

2004-05 Winter Bird Survey

Ballona Freshwater Marsh
At Playa Vista

Playa del Rey, California

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INTRODUCTION

The Ballona Freshwater Marsh at Playa Vista (hereafter “BFM”) was surveyed on five mornings and one afternoon between 07 Dec. 2004 and 22 January 2005, to continue monitoring seasonal usage of the site by birds. Surveys were generally conducted in the morning, between 7:00 am and 10:00 am, and lasted roughly 2 hours, with the exception of the 05 January survey, conducted in the afternoon.

These results may be compared with the 2003-04 effort, but note that this was conducted between 30 Nov. and 21 Dec. and covered just 4 dates. The gap in days, and additional survey days, of this year’s effort was due consistent rains, including an exceptional 2-week rainy period that began in late December after just three surveys had been run.

METHODS

A “walking transect” technique was employed, whereby during each visit, all birds were recorded and the times encountered. Territory maps were not made, as most species are not territorial in fall, and are not typically “on territory”.

RESULTS AND SUMMARY

A total of 64 species was observed over 6 visits, with 3 additional fly-overs (Peregrine Falcon, American Crow and Great-tailed Grackle). This is down slightly from the 72 species recorded in 4 visits in 2003-04.

For the two most common resident songbirds, Song Sparrow and Common Yellowthroat, numbers of the former dropped a bit (Ave. 14.25 vs. 11.2 per visit), but numbers of Common Yellowthroat were down by over half (Ave. 23.75 vs. 8.8 per visit).

Numbers of non-breeding (i.e. winter visitant) songbirds, however, were mixed. In both 2003-04 and 2004-05, the wintering songbird community was dominated by Yellow-rumped (Audubon’s) Warbler and White-crowned Sparrow. The number of White-crowns surged this year (78.5) vs. last year (25.25), while counts of Yellow-rumped Warblers dipped (47.5 vs. 33.5). Two wintering songbirds (Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Ruby-crowned Kinglet) were recorded in moderate numbers this year (2-4 birds/visit) that were absent or nearly so (gnatcatcher) last winter. Both are insectivores that prefer scrub and scrubby woodland, and it is possible that the maturing scrub and riparian vegetation made conditions favorable for them.

On the other hand, two common winterers, Savannah Sparrow and Lincoln’s Sparrow, were reduced by about half from last year. Both winter in grassland and scrub habitat. It is likely that these numbers will always be variable from year, based on local and regional conditions. (Our wintering Savannah Sparrows breed in moist grassland in the Intermountain West, and Lincoln’s in montane meadows from the Sierra Nevada north.) Other wintering songbirds at BFM (e.g. Hermit Thrush, House Wren, Golden-crowned

Sparrow) were recorded in such low numbers as to make comparisons with last year difficult.

With waterfowl, on the other hand, patterns were much more dramatic. The numbers of wintering waterbirds were greatly reduced in 2004-05 over the year before. The biggest losers were American Coot (473 vs. 17), American Wigeon (74 vs. <1), Gadwall (17 vs. 8) and Mallard (16 vs. 4). A few waterfowl species' numbers were comparable (Green-winged Teal) or even higher (Northern Shoveler, Ruddy Duck) than last year, but these were only in the low dozens; shovelers left BFM by the end of December (after which time c. 40 were seen regularly on the flooded salt pan of the Ballona Wetlands). The lack of hundreds of American Coots and dozens of wigeon certainly contributed the impression that there were many fewer waterfowl in the 2004-05 season. Whether this was due to water conditions (i.e. rain) affecting food supplies, increased cattail growth reducing the amount of open water), or simply the result of annual variation remains to be seen.

Winter shorebird numbers, notably Long-billed Dowitcher and Black-necked Stilt, were greatly reduced over last year, but this was likely due to water levels/rainfall more than anything else. The same may be said for large waders (e.g. Snowy Egret, Great Blue Heron), which were imperfectly surveyed, since they tend to gather irregularly, but generally in the late afternoon at BFM.