

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture May 6th, 2010.

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

Snowy Plovers are very pale, the color of dry sand. Their legs and bills are black.

Semipalmated Plovers are darker, the color of wet sand, similar to the color of Killdeer. Their legs and base of the bill are orange.

Western Tanagers are moving through now, as are **Lazuli Bunting** and **Black-headed Grosbeak**.

McGillivray's Warblers are shy birds that tend to stay in dense cover. You need to know their song. It is easy to miss unless you are tuned into it. It's a sweeter, sweeter, sweeter. Sometimes two-parted sweeter, sweeter, sweeter, sugar, sugar. Gazos Creek Road in San Mateo County is a good place for them.

They are increasing in the Bay Area as a breeding bird, they used to be much less common.

Joe took pictures of a **Solitary Sandpiper** east of Pescadero:

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

Several Solitary Sandpipers have been seen around the Bay Area. They are fairly scarce here in CA. They are more common as a migrant further east. In the eastern US they are much more common than here in the far west.

The Solitary Sandpiper has two subspecies, only the nominate eastern *solitaria* is shown in the books. The eastern bird has a solid black line from the eye to the bill, in the western subspecies *cinnamomea* it is speckled and much less distinct. The western bird is larger and has broader dark bars on its tail. There is some indication that the western birds may have more pale at the base of the bill.

Western Flycatcher is the name of Pacific-slope Flycatcher and Cordilleran Flycatcher together. Before they were split the species had this name. Pacific-slope and Cordilleran are virtually indistinguishable in the field. It is advisable to use the term Western Flycatcher whenever we can't be really sure it is a Pacific-slope. Birds on a nest in the bay area can probably be safely identified as Pacific-slope.

Cordilleran Flycatcher breeds only in extreme northeastern CA and is generally more of a highland species. It is generally assumed that it sticks to the highlands even in migration, but we do not really know that. We in fact have no idea what the status of Cordilleran Flycatcher is as a migrant along the coast of CA. Using the name Western Flycatcher has the advantage of clearly expressing the ignorance over which species it is. Reporting Pacific-slope Flycatchers on the ground that it must be this species since it is the one that occurs here which we know from the reports is circular evidence.

The species are said to be distinguishable by the call notes of the males. (Females have the same call notes in both species.) The male Cordilleran Flycatchers that breed further to the east have a clearly different call note form the Pacific-slope Flycatcher. But the birds that breed further west, like in northeastern CA, give calls that sound like Pacific-slope Flycatchers.

A more reliable difference is the tsepit part of the song which rises in pitch in Pacific-slope and falls in pitch in Cordilleran. The problem is that it is very fast and the difference is not detectable to the human ear, you need to analyze a sonogram from a recording.

Common Loon

Called Great Northern Diver in Britain.

OCCURRENCE

A bird of wilderness lakes, particularly up in Canada.

Rarely nests in CA. Has nested in extreme northeastern CA many years ago, may still nest occasionally.

Migrant and winter visitor in CA. Are migrating now, through May.

Migrate singly rather than in big flocks.

They fly high over the ocean, not close to the surface the way the Pacific and the Red-throated tend to.

The loon that is most likely to be found on inland lakes. Red-throated and Pacific are much less common on inland lakes, they are pretty much strictly coastal.

One of the more common species in estuaries and boat harbors.

Peer under the water with their eyes just under the water as though looking for fish.

The behavior is called looning. Done mostly by loons, some people have reported it from mergansers also.

FIELD MARKS

Blocky head: a flat crown with an angle in the front of the crown and another at the rear.

Red-throated or Pacific loons have smaller heads with a domed, rounded crown.

Oversized bill. Often dagger-shaped. Some individuals have a straight culmen (upper ridge) and an angled lower mandible, which the Yellow-billed Loon is famous for.

The feathering on the bill extends forward onto the maxilla (upper mandible) in all loons. In Common Loon the feathering stops just short of the nostril. In Yellow-billed it extends further down to the far end of the nostril.

In flight much larger feet compared to the body size than Red-throated or Pacific loons.

Adult Summer

Checkerboard pattern to the upperparts.

A dark head which may have a green iridescence to it.

An oversized black bill.

