

## **Birds of the San Jacinto Valley Important Bird Area**



## The San Jacinto Valley



*“Through this beautiful valley runs a good-sized river...on whose banks are large, shady groves... All its plain is full of flowers, fertile pastures, and other vegetation.”*

So wrote Juan Bautista De Anza in 1774, describing the San Jacinto Valley as he came down from the mountains on his expedition from Tubac, Arizona, to San Francisco. When he came to what we now call Mystic Lake in the northern part of the valley, he wrote:

*“We came to the banks of a large and pleasing lake, several leagues in circumference and as full of white geese as of water, they being so numerous that it looked like a large, white glove.”*

It is clear from these early descriptions that the San Jacinto Valley has long been a haven for wildlife. While much of the valley has been developed over the years, the San Jacinto Valley is still amazingly rich with birds and other wildlife, and has the potential to remain so in perpetuity.

This pamphlet describes a few of the many birds that make the San Jacinto Valley their home. Some species are rare and need protection, while others are common. Some migrate to the San Jacinto Valley from thousands of miles away, while others spend their entire lives within the confines of the valley. Our hope is that you get to know the birds of the San Jacinto Valley, and are moved to help protect them for future generations.

The **San Jacinto Valley** is the floodplain of the San Jacinto River in western Riverside County. More than a century ago, much of the Valley was converted to agriculture, and the farming communities of San Jacinto, Hemet, Nuevo, and Lakeview were founded. Crops currently grown include alfalfa, corn and silage wheat for a thriving dairy industry, as well as winter wheat, potatoes,

carrots and other vegetables. In recent decades, the towns have grown and spread, converting much of the surrounding farmland to urban uses.

For the most part, urbanization has not spread north of the Ramona Expressway. This part of the valley, with its combination of wetlands, uncultivated grasslands and alkali flats, dairies and cropland, remains a mecca for birds, especially raptors (birds of prey), grassland species and water birds such as the elegant **Snowy Egret**.





In recognition of the region's value, the San Jacinto Wildlife Area (SJWA) was established in 1979 to preserve upland and wetland habitats and provide public hunting areas. River channels were replanted to riparian woodland, rare plants were protected, and recycled water was used to create seasonal and permanent wetlands. These practices and policies continue today.



In 2001, the National Audubon Society recognized the northern San Jacinto Valley as an Important Bird Area (IBA) of Global Concern, based on scientific criteria. The IBA includes the SJWA, much of the northern San Jacinto Valley, Lake Perris, part of the Badlands to the east, portions of the Lakeview and Bernasconi Hills, and a discontinuous riparian woodland along San Timeteo Creek.



Recently, thousands of new homes have been proposed immediately to the south of the SJWA, and millions of square feet of warehouses are proposed immediately to the north. These developments are a direct threat to the Valley's bird life. In response to these and other threats, in 2013 the National Audubon Society recognized the San Jacinto Valley IBA as warranting special attention and protection. This booklet is a part of that effort.





**Raptors** (birds of prey) are one of the highlights of the San Jacinto Valley. Over twenty species occur here, often in concentrations as high as anywhere in North America. There is no place in southern California where so many hawks, owls, falcons and eagles can be found so close to burgeoning human population centers. The San Jacinto Valley Christmas Bird Count tallies an average of over 300 raptors within a 13-mile diameter circle. **Red-tailed Hawks** and **American Kestrels**, the two most familiar species, account for just over half of the total.



Several raptors are afforded special protection due to declining populations and habitat loss, such as **Swainson's Hawks**, which winter in South America and pass through the San Jacinto Valley on migration.



The majestic **Golden Eagle** is emblematic of wide-open spaces. With its wingspan of 6–7 feet, these formidable hunters can be seen soaring high overhead or sweeping down to the Valley floor in pursuit of jackrabbits and other prey. Golden Eagles have large territories (8-12 square miles) and range widely



over hills, grasslands, and croplands. There is an influx of northern birds in the winter, with a few breeding pairs remaining year-round. Most nests are placed on cliffs, but eagles will also use isolated trees or even transmission towers. Golden Eagles occur throughout the San Jacinto Valley IBA, from the Badlands across to the mountains bordering Lake Perris, and from San Timoteo Creek to the Lakeview Mountains.



One of our most handsome raptors is the **White-tailed Kite**.

