

**Seabirds and ocean conditions from the CalCOFI/CCE-LTER Survey:  
Winter 2024 data report**

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*Cover photo:* Bonaparte's gulls on giant kelp; photo by Sophie Webb.

## **Introduction**

Seabird surveys are an integral part of the California Cooperative Oceanic Fisheries Investigation (CalCOFI), California Current Ecosystem - Long-term Ecological Research (CCE-LTER), and Southern California Coastal Ocean Observing System (SCCOOS) programs. The seabird data are valuable for several reasons. First, information on seabird distribution and abundance provides an upper trophic level perspective that complements the lower trophic level plankton and hydrographic data collected by others. Second, estimates of seabird abundance, diversity, and distribution contribute to understanding the spatial ecology of the Southern California Bight and adjacent marine habitats (e.g., Santora et al. 2017), a region characterized by substantial temporal environmental heterogeneity and a major biogeographic boundary at Point Conception. Third, by extending our existing records (currently 37 years and building; 1988–present) and coupling this information with long-term hydrographic and plankton data, seabird data contribute to understanding the effects of climate variability and change on the southern sector of the CCE (e.g., Veit et al. 1996, Hyrenbach and Veit 2003, Santora and Sydeman 2015, Sydeman et al. 2015).

This data report summarizes observations made within the CalCOFI core region during the 2023 summer CalCOFI/CCE-LTER cruise. We present data on survey effort as well as summary information on seabird abundance, expressed at density (birds/km<sup>2</sup>), and oceanographic conditions during the survey period.

## **Methods**

*Seabird observations.* Observations of seabirds are made continuously during daylight ship transits between oceanographic/plankton sampling stations. The observer, located on the bridge approximately 15 meters above sea level, uses hand-held binoculars and occasionally also a digital camera to assist in the identification and enumeration of birds. The observer records all birds seen within a 300-meter strip transect to one side and front of the vessel while the ship is underway at > 5 knots. Observations are entered into a computer using the dedicated application “DLog”; the ship’s position is automatically recorded periodically from an external GPS every 20 seconds. Each observation includes the species, the number of individuals observed, and their behavior (mostly “flying” or “sitting on the water”). Observation data are post-processed using standardized species codes, validation of positioning data, and binning of observations into along-track sections of 3 km in length. The data are then integrated into a survey database that contains data from 1988 to the present. These data are used to derive summary statistics.

*Calculation of seabird densities.* Taxa excluded from this summary were all mammals, fish, terrestrial birds, and most shorebirds except phalaropes, which can be found in the pelagic realm. Species densities were calculated as the total number of individuals observed per species divided by the area (km<sup>2</sup>) surveyed. Density is expressed by log<sub>10</sub> function; a constant of 0.01 was added to each species’ density prior to transformation. Anomalies of log<sub>10</sub>-transformed density over time are shown for species with warm- and cold-water affinities for the period 1988 through 2024, winter only. We defined species with warm-water affinity to include black-footed

albatross, black-vented shearwater, brown pelican, Heermann's gull, Laysan albatross, and Leach's storm-petrel (Hyrenbach and Veit 2003). Since 2017 we have used a category for unidentified Leach's storm-petrels that includes all newly-described species and subspecies in a single category. Cold-water affinity species include black-legged kittiwake, Bonaparte's gull, Brandt's cormorant, Cassin's auklet, common murre, northern fulmar, rhinoceros auklet, and western gull (Hyrenbach and Veit 2003).

*Oceanographic conditions.* We present sea surface temperature (SST; C°) and wind averages for the period 5 January to 29 January 2024 in the greater CalCOFI survey area. SST data were downloaded from the Multi-scale Ultra-high Resolution SST (MURSST) dataset (<https://podaac.jpl.nasa.gov/dataset/MUR-JPL-L4-GLOB-v4.1>), and wind (speed and direction) data were downloaded for NOAA/NDBC buoys (<https://www.ndbc.noaa.gov/>). Sea surface temperature anomalies (SSTa) averages for the same period are presented, with a baseline calculation period of 1991–2020. SSTa data were downloaded from the Optimal Interpolated SST (OISST) dataset (<https://psl.noaa.gov/data/gridded/data.noaa.oisst.v2.highres.html>). Additionally, daily SST and wind averages for the study period are shown specifically for NOAA/NDBC buoy 46011 ([https://www.ndbc.noaa.gov/station\\_page.php?station=46025](https://www.ndbc.noaa.gov/station_page.php?station=46025)).

## Results

*Effort.* A summary of survey effort is shown in Table 1; transects surveyed are shown in Figure 1. Summarized species observations for all species are shown in Table 2 (see Appendix 1 for exclusions). Survey effort over 12 days covered 811 km (243 km<sup>2</sup>) of ocean habitat. Survey opportunities were limited by consistent CTD failures, which required extended time periods where the vessel was in port or stationary at sea. These events impacted seabird surveys via the complete loss of eight survey days and the partial loss of survey hours during several additional days. No observations were made outside of the core survey area, but surveys provided adequate coverage of both off-shelf regions on Lines 93 and 90, and coastal regions extending up to Line 76 (Figure 1). Thus, the 2024 Winter survey, while heavily truncated, successfully captured the seabird diversity associated with the different habitats of the CalCOFI core region.

