

California

3–18 September 2008

Participants:

Robert Davidson
Stuart Emmerson
Doug and Betty Gillett
Keith Millar
Brenda Morrison
John and Sue Rowe
John and Joan Rumball
Linda Seerey
Jane Spick
Barry and Chris Shaw
John Vosper
Derek Williams



Nuttall's Woodpecker

Leaders:

James P. Smith and Martyn Kenefick

California is a state of total contrast; from verdant fields and occasional snow covered peaks in Yosemite to the barren brown rolling hills that are the Carrezo Badlands; from the distinctly cold, misty coast to the searing heat at the Salton Sea. Between us, we managed to find 270 species of bird and 28 different mammals/reptiles. Highlights were many. Who could forget the Blue Whales in the Santa Barbara Channel; our success with no less than five owl species; the flock of flying ant-catching Lewis's Woodpeckers and the stunning male Williamson's Sapsucker close to Mammoth Lakes; our good fortune with Le Conte's Thrasher; that superb male Vermilion Flycatcher at Galileo Hills or eventually most peoples favourite, those Greater Roadrunners. We also found a number of state rarities and scarcities including Semipalmated Sandpiper, American Oystercatcher and a superb Chestnut-sided Warbler (all "hot line birds" on the west coast.) Yes, there were long days with long drives; we totalled around 2400 miles. Yes, we stayed in multiple locations, living out of suitcases but the bird diversity and customer camaraderie made this an extremely successful tour.

Day 1 If a birding holiday requires a long haul flight, then you really want a relaxing one. Air France did us proud. We left on time and arrived early. The ten or so hours in between took us via the western tip of Iceland; across southern Greenland and then swept southwest through arctic Canada and the northwest United States with minimal turbulence. Immigration and Baggage Reclaim at Los Angeles were perfectly straightforward; James was there to meet us; the two rental buses were ready and by 11.00pm local time we were in our Ventura motel for the night.

Day 2 The early part of the first day of any birding tour is spent studiously looking at everyday birds that, later in the tour, rarely warrant binoculars being raised. So it was today with Brown Pelicans, Great Blue Herons, Heermann's and Western Gulls, American Crow and Great-tailed Grackles being scrutinized (not to mention Eurasian Collared-dove, Eurasian Starling and House Sparrow). On Ventura beach itself, the exposed mud held groups of Marbled Godwits, dark-rumped Hudsonian Whimbrels and a juvenile Short-

billed Dowitcher whilst good numbers of Black Turnstones and a smattering of Surfbirds fed on or beside the harbour wall rocks. Overhead, our first Elegant Terns, their grating calls sounding confusingly like Sandwich Terns, drifted over. By 09.30 we were positioned aboard our vessel for the 90 or so minute crossing of the Santa Barbara Channel. For the most part, the sea was flat calm with patches of fog weakening further the already overcast visibility. However, it was excellent for birds. As we left the harbour, the rocks were lined with both Double-crested and the thicker-necked and darker-headed Brandt's Cormorants. Early on, an adult Pomarine Skua flew across our bows, then the first, albeit distant, Black-vented Shearwater appeared. Before long we were enjoying excellent close flight views of several "Black-vented's" together with a lone Pink-footed Shearwater sat on the sea. The further out we sailed, the more regular parties of Red-necked Phalaropes became (over the course of the return journey we were to see well over 100) together with an occasional Red (Grey) Phalarope with much bolder wing stripe and paler head. Birds were not the only things out on the water. Several pods of Bottle-nosed Dolphins briefly showed an interest in our passing and a few Californian Sea Lions nonchalantly lazed around. The final two sightings of the journey were a surprise to say the least. Firstly came a flapping quartet of Oystercatchers: three Black and an American (the latter being a California state rarity), shortly followed by two alcids flying past, which could only have been Cassin's Auklets. By late morning we had docked at Prisoner's Harbour on Santa Cruz Island. The skies were totally overcast and initially birds were extremely hard to find. However, as the day brightened, so birdlife livened up and, over the course of around four hours, we amassed a healthy selection of new species. Perhaps the most numerous passerine on view was Orange-crowned Warbler closely followed by Black Phoebe. It took at least two hours for everyone to get a glimpse of the endemic Island Scrub-jay however towards the end of our stay, their inquisitive nature took hold and a couple flew in and perched within feet of our camera lenses. Overhead several 'California' Common Ravens were a regular sight – this may be a candidate for an armchair tick in the future. Having added 'Santa Cruz Island Song Sparrow' and 'Santa Cruz Island Bewick's Wren' to our tally, we spent the final hour in some riparian vegetation alongside a nearly dry riverbed. Here we found our only Pacific-slope Flycatcher of the tour plus a Wilson's Warbler, whilst close to the beach we added Killdeer, Least and Spotted Sandpipers. On the shingle bank, a moulting sub-adult Glaucous-winged Gull was a welcome surprise, whilst nearby both Allen's (the resident *sedentarius* race) and Anna's Hummingbirds perched out in the open. Whilst all this was happening, Brenda, Jane and Stuart had opted to remain close to the jetty, and were rewarded with a swimming Pigeon Guillemot. The return journey to Ventura, in bright sunshine, initially produced much of the same. However it will long remain in our memories. We started off by seeing a couple of Pomarine and Arctic Skuas, we had more close up view of Black-vented Shearwaters but then had an audience with two magnificent Blue Whales. Occasionally during a tour one particular quote stays in your head. For me, it was learning that the tongue of a Blue Whale is bigger and heavier than an African Elephant. We probably never saw more than 10% of these fabulous cetaceans but what a 10% it was! Back on dry land, we spent the last hour driving north up the coastal highway (noting Turkey Vultures and American Kestrels along the way) to Buellton for a one-night stay with traditional dining at Pea Soup Anderson's, the home of Split Pea soup.

