The chickadee-sized Verdin has long been one of the most reliable sights in Anza-Borrego. While its numbers remain steady, other desert species are struggling as their habitats face increasing environmental stresses.
At 640,000 acres, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park holds the title of largest state park in the contiguous United States. Anza-Borrego is located in the Colorado Desert (named for the river), a subsection of the 7-million-acre Sonoran Desert. Temperatures can reach as high as 122°F in the summer or as low as 19°F in the winter, giving it one of the harshest climates in California. It rarely rains and surface water can be scarce. The desert is inhospitable to all but the most well-adapted organisms. It also means that you can find birds at Anza-Borrego Desert State Park that you won’t likely see anywhere else in San Diego County.

Anza-Borrego Desert State Park and the surrounding country contain oases and woodlands that shelter birds and other fauna from the harsh desert climate. Year-round residents include the Verdin, Black-throated Sparrow, LeConte’s Thrasher, Crissal Thrasher, White-winged Dove, Gambel’s Quail and Costa’s Hummingbird. Seasonal visitors include the Gray Vireo, Swainson’s Hawk, Summer Tanager, Brown-crested Flycatcher, and many more. Some species have been native to the region for millenia. Others are more recent additions to the ecosystem.

The Verdin is a fixture of the Anza-Borrego Desert. The San Diego County Bird Atlas states that this little gray bird with yellow head can be found wherever thorny trees are common. To find them, check the outer branches of plants for their round and shiny nests. Verdins are permanent residents of the park and have even adapted to the more developed Borrego Springs area where desert trees are used in landscaping.

A close relative of the California Thrasher, LeConte’s Thrasher makes its home in arid places. It is a terrestrial bird that nests in desert shrubs and is most often seen darting along the ground between bushes. Unfortunately, this species has been on the decline in recent years. Less rain and longer periods of high temperatures have taken their toll on the shrubs that provide habitat for LeConte’s Thrasher. Robert Theriault, former State Park Ranger, commented that in the ’90’s LeConte’s Thrasher could be found without fail in the area around Borrego Springs dump. Now, he says, they are much harder to spot there, though there are other locations they still frequent.

Crissal Thrasher, a close relative of LeConte’s and California Thrashers, is facing habitat destruction for a different reason. They have historically been found in mesquite bosque, a gallery thicket habitat found along desert flood planes. The best bosque habitat is found between the Borrego Valley airport and Borrego Sink. Unregulated pumping of the groundwater in the Borrego Springs area has caused the water table to drop. This, combined with illegal

**BIRDS OF ANZA-BORREGO**

*by Brianne Nguyen*

With a shrinking water table, drier and shorter winters and changing habitats, the unique avifauna of the Anza-Borrego Desert faces challenging times ahead. Resilience and adaptability – with some help from us – will be key to their success.
woodcutting, has devastated the mesquite bosque that the Crissal Thrashers call their home. Anza-Borrego Desert State Park is on the western fringe of its range. Always shy and difficult to spot, at this rate it is only a matter of time before they may be impossible to find in the park.

On the other hand, some species have increased their presence in the area in recent years. The White-winged Dove, a native of the Sonoran Desert, and the non-native Eurasian Collared Dove have seen their numbers increase in the past few years. White-winged Doves, once a somewhat uncommon treat to see in Anza-Borrego, are now more numerous in the park than the wider-ranging Mourning Dove. The Eurasian Collared Dove, also increasing in numbers throughout the urbanized parts of the county, is found in the developed areas of the Anza-Borrego Desert. The nectar and fruit that normally comprise its diet are not present, so it has to drink water daily. Rounding out the doves in the region are the Inca Dove and the Common Ground Dove. The Inca Dove’s range has slowly shifted upward from Mexico, through Arizona, and finally to San Diego County. Their numbers have not exploded like the exotics that migrated from the east, but it is known that there are a few individuals in the area.

