

## LATE SPRING OBSERVATIONS ON BIRDS OF SOUTH FARALLON ISLAND, CALIFORNIA

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The Farallon Islands, situated about 27 miles west of San Francisco, have long attracted the attention of ornithologists because of their enormous breeding colonies of sea birds and the rather frequent occurrence there of land birds otherwise rare to California (see Cooper, 1868; Townsend, 1885; Bryant, 1888; and Dawson, 1911*b*). Because of the fact that for over 25 years there has been no published report on the late spring bird life of the Farallones, the writer arranged for a visit to South Island from June 10 to 17, 1958.

I wish to thank the following persons from San Francisco State College for permission to use here certain of their field observations: Helen Deman, Richard Grill, Kenneth Hindes, Carl Johnson, Morton Keston, and Norman McLean. Transportation and living accommodations for our group were provided through the courtesy of the 12th Coast Guard District.

The following unusual species were collected (specimens deposited in the Vertebrate Museum, San Francisco State College):

*Oporornis agilis*. Connecticut Warbler. An adult male showing a rather heavy deposit of subcutaneous fat and a moderately enlarged testis,  $4.5 \times 2.5$  mm., was taken on June 16. I am unaware of any previous record of this species for California.

*Seiurus aurocapillus aurocapillus*. Ovenbird. An adult male with an enlarged testis,  $7.0 \times 4.5$  mm., was collected on June 17. There is one previous record of this species from the Farallon Islands (Dawson, 1911*a*) in addition to four other records from southern California (see Grinnell and Miller, 1944:408-409; and Jaeger, 1947:244).

*Dendroica pensylvanica*. Chestnut-sided Warbler. An adult female, as determined by plumage, was taken on June 17. Previous records of this species for California include an immature male from Mendocino County, September 21 (Marsden, 1909:64); an immature of unknown sex from Marin County, September 24 (Kinsey, 1947); and a female of unknown age from Imperial County, October 5 (Cardiff and Cardiff, 1953:217).

*Vireo olivaceus*. Red-eyed Vireo. An adult female, containing several ova measuring 1.0 mm. in diameter, was taken on June 16. There are but two previous records of this species for California, both in October (see Grinnell and Miller, 1944:388).

The following passeriform birds are reported on the basis of field observations only: 1 Lesser Goldfinch (*Spinus psaltria*), June 11; 5 House Finches (*Carpodacus mexicanus*), June 11; 1 Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*), June 16; 1 female House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) feeding young, June 15; 1 female American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*), June 16; 1 male Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*), June 13; 1 Swainson Thrush (*Hylocichla ustulata*), June 17; numerous Rock Wrens (*Salpinctes obsoletus*), including two discovered roosting together in a shallow concavity at the end of a wooden beam supporting a water tank, on June 13; 1 Red-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta canadensis*), June 15; 1 Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Nuttallornis borealis*), June 16; and 1 Western Flycatcher (*Empidonax difficilis*), June 17.

Except for the Rock Wren, House Sparrow, and House Finch, which are known to breed on the island, all species just mentioned may be considered to be vagrants or transients. So far as we could determine, each species was represented by but one individual, and most of them made their appearance during the last three days of our visit (June 15 to 17) when there was almost continuous fog about the island and the adjacent mainland, with very little wind. The birds were obviously confused as they first appeared in the vicinity of two Monterey cypresses which were the only trees