Day 3 It took a long while to get light this morning – the coastal mist was both thick and cold. We anticipated leaving our motel at the civilised hour of 07.30, however a family party of Western Bluebirds feeding on trees in the car park delayed proceedings. We drove just a few miles to Alisal Canyon, parked up intending to walk the road back across the river. Some 90 minutes later we were still in the parking area, so intense was the birding. Amongst the highlights were a party of 26 Cedar Waxwings; a couple of Western Tanagers; not only Nuttall's but also Acorn and Downy Woodpeckers; White-breasted Nuthatch; both California Towhee and California Thrasher; a particularly confiding party of Bushtits and a couple of Yellow Warblers. We had walked probably no more than 20 yards. Birding the road over the bridge swiftly added Belted Kingfisher, Greater Yellowlegs and Green Heron; both Sharp-shinned and Red-tailed Hawks; Brewer's Blackbirds by the score and a flyover Western Kingbird whilst overhead small parties of White-throated Swifts raced through together with a lone Violet-Green Swallow. Our one remaining target here was Yellow-billed Magpie, a California endemic. Eventually Derek spotted a couple perched high on some electricity pylons – perfectly adequate through a telescope, but hardly brilliant views. However, a five-minute walk into a quiet residential cul de sac produced closer encounters, so the photographers amongst us were smiling. From Alisal, it's just a short drive to Nojoqui Falls CP, time for the mid morning sun to finally burn

through any lingering mist; indeed it became pretty hot. The short grass adjacent to the visitors parking area was kept watered, attracting our first Lark Sparrow, several Dark-eyed "Oregon" Juncos and Acorn Woodpeckers left, right and centre. A couple of Black-tailed Mule Deer quietly fed in the background and we found several Oak Titmice, a species restricted to California and Oregon. Back in the shade of trees surprisingly called Sycamore, we found a few Lesser Goldfinches and our first Hutton's Vireo but as lunchtime drew near, bird activity seriously waned.

Following a relaxing lunch, we set off north along the coastal highway to Morro Bay and, particularly, Montano de Oro state park. On arrival, a huddle of gulls on the beach included an adult Glaucous-winged and a number of California Gulls amongst the more numerous Heermann's and Westerns. A superb adult Red-shouldered Hawk sat atop a telegraph pole no doubt eyeing up the occasional covey of California Quails. We found our first Northern "Red-shafted" Flickers and White-crowned Sparrows and, with perseverance, had reasonable views of Chestnut-backed Chickadee. By 17.30, we were walking out to a nearby headland where Sooty Shearwaters were continually streaming northwards. How many were there? I have no idea – certainly well into the thousands. Also new for the tour here was a fly-past Pacific Diver (I cannot bring myself to call them Loons), a juvenile Northern Harrier, quartering the coastal sage covered slope and a couple of Long-billed Curlew on the rocky shoreline. Perhaps the highlight of the day for some were several Sea Otters just off-shore characteristically laying on top of the surface on their backs, scratching their tummies. The sun had gone, the mist was encroaching and it quickly became quite chilly. The return walk was enlivened firstly by a couple of Wrentits which eventually showed tantalizingly to most of the group, an adult Peregrine soaring out into the gloom, whilst two Bottle-nosed Dolphins swam lazily in the shallows. Dinner was taken at a busy seafood restaurant on the harbour side. Whilst the service was seriously hampered by their computer system crashing, boy was the food good!

Day 4 Once again coastal fog meant a dull start to the day. Prior to our departure, James had heard a Great Horned Owl calling from trees surrounding a nearby school. Whilst we failed to put a face to the noise, all was not lost as a feeding party of Chestnut-backed Chickadees (so difficult yesterday and so easy today) included a fine Townsend's Warbler. The next hour or so was spent scanning the waders at Morro Bay beach. We walked literally within feet of a paddling quartet of Red-necked Phalaropes and quickly found a superb (and our only) Baird's Sandpiper feeding on the dried mud, loosely in the company of a group of Sanderlings. A little further on we came across a mixed group of Semipalmated and Snowy (Kentish) Plovers with a lone juvenile Western Sandpiper alongside. Marbled Godwits seemed ever present and amongst the roosting gulls were five Ring-billed. After breakfast we drove the short distance to Morro Bay state park to watch the high tide wader roost. At our first stop the far shore was alive with American White Pelicans; the near shore with Red-necked Phalaropes and behind us, on the golf course, a Great Horned Owl perched up in a tree totally unperturbed by the motorized golf carts buzzing by. All the while, the air reverberated to the barking of California Sea Lions nearby. Further on, the salt marsh became an absolute haven for literally hundreds of Long-billed Curlews, Marbled Godwits, Western and Least Sandpipers. A scattering of Forster's Terns flew too and fro and several Savannah Sparrows flitted through the undergrowth. We also had find close-up views of Pied-billed Grebes, Greater Yellowlegs, White-crowned Sparrows, Hutton's Vireo and oddly for this habitat, another Chestnut-backed Chickadee. A brief late morning stop at a shopping mall (to buy lunch) was enlivened for a lucky few with an American Kestrel mobbing a Cooper's Hawk over the car park. The remainder of the day was spent driving the 150 miles or so north along Scenic Route One making occasional stops en route. At the first scenic stop we found an offshore party of Surf Scoters and a winter plumaged Red-throated Diver. At the second, a bull Elephant Seal, our first respectable looks at Pelagic Cormorant and an adult American Herring Gull. Having made a further brief stop to look at a whole beach full of Elephant Seals, we motored steadily for an hour or so until we reached Big Sur. Here, at a regular watch point, we found a perched California Condor No 71 – an adult from the (so far) successful re-introduction programme. Not to be outdone, a couple of Steller's Jays vied for everyone's attention flicking around trees at the edge of the car park. During the late afternoon and early evening we drove on north reaching Salinas, our base for the next two nights.

