

# California

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## California Thrasher

**Day 1:** By 17.30 everyone had arrived in Los Angeles and introductions were made. All that remained was a 90-minute drive north in the late afternoon sunshine to Ventura. Those who stayed awake during the drive commenced the bird list with Great and Snowy Egrets plus numerous American Crows – for the rest of the group, birding would start in earnest in the morning.

**Day 2:** The day dawned overcast and decidedly chilly. Indeed, the sun didn't appear until well after lunchtime. Walking across the parking lot to breakfast brought our first two species of interest with several raucous Western Gulls and fleeting flight views of a buzzing Anna's Hummingbird. The same level of interest could not be attributed to either the local Eurasian Collared-doves or House Sparrows. Indeed, similar group apathy registered with the flock of Common Starlings in the Ventura Harbour car park! We then walked across to the beach front and it all changed, on the shoreline were numerous "Western" Willets and perhaps 20 Marbled Godwits mingling with many Heermann's Gulls of every age and plumage. But the real excitement was out to sea, there had obviously been a major influx of "bait fish", perhaps anchovy or possibly sand eels, which attracted many hundreds if not thousands, of Brandt's Cormorants, Brown Pelicans and Western Gulls and in amongst them were at least 450 Black-vented Shearwaters. This is normally a pelagic species, seen on most Birdfinders tours but rarely seen from land and never in this number. Further out there were regular flying lines of Sooty Shearwaters and it was difficult to tear ourselves away from the feeding frenzy but the rocks forming the harbour barriers produced all four of our target coastal waders. One expects on a first morning at Ventura to find Black Turnstone and Black Oystercatcher, one hopes for Surfbird, but we certainly did not envisage all three plus superb views down to no more than 10 metres of two Wandering Tattlers, one still in nearly full breeding plumage. The final quality bird on the rocks superficially resembled an American Oystercatcher (a documentation species in California), however, it's rather ragged breast feathering together with significantly darker upper parts than normal, brings into likelihood a Black x American Oystercatcher hybrid. On the water, a raft of grebes allowed us to familiarise ourselves with the plumage and bill colour differences between Clark's and Western Grebes whilst on the sand, we found our first dark-rumped

Hudsonian Whimbrel, a couple of adult California Gulls and a delightful party of 11 Snowy Plovers. All the while, Elegant Terns were flying along the shoreline whilst a considerable flock were perched on the far harbour rocks. Cetaceans also caught our eye, several dark Bottle-nosed Dolphins swam inside the harbour, at one point seemingly almost playing with a lone fisherman on a kayak, whilst California Sea lions draped themselves on the entrance marker buoys and a number of Harbour Seals swam to and fro. At midday, we boarded a 65ft powered catamaran vessel and set sail north up the Santa Barbara Channel for Santa Cruz, the largest of the Channel Islands. It is fair to say that, from a birding perspective, birds were relatively few and far between with the undoubted highlight a fly past adult Pomarine Jaeger replete with a full set of spoons. Jaegers (Skuas) can be notoriously difficult to identify from a fast moving boat with often very brief views in far from ideal light conditions and today was no exception. In total we saw six other jaegers. We had reasonable views of a light-phased adult Arctic, but to most eyes, the remainder had to be logged as “jaeger sp”. Perhaps our most memorable experience was a close encounter with a pod of perhaps 100 Short-beaked Common Dolphins whose inquisitive nature had them making a bee-line for us from some way off. We stayed in their close company for a few minutes, easily hearing their air blows before opening the throttle and continuing onto the island. With only an hour’s land birding time available at Prisoners Harbour, our principal focus was on finding Island Scrub-Jay, a species found nowhere else on earth and it only took us about 20 minutes, enjoying excellent views of probably three different birds. Other species new for the tour included both immature and adult female Western Tanager, Acorn Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Black Phoebe, Warbling Vireo, Dark-eyed (Oregon) Junco and Song Sparrow. Guy photographed a Spotted Towhee whilst a few of the group had glimpses of a surprisingly elusive female Black-headed Grosbeak. Having returned to the boat and whilst waiting for other passengers to board, we found our first Red-tailed Hawk sat on a huge boulder, watched *sinuatus* Common Ravens wheel round in the afternoons sunshine and had the opportunity to familiarise ourselves with the structural differences between Double-crested and the smaller, thinner necked and more shag-like Pelagic Cormorants. The return crossing was most memorable for many hundreds more Short-beaked Common Dolphins and a raft of perhaps 30 Pink-footed Shearwaters sat on the water. As we re-entered the harbour, a distant Belted Kingfisher was perched on a moored vessel whilst both Great Egret and Great Blue Herons nonchalantly watched us cruise by. The final hour or so of the day was spent driving north to Buellton, our base for the night, with the occasional Turkey Vulture, Red-shouldered Hawk and White-tailed Kite seen by the roadside. Dinner was taken at “Pea Soup Andersons”, a Birdfinders favourite venue and once again the management did us proud with our own private room and an excellent menu.

**Day 3:** Today was set fair, bright and sunny with temperatures in the low 70s. From outside our hotel, we watched Anna’s Hummingbirds feeding on a bottlebrush tree whilst Western Bluebirds and Lesser Goldfinches perched on the fence of the weedy fields opposite. Our first birding stop was just a few miles out of town. Alisal Canyon is a vegetated river valley with grassy slopes dotted with both trees and scrubby bushes. This was our introduction to the more usual inland passerines of the area. Whilst numbers were certainly lower than seen in previous years, we still added a number of new species including our only Phainopeplas of the tour, both California Towhee and California Thrasher, Wilson’s Warbler and Blue-grey Gnatcatcher and not forgetting our first parties of plain but cute Bushtits. On the adjacent slopes, Black-tailed Mule Deer with enormous ears grazed the grasses, California Ground-Squirrels dashed to and fro and a couple of Desert Cottontails lay sunning themselves in the stony stream bed. One of the key target birds in the area is Yellow-billed Magpie, endemic to central California. By slowly driving the country road east, we found a group of six birds initially feeding in a weedy field before flying up into nearby trees and perching out in the open. A short distance further on, we made an unscheduled roadside stop close to Nojoqui Falls Park finding our first covey of California Quails. Acorn Woodpeckers were all around us, constantly flying in and out of the roadside oaks. Several Oak Titmice were equally confiding, much less obliging however, were a pair of Nuttall’s Woodpeckers, always half hidden from view. We eventually arrived inside the park proper around 11.00 and it was extremely quiet aside from our first Hutton’s Vireo and many, many more Acorn Woodpeckers. We therefore decided to retrace our steps back to the quaint town of Solvang, a village founded by the Danish community even showing models of nesting White Storks on chimneypots, for lunch. Early afternoon saw us back on the highway driving steadily north to Morro Bay, pausing briefly to enjoy a couple of Golden Eagles soaring over the roadside. The

