LeConte’s Thrasher: A Desert Specialist on the Edge?
with Phil Unitt

Living only in sandy washes and dunes in the Southwest, LeConte’s Thrasher is perhaps more specialized for life in the desert than any other bird of North America. Yet it faces serious conservation challenges. For decades, it was best known in California as a resident of the Coachella Valley. Few, if any, now survive there. The birds prefer to nest in cholla cacti, a habit that helps protect the nest from predators—but not from drought. In the Coachella Valley, the cholla has died off over large areas, apparently as a result of the multiple successive droughts of the 21st century.

In 2019, Phil Unitt and his team from the San Diego Natural History Museum (the NAT) studied LeConte’s Thrasher in Joshua Tree National Park and the Anza-Borrego Desert, finding 26 nests. The population was clearly depressed from the levels observed from 1997 to 2002 during research for the San Diego County Bird Atlas. But in 2019, after a wet winter, the surviving birds enjoyed excellent nest success.

February’s speaker is Phil Unitt, the curator of Birds and Mammals at the NAT. He has published nearly 50 articles on the distribution, ecology, identification, taxonomy, and conservation of birds. He’s co-author of Birds of the Salton Sea and author of the San Diego County Bird Atlas. No one is more qualified to speak to the LeConte’s Thrashers’ plight and promise. Join him as he brings to life the harsh realities of survival in San Diego’s most challenging ecosystem.
A Wren for All Seasons

Unlike most songbirds, the feisty Bewick’s Wren belts out his song in any season, berating any and all intruders on his territory like a pugnacious bouncer. A medium-sized wren (at least as wrens go) with a conspicuous white line over the eye (a supercilium) and a relatively long tail tipped with white spots, a Bewick’s Wren characteristically wags that tail from side to side. The plain uniformity of the grayish brown plumage makes the long, narrow supercilium pop.

The Bewick’s Wren is one of San Diego County’s most widespread birds. These wrens choose a variety of habitats including chaparral, brushy thickets, riparian woodlands, sage scrub, and well-vegetated suburban areas. Still, favorite habitats emerge. Most notably, the only species likely to be more abundant in mature chaparral than Bewick’s Wren are the Wrentit and Spotted Towhee.

Bewick’s Wrens ingest insect adults, eggs, and larvae as well as other arthropods and small invertebrates, gleaning them from leaves and probing into crevices. They seldom feed more than 10 feet off the ground and, in areas of sparse vegetation, may even forage on the ground by flipping dead leaves and twigs.

The Bewick’s Wren’s broad definition of “cavity” opens a world of surprising nesting spots in otherwise unlikely environments: rocks, caves, holes in the ground, and the detritus of humanity such as a cast-off hubcap or a discarded coffee can. Once the pair agrees on an adequate cavity, both sexes build the nest. Clutch size ranges from 3–8 eggs, which the female incubates 14–16 days. Young fledge 14–17 days after hatching. Bewick’s Wrens commonly double-brood, if the first brood fledges early in the season.

In winter, Bewick’s Wren is even more widespread in San Diego County than during the breeding season. His song or scolding chatter will help you find him. To read more about this lively winter singer, go to https://bvaudubon.org/news/.

MAKE US YOUR VALENTINE

BVAS hopes that you will consider signing up at https://smile.amazon.com and designating Buena Vista Audubon as your favorite charity. It’s like Amazon.com in every way, except that a half percent of most purchases is donated to BVAS and its work. Show us some love. It won’t cost you a thing!
**ADAPTATIONS OF BIRDS**
This column is an introduction to a series of short notes on some of the evolutionary adaptations of birds. The basic theme of bird evolution is flight. Flight required modified forelimbs and other changes in anatomy and physiology that took tens of millions of years to evolve. Most paleontologists consider the ancestor of birds to be a small bipedal dinosaur in the theropod group called coelurosaurs, of which birds are the only living lineage. One group of coelurosaurs, the maniraptors, had long arms, three-digit hands, and a backward-pointing hip—characteristics in common with modern birds. Maniraptors first appear in the fossil record during the Jurassic more than 150 million years ago. Most modern bird orders were present 37 million years ago and most modern bird genera existed 5 million years ago.

The evolution of flight enabled birds to spread across our planet. The many innovations in morphology and physiology made it possible for birds to adapt to every type of environment. Indeed, birds live in some of the most inhospitable areas on Earth.

The class Aves has been very successful and today more than 10,000 species exist worldwide. In order to fly, the body must be lightweight, the result of a trend toward weight-reduction in almost every feature and function of a bird’s anatomy. Stay tuned as we explore some of the basic features and functions of this extraordinary group of animals.

Evolution of dinosaur into bird by Mark Hallett from an exhibit at the Yale Peabody Museum.
YES ON PROP “A” & NO ON PROP “B”

In March 2020, San Diego County residents will vote on ballot measures that give residents a say on whether land use should be determined by the County General Plan or, alternatively, by amendments to the Plan that allow sprawl development outside the urban and village core areas. The General Plan was developed consistent with “smart growth” that protects wildlife habitat and farmland. Too often developers want to build high-end housing with significant impacts on greenhouse gas emissions and traffic congestion, as well as impacts on public safety in the event of fire evacuation, in addition to loss of native wildlife habitat or agriculturally zoned lands.

Vote Yes on Prop “A”, Safeguard Our San Diego Countryside (SOS)
SOS would require San Diego County voter approval for changes to the County General Plan that include large developments in rural, backcountry, and agricultural areas. The initiative protects the rights of small landowners and does not interfere either with planned development in towns or with meeting state-mandated affordable housing requirements.

