As our warm, dry winter weather continued, we started our day by walking along beautiful Limantour Beach, the long sand spit between Drakes Bay and Limantour Estero. Offshore one White-winged Scoter popped out among the Surf Scoters, Eared and Red-necked Grebes, and Common and Red-throated Loons. Farther up the beach we began to see Snowy Plovers along the shallow puddles along the dune front. Jules discussed efforts to protect this endangered species. Marion Porter explained one approach has been to identify and remove local ravens and crows that have been identified as specializing in preying on plovers and other species such as Least Terns. These corvids teach their young to prey on plovers so it is important to break the cycle. In addition, there has been some success with “taste aversion” using fake eggs with a bad taste to “reeducate” predators. Jules also explained the difference in feeding strategy between plovers, which are visual feeders, and probing shorebirds that have highly enervated bills to feel for prey. Snowy Plovers can find mole crabs, a favorite prey, by spotting the antennae sticking out of the wet sand.

Moving over the dune to the estero, we learned about the problems with introduced European beach grass. Native beach grasses create a dynamic, mobile dune that supports a variety of wildlife, while the introduced grasses hold the dunes in place and support very few insects and birds. Beyond the estero we could see Tule Elk. An Osprey perched on a piling in the estero was probably a male, as they are the first to return from Baja and points south to set up their nest sites and await the females. Waterfowl in the estero included Buffleheads, American Widgeon, Gadwall, Northern Pintail, and Green-wing Teal. A flock of about 40 White Pelicans circled in the distance.

After lunch overlooking the estero, we walked along Muddy Hollow Trail. The number of birds was certainly down, as it has been everywhere during our drought. We saw signs of river otters and found elk scat along the trail. Bird sightings included Northern Flicker, Common Yellowthroat, Pine Siskin, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, and Ravens mobbing a Red-tailed Hawk overhead. While lamenting the lack of rain, we enjoyed the opportunity to have Jules as our guide as well as the beautiful weather. Susan Kelly tallied 48 species for the day. Look for “Birds of Coastal Northern California,” coauthored by Rich Stallcup and Jules to be published in April.

Report By Vicky Van Meter