

# California



Trip Report by Tony Stewart with a contribution from Debi Shearwater, Bob Ake & Chris Hitt

SEPTEMBER 6-21, 2010

## Background

This trip was planned primarily to take advantage of the superb pelagic wildlife off the California Coast. It was also timed to coincide with the west coast fall migration and allowed me to creep ever closer to my self-imposed target to see 700 birds on the North American Continent. Chuck in a drive along the dramatic highway 1 and the opportunity to see some incredible trees and scenery and it was all systems go.

I flew out from Newcastle via Brussels to Los Angeles armed with my trusty navigator – a TomTom Sat Nav. I had pre-booked a large 4x4 and I was off on my adventure.

With a 160 target birds, it was designed to be a relaxed 16-day holiday, following a clockwise route – the first stage went from Los Angeles, up the Big Sur to San Francisco and North to Bodega Bay. The second stage covered Yosemite, Tioga Pass for alpine birds and Mono Lake and Bodie for all the local specialities. The final leg headed back towards Los Angeles, skirting Death Valley, stopping off at several well-known migrant traps along the way.

Four offshore trips had been pre-booked, three of which were with Debi Shearwater of Shearwater Journeys, one from Monterey, one from Half Moon Bay and finally one from Bodega Bay. Each trip sailed to the deep water canyons off the west coast and offered the chance to see several Cetacean species, Shark and Sea lions.

The other trip, the first one, was to the “Galapagos” of the north namely the Channel Islands. This trip departs from Ventura harbour approximately 65 miles north of Los Angeles via Malibu. The targets are the endemic species and subspecies of Santa Cruz Island primarily Island Scrub Jay – the only place in the world that it occurs. Ventura, Malibu and Santa Barbara also offered the best chance to see the Baywatch Babes not that I would be looking of course.

To offset the expense of the Pelagics, hotels were avoided, if possible, and hostels were pre-booked via the internet at very cheap rates. The 4 x 4 came in very useful, as I planned to use it to camp out in the odd night. The reason for this was to be in place at first light for one of my targets Great Gray Owl at the high alpine meadows of Yosemite.

I had intended to camp out in my tent, but several internet reports of rogue bear activity put paid to that idea. Alone in a tent with three millimetres of canvas between me and a bear – nee chance!!!!

And so it began.....

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2010

Departed Newcastle 06.00, arrived Los Angeles LAX International 19.30. Los Angeles is eight hours behind GMT. Picked up the 4 x 4 from the vast car hire lots and punched Ventura into the Tomtom and i was off. Some ninety minutes later i arrived at the Motel6, my base for the first night. U.S Immigration Laws require a first night address for your trip when you apply, via the internet, for your *ESTA (ENTRY VISA)*.

This motel was close to Ventura Harbour which was the departure point for Santa Cruz Island.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2010

Ventura Harbour

Lots of birds were present as dawn broke with hundreds of California, Western and Heermanns Gulls. The breakwaters had good numbers of Brown Pelicans, Pelagic & Brandt's Cormorants, Western Willet and the odd Whimbrel.

Passerines on the dock included 8 California Towhees, 4 House Finch, 2 Black Phoebe and Several Juvenile Hummingbirds with Anna's probably the dominant species, but all were difficult to identify.

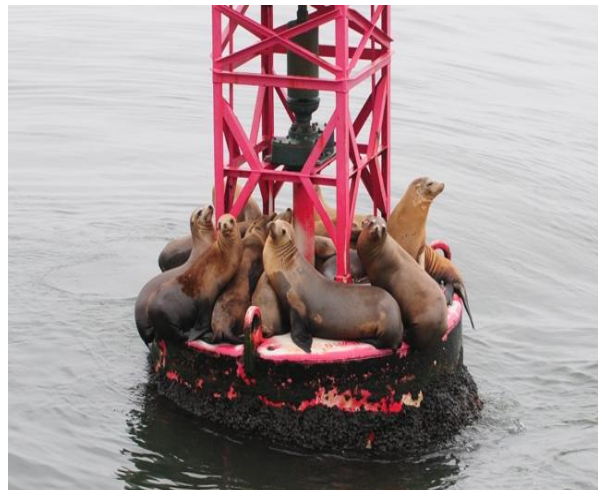
Santa Cruz Islands Trip with Islands Packers

([www.islandpackers.com](http://www.islandpackers.com))

Trip Cost \$45

Santa Cruz Island is located about 20 miles from the mainland coast, and travel time from Ventura Harbour is on a catamaran. Sailing time is only one hour and twenty minutes to Mid Santa Cruz Island Prisoners Harbour. Being the largest Channel Island, Santa Cruz is also the most diverse with interesting geological features including two mountain ranges, many canyons and a rugged shoreline. At least 600 plant species, well over 120 species of land birds including the endemic Island scrub jay, and a vast expanse of wilderness area exist for the curious to explore by land or sea.

