

## Book Review

**The Birds of San Diego County.** Philip Unitt. 1984. Available from San Diego Natural History Museum Store, P.O. Box 1390, San Diego, CA 92112. xxii + 276 pp., 12 color plates, 12 black and white photographs, 126 distribution maps. Price: \$14.00 for paperback, \$20.00 for hardcover (California residents add 6% sales tax); please add \$2.00 for postage/handling.

San Diego County, California, is certainly one of the most exciting counties for birds on the continent. Due to its strategic coastal location, varied habitats, and relatively long history of ornithological exploration, it presently boasts a list of over 450 species, highest of any county in North America. Climate, topography and soil type all vary significantly, resulting in such varied habitats as open ocean, rocky coast and sandy beaches, fresh- and salt-water marsh, grassland, chaparral, riparian and coniferous woodlands, and desert scrub. Many of these habitats have been much altered by an already large human population which continues to increase rapidly.

The ornithological exploration of the county began at a relatively early date for the Far West, with brief visits by naturalists as early as 1793 and more extensive collecting expeditions undertaken in the 1850s. Collections of specimens and eggs from the late 1800s and early 1900s provide valuable information on the nesting dates and former ranges of many species. Beginning in the 1960s, ornithology in San Diego Co. was turned in a new direction by the advancement of field identification techniques and the activities of several keen field observers whose interests in migrants and vagrants led them to "discover" some of the best birding hot spots in California (e.g. Pt. Loma and the Tijuana River Valley), as well as to add many new species to the county (and state) list.

Coming out of an appreciation for this area's rich and ever-changing birdlife is Philip Unitt's *The Birds of San Diego County*, published by the San Diego Society of Natural History. This book begins with a brief discussion of the county's ornithological history, as well as a description of the sources of information consulted and the taxonomy and nomenclature used. This section is followed by a nice overview of the geography and vegetation of the county. The accounts of major plant communities give information on characteristic or dominant plants and representative bird species found in each. Black-and-white photographs of the major communities are helpful in giving the reader a feel for the areas. The individual species accounts which follow make up the heart of the book and provide extensive information on the distribution, abundance, migration, nesting, and subspecific status (if relevant) for each species recorded in the county through 1981. Special detail is given to historical changes in status, arrival and departure dates, maximum counts of migrants and visitors, the duration of breeding seasons based on egg dates, citations of the literature or observer behind virtually all individually listed records, and the discussion of the status and distribution of all subspecies known to have occurred in the county. Outline maps of the county with symbols denoting definite vs. probable breeding based on published vs. unpublished records are valuable additions to the individual accounts of nesting species. The book concludes with a listing of the species with brief annotations denoting breeding status and method of documentation for their occurrence in the county, a thorough bibliography, and an index.

This book is certainly one of the most thorough works on the status and distribution of the birds in a region this size ever written. Unitt's treatment is not only excellent for a rich and diverse county such as San Diego, but also outshines the efforts of a good number of state and provincial publications. His coverage of breeding distributions, historical changes in status, and subspecies, as well as his extensive citations for individual records, are especially laudable. One only has to thumb through a small sample of species accounts to appreciate the detail found in this book. For species of special concern, such as the Least Tern, the amount of information is particularly im-

pressive. The author's excellent treatment of all subspecies recorded in San Diego County provides the reader with a greater understanding and appreciation of bird distribution and movement in this relatively complex region. While there are many examples of subspecies accounts which teach the reader much, one cannot help but be particularly impressed by the treatment of Orange-crowned Warbler, Fox Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco. Also invaluable is the author's discussion of the identification and separation of most of the subspecies that have occurred in the county.

