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Winging It

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Birding the Ballona Wetlands

Accessible L.A. birding on remnants and restoration

BY DANIEL S. COOPER

Southern California's Los Angeles Basin, once a vast coastal plain scoured by rivers and dotted with vernal pools and willow sumps, has been radically transformed by human activity. The first wave of change came with growth of agriculture in the basin during the late 1800s. But a final and more pervasive blow was struck in the mid-1900s, when post-war expansion took an unbelievably heavy toll on the land, draining wetlands and carving them into marinas, transforming creeks in concrete channels, and planting houses on seemingly every square inch of flat (or artificially flattened) land. By 1960, it was mostly over—but urban birding in L.A. has nevertheless exploded in popularity, thanks to the miraculous productivity of discrete patches of green widely separated by freeways and tract housing.

One of the most remarkable of these patches is the assemblage of habitats at the mouth of (channelized) Ballona Creek, the historical mouth of the Los Angeles River. Though not a particularly well-known birding spot nationally, its proximity to Los Angeles International Airport (a 10-minute cab ride) actually makes it ideal for visitors wanting to find Heermann's Gull, Elegant Tern (spring, summer and fall) and Allen's Hummingbird. Other western specialties that are common here include Pelagic Cormorant, rock-dwelling shorebirds (Black

Oystercatcher, Surfbird, Black Turnstone), Cinnamon Teal, White-tailed Kite (fall and winter only), Black-necked Stilt, Glaucous-winged Gull, Least Tern (summer), Cassin's Kingbird, and California Towhee. You may also look for the distinctive Belding's Savannah Sparrow, a saltmarsh endemic race, and the introduced Spotted Dove (declining) and Orange Bishop (summer).

For locals, the Ballona Valley ranks as one of the most productive birding areas in Los Angeles County, with a list that exceeds 320 species (more than 250 of these occur annually). Despite its modest extent and the degraded condition of some of the habitats, this area easily produces day lists that top 70 species in midwinter and during migration.

Birding Ballona is not easy, complicated by the fact that public access is scarce and not well marked as such. Though the area is covered by existing guides, such as Brad Schram's *Birders' Guide to Southern California* and Paul Lehman's *Birders' Guide to Metropolitan Areas of North America* (the latter in the ABA Birdfinding Guide series), many sites treated below have only appeared or opened in the last five years. The future may bring still more birding opportunities as restoration plans proceed.

#1: Ballona Freshwater Marsh

Probably the area's most productive spot year-round, this recently constructed (2003) lagoon features patches of cattails and

(continued on next page)

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bulrushes, plantings consisting of mostly native plants, and an L-shaped trail around the outside that provides good viewing opportunities. "BFM" is essentially the only place at Ballona for many freshwater marsh and riparian species, including Least Bittern (rare), White-faced Ibis (fall), Virginia Rail, and Yellow-headed Blackbird (spring). This is also your best bet for freshwater shorebirds (including Solitary Sandpiper and Red-necked and Wilson's Phalaropes) and dabbling ducks (especially Cinnamon Teal) in season. Not on the official ABA Checklist, the introduced Orange Bishop is also regular in small numbers here, probably nesting in exotic pampas-grass at the base of the bluffs to the south. In its first year, BFM produced an impressive list of rarities, including Red-throated Pipit, American Tree Sparrow, Sage Thrasher, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, Bobolink, White-winged Dove, and Bell's Vireo.

Parking for BFM is located only along the south side of Jefferson Boulevard (that is, along the eastbound lanes). Three large gaps in the chain-link fence allow access to the L-shaped perimeter trail, where visitors bird over a low split-rail fence. The public is not permitted in the back area of the marsh, a measure aimed at minimizing disturbance to birds and other wildlife.

#2: Del Rey Lagoon

With tidal function restored in 2002 (after decades of non-function), tiny Del Rey Lagoon is now a bona fide coastal estuary that drains each day with the tide. As such, it has already proven attractive to shorebirds and waders. Diversity is highest during spring migration (late March through April), although Heermann's and Glaucous-winged Gulls and Marbled Godwit are present nearly year-round. Over the years, vigilant observers have found Little Blue Heron, Snow and Ross' Geese, and both Glaucous and Laughing Gulls at this little estuary. Unfortunately, the trees, shrubs, and lawns surrounding the lagoon are all highly manicured and are generally unattractive to birds.

Parking is usually easy (except for summer weekends) in the lots along Pacific Avenue, reached by heading west on

Jefferson Boulevard, turning left onto Culver Boulevard. Go all the way through the village of Playa del Rey nearly to the beach, then turn right onto Pacific.

