

Central Valley Bird Highlights: December 2007 through February 2008

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WATERBIRDS

A **Tundra Swan** in southeastern Kings County on 14 January (EPa, FO) was a rare bird that far south in the valley. They are regular only as far south as Merced County where they winter in large flocks. A possible **Emperor Goose** was with other geese at the Vic Fazio Wildlife Area, Yolo County, on 14 January (MP, TC) and 12 February (JTr). This would be the first record for the region in many years if submitted to and accepted by the CBRC (California Rare Birds Committee). Two **Eurasian Green-winged Teal** were reported with one at Merced NWR on 7 January (LM) and another west of the Sutter Buttes on 21 January (JLg). A male and female **Greater Scaup** at the Woodlake Sewage Ponds provided only the second record for Tulare County on 4 January (JCS ph., SSu, TaEa, TK). **Barrow's Goldeneyes** are regular winter visitors to the region, but are highly local in their occurrence, and are therefore considered rare in many locations in the Central Valley. A male along the Sacramento River near Capay Avenue on 11 January (MR) was Glenn County's long overdue first record. Another first-winter male at the Marysville Sewage Ponds on 7 February (JLx) was only the second or third Yuba County record. Last winter's male **Smew** returned to the foothills ponds in Tuolumne County on 29 December (DM+), but was only seen sporadically (and photographed) until 12 January on private property (SU). A remarkable number of wintering Red-breasted Mergansers were found with at least six at Buena Vista Lake in January (JCS ph., GH, TaEa). A **Pacific Loon** at Thermalito Afterbay on 25 February (JB) was one of several records for that Butte County location. Another was found at Buena Vista Lake in Kern County on 6 January (TaEa, JCS, GH). Much rarer inland, a **Red-throated Loon** at Camanche Reservoir was only the second record for that location (and counties) as it moved from the Calaveras to the Amador County side of the lake on 5 January (JSL). The **Red-necked Grebe** discovered in November at Lake Natoma in Sacramento County was still present to 30 December (GE, CC+). Another was found during the Stockton CBC at White Slough on 16 December for one of few San Joaquin County records. One found at Buena Vista Lake in Kern County on 24 December (SGI+) was joined by another on 22 January (GMcC, KG, SGI, SSu+). An adult **Glossy Ibis** in basic plumage was well studied and photographed on Henry Miller Road in Merced County on 18 February (JCS ph., SGI). This would be the first county and third Central Valley record if accepted by the CBRC.

It was one of those “wild and crazy days” when several rare birds were discovered on 8 December in Tulare County, starting with a first county record of **Red Phalarope** at Lake Success (JW, JLo, TK, SSu), then proceeding to eleven **Surf Scoters** at the same place, and finally ending with a first county record of a **Long-tailed Duck** at the gravel pond near Bartlett Park (TK, JLo, JW, SSu).

The best shorebird find of the season was a **Solitary Sandpiper** in north-eastern Merced County on 2 February (JDu) for one of few, if not the first, winter record for the Central Valley. A **Marbled Godwit** at the Colusa NWR on 1 January and 16 February (RVO, JSh) was a rare Sacramento Valley winter record. This species is rare this far north in the valley even during migration. **Ruff** has been an annual wintering species with records mostly from the southern San Joaquin Valley. However, it has been seen in recent winters at the Vic Fazio Wildlife Area, and this year was no exception with one there on 19 January (PE) and two found on 27 February (SHA).

Gulls made a big splash this winter, especially in the southern San Joaquin Valley. The Central Valley’s third **Lesser Black-backed Gull** was an adult in Folsom Lake on 7 February (DR ph., ToEa+) for the second county record for Placer and the first for El Dorado. It was searched for the following day, but was replaced by a **Glaucous Gull** (SHo+). Tulare County’s first **Glaucous Gull** was at the Alpaugh pond on 23 December (SGl, FO) but was only seen a few times over the following weeks. Other **Glaucous Gulls** included the third Fresno County record at the Fresno Landfill on 17 February (JD, JSe, GW), up to four at the Yolo Landfill near Davis (ToEa, SHa, JCS) in late December and January, one in western Stanislaus County on 30 December (JG ph.) and an adult, first reported on 6 January, that returned for its fourth winter on the Jepson Prairie (JR, FO, LW+). A first-cycle **Western Gull** at Buena Vista Lake found on 27 December to 22 January (TMcG, JSL, JWi+) was only the second Kern County record and the first in the county away from the desert. Amazingly, a second-cycle Western Gull was there on 31 December for Kern’s third record (ADeM). An adult **Western Gull** at Corcoran Reservoir on 31 December and 14 January (ADeM, EPa, FO) was the second Kings County record. This coastal species is extremely rare inland away from San Luis Reservoir area and the Delta-Davis-Sacramento region. Two **Thayer’s Gulls** at the Fairmead Dump on 30 January (GW ph.) provided the overdue first record for Madera County. Several **Thayer’s Gulls** (up to thirty at one location) and **Glaucous-winged Gulls** (up to six at one location) were found in Fresno, Tulare, Kings, Merced and Kern counties in large concentrations of gulls. Four **Glaucous-winged Gulls** at the Fresno Landfill on 17 February (JSe, JD, GW) was only the fourth Fresno County record. Three **Thayer’s Gulls** in southeastern Sutter County on 16 February (ToEa, SA) was one of few records for that county. Up to 300 **Thayer’s Gulls** wintering at the Yolo Landfill near Davis (ToEa, SHa, JCS) was perhaps the high count for this species in the Central Valley. These species were thought to be rare in the southern San Joaquin Valley just a few years ago. Several first-cycle and adult

