



San Diego Botanic Garden—Annual Bird Report for the Year 2019 With Comments on the 2010-2019 Decadal Trends

Submitted by Susan E. Smith, January 2020

In 2019, 93 species of birds, and an average of 397 individual birds per month were recorded during surveys in the San Diego Botanic Garden (SDBG), a year in which we completed 52 bird count days, representing 94 hours of bird count effort. This bird survey effort 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), plus additional replicate surveys and spot checks throughout the year. The monthly Bird Walk is traditionally led by long-time SDBG bird walk leader and guide, Rita Campbell, with Gretchen Nell taking over when Rita cannot be present, and Sue Smith leading when neither Gretchen or Rita are available. The monthly bird walks, open to the public, accounted for about 44% of the total survey hours. Participation ranged from a low of 26 birders on May 6 to a high of 41 birders on our April walk, averaging a record 33 people on each walk. This beats even the past record in 2015 when an unusually large group of 54 San Diego Audubon birders joined an October walk, boosting total participation and weighting the average. Each walk, we encourage non-members to join the Garden, and many of our repeat birders are now members.

This year, after noting a dip in diversity and numbers of birds in the SDBG in 2019, despite increased average attendance on our bird walks (more eyes looking), we looked at trends in diversity and numbers of birds seen annually over the past decade, especially in light of the Science Oct 2019 article on the net loss of bird populations in North America of 29% of 1970 abundance (Rosenberg et al. 2019, *Science*). The 93 species (representing bird diversity) seen last year was less than in recent years (Fig 1), breaking an overall increase over the past decade, and less than the decadal average (\bar{x} =97.2, down about 4%). Also, average individual bird numbers or abundance (Fig. 2, avg. 397/mo) was down from the previous 4 years, and less than the 10-year average (\bar{x} =415 birds/month, also about a ~4% decline). However, we note that the full decadal effect is difficult to determine, mainly because of variations in certain other aspects of survey effort (especially variations in survey hours), and the garden’s “Oasis Effect”, which draws birds here when surrounding areas are affected by development and drought conditions, thus masking part of any decrease that may be happening to the populations as a whole.



Rose-breasted Grosbeak, male.
Web photo.

Unusual and New Bird Species in 2019--- One new species was added to our official SDBG Bird List this past year—a male **American Redstart**, seen on 26 May in a tree bordering the main parking lot, seen briefly before being flushed by a car that moved into the spot just below it. This makes the total number of species seen in or from the Garden 156, plus 2 exotic escapees (Pied Crow and Cockatiel). Other rarities included an **Orchard Oriole** on April 1 (likely one of two that over-wintered in the area), and a **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** on July 1. These three are primarily Eastern U.S. species and rare along the West Coast. With the Rose-breasted Grosbeak was a local Black-headed Grosbeak and what may have been a Rose-breasted x Black-headed cross, or hybrid, perhaps their offspring. Unusual wintering birds were **Western Tanagers** and two **Pacific-slope Flycatchers** in January and at least 3 continuing **Western Tanagers**, a **Nashville Warbler** and a **Black-Throated Gray Warbler** in December.



Adult male American Redstart, a rarity that briefly showed up in May. Web photo by Tom Warren.

Breeding Birds News--- A new Garden breeding bird, **Rough-winged Swallow**, was documented for the first time this year, when two adults were seen feeding young on 3 June on SDBG property. This brings the total number of breeding birds in the SDBG to **39**. There was also much breeding activity among our other resident birds. **Red-shouldered Hawks** and their young made quite a racket with their territorial and begging cries, and a pair of **Scaly-breasted Munias** and **Mourning Doves** built nests and successfully raised young in the New World Desert Garden, in spite of many people passing through that area, quite close to the Gift Shop. Our "tagged" **Black Phoebe** (affectionately called "Red-leg"), found a mate and built a nest under the eaves of the



Our "Red-Leg" Black Phoebe is now easy to track in his travels about the Garden, because of his plastic 'tag.' He found a mate and nested in the Lawn House this year! Photo Susan Newlin, Dec 2019.

Lawn House. Red-leg was first seen in the SDBG in early May 2018, when he (we now know it is a male) appeared with a bright red piece of plastic attached to its right leg in the Lawn Garden. No one could explain how this piece of plastic (a plastic plant seedling flag or marker?) happened to get tied to its leg, but over the year, re-sightings of this 'marked' bird have been made in the Lawn Garden, Native Garden, Fruit Garden, South American Garden, and former Duval residence, which proved to us that it ranges much more widely in its feeding habits than previously thought. And it amazed us by being able to feed and survive on its own, despite the cumbersome "tag" it was burdened with. Originally the plastic 'tag' was about an inch-long pennant, but the bird has since been able to reduce it to a red leg band. Over the past 6 months, it appears to have kept near the Lawn Garden and Lawn House, where he and his mate nested this year.



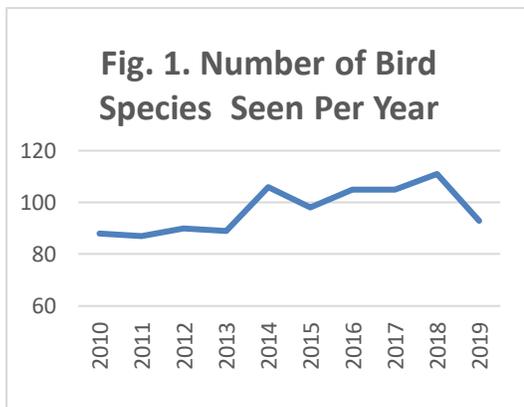
A rare Orchard Oriole (immature male) loved the nectar of our coral tree flowers! Photo by Nancy Christensen, April 1, 2019 SDBG.



Red-shouldered Hawk immature with a lizard.

We could not positively confirm breeding again in the endangered California **Gnatcatcher** this year, but a pair was seen in the Garden in suitable habitat over the summer, so it is likely they did nest again and we hope, successfully fledged young.

As for the next decade, 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 eBird data base grows on the Cornell Ornithological Laboratory's eBird online data base, where the Garden is designated a **Birding Hotspot**. A link to these data is on our web site www.sdbgarden.org, where one can access the most recent SDBG bird reports and the historical data as well. Click on 'Explore,' then 'Birding,' then 'Current Bird Counts on eBird.' Or go to our Hotspot page located at <http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L873348>. Bird survey information is constantly being added by our survey efforts and by visiting birders as well, and will increase in value and accuracy over time. A SDBG bird checklist is available for download at our web site and also at the entry kiosk. A pocket-sized version on card stock is available at our gift shop.



Northern Rough-winged Swallow confirmed breeding in SDBG in 2019

