

Figure 1. Dark-eyed (Oregon) Junco



Figure 2. Plumbeous Vireo. (Mel Senac Photo)



Figure 3. Swinhoe's White-eye. (Mel Senac photo)



## San Diego Botanic Garden—Annual Bird Report for the Year 2020

Submitted by Susan E. Smith and Gretchen Nell, January 2021

During the unprecedented pandemic year of 2020, we were grateful to be able to complete 16 bird monitoring days, representing each month except the month of April (this was the month of the initial Garden closure when COVID-19 lockdown restrictions were put in place). These bird count days included 3 Botanic Garden Bird Walk days at the beginning of the year (discontinued after March 2020 when restrictions took effect) and 13 solo bird surveys by Smith and Nell, during which we recorded a total of 80 species seen during the year. On these solo bird surveys during the pandemic, we complied with the Garden's Safety Rules specified for Volunteers, including arranging for early entry, calling or texting our temperature and current health histories beforehand, and following masking and social distancing requirements. These bird surveys, lasting 3 to 4.8 hours each, totaled 56 hours of effort, and included the amazing marathon survey conducted by Gretchen Nell, Jeff Clingan and Manolo Turner for the local Audubon Christmas Bird Count on 27 December. To this effort, we also added some incidental eBird bird counts and spot checks made by us and a few regular SDBG member birders over the year (~14 hrs of survey effort), so that total hours of effort amounted to about 70 hrs—about 75 percent of the bird count effort of the previous, non-pandemic year (2019=94 hrs). So we lost at least about 25% of the survey hours, and about 30 to 50% of survey days compared to previous non-pandemic years, but still were lucky to get representative counts for all months, and to accrue as many survey hours as we did, thanks to the cooperation and support from SDBG leadership and staff, especially Dr. Novy, Brandi Eide, Tony Gurnoe, and Sergio Bautista.

Of the three public bird walks that were held in January, February and March, participation ranged from 31 to 40 birders (mean= 34), and accounted for 10.1 survey hours, or 14% of the survey effort. These popular monthly bird walks have been held since the early 1990s and take place the first Monday of each month (starting at 8 am, rain or shine, in the main parking lot) and are 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. Each walk, we encourage non-members to join the Garden, and many of our repeat birders are now members. The independent bird surveys are usually conducted by Smith, sometimes accompanied by Nell or Campbell, but this year were done solo by Smith, until Gretchen Nell took over October and November, when Sue was sidelined with hip bursitis.

**Unusual and New Bird Species in 2020---** Amazingly, three new species were added to our official SDBG Bird List this past year, despite the reduced survey coverage— a **Dark-eyed (Oregon) Junco** female (**Fig. 1**) was seen Sept 29 with White-crowned Sparrows feeding on fallen toyon berries next to the Californiascapes Garden. After checking with Phil Unitt, curator at the San Diego Natural History Museum, this bird appears to be of the local race *Junco hyemalis thurberi*, a sedentary species which for most of its California range was only found in montane areas of the state until 1983 when it became established in low elevation locations in the San Diego area, and has since expanded its distribution from the initial La Jolla population. This is a beneficial, non-invasive species, and if it becomes established here, is relatively tame around people. Then another new species was seen the following day, on Sept 30, when Gretchen Nell, while on a visit, found a migrant **Plumbeous Vireo** (**Fig. 2**) in the Australia Garden. This is a beautiful insect-and fruit-eating vireo that breeds in the interior SW United States (rarely in our own Laguna Mountains), and is a rare migrant and winterer in coastal San Diego. Then, on Dec 14, at least three **Swinhoe's White-eyes** (**Fig. 3**) were seen near the fruiting Blue Lilly Pilly Tree in the Tropical Fruit Garden. This bird is an exotic species, originating in east China, north Vietnam, the Thai-Malay Peninsula, Sumatra and Borneo, and was introduced to southern California some decades ago. Over the years it has become established in Orange and parts of LA Counties, and in recent years has started making inroads into San Diego County (first recorded breeding in 2019). While now considered an exotic introduced species, it is possible that, like our Scaly-breasted Munias (aka Nutmeg Mannikins), they will one day become established here. These birds are very striking with their yellow and lime-green coloring and large, white-saucer-like eye rings. They're gregarious and highly sociable, often foraging in groups in the non-breeding season, but monogamous, sticking with

