Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture April 28th, 2010.
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

Jays in general can be pretty good **mimics**. Especially Steller's Jays do a lot of very good mimicking for example of hawks, they are probably the best imitators. To a lesser extent the Blue Jay in the east. Scrub Jays are much less likely to do lots of imitations. Around the nest they have a lot of weird little vocalizations including a frequently complex whisper song. Scrub Jays are very secretive around their nests, it is very hard to find them. A quite large stick platform, usually fairly well concealed.

Surprisingly, there was a lingering **White-throated Sparrow** on the class field trip to GG Park. They usually associate with flocks of wintering White-crowned Sparrows. This one was by itself, there wasn't a White-crowned Sparrow left.

The **Winter Wren** is going to be split. There is a division between migratory birds in the east and short-distance migrants and permanent residents in the far west and along the immediate coast.
Eastern *hiemalis* are much paler underneath. Their song is decidedly slower. The call notes are really different, too.
West coast *pacificus* are rich ochre colored on the throat and on the breast. Their song is very rapid and much more complicated.
The permanent resident Aleutian birds will be a subspecies of *pacificus*. They are bigger, an example of Bergman's rule.
Genetic work has shown that the western NA birds are more closely related to the Eurasian birds than to the eastern NA birds, which means that the two American populations are not even each other's closest relatives.
The AOU is currently asking for suggestions for the English names for the new species. Some people would like to retain the name Winter Wren for the birds in eastern NA. That would be an unwise decision, but retention of pre-split names in this way have happened before. It essentially means giving the same name to two different taxa. In this case to the pre-split species occurring in both NA and Eurasia and to also to a subset of them, the post-split birds in eastern NA. This will inevitably lead to confusion because it will become unclear which of the taxa the name will refer to.
There are at least a handful of claims of eastern birds in CA.

Western Flycatcher

= Pacific-slope Flycatcher + Cordilleran Flycatcher

They were formerly considered to be one species with the name Western Flycatcher.
These two species are virtually indistinguishable in the field, only some of the males can be distinguished by some of their vocalizations. It is advisable to use the term Western Flycatcher whenever you are not exactly sure which of the two species you see, this is more correct than making a guess.

If the bird is sitting on a nest right here in the Bay Area we can probably safely call it a Pacific-slope Flycatcher. Most birdwatchers call all *Empidonax* that look like this that they see in CA

Pacific-slope except for a tiny breeding population in the Warner Mountains which are known to be Cordilleran Flycatchers.
If we turn every Western Flycatcher into a Pacific-slope Flycatcher based on location we may get the wrong idea what the true status of Cordilleran Flycatcher is in a place like the Bay Area. There have been no claims of Cordilleran Flycatcher from the lowlands of CA. The conventional wisdom is that Cordilleran Flycatchers stick to the highlands, even during migration, but we don't really know that.
The bird that breeds in the mountains of Arizona is the Cordilleran. But in the lowlands in Tucson and Phoenix even during migration the birds are pretty much all considered to be Pacific-slope. We don't know that either. They might be Cordilleran Flycatchers.
We need to stop using assumptions to make our identification, we use circular reasoning to identify these birds.

The split
Dr. Ned K. Johnson of UC Berkeley studied these birds in various parts of their range for many years. In Siskiyou County where there is a contact zone he could not conclusively show that they hybridize.
Johnson also did some genetic work and wrote a monograph and a series of papers which advocated splitting the Western Flycatcher into these two species. This was accepted by the AOU. Johnson was a member of the committee and was fairly influential.
This is an example of what Johnson called cryptic species. Birds that are essentially identical in appearance but which are in fact hidden separate biological species.

OCCURRENCE PACIFIC-SLOPE FLYCATCHER
The only *Empidonax* which breeds regularly in the Bay Area.
It likes shady areas, a fairly dense cover near water. A fairly common breeding bird along the immediate coast and an even more common migrant. Particularly in the lowlands. However it does range up to at least middle elevations in the Sierra Nevada and ranges into the Cascade mountains into eastern Oregon and eastern Washington. In Washington and northward into Canada it comes into contact with the virtually identical Cordilleran Flycatcher.

Arrives in the Bay Area in late March, mostly in Redwood forests. The populations into the willow thickets seem to arrive about a month later, in late April. This is Joe's casual observation, has not been looked into more closely, may not be true.
Nest usually built on the ground along an earth embankment where there is water. Generally in fairly wild natural habitats, relatively scarce in disturbed areas. But will nest under rafters and around the walls of buildings or cabins that are constructed in appropriate places. For example they have nested on the outside of a building that was used by Point Reyes Bird Observatory for their headquarters. Nest made out of plant fibers and moss mostly. Joe has found nests under a roof and in a crevice, also in a hollow in a tree trunk about a foot off the ground.

OCCURRENCE CORDILLERAN FLYCATCHER
Interior birds. Highland species, tend to occur in the mountains, even during migration they are found mostly in the mountains.
In CA an isolated population in the Warner Mountains in Modoc County and into Siskiyou County.

FIELD MARKS WESTERN FLYCATCHER
Little puffy crest very typical of Western.
Pretty long bill.
Normally all pale mandible.

