

Birds 1977

The Shorebirds of Santa Cruz: The Ultimate Non-Polluting Tourists

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If you are wandering around Big Basin State Park at dawn one morning and hear a loud sharp cry a little like a gull's, look up. And if you happen to see some small chunky brown birds come hurtling through the redwoods at incredible speeds, take heed: you may be about to earn yourself \$100. That's the reward one ornithological journal has posted for the first article which describes the nest, eggs, and young of the Marbled Murrelet.

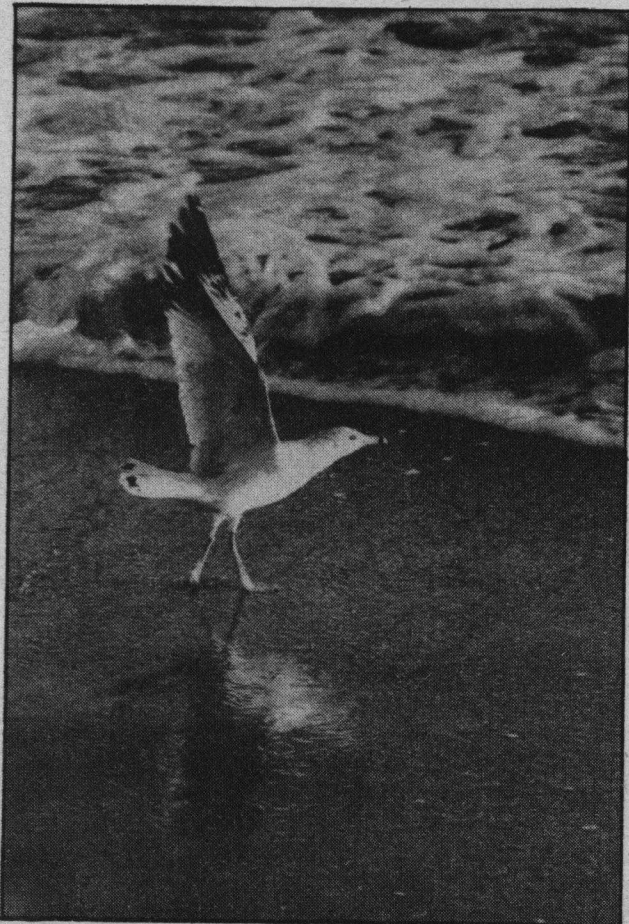
The Marbled Murrelet is just one of the hundreds of different kinds of birds that can be found at this time of the year in Santa Cruz. April and May are the most exciting months of the year for the bird watcher, simply because there are (or seem to be) more birds here than at any other time of the year. Fall also brings a large number of migrating birds, but with neither the bright plumage nor the ebullient songs that characterize the spring visitors. Simply stated, birds seem most alive in spring.

Most of the birds you see during these spring months in Santa Cruz are headed for their breeding grounds far to the north. There are about 125 species that breed in Santa Cruz, but that represents only about one-third of the total number which passes through our county in the spring or fall. The great majority sees Santa Cruz as a sort of roadside inn, and only halts briefly here on the journey to their summer homes.

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The Marbled Murrelet is one bird, though, which has found a year-round home here beside Monterey Bay. The nest of this small sea bird has been about as elusive to find as El Dorado. For a long time scientists did not even know where to begin to look for it. The Marbled Murrelet is rather common off the coast from central California to southern Alaska, but its nest remained unknown until 1974.

Four years ago a tree trimmer shook a murrelet chick from its nest high in a Douglas-Fir, in the middle of Big Basin forest. For years scientists had searched the rocky sea cliffs and islands for a nest, supposing the murrelet to breed there as did its close relatives. Surprise! This fat little ocean bird, which dives all day long in search of small sea creatures for food, often next to Lighthouse Point, flies inland at dusk to its nest, miles from Neptune's domain.



A nearly adult Ring-Billed Gull is one of a dozen species of gulls which visit Santa Cruz.



A diving Brown Pelican is seemingly surrounded by gulls waiting for leftovers off the Santa Cruz shore.

