

HOW AFRICAN BIRDS TOOK FLIGHT IN L.A.

From the Pin-tailed Whydah to the Northern Red Bishop, here's how these exotic birds arrived and what might happen now

by Renée Fabian

Southern California is the stage for some spectacular avian performers, such as the feisty Pin-tailed Whydah with its charismatic courtship ritual, swinging and fanning its long tail feathers.

Native to Africa, Pin-tailed Whydahs have made themselves a comfortable home in Los Angeles County, as well as other showy birds from the far-away continent. The Northern Red Bishop's bright orange cloak is easy to spot in certain riparian habitats during the summer. Uncommon now, the Orange-cheeked Waxbill and Bronze Mannikin have also called SoCal home.

So where did these introduced African birds come from? And how are they settling in?

The first reports of the Pin-tailed Whydah in the area date back to the 1990s, the result of releases from the pet trade, according to authors John Garrett and Kimball Garrett. The birds were first found primarily in La Mirada in Los Angeles County to the Santa Ana River in Orange County.

Northern Red Bishops are also popular pets, and released birds started populations in SoCal, where they were first reported in the 1970s. By 1991, they were breeding along the Los Angeles River, and by 1998, an estimated 600 birds lived in the area.

Similarly, the Orange-cheeked Waxbill and Bronze Mannikin were pet escapees that once looked ready to settle in, but are now rarely seen.

Once pet birds get loose, "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, said Shultz, and it's very possible additional birds escape into the wild. Northern Red Bishops are also still available for sale, and for less than \$100.

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

"Bishops ... need a certain riparian habitat that is hard to find in Southern California," Shultz said. They prefer marshy habitats or river bottoms with tall, seedy grasses.



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A Pin-tailed Whydah in all his breeding glory at Huntington Library & Gardens.

A Parasite Finds a Host

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, said Shultz. Whydahs parasitize Scaly-breasted Munias.

Pin-tailed Whydahs are obligate brood parasites, which means they don't raise their own young. The female 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 L.A. in order to survive.

Enter Scaly-breasted Munias, who build domed nests similar to the Pin-tailed Whydah's host species in Africa. Since the Munia population is "exploding," Whydahs "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 it doesn't parasitize native birds. Some researchers worried Pin-tailed Whydahs would parasitize native finches, although our finches don't build domed nests, perhaps making it less likely to happen.

Because the Pin-tailed Whydah is very adaptable to its new home and host species, we can't say for sure what will happen in the future. As of right now, Shultz expects they will continue to grow in number. "But they'll probably be constrained to the same region that the Munias live in," she said.

In the meantime, we need more information on introduced species, 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]."

the wren tit

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Ferruginous Hawk © Luke Tiller

president's perch 

Desert Winter Magic

By Luke Tiller

For those who have been members of Pasadena Audubon Society (PAS) for a while, you have probably heard me extoll the virtues of the **Christmas Bird Count (CBC)** quite enough over the years. If you are new, just know that it's the oldest community science project in the country, a key part of the Audubon winter calendar, and one that welcomes participants of all birding levels. If you haven't joined the Pasadena CBC yet, it's time to make it your (early) New Year's resolution. I'm already looking forward to seeing everyone at the post-count dinner and sharing stories from a day of birding adventures (more about CBC on page 3).

It's been a tough year for the community here in Altadena, and moments outside enjoying nature have felt even more precious for me this year. A real highlight of the fall season for me was our **all-day pelagic boat trip** (check out photos on page 10). Being on a boat away from the distractions of cell coverage was, for a few hours, just what the doctor ordered, and the **Red-footed Booby** we found on the day was a real treat too. As well as the somewhat regular trips to the Channel Islands, we hope to have more offshore offerings in the coming year, so keep your eyes peeled for those.

The two things I like most about birding in Los Angeles are the mountains and the deserts. When I grew up in England we didn't have either. And as much as I loved birding during my years on the US East Coast, it's basically a pretty homogenous set of habitats there unlike the wonderful diversity of the West.

Winter birding in the desert is a favorite, and the Antelope Valley is world class when it comes to its variety of wintering raptors. **Ferruginous Hawks** are one of my most loved species of birds of prey, and "**Prairie**" **Merlin** one of my top subspecies. There's plenty else to enjoy out in Lancaster and Palmdale in winter, including a couple of other specialties: **Mountain Plover** and **Mountain Bluebird**.

Confusingly, of the four birds with Mountain in their names found in Los Angeles County, only two are typically found in the mountains: the **Quail** and the **Chickadee**, with the other two aforementioned species typically found mostly in the High Desert. Both desert winterers are charismatic birds and, though not always easy to find, are always worth seeking out.

For the last couple of years, my winters have been involved in running some of the trips at the **Salton Sea Birding Festival (January**

17, 2026). The sea is perhaps one of the most weird and oddly wonderful places in southern California, and winter is one of the few times when birding there is physically comfortable. The place boasts all my favored wintering species I mentioned above as well as lots of adorable **Burrowing Owls**. The tour that I lead starts at the north end of the sea in the morning and finishes at the south end at dusk for the spectacular fly-in of **Sandhill Cranes, Ross's and Snow Geese**. A truly spectacular sight.

When I lived in Connecticut, we had to invent a birding game called "The Big January" to encourage people to go out birding at that time of year. We are blessed with wonderful weather for almost 365 days of the year here in SoCal, so make sure you take full advantage of it!



Mountain Bluebird © Luke Tiller