Slight tear-drop shape to the eye ring one of the famous field marks.
Eye ring often broken at the top and expands behind the eye with a tail or point. Appears to be lopsided (thicker portion behind than in front of the eye) diamond-shaped as opposed to the more rounded ones on some of the other species.
The throat and most of the entire underparts are suffused with pale yellow in almost all plumages, a very important feature. The yellow on the throat is quite pale at times and some individuals may lack yellow.
There is also grayish along the sides that extends across the breast and that is suffused with pale yellow.
Behavior tends to be fairly active, it jerks its tail upward, may or may not flip its wings.
Primary projection medium, some books call it short.
Tail relatively long.
Adult birds molt after they migrate, are in rather worn plumage in the fall and may not have a whole lot of yellow. The young birds are in fresh plumage and they also seem to have much longer undertail coverts than adult birds which makes the tail appear to be shorter.

Differences of Cordilleran Flycatcher from Western

Averages slightly larger, slightly longer billed and very slightly yellower.
The individual variation within the two species swamps out any of those average differences. Non of those average differences are reliable for field identification.

Distinction from Yellow-bellied Flycatcher

The only other *Empidonax* which typically has the throat yellow is the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, which is an extremely rare vagrant to CA. Yellow-bellied tends to have a rounder eye ring, a more rounded head, shorter bill, greener, less brown upperparts, is not necessarily any yellower on the underparts, crisper and more contrasting wing bars, shorter tail.
The link to a paper on how to distinguish Western and Yellow-bellied by Heindel and Pyle is on Joe's class website entry for April 7th. It mentions a difference in the wing formula. Primary tips on Yellow-bellied usually more evenly spaced, one larger gap on Western (more of the tip of P6 visible than of the others). Since that article was written that difference has turned out not to be completely reliable.

VOCALIZATIONS

There is a body of ornithological work that supports the idea that flycatcher vocalizations are innate and are not learned.

Call note or position note

The call note is often called the position note, they give it when perched.
Only the males can be distinguished by their position notes, and in some places the males both species give the same position note.
Pacific-slope males typically give what is called the sinusoidal call, a suwheet that goes down and then up, a pretty distinctive snappy whistle.
The **Cordilleran male**'s position note is two-parted, pit-peet, at least in the more eastern parts of the range.

Females of both species have a sharp pit, very high, very thin, very shrill, to some people virtually inaudible.

Song

According to Johnson the third part of the male's song is the best distinction between the species.
The problem is that it is given very fast and the difference is not audible to most human ears, you need to analyze a sonogram.
The song starts with a sinusoidal call which is very much like the male position note, then a sharp note which is rather similar to the female position note and then a double or triple note at the end: suweep - pit - tsepit
The tsepit is different. (If it is three-parted one has to consider only the two accented syllables.)
In **Pacific-slope** it rises in pitch, in **Cordilleran** inversely the first part is higher in pitch than the second. The difference in pitch is very slight and the whole tsepit is very fast.

The situation in the Warner Mountains, Joe's experience

Joe went to try to see Cordilleran Flycatchers in the Warner Mountians in early June, when there are are only breeding Cordilleran Flycatchers supposed to be there.
He camped with a friend at a place called Cedar Pass. A Western Flycatcher was calling at the camp ground. It's call was p-seeet. A steeply rising call with an almost inaudible p at the beginning. What was that? Not the sinusoidal call, not pit-peet. Later in the day the bird changed its call to the sinusoidal suwheet, indistinguishable from Pacific-slope.
They looked around the mountain, went to the other side, could not find any Western Flycatchers giving two parted calls. Joe corresponded with Ned Johnson who said that the birds in the Warner Mountains rarely give a two-parted call. They typically give a sinusoidal call similar to that of Pacific-slope. Johnson thought these were leftover characters from before the time when the isolating mechanisms evolved that separated out these two birds. Johnson said the birds are genetically Cordilleran Flycatchers. He also said that the best distinction is the third part of the song.
Joe has a link on his class website to a more detailed account of this he wrote on the mailing list ID-frontiers.

Buff-breasted Flycatcher

OCCURRENCE

Summer visitor to southeastern Arizona. Fairly limited distribution in some of the mountain ranges, most notably the Huachuka Mountain ranges. Huachuka Canyon the best place to see them. They are along streams where there are some deciduous trees, they are not necessarily confined to the conifers.

FIELD MARKS

Small.
Rich ochre-buff coloration on the chest.
Tiny little bill.

VOCALIZATION

Pretty distinctive call note.

Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet

There are numerous tropical tyrannulets in middle and south America.
They are tiny flycatchers with tiny little bills and a very thin tail.

This species was originally named the Beardless Flycatcher.
Most flycatchers have rictal bristles, stiff hair-like feathers that stick out around the gape.
This has no rictal bristles, hence the name beardless, rather unique among flycatchers.

OCCURRENCE
Fairly uncommon in riparian habitat in Arizona in the summer.
Joe encountered it in places like Florida Wash, Patagonia Creek, the walkout to Elephant Rock in Madera Canyon.
Also occurs in southern Texas.

FIELD MARKS
Smallest bill of any of the flycatchers we have studied. (Gray longest)
A little bit of pale on the mandible.
Thin tail.
Grayish
Bushy crest.
Eye ring well broken both in front of and behind the eye, a fairly distinctive face pattern.

Does not pump its tail. Acts more like a Lucy's warbler or a Verdin than like a flycatcher.
Does not actually do a lot of flycatching.

VOCALIZATION
Song a descending peer, peer, peer, peer, peer