

Dear Birdos4Eric,

The honeymoon definitely ended in February. After an amazing initial month when I amassed a list of 150 species, in February reality hit. I was no longer racking up big counts of new species. At first it seemed like the proverbial sophomore slump, but my friend Gary Adest had a scientific explanation for it. He said I was up against an “asymptotic curve”—when you have a lot of something and begin to account for those things, you start fast but soon slow down and then finally you creep along; in other words, if there’s a big—but limited—number of birds, you’ll see a lot at the start, then fewer and fewer, and finally you’ll be getting them one at a time. (Gary used jelly beans when he explained this to me, but birds are what we’re talking about here.) January was the big pot of birds and February is what followed afterwards. Another term for this, he said, is “exponential decay,” which sounds *really* scary. I checked all of this out with my friend Bob Lewis (another scientist) who told me Gary was unfortunately telling the truth. (I might have known all this if I hadn’t ignored my dad when he cautioned me about becoming an English major.) But luckily, the end of February featured a trip to Baja—a whole new bucket of jelly beans!

On January 31, I finished my last day in the desert. As you might recall, I was on a five-day trip to the Southern California deserts and on the last day we visited Anza Borrego Desert State Park. It was windy with scattered showers and we didn’t see many birds—in fact no new species on that last day. But we did get a great look at a Costa’s Hummingbird on her nest (last month’s Bird of the Month.) We also saw lots of Bighorn Sheep (the park is named after the Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza and *borrego*, the Spanish word for “sheep.” Weird, huh?) We were told that all of the rain this winter meant it would be an excellent year for wildflowers, and we had a look at some that were already blooming. That evening I went to spend a couple of nights in San Clemente before driving home to Berkeley.



Costa’s Hummingbird on her nest



Bighorn Sheep

I had invited Eddie Bartley and Noreen Weeden, the leaders of the desert trip, to join me in San Clemente. Our original plan had been to spend the next day at looking at shorebirds, but that night the talk turned to a very rare bird which had turned up in Los Angeles—a Red-flanked Bluetail. I’m sure some of you old timers will recall the Baikal Teal that turned up in Kittredge,

Colorado in 1993. Well, this bird has been getting even more press than that one. It's only the eighth time it's been recorded in North America and the first time in California. (It usually summers from northern Finland to Siberia and winters in southeast Asia.) We decided the shorebirds could wait—we were going for the Red-flanked Bluetail.

When we left San Clemente the weather was a bit blustery but not too bad. However, within 15 minutes of L.A., the rain started coming down hard. The bird had been reported the day before at the William Andrews Clarke Library, a UCLA facility, but one that is located midway between UCLA and USC, just off I-10. (This library has a special place in my heart—when I was a graduate student at UCLA I had a job there for several years operating a Hinman Collator in the basement of the Clarke as an editorial assistant on the *Complete Works of John Dryden*. More nerdy even than birdwatching.) We arrived at the Clarke in a deluge. Pulling into the parking lot we laughed—none of us sure whether we even wanted to get out of the car. I spotted a security guard under a shelter, and I volunteered to go ask her about the bird. Seeing me approach and noticing my binoculars, without being asked, she volunteered the information that the bird was last seen “in the shrubbery, under the big tree in the southeast corner of the garden.” I gestured to Eddie and Noreen and the three of us headed that way. Much to our surprise, there was a small flock of White-crowned Sparrows foraging under the shrubbery. After only a couple minutes we were completely soaked; our rain jackets were no match for the volume of water that was falling from the sky. But we continued to see birds—a Hermit Thrush, a Yellow-rumped Warbler, a Black Phoebe. Then Noreen and I saw something different—a bird with yellow patches on its side and a blueish sheen to the tail. A few minutes later Eddie got a look, too. All three of us were certain it was *Tarsiger cyanuras*, the Red-flanked Bluetail. None of us had even thought to bring a camera—it would have been rendered inoperable in the downpour.