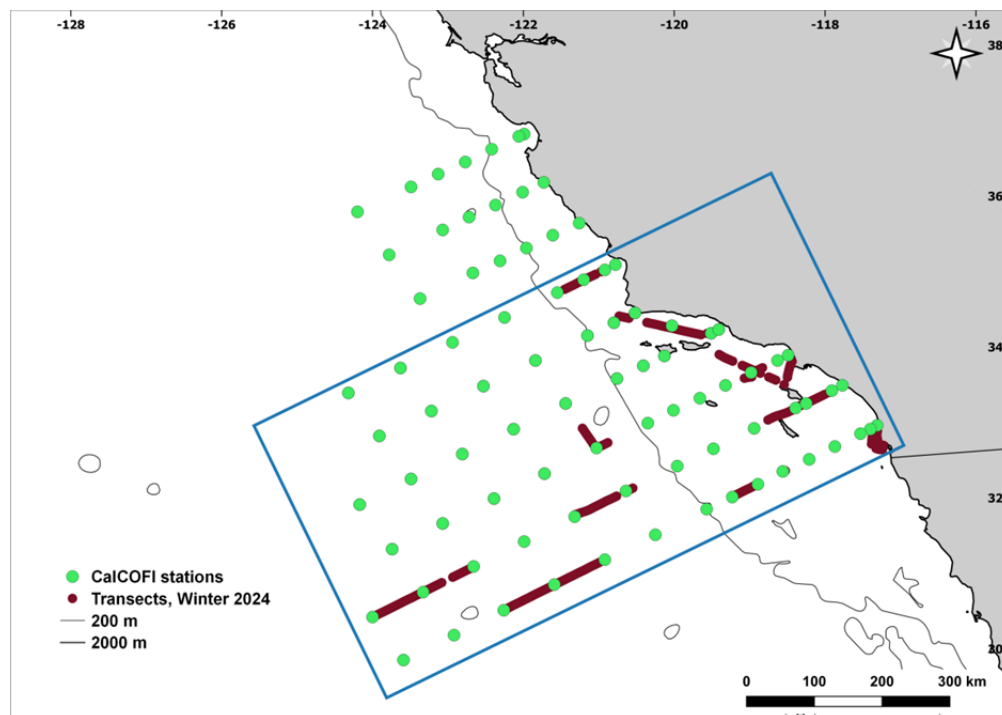
*Seabirds.* Density over time for the selected seabird species (listed above) was calculated and is shown as anomalies in Figures 2–4. Black-vented shearwater and brown pelican showed densities greater than 1 standard deviation above the long-term mean. Densities of both of albatrosses, black-footed and Laysan, were near average (Figure 2). Cold-water affiliated species showed varying densities. Northern fulmar and western gull density was below 1 s.d of the long-term mean (Figure 3). Rhinoceros auklet, Bonaparte's gull, and Brandt's cormorant had higher than average density but all were within 1 s.d. of the mean (Figure 3). Common murre was present in very high densities compared to normal, above 1 s.d. of the mean (Figure 3), but this species' density may be biased high due to lack of offshore coverage. In summary, the strongest signals indicate an increase in black-vented shearwaters, a species affiliated with sub-tropical domains. The substantial increase in brown pelicans may be attributable to the recent increase in northern anchovy, a predominant prey species, and corresponding high production of pelicans in recent years. However, temperate species were also observed with average densities, indicating high diversity of the avifauna, which may be related to varying oceanographic conditions (see below). Overall, seabird density of all species combined was average (Figure 4).

*Oceanographic conditions.* The winter CalCOFI survey transited a wide range of water temperatures, with cool waters found nearshore in the northern transects, moderate temperatures in the central California and the Southern California Bight areas, and warm offshore waters in southern California (Figure 5). During the time of this cruise, ocean conditions were warmer than normal in most of the survey area, in line with persistent El Niño conditions (Figure 6). However, at some locations, the temperature got gradually cooler and then warmer throughout the duration of the survey, and there were strong gusting winds offshore blowing to the west and northwest throughout the cruise (Figure 7).

**Table 1.** Summary of survey effort and seabird statistics for the full survey area, winter 2024.

Winter 2024	Full survey area
Survey vessel	<i>RV Reuben Lasker</i>
Start date	1/10/2024
End date	1/29/2024
Number of survey days	12
Distance surveyed (km)	811
Area surveyed (km <sup>2</sup> )	243
Number of bird species	36
Overall bird density (per km <sup>2</sup> )	5.318
Total individuals counted	1,294

**Figure 1.** Transects sampled during the CalCOFI winter 2024 survey. The core study area is denoted with the box, and includes CalCOFI lines 93 (south) to 77 (north).



**Table 2.** Observations in winter 2024 by species in the core area (see Figure 1). Cell values: total number of individuals (ind.) / number of observations per species (obs.) / species density (dens.) in individuals per km<sup>2</sup>.