But no human has yet seen a Marbled Murrelet land in a tree, and no human has yet watched a parent feed its young high in that tree. The odds are, though, that the first one who does will be standing on Santa Cruz soil when he does see that mystery unfold.

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The Black Swift is very different from a Marbled Murrelet. The swift is elegant: it is nearly all black, has long, beautifully tapered wings, and flies with amazing agility and speed. Its food is taken from the air, not the ocean; it is a bird strictly of the land and the skies above. So when an ornithologist in 1901 said he climbed down a sea cliff in Santa Cruz and collected a single egg from the nest of a Black Swift, scientists scoffed. This nest was surely that of a sea bird, they said. A Marbled Murrelet, perhaps, but a Black Swift? Though the swift's nest had not yet been discovered, no one had thought it would nest next to the ocean. But science is constantly correcting itself; the swift does indeed nest along the cliffs overlooking Monterey Bay. Only later was another nesting site found, behind the waterfalls in Big Basin, deep in Marbled Murrelet country.

But you can watch a Black Swift on a nest yourself by going out to Lighthouse Point in June. Watch for the parents near dusk, as they fly around the point bringing food to the young bird. A word of warning, however. Though this moss-lined nest is inaccessible, it is very fragile. Last year high tides destroyed the chick, and a second nest in the vicinity has been destroyed by thoughtless humans two years in a row. Don't make this rare bird even rarer by disturbing it at this crucial time in its life cycle.

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Monterey Bay is one of the best places in the world to observe pelagic birds, who spend their entire lives on the ocean and touch earth only to nest. Because the continental shelf is so close to shore here, many of the birds that follow the deep ocean currents are brought within a few miles of land. Again, the availability of food is of primary importance in migration. These deep, cold ocean currents, rich in nutrients, are brought to the surface by the submarine canyon off Moss Landing, and consequently huge numbers of ocean birds can be found feeding there.

One of the pelagic species which is attracted to Monterey Bay is the Sooty Shearwater. A spectacular sight, and one which many beach walkers and sailors have noticed, is the tremendous influx of these shearwaters. These large dark sea birds sometimes number in the hundreds of thousands as they feed in huge flocks close to shore from mid-May through August.

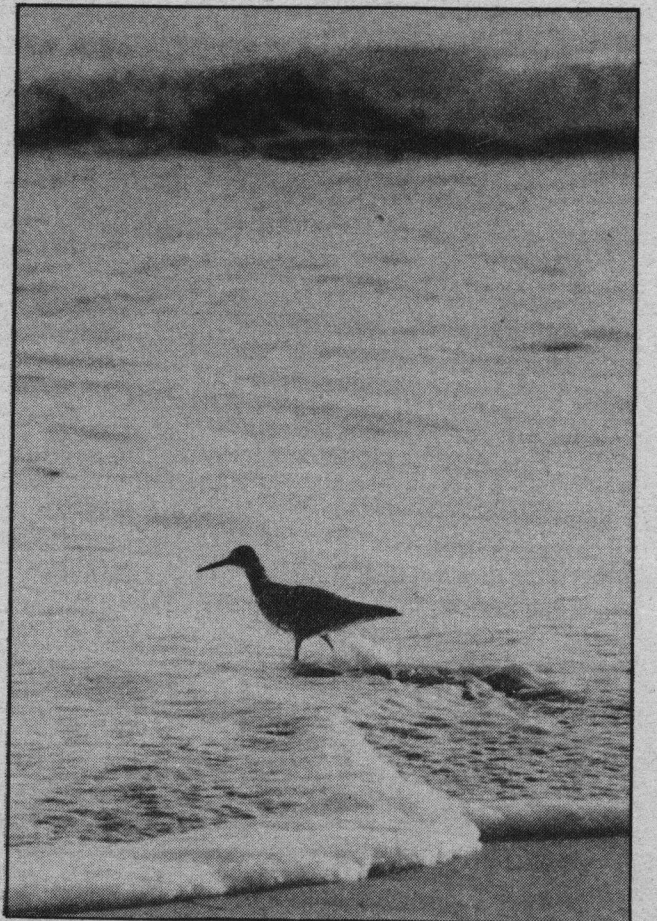
When there is a run of small fish along the break-

ers, these shearwaters can be seen within a hundred yards of shore, especially on the southern beaches in the county. From the Santa Cruz Municipal Pier they look like huge undulating brown blankets spread out over the water. Suddenly they turn into a thin stream stretching hundreds of yards, only to settle down again in another feeding flock.

