TRACY STORER AND THE BIRD LIFE OF PUTAH CREEK IN BY-GONE DAYS

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The following passage is the entire journal entry written on 19 June 1925 by Tracy Storer, summarizing the day's work and observations at Sackett Ranch along Putah Creek in Yolo County, California (see Table 2 for translation of antiquated names).

"Nothing in any of the traps. The areas flooded by late spring rains evidently have no mammals except mole (workings; trap on a big run, but no returns) and Brush Rabbit (few droppings found). Also tried edge of orange orchard but without returns. Saw one dead juvenile woodrat where killed by auto in road adjacent to thickets of elderberry and poison oak.

Elderberries (Sambucus glauca) now heavy with fully ripened fruit while at the same time other heads are blossoming. Mr. Sackett says fruiting at this season is not unusual in this locality. He counts the elderberry of aid in distracting the attention of birds from fruit but has planted mulberries as they are even earlier. The apricots here are now all gone, as also early plums, and peaches are being picked. He thus gets off his crop for the most part before the young birds are out. Thus far I have seen or shot young-of-the-year of the following species: Nuttall Woodpecker, Anna Hummingbird, Black Phoebe, Brewer Blackbird, Meadowlark, Bullock Oriole, Linnet, Song Sparrow, Green-backed Goldfinch, Warbling Vireo, Least Vireo, Cliff Swallow, Vigors Wren. It would be of interest to compare the dates of maturing of fruits and the appearance of young birds here at Davis and at Berkeley. Of course, ripening dates not picking dates should be used as the local fruit is, for the most part, picked green.

Numerous trees, chiefly Apricot and English Walnut, show woodpecker, probably sapsucker work. I found typical grilling by a Red-breasted Sapsucker on English Walnut yesterday.

On grassy slope above 3d bottom on which ranch is located, trees are chiefly blue oak, with a few valley oaks on flatter ground in gully bottoms and there also live oaks (Q. wislizenii?). There are occasionally small willows in gullies and I saw one cottonwood, possibly in a gulch fed by underground seepage. Scattered manzanita plants form the only chaparral element.

One Jackrabbit, several ground squirrel holes (no squirrels), 2 Turkey Vultures overhead, several cliff swallows overhead, 2 Ash-throated flycatchers, 1 Calif. Jay, 4 meadowlarks, 3 plain titmouses, 3 western gnatcatchers, the only birds noted here in 40 minutes over 1 mile of hillslope.

Then worked down a gully toward the creekbottom. These lateral gullies are steep sided, some of them becoming at least 25 feet deep where they join the second bottom. The banks are clothed with elder, toyon, Baccharis pilularis, Rhus diversiloba, wild roses, wild oats, and with scattered blue, live and valley oaks. Birds in the gullies are Green-backed Goldfinch, (family of 2 adults & 4 young, fully fledged), Brewer Blackbird (adults with young), Bullock Oriole, Western Kingbird, Linnet (adults & young, males still singing).

In the 2d bottom, noted alder (A. Rhombifolia), apparently Buttonwillow (C. occidentalis) and at least 2 species of willow.

Heard a Russet-backed Thrush singing near the Sackett place this evening.

While on a flat in the 2d bottom of the creek today my foot sank into a burrow in soft sand whereupon a Kangaroo Rat dashed out of the ground just behind my foot and darted behind some greenery. Consequently I set 10 rat traps in sandy spots on the second bottoms this evening.

Found larvae of Hyla regilla with hind legs well formed and of Rana b. boylii with slight indication of hind limbs in a pool now entirely separated from the main creek.

Two striped skunks wandered down thru orchard at 8p.m. going in the direction of the creek. Later one was in camp.

Heard a screech Owl in the night.

Mr. Sackett says the skunks feed on figs which fall on the ground as soon as the crop begins to mature."