birds that fit the description of the **Kumlein's** subspecies of **Iceland Gull** were seen and photographed at the Yolo Landfill near Davis in late December and January (SHA, ToEa, JCS). The status of this subspecies in California is not well-documented and is subject to much debate. Rare **Mew Gulls** were found scattered in the lower San Joaquin Valley with one at the Fresno Wastewater Treatment Plant on 21 December, two on 23 December and 1 February (GW), and one on 17 February (JD, JSe, GW); two in Kings County with one near the Homeland Canal on 29 December (JSL), and one at Corcoran Reservoir on 16 February (JCS, SGI, JSe); and one in Kern County at Buena Vista Lake on 17 February (JWi). One **Mew Gull** at Folsom Lake on 19 January (DR) was less unexpected but still a noteworthy record for Placer County.

LANDBIRDS

Northern Saw-whet Owls were found again this winter roosting in redwood trees on Ryer Island in the delta region of eastern Solano County (RLe) and another was in an orchard south of Winters in Solano County on 16 December (*vide* SHA). **Vaux's Swifts** have been found wintering regularly in the Hart Park area of Kern County since 2002 and this year's number was the highest count with 37 (JWi). This is the only area in the Central Valley where this species has consistently been found wintering over multiple years. Yuba County's first **Red-naped Sapsucker** was at the Waldo Bridge in the Spenceville Wildlife Area on 21 January (JW ph). Two **Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers** were in Fresno County with one wintering at Lost Lake first discovered on 29 January (JTz+) for the first county record, and another in Sanger on 27 February and seen for a few days afterward (BB). Another great bird at Lost Lake Park was a wintering **Mountain Chickadee** discovered on 12 December (JTz). Other **Mountain Chickadees** to make news were in the tree oasis at Buena Vista Lake in Kern County on 24 December (SGI) and another in the Land Park residential area of Sacramento from 28- 29 January (JSL, JLx, JCS ph., EPa+).

This was an extraordinary winter for Empidonax flycatchers in the Central Valley. One unidentified bird was found at the Merced NWR on 8 December (JDe), another unidentified bird was in Land Park in Sacramento on 31 December and 1 January (LE), a calling bird on Jelly's Ferry Road in Tehama County from 6-14 February (KS, CD, CO, KBr ph.+) was initially identified as a **Least** but field marks on the photos rule out that species and suggest that it was a **Dusky**. Although still considered rare, the two more likely wintering species were found with a **Pacific-slope** identified at Lake Solano along Putah Creek on 22 January (VR, AK, AH), two **Hammond's** at Truxtun Lake in Bakersfield, Kern County on 31 December (K&BK), and another **Hammond's** near Lake Success in Tulare County on 29 December (FL,GG ph.).

Two **Cassins' Vireos** found on 12 February in Modesto, Stanislaus County (HH) and Sutter County (JCS, JLx) were a surprise, but were bettered by the **Plumbeous Vireo** in Elk Grove on 16-18 January (MSM Jr, JCS ph. [back

cover], DCo, CC ph.) for one of few Sacramento County records. A probable **Tropical Kingbird** was seen along Butte Sink in western Sutter County on 18 December (ADeM) for one of few records of a wintering kingbird in the Central Valley. The female **Vermilion Flycatcher** present in November at Gray Lodge was seen again from 9-22 February (GF ph.+). A male **Vermilion Flycatcher** was found along Sante Fe Grade in Merced County on 16 December (DA ph.) and seen by many through February. This species has been found wintering in Merced County on several occasions in the past few years. An **Eastern Phoebe** made a one day appearance in Porterville on 6 January (SSu+) for one of few Tulare County records. **Yellow-billed Magpies** are rare and sporadic in the southern San Joaquin Valley south of Madera County, so two in central Fresno County on 18 February (GW) were noteworthy. **Northern Shrike** as a rare winter visitor to the Central Valley is always a nice find. One was found in western Yuba County on 20 December (BW) and the following day (ADeM), and another was at Gray Lodge on 11-26 January (PR, TR, EPa, JCS ph.+).

The Springerville CBC lead to the discovery of a **Gray Catbird** on 15 December that was seen for a few days (TK, GL ph., SSu ph.+). This was one of few Central Valley records and the second for Tulare County. A **Sage Thrasher** was found in late winter with one on Willms Road in eastern Stanislaus County on 18 February (RLi). Extraordinarily rare in the Central Valley during non-invasion years, a **Bohemian Waxwing** was seen only on 10 December (KB) near Redding in Shasta County. Rare on the valley floor, a **Townsend's Solitaire** was found in Sacramento on 19 January (LE) and seen only once again on 22 January (CH).

