

California Birding trip report, February 20-27, 2011

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Day 1 – February 20, 2011 – North of Santa Barbara

After spending the night in Carpinteria, just south of Santa Barbara, we headed north along the coast towards Santa Maria. Before we even left Carpinteria though we picked up some breakfast burritos at a Mexican bakery and ate our breakfast on the beach, getting our first look at the Pacific Ocean and getting a few birds on the beach, including Heermann's Gulls eating our scraps, Western Grebes on the water, and Willet, Long-billed Curlew, and Marbled Godwit on the beach. The drive to Santa Maria was quite nice, with lots of Western Scrub-Jays on the wires and a few "California" Red-shouldered Hawks. Our first stop of the day was Waller Park in Santa Maria, where a female Hermit Warbler was over wintering. After wandering around the park a bit we made it to the spot where she was supposed to be, and after a few minutes Ken spotted her. Great looking bird, and we had several Townsend's Warblers in the park as well for comparison. Also around the park were our only Chestnut-backed Chickadees of the trip and the first of many Black Phoebes, Allen's and Anna's Hummingbirds, and Brewer's Blackbirds. A few Nuttall's Woodpeckers were also about along with lots of sparrows.

After the park it was off into the Cuyama Valley along Highway 166 towards our next goal- McPhearson Peak and our first of two potential spots for California Condors. As we drove inland we got our first Violet-green Swallows, White-throated Swifts, Western Bluebirds, and one of only two Golden Eagles for the trip. We also had several Yellow-billed Magpies, the only ones of the trip. We turned off the highway and headed up hill into our first taste of Chapparal. Here we encountered our first singing Bewick's Wrens, Wrentits, California Thrashers, California Towhees, and a large covey of California Quail. In areas with California Live Oaks we encountered several Oak Titmice and our only White-breasted Nuthatch of the trip. The road degraded fairly quickly and we couldn't get to the peak as the road was closed, so that was it for trying to get Condors for the day.

We took a bit of a detour on our way back to the coast, opting to head through Los Padres National Forest and over a peak (near Mount Pinos), at a height of over 5000 feet. After not seeing many people all day things got strange very quickly as we neared the peak. Car after car passed us heading down, covered in snow. As we got to the summit there were parked trucks and cars everywhere! Apparently, the amount of snow at the peak was unusual and all of the Californians had headed up the mountain to play, which included covering their roofs, and filling their pickups with snow. It was pretty bizarre, but we continued on past the commotion and ended up late in the day at Ventura, where we spent the night.

Day 2 – February 21, 2011 – Heading inland

We began day 2 along the coast again and decided to take advantage. So, we headed through Oxnard south along the coast to Point Mugu, where we picked up all three loons

and had a distant Alcid, which we think was a Common Murre. A little bit north of here we spent some time scoping Mugu Lagoon, which gave us a nice shorebird list and a few herons. Here we also heard several Belding's Savannah Sparrows singing. We kept on our way north to bird Camino Real Park in Ventura. Here we had some more Townsend's Warblers, and a really nice male Black-throated Gray Warbler (only one of the trip). We also had our only Nashville Warbler with our first Orange-crowned and Bushtits of the trip. After some time in the park it was the start of our long trek inland. On the way we would try one more spot for Condors – the Sespe Condor Sanctuary north of Filmore. After about 45 minutes winding our way up 7 miles we arrived at a clearing where our bird finding guide recommended watching for Condors. This was probably our luckiest spot of the trip because after waiting less than five minutes here two adult California Condors soared right over us heading southwest! They disappeared about as fast as they appeared and we waited another half hour or so before deciding we would keep going.

Our route was going to have one more detour- we headed into the Antelope Valley north of Lancaster to search for some reported Mountain Plovers. We weren't disappointed as a flock of 44 were right where they were supposed to be! Upon leaving the Mountain Plovers a very nice Ferruginous Hawk was just down the road. From here we headed southeast towards Indio, where we stayed the night. From Lancaster onwards the scenery was completely desert – around Lancaster it was fairly rich desert with lots of Joshua Trees everywhere, but the further east we went, the more barren it became.

