

Bird of the Month: December 2003

Long-tailed Duck

Clangula hyemalis

By David Fix

Cold fingers, tepid coffee, and an overcast expanse of water dotted with birds frame circumstances recalling many of the Long-tailed Ducks seen in our Redwood Region. These are strange and beautiful ducks, with the looks and charisma to hold one's eye for long moments—were it not for their seeming habit of spending more time beneath the surface than above.

Long-tailed Ducks are among the most abundant Arctic-nesting diving ducks. Tundra pools around the Northern Hemisphere--some nearly as far north as there is land--provide broods of ducklings with shelter and sustenance during the fleet weeks of the Arctic summer. Autumn finds them moving southward and toward ocean coasts. Concentrations involving tens or even hundreds of thousands gather over shoals of the Maritime Provinces and the northern Atlantic seaboard.

A different picture develops each winter along the Pacific Coast. Numerous in coastal Alaska, British Columbia, and into the San Juan Islands and northern Puget Sound, Long-tailed Ducks are far less common to the south. Along the coast of Oregon and California this species is very much an exception rather than the rule in winter waterbird flocks. Nevertheless, a few Long-tailed Ducks show up each winter, most commonly in the lee of headlands, about jetties and breakwaters, in tidal channels, and shortly inside river mouths. Owing to its pied plumage, small size and fondness for lengthy dives, this is also a classic 'stealth' rarity among the big flocks of Buffleheads and Ruddy Ducks on sewage ponds—check those common birds twice! Birders willing to look carefully at each bird in large mixed assemblages of loons, grebes, scoters, goldeneyes and the like will eventually be rewarded for their patience. Once in awhile, several Long-tailed Ducks may show up together and remain at one site for an extended time. A remarkable flock of a dozen spent the winter inside the entrance to Coos Bay five years ago, attracting many admirers.

This species is unique among our ducks in that each sex wears two different-looking definitive plumages during the year. No two Long-tailed Ducks seen in sequence look quite alike. Look for a little ghostly-looking duck with dark upperparts, a dappled dark-and-white head, snub bill, and pointed tail. Adult males in full feather have streaming tails and scapulars and are a total show-stopper. Long-tailed Ducks fly rapidly low across the water, often swerving, showing wings that are dark both above and below.

As all but the most recent beginners are aware, the creature now called Long-tailed Duck here in North America was formerly known as Oldsquaw. Most sources state that the name 'Oldsquaw' is based on the gabbling cries of the birds, suggesting ... old squaws. It seems a pity that such an evocative label be scrapped for the sake of conforming with the long-established British name. However, the change serves political correctness, and anyway most of us are used to it by now.

Bird of the Month: November 2003

Lincoln's Sparrow

Melospiza lincolnii

by David Fix

In the course of leading trips to Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge over the past ten years, no bird has given Jude Power and I greater delight in sharing with others than Lincoln's Sparrow. So frequently have we turned people on to this little skulker of the weed patches that it has become perhaps our favorite species to be anticipated during the monthly walks at the refuge. Tiny, trim, and marked with intricate browns and grays, this is a sparrow known only to those who deliberately look for the birds of hedgerows and unmanaged lands. Although they are well known for remaining half-hidden even while close-at-hand, patient birders will be rewarded with good looks at these exquisitely-patterned sparrows when at last one elects to linger atop a protruding fennel stalk or loop of blackberry cane.

Lincoln's Sparrows spend the summer in shrubby marshes, muskeg, and around beaver ponds and lakeshores across the northern forests of Alaska and Canada. Similar habitats at higher elevations in the mountains of the western U.S. are also inhabited—a few pairs nest about the headwaters of drainages originating in Klamath Mountains in the interior of the Redwood Region. Unable to persist in such places during the colder months, a southward exodus brings these birds to our area. Beginning in late September, weedy and swampy places support large numbers of Lincoln's Sparrows. Many of these birds surely pass through to winter farther south, yet this is a routine winter sparrow in the lowlands, remaining until mid-to-late April. Favored sites support a rank growth of tall forbs, grass clumps, rushes, scattered saplings, blackberry mounds, and the like. A bit of surface water may be present. This nondescript and unheralded—yet often quite birdy--habitat is sometimes referred to by birders as 'kack'. Song Sparrows, Marsh Wrens, Virginia Rails, Black Phoebes, and Audubon's Warblers share kack habitats with Lincoln's Sparrows during the months the latter species is present in our area.

Though eventually well-learned by most birders, one's first few Lincoln's Sparrows typically are confusing; they bear a resemblance to both Song and Savannah Sparrows. Lincoln's are best known by their unique pattern of thin, short dark upper breast streakings set upon a pale buffy-brown wash; below this, the underparts are largely white. The head is marked with a crowded pattern of dark brown and gray streaks; a flaring black mark behind the eye and a pale creamy 'mustache' are easily seen with in a good study. These sparrows look remarkably thin-headed in a front-on view; I think of them as the "Narrow Sparrow." Given their habit of remaining near the ground and only hesitantly emerging into the open, the nickname "Slinkin' Sparrow" also applies.

Birders who enjoy looking over our fall and winter sparrow flocks ultimately recognize just how common these birds can be in appropriate habitat. In time, many Lincoln's Sparrows can be known not by sight, but by sound. They utter two call-notes which are unlike each other: a dreamy *eentz*—often given as they fly off—and a soft but penetrating *chik* which suggests a [Sooty] Fox Sparrow but is not as loud or persistently repeated.

