

Bird of the Month: December 2001

Short-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus tenuirostris*

by David Fix

Long-distance migrations of birds have been heralded through the ages. The capacity for removal from bitter winter to residence in some favorable climate puts to shame the rigors and rewards of any human commute. When we think of 'extreme' migrations, images of Arctic Terns or golden-plovers come to mind. Less celebrated in naturalists' annals—and surely the object of far less poetic tribute—are the northward and southward passages of Short-tailed Shearwaters (*Puffinus tenuirostris*). These are birds of the open ocean, known only by those who go to sea, or who scan from mainland shores in hopes of catching sight of their dark and swiftly-moving forms. Nevertheless, Short-tailed Shearwaters well exemplify the moss-dappled adage, 'birds have wings, and they will fly.'

Short-tailed Shearwaters nest in great numbers in southeast Australia and in Tasmania from September to May. At this season few are seen along the coast of North America. Following the breeding season, the birds disperse northward in a figure-eight pattern, crossing equatorial waters far up into the North Pacific. In fact, they breach the Aleutian Island chain, ultimately massing in the tens of thousands over favored feeding sites within the Bering Sea! More than a half-million of these birds have been estimated passing St. Lawrence Island. During late fall and early winter of many years, modest numbers of Short-taileds appear over the cool shelf waters off temperate North America before retreating southward once more. It is at this time that careful birders may attempt to distinguish them from the nearly identical Sooty Shearwater. Satisfying, positive separation under typical early-winter conditions of weather and distance is difficult for most observers. This field problem remains among the toughest challenges most birders ever tackle.

Opposite the coast of the Redwood Region, Short-tailed Shearwaters are known to occur from September into January. The normal dynamic---as we have perceived it---is for a few birds to pop up among flocks of Sooty Shearwaters during mid- to late fall, after which they make up an increasingly large percentage of the mid-sized dark shearwaters seen from shore or from boats. Short-taileds often closely approach shore, much as do Sooties; during some early winters, they can be detected from shore with comparative ease. It becomes apparent to all birders who assiduously scan the ocean on Christmas Bird Counts each year that Short-tailed Shearwaters schedule their inshore assemblages on weekdays, so as to avoid showing up on count day! Typically, the coastal CBCs record none or just a few.

Learning to distinguish Short-tailed Shearwaters requires practice. The best path to take is to spend a couple hours carefully scoping the ocean with one who knows what to look for. In a milieu of Sooty Shearwaters, Short-taileds look smaller and a touch more delicate; narrower- and more raked-winged; a touch browner; less flashy beneath the wing, and they fly with more rapid wingstrokes. They have rounded heads and slimmer, shorter bills than Sooties: exceptionally subtle points indeed. The qualifiers 'very slightly' and 'usually' must be prefixed to each of these characteristics! In a stiff breeze, Short-tailed Shearwaters exhibit less 'wind-sureness' than Sooties, flipping about sharply and generally appearing to be somewhat more lightly-built. Close views of a bird on the water may reveal a pale throat, not often seen on Sooty Shearwaters.

Bird of the Month: November 2001

Harris's Sparrow *Zonotrichia querula*

by David Fix

North American birds whose ranges fall chiefly in midcontinent hold a special appeal for birders learning their craft on either coast. For those whose opportunities for travel are limited, such creatures as Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Connecticut Warbler, Baird's Sparrow, Dickcissel, and McCown's Longspur may remain 'known' only by their images in field guides or at bird-related sites on the Internet. As a few of these birds do appear on either the west or east coast from time to time, there is yet hope for finding one...or the chance to go look for one already reported by others! Many among us have experienced a 'life' Harris's Sparrow by traveling a short distance to some backyard in a suburban neighborhood, being invited in for a warm drink and conversation with a new acquaintance, and ultimately seeing---or not seeing---the Harris's Sparrow reported to have been present. It may take several trips to catch up with the bird, but perseverance can pay off with prolonged views of a marvelous 'midcontinental specialty.' Harris's Sparrows are odd. They are our largest sparrow, measuring more than seven inches long. They have a complex plumage pattern dominated by a blackish face or throat, bold black side streaks, and the appealing upperparts pattern of other, more familiar sparrows in the genus *Zonotrichia*. A simple song of a few flat high-pitched whistles is occasionally heard in late winter. They breed across a region of northern Canada in which few people live, and as a result it was not until well into the twentieth century that this area was discovered. Summering from the Mackenzie River delta southeastward to the west side of Hudson Bay, Harris's Sparrows nest in a wilderness realm of stunted spruces, dwarf hardwood thickets, and muskeg. Four or five eggs are laid in a cup-like nest sunken into the ground; these hatch after two weeks. Details of the life history of Harris's Sparrow are still incompletely known. Despite their far-flung breeding range, they have been long known as a North American bird. The bulk of the population spends the winter in the central and southern Great Plains states. Hundreds, even a few thousand, may be totaled on Christmas Bird Counts in that region. During the 101st CBC, the Udall-Winfield count in Kansas topped all U.S. Christmas Counts with nearly seventeen hundred of them! Toward either coast their numbers thin greatly; only seven birds were detected on the 114 CBCs conducted in California last winter. This sparrow is quite scarce in the Redwood Region, but one or two usually show up each November or December. Nearly all appear in the coastal lowlands, where they run with big sparrow flocks in weedy roadside situations...or at backyard feeders! It pays to sort through the throngs of 'crowned' sparrows for a larger white-bellied sparrow with a pink bill, some black on the face or throat, and (in the young birds) a distinctly pale-brown face. They are somewhat shy, but sometimes feed on lawns with other sparrows.