Day 3 – February 22, 2011 – Blythe area and Arizona

We got up in Indio and continued on our eastward journey, arriving in Blythe along the Colorado River just after sunrise. We spent the morning birding around the town, picking up a few nice birds, including our first Abert's Towhee, Verdin, Black-tailed Gnatcatchers, Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, Gila Woodpeckers, Gambel's Quail and a bunch of new ducks and shorebirds (on the river and at the sewage treatment plant). We also had our only Vermillion Flycatcher, Rock Wren, and Sage Sparrows of the trip around town. It was a productive morning of birding, with a very different suite of birds from further west.

We decided to cross into Arizona to make better time heading for the Imperial Dam area (just north of Yuma, Arizona). So, we crossed the river and began heading south on Highway 95. As soon as we were across the river it was amazing to see the desert change, with huge Saguaro Cacti everywhere- something that was completely absent in California. About half way south, we decided we needed to stop and walk around the desert a little. So, we stopped, got out of the car and walked around for about an hour. During that time we got to closely admire the Saguaros and some other really neat desert plants, including the fierce looking Ocotillo shrubs, which were mostly blooming. As for birds, we had our only Green-tailed Towhee of the trip, our first Black-throated Sparrows, and several Phainopeplas.

We took more time than we had planned to reach the Imperial Dam, but in the last hours of daylight we saw our first Greater Roadrunner, a few new ducks, and our only flock of Yellow-headed Blackbirds of the trip. We then decided to head for Brawley, at the south end of the Salton Sea, where we would spend the next two nights. On route, we crossed through a huge area of massive sand dunes, and we could see “The Wall” along the US-Mexico border.

Day 4 – February 23, 2011 – Salton Sea

We headed out and began our day along the southeast shore of the Salton Sea at the Wister Unit, hoping to find some landbirds before spending the day focused on ducks, shorebirds, and herons. We did find a few, including our only Wilson’s Warbler and Inca Dove of the trip. The rest of the day was spent driving through agricultural areas and along the shore of the south end of the Salton Sea. The numbers of birds was very impressive, including just huge numbers of all sorts of ducks, gulls, White-faced Ibis, American White Pelican, Cattle and Great Egrets, Marbled Godwits, Long-billed Curlews, Long-billed Dowitchers, American Avocets, and Black-necked Stilts. Some of the highlight species were our first Clark’s Grebe, calling Clapper Rails, and our first pair of Burrowing Owls for the trip. We ended the day at Johnson’s Landing in Salton City, at the west side of the sea, where we successfully searched for a previously reported Pacific Golden-plover and three Snowy Plovers. Also along the beach here were at least three “Large-billed” Savannah Sparrows- a very distinct looking bird!

Day 5 – February 24, 2011 – Salton Sea and Anza-Borrego Desert

We began the day at Ramer Lake, on the east side of the Salton Sea where we decided to try one last time for Crissal Thrasher (pretty much our last chance before driving west out of their range). After a few minutes in an area described in our guide, we found one singing at the top of a Mesquite bush! We spent the rest of the morning driving counterclockwise around the sea, stopping where we could. We picked up a few new species, including our only Thayer’s Gull of the trip, but all in all the north end was much less exciting than the south end of the sea. We ended the morning at Salton City where we had great looks at the Snowy and Pacific Golden-Plovers again.

It was then off towards Borrego Springs, in the heart of the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. We arrived a little after lunch and headed straight for the visitor centre. We were very impressed with the desert here, as it had much more life than others we had passed through. Right outside we had great looks at our first Costa’s Hummingbirds (a great looking bird!), Cactus Wrens, and an incredibly bright subspecies of Orange-crowned Warbler. Here we got very lucky again, as just as we were about to head for our car we noticed two male Lawrence’s Goldfinches had just landed in a nearby tree! After some nice looks, the birds took off and we headed for our car. We next headed for Palm Canyon trail, just down the road. Here we walked part of the 3-mile trail, hoping to find a Canyon Wren. No luck with the wren, but more Costa’s Hummingbirds, and our first Black-throated Sparrows in California. As it was mid afternoon we headed into town to find a hotel for the night (and our first White-winged Dove). Our next stop was outside

of town in some very barren desert, a spot where Le Conte's Thrasher apparently breed some years. Despite our best efforts we couldn't find the birds, however, we did get a nice consolation prize – two unexpected Sage Thrashers!

Day 6 – February 25, 2011 – Anza-Borrego and the San Diego coast

First stop of the day was back to the edge of town looking for Le Conte's Thrashers. No luck again but this time we found three Sage Thrashers, and a little further on we found four more – a very good count for anywhere this time of year! After a quick stop to see the desert birds at the visitor centre we were off towards the coast, ready to leave the interior deserts behind.

