

Hi Birdos4Eric,

Well, if February was tough for finding new birds for my year's list, March was tougher. I continue to tick off Bay Area birds, meaning that the list of new birds to see grows shorter. A few brief forays away from home helped extend the list a bit. I'm really looking forward to next month, though, when I'll be joining the GGAS Travel Program on a trip to South Texas. Lots of new birds to see there! In the meantime, for Bay Area birds I'm doing what birders traditionally do—I'm checking local reports for birds I haven't seen yet and relying on the help of my birding friends, a wonderful group of people (and I'm hoping that those spring arrivals come soon!)

March began with me on the final two days of a Golden Gate Audubon birdwatching trip—the trip to Baja that I wrote about last month. When I left off, we were done with the whales but preparing to spend the last two trip nights in a lovely small town, Todos Santos. Trip leader Juan-Carlos Solis had a favorite birding spot on the edge of town that we visited the first morning in Todos Santos. At daybreak, we saw a large raptor perched at the top of the tree. Juan-Carlos originally thought it was a Common Black Hawk, a relatively rare species. But he later determined it to be a Zone-tailed Hawk, which was rare enough that most of our group had never seen one.

Our target bird was the Gray Thrasher, one of Baja's six endemic species. We spotted a pair of them in the early morning light—on the edge of a rubbish heap. The scenery wasn't too pretty but the birds were great. And that proved to be the theme of the morning—what could have been a lovely park on the edge of town was neglected and used as a dump, but proved to be a home to a suite of beautiful birds. In addition to seeing warblers that are common in the Bay Area—Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned—we saw the rarer Nashville and MacGillivray's. And other members of the morning's colorful entourage included Gilded Flickers, Hooded and Scott's Orioles, Northern Cardinals, and another appearance of the endemic Xantus's Hummingbird.

At our last dinner in Todos Santos, Juan-Carlos told us we could sleep in the next day since we'd been getting up very early most mornings. I asked him whether he himself would be going out to look at birds.

"Do you want to go?" he asked.

"Of course, I replied.

My friends Bob and Margie Gomez who were sitting next to me said "We're in!"

So the next morning we set off again at sunrise for the same spot we had birded the previous morning. I hadn't gotten very good photos the first day and wanted a chance to try again. Fortunately, the Gray Thrasher was prepared to cooperate. He was not only near the same rubbish heap but this time he was also content to parade around in front of it, almost oblivious to our presence. The orioles also presented themselves for a photo opportunity as did the Xantus's Hummingbird—a great last morning for the Baja trip.



Gray Thrasher



Xantus's Hummingbird



Scott's Oriole

When I returned from Baja, I resumed chasing local birds—a trip to the Tilden Park Nature Area (where I had seen the Red-breasted Sapsucker last month) netted me a Rufous Hummingbird and a Hutton's Vireo. Venturing a bit further afield, I drove out to West Sacramento for another lost bird that was making news, a Garganey, a Eurasian Duck that on occasion finds itself on the West Coast. This particular bird was attracting almost as much attention as the Red-flanked Bluetail that had taken up residence at the Clarke Library in Los Angeles. Luckily, it wasn't pouring rain when I went looking for the duck (as it had been in Los Angeles with the bluetail).

Robin Agarwal, a kind-hearted birder I met when I arrived, took me to where she had seen it earlier. It wasn't there, however, and Robin concluded it must be on the far side of the island where it liked to spend most of its time sleeping. Fortunately, there was a path that ran around the lake and Robin and I trudged through the overgrown spots, me lugging my scope. Within minutes, we located it—doing just what Robin had said—having a snooze on the island's beach. On the way back to my car, I got a bonus bird—my first Yellow-headed Blackbird of the year. By this time more people were arriving and I pointed to the far side of the pond.



Another out-of-place bird: a Garganey in West Sacramento—photo by Robin Agarwal

That same day I had read about White-winged Scoters at San Leandro Marina. Going to San Leandro meant driving back to Berkeley and then continuing south for another 20 miles. But from talking to Bob Lewis, I know two things: 1) this could be a tough bird to get, and 2) San Leandro Marina was the best place to see it. There was also a report of a Long-tailed Duck that had been seen at the marina as well. No choice but to drive! The long drive paid mixed dividends: I found two of the White-winged Scoters, but the Long-tailed Duck eluded me.

