

A Birding Interview with Dan Cooper

Dan Cooper's Los Angeles is not about movies, fashion trends, and celebrities. Cooper has his eyes on the skies. Currently a doctoral student in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at UCLA, he has spent the past 20 years as an independent ecology consultant, Los Angeles CBC compiler, California Director of Bird Conservation for the National Audubon Society, and author of *Important Bird Areas of California* as well as dozens of journal articles about the state's natural history—working tenaciously to find, observe, document, and defend the birds of Los Angeles County. Thanks to Cooper and other dedicated advocates, the despoiled Los Angeles River and its birds are roaring back to life.

In this entertaining *Birding* interview, Cooper dishes about SoCal's dippers, jackrabbits, fritillaries, and *Ficus*—and the connections that keep it all real.

—Noah Strycker

Birding: You're a worldly, cosmopolitan, Harvard-educated man, yet you consider L.A.—on the receiving end of so many disses—to be the greatest place on Earth?

Dan Cooper: I don't. But it is home, and it's the place I miss when I'm away. Someone wrote once that he didn't really like living in Riverside, but stayed because he "wanted to see how it all turns out." I sometimes feel that way about the whole of southern California. It's where I'm from, where I first learned about nature, and where I think I can make the most impact through my research. And I want to see how it turns out.

Birding: Could you give us a virtual tour of the Los Angeles River?

DC: The hardest thing to convey about the L.A. River is that it really doesn't conform to the popular idea of a "river." Historically, it would have been more of a broad, dry wash, punctuated with seeps and *ciene-gas*, or marshes. This is how rivers look in northern Baja California, which was never subject to the kind of flood-control zeal we saw in (Alta) California.

The L.A. River today would be almost totally unrecognizable to residents a century ago. It flows fast and wide through many parts of the city because it's fed year-round by a network of water treatment plants and

urban drains. But up in its headwaters, along the Arroyo Seco and Big Tujunga Creek, you'll find dippers bobbing on boulders, Spotted Owls hooting from dark oak groves, and Bell's Sparrows "tink"-ing from the chamise. It's as wild as you can get in southern California. There are even a couple places right at the edge of the basin that still support a boulder-strewn, desert-like habitat called "alluvial fan scrub," home to breeding Lesser Nighthawks, roadrunners, Costa's Hummingbirds,

and some of the last jackrabbits in the area. Several of its larger flood-control basins, like those behind Hansen Dam and Sepulveda Dam, feature lush growth of willow forest with Bell's Vireos, Yellow-breasted Chats, and other regionally rare nesters. Closer to downtown L.A., where the water level was naturally too high to fully cement back in the 1930s, the river occupies a "gallery forest" of willows before being culverted again south of the central city. Once it nears the harbor in Long Beach, something about the width of the channel, the amount of water flowing downstream, and the ocean's tide pushing upstream creates a "mock estuary"—a film of algae and water just a few millimeters deep that support hundreds and sometimes thousands of shorebirds and other aquatic species nearly every day of the year.



Dan Cooper is an expert on the Los Angeles River and L.A. County birds.
Photo by © Siddhartha Abbazi.



Flowing for 51 miles from the Simi Hills through Los Angeles County to its mouth in Long Beach, the Los Angeles River has been so altered by humans that it would be unrecognizable to residents from 100 years ago. Dan Cooper and others are working hard to bring the river and its birds back to life. Here, a family enjoys nature, L.A. style, in the Atwater Village neighborhood just east of Griffith Park. Photo by © Dan Cooper.

Birding: What would be the best possible outcome for this river?

DC: Let it be a river. Let the water flow as unimpeded as possible, and try to re-create the seasonal pulses, including the drying-out cycles, where we can. This is difficult because it takes great restraint on the part of developers, consultants, and elected officials. Given the tremendous human density and the existing built environment along its “banks,” I take the position that we’re doing our best by the river when we work *with* nature. This means preparing for its predictable floods not by clearing vegetation, but by allowing for designated areas where the river can safely escape its banks, such as within former rail yards and industrial sites.

As Lewis McAdams, the visionary poet and founder of Friends of the L.A. River (“FOLAR”), once mused, “When Yellow-billed Cuckoos return to the river, our job will be done.”

