Bird Photography in Cuba
with Deb and Jim Babbitt, Wednesday, October 18
Social: 6:45 p.m., Program: 7:00 p.m.

Cuba is a fascinating destination for birding enthusiasts, due to its diverse range of habitats and its unique avian species. With over 400 species of birds, including 25 endemic species found only in Cuba, it offers a rare opportunity for birdwatchers to spot some of the most unusual and rare birds in the world. Cuba's lush forests, wetlands, and coastal areas provide excellent habitats for a variety of birds, such as the Cuban Tody, the Cuban Trogon, and the Bee Hummingbird—the world's smallest bird. In addition to its rich birdlife, Cuba also offers a unique cultural experience, with a vibrant music scene, cool vintage cars, delicious cuisine, and a rich history. Birding in Cuba is an unforgettable experience that combines natural beauty, fascinating culture, and exciting wildlife viewing.

Jim and Deb Babbit have been obsessed with bird photography since 2010. Upon retiring, they increased their travel adventures and fell in love with the neotropics and the birds that call this environment home. They have been fortunate enough to travel to over 15 countries and photograph incredible birds, including the unique and colorful birds of Cuba. What started as a simple hobby has become a true passion.

Join us via Zoom to travel vicariously to the beautiful and interesting country of Cuba!

Please RSVP to Bob Crowell at bva3ruddyducks@att.net if you would like to join us on Zoom. The Zoom link will be emailed to you on the day of the lecture.
The Quirky Wrentit
by Tina Mitchell

For years, I had a blind spot about Wrentits. When we first moved here from Colorado, I’d hear an unfamiliar, one-note, accelerating song throughout our predominantly coastal-sage-scrub neighborhood. Looking through Peterson’s Field Guide to Bird Sounds of Western North America, I found a description of the Wrentit’s song: “Accelerating series of medium-high clear Pip or Peek notes.” This guide also described a similar song—the California Towhee’s—as "Accelerating series of Teetlike notes...” “Pip or Peek notes?” “Teetlike notes?” Good luck with that differentiation, human ears.

I had seen scads of California Towhees in the neighborhood and I had never seen a Wrentit here. In my mind, Wrentits were creatures of the chapparal. Since I generally figure that the rare, by definition, rarely happens to me, I decided I was hearing California Towhees. Enter Merlin’s Sound ID a few years later. It continually identified that song as Wrentit. Huh. I just figured Merlin was wrong. Until one morning, I actually spotted a Wrentit—no small feat, in itself—singing that “bouncing ball” song. Holy cow. That is NOT a California Towhee’s song—it’s a Wrentit’s. (Sorry, Merlin.) And just a few months ago, I finally saw a California Towhee singing his song. Although the rhythm was rather similar to the Wrentit’s song, the sound was dramatically different. Merlin’s not always right, but it deserved more respect than I had given it. Turned out our coastal-sage-scrub-dominant neighborhood was crawling with Wrentits.

A plain, skulking, hyperactive, somewhat incongruous-looking bird, the Wrentit is oddly shaped, with a neckless plum-shaped head/body combo and an extremely long, scraggly-tipped tail often cocked to the side. The bill is stubby and dark; the chest shows indistinct streaking; the small, piercing white eyes are conspicuous in part because they are highlighted by thin, light eyebrows and in part because the rest of the bird is so utterly and overall... well, plain. Plumage varies from drab pale brown to drab olive-brown to drab ruddy brown to gray (made a bit less drab with a warm blush of salmon). Upperparts are usually slightly darker than underparts. All in all, it presents as a rather homely-looking bird with a slightly scowling expression. But oh, that song, slicing through the air!

All of this physical description is probably a waste of words, though. Wrentits are maddeningly reticent, typically vocalizing from the interior spaces of bushes. Its song is a classic sound of both coastal sage scrub and chaparral along the West Coast. The male’s song (click here) consists of a series of measured, one-note whistles that accelerate into a trill, resembling a bouncing ball that accelerates as the bouncing distance lessens. (Females can sing a shorter, simpler version.) Males and females sing at all daylight hours, all year long. Both sexes also make an insistent, rattling call (click here), sounding a bit like a deck of cards being shuffled quickly—quite distinctive once you realize it’s not some weird insect.

