

Find it Here!

The Kern River Valley and Southern Sierra Nevada of California

by Bob Barnes¹ and Bob Steele²

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Just say “Yes”.

Six thousand Western and Clark’s Grebes tallied on a Christmas Bird Count: San Diego, California? Twelve hundred tanagers migrating north from a riparian woodland corner on an early May morning: High Island, Texas? Two thousand hummingbirds swarming a yard full of feeders in early August: Ramsey Canyon, Arizona? Five thousand diurnal raptors passing over a single point on a late September day: Cape May, New Jersey?

“Yes.”

Summer Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, and Indigo Bunting: Georgia? Le Conte’s Thrasher, Black-throated Sparrow, and Scott’s Oriole: southern Nevada? Nuttall’s Woodpecker, Oak

Titmouse, and Tricolored Blackbird: Central California?

“Yes.”

Two hundred nesting species, including: The southwestern range limit for Blue Grouse and Pileated Woodpecker? The northwestern nesting limit for Brown-crested Flycatcher and a disjunct population of Bendire’s Thrasher? The interface of Ladder-backed and Nuttall’s Woodpecker ranges?

“Yes.”

Five hundred Pinyon Jays noisily making their way past a Plumbeous Vireo pair feeding fledglings in a pinyon pine forest? Cactus Wrens and Greater Roadrunners loudly projecting their distinct calls from a Joshua tree woodland? Townsend’s Solitaires and

Hermit Warblers singing within a magnificent giant sequoia grove? Wrentits and Black-chinned Sparrows foraging in thick chaparral? A thousand Tricolored Blackbird pairs and two hundred Lawrence’s Goldfinch pairs nesting in a 9,000-acre river valley of lush riparian forest with a string of small, freshwater cattail and tule marshes in the mix?

“Yes.”

All of the preceding questions have been answered “Yes” by birders exploring within 25 miles of a single place. That place? California’s Kern River Valley and surrounding southern Sierra Nevada.

According to John Kemper (*Birding Northern California*, Falcon Press), “Kern River Valley must be counted as

The Kern River Valley and southern Sierra Nevada provide an amazing diversity of habitats for birds and birders alike. Elevations in the watershed range from 700’–14,000’, and birders may find everything from Costa’s Hummingbirds to Hermit Warblers, from Brown-crested Flycatchers to Townsend’s Solitaires, from Le Conte’s Thrashers to Pileated Woodpeckers. *Kern County, California; September 2002.*

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This five-day-old Yellow-billed Cuckoo nestling at Kern River Preserve will likely fledge when it is only seven days old. Researchers at the preserve are making important advances in our understanding of the demographics and genetics of the imperiled *occidentalis* race of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo. *Kern County, California; July 2002.*



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The elusive Le Conte's Thrasher is a Kern River Valley desert-nesting species. Visiting birders may wish to drop in on an Inyokern back yard, forty-five minutes to the east, where this species nests, is present year round, and frequents seed feeders. Inquire with the lead author to make an appointment. *Kern County, California; March 2002.*

one of the best birding sites in California because of its diversity. The South Fork of the Kern River supports the largest remaining stand of Great Valley cottonwood-willow riparian forest in California, and it has been designated a Globally Important Bird Area, because it is a major migration path for Turkey Vultures (28,000 per year), because of its breeding "Southwestern" Willow Flycatchers (a federally endangered subspecies), and because almost the entire world's population of "Kern" Red-winged Blackbird is located in the valley."



A Setting to Remember

The Kern River Valley lies at an elevation of 2,600 feet, up the spectacularly scenic and ruggedly deep Kern River Canyon 45 road miles northeast of Bakersfield. It is surrounded by 6000'–8000' + tall mountains of the southern Sierra Nevada that lie within the Sequoia National Forest.

