

Half Moon Bay

Alvaro Jaramillo • Half Moon Bay, California • chucao@coastside.net

We at the ABA have a treat for you this coming fall—several absolutely awesome days of birding in and around Half Moon Bay, California! Unless you are a surfer, or you are into pumpkins, you may never have heard of Half Moon Bay. And that's a pity because Half Moon Bay is a gem for birding. This seaside town is just half an hour from San Francisco International Airport; yet, for a place so close to “civilization,” it is amazing how much the natural world rules here. Right on the Pacific coast, Half Moon Bay is a spot where a huge amount of biodiversity can be found in a relatively small area; we have everything from Wrentits to blue whales. This is a birder's heaven, and we're gonna show it to you in a way that will make the experience unforgettable.

This is *not* the sort of ABA event you may be thinking of. This is a brand-new kind of animal, one that goes back to the grassroots of birding. This event is all about the fun, the camaraderie, and just marveling at how we have found the most incredible hobby in the world. You will not be disappointed if you come to Half Moon Bay—2011. Did you miss the opportunity to catch The Beatles when they were the bar band in Hamburg? Well, don't miss the beginning of another era!

So who am I? I'm an international birding tour guide, an author, and a longtime birder. I also happen to be the most biased person possible to write this article because I live in and I love birding in Half Moon Bay. With the Sequoia Audubon Society, I am delighted to be hosting this event in conjunction with the ABA. We are so eager to show you the birds here!

Contrary to what you may have heard, the South does not have a monopoly on hospitality. We at Half Moon Bay look forward to having you here and showing you the place, the local flavor, and of course our feathered friends. You'll fall in love with Half Moon Bay. It's so quaint and quirky—and friendly. But here's why you really want to join us this fall: Half Moon Bay is full of amazing birding possibilities.

The mix of habitats here is fantastic. Cool, moist weather on the coast means we have huge old redwood and Douglas fir forests. Riparian areas are mixed in with chaparral, coastal grasslands, rocky shores, and farmland. Just a few miles inland, in the Santa Cruz Mountains and on the “Bayside,” the habitat becomes drier, with an entirely different suite of birds. We'll visit specialized habitats, where we'll find special birds—like the “oak birds” (Oak Titmouse and Nuttall's Woodpecker,

Panoramic view of Half Moon Bay. *Photo by © Steve Geer—iStockphoto.com.*



for example). And there's more—the splendid mudflats of San Francisco Bay, the rocky shorelines of the Pacific coast, and the wide open ocean of pelagics. It is all here within a short distance of Half Moon Bay.

The surfers know Half Moon Bay as the home of one of the largest and most menacing waves in the big wave surfing world—a place called Mavericks. A stone's throw from Mavericks, in the rocky intertidal zone, we may be able to see Surf-birds (fancy that), along with Black Turnstones, Wandering Tattlers, and Black Oystercatchers. Three species of loons will be moving offshore; while you watch them, Pelagic, Brandt's, and Double-crested cormorants will be roosting on the sea rocks. We will pause to admire the ever-present Western Gulls and loafing harbor seals and California sea lions. Fall is when we have peak numbers of Elegant Terns, Heermann's Gulls, and Brown Pelicans; it's an active time of year.

Fans of improbably large pumpkins know Half Moon Bay as the site of one of the world's most important pumpkin weigh-offs. The monster from 2009 weighed in at 1,658 pounds. As you can imagine, pumpkin muffins, pumpkin pie, and the like are not hard to come by. In addition to our pumpkins and fertile agricultural land, we have terrific willow riparian thickets. In the coastal chaparral, Wrentits will serenade you with their enchanting "bouncing ball" songs. Do you think you know White-crowned Sparrows? Wait till you see and hear the distinctive fogline "Nuttall's" subspecies; there is even a Half



Anna's Hummingbird. Photo by © Alvaro Jaramillo.



Tufted Puffin. Photo by © Alvaro Jaramillo.



Moon Bay dialect the sparrows sing. We'll probably find Bewick's Wrens and maybe the newly split Pacific Wren. We're practically guaranteed to see and hear Anna's Hummingbirds—plucky and a bit feisty.

Half Moon Bay may be the only place where pushing into a field of—wait for it—Brussels sprouts gets migrants to pop up. The flocks of Chestnut-backed Chickadees and Bushtits always have their Hutton's Vireo hangers-on, and at this time of year they are joined by migrants: Townsend's, Black-throated Gray, and Orange-crowned warblers, Western Tanager, and Black-headed Grosbeaks.

Raptors put on a good show in early autumn. Regionally, Half Moon Bay has a reputation for good numbers of hawks. We'll look for decent-sized flocks of White-tailed Kites, along with a wide variety of other species. Let's hope it's a good fall for raptors!

Early fall is also the time the sparrows pile in. We'll look for recent arrivals like Lincoln's, Golden-crowned, and "Sooty." What is "Sooty," you ask? It is the distinctive, dark, Pacific coast version of the species currently known as the Fox Sparrow; here's your chance to see this beautiful, chocolate-brown bird—which may someday be split into its own species. We'll also see and hear the resident Spotted and California towhees.

