



## FEATURE ARTICLES

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### Oasis Birding in Nevada and Utah

by Paul Lehman

It was a combination of an “historical accident” and a quirk of fate.

All during the 1970s, the exploding interest in migrants and vagrant-chasing in California brought birders from the urban centers along the coast of that state to the eastern deserts in late May and again in fall. Although coverage was spotty at best, it was enough to produce a dizzying list of rarities from several places within 20 miles of the Nevada border, places such as Furnace Creek Ranch (Death Valley), Scotty’s Castle, Deep Springs, and Oasis. The Memorial Day weekend was a particularly popular time to visit these oases, and despite the long drives involved, 40 or 50 birders might assemble there on that weekend. But nary a birder would cross into Nevada, except to make the drive from Scotty’s Castle to Oasis, stopping briefly along the way at the Nevada hamlet of Lida (which, during late-May visits in the 70’s, produced such species as Northern Parula, Chestnut-sided Warbler, and Harris’s Sparrow). During this same period and a mere two hours away, however, Las Vegas birders Chuck Lawson, Vince Mowbray, and others were turning up many great finds in their region, particularly at Corn Creek and “Tule Springs” (now Floyd Lamb State Park and with most of the former habitat ruined), and at Las Vegas Wash (Lake Mead) and Davis Dam. They would occasionally join the California troops in nearby Death Valley, but most of the time there was relatively little communication between the states.

The historical accident was the placing of the California-Nevada border where it is today: a decision made in the 1840s to simply draw a straight line from Lake Tahoe to a particular point on the Colorado River, regardless of topography, watersheds, and the like. As a result, many a fine birding oasis fell barely on one side of the border or the other, and their exploration by birders over the past decades prospered or suffered accordingly.

The quirk of fate happened in May 1980, when one of the California groups birding at Oasis ranch decided not to travel the 25 miles west to Big Pine to get gas and food, as all had done before. Instead, they would go only 10 miles north, to the Nevada hamlet of Dyer, to see if any services were available there. They returned with tales of fine-looking ranchyards that rivaled Oasis and Deep Springs and that were full of birds. By 1981, some of us were adding Dyer to our desert oasis “loop.” That year,

during my first visit, we found a Kentucky Warbler. The list of rarities found there over the following years was huge, and included such finds as Scissor-tailed and Least flycatchers, Cape May, Bay-breasted, Mourning, and Hooded Warblers, Louisiana Waterthrush, Cassin’s Sparrow, and nesting Common Grackles.

For me, that was the opening of a huge new horizon, of falling in love with migrant and vagrant “oasis-hopping” in the Great Basin. Best of all, there was the spirit and thrill of discovery. Although the Las Vegas birding contingent had discovered many areas near that city, and the same was true in the Reno area, there were large gaps in between, as well as farther to the north and east that had rarely, if ever, been visited.

But first I was to visit Utah in September 1984, and together with Ella Sorensen spent a busy week exploring the western portion of that state. We checked recently “discovered” oases at Promontory Point, Fish Springs, Callao, and Beaver Dam Wash, and discovered additional sites at Trout Creek, Garrison, the Wah-Wah Valley, and around Millford. We also found that several waterbird species thought to be very rare in the state were, in fact, likely regular in small numbers at this season on the Great Salt Lake: Common Tern, Semipalmated and Stilt sandpipers, Red Knot, and Short-billed Dowitcher to name a few.

From the late 1980s through the early 1990s, my wife, Shawneen Finnegan, and I took many trips through our favorite Great Basin state: Nevada. In 1987, a post-Thanksgiving visit to the Lahontan Valley gave us our first view of the incredible waterbird concentrations found at Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge and Carson Lakes. Put simply, I was blown away by the masses of birds at such an interior location. In just a little over a day in that area we saw 4 Mountain Plovers, an exceptionally late juvenile Baird’s Sandpiper, many other late shorebirds such as Lesser Yellowlegs, Spotted Sandpiper, and Marbled Godwit, Black Phoebe, late Tree Swallows, Northern Shrike, Bohemian Waxwings, and a Palm Warbler. In later return visits, those sites never failed to produce exceptional numbers of birds and great rarities. In March 1988 there were 14 McCown’s Longspurs, Ross’s Geese and Cattle Egrets, 35,000 waterfowl, a staggering 25,000 Long-billed Dowitchers, and 8000 American Avocets. During an August visit later that same year, during which I was accompanied by Larry Neel, there was a Pacific Golden-Plover, a flock of 12 Ruddy Turnstones, small numbers of Semipalmated and Stilt sandpipers, and over 25,000 avocets and 20,000 dowitchers.

Larry Neel was the person who introduced me to the wonders of Walker Lake, farther to the south. Larry has been instrumental in discovering and publicizing the record interior counts of Common Loons that congregate on that lake. He has also found some fine strays there, such as Brant and Harlequin Duck. Walker Lake is another example of an exceptional site that happened to lie on the “wrong” side of the California-Nevada border. Mono Lake is found not too far to the southwest; and I believe that in part because it is in California, it has received relatively extensive observer coverage and its plight (water diversion) has been well publicized. Walk-

er Lake, on the other hand, is virtually unknown. Walker Lake will undoubtedly produce as many or more species, including the many fish-eating species not found on Mono Lake, if it ever receives regular censusing.

