

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

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

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There has been an incursion of **Pine Siskins** for the last month or so in the Bay Area.

Joe is not sure if they are spring migrants

The species is somewhat eruptive, sometimes completely absent, sometimes occurs in the thousands.

The last time there was a big incursion a couple of years ago a lot of those birds had an unusual call that sounded almost like a Pygmy Nuthatch, pek, pek, pek. Joe had never heard that from a Pine Siskin before, and never since. Maybe they came from a different area, where Pine Siskins have that call.

Very few breed in the Bay Area. They nest in coniferous forests but are not very common in and around the edges of coniferous forests, they are more common in the mountains.

The **Common Merganser** is the rarest of the three regularly occurring Mergansers in the Bay Area, it is increasing though. The **Red-breasted Merganser** is quite common on the ocean and along the immediate coast and in SF Bay, mostly in the shallows, it rarely occurs in fresh water but may do so right near the immediate coast. Also in sewer ponds in the interior, e.g. the Furnace Creek Ranch sewer ponds, the Red-breasted Merganser is much more likely than Common, same thing at the Salton Sea. The Common Merganser seems to be restricted to pure fresh water, it occurs inland in deep reservoirs for the most part, sometimes in pretty good numbers. Also occurs in rivers and streams. Some are where rivers and streams meet the coast, e.g. the mouth of the Russian River, maybe Pescadero Creek. Also in some of the quarries in the East Bay, for example in the Hayward Area, ponds along Alameda Creek. If you see Common Mergansers the chances are you can probably drink that water, if you see Red-breasted Mergansers, there is no way you ever want to drink the water, they like salt water and pollution water. In SF none of the mergansers are very common. The Common Merganser has occurred rarely, a couple of times. This said, both Rob and Sally recently saw Common Mergansers on the Las Gallinas sewer ponds.

Hooded Merganser also likes fresh water. Occasionally seen on SF Bay, but quite scarce.

**Song Sparrow** versus **Lincoln's Sparrow**: In the Bay Area the Song Sparrow is a very common resident in tule marshes, where it frequently sits on the tops of the tules and sings. The Lincoln's Sparrow is strictly a winter visitor and migrant to the Bay Area, where it prefers weedy fields, particularly weedy fields that have wet seeps in them or are otherwise wet, but they are not likely to be seen in a tule marsh. It would be virtually impossible to have one on top of a tule singing in the Bay Area. They sing in wet meadows up in the Sierra Nevada where they breed. Their song is much longer and somewhat more melodic. The Lincoln's is a smaller bird, the brown on the back is yellower in color, less coffee colored compared to the dark brown of the Song Sparrow. The streaks are very, very fine, both on the back and across the chest. The most important field mark is the wash of light buff coloration across the breast which only the Lincoln's Sparrow has. You may see some color like this on some Song Sparrows on the flanks and even in the malar region, but not clear across the breast.

The whole **Golden Gate Park** is completely artificial, it used to be just sand dunes. John McLaren created the park and just went through and destroyed all of the coastal dunes that used to be there, including certain endemic species of lupines which no longer exist and a butterfly that was dependent on one particular type of lupine and now is extinct. So all of the trees and all of

the systems in there are planted. The ponds themselves are fed from irrigation runoff for the most part and a lot is repumped in there. The condition of the Chain of Lakes has changed. Typically Middle Lake used to have the most birds. In the 1970s and 80s it was normal to go there in the wintertime and see 25 Wood Ducks. The big Weeping Willow in the middle of the lake was larger and some of the ducks would be sitting up there. The park service decided in their infinite wisdom to cut down the whole hedge that separated that lake from the road and the Wood Ducks all left because they didn't like the traffic and they all moved over to Mallard Lake. Eventually they all disappeared, now the Wood Duck is quite scarce in GG Park, because there is more and more intrusion, they just don't like parties, loud noises, lots of cars. Dogs are another issue. It used to be pretty quiet down there, you never saw anybody except drug dealers who were quite surreptitious and didn't bother anybody. Now it is often noisy, e.g. from the Thai Chi people at North Lake playing loud music. What birds occur on what lakes has varied a lot. E.g. Elk Glen Lake used to have all kinds of stuff, in recent years there's hardly any ducks on that lake. There is a bunch of carp in that lake now, they have apparently chewed up all the vegetation on the bottom of the lake that provided the food base for a lot of the waterfowl. The dabbling ducks chew in the shallows and get the vegetation off the bottom.