As with most of the pelagics, these shearwaters have come a long way to visit our bountiful bay. They breed on islands off New Zealand and Chile during our winter months. One final note about shearwaters and their close relatives, the storm petrels: you can find them with your eyes closed. For some reason these birds give off a musty scent, almost like that of oily rags. You won't forget your first whiff of a flock of a few thousand of these birds.

Other pelagics which you can see on Monterey Bay include the Black-footed Albatross, though you probably have to go out on a boat to see these squid and refuse eaters. June is the best time to see these huge, graceful gliders, whose wings are longer than an eagle's.

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The Willet is one of our more conspicuous shorebirds-but only when it calls or flashes its black and white wings.

No human has yet seen a Marbled Murre let land in a tree to nest. The first one who does will be standing on Santa Cruz soil...

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Albatross have been seen from shore, though you will need a telescope. Lighthouse Point is a good place to scope from, and Pigeon Point, just north of Ano Nuevo, is excellent—one of the few places in the United States where you can see these birds from shore.

You don't even need binoculars to see Brown Pelicans. Surely everyone in Santa Cruz has seen these large, ungainly birds gliding slowly over the breaking waves along our coast. Many people also know how DDT poisoning almost eliminated this bird. Strict controls over pesticide use has given this creature a second chance.

The Brown Pelican is an exception amid the flood of north-bound migrants on their way to nesting grounds. This bird breeds on islands off Baja California during our winter, and migrates north after its breeding season.

A bird which associates closely with the pelican, the Heerman's Gull, follows roughly the same pattern. This beautiful gull, with a bright red bill, white head, and all-dark body breeds on islands off northwestern Mexico in early spring, then follows the pelicans' trail to our waters.

As a pelican sits on the water with a pouch full of fish, you may notice a few gulls encircling the larger bird. These Heerman's Gulls are literally following the "footsteps" of the pelican, not only in migration, but in their food gathering. They wait patiently by the big bird's side, hoping to snatch up a morsel dropped from the bucket-like bill.

Incidentally, the name pelican comes from the Greek *pelekus*, which means axe. Greek "bird-watchers" used the word both for the pelican and a woodpecker, and apparently knew which axe-bird was the *pelekus* which just flew over.

Another gull which graces our shores is the Bonaparte's Gull. This beautiful gull is quite numerous during April and May, and is easy to find. Small flocks are seen flying over land close to shore or feeding in coastal ponds, and are often resting on the exposed sand along the lower San Lorenzo River. By the way, they are not disco dancing in the shallows. That curious shuffling of their feet which you see stirs up the mud and brings small edibles to the surface.

Thousands of these small gulls fly by Lighthouse Point, the white triangles in their grey wings contrasting vividly with their black heads. But when they get to their summer homes in the Yukon and Alaska, they seem to forget they are gulls. Instead of building their nests on the ground like all their gull relatives, these unique birds gather twigs and grass and construct a nest as high as twenty feet up in a tree.

Food is obviously a crucial concern to a migrating bird—a small bird flying across the Sahara may lose up to 50% of its body weight during the perilous journey. Shelter, usually in the form of a resting place relatively free of danger, is nearly as important. Shorebirds are a good example of this in Santa Cruz County.

There are plenty of rocky areas for those birds which utilize such niches: Turnstones, Surfbirds, Tattlers, and Black Oystercatchers are best found along the north coast, from Natural Bridges to Ano Nuevo. The latter location has a small breeding colony of Black Oystercatchers, an amazing bird which is entirely black except for a bright red bill and pale pink legs. Its flattened bill is used to pry open mussels and the like.

