

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture March 24th, 2010.

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

The **loon migration** is picking up now as we are getting into April. Scope from a promontory. They fly by low over the water, often at a considerable distance. Pacific Loon is the most common, the next most common is Red-throated Loon. The Common Loon is the least likely one to be seen migrating at this time of the year. The Common Loons don't fly close over the water, they tend to fly up high and by themselves. The other species tend to stay low over the water. At Cliff House Red-throated Loon is the most common one to be seen at this time of year.

Both male and female **American White Pelican** get the triangular plate on the bill in the breeding season. It falls off after they finished nesting.

Three new species were added to the cumulative list for the **Cliff House field trip**.

A **White-winged Scoter** was a fly-by at some considerable distance. It was together with Surf Scoters and noticeably bigger than those. (Black Scoter is maybe seen once every five years. There are more Black Scoters down at Fort Funston or in Pacifica.)

Two **Western Bluebirds** by the baths and then two in Sutro Park. Joe thought they probably were the same birds, but somebody has seen four in the area earlier, so maybe they were different birds. This species has always been rare in the city, it seems to be increasing lately. They have nested successfully at least once in the Presidio, possibly also at other sites. They forage from a perch and then drop down and pounce on the ground for things like grasshoppers and leafhoppers. The habitat by the baths has changed. A lot of the flowering **Albizia** that used to cover the entire hillside has been removed and replaced by native plants. It seemed the bluebirds were taking advantage of the new open area that they now have to forage. Albizia looks like an Acacia. It is very good at stabilizing dune areas, which is probably why it was originally planted there. It blooms profusely in the wintertime. Lots of Yellow-rumped Warblers and hummingbirds used to forage in the flowers of the Albizia. **Yellow-rumped Warblers** staged a bit of a comeback. None last year, this year quite a few. Far fewer **hummingbirds** now than in the past.

Eurasian Collared Dove was in the park. That bird is in the process of trying to conquer the world. They were added to the state list only relatively recently.

The old Robbins field guide had isobars for spring migrants, lines for different arrival dates.

Tyrant Flycatchers (family Tyrannidae)

Not related to Old World Flycatchers, which are in the family Muscicapidae.

The name flycatcher refers to their behavior of sitting on a branch, flying out to catch an insect and return.

Tyrannus is the genus of the kingbirds, which are so called because of their aggression towards larger birds, such as crows and hawks which they attack mercilessly and drive away.

400 species worldwide, all in the Americas. If you think our birds are confusing, in South America there are many more almost identical looking species.

There are more *Contopus*-species that look exactly like ours in other parts of the Americas, mostly in the tropics. For example the Tropical Pewee.

These flycatchers are generally rather cryptic, including several species which are physically almost identical but which can be told apart by their vocalizations.

One of the first things you should start to look for on a flycatcher is the **lower mandible**. Especially important with *Empidonax* flycatchers. Useful in Wood-Pewees as well.

Young birds often have longer undertail coverts than adult birds in flycatchers. If you want to judge tail length you might want to take into account if it has long fluffy undertail coverts that it might have if it is a young bird.

***Contopus* flycatchers**

Are much more likely to catch your attention than *Empidonax* flycatchers. *Empidonax* flycatchers tend to be smaller and more active, but they tend to hide in the shade and forage within the canopy or in low bushes.

The *Contopus* flycatchers are famous for being the top bird on the top of the totem pole. They sit on the top of the tallest tree and fly out for catching an insect and then return to the same perch every time, typical flycatching behavior. The birds are out there in the open. When the Wood-Pewees and Olive-sided Flycatchers start to arrive they tend to be relatively conspicuous and noticeable, unlike *Empidonax* flycatchers which tend to be really difficult to see.

Of the *Contopus* flycatchers the Olive-sided Flycatcher and the Western Wood-Pewee are relatively common in the Bay Area. Western Wood-Pewee more common. Both found in wooded habitats, mostly away from disturbed environments. Tend to be in parkland or woodland areas. The Wood-Pewee is much more common as a migrant than as a breeder. Neither of these species occur in CA in the wintertime. They are strictly summer birds and migrants. The first Wood-Pewee does not normally arrive until late April, not in numbers before early May. The Olive-sided Flycatchers tend to arrive a little bit before the Wood-Pewees do, but around the same time.

Contopus flycatchers sit very upright and usually on an exposed perch. The pewees are more likely to be at the end of a horizontal branch or along low wires. Olive-sided Flycatchers tend to perch very high, often in the highest possible place.

