

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010.  
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

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The bill of the male **Ruddy Duck** is bright blue in the breeding season, black in the non-breeding season. Now birds with bicolored bills can be seen where the bill has some of the blue retained while it is in the process of changing color.

The Ruddy Duck is a fairly abundant species throughout the Bay Area. It breeds locally in small numbers but is much more common in migration and winter.

A lot of eastern vagrants and western migrants are passing through now.

Angie found a **Chestnut-sided Warbler** at the south end of Lake Merced on Saturday: It did not have any chestnut color on it. Joe and Robbie saw another one at the same place on Monday which did have a narrow streak of chestnut on both sides, a little bit more than is usual on fall birds. Most fall Chestnut-sided Warblers either have just a touch of chestnut or none at all. In the fall it is hard to say if the birds with chestnut on their sides are adult females or immature males. We do know that most of the vagrant eastern warblers that get to the coast of CA are immatures. Assuming they were immature, the Monday bird was probably an immature male. The one without the chestnut could be either one.

There was no Chestnut-sided Warbler seen there on Sunday. The Monday bird stayed a couple of days.

It is an eastern species that occurs as a rare vagrant to the coast of CA and also to the desert oases. It is weird that two birds show up in the same place.

The immatures that we see in the fall are usually just lime-green on the back with yellow wing bars, very plain gray underparts and a gray face with a white circular eye ring. They frequently cock their tails in the air and they have white tail spots, a characteristic of the genus *Dendroica*.

A **Blackburnian Warbler** has been seen in the flowering eucalyptus at Vista Grande Canal last week. Vista Grande Canal is the most overnamed place in the world, a ditch that runs along the edge of the Olympic Golf Club across from Lake Merced.

There was also a report of a **possible Blue-headed Vireo** from that place. The Blue-headed Vireo is a split from what used to be called the Solitary Vireo. It is another eastern bird, a California Bird Records Committee review species. It occurs regularly in very tiny numbers. The problem is that it is very difficult to distinguish from bright Cassin's Vireo, which is the Solitary Vireo representative found typically in CA, migrating in small numbers but much more regularly. The differences are very subtle. Blue-headed Vireo is a slightly smaller, brighter colored bird with a sharper contrast between the slaty colored face and the pale throat. Cassin's is more blended on the side of the face.

The problems are most evident in the fall when you have Cassin's Vireos in fresh plumage. They are much crisper than in the spring and summer, bright yellow on the sides and on the flanks and pretty green on the back, they look pretty snappy.

Joe talked to a colleague in Colorado who sees a lot of both species in an area where they are both coming through and they are both reasonably common. He said that in 25-35% of those birds they don't know which of the species they see.

A blue-headed Vireo should be critically studied over a long period of time and preferably there should be photographs.

There are a lot of **Yellow Warblers** migrating through right now. A lot of these Yellow Warblers have texturing on the breast that makes them look like they have a blurry patterning. They get sometimes misidentified as Orange-crowned Warblers. The Yellow Warbler has a complete eye ring, especially in the fall. The Orange-crowned Warbler has a beady eye with a crescent above and a crescent below, and dark in front and back, so they look as if they were squinting. It gives them a different kind of expression on their face. There is a more open look on a Yellow Warbler. The Yellow Warblers can be really pale, they don't have to have any yellow on them at all. There is some geographical variation and a lot of individual variation, too.

Often these birds are high up. Look at the underside of the tail. The Yellow Warblers have yellow all the way out to the tip of the tail. The Orange-crowned Warblers have the underside of the tail gray. Both are reasonably common. Right now, Yellow Warblers are coming through in reasonable numbers. Joe did not see an Orange-crowned Warbler on Monday.

There is a trail that runs under the willows to the north of the penguin statue. It is usually overgrown but had been cleared out. There Joe found a **Northern Waterthrush**.

