

# Arizona and California

11–20 January 2011

A private trip by tour leader James P. Smith



**Baird's Sparrow**

In January 2011 my family and I took a winter break based at Fountain Hills just north of Phoenix, Arizona. The timing could not have been better as we narrowly escaped record snowfalls and sub-zero temperatures in New England. Arizona more than lived up to its reputation as an extraordinary destination for winter birding and the visit was further enhanced by a short trip to southern California.

**Day 1** With a winter storm already taking effect, our outbound flight from Hartford, Connecticut, was nearly two hours late. Despite the resulting missed connection in Philadelphia, US Airways managed to get us on the day's last flight to Phoenix, where we arrived just after midnight.

**Day 2** Waking up to some familiar sights and sounds in the Fountain Hills neighbourhood was most pleasant: Gambel's Quail, Gila Woodpecker, Anna's Hummingbird, Say's Phoebe and Verdin all appeared before breakfast. The journey into Phoenix produced a Peregrine over the Red Mountain Freeway. Once the car rental business was concluded I made my way down to Tempe Town Marsh, deep in urban Phoenix. It was full of birds and it wasn't too long before I located the main target of the afternoon – a Eurasian Teal (with Green-winged Teals) – found and reported about a week earlier. Curiously, the AOU have yet to split Eurasian and Green-winged Teals despite the BOU split taking place several years ago. This fine male was apparently only the third Eurasian Teal recorded in Arizona. The rest of a lovely afternoon was spent combing through the ducks and other wetland birds feeding in and around the marsh: Black-necked and Pied-billed Grebes, Snowy Egret, Northern Pintail, American Wigeon, Northern Shoveler, White-faced Ibis, Common Moorhen, American Coot, Killdeer and Least Sandpiper. There was a nice show of raptors, with Osprey, Peregrine, American Kestrel and Northern Harrier all present, and passerines were also in evidence, with plenty of fly-catching Black Phoebes and 'Audubon's' Yellow-rumped Warblers, Common Yellowthroats and an assortment of sparrows with White-crowned, Song and Lincoln's Sparrows all grubbing around the edge of the marsh. Red-winged Blackbirds began to fly into roost closer to dusk. Out on Tempe Town Lake a nice raft of Ruddy Ducks contained two Redheads while numerous Double-crested Cormorants and a Brown Pelican (quite rare in Arizona) perched on the pilings. It was a mellow introduction to winter birding in Arizona with much more to come!

**Day 3** Gilbert Water Ranch, an urban riparian preserve and wastewater reclamation site, was my first port of call. It is reputed to be one of the top birding spots in the Greater Phoenix area and it's easy to understand why. The place was crammed with birds: waterbirds, waders, an abundance of winter passerines and desert residents. The first birds included over a dozen Peach-faced Lovebirds, a long-established exotic in Phoenix and one perhaps destined for a place on the state and national bird lists. Walking the trails produced great views of Anna's Hummingbird, Northern Mockingbird, Curve-billed Thrasher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, 'Audubon's' Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned Warblers, Abert's Towhee and a single Costa's Hummingbird. Several subspecies of White-crowned Sparrow littered the pathways, the most obvious being the *gambelli* race but there were also quite a few birds resembling the eastern subspecies *leucophrys* and *oriantha*. The waterbirds were the most impressive: each basin held huge numbers of birds including Double-crested and Neotropical Cormorants, Green-winged Teal, Cinnamon Teal, Northern Pintail, American

