

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010.  
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

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Some **interesting shorebirds** have been seen in the **Vic Fazio Yolo Wildlife Area** in the Yolo Bypass. That is an area available for flooding in wet winters. Some dirt roads run around to the marsh, you can take a loop there. There is a lot of emerging vegetation, finding shorebirds can be pretty tricky.

**Sharp-tailed Sandpiper:** a bird of the Russian Far East, migrates abundantly to Australia and Southeast Asia.

**Pectoral Sandpiper:** breeds in both the Russian Far East and in the NA tundra.

It does migrate through NA, but it's fairly scarce in the far west and in the intermountain ranges. We do get them regularly but uncommonly along the immediate coast, but they tend to prefer sewage farms.

Most Sharp-tailed Sandpipers that we see are in juvenal plumage. Sibley shows the color of the breast more accurately than Nat Geo, it is more orange than the Nat Geo's more yellow color. The breast pattern is important in the field identification. There is no streaking in the middle of the breast of the juvenal Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Both Sharp-tailed and Pectoral may have streaking on the sides of the breast, but in the Sharp-tailed the middle of the breast remains unstreaked. There may be a dim row of streaks across the very top of the neck (bottom of the throat), but nothing like the streaks that come all the way down and form a line right across the bottom of the breast on the Pectoral Sandpiper.

Sharp-tailed is usually a little bit smaller, but males are larger than females in both species.

Sharp-tailed tends to have a redder cap and a stronger contrasting white eye brow, reminding a bit of the head pattern of a breeding plumaged Chipping Sparrow.

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper has streaks on the undertail coverts, they are clean white in Pectoral.

Both species have a pointed tail. On Sharp-tailed all tail feathers get progressively shorter as you go from the inside to the outside, the entire tail is a wedge. On the Pectoral Sandpiper the middle tail feathers are progressively shorter as you go from the inside out, but the outer three tail feathers on each side are equal in length, there is a little triangle projecting out in the middle and then a straight line.

Near Shollenberger in Petaluma recently a new place opened up, the **Ellis Creek ponds**.

At Shollenberger there are **Pacific Golden Plovers** and **American Golden Plovers**.

Pacific Golden Plovers have wintered there in the past, they are probably returning birds.

Typically Pacific Golden Plovers will show up in an area in the fall and stay through the winter. The next winter they come back to the exact same spot. There are usually only a few and the numbers will vary and the birds will eventually die off and disappear from a certain area. Then another site will become the place to go.

They used to be seen at Pt Reyes at some of the farm fields out there more often in the past. The farm fields at Pt Reyes are now being handled differently than they used to be. They used to disc the fields in October, which would result in large numbers of birds coming into the fields to eat the exposed worms and insects. Then they would seed those fields to grow hay, so there would be a giant seed feeder. Now they allow the cows to graze in some of those fields that they used to disc. What we got are overgrazed pastures with extensive amounts of thistles. The plovers used to like the plowed fields.

The American Golden Plover and the Pacific Golden Plover **used to be considered the same species**, called **Lesser Golden Plover**. They were split eventually based on some research in Alaska.

The Pacific Golden Plover is a breeder in the Russian Far East and barely gets into Alaska, where there is a little bit of overlap with the American Golden Plover.

The American Golden Plover breeds across the entire North American tundra to Hudson Bay. It migrates to South America, the entire population winters south of the equator. Thus the American Golden Plovers tend not to stick around in CA during the wintertime.

The Pacific Golden Plover has a very broad wintering range. It is for example one of the most common birds you see on golf courses and greens and open areas in Hawaii during the winter. The birds migrate non-stop all the way from Alaska to Hawaii. Many also travel longer distances to the Polynesian islands and into Australia. The winter range is from Somalia east through Asia, Australia, New Zealand and Oceania and into CA.

The plumage differences between the two species are rather subtle. The American Golden Plover in non-breeding plumage is a duller bird.

