

California

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Participants:

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California Quail

Day 1 Well, it didn't get off to the most promising start for me, with my first episode of air sickness on the plane followed by a long wait at Los Angeles airport for the vans to arrive, but bird-wise I have to say this trip was right up there among the juiciest I've done. The schedule is demanding but the rewards are many and varied – and not just in terms of the birds.

Because of our late evening flight, what was left of our first day was spent travelling to our motel in Ventura, so the checklist remained as blank as our check-in clerk... for now.

Day 2 After a good night's sleep we were keen to get cracking, and our first stop was Ventura Beach – just across the road from the jetty where we'd later catch our boat to Santa Cruz Island. Here we picked up our first few waders of the trip: Hudsonian Whimbrel, Willet, Marbled Godwit, Surf-bird, Black Turnstone, a couple of Spotted Sandpipers and three Black Oystercatchers. We also ticked our first Heermann's Gulls together with a supporting cast of Western Gulls, one scruffy juvenile California Gull, a Ring-billed Gull and several Forster's Terns.

With the boat's departure time getting closer, we made our way back across the road and joined the queue, ticking Anna's Hummingbird in a bush in the car park while filling in our next of kin details (standard procedure apparently, but not very reassuring!)

The boat trip was longer and less direct than most of us anticipated and to any bad sailors considering the trip, I would advise taking sea-sickness medication before this journey as well as on the pelagic day. What we thought would be a straight ferry journey to the island turned out to be a mini pelagic in its own right with some wallowing stops to search for cetaceans. To our delight we picked up our first few Pink-footed Shearwaters together with large numbers of Sootys and fantastic, almost boatside, views of our only Black-vented Shearwaters of the trip. Also on the agenda were Double-crested, Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants, both Red-necked and

Gray Phalaropes, several Common Murres and a Pigeon Guillemot. Steve also picked up a mysterious dark petrel, seen by some members of the group, which was at first thought to be a Murphy's, but with further investigation seems to be something even more unusual! Add to that the amazing spectacle of a couple of Blue Whales (one diving and showing its tail fluke) and numerous Common and Pacific White-sided Dolphins surfing the bow of the boat, and it was a pretty memorable ride.

Once on the island the special birds started to come thick and fast. After taking a good look at several Song Sparrows and Northern Ravens, which would join us again later while we ate our packed lunches, we wandered down the track and first heard, then saw, Island Scrub-jay. The bird sat obligingly in a tree, at one point directly above Mick's head, and then flew to the roof of a small brick building, giving us great views. One tree at the back was a particularly good little site, holding, at various times, Allen's Hummingbird, a Hooded Oriole (which appeared to morph into a Western Tanager at one point, only to be joined by the original oriole a little while later!), Island Scrub-jay and Orange-crowned Warbler. A tramp through some of the scrub on the island produced Black Phoebe (the first of dozens on this trip) and a female Brown-headed Cowbird, but there was no sign of our quarry – Pacific-slope Flycatcher. Luckily, we met up with a couple of American birders who pointed us in the right direction in exchange for info on the hummingbird. With a little encouragement from the iPod, we were soon watching several birds at close range, together with our first Wilson's Warbler of the trip.

After lovely close views of Western Gull and Red-necked Phalarope from the jetty, we boarded the boat for the return trip – this time a much more direct, speedy crossing altogether.

Another check of Ventura Beach produced little in the way of new birds, so we set off for our next overnight destination. Buellton proudly advertises itself (no joke!) as 'The home of split pea soup', so where else could we have our evening meal but at Pea Soup Andersons? (It was pretty good too).

Day 3 For me the morning birding today was some of the most enjoyable on the whole trip. It started at Alisal Canyon with a lovely Red-shouldered Hawk sitting on a telegraph pole, which was quickly followed by our first Yellow-billed Magpies. A scan of the area beneath the wires turned up our first California Towhee, while across the road on the golf course we had Oak Titmice, a nice group of Killdeer and Roy found a small covey of California Quail. Working our way towards the bridge, the next new bird was a Nuttall's Woodpecker sitting obligingly on a stem within good bins distance. The bushes and trees on either side of the water produced a veritable feast of stuff: Spotted Towhee, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, California Thrasher, Acorn Woodpeckers, our first Wrentits, Bewick's Wren and Wilson's Warbler, while above our heads swirled White-throated Swifts, and several Green Herons flew up and down the river.

