

# Tough Love:

## I. Charadriiformes

Each of us has heard the lament: *Shorebirds all look the same*. Many of us have joined in the refrain: *I don't do gulls*. Jaegers?—*No thanks, they're too hard*. Alcids?—*In a boat? In the winter? Are you crazy?*

There are valid ABA-area records for 167 species of shorebirds, jaegers, gulls, terns, skimmers, and alcids in the diverse order Charadriiformes. In numerous charadriiform taxa, the bulk of the species are to be found in North America. In some instances, the taxon's center of present-day diversity or presumed point of historical origin is right here in the ABA Area. Other speciose taxa, in contrast, are merely peripheral here—hummingbirds and kingfishers, flycatchers and tanagers, and others. Any way you slice it, the Charadriiformes are a decidedly American order.

They are as American as parking lots and landfills, as characteristic as fallow pastures and flooded cornfields. They are at home among our great river systems, along our thousands of miles of coastline. They are the stalwarts of our Great Plains and Great Basin, of the high arctic and the high seas.

And they are tough. Brown blobs on mudflats. Black-and-white blurs ahead of the bow. A silvery apparition in the heat shimmers. A blizzard of tertial crescents and primary mirrors swirling about a garbage dump. But they are eminently worthy of study—widespread and abundant, yet increasingly of management and conservation concern; challenging to be sure, and frustrating on occasion; and fascinating.

Without further ado, here are ten reasons to get acquainted—or reacquainted—with the order Charadriiformes.



They make their homes on ball fields and in barnyards. Golf courses and fairgrounds are choice real estate. Even construction sites and tenement flat-

tops in large cities are acceptable. Yet the Killdeer is still evocative of wilderness, still possessed of wildness. The ID is usually instantaneous, but the serious birder chooses to tarry all afternoon with, or to spend the whole semester with, or to devote a research career to this behaviorally complex species—agonistic, ever-vigilant, and pathologically devoted to the care of its precocial young. And the serious birder takes simple pleasure from hearing the upslurred utterance of a passing Killdeer—primal and urgent, fleeting, a disembodied voice borne on the night wind.

Limited in range and rarely seen from shore, the Xantus's Murrelet is unknown to the layman and has received scant attention even from birders and biologists. Many of us rate this exotic-sounding and unfamiliar species as little more than a name in a field guide or a checkmark on a bird list. Hence, the first order of business for the jaded visitor to southern California: to *really* get to know this warm-water species, to bone up on the differences between the *scrippsi* and nominate races, to make note of foraging behavior, flight patterns, and calls at sea. To understand, to care.

Another black-and-white bird of the ocean with a hard-to-pronounce name? Not to the New Englanders who venture out in Nor'easters in hopes of a close encounter with the Black Guillemot—sometimes surprisingly close to the beach or promontory, often confiding and cooperative, always a delight. It is a bird of salt spray and white caps, of stinging sleet, of one last scan, and then fond thoughts of a cup of clam chowder back at Joey's Diner. The Black Guillemot is defined not by feather tracts nor even by jizz, but rather by its mystique, by its *je ne sais quoi*.

*Skua!* It's the declaration that brings the boat back to life, late in the afternoon during the long haul back to Manasquan or Barnegat Light. Even the sleeping and the seasick get swept up in the frenzy. In the warmer months, the ID is certain: South Polar Skua. Or is it? How many species

really visit the western Atlantic? Indeed, how many species of skuas are there, period? And how do you tell them apart? In confronting skua identification, we are up against the bounds of knowledge, we are pushing past the limits of conjecture. Which doesn't in any way diminish the thrill of the moment.

The sighting of an adult female **Wilson's Phalarope** in breeding plumage rarely results in hand-wringing about identification. But what of the other aspects of the sighting? What, exactly, is the bird *doing* in mid-June? Is it migrating? North or south? Has it bred? Locally? With how many mates? And what forces have led to the evolution of reverse sexual dimorphism in this and other phalaropes? Now, these are the sorts of matters that typically occasion hand-wringing—and a fair bit of hand-waving. But the patient student of bird biology can make headway against these perplexing and worthwhile questions.

Let us be clear about something: It is acceptable *not* to analyze every sighting, not to sweat every identification, not to ponder every question. Sometimes it is acceptable just to sit back and soak it all in. It is acceptable—indeed wholly appropriate—just to plunk yourself down at the edge of a dike and simply watch the **Black Skimmers** out in the channel beyond. To gawk at their striking colors and patterns. To be mesmerized by their precise movements. To follow their thin tracings across the water's calm surface. Simply to marvel at them.

Anybody who claims even passing familiarity with the Charadriiformes is mindful of the management and conservation challenges facing the order. Only a dollop of awareness is required, for instance, to discern that times are tough for the **Least Tern**. The species is hardwired to breed in scattered small colonies on sandy coastal beaches and on sandbars along large rivers. And despite its proprietary demeanor and spunky disposition, this tiny tern is no match for the millions of *Homines sapientes* who would dredge and develop the coastal and riverine properties that *Sterna antillarum* is dependent upon. Reversing population declines in the Least Tern is a tall order—but it is a goal that can be attained, one beach closure, one court order, one conservationist at a time. In other words: Think globally, Act locally.

What could be more enchanting, more diverting, than

the sight of a flock of **Sanderlings** chasing the surf? Whether or not you're a birder, the Sanderling is the emblem of summer vacations and wintertime surf fishing, of sunset cookouts and early-morning runs along the beach. It is easy to let go of one's cares, in the company of Sanderlings. But it is important not to lose track of the big picture. Apparent population losses in this cosmopolitan species may be due to factors as diverse as temperature increases on the breeding grounds, over-harvesting of horseshoe crabs at migratory stopover points, and residential and commercial development of the wintering grounds. Thus, the ironic calling of the modern bird lover: hard choices and hard work in the service of life's simple gifts; global decisions with local consequences.

It is one of the major unifying themes of the Charadriiformes. For some birders, it's just low-level awareness, a vague notion lurking somewhere near the outer rim of consciousness. For others, it is *the* front-and-center reason to linger at the landfill, to scope the flats one more time. That's because many—perhaps most—charadriiform species are prone to vagrancy. In plain English: Every gull, any alcid, each shorebird has the potential to be heart-stoppingly rare. Even the most prosaic of chores—say, conducting a survey of wintering geese—may yield an unimaginable rarity, as when

C. D. MacInnes and E. B. Chamberlain stumbled upon North America's first and only **Double-striped Thick-Knee**, on 5 December 1961, in Kleberg County, Texas.

Finding a rarity, like winning the lottery, is exhilarating. But fixating on rarities, like compulsive gambling, is dangerous. It can lead us into temptation. It causes us to be overzealous, to make mistakes. Worse, obsessing about rarities is vulgar and unidimensional. It is *so* 1990s. The enlightened birder, instead, seeks inspiration and finds insight in the ordinary, for example, in a flock of hopelessly mongrelized **Olympic Gulls** in the backwaters of Puget Sound. In the course of her studies, the enlightened birder might discover a rarity. And long after the last twitcher has packed it in, she is still out there, still finding, still discovering, still learning.

— Ted Floyd



Wilson's Phalaropes. Kern County, California; May 2004. © Bob Steele.