

## ***Rare birds mystify scientists***

### **HUNGRY, STORM-TOSSED RED PHALAROPES SIGHTED IN BAY AREA**

**Mercury News – Tuesday, December 27, 2005** By Lisa M. Krieger

Pacific storms have blown thousands of rare sea birds into the Bay Area, many of them weak, emaciated and seeking refuge in rain puddles of suburban yards and parking lots. The small birds, called red phalaropes, ordinarily live many miles off the Pacific coast and are rarely seen on land.

Since the afternoon of Christmas Day, they've been sighted in Los Gatos, Palo Alto, San Francisco, even Campbell's percolation ponds at Budd Road and San Tomas Expressway. Most abundant on the coast, a flock of 1,200 was reported near Half Moon Bay.

“This is really unusual,” said Alvaro Jaramillo, a biologist with the San Francisco Bird Observatory in Alviso. [www.SFBBO.org](http://www.SFBBO.org) “There are more here than anybody can remember, and we don't know why.”

Robbie Fischer of Pacifica saw one fly down her suburban street as she stepped out onto her front porch to get laundry. “It was at eye level, eight feet off the ground, more than a mile inland from the ocean,” said Fischer, who is a member of the Western Field Ornithologists. “We're used to seeing sparrows and chickadees, yard birds like that.”

Normally they are wary of humans. And they only come on land in the Arctic, where they briefly breed and raise their young. Last week, many red phalaropes in a weakened condition made landfall in coastal Oregon. On Christmas Day, news of the first sightings along the Sonoma County coast -- from Jenner to Point Arena -- was spread by bird enthusiasts who regularly alert each other when they sight rare birds. Word quickly spread about the red phalaropes by computer and cell phone.

By Monday, they had arrived in the Bay Area. In Palo Alto, Ron Wolf saw three paddling down a flood channel by the town recycling center near Bixby Park. Others have been sighted in Lexington Reservoir. They've been seen in ponds near San Jose's Almaden Expressway and by a restroom at Mountain View's Shoreline Park.

There were at least 18 near the concrete bridge at San Francisco's urban Lake Merced; four were seen in the Presidio.

Many are weary, allowing people to approach closely. Some have been killed by cats and gulls. Along Highway 1, hundreds were reportedly struck by cars. One was rescued from traffic in a busy parking lot on San Pablo Ave. in the East Bay town of Albany.

Seven weak birds are resting in incubators at the Peninsula Humane Society in San Mateo. The International Bird Rescue and Recovery Center in Cordelia got three, all of which quickly died. "They were emaciated, with anemia and low protein levels," suggesting long-term starvation, said Marie Travers of the Peninsula Humane Society.

Their arrival is mystifying local biologists and animal lovers. Weather may be to blame. The birds float and eat by skimming sea life from the surface of the water. Smaller than a robin, they are easily tossed and turned by turbulent ocean waves and can't eat under those conditions.

"There are storms across the entire Pacific, from China to the west coast of California. It's a steady stream of storms, with no break in between them," said Steve Anderson, a forecaster with the National Weather Service in Monterey.

Off the coast, waves are 15 to 25 feet high, with winds racing from 30 to 50 mph. Rain is heavy, said Anderson.

It is also possible that the ocean has been less productive this year, so food has been scarce, Jaramillo said. If birds are healthy, people and their pets should keep a safe distance so they are not frightened, advise bird experts. Weak or injured birds can be taken to the Peninsula Humane Society in San Mateo for emergency care.

This week's weather forecast -- seven days of intermittent storms -- does not bode well for weak birds and it could be a while before they can head back to the ocean.

But the Bay Area's rich estuaries could offer badly needed food and rest. "We don't know why they're here. They may have gotten off course, or pushed in, due to the storms," Jaramillo said. "Or maybe they came here because they had no other choice," he said. "We don't understand."



Red Phalarope winter plumage