

## RECENT ADDITIONS TO THE AVIFAUNA OF SAN CLEMENTE ISLAND, INCLUDING THE FIRST RECORD OF THE BLUETHROAT IN CALIFORNIA

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**ABSTRACT:** Since Sullivan and Kershner (2005) last summarized the birds of San Clemente Island, California, 13 additional species have been recorded on the island, bringing the total number of species documented there to 330. Most notable was the first Bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica*) recorded in North America outside of its limited known range in Alaska. Additionally, we document a first record of the Black-chinned Sparrow (*Spizella atrogularis*) breeding on the California Channel Islands.

San Clemente Island, situated approximately 100 km west-northwest of San Diego, is the fourth largest and southernmost of the California Channel Islands. Jorgensen and Ferguson (1984) and Sullivan and Kershner (2005) have summarized the island's avifauna, geology and vegetation, as well as its checkered ecological history.

Between January 2005 and March 2009, we compiled reports of noteworthy species submitted to us by biologists managing endangered species on San Clemente Island. Of particular note is a Bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica*) in September 2008. While San Clemente Island is not generally known for the occurrence of wayward Old World species, this record, in conjunction with a similarly unprecedented record of a Stonechat (*Saxicola torquatus*) in October 1995 (Sullivan and Kershner 2005), confirms the island as a "trap" for truly rare vagrants.

Other observers credited in the text are Luke M. Bloch, Catherine Craig, Clemens L. Dabrowski, Jonathan P. Gunther, Susan C. Hammerly, Naira N. Johnston, Eric L. Kershner, Jimmy M. McMorrان, Kimberly D. Roth, and Sam W. Stuart.

### SPECIES ACCOUNTS

American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*). K. D. Roth saw a single bird at Lemon Tank on 12 and 13 October 2008. Although no photos were obtained, Roth provided a detailed written description noting a frozen vertical posture, yellow bill, dark brown streaking on the throat, and black tips to the wings in flight. This species is now rare as a winter visitor to nearby San Diego County (Unitt 2004), and there appear to be only two other reports from the Channel Islands: a sight record from San Nicolas Island (P. Collins unpubl. data) and a record of bones in an old Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) nest on San Miguel Island (Collins et al. 2005).

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Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*). S. W. Stuart found a single female at Lemon Tank on 4 November 2006 (Figure 1). Subsequently, it was seen once by Fidorra and C. Craig on 7 November 2006. Prior to 2004 this species wintered in small numbers on San Diego Bay (Unitt 2004) but has recently been reported in sharply increased numbers (P. E. Lehman pers. comm.). With fewer than half a dozen reports from the other California Channel Islands, however (P. Collins unpubl. data), it appears to be much rarer offshore.

Black Scoter (*Melanitta nigra*). On 8 December 2005, E. L. Kershner identified one flying south past West Cove Point with a group of Surf Scoters (*Melanitta persicallata*). The bird was all black, lacking the white markings seen in both the Surf and White-winged (*Melanitta deglandi*) Scoters, and appeared rounder headed than the associated Surf Scoters. Sullivan and Kershner (2005) considered this species hypothetical on San Clemente Island on the basis of an undocumented report in October 1997. The Black Scoter occurs annually in small numbers in coastal southern California (Garrett and Dunn 1981) and has been recorded from nearby Santa Catalina Island (P. Collins unpubl. data, Howell 1917). Although probably only a casual visitor to San Clemente Island, its eventual documentation is not surprising.

Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*). Fidorra found a female at Lemon Tank on 10 November 2007, and Bradley saw it at the same location three days later. Subsequently, it was observed on a number of occasions, last on 23 November 2007. There are records of the Bufflehead from most of the California Channel Islands, with at least 15 for a reservoir on nearby Santa Catalina Island (P. Collins unpubl. data) on dates ranging from 23 November



Figure 1. Female Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*) at Lemon Tank, 4 November 2006.

Photo by Sam W. Stuart

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to 22 March. While clearly rarer offshore than in coastal San Diego County, where it is an abundant winter visitor (Unitt 2004), its periodic occurrence on San Clemente Island can be expected.

Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*). E. L. Kershner and J. M. McMorran saw and heard a juvenile at West Cove Beach on 11 August 2005. They described prominent features including dark legs, a bill with no downward curve, a distinctive cap, and dark ear coverts and noted the absence of any rufous tone in the scapulars. The Semipalmated Sandpiper is seen annually in small numbers in southern California, and this report falls within the normal early July–early September period of occurrence (Garrett and Dunn 1981, Unitt 2004). Two previous reports from San Clemente Island were rejected by Sullivan and Kershner (2005) on the basis of insufficient details, and we know of only one other Channel Islands report, from San Nicolas Island (P. Collins unpubl. data). Although this species can be easily overlooked, the scarcity of reports from any of the Channel Islands likely reflects an overall scarcity of small *Calidris* sandpipers and their habitat there, relative to the mainland.

Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*). Bradley and Fidorra found a Glaucous Gull, likely in its first year, at West Cove Beach on 8 April 2006 (Figure 2). It was subsequently seen by a number of observers, last on 19 April 2006. A second record involves a similar individual photographed by Fidorra at the same location on 13 May 2008. Sullivan and Kershner (2005) considered this species hypothetical on San Clemente Island on the basis of an undocumented sight record in February 2002. It is probably a casual visitor to San Clemente Island, as it occurs annually along the coast of nearby San Diego



Figure 2. Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*), likely in its first cycle, at West Cove Beach, 8 April 2006.

Photo by James E. Bradley

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County (Unitt 2004) and there are at least two other late-winter records from the California Channel Islands (Garrett and Dunn 1981).

Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*). J. P. Gunther photographed an immature in Norton Canyon on 2 February 2009, but it was not identified until L. M. Bloch saw it in the same location on 3 March 2009. The photo shows a round-headed flycatcher with a dark cap and face contrasting with a pale throat and a pale yellow wash to the belly. Sullivan and Kershner (2005) rejected a report from October 2001 based on insufficient details, and the species otherwise appears to be a casual fall and winter visitor to the California Channel Islands, with reports from Santa Cruz, San Nicolas, and Santa Catalina islands (P. Collins unpubl. data).

American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*). Unusually strong easterly Santa Ana winds (50–65 km/hr on San Clemente Island) in mainland southern California during the week of 21–27 October 2007 precipitated a large influx of unusual migrants on San Clemente Island. On 23 October 2007, N. N. Johnston and C. L. Dabrowski reported a single American Crow from the southern end of the island. Later the same day, a second American Crow reported from Wilson Cove was confirmed by Bradley. Written descriptions noting the birds' smaller size and shorter, more rounded tail than of the resident Common Raven (*C. corax*) support the identification. The following day, the bird in Wilson Cove had been joined by a second individual (likely the first bird recorded the previous day), and both were observed closely by a number of observers. The two crows were last seen on 1 November 2007 in Wilson Cove. Sullivan and Kershner (2005) considered this species hypothetical on San Clemente Island on the basis of bones found in middens that could have been transported there from elsewhere. Doubtless, this species is only a straggler to San Clemente Island, and other than the possible recent establishment of a population on Santa Catalina Island (Sullivan and Kershner 2005), it remains very rare on any of the Channel Islands.

Brown Creeper (*Certhia americana*). This species was reported on San Clemente Island in 1986 and 1988 by L. Salata (M. Booker pers. comm.), but only an observation on 5 November 2006 is supported by written documentation. On that date, S. W. Stuart and C. Craig found a single Brown Creeper in Malo Canyon. They identified the bird's high-pitched "tseep" call before locating it and viewing it briefly. Both observers are familiar with the species and provided a written description that supports the identification. Interestingly, this sighting took place on a day that followed a fallout of Golden-crowned Kinglets (*Regulus satrapa*), which are only sporadic migrants to San Clemente Island (Sullivan and Kershner 2005) but frequently occur with the Brown Creeper on the mainland. There are reports of the Brown Creeper, from mid-October to late March, from most of the California Channel Islands, including five from San Nicolas Island (P. Collins unpubl. data). The species' appearance on San Clemente Island is not unexpected.

Bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica*). On 14 September 2008, Stahl and Fidorra located an unfamiliar sparrow-sized bird at Lemon Tank. On initially flushing it from tall grass, they noted distinctive reddish sides to the tail and a dark terminal band. When the bird subsequently appeared in the open, it showed long legs, a cocked tail, and a dark necklace. Although the bird kept largely

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to dense cover, we obtained digiscoped photographs from a distance of approximately 50 m and confirmed the bird's identity as a first-winter female Bluethroat (Figure 3). The bird was seen by up to 20 other biologists over the following days, last on 18 September 2008.

This record has since been accepted unanimously by the California Bird Records Committee (record 2008-116) and represents a first known occurrence in both California and the contiguous 48 states (American Ornithologists' Union 1998, P. E. Lehman pers. comm.).

Occurring widely in the Palaearctic Region, the Bluethroat is known in the Nearctic as a thinly distributed breeding population of the nominate subspecies *svecica* in northern Alaska and northwest Yukon (Guzy and McCaffery 2002). Although the winter range of this population is poorly known, the Bluethroat occurs as a regular spring and fall migrant across the Bering Strait (Lehman 2005). Peak fall passage at Gambell, St Lawrence Island, ranges from mid-August through early September with a season high of 28 in 1998, a maximum of 19 on 25 August 1997, and records no later than 22 September (Lehman 2005, P. E. Lehman pers. comm.). As a vagrant, in the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands to the south, the Bluethroat is known from occasional sightings as late as 27 September, although there are no specimen records (Gibson and Byrd 2007, P. E. Lehman pers. comm.).

On the basis of the phenology of the Bluethroat's fall migration in Alaska, the timing of this occurrence on San Clemente Island is appropriate for a natural vagrant. In many respects, an occurrence of a vagrant away from Alaska could be considered overdue, as other species with similar North



Figure 3. First-winter female Bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica*) at Lemon Tank, 14 September 2008.

