

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture May 5th, 2010.

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

Hermit Thrushes breeds in the Bay Area in Redwood and mature Douglas Fir forests. You can hear them sing in places like Tomales Bay State Park. Also in the Santa Cruz mountains.

Swainson's Thrushes are migrating now. They have been here for about a week at least. They are much more often heard than seen. They have less spotting on the throat than a Hermit Thrush. Hermit Thrushes have better defined, bigger, blacker spots. Swainson's have smaller spots that are brown and a little bit more angular. Swainson's usually has a buffier face, a bigger buffy eye ring. The difference in the tail is not reliable, not all of the Hermit Thrushes show red in the central tail feathers, which you see when you look down on the bird. When they fly away you may be able to see contrasting red, on some birds it is pretty evident. Hermit Thrush is much more variable than Swainson's. The Swainson's that are here are of the subspecies *ustulatus*, the Pacific slope subspecies. Another race is found at higher elevations in the eastern Sierra Nevada in aspen groves, those birds are much more olive in color.

The ones we have here are mostly at low elevations at water courses and willow thickets along the coast.

McGillivray's Warblers are shy birds that tend to stay in dense cover. You need to know their song. It is easy to miss unless you are tuned into it. It's a sweeter, sweeter, sweeter. Sometimes two-parted sweeter, sweeter, sweeter, sugar, sugar. Gazos Creek Road in San Mateo County is a good place for them.

They are increasing in the Bay Area as a breeding bird, they used to be much less common.

Clear skies and light winds are good conditions for migrating birds to keep going, which means they are **bad conditions for birders to see migrants**. Especially on the coast not many migrants are seen in these weather conditions. Migrants tend to stop when there is a lot of cloud cover or fog or when a front is coming through and it is cold or it is drizzling.

We don't know everything about how birds are able to **navigate**. We do know that some birds have an innate knowledge of the **stars** and their motion. That is shown by some very famous experiments using orientation cages in a planetarium. The birds are orienting according to the star patterns that they are presented with rather than the actual direction that you would expect them to be migrating.

There are other ways for birds to navigate. For example many birds can detect **magnetic fields**.

A lot of birds migrate during the daytime, like waterfowl and raptors. Most small songbirds migrate at night, apparently to avoid being eaten by raptors.

Migration does not only require an ability to navigate in the right direction, you also have to **know how far to fly**.

Some really interesting work has been done on migration of **Bar-tailed Godwits** that fly non-stop from Alaska down to Polynesia and New Zealand taking advantage of certain weather conditions. They wait for a low pressure system in the right place and follow the winds around it.

Joe took pictures of a **Solitary Sandpiper** east of Pescadero:

<http://fog.ccsf.cc.ca.us/~jmorlan/newgallery.htm>

Several Solitary Sandpipers have been seen around the Bay Area. They are fairly scarce here in CA. They are more common as a migrant further east. In the eastern US they are much more common than here in the far west.

The Solitary Sandpiper has two subspecies, only the nominate eastern *solitaria* is shown in the books. The eastern bird has a solid black line from the eye to the bill, in the western subspecies *cinnamomea* it is speckled and much less distinct. The western bird is larger and has broader dark bars on its tail. There is some indication that the western birds may have more pale at the base of the bill.

A **Dusky Flycatcher** was reported from the summit of Mt. Davidson on SF. When Joe hears about Dusky Flycatchers, especially in the spring, he always raises an eyebrow. He remembers Paul Lehman telling him years ago that he thought Dusky Flycatchers were way overreported in the spring in the lowlands in CA. This particular bird was reported to give "whit" and "deee" notes. There is a call note given by the males on the breeding grounds that sounds like "deee, deee, deee, hick", but the species is not known to give that vocalization in migration. The description of what the bird looked like sounded good for Dusky, but it was reported to flick both tail and wings. Dusky usually only flicks its tail and not the short wings.

Tufted Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

Mexico to Ecuador in the highlands.
Records from Texas and Arizona.

FIELD MARKS

Butterscotch coloration.
Tiny bill.
Perky crest.

Phoebes

Medium sized flycatchers that tend to forage fairly low and in the open.
They dip their tails down and up. Do not occur in flocks, tend to occur as individuals or pairs or small family groups.
Three species in the world.
The name comes from the vocalization that is given typically by the Eastern Phoebe.
All have an all black bill, at least in adults.

Eastern Phoebe

OCCURRENCE

More migratory than the Black Phoebe.
Breeds pretty far up into Canada. Main wintering grounds in the gulf states and in Mexico.
Occurs regularly as a vagrant in CA, not too surprising since it breeds in Alberta and northeastern British Columbia.
Has hybridized with Black Phoebe in Colorado.
Almost all CA records in late fall and through the winter.

FIELD MARKS

The least distinctive of the three phoebes.

Bill all black. Also fairly narrow and thick, rounder, less flat and triangular than on most flycatchers.

Gray upperparts. Head, wings and tail darker than the back.

Mostly white underparts.

There is often a trace of a gray vest.

Sometimes the young birds in the fall have a bit of yellow on the lower belly.

