Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture April 23rd, 2009.
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

There were a number of **Swainson's Hawks** reported in the Bay Area during the last weekend. The weather was very warm with offshore flow. They migrate during the daytime. The offshore flow might have caused some of them to drift coastwise.
Swainson's Hawks have increased in the last few decades in CA due to protection and due to the fact that some of the trees that used to have been cut down are now full sized and they can breed in residential areas where they were not able to breed before. It is a highly migratory species, but it is still pretty much restricted to the Central Valley and Great Basin regions. Very rare along the immediate coast.

There have also been quite a few **Western Kingbirds** along the coast where they are scarce. It is more of a Foothill/Central Valley/Great Basin kind of a bird.
The other kingbird that sometimes shows up at this time of the year is the **Cassin's Kingbird**. It has a darker head. But its assessment depends a lot on the light conditions.
The **Tropical Kingbird** is another candidate. It has no white in the tail.
The white in the tail on the kingbirds is way overrated as a mark to be able to tell these birds apart! Western has a dark tail, only the narrow outer web of the outermost tail feather on each side is white. Typically when the birds are perched facing away from you, those outer tail feathers are folded in underneath the rest of the tail and will not show up until the bird flies and fans its tail. Beware, almost any bird that is backlit will show white shining through the outer web of the outer tail feather.
Cassin's Kingbird has pale outer webs to the outer tail feathers, they easily appear white in certain light conditions. The only real difference is the white tip to the tail in Cassin's Kingbird.
Things to look for besides the tail pattern:
• Bill size. Cassin's and Western are relatively small billed.
• Overall color of the head: Cassin's Kingbird has an almost bluish cast to the head.
• Eye mask: Cassin's Kingbird never seems to show even a trace of the black mask through the eye because the whole head is so dark that whatever mask there is, is not going to contrast with the rest of the head.
• Chin: The white chin is present on both of them but it contrasts more on Cassin's Kingbird because of the darker head.
• Wings: Something not discussed enough in kingbird identification is the color of the wings. Most of the time the Western Kingbird has a pale gray back contrasting with nearly black wings. There is little or no contrast between the wings of the Cassin's Kingbird and the darker gray back, sometimes the wings may even appear to be paler than the back. In real fresh plumage the differences are not as clear cut.
• Vocalizations: The voices are very different, but Western Kingbird tends to be quiet or do a kind of twittereing. Cassin's Kingbird has a loud very nasal kind of cha-weer call.
Cassin's Kingbirds are very common in southern CA in the winter. They sometimes gather in enormous roosts with hundreds of birds coming in from all over and they are common even in residential areas. It is the only kingbird you are likely to find in southern CA in the winter. In the breeding season the birds disperse and they get further north.
Cassin's Kingbird is never a common bird as far north as the Bay Area. However, one or two pairs were found quite by accident nesting up in Solano County. Ron Thorn has seen Cassin's Kingbird several times at Coyote Point. It does show up as a rare stray, also in the fall.

We really have no spring records of Tropical Kingbird. It is found in October and November and very rarely it will spend the winter. In northern CA any kingbird found in the winter along the coast is much more likely a Tropical than any other. Western is a long distance migrant, it does not winter in CA, there are fewer than five valid winter records. Historically it was recorded all too often on CBCs in CA. It is likely that many of these winter records for northern CA were based on misidentified Say's Phoebes.
Western Kingbirds migrate during the daytime. In places like Mines Rd you can see flocks of them moving from field to field in about late March and early April. Cassin's Kingbirds can also show up in that area. They regularly nest on the Tracy Golf Course (by the 580 south of Tracy), probably the closest place to the Bay Area where they occur regularly. They probably are a little bit more regular in Santa Clara County and San Benito County. There is an old nesting record from Marin County from the 60s.

Swans

Very large, very heavy white birds with very, very long necks. The largest of all the waterfowl.

