

# California

12<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> November 2009

Birding trip report by Steve Arlow

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## Pre-Trip

### Reason for trip, background

As a dedicated larid lover (gull watcher) my over riding goal is to see all of the worlds gulls with the second to photograph all of the worlds gulls. As I have now seen a fair proportion of these my last remaining birds are widely scattered across the globe though I will need to make return visits to some if I want to photograph those that I saw many years ago. I needed two of the North American species, Yellow-footed and Thayer's Gulls but they tend to be in California at different times of year; Yellow-footed in August and September in the far south and Thayer's along the coast, mostly towards the north from November through to March. The Salton Sea had provided a few winter Yellow-foots in past years so I decided to target Thayer's primarily and hope to jam in on a Yellow-footed.

I had planned a birding circuit around Southern California to land me back in the San Francisco area later in the month to try and increase my chances of success with the Thayer's. I also wanted to see again and photograph Mew Gull as well as Glaucous-winged Gull as these are both possibly in the UK, Glaucous-winged already occurring there but Mew yet to do so. I wanted to become even more familiar with these birds should I be fortunate enough to find one back home. So my birding trip was planned.

## Flights

My flight was with BA for a number of reasons. Although I enjoyed my Virgin Atlantic flight the last time I had a lot more kit with me this time so BA was the obvious choice due to its weight limit allowances for transatlantic flights; 23KG for checked luggage and about 20kg for hand luggage, as long as it could be lifted into the overhead lockers there wasn't a problem, as well as a laptop bag. This meant I could put virtually all of my optical kit in my camera bag, as well as take my laptop on board with me along with my books and maps etc.

The flight itself was long and dull with a range of crap films to watch and they ran out of one of the meal types so you were left with beef or nothing. Still the flight was okay and the cabin crew very helpful.

## Booking agent

I booked my flight via Trailfinders, my usual booking agent whilst I booked the car rental direct with Alamo, this proved to be cheaper than the fly drive packages being offered.

## References

**Sibley:** I took the Western North America version of the larger book and it was a handy size to fit in the pocket. This is the only guide to really take when visiting North America.

**A Birders Guide to Southern California by Brad Schram:** A detailed guide for many excellent birding sites south of San Francisco with detailed maps and directions along with expected birds to see. My only criticism would be that some of the distances detailed are a little out thus I was looking for turn offs far sooner/later than I should have been. It is an essential book to take.

## Site guide trip reports

I obtained a number of trip reports from [www.Travellingbirder.com](http://www.Travellingbirder.com) which is probably the best trip report website out there. From these reports I was able to get a number of sites and then reference them to GoogleMaps and the Birders Site guide above.

## Maps

Numerous local maps were picked up at the various motels I stayed at and park maps given free when paying entry at the entrance booths which varied from very helpful to just showing the main roads. Other more detailed maps used were:

**Rockwell Enterprises - Monterey County**

**Rockwell Enterprises - California**

**Alamo San Francisco Road Map**

**AA Road Map to the USA**

## In Country

### • Accommodations

For the majority of the trip I stayed in motels with the exception of Yosemite National Park where I stayed in a heated tent at Curry Village. The motels varied in prices and quality with some being a little over priced for what you got. The best value for money was the Motel6 chain which I stayed at in several locations. I have detailed each of the motels below. The heated tents at Curry village were not exactly very warm, I had four blankets on the bed and I still felt the nip in the air.

**San Francisco: Super8 on Lombard Street.** The most expensive motel stayed at which was due to the location at \$165 for one night for a Queen size on the side of the Highway, which was a little noisy. The room was adequate with usual facilities whilst the motel had limited parking with numerous shops, restaurants and stores nearby. In hindsight something closer to Golden Gate Park would have been better.

**Yosemite: Curry Village.** Located at the end of the Yosemite Valley Curry Village is ideally placed to explore some of the trails here. I stayed in a heated tent which was barely warm enough to remove the chill during the day but as the temperature dropped at night it was pretty cold. There are cabins available which are more expensive. Curry village has a food hall, closed in winter, a Pizza bar, gift shop where you can buy food items, hiking shop etc. The cost for the heated tent was about \$35.

