

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture April 7th, 2010.

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

On the Arboretum walk on Sunday Josiah Clark heard a low rattle. It was the adult male **Orchard Oriole**. It was buried in a dead tree in the succulent garden. Most of our records are of female aspect birds. They are extremely difficult to identify because of their close resemblance to female Hooded Orioles. Adult males are quite distinctive, they look like no other NA oriole with their chestnut coloration. When the bird is out of season such as in the winter or unusually early or late, Orchard is more likely than Hooded. At this point now the Hooded Orioles are back in the city.

There is also a male **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** in the Arboretum, in the John Muir Area across from the Children's Garden in the dense vegetation just to the east of the pond. It has been seen there on and off since early December.

Ron saw **Elegant Trogon** at Lake Patagonia in Arizona about a week ago. They are usually found in pine-oak woodland at higher elevations in the summertime. Apparently this bird has been wintering there for several years. Normally Elegant Trogons don't winter in Arizona at all.

Class field trip to Coyote Point on March 28th

Greater White-fronted Goose: a flock of two Canada and five or six White-fronted geese was flying around the parking lot at the yacht club. They've been in the area for a month or more. Most people have reported seeing six birds. The views during the trip were distant and brief. White-fronted Goose is a common bird in the Central Valley but very scarce along the immediate coast and on the peninsula.

Black Oystercatcher new for the list in spring. We've had them there in the fall. Now there seems to be a pair left. There is probably not enough suitable habitat there for them to nest, but this is the nesting season for them, they are already starting to pair up and to nest. Maybe they are going to attempt to nest.

Dowitchers were seen very far away. Long-billed and Short-billed dowitchers are very tricky to identify in any plumage, better views and close study are necessary. They were probably Short-billed Dowitchers. Usually when there are Long-billed around Joe hears them calling, they have a very squeaky flight note. Short-billed Dowitchers tend to be silent. The dowitchers were in tidal habitat which is where Short-billeds like to be.

Wilson's Snipe was doing knee-bends, the whole body horizontal and moving up and down with the bill out straight. Joe not sure what the behavior means, it was not in any particular context. No information on Cornell's. Bent's life histories mentions it shortly without explanation.

There is an outdoor aviary that is attached to the museum that has a **Yellow-billed Magpie**. On this trip there was a magpie outside the aviary. The Yellow-billed Magpie is not migratory at all, records away from known localities are unusual. At Coyote Point Ron Thorn had reported a Yellow-billed Magpie ten days before the class field trip. He asked the museum if they were missing their Yellow-billed Magpie and they said they were not. Yesterday Ron Thorn saw it again. On other days people could not find it.

In SF a pair has attempted to nest for several years at India Basin. Some people question whether those are genuine wild birds.

Years back a pair of Yellow-billed Magpies nested at one of the cemeteries in Colma.

It is an endemic bird for CA. The only bird seen in CA that has never been recorded in any other state. An interior bird that likes oaks. Feeds on acorns a lot. But also a generalist. Found in the valleys and foothills mostly in northern CA up to Tehama County and south down into Santa Barbara County in the interior. Separated from the Black-billed Magpie by the Sierra Nevada.

Black-billed Magpie does occur in the Great Basin region. They don't normally come into contact with each other.

Magpies are highly social birds. The individual at Coyote Point was probably attracted to the one that was in the cage. In places like Sunol Regional park or in the Livermore Valley sometimes you can find colonies. Often in sycamore trees where they build large bulky domed-over nests of twigs that look like squirrel nests.

They were decimated by West Nile disease and the numbers collapsed.

***Empidonax* Flycatchers**

A group of cryptic flycatchers found in the Americas. The old wisdom was that the song was the only reliable way to tell them apart. Some of their songs don't sound all that different from each other. Some of the call notes are actually a little more different than some of the songs. But vocalizations are certainly an important factor in *Empidonax* identification.