Due to habitat loss, this graceful bird is a *Fully Protected* species. White-tailed Kites are most common in the San Jacinto Valley in winter, but a few can be found year-round, hovering over fields or perching on thin treetop branches. Winter roosts of over 50 White-tailed Kites are sometimes found at the



San Jacinto Wildlife Area. As their habitat continues to give way to urbanization, it will become harder for White-tailed Kites to find the extensive open space and abundant prey that they need.





**Northern Harriers** are one of the most common and conspicuous raptors in the San Jacinto Valley. Both the gray males and the brownish females are easily recognized by their white rumps and long wings held in a shallow “V”. Less obvious is their facial disk, similar to that of owls, which focuses sound to the ears, enabling them to locate mice rustling in the grass below even under low light conditions of dawn and dusk. They hunt by coursing back and forth low over the marshes and grasslands, then suddenly dropping, talons forward and wings back, when they locate prey. The valley is at the southern edge of their breeding range, and in winter most of

the harriers in the region are northern visitors. California lists the Northern Harrier as a *Species of Special Concern* because of declines in the breeding population from habitat loss.



Many raptors migrate from the northern plains and even the Arctic to winter in the San Jacinto Valley. **Ferruginous Hawks** arrive in October from their prairie nesting grounds, and linger in our relatively warm, snow-free climate until March, hunting gophers, ground squirrels and rabbits in farmers' fields and grasslands. Slightly larger than Red-tailed Hawks, Ferruginous Hawks often perch on power poles, fence posts or on the ground. Their pale heads and underparts stand out at a distance. Christmas Bird Count data confirm that the San Jacinto Valley is the best place in California to see these striking birds. One or more Ferruginous Hawks can usually be found in winter along Allessandro Boulevard in the northern portion of the IBA.





**Peregrine Falcons** (top photos) are a conservation success story. These awesome birds – probably the fastest of all animals -- were on the brink of extinction from pesticide pollution just a few decades ago. Now, with the worst pesticides banned and with dedicated reintroduction efforts, Peregrines are on the rebound. Still *Fully Protected*, Peregrines are one of the most dramatic birds of the San Jacinto Valley. Spend a day around the Wildlife Area wetlands and you have a good chance to see one of these lightning-fast predators chasing after some unlucky shorebird, coot or duck.



**Prairie Falcons** (at left) also inhabit the San Jacinto Valley IBA, where they hunt more often in dry open fields than the wetlands favored by Peregrines. These birds have a thin “sideburn” and tan coloration rather than the dark “helmet” and upperparts of Peregrine Falcons. They have a black “armpit” patch visible in flight. Prairie Falcons are a *California Species of Special Concern*.

Both falcons are most common in the San Jacinto Valley in the winter months, though in recent years, Peregrines have been showing up in late summer as well, perhaps due to the recent increase of breeding in California.





Our national bird, the **Bald Eagle**, is another beneficiary of conservation efforts. Like the Peregrine Falcon, Bald Eagles suffered greatly from pesticide poisoning as well as from irresponsible shooting. Happily, Bald Eagle populations on the rise in California and across the country. The prey they eat no longer carry heavy pesticide loads, and Bald Eagles are now *Fully Protected*. Adult Bald Eagles have the iconic white head and tail contrasting with a dark brown body. Young birds are less cleanly marked, with varying whitish patches under the wings and tail as they mature into adult plumage over a five year adolescence. Bald Eagles are often seen at the Wildlife Area and Lake Perris in the winter, feeding on fish as well as coots and other waterfowl.



Alkali flats, grasslands and crop edges are home to the **Burrowing Owl**. This charming small owl, most often seen in the morning and evening, lives in ground squirrel burrows and preys on insects and small rodents. Burrowing Owls are in decline over much of North America, and drastically so in western Riverside County, where urban development is crowding them out. This *California Species of Special Concern* can survive in farmland and other open areas, provided there are undisturbed places for their burrows. It will take public awareness and careful management for Burrowing Owls to thrive in the San Jacinto Valley.



If you see a ghostly white owl drift over you at night, or hear a raspy screech or strange ‘clicking’ calls, it is probably a **Barn Owl**. These are true night birds, rarely seen in daylight unless flushed from their roost or nest. Barn Owls often sit on power poles and fence posts, or fly along roads looking for mice, gophers, and rats. Abandoned buildings, holes in cliffs, and palm trees with dense “skirts” of dead fronds are favored nest sites in southern California. Barn Owl populations in southern California appear to be stable, but the species is declining in eastern North America.

