Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture February 11th, 2009.
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

Joe had a big influx of **Pine Siskins** and **Purple Finches** at his feeders just the last days as the cold front came through.

How to tell **Purple Finch** and **House Finch** apart:
Males: look at the flanks. House Finch: plain brown streaks, distinct, crisp and brown on a white background. Purple Finch: whole bird more shaded with a raspberry color, including the flanks, which may have some streaking, but blurry and mostly reddish in color.
Females: House Finch plain head pattern. Purple Finch white supercilium and white malar.
A lot of our females have green fringes to the back and the wing feathers. It is only found in the CA populations and it may be age related.
The voices and calls are quite different between the two.
Do not try to identify the males by how bright they are, because the House Finch is extremely variable. Some of the males are extraordinarily bright, some will be drab, even yellow instead of red, which is partly caused by deficiency in the bird's diet. The red pigments are carotenoids, they are produced from carotene proteins which are acquired from food supply. The males metabolize them and present to females a brighter red coloration as a badge of fitness. Females preferentially mate with males which are bright red in color. This is called honest signaling. A male that is bright red is signaling his fitness, he is desirable because he is better able to find food for the babies. The House Finch is different from many other birds in that the babies are able to digest seeds, so the parents feed them seeds, which is really unusual in a song bird.
The Purple Finch is much more uniform in its overall coloration.

Pigeons and doves

There is no difference between pigeons and doves, although the term pigeon usually is applied to the larger birds that have square tails and the term dove to the smaller birds with more pointed tails. However there are numerous intermediate Columbidae and sometimes the birds have alternate names. The Rock Pigeon was called Rock Dove for a long period, but recently the name Rock Pigeon has been resurrected because it is more closely related to the rather typical pigeons.

Pigeons and doves are believed to be an Australasian radiation. There are lots of really cool pigeons and doves when you get into the Australasian region. Some of the crowned pigeons from southern Victoria for example are the size of a Turkey and have huge plumes all over. Pigeons and doves seem to be organized in the way a songbird is, but their foot structure is quite different, their bill is quite different. Pigeons have a fleshy area around the base of the bill, similar to hawks, called the cere. Pigeons also are said to be the only birds that can drink by sucking and don't have to throw their heads back in order to get the water down. They produce in their crop a highly nutritious protein from the cells lining the crop, which is regurgitated into the baby bird's mouth. It is a milky substance and is called "pigeon's milk". It is produced by both males and females. It is way more nutritious than cow's milk.

Their nests are usually very flimsy compared to other birds. It is made out of twigs and you can usually see through it from underneath. Nest building usually takes place in the early morning. The female stays on the nest site and the male goes gathering nesting material which he delivers to the female on the nest. Joe watched Mourning Doves do that, always in the same, very organized way. The female is sitting on top of the nest, the male passes the twig over her shoulder and then she takes it and puts it into the nest. They do this for an hour or so every morning for 10 to 12 days until they have a platform of twigs and then they start to lay eggs. Many species are multi-brooded. The Mourning Dove in CA may have three or more broods in a season.

A small head and large eyes give pigeons and doves a kind of dopey or peaceful look.

Band-tailed Pigeon

OCCURRENCE
Ranges from southeastern Alaska mostly in coniferous forest and in mountain ranges south through the Sierra Nevada and Coastal Ranges into the southern Rockies. Does not occur in the northern Rockies. Then ranges down the Sierra Madre through Mexico all the way to Panama. Then it picks up again in Venezuela in the Andes and ranges clear down to Argentina and Chile. Joe knows of no other species of birds which has this range right down the American Cordilleran mountain ranges.

There is a different race in South America that has the whole bill yellow without the black tip, otherwise they are pretty much the same bird.

Has increased in the last 50 years in the Bay Area. Was missing from the Oakland CBC in the 1950s. Still a fairly uncommon bird within the city of SF. Has increased quite a bit in the East Bay, is now quite common in the East Bay hills. May have to do with the development of oaks and pines which seems to be the kind of habitat they like, pine-oak woodlands in transition zones. Not a bird of high elevations, a bird of foothill habitat. A bit north in places like Bodega Bay large flocks can be encountered.

