Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture April 8th, 2010.
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

Kevin saw what he thought was a **Red Phalarope** at the Salton Sea in March. Any kind of phalarope there is unlikely. Red Phalarope is probably the most likely one in March because they do winter in southern CA. Red-necked and Wilson's normally winter south of the equator. During migration they are much more common there, but March is not a time when we usually find phalaropes at all. Red Phalarope is reasonable, Joe does not know how many March records there are for the Salton Sea.
Phalaropes tend to float really high. You not only see a pale gray back, you see a lot of white on the underparts.
Birds like Stilt Sandpipers frequently wade up to their bellies in the water and might have a phalarope-like appearance. Probably about the same size as a Red Phalarope but slimmer with a longer neck and droopy bill. No black patch on the side of the face.

On the Arboretum walk on Sunday Josiah Clark heard a low rattle. It was the adult male **Orchard Oriole**. It was buried in a dead tree in the succulent garden. Most of our records are of female aspect birds. They are extremely difficult to identify because of their close resemblance to female Hooded Orioles. Adult males are quite distinctive, they look like no other NA oriole with their chestnut coloration. When the bird is out of season such as in the winter or unusually early or late, Orchard is more likely than Hooded. At this point now the Hooded Orioles are back in the city.

There is also a male **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** in the Arboretum, in the John Muir Area across from the Children's garden in the dense vegetation just to the east of the pond. It has been seen there on and off since early December.

One of the ways they tell females from males when banding in the summer is looking for brood patches. the female is usually the one that has the brood patches. It is exceptional that breeding birds do not have brood patches. One exception is a booby. boobies don't have brood patches. They live in the tropical islands and warm their feet up in the sun and use their feet to incubate the eggs, they don't nestle them into their body feathers.

Class field trip to Coyote Point on March 28th
Greater White-fronted Goose: a flock of two Canada and five or six White-fronted geese were flying around the parking lot at the yacht club. They've been in the area for a month or more. Most people have reported seeing six birds. The views during the trip were distant and brief. White-fronted Goose is a common bird in the Central Valley but very scarce along the immediate coast and on the peninsula.
Black Oystercatcher new for the list in spring. We've had them there in the fall. Now there seems to be a pair left. There is probably not enough suitable habitat there for them to nest, but this is the nesting season for them, they are already starting to pair up and to nest. Maybe they are going to attempt to nest.
Dowitchers were seen very far away. Long-billed and Short-billed dowitchers are very tricky to identify in any plumage, better views and close study are necessary. They were probably Short-billed Dowitchers. Usually when there are Long-billed around Joe hears them calling, they have a very squeaky flight note. Short-billed Dowitchers tend to be silent. The dowitchers were in tidal habitat which is where Short-billeds like to be.

Wilson's Snipe was doing knee-bends, the whole body horizontal and moving up and down with the bill out straight. Joe not sure what the behavior means, it was not in any particular context. No information on Cornell's. Bent's life histories mentions it shortly without explanation.
There is an outdoor aviary that is attached to the museum that has a **Yellow-billed Magpie**. On this trip there was a magpie outside the aviary. The Yellow-billed Magpie is not migratory at all, records away from known localities are unusual. At Coyote Point Ron Thorn had reported a Yellow-billed Magpie ten days before the class field trip. He asked the museum if they were missing their Yellow-billed Magpie and they said they were not. Yesterday Ron Thorn saw it again. On other days people could not find it.
In SF a pair has attempted to nest for several years at India Basin. Some people question whether those are genuine wild birds.
Years back a pair of Yellow-billed Magpies nested at one of the cemeteries in Colma.
It is an endemic bird for CA. The only bird seen in CA that has never been recorded in any other state. An interior bird that likes oaks. Feeds on acorns a lot. But they also are magpies so they are generalists. Found in the valleys and foothills mostly in northern CA up to Tehama County and south down into Santa Barbara County in the interior. Separated from the Black-billed Magpie by the Sierra Nevada. Black-billed Magpie does occur in the Great Basin region. they don't normally come into contact with each other.
They are highly social birds. This individual was probably attracted to the one that was in the cage. In places like Sunol Regional park or in the Livermore Valley sometimes you can find colonies. Often in sycamore trees they build these large bulky domed-over nests of twigs that look like squirrel nests.
They were decimated by West Nile disease and the numbers collapsed.