Bird of the Month: October 2001

The Vagrant Landbird

by David Fix

The adrenalin punch caused by the discovery of a bird that is out of its normal range is a 'rush' sought by many serious birders during the fall migration. Scouring flocks of common species in the hunt for these waifs is a bit like playing the slots: you know you won't 'win' often, so you'd better enjoy the action! While looking for a lost Blackpoll Warbler in a willow thicket jumping with routine birds, one necessarily acquires more experience with the looks and behaviors of the commonplace species. Each spring and fall, this game involves hundreds of birders and countless birds, not only on the West Coast but elsewhere in North America and in Europe. It has resulted in greater knowledge of the timing of migration in both rare and common birds alike. Here in the Redwood Region, a rich history of unusual finds has impelled a number of active observers to work the coastal thickets and farmlands in hopes of finding that Cerulean Warbler or Red-throated Pipit.

During the past forty or so years, our understanding of the 'vagrant landbird' phenomenon in California has grown from wonderment and bemused head-scratching to an awareness of discrete species-specific patterns of timing and comparative abundance among the entire suite of 'vagrant' species that occasionally appear here. Although it had been known since the turn of the century that songbirds (as well as other groups of birds) breeding in eastern North America might be found here very rarely, generally in late spring or mid-fall, it wasn't until the late 1950's and '60's that bird students recognized that these individuals could be broadly predicted to occur, and indeed could be searched for and found. Intensive coverage of outer-coastal vegetation patches by luminaries such as Guy McCaskie and Rich Stallcup, complimented by pioneering work in migrational orientation by Dr. David DeSante, brought to light the apparent 'mirror-image misorientation' that affects a small proportion of migrating landbirds each spring and fall.

This concept may be illustrated by considering a classic California vagrant, the Blackpoll Warbler. After departing Alaska and Canada in fall, they ought to migrate southeast to northeastern South America. If a warbler's 'compass' is ninety degrees off, it will head southwest, crossing the Rockies, the Great Basin, the Sierra Nevada---and ultimately making a night migratory flight which puts it out over the Pacific, still headed southwest! High overcast, which obscures star patterns used for orientation by birds, abets this situation. Should the warbler find itself well out over water at dawn, the survival instinct may override the urge to continue in the wrong direction, and it will attempt to make landfall.....or, if exhausted, may hop a ride on a boat. No doubt a great number of misoriented birds (chiefly juveniles on their first migration) perish by drowning in seawater or end up in the belly of a Sooty Shearwater or Pomarine Jaeger.

Birders have long known that isolated patches of vegetation along the immediate coast---particularly on seaward promontories, such as Point Reyes, or on islands like the Farallons off San Francisco---serve as first landfall or the 'port in the storm' for such birds. Sometimes vagrants are not present at dawn, but begin to appear in the mid-morning hours, as if arriving from miles to the west. That the all-time list of species detected on Southeast Farallon Island, where much mist-netting capture has been undertaken by researchers since the late 1960s, exceeds 400 show the attractant power of first landfall.

Here at home, the Fairhaven willows and cypress stands, the Eel River riparia, and the Patricks Point/Elk Head area have long offered rewarding birding for those hoping for a vagrant landbird. Check those chickadee flocks wherever you find them. May a Chestnut-sided Warbler or Clay-colored Sparrow grace your morning!

Bird of the Month: September 2001

Barred Owl

By David Fix

A persistent low marine layer swaddles the savaged ridgelines of the industrial forest mosaic in glarey whiteness as dawn breaks. From somewhere not far beyond the nearby timber wall, a series of bellicose baritone notes resonates above the chorus of songbirds. In the heart of a naturalist, time stands still for a spare moment as awareness of the territorial Barred Owl's pronouncement hits home. In the mind of a birder, there may never come the time when hearing this loud hooting does not bring to mind the dynamic nature of bird populations, and—at the same instant—consideration of the unforeseen impact of the human footprint upon the land.

Known as a bird of the Redwood Region mostly to birders and Spotted Owl surveyors, the Barred Owl (*Strix varia*) is a recent addition to our avifauna. Historically, this species has been characterized as the big, dark-eyed, 'earless' owl of the eastern hardwood forests and mixed conifer-hardwood regrowth. It originally occupied a broad range, reaching from the swamps of Florida northwestward across the southern fringe of boreal forest. Unlike most other forest birds of North America, that range has not diminished but has dramatically expanded. During the past several decades, Barred Owls have moved across the Continental Divide into British Columbia and the Pacific States. This range expansion is unparalleled by any other owl on the continent. Likely following the 'edgy' pattern of clearcut/leave stands into the Northwest, these birds appeared in Washington by the late 1960s, in Oregon in 1975, and on into California by 1981! During fall 1998, I did a phone survey of agency and private biologists which revealed that at least 37 Barred Owls were known at that time in Humboldt County. No doubt there are more now, as well as birds to the north and east, and also increasing numbers scattered southward through Mendocino and western Sonoma counties.

As this species has steadily entrenched itself in the Klamath Bioregion and elsewhere within the range of the Spotted Owl, researchers and land managers have noted a tendency for Barred Owls to usurp territory held by Spotted Owls. Experienced owl surveyors have expressed concerns that this aggressive and powerful owl may hamper Spotted Owl recovery efforts through badgering, displacing, hybridizing and backcrossing with, and even killing their smaller and more mild-mannered congeners.

