

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010.

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

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**Robins** are very social birds in the winter and can occur in large flocks. They often roost at specific sites during the wintertime and forage elsewhere. Birds can come in from all over and sitting in the same trees together at night, there is certain safety in numbers, some roost sites can be big. There is for example a place in Joaquin Miller Park in the Oakland Hills that is called Robin's Roost which has had up to 2,000 birds in it regularly over the different winters, Joe does not know if it is still active. Now there may be temporary roosts. The Robin is quite an early migrant.

The Robin is probably one of the most common and familiar birds in NA. It is a common bird in lawns, spends a lot of time pulling earth worms out of the lawns. They are also very common in wilderness areas. One of the most common birds in the summer in the mountains of California. They also will take advantage of abundances of food like berry crops.

**Cedar Waxwings** are also obligate frugivores often associated with ripe fruit. They are migrants here. Not very common in the fall and fairly uncommon in midwinter. Abundant in the spring. Their numbers tend to peak by April. Joe has a hypothesis that they have changed their migratory routes in response to ornamental plantings. Things like *Pyracantha* (Firethorn) and *Cotoneaster* ripen in the spring. In most places fruit become ripe in the fall. They probably use Toyon and other native berry crops in the fall and winter, which takes them more out over the countryside, perhaps more into the interior. There is a big push of Cedar Waxwings along the coast in the springtime along the coast and not in the fall.

**Brant** do the same thing for different reasons. They are very uncommon to rare fall migrants along the coast of CA. Build up in numbers in the springtime, March being the peak of the migration. In the fall they are apparently migrating offshore nonstop to wintering grounds in Mexico where they come into estuaries and feed on eelgrass. There have been some problems with the eelgrass along the coast of CA. A lot of the coastal bays are just not used much more. May have to do with the life cycle of the eelgrass. Probably also with human disturbance like hunting. In the springtime they come in on a coastal route and become common in places like Limantour Estero, Bodega Harbor and a particularly large staging area is Humboldt Bay. About the different subspecies see my notes from Thursday, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

**Phainopepla** tend to be very shy in the wintertime. They typically sit in the middle of clumps of mistletoe, often not moving for long periods of time. They occur in the foothills all the way up to the east bay. Steve and Carol saw them at the Black Diamond Mines Regional Preserve north of Mt Diablo behaving just like that. Mines Road south of Livermore is the closest place where we usually see them regularly. There are some other sites in the east bay, like Lake Solano County Park. They are very localized. This winter here has been a female, maybe even two, at the Stanford University Jasper Ridge Ecological Reserve, private property owned by the university.

The **AOU checklist** is downloadable. The checklist is modified annually by publications in the July issue of the Auk. For example this coming July the **Winter Wren** will be split into two species, a Pacific one and an eastern one. They are genetically very different, they have different vocalizations, there have been good studies on this. There are claims of eastern Winter Wrens in CA, we are going to have to deal with that.

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## **Ladder-backed Woodpecker**

### **OCCURRENCE**

All through Texas, parts of New Mexico, Arizona, much of Baja California and the southeastern part of CA. It barely gets up into Inyo County where it occurs in desert scrub habitat. Found in Mesquite, desert shrubs and trees.

Almost in contact with Nuttall's in the Owens Valley. Ladder-backed are in the desert and Nuttall's are in the towns where there are some planted oak trees. Also come into contact in Morongo Valley just north of Palm Springs. There is a sanctuary, the Big Morongo Canyon Regional Preserve right next to Covington Park (which has Vermilion Flycatchers). Both species occur there, although in somewhat different habitats. They also come into contact in northern Baja and possibly coastal San Diego. Hybridization is believed to occur in those areas.

## **Nuttall's Woodpecker**

### **OCCURRENCE**

Close to being a CA endemic. Ranges almost entirely west of the Sierra. There is a little isolated population in the Owens River Valley on the east side of the southern Sierra Nevada. It also gets down into northern Baja California.

Reasonably common in the Bay Area, where it is associated with oak trees, particularly Coast Live Oak. More common in the interior, where there are a lot of oaks. It is spreading westward. One was seen on the class field trip to Lake Merritt. Rarely encountered in SF, but there have been some around. Down on the Stanford Campus there are a lot of them. They are essentially a permanent resident and they are moving slightly towards the coast, they are doing fairly well. Hybrids with Downy Woodpecker have occurred.

## **Ladder-backed and Nuttall's Field Marks**

They look almost identical.

Back barred black and white.

Spotting and barring on the sides and flanks.