Two other local trips were productive that week. The first was to Black Diamond Mines Regional Preserve for a Prairie Falcon I had been seeking since Bruce Mast had taken me out to Sonoma County last month targeting Prairie Falcons there. At Black Diamond I saw a pair of them where they had been reported for several days previously. I also got another bird that somehow I hadn't seen yet this year—a White-breasted Nuthatch. (Funny how it happens sometimes that when it rains it pours—after not having seen this bird for the previous two and a half months, I saw a dozen or so in one week.)

At the second spot, Heather Farm Park, I picked up a bird that has apparently been wintering in Walnut Creek for several years now—a Tropical Kingbird. It's another bird that's really out of place, but this individual bird has been turning up in this park for several years now, so people expect it to be there during the winter. The day I went, there was a guy who seemed a bit desperate to find it. I explained that I had just arrived, so he wandered off when he realized I had no information on the bird's whereabouts. But it proved pretty easy to find since it's got such a bright yellow belly. I watched it catching bees for about ten minutes as the bird slowly attracted a small fan club.



Tropical Kingbird eating a bee

Midmonth Susan and I headed to northeast California on a trip to see the Greater Sage Grouse with Golden Gate Audubon staff and board members. Bruce Mast and I had set up the trip as a

Birdathon fundraiser for GGAS, and it was being led by Bruce and Dave Quady (who with Bob Lewis coordinates the annual Oakland Christmas Bird Count for Audubon.) But because Bruce is Bruce, he emailed each of us some suggestions for birding on the drive north to Susanville.

So our first stop was near a freeway underpass in an industrial section of Sacramento. I had checked Google maps (twice!) the night before; this place didn't look like a promising birding hotspot. But apparently a small colony of Purple Martins (a rare bird in California) nest at this location and so can be seen there regularly. As we approached the spot, I could tell Susan was skeptical. I must admit, so was I. *Sibley Birds West* describes these birds as "uncommon and local" and goes on to say "Nests in manmade martin houses placed in the open near water." Ahead was a dry vacant lot strewn with trash and lots of freeway infrastructure in the background. Not a promising site for a martin house. But there they were, flying fast, making large circles over our heads. We pulled off the road and I got out and watched them for about ten minutes. Bruce does it again.

Our second stop was a side road an hour north of Reno but in California, peppered on each side with mature juniper trees. The target was, of course, the Juniper Titmouse, another rare bird in California. Apparently it looks just like the Oak Titmouse that frequents our garden in Berkeley (*Sibley* characterizes the two species as "nearly identical.") But whereas Oak Titmice (Titmouses?) are common, Junipers aren't. Thirty minutes of searching didn't turn one up (in fact, our search turned up no birds at all.)

But the next morning was remarkable. We awoke in the dark at 4:15 and drove about 40 minutes to the lek site. A "lek" is a parade grounds for male birds where they dance and do displays intended to attract the females of the species. In the case of Greater Sage Grouses, the dance they do is over the top. But getting there not only involved a drive in the dark, it also required a hike in the dark. Both Susan and I had forgotten to bring headlamps, so the footing was a bit dicey—that is until Susan remembered she had her cell phone with an excellent built-in flashlight. (In the meantime, our friend Linda Carloni stepped in a large puddle; she pointed out that she was lucky—most of the puddle was frozen and the bit that wasn't instantly froze on her jean leg. She was fine until it thawed out about an hour later.)

After about 20 minutes of walking, Dave Quady announced we were in the right spot. The first glimmerings of light were appearing in the East and we peered through scopes and binoculars to a spot about 50 yards in front of us. I thought I detected movement. Then several shapes emerged. I realized I was watching a small group of males who had begun to strut their stuff. As it got lighter the male sage grouses came into full view. There were eleven of them in total, and they would come together in small groups for dance-offs. In addition to arresting tail displays, the birds inflate two air sacs on their chests and bang them together with a sound that carries beyond the lek. What an amazing spectacle!



Waiting in the dark for the Greater Sage Grouse. Photo by Dan Roth.

We watched the dancing for about an hour. Near the end, four females were spotted, watching the action from the fringe. Well, not watching that closely. They didn't seem to be very impressed by the moves of the males, and they kept wandering off.