Next stop was Nojoqui Falls CP, another great little spot teeming with Acorn Woodpeckers and their larders. We wandered around for some time, in the process picking up the Oregon form of Dark-eyed Junco underneath the picnic tables and coming to drink at a tap. Hutton's and Warbling Vireos showed well, unlike our first White-breasted Nuthatch, which was unusually skulky. Then, a good little spell produced Downy Woodpecker, two stunning Townsend's Warblers and a Western Bluebird. Heading back to the vans we had amazing views of at least two Say's Phoebes sitting on goalposts and on the tops of tiny saplings right next to the path, and a couple of Western Wood-pewees put in an appearance just after our loo stop!

To get our non-passerine list up for the day, at Montana de Oro SP we did a long walk out through scrubby vegetation to do some seawatching. The most spectacular sight by far was a

passage of uncountable thousands of Sooty Shearwaters, although by the time we reached the point, most had passed by! Luckily there were plenty of other distractions: our first Caspian and Royal Terns, scope views of Common Murre, Rhinoceros Auklet and two pairs of Marbled Murrelets and, one of the highlights of the day for me and several others, our first glimpses (albeit distant) of Sea Otters in the kelp.

On the way back down the track we had stunning views of White-tailed Kite, several White-crowned Sparrows, another, bigger, covey of California Quail and Pete found a Long-billed Curlew in one of the bays.

To round off the day we walked a little way into the wooded section of Montana de Oro, hoping for Chestnut-backed Chickadee. We weren't successful, but we did add our first Red-shafted Flickers here. With the light fading quickly, we set off for the motel in Morro Bay.

Day 4 First stop today was the bay itself. In terms of shorebirds it was, to say the least, disappointing. We had numerous gulls, Brown Pelicans and cormorants, more Long-billed Curlews and some Hudsonian Whimbrels, but absolutely nothing in the way of 'peeps'.

A little further along the shore and into Morro Bay SP, we encountered our first White Pelicans, an Eared Grebe and several herons and egrets before turning our backs on the water, dodging an old hippy with a guitar and a cigar (!) and heading into the trees. Here, we had our first fleeting glimpses of Chestnut-backed Chickadee, which led us a merry dance, crossing over the road and constantly flitting just that bit further away! Still, we did all eventually have good views of this gorgeous little bird.

Most of the day was spent negotiating the coastal Highway 1 – with several birding stops en route to recover our collective equilibrium after swinging to and fro around the curves in the road!

After finally getting to grips with our first small waders of the trip (including both Western and Least Sandpipers), we stopped for lunch at a wonderful little pull-in overlooking the sea, where we had by far our closest and most prolonged views of Black Turnstones en masse. Things got even better when, after a while, first a Surfbird and then a Wandering Tattler flew in to join them! We followed the tattler as it flew (befitting its name) from rock to rock around the cove, giving fantastic views.

The other memorable site today was a roadside stop for the facilities, during which time our first California Condor flew over our heads. It was soaring very high but was, nevertheless, worth a celebratory coffee, bought from a man playing upbeat Christian music on a beaten-up tape player on his barrow. (He later shut up shop to go for a loo break – all of 100 yards or so up the road – on a motorised bike!)

If the first condor merited a coffee, the second one must have deserved a magnum of champagne at the very least! A little way further along the road, at a hair-raising pull-in on the crown of a bend, we stopped the vans and scanned. Within a very short space of time, one bird flew so low over our heads that you felt you could almost have reached out and touched it! We watched mesmerised as first this bird, then another, circled up and away from us. Wing-tagged they may have been, but it was glorious to see these huge birds back where they belong.

With some quality birds in the bag and a long day on a boat looming ahead of us, we were more than glad to arrive at the motel in Marina tonight for the first two-night stay of the trip – some welcome relief from lugging suitcases around!