Joe has found nests of Band-tailed Pigeons in mature Redwood and Douglas Fir forests.

Although the range map shows it as being largely non-migratory, flocks of 40 birds or so are not that unusual at the hawk lookout in the Marin headlands. They do fly over the city.

A somewhat social bird, particularly in the non-breeding season. They are dependent to some extent on the acorn crop which is an unreliable food source. Band-tailed Pigeons that have had a successful nesting season followed by a year of poor oak mast production may migrate into new areas in large numbers. They may then be forced into areas that they normally would not be happy to be in, for example in the Central Valley of CA where they sometimes forage on mistletoe berries, which are very low in nutrition.
Because they sometimes congregate in large numbers and they can be attracted to bird feeders they become a bit of a problem.

Although considered to be non-migratory, the species also has a long history of vagrancy to the eastern US.

FIELD MARKS

The largest of the native American pigeons.
Overall gray plumage.
Relatively pale head.
Yellow bill with black tip, yellow feet.
Scaly iridescence on the back of the neck and a white band that extends around the nape.
The colors on the nape are iridescent. There may be some greens and purples in there. There are subtle differences in the iridescence between the males and the females. But because iridescence in itself is ephemeral Joe is not prepared to identify male form female Band-tailed Pigeons.
The pale gray terminal band on the tail is one of the less distinctive features on the bird.
(The Rock Pigeon has a black band on the tip of the tail which is more obvious.)
Underwings largely dark. When the birds are flying overhead they invariably show dark gray wing linings. Rock Pigeons will normally have most of the birds in the flock with white wing linings, Band-tailed Pigeons never have white wing linings. They can be identified by that and by their all uniformly dark appearance.

Juvenile

Missing the iridescence on the nape and the striking white band on the back of the neck.
When looking carefully you can see that the feathers on the wings have pale fringes that give the bird a somewhat scaly look. This is characteristic of the juvenal plumage of all pigeons and doves. They will look rather scaly in juvenal plumage.
Slim bills. They do not develop the ceres before they are adult. It looks as though a part of the head is missing.

VOCALIZATIONS

The birds are usually fairly quiet, but towards dusk and early in the morning they give a very low rolling hooting sound that reminds of Long-eared Owl.

Red-billed Pigeon

(No slides)

OCCURRENCE

Permanent resident of Mexico, Costa Rica, all the way down into Ecuador, barely reaching the lower Rio Grande Valley, mostly upstream in the area above Falcon Dam, not all the way down to the coast. No other places in the US where Red-billed Pigeons occur. They are extremely hard to see in southern Texas. Often seen at dawn and dusk in the tops of the trees. This species rarely comes down to the ground. It is fairly skittish in Texas and it has declined.

Joe has experience of the species in Costa Rica. There it is quite common in second growth and around towns and villages. Not particularly common in forests. More common than Rock Pigeons in that area.

FIELD MARKS

Bill yellow and cere pink! Name complete misnomer.
Otherwise pretty much an all dark pigeon. Adults have some purplish coloration on the head, the rest of the plumage is a very dark gray.

White-crowned Pigeon

(No slides)

OCCURRENCE

Endemic to the Caribbean and the Florida Keys.
Nests in mangrove swamps.
Joe found it occasionally in small flocks in the Florida Keys in the summer months, which is when it is nesting there.

FIELD MARKS

Adults white crown on an all dark bird, white eye.
Yellow bill with red base.
Juvenile very similar to the juvenile of the Red-billed Pigeon, not much white if any on the forehead.

Rock Pigeon

OCCURRENCE

Introduced in NA. Historical range in the Middle East, where it nested primarily in rocky cliffs. Has been domesticated since the Middle Ages. Has spread all over the place. The domestic strains have been kept for various purposes, one is homing. US Fish and Wildlife Service does not band pigeons, banded pigeons are from private owners.

FIELD MARKS

One of the more often misidentified birds.
Falcon-like silhouette. Pointed wings, very strong flight.
White wing linings on most, but dark types have dark underwings. In a flock of Rock Pigeons you will see a lot of variation and most of the birds have white wing linings.
If you see a flock of pigeons flying overhead and all have dark wing linings, that should be Band-tailed Pigeons.
Often white rump.
Often gray tail with a black terminal band.