**Los Banos: Los Banos Motel:** I stayed here in 2006 and found it ideally located as its just before the town of Los Banos when travelling from La Merced Wildlife Refuge on the left side of the highway just before the first set of traffic lights. The room had a fridge and was suitable for my needs at \$44 per night. Nearby, towards town, there are various places to eat and get 'gas'.

**Bakersfield, Motel6.** Located just off the freeway when travelling south. I stopped here as I was knackered and didn't think I would make my actual destination. Standard room cost was \$36 per night, which was amongst the cheapest motels stayed at.

**Joshua Tree, High Desert Motel.** One of the more expensive motels but this was probably due to me getting the last room available, a King Size double, plenty of space and set away from the highway. \$71 per night. There are a couple of convenience stores close by if you want to get something to eat.

**Brawley: Town House Inn.** When travelling south and into north Brawley turn right at the traffic lights and after two or three blocks this convenient motel is located on the right with gas stations, fast food restaurants and convenience stores nearby. I stayed here for two nights at a total of \$118, \$59 per night. The alternative is the Best Western located by turning left at the traffic lights as you come into town and is about half mile from here though is probably more expensive.

**Borrego Springs: Hacienda Del Sol.** Very limited options in Borrego Springs. Again one of the more expensive motels stayed at especially for what you get in the room, no fridge for instance however the owner as friendly and there are several close amenities. When coming into Borrego from the Salton Sea you will go round the 'circle' and then look for the large 'sun' on the right hand side. There was Black-throated Sparrow and White-winged Doves here when I arrived. It is central to exploring the surrounding desert areas. \$81 per night.

**Gorman; Eco Lodge.** A convenient location for exploring Mt.Pinos, there are few alternatives other than camping on the mountain. EconoLodge was \$61 per night with the room having fridge, large TV, coffee making facilities etc though I had to repair the door to make it secure. In Gorman there is a convenience store, a couple of fast food restaurants and a couple of Gas Stations and that's about it.

**Morro Bay: Motel6.** There are a bucket load of motels actually in town where you may find a cheaper alternative, though this may be a little difficult. Motel6 is close to Highway 1 to the north of the town its probably one of the cheaper options, its only a few minutes drive to anywhere anyway. There are few shops or restaurants here so will need to head toward Morro Bay itself. As I stayed over a weekend the rate changed for one of the days to a more expensive one thus for the two nights the cost was \$101.68 which still doesn't work out to bad but the room didn't have coffee makers or a fridge, basic but adequate for simply sleeping in.

**Monterey: Motel6:** Located on North Fremont Street I stayed here in 2006 but couldn't remember the exact way of getting there and spent a little time going round in circles however after a day I had figured out best routes in and out of town. The total cost for four nights was \$208 but again the room didn't have a fridge etc but more than adequate for my needs. Monterey has loads of Motels all over the place so there shouldn't be any

problem on turning up and finding somewhere to stay. This location was ideal for the Safeways Supermarket up the road, good for getting bread to lob out to the gulls at nearby Roberts Lake. Also out the back of the motel across the road the property had two species of woodpeckers, Oregon Junco, White-crowned Sparrows and Yellow-rumped Warblers which was nice to wake upto.

**Bodega Bay: Bodega Bay Inn.** Another of the more expensive locations but again few other options available with the only other motel in town even more expensive. I stayed for two nights, the first night I had a family room, last room available, which was \$119. The room had two bedrooms, a separate kitchen area and ample space. The second night I moved to the 'water tower' which was cheaper at \$76 and was smaller by far but again adequate for just me. When travelling into Bodega from the south there is a sharp right bend just after the convenience store on the left. There is a turning immediately on the right after the right bend and the entrance to the motel is here. The owners are very friendly and helpful. Very close by are several places to get supplies and something to eat whilst the main birding areas are also very close.

- **Travelling**

I rented a mid-sized car through Alamo, a KIA Stanza, which perform very well though anything up to 70mph it felt like it may not stay on the road, a little light in the steering. Generally I could fill the tank for less than \$38 and averaged about 250 odd miles to the tank.