INTRODUCTION TO TRACY STORER

Tracy Irwin Storer was a major figure in developing our understanding of California natural history. However, his role in documenting the vertebrates of the Sacramento Valley, with emphasis in Yolo and Solano counties, remains virtually unknown. For example, his 1920s specimens and field notes from the Sacramento Valley were largely ignored by Grinnell and Miller in their treatment of California birds (Grinnell and Miller 1944). As a means to introduce Central Valley filed ornithologists to this important natural historian, this paper summarizes Dr. Storer's life and highlights his work on the Sackett Ranch along Putah Creek.

Storer was born in San Francisco in 1889. After graduating from high school in Oakland, he attended the University of California, Berkeley beginning in 1908. There he received bachelors and masters degrees in zoology in 1912 and 1913, respectively, then began work as assistant curator

of birds at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ, Figure 1). After service in the armed forces in World War I, he returned to Berkeley and pursued a doctoral degree under Joseph Grinnell. He was awarded the degree in 1921 and remained on staff at MVZ until 1923. He then took a position in the then new Division of Zoology at the University Farm, as the Davis campus was then known. As the first faculty member in this division, he offered the seminal courses in animal biology at Davis, complementing its strengths in instruction in botany and agriculture.

Storer built the teaching collections of birds and other vertebrates used in these courses from scratch. He personally contributed over 360 vertebrate specimens to what became the Zoology Department collections, not counting those contributed by his students and acquired through trades. He was the only faculty member in the Division until 1935, when John T. Emlen, Jr. was hired. In 1956, he became Professor Emeritus (Spieth et al. 1976). In 1994, most of the Zoology collections were donated to the Museum of Wildlife and Fish Biology (MWFB), where they are now housed as part of the vertebrate holdings at the University of California, Davis (UC Davis). In the late 1990s, a portion of his amphibian collection was donated to the California Academy of Sciences.

Storer authored or co-authored several landmark books: *Game Birds of California* in 1918 (with Grinnell and Harold C. Bryant), *Animal Life in the Yosemite* in 1924 (with Grinnell), *A Synopsis of the Amphibia of California* in 1925 (based on his dissertation work), *General Zoology* in 1943, *Elements of Zoology* in 1955, *The California Grizzly* in 1955 (with Lloyd P. Tevis, Jr.), and *Sierra Nevada Natural History* in 1963 (with Robert L. Usinger). Additionally, he published over 200 professional papers. With his wife, Ruth, he endowed the Tracy and Ruth Storer Lectureship in the Life Sciences at UC Davis. He was at various times president of the Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists, Society of Mammalogists, and the Cooper Ornithological Society (three times president). His editorial skills were employed as associate editor of the journal *Ecology* and *Ecological Monographs* and as editor of *The Journal of Wildlife Management*. The California Academy of Sciences (CAS) bestowed its Fellows Medal on him in 1968. Storer Hall, then the new zoology building at UC Davis, was named after him in 1969. He died in Davis in 1973.

In building the research and teaching collections at UC Davis, Storer made numerous trips across the country, some foreign trips, and as in his days associated with MVZ, collected especially widely around the state of California, including at some sites close to Davis. The MWFB has a portion of his collecting catalog (September 1923 to July 1932), that indicates where and when, he collected what specimens during that period. The remainder of his field notes and catalog are housed at MVZ and at CAS. He has copious field notes on the birds of Putah Creek ranging from the Monticello Dam area to the Putah Creek Sinks.

Figure 1. Tracy Irwin Storer, ca. 1920.

STORER'S WORK ON SACKETT RANCH

One site of Storer's recurrent field work along Putah Creek was the L. A. Sackett Ranch, three miles southwest of Winters (Figure 2). That portion of the creek is now beneath Lake Solano just upstream of the Solano Diversion Dam. In 1925, Storer made specimen collections on nine dates from 29 May to 20 June. He also made three briefer visits to Sackett Ranch in 1928. He collected 40 birds of which 21 now reside at MWFB, all from the Yolo County side of the creek. In Table 1, the relevant entries from Storer's specimen labels in the MWFB catalog are extracted, with current names substituted where necessary.

