



Southern California

February 6 – 14, 2016

TRIP REPORT

Report by Luke Tiller



Photos, top to bottom: Island Scrub Jay, Varied Thrush,
A great group of birders giving the Mountain Quail victory nod!



Sunrise Birding LLC

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Feb 6th

We started our tour mid-morning on another beautiful blue sky day in Southern California. Our initial stop, not far from the airport was a rather innocuous looking little park. Here the introduced and still countable **Spotted Dove** clings on to existence in Los Angeles - and North America! Once a common bird in the region its population has decreased to a point that it is now difficult to find in just a couple of known spots. After a while hunting the local neighbourhood, we finally picked up two of these rather attractive doves as they rested in a couple of tree snags.

Whilst we conducted our search, we managed to pick up a few nice wintering species at the park including an unexpected **Western Tanager** and both **Black-throated Gray and Townsend's Warblers**. Though the West Coast doesn't boast the same numbers of warbler species as the east it does boast a couple of the most attractive ones and both were enjoyed immensely by the group.

Our next stop was at Huntington Beach Central Park where we had a rather leisurely lunch (for about the only time on the trip). Here our main target was the recently made countable Scaly-breasted Munia. This introduced species is usually reliable in a few places in the area, but had decided to make itself elusive on this particular day. Still there were plenty of regular wintering species in the park to enjoy including a wealth of waterfowl (highlighted by a photogenic Western Grebe) and a nice mix of other western specialties like **Nuttall's Woodpecker** and stunning **Allen's and Anna's Hummingbirds**.

We wrapped up our day relatively early and enjoyed a hearty meal and an early night in preparation for the day ahead.

Feb 7th

After a relatively low key first day we were soon into faster paced action on our second. Our first stop of the day was short but particularly sweet as we pulled up at a roadside lagoon that provided a nice rarity in the shape of a **Pacific Golden-Plover** (photo below). The birds was accommodating enough and close enough for pictures and a nice discussion on how to separate the species from its more expected Black-bellied cousin.

From there we hoofed it southward. We arrived pretty much right at the southern tip of the US to be greeted by another high value target species for the trip: **Ridgway's Rail**. Recently split from Clapper Rail, to which it is actually not particularly closely related, these warmly colored and distinctively marked rails showed well as the rising tide forced birds up and out of their marshland home. Other highlights at this stop included a beautiful sandy beach and the chance to dip our feet in



the Pacific. As well as the scenery, the stop included wonderful looks at shorebirds of all shapes and sizes from **Snowy Plovers** to **Long-billed Curlews**. We also picked up a couple of neat passerines including the unique looking and locally breeding subspecies of **Savannah Sparrow: Beldings**.

It's not often that you find **Vermilion Flycatchers** being somewhat ignored by a birding group, but when there is a bunch of **Lawrence's Goldfinch** up for grabs at the same site then even perhaps North America's most stunning flycatcher can get short shrift? This was the story at the next, quick but highly productive appointment on our morning itinerary!

Our next stop was again short but sweet as we knocked a few 'California' birds off of the target list with an extremely vocal **California Thrasher** putting on quite the show, nice looks at the common **California Towhee** and then two rarer and in fact endangered **California Gnatcatchers** finally appearing for sustained looks. These good looks allowed us to study the differences between these birds and the Black-tailed Gnatcatcher which they were once considered a subspecies of. Quite the list of birds and it was still only mid-morning!

An afternoon break in the mountains on our way eastwards allowed us to sample some of the local higher elevation species including a bunch of local specialties. We also tripped over our only **Wild Turkeys** of the trip on the drive, a pretty localized species in this part of the world. As well as the expected mixed woodland species: **Acorn Woodpecker, Pygmy Nuthatch, Oak Titmouse and Mountain Chickadee** we were treated to a locally rare subspecies of **Slate-colored Junco**: a beautiful wintering Gray-headed form.

