

Devoted birders in Avifauna Project spotted 135 bird species in 2012

March 7 2013, by Kris Lovekin



A photo of hooded mergansers. Credit: Mike Pazzani

(Phys.org) —If you spot a lanky bearded man with binoculars in one hand and a book tucked in his belt, be reassured—this is no ordinary creeper. Philosophy graduate student Kevin Gin is a birder on a mission, peeping not in windows but in branches and bushes to find as many bird species as possible on UC Riverside's campus.

From the Acorn Woodpecker to the Yellow-Rumped Warbler—better known as "Butter Butt" to local birders—you can almost cover the alphabet with the record 135 bird varieties Gin and his fellow birders counted on campus in 2012.

"I really like the challenge of it," said Gin, who memorizes bird calls by listening to a CD during his daily commute from Pasadena. "Some people look for birds because they're beautiful—and some are really beautiful—but most birders are pretty competitive and they love the challenge. You have to be passionate...obsessive maybe."

Gin, for instance, visits the UCR Botanic Gardens at least twice a week to look for [bird species](#), and that's just his quest at UCR. Last weekend he woke at 2:30 a.m. so he could spend nine hours vainly trying to spot a rare Nutting's Flycatcher near Parker Dam in Arizona. Talking with him in the gardens is a little disconcerting, since his conversation often tends to stop in mid-sentence, as he tries to identify a bird call.

"I'm easily distracted," he said, apologizing. "I do this all the time. I'll be talking to someone on campus and see a bird fly by and suddenly, I've forgotten what I'm saying. Once I saw 11 white-faced ibis flying over the campus. They didn't land. I was very lucky to see them migrating."



A photo of a cedar waxwing. Credit: Mike Pazzani

He's made other exciting finds too—a Green-Tailed Towhee, rarely seen in this county during the winter, and a desert dweller called a Verdin, originally spotted by graduate students Michelle and Jennifer Tobin, which has wintered near the botanical gardens for the past three years. "It's a big mystery why it's here," he said. "Sometimes birds fly the wrong way when they're migrating, get lost and stay where they land, but this one keeps coming back."

Gin is a member of the Campus Avifauna Project, a group started in 2007 by two members of UCR's Botany and Plant Sciences Department—Professor Norman Ellstrand and retired technician Janet Clegg. The group's initial focus was on updating the campus bird list, which hadn't been recorded since 2000. But now the intent is clear—to

find as many species as possible on campus, and increase the count every year.

So far, they're right on track, from counting 113 in 2009, 119 in 2010, 123 in 2011 and a big jump to 135 in 2012. It's not that new birds are moving on campus, Gin said, but that more people are out there counting. Gin has become the project's official compiler—"That's my title, 'Compiler'"—so everyone in the group sends their sightings to him at his campus email, kevin.gin@email.ucr.edu. He said people who are interested in joining the group or adding to the count should contact him.



Allen's hummingbird. Credit: Mike Pazzani

And how can he be sure the sightings will be accurate? "If I say I've seen some crazy stuff, other birders will come to look for the same bird. And if they can't find the bird, they will discount anything I have to say," Gin said. "You have to be reliable. Most birders are on the conservative side because it's very embarrassing if you're wrong. Nobody wants to be wrong because it hurts their credibility."

Conservative is an understatement. When he's asked how many birds he's spotted on campus so far this year, he first says 50 or 60, then a moment later adjusts that to 65, then a few minutes later says no, he better just say 55. After the interview, he sends back a list of the 15 species we saw in our 40-minute stroll through the gardens and includes a proviso—"I didn't include the Allen's Hummingbird, since when I think I heard it, I was a bit distracted and don't know for sure."

A bit distracted, perhaps, but not so distracted that he couldn't remember all 15 of the other species without writing them down. His goal for 2013 is to spot 400 different species in North America—he's already noted 230—and at least 120 on campus. He goes on ebird.org to report his finds. "It's so addictive," he says, "and it's a good way to procrastinate on a dissertation."

Mike Pazzani, UC Riverside's vice chancellor for research and economic development, is an avid birder and photographer, and he has already captured many images of birds in his relatively short time at UCR.

Not that he doesn't sympathize with birds as a hobby. But he had some words of wisdom for Kevin Gin: "Personally, I'd advise Kevin to work on his dissertation more."

Provided by University of California - Riverside

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