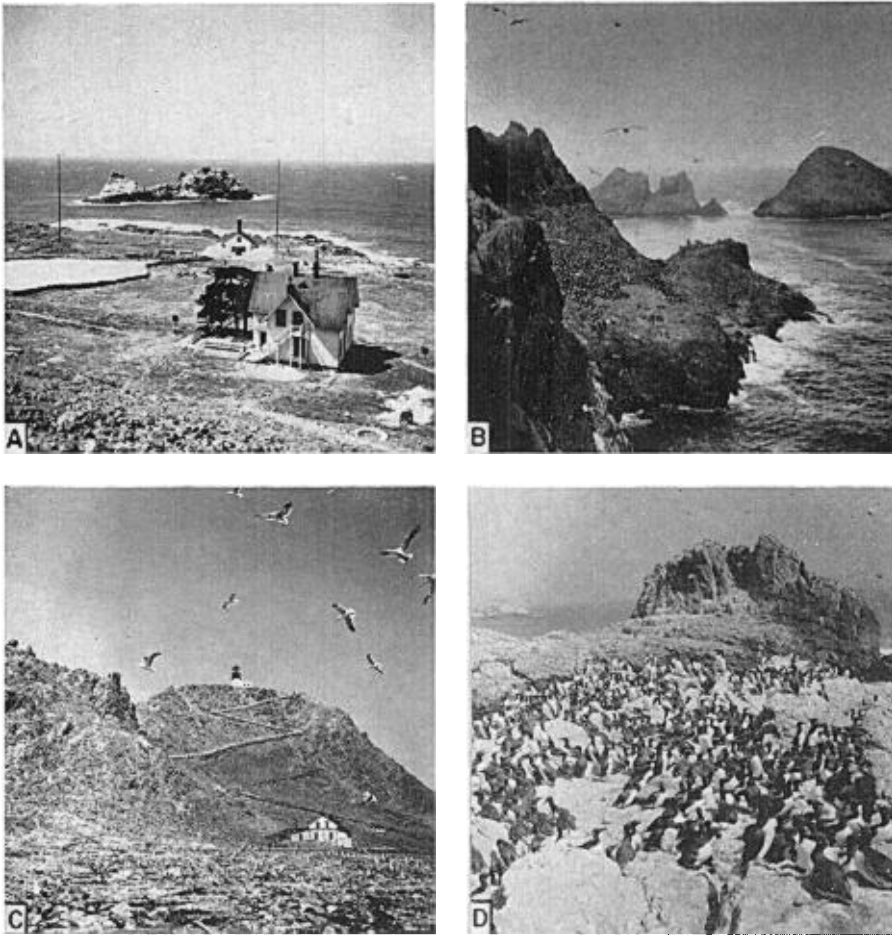


Fig. 1. Views of South Farallon Island, June, 1958.

A. Coast Guard installations, southeast end. Stone wall around rain apron is the favorite nesting site of petrels. Vagrant land birds were noted chiefly in the two Monterey cypress trees beside the house. Seal rocks are in the background.

B. Main colony of Brandt Cormorants on north terrace between Shubrick Point and Tower Point. Sugar-loaf Island is at the far right.

C. Nesting grounds of the Western Gull are to the west of the old Keeper's House. Light house peak is in the background.

D. Small portion of a breeding colony of Common Murres at West End. To the right is Indian Head.

on the island (fig. 1a). For example, the Ovenbird was first seen on the ground beneath the cypress trees, from which point it flew eastward about 200 yards; then suddenly it made a complete turnabout returning to within 100 yards of the trees, finally landing on a rocky slope barren of vegetation. About 15 minutes later the same individual flew back to the trees and was collected for us by Coast Guard personnel. Likewise the Yellowthroat flew back and forth between the ground and the trees during the very brief period that it was observed before disappearing in the fog. It was a most peculiar sight to see such species as the House Finch, House Sparrow, Redstart, Yellowthroat, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Ovenbird, Swainson Thrush, and Western Flycatcher, many

