

Calendar

Damp Wings at Dairy Mart Ponds

Birding with the Audubon Society

Last fall, Bill McCausland was so upset over how Dairy Mart Ponds has deteriorated that he didn't include it on the field-trip schedule for the San Diego Audubon Society.

McCausland, the organization's field-trip chairman, said last week, "They're not maintaining it," meaning the California Department of Fish and Game isn't. "It's discouraging. The state bought it with special funds, which was good, because it

LOCAL EVENTS

will be preserved, but they've let the peripheral vegetation go to weeds, and it's

difficult for birders to see in there anymore."

Asked if birds liked the vegetation, he allowed that migratory ones might and that his perspective was "kind of selfish."

The Tijuana River Valley was formerly dominated by agriculture. Then the farms disappeared and it became a popular passageway for undocumented workers. When the Border Patrol began to monitor it mercilessly, placing flood lights at the boundary, those workers began crossing elsewhere. "We used to see dozens [at Dairy Mart Ponds] in past years," McCausland observed. "They've all moved west, over toward Tecate."

This weekend, despite the displeasure the place causes him, McCausland has scheduled his usual spring Dairy Mart Ponds field trip. Even though the area's birding opportunities have diminished, it's still one of the liveliest birding places in close proximity to downtown San Diego, where new birds are continually being spotted.

"We have had magpie jays from Mexico," said the retired St. Paul, Minnesota, health inspector. "Their



Dairy Mart Ponds

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE ALLEN

numbers have increased. And we're getting least Bell's vireos, an endangered species. They're hard to see, but I can tell they're around, because I hear them." Great-tailed grackles are other newcomers. "They have just come into the colony, I'm not sure from where. Ten years ago they were on the rare side. Not anymore."

Guy McCaskie of Imperial Beach supplies the reason for these changes: water. A well-respected member of the San Diego Field Ornithologists, McCaskie has been birding in the Dairy Mart Ponds area since the 1960s, when he moved to San Diego from his native Scotland to study civil engineering at SDSU. The southern Pacific coast's regional editor for *North American Birds*, the quarterly journal of the American Birding Association, he is described on Internet birding sites as "legendary."

How often does he go birding at Dairy Mart Ponds these days? "Well, I live very close to it. I can be there in two minutes. I was there yesterday."

When it was agricultural, McCaskie recalled, the place was arid. "Farmers pumped water out of the ground. The water table is fairly close to the surface, so they could irrigate." Recently, there have been major floods, but the real reason for the new conditions is "The continuing paving of all ground, particularly with the development of Tijuana and the channeling of the river. The water no

longer soaks in."

How does the water affect the birds? Maybe they like it, it's ventured.

"It has certainly changed their habitat. I mean, clearly, there weren't water birds at Dairy Mart Ponds in the past, and now there are. There used to be land birds." Among the missing or near-missing, he names verdins, common ground doves, and roadrunners. Of the newcomers, he names nesting least bitterns and common Moore hens.

Is this exchange bad? "I don't know whether it's bad or good. Personally, I liked it how it used to be. It was a big, much more open space that supported raptors — hawks and eagles. It's being reduced because housing just keeps coming into it from all directions. It's a different place."