Found primarily on the western edge of North America, from the Columbia River south, Wrentits in coastal areas prefer sage scrub. Away from the coast, they inhabit chaparral shrub understory in oak and pine forest. The San Diego County Bird Atlas stated that the Wrentit is “one of the most abundant birds in San Diego County’s most abundant habitat. It vies only with the Spotted Towhee for the title of most numerous birds in mature chaparral.”
Wrentits forage at all levels in brush but almost never spend much time on the ground. They eat mostly insects when available, picking up beetles, scale insects, caterpillars, ants, larvae, and spiders from twigs and bark. Berries—including elderberry, blackberry, and laurel sumac—move up in importance during the winter. Poison oak berries are an especially important winter food source.

Wrentits may pair up as young as 30 to 40 days old; they stay with these mates for the rest of their lives. Females typically begin laying in the third or fourth week of March. Most clutches have three or four eggs; hatching occurs after 11-18 days. Fledging around 14 days old (with another wide range of 11-19 days), these young Wrentits are not usually able to fly at that point. But they are cryptically colored and hop among the undergrowth with great agility. Several days after leaving the nest, their flight feathers grow in, allowing the youngsters to begin to fly. Pairs rarely attempt a second brood following successfully fledging young from an earlier brood.

The Wrentit’s name—*Chamaea fasciata*—focuses on some hard-to-see characteristics. *Chamaea* comes from Greek *khamai* (“on the ground”), referring not to its hanging out on the ground (which it doesn’t do often) but to its skulky habits of eluding pursuit (or binoculars) by diving into the thickest bunches of weeds and tall grass or tangled bushes. *Fasciata*, Latin for “ribbon or band,” reflects this bird’s rather indistinct streaks on the breast and tail. ( Couldn’t name them for those icy white eyes? Or that strident “bouncing-ball” song? Guess not.) “Wren” derives from Anglo-Saxon *wraenna*, their name for a wren (which this bird is not, although it reminded some of wrens); “tit” comes from Middle English for something small, especially a bird.

Wrentits hold a couple of noteworthy, unofficial honors among songbirds. These homebodies may be the most sedentary bird species in North America, rarely traveling more than a quarter-mile from where they hatched. This species also has one of the simplest vocal arrays of any North American passerine. Both males and females sing, but only one song type has been documented in recordings. (The number of introductory notes can vary, but typically three to five notes open the male’s song.) So once you learn the simple song and call, you can confidently know when Wrentits lurk in your vicinity. At least assuming you’re a quicker study than I was.

The New World Wrentit has recently been classified as a member of an Old World family, the Sylviidae, which includes the Sylviid Warblers, Parrotbills, and allies.

Below is an image of a Sylviid Warbler, the Gray-hooded Fulvetta, from China. The similarities to our diminuitive Wrentit are striking—same penetrating white eyes!
NEW EVENT FOR THIS MONTH
SAN DIEGUITO COUNTY PARK
(Solana Beach/Rancho Santa Fe)
Saturday, Oct 14 — 8:00 a.m.
Meet at the “Lower Park” entrance. We will loop through the park, birding the ornamental and native vegetation. Easy to moderate, 1.5+ miles, some steep areas; restrooms onsite.
Location: 15938 El Camino Real, Rancho Santa Fe (33.00287° N, 117.23448° W). Park along El Camino Real across from El Nido (street); no fee.
Leader: Gjon Hazard (gjon_hazard@hotmail.com)

STEVE BRAD’S BIRDING TRIPS
Join Steve for these surprise-location offerings that include a good dose of education on bird identification. When and where we go is Steve’s choice! Starting times and days vary, so send Steve an email if you are interested in being on his notification list.
Leader: Steve Brad (stevanbrad@gmail.com)

