

Flock party for rare bird

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Hundreds of hard-core birders from across the nation have been flocking to South Los Angeles this week, hoping to catch a glimpse of a rare avian that wandered in from Siberia and inexplicably chose to hunker down within a hedge just south of the 10 Freeway.

The foreign visitor—or "vagrant," as bird-watchers say—became an instant celebrity five days ago, when a sharp-eyed librarian in Jefferson Park identified it as a red-flanked bluetail.

Ever since then, fans toting binoculars have crowded onto the grounds of UCLA's William Andrews Clark Memorial Library to marvel at the so-called megatick—a species so rare that most birders may never get the opportunity to "tick" it off their life's list of hoped-for sightings in the U.S.

Friday morning, scores of bird-lovers streamed through the library's gates and began a frenzied search for the avian superstar.

It didn't take long for Jeff Bray, 40, of Irvine to spot the treasure he was hunting for: a brownish ball of feathers roughly the size of a computer mouse who sported a white eye ring, orange sides and a bright blue tail.

"I saw it for a few seconds," Bray said with a smile. "It looked like a bird hopping around in the bushes. Very cool."

This is the first recorded instance of a red-flanked bluetail on California's mainland, said Kimball Garrett, manager of the ornithology collection at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. It is believed to be the bird's eighth documented visit to the North American continent.

The bluetail's native habitat ranges from coniferous forests in northern Asia, west through Russia to Finland. It typically winters in southeast Asia.

No other extremely rare bird, some say, has made this much commotion since an odd duck known as a Baikal teal blew into the Rocky Mountain village of Kittredge, Colo., in 1993 and planted itself outside the picture

window of Bear Creek Tavern.

Such unexpected appearances are known to excite and attract armies of so-called twitchers—eager bird aficionados who will travel great distances at huge expense just to ogle a unique species for the first time.

On Friday, Linda Pitman, 65, of Wilton, Calif., and her friend, Frances Oliver, 60, of Lodi got close enough to snap a few photos worth showing off to friends.

Unfortunately, the bird was so skittish that most of the cameras on hand captured only a blob in the branches.

"Think of us as crazy old ladies who flew all the way down here through the fog along Interstate 5 just to get a good look at a bird," Pitman said.

"I saw it for about five seconds," Oliver added. "I'd seen one before in Thailand."

As she spoke, someone muttered, "Up there!" Suddenly, dozens of high-end binoculars, cameras and spotting scopes were trained on—as one of them put it—a little brown job" flitting in the highest branches of a magnolia tree.

Moments later, someone else sighed, "Never mind," and all that optical firepower lowered in unison.

A few minutes after that, several birders migrated to a nearby cedar tree where, someone suggested, "it might be in there."

Rebecca Marschall, the manuscripts and archives librarian who discovered the bird, has come to find the quirky rhythms of the birder mob almost as fascinating as their quarry, *Tarsiger cyanurus*.

"Each morning, regardless of the weather, there are dozens of birders waiting expectantly for the library gate to open," Marschall, 37, said. "But we deal with specialized literary collections, so we're not exactly strangers when it comes to people with a yen for niche subjects."

Nodding toward a row of almost impenetrable hedges where the bird was apparently hiding from view at that particular moment, she said, "that pretty little thing is a long, long way from home—so I get the excitement it's generating."

The library neighborhood just south of downtown is one of the most crowded in Los Angeles County—it's crammed with buildings and bustling intersections, and the air is filled with the din of freeway traffic.

Marschall said it was in December when she first "noticed this nervous little brownish bird with a blue tail."

"I grabbed my camera and started chasing it around the library garden," she recalled. "It wasn't easy getting a decent shot."

The mystery deepened when the bird's coloration and physical traits didn't match up with those of similar species in the ultimate compendiums of North American [birds](#).

In exasperation, Marschall said, "I Googled the words 'blue tail thrush,' then hit 'enter.' To my surprise, the computer screen filled with images of our puzzling visitor."

To verify the sighting, she called Garrett.

On Jan. 7, she recalled, Garrett "came over armed with a tape recording of the bird's call—a faint, high-pitched tweet. Seconds after he played that tape, the bird called back from deep within the hedges."

"Garrett," she added, "gave me a friendly hug and said, 'Congratulations. It's a red-flanked bluetail.'"

Only two others have been recorded within California's boundaries: one was spotted in the Farallon Islands off San Francisco in 1989, and the other was found by biologists in 2011 on San Clemente Island, about 70 miles west of San Diego.

Unfortunately, that latter red-flanked bluetail to visit California found the place entirely inhospitable. After landing on the island and creating great excitement among birders, the tiny fly gobbler was killed by a loggerhead shrike and left impaled on a thorn.

The biologist who found the bluetail's corpse was crestfallen, Garrett said, because she had never gotten the chance to see it alive.

That is, until this week. "She got a view of the live one here on Wednesday," Garrett said.

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