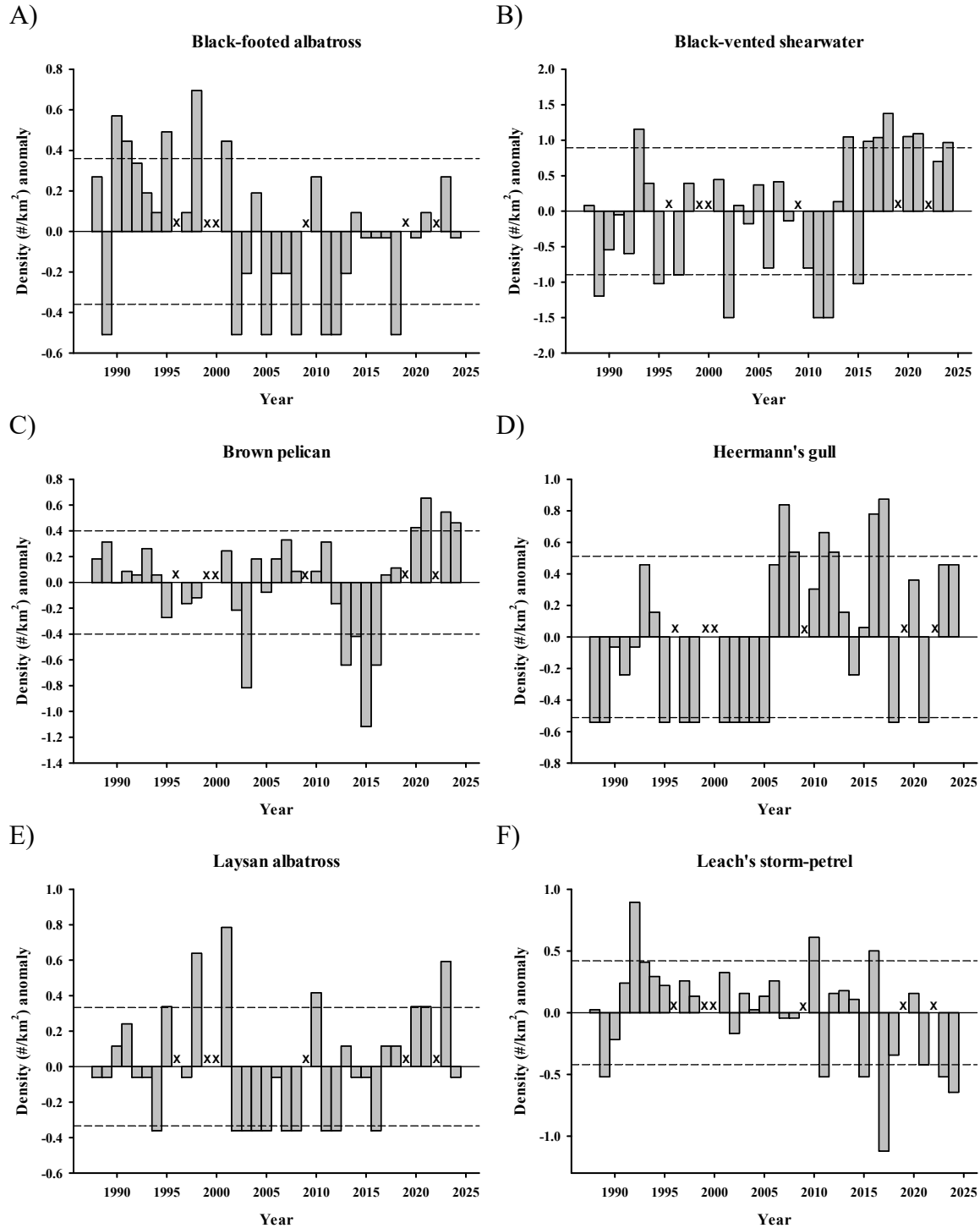
Common Name	Scientific Name	Core area
American White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>	
Ancient Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus antiquus</i>	
Arctic Loon	<i>Gavia arctica</i>	
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	
Ashy Storm-Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma homochroa</i>	
Black guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	
Black Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	2 / 1 / 0.01
Black Storm-Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma melania</i>	
Black-Footed Albatross	<i>Phoebastria nigripes</i>	5 / 5 / 0.02
Black-Legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	
Black-Vented Shearwater	<i>Puffinus opisthomelas</i>	707 / 78 / 2.91
Bonaparte's Gull	<i>Larus philadelphia</i>	42 / 7 / 0.17
Brandt's Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax penicillatus</i>	40 / 26 / 0.16
Brant	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	
Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>	2 / 2 / 0.01
Brown Noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>	
Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	89 / 57 / 0.37
Buller's Shearwater	<i>Puffinus bulleri</i>	
California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>	46 / 40 / 0.19
Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>	1 / 1 / 0
Cassin's Auklet	<i>Ptychoramphus aleuticus</i>	41 / 21 / 0.17
Clark's Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus clarkii</i>	
Common Loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>	
Common Murre	<i>Uria aalge</i>	56 / 29 / 0.23
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	
Cook's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma cookii</i>	14 / 7 / 0.06
Craveri's Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus craveri</i>	
Dark Shearwater	(species group)	
Dark-Rumped Petrel	<i>Pterodroma phaeopygia sandwichensis</i>	
Double-Crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>	3 / 3 / 0.01
Eared Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	
Elegant Tern	<i>Sterna elegans</i>	
Flesh-Footed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus carneipes</i>	
Fork-Tailed Storm-Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma furcata</i>	
Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>	
Franklin's Gull	<i>Larus pipixcan</i>	
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	
Glaucous-Winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>	
Glaucous-winged/Western Hybrid Gull		
Guadalupe Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus hypoleucus</i>	

