

Come Fly Away: Migrating Birds on the Go by [Todd Jennings](#)

Many people come to the coast to leave behind the buzz of the city. What few realize is they are entering the Pacific flyway, one of the most heavily trafficked areas on the planet. Each year, millions of birds transit between northern breeding grounds and southern wintering sites. It's all part of Mother Nature's annual migration show along the Northwest coast.

Our coast is a world class birding destination: birds come here from all over the world and people from all over the world come here to watch them. Bird watching seems an odd thing to do. But when you hear the stories of these incredible creatures and learn how they live and where they came from and why, it's easy to get hooked and find yourself stashing a pair of binoculars in the car and scribbling notes in the margins of your favorite field guide.

Many consider the coast the crown jewel for observing birds, especially in the fall, and especially in our corner of the world. Murres huddled shoulder-to-shoulder, densely packed in nesting colonies of tens or hundreds of thousands; one million shearwaters rafting offshore; the comical puffin shaking its tufts after a 200-foot plunge for fish; a curlew probing a tidal flat for shrimp; the prehistoric pelican skimming along the breaking waves and splashing down for dinner.

For us, the beach is a great place to kick-start the soul—inhale the salty air, toe the warm sand, get kissed by the sun. A bird is answering Nature's call to go someplace warm and breed, or refuel on a long flight—a pit stop to rest and dine on the bounty of food found on the ground and under the water. Maybe where they came from the temperature dropped or their food source became limited. Whatever the reason, many of these birds arrived in spring to nest and after stamping our coast on their passport for the summer they're heading home. Their precise, internal clock says it's time to go. And they do, no questions asked. They get up and fly, and fly, and fly.

Shorebird Spectacle

Mother Nature refuses to follow our schedule and just to prove it, it seems, shorebirds begin their "fall" migration in late June. By late summer things can really get crowded: about 35 species of shorebirds travel the coastal flyways of Oregon and Washington in September and October. Some species travel in pairs or small groups, others can be seen in flocks by the hundreds. Sandpipers, a common name applied to a family of over 80 species of shorebirds, are the most recognizable—long legged, narrow-billed "waders" who feed at the water's edge. In flight, flocks of shorebirds put on a fluid aerial show, instantly turn in unison like a school of fish. On the ground they often act in concert too, scurrying along the shore like a wave of their own, a remarkable choreography of nervous feeding on goodies washed up by the surf. Some two-dozen of the species can be seen this time of year including sandpipers, dunlins, plovers, sanderlings, dowitchers, snipes, whimbrels, curlews and godwits.

The fall migration, no matter how you define it, offers birdwatchers the best viewing of the year. Birds travel south leisurely, taking time to feed. There's also a lot more wandering and getting lost than in the spring, especially by the inexperienced juveniles. Fall is the best time to spot a rare bird, like lost Asian peeps, along our coast. During El Niño and La Niña events all sorts of strange encounters can occur. Three years ago a Bristle-thighed Curlew, a bird whose migratory route is an incredible over water crossing

from western Alaska directly south to islands in the South Pacific, did a brief photo-op for giddy birders at the south jetty of the Columbia River.

In the fall different age groups, and sometimes different sexes, migrate at different times, resulting in a much longer migration period than in the spring. You'll need the extra time because identification of species during this time is extra challenging. This is especially true of the smaller sandpipers, often called "peeps." During the fall migration, adults may be in breeding plumage, winter plumage or somewhere in the middle. Throw in the juvenile plumages and the differences between the sexes in some species, and it's easy to see why fall presents the most challenging shorebird identification, even for a veteran birder armed with a field guide and a scope.

Keep an eye out for shorebirds usually seen in the fall but not in the spring. These include the two golden plovers (American and Pacific), the lesser yellowlegs, and the Baird's, pectoral, sharp-tailed, stilt and buff-breasted sandpipers. The elegant Red phalaropes, who often forage by spinning like tops (up to 40 revolutions/minute) to stir up tasty larvae, crustaceans and insects, are common fall migrants but are usually found well offshore.

For such little birds, shorebirds have some impressive travel itineraries. The Pacific Golden Plover, a bird capable of flying 2,000 miles over water without landing, rests here between Tahiti and the Bering Sea; dowitchers dine on mudflats from Alaska south to Mexico, Ecuador and Venezuela; sanderlings, the only sandpiper that lacks a toe, journeys from the Arctic Circle south to Baja, Peru, Panama and the Galapagos; the Least Sandpiper, the world's smallest shorebird, winters in Peru. In a fall migration spectacle, 800,000 Semipalmated Sandpipers gather in the Bay of Fundy in August before heading south to Bahamas, Guatemala and Surinam.

In our corner of the world, the largest number of shorebirds will typically be found in estuaries and quieter bays off the coast, though many are seen along the open coast as well. High tides usually offer the best birding as flocks of feeding birds are pushed closer to public viewing areas.

Those Amazin' Alcids

The auks or alcids—auklets, guillemots, puffins, murre, murrelets—are the coast's most reliable summer visitors. You can practically plan your April Fool's Day activities around the Tufted Puffin's arrival at Haystack Rock, probably the most accessible place to observe the clownish "Sea Parrot" on the west coast of the U.S. One egg laid and hatched, they leave for their wet wintering "grounds," the waters of the North Pacific, in early August.