Barred Owls nest in spring and early summer. Two or three eggs are laid in a tree hollow or old raptor nest within a dense patch of woods. The female incubates for about one month. The nestlings are provisioned by each adult after hatching, and fledge at about six weeks of age. Small mammals comprise most of the diet, with birds and other vertebrates taken opportunistically.

Barred Owls may be distinguished from Spotted Owls by their larger size, longitudinally-streaked underparts, grayer color, and by their doubled four-note 'Who cooks for you?' call. They respond enthusiastically both to imitations of their own hooting and to imitations of Spotted Owl calls. Much of the Redwood Region's population resides on private timberland. Trailheads and side roads in Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park offer some of the more readily accessible places in which to call for them. Early morning in April and May is a good time to try for them.

Bird of the Month: May 2001

Black Swift

by David Fix

During a recent Marbled Murrelet forest survey training session I facilitated at Prairie Creek, a student in the class questioned my assertion that the murrelet is ordinarily the only North American nesting bird to never touch land. The proposed exception? Black Swift. The point made was well-taken. Although Black Swifts do breed on 'land', their ties to it are tenuous. Aside from reproductive duties and hours of nocturnal torpor, they spend their lives aloft. In a strange twist, both the Marbled Murrelet and the Black Swift know variations on a watery realm: while the murrelet is highly marine, the swift in summer is strongly tied to waterfalls--behind which it places its nest, and about which considerable foraging and vocalizing take place.

Swifts are highly specialized aerialists. They are creatures whose every form-and-function exemplify adaptation to open-sky flycatching and rapid long-distance flight. Of the four species of Apodidae found regularly in temperate North America, the Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*) is both the largest and the scarcest. These birds have an intriguing distribution, occurring from Central America and the Caribbean northwestward to southeast Alaska. Within this vast range, highly disjunct colonies occupy sites ranging from sea cliffs (as in Santa Cruz Co.) to mountains. In the Redwood Region, they are definitely known to breed only at the outfall of Grizzly Lake in the Trinity Alps. The rarity of prominent waterfalls within our region certainly plays a role in limiting their abundance as a breeding bird in northwestern California.

Black Swifts lay but one egg per year, in a small cup of moist plant material protected by an overhang. The single dull white egg is incubated for about three and a half weeks; the nestling fledges at 45-49 days of age. It is believed that the ability of adults to undertake long-range foraging trips, abetted by the between-feeding endurance of the young bird, allows this species to nest at sites which may not offer especially good foraging. The first nest of Black Swift in the United States was not located and described until 1901.

Black Swifts nesting within the U.S. are completely migratory; that is, they are absent from their breeding range during the non-nesting season. They are notably late arrivals in spring. Humboldt County sightings tend to cluster in the period from about the second week in May to the first week in June. Reports from April are questionable and probably refer to misidentified Vaux's Swifts, although sightings have been made during that time in California and in British Columbia. They are much less frequently detected during their southbound passage in late August and September.

Scanning carefully with binoculars against heavy, leaden overcast will occasionally reward the persistent bird-finder with a sighting of from one to several dozen birds. While Black Swifts are both larger and longer-winged than Vaux's Swifts, care must be taken not to misidentify either Vaux's Swift or Purple Martin as this species. Black Swifts have distinct tails with a slight notch at the tip; the tail is often rounded or fanned during quick turns in flight. Vaux's Swifts show almost no real tail and are somewhat pale-breasted in good light. They call commonly, whereas Black Swifts in migration appear to remain silent. The 'leisurely' wingstrokes and frequent extended glides of Black Swift may cause confusion with the martin, but martins at close range usually give their distinctive 'chew-chew' call-notes.

Bird of the Month: April 2001

Hammond's Flycatcher

by David Fix

Remnant patches of stale winter snowpack persist within the mountain fir forests as the year's first Hammond's Flycatchers arrive in mid-to-late April. As the season progresses, their soft but incisive call-notes and unmusical songs begin to be heard more frequently by those naturalists who have taken the time required to know these retiring little creatures. Among the birds routinely occurring in the Redwood Region, few are as inconspicuous and as difficult to see clearly as this one. It is with good reason that this species is often one of the last summer residents with which the average birder ultimately gets well-acquainted.

Hammond's Flycatchers are fond of full shade, spending the long days of the breeding season 'closeted-up' among the lower and middle crowns of mature white and red firs, Douglas-firs, incense-cedars, and pines. This 'Empid' tends to replace the Pacific-slope Flycatcher—another forest-interior bird—at and above the elevational limit of temperate oaks and other hardwoods, typically above 4000' over much of northwestern California. Preferred habitat is unmanaged or lightly-managed conifer stands of some size, in which undergrowth is minimal and canopy closure is moderate to high. Owing to these requirements, any logging beyond light commercial thinning displaces them (pers. obs. in WA, OR, and CA). Although much has been made of the plight of other old-growth birds, the potential diminishment of Hammond's Flycatcher—a creature with a distinctly low 'glamour quotient'—has received almost no attention. As much habitat has been lost, and since almost none can be projected to have regenerated by rotation age to the nearly mature stand structure favored by this species, it is likely that this bird will steadily become less numerous wherever unmanaged forest falls to the saw.

Much in the manner of Western Wood-Pewees, Hammond's Flycatchers saddle their compact nests atop horizontal boughs ten to fifty feet from the ground. Whether the male assists the female in constructing the nest is apparently not known. Three or four white eggs hatch 12-15 days after the clutch is completed; the young fledge at about two and a half weeks of age. Both male and female feed the nestlings insects captured by short sallies among the forest canopy. By mid-August, these birds either vacate their territories or otherwise become difficult to find.