In the summer you can see Brown-crested Flycatchers and Summer Tanagers. Both species expanded their ranges as historical riparian habitat around the Colorado River was destroyed. They are now established in the desert riparian habitat in and around the park and can be found in the cottonwoods along Coyote Creek.

Protected areas like state parks are essential for protecting the remaining suitable habitat for these birds and many other species facing the same challenge of habitat loss or degradation. We have to be vigilant to protect the riparian systems within the park.

Be more aware of your water use, and support public lands and conservation organizations like San Diego Audubon. The Anza-Borrego area contains several one-of-a-kind ecosystems; places that we have to care for if we want to continue to see species like Crissal Thrashers and Summer Tanagers. I hope you’ll make the trip to see these truly unique birds for yourself. I know I’ll be out there soon!

Thanks to Herb Stone and Robert Theriault for speaking with me and providing their expertise on desert birds in the area.
What are your favorite experiences with birds?
One of my first jobs out of college was as a Bald Eagle Nestwatcher in Arizona. I worked with my girlfriend, now wife, on a reservoir just north of Phoenix, keeping an eye on a breeding pair and their nestling and using a tiny metal rowboat to feebly attempt to keep speedboats out of the eagle’s nest closure area. I watched the female eagle fly across the reservoir, getting hounded incessantly by numerous crows, until, in a split second, she folded her wings in and dove 50 feet down to the water surface and picked up a fish. It was amazing that she was hunting while doing all the acrobatics required to keep the crows at bay. I also have great memories from a biological field job on the Aleutian Islands. I hope I’ll always remember Least Auklets swirling and whirling in the air off Kiska Island in the Aleutians, like a school of aerial fish.

Tell us a bit about your background in conservation.
These jobs and several others solidified my desire to pursue a career that focused on restoration ecology. A field study program in New Zealand and a job with the Channel Islands National Park Anacapa Island invasive rat eradication effort led me to study geography at the University of Colorado, Boulder and look at effects of invasive species. After that, I got a job at a small non-profit leading biodiversity trainings for municipal leaders, and then I got a job at Cornell University with the Hudson River Estuary Program. I started working on water quality and scenery projects (check out the Hudson River School painters if you haven’t yet!). I started and built up a project to identify, prioritize, and fix aquatic connectivity problems—dams and culverts—that prevented organisms from moving up and down streams freely. My family moved to San Diego because my wife got a geneticist job at the San Diego Zoo’s Institute for Conservation Research, and I got a job at the San Diego River Park Foundation working on cleaning up the river banks and getting new folks to interact with their waterways.

What attracted you to the position of Director of Conservation and working for SDAS generally?
I am really excited about this opportunity to continue the great work of the SDAS Conservation program. I love a place that’s small enough where collaborative projects are very easy to start up, but big enough to have the resources you need to really make a difference, and I think SDAS is that size exactly. I’m excited about the ReWild Mission Bay project, our work with California Least Terns, expanding the advocacy and outreach components to our Conservation programs to engage our communities on new issues and reach new audiences.

How do you think SDAS is uniquely positioned to tackle pressing local conservation threats?
SDAS has the track record and goodwill from all our previous projects and partnerships and the help from state and national Audubon; these bring us opportunities that no other group in San Diego has. Building off of our vision statement, I think birds are very useful in bringing into focus the interconnection between people, places and ecological processes. There’s nothing that demonstrates the critical connections between our coastal wetlands like shorebird migrants, or changes in global forest ecosystems like neotropical migrants from South America. Once we have the bird connection, SDAS also has the space to work on protection and restoration of other wildlife and the habitats that we all use.

What’s your vision for how SDAS can build capacity for our grassroots activism?
I think we can engage with new groups of people by closer partnerships with our education program, which goes all over, including South Bay and Salton Sea, to create opportunities for those same students to take more conservation actions. We need to figure out ways to get their families inspired, too. I also want to create internship opportunities for high school and college-age folks who are looking for real-world, conservation-focused experience and learning. I think we can organize mutually beneficial internships for our restoration and advocacy work. We can inspire folks to keep going with their activism and interests by offering exciting next steps that match the cultures and interests of our County residents.

