

The Birds of Piper Slough, Contra Costa County -- Part 2 (doves through goldfinches)

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This is the second installment of a two-part paper on the birds of Piper Slough, Contra Costa County. In the first installment (Glover 2000), I described the location and its recent history, and discussed the status of species in all orders between the Gaviiformes and Charadriiformes. This paper consists of species accounts for the Columbiformes through Passeriformes.

The following data originate primarily from 140+ trips I made to the area from 1991 through the summer of 2000 (mostly from 1995-2000). In addition, I gleaned some data from published sources, primarily *The Quail*, monthly newsletter of Mt. Diablo Audubon Society. Observer's names are cited for observations other than my own. Introduced species are indicated by the symbol "(I)".

Species Accounts

Rock Dove (*Columba livia*) (I) -- Although they do not nest in the study area, small flocks are noted in the area throughout the year.

Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*) -- Fairly common resident, an average of 3-4 pairs nesting per year.

Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) -- All records are of birds flushed during the day: Two on 8/15/99, one on 10/11/99 and two on 2/14/95.

Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) -- Recorded only sporadically, this species has nested at least once (a fledgling on 5/21/94). Eleven records fall between 11/6 and 5/30.

Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*) -- The lone record is for 4/23/82 (J. Richmond), although coverage at dusk would probably turn them up sporadically in the pastures to the south.

Vaux's Swift (*Chaetura vauxi*) -- There are just six spring records within a narrow span of dates, 4/20-5/14, with a high of 30 on 5/2/95 (F. Bennett et al.)

Black-chinned Hummingbird (*Archilochus alexandri*) -- Fairly common summer resident and fall migrant. Birds begin to arrive as early as 4/9 with breeders apparently gone by mid-August. Three records spanning 9/3-9/12 are likely of fall migrants.

Anna's Hummingbird (*Calypte anna*) -- Three records: 9/3/99, 5/10/94, and a female building a nest 5/20/2000.

Calliope Hummingbird (*Stellula calliope*) -- The lone record is of a well-studied female on 5/9/98.

Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*) -- The true status of *Selasphorus* hummingbirds is clouded at best. Adult male Rufous have been found on two occasions: 4/11/98 and 4/16/99. A male thought to be an Allen's Hummingbird (*Selasphorus sasin*) was present 3/15/97 although this record is best considered to be *Selasphorus* sp. Female/immature birds have been noted 3/25/99, 5/2/2000, and 9/1/98. The lone summer record is of a female on 6/7/98.

Belted Kingfisher (*Ceryle alcyon*) -- Permanent resident with 1-2 birds noted on most days. They do not breed within the study area but they have been found nesting very close by and are often noted carrying food in the breeding season.

Lewis's Woodpecker (*Melanerpes lewis*) -- Rare migrant with just two records: 5/17/94 and 9/11-14/1995.

Nuttall's Woodpecker (*Picoides nuttallii*) -- Uncommon permanent resident with an average of two pairs breeding annually.

Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*) -- Uncommon permanent resident with one or two pairs breeding annually.

Northern (Red-shafted) Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) -- Fairly common migrant, very rare in the middle of winter. Spring migrants begin arriving about mid-March and a few are still trickling through even into early June. They are most common in fall, with mostly single birds noted from mid-August through late-September and then an average of 3-7 birds per day throughout October and into early November.

Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Contopus cooperi*) -- Rare spring migrant with four records spanning 5/7-5/30.

Western Wood-Pewee (*Contopus sordidulus*) -- A fairly common spring migrant with the earliest record 5/4 and several records of birds still moving north as late as 6/6. Apparently much less common in fall when the few records fall between 8/22-29.

Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii*) -- Uncommon but annual late-spring migrant and sometimes abundant fall migrant. The early spring date is 4/30/94, but this is unusually early. The bulk of spring migrants, nearly always single birds, pass through from about 5/20 through 6/15. In fall, the first bird detected was 8/25/98 but they can be abundant by the end of August (i.e. 22 on 8/29/94 and 23 on 9/3/99). Smaller numbers (four or less) are detected most days through the end of September; one has yet to be found in October.

Least Flycatcher (*Empidonax minimus*) -- A fall vagrant, recorded once, on 9/12/96.