Day 5 A pre-dawn start was necessary to drive west to Fisherman's Wharf, Monterey in time for our pelagic on the *Check Mate*. Once on board, our host, Debbie Shearwater, introduced us to her team of birding guides and the logistics of 30 birders on a small boat, and then around 08.00 we set sail. Initially the skies were overcast but with good visibility. Periodically we sailed through banks of fog, but in the main conditions were excellent. The sea could not be described as rough; at full throttle it got quite bumpy and when stationary, the swell could become uncomfortable, but for the most part, it was fine. Birds were on view for the whole eight hours of the journey, which took us out 14 miles west of Monterey, sailing over water canyons up to $\frac{3}{4}$ mile deep. Highlights were many. Who could forget the 26 Black-footed Albatrosses lazing around one fishing vessel; Sooty Shearwaters in there thousands and Pink-footed Shearwaters by the hundred. Even more dramatic in appearance were the dozen or so Buller's Shearwaters, always close and very photogenic. As for petrels, it was a case of quantity rather than species diversity. It actually took a long while to find any but eventually we caught up with about 350 Ashy Storm-petrels together with three 'Pacific' Northern Fulmars of three totally different colour hues. One was really dark blue-grey overall, one intermediate and one looking decidedly "European". We only managed two species of alcids seeing around 50 of each. Rhinoceros Auklet was new for the tour and Common Guillemot (Common Murre) a familiar friend. Skuas were quite plentiful. There were at least eight dark-morph South Polars and probably as many Pomarines. Cetaceans were equally dramatic. We found a feeding pod of huge Risso's Dolphins actively hunting squid; several parties of bow-riding Pacific White-sided Dolphins and at least half a dozen Humpback Whales, several of which "tail fluked" for the cameras. For me, the undoubted highlight was a superb, close fly past juvenile Sabine's Gull (not rare at all, but magical nevertheless), almost back at the harbour entrance. Back on terra firma, we drove south along the shore to look out over the seaweed-strewn shore at Lighthouse Point. It was our last chance (so we thought) for Wandering Tattler and we weren't disappointed, with one accompanying around 25 Black Turnstones. Across the road, a reed-fringed pond on the golf course produced our final new bird for the day – Black-crowned Night-heron. But the most bizarre was left to last – a young lady taking a rabbit for a walk on a lead – well it is California!

Day 6 Our last cold coastal morning for a while. Following a caffeine fix, we briefly stopped at Locke Paddon Park with the aim of scrutinizing the Red-winged Blackbird flock, trying to pick out a Tricolored. Eventually James found one female (often more distinctive than the males) that some of the group got onto but it was a bit of a "needle in a haystack" job. However the stop was well worthwhile. Not only did Betty find us our first Sora Rail, on the tiny pond, but there were around 25 Red-necked Phalaropes spinning around close by and an inquisitive Raccoon stared at us from the reedy edge. From there we drove north up the coast to Moss Landing firstly checking out a small marshy area adjacent to arable land. Marsh Wrens were much in evidence; two Northern Rough-wings wheeled around with a party of Barn Swallows; some of the party saw a White-tailed Kite and we heard, but sadly could not entice into view, a Virginia Rail. A few miles to the north, we turned off to spend some while at Elkhorn Slough, and the adjacent slurry ponds series of Moonglow Dairy. Commonplace waders included Western and Least Sandpipers, Marbled Godwits and Red-necked Phalaropes. Initially grebes stole the show; a close quartet of paired Western and Clark's Grebes allowed a detailed comparison of key identification features i.e. the presence or absence of white above the eye; bill and flanks cover together with the width of the black neckline. These were loosely accompanied by a dozen or so Pied-billeds and a single Black-necked. New ducks for the tour here included Cinnamon and Green-winged Teals, Gadwall and Ruddy Duck. Also new for us were Long-billed Dowitcher and American Avocet, but for local California rarity value, pride of place went to a lone immature Semipalmated Sandpiper found close to the bank with Least Sandpipers. Another scarce species locally, seen by some of the party was American Goldfinch – extremely common in the eastern US, but not here. We couldn't have known at the time, but the same ponds would produce a Little Stint (a mega-rarity in California) found just one week after our visit. Nearby, at Moss Landing north jetty, we came across Sea Otters by the score lazing away the morning floating on their backs together with numerous Harbour Seals crashed out on the rocks. A Pacific Diver here was a good find, as was a couple of moulting Pigeon Guillemots. On the sea itself, there was a continual stream of thousands of Sooty Shearwaters, all gliding north. This part of the coast is a wintering ground for Sooties and these movements are part of their daily feeding routine. A lone Wandering Tattler on the rocks of the breakwater was unexpected and Derek picked out a distant southbound migrating Northern Harrier flying over the sea. On our drive out, our only Red-

breasted Merganser of the tour flew across the road and everyone enjoyed a second White-tailed Kite sat in a tree. Following lunch, we made the 150-mile or so drive east in search of warmth and sunshine, to Mariposa, our base for the next two nights. We broke the journey briefly at the San Luis reservoir. Here there were huge rafts of American Coot intermingled with a hundred or so Pied-billed Grebes; both Northern Shoveler and Northern Pintail, the latter new for the tour, a number of Ruddy Ducks and a Loggerhead Shrike along the entrance track. Our final new species for the day was a flying party of White-faced Ibis close to Merced – a species we would become very familiar with later in the tour.