Departing the harbour 2 Black Turnstone and 9 Black Oystercatchers were on the seaward side of the breakwater, and several California Sea lions were hauled up on Buoy. Dozens of Sooty Shearwaters soon came into view along with 20+ Pink-footed Shearwaters. Dolphins were everywhere, with huge pods all over the place.



Island Scrub-jay was ticked as we approached Prisoners Harbour; two birds were spotted in the Eucalyptus trees near the quay. It was a bit of an anticlimax as i was anticipating a bit of a search but a tick's a tick. The quay also had a single Lark Sparrow, and six dark plumaged Song Sparrows. Island Scrub-jay & Lark Sparrow



Island Scrub-jay & Lark Sparrow

Bagging the Jay left five hours to explore the island. Birding was difficult with the majority of stuff buried deep in cover. With a lot of persistence i managed 3 probable Pacific-slope Flycatchers, several Spotted Towhees, more Hummers, Bewicks Wren, Red shafted Flicker, Black Phoebe and another 24 Island Scrub-jays.

The boat departed at 16.00 sharp. Two Pacific Divers were just offshore with good numbers of Red-necked and Red Phalaropes. Shearwater numbers had increased dramatically and 20+ Elegant Terns, several Forsters and two "comic" and a single Sandwich Tern were seen. Also on the water were a single Black-necked Grebe and 7 Western/Clarks Grebes - None could be positively identified.

Two predatory Blue Sharks and half a dozen Northern Elephant seals were seen as we approached the harbour after a great day.

Overnight Camp at Lake Cachuma.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2010

### Lake Cachuma

Hundreds of the soon to be familiar California Quails greeted the new day. The camp site and lake proved to be an unexpected birding bonus as i had fully intended to up sticks at first light and get on the road. There were several Acorn Woodpeckers dotted around the park with parties of Western Bluebirds and Oak Titmouse. Other birds include 25 Brewers Blackbirds, American Robin, House Finch, Spotted Towhee, Ash-throated Flycatcher and Orange-crowned & Yellow Rumped (Audubon's) Warbler. The lake held



huge numbers of Western/Clark's Grebes, Common Mergansers, Ring-necked Duck, Snowy Egret and three Ospreys.



Acorn Woodpecker

### Bradbury Dam

A quick stop at the dam produced 4 California Towhee, 26 Turkey Vultures, 6 Raven, Bewicks Wren and a single Lesser Goldfinch.

### Alisal

Alisal is a beautiful picturesque Town in the heart of California's Danish community and a noted spot for Yellow-billed Magpie, a Californian endemic. The best spot is the towns golf course, which was found easily on my trusted sat-nav. The main road runs adjacent to the greens. Carefully scanning the greens i soon located a party of 8 Magpies which were feeding on the greens.



Yellow-billed Magpies

Also near the course were two Wrentits, 3 Spotted Towhees and 4 Emphid Flycatchers – i didn't even try to id them (not skilled enough).

### Morro Bay

1000's Western Willet, 1000's Sandpipers (no scope), American White-Pelicans, Elegant Terns and loads of Western Gulls.

Pine trees – 6 Stellar Jay, 11 Bush Tits and a single Chestnut-backed Chickadee at the southern edge of its range.. At Montana De Oro were Two White-crowned Sparrows, six Turkey Vultures, and one Hairy Woodpecker. At Morro Bay North i added Three Long-billed Curlews, three Pied-billed Grebes, two Spotted Sandpiper, one Snowy Egret and six Great Egret.

### Cabrillo Highway 1

Six Red-tailed Hawks, five Ravens. At a Northern Elephant Seal Colony were two Black Oystercatchers.



Black Oystercatcher & Western Gull

### Cabrillo Highway 1 - N36°10.124: W121°40.887 (2 California Condor)



Californian Condor



THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2010

### Monterey Central Park

An early morning walk around the central park produced Pied-billed Grebe, Brewer's Blackbird, Western Scrub-Jay & a single Belted Kingfisher.

### Highway 1

3 Golden Eagles

### Andrew Molera State Park

This was a great area with plenty of birds. There were several mixed flocks of birds around the park, all steadily moving south. They included one flock that contained over sixty birds of two species Wilson's & Townsends Warblers, nearly all males. Good views were had of Stellar's Jay and California Quail



Stellar's Jay

There were lots of Emphids, Spotted Towhee, and Chestnut-backed Chickadees. There were hundreds of Orange-crowned Warblers and California Quail. Also present were Nuttall's Woodpecker, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Black Phoebe and Lots of Bushtits.