Vote No on Prop “B”, Newland Sierra Development Project
Newland Sierra is located on County unincorporated land north of San Marcos and was approved by the County Board of Supervisors. This ballot measure will allow voters to decide whether this large block of natural habitat is an appropriate site for 2,125 dwelling units, since it would interrupt a critical wildlife corridor, increase greenhouse gas emissions, and endanger public safety in the highest fire-risk zone in the county.

To order a free yard sign: https://www.stopsprawl.org/yardsign or google Sierrans Against Sprawl. To purchase tickets to a fundraiser: https://artcenter.secure.force.com/ticket/#/instances/a0F3i000000NqvDEAS. Click “About this event.” The fundraiser is a concert that will be held on February 16.

10th Annual Birdhouse and Nature Art Auction

The Birdhouse and Nature Art Auction will be Saturday, March 14, from 5:00 - 8:00 p.m. at the Nature Center. The entrance fee of $15 will include music, hors d’oeuvres, wine, and craft beers.

Be creative! We are accepting birdhouses, beehouses, and other nature-themed art. This might include painting, sculpture, quilt, or other inventive art you’d like to create with nature in mind.

Bring your masterpieces to the Nature Center in February and early March.

In order to preserve space, we’re asking that contributors limit their artistic donations to three items.

We hope you’ll join us for a great evening of community, camaraderie, and charity.
RESULTS OF THE OCEANSIDE CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

The 74th Oceanside Christmas Bird Count was held on December 21, 2019. It was a perfect day for the 116 volunteer birders to cover our 15-mile diameter circle. In all, 182 species totaling 31,960 individuals were counted. Our 34 teams of volunteers logged more than 230 hours and covered more than 412 miles by foot, car, golf cart, and boat.

Several rarities were found: Northern Parula, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Gray Flycatcher, Nashville Warbler, Yellow Warbler (4), Palm Warbler (3), Bullock’s Oriole, Plumbeous Vireo, Ridgway’s Rail (7), and Brown Creeper. Other recurring rarities included Summer Tanager (2), Western Tanager, Black-and-White Warbler, and Brant.

Species that are rarely found in the Oceanside circle included Cactus Wren, Reddish Egret, Wilson’s Snipe, and Canyon Wren (3). Several species were at or near record lows: Loggerhead Shrike, Rhinoceros Auklet, Herring Gull, and Forster’s Tern (only one individual each).

Thank you very much to all of the teams who worked many hours to collect these data. Christmas Bird Counts generate an important and long-running data set dating back to the very first CBC in 1900. This information helps to track bird species trends for the United States and other countries. And a special thank you to the volunteers at the Buena Vista Nature Center who hosted the post-count lunch and compilation.

For the full report visit, http://bvaudubon.org.

KIDS’ CORNER
AT THE NATURE CENTER

Joey and Johnny’s Clubhouse
Sunday, Feb. 16, from 1-4 p.m.
Come decorate the sidewalk with your favorite lagoon images!

Preschool Nature Storytime
Monday, Feb. 24 at 10 a.m.
Bring your little ones to our monthly program. This month our story and activities will highlight crows. Questions? Call Sally at 760-525-2351.

BIRDATHON WITH STEVE BRAD
February 9

This is one of Buena Vista Audubon’s favorite fundraising events. Birders of all ages and levels of experience are welcome to join the fun. Pledging is easy. You can pledge any amount per species or a predetermined sum.

For more information on how to participate or pledge, please contact Steve at stevanbrad@gmail.com.

(The date is subject to change, depending on the weather conditions.)
BVAS QUICK CALENDAR

Sat. Feb. 1  Whelan Lake Bird Sanctuary  8:00 a.m.
Mon. Feb. 3  Garden Crew  10:00 a.m.
Thurs. Feb. 6  Birding Leo Carrillo  8:00 a.m.
Fri. Feb. 7  Nature Guides Meeting  10:00 a.m.
Mon. Feb. 10  Garden Crew  10:00 a.m.
Wed. Feb. 12  El Corazon Garrison Creek  7:30 a.m.
Sat. Feb. 15  San Dieguito River Park  8:30 a.m.
Sun. Feb. 16  Joey & Johnny’s Clubhouse  1:00 p.m.
Mon. Feb. 17  Garden Crew  10:00 a.m.
Wed. Feb. 19  Program: “LeConte’s Thrasher: A Desert Specialist on the Edge?” with Phil Unitt  6:30 p.m.
Fri. Feb. 21  Board Meeting  9:00 a.m.
Mon. Feb. 24  Preschool Nature Storytime  10:00 a.m.
Mon. Feb. 24  Garden Crew  10:00 a.m.
Sat. Feb. 29  Coastal 101 Birding  9:00 a.m.

February 26 - March 1.  San Diego Bird Festival
For information, go to https://www.sandiegoaudubon.org/news-events/upcoming-events/bird-festival.html.

For Steve Brad’s two monthly walks, dates and times will vary. If interested, send Steve an email: stevanbrad@gmail.com.

Buena Vista Audubon
A Chapter of the National Audubon Society
2202 S. Coast Highway
Oceanside, CA 92054
760-439-BIRD = (760-439-2473)
email: bvaudubon@sbcglobal.net
website: www.bvaudubon.org

Learn about the LeConte’s Thrasher. See page 1 for details.

Center Hours
Sunday: 1 - 4 p.m.
Monday: CLOSED
Tuesday - Saturday: 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.