As we came down the hill, the sun was up and there was beautiful light on the Western Meadowlarks and Horned Larks. Bruce and Dave had hoped to deliver the "sage trifecta," so they began the search for a Sagebrush Sparrow when the group reached the bottom of the hill. *Sibley Birds West* describes it as "secretive and hard to see," but we ended up seeing three of these small birds. And a few minutes later we completed the trifecta when a Sage Thrasher turned up where the sparrows had been. This bird looked similar to the Gray Thrasher that had begun my month in Baja. The sun was barely over the horizon but this trip was off to a fabulous start. (For more Greater Sage Grouse dancin', check out <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cel8gLMl9Vs>. You won't be disappointed!)



The Sage Trifecta (courtesy of Bruce Mast): Sagebrush Sparrow, Greater Sage-Grouse, Sage Thrasher

For the rest of the first day, we stayed mostly close to Susanville, birding the area around the river that runs through town and later around the water treatment plant on the outskirts of town. We didn't turn up anything too unusual in town but at the sewage treatment ponds we observed eleven species of ducks and what proved to be a life bird for many in the group (including me!), a Rough-legged Hawk. Later in the afternoon we headed further afield where we caught up with a Lewis's Woodpecker. After a fruitless look for a Harris's Sparrow, about

half the group, having been up since about 4 AM, decided to call it quits, including the group in my car. (It was with trepidation that I later asked Bruce what I had missed—the Northern Shrike, a bird I've only seen once in California. Oh, well....)

The next day we headed north out of town into a forested area called Jack's Valley where we saw a couple of rarities—three Townsend's Solitaires and a White-headed Woodpecker. Susan had loved seeing the Lewis's Woodpecker the day before (a new bird for her), and she's got a soft spot for the White-headed Woodpecker, a bird we first observed in the Southern California mountains last spring. Dropping down into a large valley that was crisscrossed by numerous streams, we again saw a diverse population of ducks, as well as Tundra Swans (which I hadn't seen yet this year) and huge numbers of geese—Canada, Greater-white Fronted, and Snow. Bruce estimated there to be about 2,000 of the Snow Geese—a beautiful sight when they all took flight. A few minutes later we stopped under a tree where another Rough-legged Hawk was perched. I opened the sunroof on the car and got a good shot of the bird overhead, looking down at us.



White-Headed Woodpecker by Dan Roth; Snow Geese (and snow); Rough-legged Hawk

We dropped down to Eagle Lake where we continued to see a large variety (and big numbers) of ducks. Several people got very excited when bluebirds appeared along the lake—first Western then a dozen Mountain. We got a close-up look at a juvenile Bald Eagle that Susan spotted and a more distant look at a Prairie Falcon—but the falcon obliged us by changing places several times and giving us interesting views. Bruce was the only one in our group who got the Juniper Titmouse.

Our last stop was at the home of the Orrings, friends of Dave who had invited us to visit and watch the birds from their two decks. We picked up a couple of new birds here—Cassin's Finch and Mountain Chickadee—but the real pleasure here was hanging out with the Orrings, two extremely hospitable folks who really know their birds! On the way home, we stopped outside of Winters so that Susan could visit her retired horse, Leo—and I could get in some last birding for the weekend. Lo and behold—I picked up a couple of American Goldfinches—my first ones for the year.

When I got back from the sage grouse trip, I resumed my pattern from the beginning of the month—watching the local eBird lists to see what others had been turning up. In particular, I wanted two wrens: the Winter Wren and the Canyon Wren. I noticed that one of my pals who took the GGAS/California Academy of Sciences Master Birding Program, Dawn Lemoine, had a pretty good string of birds that kept appearing on my eBird “need lists” for Contra Costa and Alameda counties. The day after Dawn saw a Winter Wren in the Tilden Regional Park Botanical Garden, I was there when the gates opened. Knowing that the bird would probably be near the small creek that runs through the garden, I followed the creek until I found a wren. Easier than I expected!

But the Canyon Wren proved to be a different story. I looked for one that was reported at Black Diamond Mines. No luck. Then I noticed that not only was the Canyon Wren being reported at Castle Rock Regional Park, but that a rare Harris’s Sparrow had been seen there and was apparently attracting a lot of attention. I went out to Castle Rock and spend a morning looking for the bird. Again, no luck. But I had the good fortune of meeting a local birding legend, George Paton, who at 81 years old had recently had triple-bypass surgery but was out doing Big Years in the six of the nine bay area counties. Amazing guy. While I was with George, we both saw our first Bullock’s Oriole for the year and that same day I also saw my first Wilson’s Warbler—a wonderful bright yellow bird with a small black-cap.