The valley's east end is dominated by California's largest contiguous Fremont cottonwood and red willow forest, which borders the South Fork Kern River for its lower 14 miles. This area was designated one of the first ten Globally Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in the United States by the American Bird Conservancy. A total of 327 bird species has been documented in the South Fork Valley, including a remarkable 134 nesting species, with 244 total and 89 nesting on the 1,127 acres of Audubon-California's Kern River Preserve alone. Birding access to significant parts of the IBA is available on over 5,000 acres of protected land comprising the Kern River Preserve, Sequoia National Forest's South Fork Wildlife Area, and the California Department of Fish and Game's Canebrake Ecological Reserve. The west end of the valley is dominated by 568,000-acre-foot Isabella Reservoir.

The Kern River watershed above the

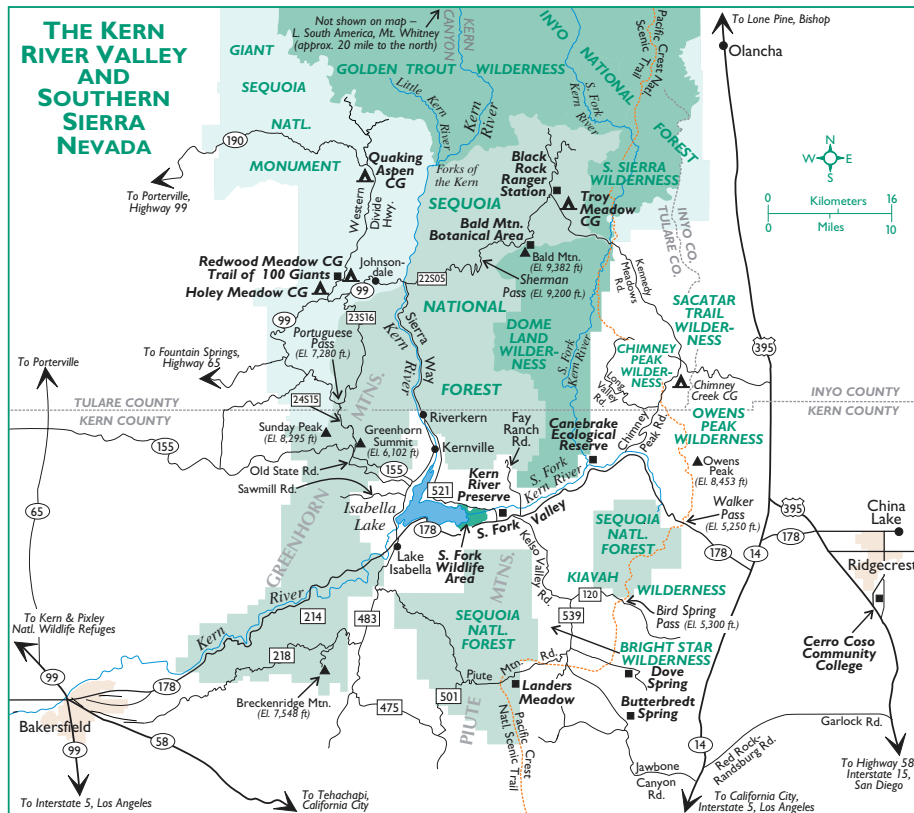
valley is amazingly diverse. The headwaters of the National Wild and Scenic North Fork Kern River rise at Sequoia National Park's north end at Lake South America. The river flows south through one of the deepest canyons in the United States, passing below 14,494' Mount Whitney and through the heart of the 303,287-acre Golden Trout Wilderness. The 327,769-acre Sequoia National Monument, managed by Sequoia National Forest, flanks the river on the west.

To the north is the Kern Plateau, headwaters of the National Wild and Scenic South Fork Kern River. Kern Plateau habitats grade from west-slope Sierran habitats on the west to Great Basin pinyon pine forest on the east. Here is the interface of Cassin's Vireo and Plumbeous Vireo ranges.

