

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009.

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

---

**Spotted Sandpiper** has extremely stiff wing beats that never reach above the horizontal. When the wings are out they are bowed downward and its almost like they are touching the water with their wing tips.

A very widespread sandpiper that breeds fairly widely in the US, especially around lake edges and river courses, more of an inland bird as a breeder. Is fairly common in the wintertime, but not in flocks, it is usually found individually. During the nonbreeding season they also may show up along the immediate coast or in bays and estuaries, they also may be on rocky shores. It teeters, moving its rear end up and down rhythmically with the head staying in the same spot, as it forages along the edges of the creeks, a behavior that it shares with other creek dwelling birds, like the waterthrushes. The Wandering Tattler also sometimes does something like it, although not as fixed and routinely as the Spotted Sandpiper. Dippers do something different, they bounce their whole bodies up and down, they do push ups rather than teetering.

Breed in CA mostly around the edges of mountain lakes at medium to low elevations. Has bred in the Bay Area, at the mouth of Pescadero Creek.

Most similar is the Solitary Sandpiper which also occurs in similar habitats in migration and in the winter, but breeds further north. Solitary Sandpiper has more patterned upperparts with little pale spots or triangles through the upperparts and not the long supercilium, a different shape with longer legs and a longer neck. Solitary Sandpiper tends to bob rather than teeter with the front end moving up and down. It does occur on inland streams and around lakes, so the two species shares that kind of habitat in an area which essentially does not have large numbers of shorebirds.

There is an almost identical species that replaces the Spotted Sandpiper in Eurasia, the Common Sandpiper. Extremely difficult to tell apart in winter plumage except by vocalizations and minor structural differences. The Spotted Sandpiper has a longer tail that projects farther beyond the folded wings. The Common Sandpiper has greener, less yellowish colored legs and generally shows a dark bill. The Spotted Sandpiper becomes boldly spotted on the underparts in the breeding season, while the Common Sandpiper looks pretty much the same year round, without spots.

The Common Sandpiper occurs as a vagrant in Alaska.

April is the peak of migration for the **Cinnamon Teal** in the Bay Area. It is a very uncommon breeder in the Bay Area. It does breed here, mostly in freshwater marshes, of which there aren't a whole lot. They are a conspicuous migrant in the springtime. They also are a common migrant in the fall, in August, September and even into October. They molt on the breeding grounds and migrate in eclipse plumage, the males look female-like. You hardly ever notice them because they are so inconspicuous. Female Cinnamon and female Blue-winged are very difficult to tell apart. They also resemble the female Green-winged Teal. Essentially in the fall none of these birds are in a male-type plumage, so they tend to get overlooked. The same is true for the Blue-winged Teal. Its status in August and September as a migrant in CA is very hard to tease apart. The status and distribution of especially Cinnamon and Blue-winged Teals in fall migration is really unclear. The problem is that there are no hard field marks. One thing you might want to look for if you get close enough is the red eye of the adult male Cinnamon Teal.

In the last weeks large numbers of **Yellow-headed Blackbirds** have been reported in the Yolo Wildlife Refuge, quite a bit larger numbers than in recent years. A lot of these blackbirds are diurnal migrants and not very reliable as to where they are going to be and where they are not

going to be, they wander to some extent. Colonies seem to appear all of a sudden and then get abandoned in subsequent years without any clarity as to why that is going on.

It is a common bird of the intermountain west, mostly in the Great Basin Regions. It breeds in freshwater marsh habitat. It also breeds to some extent in the Central Valley of CA. It has declined as a breeder for some of the same reasons that things like White-faced Ibis have declined, and that is that much of the wetland habitats in the Central Valley get drained during the summer months for mosquito abatement and wildlife management purposes, and that kind of habitat is not suitable for Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Yellow-headed Blackbirds are always very scarce along the immediate coast. One was seen on a class field trip last fall at Rodeo Lagoon. Joe has seen it maybe twice at Pt Reyes where it is extremely scarce. In the fall the birds are brown in color and have limited amounts of yellow on the head, mostly on the throat and a little bit on the face, so it is hard to pick them out in big flocks of blackbirds. Joe has seen large flocks near the Oregon border, they certainly breed up in Malheur in pretty large numbers. They tend to winter more in southern CA than they do in the Bay Area.