A couple of days later I returned to Castle Rock—there were still reports of both the Harris’s Sparrow and a pair of Canyon Wrens. I began by searching around the baseball field where the sparrow had last been seen. Very few sparrows at all. (Two days previously I had seen a flock of about 70 Golden-crowned Sparrows, and the Harris’s had been reported to have been hanging out with them.) I went looking instead for the wrens. I had a great walk up a beautiful canyon where I did find a wren—a Bewick’s alas—and lots of other birds. After a couple hours I gave up on the Canyon Wrens and returned to the baseball diamond where I met a fellow birder who was looking for the Harris’s Sparrow. He said he had seen a large flock of Golden-crowns a few minutes earlier, so together we retraced his steps and found the flock. After sorting through them with my binoculars for a few minutes, I spotted the Harris’s—in deep left-center field right at the warning track (i.e. right before you would crash into the oak trees chasing down a deep fly ball.) A sparrow unlike those Golden-crowns it was consorting with, hence easy to identify. It’s always great to add a rare bird to your list.

I made an early Sunday morning trip down to Coyote Hills Regional Park to look for some lesser-seen local birds: Ring-Necked Pheasant, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Hairy Woodpecker. I turned up 50+ species that day—including an acrobatic Peregrine Falcon and an American Bittern (normally a very tough bird to find but one I’d seen at the Salton Sea in January.) But my target species weren’t to be found. (I did get three Greater Yellowlegs, but sometimes more is less—though not Lesser.)



Birds of Coyote Hills: Song Sparrow, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Marsh Wren, and Hermit Thrush

Another sparrow that had befuddled me for the past six weeks was the Rufous-crowned. While not nearly as rare as a Harris's Sparrow, they do not travel in flocks—if you see them, you almost always see them singly or in pairs. Back in December, Dave Quady and I had found one near the memorial for the Oakland Hills firestorm. (This firestorm burned 1,500 acres in 1991 and destroyed over 3,000 homes and killed 25 people; Susan and I were returning home by airplane when it was at its height and from the plane all of the East Bay hills appeared to be on fire.) Since this memorial was near (or on the way to) several other birding hotspots, I had been stopping there every week or so to check for the Rufous-crowned. I had gotten to know several birds that seemed to live in the small garden there—a Spotted Towhee, a female Anna's Hummingbird, a small flock of White-crowned Sparrows. But I couldn't find the Rufous-crowned.

When Bob Lewis offered to bird with me out Mines Road (a famous local birding hotspot but one I had never been to), I jumped at the offer. When he asked about target birds I might have, I think I surprised him by putting the Rufous-crowned Sparrow at the top of my list. We ended up having a spectacular day—a Lewis's Woodpecker (no relation to Bob, sadly), a close fly-by from a Merlin, and Chipping Sparrows (I had seen them in Baja but this was their first California appearance of the year for me). But the highlight for me was the pair of Rufous-crowned Sparrows that Bob spotted. It felt like a large burden had been lifted from me—no more trips to the Firestorm Memorial (I hope those resident birds don't miss me too much!)

My last trip of the month was to Portland, driving along Highway 101 on the way up. I had been looking forward to the drive and to doing some birding stops on the way, particularly in Redwoods National Park. The two-day drive was characterized by rain nearly all the way with very few chances for birds—a short walk curtailed by rain at Arcata Marsh, no walk at all in Redwoods NP, and a short walk outside the Oregon Coast Aquarium (We had gone to the aquarium for the auk exhibit, an amazing chance to see some special alcids up close, and we did see two Ospreys building a nest nearby.)

