

Some winter birds of Bahia de San Quintin, Baja California

Some additions to the avifaunal information on this area previously published in Grinnell (1928) and Friedmann et al. (1950)

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EARLY ORNITHOLOGISTS (Belding 1883, Bryant 1889, Anthony 1893, Howell 1911, Willet 1913, Nelson 1921, Huey 1926, Grinnell 1928) observed birds at Bahia de San Quintin (San Quintin Bay) but little has been published in recent years (Northern 1962). Between November 1, 1974 and April 3, 1975, I made field observations on 128 days. Additional sightings were made in January, 1972, January, 1976, and November, 1979. My major objective was to document populations, hunting mortality and habitat use of Black Brant at Bahia de San Quintin (Kramer *et al.*, 1979). In conjunction with the primary study, other species, particularly water birds, shorebirds and raptors were recorded. It is from these additional observations that data for this paper was gathered.

San Quintin Bay lies 315 km south of San Diego, California, on the Pacific Coast of Baja California, Mexico (Fig. 1). Water covers 43.5 km² of the bay with only 20 per cent exceeding 1.8 m deep at mean high tide. The annual rainfall of 5 to 10 cm is concentrated in winter. Temperature extremes during the 1974-75 study period were 1.1 and 26.4°C.

Extensive tide flats supported beds of eelgrass (*Zostera marina*). Salt marshes of cordgrass (*Spartina foliosa*) and saltwort (*Salicornia virginica*) occurred along many shoreline areas with the in-shore edge of the marsh dominated by saltgrass (*Distichlis spicata*) and glasswort (*Salicornia subterminalis*) (Fig. 2). The adjacent uplands supported chamise (*Adenostoma fasciculatum*), bladderpod (*Isomeris arborea*), spurge (*Euphorbia misera*), buckeye (*Aesculus parryi*) and *Hymenoclea monogyra*. Small agricultural areas, planted to corn and olives,

were present near the northeastern shore of the bay.

I counted birds from a 25 km road that begins at the motels and makes a complete loop of the central peninsula. Most observations were made from 12 elevated shoreline vantage points along this route (Fig. 2). From 2 to 4 hours were required to make the once-daily observations. Records included here are not meant to be a treatise on the winter birds of San Quintin Bay, rather an addition or a change from information provided by Grinnell (1928) and Friedmann *et al.* (1950).

WATERBIRDS

Common Loon (*Gavia immer*)

Reported by both Grinnell (1928) and Friedmann *et al.* (1950) as a winter visitant to Baja California. A single specimen was collected at San Quintin Bay in May 1889 (Bryant 1889). While early reports indicated rarity, from 5 to 10 Common Loons were observed at San Quintin Bay almost daily throughout the study, indicating the status is now that of common winter visitant.

Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*)

Grinnell listed only one locality of occurrence, San Felipe, April, 1926. This bird is a regular winter visitor to San Quintin Bay, with up to 6 seen daily from November, 1974 to April, 1975.

Little Blue Heron (*Florida caerulea*)

Most references for this species indicate its reported range as southern Baja California (Grinnell 1928, Hill & Wiggins 1940) with casual observations in California and a questionable report of an individual sighted near Ensenada, Baja

California, on January 7, 1967 (Hubbs 1968, Unitt 1977, Garrett & Dunn 1981). During this study, two were observed feeding in the salt marsh on January 7, 1976, and one was seen on January 8, 1976. The birds observed were all adults as evidenced by their bluish-gray body, purple-gray neck and head, and dark legs and feet.

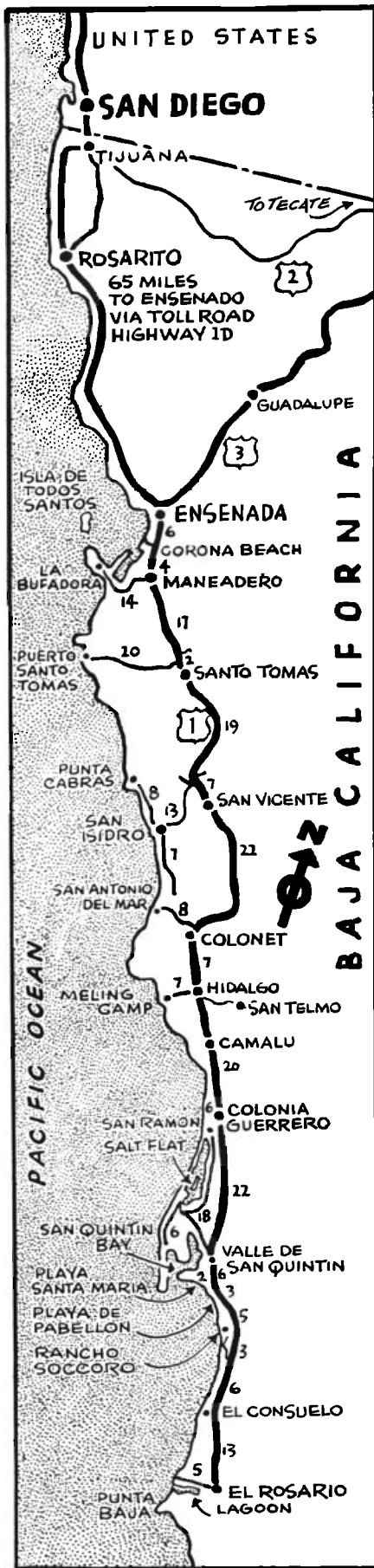
(Black) Brant (*Branta bernicla*)

