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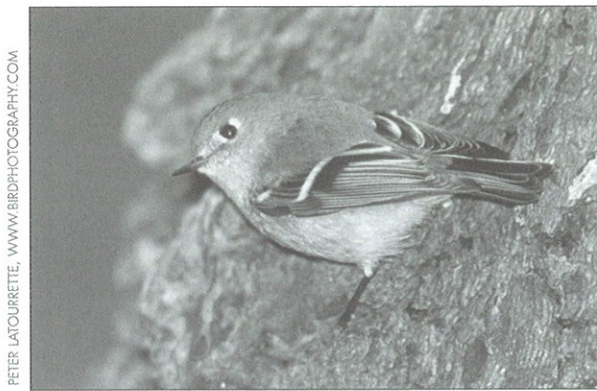
Kinglets—Curious and Feisty

Rich Stallcup

It's September 21st, and we are huddled below the weathered cypresses at the end of Point Reyes. There is fog and light drizzle but no wind. These trees and the bush lupine below, which yesterday held only a few Song and Nuttall's White-crowned Sparrows, are today a symphony of "tics, chips, rattles and trills"—voices of winter birds that arrived overnight, in the first wave from the north. The crowd includes a Varied and several Hermit Thrushes; Fox Lincoln's, Golden-crowned, and *pugetensis* White-crowned Sparrows; Audubon's and Townsend's Warblers; and *kinglets*. It is raining kinglets.

Best Month. Ask any knowledgeable California coast birder what month is most exciting for bird motion and diversity, and the answer will always be September. Of our nesting species that migrate, most are still present in the early part of the month but gone by the end. Hundreds of thousands of shorebirds pass by and settle in to winter, and waterfowl begins to arrive with a splash. Millions of ocean birds pass from north to south, most just beyond view from land, as hundreds of thousands more (mostly Sooty Shearwaters) swirl from south to north. Thousands of hawks glide down mountain ridges, and swifts jet by so fast and high they are seldom seen.

Waiting for Kinglets. I love Ruby-crowned Kinglets and really miss them when they're gone. They are so beautiful and radiant, peaceful yet sassy and assertive. Their nonsense, non-stop, high-energy business



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Ruby-crowned Kinglet.

gives motion to winter woodlands that, without them, might fall asleep.

Ruby-crowned Kinglets arrive to winter here from Oregon, Washington, British Columbia and Alaska, where they nest. Those that nest in the Sierra Nevada and Cascades mostly go to Mexico. Kinglets are full-time insectivores and have refined their leaf search to an evolutionary art form that includes hover-gleaning, a behavior that gives them access to the undersides of leaves and branches.

Leader's Friend. Winter field trip leaders are likely to succeed in showing birds to their followers *because* of the presence of Ruby-crowned Kinglets. The birds' curiosity and feisty nature drives them toward any disturbance in the thicket, like an owl, a squirrel, or a squeaking, pishing human. The little birds' goal is to confront and displace a potential predator rather than turn their backs on it. The kinglets will flit around the perceived threat, often within inches, giving rapid-fire, agitated calls that attract other near-

by birds to join the "lynch mob." Sometimes we will have 100 birds of 8-12 species—close but quick—in clear view. Kinglets and Yellow-rumped Warblers are usually the instigators of such mob scenes, and they always seem to enjoy a good rumble.

Big Day. In this part of California a fall "big day"—a 24-hour search for the maximum number of bird species—is best scheduled some time in the last ten days of September. It is early enough then to catch the last of the swallows and other southbound migrants but late enough for the winter arrivals. In some years the overlap is only one or two days, but if you can find that time window, the waterbirds and vagrants will fall into place, and you will assemble a big list.

We hope that 2005 PRBO Bird-A-Thon teams will find the right day and many species—including at least a sprinkling of kinglets.

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