

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture February 11th, 2010.
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

In the Strybing Arboretum an apparent **hybrid Red-breasted Sapsucker x Red-naped Sapsucker** has been seen.

The taxonomy of the sapsuckers has varied dramatically over time.

It is agreed that the Williamson's Sapsucker is indeed a separate species.

Beyond that there does not seem to be much agreement what is going on. We currently recognize three additional species of sapsuckers, the Red-breasted, the Yellow-bellied and the Red-naped.

They have formerly been treated as one species, the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, with three subspecies groups. They have also been treated as two species, the Red-breasted Sapsucker separated from Yellow-bellied in which Red-naped was included as a subspecies.

One reason for the instability in the taxonomy is a lack of data in the contact zones about the extent to which these birds may hybridize or intergrade. In British Columbia there is a zone in which Red-naped Sapsuckers come into contact with Red-breasted Sapsuckers.

The same thing happens in CA, where the Red-naped Sapsucker is a bird mostly of the Basin Ranges, east of the Sierran crest, and the Red-breasted Sapsucker is a bird of the Pacific slope, west of the Sierran crest.

These birds are migratory. In Arizona and the deserts of southeastern CA the wintering birds are Red-naped Sapsuckers.

In the Warner Mountains in northeastern CA they occur together. The Red-naped Sapsucker appears to nest along watercourses in aspen groves and in birch trees while the Red-breasted Sapsucker nests higher up in conifers, the kind of habitat it tends to nest in throughout its range. The Red-breasted Sapsucker nests regularly in the coastal mountains of CA as far south as San Mateo County where it occurs in the Pescadero region. It is much more common as a winter visitor. But it is nowhere a common bird.

Sapsuckers tend to be shy. They don't make loud drumming sounds. They peck very quietly. They tend not to move or move away from the observer to the other side of the tree trunk.

Identification of these sapsuckers is tricky. The Red-breasted is the most distinctive. Its key field mark is that it has a red breast, the other two species have a black bib that extends underneath the chin and throat all the way across. This black bib is absent on the Red-breasted.

The Arboretum bird seems to have some black extending down onto the breast.

The Arboretum bird has more black around the eye than is typical for a Red-breasted. It also has a trace of a white postocular stripe.

The white moustache does not mean anything, they all have that.

Any number of these features can be exhibited by some Red-breasted Sapsuckers, especially in the middle of the summer when the birds are nesting. The red on the head of the Red-breasted Sapsucker is only on the tips of the feathers. The feathers on the head may become abraded as the bird goes in and out of its nest hole. If you gave the Red-breasted Sapsucker a complete haircut you would find something very close to the pattern of the Red-naped Sapsucker underneath.

In this case we assume the feathers to be reasonably fresh. Especially the dark frame around the eye does not seem likely to have been caused by feather wear. Nevertheless the bird has too much red on its head to be a Red-naped Sapsucker which has at best a slash of red across the face.

This slash of red on a Red-naped is not shown in the Nat.Geo. A number of years ago there was a bird in the Arboretum that looked like a Red-naped Sapsucker except that it had this red slash across the face. Joe showed photos to Ned Johnson at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology in Berkeley who identified it as a Red-naped. Johnson co-authored the papers that split the

sapsuckers. One of them has a hybrid index, it shows a series of heads from pure Red-naped to pure *dagetti*-Red-breasted as they look during the breeding season.

Joe tends to be very conservative about invoking hybridization to explain every odd bird. Without actually knowing what the parents are identifying a bird as a hybrid is a presumptive process. Joe prefers to say apparent or presumed hybrid to stress that it is an opinion, not a fact, that the bird is a hybrid. Joe advocates avoiding "the dreaded H-word". It is not that unusual to see a bird of whatever species that looks weird in some way or other. Most often they are not hybrids. If you see a strange bird like this sapsucker, the parsimonious choice would be that it is an abnormal, or variant, or aberrant individual of one species as a first guess. This would just be an aberrant Red-breasted Sapsucker which has reduced amounts of red on it. That would be one way to go, the conservative approach.

When it gets to claims of hybridization there needs to be more than one thing wrong with the bird. If there is a closely related species and if the species is known to hybridize and the putative hybrid is showing multiple features that are inconsistent with any one species but show characteristics intermediate between two different species, Joe is more willing to consider the possibility of hybridization.

Females are duller than males in the Red-breasted Sapsucker. In the other two, females and males are similar and differ primarily in the amount of red on the throat. But male and female Red-breasted *dagetti* are more variable in appearance.

This bird is quite problematic in that it has a black bib, which eliminates Red-breasted Sapsucker. It also has black around the eye and white behind it. These are pro-Red-naped features.

Red-breasted x Yellow-bellied is possible, these features are available on the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker also. There is a small contact zone in British Columbia. However, Yellow-bellied tends to have more spangling on the back, while Red-naped and Red-breasted tend to have two rows of pale areas and dark down the middle like this bird.

