



*Hawk cutouts in 300 Page Street courtyard to warn birds of windows*

## BIRDS AT ZEN CENTER

Of Residents and Migrants, Native or Otherwise

by William W. Sterling

The more knowledgeable lay observers, even if not yet so keen of eye as initiates but nevertheless adequately familiar with current technical terms, will speak of residents, migrants, casuals, native and introduced species, and also, rarely, of accidentals. The last term refers to an appearance which is attested but is so unlikely that initially it commands disbelief. Rigorous skepticism is the watchword, at least until an acknowledged expert, or better, a team of experts, has sifted the data and verified the identification.

The exercise of such expertise turns, it would seem, on the ability to know an "accidental" for what it truly is. And in this endeavor much is to be gained from knowing what it is not, that is, from a thorough acquaintance with the usual and common occurrences of native species. Elimination is then possible and the field of choice can be narrowed. The trick, I suspect, is constant alertness; although in the expert, of course, what to me looks tricky, subtle or unattainable, is actually the reflex of long practice and training: a comfortable habit of always looking freshly and with an open mind at whatever presents itself.

One of my regular and most patient teachers is Charles Maury Wallace Sterling, whose constant freshness of mind on our outings together confers still sharper keenness on eyes and ears already preternaturally acute. Once on a jaunt along the levee which marks the boundary between Green Gulch Farm and Muir Beach, he and I met a flock of sparrows. A quick look confirmed they were white-crowned sparrows (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) foraging on the levee path. I continued to move along, hoping to find a less common, more anecdotal species in the willows or ponds ahead of us. My less hasty companion pulled me back, saying "there's another bird in there". Jerked into the present I thought: renew your humility, focus the glasses, look again. Reflect on ways to kick the assumption habit (a quick, assured scan will suffice for those mere sparrows!) and observe without forewish or expectation what is actually there. Maury had picked out a lark sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*) busily feeding and hopping about with the white-crowns. Lark sparrows are not uncommon although this one's presence was unusual and would have gone unnoticed had I been alone.

There are many fewer birds to be seen in and around the City Center than at Tasajara or Green Gulch. The conditions of the habitat at the intersection of Page and Laguna Streets are too limiting for an abundance of species. Nevertheless, birds are present, and like other beings observable in the vicinity, they include residents and migrants. And there as elsewhere one always hopes — at least I do — sometime, unexpectedly, by surprise, to see a rarity, an accidental.

Peter Bailey, himself a resident of the City Center and an attentive observer of circumambient warm-blooded life in the neighborhood, has recorded good field notes about the house-finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*), the most common avian denizen of the City Center. This gregarious finch, a cousin of sparrows and towhees, nests in the ivy on the inner courtyard walls and follows its domestic practice at the City Center all year long.

The house-finch is classified as a native, for it has been observable in the Bay Area for as long as anyone recording observations has bothered to look. The house-finch is also a resident, for it lives here all year long. (It was introduced to the East Coast in the 1940's). The ring-billed gull (*Larus delawarensis*) which Maury and I saw overhead a few days before the autumn equinox — we were standing on Laguna near the side-entrance to the Zendo — is also a resident native.

But the next most common bird about the City Center, the rock dove (*Columba livia*), more familiar as "pigeon", while resident, is not indigenous. The same is true of the house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), which is ubiquitous in residential San Francisco. Both species, pigeon and house-sparrow, are residents, being with us all year round. But neither is a native. They are introduced species, brought to this country from the Old World by human agency. Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) are also of this sort: an introduced species, now resident, and a species whose numbers and pesty habits, particularly its predation upon hole-nesting native species (e.g., flickers, other woodpeckers and bluebirds) can incite normally pacific birdwatchers to fantasies of avian genocide.

Brewer's blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) is widespread throughout the United States, the common blackbird of playgrounds and city parks: the park next to the Guest House and Daniel Koshland Park no less than Golden Gate Park. The beady yellow eye of the glossy blue-black male is distinctive.

Maury and I saw only one species of native migratory bird in the City Center neighborhood, a single western flycatcher (*Empidonax difficilis*) flitting after insects in the pine trees at the lower end of Koshland Park, presumably now on its way to Mexico for the winter.

Resident and migrant, native and exotic, are terms which locate and identify the speaker as much as they do the referent. Who am I, simply because my mailbox has a Bay Area address, to say that a western flycatcher is not also a resident? From the flycatcher's point of view, the entirety of North America is home ground, with particular residences that alternate with the seasons. My frame of reference is likely too confined; the close fit of my normal point of view is virtually unshedable. Consider "native" and "introduced". We do not contend, for example, that the Dharma is indelibly oriental. Or do we? My own sense has been that we ascribe to it a universal nature, a planetary adaptability. The Dharma has the capacity to flourish anywhere — as starlings can — notwithstanding initial resistance by the local species who regard themselves as prior in time and therefore superior in right.

So where, finally, is the accidental to be found, the rare bird, the rare man or woman? Maury and I saw none on our recent walk-about in San Francisco. Or perhaps we did and failed to note the signs. In any event there are none to report at this writing. Nevertheless, we do have a working hypothesis for locating the rare bird: keep looking in all the usual places. Occasionally a trip away from home may be in order to see known examples: go to the mountains near Ventura in Southern California to see the nearly extinct California condor; go to Bodhgaya; go to Tibet. But most of the time just keeping fresh and alert in our ordinary daily encounters will do. Just often enough there is a lark sparrow in the flock, and who knows what else that we may have overlooked or misjudged: a phoenix or a bodhisattva.



*A resident at 300 Page Street*