remainder of the day was spent in and around the camp site at Montana de Oro State Park, a known migrant hot spot and we were not to be disappointed. Firstly a sub-adult Glaucous-winged Gull accompanied a number of adult Western Gulls on the beach, much to the delight of the photographers amongst us. The camp site itself borders a heavily-vegetated stream bed with isolated conifers and extensive scrubby slopes. A surprise find here was a Western Kingbird, unusual in this part of California at this time of year and possibly the first seen by Birdfinders on this tour. The hillside scrub provides excellent habitat for Wrentit, a species easily heard, but sometimes extremely difficult to see well. We enjoyed prolonged and close views of at least four different birds and found unusually approachable Band-tailed Pigeons perched out in the open atop a conifer. Some caught a glimpse of a flighty Pacific-slope Flycatcher; a magnificent Cooper's Hawk ran amok through a covey of California Quails, two adult male Spotted Towhees perched right out in the open whilst a busy feeding flock of Bushtits attracted the company of several Orange-crowned Warblers and Chestnut-backed Chickadees. By 18.00 it was time to drive back to our hotel in Morro Bay before enjoying yet another excellent dinner courtesy, this time courtesy of the Great American Fish Company, a fitting finale to a most enjoyable days birding.

**Day 4:** Early morning Morro Bay was typically overcast and somewhat murky. First stop breakfast, or it would have been had there not been an incredibly tame *elegans* Red-shouldered Hawk perched on a lamp post and totally ignoring the lad on a skateboard passing right underneath. These birds have conspicuously brighter brick-red underparts than their cousins further east. Having had our caffeine fix, we drove down to the bay shore and parked up taking care to gently nudge the foraging Wild Turkeys out of the layby. New birds for the tour here included up to 150 American White Pelicans roosting together with a group of seven Pied-billed Grebes. Long-billed Curlews probed the mud alongside the more numerous Marbled Godwits, whilst several Spotted Sandpipers bobbed along the muddy edge, as only "Spotty's" can do. We then drove further around the coast and spent some time checking out the trees in a campsite which were alive with House Finches and Brewer's Blackbirds. Of much more interest however, were a couple of bright Townsend's Warblers and a particularly confiding Nuttall's Woodpecker. Several of the group also added Downy Woodpecker to their species list before James glimpsed a California rarity. A "Western" Palm Warbler, typically tail-pumping but untypically foraging high in pine trees with other warblers, and yet another new species for Birdfinders in California. Sadly, it became very flighty and was only seen well by a few before disappearing altogether. Out on the saltmarsh, the shorebird roost contained perhaps as many as 500 Least Sandpipers together with significant numbers of Willets, Marbled Godwits and Long-billed Curlews. Additionally, we found three Red Knot and a distant perched Forster's Tern. Meanwhile, Brian and Gina photographed the tour's first Caspian Tern in amongst the moored yachts. It was then time to start the fairly long drive north along Scenic Route 1. A little south of Cambria, there is a small stretch of rolling grassy hills known affectionately as "raptor alley". Having parked up safely off of the road, we initially found up to six hunting White-tailed Kites and then witnessed serious harassment of a young Golden Eagle by a persistent Red-tailed Hawk. To be frank, it took little notice and just glided by with apparent disdain. A couple of other eagles were perched more distantly, as were several American Kestrels. Having taken lunch at a picnic site alongside juvenile American Goldfinches we drove on beyond San Simeon, re-joined the coast and parked up at several lookout points overlooking kelp beds. Here we found, albeit at some distance, a pair of Marbled Murrelets whilst even further out a fast flying dark alcid could only have been a Rhinoceros Auklet. Closer to shore a Common Loon (Great Northern Diver) sat on the water whilst California Sea Otters lay on their backs, paddling away whilst scratching their tummies. The final overlook was a well signposted and popular Elephant Seal vista. Here up to 100 female and young lay sunning themselves on the beach occasionally flicking up sand over their torsos with their flippers in an effort to keep cool. They appeared totally oblivious to the action taking place in the shallows where a couple of sub-adult males put on a testosterone show for the watching public, grappling with each other, grunting away with lots of pushing and occasional neck biting. On the rocks just beyond, up to 50 Black Turnstones and four Surfbirds were particularly confiding. The rest of the afternoon was spent driving about 80 miles along the twisty single track road through Los Padres national Forest. Our quest was always a long shot, a flourishing population of the re-introduced California Condors inhabits this huge area of towering cliffs and pines. However, our only chance was to regularly scan the steep hillsides, stopping at various pull-ins and hoping that, as in previous years, a bird would drift over. We found a number of Red-tailed Hawks and

Turkey Vultures enjoying the thermals, Steller's Jay was added to our trip list – as was an exceptional flock of Vaux's Swifts over one valley. But seeing a condor here really is a 'crap shoot' and eventually we gave in to the inevitable and drove on in fading light to Monterey, our base for the next two nights.

