

A Birding Interview with Kimball Garrett

Birds are Kimball Garrett's life, and he has the rare bird records to prove it. His significant bird sightings in California include many of local interest in Los Angeles County and numerous vagrants elsewhere in the state. Over the past 40 years, Garrett has become a leading authority on the avifauna of southern California. He has been the Ornithology Collections Manager at the Natural History of Museum of Los Angeles County since 1982. Garrett is past president of Western Field Ornithologists, a member of the California Bird Records Committee, coeditor with Guy McCaskie of the Southern California regional report for *North American Birds*, and author or coauthor of a number of well-respected books and scientific publications.

In this instructive *Birding* interview, Garrett explains why birders should support museums, what the future holds for native and non-native bird populations in Los Angeles and beyond, and how he once identified a lizard as a tanager.

—Noah K. Strycker

Birding: With so many rare bird discoveries to your credit, we wonder how you do it. How much do you credit your achievements with the time you spend in the field vs. the time you spend in the museum?

Kimball Garrett: Actually, I take issue with the premise. I really don't find many rarities, in part *because* I spend al-

most all my time in the museum! Discovering vagrants—and I don't like the term “rare birds” because, in fact, most vagrants are downright common in the core of their range—is almost *all* about time spent in the field, and the best rarity finders have fine tuned the art of looking in the right places at the right times, understanding the movements of candidate species, and knowing the expected birds so thoroughly that it's easy to pick out different birds by calls, morphology, and behavior. Research in museums and referencing identification guides and distributional works is necessary, but far from sufficient.

Birding: What was your most embarrassing bird-identification mistake?

KG: I've always found the process of making, recognizing, and correcting mistakes to be highly educational. I developed a talk to give to local bird clubs along these lines, called “My Favorite Misidentifications,” to get birders to understand how and why we go wrong. Not understanding

Shown here are a taxidermied **Yellow-headed Parrot** (*Amazona oratrix*) and a live ornithologist (Kimball Garrett) in museum habitat. Some of our introduced non-native (“exotic”) bird species are faring poorly within their natural ranges. Yellow-headed Parrots, for example, are highly prized in the cage bird trade and are now scarce throughout most of their range in the lowlands of eastern and southwestern Mexico. *Photo by © Kathy Molina.*



status and distribution is certainly number one.

But there is also the “Single Field Mark Syndrome,” wherein we’re so taken by a single salient feature that argues for identification as “Species A” that we ignore a suite of other characters, be they morphological, vocal, or behavioral, that disprove such an identification. I once mistook a coast horned lizard (*Phrynosoma coronatum*) for a Western Tanager. I was driving through the high San Gabriel Mountains above Los Angeles and saw a bright yellow creature dead in the road. To me, that color alone meant Western Tanager in those conifer habitats, so imagine my surprise when I turned around and found a horned lizard lying flat on its back with its belly suffused with a surprisingly bright yellow tint.

My most infamous misidentification involved a bright yellow warbler with wingbars and tail spots in a remote desert area in southeastern California in February 1978. I called the bird a Prairie Warbler, a species I knew turned up with regularity in southern California, including a couple of times in winter. I didn’t even consider Pine Warbler—which it turned out to be—because at the time there were just four October records, all on the coast. So, the blind application of perceived status and distribution led me to exclude a species that, with 30+ years of hindsight, we know to be a nearly annual winter species in southern California.

Birding: Regarding the California Bird Records Committee (CBRC), what changes have you seen in the type of evidence submitted for vagrants and other notable sightings?

KG: I commend the foresight of those who recognized the need for a body to review rarity records in California and who laid the groundwork for the CBRC. When I joined in 1978, the committee and its procedures were well established, so I’ve mostly been just another foot soldier in the process.

The most noteworthy changes over the years have involved the manner in which records are documented. I became involved in that period when very few significant records were documented by preserved specimens—which remain the gold standard of documentation—but before it became almost trivially easy to get good photographic images and audio recordings of rarities. So most records were in the form of written descriptions and sketches. In a sense, we were reviewing the case observers were making for acceptance of their sightings, rather than tangible documentation. We were all behaving more like lawyers and judges than ornithologists, and inevitably lots of disagreements dominated the process.

The advent of digital photography and affordable, highly portable equipment has led to increasing civility and professionalism. The downside is that

Presumably, the often-seen **Pin-tailed Whydahs** (*Vidua macroura*) of southern California (alternate-plumage adult male shown here) represent surviving escaped cage birds, since no host species of this obligate brood parasite is known to be established in the region. It is possible, however, that California’s whydahs have adapted to a novel host species—perhaps the Nutmeg Mannikin, which is in the same family as the expected waxbill hosts—and that frequent sightings of individuals and small flocks do signify a breeding population. *Hansen Dam basin, Los Angeles County, California; 29 July 2007. Photo by © Kimball L. Garrett.*



record submissions frequently have little or no back story about the circumstances.

We always maintain that the *major* service of records committees to the birding community is not the decisions they reach but their archival role and the added value of peer review, interpretation, and context of a body of records.

Birding: Museums add to our understanding of avian knowledge, but why should modern birders, armed with digital cameras and the latest scientific papers on DNA, care about specimens?