The shorebirds which use the beaches and coastal wetlands can be difficult to locate in Santa Cruz. Any undisturbed beach will probably have at least some Sanderlings, a few Black Turnstones, a Black-bellied Plover or two, and a flock of Western and Least Sandpipers. The most productive areas are the places where fresh water is next to the ocean, such as the many creeks along the north coast. Unfortunately, these are also the places most often visited by the beach goer, who scares off the birds.

Moss Landing and Elkhorn Slough, with their

relatively undisturbed and extensive mudflats and marshy areas are the best places near Santa Cruz to observe the "peeps" and larger shorebirds. During a low tide you can find a dozen species feeding on the mudflats. Dowitchers look as if they were sewing the sand together, as they probe for small crustaceans, while the smaller Western and Least Sandpipers peck here and there for smaller prey amid the dows.

Large "waders", as the English call shorebirds, are the noisy Willet, the Long-Billed Curlew (whose bill is sometimes half as long as its body), Whimbrels and Marbled Godwits. Dunlin are beginning to lose their dull grey winter plumage and are now

showing their black bellies and red backs for summer. Sanderlings, those pale grey birds that look like wind-up toys playing tag with the surf, are also about to make the dramatic switch to summer red. Be aware of these seasonal molts as you try to identify any curious-looking shorebird.

Look at the bill of each of these birds as they feed and you will notice a wide variety of shapes and sizes. One is long and curves down sharply, one is long and curves up, and another may be long and straight.

Each is different because it is a tool used mostly to gather food. If each were the same size and shape, the food taken would be the same, and there would be too much competition for the limited supply. But make one bill curve down and make another short and straight, and two different food supplies are made available. Thus, a sort of "legislated" sociability, a truly effective parliament of fowls is created by the process of evolution.

Phalaropes do not follow many of the rules of shorebird society; they are behavioral misfits, like Brando in a leather jacket. While they have long legs which enable them to feed along the edges of streams and ponds as any normal shorebird, they prefer to spin in circles in the middle of the pond, stirring up tiny organisms with their seemingly bizarre antics. And, rather than follow the coast during migration where they could feed and rest their weary wings with the other shorebirds, they prefer to migrate well out on the ocean.

But what really sets them apart is their breeding behavior. Phalaropes are one of the few instances of sexual "liberation" in birds. The males of most other species are the brightly colored ones, and usually migrate first, in order to set up a territory on which he will advertise for a mate. (Even the name for the widespread Mallard has its roots in male chauvinism: mallard is derived from the Latin *masculus* (male) via the old French *masle*, and the *-ard* ending comes from a Germanic suffix denoting maleness).

But the phalarope will have none of this. The female is the brighter-plumaged one; it is she who arrives first on the breeding grounds, displays and competes for a mate, then makes him incubate the eggs all day long. She has more than social convention to reinforce her in this dominance—she is also larger than her mate. During the spring and fall you may find these delicate little shorebirds on coastal lagoons and estuaries, though the two common species here, the Red and Northern, usually migrate well out to sea. ■

