

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture April 15th, 2010.

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

The AOU will be splitting off *Troglodytes pacificus*, the pacific population of **the Winter Wren**, and *Troglodytes hiemalis*, the eastern NA population, from nominate *Troglodytes troglodytes* in Eurasia.

The AOU has asked for suggestions from the birding public as to what the split names should be. To retain Winter Wren for the eastern birds has been suggested. That would be very problematic. It would mean that two different things, the circumpolar species before the split and the eastern NA species after the split, would have the same name and there would be no way to tell which of those somebody means by "Winter Wren". For CA for example it would mean that everybody who is not aware of the split yet would report a bird that is an extreme rarity and a case for the records committee!

Eastern birds have occurred in CA, there are maybe 5 sight records.

Vocalizations fairly different, a recording would probably be the best way of documenting an eastern bird.

In general, ground nesting birds are very vulnerable where there are feral cats. Ground nesting birds like quail are much more likely to be impacted. Juncos are ground nesters but seem to do surprisingly well.

First of season for Joe today in San Pedro Valley Park: Cassin's Vireo, Western Flycatcher. Also a Bobcat.

A lot of the older literature is available online now. You can do amazing amounts of research right from you home.

The Biodiversity Heritage Library: <http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/>

The Pacific Railroad Reports with lots of accounts of western natural history:

http://www.cpr.org/Museum/Pacific_RR_Surveys/

"Chicken-run": a mid-April trip to Colorado where you circumnavigate the state in order to see the various species of Prairie-chickens and other grouse. Involves quite a long drive. In the plains of northeastern Colorado there are Greater Prairie-Chickens. Up in the high country in the Rockies there are White-tailed Ptarmigan. In the northwest are Sharp-tailed Grouse and there may also be Greater Sage-Grouse in that area. In the south-central area is the endemic Gunnison Sage-Grouse. In extreme southeastern Colorado are Lesser Prairie-Chickens.

Aptorium, plural **apteria**, featherless parts of skin on a bird. The more correct term for what the field guides call "air sacs" in these grouse. They have colored apteria on their necks under which there are air sacs that can be inflated so that the colored apteria become visible when the birds display.

When the air is expelled out of the inflated air sacs it makes a sound. In the case of the prairie chickens it is a very low booming sound. Sage-Grouse have a popping sound.

Prairie-Chickens

Can be easily identified by range, there is no overlap at all between the two species.

Two of the species that form leks. The males gather together in an open area and do a dance display.

A clump of feathers called pinnae (singular pinna) hangs down at the side of the neck. They are raised when the males are displaying and look like rabbit ears. There are plenty of rabbits where you look for Prairie-Chickens!

Raising the pinnae exposes apteria (areas of bare skin) on the sides of the neck. In addition there are air sacs under the apteria which are inflated in display. The apteria have different colors in the different species. (Not only Prairie-Chickens have colored apteria on the neck. Also Blue (Sooty + Dusky) Grouse, Sharp-tailed Grouse and the sage-grouses.)

Some difference in the displays between the two species of prairie-chicken.

The displays were sometimes imitated by Native Americans.

Greater Prairie-Chicken

OCCURRENCE

A species of grassland habitat.

Formerly ranged all the way across the plains to the eastern seaboard of the US, where a special subspecies, called the Heath Hen, formerly occurred from Virginia up to New England in coastal grasslands.

Highly prized as huntable species. Partly because they form leks they became quite vulnerable to hunters prior to controlled hunting.

Also grassland is a habitat which is itself endangered. It is likely to be co-opted for agriculture or for development. The grasslands that these birds depend on are threatened.

Today very patchy distribution with many isolated populations left.

The isolated population in southeastern Texas near Houston is generally referred to as the Attwater's Prairie-Chicken. Main difference to the northern populations is that it is smaller. Sibley has a picture.

The last time Joe went to Texas you had to make reservations well in advance and they only took small groups out to the observation site where the birds were strutting early in the morning. The situation is extremely critical and the subspecies is probably lost.

The ones on northeastern Colorado: one of the Audubon societies there runs tours on weekends for people to see them on somebody's private ranch.

FIELD MARKS

Yellow eye-combs.

Yellow-orange colored apteria.

Ventral barring (on the belly) quite crisp and complete, looks like zebra stripes.

Tail feathers blunt, form a short fan (both species).

Males all dark tail, females barred tail.

Females have shorter pinnae than males.

Lesser Prairie-Chicken

OCCURRENCE

The easiest one to see on a Colorado chicken-run. It's on a wildlife refuge with blinds that are open to the public. They dance around early in the morning or late in the evening.

FIELD MARKS

Apteria orange-red colored.

Ventral barring fainter than on Greater and broken in the middle. Looks kind of blended.

Tail feathers blunt, form a short fan (both species).

Males all dark tail, females barred tail.

Females have shorter pinnae than males.

Sharp-tailed Grouse

OCCURRENCE

Grasslands and edges of thickets.

