



THE PLAIN DEALER

Birding getaway out West tallies 160 species

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The emergence of the spring migration in Northeast Ohio is a joy to watch and an annual event to savor.

But every now and then it's good for a birder's soul to break out and explore other areas of the country.

For three of the past eight years, I've joined my longtime friend and traveling buddy Jeff Wert for a spring birding fling to Southern California. For four days last week, we explored familiar ground in and around San Diego. This time, we arrived a little later than usual, checked out some new habitats and found a whole new bunch of birds.

We hiked through muddy marshes and along riverbeds, scanned lakes and lagoons, broiled in the desert, were speared by chaparral grasses, climbed dusty mountain trails, and visited the oddly exotic Salton Sea - a 105-year-old man-made mistake that attracts a bounty of water birds.

Every locale offered Eastern birders ample opportunities to admire the unfamiliar species that fill our field guides, but which rarely are found outside of the West.

We found coastal sloughs covered with whimbrels, black-necked stilts, American avocets, marbled godwits, Pacific golden and black-bellied plovers, and an assortment of tiny shorebirds.

Marsh wrens and clapper rails called from the reeds. An osprey passed overhead with a needlefish clutched in its talons. The sandbars were covered with flocks of Caspian, royal, gull-billed and least terns; Western, Heerman's; and California gulls, and brown pelicans.

It only took a few hours to drive from the cool coastal breezes of the Pacific Ocean to the sweltering sun of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, a fascinating place where coyotes howl at dawn, Gambel's and California quail scamper about the roadsides, and cactus wrens lay down their persistent rattling songs.

Anza-Borrego is one of the most reliable destinations to find one of North America's most sought-after species, the LeConte's thrasher. We saw three this time, although just prior to our arrival, some of the country's top birders searched unsuccessfully for the stealthy, pale gray thrasher.

On the same walk, we stumbled on a bonus bird, one of the unlikeliest species imaginable: Sprague's pipit. Three of these northern grassland species were scurrying around the hard sand and sage brush - a serendipitous discovery of these always elusive birds on their journey to North Dakota or Manitoba.

As treasured as these sightings were, the highlight of the trip was a drive into the Laguna Mountains. In the crisp air of dawn, mountain quail called from perches atop boulders, Costa's hummingbirds flashed their purple gorgets the shape of Yosemite Sam mustaches, and the songs of canyon and rock wrens echoed through the valleys.

In the verdant riparian oasis of Kitchen Creek, we picked up the plaintive song of a vireo, but nothing like any vireo heard in the East. Scanning the shrub and yucca hillside, we zeroed in on a bubbly bird flitting

atop a bush: a gray vireo, one of the toughest and desired sightings in the state.

We tallied 160 species by the end of the four-day birding safari, including three new birds for Wert and four for me. We missed a few target species but figured we would leave those behind to pursue next time.

Sightings

The return of migrating songbirds to Northeast Ohio thrilled birders last week. Professor Lisa Rainsong and her students at the Cleveland Institute of Music reveled in a singing yellow-breasted chat.

A golden-winged warbler was the find of the day at Mogadore Reservoir for Gregory Bennett and Denise Powers Kissel. Other warblers there: Blackburnian, black-throated green, yellow-rumped, hooded, pine, palm, Tennessee, yellow and blue-winged; Baltimore oriole, warbling vireo, great-crested flycatcher, Eastern kingbird and wood thrush.

The weekly Shaker Lakes hike featured gray-cheeked thrush, warbling and blue-headed vireos, and warblers: Cape May, Northern parula, Nashville, yellow, yellow-rumped, black-throated green, pine, palm and black-and-white, per Laura Gooch.

A prothonotary warbler was at the Station Road Bridge Trailhead in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, Tom Fishburn reported.

Yard birds at John Pogacnik's home in Perry Township, Lake County, included pine warbler, rose-breasted grosbeak, orchard and Baltimore orioles, ruby-throated hummingbird, pine siskin and flocks of white-throated and chipping sparrows.

Katrina Heinzen welcomed Northern parula and blue-winged warblers to her Cleveland Heights yard, as well as Baltimore oriole, white-crowned and white-throated sparrows.

A summer tanager at the Rocky River Reservation was a nice find for Phil Chaon.

Keith Tarvin watched a cerulean warbler in his yard beside the Vermilion River in Lorain County. He also heard a wood thrush.

At the Spencer Wildlife Area in Medina County, Greg Emmert found black-throated green, cerulean, yellow, yellow-throated, blue-winged and common yellowthroat warblers, yellow-throated vireo, scarlet tanager, Baltimore oriole, hermit and wood thrush. At the Firestone Metro Park in Akron, he added palm, hooded and Blackburnian warblers, blue-headed and white-eyed vireos.

Marcia Polevoi spotted a rose-breasted grosbeak and Baltimore oriole at the North Chagrin Metropark.

Birders hiking the Rocky River Reservation spotted Nashville, yellow, yellow-rumped, black-throated green, palm and black-and-white warblers, great crested flycatcher, warbling and red-eyed vireos, wood thrush and purple finch, Paula Lozano reported.

Chris Pierce, birding the Sandy Ridge Reservation in North Ridgeville, reported black-throated green, palm, ovenbird, yellow and yellow-rumped warblers, white-eyed and warbling vireos and orchard oriole. Other birds there were sedge wren, wood and hermit thrush, brown thrasher and additional warblers: black-throated blue, hooded and black-and-white, Tim Fairweather reported.

Dave Yoo has a ruby-throated hummingbird visiting his feeder in Medina Township.

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