

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture March 4th, 2010.

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

The number of **Clapper Rails** at Palo Alto Baylands has dropped. It used to be the center of their distribution. Joe does not know why. At the Samtrans Terminal just north of the SF airport somebody had the brilliant ideal of removing all of the invasive non-native *Spartina* (Cordgrass) and now there are either no or very few Clapper Rails there. The Cordgrass was a primary habitat for them. Most of the Clapper Rails seem to have moved from the south bay to the north bay and are easier to find in some of the Corte Madera marshes now.

It is hard to know how many **Nelson's Sparrows** really are wintering here. There are many places where there could be that do not have access. They have been known to winter in marshes in SF Bay since the 19th century. There are very old specimens from sites like Redwood City. The marshes were probably a lot different then. It is a small wintering population, not a vagrant. Really rare and very hard to see, you have to wait for the really high tide.

Black Rails have been found at Coyote Hills Regional Park by people that go there before it gets light, by 5.30 in the morning. You have to park outside. They were there last year, too. Nobody has seen them but they've been heard calling. They probably breed around the Bay Area. Coyote Hills might well be a breeding site. We know very little about this bird. It acts more like a mouse. They have little tunnels where they go from place to place. Their nests are usually underneath matted marsh vegetation. Their main time for calling is between 1 and 3 in the morning. have Black Rails have been found at a few places in the Central Valley.

A **Clark's Nutcracker** sounds somewhat like a Steller's Jay that has been up all night drinking whisky and smoking pot.

The ABA has a monthly bird quiz on their website.

Ruddy Duck

OCCURRENCE

Does breed in SF Bay, but is more common in the wintertime. A lot of the wintering birds stick around through the spring and we see them now starting to look pretty snazzy.

Have nested successfully at Sharp Park Golf Course in Pacifica the last several years, Joe has seen them there with chicks.

In the winter common in any place that has open water. They are quite adaptable. Occur in pretty good numbers on SF Bay. Marshes will also have them. They are equally tolerant of salt and fresh water. For nesting purposes they prefer fresh water.

Lake Merced in SF sometimes has courting Ruddy Ducks.

Rob saw one display on North Lake about a year ago. It puffed up its breast and slapped its chest with its bill which was audible from shore.

PLUMAGE AND ASPECT SEQUENCES IN THE MALES

Aspect: what they look like.

Unlike any other duck we have studied, the males look bright in the spring and summer and drab in the fall and winter, as we consider normal for most birds, but the reverse of what we've seen in other ducks.

The sequence of molts is the same as in other ducks, but the timing of the molts and pigment deposition is different.

Ruddy Ducks start their complete prebasic molt in late July with the wing molt, directly followed by the body molt which is completed in November. These feathers are drab, giving the birds their drab winter aspect.

This means: Ruddy Duck basic plumage = drab aspect.

Most other ducks have approximately the same timing for their prebasic molt. The difference is that they deposit bright pigments into their prebasic plumage at that time in preparation for their courtship on the wintering grounds.

This means: other ducks basic plumage = bright aspect.

Ruddy Ducks have their prealternate molt, an incomplete body molt, in early spring. The ingrowing feathers are brightly red colored, giving them their bright aspect in time for their courtship, which is later than in other ducks and may take place on the breeding grounds.

This means: Ruddy Duck alternate plumage = bright aspect.

The males of most other ducks have their prealternate molts later, in early summer. They grow their drab feathers in at that time, giving them their drab or eclipse aspect.

This means: other ducks alternate plumage = eclipse or drab aspect.

FIELD MARKS

Neither male or female has any white in the upper wing.

Like all diving ducks they need a running start out of the water to fly.

Raise their long tail straight up when displaying. At other times the tail may be held flat against the water. When they are asleep the tail is angled out at about 45 degree angle.

Sometimes when they are just swimming along as well, when they are not actively foraging. The long tail that many diving ducks have gives them extra leverage when they submerge under the water.

One of our smallest ducks, not too much bigger than a Bufflehead.

Proportions very different from any of the other similar species.

A small bodied bird with a short neck, a relatively big head and very large bill.

The somewhat similar female Bufflehead has a tiny little bill and a relatively smaller head.

Feet pretty far back, awkward on land, rarely emerge out of the water.

Strong dark cap in all plumages. The eyes disappear within the dark cap.

Male

White face.

The female Black Scoter has a pale head and forehead, in Ruddy Duck the whole face is pure white, not grayish brown.

Adult Alternate (Bright) Plumage

Red body.

Shocking bright ice blue bill. The bill is one of the last things to change color when they get into breeding aspect.

Whole neck red or brown.

Adult Basic (Drab) Plumage

Body dull gray-brown.

Female

Look the same year round.

Look like winter aspect (drab) males with the face not pure white but off-white and with a single dark line on the side of the face under the eye that runs parallel to the dark cap.

Immature

May have a dark line in the face like females.

Sibley illustrates an abnormal bird with the whole head black, otherwise normal.

Joe has not personally seen a bird like this but has been sent photos, he has one on his website along with some discussion. Adult male Masked Duck has a black face and this bird got misidentified as such. Joe is not sure if there have been other birds like this.

