

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture February 18th, 2010.

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

The **Green Heron** is not a common bird in SF. They are suspected of having nested at the south end of Lake Merced, at least they have been seen there during the nesting season, Joe is not sure if nesting was ever confirmed. It is one of the harder species to confirm nesting even in areas where they are common. They do not nest in colonies out in the open like the Great Blue Herons. They tend to nest individually and they frequently nest a long way from water, up in the trees. When they did the Santa Clara Breeding Bird Atlas they only found two nests, one of them because a non-birder called up and said there was a chicken in her tree, which turned out to be a Green Heron nest nowhere near any water.

Much more common in the Central Valley as a breeding bird. It seems to be the core of their range here. In southern CA they are a bit more common also.

From Sibley's Guide to Bird Life and Behavior and National Geographic's Complete Birds of North America: Green Herons bait-fish: they place bait (insects, flowers, seeds, twigs, bread, even popcorn) on the surface of the water and capture fish that swim in to investigate the item.

Most birds do not reuse their nests. Herons are a bit of an exception. However, they rebuild their nest each year, they need to be reinforced after the winter. Great Blue Herons typically steal twigs from their neighbor's nests and add them to their own nests. The birds that reuse their nests are mostly large raptors, like Golden Eagles. One of the reasons to not reuse a nest is that they are infested with fleas, lice and other parasites.

Kevin observed a pair of **Nuttall's Woodpeckers** at Potrero Hill. They are rare in SF. If they breed there it would be the first breeding record for the city. The species is mostly found in oak woodland habitat. It does not like coastal fog. Places with a dryer climate like Mount Diablo or Stanford campus have many. They are more scarce on the west side of the mountains. They have been expanding. They are now seen at Lake Merritt where they did not use to be. They have been edging into SF, mostly in the winter at first, but perhaps they are getting established there.

A **Mountain Plover** looks like a clod of dirt. It moves seldom if ever. You are looking out at extensive ploughed fields with lots of other clods of dirt. In Panoche Valley they used to be seen more often than they are today, they have all but disappeared within the last decade or so, but recently there have been sightings again. Panoche Valley is a huge area. Birding it you check with your spotting scope a couple of hundred yards at best on either side of the roads. That is by no means covering the vast areas of suitable habitat for Mountain Plovers that exist in that valley. The same is true for other places where they are known to occur, like Robinson Road in Solano County. If you get there early in the morning they are more likely to be close to the road, they tend to push back as the day goes on. It is one of the easiest birds to overlook.

Panoche Valley is threatened by massive development to create solar power. It is a great place, lots of nice birds. Good for raptors, you can see Prairie Falcons, Ferruginous Hawks. Good likelihood of seeing Golden Eagles. Mountain Bluebirds are sometimes there in big numbers, sometimes absent. Cassin's Kingbird is regular, probably winters there most years. What you really want to look for is the San Joaquin Kit Fox, a highly endangered species that has been seen occasionally in that area. It is nocturnal, the chances of seeing it are better if you are there at dawn or dusk. You go south of Hollister and start at a tiny town called Paicines. There is a hidden reservoir to the west. Bird that, there are Bald Eagles there. Then you just take Panoche Pass Road east from Paicines. It goes over some foothills. Keep your eye open for Roadrunners, when

you get to the top look for things like Phainopepla, Lewis's Woodpecker. Then you get down into this big flat valley. There is one small public building, a bar and grill, Panoche Inn. Everybody has lunch there. Then you come to Little Panoche Road. That road goes over Shotgun Pass. Look for Chukars. Look for Mountain Plovers in the fields. Joe has seen Lark Buntings in the flocks of sparrows. Look for Vesper Sparrow. Once you get up over the pass you come to a place called Mercy Hot Springs. You pull into the parking lot of this private resort. They collect a fee from birdwatchers, you get to see roosting Long-eared Owls in their trees. Barn Owls and Great Horned Owls may also be present. That is your last stop before you get to Interstate 5.

If you have more time before you make that left turn onto Little Panoche Road you can go straight and make a right turn onto New Idria Road. It goes up into some canyon areas. A good place for sparrows as you go up there, probably better for Vesper Sparrow than Shotgun Pass. A creek runs through there with vertical embankments that have holes forming caves which are used by Barn Owls. The road becomes steep and goes up to a defunct mercury mining operation called New Idria. There are Canyon Wrens and Rock Wrens along the road. If you go all the way up this road in the summer, there are breeding Dusky Flycatchers at the summit of that hill. There have also been reports of nesting Gray Flycatchers, but Joe is not sure that has been verified. Joe has never done this but always wanted to. You probably need a high clearance vehicle.