Empidonax tend to stick to the shade, tend to stay inside the forest in an obfuscated environment. Do not perch out in the open. Flutter around catching insects helter skelter. Do not tend to return to the same perch over and over again, go to another perch. Often fairly close to the tree trunks. Very active unless they are tired and just sit there for long periods of time. Hammond's Flycatcher is famous for that.

If you see a flycatcher sitting out on a bare twig at the top of the tree and it is flycatching and coming back to the same branch you can cross *Empidonax* off your list of candidates. The bird is probably a pewee or a phoebe, those birds are much easier to see.

A lot of the advances in field identification happened here in CA.

David DeSante, head of the Institute for Bird Populations in Inverness, was a pioneer in resolving some of the tricky identifications that we now use for *Empidonax* flycatchers. It was based on some experience they had on the Farallon Islands. There they trap birds and get all kinds of *Empidonax*. They get eastern vagrants, they get western migrants. There are keys and measurements which can be used to identify the species in the hand. DeSante observed them after they were identified and released. He noticed consistent behavioral differences between some of them as well as plumage differences. He did some very interesting work back in the late 70s.

You can't identify an *Empidonax* on one character, you have to use a combination of characters. A lot of this is tentative and a combination of multiple characters. Joe prefers to hear the birds. He likes to know what his chances of seeing one or other of these birds might be. One of the huge problems with trying to identify *Empidonax* flycatchers is that we throw together a whole bunch of features each of which requires a judgement and each of which has an error bracket. The more features you add to it the larger your error bracket gets.

In Birding Magazine March 2009 there was an article that attempted a somewhat new approach to *Empidonax* identification. It is available online, see Joe's class website.

Joe disagrees with the identification of at least one of those birds. Try to find it!

Most of the things he mentions are matters of judgement. Joe often thinks of the Least Flycatcher as being a short-tailed, big-headed bird, he has it as a big-headed, long-tailed bird. Joe always thought the bill was short and broad, he says it's short and narrow. Joe looking at specimens saw everything from narrow to broad.

In the west it is much more difficult than in the east, we have more species and they are harder to tell apart.

Of the *Empidonax* flycatchers in the east, Willow and Alder are almost impossible to tell apart. Least and Acadian are pretty different and Yellow-bellied is fairly distinctive. Least Flycatcher is also becoming more common in the west.

As a general rule with some slight exceptions strongly contrasting wings are a feature of eastern *Empidonax*. Western species in the broad sense (birds like Hammond's, Dusky, Gray) tend to have much more blended wings and much less contrast between the wing panel and the back. Strikingly contrasting wings might be your first clue that you are looking at a vagrant.

Any *Empidonax* that you see in the Bay Area is most likely a Western (Pacific-slope) Flycatcher. Any *Empidonax* here with yellow on the throat and most of the underparts should be regarded a Western (Pacific-slope) Flycatcher. Western Flycatcher is the name for Pacific-slope and Cordilleran flycatchers.

Up in the mountains you get a lot of Dusky Flycatchers. They are found in a variety of habitats, mostly in fairly open forest. The dominant flycatcher in the summertime in Yosemite. Often found in areas that are overgrown with Manzanita, you would not expect to see Hammond's there. In deep Red Fir forests you find a lot of Hammond's Flycatchers. Harder to see than Dusky, require looking in appropriate habitat.

As a practical matter in the Bay Area, Western (Pacific-slope) Flycatcher and Willow Flycatcher are the ones you need to know. You will see Western Flycatchers and you have a good chance of seeing Willow Flycatchers, the next most common *Empidonax* in CA. More species when you go into the mountains. Some exceptions we will get into when we get to those species. In the desert in migration you can get any *Empidonax*. None of them belong in the desert, they are all migrants, anything could be possible out there.

When Van Remsen got to Louisiana and became the curator at the museum he realized that he was not as good at identifying those birds as he thought he was. He started to collect them. He was very disappointed with his success rate identifying the birds in the field and then confirming it in the specimens.

