

## **Bird of the Month: January 2006**

### **Burrowing Owl** *Athene cunicularia*

**By David Fix**

At home in treeless country, Burrowing Owls (*Athene cunicularia*) have long legs, perhaps to help them see over the tops of grasses—they are the “lawn-gear” owl. These small owls are found in temperate western North America, in Florida, and south to Argentina. They are most numerous in undisturbed grassland, sagebrush steppe, and desert, but also occur on golf courses and at airports. Burrowing Owls nest and roost chiefly in the abandoned burrows of squirrels, prairie dogs, badgers, and other mammals. One’s first look at a Burrowing Owl often happens as the owl bobs and bows on a mound of earth next to the burrow entrance or on a nearby fencepost.

Here in the Redwood Region, the Burrowing Owl is a distinctly uncommon sight. None are known to breed locally. A very few are reported nearly every year in fall, winter, and early spring. They are never quite expected, but the cluster of historical records from the Eel River and Humboldt Bay sandspits and similar places suggests that the outer coastal dunes and driftwood are a good place to look. Occasionally one appears along a dike or levee, or even in undeveloped urban industrial land, as in Eureka several years ago. Hiding and roosting cover such as logs, pipes, culverts, riprap, or large chunks of wood is important to them.

Female Burrowing Owls incubate 7-9 white eggs in a burrow for 4 weeks, and the young fledge about four weeks after hatching. Family groups remain together for awhile. Burrowing Owls eat insects, rodents, lizards, and small birds. These owls are partially migratory but are resident in some of their range.

Many North American bird species of grasslands have been diminished in range and number by human activities. This trend became increasingly apparent in the last century. Loss of 99% of the original prairie to crops or asphalt has fragmented populations of many grassland birds. Exotic weeds have had an impact. Federally subsidized cattle are among the most potent physical forces at work throughout the West, degrading to some extent practically every acre of publicly owned grassland they are allowed access to. The ruinous impact of cattle can be observed as near at hand as the Mad River Slough Wildlife Area, where Cal Fish and Game continues to play cow politics. Go take a look at their “habitat enhancement,” but be careful to avoid the barbed wire—an indispensable tool in the management of waterfowl, shorebirds, and raptors.

## **Bird of the Month: December 2005**

### **California Gull** *Larus californicus*

**By David Fix**

To those people who experience gulls only as ornaments along the shore or in the sky, little or no distinction might be made between the many species. But it might be muttered by birders who have stumbled across one too many hybrid gulls that the birds themselves make little distinction! For the person who is beginning to look at gulls in something other than an esthetic sense, there is hope in making these distinctions, for most gulls don't hybridize, and most exhibit characteristics that allow them to be identified with reasonable assurance. The California Gull is among these "easy" gulls.

California Gulls breed on islands in lakes and wetlands in interior western Canada, the northern Great Plains and Great Basin, and locally elsewhere in the West, as in South San Francisco Bay. They are almost unknown on the Atlantic Coast. These are social birds throughout most of the year, even while nesting, although pairs of adults defend space within their crowded colonies sufficient to incubate the 2 or 3 brownish-olive eggs for 23-27 days.

After nesting, they move generally westward. During late summer and autumn, they may be numerous at mountain lakes. Juveniles are quite precocious, reaching the ocean beaches and waterfronts of the Redwood Region two weeks earlier than the locally produced young Western Gulls. A noticeable southward migration takes place along the coast in October and November, at which time flocks consisting largely of this species can be seen flying over the breakers and the outer beach. Many California Gulls spend part of the nonbreeding season far offshore over the open ocean. In late March and April, a return flight of sharp-looking breeding adults moves northward along the coast and inland, followed by one-, two-, and three-year-old birds too young to attempt to breed. A few such youngsters may show up or linger coastally during May, June, and July.

California Gulls are known for appearing in large flocks at crop fields, in wet pastures, and on lawns and athletic fields. This behavior is much more obvious inland than along our coast, where most Cals resort to the open beaches and river mouths. During the summer, insects constitute much of their diet. This is the gull made famous by rescuing Mormon settlers in Utah from a plague of locusts in 1848.

These birds require more than three years to reach adulthood, and each molt causes a maturing gull to assume a different appearance. Adults have yellow or greenish bills; unlike other gulls, the lower mandible is marked with both a red and a black spot. Gull identification, though rewarding, is an endless challenge. Field guides will indicate how varied gulls are and will show how to distinguish species and age-specific plumages.

## **Bird of the Month: November 2005**

### **Snow Bunting**

#### *Plectrophenax nivalis*

**By David Fix**

From late fall into winter, those who walk along an ocean beach or among the driftwood and dunes near river mouths along the northern California coast may find a small flock of Snow Buntings. Always rare here, these visitors from the Arctic provide a moment of cheer for birders alert to their largely white plumage and rattling flight calls.