A **Black Rail** has been heard calling in Coyote Hills Regional Park. The original reporter described the call as kik-kik-grrrr. A Black Rail in Coyote Hills is pretty unusual. The description sounded more like the "kicker", which is made by the Virginia Rail, also by the Clapper Rail, Sora, Yellow Rail and Black Rail. This sound seems to be given by females sitting on their nest. A pretty unusual call, but versions of it are given by pretty much any species of rail. Then the bird at Coyote Hills got recorded. It is really high pitched, it is a Black Rail, it is not the "kicker".

On the class field trip last weekend to the Chain of Lakes there was a pair of **Western Bluebirds** on the north side of the bison enclosure. The first Western Bluebirds Joe has seen in the park. The only other place where bluebirds have been found in the city recently is in the Presidio, where they have been documented to nest. Bluebird populations in CA and especially along the immediate coast have been impacted by introduced Starlings which compete with them for limited nesting cavities. Both are obligate cavity nesting birds, the starlings evict the bluebirds out of their nests.

Also **Red Crossbills** were seen. They are variable and eruptive and erratic in the park, most years we don't see them.

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## **Pine Siskin**

### **OCCURRENCE**

Quite widespread over NA.

Breed up in the conifers in Canada, the Rocky Mountains, Sierra Nevada.

Occurs also in the coastal mountains as an uncommon breeder.

Can be abundant in the wintertime.

Flocks in the winter and during migration with other species of goldfinches.

Very fond of thistle seed, feed on introduced teasel and poison hemlock.

In the north they frequently associate in flocks of redpolls, arctic species that are similar to Pine Siskins in that they are streaked on the underparts, behavior quite a bit alike.

Many years ago when there was an invasion, Joe counted approximately 8,000 Pine Siskins while walking from one end of GG Park to the other.

Another year there was only one Pine Siskin on the entire SF CBC.

#### **FIELD MARKS**

Streaked extensively and uniformly on the underparts, unlike any of the other goldfinches, although the belly is relatively unstreaked.

Streaking on the back.

Relatively faint pattern on the head with streaks throughout.

Can be confused with female House Finch (which is bigger, longer tail).

Bill very thin though, thinner than pretty much any other kind of finch.

Kind of a dark cap, a little bit of an outline to the ear coverts.

Yellow at the base of the primaries and at the base of the tail feathers (inner webs mostly), does not show up very prominently until they fly.

Males have more yellow than females on average but there is overlap.

Young birds have less yellow than adults, but some juveniles have an overall yellowish cast.

Wing bars buffy or whitish.

Relatively short tail.

Undertail coverts white.

The Pine Siskin has a **green or yellow morph**, Sibley has a picture.

A lot of yellow in the wing bars.

In particular notice the yellow undertail coverts, greener on the back.

Can be mistaken for a Eurasian Siskin but those do not have yellow undertail coverts.

Joe has coauthored a paper about this: [http://fog.ccsf.edu/~jmorlan/siskin\\_scan.pdf](http://fog.ccsf.edu/~jmorlan/siskin_scan.pdf)

Eurasian Siskins are sometimes kept in captivity, escapes may occur.

#### **VOCALIZATIONS**

Make a lot of chittering sounds while they are foraging.

A rising buzz is a very typical call, very distinctive, not given by any other species.

In flight often a series of chittering notes, ch-ch-ch, similar to some flight notes given by the Lesser Goldfinch.

The song is very longwinded and does include mimicry.

All of these goldfinches include call notes interspersed with their songs and all of them have distinctive call notes that identify them positively.

## **American Goldfinch**

#### **OCCURRENCE**

The most widespread of the *Carduelis* finches in NA

Ranges from coast to coast and is a breeder throughout much of NA, absent in the breeding season in the south and southwest.

Very fond of thistles, even more so than Pine Siskin.

Line their nests with thistle down. Where Joe grew up in the Northeast, American Goldfinch was one of the latest nesting birds because thistles didn't get their seed until August. Here there are plenty of thistle seeds in May and June, so they nest quite early.

Prefers moister areas than the other goldfinches, is by far the most common goldfinch along the immediate coast, particularly where it's foggy and drippy.

Its favorite tree is the willow which mostly grows where there is some kind of permanent water. Willow thickets are the prime nesting habitat.

The big clump of willows where the seeps are by Drake's Beach visitor center at Pt Reyes are loaded down with American Goldfinches year round.

Also the willows growing around the edge of Rodeo Lagoon.

They especially like willow clumps next to fields that have weeds, particularly thistle type weeds, growing in them. Dandelions will work just fine as well.

In SF a little bit less common but can be found in certain areas where there are creeks or some kind of permanent water.

Quite common all up and down the coast otherwise, in the east bay as well.

Will frequently come down to the ground and forage on dandelions.

#### **FIELD MARKS**

Distribution of white in the tail: mostly in the distal part of the tail

White undertail coverts in the shade: can be really difficult to tell the white color from pale yellow

In the middle of the summer you see many with the wing bars practically worn off.

