

SAN DIEGO BIRD ALLIANCE

Sketches

Celebrating More than 75 Years of Protecting Birds

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Winged Wanderers

The Epic Journey of Fall Migration

More than 350 species of birds travel along the Pacific Flyway to their wintering grounds each fall. We can make their journey safer.

Photo by LaTresa Pearson



Witnessing the Marvel of Migration

By LaTresa Pearson, Sketches Editor

For many people, the changing colors of leaves and the store shelves filled with pumpkin-spiced snacks signal autumn’s arrival, but for me, the season begins when I hear the sweet whistling song of the first White-crowned Sparrows. They have been reliable harbingers, sometimes appearing in my yard on the first official day of fall. The adults, with their bold black-and-white-striped crowns, arrive first, popping out of the bushes to survey the area and then gliding down to the lower part of my yard to nibble on shelled sunflower seeds or to sip water from the shallow dishes I put down for them. The first juveniles, with their more muted brown-and-buff-striped crowns, begin arriving soon after.

As I listen to them sing and watch them forage in my yard, it’s hard to imagine the journey these small, delicate creatures undertake to winter here in San Diego. The subspecies we primarily see is the Gambel’s White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii*), which migrates from breeding grounds in central Alaska and western Canada to Southern California—a trek of about 2,600 miles. According to

Cornell Lab’s *All About Birds*, one White-crowned Sparrow was tracked moving 300 miles in a single night!

They spend their days foraging, stopping only to nap briefly before taking flight when night falls. While it was thought that they could rest one cerebral hemisphere at a time during migration flights, a 2004 University of Wisconsin–Madison study indicated that both hemispheres remain active. During migration, the birds just get by on far less sleep. The sparrows in the study got 63% less sleep during the fall and spring migratory seasons than during the winter season, yet they surprisingly didn’t exhibit signs of sleep deprivation when performing tasks. When they were deprived of sleep during the non-migratory season, however, their performance suffered. How they avoid the consequences of sleep deprivation during migration is a mystery that scientists are still trying to solve.

Equally incredible is what supreme navigators these birds are. In her book *The Genius of Birds*, Jennifer Ackerman discusses a study in which researchers captured 30 White-crowned Sparrows (15 adults and



Photo by Karen Straus
Townsend’s Warblers migrate from as far north as Alaska to as far south as Costa Rica.

15 juveniles) as they were passing through Seattle. They packed the birds into a crate, flew them across the country to Princeton, New Jersey, and released them 2,300 miles from their normal migratory route to see whether they could find their way back to their wintering grounds. Within a few hours of release, Ackerman recounts that the adults, even those with very little experience, were able to reorient themselves and set off flying solo across the country.

Unfortunately, the juveniles didn’t fare as well. With only instinct to guide them, they simply flew south. According to Ackerman, this experiment suggests that White-crowned Sparrows can construct vast mental navigational maps based on their *learned* experience—something that requires advanced cognitive skills such as perception, attention, distance calculations, approximations of spatial relationships, and decision making.

White-crowned Sparrows are hardly alone in this ability. More than 2,000 species of birds migrate along various flyways across the globe each fall and spring, demonstrating unfathomable navigational prowess. More than 350 of those species migrate along the Pacific Flyway, which extends from Alaska to Patagonia, including San Diego. Birds that migrate during the day are thought to use landmarks such as rivers and mountain ranges to help them stay on course, while birds migrating at night appear to orient themselves using the stars. Shorebirds adjust their routes according to the rising and setting of the sun, and researchers have discovered that some seabirds flying over vast swaths of open ocean use their sense of smell to help guide them.

Birds also seem to use Earth’s magnetic

field to help them navigate, but exactly how is yet to be revealed. Some researchers think magnetite found in the beaks and other body parts of some birds help them sense the magnetic field, but studies have yielded inconsistent results. A more recent hypothesis suggests that green- and blue-light-sensitive proteins called *cryptochromes* found in songbirds’ eyes may enable them to see Earth’s magnetic field. (Check out Ed Yong’s book, *An Immense World*, to learn more about how scientists think this works. Hint: It involves quantum physics!)

To prepare for migration, some species undergo extreme physiological changes, doubling fat stores, shrinking digestive and reproductive organs, increasing flight muscle and heart muscle mass, and reducing their need for sleep. Migration is arduous, and migratory journeys are fraught with danger. Many birds that set off for their wintering grounds in the fall don’t make it back to their breeding grounds in the spring. Between 2013 and 2017, scientists from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology tracked migratory land birds using weather radar maps to determine how many were traversing the United States during migration. They discovered a shocking drop-off of 2.6 *billion* birds between fall and spring migrations. The birds suffering the most losses were those wintering in the United States, even though



Photo by David Stump
The Spotted Sandpiper’s tail-bobbing walk makes it easy to identify.

they have shorter autumnal flights than birds wintering in the tropics. Our heavily developed landscape is the culprit.

Urban development has replaced natural habitat that migratory birds have relied on since time immemorial. California alone has lost 95% of its historic wetlands, which birds migrating along the Pacific Flyway depend on as both stopover sites and wintering grounds. According to Pacific Birds, an international partnership of public,



Photo by David Stump
Eared Grebes undergo extreme body composition changes before and after migration.

private, and tribal organizations focused on conserving bird habitats across the Pacific Coast, birds that overwinter in coastal areas are facing the greatest population losses, with one third of shorebird species experiencing cumulative population losses exceeding 70% since 1980. Efforts to protect and restore coastal wetlands are critical to slowing or reversing the decline of coastal birds.

That’s why San Diego Bird Alliance and our ReWild Mission Bay Coalition partners have been working tirelessly for more than a decade to advocate for the restoration of wetlands in the northeast corner of Mission Bay. These wetlands will provide crucial habitat to migratory birds, as well as to endangered resident species, such as Ridgway’s Rails and Belding’s Savannah Sparrows. We need your continued advocacy to finally bring this project to fruition.