In juvenal plumage the two are fairly easy to tell apart.

The Pacific Golden Plovers are bright golden yellow almost all over, some of them are strikingly golden. The adult birds are browner, not quite as bright yellow.

The American Golden Plovers are closer to Black-bellied Plover. They look like a small version of it, a little bit more graceful with a longer neck, a finer bill.

Vocalizations can be helpful, but there is variation, the American Golden Plover has been documented to have over 20 different vocalizations.

There was a **Laughing Gull** at Las Gallinas Sewer Ponds. They have been expanding their range. Joe was surprised how many he saw in Rhode Island in early October. They used to be a more southerly species.

**Point Reyes class field trip** last weekend. Three new species added to the cumulative list.

**Great Egret**: not seen at any of the stops, but there were plenty of them out in the farm fields eating gophers and voles. There is a rodent outbreak this year at Pt Reyes, which also accounted for the large number of raptors seen.

**Pigeon Guillemot**: distant views of two birds in their rather cryptic looking winter plumage off the Fish Docks. That is a plumage we seldom see. The Pigeon Guillemot is normally seen here in the spring and summer in breeding plumage, by this time most of them are gone.

**Chestnut-backed Chickadees**: are actually there all the time, but in a place where Joe does not usually go, the former RCA station. There is a double row of cyprus trees that runs down a paved road just as you are approaching the outer point. It is a ranger station now. Some participants went there after lunch to look for reported White-tailed Kites. It is as far out at Pt Reyes as the Chestnut-backed Chickadee gets. They are non-migratory and would have to fly over some inhospitable open country with no trees to get to the other islands of trees out there.

Other birds of interest included **Lapland Longspurs** calling and flying around, **Barn Owls** and **Moorhens** at the meeting site, **Great Horned Owls** at the outer point. Good views of **Ferruginous Hawk**, including one that flew right over. **Great photos** from the trip by Peter Seubert are on Joe's website at

<http://fog.ccsf.cc.ca.us/~jmorlan/PtReyesPhotos10Oct10Seubert.htm>

**Western Field Ornithologists (WFO)** is an organization joining the talents of amateurs and professionals to advance field ornithology throughout the West. They publish the journal Western Birds.

Joe was at the WFO conference in Palm Desert last week. Photos from the conference are on the WFO website: <http://www.westernfieldornithologists.org/gallery/thumbnails.php?album=12>

Joe went on a field trip to **Whitewater Canyon Preserve**

([http://www.wildlandsconservancy.org/preserve\\_whitewater.html](http://www.wildlandsconservancy.org/preserve_whitewater.html))

They do a lot of restoration, getting rid of invasive species, trying to save the many endangered species that live there. Joe saw Bighorn Sheep there.

The water levels are way down at the **Salton Sea**. They have been going down for the last five years or so and will probably continue to do so. Water that used to go into farmland and then leach through and end up in the Salton Sea is now being pumped off. There is danger that the sea will shrink into a lifeless sump.

The Salton Sea was created by accident when they were building some of the dams along the Colorado River.

There is a **great documentary** on the Salton Sea, narrated by John Waters: **Plagues & Pleasures on the Salton Sea**. It is hysterical. They talk a little bit about the history of the Salton Sea. They also focus on the people that live there and there is a little bit about the natural history. It's quite a quirky documentary.

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The lecture started with a painting showing several petrel species of the southern hemisphere:

### **Cape Petrel**

South African name: **Pintado Petrel** (pintado means "painted")

Not reported in NA. Abundant in the southern hemisphere.

A very striking, shearwater-like bird.

About the size of a Sooty Shearwater but a little bulkier, fulmar-like in its shape.

Bill length about half of that of a Sooty Shearwater, a proportionately shorter, bulkier bill.

Bold patches of white in the upper wing.

Belly and underwings pure white.

Black hood.

