

How African Birds Like the Pin-tailed Whydah Got to LA, and What to Expect Now They're Here

For Pasadena Audubon Society Wrentit Newsletter

By Renée Fabian

Summer brings an inevitable spectacle for birders: The feisty, charismatic courtship ritual of the male Pin-tailed Whydah, his long tail feathers dancing behind him. Native to Africa, Pin-tailed Whydahs have made themselves a comfortable home in Los Angeles County.

Pin-tailed Whydahs aren't the only African birds who now call Southern California home. The Northern Red Bishop's bright orange cloak is easy to spot in certain riparian habitats during the summer. Less common now, the Orange-cheeked Waxbill and Bronze Mannikin have also called SoCal home.

So where did these introduced African birds come from? And what can we expect now that they're here?

The first reports of the Pin-tailed Whydah in SoCal date back to the 1990s, the result of releases from the pet trade (Garrett & Garrett, 2016). They were first found primarily in La Mirada in Los Angeles County to the Santa Ana River in Orange County.

While some of these first Pin-tailed Whydahs may have come directly from Africa, many of them landed in SoCal from Puerto Rico (Garrett & Garrett, 2016). Escaped Pin-tailed Whydahs established themselves in Puerto Rico in the 1960s and '70s (Crystal-Ornelas et al., 2017).

Similarly, Northern Red Bishops are popular in the pet trade, and escaped birds started populations in SoCal. They were first reported in Los Angeles County in the 1970s. By 1991, Northern Red Bishops were breeding along the Los Angeles River, and an estimated 600 birds lived in the area by 1998 (Johnson & Garrett, 1994; Pranty & Garrett, 2011).

Once birds escape from the pet trade, "You really don't need very many individuals to start a population," said Allison Shultz, associate curator of ornithology at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. "Even a handful of individuals can establish and do pretty well."

Pin-tailed Whydahs are still popular pets in Southern California, said Shultz, and it's very possible additional birds escape into the wild. Northern Red Bishops are also still available in the pet trade. (A male Pin-tailed Whydah can be purchased for \$120 to \$135. Northern Red Bishops cost \$65 to \$70.)

But these two non-native birds may have different fates in Southern California. The Northern Red Bishop seems to be declining and is probably not doing as well, said Shultz. It's unclear exactly why that might be, but it could be due to their habitat needs.

"Bishops ... need a certain riparian habitat that is hard to find in Southern California," Shultz said. Bishops prefer marshy habitats or river bottoms with tall grasses, especially *Echinochloa spp.* grasses. (Pranty & Garrett, 2011; Gleditsch et al., 2020).

The Pin-tailed Whydah, on the other hand, is thriving. That's likely due to their relationship with the Scaly-breasted Munia. Munias came to SoCal from India and were also introduced through the pet trade (Shultz, 2025). Whydahs parasitize Scaly-breasted Munias.

Pin-tailed Whydahs are obligate brood parasites, which means they don't raise their own young. The female Whydah lays her eggs in a host species' nest, and the host is left to do all the hard work of raising the Whydah's young. That means they needed a host in Los Angeles County in order to survive.

Enter Scaly-breasted Munias, who build domed nests similar to the Pin-tailed Whydah's host species in Africa (Garrett & Garrett, 2016). "That species is exploding, and so because the Pin-tailed Whydahs can actually parasitize that species, they have quite a lot of breeding opportunities," Shultz said.

It's unclear if the Pin-tailed Whydah will stick with the Scaly-breasted Munia as their only host. But so far, the Whydah isn't known to parasitize native birds. Some researchers think they would parasitize native finches first (Crystal-Ornelas et al., 2017). But native finches don't build domed nests, so Pin-tailed Whydahs may be less likely to parasitize them (Garrett & Garrett, 2016).

Yet the Pin-tailed Whydah has shown itself to be very adaptable to not only a new country but a whole new host species. So we can't say for sure what will happen in the future. But right now, Shultz expects "they will probably continue to grow in number but probably be constrained to the same region that the Munias live in."

In the meantime, we need more information on introduced species like the Pin-tailed Whydah and the Northern Red Bishop, from genetics to population distribution. That's where you come in.

"When you're doing your eBird checklist, make sure to report introduced birds," Shultz said. "That's how we're tracking these populations, so they're equally as important [as native birds]."

References

- Crystal-Ornelas, R., et al. (2017). [The establishment threat of the obligate brood-parasitic Pin-tailed Whydah \(*Vidua macroura*\) in North America and the Antilles](#). *The Condor*.
- Garrett, J. F. & Garrett, K. L. (2016). [The Pin-tailed Whydah as a brood parasite of the Scaly-breasted Munia in Southern California](#). *Western Birds*.
- Gleditsch, J. M., et al. (2020). [Northern Red Bishop \(*Euplectes franciscanus* Lert 1789\)](#). *Invasive Birds: Global Trends and Impacts*.
- Johnson, R. F. & Garrett, K. L. (1994). [Population trends of introduced birds in Western North America](#). *Studies in Avian Biology*.
- Pranty, B. & Garrett, K. L. (2011). [Under the radar: "Non-countable" exotic birds in the ABA area](#). *Birding*.
- Shultz, A. (2025). [Phone interview](#).