In addition to causing habitat loss, our developed environment presents many other challenges and hazards to migratory birds. Light pollution, for example, not only obscures the stars birds use to navigate, disorienting the birds, but also distracts them and draws them off course, sometimes with fatal results. To make matters worse, enormous skyscrapers, cloaked in glass, tower into the skies along birds’ ancestral pathways, leading to fatal collisions, both when the buildings are lit up at night, and when they reflect the surrounding landscape in daylight.

To help reduce bird losses due to light pollution and glass collisions, SDBA has embarked on a Lights Out, San Diego campaign to encourage residents and business owners to turn lights off from 11 P.M. to 6 A.M. during peak fall and spring migration periods, as well as to use bird-safe window treatments. In this issue, you can read more about how fellow San Diegans are taking part in our Lights Out campaign and ways you can both help and enjoy the amazing migratory birds visiting our county this fall and winter.

Follow live San Diego migration stats on BirdCast
<https://dashboard.birdcast.info/region/US-CA-073>

FALL MIGRATION CHECKLIST

Waterfowl and Other Waterbirds

- ☐ American White Pelican
- ☐ Brant
- ☐ Bufflehead
- ☐ Common Loon
- ☐ Eared Grebe
- ☐ Hooded Merganser
- ☐ Red-breasted Merganser
- ☐ Northern Pintail
- ☐ Lesser Scaup
- ☐ Surf Scoter
- ☐ Northern Shoveler
- ☐ Blue-winged Teal
- ☐ Green-winged Teal
- ☐ American Wigeon

Shorebirds

- ☐ Long-billed Curlew
- ☐ Long-billed Dowitcher
- ☐ Short-billed Dowitcher
- ☐ Marbled Godwit
- ☐ Red Knot
- ☐ Red-necked Phalarope
- ☐ Black-bellied Plover
- ☐ Semipalmated Plover
- ☐ Snowy Plover
- ☐ Least Sandpiper
- ☐ Spotted Sandpiper
- ☐ Western Sandpiper
- ☐ Wandering Tattler
- ☐ Black Turnstone
- ☐ Whimbrel
- ☐ Willet
- ☐ Greater Yellowlegs

Raptors

- ☐ Ferruginous Hawk
- ☐ Sharp-shinned Hawk
- ☐ Merlin
- ☐ Burrowing Owl
- ☐ Short-eared Owl

Passerines

- ☐ Mountain Bluebird
- ☐ Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- ☐ Western Meadowlark
- ☐ American Pipit
- ☐ American Robin
- ☐ Pine Siskin
- ☐ Golden-crowned Sparrow
- ☐ Lincoln’s Sparrow
- ☐ White-crowned Sparrow
- ☐ Hermit Thrush
- ☐ Black-throated Gray Warbler
- ☐ Townsend’s Warbler
- ☐ Yellow-rumped Warbler
- ☐ Cedar Waxwing



Photo by LaTresa Pearson

Autumn’s Arrivals

by Nick Thorpe



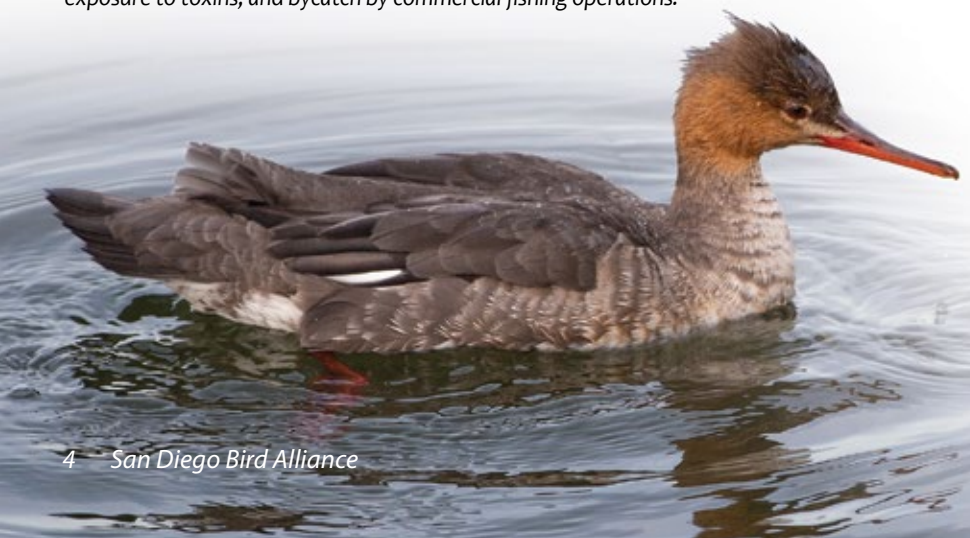
Sturnella neglecta
WESTERN MEADOWLARK
MIGRATION ROUTE: Canada and Northern U.S. to Mexico and Southern U.S. (distance varies, over 3 months)
WHEN TO SEE THEM: August to May, migrants; year-round, local breeders (migrants join locals to form larger flocks in fall/winter)
WHERE TO SEE THEM: Ramona Grasslands, Santa Ysabel Preserve, Fiesta Island, Sweetwater Reservoir, Warner Valley, Rancho Jamul
FUN FACT: Western Meadowlarks use a feeding behavior called “gaping,” in which they insert their bill into soil, bark, or other substrate then use their powerful muscles to force it open to create a hole. Gaping gives them access to insects and other food items that most other birds can’t reach.

One of the fastest declining bird populations in North America, with declines by more than 40% in the past 50 years, due to habitat loss, pesticide use, and human activity.

Mergus serrator
RED-BREASTED MERGANSER

MIGRATION ROUTE: Alaska and the Aleutian Islands, northern Canada, the Great Lakes, and the Maritimes on the Atlantic Coast to the Great Lakes and along both coasts as far south as northern Mexico and Florida Keys (distance varies, over 3 months)
WHEN TO SEE THEM: October to April
WHERE TO SEE THEM: Sheltered bays, estuaries, and wetlands, including San Diego River tidal mudflats, South Bay Salt Works and Bayshore Bikeway, San Diego Bay, Mission Bay, San Elijo Lagoon
FUN FACT: This species of merganser can fly 81 miles per hour, making it one of the fastest flying ducks.

