

# SWOC TALK

Sep-Oct, 1975

Newsletter of the Southern Willamette Ornithological Club

Volume 1, Number 5

## MEETINGS

The thirteenth meeting of SWOC will be held at 7:30 PM, November 3, 1975 at the conference room on the third floor of Science III, University of Oregon campus, Eugene. Member Chip Jobanek will give a slide presentation and talk on the birds of Midway Atoll of the Hawaiian Leeward Islands, in particular discussing the life history of the Laysan Albatross. Chip will also provide a nostalgic look at life on Midway.

The fourteenth meeting of SWOC is scheduled for 7:30 PM, December 1, 1975, again in the conference room of Science III.

## PAST MEETINGS

The twelfth meeting of SWOC was held on October 6, 1975. A variety of topics were discussed and slides of several subjects were shown, though discussion primarily concerned the birds of Summit Spring, Jefferson County. Seventeen people attended.

## A REMINDER

Dues for SWOC provide membership for the calendar year January 1 to December 31. Why not pay next year's dues now? Dues paid by new members now will be credited towards next year.

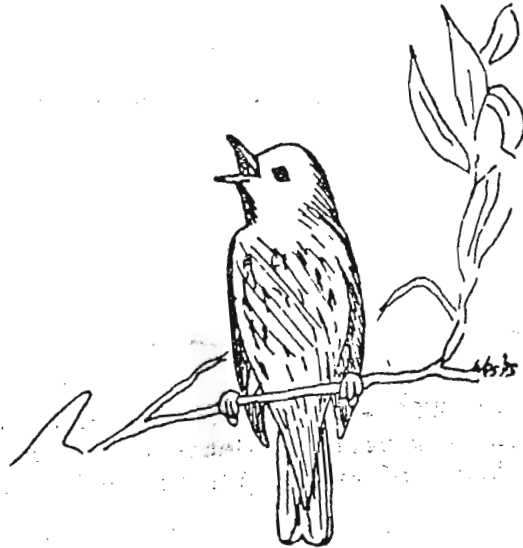
# BUSINESS

SWOC now has thirty-six members, the dues paid by Chris Maxwell being applied to his next year's membership as well. Three other members have paid next year's dues.

Printing costs for volume 1, number 4 of SWOC TALK were \$8.24 and mailing costs were \$3.70, making total cost for that issue \$11.94.

It appears that SWOC will be over \$100 ahead this year. There has been discussion that some of this surplus money might go to the printing of more lengthy papers or newsletter. Also, surplus money might be used as a cash award, presented to someone working on an ornithological project in either the southern Willamette Valley or the state (geographical restrictions would have to be established by members). Perhaps this could be a \$50 or \$75 prize, on the order of the Louis Agassiz Fuertes and Margaret Morse Nice Awards of the Wilson Ornithological Society. Our award (suggested name: the Alfred Cooper Shelton Award) would not only benefit the recipient but also would show that the Southern Willamette Ornithological Club is an active bird club concerned with serious research on Oregon's birds.

Dues are \$5.00 yearly. Please make checks out to SWOC. Mail should be addressed to "SWOC, c/o Chip Jobanek, 10600 McKenzie Highway, Springfield, Oregon 97477."



On the opposite page Larry McQueen details the occurrence of the Indigo Bunting, Passerina cyanea, in the southern Willamette Valley at Eugene. However, the first authentic record for the state is believed to be a male which was first seen at a Medford bird feeder on April 14, 1972 and stayed for eight days. This bird was well-observed by Otis Swisher and Joseph Hicks. Harry Nehls wrote in the Audubon Warbler for May, 1972 that "attempts are being made to photograph and band the bird." See also American Birds, volume 26(4), page 801.