To the east, southeast, and south, are three "sky island" ranges—Owens Peak (the highest, at 8,475'), the Scodie Mountains and the Piute Mountains. Kern Joshua tree woodland with silver cholla mixed in dominates the lower slopes and desert flats. Extensive pinyon pine woodland dominates the mid-elevations, including the area around 5,250' Walker Pass. Higher elevations support stands of Jeffrey pine and white fir. A few wet meadows are found in the Piutes. The Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to Canada traverses all three sky islands.

To the southwest is the massive "sky island" of Breckenridge Mountain, peaking at 7,544'. It supports the southern limit of habitats typically used by west-slope Sierran avifauna and is the bridge between the drier Piute Mountains to the southeast and the wetter Greenhorn Mountains to the north.

To the immediate west is the spine of the Greenhorn Mountains. The Greenhorns support Pileated Woodpeckers and Winter Wrens at the southwestern limits of their nesting ranges. The highest point is 8,295'



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From April through June of each year, the Kern River Valley is "The Lawrence's Goldfinch Capital of the World". Peak numbers occur between 20 May and 10 June, and in recent years flocks of 225–250 individuals have been recorded daily during this window of time. Kern County, California; July 2002.

Kern River Valley & Southern Sierra Nevada

An Artist's Perspective, from John Schmitt

“I enjoy the subtleties found by studying birds carefully for prolonged periods of time. The Kern River Valley offers a juxtaposition of habitats resulting in out-of-character birding experiences. In spring 2002 it was singing Black-throated Sparrows and Scott's Orioles in chaparral. In fall I was drawn to careful study of juncos of all but one field-recognizable population. I even determined a hybrid Pink-sided x Gray-headed. In less than ten minutes up the hill from my house I can be in west-side Sierran forest habitat searching for Flammulated or Northern Saw-whet Owl nests to study in depth, while in twenty-five minutes in the other direction I can reach the South Fork riparian forest or find myself within the borders of the Mojave desert. The longer I live here, the more interesting the careful study of the birds becomes to me.”



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Hummingbird viewing and study at the Kern River Preserve headquarters can be mesmerizing. Based on sugar water solution consumption, up to 2,500 hummingbirds per day are estimated to come to the two dozen feeders in the yard, during the peak of migration in August. *Kern County, California; August 2002.*

Sunday Peak in Kern County just south of the Tulare County line. On the slopes of this peak are where eight sightings of Blue Grouse were recorded, here at their southwestern range limit, on a species-specific survey sponsored by the California Department of Fish & Game in the spring of 2002.

The Kern River watershed above the San Joaquin Valley floor includes all or part of one national park, one national monument, two national forests, two national wild and scenic rivers, three state-designated wildlife areas, and ten federally-designated wilderness areas. Protected land abounds.

Abundant Diversity Close at Hand

An astounding 197 breeding bird species have been recorded within an 18-mile radius of a single point in the Kern River Valley (including non-breeding species, 340 in all). This total is one of the highest numbers (if not the highest number) of breeding bird species in an area its size in the United States and Canada. What makes this relatively small area home to such a diversity of avian life?

- Elevation and Topography Range: Elevations in the entire watershed

range from 700' to 14,000'. The topography is highly varied.

- Variety of Soils: The soil type and age is highly varied, with the expected granitic soils supplemented by basalt and limestone-based soils.
- Precipitation: Most precipitation arrives with winter storms originating in the Gulf of Alaska or the Pacific Northwest. As storms sweep across California toward the Kern River Valley, they reach the Greenhorns first. Here the mountain barrier often stops storms in their tracks. The "Sierran rain shadow effect" results in the Greenhorn Mountains receiving twice as much precipitation as the Kern Plateau less than ten miles to the east. On numerous days in winter, the Greenhorns are shrouded in clouds and the San Joaquin Valley is deep in fog, while the Kern River Valley and the rest of the surrounding mountains are bathed in brilliant sunshine.
- Low Passes: 5,250' Walker Pass, 5,300' Bird Spring Pass and the 5,200' pass near Dove Spring are low enough to allow plants and animals typical of the desert to the east to reach the Central Valley slope of the

mountains to the west. This migration does not occur through higher passes to the north.

