

CHAPTER SEVEN

OCCASIONAL, FORMER, AND POTENTIAL BREEDERS

The species discussed below did not meet our criteria for inclusion in either Atlas 1 or Atlas 2, but deserve mention as occasional, former, or potential breeders in Sacramento County. While the two atlas projects combined to cover more than 10 of the past 34 years, some rare to uncommon species were bound to be missed. There are species that seemed to be establishing themselves, only to melt away. Some species nested in the more distant past. Others have shown possible breeding behavior in the county at some point, or just over the county line.

BETWEEN THE ATLASES

These species are known to have bred in the county since 1994 (after the end of data collection for Atlas 1), but were not recorded with a breeding behavior observation (possible, probable, or confirmed) during either Atlas 1 or Atlas 2.

Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*) nested at least twice at Cosumnes River Preserve. The most recent observation was of a female with four young in May 2010; the first nesting was noted in 2001 (Cosumnes River Preserve unpublished database).

A pair of **Caspian Terns** (*Hydroprogne caspia*) nested successfully at Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in the summer of 2000 (M. Brady pers. comm., *fide* CC), establishing the only known nesting record in the county. The nearest nesting sites in adjacent counties are from the Solano County portion of the Napa Marsh (Berner 2015), and Brooks Island, Contra Costa County, near Richmond (Glover 2009) through at least 2018 (eBird).

White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihi*) began increasing in the region in the 1980s and continued to grow in numbers, likely as the result of improved wetland management and the banning of DDT (Small 1994, Perrone 2015, Ryder and Manry 2020). The first known nesting in Sacramento County occurred from 2007 through 2010 in the Natomas Basin, just south of the Sutter County line (D. Airola pers. comm., ICF 2020). There has been no confirmed

nesting since, though large numbers have been reported near the nesting location abandoned in 2010, suggesting they may nest in the future (ICF 2020). Despite limited breeding in Sacramento County, they have been nesting in Yolo County for over 30 years (Perrone 2015, Hampton et al. 2019, eBird). The species' nesting locations and numbers are known to fluctuate depending on conditions, so they may colonize new sites as they become suitable (Ryder and Manry 2020).

A **Long-eared Owl** (*Asio otus*) was photographed on a nest at the River Bend access to the American River Parkway in the spring of 2002. The bird was seen over the course of a few days, but the nest was apparently abandoned before young were detected (S. Flannery pers. comm., *fide* CC). Earlier records include a nest with young in an orchard in Rio Linda in 1974 (*fide* TM) and an adult hit by a car near Folsom Dam in July 1979 (*fide* TM), with timing suggesting possible breeding. More recently, a bird photographed in a Sacramento yard on 29 April 2020 (eBird) was much later in the season than typical for a wintering bird.

This is an enigmatic and easily overlooked species. They are found sporadically in fall and winter, most often in portions of Cosumnes River Preserve closed to regular public access. The winter roosts occasionally contain more than 10 birds, and they seem particularly sensitive to disturbance, scattering frantically when chanced upon (J. Trochet pers. comm., CC pers. obs.). There are very few breeding records for the region, with the only published Yolo County nesting record from the Yolo Bypass in 1961 (Hampton et al. 2019). There is also a Yuba County nesting record from Beale Air Force Base in 1972 (*fide* B. Deuel). Glover (2009) considered it perhaps the least understood breeding species in Contra Costa County, where the only confirmed nesting for that county was west of Mount Diablo, near Moraga, in July 2002. While poorly understood, most trends in California are thought to be decidedly downward, especially owing to the historical loss of riparian habitat (Hunting 2008). Perhaps, with the

sustained restoration efforts bringing back suitable habitat, a quiet observer may once again find a nest in Sacramento County.

Cassin's Vireos (*Vireo cassinii*) summered at Cosumnes River Preserve in 2002, and an adult was seen feeding a young vireo on 6 August (J. Trochet pers. comm.). The species nests on both sides of the Central Valley floor in the foothills of the Coast Range and Sierra, but this is the only evidence of local breeding reported.

The only **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*) breeding record is of a female paired with a male Black-headed Grosbeak in June 1998 at Cosumnes River Preserve. The nest apparently failed (J. Trochet pers. comm.). The same species combination nested in Contra Costa County in 1992, though the sex combination was reversed (Glover 2009).