At the River crossing I spotted my first American Dipper and then a second shortly afterwards.

### Palo Colorado Road

A long drive through a stunning Red wood Forest was rewarded with two Band-tailed Pigeons, Pacific Winter Wren; Red shouldered Hawk, Acorn Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker and several Dark-eyed Juncos'.

At a pit stop a large flock of Warblers went through, including Wilsons, Townsends, Orange-crowned and several belter Black-throated Gray's which were hugely appreciated. Also overhead appeared a group of ten Black Swifts and further along the

road two Vaux's Swifts foraged for insects. The car park at the top of the trail overlooked a stunning Vista and a further 60+ Black Swifts were on show.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2010

### Pinnacles National Monument

Another fantastic place but the heat was overpowering. Despite this there were plenty of birds on show including two roosting Californian Condor.

The first new bird for me was a very showy California Thrasher, also seen were 200+ House Finch, Phainopepla, 300+ California Quail, 6 Western Bluebirds, Lark Sparrow, Oak Titmouse and a Bewicks Wren. Close to the car park were six Lawrence's Goldfinch, a target bird and a welcome lifer.

The Balconies Trail produced American Kestrel, Oak Titmouse, Stellars Jay and under the cliffs were hundreds of White-tailed Swifts. In a dry gully a Canyon Wren showed well down to a few feet.

### Elkhorn Slough

It was late afternoon when I arrived at the "Slew". It has a good reputation for birds but despite its size it had very few birds. The main highlights were the presence of Barn Owl & Tri-coloured Blackbird both new birds for my 700 quest.

Water birds included White Pelican, Great Egret, Snowy Egret and Great Blue Heron. There were also two Western Willet's and two Spotted Sandpipers.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2010

### Monterey Sea valley: Fall Seabird Classic

([www.shearwaterjourneys.com](http://www.shearwaterjourneys.com))

Trip Cost \$145

My first pelagic trip of the holiday began with a 05.00 meet at Fisherman's Wharf in Monterey. This is where I met Debbie Shearwater and her excellent team of guides. With the safety briefing over we set sail in heavy fog, bound for the Monterey Sea Valley, some 25 mile offshore. This turned out to be a memorable day (12 hours) for a first time trip with excellent, informative guides. Highlights:

1 BLACK-FOOTED ALBATROSS  
2 NORTHERN FULMARS  
25 PINK-FOOTED SHEARWATERS  
12 BULLER'S SHEARWATERS  
200+ SOOTY SHEARWATERS  
12 ASHY STORM-PETRELS  
18 BLACK STORM-PETRELS  
6 RED-NECKED PHALAROPE  
4 RED PHALAROPE  
2 POMARINE JAEGER  
1 PARASITIC JAEGER  
3 LONG-TAILED JAEGER  
4 SABINE'S GULLS

10 ELEGANT TERNS  
1 PIGEON GUILLEMOT  
14 CASSIN'S AUKLETS  
2 XANTUS' MURRELETS (hypoleuca)  
25 RHINOCEROS AUKLETS  
2 TUFTED PUFFINS

CALIFORNIA SEA LIONS  
NORTHERN FUR SEAL  
BLUE WHALE (WOW WOW WOW)  
HUMPBACK WHALES  
RISSO'S DOLPHINS  
PACIFIC WHITE-SIDED DOLPHINS  
OCEAN SUNFISH  
BLUE SHARK

A brilliant day

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2010

Left Monterey and headed north to Half Moon Bay. I drove north along the San Mateo coast at the appropriately named Pigeon Point I found 17 Band-tailed pigeons sitting on the telephone wires.

N37°13.997 W122° 24.843



Band-tailed Pigeon

On the nearby beach were 8 Black Oystercatchers, 6 Black Turnstones, 1 Whimbrel and a Wandering Tattler.

At Prescadaro Marsh there were loads of Dunlin, Least & Western Sandpipers, Semi-palmated Plover and several noisy Kildeer.

I was nearing San Francisco so I decided to a quick tour of San Francisco en route including the Golden Gate Bridge.





Brewers Blackbird & Western Scrub-Jay (First Light Cachuma)

This was a very slow relaxing day – not particularly birdie.

