

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture March 25th, 2009.

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

Female teal can be really tricky, particularly between the Blue-winged and the Cinnamon. One of the significant differences is the larger bill, particularly the tip of the bill of the Cinnamon Teal versus the narrower, a little bit more pointed bill of the Blue-winged Teal. The Nat Geo shows the Cinnamon Teal female with her bill in the water. In some ways the bill of the Cinnamon Teal is intermediate between that of a Blue-winged Teal and a Shoveler, never as exaggerated but it is a bigger billed bird. One of the problems is that the field marks are all quantitative, all matters of degree. Blue-winged Teal has a paler face, a stronger line through the eye, a narrower bill, more white at the belly.

A similar thing comes up with **Rufous and Allen's Hummingbirds females**, which are even worse. One of the many differences is the width of the outer tail feathers. When looking at the same photographs people have judged a bird either as an Allen's based on the narrow tail feathers or as a Rufous based on the very broad tail feathers!

We discussed the photo of a **sapsucker** seen at Filoli. The photo is published on the website of the yahoo-group Peninsula-birding, you can view it if you are a member of that group, the only photo in the folder "Yellow-bellied Sapsucker".

When analyzing a sapsucker that might be a Red-naped or a Yellow-bellied one of the first things to do is to try to figure out the sex of the bird. If it is all white on the throat it is a female Yellow-bellied. If it is all red on the throat it is either a male Red-naped or a male Yellow-bellied. The female Red-naped has red on the throat but white on the chin.

If you see a bird with an all red throat the next thing to look for is if the throat is completely framed in solid black or whether the red throat penetrates or bleeds through a narrowing especially on the sides of the frame. On the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker the red is completely surrounded by a thick solid black frame, on Red-naped it isn't, it breaks through and penetrates to the white.

In addition a Red-naped Sapsucker should have some obvious red on the nape, sometimes it is a little bit fainter but no red at all is pretty unusual.

The bird on the photo has a red throat with a solid black frame. It has a brownish smudge on the nape, not a compelling red or rose colored spot. The back seems to show black running down the middle with spangling on either side. In general on the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker the spangling is quite large and covering almost the whole back, with very little if any black coming down the middle. The black area coming down the middle is a variable character, the least is on Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Red-naped Sapsucker has more black, and then the Red-bellied Sapsucker has the most amount of black. The Red-breasted we usually see have some spangling on the sides, a lot more dark, and as you get up into Oregon and Washington where its nominate race occurs, there is just a small number of light spots basically on a mostly black back. The black strip that seems to come down in the middle of the back on the photo is a matter of concern as being a character more suggestive of Red-naped than Yellow-bellied Sapsucker.

The whole business of the red throat and the black frame can be misinterpreted, Joe has photos on his website which illustrate this. It would be really nice if all the female Red-naped Sapsuckers had an obvious white chin and an obvious red throat. Unfortunately a number of Red-naped sapsucker females have a red throat with just a teeny, teeny white spot on the chin that may not even show up in the field and may appear to have a solid red throat. Those birds have an all thick black frame, thus mimicking the male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. There is a little white spot on

the chin of the bird in the photograph, which very well may be a photographic artifact though. Those birds that have the most red on the chin also have the most red on the nape. The red on the nape is a character that periodically also shows up in the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Joe appreciates why the bird has been identified as a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, but it still has an ambiguous pattern on the back.

This brings us to the h-word. In the area of contact, primarily in British Columbia, Yellow-bellied and Red-naped sapsuckers do hybridize. The hybridization is to a limited extent which is why they are recognized as separate species. That was not always the case. Yellow-bellied, Red-naped and Red-breasted sapsuckers all have for a long time been regarded as one species, the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Studies some years ago recommended a lumping.

In the contact zone of Red-breasted and Red-naped, in some parts of eastern CA even, there are definitely mixed pairs. Slightly different habitats.

