

Few Wildflowers? Time To Do Some Birding!

As of late February, the Poppy Reserve has received less than 2 inches of rain, pointing to what may be a poor wildflower season for the Antelope Valley. But don't despair, 2021 may be a good time to add birding to your flower watching trips - and you may be able to start in your own back yard or nearby park! Over the last several years, our backyard has been selected by a very perky and confident Flycatcher as a good place to hunt insects. It has a large black wedge-shaped head with a slight crest and is very comfortable perching on the back of our patio chairs. It ignores our bird feeder and is interested only in insects which it catches in midair. Even though the bird was frequently close to the house, identification was not easy. Its dark color and affinity for our shaded patio coupled with a tendency to fly away if we got near the adjacent windows made it hard to get a good look, even with binoculars. We finally decided that it must be a Black Phoebe, one of the many species of Flycatchers native to California. Our identification was aided by three of my favorite websites: ebird.org, allaboutbirds.org and Audubon.org, <https://merlin.allaboutbirds.org/>

EBird allows users to contribute to science and conservation by sharing their bird sightings. Sightings are organized geographically and include most of the planet. And fortunately, they are easily searchable by even casual birders like me! I started by selecting "explore" and then entering California for "region." Using "map" allowed me to zero in on the Antelope Valley. The map shows local "hotspots" for birders. One of those hotspots is George Lane Park, about 2 miles from my house, so I started there. I found two flycatchers on the list that had been identified recently: Say's Phoebe and Black Phoebe. Selecting Black Phoebe linked me to a photo of an adult male that matched our backyard guest.

From there, a visit to another favorite Internet site, allaboutbirds.org, revealed interesting facts about Black Phoebes. Some of the behaviors described helped identification, including "distinctive tail-pumping" and "shrill, scratchy chirp." We also verified that these birds, unlike many others, have adapted well to living near humans.

Looking again at ebird.org allowed me to explore other birding hotspots in the Antelope Valley. In January, my husband and I spent several mornings walking along the aqueduct starting at 70th West. This is a good birding spot and good place to reliably view male white and black Buffleheads, a diving duck with iridescent plumage on the head and neck. This year we also saw ducks with a very blue bill. EBird helped us identify these as Lesser Scaups, another diving duck. Besides 70th West, hotspots along the aqueduct include Godde Hill (60th West) and Johnson Road (110th West).

Our local state, county and city parks are also eBird hotspots. Birds spotted in January at the Poppy Reserve include Mountain BlueBirds, Ferruginous Hawks, Prairie Falcons, Loggerhead Shrikes, and Horned Larks. Two of the most well-adapted and successful birds of the desert, White-crowned Sparrows and Cactus Wrens, have been spotted at Ripley Desert Woodland and the Prime Desert Woodland.

The local state park with the most total species identified according to eBird is Saddleback Butte State Park with 72 species observed. Saddleback is the one local park that allows overnight camping, perfect for early morning birdwatching. (Saddleback recently reopened for camping.) Before taking a trip to Saddleback, visit ebird.org to take a look at the birds recently seen there: Mourning Dove, Loggerhead Shrike, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, White-crowned Sparrow, Black-throated Sparrow and Lesser Goldfinch.

Finally, a discussion of Antelope Valley birding hotspots would not be complete without mentioning the two with the most identified species, Apollo Park (253 species) and Piute Ponds (302 species). Apollo Park is an easy visit, located on Avenue G next to Fox Field. It is a favorite with families for picnics and fishing. Water loving birds migrate through the park, with different species floating on its manmade ponds, depending on the time of year. Birds spotted there in February include Snow Geese, Greater White-fronted Geese, American Coots and American White Pelicans. Apollo Park is a great place to get children interested in birding as common birds such as Mallards and Canada Geese are easy to spot there.

Piute Ponds, like Apollo Park, features water ponds used for water treatment. Unlike Apollo Park, arrangements must be made through Edward's Air Force Base to visit. The area historically featured riparian habitat; now enlarged due to its use for water treatment for Lancaster. There are several websites that give more information. If you visit www.prmdia.org and select News and the Newsletter you will reach an online version of this President's Message with links to the websites mentioned above and more. Happy Birding!