When I returned to Berkeley my friend Bruce Mast offered to spend a day with me plugging some holes in my California list. He asked me to send him a list of birds I'd seen thus far; from it he produced a list of 30 target species. He had used an algorithm that he had designed himself to predict the likelihood of seeing particular species (Like Gary and Bob, Bruce knows science and math; I usually don't understand these guys but I nod along like I do.) Since over 17 of his target species had been seen recently at Bodega Bay, we decided to start there.

Bruce picked me up on a Sunday morning at 6 AM and within 90 minutes we were looking out over Bodega Head. We quickly saw the cormorants I was missing—the Pelagic and the Brandt's—and we also added the Red-throated Loon. A little later while birding the harbor we added the Brant, the Red-necked Grebe, the Common Loon, and the Ruddy Turnstone (we had seen the Lincoln's Sparrow on our way in while checking the rail pond—alas no luck with the Virginia and Black Rails!) One final stop at Doran Regional Park added the Snowy Plover and completed our visit to Bodega. On the drive back towards Marin, we added the Ferruginous Hawk but struck out on the Prairie Falcon. At Shollenberger Park in Petaluma we saw hundreds of ducks and gulls, and added the Iceland Gull and a pair of Mute Swans.

Our penultimate stop was near the Loch Lomond Marina in San Rafael to see another rarity—a heron. Although not as rare as the Red-flanked Bluetail, nonetheless the Little Blue Heron was a

long way from home. These birds are seen in the Southeast USA, in Mexico, Central America, and northern South America (I had seen one last year—in southeast Peru!) This one apparently turned up in Marin County in December and has been a consistent resident in a small pond. We drove up to the pond, and there it was. Isn't it great when things are where they are supposed to be? (Even if they're actually not supposed to be anywhere near there, if you know what I mean.)



Little Blue Heron by Bruce Mast



American White Pelicans

Our final stop was Richardson Bay near the Audubon Center in Marin. Bruce had read that a Tufted Duck had been seen there. When we arrived, it was growing dark. But more to the point, there were about 2,000 scaups in the water in front of us. We set up our scopes and did a lot of scanning, but out of that crowd a Tufted Duck failed to materialize. Later, when I had tallied up all of the new birds, Bruce was a little disappointed that we'd only gotten 13 out of his 30 targets. But I was thrilled. It proved to be the biggest day I had in California in the month of February.

By Presidents' Day weekend I was trying to get new species one bird at a time. But over that weekend I got on a bit of a roll. Susan joined me on those outings and I think she must have brought good luck. Starting on Friday on the UC Davis campus, we added four new species to my list: Purple Finch, Common Merganser, Wild Turkey (don't start with the jokes—how could I get a month and a half and not see a turkey??!!), and my target bird for UCD—14 Wood Ducks. The next morning I had one of the regular walks that I lead for Ashby Village (a non-profit that I belong to and for which I volunteer). We went to Lake Merritt where the first and last birds seen that day were new to my list: a Townsend's Warbler and a single Greater White-fronted Goose. That afternoon following a tip from Bob Lewis, we picked up a pair of Black Scoters at the Richmond Marina. Sunday morning found us at Hossmoor where our horse is stabled and there in the barn I got the first Brown-headed Cowbirds of the season. On the way home we made a detour to Miller/Knox Regional shoreline, and out of a flock of 50+ American Wigeons, we picked out three Eurasian Wigeons.

