

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture March 19th, 2009.

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

Dave Quady observed a couple of **Black-backed Woodpeckers** in Lassen County at a burn site at the west side of Eagle Lake which is approximately five years old. When they flew in each of them gave a call he'd never heard before. It was similar to a Flicker's whicker-whicker-whicker but descending like a Sora.

Black-backed Woodpecker is a pretty localized bird mostly in highland areas in the Sierra and further to the north. They are a little bit erratic, they tend to move into burn areas. Joe remembers the last ones he saw flew really funny, flew kind of low with really rapid wing beats. The ones Dave saw, the male came in really slowly, with its tail feathers flared as if doing a display and it was calling and he thinks the female followed it. She gave the same kind of call.

Black-backed Woodpeckers scale the bark of the trees.

Least Bittern are easiest to see in the late summer, when they have young out of their nests, late July into August. They are also a lot easier to see in the evening, they fly around quite a bit at dusk. Otherwise they are like a Bittern, kind of shy and tricky to see. The entire Imperial Valley area is actually fairly thick with Least Bitterns. They breed all the way up in the Central Valley to the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge. If you go to a place like Gray Lodge in August in the evening and drive around the visitor's loop, people have reported 8 – 10 Least Bitterns at that time of year, they definitely breed in that area. They are also at Los Banos Wildlife Management Area along the visitor's tour loop.

Warbling Vireos arrive right about this time, March 20th often the day the first ones get reported.. On these migrant birds there is very little difference between arrival dates in northern CA and in southern CA, it does not take them very long. When they first come they are more likely in the interior and in the foothill regions, maybe in the valleys, they arrive later along the immediate coast here.

Common Redpoll

OCCURRENCE

Found in the far north.

Move south from their arctic breeding grounds sporadically, sometimes in enormous numbers, sometimes hardly any at all.

Associate together, are usually found in flocks in migration and in the winter.

Often associate in flocks of other finches, such as Pine Siskins.

The migration takes them to Canada, down into the northern tier and down into the eastern states where e.g. in the New York City area it was common in some winters and absent in other winters. In CA an extremely rare visitor to the northern part of the state for the most part, with an obscure status. For many years there were no records at all, except for a flock of 15 or so specimens that were collected out of a much larger flock at Eagle Lake in December of 1899.

Odd record at Arcata in Humboldt County in May 1969. It was brought in by an ornithology student who claimed to have shot it in his yard. Some people doubt where this bird really came from. The date was really strange, they usually show up in midwinter and are gone by March. But the record has been accepted.

Dec 1985-Jan86 there was an invasion to Tule Lake and lower Klamath.

More recently there was one bird that came to a thistle feeder in Mendocino and just this last week there was one at a thistle feeder in Fresno, the furthest south record in CA by far.

There are many more claims that probably are misidentified birds. Pretty much all the accepted records have been specimens or photographed. The problem is Cassin's Finch, which has a red patch on the forehead, some streaking underneath and a little bit of a pinkish wash on the chest. Also House Finches that have been foraging in Eucalyptus gum get black around the base of the bill, they are variable with some red on the crown and variable amounts of red elsewhere. Both are a lot larger than an actual redpoll.

FIELD MARKS

Small, siskin-sized and -shaped bird

Smaller bill than a siskin

Black all around the bill

Dark red spot on the crown

Streaks sort of siskin-like but less extensive than on siskin

Fairly notched tail

Males extensive rosy red on the chest

Hoary Redpoll

OCCURENCE

Considerable overlap in the breeding range with Common Redpoll.

Also come to the northern states in the wintertime, usually less far south than the Common Redpoll.

THE REDPOLL PROBLEM

Distinguishing the two redpolls is one of the most difficult and challenging tasks that birders face. At a place like Nome, Alaska, where both species occur you will see some birds that are clearly Common Redpolls. You will also see some birds that are clearly Hoary Redpolls. You will also see a bunch of redpolls that you will not be able to classify as either one. This brings up the question whether or not the Hoary Redpoll is actually a valid species. There have been numerous attempts to unravel the redpoll situation. Troy did discriminate function analysis on the skeletons of the birds and concluded that there is only one redpoll. Some European ornithologists used captive birds and concluded that there were two species and that the intermediates turned out to be immature Hoary. However some of that research has been called into question by other studies.

