



Santa Clara Valley  
Chapter

## Berries for the Birds

*By Jeffrey Caldwell, updated Feb. 2008, May 2014*

One of the best ways to watch birds is to find native plants laden with ripe fruits of the sorts they love to eat. A good food source will bring them out in the open to feed, and when there is plenty of good food they seem more at ease with human presence, or at least much less likely to fly far away. While out gathering ripe coffeeberry fruits I was astonished at what a good look I was able to get of the western bluebirds which continued to feed on them, or retreated but a very short distance, eyeing me as I eyed them! Yellow-rumped warblers were feeding with them.

A very satisfying way to enjoy birds is to plant native plants which provide food for them. Many berrying plants attract birds. Some people plant non-native species such as pyracantha or cotoneaster for the birds, but native berries attract a greater diversity of songbirds and often greater numbers as well. The flowers, foliage, leaf litter, etc., of native plant species also supports a greater diversity and abundance of the invertebrates the birds feed upon year round.

Some of the more useful berrying species are:

### **Mexican elderberry** (*Sambucus nigra caerulea*)

This is a common riparian species and also found at the base of hills or in ravines. The fruits in early summer attract an extremely wide range of birds, such as quail, thrashers, grosbeaks, woodpeckers, orioles, house finches, and orange-crowned warblers. Mexican elderberry is very easy to cultivate. It does tend to get large and can be rangy, but responds well to pruning and if need be can be renewed by cutting it to the ground in its winter dormancy.

### **Hollyleaf cherry** (*Prunus ilicifolia*)

Formerly commonly used for hedges, hollyleaf cherry provides good bird food. The seeds may be planted where the plants are to stand. Hollyleaf cherry is well suited for screening planting along property lines. Hollyleaf cherry can be severely hedged, but it is best to allow it to grow at least 6 feet tall, or better yet, give each plant plenty of room to develop as specimens. For maximum value to birds allow it to be branched to the ground and allow leaf litter to accumulate.

**California coffeeberry** (*Frangula [Rhamnus] californica*)

This shrub is particularly useful because it provides succulent berries in early fall, a lean and hungry season. Many birds visit it year round for insects. California coffeeberry is an attractive foliage plant, easy to cultivate and grows quickly. There are several named varieties with various growth forms and foliage characteristics.

**Brown dogwood** (*Cornus glabrata*)

This riparian species grows very fast with some water. It features lush foliage, bright blue berries in late summer loved by many songbirds, and good fall leaf color as well. Small birds like to nest in it. To observe brown dogwood with its associated birds in the wild check out the stands found along Old Page Mill Road in Palo Alto.

**Toyon** (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*)

Bright red toyon berries are the favorite food of robins and waxwings in winter, with more than 20 species of birds utilizing them for food. The seeds contain a small percentage of cyanide compounds, but nevertheless purple finches (seed predators) rip open the fruits to eat great numbers of them. In its season no berry is more attractive. The birds do **not** get "drunk" on toyon as they do with the non-native pyracantha which often results in tragedy if a busy street is adjacent. Toyon is easy to grow. Give it enough room so that little or no pruning will be required. A great variety of insects, or sometimes many honeybees, visit its white flower panicles in early summer.

**Oregon grape** (*Mahonia aquifolium*) and **Shinyleaf barberry** (*Mahonia pinnata*)

Native barberries are easy to grow and quite decorative. I will never forget how close I was able to approach a small flock of Phainopeplas feeding on *Mahonia pinnata* fruits at Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in Claremont. They were most reluctant to leave such a delicious feast. Distinctive named varieties are available for garden use.

**Poison oak** (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*)

Poison oak is in the cashew family and its fruits are attractive to birds that normally eat mast or insects, such as jays, woodpeckers, titmice, and wrentits. It is an important food for many birds, especially for wrentits and hermit thrushes. Poison oak is not as difficult to live with as some people think. Simply avoid direct contact with the plant, alive or dead, or anything – such as a cutting blade or the coat of an animal – that has touched it. The irritation is caused by urushiol, an oil that coats the stems and leaves. If you want to clear poison oak away from trails or heavily used areas, safely pull up nuisance seedlings with a pair of pliers, or larger specimens with a weed wrench. Another great technique is to “hedge it back” along trails, cutting the facing surface on an even slope, as with a fine hedge, narrower at the top, with foliage to the ground. Thus regimented, the plant is much easier to avoid. This technique has been used along trails in the Edgewood Preserve.

There are many other fine berries for birds, such as thimbleberry, hairy honeysuckle, wild grape, blue witch -- any berry species is worth trying. Flocks of yellow warblers come for Pacific wax myrtle. Berrying plants with prickly leaves, such as barberries or hollyleaf cherry, or with stem prickles, thorns, or spines, such as native hawthorns, blackberries, blackcap raspberry, wild roses, or gooseberries, create particularly protective cover which is much needed in populated areas. Combine with vines for excellent nesting cover.