Much more widespread than either of the two prairie-chickens, ranging from Alaska through western Canada and southward, reaching the southern limits of its range in Washington State and northern Colorado.

Display the most spectacular of any of these chickens. All of the males crouch down, spread their wings out, raise their tail and run around in a circle. Then they all stop, stay for about 20-30 seconds without moving and then they all move again.

Was and maybe still is on the CA list. With an E next to it which means extirpated. Reportedly occurred in the northeastern part of CA up until the early part of the 20th century. Got on the list based on these historical records. The last ones were recorded around the town of Lookout which does not exist any more. Became extirpated for two reasons. They were shot for food. Native grassland habitat is gone. We brought cattle that grazed all of the grass down to the knob and overgrazed it. Thistle and sagebrush is what comes back when the grasslands are overgrazed to the extent that they are not able to sustain themselves any more. There may have been drought issues also. There is no suitable habitat for them in CA any more.

FIELD MARKS

Yellow combs over the eye.

Underparts spotted on the sides and whitish or plain in the middle of the belly.

Pointed tail, held upright in display, gleaming white underside.

Gunnison Sage-Grouse

OCCURRENCE

Found very locally in Utah and in Colorado.

Does not overlap with the Greater Sage-Grouse.

One place where there is an observation site from a road where you can see the birds at a great distance: the Waunita Lek, located 19 miles east of Gunnison just off Hwy 50. Turn north on County Road 887 (Waunita Hot Springs Road) and go 0.6 miles to a small pull-off where you can view the birds. The site is open April 1st through May 10th.

Displays and vocalizations somewhat different from Greater. Tend to be more spread out on their leks

A fairly recent split.

The US Government decided not to list it as endangered. There are a lot of historic sites where it used to be and is no longer present. The population has basically collapsed. However, Fish and Wildlife Service has the rule that they have to use science to make their decisions. They sent the data to a professor in mathematical statistics. He thought out the sites that had no birds as being statistically invalid. They were trying to judge the extent to which the bird decreased.

FIELD MARKS

The filoplumes, hair like feathers on the neck that are raised around the back of the head in display, are much thicker and more robust than on Greater.

Smaller size than Greater.

Much more black and white contrasting on the tail than Greater.

Nat Geo much better than Sibley on this bird. Paler tail wrong.

Greater Sage-Grouse

OCCURRENCE

A species that seems to be doing pretty well.

Found mostly in the Great Basin regions.

Occurs at a number of localities in CA.

Joe personally discovered the site at Schaffer Mountain many years ago on an Audubon Society field trip to Honey Lake. Each spring the Audubon Society has a field trip to eastern Lassen County. Joe was on this trip and there were no Greater Sage-Grouse at the spot where there was supposed to be a lek. They went further on and Joe saw what looked like little balls of cotton up on a hillside. It were the large white vests of displaying sage-grouse. A dirt road led up to the area where they were. An area with a lot of Sagebrush but very rocky, not enough soil where the lek is for Sagebrush to grow, an open area where these grouse can see each other. You can also see Sage Thrashers and Pronghorn Antelope in the area.

Another lek site is at Crowley Lake in southern Mono County. There used to be signs that have been removed. Off hwy 395, just north of the lake, not far from a church called Green Church.

The signs were removed after sage-grouse biologists took over the church. They now occupy the church site and discourage people from going there. Nevertheless LA Audubon Society still has annual field trips there. They can't keep you out. It is BLM land, open country. LA Audubon goes there because they can get there without having to cross any major mountains. For us it is harder, the Tioga Pass Road does not open until maybe May, too late for the lek.

The lek is somewhere in the flat grassy area by the arm of the lake that extends to the north.

You can frequently find these birds in the evening as well as in the very early morning. The birds have little territories on the lek, where the adult males strut back and forth. They inflate the air sacs. Tail all spread. Each male comes back every day to the same little territory. The females mate with only one or two dominant males. They choose the males that have central territories within the lek. The central spots are occupied by older males. Younger ones take up a position at the periphery. Spots open up over the course of the years. When a vacancy occurs birds of the outer ring move into the central ring. Gradually get closer and closer to the center. The best way to become dominant is to live longer than any of the other males that are around. The strutting is apparently not to impress females but to compete with other males. No physical contact, all is done through strut, through threat. Copulations take place only in the morning, the females are not there in the evening. The females do the whole thing, build the nest, lay a lot of eggs, take care of the precocial chicks.

All of the Greater Sage-Grouse in CA are similar in their genetics, except the Crowley Lake population which are genetically quite different from any other CA population. Almost as big a difference as between Gunnison and Greater.

FIELD MARKS

Black belly on both males and females.

Markings on the tail relatively blended.

Pointed tail feathers.

Female grouse-like face pattern. Pale throat. Dark spot behind the eye. Pheasant more of a large pale eye ring and a much blanker expression on its face. Also a warmer browner bird than a sage-grouse.

Underwing coverts contrastingly white, in pheasant all gray.

Male white breast, looks like an ermine stole.

Yellow apteria visible on the front of the white breast during display.