



Tropical Audubon Society



Southern California Birding

June 13-21, 2015

Leaders: Brian Rapoza and Paul Bithorn

Participants: Ted and Barbara Center, Lorena Siqueira, Linda Cames, Lois Cross, Eusebio Andres and Tatiana Tapia

Saturday, June 13: After leaders and participants met at a car rental facility near Los Angeles International Airport and our rental vehicles were packed, we headed south to Upper Newport Bay Nature Preserve in Orange County. **Western Gull**, Vaux's Swift and Great-tailed Grackle were among the birds seen en-route. In coastal sage scrub on the hillsides surrounding the preserve, we found one of the trip's top target species, California Gnatcatcher. Other species seen while driving through the preserve included Western Grebe, Caspian, Forster's and Least Tern, Allen's Hummingbird, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Western Kingbird, Yellow-breasted Chat, California Towhee, Song and Savannah Sparrow (Belding's race) and Lesser Goldfinch. The preserve has a large population of Ridgeway's Rail (recently split from Clapper Rail), but time of day may have factored into our inability to find any.



We then backtracked north to George F Canyon Nature Preserve on the Palos Verde Peninsula in Los Angeles County. A short walk on one of

the preserve's trails added Downy Woodpecker, Willow Flycatcher, Cassin's Kingbird, Common Raven, Bushtit, Bewick's Wren, Orange-crowned Warbler, Western Tanager, Spotted Towhee, Bullock's Oriole and House Finch to our trip list. Common Peafowl were heard in an adjacent neighborhood. We then continued north through Los Angeles' world-renowned traffic to Ventura (in Ventura County), our base for the next two nights.

Sunday, June 14: Island Packers provided our transportation today to Santa Cruz Island in Channel Islands National Park. Prior to the ferry's departure, we walked down to the beach at Ventura Harbor; Brown Pelican, Willet, Whimbrel and Heermann's Gull were among the species seen on the beach and jetties. A Pelagic Cormorant was found among the many Double-crested swimming in the harbor; a few harbor seals were also present and Cliff Swallows were flying overhead. Once underway, we spotted several California sea lions loafing on a channel marker outside the harbor. Not long after leaving the harbor, we encountered our first alcid, a late-for-the-season Common Murre. Soon,



our first Sooty Shearwaters came into view. Within minutes, a feeding flock of shearwaters numbering over a thousand were swirling around us; most were Sooty, with a few Pink-footed in the mix. Several Elegant Terns were also present, as were dozens of **common dolphin** and at least two humpback whales!

As Santa Cruz came into view, we spotted another unexpected alcid, this time Rhinoceros Auklet. Pigeon Guillemots began to appear as we neared the island. After dropping off most of the passengers at Scorpion Anchorage, the ferry continued to Prisoner's Harbor, where we disembarked. After a picnic lunch near the ferry dock, we took a short hike into the island's interior, where we soon crossed paths with an endemic **island gray fox**. It also didn't take long to locate our primary avian quarry, the endemic Island Scrub Jay. Other species found during our



exploration of the Prisoner's Harbor area included Black Oystercatcher (seen only by Brian), Acorn Woodpecker, Northern (Red-shafted) Flicker, Pacific-slope and Ash-throated Flycatcher, Bewick's Wren and Song and Rufous-crowned Sparrow (the latter heard often but only seen by a few participants).

On our return ferry ride to the mainland, seabirds were more dispersed than in the morning, but diversity was higher. At least two Scripp's Murrelets were encountered, as were several Rhinoceros Auklets. Among the hundreds of Sooty and handful of Pink-footed Shearwaters, we also picked out a few Black-vented Shearwaters. After arriving back at Ventura harbor but before heading back to our hotel, we made a quick stop at a pond near the mouth of the Santa Clara River, where we added Gadwall and Ruddy Duck, among other birds, to our growing trip list.



Monday, June 15: Today's itinerary took us from Ventura County up the coast on US 101 through Santa Barbara County to Arroyo Grande in San Luis Obispo County. We began the day at Arroyo Verde Park in Ventura, which provides access to foothills chaparral habitat via an extensive trail system. Birds found in the parking area as well as on the

trails we explored included Band-tailed Pigeon, Anna's Hummingbird, Black Phoebe, Western Scrub-Jay, **Wrentit**, California Thrasher, Dark-eyed Junco and Hooded Oriole.