TRIP REPORT: SEPTEMBER 13, 2010 HALF MOON BAY by **Debi Shearwater**  
([www.shearwaterjourneys.com](http://www.shearwaterjourneys.com))

Trip Cost \$180

Howdy, Seabirders,

Shearwater Journey's pelagic trip from Half Moon Bay on Monday, September 13, 2010 was astounding! We covered both San Mateo and San Francisco Counties, spending a significant part of the day in San Francisco County. We reached the warm water edge where the albacore boats were fishing. One of these guys gave me two albacore for my birthday! This is where Wes Fritz found a single, distant "Cook's type" petrel. The murrelets were also at this edge. The warm water out of Half Moon Bay is the only place along the coast where it can be reached in a one day trip, right now. The numbers, below, may be tweaked a bit, once I get some input from the other leaders who were on board with us. It sure was a fantastic day! and, birthday!

We were out on glassy, smooth seas for a solid 12 hours (much longer than the trip was scheduled to be out). It was an incredible day for photographers, with the afternoon lighting especially awesome. It is pretty obvious that there is an awful lot of food available in this region, not only for birds, but also whales, dolphins, and sea lions.

SEPTEMBER 13, 2010 HALF MOON BAY:

1 COOKELARIA PETREL  
2 or 3 LAYSAN ALBATROSSES  
45 BLACK-FOOTED ALBATROSSES  
130 NORTHERN FULMARS  
82 PINK-FOOTED SHEARWATERS  
28 BULLER'S SHEARWATERS  
265 SOOTY SHEARWATERS  
4 WILSON'S STORM-PETRELS  
14 FORK-TAILED STORM-PETRELS  
580 ASHY STORM-PETRELS  
12 BLACK STORM-PETRELS

20,000 RED/RED-NECKED PHALAROPES- huge migrating flocks which darkened the sky)  
4 SOUTH POLAR SKUAS  
2 POMARINE JAEGER  
8 PARASITIC JAEGER  
20 LONG-TAILED JAEGER  
24 SABINE'S GULLS  
250 ELEGANT TERNS  
8 COMMON TERNS  
6 ARCTIC TERNS  
385 COMMON MURRES  
1 PIGEON GUILLEMOT  
28 CASSIN'S AUKLETS  
2 XANTUS' MURRELETS (hypoleuca)  
76 RHINOCEROS AUKLETS

450 CALIFORNIA SEA LIONS, feeding offshore, probably on sardines  
1 NORTHERN FUR SEAL  
4 HARBOR SEALS  
6 FIN WHALES  
73 HUMPBACK WHALES!  
32 RISSO'S DOLPHINS  
120 PACIFIC WHITE-SIDED DOLPHINS  
16 DALL'S PORPOISE  
3 OCEAN SUNFISH  
3 BLUE SHARKS

Shearwaters forever,  
Debi Shearwater

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2010

I had met a couple of great blokes on the Pelagic's who in typical American style were more than willing to offer advice and tips. One guy told me of a place where I could connect with another of my targets. Ironically I had driven past the place en route to Half Moon Bay.

#### Prescadaro Beach

It was a stunning morning as I arrived at the deserted beach and within minutes I had connected with two Surfbirds my target for the day. Also on the beach were 60+ Heermans Gulls, 4 Grey Plover, 4 Wandering Tattler, 2 Black Oystercatcher and 1 Whimbrel. With the target in the bagged I headed north again through San Fran and across the Golden Gate to Point Reyes.

#### Point Reyes

I arrived and parked up and almost immediately had two Wrentits, Townsend's Warbler, Northern Flicker, Western Bluebird and Western Scrub Jay.

The Banding Station was open and I was fortunate to catch the last run of the day. The two girls at the observatory had only managed to bag a single Flycatcher. This was still good news for me as I had struggled with all of the Emphids so far. After a careful diagnostic check I was informed that they had ringed a Pacific- slope Flycatcher.



Pacific-slope Flycatcher

The two very young and extremely knowledgeable girls told me that the previous run yielded Western Fly and Olive-sided Flycatcher! For the remainder of the day I banded this huge area with the only new birds added to the list being a nice flock of 20 Violet-green Swallows, White-tailed Kite and a Mammal tick -Bobcat

**TRIP REPORT: SEPTEMBER 15, 2010 HALF MOON BAY by Debi Shearwater**

([www.shearwaterjourneys.com](http://www.shearwaterjourneys.com))

Trip Cost \$180

Yup, another fantastic Shearwater Journeys' pelagic trip— this time, departing from Bodega Bay, offshore to Bodega Canyon and Cordell Bank. This trip covered both Marin and Sonoma Counties. The seas were a bit bouncy in the early morning. Fog had engulfed the coast, as we departed at 6:50 am from Port O' Bodega.