From coast, through mountain to desert we ended our wonderful day at a site that only birders might add to their holiday itinerary: the settling beds of a wastewater treatment plant. Amongst some of the more expected but no less stunning for its desert species, **Phainopepla, Costa's Hummingbird** and **Verdin**, we picked out two species of thrasher **California** (itself rare in the area) and the much more highly prized **Le Conte's Thrasher**. A long but wonderful day ended with a fly in of ducks that included a gaggle of stunning **Cinnamon Teal**!

Feb 8th

Our day started with a bang as we picked up a large group of **Sandhill Cranes** in flight overhead before heading for our first stop of the day just south of the famous/infamous Salton Sea. This first stop was targeted at a species that is always a real crowd pleaser: **Burrowing Owl** (photo below). We eventually worked great looks at a number of individuals, a few of which were more than happy to pose for the photographers on the trip.

Next stop was at a small park that promised a few birds somewhere at the western edge of their range: **Abert's Towhee, Gila Woodpecker** and **White-winged Dove**. All were accommodating, with the woodpecker even coming down to drink at the park's water fountain and pose for pictures!

The Salton Sea is always an interesting place to stop and although we weren't able to find any of the seasonally rare



Yellow-footed Gulls that grace it in summer we enjoyed a host of excellent water birds including five **Ross's Geese** mixed in with another 250 of their larger white cousins. Feeders yielded us **Gambel's Quail** and **Common Ground-Dove** and our hike was not in vain as we picked up our first **Greater Roadrunner** for the tour. Another nice addition at the Salton Sea was a rather well hidden **Barn Owl** that the group worked hard to eventually see – no easy task tucked as it was in the fans of palm tree! Before we left the south end of the sea we just had time to dig out wonderful views of a **Prairie Falcon** and less wonderful ones of a number of **Mountain Plovers** – most of which were disappearing in and out of the shimmer of the now increasing heat haze.

After eating up a little ground heading towards our hotel for the night we stopped at a park that is part of my usual Los Angeles County big day route. Here we picked up our third nuthatch species of the trip: **Red-breasted Nuthatch** as well as our fourth subspecies of **Slate-colored Junco** (**Cassiar**, to add to **Gray-headed, Oregon** and **Slate-colored**), highlight of the stop though had to be the magnificent **Great Horned Owl** that we heard call and then finally tracked down to its roost – a truly stunning vision in the late day dappled sunlight.



Feb 9th

After a couple of days on the move we took the opportunity for a day centered in just one small but highly productive area: The Antelope Valley. Named for the once abundant pronghorn here the valley is now devoid of these incredible creatures apart from a few individuals that are part of a reintroduction program.

The valley is however still a wonderful spot for a number of avian treasures. An early morning highlight was the number of large and imposing **Ferruginous Hawks**. Our next stop was a little known migrant trap that produced an excitedly unexpected male **Varied Thrush**. Last year had produced an incredible irruption of Varied Thrushes and they were seen at several sites. This year was back to normal with just this one incredibly beautiful bird.



Other highlights from a myriad of different stops included stunning **Mountain Bluebirds**, more **Ferruginous Hawks** and killer views of the rather spiffy and recently split **Bell's Sparrow**. These gray helmeted sparrows are dapper birds and give away the lie to this family being thought of little brown jobs!

With rising temperatures, the birding became a little trickier. Though beautiful **California Quail** and jaunty **Cactus Wren** provided us with incredible views we were forced to work much harder for our **Ladder-backed Woodpecker**. A male eventually gave itself up to both some joy and even more sense of relief. It was nice to compare this species to the closely related Nuttall's that we had seen earlier in the trip. While we searched we at least were afforded a couple of nice views of

some particularly tame **Black-tailed Jackrabbits**. With target species falling left and right we ended our day at a reasonable hour before heading for an excellent and healthy looking meal at a local 'Californian' style restaurant.