## Birds of Open Country



The small but fierce **Loggerhead Shrike** looks like a miniature hawk with its hooked bill and black mask. Insects, small birds, lizards and mice are its prey. These unusual songbirds are found in grasslands and deserts throughout much of North America. Shrikes are often seen on fences or isolated bushes, or flying low with rapid wing beats, followed by a quick upward swoop to their next perch. They are a *Species of Special Concern* because of steep population declines in the south coast area from habitat degradation and development. As long as open habitat with abundant prey remains available, shrikes are likely to continue to thrive in the San Jacinto Valley.

One of the San Jacinto Valley's "specialty" birds is the **Mountain Bluebird**. In most years, flocks of these stunning sky-blue birds arrive in the fall from their mountain nesting grounds throughout western North America and grace the valley's grasslands and croplands until spring. They particularly favor the alkali flats around Mystic Lake and plowed fields anywhere in the valley, where they can be seen hovering a few feet above the ground or perching on fences or low shrubs.



**Western Meadowlarks** are often seen flying low over the fields with rapid wing beats, seemingly barely able to keep their stout bodies airborne, or singing their clear songs from fence posts or dirt clods. This familiar species is the perhaps most easily seen of the many grassland birds that frequent the San Jacinto Valley.







**Mountain Plovers** are rare birds of alkali flats and fallow fields. This subtly-colored dry-land bird flies south from its high plains nesting grounds to winter in scattered locations in the southwest, including the San Jacinto Valley. Small flocks can sometimes be seen coursing low over the fields around Bridge Street and elsewhere in the Valley. They seem to disappear among the dirt clods upon landing, sitting quietly but alertly, frequently scanning the sky for raptors.

The Mountain Plover is listed as *Near Threatened* by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the World Wildlife Fund. It is in decline because it needs wide-open spaces everywhere it lives, putting it at odds with development on both its nesting and wintering grounds.



## Wetlands and Waterbirds



Wetlands range from lakes and ponds to marshes and mudflats. Some are permanent; others, like Mystic Lake, are seasonal or ephemeral. Ample nutrients generate abundant plants, algae and insects, which support a diverse array of birds. This complex food web includes ducks, rails, shorebirds, herons, egrets, songbirds and raptors.



Long ago, most natural wetlands were drained and converted to farms and towns. California's Central Valley was once covered with vast marshes, and early explorers described Mystic Lake in the San Jacinto Valley as teeming with waterbirds. To reclaim some of that natural heritage, State and Federal governments have created wildlife refuges. The San Jacinto Wildlife Area is such a place, with 1,100 acres of wetlands.

There are many other wetlands in the San Jacinto Valley besides those at the Wildlife Area. Some were created for birds and some for other purposes, but birds use them all. For example, the Eastern Municipal Water District has managed wetlands to help clean residential wastewater. These managed wetlands provide habitat for Tricolored Blackbirds, White-faced Ibises, and many other wetland birds. Flooded dairy fields and disposal ponds are great places for birds to congregate. Several duck clubs have been established to attract waterfowl for hunting, but the habitat they create is used by myriads of other wetland birds as well.

## Waterfowl

These are some of the common ducks of the San Jacinto Valley (all shown here are males).



Mallard



Gadwall



Green-winged Teal



Northern Shoveler





American Wigeon



Cinnamon Teal



Northern Pintail



Ruddy Duck



At times, **Mystic Lake** is prominent Valley feature. This ephemeral lake forms when heavy rains force the San Jacinto River out of its channel into a broad shallow basin. The lake might last part of a season or for several years, depending on rainfall. At its peak, it can measure three miles by one mile, and supports thousands of ducks, grebes, gulls, pelicans, and herons. As Mystic Lake dries and the shoreline recedes, new habitat is created for shorebirds that feed on invertebrates in the mud and shallow water. The food chain is extended one more link when Peregrine Falcons and Bald Eagles are attracted to the huge concentration of water birds.





Flooded fields and mudflats are habitat for migrants as well as local residents. **Long-billed Dowitchers** probe mudflats and marsh edges for invertebrates, always watchful for falcons or other raptors. In spring, they molt from their gray winter garb into a colorful breeding plumage and set forth on a 2,000-3,000 mile flight to the northern edge of Alaska, where they nest.