First up, a single male ORCA surfaced near our vessel. Everyone on board got great views. As we approached Bodega Canyon, the fog parted. Beyond the canyon, we reached 58F sea surface temperature, and the fog pushed out even more. The single highlight of the day was a COOK'S PETREL spotted by Steve Howell, as it zoomed past Wes Fritz's oil slick behind the boat. Since it was not foggy at that moment, everyone who was at the stern of the vessel was able to see the bird well. (About one third of the folks on board this sold out trip) This Cook's Petrel was in Marin County. Small rafts of storm-petrels were spotted, and others flew up to Wes' oil slick.

Notably, both WILSON'S STORM-PETRELS and FORK-TAILED STORM-PETRELS made an excellent showing for all on board, especially great for the photographers. The Jaeger show, over the slick was not too shabby, either! 150 LONG-TAILED JAEGERs! The fog disappeared by early afternoon, and we could see whale spouts in every direction— half a dozen BLUE WHALES, about 30 humpback whales. Two XANTUS' MURRELETS were spotted once we hit the temperature break. A TUFTED PUFFIN circled the vessel, and another one was spotted, sitting on the water. Great photo ops. Finally, on the way home, the captain took us over to see the half dozen summering GRAY WHALES off Bodega Head. We could see the crowds of people on the cliff, watching the whales, as well. Peter Pyle spotted an early; fly away, ANCIENT MURRELET, first of the fall season. It was a long, successful and smashing day for both seabirds and marine mammals!

We thank the many participants who came from near and far for this pelagic trip. The leaders were: Steve Howell, Peter Pyle, Lisa Hug, Wes Fritz, and Debi Shearwater. Once I receive some photographs, I will post them.

The complete species list follows:

PACIFIC LOON- 1  
BLACK-FOOTED ALBATROSS- 30  
NORTHERN FULMAR- 21  
COOK'S PETREL- 1 (adult male)  
PINK-FOOTED SHEARWATER- 50  
BULLER'S SHEARWATER- 8  
SOOTY SHEARWATER- 60  
WILSON'S STORM-PETREL- 2  
FORK-TAILED STORM-PETREL- 4  
ASHY STORM-PETREL- 350  
BLACK STORM-PETREL- 5  
BROWN PELICAN- 2, offshore  
BRANDT'S CORMORANT- 100  
PELAGIC CORMORANT- 10 (1 offshore)  
SURF SCOTER- 2, in harbour  
WHITE-WINGED SCOTER- 1, in harbour  
RED-NECKED PHALAROPE- 25  
RED PHALAROPE- 30  
SOUTH POLAR SKUA- 4  
POMARINE JAEGER- 12  
PARASITIC JAEGER- 8  
PARASITIC/LONG-TAILED JAEGER- 2  
LONG-TAILED JAEGER- 150  
JAEGER SP.- 4  
HEERMANN'S GULL- 100  
CALIFORNIA GULL- 120  
WESTERN GULL- 200  
WESTERN/GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL- 1  
SABINE'S GULL- 6  
ELEGANT TERN- 35  
COMMON TERN- 2  
ARCTIC TERN- 2  
COMMON MURRE- 1000  
PIGEON GUILLEMOT- 20  
XANTUS' MURRELET- 2 (scrippsi)  
ANCIENT MURRELET- 1  
CASSIN'S AUKLET- 30  
RHINOCEROS AUKLET- 200  
TUFTED PUFFIN- 2  
CALIFORNIA SEA LION- 2, offshore  
GRAY WHALE- 6  
BLUE WHALE- 5  
HUMPBACK WHALE- 30  
KILLER WHALE- 1, adult male  
NORTHERN RIGHT WHALE DOLPHIN- 30  
PACIFIC WHITE-SIDED DOLPIN- 16  
DALL'S PORPOISE- 5  
OCEAN SUNFISH- 1  
SALMON SHARK- 1

This was my final Pelagic Trip and was equally memorable as the first two. I had met some very friendly people two off which allowed the use of the following Photos – Bob Ake & Chris Hitt. Debbie and her team were brilliant hosts who readily shared their knowledge of years of Pelagic Birding. The cost of the trips seemed a lot at the time of booking but they were worth every cent I paid.





Buller's Petrel © Bob Ake



Brown Pelican



Red Phalaropes & Laysan Albatross © Bob Ake



South Polar Skua & Parasitic Jaeger © Bob Ake



Tufted Puffin & Sabine's Gull © Bob Ake



Humpbacked Whale © Chris Hitt

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2010

I nipped into a very quiet Banding Station at Point Reyes hoping that the staff would bag a goodie or three. But despite three runs of the nets they failed to catch a single bird. I did however see Pacific Winter Wren, Swainson's thrush and several Dark-eyed Juncos. I departed Point Reyes a little underwhelmed. It has a massive reputation for birds but its huge size makes it a difficult place to bird in the limited time I had.

