

## NOTEWORTHY OBSERVATIONS FROM NORTHEASTERN BAJA CALIFORNIA

MICHAEL A. PATTEN, P. O. Box 8561, Riverside, California 92515-8561

KURT RADAMAKER, 945 S. Idaho #132, La Habra, California 90631

THOMAS E. WURSTER, 278 Santa Anita Ct., Sierra Madre, California 91024-2648

Despite increased observer awareness of the Salton Sea and the United States portion of the lower Colorado River, coverage of adjacent areas in extreme northeastern Baja California remains low and our knowledge of the avifauna of that region remains slight. The Mexicali Valley contains a substantial amount of agricultural habitat resembling that found just north of the international border in the Imperial Valley. Because of the habitat similarity, the status of many species in northeastern Baja California should be very similar to that known for the Salton Sea or the lower Colorado River. Here we report on a number of species, in hopes that we may help fill some gaps in knowledge of the Baja California avifauna.

### SPECIES ACCOUNTS

White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihi*). Wilbur (1987) listed this species as "apparently a rare transient, only a few having been reported in recent years. There are older records from the Río Colorado." On various occasions between April 1987 and January 1992, we observed hundreds (e.g., 300-400 on 29 December 1991) feeding in the agricultural areas near Mexicali. This species is common year round (although numbers are smaller in spring and summer) in the Imperial Valley and around the south end of the Salton Sea (Garrett and Dunn 1981, Patten pers. obs.). It is also an uncommon transient and rare winter visitor along the lower Colorado River (Rosenberg et al. 1991). The White-faced Ibis nested irregularly in the Imperial Valley until 1978 (Ryder 1967, Garrett and Dunn 1981) and was recently found nesting there again at Finney Lake, where "at least 100 pairs" bred in 1991 (Am. Birds 45:1160) and 370 pairs bred in 1992 (William R. Radke, fide G. McCaskie). Thus, the White-faced Ibis may be increasing in this area, and nesting should be watched for in the Mexicali Valley.

Greater White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*). Wilbur (1987) called this species a "rare winter visitor," with "small numbers likely to show up at any wetland location." Twenty observed by Wurster on 14 January 1990 along the Río Colorado just south of Algodones were likely early spring transients, as the species begins to move through the Salton Sea and adjacent areas at this time. Up to 400 have been found along the Río Colorado in January (Saunders and Saunders 1981), further indicating a regular movement through this area. The Saunders' sighting, however, took place in 1964, when the species was more common in the West. The recent maximum in the Imperial Valley is 41 near Westmorland on 26 January 1992 (Patten pers. obs.).

Hooded Merganser (*Lophodytes cucullatus*). We observed two adult males and three females or immatures feeding and swimming in the marsh adjacent to Campo Mosquedo on 29 December 1991; a single female was seen here on 11 January 1992. The white hoods surrounded by a black stripe on the adult males were noticeable at a great distance, as were the warm orange-brown hoods of the others. The three previous records for Baja California are of a female collected by John Xantus at San José del Cabo in February 1860 (U.S. National Museum 31940), one

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or more seen by Lyman Belding at La Paz on an unknown date (Belding 1883), and two observed by Rich Stallcup at the mouth of Río San Telmo on 24 January 1982 (Wilbur 1987). Hooded Mergansers are scarce anywhere in Mexico (Sada 1989) but are rare and nearly annual winter visitors to the Salton Sea and the Imperial Valley (Patten unpubl. data), so future records should be expected in the Mexicali Valley.

Black-shouldered Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*). Wurster observed two near Mexicali on 28 February 1987 and single birds near Algodones on 14 January 1989 and 14 January 1990. We observed six individuals between Ciudad Morelos and Victoria on 29 December 1991, including what appeared to be two mated pairs (suitable nesting trees exist around many of the rancherías in the Mexicali Valley). There is also a somewhat doubtful report of two along the Río Hardy in 1905 (Stone and Rhoads 1905). This species was not listed by Wilbur (1987) as occurring away from the Pacific coast in Baja California, although it is rare but regular at the Salton Sea and in the Imperial Valley and probably nested at Brawley in 1975 (Am. Birds 29:1030). The few noted on each of our visits suggest a small population near Mexicali.

Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*). Wilbur (1987) noted only two recent records away from Magdalena Bay, so an immature observed along the Río Hardy by Wurster on 14 January 1989 is of interest. S. N. Rhoads, an unreliable observer, reported seeing single birds twice along the upper Río Hardy in February 1905 (Stone and Rhoads 1905). One or two are found at the Salton Sea each winter (Patten unpubl. data), suggesting the species may occur regularly in very small numbers in the Mexicali Valley.

Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*). Wurster observed two at the Laguna Salada on 4 April 1987. Wilbur (1987) listed only two recent records for Baja California, although small numbers probably move through the Mexicali Valley each spring, as they do through the Imperial Valley, where records extend from 4 March (1989, nine near El Centro; Am. Birds 43:536) to 11 June (1983, one near Plaster City; Am. Birds 37:1027). The Laguna Salada sighting fits well within this time frame.

Ferruginous Hawk (*Buteo regalis*). Wilbur (1987) considered this species a winter visitor to the northwestern portion of the peninsula, but neither he nor Grinnell (1928) mentioned any records for northeastern Baja California. On 29 December 1991, we observed four in agricultural fields near the town of Nuevo León. Since this hawk is a rare to uncommon winter visitor in the vicinity of the Salton Sea (Garrett and Dunn 1981), it almost certainly winters regularly in the Mexicali Valley.

Ring-necked Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*). Wurster observed one near Algodones on 14 January 1989, we saw two males and three females feeding in a stubble field 20 km southeast of Mexicali on 29 December 1991, and Radamaker observed a male about 15 km southeast of Mexicali on 22 August 1992. In addition, Howell and Pyle (1988) reported observing five or six pheasants on 4 December 1983 a "few miles south of Mexicali on Route 5."

This species is rare in the Imperial Valley (Garrett and Dunn 1981), and Wilbur (1987) stated that it had not been recorded across the border in the northeastern portion of Baja California. Wilbur's statement is inaccurate, however, since Leopold (1959) indicated that pheasant stock from China was introduced into the Mexicali Valley beginning in 1912. By 1922, the Ring-necked Pheasant was established in the Mexicali Valley (Hart et al. 1956). Leopold (1959) estimated a density of 50 pheasants per square mile (about 19/km<sup>2</sup>) between the Imperial and Mexicali valleys, although he indicated that there were more birds in the Mexicali Valley where the "habitat is better."

The Mexicali Valley was opened to pheasant hunting in 1929, with a bag limit of two birds and an estimated aggregate kill there of 1000 birds per year by 1948/49 and 1949/50 (Hart et al. 1956). Current Mexican hunting regulations specify a bag

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limit of three birds and a seasonal limit of six birds (E. Mellink pers. comm.), implying that the species is quite common in the valley.

Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*). Wilbur (1987) stated that this species is "apparently an irregular fall transient and winter visitor" with "only five records." On 29 December 1991, we observed at least ten in a flooded field roughly 25 km southeast of Mexicali. Since the Lesser Yellowlegs is an uncommon transient and rare winter visitor to the Imperial Valley and Salton Sea (Garrett and Dunn 1981), it almost certainly occurs in the Mexicali Valley on a regular basis.

Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*). We observed one on 29 December 1991 in a flooded field roughly 25 km southeast of Mexicali. The short bill (compared to a Long-billed Curlew, *Numenius americanus*), the grayer tone of the plumage, and the distinct blackish head stripes identified the Whimbrel. The bird was smaller than a curlew but larger than the nearby Willets (*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*). This observation is noteworthy because there are only four winter records for the Salton Sea area: one at the south end of the sea on 29 January 1989 (Am. Birds 43:366), three at the south end on 18 December 1990 (Am. Birds 45:999), one at the north end of the sea on 12 January 1991 (Rademaker pers. obs.), and up to two at the south end from 17 December 1991 to 23 February 1992 (Am. Birds 46:315).