Freeway driving is easy though for those not used to driving on American roads its worth noting the following:

- i) Traffic can overtake on both sides but generally slower vehicles will use the right hand lanes.
- ii) Unless there is a sign saying No right turn on Red you can turn right on a red traffic light as long as it is safe to do so and nothing is coming.
- iii) When turning right be aware that pedestrians have right of way so even if the light is green its also green to walk so you must stop until they have completely crossed.
- iv) When you get to a stop line at a junction all vehicles must stop before proceeding, something that I found all drivers adhered to. Whoever gets to a junction first has right of way.
- v) Flashing yellow single light means 'warning' and generally implies there's a junction or traffic lights coming up.
- vi) When getting petrol /gas for the car note that, in California at least, you have to pre-pay for the fuel if paying by cash. This means that you will need to go in to the gas station and pay for the amount you want to dispense. If the amount turns out to be less than what was paid you just go and get your change. Many pumps have the ability to pay with a credit card, pay@pump though I didn't try this personally I don't know how it would react with a UK card.

Away from towns and the Freeways some of the designated roads are actually just hardened dirt tracks, especially around the Salton Sea, and can be very dusty, and as such traction is reduced.

## **Important Notes**

- i) Travelling distances nearly always take more time than anticipated; allow more time for longer drives.
- ii) When travelling north on either side of the Salton Sea from Brawley be aware that you will need to pass through the border check points so have you Passports and any other ID handy, don't have them packed away in the trunk as this will only waste time and you also don't want to annoy the border guards.

- **Weather**

The weather for the most part was fine though some conditions were a little 'off'. The first real uncomfortable conditions were at Jawbone Canyon in the desert where a strong and freezing cold wind cut through all the clothes that I was wearing which made looking for Le Conte's Thrashers and photographing the sparrows very unpleasant and was probably the cause of me not feeling to cleaver later in the day.

The Salton Sea was clear and hot with a little murk later in the evening however this never hindered birding. On Mt. Pinos is worth remembering that at this time of year onwards there can be freezing frosts and snowfall and it was very cold here at times, the road up the mountain was covered in ice, especially in the sheltered areas, which resulted in the car slipping all over the road and crashing into the mountainside. These conditions should be less of a problem in spring when species such as Mountain Quails should be singing.

Leaving Mt. Pinos and heading to the Carrizo Plain resulted in other weather problems and this should be noted if there is generally murk around, low cloud. For a good 20miles I drove through cloud on the high elevations where visibility was reduce to mere feet, at one point I struggled to see the bonnet of the car. The cloud also resulted in soaking the roadside that resulted in rockfalls, numerous football sized rocks on the road. The highway patrol were out trying to clear these falls.

The coast at Morro Bay was warm and pleasant, often following a chilly start but it was toward the latter part of the trip when I headed north to Monterey that the temperature went up into the 80's and I got severely sunburnt through the car windows, my hands when on the steering wheel really took a toasting. If sunny on the coast always cover up, long sleeves, wide brimmed hat and lots of sun block, you have been warned.

- **Eating**

I ate healthily on Burgers, Pizza and Beef Jerky for the trip, at the end of the day I was pretty knackered so I tended to opt for the easy option, if the wife was with me I would have searched out better eateries. There are plenty of places to eat in most places and the prices are pretty reasonable, especially by UK standards.

- **Birding Sites**

For some of the sites in Southern California I have made reference to the page number in the Site Guide detailed in the references section of this trip report above. This will help with birding and maps for these areas.

### **San Francisco Bay**

Only birded the shore of the bay opposite Alcatraz where Western and Clarke's Grebes, Pelicans and Cormorants were seen from the parking lot.

### **Golden Gate Park**

Pretty disappointing with far to much traffic on the park roads whilst the main lake, Spreckles Lake, had a constant stream of local Chinese doing Tai Chi and constantly disturbing the birds that I was trying to photograph. Majority of the other park lakes were small with little on or around them. However a little exploration in the parklands away from the roads resulted in some nice birding at the start of the trip with some stunning Townsend's Warblers being the highlight. The other lake, Stow Lake, was the best with Glaucous-winged Gull, some superbly photographable Mew Gulls and number of other interesting species.

## **Yosemite National Park**

As a birding site it wasn't much to write home about though of the few species that were



seen the White-headed Woodpecker and the superb Red-breasted Nuthatch that showed point blank calling were stunning. I didn't visit Yosemite though for the birding as the scenery was simply stunning and made all the better due to the cold conditions that kept most people away. It really did deserve more time for exploration than I could give.