Snow Buntings are found in spring and summer in the treeless Far North, nesting on tundra, at rock outcrops, and around human habitations. *The Birder's Handbook* (Ehrlich et al. 1988) indicates that the nest is placed in a cavity, females incubate 4-7 eggs for 10-16 days, and nestlings fledge 10-17 days after hatching.

These sparrow-like ground birds are Holarctic, occurring all around the high latitudes of the Northern Hemisphere. In fall, they move generally southward. In open country such as typifies the Great Plains, flocks of thousands may concentrate in harvested crop fields and, in snowy weather, along roadsides. Variable numbers appear annually in Washington and, less commonly, in western Oregon. Few indeed make it as far south as California, and the discovery of one or more Snow Buntings in the Redwood Region is always news.

Most of the Snow Buntings that have been found in northwestern California have been along the upper waveslopes of ocean beaches, in sparse drift material, or in dunes. Some, however, have appeared on jetties and breakwaters, and a few have shown up with flocks of ground-feeding birds in dairy pastureland. An intriguing aspect of this species' irregular and restricted distribution in California is that several reports have come from the "mountain prairies" of Bear River Ridge and Cape Mendocino Ridge, where individuals occur in flocks of Horned Larks or longspurs.

Most Snow Buntings occurring in northwestern California tend toward the dark end of the plumage spectrum, looking like large, squat sparrows with mostly white underparts, white edges to the tail, and a lot of white in the inner wing. The breast is often smudged with rust at the sides, and rust or other brownish marks are noticeable on the head. The pink bill is small and conical. Rarely, Dark-eyed Juncos, House Sparrows, or other sparrows with abnormally great amounts of white or dilute plumage may suggest a Snow Bunting, and such birds have been misidentified as that species. Any bird that looks like a large Snow Bunting that also has much white in the wing coverts should be checked for the possibility of McKay's Bunting, a similar bird breeding on Bering Sea islands that has strayed in winter to British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon, but has not yet been proven to make it to California.

## **Bird of the Month: October 2005**

### **Ruff** *Philomachus pugnax*

**By David Fix**

Continuing last month's Bird of the Month theme, let's take a closer look at a shorebird that occurs only rarely in the Redwood Region. The Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*) is chiefly an Old World species, named for the spectacular neck feathering and head tufts worn by the breeding male in spring and summer. The sexual dimorphism exhibited by Ruffs is pronounced, with the males not only about one-quarter larger than females, but more colorful. The striking alternate (breeding) plumage of the males is strongly patterned with barred and variegated feathers, and individual ruffs-and-tufts vary from black to red to nearly white. Gathering at traditional courtship sites ("leks") scattered from Britain eastward through Siberia, male Ruffs display to assembled females—in Europe, known as Reeves. Females lay 4 eggs that are incubated for 20-23 days. The young fly at 25-28 days of age.

After breeding or fledging, most of the world's Ruffs fly south to winter around the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf and in Africa, India, and southeast Asia. Like some other long-range migrants from the Eastern Hemisphere, this species is seen in small numbers in North America. Autumn occurrences tend strongly toward either the Pacific or Atlantic coast, as might be expected of shorebirds crossing or following the shorelines of those ocean basins. In spring, however, some Ruffs are detected in the interior of the continent, as in the upper Midwest and in the Prairie Provinces; this indicates that such birds wintered somewhere in the New World. Some suspect that undiscovered New World breeding sites exist. Although unrecorded in California until 1961, the Ruff has now been found many times, and it is certainly a species worth looking for. Perhaps related to greater birder expertise and better bird books, reports increased along the West Coast in the 1970s and '80s. These birds may show up as early as mid-July but are most often seen in August and September. Exceptionally, one or two Ruffs spend the winter in California, usually among dowitchers or yellowlegs at estuarine mudflats and lagoons or in managed wetlands of the San Joaquin Valley.

Ruffs that are in plumages other than that of the breeding male are fairly nondescript, and they are easily overlooked by birders who are not aware of the possibility of their occurrence. Most, though not all, are juveniles. These birds are warm brown, rather scaly-looking owing to pale feather edges, about the size of a Greater Yellowlegs (male) or just slightly larger than a dowitcher (female), with a vaguely squat, thin-necked, and small-headed appearance. Legs are dull yellow, the bill of medium length and very slightly drooped. Ruffs often wander about within a mixed-species flock as if following their own inscrutable program. The sum of this build and behavior is a shorebird that somehow suggests a cross between a Virginia Rail and a rubber chicken! To make sure, study it closely, check a couple of field guides, and photograph it if you can.

