



Sunrise Birding LLC
Southern California

January 28 – February 5, 2017

TRIP REPORT

Photos and report by Luke Tiller



Photos: Ridgway's Rail, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Island Scrub Jay by Luke Tiller.



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Day one:

We started our tour searching the streets of Compton for a rapidly declining, but much sought after introduced bird species: **Spotted Dove**. After expending a little time walking a likely neighborhood looking for these attractive doves we were returning towards our vehicle when one zipped past us and eventually popped up on a roadside wire. We soon had a couple pinned down for obliging looks and a couple of photos. A nice start to our adventures.

Next stop was the West San Gabriel River Parkway Nature Trail. Here we picked up another attractive introduced bird in the shape of a flock of recently countable **Scaly-breasted Munias**. As well as the Munias, we managed to pick off a few other nice species including the newly split and rechristened **California Scrub Jay** and a “**Sooty**” **Fox Sparrow** among a flock of the ubiquitous **White-crowned Sparrows**.

After bolting down a quick lunch we were on to perhaps one of the jewels in Southern California’s birding sites crown: Bolsa Chica. A hotspot for birding almost at any time of year, this site often provides great views of desired species. It’s also a well-known hangout for photographers who like to take advantage of the birds often close approach. Here we enjoyed a wealth of beautiful shorebirds, waders, waterfowl and more including **Marbled Godwit**, **American White Pelican**, **Reddish Egret** and “**Western**” **Willet**. We ended our day at Upper Newport Bay where we enjoyed great looks at a pair of **California Gnatcatchers**. A successful end to a fruitful day’s birding!

Day two:

We started our day winging our way southwards, stopping almost right along the Mexican border at Tijuana Slough. Here we picked up our next local specialty in the form of a stunning **Ridgway’s Rail**. Recently split from the eastern Clapper Rail this bird provided great views out in the open at high tide as it weaved between the marsh grasses in front of us.

Our next targets were a couple of plover species. First out among the sand dunes we eeked out rewarding views of a rare overwintering **Pacific Golden Plover** (Photo) and on our walk



back to the car we picked up a large group of unbearably cute **Snowy Plovers**. Though a long hike, it was a rewarding one. We also picked up a few good species out on the water including **Pelagic Cormorant** and perhaps North America's most resplendent gull: **Heerman's Gull**.

With target species under our belt we jetted off to a couple of other local spots to see what we could find. First stop was a rather unassuming ballfield that among the throngs of Sunday soccer players yielded us both stunning **Vermilion Flycatchers** and rather more cryptic **Common Ground Doves**. The next stop, a bird and butterfly garden, produced a brilliant and unexpected **Green-tailed Towhee**, a **Red-naped Sapsucker** and a **Hutton's Vireo** among its highlights.

Last stop in suburban San Diego was for a long returning winter vagrant in the shape of a **Thick-billed Kingbird**. This year I was disappointed to discover that the bird's favorite tree had been given an extensive trim, however with some effort the group were finally rewarded with scoped views of the bird, away from its usual perch.

With a collection of great birds under our belt we set off on the road for the desert, whiling away the midday hours in the car. Our next birding stop was at Tamarisk Grove campground, which along with the nearby Yaqui Wells seep creates something of a trap for migrant birds in season. That said you never know quite what the place will produce and we were happy to pick up a few new trip birds in the shape of a **Lark Sparrow** mixed in with a group of **White-crowned Sparrows** (photo) and a handful of seemingly out of place **Western Bluebirds**.



Our day ended with a visit to a local wastewater treatment plant, it isn't a real birding trip without a visit to at least one in my opinion. Though it was somewhat quiet on the hoped-for desert bird front (beyond a number of **Phainopepla**), a jaunty **Wilson's Snipe** certainly made for an incongruous find slap bang in the middle of this desert environs.

Day three:

We started our day at the (in)famous Salton Sea. Though a great birding site, it is not among the most scenic or beautiful that Southern California has to offer, especially when summer daytime highs hit 110+ degrees. Our winter morning visit however started with relatively cool temps and a mix of nice bird finds including a couple of crowd

pleasing **Burrowing Owls**.

