

# Baja California Peninsula



## Richard A. Erickson

LSA Associates  
20 Executive Park  
Suite 200, Irvine, California 92614  
(richard.erickson@lsa-assoc.com)

## Robert A. Hamilton

34 Rivo Alto Canal  
Long Beach, California 90803  
(robb.hamilton@gte.net)

## Roberto Carmona

Departamento de Biología Marina  
Universidad Autónoma de Baja California Sur  
Apartado Postal 19-B  
La Paz, Baja California Sur, Mexico  
(beauty@uabcs.mx)

## Eduardo Palacios

Ecología, Centro de Investigación Científica  
y Educación Superior de Ensenada  
Miraflores 334, Fracc. Bella Vista  
La Paz, Baja California Sur 23050, Mexico  
U.S. mailing address: P.O. Box 434844  
San Diego, California 92143-4844  
(epalacio@cicese.mx)

**I**t was a quiet season generally, with most observations coming from the northwestern and northeastern portions of Baja California, as is usual. However, some interesting birds were seen in the southern Gulf of California, where reports are typically rare.

**Abbreviation:** C.P.G.P. (Cerro Prieto geothermal ponds).

### LOONS THROUGH TERNS

Clark's Grebes nested at C.P.G.P. for the 2nd consecutive year: a nest with one egg was

there 20 May (ph. MJI, RAE). Fifteen Pelagic Cormorants at Islas Todos Santos (both islands) 11 Jun were nesting near the s. edge of their breeding range (EP et al.). White-faced Ibis were recorded in the nw. and ne., including a high count of 55 at Presa Rodríguez, above Tijuana 11 Jul (MSM et al.). Modest numbers of Gadwalls, Mallards, Cinnamon Teal, and Ruddy Ducks were found nesting in the nw. (m.ob.). Ducks more unusual in summer included a male Blue-winged Teal s. of Playas de Tijuana 11 Jun; a male Northern Pintail at Presa Emilio López Zamora, above Ensenada 11 Jun; and a male Ring-necked Duck on the Maneadero Plain 10 Jun (all RAE). Most unusual were 3 Green-winged Teal at Presa Rodríguez 11 Jun (DSC et al.).

Ospreys nested at El Sauzal in 2002 and 2003, and a lone Osprey was seen at the nest site on 1 Jul (RAE). The season's only Northern Harrier pair was at La Salina 10 Jun (RAE). Two Clapper Rails heard at "Balandra Bay" 22 Jun were the first to be found on Isla Carmen (v.r. MG). An aseasonal Greater Yellowlegs was on the Maneadero Plain 11 Jun (RAE). Single Wandering Tattlers, apparently summering in B.C.S., were at Isla San José 13 Jun (LS, RC) and at Isla Santa Catalina 17 Jun (MG). An estimated 10–15 Red Knots were at C.P.G.P. 24 Jul (KAR, CR).

A South Polar Skua near Los Islotes in the s. Gulf 4 Jun (MG) fit the incipient Regional pattern of records in May–Jun and Oct–Nov. At least 63 ad. Laughing Gulls were at C.P.G.P. 3 Jul, where small numbers occasionally nest; 2 ad. Yellow-footed Gulls were also present (both KLG, KCM). More unexpected was an ad. Herring Gull there 24 Jul (KAR, CR). The nw. coast has built up a smattering of spring and fall Gull-billed Tern records, the latest pertaining to an ad. at Estero Punta Banda 10 Jun (RAE); nesting birds in sw. *San Diego* regularly cross the border to forage along the shore (*vide* KCM). Notable terns at C.P.G.P. included 2 Elegants 20 May (ph. MJI, RAE) and 3 Commons, a Least, and 100–120 Blacks 24 Jul (KAR, CR).

