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Where Magic, Avian Science, and Beauty Merge



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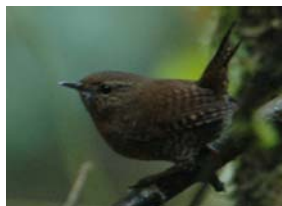
A Coastal Adventure (October 19-23, 2005) Never a Dull Moment

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The quartet of Idaho birders that have become well known to *Majestic Feathers* readers (Dave, Poo, Jean, and myself), having recovered from the challenges of the Texas trip, were anxious for another avian-focused outing. An itinerary was developed, thanks to Jean, our excellent trip planner, a date was set, tickets purchased, rental vehicle reserved, bird lists studied, and away we went.

Our plan was to bird our way up the coast of Oregon starting near Tillamook and ending in Washington at Ocean Shores. We had 18 major stops planned between our starting point and ending point and an untold number of "Wait! Stop! Back up!" stops ahead of us.

We landed in Portland early enough to have an entire day of birding available to us after we got our rental van, so we headed for our first planned stop, the Audubon Society of Portland. There was a slight drizzle, but this did not dampen our enthusiastic exploration of the sanctuary which is comprised of ancient forest, mixed woodland, streamside, and a pond. Amongst this lush green landscape we enjoyed seeing Steller's Jays, Downy Woodpeckers, Black-capped and Chestnut-backed Chickadees and were delighted at the sight of a Winter Wren that put on a marvelous ten minute show in a brush pile. Just above at the edge of a thicket, while the diminutive wren bounced about, both the Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets actively foraged, darting about, flicking their wings, completely unaware of us. A Townsend's Warbler, Spotted Towhee, and Dark-eyed Junco were also in the thicket. It was a pleasing little spot along the trail. The jumbo ferns and moss-covered fallen trees and rocks cushioned the sounds of nature, magnified the peace, and provided many hiding places for spiders, beetles, frogs, and banana slugs.



Winter Wren

From Portland we traveled southwest to Tillamook and left the drizzle behind. Uncommon sunny and warm weather was forecast for the next two days, with rain forecast for our last day of birding on Saturday. In Tillamook we continued south to take a look at the fields that are well known for large flocks of foraging waders.

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**Thank you for your interest and appreciation of
the birds!**

While we scoped one of the fields, a carload of Oregon birders stopped to chat and told us that a Curlew Sandpiper was being seen at the Nehalem Sewage Pond. In the flick of a flycatcher's tail we were off to Nehalem.



By Poo Wright-Pulliam

The author, Jean, and Dave in Portland

I had been on a "wild goose," I mean a wild Curlew Sandpiper chase on the Antelope Island Causeway in Utah on the Great Salt Lake the first week in September, so I was excited for this second chance to possibly see this rare visitor which breeds exclusively in northern Siberia and strays to the lower 48 and Arctic coast of Alaska just once in awhile. We had been told that the Curlew Sandpiper was with a group of Dunlin and Yellowlegs foraging at the water's edge at the sewage pond. The Curlew Sandpiper is the same size as a Dunlin and is also very similarly shaped, but the bill of the curlew is more noticeably decurved than the Dunlin's. From

A Coastal Adventure cont...

August to March this sandpiper is gray above and white below. Its white rump is visible in flight.

When we found the group of birds, I thought it would be miraculous if we found the sandpiper in its winter gray plumage among the rubble of pond-lining rocks, ducks, and shorebirds. To make the situation even more challenging the light was bad because the sun was setting. We had three scopes trained on the birds. Repeatedly we ruled out drab-looking Dunlin after Dunlin. Then in the back of the group I caught a quick glimpse of a pale gray head with a distinctive white eyestripe, an eyestripe more prominent than the Dunlin's. Until that moment the Dunlin all seemed gray, but when this bird appeared, the Dunlin now were clearly dull-brownish. We all began to watch closely for the next appearance of the pale gray bird, straining to see it and to get a good look at its bill. We used the following field marks as we attempted to find and identify the elusive gray bird. The Curlew Sandpiper is a medium-sized shorebird with a decurved bill and black legs. Its white rump and white wing stripe are visible in flight. (The Dunlin has a white wing stripe, too, but no white rump.) The non-breeding plumage (Aug.-Mar.), which is what we were looking for, will feature a gray head with white supercillium (eyestripe), a gray breast with indistinct streaking, gray upperparts, a white belly, and undertail coverts. In breeding plumage the head is a dark rufous (reddish-brown) as are the mantle, breast, and belly. These striking colors will get a birder's attention quickly, and they are diagnostic! The feathers on the back have black bases, and the white undertail coverts have dark spots.

