

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

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

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Steve found a **Brown Thrasher** at the south end of the Salton Sea area at Wiest Lake County Park two weeks ago. Wiest Lake is just south of Ramer and Finney Lakes, the one that nobody ever goes to. Steve went there because he missed the turn off to the wildlife area.

The Brown Thrasher is an eastern migratory bird with much of the population retrenching into the southeast. One of these birds that sometimes exhibit some kind of navigational error that takes them to CA.

Two other Brown Thrashers have been found in CA this season, one at a CBC on private property in San Mateo County and one at Coyote Hills a while ago.

They can be either cooperative, such as coming to somebody's bird feeder, or they can be extraordinarily secretive.

**Northern Mockingbirds** tend to be territorial. Family groups can occur. They migrate to some extent, in migration there can be groups, there have been reports in the Central Valley where people have seen hundreds.

Mockingbirds sing year round, except for the month of August in which they tend to be quiet.

Joe spent a week in Louisiana. A terrible place in terms of directions to birding places.

The eastern race of the **Willet** breeds in coastal Louisiana. It is quite a different looking bird and it has a different vocalization from the ones that breed in the Great Basin and prairies and winter on our coasts. They are nesting in Louisiana now and the males are displaying from telephone wires, doing wing up displays and calling all over the place.

The **Bronzed Cowbird** has apparently invaded Louisiana quite seriously. The range map in the newest Nat Geo shows an isolated spot in eastern Louisiana, the older Sibley does not have that. They are believed to have some impact on the population of Cardinals in the area. They also tend to specialize on orioles, the Orchard Oriole has suffered in Louisiana. The females of the subspecies in the east are very dark and quite male-like, so it is very easy to separate them from the female Brown-headed Cowbirds which are also abundant in the area. In other areas it is hard to tell female cowbirds apart.

Also the spectacular and graceful **Swallow-tailed Kite** has been expanding its range a little bit. It ranges through the southeast and into Louisiana. The bird now breeds as far west as Texas. The picture in the Nat Geo with Spanish Moss hanging down is telling, when Joe was watching them they were gathering Spanish Moss to take to their nest site.

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## **Flammulated Owl**

One of the least known, least seen of all of CA's breeding birds.

It is still in the genus *Otus*, the genus of Old World Scops Owls, from which the Screech-Owls were removed.

### **OCCURRENCE**

Migratory, summer visitor only in NA.

Habitat preferences pretty specific, they are found in the Ponderosa Pine belt where there are mixed oaks and pines. Are found at middle elevations in the Sierra Nevada. Locally along the immediate coast it is possible to find them. There is a known population in Monterey County at China Camp, about 5,000 feet high.

Winter range essentially unknown. Not long ago it was believed to hibernate because no migrating birds had been found and there was no evidence of them during the winter. There is now plenty of evidence that they are migratory and occasionally Flammulated Owls are seen roosting during the day in the lowlands well away from their normal breeding range. One was found on an oil rig off the Louisiana coast, suggesting a pretty long range migration, possibly to South America. At least one sighting at Lake Berryessa. Has also been seen in some of the desert locations in southeastern CA during the migration period in areas where it most likely does not breed.

To find a Flammulated Owl is one of the greatest challenges in CA birding. It is probably the resident species that has been seen the least by most CA birdwatchers. There are probably more people that have seen Great Gray Owl in CA than Flammulated Owl although it is not even rare in a lot of places and their range is quite extensive, but it is very secretive. Seeing one generally involves a project, getting out starting around 11 pm or midnight and working until 3 or 4 in the morning, driving dirt roads through the national forest, generally with directions that somebody gave you. One famous site is Henness Ridge just outside of Yosemite Valley.

In most cases when you try to have a conversation with an owl you walk towards it and hoot at it and it comes towards you and pretty soon you are close to it. That does not work with Flammulated Owls. If you approach the calling bird that will cause it to withdraw. It may work better to back away from the bird, it will follow you.