In general birds of the genus *Contopus* at the distance give the impression that they do not have an obvious eye ring. Most *Empidonax* have an obvious eye ring. Another difference is that *Empidonax* flycatchers almost always spend a lot of time pumping their tail up and down or dipping the tail back and forth like a Phoebe does. Pewees don't do that. They may quiver the tail very slightly when they land, but they don't just sit there and wag their tails up and down. You are looking for no tail wagging and no obvious eye ring to get the bird into the right genus.

There is one *Empidonax* flycatcher that does not have an apparent eye ring and which is frequently mistaken for a Wood-Pewee or vice versa, the **Willow Flycatcher**. It is also a fairly large *Empidonax* and therefore closer in size to a Wood-Pewee than most of the other species. The Willow Flycatcher is a brown bird on the back, the Wood-pewees are gray. The lower mandible of a Willow Flycatcher is almost always all pale orange or yellow. The throat of the Willow Flycatcher is normally white as opposed to grayish white or grayish on a Wood-Pewee. The Willow Flycatcher frequently bobs its tail, kind of fans it out in a circle, it

actively moves its tail while foraging or perched. Wood-Pewees may shake their tail a little bit when they first land but then hold their tail still.

Wood-Pewees have a much longer primary projection.

The Wood-Pewee often has a bit of a crest, the Willow Flycatcher normally has a rounded crown.

The Willow Flycatcher has very different vocalizations, the typical call note being a rising slightly whistled note. However its song is a sneezy fitz-bew. The bew can sound a little bit like the bwurr of the Western Wood-Pewee.

The Willow Flycatcher likes willows and tends to usually perch in the vegetation and forage fairly low within the vegetation. It does not like to sit out exposed perches, wires, the tops of trees like *Contopus* flycatchers do.

This sounds as if they should be pretty separable, but Joe would like a nickel for every time he has been with a bunch of experts that argued about whether a bird was a Wood-Pewee or a Willow Flycatcher and never came to an agreement. In the field under life conditions there may be problematic birds.

Greater Pewee

OCCURRENCE

Bird of pine-oak woodlands in Mexico. Fairly common in southeastern Arizona and adjacent New Mexico in the summertime.

Short-distance migrant.

Very rare bird in CA. All but one records are for the late fall and winter.

If you see a pewee on a CBC or in the middle of winter the chances are it's a Greater Pewee.

We have basically no confirmed winter records of any kind of Wood-Pewee. One or maybe two records of wintering Olive-sided Flycatcher.

Numerous CA records, mostly from southern CA. One was found on a Hayward CBC a number of years back. Joe has seen it at New Brighton State Beach in Santa Cruz in the wintertime.

Another one in Imperial Valley in the very low desert in mid-winter. The bird was found over a bee-hive and was foraging mostly on the bees.

This is a pattern you get used to. If the bird is unseasonal it is probably not the species you thought it was. Similar to the situation with the kingbirds. There are almost no winter records of Western Kingbirds for CA and lots of records of Tropical Kingbirds, especially near the coast.

If the birds are settled in they can often be confirmed.

FIELD MARKS

Large conspicuous bird.

Very pointed head, almost looks like a titmouse.

In general Greater Pewees will have the crest raised at all times. Other flycatchers more variable, raise the crest when excited or alarmed.

Tail relatively long.

Lower mandible usually all yellow.

Overall rather plain plumage.

Wing bars generally faint.

Underparts quite plain without any kind of obvious vested appearance, instead a rather plain pure gray coloration lacking any streaking.

VOCALIZATION

The song is a whistled Ho-say ma-Ree-a.

Call note a sharp pip-pip, pip-pip. Usually double notes.

Almost identical to the call of the Olive-sided, perhaps a little sweeter.

Olive-sided also gives a bright note like that, usually in threes.

Olive-sided Flycatcher

Used to be in a different genus. When it was merged into *Contopus* there was an attempt to change the name to Olive-sided Pewee.

OCCURRENCE

Arrive in mid to late April. Usually heard before they are seen.

Used to be common in SF in GG Park and on golf courses. Now uncommon at best in SF.

When they are singing they are easy to detect from a long ways away, have a very high detectability rate. You may get the impression that they are all around the place when in fact there are relatively few birds.

Trying to find the singing birds involves looking for mostly pine trees which have little dead spires at the top and looking for a little bird a long way away sitting up there. These birds are not likely to allow close approach.