Bird of the Month: October 2003

Buller's Shearwater

Puffinus bulleri

by David Fix

'Globalization' was expressed by the distribution of life long before the WTO fought for the corporate right to Pepsify the world. Among birds claiming a great share of territory are the tubenosed swimmers, or 'tubenoses.' The extent to which members of this group have found niches in every ocean is wondrous. Tubenoses varying in size from the Least Storm-Petrel to the largest albatrosses occupy oceanic waters in great variety. The Southern Ocean, nearly contiguous through the mid- and higher latitudes and studded with islands, hosts the largest number of these birds. Many tubenoses nest at only a few locations, yet disperse northward across the Equator in annual migrations which carry individual birds thousands of miles. Among these wanderers is Buller's Shearwater (*Puffinus bulleri*), an attractive seabird which occurs over the ocean opposite the Redwood Region from late summer through late fall. Numbers are thought to vary from year to year.

Portraiture in the field guides suggests that Buller's is boldly-patterned. Indeed they are quite striking. Impossible to convey in the pages of any bird book is the grace and economy of their flight. No matter how impressed one may be with the flowing progression of Sooty Shearwaters, one's judgement of grace on the wing is recalibrated when a group of Buller's Shearwaters comes within sight. Their movements are superb, each bird arcing and tilting in turn, seemingly without effort. The first Pink-footed Shearwater or Pomarine Jaeger seen on a birding boat trip is noted with a shout and a nod; the day's first Buller's Shearwater is met with concerted gestures toward "Three-o'clock, right THERE!" followed by a charged moment of congratulatory merriment.

Adding charisma to the allure of such streamlined and showy birds is their vastly remote breeding range. Buller's Shearwaters nest in burrows on the Poor Knights Islands, off New Zealand. Dense concentrations of shearwaters there were ravaged by introduced pigs. After eradication of the pigs the shearwaters rebounded, with the population estimated at two million. Following nesting, Buller's move northward on a circuitous route through the North Pacific, reaching northward to the cool waters off British Columbia and the Pacific States. Though they aren't classic deep-water seabirds, most nevertheless remain out of sight of our shores. Most are encountered over the mid- and outer continental shelf. Skillful and cautious birders scanning the ocean with a scope occasionally spy one or more of these shearwaters from coastal points, typically near the limit of identification but sometimes only a mile or so offshore.

No other shearwater looks quite like the Buller's. They are distinctively gleaming white below on body and underwings (shore-based birders beware pale fulmars!), black-capped, and have a strange and arresting upperwing pattern of dark coverts and outer primaries. The balance of the upperparts is pale gray. The bill is thin and black. Buller's Shearwaters are nearly a 'sure thing' on boat trips going offshore in September and October—fortunate are those persons who encounter a nearly pure flock, lifting from the ocean's surface and flying off in synchronized passage across the swells. Birds lagging behind the main seasonal dynamic have been observed in some years as late as December.

Bird of the Month: September 2003
Swainson's Thrush
Catharus ustulatus

by David Fix

The song of Swainson's Thrush is so appealing and so distinctive that bird-conscious people living near a nesting territory promptly fall under its murmurous thrall. Within the Redwood Region, forests, streamsides, and woodlots offering consistent overhead cover, multi-storied broadleaf shrubbery, and a humid or otherwise damp setting attract these summer visitors. Swainson's Thrushes are comparatively late-arriving spring migrants. They are typically not in evidence until the last few days of April, although they become commonplace within a week or so of reported 'first arrival' each year.

Field work during the 1995-1999 Breeding Bird Atlas lent weight to a preexisting perception held by birders here that the great bulk of the Humboldt County population occurs within the near-coastal fog belt. Where moist conifer forests and luxuriant red alder or willow regrowth is found, so also are found great numbers of these shy thrushes. In this well-watered zone they occur in both riparian (streamside) and hillside situations. East of the fog belt where tanoak and other evergreen hardwoods come into their own, Swainson's Thrushes are quite confined to streamsides, pond margins, bogs, and seepy benches or springs. Because of the tolerance the related Hermit Thrush (*C. guttatus*) has for dry, completely-drained ridges and featureless midslopes, that species appears to far outnumber Swainson's across the county (and elsewhere in interior n.w. California) east of the zone in which vegetation is influenced by the 'marine layer'.

Swainson's Thrushes are birds of the forest or woodlot interior, only infrequently foraging in the open. Large eyes and sturdy legs are adaptations allowing the birds to see and scratch out the varied invertebrates they consume during the breeding season. The female builds a sturdy, mossy, cupped nest in the crotch of a shrub or small tree, in which 3 or 4 eggs are laid. Incubation lasts 12-14 days and the young fledge about two weeks after hatching. In late summer and early fall, evergreen huckleberry thickets near the outer coast attract great numbers of migrants, as do sheltered stands of cascara, whose ripening berries are a favored food item. On nearly any September evening, the mellow, piping *heep* notes of night migrants may be heard coming from overhead. These calls diminish rapidly after the first of October. The latest I have heard a night call is November 2nd. Nearly all of these birds retire to the tropics for the winter. There are very few confirmed reports from November through March—so, should you believe you've spotted a Swainson's Thrush during a Christmas Bird Count, think twice and check your field marks!

