

Dear Birdos4Eric,

I expected July to be VERY slow. It's usually a slow month in California—breeding is just about wrapped up, lots of birds are busy molting (and staying out of sight), and for the birds that travel, migration hasn't quite begun. And me? Except for a trip to a trip to Southern California for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, I wasn't traveling either. I hoped I might pick up a few birds down there since my daily eBird updates for Contra Costa and Alameda counties only rarely showed me a new year bird (San Francisco was a little different—those Red-capped Parakeets kept showing up as life birds for me, and a Parakeet Auklet seemed to have strayed from its range and was bobbing offshore near Land's End.) Southern California at least offered the hope of an exotic or two—birds that historically didn't belong there but had been brought in, released, and were now established.

When I set off for San Clemente I had only one target clearly in mind—the California Gnatcatcher. This species had been in the news that week—a federal court had just dismissed a lawsuit that would have removed the California Gnatcatcher from the endangered species list, thereby opening up a lot of protected coastal sagebrush land in Southern California for development. So a lot of suitable gnatcatcher habitat in Southern California had been saved—for now at least. For a couple of years, my brother Mark had been telling me about an area at the north end of town that had been developed with walking trails as part of a deal made by a local mall (the mall on a bluff above the ocean had undoubtedly paved over a lot of gnatcatcher habitat). Driving by the trail area on the Pacific Coast Highway, I had always thought that the area looked decidedly unpromising—bare hillsides that had been contoured with lots of drainage channels to minimize mudslides (a historic problem in this location).

But when I went to check the trails out, I came in from the top and was pleased to see a large bowl of dense Pacific coast chaparral that looked like excellent bird habitat to me. Descending down the trail, I saw lots of birds, including a huge flock of Bushtits that I sorted through very carefully since California Gnatcatchers are roughly the same size and shape. Near the bottom I encountered a large interpretive signboard proclaiming this spot to be the epicenter of the California Gnatcatcher population. Encouraging! And as I turned around from the sign, one of the little blighters was perched on a branch right in front of me—I think he'd been reading the sign over my shoulder. As I watched, his mate appeared, and after checking me out, both of them disappeared into the shrubbery where I supposed they had a nest. Nice start to my San Clemente visit!

I had thought that while in Southern California I might try to track down an exotic species or two since the southland seems to be home to quite a few exotic species (consider Hollywood, for example). I began this quest at the San Joaquin Wildlife Sanctuary, located across the street from the UC Irvine campus (where I spent my first year at college—long before I began watching birds!) I had read on eBird that both Egyptian Geese and Northern Red Bishops were present there (both species are originally from Sub-Saharan Africa). As I approached the sanctuary, the road I was on paralleled the San Diego Creek, which is a wide flood-control channel that in this section is a prime riparian corridor. I parked the car and walked back to the

creek. As I stood on the riverbank and tried to sort out the terns overhead, a small orange and black shape flew in front of the bright green reeds below me—I knew instantly it was the bishop! Nothing else in that area is that color. It disappeared into the reeds about 100 yards from where I was. As I gave a thought to pursuing it, I glanced the other direction and noticed some geese. But these weren't the Canada Geese I had noticed when I drove in on the road—they looked a lot like the Egyptian Geese I knew from my time in Cape Town. I quickly hurried down the embankment towards them and noticed that the pair of adults had two goslings with them. These birds proved to be as bold as the ones back in Africa—I was able to get closeup photographs of the whole family.

Later I learned from Nancy Kenyon, a member of Sea and Sage Audubon which has its headquarters at the sanctuary, that these geese were famous; here's what she told me about them: "The Egyptian Geese used to nest in a bucket in a eucalyptus tree 100+ feet above the ground. When the goslings were old enough to fledge, they would leap out of the bucket to the ground and somehow they always managed to survive. But we worried about them, so we finally got the Irvine Ranch Water District to remove that bucket, and now the Egyptian Geese nest on the ground." What a bird! Obviously very flexible in its housing arrangements.