Day 5 This was, undoubtedly, the day most people had been waiting for – some with trepidation, others with excited anticipation – it was time for our eight-hour pelagic out of Monterey. Before we even set foot on the boat, we had amazing views of Sea Otters right below us in the water. The light was terrible but we watched entranced as an adult moved its pup (which we had at first thought to be dead) out of the way of the traffic – it was a great start to the day.

After a long introductory talk from Debbie, we got underway. The sea was relatively calm (for which some people were extremely grateful!) and the sun not too strong, which made for promising conditions and high hopes. First up was a quick trip around the harbour to tick the female Harlequin Duck that had been seen in the area. With that under our belts, we passed the dozens of California Sea Lions and Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants decorating the rocks and set off along a spit of land containing Monterey Aquarium and said to be the setting for Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*. (Note, anybody particularly interested in this part of the trip should stand on the 9 o'clock side of the boat, as it is not repeated on the way back to shore.)

Out at sea, the first birds to make an appearance were the Sooty Shearwaters, closely followed by smaller numbers of Pink-footeds and the odd one or two Buller's Shearwaters. Before too long we also started to see our first Rhinoceros Auklets (a million times better than a distant scope view from the shore!) and Cassin's Auklets (of which, apparently, we had good numbers compared to some trips).

Great excitement was drummed up by the appearance of our first Black-footed Albatross, and the Sabine's Gulls, South Polar Skuas and Pomarine Jaegers vied for our attention with the Risso's Dolphins, the Dall's Porpoises and the Blue and Humpback Whales (yet another great tail view).

Further out from shore we found a massive raft of storm-petrels. They were relatively distant but we managed to separate Ashy and Black and picked out a handful of Wilson's. Some lucky people also caught a glimpse of a Least.

With Ocean Sunfish and Northern Fur Seal added to the list of 'others', and Northern Fulmar and stunning boatside views of Xantus's Murrelet added to the birdlist, we eventually headed back to shore. Each of us probably has a slightly different list of good sightings, but nevertheless it was an unforgettable experience (and nobody was ill!).

Just to bring us back down to earth with a bump, the only other birding stop today was Locke-Paddon Park to scour the Red-winged Blackbird flocks (successfully) for 'Bicoloured' and Tricoloured Blackbirds. Personally, I have to say that the close views of Red-necked Phalarope and Black-necked Stilt on the water just in front of us, and the Red-shouldered Hawk sitting on a wire fence at the back, proved slightly more of a draw (even though they weren't new!).

Day 6 On our way to Moss Landing this morning, we stopped and walked a little dirt track bordered by water and bushes on the left and fields to the right. It was here that we picked up our first Marsh Wrens, one of which was intermittently visiting a plank of wood across the stream and occasionally bending forward to drink. Next came good views of Virginia Rail, quickly followed by slightly poorer views of Sora. With Wilson's Phalaropes mixed in with the Red-necks and more exquisite White-tailed Kites over the fields, it was a fruitful little stop... which is a little more than can be said for Moss Landing! Here, on the buildings and boat jetties, we became very familiar with all the gull species in the area – with the exception of Glaucous-winged! After scrutinising every rooftop and boat mast several times over, we decided to try our luck on the beach. Here, we had nice views of a relatively close Surf Scoter playing in the breaking waves and several Common Murres out at sea, but there was still no sign of our quarry.

Then, James picked out a young bird on the top of a distant rocky outcrop. Obliging, it flapped its wings to show not a hint of black, but it never did come closer (nor did it bring its parents along). By far the best thing about the place was the group of incredibly close Sea Otters in a small bay on our way out, which we stopped to photograph (along with what seemed like the whole local population!).

Isn't it funny how, often, just after a slightly disappointing site, comes one with a veritable flood of birds, where you don't really know where to look for the best? Moonglow Dairy was one such place. It was positively heaving with water birds of all descriptions: waders, ducks, egrets, grebes, you name it. A scan from close to the vans picked out scope views of Green-winged Teal and Pectoral Sandpiper, while a walk around the first few pools gave us stunning close views of hundreds, if not thousands, of Western Sandpipers, Least Sandpipers, Red-necked Phalaropes, Willet and both dowitchers.