Feb 10th

Our next day started with us clawing back a species we had hoped to pick up the day before: **Tricolored Blackbird**. It was great to see this rapidly declining species and we actually had a nice sized flock out in the Antelope Valley. We talked about some of the important work undertaken by Audubon California to preserve this species and the way it works with local farmers to buy up fields that they choose to nest in.

As we made our way to Condor Country we made a quick stop that provided a few nice birds including our first **Red-breasted Sapsucker** for the trip – a real favorite with the group. Once we had left pine forests for rolling hillsides we were on the alert for condors. Our first stop provided for an abundance of great birds including large numbers of **Lark Sparrows**, **Vesper Sparrows** and **Mountain Bluebirds**. It also provided a number of raptors including an attractive dark **Red-tailed Hawk**, another Ferruginous Hawk and a couple of **Prairie Falcons**. What we couldn't find were the condors.

A quick change of plan and a change of location produced immediate results as we pulled over to find a kettle of **California Condors** soaring in the valley below us. Mixed in with the five young birds and two adults was an adult **Golden Eagle** that was positively dwarfed by these incredibly magnificent mountain denizens. Now countable under the new ABA rules, these improbable and majestic creatures have always been worth seeking out and we were thankful for the somewhat contested decision to take in these birds some 30 years ago to form a, mercifully, successful breeding and reintroduction program.

With the big birds successfully sought out, we spent the rest of our day seeking out a few prized smaller ones. Our success continued as we picked up cheery **Chestnut-backed Chickadees**, a couple of neat **Golden-crowned Sparrows** and a vocal and cooperative **Hutton's Vireo**. Not to be outdone by the vireo we had a very confiding **Wrentit**. This species can often be quite hard work to see well, but this individual showed perfectly for the group.

Speaking of cooperative we ended our day sifting through some loafing gulls and workshopped a few both identifying and aging birds. In the mix was a nice **Glaucous-winged Gull**, a new species for the trip.

Another excellent day was rounded out by exploring some of the adult beverages on offer at the excellent Firestone Walker Brewery Restaurant!

Feb 11th

Though you may have birded a few, it's not often that a rest area is a destination for part of a day's birding? At Camp Roberts the allure of confiding **Yellow-billed Magpies** makes a stop here a must for those in the area and we were not to be disappointed when we finally received close views of one very friendly individual. The site also hosted a bunch of very accommodating **Golden-crowned Sparrows** and **White-crowned Sparrows** of one of the yellow billed forms. Of course where most of our participants hailed from a White-crowned Sparrow was a somewhat desirous bird, here it is the common denizen of downtown parks, weedy edges and parking lots.

Our next stop on the day was the dramatic Estero Bluffs State Park. Here we enjoyed our first **Pelagic Cormorant** of the trip as well as a number of rocky shoreline shorebirds on this suitably rocky shoreline including both **Black Oystercatcher** and **Black Turnstone**. Oddly the target species we sought here **Harlequin Duck** was seen only briefly and only by a few before it seemed



to disappear into thin air (or more accurately surf and rocks) not to be relocated.

Though somewhat on the fly, our next stop was an extremely productive one. Here in the heart of San Luis Obispo we stumbled on a site that produced a wealth of desired species. Even before we managed to get to the known wintering **Tropical Kingbird** that was at the site we had already pulled out a couple of **Cackling Geese** from the flock of Canada's (a couple of those neat and easily

identified white-collared ones). From the kingbird we moved to raptors: first a stunning California subspecies of **Red-shouldered Hawk** (above) and then the eminently more exciting **White-tailed Kite** which posed for wonderful scope views. Our good run continued with a couple of bonus **Scaly-breasted Munias** that had proved so elusive on day one and a couple of fun native species that included both **Rock Wren** and **Rufous-crowned Sparrow**.

A failed hunt for Lewis's Woodpecker at least produced nice views of more **Yellow-billed Magpies**, **California Thrashers** and **California Quail** before a brief stop at dusk afforded us our only **Clark's Grebes** of the tour.