Any surprises in your first two weeks on the job?
I’ve been impressed by how capable and friendly all the staff and volunteers have been, thanks! I am constantly surprised by the biodiversity in San Diego County, and it’s very cool to learn about all the resident and migrant birds. I saw my first California Least Tern egg yesterday, and it is surprising that each one of those, barely an inch long, holds the beginning of a life that will fly thousands of miles over many years. And lastly, it’s surprising that no one’s sure where California Least Terns go in the winter!

**Conservation In Action** An Interview with the New San Diego Audubon Director of Conservation, Andrew Meyer

**A Celebration of Wetlands:** Saturday, 2/2/19 at the Kendall-Frost Marsh Reserve
*By Megan Flaherty, Restoration Program Manager*

Join San Diego Audubon and the UC Natural Reserve System as we give the public an up-close look of Kendall-Frost, Mission Bay’s largest remaining wetland. Now in its 14th year, our annual **Love Your Wetlands Day** is the only day of the year that portions of San Diego’s Northern Wildlife Preserve are open to the public. Activities run from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., and include guided walking tours through the marsh (where you can help pick up trash and fix nesting platforms for the endangered Ridgway’s Light-footed Rail), wetlands-themed crafts and science experiments, and presentations on the importance of wetlands for people, birds and other wildlife. All are welcome, but come prepared with rain boots and field clothes if you want to get into the marsh. RSVPs are not required, but are encouraged: emails can be sent to flaherty@sandiegoaudubon.org for more information.
Because of the lack of early rains this year, birding continued to be excellent at the bird baths for most of October and into November. Occasionally, all the usual winter migrants could be seen together at a single bird bath, including White-crowned Sparrows, Golden-crowned Sparrows, Fox Sparrows and their look-alike Hermit Thrushes. This year, the Rufous-crowned Sparrows joined in.

But birds were not the only ones to take the Silverwood stage this fall. One day at the beginning of November, during the early hour of dusk, the female Bobcat was spotted stalking cottontails in the observation area using every log, tree trunk and bench for concealment while inching her way upon her prey. Moments later, tailing right behind and mimicking mom’s every move was her youngster, no more than half her size. As the female made her way down into the streambed and out of sight, the juvenile hunkered down next to an oak log along the trail. Within seconds, a desert cottontail came bolting out of the stream bed up the trail, passing right in front of the youngster. Seemingly on cue, the youngster began the chase for ten feet or so. Then, with only inches from contact, it backed off and stood down. For a moment there, the young Bobcat turned and looked down towards its mother. A bystander could appreciate all of mom’s efforts to bring about such an extremely rare opportunity to trigger the growing bobcat’s hunting instinct. But in the end, the youngster missed the opportunity to fulfill a critical life skill by making the kill.

Studies indicate juveniles show high mortality shortly after leaving their mothers, as they are still perfecting their hunting techniques. Though adult Bobcats can kill prey bigger than themselves, they tend to go for prey a little smaller than themselves. They prefer to take on prey from above and aim a swift killing bite at the back of the neck. For this younger, the rabbit was just as large, if not a little larger, and proved to be too big of a beast for its current skill level.

Also interesting were the hunting strategies used by both mom and her little one. Strength and speed are important in the pursuit of predators, whereas ambush predators overlook these in favor of surprise from a typically concealed location. Here at Silverwood, our Bobcat often finds shelter in hollow logs, rocky dens, or even thick, tangled shrubs. Their territory is large — not as a matter of want, but of necessity.