On the way towards San Diego we had to cross back over the mountains, and when we did we were in for a shock! After very pleasant weather in the deserts, we soon were surrounded by fog, scattered snow on the ground, and close to zero degrees! We made a quick stop at a campground in Cuyamaca Rancho State Park where we got our only Steller's Jays, Mountain Chickadees, and Pygmy Nuthatches of the trip.

We continued on our way and soon enough were back to foothills and much more pleasant California weather. In San Diego we made a quick stop for Thick-billed Kingbird and Broad-billed Hummingbird, that were both staked out at small city parks. At the park with the hummingbird we also had our only Cassin's Kingbirds of the trip. Also in San Diego, we stopped at Mission Bay / the San Diego River mouth to look for waterbirds and had our first really good looks at Brandt's Cormorants and "White-crested" Double-crested Cormorants. We continued on to Mission Trails Regional Park, a place that we could have spent a lot more time at; here our goal was the endangered California Gnatcatcher. No luck with it, but we did see our only White-tailed Kite of the trip here. We had time for one more spot to look for the gnatcatchers, so we headed for Torrey Pines State Park, another known site. It was a nice walk but no gnatcatchers again. We did, however, have our only Rufous Hummingbird of the trip. We hit the freeway and braved LA traffic (which wasn't as bad as Toronto's) to arrive at our hotel near the airport.

By early evening a severe rainstorm had moved down the coast, seriously putting our planned pelagic trip with the LA Audubon Society the next day in jeopardy. We took our minds off the storm by catching an Anaheim Ducks game – they lost in OT to the Wild.

Day 7 – February 26, 2011 – LA Pelagic

We got to the docks at San Pedro shortly after 7am and were happy to see the trip leaders arrive as well; the trip was still on. We left dock at 8am and headed out to the near shore waters off of the Palos Verde Peninsula to the underwater Redondo Canyon. We never went more than 10 miles from shore, which was probably a good thing. The water was very rough, with 6-10 foot waves all day. About half of the boat spent the trip leaning over the rear of the boat. Thankfully, the three of us were among the few lucky ones that got to enjoy the whole trip. Most of the day we enjoyed Rhinoceros Auklets in good

numbers. A handful of Cassin's Auklets and Common Murres were also present as well as a single Pigeon Guillemot. We weren't lucky enough to see the Xantus' Murrelets that were spotted from the bridge, but we did have nice looks at Pomarine and Parasitic Jaeger, Red Phalarope, and Sooty Shearwater. We also had a quick look at a Northern Fulmar as it flew by the boat before landing on the water. The trip in to dock was also very exciting- we slowly passed by the detached rock jetty and got to see several Black Oystercatchers, Surfbirds, Black Turnstones, and a couple of Wandering Tattlers. By the time we got in we were all tired from the day at sea and called it a day.

Day 8 – February 27, 2011 – Last day in LA

With some new information gathered the previous day on where to find our remaining target species, we headed to the Palos Verde Peninsula. Here we headed to a trail we were told was a sure bet for California Gnatcatcher. And, sure enough after a short walk we encountered several calling birds, including some really nice looking males. Allen's Hummingbirds also zipped everywhere here and we even had comparisons with Blue-gray Gnatcatchers seen here as well.

Our next stop was a small park around a man-made lake at the base of the peninsula. We weren't looking for anything in particular here, but enjoyed our last Townsend's Warbler of the trip and we found a really nice *minima* Cackling Goose on the lawn. The real highlight was finding a Tennessee Warbler, though, a good find in California in the winter. We headed back to our hotel to checkout and pack-up before a drive through Hollywood to do some non-bird sight-seeing.

Afterwards, we were off to another city park – Whittier Narrows. Here we were told was the best place for Tricolored Blackbird in the city, and we soon found a blackbird flock exactly where it was supposed to be- but no Tricoloreds. We continued on in the park, deciding to look for some other birds we had been told about. We easily found the Tropical Kingbird and the Chestnut-sided Warbler that had been wintering here and even had a couple of Yellow-chevrons Parakeets fly over. It was getting late, so we headed back towards our car. On the way, we ran into the same blackbird flock from earlier, but this time there were about ten Tricoloreds mixed in!