Breed in the Bay Area, but their numbers continue to decline. They tend to prefer conifers, but they will nest in other types of trees. The nest is usually on a horizontal limb about half way out from the tree trunk and usually quite high in the tree.

Has really long wings because it migrates all the way to South America, a very long distance migrant.

A neotropical migrant. Neotropical migrants are birds that breed in the nearctic (NA, New World north of the tropic of cancer) and winter in the neotropics (Middle and South America). Their populations appear to be on the verge of becoming imperiled, most likely due to habitat destruction in the tropics. Certainly possible that habitat destruction elsewhere is a factor. There may be other factors that we have not yet considered.

FIELD MARKS

About the same size as the Greater Pewee.

Less of a pointed crest.

Tends to have a white throat that contrasts with very dusky gray sides and flanks.

The white from the throat extends down through the middle of the breast. From the front it gives the appearance of having an open vest. There are blurry streaks in the vest, a textured appearance, an excellent field mark. No other similar flycatcher is streaked in any way.

Not much in the way of wing bars. These birds do not molt until they get to their wintering grounds. In the fall they are generally in very worn plumage.

The bill is broader than it is deep.

It is flat and triangular in shape, which is a general feature of flycatchers, as is a slight hook at the tip of the maxilla (upper mandible).

Mostly dark lower mandible. But Joe has enough photos of birds that show a pale mandible that he would not use that as a way to separate it from Greater Pewee, it varies on Olive-sided.

These birds frequently hit their bill together so hard that you can get an audible snapping sound as the bill closes down at the insects that they are trying to go after.

Eye ring very faint.

Dark face.

Relatively shorter tail than a Greater Pewee.

Generally shorter tail and relatively longer wings than a wood-pewee.

A very compact bird at the rear end without a very long tail.

White tufts on either side of the lower back formed by fluffy loose flank feathers. But many times you can not see these tufts at all! If you see them it is a good indicator for an Olive-sided Flycatcher, but if you don't see them that does not mean that it is not an Olive-sided Flycatcher.

Dusky spots on the undertail coverts, you don't get it that much in Wood-Pewees.

(Some spotting on undertail coverts more likely on Western Wood-Pewee than on Eastern.)

VOCALIZATION

Song: Quick THREE beers.

The ones in the west sound more like What PEEVES you? Or Mar-TI-ni.

Fairly easy to imitate. Carries a long way.

Call notes pick-pick-pick, pick-pick, pick-pick, pick-pick-pick, usually in threes.

Eastern and Western Wood-Pewees

Examples of sibling species. Species which act as biological species but which do not differ significantly in their morphology. Joe prefers to call them cryptic species since it is not obvious that they are different species from looking at them.

Two species occur in NA. They barely come together in the Great Plains along watercourses in Kansas and Nebraska. The two birds are best identified by their range. Physically they are almost identical. Both species are variable and they both have pretty much the same set of field marks.

There was an identification article on Wood-Pewees in *Birding Magazine*. Link on Joe's class website. A courageous article. Joe does not buy the difference in back posture, there is too much variation. Western darker coloration overall is true. Western more extensive vest - that's going to vary. Wing bars might be helpful. Western generally dark lower mandible - pretty good. Joe would be very cautious on tail posture. What you've got is a whole lot of new field marks that are helpful but none of which are completely diagnostic. Perhaps when taken in combination you might be able to build a case. But if the bird doesn't call you will not be able to get that case accepted by the records committee.

EASTERN WOOD-PEWEE OCCURRENCE

Have shown up in CA. Every one or almost every one has been confirmed by its song.

When the bird thought to be an Eastern did not sing the record always or almost always was not found to be acceptable. One Joe had in CA had no wing bars, it was August and they were all worn off. Presence or absence of wing bars is going to depend on the time of year and the condition of wear that these birds may have.

WESTERN WOOD-PEWEE OCCURRENCE

Replaces the Eastern Wood-Pewee in the west and in the northwest.

The one that is likely to be seen here, especially as a migrant but also as an increasingly uncommon breeder.

Much less common than it used to be. A very common bird in the mountains in the summer. You should be hearing them all over the place in the emorning when you are camping in the mountains.