Populations in some areas may be declining due to threats such as wetland destruction exposure to toxins, and bycatch by commercial fishing operations.



Buteo regalis
FERRUGINOUS HAWK
MIGRATION ROUTE: Northern Great Plains to California (1,300 miles, over 3 months)
WHEN TO SEE THEM: October to March
WHERE TO SEE THEM: Ramona Grasslands and Warner Valley
FUN FACT: Ferruginous Hawks, the largest buteo hawks in North America, often build their nests on the remains of pre-existing hawk or crow nests. Conservation managers take advantage of this and provide artificial nests to boost hawk populations.

California Department of Fish and Wildlife Species of Special Concern



Calidris mauri
WESTERN SANDPIPER

MIGRATION ROUTE: Western Alaska to coastal areas from British Columbia to Peru (up to 7,000 miles, over 5 months)
WHEN TO SEE THEM: July to March, mainly, but with outliers at both ends
WHERE TO SEE THEM: Tidal wetlands, including Kendall–Frost Marsh, San Diego River tidal mudflats, South San Diego Bay, and Tijuana Slough
FUN FACT: Western Sandpipers form flocks in the thousands during migration, with local single-site counts reaching nearly 9,000.

Bird of Moderate Concern on the Shorebirds of Conservation Concern 2016 List

Branta bernicla nigricans
BRANT
MIGRATION ROUTE: Alaska to Baja California (2,700 miles, over 3 months)
WHEN TO SEE THEM: November to March
WHERE TO SEE THEM: San Diego Bay, Mission Bay, San Diego River tidal mudflats; in migration, may take refuge on inland bodies of water during storms
FUN FACT: Brants love eating eelgrass, which is why they are most abundant locally in unscrapped sections of San Diego Bay. Their reliance on eelgrass makes them highly vulnerable to fluctuations in the quality of this habitat, so it is important to prioritize eelgrass protection in Mission Bay and San Diego Bay.

California Department of Fish and Wildlife Species of Special Concern

Calidris canutus roselaari
RED KNOT
MIGRATION ROUTE: Northwestern Alaska and Wrangel Island to California and northwestern Mexico (3,500 miles, over 5 months)
WHEN TO SEE THEM: July to May; some nonbreeding birds occasionally summer here
WHERE TO SEE THEM: Tidal mudflats, especially in San Diego Bay, but also Mission Bay, Kendall–Frost Marsh, and the San Diego River
FUN FACT: With only about 22,000 birds, the *roselaari* Red Knot population is one of the rarest shorebird populations in North America.

Bird of Greatest Concern on the Shorebirds of Conservation Concern 2016 List



References: *San Diego County Bird Atlas*, *San Diego County Avian Records 2002–2025*, *National Audubon Society Guide to North American Birds*, *Cornell Lab of Ornithology All About Birds*, *Birds of the World*, and *eBird*

Photos: Western Meadowlark, Ed Henry; Ferruginous Hawk, Ed Henry; Red-breasted Merganser, David Stump; Western Sandpiper, Ernie Cowens; Brant, David Stump; Red Knot, Ed Henry; American Wigeon, David Stump



Mareca americana
AMERICAN WIGEON
MIGRATION ROUTE: Tundra and boreal forest in Alaska and Canada to Southern U.S. and Mexico (3,900 miles, over 4 months), but some year-round residents throughout the Western U.S.
WHEN TO SEE THEM: Late September to early April
WHERE TO SEE THEM: Widespread, but most numerous at coastal wetlands with native vegetation, including San Elijo Lagoon, South San Diego Bay, and the San Diego River
FUN FACT: Look for the elusive “Storm Wigeon” males with white heads. This is a rare color morph that occurs in 1 out of 500 drakes.



Turn the Lights Out, San Diego!

by Padma Jagannathan, SDBA Board Vice President

Photo by Olga Poleshchuk



LIGHTS OUT 2025

If a bird collides with a glass window in an urban jungle and there is no one around to record it, does that death still count? How about if the number is 400 birds or 40,000 birds, or even a billion?

When 400 birds crashed into a building in a single night in Texas in 2017, it became a clarion call for Lights Out, Texas!—a program that advocates for turning off unnecessary lighting during peak migration nights to protect the billions of birds that use the night sky for their annual migration. Light pollution disorients birds, steers them away from their migratory paths, expends their energy, and draws them toward glass buildings that become death traps. It is estimated that in the United States alone, a billion birds are killed annually due to building collisions.

The statistics are alarming, but rarely do we come across such a huge, widespread problem that can be mitigated with such simple, clear, effective solutions. Every year, for more than 40 years, thousands of birds collided into McCormick Place on the shores of Lake Michigan, but that changed dramatically in 2024 when they installed bird-safe film on the windows. That year’s fall migration saw only 18 deaths, compared to 1,280 the previous fall. Protecting birds from light pollution and deadly glass has numerous positive spillover effects—what’s good for birds is also good for insects, other pollinators, humans, and the planet. It saves energy and money while also saving lives.

While San Diego has not witnessed a catastrophic event yet, we believe that a Lights Out campaign here—one of the most important layover points on the Pacific Flyway—will pay huge

dividends in the long run. For the past two years, San Diego Bird Alliance, along with our partners Dark Sky San Diego County, Friends of Famosa Slough, Living Coast Discovery Center, and Buena Vista Audubon Society, have been advocating for protecting migratory birds during fall and spring migration. We’re asking San Diegans to take a couple of simple and easy steps—flip your light switches off and draw your curtains from 11 P.M. to 6 A.M. during peak migratory season. (The fall migratory season runs from approximately August 1 – November 30, with critical peak September 1 – November 15). Hundreds of people have taken our pledge and participated in our campaign. We have also heard from people using the campaign to highlight light pollution and take action in their neighborhoods, including one volunteer who launched a pilot study at the University of California San Diego (UCSD) to understand bird mortality at the campus. (Please see “UCSD Students Strive to Make Campus Safe for Birds” on page 9.)