Swainson's Thrush can be distinguished from our only other regularly-occurring spot-breasted *Catharus* thrush, the Hermit, by its narrow but apparent buffy eye-ring and thin loreal extension—imparting a somewhat 'spectacled' look—and by lacking the foxy-reddish tail of the Hermit. Unlike Hermit Thrush, Swainson's doesn't habitually flick its tail upward and slowly lower it. The song of this species is a rich, fluty, upward-spiralling '*cor-cor-cordelia, cordeelia, corDEE-lia*'. Among several common call-notes, an interrogative, upward-inflected '*wit?*' is most frequently heard.

Bird of the Month: May 2003

Pacific Loon

Gavia pacifica

by David Fix

For living things throughout the Northern Hemisphere, the time of year we call the month of May is flush with purpose, poignant in its hope and promise. Winter is scarcely a memory, nor can summer yet be foreseen by those beings consumed by the irresistible urgency of procreation. Across landscapes pulsing with the fever of the season, those which are alive rush to pass the baton, members of each nation striving to keep unbroken the string of generations. Mid-spring touches the face of the waters as well. Along the eastern north Pacific coast and well out over the continental shelf, the ocean's surface now and again mirrors the fleet images of millions of northbound migratory birds, throngs headed in flocks, wedges, and individually to far northern nesting grounds. For a period of a month or more, Pacific Loons typically dominate the migratory spectacle witnessed by birders watching the sea from shore points or on boats close to the coast. This phenomenon is impressive. More than one million have been tallied in passage in the course of a single season by an observer conducting daily seabird counts.

Pacific Loons breed on lakes and ponds in n.e. Siberia, Alaska, and n.w. Canada. Certainly the vast majority of their numbers are seen by but few humans in summer--nor in winter, when most of the population appears to retire to the Sea of Cortez. It is during their annual spring migration from subtropical wintering grounds to the freshly-exposed wet wilderness of the tundra that we are able to admire their lean forms and white-spangled summer plumage. Beginning in mid-April, flocks of these large waterbirds race northward near shore and over the comparatively shallow shelf waters. Typically in early May, the floodgates are thrown wide open: it is then that a birder armed with no more than binoculars and an ability to scan the horizon may see flocks of scores and hundreds pass any exposed coastal point. A spotting scope brings even more into view.

These loons migrate in large, dispersed, open flocks, with plenty of space between each bird. Because of this, the larger flocks (sometimes as many as a thousand) may occupy a great reach of sky, individuals flying both low over the water and quite high above it, seeming to fill the air with flashing wings. Hours can pass, still the loons swarm past. So many migrate past the Redwood Region that, although 99% of them may have disappeared to the north by early June, at least a few late stragglers can be spotted as late as the middle of the month! The return movement of birds takes place mostly in October and November and is a more protracted, less conspicuous affair. Surprisingly few of these hardy birds linger into mid-winter here. Christmas Bird Count participants learn to train their scopes on the lee waters of headlands and jetties, where one or a few may associate with Red-throated Loons, Red-necked Grebes, and similar species.

Owing to distant views, poor lighting, and the birds' active diving, loon identification is a bit more involved than the straightforward accounts in the field guides may lead one to believe. This is especially true for the duller, basic-plumaged or immature birds. In winter, the Pacific Loon may resemble both the Common and Red-throated Loon, and practice is demanded in order to learn them well. In their brilliant alternate plumage, however, they are distinctive. The key points to notice are the eye-catching silvery crown and nape, black throat patch, and two rows of neat white spots along the shoulders. Any flock of loons numbering in the dozens or hundreds will likely prove to be this species.

Bird of the Month: April 2003
Black-throated Gray Warbler
Dendroica nigrescens

by David Fix

Think of North American warblers, and an image of color may sweep across your mind. Maybe a green back, yellow breast... perhaps some blue or rich brown. Many of the most highly colorful warblers are species in the great treetop genus *Dendroica*. Yet here in the Redwood Region we enjoy the sight of a widespread western *Dendroica*--typical in other respects--which lacks conspicuous color and is simply black and white or gray and white. This is the Black-throated Gray Warbler.

While it may lack the eye-catching colors of its close relatives the Hermit and Townsend's warblers, the Black-throated Gray makes it all up in spirit. These birds generally avoid closed-canopy conifer forests, instead preferring more broken, uneven-aged, or park-like stands in which oaks are strongly represented. Hillside or ridgeline regrowth timber at lower and middle elevations dominated by tanoak, canyon live-oak, black or white oak, and with only a modest conifer component attract them. They also differ from Hermit and Townsend's warblers in spending a great deal of time foraging not in the taller treetops but within the welter of lower limbs created by the mingling of taller shrubs, struggling understory trees, and the lower and middle canopy of whatever conifer trees may be present in a given territory. This habit, together with the species' propensity for quick response to 'spishing' or pygmy-owl imitations, causes it to be among the more consistently visible and engaging warblers.

This species appears in migration in early to mid-April, quickly becoming numerous across the drier slopes and ridges east of the coastal fog belt and locally westward. By early May, the songs of males and soft contact notes of females may be readily detected in the 'morning chorus' from the bottoms of river canyons upslope through the oak-and-Douglas-fir woods to the ridgelines. Where extensive stands of larger, vigorous conifers have outcompeted oaks and have formed a deep-woods setting, 'BTGs' give way to Hermit Warblers. Even in post-breeding dispersal and during migration, these warblers are seldom met with at higher elevations. In our area, they are far more common even a few miles inland than along or near the coast.

