

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2010.  
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

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Someone heard that on the second weekend of November an extremely **high tide** is expected. Check out a tide table, it seems to rather be the **first** weekend!

Most serious birdwatchers are aware of the tides and plan to do some birdwatching when there are extremely high tides during the daytime. Those high tides tend to occur in the wintertime. Typically the highest tides are in December and January.

There is a link to some **tide tables** on the links page on Joe's website. Tide predictions are based only on the gravitational forces of the sun and moon and do not include runoff, wind or air pressure which all influence how high the tide really gets. The tides can get substantially higher or lower.

The tide tables have corrections for different sites. The further you get into the extremities of SF Bay, the higher the high tides and the lower the low tides are. What you are looking for is something that is at least 6.2 at the Golden Gate, which is the lowest site.

The times of the high tides are also different in the different locations. The tides are earlier at the Golden Gate and progressively later as you get further into the bay.

If you're there **an hour or even an hour and a half before the high tide** you will see a lot more action than if you get there when the tide already is at the highest. You will be there when the tide is rising and forcing rails and sparrows and yellowthroats out of the marsh. At the very highest tide the birds are often hunkered down in shrubs and not really showing themselves at all, they are not moving. Sometimes you can get interesting results as the tide is going out when the same thing happens in reverse, only under a longer period of time.

There are a number of sites that people traditionally visit. **Palo Alto Baylands** is one of them. It has disappointed Joe in the last few years, he no longer does field trips there because of the unreliability of seeing Clapper Rails. The tide table times for Palo Alto Baylands are a little bit tricky. The times for the Palo Alto Yacht Harbor are not the same as for the Baylands where the rails are. You are probably better off using the numbers for the Dunbarton Bridge.

During the last winters a **Nelson's Sparrow** has been seen in the baylands. From the parking lot, walk the path that leads to the Nature Center and continue past it. The path curves to the left. Just after that bend in the marsh on the right side of the path is where the bird has been. There is a big white X on the ground on the path there. The Nelson's Sparrow is only seen during the highest tides, but sometimes well before the peak time. Often you only get short glimpses.

The **California Clapper Rail** is an endangered subspecies that lives in those marshes. The decline in Palo Alto Baylands is perhaps related to fox predation but it is not clear exactly what has been going on there. Certainly the Clapper Rails have been moving out of the south bay and up into the central and north bay. There are quite a lot of Clapper Rails in Marin County now. For example in the marshes out of Corte Madera. They sometimes get into the channels along Corte Madera Creek, quite far upstream.

Another site has been **Waldo's Dike** between Inverness Park and Inverness, on the way out to Point Reyes. Since recently Joe believes that that dike has been breached as part of the Giacomini Wetland Restoration Project. There was this levee that separated Tomales Bay from this marshland that's out there. It formerly protected some farmland called the Giacomini ranch in Tomales Bay. You had to be there early, otherwise you'd be trapped by the tide. It was one of the more reliable places to find the **Black Rail**. The way people would go to see it would be to stand on the dike and watch the Great Egrets. Large numbers of Great Egrets would come in at high tide to forage on the Harvest Mice that live in the marsh and are forced out by the water, swimming around. The egrets eat the Black Rails, too. You watch those hunting Great Egrets.

There is a huge amount of predation at these high tides. The same thing happens at Palo Alto Baylands, the Night-Herons forage on the rodents. It is a natural thing that happens.

When **rails** flush up they fly, their legs dangling, then they drop down, and they will not flush again. They will freeze in place. You can't flush them twice. This makes them **sensitive**.

The **impact of birdwatching** on this always needs to be considered. There have been political controversies. There is this image of birders behaving badly.

On the **field trip on Sunday to Rodeo Lagoon** there was a **Palm Warbler** around the edge of the parking lot that overlooks bird rock at the end of the trip. A **Black-and-White Warbler** was also in a willow thicket, but only another birdwatching group got to see it.