The most accurate thing you can say is *Empidonax* sp.

Acadian Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

Breeds in moist forests in the east and south of the US.

Completely migratory, migrates into the South American jungles. Joe has seen it on both trips he made to Panama.

Unrecorded in CA, possibly because of identification issues.

There was a bird in Point Loma in San Diego in the fall. Very detailed descriptions were taken. It was quite different from any other *Empidonax*. It had a greenish back, bold white wing bars, a big bill, seemed to have a pretty long primary projection. Thought to be an Acadian Flycatcher essentially because they could not figure out what else it might be. The description was sent to the late Allan Phillips who was living in Mexico at the time and was regarded as the world authority on *Empidonax* identification. He said that lacking a specimen he would not accept it but based on

the sight record he considered it 99% certain to be an Acadian Flycatcher. It was accepted by the records committee. Some time later Van Remsen from the museum at LSU asked to see the record. Van Remsen was worried about this individual. Living in Louisiana he sees lots of Acadian Flycatchers. The description said that the wing bars were white. Remsen pointed out that there was no fall specimen at LSU of an Acadian Flycatcher with white wing bars, they all had rich buffy wing bars in the fall, easily noticeable in the field. They molt before they migrate. Most other *Empidonax* molt on the wintering grounds. So you can have a juvenal bird, still holding juvenal wing bars which are buffy, or you can have an adult and it would molt the wing coverts before migrating. In fresh plumage the wing bars are rich buff in color. Any *Empidonax* can have buffy wing bars. the point is that this bird was specifically described as having white wing bars. That was enough to call the record into question. The record was re-circulated in the committee and rejected. Allan Phillips gave further comments and agreed with Remsen, he thought it might have been some Baja race of Western Flycatcher.

FIELD MARKS

A fairly large *Empidonax*.

An almost pewee-like appearance in shape.

Fairly big bill, one of the biggest of any *Empidonax*.

Lower mandible all pale.

Eye ring usually fairly prominent and frequently has a little bit of a tail behind the eye, which may remind you of the eye ring of the Pacific-slope Flycatcher.

Eye ring slightly broken above and below.

Long primary projection that gives the wing tip a sword-like aspect, the longest primary projection of any of our *Empidonax*.

Rather greenish on the back. Often contrasting gray head.

Molt before they migrate in the fall, get fresh rich buffy wing bars.

Joe's recollection is that it may have a yellowish throat which makes it sometimes hard to tell from Yellow-bellied Flycatcher in the east.

Pattern on the underparts quite variable.

Often a pale patch on the middle of the chest contrasting with the slight dingy vest and dingy coloration further down..

The books do not really show this. Sibley has a little arrow pointed to pale underparts.

The birds Joe has seen in Panama showed it more prominently. Look for a whitish patch in the middle of the chest below the vest. It is kind of isolated, not like a pewee, but it does add to the pewee-like appearance of the bird.

Remember that pewees do not have an eye ring or if they do it is extremely hard to see.

Pewees don't have an expressive tail that they are pumping in the way most *Empidonax* do.

VOCALIZATIONS

Song: whee-see.

Call note an emphatic peece, a little bit like part of the song.

Yellow-bellied Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

Canada, northeastern US. Joe has seen it in Canada at Pt Pelee a couple of times.

Never when he grew up in the east, it is not a common bird in the east.

A rare vagrant to CA. All CA records in the fall when these birds are quite yellow in color.

FIELD MARKS

In the summer they can be fairly pale, quite yellow in the fall.

A round-headed, demure, short-tailed little *Empidonax*.

Overall shape similar to Least Flycatcher (big-headed and rather short-tailed).

No crest.

Fairly round eye ring.

Bill fairly short and broad.

Green back, yellow underparts.

Wings black or fairly dark, contrast quite a bit with the back.

Wing bars and tertial fringes strongly contrasting with the dark wings.