Nesting takes place in May, June, and the first half of July. The cup-shaped, feather-lined nest is usually built in lower limbs of oaks or conifers but may be as high as 50 ft. above ground. Three to five eggs are laid. Only one brood is known to be raised per year. Frequency of the buzzy, emphatic song diminishes sharply as nestlings approach fledging. Migration is in full swing by August and few are seen later than September, although late fall and early-winter stragglers may be noted along the coast or in interior valleys. Fall migrants in mixed-species flocks are easily overlooked.

Identification of Black-throated Gray Warblers is easy. Males are black on crown, cheek, and throat and have a tiny bright yellow spot before the eye. Females and young birds have the black of the face replaced by paler gray, and some have nearly white throats. All have a few neat black streaks along the sides and two white wing-bars. The rather similar Black-and-White Warbler is more strikingly streaked throughout, has black spots on the undertail coverts, and creeps along larger limbs rather than gleaning and flycatching amid slender twigs and foliage.

Bird of the Month: March 2003
Rufous-crowned Sparrow
Aimophila ruficeps

by David Fix

Many surprises were uncovered by birders during the five years of field work for the Humboldt County Breeding Bird Atlas. Among the more dramatic and satisfying events for those involved was the discovery in May 1998 of a population of Rufous-crowned Sparrows (*Aimophila ruficeps*) in the county. This is a species characteristic of sunny, dry slopes in the foothills of California and the Southwest. Rufous-crowned Sparrows were previously known to occur as far north as north-central Mendocino County. Subsequent field work has shown that these birds are uncommon and a bit localized, yet they can be encountered given patience and perseverance. They appear to be found in our area throughout the year.

Rufous-crowned Sparrows are known to few persons other than birders, as their preferred habitat lies well beyond the bounds of cities and suburbs. Slopes grown to scant grass, scattered dry-site shrubs, and a few oaks may furnish these sparrows with all they require. Good habitat often features stony ground, a talus slope, riverbank bluffs and boulders, or rock outcrops. All of the Rufous-crowned Sparrows yet detected in Humboldt County have been along, or on slopes shortly above, the main stem Eel River from the vicinity of Fort Seward upstream to the Trinity Co. line. Observations from Island Mountain, a bit further upstream, suggest that a more or less continuous smattering of these sparrows could extend from Fort Seward up the Eel canyon into central Mendocino County. The extent to which this population might spread out in side drainages or upslope toward the ridges is undetermined.

This is one of many species in the typically southwestern genus *Aimophila*, which also includes the Bachman's Sparrow of piney woods in the s.e. United States. With a few exceptions, these are drab and indistinctly-marked ground birds. Rufous-crowned Sparrow may be recognized by its reddish-brown crown, plain pale-gray breast, thin black eye-line, and thin, complete white eye-ring. A whitish 'whisker' stripe bordered by a thin black line can be seen on each side of the face. An aid to identification is the plaintive 'dear, dear, dear' heard from the base of a rockslide or patch of stony, shrub-dotted hillside. The pleasing song may suggest that of a House Wren, Lincoln's Sparrow, or Lazuli Bunting.

The first time Rufous-crowned Sparrow was found in Humboldt, the observers (Tom Leskiw and John Hunter) topped off the feat by locating a nest! These sparrows nest on or very near the ground, laying 3-4 eggs. Details of the species' life history are not well known.

This is one of only a few bird species common in California, yet reaching the northern limit of its range at the edge of the 'redwood curtain'. And YOU can look for--and enjoy--this interesting bird by participating in the joint RRAS-Native Plant Society outing scheduled for April 27th. Watch the front page of *The Sandpiper* for details.

Bird of the Month: January 2003

Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*

by David Fix

At some point in the mind of a birder, there comes the general leap of conception that gulls aren't merely esthetic objects—with practice, many can be distinguished, species from species. Causing this shift in awareness to follow a bit of a rocky course is the apprehension nearly everyone feels at attempting to ID large gulls. Indeed, years are required to become proficient. And there are no 'experts' who place a name on each gull they look at! With hybridization among related taxa further muddying the picture, the complexities facing the gull-watcher can seem a howling wilderness of potential wrong choices. For these reasons, an encounter with a species or plumage that is fairly distinctive offers an encouraging moment of orientation. Sooner or later, one's first Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*) appears. Large, and with strikingly pale wing-tips, Glaucous Gulls often stand out among a crowd of smaller, darker-winged gulls.

Glaucous Gulls are northern-nesting birds—the species name "*hyperboreus*" means 'beyond the north wind'—which have a circumpolar breeding range. They are powerful predators as well as scavengers, eating small rodents, birds, and birds' eggs during the brief Arctic summer. In winter, a very small proportion of the population drifts southward to shores and waters of the temperate eastern North Pacific Ocean. From late fall into early spring, a few of these gulls occur along the California coast. Here in the Redwood Region, one (almost always), two (rarely), or three (exceptionally!) may be found associating with big flocks of large gulls gathered at feeding or loafing sites. As a tiny number usually winter south of us, the occasional south- or northbound migrant is sometimes detected in apparent daytime passage from coastal vantage points, flying through the surf zone alone or in the loose company of other gulls.

Since (a) individuals representing the younger age classes move farthest south, and (b) the mortality curve dictates that first-year immatures will typically make up a disproportionately large fraction of the total population, most of the Glaucous Gulls seen here are in their first year of life. So how will you know a first-winter bird? Four key marks are (1) generally conspicuous paleness, the whole bird being either palest latte color or whitish and finely 'freckled' across the back and wings; (2) a heavy bright pink bill with a sharply-demarcated black outer quarter of the bill; (3) wingtips which are white, or nearly white, and are nearly unmarked, and (4) large size-- first-winter birds are usually the size of a Glaucous-winged Gull or just slightly larger. A few are by some margin the biggest gull in the flock, others might 'tie' for size, while still others may be only the bulk of a Western Gull. Second- and third-winter birds are seldom seen here. Adults are rare; they are known by their immaculate white wing-tips, very pale gray 'mantles', and yellow eyes.