And finally on Presidents' Day itself, my friend Sandy Steinman and his wife Celia Ronis invited us to the annual brunch they host for the Backyard Bird Count. I met Sandy a couple of years ago when we took a course together on identifying gulls. We bonded over watching the two

instructors fight on field trips while trying to identify odd gulls: “That’s a second year Western/Glaucous-winged hybrid!” “Actually I think it’s a new third-year bird—a Glaucous-winged/Herring hybrid.” (You can see why this class and typing are the two courses that I’ve failed in my life.) At any rate, Sandy has been tormenting me for the past year or so with tales of a White-throated Sparrow that’s a regular visitor in his back garden. So what, you say? A sparrow? Well, yes, but it’s a bird I’ve never seen—and Sandy actually lives in my neighborhood. It’s become a bit of a bogey bird for me—a bit like the Southern Cassowary pictured on my web page (but that’s a story for another time). When we arrived for the brunch, Sandy said the sparrow had been there earlier. Right. I hung out by the window, drinking coffee, being anti-social, hoping to get a glimpse. Finally midway through brunch Sandy got up to get more coffee and came back to report the bird was out there. I jumped up, went to the window and got an excellent look at the little blighter on the birdbath. Tick!

Susan and I finished the weekend that evening in the wetland out on Waterfront Road beyond Martinez. My friend Dave Quady tipped me off that Short-eared Owls had been seen there a couple of days earlier. I couldn’t quite work out where this location was, so Dave suggested I contact Hugh Harvey, who had seen the owls. Hugh wrote me a very detailed description. Susan and I followed his perfect directions and waited for sunset. While waiting for sunset we notice a black cloud over the refinery across the Sacramento River from us. But as we watched, the cloud moved and morphed—a murmuration of starlings! Murmurations are huge flocks that move as if of one mind—check out the photo below (but if you REALLY want to get a sense of what a sight this is, watch this short [video](#)—it’s just amazing!) It was almost dark by now, and lo and behold! a Short-eared Owl appeared right where Hugh had said it would be. Thank you, Hugh and Dave!



Looking for Short-eared owls near the Sacramento River past Martinez



A murmuration of starlings

I spent the next week mostly visiting spots nearby that had eBird reports of target birds. Thus I got a flock of Cackling Geese and a Red Knot at Hayward Regional Seashore and a Palm Warbler at Doyle Hollis Park (a park only a couple of miles from my house but one I didn't know about until it popped up on my target list). I also made several trips to Tilden Regional Park, my favorite local park. I noticed that a number of local birds I hadn't seen yet had been turning up regularly at the Nature Area in Tilden (a better name for this area would be the Barnyard since it's the home of the Little Farm where school kids visit cows, sheep, and pigs). Over the course of several days, this location turned up three Hooded Mergansers, a Pygmy Nuthatch, several Brown Creepers, and the Bird of the Month (see below—I'm creating suspense here).



Birds of Tilden Park: Townsend's Warbler, Spotted Towhee and Red-tailed Hawk

At the end of the month I set off for a week-long trip to Southern Baja. One of the pleasures of the trip was getting to bird with my close friends Bob and Margie Gomez, who traveled from Virginia to

join our bay area group in Baja. Our group was led by Juan-Carlos Solis who was joined by his Mexican colleague, Gerardo Marron, a Baja specialist, and his cousin Daniel, who drove and was heroic with the logistics of managing our group. Gerardo was along to help us find some of the more difficult birds--Baja has only six endemic species, though there are many, many endemic subspecies as Gerardo pointed out to us—over the week we would see birds that looked very familiar yet just a bit different, including California Scrub Jays, Acorn Woodpeckers, and even California Towhees.

The first day we spent the morning birding around the *estero* next to the hotel in San Jose del Cabo. Our target species was the Belding's Yellowthroat, formerly a yellowthroat subspecies but recently recognized as a new endemic. We got excellent (albeit quick) looks at this shy bird. Along the Estero San Jose we saw lots of familiar ducks and shorebirds and a large assortment of herons and egrets. Wheeling overhead were Magnificent Frigatebirds and Ospreys, with the latter occasionally swooping down to catch a fish. Returning to the hotel grounds where we watched the most beautiful house finches any of us had ever seen (a subspecies that Gerardo explained was called "rubioso," or "the reddest red," as he put it) along with Hooded Orioles and Cactus Wrens.