Another long-distance migratory shorebird, the Whimbrel, flies from the Arctic to as far as the southern tip of South America. The individual in front at right was banded in Peru during the winter, and was later seen at Mystic Lake where it stopped to fatten up on its 6,000 mile journey to the Arctic.



North America's largest shorebird, the **Long-billed Curlew** is common in migration and winter along the coast and in the Imperial Valley, but rare in inland Southern California except for the San Jacinto Valley. They frequent alfalfa fields, pond edges and mudflats. While their population seems stable, there is still concern over the status of this prairie nester. Like the much rarer Mountain Plover, these curlews range over much of the San Jacinto Valley in the winter in search of food.



**American Avocets** are found throughout open country in western North America, including California. Remarkably tolerant of intense summer heat, they nest near the edges of the shallow water of drying ponds, mudflats and even wastewater treatment plants. They sweep their upturned bills back and forth through the water searching for brine flies and other invertebrates.



**Black-necked Stilts** use the same shallow wetlands as American Avocets. They lay their eggs in scrapes on small islands, dikes or vegetation clumps surrounded by open mudflats. Stilts are extremely noisy and challenge anyone trespassing on their territory. This behavior stems from high nest predation, a consequence of nesting on open ground. In the San Jacinto Valley, Black-necked Stilts can be found at dairy ponds, duck clubs, the SJWA and in wet years, Mystic Lake.





The San Jacinto Valley's cattail and tule marshes are home to several secretive species, often heard but rarely seen by the casual observer.



A morning visit to a marsh can be a noisy experience, with the insistent rattle and chatter of **Marsh Wrens** and the rollicking notes of male **Common Yellowthroats**, with their characteristic black masks and bright yellow throat and chest. Females are a more sedate olive-yellow and lack the male's mask.

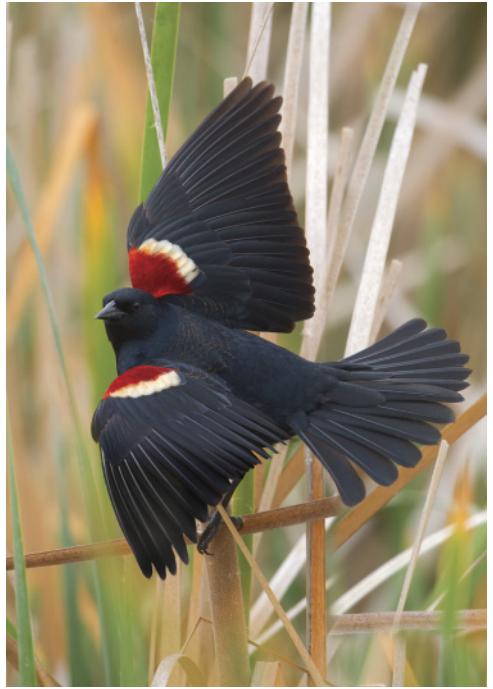


Occasional squawks and 'whinnys' indicate the presence of **Virginia** and **Sora Rails**. With luck, these secretive birds may be seen as they work their way among the cattails, searching for aquatic insects.



Two *Species of Special Concern* depend both on wetlands and grasslands/croplands. One is the **Tricolored Blackbird**. This colonial nester is a native Californian, with very few breeding locations beyond our borders. Until recently, “trikes,” as they are sometimes called, had a robust population in the Central Valley, but is now in steep decline. Similarly, the last decade has seen significant losses in Southern California, where the population has declined from 30,000 to only 6,000 birds in 2011 and even fewer today. One of their last strongholds is the San Jacinto Valley, where they nest in marshes and forage in nearby fields and hillsides. They frequent dairies, eating spilled grain and sometimes nesting in lush fields of silage wheat grown for cattle feed.

Conflicts arise if the blackbirds have not completed nesting by harvest time. Crop buyouts have saved some colonies, but others have been lost. San Jacinto Wildlife Area management, in cooperation with San Bernardino Valley Audubon and Audubon California, is working to create good nesting habitats as an alternative to farmers’ fields.