While our campaign has primarily used social media to raise awareness about light pollution, we have also used good old-fashioned letter writing to advocate for better building practices to prevent both nighttime and daytime collisions. And people are reading them! In a comment letter we submitted in February 2024, we advocated for bird-friendly lighting and glass in the Midway Rising project at the former San Diego Sports Arena site. The 2025 Impact Analysis for the project stated, “The Project would comply with SDMC Section 142.0740 related to shielding outdoor lighting and directing lighting downward as recommended by the San Diego Audubon Society (SDAS 2024)

to avoid bird strikes. Other ways to reduce light would also include minimizing light trespassing in accordance with green building regulations and turning off non-essential lighting during nighttime hours.” This is an example of a small but significant step in the right direction for new building projects in our county, and we will continue to advocate for nonreflective glass and other design features that reduce bird strikes even during the day.

In the age of X and ChatGPT, letter writing seems like an arcane and archaic art form. I had often wondered, “Do comment letters matter? Do they make a difference?” The Midway Rising Impact Analysis is a timely reminder that they do matter. With the threats facing important laws such as California’s Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), and the Endangered Species Act (ESA), this is the time to double down on letter writing and other forms of advocacy.

In the words of historian Howard Zinn, “History is instructive. And what it suggests to people is that even if they do little things, if they walk on the picket line, if they join a vigil, if they write a letter to their local newspaper . . . anything they do, however small, becomes part of a much, much larger sort of flow of energy. And when enough people do enough things, however small they are, then change takes place.”

So, let’s grab our digital quills to write letters and advocate on behalf of our feathered friends. Whether it is in support of Lights Out, or MBTA, or against fireworks, there is a lot to write about!



For more information about the Lights Out, San Diego campaign and to take the pledge, go to <https://www.sandiegobirdalliance.org/what-we-do/lights-out-san-diego-english.html>.

- ## Ways You Can Help Migrating Birds
- **Take the pledge to go Lights Out!** Use the QR code to take the pledge today!
 - **Make your windows bird friendly.** Colliding with glass is the number two human-caused killer of birds in the United States, causing up to 1 billion bird deaths each year. (See “Help Prevent Injuries and Deaths from Window Strikes” on page 9).
 - **Keep cats indoors or use a catio.** Cats that roam freely outdoors are the number one human-caused killer of birds in the U.S., killing approximately 2.4 billion birds each year.
 - **Landscape with native plants to provide birds with food and shelter.** Provide sources of clean water. To learn more, check out the **Native Seed Library** program on our website.
 - **Avoid using pesticides,** which can harm birds and the insects they rely on for food.
 - **Leash your dog.** Unrestrained dogs can disturb migrating birds and prevent them from getting much-needed food and rest. See our docents at the San Diego River Mouth on Sunday afternoons and ask your dog if it’s ready to take the **OB Bark Ranger Pledge**.
 - **Practice ethical birding and bird photography** to avoid increasing stress on migratory birds. <https://www.aba.org/aba-code-of-birding-ethics/> <https://www.audubon.org/photography/awards/audubons-guide-ethical-bird-photography-and-videography>
 - **Participate in community science** by joining efforts such as our **Christmas Bird Count**, Project Feederwatch (<https://feederwatch.org>), and Audubon’s Climate Watch (<https://www.audubon.org/community-science/climate-watch>), as well as recording your observations on eBird and iNaturalist.
 - **Help restore local habitat.** Check the **Events Calendar** on our website for upcoming opportunities.
 - **Become a SDBA volunteer Ternwatcher** to help reduce the threat of predators and human disturbances to California Least Terns, which migrate to San Diego in late spring to nest through the summer months.
 - **Advocate for birds.** Use your voice and your vote to protect birds, other wildlife, and the habitat they rely on. Join our **Conservation Committee** or become an **Earth Advocate**.
 - **Reduce your greenhouse gas emissions and support policies aimed at reducing the global impact of the climate crisis.** The climate crisis puts migratory bird populations at risk in many ways, including by disrupting migration timing and routes, causing mismatches in food availability, increasing extreme weather events, and even triggering changes in bird physiology that make them more vulnerable during migration.

Torrey Hills Kids Take Action

by Tanya Lubomudrov

Last school year, as the Innovative Technologist at Torrey Hills School, it was my mission to get students involved in the community and to make an impact in their local environment. I chose to reach out to San Diego Bird Alliance. Lesley Handa (SDBA's lead ornithologist) came to our school and delivered a presentation to our third-grade students about the Lights Out, San Diego program and our migratory birds. We filmed the presentation and showed it to all the students that attend our K–6 elementary school.

Once migration season began, the students took the Lights Out, San Diego pledge, and the Torrey Hills Hawks on Air team created videos each week for a month, informing students about migratory birds and some ways the students could help keep the birds safe as they migrated during the day and at night. We tracked the migration numbers regularly through BirdCast and highlighted the most observable birds seen around the community.

Principal Jacob Ruth and the PTA sponsored a Wetlands Walk through the San Elijo Lagoon on a Saturday in April, and more than 50 students and families attended. They were able to spot several of our migrating bird species and developed

a deeper appreciation for the unique and special qualities of these birds.

Each grade level focused on studying the migrating birds and the problems that lights can cause on their journey. In addition, each class wrote a letter to a local business, explaining the Lights Out campaign to bring awareness to the problem and suggest simple solutions for businesses to implement.

Students at each of the grade levels took part in a variety of projects. Kindergarten and first-grade students built light-shielding structures out of Legos to protect the birds from bright lights on the ground at night. Using materials of their choice, third- and fourth-grade students created light-shielding structures around hanging lights. Fourth- and fifth-grade students studied light pollution in more depth, and created a poster, presentation, or video about the effects of light pollution on migrating birds. Their work included solutions that could easily be implemented within the school and the surrounding community. Sixth-grade students created and distributed posters, along with letters, to local businesses throughout the Carmel Valley and Del Mar communities. Businesses that displayed the posters and agreed to



Photo by Ashley Farrel

support Lights Out, San Diego received an additional “shout out” on the school Instagram page.