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The date was June 7, 1975. I was taking my Saturday morning ornithology class near the wooded hills south of Lane Community College Campus where we were hoping for a good look at a singing male Lazuli Bunting. The species is common enough in the area, but for each person in a group to see the same bird clearly is a rare treat, and to watch a brightly colored bunting singing in the open is a joyous way to begin a field trip. As we walked on the road by the edge of the woods, Colleen Sweeny, who had been bird-watching in the area, was fast approaching our group. When we met, Colleen was too winded and excited to speak, but she did manage to point up hill and to say, "... Indigo Bunting.", and then I became speechless.

It was almost 15 years since I had seen Indigo Buntings in the eastern states, where they are very common. I explained as we walked up the hill, that the bird is so far from its expected range it could represent a new state record. Naturally, the sighting is more convincing when there are many observers, and I was anxious for everyone to see this bird. My camera was ready with its telephoto, but to get a picture can often be difficult if not impossible. As we approached the power-line clearing near the top of the hill just south of L.C.C., I saw a small bird fly from one of the large oaks on the woods border and cross the clearing. Just as it disappeared into a large oak on the other side I detected dark blue and no other color -- that was it! It took awhile for everyone to arrive at a spot on the hillside overlooking the tree, but the bird stayed put. Eventually all eleven members of the class saw the bird and agreed that it was without doubt a male Indigo Bunting in pure, adult, breeding plumage. A Lazuli Bunting was in the same tree -- in fact, on the same branch. Both sang (appearing to ignore the other) and we noticed a slight difference in their songs. The song of the lazuli had a burry quality - at least in part - whereas the indigo's song was clear and sweet, generally higher in pitch (pitch, however, varies within each species). I later checked the literature and recordings and found this difference to be specific -- a revelation to me, for I had always thought the songs of the two species to be identical.

Colleen was relieved that her discovery was being shared and varified, the class was eminently pleased that they had seen it, and I set about the task of getting pictures. Distant though it was, and within the shade of the oak tree, the exposures were adequate and the bird is now identifiable on color film.

The bird was seen later the same day by Claire Watson, Dorris Swanson, and Tom Lund, from Eugene; and Fred Ramsey and Vaughn Morrison from Corvallis. It was not seen again to my knowledge.

This was the first (presently, the only) authentic record of an Indigo Bunting for Oregon, although there is an unverified sighting for Eastern Oregon. California has numerous records during migration and the species is accidental in Washington. There will undoubtedly be more reports of this species in Oregon.

-Larry McQueen.

## GULLS, GULLS, GULLS

The hoardes of gulls that inundate garbage dumps, seashores and other places on the west coast are seldom the subjects of intensive scrutiny by observers of birdlife. Gulls, at least the white-headed species of the genus Larus, are not favorites among bird watchers and even many professional ornithologists; if the common species are looked at all usually just well-marked birds are identified with immatures and oddly plumaged individuals passed over as "just gulls". This lack of interest in one of the major groups of west coast birds is unfortunate, for not only can "gull watching" be as interesting as any other facet of bird observation but the distributional status of several species is poorly understood, largely due to an absence of serious field work on gulls both in the past and the present. But this situation is understandable considering the general confusion about gull taxonomy and identification, and the paucity of accurate and clear information on the subject; unfortunately, the last place to look for the latter is in the popular field guides.

The white-headed gulls of the genus Larus mature in either three or four years, as a rule, and during this time several distinctly different plumages are worn by each species. There are two moults a year (excepting 1st year birds), the most important of which is the postnuptial; this moult is complete (again excepting 1st year birds) and produces the typical winter plumage, which is characteristic of birds seen on their wintering grounds. For each species, then, there are two or three immature winter plumages and an adult winter plumage. Thus, for the 10 species and 4 hybrids of the white-headed Larus gulls positively recorded from the west coast of North America, there are some 53 distinctly different winter plumages; this doesnot take into account the variations present in all species, particularly in 2nd and 3rd year immatures, and the considerable variation present in such polymorphic species as Thayer's, Glaucous-winged and Mew. Trying to sort out this multifarious host of avian life seems like an impossible task for the birdwatcher; certainly, if it is attempted in the manner in which the field guides go about it, it is impossible.