Hammond's Flycatcher (*Empidonax hammondi*) -- Although likely more common as a migrant, there are but two records: One on 4/29/96 (J. Morlan) and another or the same bird on 5/7/96.

Gray Flycatcher (*Empidonax wrightii*) -- The lone record is for 4/29/96 (J. Morlan).

Pacific-slope Flycatcher (*Empidonax difficilis*) -- Uncommon migrant, a high count of but three noted on several occasions. Spring dates span 5/4-6/7, fall dates span 8/20-10/2.

Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*) -- Permanent resident, two pairs usually nesting within the study area. The high count of 8 on 9/1/98 perhaps suggests migration or dispersal through the area.

Ash-throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens*) -- Uncommon spring migrant and rare breeder. The early spring record is for 4/22/98, with most records coming from mid-May on. The lone breeding record is of a pair carrying food 6/17/98.

Cassin's Kingbird (*Tyrannus vociferans*) -- A spring vagrant, recorded once: a pair on 5/3/96.

Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) -- Fairly common summer resident with two pairs usually nesting each summer. The early spring arrival date is 3/29/95, the late fall date, 9/1/98. It is unclear when breeding birds depart but it appears that fall migrants are moving through in mid-August.

Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) -- A rare resident with a pair nesting annually at the south end of the study area. The vast majority of records, however, span August through November, suggesting that birds at that time are migrants.

Cassin's Vireo (*Vireo cassinii*) -- A rare spring migrant with eight records between 5/2 and 5/28, and a peak count of three on 5/4/95.

Warbling Vireo (*Vireo gilvus*) -- Fairly common migrant. Spring dates span 5/2- 6/7, with a high of just three. Fall dates range from 8/29-9/26, again with a high of just three birds.

Western Scrub-Jay (*Apelocoma californica*) -- A fairly common permanent resident, 4-5 pairs breeding annually.

American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) -- Common permanent resident, although nesting appears to take place within the study area only occasionally.

Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) -- Noted sporadically throughout the year but with increasing frequency in recent years as they have nested on transmission towers to the south and to the west. All records are of single birds or pairs except for a kettle of 31 birds on 9/14/94.

Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*) -- Found throughout the year in varying numbers. They are rarest in winter when tiny flocks are noted sporadically. Just 1-3 pairs nest annually within the study area and they appear to arrive sometime in late February or early March and depart around late August. Detectable movements of spring migrants are mostly recorded late March through late April with a high count of 300 on 4/21/97. Southbound fall migrants begin to appear in modest numbers about 8/20 but highest numbers are found late September through mid-October, including a high count of 2265 on 9/22/99, followed by 2000+ on 9/25/99. By November, only small flocks are noted and they often appear to be wintering birds.

Violet-green Swallows (*Tachycineta thalassina*) -- Although some likely escape detection amongst flocks of Tree Swallows, there is but one definite record of this swallow: one on 3/4/99.

Northern Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*) -- Very uncommon summer resident with an early spring date of 3/20. A pair nests annually in the ditch along Bethel Island Rd. just south of the study area and in 1998 a pair attempted to nest in a pipe within the study area (they apparently abandoned the nest).

Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*) -- The status of this beleaguered species is somewhat clouded but seemingly reliable records are as follows: One on 5/9/96 (D. Wight, J. Goodman); Four on 6/13/81 (B. Richmond); Three on 8/22/96; and two on 9/1/98. Fifty were recorded from nearby Bradford Is. on 8/11/79 (B. Richmond). As of this writing there appears to be no suitable nesting habitat for this species in Contra Costa County although it is unclear whether or not such habitat (sand banks) existed historically.

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) -- Common summer resident with many pairs nesting amongst the boat slips in the northeast corner of the study area. The earliest arrivals have been March 12 in several different years with the local breeders appearing to linger as late as mid-October, although this is confused by southbound fall migrants. Fall migration appears to occur chiefly in late-September, including 200 moving southwest with Tree Swallows on 9/25/1999.

Cliff Swallow (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*) -- Uncommon overall but occasionally very common summer visitor although it does not breed within the study area. Dates span 4/11-8/22 with a high count of 150+ on 4/2/98.

Bushtit (*Psaltriparus minimus*) -- Uncommon permanent resident with just two or possibly three pairs nesting annually.

