

## **Birding Arcata Marsh**

By John F. Garrett

From September 5-17, 2005, my family and I went on a camping trip in Northern California. First we went to Samuel P. Taylor Park, which is right next to the justly famous Point Reyes. After that, we went to Humboldt Redwoods State Park, and finally to Tuolumne Meadows in Yosemite National Park. It was on September 11, during our stay in the redwoods that we went to Arcata Marsh.

Arcata Marsh is an amazing birding hotspot. It wasn't always like that though. Before the 1970's it was an empty and abandoned landfill, and it wasn't until recently that they started reclaiming it as a freshwater marsh. The marsh serves as a waste treatment plant right on Arcata Bay. The wastewater travels through a "six marsh system" and then, once clean, is released into the bay. The waste makes the water nitrogen-rich, which helps the plants grow. All the nutrients in the water also help attract over 200 species of birds, many migrating through or wintering there.

It is a great place for shorebirds and waterfowl. During Christmas Bird counts, it can have the most Marbled Godwits in the nation. With a wide variety of habitats, including fields, marshes, lakes, trees, mudflats and more, it attracts all sorts of rare birds from the Lesser Sand-plover (formerly the Mongolian Plover) to vagrant eastern warblers.

On the way to the Arcata Marsh Interpretive Center we walked by the marshes, getting great views of egrets and herons. In the center, we looked at the displays and asked the docent what we should see at the marsh. As we left the center we saw a Belted Kingfisher, and a short walk brought us to a small mudflat that had some shorebirds, which turned out to be Marbled Godwits, Willets, and American Avocets. Walking further down the path, we got much closer to these birds and were able to get a better look at them. After passing the curiously named "Stanley Harris' No Name Pond", we reached Franklin Klopp Lake. An island on the lake had some large unidentified shorebirds. To our right was the mudflat where the Willets, Godwits, and Avocets were. Upon closer

inspection, we saw that one of the godwits was larger and gray. Unfortunately they were too far away to see with binoculars, and it was then that we realized that we had left the scope in the car.

Returning with the scope, we looked at the large shorebirds on the island, which turned out to be Greater Yellowlegs. Then we turned around and looked for the unidentified godwit, but by then, much to my disappointment, it had left. After hopelessly scanning for several minutes, during which my mom got a rare glimpse of a Virginia Rail, we continued on. We quickly reached a huge mudflat with thousands of shorebirds scattered all over it. I scanned them; most of them turned out to be Marbled Godwits, but quite a few were Willets, and I also found several Whimbrels and Long-billed Curlews and a flock of Sanderlings.

Further down the path, we stopped to scan the mudflats again. Way out in the distance, I glimpsed a plover of the genus *Pluvialis*. After inspecting it for a while we realized that there were actually three of them and that we probably needed my father to help identify them. My dad, although not exactly a serious birder, is very good at telling similar species apart, as it was in this case.

After much study and debate, we eventually identified them as Pacific Golden-Plovers by noting that they were a bright golden color, had bold white supercilia, smallish bills, pale off-white bellies, and relatively short primaries. Also Golden-Plovers are far more likely in California in the fall than American Golden-Plovers, although neither is particularly common. I realized that Pacific Golden-Plovers were lifebirds for us, and we celebrated as we continued along the path, listening to the cackling calls of Soras and Virginia Rails.

Soon after, we reached some small ponds that had some waterfowl on them. Although they all appeared to be Mallards at first, when we looked through the scope we saw many Cinnamon Teal, many American Wigeon, and a single female Green-winged Teal. Except for the Cinnamon Teal, which is a resident at the marsh, the presence of these wintering waterfowl in September surprised us.

The path took us away from the mudflats and so we shifted our attention to the bushes and trees. We scanned them for any warblers but were instead rewarded with a great view of what we assumed was a juvenile Cooper's Hawk,

which soared directly in front of our faces, just above eye-level. But then I noticed how speckled it was on the underside, even on the tail, which I didn't remember Cooper's Hawks having. It landed in a tree with its back towards us, and I thought how strangely pale and speckled it was, and how uneven the black and gray tail bands were.

"Funny," I thought to myself, noticing how large it was, "I always thought that Cooper's Hawks were a bit smaller than that." It was then that I finally realized, just as it flew off, what it was. My eyes grew wide as I thought, "Could it possibly be a . . ." I saw that my mom was holding the field guide and I asked if I could see it. She gave it to me and I flipped it open to the page that showed the accipiters.

"Hey mom," I asked, "Do you think that it could possibly have been a Northern Goshawk?"

After I showed her the page and she said, "You know, I think you might be right."

We convinced ourselves very quickly that it was a Goshawk, and we both were very excited. It was our second lifebird of the day. When I had settled down we continued on the path through the marshes. The chittering Virginia Rail and the Sora calls became much louder and closer, and some of them sounded so close that it seemed we could literally have bent down and touched them. But, try as we might, we couldn't see them.

We soon got back to the Interpretive Center and while my mom looked around, I told the lady at the desk what we had seen: three Pacific Golden-Plovers, a juvenile Northern Goshawk, a Virginia Rail, a Green-winged Teal several American Wigeons.

"Wow!" she said. "I guess you guys sure had a good day."

"We sure did," I replied. "We sure did."