In some ways, he’s exactly right, given that cuckoos need big, dense forests with lots of prey, and used to breed throughout the basin before such habitats were drained and developed. I’m confident that with a little management—say, re-landscaping the golf courses that border the river through the Sepulveda Basin—the cuckoos can return, along with other nesting riparian birds like the Red-shouldered Hawk and Blue Grosbeak. But this is only part of the solution. The public must

To get to know an ecosystem, the interviewee takes a broad approach, conducting wildlife censuses, digging into historical records, and appreciating the evolving connections between native and non-native species. Photo by © Joe Decruyenaere.



be brought along to appreciate Yellow-billed Cuckoos—and cuckoo habitat—to protect it in the long term. This includes changing the minds of public works agencies that wish to keep willows trimmed, as well as law-enforcement and social service personnel who look the other way as homeless encampments explode and cause incredible degradation through waste and arson-set fires.

I'm also a realist. I recognize that for much of the river's run through the densely urban city, we need to do the best with what we've got. We will almost certainly never get Belted Kingfishers or Bank Swallows nesting in eroding banks through Long Beach—and that's okay. I encourage ongoing efforts to protect and repurpose little-used river-adjacent land, support more volunteer safety patrols, install clearer access points and vandal-proof signage... I'd start with the most intact, ecologically significant stretches, like Big Tujunga Wash and the Sepulveda Basin area, which still support some significant, astonishing bits of original Los Angeles biodiversity.

Birding: What connections do you see between the L.A. River and minorities in the city?

DC: I'm not even sure what the term "minority" means in L.A. On any given day, you'll see people of all races and back-

grounds using the L.A. River. The neighborhoods the river and its tributaries pass through reflect this diversity, from the horse properties up against the hills at the periphery of the basin to enclaves of Russian, Armenian, and Latin American families in the stucco apartment complexes of the San Fernando Valley. I'm inspired by the largely Hispanic ranger program run by the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, where pairs of young rangers on bicycles patrol the soft-bottom stretch north of downtown. I'm amazed at the kayak programs that bring groups from all corners of the region alongside squawking Green Herons and yapping Black-necked Stilts.

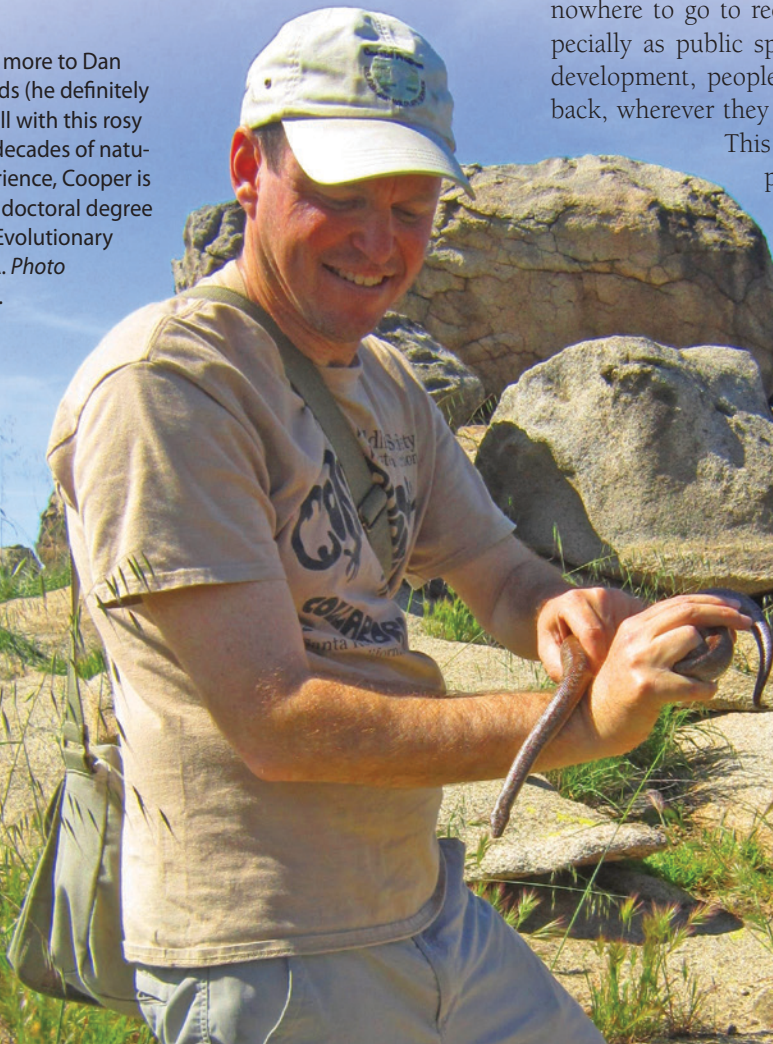
Is everyone using the river the way we birders use it? Of course not. But it's not a river that belongs to any one group. It's a shared resource. One thing the river has going for it is that it's hard to really "screw it up," since it's constantly being flooded and scoured out during winter storms.