- **Diverse Habitats:** The four factors above, along with human overlays, result in a variety of habitats, such as chaparral, cliffs and rocky hillsides, cottonwood and willow riparian forests, desert washes, dry and wet meadows, fir forest, freshwater marsh and pond, giant sequoia groves, grasslands and irrigated pasture, Joshua tree woodland, mixed conifer forest, oak woodland, pinyon pine woodland, reservoir, residential and parklands, and rivers and streams. Birds and other animals that occupy these habitats are representative of the Sierra Nevada, Great Basin, Mojave Desert, Central Valley, and Southern California eco-regions of the state.

Thus, within fifteen miles of each other have been found nesting Osprey and Northern Goshawk, Barn Owl and Flammulated Owl, Costa's Hummingbird and Calliope Hummingbird, Ladder-backed Woodpecker and White-headed Woodpecker, Vermilion Flycatcher and American Dipper, Grasshopper Sparrow and "Thick-billed" Fox Sparrow, Great-tailed Grackle, and Evening Grosbeak.

Visiting Through the Year

Although a day or two may be adequate for finding a few targeted species, a four-to-seven-day stay is recommended in order to explore all the habitats and to observe a high percentage of species. Before each trip, up-to-date information should be gathered for trip planning from website pages or via email, telephone, or letter. The Kern River Valley has a tourism-based economy, and support services abound. The <www.valleywild.org> website leads to comprehensive websites geared toward birders, including checklists, seasonal sightings reports, arrival dates, birding routes for all seasons of the year to all available habitats, local leaders,

Christmas Bird Count results, birding festival information, field trip schedules and reports, special events and workshops, universal (disabled) access birding, monitoring and research, nearby birding areas, and a complete Birders Guide to the Kern River Valley and Southern Sierra Nevada with detailed annotations for numerous species. Personalized trip planning including the most current information on finding target species is available via email at <krpfriends@lightspeed.com>.

The Kern River Valley has four-seasons temperatures, ranging from a January average low of 33° F to an August average high of 96° F. Yet the Kern River Valley is a very sunny location. Most days have blue skies with bright sunshine. Most mornings are calm, but afternoons are often windy. From late spring until early fall, the area may go months without rain.

Resident Bird Species

The Kern River Valley and southern Sierra Nevada support over 125 resident nesting bird species, including many sought by visiting birders: Clark's Grebe, Prairie Falcon, California Quail, Mountain Quail, Anna's Hummingbird,



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Visitors to the Kern River Valley and southern Sierra Nevada will be fascinated by the interface of so many species pairs. Here, one may find Indigo and Lazuli Buntings breeding side-by-side, Cassin's and Plumbeous Vireos in the same upland forests, and Nuttall's (shown here) and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers in the same lowlands. *Kern County, California; March 2002.*

A Big Day Birder's Perspective, from John Sterling

“On Saturday, 4 May 2002, the team of Todd Easterla, Steve Rovell, Scott Terrill, and I set a national inland county Big Day record in Kern County. We started with owling in the Greenhorns and Kern River Valley. By four in the morning, eight species of owls had been recorded. Our Big Day team birded east through the Kern River Valley to the Indian Wells Valley and back. By the time we left the preserve headquarters at 1:30 PM, we had found 167 species. The team had not yet birded Isabella Reservoir or the Greenhorn Mountains! After the Greenhorns, the Big Day's final hours were spent birding down the Kern River Canyon and out to the Kern NWR northwest of Bakersfield. Our Kern County Big Day ended at a record 202 species. The all-time County Big Day record is from Monterey County, California (208 species, set by the same team). Besides Monterey County (three times), only Cape May County, New Jersey (202 species), and San Diego County, California (200 species), have equaled or surpassed 200 species. All of these except Kern are coastal counties.”