Egyptian Goose—note the telltale bull's eyes



Egyptian Goose family

As I left the geese and climbed back up the channel's embankment, I saw the bishop heading back in my direction. (Although the bird is small—the size of a House Finch—because of its color, you can see it from a long way off.) And, despite its name, many of the males are a rich orange, rather than the more common scarlet color. This time it landed in the rushes below me and perched where I could get a shot of it. Mind you, the bird was a long way away and thus it's not a great picture, but that color sure shows up! Score two exotics for the day.



Northern Red Bishop (looks orange to me!)

After this outing, I decided to get a bit more systematic in my quest for Orange County exotics. I went on eBird and started looking at what else was around. I knew from talking to local folks that there were some famous hotspots around Huntington Beach, so I focused on that area. In doing so, I discovered a small local park—John Baca Park—that seemed to be punching above its weight when it came to exotics. So on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July I got up early and headed up the coast.

I had been at John Baca for about 10 minutes, initially trying to decide if a bird I was chasing was a Willow Flycatcher or a Western Wood Pewee (I had decided it was the flycatcher since it had a faint eye-ring—the local eBird reviewer ended up gonging both species) when I noticed a small flock of birds flitting by in the background. I focused in on them and was immediately rewarded with a clear look at a head that features a bright orange bill and an equally bright large orange spot around the bird's eye—an Orange-cheeked Waxbill. These birds are small finches, also from sub-Saharan Africa, that have been introduced to Japan, Spain, the Hawaiian Islands—and Southern California.

A little bit later I caught sight of another target species: a Scaly-breasted Munia, mixed in with some House Finches, was feeding on the lawn in front of me. This species is from Southeast Asia, but I'd seen it previously in Queensland, Australia (it, too, has been introduced in Spain and on Hawaii.) As I watched—and tried to photograph the bird—I noticed another. And another. And another. I realized that there was a very large flock of these birds—perhaps as many as 60 (I conservatively reported 40 on eBird) with about a third of them being immature birds—they are clearly thriving in Southern California.



Scaly-breasted Munia (adult)



Scaly-breasted Munia (juveniles)

As I was trying to photograph a group of them, another bird flew in front of me—one I recognized instantly—a Pin-tailed Whydah. I knew this bird from photographs since it's one I've often watched for in South Africa, never having managed to see it in the past. It, too, is about the size of a House Finch (5 inches), but the male whydah has a tail that's more than double its body length—another 8 inches. As it flew by me, trailing those streamers, I couldn't believe my luck. When it landed in a nearby tree, I was able to get a look at its mate—a much plainer-looking bird with a nondescript tail.



Pin-tailed Whydah (male)



Pin-tailed Whydah (female)

Having gone three for three, I decided to press my luck before leaving, and I climbed the only path I hadn't yet explored in the small park. The trail came out onto a very wide, busy Orange County boulevard, but a few feet from its end, I had noticed some movement in a dense shrub. It took some patience and careful watching but those were rewarded by a glimpse of another exotic—a Japanese White-eye. This bird is another east Asian species and historically they were kept as caged birds in Japan. (It's another species that is also found extensively in Hawaii, having been introduced onto O'ahu in 1929; it's introduction into Southern California was more recent;

it was first sighted there just last year and found to be in San Diego County this year.) After a few minutes it flew to a nearby tree where it was joined by a friend—and both of them offered me a good clear look. Later that night I enjoyed the fireworks display at the San Clemente Pier, knowing that the real fireworks had taken place 12 hours earlier in John Baca Park.

Three days later I had one more stop to make in Southern California, Irvine Regional Park. I had read that there were Indian Peafowl breeding there (“Peacocks” to most of us—though this name describes only the male of the species.) I had also discovered that over the past few weeks, several different species of parrots had been seen there. Turns out the Peafowl are pretty easy—I listed 14 on my eBird count but this was a VERY conservative number (I suspect that I saw twice this many.)