## **La Merced Wildlife Refuge**

I visited here in 2007 and was really looking forward to it however sometimes the first visit is always the best. At first I found it a disappointment, put my expectations to high?. There were not the large numbers of American Avocets and Long-billed Dowitchers that were here last time and the numbers of winter geese seemed less. However after several hours and evening and morning visits I found the magic was still there. Seeing the Great Horned Owl was still in the same flooded clump of trees, an American Bittern seen mere feet from the one I saw 2007, stunning views of feeding and calling Sandhill Cranes and winter geese was again inspiring. Because of the different time of year there were a few different aspects to birding here, American Pipits seemed everywhere and just begging to be photographed whilst Wilson's Snipe and Greater Yellowlegs were far more easily connected with.

There is a long one way auto route which should be done several times in the mornings and evenings to get the best out of the place. There are several places to get out bird on foot though the wildfowl and cranes don't seem to like it when they can see you thus for the most part it was best to stay in the car.

## **Sequoia National Park**

Another non birding location that did produce a couple of birds but it was a visit to see the General Sherman Tree, the world's largest living thing, a bloody big tree. It also gave me a treat as I got a Black Bear along the roadside at dusk on the drive back down the mountain.

## **Jawbone Canyon / Butterbredt Spring / Mt. Puite**

Jawbone Canyon was visited mainly to look for Le Conte's Thrasher, which I failed to see. The canyon is basically the site of off roading thus it looks far from pretty with all the scaring on the hillsides. It was also very very cold at first thing with a biting wind blasting down the valley. Butterbredt Spring is a small isolated oasis of trees higher up the valley which is meant to be a migrant trap in season though there was little there when I was. To get up to Mt. Puite requires a long drive on dusty roads with many tight switchbacks. It is better the higher you get where pines start to predominate. It is probably worth a whole day up here from early morning rather than late morning when I was there.

### **Joshua Tree National Park**

An interesting place that is probably better birded earlier in the morning than at 11am



when nothing was moving when I was there. It is an almost prehistoric looking places just waiting for Raquel Welch to appear whilst being chased by a Dinosaur. It's worth a visit, to the north end at West Entrance to the Hidden Valley, at least for the scenery.

### **Big Morongo Canyon Preserve**

A great little place near Joshua where there are a number of trails that lead into a variety of different habitats thus producing a good set of birds. An early morning visit is best and if time allows an evening one, excellent little site. Reference page 174 in the Southern California Site Guide.

### **Salton Sea, southern end**

Reference page 194 in the Southern California Site guide. Many birding areas though some of those detailed in the site guide were not worth visiting. Those that were are Obsidian Butte, Sono Bono Reserve HQ and Gast Road. These sites allow easy birding from the car and there are bucket loads of birds.

### **Brawley**

The fields south of Brawley are perhaps the best place to look for Mountain Plovers in winter. Reference page 204 of the Southern California Site Guide. I located a flock of birds in the fields near the junction of Huff and Erskine Roads. Early mornings and late evenings are best.

### **Borrego Springs**

I stopped here and tried some desert birding looking for thrashers but failed miserably, and indeed didn't see much of anything here so soon moved on after an overnight stay.

### **Veterans Park**

Small wooded park, reference page 29 in the Southern California Site Guide, produced a number of woodpeckers and woody species but I was there in the mid afternoon and things were a little quite.

### **Mt. Pinos**

Excellent birding from first thing. The road to the summit should be driven with care in the winter as even in November the frozen road was dangerous. There is excellent birding along the road, try stopping and pishing for Fox Sparrows at various points whilst the camp ground near the top had lots of woodpeckers and nuthatches and other woodland birds. The trail at the very top is the place to look for Clarke's Nutcrackers and more woodland birds. One of the better high elevation birding sites I visited.

### **Morro Bay area**

A whole bucket load of good birds and good birding sites here; Morro Rock, the Marina etc, refer to page 86 in the Southern California Site Guide. The Marina and trails here were the most rewarding birding with numerous very good birds and close views as well. A good three days could be spent around the area.



### **Monterey, Roberts Lake**

One of the better places to look at gulls is actually in the town of Seaside but is only a few minutes from the motel and Monterey. There are two viewpoints to watch the gulls though the one at the far end is the better as the birds stand out on the car parking lot.

