

## F O C U S



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## Migrants Astray

**Rich Stallcup**

**I**T'S EARLY AUGUST and a Prairie Falcon whacks a McCown's Longspur in flight just inches above the Pawnee National Grasslands. The attempt is not fatal, but knocks the livin' symmetry out of the smaller bird.

ON OCTOBER 24TH, a McCown's Longspur is found with Horned Larks on a plowed field on outer Point Reyes. Some disheveled feathers on its right flank suggest a previous wound. A stronger left side may have overrode the internal compass and, instead of arriving to winter in West Texas, this bird finds itself on the coast of California and will probably press on to the west-southwest, offshore.

IT'S EARLY MAY 1998, and, as usual, all of Earth's few Bristle-thighed Curlews are restless. They have wintered on beaches and rocky shores of the equatorial Pacific, but now it's time to go. They gather in small groups, calling as they move from atoll to island, staging for their annual nonstop oceanic flight to Alaska—their natal home. By the 10th, most of the world's population is in the air to fly day and night, thousands of miles north. There is no shelter along the way.

Most years, the trip is easy. May is past the period of Arctic borne storms, and though it is often windy, these are wind-birds and their navigation is almost flawless (there are near zero extra-limital records for this species anywhere). But spring 1998 is not a normal

On October 24th, this McCown's Longspur was found on Point Reyes with disheveled feathers on its right side, perhaps from a previous wound.



weather year. El Niño has welled up in the Pacific Gyre, and two-thirds of the way home, the curlews collide with a violent south borne storm and are tossed, tumbled and torn. Many are probably lost, others thrown far from course, and by the 20th, individuals are found scattered along the coast from California to Canada. Most show injuries. With this many seen, how many have crashed? While we are ecstatic to see one at Point Reyes, some of us are concerned for the continuance of the species.

IT'S AUGUST IN WESTERN QUEBEC near the south end of James Bay, and four recently fledged Magnolia Warblers are feeding voraciously, on-loading fat to be used as fuel for their first migration. The correct date arrives, and at twilight they hurtle upward, each giving Dendroica "vamanos" calls. When the appropriate altitude is reached, the internal compasses lock-in. Three head off to the southeast, eventually to Northern Columbia . . . the other goes southwest towards California.

### Perspectives on misorientation

**V**AGRANCY IN MIGRATORY birds is not random. It happens because something has gone wrong in the vagrant's life, and the most common causes seem to be physical trauma, violent weather and genetic anomalies.

Physical trauma incurred before or during migratory travel causes far-flung displacement for some. The longspur was injured at "home," but maladies for others happen along the way. Sometimes birds run into things like wires or windows, and sometimes things run into them— things like Sharp-shinned Hawks and Merlins. Anything that results in asymmetry— especially, it seems, retrices or remiges



This Bristle-thighed Curlew, en route from islands in the tropical Pacific to Alaska with others of its kind, was slammed into the California coast by anomalous weather.

(tail and major wing feathers)—might cause migrating birds to go wrong ways. A single missing rectrix unbalances the bird's rudder. Vagrants we see here, often show such deficiencies.

Extreme or violent weather (like hurricanes, monsoons, and blizzards) can throw individual migrants or groups of them far from their programmed destinations. Migratory birds are equipped to survive normal bad weather and stick to course, but catastrophic disturbances toss birds around the map.

Genetic "Mirror-Image Misorientation" proposed by former PRBO biologist Dave DeSante, based on Farallon Islands vagrants in the 1970s, suggests that a small percentage of young, southbound migrants are born with a genetic glitch causing them to be directionally challenged. This probably accounts for most of the songbirds rarities found along our coast each fall. Their flight compass sends them southwest instead of southeast, a mirror image of their intended direction, stacking them up along the coast from Oregon to Baja. It is likely that most of these lost birds will continue on, over the ocean where they will be taken by jaegers or skuas . . . it is not good to bring faulty navigation back to the gene pool.



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