

2009 Addendum to Annotated Checklist of Birds of Ballona Valley
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With this addendum, I add three new native species to the Ballona Valley checklist: **Eastern Phoebe**, **Northern Parula** and **Hooded Warbler**. I present details on several other scarce birds from 2009, including Common Poorwill, Vermilion Flycatcher, Horned Lark, Phainopepla, and Grasshopper Sparrow.

This list covers birds seen within the Ballona Valley and inshore waters of the Pacific Ocean adjacent to Playa del Rey/Marina del Rey, south of Venice Blvd., inland to the 405 Fwy., and south to and including the Westchester Bluffs/Loyola Marymount University campus.

Abbreviations used in text:

BFM = Ballona Freshwater Marsh

BCr = Ballona Creek, from Mar Vista to Playa del Rey

BW = Ballona Wetlands proper; flat areas west of Lincoln Blvd.

DRL = Del Rey Lagoon, Playa del Rey

DW = Dune Willows, western edge of Ballona Wetlands

LACoBirds = Los Angeles County Birds, a Yahoo Groups listserv where notable sightings are posted online

M. ob. = Multiple observers

PVRC = Playa Vista Riparian Corridor, east of Lincoln Blvd. at base of Westchester Bluffs

Observer initials:

JC: Jonathan Coffin

DSC: Daniel S. Cooper

WL: Walter Lamb

KL: Kevin Larson

JP: Jean Pickus

DS: Don Sterba

RDS: Russell and Dorothy Stone

RVDH: Robert van de Hoek

Greater White-fronted Goose: Two additional records of this scarce visitor, one each in spring (one on 27 April at BFM, S. Glover, LACoBirds) and fall (two in flight over Del Rey Lagoon on 26 Oct., L. Gomes, LACoBirds).

Ross's Goose: One 21 - 22 Nov. at PVRC (RDS; ph. D. Kay) was probably a late southbound migrant, for about the eighth local record.

Cackling Goose: One was photographed in flight within a flock of larger Canada Geese over PVRC on 04 Jan. (WL) for the fifth local record; known prior records include: 14 Nov. 1981, 14 June 2004, 28 Oct. 2006, and a wintering bird from 21 Oct. 2007 - 12 Apr. 2008

Canada Goose: Now an established breeding resident at BFM (2 pr.).

Brant: 2009 proved to be a good year for this species at Ballona. One that touched down briefly at Ballona Creek on 04 Jan. (N./M. Freeman) is difficult to classify, as the species does not winter locally. Six noted here on 13 Feb. (M. Meyers), one of which ventured into the Ballona Wetlands tidal channels, were clearly northbound migrants, one of which lingered to 04 Mar. (L. Fimiani). Two here on 23 April (JC, LACoBirds) were also spring migrants.

Blue-winged Teal: One lingered at PVRC into April, and a "mid-summer wanderer" was at BFM 01 - 03 July (DS).

Cinnamon Teal: Two broods were produced at BFM, including five young on 20 May (DS) and six chicks on 19 June (DSC), where this species appears (re-) established as a breeding resident.

Northern Pintail: With its numbers greatly reduced from historical times, practically any observation is notable. A female was in the tidal channels of BW on 25 Sept. 2009 (DSC), and one was nearby in lower BCr, atypical habitat, on 15 Nov. (L. Conrad, LACoBirds).

Black Scoter: Up to three along lower Ballona Creek 04 - 18 Jan. (m. ob.) were wintering locally.

Ruddy Duck: A pair with five ducklings at BFM on 04 Oct. was a very late breeding record.

Eared Grebe: What was likely the same bird attempting to over-summer was at BFM/PVRC 20 May - 10 June (DS, DSC).

Double-crested Cormorant: New information (from J. Froke, via email) concerning its recent colonization of Marina del Rey: the species first nested in MdR (in large cypress at the Coast Guard station) in 2007 (three nests, failed). They nested again in 2008 (four nests, all but one successful). In 2009 there were again four active nests.

American White Pelican: One was along BCr on 01 Jan. 2009 (M. Meyers, LACoBirds), and a flock of twelve birds seen in flight over BFM on 26 Mar. may have been the same group seen leaving Sepulveda Basin earlier that day (JC, T. Hinnebausch, LACoBirds).

Least Bittern: Two downy young were at BFM on 23 Sept. (DS) for another record of successful (and late) breeding.

Great Egret: After its recent establishment, this species continues to breed in small numbers at MdR (<5 pr.), in mixed-species rookeries in non-native trees.