Tundra Swan

TAXONOMY

Formerly called Whistling Swan, which still can be used as a name for the NA subspecies. Originally the Bewick's Swan, which is found in Europe and Asia, was considered to be a separate species from the Whistling Swan, which replaces it in NA. Because of the presence of intermediate birds and some evidence of hybridization the taxonomists decided that it would be more beneficial to lump the two together into a single species of tundra breeding swans. The ones in Europe and Asia have more yellow on the bill than the ones that are found here in NA.

OCCURRENCE

Generally found in CA in the wintertime and during migration. Can become quite common locally in the Central Valley, particularly the upper Central Valley in the regions around Graylodge and Sacramento wildlife areas and even further north up into Redding and Red Bluff. Particular in flooded fields and particular in old rice pastures. If it is a wet year swans may disperse out into some of the bypasses, like the big Yolo Bypass. They do occur locally in the Bay Area but they are generally scarce. The further east you go the more likely it is that you will find them. In Joe's opinion they have declined in the last 30 years. Partly because some of the fields are not flooded any more. Also, the last year when there were large numbers of them there was apparently an outbreak of avian cholera and huge numbers of these birds died. They do not seem to have recovered. Part of the reason for that may be that they are relatively slow breeders.

FIELD MARKS

Adult birds all white.
Bill black with variable amounts of yellow in front of the eye.
The yellow is usually fairly pale but sometimes has an orange coloration to it.
Gape a salmon color visible between the upper and lower mandible. This is not a valid field mark for the Trumpeter Swan, both species have salmon gape marks contrary to what some old field guides showed.

Focus on bill and eye pattern to distinguish it from Trumpeter Swan.
A variable spot of yellow in the lore region is separating out the dark eye from the black bill. If you see any yellow there that identifies the bird as a Tundra Swan, Trumpeter Swans never have yellow in that area. The problem is that between 5 and 10 % of Tundra Swans have little or no yellow. Unfortunately this one field mark identifies the common one, we don't have a field mark to identify the rare one.
There are also subtle differences in the bill shape.
Bill a little bit shorter on Tundra Swan and it tends to be somewhat concave along the culmen. (On Trumpeter you tend to see a longer bill which tends to have a straighter culmen.)
Also some differences in the pattern of feathering around the face. On Tundra Swan the cheek area seems to look a little fuller, the feathering tends to curve out and then back in at the gape so you have a rounded interface on the side of the face where the white meets the bill. (On Trumpeter Swan the white feather pattern cuts pretty much straight across down form the eye towards the culmen.)
From a distance it appears that when you look at the eye and at the angle subtended by the white feathering on each side, that it is pinched in and narrow on Tundra Swan (very wide and open on Trumpeter Swan). This is partly because of the fact that the feathering on the Trumpeter Swan comes down straight and that there is no yellow in front of the eye.
If the bird is facing towards you the feathering coming forward from the eye curves smoothly back across the ridge of the bill to the other eye. (On an adult Trumpeter Swan the feathers will come straight forward to a point and then straight back almost forming an isosceles triangle, a rather exaggerated widow's peak.)

IMMATURES

Bill base pink but becoming black. (Trumpeter always black at the base.)
Although there seem to be some differences between the species they are virtually indistinguishable. Trumpeter Swans are identifiable with confidence only if they are adults. But there is a difference in molt timing, in late spring usually white, Trumpeter still dark.

BEWICK'S SWAN (THE EURASIAN SUBSPECIES)

First recorded in CA in the 1970s. Now believed to occur regularly in very small numbers in large flocks of Tundra Swans. However some of these birds may be merely variants of American Tundra Swans.
Bewick's Swans are as variable as Whistling Swans are. The amount and distribution of yellow or orange coloration on the bill is unique among individuals. Partly because of this Bewick's Swans have been the subject of considerable study. Biologists have looked at wintering flocks of Bewick's Swans and photographed them and been able to identify them as individuals year after year coming back to the same area and studying their behavior and longevity. They are like snow flakes, each one of them is unique. Some have yellow all the way across the top of the bill, some do not, some have yellow on the underside of the mandible, others do not.
Some individuals that come here show some characteristics of Bewick's Swans. Some of them obviously so, but many intermediate birds are also seen, which is part of the reason why they were lumped, because there are a substantial numbers of intermediate birds.
Immatures have a similar bill pattern but with just pale instead of yellow.

