

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture April 29th, 2010.

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

Bullock's Orioles are nesting in Glen Park. They have nested there before. They are otherwise a very scarce breeder in the city, Glen Park may be the only pair. They are much more common in the interior, they don't like the coastal fog. Maybe Glen Park is sheltered from the fog, maybe they are attracted to the sycamores which are not a common tree in the city.

Lawrence's Goldfinch is an eruptive species, in some years they are everywhere, most years they are scarce. This year they are hardly anywhere. Joe thinks it is correlated with rainfall in the deserts. If it's a wet year we don't get very many. They come here when there is a dry winter in the deserts. They are a specialist in burned habitats. It depends a lot on whether or not there have been some fires, particularly in southern CA, their core breeding area. If there have been a lot of fires there are a lot of Lawrence's Goldfinches. Without fire, if it is wet and other reasons why there are no fires, you will have a lot fewer. They breed here when they get here. They specialize in the seeds of fiddleneck.

Our **Brown Creeper** is of the subspecies *philipsi*. It ranges from SF to about San Louis Obispo County along the coast. It is fairly dark on the belly instead of all white on the entire underparts.

The **Southwest Wings Birding and Nature Festival** is held every year in August in **Arizona**, August is a very good time to visit Arizona. The festival is reasonably prized and the field trips are very inexpensive. You will often get top notch professional quality leaders. They also have good programs. One of the better bird festivals.

Northern Bobwhite

OCCURRENCE

The only quail that is found in the eastern US. Very little overlap with other species of quail.

A game species throughout much of the east.

A lot of the birds disappeared from the northern tier where the winters are cold and the birds are under a lot more pressure than they are in Missouri or Indiana or other places where they are much more common. The big mistake that was made was that hand-reared birds from populations further to the south were introduced into places like upstate New York and Massachusetts. Those birds were not tolerant of cold winters. They hybridized with the native stock and the offspring were not tolerant of cold winters. Introducing the wrong subspecies into this area resulted in a collapse of the northern population. It is still a pretty scarce bird in New England.

Locally common particularly in the southern and central part of the eastern US.

Along roadsides and particularly around the edges of farm lots if there is decent cover.

The birds can be hard to see but are usually detectable by their whistled call.

Introduced as a game bird in many game preserves. Have also been released in parts of the west.

None of the Bobwhite introductions into CA have been successful.

Masked Bobwhite is a severely endangered subspecies. The last wild ones are in Sonora.

Reintroduced in the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge in southern Arizona. They look very different.

FIELD MARKS

Very round shaped bird, very short tail.

Male and female pretty similar.

Male bold dark and white head pattern, bold white supercilium and white throat.

Females buffy around the head.

Reddish brown coloration on the body and on the sides.

Sibley's pictures are a little bit overstated in the rusty coloration.

White spots on sides and flanks.

Sibley illustrates the geographical variation better.

A lot of them have been hybridized in captivity.

VOCALIZATIONS

Bobwhite is onomatopoeia for the song oh-bob-white.

Montezuma Quail

Originally called Mearn's Quail in honor of a wildlife biologist from the 19th century.

At some point the AOU tried to get rid of all of the English names that honor people.

It was substituted by Harlequin Quail because of the appearance of the male's head.

Then somebody pointed out that a bird in Africa was already called the Harlequin Quail.

It got changed to Montezuma Quail.

OCCURRENCE

Very limited distribution in southeastern Arizona over to extreme west Texas where tiny populations are found in the Davis Mountains for example. The Davis Mountains are an isolated mountain range north of Big Bend in extreme western Texas.

The best place to find these birds is where there is a mixture of grass and oak, sort of a scrubby type of habitat, but Joe has seen them in open areas that were heavily forested also.

Very secretive and difficult to see. Much more often heard than seen. As soon as you see them they will flush and they will fly straight away and disappear, fly low. It is like trying to look for a rail.

FIELD MARKS

The birds are extremely spherical.

A crest of loose feathers that hang down on the back of the head like a ponytail.

Male clown-like head pattern.

Very short legs.

The females are quite plain.

Bold white polkadots on the underparts.

VOCALIZATIONS

Loud quavering descending whistle.

Scaled Quail

OCCURRENCE

Birds of the desert and grasslands.

Do occur in disturbed habitats.

Quite common in southern and southwestern Texas. Around the campground at Falcon Dam there are plenty.

Fairly common locally in certain places in Arizona also, but not as common as they are in Texas.

Unknown in CA.

FIELD MARKS

Gets its name from the scaling across the chest.

Crest on top of the head straight and somewhat short, in males it has white tips that are particularly evident when the birds are scurrying away from you. Hunters call it the "cottontop".

Females usually shorter crest with buffy rather than white tips.

Fairly long tail.

VOCALIZATIONS

Unlike either California or Gambel's

Loons

Called divers in Britain.

