



Santa Cruz Birds

by Alex Rinkert

Including reports from September 1 to November 30, 2024

Another exciting fall is in the books. This fall, some places such as Swanton Pond and the Lighthouse Field area kept producing some fantastic birds, leading to trip after trip back to these favored locales. Highlighting this season were several species—Lark Bunting, Dickcissel, Prothonotary Warbler—with very few records in the county in the past few decades. Other significant rarities found this fall for which there are ten or fewer records in the county included Neotropic Cormorant, Black-throated Sparrow, Canada Warbler, and Scarlet Tanager.

Schooling anchovies in late October and early November attracted large numbers of gulls to the mid-county coastline, and diligent sorting through these flocks produced some fine rarities (Slaty-backed, Vega, and Lesser Black-backed Gull). Winter irruptive species were mainly found in average to below average numbers except for Golden-crowned Kinglet, which was fairly plentiful especially in the lowlands.

While no new species for the county were found this fall, the Clements taxonomic update that happened in October 2024 resulted in a number of locally occurring subspecies being elevated to species, and resultantly increasing the number of bird species documented in Santa Cruz County to 474. Those species newly added to the county list through taxonomic splits are Vega Gull and Siberian Pipit, which were formerly subspecies of Herring Gull and American Pipit, respectively. A few species on the Santa Cruz County bird list also received new names as a result of splits and lumps: American Herring Gull, Cocos Booby, American Barn Owl, Northern House Wren, and Redpoll.

A flock of 160 **Snow/Ross's Geese** flying over Seacliff State Beach on November 16 was an exceptional number to see in the county (KR, LZ). A **Common Poorwill** calling in an Aptos backyard

on October 17 was presumably a rarely detected migrant (BKy). At least six **Black-chinned Hummingbirds** were reported in Santa Cruz and Larkin Valley in September (v.ob.). Special attention to the female and immature *Selasphorus* hummingbirds this fall identified at least 15 **Rufous Hummingbirds** in Santa Cruz through September 13. Rufous are an uncommon fall migrant in the county through mid- to late September, while **Allen's Hummingbird** is believed to be exceptional after August, although the challenge of identifying *Selasphorus* to species at this time of year may be masking their true status. This fall, three Allen's were identified from photographs of their tail feather shape and rump color, and observations of dive displays; all were seen in Santa Cruz, with two between September 7–8, and one especially late individual seen between October 12–17 (AR).



Black-chinned Hummingbird

A flock of 5 **Sandhill Cranes** flew over Younger Lagoon on October 18 (EG et al.). A juvenile **American Golden-Plover** at Laguna Beach from October 4–5 was the rarest shorebird found this



American Golden-Plover

fall; only five others have been previously identified in the county (SM, v.ob.). A **Baird's Sandpiper** was at College Lake on September 12, just the second reported this fall (NU), while about 16 **Pectoral Sandpipers** were found in September and early October (v.ob.). Three **Solitary Sandpipers** and 3 **Pacific-Golden Plovers** were also reported, while no **Wilson's Phalaropes** were found (v.ob.). A **Pigeon Guillemot** nest at West Cliff Drive remaining active until at least September 11, and fledging within the following two days, was the latest active nest of this species recorded in the county (AR).

Masses of anchovies in the nearshore waters off the mid-county coast, and especially off Santa Cruz, attracted large numbers of gulls to the area. In these large flocks was an adult or subadult **Slaty-backed Gull** bathing at the San Lorenzo River mouth on November 4, the second recorded in the county (AR). Also at the San Lorenzo River mouth was a first-cycle **Vega Gull**, seen on November 6 and again on November 9 (AR, NA, v.ob.). There are only a few prior county records in of this newly elevated species. A third-cycle **Lesser Black-backed Gull** photographed at the Santa Cruz Harbor on October 19 was surprisingly the fourth found this year (AR); there were only ten previous records of this species before 2024. A **Franklin's Gull** found at Struve Slough on October 31 remained there through at least November 2 (NU, v.ob.). Lastly, a first-cycle **American Herring x Glaucous Gull hybrid** was at the San Lorenzo River mouth from November 8–9 (AR, v.ob.).