Next stop was a park in Brawley where our targets were several species that reach the very western portion of their range including **Abert's Towhee**, **Gambel's Quail** and **Gila Woodpecker**. After picking up these expected species, we spent a little time playing hide-and-seek with a sapsucker round the park. We finally managed to nail down the ID and added a somewhat misplaced **Red-naped Sapsucker** to our list of species. Before leaving the park, we tracked down a previously illusive **Costa's Hummingbird** by staking out a bunch of likely looking flowering shrubs.

Unlike previous years, we were met at Sonny Bono by relatively cool temps. This made hiking out on the Red Hill Trail a little more pleasant than usual. Here we were soon adding new birds to our trip list including a few **Ross's Geese** that were residing among the throngs of **Snow Geese**. Along the trail we picked off some desert species including gnatcatcher number three for the trip: **Black-tailed**. Among the mixed flocks also lurked cheerful **Verdin**. We checked the ponds sifting through the regularly occurring gulls to finally pick out a rare wintering **Yellow-footed Gull** and an almost equally uncommon **Lesser Black-backed Gull**. Adding the **Neotropical Cormorant** and **Greater Roadrunners** we had seen heading over to Sonny Bono meant we had had another successful morning of bird seeking under our belts.

Again we used the "hot high noon" hours of reduced bird activity to eat up a few miles as we wended our way northwards. We finished our day in Wrightwood atop a snow-capped mountain. Amazing that we had essentially gone from a morning in the desert to frolicking in the snow in the dying hours of the day. Here we were rewarded with mixed flocks of birds including **Pygmy Nuthatch**, **Mountain Chickadee** and **Dark-eyed Junco**. Scene stealing however was a **White-headed Woodpecker** that capped off a great end to a great day.

Day four:

We spent our fourth day in the Antelope Valley. Here we sought out denizens of the high desert and species that utilize the agricultural areas here in winter. Our first highlights were the nice sized flocks of **Mountain Bluebirds** that were scattered around the turf farms of Lancaster. It was a good year for these birds in the Antelope Valley and we encountered several sizeable flocks. As well as the bluebirds we soon added another "mountain" species to our hit list: **Mountain Plover**. These uncommon plovers of the short grass prairie have declined along with their habitat and are always a treat to see. Almost as exciting were a small group of **Sage Thrashers** that showed nicely in the early morning light. Next stop was a little golf course on the edge of town. A personal favorite spot of mine it always turns up something interesting, in this case an out of place **Great Egret** and a roosting **Great Horned Owl**.





Our mid-morning stop was out on the eastern edge of town, where we went to seek out **Ferruginous Hawks** (photo). Uncommon almost anywhere in the country these birds are probably as common here as they are anywhere in the US. We eventually had great looks at more than a half dozen birds. We also picked up a beautiful rufous-morph **Red-tailed Hawk** as well as other common farmland denizens: **Western Meadowlark**, **American Pipit** and **Horned Lark**.

After lunch at a great local taqueria we headed over to Prime Desert Woodland Preserve. Here we connected with a few more desert specialists including a particularly accommodating **Cactus Wren** and an equally obliging **Ladder-backed Woodpecker**. This beautifully maintained little park is a real gem in downtown Lancaster and great for local desert specialties.

Next stop on the day was Apollo Park, a town park that is a real favorite with LA birders especially during migration. With a mix of tamarisk, pine and a couple of large ponds, this desert oasis always provides birders with an odd and interesting mix of species which this particular time included **Greater White-fronted Goose**, **Hooded Merganser**, **Herring Gull** (rare for the park) and “**Pink-sided**” **Dark-eyed Junco**.

We ended our day in the northwest corner of LA County searching out a couple more specialist species. Here we picked up the recently split **Bell's Sparrow**, a beautiful bird that defies the description of sparrows as little brown jobs. High point though here had to be tracking down at least four rare and highly sought after **Le Conte's Thrashers** just after sunset. A fly in of a few hundred **Snow Geese** and a Coyote stood in the middle of the field nearby all added to the wonderful atmosphere as the sun set around us.

