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New tool shows Southern California is a key pit stop for migrating birds

Experts say such digital products, along with growing environmental awareness, are creating more bird advocates when they're needed the most.



With a wingspan of approximately six feet, a great blue heron comes in for a landing in the tall marsh grass at the edge of the water at Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve in Huntington Beach in 2020. (Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG)

By **BROOKE STAGGS** | bstaggs@scng.com | Southern California News Group



Southern California baseball fans all briefly became birders earlier this month, when a goose made a hard landing in right field at Dodger Stadium during the eighth inning of the Dodgers vs. Padres game.

Thousands cheered as the goose evaded ground crews, then booed when workers used a towel and a trash can to scoop up the confused waterfowl. Fans deemed it the “rally goose,” with at least one mural painted in the bird’s honor. And they demanded updates on the status of the bird, which eventually was identified as a greater white-fronted goose.

“It started a conversation about where did this bird come from, where was it going, what was it doing there?” said Jill Deppe, senior director of Audubon’s Migratory Bird Initiative.

Her team at the Audubon Society recently released a new online tool, called Bird Migration Explorer, in hopes of engaging, informing and inspiring people to help protect migrating birds.

As that tool shows, Southern California is on the flight path for greater white-fronted geese, which are typically spotted on bodies of water as they migrate each fall from Alaska down south as far as Mexico, then back again each spring. But Deppe suggests the “rally goose” was attracted by the lights of Dodger stadium, became disoriented, and saw a chance to rest on the grassy outfield.

“These birds are out there,” she said. “We just don’t pay attention to them until they interrupt our baseball games.”

The high-profile interruption gave bird advocates a window to shed light on the hundreds of species of migratory birds that make their way through Southern California each fall and spring, with commutes peaking locally in October and May.

It’s also sparking conversations about how human behavior can affect those winged journeys, for better and for worse. And experts say digital tools like the new Audubon site combined with growing awareness about the importance of

New tool maps migration

Audubon's new [Bird Migration Explorer](#) is a first-of-its-kind online tool that combines data from dozens of sources across North America and delivers it to the public in free, accessible maps.

"The maps reveal unprecedented views of the abundance and movement of birds at levels that are vast across the continental scale," said Miyoko Chu with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, which collects data that helped build the Audubon tool.

Everyone from scientists to avid birders to those who are simply bird curious can search the website by location and see which migratory birds might pass through, where those birds are heading next, and what obstacles they might face along the way.

Users also can search by specific bird species. Or they can browse the maze of lines on migration maps, clicking on each to see animated routes of tagged birds throughout the year.

"One of the most miraculous things for me about birds is bird migration, how these tiny little hummingbirds can migrate from Alaska to Central America and back again when they weigh about three or four grams," said Luke Tiller, who's president of the Pasadena Audubon Society.

"A picture is worth a thousand words. So a visual representation of this movement of birds throughout the year is really something."

The map shows that the Swainson's hawk, for example, might fly through Ontario this fall before continuing on to destinations as far away as Argentina. The Whimbrel might summer in Bethel, Alaska and fly through Whittier on its way to winter in Ecuador.

All told, Deppe said they've learned that 99% of migratory birds that come through the United States spend at least some time in another country.

"It really shows that migratory birds are this thread that connects us," Deppe said.

Attracting new bird lovers

The Audubon site is the latest in a growing list of digital tools that may be helping to attract environmentally minded young folks to bird watching, with apps like Merlin Bird ID, which can help identify a bird by appearance or song, and eBird, which helps millions of birders find and tally species, also making the hobby more accessible.

It's an interest that's long been dominated by older White people, acknowledged Brad Singer, founder of the [Inland County Birds](#) listserv group, whose members share bird sightings across Riverside, San Bernardino and Imperial counties. He said when apps like eBird emerged a decade ago, many of those over-50 birders were initially resistant to the idea of pulling out smartphones while they were in nature.

But Singer said most have come to see the convenience such programs offer — and he believes that could be one factor helping to shake up the mix of people who in recent years have expressed interest in bird watching.

"I'm finding that we're getting younger and younger teenage activists, and that's tremendous," said the Lake Arrowhead resident, who has more than 2,000 species on his personal birding list. (There are more than 10,000 species of birds total around the world.)

Tiller said Pasadena Audubon Society membership spiked 20% during the pandemic as people slowed down and started spending more time outdoors. Now, he said, it's common to see 20-year-olds, representing more diverse backgrounds, at their events. And while customers with his tour company Birding Los Angeles and Beyond not long ago were primarily avid "bird nerds" like himself, who wanted help finding a couple particular species to add to their lifetime lists, Tiller said a majority now are newer to bird watching and simply want help finding and identifying birds.

He suspects technology might be playing a role in that, with younger people perhaps seeing birding as a Pokémon Go-style search for new species. But he believes younger people also have a greater general awareness of environmental issues and may see avian health as the canaries in the coal mine when it comes to environmental challenges.