Day 7 It started with an owl; it finished with an owl; and there was unexpected excitement for some in between. Today was spent almost entirely within Yosemite NP in glorious sunshine where we climbed to around 9,000ft. Our good fortune started well before we reached the park gates. A speculative stop looking over a mountain stream produced not only a juvenile American Dipper, but also both Rock Wren and Western Tanager. We were just about to board the buses when James heard a Northern Pygmy-owl calling from the tree-strewn slope above us. Twenty minutes later, everyone had enjoyed protracted views of this much sought after and normally secretive species through telescopes, down to as little as 20 metres. Once inside the park, we came across a troop of Wild Turkeys ambling nonchalantly beside the road and then spent the morning birding the road up to Glacier Point. Almost the first bird found was a low flying sub-adult Golden Eagle, shortly followed by several fairly brief views of perched Red-breasted Sapsuckers. A little further up the road, at our next stop we managed to find Red-breasted Nuthatches calling like a child's toy trumpet, superb Black-throated Gray and Townsend's Warblers, Mountain Chickadees and a female Purple Finch whilst Steller's Jays were calling all around us. To be honest, the midday and early afternoon period was almost totally devoid of birds, and so we just enjoyed the spectacular scenery. By late afternoon, we were walking the trail to McGurk's Meadows and, after some way, thought we could hear a rather distant Black-backed Woodpecker. Most of us crashed through the forest in the direction the noise was coming from; Jane and Brenda decided to stay behind. The next 15 minutes can only be described as a double whammy. Our "woodpecker" turned out to be an impressionist Ground Squirrel and whilst we were away, the girls had an extremely close encounter with a young Black Bear – all we could find was its remaining scat on the path! On returning to the road, we found some consolation in a confiding group of young male Black-tailed Mule Deer, all sporting a good head of antlers; several Brown Creepers and even more Audubon's Warblers, and scope views of Golden-crowned Kinglet but the bear – the only one to be found on the tour – had certainly stolen the show. Nevertheless, there was still time for a Grand Finale. Early evening found us lined up at the edge of a meadow overlooking light woodland. A fine pair of White-headed Woodpeckers were an admirable supporting cast, but the main event was a stunning Great Gray Owl. We really earned this bird. It didn't appear until almost last light, when Linda called it flying out and high over our heads. We have James' keen eyesight to thank for everyone re-finding this fabulous beast perched through telescopes. The long dark drive back to Mariposa was enlivened by a "headlight" Coyote sauntering assuredly along the side of the road and a Gray Fox scampering off to the edge. It was close on 10.00pm by the time we reached our hotels, and for most a case of straight to bed and a good (complimentary) breakfast in the morning.

Day 8 Another bright and glorious early morning. We were to spend the majority of the day working our way through Yosemite via Crane Flats, Tuolumne Meadows, exiting over the Tioga Pass, reaching an altitude of over 10,000ft. However, as yesterday a speculative stop on the road out of Mariposa produced new birds for the tour. A party of migrating Vaux Swifts were swirling over the canyon rim opposite and our first Western Wood-pewee sat up prominently, repeatedly sallying out after flying insects before returning to the same perch. A little further on, confiding Band-tailed Pigeons perched up on utility wires (a welcome change from the usual distant fly-overs). Once away from the park traffic, we walked a trail through scattered pines and sage brush finding our first Warbling Vireo, having excellent views of Spotted Towhee and a pair of Red-breasted Sapsuckers. By checking several areas of woodland at Crane Flats, we came across a noisy mixed feeding flock of Mountain Chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatches. Persistence in checking and re-checking this loose flock paid off as we slowly caught up with Hermit Warbler, Cassin's Finch and an obliging pair of Townsend's Solitaires. There then followed a long middle of the day drive to Tuolumne. After a late lunch, we birded the open meadows to the north of the road locating several Clark's Nutcrackers and Red Crossbills

in the pine trees. Keith found an Olive-sided Flycatcher alongside a Western Wood-pewee and James had an all too brief female Williamson's Sapsucker. A number of sparrows in willows bordering a flowing stream were new for the tour; tiny Brewer's; Vesper's sporting their white out-tail and the large, pale *oriantha* race of White-crowned Sparrow, an exciting find with two of the more expected 'Gambell's' White-crowned Sparrows. By late afternoon, we had left Yosemite and descended several thousand feet through dramatic scenery before making a final birding stop at Saddlebag Lake Road. This was John V's moment, picking up and identifying a splendid Prairie Falcon, which put on quite a show for us. Here we enjoyed a supporting cast comprising a mixed feeding flock of Mountain Bluebird, Oregon Junco, Chipping Sparrow, Mountain Chickadee and many 'Audubon's' Yellow-rumped Warblers. With several more close flight views of Clark's Nutcracker, we drove on down to Mammoth Lakes for a one night stay and dinner at a favourite Italian Restaurant.

