



# Southern California

February 21 – March 1, 2015

Trip Report & Species List





Sunrise Birding LLC

www.sunrisebirding.com

# SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA TRIP REPORT

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Leaders: Luke Tiller, Gina Nichol & Steve Bird

## Day 1 – February 21

We started our day with pickups at Los Angeles International Airport and I welcomed both tour participants and Sunrise Birding owner and co-leader for the trip respectively: Gina Nichol and Steve Bird.

Our first stop of the tour went about as swimmingly as possible as we stepped out the van and almost immediately we had a **Spotted Dove**, one of our targets here and the first bird I'd looked at on the trip! Once a common introduced species, this bird had recently changed status from common and reliable, to uncommon but reliable, to uncommon and unreliable and had taken some scouting to find pre-tour. Also lurking at this rather inauspicious Los Angeles Park was another nice dove, this time a native one, **Inca Dove**. The red flash of their flight feathers gave them away as we searched for and found the birds along the shrub line of the railroad tracks.



We traveled from urban LA to a real beauty right on the coast, Bolsa Chica. Here we reveled in a number of waterfowl and shorebird sightings with nice comparisons of species including **Eared** and **Horned Grebe**, **Brandt's** and **Double-crested Cormorant**, and **Brown** and **American White Pelican**. We also picked out a nice specialty of the site: **Reddish Egret**.

Further stops included another park that finally yielded the newly countable **Scaly-breasted Munia** and a picturesque spot to tally our first couple of 'California specialties': the relatively common **California Towhee** and much more of a specialist in its habitat requirements: **California Gnatcatcher**.  
(Photo: Steve Bird)

## Day 2 – February 22

This day started the day with killer views of a species that didn't exist when I wrote the trip outline for the tour: **Ridgway's Rail**. It was interesting to compare this comparatively brightly colored rail to the Clapper Rails with which most people had experienced.

Next stop was a beach stroll which offered adorable **Snowy Plovers** and, after picking it up in flight, an uncommon lingering **Pacific Golden Plover**. Out over the water we scoped and picked up a few birds in the surf which, though most were distant, eventually included decent views of a **Brown Booby**, an ABA bird for most concerned.

From there a couple of quick stops provided a few more nice birds for many participants' life and ABA lists. First up we worked hard to finally get great views of a **Harris's Sparrow** - perhaps one of the more charismatic sparrows on the continent and difficult to find beyond its usual range. Next up, we tracked down a **Thick-billed Kingbird** (Photo: Gina Nichol) - an accommodating bird that we'd also picked up on the prior tour.





In the afternoon we ran into some inclement weather before hitting a couple of spots for birds like **Phainopepla** (Photo: Gina Nichol) and **Costa's Hummingbird** and enjoying the beautiful scenery of Anza Borrego State Park.

### Day 3 – February 23

Our day started by picking out a number of **Burrowing Owls** that were using the farm fields around our hotel (and more importantly the roadside drainage ditches) as nesting sites. From there we were on to a wetland site that had **Common Gallinules** and **American Coots** and also revealed a **Neotropic Cormorant** or two. Another urban park provided our first and only **Gila Woodpeckers** and **White-winged Doves** for the tour.

At the Salton Sea Visitors Center, we enjoyed **Common Ground Doves**, **Abert's Towhees** and **Gambel's Quail** and surrounding scrub provided habitat for **Verdin** and **Black-tailed Gnatcatcher**.

A hike out on Rock Hill Trail had us arrive to find that the system that had caused the inclement weather the previous day had also disturbed the usual gull congregations and there were suddenly no **Yellow-footed Gulls** to be found on their usual island roosts. Plan B was rushed into action and, though it ate into the rest of our days birding, we finally tracked a few down as they loafed with other gulls off on some flats of the Salton Sea itself. Here we also picked up impressive numbers of shorebirds, ducks and a few more **Neotropic Cormorants** - a still relatively new arrival in the local avifauna.



With the day eaten into somewhat by the extended Gull getting excursion, we winged our way north to set ourselves up for an early start the next day.

Photo:  
Salton Sea by  
Gina Nichol.

