

California

9–25 September 2009

Participants:

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Bob Power
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Mountain Quail

Leaders: James P. Smith and Peter Lansdown

Day 1: Having left the Midlands by taxi in the early hours of the morning we met up with Pete Lansdown and the rest of the UK group at Heathrow terminal 1 in good time to catch our 10.35 United Airlines flight to Los Angeles. Just how many times can you see an in-flight movie? Well during the 11 hour 40 minute flight we managed to watch the new Star Trek movie 4 times! The 8-hour UK/US time difference meant we landed 5650 miles away at Los Angeles, LAX Airport, at 13.40pm. As we approached smoke hung in the air from a wildfire that had raged in the foothills of Los Angeles since 31 August. The pilot joked it was an extra \$40 to fly over the fire. Once aboard the two blue minibuses that would become our home for the next fortnight, we set off down the six lanes of Hollywood Freeway U.S. Route 101 in heavy traffic through the western part of Los Angeles. Western Gulls, American Crows, Eurasian Collared-doves, European Starlings, House Sparrows, Feral Pigeons, Mourning Dove, American Kestrel, Red-tailed Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk and Turkey Vultures were all called, but at 60mph views if any were brief. Signs for iconic streets like 'Sunset Boulevard', and 'Mulholland Drive' flashed past, as did the vast Los Angeles National Cemetery where local war veterans are interred. It was 17.30 before we arrived for our one-night stay in Ventura Beach. Delays with check in enabled us to get really good views of the Western Gulls that perched on the surrounding street lights and bathed in the motel pool. Dinner was taken at an adjacent Denny's Diner and where we started to get to know everyone. The trip had begun.

Day 2: After a quick McDonald's breakfast we parked at Ventura Beach and had twenty minutes to view the birds around the sandy beach there. Fifty or more Elegant Terns patrolled the shore giving off their Sandwich Tern like calls. We saw, the first of many Brown Pelicans and four of the common Heermann's Gulls. Stone groynes held ten Black Oystercatchers, four Black Turnstones, one Surf-bird and a Wandering Tattler, plus a 100+ Brandt's Cormorants. A small passage of hirundines across the beach included many Barn Swallows, a Cliff Swallow and two Northern Rough-winged Swallows. Rock Squirrels were seen. The first of many Anna's Hummingbirds kept the trip list moving whilst we waited to board the catamaran *Island Adventure* for the Island Packers ferry to Santa Cruz. Santa Cruz is California's largest island: approximately 24 miles long and up to 6 miles wide. The Spaniards called the island "La Isla de Santa Cruz," the Island of the Sacred Cross. Owing to millions of years of isolation, many distinctive species of plant and animal have adapted to the island's unique environment, including our target, the Island Scrub-jay. A number of the birds we would see would be potential splits. The island is now a nature reserve but was until recently a working cattle ranch. With Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821, the Mexican government asserted its control over California. In an effort to increase the Mexican presence, the government began sending convicted criminals to populate many areas. Around 40 prisoners were sent to Santa Cruz. They lived for a short time in an area now known as Prisoners Harbor. This was where we would be landed. The crossing to the island was by a very quick catamaran, and there were a lot of native Chumash Indians (shell bead people) aboard, which made moving about birdwatching difficult at times. Birds seen in the channel in the one hour twenty-minute crossing were Sooty and Pink-footed Shearwaters and Red-necked Phalarope, with some really nice close views. We looked even harder on the return journey for the expected Black-vented Shearwaters but saw none. We did add both Pomarine and Parasitic (Arctic) Jaegers (Skua). We also saw Californian Sea Lion and Common Dolphin. Before we got to our intended destination, we had to land the Chumash Indians who used to live on the Santa Barbara Channel Islands many years ago and who were returning to celebrate harvest festival. As they had brought everything with them including the kitchen sink it took some time to unload them and their equipment.

We were on Santa Cruz for about three and a half hours working the Prisoner's Harbour area of paddocks, and scrub. We saw our target bird Island Scrub-jay, which is found nowhere else in the world, fairly quickly, close to the harbour in nearby trees. It is characterized by its darker blue plumage, larger bill and larger size compared to its mainland relative, the Western Scrub-jay, which is not found on the Channel Islands. We also saw a number of the specific Santa Cruz sub-species that breed on the island including races of Allen's Hummingbird, (*sedentarius*), House Finch, (*clementis*), Song Sparrow, (*clementae*), Bewick's Wren, (*nesophilus*), and Pacific-slope Flycatcher, (*insulicola*). These differ from the mainland populations. Also seen were the coastal Californian subspecies of Great Blue Heron, (*herodias*), Brown-headed Cowbird, (*californicus*), Bushtit, (*melanurus*), Orange-crowned Warbler, (*sordida*), Spotted Towhee, (*megalonyx*). Plus we also saw Osprey, Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, Killdeer, Belted Kingfisher, Warbling Vireo, Black Phoebe, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Common Yellowthroat, Wilson's Warbler, Lesser Goldfinch, and Common Raven. Lunch, eaten in Prisoners Harbour, was the Subway rolls brought with us. There were large numbers of the butterfly, Californian Sister (*Adelpha californica*), flying around in the sunshine and one or two Fiery Skippers (*Hylephila phyleus*). We also found a fast-moving, highly-active, diurnal snake on Santa Cruz, an adult Western Yellow-bellied Racer. Although they will not hesitate to bite they are not venomous. We left Ventura Harbour north on Highway 101 for a one-night stay at Motel 6 – Buellton and another check in comedy. Brewer's Blackbirds, Western Kingbird, Western Scrub-jay, Red-tailed Hawk, Northern Mockingbird and Mourning Dove were watched while we waited, and waited. Eventually dining at Pea Soup Andersen's in Bulleton where as you would expect, the soup was very good but how did Ron manage to eat that pea soup in a breadbasket?