Day 9 Dawn in the high sagebrush desert isn't cold, it's absolutely freezing! Nevertheless, as the sun appeared over the eastern hills we donned scarves and gloves and lined up along a dusty dirt road, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. A ring-tail Northern Harrier perched up on a fence post; on the stream you could just about pick up several Gadwalls and Northern Pintails through the rising mist, and both Say's Phoebe and Sage Thrasher flitted from one sage bush to another. As it started to warm up our first Solitary Sandpiper of the tour flew over calling but these were not the birds we had braved the cold to find. We therefore walked across a sagebrush plateau to view a wide area of grazing fields and water meadows. Almost immediately the first pair of Greater Sage Grouse was found feeding on the short grass (we were to find at least 20 birds over the course of the next hour); our first Western Meadowlarks added a splash of colour and three distant flying *Charadrius* plovers eventually turned out to be Killdeers and not something far more exciting. All of a sudden, Green-tailed Towhees appeared from nowhere flicking from one side of the road to the other, joined at one point by a photogenic Rock Wren. A couple of miles further along the road, we came to an area of hot springs. Whilst this was intended to be just a brief photo stop, Derek found a perched Great Horned Owl beside the stream and a Wilson's Warbler flitted around the car park bushes. Acting on some local information gleaned on the previous day, we then retraced our steps to Mammoth Lakes and drove up into the Inyo National Forest. Close to Rainbow Falls, we found an area of burnt pine teeming with birds. At least eight (and probably 12) Lewis' Woodpeckers sallied to and fro like giant flycatchers (one briefly becoming a potential prey target for a marauding Sharp-shinned Hawk), whilst several Pine Siskins and Lesser Goldfinches twittered from bare snags. On the edge of the forest proper, life was just as hectic. Three Williamson's Sapsuckers, including a stunning adult male, were particularly confiding as were a party of Pygmy Nuthatches and one larger White-breasted cousin. All the while Clark's Nutcrackers flew in and out, some posing for the cameras. Just as we were about to return to the vehicles, a juvenile hawk slowly drifted our way before briefly perching up on a bare tree. It was a dark morph bird with an extended gape line indicating the possibility of Ferruginous Hawk. However the patterning of the under-wing and under-tail didn't quite fit, the bird also recalling a dark Red-tailed Hawk. Later examination of the photographs taken resolved the issue – it was juvenile of the rare dark morph of Western Red-tailed Hawk *B.j. calurus*. Whilst all this was going on, Joan was taking a more relaxing stroll through the forest and found a single male White-headed Woodpecker. This previously unknown site to us, could well figure in future itineraries should the conditions remain good. Following a "Subway lunch" in Mammoth Lakes, we drove south before turning east and taking the winding escarpment road up to Cedar Flats (with a brief roadside stop to enjoy a large covey of Chukar). Here our main target was Juniper Titmouse, which we couldn't find in the heat of the afternoon. However, we were more than compensated by a fresh-plumaged juvenile Plumbeous Vireo (a new California species for Birdfinders, described as rare and local in the birding guides), Chipping Sparrow, Spotted Towhee and a lone Olive-sided Flycatcher, seen by Keith, again! From late afternoon to mid evening, we were on the road driving due south to Mojave, our base for the next two nights. Despite a late arrival, a quick supper and check in ensured that we got to bed earlier than any other night of the tour thus far.

Day 10 What a difference 6,000ft makes. Yesterday's sun up found us walking across sagebrush desert – this time, some 10 miles out of Mojave, the temperature was almost balmy. Indeed, throughout the day it was pretty warm, even hot during midday (a taste of things to come). Our priority this morning was to find Le

Conte's Thrasher; characteristically shy, wary and rarely showing well for long. After quite a long flog, seeing nothing but plenty of Sage Sparrows, one perched up on a derelict wall for at least five minutes allowing everyone relaxed views through a telescope. At one point, in a line on the same wall were both Le Conte's and Sage Thrasher, Sage Sparrow and Rock Wren, the latter intent on inspecting a hole that may well have been a nest site. With the infamous 'desert phantom' in the bag, we were now well ahead of schedule, as sometimes Le Conte's Thrasher takes a long while to give itself up, and drove on through Jawbone Canyon watching a flock of 25 Horned Larks feeding in short grass on one side of the road and an exceptional flock of 92 'California' Common Ravens huddled together on the other side. The last seven miles of our drive were "off road" winding steeply through an area of Joshua Trees, eventually reaching Butterbredt Spring; a literal oasis in the desert, leaping with birds. There seemed to be a continual throughput of Sage Sparrows, several hundred birds at least, and amazingly a Lewis Woodpecker circled round over our head. Initial impressions suggested to James that it was busier than he'd ever seen it. Once inside, and under the canopy, the first two warblers found were both new for James in California. In one tree we found not only the first of three different American Redstarts but also a non-breeding-plumaged adult male Chestnut-sided Warbler – another rarity, not quite a documentation species. Over the course of the next two hours or so, we also added Great Horned Owl, Ladder-backed and Nuttall's Woodpeckers, Western Wood-pewee, Bewick's Wren, Swainson's and Hermit Thrushes, Warbling Vireo, Nashville, Orange-crowned and Yellow Warblers, Western Tanager together with Green-tailed and Spotted Towhees. Understandably, by midday activity had diminished and so we took a lunch break in California City. Initially we were saddened by the fact that the restaurant which last year boasted the best selection of omlettes in the state was under new management (and a new menu) but the food was excellent value nevertheless. The weather continued to be kind to us. Usually, the desert gets very windy in the afternoons but today it was flat calm, ideal for the two "migrant hotspots" we had left to visit today. Firstly we went to Central Park in California City. Here on the lagoons two Ross's Geese and a Tundra Swan were, to the uninformed, a strange find. However all were true migrants, which just had not returned north. The swan and one goose had been around for a couple of years, but the second goose was a relatively new arrival. More surprising were two juvenile Common Terns (possibly present as a consequence of hurricane activity in the Gulf). More expected but perhaps much more appreciated were the first of two MacGillivray's Warblers to be seen during the afternoon, creeping about in waterside shrubbery and not far away, a couple of obliging Black-headed Grosbeaks. Our final birding site for the day was another oasis/migrant trap – the superb resort at Galileo Hill. Here Wilson's Warblers were hopping about on the grass; James had another "California tick" in the shape of a Northern Waterthrush and we enjoyed good views of our first Cassin's Vireo. Towards the far end of the trees, a female Vermilion Flycatcher showed briefly together with a couple of Say's Phoebes. Beyond this point, desert scrub predominates surrounding a small reed-fringed pool. Here we found a party of rather drab looking juvenile Lazuli Buntings, Lark Sparrows and Olive-sided Flycatcher all of which appeared to be valid prey items for a superb Cooper's Hawk which repeatedly swooped low over the pond, scaring another Solitary Sandpiper to flight. Back at the car park, we accepted complimentary (and exceedingly refreshing) glasses of cactus lemonade from the site office before the short drive back to Mojave.