Our last stop of the day (and of the trip) was to Temple City, where mixed flocks of escaped parrots and parakeets are often seen coming to roost. After driving around a bit we managed to see a few small flocks, mostly Mitred and Red-masked Parakeets, but we did have a look at one Blue-crowned Parakeet. It was now time to head to the airport so we called it a day and headed south.

It was a great trip with 220 species between the three of us, and all of us with more than 50 lifers- many of them were thanks to the ABA/Lane Birdfinding guide to Southern California, eBird, and to the various birding listserves for southern California.

The following is our list of birds seen, including the percentage of ebird checklists (39 total) containing the species from our trip.

num	Species Name	%		55	Ferruginous Hawk	3%
1	Snow Goose	3%		56	Golden Eagle	5%
2	Ross's Goose	3%		57	American Kestrel	46%
3	Cackling Goose	3%		58	Merlin	5%
4	Canada Goose	13%		59	Peregrine Falcon	5%
5	Brant	3%		60	Prairie Falcon	3%
6	Gadwall	10%		61	Clapper Rail	3%
7	American Wigeon	13%		62	Virginia Rail	3%
8	Mallard	18%		63	Sora	8%
9	Blue-winged Teal	5%		64	Common Moorhen	3%
10	Cinnamon Teal	8%		65	American Coot	18%
11	Northern Shoveler	15%		66	Sandhill Crane	3%
12	Northern Pintail	13%		67	Black-bellied Plover	13%
13	Green-winged Teal	13%		68	Pacific Golden-Plover	5%
14	Canvasback	3%		69	Snowy Plover	5%
15	Redhead	5%		70	Killdeer	15%
16	Ring-necked Duck	3%		71	Mountain Plover	3%
17	Greater Scaup	3%		72	Black Oystercatcher	3%
18	Lesser Scaup	10%		73	Black-necked Stilt	15%
19	Surf Scoter	10%		74	American Avocet	13%
20	Bufflehead	10%		75	Spotted Sandpiper	5%
21	Common Goldeneye	5%		76	Wandering Tattler	3%
22	Ruddy Duck	23%		77	Greater Yellowlegs	10%
23	California Quail	10%		78	Willet	10%
24	Gambel's Quail	8%		79	Lesser Yellowlegs	3%
25	Ring-necked Pheasant	3%		80	Whimbrel	5%
26	Red-throated Loon	5%		81	Long-billed Curlew	10%
27	Pacific Loon	5%		82	Marbled Godwit	21%
28	Common Loon	3%		83	Ruddy Turnstone	5%
29	Pied-billed Grebe	13%		84	Black Turnstone	3%
30	Eared Grebe	13%		85	Surfbird	3%
31	Western Grebe	23%		86	Sanderling	5%
32	Clark's Grebe	5%		87	Western Sandpiper	10%
33	Northern Fulmar	3%		88	Least Sandpiper	23%
34	Sooty Shearwater	5%		89	Long-billed Dowitcher	5%
	Sooty/Short-tailed Shearwater	3%		90	Wilson's Snipe	5%
35	Brandt's Cormorant	15%		91	Red Phalarope	3%
36	Double-crested Cormorant	36%		92	Bonaparte's Gull	8%
	cormorant sp.	3%		93	Heermann's Gull	13%
37	American White Pelican	13%		94	Mew Gull	10%
38	Brown Pelican	26%		95	Ring-billed Gull	28%
39	Great Blue Heron	23%		96	Western Gull	38%
40	Great Egret	23%		97	California Gull	36%
41	Snowy Egret	10%		98	Herring Gull	21%
42	Cattle Egret	10%		99	Thayer's Gull	3%
43	Green Heron	8%		100	Glaucous-winged Gull	13%
44	Black-crowned Night-Heron	10%		101	Caspian Tern	5%
45	White-faced Ibis	5%		102	Forster's Tern	5%
46	Turkey Vulture	36%		103	Royal Tern	8%
47	California Condor	3%		104	Pomarine Jaeger	3%
48	Osprey	8%		105	Parasitic Jaeger	3%
49	White-tailed Kite	3%		106	Common Murre	5%
50	Northern Harrier	18%		107	Pigeon Guillemot	3%
51	Sharp-shinned Hawk	3%		108	Cassin's Auklet	8%
52	Cooper's Hawk	18%		109	Rhinoceros Auklet	8%
53	Red-shouldered Hawk	10%		110	Rock Pigeon	49%
54	Red-tailed Hawk	69%		111	Band-tailed Pigeon	5%