## Day 4 – February 24



An early start and pre-dawn breakfast had us on our way to a desert oasis that provided for numerous stunning looks at **Lawrence's Goldfinch**, a bird with a beautiful call that sounds like tinkling bells. We also had great looks at **California Thrasher**, **Bell's Sparrow** (Photo: Gina Nichol) and both **Rock** and **Cactus Wren** but no sign of the hoped for **Mountain Quail**. All of these against the backdrop of the weird moonscape habitat of Kern that has doubled as the backdrop for a fair number of alien planets in its film career.

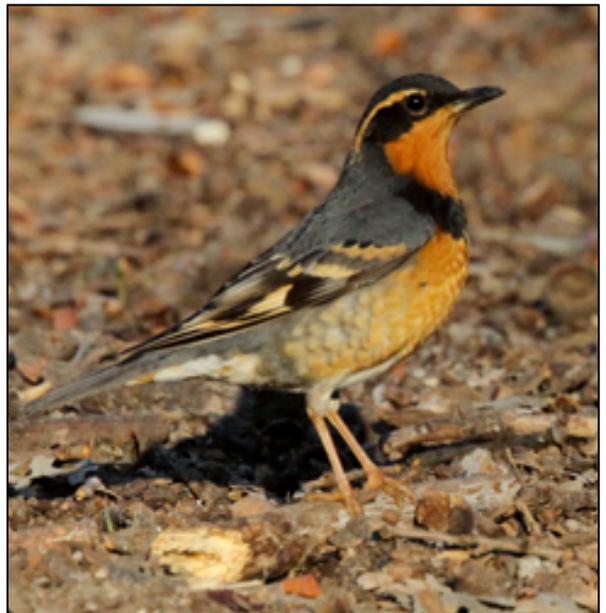
Next stop was in Lancaster. A roadside pullover had us find some highly prized **Tricolored Blackbirds** and some ever beautiful **Mountain Bluebirds** which

were a big hit with all participants. From there we were on to a somewhat scruffy desert park which revealed a couple of very cooperative **Ross's** and **Greater White-fronted Geese**. The park also had a couple of interesting land birds including both '**Slate-colored**' type **Dark-eyed Junco** and a '**Myrtle**' **Yellow-rumped Warbler**.

Our day ended with a trip to the excellent Firestone Walker brewery where we all had a wonderful evening trying out a few of their excellent brews.

## Day 5 – February 25

Our morning started at Pinnacles National Park, a site that is beautiful and more importantly extremely birdy. Many **Varied Thrushes** (Photo: Steve Bird) were enjoyed and though they usually are renowned for skulking in the shadows, at least a few put on a show for the cameras. All around us birds frolicked and we picked up **Red-breasted Sapsucker**, **Acorn Woodpecker**, **California Quail** and huge numbers of **Golden-crowned Sparrows**. The highlight of the site though surely was the **California Condor**. We enjoyed prolonged scope views as they preened on their roost sites. Now countable for your ABA lists, this bird has always been worth searching out in my opinion.



Next stop was a little spot that held **Lewis's Woodpecker** that we had uncovered on the previous tour and though we had to work a little for it they eventually gave themselves up. Next we pulled over after picking up a **Golden Eagle** that flew straight over our lead van before alighting on a nearby hillside, not bad for what was essentially a drive to the next stop.

Our afternoon was spent enjoying the birds of Monterey Bay. Shorebirds like **Surfbird** and **Black Oystercatcher** were seen easily but the winds had picked up and we had to work particularly hard for any land birds including **Hutton's Vireo**, **Chestnut-backed Chickadee** and **Townsend's**

**Warbler.** We finished our day with a run up to elevation to seek out a few owls but with the owls being uncooperative and people ready for food we left after hearing **Northern Pygmy Owl** but without a sighting.

### Day 6 – February 26

We started our day heading south from King City. A drizzly roadside stop brought us nice views of **Yellow-billed Magpies** as well as more **Golden-crowned Sparrows**, a **Red-breasted Sapsucker** and some **Western Bluebirds**.