### **Monterey, Pinos Point**

There are various pull offs along the coast road from where to look for the various speciality birds though those past the golf course and lighthouse I found were better. Search the rocky tidal pool areas for Surfbird, Black Turnstone and Black Oystercatcher. Numerous other species were also seen here. Early mornings are best before too many people are out and about.

### **Monterey, Moss Landing**

Another much wanted to revisit site but wasn't as good as in 2007. Unlike my last visit there very few gulls, very few Surf Scoter, very little anything. There were still birds but the numbers were nowhere as high thus it was hard work finding stuff though it did give me a good adult Thayer's Gull.

### **Monterey, Elkhorn Slough**

I only stayed here for an hour or so as it was very hot and nothing was really occurring though there were good views of Hermit Thrush and Song Sparrows amongst a few other things. It doesn't open until 10am which means that birding can be difficult in the heat of the day.

### **Monterey, Salinas River Mouth**

A long slog along the beach for a couple of miles out you amongst thousands of gulls and no people. It is exposed and sunburn was a problem.

**Bodega Bay:** In essence there are two birding areas around the bay, the north side and the south side. The north side is reached from Highway 1 by taking the left hand turning just as you begin to leave Bodega Bay heading north. At the crossroads at the bottom of the hill you can continue straight across and check the marina where lots of Marbled Godwits were found feeding and roosting however no matter the time of day you are for the most part looking into the sun. From the crossroads turn right and this road skirts the edge of the harbour and there are several pull out areas where you can get up and close to the birds. On an incoming tide the area out towards the outer harbour had large flocks of Buffleheads feeding in the deeper water channel close to the road along with large numbers of Mew and California Gulls. The end car park before heading up and over the headland was good for looking for White-winged and Surf Scoters and there were a few Great Northern Divers present.

The south side, the camper ground, requires payment at the booth to enter. The best birding area here was at the very end at the harbour mouth where numerous gulls and



sea duck were present but due to close birding on the north side I visited here much less often.

Not quite Bodega Bay but included here is Goat Rock Beach about 10miles or so to the north near Jenner. This beach in the early to mid

morning often had a large gull flock present and was one of the few places, surprisingly, that produced Thayer's Gull. There were also a number of other good birds and Black-tailed Deer along the approach road.

## Day to Day diary

### Day 1: 12<sup>th</sup> November, Thursday

Following a long and dull flight, in flight entertainments helped to fritter away the time. Getting through Customs on arrival was no bother and the bag arrived at the carousel nice and quickly. Got the car, should have got a smaller one as now only me, and headed north to San Francisco. On the way picked up a few **Western Gulls**, a couple of **Glaucous-winged Gulls**, a **Brown Pelican** and sea duck which looked like **Lesser Scaup** though I couldn't stop on the Highway as it was rush hour.

Arrived at the motel to find I had a room on the busy roadside however following getting some supplies in I went to bed as was knackered with a slight headache and hardly noticed the traffic outside.

## Day 2: 13<sup>th</sup> November, Friday

Was getting light at 6.30 so got my stuff together and hit the road, ended up along the beach front at the same place I found a few years ago. Here there were many **Western Gulls**, five **Ring-billed Gulls**, a single **Heermann's Gull**, a fly by first-year **Mew Gull**, many **Brown Pelicans** and a mixed flock of **Clarke's** and **Western Grebes**.

Alcatraz was photographed, as was the Golden Gate Bridge, which was glowing in the morning sunlight. From here went to Golden Gate Park, which was a disappointment as the roads in here were very busy with traffic whilst many of the lakes were nothing more than small ponds. There were many Western Gulls. The large Spreckles Lake had



**American Coot** but it was the bushes nearby that had the best stuff with a small flock of **White-crowned Sparrows**, a **Steller's Jay**, one or two **Anna's Hummingbirds**, several **Townsend's Warblers**, a **Chestnut-backed Chickadee**, numerous **Ruby-crowned Kinglets** and a **Pygmy Nuthatch**.

Following this I drove round to Stow Lake, with a brief photo stop for a **Great Blue Heron** where there was also a male **Yellowthroat**, where there was a **Richardsons/Cackling Goose** and a drake **Wood Duck** and many gulls with the majority being Westerns however there were a few mixed aged **Glaucous-winged**, three or four adult **Mew Gulls**, minimum, and a stunning fully albino presumed **Western Gull**. There were also several **Pied-billed Grebes**.

