deanne stillman

Life on the Edge and the Man Who Studies It

Tom Scott: tracking wildlife in the urban jungle.

ONE OF THE THINGS I HEARD WHEN LEARNing how to drive was, "Don't barrel through intersections." I've rarely heeded that advice while in traffic, but in life it has apparently been a key influence. One of my favorite things about Southern California is that it's one vast intersection, and since I've been here for 13 years, I guess you could say that I haven't exactly barrelled through it.

In fact, here, where land meets sea, mountains meet desert, tomorrow meets next week, space meets place, Sunset meets Vine, I meet a lot of people I would never meet anywhere else. It's a region that, for all its flux and upheaval and rootlessness, makes me feel right at home, a foundation that is based on perpetual change. Mike Davis says Southern California is characterized by the ecology of fear. I call it the ecology of the edge.

For some biologists, this collision of dimensions has resulted in a gigantic experiment called "What's up with the bird population?" It's playing out now—and scheduled for an indefinite run—at your local canyon, freeway underpass, woodpile and riverbed.

UC Riverside/Berkeley wildlife ecologist Tom Scott and a Riverside graduate student are taking advantage of this perpetual experiment with their study "The Avifauna of the Puente-Chino Hills," which is monitoring the effects of the "wildland/urban interface" on some of the avian residents of Pete Schabarum Park in Rowland Heights and other sites.

The Schabarum park in eastern Los Angeles County is at the edge of a shopping mall and a housing development, or, as Scott describes it, where "a pre-Columbian wildlands meets an urban area." Some scientists have written this, and other such pocket parks, off the environmental ledger. "This is a park for people, not birds," Scott says. Which is why he and graduate student Dan Cooper are studying it. Right now, they are showing me a riparian arroyo where birds can nest amid the native willows and non-native mustard. In this little hinge of vegetation, the pair have observed least Bell's vireos and yellow-breasted chats and Lorquin admiral butterflies. How these and other birds and butterflies in the area are affected is of particular note, as birds and flying insects fare better in the face of human impact than other species, Scott explains: "Lizards don't move three canyons over." So they and other reptiles are among the first creatures to wither in the face of runoff from driveways and lawns into their system, what biologists call "urban drool." Birds can fly off to the next grove of trees if they are threatened, provided there are trees. "I never expected to see a yellow-breasted chat here," Cooper says. "People think it's sensitive to human impact. They are usually the first to drop out because they nest in thickets of riparian vegetation, which are under siege."

Like the birds caught between civilization and nature, Tom Scott himself is at an intersection, in the middle of a heated debate between developers and environmentalists. To characterize the two sides simply, all developers want to pave paradise and put up a parking lot; all environmentalists want to save all life, with the exception of people.

In my opinion, birds trump people most of the time. However, I'm open to reason, and Professor Scott is not only a reasonable man but one with a keen understanding of both positions. He grew up in San Diego at the ed
of La Mesa, right on the wildland/urban i
terface. "One of my earliest memories,"
says, "is the destruction of a canyon for I
terstate 8. I was monkey-wrenching in fif
grade, hiking through subdivisions and pulli
up a stake or two; they were taking away o
playground. Now, every place I ever cherish
is under concrete. That doesn't mean I'm g
ing to move to Montana. We haven't been ab
to convince people that certain resources a
worth saving, so let's find out exactly what ha
pens when development occurs and pass
the information. Southern California is grou
zero for conflicts, so what better place to study

Now we are at the southwestern edge of t
park, where it abuts a typical Southern Ca
fornia development of tract housing. As Sc
points out, it is likely that the fenced-in co
munity has a name like Quail Run, hinting
a rustic surrounding that, in reality, was d
placed to erect such enclaves of single-fam
dwellings. On the park side of the road arou
the development, down a ridge, is a little sta
of prickly pears. Some coast live oak trees pr
vide a canopy for the underlying chaparral

"There's a Hutton's vireo," Cooper says. "Th
are tied to the oaks." As we leave the park
red-shouldered hawk glides on the air currer
swirling across the changing landscape, ov
Chuck E. Cheese and the peaks of the Hilt
hotel, still part of the ecological edge. This hav
appears to be faring well in certain parts
Southern California, along with the black phoeb
hooded orioles and cliff swallows.

"But how many elements can we pull o
of here," Scott asks, "and still have a bla
phoebe or a yellow-breasted chat? I am afra
of the time when we live in a world where p
geons, black rats and cockroaches are our or
interaction with wildlife." That would be t
ecology of hell.

Patt Morrison is on assignment. Her column
turns next month.

hotograph by Gina Ferazzi/Los Angeles Times