Our next stop was Nojoqui Falls County Park in western Santa Barbara County; our drive led us past Refugio State Beach, where we were able to observe the ongoing cleanup from a recent oil spill. Though the trail to Nojoqui Falls was closed, we were still able to find a number of species typical of the area's moist woodland canyons, including Nuttall's and **Acorn Woodpecker**, Pacific-



slope Flycatcher, Hutton's, Cassin's and Warbling Vireo, Oak Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Western Bluebird and Yellow and Black-throated Gray Warbler (the latter heard only).



After lunch in Santa Maria, we continued north into San Luis Obispo County, stopping first at Oso Flaco Lake. In the willows leading to the lake's boardwalk system, we found Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Swainson's Thrush and Wilson's Warbler. Along the boardwalk, we added **Cinnamon Teal**, American White Pelican and Marsh Wren. Violet-

green Swallows were everywhere; we even witnessed feeding of babies perched precipitously in stands of bullrush.

We then proceeded to the cliffs at Shell Beach, where we found hundreds of roosting Brown Pelicans, smaller numbers of **Brandt's Cormorant** and Heermann's Gull. A flock of Surf Scoter and one or two Pigeon Guillemot were swimming offshore. Western Gull chicks of various sizes were observed on enormous rocks just a few yards away from the cliffs; a few participants spotted a hungry Peregrine Falcon hurtling by. We also found a Western Grebe that had hauled up on the beach below; it's not often that one gets to see this species on land.



The day's last stop was Santa Margarita Lake, north of San Luis Obispo. Several **Yellow-billed Magpie**, our second and final California endemic, were seen in farmland along the road to the lake; we also encountered our first California Quail along the way. At the lake, we found dozens of Clark's and Western Grebes. A small flock of Wild Turkey was

spotted as we departed from the lake and headed to our hotel in Arroyo Grande.

Tuesday, June 16: Leaving the coast behind, we headed east into the Sierra Madre range of interior Santa Barbara County, an area known as Condor Country. A couple of Yellow-billed Magpies were seen in the ranchlands along Highway 166, which follows the Cuyama River; a few participants spotted a Golden Eagle soaring above. Many **Horned Larks** were feeding along the first stretch of Cottonwood Canyon Road, which led us to Bates Canyon campground in the foothills of the mountains. Birds found in the vicinity of the primitive campground included Prairie Falcon, Acorn Woodpecker, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Western Scrub-Jay, Oak Titmouse, California Thrasher, Phainopepla and Black-headed Grosbeak.



Continuing east on Highway 166, we turned onto Cerro Noroeste Road, leading to Mount Pinos in Ventura County. Horned Larks and Western Meadowlarks were abundant along the lower stretch of this winding road. At a random stop in pinyon-juniper woodland higher up the road, participant Tatiana Tapia alerted us to a large bird soaring overhead. It was a **California Condor!** We celebrated this

fantastic sighting at a Mexican restaurant in the tiny village of Pine Mountain, then pressed on to the summit of Mt. Pinos. Birds seen around the restaurant included Stellar's Jay, Mountain Chickadee and Western Tanager. At McGill campground, in beautiful Jeffrey pine forest at an elevation of 7,500 feet, we found several more high-elevation species, including White-headed Woodpecker, Western Wood-Pewee, **Pygmy Nuthatch**,



Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler and Chipping Sparrow. At Iris Meadow, at the end of Mount Pinos Road, Clark's Nutcracker (seen only by Paul) and Cassin's Finch were added.

Leaving the Sierra Madre Mountains behind, we headed north into Kern County, making a quick stop in Bakersfield at Beale Park, a small city park where the introduced Spotted Dove is often reported. We failed to find the dove, but we did see a small flock of Rose-ringed Parakeets while there. We then drove east, through a dramatic canyon along the Kern River to Kernville, at the northern tip of Lake Isabella. A Bald Eagle and Vaux's Swifts were seen en route. Kernville is the gateway to the southern Sierra Nevada Mountains and would be our base for the next two nights.



Wednesday, June 17: Our first destination this morning was Kern River Preserve, in a beautiful riparian area near the eastern end of Lake Isabella. Birds seen at feeders and along the trails and entrance road at the preserve's headquarters included Red-shouldered Hawk, Anna's and Black-chinned Hummingbird, Ash-throated Flycatcher,

Bell's Vireo, Oak Titmouse, House Wren, Western Bluebird, Summer Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak, Tricolored Blackbird, **Bullock's Oriole** and Lesser Goldfinch. We then continued our circumnavigation of Lake Isabella, stopping briefly to observe a flock of American White Pelicans on the lake. Evidence of California's ongoing drought was obvious, as lake levels were dramatically lower than during the TAS tour in 2009.