Was reported in CA in a written description that said that the bird was with Sooty Shearwaters, had the same size and shape as a Sooty Shearwater and flew like a Sooty Shearwater. That possibly was a Sooty Shearwater. We see shearwaters of various species from time to time exhibiting bilateral symmetrical partial albinism. Some Sooty Shearwaters can look weird, with various white patches in odd places. This seems to happen in a slightly higher rate in seabirds than in other birds.

Joe's photo from South Africa:

<http://outdoors.webshots.com/photo/2128960300040004820LOBLHI>

### **Antarctic Petrel**

A slightly larger version of the Cape Petrel that does not have the patchiness on the upper wings.

Only found in the Antarctic region.

### **Northern Giant Petrel**

#### **Southern Giant Petrel**

Are the biggest fulmars you have ever seen, the size of an albatross.

They don't fly like an albatross, they fly like a fulmar, they are not nearly as graceful as an

albatross is. They don't handle the winds quite the way an albatross does. They are stiff-winged.

There is at least one believable sight record of a Giant Petrel in Monterey Bay. However, the bird was too far away to tell if it was a Northern or a Southern Giant Petrel. They differ in very minor ways; you have to be really close. Northern has a reddish bill tip, Southern has a greenish bill tip.

Southern occurs also in a light morph, Northern are all dark.

Joe's photos from South Africa:

<http://outdoors.webshots.com/photo/2313905160040004820UjRaKE>

<http://outdoors.webshots.com/photo/2731598020040004820QintIK>

### **Snow Petrel**

An all white petrel that is found in Antarctica only.

### **Blue Petrel**

A very small bird, sort of like a Cook's Petrel, but more like a Prion in a lot of ways.

Very common in the Antarctic ocean.

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## **Black-capped Petrel**

### **OCCURRENCE**

Nests on mountain tops on Hispaniola, migrates into the Gulf Stream.

Was formerly very rare, having been almost eradicated by introduced rats. Protection of the colonies has resulted in a considerable comeback.

One of the target birds if you take a pelagic trip out off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina.

(The Band-rumped Storm-Petrel is another target bird. The best known pelagics out of Cape Hatteras are the ones offered by Brian Patteson. It is his business to take birdwatchers out to the Gulf Stream. Very professionally organized tours. About the trips of another organization, Focus on Nature or FONT, many horror stories are told.)

No records for the Pacific Ocean.

### **FIELD MARKS**

Heavy *Pterodroma*-type bill.

Black cap.

Variable amounts of white on the nape.

Upperparts dark.

Underparts white.

Can be confused with Great Shearwater.

Like most other *Pterodroma* they fly with their wings angled, unlike shearwaters that fly with their wings out straight. They also don't flap much. This is a large *Pterodroma*, its flight style is not nearly as erratic as for example Cook's Petrel's.

### **Juan Fernández Petrel**

Also has a black cap and is the size of a Black-capped Petrel.

Much more likely to occur in CA waters.

Breeds on Juan Fernández island off Chile.

## **Fea's Petrel**

Used to be treated as subspecies of **Soft-plumaged Petrel**.  
Soft-plumaged Petrel is a bird of the south Atlantic.

### **OCCURRENCE**

Breeds on the Cape Verde islands.

Seen sporadically on North Carolina pelagic trips.

Has been submitted to the ABA checklist committee based on photos taken at sea. The committee has refused to endorse any of these birds as Fea's Petrel because they have concluded that Zino's Petrel may be indistinguishable in the field.

### **FIELD MARKS**

Slightly smaller, a medium-sized *Pterodroma*.

White below with dark underwings, they should be darker than what Sibley illustrates, Nat.Geo. is correct.

## **Zino's Petrel**

Also split off from Soft-plumaged Petrel.

Breeds on Madeira island.

Identical to Fea's Petrel except that it is slightly different in shape and has a slightly slimmer bill.

## **Bermuda Petrel**

Called the **Cahow** on Bermuda because of its call.

