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Hail to the Birds of Westwood

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All photos by Jason R. Finley

Western Scrub Jay in UCLA Mildred E Mathias Botanical Garden

Pigeons, sparrows, and crows. That's it, right? Oh, and those little black birds with the green eyes, and that noisy grey bird... and I think I saw a hawk once. There couldn't be many more than those; this is Los Angeles...

It was 2003 at UCLA. After graduating, I began work as a cognitive psychology researcher. Without classes to take, I had some time for a new project: Birds of Westwood. (www.birdsofwestwood.com)

It began from a mild curiosity in birds, and the idea to make a website. I could roam the campus and document the handful of bird species I saw to help other students learn about them too. It would be fun and interesting, but an easily completed task.

I had no clue how far off I was on that last point.

My initial list consisted of 13 birds altogether, some lacking proper names (e.g., the "Half-and-Half Bird"). But how could I find out what that bird was *really* called? And how could I tell what kind of hummingbirds those were hanging out by the red flowers? And where could I say were good places on campus to see birds? Where do birds go? What do they do? What are all the different types?

I think now that the *idea* of birds never fully occurred to me until I started asking myself these questions.

I began to learn new ways to pay attention, to listen, to look (and to photograph). I soon discovered an entire secret world, a new layer of perception, hidden in plain sight. I had actually been surrounded by many more birds than I'd ever imagined, pretty much the whole time; I had just never noticed them.

The UCLA campus turns out to be something of an oasis in the city's desert of grey.

There is, of course, UCLA's Mildred E Mathias Botanical Garden: a lush panoply of habitats where I first met the California Towhee and the Northern Mockingbird. And, as I stayed longer and improved my bird-stalking skills, I found the Town-send's Warbler high in a tree, the Bewick's Wren singing and hiding in the desert section, the Cooper's Hawk rushing through branches overhead, and a lone Hermit Thrush near the stream who seemed embarrassed at being seen. And during migrations, a ragtag convoy of migrants have passed through to surprise and challenge me further: Lincoln's Sparrow, Rufous Hummingbird, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Dusky Flycatcher, Mac-Gillivray's Warbler, and others.

There is the little-known Stone Canyon Creek behind the Anderson School of Management, where I found a cleverly hidden Black Phoebe nest (the "Half-and-Half Bird," identified at last), an anxious flock of Ruby-crowned Kinglets, a vocal pair of Song Sparrows, and a Warbling Vireo diving into the creek for a quick dip.

There is the grassy intramural field, where Killdeer are known to forage, along with the occasional Western Meadowlarks and Savannah Sparrows.

There is the Sunset Canyon Recreation Center, where Dark-eyed Juncos hop up hillsides and Spotted Towhees go berserk in the leaves.

There are the silk-floss trees, where small flocks of Yellow-Chevroned Parakeets chatter and eat.

There is the “Native Fragment,” revealed to me by Bobby Walsh, a student leader with the Environmental Bruins and a fellow birder (as I found out we’re called). This is a sizable chunk of undeveloped land tucked behind the dorms and consisting mostly of coastal sage scrub. Here you can find Western Scrub Jays swooping and calling, a Red-Shouldered Hawk perching in the pines, a Downy Woodpecker creeping up a tree, or even the strange and elusive Wrentit.

And almost everywhere on campus there are hummingbirds, Allen’s and Anna’s (and at times, Rufous or even Costa’s). And Bushtits, Lesser Goldfinches, House Finches, Mourning Doves, Common Ravens. And of course: Pigeons, Sparrows, and Crows. (Oh my.)

Every new bird I have met—each with its own personality—has fueled my motivation to share knowledge of these feathered ambassadors of nature with the rest of the UCLA community.



YC Parakeet just outside the UCLA Mildred E Mathias Botanical Garden

The list on the website is now up to 60 birds, and counting.

This project has proven both more fascinating and more ambitious than I estimated some three years ago. It has also taken unexpected new directions as I myself have transformed from curious novice to citizen scientist and ecological activist. We now have observational records—collected with the help of many new friends from whom I have learned much—that wouldn’t have existed otherwise, and can be compared to the historical data recorded by UCLA Professor Loye Miller from 1929 to

1947 (another wonderful discovery that I have worked into the website).

A campus bird count conducted by eight birders from UCLA and L.A. Audubon on February 12, 2006 tallied 36 species and 498 individual birds. Compare this to the results, reported by Miller, of one Miss Dorothy Groner’s day-long observation, in the rain, on January 30, 1944: 43 species and 1,571 individual birds.

Human development of the campus and the surrounding area has taken its toll, with the disappearance of riparian birds like the California Thrasher, Bell’s Vireo, Blue Grosbeak, and Belted Kingfisher when both of the two streams that flowed through campus were filled and channeled underground in the late 1930s and 1940s. Grassland birds, such as the Horned Lark and Loggerhead Shrike, have also been lost as our open spaces have diminished, although a few species still pass through to stop at the athletic fields (Longcore & Rich, 1998; B. Walsh, personal communication, July 16, 2006).

A good number of species can still be found on campus, though in apparently smaller numbers. For example, the Black-headed Grosbeak is a rare and fleeting sight today, despite Miller’s statement about them: “I see no reason why they should not some day be a common nesting bird within our limits” (Miller, 1947).

