

## NOTES ON FOUR SPORADIC VISITANTS IN CALIFORNIA

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The role of the avian "accidental" is well demonstrated in California by the number of species on the State list for which single individuals only have been recorded. When a species has twice been reported from different localities or on different dates with a reasonable intermission, it still may fall within the class of the accidental visitant; but with the third or fourth occurrence, one may well give serious thought to the records and tabulate them, both for date and locality. In this way, perhaps, some fine thread may be woven into the pattern of the bird's migration or some light may be shed on adjustments influencing its geographical range. The recent capture in San Diego County, California, of a Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*) has turned the writer's thoughts toward the subject of the "accidental" and has prompted him to compile the available data not only for this species, but also for three other sporadic visitants to coastal southern California, the Louisiana Heron (*Hydranassa tricolor ruficollis*), the Reddish Egret (*Dichromanassa rufescens*), and the Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*).

Reviewing the records of Swamp Sparrows, there are two instances, before the present one, listed in the ornithological literature for California. The first was a specimen taken by Mrs. May Canfield near Keeler, Inyo County, California, on November 1, 1921. This specimen was recorded by Dickey (*Condor*, 24, 1922:136), but some details were omitted, which the writer, who was present, may here add. The collectors' camp was situated near a small boxed spring of water on a level, grassy, but brushless, plain, a mile south of Keeler. This small seepage of fresh water was the only one within miles of the locality and dozens of birds of several species came to it daily to drink. The camp site was ideal for observation, and it happened that about ten o'clock on that November morning an unfamiliar and strangely acting bird, that seemed almost exhausted, was seen by Mrs. Canfield near the spring. She collected the specimen, which, upon dissection, proved to be an immature female. This locality was far from any habitat that would be attractive to *Melospiza* and its occurrence there, in an exhausted condition, offered evidence of the bird's having been far from its regular migration route.

The second occurrence of a Swamp Sparrow was that recorded by Grinnell (*Auk*, 42, 1925:247). This specimen was found among 133 contraband birds of several species seized by a deputy of the California Fish and Game Commission, when he arrested four men netting song birds in a ravine near Daly City, San Mateo County, on October 21, 1923. The Swamp Sparrow was apparently in an acceptable habitat, as representatives of two other species of *Melospiza* were in the lot.

The third Californian record specimen of the Swamp Sparrow was obtained by the writer in a fresh water marsh situated on the northeastern end of Sweetwater Reservoir, San Diego County, California, on November 4, 1943. This locality was well populated by Song Sparrows and was thus a likely place in which any *Melospiza* might be found. The moving of a bird within the deep shadows of a thick tangle was observed and, in response to "squeaking," this Swamp Sparrow ascended to the upper twigs of a bush, where it was recognized and shot. It proved to be an immature female in fat, healthy condition.

Thus there are now three Californian records for *Melospiza georgiana*. The first two were taken in 1921 and 1923 and the third in 1943—twenty years later. This long interval might lead to the classification of the species as "accidental" in California, yet the fact that all three specimens were taken in late October or early November would

open the question as to whether a fall migration of a limited number of this species takes place along the Pacific coast. Such a migration could easily occur with but slight chance of observation, as the elusive character of the Swamp Sparrow, its similarity to the Song Sparrow, and its habitat of tangled vegetation combine to hide its identity.

The tabulation of records of the two following species offers both interesting facts and somewhat discouraging prospects for the future. As has been suggested by Grinnell in his article on "The Role of the Accidental" (Auk, 39, 1922:373-380), bird species are ever trying to expand their ranges into suitable localities and these data tend to corroborate his statements. The first record of Louisiana Heron (*Hydranassa tricolor ruficollis*) for California was made by the writer, when, on January 17, 1914, a female was collected at the south end of San Diego Bay. Eleven years later, on March 25, 1925, another female was collected, also by the writer, at Sweetwater Sloughs, San Diego Bay, some four miles northward from the south end. From this same salt marsh Frank F. Gander collected a male on December 20, 1932.

The last specified capture was made during the annual Christmas bird count, sponsored by the National Audubon Society, in which members of the San Diego Natural History Museum's staff have participated since 1922. Subsequently the Louisiana Heron appeared with great regularity on the Christmas bird count, as follows: 1934, 2 birds; 1935, 5 birds; 1936, 3 birds; 1937, 1 bird; 1938, 3 birds; 1939, 3 birds; 1940, 1 bird; and 1943, 1 bird. All were observed by either C. G. Abbott, F. F. Gander or the writer, and the place was either San Diego Bay or near-by Mission Bay.