### DOVES THROUGH WAXWINGS

Several species of columbids are common in the Mexicali Valley, but a count of 500 White-winged Doves along the Río Colorado near Algodones 24 Jul (KAR, CR) was exceptional. Eurasian Collared-Doves continued to consolidate their status mid-peninsula: 5 were at Villa Jesus Maria 24 Jun, and 4 were at Guerrero Negro in Jul (AG). Belted Kingfishers are early fall migrants, as shown by individuals in the nw. at La Misión 12 Jul (DSC et al.) and in the Vizcaino Desert at Misión San Borja 16 Jul (RC, JAC). Among the last of the spring migrants was the season's only reported Willow Flycatcher, at La Salina 10 Jun (RAE). Pacific-slope Flycatchers were found in several low-elevation oak-

### Absent Lower Río Colorado River Specialties

**SA** Although there have been no likely reports of the U.S. Endangered Southwestern Willow Flycatcher (*E.t. extimus*) in the Region since the mid 1980s (*Monographs in Field Ornithology* 3: 131), hope remains that nesting birds will be found. Extensive surveys along the U.S. portion of the lower Colorado River revealed 218 individuals in 2001 (R.L. McKernan and G. Braden. 2002. Status, distribution, and habitat affinities of the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher along the Lower Colorado River: Year 6—2001. unpubl. report to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Boulder City, NV.) and aerial surveys of the Mexican portion of the river suggest that an ample amount of suitable habitat is available, at least in wet years (McKernan, pers. comm.). Among other species of concern reported by McKernan and Braden on the Arizona side of the river south of Yuma were the following, all unrecorded recently—or ever—on Mexican portions of the river: Elf Owl, Gilded Flicker, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Lucy's Warbler, and Summer Tanager.

riparian situations in nw. Baja California 12–13 Jul (MSM et al.): San José de la Zorra; above San Antonio Necua (including juvs.); and Arroyo San Carlos, near Maneadero.

Bell's Vireos were recorded at new locations in addition to those listed in the spring report: km 65.5 on Hwy. 3, s. of Tecate, 11 Jul (including juvs.; MSM et al.); above San Antonio Necua 13 Jul (MSM et al.); and in the Vizcaino Desert at Misión San Borja 16 Jul (5 birds, including a fledgling; RC, JAC). More unusual was an aseasonal bird on Isla San Francisco, n. of La Paz, 10 Jun (JAC, AC); however, note a similar record from Isla Cedros in Jul 1999 (*Monographs in Field Ornithology* 3: 223). Single Tree Swallows at Presa Rodriguez 11 Jul (DSC et al.) and C.P.G.P. 24 Jul (KAR, CR) were likely fall migrants, but Barn Swallows on the n. coast at Cantamar 1 Jul (2; RAE) and La Joya 11 Jul (MSM et al.) might not have been, as the Region's only confirmed nesting site is nearby Islas Los Coronados. Far from its boreal breeding range was a Ruby-crowned Kinglet on Isla San José, B.C.S. 11 Jun (†LS, DS), representing the first summer report for the Region away from I. Guadalupe. Following the spring report, another Blue-gray Gnat-

catcher was found in low-elevation nw. Baja California, above San Antonio Necua 13 Jul (DSC et al.).

### WARBLERS THROUGH FINCHES

Orange-crowned Warbler is a local summer resident in the nw. corner of the Region, and more than usual were reported this season. One at El Sauzal 10 Jun was followed the next day by one at Islas Todos Santos and an ad. feeding a juv. at Presa Emilio López Zamora in Ensenada (all RAE). Later, 2 were on Arroyo San Carlos 12 Jul with one above San Antonio Necua the following day (all MSM et al.). Nine singing Yellow Warblers were at scattered locations from s. of Playas de Tijuana to se. of Maneadero 10–11 Jun (RAE), and nesting was confirmed on Arroyo San Carlos 12 Jul, when a male was photographed feeding a juv. (AH et al.). For the 3rd consecutive spring, an American Redstart was found on one of the n. Pacific islands, this time on Islas Todos Santos 11 Jun (RAE).