While Grinnell and Friedmann *et al.* list Black Brant as a very common migrant to Baja California and Nordhoff (1922) states, "it winters in vast numbers at San Quintin Bay," these authors do not indicate the magnitude of winter use.

Based on periodic ground counts, between 8000 and 11,000 Brant were present at San Quintin Bay between November, 1974 and mid-January, 1975. Aerial surveys of Mexican wintering areas have shown that an average of 7125 Black Brant are counted each January at San Quintin Bay. These surveys, conducted prior to the spring migration, indicate that 5.5 per cent of the Mexican Brant population (10-year average: 128,220) "winters" at San Quintin Bay (Conant & Novara 1983). Spring migrants began to arrive from more southerly wintering grounds in mid-January and the population steadily increased, reaching a peak of 35,600 on March 21, 1975. The population declined in April as the birds continued their northward migration, and by early May, the last Brant flocks had departed (Kramer *et al.* 1979).

White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*)

Friedmann *et al.* list this species as occurring in Baja California without ref-



erence to a specific location, while Grinnell shows it as a sporadic winter visitor with only two birds collected, one in January, 1885 on Guadalupe Island, and one south of La Paz about 1889 (specific data not provided).

On January 20, 1972, two birds were shot by Larry Rauen and the author from a group of six birds along the southwest shoreline of San Quintin Bay. Unfortunately, the specimens were not retained in a collection. Local hunting guides stated these birds were the first White-fronteds they had seen at San Quintin Bay.

Snow Goose (*Anser caerulescens*)

As with White-fronted Geese, Friedmann *et al.* list this species as occurring in Baja California without reference to location or abundance. Grinnell, however, does indicate it is a winter visitor in considerable numbers to the Colorado River Delta, but does not indicate its occurrence in northwest Baja California. It is a rare fall transient and winter visitor to coastal Southern California (Garrett & Dunn 1981). In 1974, one white-phase adult was observed on November 15, November 20 and December 3.

Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*)

Blue-winged Teal is listed as a rare visitor to Baja California by Grinnell, who indicates only two published records, San Jose del Cabo—May, 1882 and at San Ramon just north of San Quintin Bay as, "a few" seen in April, 1888. Friedmann *et al.* indicate this species occurs in Baja California without reference to location. Along the Southern California Coast it is an uncommon spring and fall transient (Garrett & Dunn 1981).

On March 22, 1975, two ♂ Blue-winged Teal were seen in the company of two Cinnamon Teal (*Anas cyanoptera*) and four unidentified ♀ teal.

Redhead (*Aythya americana*)

While relatively common at San Ignacio and Magdalena Bays (in the southern portion of the peninsula) where 140 and 2410 respectively were counted in January, 1982, Redheads are not observed with the same regularity in northern Baja during the annual aerial surveys of Baja California's coastal bays (Norman 1982). Friedmann *et al.* and Grinnell list the Redhead as uncommon in Baja.

Records compiled between November, 1974 and January, 1975 showed 30-40 birds could be seen daily at San Quin-

tin Bay. Late winter sightings were more sporadic with six birds seen on February 15 and two on March 4, 1975.

Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*)

Grinnell reports one verifiable instance of occurrence; a female collected in the Rio Colorado Delta February 7, 1928. The first known sighting on Baja's Pacific Coast took place during a Christmas Bird Count at Scammons Lagoon December 28, 1973 (Heilbrun & Arbib 1974).

On January 5, 1975, five males and three females observed in hunters' bags were compared to Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*) also in the bags. The most notable differences were the larger size, wider bill and longer white wing stripe of the Greater Scaups. This apparently represents the second record from Baja California's Pacific Coast, although small numbers often winter in San Diego Bay, California, 315 km north of San Quintin (Bellrose 1976, Garrett & Dunn 1981).

Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*)

This species is not mentioned by Grinnell, while Friedmann *et al.* list it as occurring only on the Mexican mainland (Sonora). In coastal Southern California, it is a sporadic visitant with an active nesting colony of up to 75 birds present in San Diego Bay since 1976. In northwestern Baja, Wilbur (*pers. comm.*) has knowledge of 4 records of skimmers in January, 1981 and January, 1982, one at San Quintin Bay and three at Todos Santos Bay. The maximum of birds reported in a flock was 31.