With job done in photographing **Mew Gull** it was time to head east. The drive to Oakland took about an hour with the traffic but it was easy enough to find. There were at least 400 **Lesser Scaup** on the lake along with many **Ring-billed Gulls**, numerous **Double-crested Cormorants** and **Western Gulls**.

I ended up at the Lakeshore park where there were many of the same as above but included photogenic first-winter **Ring-billed Gulls**, **Lesser Scaups**, **Canvasback** and **Night Heron** however I also managed my first lifer of the trip and the reason for stopping off here, **Barrows Goldeneye**. At least three drakes and a female were seen but were too distant to photograph but crackers they were. There were a couple of **Coopers Hawks** here that flew off over the lake and the trips first **Great Egret** was stood on the roof of the visitor centre.

Time to press on and the drive to Yosemite was far longer than expected on slow roads, arrived after dark. On the way several roadside birds were noted, with three or so **Red-shouldered Hawks** sat on roadside posts, a couple of **Red-tailed Hawks**, the trips first **Turkey Vultures**, a flock of **Eurasian Starlings**, several **Mourning Doves**, a brief **Yellow-billed Magpies**, an **American Kestrel**, a field of **Great Egrets** and a couple of **Ravens**.

At Yosemite I had one of the heated tents which was to be fun, there was a little snow on the ground so I was expecting a cold one. \*\*\$&?88!!\*\*\*\*, expletive, a mouse just run from

under my bed as I was writing this making me jump, wondered what the bloody thing was at first. Hopefully it won't be followed by a Black Bear, would be nice to see but not under my bed.

So then ends the first days birding.

### **Day 3: 14<sup>th</sup> November, Saturday**

Was awoken by the cold. The heated tent wasn't that warm but at least it wasn't long before it was light. It was clear with a frost so I headed off towards Mirror Lake. There were numerous stops on the way for scenic photos and birds with numbers low. An **Oregon Junco** was at the campsite and a **Horned Lark** along the road as well as the usual **American Crows** and **Steller's Jays** but also a pair of **Northern Flickers** which nice. However it was whilst trying to watch these birds that I realised that my Bins would not close focus and the left barrel was out of sync with the right. I had noticed this yesterday in Golden Gate Park but put it down to my eyes streaming at the time. My bins were majorly playing up from the first day though I had a work around for it, I would though have to send them back for fixing when I got home though.

In the meantime it was a while before I got any more birds but these were in the form of two lifers, **White-headed Woodpecker** and **Mountain Chickadee** with the latter in mixed flocks with Golden-crowned Kinglets. Perhaps the highlight though was the cracking bright **Red-breasted Nuthatch** that was feeding low down on a tree close to the path and was watched for about 15 minutes, between cleaning misted up lenses, superb stuff.

After this it was a round robin for some scenic images, and the scenery was impressive, before heading towards Merced with only a few birds noted but nothing that's not been seen before.

Dumped the gear at the motel in Los Banos and shot off to La Merced where there were plenty of birds, though not as much as my previous visit. As with then the highlight were the flocks of bugling **Sandhill Cranes** and **Snow Geese**. Other birds of note were the



flock of 'small' **Canada Geese**, **White-fronted Geese**, **Loggerhead Shrike**, **Merlin** with dragonfly prey, several of both **Red-tailed Hawks** and **Northern Harriers**, many **Killdeers**, one or two **Wilson's Snipe**, five or more **Long-billed Dowitchers**, up to ten **American Pipits**,

**Savannah Sparrows**, **Western Meadowlarks**, many **White-crowned Sparrows**, a **Black Phoebe**, numerous commoner wildfowl including **Green-winged** and **Cinnamon Teal**, a **Greater Yellowlegs**, adult **American Herring Gull**, many 'blackbirds' including **Red-shouldered**, a couple of **White-tailed Kites** and a flock of Ibis.

The cranes and geese gathered at dusk in the fields on the east side of the refuge and showed well close to the track, simply stunning.

The morning will hopefully bring some more of this spectacle.

