**JAMES K. HERBERT WETLAND PRAIRIE PRESEVE**

**ANNOTATED BIRD CHECKLIST**

**Prepared by Rob Hansen**

**Dedicated with fond appreciation to CAROL SELLERS HERBERT**

**in celebration of the March 23, 2006 SELLERS SLOUGH DEDICATION**

**(this part of the Preserve was formerly known as Area C)**

**Checklist data is updated to OCTOBER 4, 2010**

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This bird checklist is a compilation of field notes collected by many observers on 346 field days during the 18½ years between April 11, 1992 and October 4, 2010.

The status of 147 bird species is coded (see codes and symbols below) to indicate their seasonal status and relative abundance.

Each month (see abbreviated column header and footer on each page) is divided into three columns to represent 10-day portions of each month. In this way, an observer in early June for example (see the gray shaded bar on this sample checklist), could determine that 65 species have been seen at the Preserve during this 10-day period some time in the course of the last 18½ years. While it is unlikely that an observer would ever see all of those species on a single day in early June, your birding results will depend on how much time you can spend, how much of the Preserve you visit, and whether or not water is present in the Preserve wetlands.

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**Relative Abundance Codes**

**oooo** Rare – These species, numerically rare, are seen in the lowest relative numbers (an average of only 1 - 3 birds per day spent in the field in suitable habitat at the proper season). Since the checklist looks like a bunch of “O”s, one is encouraged to exclaim, “oooo” when you see these numerically challenged species.

**####** Fairly Common – These species are usually seen in moderate numbers (an average of 4 - 9 birds per day).

**!!!!!!** Common to Abundant – These species are seen in the greatest relative number (an average of 10 or more birds per day…sometimes hundreds). When you see this many birds, you will probably be thinking, “**!!!!!!!!!**”.

**Seasonal Status Codes and Symbols**

While the following Seasonal Status codes refer to the status of each species in this part of the Tulare Basin (southern San Joaquin Valley, the calendar portion of the checklist indicates when each species has **actually** been seen at the Preserve. Some species which are classified as a Resident in this **region** (e.g. wood duck) may have only been seen at the Herbert Preserve at scattered dates when suitable wetland habitat is present.

**R Resident species -** Resident birds are species that may be seen in an area year- round but do not necessarily breed in the area.

**W Wintering species –** Wintering species are birds that may be seen in this part of the Tulare Basin between July and May (chiefly early September through late April).

**S Summer species -** Summer species are birds that may be seen in this part of the Tulare Basin between February and October (chiefly April through August) but do not necessarily breed in the area.

**T Transient species** - Transients are bird species that migrate through the Tulare Basin in spring (February to May) or fall (July to October) but they do not spend either summer or winter in this area.

**V Vagrant species –** Vagrants areindividuals well outside their normal areas of residence or migration.

**~~ wetland dependent species** – These are species which a birder can expect to see **only** when the Preserve’s wetlands are wet. Many bird species commonly referred to as water birds are typically seen at the Preserve only when the vernal pools, seasonal freshwater marshes, slough channels, and mudflats are wet. Some species, such as certain ducks and shorebirds, are completely absent from the preserve when those wetlands have dried up. Other species, such as great blue heron and great egret (both of which are most numerous when wetlands are present) may still be seen on the Preserve foraging for pocket gophers even in dry upland (grassland) habitat.

**Breeding Species** – The 27 bird species whose names are entered in **BOLD TYPE** on the checklist have been documented as breeding species at the Preserve. Other species which have been seen at the Preserve in suitable habitat during the breeding season and which are “suspected breeders” are gadwall, blue-winged teal, northern pintail, Wilson’s phalarope, mourning dove, lark sparrow, blue grosbeak, Brewer’s blackbird, and house finch.

***Introduced Species*** – Three bird species whose names are printed in ***ITALICS***are non-native (exotic) species.

**# days/346** – The number in parentheses following each bird’s name in the species column represents the number of field visits (out of 346 total visits) during which a given species was observed at the Preserve. Note that while 46 of the species (31%) on the Preserve’s bird inventory have only been recorded at the Herbert Preserve on one day (26 species), two days (12 species) or three days (8 species) in the past 18½ years, there are 28 species that have been observed at the Preserve on 100 or more days in the past 18½ years. These “regulars” include resident species (such as Mallard, Great Blue Heron, Red-tailed Hawk, Mourning Dove, Burrowing Owl, Loggerhead Shrike, Common Raven, Horned Lark, Red-winged Blackbird, and Western Meadowlark), wintering species (like Greater Yellowlegs and Savannah Sparrow), and summer species (including Cinnamon Teal, Black- necked Stilt, Western Kingbird, and Cliff Swallow). Other species walking away (or flying away) with “superlative number” distinction are: 1) Western Meadowlark (seen on 232 of the 346 field days); 2) Mallard (seen on 229 of the 346 field days); 3) Red-winged Blackbirds (the largest individual total of all 147 species -- a grand total of 13,528 individuals were tallied on 197 of the 346 field days), and 4) Violet-green Swallow and White-faced Ibis (the two species with the “highest daily average count” -- a daily average of 124 Violet-green Swallows, averaged across 26 days and a daily average of 107 White-faced Ibis, averaged across 66 days.