At the Sackett Ranch site, the Solano County side includes the lowest foothills of the inner Coast Range, supporting blue oak savanna and occasional foothill pines, with denser tree growth and shrubs on north-facing slopes. The Yolo County side of the ranch is a nearly flat westward extension of the plains of the Central Valley that is devoted to agriculture (mainly orchards).

Table 1. List of Tracy Storer's specimens collected and curated at the MWFB.

WFB Catalog #	TI Storer #	Taxon	Notes
30-May-25			
489z	2076	*Myiarchus cinerascens* (Ash-throated-flycatcher)	male testes 11 mm; taken 29 May
31-May-25			
460z	2081	*Calypte anna* (Anna's Hummingbird)	male testes large (LOST)
659z	2082	*Euphagus cyanocephalus* (Brewer's Blackbird)	juv. (f?); taken 30 May
660z	2083	*Euphagus cyanocephalus* (Brewer's Blackbird)	female adult; taken 30 May
601z	2087	*Phainopepla nitens* (Phainopepla)	male testes 4x6 mm, iris carmine
1-Jun-25			
712z	2091	*Melozone crissalis* (California Towhee)	female ad.; 2 ova, 7 & 5 mm (1983 LOAN)
544z	2092	*Sitta carolinensis* (White-breasted Nuthatch)	female imm. (LOST)
539z	2093	*Baeolophus inornatus* (Oak Titmouse)	female imm. (LOST)
2-Jun-25			
557z	2105	*Thryomanes bewickii* (Bewick's Wren)	female juv.
763z	2106	*Melospiza melodia* (Song Sparrow)	male ad. testes large (drawn 10x5)
514z	2107	*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota* (Cliff Swallow)	male ad. testes large (LOST)
17-Jun-25			
617z	2115	*Icteria virens* (Yellow-breasted Chat)	male adult testes 10x5 mm
606z	2116	*Vireo bellii* (Bell's Vireo)	male breeding
18-Jun-25			
462z	2117	*Calypte anna* (Anna's Hummngbird)	male (?) imm.

Table 1. (continued)

WFB Catalog #	TI Storer #	Taxon	Notes
18-Jun-25			
609z	2118	*Vireo gilvus* (Warbling Vireo)	male adult, testes 10x4 mm (LOST)
670z	2119	*Pheucticus melanocephalus* (Black-headed Grosbeak)	male adult, testes 14x7 mm
491z	2120	*Sayornis nigricans* (Black Phoebe)	sex (?) imm.
482z	2121	*Picoides nuttallii* (Nuttall's Woodpecker)	female imm (?); [male on tag]
762z	2122	*Melospiza melodia* (Song Sparrow)	male juv.
558z	2123	*Thryomanes bewickii* (Bewick's Wren)	male juv.
19-Jun-25			
702z	2124	*Spinus psaltria* (Lesser Goldfinch)	sex (?) imm. (LOST)
658z	2125	*Icterus bullockii* (Bullock's Oriole)	male adult, testes 7x3 mm
485z	2126	*Tyrannus verticalis* (Western Kingbird)	female adult (LOST)
692z	2127	*Haemorhous mexicanus* (House Finch)	male adult, testes 6x3 mm (1983 LOAN)
619z	2128	*Geothlypis trichas* (Common Yellowthroat)	male adult breeding
608z	2129	*Vireo gilvus* (Warbling Vireo)	male adult breeding
541z	2130	*Baeolophus inornatus* (Oak Titmouse)	adult male, testes small; in molt
20-Jun-25			
713z	2133	*Melozone crissalis* (California Towhee)	male juv.; still getting new feathers
503z	2134	*Contopus sordidulus* (Western Wood-Pewee	male adult testis drawn-3.3x2.0 mm
634z	2135	*Setophaga petechia* (Yellow Warbler)	male adult breeding testes 6x3 mm

Figure 2. Location of Sackett Ranch (parcels outlined in white), "3 miles southwest of Winters, CA." Adapted from 1926 Official Map of Yolo County, source: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com/ accessed on 01 April 2014.