Day 11 The first few hours of the day were spent driving initially east from Mojave before veering south past Edwards Air Force Base and Yucca Valley. A speculative stop produced perhaps 400 Horned Larks and a quartering ringtail Northern Harrier, but sadly not the hoped for Swainson's Hawk and so it was late morning by the time we finally arrived at Big Morongo nature reserve. The sugar water feeders were positively heaving with hummingbirds. As expected, the most numerous were Anna's including a couple of red throated males. Next in abundance came "those with orange in the tail". Without doubt most would be migratory Rufous Hummingbirds and not Allen's, but the only way to be sure in this plumage is to examine birds in the hand. There were also at least a couple of very frosty looking Black-chinned Hummingbirds. Of smaller fare were several Costa's including one male still retaining a fair bit of purple on the throat. The surprise, however, was a female/juvenile Calliope – yet another new addition for the Birdfinders trip list. Hummingbirds were not the only family in the parking lot. A couple of Nuttall's Woodpeckers and single White-breasted Nuthatch, Mountain Chickadee and Oak Titmouse also put in an appearance, attracted by the peanuts on offer. Of the four-legged variety, the family party of Raccoons, including the naughty child at the back, passing through were good fun to watch. Just after lunch we walked through nearby Covington Park. It

was hot, and initially quiet. However with perseverance we amalgamated a respectable list including a pair of Vermilion Flycatchers, Warbling Vireo, several Western Tanager and two new birds for the trip; Willow Flycatcher and a female Bullock's Oriole. During the heat of the afternoon, we journeyed further south for several hours through Indio and along the eastern shore of the Salton Sea. Towards the southern end, we branched off to Niland Boat Ramp. Opening the bus doors was like walking into a furnace. There was a temperature reading of 100 °F inside the bus, I have no idea what it was outside! Here hundreds of Caspian Terns roosted alongside hundreds of Black Terns whilst parties of Black-necked Stilts fed alongside both Least and Western Sandpipers, but the best was exquisite views of Black Skimmers in wonderful light. A short drive south took us to Garst Road. At least seven Burrowing Owls inquisitively watched our passing and we were met at the end by a huge throng of wildfowl and shorebirds. Numbers were difficult to be sure of but there were at least 3000 American White Pelicans, 2500 American Avocets and 1400 Red-necked Phalaropes. A specialty of the area at this time of year is Yellow-footed Gull – a post-breeding wanderer from Mexico. We found six, surrounded by a small party of Laughing Gulls. Other new birds for the tour included Cattle Egret, Redhead, Gambel's Quail and Common Moorhen! As the sun receded, we drove the 10 or so miles to Brawley, but there was still time for skeins of White-faced Ibis to fly over the road, and an early feeding Lesser Nighthawk to flap over the road. Checking into our comfortable hotel at Brawley felt like luxury after three straight nights of Motel 6, and the local restaurant owner did us proud for dinner.

