

San Diego Botanic Garden—Annual Bird Report for the Year 2018

Submitted by Susan E. Smith, January 2019

In 2018, 111 species of birds were seen in the San Diego Botanic Garden (SDBG) on our monthly bird walks and additional replicate surveys---an increase over previous years (see table). This is likely due to greater survey effort in recent years, the growing popularity of birding in the SDBG (more eyes looking for birds), and the draw of the Garden as a bird 'oasis' as our drought continued into 2018.

We completed 39 survey days in 2018, representing 114 survey hours. This includes time spent (and sightings made) during the popular monthly bird walks held the first Monday of each month (starting at 8 am, rain or shine, in the main parking lot). The walk is traditionally led by long-time SDBG bird walk leader, Rita Campbell, with Gretchen Nell taking over as leader for many of the months this year, during times when Rita was sidelined by her 2nd hip surgery. Sue Smith continues to help on the bird walks and conduct many of the replicate bird surveys during non-walk periods, and enters bird sighting data from both the walks and independent surveys into the Garden's eBird data base.

The monthly bird walks, open to the public, accounted for about 43% of the total survey hours, and continue to have consistently good attendance. Participation ranged from a low of 13 to 14 birders in our slow months of January and July, to a high of 36 birders on both our April and November bird walks. Participation was up this year, averaging 25 people on each walk. This average annual participation was only exceeded once, in 2015 (26 people), when an unusually large group of San Diego Audubon birders joined an October walk, boosting total participation on that day to 54 people, and weighting the average.

Year	#Bird Species
2009	68
2010	88
2011	87
2012	90
2013	89
2014	100
2015	99
2016	105
2017	105
2018	111

New Bird Species Added in 2018--- Four new birds (plus 2 exotic birds) were added to our SDBG list this past year. Early in the year, on January 19, visiting birders discovered an Australian **Cockatiel** wandering about the Garden, probably someone's escaped pet. In February, a **Rock Wren** took up residence around a stacked pile of landscape rocks and logs in the overflow lot and stayed for a couple of months. This Wren is usually found inland, especially in desert areas, but a few do inhabit coastal cliffs in winter.

In March, another surprise exotic on our monthly Bird Walk was a **Pied Crow**, native of Africa, that flew over our heads in the Overlook area, heading east. (The all-white leucistic American Crow seen last year, did not reappear in 2018, at least that we know of). On the September 3 bird walk, two **Purple Martins** were seen flying with a mixed swallow flock above the Lawn Garden. In San Diego County, Purple Martin is a rare and declining summer visitor, mostly restricted to the mountains, but fall migrants from the north do pass over in September, and these birds were likely from this group. On

October 5, a **Palm Warbler**, off-course visitor from the eastern part of the U.S., paid a brief visit and was seen in the Native Garden, by the pond. Later in the month, on October 30, Julian and Leslie Duval spotted a **Barn Owl** that evening near the Overflow Lot---the first documented sighting of this owl in the Garden. We hope it stays, finds a mate, and takes up residence here, since Barn Owls are excellent natural controllers of rodent populations.



Rock Wren (top) observed in Feb-March (photo by Gail DeLalla). A Pied Crow (below) flew over in March (photo by Diane Stinson, and web photo)



Purple Martins (photo by Chris Dong) circled the Lawn Garden in September.



A Palm Warbler (above, left) was discovered in the Native Garden, and a Barn Owl (above, right) was spotted near the overflow lot, both in October (web photos).