Both species are **eastern vagrants** that have navigated the wrong way. That is particularly true of the Palm Warbler. **The Black-and-White Warbler** is more a rare migrant. It breeds due north of us and we get enough Black-and-White Warblers coming through each year that it suggests that this is the periphery of their normal migration route, where their density is really thin. It's a question whether or not the bird is mirror-image off course, which would be the Palm Warbler, or possibly just a rarity at the periphery of its normal range. Black-and-White Warbler could be either one. The Black-and-White Warbler is a nuthatch mimic. It creeps around the branches of the trees, often upside down.

**The Palm Warbler** acts like a pipit. It often stays close to the ground pumping its tail. The Palm Warbler was new to the cumulative field trip list.

The Palm Warbler is divided into two subspecies. The western subspecies is *palmarum*. The eastern subspecies is *hypochrysea* (which means: golden beneath). The western Palm Warbler winters in the east, particularly Florida and the Caribbean. In Florida in the wintertime Palm Warblers are abundant roadside birds. If you drive along the road in suitable habitat, small flocks of brown birds fly up. Here in CA those are White-crowned Sparrows, in Florida those are Palm Warblers. The eastern Palm Warbler breeds in the Maritime Provinces and winters at the gulf coast, mostly west of Florida. The two different subspecies have a crisscross migration route, which is unusual.

An interesting article about the subspecies of the Palm Warbler by Ron Pittaway's in Ontario Birds, April 1995: <http://www.jeaniron.ca/2010/palmwarblers.pdf>

The Palm Warblers we get here in CA are almost all western ones, they come here because of mirror image misorientation. They occur with some regularity along the coast of CA as vagrants. A **vagrant** is a bird which is migrating and is off course, not on part of its normal migration route.

There are some birds showing the characteristics of eastern Palm Warbler that have been found in CA, one of which wintered along Corte Madera Creek. That bird was very distinctive. It was midwinter, the bird was all yellow on the entire underparts, and the streaks on the chest were chestnut in color. It was brighter even than any breeding western Palm Warbler Joe has seen. Many eastern Palm Warblers seem to be bright year round, not having a drab winter aspect. Important field marks for the Palm Warbler are the yellow undertail coverts and the tail bobbing behavior.

Another bird that was new to the cumulative list was the **Common Murre**. Pigeon Guillemots occur regularly there in the spring time but are pretty much gone by the end of August.

Also a lot of migrant **Yellow Warblers** at Rodeo Lagoon.

This year the road up to the **hawk migration site**, where **Golden Gate Raptor Observatory** has gathered data for some 20 years, is closed. Even Golden Gate Raptor teams can't get up there during the week. During weekends they can get there with special permission, they have a key and use a four wheel drive van. Golden Gate Raptor has moved the interns down to a place called **Four Benches**, which is on Conzelman Road before it closes. There are some pullouts and some benches, but you are down below, you don't get the spectacular views that you would get at the

normal hawk migration site. Golden Gate Raptor has decided to count on a different hill on the weekdays this year. That means unfortunately that the data they get is not comparable to data from prior years. In order to do science you stick with your protocol. If you change the way you are doing your census or start censusing from a different place that has no scientific value. You have to use the same protocol year after year to get comparable data. Therefore they are not going to include the data they gather this year with the past data. They are continuing to count, but it is a different study.

Golden Gate Raptor Observatory publishes annually the Pacific Raptor Report. This year's 31<sup>st</sup> report includes an article by Joe "Memories of Laurie Binford". Dr. **Laurence Binford** was curator of birds and mammals at the Academy of Sciences. He was the discoverer of the hawk migration site. At the time there were no west coast hawk migration sites. Places like this or Cape May concentrate raptors because of their funnel shape. The birds use thermals to migrate. Thermals are created when sunlight hits the ground. There are no thermals over the ocean or over open water. Birds funneling over Cape May try to get up as high as they can before making an overwater crossing or perhaps flying back. The shape of Marin County is like a funnel also.