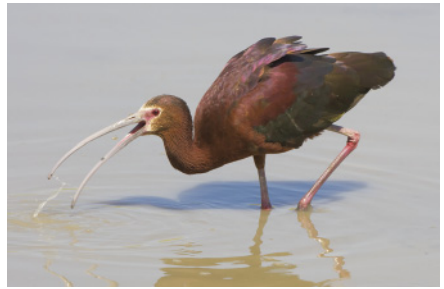


Compared to the more common and familiar **Red-winged Blackbird** (below at right), male Tricolored Blackbirds have darker red ‘shoulders’ with a broad white edge, while male red-wings have more orange-red shoulders with narrow buff edges.





Like the Tricolored Blackbird, the **White-faced Ibis** is a *California Species of Concern*. Both need marshes for nesting and grasslands and croplands for food. A favorite ibis foraging strategy is to seek out recently irrigated alfalfa and hay fields, where they feast on the insects driven up from the soil by the water. At nesting colonies, one can watch ibis streaming out to agricultural fields miles away and returning with food for their nestlings. Urban development directly threatens the continued existence of White-faced Ibis in the San Jacinto Valley.



**American Coots** are the most common and obvious marsh birds in the San Jacinto Valley. They are at home on open water or swimming in and out of the cattails with heads bobbing, picking at the vegetation. Coots are extremely common in winter, and are heavily preyed on by a variety of raptors.







Lake Perris, part of the State Water Project that brings water from the Sacramento River to southern California, is popular for human recreation and is also used by thousands of birds. The lake's deep water attracts many fish-eating birds. **Great Blue Herons** (below right) nest here, and **Ospreys** (below left) can be seen year round carrying fish in their talons. Large numbers of grebes, loons, ducks, and gulls winter on the lake.



**Bonaparte's Gulls** are common and entertaining winter residents, with their buoyant flight and patterned wings. In breeding plumage they sport a striking blackish-gray head.





Lake Perris supports hundreds of Western and **Clark's Grebes**, with long necks, sharp yellowish beaks and streamlined bodies adapted for pursuing small fish. Both species breed here, but are most abundant in winter. The juvenile Clark's Grebe below is hitching a ride on its parent's back.



Lake Perris is the best place in inland southern California to see **Horned Grebes**, a small species usually associated with coastal waters.



Some birds divide their time between Lake Perris and the San Jacinto Valley. Gulls, **American White Pelicans**, egrets and raptors can be seen flying high over the hills of the Wildlife Area in the morning and evening, heading to and from Lake Perris.



## Birds of Riparian Woodland



Riparian woodland consists of willows, cottonwoods and other trees, often with a diverse understory of mulefat and other shrubs and a dense groundcover of moisture-loving plants. It occurs at the edges of streams, lakes, marshes and other places with ample water. Shade, nest sites, water and abundant insects draw many birds to riparian areas. The San Jacinto Wildlife Area and the San Jacinto River channel have some of the most extensive riparian woodland in the region, providing excellent nesting and foraging habitat for a variety of birds. Some species are found only in riparian woodland, and many birds from drier habitats visit riparian woodlands to drink and bathe.

As California developed, riparian habitat steadily disappeared due to farming, urban growth and river channelization. Only 5-10% of our original riparian areas are left. Besides habitat loss, riparian birds must contend with non-native **Brown-headed Cowbirds**: brood parasites which lay their eggs in songbird nests. The large cowbird chicks crowd



out the songbird nestlings, and the songbird parents raise cowbirds instead of their own young. Cowbirds arrived in California a century ago, spreading from the eastern United States by colonizing tree-filled ranches and towns in formerly inhospitable terrain. Cowbirds have contributed to serious declines in several songbird species in California and elsewhere.



**Least Bell's Vireos**, found only in southern California, were hit hard by habitat loss and cowbird parasitism, and consequently were placed on the *Endangered Species* list to implement actions designed to bring them back to healthy population levels. They are now recovering strongly and have recently colonized the San Jacinto Valley, thanks to cowbird trapping in key breeding areas and region-wide protection of riparian growth.

This small grayish bird favors dense cover, and you are more likely to hear it than see it. The loud and persistent song was described by the ornithologist Ralph Hoffman\* as:

*“a series of low husky warbled notes ending with a rising inflection, like an anxious query; an instant later the song is repeated with a downward phrase at the close as if the question were answered,  
cheedlecheedlecheeee;  
cheedlecheedlechee.”*



The **Yellow Warbler** has made even more of a comeback than the Least Bell's Vireo, and now breeds in many riparian groves in southern California. In autumn they fly to Central and South America to spend the winter with other migrants from North America. Many of the birds we see in the summer follow the same pattern, and are called neotropical migrants.

