



Southern California

February 7 – 15, 2015

TRIP REPORT

Report by Luke Tiller. Photos by Catherine Hamilton



Photos, top to bottom: Costa's Hummingbird, Black-throated Magpie Jay, Yellow-billed Magpie, Group at Monterey Bay, Ridgeway's Rail, Island Fox



Sunrise Birding LLC

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Leaders: Luke Tiller & Catherine Hamilton

Day 1

After picking up participants at airport hotels we quickly made our way to our first port of call for the trip at a not particularly salubrious park in a somewhat rundown part of Los Angeles which has become one of the only places that one might hope to find **Spotted Dove** these days. This introduced species which is countable in California was once a widespread and integral part of the area's avifauna, but has steadily declined to a point where it is now very rare and hard to find. After the bird initially flushed, Dianne did a great job keeping the bird in view (and not for the only time that week) so that we could all get on it. The park also boasts a handful of **Inca Doves**, a rare native species often confined to scrubby desert or agricultural habitat in the southern half of the state that has a tiny toehold in this one downtown park in LA. Both species were relatively quickly tracked down and the group enjoyed a species that may not be countable in California in the not too distant future.

From a slightly run down Los Angeles Park, we made our way to what must be one of the jewels of SoCal birding Bolsa Chica, whose name was artfully translated for us by Maggie. Here we reveled in awesome close encounters with some waterfowl including **Surf Scoter** and **Bufflehead** which the Chicago girls Joan and Mary Lou particularly enjoyed both because they were close and also because it wasn't freezing while they were watching them. Searching through a myriad of shorebirds, we enjoyed sightings of site specialties like **Reddish Egret** and two exciting subspecies of **Savannah Sparrow**: the expected Belding's and the rare Thick-billed, all while devouring a delectable packed lunch from a local boutique sandwich shop - homemade cookies and all.



The final stop of the day was the stunning Upper Newport Bay. Here we enjoyed more waterfowl, including eye-catching **Cinnamon** and **Blue-winged Teal** in the marsh. Our real targets here though were a couple of the sought after 'California' birds: California Towhee and California Gnatcatcher. We quickly stumbled upon the towhee amongst a mix of sparrows that included our first **Golden-crowned Sparrows** for the trip and whilst momentarily being distracted by a beautiful and co-operative **Allen's Hummingbird** we soon tracked down a jaunty singing **California Gnatcatcher**.



Day 2

Day two had us winging our way south to San Diego and the Tijuana River Estuary. A stroll along the beach had us encountering a wealth of highly prized birds. In the marshes we had incredible close range encounters with the now split and highly prized **Ridgway's Rail**, the beach itself offered up adorable **Snowy Plovers** and out over the water the group worked hard to obtain

views of **Brown Booby** an excellent addition to almost everyone's ABA list. One other bird on the beach was a lingering **Pacific Golden-plover**. Though something of a needle in a haystack amongst the **Black-bellied Plovers**, co-leader Catherine Hamilton spotted the needle and the group were soon enjoying views of the bird.

A quick jaunt around San Diego bought us a few less expected winter hangers on like **Western Tanager** and included a productive five minute stop that added a vagrant **Thick-billed Kingbird** to the list of less expected species. Wending our way inland we spotted our last incredible bird for the day a **Zone-tailed Hawk** which paralleled the van. Joan's eagle eyes also spotted a **White-tailed Kite** while we were driving that a few of the van got on, but unfortunately a few did not.

We ended the day in the scenic vicinity of Anza Borrego, after a quick stop to view one of the borrego (Big Horn Sheep) that give the place its name. Here we found desert species like **Black-tailed Gnatcatcher** and **Verdin** but unfortunately most of the group only managed to hear **Crissal Thrasher** rather than see it - though David had a brief view as it dropped through some desert mesquite scrub in failing light.



Day 3

Our third day started in the vicinity of the Salton Sea with great views of a **Burrowing Owl** that was using the roadside culverts of a farm just a stone's throw from our overnight hotel. From there we were on to one of the areas new wetland conservation complexes where amongst other things we picked up some local specialties: **Gila Woodpecker** and **Abert's Towhee** as well as a species that is rapidly expanding in the valley: **Neotropic Cormorant**.