Species of Note
The Ringneck Snake (Diadophis punctatus) made a rare appearance this fall when the McCain Valley Conservation Camp inmates were doing fire clearance on the Silverwood grounds. Though the snake is already a recorded species and once was frequently seen here, it has not been recorded here since the Cedar Fire in 2003. This makes 11 confirmed sightings of snake species out of 15 recorded before the Cedar Fire. The Vinegar Weed (Trichostema lanceolatum), a native mint species, was located in the cienega on Sept. 12 while Silverwood assistant Joe Brennan and I were conducting a survey on restoration efforts. This late seasonal bloomer starts out looking very similar to the invasive non-native species, Stinkwort, and smells just as strong. The Vinegar Weed is the third newly identified plant species recorded for Silverwood during 2018.

Another sight worth noting was that of our national animal, the Bald Eagle, recorded Sept. 18 after it was seen soaring above the Silverwood ridgeline. This is only the fifth sighting of the Bald Eagle since it was first recorded at Silverwood on April 6, 2011.

School’s in Session
With the school year back in full swing, Silverwood hosted a range of educational groups and organizations. Our nature event programs were booked with some 298 visitors up through the first couple of weeks of November. Among them: The San Diego Home Education Charter School, San Diego Academy Charter School, Inspire Charter Schools and the Learning Choice Academy Charter School. Also learning about wildlife at Silverwood was a local Cub Scout group from Den 1209 and a Girl Scout Daisies troop.

Call 619-443-2998 for information. Silverwood is located at 13003 Wildcat Canyon Road in Lakeside. Watch closely on right for Silverwood entrance sign.

OUR VOLUNTEERS: Silverwood always appreciates volunteers who help with trail clearing and many other ongoing needs. If you’d like to help, call Phillip Lambert at 619-443-2998. I’d like to offer my personal thanks to all of you who have put forth your best efforts in 2018 to keep Silverwood operating as a Nature Education Facility we all can be proud of. Happy New Year from Silverwood!
IN MEMORIAM

Christine Elizabeth Tratnyek
APRIL 1945 - OCTOBER 2018

There are some who seem born for the long game – those who patiently, faithfully carry out their tasks with the big picture in mind, content to let others receive the attention, even the accolades, while they are nourished with simpler satisfactions.

Christine Tratnyek was one of those people. She took over the duties of coordinating, designing and producing the Sketches newsletter in September 1984. We’re not quite sure how many years she devoted to the labors of completing ten issues per volume, running September to June. Probably more than 15. If she kept score, she kept it to herself.

My first acquaintance with Chris, as she was always known, was through the visits she made to my apartment to pick up drawings or painting for use in Sketches. Back then there was no desktop publishing, no Internet. Everything was done by hand and in person. Always cheerful and supportive, Chris made this work fun and interesting. She had a knack for making things special, and making you feel special. I’m sure that was the also case during her successful term as San Diego Audubon President.

One of the original Wandering Totalers, the nearly dynastic Birdathon team, Chris became a champion birder. She did point out, with some satisfaction, that she was the first to officially spot an American Crow in San Diego County during a Birdathon competition. She undertook many birding expeditions around the globe, traveling to Latin America, Asia and much of North America. (One of her last trips was to Iceland, and Sketches published a photo she had taken there.) Her housemate and long-time companion, a Blue-fronted Amazon parrot named Orlando, would always greet her upon her return.

Those of us who frequent the San Diego Zoo will never be able to view the Giant Pandas without hearing in our minds her soft yet confident voice sharing the unique details and observations that helped make these celebrity animals so beloved. She worked at the zoo for many years in that capacity, never missing an assignment, and always on time.

To celebrate her life, friends and family gathered together on November 9th at the Treetops Room at the zoo. Among those present were at least a dozen Audubon friends and staff, and nearly as many from the zoo. Multiple generations of her family were honored with smaller satisfactions.