One additional fly in the ointment is something called the "Greenland Hoary Redpoll" or "Hornemann's Redpoll". It is a population of very hoary-type redpolls. Restricted to the Greenland area and occurs as a very rare visitor down into the Maritime Provinces. The birds there seem to be quite distinct without all the intermediates that can be found in the other redpolls. In Greenland both exist together with assortative mating, acting like fairly obvious

separate species. In Alaska you find them both together and you find a lot of what appear to be phenotypically hybrids.

When there is an invasion of Common Redpolls, a small percentage of them will invariably show characters of Hoary Redpoll. They get photographed and argued about. Nobody really knows what those birds are. In CA we consider ourselves extremely lucky to get the Common Redpoll.

FIELD MARKS

A little bit larger than Common Redpoll

Shorter bill with straighter culmen on average

Paler, particularly on the scapulars and on the underparts

Much less streaking on bodies, flanks, undertail coverts

But when the birds fluff up the streaks go away! And these birds occur in cold climates and they fluff up a lot.

Wing bars white and very broad.

A lot of white on the lower back, back paler than on Common Redpoll.

Rump should have no or very few streaks, but the wingtips are often folded over it so you can't see it.

Legs rather short.

Males never show bright red on the breast, only a little bit of a flush of pinkish coloration on the chest, the color never extends up on the face.

Evening Grosbeak

OCCURRENCE

More or less a permanent resident across the northern US and southern Canada

Not a very northern finch, does not get into Alaska.

In the Pacific Northwest they are found throughout the mountains, down into the Cascades and into the Sierra Nevada where they are somewhat erratic.

Eruptive species, particularly in the east where they may come to bird feeders in pretty good numbers. They usually are in flocks and are really unpredictable and unreliable year round, not winter eruptions, even in the middle of summer there is either a bunch of them or there is none. You think of this as a mountain bird, but the numbers fluctuate even in the mountains. Even in the Sierra Nevada the birds are not there every summer. The whole concept of a range map barely works with a bird like this.

In the Bay Area their occurrence is primarily in the wintertime.

If you are comfortable with the flight call and do a lot of hiking in the Santa Cruz mountains, in certain winters people record lots of them, but most people do not see those birds, they are just flyovers or sitting up in the tops of conifers where they are not visible.

In the Sierras you can have luck at the Yuba Pass road, they like to forage on the salt that is used to keep the road open in the wintertime

Found in a variety of habitats.

Found in the mountains, occur in conifers, but they also seem to like alders and willows.

When they show up in CA they are frequently in riparian type of vegetation or sometimes hanging around in planted conifers.

FIELD MARKS

Quite a bit bigger than a goldfinch.

Bill very big, greenish at least in the summertime, may fade to yellowish in the winter.

Adult **male** dark coffee brown head with a yellow supercilium and forehead.

Big white patch in the tertials and the inner wing.

Tail entirely black with no white tips.

Golden yellow color on the belly and on part of the wings and the back.

Female grayish colored.

No yellow forehead.

Little black lateral throat stripes that you do not find in the males.

Pattern on the wings more spangled.

Tip of tail noticeable amounts of white.

Legs solid pink.

VOCALIZATIONS

Give kind of a loud rising call in flight that sounds like a House Sparrow on steroids.

Hawfinch

Essentially replaces the Evening Grosbeak in Europe and Asia.

Very rare vagrant to Alaska.

Some similarity to Evening Grosbeak, especially to the female, but warmer coloration.

Back brown, head yellowish brown, gray collar around the back of the neck, underparts with pinkish wash.

Eurasian Bullfinch

Has occurred in Alaska.

Male rose colored underparts, female brownish underparts.