

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

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**Gulls** seen recently at the sewer ponds by the landfill in Davis, **Yolo County**:

**Adult Slaty-backed Gull.** Has a dark gray mantle, not really black, similar to a Western Gull. Very broad tertial and secondary crescents. The underwings are quite pale, a lot like a Western x Glaucous-winged Gull hybrid, having black on the upper portion of the wings and gray on the underwings. But more white in the wing tips, a series of white spots extending from the inner primaries out to about P8. It is visible both on the upperwing and the underwing and often called a string of pearls. (Glaucous-winged Gull can show a pattern reminiscent of that.) The bill shape is usually pretty slim on a Slaty-backed Gull. The pattern of streaking on the head varies, but they often look like they have quite a bit of dark around the eye. The bird in Davis did not have that, but it is already March. By this time gulls are a lot harder to identify than the same species would be in December or January because they tend to bleach and fade plus the head starts to get whiter as they approach breeding plumage. Some of the features you might be looking for tend to disappear.

There has been a **Western Gull** in Davis also. That is extremely rare in the Central Valley. The Western Gulls are right along the immediate coast, they get inside SF Bay all the way down into the South Bay where they start to get a little more scarce. They penetrate into San Pablo Bay. But when you get to the Benicia bridge and start getting into Suisun Bay, they get really scarce right by that line where that bridge is, they don't get very far into the interior. Slaty-backed Gulls are much easier to pick out in Davis than in Half Moon Bay, where there are many Western Gulls. There are no common dark mantled gulls at the Davis landfill.

There has also been a second cycle **Lesser Black-backed Gull**. The taxonomy of the Lesser Black-backed Gull is pretty tricky. It is confined to Europe and has spread to NA, where it is now quite regular on the east coast, but still a rarity here on the west coast. There are other gulls in Siberia, most notably something called **Heuglin's Gull** which breeds in the tundra of northern Russia from the Kola Peninsula eastward to the Taimyr Peninsula, where it gets replaced by the **Taimyr Gull**, which eventually gets replaced by the **Vega Gull**. They get progressively lighter as you get eastward across Siberia. Vega Gull and Taimyr Gull are currently by many authorities treated as subspecies of the Herring Gull, but they are much darker mantled than the Herring Gull. Also, the Vega Gull has dark eyes. Joe sees no reason at all that the Vega Gull is a race of the Herring Gull. The Vega Gull reaches all the way to Alaska. The Heuglin's Gull is a mess though. It is almost impossible to distinguish from the Lesser Black-backed Gull, except by its longer legs and longer neck. In the past it was considered a race of the Lesser Black-backed Gull, but most taxonomists split it now. To claim one in CA would require a specimen. If that happens it will call all the Lesser Black-backed Gulls into question.

There have been several **Glaucous Gulls** in Davis. The adults are outnumbered by immatures quite a bit when they are seen in CA. That site has been famous for Glaucous Gulls for many years.

The **Glaucous-winged Gull** can bleach out at this time of the year, they often look pretty white right now, but the young ones will still have an all dark bill.

There are no herons or egrets coming to the trees at Audubon Canyon Ranch. Usually by this time of the year there are at least two or three nests. A couple of weeks ago there were some herons coming in and then they left. When we went on our field trip to Lake Merritt in Oakland the heron colony there was abandoned, too.

Joe now has the photos from his birding trip to Costa Rica in January on his website under Trip Reports.

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## **Common Cuckoo**

Famous for being obligate brood parasites, lay their eggs into the nests of other birds. They use egg mimicry. Females lay their eggs in the nests of the same species that raised them, her egg closely resembles the eggs of the host species, so there are different lineages of females that specialize in different hosts. Not subspecies, the males mate with any female. The cuckoo's eggs are relatively small in relation to the bird's size, only slightly bigger than the host's eggs. (The hosts are usually much smaller birds). Baby cuckoos move around in their host's nest and when something touches an area on their back between their shoulder blades, they push it out of the nest, this way ejecting the eggs or any hatchlings of their foster parents.