We had several other quick peeks at the pale shorebird, and I could feel our joint telepathic messages to the sandpiper, "Wander to the right. Stop in that space between the mallard and the Dunlin. Hold still!" But no such luck! Just as the sandpiper made its way to the front of the pack, something spooked the entire group! When the birds launched, we were at just the right angle to note that only one of the birds in the group had a white rump, and it was the pale gray one with the decurved bill. Thanks to the "heads up" from the local birders, we had located the Curlew Sandpiper! It was a great way to end our first day on the coast.

It is important to note that if we had been the first to observe the Curlew Sandpiper and knew for certain that it was this rare bird, we would have called the nearest rare bird hot line. Our group includes this number as part of the data we carry with us. An Internet search such as "rare bird hotline Oregon" will result in getting this number. We would have also filed a written rare bird report. Forms for completing this report can also be downloaded from the Internet. If we had filed a report, we would have listed the diagnostic field marks which are the natural characteristics needed to uniquely determine the species of the bird while it is wild and unrestrained. We would have also been very particular to rule out similar species like the Dunlin, which also has a decurved bill, but is not as decurved as the Curlew Sandpiper's, and the Dunlin lacks the white rump. The Stilt Sandpiper is similar in

size and color, but a quick eliminator is its greenish legs. It would also be important to state why the bird seen was not a White-rumped Sandpiper. Failure to eliminate similar species and poorly documenting field marks are the top reasons for rare bird reports not being accepted by State Bird Report Committees. One more thing to remember is that the other birders could have been wrong, so it is important not to just assume that the species has been correctly identified. Go through the process even if someone else has declared the bird to be a certain species.



Day two of our trip arrived in misty, damp, coastal style, but again, it was not raining, and we were thankful for that as we began our exploration of the Bayocean Spit. This is the spit that encompasses Tillamook Bay. Visitors can drive out the spit to a parking area and then continue on foot from there. It was wonderfully quiet during our round trip hike of about three miles. We had good views of the bay and mud flats that hosted about 40 Common Loons, many Double-crested Cormorants, and various ducks. The hills in the background were draped with wispy, low clouds, and the morning sun was breaking through to highlight brilliant greens and forest blues. We were all strolling along enjoying the beauty of the morning and checking out the Fox Sparrows that were acting as scouts, flying just ahead of us along the trail. I stopped when a flash of orange caught my eye. My first thought was that an oriole species was about to pop into full view. I was nearly bowled over when a striking, bright orange and black bird made its grand entry! I would have never dreamed that we would see an Orange Bishop on the spit or anywhere outside of California for that matter! We were all in disbelief at what we were seeing, and we were totally dazzled as we watched the Bishop preen, bathe in a puddle, and sit proudly and conspicuously on the top of various flora. This sighting was reported to the Oregon Rare Bird Hotline so that Oregon birders could have a chance to search for the Orange Bishop and to discuss the possibility of the expansion of this introduced species. Later on at home I also reported the details of this encounter to Kimball Garrett.

Orange Bishop on Bayocean Spit



A Coastal Adventure cont...

Kimball is an avid California birder who is observing the adaptation and expansion of the Orange Bishop flock that was introduced to the L.A. area in the 1980's.

The far end of the trail ended at the dunes, and we thoroughly enjoyed the last 1/8 mile of the trail as it was just packed with huckleberry bushes. Ripe huckleberries generated as much joy for us as seeing a Wrentit, a lifer for all of us, and our first Peregrine of the trip.

A short jaunt southward from the spit brought us to Cape Meares State Park. Poo was going to see her first lighthouse here, so she was stoked. From the cliffs here we saw another Peregrine and spotted our first Black Oystercatcher of the trip. Jean, Poo, and Dave also saw Brandt's Cormorant among the gulls, terns, and Double-crested Cormorants on the rocks below. We explored the lighthouse, which we all enjoyed, and then headed northward.