For a brief period, it seemed that **Indigo Buntings** (*Passerina cyanea*) would become a regular feature of Sacramento County's avifauna. From 1996–1998, territorial males were present at Cosumnes River Preserve, and even paired with females (presumably Lazuli Buntings, but good looks at the difficult-to-identify females were often not possible; Manolis et al. 2002, J. Trochet pers. comm.). Then, in 2007, a male summered at Cosumnes River Preserve and was seen attending to two (perhaps hybrid) juveniles, and feeding one, on 12 August (J. Trochet pers. comm.); a male also summered at the Bufferlands in 2006 and was seen in the same willow clump as a female Lazuli Bunting (CC pers. obs.). There have been occasional breeding season occurrences since 2007, but not of extended duration. Apparent hybrids have been observed on a few occasions, including a bird mist-netted at Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge on 11 May 2002 (Manolis et al. 2002).

FORMER BREEDERS

These species are known to have bred in the county, but have not been recorded showing breeding behavior in many decades.

Reports from the 1800s suggest that **Yellow-billed Cuckoos** (*Coccyzus americanus*) were numerous in the Sacramento Valley (Ridgway 1877). They were



Male Black-headed Grosbeak on nest by Tim Manolis

still fairly common, at least in some areas, into the 1930s, but were greatly reduced before the 1970s (Gaines and Laymon 1984). The species is listed as Endangered by the State of California, and the western population is listed as federally Threatened. It was hoped that restoring natural flooding cycles to the lower Cosumnes River floodplain would lead to improved conditions and, among other things, to the ultimate return of cuckoos as breeders in Sacramento County (J. Trochet pers. comm.). The forest responded, but, so far, the cuckoos mostly have not. Detections of a single Yellow-billed Cuckoo over the course of two weeks at Cosumnes River Preserve in July 1996 (Manolis 2001) were cause for some optimism, but occurrences in the county since have been very few and limited to single-day observations.

In the 21st century, rather steep declines in the Sacramento Valley apparently continue, despite a net increase in appropriate habitat in recent decades through restoration efforts. Food in the form of their insect prey, especially caterpillars, may be the limiting factor for cuckoos now more than lack of habitat (Dettling et al. 2015). Declines in caterpillars have been noted at Cosumnes River Preserve (J. Trochet pers. comm.) and may be at least partially attributable to the introduction of a nonnative paper wasp that is highly predatory on caterpillars (as investigated by A. Shapiro at the University of California, Davis: <https://tinyurl.com/u27h7z6w>). Migrant songbird foraging has been noticeably

altered by the reduction in caterpillars (J. Trochet pers. comm, CC pers. obs.). This reduction would also make the forests less attractive to cuckoos, as would overall declines in insects thought to be linked to climate change and neonicotinoid insecticides (Forister et al. 2016, Hallmann et al. 2017).

Least Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*) is now listed as Endangered at the state and federal levels. They certainly bred in the county before dramatic clearing of riparian forest and the arrival of Brown-headed Cowbirds. Although Grinnell and Miller (1944) did not specifically mention a Sacramento County location among the records listed, they describe the species as common to abundant in their range, including the Sacramento Valley, while noting the beginnings of the widespread decline that resulted in extirpation in the Central Valley by (and probably well before) the 1970s (Dettling et al. 2012).

The news turned a little rosier as conservation and restoration efforts appeared to pay off with the discovery of successful nesting by the species in restored riparian forest at San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge, Stanislaus County, in 2005–2007. However, they were not observed in 2008–2009 (Dettling et al. 2012). There have been sporadic reports since, through at least 2016 (eBird). Just west of Sacramento County, there was a flurry of breeding season records in 2010–2013 at the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area, including courtship and a vireo seen carrying nesting material (Trochet et al. 2017). A singing male was found at the Bufferlands from 29 to 30 April 2013, but no breeding season observations from Sacramento or Yolo counties have been reported since 2013. Most recently, one to two singing birds were found during the summers of 2018–2020 at Bradford Island in Contra Costa County (eBird), just across the San Joaquin River from southwestern Sacramento County. It is highly likely that Bell's Vireos will be found again in the county, given that they are incessant singers, aiding detection, and are often found in patches of small to medium-sized willows (Kus et al. 2020), a habitat fairly common at sites like Cosumnes River Preserve. Whether they will be able to successfully breed is more uncertain.

Much like the vireo, **Willow Flycatchers** (*Empidonax traillii*) presumably nested in much

of the Sacramento Valley, but a combination of habitat destruction and Brown-headed Cowbird brood parasitism led to their local extirpation and severe reduction statewide (Small 1994, Craig and Williams 1998). Unlike the vireo, there has been no suspected breeding behavior reported in the region in many decades, and there are no specific historical records that we were able to uncover. Therefore, the timing of their local extirpation is unknown. The species is a relatively late spring migrant, with a tendency to sing en route (often into June), suggesting breeding to the unwary. They are relatively rare spring migrants in Sacramento County, and much more common in late summer, during their post-breeding migration (eBird).

POTENTIAL BREEDERS

The following species occurred during the breeding season in the past, or are known to nest in adjacent counties.