Based on data from Oregon and looking at this bird Joe is prepared to invoke the H-word in this particular case.

Scoters

All scoters are Arctic breeding species. All of them tend to winter on the ocean or in bays and estuaries. All of them are scarce inland.

Like eiders, they are distinguishable by the extent of feathering on their bill.

They specialize in feeding on shellfish. They crush the shell in their often oddly shaped bill. The indigestible shell is regurgitated in the form of a pellet.

The feet are located way to the back, they are awkward on land, get seldom out of the water.

Individuals of all three species of scoters summer in the Bay Area. Joe believes that most of those that summer here are first year birds. The same thing is happening with shorebirds and some other ducks.

Black Scoter

Old name: Common Scoter

OCCURRENCE

Tends to occur in colder water. The further north in CA, the more likely Black Scoters occur. In the Bay Area it is the next most common scoter after, far after, the Surf Scoter. Before the decline of the White-winged Scoter it was the rarest.

Somewhat local in the Bay Area. The best, most reliable place right now is Mussel Rock on the Daly City - Pacifica line. Access from Pacifica where you go to a transfer station (for dump). Right next to it there is a parking lot that is open to the public. There is a large rock with a broken down structure on it just offshore. Use your binoculars to look down on the water on the north side of those rocks. You are very likely to find up to a dozen or more Black Scoters there anytime in the winter, sometimes they persist into the summer.

An even larger number has been reported off Fort Funston on the CBC. They have occurred there in the past. Joe is not sure if they persisted there.

Sometimes Joe sees them from the Pacifica Pier, but not lately.

Another place that is fairly reliable is the Fish Docks at Pt Reyes.

A different subspecies in Eurasia. There may be a proposal eventually to split the Black Scoter. The male has less yellow on the bill.

The vocalizations, particularly of the males, are very different.

FIELD MARKS

The smallest scoter.

Shape similar to a surface feeding duck with a rounded head.

No feathering on the bill.

Feet black.

Wings all dark, but the flight feathers have a silvery cast to the undersides that cause the underwings to appear to be two-toned. Sibley fails to show this.

Basic (Bright) Plumage Male

All black.

Looks like it has a dab of melted butter on its small, triangular, black bill.

Immature Male

Resembles the female, but with some yellow on the bill.

Female

Gray-brown with a pale face and foreneck. The whole side of the face and of the neck are pale gray-brown, without any distinct white patches or spots.

Dark cap and nape. (Female Surf Scoters also have a dark cap. But they have distinct pale patches on the side of the face.)

Bill all black.

Most likely to be confused with a female or winter male Ruddy Duck. A female Ruddy Duck has the face gray-brown, but with a stripe running through the face. A male Ruddy Duck has a pure white face. The light face does not extend down onto the neck. The shape is very different. It has one of the largest heads and largest bills in relation to its body size of any duck. The Black Scoter is a relatively small billed, small headed bird. The tail of a scoter may stick up into the air as it often does on Ruddy Duck.

White-winged Scoter

In Europe the nominate subspecies *fusca* is considered a separate species, called the Velvet Scoter.

OCCURRENCE

Currently the rarest of the three scoters in the Bay Area.

Prior to about 1980 it was much more common in CA than it is today.

There was a small incursion of them last winter.

Joe remembers a winter maybe 15 years ago when there were lots and then the next winter there were none.

FIELD MARKS

The largest scoter.

The secondaries are all white. They are frequently visible even when the bird has its wings folded, but they may also be hidden.

In flight they form a white rectangle on the trailing edge of the wing. (Gadwall show a smaller white square, only part of the secondaries are white. Pigeon Guillemot has white wing coverts, forming an oval shaped patch only on the upper side of the wing.)

When White-winged Scoters dive they use their wings to swim, similar to alcids. They spread their wings before they submerge, showing the white wing patch. Joe showed a painting of a bird diving with its alula pointed straight forward and the wing otherwise partly closed.

Feathering extending about half way down the sides of the bill and across the top.

Rounded crown.

Rather sloping forehead.

Foot color purportedly reddish but seems to vary and sometimes be grayish.

Basic (Bright) Plumage Male

White eye.

White J-shaped stripe extends under the eye rising to a point above and behind the eye.

Bill can be bright red, particularly in midwinter. Black knob at the base of the bill.

In the Asiatic subspecies *stejnegeri* the knob has the shape of a hook. It has been reported in the western Aleutians.

Female

Typically two indistinct white patches on the side of the head. One of them behind and below the eye. The other one, a little bit larger, below and in front of the eye. That second patch extends onto the feathering on the upper surface of the bill.

(In a Surf Scoter female the forward patch will be smaller and not extend onto the side of the bill where there is no feathering. There are also differences in head shape, but the head shape is depending on what the bird is doing.)

The only scoter in which female type birds don't appear to be capped.