As a general rule with some slight exceptions strongly contrasting wings are a feature of eastern *Empidonax*.

The secondary fringes stop before you get to the wing bar. A pattern more similar to Ruby-crowned Kinglet than to Hutton's Vireo, in that respect more like Yellow-bellied and less like Western. On Western the secondary fringes usually get closer to the rear wing bar.

Both Acadian and Yellow-bellied are eastern species. They are confused with each other because both have a fair amount of yellow on the underparts.

Yellow-bellied usually has the throat yellow as well as the belly, typically Acadian Flycatchers have a white throat.

Yellow-bellied short-billed, Acadian long-billed.

Yellow-bellied more small-headed, Acadian more impressive.

Yellow-bellied tend to be greener, at least in the fall.

Can be distinguished from the Western (Pacific-slope) Flycatcher using range.

Both have yellow throats.

Identify Yellow-bellied Flycatchers in CA with extreme caution!

Many bright Western Flycatchers have been misidentified.

Western has a peaked crest in the back, you normally will not see that in Yellow-bellied.

Bill generally shorter on Yellow-bellied.

Primary projection on Yellow-bellied longer.

Tail relatively shorter on Yellow-bellied.

They tend to be greener on the back, Western are browner.

In general the brightest yellow of these *Empidonax* are Western, seldom do Yellow-bellied approach the really bright yellow of the brightest Western.

Neither species of pewee has yellow marginal coverts.

Of the birds we have studied so far the Yellow-bellied is the one that has the strongest yellow on the wing linings and on the marginal coverts.

VOCALIZATIONS

The ones Joe has seen have been unaccountably silent.

One found at the Fish Docks gave a call sounding like a Semipalmated Plover, to-WEE. It was a compact little bird with a short tail. Joe has always regarded it as an acceptable record, but it has never been submitted to the committee. Call in Joe's opinion diagnostic.

Traill's Flycatcher

Name of Alder + Willow Flycatcher before they were split.

Birders had noticed that there were two call types or song types in Traill's Flycatcher.

Roger Tory Peterson was aware of this, he listed both song types in the early editions of his field guide and said "maybe two species"

Stein did his Ph.D. dissertation on these flycatchers. He found that they had different songs, different habitats, built a different type of nest and nested in a different kind of location. He took measurements and came up with a formula that allowed you to identify about 85-90% of the individual specimens as long as you had sexed the birds first. 10-15% of dead birds could not be assigned to one or the other species. Another classic case of cryptic species that look the same and differ only in their songs. They do have habitat differences.

There is a contact zone, that is the area that was studied by Stein. He found no evidence of hybridization.

Probably not reliably distinguished in the field unless they are singing or calling, the differences between them are not consistent.

Alder Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

Northern bogs and forested swamp areas.

From Alaska through Canada down to the New England and Middle Atlantic states.

A fairly late migrant. Joe had it in Alaska arriving in mid-June when it warming up and mosquitoes hatched in big numbers on the last day of his trip.

Have been recorded and documented in CA. Several on the Farallon Islands. A number of singing birds, mostly from the eastern deserts such as eastern Kern County. Joe saw one at Pt Reyes. It was on the ground. The behavioral clues don't necessarily work in migration. The birds may be exhausted, food stressed. They may be in situations that you would not expect to find them in during the breeding season. Joe was not able to identify that bird on the ground. Rich Stallcup thought it was an Alder. It looked very green, different. Maybe because Joe saw it from above and because of the light conditions.

In order to get an Alder in CA you will need to be able to get vocalizations, song or call notes.

FIELD MARKS

Large, brown, usually with a slight greenish cast.

Willow Flycatchers tend to be a little browner, the Alders tend to be a little greener.

Fairly big bill.

Usually a fairly prominent eye ring, but narrow. (Willow's indistinct.)

Mandible normally pale.

Throat white.

Little or no yellow color on the underparts.

