Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture February 24th, 2010.
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

A **Ruff** has been seen at Berkeley Aquatic Park. It could be a very early migrant, but it has probably wintered locally. We usually think that migratory birds breed in one place, migrate and then spend the whole winter in one place. There is a lot of evidence that migratory birds in fact move around from one area to another. Hummingbirds are an example of that. It appears that a lot of them migrate to Mexico first and later wander up to the gulf states.
Berkeley Aquatic Park does not have much shorebird habitat. But the water levels change, depending on the tide level, it is right across from the bay, The bird could be looked for on those tidal flats on SF Bay. Look for it where there is fresh water, a creek mouth or something like that.

A birder from Oregon reported what he thought was a pair of displaying **Northern Goshawks** in Santa Clara County. The birds were described as calling and doing display flights with really slow deep wing beats. Cooper's Hawks have a similar display and they are doing it right now. For example in Los Angeles it happens all the time people report goshawks. Northern Goshawks as well as Cooper's Hawks do not normally call or do display flights except around the nest. There are no nesting sites anywhere near the Bay Area. It is a very, very rare migrant and winter visitor to the Bay Area. We have to be very cautious about this report.

On the **field trip to Lake Merritt** this weekend three **Common Mergansers** were seen, two with female aspect and one molting male, probably a first year bird. Common Mergansers tend to prefer more pristine, clear and clean water. They prefer to be on deep reservoirs such as are used for drinking water. They are also not very tolerant of salt. They are very rarely seen on SF Bay. Lake Merritt has a salt water component to it, it is connected to the Oakland Channel and is at least partially tidal. But it gets most of its water from freshwater runoff.
Joe has seen more Common Mergansers in unusual places this year than he has in the past, e.g. in Foster City. Common Mergansers have also been seen at the Las Gallinas sewer ponds.
Common Mergansers are increasing as a breeding bird around the Bay Area. They breed in the mountains and in the foothills along major rivers and reservoirs. They get really common as you get up into northwestern CA, all of the rivers up there have plenty of them. 30 years ago they did not nest in the Bay Area except for the Russian River where there still are plenty. They are now nesting regularly at Pescadero Creek. They have been seen in the summer with broods on Alameda Creek.
Red-breasted Mergansers are much more tolerant of salt water and also much more tolerant of dirty water.

Another bird new for the field trip cumulative list was the **Green Heron**. It tends to be a shy bird. In SF they occur at Lake Merced. They are much more common in the Central Valley.

Also new to the list was an Osprey. It was presumably a migrant, it was heading north.

Joe strongly encourages to use eBird. He submitted the field trip list there. It is also on his website as usual of course.

Sapsuckers

They drill little holes, called wells, in the trunks of trees. The sap leaks out and the sapsuckers come back and forage on the sap by lapping it up. They have a tongue which has a brush tip. They tend to be rather quiet and easily overlooked when foraging.

Williamson's Sapsucker

OCCURRENCE

Permanent resident in the Sierra Nevada. Also a summer visitor to the Rocky Mountains and Cascades.

A fairly migratory species over much of its range. Regular in some of the southern CA mountains in the wintertime. Tends to prefer dry forests and forages on Ponderosa Pine for the most part. Does occasionally migrate through the Bay Area and sometimes winters successfully.

The Williamson's Sapsucker does not drill neat little rows of wells. Instead the wells are drilled haphazardly on the tree trunks.

There is another woodpecker with an all black back at high elevations in the Sierra Nevada, the Black-backed Woodpecker. It is highly sought after by birders. The Williamson's Sapsucker outnumbers it probably by 5:1 or more.

FIELD MARKS

Highly sexually dimorphic, the females look absolutely nothing like the males.
When first collected by early explorers they were described as separate species.

Male

All black back.
White rump.
Large white wing patch.
No red on the top of the head.
Red spot on the middle of the throat, difficult to see. (White in juvenal male.)
Head black with long white moustacial stripes and white postocular stripes.
Yellow belly (absent on juvenile).

Female

Looks more like a flicker or a Gila Woodpecker than like a sapsucker.
Brown head.
Most of the body striped dark and white.
White rump.
No white wing patch.
Black patch across the chest. (Missing on juvenal female.)
Yellow belly (absent on juvenile).

Red-breasted, Yellow-bellied and Red-naped sapsuckers

These other three sapsuckers are very closely related to each other.
Historically they have been treated as one species under the name Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and as two species, the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (which included the Red-naped as a subspecies) and the Red-breasted Sapsucker.
The pattern on the back identifies them quite well.

Red-breasted Sapsucker

OCCURRENCE
A species of the far west found mostly in broadleaf trees.
Ranges from southeast Alaska down into CA.
Two subspecies. The one in CA is called *dagetti*. The nominate subspecies *ruber* breeds further north. It is not thought to be particularly migratory, but birds of this type have been recorded occasionally in CA, including southern CA.
Breeds in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, not at very high elevations. Breeds in the coastal mountains commonly south to Mendocino County, uncommonly south to Marin County and apparently regularly in the Pescadero area of San Mateo County, which is a relatively recent range extension.
Much more likely to be seen in the fall and in the winter. Frequently will settle in on a certain tree or group of trees.
The vast majority of sapsuckers you will see in the Bay Area are Red-breasted, and the vast majority of those are *dagetti*. *Ruber* is really rare here, they get probably overreported when people see a bird with a really bright red head. Check the back pattern!