Wigeon, Northern Shoveler, Mallard, Mexican Duck and Canada Goose *moffitti*. One pool was filled with a mixture of Long-billed Dowitchers and Least Sandpipers with a handful of Dunlins; Black-necked Stilts and American Avocets were standing elegantly amongst the dowitchers while American Pipits, Wilson's Snipe and Killdeers foraged in the muddy furrows. Exceptionally close Ring-necked Ducks, Lesser Scaup and Buffleheads must have been a photographer's dream in the superb light. After taking a break from the midday heat (it really was that warm in January!) I headed to Fountain Lake. Perhaps morning would have been better as the site gets pretty crowded with visitors in the late afternoon. Nevertheless, it was incredible to see how tame so many waterbirds actually were in such circumstances and I watched hundreds of American Wigeons, Buffleheads, Lesser Scaup and American Coots at point blank range. A Say's Phoebe also looked perfectly settled using a frizbee 'golf' tee as a base for its hunting sorties. Around the lake's concrete fringes Killdeers and Spotted Sandpipers were commonplace and, out in the middle of the water, a raft of Black-necked Grebes rested. Late afternoon I returned to Tempe Town Marsh, finding much the same species as the previous day, including the Eurasian Teal, but also Great White Egret and Green Heron and now two Brown Pelicans! I also had tantalizing glimpses of what could only have been a Great Horned Owl slipping through the willows.

**Day 4** An early start from Fountain Hills enabled me to reach the San Rafael grasslands, near Patagonia, close to first light. The first bird I noticed was a light-morph Ferruginous Hawk perched on top of a small oak right at the edge of the grasslands. The goal of the morning, however, was much smaller fare: specifically a personal quest for Baird's Sparrow. Something of a nemesis for many birders, Baird's Sparrow is known to be difficult, especially to see well. Over the next three hours, by gently walking the magnificent grasslands, I slowly amassed an excellent suite of birds. It reminded me a great deal of desert birding in Israel and, by working with the birds in the same manner, I had stunning, prolonged scope-views of two Baird's Sparrows with a third seen less well through binoculars. In all three cases the birds were perched up, giving excellent comparisons with Savannah, Grasshopper and Lincoln's Sparrows. Scattered about the plains were perhaps as many as a dozen Eastern (Lillian's) Meadowlarks. Another highlight was two Sprague's Pipits, one of which showed reasonably well in the scope. Feeding in the same corner of the grasslands were about twenty-five Horned Larks including one white-faced bird, which may have belonged to one of the Arctic races. After a superb morning I dropped down to Patagonia for a well-deserved brunch and some fresh coffee, a journey which produced Northern (Red-shafted) Flicker, a large flock of Bushtits and many Brewer's Sparrows. Around noon I visited the famous Paton's Yard, where the well-stocked feeders drew in hordes of birds. Most numerous were Lesser Goldfinches and House Finches but there were also plenty of 'Gambel's' White-crowned Sparrows and Chipping Sparrows and a couple of Lincoln's Sparrows. Hummingbirds were surprisingly scarce, with only a few Anna's Hummingbirds coming into the feeders. The best birds were a Pyrrhuloxia and a Green-tailed Towhee; both visited the yard's water feature. By early afternoon I was walking through mesquite scrub along the nature trail at Patagonia Lake State Park. As always in winter, several good rarities had been reported and I was keen to see a pair of Rufous-backed Robins last reported a couple of days earlier. The trail was full of birds, one of the first being a Marsh Wren uncharacteristically working the cattails totally out in the open. But it was the flycatchers that really vied for attention, starting with a Grey Flycatcher, displaying its phoebe-like tail-movements, then a Hammond's Flycatcher, then another Grey Flycatcher and then a Dusky Flycatcher, all within just a couple of hundred yards. This spot remains incredibly consistent for seeing (and hearing) *Empidonax* flycatchers in the winter months and is a great place to practice the identification of this difficult group. Despite a concerted effort I could not muster any Rufous-backed Robins, which seem to have exhausted the berries on their favourite Hackberry tree. I did, however, see a lovely male Hepatic Tanager, quite rare in winter, and I watched in awe as streams of Brewer's and Chipping Sparrows came down from the desert to drink at the lakeside. There was also a nice feeding flock containing White-breasted Nuthatches, Brown Creepers, Hermit Thrushes, Verdins and a single Bridled Titmouse. By using a scope from various points around the lake I notched up a good selection of waterbirds, most notably two Pacific Divers, one Great Northern Diver and one unidentified diver, plus small numbers Canvasbacks, Goosanders and Cinnamon Teal as well as fantastic views of a pair of Mexican Ducks. By late afternoon, the early-morning start was beginning to tell and I called it a day and headed back to Fountain Hills thoroughly satisfied with an amazing morning in the grasslands.