The term cuckold for a man who raises a child that he thinks is his but which is not comes from cuckoo.

### **OCCURRENCE**

The cuckoo that occurs in Europe. It ranges all the way to east Asia, vagrant to NA.

### **FIELD MARKS**

Slightly bigger than an American Kestrel. Has a falcon-like appearance in flight.

Occurs in two different types.

The males are always gray, gray on the back, barred with gray underneath.

The females occur in two morphs, one gray like the males, the other "hepatic morph" chestnut brown or tawny in color.

### **VOCALIZATIONS**

Cuc-coo, its call gives the cuckoos their name.

Very seldom heard by vagrants to NA.

## **Oriental Cuckoo**

### **OCCURRENCE**

From east Asia.

Has occurred as a vagrant in Alaska also, was collected there before they got the first Common Cuckoo, now more records of Common Cuckoo. There are records where they don't know what species they were (mostly of gray morphed birds, which are more difficult to tell apart).

### **FIELD MARKS**

Very similar to the Common Cuckoo.

Somewhat coarser barring.

Hepatic morph always barred throughout the underparts, on hepatic Common Cuckoo the barring is faint or absent on the rump.

## **Anis**

Strictly New World cuckoos.

About the size of a Great-tailed Grackle and can be confused with it unless you get a look at the big parrot-shaped bill.

Not nearly as common as grackles. Most likely to be encountered in a crossword puzzle.

Tend to occur in farm fields and overgrown weedy pastures and around the edges of woodlots.

Frequently forage on the ground. Sometimes follow cattle to pick up insects.

Build communal nests, big platforms of twigs. Multiple females lay their eggs in the same nest.

3-5 females may be sitting on eggs in the same big nest. These nests are surprisingly hard to find, one of the most difficult birds to ever find their nest.

They roost together, move in flocks, at night they cuddle up in the branches.

Anis are claimed to never bathe. They tend to have their feathers in really bad condition. They look really ratty, they always look like half their feathers are about ready to fall out.

The whole bird looks disjointed. The tail is pumping around this way and sideways and in flight they look like they can barely fly.

The two species are not easy to tell apart by sight. They can be told apart by their voice.

## **Smooth-billed Ani**

### **OCCURRENCE**

Formerly occurred in southern Florida. Is now very rare and just at the very tip of Florida. Might become extinct in Florida.

Is however abundant in South America. One of the more common species in Panama.

### **FIELD MARKS**

Has kind of a keel along the top of the bill which is not found on the smaller build Groove-billed Ani. Unfortunately there is a lot of variation. There is not a whole lot of difference between a small-billed adult Smooth-billed Ani and a typical adult Groove-billed Ani. A large-billed Groove-billed Ani may even have a larger bill than some of the Smooth-billed Anis.

The presence of the keel on top of the bill, if it is exaggerated and obvious, suggests Smooth-billed Ani.

The young ones have smaller bills than the adults.

Sibley instead focuses on the lower mandible, Smooth-billed has a stronger gonydeal angle. This is not visible in Joe's slides.

A little more feathering around the eye.

### **VOCALIZATIONS**

Kind of a rising whistled call, reminding a little bit of the rising whistle given by the Great-tailed Grackle, which does not occur in Florida.

The Boat-tailed Grackle that occurs there does not have a rising whistle.

## **Groove-billed Ani**

### **OCCURRENCE**

Found in Mexico, reaches the southern area of southern Texas, mostly along the Rio Grande, usually in the summer months.

Gets all the way down into Panama.

Seems to be expanding a bit.

Much more likely to show up as a vagrant in NA than Smooth-billed Ani.

A handful of records in southern CA, mostly in the late fall and some through the winter.

### **FIELD MARKS**

Grooves that run from the base of the bill all the way out to the tip, kind of corrugations on the maxilla (the upper mandible). Only visible at very close range. Some Smooth-billed Anis have faint grooves.

In Joe's pictures they all look like they got a bit of a keel.

### **VOCALIZATIONS**

It does not have that rising whistle.

It has a number of other vocalizations, a slurr, a descending whistle.