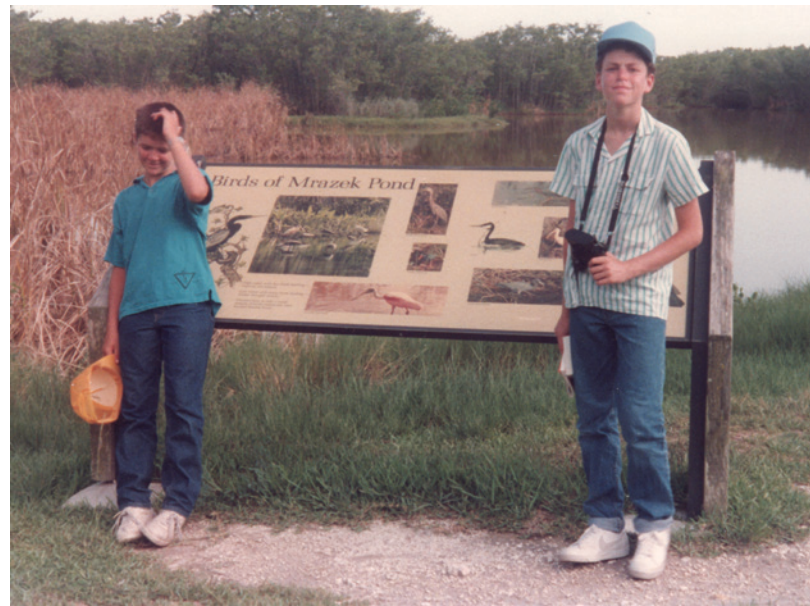
Birding: What do real rivers do for a big city?

DC: Real rivers remind us that we're part of nature, that we're animals to the core. We're naturally drawn to elemental forces, like the flow of water over rocks, which are deeply, undeniably attractive. So it's not so much "what can our rivers do," but, rather, do we really want a society where there's literally nowhere to go to reconnect with nature? Ultimately, and especially as public space is whittled away in favor of denser development, people rise up, and demand their open space back, wherever they can find it, in whatever condition it's in.

This has happened all over the city. Two major parks have opened along the river north of downtown, the Rio de Los Angeles State Park and the Los Angeles State Historic

Oh, bo! There's more to Dan Cooper than birds (he definitely has his hands full with this rosy boa). With two decades of natural history experience, Cooper is now pursuing a doctoral degree in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at UCLA. *Photo by © Brian Hinds.*





Dan Cooper grew up in a family in which no one had ever heard of a “birder,” but that didn’t stop him from developing a deep passion for all wild things. He squeezed the most out of family trips in the 1970s and 1980s, laying the groundwork for a career as an ornithologist and ecologist. *Images courtesy of Dan Cooper.*



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: ■ Cooper usually had only a few minutes of birding time each day on family outings, so a birdless stop at the tailing ponds from a mine near Death Valley in the mid-1980s was a disaster. ■ In a typical snapshot—this one from the mid-1980s in a Joshua tree desert in California—the interviewee carries binoculars while his brother Ken looks bored. ■ At the Fresno Zoo, circa 1978, tugging at his older brother David, Cooper took his job as a “nesting bird monitor” very seriously. ■ A VENT camp for young birders to Guadalupe Canyon, Arizona, in 1988 was life-changing. Not only did Cooper find Rose-throated Becards and Gray Hawks, but he also made lifelong friends who have since become distinguished ornithologists, birders, and scientists. ■ On a family vacation to Everglades National Park in August 1987, posing with brother Ken, the mosquitoes were thick and every bird was new. The interviewee would return to south Florida, co-leading a VENT tour with now-ABA President Jeffrey A. Gordon in the 1990s.

Park, and plans are in place for the dedication of even more parkland.