Hawaiian Petrel	<i>Pterodroma sandwichensis</i>	
Heermann's Gull	<i>Larus heermanni</i>	23 / 12 / 0.09
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	3 / 2 / 0.01
Horned Puffin	<i>Fratercula corniculata</i>	
Hybrid Gull	(species group)	
Juan Fernandez Petrel	<i>Pterodroma externa</i>	
Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	
Kermadec Petrel	<i>Pterodroma neglecta</i>	
Laughing Gull	<i>Larus atricilla</i>	
Laysan Albatross	<i>Phoebastria immutabilis</i>	2 / 2 / 0.01
Leach's Storm-Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma leucorhoa</i>	6 / 6 / 0.02
Least Storm-Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma microsoma</i>	
Least Tern	<i>Sterna antillarum</i>	
Long-Tailed Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>	
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	
Marbled Murrelet	<i>Brachyramphus marmoratus</i>	
Masked Booby	<i>Sula dactylatra</i>	
Mew Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	
Mottled Petrel	<i>Pterodroma inexpectata</i>	
Murphy's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma ultima</i>	1 / 1 / 0
Nazca Booby	<i>Sula granti</i>	
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	3 / 2 / 0.01
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	
Pacific Loon	<i>Gavia pacifica</i>	2 / 2 / 0.01
Parakeet Auklet	<i>Aethia psittacula</i>	
Parasitic Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	5 / 4 / 0.02
Parkinson's Petrel	<i>Procellaria parkinsoni</i>	
Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>	3 / 1 / 0.01
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	
Pigeon Guillemot	<i>Cepphus columba</i>	
Pink-Footed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus creatopus</i>	16 / 15 / 0.07
Pomarine Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>	2 / 2 / 0.01
Red Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicaria</i>	22 / 5 / 0.09
Red-Billed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon aethereus</i>	
Red-Footed Booby	<i>Sula sula</i>	
Red-Necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>	
Red-Necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	7 / 2 / 0.03
Red-Tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon rubricauda</i>	
Red-Throated Loon	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	
Rhinoceros Auklet	<i>Cerorhinca monocerata</i>	39 / 14 / 0.16
Ring-Billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>	2 / 2 / 0.01
Royal Tern	<i>Sterna maxima</i>	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	
Sabine's Gull	<i>Larus sabini</i>	
Scripps's murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus scrippsi</i>	
Short-Tailed / Slender-Billed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus tenuirostris</i>	
Short-Tailed Albatross	<i>Phoebastria albatrus</i>	

