

A previous job for David involved jetting around the world producing commercials. Which meant plenty of birding opportunities in urban locations...



**A**LTHOUGH BASED IN LONDON, I DO TRY TO GET myself out the capital as much as I can. In my previous life as a PA to a commercials director, I found myself jetting off to various locations around the world to assist him in making his pop promos and adverts. “What a hard life!” I hear you cry. Well, as glamorous as it may sound, my trips were rarely to birding paradises. More often than not, I would end up in the middle of a city miles away from the nearest tree, let alone any decent habitat. So, like any true urban explorer, I would venture out locally

and adopt an unlikely area, often with only just a hint of habitat as my ‘patch’ to watch religiously until I left.

Over the years, I often found myself in West Hollywood in Los Angeles, where my boss met up with his agent. When you think of LA, the images that get conjured up include visions of ‘beautiful’ silicone wannabes, fancy cars, blazing sunshine, movie stars and more recently, the Beckhams larging it up. All those things exist, but there is much more to life here than what initially meets the eye.

Amazingly, the birdlife in this truly-sprawling metropolis can be startlingly rich. Interesting birds can be seen almost anywhere. I often used to bird from the rooftop of the West Hollywood hotel that we stayed in, and I built up a reasonable roof list over the years. I loved watching the ubiquitous Ravens and American Crows swirling above the streets and around the sun-bleached Hollywood Hills. Often, I would see a Red-tailed Hawk distantly launch itself into the air and lazily ride the thermals above the unsuspecting city. Checking the treetops often revealed hummingbirds busying themselves among the blossoms, and I once chanced upon a gorgeous migrant male Wilson’s Warbler in the foliage.

A couple of years ago I twitched a vagrant Red-naped Sapsucker perched quietly on the trunk of a tree in a tiny area of green right next to the busy Sunset Boulevard. I’ve ticked a Western Meadowlark that landed near to me while I was playing football on a Beverly Hills baseball pitch, and one late afternoon in the same park, while lying on my back staring into

the sky, knackered after a marathon football session, I noticed six American White Pelicans head over.

On one of my wanderings, I met a retired casting director who turned out to be an amazing urban birder. He was incredibly observant and could hear a bird tweet a mile away, despite being hard of hearing – I never did quite understand that one! He once took me to a very scary park in downtown LA that only contained about ten trees. He had found a wintering Black-and-White Warbler (a rarity on the west coast) a few days previously, and had brought me there to see it. The problem was that this park was also inhabited by some very shady characters – a couple of whom were scoring drugs yards from where we stood. I watched the pied sprite though trembling binoculars.

By far my favourite place is the Ballona Wetlands (pronounced Bi-yowna). This remarkable and beautiful place is my main LA patch. Situated on the coast close to LAX (the city’s international airport) and a short 30-minute drive from the salubrious streets of Beverly Hills, this 1,087-acre ecosystem consists of saltwater and freshwater wetlands, dunes and upland habitat.

For more than 100 years the site has had a truly turbulent existence, with Hollywood-style drama thrown in for good measure. Howard Hughes bought more than half the land in the 1930s, and more recently Steven Spielberg was only just warded off from developing the area into a studio. The Ballona Wetlands of today is a result of years of fighting the threat of development. This incredible urban refuge plays host to a wide range of birds, especially waders, waterfowl, raptors, gulls and terns. It’s a great place to get to grips with species such as Pacific Diver, Surf Scoter and Long-billed Dowitcher at close quarters; birds that have us sweating when they come here.

I’ve seen some amazing birds in LA and have met some really helpful birders there, some of whom I now regard as friends. They seem to be one of the few groups of people in LA who are actually ‘real’. So, all I have to say is that if you are in LA after seeing the ‘Hollywood’ sign, train your binoculars onto the nearest bush – you will be surprised!

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