CALL

Rather musical, goose like.

Whooper Swan

OCCURRENCE
Eurasian species.
Apparently a regular visitor to the Aleutian islands in the winter.
Rare visitor to Alaska, Oregon and CA.
A number of accepted records from CA. Generally found associating in large flocks of Tundra Swans. They often show up year after year in the same flock in the same place.
One of the better places in CA is near Tule Lake, at White Lake accessed through State Line Road.
Reasonably common in captivity and they do escape. Eastern NA birds are generally assumed to be escaped. With waterfowl you really don't know in a lot of cases whether or not these Asiatic birds are wild or escapes. There are some very large commercial swan breeders that breed Whooper Swans in CA.
There was a Whooper Swan at White Lake that was rejected by the California Bird Records Committee. It flew north into Oregon. It was accepted by the Oregon Rare Birds Committee as being a presumably wild bird.
When the first Whooper Swans appeared in CA there did not seem to be enough pattern to add them to the list. But once these same birds started to come back year after year acting like migratory birds eventually the committee gave up, correct or not.

FIELD MARKS
Bigger than Tundra Swan, about the size of a Trumpeter Swan.
Thicker neck than Tundra Swan.
The yellow comes all the way down to the gape and extends underneath the nostril.
The yellow comes extensively over the top of the bill and it reaches all the way to the gape and extends forward in a point underneath the nostril. The furthest forward the yellow gets is along the gape. On Bewick's Swan the furthest forward it gets is above the nostril.

Trumpeter Swan

Generally considered to be an endangered species although it is not listed as such.

OCCURRENCE
North American species that breeds in the taiga, nests in lakes in forested areas south of the tundra. In the summertime breeding Trumpeter Swans usually get their heads and necks stained with rust from dissolved iron in the water. The nests are widely separated, they are not colonial birds. The nests are piles of debris on a tussock in a shallow lake.
The population centers in Alaska. The populations in Alaska and northwestern Canada are migratory, moving mostly to the northwest Pacific coast in British Columbia and parts of Washington State. They occur in large flocks along the immediate coast. In general, Tundra Swans are scarce along the immediate coast, being birds more of the interior. However, they do occur on the coasts of northern CA, Oregon and Washington and they are mixed in with Trumpeter Swans at those locations. In CA there used to be conventional wisdom that swans seen

along the immediate coast were more likely to be Trumpeter Swans than Tundra Swans. That is false. Swans seen anywhere in CA are far more likely to be Tundra Swans.
Why the birds declined so seriously had to do with market hunting. We don't really know the full extent of the birds' original breeding range in the US. Some of the populations in the US are migratory, others are not.
There is quite a bit of fragmentation in the breeding range of the Trumpeter Swan in the lower 48. Virtually all of the populations in the lower 48 are managed populations. They do captive breeding, put extra chicks in the nests. They have a captive breeding population in northwest Washington and they move those birds around a lot. Almost all of them have neck collars and some of them have been marked with various colored dies.
Places like Yellowstone National Park and the adjacent Red Rock National Wildlife Refuge are centers of abundance in the west as part of the original population.
In Oregon there is a managed population at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.
There are managed populations in places like Ohio, well outside the known former range.

There is an organization, the Trumpeter Swan Society, devoted to learning about and supporting and studying and seeing the Trumpeter Swan. They know from aerial surveys how many swans there are in NA, they know where they breed and they know where they winter. There are missing swans in the wintertime. The society took the position that probably 200 Trumpeter Swans winter among large flocks of Tundra Swans in CA and are unnoticed because of the difficulty of identification. The records committee had at that point accepted fewer than 20 records. For a year there were efforts to find these wintering Trumpeter Swans in CA without success. Basically the Trumpeter Swan Society gave up the idea, where those swans are we still don't know but here doesn't seem to be much evidence that they are in CA.