A **Burrowing Owl** was seen at Heron's Head. They can be pretty tricky. They are a scarce bird, they migrate a bit and sometimes they settle into riff-raff, rocky stuff. One was in a hole over by the cliff house some years ago. They are scarcer now than they used to be. They are seriously declining.

On Saturday, September 25<sup>th</sup>, there will be the **San Francisco Rare Bird Round Up**. That is something Alan Hopkins started years ago. The idea is that since there are so many great birds found on the CBC, what would happen if we put people out there in a similar form at the height of migration, what would we find then. So they set up this unofficial rare bird roundup. You bird your area from dawn to noon. You don't have to count numbers, you are basically just going after species and trying to find rarities. You are encouraged to poach other people's territories if you want to. The main rule is there are no rules. Then you meet at 12.30 at Crissy Field and have lunch and do a countdown. If any rarities are seen in the morning, people have a chance to go and look for them in the afternoon.

**Velella**, or **By-the-wind-sailors**, are distantly related to jellyfish and float on the surface of the water. Each Velella is a little hydroid colony with a sail-like structure on top. They get blown about by the wind. They can occur in big numbers and look like bubbles on the water. They are part of the pleuston, the surface community of tropical and temperate seas. Short tentacles hang down from them which they use to feed on zooplankton in the surface water. Where these animals are other animals like fish come to feed on them and are in their turn attracting birds. So when you see them on a pelagic that's often a good sign, it means that there is probably fish, which means that there are probably birds.

A lot about Velella's fascinating biology can be read here:

<http://webs.lander.edu/rsfox/invertebrates/velella.html>

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## **Procellariidae**

The family that includes the fulmars, the shearwaters, and certain petrels.

All of them have the nostril tubes connecting on the top of the bill, unlike albatrosses.

Many species nest in burrows, mostly in remote oceanic islands.

## **Northern Fulmar**

The Northern Fulmar belongs to a group within the Procellariidae called the fulmarine petrels.

The other species of this group are southern hemisphere birds.

The fulmarine petrels also include the giant petrels. They are like fulmars, but they are the size of albatrosses, big, big petrels. There are two species in the southern hemisphere.

The Cape Petrel or Pintado Petrel is another bird in this group.

On the fulmars the nasal tubes are running about halfway out the culmen of the bird's bill.

There is also a Southern Fulmar or Antarctic Fulmar, but it is not documented to occur in the northern hemisphere. Very similar, slimmer bill. Would probably be overlooked if they occurred in the northern hemisphere.

### **OCCURRENCE**

Breeds in the northern hemisphere. Large numbers breed on the Alaskan islands, the Aleutian chain. Also in the North Atlantic, on cliffs and islands off Europe and up into Greenland and some of the Maritime Provinces.

They nest on cliff ledges. Cliff nesting instead of in burrows is a little bit unusual in the family. Fulmars are famous for having a smelly stomach oil which they use to feed their babies and which they also use to defend themselves if a predator approaches their nest. They eject the smelly oil at the intruder. When you examine specimens of fulmars and many other similar species of shearwater-type birds, they still smell, even though the specimens are a hundred years old.

Every five years or so we get an incursion, decent numbers of fulmars show up close to our shores and you can see them without having to get seasick on a boat.

Most of the fulmars that we see are in migration and during the winter months because they breed in our summer. Stragglers may appear throughout the year after there has been a winter invasion, but most of the time the birds are absent from our waters during the summer months.

Extremely scarce inside SF Bay.

They may occur in flocks, but that is not because of flocking behavior but because they are attracted to local food supply densities.

There have been interesting studies about the distribution of fulmars at sea, depending on water temperature and salinity. David Ainley wrote a paper on the occurrence of seabirds in CA, in which he concluded that fulmars seem to prefer cold water and high salinity:

<http://elibrary.unm.edu/sora/wb/v07n02/p0033-p0068.pdf>

### **FIELD MARKS**

There are dark, light and intermediate morphs. The light morph birds are more common in the north Atlantic and in parts of the Bering Sea. Further south in the Pacific we tend to get more dark morph birds.