Breeding Birds News--- The biggest news of the year is that we finally confirmed successful nesting of the endangered coastal **California Gnatcatcher** here on the grounds of the Botanic Garden in June 2018. Sometimes called the ‘canary in Southern California’s proverbial coal mine,’ the tiny coastal **California Gnatcatcher** with its kitten-like mew of a call is a prime indicator of ecosystem health. So it is a tribute to our coastal sage scrub habitat plantings and restoration efforts by our gardeners in the Native Garden, Overlook area, and Californiascapes gardens, that these birds have finally come to nest here, and successfully fledged young. There may even be two pairs that nested here this year. Presence of the coastal **California Gnatcatcher** was first documented in the SDBG by us in 2016, and ever since then, we have been hoping for proof that they have indeed taken up residence here, and were not just passing through. (Another species, the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, which is not threatened or endangered, has been a regular winter visitor here at the Garden for some time, but breeds elsewhere). This brings the number of breeding birds nesting on the SDBG grounds to 38 species, an admirable number considering the acreage of the Garden.



This pair of CA Gnatcatcher fledglings was photographed by Charlotte Morris on our August 2018 walk.

The adult male California Gnatcatcher sports a black cap in spring and summer (above, Jane Mygatt photo), which is replaced by a grey crown and thin black line over the eye in its winter plumage (Jeff Clingan, photo)

Other Interesting Birds in 2018---Among the many migrant birds passing through in fall 2018, was a rare **Tennessee Warbler**, an eastern U.S. migrant, spotted on the Oct 1 monthly bird walk. Also, during the winter months, as many as five **Western Tanagers** opted to stay here instead of flying south to their usual wintering grounds in Mexico and Central America, probably drawn by the abundance of fruit and nectar-producing trees here. And for the first time since record-keeping began, a **Pacific Slope Flycatcher** took up winter



Western Tanager, photo Charlotte Morris

residence in the Australia Garden—this species breeds here, but usually flies south in fall to spend winter along the coast of Mexico. Two **Wilson’s Warblers**, and a **Hooded Oriole** and **Bullocks Oriole**, also overwintered here in 2018, instead of flying south to their more tropical wintering grounds.

In early May, a **Black Phoebe** appeared with a bright red piece of plastic attached to its right leg, and was spotted in the Lawn Garden. No one could explain how this piece of plastic happened to get tied to its leg, but over the year, re-sightings of this ‘marked’ bird --- in the Lawn Garden, Native Garden, Fruit Garden, South American Garden, around the Duval residence --- proved to us that this common California flycatcher ranges much more widely in its feeding habits than previously thought, and amazed us by being able to feed and survive on its own, despite the cumbersome “tag” it was burdened with. It was seen again in the Tropical Fruit Garden on our January 7 2019 walk--the ingenious bird had picked off most of the red ‘flag,’ except for a small red band around its leg—convenient for us, since we look forward to following this resourceful bird over the coming year. (We estimate there are about 14 Black Phoebes resident in the Garden, perhaps more).



Wild Mammal Sightings--- For the first time in many years, a **Bobcat** was spotted on the grounds twice—on Nov 28 (Jill Gardner) and on the following day (Julian and Leslie Duval). The previous year (Sept 2017), we had seen fresh Bobcat scat and tracks on the trail near the pond in the Native Garden, but did not see the animal. These recent eye witness accounts confirm the presence of these cats. No sightings that we know of have taken place since Sept 2018, so it is possible the animal has moved on.



To conclude, we look forward to continuing our bird monitoring and bird walk outreach efforts with the public. This includes sharing with others the Garden’s birds on our monthly bird walks and making timely bird sighting and bird trend information available online. Our SDBG Bird data base grows on the Cornell Ornithological Laboratory’s eBird online data base, where the Garden is a designated Birding Hotspot. You can see a link to this data on our web site www.sdbgarden.org, and instantly access the most recent SDBG bird reports, and the historical data as well. Just click on ‘Explore’ then ‘Bird Watching’ then ‘Current Bird Counts on eBird.’ Or simply go to our Hotspot page located at <http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L873348>. Bird survey information is constantly being added to, and will increase in value and accuracy over time. Our new official SDBG pocket bird checklist is available for purchase (\$1) at the entry kiosk as well as in the gift shop.



Pacific-slope Flycatcher and its SDBG nest (Gail DeLalla photo)

Young male Bullock’s Oriole in one of our Coral Trees, photo by Jane Mygatt