It's best to learn gulls in the company of an experienced observer. Such a person may point out subtle but regular identification pitfalls involving look-alikes such as Glaucous-winged Gulls in worn late spring plumage, other gulls with pink-based bills, and the possibility of hybrids (for example, Glaucous X Glaucous-winged and Glaucous X Herring are known to be produced in Alaska and are suspected to show up on the northern California coast). But armed with several field guides and a willingness to 'let them go' sometimes, any birder can have fun taking a look for one of these northern visitors and, with patience, luck, and a good long study, enjoy a Glaucous Gull.

Bird of the Month: December 2002

Northern Shrike *Lanius excubitor*

by David Fix

When the yellowed leaves of cottonwoods and maples have begun to drop with the slightest breeze and the autumnal equinox is a vague memory, robin-sized predatory birds with drab gray-brown plumage drift southward from subarctic breeding grounds and appear in the Redwood Region. With a hankering for open countryside and plenty of it, Northern Shrikes escape the attention of most human observers. Sitting silently just below the top of an isolated sapling, along a rural hedgerow fronting an abandoned pasture, or on a projecting stub of driftwood in the dunes, a shrike may easily be overlooked—yet the bird itself would seem to overlook little of the songbird and vole populations that sustain it during the colder months. Given its nasty disposition and vigor for the chase, smaller birds and mice alike must maintain watch for this meat-eating songbird. Although most Northern Shrikes winter well to the north of us, late fall and early winter usually bring a very few of these hunters to fields, shores, and woodland edge in northwestern California.

Claiming great variety among many species worldwide, shrikes as a family are nevertheless specialized. They are able to subdue and dispatch a variety of smaller creatures by using their hooked bills—their feet lack talons, and look much like those of other songbirds. They are related to vireos, which perform similar butchery upon caterpillars; as C.J. Ralph has put it, shrikes are Vireos Gone Bad. Food captured is sometimes impaled on the thorns of prickly shrubs and trees or on barbed-wire fences, or may be jammed into a niche between crossed twigs. The Northern Shrike (known as Great Grey Shrike in Europe) is unknown in our area in summer, retreating to the northern boreal forest and taiga edge to breed. These birds begin to appear in Oregon by mid-October, but ordinarily are not detected in our area until November or later. Most are young-of-the-year in rather drab feather, but once in awhile an adult in snappy pale gray, black, and white trim is seen. Once present, an individual may remain for weeks in a given territory; others are seen but once. Sightings in late winter are fewer, and reports after mid-March are unusual. In many years, one or two of these birds grace our local Christmas Bird Counts, while in other years there are next to none. Only one was reported in Humboldt County in 2001-2002.

When looking at a shrike, check to see if the bill has an easily-seen hook and a pale base to the lower mandible; if it does, it is almost certainly a Northern. As young Loggerheads molt from juvenile into adult-like plumage by fall, any brownish shrike with an ill-defined 'mask' seen here from October to March is a Northern. Other points separating Northern Shrike from Loggerhead are a thinner and (in immature birds) often dingier dark 'mask', longer tail, and greater size. Loggerheads strike me as 'cute', looking like mere songbirds at a distance, while Northerns have a cruel aura—constantly looking as if they want to kill something.

Likely places to see one of these birds are from lightly-traveled roads in the Lake Earl – Smith River area, the Arcata Bottoms, the north spit of Humboldt Bay, and the outer portion of the Eel River delta. Carefully scanning all conspicuous tall saplings, fence lines, and other exposed perches in nearly treeless country for the vigilant, long-tailed silhouette of this shrike will eventually pay off.

Bird of the Month: November 2002

Rock Sandpiper *Calidris ptilocnemis*

by David Fix

The list of 'life birds' kept by birdwatchers living in the Redwood Region typically grows quite large before there is a checkmark alongside the name of Rock Sandpiper (*Calidris ptilocnemis*). To see one of these winter shorebirds well requires a hike into their chosen habitat of surf-splashed rocky coastline. Although one's expedition in search of this species may entail nothing more adventuresome than a low-tide walk along a rocky shoreline in sturdy boots and warm clothing, still there is the feeling that a special place is being visited in pursuit of a special bird.

This species is among the later-arriving migrants, usually appearing only in mid-October or in November. It is uncommon this far south, and is seldom encountered away from the flocks of Surfbirds and Black Turnstones in which it seems to hide. Rock Sandpipers are so scarce here, and are so cryptically patterned, that success in the search is far from guaranteed. However, once one of these drab grayish 'rockpipers' is in view, it is often possible to enjoy a close-range study as it forages among its larger cousins, picking methodically at marine algae and invertebrates clinging to the slick rockscape from which the bird seems inseparable.