Kern River Valley & Southern Sierra Nevada



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Low passes have allowed extensive Joshua tree woodlands to become established on the west slope of the Sierra. Although not as lush as the riparian forest associated with the Kern River, these Joshua tree woodlands are home to a diverse suite of species, including Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Cactus Wren, and Scott's Oriole. *Kern County, California; May 2002.*

Number of Nesting Species for Selected Groups within 25 miles of the Kern River Valley.

<u>Taxon</u>	<u>Number of Species</u>
Diurnal Raptors	13
Owls	9
Woodpeckers	10
Flycatchers	14
Wrens	7
Warblers	12
Sparrows	15
Blackbirds and Orioles	10

Acorn Woodpecker, Red-breasted Sapsucker, Williamson's Sapsucker, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Nuttall's Woodpecker, White-headed Woodpecker, Say's Phoebe, Pinyon Jay, Oak Titmouse, Canyon Wren, American Dipper, Wrentit, California Thrasher, Le Conte's Thrasher, Phainopepla, California Towhee, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Tricolored Blackbird, and "Kern" Red-winged Blackbird among them.

January: Winter's Peak

Results of the two local Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs)—Kern River Valley and South Fork Valley—give a comprehensive overview of winter avifauna. Some 130 to 150 species are expected over the two days of these side-by-side CBCs. The two CBCs have, one or the other, led the nation one or more times in numbers of Mountain Quail, White-throated Swift, Williamson's Sapsucker, White-headed Woodpecker, Pinyon Jay,

and Lark Sparrow. They have hosted up to six thousand wintering Western and Clark's Grebes, 1,500 Common Mergansers, and 20 Bald Eagles. These CBCs have tallied impressive numbers of Black-throated and Sage Sparrows and up to one thousand Tricolored Blackbirds.

Recommended winter birding areas include Kern River Preserve Headquarters, Canebrake Ecological Reserve, lower Chimney Peak Road, Fay Ranch Road, Kelso Valley Road, all around Isabella Reservoir and its campgrounds, and the Greenhorn Mountains via snow-cleared State Highway 155.

February: Early Spring Arrivals

By the end of February, resident and wintering species have been supplemented by the first "spring" migrants. The first Turkey Vultures, Cinnamon Teal, and Rufous Hummingbirds arrive, and so do several species of swallow. Some years the first Scott's Oriole and Lawrence's Goldfinch will have arrived as well.

Kern Valley "Crane Days"

The Kern River Valley has only one Sandhill Crane record. The remedy? Start an event for local residents to visit nearby Pixley National Wildlife Refuge northwest of Bakersfield the last Saturday of February and the first one in March. In 2002, dozens of people were treated to 4,000 Sandhill Cranes, 8,000 White-faced Ibises, and thousands more ducks, shorebirds, and Tricolored Blackbirds. The nearby Kern National Wildlife Refuge doesn't have reliable cranes, but it added to part of the day's festivities, as it has excellent birding. The day ended at Woolgrowers, Bakersfield's most noted Basque restaurant. In addition to being wonderful outings, Crane Days serve as a powerful conservation tool. They help to show Kern locals the connections and interrelationships between natural communities at home and away from home.

March: Winter Lingers, Spring Picks Up

Temperatures rise through March. By month's end, Fremont cottonwoods and red willows are well along to being fully leafed-out. Wintering species are still present. Breeding species that typically arrive at this time include Costa's Hummingbird, Western Kingbird, Bullock's Oriole, and Lawrence's Goldfinch.

Recommended spring birding areas include Kern River Preserve Headquarters, Kern River Preserve's Migrant Corner Trail, Fay Ranch Road, Canebrake Ecological Reserve, Chimney Peak Road, Kelso Valley Road, Isabella Reservoir, the Greenhorn Mountains, and the other mountain areas as roads become accessible.