We offer this fond adieu to Chris Tratnyek, knowing her enduring legacy at San Diego Audubon will continue to be a source of strength even for those who never knew her. —by David Stump

Anstine-Audubon has been buzzing with activity. We kicked off the new season with a Halloween Party, an evening filled with fascinations instead of frights. Volunteers and staff worked together to create a maze of stations weaving through the eleven-acre property – from craft stations making bats to water quality investigations and yes, bird watching. A scavenger hunt tied it all together. Sixty-two costumed visitors in total enjoyed the night. We partnered with Project Wildlife and guests enjoyed the local diva, a Western Screech Owl named Luna. Additional animal encounters let brave guests come face to face with a Chilean Rose Hair Tarantula and Kenyan Sand Boa – neither natives, but good stand-ins for our local species. The night was full of smiles, questions, and candies. Many who arrived were locals who had never been to our property before. We at Anstine hope your night was ghoulishly fun and that you remember us for next year’s All Hallow’s Eve.

But you don’t have to wait a year to enjoy events at Anstine. Following up last year’s nest box-making class, we had a Pollinator’s Workshop where guests made homes for solitary bees. As we crafted and painted these little homes, guests enjoyed a lecture (led by Anstine Committee member Pattie Langen) and a Q&A about local pollinators and the plants they frequent. Attendees came away with seeds to start their own garden and tips to bring in birds and butterflies alike. San Diego County is a hotspot for pollinators, many of which are solitary bees that are no danger to humans. As pressures from habitat loss and invasive species threaten our wildlife, we can help by planting native species. Even a simple balcony can become an oasis with a flowerpot or two. Small, everyday actions keep San Diego a home we can all be proud of.

Anstine’s Hours: Saturdays, 9 a.m.-12 p.m.

Members Only: Third Wednesday of every month, 8 a.m.-11 a.m.

On Thursday, Oct. 4 at the Natural History Museum, roughly 100 guests gathered to celebrate the work we do as a community to protect San Diego’s natural resources and inspire the next generation to enjoy nature. Together, from a beautiful rooftop venue, we enjoyed a lively sunset cocktail hour, followed by dinner and a presentation from Audubon California.

The event raised more than $8,000 for San Diego Audubon’s nature education, conservation and sanctuary programs. All available Silverwood trails were adopted, 20 pairs of binoculars were purchased for use by local schoolchildren in our education programs, and 97 student visits to our sanctuaries were sponsored. Thank you to everyone who attended or contributed in some way to the evening’s success.
BIRD ID FOR BEGINNERS: How to Become a Bird Watcher
February 2 and 9, 2019 (Consecutive Saturdays)
Taught by Dr. Matthew Binns
Are you new to bird watching, or maybe intimidated by the overwhelming number of bird species there are to learn? Have you ever wondered what kinds of birds visit your garden? Or are you just looking for a new activity that will get you out into San Diego’s beautiful natural surroundings? Then join us at the Tijuana Estuary Visitor Center for a new bird identification workshop for beginners running two consecutive Saturdays: February 2nd, 9 am–12 pm, and February 9th, 8 a.m.–11 a.m. The Visitor Center is located at 301 Caspian Way, in Imperial Beach. This workshop will be led by Dr. Matthew Binns, a molecular geneticist who has had an interest in birds since his childhood in England. His work has given him the opportunity to bird in many exotic locations, including pelagic birding trips off four different continents. Dr. Binns is also a highly experienced bird photographer, whose work appears in Sketches. The first day will be an in-class lesson on how to get started in birding. Participants will learn about common characteristics and adaptations of backyard birds, discover useful computer and app resources, learn how to choose the best birding tools, and become familiar with the most important locations and habitats to view birds around San Diego.

The second day of the workshop is an interactive field trip out on the trails at the Estuary and possibly other locations around Imperial Beach. Participants will identify local bird species with a focus on how to identify relevant field marks of many common species. The walk will be at an easy pace, on relatively flat trails. We might even spot a rare species while observing local birds! Cost: Students and limited income, $60; Member of SD Audubon, $105, general public, $125. Register at www.sandiegoaudubon.org (Events, then Workshops). Contact Jill Cooper at cooper@sandiegoaudubon.org with any questions.

