

Central Valley and Foothills Bird Highlights: March through May 2014

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By far the most exciting bird of the season was California's second but first chase-able **Marsh Sandpiper** found on Liberty Island Road in eastern Solano County on 9 April (RMu). Fortunately it stuck around for several days so that hundreds of birders were able to see and photograph this Siberian bird. A few lucky birders saw it fly east on a several occasions into Yolo County on 11 April (JSL+).

The second best find this spring was the basic plumaged **Yellow-billed Loon** photographed well on 23 May (AWL) on Clifton Court Forebay in eastern Contra Costa County. This is only the second Central Valley record and a surprising find in late May of this rare northern species. It was not seen on subsequent days.

Red-breasted Mergansers are rare but regular winter visitors, but a male at Lake Success on 3 March in Tulare County (KK) and another along the America River Parkway in Sacramento County on 6 April (JML) were clearly migrants. A basic-plumaged **Pacific Loon** was on Millerton Res in Madera County on 9 April (EE). A few are found annually in large reservoirs in or surrounding the Central Valley. Rare in Sutter County due to lack of much suitable habitat, a **Horned Grebe** west of the Sutter Buttes was only the second county record on 16 March (JLg). A **White-faced Ibis** fed along the lone WTP in Amador County on 19 May (JSL). Although rare in the foothills, this species occasionally wanders away from its regular breeding and foraging sites in the Central Valley. The Ton Tache Wetlands near Alpaugh is a mecca for waterbirds in that area including breeding species. It is also where most of the **Least Bitterns** have been documented in Tulare County. One was heard on 16 May (DF).

The Modesto WTP is the best location for several rare species in Stanislaus County, including five **Snowy Plovers** and one **Sanderling** on 27 April (HMR, SSa). Single **Snowy Plovers** were at Llano Seco unit of the Sacramento NWR in Butte County on 5-6 April (KSb) from where there are few records, and the Yolo Bypass WA on 23 April (RA) and the Woodland WTP on 2 May (SK) where they have been nearly annual in those two Yolo County locations in recent years. A few **Pacific Golden-Plovers** are often found wintering or migrating in large flocks of **Black-bellied Plovers** at a handful of wastewater treatment ponds in the Central Valley. One was at the Ripon WTP

in San Joaquin County on 30 March to 5 April (JRw+), another was at the Tulare WTP on 5-7 April (JLk, DF) a third was on Sherman Island in SW Sacramento County on 27 April (CG), and a fourth was at the Ton Tache Wetlands near Alpaugh in SW Tulare County on 29 April (KK). A new wetland complex north of Corning, the Olive City Agriculture & Nature Center, set the record high counts for Tehama County with 17 **Black-bellied Plovers** on 15 April (JCS) and 8 **Whimbrels** on 22 April (JSL, JLx). One **Willet** flying over rice fields in southern Sutter County on 12 May (JCS) provided one of very few records for the county, and another at California Lake Park in Chico, Butte County, on 25 April (JTL) was at an unusual location. Another flew over Woodland, Yolo County, calling at night on 27 April (JCS). **Marbled Godwits**, along with **Willetts**, are relatively rare north of Yolo County in the Central Valley, so seven godwits at Llano Seco on 25 April (MRg) was a high number for Butte County and one visited Cosumnes Preserve in Sacramento County on 28 April (CCo). Single **Solitary Sandpipers** visited the Yolo Bypass WA and the Sacramento Bufferlands on the unusually early date of 25 March (DA, CCo). On a much more typical date, one was at the Cosumnes Preserve on 17 April (CG), and 5-7 on 28 April (CCo) was a high count for the location. Although found annually in Kings County, four **Stilt Sandpipers** on private property near Hanford on 18 April (MSy) was a large number for spring. Much more rare in Sacramento County, one was at the Cosumnes Preserve on 27 April (JTr). Rare in spring but more regular in fall, two **Pectoral Sandpipers** were at the Ceres WTP in Stanislaus County on 14-16 May (JHG). A **Sanderling** and two **Red Knots** were near Corcoran in Kings County on 6 May (SSt) where they are rare but annual spring migrants.

