

# Central Valley Bird Highlights: August through October 2023

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A pair of **Wedge-rumped Storm-Petrels** were found on 21 August at Tulare Lake in Kings County (MSt). This remarkable first Central Valley record came on the heels of Hurricane Hilary slamming into southern California, bringing with it a wave of displaced seabirds looking for refuge on inland water bodies. Prior to this storm, there were only 16 state records for this species accepted by the California Bird Records Committee, and Hurricane Hilary brought an additional 32 records to the state!



Wedge-rumped Storm-Petrel (*Hydrobates Tethys*). 21 August 2023. Tulare Lake, Kings County. Photo by Gary Woods.

Tulare County had another Central Valley first with a shocking **Greater Pewee** from 8–26 November, one of the northernmost inland records for California (SSu). The bird was seen at Bartlett Park just outside Porterville. The Central Valley's first **Blue-headed Vireo** was at the Putah Creek Riparian

Reserve on 11 September, seen and photographed briefly in both Yolo and Solano counties (MMA, LC, JG). While birders were initially disappointed at the rapid disappearance of this rarity, it was relieved for some when another **Blue-headed Vireo** was found upstream in Putah Creek Canyon in the evening of 1 October (BW). This second county record for Yolo and Solano counties, while only seen for an evening, was successfully chased by those close enough to arrive before dark. While it is quite surprising that the region got its first and second records of **Blue-headed Vireo** in such a short timeframe, perhaps it makes sense given the species had an above average showing on the coast of California in the fall of 2023.



Blue-headed Vireo (*Vireo solitarius*). 1 October 2023. Putah Creek—fishing access #2, Yolo County. Photo by Bart Wickel.

Two **Brants** were found, with one on 10 November from Staten Island in San Joaquin County (CW, TW) and a notably early record from Grand Island Bakersfield in Kern County on 13 September (JW). **Surf Scoters** were reported twice with one on 16 November at Folsom Lake in Placer County and another at “Private Property H” in Kings County on 29 October (MSt). A **White-winged Scoter** found at the Thermalito Afterbay in Butte County on 30 October remained until 5 November (LH, JLe). San Joaquin had a **Long-tailed Duck** at Staten Island on 23 November that stayed for a week (AE). Seven **Red-breasted Merganser** records occurred during this period, almost all at large reservoirs along the edge of the valley in November. A **Barrow’s Goldeneye** was at the Lincoln WTP in Placer County on 30 November (GM). This species is always quite unusual away from usual wintering locations.

The southern portion of the Central Valley had seven **Common Ground Dove** records, with five coming from Tulare County and one each from Kern and Kings counties, respectively. **White-winged Doves** had quite the fall with four in the region, three of which came from the northern part of the valley. Solano County kicked off the action with a bird along Putah Creek at Fishing Access #1 on 15 August (KD, JLi). Another was along Newville Road in Tehama on 17 September (MSw), and a few days later on 21 September yet another was in Butte County at the Bidwell-Sacramento River State Park (MRO). The only report of this species from the southern portion of the valley came from the town of Tulare on 25 November (DF).

A **Yellow-billed Cuckoo** was detected in Butte County while doing permitted surveys at the Upper Butte Basin Wildlife Area on 12 August in Butte County (LCo). This species has plummeted in population over recent decades, so it is always encouraging to see reports from historic breeding areas.

A young male **Costa's Hummingbird** was found 7 September on Payen Rd in El Dorado County (AP). San Joaquin had a **Costa's Hummingbird** as well, first found on 8 September and continuing through the winter, though it was only seen intermittently (GO, EO). A stunning male **Broad-billed Hummingbird** was photographed just outside Redding in Shasta County on 4 October (TK, MK). This bird delighted local birders for two days before moving on and represents a first county and second Central Valley record. The wait for the third record was short though, as on 8 November, a young male **Broad-billed Hummingbird** was found in Fresno County at the Clovis Botanical Gardens (RC). This individual continued into early December.