**Mean/High -** The first number in this column represents the average number of individuals of each species seen per day (this numerical mean is calculated by dividing the total number of individuals seen on all field visits by the number of days the species has been observed at the Preserve). The second number in this column represents the record single-day high count for each species among all 346 of the field survey days at the Preserve.

**# of species noted in this 10-day period –** Look for these numbers way down at the very bottom of the last page of the checklist. This total provides some sense for how the species richness in this part of the Tulare Basin changes from season to season. At the Herbert Preserve (as in most other parts of the Tulare Basin), April (especially late April) gives a birder the chance to see the greatest number of species in a given day (72-78 species) because resident species, lingering winter species, early arriving summer species, and transients may all be observed.

**Using the checklist “calendar” and numbers to help identify birds** – Here are seven examples of how a birder can use the seasonal status “calendar”, the relative abundance codes, and the “mean/high” numbers to help identify birds (and to gain a greater appreciation for the natural history and ecology of the birds) at the Herbert Preserve) .

1) **Cinnamon Teal or Green-winged Teal?** - If you are birding at the Preserve during summer months and a flock of teal flies off before you can identify them, you can be fairly certain they are ***Cinnamon*** Teal (present there from late January to late September but absent or rare during most winter months). Conversely, if you are birding at the Preserve during winter months and a flock of teal flies off before you can identify them, you can be fairly certain they are ***Green-winged*** Teal(present there from late August through late May but absent during summer months).

2) **nesting shorebirds** – Killdeer, Stilts, and Avocets all nest at the Herbert Preserve but Killdeer can be seen in modest numbers all year long (they’ve been observed at the Preserve on 226 of the 346 field visits). While Killdeer will nest in wetlands on the Preserve when water is present, their presence at the Preserve is not so tied (as is true for stilts and avocets) to the presence of water on the Preserve’s wetlands (they often visit the preserve from adjacent irrigated farm fields and canals even when the entire Preserve is dry.). While both stilts and avocets are absent from the Preserve during winter months, stilts are typically more numerous on the Preserve than avocets and stilts arrive earlier in spring and depart later in fall than avocets.

3) **Which “peep” sandpipers were those?** – Least and Western Sandpipers (our two most common “peep” sandpipers), can be difficult to differentiate from one another if they are not heard or are observed under poor viewing conditions. The checklist’s seasonal status information and relative abundance codes show that Least Sandpiper is a ***wintering*** shorebird that can be seen in modest numbers (a mean of nearly 18/day) on local mudflats from early July through early May. During spring and fall migration, **transient** flocks of Western Sandpipers may outnumber least sandpipers as the number of northbound Western Sandpipers peaks and declines over a three-week period in late April/early May and again as fall migrant flocks of Western Sandpipers stop briefly to feed at the Herbert Preserve during a three week period in July as they head south from the Arctic.

4) **Which hummingbird is that?** – While elderberry, willow, and mule fat at the Herbert Preserve are just beginning to provide habitat suitable for hummingbird nesting, it is likely to support more “hummingbird-friendly” flowering annuals and shrubs as restoration work continues. The checklist’s seasonal status information and relative abundance codes show that Black-chinned Hummingbird (a Neotropical migrant) is a ***summer*** bird (records at the Preserve extend from late April to late August) while Anna’s Hummingbird, which is present in the Tulare Basin as a year-round resident, has only been seen at the Herbert Preserve from late September to late October (after the last of the summer’s Black-chinned Hummingbirds have headed back south to the tropics). Even though no Rufous Hummingbirds have been positively identified yet at the Preserve, this Arctic-nesting hummingbird is a common spring (March to May) and fall (July to September) transient through this part of Central California. Some of the unidentified hummingbirds that have been seen “zipping” over the Preserve during spring and fall months have probably been Rufous Hummingbirds.

5) **Which swift is that? –** In the Tulare Basin there are three species of swifts that can be found at different times of year at different heights above the ground as they forage aerially for flying insect prey. The checklist’s seasonal status information and relative abundance codes show only one summer record of Black Swift (a Neotropical migrant) at the Herbert Preserve (a flock of 17 birds foraging with Cliff Swallows just above the grassland on June 14, 1992). So, summer (June and July) swifts over the Preserve (especially on very cloudy or overcast days) are most likely to be ***black*** swifts. Vaux’s Swifts on the Valley floor are typically seen as transients, especially during the fall. Vaux’s Swifts at the Herbert Preserve (from 1 to 3 birds/day only) have all been recorded on just four dates between September 10 and September 25. So, fall swifts over the Preserve are most likely to be ***Vaux’s*** Swifts. While White-throated Swifts are considered a year-round resident in Central California, these contrasting black-and-white swifts are most often seen over the Valley floor (away from their high Sierra cliff nest sites) during winter months. White-throated Swifts at the Herbert Preserve (from 2 to 14 birds/day) have all been recorded on just four dates between December 9 and February 28 (usually on fairly clear, sunny days). So, winter swifts over the Preserve are most likely to be ***White-throated*** Swifts.