**Day 5:** A much-anticipated day spent out in Monterey Bay on a Shearwater Journeys pelagic. We parked up at Fisherman's Wharf around 06.45 and walked out to board the *Checkmate*, our vessel for the day. This is a much smaller and more maneuverable boat than that used for the Channel Islands crossing. Debi greeted us and spent the next 20 minutes providing a thorough orientation embracing safety, what to expect and most importantly introducing us not only to the volunteer leaders for the day but also the ever dependable Tinker, our captain. The day started off cool and overcast, indeed when out on the open sea, it became pretty cold. However, by late morning, the clear conditions, bright sunshine and a "millpond sea" made for a thoroughly comfortable experience. The first 30 minutes at sea was spent sailing slowly south along the Monterey beachfront familiarising ourselves with close range looks at Pigeon Guillemots, Red-necked Phalaropes, California Gulls and Elegant Terns whilst a juvenile Black-crowned Night-heron flew along the shoreline, presumably on its way to roost. Once 'at sea proper', cetaceans really stole the show. First to show were several packs of Risso's Dolphins. These creatures can grow up to 13ft in length with an extremely large dorsal fin almost reminiscent of an Orca. They have a bulbous, pink tinged head invariably scarred by squid, their preferred food source. As is often the case, they were accompanied by much smaller, but equally attractive Pacific White-sided Dolphins which rode our bow wave. Within an hour, a huge 30ft tall blow heralded the presence of a majestic Blue Whale, the largest creature to have ever lived on this planet. During this first part of our journey we were to see, at fairly close range, at least four of these magnificent beasts which can grow to anything between 80–115 feet in length. Only a small percentage of their body size ever breaks the surface but we regularly saw the blow hole, then a small almost insignificant looking dorsal fin, and then the back goes on...and on...and on. Our final whale even showed us its enormous tail flukes. If we thought our Blue Whale experience was the ultimate, our time today with Humpback Whales came a close second. Whilst not as big as their cousins, with the blow nowhere near as tall, many were significantly closer to us. A very recent census estimates between 60–85 Humpbacks in the bay and during our time here we saw at least 30 of them. Some totally breached whilst others repeatedly smashed their tail flukes into the sea. During the middle of the afternoon, we found ourselves surrounded by at least nine individuals avidly feeding in amongst huge pods of California Sea Lions – the Pacific was quite literally bubbling with sea-life. The final marine creature that really put on a show for us were Ocean Sunfish. Several really large specimens floated close to the boat, occasionally wagging their elongated fin and it seemed surreal on one to actually see bright blue eye-rims. It has to be said that the birding suite of sightings became secondary to cetaceans. Sadly the water temperature was several degrees too cold to attract the food source for some of our target species but highlights included a close fly past by an adult Black-footed Albatross, around 80 or so Pink-footed Shearwaters many swirling around our wake, perhaps as many as 2,000 Sooty Shearwaters and at least 250 Red-necked Phalaropes intermingled with a few Grey Phalaropes, the latter being slightly larger and looking whiter on the head and in the wing. As ever, fly past jaegers caused both confusion and sometimes disagreement over identification. We definitely saw five adult Pomarine and eight Arctic. Additionally, there were four other birds which in all likelihood were also Arctics but viewing conditions were poor, distant and brief. For some of the group, a high flying Sabine's Gull off of the stern was a welcome sight, for the remainder a disappointment as, most unusually, it was one of only three to be seen during the day. Alcids are always a highlight of any birding pelagic and we encountered extremely high numbers of Rhinoceros Auklets throughout the day – perhaps as many as 250 in all. Cassin's Auklets had been extremely scarce this season but we enjoyed at least eight different birds known locally and affectionately as "flying potatoes". From the tiny to the large, James found a Tufted Puffin that became incredibly approachable – perhaps its heavy moult made it reluctant to fly. This is not a species expected on a Monterey Bay tour which made it particularly special. By 15.45 we were sailing back into harbour – our whale experience ensuring tired but happy smiling faces. All that remained was a congratulatory coffee and ice-cream in Starbucks and the short drive back through commuter traffic for an early dinner.

**Day 6:** Another typically chilly coastal California early morning saw us driving north to Moss Landing before turning

eastwards and entering Moonglow Dairy. This is a cattle ranch, which provides access to the tidal mudflats and saltmarsh of Elkhorn Slough. We walk a raised bund with the Slough on one side and reed-fringed slurry-pools on the other. Whilst this gave us an excellent opportunity to add freshwater marsh species to the tour checklist, there are also target birds available which would be extremely difficult to find elsewhere on this itinerary. Perhaps in distribution terms, the most important species is Tricoloured Blackbird only found in SW Oregon and California. Both in the cattle pens and the reeds and wet grasses, blackbirds abound. The separating plumage feature in male birds is the colour of the lesser and median coverts. Red-winged predominate with orange-red and yellowish coverts. Next in abundance is a California subspecies known as Bicoloured Blackbird where the coverts are solely red and finally, Tricoloured Blackbird males have a creamy-white bar forming the lower boundary of the red. Additionally, females are rather frosty in appearance with whitish supercilia and the vocalisation is also much harsher. We found all three variations in one feeding flock. Perhaps more pleasing to the eye were no less than three Virginia Rails running around in front of the reeds on one slurry pool. We found our first three American Avocets and spent time distinguishing Western from Least Sandpipers. In the vegetated borders of the raised bund, we coaxed several Marsh Wrens into view and found our first Common Yellowthroats flitting to and fro along the reedy edges. Above us a most spectacular sight was a never ending passage of Elegant Terns flying up river. We understand that their population has rocketed following a lengthy exercise to eradicate rats from their nesting sites in California; we certainly saw 1,500 and quite possibly many more. On driving out of the ranch, we paused to watch our first Say's Phoebe perched on a barbed wire fence whilst a male Cooper's Hawk sat low in a tree. We then continued inland, breaking for lunch in Hollister before driving south once more to La Gloria Road, some 20 miles south of town. By now the sun had come out with a vengeance – it was probably mid 80s°F. This rough track winds through rolling dry grass hillsides with scattered sage brush. A mile or so in there is a tiny vegetated creek which in such dry and hot weather is a refreshing magnet for passerines. One species in particular was our quarry and we weren't to be disappointed. Lawrence's Goldfinch is nomadic in character and on past tours we have spent many hours trying to catch up with it, with varying degrees of success. Over the course of an hour, sitting quietly overlooking this rank vegetated ditch we saw at least eight birds including a cracking adult male. Quality back up was ensured with close views of probably three different Bells Sparrows. This new species arises from a recent split by the AOU of the former super species 'Sage Sparrow'. The '*belli*' race of Bell's has a more coastal distribution, is darker grey around the head with more pronounced white orbital ring and loreal spot together with a darker, more clearly defined malar stripe. The song also differs markedly from the newly named 'Sagebrush Sparrow'. Also coming into drink were Wrentit, Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Hutton's and Warbling Vireos, Wilson's Warbler and Lesser Goldfinches. By 15.00 it was time to make the long drive east to the rather upmarket tourist town (and motels to match) of Mariposa on the edge of Yosemite National Park, our base for the next two nights.