## **Bird of the Month: September 2005**

### **Stilt Sandpiper** *Micropalama himantopus*

**By David Fix**

Great numbers of shorebirds migrate southward from far-northern breeding areas beginning in late June and continuing through late fall. This movement takes hundreds of thousands of shorebirds through California, where they rest and refuel in wetlands, on mudflats, and at shorelines. By proportion, most of these are the common and familiar species such as Western and Least Sandpipers, Dunlin, Sanderlings, Marbled Godwits, Willets, the dowitchers and yellowlegs, the plovers, and others. But among these throngs may occasionally appear an outlier, an oddball: a shorebird off the beaten track for most of its kind. The period from late July into early October is a good time to search particularly for the Stilt Sandpiper (*Micropalama himantopus*). Nearly 100 of these birds have been reported in northwestern California, and in 28 years since 1969 (Harris 2005).

Stilt Sandpipers are medium-small shorebirds, known by their slender proportions, long legs, and a rather long bill that is drooped at the tip. In alternate (breeding) plumage, one would not readily mistake an adult with its finely barred underparts and orange-chestnut cap and cheeks. However, juveniles and basic-plumaged adults can create confusion for less-experienced birders, as they are similar in many respects to several other species.

These waders breed on dry tundra above treeline in the central Canadian Arctic and in northern Alaska. Their route to and from the main wintering grounds in southern South America takes most of them across the eastern half of Canada and the U.S. Over nearly the entire West they are typically quite rare. In some years, single birds and very small flocks are detected at prime shorebird gathering sites such as lakeshores and sheltered mudflats.

Stilt Sandpipers feed by inserting the bill in soft or fluid mud and repeatedly plunging it up and down, as if sewing. It is likely that worms, tiny mollusks, and other small invertebrates form their diet while the birds visit our area. Because they share their need for soft mud and very shallow water with Long-billed and Short-billed Dowitchers and both species of yellowlegs, they are frequently seen in the company of flocks of those species. Their similarity to dowitchers in size, shape, coloration, and foraging style often causes Stilt Sandpipers to be nearly overlooked when a single bird is present amid a flock of dowitchers or other small shorebirds that probe when they feed.

While the sight of an alternate-plumaged Stilt Sandpiper in spring or summer is truly exceptional in the Redwood Region, any shorebird enthusiast who carefully works through the early fall flocks with an eye for an odd individual has a reasonable chance of eventually finding one of these birds in its subtle juvenile plumage. Watch for a nearly dowitcher-sized shorebird with comparatively longer legs, white-edged shoulder feathers, and a shorter bill that is distinctly drooped near the tip. Rather than having white extending well up the lower back, as in the dowitchers, the Stilt Sandpiper has a more restricted white rump and grayish tail.

## **Bird of the Month: January 2005**

### **Red-breasted Nuthatch**

*Sitta canadensis*

**By David Fix**

The tell-tale voice, strongly patterned appearance, and creeping habits of the Red-breasted Nuthatch endear this species to many. Their curiosity is well known to bird enthusiasts. As visitors to bird feeders, they bring variety to residential neighborhoods. Along the West Coast, they are often to be encountered among mixed-species foraging flocks of kinglets, chickadees, Hutton's Vireos, Townsend's Warblers, and other insectivorous birds. These lively creatures make a living by moving in quick hops along the trunks and limbs of trees, inspecting bark and twigs for insects and eggs and pupae.

The breeding range of these nuthatches is from southern Alaska across boreal Canada to the Maritime Provinces, extending southward in the Appalachians and in most of the western mountain ranges nearly to Mexico. Habitat preferred by Red-breasted Nuthatches for breeding is coniferous or conifer-dominated forest. Each member of a nesting pair helps excavate a nest cavity in rotting wood. Abandoned holes created by woodpeckers are also used. In such cavities are incubated 5-6 eggs. Nestlings fledge at two to three weeks of age. I once noticed an adult Red-breasted Nuthatch working silently on a cavity in a tree above my head by first observing a tiny powder-burst of coarse "sawdust" floating past through a forest sunbeam. A glance upward revealed nothing but a hole in a decayed maple bough, but then a moment later a striped head masking a lively black eye jutted boldly from the entrance. The bird opened its mandibles, another puff of delicate shavings dispersed into the still air, and then it turned about and headed back inside, to further expand its frontier of coziness.

Strongly migratory, Red-breasted Nuthatches appear in fall and winter in southerly regions of the continent, where they may be unknown during the warmer months.

This is particularly true in years when food supplies in the north fall short, sending large numbers of the birds to the Pacific and Atlantic coasts and innumerable points in between. Sunflower seed attracts them to backyards, especially where a stand of conifers or scrap of woodlot adjoins.

Breeding Bird Atlas fieldwork in Humboldt County from 1995 through 1999 revealed the presence of these birds in nearly six out of ten survey blocks. They were confirmed breeding in 7% of all blocks and were judged a probable, unconfirmed breeder in 13%. Red-breasted Nuthatches were distributed nearly throughout the county, but with more detections and proportionally many more confirmed and probable nesting reports, coming from Humboldt's northern and northeastern portions.