Traditionally placed first in the book in what is called the Wetmore sequence, partly because of their "primitive" skeleton. Most flying birds have a pneumatic skeleton with air pockets in it. Loons have solid bones, which makes it easier for them to dive but a little harder for them to fly.

Loons are diving birds with pointed, dagger-like bills. When they are foraging they most of their time under the water and only come up to gasp for breath before they go back down. Invariably come up in a different spot from where they dived. They can dive quite deep. Forage mostly for fish but take also crabs and other things off the bottom.

Have fairly short tails but long feet that they use as rudders to propel themselves under the water. The legs are compressed laterally. The tarsus is flat and slices through the water like a knife. They have webbed feet.

In flight the feet project out beyond the tail.

They sleep sitting on the water. No species of loon likes to come out onto land. Their feet are so far back that they can't walk well.

They come up on shore if they are sick or injured. A fairly common injury is swallowing a fish hook.

Oil is a fairly serious problem for diving birds. When they try to preen it off they ingest it and it poisons them. Whenever you find a loon on the shore it is likely not a healthy bird.

According to rehab people injured loons are a catch 22. If they are in the water there is no way you can catch them. By the time they are so sick they come up on shore so you can catch them the chances of their survival have dropped dramatically, 5% survival rates.

There are five species of loons in the world. All of them are found in the northern hemisphere where they breed at high latitudes.

All five species have been recorded in CA waters, the Arctic is the rarest.

Loons sometimes spend the summer here, especially first year birds. In the first year of their life they frequently do not migrate or do not migrate all the way to their breeding grounds. They don't get into full breeding plumage for two years, many of them are in a winter-like plumage through that first summer. So we do get loons year round, which includes basically all the regularly occurring species. They are much less common in the summer than in the winter and in migration.

In general identification of loons in flight is a little bit more art than it is science.

A lot of people like to do it by setting up their scopes in the springtime at Pigeon Point in San Mateo County or at Ocean Beach in SF. You can see loons streaming by. They will mostly be Pacific Loons which occur off shore in the largest numbers.

Loons lose all of their remiges (primaries and secondaries) simultaneously in the wing molt and become flightless.

Males and females look identical in all species.

All loons have red eyes.

The chicks are precocial. They cling to the back of the mother, even while the mother dives.

Red-throated Loon

Called Red-throated Diver in Britain

OCCURRENCE

One of the more common species in CA where we find it primarily as a migrant and winter visitor along the immediate coast. They tend to prefer inshore waters and shallow waters. Flocks of up to several hundred may be found at favorable locations where there is a lot of fish. They are almost strictly oceanic. They do come into SF Bay where they can be at least locally common.

Like to feed on sanddab and other small flatfish.

A good place to look for them in SF is off the Cliff House. It is the loon you are most likely to see from there.

Breeds in the high arctic.

The only loon that builds its nest at any distance from shore. It will nest inland on the ground away from the water.

FIELD MARKS

The smallest loon.

Bill frequently held up in the air. Lower mandible slightly uptilted. The bill is mostly straight, the upward tilt that many field guides emphasize is mainly because of the way it is often held. The bill gets progressively more upturned with age.

A considerable amount of white along the waterline typical of both juvenal and adult winter Red-throated. They have much more white along the waterline when they are swimming than any other species of loon, usually extending all the way forward. Because of this they are sometimes misidentified as Arctic Loons, an accidental visitor to CA which is famous for having white at the waterline, particularly on the flanks.

Any loon can show a lot of white if it rolls on its side which they do while they preen. All loons have white bellies.

Adult Summer

In the breeding season dark red throat, the color of dry blood.

Dark upperparts without any checkerboard pattern.

Adult Winter

The birds that we see are mostly in winter plumage or young birds.

Very pale on the crown, not a huge amount of contrast between the pale gray on the top of the head and the very white face.

Front of the neck pure white. The gray on the back of the neck is reduced to the rearmost portion so that most of the side of the neck is white.

Back quite distinctive, medium gray speckled with white. The white spots are shaped like grains of rice, uniformly scattered over the entire back.

Juvenal

Retained through most of the first winter on loons. Can be seen well into February and sometimes even March.

Looks quite different from both winter and breeding adult.

A fairly dark back with tiny white spots, much smaller than those on the winter adult.

A considerable amount of gray extending across the face, the side of the neck and the foreneck, leaving a fairly small white patch on the side of the face. The neck is completely dusky without reddish, the reddish that Sibley shows is a mistake.

In flight

Low-slung neck, the other loons tend to hold their necks out straight.

Frequently they will angle their heads upwards slightly, so that the bill is pointing upwards.

Tend to raise their wings up higher above the horizontal than most other species of loons.

The stripe under the wing that separated the white underwing from the white underparts is narrower and paler than in the other 3 species.

Feet not as outlandishly big as on Common or Yellow-billed, look more normally proportioned.

Pacific Loon

Was formerly lumped with the Arctic Loon and the combined name for them was Arctic Loon.