**Day 7:** Birding Yosemite evokes images of outstanding target species. However the area is huge and the species thinly spread. To do the park justice, you need time... more of that later. It was to be a hot, sunny weekend and therefore important to get to our principal birding sites in the park before the crowds arrived. We therefore drove north for about 45 miles alongside the Merced River, before checking in at the park gates. A quick comfort break stop in Yosemite Valley allowed a few of us time to find single White-headed Woodpecker, Western Tanager and Black-throated Grey Warbler whilst a good number of White-throated Swifts swirled around the cliff faces. It was then a non-stop drive up to Glacier Point, a magnificent look-out point at a height of 7,214 feet. The real target species here is Sooty Grouse which are known to be relatively tame and approachable in the early morning. We found two just before the car park and another seven in a forested dell close by. By standing quietly, we allowed them to walk almost up to us, completely indifferent to our presence and contentedly feeding on under-storey seeds. Over the course of the morning, we all enjoyed a couple of Lewis Woodpeckers both flycatching and doing what woodpeckers should do to bare tree trunks; had multiple sightings of White-headed Woodpecker; extensive views of a pair of Hairy Woodpeckers and finally enticed a thick-billed *megahyncha* race Fox Sparrow into view. Several small feeding parties of passerines flitted through the pines, most were Red-breasted Nuthatches and Mountain Chickadees but were joined at one point by at least three Golden-crowned Kinglets (or poor man's Firecrest as they were referred to by at least one member of the group). The undoubted star bird of the morning was an exquisite Hermit Warbler which

put on quite a show. By contrast sadly, only a lucky few managed to glimpse a secretive MacGillivray's Warbler that lurked in the undergrowth, periodically and tantalisingly calling to add to our frustration. By early afternoon, the area was packed with visitors – time to move elsewhere. We decided upon a hike down to McGurk Meadows, an easily navigable path through open old coniferous trees leading down to a couple of grassy meadows. It was the middle of a very hot afternoon and the forest was understandably quiet. We did add Brown Creeper to our species list and found many more “Rednuts” and Dark-eyed (Oregon) Juncos; a select few saw bits of another lurking MacGillivray's Warbler – but little else. Some time was spent avidly scrutinising the borders of the meadows. This is a favourite hunting ground for Great Grey Owl – all we found was a whole lot of bird droppings on some rocks which were likely owl hunting perches. We had one more chance for the owl, an area where previous Birdfinders tours had found hunting birds on several occasions but despite staying onsite until last light, luck wasn't with us. Leaving via the south park gate, we journeyed back, via a fast food stop, to arrive in Mariposa by 21.30.

**Day 8:** The well-documented forest fires that engulfed part of Yosemite from 17th August onwards were, at the time of our visit, 90% under control but had already destroyed over 280,000 acres and caused a number of deaths including fire-fighters. The effect upon our itinerary was the closure of our usual route through the park from Crane Flats to Tioga Pass. The only viable alternative was a much longer journey skirting initially around the northern boundaries, crossing the Sierra Nevada Mountains at Sonora Pass. We were a little concerned that this may well jeopardise our finding a number of key birds. We ended up however, having an excellent days birding, arguably better than our previous day in Yosemite. With another clear sky and the promise of a sunny day, an early start saw us driving through the winding grass and scrub covered hillsides towards Coulterville. As we rounded one bend, two resplendent male Mountain Quails, a species so often missed by tours, fed out on the roadside verges. They are notoriously skittish and soon headed off at the double for the nearest batch of cover but not before everyone had managed a reasonable look at this, the most difficult of the quail species to be found on this tour. From Chinese Camp, we turned north-east and made the slow climb up towards Sonora Pass. A speculative stop to view the fast flowing, rocky Stanislaus river from the bridge at Strawberry produced excellent views of an American Dipper whilst a few of the group managed to see a furtive Hermit Thrush creeping through the bushes. Several miles further on, we pulled into a viewing area providing spectacular scenery, albeit with a thin smoky haze. Here we found not only the first Pine Siskins of the tour but also a distant view of a couple of Common Mergansers (Goosander) lazily swimming in Donnell Lake. The final climb to the top was steep and tortuous, certainly not appreciated by our rental vehicles, but we eventually levelled out at 9,400ft and pulled off at a picnic area for lunch. In the scattered pines a number of Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warblers fed in the loose company of Mountain Chickadees, a White-breasted Nuthatch and a party of Dark-eyed (Oregon) Juncos but the undoubted highlight was a pair of Clark's Nutcrackers calling from the tops of trees. The eastern slope road was, if anything, steeper going down than the western road going up, but it finally levelled off at about 7,000ft where a speculative stop not only provided excellent views of Townsend's Solitaire but also a close and confiding female Williamson's Sapsucker. Further east and further down, a tiny remnant of freshwater marsh had just the merest of puddles but nevertheless it was the home to a couple of Gadwalls and, incongruously, a Ruddy Duck. There was barely enough depth to paddle, let alone dive! Whilst scanning the area, which was a mixture of grasslands and cattle pens, we picked up a party of about six Mountain Bluebirds, whilst just a few of the group latched onto James' call notifying them of a Red-breasted Sapsucker flying down the road away from us. At the end of that stretch of road was a clump of trees inside a private garden. These are the only trees for miles around. The sapsucker was obviously in there somewhere and fortunately showed again for some. Whilst all this was going on a pair of Northern Harriers playfully tussled with each other whilst quartering the fields and a Prairie Falcon made a thrilling low fly past right over our heads chasing a Red-shouldered Hawk. By now we were heading south and the vastness of Mono Lake came into view. We spent the rest of the birding light watching out from one portion of the lake-shore with more than half an eye out in the sage scrub behind. Mono is famous for its breeding population of California Gulls and Black-necked Grebes. Gulls of every age and plumage were dotted all along the shoreline whilst perhaps as many as 1,500 grebes sat out on the water as far as the eye could see. In amongst all of this in one small bay were a feeding group of 53 American Avocets, some still retaining vestiges of breeding dress whilst out on an isolated clump of Tufa sat an Osprey on its nest. Our final 30

minutes looking over the sagebrush produced a number of new species for the tour. A rather pallid looking Savannah Sparrow and a Lincoln's Sparrow sat atop isolated bushes, whilst a couple of Western Meadowlarks flew across in front of us. The first was a little confusing, it showed all the characteristics of basic size and shape including triangular wings, white outer-tail and both black crown stripe and white supercilia but it was heavily streaked on the under-parts showing no hint of yellow whatsoever. Presumably this is an extremely young bird. Fortunately the other bird was in classic plumage. As we walked back to the car park, we initially stopped to enjoy a pair of Sage Thrashers when a confiding Green-tailed Towhee perched up and one of its more common Spotted relatives flew in. Whilst the extra mileage involved in this enforced detour was more than a little tiring, we picked up a number of Yosemite targets so it proved to be an excellent days birding and we celebrated in style at a Mexican restaurant in Mammoth Springs, our base for the night.

