

BIRD EXPLORER

Time for ocean birds

BY PETER J. THIEMANN



Peter J. Thiemann

Living in the Applegate Valley means we have opportunities for quick escapes to the coast on warm late-summer days. It is only two hours to Crescent City beaches where there is rich ocean bird life. At the offshore St. George Reef, there is a large colony of Common Murres, the “penguin” of the northern hemisphere. Thousands of these ocean birds rear their young there, and constant coming and going can be observed. Colorful Black Oystercatchers are seen on intertidal rocks, often in flocks of three to six.

By early September large flocks of shorebirds are migrating down the coast and stopping on our beaches to refuel. Most common is

the Western Sandpiper, seen chasing incoming waves looking for food. Point St. George is a great place to visit at low tide, and, with the aid of binoculars, other ocean shorebirds reveal themselves. There are Semipalmated Plovers, a smaller cousin of the familiar Killdeer. Larger Black-bellied Plovers are coming back from their arctic breeding grounds. With luck you may see a few Snowy Plovers, an endangered species that nests in sand dunes on our Pacific coast.

Then there are the very showy Whimbrels, a large shorebird not to be confused with the Large-billed Curlew, that also can be seen in migration.

Sanderlings are of the sandpiper family, but somewhat larger than the

more common Western Sandpiper and show much white. They are seen chasing ocean waves but also rest in small flocks on intertidal rocks. Black Turnstones are common all year on our ocean beaches, although they do not nest here. The smallest sandpiper of the shorebird group that we call “peeps” is the Least Sandpiper, often overlooked because of its small size and its habit to forage in washed-up kelp after high tide.

After your beach visit, do not forget to stop at Crescent City Harbor, both near the old lighthouse and in the boat basin. Rebuilt after the large tsunami that resulted from the Japanese earthquake, the harbor is a great place to see colorful Surf Scoters, Pigeon

Guillemots and Common Murres up close. By July of this year I had already seen a number of Common and Pacific Loons in winter plumage. A real treat is to see the Elegant Tern, a species that nests on only four small islands in the Gulf of California and comes up the coast in late summer and fall. We are seeing record numbers of ocean birds coming up this year due to a strengthening El Niño. Cooler ocean water means more seafood, which is what ocean birds and mammals look for.

If anyone is interested in a guided ocean-bird trip, please contact me.

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Common Murre



Black Oystercatchers



Western Sandpipers



Whimbrels

All photos courtesy of Peter J. Thiemann, Flickr photo stream.



GATER FUNDRAISER
Much fun, amazing music, gourmet food, and fine wine were highlights of the Applegater's Annual Summer Soirée. Thank you to everyone who joined us for this special event at Red Lily. We are gratified by your support.





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