In Bay City we stopped at the Pacific Oyster Company and took a long time to study the Black Turnstones finding bits to eat in the huge heap of discarded oyster shells. The heap was also foraging grounds for many Glaucous Gulls, both of which were lifers for all of us. What total fun!



A Black Turnstone (nonbreeding plumage)



Coastal Sea Stacks

We spent the night in Hammond in a dumpsy and too expensive hotel and headed out in the morning, anxious for the day's adventures. Our destinations for the day were scheduled to be Coffenbury Lake at Fort Stevens State Park, the South Jetty of the Columbia River, North Head Light House State Park in Washington, the Emerson Avenue Dead End by the marina in Tokeland, Washington, the Tokeland marina, Westport marina, and Westport jetty in Westport, Washington. The reader may be asking, "Now, how did they know where to go?" Jean, our expert trip planner, generally takes three fact-finding steps toward planning a trip. For this trip she first did two Internet searches by typing in "bird watching in Oregon" and "bird watching in Washington." This is a great way to see where the most popular spots are.

Second, either at the bookstore or online, she searches for books about birding in these states. The third very important step is a visit online or a call to the rare bird alerts for the state or area we will be birding. By calling the rare bird alert for Washington we found out that a Bar-tailed Godwit had been seen at the Tokeland marina, which is where I will pick up the tale of the day's adventure.

At the marina in Tokeland there were hundreds of migrating Marbled Godwits to scrutinize for the Bar-tailed. As we studied these large flocks, we found a Whimbrel. Its striped head drew our attention, and then it was easy to differentiate its long, downward curved bill from the Godwit's long, upward-swooped bill. After enjoying this find, we resumed our Bar-tailed search. Then we spotted a more lightly colored (more gray than the buffy Marbled Godwits) and slightly smaller Godwit, so we trained our scopes on it. We picked out each of the nonbreeding plumage field marks, compared them with the Marbled Godwit, and determined that we had identified the Bar-tailed Godwit, a Eurasian species that is a rare visitor to North America. This was an exciting new addition to all of our life lists, and we relished the chance to spend time studying it.



The lighter colored bird in this flock is the Bar-tailed Godwit.

From Tokeland we raced the sunset to the Westport marina. Indeed, when we arrived there the sky was filling with the magical colors of sunset, pinks, lavenders, pastel blues, and golden highlights. I marveled at the view of Mt. Rainier to the north, the sound of the surf, and the stillness of the boats in the slips. While walking through the marina the slight sound of water lapping against the vessels was soothing. We all took in the jeweled, lucent reflection of the sunset and, amazingly, even as transfixed as we were, we located several Surfbirds and a wayward, solitary Cassin's Auklet. Both were lifers!



Sunset, Westport Marina

A Coastal Adventure cont...

Our next stop was Aberdeen where we rendezvoused with Dave's wife Renea. Dave had a family wedding in Seattle the next day, so he was parting company with us to attend it. Over dinner we told Renea about the events of the day and reviewed our list. We had seen hundreds of Black-bellied Plovers along highway 105 in the bay near Tokeland. At the South Getty at the Columbia we had seen Red-throated, Pacific, and Common Loons. We also had been wonderfully lucky to see a Xantus's and Ancient Murrelet. Wow! Along the way we had also spotted all three of the possible Scoters: Surf, White-winged, and Black. Our species total for the day was 65.

Our goal for Saturday the 22nd was to explore as much of Ocean Shores, Washington, as possible and to hit Grays Harbor NWR before the sunset. In Ocean Shores our list of exploration spots included the beach, golf course, south jetty, the sewage ponds, Salicornia Marsh, Damon Point, four good viewing spots along the inner bay, Duck Lake, and, lastly, the fire station pond.



At Cannon Beach a Western Gull eats a Dungeness Crab that it pulled from the surf.