Little Blue Heron: For a seventh local record, one was present 04 June - 01 Aug. (BGJ, LACoBirds; original observer unk.), mainly at DRL (also observed at Ballona Lagoon, BCr and BW), where it established a day roost with Snowy Egrets in a ficus tree on the south side of the lagoon. This may have been the same returning bird from 2008, when a first-year bird was present May - July.

Cattle Egret: Barely annual, one was in a gull roost on PdR beach on 16 Nov. (DSC)

Black-crowned Night-Heron and Snowy Egret: New information (from J. Froke, via email) concerning their colonization of Marina del Rey: in 2005, a mixed-species rookery of 150-200 pairs (relative number of each species unknown) was located on the east side of Oxford Basin, in eucalyptus and other trees.

White-faced Ibis: Scarce in 2009, a spring bird was reported by a visiting birder on 10 May (P. Michel), and what was likely the same bird was reported several times at BFM and BW 02 Sept. - 21 Oct. (DS, m. ob.).

Turkey Vulture: Fall migrants were over BFM 09 Aug. (DSC), and over BW 20 and 29 Oct. (RVDH, DSC).

Osprey: A single bird, probably the same individual, was reported on several dates in July and August (RVDH, LACoBirds), over BW/BCr. This bird may have been prospecting potential nesting sites, as it has recently become an established breeder in Orange and San Diego counties.

White-tailed Kite: The first "fall"/post-breeding birds were at BFM on 10 July (DS) and BW (north of BCr) on 28 July (RVDH, LACoBirds). One (= the same bird) that was present through the fall was joined by a second bird on 29 Nov. (DSC), and two wintered at BW through the end of the period.

Northern Harrier: Three harriers were wintering at BW by 25 Nov. (DSC, m. ob.), continuing last year's over-wintering after an apparent 10-year absence doing so (see Cooper 2006b).

Red-shouldered Hawk: As in 2008, multiple sightings of an immature bird were made, mainly at BFM/PVRC, from August (01 Aug.) through the end of the period, though it is not known how many birds were involved.

Ferruginous Hawk: Birds wintered locally in 2004/5, 2007/8, and 2008/9, with the last sighting from spring 2009 made on 02 Mar. (RVDH, LACoBirds). One that cruised south over PVRC on the early date of 01 Oct. (DSC) was probably the same bird that would spend the winter at PdR, for the fourth winter (and third consecutive one) that a Ferruginous Hawk has wintered near Ballona. As with the birds in the prior two winters, this bird spent most of its time south of Ballona, but would occasionally be seen venturing north to the southern edge of BW or along the PdR bluffs.

American Kestrel: One or two were along PVRC to 03 May, and one was observed carrying a small bird, heading east over BFM, on 24 May (both DSC); however, direct evidence of nesting was not obtained. Its breeding status elsewhere in Ballona is not known. As of spring 2010, this species appears extirpated as a nester here, or nearly so.

Virginia Rail: Successful local breeding (first modern nesting record) was confirmed by an all-dark juvenile at PVRC on 25 May (DSC), in the same area where multiple birds had been present the previous spring (2008).

Common Moorhen: For the second year in a row, birds bred at BFM, with two chicks on 25 Apr. (LF) and five chicks here on 05 May (DS).

Black-bellied Plover: A lone bird at BW on 13 July (DSC) was deemed to be the first of fall, but a handful may over-summer locally.

Killdeer: Two young birds were at BFM on the remarkably date of 17 Mar. (DS), showing how early in the spring this species can breed.

American Avocet: Two fall sightings, from BCr on 22 Sept. (DSC) and BW on 23 Oct. (JC) were the only ones reported of this still-scarce transient.

Spotted Sandpiper: A pair was at BFM on 15 May (displaying; DSC), and a single continued there to 05 June (DS). There are no breeding records of this species for the Ballona Valley.

Dunlin: One made a brief stop at BFM, where very rare, on 17 Apr. (DS). This shorebird remains uncommon at Ballona, with one or two wintering each year along BCr or pausing at DRL during migration.

Short-billed Dowitcher: An uncommon but regular transient, three were along Ballona Creek on 22 Aug. (DS).

Long-billed Curlew: Still scarce, birds were reported on five dates during May, June and July, with two at BW on 30 July (R. Hamilton). A single was noted over BCr on 22 Oct.

Glaucous-winged Gull: One at BCr 22 Sept. (DS) likely over-summered locally.

Glaucous Gull: One was along BCr 14 - 15 Mar. (M. Meyers, LACoBirds), and what may have been the same bird was photographed at Dockweiler Beach south of the study area a few weeks later (DSC).