I began the 6 hour drive to Yosemite National Park and a welcome change of scenery. En route a Northern Harrier was seen with 12 Brown-headed Cowbirds close by. At Tuolumne River Canyon were six Bushtits, Western Scrub Jay and a single Golden Eagle.

An English birder on the pelagic gave me a site for Great Gray Owl on Glacier Point Road in Yosemite. The bird had been showing well at mile marker 7 (N37°42' .369 W119°35'309) during the past week. It was dusk as I arrived at the meadow. Chris Hitt was already in position as I joined him. We waited for over an hour but the bird failed to show. I retired to the back of the Jeep for a bitterly cold nights sleep as the temperature plummeted. The following morning was another disappointment as we waited patiently for the Owl, but again it failed to show.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2010

A sharp frost greeted me as I emerged bleary eyed from the vehicle. First birds of the day were woodpeckers Pileated, White-headed and Hairy followed by Brown Creeper and Red-breasted Nuthatch. Mountain Chickadees seemed to be all over the place.



White-headed Woodpecker

We waited for 3 hours for any sign of the Owl but it failed to show. I was frozen to the bone and gave up the ghost and went and sat in the car for an hour with the heating on full belt. I spent the rest of the day touring the park absorbing the incredible jaw dropping beauty.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2010

I emerged from another poxy freezing cold night in the Jeep at mile marker 7. Again the Owl failed to show. I decided to check out a meadow further down Glacier road on the right (N37°40.95 W119°37.440). Bingo!!!! Almost as I stepped out of the vehicle I was watching a magnificent Great Gray Owl hunting in the meadow. I watched the bird for over an hour before it finally disappeared into the forest to roost. I returned to the vehicle and headed back up the road. I was ecstatic as I drove up to Glacier Point.

Again my luck held within minutes of parking up I had connected with 10 Sooty Grouse, Williamson's Sapsucker, White-headed Woodpecker, Black Swift, White-throated Swift and a Northern Pygmy Owl sounding almost like a Scops Owl. At the point I met a Ranger who informed me that the Great Gray Owl population was in the region of 7 pairs





Sooty Grouse

but was contradicted by a fellow worker who maintained that the population was a lot more. Research was on-going as to how the population is sustaining itself and by the effects of fire and tourism. Half Dome - Yosemite

The upper echelons of Glacier Point were difficult to bird as it was typical mountain terrain. There were lots of people here viewing the magnificence of Glacier Valley and in particular Half Dome the famous granite mountain. Warnings were posted around the area of rogue bear activity and you were advised not to stray off the paths. It was advice that I heeded.



Half Dome "The North Face" - Yosemite





SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2010

I had spent the night in a hostel some 25 mile outside the park which was a welcome bit of luxury. I was up early and en route by 05.30 bound for the Tioga Pass. This was a beautiful mountain drive which led over the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the almost desert like region of the Mono Basin. I made frequent stops along the road searching for birds and absorbing the scenery. At 07.45 I spotted a covey of 6 Mountain Quails just off the road. I watched them for about 15 minutes until they disappeared into the undergrowth. There were also plenty of Mountain Chickadees and Yellow-rumped Warblers present.



Mountain Quail

At 09.15 I reach an area of open pasture (N37°53.946 W119°15.591). There was at least 4 pair of Clark's Nutcrackers, 24 Brewers Blackbirds and 3 Red-tailed Hawks.

Eventually I reach Saddlebag Lake. It was biting cold as I trekked around searching for birds. The Aspens were a stunning Gold Colour reminiscent of a scene from New England. The Mountain tops were still snow covered in places. Birding was tough with the only highlight being a pair of magnificent Bald Eagles. I failed to see my target bird of Gray-crowned Rosy Finch despite several reports of flocks around the lake. I returned to the road and pulled in at a diner and had a welcome cup of coffee outside on the Patio with three Clarks Nutcrackers foraging very closely. As I descended to the valley floor the wind had picked up to gale force making birding almost impossible. A couple of pre planned stops were birdless. I gave up and headed for Lee Vining and the Mono Lake Area.

Mono Lake is located in California's Eastern Sierra situated in the Dry Basin and is a magnet for birds. Some 50000 Californian Gulls nest on its islands and autumn brings in wintering Black-necked Grebes, with an estimated population of 1.5 million birds. It is a spectacular place with the added attraction of a pub which sells Broon Ale.