#3: Playa del Rey Breakwater and Beach

The twin mouths of Ballona Creek and Marina del Rey, which include several rock jetties and sandy beaches to the north and south, have long been the main birding draw in the Ballona area. Time of year isn't nearly as important here as time of day: don't bother with the beach after about 9 a.m. (earlier in summer and on weekends); the jetties can be very crowded with fishermen on weekends; and boating traffic can be very heavy after late morning during nice weather.

Check the sandy beach just south of the creek mouth, which hosts a large tern and shorebird night roost in late summer (including Elegant Terns from April to October), and if you're lucky, Snowy Plover may be found from here south



Marbled Godwit is among the shorebirds you can expect on beaches and mudflats around the outlet of Ballona Creek. Photo: Lee Karney/USFWS

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toward Dockweiler Beach during fall and winter. If the wind is blowing onshore, scope the ocean for pelagic species like Black-vented Shearwater. Scoter flocks, consisting mostly Surf Scoters, should be scanned for Black and White-winged Scoters and Long-tailed Ducks, a handful of which are present during some winters.

From the beach, you can walk out to the end of either jetty and scan the rocks at your feet and the breakwater offshore for cormorants (Double-crested, Brandt's, and Pelagic), Brown Pelican, and rocky-coast shorebirds (including Black Oystercatcher). Inshore waterbirds (e.g., grebes in winter, terns in summer) frequent the lower portion of

Ballona Creek and the adjacent Marina del Rey harbor, and shorebirds become more common as you move upstream along Ballona Creek. Great Blue Herons nest in cypress trees just behind the boathouse during late winter, and the few recent Burrowing Owl sightings have been of birds perched atop the inlet structures here and on the south side of Ballona Creek.

Because this site has been birded consistently for more than fifty years, its list of rarities is impressive and includes Brown Booby, Roseate Spoonbill, Bar-tailed Godwit, and Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel, to name just a few. Uncommon coastal birds such as Red-necked Grebe, Marbled Murrelet, and Large-billed Savannah Sparrow have proven somewhat regular here, but should never be expected.

Park at Del Rey Lagoon (see above) and walk north. A bike path runs east/west between the Ballona Creek channel and the harbor entrance, just over the Pacific Avenue bridge from Del Rey Lagoon. Another bike path (on which birder access is tolerated, but not exactly encouraged) runs along the south side of Ballona Creek, bordering the Ballona Wetlands.

#4: Ballona Wetlands

The Ballona Wetlands proper are among the most interesting features of this area—and also among the most difficult to bird, though technically they are public property (State of California). The wetlands themselves are actually spread across several parcels of muted tidal marsh, mainly grown into a mix of exotic grasses, Pickleweed (*Salicornia* spp.), and, on raised areas, native scrub. Narrow tidal channels dissect the western end of the wetlands.

Among the most distinctive features of the wetlands are large, natural saltpans that fill up with water after rain, just north of Culver Boulevard and south of Ballona Creek. The saltpans can host hundreds of shorebirds and terns after being filled by rain (especially when high tides restrict roosting



areas elsewhere). Black-bellied Plover (winter) and Elegant Tern (summer) are the most numerous, but occasionally more interesting things turn up here, such as Cattle Egret, Long-billed Curlew, Bobolink, or (very rarely) Burrowing and Short-eared Owls. White-tailed Kite, Belding's Savannah Sparrow, and Loggerhead Shrike are all fairly easy to see in fall and winter on the Ballona Wetlands proper, visible from the south levee of Ballona Creek (late afternoon light is best). The last Los Angeles County records of Clapper Rail came from this area, and if this species ever occurs here again, it should be visible (or at least audible) from the bike path. Peregrine Falcon and other raptors visit in late fall, often perching on the telephone poles along Culver Boulevard.

The wetlands are best birded in the late afternoon, and a scope is essential. The easiest viewing is over the chainlink fence along the bike path on the south side of the Ballona Creek channel, as you walk east from the Pacific Avenue Bridge. Another good place to scan the wetlands is from the "north willows" (see below).