Smaller size, dark blue-gray upperparts, a black facial stripe, and reddish-washed underparts serve to distinguish these nuthatches from the White-breasted Nuthatch. Nasal tooting calls in either slow or rapid series generally betray their presence before they are seen. Red-breasted Nuthatches are among the promptest responders to Northern Pygmy-Owl imitations made by birders in attempts to attract flocks of small birds.

**Bird of the Month: December 2004**  
**Red Phalarope**  
*Phalaropus fulicaria*

**By David Fix**

The phalaropes are remarkable birds, adapted to life both on land and on open water. Each of the three species occurs in the Redwood Region. Among this trio, the Red Phalarope remains a bird of mystery for many. Although it migrates off our coast each spring and fall and is occasionally common or even (for brief periods) abundant, the great bulk of the population stays well offshore.

Red Phalaropes breed on low-lying wet tundra near the coast in the high Arctic, nearly as far north as land extends. In common with Red-necked (*P. lobatus*) and Wilson's (*P. tricolor*) phalaropes, Red Phalaropes exhibit a dramatic reversal of the usual sex roles during breeding. Females are not only larger and more colorful than males, they also take the lead in initiating courtship, leaving the males to incubate eggs and care for nestlings. The nest is a shallow scrape lined with grass, lichen, and moss. While birds of each sex make scrapes, females select a final nest site, and males then add nest lining. A clutch typically of four eggs is incubated for 18-20 days. Like most shorebirds, young Red Phalaropes leave the nest soon after hatching and can fly at 16-18 days.

Birders aboard boats plying waters a few miles or more from shore can expect to see small numbers of these phalaropes during the spring migration, from late April through May. However, it is during the extended fall migration that most are observed. Some are present during the peak migration period of other northern-nesting shorebirds, from early August through September, yet greatest numbers are seen later in the season. Red Phalaropes are the most pelagic members of the family, occurring from the coastal estuaries, where typically scarce, hundreds of miles seaward out over deep ocean waters. They may associate loosely with Red-necked Phalaropes, especially over the continental shelf, but often assemble in large flocks consisting mostly of their own kind.

Red Phalaropes are notable for impressive "wrecks" that take place irregularly in November and December of some years. During such events, hundreds or indeed many thousands may be blown onshore as a result of prolonged gales and turbulent ocean conditions. Wrecks of phalaropes can't be overlooked by even the most casual observer, as all wetland and aquatic habitats may be dotted with the hapless waifs. The surf zone, ocean beaches, lagoons, flooded pastures, and sewage ponds can support great numbers of phalaropes for days, with the glut of storm-driven migrants gradually diminishing as they either move onward, die of starvation, become injured by wire fences and telephone lines, or receive the attentions of birds of prey. Ultimately, the survivors spend the winter in ocean waters chiefly south of the Equator, though some appear to winter farther north.

Identification of alternate-plumaged Red Phalaropes is straightforward: they are richly colored with bright chestnut-reddish and have stout yellow bills. Birds in other plumages may pose challenges for the inexperienced. Compared to Red-necked, the other sea-going phalarope species, Reds are larger and chubbier, have paler upperparts, and usually have at least some pale coloration at the base of the bill. The fall migration of Red Phalaropes continues well beyond the seasonal limit for Red-necked Phalaropes, which ordinarily are no longer seen by the beginning of October. Two of the world's three species, Red and Red-necked, breed at high latitudes in the Northern Hemisphere and winter on the ocean far to the south. Wilson's Phalarope breeds chiefly in prairie and Great Basin wetlands and spends the colder months in South America. Of the first two mentioned, the Red-necked Phalarope is more familiar, as it migrates virtually across North America. Rare inland and less commonly seen even along the coast is the Red Phalarope.

## **Bird of the Month: November 2004**

### **Yellow-billed Loon**

*Gavia adamsii*

**By David Fix**

Hundreds of thousands of loons occur in California each year, the vast majority along the coast and over nearshore ocean waters. By far the greatest proportion of this throng is represented by Pacific Loons (*G. pacifica*), which migrate through California waters each spring and fall, wintering in smaller numbers. Common (*G. immer*) and Red-throated (*G. stellata*) loons make up nearly all of the remainder and comprise most of the loons spending the winter locally. Five reports of single Arctic Loons (*G. arctica*) from Asia have been accepted for the state, none from far northwestern California. Completing the list of species is the Yellow-billed Loon. This is the largest and scarcest member of the family, it lives farthest north throughout the year, and it is a 'bird to see' in California.

Dating from the first report in the state—a single bird at Inverness, Marin County, in December 1967—Yellow-billed Loons have occurred about 70 times in California, and they have been recorded annually since 1971. Nearly 90% of all accepted reports have been from Monterey Bay northward along the coast. Only four have ever been found inland in California. However, increasing numbers are now detected inland nearly across the continent. This almost certainly owes more to greater numbers of talented birders than to an increase in population or change in wintering distribution of these loons.