So far I've been talking about the more-or-less expected species we have a very good shot at finding. But one of the truly fantastic aspects of this part of the world is that anything is possible—well, practically anything. At this time of year, the much-desired *vagrants* show up. They come from points east and south—even from Asia. I would not be surprised, although I would be overjoyed, if our final checklist yields such



Wrentit. Photo by © Alvaro Jaramillo.

species as Tropical Kingbird, Red-throated Pipit, Lucy's Warbler, and various eastern species that should not be here; Blackpoll Warbler and American Redstart are almost a given. While you are in the process of piling on all the lifers, you could come up with something entirely unexpected. Fabulous!

The shorebirds on what we call the Bayside (San Francisco Bay) can be impressive at this time of year. Thousands of

Western Sandpipers, Willets, Marbled Godwits, and both dowitchers stage or winter here. Large numbers will have arrived by the time of this event. Mixed in with them will be smaller numbers of Long-billed Curlews, Black-bellied Plovers, and practically any shorebird you can think of—including unexpected species.

The species diversity is impressive, but the true spectacle is the numbers you'll see. It is really spectacular. Wait till a Peregrine Falcon goes through and riles up the birds into a living cloud that moves as if it had a single brain controlling the whole show. You'll never forget the experience. And while we're taking it all in, we'll learn about some of the shorebirds that are of special concern in our region—the Pacific coast population of the Snowy Plover, for example.

And now for the Number One reason some of you will come to Half Moon Bay: pelagics! The seabirds and other marine life off the central California coast are, quite simply, one of the grandest extravaganzas of life on earth. The sea at times can be packed with thousands of Common Murres, thousands if not tens of thousands of Sooty Shearwaters, maybe flocks of Cassin's Auklets, and so much more. At this time of year, the diversity of shearwaters is at a peak: The Pink-foots and Sooties are still around, while the Buller's are at their peak numbers. And when Buller's is about, the rare Flesh-footed may show up. If the water is relatively warm out there, this is prime time for Black-vented Shearwaters. If we are lucky, as we were in 2010, the storm-petrels, such as Ashy, Black, and maybe Fork-tailed, will be findable. A special treat is the sighting of a Tufted Puffin—the "sea parrot." We have a chance. As is always the case with seabirds, our fortunes will depend on water temperature and weather influences.

Half Moon Bay is not yet well known for pelagics, but it is



Blue Whale. Photo by © Alvaro Jaramillo.



Snowy Plover. Photo by © Alvaro Jaramillo.

gaining a reputation fast. In particular, it is proving to be a great place for those most glorious of all seabirds—albatrosses. Black-footed Albatross is relatively common, and the rare Laysan actually has a fine track record from this port. The still-highly-endangered—but gradually recovering—Short-tailed has shown up here, and surely will again. The sea will not disappoint. At this time of year weird stuff can always appear—like California's first and North America's second White-chinned Petrel two years ago. If that does not happen again, something else will, and we hope it's while we are out there with *you* on board.

A final word about the ocean. Whales. Yes, we're birders, but it's impossible not to marvel at the cetaceans of the central California coast. Whales were all over the place in 2010, and we hope to have a good show again this year. Humpback whales are the most common species here, but, if the krill is in, we have a great shot at the marvelous blue whale—the largest animal in the history of life on this planet. Amazing is not strong enough a word to describe the experience of seeing a blue whale.

I can't help myself. I talk about my home town and I just light up. I love showing people the place and the birds. The ABA, Sequoia Audubon, and I can't wait for you to join us.

I'd like to highlight one other aspect of this gathering. You know how there is a growing movement of people who eat only locally grown food? Well, this is the birding equivalent. We will stick to one California county, San Mateo. This is a fo-

cused event. The idea is *not* to be in a bus or van all the time. Instead, we will be out there enjoying birds and learning a great deal about this small region, guided and hosted by superb local talent. We will visit spots the birding guides don't always know about—fruitful local patches known to the locals, but not to most others.

We are committed to making this a cozy, warm, sociable gathering. Come not only to see the good birds, but also to enjoy the great company. We'll get lifers of the feathered variety, but we'll also revel in the variety of folks who carry binoculars. We hope that you will come away with great memories of central California and of the many great birding friends you will make.

The whole point of birding is to have fun. And the whole point of the ABA is to promote the enjoyment of birding. Come and have a wonderful time with your birding friends in Half Moon Bay.

I'll be getting those pumpkin muffins in the oven. We'll be waiting for ya.



Black-footed Albatross. Photo by © Alvaro Jaramillo.

ABA Half Moon Bay Conference • September 29–October 4, 2011

Registration for the ABA Half Moon Bay Conference opens at **9:00 a.m. Mountain Daylight Time on Wednesday, May 25, 2011.** The event promises to be chock-full of birding fun from start to finish. Cost for the event is \$1,495 per person, double occupancy (\$345 single supplement). This full package includes 5 nights' lodging at the Half Moon Bay Lodge, all meals starting September 30, a full-day pelagic trip, and three additional field trips to seek out those California specialties you've been yearning for.

Mark your calendars and arm your alarm clocks NOW, as space is limited to just 60 lucky ABA members. You'll be guided by the area's best field trip leaders, including world-renowned author and field guide Alvaro Jaramillo, ABA President Jeff Gordon, and Sequoia Audubon President Jennifer Rycenga. Registration information, including the full list of expected bird species, is available online: aba.org/events/2011halfmoonbay