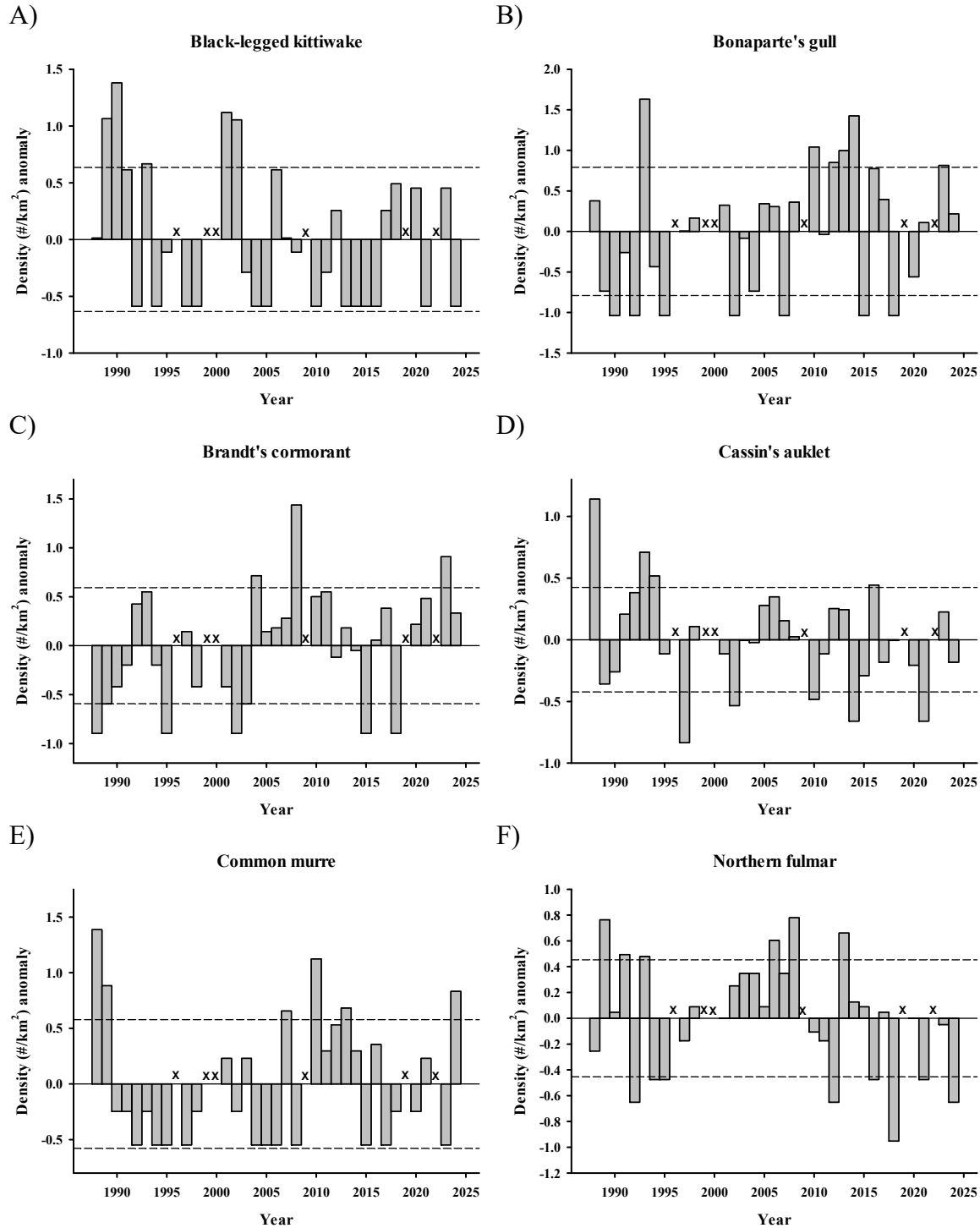
Solander's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma solandri</i>	
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>	1 / 1 / 0
South Polar Skua	<i>Stercorarius maccormicki</i>	
Stejneger's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma longirostris</i>	
Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>	4 / 2 / 0.02
Thayer's Gull	<i>Larus thayeri</i>	
Townsend's Storm-Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma socorroensis</i>	
Tufted Puffin	<i>Fratercula cirrhata</i>	
Unidentified Albatross	(species group)	
Unidentified Auklet	(species group)	
Unidentified Booby	(species group)	
Unidentified Cormorant	(species group)	
Unidentified Duck	(species group)	
Unidentified Grebe	(species group)	
Unidentified Gull	(species group)	49 / 43 / 0.2
Unidentified Jaeger	(species group)	
Unidentified Large Alcid	(species group)	
Unidentified Leach's Storm-Petrel	(species group)	
Unidentified Loon	(species group)	
Unidentified Murre	(species group)	5 / 2 / 0.02
Unidentified Murrelet	(species group)	6 / 4 / 0.02
Unidentified Petrel	(species group)	
Unidentified Phalarope	(species group)	11 / 3 / 0.05
Unidentified Procellarid	(species group)	
Unidentified Shearwater	(species group)	
Unidentified Skua	(species group)	
Unidentified Small Alcid	(species group)	
Unidentified Storm-Petrel	(species group)	
Unidentified Tern	(species group)	1 / 1 / 0
Unidentified Tropicbird	(species group)	
Wedge-Rumped Storm-Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma tethys</i>	
Wedge-Tailed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus pacificus</i>	
Western Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>	
Western Gull	<i>Larus occidentalis</i>	33 / 31 / 0.14
Wilson's Storm-Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>	
Xantus's / Craveri's Murrelet	(species group)	
Xantus's Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus hypoleucus</i>	



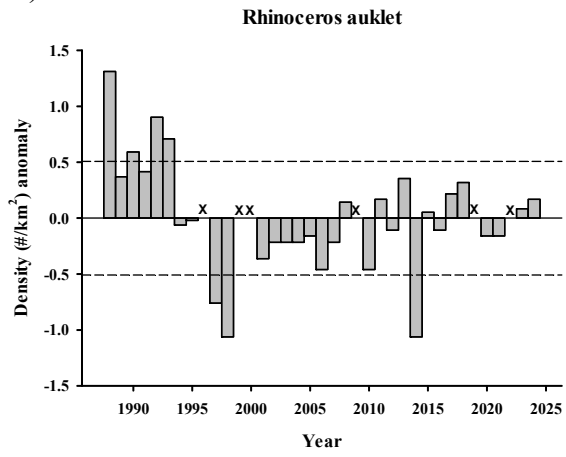
**Figure 2.** Log<sub>10</sub> density anomalies for species with warm-water affinities, core survey area, 1988–2024. A) black-footed albatross, B) black-vented shearwater, C) brown pelican, D) Heermann’s gull, E) Laysan albatross, and F) Leach’s storm-petrel (includes unidentified Leach’s storm-petrels since 2017). The dashed lines indicate  $\pm 1$  s.d. of the long-term mean, and ‘X’ indicates years when no winter survey was conducted. A constant of 0.01 was added to each density prior to log<sub>10</sub> transformation and the anomaly calculation.



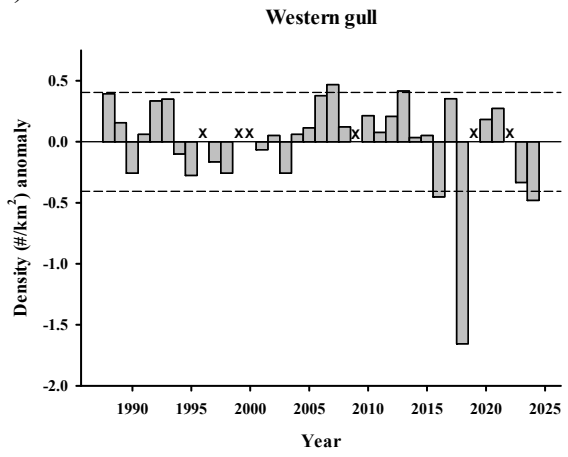
**Figure 3.** Log<sub>10</sub> density anomalies for species with cold-water affinities, core area only, 1988–2024. A) black-legged kittiwake, B) Bonaparte’s gull, C) Brandt’s cormorant, D) Cassin’s auklet, E) common murre, F) northern fulmar, G) rhinoceros auklet, and H) western gull. The dashed lines indicate  $\pm 1$  s.d. of the long-term mean, and ‘X’ indicates years when no winter survey was conducted. A constant of 0.01 was added to each density prior to log<sub>10</sub> transformation and the anomaly calculation.