Day 3: We left our motel, devoured another quick McDonald's and arrived at Ailsal Canyon to search for oak woodland birds, and our target Yellow-billed Magpie. It was hot and flies were bothersome but this turned out to be a very productive area for birds and there were many new ones to view. These included a covey of the state bird of California, the California Quail, Californian Thrashers (dark iris, dark eye line, buffy belly and under tail), Californian Towhees (dark brown, rufous under black tail, dusky belly, cinnamon face markings), Acorn and male Nuttall's Woodpeckers, Band-tailed Pigeons, female Black-headed Grosbeak, White-throated Swifts, three brief Pine Siskin, a Purple Finch, three Wood Ducks, Western Tanagers, Western Bluebirds and a Green Heron before we eventually located our target bird of Yellow-billed Magpie, up close and confiding. Final birding around the vans before setting off to our next destination brought us more new birds; Berwick's Wren, a superb, perched Sharp-shinned Hawk and two Phainopeplas, not a bird we expected to see at this location.

It was with some reluctance that we were dragged away from Ailsal Canyon to Nojoqui Falls Country Park, a day park just north of Goleta Pass near Solvang. A secluded canyon canopied in a tilted forest of sycamores, laurels and oaks. On our arrival a small number of Wild Turkeys slinked off into the long grass no doubt practicing becoming invisible before thanksgiving at the end of November. We soon caught up with our target species, Oak Titmouse, a drab brown bird with a short crest, feeding under the live oaks with a number of Dark-eyed Juncos of the black hooded Oregon race (*oreganus*). A Californian Ground Squirrel played on the lawns and above an Acorn Woodpecker, one of many flying around, searched for the perfect hole in its 'Acorn Tree' granary. Three Nuttall's Woodpecker's put on their noisy display, whilst two White-breasted Nuthatches probed for insects. A local birder told us of rare migrants near the restrooms (toilets to you and me) and the hunt was on – but how do you get a party of birders onto fast moving migrants in a dense arboreal habitat? Most saw Hutton's Vireo, and Orange-crowned Warbler but few saw the Wilson's or Canada Warblers or the butterfly, Lorquin's Admiral (*Limenitis lorquini*). Lunch beckoned and we went into Solvang, windmills, and quiet streets, the 'Danish Capital of America' nestled in the Santa Ynez Valley. Here we had time to relax. To get rid of some of the frustrations felt by missing birds and leaving sites before we were ready – its always the same on these trips, it takes days to recognise what is common and which birds are important. James knew and we were lucky to be led by him. We shunned a quaint Danish smorgasbord restaurant in favour of another Subway lunch.

Success with shorebirds on Day 2 meant a change was possible to our itinerary. We headed for Montaña de Oro State Park, six miles southwest of Morro Bay on the Central California Pacific Coast. En route, Lee spotted a Great Horned Owl roosting in pines. The vans came to a fortuitous stop for as well as the owl several difficult-to-see Wrentits responded to James's tape. As we drove into the park we also saw a Black-tailed Deer, a subspecies of Mule Deer; we would see more of these on our trip, particularly around Yosemite. The park's name, "Mountain of Gold," comes from the golden wildflowers that bloom in spring. A few of the bright orange and yellow Californian Poppies, the state flower, were still in bloom. California live oak and Bishop pine occur here in chaparral-covered hills, and there are willows, big-leaf maple, box elder, myrtle and black cottonwood trees in the stream-cut canyons. The coast was shrouded in mist. It had gone from mid-summer to autumn. A short walk around the campsite area produced a lot of birds Chestnut-backed Chickadees and a few 'common' migrants: Western Tanager, Yellow, Wilson's and Townsend's Warblers. Californian Towhees and White-crowned Sparrows foraged on the ground with numbers of Brewer's Blackbirds, which would prove to be one of the most common birds we would see on this trip. A bonus came in the form of two American Goldfinches. Cabbage White (*Pieris rapae*) butterflies were common despite the cold.

We moved on to a peninsula headland and scoped the sea. Many Sooty Shearwaters and Elegant Terns were passing by, and small parties of Red-necked Phalaropes. But the prizes went to Pigeon Guillemot, Rhinoceros Auklet and a second Wandering Tattler. We saw our first Sea Otters, and recorded Black Oystercatcher, Royal Tern, Common Murre (Guillemot), Parasitic and Long-tailed Jaeger, Common Loon (Great Northern Diver), the ubiquitous Brown Pelican, Brandt's Cormorant, 'Hudsonian' Whimbrel, Long-billed Curlew and the by now, ever-present Black Phoebe. A collection of gulls on the beach included California, Heermann's and both the northern and southern races of Western Gull. The southern race *wymani* is slightly smaller and darker-backed than the paler-backed northern race *occidentalis*. It is the northern Western Gull race, which commonly hybridises with Glaucous-winged

Gull. We had a one night stay in Morro Bay and took dinner at the Great American Fish Company, Morro Bay. Adrian looked like he had been a little ambitious with mesquite broiled seafood with a Cioppino special – who was going to eat who – a dish to swim from!

Day 4: Mist shrouded the beach and Morro Bays famous landmark rock. It looked deserted at first but the more you looked the more birds came into view. Two Caspian Terns flew past. James drew our attention to an interesting gull, a Glaucous-winged x Western Gull hybrid amongst the Western, Ring-billed, California and Heermann's Gulls present. Small numbers of Long-billed Curlews, 'Hudsonian' Whimbrels, Marbled Godwits, Sanderlings and Semipalmated Sandpipers were seen and five 'Western' Snowy Plovers flew past.