6) **Which green-colored swallow is that?** - If you are birding at the Preserve and you notice green-backed, white-bellied, fork-tailed swallows among mixed- species foraging flocks of swallows but you can’t quite see the birds’ faces or rumps to differentiate between Tree Swallow and Violet-green Swallow, here’s how the checklist’s seasonal status information and relative abundance codes can help you narrow down the identification. Both Tree Swallow and Violet-green Swallow are Neotropical migrants (most of “our” breeders winter in Meso-America) but there are subtle differences in their seasonal status on the Valley floor. Tree Swallow, present in the Tulare Basin as a year-round resident (and the swallow species most likely to be seen during winter months over most of the Valley) has only been seen on 17 days at the Herbert Preserve (in numbers ranging from 1 to 17 with a mean of 4) from mid-March to early December – with ***no records from*** May or ***September***. In contrast, Violet-green Swallows on the Valley floor (at places like the Herbert Preserve) are typically seen ***only*** as transients with 11 spring records (in numbers ranging from 1 to 450 with a mean of 58) extending from March 7 to April 8 and 13 fall records (in numbers ranging from 1 to 1,000 with a mean of 158) extending from August 1 to November 1 (with peak numbers in ***September***). So, ***large*** flocks of green-colored swallows over the Preserve early in spring and in fall (especially in ***September***) are most likely to be ***violet-green*** swallows.

7) **“Changing of the guard” among Tyrant flycatchers** – At the royal palaces in England, smartly dressed Beefeater guards have stood watch over the centuries as they protect British monarchs. While their subjects may consider kings and queens to be “tyrants”, birders use the same term to describe flycatchers in Family Tyrannidae, species like western kingbird which are famous for guarding their nests against larger birds like hawks and ravens, which they chase out of their territories like fierce little tyrants. A drive around the perimeter of the Herbert Preserve at any season is likely to provide a view of from one to several Tyrant flycatchers, perched on the fence wires watching attentively for a passing insect to fly through their airspace so that they can sally forth and snap a winged hexapod from the air. Depending on the ***season***, the bird in question is likely to be a either a Western Kingbird or a Say’s Phoebe, two species of similar-sized Tyrant flycatchers that typically perch in open country to ply their aerial fly-catching skills. The checklist’s seasonal status information and relative abundance codes show Western Kingbird (a Neotropical migrant) is a ***summer*** species present at the Herbert Preserve in numbers ranging from 1 to 53 individuals/day (with a mean of 9) from late March to late September. Say’s phoebe, considered a year-round resident in Central California with complex seasonal movements between different parts of its mostly desert and grassland range, is a ***winter*** bird at the Herbert Preserve in numbers ranging from 1 to 9 individuals/day (with a mean of 2) from early September to late March. So, a ***wintering*** Tyrant flycatcher perched on one of the Herbert Preserve’s perimeter fences is most likely to be a Say’s Phoebe. While Western Kingbirds nest in small numbers at the Preserve where suitable utility poles are present (not enough large trees yet), the *only* summer records of Say’s Phoebe at the Preserve (one on June 2, 2008 and a juvenile on August 3, 2010) were probably wandering individuals from a “northern outpost” nest site on Badger Hill near Exeter or from similar terrain east of Lindsay. While Say’s Phoebes do not normally nest on the floor of the Tulare Basin (there is one nest record in a residential neighborhood in Visalia!), they do nest in low hilly country along the east edge of the Valley from Oildale (Kern County) and north, at least as far as Badger Hill, 10 miles northeast of the Preserve. The reason this text entry mentions “changing of the guard” is because, like the Beefeater guards in England, the Western Kingbirds and Say’s Phoebes (ecological equivalents in terms of their foraging niche) probably see themselves as royal guards who take their seasonal turn protecting the Preserve vegetation from winged insect hordes who would otherwise defoliate their beloved grasslands. The seasonal overlap between winter Say’s Phoebes and Summer Western kingbirds (days when you may find both species sharing guard duties on the Preserve’s fence wires) is only 2 days in March (March 22 and March 23) and most of August and September. Bioenergetics (the way species balance their metabolic needs with available food supply) has an impact on which flycatcher stays through the insect-poor winter months. Kingbirds (the larger of these 2 species with a greater caloric demand), leaves our latitude as the insect population declines in fall. Say’s Phoebes, desert-adapted flycatchers accustomed to leaner offerings in their arid habitats, apparently find that the relatively small number of flying insects available during our Valley winters, is adequate to supply their more modest energy needs.