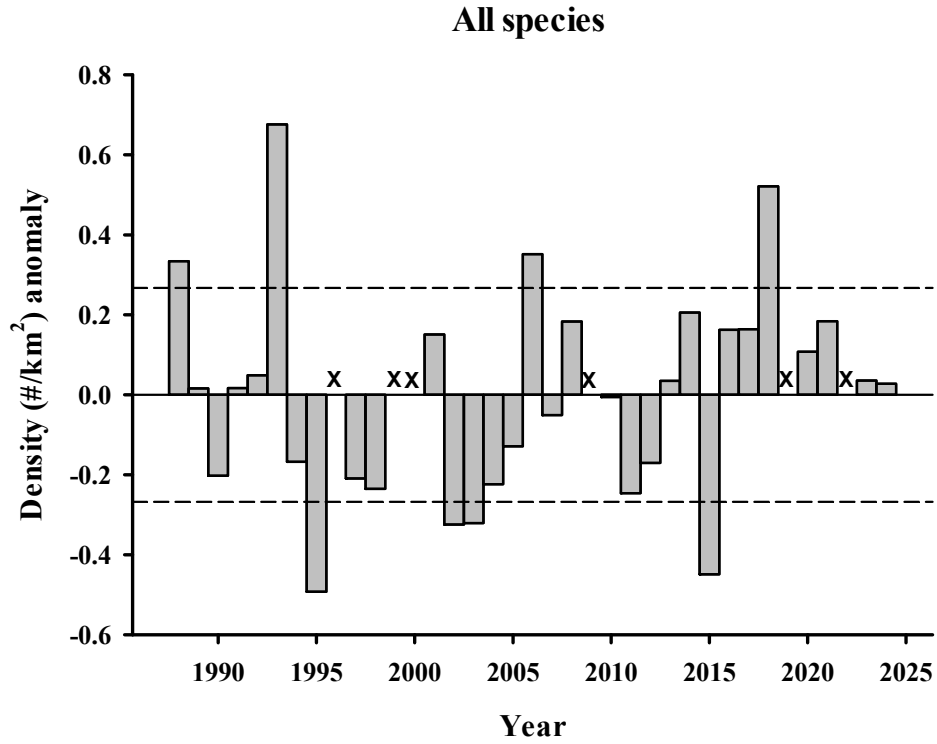
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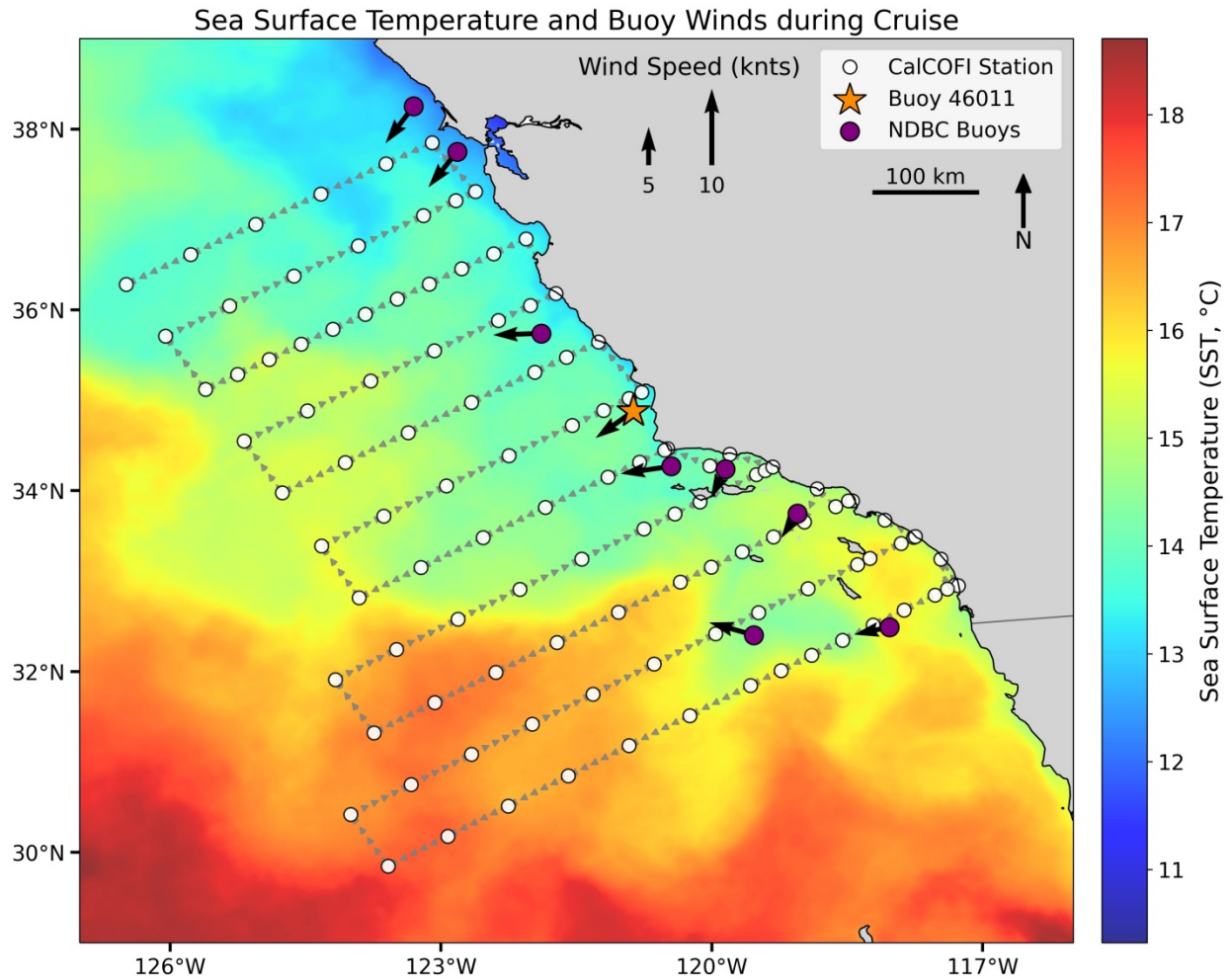
H)