We began the morning with an exhilarating drive on the hard sand along the beach on the north end of town. We discovered that Poo and I could sit in the back seats of the van with both back doors open with our scopes across our laps ready whenever the van stopped. When we stopped we could simply set the scope and tripod down, stay seated, and view the large flocks of shorebirds foraging in the surf without spooking them. Both doors opening like this, as it turned out, made for a wonderful birding-mobile! There were huge flocks of mixed shorebirds along the surf. The largest percentage of them were Sanderlings, and, besides our interest in looking through them for occasional Western or Least sandpipers, we got a kick out of just watching them scurrying about. We found an American Golden-Plover, saw a Peregrine scare the heck out of the beachcombing peeps, and we identified the first Western Gulls of the trip.

Driving south to the South Jetty we took a detour past the golf course and found several Greater White-fronted Geese with a flock of Canada Geese. Then on to the jetty we went, spotting some little brown birds here and there



Greater White-fronted Geese

along the way. At the entrance to the South Jetty area there is a parking lot and several "Port O Janes"--a welcome sight as we got out to stretch. I thought that we would then proceed about 20 yards to our left to park the car. But Jean, who had elected to be the only driver on the rental agreement, jumped back into the driver's seat, put the van in gear, and proceeded forward. Now, so the readers will know as we do, Jean is a rather adventurous gal, or maybe she is hazard-shy. I am not quite sure what the descriptors for this part of her nature are. Add to this that Jean was raised in Washington and spent lots of time at the beach, so she feels beach-confident compared to Poo and me.

She geared up, hit the gas pedal, and we pressed forward--not to the left to the parking lot but ahead into the sandy entrance of the South Jetty beach area. Directly ahead lay deep ruts in loose sand, and to the right we passed a red and white sign that warned "Caution Soft Sand." That sign whizzed by and from the back seat the ruts loomed cavernously and screamed of the misfortune of several other vehicles. Before I could utter my request that this course of action be halted, the van came to a squiggling, sinking, bogged-down stop. We were stuck! No amount of pushing by beachcombers, who generally admonished us for our choice, or our pushing was helpful. Poo dialed up a tow company, and we began our wait.



I noticed a very large, log-sized piece of driftwood about thirty feet to the right of van. The hard-packed beach, surf, and ocean were about 70 or 80 yards further to the right of the van past the driftwood. I got out to take a look at the interesting object. A few feet from it I started to consider that it was not wood at all. It looked a bit hairy, and, oh, my gosh! It then sank in! There lay a huge, bloated, reeking, rotting harbor seal! Thank heaven the wind was blowing away from the van! The monstrous, dead thing was headless. The flaccid swath of flesh formerly known as the neck was draped on the sand like an empty balloon or the sound flap of a whoopee cushion. The entire sight and smell, down to the oozing, fly-encased holes made by birds, was hideous.

A Coastal Adventure



So, there we were, dead in the sand with a rotting, dead seal nearby. There was nothing to do but accept the situation, realize that we would not be making it to all the birding spots we had scheduled for the day, and understand that this predicament was just part of the adventure. So, the best thing to do since we weren't going anywhere until after the tow was to bird the jetty. We didn't see much, so we went back to wait in the van. It was taking a long time for the tow truck to arrive, so we all set about working on our lists and reviewing details in our field guides. I sat thinking and soon wondered about how much longer it would be until we got pulled out of here and how long it would be until the tide came back in. I wondered just how buoyant that dead seal might still be. I had this ghastly train of "what if" thoughts pouring into my brain, a cognitive process I have engaged in since I was a small child. "What if a big

wave came and that decaying mass bursts against the side of the van?" I dismissed this thought until the tow truck driver, who arrived about an hour after we called, told us the story of a "sneaker" wave that had the year before swept a mom and her son, who was in wheelchair, way up the beach and just spared slamming them against the jetty. I asked what a sneaker wave was, and he told me that about every seventh wave was larger and tended to come in much further than the previous six waves, often taking people by surprise.

He hooked up the winch to the axle of the van and walked back to his truck to begin reeling us out and back to the parking lot area. He told us to get in the van and stay there until he told us to get out. We sat there, and nothing happened. We waited for a bit, and soon he was out of his truck, working on the gearbox for the winch. Since nothing was happening and we hadn't moved even a fraction of an inch, we got out to go see what was going on. There was something wrong with the gearbox, and after about 20 minutes of attempting to fix it, he called for another tow truck, and we went back to waiting. More than waiting, I was watching. Watching the tide coming in, watching for that sneaker wave, and imagining the dead seal being lifted up and slammed into the van as a wave engulfed the rented vehicle. That was as far as I could let my mind go without setting off my gag reflex!