Challenges and ways to help

More than 450 bird species migrate across portions of North America each year. But over the past half a century, one in four migrators, totaling millions of individual birds, has been lost to urbanization, drought, climate change and other threats.

That isn't just a loss for those who, each year, eagerly try to spot migrating birds as they come through their neck of the woods. The decline in biodiversity or shift in migratory patterns has ripple effects on the balance of entire ecosystems, since different birds feed on specific bugs or plant matter, rodents and more, while also serving themselves as needed food for other area wildlife.

"People think it doesn't really matter," Tiller said. "But everything that affects bird species will eventually affect the human species."

To raise awareness of these issues, Audubon's new migratory bird tool has a section that lists 19 "conservation challenges," including development, wind turbines, light pollution, rising seas and groundwater depletion. Users can click on the challenge to see how many bird species in their area are threatened by that change, and they can get links to articles with more information.

"We have more powerful tools than ever to detect where birds need help and where successes are happening," Chu said. That means advocates can replicate those successes at bigger scales, which she said will "accelerate our ability to find conservation solutions and put them into action."

The site also tells users about the closest spots in any given location where they'll have a good chance at spotting migratory birds.

For Southern California, that lists includes Singer's favorite birding spot in the Inland Empire: [San Jacinto Wildlife Area](#), which includes 900 acres of restored wetlands near Moreno Valley.

But migratory birds can be spotted anywhere that has some greenery and water, including smaller local parks. Other local hot spots include the [Salton Sea](#), which straddles Riverside and Imperial counties; the [Orange Coast Wetlands](#), which stretch from Upper Newport Bay through rich bird sanctuaries in Bolsa Chica and up to Los Cerritos; and wetlands along the southern edge of the [Palos Verdes Peninsula](#), which are particularly good for Elegant Tern sightings.

One of Tiller's favorite spots in his corner of Southern California is what's called Bear Divide, a canyon on the west end of the San Gabriel Mountains, running north from Sylmar. It's a hot spot for the phenomenon known as "morning flight," where songbirds that have migrated overnight take off in droves after dawn and reorient themselves before continuing on their journey. On good mornings, Tiller said 25,000 songbirds take off from Bear Divide, flying close enough that observers can reach out and touch them.

The Pasadena Audubon Society just raised \$10,000 to install a Motus Wildlife Tracking System tower at Bear Divide. Rather than tagging birds with full GPS trackers, the Motus system lets people attach lightweight tags on birds that then use radio waves to ping towers as they fly by.

The Motus system could be up in Bear Divide by the end of the year. And as more towers go up in more places bird enthusiasts can start to get more accurate data on the precise flight paths of migratory birds.

When it comes to the paths these birds take, the goose in Dodger stadium was a glaring example of how they can be thrown off course by disruptions to their environment, with drought and other climate changes currently posing particular concern.

It's not clear if such changes are responsible for more unusual sightings around Southern California of late, such as the recent appearance of a [Wood Warbler](#) in Long Beach, which marked the bird's first sighting in the contiguous United States, or [footage](#) of a red-footed booby off the coast of Orange County.

To protect migratory birds, advocates call for sweeping changes such as conserving wetlands and passing laws that would require tall office buildings and empty stadiums to dim lights at night. Bird lovers can support organizations like Audubon that are lobbying for such moves. They also can use data from the Audubon site to advocate for birds themselves, Deppe noted, by, say, showing city councils that might be considering a development project what role that area plays for migratory birds.

Typically, Tiller would recommend residents who want to help migratory birds put water features in their yards. But with avian flu a serious threat, people in Southern California are being asked to temporarily remove bird feeders and bird baths, which can be sources of transmission.

Residents still can consider reducing light pollution from their own homes, though. They also can buy bird-friendly products, such as sustainably grown coffee, keep their pet cats inside, and add native plants to their yards or balconies.

Even such seemingly small steps can give birds safe resting spots, which Deppe said can help ensure they make it to the next ecosystem that's waiting for their seasonal arrival.

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 Author **Brooke Staggs** | Reporter

Brooke Staggs covers the environment for Southern California News Group's chain of 11 newspapers. Her work has triggered FBI investigations, landed her appearances on national TV and radio outlets, and helped her win some of the top journalism awards in the western United States. The Big Bear native got her start teaching high school English and journalism in Riverside County but left in 2006 to be a student again herself, earning a masters degree in journalism from New York University. She's written for dozens of newspapers and magazines across the country, with projects that have taken her from a zero gravity flight over Queens to a fishing village in Ghana. Brooke joined the Orange County Register in January 2013, covering local communities, cannabis and politics before starting on the environment beat for SCNG in July 2022. She also occasionally teaches community college and writes nonfiction, with her co-authored book "Stealing from the World's Best Schools" available now wherever books are sold. Brooke lives in the Inland Empire with her husband and their much-loved pets. Her freetime is filled with traveling, hiking, reading, crafting and scheming about new ways to make the world a more informed, just and joyful place.

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