Look really sharp only during a brief period in spring, at other times molting or in winter plumage.

#### **BREEDING MALE**

A bright all yellow bird with black wings and white wing bars.

A little black cap, almost recalling Wilson's Warbler (which is a warbler with a warbler bill and does not have black and white wings).

Black with some white in the tail, mostly at the tip of the tail.

Bill and legs pink during the breeding season.

By beginning birders frequently confused with warblers: they flick around in the willow trees, they are warbler size, they are bright yellow which is sort of a key color to what a lot of warblers have.

#### **BREEDING FEMALE**

Back rather olive brown.

Quite yellow on the entire underparts but not nearly as bright as the male.

Wings are not quite as contrasting as the males' are.

Never has a black forehead.

These birds can be confused with the Lesser Goldfinch, which tends to have an olive green back rather than olive brown. American Goldfinch breeding female feet and legs pink, normally black on Lesser Goldfinch. Lesser Goldfinch frequently has faint streaks on the back that the American Goldfinch does not show.

#### **NONBREEDING**

You can't necessarily tell the males from the females in nonbreeding plumage.

Very different from breeding birds. Undergo a rather prolonged molt during which they are messy and patchy looking.

Pretty drab looking bird, plain gray brown, some without any yellow at all, especially females.

Gray brown on underparts, yellow just on the head.

Can sometimes look a little bit like a Hermit Warbler with wing bars on a little gray bird and then the yellow face.

Belly usually white.

Undertail coverts white.

Bill and feet dark.

Back quite brown, no streaking at all.

Freshly molted wing bars really strong, buff (bleach to white in the breeding season).

Also buff on the tertials.

#### **COMPARISON WITH LESSER GOLDFINCH**

American Goldfinch night and day different from each other seasonally. Bright in the breeding season, drab brown with hardly any yellow at all in winter. In winter plain gray brown birds with a lot of strong wing bars, no particular pattern anywhere else, whitish on the belly and on the undertail coverts, sitting on barb wire along the side of the road.

Lesser Goldfinch look practically the same all year round, they are always bright yellow underneath, even in the middle of winter, with few exceptions.

So in the breeding season they look quite different, and in the winter season they look very different.

The spring females can be pretty hard to tell apart. Both are yellow underneath and olive on the back. You might want to look at the tail pattern or the pattern on the undertail coverts (yellow on Lesser).

American Goldfinch has broad buff wing bars when fresh in fall, wing bars never buff on Lesser Goldfinch, whitish or off-white.

American Goldfinch is slightly larger than Lesser Goldfinch

#### **VOCALIZATIONS**

Perpetually cheerful. In flight or when perched or in the middle of its song it gives a optimistic “potato chip” (Lesser Goldfinch perpetually morose)

## **Lesser Goldfinch**

#### **OCCURRENCE**

Found only in the far west.

In CA it is particularly common in the Central Valley and foothill regions but prefers areas that are somewhat more arid than American Goldfinch.

Not usually found in willows, seems to prefer stands of oaks in grassland areas.

Definitely likes to have some permanent water around (true of all of the goldfinches), but the habitat is more away from the coastal fog.

The goldfinch we find e.g. in Briones Regional Park.

#### **NEST BUILDING BEHAVIOR**

All of these goldfinches build a very well constructed cup nest which is built entirely by the female. The female gathers the nesting material and the male follows, and he sings. Then the female goes and puts the material in the nest, and the male follows, and he sings. So he does all the supervision and she does all the work. Might be a way to make sure that no other males mate with her. She incubates and he feeds her.

#### **FIELD MARKS**

Yellow underparts.

Back has got a greenish cast to it, contrast between the grayish olive back and the bright yellow of the underparts. Used to be called “Green-backed Goldfinch”. Frequently faint

streaks on the back, looks like feather texturing (looked like dark feather centers to me on some slide). The males are more likely to show this than the females.

Black cap in males more extensive than on American Goldfinch, all the way back to the nape instead of just on the forehead, less extensive in winter.

Females similar to the males but lack the bold black cap.

Pretty bold pattern on the wings.

White patch at the bases of the primaries, females have a small one.

Rather dark bill, perhaps a little thinner than AG

Usually dark legs.

White on the tail in a different place than American: on the base of the tail instead of at the tip.

The yellow extends down to the undertail coverts, but can be white between the legs (at least on one of the slides).

Some birds can appear to have white undertail coverts, you need to use a whole suite of characters and not rely on just one or a misjudgment of one. Pale yellow undertail coverts can seem white against the more intense yellow of the underparts!

