

Dear Birdos4Eric,

This newsletter begins with an apology followed by a defense.

My pal Bob Lewis pointed out after my last newsletter that I still seem to be confusing the Willow Flycatcher with the Willow Warbler. I plead guilty. I think it's the alliteration. "Willow Warbler" just sounds better than "Willow Flycatcher," doesn't it? I go to write "Willow Flycatcher," and "Willow Warbler" just seems to come out instead. I thought long and hard about this mistake and decided that part of the problem is that I'm just stuck on seeing this particular species. Some of you might remember that I saw the bird early in the morning on the 4th of July but that a vigilant eBird reviewer disputed the sighting. I backed down. But maybe I shouldn't have. I was certain about what I'd seen. I've gone back and added it to my list for that day. Just waiting now for the eBird reviewer to respond. And maybe on a future trip to Europe or Africa I might even see that Willow Warbler.

"Other than that pesky eBird reviewer, why would you need to defend yourself?" I hear some of you asking. Well, it has to do with this month's mailbag. Seems that a lot of my followers found something that I said in the last issue rather extraordinary—my admission that I'm not overly fond of spiders (though I may have phrased it a bit more emphatically than that.) Well, it's true. And for those of you who question my courage, all I can say is "You shoulda been there." Or, I can offer you the ocular proof? Below are pictures of just two of the many spiders I saw in Madagascar.



Golden Orb Spider



Huntsman Spider

WARNING: Photographs are NOT to scale—spiders are actually *much* larger than this.

Do these pictures speak a thousand words? Any more questions?? (Yes, that's a female Golden Orb—the male is much smaller and the female sometimes eats him after mating. Yes, there IS a famous video on YouTube of a Golden Orb spider eating a bird. No, I'm not giving you the link. Yes, the Huntsman Spider is also called the Giant Crab Spider—for rather obvious reasons.) Now let's get back to the birds, shall we?

I went a whole week without birding when I got home from Madagascar. The first few days of that week were spent getting over jetlag—and finishing the October Newsletter. But then I received an email from Peter Hawrylyshyn whom I met on the Namibia trip in September; he was coming out to visit for the weekend and wondered if I'd like to go birding with him and Bob Lewis. Bob reported that a Rock Sandpiper had been seen at Heron's Head, a reserve on the San Francisco-side of the bay. This bird breeds in Siberia and Alaska—the southernmost end of its winter range is the San Francisco Bay. This particular bird had gone to the edge of its world.

A follow-up email from Bob reported that, not far from the sandpiper, a Lapland Longspur had been found. Another northern species, even more out of its range—southernmost birds on the west coast would be found in Oregon. Bob had one caveat, however: "The longspur is in a radioactive zone but I don't mind going through the hole in the fence if you're through with having kids." Since I don't have any kids (and don't plan to start now), I responded, "Let's go."

On Saturday morning Bob and I met up with Peter at Heron's Head Park in San Francisco. Our target there was the aforementioned Rock Sandpiper. This is a small shorebird that looks much like our local Least Sandpiper. It's a bit bigger, however, and has a distinctive coloration to its bill—the bill is yellow at its base but gradually shades to black, moving towards the tip. (The Least Sandpiper's bill is completely yellow.) Heron's Head Park, which in part owes its existence to my pals Eddie Bartley and Noreen Weeden, is a gem.

We headed out towards the point where we had heard the sandpiper had been seen regularly for the past week or so. On the way we saw lots of shorebirds that had recently returned from their summer breeding seasons up north: Willets, American Avocets, Whimbrels, Black-bellied Plovers, and Black-necked Stilts. Ducks and gulls, too, were returning. As we approached the point, we saw a small sandpiper. A close look revealed it to be a Least Sandpiper. Another. Also a Least. Another. And another. We examined seven small sandpipers closely—all were Least.