Along with the closely-related Purple Sandpiper (*C. maritima*) of the North Atlantic, the several distinctive races of Rock Sandpiper comprise a superspecies of medium-small sandpipers typical of subarctic and arctic tundra in summer and rocky shores in winter. Rock Sandpipers nest in western Alaska. In contrast with other tundra-nesting shorebirds, they typically do not migrate great distances. Indeed, the bulk of the population of the nominate subspecies *C. p. ptilocnemis* apparently overwinters in Alaska's Upper Cook Inlet, feeding during the fleeting hours of low sunlight in scour-tracks created in the mudflats by room-sized icebergs that retreat with the ebbing tide! This phenomenon was discovered only as recently as 1997 (*Field Notes* 51:786-787), suggesting that much remains to be learned about even the regular North American bird species. Only a very small minority of the world population moves as far south as Washington, Oregon, and California. This species has always been quite scarce in our area and is never numerous. Christmas Bird Count data suggest a decline over the past several decades; the cause is not understood.

While Rock Sandpipers are in our area, groups of from 1-4 birds (exceptionally more) may be looked for at tidepools, on rocky promontories, and along jetties. They have a marked tendency to 'sub-flock' in groups of Surfbirds, among which their rather similar plumage pattern, yellow legs, and foraging behavior cause them to be easily overlooked. A rather long, slightly decurved bill and a simple flight pattern (white wing-stripe, dark back, whitish sides of tail) and smaller size distinguishes them from Surfbirds and both species of turnstone. Field guides treat this species well, but fail to warn that other small shorebirds such as Dunlins, Least Sandpipers, Sanderlings, and Spotted Sandpipers sometimes feed with or near 'rockpiper' flocks on rocky shores, creating a pitfall for the over-eager birder. Outer Point St. George, Trinidad harbor, and the north jetty of Humboldt Bay are traditional wintering sites. Good luck--and remember to watch the waves!

Bird of the Month: October 2002

Rose-breasted Grosbeak

Pheucticus ludovicianus

by David Fix

Gaudy plumage causes a birder's first good look at a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak to sear an image persisting long in memory. The less showy immature males and soberly-patterned females, while hardly a riveting sight, appeal with their heavy bills, intricate plumage patterns, and general bull-headed appearance. This is a species few Western birders will encounter early in their experience. The humblest field guide will instruct one that Rose-breasted Grosbeak is a bird expected only east of the Rockies. Even though its portrait is emblazoned upon innumerable bags of birdseed sold in California, it is only infrequently seen here. True enough, but alert observers on the watch for unusual visitors to their backyard feeders may be rewarded with the sight of one of these birds.

Rose-breasted Grosbeaks actually have come to be known as regular visitors to California. They occur in very small numbers nearly throughout the year. This having been said, the situation can be qualified with respect to season. In our Redwood Region, from one (occasionally none) to several spring 'vagrants' appear nearly every year near the tail end of the spring migration of routine West Coast songbirds. Commonly, these strays remain a day, a week perhaps, and then disappear. A few have lingered at feeders or on apparent song territories well into mid-summer. Although rare, this species has a long history of appearing in the fall migration, chiefly from mid-September through October, single birds popping up in brushy coastal woodlots or at feeding stations. Finally, once in awhile a Rose-breasted Grosbeak will spend the winter--or most of it--establishing a regular daily routine at a favored birdfeeder. Should such a lingerer occur within a local Christmas Bird Count circle, and should it be seen on the count, it is immediately among the 'best birds' to be found... 'list unseen'!

All of you who feed wild birds here should be aware that Rose-breasted Grosbeaks do show up. Watch for one to drop in at your feeding station! What do you look for? Look for a bird resembling a Black-headed Grosbeak in size, build, voice and mannerisms—but with different colors. Adult males have a remarkable inverted triangle of rose-red on upper breast, a white lower breast and rump, and a flash of red in the underwing; they lack the intense burnt-orange color of the closely-related male Black-headed. Females look almost like the female Black-headed, but lack the warm buff underparts of that species, instead showing coarse and conspicuous dark streaking across the breast. Their supercilium (line above the eye) and nape are whitish rather than buff. A supporting field mark for each sex is that the entire bill of Rose-breasted Grosbeak is pale; in Black-headed Grosbeak, the upper mandible is darker. Bear in mind that Rose-breasted Grosbeak is (strangely) encountered more frequently in California from late fall into early spring than is the Black-headed.

The rollicking song of the male sounds much like that of its western replacement, but is slower, a bit lower-pitched, and less apt to consist of the iambic triplets ('da-da-DAH') that so characterize the songs of most Black-headed Grosbeaks. The call-note is a sharp, excited single squeak like that of Black-headed. Generally, only experienced birders are able to distinguish these species by voice.

Bird of the Month: September 2002

Lesser Yellowlegs

Tringa flavipes

by David Fix

An identification question frequently posed among a gathering of birders is, “How do you tell a Lesser Yellowlegs from a Greater Yellowlegs?” One might hear in reply, “Lesser is half the size of Greater”; “Lesser’s bill is no more than one head-width long”; or “Lesser’s call is soft and is only one or two notes.” Each of these responses is helpful. A ‘softer’ criterion—yet vivid, and perhaps the most original—is credited to the great north coast birder Alan Barron. Alan suggests that the bill of Lesser Yellowlegs doesn’t seem like much of a weapon, whereas the bill of Greater Yellowlegs “looks like it could do some real damage.” Leave it to the experts to make the complex as simple as possible!

Lesser Yellowlegs are fun birds to encounter. The same certainly can be said for its larger congener--yet the delicacy, elegant figure, and deliberate movements of the *Tringa* shorebird group all seem to be best exemplified by this species. They are truly but half the size of Greater Yellowlegs, with body bulk about the same as that of a Killdeer. Dark above, their feathers are edged or tipped with dots of white; a variable pattern of fine dark streaking across the breast gives way to white lower breast, belly, and undertail coverts. ‘Crayon-yellow’ legs and feet are readily noted even in poor light. The bill is slim and straight, of moderate length, and almost always entirely dark; the bill of Greater Yellowlegs is usually touched with paler blue-gray at the base, and often (though not always) looks very slightly uptilted.