Listomania: Getting Into Local Birds

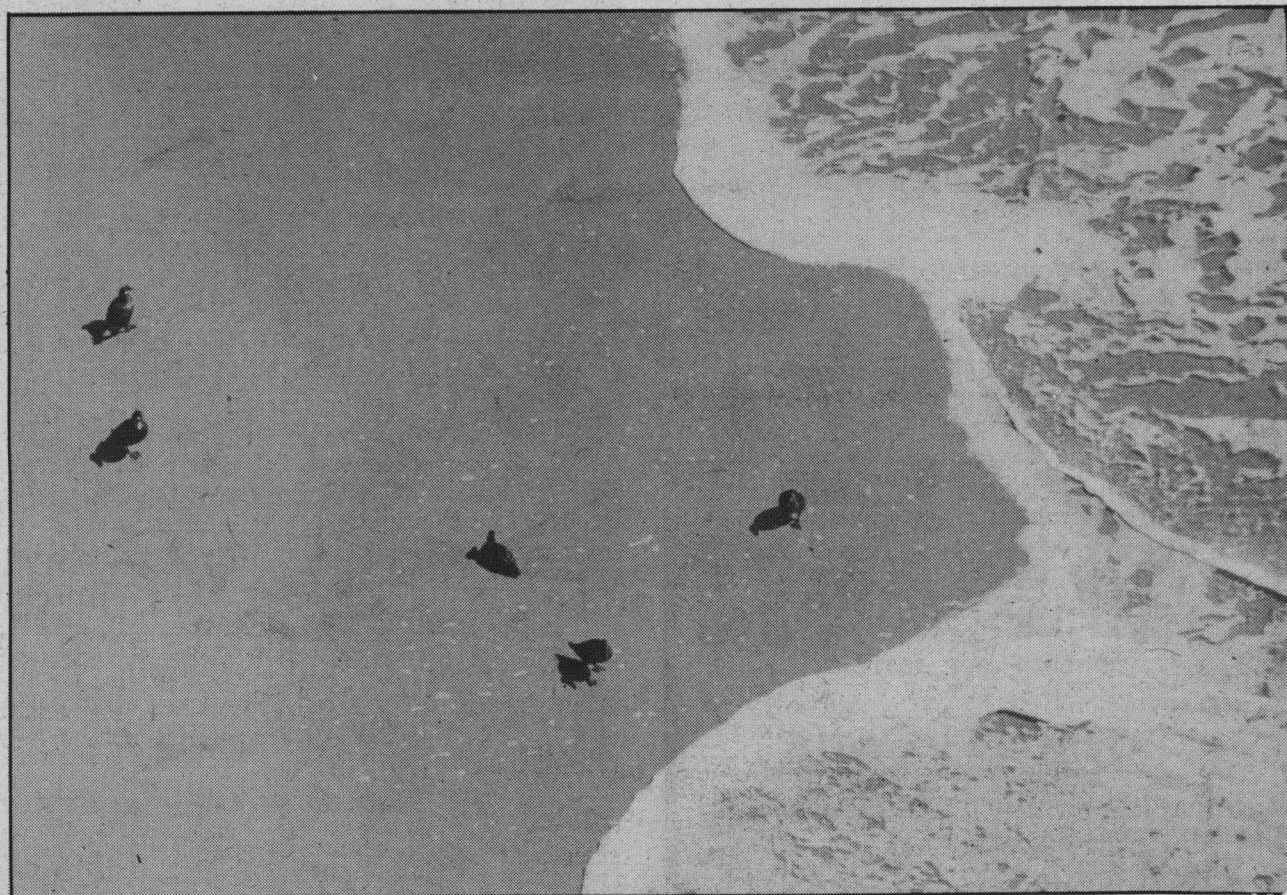
There is a primitive tribe in the mountains of New Guinea which until recently had never seen a white man, let alone a scientist. When scientists finally beat a path to these "barbarians", it was found that the tribe had names for 137 different types of birds. Sophisticated western scientists could find only 138 species based on their own system of classification. Only one species was confused with another by the natives.

Obviously the natives were intimate with their environment. But the example also illustrates that man has an almost inherent need to categorize nature. You can satisfy your own innate desires by using several resources readily available.

The first tool you must have is a good field guide. Both Peterson's and Robbins' are good, and both have their supporters. Peterson's illustrations seem to be more accurate, and his method of pointing to diagnostic "field marks" is often useful. Robbins is good for his distributional maps and illustrations of fall-plumaged and young birds.

Fellow categorizers can be found in the Santa Cruz Bird Club, which meets the third Thursday of every month, except during the summer. They take frequent trips, and usually the leaders take care that all see the birds, including the novices.

Finally, the museum on East Cliff has a small but enjoyable collection of mounted bird specimens. They also have a live Yellow-Billed Magpie, which is the only species of bird in California which has never been seen outside the state. ■



Surf Scoters lay back on the sunny beach.