As the day began to heat up, we headed to the Greenhorn Mountains, which border the western edge of Lake Isabella. We birded along a forest road at Greenhorn Summit, where we were joined by a local firefighter who once lived in Florida. Birds found here included Hammond's Flycatcher, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Western Tanager and **Dark-eyed Junco**. As



we made our way back to our vehicles, Ted and Barbara Center spotted a lone Lawrence's Goldfinch feeding along the road. Unfortunately, most of us only saw the bird once it took off down the road.



After lunch back in Kernville, we returned to the mountains, this time in Sequoia National Monument, north of Kernville in Tulare County. At the Trail of 100 Giants, a magnificent forest of sequoia and Jeffrey pine, we found Red-breasted Sapsucker (observed fly-catching), White-headed Woodpecker, **Stellar's Jay**, Mountain Chickadee and Western Tanager. At Holey Meadow

campground, we flushed thousands of grasshoppers as we walked through the meadow; Audubon's Warbler, Green-tailed Towhee and Fox Sparrow (Thick-billed) were seen here as well. We ended this splendid day with dinner at a local brewery back in Kernville.

Thursday, June 18: Before breakfast each of the last two mornings, some in the group searched for American Dippers in the fast-moving river directly behind our Kernville hotel. Though we came up empty both days, this morning's search added Merlin and Ladder-backed Woodpecker to the trip list. A long drive was on today's



itinerary, from Kernville across the Mohave Desert, Antelope Valley and San Bernardino Mountains to Indio, in Riverside County near the northern end of the Salton Sea. We made several quick stops along the way; one, near a cemetery in the town of Onyx, east of Lake Isabella, produced the trip's first Rock Wren. A side trip on the Chimney Peak National Backcountry By-way added Loggerhead Shrike, **Black-throated Sparrow** and Bell's Sparrow (recently split from Sage Sparrow). A Plumbeous Vireo was calling at our turn-around point at Chimney Creek campground, but the bird flew before most participants were able to see it. On our way back down this unpaved road through scenic but unforgiving country, we flushed a flock of Mountain Quail

from the roadside. Paul, driving the trailing van, decided to wait to see if any would return; this strategy quickly paid off for his passengers.



We stopped briefly at Walker Pass campground, hoping for Pinyon Jay, but found only **Bell's Sparrow**. The Pacific Crest Trail, featured in the recent film *Wild*, starring Reese Witherspoon and based on a true story, passes through this campground. We also crossed the PCT earlier at Lamont Peak, just before reaching Chimney Creek campground.

After lunch in Ridgecrest, we explored a small section of extremely arid Mohave desert habitat, home to the secretive Le Conte's Thrasher, but time of year as well as time of day were not in our favor and we came up empty. We flushed several black-tailed jackrabbits while searching. Our last few hours of daylight were spent making the long drive to Indio, our base for the next two nights. An ongoing forest fire in the adjacent San Bernardino Mountains created a thick haze over the area; these smoky conditions persisted for our entire stay.

Friday, June 19: Circumnavigation of the Salton Sea, California's largest inland body of water, was on today's birding agenda. Heading south along the eastern side of the big lake, our first stop was at Salton Sea State Recreation Area, where American White Pelicans and Western and **Clark's Grebes** could be seen just offshore. A few Black-necked Stilts were also present; Lesser Nighthawk and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher were found in mesquite trees in the parking area. Burrowing Owl and Greater Roadrunner were among the species seen as we continued south into Imperial County. Near Niland, we found a flooded field that attracted White-faced Ibis, American Avocet, California Gull and Caspian Tern.



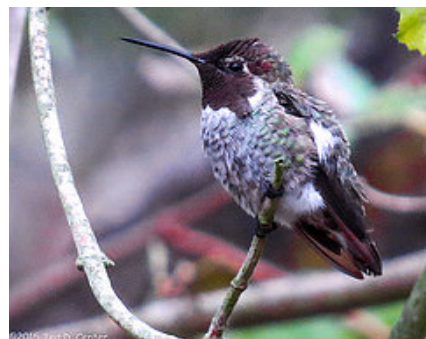
Long-billed Curlew was spotted in a field along the road leading to the headquarters of Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge; another was seen in flight once we reached the NWR headquarters.