Prior to the building of Monticello Dam and Solano Diversion Dam during 1953 to 1957, Storer worked on a stretch of the creek that meandered across broad deposits of sand and gravel and which was subject to irregular major flooding that inundated adjacent crop fields, destroyed parts of the stream-side road, scoured creek-side vegetation, and changed the stream course (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Putah Creek in flood prior to the completion of Monticello and Diversion Dams, Solano Co. 9 January 1953.

Photo by D.K. McNaughton.

Two 1950 images show Putah Creek at Sackett Ranch (Figure 4). From his journal, Storer describes the creek as a thin, discontinuous rind of large trees, mostly Fremont cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*), near the margin of the gravel, thickets of willows (*Salix* sp.) and other shrubs and saplings scattered across the dry portions of the channel, and stream-side willow clumps. The largest trees and shrubs were concentrated on the slopes of feeder channels. A representative, hand-drawn cross-section of the channel at the Sackett Ranch recorded in Storer's notes is reproduced here (Figure 5). Also indicated on the figure is the distribution of bird species, as Storer documented, in the riparian zone.

Figure 4.
Two images of Putah Creek from the Sackett Ranch. Note the gravel beds, multiple layers of riparian vegetation and broad floodplain.

The bluff in the background is on the Solano County side west of the Diversion Dam where there is a large pull-out adjacent to California Route 128.

Photos by C.B. Hertzog, 2 November 1950.

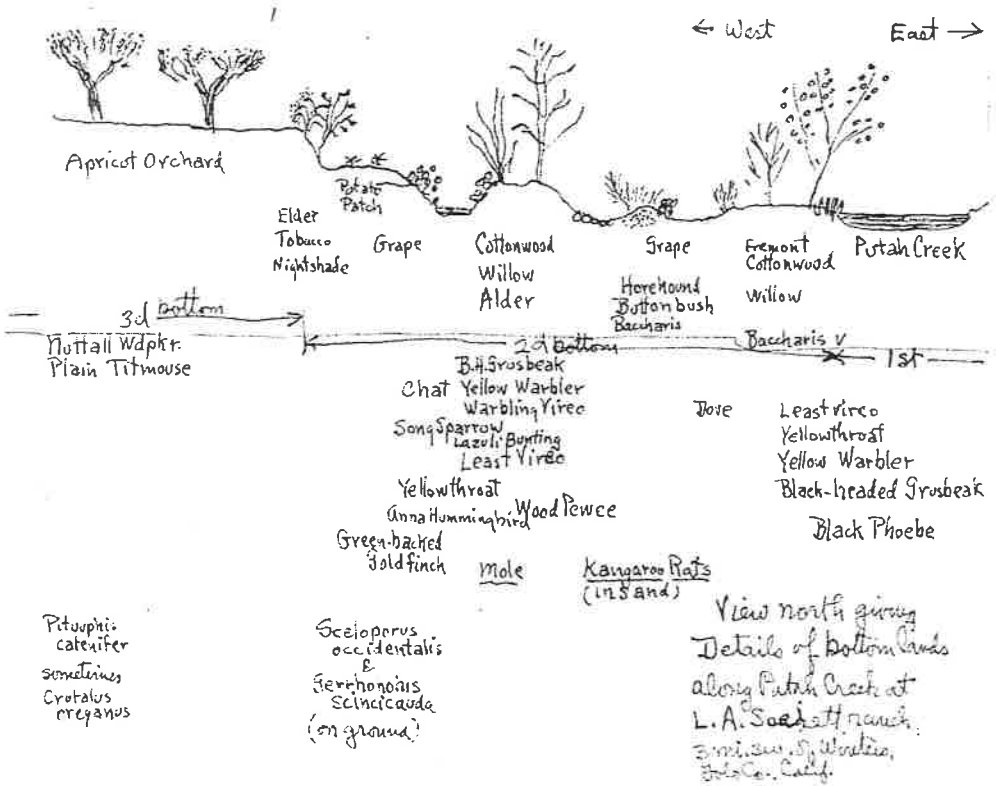

Figure 5. A diagram of a cross section of Putah Creek as drawn in Storer's journal entry for 20 June 1925.