**Day 9:** Following a quick caffeine fix, we drove out of town, first south and then east shortly after daybreak. Our first destination was Mammoth Hot Springs. This is an area of rolling sage brush hillsides overlooking a beautiful water meadow. The sky was clear and the sun just breaking the horizon, but we were at 6,000ft and it was pretty chilly. Our reason for being there was an early morning appointment with Greater Sage-grouse. Each morning these magnificent creatures take the opportunity to feed out in the open beside the ox-bow lakes without disturbance. This morning we saw a very respectable 32. Also of interest were our first eclipse-plumaged Blue-winged Teal, a beautifully-plumaged flying male Wood Duck and several of the newly named species - Sagebrush Sparrow, which differed from the Bell's Sparrows seen previously by their paler crown, less distinct malar and a completely different vocalisation. We also found a particularly confiding Rock Wren. A short distance away, at the Hot Springs proper, the highlight was a flock of perhaps 250 Pinyon Jays. Whilst resident in California, they are highly nomadic following the availability of pine cones and often congregate in large feeding flocks. Just as we were leaving the area, we stopped to watch a large gathering of hirundines on overhead wires consisting of several hundred Violet-green Swallows augmented by a handful of Barn Swallows, Bank Swallows (Sand Martins) and a Northern Rough-winged Swallow. It was time to put some miles behind us as we travelled south, detouring for a Denny's brunch. In the rising heat of mid-morning, we took a winding climb east into the Inyo National Forest before arriving at Cedar Flats. This is an extensive area of sage and juniper holding one or two key species. Over the course of about an hour, slowly walking through the lightly-wooded campsite, we found two obliging Juniper Titmouse, a range-restricted species only found in interior, south-western North America. Also in the area, a flighty Black-throated Grey Warbler and a Grey Flycatcher. By early afternoon, with temperatures hitting around 90°F we gently coaxed our vehicles up to 10,200ft into the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest along a winding road with absolutely stunning scenery. The trees themselves are known to be oldest living organisms on earth, many well over 5,000 years old! Understandably, birds were thin on the ground but our patience was rewarded firstly with a party of Mountain Bluebirds including at least two extremely bright blue males and latterly with a trio of inquisitive Pygmy Nuthatches, which were absolutely adorable. Frustratingly for some, and for the third time on this tour, a skulking MacGillivrays Warbler showed itself just to a select few. It was now mid-afternoon and with our next hotel well over 100 miles away, much of the remainder of the day was spent steadily driving south. We broke the journey to overlook Tinamaha reservoir. Initially all that could be seen were hundreds Black-necked Grebes with about 50 Clark's Grebes amongst them. On more careful scrutiny, we found small parties of both Ruddy Ducks and Red-necked Phalaropes and James found a female Redhead. However copious house points and gold stars are due to Richard who picked out an adult Sabine's Gull, still in full breeding dress, swimming in with the grebes. I later re-found the gull flying towards us – my favourite bird of the tour! The further south we travelled, the flatter the landscape became with scattered sage scrub and the occasional Joshua Tree, otherwise known as Yucca Palms. Shortly after 18.00, we arrived in Ridgecrest, the town which serves the huge China Lake military facility and our base for the next two nights.

**Day 10:** A dawn start was necessary this morning to drive south for about an hour to a rather uninspiring looking area of sage brush desert, appearing no different from any other. This was the home of the bird Americans call the Desert Phantom – better known as Le Conte's Thrasher. Historically the desert is pretty cold first thing, today however, it was shirtsleeve-weather from the start. The plan normally is to walk in line abreast through the scrub hoping that one

will sit atop a bush taking in the morning rays. Usually we need some time to find one – today, no doubt because of the warmer conditions, it took less than five minutes! During the ensuing hour at least three individuals sat in the tops of bushes long enough for everyone to get a really good look at a bird which sometimes spends almost all of its time running with cocked tail from one set of cover to the other. Also in the area was a particularly photogenic Say's Phoebe together with multiple sightings of the *canescens* inland race of Bell's Sparrow and several Sagebrush Sparrows. Overhead, a steady trickle of fast moving migrating Vaux Swifts passed through. With our primary mission accomplished ahead of schedule, we were to spend the rest of the day checking out two lush green migrant traps that literally are oases in the barren landscape that is the Mohave Desert. The first area is Central Park in California City, a series of watered lawns and lakes bordered with willows and numerous other trees. The dominant migrant in the park seemed to be Wilson's Warblers. We probably saw at least 15 together with a few Yellow Warblers as back up. The star attraction however, was a fine adult male MacGillivray's Warbler that, with patience, allowed all of the group to finally have excellent views of this arch-skulker. On the lawns, in and amongst a flock of feral geese, we saw three species certainly not expected in a California desert in September – singles of Ross's, Snow and Aleutian Cackling Goose. For a number of years migrant winter visiting wildfowl have made the park their second home although the group dynamics change from year to year. Other species of note were a male Cooper's Hawk together with our first Western Wood-pewees and both Chipping and Lark Sparrows. By late morning, the sun was quiet fierce and it was time for a well-deserved brunch. I'm not certain what was more popular, the excellent food at the Coyote Café or the superb roosting Barn Owl in the parking lot! From California City we drove about 12 miles north to our second oasis – the Silver Saddle Resort set in the Galileo Hills. This is an estate only occasionally accessible to birding groups and we made the most of an absolutely fantastic afternoon. There are extensive tracts of deciduous trees and lawns bordering lagoons, reed-fringed bays and numerous stands of willow. Again Wilson's Warblers were much in evidence, we probably saw at least 25 and were well supported by both Western Wood-pewee and Willow Flycatcher. We found 5 or 6 each of both Yellow and Orange-crowned Warblers, however the real attractions were a tree-creeping Black-and-white Warbler and a posing, photogenic immature male American Redstart, both 'eastern' wood-warblers and pretty rare this far west. At the rear of the Information Office, the flowering shrubs and sugar water feeder enticed both immature Costa's and Anna's Hummingbirds; the drier scrub held both immature and female Lazuli Buntings whilst the track back to the car park enabled everyone to enjoy both female Black-headed Grosbeak and a delightful party of eight Cedar Waxwings. Our return journey, including a lengthy stretch of dirt road, was considerably shorter than the outward run. Despite a degree of scepticism, full thanks go to the oft maligned 'Angelina' – James' "satnav lady". Once again new birds were celebrated in the China Buffet restaurant