Solano County's B and J Landfill at Hwy 113 south of Dixon had quite a few gulls lingering into the spring season with the continuing adult **Slaty-backed** and **Lesser Black-backed gulls** to 4 March (JH), and a first cycle **Glaucous Gull** to 3 March (JSL). Another first-cycle **Glaucous Gull** roosted in a field at the Yolo Bypass WA on 22 March (ELoP). A first-cycle **Western Gull** was at the Modesto WTP on 8 March (JCS) where this coastal species is rare in Stanislaus County away from the Recology Landfill on Gaffney Road. A second-cycle **Lesser Black-backed Gull** remained at the Yolo County Landfill to at least 5 April (CG) and an adult at the landfill at end of Ostrom Road on 5-6 March (JLg) was a first for Yuba County. **Mew Gulls** are rare away from the Delta, so one along Sante Fe Grade in Merced County on 9 March (BS) was noteworthy for the location as most records for Merced are from Gustine WTP. Single migrant **Franklin's Gulls** were at Corcoran Res. in Kings County on 22 and 28 May (MSy, KSch), and five were near Earlimart in Tulare County on 10 May (BT, DF). Also at the Corcoran Res. was a **Sabine's Gull** on 1 May (MSy) that is probably the first spring record for the Central Valley. This pelagic gull is a rare fall visitor to inland sites, but spring records are exceptionally rare anywhere inland. A private wetland in Kings County

provided excitement as a juvenile **Little Gull** and the Central Valley's first **Gull-billed Tern** were found on 2 May (SSt). The gull lingered for a few days, but the tern was seen off-and-on through May.

Always rare in the Central Valley, a **White-winged Dove** visited a feeder in Tulare on 9 and 12 April (DF). **Gray Flycatchers** are rare but regular spring migrants in the Central Valley with most records from Butte and Colusa counties south to Kern. One at the Sacramento NWR in Glenn County on 13-15 May (JCS) was one of few records for Glenn County and another at the Sacramento Bufferlands on 2 May (CCo) was a first for that location. A male **Purple Martin** was at the Fremont Weir in Sutter/Yolo counties on 8 May (JSL) where this species has been seen on previous years although breeding has not been confirmed. Currently, the only documented nesting locations in the Central Valley are in freeway overpasses and bridges in the Sacramento metropolitan area and transmission towers in the lower foothills of Tulare County. A probable migrant **Purple Martin** along West Butte Road in Sutter County on 27 April (SSk, DSk, JLG+) was a very lucky find. As usual, multiple **Sage Thrashers** were reported in March from Stanislaus County south to Kern County where they are regular but sparse migrants. A rare spring **Plumbeous Vireo** was well described along the American River Parkway and Larchmont Park in Sacramento County on 12-14 May (JML).

Late May is a great time to look for rare eastern warblers in the region. A singing male **Black-and-white Warbler** graced the Sacramento Bypass on 24 May (MPE) and a female quietly fed at Oak Grove Regional Park in Stockton on 12 May (DGY). A male **Tennessee Warbler** joined a flock of western warblers in a lerp-infested eucalyptus tree along Putah Creek Road east of Winters in Solano County on 16 May (AEjr).

Rose-breasted Grosbeaks are rare eastern visitors to the region and adult males are always a delight to see. One was at the Orange Blossom Recreation Area on the Stanislaus River on 17 May (DG). Another "eastern" vagrant, the **Indigo Bunting** is somewhat more regularly seen in the Central Valley. A male was in the Sacramento Bypass in Yolo County on 25-31 May (MStr). The wintering **Swamp Sparrow** was sighted along Putah Creek near Pedrick Road on 7 March (MStr). Yolo County's third **Black-throated Sparrow** was found along the Knight's Landing Ridge Cut levee at County Road 16 on 8 March and was seen by many through 28 March (SLaR). **Brewer's Sparrows** are rare but regular spring and fall migrants through the Central Valley with most found in the southern third of the valley. One was near Hanford in Kings County on 10 May (BT). Further north, three were along Michigan Bar Road in eastern Sacramento County on 21 April (CG, CCo), two on Waverly Road in eastern San Joaquin County on 26 April (EP) and three there the following day (ME). The north Davis **Harris's Sparrow** finished its third overwintering visit on 5 April (CD). A very late **White-throated Sparrow** was photographed on 31 May

in Davis, Yolo County (GZ). This date is exceptionally late for the Central Valley, but fits with dates of vagrants in the Mojave Desert. **Grasshopper Sparrows** are very local but generally rare in the Central Valley and surrounding foothills. One near Chrome on 30 April (JLx) is the first breeding season record for Glenn County (but breeding remains unconfirmed) and only the third record for any season.

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WA=State Wildlife Area; WTP=Wastewater Treatment Ponds; NWR=National Wildlife Refuge; Res.=Reservoir



Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*) 15 Nov 14.
Santa Fe Grade Rd, Merced Co. Photo © Patricia Bacchetti