Further around the trail we had fantastic side-by-side views of Western and Clark's Grebes, allowing us to study the differences in detail. We also had our first Cinnamon Teal, a lone scruffy Black Brant and a Long-tailed Duck, while overhead wheeled a mixture of Barn, Violet-Green and Northern Rough-winged Swallows.

Lunch today was split between those who opted for sandwiches from the supermarket and those who opted for pizza (and could still have been eating it three days later!). Those who opted for the medium between two people were struggling to finish; those who opted for a medium each...well, draw your own conclusions! Why do the Americans offer you a doggy bag for something you never want to look at again for the rest of your life?

Our only other stop on the way to Mariposa was San Luis Reservoir, which did turn up our first Loggerhead Shrikes of the trip as we drove down the track, but was very quiet otherwise – Snowy Egrets, Eared Grebes and more gulls being the primary fare.

And so to Mariposa and the Miners' Inn – undoubtedly the best-equipped and most comfortable accommodation of the trip. (Note to anyone thinking of doing the trip: this place has a washing line over the bath and a coffee machine in the room). Dinner tonight was taken in the inn's restaurant, complete with a miniature train running around above our heads. (Second note to anyone thinking of doing the trip: the liver and onions is very nice, but Mick recommends avoiding the salads, which come in a dish the size of a large fruit bowl – enough for a family of four!)

Day 7 Our first day in Yosemite did not disappoint. At a glorious little spot alongside the river, we stopped to admire a female Common Merganser (Goosander) and in the process picked up several American Dippers, a small group of Black-throated Gray Warblers and a Mule Deer coming in to drink.

We stopped at several sites for woodpeckers and built up an impressive list, including Lewis's, both Red-naped and Red-breasted Sapsuckers, Downy and Hairy, together with our first views of Red-breasted Nuthatch, Townsend's Solitaire, Nashville Warbler, Steller's Jays, Band-tailed Pigeon and a flock of Clark's Nutcrackers.

Just around a bend in the road, we screeched to a halt after Mick brilliantly spotted Sooty Grouse from the van. Trying to avoid the perennial American National Park cry of 'Got a Moose?' we stalked two birds for some time, which didn't seem a bit bothered by our presence and happily carried on feeding.

After stopping at the Half Dome café for a hotdog and ice cream lunch, with chipmunks scavenging outside, we set off again. We ticked Mountain Chickadee, Olive-sided Flycatcher and

both Purple and Cassin's Finches before we really started to hit the big time. At another stop for woodpeckers, Pete picked one up briefly in a close-by tree. It turned out to be a Black-backed, which, although flighty, gave us fairly prolonged and stunning views.

Nearing the end of our birding for the day we hit another rich seam. First up was a stunning close view of a Red-breasted Sapsucker at eye level in a tree. This was quickly followed by our first American Robins on a large grassy area, a single Fox Sparrow seen by some of the group and a small flock of Cedar Waxwings seen by others. But the best was yet to come. In one amazing session we picked up several Brown Creepers, Jo found our first White-headed Woodpecker and Steve brilliantly spotted a Great Gray Owl. It was a fantastic way to end the day and we headed back to the motel feeling suitably smug.

Day 8 After another breakfast in the lobby (the only chance to have cereal and toast on the trip), sadly it was time to leave the Miners' Inn. We set off through Yosemite again, stopping first at a site on Forrester Road, where we had great views of Brewer's, Chipping and Vesper Sparrows on the ground ahead of us. Walking back along the road a little way, we added House Wren, fleeting glimpses of MacGillivray's Warbler and more Wrentits to the list, together with larger flocks of Chipping Sparrows feeding on the roadside verge. Sadly, despite good habitat, there was no sign of any Mountain Quail.

The next stop was Tamarack Flat, where we heard, but sadly didn't see, Pine Grosbeak. However, we soon made up for it as Mick spotted our second, much closer, White-headed Woodpecker (missed by some the night before). We watched this beautiful bird for some time as it worked its way up a dead tree, giving fantastic views, even to the naked eye.