BIRDABILITY BIRDING WITH BARBARA
Saturday, Oct 21— 8:00 a.m. NEW TIME
This month we will explore Buddy Todd Park in Oceanside. Paved surfaces, gentle slopes, easy to amble around the park.
Location: Meet in the parking lot by the restrooms off of Mesa Drive.
Leader: Barbara Swanson (baswanson100@hotmail.com)

COASTAL 101 BIRDING (Oceanside)
2202 S Coast Highway
Saturday, Oct 28 — 9:00 a.m.
We start along the Buena Vista Lagoon, visit Maxton Brown Park, travel to the ocean and weir, and return to the Nature Center along Coast Hwy. Easy 1.5 miles.
Location: Buena Vista Nature Center, 2202 S. Coast Hwy, Oceanside. Meet in the parking lot.
Leader: Tom Troy (760-420-7328)
Check it Out

Fall is a time of renewal in Southern California, from the planting of natives to children settled into school routines and looking for new learning opportunities. The Nature Center library can be a fantastic resource to prepare for a number of new fall activities.

Jean Booth, BVAS Librarian

Nature Center Garden Crew

Join the Garden Crew every Monday 9-11 a.m. to help out and learn about native plants.

Santa Ana winds can really stress our plants. Hardening our homes for fire protection is more critical than removing any plants since embers can travel long distances. Go to Californiachaparral.org for more information.

Joan Bockman, BVAS Garden Crew

Join Us for Preschool Nature Storytime

Monday, Oct 23, 10:00-10:45 a.m. at the Nature Center.

This month we will read and sing about SPIDERS. We will also walk along the lagoon trail looking for spiders and their webs. Please invite your neighbors and friends!

Questions? Call Sally Bickerton, 760-525-2351.

Nature Craft Clubhouse

Sunday, Oct 8, 10:00 a.m.

Bring your school-aged children to the Nature Center to create a nature-themed craft. This month we will create Nature Suncatchers!
**Toyon**

by Barbara Swanson

Toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*) is a stunning member of our coastal sage scrub, chaparral, and mixed oak woodland habitats. It is found along most of the California coast and inland, growing on foothills and low mountains below 4,000 feet. It thrives in a range of light conditions from full sun to partial shade and is tolerant of many soil types. Toyon can grow very quickly, reaching full size of 8 feet or more in only a few years.

Toyon is an evergreen shrub with two-inch-long sturdy, bright green leaves that are less than an inch wide and toothed. It is a member of the rose family. The plant contains a toxic cyanide compound; Native Americans would cook parts of the plant before consuming them to destroy this chemical. The plants bloom around July, with large clusters of small, white, five-petaled flowers providing nourishment to insects during the dry season. Pollinated flowers become berries that turn a brilliant red by late fall, giving this plant its common names of Christmas berry and California holly. Birds love to eat these berries, with flocks of Cedar Waxwings or American Robins commonly descending on these bushes to pick them clean of berries. Various native butterflies and moths use the plant for feeding their larvae, including the diminutive Pacific Azure butterfly.

Unlike many native plants that grow in coastal sage scrub or chaparral, Toyons need some moisture during the summer dry season, making them compatible with many yards and gardens. They can be trimmed into a hedge or grown as a single specimen plant that can tolerate occasional hard pruning. They are also fire-retardant, which is always an attractive feature in southern California. I have a one-year old Toyon growing in my yard in clay soil that I managed to sprout from local seed; the plant is about two feet tall but is bushy and growing vigorously.
Endangered Species Stamps Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Endangered Species Act
by Joan Herskowitz

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) has proven to be a landmark piece of legislation that institutionalized the national commitment to conservation and the protection of threatened and endangered fish, plants, wildlife, and the habitats that sustain them. In 1973, this bipartisan bill was passed by a vote of 92-0 in the Senate and 355-4 in the House. Although over the years there have been attempts to delay listings, and to “reform” the Act by limiting protections based on economic considerations, the Act continues to carry out its mission.