It was late afternoon as I arrived with the wind still blowing strong. But I managed to see target birds such as Green-tailed Towhee, Sage Thrasher and Sage Sparrow. The Lake shore close to the visitor centre had 80+ American Avocets, 3 Kildeer and 20 Marbled Godwits, 16 Western Sands and a single Spotted Sandpiper.



American Avocet & California Gull

Further to the North I saw 3 Mountain Bluebirds and 2 Pinyon Jays. Another night of luxury beckoned, as I booked a room in Lee Vining and had a night on the tiles with copious amounts of Broon Ale and a slap up dinner.

The following morning armed with a stinking head ache I headed off before sunrise to Bodie State Park. The ghost town, a former gold mining settlement, within the park is a well known area for Greater Sage Grouse which frequently enters the town and can be seen at first light in the deserted streets. As I approached the town I managed to spot a bird in the scrub, eventually a 100+ would be seen within a couple of hundred metres. I loved this area. Species seen included Loggerhead Shrike, 40+ Western Meadowlarks, 3 Mountain Bluebirds, A Single Horned Lark, Brewers, White-crowned and Sage Spugs. At a wrecked Caravan (N38°09.653 W119°08.100) there was a single, and my only trip, Black-billed Magpie, 20 Cassin's Finches, 2 Rock Wren, More Sage Grouse and Bluebirds and an American Kestrel. A possible Prairie Falcon was distant speck.



Sage Grouse

Eventually I left the area and headed for Virginia Lakes where I was told there was a good chance of Lewis's Woodpecker. This was a target bird for me and one I was particularly trying to see having dipped in Las Vegas on a previous trip. Again I was out of luck and the 'pecker will have to wait for another day.

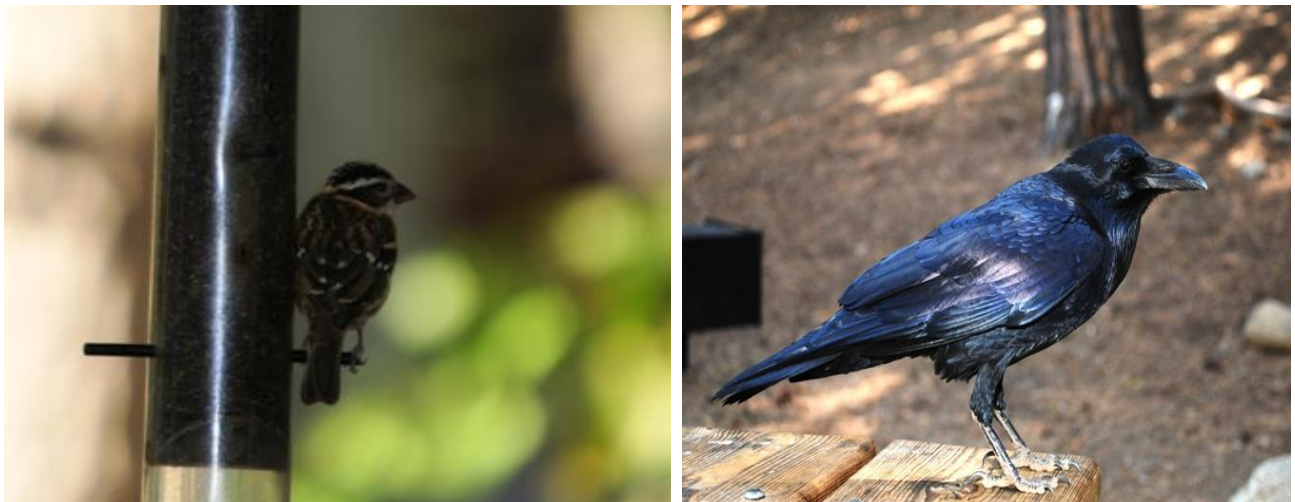


All was not lost though as I managed to see a stunning 'Red' Fox Sparrow, Cooper's Hawk and more Clark's Nutcrackers.

I then began my journey south down the 395 which cuts between Sequoia National Park and Death Valley. At Crowley Lake I caught up with a perched Prairie Falcon which gave good views.

The journey south produced lots of Raven, Turkey Vulture, and Red-tailed Hawk. At Pleasantville a flock of 50+ Pinyon Jays were welcome, as was a brilliant Roadrunner. Eventually i arrived at Kern Preserve. This planned as a brief stop as still had a long way to go.

The Preserve was an excellent place with a good size flock of Tri-coloured Blackbirds, Raven, Black-headed Grosbeak and lots of Anna's/Costa's Hummingbirds.