April and May: Spring Migration

The Kern River Valley is among the



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The Kern River Valley provides the setting for one of the most impressive passages of Turkey Vultures in the United States. The peak is reached between 20 September and 10 October, when 1,000–3,000 migrating individuals may be expected on a day with favorable weather conditions. More than 27,000 individuals are tallied in an average fall. *Kern County, California; October 2002.*

South Fork (Kern River) Valley Nesting-Pair Survey-Estimates for Common Species

<u>Species</u>	<u>Number of Pairs</u>
Nuttall's Woodpecker	100–150 pairs
Yellow Warbler	150–200 pairs
Common Yellowthroat	300–400 pairs
Song Sparrow	1,000–1,500 pairs
Blue Grosbeak	150–200 pairs
Lazuli Bunting	200–250 pairs
Bullock's Oriole	100–150 pairs

Selected Nesting-Pair Estimates for South Fork (Kern River) Valley "Specialty" Species.

<u>Species</u>	<u>Number of Pairs</u>
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	10–20 pairs
"Southwestern" Willow Flycatcher	10–20 pairs
Brown-crested Flycatcher	10–20 pairs
Summer Tanager	50–70 pairs
"Kern" Red-winged Blackbird	400–500 pairs
Tricolored Blackbird	900–1,000 pairs
Lawrence's Goldfinch	175–225 pairs

Kern River Valley & Southern Sierra Nevada

West's best places to witness spring migration, and the Kern River Preserve's Migrant Corner Trail is the recommended start for each day's birding.

Migrant Corner Trail is on the north edge of the preserve's riparian forest. Its start is 1.2 miles north of Highway 178, less than 100 feet beyond the northeast side of the Sierra Way bridge. Birds migrate from the Mojave Desert to the southeast and make their way northwest over or through the forest to its north edge, which is paralleled by the trail. You can find a hillside to observe birds migrating past, about 300 yards along the trail. As with most migration hot spots, numbers of individuals on a day-to-day basis can range from spectacular to somewhat disappointing. However, species diversity is good to excellent virtually every day. As many as one hundred species have been recorded in

and from an area of forty acres on a single mid-May morning. The peak combination of numbers and species takes place from 25 April through 20 May.

The Kern River Valley Bioregions (Birding) Festival

One of the best ways to get acquainted with the area's spring migration phenomenon and Migrant Corner is to attend the Kern River Valley BioFest. It is held each year on the last weekend in April. The BioFest celebrates spring migration with world-class birding. This year's festival (the ninth annual) will be held 25–30 April 2003. It is the second-oldest California birding festival. The BioFest is held in the heart of spring migration, and it has produced 190–220 species in each of the last several years. Led by expert birders who love the area, over 25 birding trips limited to 12–15 participants each are offered.

Spring Arrivals

Birds usually observed in the Kern River Valley and Southern Sierra Nevada by mid-April include nesting Gray Flycatcher, Cassin's Vireo, Black-throated Gray, Hermit, and MacGillivray's Warblers, and Hooded Oriole. By the end of April, first appearances have been made by nesting species, including Vaux's Swift, Calliope Hummingbird, Summer Tanager, Green-tailed Towhee, and Black-chinned Sparrow. By the end of May, virtually the full complement of migrant and nesting species has arrived, with highlight such as nesting Flammulated Owl, Black Swift, Brown-crested Flycatcher, and Plumbeous Vireo.

Access

During April and May, mountain areas besides the Greenhorns become accessible as the winter's snowpack melts. The Piute Mountain Road is usually the first to open, leading to remarkably reliable Pinyon Jays around Lander's Meadow. Breckenridge Mountain, the Kern Plateau, the Western Divide Highway, and Sherman Pass follow. As each becomes accessible, montane birding becomes more varied and impressive.

