

***Rare Birds of California* (2007), edited by Robert A. Hamilton, Michael A. Patten, and Richard A. Erickson for the California Bird Records Committee.** Western Field Ornithologists, Camarillo. Color and black-and-white photographs and drawings, maps, tables, graphs, introductory matter, species accounts, appendices, bibliography, and index. viii + 594 pages. \$59.99 (hardcover; \$54 for WFO members).

Do you need to know the date and location of all 204 Red-throated Pipit records accepted by the California Bird Records Committee (CBRC)? Or of 26 records not accepted? Or of 17 records published somewhere but not submitted for review? Or the birds' age and sex if known? Or whether documentation includes physical evidence? Or reference citations for every published record?

Do you want to know the exact number of accepted records and total reports that originated in each of more than 1,149 localities? Or the precise latitude and longitude of each locality? Or the names of 1,883 people who have ever submitted documentation for the committee to review?

Do you care to know the date and the members present at all 36 CBRC meetings since 1967? Or the location of each meeting? Or the names of the committee members in each year since

1970? Or whether they served as chair, vice-chair, or secretary?

Then you absolutely need *Rare Birds of California*.

But even if you don't need all of that, and probably not most of it, who can fail to admire the manic effort expended in compiling such masses of minutiae?

More importantly, *Rare Birds of California* deals with major themes as well. Foremost is the CBRC's primary purpose for the book: to elucidate "patterns of occurrence that have emerged with the passage of time." These are the spatial and temporal patterns of distribution and abundance of those birds we call vagrants—birds away from what are considered to be their normal ranges and not merely rare residents of the state.

The big volume's core consists of 242 accounts for species, species-pairs, subspecies, and one hybrid, all currently or formerly reviewed by the CBRC. This coverage includes all records of species on California's main list that were submitted for review through 31 December 2003. An appendix provides accounts for seven additionally reviewed species that joined the main list from 2004 through 2006, and it summarizes other "especially notable" records from that three-year period. A commendable effort was obviously necessary to add the updated data so close to production.