Osprey and Magnificent Frigatebird at the Estero San José; Cactus Wren and Hooded Oriole

In the afternoon we headed north and inland and stopped at a piece of dry tropical forest. When we got out of the van, it was warm and still. But as we focused in, we soon realized that the place was teeming with birds—flycatchers, warblers, and vireos. But the vegetation was thick and these birds moved fast. But the guides were also fast, calling out the birds. I got excellent looks at a Black-throated Gray Warbler and a pair of Blue-grey Gnatcatchers. A flock of about ten Western Tanagers ate berries in a big tree, fueling themselves for their journey north. But the star of the afternoon was the Xantus hummingbird—a beautiful male gave us long looks as it perched not far from us. This is a jewel of a bird—brilliant green on the head with a bold white eye stripe and a long red bill tipped in black. Our second endemic of the day. (But I was neither good enough nor quick enough with the camera—no photo of this beauty, alas!)

On Monday we awoke in the dark to drive to a reserve located high in the southern Baja Sierra. As we got close, the road deteriorated—towards the end it became a steep, rutted dirt track and at one point we all had to get out because we were afraid the vehicle could get bogged down in the small stream we had to cross. Shortly afterwards, Daniel parked the van and we prepared to hike up the mountain. We were told that it was a 1.9 miles hike, but what wasn't made clear is that we'd be gaining almost 1500 feet of altitude in that distance. Our target for the day was the Baird's Junco, a bird that lived in the forests high up in the mountains.

Towards the bottom we saw Lazuli Buntings, Pacific-coast and Ash-throated Flycatchers, and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. As we climbed and the day warmed we saw fewer species. And people slowed down. Nearing the top of our climb I saw a pair of Scott's Orioles (life birds for me!) and a Cassin's Vireo. When we finally made it to the top, most of our group collapsed in the shade. After some rest and very large sandwiches, we began scouring the area for the Baird's Junco. Not only were the juncos absent, but the mountaintop seemed completely void of bird life.

Juan-Carlos persuaded us to continue for another few hundred meters—to one last spot where Gerardo had seen the juncos previously. Approaching the spot, Gerardo and Juan-Carlos got excited—they could hear the Baird's Junco. I got a great look at one through a gap in some foliage. Unfortunately, not everyone was so lucky. But everyone was relieved that we had made it to the top—and even more relieved when we were at the bottom and back on the van.



Blue-gray Gnatcatcher



Ash-throated Flycatcher

We spent Monday night in the original capital of California, La Paz, and on Tuesday morning we headed out to the mud flats. We were greeted there by a huge array of shorebirds (including American Avocets, American Oystercatchers, Marbled Godwits, Whimbrels, and Long-billed Curlews) and herons (Little Blue, Great Blue, Tricolor and both Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night Herons), egrets (Great, Snowy, and Reddish), and cormorants (Double-crested, Brandt's, and Neotropic). My birding friends who know me well know that I struggle with gulls, but I was pleased to see one I don't see very often—the Laughing Gull—and even more pleased to see one that was new for me, the Yellow-footed Gull. The biggest treat of the mud flats was the large flock of Black Skimmers—so large at 75 birds that eBird wouldn't allow me to enter that number without an explanation as to how it was that I saw so many of them (I'm still not sure how to answer that question, other to say that they flew in and I counted them all.)



Reddish Egret



White Ibis & Snowy Egret



Tricolor Heron

After the mud flats, we made a visit to the nearby sewage treatment plant. Those of you who aren't birders are probably having everything you ever suspected about birders confirmed by this fact (but those of you who are know that this was a good move!) We saw two kinds of ibis—White and White-faced—and more ducks and coots. Although we didn't pick up the bird we had come for—another look at the Belding's Yellowthroat—we saw an equally colorful bird, a Vermillion Flycatcher. The day's birding cumulated with a Phainopepla perched on a telephone wire outside our lunch stop, followed by a quick late afternoon stop about 200 kilometers down the road to observe four Harris's Hawks perched alongside each other on cacti.