---

### **OWLING**

People claim that using a flash when photographing owls will cause blindness in the owl because their eyes are wide open and they are not used to that kind of thing. Joe looked into it a little bit. Yes, it does cause temporary blindness or visual problems and so probably should not be done. A flashlight is a little bit different than a flash, a flash is way brighter and has more of an impact.

When owling, one of the things to try to locate where an owl is, is go out with two or more people and spread out along the trail and when you hear a bird calling you may be able to triangulate on its location by several people pointing their flashlights in the direction they think the sound is coming from, ideally the lights will cross at or close to the owl.

Another thing that is frequently done is looking for eye shine, if the bird looks back at you, you will see the reflection in its eyes. All animals have eye shine, some kind of a reflection. Owls have large eyes and tend to produce a red eye shine back at the observer. In order to get the eye shine the spotlight needs to be next to your eyes. Usually the owl turns its head in different directions so that the eye shine is flashing at you when it turns a little bit into the light and then turns away.

A famous beam used for spotlighting at night is called a Q beam. Very powerful, plugs into the cigarette lighter of your car.

All of these owls, once they have owlets, baby branchlings, out of the nest, they will still be feeding them and they become active during the daytime because the babies require a lot of protein as they are growing

### **Screech-Owls**

All three Screech-Owls are cryptically patterned. They tend to look very much alike. The Eastern and Western are almost indistinguishable in plumage and structure. The Whiskered is a little smaller and has proportionately smaller feet. All three are almost strictly nocturnal and are not normally active during the daytime. They nest and roost in tree cavities. They may be seen sitting in the entrance of their cavity during the daytime or sometimes just perched on a branch sleeping during the day. They will often stay in the same spot for the whole day. Otherwise seeing these birds generally involves going out in the middle of the night and listening for their vocalizations.

These owls were formerly listed in the genus *Otus* and are so in older field guides (e.g. Sibley). *Otus* is a widespread genus of small owls, usually with ear tufts, throughout the world. In the Old World they generally are called Scops Owls. Some biochemical data supported the idea that the New World *Otus* owls were so different genetically and in other ways from the Old World Scops Owls that they needed to be placed in a separate genus, called *Megascops*.

Eastern and Western Screech-Owls were considered to be the same species for a long time until an ornithologist by the name of Marshall did a very, very thorough study on Screech-Owl taxonomy, all the different subspecies and variations.

The Eastern and Western Screech-Owls are claimed to overlap. In fact they do not, there is essentially no overlap. There are specimens of both species that have been collected in the Big Bend Area in Texas and there are a couple of specimens collected that are believed to have been hybrids between Eastern and Western. As far as Big Bend is concerned, the Screech-Owls that are there are very scarce, or actually the Western Screech-Owl is very scarce and the Eastern Screech-Owl apparently does not occur there any more. Whether there was some kind of ecological difference between the two is unclear because both species were so rare in that area.

In most areas where Screech-Owls occur they are relatively common but seldom seen. They are so cryptically colored they look like pieces of bark, and they are rather small. Even when sitting out in the open they are likely to be overlooked. If you know where a day roost is, a tree cavity, they may or may not sit at the entrance of the tree cavity. Particularly on hot days they may come out and try to cool off a little bit, other times they can be deep down in the cavity.

In a few places they have put up nesting boxes for Wood Ducks, which also nest in tree cavities, particularly over water, and as a project to try to improve the productivity of Wood Ducks nesting boxes are frequently nailed up to trees or put up on posts in appropriate habitat. Screech-Owls readily accept Wood Duck nesting boxes. They also readily accept nesting boxes that are intended for Screech-Owls, they have somewhat similar measurements.