We left for breakfast and a 'Big Mac' at McDonald's. We then drove to the huge natural bay in Morro Bay State Park and walked out onto the salt marsh to 'scope the hundreds of shorebirds. It took time to appreciate that we were looking at large flocks of small, yellow-legged Least Sandpipers frantically feeding on the incoming tide. Here and there larger, paler, dark legged Western Sandpipers, mostly juvenile, fed amongst them. Larger waders were represented by flocks of Willet, Marbled Godwit and Long-billed Curlew. There was a single Greater Yellowlegs. Ducks were mostly Mallard but included Northern Shoveler and Northern Pintail and terns were mostly Elegant but included a few Forster's. Large flocks of Double-crested Cormorant and American White Pelican loafed on mud banks and Harbour Seals were present. We continued north along the Golden Coast on Highway One. Just south of Cambria we screeched to a halt. Lee, the photographer, had seen a large raptor with a white tail. James called a Ferruginous Hawk and we leapt out of the van. This activity normally took about two minutes or longer, but this time we were all out within 30 seconds and watching the bird. It was a light phase juvenile, it breeds in Nevada, but was thought unusual for California at this time of year. We watched the hawk for some time. Two Prairie Falcons flew up and circled around it. We moved on, stopping at a pull off on the WR Hearst State Beach to eat lunch, which we shared with the Western, California and Heermann's Gulls present. We took the opportunity to scan the sea and soon picked up a small flock of Surf Scoters. James also found us two Marbled Murrelets. In contrast to other seabirds, murrelets do not form dense colonies, and can fly many miles inland to nest in old coniferous forests. They breed locally in the forests of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Other birds we saw included Red-breasted Merganser, Common Murre and Common Loon. We made a second stop just south of Piedras Blancos Lighthouse to view the Northern Elephant Seal haul out. Birds here included two Pelagic Cormorants amongst larger numbers of Brandt's, 23 Black Turnstones, four Black Oystercatchers and ten Royal Terns. Stuart photographed a Common Buckeye butterfly (*Junonia coenia*) on the rocks.

A thick coastal fog descended over us as we drove Big Sur. It was cold, visibility was poor and it soon became clear that we had little chance of seeing our target bird, California Condor. We stopped for restrooms and ice creams and picked up Northern Flicker for the list. As we drove off Big Sur we looked for somewhere from where we might see condor. There were a few Bushtits around the lay-by where we pulled off, and the grey coastal form of Chestnut-backed Chickadee (*barlowi*) with almost no rufous color on its flanks, then a few warblers. James played an owl tape to bring them in. There was a sudden commotion and many warblers began mobbing a Northern Pygmy-owl, which had been lured by the tape. The excitement of this rare find overshadowed the first Hairy Woodpecker for the trip and the fact that we did not see a condor. We arrived late for our two night stay in Salinas and were grateful for a Denny's that was still open, and even more grateful that it was licensed.

Day 5: After our McDonald's breakfast, we negotiated our way through Monterey to Fisherman's Wharf. Here we were greeted by Debra Love Shearwater aboard the *Check Mate*. Debbie explained the dos and don'ts of our eight-hour pelagic trip and introduced the crew, which included Linda and Scott Terrill. The previous day's pelagic had seen Cook's and Hawaiian Petrels, but that was a twelve-hour pelagic and we could not reach the area in which they were found in the time we had available. Belted Kingfisher and Black Turnstone were seen before we left the harbour. Then our first mammals, a gathering of Californian Sea Lions hauled out on a buoy. Soon we were watching Sea Otters resting and grooming lying on their backs in the kelp. A chum trail of popcorn and pilchards ensured a following of gulls, Western, California and Heermann's, and it was not long before other sea birds were attracted. Sabine's Gull and Northern Fulmar were seen. As the boat criss-crossed Monterey Bay looking for the concentration of birds our list of birds increased. It included four species of 'skua', South Polar, Pomarine, Long-tailed and Parasitic (Jaeger); three species of shearwater, Sooty, Pink-footed and Buller's; the majestic Black-footed Albatrosses brought much excitement; two species of storm-petrels, Black and Ashy; and many aluids, Common Murre, Pigeon Guillemot, fly away Cassin's and Rhinoceros Auklets. The twenty or so Black-footed Albatrosses we saw were all dark juveniles, only one of which was beginning to show the white tail coverts of an adult bird. As usual the best is always left to the last. Just when we thought we had seen all the birds we were going to see the stars of the show turned up, single, Tufted and Horned Puffins. The Horned Puffin being the rarest sighting. How many of the birds you saw, how close your views, depended on where you were on the boat and your control of sea sickness as the boat pitched in the 20-foot Pacific swell on a relatively calm day. We found out why the experienced Linda Terrill had vacated her prime forward position, when the Pacific threw a bathtub of water over us – thank goodness for fast-drying field wear! We saw or shall I say experienced Humpback Whales for as they dive the blowhole opens wide and foul-smelling air, which has accumulated during the dive, is expelled explosively. This produces the pear shaped whale spout, which rises 10 feet in to the air and an unbelievably and unexpected bad smell! We also saw Blue Shark, Harbour Seals, Common and Northern Right-Whale Dolphins.

Once back on terra firm a West Coast Lady butterfly (*Vanessa annabella*) was seen near the vans: whilst most of the group relaxed over a coffee in one of the Fisherman's Wharf themed cafes. We then drove south again and put in another hour on the approach to

Big Sur looking for condor: our only success adding White-tailed Kite to the group list. It was our second night stay at the motel and Denny's got our business again, I think the beer had something to do with it!