Day 12 Parties of White-faced Ibis were lazily gliding over the hotel car park first thing this morning and our first White-winged Dove flashed past. Our aim was to maximize birding time before the midday sun became unbearable – indeed at 7.00am it was very pleasantly warm. We drove north towards Calipatria, and then west. There were continual flocks of ibis and Cattle Egrets passing over. They had to feed somewhere and so we were on the hunt for flooded meadows. Sure enough, we eventually found a large wet field absolutely alive with birds. Hidden amongst more common fare were a Ruff (rare in the US), two Wilson's Phalaropes and five Pectoral Sandpipers. In a dusty field opposite, numerous Horned Larks were running around everywhere you put your binoculars. It now seemed as if the target bird for the whole tour was to become Greater Roadrunner. Sure enough, two birds were found along a raised embankment. They never came close, but nevertheless performed admirably for an admiring audience. Driving northwest to the southern seashore, we passed several Burrowing Owls on sentry duty and over one small pond a group of Tree Swallows perched on overhead wires. Eventually we parked up and walked to the gull and tern roost. As expected Caspian Terns and Ring-billed Gulls were much in evidence together with smaller numbers of American White and Brown Pelicans, Great Blue Herons, Snowy Egrets, Black-necked Stilts and Forster's Terns. We had excellent close up views of seven adult Yellow-footed Gulls, small groups of Laughing Gulls and one adult American Herring Gull. It was also good to catch up with our first Lesser Yellowlegs and a nice inland party of Ruddy Turnstone. Our final birding site for the morning was the Sonny Bono Wildlife Refuge HQ. Here the bushes acted as a welcome shade for coveys of Gambel's Quail (well for almost all of them – a hunting Cooper's Hawk crashed through the shrubbery accounting for one). Three Lesser Nighthawks alternated between roosting in plain sight and flapping around the car park; both Verdin and Abert's Towhee were new for the tour here and we enjoyed our best views yet of Common Ground-dove. We were also treated to a rare daytime sighting of Barn Owl. By 11.30 the temperature was in the high 90s: birds sought shelter from the blistering sun and birders did likewise. One of the finest inventions known to man is a siesta – partaken by most of us. Stuart, Jane and Brenda fared almost as well in the hotel swimming pool. By 15.30 a smaller and very select group re-appeared for a late afternoon session. If anything, it was even hotter! Our first port of call, Finney Lakes, was initially almost devoid of birds: it was certainly devoid of Crissal's Thrashers! Across the railway line, we found a shallow pond choc-a-block full of birds. Amongst the many White-faced Ibis and American Avocets were several parties of Long-billed Dowitchers, 17 Wilson's Phalaropes and both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs alongside each other for comparison. Derek picked out our second Ruff for the day and a Sora Rail stood right out in the open having a preen. Finally, after much persuasion a Black-tailed Gnatcatcher was lured into view from its hiding place in the dry shrubbery. Our final Salton Sea birding was overlooking the muddy edges from Red Hill Marina. Birds were everywhere including around 5000 Black-necked Stilts, 750 Caspian Terns, 400 Long-billed Dowitchers, 250 Marbled Godwits, 200 American Avocets and up to 60 Western Grebes. A further 50 Yellow-footed Gulls were found, far and away the largest total seen on any Birdfinders tour previously. Just as the light was fading

John R picked out a “Large-billed” Savannah Sparrow, likely to be another future armchair tick. This was our last view of the Salton Sea. Despite the heat (and the smell) it is a truly fabulous place for birds and a true spectacle.

Day 13 Birding today began in an area of scrubland very close to our hotel. Along the residential entrance road Northern Mockingbirds and White-winged Doves appeared on every light pole and utility wire; a pair of Inca Doves scurried around a dusty yard; one of our targets here, Gila Woodpecker gave it self up very quickly and a male Costa’s Hummingbird took the morning rays. Looking out over the scrub, an adult Cooper’s Hawk sat right out in the open, we found our other target, Cactus Wren atop a thorn bush and a number of Verdins scurried around the undergrowth. Sadly this area appears earmarked for development. A number of bushes have already been cleared and it may well be the last year that this becomes a viable part of the tour itinerary. From Brawley we headed west, stopping briefly to overlook Sunbeam Lake. Here we caught up with another two “long staying” northern breeders. Firstly an Aleutian Cackling Goose (looking structurally much more like a Barnacle rather than a Canada) quickly followed by a White-fronted Goose. Both were truly wild birds that had resisted the urge to go back north having arrived almost a year ago. Interestingly, Keith also noted another Large-billed Savannah Sparrow here. We continued out into the desert towards Julian, only being briefly delayed by a US Border Patrol checkpoint. Travelling through the Carrezo badlands, so reminiscent of southern Israel, we didn’t see a single bird – and boy was it hot! Eventually around lunchtime, we arrived in the small town of Julian, famous for its apple pie. The equally famous Birdwatchers Shop did a roaring trade (two pairs of bins sold!) and a visit to the owner’s back yard produced both Cassin’s Vireo and Black-chinned Hummingbird. The most sought after bird in this area is the nomadic Lawrence’s Goldfinch. None had been seen recently and it was only Derek who caught a brief glimpse at some feeders. In a park just out of town we found our only Phainopeplas of the tour together with a perched sextet of Band-tailed Pigeons atop a burnt tree. Driving further west we came to the reed-fringed Lake Cuyamaca. Out on the water, several Wood Ducks and Ruddy Ducks intermingled with the American Coots whilst during a walk along the lakeside tracks an Osprey skimmed the surface, a Common Yellowthroat popped out of the reeds and a delightful duo of Pygmy Nuthatches played around some dead tree branches and an empidonax flycatcher defied identification. From here it was a return to the metropolis. In ever increasing traffic we drove towards San Diego before turning south on the coastal highway to reach San Ysidro, our base for the next two nights within clear sight of Mexico.