Some things have stayed the same, like the abundance of House Finches (known



Sunset Canyon Recreation Center (including a native plant garden maintained by the Environmental Bruins)



Bewick’s Wren in UCLA Mildred E Mathias Botanical Garden

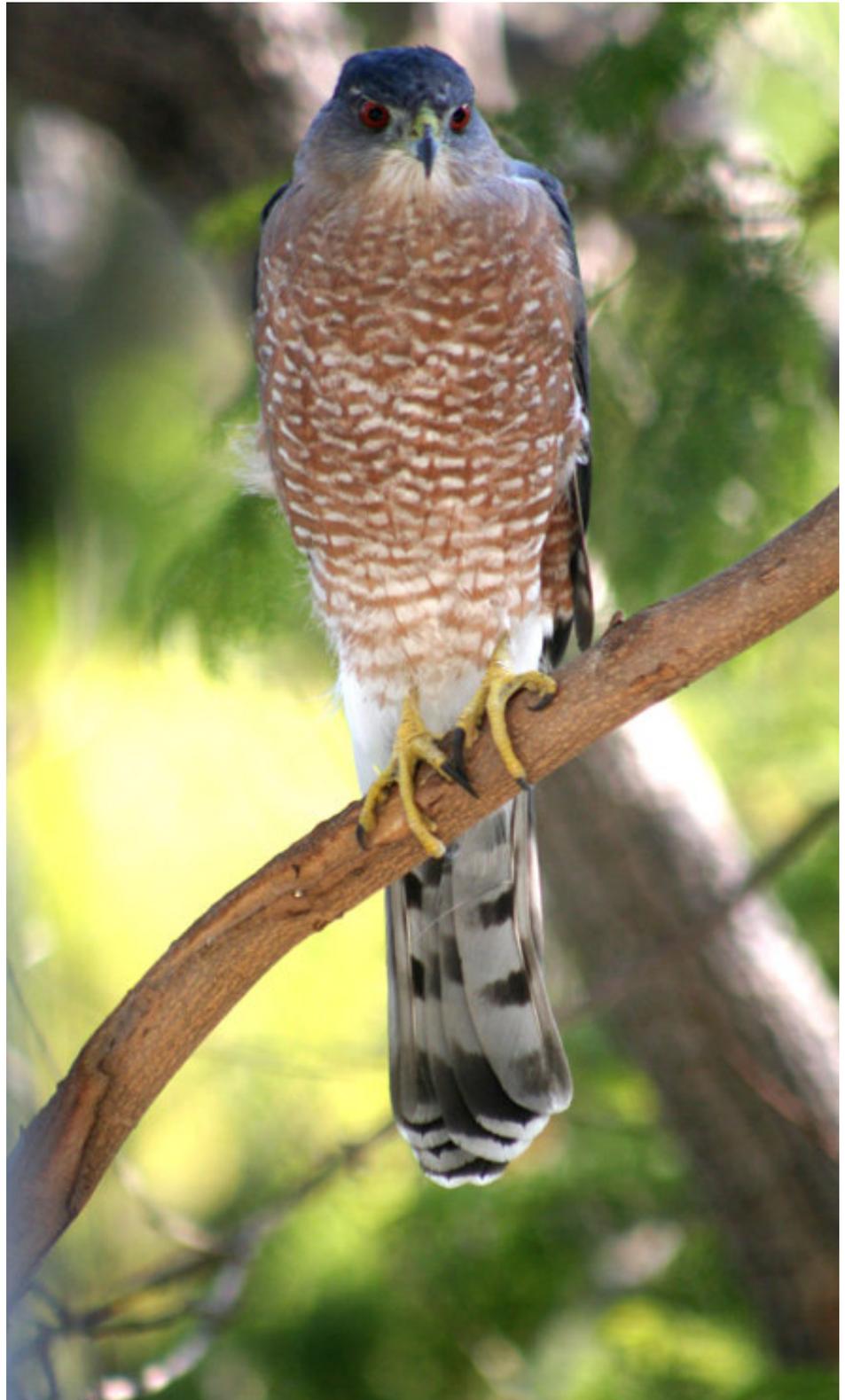
to Miller as California Linnets), and Lesser Goldfinches. And there have been a handful of new additions since 1947 too: non-native species that have thrived in co-habitation with humans, like the House Sparrow, European Starling, and Yellow-Chevroned Parakeet.

Despite the loss of habitat, the campus has become perhaps even *more* of an oasis as the city has developed more around it. This means that those birds passing through, although fewer now, might be found in high concentration in places like the botanical garden (hence the Lincoln's, the MacGillivray's, etc.).

In addition to helping record and interpret data, I've used the website to facilitate ongoing efforts to restore the remnants of Stone Canyon Creek with native vegetation, initiated by Rafe Sagarin of the UCLA Institute of the Environment. Across two weeks in October, 2005—before work on the creek began—twenty-one volunteers observed 19 bird species at the creek. These data can be compared to future surveys, done by the Environmental Bruins and others on campus, to assess the impact of the restoration of native habitats on bird life. We hope to continue work on the creek, and elsewhere too (e.g., a new native plant garden at Sunset Canyon Recreation Center).

Throughout this surprising and fulfilling odyssey, I have not lost sight of my goal to assist and inspire those who, like I once did, know next to nothing about birds. So I've done my best to hold onto the wonder and even the naïveté of that initial beginner's outlook, the excitement of noticing, for the first time, a lively little bird with a bright yellow butt who I've come to know as the Yellow-rumped Warbler.

I hope this perspective will serve me well as I begin graduate study at the University of Illinois, where I look forward to new marvels (Cardinals! Blue Jays!). And rest assured, the Birds of Westwood aren't going anywhere, and neither is their website. 



Coopers Hawk- just off campus, at Hilgard Ave. & Le Conte

Jason Finley is a member of Environmental Bruins at UCLA. Visit his website at <http://www.birdsofwestwood.com>

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