Photo by Jason C. Fidorra

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American breeding ranges and migratory routes, such as the Eastern Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla tschutschensis*) and Arctic Warbler (*Phylloscopus borealis*), are known in California from multiple records each (Hamilton et al. 2007). However, ours being the only record of the Bluethroat away from Alaska and the Yukon suggests that the species, like some other thrushes, is not prone to vagrancy and highlights the remarkable nature of this record.

Hooded Warbler (*Wilsonia citrina*). During a large fallout of migrants on 9 May 2006, S. C. Hammerly located a male Hooded Warbler in Wilson Cove. The bird was later seen and confirmed by S. W. Stuart and several others; it remained until 11 May 2006. On 27 May 2007, also in Wilson Cove, Bradley located a second Hooded Warbler, a first-spring female, seen by several other observers (Figure 4). This species is a regular spring vagrant to the southern California mainland and San Diego County (Garrett and Dunn 1981, Unitt 2004), and there are records from San Nicolas Island for the spring and fall as well as single records for Anacapa Island in the fall and Santa Catalina Island in the spring (P. Collins unpubl. data, Stewart 1984). Its occurrence on San Clemente Island is thus expected.

Black-chinned Sparrow (*Spizella atrogularis*). S. W. Stuart found two adults feeding a recent fledgling in Horse Canyon on 30 June 2006, representing the first record of this species' breeding not only for San Clemente Island but for any of the California Channel Islands. This is the same site where Stuart and Bradley heard two apparently territorial males singing



Figure 4. First-spring female Hooded Warbler (*Wilsonia citrina*) in Wilson Cove, 27 May 2007.

Photo by James E. Bradley

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several weeks prior in May. The habitat consists primarily of dense sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*) on steep canyon slopes, mixed with smaller quantities of prickly pear cactus (*Opuntia littoralis*) and lemonadeberry (*Rhus integrifolia*), differing from traditional breeding habitat of chaparral dominated by manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* spp.), scrub oak (*Quercus* spp.), and chamise (*Adenostoma fasciculatum*) on the adjacent mainland (Hargrove 2010). The Black-chinned Sparrow was known previously on San Clemente Island only as a casual migrant, with just four fall and four spring records (Sullivan and Kershner 2005, unpubl. data). With no subsequent evidence of breeding, this appears to be an isolated record. Numbers of the Black-chinned Sparrow on the nearby mainland increased greatly after the wildfires of 2002 and 2003 (Unitt 2007), perhaps increasing the chance the species would reach and colonize San Clemente Island.

Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*). Bradley photographed a single individual at the Natural Resources Office on 30 November 2007. It remained within a very small area of bushes and was eventually seen by a number of observers, last on 19 February 2008. This species is a rare but annual winter visitor to nearby coastal San Diego County (Unitt 2004), although it has been reported with decreasing frequency there in recent years (P. E. Lehman pers. comm.). It appears to be very rare on the California Channel Islands as a whole, with only four reports, from Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, and Santa Catalina Islands (P. Collins unpubl. data). Although possibly underreported because of its skulking habits, the Swamp Sparrow prefers



Figure 5. Female or first-year male Cassin's Finch (*Carpodacus cassinii*) at Lemon Tank, 5 November 2007.

Photo by James E. Bradley

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wet brush and marsh, which are scarce on San Clemente Island, possibly explaining its rarity.

Cassin's Finch (*Carpodacus cassinii*). Bradley found a single female-plumaged individual at Lemon Tank on 4 November 2007; it was seen again there the following day (Figure 5). The bird associated loosely with a few female Purple Finches (*C. purpureus*) and showed the characteristic long wings, conical bill, and fine streaking typical of this species. Although this occasionally irruptive species is resident in the San Jacinto Mountains only 190 km east of San Clemente Island (Garrett and Dunn 1981), it is extremely rare on any of the Channel Islands with only five reports to date, all from San Nicolas Island (P. Collins unpubl. data).

During the period of this summary, three additional species were reported without documentation. These species, which we consider as unconfirmed, include Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*; December 2006, April 2008), Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*; March 2006) and Hepatic Tanager (*Piranga flava*; June 2005, October 2006). It should be noted that Sullivan and Kershner (2005), likewise, treated Cooper's Hawk and Swainson's Hawk as unconfirmed on the basis of reports before 2005.

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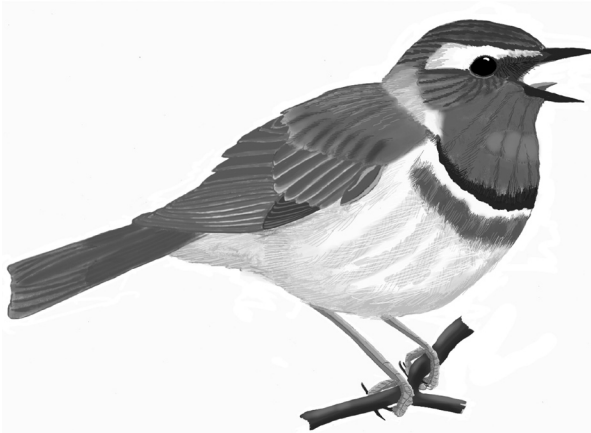
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Bluethroat

*Sketch by George C. West*