### **OCCURRENCE**

Breeds only on Bermuda. Was long thought extinct, rediscovered in 1951.

There are scattered records to the west of Bermuda at sea, but its at-sea-distribution is very poorly known. The total number of Bermuda Petrels is unclear.

### **FIELD MARKS**

A slightly smaller version of the Black-capped Petrel.

Has less of a pale collar.

Darker rump.

Differs slightly in shape, smaller bill, longer wings.

## Herald Petrel

### OCCURRENCE

Found in both the south Atlantic and the south Pacific.

Those two populations have in the past been considered to be two separate species:

**Trinidad Petrel** (during the split *Pterodroma arminjoniana*, now *Pterodroma arminjoniana arminjoniana*) in the south Atlantic

and **(Pacific) Herald Petrel** (during the split *Pterodroma heraldica*, now *Pterodroma arminjoniana heraldica*) in the south Pacific.

Not recorded in CA but recorded regularly from trips off the outer banks out of California waters.

Does reach the western north Pacific, certainly a potential vagrant off CA.

When Murphy's Petrels were being recorded there was always a concern that dark morph Herald Petrel might have been involved. However, there are no claims of Herald's Petrel, people just made sure it's no Herald's.

### FIELD MARKS

Dark-morphed birds a little harder to identify, look a bit like a Sooty Shearwater.

All dark.

Angled wings.

Very short bill.

Different, graceful flight style.

### Kermadec Petrel

Breeds on islands in the south Pacific from west of Chile to north of New Zealand.

Unrecorded in NA.

One claim on Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania. Hawk watcher and photographer Heintzelman videotaped a petrel there in October 1959 that subsequently was identified as a Kermadec by Robert Cushman Murphy. Others thought it was a Trinidad Petrel (=Atlantic Herald Petrel). The video has since been lost and available photographs from it do not show the diagnostic upper side of the wing. An article by Heintzelman is here:

<http://elibrary.unm.edu/sora/Wilson/v073n03/p0262-p0267.pdf>

White shafts to the primaries, visible on the upper side of the wing, are the main difference from dark-morph Herald Petrel.

## Shearwaters

Puffinus-type shearwaters have finer, thinner, more delicate bills that are held out straight.

The heavier bill of the fulmars and petrels is usually held down at a 45° angle.

All of these birds have a very thick layer of body feathers. In general the feet of shearwaters are pulled inside the body feathers in flight. That can be problematic in a few species where foot color is a key field mark.

All shearwaters have their feet located way in the rear. They need a running start from the water surface. They forage by shallow diving. They will come in and follow the boat if you chum but usually they won't stay for too long.

## Cory's Shearwater

### OCCURRENCE

A fairly common summer visitor to the warm waters off the east coast, also occurs in the Gulf of Mexico, reasonably common in the Gulf stream. Does also occur in colder waters close to shore as far north as the Maritime Provinces, at least rarely.

Two records for CA. Most remarkably, a Cory's Shearwater was seen around the rocks of Los Coronados islands off San Diego in Mexican waters, it was even seen sitting on an empty nest there. (First identified as a Pink-footed Shearwater, a Pacific species with a pinkish bill with a dark tip, otherwise quite similar to Cory's. It is a *Puffinus*, it flies differently, it is somewhat darker and never has the pale area at the tips of the upper tail coverts that forms a little bit of a U shaped pattern, which is variable on Cory's.)

### FIELD MARKS

Different genus than the other shearwaters (*Calonectris*), it is a shearwater in the sense that it has a thin, rather long bill. *Calonectris*-shearwaters tend to fly with their wings bent at an angle. They still fly like a shearwater but a little more floppy.

Bill yellowish in color.

Belly all white.

Long winged appearance.

Fairly white underwings.

Distinguished from the similarly sized Great Shearwater by lacking a distinct black cap, by its pale bill and overall brownish coloration, less gray.