KG: Many birders fail to realize the extent to which the guides, distributional works, and taxonomic checklists they consult every day rely on the collections of birds amassed over 150+ years and cared for in institutions that are perennially underfunded and understaffed. Molecular work is revolutionizing our understanding of evolutionary relationships and speciation processes in birds, and few birders aren't fascinated by the advances being made. But if you care about DNA studies, you certainly ought to care about

what sort of creature that DNA came from—and this can only be verified by the preservation of museum specimens as vouchers. Studies of molt and age/sex criteria simply can't be attempted without large sample sizes in specimen collections.

Birding: How can birders help museums?

KG: It goes without saying that financial support—even a basic museum membership—is a great help. But there are often many tasks that can be done by volunteers, even those who aren't thoroughly familiar with bird identification and taxonomy. Talk with staff about salvaging specimens and recording thorough specimen data. You might be able to be listed on the museum's salvage permit, or staff can help you apply for your own permit. Perhaps even learn to prepare specimens. There's no better crash course in bird anatomy.

Birding: How did you become involved with *North American Birds* (NAB)?

KG: NAB is without question the single most important journal for the American birder. The development of my relationship with NAB and its predecessors (including *Audubon Field Notes* and *American Birds*) was probably similar to that of many birders. At first, I was mainly interested in the self-gratification of finding my initials in the local regional report. But soon thereafter I was reading regional reports in and around California and learning a great deal. As I got more involved, I took to reading all regional reports. I became a sub-regional editor for Los Angeles County in 1979, and have coedited the Southern California regional report since 2000. That last step made me realize what a phenomenal workload my coeditor Guy McCaskie has shouldered for 40 years, and he



Museum collections of birds provide information used in many lines of scientific inquiry, from population genetics, species limits, and phylogeny to functional morphology, timing of annual cycles (such as molt and breeding), environmental contamination, and long-term changes in status and distribution. Here are just a few of the study skins of **Western Scrub-Jays** (*Aphelocoma californica*) at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. Each specimen provides unique information. Photo by © Kimball Garrett.

still absolutely remains the conscience and the workhorse of the process.

Birding: Birders in the past learned about bird status and distribution from the print literature. What is happening to this information in the age of the internet?

KG: What you can't learn either in books or online is field craft: sensing things, using lighting to your advantage, getting a whiff of tubenose scent, knowing a bird's next move, mastering the real-world context of all the data available. This comes *only* from spending time away from books and the internet. As for books vs. online information, both media run the gamut from laughable to classic and indispensable. I'm a big fan of the peer-review process, and the worst books and websites suffer from the lack of such review. Cumulative, real-time online information, like that mined from eBird, has tremendous potential which is already being realized.

Birding: What is the future of birding in California and beyond?

KG: California, and the Los Angeles region in particular, is a microcosm of the world, with unsustainable human population growth and resource impacts superimposed upon areas of high biological diversity and endemism; Los Angeles County alone has ten million human residents and a bird list of about 495 naturally occurring species. In some ways, birding here in the 21st century has become the documentation of regional population declines and species loss, not just of habitat specialists but also of seemingly widespread species such as the Loggerhead Shrike and American Kestrel.

In back-entering my checklists from the 1980s into eBird, I'm struck by the frequency with which I saw species

then that I rarely see today in the L.A. area, including shrikes and kestrels, as well as Forster's Terns, Black Turnstones, Spotted Doves, and many others. Conversely, 30 or so years of field notes show an equally striking spread and increase of Allen's Hummingbirds, Great-tailed Grackles, wintering Merlins, and others. Increasing regional and global changes mean bird distributions will change at an ever-greater rate—they may shrink, shift, or expand—and birders in California and worldwide will consciously or unwittingly be the key to documenting such changes.

Birding: What trends do you see developing with naturalized exotic populations of birds in urban areas?

KG: Here in southern California, parrots, mannikins, bulbuls, and most other non-natives are largely dependent on exotic plantings. An interesting trend, just beginning to develop in Black-hooded Parakeets and perhaps other exotics, is their "invasion" of more natural habitats for nest sites. This certainly makes us aware that these essentially "benign" additions to the "aviary" of coastal southern California might actually have deleterious impacts. But it remains true that the best way to manage exotic bird species is to preserve and restore functioning natural habitats, which are by and large "immune" to such species.

The bottom line is that we need more data on all of our exotics—their population trends, annual cycles, habitat use, and diets. I'm constantly asked when such-and-such parrot or other exotic species will be "countable." If I can stifle my initial response of "who cares?" I will usually add that it will only be after we have the published data to make an informed judgment about the viability of their populations.

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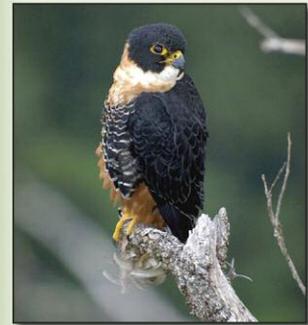


Photo: Orange-breasted Falcon
by Marianne Phillips

May 27 – June 8:

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July 23 – 30:

ARIZONA OWLS and
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KRUGER NATIONAL PARK BIRDS
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September 13 – 23:

KALAHARI DESERT BIRDS
& BIG GAME PHOTO SAFARI

September 14 – 27:

ECUADOR: THE ANDES, CLOUD FORESTS
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BIRDS OF SONORA: Yecora & Alamos

November 18 – 30:

THANKSGIVING IN BELIZE:
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BIRDS OF ALASKA

MAY – JUNE 2011:

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