Despite the loss and degradation of habitat inflicted by the timber industry, fair numbers of Hammond's Flycatchers may still be encountered by those who know where and when to look, and what to look for. From spring into early August, forests within the snow zone well-grown to older conifers (an abundance of white fir or red fir is a good indicator) offer a good chance to become familiar with this drab bird. The 1995-99 Humboldt County Breeding Bird Atlas confirmed breeding in four blocks, found probable breeding in fourteen, and 'presence' without further evidence of nesting in another 33 of 420 total blocks. The population was spread from northeasternmost Humboldt irregularly across the higher portions of east county and southward into the Lassics. This flycatcher is not often encountered at lower elevations in our area. Only a very few migrants are detected near the coast or elsewhere outside appropriate breeding habitat. None have yet been found in winter.

Although the plumage varies seasonally and with age, Hammond's Flycatchers may generally be known by their very small size; short, narrow, and dark bills; short thin tails, and habit of remaining in the shadows. Simultaneous wing- and tail-flicking, while not diagnostic, is a good clue. The call-note doesn't carry far, but is easily heard at close range---a soft, Robin- or Long-billed Dowitcher-like 'pip' or 'peep'. The song is a low, rough 'DISsup. . . WAHsup!' uttered at intervals of many seconds.

Bird of the Month: March 2001

Ferruginous Hawk

By David Fix

The clearing of land along the northern California coast over the past one hundred fifty years has brought opportunities for grassland bird species to expand their range and abundance here. With the establishment of ranching and the dairy industry, what was once forest or salt marsh has become man-made grassland. Today, sufficient habitat for raptors of open country exists that we are able to enjoy the presence of a very few Ferruginous Hawks each winter.

This big hawk is at home in summer in the grasslands and shrub steppe of the northern Great Basin and the Great Plains. Ground squirrels make up much of its diet during summer. It is suspected that the unusually wide 'gape' of the Ferruginous Hawk is an adaptation allowing passage of large food items [in profile, the base of the bill extends behind the eye]. Large nests made of sticks and sometimes dried cow flocs are placed in isolated low trees, on exposed ridgelines or rimrocks, or on the ground. Both male and female build the nest and incubate the two to five eggs, which hatch in one month. Surviving nestlings fledge at about six weeks of age.

Fall migration sees most Ferruginous Hawks retreating well to the south, but a few linger in the northern portion of their range. It is in late autumn that the few individuals we see in the Redwood Region show up. It is apparent that many of these hawks return to the same area year after year. Good places to look for them are about the lower Mad River pasturelands from Blue Lake to Hammond Bridge; the Arcata Bottoms; the southern portion of the Eel River delta; along the lower Van Duzen River, and on Bear River Ridge. In recent years, one or two have wintered around Fort Dick north of Crescent City. Owing to the scarcity of this species in our area, 'pure migrants' in northbound or southbound flight are almost never detected, but surely must overfly us at times.

Ferruginous Hawks are large, rangy, and handsome *Buteo* hawks; the name *Buteo regalis* is surely fitting. The identification of large hawks is an involved matter, but you may suspect a Ferruginous by noting a combination of all-white underparts, almost entirely white underwings, and whitish tail with a faint rusty wash. Adults are rusty-reddish across the back and shoulders. Young birds have grayish-brown upperparts. At all ages, a prominent whitish flash occurs across the base of the primaries as viewed from above. Neither Red-tailed nor Rough-legged Hawks show this feature. Any *buteo* soaring with a Common Raven, and which is plainly longer-winged than the raven, is likely of this species. In addition to their flashy plumage and impressive size, Ferruginous Hawks are notable for their habit of perching for long periods on the ground, even where elevated perches are available. However, they also use power poles, fenceposts, center-pivot sprinkler setups, and other lookout posts. Although they seem rather wary, roadside perching right along Highway 101 is sometimes noted around the north end of Arcata.

Bird of the Month: January 2001 Western Meadowlark

By David Fix

While crossing a patch of mostly treeless country, we notice a chubby little bird of nearly Robin size spring into the air. It alternates rapid wingbeats with brief glides as it sails off in low, unwavering flight---and, in the instant before it settles to earth once more, much white is seen to flash at the sides of its short tail. From some distance, we manage to maintain a marginal view of the nervous bird as it stands motionless for a moment within crowded grass-tufts, peering upward and about. Taking a few cautious steps, it begins to blend with the grass, and then.....somehow, it simply melts from view. For many naturalists, an unremarkable experience such as this marks a first encounter with a meadowlark.

A set of adaptations featuring a strong, finely-pointed slender bill and streaky upperparts patterned very much like dried grass have enabled the Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*) to probe for food and elude the predator's eye throughout the open landscapes of the West. Though these birds spend much of their lives hidden within grasses and forbs, territorial males are conspicuous because they sing loudly from prominent perches such as boulders, fenceposts, power lines, or the tiptop of an isolated oak. This seasonally-high visibility together with a bright song caused many western states to proclaim this species as their emblematic bird.

Despite their singular name, meadowlarks are not in a family by themselves but are icterids, and they share many of the structural and life history details of other species in the large family of American blackbirds. Pairs settle in grassy expanses in spring, with the female incubating 3-5 eggs in a domed ground nest for 13-15 days. The altricial (helpless) nestlings are fed insects by both adults for about two weeks. Following the nesting season, groups migrate southward, and by late fall much of the northern portion of the breeding range is vacated for winter. Good-sized flocks of Western Meadowlarks assemble in wintering quarters, where they may be quite abundant locally. With lengthening days, a reverse movement brings them northward, and the cycle begins anew.

