

LES-SON'S ALMANAC (Volume 1, November/December 2004)

by Tom Leskiw and Frank Anderson

Welcome to the inaugural issue of Les-son's Almanac. RRAS periodically receives inquiries from parents, teachers, and beginning birders regarding when and where to go in search of birds. This bi-monthly offering seeks to provide an overview of the changing seasonal nature of birding here on the north coast.

November and December are marked by cooling temperatures and the advent of the rainy season. Insect activity slackens, leading to the relinquishment of center stage by birds such as warblers and flycatchers in favor of grain and berry eaters. The abundance—varying from year to year—of mast sources that include madrone, huckleberry, Himalaya berry, cascara, and (European) hawthorn is a prime factor in the wintering habitat selection of species such as waxwings, robins, Hermit and Varied Thrushes. Veteran birders understand that the “summertime and the livin’ is easy” motif has evaporated, leaving many of the more noteworthy birds to be found at grain and suet feeders, garden stubble, orchards, or introduced plants that bloom during this time frame – even landscaped “urban oases.” Birds are adept at utilizing the warmer microclimates afforded by cities and semi-winter hardy species such as Orange-crowned and (rarely) Yellow-throated Warblers can be found foraging in Himalaya berry thickets and on spider webs encrusting rain gutters, respectively.

Freezing temperatures in the northern climes bring many visitors. In our riverbottom farmlands (the Eel, Smith, and Mad Rivers) the arrival of wintering raptors -- Merlin, Peregrine and Prairie Falcons, Ferruginous and Rough-legged Hawks -- complements common species such as Red-tailed and Red-shouldered Hawks. It is not uncommon to spot five or six raptor species during a brief visit to the Bottoms, including Bald Eagle. Bear River Ridge and Cape Mendocino are other hawk-watching hot spots.

Waterfowl definitely are in season. While at pasturelands, look for skeins of geese. Aleutian Canada geese, having staged a remarkable recovery from a population of under 800 in 1970, can now be counted among our wintering geese species, along with smaller numbers of Greater White-fronted Geese and the occasional Snow and Ross's goose.

On south Humboldt Bay, large numbers of Brant accumulate for the winter, best seen from the south spit road. Tundra Swans can be encountered at the Humboldt Bay NWR or the Ferndale Bottoms. Waterfowl should be plentiful in all wet areas, including flooded pastures, ponds, and lagoons.

Wintering shorebirds are abundant; popular roost sites include Bracut Marsh, the Arcata Marsh and Vance Road/Woodley Island area. Remember to check the tide status, as shorebirding is most productive on an incoming tide. During the rainy season, many shorebirds will feed on flooded pastures and wetlands, especially at high tide.

Humboldt Bay, the largest bay between San Francisco and Coos Bay, can provide safe harbor for ranks of seabirds that must contend with powerful winter storms. The inclement weather that often accompanies the holiday season prompts a refocus of our activities to hearth and home. As we nudge the thermostat upward or throw another log on the fire, one cannot help but feel a mixture of awe and empathy for those creatures that must contend with nature's fury. Red Phalaropes and an assortment of gulls are among the species that can be detected in shoreline areas following “big blows.” The jetty at King Salmon is the county's most reliable location for Harlequin Ducks. An overlook at the nearby PG&E property affords a great view of the bay; it may be you who finds the next wintering King Eider!

Mid-December ushers in the Christmas Bird Count season. If you've yet to partake, we encourage you to join us. Enjoy these months, with all the varied birdlife they bring, and remember to bring waterproof boots!

LES-SON'S ALMANAC (Volume 2, January/February 2005)

by Tom Leskiw and Frank Anderson

As we progress into the life-giving rainy season here on the North Coast, the quantity and variety of the “wet birds” (shorebirds, ducks, and gulls) are driven in large measure by the amount of precipitation received. Drier-than-normal conditions favor the presence of shorebirds at semi-permanent wetland edges. Following the arrival of serious storm activity, seasonal ponds appear in low-lying areas, providing winter habitat for species of dabbling ducks such as mallard, gadwall, widgeon, shovelers, and teal. Moving along the moisture gradient, the appearance of large numbers of Mew Gulls in pasturelands is to be expected following copious rainfall events.

The divers -- such as scaup, Ruddy Duck, Canvasback, Redhead, Bufflehead and mergansers -- will remain in larger flocks in the deeper water of our lagoons, southern Humboldt Bay, and the river estuaries. Common Goldeneye can be found in estuaries and the south bay as well.

Harlequin Ducks frequent rocky shoreline areas such King Salmon and near the North Jetty. The North and South jetties also host a suite of birds that includes Surfbird, Black Turnstone, and Rock Sandpiper. Conversely, Ruddy Turnstones generally are restricted to the gravel-lined shore at Fields Landing.