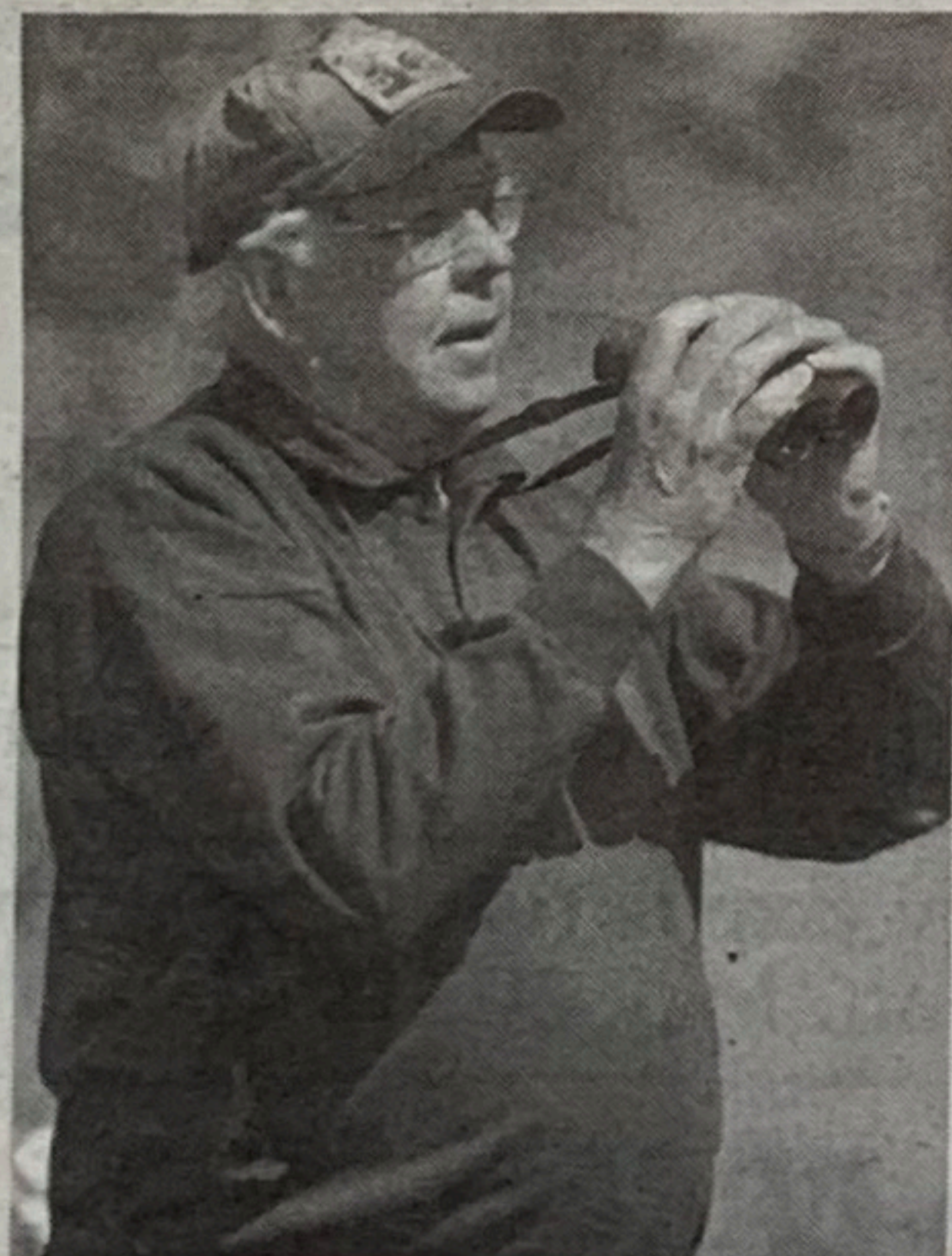
McCaskie, like his Audubon counterpart, mentioned uncontrolled vegetation. "There used not to be a huge mass of riparian growth. So there weren't nesting Bell's vireos. There are now." But birders can't see them easily, he regretted, echoing McCausland. "There used to be some isolated little clumps of trees that were magnets to migratory land birds. All we had to do was go to three or four spots, and we found everything! We could survey it totally in an hour, and if that one bird was there, you could find it, guaranteed. Now if you've got one bird in five miles of riparian forest, do you think you can find it? As far as

birdwatchers go, they're never going to find all the stuff we used to find."

But do the birds like the vegetation? "I don't know. I've never talked to one."

McCaskie is equally sardonic on the changes that the border activity has brought. "Well, yeah, that's one more thing that used not to be there. We used to encounter aliens in fair numbers down there. They'd just walk by. Now you don't see aliens as much, but you have to deal with high-speed vehicles that are white with green stripes — you know — and they hurtle from one spot to the next to see who's tripped some sort of a gadget, and then you're standing there saying, 'Well, I just walked through there.'"

— Jeanne Schinto



Guy McCaskie

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San Diego Audubon Society field trip to Dairy Mart Ponds
Saturday, May 12,
8:00 a.m.–noon
I-5 south past Imperial Beach. Exit Dairy Mart Road. Turn right, go about 100 yards. Meet just past the concrete bridge, beside the large pond on west side of Dairy Mart Road
Expect hot weather. No restrooms or drinking water available. Free
Info: 619-692-3246 or
www.sandiegoaudubon.org