Our next stop was the visitor's center at the Salton Sea. Here we picked up a couple of great birds at the feeder including killer views of **Gambel's Quail** and a diminutive new dove for the trip **Common Ground Dove**. It was another beautiful day and though we were thankful that it wasn't the 115 degrees it can sometimes be in summer the hike out on the Rock Hill Trail was certainly warm enough as temperatures touched almost eighty degrees. The hike though was well worth the effort though as we soon laid our eyes on some distinctive adult **Yellow-footed Gulls** at the only spot you are likely to find them in the US. They are by no means guaranteed at this time of year as they mainly wander to the Salton Sea post breeding - that said a handful often do winter along the sea and it is certainly a more pleasant time to see them. As an oasis in the desert there is always much else to see and we enjoyed a wealth of shorebirds and ducks. Rails were a little less cooperative with both **Sora** and **Virginia Rail** heard but the Virginia stubbornly refusing to put in an appearance.

With a few miles to cover and hot high noon upon us we headed north for the day and got ourselves set for a trek out to the wilds of Kern County the following morning, with just enough time for a quick stop to stretch legs and scoop up **Red-breasted Sapsucker**, **Western Kingbird** and **Lark Sparrow**. While whiling away drive time we were indebted to Peter's various iPhone apps and gadgets to keep us up to date on what was happening in the rest of the world around us and to Irving's droll sense of humor, not that we couldn't rely on Mary Lou for a witty quip either.

Day 4

Day four started with a chilly pre-dawn run out to a desert oasis in Kern County. Our target, what a friend of mine has dubbed Sasquatch Quail, but what most know simply as **Mountain Quail**. Those who have sought an audience with this bird know how difficult of a quarry it can be and for

that reason there was much rejoicing in the van when not only did one appear on the side of the road in front of us but that it ran right out in front of the van and then scampered away uphill alongside the van before disappearing back into the ether in view long enough to provide for some decent record shots from the quick camera draws in the van Irving and Maggie. In fact these two were rapidly becoming the official tour photographers.

Next stop was Lancaster CA. Here a roadside stop provided incredible extended views of the much sought after **Le Conte's Thrasher** (two difficult birds tracked down in one morning!) other exciting sightings that morning included a number of stunning and uncommon **Ferruginous Hawks** and great scoped views of a perched **Golden Eagle**. The other highlight of the morning was great comparison views of **Red-winged** and **Tricolored Blackbirds**. The Tricoloreds are a species of some current concern here in California and bird conservationists are concentrating much energy on.

Rising temperatures in the afternoon saw us winging our way north in order to set ourselves up for the next day and a date with another 'California' bird: The California Condor.

Day 5

It was nice to wake on day five and be able to leave all of our bags sitting in our hotel room for the first time as we stayed for two nights in King's City. First stop of day was at the incredible Pinnacles National Park. The youngest of our national parks, our visit here allowed Peter to get a stamp for his passport collection. Birds were to be found aplenty and there were an abundance of many species including incredible numbers of stunning **Varied Thrushes**. As well as the **Varied Thrushes** there were good numbers of **Golden-crowned Sparrows**, frolicking **California Quail** and our first **California Thrashers** for the tour. I think this was many participants stop of the trip just for the sheer number and diversity of birds here and it was a stop made all the sweeter thanks to our picking out two stunning **California Condors** as they roosted on a nearby hillside.

With the local subspecies of **Red-shouldered Hawk** under our belt and **Acorn** and **Nuttall's Woodpeckers** enjoyed we swung north to Monterey Bay. Our route north yielded a few incredible sightings including roadside **Bobcat**, a pair of **Golden Eagles** (with prey) and **Lewis's Woodpeckers**. Stunning!

The afternoon stops allowed us to enjoy some rocky shoreline specialties: **Surfbird**, **Black Oystercatcher** and **Black Turnstone** and a couple of cool gulls: **Heermann's**, **Mew** and **Thayer's**. Highlight though for many must have been the group of adorable **Sea Otters**. Though not quite as adorable, three species of cormorant were nice to compare: **Pelagic**, **Brandt's** and **Double-crested**. We also worked hard to pick out a few nice land birds at a local cemetery including charming **Chestnut-backed Chickadees** and darling little **Pygmy Nuthatches** as well as our first **Hutton's Vireos**.