Black and white face pattern.

Male red on crown, female all black.

### **DIFFERENCES**

The differences are matters of degree, both species vary in the different characters, you have to use is a combination of characters.

The very best way to tell them apart is by range.

### **Back**

Start looking at the pattern on the back.

On Ladder-backed the white and black bars are either about equal or the white bars are broader than the black bars, more white on the back.

Nuttall's tends to be a darker bird. Barring across the back similar but perhaps a bit coarser. On average narrower white, broader black bars.

Also a slight difference in the amount of black across the upper back. In Nuttall's that will normally be solidly black. On Ladder-backed bars will continue all the way up to the bottom of the neck covering the entire back.

#### **Face**

Face similar, but typically Ladder-backed have more white in the face. Usually a larger white patch on the side of the face.

Sibley shows female Ladder-backed in two color morphs, a darker adult and a paler adult. The difference is on the face as well as the amount of barring on the back.

The darker bird does show a solid black area across the shoulders. This is not unusual, female Ladder-backs can approach Nuttall's in some of the plumage characters.

Nat Geo is overstating reality in both birds, Sibley is much more realistic.

#### **Red on Crown in Males**

The field guides emphasize a difference in the amount of red on the crown of the males. Ladder-backed red all the way forward to the eye, Nuttall's supposedly less.

Do not rely on that field mark! There is variability, the differences are on average.

Also keep in mind that juvenal males have more red on the head than adult males and that it extends forward even in Nuttall's. Such birds have given rise to erroneous claims of Ladder-backed from the Bay Area.

#### **Outer Tail Feathers**

There are differences in the amount of black barring on the outer tail feathers.

Ladder-backed has more black bars.

Nuttall's mostly white with at most a few dark spots or bars, much less marking there than on most Ladder-backed.

#### **VOCALIZATIONS**

The long call of Nuttall's is a rattling, a very staccato series of sharp notes, a little like an Ash-throated Flycatcher,.

The long call of the Ladder-backed sounds more like a Downy whinny, only it sounds like it's drunk.

## **Red-cockaded Woodpecker**

#### **OCCURRENCE**

A critically endangered species.

Found nowhere close to CA Fragmented distribution from east Texas to Florida. Range north into the Carolinas. Formerly north as far as Illinois. In recent years there was a documented record in Illinois where there hasn't been one for decades.

Excavate their cavities in live Longleaf Pines that are infested with Red Heart Rot. Drill numerous holes around the cavities that profusely bleed sap. The sticky gum presumably protects them from certain predators such as tree climbing snakes.

They live in family groups and are communal nesters. In general you are going to need directions to find them. In most cases these little colonies will be staked out with nest holes all neatly marked with numbers and letters by whoever it is that got the grant money to study them.

The species is under pressure from logging interests that own most of the pine forests in the southeast. Logging can destroy nesting colonies and foraging areas. Some years ago the logging industry came to a compromise agreement with the fish and wildlife service to reduce logging in areas occupied by Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. They were going to reduce their logging operations in sensitive areas by about half. The Audubon Society presented this as a success, but actually they negotiated an existing law (the endangered species act) away by allowing logging in sensitive areas.

#### **FIELD MARKS**

Barring across the back.

An entirely plain white face, no moustacial or eye line.

Dark cap.

Named for the least conspicuous field mark of any bird. The males have tiny red dots on either side of the head which are almost invisible. It is not possible in the field to tell male from female unless you get an extraordinarily good look

### **Arizona Woodpecker**

#### **OCCURRENCE**

Restricted to southeastern Arizona and barely southwestern New Mexico.

Mostly in the mountains at middle or lower elevations.

Attracted to oaks and sycamores.

Joe has seen it regularly in Cave Creek Canyon in southeastern Arizona.

The taxonomy of this bird has been under a lot of change.

Originally called Arizona Woodpecker. At some point the AOU lumped it with a similar bird found in Mexico, called Strickland's Woodpecker. It has a mostly white back similar to a Hairy. Presumably there was hybridization. The name Strickland's had priority because it was described before the northern population. Fairly recently they decided that the lump was a mistake and split the Arizona Woodpecker back to being a separate species.

#### **FIELD MARKS**

About the size and shape of a Hairy Woodpecker.

Face similar to Hairy.

Back solidly dark brown, the only NA woodpecker with a brown back.

Spotted on the underparts.

### **Great Spotted Woodpecker**

Eurasian species.

First found on Attu Island many years ago (the last island on the Aleutian chain).

Now there are a few records from elsewhere.