Like all alcids, the puffin's flight above water is rapid, struggling to keep their football shape aloft. Their aerial awkwardness is more than compensated underwater where they "fly" in graceful pursuit of fish. Tufted puffins can descend to 200 feet, the common murre to more than 500 feet.

Alcids have more of an east-west than north-south migration. When they depart in August they live up to their pelagic billing and head out to open sea where they can be seen bobbing alone, in pairs or small groups. The young Tufted Puffin fledges under cover of night, hurtling from burrows in the steep grassy slopes high above the water. It ventures out to sea unaided by the parents. At sea the adult puffins lose their

spectacular breeding face—bright orange bills, white feathers around the eyes, straw-colored tufts drooping back over the neck.

The Common Murre—a fitting name for the most common seabird in Oregon—lives in very large and dense colonies when on land. Around Tillamook Head there are some 54,000 individuals; Three Arch Rocks hosts the largest colony of murre south of Alaska, estimated at more than 200,000 birds. During breeding season Oregon's murre population consumes 129 metric tons of fish per day. To maximize space and for safety, their sole egg is pear-shaped, and, remarkably, the young is fledged on the water. Unable to fly, the murre chick leaves the colony at dusk and goes to sea, accompanied by the male parent who teaches it to feed and protects it from predators. While caring for its young at sea the dad molts, rendering it flightless for four to six weeks.

The starling-sized Marbled Murrelet, though pelagic like all alcids, nests up to 40 miles inland. It requires a high, mossy branch in an ancient forest to lay its one egg. It's difficult to see nesting and because of its need to nest in old growth forests it has been federally listed as threatened—a marbled murrelet can fly up to 60mph but it can't get away from man. Considered the "enigma of the Pacific" for a long time, it was the last bird in North America to have its nesting site discovered (1974). The young fledges at dusk between mid-June and late September and flies directly to sea.

Another pelagic bird to look for—but one that remains offshore in our area—is the Sooty Shearwater. A gull-sized birds who breed in islands off South America and in Australasia, Sooty Shearwaters are believed to be one of the most abundant birds in the world, numbering up to one billion individuals and appearing in flocks of millions on the Pacific. Unlike most birds, scientists believe they have a developed sense of smell and when downwind can sniff out fish oils, squid and krill. (In August and September you can often find Sooty Shearwaters by training your binoculars or scope just beyond where the farthest waves are forming.)

Hummer

Always a backyard crowd-pleaser, the pugnacious Rufous Hummingbird is a small creature with an impressive passport. For this area, it's the earliest neo-tropical (south of the border) bird to migrate, usually showing up in February. It migrates north from Mexico along the coast, and then goes inland in March after breeding; fall migration occurs along the mountains at high elevation. Rufous Hummers have been known to log 12,000 miles on a round-trip migration.

Big Mouth

Another summer favorite is the Brown Pelican, a huge bird—an adult's wingspan can be over seven feet—that is somehow both gawky and graceful. Look for it cruising in small groups just above the waves and generally adding a dash of the tropics to our waning summer. The Brown Pelican dines exclusively on fish, diving head-first from heights of 20 to 50 feet in spectacular, violent splashes to capture its prey. Their giant pouch serves as a fishnet on these dives. On surfacing after a successful splashdown it points the bill to drain the pouch, then up to swallow the fish.

The Columbia River is the northern extent of their range; our pelican visitors spend most of their year at their breeding grounds in southern California and Baja. Along our coast the peak of pelican activity is in August; the first ones typically arrive in late May and the last ones wave goodbye in late September. Reports are the number of Brown Pelican tourists is down this year due to cooler ocean temperatures.

Year-rounders

A few of the area's signature birds are essentially non-migratory. That is, our temperate climate and abundant food source have made year-round residents of otherwise migratory birds.

Outside of Alaska, Oregon and Washington are the best states to see the Bald Eagle (or more correctly *balde* because when American colonists named this bird, that term meant white or white-headed, not hairless). The Lower Columbia River supports a strong bald eagle population; from the Bonneville Dam to the mouth of the river is home to 80 nesting pairs and later in the year this number may double with winter migrants. A banding study showed that this area is a crossroads for migrating bald eagles: winter visitors to the Lower Columbia hailed from New Mexico, Arizona, California and Yellowstone. (And remember, if you see a nondescript brown eagle it might very well be a bald one—the striking white on the head and tail doesn't fully appear until the fourth or fifth year.)

The peregrine falcon has the most extensive worldwide range of any bird. Populations of the peregrine, however, like the bald eagle, brown pelican and other birds we see in this area, were seriously threatened by eggshell thinning from pesticides, particularly DDT. In some parts of the country, they are only now being re-established in their former range. Peregrine means "one who wanders" but the ones on our coast, just like the Bald Eagles, don't migrate but their numbers swell in winter with migrants from elsewhere.

Consider yourself lucky if you spot this amazing and endangered bird. It's the fastest thing on the planet, able to fly nearly 200 mph when diving for birds, its primary source of food.

How can you catch some of this incredible action? Easy: check out the bird-watching sidebar for recommended locations, grab some binoculars, dust off that dog-eared field guide, and go witness one of the most remarkable shows in nature.