Joe strongly encourages to use eBird.

Long-tailed Duck

The old name "Old Squaw" got changed to the name that was used for it in Britain because some Native Americans regarded the term squaw as offensive. In particular there were conservation issues in which they were trying to get the support of some of the tribes in Alaska.

OCCURRENCE

Circumpolar breeder in the high arctic.

Abundant winter visitor along the New England coast.

Decidedly rare in CA. Most records are along the immediate coast but it sometimes they show up on inland lakes.

The further north you go the more likely you are to find them but they are nowhere common.

Look for them in flocks of Surf Scoters, they frequently associate with scoters.

Joe has seen it once off the Cliff House. Sometimes occurs in Princeton Harbor, there was one for the CBC. There were up to five of them one time that summered there.

We have seen it on a class field trip at Coyote Point.

Has occurred at Berkeley Aquatic Park and off the Berkeley Pier and at Lake Merritt.

One in San Diego this year.

FIELD MARKS

Quite distinctive and fairly spectacular.

There is a great deal of individual variation. Despite of all that variation there is no plumage of it that looks anything like any other duck. What you see usually does not look like any of the pictures in the book, but it is completely obvious what it is anyway.

A small duck with a small, rounded head and a short, stubby bill.

Black and white with brown and gray.

The wings are all dark in all plumages.

Underparts behind the chest always white.

Adult male

Elongated black central tail feathers almost as long as the body. Absent only when molted in summer or when broken off. They may be trailing behind lying on the water. They form a thin line that can be difficult to see at a distance.

The bird is generally mostly white in the winter, mostly dark in the summer.

Always a black band across the chest going around and merging with the always black central back. On flying winter birds this forms a Y on the back between the white scapulars on either side.

Neck and head white in winter and spring with a dark patch on the side of the neck connecting to a grayish one on the face.

Neck and head blackish in summer with a brownish gray patch in the face that later turns white, always white around the eye.

Scapulars grayish to white in winter, dark with rusty edges in summer.

Dark bill with a pink band across at the tip, can turn all dark in summer.

Female

Also lighter in winter than in summer, but difference less dramatic than in male.

Central tail feathers only slightly elongated.

Always a white ring around the neck.

Crown always dark.

Face and neck white in winter with a dark cheek patch, generally darker in summer

Upperparts always brownish dark.

Breast band brown or brownish gray.

Bill always all dark.

Immature

Similar to summer female with more brown smudging on the face and the underparts.

Barrow's Goldeneye**OCCURRENCE**

Nest well into the interior, along the edges of mountain lakes in the Canadian far west and in southern Alaska, also from extreme eastern Canada to Greenland.

Highly migratory.

There also is a resident, non-migratory population in Iceland.

Winter regularly south into CA and into the interior Great Basin. Arrive fairly late, in October/November. Leave in February/March.

Were historically very rare anywhere in CA. One of the first places they showed up was at Lake Merritt around the 1950s. Still regular there. Get scarce in Lake Merritt after the hunting season, after mid-January, disperse out onto SF Bay.

Has been reported this year at Shoreline Lake in Mountain View.

Also occurs in the New England area, but much more scarce in the east than in the west.

FIELD MARKS

Marginally larger than the Common Goldeneye, but has a smaller bill.

More bulbous head, particularly at the crown.

The head shape will vary depending on how the feathers are arranged!

Bill quite short and stubby, culmen and lower edge curved, a little cute nose.

Basic (Bright) Plumage Male

Teardrop shaped white patch in front of the eye coming up to a point well above the eye.

More black on the scapulars and on the wing coverts than Common.

The scapulars form isolated white "piano keys" framed in black.

Black spur on the side of the breast extending down towards the water line.

Usually purple sheen on the head, may appear to be green in some lights.

Female

Gray body, white neck ring, chocolate-brown head. Darker brown head than Common.

The difference may be noticeable when the two are together.

Adult females normally have an all orange or yellow-orange colored bill.

However, there is a very small percentage of Common Goldeneye females that also show an all yellow bill, including one that was photographed in San Diego Bay recently where neither species of goldeneye is very common. These birds are troublesome. They need to be analyzed in terms of the bill size and shape and subtle head differences. It is not always possible to come to a conclusion.

