1945 we saw flocks drifting through the trees in our yard on September 21, October 10, November 22, and December 26.

Toxostoma lecontei. LeConte Thrasher. In his letter of March 6, 1949, Mr. Fred Ross states that this species was "seen on west side of hills near present site of one of our 'Guzzlers' (self-maintaining watering device) in August, 1942."

Ixoreus naevius. Varied Thrush. On November 9, 1948, I saw one running on the lawn like a Robin. When I approached, it flew up into one of our umbrella trees, then flew to some cottonwoods half a block to the east. One was on the front lawn of the Avenal High School near the eucalyptus trees on March 7, 1949.

Phainopepla nitens. Phainopepla. George A. Wilson saw one flying across our yard on September 3, 1948.

Vireo gilvus. Warbling Vireo. Seen in our trees on April 28, 1947, April 28, 1948, May 14, 1948 (singing), May 20, 1946, August 13, 1946 (an adult and three young), August 14, 1946, and September 14, 1946.

Vermivora celata. Orange-crowned Warbler. Seen in our trees on September 16 and 20, 1945, March 12, 1949, April 20, 1947, and May 6, 1948.

Vermivora ruficapilla. Nashville Warbler. One with a Pileolated Warbler was eating aphids in the vines on the trellises over our front porch on April 30 and May 1, 1948.

Dendroica nigrescens. Black-throated Gray Warbler. Seen in this area when there were storms in the mountains to the southwest. One bird was seen in the cottonwoods on section 11P on October 5, 1945. One was in our umbrella trees on April 28, 1948.

Dendroica townsendi. Townsend Warbler. A female was hopping about among the leaves and branches of cottonwoods on section 11P on May 17 and 22, 1945.

Geothlypis trichas. Yellow-throat. A male and a female were in our yard all day on May 14, 1946. They stayed close to the ground near shrubbery of some sort, but hunted for insects in the grass. Several times we watched them from distances of about eight feet.

Icteria virens. Chat. Heard and seen in our trees between May 2 and 19 in 1946, 1947, and 1948; single birds, usually very shy.

Piranga ludoviciana. Western Tanager. We have seen them in our trees between April 25 and August 26 in 1946, 1947, and 1948, with increasing frequency each year. There were four on our back lawn on May 5, 1948, apparently catching insects in the grass.

Passerina amoena. Lazuli Bunting. Two, evidently male and female, were seen on the power lines behind our yard on August 15, 1946.

Hesperiphona vespertina. Evening Grosbeak. Three females and a male were eating seeds from the ground under eucalyptus trees on the front lawn of the Avenal High School on March 6, 1949. A male and five females were at the same place on March 7, 1949, and five females were on our front lawn on March 8, 1949.

Spinus tristis. American Goldfinch. Flocks seen in trees on section 11P in the Kettleman Hills, in our yard in Avenal, and near the Gujarral Hills between March 20 and April 26, 1945, on March 12 and April 4, 1946, on March 26, 1947, and between March 5 and 18, 1949.

Pipilo maculatus. Spotted Towhee. Single birds were in our trees or in our yard on October 5 and 14, 1947, between February 11 and March 12, 1948, and on October 27, 1948.

Amphispiza belli. Bell Sparrow. A few seen in the Kettleman Hills on section 18Q on May 18, 1947.

Zonotrichia coronata. Golden-crowned Sparrow. There was one on our back lawn near the hedge on May 5, 1948, May 6, 1945, and May 7, 1946. One was in a cottonwood by a building on section 11P on May 10, 1945.

Passerella iliaca. Fox Sparrow. About 1:30 p.m. on October 9, 1946, I saw one scratching on the ground under our pepper tree; it soon flew to a small peach tree in our neighbor's yard. It was evidently sick or very tired, for it sat quietly for at least 15 minutes and closed its eyes occasionally while I examined it from distances of four to ten feet. Finally it flew about 25 feet away, scratched on the ground again, and disappeared into a tangle of dry berry vines and weeds.

Of the 103 species now recorded from Avenal and the Kettleman Hills, only 14 seem to be common or abundant here. Thirty-two may be classed as fairly common in the proper season. All the rest (57 species) appear to be of rare or casual occurrence, for we have seen them only once or just a few times.

Recent records show that the early and late dates of many of the species discussed in 1945 should be extended a month or two. Some of the changes are great enough to be noted here. Species whose status or dates of occurrence have been altered by observations made since 1945 are as follows:

Residents:

Barn Owl. Fairly common.
Say Phoebe. Fairly common.
Rock Wren. Fairly common.
Brewer Blackbird. Common.

Summer visitants:

Bullock Oriole. Fairly common. April to July; September. Breeds.
Black-headed Grosbeak. Fairly common. April, May; July to September.

Winter visitants:

Hermit Thrush. Fairly common. September to May.
Cedar Waxwing. Common. October to May (one in August).

Migrant:

Oregon Junco. Fairly common. March, April; October to December.

Arenal, California, March 21, 1949.