A few of the field trip participants went and had lunch at the Four Benches site after the field trip was over. There was not much happening. Other people had seen a **Broad-winged Hawk** fly over earlier. Joe and the others then saw an adult **Swainson's Hawk**. Swainson's Hawk is a bird of the Great Basin and the Central Valley. Most of the birds migrate all the way down to South America and huge numbers of them funnel through Panama where they darken the skies. On our immediate coast they are very scarce. Golden Gate Raptor Observatory averages one Swainson's Hawk a year. It is quite a bit rarer here than for example the Broad-winged Hawk. The Swainson's Hawks are interior, they are Central Valley and foothill birds. They sometimes gather in large concentrations in the Central Valley, particularly when the fields are being burnt. It forces all the rodents and grasshoppers out. Sometimes in burn areas there will be hundreds of Swainson's Hawks sitting on the ground.

On Saturday there was the **Rare Bird Roundup** in SF. Joe did Lake Merced, joined by Sally part of the time. They had a Moorhen by the concrete bridge. Also saw one or two Green Herons. Did not refind the Northern Waterthrush, but somebody from England refound it recently. Red Crossbills were in the trees at the compilation site at Crissy Field. Best birds seen on the roundup were Broad-winged Hawk and Lewis's Woodpecker. **Battery Godfrey** off Lincoln on the west side of the Presidio. You stand on top of a tilted battery roof and you can see the hawks coming across the Golden Gate. There was an immature **Lewis's Woodpecker** and one person also had a Green-tailed Towhee there. Other Lewis's Woodpeckers have been seen in Marin County and in Shasta County, they are on the move.

**Lewis's Woodpeckers** are interior birds. As far as the Bay Area is concerned, the closest breeding colonies are in Santa Clara County in San Antonio Valley, the upper Mines Road area. They used to breed all along Mines Road, but they have been driven out by European Starlings. They have declined because of Starling intrusions into their nesting areas. The starlings evict the woodpeckers out of their holes. The woodpeckers have not evolved to defend their holes. It is the same with Acorn Woodpeckers. In some places Acorn Woodpeckers have started to nest unusually late, they wait until the starlings are done. Lewis's Woodpecker is also a somewhat erratic species. They are seen in migration from the hawk lookout, they are a diurnal migrant. Sometimes they show up along the coast. One year there were quite a few out at Pt Reyes. Once they settle in they may stick around for several weeks or even the whole winter.

There was an adult male **American Redstart** at Pt Reyes yesterday. American Redstarts take two years to acquire their adult aspect. A first fall male is yellow and gray, looks similar to a female.

By the spring it will acquire the black and red aspect and keep it for the rest of its life, it does not have a drab winter aspect. American Redstarts are (like the Black-and White Warblers) probably best treated as rare migrants. They have nested in Humboldt County, although almost all of those nests have failed because of cowbirds. But they do breed to the north of us. A bird that is clearly an adult is less likely to be an example of vagrancy. This bird has already survived at least one migration. The occurrence of a bird like that is noteworthy.

**Joe is receiving** an award from the ABA, **the Ludlow Griscom Award Outstanding Contributions in Regional Ornithology**. Ludlow Griscom was a person who did a lot for early ornithology, basically one of the first people who was able to do field identification. Joe is a huge fan of his.

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## Scissor-tailed Flycatcher

### **OCCURRENCE**

Endemic to Texas, Oklahoma and surrounding states.

Really common in parts of Texas, are just on all the wires. You actually have a chance to see it at the Houston airport between flights. They are pretty conspicuous on fence lines around airports.

A long distance migrant, winters in South America.

Winter records from southern Florida.

Show up as vagrants all over the US.

A lot of these are overshoots, birds that were planning to migrate to or from Texas but just went too far.

In CA primarily summer vagrants with most records in June. Show up both in the interior and along the immediate coast. No longer is a review species in CA, there are well over a hundred records.

Scissor-tailed Flycatchers are just as bad as Eastern Kingbirds about not sticking around.

Sometimes they'll settle in for the winter or for the summer, but in migration a lot of times they're really rough.

