

Winging It

Panama
Conference
Inside!

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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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Birding on the Fly:

Manila, Philippines: American Cemetery

BY TODD R. PEPPER

A must-see for birders with time on their hands in the city of Manila, in the Republic of the Philippines, is the World War II Manila American Cemetery and Memorial. The cemetery is located in the Municipality of Taguig, a suburb of Manila, approximately six miles from the hotels and embassy section of Manila. It can be reached easily by taxicab, but given Manila traffic, expect the trip to take you at least half an hour. I have visited the cemetery six times since 2001, finding something new on every visit. You can only enter the cemetery from the main entrance off McKinley Road, and for security reasons, you must now sign in and out, and the hours of visitation have been reduced. The gate opens at 9 a.m. and closes at 5 p.m.

About 150 acres in size, the cemetery contains the headstones of more than 17,000 soldiers, sailors, and marines, mostly American but many from other countries as well, aligned in eleven plots forming a circular pattern with a memorial to the war dead in the center. It is truly an inspiring sight. Around the memorial and along the edges of the cemetery, a wide variety of tropical trees, shrubbery, and flowering plants provide habitat for birds.

One of the most common birds in the cemetery, aside from the Eurasian Tree Sparrow that has taken over many Asian urban areas, is the Barred Rail. Several members of this species usually be found, in every season and at all times of day, as they feed on insects in the grass on the west side of the central monument or scurry under shrubs just about anywhere on the property. Equally common in any season are Yellow-vented Bulbul, Zebra Dove, Spotted Dove, and Pied Fantail.

The loud *ke kak kak kak kak* of the Collared Kingfisher will draw you to the stream that runs along the northeastern side of the cemetery, although you must be quick to see the turquoise flash of the bird before it disappears. The trees and shrubs near the service area on this side of the cemetery have also produced Red Collared-Dove and Java Sparrow, and, during spring and fall migration, Brown Shrike, Arctic Warbler, Blue Rock-Thrush, and Singing Bushlark.

The manicured grass around the headstones is a natural for Richard's Pipit in migration and Crested Myna just about any time of year. But for some of the regularly occurring species, it is necessary to look in the less maintained areas of the cemetery. Behind a row of flowering shrubs on the south edge of the cemetery, and in the northwestern corner near McKinley Road and the border with Fort Bonifacio, you can usually hear and see Striated Grassbird, Tawny Grassbird, Pied Bushchat, and Pied Triller as they compete for your attention. A little rain often seems to bring out the song in them. You'll probably see both Scaly-breasted and Chestnut Munias foraging on the seeds of longer grasses. White-

breasted Woodswallow, Pacific Swallow, and Barn Swallow will be lined up side by side on the hydro lines or on top of the chain-link fence on these outer edges of the cemetery.

In the tall trees in the center of the property, near the memorial, a flock of Rose-ringed Parakeets has taken up residence. I first noticed the birds, approximately six individuals, in November 2003. A return visit in March 2004 provided evidence of nesting behavior, so they might be there to stay. Species such as Philippine Woodpecker and Black-naped Oriole are also commonly observed in this area of the cemetery. Raptors observed from the vantage point of the cemetery have included Brahminy Kite seen out over Manila Bay to the west and the fishponds in Laguna de Bay to the south. Eurasian Kestrel and Grey-faced Buzzard have also been observed in the tall trees near the entrance gate.

By members of Birdwatch Philippines (<www.birdwatch.ph> on the web), Golden-bellied Gerygone has been described as a very common bird at the cemetery, and Grey-streaked Flycatcher and Chestnut-cheeked Starling have been reported as migrants. This group has regular day-trips on the weekends in and around Manila, if you have a little more time available for bird watching.

While Purple Noddy is not a regularly observed species here, one of my most memorable moments at the American Cemetery was when five of them flashed through the sky over my head like a formation of fighter jets honoring fallen heroes. Appropriate to the setting, I thought.

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