But the birding picked up the third morning when we visited Yaquina Head Lighthouse. I had checked some eBird lists from the previous weeks or two and noticed some interesting birds—and some big numbers; one observer reported 20,000 Common Murres there (yes, you read that figure correctly!) I only saw about 50 of them (not sure where the other 19,950 were when we visited, but I loved seeing them and the Pigeon Guillemots, two the species that Susan and I had been watching at the aquarium. Alas, no Tufted Puffin or Rhinoceros Auklets, but I did see three kinds of loons—Common, Red-throated, and Pacific (this last one being a first bird for the

year)—and I got a distant look at a Harlequin Duck. Additionally we had an excellent look at a pair of Bald Eagles and a large colony of Harbor Seals (which we had also enjoyed watching at the aquarium.) The cherry on the sundae was standing in the parking lot amidst a group of photographers with serious cameras, watching a pair of Peregrine Falcons copulate. (Nonbirders will think this peculiar but you out there birders will understand—and not judge—the thrill.)

In Portland, I had a morning meeting with Ivan Phillipson, a co-owner of Wild Latitudes, a company that does birding tours for GGAS to Alaska, Montana, and Iceland. Although originally from Southern California, Ivan now lives outside of Portland and knows the local birding scene well. He knew I was looking for American Dippers and had a couple of suggestions for that and he also recommended a visit to Sandy River Delta Park since there had been multiple Pileated Woodpecker sightings there recently. He mentioned that Sandy River Delta Park was also the largest off-leash dog park in Greater Portland, which was actually good for us since we had our Scottie Maggie with us.

When we arrived at the park, we could tell that it was the first good weekend in ages in Portland—everyone with a dog seemed to crowding into the small parking lot and spilling over onto the approach road for several blocks. We were lucky; a man walking across the lot with a wet dog told us to follow him—he was just leaving. The park was heavily wooded in places and within two minutes of leaving the parking lot, I heard a woodpecker and spotted it high in a tree overhead—it wasn't a Pileated but it was a Hairy Woodpecker, another species I've been trying to see for the past month. Towards the end of the walk we saw a small flock of Black-capped Chickadees, another local target. Pretty good work for a dog park.

From there we got on Route 30, the old historic road that runs along the Columbia River Gorge. The first part of the road was very quiet, but when we approached the area where the waterfalls are, signs started warning us of heavy congestion ahead. Ivan had recommended two places for the dipper, Wahkeena Falls and Multnomah Falls. But it was impossible to stop at either; they were both completely overwhelmed by hordes of people enjoying the beautiful spring day. We continued on the road for a couple more miles and, as we were passing Horsetail Falls, I noticed an empty space in the lot. I zipped in and went over for a quick look beneath the falls. It took about two minutes, but an American Dipper flew in and landed on a rock just beneath where I was standing. Not only was the beautiful weather making up for the terrible drive up the coast, but the birds were helping, too. That bird was a great ending to the month!

So just how did I do overall this month? I submitted 49 checklists, identifying 202 species for the month. Of these 202 species, 47 of them were new birds, bringing my total of different species for the year to 278. (If I'm hoping to see 1,000 species this year, I need to average about 84 species a month, so overall I'm on track. But it's easy to see I'm going to have to do more traveling out of state if I'm going to keep on seeing birds at that pace.)

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Despite intense lobbying on the part of several Song Sparrows who sang their hearts out right in front of me, the bird of the month is the beautiful Common Yellowthroat. As its name suggests, this bird is common in marshy habitats in the Bay Area (and across much of North America). *Sibley Birds West*, however, points out that they are “Secretive and can be difficult to see.” The exception seems to be male birds in the spring, who will often perch conspicuously on a twig and sing loudly. On the Baja Trip I had seen the Belding’s Yellowthroat, previously considered a subspecies of the Common Yellowthroat but recently recognized as a new species and a Baja endemic. In the pictures below you’ll see that visually there’s not much difference between the two species—the notable difference being that the Belding’s lacks the white band across the forehead.



Common Yellowthroat



Belding's Yellowthroat by Margie Gomez

I'd like to end this update by welcoming new subscribers to my newsletter and thanking all of you who have signed up for it—and have been reading it! I'd particularly like to thank those who donated to GGAS this past month, including Barbara Riper, my wife's dear cousin. And it was a good month for donors from Southern California: my friends Luis Legaspi, Linda Venis, and David Chaparro & Tim Anderson. And, finally, thank you to Pat Kirkpatrick who has pledged \$1 per bird—Pat, at year's end I'm gonna send you a HUGE bill—thanks so much for your generosity! If you would like to make a pledge, email me; if you would like to donate online, you can do so here: <https://goldengateaudubon.z2systems.com/np/clients/goldengateaudubon/donation.jsp?campaign=449>