Feb 12th

This was our day out on the boat and a nice break from being in the van. The somewhat off-putting report on water conditions didn't really materialize and it was all in all pretty smooth sailing. The way out to Santa Cruz Island provided **Scripps's Murrelet**, **Cassin's Auklet** and the very local **Black-vented Shearwater**. **Common Murre** were surprisingly tough to find even considering the die-offs that had been occurring on the west coast this year and we only saw three the whole ride out!

The only other species of note on the outbound ride were a nice **Pomarine Jaeger** and the added treat were the large numbers of **Brown Booby** that have taken to roosting on Anacapa Island. Brown Booby numbers have exploded in recent years. Until less than ten years ago about the only place one could hope to reliably see these birds in the US was in the waters right down along the Mexican border near Tijuana, with it being little more than a vagrant elsewhere. With a mix of ages and sexes present on Anacapa currently it feels like the first known US breeding record of this bird species is just around the corner.

Once we got to the Santa Cruz Island we were soon treated to great views of the **Island Scrub Jay**. Found only upon the Island of Santa Cruz, this large and beautiful blue jay is now thought to have been split from its mainland cousin about 150,000 years ago during a period of glaciation. Other island highlights included a bunch of island endemic subspecies, our fifth subspecies of **Slate-colored Junco** (a rare, and even more rarely correctly identified, Pink-sided) and a couple of nice





gulls in the shape of a large number of **Heermann's Gulls** (previous page) and **Mew Gulls**.

Our ride home turned up another couple of nice birds in the shape of both **Northern Fulmar** (a potential future split from its Atlantic brethren) and an uncommon wintering shearwater: **Pink-footed Shearwater**. The show was however completely stolen by the **Orca** that we stumbled upon on our journey home! This was an incredible sighting for the Santa Barbara

Channel. The company that runs the boats out to the Channel Islands has thousands of trips out a year and yet they are lucky to see Orcas five times over the year. This rare and special treat was enjoyed by everyone.

Feb 13th

Our last full day of the tour started with a bang as we found three sapsucker species in the space of a few minutes in one innocuous looking LA city park. First up a stunning male **Williamson's Sapsucker**, a bird so striking that it surely must be a contender for North America's most attractive Woodpecker. Then a rare vagrant **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** appeared and finally a total of three splendid **Red-breasted Sapsuckers**. Other park highlights included a flock of flyover **Red-crowned Parrots** and a couple of cooperatively perched (but sadly not countable) **Lilac-crowned Parrots**.

An auspiciously timed stop in the mountains lead us to discover a soaring **Golden Eagle** before a quick stop yielded us a clean sweep of the world's sapsuckers with the discovery of a male **Red-naped Sapsucker**! Our other stops in the mountains had been somewhat unproductive with what was a brief glimpse of what was almost certainly a Mountain Quail flushing into cover not much to show for our time spent there. After a stop for lunch and to recharge the batteries we headed back to the fray refreshed. From here things started to go right. We now at least had heard some **Mountain Quail** and with perseverance had managed to close to within a few yards of them, still unseen. Thanks to a great plan and a little encouragement from me, one ran away across and up a bare section of hillside that the group had fixed their binoculars upon. This was yet another incredible encounter with this extremely secretive denizen of Southern California's mountains.

Our stop at this spot was rounded out with great views of another highly prized mountain species, and challenger to the Williamson's Sapsucker in the beauty stakes: **White-headed Woodpecker**. With this prize under our belts we headed to watch and enjoy the flyby of hundreds of **Red-crowned Parrots** in Pasadena as they headed for their night-time roosts. Whilst we were waiting we actually managed to pick off a couple of new species for the trip including a couple of wonderful countable ones like **Merlin** and **Clay-colored Sparrow** as well as one that looks like it might be on the way to establishing itself: **Pin-tailed Whydah**.

A great end to both a great day and a great tour was completed by a fantastic meal of Chinese comfort food at Pasadena's very own Panda Inn.

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