**Day 5** It was a warm, sunny and almost spring-like day, but a relatively low-key one bird-wise with family and friends taking priority. However, we still came across some good birds, with a couple of Gilded Flickers at the Railroad Park in Scottsdale along with Brown-headed Cowbirds, Orange-crowned Warblers and Ruby-crowned Kinglets. There was also a mass of about six hundred Canada Geese on a recently excavated plot behind a shopping plaza on Indian Bend Road. Had we had time to check, surely something special would have been spotted amongst them: perhaps a Greater White-fronted Goose or a Cackling Goose, both of which can be found in Scottsdale in winter.

**Day 6** We left Fountain Hills early, heading for the southern Salton Sea in California. The journey on Interstate 10 was enlivened by periodic sightings of raptors with numerous Red-tailed Hawks, a Harris's Hawk in west Phoenix, a Merlin close to Buckeye and several Northern Harriers. Breaking news of a White-billed Diver on the Lower Colorado River

at Parker persuaded us to make a northward diversion at Quartzite. While heading across La Posa Plain we noted several Ferruginous Hawks perched on roadside posts, a party of Gambel's Quail and a Loggerhead Shrike just south of Parker. We arrived at Headgate Dam in Parker fully expecting to find a White-billed Diver on the river in front of us but, as the morning dragged on, it became clear that we might not get lucky after all. Surprisingly, we did not see any other birders looking for the bird and even trawling various points along the river all the way up to Parker Dam revealed no divers at all. Lake Havasu, above the dam, was better: we tallied ten Great Northern Divers and a possible Pacific Diver but no White-billed Diver. Had we not felt pressured to get down to the Salton Sea we could have spent more time scouring the river but we threw in the towel and headed south. Our time along the Parker Strip was not disappointing, however, as the river held plenty of interest with scores of Gadwalls, American Wigeons, Redheads, Canvasbacks, Common Goldeneyes, Lesser Scaup, American Coots and White-faced Ibises; there was even a female Black Scoter just below Parker Dam. In the surrounding area Merlin, Black and Say's Phoebes, Loggerhead Shrike, Western Meadowlark and three Rock Wrens were notable. We decided to take the slower roads heading south, passing through the Colorado River Indian Reservation lands. Raptors accompanied us all the way to Ehrenberg and we amassed 24 Red-tailed Hawks, 29 American Kestrels, several Northern Harriers and a Ferruginous Hawk. After entering California at Blythe the remainder of the journey was relatively quiet, though there was some impressive scenery at the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area. On reaching the south side of the dunes the landscape quickly changed from desert to agriculture as we entered the Imperial Valley and, as we approached Brawley, our first Greater Roadrunner ran across the main road! We spent the late afternoon at Unit 1 of the National Wildlife Refuge. We had hopes of seeing a Bean Goose (new to California) that had been present since late November but last reported on 10 January, a week earlier. The Bean Goose apparently consorted with eight Greater White-fronted Geese, so effectively we were looking for a party of nine grey geese amongst the thousands of Snow and Ross's Geese. Plenty of other birders had the same idea and a steady procession stopped to ask 'have you got the goose?' when thousands of geese fed in front of us! Dusk closed in and we had no Bean Goose to show for our efforts but the birding had been outstanding and the evening was positively balmy. Thousands of Snow and Ross's Geese had foraged in front of us along with tens of Sandhill Cranes. Every so often thousands of Red-winged Blackbirds would lift up from the fields and careful scanning produced several dazzling male Yellow-headed Blackbirds amongst the hordes. Flights of Brown and White Pelicans could be seen above the delta, as could Black-necked Stilts and American Avocets. We saw a hunting White-tailed Kite and heard a couple of 'Yuma' Clapper Rails at close range. The last birds at sunset were Say's Phoebe and Western Meadowlark and we vowed to return in the morning to have another try for the Bean Goose.