Discounting the Slaty-backed Gull, which is a rare straggler to most of the Pacific Coast, the recently seperated Thayer's and the various hybrids about which little is known, we are left with 8 species and some 29 winter plumages. Peterson, in his A Field Guide to Western Birds, 1961, illustrates only 19 of these plumages. Few pointers are offered to indicate distinguishing features and most of the illustrations suffer from a lack of realism and accuracy on critical points: The mantles of the 1st year birds are illustrated as being fairly uniform in pattern whereas in reality, excepting Heermann's, they are conspicuously mottled, a feature which sets them apart from all other immatures; Peterson's 1st year Ring-billed bears little resemblance to anything seen in the field, the mantle being much too dark and uniform, and the bill shown as rather dull-colored, whereas it is actually conspicuously pink with a sharply cut black tip; the 1st year Western Gull is pictured as paler than the 1st year Herring Gull but the reverse is actually the case; the adult Glaucous Gull is drawn with a mantle about the same color as that of the adult Glaucous-winged, and the adult Herring is pictured with a mantle slightly darker than either of these whereas the Glaucous-winged is really the darkest of the three and decidedly darker at that; except for the bill Peterson's 3rd year Glaucous Gull looks mostly like a pale 1st year Glaucous-winged which in life they certainly do not; etc., etc.

If one cannot rely on Peterson's illustrations in identifying gulls, what about the written word? Positively identifying a 1st year Glaucous Gull from the information given would be a problem as no mention is made of the distinctively mottled tail; seperating 1st year Mew Gulls from 1st year Ring-billed

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would be difficult as several important field marks are not mentioned; separating 2nd year Mews from 2nd year and adult Ring-billeds would be next to impossible as there is no mention of the fact that Mews of this age have ringed bills; many adult Glaucous-winged Gulls could be identified as Glaucous Gulls on the basis of Peterson's statement that the former have dark eyes (actually they can have both); no mention is made of the 1st year Western Gull's conspicuous pale rump, which sets this bird apart from all other 1st year gulls; we are told that the immature (presumably 1st year) Ring-billed Gull is gray-brown on the upperparts but this more characteristic of the 1st year Mew Gull; etc., etc., etc., It seems incredible that such poor illustrations, and errors and omissions in the text could occur in a book which is in many ways excellent but this is the case, I'm afraid.

Robbins' Birds of North America is even worse on gulls than Peterson, with only, again, 19 plumages illustrated and extremely erroneous colors on the pictures of the adults; while the immatures are slightly more accurately portrayed than in Peterson they leave much to be desired. Separating the various immatures and even the adults, using the little bits and pieces of information in the text, would be quite a guessing game, if one attempted it at all.

Two other authors' works are worth mentioning.

The now out of print Audubon Bird Guides by Pough, are a curious mixture of a small quantity of excellence and a large amount of inaccuracy and inadequacy. In the Water Bird Guide it is at first difficult to tell which label belongs to what illustration; but once that dubious task is accomplished it is hard to see in the illustrations much relationship with reality. The adult gulls, except the Black-backed, are all painted with an identical shade of grey; but for the legs, the adult California Gull looks more like a Herring Gull than does the illustration of that species; the first year Mew Gull scarcely resembles anything seen on the Pacific Coast, if indeed anything anywhere; and, in common with everyone else, the 1st year Ring-billed is much too dark. The text of the guide, while providing quite a bit of life history information, is very sketchy as it pertains to identification and is lacking in many critical details. The few illustrations in Pough's Western Bird Guide are not too bad, mainly because the birds are standing at rest, the situation in which gulls are identified by most observers; here we find one of the very few illustrations to be found in any book of the Slaty-backed Gull (but nothing in the text telling how this species differs from the wymani form of the Western Gull); however, the labeling of the illustrations is not always exact and does not match the precision found in most of the text; and only the gulls endemic or casual to the west coast are illustrated, so that it is necessary to have both the Water Bird Guide and this guide in hand simultaneously in order to satisfactorily identify a bird, certainly a clumsy arrangement. In contrast, the text of the Westerns Bird Guide pertaining to gull identification is precise and thorough, at least the parts written by Dr. Harold Cogswell, though one wishes that more comparisons were made between similar species; but again, for nonendemics, one must refer to the definitely inferior Water Bird Guide.