August is a good time for any kind of grouse. They have young out of their nests and they are much more active. When they are just starting to nest they are secretive and they don't move much. Kevin saw **Greater Sage Grouse** near Bodie in August. A group had **White-tailed Ptarmigan** with young in the mountains in the area the same day.

Ptarmigan

Small to medium sized grouse found mostly of the high arctic.
Unlike most grouse these are especially well adapted for snowpack. They have snow shoes in the form of feathering all the way down to their toes and lateral from their toes so that they are able to walk around in the snow with ease. They also have an all white plumage in the wintertime. They go through a series of complex plumage changes to get into a brown or reddish brown plumage in the summertime. When the environment has patches of snow and rocks the ptarmigan will have a patchy brown and white plumage that will make them look like a rock with some snow on it. In the winter they look like snow, in the summer they look like a rock.
They have very short legs. Often sit in one spot for long periods of time and rely on their cryptic coloration. Main predators are Gyrfalcons. Also foxes and in same areas humans.

Rock and Willow ptarmigan are birds of wholearctic distribution. The White-tailed Ptarmigan is endemic to NA.

It is not easy to tell the different species apart.

All three species have a presupplemental molt. Peter Pyle did a study that was published in 2007, link on Joe's class website.
Pyle was able to show that ptarmigan indeed molt some of their body feathers three times in a molt cycle and thus do have a presupplemental molt as had been suspected before.
Pyle thinks that females have their prealternate molt in April and May and their presupplemental molt when they molt fewer body feathers in July. Males have their presupplemental molt which molts very few feathers in April and into May and their prealternate molt including almost all the body feathers from late May and into July. Both have their prebasic molt in the fall starting with the wing molt in the summer.
A sex difference in molt timing is not unique to ptarmigan. In mallards and other ducks for example females have their prealternate molt in the spring before nesting and males have their prealternate molt in the early summer, giving them their drab eclipse plumage.

White-tailed Ptarmigan

OCCURRENCE
Endemic to NA. Restricted to the far west where it occurs mostly on very high mountains. It can be seen further south than any other kind of ptarmigan. It has isolated populations, probably left over from the glaciers, in the Rocky Mountains.
There are also introduced populations. They are introduced and established in the Sierra Nevada, pretty much throughout the entire high Sierran range. A couple of dozen birds were acquired by the Colorado Department of Game and were traded to the California Department of Fish and Game for 200 White-winged Pheasants.
The ptarmigan were released from aircraft at Monitor Pass. They were successful. They became a subject of scientific research. The Carnegie Institute of Washington has a research station, the Hall Natural Area, near Tioga Pass. The ptarmigan showed up there and some graduate students started to study them. To add them to the state list documentation was needed of 15 consecutive years of successful breeding. Also information that the birds had established themselves in all or nearly all suitable habitat was needed. Those studies provided this information.
They are pretty wide spread in high elevations above tree line in the Sierra Nevada. There was a certain amount of controversy about the introduction. The Ptarmigan feed primarily on the Snow Willow. It grows above tree line, only about half an inch high, it is the world's smallest tree. The Snow Willow is found nowhere else in CA except above tree line in these areas. There was concern about the impact of the ptarmigan on the Snow Willow. In particular there was no reason for introducing the ptarmigan into that sensitive and fragile ecosystem. The whole purpose was to introduce a huntable species into an area where there were no huntable species of bird before.
Access to the Hall Natural Area is from the road that goes to Saddleback Lake. You need a key and four wheel drive vehicle to get into that site. A dirt road just on the east side of Tioga Pass runs out to Saddleback Lake. There is a water taxi that you can take from the lodge there and go to the other side. If you hike up the hill and go up to the bridges on the other side there you can see ptarmigan. Also at some other lakes on the east side of Tioga Pass and some snowfields behind them. There are Rosy Finches up there, too. For people with excellent lungs who are out for an adventure.
Joe saw them on a chicken run in Colorado in April. The ones they saw then were patchy. Their molt timing seems to depend on latitude and local climate.
They like to hide in depressions in the snow behind little shrubs.