The taxonomy has gone from three species to one species to two species to three species. (For a while they split off just the Red-breasted and then Yellow-bellied included Red-naped). These birds are pretty marginal in terms of species limits. The extent to which the birds hybridize is a little unclear. The contact area in British Columbia is fairly remote and difficult to study and the birds themselves are rather shy. Sapsuckers tend not to be in-your-face-woodpeckers, they tend to be very quiet, they tend not to do a lot of drumming, their vocalizations are kind of squealy, they tend to avoid being conspicuous in any particular way.

On the other hand it is Joe's view (which differs from some of his colleagues), that the h-word should be your last choice. Joe thinks the possibility that this bird might be a hybrid needs to be considered but he is not prepared to call it a hybrid. Based on this one photo Joe is not prepared to identify the bird with any confidence.

One of the reasons the head pattern in sapsuckers is so ambiguous is that the red does not penetrate deep into the feathers, it can wear off, for example as the birds go in and out of the tree cavities. A Red-breasted Sapsucker, if you give it a little trim, actually got a Red-naped Sapsucker underneath it, which makes some of the so called mixed pairs questionable, they may all just be Red-breasted Sapsuckers, some of them may just have their head feathers more worn off.

Hybrid **Tanagers** in Arizona: the Flame-colored Tanagers that are there can hybridize with Western Tanagers. A lot of these birds that are claimed to be hybrids are in fact first year Flame-colored Tanagers.

Owls in the genus *Strix*

A widespread genus that are often grouped together as “**wood owls**”. There are numerous species around the world. Of the three NA species the Great Gray Owl is quite distinct because it is larger and has yellow colored eyes. The Barred and the Spotted are closely related to each other, they form a superspecies, that means that they have ranges which supplant each other for the most part, however, that is becoming less and less true.

No ear tufts on any of these
Fairly flat facial disc

Barred Owl

OCCURRENCE

Fairly common wood owl in eastern deciduous forests, gets up into coniferous forests in Canada, has expanded into the Pacific Northwest in recent times. It also has expanded into CA in recent times.

Easiest places to see them in Texas and Florida, Joe has encountered them in that areas not infrequently early in the morning sitting on phone poles along the road.

During the middle of the day they retreat into the woodlots.

Much of their hunting seems to be done along the edges and clearings.

Seem to be pretty well adapted to changes in habitat, change brought about by civilization, so they are frequently found not too far from where people live as long as there is a decent area of woodlots or wooded areas for them to live.

RECENT RANGE EXPANSION

On the range map you see an oddly narrow connection up across the western Canadian provinces and then a big range expansion into the Pacific Northwest that has brought these birds down to CA. This range expansion is all new, it has happened within the last 25 - 30 years. It is not long ago that they were getting their first record of Barred Owl in Washington State. What appears to have happened is that these birds have moved into the area because of logging, particularly cutting down heavily forested areas and creating open areas within the forests. This is particularly pernicious in the logging industry in Canada and British Columbia. It has resulted in the Barred Owl moving into areas that used to have the Spotted Owl. The Spotted Owl is not at all adaptable to these kinds of changes. It is suffering, at least in part, because of habitat changes, but also because of the encroachment of Barred Owls which are starting to supplant Spotted Owls in a lot of the Pacific Northwest. There are now Barred Owls as far south in CA as Marin County. They are known and have been seen in Muir Woods, an area famous for the Spotted Owls. Also, in areas where the two come into contact they appear to hybridize. There are a number of cases of hybrids documented from CA and the Pacific Northwest. This is a new phenomenon because the Barred Owls are a recent arrival, it remains to be seen whether or not hybridization will become rampant or whether the young have a selective disadvantage and hybridization will drop out. It is too new a situation with the Barred Owl invading Spotted Owl to know what the ultimate outcome of this range expansion is going to be. One Barred Owl roosting near Tule Lake in the 1980s is probably still the only record from the Great Basin Region in CA, most of the Barred Owls appear to be in the coastal area.

FIELD MARKS

Dark eyes

Concentric circles around the eyes make the bird look quite a bit like a great Gray Owl.

Polymorphic with a reddish and a grayish morph. They do not show this in the books.