Although this species is certainly resident in the larger sense across northwestern California, it is also quite migratory. Observant birders in the Redwood Region can readily perceive this pattern. Breeding meadowlarks appear essentially absent in the Humboldt Bay lowlands and on the sandspits. Watch for the annual influx of little migrant flocks which occurs every year in late September and October. The less-heavily-trampled coastal pastures support flocks of these birds all winter; though some sing during springtime, these birds seem to disappear by April. Breeding Bird Atlas fieldwork revealed that Humboldt County's nesting meadowlarks are somewhat concentrated in the central Bald Hills; the hillside grasslands of the central Mad River corridor from Bald Mountain south through the Showers Pass Road area; the near-coastal 'mountain prairies of Bear River Ridge and back of Cape Mendocino; the Mattole; upper Salmon Creek, and the oak-and-grassland mosaic found generally through the middle elevations of southern interior Humboldt.

Western Meadowlarks are among the simplest birds to identify visually. The underparts are lemon-yellow, the breast is marked with a black crescent (smudgy or faint in some birds), and the upperparts are streaked brown-and-pale. A meadowlark may be known in poor viewing conditions by its flattish forehead, short neck, and stubby tail—which is often flicked open and shut in anxiety. Conversely, although the song is easily remembered, the many different-sounding call-notes given by this species require some time to learn.

Bird of the Month: December 2000

Merlin

By David Fix

It seems to be that nearly all persons interested in birds see and learn common and flashy species earlier, and uncommon or inconspicuous birds later. This has surely been my own experience, as I jumped straightaway into birding but didn't see my first Merlin for more than a year. Merlins (*Falco columbarius*) do not advertise their presence, which assists them in their hunting strategy. Sitting quietly atop a snag, treetop, or fencepost in open country, a Merlin scans the outlying avian scene with an eye for flocks of small birds---or simply a wayward individual flying along. Bursting from its perch, it reaches top speed in but a moment, ripping across the intervening distance with twinkling wingbeats at something approximating freeway speed. Therefore ensues either a culling of the latest, least straggler among the flock, or a final closing with the single bird selected for capture. When a kill is made, the hunter either dines on the spot or immediately lugs the prey item to a sheltered location for consumption.

Merlins are distributed throughout the cooler regions of the Northern Hemisphere, breeding across boreal North America and south spottily into the northern tier of the United States. Here in the Redwood Region, we know them as uncommon but regular migrantS and winter visitorS, present from September into April. Although they do hunt along forest edge, Merlins in wooded country are notoriously difficult to detect; most of our observations are in the open lowlands within several miles of the seacoast. Pastures, ranchland, salt marsh, open mudflats, sandspits, lagoons, and mountain prairies all host their modest share of Merlins.

A varied and plentiful population of small birds, scattered prominent lookout posts, and lots of open sky attract these small falcons. While in our area, flocks of Dunlin, Least Sandpipers, blackbirds, starlings, and pipits get much of their attention. During autumns when dragonflies are abundant, they will make short sorties from the power towers in the Arcata Marsh after these tiny but readily-captured meals. A few birds routinely hunt over city rooftops and around the suburban/rural frontier.

Merlins use tree cavities and old stick nests of other birds for their breeding activities. The female lays 4-5 eggs, which hatch in about one month. The nestlings fledge a month or so later. Much of the continental population then drifts southward, wintering mostly from the northern U.S. down into the tropics. This species is much more commonly seen in actual migration in the Lake States and on the Atlantic Coast than locally, although we can assume that many must pass through our stretch of country en route to their final destinations without being seen.

Because this raptor is not abundant, it requires considerable time to hone a useful 'search image' for it. Merlins seen perched at a distance generally look dark, sedate, compact, block-headed, flat-crowned, and tiny-billed. Females are perceptibly larger than males, but side-by-side comparison of the sexes is almost never experienced in California. They fly directly and speedily; a small male Merlin (a 'jack', in falconers' parlance) chasing a bird flat-out, glimpsed harshly backlit against overcast, can suggest a puzzling cross between a pint-sized Peregrine Falcon and a frantic Mourning Dove. Unlike many smaller birds of prey, a Merlin viewed well shows no 'break' or angle along the line of the hind-wings, appearing cut nearly straight across through 'arm' and 'hand' to the wing-tip. Long-time birders learn that the best way to spot a Merlin is to carefully scan snag-top trees and fencelines in our dairy bottoms at sites supporting large concentrations of prey species. Unlike American Kestrels, Merlins seldom perch on wires---my life Merlin did so, but I didn't see that behavior again for twenty-six years!

Bird of the Month: November 2000

Short-eared Owl

By David Fix

The final precious blush of burnt auburn is vanishing from the sky west of the south Arcata Bottoms as a winter evening begins to deepen. With the twilight comes a changing of the guard among local birds of prey. While the last few Northern Harriers and White-tailed Kites are still finding their places in the big communal roost, several warm-brown owls appear as if from nowhere, and start their nocturnal foraging. For the thousands of voles, frogs, and other small critters thronging in the ungrazed grassland south of Old Samoa Road, there can be no break in the vigilance with which they attempt to safeguard their lives. Beating slowly over and among the tussocks of rank grass now moistening with fresh dew, the Short-eared Owls hunt with seeming leisure, their moth-like pumping wingbeats belying the urgent purpose of their patrol.