Lunch today was at another, somewhat more humble, café within Yosemite. However, what it lacked in finesse, it certainly made up for in birds! We were surrounded by Brewer's Blackbirds, and both they and the Steller's Jays were almost eating out of our hands. On the other side of the road were Dark-eyed Juncos, more Chipping Sparrows and a cute and photogenic ground squirrel.

Tuolumne Meadows can only be described as a beautiful spot to watch wildlife – and we did, picking up our only Lincoln's Sparrow of the trip, good views of Northern Harrier and a lovely White-tailed Deer stag in velvet.

Shortly afterwards, having missed out at Tuolumne, our first Prairie Falcon of the trip put in an appearance above a high ridge, causing much excitement and probable bewilderment to the man trying to spend some quiet time with his newborn baby. We also had a couple of Mountain Bluebirds at this spot.

We finished the day's birding at Mono Lake with the warm glow of the evening light turning the tufa pink. Here we had our first Black-billed Magpie, some stunning Yellow-headed Blackbirds, a female Lazuli Bunting and a manic Sage Thrasher feeding voraciously on the flies at the edge of the water. It was also here that Linda and I lost a certain amount of dignity and discovered the hard way that the locks weren't working in the car park loos (why can't they just use bolts?). I will never think of James in quite the same way again (and I'm sure the same applies doubly for him)!

Day 9 Today we invested a huge amount of time and effort scanning and tramping through various sites in the Owens River area looking, sadly in vain, for Greater Sage Grouse, which appears to be in deep trouble throughout the US. However, our efforts did result in nice views of Belted Kingfisher, our first few Sage Sparrows, Sharp-shinned Hawk, a Black-crowned Night-

heron, our first flock of Blue-winged Teal, nice views of Western Meadowlark and a Great Horned Owl in flight!

A lovely little spot close to a hot spring gave us a typically skulky Green-tailed Towhee and our first Rock Wrens, while higher up in the mountains, the ancient Bristlecone Pines produced stunning views of Mountain Bluebirds, Clark's Nutcrackers and a juvenile Black-throated Sparrow.

At Deep Spring I found a small group of Chukar heading up a dry streambed, but migrants were thin on the ground.

With the light again fading, we arrived at Lake Tinemaha, where we managed to pick out several Redheads, American Wigeon, Gadwall, Pintail and Shoveler among the myriad American Coot, Eared Grebes and Mallard. We spent some time watching a couple of gnatcatchers flit along the fence line, trying to catch a glimpse of the undertail pattern. After much discussion, we concluded that they weren't the hoped-for Black-tailed but simply another couple of Blue-Grays.

Day 10 After a slightly frustrating day yesterday, today began well with one of my target birds added to the list. We stopped, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, and trudged out into a semi-barren landscape dotted with sage bushes. As Jo had seen a promising looking bird near to some ramshackle buildings as we left the vans, we headed in roughly that direction. Eventually, with a bit of taped encouragement, we had our first views of LeConte's Thrasher, which looked much greyer and less sandy than I expected from the field guide pictures, but nevertheless showed the dark eye and tawny undertail. With one bird perched on a large cylindrical tank, I had fleeting glimpses of two others in different directions.

Typically, after going to all that trouble, we then stumbled across another bird perched in a tree at Butterbrecht Spring! Making up the cast here were a Ladder-backed Woodpecker, numerous Willow Flycatchers and another Pacific-slope Flycatcher, two Warbling Vireos and a stunning Great Horned Owl perched on a rock face.

After lunch in a specialist omelette café (something like 104 varieties, with all but 3 containing cheese of one kind or another!), our next stop was California City Park. Here, by far the highlight was another Great Horned Owl, this time sitting in a tree above our heads – the size of the talons alone was awe-inspiring. Also here were a handful of Red-breasted Nuthatches in the trees behind the owl, an incredibly tatty Great-tailed Grackle minus his tail feathers, two Lark Sparrows in a tree and one each of Ross's Goose and Tundra Swan, apparently accepted by local birders as wild birds left behind during migration (they were certainly free-flying).