#5: Dune Willows

Some of the most productive birding areas of the Ballona Valley—small, willow-filled sumps within the dunes at the far western edge of the Ballona Wetlands—have recently become slightly more accessible. There are really two spots to bird these willows, both of which unfortunately involve looking through a chain-link fence. The willows are most productive during fall migration and again in April and early May, with most records of vagrants from either September or late May and early June. Sparrows, including White-crowned, Golden-crowned, and Lincoln's, should be visible along the black chain-link fence at the north willows, also good for Willow and Pacific-slope Flycatchers, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Western Tanager, and Black-headed Grosbeak. Allen's Hummingbirds may outnumber Anna's here. Vagrants recorded here have included Least Flycatcher,



Golden-crowned Sparrow is among the passerines to look for in winter and migration in upland and interior habitats around Ballona Creek. Photo: Lee Karney/USFWS

Brown Thrasher, Scott's Oriole, and Prairie, Magnolia, and Blackburnian Warblers.

The first area (the "south willows") may be birded from the dirt parking lot behind the shopping center in Playa del Rey. Heading west into town along Culver Boulevard, turn right on Vista del Mar and quickly right again behind the stores into a dirt parking lot. To reach the second area (the "north willows"), backtrack and continue north up Vista del Mar to the end (62nd Avenue). Park along the street and walk to the east end of 62nd Avenue, birding through the black chain-link fence. Follow the footpath to the left along the fence toward Ballona Creek.

#6: "Upper" Ballona Creek

Low tide exposes more than a mile of silt bars and shallow brackish water along Ballona Creek, downstream of Centinela Avenue. This is a concrete-sided channel, not the most aesthetically pleasing birding spot (and it can be unbelievably full of plastic trash after a rain). But it's worth a quick check at any time of year. Notable birds likely here include hundreds (occasionally thousands) of Bonaparte's Gulls during winter and a good diversity of waterfowl and shorebirds (especially during April and late summer), including Black-necked Stilt, Short-billed Dowitcher (summer), and phalaropes.

Birding is done either where streets end at the channel or from the bike path along the north edge of the channel. When the position of the sun yields good light, check the south end of McConnell (off Culver Boulevard) and the north end of Alla (off Jefferson Boulevard).

#7: Ballona Lagoon

This tiny, restored estuary is one of the few birding features of the Ballona Valley located on the north side of the Ballona Creek channel (in Marina del Rey). A walking path fol-

lows the eastern edge of the lagoon, with houses on one side of the path and landscaped, mostly native shrubs on the other. Though the number of species seen at Ballona Lagoon is rarely high, the site has decent species diversity, and the birds are often very tame and easily studied. Expect to see Belted Kingfisher, Snowy Egret, and small numbers of common shorebirds and waterfowl. Spotted Doves, formerly common throughout the area, have declined greatly but are most often seen in this area, perched on utility wires.

Ballona Lagoon is located off Washington Boulevard. From Lincoln and Washington, head west down Washington toward the Venice pier and turn left onto Via Dolce. Keep bearing to the right along Via Dolce, and Ballona Lagoon will appear on your right after about a half-mile. Park here and walk along the footpath at the edge of the lagoon.

#8: Westchester Bluffs

For a complete tour of the habitat types within the Ballona Valley, a visit to the coastal sage scrub of the Westchester Bluffs is essential. The scrub here can be filled with sparrows in late fall and winter; Golden-crowned Sparrow is common, Fox Sparrow less so. During migration, Lazuli Buntings are often heard overhead, and they occasionally land. In winter, watch for Merlin and Cassin's Kingbird. From May to early September, birding can be dull, though there are always kingbirds around, along with a handful of scrub-nesting species that are rather local elsewhere in the Ballona Valley (such as Lesser Goldfinch and California Towhee).

Head south on Lincoln Blvd. from Jefferson and turn left (east) onto 83rd Street. Continue for about a mile to Dunbarton, and turn left. Go almost to the end, park where Dunbarton curves to the right, and walk along the footpath in between two houses. From here, a paved trail leads to the right, down the face of the hillside, to a larger walking path below. You can turn either left or right.

Future plans for the Ballona Wetlands include the complete development of open land east of Lincoln Boulevard, with the exception of a narrow riparian strip along the base of the Westchester Bluffs. Studies aimed at restoring tidal flow to much of the salt marsh are ongoing (but have been so for several decades, with no results so far). In any case, access for birders is likely to increase in future years, and habitat restoration may see the return of several extirpated phenomena, including waves of shorebirds feeding on (restored) tidal flats and breeding riparian species in (re-created) willow thickets.

*Thanks to **Richard Barth** and **Kimball Garrett** for helpful comments on this article. **Daniel S. Cooper** is a conservation biologist based in Los Angeles. He is the author of *Important Bird Areas of California* (2004) and was the *Director of Bird Conservation for Audubon California* from 2000–2005.*