Field Trips

Audubon California chapters and other birding groups schedule low-cost, two-to-four-day field trips to the Kern River Valley from mid-April through mid-July. These trips are often open to anyone who wishes to register. June through mid-July is particularly popular for California-based field trip visits, as birders come to look for bird species rare in most of the rest of state, including nesting Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Summer Tanager, and Indigo Bunting. Guided four-day field trips in June and July record 125–175 species, depending on group energy and hours spent birding.



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The south fork of the Kern River is the crown jewel of Kern County. Dominated by Fremont cottonwood and red willow, its fourteen-mile course is home to Yellow-billed Cuckoos and Blue Grosbeaks, to Summer Tanagers and Yellow-breasted Chats, and more. *Kern County, California; April 2002.*

For maps, target birds, and detailed itineraries for four-day trips, consult <www.valleywild.org> or email <krfriends@lightspeed.net>.

June and July: Nesting Season Bonanza

These three months are the height of the nesting season for the region's nearly 200 species, a nationally remarkable number.

As further demonstration of the richness of this area during nesting season, consider that when the Western Field Ornithologists (WFO) held their Thirtieth Anniversary Celebration in Kernville 5–9 July 2000, 187 species were reported within a 25 mile radius. All but a handful were nesting species.

The birding here is world class. The numbers of pairs of nesting birds are wonderfully overwhelming. Yellow-billed Cuckoos arrive as late as the end of June—the same time the first southbound fall migrants appear, including a few Rufous and Allen's Hummingbirds. The strategy is to bird low in the mornings and high in the afternoons. An early start (5:30 a.m.) at Kern River Preserve Headquarters is best.

Except in the heaviest of snowpack years, all mountain areas are open. They are best visited on afternoons, after the lowlands become uncomfortably warm. The Kern Plateau requires a full-day visit starting at dawn. The Piute Mountains, Greenhorn Mountains, and Western Divide Highway all require half-day or full-day visits. The rewards are great, with nesting species such as Blue Grouse, Mountain Quail, Black Swift, Calliope Hummingbird, Williamson's Sapsucker, Cassin's Vireo, Plumbeous Vireo, Pinyon Jay, Hermit Warbler, and Green-tailed Towhee. By July's end, Lawrence's Goldfinches have often become exceedingly scarce (unless it is a wet year), and several species have begun migrating south through the Kern River Valley.

Recommended nesting-season bird-

A Sound Recordist's Perspective, from Geoff Keller

“When it came time to gather recordings for Cornell's Bird Songs of California project for which I served as chief sound recordist, I scheduled a morning for recording Blue Grosbeak at Kern River Preserve. On my visit I was completely surprised to learn of one specialty bird after another that could either be found on the Preserve or in the surrounding area: Summer Tanager, Cassin's Kingbird, and Hooded Oriole, all of which I knew would be tough to locate and record in the state. Then I learned of Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Plumbeous Vireo, Indigo Bunting, Scott's Oriole, and the southwestern race of Willow Flycatcher. I was ecstatic. I had previously regarded all of these as how-lucky-can-you-get? species. My planned one-day visit to the Kern River Preserve to record Blue Grosbeak evolved into the major southern California hub for gathering the tough, specialty birds for the guide. Not only did we pick up all of the above-mentioned specialty birds, but dozens of other species were added as well. The key was not just having the species present. The conditions had to be quiet enough to get uninterrupted, high-quality recordings. Thus, it appeared, I had found my California recording mecca in the Kern River Valley.”

ing areas include Kern River Preserve Headquarters, Fay Ranch Road, Canebrake Ecological Reserve, Kern Plateau (Chimney Creek Campground, Troy Meadow Campground, Black Rock Ranger Station, Bald Mountain Lookout), Piute Mountains (Kelso Valley Road, Piute Mountain Road, Lander's Meadow), Greenhorns (Sawmill Road, Old State Road, Greenhorn Summit, Portuguese Pass and Campground), and Giant Sequoia National Monument (Holy Meadow Campground, Trail of 100 Giants, Redwood Meadow, and Quaking Aspen Meadow and Campground).