#### Day 4: 15<sup>th</sup> November, Sunday

Back early to La Merced where I was to spend much of the rest of the day. On the road on the way there was a fine flock of **White Pelicans** that circled around and around over the fields and were probably the same flock I had over the reserve a few hours later. The cranes of yesterday were much closer today but were still difficult to photograph well as they were nervous and took flight easily however I managed a fair few respectable shots. Also the same species of geese were present with what looked like two small forms of **Canada Goose**. In addition to the duck species yesterday today I added **Blue-winged Teal** and **Gadwall** to the trip list, surprisingly there were no American Wigeon yet. There were numerous raptors around the loop trail with **Red-tailed Hawks** and **Northern Harriers** being the commoner species though **Turkey Vulture**, **Red-shouldered Hawk**, **White-tailed Kite**, **American Kestrel**, **Merlin** and **Sharp-shinned Hawk** were all noted.

Not seen last night the **Great Horned Owl** was this morning found in the same clump of bushes where I had two three years ago, seen well but not photographable due to range and against the light. A second bird was flushed by a **Red-shouldered Hawk** by the walking trail before I could get close to see what the commotion was.

Waders remained thin on the ground with a couple of **Greater Yellowlegs**, **Least Sandpipers**, a few **Long-billed Dowitchers**, a dozen or so **Wilson's Snipe** and **Killdeers**. Herons were scarce with only a few **Snow Egrets** seen, a flock or two were along the road at dawn, a couple each of **Great Blue Heron** and **Great Egret** and an **American Bittern** again seen in the area where I had one three years ago.

**Marsh Wrens** were in fine voice around the wetlands and a couple of **Northern Flickers** were at the walking trail. **Western Meadow Larks** were common on the east side of the reserve and **Yellow-rumped Warblers** were widely spread and fairly abundant. Bird of the day though probably goes to the unassuming **Buff-bellied Pipit** with several seen that included a very confiding bird right next to the car, sometimes too close to focus on with the camera, for 40 minutes.



Once I had done the loop three times I left the reserve at 1pm and headed off south with the intention of stopping at the Giant Red Wood Forests however again the distances were greater than first thought and time to get there took longer than hoped, I had hoped of getting there at around 3pm but got there at 4pm. With time against me the walk to the **General Sherman Tree**, the worlds largest living organism, was done in 35 minutes. It was worth the effort to see these tree's, even some of the not as big trees were still huge.

I wanted to get out of the park before dark as the road back was full of switchbacks and didn't want to do that in the dark. The lower part was in the dark however. The drive back down in the failing light did though result in a **Black Bear** briefly on the roadside, smashing.

The drive to Weldon ended short at Bakersfield as I was knackered, it was 8pm and the drive was another hour and a half.

#### **Day 5: 16<sup>th</sup> November, Monday**

Much earlier start today along with a persisting headache for the long drive to Jawbone Creek. This took about an hour and half. On getting out the car at the first aqueduct the cold wind nearly cut me in two. I clothed up and went searching for Le Contes Thrasher however the biting wind took its toll and the headache got worse rapidly and I ended up giving up on the search and instead stood by a drip in the pipe where sparrows and finches were visiting in their masses. It was hard work photographing the **Sage, Black-throated** and **White-crowned Sparrows** along with **House Finches** whilst shivering and having thick woolly gloves on, this is the desert for crying out loud.



Still had some nice shots of these birds in the end whilst other birds seen were **Loggerhead Shrike** and a couple of **Rock Wrens**.

From here mid morning drive to Butterbredt Springs reserve further up the valley which wasn't worth the effort with the only new bird being a **Bewick's Wren**.

Continued up to Mt Puite but despite a few good birds I failed on all of my targets. There are several reasons for this, firstly I was running out of time and the distances were greater than first thought (a continuing theme for the trip) and my headache meant my bird finding ability and enthusiasm were reduced. As I got closer to the peak I ran out of steam and had to stop for a sleep in the car to try and clear the headache. On the way up I noted several **Scrub Jays, Western Bluebirds** and two **Spotted Towhees** whilst close to where I took a break were more **Bluebirds**, a **Phainopepla** and some **Acorn Woodpeckers**.

After waking with a start, I think I was asleep a couple of hours, I realised I needed to get moving an hour ago so made a dash down the hill again with **Mountain Bluebirds** seen lower down. It was still cold and the light was going and I had a hell of a long drive to go so few birds were stopped for. At least my head felt better.

A **Great Horned Owl** was seen flying over the highway shortly after dusk. Overnighted at Joshua.