Could be confused with an *Empidonax*, partly because of its tail wagging behavior.

One found at San Bruno Mountain a couple of years ago was originally identified as a Willow Flycatcher. Willow Flycatcher is extremely unusual in the winter, much more so than Eastern Phoebe.

Can be confused with the Eastern Kingbird which is also gray above and white below.

The Eastern Kingbird has a stronger, more defined black cap. The pattern on the side of the face is crisper, it is more blended on the Eastern Phoebe.

The Eastern Kingbird has a shorter tail with a white band at the tip.

A Wood-Pewee is also a gray bird with pale underparts. It has more in the way of wing bars, usually fairly well defined, but in the late summer they may be worn completely off.

VOCALIZATION

A very measured fee-be, fee-be.

Also a metallic chip note, not too different from some of the calls given by the Black Phoebe.

Black Phoebe**OCCURRENCE**

Found in parks and gardens, particularly if there is water around. Also in rural areas, farmland, any kind of open area where there is water. A variety of different habitats mostly in the lowlands. Avoids the arid deserts.

Not very migratory.

Ranges all the way down to Panama. There it occurs along watercourses even at higher elevations than it does here.

Likes to nest under bridges or on rafters or under eaves of buildings. Builds a nest mostly out of mud with twigs and plant fibers mixed in, the nest is essentially indistinguishable from the nest of a Barn Swallow.

FIELD MARKS

One of NA's more striking birds.

Dressed in a black tuxedo, with a snowy white belly coming to a point in the middle of the chest.

Superficial resemblance to some plumages of the eastern slate-colored race of the Dark-eyed Junco. However, a junco is a little bird with a pink bill that forages for seeds on the ground.

Very faint wing bars.

White fringes to the tertials. They vary geographically. In Panama they have solidly white tertials.

Juvenal plumage held for only about six weeks. Buff edges to the wings, particularly the wing bars and also the rump may be buffy. A lot of variation, some of them have a lot more buff than others. Browner color overall.

VOCALIZATION

Some interesting songs most of which are very high and thin and metallic, carry a long way.

Most typical call is a loud cleep, carries a long way.

Say's Phoebe

OCCURRENCE

Ranges up to Alaska. Quite migratory.

In CA it is a bird more of foothills and arid canyons and arroyos than the Black Phoebe.

Scrubby habitat, they do need some water nearby. Drier air conditions compared to what the Black Phoebe likes. More open grassland or farmland, areas with relatively few trees rather than suburban habitats.

Mojave and the east side of the Sierra Nevada is all Say's Phoebe country.

In the Bay Area it is a migrant and winter visitor. It does nest in the foothills of the San Joaquin Valley in places like Del Puente Canyon, Fresno County, parts of Kern County, Kings county.

The Sacramento Valley is pretty much occupied by Black Phoebes. Say's are in the San Joaquin Valley which is more desert-like.

The birds that we see in the Bay Area along the immediate coast are probably migrants from the north.

It is possible that a lot of kingbird reports on CBCs are misidentified Say's Phoebes.

Nest typically built into earth embankments along watercourses or dry arroyos. They will use buildings. Similar in structure to Black Phoebe nests.

FIELD MARKS

Pumpkin orange color to the flanks, lower belly and undertail coverts.

Otherwise somewhat similar in plumage to an Eastern Phoebe, gray on the back, blackish or dark on the forehead, in particular a striking contrast to the black tail.

Really narrow tertial fringes.

Quite rusty on the undertail coverts.

Poorly illustrated in most field guides, and it used to be worse.

Nat Geo shows it much darker, dingier than it actually is.

The gray colors in Sibley are a big improvement, but Sibley does not show the darkness to the face and the crown that the bird has in life, instead showing it with an uncharacteristic pale head and dark ear coverts. Sibley's bird is also too red underneath.

VOCALIZATION

A plaintive descending whistle.

Similar to the descending whistle given by the Dusky-capped Flycatcher, a bird of pine-oak woodland in Mexico and Arizona and a vagrant to CA in the winter.

Vermilion Flycatcher

Note that there is only one L in Vermilion!

OCCURRENCE

Ranges from South America up to Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and very locally in southern CA, along the Colorado River where it breeds. It has nested as far north as the Kern River Preserve.

Generally prefers things like cottonwood and sycamores along water courses. A lowland bird.

Tends to act like a tiny little Phoebe. Tends to pump its tail a bit.

Near the town of Blythe which is right on the Colorado River, there is a trailer park called Mayflower Park that has quite a few Vermilion Flycatchers. Sometimes at the Salton Sea.

Most northern CA records are from the Central Valley or the interior. There are very few records from along the immediate coast.

FIELD MARKS

Tiny bill.

Very short tail.

Adult Male

Crown and entire underparts orange red.

Dark brown mask, upperparts, wings and tail.

First Year Male

A highly variable plumage.

Can look almost like a full on adult or much more like a female.

Female

Dark crown.

Dark mask through the eye, no eye ring.

White eyebrow.

Faint wing bars.

Streaked underneath.

Belly usually pinkish or reddish, or yellowish in immatures.

Some of the immatures may lack that entirely.