It was November 1988 that a small group of us were driving up Route 95 from Las Vegas toward Death Valley when we came upon the town of Indian Springs. We started driving the streets through this oasis of a town and soon found a fine series of pastures, an abandoned weedy orchard, small ponds, and large cottonwood trees. It looked fantastic. No birder we knew had ever visited there before. And although that first visit produced nothing rarer than a group of Inca Doves, many subsequent visits by many birders have produced such gems as Purple Gallinule, Red Phalaropes, several Ruddy Ground-Doves, Philadelphia Vireo, Golden-winged, Blue-winged, and Hooded Warblers, Dickcissel, and Le Conte's Sparrow.

Several more sites were stumbled into during the ensuing years. The Amargosa Valley southeast of Beatty (Ruddy Ground-Doves, Smith's Longspur, Lark Bunting, Orchard Oriole, etc.) was first checked in September 1989. Nearby Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge (Arctic Tern, Brant, Oldsquaw, Red Phalaropes) was first visited only because we stumbled into the refuge manager while getting gas nearby on our way out of Death Valley. The Miller rest-stop ten miles west of Tonopah is a classic mini-oasis that has been made famous over the past number of years by the many rarities found there by John Brack et al. The oasis is small and is irrigated daily; it has with superb visibility in all directions so that birds can easily see it from many miles around. We visited it (and the Warm Springs highway maintenance yard farther to the east) by chance in November 1990, when we took a slightly different route out of Dyer to the east, and saw a Rusty Blackbird and Red-breasted Sapsucker. But I always wondered what would have been seen there during the previous decade if somebody—anybody—visiting the Dyer region or driving along Route 95 from Reno to Las Vegas had just happened to have stopped there, found many migrants and some rarities, and had spread the news. If people knew of its potential back then, that information was not widely disseminated.

Our long-time friends Jim and Marian Cressman of Las Vegas introduced us to the Pahrnagat/Ash Springs/Hiko area located well north-northeast of the city. We were able to visit the area in November 1990 and were rewarded with Eurasian Wigeon and a Northern Parula in the falling snow, plus Winter Wrens and an American Tree Sparrow. The more recent Red-headed Woodpecker seen there is certainly one of the area's stellar finds.

Lastly, there is northeastern Nevada, which truly receives very limited coverage. Even with the recent surge in interest in finding the Himalayan Snowcock in the Ruby Mountains, few visiting birders have explored sites away from the snowcock area and Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge. Our one attempt at finding migrant oases in that region occurred in late May 1991, when our best "find" was the small town of Montello and a large ranch complex to its north. (Red-eyed Vireo and 4 Bobolinks were the rarest birds seen, but there were 50 Western Tanagers and 50 Lazuli

Buntings present as well.) And just across the border to the east, the tiny "hamlet" of Lucin, Utah, first discovered by Utah birder Craig Kneedy, was excellent.



Hopefully this article does not come across as merely a summary of many of the best birding sites and rarities we have seen and found over the years. Instead, it is an attempt to show just how superb the birding potential is in many parts of the Great Basin, and how just a few interested people can discover a great deal. Although more and more fine birding areas continue to be discovered in Nevada, Utah, and Idaho, and many of the now-known sites are producing more and more records of migrant concentrations and rarities, there is still a great deal of additional exploration needed. Most sites could use much more regular coverage. Some others are undoubtedly still waiting to be discovered. The true status and distribution of many species in the Great Basin are still poorly known. Such areas as eastern and northern Nevada (has anyone tried checking for migrants in the Gerlach area? At Denio?), southwestern Idaho, and western Utah are in particular need. Observers are encouraged to get out and explore. They should study the status of species in better-worked surrounding states for possible clues as to avian status and seasonal occurrence in these under-worked areas. And lastly, observers are encouraged to bird in other regions such as along the Pacific coast and back East, so that they may see large numbers of what are potential vagrant-species to the Great Basin. Taking such trips is certainly the best way to learn plumages and calls of many hard-to-identify species such as shorebirds, jaegers, gulls, *empidonax* flycatchers, and fall warblers.



In 1994, Shawneen and I moved from California to Cape May, New Jersey, a superb place to study migration. We are very happy here. But when people ask us what we miss most about leaving the birding scene in the West, we don't hesitate in our answer: oasis birding in the desert Southwest and Great Basin!

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## Status of the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher in Nevada *Empidonax traillii extimus*

Ken Voget

The Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, *Empidonax traillii extimus*, is one of five recognized sub-species of Willow Flycatcher (*E. traillii*) occurring in North America, and is one of ten recognized North American species of *Empidonax*. First described in 1948 by A.R. Phillips, from a collection