Although many shorebirds are found across the Northern Hemisphere, both yellowlegs are ordinarily confined to North and Middle America. Lesser Yellowlegs breed across the boreal taiga from northwestern Alaska to James Bay. Much of the migration takes place well to the east of the Pacific Coast, particularly in spring; most birds appearing in the Redwood Region are seen from early August through September. Most are juveniles. A very few linger into early winter at extensive rainpools in the Arcata or Eel River bottoms. Numbers present vary from year to year.

Although both yellowlegs species commonly mingle at foraging sites, Lesser Yellowlegs are less apt to use the exposed estuarine edge habitats and large tidal sloughs which attract so many Greater Yellowlegs. They prefer drying freshwater mudflats, grassy rainpools, cobbly river bars, and similar sites offering undisturbed shallow-water edge. Good places to look for them include the Smith River and Mad River estuaries and Eel River Wildlife Area. During the peak of their migration, loose flocks of as many as several dozen may scatter throughout expanses of favored habitat, dispersing among Greater Yellowlegs, dowitchers, and other shorebirds.

Bird of the Month: May 2002

Cassin's Vireo *Vireo cassinii*

by David Fix

It's 93° in the shade, right around the optimum operating temperature for flies. Morning's marine layer is forgotten. Vivid heat haze softens even the nearer ridges; annual cicadas ziznzik everywhere in the oaks and scattered overstory firs: it's mid-July east of the Redwood Curtain now. The slumberous two-o'clocks cause human activity to wane, and many woodland birds to cease singing, 'closet-up', and while away an hour preening.

This lull of early afternoon in the foothills passes typically unnoticed by Cassin's Vireos. Throughout their April-September period of visitation in northwestern California, the songs of territorial males carry through the timber and across the vest-pocket meadows and glades within nearly all forests of any age in our region, except for the immediate coastal lowlands. Should a raptor, human, or some other persistent disturbance in the woods result in a frenzy of anxious birds, one or two Cassin's Vireos will usually be among the mob. This is one of the more routine birds of mature and old-growth conifer stands supporting at least a minimal hardwood component, and is commonly encountered in nearly every closed-canopy situation dominated by oaks. The 1995-1999 Humboldt County Breeding Bird Atlas mapped detections throughout most of the county. Breeding confirmations—often based on adults carrying food—were frequent. Despite its abundance over much of temperate western North America, Cassin's Vireo is nevertheless a species known well only by those who seek birds just to look at them. Persons who feed sparrows all winter may remain unaware that a pair of these vireos nests in the woodlot down the street each summer.

The bird we now perceive as Cassin's Vireo was long known by that common name during a previous birding era. However, it was then classified as merely a western subspecies of what was until a few years ago the 'Solitary Vireo'. This complex involves several sibling species varying somewhat in coloration, size, song, and—particularly in the breeding season--habitat preference. Cassin's Vireo is the bird breeding from southwestern Canada southward through all but the driest portions of the Pacific States, and wintering in Middle America. In migration, they appear in the Great Basin and in the Rockies. Cassin's Vireos usually appear in early April, but don't become common until well into the month. Singing spring migrants outside appropriate nesting habitat are not common coastward. These vireos are noted for their habit of suspending their woven, semi-pendulant nest in a twig crotch scarcely above head height. Lowermost limbs of tall trees and the tangled canopies of shrub-trees are most often used. From 3-5 (usually 4) dark-spotted white eggs are incubated for about two weeks, with nestlings fed caterpillars and other such prey until they fledge in another half-month. A smattering of birds (which are generally quite plain, and are likely mostly juveniles) occurs in alder stands and similar unmanaged taller vegetation from late August into early October, occasionally up to the time of the Christmas Bird Counts.

As a group, 'Solitary' Vireos of whatever race are characterized by mid-sized, Chevy-standard proportions, a stout hooked bill, thin whitish 'spectacles', and two pale wing-bars and thin pale tertial edgings that contrast with a darker wing panel. Songs of all forms are similar: an insistent if deliberate progression of unmusical phrases, each of which seems incongruous with the preceding phrase: *See-Me? . . . De-troit . . . sur-Real!* Their call-note is a peevish scold ordinarily of one syllable, but variable.

Bird of the Month: April 2002

Pelagic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pelagicus*

by David Fix

When I was a kid, going about my brand of nature study without a field guide, I often tide-pooled at Haystack Rock, a seastack at Cannon Beach on the northern Oregon coast. While poking sticks at (colonial) pink sea anemones and happily imprisoning innocent hermit crabs in Miracle Whip jars, I saw various nesting seabirds...all in a non-birdish sort of way. One kind of bird most intrigued me. It marked itself in my memory for nesting on absurdly small ledges high on the cliffy sides of the rock. As a shy child, I think I must have felt a twinge of empathy for the unglamorous, seeming 'outcasts' at their harsh redoubts on Haystack. I later learned I had made the acquaintance of Pelagic Cormorants. I think often of the value of simple, formative experiences such as these when doing murrelet surveys in summer. Gazing from the boat, the slow passage of each whitewash-splotched coastal cliff decorated with Pelagic Cormorant nests brings those days back, if only dimly now.

