



Figure 1. SDBG Bird Walk birders checking out Garden birds, September 2023.

## San Diego Botanic Garden—Annual Bird Report for the Year 2023

Submitted by Sue Smith, January 2024

In 2023, our San Diego Botanic Garden (SDBG) Bird Walks, held on the first Monday of each month, continued to be popular with members and other sign-up visitors. The Bird Walks start at the Conservatory main entrance at 8 am, then wind through the Garden, as leaders help point out birds along the way. Registration is online, coordinated by Membership Lead, Wendy Czech, who also opens the gate for our early entry, checks in participants on Bird Walk Day, and provides us with the final roster information so we can share the day's bird list with participants. The walk is free to members, a standard day-fee is charged for non-members, and the attendance cap is currently 40. These walks first started 35 years ago in 1988, and have been led by birding specialist, Rita Campbell, since 1990. SDBG volunteer, Sue Smith, joined her as a co-leader in 2009, and Gretchen Nell joined as co-leader in 2014. As attendance grew, Jeff Clingan, Chair of the SDBG Volunteer Committee and Docent Training Coordinator, joined us as our 4<sup>th</sup> co-leader in April 2022. Also in 2023, we continued our independent bird surveys, covering the old pre-pandemic route so that our 14-yr-old bird data stream will remain comparable. These independent bird counts are conducted with 1-3 people (Smith, Nell and Clingan), one morning per month. All birds seen and identified on these bird walks and surveys are recorded in an online (eBird) data base available to the public at the San Diego Botanic Garden birding hotspot link: <https://ebird.org/hotspot/L873348>

**2023 Birding Stats.** During 2023, 11 public bird walks were completed, averaging 28 people per walk (including leaders), ranging from 13 to 40 participants covering an average of 1.4 miles and lasting an average of 3 hrs. each walk (the January walk was cancelled to clear the way for disassembly of the holiday season's Lightscape equipment). Added to the Bird Walks were 11 independent monthly bird surveys covering an average of 3.2 miles and 4.6 survey hours each survey, with only one survey missed in the slow birding month of July. Together, this amounted to 22 bird count days, and at least 83 hrs. and 52 miles of bird count effort.

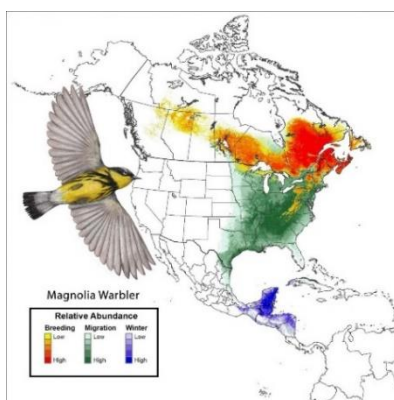


Figure 2. The Magnolia Warbler's normal distribution.

**Bird Diversity and Abundance.** A total of 81 bird species was recorded by us in the Garden in 2023, eight less species than the previous year, but about average for the period 2019-2022. Counts of individual birds seen in 2023 ranged from a high of 459 birds per survey in January to a low of 274 per survey in March, with an average of 361 individual birds per monthly survey in the Garden, which is also about average for recent years. Visitors and SDBG staff, reporting to the eBird data base, added another 14 species, thus the combined total for the year amounted to 95 bird species reported in and from the Garden in 2023.

**Two New Species Added to the Garden's List in 2023.** On October 18, SDBG bird guide, Gretchen Nell, found a beautiful **Magnolia Warbler** in Palm Canyon, actively feeding in the dense foliage of our large *Bunya bunya* tree, and in nearby *Tipuana*



*tipu* trees. This eastern warbler, far off course in its fall migration, stayed for a little over a week at this location, fueling up on grubs and other insects before moving on. It winters in SE Mexico, Panama and parts of the Caribbean, breeding mostly in the boreal forests of Canada, passing through the eastern and midwestern U.S. States in migration, rare in the west. Then on November 27, on a monthly independent bird survey, Jeff Clingan, Gretchen Nell and Sue Smith spotted and identified a **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** in the California Landscapes Garden, tapping sap holes in a Burr Oak. This classic, “birder’s bird” is actually considered rare in southern California, and only as an unusual winter visitor here in San Diego County. It was last seen on November 29, so did not stay long. This was a young bird, still retaining the largely brown, diffuse mottling of juvenile plumage. Like the Magnolia Warbler, it is a boreal Canada breeder, usually wintering in the southeastern U.S., Mexico, Central America, and Canada.



*Figure 3. Rare Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in the California Gardenscapes area in November.*

**Other Rarities and Unusual Occurrences.** While conducting the June independent survey, Jeff Clingan discovered a singing adult male **Northern Parula** in the Lawn Garden, another rare eastern U.S. off-course warbler. There have only been a couple of other previous sightings of this species in recent years—one in April 2016, and one in January 2012. Also, starting in fall of 2023, San Diego County experienced a record invasion of montane **Red-breasted Nuthatches** in the coastal slope, mostly likely due to a lack of cone seeds in their regular mountain haunts. A record high count of 4 of these nuthatches was recorded in the Garden on our October 4 Bird Walk, joining many high counts of this species all over coastal San Diego.

**Breeding Bird News.** Overall, 22 bird species were confirmed nesting in the Garden in 2023, with many other ‘probable’ breeders. A new breeder was Red-tailed Hawk, based on an adult observed flying over with food in its talons on May 1, though the nest site may have been outside the boundaries of the Garden. This nesting total is only one less than the previous year, even though we missed some coverage during the nesting season when the Bamboo Garden was closed between March and November for repairs and construction of an ADA wheelchair accessible path. In other breeding news, the Garden’s population of exotic **Swinhoe’s White-eye** reached record numbers, with a high count of 32 birds on Oct 26 and again on December 4 in the Garden. This species was first seen in San Diego County in 2018, first discovered in the Garden in 2020, and first confirmed nesting in the Garden in 2022 (also confirmed nesting in 2023). This fruit-loving southeast Asian species is a popular cage bird in China. Our population is thought to originate from a few escaped or released birds discovered initially in Costa Mesa, Orange County in 2006.

**The Future---**We will continue our Monthly Bird Walks in 2024, and look forward to sharing with others the beauty of the Garden’s birds, and encouraging non-members to become members. We also like to stress how important the Garden is as an oasis and feeding stop for birds in arid San Diego, especially for breeding, wintering and also migrating birds. We hope to continue our independent bird surveys, which are important for maintaining a consistent data stream of information on bird abundance and diversity in the Garden. This multiyear data set continues to grow on the Cornell Ornithological Laboratory’s world-wide eBird online data repository, where the Garden is designated a **Birding Hotspot**.



*Figure 5. At least four Red-breasted Nuthatches, a mountain species, found a home in the Garden this winter.*



*Figure 4. Rare adult male Northern Parula, found by Jeff Clingan, in June, singing in the Lawn Garden.*



*Figure 6. The exotic Swinhoe’s White-Eye greatly increased in numbers in 2023 in the Garden.*

