

## BIRDING SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

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More bird species have been recorded from San Diego County than any other county or area of similar size in the United States. This is due in part to the numerous habitats in the county, including open ocean, bays, estuaries, coastal sage scrub, chaparral, oak woodland, coniferous forest, and deserts. According to the citizen science platform eBird, 543 species of birds have been recorded from the county, with well over 200 species recorded from some locations. With 103 species currently reported on eBird from SDSU (<http://ebird.org/ebird/hotspot/L716168>), our campus is a great place to watch birds.

At the time of this writing, 388 independent eBird checklists have been reported since 1999 from SDSU, though most date from 2010 to the present. These checklists span the calendar year, which allows us to see seasonal trends in species occurrence. Many occur year round, meaning they winter and likely nest on campus. These include Cooper's Hawk, Mourning Dove, Anna's Hummingbird, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Black Phoebe, Cassin's Kingbird, American Crow, Common Raven, Bushtit, Bewick's Wren, Northern Mockingbird, Orange-crowned Warbler, Song Sparrow, California Towhee, House Finch, and Lesser Goldfinch. Spring is an exciting time to watch birds on campus when many species that winter south of us return for summer breeding. These include the spectacular Hooded Oriole as well as the Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Western Kingbird, and Cliff Swallow. Likewise, fall brings the welcome return of many species that breed in the north but spend their winter in the mild climate of San Diego. These species include Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Cedar Waxwing, Townsend's Warbler, White-crowned Sparrow, and the ubiquitous Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler. Other species just pass through campus for a few weeks during spring and/or fall migration, such as Sharp-shinned Hawk, Rufous Hummingbird, Warbling Vireo, Hermit Thrush, Nashville Warbler, Black-throated Gray Warbler, Western Tanager, and Bullock's Oriole. This seasonality is not specific to SDSU, but for all of San Diego.

There have been many changes to the birds seen on campus over the years. Great Horned Owls used to nest in Hardy Tower, and Brewers Black-

birds were reported in the hundreds from grassy fields, but both have apparently been extirpated from campus. Likewise, Cliff Swallows were more abundant and American Robins were commonly seen. A large palm just south of Hepner Hall used to house a colony of Rose-ringed Parakeets before Landscape Services removed their nest cavity. In contrast, many species are newcomers to campus. The Allen's Hummingbird can now be regularly seen in the Mediterranean Garden, and the Dark-eyed Junco has established breeding territories in the last few years. Another recent arrival is an introduced species from Asia, the Scaly-breasted Munia.



Kevin Burns and Casey Richart  
birding in the Mediterranean Garden  
(Photo credit: Rosalyn Price-Waldman)

Where to bird on campus? There are some species that are only found in specific places on campus. For example, Aztec Canyon (north and west of Chapultepec Hall) is the last remaining patch of coastal sage scrub on campus, and the only place to see California Scrub-jay, Wrentit, California Thrasher, and Spotted Towhee, and is the most likely place on campus to find a Red-tailed Hawk nest. This canyon may soon be converted into dormitory housing, so if you're trying to build an SDSU bird list, you may want to see these species soon. On the east side of campus, the riparian woodland along Alvarado Creek is perhaps the best place to bird in terms of overall species diversity. In the winter Belted Kingfishers can be seen hunting up and down the creek, Mallards become common, and as many as five species of herons and egrets are possible. In the spring, the riparian vegetation provides nesting habitat for Red-shouldered Hawk, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow Warbler, and Wilson's Warbler. White-throated Swifts breed here under the trolley line. This is also a

good place to pick-up campus "rarities" such as Ash-throated Flycatcher, Lincoln's Sparrow, and MacGillivray's Warbler—species easier to see other places in the county, but difficult to encounter on campus. The flat open mesa including Tony Gwynn Stadium to the large grass field south of the Music building (ENS 700) does not have a diverse avifauna, but are good places to find birds that prefer open-spaces such as Killdeer and Say's Phoebe; sometimes Peregrine Falcons perch atop the stadium lights. Speaking of Peregrine Falcons, in some winters, a Peregrine has set up residence atop Hardy Tower, feasting on the local pigeons and doves.

Perhaps the most relaxing place to bird campus is Aztec Terrace, where you can grab a coffee or cold drink from the market, sit in a comfy chair, and enjoy swifts flying by at eye-level, gulls and egrets moving up and down Alvarado Canyon, and perhaps catch migrating raptors and vultures pass overhead. On the main campus, Scripp's Pond and the Mediterranean Garden are often good places to see wintering, breeding, and migrant birds. Birds are perhaps more abundant in this area during drought years, when they are attracted to the irrigated landscape. Around the last week of March when the orchid trees are flowering around the lawn above Scripp's Pond, Rufous Hummingbirds aggregate at dusk in the dozens, aggressively defending nectaries with whistling wings and threatening *tchew-tchew-tchew* calls, creating an energetic sunset of pink flowers and red hummingbirds. The best time to bird campus is Saturday or Sunday morning when all is quiet with the exception of calling birds. During weekday mornings, a birder must contend with the hustle and bustle of students rushing to class and the atrocious sound of the ubiquitous leaf-blower, which for unfathomable reasons some humans perceive as an improvement to rakes and brooms.

There are many birds to enjoy at San Diego State University. Maybe you will come across an old favorite or something new. Birds have wings, and you never know just who might show up. In the words of coach Steve Fisher, "Eyes and ears Aztecs!;" keep them both open, for there are many wonderful birds to see at San Diego State.

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