The students became enamored with the migrating birds and felt empowered by the opportunity to participate in Lights Out, San Diego and to make an immediate, impactful difference. They were eager to share how they were participating at home, too, by closing blinds and turning off lights to help the birds. Students and parents were excited to see the posters around the community, and to understand that their voices truly had the power to make a change for good.

Connecting Policymakers with Solutions

by Jazmin Barajas, Julia Carroll, and Vibha Alladi, 2025 Earth Advocates

Our Earth Advocates team has chosen to focus on the Lights Out campaign because it highlights our community's influence along the Pacific Flyway, a migration route that reaches from Alaska to Patagonia, where millions of birds cross paths in the skies over San Diego.

“Lights Out represents the intersection of two things I've always been interested in, animals and the physics of light and sound,” says Julia Carroll, a fisheries and wildlife sciences student at Oregon State University. “How animals, especially birds, use light cues to navigate, sometimes over very long distances, is fascinating to me, and this campaign is a great opportunity to learn more about how anthropological use of light is affecting wildlife—and more importantly, what we can do to mitigate those effects.”



Our county's authorities have the power to protect migratory birds. Our mission is to connect them with the latest research and solutions that have brought positive results for other populations facing similar challenges around the world. Through the Earth Advocates program, we will hone the support of our cohort and the leaders at the San Diego Bird Alliance to represent the best interests of conservation and advocacy for the migratory birds that find refuge in our county.

“Half of this battle includes connecting the array of San Diego's resources to earn us a spot on the map of cities who have pioneered creative solutions in service to our non-human neighbors,” says Jazmin Barajas, an aspiring science writer specializing in earth science and astronomy.

UCSD Students Strive to Make Campus Safe for Birds

by Leo Harris, BirdSafe UCSD

Students from the University of California San Diego (UCSD) have partnered with the San Diego Bird Alliance to kick-start a chapter of BirdSafe, a widespread initiative to tackle the issue of bird mortality due to window collisions. BirdSafe UCSD focuses on understanding the impacts of UCSD's infrastructure on migrating birds and recording the presence of sensitive species on campus.

During the 2024–2025 fall and spring migration seasons, volunteers conducted bird censuses and building-specific mortality surveys, which involved counting bird carcasses surrounding buildings. Estimating how many birds collide with a specific building's windows is complicated because not all collisions result in immediate death, and carcasses can be removed from a crash site before being counted. This is where bird censuses come in. Bird censuses quantify the abundance of at-risk species on campus, such as hummingbirds and warblers, which are disproportionately impacted by window strikes. A higher abundance of these species indicates a need for thoughtful

decision making to avoid future collisions.

Our surveys showed a handful of building collisions, giving us a baseline to help determine how collisions may vary both seasonally and with the addition of new buildings and other campus developments. Our bird censuses revealed an abundance of species on campus, including at-risk hummingbirds and warblers such as Anna's and Allen's Hummingbirds, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Wilson's Warblers, and Black-throated Gray Warblers. We also observed Common Yellowthroats and a Common Poorwill, species we would not typically expect to thrive on campus.

These surveys help us to better understand what's happening at UCSD from a bird's-eye view, by including observable impacts and identification of birds that could be impacted by future architectural decisions. They also give students the opportunity to engage with wild birds and their protection, serving as an entry point to ecological field techniques.

Help Prevent Injuries and Deaths from Window Strikes

by Lesley Handa, SDBA Lead Ornithologist

As I was walking to my office in downtown San Diego early one August morning, I saw a stunned-looking Song Sparrow on the ground nearby. It had a craned neck, and I immediately knew it had collided with a window. Ever since I witnessed an American Crow die instantly after hitting a window on an overpass walkway at the county court building, I've made a habit of scanning the ground around windows in the downtown area for victims of window strikes.

Closely examining the Song Sparrow, I noted that the right eye was open, non-responsive, and glassy, likely from neurological damage sustained from the window strike. The left eye looked normal, though the bird remained immobile in my hand. I gave up going to work on time and decided to walk back to my car to take it to Project Wildlife. As I was waiting for the walk sign

at a traffic light, the bird made a feeble attempt to fly and fluttered to the ground about five feet in front of me. I picked it up and continued heading to my car, but the bird died in my hand before I made it.

I evaluated its body condition and determined it was healthy, complete with pristine primary feathers and a bit of fat stored in the hollow in its furcula. It was a needless loss of one of our common birds here in San Diego. Common birds, such as this Song Sparrow, are declining across North America,

with 5% of species making up 80% of the total declines in avian abundance.

The primary cause of the tremendous declines in bird populations is habitat loss, but bird collisions with windows are becoming one of the leading human-caused threats to birds in North America.



Photo by Lesley Handa

Each year, up to 1 billion birds die after colliding with glass, according to the American Bird Conservancy. Like the Song Sparrow I tried to rescue, birds may not always die immediately after the initial collision. They can sustain severe injuries, such as fractured bones and beaks, concussions, and internal bleeding. Birds that initially fly away often die elsewhere. In one study, out of 29 window collisions, only 2 birds died immediately, leaving a carcass near the window.

As a member of the Bird Collision Prevention Alliance (BCPA), the San Diego Bird Alliance encourages you to join us to help reduce bird-collision impacts by using window treatments such as those suggested by the American Bird Conservancy (<https://abcbirds.org/glass-collisions/>). Please also take our Light's Out pledge to turn off outdoor lighting during fall and spring migration. (See “Turn the Lights Out, San Diego!” on page 6.) San Diego County is the birdiest area in the United States, so we must be particularly protective of both migratory and year-round resident birds, who are vulnerable to window collisions. Let's all work together for the birds to help address this issue in San Diego County.