You can now register online for ALL our Nature Discovery Workshops in the 2018-2019 line-up by going to our website. Upcoming courses include The Dirt on Silverwood; a Walk Through Geological History on March 23rd, Photographing Nature in the Field on April 20th, and Drawing Birds as Living Animals on May 4th and 11th, 2019. To learn more, visit our website: www.sandiegoaudubon.org/events/workshops.

SAN DIEGO AUDUBON BIRDING TRIPS are open to all. Please remember that these birding trips are very popular, and most fill up quickly.

1: Follow our listings at sandiegoaudubon.org (Bidding, Local Bird Trips). Trips shown in Sketches are posted first online, generally around the latter part of the month prior to issue date. Starting dates for registration will be indicated on the website.

2: Online registration is required for all field trips. Attendance for trips is now capped at specific numbers to ensure the best experience for all participants, and all trips are filled in order of registration. A few trips will require a registration fee. Even if a trip is full, you can register for a potential opening.

3: For directions, go to website (look for Birding, then Local Bird Trips). Google Maps info is provided for each birding trip. Detailed trip descriptions are provided.

Call Peter Thomas with questions at 858-571-5076, or email your queries to: prthomas1@yahoo.com. And always remember, “Cherish Nature.”

JANUARY 2019
Dairy Mart Ponds and the Bird and Butterfly Garden
Saturday, January 5, 8 a.m. to 11 a.m.
Led by John Walters, Jim Banks and others
Capped at 25 participants. Directions on website.

The Salton Sea in Winter – Overnighter in Brawley
Saturday and Sunday, January 12-13
Led by Peter Thomas and local birding guru Bob Miller
Capped at 20 participants. Directions on website.

Winter Raptors of the Ramona Grasslands
Sunday, January 20, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Led by Peter Thomas, Jim Pea, Chris Smith and others
Capped at 30 participants. Directions on website.

Tecolote Canyon Natural Park
Saturday, January 26, 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.
Leaders: Anitra Kaye, 619-517-1168, John Walters, and Jack Friery
Capped at 25 participants. Directions on website.

South Bay Salt Works – San Diego National Wildlife Refuge
Sunday, January 20, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Led by Peter Thomas, Jim Pea, Chris Smith and others
Capped at 30 participants. Directions on website.

COMING IN FEBRUARY:
San Jacinto Wildlife Area (return visit)
Kit Carson Park
Beginning Birders at Lindo Lake
South Bay Salt Works and the South San Diego Bay
Tecolote Canyon
San Diego Bird Festival 2019
Where Every Day Is a Big Day
From February 27 to March 3, 2019
Marina Village Conference Center

This annual celebration of the wild birds and habitats of San Diego County will feature field trips to every corner of the county, as well as workshops, a birding and optics expo, and many free activities. With an extensive checklist of birds to see, every day you go birding in San Diego can be a big day.

Though the October registration push fills many of our programs, we usually add new trips in November. If there is a trip you would like to do that is currently full, add yourself to the waiting list. We just might be able to get you in after all.

2019 highlights include:

- Keynote exciting and informative speakers Sam Fried, Karan Odom, David La Puma and Steve Shunk.
- Several sections of each of our most popular trips: five Big Day trips, four Birding the Border trips, three Pelagic trips, and more.
- Photography workshops brought to you by Hunt’s Photo and Video and Tamron, teaching you basic bird photography skills or more advanced techniques such as photographing birds in flight.
- The Expo, where you can try different binoculars and spotting scopes and outfit yourself with the birding gear you need.

To view the full festival event schedule or to register online, go to: www.sandiegoaudubon.org and click the San Diego Bird Festival logo on the right-hand side. We can’t wait to see you there!