On a quest for further migrants, we headed for Galileo. This wasn't at all what I'd expected and turned out to be a swish country club with manicured grounds, ornamental ponds with mini fountains and scattered trees. We set off to explore and almost immediately bumped into a female and then a male Vermilion Flycatcher. Next up was a lovely Black-and-white Warbler. We also chalked up MacGillivray's Warbler, Common Yellowthroat and a young male Costa's Hummingbird before heading to the clubhouse for a drink. Amazingly (would this ever happen in Britain?), we were welcomed in, served quickly and were not charged a penny! Meanwhile, Roy and Linda had bumped into another kindly bloke outside, who had plied them with canned drinks for the whole group, also free of charge. No wonder it's a popular birding spot!

Day 11 The day started well with stunning views of Golden Eagle in the Lucerne Valley en route to our first major stop of the day – Big Morongo Canyon Preserve. On arrival at Big Morongo,

we headed straight to the feeding station and sat for some time watching the continual stream of visiting hummingbirds (Anna's, Black-chinned, Broad-tailed, Rufous and a lovely male Costa's). The other feeders attracted Hooded Orioles, Black-headed Grosbeaks, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Western Tanager and numerous House Finches (one with an extremely malformed, Thrasher-style bill) and Lesser Goldfinches (despite our scans, there were no Lawrence's amongst them).

We could have stayed longer, but with hindsight, thank goodness nobody chose to. A walk around and into the neighbouring Covington Park gave us good views of a Gray Flycatcher, and then, as we were watching a group of Lazuli Buntings and a Red-tailed Hawk on the ground ahead of us, Chris picked up a raptor coming directly towards us. There was a bit of a scramble as James yelled, 'You need to get onto this bird!' but you couldn't really miss it – a Common Black-hawk flew right over our heads and away towards the hills. We watched until it disappeared, trying to make mental notes and get some sort of photographs of it for the sake of a state report before continuing our walk (apparently, this would be only the fourth or fifth California record). The only other bird of note that we found before heading back for another quick check of the feeders was a stunning male Summer Tanager perched high in a tree. With the feeders turning up nothing new, we put some money into the collection tin, told the man about our Black-hawk and set off on the long drive to the Salton Sea.

What can you say about the Salton Sea? It's swelteringly hot, it stinks, it's probably not somewhere you'd want to live, but it's fantastic for birds!

Our first stop was the Niland boat ramp, where we sought some shelter behind a hut to scan the flocks. Here, amongst the usual suspects, we had our first good views of Yellow-footed Gull and thousands of Black Terns.

Our other stop tonight was on the Garst road, en route to which we came across a huge roadside flock of thousands of White-faced Ibis huddled together in a long line that spread across several fields. Our first Roadrunner of the trip put in an appearance behind the vans while we were here and our first Burrowing Owls were seen perching on the tops of haystacks as we drove along!

The light was fading pretty badly as we arrived at the Garst road stop, so we didn't stay too long, but it was long enough to see that most of the vast flock of ducks were Shoveler – more than I've ever seen in one place before. Also here, we picked up Snowy Plover, a Bonaparte's Gull perched on a tree stump and a handful of Laughing Gulls.

And so to the Brawley Inn – our base for the next two nights and another well-equipped place, with free drinks and Internet access in reception. This was also where we met up with Paula – an American friend from previous Birdfinders' trips who was joining us for the last few days for a number of specific target birds (all of which she got).

Day 12 First up this morning was a stop at Finney Lakes to try, unsuccessfully, for Crissal Thrasher. However, we did see our first Verdins of the trip here.

After a second stop at the Garst road site, where we viewed the Shoveler in better light, next on the agenda was a large lagoon, where Paula ticked her first Yellow-footed Gull and we had our first views of American Herring Gull. We darted from one wooden shelter to the next, picking out our first Black Skimmers of the trip on the gravel with the tern flock, and then headed out to the point. From here we found our first Reddish Egret, a reasonably close Laughing Gull and the aforementioned Herrings. John also picked out a distant Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua). In need of a loo stop, we diverted to the ranger station, where we handily refilled our water bottles for free while chatting to the ranger.