one mate. They eat fruit, insects and nectar. In the very early 1980s there existed an eradication program after introduction of a similar species, the Oriental White-eye (aka Indian White-eye), after several birds escaped from the San Diego Zoo. At the time the county Dept of Agriculture considered them a prospective plant (fruit) pest and exterminated them in 1983. Other species of White-eye's, such as the species introduced to Hawaii, are thought to compete detrimentally with native and endangered birds. These birds have not been seen again, and it is not known what impact this species may have in San Diego County, when and if they become firmly established. Perhaps their beneficial effects in controlling insect pests may outweigh the threat they might pose to fruit crops. These additions bring the number of bird species seen in the Garden to a total of **158** naturally occurring species, plus **3** exotics (adding the White-eye to our exotic escapees list, which also includes the Pied Crow and Cockatiel.)



Fig. 4. Western Tanager (web)



Fig. 6. American White Pelican.



Fig. 8. Snowy Egret in Bamboo Garden Pond. Gretchen Nell photo



Fig.9. Lincoln's Sparrow. (web)

Other interesting birds seen this year and not common here in the Garden, included overwintering **Western Tanagers** (up to two in Feb-Mar 2020, and at least one in Dec 2020 ) (**Fig.4**), and a single **Black-throated Gray Warbler** (**Fig. 5**) occurring both winters. These two species usually overwinter in Mexico or Central America, but a few do overwinter here in the county when conditions are favorable. The sighting of two **American White Pelicans** (**Fig. 6**) flying over in February may reflect the increasing number of winter sightings in coastal San Diego County. According to Unitt (2004), these pelicans are adapted to an environment of ever-changing water levels, shifting opportunistically from site to site, and winter numbers vary greatly in San Diego County. The birds use both shallow coastal wetlands and inland lakes. For decades, much of the population wintered on the Salton Sea, but with the fish population collapsing there, a major redistribution has been occurring, which may account for an upsurge in the number of White Pelicans in San Diego County since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Also, a **Willow Flycatcher** (**Fig.7**), likely of the endangered race *E. traillii traillii*, was spotted in September during the fall migration period, and a **Snowy Egret** (**Fig.8**) was seen looking hungrily at the fish in the Bamboo Garden pond on 23 Nov. And an unusual number of **Lincoln's Sparrows** overwintered this year (up to 7 counted in the Lawn Garden area and elsewhere in December), and a good-sized group of five **Golden-crowned Sparrows** (**Fig. 10**) were feeding in the upper Native Garden with our White-crowned Sparrows on Christmas Bird Count Day (Dec 27), found by Manolo Turner. Finally, we noted that our **'banded' Black Phoebe** (dubbed 'Red-leg' for a bit of plastic that somehow got attached to its leg in May 2018) is still thriving, and splits his time between the Lawn Garden and the Tropical Fruit Garden.



Fig. 5. Black-throated Gray Warbler. (web)



Fig. 7. Willow Flycatcher. (web)



Fig.10. Golden-crowned Sparrow. Manolo Turner photo

were discovered this year, but 17 species were confirmed breeding, with 9 more considered probable breeders. No doubt most noticeable to the staff and visitors were the begging cries of the fledgling **Red-shouldered Hawks** which filled the Garden with their loud *Peeeeeeur* calls in July. And even though both our **Western Bluebird** boxes had to be removed because of Hamilton Garden and Overflow lot construction, at least one pair of Western Bluebirds were seen carrying food to young in a nesting cavity in one of the dead pine tree snags in the Native Garden. We could not positively confirm breeding again in the endangered **California Gnatcatcher** this year, but a pair was seen in the suitable coastal sage scrub habitat over the summer, so they may have bred on the property again.

**The Future---**In 2021, we plan to continue our bird surveys and hopefully increase our monitoring effort, by having two people census birds during a given survey day, with each person taking half of the Garden survey route. This way, during the crucial early morning hours, we can spend more time along the route listening and looking, especially for cryptic species and those high in the canopy. And we very much look forward to the happy day when the popular SDBG Monthly Bird Walks can resume, post-pandemic, and we can continue our bird walk outreach efforts with the public. This includes sharing with others the Garden's birds and beauty on our monthly bird walks and making timely bird sighting and bird trend information available online. Our decade-long 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](http://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.