With so much of the Redwood Region blanketed in forest, birds which prefer expansive grassy areas are only locally numerous here. Among these species, Short-eared Owls (*Otus flammeus*) appear especially picky about where they will live. Quality habitat for them is fragmented, and is susceptible to degradation by cattle grazing, agriculture, and industrial development. Because they are owls, our knowledge of their abundance and distribution is far from satisfying. We do know that the coastal lowlands hold at least modest numbers of Short-eared Owls from October to March. The outer Eel River delta, the pasture-edges and saltmarsh around Humboldt Bay, and the various sandspits offer parcels of habitat for these birds. The extent to which they occur on the near-coastal balds of the Cape Mendocino/Bear River country and in the sprawling hillside pasturelands of central interior Humboldt County remains poorly known. Perhaps this is a mystery the next generation of determined night birders can attempt to resolve.

Although a diminishing population of Short-eared Owls continues to nest spottily in Northern California, the 1995-1999 Breeding Bird Atlas failed to confirm nesting. Pairs of breeding birds engage in a marvelous 'sky-dance' featuring aerial maneuvers and vocalizations. From 4-7 white eggs are laid in a simple nest in dense grasses or a shallow marsh. Incubation takes about four weeks, and the owlets fledge after about one month.

Short-eared Owls are strongly migratory, and with their high sail-area-to-weight ratio, they are able to cover long distances efficiently. Many reports exist of migrating Short-eared Owls seen miles at sea in late autumn; over the ages, they have used their powers of flight to colonize isolated Pacific islands. Closer to home, your best bet for seeing this beautiful owl is to scan the Mad River Slough Wildlife Area (south of Old Samoa Road) with binoculars beginning just after sunset. Concentrate your careful scanning along fencelines and natural vegetation edges far out over the grassland, and look for the remarkably slow, flopping wingbeats, buffy wing-patches, and streaked underparts which distinguish this species.

Bird of the Month: October 2000

Swamp Sparrow

By David Fix

As we gain experience with birds, families with numerous similar-looking species gradually begin to sort themselves out in our minds. What were once perceived vaguely as simply 'puddle ducks', 'small gray sandpipers', or 'sparrows' acquire an identity and a set of unique characteristics, features which forever after will mark them as distinctive. Sparrows are especially confusing at first. Through time, and with exploration of different habitats, they too will become distinctive.

Many of our local sparrows prefer sites with rank grassy or weedy cover. Add a little standing water and you may be in the haunts of the Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*).

Swamp Sparrows are somewhat similar in appearance and behavior to both the Song and Lincoln's sparrows; it's not surprising that all three are classified in the same genus. Unlike either of those species, however, they do not breed in the western U.S., summering instead primarily across boreal Canada and in the north-central and northeastern states. The bulk of the population winters in the southeastern U.S. Since the late 1950s, Swamp Sparrows have been recognized to occur regularly in California. Very small numbers are located each year from late October into early spring. The breeding range and the fall/winter distribution somewhat resembles that of the White-throated Sparrow. Unlike White-throats, however, Swamp Sparrows do not often visit backyard feeders, and to find them, you must become familiar with their habitat and their easily-overlooked call-notes.

The lowlands of coastal and near-coastal Del Norte and Humboldt counties offer numerous small marshes, pondsides, and seeps attractive to Swamp Sparrows. These birds appear to prefer at least a bit of standing water mixed with dense rank grasses, a bit of blackberry, and forbs such as teasel, fennel, and the like. A scattering of young saplings often dots their hangouts. Both freshwater marshes and brackish marshes about the upper reaches of tidal channels are used. The Smith River and Lake Earl wetlands, the Arcata Marsh Project, and various small marshes around Eureka offer promising hunting for this species. Where there's one Swamp Sparrow, there are often several.

To find a Swamp Sparrow, locate such a site and 'spish' loudly for some time. If you pull up many agitated Song Sparrows along with a few Lincoln's Sparrows and Marsh Wrens---and and hear a Virginia Rail or two!---you're on the right track. Listen for the sharp, sweet **TSEEK!** or **TSIP!** call-note, which sounds very much like that of a Black Phoebe. Watch carefully for a grayish-breasted, white-chinned sparrow with rusty wings and back (and beware of turning a distant perched-up Marsh Wren with its pale underparts and dark back into a Swamp Sparrow). Spishing *loudly* for several minutes and glassing each sparrow that pops up are required skills.

Because so much Swamp Sparrow habitat is fragmented, difficult to access, and privately owned, only a tiny fraction of the available habitat is ever visited by birders. Based on the handful of sightings each fall and winter season, the total population occurring here must be fairly significant, surely running many scores of birds at the least. A few are usually encountered on our coastal Christmas Bird Counts.

In addition to the field marks mentioned above, you can check your identification by eliminating Song Sparrow or Lincoln's Sparrow. Song Sparrows are larger and have densely-streaked breasts. Lincoln's sparrows are about the same size as Swamp Sparrows, but have buffy upper breasts delicately pin-striped with blackish streaks coalescing in the center; they lack deep rusty tones.

Neither of these species utters the sweet, piping **TSEEK** call of the Swamp Sparrow.

Bird of the Month: September 2000

Hairy Woodpecker

By David Fix

During a recent conversation with another person intrigued by birds, agreement was strong that the Hairy Woodpecker (*Picoides villosus*) has about as low a 'glamour quotient' as any of the birds in northwestern California. Surely its plain and sturdy form has graced no state capital rotunda ceiling, no food product container, no microbrew label, and no postage stamp. I would imagine that the original people to inhabit our region also paid it short shrift---it's tough to imagine a painstaking pictograph, massive wooden carving, or even a simple crib toy honoring this truly 'redneck' forest bird.