Our next site used to be the renowned breeding site for Ruddy Ground-dove. Sadly, the pig farm with which they were associated has now gone, along with the ground-doves! We scoured the area anyway, picking up Common Ground-dove, White-winged Dove, Inca Dove, our first pair of Gila Woodpeckers on a telegraph pole and nice views of American Kestrel on the wires.

Following some local information, we next walked out along a bank in baking heat to scan a wader flock for Ruff and Buff-breasted Sandpiper. We found the Ruff fairly quickly and added a couple of Pectoral Sandpipers, but the Buff-breast eluded us. With the temperature hitting a dangerous 50 °C, we decided to break for lunch and come back in slightly cooler conditions later.

We took a long lunch of British-sized sandwiches in a spacious, air-conditioned back room, during which our first Lesser Nighthawk flew past the window, before heading out again.

At Sonny Bono Reserve we were escorted to see a roosting Barn Owl deep in a palm tree, which would have been impossible to find without local knowledge. As it was, you had to stand in just the right position beneath the tree to see the bird. Within a short space of time and in a very small area, we had added Gambel's Quail and Abert's Towhee to our growing list, and had a fly-over Cooper's Hawk and a Lesser Nighthawk wheeling around and darting over our heads.

By the time we got back to the wader site, the flock had thinned out considerably and we never did find our Buff-breast, but we added a couple more Roadrunners to the list and spent some time admiring the Burrowing Owls along the banks.

Day 13 Today was undoubtedly a day of two halves – the morning was somewhat frustrating, but the afternoon was golden (literally). In the morning, we tried again for Crissal Thrasher, first at a scrubby site just down the road from the motel and then at Finney Lakes, but again failed to coax one out. However, we did pick up nice views of Cactus Wren and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher at the scrubby site (which I now refer to as Mockingbird Central due to the sheer numbers present).

On the long drive through Anza–Borrego, we stopped at Tamarisk Grove Campground to see if we could gain better views of Black-throated Sparrow. However, as the whole place had been closed due to fire risk and there were no scraps from campers, the birds were thin on the ground. We only really managed a female Vermilion Flycatcher before moving on again.

The fire closure marked a bit of an omen for our day. Our lunch stop was to be Julian – a very touristy town with old, Western-style shop fronts – but we were initially thwarted in our efforts to get there by a road closure caused by, you guessed it, a fire. Apparently, it had been raging for well over a day and we could see the helicopters flying overhead with huge quantities of water slung underneath. Julian itself had been evacuated just 24 hours previously, but was, we were assured, now open again for business. Luckily, there was a slightly straighter (if less direct) way to get there, and we took it.

After lunch in a rustic, dark wood-timbered restaurant (with good apple pie and non-alcoholic 'cider' – more like cloudy apple juice), we spent some time souvenir shopping in The Birdwatcher. This was a great little place to buy anything and everything connected to birds – books, fridge magnets, CDs, tea towels, cards, hummingbird feeders (sadly not much use back home!) and so on. Even better, it also had several feeders and bird baths outside, which we spent time scanning. Hoping against hope for a Lawrence's, we scoured the flocks of Lesser Goldfinches, but to no avail. However, we did have great views of White-breasted Nuthatch and Mountain Chickadees coming in to drink. Then suddenly, a little while after Mick had said he

thought he saw a different nuthatch, lo and behold, one appeared – henceforth forever called a PygNut! The excitement caused by the appearance of the first one doubled, then trebled, then quadrupled, as another three birds in turn lined up on the side of the bird bath to drink (one of those cute ahhhhhhhh moments).

The next stop was to be a Phainopepla site, but again we were unable to get there due to another road closure. Stopping to get our bearings and have a rethink of options, we decided we might as well have a scan of the immediate area (which appeared to be a gathering point for officials in charge of dealing with the fire). In no time at all we picked up a large flock of feeding finches on the ground and in the trees ahead of us. Unbelievably, all 160 or so of them turned out to be Lawrence's Goldfinches! Having tried so hard for several days to find a single bird, we were absolutely blown away by the sight, and in trying to get a little closer, we also stumbled across a small party of Turkeys walking up a nearby bank and several Western Bluebirds sitting on fence posts. We'd hit one of those glorious purple patches in birding where seemingly nothing can go wrong.