Baird's Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*). Wilbur (1987) considered this species "apparently a rare transient, [with] five records to date," and it is a rare to uncommon migrant through the Salton Sea (Garrett and Dunn 1981, Patten pers. obs.). Wurster observed four in the Mexicali area on 9 September 1987.

Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*). This gull is considered a regular winter visitor, in small numbers, on both coasts of Baja California south of latitude 27° N (Wilbur 1987). Two observed by Wurster along the Río Hardy on 28 February 1991 and an adult observed by Rademaker at Campo Mosquedo on 11 January 1992 are probably the northernmost (both locations are at roughly 32.5° N) for the species in Baja California during this season, although there are over ten winter records for the Salton Sea (Patten unpubl. data). This species was recently discovered breeding in the Colorado delta (Palacios and Mellink 1992) and has been found in winter at Puerto Peñasco, Sonora (Am. Birds 45:1009), so future winter records for northeastern Baja California are likely.

Inca Dove (*Columbina inca*). Wurster observed one on 11 April 1987 at Algodones, and Rademaker saw four 4 km southeast of Mexicali on 22 August 1992. A report of a "few in the upper Hardy River region" by S. N. Rhoads (Stone and Rhoads 1905) is presumably in error (the Inca Dove did not extend west in Arizona to the Colorado River before 1942), so we believe the Algodones record to be the first valid one for Baja California, although Wilbur (1987) called the Inca Dove's addition to the peninsula's avifauna "only a matter of time." Rosenberg et al. (1991) called Inca Doves rare at Yuma, Arizona, stating that "they have not become established" there, so the Algodones sighting was somewhat unexpected. The species is probably resident in northeastern Baja California, since it has been resident in Calexico, California, since the discovery of 25+ there on 4 February 1984 (Am. Birds 38:358).

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*). We carefully studied an adult male at Campo Mosquedo on 29 December 1991 for 20 minutes as it perched on a eucalyptus about 10 to 12 m above the ground. We watched the bird mostly with the sun to our backs (it was about 1430 we found it). At all angles, and in every light, the throat appeared to be wholly red; that is, we could not see even a trace of white feathering in the chin. Most interesting was the color of the red throat: the upper and lower throat were deep red (the "normal" color shown on these sapsuckers), but the middle section of the throat appeared to be a bit paler and pinker. We are not sure if this was because of feather placement or not. The black border to this red throat was

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thick and unbroken and seemed to thicken as it reached the sides of the throat. The lower border of the throat was a wide black crescent across the upper breast. This crescent appeared to be complete (not mottled). The cheek was black, bordered below by a fairly thick whitish mustachial stripe; this stripe bent down along the posterior edge of the border to the throat, where it widened and blended into the sides of the breast. The anterior end of the mustachial stripe ran through the grayish nasal bristles at the base of the culmen. The bill was stout, straight, and wholly black. Wide whitish supercilia flared widely as they crossed the nape, which showed no trace of red. The supercilia were bordered above by black, which completely surrounded a bright red crown; this black border was thicker toward the nape. The back was largely black with golden-buff spangling running in distinct rows down each side and blending into the upper edge of the white rump. The scapulars were black, as were much of the wings. The secondary coverts were mostly white, forming a large patch along the front edge of the folded wing. The tail was mainly black. The underparts were dirty white, with bright yellow on the center of the breast and belly. The flanks were marked with black chevrons and bars.