In late spring and summer, Yellow-billed Loons are birds of the far north. In North America, they nest on lakes and pools of the tundra from the Seward Peninsula in Alaska to central arctic Canada northwest of Hudson Bay. Most of the birds encountered in California are found from November into late winter. Many are individuals in their first winter of life, but some are adult or adult-like. While some are seen only once, others have remained at the point of discovery for weeks or even months; some have appeared to return to the same location in successive winters. Any Christmas Bird Count team stumbling onto one of these loons has instantly found one of the best birds of the day! Further attesting to the rarity of Yellow-billed Loon in California is that only a very few have ever been detected actually migrating north or south among groups of other loons seen from shore points.

The Yellow-billed Loon closely resembles the Common Loon at all seasons. As is true for many rare species that are similar to other, much more common species, it is best to support an identification of this bird by observing all possible points of distinction. In comparison to Common Loon, the best marks for Yellow-billed Loon in non-breeding plumage are slightly greater size, longer and thicker neck, and a long, pale yellowish or whitish bill which is straight along the top, upcurved along the bottom, and usually pale on all of the outer portion of upper mandible ridge. A dark smudge behind the ear is usually noticeable. This smudge may be neat and well-defined or broad and smudgy. Pale edges to the back feathers are often conspicuous, especially in immatures. Yellow-billed Loons tend to have an 'alert' posture because they carry the bill somewhat uptilted, which in turn emphasizes its upswept shape.

## Bird of the Month: October 2004

### Sharp-tailed Sandpiper

*Calidris acuminata*

By David Fix

The fall migration brings special rewards for those who look at shorebirds. Juveniles in bright plumage can be seen south of Arctic breeding sites only at this time. Such species as Baird's Sandpipers and Pectoral Sandpipers and Lesser Yellowlegs pass through the Redwood Region in greatest numbers then. Following the peak of abundance for those species is the period of six weeks or so during which Sharp-tailed Sandpipers sometimes show up. These attractive waders breed in northeast Asia. Although virtually the entire population winters in and around Australia, a very few wander southeast along the Pacific coast of North America from Alaska to California. These birds are almost all juveniles, hatched several months earlier and headed who knows where. While many may ultimately steer a bold course offshore toward the southwestern Pacific Ocean basin, a few may winter undetected in the Western Hemisphere. This is suggested by rare spring sightings of alternate-plumaged adults in California and elsewhere in North America.

Late September through October is prime time to search for a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. This is the season when most Western Sandpipers have departed, Pectoral Sandpipers stalk along the grassy edges of mudflats, and the Dunlin have arrived in numbers. In his regional work Northwestern California Birds (1996), Stan Harris noted that 15 reports of Sharp-tails from the area initially took place in September, 12 in October, and 1 in November. The earliest sighting for northwestern California has been 7 Sep, but even in Oregon and Washington they are seldom found so early.

Birders on the lookout for this species would do well to concentrate their searches at exposed mudflats supporting Pectoral Sandpipers, dowitchers, and yellowlegs. Although the great majority of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers seen south of Alaska have been in coastal areas, at least a few show up somewhere well inland each fall, and they are not averse to using freshwater settings. Dairy 'slop ponds' occasionally attract them. Most, however, are encountered at brackish or salt marshes within a few miles of the outer coast. *Salicornia* is often present in marshes they prefer. Lake Earl/Talawa and Eel River Wildlife Area are two well-known sites for these birds in northwestern California.

The species most closely resembling Sharp-tailed Sandpiper is Pectoral Sandpiper, and many inexperienced birders have rushed into misidentifying the latter species as the former! The juvenile Sharp-tail may be distinguished from like-aged Pectoral (most of our Pecs are also juvies) by the following points. Rather than being heavily marked all the way across with dark brown streaks on a whitish ground color, the upper breast of Sharp-tailed Sandpiper is a bright, 'peachy' buff with only slight streaking at the sides. No abrupt delineation in pattern occurs at mid-breast. The cap is rich reddish-chestnut, contrasting more than that of the Pectoral. A distinct white eye-ring is often noticed, and the white line over the eye is more pronounced than in the Pec, flaring a bit behind the eye. The bill averages just a tad shorter than that of the Pec, and the crown may appear flattened. Overall, the Sharp-tailed seems brighter than the Pectoral owing to richer reddish edges to many of the feathers of the upperparts. Remember: if it doesn't really look like a different species, ask yourself, is there a good reason for that?

## Bird of the Month: September 2004

### Chestnut-sided Warbler

*Dendroica pennsylvanica*

By David Fix

It's late morning at the 'Horse Pasture' willow patch at Fairhaven, the marine layer breaking up into tendrils and dissipating before the first onshore breezes of the day. Although it's only the second week in September, the leaves of willows have begun to fall. The call-notes of Black-capped Chickadees and the chip calls of warblers betray a flock of songbirds somewhere up ahead. Birds silhouetted and but half-observed jitter and fly-catch in the willow canopy, each begging the application of binoculars and patience. Multiple Wilson's and Orange-crowned warblers are seen, along with two or three Warbling Vireos. Yet another small bird draws the eye, and suddenly here is no Orange-crown! It has pale gray underparts, yellowish wingbars, a crisp circular eye-ring, and a remarkable deep yellow crown. It's a bright first-fall Chestnut-sided Warbler, member of a species which doesn't breed anywhere near California, but appears rarely in migration.