(The **Velvet Scoter** has never been recorded in NA. The **male** has a knob at the base of the bill, bill at best slightly swollen. Bill less reddish, more yellow. Smaller white stripe just horizontally beneath the eye, does not extend upward behind the eye. The **female** has subtle differences in head and bill shape as well as in bill feathering: a smaller, evenly sloping bill with a smaller, more rounded lateral lobe of feathering.)

Surf Scoter

Hunters call it "Skunk Head"

OCCURRENCE

American bird, in Europe only found as a vagrant.

Very common wintering bird along the coast of CA, but an exceptional rarity inland.

By far the most common scoter in the Bay Area.

They often forage in the surf, diving in the braking waves. Usually associated with areas where there are a lot of rocks and rocky bottoms, particularly places with a lot of mussels. They will forage underneath piers where shellfish are attaching themselves to the pier poles.

FIELD MARKS

Bill very thick at the base.

The sides of the bill are completely unfeathered, but a little wedge of feathers extends a short distance down the culmen, a little widow's peak.

When diving they tend to jump up out of the water and then down, their wings are not open when they do that.

No white in the wings. Frequently fly in large flocks, fairly low just offshore.

Underwings all dark without the silvery cast that the Black Scoter has on the flight feathers.

Younger adults frequently have pale bellies. As they get older, the belly becomes progressively darker.

Feet and legs normally red.

Basic (Bright) Plumage Male

Huge, fabulous bill with all kinds of cool colors. Red, white, orangey yellow, black.

(The Tufted Puffin is black with a big orange honking parrot-like bill. They have a blonde mane which is similar to the white patch on the back of the head of the Surf Scoter. They are smaller and more compact with no visible neck, the head seems attached directly to the body. Puffins tend to fly fairly high and not in flocks.)

White eye.

One white patch on the back of the head and one on the forehead.

Birds with little or no white on the head are not that unusual.

Immature Male

Some pink and white and black on the bill.

Do not necessarily show any obvious white on the forehead or the back of the head.

Plumage might be confused with Black Scoter, bill more reliable.

Female

Dark cap. (Female White-winged do not have a capped appearance.)

Two distinct patches on the side of the face. The most obvious one is behind the eye, the one in front of the eye is much smaller and does not extend onto the bill. It is squeezed, compressed vertically, compared to the White-winged Scoter in which the spot in front of the eye extends down onto the bill.

Quite a bit of variation, not all birds show much white in the face.

Older females frequently have a white patch on the back of the head similar to males.

Never any color on the bill.

Harlequin Duck

OCCURRENCE

Breeds in rushing torrents and cataracts of rivers in the Canadian Rockies to the Canadian west coast. and in Alaska. This population extends into eastern Asia. There is also a population in easternmost Canada, Greenland and Iceland and those birds are occasionally seen in the northeastern US.

Breeds as far south as CA, where it formerly nested in the Merced River in Yosemite Valley, up until the 1940s. Nowadays primarily a winter visitor to CA. May still breed occasionally locally in the Sierra Nevada.

In the Bay Area individuals, usually males, tend to show up in one particular area and stay there all year round. One, sometimes two, for example at Coyote Point. It is easiest to see at high tide when it cannot hide behind the concrete slabs surrounding the harbor. In SF there is one at Heron's Head, missed more often than its seen, it tends to go to the back side of a rock and sleep or move to another spot. Also usually at the end of Cannery Row in Monterey.

Joe has never seen a female Harlequin duck in the Bay Area. The reason the males here usually stay year round may have to do with the way migrating and pair bonding works in ducks.

Migrating is a learned behavior in ducks. Pairs are formed on the wintering grounds and the males follow the females to their breeding grounds. If the males that somehow end up wintering in the Bay Area do not find females they do not know where to go.

Are occasionally found in the interior. Joe once saw one at the Stockton sewage ponds.

They are frequently swimming next to vertical rock edges and diving right there.

In South America ecologically replaced by the Torrent Duck. It is a neat thing to see ducks having fun in the rip-roaring currents.

FIELD MARKS

Much smaller than any of the scoters, but will frequently associate with scoters.

Teensy little bill, not the big honker that most of the scoters have.

Very steep forehead.

Basic (Bright) Plumage Male

When perched on a wet rock this spectacular duck can be all but invisible!

Sometimes they show a lot of rusty coloration on the sides and flanks.

Complex pattern of white stripes and spots.

Alternate (Eclipse) Plumage Male

Closely resembles the female but with white scapular feathers and sometimes traces of rusty coloration..

When Joe started birding in the Bay Area in the 1970s one good place to see Harlequin Ducks was Año Nuevo State Reserve. Every winter there were six male Harlequin Ducks. It was funny reading the accounts in Audubon Field Notes. Every summer the male Harlequin Ducks used to be reported as replaced by six females!

Female

All brown duck with spots on the face. One spot behind the eye, one or usually two spots in front of the eye.

No markings on their bodies at all.

Best identified by their shape, their small size, their really short bill.