Winter shorebird scene on the bay: American Avocets and Willets

The Rock Sandpiper might have eluded us, but the Lapland Longspur wouldn't. We made our way to the nearby Candlestick Point State Recreation Area. What a contrast to Heron's Head! It's obvious that Heron's Head is a much-loved park. When we left that day, there was a class

of high school students who were getting ready to do some conservation work on site. When we arrived at Candlestick SRA, it looked like no amount of conservation effort could save this place. We couldn't even find the hole in the fence that would get us into the radioactive zone where the longspur had been seen. As we searched, the door of an abandoned pick-up truck opened with a load screech; its inhabitant stuck his neck out to tell us that the authorities had been by the day before to wire shut the hole in the fence. We wandered around on our side of the fence—and we did see birds—but it was clear that the longspur was also going to elude us.



A Mourning Dove contemplates its options at the Candlestick Point State Recreation Area

Peter left us to spend some time with his family, whom he was supposed to be visiting, and Bob and I decided to head to the other end of San Francisco to look for a Red-footed Booby that had been attracting crowds for several days. This bird was also completely out of range, but unlike our first two targets, it was far north of where it should have been (you might encounter these birds in Southern Baja). When we arrived at Crissy Field, we ran into birding pal Alex Smolyanskaya in the parking lot. “Red-footed Booby?” she asked. We nodded.

The three of us headed over to the small Coast Guard pier and there was the bird, mixed in with some of the local resident birds, seemingly content with where it had ended up. Some readers might remember that this was the same species that I had seen at the beginning of the summer with my birding pal Dawn in Santa Cruz. There had been some on-line speculation as to whether this indeed might be the same individual bird. But this bird looked quite different. The former was a juvenile and its color wasn't very pronounced. This one had bright red feet (hence its name) but equally noticeable was its lavender-colored bill. The color of its bill made it look like it was wearing some exotic lipstick. If it *was* the same bird, it had grown up *awfully* fast!



Red-footed Booby with an unimpressed Double-crested Cormorant  
Photo by Alex Smolyanskaya

A couple days later I was trying to get ahold of my pal Dawn. She texted me back that she was at Heron’s Head, looking for the Rock Sandpiper. “Good luck with THAT,” I replied, adding, “Bob and I struck out on Saturday.” Five minutes later I got a text alert. It was Dawn, of course. “Looking at the bird,” her text read. Of course it did. I called Bob.

The next morning we were back at Heron’s Head. Dawn had given us precise instructions: “Near the end of the point, on the south side.” As we approached the spot, I stepped off the path onto a rock and looked on the other side, nearly stepping on a bird. “That’s it,” I said. Meanwhile, Bob had stopped on the path, a few feet beyond where I was, and had been looking back. “That’s it,” he said. The bird did look like a least sandpiper but as soon as we had seen it, both of us knew it wasn’t. We had a good laugh. “Wonder if we walked right by it on Saturday?” Bob asked. “Most likely we did,” I replied. We had another laugh.



Rock Sandpiper: Anterior View



Rock Sandpiper: Posterior View

A few days later, it was more shorebirds with Dawn at the Elsie Roemer Bird Sanctuary in Alameda: Long-billed Curlews, Marbled Godwits, Willets, and a single Whimbrel, a single Black Turnstone, and a single Greater Yellowlegs. There were 150 Western Sandpipers; we kept looking at them until we were able to pick out a single Least Sandpiper (I've already told you about the Least—in addition to looking much like the Rock Sandpiper, it looks even more like the Western—except that the Western has black legs and the Least has yellow legs. These are the small shorebirds often simply lumped together as “peeps.”) But the largest congregation of shorebirds was the flock of 300 Dunlins (these are also sandpipers, but are a little bit bigger than the peeps.) We didn't see the elusive Wandering Tattler which Dawn and I had searched for over the summer at Oyster Bay Regional Shoreline (and Dawn later saw at that location), which is less than three miles away as the shorebird flies.



Peeps galore—in this case, Western Sandpipers

A few days later I set off for yet another field trip on the Bay in which shorebirds were likely to feature—though the stars of the show were billed as the rails. This was an organized Golden Gate Audubon trip that Dawn was leading at Arrowhead Marsh. She had invited Susan to join the walk several weeks earlier, so we arrived at the meeting place to find Dawn marshalling her troops. The occasion for this walk was a very high November tide, which theoretically would force some of the resident rails out into the open. Dawn leads this walk regularly, and I suspect that she knows many of these birds individually. She did the same Master Birding Program that I did, albeit a couple of years after I was enrolled. One of the requirements of the program is to pick a local “patch” which you will bird at least twice a month for the year that the program runs. Dawn's patch was Arrowhead Marsh.