There are other birds in this genus from South America, Africa and Australia. Some of which have black heads. Those birds need to be carefully addressed if you ever do run into a Ruddy Duck with a black head. It might be one of these other species, escaped from a zoo. Also apparently there is a population of Ruddy Ducks in South America in which the head is polymorphic.

Masked Duck

OCCURRENCE

Unrecorded in CA. There has been a sight record from the Salton Sea, possibly correct but was never documented.

Very, very shy, even in areas where they are common. Spend most of their time deep in the marshes and swamps and do not come out, very difficult to see. Tend to avoid any kind of disturbance or human habitation.

FIELD MARKS

Somewhat different bill shape, perhaps a little bit stubbier looking, especially towards the tip.

White secondaries and greater coverts, shows a white patch in flight.

Adult Bright Male

Black face.

Red on the back of the head.

Black scaling in the red back.

Female and winter male

A white or pale stripe above the eye which results in two dark facial stripes instead of just one.

Exotic waterfowl

Birds that we don't really care about, they are in the field guide just to answer the public's questions what those ducks are that swim around in the park pond. None of these birds are on the NA list or on the CA list. Any one of them as well as multitudes of other exotic waterfowl could be found as an escaped bird or as a deliberately released bird. It is a hobby to keep and breed exotic waterfowl, escapes do not necessarily come from a zoo, often from private collections. A large collection close by is in one of the wineries in Napa County.

In general these birds are supposed to be marked in some way. One way is to surgically remove the rear toe on one foot. Another a band on a leg. Some ducks are common in captivity but there is also probable cause that they might get here on their own, like Falcated Duck or Baikal Teal. You have to weigh and balance.

If a bird is of Asiatic origin, migratory, with multiple records to the north of us during the period of migration, it may get accepted as a wild bird. All of this supports a pattern of natural occurrence. Examples are Eurasian Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Falcated Duck, Baikal Teal. In general those are considered to be wild birds. Any one individual might turn out to be an escaped captive though. Unless it is marked in some way you would not know that.

There is also a tendency when a species shows up that never has shown up before, to assume that it must be an escape because there is no pattern of occurrence. It also depends on the birds natural range what the chance is that it occurs naturally.

We go through a few that Joe has pictures of, they do not necessarily match what is in the book.

Egyptian Goose

Frequently bred in captivity. One of the most popular geese. Small, diistinctive. Iridescent copper brown color to the back. Huge white patches on the upper wing coverts, very striking in flight. Always has a shiner, this big dark eye patch. Rob saw them recently at Lake Merritt.

Swan Goose or Chinese Goose

The domestic forms tend to be very large, among the largest of all of the domestic geese. Frequently hybridize with other domestic goose forms.

A typical bird will usually have a very high frontal shield either black or orange in color. The dark coloration of the crown extends down along the back giving the neck a rather sleek appearance.

Mandarin Duck

One of the more spectacular birds that sometimes show up as escapes. Will show up in quite a number of places far away from any known captive breeding sites. Joe has seen them in Olema Marsh in with Wood Ducks.

A native of China. Closely related to the Wood Duck, in the same genus. Interestingly there are no known hybrids. Does not migrate anywhere near NA. The species is considered established in some parks in Great Britain and self sustaining as a breeding population. Breeding is dicey for them. They need nest cavities. Here they compete with Wood Ducks for natural nest cavities.

Female Mandarin Duck vs. Wood Duck

The female is very similar to a female Wood Duck. A few years ago a female was found at a CBC and reported as a Wood Duck at the Palace of Fine Arts.

Differences:

On the Wood Duck there is a big round eye ring tapering out tear drop shaped into a wide projection backwards from it, big wide eye effect.

Female Mandarin just has a little narrow eye ring and postocular stripe, more of a mean squinting look.

The face is streaked with whitish under the eye in Mandarin Duck, plain gray in Wood Duck.

The flanks have big round pale spots in Mandarin Duck, small narrow ones in Wood Duck.

Black Swan

(Not in NatGeo, but in Sibley p.89)

Native to Australia. A very popular avicultural bird. Easily bred in captivity. Have been seen free flying in SF Bay in recent years, usually don't hang around long though.

White wing tips, otherwise all black.

Red-crested Pochard

(Not in NatGeo, but in Sibley p.89)

Southern Europe eastwards to central southern Asia, strongest population centered on a few lakes in Spain.

The female has an uncanny resemblance to a female Black Scoter.

Chestnut Teal

(Not in our books)

From southern Australia.

Similar to Cinnamon Teal in a lot of ways.

Dark head and scaly pattern on the body might cause confusion with Masked Duck.

Bar-headed Goose

Breeds in central Siberia, winters in India. Holds the record for being the highest flying bird. Flies over the Himalayan mountain ranges. Has all kinds of adaptations to be able to breathe and fly at 20,000 feet. However, there does not appear to be any evidence that it occurs in Alaska or anywhere in NA.

Graylag Goose

Common in Eurasia, has been claimed to have occurred in Alaska as a wild bird.

Has been widely domesticated and introduced into NA. The domestic forms are like domestic forms of the Mallard: big, fat, a little bit ungainly. Also quite aggressive.

White type sometimes called "Embden Goose". They are bred to be white because they look better when they are plucked. The all yellow babies will turn into all white adults.