

BIRDS OF THE LAS POSADAS REGION

by

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The Las Posadas area is a delightful spot for the bird student. Several sorts of habitats are found here within easy walking distance so there is a wide variety of birds represented. The shaded woods of the pine forests harbor different birds than do the adjacent brushy slopes and one need walk only a few minutes down the canyon to reach open fields and a willow-bordered stream each of which has its own community of birds.

Because of an extended account of birds of this region might be confusing to the beginner, only the commonest birds will be described. As a further help, the birds will be arranged according to the habitat in which they are usually found. The beginner should be warned though that no bird is found strictly in one habitat; their assignments here are meant only as a general guide.

### BIRDS OF THE REDWOOD - PINE - FIR FOREST

Western Flycatcher (*Empidonax difficilis*). In the early morning the explosive "psswit" call of the Western Flycatcher is one of the commonest calls to be heard coming from the shady parts of the dense forest. The bird is of small (warbler) size with brown back, yellowish breast, a white eye ring, and two whitish wing bars.

Solitary Vireo (*Vireo solitarius*). This is another retiring bird of the deep woods. It would be seldom noticed if it were not for its persistent cheerful song. Some say it sounds like: "Johnny, come here - hurry up!" It is a grey bird of warbler size, with white under parts, white eye ring and line to bill, and white wing bars.

Warbling Vireo. (*Vireo gilvus*). From the dense trees anywhere along the stream above or below camp headquarters the commonest song to be heard in early summer is that of the warbling vireo. The song bounces up and down in a series of cheery phases at all hours of the day. The plumage is brownish grey; there is a dull white line over the eye but the white eye ring of the solitary vireo is lacking.

Black Throated Grey Warbler (*Dendroica nigrescens*). A wheezy "zee-ee, zee-ee, zee-ee zee, zip" from high in the tall conifers is usually all one can detect of this warbler unless after much neck craning the bird is seen out on the tip of a spray. On rare occasions the bird may be close enough to show its identifying marks; two white stripes on the cheek contrasting sharply with its black head.

Western Winter Wren (*Tannus hiemalis pacificus*). From among the dense woodwardia ferns along the stream between camp headquarters and the swimming pool a sudden burst of song that pours out in abandon as though it will never stop. The bird can be identified easily as it slips through the foliage by its extremely short tail and its habit of frequently bobbing.

Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Nuttallornis borealis*). This flycatcher is a bird of the tree tops. It is usually seen on a dead stub towards the top of one of the highest trees. Its strong call can be heard for half a mile or more. Some think the bird says "Hip, three cheers." Others think it sounds more like "Quit, we're here." It is seldom that the singer comes low enough to show its dark sides separated by a light line down the middle of the breast. Its larger size distinguishes it from the wood pewee.

Yellow Warbler (*Dendroica aestiva*). Perhaps the loudest of the many calls that come from the deep woods bordering the stream up the Metcalf Trail is that of the Yellow Warbler. It is a descending series of notes sharp and clear in quality. The male is a canary yellow in color, the female greenish yellow.

Pileolated Warbler (*Wilsonia pusilla*). The pileolated warbler is quite similar to the yellow warbler but has a small area of velvety black on the crown. It is usually found foraging in the lower bushes near a stream. On the Metcalf Trail its song is heard coming from the occasional side canyons that cross the trail. Its song is a series of strong chirps which gradually increase in intensity.

Crested Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*). A glimpse of the solid blue lower back and long blackish crest distinguishes this jay from the California jay. Its call is harsher and has less of the shrillness of the California jay.

Brown Creeper (*Certhia familiaris*). Another bird that is usually first located by its song is the brown creeper. A thin, very high "scrap" from somewhere in the forest will make us aware of a small bird with markings that match the bark of the tree trunk. It creeps slowly up the trunks of trees as it searches for insects hidden in the crevices of the bark. It takes a trained ear not to confuse the note of the creeper with that of the golden crowned kinglet which is also found in the tops of conifers.

Wood Pewee (*Myiochanes richardsoni*). A song that is mingled with the confusion of notes heard in the spring and early summer in the shady woods is the raspy descending "pee-ee" of the wood Pewee. The singer when located will be found to be sitting more upright on its perch than most birds and occasionally launching forth after an insect. When the bird turns toward the observer one can see the dark sides of the breast divided by a narrow lighter colored line.

Western Tanager (*Piranga ludoviciana*). It is not easy to understand how a bird as brightly colored as the male tanager can remain so inconspicuous in the evergreen forest. Many campers, if not most, go through the entire season at Las Posadas without seeing one, although there are literally dozens of brilliant birds in the trees above, each one of which would be a rare privilege indeed to see close at hand. The plumage is brilliant yellow with black wings. When the bird is turned toward the observer the crimson head can be seen. The song which is frequently to be heard in the vicinity of camp headquarters sounds a little like a robin but is made up of shorter phrases and is hoarser and lower in pitch. The call is a short "prit-it".

#### BIRDS OF THE OPEN FIELDS WITH OCCASIONAL OAKS

Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*). This is a large sparrow that can be easily identified by a marked pattern of brown and white stripes on the head, a rounded tail edged with white, and a small dark spot in the middle of the white breast. It has an attractive song full of trills and sweet notes.

Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*). From among the oaks of the grassy hillsides a dry extended trill may be heard often from several directions in breeding season. The singer is a tiny sparrow, inconspicuous except for a reddish brown crown.

Junco (*Junco hyemalis*). These birds are of sparrow size and are distinguished by their black heads and white outer tail feathers. The song is a trill similar to the chipping sparrows but shorter and more musical.

California Jay (*Aphelocoma californica*). The California Jay is a lighter blue color than the crested jay. It has no crest, is slimmer and has a grey breast so should be easily distinguished from its cousin.