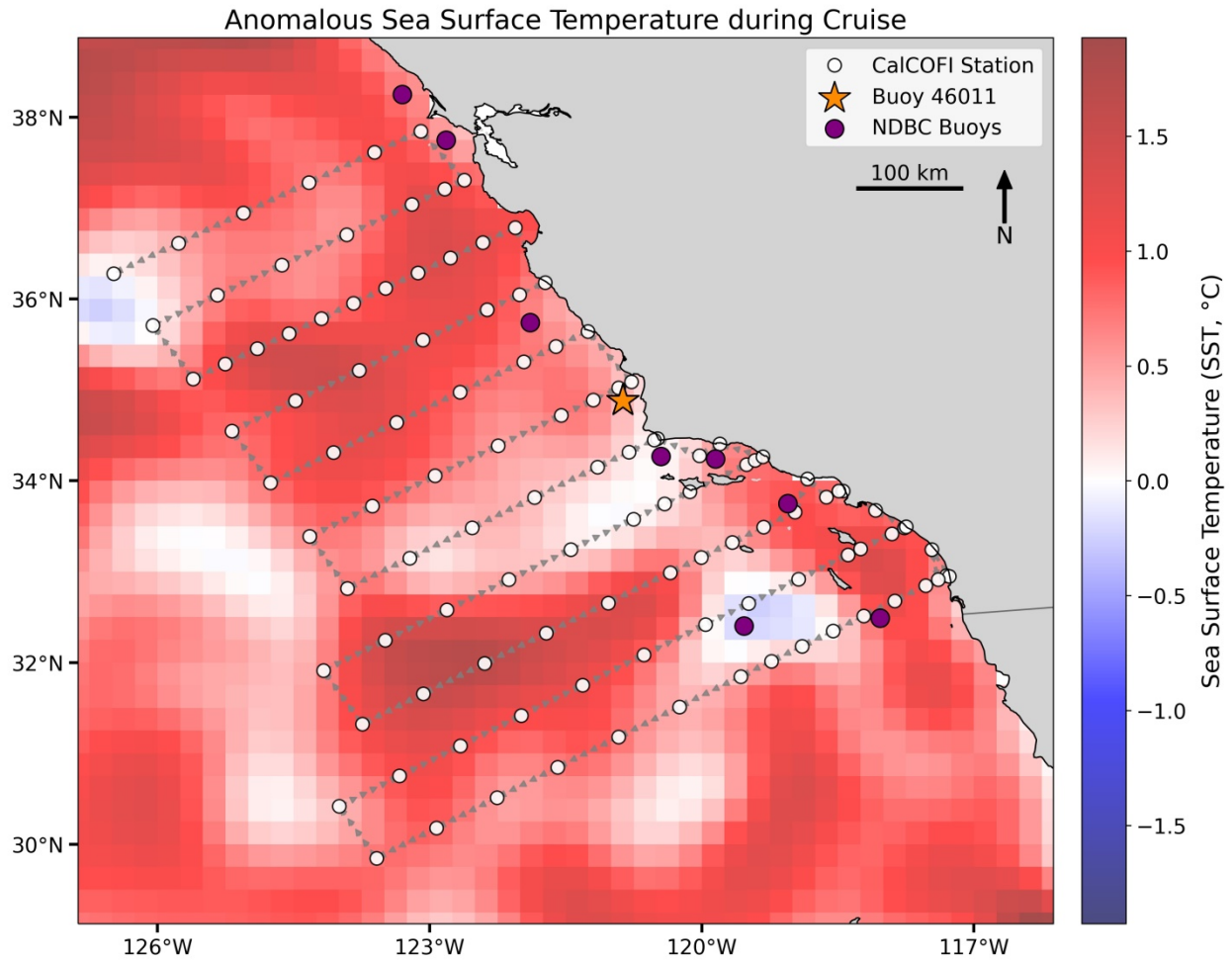
**Figure 4.** Log<sub>10</sub> density anomalies in the winter for all species in the core area only, 1988–2024. The dashed lines indicate  $\pm 1$  s.d. of the long-term mean, and ‘X’ indicates years when no summer survey was conducted. A constant of 0.01 was added prior to log<sub>10</sub> transformation and the anomaly calculation.