A broken collar of two white bands with black stripes at the sides of the neck and one on the throat.

Many individuals in the first summer have a patchy appearance with various amounts of white spots on the upperparts but a pattern around the head that is not correct for adult breeding plumage.

Adult Winter

An unique zigzag-pattern on the side of the neck, an excellent field mark.

A trace of a white collar which is a shadow of the pale collar with dark stripes on the side of the dark neck that they have in breeding plumage.

Pretty dark on the back, tends to have a little more gray scaling than Pacific Loon, but the difference is slight. The back feathers are quite square and have thin gray tips.. Usually the slightly darker nape contrasts a bit with the back, less so on Pacific.

The eye is said to be in the white area of the bird's face on Common Loon, as opposed to Pacific Loon where it is encased in the dark part of the face. That does not work. It is variable on the Common Loon. There may be a fair amount of dark underneath the eye. They may show an eye ring which would not be expected on Pacific which don't usually have any noticeable white right around the eye. Many Common Loons have quite a bit of white extending up over the eye but many do not.

Some Common Loons may have a dark face patch which the Yellow-billed Loon is famous for.

Bill color variable. Often a steel gray or blue gray, but frequently much paler. In all cases a dark culmen all the way to the tip. The Yellow-billed Loon has a pale culmen. The culmen is the ridge along the top of the bill. It is just a thin line. When you see a pale bill against dark water it is not always easy to tell if there is a dark culmen or not.

Juvenile

Pale buff colored fringe on each feather in juvenal plumage which is retained through the first winter. Individual feathers rounded, on adult birds more square.

Also a zigzag-pattern on the side of the neck, a little more blended than in the adults.

VOCALIZATIONS

Quite active at night, frequently giving loud horrendous calls and screams.

We sometimes hear that in migration. Joe has heard them along the coast and in very dense fog in the spring. Also other species of loon.

Yellow-billed Loon

Called White-billed Diver in Britain.

OCCURRENCE

Replaces the Common Loon in the high arctic. The two together form a superpspecies.

A rare visitor to CA, almost annual but definitely fewer than four records a year.

Most records between mid-December and mid-March with a peak in late January.

Most records are of young birds.

Lately several on inland lakes, almost as likely to show up on inland lakes as along the immediate coast

FIELD MARKS

A strong bulk in front of the eye with a flat crown similar to Common Loon, many people think it is even blockier than Common.

Slightly larger bird than Common.

Eye smaller than that of Common but that is not much of a field mark

The base of the culmen (towards the forehead) or even the base of the upper mandible may be dark, it is the tip of the culmen that we want to have pale. This is the main field mark.

Somewhat more extensive maxillary feathering extending forward to the tip of the nostril.

The upturned bill shape with a straight culmen and an angled lower mandible used to be the famous field mark. Common Loons often have that kind of bill shape, it is not reliable! Also the culmen is not always straight in Yellow-billed Loons.

Both species have variable bill shapes. Either one can look upturned or dagger-like. The younger birds tend to start out with a dagger-like bill in which the culmen curves down and the mandible curves up and the bill looks relatively straight. As they get older the bill tends to grow more on the underside and less on the upperside so that it gets that up-angled look.

They often swim with the bill held up at an angle, sometimes a substantial angle, and even when they are flying the bill is usually held up.

The bill is larger than on Common Loon. Seems to be top-heavy.

There is often a curvature where the two mandibles meet which gives the bird the impression of a smile.

Common Loons tend to appear scowling if anything.

Adult Summer

Breeding plumage almost identical to Common Loon.

Bill straw yellow, strongest yellow at the tip.

Checkerboard spots on the back larger.

Collar on the side of the neck more coarsely barred.

Adult Winter

The pattern on the side of the neck is more blended, not that obvious a zigzag-pattern.

A faint patch behind the eye.

The dark ear patch is a useful thing to look for. Not all of them have it but most do.

The eye is normally in a paler area on the face, the entire face itself is much more blended than on Common Loon

Pale markings on the back in winter plumage of all ages, Common Loon winter adult more solid dark

Juvenile

Buff fringes on the back.

There is an immature summer plumage with some amount of checkerboard spotting on the back but pattern around the head and neck is not right yet.

These birds may take several years to get into full adult plumage.