Black-headed Grosbeak & Raven

The deserted trails had evidence of several Mountain Lion Kills which played havoc with the imagination. It was very quiet and there was not a lot of bird activity. A large flock of Bushtits went through and i also added Red-breasted Nuthatch. The best bid and a most unexpected bonus was a superb Male MacGillivray's Warbler which showed well down to 6 feet. This was a bird i had given up on as i had missed it in Yosemite. There were several Oak Titmice present.

I left Kern and headed off for Jawbone Canyon. Birds were very thinly spread with only Northern Harrier and 2 Canyon Wrens worth noting. Eventually i reached California City located in the Mojave Desert's Fremont Valley of northern Antelope Valley. This is the place where Edwards Air force base is located and many of the residents work at the base. After my evening meal I bedded down in the car park of the local Mall.

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2010

I was up before sunrise and on my way to the Silver Saddle Resort, an oasis in the middle of the Mojave Desert. The resort is an 80 acre Ranch offering horse riding and golf and its position means it is a migrant trap due to the availability of water. It is reached by taking the 20 Mule Team Parkway out of California City. Just outside the gates a Prairie Falcon sat on the telephone wires.

The resort welcomes birders but insists that they make themselves known at reception. After i checked in i walked the grounds quickly racking up birds. The place was alive with birds. There lots of warbler flocks mainly consisting of Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned but there were several Wilson's, Black-throated Gray, MacGillivray's, and Yellow Warblers.

Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks were seen well. Other birds included Nuttall's Woodpecker, Barn Swallow, Cedar Waxwing, Winter Wren, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Towards one of the ornamental ponds a single Verdin and a Warbling Vireo were seen together with more Warblers including Black-throated Gray, MacGillivray's and Yellow. There were also 4 Western Wood-Pewee's around the paddocks.



Cedar Waxwing

Galileo Hill at the back of the resort was said to be good for Sparrows and indeed it was with lots of Black-throated, Brewer's and Sage Spugs in the scrub. I also had 8 Chukar. Back at the resort i met 2 eminent Californian Birders who were only too willing to impart their knowledge. They beckoned me over to the club house where several birders had gathered to twitch a Magnolia Warbler which is a rarity this far west. With the bird in the bag they took me to a Great Horned Owl roost which had two birds present. They also identified Cassin's Vireo and Willow Flycatcher for me. There also 4 Lazuli Buntings, 3 Say's Phoebe and a single Swainson's thrush. There was also a single Red-breasted Sapsucker and a Ladder-backed Woodpecker.

A great mornings birding came to an end and i headed off to the city park, another migrant trap. The park was quiet but there were a few waterbirds present including Pied-billed Grebe, American Coot, Green Heron and Snowy Egret. I headed south towards Los Angeles and my last birding stop – Griffith Park. The park was very busy but there were still a good variety of birds. There were 20+ Western Bluebirds, Oak Titmice, Wrentits, Acorn and Nuttall's Woodpeckers and more parties of Warblers. I spent the last hour of daylight packing my bags before heading into the city for a tour of the main hotspots. I left for the airport at about 01.30 to check in for my flight.

The end of a memorable trip.

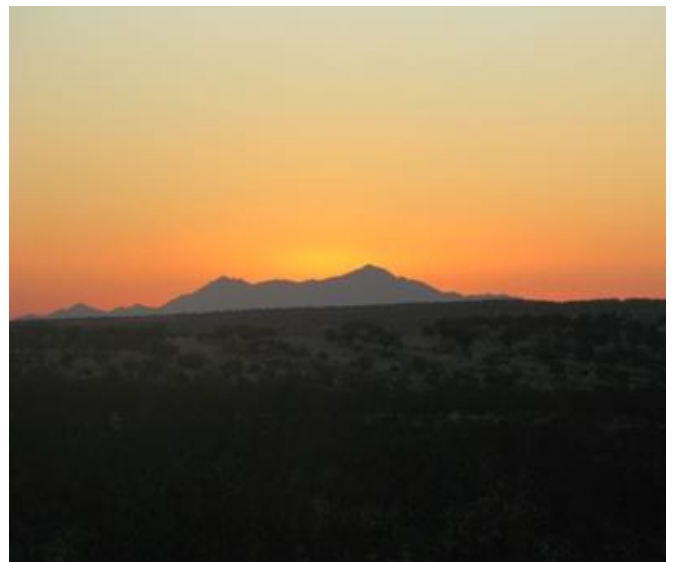




California Quail & Wandering Tattler



Golden Gate Bridge & Alcatraz



Mono Lake & Mojave Desert