You get a lot of birds that have yellow growing like a cancer up the bill and spreading unevenly towards the base of the bill instead of a ring, that is normal for female Barrow's. Joe does not see it very often in Common Goldeneyes.

When they arrive both males and immature females have all black bills. When they leave in February/March the females have yellow on the bill.

(Nat.Geo. has the labeling of first winter male and female reversed!)

Nat.Geo. shows a quite unusual bill pattern with a yellow band near the tip of the bill.

That is the usual pattern of female Common, it is a very rare condition for a Barrow's Goldeneye of any age. However, females of the Iceland population show a pattern that resembles that of the Common Goldeneye.

Black nail on the bill tends to be a little bit larger than on Common.

In Barrow's both median and lesser coverts are gray with very little white.

That means that a typical swimming bird will show a white patch where the secondaries are but will show little or no white elsewhere on the folded wing.

Immature Male

Like female gray body and brown head through much of the first winter.

The first place to start to molt is usually the white area coming in on the face. It is not there yet when the birds first arrive in the fall. It starts to form uniformly front to back.

Males are larger and have bigger heads in both species.

An immature male next to a female of the same species will appear to have a bigger head.

If you are using head shape as a way to identify these birds you might get confused.

Joe has seen people trying to turn immature male Common into female Barrow's because they had such big, puffy heads.

All black bill in both immature females and males.

Eyes dark in immatures of both species, golden in adults of both species.

Common Goldeneye

OCCURRENCE

Pretty widespread as a breeding bird across Canada.

Highly migratory.

Winters on deep lakes and reservoirs throughout most of the US.

Tends to substantially outnumber Barrow's Goldeneyes.

FIELD MARKS

Head more wedge shaped, less bulbous than Barrow's Goldeneye.

The head shape will vary depending on how the feathers are arranged!

Longer, straighter bill, less cute.

Basic (Bright) Plumage Male

Rounded white spot in front of and entirely below the eye.

The white on the scapulars connects with the white sides.

No black spur on the sides of the breast.

Usually green sheen on the head, may appear to be purple in some lights.

Female

Gray body, white neck ring, brown head. Somewhat more reddish brown than Barrow's.

Bill black with a little pink or yellowish ring right near the tip just behind the black nail.

An all orange or yellow-orange colored bill is rare.

White secondaries, quite a lot of white on the median coverts and also some white on the lesser coverts, a lot of white in the wing.

In Barrow's both median and lesser coverts are gray with very little white.

If you see a swimming bird that shows a lot of white at the sides that is a very strong indicator for Common Goldeneye. If you see one that does not show a lot of white, it could be either one. The white areas are on the wings and can easily be concealed by scapulars.

Barrow's x Common Goldeneye hybrid

Male hybrids will show intermediate characters.

Piano keys larger, less well separated from the white sides.

Not much of a dark spur at the side of the breast.

White face patch is teardrop shaped but does not seem to extend above the eye.

Bill seems slightly curved but not as small as that of the Barrow's.

A bird of this type has been seen in recent years at Shoreline Lake in Mountain View.

Hybrid females are very difficult to identify.

There are other birds that are related to the goldeneyes that also have a gray body and a brownish head, the female mergansers. Both mergansers and goldeneyes are cavity nesting birds, they do hybridize occasionally. Both goldeneye species have hybridized with the Hooded Merganser. Common Goldeneye and Bufflehead can also hybridize. There has been such a bird reported in the last few days from Richardson's Bay near the Richardson's Bay Wildlife Area in Tiburon. On the WFO website there is a photo of another bird believed to be such a hybrid from Lake Solano County Park on Putah Creek, link on Joe's class website.

Bufflehead

OCCURRENCE

Quite common in the wintertime in SF Bay and on lakes.
Occur inland as well as along the ocean, sometimes get pretty far out on the ocean.

FIELD MARKS

The smallest of our diving ducks.
Relatively large head.

Basic (Bright) Plumage Male

The bird is all one field mark.
Black back.
White body.
White wedge on the black head, forming kind of a crest.
Tiny little black bill.
Appear black and white at a distance, in good light the head has interesting iridescent colors.
In flight a lot of white in the wing including the wing coverts.

Female

Gray body.
Dark head with a white patch on the side of the face.
Females can be confused with other species such as male goldeneyes or scoters.
They are quite small, the shape of the white patch in the face is quite different.
White secondaries.

Immature Male

Resembles the female, rather difficult to distinguish.
A picture in the book shows one a little bit later in the season, the white wedge is starting to develop.
The bill being rather bluish in color is more typical of the males than the females.