Mid-winter is the best time for raptors in our region, although most members of one of our trademark birds, the osprey, have departed for points south. We are visited by many others, from the small (Merlin) to the large (Ferruginous Hawks and Bald Eagles). Nationally, Bald Eagles have enjoyed a strong comeback over the past decade; they have grown conspicuous here as well. The most-likely spots to see them are near Humboldt Bay, along major rivers, coastal lagoons, and at Lake Earl/Tolowa. Ferruginous Hawks, with their pale heads and rusty upper wings, now arrive regularly in November to grace the coastal farmlands.

Winter is a great time to build confidence with basic gull identification, as more species are seen now than at any other time of year. For beginners, a good place to start would be to separate the following four species: Mew, Ring-billed, Glaucous-winged, and Western. Start with the adults; the subtle and confusing array of immature plumages is best saved for later!

Sparrow flocks are prevalent now, especially along roadside berry brambles or thickets. Our most-common sparrows are White- and Golden-crowned, Song, Fox, and Savannah. There's safety in numbers and sparrow aficionados know to carefully scan the flocks in search of the rarer species -- White-throated, Clay-colored, or Harris's -- that often keep company with their more-expected brethren. The Oregon Junco becomes a ubiquitous fixture at feeders, their coastal numbers often spiking when inland areas are blanketed by snow. Speaking of seedeaters, be sure to keep your feeders filled and periodically scrubbed out to prevent the spread of disease.

Fall and winter often bring an irruption of seedeaters that include Red Crossbill and Pine Siskin. These populations fluctuate wildly from year to year. Following several years of paltry numbers, Pine Siskins can be seen this year by the hundreds, usually dining on alder seeds or at feeders.

One side benefit of this season is the absence of leaves on deciduous hardwoods, which greatly improves visibility. Although fewer birds now inhabit the woodlands, the lair of the furtive, singing American Redstart that one struggled to view in June is now laid bare for inspection. The formerly well concealed nests -- necessary to avoid the prying eyes of corvids and other predators -- are now apparent, even to the casual observer. Another inspiring sight is the flocks of apricot-and-black Varied Thrush seen moving through the trees or flushed along roadsides.

A break in the weather may prompt some to venture further afield. A trip to 3000-foot elevation and above will open up a fun group of mountain birds, including Mountain Chickadee, Blue Grouse ... or possibly a White-headed Woodpecker. Wintertime birding can be slow going until one locates the flock. Listen for the insistent *ank, ank, ank*

call of the Red-breasted Nuthatch or an excitable Mountain Chickadee to help guide you to the roaming mixed-species flocks.

Other suggested trips include Ferndale to the mouth of the Mattole and Bald Hills Road near Orick. During the winter of 1993-94, a bonafide Palm Warbler invasion year, it seemed as though every farmhouse and hedgerow along the former route had its “resident” Palm Warbler. Introduced trees (birch, acacia, Lombardy poplar, and orchards) along this route and elsewhere should be checked for “funny sapsuckers” (Red-naped and Yellow-bellied). A seawatch at the mouth of the Mattole is recommended; additional spots that have proven productive include Table Bluff and Patricks Point (Wedding Rock).

The middle of February may feel to us like the depths of winter. However, migrants such as Tree and Violet-green Swallows and Rufous and Allen’s Hummingbirds are already arriving, sure to brighten a slate-hued day. Their presence reminds us of the continuing natural cycle of life and seasons, giving us a glimmer of spring.

And, in our opinion, the two best features of birding this time of year are 1) NO mosquitoes and 2) the thermos of hot chocolate, coffee, or tea that serves as a reward for your bracing outdoor adventure, while you scan your field guide to confirm an exciting new (to you) bird, spotted just as the seam in your jacket succumbed to the insistent seeping of liquid sunshine!

Bird Watching: All in the Family

by Brianne Yokoyama

Bird watching runs in the family you could say. My grandpa, George Burtchett, was a biology teacher at Arcata High and has been interested in wildlife and nature all his life. After retiring, Grandpa began to spend more time bird watching. After my parents moved to Eureka in 1990, my mom also picked up the hobby.

I've been home schooled since kindergarten, so most of my time has been spent with my family. Since what interested them quickly got passed on to me, I can hardly remember how I initially got interested in bird watching! In second grade we studied birds along with another home school family, species, habitat, etc. That was when I actually learned about specific types of birds and started drawing pictures of the ones I saw.

The first bird I remember specifically was a Brown Creeper, which behaves like a nuthatch, scurrying up and down the sides of trees. The Brown Creeper was crawling up and down and around one of the trees nearby our house, looking for bugs in the tree bark. I can remember excitedly pointing him out to mom and feeling so proud and important looking through Peterson's Field Guide to determine what he was. Since that little Brown Creeper, I've seen over 200 species of birds, including a Pileated Woodpecker and even a migrant Rose-breasted Grosbeak on our property.

When my dad, who teaches math at College of the Redwoods, took a sabbatical in 1998, we went on a 3-month trip and visited several national parks. During that time I wrote down all the bird species I saw and made a few sketches. Identifying birds is hard enough, but trying to do it from a car going 60 mph is very difficult! However, that experience made me realize why bird watching is such a great hobby. As my grandpa says, when you are looking for birds you will appreciate the natural beauty of the trees, landscape, and the world in general. After that sabbatical, I started making bird lists for almost every car trip, even sometimes from Eureka to Arcata.