Other birds seen around the headquarters building included Gambel's Quail, White-winged Dove, Common Ground-Dove, Verdin and Abert's Towhee. Black Terns and a Yellow-headed Blackbird were found on the way to Red Hill boat launch and our first Yellow-footed Gull was observed in flight at Obsidian Butte. Large numbers of Cattle Egret and other waders, coots and Ruddy Ducks were seen at Ramer Lake, south of Calipatria.



After lunch in Brawley, at the Sea's southern end, we visited Cattle Call Park, where we easily found our only Gila Woodpecker of the trip. In Unit 1 of the Salton Sea NWR, we searched unsuccessfully for Ridgeway's Rail; this species was heard at this location during our visit in 2009, when it was still considered a subspecies of Clapper Rail. Heading north up the western side of the sea, we made our final stop of the day at Yacht Club Drive in Salton City. This location provided an excellent vantage point for scanning the shoreline; it was here that we obtained excellent views of roosting **Yellow-footed Gulls**. A few Eared Grebes were swimming just offshore. Also present were a number of Snowy Plover, including one observed guarding its nest.

Saturday, June 20: The first stop of our last full day in California was at Big Morongo Canyon Preserve and adjacent Covington Park, located in the Morongo Valley of Riverside County, between the San Bernardino Mountains and Joshua Tree National Park. We explored Covington Park first; as is typically the case at this little park, birds were everywhere we looked. Species found here included Vermilion and Brown-crested Flycatcher, Cassin's Kingbird, California Thrasher, Summer Tanager, California Towhee, Hooded Oriole and Lesser Goldfinch. Feeders at the Big Morongo entrance attracted Black-chinned, Costa's and **Anna's Hummingbirds**. Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Western Scrub-Jay and Oak Titmouse were also seen here.



Birds encountered during a walk along the preserve's boardwalk included Nuttall's Woodpecker, Bell's Vireo, Bewick's and Rock Wren, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Yellow Warbler and Yellow-breasted Chat.

From Morongo Valley, we drove east to Joshua Tree National Park, entering at Twentynine Palms. The drive on the park road from Twentynine Palms west to the exit at Joshua Tree, which included stops at Jumbo Rocks Campground and Queen Valley, allowed us to experience the park's spectacular geological formations and of course, its thousands of Joshua trees. Bird activity was slow in the mid-day desert heat; species we encountered during the drive included Greater Roadrunner, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Phainopepla and Black-throated Sparrow.



After lunch in Yucca Valley, near Joshua Tree, we backtracked through Morongo Valley, then headed south to Mount San Jacinto, near Palm Springs. We reached the boreal zone of the mountain the quick and easy way, via the **Palm Springs Aerial Tramway**. In an exhilarating 14 minutes, a rotating tram car carried us 5,873 vertical feet over

Chino Canyon to the 8,500 foot elevation level of the 10,786 foot mountain. A ramp winding down from the mountain tram station allowed us to explore the 1.5-mile Desert View Trail, which provides several panoramic viewpoints of the area surrounding Palm Springs. High-elevation birdlife was plentiful here; species seen included Red-breasted Sapsucker, White-headed Woodpecker, Stellar's Jay, Mountain Chickadee, Pygmy Nuthatch, Western Bluebird, Audubon's Warbler, **Green-tailed Towhee** and Dark-eyed Junco. After an equally exhilarating tram ride back down the mountain, we drove west, back to Los Angeles County and our hotel in Arcadia, in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. Just before



arriving at our hotel, we stopped for a quintessential southern California fast-food experience, at In-n-Out Burger.

Sunday, June 21: A few participants were willing to make one more birding stop before heading to LAX for our flights home. We chose Peck Road Water Conservation Park, located only a couple of miles from our hotel. Our target species at this small park was Scaly-breasted Munia (formerly known as Nutmeg Manakin), an introduced species now ABA-countable in southern California. After considerable searching, we found a spiffy male hiding in a weedy area beside the lake adjacent to the park. A few non-countable exotics were also seen at the park, including Swan Goose, Mitred Parakeet, Red-crowned Parrot and Red-whiskered Bulbul. The Canada Geese and Mallards on the lake were likely feral. Native



birds we encountered included Ruddy Duck, Cooper's Hawk, **Black-necked Stilt**, Caspian Tern, Allen's Hummingbird, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Black Phoebe, Western Kingbird, Violet-green and Northern Rough-winged Swallows, Bushtit, Bewick's Wren, Yellow Warbler, Song Sparrow, Hooded Oriole, House Finch and Lesser Goldfinch.