Day 14 You could tell we were back on the coast. At 07.00 the skies were overcast, there was a slight mist and it was not quite warm. This morning we had a specific mission in an area of rather ordinary looking scrubland close to Otay Lakes; the quest for California Gnatcatcher, a species restricted to south western California and the Baja peninsula. Tradition has it that this bird does not give itself up easily; today it took well over three hours. We were initially compensated by several Blue-gray Gnatcatchers with bold white eye rings and white in the outertail. John R found a superb Greater Roadrunner; a Lincoln Sparrow was chased by a Song Sparrow and a party of House Wrens were obviously out to spoil the show by making “un House Wren” noises that sounded suspiciously like California Gnatcatcher ! Eventually a pair of our quarry was pinned down; never easy to see for long, always on the move. Also in keeping with tradition, we brunchd at IHOP after our success, which was as entertaining as it was nutritious thanks to an amazing waitress called Sylvia who had next to no teeth! Later we drove to the coast and spent the afternoon birding Imperial Beach out to the mouth of the Tijuana River. The whole area was constantly buzzed by US Navy helicopters performing training exercises right up to the border fence and a huge aircraft carrier sat off-ashore. Over the course of the afternoon, we added Least Tern to our trip list whilst seeing good numbers of Elegant, Royal and Forster’s Terns. Waders were much in evidence with at least 175 Marbled Godwits. 150 Western Sandpipers, 75 Willet being the predominant species. Around a dozen Snowy Plovers, (to my eyes looking nothing like Kentish Plover), quietly fed on the sand banks and small parties of Sanderlings did what Sanderlings do best on the waters edge. On the sea, there were small rafts of Western Grebes dotted all the way along the shoreline and a Black Scoter flew south. Amongst the strewn seaweed we found up to 12 dark and very streaky “Beldings” Savannah Sparrows together with a lone “Large-billed” Savannah. Shortly before leaving the site, we enticed into view a light-footed and very orange-fronted Clapper Rail from inside the salt marsh. Our final port of call was at DairyMart Sod Farm. In previous years this has often given up a

good bird for the tour; but not today. The best we could find were a party of around 30 Killdeers and a confiding Red-tailed Hawk. However, on the way back to the hotel, the seven Cassin's Kingbirds on the roadside wires were an adequate consolation. At dinner we tried a Mexican place catering to American tastes, which was a success for some, rather less so for others.

Day 15 Traditionally the last full day of the tour is set aside as a "catch-up" day for species missed earlier. So it was that we joined the early morning commuter traffic heading north out of San Diego before branching off east, leaving the coastal mist behind us and heading up into the warm hills. At breakfast we had a fly-over White-fronted Parrot, an established exotic in San Diego, though not yet ABA countable. We decided to take an exploratory hike down through a lightly wooded gorge, which looked as though it was suitable for Mountain Quail. It probably was, but we saw neither hide nor hair of the beast. However all was not lost. Close to the road, a superb male Hairy Woodpecker knocking huge chunks of bark out of a dead tree allowed 'Colonel' John V a much needed pull-back. California Thrasher, Western Wood-pewee, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Warbling Vireo, Orange-crowned and Wilson's Warblers all showed well; and then it was all about Lawrence's Goldfinch. If we thought California Gnatcatcher was hard going, this one took the biscuit. Having glimpsed a male briefly, we spent the next few hours watching flight views of at 5-6 birds, which always landed out of sight in the backs of trees. Eventually we built up a picture of what the overall birds looked like but there was a lot of frustration in between. En route to Julian and another apple pie lunch (it really is as good as they say), we revisited Lake Cuyamaca hoping for Bald Eagle, to no avail. A juvenile Black-crowned Night-heron stood at the reeds edge; a large party of 'California' Common Ravens soared in the thermals, and a large party of Vaux's Swifts buzzed the air but there was little else of note. The afternoon was all about the drive to Los Angeles. It was a rather tedious affair getting from the hill country to the faster roads, but enlivened firstly by a circling trio of two Golden Eagles and a Red-tailed Hawk and latterly by Linda making a truck drivers day by perching for a photo on his rig! Our final evening meal together was memorable not only for what several described as the best meal of the trip but more specifically for the young, testy and no nonsense Asian waitress. The restaurant was scheduled to close at 21.00 and she was doing her damndest to ensure we were out of there on time!

Day 16 Whilst a quartet opted for a lie in and a swim, post breakfast found the remainder of us back on the coast, walking the boardwalk and well laid out trail across Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve, and it was teeming with birds. With slightly overcast skies and warm but not hot temperature, the setting was ideal. It is difficult to accurately assess the numbers of Western Sandpipers and Short-billed Dowitchers on view; certainly thousands of the former and many hundred of the latter. With 150 Marbled Godwits; plenty of Least Sandpipers, Long-billed Curlews and Semipalmated Plovers, a couple of Red Knots and a Snowy Plover, it was a magnificent farewell to American waders. Amongst the noisy Elegant Tern flocks roosting on the sandbars, there were smaller numbers of Forster's; a scattering of Royals and a party of five Caspians whilst Black Skimmers were almost constantly on view. Definite "bird of the morning" status went to two adult Reddish Egrets. The length of their scapular plumes suggested they were close to breeding plumage yet, rather oddly, their bills were uniform and dark. A little further on we came to "duck dyke" where we found a fairly distant party of American Wigeons with much closer Blue-winged Teals and Gadwalls. The return walk enjoyed a number of Black-necked Grebes on the water and "Beldings" Savannah Sparrows on the tide line. Late morning found us back at the motel for the final packing of suitcases. We then drove for some while through various western Los Angeles suburbs before stopping for lunch. The area looked seedy, but the food was great and the service friendly. With a few hours to kill before getting to the airport, we drove along the coast out to the Palos Verdes peninsula where some of LA's rich and famous obviously live. Looking out over the sea (and visiting the gift shop inside the Interpretive Centre) allowed us final American birds. Amazingly James pulled out a rather distant Long-tailed Skua which some of us got onto; Linda photographed her final pelicans and even found time to buy a cuddly toy one for home. Airport proceedings went smoothly; we bade our farewell to James who had been an excellent and skillful tour leader and our plane departed on time. I'm told that the Air France service matched the outward journey: I have no idea, I slept!

Martyn Kenefick, Birdfinders