**Day 11:** Today's journey was the longest of the tour. No matter which way you drive from Ridgecrest to the southern end of the Salton Sea, it is a matter of some 300 miles. We actually deviated from our normal itinerary to take advantage of a northward influx of Blue-footed Boobies into southern California, an incursion that turned out to be of absolutely historic proportions. At the time, well in excess of 30 birds had found their way, either flying past well watched headlands, or taking temporary sanctuary in inland waters. There had been regular reports of up to five birds at Lake Skinner County Park and a quest to see some of these became our focus for the morning. Our dawn drive took us initially south through the Mohave desert before swinging southwest into a very misty and very urban San Bernadino Valley, before arriving on site in the sunshine once more, around 10.00. This is a large area of parkland comprised of both manicured lawns, rolling scrubby hillsides and of course, a very large lake. Once inside the park gates, we added close, perched Cassin's Kingbirds to our tour list. We parked up and located two boobies quite quickly sat out on the water but quite distant and in ever increasing heat haze. One bird had quite a pale head and was presumably, an adult whilst the second much darker indicating immaturity. Distant views were totally inadequate for such a rarity – this species has not been seen on a Birdfinders California tour before and so we walked around to another headland. As we approached the water, the adult bird took flight but we quickly found two more birds, possibly sub-adults, sat preening on the water and gradually drifting towards us with the on-shore breeze. Also seen on the water were at least 40 Pied-billed Grebes; a number of both Clark's and Western Grebes together with pairs of American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal and Gadwall. Overhead, two Ospreys fished with precision and were enjoyed

by all but sadly the Coyote walking along the waters' edge was only seen by a few of the group. In and around the parking lot single Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher and Western Wood-pewee all showed well. With our main target achieved, it was time for the two-hour drive to Julian made famous for both its hummingbird feeders and its apple pie. The sugar water feeders in the Birdwatchers Store car park attracted perhaps 30 Anna's Hummingbirds. This is the common default species of the state to which all other species are compared. Several Black-chinned Hummingbirds put on a show; they are slightly smaller with a shorter bill, frostier and cleaner in appearance and have shorter tails. A fleeting glimpse of a full adult male Costa's was witnessed by just one or two. By mid-afternoon, it was time to drive southeast towards the Salton Sea. We broke the journey to briefly check out the tamarisk campground at Anza Borrego where we were surprised to find a Townsend's Warbler flitting around the bushes, before the final leg through the flat sandy desert roads to Brawley, our base for the next two nights of the tour. Whilst we were handling the check in administration, a hundred or so White-faced Ibises soared over – a taste for what would lie in store for us the following morning.

**Day 12:** This was to be the hottest day of the tour to date by a considerable margin. When we left our hotel at 06.30 it was the low 70s; by late morning, when we took a lunchtime break it had risen to the mid 90s and by 16.00 when we reconvened it had easily topped the 100°F mark. It is hard to envisage the sheer number of shore and water birds that live or pass through both the seashore itself, or the wet alfalfa fields that border them. Brown Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorants, Cattle Egrets and White-faced Ibis were present in the thousands, Caspian Terns, Laughing and Ring-billed Gulls in their hundreds. The morning was spent slowly driving the agricultural tracks off of Lack Road, pausing to enjoy our first Burrowing Owls sat up on sentry duty, then on to watch over our first wet fields. The dominant two species were White-faced Ibises and Long-billed Curlews, apparently feeding on an abundance of crickets. In amongst the Laughing Gulls were four delightful, dainty first-winter plumaged Franklin's Gulls. In the wetter areas about 25 Wilson's Phalaropes swam around whilst Pectoral Sandpipers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs fed near-by. A short drive further on brought us to the shores of the lake where the National Wildlife Refuge was awash with birds. One of our principal targets here is the huge Yellow-footed Gull. This species has a narrow distribution range incorporating the Gulf of California with post-breeding dispersal to the Salton Sea. We saw at least 15 full adults and another 10 younger birds in and amongst the smaller California and Ring-billed Gulls. An additional three Franklin's Gulls made this far and away the most successful Birdfinders California tour ever for the species. Several Forster's Terns and a single Black Tern perched up on sunken snags whilst good numbers of Western Sandpipers, Black-necked Stilts and American Avocets fed in the shallows. A group of 12 winter-plumaged Long-billed Dowitchers flew in to rest on the exposed mud and our first Black Skimmer flew in along the shoreline, landed on an island of dried mud and immediately fell asleep. A splash of colour was added by the presence of two adult-plumaged Lesser Flamingos. Pleasing to the eye but being at least 5,000 miles out of their range prevents their inclusion in the "acceptable species" on our tour checklist! Today we likened Blue-footed Booby to the No 53 bus service, Birdfinders has waited at least 14 years to see one in California, and then they appear before us on two consecutive days. We received news from local birders that a group of boobies were sat on a rock just a short distance away. Upon our arrival, not only were there 15 of them but they were at extremely close range, sat preening and panting in the heat, totally oblivious to the whirring of the camera motor-drives pointed in their direction. The Salton Sea is about more than water and shorebirds and we spent the remainder of our time this morning in the Sonny Bono Wildlife Refuge, a couple of acres of tamarisk and thorn scrub surrounding water sprinklers. Here we found almost all of our target species for the area. Gambel's Quail reside in the refuge but are notoriously skittish, keeping mainly to the ground right in the middle of thorn tangle. In all, we probably saw 10 or so. Next came delightful little Verdins chattering away together with a pair of noisy Black-tailed Gnatcatchers. The final new species was far easier to see but, in truth, was hardly spectacular. Abert's Towhee is a highly range-restricted species found only in parts of Utah, Arizona and California and to be frank it's boring and brown. The plan was now to return to the hotel for a midday siesta, but Guy had a different agenda. I have no idea what made him turn his head to look atop a haystack that we had already driven past, but his shout of Greater Roadrunner had the brakes of bus No 2 squealing. It remained out in the open for just a few seconds before leaping down and then doing what roadrunners do best, and at quite a lick before disappearing into the middle of a large batch of scrub. We gathered once more at 16.00. The first hour or so

was again driving the Lack Road area, our mission to get better views of Greater Roadrunner. We saw two more birds, the second one posing magnificently for us. A brief look over a small lagoon produced a flock of 100 American Avocets and a flying group of 20 or so Blue-winged Teal. We then drove north, pausing to enjoy a troop of 17 adult Sandhill Cranes feeding in roadside meadows, before arriving at a conservation area within the refuge called Unit One. Basically this is an elevated platform overlooking reed-beds and freshwater marsh. And here we remained until sunset. It began with a rail and ended with another. Whilst walking down the track to the platform, we flushed a *yumanensis* “Yuma” Clapper Rail which flew back into the reeds. It is quite possible that this may become a separate species in its own right with a distribution restricted to the Salton Sea and Colorado River basin into northern Mexico. It’s also unique in the sense that it’s the only ‘freshwater’ form of Clapper Rail in North America. Little were we to know that a second bird would decide to prance about in the sedges and grasses in front of us for about 15 minutes, often in the company of a manic Virginia rail that ran around all over the place. And finally our most unexpected find – sadly only heard and not seen – the exciting sound of a Black Rail calling from deep within the reeds. Whilst all this was going on, the evening roost of shorebirds on the distant lake shore was mind boggling. One stretch of rocks alone held over 100 Black Skimmers; gulls and terns stood there in their thousands and as the light drew in; skein after skein of White-faced Ibises flew across the fields and a huge gathering of Tree Swallows, many hundreds in total, swirled around the sky before selecting their roost. With all this birdlife, it was not too surprising to see the trio of extremely healthy looking Coyotes trotting off to hunt at the back of the marsh. The heat had definitely gone out of the day and the return drive to Brawley could best be described as pleasantly mild after an absolutely astounding days birding.

