



## San Diego Botanic Garden—Annual Bird Report for 2015 Susan Smith, Jan 2016

During 2015, a total of 99 different bird species was seen over the year in the San Diego Botanic Garden (SDBG). This is one less than the total for 2014, but still a higher annual count than seen in each of the previous years ---2009 (68 species), 2010 (88), 2011 (87), 2012 (90), and in 2013 (89). Higher species numbers undoubtedly reflect greater survey effort in recent years. We also completed a total of 40 survey days this year, representing a total of about 136 survey hours. This survey time includes time spent (and sightings made) during the popular monthly bird walks held the first Monday of each month, led by Rita Campbell. These walks, open to the public, accounted for about 30% of the total survey hours, and continue to have a high number of attendees. Participation this year ranged from a low of 13 in the slow birding month of August, to an amazing high count of 54 people attending November's joint SDBG-San Diego Audubon walk—a new record for the bird walk. Participation continues to increase. This year we averaged 26 people per walk, up from the 21- 22 people per walk in the previous two years. New SDBG volunteer Gretchen Nell continues to provide her bird expertise to the monthly walks and periodic surveys, and is a great help when we have large groups on the monthly walk, which has become the norm for most of the year.

**New Birds---** Three species were added to the SDBG bird checklist in 2015--- **Caspian Tern**, **Calliope Hummingbird**, and **Tennessee Warbler**. A Caspian Tern, normally seen over coastal lagoons and the ocean, was seen flying over the garden on July 31. On May 5, a beautiful male **Calliope Hummingbird**, North America's *smallest* bird, was seen in the Central American Garden. These tiny hummers breed in western coniferous mountain forests, winter in Mexico and migrate through in Spring. One had been seen by us the previous year around the same time (May, 1, 2014) in the Native Garden, but we missed it in our tallies last year. So the first week in May is a good time to keep a look out for this tiny, gorgeous hummer! In fall, on October 31, Gretchen Nell, discovered a **Tennessee Warbler** in the Fruit Garden near the Blue Lilly Pilly tree during one of our routine bird surveys. An off-course Eastern bird, the Tennessee Warbler looks very similar to our Orange-crowned Warbler, but always has white under tail feathers –not yellow, as in the Orange-crowned Warbler. Our new total for bird species seen in/from the Garden now stands at 139 species.



*Fig 2. New birds L to R: Caspian Tern (John Schwartz photo); male Calliope Hummingbird with streaky purple gorget (Kati Fleming photo); and Tennessee Warbler (Dave Kutilex photo)*

**Breeding Birds News---** We confirmed the breeding of two new species in June—**Hutton’s Vireo** (a pair feeding at least one fledgling in a Carolina Cherry Laurel by the Lawn Garden) and **Common Yellowthroat** (carrying food to young in the Bamboo Garden). This brings the number of breeding birds that have nested on the SDBG grounds to 35 species—25% of all the birds reported for the garden. In July, many people were treated with excellent views of a nesting pair of **Pacific-slope Flycatchers**, who fledged 4 young that month in the Waterfall area. Two **Western Bluebird** pairs, using separate nest boxes in the overflow parking lot and in the Hamilton Garden, completed at least two, possibly three nestings this year, fledging the last batch of young in mid-August, very unusual for them. It is possible that the late spring and early summer rains produced a larger insect supply than normal late in the breeding season, providing good nesting conditions well into the summer. A pair of **Cooper’s Hawks** may have temporarily displaced our Red-shouldered Hawks as nesting hawks, often joining the crows in chasing them off. They established their nest in a Torrey Pine tree near the Overlook in March. The Cooper’s Hawks and their three raucous fledglings created quite a racket and side show near the Walled and Herb Garden area in June, and their battles with the crows, nesting nearby, lasted throughout the nesting season. Our **American Crows** had at least three separate nests in the garden this year, and nesting may be increasing.

*Black-crowned Night Heron (Julian Duval photo)*



**Other Interesting Birds in 2015---** Early in January at the start of year, some of the rarer wintering birds that arrived in fall 2014 were still being seen, including up to 10 **Varied Thrushes**, that stayed in the garden until the end of March 2015, with the males leaving first, then the females. Just before the males left, the garden was treated to their eerie, fluty songs, before the birds headed northward to their breeding grounds in Pacific Northwest rainforests. While here, they could be seen competing with the crows for Cork Oak acorns (a favorite) and also fruits and berries. Three **Western Tanagers**, skipping their migration to Mexico and Central America, overwintered here in 2014-15, attracted no doubt to the rich food supply here in the garden.

On January 27, SDBG President and CEO, Julian Duval, spotted and photographed a nocturnal **Black-crowned Night Heron**, perched on the railing of Sam’s (our Galapagos Turtle’s) corral, as Pacific Tree Frogs were calling in the evening darkness. Previous records of this night heron in the Garden have been only of single individuals flying over---one in May 2010 and another in July 2010. It may be the heron was hunting the tree frogs, attracted by their calls. In September, Gretchen Nell found a **Great Horned Owl** near the Larabee House, alerting the staff, who came to look at it. Julian Duval has reported owl activity and calls at night before, and possible nesting in trees around his residence, so this could be one of our own resident owls. As fall bird migration picked up in October, a **Red-breasted Nuthatch** was seen picking at pine cones near the entrance to the Hamilton Garden, **Black-throated Grey Warblers** were seen in both the Native, California Gardenscapes, and Hamilton gardens, and toward the end of the month, a late **Mac Gillivray’s Warbler** and **Tennessee Warbler** (as mentioned above) were glimpsed in the Fruit Garden. In November, another wintering **Nashville Warbler** appeared in the *Tipuana tipu* trees above the Lawn House patio. It was not a returning bird, since it was in first-year plumage. Of note in December was a flock of 22 **Purple Finches** seen on Dec 24, seen feeding on seeds and flowers of *Camptheca acuminata* trees at the eastern edge of the Bamboo Garden. These mountain birds are unusual for the garden, and first seen here last year in low numbers. It is possible the drought brought them to the coast in search of food. Three **Western Tanagers** (presumably the same that overwintered last year) returned, and we spotted an **Orchard Oriole** with them in the garden during the annual Rancho Santa Fe Christmas Bird Count on December 2. The tanagers and oriole seemed to prefer the ripe fruit of our tropical rainforests palms, and the tanagers were also seen feeding on fruit of the Thatch Palmetto (NZ Garden), and the Blue Lilly Pilly tree and Rusty Leaf Fig in the Tropical Fruit Garden. The oriole and tanagers also were seen to gobble down the bright red seeds of the Lawn Garden’s large Magnolia Tree. Lastly, the introduced, but now naturalized, **Scaly-breasted Munias**, continue to expand and were more frequently seen in larger numbers this year. A favorite area seems to be the Native Garden stream and pond.

Our bird monitoring and bird walk outreach efforts with the public continue. We enjoy sharing with others the beauty of the garden’s birds on Rita Campbell’s monthly bird walks and making timely bird sighting and bird trend information available online. We continue to maintain and expand our SDBG Bird Data Base on the Cornell Ornithological Laboratory’s eBird online data base, where the Garden is a designated Birding Hotspot. With the link to this data on our web site, people can instantly access the most recent bird reports in the Garden, and the historical data as well. Our bird survey information is constantly being added to, and will increase in value and accuracy over time. The official SDBG pocket bird list continues to be available for purchase (~\$1) at the entry kiosk as well as in the gift shop.

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