Redheads (*Aythya americana*) have never been confirmed as breeders in Sacramento County, but they do breed in very low numbers in adjacent Yolo County (Hampton et al. 2019). They are occasionally found in late spring and summer (eBird), so it is conceivable that they have nested or will one day be confirmed nesting in Sacramento County.

There are breeding season records of **American Wigeon** (*Mareca americana*) in late May through July between the atlases, but no stronger evidence of breeding (Cosumnes River Preserve unpublished database).

Either a **Vaux's Swift** (*Chaetura vauxi*) or a **Chimney Swift** (*Chaetura pelagica*) was seen for a few weeks (into late June 2020) near the Purple Martin colony in Old Town Sacramento (D. Airola pers comm., eBird). It was flying near and under the overpass where the martins and White-throated Swifts (*Aeronautes saxatalis*) regularly nest. The views were brief and inconclusive. While Vaux's Swifts are regular migrants (Conard and Oliver 2003), the nearest suggestion of breeding was of Chimney Swifts (entering a chimney, carrying nesting material, but no nest was ultimately found) from Davis, Yolo County, in 1975 (Stallcup and Winter 1975, Stallcup and Winter 1976).

Western Gulls (*Larus occidentalis*) are fairly regular in low numbers in summer along the rivers at Sherman Island. For the Contra Costa County BBA, they were reported as possible breeders from two blocks adjacent to the southwestern tip of Sacramento County, and probable in a block just over 10 km southwest of the county (Glover 2009).

California Gulls (*Larus californicus*) attempted nesting during at least three seasons (the last in 2012) in Yolo County at the City of Davis Wastewater Treatment Plant (*fide* E. Whisler, Hampton et al. 2019). They are periodically seen in Sacramento County during the breeding season, and roosts of up to a few dozen may be found at the Sacramento Regional Wastewater Treatment Plant in summer (CC pers. obs.). It is conceivable they may someday attempt nesting, but so far we have no evidence of breeding.

The following two species were each recorded on an active heronry in the county. A **Little Blue Heron** (*Egretta caerulea*) visited a large heronry in Natomas (with nesting Snowy Egrets, Cattle Egrets, and Black-crowned Night-Herons) for over two weeks in June and July 2014, displaying but not witnessed pairing. Probably the same bird was reported on a single day in May the following year (eBird). A **Yellow-crowned Night-Heron** (*Nyctanassa violacea*) was seen at a heronry (with a large number of Black-crowned Night-Herons) in the Pocket area of Sacramento and was detected twice over four days in May 2019 (eBird).

Hairy Woodpeckers (*Dryobates villosus*), though rare on the valley floor, are reported with some regularity in the county. Because they are similar in appearance to Downy Woodpeckers, they are probably over-reported on the Central Valley floor. Most records with documentation are from the eastern portion of the county (eBird). Beginning in 2013, there have been fairly regular reports along the shore of Lake Natoma near Folsom. A presumed pair was detected in early 2015, with at least one bird continuing into June that year (eBird), providing the strongest suggestion of breeding in the county.

There are three **Canyon Wren** (*Catherpes mexicanus*) records from block O-9 in the southeastern county (J. Trochet pers. comm., CC pers. obs.). One record

from April 2011 was most suggestive of possible breeding. There are a few winter reports from upper Lake Natoma in the past 15 years (eBird, Folsom Christmas Bird Count data), where the habitat looks good, but attempts to find them in spring have been unsuccessful (*fide* CC). Reports from the 1960s are vague as to their exact location (*fide* TM). It is likely that, prior to the construction of the Folsom and Nimbus dams in the 1950s, canyon habitat (connected to populations upstream) could have hosted a small number of these evocative singers.

A pair of **Swainson's Thrushes** (*Catharus ustulatus*) summered at Cosumnes River Preserve in 2002, but despite considerable effort, no nest or other confirmatory behavior was observed. There were also extended breeding season records in 2005 (J. Trochet pers. comm.). This species is a late spring migrant, regularly found into June (eBird). The 2002 records remain the most suggestive of possible breeding.

ADDITIONAL SPECIES

The following species deserve mention, but are more hypothetical in status than those listed above.

Fulvous Whistling-Ducks (*Dendrocygna bicolor*) were found in breeding season at the (no longer extant) Woodland Sugar Ponds in Yolo County from 1971 to 1976, with highs of 15–25 individuals, and nesting reported in 1974 (*fide* TM, A. Engilis pers. comm., see Engilis 2013 for source). They were



Downy Woodpecker by Tim Manolis

considered more common in the state in earlier decades, with breeding in the San Joaquin Valley (Small 1994). There are no records of the species for Sacramento County, and, if they ever nested, it went unrecorded.