Fairly contrasting tertial fringes, more so than western Willow Flycatchers, but not much different from eastern Willow Flycatchers.

Tail relatively long.

VOCALIZATIONS

Song a rolling feBEE-ow, BEE-ow.

Call note according to the book similar to Hammond's.

Hammond's is sort of like kipp, almost like a Pygmy Nuthatch.

Willow Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

Dryer habitats than Alder Flycatcher, in some areas in the east found in dry brush.

Several different populations: an eastern one (*traillii*), a Great Basin one (*adastus*), a western one (*brewsteri*) and one found in the desert southwest (*extimus*).

The eastern Willow Flycatchers are very similar to the Alder Flycatcher.

The western Willow Flycatchers are quite different.

In CA found primarily in willow thickets. Formerly nested in lowland willows throughout the state of CA. In the last century it has retrenched due to cowbird parasitism and is now a very rare breeding bird in the lowlands of CA. Most breeding birds are in the Sierra Nevada in willow thickets next to mountain meadows where small populations still persist in a few areas. Cowbirds have begun to move into the high Sierra though.

You need to know this species here. You will see Western Flycatchers and you have a good chance of seeing Willow Flycatchers, it is the next most common *Empidonax* in CA. It is endangered or rare in the state as a breeding bird, but there is a reservoir of healthy populations to the north of us that are not yet affected by cowbirds and are migrating through. We find them in pretty good numbers. They get a lot of Willow Flycatchers at Coyote Creek Riparian Station in their mist nets, the habitat is pretty good. Those are all migrants.

They are quite common, at least locally common, in late August through much of September.

They are also fairly common migrants in the spring. More in the interior, you might run into them in places like Mines Road. they sometimes sing on migration.

Be careful with claims of Willow Flycatcher in the wintertime or in the late fall.

Willow Flycatchers are early migrants in the fall, with big numbers moving through at the end of August and through much of September throughout CA. The main rush of Willow Flycatchers are migrants and they are common throughout CA in the fall and fairly common in the spring. They will sing and call on migration, especially in the spring time. They'll do the fitz-bew, they do a rolling brrr, they do a whit-note, a lot of different kinds of calls and songs which are pretty much diagnostic.

Cowbird Parasitism

Brown-headed Cowbirds love *Empidonax* flycatchers. They go for riparian habitat for laying their eggs. During the wintertime they are out with the blackbird flocks in the farm lots with the cows. In the springtime they move into the willow thickets. They look for Yellow Warblers and Willow Flycatchers and vireos and other birds that nest in willow thickets. There are more birds nesting in willow thickets per hectare than in any other habitat, it is much more efficient to find hosts in riparian habitat.

Brown-headed Cowbirds got to CA partly because of different land use. The irrigation projects that were connected to the Colorado River turned the desert areas into gardens and lots and lots of farmland. Cowbirds marched across the new farmlands. The desert was an isolating factor that prevented the cowbirds from entering into CA. Once the desert was crossed the birds got into the Central Valley, it is wonderful for cowbirds there. They lay their eggs into the nests of other birds. Because their eggs hatch early the babies of the host species seldom survive. Parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds has led to the near extinction of Bell's Vireo in CA and to the near extinction of the subspecies *extimus* of the Willow Flycatcher in the southwestern part of the state.

Normally it is not in the interest of the parasite to kill its host because then it has no place to live. Typically a parasite reduces the amount of hosts which reduces the amount of parasites, which allows the amount of hosts to increase, which allows the amount of parasites to increase. Eventually you get an equilibrium. It may not be stable but usually you will see something like that. Here we have a case where the cowbird is coming in and all the Bell's Vireos are gone because the cowbird has driven them to extinction. Why didn't the cowbird numbers fall as the Bell's Vireo numbers and the Willow Flycatcher numbers fell? Because they have other species that are a reservoir for them to be able to use that are abundant. The Red-winged Blackbird is a major reservoir for Brown-headed Cowbirds. Without it cowbird populations would probably be sustainable with respect to its other hosts. Red-winged Blackbirds are an abundant breeding bird throughout the state. Red-winged Blackbird babies survive along with the baby cowbirds because the Red-winged Blackbirds are larger. The cowbird is an obligate brood parasite, but it is indiscriminate in its choice of host.