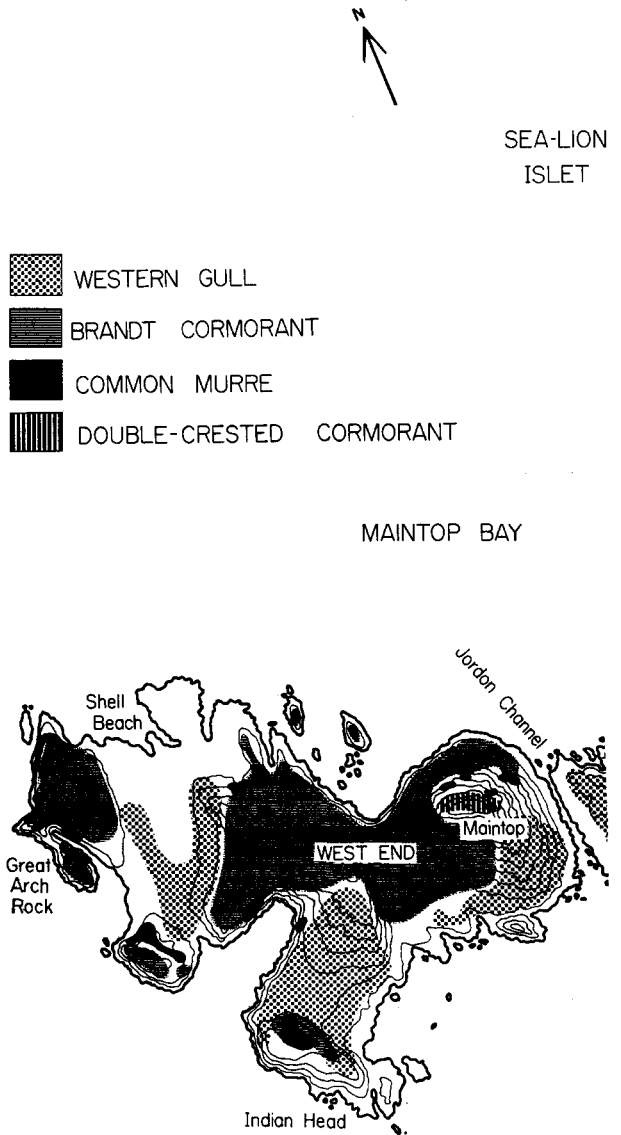


Fig. 2. Map of South Farallon Island and adjacent rocks showing the distribution of the principal breeding colonies of four species of sea birds, June 10 to 17, 1958. Scale, 1 inch to approximately 175 yards. Sea-lion Islet is first to the right of the printed name.