Caspian Tern: A flock of 100+ birds roosting along upper BCr (near the Centinela Cr. confluence) on 12 Apr. (WL, LACoBirds) is a typical spring concentration; numbers are now present through spring and summer, often accompanied by young-of-the-year, probably from regional colonies such as Terminal Island (near San Pedro) or Bolsa Chica in Orange Co.

Royal Tern: An adult accompanied by a first-year bird was observed in flight at MdR on 10 Sept. (DSC), likely post-breeding dispersers from regional colonies (e.g., Bolsa Chica, Orange Co.). The status of this species at Ballona is still unclear, due to confusion with other large tern species; however, it appears to be most regular in winter and spring on the immediate coast and just offshore, and it has not been recorded at BFM or other (slightly) inland locations.

Black Skimmer: Another spring migrant graced BCr on 25 Apr. (M. Meyers), and a remarkable 20+ birds were noted around 11:00 PM flying just offshore at Venice Beach on the night of 11 May (DSC), during annual surveys.

Eurasian Collared-Dove: One in flight over PVRC on 02 Sept. (DSC) was the only one reported from the Ballona area in 2009, away from the established population in residential Venice.

Barn Owl: Singles were in the willow thicket south of BFM on 01 May (B. Shanman) and 18 Oct. (DSC).

Burrowing Owl: One was reported from a traditional roost on the BW saltpan 28 Sept. - 15 Nov. (RVDH, LACoBirds), but it apparently did not overwinter.

Short-eared Owl: DS tracked down a photograph of one perched atop a birdbox at BFM taken 06 Dec. 2009 (F. Espiritusanto). What was presumably this individual was observed as road-kill in the same area by the photographer "a few days later". Given the date, this bird was almost certainly attempting to overwinter, a phenomenon that has not been documented in modern years (post-1960).

Common Poorwill: Representing just the second and third records, one each in spring (04 Apr. on the Westchester Bluffs) and fall (13 Oct. at BW), both flushed from the ground by DSC conducting bird surveys, give an indication of what are likely normal migration windows of this hard-to-detect species (previously recorded 20 Oct. 2002 on the PdR bluffs by DS).

Nuttall's Woodpecker: Singles were at PVRC 20 June (DSC) and at nearby LMU, where irregularly present year-round, 08 - 15 Aug. (RDS).

Downy Woodpecker: One was at BFM 05 June (JP, m. ob.).

Willow Flycatcher: Four in fall were reported 02 Sept. - 01 Oct., and two were observed in spring, 14 May (PVRC, DSC) and 05 June (DS), neither attempting to hold a territory.

Eastern Phoebe: A remarkably early first-year bird was photographed at BFM on 22 Sept. (DS), for the first Ballona record.

Say's Phoebe: It appears that 2009 was the year this species nested for the first time at Ballona, where it is likely established as a breeding resident. A family of three (incl. at two young, *fide* JC) was observed at BW near The Gas Co. facility on 01 July (DS), with what was likely the same group nearby on 10 and 17 July (JC). In addition, several birds, including apparently paired birds, were around structures at Playa Vista through spring.

Vermilion Flycatcher: For only the third local record, a female was photographed at BFM on 18 Oct. (DSC).

Loggerhead Shrike: This species returned to Ballona in July 2009 (1 at BW on 14 July, then two on 27 July, JC) after being absent during fall/winter 2008, and just a single bird remained here through end of the period.

Cassin's Vireo: One at BFM 17 Apr. (DS) adds another record of this scarce transient.

Common Raven: Three birds were near an apparent nest in a large eucalyptus on the Westchester Bluffs east of LMU on 15 July (DSC).

Horned Lark: One was heard in flight over PdR beach on 18 Nov. (DSC), for about the third record since this species was extirpated from Ballona in the 1970s.

Violet-green Swallow: A wave of fall migrants, apparently brought by an early cold and rainy frontal system, appeared on 12 Oct., with 20 at BFM, and continued the next day with five at BW (both DSC); the spring's sole report was of a typical early-spring bird at BFM on 06 Mar. (DS).

Northern Rough-winged Swallow: The last wintering bird (at BFM) was noted 21 Jan. (DS).

Bank Swallow: One was in a large mixed swallow flock at BFM 06 Sept. (DSC).

Bewick's Wren: Still scarce, one at PVRC 17 Jan. (RDS) was the only report.

Marsh Wren: Two singing males at BFM continued to mid-March, with one of them lingering, apparently on territory, to 01 May (DS), suggesting its re-establishment as a breeder at Ballona may be imminent.

Wrentit: What was probably the same singing male continuing from 2008 remained in Area A of the Ballona Wetlands through the period.

California Thrasher: What may have been the same continuing male from 2006 was in Area A of the Ballona Wetlands through the period.