**American Golden-Plovers** had a strong fall in the Central Valley with four observed, including the first documented record for Butte County on 6 October (LH). A five-minute-wonder touched down at the County Road 104 Ponds in Yolo County on 23 September (ZP, BW) and another spent a week at Los Banos WTP in Merced County from 14–21 September (GW). Finally, an **American Golden-Plover** was found 14 October on "Private Property H" in Kings County and continued into early November (MSt). A **Pacific Golden-Plover** at Cosumnes River Preserve in Sacramento County on 19 August was a delight for birders (AL), as was an adult in basic plumage found in Butte County on 11 September (KM).

**Mountain Plovers** have declined significantly in the Central Valley in the past 50 years and only a few wintering flocks persist at known locations. So, it was exciting when on 7 October, a flock of four migrant **Mountain Plovers** were found along Nelson Shippee Road in Butte County (KSo), just the second county record. A smattering of **Snowy Plovers** occurred with sightings from Clifton Court Forebay in Contra Costa (JB, EM) and Los Banos WTP in Merced

County (PD). Both locations had up to three birds from early August into mid-October. **Snowy Plovers** are much more expected at private locations around Tulare Lake than elsewhere in the valley and up to 75 were reported on a single eBird checklist on 21 October (MSt). WTP in Merced County (PD). Both locations had up to three birds and the dates spanned from early August into mid-October.



Hudsonian Godwit  
(*Limosa haemastica*).  
18 August 2023.  
County Rd 104 Ponds,  
Yolo County.

Photo by  
Josh Greenfield.

A juvenile **Hudsonian Godwit** stopped a few hearts on the evening of 18 August, when photos were sent out via group chats and listservs from the County Road 104 Ponds in Yolo County (ZP). It was briefly seen the following morning at dawn and then disappeared without a trace, less than an hour after sunrise. This stunning trans-equatorial migrant was the first confirmed record for Yolo County and the third for the Central Valley, with the previous two records from Kings County. A rusty adult **Red Knot** was found at the Woodland WTP in Yolo County on 3 August, but it did not stay for more than a day (LC, MMA). Two more **Red Knots** occurred, with a report at “Private Property H” in Kings County from 21 October to mid-November (MSt), and another from the Tulare County portion of the Tulare Lake on 23 September (DF), where a **Ruff** was also photographed (SSu). The only other **Ruff** during this period was a bird found on Staten Island in San Joaquin on 18 August (ISC).

A pair of **Stilt Sandpipers** found 7 September on Nelson Shippee Road was the first record for Butte County (LH). Lincoln WTP in Placer County had a **Stilt Sandpiper** on 15 August (RP). The County Road 104 ponds in Yolo had a **Stilt Sandpiper** stay several weeks in mid-September (ZP, FF, KF, MH) and Solano County had a one-day wonder on 23 August at the Robben Road Ponds (RM). Up to eight **Sanderlings** were seen at Los Banos WTP in Merced County in mid-August and early-September (PD, GW). Staten Island in San Joaquin also had a **Sanderling** on 19 September (KF, RP). 16 to 20 **Semipalmated Sandpipers** were found, almost all from August with just a few September records. This species seems much more expected in the northern part of the Central Valley, with very few reports each year in the south, usually from Kings and Tulare counties. Another scarce migrant, the **Solitary Sandpiper** produced 14 records during this period, about average for this species.

Dreams came true for a young birder, when a fading adult **Red-necked Stint** popped into their scope on 29 August at the Yolo Bypass WA, Yolo County (ZP). This Siberian peep was the second record for the Central Valley, with the only previous record also from the Yolo Bypass WA in August 2009. Fortuitously, it was re-found the following evening amongst a skittish flock of **Western Sandpipers**.



Red-necked Stint (*Calidris ruficollis*) with two Western Sandpipers (*Calidris mauri*).  
Yolo Bypass WA, Yolo County. Photo by Josh Greenfield.