Despite their abject shortcoming in the charisma department, Hairy Woodpeckers are fine and lovely creatures. Throughout the day, their industry is nearly ceaseless, and they can be located by their far-carrying 'PEEK!' call. Birders quickly learn how common they are---they inhabit nearly every kind of forest, provided there is sufficient cover and some abundance of decaying wood. Redwood, pine, Douglas-fir, and mixed oak/conifer stands support them. They readily use dense riparia with plenty of good-sized trees. Sun-parched open oak woodlands are not highly used. They are notable for their penchant for nesting two to four feet off the ground in stumps in steeper clearcuts and for foraging on down logs and widely scattered snags remaining after logging.

Hairies nest from April into July, raising from three to six nestlings in a hole excavated in a snag or soft-stemmed tree. Incubation lasts 11-15 days and the young fledge at about four weeks of age. These woodpeckers may be distinguished from the similar Downy Woodpecker by their much larger bills, lack of black spots on the white outer tail feathers, and by their general avoidance of smaller limbs and twigs while foraging. Your Humboldt County Breeding Bird Atlas project found them to be widespread, with breeding confirmed nearly throughout the area from coast to mountains.

Bird of the Month: May 2000

Hermit Warbler

By David Fix

Along with species seen chiefly on the open ocean, the birds of the forest are those with which beginning birders must make pointed efforts to gain acquaintance and familiarity. As the places where most of us live lie in lowlands which are only lightly wooded, we tend to get experience with the birds of the forest only slowly, and through repeated trips to the secluded habitats they chose. The Hermit Warbler (*Dendroica occidentalis*) might serve as the standard-bearer of this suite of species. Although many people live just a few miles from where they are numerous in summer, the treetop habits and inconspicuous foraging behavior of Hermit Warblers cause them to remain poorly known to many.

Described in an era when the forest vastness was but lightly-roaded and not often visited by naturalists, the reclusive image its common name brings to mind is less appropriate today. However, its specific epithet---alluding to 'the west' in a general sense---remains meaningful. Hermit Warblers occupy a rather small range compared to other warblers in the great genus *Dendroica*, extending from about Mount Rainier and the east flanks of the Olympic Mountains south through the Cascades, the Coast Range, and the length of the higher Sierra Nevada. They are scarce even as far east as the western Great Basin, and are a great rarity in eastern North America.

In northwestern California, it is a widespread species throughout the general zone of conifer forests, reaching the coast locally and occurring upslope well into lower subalpine stands dominated by true firs and mountain hemlock. Based on personal observation, I think there must be many thousands of these birds in our region each season. Across much of mountainous interior northwestern California, Hermit Warblers are as ubiquitous as Steller's Jays, Chestnut-backed Chickadees, and Dark-eyed Juncos.

Mature or maturing conifer stands with high canopy closure (crowns often touching) and a minimal hardwood component are preferred. Tree species composition varies from site to site, including such disparate species as Jeffrey Pine and Brewer spruce. Stands of foothill regrowth forest running heavily to tanoak, madrone, and canyon live-oak and with only a few remnant conifers are used to some extent, but this habitat is more preferred by this species' relative, the Black-throated Gray Warbler. Park-like, semi-open, or heavily thinned stands in which trees have full crowns but are widely spaced are more often inhabited by "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warblers. Riparian corridors are only lightly used by these birds, and mostly during spring migration. Hermit Warblers are very uncommon migrants in floodplain or dune-hollow willow thickets; the few outer-coastal migrants in fall tend to favor stands of Monterey cypress.

Hermit Warblers begin to arrive in mid- to late April, reaching fullest density by mid-May, and they remain common through July. The single (?) brood of 3-5 young is fledged from cup-like nests 15'-100' up in conifers in July. The fairly synchronous nesting cycle is readily perceived by a forest birder who listens for the sibilant noise created by incessantly-begging nestlings and recent dependent fledglings. After mid-July their detectability greatly diminishes, as cessation of song and the beginning of outmigration occurs. Southbound migrants are suspected to use higher mountain ridges, which enjoy only occasional coverage by birders in early fall; thus, their autumnal passage is not commonly remarked upon. One or two birds are detected among flocks of wintering Townsend's Warblers from time to time; this habit is far more pronounced to the south of us, particularly in the lowlands and lower mountain slopes of the Monterey Bay region. The bulk of the population retires to the highlands of Middle and Central America during the cooler months.

Male Hermit Warblers may be recognized by their yellow faces, black crowns, gray backs, and white underparts. Females and juveniles suggest the pattern of the male, but are variably dingy, often showing a dim paler eye-ring and dusky cheek smudge. The song is typically a shrill, piping 'ZEE-zoo-ZEE-zoo-ZEE-zoo-DZEE-ZEET!', the final notes higher. Songs of this species and Black-throated Gray Warbler can be easily confused. The birder who believes he or she can identify nearly all unseen singing warblers of this group---especially in mid-summer---is either a genius or highly naive!

In addition to individual variation and at least occasional ‘vocal copying’ of one species by another, Hermit Warblers exhibit a remarkable degree of song dialecticism (pers. obs.). Birds from the region around Mount St. Helens sound different from those around Mount Hood, and those around Crater Lake sound different from those around the Lassics. Adding to this confusion, softer, ‘secondary’ songs are sung in late June and July. Caution is advised! The call-note is a thin, high-pitched, silvery *tzp!*, nearly identical to the chip of Townsend’s Warbler, the species to which Hermit Warbler appears to be most closely related. These species routinely hybridize in Oregon and Washington.