**Day 7** After a comfortable night at the Brawley Inn, dawn broke with even more Snow and Ross's Geese north-west of town – great clouds of birds would occasionally lift up and we estimated that at least twenty thousand birds were in the area. In the fields across Vandal Road a group of Sandhill Cranes contained a strikingly small 'Lesser' Sandhill Crane and Tree Swallows hawked over the same fields. Raptors included a fourth-year Bald Eagle perched on a telegraph pole. As for the White-fronted Geese and the Bean Goose, we accepted defeat after an hour or so. Rather than linger we opted to explore more of the southern end of the Salton Sea itself. On the way we found a large flock of Long-billed Curlews packed around White-faced Ibises and Cattle Egrets in a damp field. Our first proper view of the Salton Sea was quite overwhelming: the shore and the open water seemed to be saturated with thousands upon thousands of birds. There were uncountable numbers of gulls, Western and Black-necked Grebes, Ruddy Ducks and Brown and White Pelicans while, along the shore, large flocks of Least and Western Sandpipers buzzed past and larger waders included American Avocet, Marbled Godwit and 'western' Willet. It was an impressive show, to say the least. As we continued driving around the fringe of the southeast corner we methodically worked through the masses of birds. Most of the gulls were California Gulls but there were also good numbers of American Herring Gulls; we were thrilled by a close fly-by Thayer's Gull and there was also a first-year Glaucous Gull, rare anywhere in southern California and especially inland in Imperial County. We also saw a Snowy (Kentish) Plover and a few Semipalmated Plovers before moving on to Obsidian Butte, where we found a huge roost of Double-crested Cormorants and Brown Pelicans, several Black-crowned Night Herons, a couple of Green Herons and a couple of very vocal Black-tailed Gnatcatchers, while Abert's Towhees were commonly heard from the tamarisks. Next we visited Sonny Bono NWR headquarters, our last stop before lunch. Some Ross's Geese could be seen from the public viewing deck but we really needed to walk the Rocky Hill trail to get better views of them. It was well worth it! Close in front of us a freshwater basin was densely packed with thousands of birds: many of them were Ross's Geese, with some Snow Geese, and there was a broad range of waterfowl, mostly Northern Pintails and American Wigeons but there were some Buffleheads and three Greater Scaup. The islands in the basin were full of gulls, almost all of them California Gulls, but we did manage to pick out a nice adult Hermann's Gull. It was a marvellous spot: rarely can so many Ross's Geese be seen so close up and personal. The walk back along the trail gave us Savannah Sparrow, Gambel's Quail, Abert's Towhee, Verdin and a fine Blue-grey Gnatcatcher. After a great Mexican lunch in Calipatria we scoured the agricultural fields to the northeast of town in an attempt to find a reported roaming flock of about two hundred Mountain Plovers. We failed to find the flock in the time we had available and settled down for the long drive back to Phoenix.