The parrots, however, were another story. Early on I had two flyovers, but they were high up and moving fast—when you see them like this, you list them as “Amazona sp.” on eBird. Later as I was walking around the small lake to get a better look at a peacock perched in a tree (see photo below!), I saw an older Japanese man (birder or photographer? Or both?) with a very big camera sizing up the bird. I struck up a conversation with him, asking in particular about the parrots. He explained that the Red-crowned Parrot could often be seen in the direction that I was headed, while the Yellow-headed Parrot was back in the direction I had come from. He added, somewhat sadly I thought, that he had only seen one of the latter this year.



Red-crowned Parrot (normal view)



Red-crowned Parrot (lucky view)



Indian Peafowl

As we were talking, another pair of “Amazona sp.” flew over, heading in the direction he had indicated they would go. I grabbed my scope and trotted off. I came to a huge oak a few minutes later and I could tell that some sort of parrot-like activity was taking place high up in its branches. Even with the scope, getting a good look at these birds seemed like a longshot. Then one of them flew down and perched on a branch over my head. A few minutes later it was joined by the second bird, which crept down lower on the branch until it came to the tree’s

main crotch. It stuck its head down into a hole there and when it raised its head, up came the head of a juvenile parrot—clear evidence of exotics breeding in Southern California.

I finally tore myself away from the park, but not without a final look for that Yellow-headed Parrot that my new friend had mentioned. No luck there. But when I got back home, I had another look at the park's historical eBird record. Among the other parrots that have been seen there are the Red-lored, the Lilac-crowned, and the Mitred Parakeet. And there's also a Mandarin Duck—I'm already planning a return visit in September.

Following the trip south, I had nearly ten days off from birding (my longest stretch this big year) before heading up to Yosemite for a whirlwind trip with my friends Mike Scott and Vicki Piovia. Mike and Vicki had been with me in the Southern Sierra on the GGAS "Tule Transect" in May, and, being fans of the mountains, agreed to accompany me on my latest harebrained scheme—to stand in a meadow for a couple of hours at dusk and see whether a Great Gray Owl would show up. This endeavor is harebrained for several reasons—the primary one being that the Great Grey Owl is one of the rarest birds in California, occurring in limited numbers only in Yosemite National Park. (Elsewhere it can be found in the northern USA and Canada and in Scandinavia, but throughout its extensive range it's a very rare species.) Because of its highly endangered status in California, websites like eBird don't make public the locations of Great Gray Owl sightings.

Furthermore, many individuals who are among the most expert owlers in California won't divulge the places where these birds can sometimes be found (I understand your position completely, Dave, and I respect you for it!) Fortunately, not all expert birders have been sworn to silence. When I asked Bob Lewis where I should go to look for the bird, he replied "The meadow at the Chevron station." Now Bob used to work for Chevron, so I thought I should get a second opinion. When I asked Eddie Bartley and Noreen Weeden the same question, they replied, "The meadow at the Chevron station." I thought to myself, "It seems like I should go to the meadow at the Chevron station." Now if I just knew where the Chevron station was.

That's where Mike and Vicki came in. These two have been going to Yosemite at least once a year for decades. When I asked if they knew where the Chevron station was, Mike replied, "Everyone knows where the Chevron station is." Clearly I'm more out of it than I suspected. So on July 17<sup>th</sup> at 9 PM I found myself standing in a meadow in Yosemite National Park (near the Chevron station), hoping to get a glimpse of the Great Gray Ghost as the bird is sometimes affectionately called. We waited a long time in silence—there was no playing of a recording since recordings aren't allowed in National Parks. Vicki wrote a haiku about the experience:

dusk in the meadow  
looking 'round at all the trees  
where is Great Gray Owl?

Where indeed? He wasn't home that night. But this experience has to rank right up there as one of the most memorable of my big year—certainly the most memorable occasion that I failed to turn up a target species—or any species at all!



The famous Chevron station meadow—note the lack of a Great Grey Owl

Several days later I was off on another adventure with Mike and Vicki—and this time we were joined by some other good friends. Susan and I had talked for some time about going up to Clear Lake to see the dancing grebes in the late spring/summer. One of the auction items at Golden Gate Audubon's Birdathon this spring was a trip to see the grebes which would be led by Bob Lewis. Susan was determined to secure this prize and resolved that hers would be the top bid. Rumors of a possible bidding war materialized. Susan assembled a consortium to help her secure the winning bid. But when the trip came up for auction, she was pleased to find that there was no opposition. As the chair of this year's Birdathon Committee, I urged her to bid against herself to raise more money for the organization. But she was content with her deal and so we were also joined by Claudia Moose and JoAnn Graham, Alex Smolyanskaya and Dan Brown, and Bob's wife Hanno to make a total of ten of us.