Day 6: We visited the 17-acre Locke-Paddon Community Park in Marina, which holds a series of freshwater vernal ponds, looking for Tricoloured Blackbird (dark red lesser/white median coverts) amongst the numerous Red-winged (red lesser/yellow median coverts) and 'Bi-coloured' Red-winged Blackbirds (no yellow) that roost there. Only a few of the Bi-coloured form were present, but we did make additions to the list in the form of Sora and Virginia Rails, and Common Yellowthroat, all of which gave excellent views. So it was onto the privately owned MoonGlow Dairy. A few Yellow-headed Blackbirds were glimpsed in the paddocks as we drove into the area but we did not stop. We eventually parked up by a large eucalyptus grove overlooking some mucky cattle pens with associated smells, and it was not long before James had identified two male and a female Tricoloured Blackbirds amongst the several hundred Brown-headed Cowbirds, Brewer's and 'Bi-coloured' Red-winged Blackbirds that were sharing the cattle's feed. The eucalyptus held a few migrants Yellow and Townsend's Warblers and Pacific-slope Flycatcher. As we walked the levee that starts at the eucalyptus grove and heads along the edge of the tidal Elkhorn Slough, and around the big freshwater pond, McGillivray's Warbler, Marsh Wrens and Savannah and Song Sparrows bounced along the weedy edges in front of us. They were not easy to see. A Pacific Diver preened itself on the slough where Willet, Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwit and Greater Yellowlegs were feeding. Two Pectoral Sandpipers were found amongst Least and Western Sandpipers on the freshwater pond. There were many more birds on view. A Northern Harrier quartered the marsh as we arrived and there were a large numbers of Brown Pelicans and Red-necked Phalaropes. Double-crested, Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants, Western, Clark's, Pied-billed and Eared Grebes made a good grebe day and a White-shouldered Kite was perched distantly. It was an idyllic spot for birdwatching and the weather was not yet too hot so we would have to be dragged away again!

We stopped briefly at Moss Landing Harbour to scan for Glaucous-winged Gull but saw none. In the harbour there was a large raft of the Californian or Southern Sea Otters and another preening diver, this time Red-throated. A Surfbird foraged the coastal defences and two Pigeon Guillemots and a Great Northern Diver were feeding close inshore, whilst there was a steady passage of Sooty Shearwaters offshore. In the car park White-crowned Sparrows hopped amongst the cars. We set off on a long drive east to Mariposa, on the western edge of Yosemite, and made short stops at San Felipe Lake and the San Luis Reservoir. The lake held good numbers of American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt and Greater Yellowlegs. Northern Shoveler and a female Cinnamon Teal were picked out from the American Coots. A flock of 30 Canada Geese were present, most birds were however too far away to identify in the heat haze. The San Luis Reservoir held around 3,500 American Coots and many Eared and Pied-billed Grebes, Northern Shoveler and Double-crested Cormorants with smaller numbers of Ruddy Ducks and Green winged Teals. Vaux's Swifts, Violet-green Swallows and a single Cliff Swallow hawked the water. Much of the landscape we travelled was uninteresting; mile upon mile of flat and treeless alfalfa fields recalling fenland. Clouds of Orange Sulphur (*Colias eurytheme*) butterflies flew across the fields and roads. Nearer our destination a lucky few were fortunate to glimpse a female Bobcat stretching in the sun of the Yosemite foothills. Two nights in nice rooms at the Miners Inn, Mariposa, would have been nicer if they had the same layout as Motel 6 rooms but then where would we have put the 'in room' coffee-making machine! Evening meal in the Miners Inn – Gold Rush-themed family style restaurant – sassy!

Day 7: A day of much anticipation: we were going into the famous Yosemite National Park; no one was going to be late. A quick continental breakfast and into the local garage to grab a lunchtime sandwich and we were off. We entered the park along the fast flowing Merced River where we stopped to search for an American Dipper, which when it flew became a Brewer's Blackbird for some. But it was not long before the dipper re-appeared. The canyon through which the Merced flowed held Canyon Wren, which readily responded to tape. We entered the National Park through Tunnel View making our way to Glacier Point. The habitat was mainly coniferous forest, principally Ponderosa Pines, purple barked, Sugar Pines, Incense Cedars, White Firs, Douglas Firs and a few stands of Giant Sequoia, interspersed by areas of chaparral, Black Oak and Canyon Live Oak. The bird-like calls of the very vocal Chickaree, or Douglas Squirrel filled the air, as well as real birdsong, a taste of what was to come. We stopped to explore one of the many trails to one of the many alpine meadows, McGurk Meadow. As we walked along the trail Zerene Fritillaries basked in the sunshine. Small flocks of Mountain Chickadees were scrutinized to find Audubon's Warblers, Red-breasted Nuthatch, with its toy trumpet call, and Brown Creepers (indistinguishable from our own treecreeper). Black-backed Woodpecker and Red-breasted Sapsucker were excellent finds. A Mountain Quail was flushed in front of James but few glimpsed it. We spread out, another dark game bird shape shot silently around to our side. Stuart went forward – two more shapes. Perry stepped forward, another shape, some saw the greyish brown of its mantle. James and Peter chasing Stuart's two birds put up three more dark shapes. Some could hear the noisy whirl of wings as they took off, but not everyone was able to see or hear the birds. Would these be the only views we would get of this illusive quail? During our hunt for the quail a Yellow-bellied Marmot was added to our mammal list. Back at the vans, we took lunch where Golden-crowned Kinglets responded angrily to tape and a Pine Grosbeak flew over calling. Driving higher in elevation, the coniferous forests became smaller and sparser with stands of Red Fir, Western White Pine, Jeffrey Pine and Lodgepole Pine eventually broken by areas of exposed granite. We arrived at Glacier Point a viewpoint located on the south wall of Yosemite Valley at 7,214 feet. The point gives a superb view of the Sierra Nevada, including Yosemite Valley, Half Dome, the granite cliffs, and Yosemite Falls. We were not sure what we were supposed to do here be tourists or birdwatchers. Eventually the birdwatcher in each of us won through. It was either that or miss the Lewis's and White-headed Woodpeckers showing from the lower viewpoint. One of target birds here was Sooty Grouse, which occur above 7000 feet in the Sierra Nevada where they feed on fir needles. Here we had some luck, Bob was approached by a photographer who showed him a photograph of a Sooty Grouse that he had just taken. He took Bob to see the bird and Bob came and collected the group, curbing the natural exuberance of the photographers to be out front, the whole group was soon enjoying close views of three cryptic Sooty Grouse feeding along a trail

under the pines. The grouse were left to the photographers whilst the rest of us had further views of Hairy, White-headed and Acorn Woodpeckers. Two Vaux's Swifts were seen but none of the fabled Black Swifts, which can occasionally be seen amongst them. Lodgepole Chipmunks were common in the open-canopy Lodgepole Pine habitat. We ended the day at a stake out for Great Grey Owl where a pre roost of 18 American Robins occurred in front of us and Pileated Woodpecker was heard to call but the owl did not show. We spent our second night at the Miners Inn, Mariposa but as we were very late back from owling, the evening meal was what you could grab before you fell asleep.