On 10 Jun, a Chipping Sparrow was singing in the same olive grove on the Maneadero Plain in which nesting was confirmed in 2003 (RAE). Away from breeding areas in nw. Baja California, a Black-chinned

Sparrow in cultivated land at Misión San Borja 16 Jul (RC, JAC) was unexpected on that date. Away from the major estuaries, Belding's Savannah Sparrows (*P. s. beldingi*; Threatened in Mexico, Endangered in California) were reported this spring/summer at the Río Guadalupe estuary, La Salina, Islas Todos Santos, and El Rosario, all known localities. Five Scott's Orioles, involving one or two family groups, were at Arroyo San Carlos 12 Jul (DSC et al.); this is the northernmost site near the coast at which the species has been found nesting in recent years (cf. *Western Birds* 26: 152). On 12 Jul, 5 American Goldfinches were at La Misión (MSM et al.), a location from which we are aware of no previous records.

**Contributors:** Roberto Carmona, José Alfredo Castillo, Lyann A. Comrack, Daniel S. Cooper, Andrea Cuéllar, Richard A. Erickson, Erin Fernandez, Kimball L. Garrett, Mike Greenfelder, Franklin Gress, Antonio Gutierrez, Alan Harper, Steve N.G. Howell, Marshall J. Iliif, Pablo Lobera, Kathy C. Molina, Eduardo Palacios, Cindy Radamaker, Kurt A. Radamaker, Mike San Miguel, Dalia Saravia, Luis Sauma, Michael B. Trotta. ☉

### Important Bird Area: the Lower Río Santo Tomás

**SA** The oak and riparian woodland along the lower Río Santo Tomás has long been recognized as an important area for nesting landbirds such as the Least Bell's Vireo. Less well-known are some of the river's other attributes, such as its scrub-bird community and desert species. Comrack and Howell visited the valley 7–8 May and shared some of their highlights. Confirmed and presumed breeders included Say's Phoebe, Vermilion Flycatcher, Bell's Vireo (11 males), Violet-green Swallow, Cactus Wren, California Gnatcatcher, Orange-crowned Warbler, Yellow Warbler (11–12 males), Yellow-breasted Chat (23 males), Black-chinned Sparrow (3–4 males), Sage Sparrow (3–4 males), Grasshopper Sparrow, Black-headed Grosbeak (12 males), Blue Grosbeak (two pairs plus 2 males), Tricolored Blackbird (10 flyovers), Scott's Oriole (pair plus singing male), and Lawrence's Goldfinch. They were pleased by the Brown-headed Cowbird's relative scarcity, with only 9 observed. The mouth of the river does not support a large saltwater marsh, but the endangered Light-footed Clapper Rail (*R. l. levipes*) has been recorded there on a few occasions in fall. Along with other areas on the rapidly developing nw. coast of Baja California (e.g., lower Río Descanso, lower Río Guadalupe, La Salina, Lagunita El Ciprés, Estero Punta Banda/Maneadero Plain), this area deserves protection.

## State of the Region

**Daniel S. Cooper** • Director of Bird Conservation • Audubon California  
11340 West Olympic Boulevard, Suite 209 • Los Angeles, California 90064 • (dcooper@audubon.org)

**Roberto Carmona** • Departamento de Biología Marina • Universidad Autónoma de Baja California Sur  
Apartado Postal 19-B • La Paz, Baja California Sur, Mexico • (beauty@uabcs.mx)

**Richard A. Erickson** • LSA Associates  
20 Executive Park • Suite 200, Irvine, California 92614 • (richard.erickson@lsa-assoc.com)

The Baja California Peninsula is one of the wildest places in North America and is immediately adjacent to one of the continent's most urbanized (and still rapidly-growing) regions—southern California. An effort to catalogue the areas of Mexico most important to birds—paralleling the Important Bird Area approach of BirdLife International and Audubon—has resulted in the identification of 35 "AICAS" (*Áreas de Importancia para la Conservación de Aves*) on the Baja California Peninsula (Benitez

et al. 1999). Most of the sites mentioned below are AICAS, with the notable exception of the scrub and riparian habitats of northwestern Baja California (which are included as the southern terminus of Bird Conservation Region 32—Coastal California).