Tend to occur at higher elevations mostly in fairly barren, rocky areas.
Mostly you identify them on their range and on their habitat.

Tend to not overlap the Rock or the Willow Ptarmigan.
To see the White-tailed Ptarmigan you have to climb up to the highest peaks, a very alpine bird.
The Rock Ptarmigan is somewhat lower down and the Willow lower still.

FIELD MARKS
The smallest of the ptarmigan.
Extremely thick feathering. The bird looks like a ball with a tiny little head and very short, heavily feathered legs and feet.
Tail white. (Other ptarmigan black year round.) Long tail coverts, when the wings are folded you often can't see the tail.
Red comb over the eye (all ptarmigan).
Short hooked bill.
Dark feathers drab gray mixed with black and brown very similar to rocks with lichens on them.
There is some white in the face but no black lore stripe.
Wings stay white all year round on all three species, shows up even on the folded wing assuming that the wing coverts are showing.

Rock Ptarmigan

OCCURRENCE
Much larger range than White-tailed but does not occur in the Rocky Mountains or in the Sierra Nevada. Not in the lower 48. Alaska and Canada.
Alaska best place to see them.
At higher elevations than Willow, more arid barren mountain tops.
The only ptarmigan found on the outer Aleutian islands (west of Unimak Island), where they can occupy more vegetated areas than they do on the mainland.

FIELD MARKS
Slightly larger than White-tailed.
Males can be distinguished from Willow because they are quite dark in color, quite blackish.
The male has a black line between the eye and the bill in all plumages. Females don't.
Considerable caution in distinguishing females from Willow is recommended.
Bill varies geographically. Some populations on the Aleutian islands that are larger and have bigger bills. In general where Rock and Willow occur in reasonable proximity the thing to look for is the bill size. More dainty, thinner looking bill, thicker at the base in Rock. Much thinner than it is long.
Overall plumage nondescript, somewhat similar to White-tailed.
Not that red. White on the face, black lore stripe in males contrasts even in summer.
Darker bird with darker cinnamon color on the underparts.

Sibley shows a "courtship plumage" with a buffy tinge. The males retain their white plumage for a while after the snow melts and become very conspicuous. Apparently this is an advantage in courting. As soon as the females started laying eggs the males soil themselves to become less conspicuous, which is what Sibley shows. Research article about this here: http://beheco.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/12/4/429.pdf

Willow Ptarmigan

OCCURRENCE
Tend to occur in wet areas where there are willows, along stream courses.
Different habitat from Rock, tend not to overlap too much, but Joe has run into both species in Nome. Rock was more common up there but in vegetated areas where it was wet there were Willow also.
They sometimes do wander downslope and show up in out of the way places in the wintertime.

FIELD MARKS
Larger.
Bill also small but much thicker at the base, at least as thick as it is long.
Strongly arched culmen.
Joe not sure if the females have bills that are quite as massive. They average a little bit smaller and may have somewhat smaller bills.
Redder in color.
No black lore stripe.
Males very reddish colored, much redder than the other 2 species.
Head and breast all dark very typical.
Quite a bit paler than Rock, especially on the back.

Red Grouse

The subspecies of Willow Ptarmigan that occurs on the British Isles.
Lives in an area where it is warmer, it never turns white. Never any white in the wings.