**Day 13:** Another cloudless and pleasantly warm dawn. Our initial birding was close to the hotel along La Flores Drive before walking through an area of sandy thorn scrub and tamarisk behind the residential complex. In quick succession we added our first two new species for the tour: Gila Woodpecker, which has a penchant for telegraph poles, and a few White-winged Doves struggling to maintain a presence amongst the ever growing population of Eurasian Collared-doves. This area also contained our only concentration of Northern Mockingbirds on this itinerary, which we added to our tally together with a pair of Inca Doves. Out in the waste ground we quickly picked out our fourth target, Cactus Wren, although Jen was disappointed that it was feeding in a date palm as opposed to a cactus (there were no cacti in the area)! Much more unexpected however, was a migrant MacGillivray’s Warbler hopping around in the bottom of a dense thorny scrub bush. (Five MacGillivray’s on one tour is pretty exceptional). We managed to find a couple more Black-tailed Gnatcatchers although neither were close, plus a whole host of Verdins. With the sun coming up behind us, the light was excellent to enjoy a young male Costa’s Hummingbird taking in the rays, and an obliging pair of Abert’s Towhees clambered about in a nearby bush. This land backs onto a vegetated stream gully where perhaps the least memorable of the new species for the tour was found – Common Gallinule, now split as a separate species from the Common Moorhens of Eurasia. A Belted Kingfisher flew up the gully and a distant family of Gambel’s Quail were just about identifiable through telescopes perched atop a hay bale. It was then time to return for a quick breakfast and check out of our very comfortable accommodation. There was still a huge area of the Salton Sea NWR that we hadn’t checked out so we drove north along Garst Road, finding a couple of obliging Greater Roadrunners and our final Burrowing Owl of the tour. Our next trackside halt was to add Ring-necked Pheasant to our total before we reached the end of the road at the water’s edge. The rest of the morning was spent here and at the nearby Red Hill Marina. If we thought yesterday was busy with birds, today was just unbelievable. Everywhere you looked there were American Avocets feeding in the shallow water. I have no idea how many, certainly several thousand. Then you have to add into the mix perhaps 300 Red-necked Phalaropes, 300 Caspian Terns, 200 American White Pelicans, 200 Northern Shovelers, 200 Ring-billed and 100 California Gulls, 50 Great Egrets, 50 Black-necked Stilts, 50 Western Sandpipers, 40 Long-billed Dowitchers and 30 Wilson’s Phalaropes. We also managed to add a few American Herring Gulls and a lone winter-plumaged adult Bonaparte’s Gull before the strength of the sun took its toll. Finally, a walk out to view a reed-fringed lagoon provided us with a quartet of Redheads together with female and immature male Lesser Scaup whilst a Virginia Rail crept through the sedges. Our planned return to Brawley for lunch was delayed as we watched a wet field absolutely saturated with White-faced Ibises and Cattle Egrets. Again the totals would be numbered in thousands. Our afternoon drive took us

initially south to El Centro before going west and parking up to overlook Fig Lagoon. The temperature at 15.00 was 104°F so a careful survey of the birds on the water took a lot of perseverance. Surprises here included both first-winter-plumaged Franklin's and Bonaparte's Gulls together with a *diazi* "Mexican" Mallard. Numerous Double-crested Cormorants perched up on partially sunken trees yet we were unable to find any Neotropic Cormorants that had occasionally been seen at this site in the last few years. The drive west was mainly on the fast Interstate Highway 8 and it was at this point that we saw our first cloud in the sky for several days. Eventually, after negotiating commuter traffic through San Diego, we arrived at San Ysidro close to the Mexican border, our base for the next two nights.

**Day 14:** You could tell we were back on the Pacific coast. The day dawned chilly with 100% cloud cover as we made our way northeast to spend the first part of the day birding the coastal sage scrub slopes of Otay Lakes. Our quarry was the very rang- restricted California Gnatcatcher, which only occurs in this part of the state and in Baha California. It is, perhaps, the most elusive of the three gnatcatchers to be found on this tour and has, in previous years, been known to take up to a couple of hours to satisfactorily see. We found our first within ten minutes and in a short while all of the group had had sufficiently good views to see its plumage separation features. This is probably a once in a lifetime opportunity to watch this near endemic and so we spent time searching for other calling birds. At one time, in the same small viewing area California Gnatcatcher, California Thrasher and California Towhee all performed out in the open. Also on show were both Wrentit and Bushtit whilst closer to the shoreline, Common Yellowthroats called from all directions and many perched up atop reed stems whilst a Cassin's Kingbird sat on overhead utility wires. It is traditional at this point in the tour, to brunch at IHOP, normally a relaxing affair. And so it was until James' iPhone brought news of a Yellow-green Vireo found earlier in the morning north of San Diego. There really was little choice as this is an extreme rarity wandering north from Mexico. Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery on Point Loma is a known migrant trap, the drive would only be 35 minutes and, most importantly, it would be a new species for any Birdfinders tour in the USA. We had been told that the bird preferred a *Ficus* tree in the northeast corner of the cemetery but nothing was on view as we arrived. Full credit goes to David and Ted who, whilst scanning the canopy for the umpteenth time, some 30 minutes later, called our attention to the bird. Vireos are typically sluggish feeders but not so this individual. It was constantly on the move within the tree and never easy to study. It moved from tree to tree regularly, barely allowing all of us to see it before it flew again. It was also not quite in the plumage we expected. Yes, the under-tail coverts were exceedingly bright yellow, certainly the colour was more intense than the soft lemon-yellow of Red-eyed Vireos and yes, the head patterning was mute with no hint of a black border to the grey crown but the general underparts seemed to lack the brightness we expected but of course, our views were limited. It was therefore a great relief to meet up with Gary Nunn (the original finder) and see the photographs he had managed to take when the bird was more co-operative, and which left the identity in no doubt whatsoever. With the pressure off, the next few hours were spent checking out each and every tree in the cemetery. Noteworthy finds included a Clay-coloured Sparrow (rare on this itinerary) amongst a party of Chipping Sparrows, a couple of Lark Sparrows and a Townsend's Warbler together with an exceptionally confiding and photogenic couple of Cooper's Hawks, up to 10 Western Bluebirds, half a dozen Yellow-rumped Warblers, a couple of Pacific-slope Flycatchers; single Western Wood-pewee and Western Tanager and brief views of an elusive hummingbird which just could have been a Calliope. Whilst there were obviously more birds to find (other local birders had seen Bullock's Oriole, Tennessee Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler and American Redstart earlier in the day), it was time to return via the harbour shoreline of San Diego before re-joining the Interstate. Our final birding stop of the day was at DairyMart Sod Fields. Occasionally the short grasses turn up a Baird's Sandpiper or American Pipit and can attract Red-throated Pipit in late September. But this afternoon all we could find were a couple of hunting White-tailed Kites and perched Say's Phoebes. It had been a long and somewhat intense day, and a slighter earlier than usual finish allowed an extra hour to unwind before dinner.