White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*) -- One March record but date now lost. Because there are no oaks in the vicinity this normally sedentary bird was completely unexpected.

Bewick's Wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*) -- Uncommon permanent resident with perhaps two pairs nesting annually.

House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*) -- Uncommon at all seasons and apparently a sporadic nester. House Wrens are recorded most often in fall (high of five 11/6/97) and winter (an average of about three per winter). They have remained to breed in at least two different years but were completely absent during the breeding seasons of 96, 97 and 99.

Winter Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) -- Rare winter resident and fall migrant. The early fall record is for 9/22/99. Up to three wintered in 95-96, one wintered in 97, and up to three again wintered in 98-99. One on 3/12/98 may have been the winter bird lingering or it may have represented a spring migrant.

Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*) -- Uncommon permanent resident with at most two pairs nesting annually. A high count of seven on 10/11/99 suggests a push of migrants.

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila caerulea*) -- Rare migrant and winter visitor. The lone spring record is for 4/2/96. Two fall records are for 8/15/99 and 9/26/98. Winter records include a single bird present 12/11/97 and two birds noted 2/4-8/2000.

Golden-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus satrapa*) -- Very rare migrant with but two records: one on 3/29/95 and up to two 10/12-20/98.

Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*) -- Fairly common migrant and winter resident. The early fall date is 10/2/98; they are most common mid-October through mid-November (high of 17 on 10/31/95) with numbers gradually tailing off through the winter. There is apparently a small rise in numbers during the second half of March with all birds normally gone by mid-April. A very late individual was present 5/17/94.

Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*) -- The lone record is of one on 4/26/97 (M. Havman).

Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*) -- Fairly common spring migrant. The records span 5/5 through 6/3, with a high of 15 on 5/14/95.

Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*) -- Uncommon winter resident with dates spanning 9/25 to 4/22 and a high count of just four on several different occasions.

American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) -- Uncommon permanent resident, nesting around the houses at the northeast corner of the study area.

Varied Thrush (*Ixoreus naevius*) -- The lone record is of two on 10/17/98 (J. Summerhill).

Wrentit (*Chamaea fasciata*) -- There were at least two singing males present as recently as 5/21/94 and the last bird recorded was 9/14/94. Wrentits have probably always been marginal in eastern Contra Costa and they have also disappeared from their other known sites in the eastern part of the county in recent years (pers. obs.).

Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) -- Uncommon permanent resident with two pairs breeding annually.

European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) (I) -- Common permanent resident, although most breeding activity appears to take place outside of the study area, likely due to a paucity of woodpecker cavities. Flocks in the hundreds are not unusual fall through spring.

American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*) -- Uncommon winter visitor with dates spanning 10/11 to 4/16 and a high count of eight on 2/4/2000.

Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) -- Uncommon and sporadic migrant with a few winter records, with most birds noted in association with the exotic plantings around the houses at the northeast corner of the study area. Fall records range from 9/13-9/25, spring records from 4/21-5/30. The high count was a total of 60+ moving north in a total of four flocks on 5/20/2000.

Phainopepla (*Phainopepla nitens*) -- One of the least expected species thus far recorded, the lone record is of a single female/immature flying west on 8/30/96 (S. Glover, D. Wight).

Orange-crowned Warbler (*Vermivora celata*) -- Fairly common migrant, uncommon winter resident. Spring migrants noted as early as 3/12 (with the high count of ten on that date in 1999) to as late as 5/30. Fall birds arrive as early as 8/10. Arrival and departure

dates of wintering birds are obscured by the presence of migrants but they appear to be present from about mid-October to about mid-February.

Nashville Warbler (*Vermivora ruficapilla*) -- Very uncommon spring migrant with dates spanning 4/22 to 5/14. All were of single birds except for six on 4/23/96 (F. Bennett, J. Richmond, et al.).

Yellow Warbler (*Dendroica petechia*) -- Very common migrant, in fact often the most common migrant recorded at Piper Slough. Spring dates span 4/22 through 6/6 with the highest numbers usually passing through during the second half of May. The high spring count was 15+ on 5/14/95. Fall migrants have been noted as early as 8/15 and as late as 10/12 with the highest numbers typically found late August through late September (e. g., 20 on 8/29/94 and 25+ 9/12/96).

Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Dendroica coronata*) -- Common winter resident and migrant. Spring migrants apparently begin to arrive in numbers in late March and early April (e. g., high counts of 75+ on 4/11/95 and 64 on 3/27/96). The late date for spring is 5/14/96 (two birds). The earliest fall migrant was one seen 9/25/99, with the fall peak around the second half of October through early November. All of the above records refer to apparent *D. c. auduboni*. *D. c. coronata* has been found exclusively in late winter and spring from 2/7-5/5, never more than three birds in a day.

Black-throated Gray Warbler (*Dendroica nigrescens*) -- Uncommon spring migrant, fairly common fall migrant. All of the spring records are squeezed between 5/4 and 5/21 with a high of just two found on several occasions. Fall dates span 8/29 through 10/12 with a high of three 9/25/99.

Townsend's Warbler (*Dendroica townsendi*) -- Fairly common spring migrant, rare in fall. Spring dates span 5/4 to 5/30 with a high of 5 on 5/4/95. The only two birds found thus far in fall were seen 8/29/94 and 9/3/99.

Hermit Warbler (*Dendroica occidentalis*) -- Seven records, all from May, with dates spanning 5/2 to 5/21. The high count was of five on 5/9/94 (G. Finger).

Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*) -- Two records: a singing male 6/9/95 and one on 9/12/95 (J. Lomax, D. Wight).

American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*) -- A singing male was present 5/21/94 (John Robinson).

MacGillivray's Warbler (*Oporornis tolmiei*) -- Very scarce migrant, just four records: 5/14/95, 5/21/96, 8/29/94 (three birds), and 9/12/96 (D. Wight).

Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*) -- Very common permanent resident, although perhaps in decline in recent years. Very high numbers in March suggest migrants (i.e. 20 males present 3/29/95), but otherwise the numbers of residents obscures any possible migration patterns.

Wilson's Warbler (*Wilsonia pusilla*) -- Very common migrant. Spring records span 4/2 through 6/2, the largest numbers passing through in the first half of May (e. g., nine

singing males 5/2/2000). Fall records reach from 8/10 to 10/12 with largest numbers present from about 8/20 to late September (i.e. 8+ on 8/22/96 and nine on 9/25/99).

Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*) -- Fairly common summer resident. The first singing males generally arrive about 4/21-23, with five pairs breeding annually. Birds are noted annually through the first two weeks of September but it is unclear whether they are migrants or local breeders. The fact that there are five pairs present each summer suggests that they have been unaffected by bulldozing in recent years.

Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*) -- The lone record is of a female on 5/14/96.

Western Tanager (*Piranga ludoviciana*) -- Fairly common spring migrant, less common in fall. Spring records span 5/2 through 6/2 with a high of just four on 5/20/2000. Fall records span 8/15-9/26 with all records being of single birds.

Spotted Towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*) -- Common permanent resident, although numbers may have declined in recent years. Through 1998 there were normally 10-12 pairs nesting but in 1999 and 2000 there were about 5-6 pairs.

Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*) -- Rare migrant with just three records: 5/2/97, 5/14/95 (two birds), and 9/3/99.

Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*) -- One record: an immature on 10/31/95.

Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*) -- Rare migrant: 4/22/95 (two birds), 5/10/94 (two birds), 5/21/94, and 8/22/96.

Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) -- Recorded just once: Two birds on 4/16/99. They are likely more common in winter in the fields to the south but the habitat along the levee is inappropriate.

Fox Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca*) -- Uncommon winter resident with dates spanning 9/26 through 4/16. All records are of 1-5 birds except for 9 on 2/4/2000 and 26 on 1/8/96.

Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*) -- Common permanent resident with perhaps 5-7 pairs breeding annually.

Lincoln's Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolni*) -- A fairly common winter resident with records spanning 9/9 through 4/22. Highest numbers typically recorded October to late March (e. g., 20+ on 11/11/94 and 20+ 3/29/95).

White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) -- Rare winter visitor, recorded three times: 11/3/99, 1/16/95 (J. Robinson), and 2/7/96.

White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) -- Common, sometimes abundant, migrant and winter resident. Dates span 9/9 through 4/22 with highest numbers usually recorded mid-October to early November (e. g., 700 on 10/31/95). Except for an anomalous 250+ on 1/8/96, winter numbers are generally at or below 50 birds.