Overall, the production of the book is attractive. It is relatively free of typographical errors or lapses, one of the more serious being the omission of Black-throated Sparrow from the final "List of Species." *The Birds of San Diego County* contains twelve color plates from original watercolors by Allan Brooks. The quality of reproduction is average, and while many readers will find them appealing, this reviewer was not overly impressed and does not believe they add much to the quality of this type of book. One drawback in the production of this volume was the lengthy delay in publication. Unitt includes all records known to him through 1981, yet the book was not published until 1984. Even though the author partially compensates for this by including an addendum listing the most significant records occurring between January 1982 and December 1983, a fair amount of recent, valuable information is not included, resulting in the book's being a little more out-of-date than "need be."

While this book is very thorough in many regards (as discussed above), it should be pointed out that it does lack a number of important records. The main text (implied to be complete through 1981) is missing records of "Aleutian" Canada Goose (November 1981), Grace's Warbler (October 1981), Worm-eating Warbler (October 1981) and Hooded Warbler (additional individual in spring 1981). It appears from the acknowledgements that *no* active field observers reviewed the manuscript in its final form, a process which would certainly have resulted in improvements to a significant number of the species accounts. Such review would have refined a number of the early and late arrival dates, provided more realistic high counts for some species (e.g. Long-billed Dowitcher), and removed some of the few inaccuracies: for instance, the statement that the Kittlitz's Murrelet record is the only one south of Alaska is incorrect—there is also one from Washington.

Although such a book deals only with a limited geographical area, it is often helpful to mention briefly the status of a species in adjoining regions. This practice helps to explain patterns of records, highlight outstanding sightings, and point out "holes" in the data that need to be filled in. Unitt has added this information for a number of accounts (e.g. Marbled Murrelet), particularly for subspecies, yet more would have been helpful. Through 1981 no records were cited for over-summering Semipalmated Plover or Pomarine Jaeger (both have been recorded several times since 1981); a statement that there are a number of such records for adjoining regions would have put the lack of San Diego County records in better perspective.

The author certainly has the final say on the inclusion or rejection of any record. However, it would have helped many readers if Unitt had briefly described the nature of the more "controversial" ones. The existence of the California Bird Records Committee (CBRC) and its decisions are never mentioned anywhere in the book, even though the author was a former member of that committee. While he need not have followed that body's decisions in cases with which he disagreed, a discussion of the different views on particular records was in order. For example, the record of Anhinga is published with no mention of the debate surrounding the bird's possible origin or that the record has, to date, been rejected by the CBRC. Unitt includes a good section on "Species Erroneously or Inadequately Reported from San Diego County" in which he discusses previously published records which should be either questioned or dismissed. However, this section includes the San Diego record of Harcourt's Storm-Petrel with no mention of its being accepted by the CBRC, and a reference to a Cape Petrel record for California which has been rejected.

My biggest complaint with this book is the author's choice of taxonomy. The organization follows neither the 5th nor 6th editions of the AOU Check-list. Unitt explains that "I realize this unorthodox approach may be disconcerting to some readers, but I hope to compensate for this by sparking increased interest in the wondrous complexities of bird evolution." I disagree. This book deals with the status and distribution of the birds of a region, not the controversial field of taxonomy above the species level, and will be read primarily by amateur birders, field ornithologists, and environmentalists and government officials interested in making informed decisions regarding land use, conservation and development. These people can only be confused by the location of shrikes and vireos between the corvids and chickadees and by the cardueline finches' placement between the waxwings and warblers. Other examples include the locations of the loons, grebes and hawks, as well as the ordering within the shorebirds. The index will be an absolute necessity for most readers. Unitt largely adheres to the AOU's selection of English names, with one notable exception: his use of Painted "Whitestart" (= Painted Redstart).

In sum, Philip Unitt's *The Birds of San Diego County* is an excellent book, crammed with more information than one can find in many publications on entire states. The treatment of breeding distributions and egg dates, historical changes in range and status, and subspecies are especially fine. The presentations on the identification of many subspecies will be of great value to all. For those reasons, this book can be highly recommended not only to students of bird distribution and residents of the San Diego region, but to all field ornithologists and birders alike.

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