Now in 2023, we celebrate 50 years that the Act has protected, conserved, and aided in the recovery of plants and animals in an ongoing effort to prevent extinctions. The anniversary is a reminder that conservation efforts are essential for stemming the worsening impacts of climate change, protecting biodiversity, and preserving our planet’s resources. The ESA provisions have helped to increase threatened native plant and animal populations, thereby reducing threats to their survival—the ultimate goal being to be able to remove them from federal protection.

Under the ESA, more than 1,600 imperiled plant and animal species in the United States have been listed as “threatened” or “endangered” and their chances of survival have been increased. Just a few of the animal species in San Diego County that are covered by the law’s protections include the California Least Tern, Light-Footed Ridgeway’s Rail, Least Bell’s Vireo, California Gnatcatcher, Stephen’s Kangaroo Rat, San Diego Fairy Shrimp, Peninsula Bighorn Sheep, and Quino Checkerspot butterfly. Although many species have benefited from the Act, 46 species were considered to have recovered and were removed from coverage under the Act, including Bald Eagles.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service maintains a list of candidates for protection under the Act—those whose biological status and threats support a proposal for listing in the future. The Monarch Butterfly is one of these candidates and hopefully this listing will soon be proposed by the agency. The documented successes of the Act, along with some public frustrations with the often slow process, are reminders of how important it is that we continue to defend, fund, and strengthen the ESA so that we retain the Earth’s natural diversity of plants and animals.

In an effort to create awareness and celebrate the accomplishments of the legislation, the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) issued a block of stamps in May of this year with strikingly beautiful photographs of 20 representative endangered animal species. The photographs were chosen from among the 13,000 species featured in Joel Sartore’s National Geographic Photo Ark project, which attempted to document species living in the world’s zoos, aquariums, and wildlife sanctuaries. The “Endangered Species” stamps were issued as “Forever” stamps (equal in value to the current First-Class Mail one-ounce price) and can be purchased from the USPS.
The Hurricane Edition

The most exciting news in August for the San Diego birding community was Tropical Storm *Hilary*, which catapulted a boat-load of pelagic (open ocean) birds to the coast, inland lakes, and much farther inland to neighboring states. From August 20-23, birders were combing the county with binoculars and spotting scopes in hand, focusing on inland lakes and the coastline, where potential rarities were likely to settle. And folks were not disappointed. Common Tern, Black Tern, Sooty Shearwater, Least Storm-Petrel, Black Storm-Petrel, and the exceptionally rare Wedge-rumped Storm-Petrel were seen. It was quite an extraordinary few days!

Where did they come from?

**Wedge-rumped Storm-Petrel**'s range map is shown (left). There are two subspecies—one breeds on the Galapagos Islands, the other breeds on islands off Central Peru and Northern Chile. The birds we had were likely the Peruvian subspecies that range along the Pacific coast from Southern Baja California to Northern Chile. These were first-time records for San Diego County!

**Sooty Shearwaters** range along most of the major oceans. The bird at Lake Henshaw was an exceptional county inland sighting.
Contemplations of the Constellations
by Tina Mitchell

A favorite memory with my father starts with a cold, clear winter’s evening. I’m seven; we’re bundled up against the Midwest cold; he’s behind me and I’m leaning back on him to stare up at the twinkling stars. He’s pointing out constellations and I’m feeling small, safe, loved, and at one with the cosmos (in a 7-year-old way). Is it any wonder I love the winter night sky?

Winter constellations include some of the brightest and easiest to recognize. Circumpolar constellations—those that circle counter-clockwise around the North Pole—offer a good starting point, especially starting around Thanksgiving and late December. **Ursa Major**, the Great Bear, is one of the best known and begins to rise in the east in the late evening sky around Christmas. The ancient Greeks held that Hera discovered Zeus was having an affair with Callisto and turned her into a bear. Zeus then put her in the sky. (Those Greek gods really had some serious powers.)

Facing north, you’ll see the **Big Dipper**, which makes up the bear’s body and tail. These bright stars—four outlining the "bowl," three tracing the "handle"—create one of the easiest patterns to spot in the night sky.

