

## Spring pelagic, Half Moon Bay, May 4, 2014



It was a great trip out, there was a good swell but almost no wind which kept conditions pretty ideal for observation and photography. The light was good, and many of the birds, and the mammals came in close – sometimes ridiculously close! Water ranged from 54 degrees right at the shore, to nearly 58 farther out. The higher numbers are quite warm for this time of year!

There are few spring pelagics done, particularly out of Half Moon Bay so we are still learning the distribution of the birds here at this time of year. It was interesting to once again see that the Bonaparte's Gulls are migrating offshore in that stretch from 5 to 10 miles out or so, we saw this last year as well and is obviously a regular route they take northward which is not well documented. Birdwise the stars of the show were the two Laysan Albatrosses, rare here, both of which gave super views. We could confirm that two were involved due to the differences in the underwing pattern. Also superb was seeing that swimming Tufted Puffin, wow! A second flew by later on. There were

# ALVARO'S ADVENTURES

birding & nature tours



breeding phalaropes, always a fun part of a spring pelagic, as well as breeding plumaged Sabine's Gulls going north and looking pretty spiffy.

Mammals were awesome, with a show of a small group of friendly Humpback Whales which essentially touched the boat, and gave us an awesome show that lasted for some twenty minutes or so. What incredible creatures! There were two different sightings of Pacific White-sided Dolphins, and some folks may have seen Harbor Porpoise which was called out close to shore. The pinnipeds included California Sea Lions out there, Harbor Seal in the harbor. In the fish department, we saw three Ocean Sunfish (*Mola mola*), although these were small ones.



Red-necked Phalarope female

## Summary of the birds.

### Waterfowl

Canada Goose in harbor; and at least two flocks of Surf Scoters went by inshore, heading north.

**ALVARO'S ADVENTURES**  
birding & nature tours



**Loons**

The loons are in their northbound migratory push. The most numerous loon was the Pacific Loon with nearly 200 flying by as we were heading out. There were a few more well offshore, almost all of these seemed to be going south for some reason. A couple of Common Loons were inshore, and one offshore. At least one Red-throated Loon (likely more) were in the groups of Pacifics close to shore.

**Grebes**

Western Grebe was inshore near Half Moon Bay.

**Tubenoses**

Black-footed Albatross. As expected this was the most common albatross of the trip, it is incredibly difficult to estimate how many we saw in total. But the max number if I recall was four at one time. Likely there were more than a dozen, but maybe not as many as 20 all day.

Laysan Albatross!!! Two different birds were found, one on the way out and one on the way back. The two were less than 4 miles apart, yet the underwing patterns clarified that two birds were there. Both were in San Francisco County waters.

I took locations for these two birds, in order the coordinates for the two were:

N 37° 21.345'  
W123° 02.683'

N 37° 21.486'  
W122° 58.318'

# ALVARO'S ADVENTURES

birding & nature tours



These are the two Laysan Albatrosses we saw.

Northern Fulmar – reasonably common but in small numbers, there were dark and pale morph birds including one nearly white individual with a funny growth on the right side of its face.

Pink-footed Shearwater – common, but not as numerous as the Sooty Shearwater, in the low hundreds.

Sooty Shearwater – The most common tubenose, although we did not break 1000 birds, in the mid to high hundreds. Numbers increase dramatically later on in the season.

Ashy Storm-Petrel – Although they breed nearby on the Farallon Islands, they are very difficult to see in spring. They become much more likely to be found later on in the summer and fall. Only a few went by, none close, and all frustrating to spot. I think 3-4 birds were found.

## **Cormorants and Pelicans**

All three species were found. Double-crested was common in the harbor, and there were a few Brandt's Cormorants in the harbor as well as nearshore. A few made it several miles offshore. Pelagic Cormorant was in the harbor, typically the least common of the





three in Half Moon Bay. Brown Pelicans were roosting in the harbor, and a few nearshore, none offshore.

### **Shorebirds**

The last addition to the trip list was a Black Oystercatcher spotted by Zach before arriving at the dock. On the way out there were two different Wandering Tattlers, and one Surfbird. One of the tattlers flew by the stern giving a superb view! A flock of Whimbrels flew by while still at the dock, heading north of course.

Of course the pelagic specialties are the two phalaropes, Red-necked was more common closer to shore, and Red Phalarope more common in deeper water. Overall there were many more Reds seen out there, perhaps 600 or so on this day! Totals of Red-necked may have broken 100. Most special was seeing some outstandingly plumaged breeding birds, both Red-necked and Red phalaropes. Many of the reds were not yet in full plumage, they arrive on the breeding grounds later and head farther north than the Red-necks so delay body molt a bit as compared to Red-necked.

### **Alcids**

Common Murre – Common throughout the trip, unlike in summer and fall trips this time the murre were out a lot farther than we are used to. They were common off the continental shelf, while later on in the season they remain over the shelf.

Pigeon Guillemot – A species that is increasing as a breeder in the harbor. There are about a dozen birds there now which is great to see.

Cassin's Auklet – These birds feed on small zooplankton, particularly krill when it is available. They were in nice numbers roughly in the same area that the phalaropes were concentrating. This was a region where two water masses were coming together, likely the currents and movement of the water was concentrating food for the Cassin's as well as the phalaropes. We saw 50 or so on our trip.

Rhinoceros Auklet – A few were here and there, small numbers today, but we had great views at a breeding adult showing its white whisker stripes.

Tufted Puffin – A gorgeous adult on the water in San Mateo County, and then a fly by bird in San Francisco County a bit later on in the day. Trips out of Half Moon Bay appear to be pretty good not only for finding Laysan Albatross, but also the Tufted Puffin. Only about 200 breed on the Farallon Islands, the only spot nearby where this gorgeous alcid breeds.



Tufted Puffin

### **Gulls and Terns**

Sabine's Gull – We hit a nice migratory push of this offshore species. Little flocks or ones and twos once we were a ways out. The first one we saw was in a flock of Bonaparte's Gulls.

Bonaparte's Gull – As I mentioned above, it is neat that we are documenting the northbound push of these birds may have a large and perhaps very significant component. Most of the birds are between 5 and 15 miles out or so, over the continental shelf.

Western Gull – common, breeding in the harbor.

California Gull – small numbers, but present even offshore.

Herring Gull – one late bird was in the mass of gulls as we returned towards port. This is a winter species in our part of the world.

**ALVARO'S ADVENTURES**  
birding & nature tours



Glaucous-winged Gull – at least one bird which looked like it might have had Western genes, but not being an adult it was harder to say. Also getting late here.

Caspian Tern – a few inshore, common in Half Moon Bay.



Bonaparte's Gull – an adult in breeding plumage about 10 miles offshore.