Birding: Wearing your Cooper Ecological Monitoring Inc. hat, how do you encourage public and private clients to take birds and habitat conservation seriously?

DC: Fortunately, that's what the California Environmental Quality Act is for! Actually, I guess I pick my battles. Look, if you've lived your life unable to appreciate nature within your own city, I don't expect you to have a change of heart at a public hearing as I'm speaking out against a terrible development proposal. I'm more excited by research and discovery, like back in 2009 when I organized a volunteer effort to search out and map all the remaining coastal Cactus Wrens in Los Angeles County, where the species was poorly known even to most birders. We published our results and shared our findings with the relevant agencies and local conservation groups. In 2012, my collaborators and I, using a camera trap, found the now-famous Griffith Park mountain lion ("P-22"), now a symbol of urban wildlife around the world. In the spring of 2017, I organized the first-ever survey of nesting raptors in the city of L.A.; we had a flood of interest, had to hold two separate training sessions, and were hearing about new nests well into July. We're starting a movement, one backyard Cooper's Hawk at a time.

Birding: How do you get to know a particular ecosystem?

DC: It's not just about the birds. Broadening one's natural history horizons is critical when it comes to guiding ecosystem management and restoration, or assessing whether a habitat project is working. Researching the historical function of the Ballona Wetlands ecosystem, I went deep, poring through 1920s issues of *Bird-Lore* (which eventually morphed into *North American Birds*), tracking down birders from the 1970s who'd recorded sightings from their local walks. As a local, I knew what to take note of—like an astronomically high count of dowitchers or Green-winged Teals, which conveys something of the former extent of a lost wetland, or a throwaway line about owls nesting under slabs of concrete on a former runway, which speaks volumes about how birds like Burrowing Owl had once adapted to land-use change.

Birding: Now, switching to your Cooper Ecotours hat, could you tell us where to get the best birds in and around the Los Angeles area?

DC: First, where are you staying? Since it can take an hour or two to drive from one end of town, this matters. Most serious birders need to get the Island Scrub-Jay out on Santa Cruz Island, then the Spotted Dove in southeast L.A., though this bird

is getting so rare that there may be fewer than five left in town. If you have more time, head up the Angeles Crest Highway to the pine-covered peaks that form that backdrop to the city, and pick up White-headed Woodpecker and, maybe if you're lucky, Mountain Quail. With a full day or two, you can get to the Salton Sea for Yellow-footed Gull and loads of Burrowing Owls, or north of Santa Barbara for Yellow-billed Magpie and (in fall and winter) Lewis's Woodpecker.

Birding: What is your view of L.A.'s diverse community of non-native birds?

DC: It's one of the things that makes L.A. unique, this subculture of foreigners making a living amongst the natives. Actually, the interactions between natives and non-natives is pretty fascinating too, especially when you throw in the vegetation, which is so overwhelmingly non-native below the 500-foot elevation level. The bird community here is constantly in flux. We've had a few well-established non-natives vanish from the region, so what seems like a permanent situation rarely is. It's a lot like neighborhoods: Wait a couple decades and things can change.

Birding: What and why is Bird LA Day?

DC: Bird LA Day was the brainchild of some Audubon California staff and local birders, conceived of as a way to raise the profile of birds, birding, and bird conservation citywide. It's a "diffuse" event, with dozens of mini-events related to birds taking place around the city, from bird-themed yoga to a rooftop cocktail party to photography workshops and field trips. There's no official tally and it's far from scientific. In May 2017, some friends and I tried to see how many species we could find in a single day inside the city limits of Los Angeles. We were joined by a *Los Angeles Times* reporter, and ended up with 132, including hard-to-find species like Lesser Nighthawk, Western Screech-Owl, and Wandering Tattler. With a little scouting and a good push of migrants, I think 150 might be possible.

Birding: There's more to you than birds—you're also into bats, butterflies, and squirrels. How do these other species fit into the L.A. scene?

DC: They're basically unavoidable, since wherever you go in L.A., any time of year, you're bound to be confronted by some sort of nature, either native or not. This includes the Gulf fritillary butterflies that swarm around the non-native passion-vines lining the fences in the central city, or the now-ubiquitous Cooper's Hawks, once persecuted to near-extirpation, now nesting throughout the city in ornamental *Ficus* and pine trees. To make sense of these new connections that are constantly forming and evolving, it helps to learn the names of a few things. It's easier than you think!