There is a lot of variation, hardly any two fulmars look exactly alike, although typical dark morph birds and typical light morph birds are reasonably common. What we call morphs are merely the ends of a continuum of variation. Molt contributes also to this variation. If you see a seabird that has no picture in the book it is probably a fulmar. They show the greatest amount of variation. Instead of leaping to the conclusion that you are seeing the first northern hemisphere record of an Antarctic petrel, you might want to make sure that the bird is not just a fulmar in weird plumage. The plumage is not important. The shape and particularly your assessment of the bill and the flight style of the bird is going to be critical in the identification.

A melon-shaped head with a very rounded, bulbous crown, a thick neck and a thickset body shaped like a football, it has a chunky, rather muscular look to it. A different shape than most of the gulls and other seabird species. The shearwaters are much sleeker with narrower wings and generally longer tails.

Bill with plates, light colored even in dark morph birds.

Bill held at a 45° angle when the bird sits on the water and also in flight, the short stubby bill held downward is an excellent clue, a gull does not fly that way. Flies with very shallow wing beats followed by long glides.

A lot of the seabirds are identified the way a lot of the people identify hawks, more a general kind of impression thing, you get to know the shape and the flight style. But remember that the flight style of any bird will depend on the wind conditions! If it is really calm, a bird might have a very labored flight. If there are gale force winds they birds may be towering up into those winds, using dynamic gliding.

The Pacific population tends to have a darker tail than the Atlantic population. On the Atlantic population the tail is about the same color as the rump, usually relatively pale. Individual variation in both subspecies.

They can have some mottling, but never a distinct M-pattern which we see on some of the shearwaters, like the Buller's Shearwater, or on some of the Gadfly Petrels.

Some of the fulmars are gull mimics in that they have a light body and a gray mantle. There isn't any gull that has tubes on the bill. In a lot of the tubenose birds you can't really see the tubes, but on fulmars they are quite evident.

On light morph birds the eye stands out on the pale face, something you don't see on any of the other Procellariidae.

Dark ones can be confused with other species, like some of the dark shearwaters. Best identified by the short, stubby bill and by the lack of any patterning on the back. Some of the individuals may have some pale on some of the outer primaries, but in general they are pretty uniformly patterned.

## **Parkinson's Petrel**

Australian name: Black Petrel

They also have the Westland Petrel, which is almost identical but bigger and has a much more lumbering flight.

Parkinson's Petrel is about the size of a Pink-footed Shearwater. Westland Petrel dwarfs the Pink-footed Shearwaters. Distinguishing them is not easy. Westland is not known from the north Pacific.

A fulmarine petrel, related to the fulmars. Big, lumbering seabirds. not as graceful as most of the shearwaters and with broader, blunter-tipped wings and slightly bigger heads. Bill probably the main difference.

## **OCCURRENCE**

Found in New Zealand and Australian waters.

Both Parkinson's (Black) and Westland petrels are found in southern waters, including off South America.

Parkinson's has only recently been added to the CA list based on a single, well photographed bird. Our knowledge of Parkinson's is also relatively new and it dates back to Joe Jehl, who was curator of birds at the San Diego Museum of Natural History. In the early 1970s he found a some Parkinson's Petrels off Middle America, they had not been previously known to occur there. His account is in this article:

<http://elibrary.unm.edu/sora/Auk/v091n04/p0681-p0699.pdf> (p.687 = p.7 of the pdf)

They are similar to Flesh-footed Shearwaters, an uncommon species that ranges in Australian waters but is known to occur regularly in the north Pacific. Parkinson's Petrel is dark, the same size, with a yellow bill with a dark tip. Perhaps a slightly more wedge-shaped tail and dark feet. But these birds fly with their feet tucked in under the feathers, so seeing the feet can be tricky. The bill shape is different. Jehl speculated that many claims of Flesh-footed Shearwaters off CA might actually be misidentified Parkinson's Petrels. With Jehl's warning people started to look really close at Flesh-footed Shearwaters off CA to make sure that's what they were, and they were all Flesh-footed Shearwaters.