American Herring x Glaucous Gull hybrid



Ferruginous Hawk

A **Leach's Storm-Petrel** seen far offshore on September 14 was one of relatively few records for the county (JW, MMK, PH, EMK, DU, NU). **Sooty Shearwaters** continued to be seen in large numbers from shore into early September (v.ob.). A **Manx Shearwater** seen on the Monterey Bay on October 6 was the only one reported in county waters this fall (BH et al.). An adult **Neotropic Cormorant** photographed at Struve Slough on September 13 remained until at least November 9 was just the 4th recorded in the county (ST, v.ob.). The cormorant had apparently been in the area since at least

September 7 (SP). A **White-faced Ibis** flying 10 miles offshore over the Monterey Bay was just the second recorded in the county's offshore waters (AJ et al.).

A light-morph **Swainson's Hawk** soaring over Moore Creek Preserve on November 29 was the latest ever fall migrant recorded in the county (RT). **Ferruginous Hawks**, rather rare in recent years, were seen at Swanton Pond on September 22 (NU) and Quail Hollow Ranch on October 20 (AF). Three **Burrowing Owls** were reported this period, all from open space west of Santa Cruz (v.ob.). Migrant **Short-eared Owls** dropping in for a few days were at El Jarro Point from November 8–12 (AR, v.ob.) and the East Meadow at UC Santa Cruz on October 5–7 (MB, v.ob.).



Burrowing Owl

A **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** was found in the birch trees at Bethany Curve on November 5 (DS). A **"Yellow-shafted" Northern Flicker** was at Quail Hollow Ranch from November 3–18 (AR, v.ob.). Pure "Yellow-shafted" flickers are quite rare locally compared to "Yellow-shafted" x "Red-shafted" intergrades, which are uncommon in fall and winter.



Yellow-shafted Northern Flicker

An intriguing Alder/Willow ("Traill's") Flycatcher photographed at Lighthouse Field State Beach on September 12 showed many characteristics of **Alder Flycatcher**, an exceptionally rare species in California and a would-be first for the county (RP). Unfortunately, the bird was not refound in the following days and the record has not been evaluated by the California Bird Records Committee. Seven or eight **Willow Flycatchers** this period was an average showing (v.ob.). A **Gray Flycatcher** twitched its tail at Lighthouse Field State Beach on September 8 (NU). An **Ash-throated Flycatcher** was at Chittenden on the very late date of November 9 (NU); most migrants

have passed through the county by the end of August. About 10 **Tropical Kingbirds** were reported this period (v.ob.). A **Cassin's Kingbird** photographed at Arana Gulch on October 25 was just the second fall migrant recorded in the county (ZG et al.); all but two of the sixteen recorded in the county have been spring migrants.

At least eleven **Loggerhead Shrikes** found this period was a decent showing of this declining species (v.ob.). **Rock Wrens** were at the Davenport Cement Plant on October 25 (ES) and Three Mile Beach beginning November 10 (LoR, KB, NLy, v.ob.). On September 29, a **Golden-crowned Kinglet** circled a boat on the Monterey Bay before continuing south (NL, AR, PB, AF). This was the first record of this species in the offshore waters of the county. A **Sage Thrasher** was at Swanton Pond, often seen flycatching from the roof of an old building, from September 22 to October 5 (SH, LG, BM, v.ob.).



A **Lapland Longspur** in the fields between Wilder Beach and Younger Lagoon on October 22 was



perhaps the same individual seen several times through November 3 (NL, v.ob.). **Chipping Sparrows**, now regularly seen at the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum, were especially abundant there this fall. An estimated 24–25 individuals on September 21 was an incredible count (EMK, MMK, ST, JS), while others reported 5–10 at other times in September (v.ob.). Other *Spizella* sparrows found this fall were eight **Clay-colored Sparrows** at various places around the county and a **Brewer's**

Sparrow at Swanton Pond from September 21–23 (JT, DS, v.ob.). A juvenile **Black-throated Sparrow** seen at the UC Santa Cruz Farm Project from September 19–22 was the eighth recorded in the county (MNC, v.ob.). Five of the six fall records of this species have now been in September. Eighteen **Lark Sparrows** found this fall was a good total.