Bush Tit (*Psaltriparus minimus*). Except during the nesting season, bush tits are found in flocks of twenty or thirty, usually in the oaks on the hillsides. As the birds feed actively they utter quiet twittering notes. They are of about warbler size but have a slightly longer tail. The upper parts are grey the under parts dull whitish.

Western Blue Bird (*Sialia mexicana*). The head and upper parts of the blue-bird are a deep blue, the throat is blue, and the rest of the under parts are chestnut. The female is much paler.

Red-shafted Flicker (*Colaptes cafer*). This is a large woodpecker with broad wings and undulating flight. Its white rump may show as it swoops up to alight vertically on a dead branch. A flash of red may show on the wings and if the bird turns toward the observer a black band shows against the grey breast.

#### BIRDS OF THE BRUSHY SLOPES

Mountain Quail (*Oreortyx picta*). These are shy denizens of the dense brush seldom seen unless one surprises them by chance. In the spring and early summer the male repeats a single loud call, a resonant, far-reaching "quork". By patient stalking an observer may discover a large quail with a rich reddish brown throat and long straight plume.

Ash Throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens*). A long rolling "prip" or perhaps "Too-weerp-lookateer" will attract one to this bird. This is a rather lanky bird with bushy head and long reddish brown tail.

Wren-tit (*Chamaea fasciata*). This bird might be heard a hundred times before it is seen. The song that drifts out from the dense brush of the hillsides repeats the same staccato note finally running the series rapidly together. A diligent watcher tracing down the source might catch glimpses of the bird as it moves about in the tangle and note the small grey body with a very long tail held at a slight angle above the body.

Bewick Wren (*Thryomanes bewicki*). A clear high song with the burry quality of the wren closing in a very delicate fine trill might attract one to this bird. A rather long bill, long tipped-up tail, and white line over the eye will identify it.

Orange Crowned Warbler (*Vermivora celata*). In the spring if one were to count the number of bird songs heard in the brush fields this warbler would probably head the list. The song is a faint trill, rising a little in pitch, then falling and fading toward the end. There are no distinctive markings. The upper parts are greenish and the lower parts dull yellow.

Spotted Towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*). A loud rustle of dry leaves might attract the observer to the spot where a spotted towhee is busily scratching with both feet at once under the dense brush. This is a colorful bird with black head and neck contrasting with a white belly, reddish brown flanks and white spots on the tail.

BIRDS NEAR THE WILLOW-BORDERED STREAM (Meadow Below Camp)

House Wren (*Troglodytes Aedon*). House wrens nest regularly in the walls of the ruined house by the meadow below camp. They are similar in appearance to the Bewick wren but have no white line over the eye.

Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*). A few minutes watching of the black phoebes that are found around the old farm buildings may lead one to a mud nest plastered on the wall of one of the buildings. The phoebe is a large flycatcher which can easily be identified by the black of the head neck and upper parts contrasting with the pure white area of the belly.

Brown Towhee (*Pipilo crissalis*). This is a stout brown bird with longish tail to be found in tangles of blackberries near the stream. It will be recognized by most as a bird that lives in or close to his own backyard.

Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*). This familiar song of the song sparrow will disclose the singer - a brown bird with streaked breast with a dark blotch in the middle.

House Finch: Linnet (*Carpodacus mexicanus*). This bird sings with a rapid joyous succession of notes. The male is bright crimson on head and breast, the female is greyish brown heavily streaked on the under parts.

HOW TO OBSERVE BIRDS

Birds are most active, their plumage is most brilliant and their songs are best in spring and early summer. After the nesting season they become quieter and less conspicuous. Many birds are seen in Central California only during their migrations north and south. Weather conditions and availability of food supplies also influence their habits. They seek food most actively during early morning and twilight hours so are most easily seen at those times. It is difficult to find many birds during the middle of the day - especially in warm, summer weather.

Locating and observing birds requires patience and quiet concentration. A good pair of field glasses is a big help but many species can be seen and identified without them. A bird feeding stand near a window at home will give one an opportunity to study many birds which otherwise might be difficult to see.

Supplementary list of birds which should be found in the Las Posadas area during part of each year:

Turkey Vulture; Buzzard - (*Cathartes aura*)  
Sharp-shinned Hawk - (*Accipiter velox*)  
Cooper Hawk - (*Accipiter cooperi*)  
Red-tailed Hawk - (*Buteo borealis*)  
California Quail - (*Lophortyx californica*)  
Mourning Dove - (*Zenaidura macroura*)  
Allen Humming Bird - (*Selasphorus alleni*)  
Anna Humming Bird - (*Calypte anna*)  
Hairy Woodpecker - (*Dryobates villosus*)  
Downy Woodpecker - (*Dryobates pubescens*)  
Plain Titmouse - (*Parus inornatus*)  
Slender-billed Nuthatch - (*Sitta carolinensis*)  
California Thrasher - (*Toxostoma redivivum*)

Hermit Thrush - (*Hylocichla guttata*)  
Western Robin - (*Turdus (Planesticus) migratorius*)  
Western Gnat catcher - (*Polioptila caerulea*)  
Golden Crowned Kinglet - (*Regulus calendula*)  
Pipit - (*Anthus (Rubescens) spinoletta*)  
Hutton Vireo - (*Virco huttoni*)  
Cowbird - (*Molothrus ater*)  
Western Meadowlark - (*Icterus parisorum*)  
Black-headed Grosbeak - (*Hedymeles (Zamelodia) melanocephalus*)  
Green-backed Goldfinch - (*Spinus (Astragalinus) psaltria*)  
Lawrence Goldfinch - (*Spinus (Astragalinus) lawrencei*)