## **FIELD MARKS**

An all dark *Procellaria*.

Basically looks all black from a distance, shown as brown in the book.

Shorter, more angular and stubbier looking bill than Flesh-footed Shearwater.

## **White-chinned Petrel**

*Procellaria aequinoctialis*

## **OCCURRENCE**

Another bird from the southern hemisphere.

This was the most common tubenose when Joe took a pelagic out of Cape Town to the Atlantic side of South Africa. They saw all kinds of variation.

First CA record last year in October on a pelagic out of Half Moon Bay where Alvaro Jaramillo recognized it. The bird was beautifully photographed and video taped, it was very nicely documented. It is now accepted.

## **FIELD MARKS**

Another dark *Procellaria*, similar to Parkinson's and Westland petrels.

All these species are big-headed, with a short, stubby yellow bill.

In White-chinned the tip of the bill is pale, dark in the other two.

A tiny little white spot on the chin of more than half of them, evident on a museum tray, essentially not visible in the field.

## Gadfly Petrels

The genus *Pterodroma*.

These are among the poorest known of all of the seabirds. Rarely do they come in and follow ships. Most of them nest on extremely remote islands. When they are seen, they are seen flying away at high speed. They are among the most agile and impressive flyers of any bird in the world. They tend to fly with their wings angled, unlike other seabirds that have their wings out straight. They rarely flap their wings. There are numerous cryptic species.

## Great-winged Petrel

### OCCURRENCE

Found on the southern oceans around Antarctica.

2 subspecies, nominate *macroptera*, and *gouldi* which ranges in new Zealand waters.

Some authorities think they should be two different species.

About 3 records for CA (*gouldi*), really unexpected.

The first record was quite remarkable. It was found on a pelagic trip in July 1996 out of Bodega Harbor into the Cordell bank. There was nice video of that bird. It was identified by the leader as a Murphy's Petrel. A big lumbering thing that had all the field marks of a Murphy's Petrel. An Australian field ornithologist thought of the video that the bird was way too big and bulky (there was some interaction between it and a fulmar) and did not fly like a Murphy's Petrel.

In October 1998 a Great-winged Petrel was seen in Monterey Bay, identified in the field by Steve Howell and photographed at fairly close range.

This last weekend, September 18<sup>th</sup>, a third one was well documented on a Monterey Seabirds pelagic at Cabrillo Canyon, out of Santa Cruz.

### FIELD MARKS

Pale throat and forehead characteristic of the *gouldi* subspecies (which is sometimes called Gray-faced Petrel). The nominate race tends not to have much pale on the face.

A lot of the field marks of Murphy's, but a bigger bird, it looks blockier.

The bill is about twice as thick. A much steeper forehead.

More lumbering flight.

## Murphy's Petrel

Was not described to science until 1949. Was described by the curator at the American Museum of Natural History, Robert Cushman Murphy. He named it *Pterodroma ultima* because he didn't think there was going to be any further new species of *Pterodroma* described.

When this bird was described by Murphy he had known about it for quite a long period of time, over two decades. There were numerous museum specimens that were Murphy's Petrels, but they had all been mislabeled as other species. Before he described a new species, he wanted to make sure that there wasn't somebody out there who would have priority. According to the Linnean rules of taxonomy and nomenclature, the official name for a bird is the one given to it by the first person to describe it properly. Murphy could not believe that such a widespread species had not been recognized as a species before. He kept expecting that somewhere someplace some museum would have one of them and would have a name that was unique and new. Instead all of the specimens were called something else.

## OCCURRENCE

It breeds in the south Pacific islands, mostly the Tuamotu Archipelago.