The ones in the southwest tend to be gray, the ones in the southeast like in Florida for example are more likely to be brownish.

Spotted on the back similar to the pattern of the Spotted Owl.

About the same size and shape as Spotted, pattern on the belly different.

Streaked underneath, no crossbars and no pale spots.

Kind of a collar of bars across the upper chest almost as if wearing a scarf wrapped around the neck and then underneath that are the dark brown stripes that extend fairly far down on the belly.

More yellow bill compared to Spotted.

Great Gray Owl

Frequently said to be the largest owl in the world, which it is if you measure the specimen from head to tail, but it is by no means the heaviest owl, which is the Eurasian Eagle Owl (Snowy Owl in NA). The Great Gray Owl is extremely thickly feathered, the amount of actual owl inside those feathers is about half of what you think is there based on what you can see from the outline. Inside those feathers is in fact a very scrawny, rather light weight owl. Also the tail is relatively long.

OCCURRENCE

Permanent resident in Canada and Alaska.

Also found throughout Eurasia.

Reaches the southern limit of its breeding range in the Sierra Nevada, where it is very rare and very localized. It occurs in Yosemite Sierra and it also occurs in the southern Sierra as far south as Shaver Lake. There are spotted records of breeding in the Yuba Pass region, another enclave when you get into Oregon, in the Klamath Basin, particularly around the old Klamath dump. In the old times when the dump was still active Great Gray Owls came there from the nearby forests and foraged on the rat. But the dump has since turned into a sanitary landfill and nobody has seen Great Gray Owls very often. Crane Flat Meadows in Yosemite one of the most famous places to see Great gray Owl in CA. They probably still occur in tiny numbers there. There was a time at the Chevron Meadow when a young bird was out there all day every day. They are so scarce though and so prized, many who know where they are keep it secret. At Bridal Veil campground in Yosemite there is a meadow across the way from there that has had Great Gray Owl nesting. Strongly eruptive species, in invasion years they can get all the way into New England. When there is an invasion the place to go is usually Minnesota. You can see dozens there just driving around, they are sitting on posts on the side of the road. Those owls are there because they are food stressed. They don't have high survival rates. They are also particularly subject to being killed on the road ways. Another place that has owls in invasion years and even in non invasion years is Amherst Island in Lake Ontario. All kind of owls come there during the winter, it is a very famous area for looking at owls during the daytime.

Inhabits mature coniferous forests with wet meadows that open the forests up, they forage at the edges of those meadows, boreal or mountain meadows.

Will also hunt during the daytime. Most of the time they hunt at night but they will come out at dusk and sit on the smaller trees that are on the edges of these wet meadows. They are basically listening for rodents.

Have one of the best hearing of any owl. Famous for being able to hear rodents under the snow. Dive basically head first into the snow bank and plough through the snow and grab the rodent with their feet.

FIELD MARKS

Yellow eyes, unusual in its genus.

Eyes look small in all the fluffy plumage.

Very big, very flat face.

White "bow-tie" under the face.

Concentric circles on the facial disc, somewhat similar to Barred Owl.

Spotted Owl

SUBSPECIES AND OCCURRENCE

Two subspecies in CA.

The Northern Spotted Owl is found from in the coastal mountains of British Columbia down into Marin County.

The southern one, California Spotted Owl, ranges from Monterey County down into the Tehachapis and also occurs along the western Sierra Nevada.

A third subspecies, Mexican Spotted Owl, occurs in Arizona and New Mexico and southward into Mexico. It is paler than the other two.

In CA very scarce in the Sierra Nevada. More common along the immediate coast south to Marin County. Marin County has about the densest population of Spotted Owls in the state. They are found in places like Muir Woods, Samuel P Taylor State Park, Tomales Bay State Park. All of those places have multiple Spotted Owl territories.

In hot weather when it's clear Spotted Owls roost lower down in the trees than in cold weather. In cold weather they tend to be up high. They don't like the heat so on hot days they tend to stay cool by sitting lower in the trees. They also stay cool by spreading their toes.