Thus, in ten years, nineteen records of Louisiana Herons have been made. The regularity of occurrence has been broken only in the years 1941 and 1942. During those two years tremendous changes were taking place along the shore line of San Diego Bay. Dredging operations were filling in a large part of the tidal marshes, completely driving out or killing the littoral residents of the affected sections and removing any attraction to transient avian visitors. These changes had given rise to fears that the winter sojourn of Louisiana Herons might have stopped. The bird's presence, on December 22, 1943, at Mission Bay, therefore offered a ray of hope for the future.

In summing up the occurrences of Louisiana Herons, the records would seem to demonstrate the "trial and error" or "trial and success" aspects of avian range extension. The salt marshes about San Diego Bay are the most northerly stations yet reached along the Pacific coast by this species, and the recent regularity of its occurrence there would indicate that the Louisiana Heron is well on its way to becoming a regular winter visitor in this portion of California, providing the havoc being wrought upon its habitat is not carried on to the complete eradication of all the salt-marsh land.

Another closely related sporadic visitor, whose possible attempts to establish a regular wintering ground in the San Diego region would also be adversely affected by alteration of the marsh lands is the Reddish Egret. Unfortunately we have no specimen to prove that this beautiful heron has ever visited California. But on February 12, 1931, F. F. Gander and the writer definitely saw a bird of this species at close range on the tidal flats at the south end of San Diego Bay (Condor, 33, 1931:125). Now Ken Stott, Jr., of San Diego, a reliable observer, reports that he saw a single individual at Otay Lake, San Diego County, on September 20, 1943. The Reddish Egret is so strikingly colored that it would seem to be impossible to mistake it for any other species.

The occurrence of Vermilion Flycatchers on the Pacific slope of southern California has long been established. In 1933, Willett (Pac. Coast Avif. No. 21:111) stated that about 25 records were available for the area at that time. Behind these records there is much of interest. The Vermilion Flycatcher is naturally more "observable" than such

a bird as the Swamp Sparrow and hence is more accurately recorded. In fact a brilliant male Vermilion Flycatcher would catch the eye of a person with but little ornithological knowledge, and a query requesting its identification would be likely to find its way to the San Diego Natural History Museum. Oddly enough this has not been so in the case of the following local records, all of which were made by trained observers. However, many of our friends have been successfully directed to the localities where the birds were to be seen and have enjoyed their presence here.

Examining the literature for near-by occurrences of this flycatcher, we find that Henry Grey's records (*Condor*, 19, 1917:102) of two birds at Nestor, near the south end of San Diego Bay, one on March 17, 1906, and another on December 25, 1916, head the list. On the Christmas bird-count trips, Abbott and Huey twice observed a brilliant male catching insects from a corral fence at Lakeside, first on December 24, 1924, and again on December 23, 1926. Five years later, two brilliant males were found living about an abandoned gravel-pit pond, where sedges and tules had become established. This locality was two miles west of Bonita in the Sweetwater Valley. The following dates of occurrence were all recorded from this pond on Christmas bird counts by members of the Museum staff: 1931, 2 birds; 1932, 2 birds; 1933, 1 bird; 1934, 2 birds; 1935, 1 bird; (1936, not found) 1937, 2 birds. All were males. Since 1937, Vermilion Flycatchers have not been found in this vicinity nor have they appeared on the Christmas bird count in spite of assiduous search by all persons participating.

The locality where these brilliant flycatchers were so long observed has remained unchanged by man's activity. The near-by fields are used for cattle pasturage and are never plowed, a condition which, to judge from the writer's experience elsewhere with Vermilion Flycatchers, is favored by these birds. An inauspicious factor was doubtless the proximity of human dwellings, with the inevitable "boy gunners," who may well have been responsible for the disappearance of the two gorgeous flycatchers at Bonita Pond.

The presence of male birds, only, offers some grounds for speculation. In his past experience, the writer has found both sexes about equally distributed during the winter months within the Colorado Valley district, where the species commonly breeds. Yet the slight westerly dispersal movement which these notes record brought only males to the San Diego region. It is hardly likely that trained observers, looking for the birds, would, over a period of years, miss females of this species if they were about. It would appear that the presence of Vermilion Flycatchers on the Pacific slope of southern California during the winter season is fortuitous, and that the annually recurring observations at the same place may well record individuals which returned again and again to the extended edge of a newly found range, where the winter fare had been to their liking. At Bonita Pond, when mishap befell them, their places were not filled by others—another example of the working of the "trial and error" principle.

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