The bird was still present on 11 January 1992. This species is a rare but regular fall and winter vagrant to southern California (Garrett and Dunn 1981), with several records for the Imperial Valley (Patten unpubl. data) and the lower Colorado River (Devillers 1970, Rosenberg et al. 1991). Even so, this record appears to be only the second for Baja California, following a juvenile observed by Rich Stallcup at the Meling Ranch at the west base of the Sierra San Pedro Mártir on 4 February 1984 (Mexican Birding Assoc. Bull. Board 1(87-3):7, 1987).

Hammond's Flycatcher (*Empidonax hammondit*). Even though this species was considered "apparently a sparse spring migrant" in Baja California by Wilbur (1987), it is a fairly common spring migrant along the Colorado River (Rosenberg et al. 1991) and through interior California (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Wurster observed one on 11 April 1987 at Algodones, and Grinnell (1928) listed two Río Colorado specimens, suggesting that the spring status of the Hammond's Flycatcher in northeastern Baja California is probably similar to that in interior Upper California.

Bendire's Thrasher (*Toxostoma bendirei*). Brian Daniels, Doug Willick, and Wurster observed one on 14 January 1989 at Algodones. The bird was studied for 20 minutes. Compared to the similar Curve-billed Thrasher (*T. curvirostre*), this bird had a straighter, shorter bill and had fine, although faint, spots on the breast. Since there are only three records of Bendire's Thrasher around the Salton Sea (England and Laudenslayer 1989) and the species is "rare and irregular" along the lower Colorado River (Rosenberg et al. 1991), the Algodones record is most interesting. Wilbur (1987) listed only five records for Baja California, none of which were for the extreme northeast. We feel, however, that all of the records listed by Wilbur are highly suspect and likely pertain to either the Gray Thrasher (*T. cinereum*) or the Sage Thrasher (*Oreoscoptes montanus*). Thus, we consider the Algodones record to be the first reliable one for Baja California.

Pine Siskin (*Carduelis pinus*). We observed one in a mesquite along the main road 10 km south of Algodones on 29 December 1991. It was calling (a buzzy, upslurred "jer-EET"). The bird was small and brown, with whitish underparts that were finely streaked with dark brown. The dark brown wings showed yellow stripes at the base of the remiges. This species is considered an occasional winter visitor to the lowlands by Wilbur (1987).

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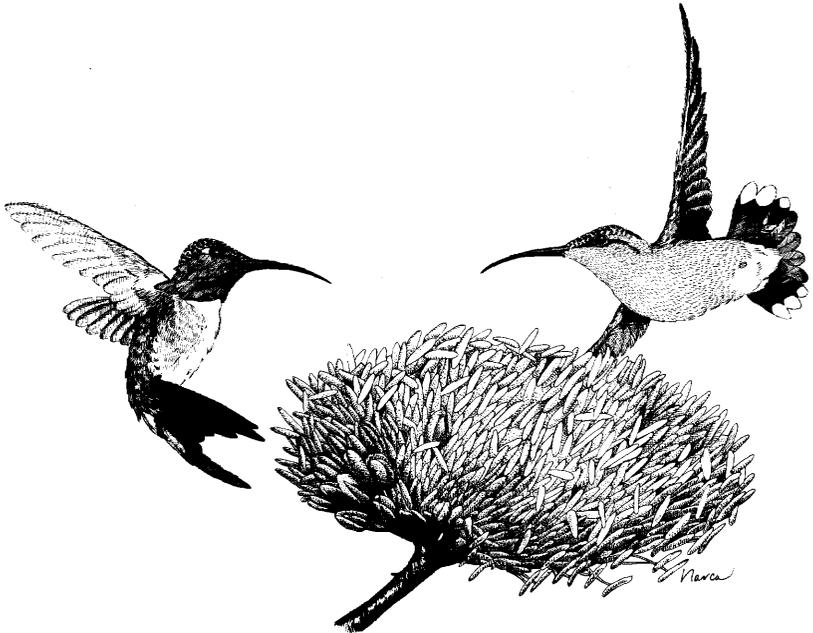
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