Day five:

Our day started with a quick stop on the edge of Los Angeles County to pick up a **Clark's Grebe** and round out our *aechmophorus* grebes of the world list. Our next stop was a fortuitous one when pulled over to the side of the road to quickly check some directions Heidi spotted a small covey of **California Quail** feeding right beside us! As well as being a new species for the trip the California Quails also allowed us to line up **California Condor** as ABA species number 600 for Chris and Dean! They took a little while to track down, but we eventually had enjoyable scoped views of an incredible 18 birds! It really speaks to the reintroduction programs success when you consider that there were only 27 left of these magnificent beasts left when the last of this species were taken in from the wild (to start a captive breeding program). Almost as stunning was the incredible habitat at Bitter Creek NWR, a mix of beautiful rolling hills and

incredible deep ravines.

Our final highlight at Bitter Creek was an incredible looking Jerusalem Cricket that Frances discovered while we explored a little used campground! A truly weird and wonderful little creature!

After lunch we headed out to one of my favorite non-birding sites in Southern California – the Monarch Grove at Pismo Beach. Here tens of thousands of the pacific coast population of **Monarch**



Butterfly spend their winter. Even on a down year, it's quite the spectacle. Adding to the excitement here were our first **Chestnut-backed Chickadees** of the tour and a wayward **Dusky-capped Flycatcher** that was whistling somewhat mournfully from a streamside willow.

A couple of quick stops allowed us to workshop a few of the common gull species including **Glaucous-winged Gull** as well as pick up a **Townsend's Warbler** and **Hutton's Vireo** or two from a nice little mixed species flock.

We ended our day at a Wastewater Treatment plant where we nailed down a nice mix of oak chaparral species including: **Nuttall's Woodpecker**, **Oak Titmouse** and **Acorn Woodpecker**. On the water was a mix of ducks including a few **Wood Ducks**, which were new for the trip too. Prize species here was however our first **Yellow-billed Magpies** of the tour, perched in a tall oak tree. We finally worked good scoped views of these awesome and highly localized corvid species.

Day six:

After a good night's rest at a quaint little hotel, we were on the road early again. Today wet weather had finally caught up with us. After years of drought California was finally getting some much-needed rain, it wasn't however what we needed for our day's birding. That said we managed to successfully dodge showers for almost all of the day. Swinging west, our first stop was a quick roadside jaunt for **Wrentit**. Though not uncommon this bird is certainly skulky, so we were all pleased to get excellent prolonged views of the species. Next stop was at an exceptionally pretty stretch of coastline. Here among the rocky outcroppings we picked out a host of exciting birds including **Black Oystercatcher**, **Black Turnstone** and a long staying group of **Harlequin Duck**!

Now winging our way back south, dodging rain showers, our next stop was at a pleasant town park. Here we picked up a couple of new species including an obliging **Rufous-crowned Sparrow** and a distant **White-tailed Kite** (a species seemingly hard

hit by the drought). Among the throng of migrant swallows that were hunting out over the park lake we picked out **Violet-green Swallow** for our ever-growing trip list. Heading all the way south now into Ventura County we ended our day with a somewhat productive short trip to the beach before rounding out the day at a little wetland area where we both listened to and saw **Sora** and **Virginia Rails**. Another magical end to the day.

Day seven:

This day was taken up with our journey to and adventures on Channel Islands National Park. The boat ride out to the park provides opportunity to look for shoreline birds on the harbor jetties, seabirds on the ride to the island and then the island endemics once ashore.

Unlike your dedicated pelagic, the boat to the island doesn't stop for birds so views tend to be fleeting of many species. That said the captain usually obliges people by slowing down for dolphins (Common White-sided) and whales (Gray) which also means there are opportunities to look for birds too.