Appear to be somewhat colonial, frequently areas that have them have several territories while other areas that seem to be just as good habitat don't have any.

Usually sit close to a tree trunk.

Strictly nocturnal.

Feed on insects, primarily on moths.

### **FIELD MARKS**

Smaller than most Screech-Owls.

Dark eyes make it readily distinguishable from Screech-Owls.

Little ear tufts.

Face brown with some reddish color. Flammulated means flame colored.

No feathering on the toes unlike Screech-Owls.

### **VOCALIZATIONS**

Call not at all like any Screech-Owl, not a whistle. Low-pitched hoots, sometimes double, sometimes single.

### **Pygmy-Owls**

Two species of Pygmy-Owl in NA.

About the same size and shape.

Ranges barely overlap.

Often active during the daytime.

Feed largely on small birds, have been reported to kill birds as large as a Mourning Dove which is larger and heavier than the owl itself.

### **COMMON FIELD MARKS**

Tiny.

Streaked underneath, the streaks are rather crisp. (Blurrier on Northern Saw-whet and Boreal.)

Rather long, square tail.

Eye spots on the back of the head.

Flight unmuffled unlike other owls, they use their eyes more than their ears for finding prey.

Flight style also different from other owls. Very rapid wing beats reminding of a Loggerhead Shrike. Flap, flap, flap, dipping, sort of down and then up. Very direct flight.

### **Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl**

#### **OCCURRENCE**

Ranges widely in the tropics where it is frequently seen in the middle of the day and where imitations of its call will frequently bring in a flock of small songbirds.

In NA two populations: one in extreme southern Texas and one in the desert regions of Arizona, that is one in east Mexico and one in west Mexico barely penetrate into NA.

#### **ARIZONA POPULATION**

The ones in Arizona are found in essentially low desert. There is a substantial population in the outskirts of Tucson, a matter of considerable political and environmental controversy because Tucson at least at one time was expanding rapidly into suburban sprawl with lots of projects planned into areas that were known to have Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls. There were people that had jobs surveying Pygmy-Owls in the area. At the same time it was a highly sought after bird by birdwatchers who visited southeastern Arizona during any season. Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl will often be one of the birds you are looking for on a trip to Arizona and you will find that nobody will tell you where they are. The people that are out there talking to the public don't even want to know where the owls are so they don't get into a position of knowing something that they can't share. The species is considered very sensitive, vulnerable and threatened, not just by birdwatchers but by potential development.

Frequently nest in woodpecker holes in cactuses.

The habitat they are in does not seem that limited a habitat. They are similar to Burrowing Owls in the sense that the places that they like are always places that are slated for a development.

### **TEXAS POPULATION**

In Texas sometimes seen near Falcon Dam. The biggest populations are on the King Ranch, which is private property and one of the other ranches there. These are very large ranches, King Ranch includes about three counties in southeastern Texas. The birds are found in small copses of trees in fairly arid habitat. Some of the bird tour companies make arrangements with the ranches to take groups in. They pay a fee and then they go with a naturalist who is hired by the ranch and knows where the owls are. Recently the Canelo Ranch had a pair and let people in and see them for a fee, but they are not there any more. Joe and Robbie were lucky to see one at Bentson Rio Grande State Park. They are getting more and more sightings there.

### **FIELD MARKS**

Little white streaks on the top of the head. (Northern has spots.)

Tail reddish brown with dark bars. (Northern has a brown tail with white bars.)

Tend to have less dark on the chest than Northern, but that is a variable trait.

### **VOCALIZATIONS**

Song very monotonous whistles, goes on all day long

## **Elf Owl**

### **OCCURRENCE**

Confined to the desert southwest.

Migratory, no winter records in NA.

Formerly occurred in CA in the Colorado River valley in cottonwood groves along the river.

Cottonwood trees drink enormous amounts of water. Because of ill advised conservation attempts to conserve water it has been best practice to cut down every Cottonwood tree that you can find.