Day 8: After our continental breakfast we said goodbye to the Miners Inn and headed once more for Yosemite. We were getting accustomed to living out of our suitcases, if you ever get used to it. A few more coughs could be heard; put down to the essential air conditioning and the altitude we were birding at. We entered Yosemite through tunnel view and took the Big Oak Flat road to Chevron Meadow where we explored the woods surrounding the meadow. There was always a chance we might pick up a Great Grey Owl. The woodland had been left to its own devices and as a consequence there were a lot of fallen trees making walking in a straight line impossible. The group soon became split up and as we threaded our way through the trees we hummed the old nursery rhyme: "If you go down to the woods today" and it was almost true for Tony. Ron photographed not one but two Black Bears stalking him but on seeing Ron the bears thought better of it. None-the-less, the rest of us were a little jealous that we did not see them. A flock of Mountain Chickadees with attendant Red-breasted Nuthatch, Dark-eyed Juncos and Golden-crowned Kinglets on our trail mobbed a Long-tailed Weasel as it scurried around fallen logs. A distant Olive-sided Flycatcher was new to the list. We stopped along the Tioga Road at Tamarack Flat. Three Cassin's and a Purple Finch were found among the pines and two Hammond's Flycatchers. A distant Osprey passed over; Townsend's Solitaire came to tape and Yellow and Nashville Warblers showed briefly. Perry located two 'Thick-billed' Fox Sparrows skulking around dense scrub before we took lunch at the Tuolumne Meadows centre; most settling for freshly cooked burgers. After lunch, we walked the meadow across the road. Here we found Chipping, Song and a Vesper Sparrow. American Dippers along the fast flowing Merced, from the banks of which Mountain Bluebirds and Clark's Nutcrackers were observed. This was high country, with an altitude of 8,500ft at its lowest point. Walking in the thin air was not without difficulty, and there were those nagging coughs again. We left Yosemite by the nearby Tioga Pass, on the east side of the park. We stopped briefly at Tioga Lake looking for Bald Eagle. James picked up two very distant Golden Eagles with a Northern Goshawk: frustration for those who could not get on to them. Perry located some very distant passerines, which several of us tried desperately to turn into rosy-finches – James pointing out that rosy-finches are not grey above and pale below but all dark! We dropped several 1000 feet to Mono Lake but not before we had witnessed with amazement a number of aged cyclists peddling up the steep mountain road towards us. There must surely be easier roads to cycle along. The group became very spread out at Mono Lake so that not everyone saw Sage Thrasher and Sage Sparrow but instead focused on the Yellow-headed Blackbirds and the spectacle that is Mono Lake. Although we were not to know it, there was no need for any frustration as these birds would be seen well, and in numbers, in the days that followed. Mono Lake is an interesting alkaline and hyper saline soda Lake with spectacular Tufa formations surrounded by sagebrush and yellow flowering rabbit brush. The lake held several hundred Eared (Black-necked) Grebes, and more than 100 California Gulls, whilst forty White-faced Ibises flew past. Least Chipmunks 'perched' in the bushes looking very bird like for the unwary.

Day 9: We made a pre-breakfast run to Owens River for Greater Sage-grouse, which is found in sagebrush-dominated habitats across western North America. Populations have declined dramatically throughout their range and most populations face problems that will likely affect the long-term viability of the species. Much of this species' habitat has been lost to cultivation, burning and overgrazing. The birds that occupy the Mono County area are the eastern subspecies (*urophasianus*). Some previous trips have failed to see them so it was with some relief that we saw a number of birds before we had even parked. Once parked we scoped 25 birds feeding, as we watched some flew to cover in the adjacent sagebrush. Small numbers of Sage Thrasher and Sage Sparrows flitted around – see? no need to worry – and Western Meadowlark sang from the valley bottom. This was a lovely spot, the weather refreshingly cool. A second stop along the roadway produced a close fly past from Prairie Falcon and Green-tailed Towhee responded to a tape. We paused to view the Hot Creek Springs but found no birds there.

On the way back to Bishop we stopped along the 395 where some had seen Pinyon Jay on the journey out. We were soon watching 46 Pinyon Jays and four Clark's Nutcrackers fly over, whilst five Meadow Bluebirds moved along fence posts and a few recorded and photographed a brief Red-naped Sapsucker. After an almost leisurely breakfast at Denny's, we set off south down the 395 to Mojave. We diverted into Cedar Flats for Juniper Titmouse: the oak titmouse of Juniper woods, and worked the nearby Deep Springs oasis, it may only have been a few trees by the roadside but it had water and was a magnet for migrants. Olive-sided Flycatcher, Cedar Waxwing, Lewis's Woodpecker, Rock Wren, Black-throated and White-crowned Sparrow were all seen here. We continued south along the eastern edge of California and the Sierra Nevada Mountains, through the Inyo National Forest and Big Pine (Indian Reservation). It was hot and a good opportunity to sleep. We made our last stop of the day at Tinemaha Reservoir, south of Big Pine. This reservoir in the Owens River Valley is surrounded by areas of marsh, meadow, and mature riparian woodland. The water held Clark's, Western and Eared Grebes, Double-crested Cormorants and American Coots with smaller numbers of Mallards, Ruddy Ducks and Red-necked Phalaropes. The few gulls included both Ring-billed and California and Brewer's Sparrow was added to the list. It got much hotter as we dropped down into the Mojave Desert. This is a rain shadow desert situated between the Great Basin Desert and the Sonoran Desert. Nearly one quarter of all Mojave Desert plants are endemics; Joshua Tree, Parry Saltbush and Mojave Sage. A more widely distributed plant, the tall Mojave creosote bush, dominates much of the land surface often in close association with smaller White Bursage. We spent the next two nights in Mojave.