The Big Dipper serves as a guide to other circumpolar constellations. For instance, **Ursa Minor**, the Little Bear, parallels its big brother with its **Little Dipper**, also with seven stars—four in the bowl, three in the handle. (Zeus put Callisto’s son, Arcas, in the sky too, as the Little Bear, so he could be close to his mother. What a thoughtful god.) Together, the dippers appear to be pouring their contents into each other. **Polaris**, the North Star, lies at the very end of the Little Dipper’s handle. Polaris is visible in the north pretty much any time it’s dark; but it’s easier to find if you can start with Ursa Major. Extend a line between the two outer stars of the Big Dipper’s bowl about five times the distance between them and you’ve arrived. Polaris doesn’t point exactly north, but it’s less than a degree off—about the width of your pinkie finger held against the sky—and has been vital for navigation around the Northern Hemisphere for thousands of years.

Returning to the Big Dipper, trace a line from the bowl of the Big Dipper through Polaris. Continue an equal distance beyond, and you’ll find **Cassiopeia**, queen of Ethiopia, sitting on her throne. Allegedly a lovely woman, she would often brag that she and her daughter were more beautiful than the sea nymphs, the Nereids. This claim didn’t sit well with the Nereids (you know how competitive sea nymphs can be), so they lodged a complaint with Poseidon, mayhem ensued, and Cassiopeia ended up in the sky. A very distinct shape, the constellation of Cassiopeia looks like a "W" or "M" in the sky, depending on where she is in relation to the North Pole.

Not all of the interesting constellations circle the pole, though. Most others can only be seen during certain seasons. To see the Northern Hemisphere’s winter-only constellations starting in late November, face south. Arguably the most famous seasonal constellation, **Orion**, the Hunter, provides an easy-to-spot starting point. A famed hunter, Orion boasted that no creature could kill him. Challenge accepted by the gods—send in the scorpion,

Continued on page 10
declared Hera. Orion smashed the insect with his club, but not before it stung him. Orion’s Belt anchors the constellation—three bright stars in a straight line. Orion’s sword—another row of three stars—hangs down from his belt. Actually, the middle “star” looks a bit fuzzy and isn’t a star at all. It’s the Orion Nebula, a vast and bright cloud of gas and dust.

Orion also leads you to other constellations in his area. He appears to chase Taurus, the Bull, across the sky. The Greeks thought Zeus took a disguise as a magnificent white bull to carry out yet another of his myriad extramarital affairs. He tricked Europa, a Phoenician princess, into climbing on his back. He then carried her across the sea to Crete. To find Taurus, go back to Orion’s belt and move up and to the right. You arrive at a V-shaped group of stars called the Hyades (who were five daughters of Atlas) in Taurus’s head. Each end of this V extends outward to a star that forms a tip of one of the Bull’s horns. Beyond the Hyades, look for a small cluster of stars in Taurus’s shoulder—the Seven Sisters, or Pleiades (seven other daughters of Atlas and half-sisters of the Pleiades). The story claims that these sisters asked Zeus to place them in the sky to escape Orion, who was desperately pursuing them. Little did they know that Orion would be placed right next to Taurus in the night sky. The pursuit continues for eternity.

Gemini, the Twins, can be found from Orion as well. Ancient Greeks saw Gemini as Castor and Pollux, two of Zeus’s sons. The Romans saw the brothers Romulus and Remus, two heroes who founded Rome. Extend a line to the northeast along Orion to two close-together bright stars, Castor and Pollux. These two represent the heads of the twins, while fainter stars sketch out their bodies.

One last constellation completes Orion’s heavenly entourage. His belt points down—east and a little south—to the brilliant white star called Sirius, the Dog Star. As part of Canis Major, the Great Dog, Sirius is the brightest star in the night sky and represents the shoulder of Orion’s hunting dog. Sirius always blazes intensely, but the star especially captivates when near the horizon. The phrase “the dog days of summer” arises from this star. In late summer, Sirius hangs low on the eastern horizon just as the sun rises. The star shines so brightly that early people thought its brilliance added to the already wearingly hot late-summer sun. In fact, the name Sirius derives from Ancient Greek, meaning “scorcher.”