Another classic example of an ill-advised retention of an old name.

The new Arctic Loon is a California Bird Record Committee review species.

People are still after 20 years submitting their Arctic Loon sightings, blissfully unaware that we don't want *that* Arctic Loon, we want the *new* Arctic Loon.

OCCURRENCE

Replaces the Arctic Loon in our hemisphere. Breeds from Alaska to about Hudson Bay.

A scarce visitor to the east. Also very scarce anywhere in the interior. Migrates high above the interior, is otherwise a strictly coastal bird.

Pacific and Arctic Loons overlap in western Alaska and do not interbreed, so the split seems to be a pretty good one. They winter sympatricly in the Sea of Japan.

Pacific prefers deeper water than Red-throated. Joe associates that with its straighter, more dagger-like bill. Because they are not fishing from off the bottom there is no advantage to having an upturned bill. They are foraging on other kinds of fish, mostly further off shore.

Pacific Loon is the most common loon off our coast. If you go out on boat trips it should outnumber all of the other loons by 10:1.

It is much less likely to be seen inshore and for that reason a lot of people don't see it that often.

It will come in to the shallows sometimes, it will come into SF Bay, but it is never a common bird there.

If you do seawatching the vast majority of loons that you see burning your eyes out into the horizon of the ocean are going to be Pacific.

Basically all the loons of this type that you'll see can be safely assumed to be Pacific, unless you are sure that it's an actual Arctic and you have studied up on that and know quite a bit about it.

FIELD MARKS

Bill straighter, more dagger-like, never has that upturned look that some of the Red-throated get. Bill fairly thin. Arctic has a much more substantial bill.

Head rounded. Nicely curving up and then coming to a slight slope where it meets the bill.

This shape with a fairly thin bill and relatively small rounded head is somewhat like Red-throated.

Adult Summer

Differences to Arctic in breeding plumage very slight.

Nape very pale, almost pearl gray. In Arctic it is darker, more lead gray.

Pacific shows fairly fine stripes on the side of the neck.

A purple or slightly violet iridescence to the throat. (Alaskan Arctic *viridigularis* green iridescence). This is about as reliable as telling the two scaup apart by head sheen. It is an iridescent color and is depending a lot on the light. Identifying them by the color of the throat is not a reliable way.

Upperparts have patches of checkerboard pattern on the scapulars and on the upper back.

Arctic has the same pattern on the upperparts.

Common has checkerboard pattern over the entire back, not in patches.

Red-throated never has a checkerboard pattern.

Adult Winter and Juvenile

The main thing to look for when identifying loons is the pattern on the side of the neck.

In Pacific it is three-toned gray-dark-white. Gray on the hindneck with a dark outline and then a contrasting white foreneck. The dark is coming forward on the side of the neck at least half way.

The pattern is straight, there are no zigzags on the side of the neck.

No other loon has this crisp clear simple pattern on the side of the neck.

Red-throated and Arctic show more white along the waterline, Red-throated along the whole side of the body and Arctic as a flank patch.

Pacific does not show white along the waterline.

A little dark chin strap separates the white throat from the white on the front of the neck in about 80-85% of the birds.

That differs from Arctic which rarely if ever has a dark chin strap.

The dark chin strap is easily seen in museum specimens where the birds are lying on their backs and their necks stretched straight out. In the field it is very easy to overlook. It occurs right where there is a fold of feathers between the chin and the foreneck. It can be construed to be a shadow or an artifact of feathers overlapping. You will not see it unless you are specifically looking for it.

Winter adults are solidly dark on the upperparts.

A scaly look caused by buffy tips to the feathers indicates that the bird is a juvenile.

Arctic Loon

Called Black-throated Diver in Britain

OCCURRENCE

Ranges from Europe all the way to the Russian Far East and extreme western Alaska. Breed locally in the Nome Area where they overlap Pacific.

The Arctic Loons in Alaska are of the subspecies *viridigularis*, which means green-throated. First documented for CA was found at Abbotts Lagoon quite a few years ago. The bird never came in close.

FIELD MARKS

Head larger and blockier and bill bigger than Pacific Loon. This may lead to confusion with Common Loon.

Pacific Loons are in many ways more like Red-throated Loons. They are smaller, more petite, have thinner bills, lighter gray heads.

Best field mark in all plumages is the white flank patch above the waterline. It is important that it is confined to the flanks and that it is obvious and does not disappear as the bird rolls around and that it is on both sides of the bird not just one.

Red-throated Loons show white along the waterline which extends all the way forward, on Arctic Loons it is confined to the flanks.

The gray color of the head and neck is a little darker than on Pacific Loon in all plumages.

Adult Summer

The white lines on the side of the neck are bolder, more obvious. A far better mark than the iridescence of the throat.

Greenish iridescence to the color of the throat which is not a good way to tell them apart (see above under Pacific Loon).

Adult Winter and Juvenile

The chin strap is absent or indistinct.