

# Released

Back to the Wild

## A Journey Interrupted by Claudia Duckworth

Phalaropes are tiny open ocean birds that breed in the Arctic and winter on tropical oceans. There are three species---red, red-necked and Wilson's that appear here on the central coast of California.

This year, in mid May, Richard Rowlett, a NOAA scientist who tracks whale and seabird migrations from the Point Piedras Blancas Light Station, reported thousands of red and red-necked phalaropes moving north off our coasts.



They were traveling in large flocks with tens of thousands of other birds including several species of loons, cormorants, murrelets, shearwaters, whimbrels, wandering tattlers and others along with various marine mammals. Mr. Rowlett writes marvelously descriptive letters that are posted on a San Luis birding list. At almost the exact same time, a red-necked phalarope was brought into the Center covered in oil.

Phalaropes are interesting in that it is the females who are brightly colored and who display to attract the less conspicuous males. The males brood and raise the young while the female leaves to find another mate.

Our bird was a female. She was so tiny, it was frightening to wash her for fear of causing injury, but we did. Eventually, she regained her waterproofing and literally flew out of the hospital pool up to the ceiling of the seabird room.

We released her at Morro Bay on Sunday and on Monday, Mr. Rowlett sent another of his emails listing the bird species seen that day migrating north. Among his listings was a rather odd one----- 1 adult red-necked phalarope amongst a pack of 10 Pacific loons.

Loons are quite large birds, so this was comparable to a hummingbird flying with a flock of crows. She was the only phalarope spotted that day and I'd like to believe it was our bird back on her way to the Arctic with an interesting story to tell her friends.