Monitoring and Research

A visit during June through August will allow birders to learn firsthand about more than a decade's worth of nesting and population ecology research on the state-listed “Western” Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*occidentalis* subspecies) and Federally Endangered “Southwestern” Willow Flycatcher (*extimus* subspecies). Numerous scien-

tific papers have been published as a result. Other research projects conducted in the South Fork Valley over the years include studies of Turkey Vulture, hummingbirds, Common Yellowthroat, Summer Tanager, and Song Sparrow, as well as on western pond turtle and various small mammal species. Local research stations that have been involved include the Kern River Research Center (1990–1997) and Southern Sierra Research Station (since 1998).

Hummingbird Viewing Capital of California

The Kern River Valley bills itself as the “Hummingbird Viewing Capital of California”. Several motels, restaurants, businesses, and private residences have set up feeding stations for birders. The Kern River Preserve and many others feed 250–500 ounces of sugar water solution per day during the peak of numbers, which are recorded from mid-July through August. In addition to four local nesting species (Black-chinned, Anna's, Costa's, and Calliope), the valley

Neo Journey

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intercepts one of two major south-bound fall migrations of Rufous Hummingbirds. Ten to twenty Rufous are banded for each Allen's. Black Rock Ranger Station is the best place for Calliope Hummingbird from June through mid-July.

August: Hummingbirds Everywhere, and More!

Hummingbird numbers are amazing. They reach peak numbers around 20 August. Even though fall migration has begun for many individual birds and singing has diminished greatly, thorough birding still leads to an impressive species list that is almost equal to what can be achieved in late April through mid-July. Yellow-billed Cuckoos and Willow Flycatchers are still present at the preserve headquarters. All areas are free of snow, leading to easy access to montane birding locations.

September: Transition

September witnesses southbound fall migrants, as well as the arrival of winter visitors from the north. Hummingbird feeders at the preserve go from two dozen to one. Eastern vagrant species in nearby Mojave desert oases are most likely from mid-September through mid-October. Fall passerine migration is best in desert oases to the east of the Kern River Valley, including the grounds of Cerro Coso College in Ridgecrest and Central Park in California City. Turkey Vultures and other raptors are on migration. Many local birders rate the September and October fall migration period as their favorite birding time of the year.

Turkey Vultures Galore

Fall Turkey Vulture migration through the Kern River Valley had been known for decades. Guesstimates ranged from 5,000 to over 100,000 per migration. In 1994, Terri Gallion and Sean Rowe started the Kern Valley Vulture Watch to quantify the migra-

tion. Since then, one of the largest Turkey Vulture migrations in the U.S. has been documented, with an average of 27,000+ individuals per fall count. A Kern Vulture Festival is held every year, centered on the last Saturday of September. This year's festival, our ninth, will be held 26–29 September 2003. The Turkey Vulture Fest is much more than vultures. Fall western passerine migration is at its height, and so are occurrences of eastern vagrants.

October Through December: Migration Passes, Winter Returns

Throughout October and November, fall migration subsides, and wintering water birds, Bald Eagles, and hawks from the north arrive. The occasional loon, grebe, or scoter is brought in by a strong, early winter storm in November. As December progresses, birding opportunities approximate those found in January. The next birding year is about to start.

Recommended fall birding areas

include Kern River Preserve Headquarters, Fay Ranch Road, Canebrake Ecological Reserve, Kelso Valley Road, Piute Mountains, Greenhorns, and Giant Sequoia National Monument (through September).

The Final Word

Taken together, the Kern River Valley and Southern Sierra Nevada are one of America's great birding regions. In a stunningly scenic setting, this region provides world-class bird and birding phenomena, including spring passerine migration, nesting diversity, a variety of hummingbirds, and the Turkey Vulture migration. It is hoped that each birder who visits this wonderful place will come away answering "Yes!" to the question "Were visiting and experiencing the birds of the Kern River Valley and Southern Sierra Nevada all you hoped that they would be?" ➤

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