Three Spectacular Birding Outings for Fall Migratory Birds

By LaTresa Pearson, Sketches Editor



South San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge/SoCal Saltworks

The South San Diego Bay Unit of the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge is located at the southernmost tip of the bay within the cities of Imperial Beach, Coronado, National City, and the City of San Diego. With plentiful eelgrass beds, the largest contiguous mudflat in Southern California, and a series of salt ponds, the 2,300-acre unit attracts thousands of migrating and overwintering waterfowl, seabirds, and shorebirds.

Birding here feels a bit like attending an A-list party. It's closed to the public throughout the spring and summer months to protect nesting terns, including endangered California Least Terns, as well as threatened Western Snowy Plovers. From October to February, however, the San Diego Bird Alliance receives special access to lead monthly birding outings, which are capped at 15 lucky participants.

The four-hour outings begin at the entrance to the South Bay Salt Works, a private business that holds a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Special Use Permit to harvest industrial-use sea salt through solar evaporation. The tall white salt dunes and iridescent evaporation ponds lend the site an otherworldly feel as you set off onto the flat trail that loops around the salt ponds. The walk provides opportunities to view the many species of birds using the ponds, mudflats, salt marsh, and bay habitats. Participants routinely spot 50 or more species of birds, including Brants, American Wigeons, Red-breasted Mergansers, and

other overwintering waterfowl; a variety of tern and gull species; Eared Grebes; Black-bellied, Semipalmated, and Snowy Plovers; Least and Western Sandpipers; Marbled Godwits; Willets; Long-billed Curlews; Red Knots; Dunlins; Short-billed Dowitchers; Red-necked Phalaropes; American Pipits; and endangered Ridgway's Rails and Belding's Savannah Sparrows. A Little Stint has made appearances in recent years, and you might also spot an occasional Burrowing or Short-eared Owl, as well as Floyd and Flo, the popular pair of wild American Flamingos that have taken up residence in San Diego's South Bay.



San Diego River Estuary/Robb Field

The San Diego River Estuary extends west from Interstate 5 to the mouth of the San Diego River at Dog Beach in Ocean Beach. With a multiuse paved path that runs parallel to the estuary, this is an easily accessible location that attracts a wealth of

migratory, overwintering, and resident bird species. The path can get busy with cyclists, dog walkers, and other pedestrians, but there's room along the side to steer clear of passersby. This is a great location to do a "bird sit," and it's not unusual to see birders with spotting scopes set up along the route.

SDBA birding outings meet across from the tennis courts at Robb Field and last about 2 ½ hours. Leaders focus on identifying the many shorebirds, waterfowl, and seabirds that use the salt marsh mudflats, sand islands, and wetlands as resting and foraging areas. Timed to coincide with low tide, when birds are most abundant at the estuary, this is another location where you may spot as many as 50 species in an outing, including Killdeer, Black-bellied, Semipalmated, and Snowy Plovers; Long-billed Curlews; Marbled Godwits; Willets; Whimbrels; Greater Yellowlegs; Western, Least, and Spotted Sandpipers; and Short-billed Dowitchers; Little Blue, Great Blue, Tricolored, Black-crowned, and Yellow-crowned Night Herons, as well as Great, Reddish, and Snowy Egrets; Black Skimmers; various tern and gull species; Brown and American White Pelicans; Double-crested Cormorants; Brants, American Wigeons, grebes, and other overwintering waterfowl; American Pipits, Cassin's Kingbirds, and Western Meadowlarks.

Resident Belted Kingfishers regularly fish the channel, and a longstanding nest at Robb Field provides the opportunity to watch fishing Osprey carry their catch to

their mate and offspring. You may even spot a wintering Burrowing Owl among the rocks. Be sure to check out the trees and grassy fields near the tennis courts for migrating songbirds, including many warbler species.

Ramona Grasslands

The Ramona Grasslands Preserve is in the Santa Maria Valley west of Ramona and northeast of Mount Woodson. It features more than 3,500 acres of oak woodland, grassland, chaparral, and wetland habitats, which attract many species of birds, but it's best known for a wide range of raptors, including wintering Ferruginous Hawks.

SDBA's birding outing meets on Highland Valley Court and involves some car caravanning along Highland Valley Road

and Rangeland Road before finishing at the Ramona Grasslands Preserve. Combining the stops, you may spot American Bald Eagles and Golden Eagles; Ferruginous and Red-tailed Hawks; Prairie and Peregrine Falcons; American Kestrels; White-tailed Kites; Mountain Bluebirds; Vermilion Flycatchers; Western Meadowlarks; Tricolored Blackbirds; Burrowing Owls; Greater Roadrunners; Loggerhead Shrikes; American Pipits; Lawrence's Goldfinches; White-crowned Sparrows; Acorn and Nuttall's Woodpeckers; Northern Flickers; and even hundreds of American Wigeons and other migrating waterfowl foraging in the fields. When the preserve's small pond fills, you may also see a variety of migrating waterfowl, shorebirds, and other waterbirds taking refuge there.



20 Fall/Winter Birding Hotspots from North County to the Border and Beyond

1. Batiquitos Lagoon
2. San Elijo Lagoon
3. San Dieguito Lagoon
4. Whelan Lake Bird Sanctuary — private sanctuary; Buena Vista Audubon offers guided walks the first Saturday of each month, or call (760) 722-4887 to make an appointment
5. Guajome Regional Park
6. Lake Hodges*
7. Torrey Pines State Reserve*
8. Point La Jolla Seawatch and La Jolla Rocky Shores*
9. Kendall-Frost Marsh Reserve*
10. Famosa Slough*
11. Cabrillo National Monument
12. Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve (Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge, Border Field State Park, Seacoast Dr. to Tijuana River mouth)*
13. Tijuana River Valley Regional Park (Dairy Mart Ponds and Bird & Butterfly Garden)*
14. Sweetwater Reservoir
15. Otay Reservoir
16. Santee Lakes*
17. Lindo Lake*
18. Lake Murray*
19. Lake Cuyamaca
20. Sonny Bono National Wildlife Refuge/Salton Sea State Recreation Area

**Check SDBA's Events Calendar for free guided birding outings at these locations. All SDBA outings are capped at 15 participants. Outings at many of these locations are also offered during the San Diego Bird Festival. Go to www.sandiegobirdfestival.org for more information.*

Top: Black-necked Stilts and two Willets rest at the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge's salt ponds.