Again, its habitat is open country with wires and fences. When they do show up, they are generally recognizable even by beginning birders. We have sight records of Scissor-tailed Flycatchers going way back to the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century all of which are probably correctly identified.

There are records probably from most months of the year and the species has wintered.

Near the town of Needles in CA on the Colorado River Scissor-tailed Flycatcher female has hybridized with Western Kingbird, laid eggs and produced babies. However, the babies apparently did not survive to adulthood. There was no male present but there were plenty of Western Kingbirds around.

There is also a really weird kingbird from western New York that looks like a hybrid of a Tropical Kingbird with a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, it got a deeply forked tail.

### **FIELD MARKS**

The body size is probably about the same as a Western Kingbird or slightly smaller. Bill small.

The bird' gray head and back with the black wings is reminiscent of the body of a Western Kingbird. They are in the same genus and have hybridized.

Extremely long tail in adult birds. The males have much longer tails than the females. Young birds can have fairly short tails.

When they fly out after passing insects they open their tail and use it as a rudder. It seems to act like scissors, opening and closing shut as the birds fly back and forth. Compare to the Fork-tailed Flycatcher, which also has a long tail. Those feathers are rather soft and appear to bend in a sinusoidal way as the bird flies.

The inner tail feathers are short, the outer ones very long. Inner tail feathers black, outer ones white with black tips. You see white mixed in with the black even on the upper side, the underside is mostly white.

The adults have varying amounts of salmon color on the flanks. On the full adult males it can be crimson red. That extends into the wing linings also. It is fairly faint on most of the immatures. The adult males have a blazing red color in the wing linings.

## **Great Kiskadee**

### **OCCURRENCE**

Abundant in South and Middle America, ranges up to southern Texas, where it is quite common. Riparian habitat or even sewer ponds in the lower Rio Grande Valley.

Does not appear to be migratory.

No accepted records for CA.

There was one in San Jose back in the 1950s that spent two years in somebody's back yard. Joe is not sure whether the records committee has ever reviewed the documentation. Some people think it was a genuine wild bird, most people think it is more likely to have been an escape. Usually vagrants, birds that are migrating in the wrong direction, exhibit migratory behavior. That means they either only stay for a few days and keep on moving, or they stay for a season. The birds tend not to arrive and just stay there. The fact that it stayed in somebody's yard in a residential area for two years would cause at least some people to think that the bird was of questionable natural occurrence.

They can take fish like a kingfisher.

### **FIELD MARKS**

A very spectacular, robust, large flycatcher with a large head and a big, all black bill.

They tend to have a little bit of pink right at the gape.

Very stripy head.

Underparts all yellow.

There is considerable red on the inner webs of the tail feathers. A little bit of red may show on the upper side of the tail.

Also some red fringing to the secondary feathers.

Nothing else in the North American guide looks like this. However, there are numerous other species of birds that are in this genus or of this type, that occur in the American tropics.

The **Boat-billed Flycatcher** looks just like it but has a high, thin, squealy call and usually forages in the tops of the canopy, found from Mexico south into Panama.

The **Lesser Kiskadee** is smaller, has a thinner bill and lacks rusty in the wings and in the tail.

The most abundant bird of this type, which is found from Mexico all the way down into South America, is called the **Social Flycatcher**, p.475. It has a very small bill and it has very little red on it, it is a smaller bird. It is actually convergent on the Great Kiskadee, it is in a different genus. There are claims of Social Flycatcher from Texas and one accepted record.

#### **VOCALIZATIONS**

The name Kiskadee comes from the song, particularly the dawn song, but you can hear this pretty much throughout the day. A harsh ki-ka-dee. You usually hear them before you see them.

## **Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher**

#### **OCCURRENCE**

Ranges in the summer months to mid-elevations in the mountains of southeastern Arizona, where it is particularly fond of sycamores, especially along water courses. But it tends to be up in the mountains, not down in the lowlands where the Thick-billed Kingbirds are. They tend to hide in the canopy and can be very difficult to see. The squeaky call note is what usually gives away its presence. Hard to find anyway. they tend to perch high and within the canopy.