Time was ticking, and the second tow truck, which would arrive in about 15 minutes according to the first driver, was now not present after 25 minutes of passed time. I tried to be calm, but, seriously, the tide really was coming in! Finally we were lashed to the new winch line. The waves were getting closer, and the progress backward off the beach was painfully slow. With the rising tide gliding ever closer to the seal and threatening to make my mental images a reality, the driver must have sensed that he needed to hurry up. He revved the engine and attempted to pull us out with the truck, but his wheels just spun. Should we get the heck out of the van? We had been told to stay in so that in the event the cable broke, we would not be outside and get hit by it. The inching winching continued. More images, more concern. Getting a rented vehicle flooded or filled with wet sand would not be a good thing. Getting trapped inside a van covered with decaying seal would not be a good thing either. Inching, inching...

The sneaker wave was indeed large and swift. The bloated seal was heaved up and afloat, green slime spraying out of the deflated neck tube, its flesh split. An elderly couple that had been caught off guard by the wave, now water-borne rushed along engulfed by the sandy, foamy water, their yellow and blue slickers reminiscent of a brightly colored beach ball that had escaped into the surf. They both looked surprisingly calm considering their situation as they narrowly missed the carcass, and, in the same instant, made eye contact with us as they continued in composed, adrift style past the front of the van. Behind, us in the same instant, the driver gunned the truck, and we lurched backward just as the seal came to rest where the van had been just a fraction of a moment before! The water did rush under the van, but because of our backward movement, it and we were spared any damage! Safe, but downwind of the carcass, we made haste to settle up with the driver and get on with our interrupted birding. Before we left, we checked on the bodysurfing, slicker-clad couple that, thankfully, had weathered their swept-away moment with no ill effects. We were all just fine, while the carcass was a bit closer to falling apart and vanishing.

The rest of our day was welcomingly uneventful, even with the arrival of rain, and, true to form, we switched into high birding gear and visited every spot on our list. We ended our birding day by coming off the trail at Gray's Harbor in the pitch dark!

Our final coast trip bird list was 110 species and...never a dull moment! Yes, it seems that birding is never dull for us, which is just the opposite of the stereotypical idea that some people hold of what bird watching is like. The fact is that we almost always have an experience that exercises mind, body, and spirit! Our connection to nature is deepened, and our friendships are stretched and enhanced. There are moments of deep peace and moments when we are definitely not surprisingly calm.



Tow truck driver number one talking with Jean about the failed winch.



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Fuji Crystal Archive Prints of several images in the gallery are available for purchase.



Birding News From Around the Globe

An international team of scientists has found dozens of new animal and plant species in the jungle of Indonesia! Here is a brief rundown of their bird findings. A new species of Honeyeater bird was found, as was the location of the breeding grounds of the Berlepsch's Six-wired Bird of Paradise, and the first photograph of a Golden-fronted Bower Bird displaying at its bower was taken.

More On Making A Rare Bird Report

- If possible, get a photo, video or audio recording of the bird.
- Make a quick sketch.
- Jot down the field marks that you observed: overall color, approx. size of the bird, bill shape, wing beats and flight style.
- Note the bird's behavior and the habitat where you saw the bird.
- If you carry a cell phone, call others birders to come and see the bird.
- Discuss your observations with other birders.
- Spend more time looking at the bird than looking at your field guide. The book will be there long after the bird has flown.

If you want to learn more about the discovery of what is being called the "Lost World," simply go to a search engine and type in *lost world new bird species*.

Idaho birders are enjoying the wonderful opportunity of seeing several Snowy Owls that are wintering in various places in the state.

Also in Idaho Great Gray Owls have moved down from elevations of 6-7,000 ft. and are being seen in large numbers in meadows north of St. Anthony, elevation 4,972 ft. Moving to lower elevations may be due to very deep snow in their regular hunting grounds.

A Correction

The caption of this photo should have read: In a corkscrew-like maneuver this Sandhill Crane cleans the area near its vent. Homassassa State Park, Florida.



In the last issue the Sandhill's behavior was mistakenly identified as using its beak to gather oil from the uropygial gland.

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