On November 16, 1979, Larry Rauen, Dirk Derksen and I observed a group of eight Black Skimmers flying near the southwestern shore of San Quintin Bay.

RAPTORS

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*)

Two were sighted; one on November 8, 1974, and one on March 12, 1975. These records suggest that it is rare at San Quintin Bay. In coastal Southern California it was formerly much more common and is now listed as a rare fall transient and winter visitant (Garrett & Dunn 1981). Friedmann *et al.* list it as a coastal migrant and winter resident with numerous breeding pairs northward, while Grinnell indicates it is a common resident, chiefly coastwise and around islands on both sides of the Baja peninsula.

Merlin (*Falco columbarius*)

This species is listed by Grinnell and Friedmann *et al.* as an occasional winter visitor through the peninsula.

Throughout the study one, and occasionally two Merlins could be observed daily, indicating this species may be a rare winter resident of San Quintin Bay.

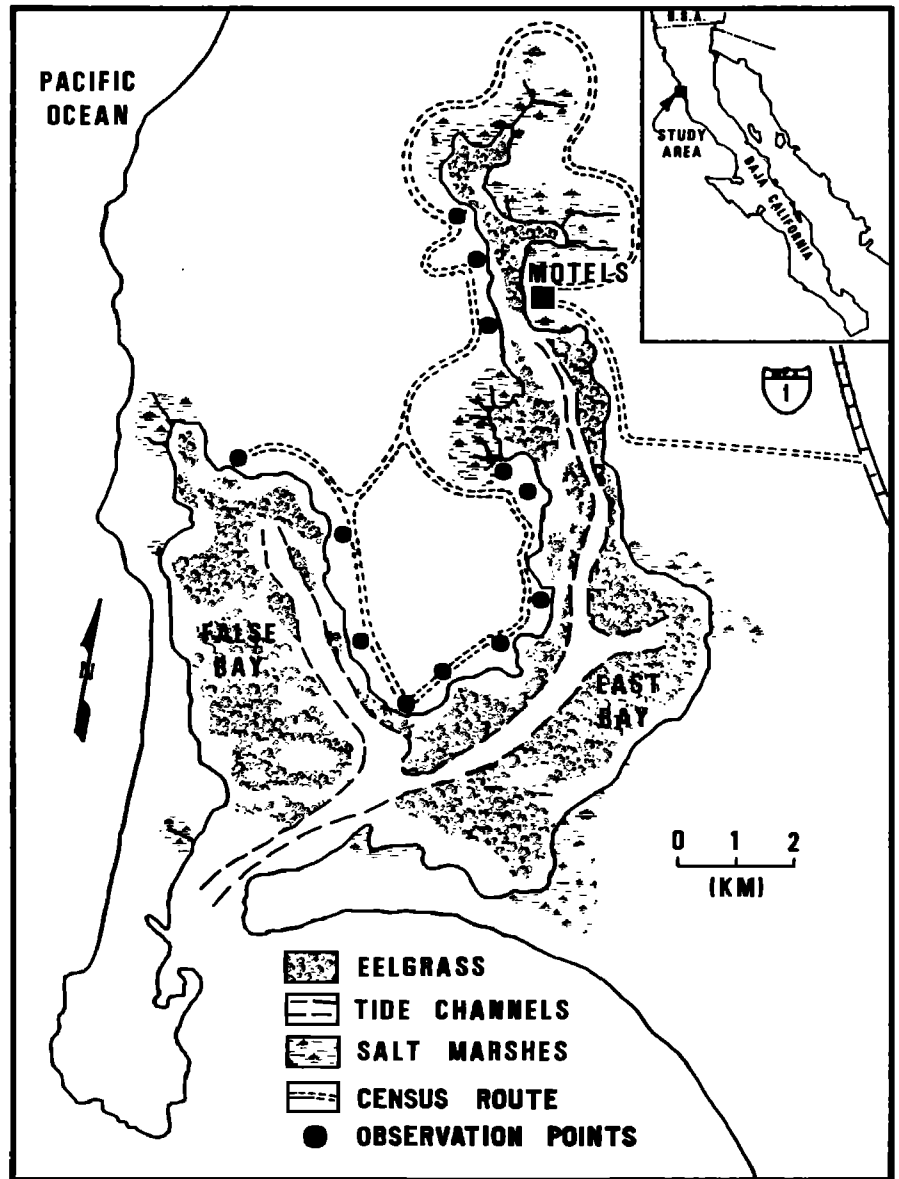
On March 5, 1975, a Merlin was observed capturing a Western Sandpiper (*Calidris mauri*) from a large flock of shorebirds feeding on a mudflat, 50m from a brushy shoreline.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank S. W. Harris and P. F. Springer for reviewing early drafts of the manuscript and L. R. Rauen for assistance in the field.

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