Western Grebes (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*) and **Clark's Grebes** (*Aechmophorus clarkii*) are regularly seen through spring and summer, but not usually in appropriate breeding habitat. Most records are from Folsom Lake (eBird), where fluctuating water levels prevent the establishment of the emergent vegetation they need for nesting (LaPorte et al. 2020). Both species have bred on rare occasions in adjacent Contra Costa County (Glover 2009). They were also seen in Solano County during the breeding season at Decker Island in the Sacramento River, just off Sherman Island, in 2007 (Berner 2015). Someday, if conditions are right in the Delta or on a large reservoir, one or both of these species may nest.

It is likely that **Greater Roadrunners** (*Geococcyx californianus*) once nested in the eastern portion of the county, and there is a remote chance they still might. The closest observation of a roadrunner in appropriate habitat in recent memory was a bird in January 2001, just east of the Sacramento County line in Amador County (J. Trochet pers. comm.). Another near miss was much further in the past, July 1961 on South Shingle Road, just east of the Sacramento County line in El Dorado County (eBird). Decades ago, when development was not as dense, there were occasional reports around Folsom Lake in Placer and El Dorado counties (T. Fitzer and E. Harper pers. comm.). Two known records solidly within the county, but not near expected breeding habitat, are of a bird in October 1994 at Cosumnes River Preserve (J. Trochet pers. comm.) and one near the Sacramento International Airport in September 2013 (eBird).

The federally Threatened **Snowy Plover** (*Charadrius nivosus*) has nested very rarely in Yolo County (Hampton et al. 2019). If habitat conditions are suitable, the species could nest in Sacramento County, where they are rare migrants in spring and late summer (eBird).

Two **Glossy Ibis** (*Plegadis falcinellus*) paired with

White-faced Ibis in a breeding colony in Yolo County at Woodland's wastewater treatment plant (Water Pollution Control Facility) in 2018. One pair produced hybrid chicks (Hampton et al. 2019, eBird). If and when White-faced Ibis nest again in Sacramento County, there is a chance that Glossy Ibis, increasing in the region, could join them. Note that hybrids and back-crosses are documented, so caution is advised in reviewing any such reports (Oswald et al. 2019).

Lewis's Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes lewis*) are irregular, sometimes locally common, winter residents in open blue oak woodland and savanna in the eastern county. A few records of birds lingering into late spring have aroused suspicion, but no evidence of breeding was reported (J. Trochet pers. comm., eBird).

There are a few scattered late spring and early summer **Red-breasted Nuthatch** (*Sitta canadensis*) records (eBird), but the most intriguing was of a bird that summered in Midtown Sacramento in 1999 (*vide* TM).

There are no **Brown Creeper** (*Certhia americana*) records in eBird for late spring or summer, but confirmed nesting, beginning in 2008, along Putah Creek near Winters (Trochet et al. 2017) and additional breeding season records (eBird) suggest they could be moving toward Sacramento County in the manner of Dark-eyed Juncos.

Pacific Wrens (*Troglodytes pacificus*) are rare to uncommon winter residents in areas with dense understory tangles. They are most dependable in a few mature valley oak riparian patches at Cosumnes River Preserve, though detections have declined beginning in 2007 (Conard 2012). Almost all depart by the end of March, but two found on the late date of 22 May 2004 are intriguing (Cosumnes River Preserve unpublished database). Especially in wetter years, the combination of tall trees, moss-covered logs, and dense groundcover of native blackberry (*Rubus ursinus*) and grape (*Vitis californicus*) might entice these damp-forest wrens to stay for the breeding season.

Western Tanagers (*Piranga ludoviciana*) have nested at least twice since 2004 along Putah Creek in the vicinity of Winters in Yolo County (Trochet

et al. 2017). There are breeding season records in Sacramento County, though no strong evidence of breeding behavior. A female Western Tanager was seen near the singing Summer Tanager at Cosumnes River Preserve on 18 July 2015 (CC pers. obs.).

This is not an exhaustive list of potential breeding species and, likely as not, a new breeder will be one we have not anticipated. For example, a completely unexpected Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) brood was found in a Wood Duck box at San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, Merced County (Fulton 2002). We probably would not have given high probability to Least Terns until they arrived

and started nesting. A few late spring Prairie Falcons (*Falco mexicanus*) and late singing Purple Finches (*Haemorhous purpureus*) have aroused suspicions, but nothing more. The next new breeding record may be of a species like Neotropic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*), which has not yet been recorded in the county, but is now breeding in the southeastern portion of the state and has just begun to be detected in the Central Valley (eBird). New species are more fun to consider than those that appear to be on their way to becoming former breeders, but awareness of trends, both positive and negative, dynamic or seemingly static will, we hope, help inform land use and conservation decisions.



Horned Lark in a vernal pool by Tim Manolis