112	Eurasian Collared-Dove	44%		169	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	5%
113	White-winged Dove	5%		170	California Gnatcatcher	3%
114	Mourning Dove	49%		171	Black-tailed Gnatcatcher	15%
115	Inca Dove	3%		172	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	18%
116	Common Ground-Dove	8%		173	Wrentit	10%
117	Blue-crowned Parakeet	3%		174	Western Bluebird	13%
118	Mitred Parakeet	3%		175	Hermit Thrush	8%
119	Red-masked Parakeet	3%		176	American Robin	10%
120	Yellow-chevroned Parakeet	3%		177	Northern Mockingbird	36%
121	Greater Roadrunner	10%		178	Sage Thrasher	5%
122	Great Horned Owl	3%		179	California Thrasher	10%
123	Burrowing Owl	5%		180	Crissal Thrasher	3%
124	White-throated Swift	5%		181	European Starling	59%
125	Anna's Hummingbird	54%		182	American Pipit	13%
126	Costa's Hummingbird	5%		183	Cedar Waxwing	3%
127	Rufous Hummingbird	3%		184	Phainopepla	18%
128	Allen's Hummingbird	13%		185	Tennessee Warbler	3%
129	Broad-billed Hummingbird	3%		186	Orange-crowned Warbler	23%
130	Belted Kingfisher	5%		187	Nashville Warbler	3%
131	Acorn Woodpecker	8%		188	Chestnut-sided Warbler	3%
132	Gila Woodpecker	8%		189	Yellow-rumped Warbler	59%
133	Ladder-backed Woodpecker	8%		190	Black-throated Gray Warbler	3%
134	Nuttall's Woodpecker	5%		191	Townsend's Warbler	10%
135	Downy Woodpecker	5%		192	Hermit Warbler	3%
136	Hairy Woodpecker	3%		193	Common Yellowthroat	10%
137	Northern Flicker	13%		194	Wilson's Warbler	3%
138	Black Phoebe	33%		195	Green-tailed Towhee	3%
139	Say's Phoebe	28%		196	Spotted Towhee	8%
140	Vermilion Flycatcher	3%		197	California Towhee	13%
141	Tropical Kingbird	3%		198	Abert's Towhee	8%
142	Cassin's Kingbird	3%		199	Vesper Sparrow	5%
143	Thick-billed Kingbird	3%		200	Lark Sparrow	3%
144	Loggerhead Shrike	26%		201	Black-throated Sparrow	8%
145	Steller's Jay	3%		202	Sage Sparrow	3%
146	Western Scrub-Jay	23%		203	Savannah Sparrow	13%
147	Yellow-billed Magpie	3%			Large-billed Savannah Sparrow	3%
148	American Crow	33%			Belding's Savannah Sparrow	3%
149	Common Raven	46%		204	Song Sparrow	21%
150	Horned Lark	13%		205	Lincoln's Sparrow	13%
151	Northern Rough-winged Swallow	13%		206	White-crowned Sparrow	49%
152	Tree Swallow	31%		207	Golden-crowned Sparrow	10%
153	Violet-green Swallow	5%		208	Dark-eyed Junco	15%
154	Barn Swallow	3%		209	Red-winged Blackbird	23%
155	Cliff Swallow	5%		210	Tricolored Blackbird	3%
156	Mountain Chickadee	3%		211	Western Meadowlark	15%
157	Chestnut-backed Chickadee	3%		212	Yellow-headed Blackbird	3%
158	Oak Titmouse	10%		213	Brewer's Blackbird	23%
159	Verdin	18%		214	Great-tailed Grackle	21%
160	Bushtit	10%		215	Brown-headed Cowbird	10%
161	Red-breasted Nuthatch	5%		216	House Finch	51%
162	White-breasted Nuthatch	3%		217	Pine Siskin	5%
163	Pygmy Nuthatch	3%		218	Lesser Goldfinch	18%
164	Cactus Wren	5%		219	Lawrence's Goldfinch	3%
165	Rock Wren	3%		220	American Goldfinch	8%
166	Bewick's Wren	10%		221	House Sparrow	51%
167	House Wren	13%				
168	Marsh Wren	13%				