In the Bay Area the numbers are down. Mt Tamalpais is still a good place for them. First ones start arriving in late April. One of the latest migrants in the springtime. Still migrating through in mid-June. The ones Joe sees in his yard are almost always late spring migrants in late May and into early June. One of the birds he looks for when he hopes to find vagrants at Pt Reyes. If he goes out to Pt Reyes in June looking for spring vagrants, if he does not see any pewees he know there was very little migration. Pewees are an indicator that the conditions were favorable for migration. It is not that unusual driving out there to see quite a few pewees on the barb wire fences. Mostly migrants, not nearly as many breeding as used to be the case. But Wood-Pewees are quite common at times, much more common than the Olive-sided Flycatcher or the Greater Pewee.

Records in Louisiana and the eastern seaboard. Problematic whether they can be identified unless they are extreme examples.

FIELD MARKS BOTH WOOD-PEWEEES

Average slightly smaller than Olive-sided Flycatcher.

Both Pewees short tail, long wings, long distance migrants.

But tail longer, wings shorter than Olive-sided Flycatcher.

Indistinct or obsolete eye ring.

Wing bars relatively strong compared to Greater Pewee or Olive-sided Flycatcher, but can also be more or less absent.

Tend to have a closed vest. No big blurry streaks in it like on Olive-sided Flycatcher, but can look slightly mottled.

Nest

A typical Wood-Pewee nest is unlike an Olive-sided Flycatcher nest which is made out of twigs and on a horizontal branch. Wood-Pewee nests are nestled in the crotch of a tree. Often a deciduous tree. the nest is quite neat with plant fibers and a lot of spider web on the outside. It tends to look fairly pale.

FIELD MARK DIFFERENCES

Overall Coloration

The Eastern tends to have a paler appearance over all. Western darker.

Eastern sometimes slight olive or greenish color to the upper parts which is generally lacking in Western which tends to be more of a charcoal gray color or dingy gray.

Throat

Many Western have the throat all gray, Eastern tends to be paler on the throat.

Vest

Eastern may have the appearance of a more open vest or at least paler on the throat area and in the middle of the vest.

Most Western have the throat dark and the breast dark and a white streak coming up into the middle forming a point, a closed vest appearance. Somewhat more ambiguous but similar on the Eastern.

Lower Mandible

A mostly dark lower mandible is very unusual for an Eastern and typical for a Western. In Western it is unusual that the lower mandible is all pale, usually at least partly dark, but there are clearly examples of exceptions.

Wing Bars

Wing bars variable. Can be fairly strong or more or less absent.

Western have the front wing bar decidedly fainter than the rear wing bar.

Eastern often have the two wing bars equally bright.

Unfortunately this does not work consistently.

Immatures look like adults except that they have buffy wing bars instead of white or pale.

Undertail Coverts

Grayish on undertail coverts often paler on Eastern.

Some spotting on undertail coverts more likely on Western than on Eastern.

Marginal Coverts

The marginal coverts are along the leading edge of the folded wing. They show when the bird is facing you, basically what you see just under the folded wing.

Most of the time you can't see them.

Marginal coverts and underwing coverts often have the same color.

The underwing coverts of the Eastern Wood-Pewee tend to be white.

The underwing coverts of the Western Wood-Pewee tend to be gray or dull white.

On an Eastern Wood-Pewee you see gray on the chest, then you see the wings that are dark, but underneath the wings there is this little white slash or headlights that show up when the bird is facing you.

On the Western Wood-Pewee you tend to get a more blended appearance because of the grayer marginal coverts. This doesn't always work but it's certainly something to look at.

VOCALIZATIONS

The songs differ quite a bit.

Eastern sings a series of sad clear whistled bee-ow-weew and then after that there is usually a separate little note that comes down at the end, pee-yeer, sounds a little bit like an emphatic Lesser Goldfinch, then goes back to pee-a-wee.

Western typical song a very harsh descending bschuirrrr.

Call notes similar burry descending notes, sometimes a whistled descending note.

It also does a rising whistle that also sometimes is given by the Eastern. So some of their vocalizations are similar.

There are also some odd songs that are given briefly at dawn by both species. They usually include a bunch of different call notes that are distinctive.

The songs are an isolating mechanism and as far as anybody knows they have never hybridized. However, the females don't sing, so how do you detect hybrids?

Eastern has a chip-note that is not given by the Western. Sounds almost like a warbler.

Cuban Pewee

Beyond the scope of this class.

Added to the fifth edition based on records from Florida.

There are other species of pewees found on different islands in the Caribbean that are almost identical but have different songs

FIELD MARKS

Much shorter wings than a regular Wood-Pewee.

Crescent behind the eye.