A crispy, immature **Little Gull** was spotted at the Kern Water Bank in Kern County on 22 September (JSt). An adult **Black-legged Kittiwake** at the Fresno WTP on 12 October was the first Fresno County record (GW). The bird was seen through 15 October and is one of fewer than five records for the Central Valley. Two adult **Heermann's Gulls**, the Central Valley's third record, were found at the Sacramento County Bufferlands on 27 October (CC). A **Long-**

**tailed Jaeger** at Stockton WTP on 1 September was a first record for San Joaquin County (DY). It was a poor fall for **Sabine's Gull** in the Central Valley, with a lone bird from Clifton Court Forebay in Contra Costa County on 31 August (JB).

Two **Franklin's Gulls** were in Butte County. One at Thermalito Afterbay was found 30 August and continued until 21 September (LH). Possibly the same bird was reported 11 October from Nelson Shippee Road (SA). Three **Franklin's Gull** occurred in the southern valley, one from Tulare County (SSu) and two from Kings County (MSt). Five **Western Gull** occurred this fall, including the return of a banded adult in Yolo County that has been seen every winter since 2009 (JT). The **Lesser Black-backed Gull**, a species that was a mega rarity just 25 years ago, continues to show up with some regularity as five were found during this period, nearly all in November. A second-cycle **Glaucous Gull** on the Feather River in Butte County was at the early date of 31 October.

**Common Terns** had a fantastic fall with seven observations, some with up to 15 birds present! Two birds flying around Black Butte Reservoir on 11 September represented the first record for both Glenn and Tehama counties (JLo). The Thermalito Afterbay in Butte County had a flock with 15 birds on 17 September and three on 4 October (LH). Very rare in Yolo County, a lone **Common Tern** was downed by a storm on 21 August at the Woodland WTP (ZP, FF). Comanche Reservoir in Amador had three sightings in the period with up to 13 birds present at once (TE).

On 21 November, a **Pacific Loon** was found on Bullard/Fulkner Pond, a small pond in Fresno (GF). Quite rare in Fresno County, this bird remained until 27 November. Another **Pacific Loon**, this time in San Joaquin County, was on Camanche Reservoir with thirteen **Common Loons** on 2 November. There were scattered records of the Common Loon during this period, usually at reservoirs in November.

**Neotropic Cormorants** were found at Fresno WTP in August with up to four birds present and reports continued through the end of November (JM, JSt). The species is slowly expanding its range northward, and it will be interesting to see if it will colonize the Central Valley the way **Great-tailed Grackles** did in the early 2000s. An immature **Brown Pelican** was at the Stockton WTP in San Joaquin County from 2–17 September (RB). Another inland **Brown Pelican** flew over the Cosumnes River Preserve in Sacramento County on 19 November (PM, MGe).

Three **Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers** were found during this period, including a migrant on 18 September at Lake Solano County Park in Solano County (JG). On the edge of the valley, an immature bird was near the town of Guinda in Yolo County on 22 November (ZP, ES, EI). A second Yolo County **Yellow-**

**bellied Sapsucker** was photographed along Cache Creek on 6 November (CCCS). Only one **Red-naped Sapsucker** was found, in Porterville, Tulare County on 21 October (SSu).

Late flycatchers included a **Tropical Kingbird** at Lake Yosemite County Park beginning 12 November and observed regularly through the end of the period (DK). This was the second Merced County record. By the end of the fall, any *Myiarchus* flycatcher is exceptional, so a report of a likely **Ash-throated Flycatcher** on 18 November in Tulare County was intriguing (DF). Two **Eastern Kingbirds** were found, one at the Lakeshore East Campground, Shasta County on 3 September (DM, MMo). Another along the Natomas Main Drainage Canal, Sacramento County on 6 September was a third county record (BP).

A single **Gray Flycatcher** was observed in San Joaquin County on 1 September (KM). A female **Vermilion Flycatcher** returned on 13 October for a fifth consecutive winter at Merced NWR (DS). Later, a brilliant male joined her and continued through the period (m.obs.). Another pair of **Vermilion Flycatchers** were at Kern NWR 10 October–16 November (SSu). Quite surprisingly for fall was a **Bell's Vireo** at Grand Island Bakersfield on 12 August in Kern County (JW). Typically, this species is detected singing earlier in the season, so where this bird spent the summer remains a mystery. A **Red-eyed Vireo** continued into August from its previously reported summering location in Redding, Shasta County.