A female **Lark Bunting** found at Lighthouse Community Garden on October 17 was thought to have left the area that day, as intensive searching throughout the neighborhood failed to find it (NU, v.ob.). However, On October 23, it was refound in a nearby garden and remained in the area through the end of November (AF, v.ob.). This was only the sixth recorded in the county, and the first since 2015. A **“Thick-billed” Fox Sparrow** at Lighthouse Field State Beach on October 17 was just the third recorded in the lowlands of the county (AF). Two **Vesper Sparrows** were at Swanton Pond on





September 14–22 (NS, AK, BK, v.ob.), and singles were near Lighthouse Field State Beach on September 20 (AF) and the fields between Wilder Beach and Younger Lagoon on November 1 (AF). Four **Swamp Sparrows** were reported this period (v.ob.). **Green-tailed Towhees** were at Wilder Ranch State Park on November 4–5 (CR, LR, v.ob.), and one stayed at Sunset State Beach from October 11 through the end of November (LP, v.ob.). A **White-crowned x Golden-crowned Sparrow hybrid** at the Santa Cruz Harbor on

October 25 was a taxon that is rarely reported in the county (NA).

Two **Bobolinks** flew over Swanton Pond on October 4 (TE, CO). An **Orchard Oriole** was at Lighthouse Community Garden from October 16–19 (AF, v.ob.). A flock of about 1,000–1,500 **Tricolored Blackbirds** descending to roost for the night at Kalkar Quarry on November 11 was a noteworthy count for Santa Cruz (BL).

Rare warblers this fall were headlined by a **Prothonotary Warbler** at Wilder Ranch State Park from October 31–November 17 (JM, v.ob.), the twelfth recorded in the county but only the second recorded in the last 20 years. Many enjoyed close up views of this stunning golden orb as it sluggishly gleaned insects from the foliage and the ground. A **Canada Warbler** at Corralitos Lagoon from September 22–23 (NU, v.ob.) and a **Prairie Warbler** at Swanton Pond from September 30–October 1 (NSu, v.ob.) were also nice finds. A **Blackburnian Warbler** at Shorebirds Pond from October 5–10 met the quota of about one per fall (CK, RF, v.ob.), and an **Orange-crowned Warbler** of the “celata” subspecies seen at Coast Road on October 7 was one of only a handful of records in the county (NA). Totals of other rare but more regularly occurring “eastern” warblers included the following: **Northern Waterthrush** (1), **Black-and-white Warbler** (3), **Tennessee Warbler** (4), **American Redstart** (3–4), **Chestnut-sided Warbler** (4), and **Blackpoll Warbler** (2) (v.ob.). Totals of scarce “western” warblers were 7 **Nashville**, 4 **MacGillivray’s**, and at least 9 **Palm Warblers** (v.ob.).



A **Scarlet Tanager** feasting on wasps and bees at Neary Lagoon from November 18–23 was just the sixth recorded in the county (LM, v.ob.). Four **Summer Tanagers** and six **Rose-breasted Grosbeaks** were reported this period (v.ob.). A **Blue Grosbeak** found at Swanton Pond on September 25 was the only one reported this fall (SBB, SE). A **Dickcissel** at Swanton Pond from October 1–5 was a fantastic find, being just the sixth recorded in the county and the second in the last 20 years (NU, v.ob.).

Cited Observers:

Noah Arthur, Sam Baxter-Bray, Michael Bolte, Phil Brown, Kimberly Butts, Todd Easterla, Sam Everhard, Abram Fleishman, Rick Fournier, Ezra Garfield, Zachary Ginn, Lois Goldfrank, Paul Heady, Bill Hubick, Sharon Hull, Alvaro Jaramillo, Brooke Keeney (BKy), Alex Keitt, Brad Keitt, Clay Kempf, Nick Levendosky, Bruce Lyon, Nelle Lyons (NLy), Leland Mackessy, Stephanie Martin, James Maughn, Elias McKown, Matthew McKown, Bobbie Mayer, Monte Neate-Clegg, Chris Ortega, Laura Paulson, Ryan Phillips, Shantanu Phukan, Alex Rinkert, Carol Rose, Larry Rose, Lola Ross (LoR), Kyan Russell, Nico Schnack, Elena Scott, David Sidle, Justyn Stahl, Nicholas Sundeen (NSu), Scott Terrill, Robert Thorn, Jaclyn Tolchin, Steve Tucker (STu), Darrell Uyeda, Norman Uyeda, Jonny Wahl, Linda Zhang. "v.ob." means various observers. Please enter interesting observations into eBird or report them to Alex Rinkert at arinkert@gmail.com.

All photos courtesy of Alex Rinkert.