

## F O C U S



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## Fall Treasure Hunt on the O.P.

**Rich Stallcup**

**I**T'S 4:30 AM AND DARK. September 23rd. Can't sleep. I stumble from bed to the kitchen window. No fog... but no stars! Yessss!

Last night the wind went around from 20 WNW to dead calm ESE, and now, with the high ceiling, it's classic Vagrant Weather. I call a couple of (slightly deranged) friends, and by sunrise we are hurtling past the Holsteins towards outer Point Reyes—the O.P. A treasure hunt is on.

At each grove of wind-battered conifers, each willow clump, and even through the bush lupine, migrants abound—many, coveted gems from far, far away. They are nocturnal migrants, many on their first journey, and some carry faulty compasses that cause mirror-image travel routes. Some came down during the night. Others are still arriving—we can hear, then see them dropping from the sky, returning to the mainland after overshooting the coast.

**The O.P. and the Farallones**

**I**N MANY WAYS, outer Point Reyes is like an offshore island—a lot like the Farallones. Because they are way out in the ocean (the O.P. is 13 miles west of the mainland), both places attract large numbers of migrant landbirds during Vagrant Weather. For the same reason, both places totally lack many sedentary coastal birds.

Each of these tiny geographical entities has a bird species list of just over 400—the Farallones with more outrageous rarities (Golden-cheeked Warbler, Red-flanked Bluetail) and the O.P. with more of the sedentary birds like Wrentit and Bewick's Wren. One fact that stands out while analyzing these avifauna, especially for the O.P., are those birds absent: California Towhee, Steller's Jay, and Oak Titmouse have never been recorded! Hairy Woodpecker, Pygmy and White-breasted Nuthatches, and Chestnut-backed Chickadee have fewer than three records each. There are more



The promontory southwest of the dotted line—Outer Point Reyes (the O.P.)—often holds avian treasure in “Vagrant Weather.” Birds of the larger Point Reyes peninsula, represented above, include both rare species and sedentary ones that have seldom or never been recorded on the O.P.

examples. All of these species have huge resident populations in Marin County—five of them within ten flight-line miles of outer Point Reyes. They are unwilling to cross the open ground, the scrub savannah, between trees.

**Defining the O.P.**

**O**N SIR FRANCIS DRAKE Boulevard one enters the O.P. at mile marker 37.44. It is the line where Barrie's Bay (in Drake's Estero) comes within one mile of biting through to the Great Beach. The line extends to mid-estero then south into Drake's Bay. Watery habitats include tidal flow over mud and rocks, the Bay, the open ocean, and farm ponds. Most of the land is grazed or shrouded with heavy scrub dominated by bush lupine. Swales contain willows and, in some autumns, surface water. Most of the migrants on the O.P. are found in five scattered stands of Monterey cypress (and a few Monterey pines, at the Fish Docks).

Some of us have been seeking the traveling treasures on the O.P. for 40

years now, since we discovered the vagrant phenomenon on 16 October 1961 at the “B” Ranch, and it *never* gets old. It's never the same!

Over time: 300 Blackpolls, 150 American Redstarts, 80 Magnolias, 50 Black-throated Blues, 35 Lark Buntings, 30 Orchard Orioles, 30 Prairie Warblers, 15 Philadelphia Vireos, 20 Bobolinks, 15 Summer Tanagers, 10 Connecticut Warblers, 3 Yellow-green Vireos, 3 Scarlet Tanagers, 1 Painted Redstart, and thousands more... each as wonderful as the first!

The anticipation caused by the weather giving assurance that “tomorrow there will be a migratory wave...” the fire of excitement at the instant of connection with some wild-eyed, far-flung wanderer... these are emotions from nature that cannot be explained. Only shared. Treasure!

So watch the sky, sense the wind, and we'll see you on the O.P.

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