#### **FIELD MARKS IN GENERAL**

Practical matter is that you will be identifying Screech-Owls by range.

All of these have yellow eyes, but notice the pupil may be very large, so it may look more like a yellow eye ring.

They do have ear tufts, but when the birds are relaxed the ear tufts are often down and it is not unusual at all to see these birds with just little knobs or they appear to have no ear tufts at all and they appear to be round headed.

Visual field marks to distinguish them have to do with bill color and the pattern on the underparts. All three have a yellow tip to the bill. All have a mixture of streaks and bars on the underparts. Both Eastern and Western will show rather outsized large feet. This does eliminate Whiskered Screech-Owl.

#### **VOCALIZATIONS**

There is a significant difference in the vocalizations of the different species.

They give a wide variety of whistled calls, mostly with a sort of a tremulous, none of them typically gives a call that sounds like a screech, they are quite misnamed. Owls that screech are for example the Great Horned Owl and the Barn Owl.

Popular to learn to imitate because Screech-Owl vocalizations not only bring in Screech-Owls but they bring in every other kind of bird that wants to know where the Screech-Owls are, small birds tend to mob owls, especially small owls.

## **Eastern Screech-Owl**

### **FIELD MARKS**

Bill with greenish base and yellow tip, the bill looks a bit paler than on Western. More sparsely barred on underparts than Western, appears more streaked and less barred than most Western (many birds ambiguous though in both species, no really big difference). Also, if the birds are fluffed up the pattern varies quite a bit, especially if down feathers from underneath are exposed.

### **MORPHS**

There is a gray morph and a rufous morph. The rufous or bright reddish plumage does not occur in any other Screech-Owl. Unfortunately that plumage is most common in Florida, the Gulf States, Georgia, also up into the Midwest, areas where no Western Screech-Owl has ever gotten within a thousand miles of, and so even though it is a wonderful field mark it doesn't do you a whole lot of good because you already know that the bird is an Eastern Screech-Owl by its range. The gray morph predominates elsewhere, particularly in the western part of the range of the Eastern Screech-Owl. In the areas where they come into contact with Western Screech-Owls the Eastern are almost all gray morph birds, the red morph being extremely rare in those areas. There is not only the color morphs, which are essentially individual variation, but there's also racial variation throughout the ranges of both species.

### **VOCALIZATIONS**

Eastern Screech-Owl gives a tremulous whinny that sort of goes downhill.

## **Western Screech-Owl**

### **OCCURRENCE**

Found in a variety of habitats.  
Particularly seen in areas where there are oaks.  
A little more common inland than along the immediate coast.

### **FIELD MARKS**

Almost all are gray. There is a subspecies that is found in the Pacific Northwest and those birds are browner, but none of them are rufous or bright reddish.  
Bill base blackish or dark gray, tip yellow. Bill looks darker than on Eastern.  
Bars on underparts finer and more dense than Eastern.

### **VOCALIZATIONS**

There is a bouncing ball call that is given by the Western Screech-Owl and not by Eastern.

## **Whiskered Screech-Owl**

### **OCCURRENCE**

Mexican species.

Overlaps the Western Screech-Owl in Mexico.

Occurs very locally in NA, only ranges into the mountains of southeastern Arizona where it occurs primarily in oak and pine-oak woodlands. It overlaps the Western in those areas but the Whiskered is at higher elevations, mostly at 5000 feet, while Western Screech-Owls generally occupy slightly lower elevations.

### **FIELD MARKS**

Smaller bird than Eastern and Western.

Feet relatively small.

Dense barring on underparts.

Bill color yellow green, more like the Eastern.

All are gray morph. There are brown or reddish morph birds, but they occur in Mexico, only the gray morph occurs in Arizona.

### **VOCALIZATIONS**

Vocalizations definitely different from Western.

Series of whistles on one pitch and fairly even tempo and a series of fairly irregular hoots like Morse code.