

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture April 30th, 2009.
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

Female **Red-winged Blackbirds** are pretty distinctive birds. They are heavily streaked on both upper- and underparts, they often have a little reddish on the head, they have a long, pointed bill. Redwinged Blackbirds are somewhat colonial in their breeding strategy, they are polygynous with males often having multiple females in their territories.

Juvenile birds, which probably shouldn't be out of the nest yet, are sometimes fledged with very short, stubby tails.

The **Northern Mockingbird** is fairly scarce in the city. It tends to occur in areas that are less effected by coastal fog. Males and females are identical in their appearance. Female Northern Mockingbirds do sing in the wintertime, it is a softer song. They have separate territories. Females probably don't sing a lot during the breeding season. The male does a lot of singing to impress the female. If you look at Northern Mockingbird male territories, they are usually defended by the bird moving around, this is like most birds, they are singing outwards from the territory so that they are competing with the males. But frequently the Northern Mockingbird is actually facing towards the nest and towards the female.

There are a lot of **Merlins** migrating through the Bay Area right now. On last weekend's class field trip to GG Park there was probably a Merlin, the bird was not seen well enough to be absolutely sure.

Joe read a very interesting paper on the reliability of anecdotal data in science. They assessed three different cases: the fisher in the west, the wolverine in CA and the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. http://www.fs.fed.us/rm/pubs_other/rmrs_2008_mckelvey_k001.pdf

Joe got quite a bit of lowdown on Ivory-billed Woodpecker when he was in Louisiana from people who where involved in the whole thing. The Pearl River sighting, a report by Kulivan in 1999 which had seemed promising, is no good either. They were seen on April 1st. He did not tell anybody until some time later. As soon as the information got out a whole team of people went looking at the spot. The habitat is not supportive. He saw presumably Pileated Woodpeckers.

A goose has a narrow, triangular or wedge shaped bill that more or less comes to a point. Ducks differ from geese in that their bill is flatter and more broad at the tip. Swans have the bill connecting to the eye.

Whistling-Ducks

Two species in NA. Neither one of these is likely to be seen in CA.

Some studies suggest that Whistling-Ducks are ancestral to other waterfowl, sort of intermediate between geese and ducks.

Used to be called Tree-Ducks. Fulvous Whistling-Ducks do not actually use trees. They just live in the water and in marshes, they can be quite common locally in rice fields.

Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks do perch up into the trees and woodlands along water courses, so this is a real tree duck.

Both species are nocturnal, much more active at night than during the daytime. Flying over at night you can hear them whistling, they usually do their calling in flight. Tend to be pretty silent when you see them sitting in the water.

Fulvous Whistling-Duck

Fulvous is a color, a dull brownish yellow or tawny.

OCCURRENCE

Distributed pretty much throughout the world, occurs in the Americas, Africa and Asia. None of the isolated populations throughout the world have evolved any named subspecies.

Best place to see them is in the Gulf States, Texas and Louisiana. It is essentially a gulf coast and Mexican species.

Historically occurred as a reasonably common breeding bird north all the way through the Central Valley of CA. It was occasionally seen in the Bay Area then. It is now virtually extirpated from the state. It retreated into the Imperial Valley where it used to be a regular breeding bird at some of the freshwater lakes and ponds such as the Wister Unit at the Salton Sea and Finney and Ramer Lakes just southwest of the Salton Sea. The numbers have continued to decline.

It is unclear exactly what caused this decline. Flood control and water canalization might be reasons. Also the draining of freshwater wetlands during the summer months for mosquito abatement. All of this can have an impact on breeding water birds, especially sensitive species.

While it has been declining and disappearing in CA it has appeared rather mysteriously in parts of peninsular Florida. It is unclear whether they arrived as wild birds or somehow or other escaped from captivity. When birds like Fulvous Whistling-Ducks show up outside their normal range it is almost impossible to tell whether or not they came as naturally occurring vagrants or if they came out of somebody's game farm. They are kept in captivity, aviculturalists that keep exotic waterfowl find them relatively easy to keep.

FIELD MARKS

Fairly large duck.

Long legs.

Warm tawny coloration over the whole body.

Rather long-necked. Can be confused with female Northern Pintails which have long graceful necks and a warm brown coloration.

Dark bill, looks a little bit bluish.

Dark line along the back of the neck.

Adults black on the back with tawny brown feather edges that form a scaling.

Pattern of white on the flanks.

In flight they look quite different from a pintail, they look rather goose like with all dark wings and a white band on the tail. Long legs and feet project beyond the tail, No other ducks than Whistling-Ducks have that. Flight profile somewhat similar to a loon with a rather long, low-slung neck and feet that project beyond the tail.

Males and females largely identical, another feature that suggests geese.

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck

OCCURRENCE

Range somewhat similar to Fulvous Whistling-Duck. It appears to occur somewhat further inland. The population from the west coast of Mexico penetrates into Arizona in the summer months. Southern Texas is where you can really see them though, you can hardly go without seeing them. Its status in CA is as a vagrant to the Imperial Valley, particularly the Salton Sea area, where there are a handful of records. The Imperial Valley is about as far as we think that they may occur as wild birds.

There are records from much of CA, including coastal southern CA and as far north as Marysville in the Central Valley. There was one on the Hollister Golf Course in San Benito County. Most of these birds if not all of them are escaped captives. They are more common in captivity than the Fulvous Whistling-Duck.

Lakes and river courses with fallen over root balls which the ducks are using as lookout perches are the kind of places where you sometimes will see them.