## Streaked Shearwater

another *Calonectris*

breeds on islands off Japan. A very rare visitor to CA waters.

(will be treated on p. 92)

## Cape Verde Shearwater

Used to be a race of Cory's. Now considered a separate species.

Has been documented off North Carolina, an article about that record is here:

<http://elibrary.unm.edu/sora/NAB/v058n04/p00468-p00473.pdf>

## Great Shearwater

Used to be called Greater Shearwater, name changed in July this year.

### OCCURRENCE

One of the most common shearwaters off the Atlantic coast during the summer months and migration.

Several records for CA.

Both Great and Cory's shearwaters breed on islands off Atlantic South America. Their migration route takes them northward into the north Atlantic. They loop around the north Atlantic and then return to their nesting islands in our winter, which is their summer. Neither of these species nests off western South America, where they are replaced by species like the Pink-footed Shearwater, which ranges into the north Pacific, the large white-bellied shearwater usually seen in CA waters. These birds can get swept around the tip of South America in a storm and end up in the wrong ocean. They may then have difficulty fighting the winds to get back to the Atlantic and may wander northward following their migratory instincts and end up in the north Pacific.

Almost all of the Atlantic species that range into southern South America show eventually up in the north Pacific in tiny, tiny numbers.

### FIELD MARKS

Distinct, well defined black cap, contrasting with a white throat and breast.

(Similar head pattern to Juan Fernández Petrel)

White collar around the back of the neck.

A fairly scaly look to the upper parts on an otherwise dark gray looking bird.

Bill thin, completely black at all times.

Straight wings, not bend like a *Pterodroma* or like a Cory's Shearwater.

Gray, not brown look to the bird.

Tail pattern overlaps Cory's in having various amounts of white at the tips of the upper tail coverts. Tail pattern is not the most important feature in trying to identify a Great Shearwater.

Gray patch on the lower belly a known field mark. They all have it, but it's right where there's going to be a shadow anyway.

## Manx Shearwater

Name comes from the Isle of Man.

### OCCURRENCE

Occupies cold water currents in the north Atlantic.

Breed on islands off the British Isles.

Historically occurred as an uncommon migrant to the northern coasts of NA.

Eventually they started to show up commonly enough in the Maritime Provinces that they were suspected of nesting. They do in fact breed at least occasionally on islands off New England and Canada.

Occur primarily in cold water. Joe has not seen them on Hatteras trips that go out into the Gulf Stream. The small shearwater usually seen in the Gulf Stream is the Audubon's Shearwater.

Sometimes you can get the two birds together. If you are going to the Atlantic, you need to be prepared for telling them apart.

Joe Morlan and Guy McKaskie are convinced they saw CA's first Manx Shearwater in late August 1977 on a WFO pelagic trip in Monterey Bay. Guy yelled out Black-vented Shearwater,



which is the brown, dark-vented bird that occurs in CA waters. It was an all dark small shearwater flying past the boat. It banked and Guy changed his mind to Buller's Shearwater because it was gleaming white on the entire underparts. It banked again and appeared to be all dark above, so it was clearly not a Buller's Shearwater which has a black cap, a gray back with a W or M pattern on it and also a very different shape from this small shearwater. It zigzagged away from the boat, few people got on the bird. It was foggy, other people did not get good views. Guy and Joe decided that it was a nominate Manx Shearwater. In those days the taxonomy was different. What we now call the Black-vented Shearwater was considered to be a race of the Manx Shearwater. Since then the Black-vented and numerous other small shearwaters have been split off and are now recognized as separate species. They called it a Manx Shearwater in the broad sense that included Black-vented because that was the species' taxonomy of that day. After the split Guy and Joe started to talk about this bird, thinking that it was a good Manx Shearwater with the white undertail coverts coming down to the tip of the tail. There is no physical evidence, just Joe's and Guy's memories and imagination. Everybody else on the boat, including some committee members, only got poor looks, the bird was rejected by the committee. There were a number of sightings of white vented Manx-type shearwaters as far north as Alaska. Eventually a bird photographed on a boat trip out of Monterey in 1993 was accepted as a Manx Shearwater. Since then more and more birds have been photographed or videotaped, quite a body of evidence that the bird occurs in CA accumulated.