SPOTTED OWL AND OLD GROWTH FOREST

At least the northern subspecies is claimed to need old growth forest to survive.

After it got declared an endangered species the Fish and Wildlife Service tried to prevent logging in lots of areas of old growth forest and that cost jobs, particularly jobs in the timber industry that depended on being able to cut forests of various types. Old growth is from the economic standpoint the first forest that you should cut because the amount of timber feet added onto each tree per year is miniscule. Once you get the trees into full size they're not going to add any more board feet if you let them grow for another year. So the idea is take out the old growth and plant new growth which grows a lot faster. You end up with an increase of board feet by allowing the new growth to continue to expand. From an economic standpoint it is much more efficient to get rid of your old growth and replace it with second growth. The forest industry thinks about trees in terms of board feet. When the Spotted Owl and a few other species like the Marbled Murrelet and the Red Treemouse came along that were indicators of old growth and got on the endangered species list, most of Americas old growth forest had been logged, only a little bit was left and that was the areas where the Spotted Owls occurred. The timber industry had to hire a lot of biologists to censor the Spotted Owls on their properties so they would not damage their territories. A lot of money was spent by the timber industry on Spotted Owl research. Almost all we know about Spotted Owls comes from research funded by the timber industry. Here is the dirty little secret: Spotted Owls do not require old growth. Spotted Owls do well in second growth. The type of second growth Spotted Owls do well in is not your typical second growth where you clearcut your forest and have all of the trees the same age, a timber farm basically. What Spotted Owls need is trees of differing sizes mixed together with a multilayer canopy, that is some smaller trees, some bigger trees and some very big trees.

The southern subspecies has been known for a long time not to require old growth forest but simply a multilayered forest of any age.

FIELD MARKS

Belly pattern bold white broad horizontal spots, very different from Barred Owl.

Ruff across the chest similar to Barred Owl, the belly pattern underneath is the difference.

Duller olive or greenish colored bill.

Somewhat polymorphic, some birds being more reddish and some a little bit browner.

Head looks kind of small with very large forward facing dark eyes.

The California Spotted Owls have bigger spots on the scapulars, more white in the wing and somewhat larger spotting below than the Northern Spotted Owls. They also are smaller than the northern. The Mexican Spotted Owl is smaller yet and paler.

VOCALIZATIONS

There is a number of different kinds of calls that they give, the most excited one is a series of rising hoots

A rising whistle is given by the female while the male is also hooting away.

Snowy Owl

OCCURRENCE

A circumpolar species that occurs primarily in arctic tundra and is dependent on arctic hares and arctic lemmings.

During the summer months they are definitely out during the day because north of the arctic circle it is always day during the summer.

Are forced out after the lemmings or arctic hare population crashes and they come down to places like Humboldt Bay where they may be seen on sand dunes or open areas that mimic arctic tundra. They are on more or less a four year cycle in the New England area, there is a four year cycle in arctic lemmings in the east. In the west the cycles are much more complex. Most years we do not get Snowy Owls coming down as far as CA or even Florida and Texas. In 1974 there was the biggest invasion of Snowy Owls that has ever been recorded in CA. The same year there was also a major invasion of Rough-legged Hawks. There were Snowy Owls in San Francisco. They came south as far as Monterey County. The first was found at the CBC at Pt Reyes. Almost all the snowy Owls were along the immediate coast. Both two and three years ago a Snowy Owl showed up, on Grizzly Island respectively in Solano County. Both were immatures, thus two different birds. Most of the birds that are seen south of Canada are immatures.

FIELD MARKS

Large. The heaviest owl, almost twice as heavy as a Great Gray Owl. Female considerably larger than male.

White with variable amounts of dark markings. In general the females have more markings than the males and the immatures are more heavily marked than the adults.

Light-colored eyes.

Usually quite conspicuous (where there is no snow).

Not likely to be confused, however male light morph Barn Owls can look all white from underneath, sometimes they are mistaken for Snowy Owls.

Baby Owls of other species with grayish-white down feathers look light.

Sometimes people try turn White-tailed Kites into Snowy Owls.