My favorite bird watching trips have been made with my mom and grandpa. We've taken trips to the Arcata Marsh, Humboldt Bay Wildlife Refuge, and trail walks in Colorado, Kansas, Hawaii, and Alaska. My sister Bethany and I do the Thanksgiving Bird Count distributed by Dr. John Hewston and like to participate in the Christmas count too. Bird watching is an established family activity; we all are watching wherever we go. My littlest sister Hannah, age 7, even knows some bird names: "Hey Brianne, is that a Vulchey Turker? (Turkey Vulture)!" The only problem is keeping everyone quiet enough. This is a big task with an energetic little brother and sister but the benefits far outweigh the effort if they gain an interest in wildlife.

I would encourage other young people to keep an eye out for birds, even if they don't know enough to identify them. That comes with experience and in the mean time you can still enjoy how amazing and beautiful birds (and other creatures) are! It's as simple as just taking a moment when you are at a beach or park to stop and look around. Birds are practically everywhere and anywhere! And when you go on long trips, make a car game of who can see the most birds. That's also a good way to train your eye to notice important bird characteristics (body shape, beak, posture, size, etc) and to do it rapidly.

As a high school junior, I understand what it's like to have a hectic schedule. But hey, everyone needs some time to relax! Bird watching is a lot better than sitting around on Saturday mornings watching TV or just lounging around the house. Once you really start, it's hard not to do it all the time; it just happens automatically! That's been my experience anyway. I hope this encourages you to enter the realm of birding, so you'll be able to say, "Wow, that's incredible! I'm sure glad I was looking!"

Free Sound and Light Show at Arcata Marsh

by Michael Schleyer

Early in the morning, where Arcata Marsh meets the bay, thousands of birds have been flying overhead and landing on the two islands inside the marsh. Because of high tide, these birds cannot feed while standing on the mud, and therefore put on a splendid show, with front row seats provided for free.

About 10 different species are present--many hundreds flying in flocks that remind one of the pigeons over Manhattan rooftops. There is no individual consciousness here, only oneness, as the flocks turn and circle all at once, interweaving with other flocks, diving and chirping at the birds already at rest on the islands.

Their beautiful colors, and the sun's reflection off their wings and breasts, and off the water as they pass over, provide a dazzling display of changing hues of light, worthy of any first-rate rock concert.

The sound of their beating wings adds to your feeling of being present in the middle of one of Earth's wonders. It is nature at its most inspirational...right in our own backyard.

The Green Flash

by Ron LeValley

One of the more exciting, less-well-known, and even possibly mystical of the outdoor phenomena is the one known as the Green Flash. Well known to sailors and many coastal dwellers, the Green Flash is a phenomenon where the last rays of the sun turn a brilliant emerald green before disappearing.

Although the Green Flash has been known for centuries (at least one northern California Indian legend describes it), many people doubt its existence. One of the reasons for skepticism is that the phenomenon is somewhat difficult to see except under certain conditions, and even then binoculars or a telescope can make the difference between a real sighting and disappointment.

So what is the Green Flash? It is not, as many have suggested, the result of fatiguing the eyes with the red of the sun until the complementary green color remains in your eye after the sun has gone. This theory can be disproven, for the Green Flash is visible as the sun rises -- before your eye has seen the red color. It is also not painted on the inside of my binoculars as some of my tour passengers over the years have accused. The explanation lies in the way that the atmosphere diffracts the last rays of the sun, acting as a prism to divide the rays into the colors of the rainbow. The first colors to sink behind the horizon are the long wavelength, and more visible, red, orange and yellow colors. Since the short wavelength blues and violets are scattered by the atmosphere (remember that's why the sky is blue) the last visible rays are green! As you might expect, some nights are clearer than others, and really clear nights will occasionally result in a turquoise blue flash as shorter wavelengths penetrate the atmosphere.

The Green Flash lasts longer nearer the poles than it does on the equator. This is due to the relative speed of the sun across the sky. In fact at the poles the Green Flash can last for hours when the midnight sun is setting (or rising!) and the sun is stuck at the perfect spot on the horizon.

The best conditions for witnessing the Green Flash are a clear view of the horizon, a clear night, and binoculars. You should wait until the sun has started to sink behind the horizon (take care not to look at the bright sun with your binoculars!) and then look carefully at the edges of the sun as they fade away. Under good conditions you will see multiple Green Flashes as the sun "melts" away.

Not every night is a good night for seeing the Green Flash; sometimes, even under what I thought were ideal conditions, nothing appeared. Sometimes clouds will get in the way, but other times as the sun disappears behind a cloud near the horizon, spectacular Green Flashes can be seen.

So, one of these clear autumn evenings, take your binoculars and go where you can see the ocean, watch the setting sun carefully, and treat yourself to one of the prettiest of the sunset's many beauties!