Of the three species of cormorant breeding along the coast of the Redwood Region, the Pelagic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) is the smallest and most slender. It is a sinuous blackish bird about 28 inches in length, with a wingspan of slightly more than three feet, and weighing about three or four pounds. As well as being smaller than Double-crested and Brandt's cormorants, Pelagics differ in having comparatively thinner necks, strikingly thin bills, and—from January to late summer—a conspicuous white patch on each flank. Subdued red facial skin is visible at close range, as are appealing purplish and greenish highlights. The noticeable iridescence of the adults gave rise to the old vernacular for our local subspecies, *P. p. resplendens*: the 'Violet-green Cormorant'.

How can three species of cormorants nest on the same rocks? In what ways do their habits ensure both coexistence and separation? Answers can readily be found with a quick look at their respective life histories. While Brandt's and (marine-nesting) Double-crested Cormorants each prefer to nest in fairly dense colonies on flat or sloping tops of rocks, Pelagic Cormorants place their nests only on ledges, niches, and in shallow hollows on the steepest and tallest rock faces available. Further, they forage very near the shore, diving to the bottom to find gunnels, greenlings, sculpins, small rockfish, and crustaceans in the rough waters of the surf zone (Ainley and Boekelheide 1990, Seabirds of the Farallon Islands). Brandt's Cormorants spread out north and south over the innermost continental shelf, and Double-crested fly to freshwater or to estuaries to fish—seldom ever foraging in the ocean in our area. By apparent family agreement, the spoils of their chosen environment are available to each bird nation, such that all may pursue life with minimal interspecies conflict and maximum efficiency.

Pelagic Cormorants are common residents, confined to the nearshore ocean coast. A few birds regularly feed in the lower reaches of estuaries, especially in winter. They construct compact nests of marine algae, grass, moss, and debris—all cemented to the precarious ledge with their excrement. Three to five light blue eggs are incubated for about four weeks. Young hatch asynchronously---those without a good headstart are likely to perish as nestlings. They are fed regurgitated meals until they depart their nest sites at 45-50 days. Following breeding, they abandon nest sites and assemble in small groups with other cormorants on offshore rocks, jetties, and breakwaters. Pelagic Cormorants distribute themselves over the water at low density, and are never seen flying in flocks.

Bird of the Month: March 2002

Purple Martin

Progne subis

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 to others. Here in the Redwood Region there are but few places near towns and cities where it is possible to encounter martins.

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 altogether.

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: January 2002

Bewick's Wren *Thryomanes bewickii*

by David Fix

The presence of Bewick's Wrens in a brushy place is one of a number of phenomena termed by regimented, by-the-book wildlife professionals 'symptoms of no management.' As this dread pathology presents in Bewick's Wren, we see a thorough rambling of extensive underbrush lightly overgrown with deciduous trees and, perhaps, a bit of sunny opening or edge. Standing water is often present. Diagnosis: a piece of land unmanaged for years, supporting an increasing number of animal and plant species, and developing steadily more intricate ecological relationships. Prognosis: with continued freedom from early-seral setback impacted by the human footprint, favorable...

Bewick's Wren is but one of many songbirds partial to expanses of quality brush. This species has a broad range in North America, extending from southwestern British Columbia through the Pacific States, in the Southwest southward well into Mexico, and eastward locally into the central-southern U.S. Although it has experienced pronounced declines and a wholesale range retraction east of the Mississippi in the past half-century, it remains a common bird elsewhere. Here in the Redwood Region we find Bewick's Wrens rather infrequently in the course of regular birding. Although they are actually quite numerous in appropriate habitat, they usually remain out of sight except when agitated; for most birders, the neglected rural thickets and ungrazed streamside riparia they prefer are places often left unvisited. The Breeding Bird Atlas revealed that this species is most frequently encountered in the southwestern one-third of Humboldt County, with another concentration of survey blocks with detections in the north-central portion of the county. Few were detected near the coast north of Bear River Ridge, in interior southwest Humboldt, nor across a sizeable chunk of east-central county.

These wrens are endearing. They readily generate smiles among groups of birders, thus closely approaching Snowy Plover on the 'Cute-Meter.' They would seem to make up for their lack of bright colors with an inquisitive nature---and with an exuberant song that breathes to the perceptive observer all the joys of a wet-sneakers morning in late April. The song of Bewick's Wren is variable and can prove tough for the newer birder to remember. Jude recalls it as 'Dial Five': a soft, spluttery opening to the song is followed by a few high and low notes, then a trill or two, ending with a short series of rapid notes, recalling the regular recoil movement of a rotary telephone dial. Bewick's Wrens respond energetically to spishing, popping into view atop a brush pile or in the lower boughs of a sapling; however, they seem often to be among the later birds to appear in the midst of a mixed flock, and often remain in clear sight for only a few moments.

In the fashion of many wrens, these birds nest in secluded crannies, which they cram with varied nest material. Females lay 5-7 lightly-marked white eggs for about two weeks. Nestlings are fed by both male and female, and fledge two weeks after hatching. Family groups do not persist long after the young are independent. As they would appear to exhibit no detectable increase in fall or winter, it would seem that Bewick's Wrens are essentially resident here.

Bewick's Wren can be distinguished from the House Wren (rarely seen in our lowlands, though occurring with it in some foothill locations) by its plain white eyebrow stripe, whitish underparts, and by the nervous side-to-side joggling of its long tail. The peevish '*zhjeeb, zhjeeb*' call-note has a distinct long-E vowel tone, not noticeable in the calls of House Wrens.