

F O C U S

The Three Amigos



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WANTED in the California Current marine ecosystem: Heermann's Gull (left), Elegant Tern (above), and Brown Pelican (right).

Rich Stallcup

EACH SUMMER AND FALL, many thousands of large, colonial seabirds immigrate from insular nesting sites in Mexico to the cool, nutrient-rich waters of the California Pacific to forage. Three bird species are involved: Brown Pelican, Heermann's Gull, and Elegant Tern—"the three amigos."

While they may not actually be friends, they do have a lot in common. Most individuals that we see use islands inside the Sea of Cortez for nesting. The bulk of the world population of Heermann's Gulls, and many Elegant Terns, nest on Isla Raza offshore of Hermosillo, Sonora. There are pelican and tern colonies in southern California, as well, and Heermann's Gulls have recently tried to colonize Monterey and San Mateo Counties, producing eight young at Robert's Lake, Monterey County, in 2000.

Heermann's Gulls derive much of their forage by picking up scraps from plunge-diving pelicans. They grab sardines or anchovies that spill from the pelican's bill, as well as "floaters"—fish stunned by the concussion of the peli-

can's dive. Elegant Terns plunge-dive (like Brown Pelicans but more daintily) and catch their own fish, one at a time. All three species often participate in nearshore "feeding frenzies" when small schooling fish come to the surface or are forced upward by bigger fish below them.

The pelicans and gulls come north together, beginning with mostly sub-adults and adults in May followed by juveniles by late June. Elegant Terns begin to appear in late August and are virtually gone by mid-October: back to Mexico.

In recent years, all three species have been abundant along the California coast in September. Their northward progression depends upon the season's incursion of warm water, which carries with it the obligate schooling fish and many other comrades, such as pinnipeds and white sharks. When El Niño surges up the coast of North America, so do the three amigos—to Oregon, Washington, and even southern British Columbia. During one of the major Niños in the

early 1980s, we found Elegants at Vancouver during a birding tour; they were the first ever for Canada.

It wasn't always this way. Elegant Terns were absent from California before the 1960s (they have been expanding their range), and Brown Pelicans were very close to extinction in the 1950s and '60s due to toxins in the marine food chain—pesticides used on crops that were rain-washed into the sea.

In the mid-1960s, we sometimes sat on beaches or cliffs watching northbound "pellies" in the sunset. Within a few short years, people noticed fewer and fewer young birds in the flocks, and flocks that were drastically smaller and scarcer. Birders and activists raised a hue and cry, playing a pivotal role in the consequent banning of DDT and its chemical relatives.

Now, in the early 2000s, things seem to be going well for the three amigos, but we must be ever vigilant to ensure these marine birds safe passage over the waters between northern California and Mexico.



Farallon Patrol Log

THROUGH WINTER storms, spring winds, and the seabird breeding season, the volunteer skippers of the Farallon Patrol have transported PRBO personnel and supplies to our field station on Southeast Farallon Island. Their expert support is vital to our Farallon research: thanks!

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|--------|----------------|-----------------------------|
| JAN 20 | Burt McChesney | <i>La Storia</i> |
| FEB 3 | Doug Engelke | <i>Its a Wonderful Life</i> |
| FEB 17 | Al DiVittorio | <i>Solbritt</i> |
| MAR 3 | Alex Pop-Lazic | <i>Tamo Daleko</i> |
| MAR 24 | Fred Babian | <i>Temerity</i> |
| APR 3 | Peter Ross | <i>Kidaly</i> |

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|---------|----------------|--------------------|
| APR 15 | Ed Kelly | <i>Desperado</i> |
| APR 28 | John Gratton | <i>Nakia</i> |
| MAY 13 | Tom Charkins | <i>Kumbaya</i> |
| MAY 26 | Burt McChesney | <i>La Storia</i> |
| JUNE 9 | Al DiVittorio | <i>Solbritt</i> |
| JUNE 23 | Greg Stach | <i>Lebenstraum</i> |
| JULY 7 | Dale Head | <i>Magic</i> |