San Vicente Cienega Trail

By Dave McDonald

The San Vicente Cienega Trail is arguably an oft-overlooked treasure of the natural history of our area. "It winds from Chicago to L.A., more than 2,000 miles all the way" – wait, that's a different topic. San Vicente starts near the south end of Bullard. If you turn left at the Corner Kitchen (onto San Vicente St. two blocks south of Broadway), the road turns to dirt and curves around to a parking area under the Highway 90 overpass. The trail then follows the creek for a while until it reaches the remains – just the abutments – of an old railroad bridge. Beyond that, it runs along the rails-to-trails raised embankment, toward the sports complex and Scott Park golf course. The combination of forested stream and open yucca-juniper habitat makes for a great year-round birding hotspot.

With the addition of 21 species first seen there in 2023 (at least on Cornell's eBird list), San Vicente now has an official list of 209 species (number 209 was a rare Rufous-backed Robin, added on 10-Dec-2023). Most of the 209 species are more-or-less "common" birds of the area doves, ravens, towhees, Gambel's Quail, White-breasted Nuthatches, Ladder-backed Woodpeckers and Bewick's Wrens. One of the 209 species, though, is the Common Black Hawk, which has nested near the start of the trail for a number of years, above the old cars that were used to stabilize the banks – they now resemble either sculpture or eyesores, depending on your perspective. The nest has to be one of the most accessible anywhere in the U.S. This magnificent bird of the borderlands is a great treat for visiting birders from other parts (e.g., Chicago or St. Louis).

One of the adult Common Black Hawks near its nest

Spring and fall bring a sprinkling of migrants. Painted Redstarts from up higher in the Gila National Forest, for example, are regulars in the spring and fall. Occasionally, a rarity from elsewhere is drawn to the perennial waterflow and abundant trees of this riparian belt. This fall, a Prothonotary Warbler showed up at the beginning of September. The little cutie normally lives in bald cypress swamps in the south-east.

Another stray, whose normal range barely extends to the Brownsville area of coastal Texas, near the Mexican border, was a Couch's Kingbird that stayed for 10 days in November. It drew a number of ace birders from the

A Prothonotary Warbler, along San Vicente, 1-Sep-23

Albuquerque area. Much easier to find (in the summer) are Cassin's Kingbirds in the trees, and Western Kingbirds in the more open areas.

A breeding warbler that can be difficult to see, but is easier to hear, is Lucy's Warbler. Its breeding range is more or less restricted to AZ, and the fringes of neighboring states, including our corner of NM. Other summer breeders that add a splash of color are Summer Tanagers (red) and Blue Grosbeaks. If you prefer simple black and white, Black Phoebes are common much of the year, sallying for insects right along the waterway. Or look for Bridled Titmice, found only in SE AZ and our corner of NM, along with the more widely distributed Juniper Titmouse.

A Bridled Titmouse

In the upland areas, one can hear and sometimes see Rufous-crowned Sparrows, Crissal Thrashers, Cactus Wrens (look for the big cholla cactus patch in the open area), Greater Roadrunners, Phainopeplas, and other desert birds.

Efforts are underway, led by Silver City Watershed Keepers, to remove invasive trees (primarily Siberian elm and tree of heaven) and replace them with native species

Volunteers watered the new plantings through the dry non-monsoon of 2023. If you are interested in helping with watering or planting, contact Beth Cable (my wife) at silvercitywatershedkeepers@gmail.com.

One of the great things about San Vicente is that the birding can be exciting all year long. Something new is almost bound to show up eventually some time, somewhere, winter, spring, summer or fall. And the old familiars are great fun too.

As Nat King Cole would say, "won't you get hip to this timely tip" and try San Vicente for yourself?