Chestnut-sided Warbler is one among a large group of warblers we tend to consider 'Eastern', even though the breeding range of this species and others extends into Alberta. It occurs in summer across much of southern Canada and in the northeastern United States. Nearly all Chestnut-sideds normally migrate, nest, and spend the winter far from California. Yet during periods of migration, a very few stray well to the west of this range. It is during late May and early June and again in September and early October that birders in the Redwood Region enjoy a chance to encounter one of these beautiful creatures. This species is not at the top of the list of the most frequently detected Eastern warblers, but it is in the top half-dozen. During the past decade, a half-dozen Chestnut-sided Warblers has been the annual average in Humboldt County, with most of these found during the fall migration. Nearly every one has been either along the coast or in the near-coastal lowlands. These birds have also made many appearances elsewhere along the northern California coast, with far fewer occurrences yet documented along the southern Oregon coast.

Searching for 'vagrant' warblers from east of the Rockies is a pastime a little like casino gambling. With big payoffs infrequent, you'd better enjoy the action. And the 'action' pays off through mornings or after-work junkets targeting one or two prime willow thickets with a history of rare warblers. Absent perfect weather conditions or an amazing wave of rarities, the odds seldom favor success in simply going out and finding a vagrant. A friend of mine (who might have headed the Department of Redundancy Department) once said, "Rare birds are rare because they're rare." But what nicer way is there to better understand the routine ebb-and-flow of the migration of Orange-crowned and Wilson's warblers and Warbling Vireos? Ninety-nine percent of birding is experiencing common birds in common places.

Chestnut-sided Warblers in spring are vividly patterned with a yellow crown, black facial bridle, and rich chestnut-brown flanks. Males are more boldly patterned than females. Many spring vagrants are initially detected by their loud, accented songs. In fall, nearly all of the birds occurring on the West Coast and at desert oases are juveniles. These are known by pale gray underparts and face, neat white eye-rings, intense chartreuse-yellow crowns, and off-white to yellowish wingbars. All Chestnut-sided Warblers are somewhat chunky, and tend to cock their tail above the level of the wing-tips while foraging, useful clues in the low light prevailing in the thickets they favor.

## **Bird of the Month: July 2004**

### **Wandering Tattler** *Heteroscelus incanus*

**By David Fix**

The saying 'Nature abhors a vacuum' holds true throughout the biological realm. If there is room for life, there is generally room for much life, and for specialization. Thus our living world has become one of remarkable and unlikely niches, occupied by those beings tough and talented enough to exploit them. Although they inhabit niches falling short of the extremes manifested by Antarctic dry-valley bacteria or the worms clustered about 'black smokers' in the blackness of the deep-sea floor, birds nevertheless amaze with their ability to thrive in rugged environments. Among the more specialized birds we can readily encounter in the Redwood Region is the Wandering Tattler. Its' curious name isn't all that inspires wonder among birders and naturalists: it lives out a life distinguished by greatly different summer and 'off-season' habitats.

Wandering Tattlers live in places where conditions favor creatures able to endure harsh weather, hidden food resources, and the challenges of the intertidal zone. Humans generally are few and scattered where tattlers are found. This holds true during both their breeding and non-breeding seasons.

From early May into late summer, they nest and raise their young in subarctic wilderness areas of Alaska, Yukon, and extreme northern British Columbia. There they occupy a streamside niche somewhat similar to that of the Spotted Sandpiper, except that the tattler is often found along gravel bars and cold freshets above timberline, where late-spring snows may persist well into the breeding season and glaciers spawned from nearby peaks loom nearby. According to *The Birder's Handbook* (Ehrlich et al. 1988), male and female construct a nest on an elevated site among grass and rocks. Four eggs are laid, which the male incubates for 20-24 days. The young fledge in 17-21 days.

A diet composed largely of flying insects changes dramatically to marine invertebrates such as worms and mollusks upon out-migration to non-breeding season habitat. Leaving the boreal and alpine nesting areas far behind, Wandering Tattlers move southward and to the Pacific coast as early as the beginning of July. Along the northern California coast, adult tattlers become a familiar sight by mid-month. They remain until late September.

Sightings later in the season are unusual, and winter occurrences are exceptional. While not breeding, these shorebirds inhabit a far different world, one they share with Black Oystercatchers, Black Turnstones, and Surfbirds. This is the narrow strip of intertidal habitat characterized by rocky shelves, islets, boulders, and tidepools within constant reach of pounding surf. Here they walk slowly among the stones and seaweeds, inspecting shadows and crannies for small marine animals which they extricate with their slim pointed bills, seemingly taking flight only when an especially large wave forces them to. Adults in molting alternate plumage are soon joined by neatly-feathered juveniles.