FIELD MARKS
Red coloration on the head extends down onto the breast.
Ruber: entire head red without much of a white moustacial stripe.
A very black back with only a few spots that are yellowish rather than white, the upper back is solidly black.
Dagetti: look similar, but they have more white spangling on the back.
The spangling is whiter and extends all the way up to the back of the head.
The white moustacial can vary from being almost as little as in *ruber*, particularly in males, to quite long, particularly in females.
The back spangling in both subspecies forms two distinct stripes on either side of the back with dark in the middle between them.
The red on the head does not penetrate the feathers very far. There is a veil of red over a black and white pattern that is underneath. That black and white pattern is very similar if not identical to that of the Red-naped Sapsucker. Especially worn females in the summer can resemble probable hybrids.
White on the wings, frequently concealed behind loose body feathers. Shows up in the rather bouncy, quite agile flight.
Some yellow on the belly, usually hard to see.
In general females look like males but they tend to be paler on the head and tend to have more pale striping on the face.

Hybrids with Red-naped Sapsucker:

Although there have been attempts to categorize these hybrids, in most cases we do not know what the true parents were. Our judgment as to whether or not a particular odd looking sapsucker is within the range of normal for one species or the other or whether we need to invoke hybridization remains elusive.
Red-naped Sapsuckers in the eastern Cascades of Washington often have more red on the head than shown in Sibley (comment by Dennis Poulsen).
Ned Johnson made a hybrid index in his article in The Auk in 1985, link on Joe's class website.

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

OCCURRENCE

Common throughout the eastern US.
Very widespread, much more likely to be seen within its range than the Red-breasted is likely to bee seen within its range.
Birds primarily of deciduous forests.
Migrate during the time when the deciduous forest is leafless and when there is little sap flowing.
Almost completely migratory with the entire population moving out of the northern areas and into southern areas.
Occur regularly as a vagrant all the way to CA, there are several birds in the Bay Area right now, they seem to be annual here.

In parts of the eastern US sapsuckers will come into orchards, particularly apple orchards, and will infest those orchards with their wells. Because if this farmers have gotten permits to shoot sapsuckers and there are programs to eliminate sapsuckers from orchards in some eastern states. Joe read about a study of sapsucker infestations that found that the trees that were infested with sapsuckers had more and larger fruit then the other trees. The explanation was that bleeding the tree causes the tree to produce more sap. Joe he has not been able to find the reference.

FIELD MARKS

The most amount of white on the back of these three sapsuckers, with extensive spangling tending not to form two rows of spots, instead the entire back is equally spangled without a dark line down the middle.
Black-and white striping on the side of the face.
Red on the forehead and extending up onto the crown.
Red on the throat only in the males, in females white.
Throat surrounded by black.
Normally no red on the nape, but supposedly some rare individuals have it.

1st winter

Many of the Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers seen in CA are of this type.
The juvenal plumage lasts briefly and is molted away before migration in Red-breasted.
It lasts a little longer and is molted after migration in Red-naped.
It lasts through the entire winter and into the spring in Yellow-bellied.
Any sapsucker that is in juvenal-like plumage from October through March should be a Yellow-bellied. (It may actually be a formative plumage.)
Mostly grayish-brownish instead of black.
No obvious red on it at all. Extensive marbling on the back.

Red-naped Sapsucker

OCCURRENCE

Breeds in the Great Basin Ranges.
Winters primarily in Mexico.
Found on the east side of the Sierra Nevada. Have nested in Lee Vining Canyon. Have hybridized with Red-breasted on the east side of the Sierra Nevada.
It is the rarest of these three sapsuckers to occur in the Bay Area.
The Warner Mountains in extreme northeastern CA is one of the areas where they overlap with the Red-breasted. It is partly because of studies in the Warner Mountains that they are split. In those areas the Red-naped Sapsuckers tend to occur along the watercourses in aspens and other broad-leaved trees. The Red-breasted Sapsuckers are in the conifers, but in wetter areas, not dry Ponderosa Pine habitat, denser, wetter coniferous forest. Hybridization is limited.
Fairly common in the desert portions of southern CA in migration and in the winter. In Death Valley and the Imperial Valley it is the sapsucker that is most likely to be found in the wintertime. Likewise Arizona gets a lot of them in the wintertime.
In southern CA they are more common along the coast, they are still scarce there.

FIELD MARKS

In many ways intermediate between Yellow-bellied and Red-breasted.
Usually look very much like Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers but usually, apparently not always, have a red spot in addition on the nape. It looks less red than the red on the crown or on the throat, it is lighter, pinker. This red nape spot may sometime be absent!
On the males the entire throat is red, the same as on the male Yellow-bellied.
The difference is that the black frame which surrounds the red is broken on the Red-naped, the red bleeds through it. On Yellow-bellied the red is completely contained within a thick, well defined black frame.
The females should be distinguishable by their throat pattern. They have white on the chin and then red on the rest of the throat. The amount of white on the chin is highly variable though and can be all but invisible in the field. The black frame around this bicolored throat is more complete.
Perhaps more important is the back pattern which is almost the same as on the *dagetti* Red-breasted. It does not have nearly as much white spangling on the back as the Yellow-bellied.
Joe has some slides of males that have a little red spilling onto the chest even though they otherwise look like perfect Red-naped.
The red penetrates through the black throat frame.
They can show a red slash across the face.

We have not been able to detect any hybrids between Red-naped and Yellow-bellied, they are too similar.

We are assuming because the bird has a red nape that the other parent of a hybrid with Red-breasted is Red-naped. But there are areas in British Columbia where Red-breasted meets and hybridizes with Yellow-bellied.