We boarded Faith Rigolosi's pontoon boat on Clear Lake, and as we set out, she began explaining grebe courtship. Both the Western Grebe and Clark's Grebe perform a nearly identical, two-part courtship ritual. The first part is the "weed dance" where the male and female both take a long strand or two of water plants, raise their chests out of the water, rub each other with the weeds and often drape the weeds over the other bird's head. The second part is "rushing"—the birds look at each other as if signaling for the race to begin, then they explode across the surface of the water with necks high and rigid and wings held behind their bodies. At the end of the "rush" they dive head-first into the water. It's an extraordinary performance.

Faith was nervous at first, saying that recently she hadn't seen much of this courtship behavior, despite the fact that there were several hundred grebes present at her end of the lake. But shortly after we got underway, we observed a small burst or two of rushing and a little bit of weed draping, too. There were about 30-40 birds around us, mostly Western Grebes with about a quarter being Clark's. After a bit, however, Faith moved the boat to a spot where there were greater

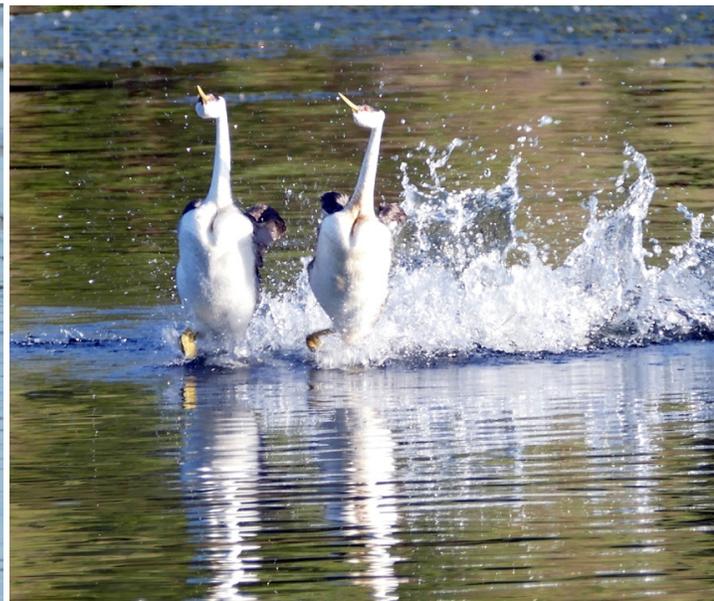
numbers of grebes—over 100 birds—and then the show began in earnest: lots of weed draping and rushing all around us. Sometimes a third bird (rival male?) or even another couple (dance competitors?) would join a rush, and we would be amazed at the distance they would cover.

Several birds, not content with dancing and rushing, also did a bit of copulating—Faith pointed out the distinctive noise that the birds made; perhaps Cornell’s online *Birds of North America* describes it best: “a loud trill given by the male (with regular interspersed shorter call notes by the female) during copulation. Vocal roles reversed during reverse mounting.” Or perhaps it doesn’t. I must admit that what was most striking about grebe copulations wasn’t how quickly it took place (this is typical in most bird species) but rather the male’s dismount—he comes right over the top of the female, pushing her long neck and head aside.

The time flew by (appropriate since we were watching birds) and soon we were headed back to the dock. Despite the fact that I didn’t add any new birds to my list that day, this excursion, like the Yosemite trip, was another extraordinary experience.



Western Grebes doing the Weed Dance



Western Grebes Rushing

Towards the end of the month I got a call from my friend Dawn. Did I want to go see a Bar-tailed Godwit? Of course I did. She had seen one that day and proposed going back the next day. I did a little bit of research online that evening and learned that a Wandering Tattler had been seen not far from where Dawn had seen the godwit. So the next morning we went after both birds.