### **ARKKANSAS GOLFINCH**

It comes in two flavors: the green backed types that we have here in the west, and then there are black backed types that are found in Texas and Oklahoma. Those used to be called the "Arkansas Goldfinch". Never recorded in Arkansas, named for the Arkansas River in Texas.

Occasionally black backed birds are reported in CA. Are they really black backed birds or is it just variation or how do you deal with this? They have been found breeding in CA with green backed birds. They are probably best considered a color morph but the situation is quite unclear. Some of them are not really black, some are just dark, others are really shiny black. In Texas the opposite problem, they have occasional green backed birds. They are described as subspecies. There may be some overlap in their characters.

### **PALE BIRDS**

There is a pale morph, the books make an attempt to show it

Joe tends to see these very pale birds more often in the desert but has also seen them in the Bay Area.

They are kind of confounding, not really well illustrated in the books at all.

Can be identified by their call, by their association with flocks of Lesser Goldfinches and possibly by the tail pattern, which has quite a bit of white at the base of the tail, not at the tip of the tail.

Dark legs and feet and overall goldfinch size and shape

### **VOCALIZATIONS**

Perpetually morose: sad little soft mellow descending whistle

## Lawrence's Goldfinch

### OCCURRENCE

A west coast endemic, found only in CA and in Baja California with vagrants as far away as Texas. Range map in Nat Geo a bit optimistic, Sibley showing the bird wintering in Mexico and Arizona and in the breeding season in CA is probably more correct. Found locally in southern CA in the nonbreeding season, then migrate into northern CA through the foothills. It is a foothill bird, found in the foothills around the edges of the Central Valley. Particularly fond of savannah habitat, oak woodland. A specialist on the seeds (maybe also the buds) of fiddleneck, which is a common wildflower that grows in that area. The flowers grow in the shade.

Almost never seen at feeding stations.

In SF the bird would be considered accidental. One year there was a small flock at a place called Quail Commons. They were juvenal birds. Lawrence's Goldfinch is unique among the goldfinches in that the juveniles have streaks on them, down the middle of the breast, very faint. Unlikely that they nested in SF. There were fires, they possibly got displaced.

They are erratic at any season. Some years they are all over the place, even reaching the immediate coast. Other years, there is hardly any Lawrence's Goldfinch anywhere. There are a few locations where they are regular each summer. That includes Mines Road south of Livermore, particular in the area around San Antonio Junction across from the fire house, and further down towards Del Porto Canyon Road at Frank Raines Off Highway Vehicle Park. Some years they are all over the place down there, some years they are hard to find. Seems to depend a lot on rainfall in the deserts. If it is very dry the birds seem to be pushed more towards the coast, there seems to be inadequate water or inadequate food in their normal core range. Also occur regularly in upper Carmel Valley in Monterey County. Listen for them there. They could be in flocks of Lesser Goldfinches. American Goldfinch is not particularly common in the areas where Lawrence's Goldfinches like to be, Lesser is the main goldfinch in that kind of habitat.

In the wintertime they are absent from almost all of the areas where they normally occur in the breeding season. One exception: Mount Hamilton. Up on the way to the summit of Mount Hamilton they routinely get a small number of them on the CBC. No other CBC in northern CA routinely gets them. This is east of San Jose. Basically on your way out of San Antonio Junction to San Jose. Very windy. There is a few places where you might be able to find them in southern CA in the winter.

### FIELD MARKS

Adult male very striking bird.

Lots of gold color in the wings, a lot of bright yellow on the breast, a pearl gray body and black not just on the forehead but also including the chin. A little bit of a greenish coloration in the rump, not normally visible.

Pretty much unmistakable, but some reports of Golden-winged Warbler may be based on misidentified Lawrence's Goldfinches.

Bill and legs pink in spring. Seemingly these too change bill and leg color.

Tail pattern similar to that of the Lesser Goldfinch, but often has black at the base, so the white spots are in the middle of the feathers instead of at either end. Black at the base and black at the tip.

Female almost identical to the male but without the black on the head.

## **VOCALIZATIONS**

Typical call note a bell like “tin-kle”. Included in the song which includes even more mimicry than the other goldfinches. Mimicry less obvious than in Mockingbirds, they roll this in almost like a jazz musician, running from one riff to another and singing basically what is recognizably a goldfinch like song, including within it the call notes.

## **European Goldfinch**

Not in our books.

There was an established population in western Long Island in the 1940s and 50s. They are in older field guides.

Eventually the fields where they fed were all build up with housing and the population collapsed. Kept in captivity, sometimes escape. A number of sightings throughout the country periodically, including CA. The pattern of occurrence does not seem to support vagrancy from either Asia or from Europe, it seems to be consistent with random escapes from captivity.