The most threatened location in the Region is Isla Guadalupe, 280 km off the Pacific coast. Six endemic bird taxa and four additional populations are extinct, and Stattersfield et al. (1998) estimated that thousands of feral goats still ravage the island. Though goats are currently being eradicated in a project conducted by the NGO Grupo de Ecología y Conservación de Islas, the Mexican Secretary of Natural Resources, the Mexican Navy, and the island's fishing cooperative (B. R. Tershey, pers. comm.), the goats' effects on birds were most recently described by Ceballos et al. (2000) and Unitt (2000), who confirmed that, of an historically endemic-rich forest avifauna, only the Guadalupe Junco remains. Two other endemic subspecies remain common: the generalist House Finch and Rock Wren, which probably has benefited from the devastation.

Also highly degraded is the Delta Río Colorado, where a maze of tamarisk-lined drainage channels has replaced much of the cottonwood-willow forest and freshwater wetlands interspersed with seasonal alkali lakes. Recent work (*N.A.B.* 57: 549) has documented the persistence of a semi-intact desert riparian bird community, albeit one strongly dependent on cyclical flood events that partially compensate for the water diverted to human uses upstream. The decline of fish-eating waterbirds at

the Salton Sea just across the U.S. border—an integral part of this ecosystem—is expected to impact avian use of the delta (e.g., recent observations of “thousands” of American White Pelicans on the Rio Hardy; D.W. Anderson, pers. comm.).

The islands off both coasts of the peninsula are important breeding grounds for about 30 species of seabirds, due to the availability of nesting sites, high marine food productivity, and relative isolation from human disturbance (Anderson 1983, Carmona et al. 1994, Velarde and Anderson 1994). These include endemics and quasi-endemics such as Black-vented Shearwater, Black and Least Storm-Petrels, Yellow-footed and Heermann’s Gulls, Elegant Tern, and Craver’s and Xantus’s (*hypoleucus* race) Murrelets (Everett and Anderson 1991, Velarde and Anderson 1994, Wolf 2002). Also present are exceptionally large nesting concentrations of Brown Pelicans, Brown and Blue-footed Boobies and, at Bahía Magdalena, the world’s largest colony of Magnificent Frigatebirds.

Despite the aforementioned isolation, human disturbance has resulted in the decrease or even extirpation of several nesting colonies. These activities are often associated with temporary fishing camps erected on otherwise uninhabited islands. U.S.-based sport fishermen also regularly visit colonies when in the Region, and when the visits coincide with the breeding season, the effects can be detrimental and lasting, particularly for large species such as Brown Pelican. The best hope of addressing this problem may be with the internalization of “best conservation practices” by tourist guides, although many visitors arrive on private vessels. Commercial sardine and anchovy harvesting has been correlated to changes in marine bird diet and prey-length (Velarde et al. 1995), though the long-term effects of these changes are unknown. The most serious problems on these islands result from introduced invasive fauna (pigs, goats, dogs, cats, rats, and mice), which have had particularly dramatic effects on cavity-nesting taxa and endemic landbirds. Fortunately, one or more introduced mammals have been eradicated from 24 islands in the Region (Tershy et al. 2002; B. R. Tershy, pers. comm.).