In general the area along the Colorado River on the CA side has been trashed with trailer parks and parking lots, the habitat has pretty much been ruined.

It also occurred as far west as a place called Corn Springs, a palm oasis in the Chuckwalla Mountains of the Colorado Desert over 40 miles west of the Colorado River, there is a BLM campsite there. Over the last 50 years the Elf Owl has retrenched from its former outposts in southeastern CA. It disappeared from Corn Springs after somebody tried to band the owls and apparently left the trap up all night long. Somebody else found the owl in the net at dawn and cut it out and released it. It was considerably stressed. Elf Owl has not been seen in Corn Springs since.

Most people go to Arizona to see Elf Owl, it is relatively easy to find in southeastern Arizona. Particularly at places like Madera Canyon, where there is a lodge and there are telephone poles along the road and people know which telephone pole has the hole in it that the Elf Owls are roosting or nesting in. Each evening the birders gather by the telephone pole and watch the owl come to the entrance of the hole and then fly out as it gets dark.

### **FIELD MARKS**

The smallest owl in NA.

Very softly mottled on the underparts.

Head relatively small for an owl.

Pale eyes.

Tail very short.

Legs rather long.  
Unfeathered toes.

#### **VOCALIZATIONS**

A variety of squeaky chirping notes that sound a whole lot like the dawn song of the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. There is a number of other things that can be mistaken for the vocalizations of the Elf Owl.

### **Northern Pygmy-Owl**

See also notes under "Pygmy-Owls" further up.

#### **OCCURRENCE**

Replaces the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl in the western US.

In Mexico they occur at higher elevations than Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl which is more of a lowland species.

The distribution in CA is a matter of some contention.

In the Bay Area they can be found regularly on Gazos Creek Road about a half mile west of Cloverdale Road in the southern part of San Mateo county. Also occur at Butano State Park not far from there. North of SF in places like along the Russian River, Lake Hennessey in Napa Valley, Putah Creek below Lake Berryessa in Yolo County. Wherever you go you have to be lucky to see them during the day.

Joe has also encountered them at Sunol Regional Park, Calaveras Reservoir, Yuba Pass, in the Great Basin, camping out at Tassajara Road, which is the one that goes up to China Ranch where the Flammulated Owls are.

Status in the East Bay: They have been reported consistently from some of the reservoirs there like Upper San Leandro Reservoir, from people that get there early in the morning and hear a series of whistled notes. None of these reports have ever been confirmed visually. These owls reported on the CBCs are Saw-Whet Owls which have a variety of different whistles and do occur in that area.

No confirmed records from the coastal mountains in southern CA either (Riverside, Orange and San Diego counties).

Most of the bogus sightings are by people that are well known in birding circles and generally considered to be confident. Includes reports on Big Days, competitive events often done as part of a birdathon for a good course.

The distribution of Pygmy-Owls is really unclear, why they are in some places and not in others. No SF records.

#### **FIELD MARKS**

Small white spots on the crown, not streaks.

White bands on the brown tail rather than dark bands.

Streaks on the underparts that coalesce into a dark area across the top of the chest. (This dark area tends to be broader on Northern than on Ferruginous.)

Small head, little eye brows.

Yellow eyes.

Often some rusty across the breast.

Vary a lot, from being dull gray, particularly in the mountain forms, to quite reddish in the coastal regions.

### **VOCALIZATIONS**

Song varies a bit. A series of toots. Usually four notes, somewhat spaced out, followed by a long pause.

Northern Pygmy-Owls and Northern Saw-whet Owls sound a lot alike, try to see the bird! I found on the internet that Bill Bousman says that the Merriam's Chipmunk has a call he can't distinguish from Pygmy-Owl.

Young out of the nest give a call that sounds very much like a cricket.

Birds in the Rocky Mountain region apparently give call notes in pairs. Some people have suggested that the Mountain Pygmy-Owl deserves recognition as a separate species.