Because of the identification issues the committee does not like to accept Trumpeter Swans unless they are absolutely solid. Trumpeter Swan has one of the highest rejection rates of any bird claimed in CA.

FIELD MARKS

Probably NA's heaviest flying bird. Big, but in general male swans are bigger than females and there is some overlap between the smallest Trumpeter and the biggest Tundra Swans.
Black legs and feet which are very large to support a heavy bird.
No yellow in front of the eye.
The angle where the eye meets the bill appears to be quite wide, that is the eye appears to be a part of the angle, there is no narrowing in front of it, you don't see the eye as separate from the bill.
The bill is quite long, bigger and fuller than on Tundra Swan, the profile very Canvasback-like. Basically no angle between the top of the bill and the forehead.
The feathering at the side of the bill where it meets the cheek is quite straight and then cuts down instead of giving that puffy cheeked look of the Tundra Swan, this gives the whole bird a somewhat more dour expression.
The feathering on the forehead comes to a point.
Tend to have in average a somewhat longer neck. If drawn all the way back it is about as long as the body, most Tundra Swans have somewhat shorter necks. But Joe has seen pictures of apparent immature Trumpeter Swans that seem to have shorter necks.
The white is creamy colored, the Whistling Swan has a bluish cast, a very subtle difference that might not be visible on all birds.

IMMATURES

Bill and foot color different.

Bill has pink, but is always black at the base. (Tundra Swans have a pink base first which becomes black.)

Despite of the minor differences the immature Tundra and Trumpeter Swans are virtually indistinguishable. Trumpeter Swans are identifiable with confidence only when they are adults. But there is a difference in molt timing. Trumpeter Swans stay dark longer. In general Trumpeter Swan first year birds stay dark at least until March. It is unusual to have a dark immature Tundra Swan in March. If a bird has quite a bit of dark on it in late spring and into the summer it is much more likely to be a Trumpeter Swan.

There is only one example in all the literature of a white morph juvenile Trumpeter Swan. Change this in Sibley (corrections form Sibley's website): p.72, Trumpeter Swan, juvenile, change the dates to July-March. 1st summer, change the dates to April-Jul.

VOCALIZATIONS

Lower pitched honking, bugling like an old auto horn, really throaty.

Caused at least in part by the very long windpipe which is curled around inside the breast plate and echoes more than on Tundra Swan. Can always be identified by internal dissection.

Mute Swan

OCCURRENCE

Eurasian bird, introduced into the US. Extremely popular ornamental bird in captivity.

Became established in the New York City area when Joe was growing up.

Where Mute Swans have manged to establish themselves they tear out all of the vegetation and chase away all other water birds that are there. They eat the chicks of the coots and rails and basically cause mayhem. They are big and they are mean. This situation has continued as the birds have expanded on their own into the Great Lakes Region. In some areas population control measures have been enacted to try to reduce or eliminate Mute Swans.

Up until recently it was an occasional escapee in CA. But then in the last five years or so they got established at Schollenberger Park which is a sanctuary near Petaluma. On some of the reservoirs in eastern Contra Costa County you can see 30 or 50 Mute Swans, they seem to be getting a toehold in the SF Bay Region.

FIELD MARKS

The bill of the adult is orange red with a variable size black shield or knob at its base. Males have bigger knobs than females.

Its neck is usually held in a somewhat more curved and graceful posture compared to other swans and they have the habit of swimming with their wings partly out, so they have an elegant aspect to them. (White Pelicans often swim like this with their wings also.)

Tail relatively long, pointed. On swimming birds it often is held up in a 45% angle.

The silhouette of a swimming bird is different from other swans and identifies them at a distance.