Back on the mainland, in the northwestern corner of Baja California, urban expansion along the border and the northern coast (the latter mainly for tourism) has already led to the degradation of irreplaceable, endemic-rich coastal landscapes, though surprisingly large blocks of intact sage and succulent scrub are still available for conservation. As the population of Mexico and northern Central America shifts ever northward (Tijuana is one of Mexico’s largest cities), demands for housing and recreation will continue to drive growth here. For birds, this has major ramifications on the persistence of endemic scrubland and grassland taxa such as San Diego Cactus Wren (*C. b. sandiegensis*). Though some taxa (e.g., California Gnatcatcher) are now believed to be widespread within this ecoregion, the status of others, such as Grasshopper Sparrow, is much less well known (Wurster et al. 2001), and fieldwork is needed to identify breeding and wintering populations for conservation activity.

Endemic and/or imperiled taxa of northwestern (= Californian) riparian systems, such as Least Bell’s Vireo (*V. b. pusillus*) and Yellow Warbler, persist locally in numbers depressed by agriculture, gravel extraction (e.g., Rio Guadalupe, Rio San Carlos), and groundwater pumping. Disturbingly, though, recent fieldwork has shown extirpation patterns similar to those in Alta California, in that these drainages have lost the most sensitive taxa such as *occidentalis* Yellow-billed Cuckoo and *extimus* Willow Flycatcher. However, the same fieldwork has revealed remnant populations of Black Rail (*N.A.B.* 56: 361), long extirpated from southwestern California.

At the opposite end of the peninsula, the Cape Region is urbanizing from Cabo San Lucas northward. Threats include tourism-associated recreation and urbanization, which lead to degradation of isolated freshwater wetlands (critical for Least Grebe and Belding’s Yellowthroat) and coastal environments such as Estero San Jose. Some of the most intact palm oases are found here (and locally farther north through the desert clear to the U.S. border). Their importance to birds—particularly as stopover habitat for migrants—is poorly understood, but threats include water extraction, arson, over-grazing, dumping, and off-road vehicles (Arriaga and Rodriguez-Estrella 1997). Agricultural expansion in central and northern Baja California Sur is impacting native desert scrub, and this is also a concern farther north in the San Quintín area.

Coastal wetlands are at least as threatened in the Region as they are in the United States. The northwestern coast has two mid-sized estuaries: Estero Punta Banda, near Ensenada, and San Quintín; both are heavily used by sensitive birds and are essentially unprotected. Their large populations of Light-footed Clapper-Rail (*R. l. levipes*) and wintering Brant may be most threatened by tourism/recreation use and by resort development. At mid-peninsula, the sprawling, twin estuaries of Ojo de Liebre and San Ignacio continue to fight off proposals for salt extraction and shrimp aquaculture, despite their location within the Vizcaino Biosphere Preserve and their popularity as ecotourism resorts (mostly for whale-watching). To the south, a third massive Pacific estuary complex, Bahía Magdalena, is not currently protected. It must be noted that for birds—especially shorebirds—certain modified wetland habitats such as salt ponds are extremely attractive (Danneman et al. 2002); problems arise when they replace native, intact salt marsh and mangrove swamp.

Finally, unforeseen threats appear unexpectedly, often the result of development proposals for relatively pristine natural areas. Recent efforts to site a liquefied natural-gas terminal (alternately



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proposed for Is. Los Coronados and for the long sweep of maritime scrub north of Ensenada) exemplify the problem, as does the push to establish a chain of ports and associated infrastructure along the Pacific coast (the “*Escalera Nautica*”), which has already carved wide, new roads through previously-untouched scrub habitats rich in endemic plants and animals.

We wish to end on a positive note, acknowledging a still-growing appreciation of natural resources by the Mexican people and their government, as shown by the establishment of several large protected areas (biosphere reserves; the protection of most islands in the Gulf of California) and by the work of private organizations such as Conservación de Islas, Niparaja, ProEsteros, ProNatura, and Terra Peninsular. Works by Caballos and Márquez Valdelamar (2000) and Gómez de Silva and Oliveras de Ita (2003) are examples of recent additions to the Mexican literature. Binational conservation efforts are also underway and will be especially important in lowland habitats closest to California and Arizona. With sufficient effort, the Region’s existing avifauna—so rich in endemism—will be preserved.

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