Left: A flock of American Wigeons takes off over the Ramona Grasslands.

Center: Black Skimmers, Brant, and a variety of shorebirds gather along the San Diego River Estuary's tidal mudflats.

Photos by LaTresa Pearson

What's Soaring Your Way at the 2026 San Diego Bird Festival

by Jen Hajj,
Public Programs Manager



Photo by Sandy McCann

Mark your calendars, birders—February 26 to March 1, 2026—because San Diego will come alive with the sights, sounds, and spirit of the 2026 San Diego Bird Festival! This year's festival promises more than just birdwatching—it's a celebration of community, conservation, and the wild beauty that makes our region one of the top birding destinations in the world.

From misty coastal mornings to sun-soaked desert evenings, the San Diego Bird Festival is your front-row seat to Southern California's spectacular biodiversity.

WHAT'S COMING IN 2026?



Kenn Kaufman Returns!
We're thrilled to welcome back legendary field guide author, artist, and conservationist Kenn Kaufman as a keynote speaker and field trip leader.

His insights, stories, and down-to-earth birding style are sure to inspire and delight.

Bird the Border & Beyond

From pelagic voyages to bus tours through every major habitat in the county, we'll take you from saltmarsh to sage scrub. And yes—more than 100 expertly guided trips are on the roster!

Art & Avian Expression

Unleash your creative side with hands-on workshops led by artists specializing in birds. Whether you're sketching in a field journal or painting feathered masterpieces, we're offering new ways to celebrate birds through art.

Conservation in Action

Meet the people working to protect birds and habitats across our region. Through panels and storytelling, we'll spotlight inspiring community-led conservation efforts. These aren't just birds you're seeing—they're part of a larger story of resilience, connection, and care for the natural world.

You!

At the heart of it all is you, our members. Your support makes the San Diego Bird Festival more than a series of field trips—it makes it a movement. A gathering place. A homecoming. In 2026, we celebrate not only the incredible birds that grace our skies but also the community that stands behind them.

So, bring a friend, bring a scope, bring your whole bird club. The 2026 San Diego Bird Festival is ready to take flight—and we can't wait to share the skies with you.

Registration opens November 2025. Stay tuned for the full trip list and lineup at www.sandiegobirdfestival.org



Photo by Nathan French

CAMP SURFBIRD Find Your Peeps

Since 2024, the San Diego Bird Festival has featured a new program just for teens ages 13–17, Camp Surfbird!

This partnership between San Diego Bird Alliance and the American Birding Association has made possible an unforgettable weekend for young birders to gather and explore birding in San Diego with like-minded peers. Campers participate in chaperoned festival activities and experiences just for them. Based out of YMCA Camp Surf in Imperial Beach, the young birders embark on a pelagic trip, meet birding “celebirdies,” and explore birding along the border. Together, we expand our birding skills, learn about the natural history of coastal California, meet other young people with similar interests, and explore careers and opportunities in ornithology, research, and conservation. Registration for the next session of Camp Surfbird will be open in Fall of 2026. For more information, contact jhajj@sandiegobirdalliance.org

SANCTUARTIES

Art and Wellness Workshops Inspire Creativity and Connection

By Kenzie Kuras

As California Climate Action Fellows for the San Diego Bird Alliance, Hailey Matthews and I chose to explore the intersection of art and science through a series of biweekly open crafting events. These events cultivated an incredible community of makers and nature lovers looking to delve into their artistic endeavors in the peaceful and inspiring surroundings at the Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary and Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve.

With the connections we made with our participants, we planned dedicated workshops to highlight their unique interests and further interlink art, science, and nature. One of the workshops that grew out of this process was a natural dye workshop created and developed by longtime SDBA volunteer and talented artist, Beatrice Darimont.

In the workshop, which was offered at

Silverwood in June and July, Darimont taught participants how to use oak galls to create inks and washes. An oak gall is a growth produced by an oak tree, which forms around the eggs of the gall wasp, a native insect, to protect and nourish the larvae. As the eggs hatch and the larvae mature, they emerge from the gall, leaving behind an abnormal, brownish-black, fruit-like structure. The gall is used by the gall wasp only once. Therefore, an inactive gall is safe to harvest if the wasp's exit hole is visible. If

there is no hole, the gall is active. These galls have been used for more than 1,000 years to make gall ink, a waterproof stain meant to last forever. Historically, gall inks were used for the *Declaration of Independence*, the *Magna Carta*, and for Leonardo da Vinci's

notebooks and drawings.

In the workshop, attendees learned about the historical and cultural uses of natural dyes, oak and gall variations at Silverwood, the chemistry of the process that creates the gall dye, and the steps involved in making the dye. Participants experienced the full process of dye making, from harvesting oak galls at Silverwood to the step-by-step preparation of the dye. After making the dye, participants experimented with using it artistically through various activities, including writing

with dip pens, creating different washes to use the dye similarly to watercolor, and using the dye in a stamp pad with hand-carved stamps.

After the great success of the oak gall workshops, more natural dye workshops using materials at Silverwood, such as elderberry and yarrow, are being planned for the fall and onward. These workshops not only spark creative expression but also a deeper connection to

Silverwood and the intricate relationships between plants, insects, and the art they inspire.

All materials are harvested responsibly and with sustainability in mind.



Above: Created by Beatrice Darimont, this display showcases oak gall art and dye creation.

Left: Great Horned Owl oak gall watercolor made by a participant.

Below: Participants learn historical oak gall uses and engage in a demo of dye making.



See the Events Calendar on our website for workshop dates and details.

Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary is open to the public from 9 A.M. to 4 P.M. on Saturdays and 8 A.M. to 12 P.M. on Wednesdays.

Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve is open to the public on Saturdays from 9 A.M. to 4 P.M.