And our luck continued at the last stop of the day – Cuyamaca State Park – where we had our only views of Wood Duck on the trip and the most incredible views of both Osprey and Bald Eagle fishing.

With a truly memorable day's birding behind us, it was time to head back into the urban madness of the city and our motel in San Diego.

Day 14 The apparent ease with which we picked up the birds yesterday afternoon did not, unfortunately, spill over to this morning! We spent three hours or so scouring the bushes around Otay Lakes for California Gnatcatcher. However, it was all worth it when we eventually had great views of this declining species, together with a nice Blue-Gray for comparison.

Next up was one of those wonderful sites where, if it wasn't for the incessant noise from the circling helicopters, you could happily spend days birding. We headed to the Tijuana River right on the Mexican border (hence the Customs helicopters). First to put in an appearance as we walked along the beach were both Belding's and Large-billed Savannah Sparrows, but the real fun began as we walked around the back of a fenced-off Snowy Plover breeding area. You almost didn't know where to look for the best here – there were birds everywhere to our left and two squatting Mexicans trying to evade capture away to our right (after some time, they were picked up, handcuffed and taken away in a jeep). As for the birds, within a large flock of Black-bellied (Grey) Plover, we first found a Pacific Golden Plover. Also of note, in with all the commoner stuff, were our second Reddish Egret, good views of side-by-side Royal and Elegant Terns, closer views of Large-billed Savannah Sparrow, an American Golden Plover and a distant (but still great through a scope) Light-footed Clapper Rail. This bird proceeded to promenade up and down and then take a bath, showing his pale legs really clearly.

The last stop of the day was the Dairy Mart Sod Farm. Here, most of the group decamped to peruse a Baird's Sandpiper, while Jo and I amused ourselves in the van by watching the 'jogger' (or Reddish Egret as we preferred to think of him) totter up and down the road in a seemingly random manner!

Correction, the real last stop of the day was just around the corner from our motel, when we stopped at the side of the road to look at our first Cassin's Kingbirds on the wires. Luckily, there were a couple of Westerns in the flock, so we had a nice comparison.

Day 15 This morning began with a trip to Pine Creek Wilderness Area in a last ditch attempt to find Mountain Quail. Sadly, once again, the place was closed due to the risk of fire. We hung around the car park in the vague hope that we might pick something up by chance, but apart from a party of Bushtits and a few Western Scrub-jays, there was nothing much about.

We set off towards Los Angeles along the Pacific Coast Highway, from which we had the usual generous helpings of gulls, terns, cormorants, pelicans and waders. After a long drive, we arrived at Bolsa Chica Reserve, which is a pale shadow of what it once was due to the discovery of oil in the area and the consequent loss of some of the habitat. However, you can get stunningly close views of some of the commoner birds here – our haul included Willet, Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Eared Grebe, Belding's Savannah Sparrow and Forster's Tern (great for photographers – even those with a little point-and-click camera). We also spent some time watching the skimmers patrol up and down (sadly a bit further away) before setting off once again.

Our last birding stop, both of the day and the trip, was Huntington Park. Here we had good views of Downy Woodpecker, a lovely close fly-over Cooper's Hawk and a nice little collection of warblers – Orange-crowned, Common Yellowthroat and Townsend's. It also seemed somewhat fitting that our ever-present Black Phoebe, which had popped up somewhere on every day of the trip bar one, was here to say goodbye.

Day 16 Finally, after a round trip covering well over 2000 miles and clocking up a record group tally of 285 species, it was time to brave the madness of LA rush hour traffic and head to the airport. After battling with five lanes of crawling single-driver cars and pick-ups, to the point where time was getting tight, we fought our way into the car pool lane and breezed through, arriving in good time for Roy and Linda's earlier check-in. With James, Pete and I heading off to return the vans, we said goodbye here. It had been a fantastic trip shared with some really lovely people and, as always, it was sad to break up the party. May our paths cross again in the not-too-distant future, and may the god of birding grant us all a Mountain Quail somewhere down the line!