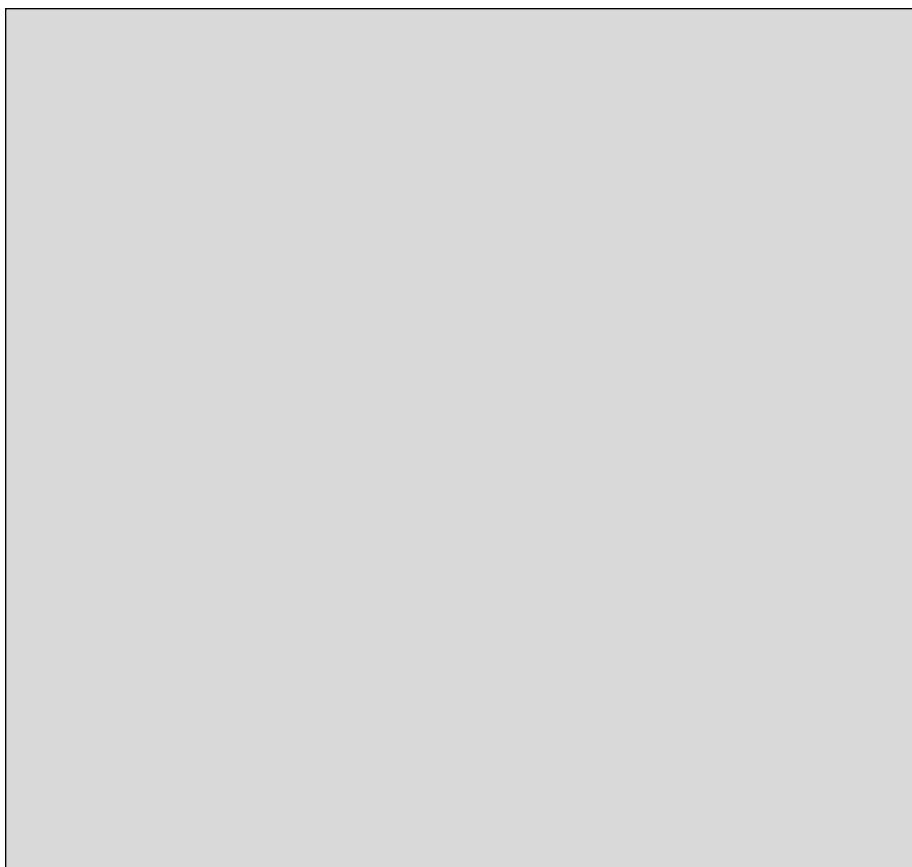
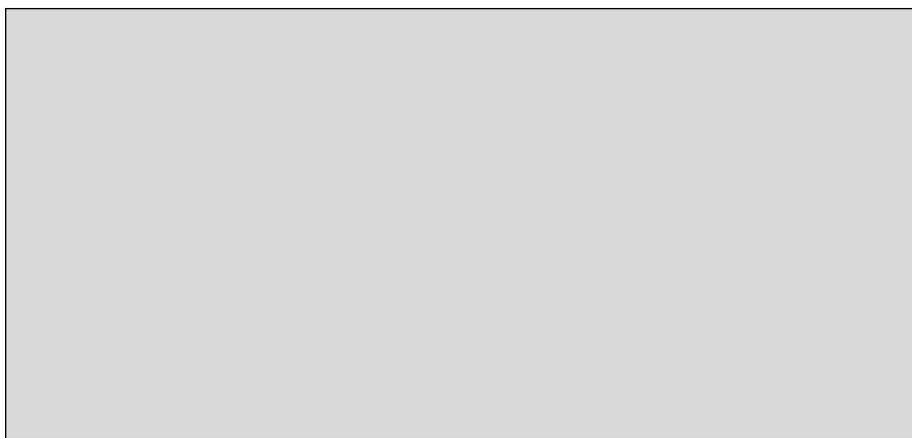
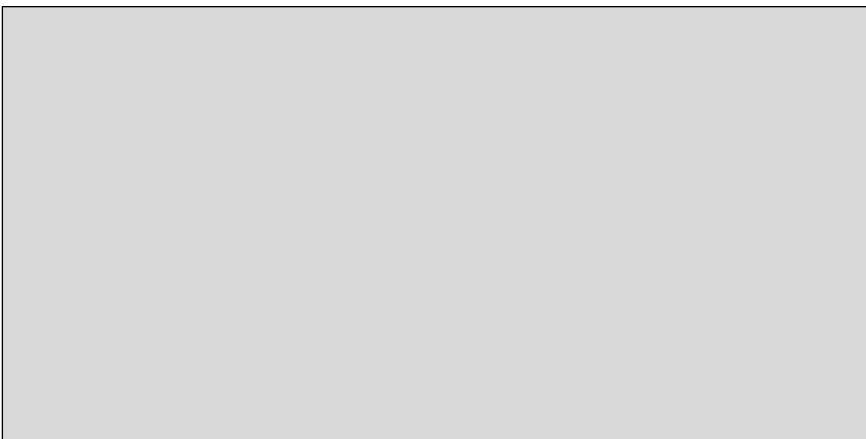
Next, there are accounts for six species on a supplemental list: Nazca Booby, Demoiselle Crane, Blue Mockingbird, Gray Silky-Flycatcher, Black-backed Oriole, and Oriental Greenfinch. These were correctly identified, but the committee was uncertain that they represented natural occurrences. All but one involve possible escapes from captivity. The exception is the booby, which rode a sportfishing boat northbound from waters off Baja California into San Diego Bay. (Don't ask whether I believe this should be called

a natural or an unnatural occurrence.)