FIELD MARKS

Cinnamon brown color with a black belly.

Big white patch on the top of the wing, underwing all black.

Red bill.

Gray face with white eye ring, contrasts with darker neck.

No white in the tail.

Pink legs.

JUVENILE

Bill gray

Pale gray head.

No conspicuous eye ring.

Pale brown unpatterned back.

Tail and uppertail coverts black.

Fulvous should have a bumpier looking head and perhaps a brighter plumage overall, less drab looking.

Wood Duck

OCCURRENCE

The Wood Duck has an interesting distribution in the US. It is found abundantly throughout pretty much of the east. The western population is almost isolated, they are cutting across the northern Rockies and then getting down into CA. Most of the Great Basin does not have Wood Ducks in it at all.

In the Bay Area Wood Ducks are considered to be permanent residents. They are here year round, however the numbers in the wintertime are augmented by migrants from the north.

Sometimes seen in city parks. In that kind of situation you wonder how wild they really are. With Wood Ducks you really don't know. If they come and pick at your kneecaps that's an indication that they are probably tame. The wild ones usually try to hide underneath dense cover and they can be quite tricky to see. They also roost up in trees quite a bit, especially during the daytime.

They usually don't rest on the ground particularly. They rest in fallen trees, sometimes over water.

In SF Wood Ducks used to occur in good numbers at Middle Lake in GG Park every winter. They like quiet shady pools, which Middle Lake used to be. A large hedge separated it from Chain of Lakes Drive. Park and Recreation removed that whole buffer. All the Wood Ducks moved to Mallard Lake for a while. Then they declined and disappeared from GG Park.

Like the Mandarin Duck, Wood Ducks nest in tree cavities. They are frequently the subject of management efforts to try to improve the numbers of Wood Ducks. Those management efforts consist of the very inexpensive placing of nest boxes in areas where Wood Ducks are known to nest and where trees are relatively scarce, especially snags that have holes that are large enough to support a nest of a Wood Duck. Nest holes are a limiting factor in the birds' nesting success. Wood Duck boxes are also very good for Screech Owls.

MANDARIN DUCK

There is one other duck in the same genus, the Mandarin Duck which replaces it in China. Both species are very attractive and particularly sought after by aviculturalists. In many places the Wood Duck and the Mandarin Duck have been introduced and in some places those introductions have been successful. Most notably the Mandarin Duck has been introduced successfully into Britain. In the US there are no successful Mandarin Duck introductions although they may breed in the wild for a few years, but they don't usually seem to last very long. The females of both species are very similar.

WOOD DUCK FIELD MARKS

In flight the wings appear to be dark, on the underside mostly gray. Rather rapid wing beats. Fly often fairly high and through the trees.

MALE

Breeding male unmistakable, which does not mean that they are always obvious and easy to identify. In flight or when the bird is far away it can be difficult to see any of those field marks, especially when the birds are perched high in the trees they look all dark.

Huge crest.

Red bill.

Red eye.

Long tail.

Neck relatively short.

Color on the sides and flanks a rather soft light tan, not bright yellow as in Sibley.

Young male similar to female, shows the white chin strap that comes up and points to the eye. Winter male also shows this.

FEMALE

Plain brown bird with a big white tear drop shaped eye ring which makes the eye stand out like a real pop eyed bird.

Shorter crest than the male.

Similar to female Mandarin Duck. Mandarin Duck has a narrow eye ring with a tail to it extending behind the eye.

VOCALIZATIONS

Squealing series of whistled notes given by female in flight. Male wing whistle similar to Mallard.

Muscovy Duck

OCCURRENCE

Tiny little population in the lower Rio Grande Valley, particularly in the area around Falcon Dam, a very recent establishment. Otherwise closest occurrence as resident in northeastern Mexico.

These are very shy secretive forest birds in Mexico, and for good reason, because they are big and fat and juicy and they have been shot for food for centuries. Natural selection has left only the most skittish, weary and secretive individuals. The truly wild Muscovy Ducks that seem to be established in the Rio Grande Valley are generally seen only at the crack of dawn or at dusk flying rapidly up or down the river, seldom giving particularly good views.

DOMESTIC BIRDS

You will see many more domestic style Muscovy Ducks than you will ever see wild Muscovy Ducks anywhere within or without their range.

They became established in Florida probably in the 1950s or 60s. Abundant in city parks throughout peninsular Florida. They are generally tame and they walk up to you and people feed them.

They also occur in CA. Occasionally in GG Park.

Interestingly the field guides show the Rock Pigeon as established throughout NA, the Muscovy Duck does not have a similar map. These are largely self sustaining populations, especially the ones in Florida. Nobody is adding them to any of these lists. You only can count the wild ones at the Rio Grande, having to pray that the bird is flying on the Texas side of the line. The argument being they are not wild birds. That is true, but are Rock Pigeons wild birds? They are entirely dependant on human handouts, and most of them do not look like the ancestral Rock Pigeon.

FIELD MARKS

WILD BIRDS

White patches in the upper and underwings are distinctive in the adult birds, the all black immature birds can be confused with cormorants.

DOMESTIC BIRDS

They have variable amounts of white on them. They frequently show wattles around the head that are bright red or black, depending on how much pigment there is on the head. Pure domestic Muscovy Ducks are bred to be white, just like table ducks.

They can look like almost anything, but with these big warts, usually bright red and ugly looking, on their face.

Chicks also variable. The dark ones will end up being mostly dark birds, the yellow ones being mostly white birds.