Madera Canyon is a place where Joe runs into them quite often.

Fort Machuka

Migratory, leave Arizona in the wintertime, migrate down into South America.

A couple of records in CA, in places like Sycamore Canyon in Ventura County, San Diego...

In general these have been extremely difficult birds, where the birds get lost in the canopy in some big trees and some people get glimpses of them. They tend not to stay very long.

Joe's first one was at the Hall Ranch Pt Reyes where it was in totally inhospitable habitat, in the weeds. It only stayed for one day.

#### **FIELD MARKS**

A little bit smaller than a Great Kiskadee

Heavily streaked underparts

A yellow wash on the underparts

The only North American Flycatcher which is streaked on the underparts as an adult.

Quite a bit of red in the tail

A dark mask and a bit of a malar stripe (which Joe believes includes the chin area at least a little bit)

Big thick bill

#### **VOCALIZATIONS**

Squeaky call note sounds like a toy rubber duck

## **Variegated Flycatcher**

### **OCCURRENCE**

An austral migrant, breeding in southern South America and migrating into northern South America in its winter.

First NA record in November 1977 in Maine. A case of reverse migration, it migrated north in its spring instead of back south to southern South America. An account of this record is here:

<http://elibrary.unm.edu/sora/NAB/v032n02/p00161-p00163.pdf>

There are now at least three records of Variegated Flycatcher for the East Coast, one of them from Canada.

### **FIELD MARKS**

Decidedly small-billed

## **Piratic Flycatcher**

### **OCCURRENCE**

South and Middle America.

It parasitizes the nest of oropendolas, colonial breeders that build woven hanging nests.

Oropendulas are a tropical group of blackbirds that are found in Middle and South America. They have a polygamous mating system. They build hanging nests with a sort of lobe at the bottom.

Sort of like orioles, only more so.

The Piratic Flycatcher drives them out of their nest and takes over the nest to breed there themselves.

### **FIELD MARKS**

Both the Variegated and the Piratic flycatchers mimic Sulphur-bellied, but have smaller bills, slightly different face patterns, blander patterns on the back and less red in the tail.

## **Streaked Flycatcher**

Not in our field guide.

Occurs in Mexico. It has not been recorded in North America yet.

It is almost identical to the Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, way closer than either Piratic or Variegated.

It is whiter on the belly, less yellow.

White chin.

Yellow supercilium.

Howell says in his Guide to the Birds of Mexico that Streaked has a pale base to the bill and Sulphur-bellied doesn't. That does not work. Some Sulphur-bellied do show a pale base to the bill, possibly those are young birds.

## **Rose-throated Becard**

No longer considered flycatchers or rather distantly related  
There are numerous species of Becard in South America.

### **OCCURRENCE**

Rare, really marginal in NA.

Occurs in tiny numbers in southeastern Arizona in lowland areas in the spring and summer.

A famous place is the Patagonia Roadside Rest. They used to nest there quite regularly. Have not been there in the last year or two. Quite obvious and extensive nests.

Records for south Texas which are mostly winter birds. That is a different subspecies.

Has been reported from Ventura in CA but there were no photographs. Record not reviewed or not accepted. If it was determined to be the species there would also be questions about its natural occurrence.

The Patagonia Roadside Rest in southeastern Arizona is in the lowlands on Highway 82. There is a rather large pullout which is a roadside rest. It has also been used as the name of an ornithological phenomenon, called the Patagonia Roadside Rest Effect. That is what happens when an interesting bird is found in a particular spot. All the birdwatchers go there to see that bird. So other rare birds are seen in the same place.

### **FIELD MARKS**

An odd hunched look with a big head and a small bill.

#### **Male**

Black cap and a little bit of rosy coloration on the throat, quite gray otherwise.

#### **Female**

Brown above, buffy underneath, dark crown.

Black cap.

Most of the becards of different species that Joe has seen in Mexico and in the tropics have been like the female Rose-throated Becard.