**Day 8** The penultimate day in Arizona began at the magnificent Boyce Thompson Arboretum State Park near Superior. A collection of mature trees and plants from deserts around the world create something of an oasis and attract all manner of birds. In just one hour I assembled a decent list of species including very good views of a male Red-naped Sapsucker, a Plumbeous Vireo and a Hermit Thrush. Cactus, Canyon and Rock Wrens were also present, a fine adult Golden Eagle soared above the Sonoran Desert behind the park and tame Inca Doves, White-crowned Sparrows and Abert's Towhees were all free-loading around the picnic tables. After a fine morning I headed due south for Santa Cruz Flats. A Rufous-backed Robin had been found while we were at the Salton Sea and, having missed the Patagonia birds, I was more than keen to catch up with this one. After twenty minutes the robin appeared, feeding on privet berries in a private yard but comfortably viewable from the road. To the west of the same property a small cattle-pen attracted a handful of doves and sparrows and offered superb views of two Ruddy Ground-doves, as well as four Common Ground-doves and three Lark Sparrows. Raptors in the area included an American Black Vulture, a Prairie Falcon and a Red-tailed (Harlan's) Hawk. The rest of the afternoon was spent searching the vast fields for Mountain Plovers, which again turned out to be elusive, although up to 38 would be reported from the same fields several days later. However, my plover-quest produced some great incidental sightings including Ferruginous Hawk, Greater Roadrunner, a singing Bendire's Thrasher and about 250 Lark Buntings. Curiously, I found both Rock Wrens and House Wrens around the piles of stacked turf at dusk, perhaps looking for places to roost. As dusk fell, I headed back to Fountain Hills thinking about where I would spend my last full morning in Arizona. A quick perusal of the internet and the decision was made for me: a positive report on the Parker White-billed Diver was all I needed to read.

**Day 9** Leaving Fountain Hills at 4.20am enabled me to arrive at Parker at 7.20am, just before the sun rose above the Gibraltar Mountain Wilderness. My plan was simply to work the river until the White-billed Diver was found. Beginning at Headgate Dam I discovered a similar range of birds to those on my previous visit, but two Neotropical Cormorants at roost with Double-crested Cormorants were notable and apparently quite scarce locally. The highlights on the river itself were a lovely drake Cinnamon Teal and a drake Canvasback but, if anything, fewer birds were present there. The best bird nearby was a nice male Phainopepla, the only one of the trip. I headed up-river searching for access points, which were few owing to properties lining most of the riverbank. But, at last, from a small patch of waste ground in between a couple of premises, I noted a pale, near goose-sized bird wrestling with a large fish in the middle of the river – surely this was a candidate for the diver? Scope views confirmed the identification but the bird was very distant. The drive north on River Road ended in frustration as waterfront properties offered no access at all but, by climbing the desert bluffs, which overlooked the river, I enjoyed excellent scope views of a beautiful White-billed Diver! The bird was mobile, very mobile in fact, and covered more than half a mile in just a few minutes as it continued to swim up-river. Driving north once more I decided to take a chance from the 'business district' on the Parker Strip and found a public boat-launch; there, just a few yards off the boat-launch and right alongside a first-year Great Northern Diver, was the immaculate White-billed Diver at point-blank range. Strangely, after watching both birds dive next to each other, I never saw the commoner bird again. In truth, though, I only had eyes for the White-billed Diver and I watched it drift down-river until it disappeared from view. By 9.30am the day was essentially complete and I explored the rest of the area at leisure. At Parker Dam the female Black Scoter was again present along with a fine drake Canvasback and above the dam were four distant Great Northern Divers. There was also a Canyon Wren singing from the hillside. I finished the morning at the fabulous Bill William's National Wildlife Refuge, where there were huge rafts of waterfowl including 150 Common Goldeneyes, about 120 Clark's Grebes and a few Western Grebes. The undoubted highlight was three Barrow's Goldeneyes: super views of a close drake and more distant views of a pair displaying. It had been a terrific morning and by noon I was on the road heading back to Fountain Hills.

**Day 10** A short drive to Sky Harbor International Airport followed by a relatively trouble-free journey home saw us arrive in Massachusetts just in time for another eight inches of snow to fall overnight!

The trip had been a fantastic success and a truly welcome break in the middle of the winter. Although not a dedicated birding trip, it provided a taste of better things to come on the longer, more comprehensive Birdfinders tour to Arizona and California.

James P. Smith