Day 10: We were up early this morning as we needed to be in and out of Galileo before noon. We stopped in the Mojave Desert along the Neuralia Road to look for Le Conte's Thrasher. There was a lot of small bird activity as numbers of Horned Larks and Sage Sparrows foraged. We spread out to search for the thrasher stumbling across a Northern Mojave Rattlesnake or "Mojave Green". A bite from the Mojave rattlesnakes can be extremely toxic (as with all snakebites, the quantity of venom injected is highly variable and unpredictable) and can produce vision abnormalities and difficulty swallowing and speaking. In severe cases, skeletal muscle weakness can lead to difficulty breathing and even respiratory failure. Contrary to popular belief, fatalities are uncommon. None-the-less, Perry was still a bit too close taking that photograph! We found our target bird after about 20 minutes – Le Conte's Thrasher. Three Mistle Thrush-sized birds, with long thin decurved bills, running from sagebrush to sagebrush, occasionally perching on the bushes, like roadrunners, with long dark tails cocked, and flashing orange under tail coverts.

Job done we headed for Galileo, and just outside the new town of California City halted to look at a perched Prairie Falcon and Northern Harrier in flight. We were not delayed long and soon arrived at Galileo Hill home to the private Silver Saddle Ranch. We were allowed to birdwatch the area until midday. The area was then off limits to all but private guests over the weekend. This was a lovely spot with tended lawns, lakes, fountains and willows, truly an oasis in the impressive Mojave desert. Unfortunately we did not meet with much migration but were still able to add Willow Flycatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Say's Phoebe and Western Wood-pewee to our list. We met John Dunn (JD) here, a well known US birder and author of a number of authoritative US bird identification books. He gave his master class on why a female teal on the lake was more likely Blue-winged rather than Cinnamon. It still looked like cinnamon to some!

We were obliged to leave Galileo, reluctantly, at midday and headed for California City Central Park. Here we found two summering Ross's Geese and a Trumpeter Swan on the park pond with American Coots, Pied-billed Grebes, Black-crowned Night-herons and Spotted Sandpipers. Surrounding trees produced a Black-throated Grey Warbler amongst the common migrants. It was very hot, and cold drinks and homemade sandwiches at the old omelette cafe made a welcoming lunch. We drove up Jawbone Canyon west of Red Rock Canyon State Park to Butterbrecht Spring Wildlife Sanctuary. A distinctive White-tailed Antelope Squirrel ran across in front of the first van, its white tail held firmly along its back. We drove through some lovely mountain scenery. The journey to the spring brought our first Greater Roadrunner of the trip. Here a small spring in an area with willows and cottonwoods is a "migrant trap". There was however little evidence of migration, perhaps the two Great Horned Owls present had deterred any passage birds. Close views were had of a stream of Sage Sparrows visiting the spring. Dinner was taken at a licensed pizza place.

Day 11: Today was to be a big drive down to Brawley on the Salton Sea: temperatures would soar. After a breakfast at Denny's in Barstow, we headed for Big Morongo, an oasis of riparian forest between the Mojave and Sonoran deserts. For centuries it was used by the nomadic Morongo's Indians, who found water and game plentiful here. A large trailer parked near the car park provided a shaded seating area from where one could watch a variety of feeders including a number for hummingbirds, which proved to be very popular with the photographers in the group. The majority of the hummingbirds were Anna's but two Costa's and a Black-chinned were new for the trip list. A male Wilson's Warbler gave stunning views and Californian Towhee, White-breasted Nuthatch and Nuttall's and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers were all seen well. The adjacent Covington Park held two stunning males and a female Vermilion Flycatcher whilst a Lark Sparrow fed with two Chipping Sparrows. An LBJ was identified by James as a juvenile Lazuli Bunting, a disappointing way to see what can be such a stunning bunting. Locals put us on to two roosting Barn Owls but a Northern Parula present in the park earlier in the day eluded us. We pressed on to the Salton Sea, many catching up on two night's lost sleep: coughing got worse.

We drive through the outskirts of Palm Springs, who will forget the array of wind turbines covering mile after mile of the Palm Springs hills? It was near the end of the day when we pulled onto the north end of the Salton Sea at White Water Delta via Johnson's Street. There were large numbers of birds in view, too many to estimate. The blind (hide) was high and dry and a long way from the water's edge, which gave you a good idea of how much the water was receding. It was also in need a bit of repair! To say it was hot was an understatement it was blistering even at this late hour. A Baird's Sandpiper was found amongst the myriad of Least and Western Sandpipers, which together with Semipalmated Plovers made up the bulk of the smaller shorebirds. The larger shorebirds included American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Long-billed Dowitchers, Killdeers and Greater Yellowlegs (we never did see Lesser Yellowlegs). Large numbers of Brown and White Pelicans could be seen whilst terns were represented by Caspian and Black Terns, herons by Great Blue and Green Herons and Snowy and Great Egrets. Thousands of eclipse/female/juvenile teals seemed to be mostly Cinnamon but included some Blue-winged and Green-winged but there was little time for any proper assessment. Most gulls appeared to be California. Numbers of Ruddy Ducks, Gadwalls and Northern Shovelers dabbled amongst the hundreds of American Coot and Mallard. Every wooden post sticking out of the water seemed to hold an Osprey or Double-crested Cormorant, one even had a Peregrine. We searched in vain for a Blue-footed Booby, which had been present in recent weeks, as flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds came into roost before it was time to call it a day. The next two nights would be spent in the very pleasant Brawley.