Bird List

The following 184 species of birds were tallied during our tour:

Swan Goose
Canada Goose
Gadwall
Mallard
Cinnamon Teal
Surf Scoter
Ruddy Duck
Common Peafowl
Wild Turkey
Mountain Quail
California Quail
Gambel's Quail
Pied-billed Grebe

Eared Grebe
Western Grebe
Clark's Grebe
Pink-footed Shearwater
Sooty Shearwater
Black-vented Shearwater
American White Pelican
Brown Pelican
Brandt's Cormorant
Double-crested Cormorant
Pelagic Cormorant
Great Blue Heron
Great Egret
Snowy Egret
Cattle Egret
Green Heron
Black-crowned Night-Heron
White-faced Ibis
Turkey Vulture
California Condor
Osprey
Bald Eagle
Cooper's Hawk
Red-shouldered Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Golden Eagle
Common Gallinule
American Coot
Snowy Plover
Killdeer
Black Oystercatcher
Black-necked Stilt
American Avocet
Willet
Whimbrel
Long-billed Curlew
Heermann's Gull
Ring-billed Gull
California Gull

Yellow-footed Gull
Western Gull
Caspian Tern
Elegant Tern
Forster's Tern
Least Tern
Black Tern
Black Skimmer
Common Murre
Pigeon Guillemot
Scripps's Murrelet
Rhinoceros Auklet
Rock Pigeon
Band-tailed Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove
White-winged Dove
Mourning Dove
Common Ground-Dove
Rose-ringed Parakeet
Mitre Parakeet
Red-crowned Parrot
American Kestrel
Merlin
Peregrine Falcon
Prairie Falcon
Greater Roadrunner
Burrowing Owl
Lesser Nighthawk
Vaux's Swift
Black-chinned Hummingbird
Anna's Hummingbird
Costa's Hummingbird
Allen's Hummingbird
Acorn Woodpecker
Gila Woodpecker
Red-breasted Sapsucker
Ladder-backed Woodpecker
Nuttall's Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker

White-headed Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Western Wood-Pewee
Willow Flycatcher
Hammond's Flycatcher
Pacific-slope Flycatcher
Black Phoebe
Vermilion Flycatcher
Ash-throated Flycatcher
Brown-crested Flycatcher
Cassin's Kingbird
Western Kingbird
Loggerhead Shrike
Bell's Vireo
Plumbeous Vireo
Cassin's Vireo
Hutton's Vireo
Warbling Vireo
Steller's Jay
Western Scrub-Jay
Island Scrub-Jay
Clark's Nutcracker
Yellow-billed Magpie
American Crow
Common Raven
Horned Lark
Violet-green Swallow
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Cliff Swallow
Barn Swallow
Mountain Chickadee
Chestnut-backed Chickadee
Oak Titmouse
Verdin
Bushtit
Red-breasted Nuthatch
White-breasted Nuthatch
Pigmy Nuthatch
Cactus Wren

Rock Wren
Bewick's Wren
House Wren
Marsh Wren
Red-whiskered Bulbul
Golden-crowned Kinglet
California Gnatcatcher
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher
Western Bluebird
Swainson's Thrush
American Robin
Wrentit
Northern Mockingbird
California Thrasher
European Starling
Phainopepla
Orange-crowned Warbler
Yellow Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Black-throated Gray Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
Wilson's Warbler
Yellow-breasted Chat
Summer Tanager
Western Tanager
Green-tailed Towhee
Spotted Towhee
California Towhee
Abert's Towhee
Rufous-crowned Sparrow
Chipping Sparrow
Black-throated Sparrow
Bell's Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow (Belding's)
Fox Sparrow (thick-billed)
Song Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Black-headed Grosbeak
Red-winged Blackbird

Tricolored Blackbird
Western Meadowlark
Yellow-headed Blackbird
Brewer's Blackbird
Great-tailed Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Hooded Oriole
Bullock's Oriole
Cassin's Finch
House Finch
Lesser Goldfinch
Lawrence's Goldfinch
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow
Scaly-breasted Munia

Mammal List

The following 17 species of mammals were tallied during our tour:

Opposum
Desert Cottontail
Brush Rabbit
Black-tailed Jackrabbit
Western Gray Squirrel
Eastern Fox Squirrel
California Ground Squirrel
Round-tailed Ground Squirrel
White-tailed Antelope Squirrel
Merriam's Chipmunk
Island Gray Fox
Northern Raccoon
California Sea Lion
Harbor Seal
Mule Deer
Common Dolphin
Humpback Whale