This species was somewhat aptly named 'wandering', as it occurs southward to Peru. The name 'tattler' refers to the incisive, piping calls given by these birds as they fly. The call is given in a quick series of notes, and is frequently the first indication of their presence. Typically, from one to several tattlers may be encountered in suitable habitat, often feeding in loose company with other 'rockpipers' but not mixing among them, nor clambering over and among rocks as actively as do those birds. Wandering Tattlers are given to perching alone atop intertidal boulders for long intervals. The concrete 'dolos' reinforcing the jetties at Crescent City and Humboldt Bay hold an attraction for tattlers. In flight, this is the only rockpiper with plain gray upperparts, lacking any white in the wings or tail.

## **Bird of the Month: April 2004**

### **American Bittern**

#### ***Botaurus lentiginosus***

**By David Fix**

Bitterns are streaked herons of marshes and similar wetlands. As a group, they are best represented in the Old World tropics. Of the world's fourteen species, only the American and Least bitterns are found in North America. The Least Bittern is a very rarely detected visitor to our area, while the American Bittern occurs widely and is often seen.

One's first acquaintance with the American Bittern may surprise both the birder and the bird, as a rangy brown form springs into the air from close at hand in a sapling-dotted old pasture and flies off with smooth, powerful wingbeats--leaving a lucky vole to live another hour. Or a hunter of frogs may catch the eye with its last fluid movement into a persistent stillness against cattails, its gaze never wavering from the face of the observer---also motionless, binoculars trained. Many will recall their first bittern as a remarkable sound coming from within a marsh, a peculiar and penetrating voice accompanying the songs of Common Yellowthroats and Red-winged Blackbirds. Although few persons see these birds commonly, over time even a casual birder or naturalist comes to recognize them and gain a fondness for them. Bitterns are typically found in untrammelled places in which other wildlife dependent on wetlands make a stand. Unfamiliar wonders and routines alike may be witnessed wherever bitterns are to be encountered; they stamp a landscape as worthy of paying the honor of attention.

Marshes and other freshwater wetlands with standing water and luxuriant overhead cover---cattails, reeds, rushes, or shrubbery---support American Bitterns during the breeding season. Patches of such habitat of size and quality sufficient to attract nesting bitterns is scarce and localized in the Redwood Region. During the five years of the Humboldt County Breeding Bird Atlas surveys, American Bitterns were detected in only 9 of the 425 blocks, with one Confirmed Breeding record: a family group watched and photographed by George Green and others at the Arcata Marsh in late July and early August 1995.

Bitterns are seen more often from October through April, when migrants and winter visitors move into the region. Favored sites on the north coast include Lake Earl, Goodwin's Pond, Dry Lagoon, Essex Pond, and marshes around Humboldt Bay and in the Eel River delta. Migrants are occasionally seen in the open in grazed pastures or along exposed sloughs. Few have been found well away from the coastal lowlands in northwestern California.

Where they breed, American Bitterns may be heard at intervals throughout the day and night, as males deliver a 'pumping' song that sounds like a pile being driven into wet ground. A flat or saucer-shaped platform of dead marsh vegetation is built by the female, who incubates 4-5 eggs for 28-29 days. Nestlings remain in or at the nest until they fledge 42-49 days later (Ehrlich 1988, *The Birders Handbook*). In the manner of other herons, both adults feed the young by regurgitation.

These birds may be recognized by their fairly large size, larger than a Green Heron; brownish plumage with darker flight feathers; noticeably streaked appearance, and black marks at the side of the throat. In flight they look heavy-billed, and their large feet can easily be seen projecting beyond a short tail. Upon flushing, a bittern may utter a sharp call-note, but generally they are silent.

## Bird of the Month: March 2004

### California Towhee

*Pipilo crissalis*

By David Fix

In the heat of mid-afternoon, when most birds have fallen silent, metallic call-notes coming from a shrub-dotted slope announce the presence of California Towhees. These are stout brown birds, nearly as plain as any, lacking the white markings in wing and tail shown by the Spotted Towhee. Adults have buffy-orangeish undertail coverts and a buffy throat. California Towhees are notable for the frequency with which members of pairs keep in contact. They squeal and quiver their wings upon meeting in the territory. In addition to the sharp single calls given by each sex, males deliver an accelerating staccato run of notes that typically drops in pitch near the end. This song is familiar---sometimes tiresomely so---to many who live within its extensive range. It is found in lowland California west of the Sierra Nevada and locally on the eastern Sierran slopes and in southern California.