Shockingly, **Pinyon Jay** was photographed at “Private Property H” on 29 October (MSt), just the second record for Kings County and apparently the fourth for the Central Valley. Perhaps just as surprising was that the bird was in a eucalyptus grove, a far cry from its typical pinyon pine habitat. An odd, California-wide irruption of **Pygmy Nuthatches** occurred in September, with the Central Valley lucky enough to get a few records. A small flock of four birds was near Rocklin, Placer County on 17 September (CW), and three more were together at Riverbottom Park in Fresno County on 15 September (JSe). Perhaps unrelated to the irruption was a single bird near Chico in Butte County on 27 November (LH, MSK). The late November date is more typical for the species based on prior records in the region.

It was another active fall for **Winter Wrens** in Putah Creek Canyon. One returned to Lake Solano County Park in Solano County for its second winter, first reported on 24 October and continuing through the winter (DaH, DeH). Another was briefly observed below Monticello Dam in Solano County on 30 October (EM). A third was at Putah Creek, Fishing Access #3 on 26 November, which stuck around through the winter (SSc). Finally, a fourth **Winter Wren** returned to the same location as the previous winter at Putah Creek, Fishing Access #2 on 30 November, remaining through the season (JG).

All four records were thoroughly documented and accepted by the California Bird Records Committee.

A vagrant **Gray Catbird** was found along Putah Creek west of Mace Blvd. on 31 August, representing the third Solano County record (RM). Five **Sage Thrashers** were found in the period, with one near Red Bluff in Tehama County (SL), two low in the foothills of Stanislaus County (SN, SR), one at Pixley NWR in Tulare County (DF), and one at the Kern Water Bank (JSt). These records spanned from late September to early November. Only one **Townsend's Solitaire** was reported on 24 September at Laughlin Park in San Joaquin County (KM).

Winter finches often appear in the valley in late fall. This year, there were six reports of **Evening Grosbeak**, with one coming from Sacramento County, two from the lowlands of Shasta County, and three near Chico, Butte County (m.obs.). Five reports of **Red Crossbill** is a typical fall tally, with reports from San Joaquin, Sacramento, Yolo, and Yuba counties (m.obs.). Surprisingly, there were no reports of **Cassin's Finch** in the period.

Four **Lapland Longspurs** were found in the Central Valley in fall 2023. One was heard near Willows, Glenn County on 30 November (MSw), and another was picked out of a large flock of **Horned Larks** on Poundstone Road in Colusa County on 18 November (LS, LuC, MS). Additional birds were at Folsom Lake in Placer County on 8 November (RP) and flying over Clifton Court Forebay in Contra Costa County on 19 November (DM). Four **Grasshopper Sparrows** were reported from late-October into November, not entirely surprising for a species that migrates later than other summer sparrows in the region. These records came from Kern, Madera, Yolo, and Colusa counties (m.obs.). A **Lark Bunting** was an exciting find at the Yolo Bypass WA on 8 September (JE).

Two **Clay-colored Sparrows** were found, with one in residential Roseville in Placer County on 28 August (AK), and another at Grand Island Bakersfield in Kern County on 20 September (JW). **Brewer's Sparrows** are rare but regular migrants through the Central Valley in fall. One was at the Sacramento Bypass WA in Yolo County 14-15 September (KD), two were in lowland Placer County on 15 and 21 September (DC, JT), and another was on Frankenheimer Road in Stanislaus County on 8 October (HR). **Brewer's Sparrows** tend to be much more regular in the southern valley, and this year was no exception, with roughly half a dozen reports spread throughout Kern and Tulare counties (m.obs.). A **Swamp Sparrow** was at the San Joaquin River NWR in Stanislaus County on 20 November (CS), and another was at Kapusta Lake in Shasta County a week later on 27 November (KO, EO). Surprisingly, a group of three individuals were together at a marsh near Tupman, Kern County on 11 November (TE). **Green-tailed Towhees** had a typical fall showing with four records from the region, with birds found in Yolo, Sacramento, and Tehama counties (m.obs.).