COMPARISON OF PAST AND RECENT CONDITIONS

Today, the reach of Putah Creek near the Sackett Ranch site is fully submerged under Lake Solano (Figure 6). Putah Creek below the dam is now incised and gravel-starved, and the riparian vegetation, no longer subject to periodic scouring, has a very different structure (Figure 7). In the decades since the dam was built, substantial trees have, in places, formed closed-canopy gallery woodland mainly of cottonwood and valley oak (*Quercus lobata*). Groves of blue gum (*Eucalyptus globulus*) are scattered along the creek. Other canopy components include red willow (*Salix laevigata*), black willow (*Salix gooddingii*), white alder (*Alnus rhombifolia*), California walnut (*Juglans californica* var. *hindsii*) and Oregon ash (*Fraxinus latifolia*), and others to a minor extent. The understory vegetation is now varied and in many places and well-developed, with Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus armeniacus*), tamarisk (*Tamarix parviflora*), as well as native California rose (*Rosa* californica), coyote bush (*Baccharis pilularis*), poison oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*), false bamboo (*Arundo donax*), buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) and blue elderberry (*Sambucus mexicana*). Non-native Himalayan blackberry is by far the most extensive of shrub species. California blackberry (*Rubus ursinus*) occurs but is much scarcer. Saplings also contribute to shrub layer, with sandbar willow (*Salix exigua*), box elder (*Acer negundo*), and Oregon ash most important (Truan, et al. 2010).

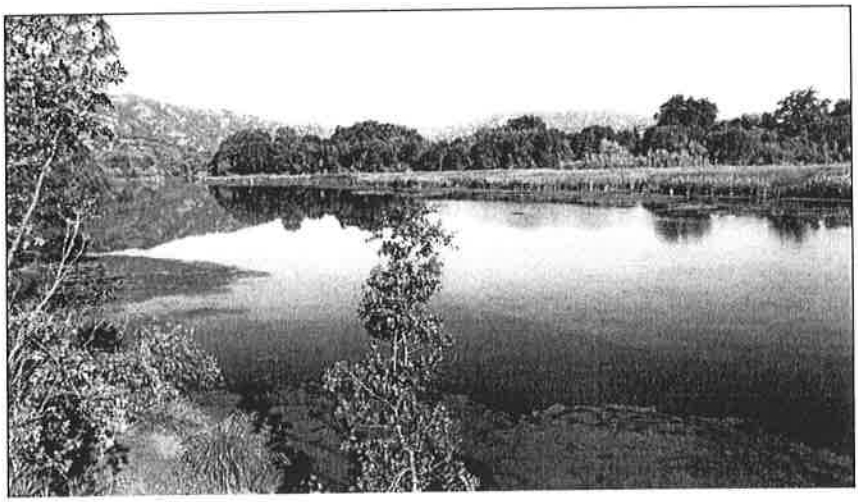

Figure 6. The Sackett Ranch Site in 2014, taken from the bluff site looking north to Yolo County. The cattail beds have developed behind Solano Diversion Dam. Photo by A. Engilis Jr., 9 April 2014.

Figure 7. The Solano Diversion Dam during construction in 1956 and 58 years later. The area below the dam the along entire waterway was cleared of all vegetation and channelized. The large closed canopy trees found at the site today, are quite unlike the historic creek. Photos by E. S. Ensor on 16 December 1956 and A. Engilis Jr. on 9 April 2014.

Storer documented 66 species of birds during the breeding season at the Sackett Ranch (Table 2). His field notes on 18 June 1925 were particularly enlightening. He writes, in part:

"...Black-headed Grosbeak (at least 6, males singing though less insistently than earlier; calls of young heard at least once); Green-backed (i.e., Lesser) Goldfinch (3 pairs down either to drink or forage tho one female seemed to be after nest material); Lazuli Bunting (3 females noted and at least two males in song, at heights up to 25 ft above the ground, the females appearing on the inner side of the leafy cover when I "squeeked""); Warbling Vireo (a brood being fed, at least 2 yg, and another pair, all the birds keeping 15-35 ft above ground); Calif. Least Vireo (at least two pairs [I think I saw young last evening], all under 15 ft at practically all times, thus not competing with Warbling Vireos, male singing but at long intervals); Calif. Yellow Warbler (3, 2 males in song and a female at heights of 10 to 35 ft above ground, chiefly in cottonwoods); Yellowthroat (2 or 3, a male seen, song once heard, in thickets along gully in 2nd bottom); Long-tailed Chat (in voice frequently, at least 3 or 4 males and one female noted, the latter with a twig in her bill disappeared in a tangle of grapes, nettles ..."