Before leaving the harbor we had added a new species to our trip list in the form of a **Black Skimmer** that was loafing on the beach with a group of gulls and terns. Some of the easiest found birds included large numbers of **Pacific Loons**, just outside the harbor walls. As we got further from the coastline we began to add more pelagic species including **Black-vented Shearwater**. Arcing shearwaters almost always show well, but alcids give themselves up less easily. Surprisingly common on the day were good numbers of stunning **Rhinoceros Auklet** (photo), which were relatively easy to pick out both on size and darker coloration. On the surprisingly rare front just the one **Common Murre** from the whole trip.



Once on the island we had soon pinned down a couple of endemic **Island Scrub Jay**. These beautiful big blue jays are a real treat, especially since they have been split into a separate species from their mainland cousins. The rest of the time we spent loafing on the island enjoying the incredible flora and fauna and an amazing ritualized display involving bowing, nictitating membrane fluttering and odd vocalizations by a group of **Common Raven** – quite mesmerizing.

We also managed to enjoy decent views of a couple of **Island Fox** (*Urocyon littoralis*). This tiny (and adorable) relative of the Grey Fox is endemic to the islands and has bounced back from the brink thanks to a well-planned conservation effort. We first saw one just near the dock at Prisoner's Harbor then spotted another skulking around unseen by loading campers which we picked from Santa Cruz Islands other dock at Scorpion Harbor.

Highlight on the island had to be the **Island Scrub Jay** that Jean discovered along the road while upping her "steps" for the day while most of the group took a little afternoon nap waiting for the boat. It provided for both nice views and photos for those inclined to hike up after it.

The ferry ride back always seems to be a little more productive for quality bird sightings of seabirds and I think we all managed to eventually get good on the water views of **Scripps's Murrelet**, **Cassin's Auklet** and more **Rhinoceros Auklets**. The end of the trip was highlighted by a stunning flyby **Pomarine Jaeger**. Any day out on the water is a good one in my opinion and this day was no different.

Day eight:

Our last day together, and thanks to successful run thus far, we had little remaining on our list of target species.

Our day started with a quick stop at a park that is renowned as a great site to find wintering sapsuckers. With two species already under our belt we only really needed one more to complete our list of likely birds. It didn't take long to track down a spectacular male **Williamson's Sapsucker** and we enjoyed prolonged scope views of this stunning bird. Not to be outdone we also had good views of a striking Red-breasted too. Another unexpected highlight at the park was a dark-morph **Swainson's Hawk** circling over the park.

The rest of our day saw us searching the San Gabriel Mountains for some of the specialties that call the area home. Here we finally got some good looks at a **Steller's Jay** and enjoyed views of both **Pygmy** and **White-breasted Nuthatches** (another potential future split). Birds however appeared to be generally few and somewhat far between on the day – perhaps thanks to the fairly deep carpet of snow in many areas and perhaps also thanks to the coming and going of many people enjoying a romp in that snow.

We ended our last day heading downslope and into the neighborhoods of Pasadena. Here we witnessed the incredible gathering of feral parrots at their wintering roosts. The sight and sound is something to behold as perhaps a few thousand birds descend onto just a small area of town at dusk. The majority of birds involved are **Red-crowned**

Parrots a species that is in some trouble in their native range (Mexico). It is hoped that these countable non-native wild birds in LA may play a part in some future reintroduction program. Among the abundant Red-crowned are a growing number of **Lilac-crowned Parrots**, small numbers of **Yellow-headed Parrots** (which are easily spotted due to their coloration, vocalizations and size) and smaller numbers of **Red-ored Parrots**. We managed to find all four of these somewhat expected species and we enjoyed them greatly, rounding out our species for the trip.

We ended our day with another nice meal before we finally said out goodbyes. A wonderful week with a wonderful group of birders that showcased the brilliant landscape and birds of Southern California and unlike previous years we even got a taste of what winters in the state should be like. We ended up with a record tally of 221 species for this trip (216 ABA countable). A pretty impressive feat for the US in January/February.

Luke Tiller, February 2017



California Thrasher. Photo by Luke Tiller.



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