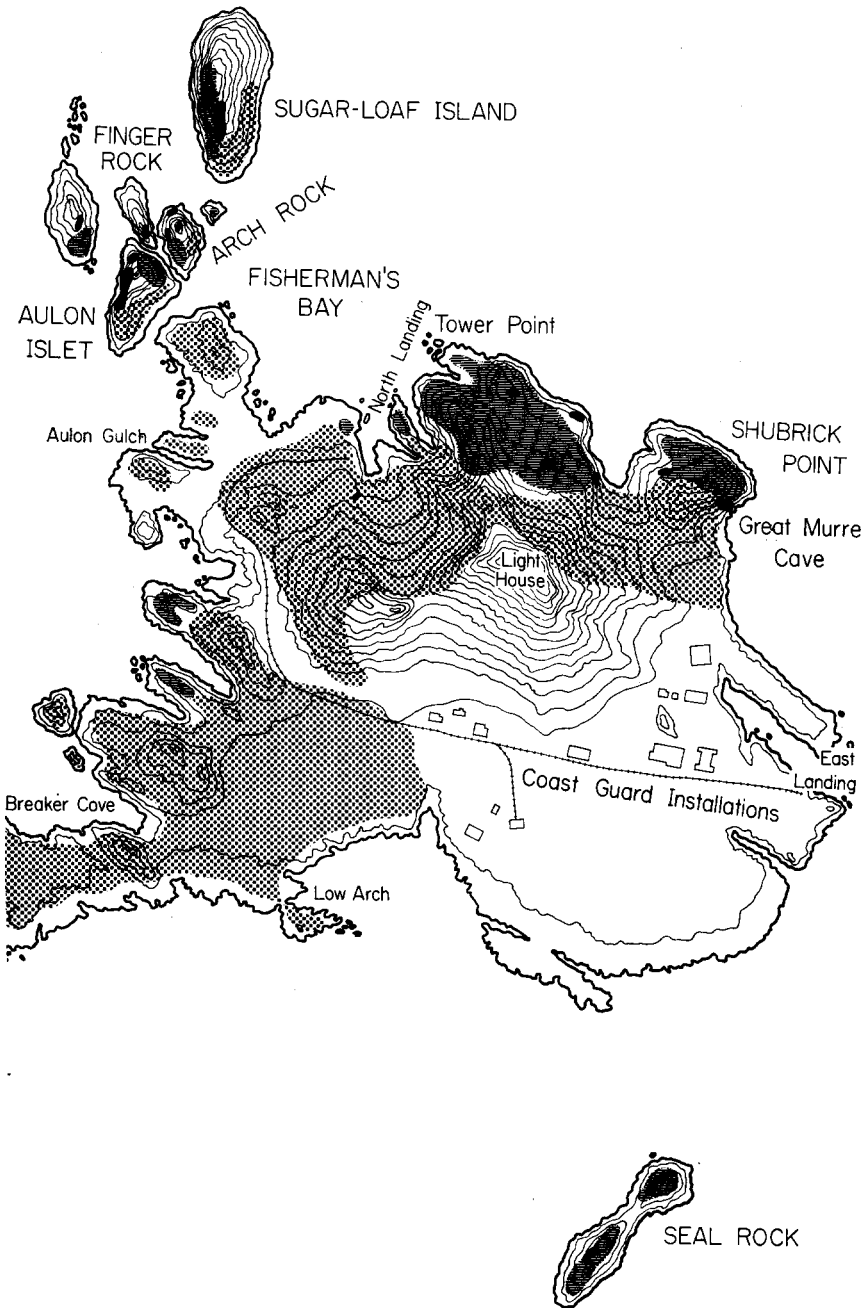


Fig. 2 continued. See opposite page.

with rather dissimilar ecologic requirements, moving about in the same tree at the same time on the morning of June 17.

The feathered remains of a Burrowing Owl (*Speotyto cunicularia*) and a Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*) were found on the south side of the island some distance from shore. There is only one previous record of the Glaucous Gull from the Farallon Islands (Cooper, 1868:9).

As a basis for future studies, a few estimates of the size of the sea-bird populations were made and the locations of the principal breeding colonies were plotted on a large-scale map of the island (fig. 2).

*Oceanodroma leucorhoa beali*. Leach Petrel. Previous reports of this petrel on the Farallones were made by Loomis (1896:359) and Dawson (1911b:176), both of whom found breeding adults in late spring and early summer. On June 15, 1958, we captured three individuals as they were about to enter crevices in the rock walls which enclose the large rain apron on the south side of the island (fig. 1a). A single bird was banded and released and two were saved as study skins.

*Oceanodroma homochroa*. Ashy Petrel. Thousands of petrels were seen or heard about the island after dark. On clear evenings the first birds would make their appearance from over the ocean about 40 minutes after sunset. The number of birds in flight seemed to reach a peak around midnight on June 14. Many petrels were captured by hand as they landed on the ground. Nests were situated in the stone walls, in rock piles, under boards, and beneath barracks. There were few areas visited after dark where petrels were not detected. Their presence was indicated by faint gurgling sounds or by strong musky odors. Sixteen Ashy Petrels were banded on June 14 and 15. A bird captured on June 15 was prepared as a study skin. Fresh eggs were noted in three nests on June 14, and a very young nestling was discovered on June 17.

*Pelecanus occidentalis*. Brown Pelican. From an observation point on Arch Rock about 75 pelicans were visible atop Sugar-loaf Island (fig. 2). Because of the angle of observation and the distance involved, it was not possible to determine with absolute certainty if the birds were nesting; but a few shallow mounds scattered about the slopes between the sitting birds were suggestive of nests. If, in fact, Brown Pelicans do breed on the Farallones, it would constitute the northernmost breeding station in California (see Grinnell and Miller, 1944:51). There is one previous report of this species on the Farallones (Bryant, 1888:41). A left humerus, matching that of a Brown Pelican, was found by our group on South Island.

*Phalacrocorax auritus*. Double-crested Cormorant. This cormorant, the largest of the three species breeding on the island, was found only on the ridge of Maintop at West End where over 50 attended nests were counted. It is unknown if eggs or young were present since a closer approach, it was feared, might have frightened the birds from their nests, exposing their contents to the predatory Western Gulls. In 1911, between May 20 and June 3, Dawson (1911b:177) counted about 35 pairs (15 nests) on Maintop.