In addition to observations, Storer's short list of specimens contains four species that no longer regularly breed in this part of the Central Valley: Bell's Vireo, Warbling Vireo, Yellow Warbler, and Yellow-breasted Chat.

When John T. Emlen, Jr. joined the faculty at Davis, he also assembled field notes, now in the files of MWFB, and collected specimens of birds encountered in the greater campus environs, including sites along Putah Creek. The notes date from 1935-1943, during which time Emlen did not encounter the preceding four species in the breeding season along Putah Creek. The timing of their disappearance from the creek's breeding avifauna coincides with the appearance of Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) locally. Cowbirds, not recorded by Storer in 1925 or 1928, were regularly noted by Emlen in small numbers between mid-April and mid-July.

From 2004-2013, MWFB documented 84 species during the same time frame (late May-July) in the same reach of the creek (Table 2). Of these, 62 species were found to nest or probably nest. Thus, the diversity along the creek now is richer than reported by Storer. A comparison shows the added diversity is due to four changes in the avifauna:

- addition of waterbirds (several species now nest as a result of the impoundment),
- appearance of forest nesting species (Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*), Brown Creeper (*Certhia americana*), Western Tanager (*Piranga ludoviciana*) etc.) attracted to the mature woodland structure now present,

- spread of naturalized species (Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) and Brown-headed cowbird), and
- spread of non-native species (Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*), Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*), European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), and House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)).

Storer infrequently mentioned hawks. Their apparent paucity may have been real, as most hawks were persecuted during this era as killers of livestock (Bildstein 2001). Today three species of *Buteo* use the area, Red-shouldered (*B. lineatus*), Swainson's (*B. swainsoni*) and Red-tailed (*B. jamaicensis*) hawks. Storer also does not mention other species that are now regular on the creek. Most notably missing from his field notes are Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*) and Yellow-billed Magpie (*Pica nuttalli*). The latter may have been absent owing to collateral damage of control efforts aimed at coyotes and ground squirrels (W.E. Bryant 1890 for the coyote poisoning and J.G. Cooper 1875 and J. and J.W. Mailliard 1901 for the squirrel poisoning, all quoted in Linsdale 1937).

The MVZ never surveyed a lower or middle Sacramento Valley setting in the early days of the institution. Apparently, Grinnell thought the valley was already too altered by human activity to supersede other sites in priority of study, and such work was never undertaken (Frank Pitelka, pers. comm. to JT in late 1980s). We targeted entries for the Sackett Ranch during our otherwise cursory search of the CAS archives. But we have found among the pages of Storer's journal, entries from the North Fork of Putah Creek, now the UC Davis Arboretum, descriptions of his visits to where Mace Boulevard crosses the creek, and notes on the Putah Creek Sinks themselves. A more thorough search of his journals may reveal an even fuller picture of the historic birdlife along the entire length of Lower Putah Creek. This is particularly important as we move forward with ecological and distributional papers from data about the creek's birds gathered by MWFB in the last 17 years of systematic monitoring (Dybala et al., *in review*, Trochet et al., in prep.). We are fortunate that the written and specimen records of Tracy Storer give us a relatively detailed picture of the terrestrial vertebrate biota of one small stream in the southern Sacramento Valley, as well as its landscape and floristic correlates, which serves as a benchmark against which to measure gains and losses over the last nearly ninety years.

