

## Target Species and Rare Birds

### Finding and Reporting Rare Birds

One of the exciting aspects of birding is finding rare birds. The best way to do that is to get out in the field as often as you can and to learn the status, distribution, field marks, and calls of the regular species. Because birds fly, no visit to a familiar site is quite the same, and just about anything can turn up.

Certain patterns have been recognized over time, and some birds are far rarer than others. For example, some eastern songbirds, such as Blackpoll Warblers and American Redstarts, show up in fair numbers each year at coastal sites like Point Reyes, and they are not completely unexpected for the Sacramento area. Indigo Buntings, as another example, have nested several times in the Sacramento area. Others, like Blackburnian Warblers and Bay-breasted Warblers, account for only a few records each for the Sacramento area, despite decades of observations. Some species that were long considered very rare, like Semipalmated Sandpipers, are now known to occur annually in low numbers (there may be a combination of factors at work, including people knowing what to look for and making a concerted effort to find them, improved habitat and birder access to locations such as the DAVIS WETLANDS, and a greater number of birders with high quality spotting scopes).

Rare birds can turn up at any time, but knowing when to look can improve your odds. Many rare songbirds have been found in late May and June, when the bulk of the common Western migrants already have passed. September and October are also very productive. Occasionally, rare species spend the winter in our area. With many eyes and ears in the field during the Christmas Bird Counts, rarities are found each year. Shorebirding is often most productive in July through October, while unusual gulls and waterfowl are typically found in winter.

**Documentation:** Once an unusual species is found, careful observation of the bird's field marks, calls, and behavior is key to documenting it. Note the relative shape and size of the bird compared to common species. Write down as much detail as possible regarding bill shape, the facial pattern, relative proportions and length of wings and tail, coloration of bare parts as well as feather patterns. Vocalizations can be extremely helpful. Rule out common species and hybrids. For example, if you find a suspected Red-naped Sapsucker, make sure it does not show characteristics of hybridization with a Red-breasted Sapsucker.

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Experience will tell you that these hybrids are more common than pure Red-naped Sapsuckers in the Sacramento area.

A good description of a rare bird explains why it is not one of the more common species or another rarity with a similar appearance. Much of documenting a rarity is ruling out other possibilities. Photographs can be very helpful. Many birders never go out without a camera. A small digital camera used with a spotting scope can provide definitive documentation of a rare species. The video features on digital cameras are improving rapidly and can record songs and calls. But photography can also distract you from careful observation of a bird that you may only have in view for a few minutes (or seconds). It is better to have a tentative identification than to jump to conclusions. Report the bird so others may see it. The most active rare bird reporting site for the Sacramento area is the Central Valley Bird Club listserv; see RESOURCES.

Well-documented birds become part of the scientific record, and are published quarterly in *North American Birds*. The understanding of status and distribution of rare birds as well as common species has largely been the work of committed amateurs.

In addition to reporting your finds to listservs and rare bird alerts (see RESOURCES), please submit reports of rare and uncommon species, nesting found out of season, and rare or previously undocumented species to the appropriate North American Birds county editor. For the Sacramento Area:

Amador, Tim Steurer ([tsteurer@hotmail.com](mailto:tsteurer@hotmail.com));  
Calaveras, John Sterling ([ani@cal.net](mailto:ani@cal.net));  
Colusa, Sutter, Yuba, Bruce Deuel ([bdeuel@dfg.ca.gov](mailto:bdeuel@dfg.ca.gov));  
Placer, Ed Pandolfino ([erpfromca@aol.com](mailto:erpfromca@aol.com));  
Sacramento, Chris Conard ([conardc@gmail.com](mailto:conardc@gmail.com));  
San Joaquin, Frances Oliver ([hummer52@sbcglobal.net](mailto:hummer52@sbcglobal.net));  
Solano, Robin Leong ([robin\\_leong@netzero.net](mailto:robin_leong@netzero.net));  
Yolo, John Sterling ([jsterling@wavecable.com](mailto:jsterling@wavecable.com)).

A *Checklist to the Birds of the Sacramento Area* is available through the Sacramento Audubon Society.