An appendix adds accounts for 66 hypothetical species whose records are not accepted because of unsatisfactory identification, doubtful natural occurrence, or lack of evidence that an introduced population is established. Some of these accounts open fascinating windows onto the committee's changing views. A storm-petrel sighted off San Diego in 1970 was accepted as a Band-rumped in 1983, but was then reassessed and ruled unacceptable in 1998 in what the committee called an "agonizing" decision (*Western Birds* 29:133–156). Eight subsequent sight-records of Band-rumped Storm-Petrel have failed to pass muster, mostly on grounds that they were not separated satisfactorily from Leach's Storm-Petrel. A gull photographed at Upper Newport Bay in 1977 and reported as Great Black-backed was at first accepted by almost all committee members, but ultimately was found unacceptable by a vote of 1–9. As of this writing, California still awaits its first confirmed Great Black-backed Gull.

Back to the main-list accounts. Each opens with a description of the species' primary distribution on global and North American scales, giving the California records a broad geographical context. The descriptions for polytypic species often deal with the general distribution and taxonomy of the subspecies, and these are handy references useful beyond the book's purpose. Some of the subspecies reported in California strain credulity. Have seven races of the virtually non-migratory Northern Cardinal really occurred in California, including *floridanus*, a population strictly confined to southeastern Georgia and peninsular Florida? Ah but, as we learn, the great majority of these were judged to be naturalized birds from escaped or introduced stock.

Next is a discussion of California



records, often diabolically hard to read when broken into narrative bits by parenthetical dates and citations. Despite that annoyance, this is the book's educational essence: analyses of birds' patterns of "vagrancy." I put the word in quotation marks to express my doubt about whether a lot of these birds ought to be called vagrants at all. Some patterns of occurrence are so consistent and so regular as to suggest that California is an outlying portion of these species' normal migration or winter ranges. This is not a new question but one that many of us have pondered for a long time. For example, based on a novel mathematical model, Steve Hampton proposed in 1997 that patterns of Palm Warbler, Clay-colored Sparrow, and Swamp Sparrow occurrence in California represent range expansions rather than vagrancy (*Western Birds* 28:30–42). Participants in the Frontiers of Field Identification e-mail list grappled further with this issue in a spirited discussion in January 2007 (see *Birding* September/October 2007, p. 32.) *Rare Birds of California* offers a lot to ponder in its well-chosen maps and graphs.

The maps show distributional patterns at a glance, using the diameter of circles to represent localities' relative numbers of records. Some of these patterns undoubtedly reflect the bias of well-birded hotspots such as Monterey Bay, the Salton Sea, Furnace Creek Ranch, the Tijuana River, Point Loma, Arcata, and Galileo Hill. But, of course, birders go to these places because vagrants appear there. The important questions are more subtle. Why do many more Scarlet Tanagers (136 records for California as of 2006) end up at Point Loma than on fabled Southeast Farallon Island or at any other location? Why are 76 of 82 Yellow-green Vireo records coastal and so few at prime inland vagrant traps? Why do

wandering Dusky-capped Flycatchers (76 records) leapfrog over areas closest to their usual range?

The graphs, meanwhile, offer temporal patterns to ponder, depicting seasonal frequency of records as well as long-term trends in annual occurrence. Why do Worm-eating Warblers have a four-month-wide peak from October through January, whereas Mourning Warblers have a spike sharply limited to September and the first half of October? Why do Yellow-throated Vireos peak strongly in May, whereas Philadelphia Vireos peak highly in October? Why have Black-bellied Whistling Duck records increased greatly since the 1970s and Gray Catbird records since the 1980s?

Most accounts conclude with a discussion, or at least a mention, of identification issues. Some of these describe particularly thorny problems at great length; these include, not surprisingly, the Thayer's/Iceland Gull conundrum. A useful chart offers a method for assessing the often odd-looking hybrids between Black Oystercatcher and American Oystercatcher. At the other extreme are many tantalizingly cursory remarks. Nothing is said, for example, about the vexing Yellow-bellied vs. "Western" Flycatcher issue except that it "presents a challenge that should not be taken lightly" and nothing about Sharp-tailed Sandpipers except that they "should be identified with care." Many of the photo captions do give at least a few pointers.