In many areas particularly in southern CA efforts to control cowbirds in riparian habitat have worked pretty effectively at bringing back healthy populations of Bell's Vireo and a little bit less effectively at bringing back healthy populations of Willow Flycatcher, particularly the drab southern CA subspecies *extimus* which is critically endangered. Cowbirds are protected because they are native birds. The trapping is done under permits funded through the endangered species act.

They do the same kind of thing in Michigan to protect the Kirtland's Warbler.

The northern populations of Willow Flycatchers are also impacted.

They now rarely breed at all in northern CA except in mountain meadows surrounded by willows. Partly has to do with grazing which attracts cowbirds. Cowbirds have moved recently into the high Sierra, in the last decade or so. It is becoming a problem.

FIELD MARKS

The eastern Willow Flycatchers are very similar to the Alder Flycatcher.

The western Willow Flycatchers are quite different.

Large, brown.

Usually fairly large bill.

All pale mandible.

Usually fairly rounded small head, have a rather gentle look.

No apparent eye ring.

Because of the lack of an apparent eye ring people get confused between Willow Flycatcher and Wood-Pewee. In addition to the earlier discussed differences in behavior the Willow Flycatcher pumps its tail rather slowly and often fans it at the same time, it

has a fairly expressive tail, and the tail is relatively long. In a Wood-Pewee the tail is relatively short and it does not pump the tail. The tail stands still or trembles a little bit when the bird has just landed. The Willow Flycatcher is a large brown colored bird with a smaller head, it seldom shows a crest.

White throat, important difference to Western which is the other species that you are likely to encounter in CA, it has almost always a yellow colored throat.

Blended wing pattern on western birds, do not have the kind of contrast on the tertials and secondary fringes like on Alder or other eastern *Empidonax* species. The tertial fringes are brownish, yellower in color instead of gleaming white and the brown color of the feathers is not as dark, you don't get that much contrast. The nominate Willow Flycatchers in the eastern US are much more contrasting.

Primary projection medium to medium-short, not extending well down the tail as we would expect on a Wood-Pewee or on an Acadian Flycatcher. This means that when the bird pumps its tail it will normally keep its wings folded. Some *Empidonax*, most notably the Hammond's but others as well that have fairly long primary projections, flip their wings at the same time when they flip their tails, those look more active than the Willow Flycatchers.

Sometimes a little tinge of yellow in the undertail coverts. Almost all *Empidonax* when young or in fresh plumage may show yellow on the lower belly or on the undertail coverts.

The Eastern Phoebe is sometimes misidentified as a Willow Flycatcher and vice versa. It pumps its tail up and down, has faint wing bars and no eye ring.

Slide of a bird that has that same kind of pattern that we saw on the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. Joe knew that that was not going to work.

VOCALIZATION

Song a sneezy fitz-bew, fitz-bew, bew.

Do sometimes sing in migration and frequently call in migration.

Sometimes it is not that easy to tell the difference between fitz-bew and fe-BEE-ow

Joe has been confused in the desert.

Call note a breathy, liquid whit, which is quite different from the hard call that is given by the Alder Flycatcher. It sounds like a far away Swainson's Thrush.

If you think that makes it easy, please understand that Gray, Least and Dusky all go whit. Also a rolling brrr and a variety of other rolling vocalizations.

There is information on Joe's class website that goes in a bit more detail into some exceptions to the general difference between the Alder and Willow call notes. Some Willow Flycatchers can give an emphatic call that sounds a bit like the hard note given by the Alder Flycatcher.