Photos: Kenzie Kuras

After the Homecoming

A Season of Setbacks

by Cristina Santa Maria, Conservation Manager

Despite early signs of promise, the 2025 California Least Tern nesting season is winding down, and we’re taking stock of a very troubling year for the Mission Bay colonies. At Mariner’s Point, only 27 nests were attempted, down from more than 100 the year prior. Of those, just 3 nests hatched, producing a total of 5 chicks. At FAA Island, another Mission Bay nesting preserve, 35 nest attempts yielded a single chick, now close to fledging as I write this update. We’re hoping it stays safe from predators in these final days.

The culprits were familiar: persistent predator activity and human disturbance. But this year, daytime drone use has emerged as a newer and growing concern. Small, quiet, and often flown recreationally near nesting areas, they can trigger panic in incubating adults, leaving eggs vulnerable and disrupting

feeding routines. While drone use around preserves is technically restricted, public awareness is low, and enforcement remains challenging.

We’ll be urging the City to strengthen regulations and make off-limits zones clearer and more enforceable.

Still, even in a difficult year, there were moments of resilience. Volunteer Ternwatchers witnessed fledglings take flight for the first time, kept watch of the lone chick at FAA Island, and stepped in when the terns needed them most. Thank you to all the Ternwatchers for your

care, consistent presence, and commitment to protecting these fragile birds.

Even in a season marked by setbacks, the resilience of these birds and the dedication of those who protect them reminds us that with vigilance, advocacy, and community support, there’s still hope for their future in Mission Bay.

Please report suspicious activity, such as trespass into the preserves or harassment of wildlife, to the local wildlife agencies, Mission Bay Park Rangers, Lifeguards, or through the City of San Diego’s Get It Done app.



(TOP LEFT) This image shows how small CLTE eggs are and how they have evolved to blend in with the sand.

(BOTTOM) Young chicks often take advantage of the shelter the roofing tiles provide. Thanks to the Mission Bay Park Rangers for replacing these after the vandalism incident.

(TOP RIGHT) A “teenager” tern and one of our biological monitors, Jennifer Jackson, recording health and metric data for its sibling. The USGS bands are like Social Security numbers for the birds. If they are recaptured, the bands indicate where and when they hatched. Birds handled with federally acquired permits.

Photos by Cristina Santa Maria



2025 Birdathoners Break Fundraising Record

by Nick Thorpe, Philanthropy Coordinator

The 2025 Birdathon was bigger and birdier than ever before! Our **125 valiant Birdathoners raised a collective \$33,299** between **March 1 and May 31**, supporting San Diego Bird Alliance’s local conservation, outdoor education, and environmental advocacy work. This record-breaking fundraising achievement was made possible by 312 donors supporting their friends, family, and coworkers in their birding endeavors. Thank you to everyone who made this year’s Birdathon a huge success!

Collectively, Birdathon participants spotted **241 species** in San Diego County and **more than 25,000 individual birds** between April 11 and May 11. Along the way, they submitted 185 eBird checklists, providing valuable data to ongoing community science efforts. Speaking of which, Cornell’s BirdCast tool estimates that 25 million birds migrated through San Diego County during the Birdathon. This is why we protect native habitats and urge people to turn off lights at night—the amazing biodiversity we observe in San Diego is only a small fraction of the full picture!

Didn’t get to participate this year? Join us for the **2026 Birdathon**, which will be held **April 10 – May 10**. The Birdathon is like a walkathon, except instead of counting miles, you count

birds! Teams and individuals pick a day to get outside in San Diego County and try to identify as many species as possible within 24 hours, while raising funds along the way. It’s a fun opportunity to enjoy the beauty of nature, see the birds we love, and support the San Diego Bird Alliance. And for those with a competitive side, it’s a chance to win sweet, sweet bragging rights for a year.

2025 BRAGGING RIGHTS GO TO...

The top five fundraising teams were the SDBA U-Terns, Silent Siskins, ElderBirds, Wandering Totalers, and Wild Birds Unlimited. The top five fundraising individuals were Vanessa Malcarne, Muriel Spooner, Brandi Sanchez, Travis Kemnitz, and Amanda Kelly. The top five teams with the most species seen birding as a group were Alive, Wild, and Unrestrained; Wandering Totalers (core group); Silent Siskins; Birden of Proof; and the Rolling Turnstones. The top five teams with the most species seen birding separately were Bowling for Buffleheads, SDBA U-Terns, Wandering Totalers (extended group), ElderBirds, and SoCal Bird Nerds. The top three individuals not participating as a team with the most species seen were Erika Garig, Rachael Morgan, and Sarah Kesty.



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A Life List Is More Than a Number— It's a Journey

*It's a life full of stories, of
moments of wonder, and
mind-enriching experiences.
Come join us on the trail—there's
so much to see!*

When you become a **San Diego Bird Alliance member** and discover all the ways to enjoy our region's more than 400 bird species, other wildlife, and their habitats, you'll find yourself caught up on a journey that can last a lifetime!

By joining at any level, you help us achieve our mission — and help protect our natural heritage.



Join or Renew as a Member. Make monthly or yearly contributions, meet other bird enthusiasts, and enjoy member benefits.

Volunteer. There are many ways to contribute your time and talents. Explore our website for ideas!

Make a Donation. Make a tax-deductible gift to support our initiatives, our many programs, and both of our sanctuaries.

Leave a Legacy. Make plans today for a gift tomorrow and become part of our esteemed Golden Eagle Legacy Club.

We encourage you to become a member of San Diego Bird Alliance, especially if you are already a National Audubon member.

To become a member, visit:
sandiegobirdalliance.org/joinourflock/become-a-member.html

SAN DIEGO BIRD ALLIANCE

Sketches

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(Emails might be more effective than calling.)

San Diego Bird Alliance Office: 858-273-7800

California Audubon Society: ca.audubon.org

National Audubon Society: www.audubon.org

National Audubon Activist Hotline: 800-659-2622

National Audubon Customer Service: 800-274-4201

*San Diego Bird Alliance is a chapter
of the National Audubon Society*



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website for all calendar items and registrations.*

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