Table 2. Bird species recorded at and near Sackett Ranch in late Apr-Aug 1925 and 1928 by Tracy Storer and in Apr-Aug 2004-2013 MWFB bird surveys along the same region of the creek, from just above Lake Solano to just below the Diversion Dam. Status is indicated as Observed (Ob), Probable Nesting (P) or Nesting (N). Local common names for some taxa as written by Storer are in parentheses.

Species	Storer 1925-28	MWFB 2004-13
California (Valley) Quail	N	N
Great Blue Heron	Ob	Ob
Green Heron	Ob	P
Turkey Vulture	Ob	Ob
Red-tailed Hawk	Ob	Ob
Golden Eagle	Ob	Ob
American Kestrel (Sparrow Hawk)	Ob	Ob
Killdeer	N	N
Spotted Sandpiper	P	Ob
Mourning Dove	N	N
Western Screech-Owl	P	
Great Horned Owl	N	N
Lesser (Texas) Nighthawk	N	
White-throated Swift	Ob	Ob
Black-chinned Hummingbird	Ob	Ob
Anna's Hummingbird	N	N
Acorn (California) Woodpecker	N	N
Red-breasted Sapsucker	drillings	
Nuttall's Woodpecker	N	N
Downy (Willow) Woodpecker	N	N
Northern Flicker	N	N
Western Wood-Pewee	N	P
Black Phoebe	N	N
Ash-throated Flycatcher	N	N
Western Kingbird	N	N
Bell's (California Least) Vireo	N	Ob
Cassin's Vireo	P	Ob
Hutton's Vireo	Ob	
Warbling Vireo	N	Ob

Table 2. (continued)

Species	Storer 1925-28	MWFB 2004-13
Western Scrub-Jay (California Jay)	N	N
American Crow	Ob	Ob
Common Raven	Ob	P
Cliff Swallow	N	N
Oak (Plain) Titmouse	N	N
Bushtit	N	N
White-breasted (Slender-billed) Nuthatch	N	N
Canyon Wren	Ob	
Bewick's (Vigor's) Wren	N	N
House (Parkmann) Wren	N	N
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	Ob	
Blue-gray (Western) Gnatcatcher	N	
Western Bluebird	Ob	N
Swainson's (Russet-backed) Thrush	Ob	Ob
Wrentit	Ob	P
Phainopepla	N	N
Orange-crowned (Lutescent) Warbler	N	Ob
Yellow Warbler	N	Ob
Yellow-rumped (Audubon) Warbler	Ob	Ob
Common (Western) Yellowthroat	N	
Yellow-breasted (Long-tailed) Chat	N	
Spotted (Spurred) Towhee	P	N
California (Brown) Towhee	N	N
Chipping Sparrow	Ob	
Lark Sparrow	P	Ob
Song Sparrow	N	P
White-crowned Sparrow	Ob	
Golden-crowned Sparrow	Ob	
Black-headed Grosbeak	P	N
Lazuli Bunting	P	
Western Meadowlark	N	N
Brewer's Blackbird	N	N
Bullock's Oriole	N	N
Purple Finch	Ob	Ob
House Finch (California Linnet)	N	N
Lesser (Green-backed) Goldfinch	N	N
American (Willow) Goldfinch	Ob	N

Table 2. (continued)

Additional Species Observed Only by MWFB			
Pied-billed Grebe	N	Pileated Woodpecker	P
Canada Goose	N	Belted Kingfisher	N
Wood Duck	N	Pacific-sloped Flycatcher	Ob
Mallard	N	Yellow-billed Magpie	P
Gadwall	N	Tree Swallow	N
Common Merganser	N	No. Rough-winged Swallow	N
Great Egret	Ob	Brown Creeper	N
Snowy Egret	Ob	American Robin	N
Black-crowned Night-heron	Ob	Northern Mockingbird	N
Osprey	N	European Starling	N
Swainson's Hawk	N	Rufous-crowned Sparrow	P
Red-shouldered Hawk	N	Western Tanager	P
Wild Turkey	N	Red-winged Blackbird	N
American Coot	N	Brown-headed Cowbird	P
Eurasian Collared Dove	P	House Sparrow	N
Hairy Woodpecker	P		

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