Golden-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*) -- Fairly common winter resident, although sometimes completely absent. Dates span 9/13 to 5/14 with most present October to mid-April. All counts have been less than 50 except for 150 on 10/31/95, this date coinciding with the high count for White-crowned Sparrow.

Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*) -- Rare fall migrant and winter visitor with the following records: 5-6 on 10/31/95, two 10/2-12/98 and then nine on 10/20/98. What may have been a portion of this flock lingered to 3/4/99 (five birds) and 4/16/99 (two birds). All records to date have been of "Oregon" Juncos.

Black-headed Grosbeak (*Pheucticus melanocephalus*) -- Uncommon summer nester with perhaps two pairs nesting annually, although breeding has never been confirmed. The early spring date is 5/4 while the late fall date is 9/6, but it is unclear how many of the fall records represent migrants rather than local breeders.

Blue Grosbeak (*Guiraca caerulea*) -- Fairly common summer resident with a date range of 4/21 to 9/9. Five-six pairs breed annually. By late August all birds are female/immature types, often in small family groups with begging fledglings.

Lazuli Bunting (*Passerina amoena*) -- Generally an uncommon summer resident, but numbers fluctuate wildly year to year. The early spring date was 4/29/97 and all are apparently gone by early August. Most years there are two or three pairs present but in 1996 there were six or seven.

Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*) -- Very rare in summer with an adult male present 5/30-7/28/1998 and again 6/1/2000. On 7/28, the territorial male was singing from a bush containing a female Lazuli Bunting and young, suggesting probable hybridization.

Red-winged Blackbird (*Aegialius phoeniceus*) -- A common permanent resident with dozens and even hundreds nesting in the thistle and brambles to the south and especially west.

Tricolored Blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*) -- Rarely detected, the four records all being of fly-by flocks of males: 50 on 4/11/96, 20 on 5/30/96, 25+ 6/6/96 and 30 on 9/3/99. The June record may indicate nesting somewhere in the vicinity.

Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*) -- Uncommon summer resident, more common in winter, with a couple of pairs nesting annually on the southern and western fringes of the study area. The high count was 31 on 2/4/2000, but it is likely that similar numbers occur regularly.

Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) -- All records in recent years have been of 1-2 males within a narrow span of dates, 9/24-10/9. They were also recorded regularly in small numbers in the winter of 79-80 through the winter of 81-82, but this was before Little Frank's Tract flooded.

Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) -- Common permanent resident.

Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) -- Apparently a fairly common summer resident although breeding has never been confirmed. The vast majority of records are

for spring, with records spanning 3/12-6/10 and a high count of 50 on 4/21/97. The two fall records, both of single males, are for 9/1/98 and 9/3/99.

Hooded Oriole (*Icterus cucullatus*) -- A very uncommon summer resident, nesting only around the houses at the northeast corner of the study area. Because nest sites (in palms) are only checked on occasion, the early date is just 4/16. They certainly arrive earlier than that, though, as on that date in 1999 a nest was already under construction. Females or immatures have been recorded as late as 9/9.

Bullock's Oriole (*Icterus bullockii*) -- An uncommon permanent summer resident with perhaps two pairs nesting annually. The earliest spring arrival date is 4/2/96 and the late fall date is 9/6/98. By late August, all birds are female/immature types.

House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) -- An often abundant permanent resident with highest numbers during the post-breeding period (e. g., 300+ on 8/15/99).

Pine Siskin (*Carduelis pinus*) -- The lone record is of two birds present 10/20/98.

Lesser Goldfinch (*Carduelis psaltria*) -- The only records are of three on 11/11/94 and two on 3/29/95. Lesser Goldfinches are very uncommon and sporadic in eastern Contra Costa County.

Lawrence's Goldfinch (*Carduelis lawrencei*) -- The lone record, the only one for eastern Contra Costa County, is of a single male present 4/16/99.

American Goldfinch (*Carduelis tristis*) -- A common and often abundant permanent resident, but most common in the fall, beginning in mid-August (i.e. 57 on 8/15/99 and 75 on 11/3/99).

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LITERATURE CITED

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