Day 12: We began the day by exploring the suburbs and scrubland adjacent to our hotel and added a surprising number of trip ticks. We were by now used to the Eurasian Collared-doves, which frequented the areas around all the motels, we had stayed at, but here they were supplemented by White-winged and Inca Doves and Common Ground-doves. Verdin, Gila Woodpecker, Cactus Wren and Abert's Towhee all responded to tape but we did not linger as armed with some internet news of recent sightings, the hunt for the Blue-footed Booby around the Salton Sea was on again! The Imperial Valley, which holds the Salton Sea, is 228 feet

below sea level and exceedingly fertile. In 1901, 300,000 acres were being farmed, after a 40-mile canal had been built to provide water for irrigation. In 1905 a flood caused a breach in the canal, and almost the entire Colorado River started to flow into an old rift lakebed, which is on the San Andreas Fault. Until the river was turned back 18 months later, some 63 billion gallons of water a day emptied into what became a saline lake 35 miles long and 15 miles wide, the Salton Sea. The Sea is one of the most important wetlands along the Pacific Flyway. Several million birds migrate and inhabit the area every year. It supports 30% of the remaining population of the American White Pelican and Laughing Gulls and Gull-billed Terns breed here. We covered the southern end of the Sea comprehensively in our search for the booby, down the Foulds and Young Roads to Sonny Bono and Red-Hill Marina. The blistering 120°F heat was brutal and meant we had to retire to our well air-conditioned rooms between noon and 15.30, splitting our Salton Sea sessions in two. There were hundreds of thousands of birds on view on the Salton Sea and few places in the world where one would see so many. James and Peter both commented on the severe contraction of the sea through drought since they were here last. The species were as noted on our first visit to which we added three escaped Lesser Flamingos and a White-fronted Goose! Setting aside the booby, the bird everyone wanted to see was, arguably, the Gulf of California's only endemic seabird species, the Yellow-footed Gull and we saw a dozen. The Yellow-footed Gull is large and white-headed, with a dark slate-gray mantle and bulbous bill that recalls the Western Gull. It was until recently treated as a subspecies of Western Gull, but it is probably more closely related to the Kelp Gull of the Southern Hemisphere. Although its breeding range lies completely within Mexico, the Yellow-footed Gull occurs regularly as a post breeding visitor to the Salton Sea, appearing at this location in late May, with numbers building to many hundreds by July and August and then tapering off through the fall. Other gulls seen included Franklin's Gull, several Bonaparte's, a small number of Laughing and many Ring-billed. Tern's included Forster's and a single Gull-billed. Shorebirds included many Grey Plovers, a single Ruff, a real rarity, a single Snowy Plover and seven Wilson's Phalaropes. A few Black Skimmers skimmed distantly. Ducks included a pair of Redheads, female Lesser Scaup and several Northern Pintails. At the Sonny Bono Salton Sea Reserve Centre headquarters, coveys of Gambel's Quails, Abert's Towhee and Western Tanager were found in the scrubby brush whilst James located a roosting Lesser Nighthawk in the palms. We had a mammal tick here in the form of Desert Cottontail. We diverted into a desert wash during the hottest part of the day to try and get Black-tailed Gnatcatcher: a difficult bird at the best of times. One was encouraged to utter its hissing *psssh* back to our tape but it was never going to be seen in such dense cover and what had seemed a forlorn exercise became exactly that: It seemed at times that the only bird which responded well to whatever tape we played was Verdin. We bird watched until dark looking for the booby.

Day 13: We were not giving up on the booby just yet and put in another hot morning around the Young Road area of the Salton Sea's south east corner. As yesterday we passed a number of pairs of Burrowing Owls and fields with flocks of Cattle Egrets (the only place we saw them) and White-faced Ibises. We did not connect with the booby but saw something uncannily like it dead and dehydrated by the side of the sea, but James identified this as a late Common Loon. Of note this morning were a Pomarine Jaeger, Bonaparte's Gull and Brant and we had this one last opportunity to take in the awe-inspiring majesty and spectacle of hundreds of thousands of birds on the Salton Sea. Few of us I would suspect will be back here to see it again. We had another fruitless crack at Black-tailed Gnatcatcher at a wash in the Anza-Borrego Desert where Crissal Thrasher occurs but despite a good old thrash round just clocked up Verdin. We searched Whispering Pines outside Julian hoping for Phainopepla and Lawrence's Goldfinch, but saw neither so it was fortunate we had seen Phainopepla on day 3. We arrived in the town of Julian, a town that time seemed to have passed by for it looked as if it was still in the Twenties. Here we got time off for good behaviour and there was time to shop at the 'Birdwatcher' for those essential birding tea shirts and inexpensive birding books and time to take lunch in one of the many cafes that specialised in apple pie. The feeders at The Birdwatcher pulled back one of the birds we missed at Big Morongo – Rufous Hummingbird amongst the many Anna's.

We left Julian towards San Diego and drove through the Cleveland National forest to an elevation of 4,600 feet to reach Cuyamaca Mountain Lake, a mountain oasis in the Cuyamaca Mountains within one of California's largest state parks. There was still evidence around the 110-acre lake of the devastating fire suffered in October of 2003. Mountain lions are said to be common around here and in 1995 a woman was attacked and killed hiking to Cuyamaca Peak. There was a good collection of ducks on the lake including Wood and Ring-necked Ducks. We also added Pygmy Nuthatch and American (Buff-bellied) Pipit to the trip list. We left the area working our way through the traffic of San Diego to the Mexican Border for a two-night stop in San Ysidro. Once we got access to our rooms, the first author collapsed into bed and did not surface for 12 hours to hear tales of a marvellous Mexican Restaurant to which we would assuredly return tomorrow.