On Wednesday and Thursday we went looking for something completely different—California Gray Whales. And we found them—lots of them. We were in Magdalena Bay where the Grey Whales come to calve, and although we didn't see any newborns, we saw lots of adults, some of which swam right up to and under the boat. Amazing. And I'm pleased to say we did see birds. Included were three kinds of terns—Elegant, Royal, and Caspian—six kinds of gulls—Western, California, Laughing, Heerman's, Ring-billed, and Yellow-footed—as well as Parasitic Jaegers and Black-vented Shearwaters.

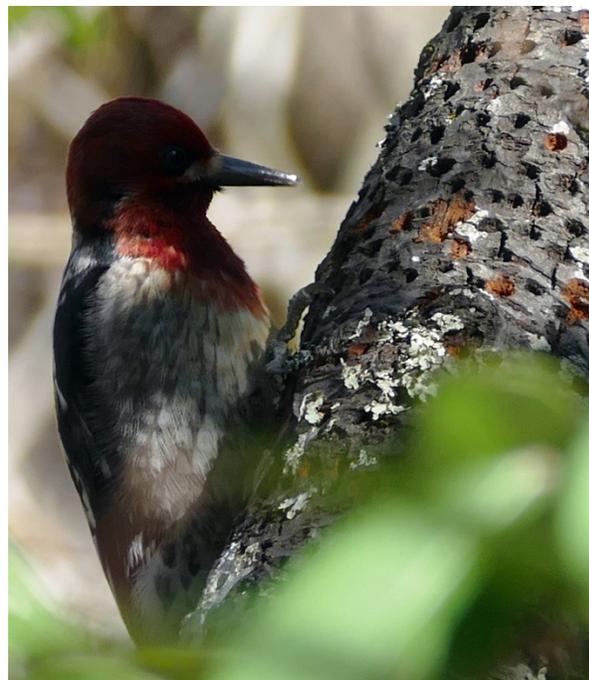


Head 'n Tail: California Gray Whale



How did I end up doing this month? Well, as I said at the outset, birding in California got tougher—only 49 new species. Though interestingly enough, the total number of species I saw in California in February was 150—exactly the number I saw in January. In Baja I saw a total of 102 species, 32 of which were new birds for the year. So my total number of birds for the month was 197 with 81 of them being new ones for the year. Confusing? You betcha!

And what about the Bird of the Month? There were lots of candidates. Many would opt for that rarest of California visitors, the Red-flanked Bluetail. My own shortlist included the Short-eared Owl—watching this bird fly was a remarkable sight—and that emerald gem, the Xantus Hummingbird. But I've opted for a local bird—one that Susan and I found in our own beloved Tilden Park, the Red-breasted Sapsucker. This species winters in the bay area and breeds in the Sierras. I was told where to find this one by a woman I met a couple of days earlier in Tilden. She said its favorite tree was conveniently located a few feet from the parking lot. These birds drill rows of orderly small holes in the bark of trees and then feed on the sap that flows from them—and the insects that are attracted to the sap. Once I found the tree, it was just a matter of time before it showed up. I missed it the first two days I looked, but the day I came with Susan there it was, drilling away, adding to its already substantial number of holes in that oak tree.



Red-breasted Sapsucker

I'd like to end this update by again thanking all of you who signed up for this newsletter (there were many new subscribers in February.) And I'd particularly like to thank those of you who donated to GGAS this past month—Nancy Bombardieri & Tony Read, Karen Morikawa in memory of my dear friends Flavio and Nat Ciferri, Sue Eoff, Ann Linsley, Erin Schlemmer, Teresa Pfiffner, and Eugenia Caldwell (who made a per bird pledge which she'll pay off at the end of the year when I send her my finally tally—yes, you too can give this way if you choose—just drop me an email!) And remember, it's never too late to make a donation—just click [here](#)!