\* Birds of the Pacific States, 1927, Houghton Mifflin Co.

Another bird that has returned as a nesting species is the metallic blue and white **Tree Swallow**. They are cavity nesters, typically using abandoned woodpecker holes to raise their young. However, they compete with introduced House Sparrows and European Starlings for nest cavities, making it hard for the swallows to maintain their numbers in southern California. The provision of nest boxes, including many at the San Jacinto Wildlife Area, has aided Tree Swallow recovery.



Many other birds rely on riparian woodlands. Some are transients and summer breeders, including the colorful **Bullock's Oriole**, which builds its hanging nest most often in cottonwood trees. Other species are permanent

residents, like the **Nuttall's Woodpecker** (lower left) and the **Red-shouldered Hawk**, with its striking wing pattern and characteristic loud kee-yerkee-yer call.





## Scrubland Birds



A surprising number of bird species live in dry scrubland or grassland. While some can make a living in “pure” grassy hillsides, **California Gnatcatchers** cannot. This tiny rare songbird (upper left) is closely tied to **Coastal Sage Scrub**, an uncommon and declining type of scrub habitat. Only a few pairs of California Gnatcatchers remain in the hilly portions of the San Jacinto Valley IBA. California Gnatcatchers are listed as *Threatened*, and recovery is proving elusive as more and more of their scrubby habitat is degraded and lost by frequent fires, development, and the spread of non-native grasses.



The coastal race of **Bell's Sparrow** (lower left), previously known as Bell's Sage Sparrow, is another bird closely tied to Coastal Sage Scrub and the more widespread **Chaparral** habitat. Endemic to California and Baja California, it can be found in the hills around Lake Perris, the Lakeview Mountains and the Badlands. **Rufous-crowned Sparrows** (lower right) prefer hilly grassland with scattered shrubs. Coastal Bell's Sparrow and Rufous-crowned Sparrow populations are in decline, but both species are able to use a broader variety of scrub habitats and have a more extensive range than the California Gnatcatcher.

## Unusual Visitors

Situated on a major flyway close to a diversity of other habitats, the San Jacinto Valley occasionally hosts rare vagrants.

Some, such as the **American Golden Plover** (left below), are seen every decade or so. Others, including the **Glossy Ibis** (right below - nearly identical to the White-faced Ibis) are considerably rarer.



Some 'visits' are once-in-a-lifetime events, such as that of a juvenile **Gyr Falcon** (below left) that stayed near the Wildlife Area for a few weeks in early 2012, living high on easy-to-catch coots. Gyrfalcons, the largest, most powerful, and perhaps the most impressive of the falcons, are high Arctic birds. None had ever been seen this far south in California, so this one attracted birders from far and wide. A young **Iceland Gull**, (below right) only the second record for southern California, made a similarly brief visit to the Lakeview dairies in early 2013.



## The San Jacinto Valley and the Pacific Flyway

Each year at least a billion birds migrate along the Pacific Flyway, which stretches from the North Slope of Alaska to Central and South America. However, these birds are only a fraction of those that used the flyway a century ago. Habitat destruction, water shortages and diversions, diminishing food sources and climate change all threaten the birds of the Pacific Flyway.

The birds of the Pacific Flyway depend on a diverse chain of habitats from the Arctic tundra and northwestern rainforest to tropical beaches and mangroves. The Audubon Society is helping to preserve and restore these vital links along the way, starting with an ambitious effort to identify, monitor and protect the most important places for birds.

The San Jacinto Valley (arrow at right) was recognized by the National Audubon Society in 2013 as an Important Bird Area of Global Significance



under serious threat.

Five of the twenty-four *Priority Species* for North America are found here: Black-necked Stilt, Long-billed Curlew, Swainson's Hawk, Tricolored Blackbird, and Western Sandpiper. This designation means that there are initial signs of population decline and enough potential threats to warrant a close watch on their status.

It will take a concerted and cooperative effort involving the public and private sectors to ensure that the San Jacinto Valley continues as a vital link in the Pacific Flyway. By protecting birds, we are also safeguarding America's great natural heritage for future generations, preserving our shared quality of life and fostering a healthier environment.



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American Coot feeding Young



Vermilion Flycatcher

Front Cover: Merlin (pale “prairie” race) with White-throated Swift

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