Over the past century, many thousands of square miles of Hermit Warbler habitat have ended up stacked in log decks, awaiting the headsaw. Remaining blocks of habitat have no doubt been impacted in one way or another by the many environmental factors which, together, comprise the ‘edge effect’ (in its deleterious connotation). Despite this seeming setback, it is cheering to recognize that these birds commonly recolonize monoculture plantations of managed Douglas-fir as young as twenty-five years. Although for better or worse ‘we will always cut’, the present-day rotation of timber stands of sufficient size may ensure a safe future for this pretty warbler in the Redwood Region and elsewhere.

Bird of the Month: April 2000

Purple Martin

By David Fix

Cloud-dotted April skies alive with swallows and swifts offer a special return for an investment in persistence. Rich, snappy, downslurred call-notes that seem to emanate from the same patch of sky for long moments alert the birder to one or more Purple Martins foraging high overhead. These vibrant calls are complemented at intervals by the rapid-fire, congested warbling of the male as he advertises his territory. Here in the Redwood Region there are but few places near towns and cities where it is possible to encounter martins. Nearly all of our regional breeding population nests in forested country far from habitations. This is quite different from the scenario experienced within this species' range east of the Rocky Mountains.

Purple Martins are members of a group of about six species of larger American swallows, ranging from southern Canada to Argentina. They leave their tropical South American wintering grounds quite early in spring, but do not arrive at their northernmost nesting sites in the West until late April or early May. Only a very small proportion of the continental population now occurs in the Pacific States. This population was once quite significant, but has decreased steadily over the past century, particularly in California. Today the entire nesting population in northern California may number only some hundreds of birds.

Purple Martins are widely heralded commensals of human settlement in the eastern United States, readily using 'apartment style' nest boxes erected for them. This is clearly not the case on the West Coast, where nearly all sites are in snags or pilings in rural areas. Notably, they will accept boxes placed at colony sites to augment existing cavities, but do not colonize boxes erected far from established colonies...a 'yellow flag' for a troubled population in the minds of some biologists. In the Redwood Region, Purple Martins favor snags in forested landscapes outside the foraging range of adult Starlings, with which they might otherwise suffer from nest site competition. Clustered tall snags with numerous woodpecker holes are preferred, but short, individual 'soft snags' left for them in clearcuts by responsible timberland managers are also used.

Owing to suppression of wildfire and the routine logging of immature timber of small diameter, Purple Martin nesting substrate is a 'threatened resource'.

Sizable spring concentrations are sometimes seen around the Arcata Marsh Project (check the power towers...are those really Starlings sitting up there?). Male martins may mate with more than one female, and from one to three broods may be raised. The four or five white eggs are incubated for 15-18 days, and the nestlings fledge in about four weeks. After fledging, martins seem to disappear from our area by mid-September, with only occasional fall migrants noted in the coastal bottomlands.

Even the least experienced birders who have idly flipped through field guides will recall that the male Purple Martin is distinctive: entirely blackish with indigo iridescence. Females and young birds are variably paler beneath with dusky throats. Regardless of plumage, all martins may be distinguished by their broad, shallowly-forked tails, exceptionally broad but pointed wings, and their tendency to glide a great deal. They are among the earliest of all 'early birds', routinely foraging two hours before sunrise in early summer.

Bird of the Month: March 2000

Lesser Scaup

By David Fix

Greater (*Aythya marila*) and Lesser (*A. affinis*) Scaup are the 'dowitchers of the duck world,' with similar appearance, life histories, and behaviors. Like the two species of North American dowitchers, the scaups are often difficult to distinguish from one another. And, like dowitchers, the larger flocks may contain members of each species. While the Greater Scaup is found throughout much of the Northern Hemisphere, the Lesser Scaup is confined to North America. Lesser Scaup are small-to-mid-sized diving ducks with what might politely be called a low glamor quotient: no exalted sonnets, ancient frescos, nor imposing statuary memorialize these humble creatures!

Lesser Scaup nest across much of Canada and into interior Alaska, southward into the northern United States pothole country, and through the northern Great Basin. As is typical with many widespread waterfowl, scattered nestings occur outside the normal range---a pair nested at the Arcata sewage ponds in 1994. The hen builds a well-concealed nest in or near a pond or marsh, incubating the eggs and tending the ducklings on her own. Scaup become numerous on their more southerly wintering grounds by October. They are not especially abundant locally, but can be encountered on reservoirs, ponds, estuarine waters, and lagoons nearly anywhere. Concern has been raised recently over significant declines within the heart of their nesting range in boreal Canada (see Audubon, Jan.-Feb. 2000, p. 14, where the wrong 'bluebill' species is illustrated!).

Male Lesser Scaup are 'black at both ends and white in the middle,' with pale gray backs and gray-flecked sides. True to their well-established nickname, they are 'bluebills.' Females are brownish nearly throughout, with white bellies and a prominent white patch at the base of the bill. Adult scaup of each sex have pale golden eyes.

Birders often grapple with the separation of Greater and Lesser Scaup. The shape of the head and bill offer the best marks at any distance. The highest point on the head of a Greater Scaup is just forward of the eye, imparting a 'bullish' or knob-headed look, while in Lesser Scaup the highest point of the head lies behind the eye---and there is a very slight but telltale break in the smooth contour of the hind-crown, visible in birds of either sex. Lesser Scaup have smaller bills, lacking the prominent 'nail' on the tip of the bill, and there is no black on the bill tip itself. The white wing stripe of Greater Scaup extends distinctly onto the primaries, where in Lesser Scaup this is confined almost entirely to the secondaries.