The **Northern Parula** seen only once earlier in the fall at the Gristmill Park along the American River in Rancho Cordova was rediscovered on 1 December (CH) and seen again on 14 December (JLa, CH) for the third winter record for Sacramento County. Lodi Lakes hosted two rare warblers with a **Nashville** and a **Black-and-white** found during the Stockton CBC on 16 December (*fide* JR). There is a previous winter record for the latter species from that San Joaquin County location, and winter records of Nashville Warblers are few for the Central Valley. This species is a regular winter visitor in small numbers on the coast as far north as Humboldt County, but is decidedly rare anywhere inland in California during winter. A **Black-headed Grosbeak** found on 21 January and 3 February near Davis (SHa) was the first winter record for Yolo County. The **Clay-colored Sparrow** discovered in November in Hart Park near Bakersfield, Kern County was seen throughout the winter period. Very rare on the valley floor was a wintering **Black-throated Sparrow** discovered on 15 December (TK+) near Springerville in Tulare County. Fresno County hosted two wintering **Swamp Sparrows** with one discovered at Lost Lake on 27 December (JSe, JD) and another at the Fig Garden Golf Course on 23 December (*fide* LP). A few **Harris' Sparrows** were found including one near Springerville on 15 December (CL+) in Tulare County, one at the Colusa Sacramento River Recreation Area on 13-14 February (SR, JLx) in Colusa County, and one in Redding on 5-13 February (KS, CD, CO+) in Shasta County.

Longspurs once again were found in good numbers highlighted by a **McCown's Longspur** in northern Yolo County on 30 December (ToEa ph, TaEa). As many as four **Lapland Longspurs** were at their usual location near Brewer and Nicholas roads in western Placer County on 1 January and 9 February (DR, DC, CH). Sixty **Lapland Longspurs** found in southern Shasta County on Dersch Road on 6-10 February (KS, CD, CO, BY) was a large flock and a new location for the region. One in Paskenta on 10 February (MR) was one of few Tehama County records. Always a great find in California, a **Snow Bunting** visited a gravel road east of Willows from 1-7 December (JSn, KP, BED, JCS ph., Fig 1.) for one of few records for the Central Valley and the second for Glenn County. **Hooded Orioles** are very rare anywhere in northern California in winter so one female at Reichmuth Park in Sacramento on 22-26 December (JTr, ADeM, CC ph.) and another at the Gristmill Park along the American River Parkway in Rancho Cordova on 16 February (JLa, CH+) were a surprising number for a single county. Lost Lake on the valley floor in Fresno County hosted a **Cassin's Finch** on 12 December (JTz). Another male **Cassin's Finch** was seen sporadically for several days in Davis from 29+ January (MP, CH), for one of few Yolo County records.

Also, I was recently informed by John Lockhart of a previously unreported **Tricolored Heron** photographed in June 2000 southeast of Woodlake (J&J W) for the first Tulare County record.



Figure 1. Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) along Road R, .5 mi. N of Hwy 39, Glenn Co.

photo by Scott Huber

I greatly appreciate the summaries of bird sightings generously provided by Chris Conard, Bruce Deuel (BED), Steve Hampton (SHa) and Ed Pandolfino (EPa). Additional Observers: Steve Abbott, Dale Azevedo, Jay Boggiano, Ken Brachman (KBr), Matt Brady, Ken Burton, Dennis Cavallo, Terry Colborn, Daryl Coldren (DCo), Jeff Davis, Al DeMartini, Joe Devine (JDe), Colin Dillingham, Jim Dunn (JDu), Todd Easterla (ToEa), Tanner Easterla (TaEa), Leo Edson, Pete Epanchin, Gil Ewing, Gary Fiegen, Jim Gain, Kimball Garrett, George Glover, Steve Glover, Frank Gray, Cliff Hawley, Gjon Hazard, Allan Hollander, Harold Holt, Scott Hoppe (SHo), Alison Kent, Tony Kurz, Kim Kuska, Ken and Brenda Kyle, Carol Lapham, Jeri Langham (JLa), Jim Laughlin (JLg), Robin Leong (RLe), Frank Lewis, Gary Lindquist, Randy Little (RLi), John Lockhart (JLk), Jim Lomax (JLx), John Luther (JSL), Dan Maxwell, Guy McCaskie, Todd McGrath, Lisa Myers, Chet Ogan, Frances Oliver, Randy Van Orden, Kathy Parker, Larry Parmeter, Michael Perrone, Tom Roach, Phil Robertson, Michael Rogner, Steve Rose, Deren Ross, Jim Rowth, Vance Russell, Mike San Miguel, Jr., Jeff Seay (JSe), Jackie Shulters, Keith Slauson, Jim Snowden (JSn), John Sterling (JCS), Steve Summers, Jim Tietz (JTz), John Trochet (JTr), Steve Umland, Bruce Webb, Liz West, Jeff and Jeanne Wheaton, Jim White, John Wilson (JWi), and Gary Woods, Bob Yutzy.