Day 14: James seemed to get everything wrong today. We made an early start for California Gnatcatcher in an area of scrub around Otay Lakes – the 'nasties' capital of California. James said he had set aside three hours to search for this difficult endemic gnatcatcher. Armed with our previous knowledge of gnatcatchers on this trip all we could do was to nod sagely. However, no sooner had we decamped from the vans than we were watching an adult California Gnatcatcher feed its youngster. Lovely views in the dead of a creosote bush: job done and James was wrong as we were out and back in the vans in twenty minutes. It's a funny old game this bird watching! Near to where we were standing a very large brown and black California Tarantula was found lurking in the grass: James glanced down nervously at the exposed flesh in his open toed sandals. Fortunately the tarantula is only mildly venomous and has a docile disposition. But the same could not be said of the Southern Pacific Rattlesnake, which we came across next! I don't think James will be in open-toed footwear when next he visits this site! We continued birding this excellent area seeing Cassin's Kingbird, Wrentit, Greater Roadrunner, Lincoln's Sparrow and several immature Blue Grosbeaks. En route to breakfast we stopped at the "shallow end" of Otay Lakes where an American Wigeon was an addition to the list and scope views of House Wren were had. We took a relaxing breakfast at the IHOP (International House of Pancakes) everyone being able to look back on the excellent mornings birding.

Next we went to Imperial Beach and the Tijuana Rivermouth. No sooner had we parked than we were we looking at the 'Light-footed' Clapper Rail (*Rallus longirostris levipes*) a year-round, non-migratory resident in coastal wetlands in Southern California and northern Baja California, Mexico. The light-footed clapper rail is found in freshwater and saltwater marshes containing cord grass, cattails, rushes and dense vegetation. It has been listed as endangered since 1970 as there are only 250–350 pairs left in California. James called several out to tape but said we would probably get much better views when we returned to the vans when the tide would be out: still a bird in the hand and all that. A Northern Harrier hawked the marsh. On the beach James drew attention to several sparrows. 'Belding's' Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis beldingi*) is a non-migratory bird and one of the few bird species that stays in the saltmarsh all year. It is a small, inconspicuous bird distinguished by its dark streaking on the chest and head, along with a yellowish eyebrow. It feeds on insects and is the only bird that drinks salt water. It is also a state endangered bird as the populations are small, and are highly vulnerable to local extirpation. As we walked along the beach to the river mouth James picked out a 'Large-billed' Savannah Sparrow (*P. s. rostratus*) amongst the Belding's feeding on the falling tide. At the mouth of the estuary an area of sand dunes and salt marshes held twenty of the critically-threatened and endangered Western or Californian Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus*): 5% of the total California population nests in these dunes. Ken drew attention to three Pacific Golden-plovers feeding on the shore, which James said, was the common winter plover of this area and that American Golden-plover was a bird of note! We looked optimistically for a Least Tern amongst the parties of roosting Royal, Elegant and Forster's but they had apparently already left for their wintering grounds. Despite the constant carousel of helicopters from the nearby training base circling our position, with as many as four in the air at any one time, it was remarkably relaxing in the sun with a cool sea breeze, watching the birds on the falling tide. A Reddish Egret appeared flashing its wings as it chased its shadow. Carefully but slowly James checked through the suite of features on a nearby gull before pronouncing it to be moulting 1st winter Glaucous-winged Gull: a particularly grotty specimen for a lifer for the assembled, but still nice to see a bird we had hoped to see at Moss Landing. A flock of 50 Short-billed Dowitchers showed notched tiger-striped tertials with golden fringes. We stopped at McDonald's for refreshments. Last call of a successful day was at Dairy Mart, Sod Farm but our visit added no new birds just a bemused enquiry from the border patrol. The border fence with Mexico was only about 400 yards away. But we had done enough this day and the 'Anchioro' Mexican Restaurant in San Ysidro was a happy place that evening despite the absence of the waitress from the previous night whom Perry was trying to chat up.

Day 15: James announced an ambitious plan to go into the Cleveland National forest in search of Lawrence's Goldfinch and Mountain Quail – which a number of the group had failed to glimpse in Yosemite. We would then seek out a headland in San Diego and see if we could pull back Black-vented Shearwater. After breakfast at McDonald's, we made our first stop at a campsite in the Laguna Mountains, a lovely little riparian woodland running along a mountain stream with a few camper vans parked up. There was a little bit of milling around, looking at small birds as they flicked through the trees. Before Lynne uttered the 'what's that' line and there were our Lawrence's Goldfinch's. What luck to pick up on a flock of these unpredictable nomadic wanderers. We had lovely views of perched males within a flock of about 15 birds. A few warblers were coming down to the stream to drink and we had our last look at some of the commoner migrants: Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Dark-eyed Junco, Western Tanager and Townsend's, Orange-crowned, Wilson's and Black-throated Grey Warblers. Perry even managed a Hermit Warbler. It was then that Ken who had wondered off for a quite smoke happened upon some quails drinking and dust bathing. James went to check them out and soon we were treated to amazing close and confiding views of about a dozen Mountain Quails. James plan was looking considerably less ambitious and we left the mountains very happy.

Lee negotiated our way through San Diego to the Life Guard Station, which was no mean feat. Both vans had difficulty in finding a parking space as the cliff top position was very popular. A few of us took up position on the cliffs and began scanning the sea. Immediately a small shearwater with dark under tail coverts came into view but we could get little more on it before it disappeared into a fog bank. It was probably a Black-vented Shearwater as they are supposed to be the most common, but the views were not good enough to claim it and unfortunately we saw no more. It took a long time to get to our motel. The traffic on the six to eight lane freeway was particularly heavy as we approached rush hour. We got to our motel for our last evening tired but exhilarated by the birding exploits of the last two weeks. We had travelled over 2401 miles, seen 271 species of bird and a great deal besides.

Day 16: Early birding and birds seen on the way to the airport added nothing new to the group list but emphasised what we would be missing once we were back home. The day ended as we flew out of Terminal 7 LAX Airport on a Boeing 777 at 10.35 arriving Heathrow 07.30 next morning.

John Sirrett and Bob Power