#### **FIELD MARKS**

A strikingly black and white looking, small shearwater.

Very black above, not brown like Audubon's.

Dark cap, white coming up around the rear of the eye, forming what is called an ear-surround: white wrapping around the rear of the dark face, a very useful mark.

A very short tail, unlike the longer tail of Audubon's.

Undertail coverts cleanly white, extending all the way or almost all the way to the tip of the tail. From below only the corners of the tail are exposed behind the undertail coverts.

Many Manx Shearwaters tuck their feet in, if the feet are visible they project beyond the tail. Audubon's Shearwater with its longer tail has the feet not projecting beyond the tail.

Gleaming white underwings. The whiteness of the underwings is dependent of the reflectivity of the primaries and secondaries. It is a shininess to the feathers that makes it look that white when hit by the glare of the sun, does not show it when the underwings are in shadow, the underwing pattern can change depending on light conditions.

Frequently show some white on the sides of the upper tail coverts, more like a Tree Swallow than a like Violet-green Swallow, but it does wrap around a bit.

#### **Townsend's Shearwater**

Also once considered a subspecies of Manx.

Breeds on islands off southern Baja California.

Doesn't seem to move much.

No accepted record for CA yet.

Lives in warm water unlike Manx.

A black and white shearwater like Manx.

Has dark undertail coverts unlike Manx.

The white flanks wrap around onto the sides of the upper tail coverts, similar to a Violet-green Swallow. Manx also frequently show white on the sides of the upper tail coverts, more like a Tree Swallow but it does wrap around a bit.

## **Audubon's Shearwater**

### **OCCURRENCE**

The warm water version of Manx from the Caribbean that gets up into the Gulf Stream.

You will see them if you go out of Hatteras.

Occurs in warm waters in all oceans with different subspecies.

Does occur off Mexico and could easily occur in CA.

However, its close similarity with the Black-vented Shearwater, which occurs regularly in CA, may make it hard to detect and document.

### **FIELD MARKS**

Brown above, not black.

Longer tail than Manx.

Dark on the shorter undertail coverts, much dark at the tip of the tail.

Tends to have more dark on the underwings than Manx, not nearly as gleaming white.

Longer looking wings, a less compact bird than Manx.

Tends to fly really low with fairly strong but shallow wing beats.

## **Little Shearwater**

### **OCCURRENCE**

A southern hemisphere species that occurs in mostly cold water.

The Monterey County bird mentioned in Nat Geo was accepted by the records committee as a Little Shearwater, the main feature being the apparent white face.

However, after the record was accepted, Steve Howell, who was working on a book on tubenosed birds, reviewed the photos and did not like the record. Particularly the bill and the overall shape of the bird. He concluded that it very likely was not a Little Shearwater. Steve Howell concluded that the bird was likely a Manx Shearwater, an aberrant bird or photographic effect. When you have a lot of glare and a bird that is black and white, the white often bleeds into the black area. The bird was photographed by Peter Pyle, one of the leading ornithologists in CA. He basically backed down on the idea that this was a Little Shearwater. The record was re-submitted, and it was not accepted. It is no longer considered a valid record.

Any claim of Little Shearwater in NA requires excruciating documentation and preferably a specimen, identification of these birds is not to be taken lightly.

Joe's understanding is that it occurs with more regularity off Europe.

### **FIELD MARKS**

Eye mostly surrounded by white.

There are numerous different subspecies and they vary a great deal.

A bit smaller than an Audubon's Shearwater

A very rapid flight.

Flight and appearance have been described as being Alcid-like in being black above, white below, with very rapid wing beats, flying very close to the surface of the water.