Interestingly, that old pioneer of field guides, Hoffmann's Birds of the Pacific States, has the most complete and accurate information overall on gulls of the west coast of almost any book I'm able to find, including many of the more technical works. While there are a number of omissions of various field marks---the descriptions are not as thorough as Cogswell's in Pough---the regularly occurring species (excluding Thayer's and Glaucous) are described in all the winter plumages and most of the adult breeding plumages; even the colors of many of the soft parts are accurately described, information which is extremely hard to find in any books or articles. But Birds of the Pacific States is not a field guide in the sense that we think of Peterson and Robbins as being.

There are very few illustrations and there is no key or analytical chart; it is time consuming and confusing to read through the accounts of seven species with a total of 32 plumages. But how one wishes that Hoffmann could have written a "modern" bird guide!

It seems obvious that the common, "ordinary" species of gulls have taken a back seat in the ornithological world, especially in the field guides. Why couldn't Peterson, who took great pain and pride no doubt, to show subtle differences in coloration and proportion among such difficult groups to identify as the shorebirds do the same for the gulls? And why are gulls drawn primarily in flight, certainly not the position in which most gulls are studied, particularly by persons unfamiliar with them? And why the texts of these books have to so often be a morass of inaccurate, incomplete and downright misleading statements is beyond my comprehension.

In short, using the currently available field guides to identify gulls, especially immatures, is difficult and often impossible; serious errors can be made by even experienced observers if the information in these guides is used as the sole basis for field identification. However, after researching the problems thoroughly I have come to the conclusion that the field guides and other books have made the study of gulls much more confusing and complicated than it really is. True, gull identification is by no means simple; some birds ~~area~~ challenge to even the most experienced observers; but I am convinced that with a reasonable amount of effort the average observer can correctly identify 95% or more of the individuals encountered in the field, providing that clear, accurate and thorough information is at hand. However, such information, in the form of a field guide, is at this time unavailable; the sad result is that the common species of gulls continue to be neglected and misunderstood, and a potential source of enjoyment and interest denied to many. Gulls, after all, are birds too!

Tom Lund  
Box 3105, Eugene 97403

We are compiling a list of the errors in Gabrielson and Jewetts' Birds of Oregon in order that users of this book might be aware of all inconsistencies and misconceptions and do not repeat them elsewhere. Errors involving misquotations, obvious omissions, and inconsistencies in citing references are especially desired. Please send all errors to either Chip Jobanek or Tom Lund.

This issue of SWOC TALK was prepared by Tom Lund, Larry McQueen and Chip Jobanek and was printed on October 28, 1975 by the Quick Copy Center of the University of Oregon, Eugene.

97403  
Eugene, OR



SWOC  
10600 McKenzie Highway  
Springfield, OR 97477

The Southern Willamette Ornithological Club, or SWOC, is an organization representing the interests of bird students in the southern Willamette Valley. The goals of SWOC include:

- Conduct monthly meetings of ornithological interest
- Act as the coordinating body for local projects
- Participate actively in local governmental planning
- Act as a "sounding board" for new ideas and information pertinent to the study of Willamette Valley birdlife
- Distribute this information through the form of a newsletter and papers

Quite simply, SWOC is an informal discussion group which deals with the problems of Willamette Valley birds. We need your participation. Please consider joining SWOC and playing an active role in any of these stated goals. Address all letters to "SWOC, c/o Chip Jobanek, 10600 McKenzie Highway, Springfield, Oregon, 97477."