

BLACK TURNSTONE**Donald Shephard**

Black Turnstone winter plumage

A double rainbow arced over the Point Cabrillo lighthouse early on the second day of January. Our group of Christmas Bird Counters, David Jensen, Peter Gealey, Joel Franks and myself, had walked down the trail from the parking lot in cold wet weather. We strolled around to Frolic Cove in hopes of spotting something other than Yellow-rumped Warblers. On the surf-splattered rocks a group of Black Turnstones flashed their wing pattern and called. The Black Turnstone is a defining species for our

rocky, wave-battered Pacific Coast. It blends in well with the dark rocks, but a careful winter observer will find it from Canada through Baja California.

In winter the head and breast become largely dark brown with little white. Juveniles appear similar to winter adults but browner with buff fringes to the wing-coverts and scapulars and a grey-brown tip to the tail. As the birds flew among the rocks, their bold wing pattern allowed us easy tracking. White feathers along the flanks, a white wing stripe, and a white lower back produce this pattern. A black band terminates the white tail.

The Ruddy Turnstone (see November 2010 Whistling Swan) is similar but has rufous-brown markings on the upperparts and more white on the head and breast. The narrower wings of Ruddy Turnstones accompany narrower white wingbars. Ornithologists classify both Black and Ruddy Turnstones in the genus *Arenaria* within the sandpiper family but once placed them in the plover family.

The Black Turnstone has a variety of calls, especially a rattlingtrill. Other calls include a loud, screeching alarm call and a soft, purring call uttered to young chicks.

Food consists mainly of invertebrates, particularly crustaceans and mollusks in winter. They do not eschew seeds, eggs and carrion. On their summer breeding grounds in Alaska where they forage among wet sedge meadows, they switch to protein-rich insects to raise and feed their young.

In winter, its typical habitat is rocky coasts but it also feeds on beaches, mudflats and man-made structures such as jetties and breakwaters. Black Turnstones forage by walking along rocks

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continued

and using their short, pointed bills to pry open or hammer preferred food items like barnacles and limpets. On sandy beaches, a turnstone uses its bill to turn over stones, shells, and seaweed in search of food.

Individuals of this species often show strong site and mate fidelity when breeding, nesting at the same exact site with the same mate year after year. Males perform a display flight in which they climb high in the air and dive abruptly like a Common Snipe, with vibrating feathers producing an audible sound. For nests, Black Turnstones line a shallow depression with grass on the ground near water. She lays three to four eggs, which are incubated by both sexes for about three weeks. Chicks leave the nest shortly after hatching, and find all their own food. Both parents care for the young at first, but the female often departs after two weeks, leaving further parental care to the male.

Relative abundance, threats both on breeding grounds and non-breeding grounds, and most importantly, its very small breeding area place this bird as a Species of High Concern. All 80,000 birds breed in a narrow stretch of coastal plain in western Alaska which is susceptible to oil spills. Black Turnstones use Prince Williams Sound, Alaska, site of the Exxon Valdez oil spill, as their major spring staging site.

The Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in Alaska, home to breeding Black Turnstone, and Kachemak Bay, Alaska, an area used by many turnstones in spring and autumn, have both been included in the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network. Increased numbers of wintering Black Turnstones associate with restored kelp beds off the coast of Palos Verde Peninsula in California. That is good conservation news, but Christmas Bird Count data suggest that winter populations of Black Turnstone in the Pacific Northwest may have decreased.

Join the Save Our Shorebirds volunteers and you will surely spot this characteristic shorebird in the rocky intertidal zone along with its fellow "rockpipers"-- Ruddy Turnstone, Wandering Tattler, Surfbird, and Rock Sandpiper. Certainly, you will enjoy sharing birding with knowledgeable local birders. Perhaps you will see Black Turnstones. A double rainbow will, at least metaphorically, arc above you.

Black Turnstone photo Jim Wedge