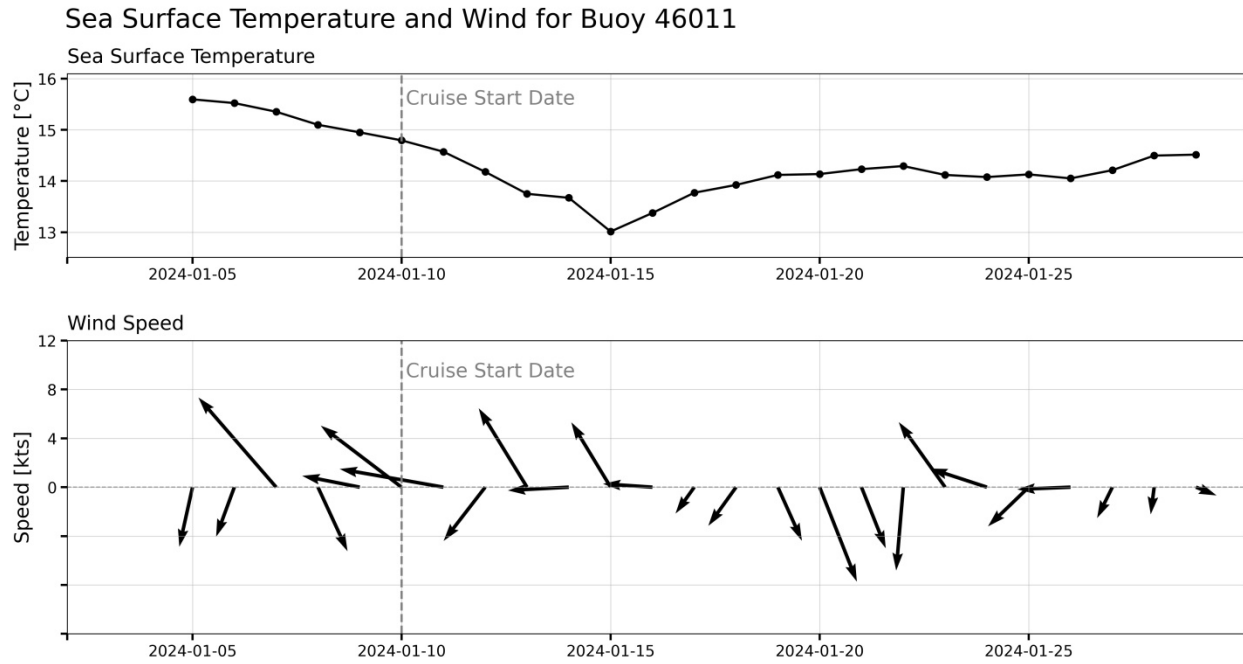
**Figure 5.** Sea surface temperature (SST;  $^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) and wind averages (speed and direction) for the period 5–29 January 2024 in the greater CalCOFI survey area. Wind direction is shown at NOAA/NDBC buoys (purple dots and orange star). White dots indicate CalCOFI sampling stations.



**Figure 6.** Sea surface temperature anomalies (SSTa; C°) averages for the period 5–29 January 2024 in the greater CalCOFI survey area. Baseline period: 1991–2020. NOAA/NDBC buoys shown in Figure 5 are shown again here.



**Figure 7.** Daily SST (C°) and wind averages for the period 5–29 January 2024 at NOAA/NDBC buoy 46011; location is marked in Figures 5 and 6 with an orange star. The beginning of the cruise is shown with a dashed vertical line. Bottom panel: arrow direction indicates wind direction (up = north), the y-axis indicates wind speed scale in knots.



## References

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**Appendix 1.** List of bird species excluded from this summary. These species may or may not have been observed during the survey.

Common Name	Scientific Name
American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>
Black Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>
Black Skimmer	<i>Rynchops niger</i>
Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>
Black Turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>
Black-throated gray warbler	<i>Setophaga nigrescens</i>
Blue-footed booby	<i>Sula nebouxii</i>
Brewer's Sparrow	<i>Spizella breweri</i>
Brown-headed cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>
Bufflehead	<i>Bucephala albeola</i>
Chapman's Storm-Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma leucorhoa chapmani</i>
Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>
Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>
Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>
Long-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus scolopaceus</i>
Mallard Duck	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
Red-Breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
Savannah sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>
Snow Goose	<i>Chen caerulescens</i>
Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>
Townsend's warbler	<i>Setophaga townsendi</i>
Unidentified Bird	(species group)
Unidentified Dowitcher	
Unidentified Goose	(species group)
Unidentified Hummingbird	(species group)
Unidentified Passerine	(species group)
Unidentified raptor	(species group)
Unidentified Shorebird	(species group)
Wandering tattler	<i>Tringa incana</i>
Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
White-Winged Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>
Willet	<i>Catoptrophorus semipalmatus</i>
Wilson's warbler	<i>Cardellina pusilla</i>
Yellow-Rumped Warbler	<i>Dendroica coronata</i>