As these birds favor sunny, summer-hot places in which trees may be well-scattered and dominated by various species of oaks, the California Towhee and the phrase 'Redwood Region' might seem an uneasy pairing. True, the old-growth redwood parks host none of these birds. This towhee is characteristic of edge habitats featuring scattered shrubs, a growth of annual grasses and forbs, and adjacent semi-open country. Lower slopes of southern exposures grown to sprawling oaks, lightly-grazed hillside pastures with clumps of shrubs, untended ground along rural roads and railroad rights-of-way, and exotic plantings in residential areas are well-populated. In Del Norte County, this species is to be searched for only in the extreme northeast corner of the county. Interior valleys of southwestern Oregon are well-known for a scattered population of California Towhees. Humboldt County hosts numerous California Towhees, but only in the southern half. Valleys, foothills, stony canyons, and ranch yards south of Highway 299---particularly in the upper Eel, South Fork Eel, and Mattole river drainages---support their share of these birds. This species is absent along the coast north of Cape Mendocino, but is quite common in appropriate habitat on grassy coastal slopes very near the ocean south of there along the remainder of the state's coastline.

Breeding Bird Atlas surveys from 1995-1999 found California towhees in 111 blocks, or 26% of the total of 425 survey blocks. Confirmed breeding was established in 23 blocks or 21% of all blocks in which there were detections. The most frequently reported evidence was the observation of fledged young.

California Towhees usually nest in low shrubs, from four to twelve feet from the ground. Three or four bluish-white marked with brown or purple eggs are typically laid. Females incubate for eleven days; nestlings are fed by both adults and fledge about eight days after hatching (Ehrlich 1988, *The Birders Handbook*).

The northern limit of these birds in the Humboldt Bay region is not sharply-defined. They are recognized as uncommon but present throughout the year at Fortuna. Reports have also come from Maple Creek and Blue Lake (occasional). A very few birds have been present in the Bayside area since the mid-1990s and possibly earlier; they have nested along Jacoby Creek Road and in Sunny Brae. California Towhees have done very well in suburbia farther south in the state...will they someday be a routine sight in the towns and neighborhoods around Humboldt Bay?

## Bird of the Month: January 2004

### The Wintering Semi-hardy Landbird

By David Fix

The temperate West Coast in the colder months hosts millions of birds. Away from the higher mountains, habitats for several hundred species remain available—or become available. Blackbirds, sparrows, and other birds inhabit a mosaic of common edge habitats. Waterfowl from the Far North resort to lagoons, ponds, rivers, refuges, estuarine and seacoast habitats, and sodden pastures. Generalist species continue to exploit opportunity, while specialists stick with what works. Scattered thinly among these millions which have placed themselves in the right place at the right time are those that have not. This phenomenon is well-noted among our landbirds.

For, say, every fifty Orange-crowned Warblers, it seems there's a Black and White making do north of its principal winter range in the tropics. We have learned that Sharp-tailed and Le Conte's Sparrows, each very rare here, might be found once in a great while through searches in tidelands and 'decadent thatch'. Rose-breasted and Black-headed grosbeaks, various orioles and swallows, and from one to many representatives of 25 warbler species not expected here have lingered in the Redwood Region after the close of the main fall migration period. These are the wintering semi-hardy landbirds, called such for the varying response they exhibit to cold weather.

Fall migration in birds is spurred by changes in hormones caused by decreasing daylight after the summer solstice. In late fall, having migrated some distance, an off-course waif in the midst of a flock of similar birds—and with its needs met for the present—may elect to remain where it is, the urge to continue migrating quelled. Clay-colored Sparrows run with 'crowned' sparrows. Nashville Warblers flock with chickadees and kinglets. Such a lingerer will have found itself in a somewhat exotic winter environment, in circumstances its innate biology has not specifically prepared it for, in the company of a suite of wintering birds likely far different than those species it might rub coverts with on the main wintering ground. If it has what it takes, it shall know the pleasures of Ferndale in March.

Winter tests birds, picking from the nations of water- and landbirds each of those individuals less fit to survive. The survivors find appropriate food and habitat, maintain their metabolism, and keep out of harm's way. Most of the wintering semi-hardy landbirds are encountered among flocks of routine species. To be associated with a flock surely confers greater survivorship on such birds: the individual is less frequently the lone target of predators, is alerted to them more readily, benefits from discovery of food resources by the group, and may roost with them at night.

Cold is typically the greatest test faced by a proto-wintering warbler, swallow, or *Empidonax* flycatcher in our area. During a normal year, the near-coastal lowlands where most of these individuals persist do not experience hard freezes. This allows adult and larval insects to remain active. Intense cold continued over days removes this food source, leaving the obligate 'big-bug-getters' to find alternative food, find food through alternative methods, leave, or starve. With fat reserves low or absent as a result of their daily struggle, most of these birds may not have the option to continue to migrate far. Indicating that some of our regular wintering landbirds actually are only a few notches above semi-hardy is that the Siberian Express winter about fifteen years ago was thought to have killed 90% of the Townsend's Warblers in Marin County. The same massive freeze left Western Oregon with essentially no living Ruby-crowned Kinglets.