I did this walk with Dawn back at the beginning of the year and at that time we did extremely well with the rails; on that trip we counted six Ridgway's Rails and three Sora (and Dawn saw a Virginia Rail after I left.) The group was in good hands with Dawn. (Dawn has also seen a Black

Rail near Arrowhead. This is one of California's most elusive birds. I have never seen one. And the even more secretive Yellow Rail was seen at Arrowhead Marsh in 2008. Dawn has never seen one. Needless to say, neither have I.)

The walk began with Dawn appointing me group scribe, which I was happy to do since I was going to do my own list in any case. We saw lots of ducks (Ruddy Ducks, Goldeneyes, Buffleheads, a couple of Hooded Mergansers, and a Lesser Scaup), Grebes (Eared, Horned, Pied-billed, and Clark's), Egrets and Herons (Great and Snowy; Great Blue) and the expected shorebirds (Willetts, American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Marbled Godwits, a solo Spotted Sandpiper, and dowitchers—too early in the season to tell if they were Short-billed or Long-billed). There were also raptors: a Red-tailed Hawk, a Cooper's Hawk, and a Northern Harrier. And finally, when the tide crested, there were rails. Unfortunately, only one species—the Ridgway's Rail—but we counted six of them and we got excellent looks at two of them. (Not always easy to do as you'll see from the photo below!)



Typical view of the elusive Ridgway's Rail



Slightly better look at a Ridgway's as the tide rises

I had known that, because I had scoured California pretty well in the months preceding my international travel, November would be a slow month. But I hoped to pick up a few new birds around Thanksgiving when I would be down in Southern California for nearly a week. All those parrots, for instance. Or the Bell's Sparrow, another bird that has managed to give me the slip this year. But weather happens. When I finally had some free time to bird on the holiday and the day after, the rains had set in. I wasn't even able to revisit the nearby California Gnatcatcher that I had seen in July, let alone see a new species of parrot or two.

So my total for the month? Only 105 species (I know, I know, pretty pathetic but I did manage to break 100.) And of those, only one new species, the Rock Sandpiper. At least it was a lifer.

But the good news is that my total now stands at 951 birds for the year and tonight I leave for Tasmania. I think I'm actually gonna get those 1,000 species....

Bird of the Month. Well this is actually harder than it would seem. After all, that Red-Footed Booby turned out to be a pretty good lookin' bird. And there was only one new bird this month, the Rock Sandpiper, which was also a lifer for me. But it seems fitting that since I've been home for the past month, the BOTM be a local one—that's right, step out of those reeds, you elusive creature! The BOTM is the Ridgway's Rail! These birds are actually common on the west coast of the Mexican mainland and Baja. In California, there are uncommon at the Salton Sea, the Southern California coast, and here in the Bay Area. Until very recently, they were considered to be the same as an Atlantic and Gulf coast species, the Clapper Rail, but they were split off as a separate species in 2014. According to the online *Audubon Guide to North American Birds*, because of loss of extremely limited habitat—salt marshes on the coast and brackish and freshwater marshes inland—the status of most Ridgway's populations is threatened or endangered.



Pretty good view of a Ridgway's Rail



Unusually good view of a Ridgway's Rail

This month's quiz: What will be the final number of species that Eric sees in his big year? Since no one (!) sent in any entries for last month's quiz, the jackpot for the past two months will rollover to December. Why play the lottery when your chances of winning this payout are so much better?

Finally, I'd like to thank my friends Sandy Steinman and Bob Lewis for their donations to GGAS. Nobody knows the birds of my neighborhood like Sandy. And, Bob, thanks for cleaning up my messes. Let me remind anyone who hasn't done so yet that now would be a great time to make a donation in support of this organization's wonderful work—my website is <https://goldengateaudubon.z2systems.com/np/clients/goldengateaudubon/campaign.jsp?campaign=449&&test=true>. (This link has been dodgy in the pdf version of the newsletter; if it doesn't work, just copy and paste the address into your browser!)