Its distribution at sea is not particularly well known.

Found only in the deepest water. Do not come to shore except to nest.

Our far offshore waters are not often visited by birders. In the early 1980s seabird biologists on oceanographic ships observed dark *Pterodromas*, sometimes in big numbers. Also pelagic birding trips saw birds like that. The identification remained controversial, but generally the birds were thought to be Solander's Petrels, an all dark *Pterodroma* with white flashes in the underwings that was reasonably well known.

Birds washed up on the coast of Oregon on three different occasions were identified as Murphy's Petrels.

Eventually some of these dark *Pterodromas* in our far offshore waters could be collected and they all proved to be Murphy's Petrels.

We now know that they are regular in deep water off our shores during spring, April, May and into early June.

This is the best known place to see them.

The thing about going out in April and May off California is that there is a prevailing northwesterly wind that does not stop. It is extremely difficult to get out into deep water.

**Solander's Petrel** (*Pterodroma solandri*), also called the Bird of Providence  
Breeds on islands off New Zealand.

It is reasonably common in the Tasman sea.

It regularly reaches waters off Japan.

It is right now not on the NA list. Recently there was a bird photographed off British Columbia that looks good. It might get on the list if that bird it is accepted.

## FIELD MARKS

A dark gray bird that looks black in the glare.

There is a very faint M on the back.

Too small bodied to be a fulmar.

The tail is relatively long compared to a fulmar.

Bill dark, much thinner than a fulmar's, held downward like a fulmar.

(**Solander's Petrel** is a heavier billed bird.)

Chin grayish white.

(**Solander's Petrel** also has a pale patch, but it has pale above on the forehead also, about equal to the pale on the chin area, which is less (on the chin) than Murphy's. In Murphy's the white is mostly below the bill.)

Depending on the light you may get a little light flash in the underwing on the primaries, it makes them look a little bit like a jaeger.

The underwing primary coverts are dark.

(On **Solander's Petrel** the primary coverts are white with dark tips. An obvious dark band is bisecting the white patch. That mark actually shows up in the field from about as far away as you can see the bird.)

On Murphy's there is only the faintest suggestion of a bisection, if at all.

They often have a dark hooded effect, a normal variation depending on the light conditions.

*Pterodroma* flight style, the wings held angled. Never really flap, move very erratically from one direction to the other, show this side and that side and then they're gone.

## **JOE'S SPEACH ABOUT THESE SEABIRDS AND PELAGIC TRIPS**

We were very ignorant just a few decades ago compared to what we know today to be out there. The birds were there before. They were seen and thought to be just a weird something or other. There could be other species that may be regular in CA waters.

Many of these birds are very long distance migrants. It is tempting to think that the birds have the entire ocean to wander around in. In that case we should get all of them eventually.

But there are ecosystems within the ocean. Things like temperature and salinity and what kind of food there is and what depth the food is at and what kind of upwelling there is. To us it just looks like water, but to the birds these are strong, important differences.

Many of these seabirds go on oceanic voyages taking them from the south Pacific into the north Pacific and back again routinely. The abundant Sooty Shearwaters and Pink-footed Shearwaters do exactly that.

Do get out on pelagic trips. Enjoy being out on a boat and even watching something like a Pink-footed Shearwater and realizing that this little piece of flesh and bone and life flew here on its own from South America and it lives here now and it is going to fly round the world back down to islands off Chile. It's just totally remarkable that birds have evolved to be able to do that. To be a part of that and to see them is magic.

Besides other pelagic trips discussed earlier, Monterey Bay is a really good thing to do. Those trips will not be cancelled because of weather. Monterey Bay has the advantage of being a deep canyon with upwelling that comes in really close. The Santa Cruz Mountains shelter Monterey Bay from the prevailing northwest winds. Even if there is small craft advisory out offshore, they'll stay inside and you can still get into deep water and see the albatrosses and stuff like that. Monterey Bay is really spectacular.