But let's be fair. This is not a forum for long lessons in identification. The accounts list references that should be consulted, and in this we certainly are not short-changed. The Literature Cited section spans 21 pages in tiny eye-straining type that, by my count, contain 1,245 sources. A goodly proportion of those deal with identification.

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I'm not sure how much value there is for most of us in the authors' reference to the *Vår Fågelvärld* journal for tips on identifying Lanceolated Warbler but, thank goodness, there is a *Western Birds* reference as well; issues of *Western Birds* are handily available on the web <elibrary.unm.edu/sora>.

Two other chapters are worth noting. One is a history of California birding since 1960, which contains the jolting announcement that by the 1980s "[t]he Golden Age of California birding had passed" (hold your gasps; that doesn't mean exactly what you think). More significant is a first-rate essay on how to document and report records, unfortunately buried amid the mass of other information. This ought to be added prominently to the CBRC website.

Not least of the book's charms is a veritable art exhibition: 71 pages devoted to stunning color photographs and drawings, all reproduced outstandingly. In addition, most species accounts feature black-and-white photos, as well as hand-drawn illustrations so exquisitely rendered that it is almost impossible to believe they were made in the field. My favorites are a photograph of a dazzling Streak-backed Oriole hanging upside down on a tree branch and the surreal 40-year-old image of a Wandering Albatross standing forlornly with wings half-spread in a grassy field, a historic photograph discovered by Steve Howell in 2003 while he was spring-cleaning a Point Reyes Bird Observatory field station.

Is *Rare Birds of California* worth your dollars and your bookshelf space? It is obviously an essential reference for anyone undertaking serious study of the state's ornithological past and present. Almost as surely, California birders with an intense interest in their own avifauna will be fascinated by the breadth and depth of detail—not to

mention the exhilarating memories revived for those fortunate enough to have shared in the excitement of, say, the White-tailed Tropicbird at Upper Newport Bay, the Greater Sand-Plover at Bolinas Lagoon, the Ross's Gull at the Salton Sea, or the Nutting's Flycatcher at Irvine.

Members of bird records committees should also find the book inspiring—although beware of the envy it may arouse. It was obviously very expensive to produce and would not have been possible without substantial funding and other support from Audubon California, the Chevron Corporation, LSA Associates, and the Oklahoma Biological Survey (which underwrote much of the time Patten spent on this project while he was on the Survey's staff). Nor could it have been done without an enormous volunteer effort by members of an organization as large as Western Field Ornithologists. Yet it points to what might be done more practically, more efficiently, and certainly more inexpensively on a committee's website if enough volunteers were put to work compiling information.

What about the rest of us? Well, by chance, I had my first brief look at a copy of *Rare Birds of California* during a birding tour at—of all appropriate places—Galileo Hill in Kern County, one of the state's famous inland vagrant traps. All I could do was glance randomly at pages, marveling at the photographs but wondering what I could possibly find of interest in the long, gray parade of tables, charts, graphs, maps, and blocks of text crammed with dates and places.

A month later, when my copy arrived and I had time for study, I began to recognize the book's potential value to birders anywhere who are particularly interested in patterns of avian vagrancy. If you are willing to plunge into the

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jam-packed mass of major and minor facts—guided by the maps and graphs—you should find much that you will be happy to have learned.

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A retired newspaper editor, **PH** is a former chairman of the Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee. He writes the "News and Notes" column in *Birding*, has coauthored books on the birds of Pennsylvania and New York for beginners, and proudly edits *The Peregrine*, newsletter of the 240-member Three Rivers Birding Club in Pittsburgh.