The night sky never dazzles more than on clear, sparkling winter nights if you can find an area far from the city lights. Maybe download a night sky app to your smart phone and head into the dark outdoors. Or go super-low-tech with a “planisphere”—a hand-held tool calibrated around your latitude that you adjust to show the stars of the night sky on any date and time. Or find a kid, bundle yourselves up against the chill, and just drink in the wonders of the winter night sky. Perhaps you too will make a memory that she’ll remember more than a half-century later!

WITH THANKS

The newsletter continues to be a group effort. Thanks to all the contributors and proofreaders. A special thanks to Tina Mitchell, who contributes interesting stories and meticulously edits every article.  

Jane Mygatt, Newsletter Editor
Several rare shorebirds dropped in at the San Dieguito River Park in Del Mar in early September. An ephemeral wetland in the field adjacent to the soccer fields had these three rarities. Our bird-loving board members Patti Langen and Barbara Swanson captured these photos.

Solitary Sandpiper (Patti Langen)

Stilt Sandpiper (Patti Langen)

Pectoral Sandpiper (Barbara Swanson)

THE OCEANSIDE CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT WILL BE FRIDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2023

Save the date—don’t miss the greatest, most exciting, and fun community science event of the year!

More information to follow in the November-December issue of the newsletter.

Patti Langen will be coordinating the event!
patti.langenzoo@gmail.com
Save the Date!
Fundraiser/music event with MandoBasso!

Check for details at the Nature Center (or on our website) after October 1st.

Saturday, November 11
4:00-7:00 p.m.

Nature Center Quick Calendar

Birding – see page 4
Garden Crew – Mondays, 9 – 11 a.m.
Nature Guides – First Friday at 10 a.m.
Nature Craft Clubhouse – 2nd Sunday at 10 a.m.
Program on Zoom – 3rd Wednesday at 7 p.m.
BVAS Board Meeting – 3rd Friday at 10 a.m., this month in the Nature Center.
Preschool Nature Storytime – 4th Monday at 10 a.m.

Become a Member!

Help support our work and become a member of BVAS. All donations of $25/year or more qualify as membership dues. As a BVAS member, you will receive the chapter newsletter, have voting privileges at our Annual Meeting and other member meetings, and enjoy the satisfaction of belonging to a group that supports nature in North County. All donations are tax-deductible. BVAS is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation and will receive 100% of your contribution.

https://bvaudubon.org/donate/

Our Mission: Conservation through education, advocacy, land management, and monitoring.

Buena Vista Audubon Nature Center
2202 S. Coast Highway
Oceanside, CA 92054 (760-439-2473)

Nature Center Hours
Tuesday-Sunday: 10 a.m. – 1 p.m.
Monday: Closed

BVAS honors and respectfully acknowledges the Payómkawichum (also known as the Luiseños), who are of the land on which the BVAS Nature Center stands. The Tribal Nations of San Diego County are the Payómkawichum, the Kumeyaay, the Cupeño, and the Cahuilla.
MANDOBASSO IN CONCERT!

Saturday, November 11, 2023
4:00—7:00 p.m.
Buena Vista Audubon Nature Center
2202 S. Coast Highway, Oceanside
Phone: (760) 439-2473

Visit bvaudubon.org after Oct. 1st for the full details.

MandoBasso is a musical duo featuring Gunner Biggs on bass and Bill Bradbury on mandolin. You won’t want to miss their creative arrangements of traditional and classical music, jazz, ragtime, and their own compositions.

$25 current members
$35 non-members
Tickets available at the Nature Center after Oct. 1.

Come enjoy music, food, drinks, and friends.

Raffle of gift baskets will be held at 6:30 p.m.

Parking is limited. Please carpool or park on side streets if our lot is full.