Phainopepla: A male was just south of BFM on 24 June (DS), for only the fourth known local record.

Northern Parula: A male was photographed at BFM on 27 May (DS) for the first Ballona Valley record.

Yellow Warbler: Singing birds in willows remained into the third week of June at BFM/PVRC, with one still at BFM on 03 July (DS); however, no breeding evidence was obtained (despite some searching). It seems plausible that this species will start nesting locally, however, given the amount of riparian habitat planted locally since 2003. Unlike in 2008/09, no birds were found during the 2009/10 winter.

Palm Warbler: One was at BFM 06 Nov. (DS, m. ob.), within the normal late-fall window for this species.

Northern Waterthrush: One was at PVRC 09 Sept. (DSC), for just the 7th local record.

Hooded Warbler: A singing male was on the lushly-planted slope below the eastern parking lot of LMU on 10 June (DSC), for a first Ballona record.

Wilson's Warbler: One wintering at BFM in 2008/09 was last reported 04 Feb. (DS).

Yellow-breasted Chat: One lingered at PVRC to 12 June (DS), though this species apparently has yet to actually over-summer or defend a breeding-season territory in modern times (historical nesting records exist; see Cooper 2006a).

Spotted Towhee: Two were along PVRC 09 Dec. (DSC), where apparently regular in winter; one at BFM (where rare) on 23 Sept. (DS) was a transient.

Chipping Sparrow: One at PVRC on 22 Apr. (DSC) was the only report, though reduced observation at BFM in fall 2009 may be partially to blame.

Clay-colored Sparrow: One was along PVRC on 24 Sept. (DSC); it is apparently annual in fall at Ballona.

Vesper Sparrow: Formerly more frequent and even over-wintering, this year's only records were of singles (possibly the same bird) at BFM 30 Sept. and 04 Oct. (both DSC).

Lark Sparrow: Apparently regular in fall, singles were in residential Mar Vista on 31 July (KL), at LMU on 15 Aug. (RDS) and at BFM on 16 Dec. (DS), but none over-wintered.

"Belding's" Savannah Sparrow: Six birds foraging on a band of pickleweed along lower Ballona Creek just upstream of the Pacific Ave. bridge on 06 Dec. (DSC) were indicative of an apparently recent phenomenon of this taxon foraging (year-round) along the edge of the creek channel.

Grasshopper Sparrow: One was in a mixed sparrow flock at BW (Area A) on 07 Oct. (DSC), for only the second Ballona record.

Swamp Sparrow: One at BFM 15 Nov. (J. Fisher, LACoBirds) was the 7th known record, and the first since 2006.

White-throated Sparrow: One was apparently wintering on the Westchester Bluffs, found on 04 Jan. (KL), and another was present the following winter for one day at BFM (26 Nov., D. Haake).

Dark-eyed Junco: A streaky juvenile in residential Mar Vista on 10 July (KL) was totally unexpected, though numbers breed in residential areas along the base of the Santa Monica Mountains a few miles to the north.

Rose-breasted Grosbeak: The wintering bird from 2008 continued along PVRC to 04 Jan., and another female was at PVRC on 25 May (DSC) for the 6th local record.

Black-headed Grosbeak: This common spring transient (no breeding records) continues to linger late (one singing in willows south of BFM on 02 June, DS), and mid-summer wanderers (or "molt migrants"), typically adult males, frequently appear in July (e.g., one at PVRC on 15 July, DSC).

Blue Grosbeak: Up to seven birds were along the PVRC from late May to late June (DSC), and one singing male continued to 10 July (RDS); however, no evidence of breeding behavior was noted (breeding was confirmed in the late 1990s on land that is now Playa Vista but not since; see Cooper 2006a). Fall migrants were at DW 16 July and at PVRC 09 Sept. (both DSC).

Bobolink: One was in pickleweed near DW on 19 Oct. (DSC), for another record of this rare-but-regular transient.

American Goldfinch: Singing males were again at BFM all summer, with one even performing flight songs, (DS, m. ob.), and a pair was observed flying from BFM east into Playa Vista, yet we still obtained no evidence of local breeding. A flock of 15 birds (with Lesser Goldfinches and other seed-eaters) foraging in weeds at PVRC on 15 July may have included young produced locally.

Hypothetical List

As happens every year, several rare birds were reported that were either insufficiently described or otherwise not credible (and not accompanied by details), including Eurasian Wigeon and American Redstart, both at BFM.

In addition, several free-flying escaped cage-birds (incl. parrots) were reported but not detailed here, including an unidentified weaver *Ploceus* sp. photographed south of BFM on 21 Oct. (DSC).

Sources cited:

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