As we fled south beyond the grey skies we stopped to check out a couple of beautiful coastal spots. As well as picking up many of the regular coastal goodies at the particularly charming Estero Bluffs: **Pacific Loon**, **Surf Scoter**, **Brant** we also tallied a long staying **Harlequin Duck**. This wasn't just a great bird but also one that the group really worked as a team to get on and then share with the rest of the group - good birding and great fun!

From there we stopped briefly to enjoy the impressive **Monarch Butterfly** (Photo: Carmelit Gefen) roost in Oceano and to bird a couple of migrant traps where we uncovered a couple of new species for the tour **Purple Finch** and **Downy Woodpecker**.



Last stop of the day was at the beautiful UC Santa Barbara campus and though we had no luck with the long-staying Tufted Duck we did stumble upon a previously reported **Orchard Oriole**. Interestingly the first Tufted Duck in many years had just been found in Connecticut and thankfully it was obliging enough for those Connecticut based participants (the majority) to see it after returning from this trip.

### Day 7 – February 27

This day saw us heading out to the “Galapagos of California”, the Channel Islands. I had warned the group that though just a short ride the water got deep fast and could be pretty rough. Unlike the previous tour that rode out into glass like calm water, we managed to hit perhaps some of the roughest seas in recent times. Still, though all a little damp, we arrived on the Santa Cruz all in one piece and with a few decent birds under our belt including both **Parasitic** and **Pomarine Jaegers**. The rough water had not made for great viewing conditions on the way out. Still we tallied **Rhinoceros** and **Cassin’s Auklets** had views of **Scripps’s Murrelet** from the rocking boat.

As soon as we stepped onto the island we were treated to the incredible view of both **Bald** and **Golden Eagles** as they soared overhead with a pair of **Ospreys** - incredible. Actually the Channel Islands are one of the few places in the world where people aren't so fond of Golden Eagles, given their proclivity to hunting the endangered Island Gray Fox. A Bald Eagle reintroduction plan was part of an attempt to keep them off of the islands during nesting season.

Again the group split up and some went on the guided walk while others spent some time around the wetlands near where we had disembarked. All eventually enjoyed good views of both the **Island Scrub Jay** and adorable little **Island Gray Fox** (Photo: Gina Nichol) as well as a stunning **Pigeon Guillemot** before re-boarding the boat.



On the way the seas were again pretty rough but the light was good and the captain rode the waves carefully. The combination of great light and a smoother ride allowed us to eventually get great views of 16 **Scripps's Murrelets** and some close **Black-vented Shearwaters** - a great end to a memorable day.

### Day 8 – February 28

Our last full day birding saw us up early to pick up **Williamson's Sapsucker** at a lowland park before we ventured up into the mountains. Here we started with another highly prized woodpecker in the shape of a **White-headed Woodpecker** - perhaps two of the continent's more stunning woodpeckers seen in just one morning.

Other stops also revealed **Pygmy Nuthatch**, **Mountain Chickadee** and both **Western Scrub** and **Steller's Jay**. After a couple of colder stops at higher elevation we were actually forced to somewhat turn tail by some potential snowy weather that was rolling in above 6000 feet. No need to worry. We just dropped down below the weather and took a last chance saloon shot at perhaps one of the continents more difficult to see species: Mountain Quail.



Though in theory quite common at the right altitude and often not difficult to hear, we had no luck thus far on tour with **Mountain Quail** (Photo: Steve Bird). I had tried a spot when I scouted a week or so prior to the tour so I was encouraged to at least hear what sounded like relatively close birds. That said there was no guarantee even from there that we would have any chance of seeing them. As we slowly honed in on where their calls seemed to be coming from Steve suddenly exclaimed that he had them. From there we got out views for the whole group, then put the birds in the scope and eventually gained some pretty decent photographs of them - an amazing experience for the whole group.

It almost seemed like that would be a fitting place to just end the tour, but we had a rather prosaic finale as we searched out, and

with some difficulty finally saw our first **Wrentits** (Photo: Steve Bird) of the trip. After that everyone was happy to end the day early and go get themselves washed and ready for a fun evening at an authentic local Sichuan restaurant. On the way, we passed by one of the famous Red-crowned Parrot roosts in the city.

Thanks to all of the participants whose good humor and enthusiasm added greatly to our trip! We look forward to traveling with you again soon.

Report by Luke Tiller