We ended our day with a short nighttime run up hill for owls. Much perseverance saw us finally rewarded with memorable views of **Northern Pygmy Owl**. Though not seen we also heard **Northern Saw-whet**, **Great Horned** and **Western Screech Owl** a pretty nice haul for what was essentially less than an hour's owling.

Day 6

Day six saw us return to Pinnacles. Though it through something of a wrench into the rest of the days plans the group decided that they wanted more time to appreciate the **California Condors** and the consequences for the rest of the day be damned. Again we enjoyed another great morning with these majestic birds and even got some decent flight views as one of the six in view flew around the hillside they were roosting on - the wow moment Irving had been waiting for. It amused the rest of the group no end though that David was almost as happy with his **Merriam's Chipmunk** sighting as much as the condor - that said it certainly is a cute and charismatic little thing.

The rest of the day was then spent heading south with a few nice little stops thrown in for good measure. These included some wonderful encounters with accommodating **Yellow-billed Magpies** at a very cool little rest stop, a brief stop to enjoy one of the incredible **Monarch Butterfly** roosts that can be found along the California coast and a little migrant trap that yielded a little lost **Black-and-White Warbler**.

Day 7

A nice night in Camarillo had us nicely set for our boat day out to Santa Cruz Island. The Channel Islands are often described as the "Galapagos of California". Though only an hour and a half from the mainland, it hosts a range of endemic species and subspecies of flora and fauna that are found there and nowhere else. California Coastal waters get deep pretty quickly and so that short ride out to the island can often be profitable for near shore pelagic and alcids. We were not to be disappointed on the day with a host of nice sightings on the way over including an amazing view of



a **Pomarine Jaeger** dumping a gull into the water in front of our very eyes. Other nice pick-ups for the day included **Common Murre**, **Rhinoceros Auklet**, and **Cassin's Auklet** and eventually nice views of one of the world's rarest alcids **Scripps's Murrelet**.

As we pulled up to Santa Cruz a rare **Long-tailed Duck** flew past us out of the harbor - one of just two records for SoCal that year! There was little time to bask in glory though as we were soon on the island and off in search of other treasures. These included the relatively recently split **Island Scrub Jay** and the adorable **Island Gray Fox**. Some of the group took the informative tour of the Nature Conservancy Property (Jack, Peter and I lasting longest on this fairly demanding hike) and some stayed by the wetlands right at the point of disembarkation, but both groups were eventually rewarded with great views of our intended quarry as well as getting to see some of the cool plants and animals that call the islands home including localized subspecies of a number of birds. The ride home was uneventful apart from picking up some nice views of the much localized **Black-vented Shearwater**.

On the road back to the hotel we finally spotted a **White-tailed Kite** that the whole van got to see and an evening at our newly favorite Irish Pub in Camarillo was topped off with a beer or two to celebrate. Maggie and Jack had promised us a beer for every life bird they had on the trip but thankfully we didn't try and hold them to that as it could have gotten quite messy.

Day 8

Day eight was our last full day of birding. Our early morning stop saw us pick up a trio of beautiful woodpeckers: **Williamson's**, **Red-breasted** and **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** (a rare vagrant for the region). From there we worked our way up into the mountains for a wealth of mountain specialties including the aptly named **Mountain Chickadee** and one of the country's most beautiful and highly prized woodpeckers: **White-headed**. **Steller's** and **Western Scrub Jays** squabbled over the same feeders and daring **Merriam's Chipmunks** picked up the scraps.

A further stop yielded another recent split in the dark race of the recently split **Bell's Sparrow** (once Sage) a few nice **Fox Sparrows** and a couple of heard only **Mountain Quail**. We spent the rest of our day picking off a few more specialties like **Wrentit**, **Rufous-crowned Sparrow** and **White-throated Swift**. The tour ended on a cacophonous high note as we visited the incredible Pasadena Parrot roosts. Though only the **Red-crowned Parrot** is countable we were pleased to find **Yellow-headed** and **Lilac-crowned** birds in the mix.

A great week in Southern California with some long days and many miles travelled but with some incredible and memorable sightings that made the whole thing a richly rewarding experience.



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