*Phalacrocorax penicillatus*. Brandt Cormorant. This was the commonest and most widely distributed cormorant on South Farallon Island. The greatest concentration of breeding birds was situated on the gently sloping sea terrace between Tower Point and the lighthouse where approximately 1000 nests were counted (fig. 1b). Eggs were present in most of these nests. Nesting colonies were generally situated on north-facing slopes and thus were exposed to the full sweep of the prevailing northwest winds. Such locations are probably preferred by these large black birds because they are cooler and permit easier takeoffs and landings. The first young, only a day or two old, was noted on June 15. Nests were composed of dried Farallon weed (*Baeria maritima*) and algae.

Most of the guano deposits on West End are probably due to the Brandt Cormorant. Even though this avian fertilizer was once harvested commercially (Barlow, 1897), extensive deposits still remain. Some deposits are as much as 10 inches deep.

*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*. Pelagic Cormorant. In marked contrast to the two previous species which are colonial nesters, the Pelagic Cormorant is largely a solitary nester. Breeding birds were found mainly on inaccessible ledges at the northeast end of the island and at the east side of Maintop (West End). No young were seen.

*Haemantopus bachmani*. Black Oystercatcher. Although reported to have disappeared from the

Farallon Islands where it was once known (Grinnell and Miller, 1944:134), our group estimated that there were about 12 pairs resident on South Island in mid-June, 1958. The species was heard and seen regularly. One nest, composed of small pebbles and containing three fresh eggs, was found near East Landing on June 17.

*Larus occidentalis*. Western Gull. No other species was so conspicuous and ubiquitous as the Western Gull (fig. 1c). Nests were absent only from those areas occupied by cormorant or murre colonies or those immediately adjacent to Coast Guard installations (fig. 2). Most of the young were no more than ten days old.

*Uria aalge*. Common Murre. Early reports of this species (Bryant, 1888) state that the murre is by far the commonest nesting sea bird on the Farallones, outnumbering all other species combined! Indeed, the birds were so plentiful during the latter part of the 19th century that they supported a large commercial egg industry that operated out of San Francisco (Loomis, 1896). Smith (1934:171) who was the last observer to report on the nesting population of mures, noted no more than 30 adults on South Island in August, 1933. In mid-June, 1958, small groups of 5 to 20 birds were found nesting in caves and on ledges at several points (see fig. 2). The bulk of the population was centered along the westernmost cliffs of West End where we estimated that over 2000 birds were attending eggs (fig. 1d). Emerson (1904) also found mures most plentiful in this same area in 1903. On June 14 we found one young estimated to be less than two days old. The large colony that formerly inhabited Great Murre Cave near Shubrick Point, was not intact in 1958. Only 30 birds were observed there on June 10. Small colonies occurred on the two peaks of Seal Rock (fig. 2).

*Cephus columba*. Pigeon Guillemot. Individuals were observed in rocky crevices, in burrows of the European rabbit (*Oryctolagus*), and beneath railroad ties. The principal nesting sites were in the vicinity of Shubrick Point and the large surge channel immediately south of East Landing. Although most of the birds were found sitting on eggs in burrows, on June 15 a bird was observed incubating a single egg upon an exposed ledge. The largest group contained 10 birds.

*Ptychoramphus aleutica*. Cassin Auklet. Locally called "night-birds," the Cassin Auklet was observed above ground only after dark. During daylight hours numerous birds were removed from shallow burrows in the soil at the southeast end of the island. Many could be seen in rock crevices near Shubrick Point. Most of the auklets examined were sitting on single eggs. A recently hatched young was removed from a rockpile on June 15. Thirty-three adults were banded.

*Lunda cirrhata*. Tufted Puffin. Nesting puffins were probably more numerous than our observations would suggest. During the morning of June 13 approximately 20 birds were observed along the north side of Shubrick Point. Several of the birds were seen to enter crevices in the rocks wherein a single egg was found in each of five nest tunnels examined with a flashlight. One such egg removed from under an incubating puffin was found to contain a feathered embryo nearly at the hatching stage.

On May 18, 1954, the writer made a brief visit to South Island in company with Mr. George Treichel. Among the land birds observed, three species have not previously been reported from the Farallon Islands, namely, Pine Siskin (*Spinus pinus*), Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*), and Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*).

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