**Day 15:** A lovely bright, sunny, warm (not hot) morning, just the right weather for a walk along the beach. We set off around 07.30 for Imperial Beach leading down to the Tijuana River mouth. The last stretch of road passes alongside saltmarsh with a raised viewing point. Here we quite quickly found one of our targets, *levipepes* "Light-footed"

Clapper Rail. At least three birds came out to the water's edge, happily feeding right out in the open. Also in the water channel were both Pied-billed and Black-necked Grebes. We were able to entice both the heavily streaked "Belding's" and the appropriately named "Large-billed" Savannah Sparrows and, at one point were able to make a direct comparison between the two whilst sat on top of the same patch of scrub. We then began the mile or so walk south along the sand. Two notable species were seen offshore when James found a distant Blue-footed Booby (yes another one) seen by just one or two of the group, and a couple of Black-vented Shearwaters. Around 30 or so Western Grebes sat out on the water, but little else. On arrival at the river mouth, an unexpected find was a manic dancing adult Reddish Egret, a bird not seen on every tour to California. The shorebird and seabird roost was disappointingly small this year only containing about 100 Willet and smaller numbers of Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwit, Grey Plover and Short-billed Dowitchers. Birds of note in the sand dunes included a group of four Horned Larks providing our first 'proper' looks of the tour. Whilst the return walk held few birds, it was an extremely relaxing walk (or paddle for a few). A couple of light-morph Arctic Jaegers flew past, a quintet of Marbled Godwits behaved rather "Sanderlingesque" along the water's edge and a Common Dolphin fed close inshore. Back at the viewing platform, it was Polly's turn to come up trumps by finding a rather distant adult Little Blue Heron, a species very uncommon in coastal California and only rarely found on this itinerary. It was then time to drive into downtown San Diego and say our goodbyes to Guy who would be staying in the area for a few days before continuing his round-the-world voyage. Much of the middle portion of the day was taken up with driving the heavily congested Interstate 5 north towards Los Angeles. But there's always time for one more California rarity! In early July, an East Asian *viridigularis* Black-throated Diver turned up at Bonelli Regional Park in the sprawling suburbs of LA. It was still being reported on 'ebird' and we felt had nothing to lose by pursuing it. On entering the park, it was virtually the first bird we found on the lake, an adult in full winter plumage and we were able to watch it for close on an hour at ranges closing to 50 metres. It fed actively, sometimes remaining on the surface for no more than 10 seconds at a time whilst other times it posed delightfully for images. Although regular in Alaska, this species is exceedingly rare in the lower 48 states with perhaps less than ten accepted records in all. The time of year and the location make this record absolutely unique. Moreover, there are no North American records of the European form of Black-throated Diver so this subspecies, colloquially known as 'Green-throated' Diver, was new to almost all of our group, and ironically provided the best views of any diver seen on the entire tour! Also on the lake were a number of Clark's Grebes, several Gadwall and Ruddy Duck and a lone Northern Shoveler amongst a whole host of Mallard and American Coots. Soaring over, and sometimes drinking from the water were a sizeable flock of White-throated Swifts, whilst a Belted Kingfisher perched out on an exposed tree on the water's edge. All that remained was a further one-hour drive southwest to our final Motel 6 hotel of the tour and a celebratory dinner at the local Olive Garden, voted by all as the best meal of the tour.

**Day 16:** The agenda for the last day of a California tour is always governed by return flight times. This year, our various flights were not until the late evening and so we had a full extra day in the field. The most wanted species by the group was California Condor and this one species became the focus of the whole day. Driving north through Los Angeles morning commuter traffic is hardly an enjoyable experience but by 10.30 we were away from the crowds and able to brunch at Philmore. From here we followed a seven-mile (it seemed like 17) tortuous, dusty, bumpy and steep track eventually arriving at a known Condor viewing area. After an hour or so, one bird had been seen flying distantly along the range of hills by most of the group. The remainder, who had not walked the final stretch up to the vista point, enjoyed an approachable Sage Thrasher at the edge of the parking lot. All that now remained for the tour was a return drive, this time in late afternoon commuter traffic back through LA before checking in for our various flights back to the UK. In all, whilst our species total for the tour was slightly below par and lacked a few of the more regularly seen species found on past visits, this was more than compensated by the superb views we had of almost all of the birds we found together with some truly fantastically rare species. As always, we have to thank not only James but, in no small measure, 'Angelina' for getting us safely to each destination on this hectic itinerary. Additionally James' superb field identification abilities were crucial to everyone participating in a thoroughly enjoyable tour.

**MAMMAL LIST**

Short-beaked Common Dolphin - *Delphinus capensis*  
Bottle-nosed Dolphin - *Tursiops truncatus*  
Risso's Dolphin - *Grampus griseus*  
Pacific White-sided Dolphin - *Lagenorhynchus olivoides*  
Blue Whale - *Balaenoptera musculus*  
Humpback Whale - *Megaptera novaeangliae*  
California Sea Lion - *Zalophus californianus*  
Harbour Seal - *Phoca vitulina*  
Northern Elephant Seal - *Mirounga angustirostris*  
Northern Fur Seal - *Callorhinus ursinus*  
Sea Otter - *Enhydra lutris*  
Muskrat - *Ondatra zibethicus*  
Coyote - *Canis latrans*  
Black-tailed Mule Deer - *Odocoileus hemionus*  
Desert Cottontail - *Sylvilagus audubonii*  
California Ground Squirrel - *Spermophilus beecheyi*  
Lodgepole Chipmunk - *Tamias speciosus*  
Least Chipmunk - *Tamias minimus*