Our start was not auspicious. We wandered around the San Leandro Marina looking for the wandering bird. No luck. Then we headed south to a place known locally as Frank’s Dump. When we got to the parking lot, the ranger turned us back, saying he’d be locking up in 30 minutes. He directed us to go back beyond the gate to park and then told us of a shortcut to the place where he said the godwit was still being seen that day. We followed his directions which

proved to be terrible—after bushwhacking through some tall, dry weeds, we got back onto a recognizable trail and soon spotted a group on the path ahead armed with binoculars, scopes, and cameras—a sure sign a rare bird was near!

The first two women we came to were just leaving, but they said they had seen the bird—having looked for it for 4 ½ hours! They assured us, however, that “the guy on the bike” up ahead knew where it was and could point it out to us. As we approached the guy on the bike, we could see why the women had taken so long to spot the bird—the flock of birds up ahead consisted of about 500 Willets and 500 Marbled Godwits—and apparently one Bar-Tailed Godwit. When we got to the guy on the bike who was looking up through a camera with a very long lens, we got a funny look when we asked about the godwit. He explained that he was watching airplanes land at Oakland International Airport. Wrong bike, apparently. Up ahead was another guy with a bike, also with a long-lensed camera, but this time pointed at the birds in front of him. “Bar-tailed Godwit? Sure. Fourth bird on the right in that clump of birds in front of us.” Five minutes later we started the long trek back to the car.



Bar-tailed Godwit (photo by Dawn Lemoine who did an excellent job of cropping the other 1,000 birds out of the shot)

So just how *did* July go? Pretty pathetic, actually. By most measures my worst month of the year. A total of only 96 species for the month. Part of the problem is that since there are fewer target birds out there, I didn’t go birding very often—up until July 1, I had 298 eBird checklists for the year; I added only 12 new ones this month. And as for new species, only two birds in Northern California and those eight exotics in Southern California: a total of ten new birds, four of which (all exotics) were lifers. So I’m currently at 483 species for the year—about five weeks behind schedule. But the good news? Southern Africa awaits next month—South Africa, Namibia, and Botswana. Over the past 20 years, I’ve visited South Africa 9 times, each time with about 20 students in tow. There will be no students this year—only birds—and birdos!

Bird of the month. By all rights the California Gnatcatcher should be the Bird of the Month. It’s not only an endangered species, but it’s a charismatic little bird—and a local favorite in San Clemente.

But because I am a mediocre photographer at the best of times, I didn't manage to get a picture of the bird. So my apologies, California Gnatcatcher. Perhaps another month? Thus without further fanfare I offer you this month's bird—the Red-Crowned Parrot! "What??" you exclaim; "an EXOTIC as the Bird of the Month??" Well, yes. It's a charismatic bird in its own right. Its normal range is from Eastern Mexico to Ecuador but it's become rare in parts of its range due to trapping for the pet trade. As pets these birds are devoted to their owners and some are talkers. (But they also bite!) They are also good at adapting to human-altered habitats—hence their success in new environments, like Southern California cities. But perhaps best of all, although it looks similar to the famous parrots of San Francisco, this is a different species (those are Red-masked Parakeets, also known as the Cherry-headed Conure.) That means that when I get back from Africa I can head over to San Francisco for another parrot!



Red-crowned Parrot with offspring

Thank you, my readers, for tolerating a deplorable shortage of photos in this issue. But that's what happens when you get only 10 new birds in a month. Next month is Southern Africa, my first foray to a new continent this year. I promise I'll do better with the pictures.

And thanks, especially, to my GGAS pal Beth Mosley for her donation this month. If you are reading this and have put off donating thus far, you can step up and make a pledge at <https://goldengateaudubon.z2systems.com/np/clients/goldengateaudubon/donation.jsp?campaign=449>. Or, if you'd like to pledge a donation for every bird I see, email me at [ejschroeder@ucdavis.edu](mailto:ejschroeder@ucdavis.edu) and I'll bill you at year's end.