A first-year male **Orchard Oriole** found at the University of California, Davis Arboretum on 11 October continued through the winter to delight dozens of birders (GP). It was the fifth Yolo County record. On the edge of the region, a **Baltimore Oriole** was photographed on private property near lone on 11 September, representing the first record for Amador County (TE).

It was an excellent fall for vagrant eastern warblers in the Central Valley. Two **Northern Waterthrushes** were found, with one at Putah Creek, Fishing Access #1 in Yolo and Solano counties on 15 August (KD, JLi), and another at the Yolo Bypass WA on 9 September (JG). A **Black-and-white Warbler**, Solano's third, was photographed at Lake Solano County Park on 29 August (MRe). Particularly rare for the region was a **Lucy's Warbler** at the Kern Water Bank on 20 November (TE). While not nearly as exceptional in the deserts of eastern Kern County, there are as few as two prior Central Valley records. A **Virginia's Warbler** at Lake Solano County Park 17–18 September was the first county record for Solano (KD, LWD).

Four **American Redstarts** were found, including three in Yolo County. The first was at the Putah Creek Riparian Reserve on 1 September (SSc). A stunning adult male was at Babel Slough from 2–7 September (KT, MGu), and a likely hatch-year bird was in residential Davis on 10 September (CD). The fourth **American Redstart** was just inside the El Dorado County line on Payen Road on 12 September, making it a first county record (DE).

**Northern Parulas** had a sensational year in the Central Valley, with nine reports from around the region. Butte County had two individuals, with one at Big Chico Creek on 13 September (MF) and another at Gray Lodge WA on 19 September (LH, MSk). Another was along the American River Parkway in Sacramento County on 18 September (MMa). Yolo and Solano counties did especially well for **Northern Parulas**, with two together simultaneously at the Putah Creek Riparian Reserve in late August through early September (KS<sub>w</sub>, JG), one at Lake Solano County Park 6–17 September (DaH, DeH), and another at Elk Slough near Clarksburg on 2 September (AE). A **Northern Parula** at Riverbottom Park in Fresno County was a second county record (GW). Perhaps the most exceptional of the reports was a very late bird discovered 20 November at the Kern Water Bank, which stuck around for the winter (TE).

A **Magnolia Warbler**, Merced County's third, was at San Luis Reservoir SRA on 1 October (GH). A **Chestnut-sided Warbler** on private property near lone on 31 August was a second county record for Amador (TE). Another was within the American River Parkway on 19 September (MMa, LC). A **Blackpoll Warbler**, straddling the Fresno-Madera County line at Riverbottom Park on 7 September, is one of very few records for both counties (JSe). Another **Blackpoll Warbler**, the second record for Butte County, was at Gray Lodge WA on 17 September (LH). Two other **Blackpoll Warblers** were in eastern Contra Costa County on 16–19 September (SC) and 20 October (AL).

A few vagrant Cardenallids were found as well. For the first time in Central Valley, a pair of **Summer Tanagers** were documented breeding with two fledged offspring photographed at Oak Grove Park in San Joaquin County (Oliver et al. 2024. *Central Valley Birds* 27:41–50). Additional reports from nearby riparian areas in August and September were likely these same birds beginning to wander about the area. Another **Summer Tanager** was at the Kern Water Bank on 22 September (JSt). The flamboyant male **Summer Tanager** returned to winter near the honeybee box at William Land Park in Sacramento County on 26 September (AL), although it proved difficult to see until later in the season. A female **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** was photographed on Eight Mile Road in San Joaquin County on 22 August (RB, SR). Finally, an **Indigo Bunting** was reported from the Kern Water Bank on 23 August (TE). We thank the following observers who reported their significant findings to the Central Valley Bird Club's listserv, eBird, and, where appropriate, the California Bird Records Committee:

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m.obs. = many observers; NWR = National Wildlife Refuge; SRA = State Recreation Area; WA = State Wildlife Area; WTP = Wastewater Treatment Plant.