A **Great Horned Owl** was seen flying over the highway shortly after dusk. Overnighted at Joshua.

#### **Day 6: 17<sup>th</sup> November, Tuesday**

Had a good nights sleep and woke to it already being light for a while and no headache, h'ray.

After packing up the car I headed off to Big Morongo Canyon Preserve for some early morning birding, this would be to the detriment of birding in Joshua Tree National Park it self.

The reserve has numerous boardwalks and a variety of habitats that I would not have the time to fully explore however I did notch up a few lifers and trip ticks whilst I was here. I birded the Marsh and Mesquite Trails and by 9am it was already pretty hot and the bird activity had already dropped off. I did however have the following in the two hours I was there; a family party of Northern Flickers, several flocks of Cedar Waxwing, some with **Western Bluebirds** mixed in, several **Bewick's Wrens**, a dozen or so **Vesper and Song Sparrows** amongst the **White-crowed Sparrows**, about six **Black-throated Sparrows**, a **California Thrasher**, half a dozen **California Towhees**, a **Spotted Towhee**, several **Verdins**, a couple of **Hermit Thrushes**, **Yellow-rumped Warblers**, **House Finches**, **Western Scrub Jays** and **Anna's Hummingbirds**.

It had really warmed up so I decided to head back to the car but got stopped by a **Mountain Chickadee** and a couple of **Oak Titmice**. I noticed that some **Western Bluebirds** were using a nearby fence as sallying points so I moved into Covington Park to improve the light however the birds were flighty and did not like close approach but I ended up with some okay pics, including a bright spanking male. In the large tree nearby was a **White-breasted Nuthatch** and a many of the bluebirds. Also here were



numerous **House Finches**, including a male of the yellow variety, and a **Say's Phoebe** and a **Black Phoebe** along with the obligatory **Yellow-rumped Warblers**.

I was just driving out of the reserve when I noticed some feeders by the Reserve Host building which had a many **Lesser Goldfinch** as well as a **Ladder-backed Woodpecker**, a **White-breasted Nuthatch** and a couple of **Scrub Jays**.

Well later away than planned which resulted in very few birds being seen in the prehistoric landscape of Joshua Tree Reserve. An amazing place of boulders and odd plant life. The late hour here meant that virtually all birds were tucked away in the shade some where with only four or five **Cactus Wrens**, a single **Ladder-backed Woodpecker** and a **Red-**

**tailed Hawk** or two. The only other animal life seen were a few Chipmunks.

Arrived at the southern end of the Salton Sea at around 3pm, passed hundreds of **White Pelicans** and other waterbirds on the way.

I pulled off at Davis Road and found that there was lots of nothing here. Some of the probably usually wet places were far from the lakeshore so birding was hard work. A few **Say's Phoebes** were noted, as were a lot of **Yellow-rumped Warblers** but I had to get to McDonald Road before I saw any numbers of birds. The highlight of Davis Road though was a **Yellow-headed Blackbird** seen in flight amongst the hordes of blackbirds and grackles flying over the road.

The Lake edge at the end of the road had many tens of thousands of birds, mostly **American Coot** and **Pintail** but there was probably about a thousand **American Avocets** also there. **Northern Harriers** were around the area and **Snowy** and **Great Egrets** were now up in numbers.

By 4pm the light was going fast, sooner than expected, so I dashed towards the fields at Kalin to look for Mountain Plovers but the fields are huge and the light was getting worse. On the way I noted a **Burrowing Owl** at the end of Sinclair Road and a **Ferruginous Hawk** along the Kalin Road.

I had planned on staying in nearby Calipatria but couldn't find the motel so went to Brawley instead and stayed in a mid priced motel, at least it was only half hour drive away at most.

### **Day 7: 18<sup>th</sup> November, Wednesday**

Awoke early, 6am, to find it already pretty light outside. Got myself together and headed off south of Brawley on a **Mountain Plover** quest. The best place to find them, the Erskine-Pierle-Wheeler road area, was easy to find however there was only really one suitably looking field, along Erskine, and that was looking into the sun. However I did find a 'trip' of 47 Mounties. After scoping these guys for a while I decided to return later when the sun would be from behind. Also in this one field was just as many **Killdeers**. The fields around here were covered in **Meadowlarks** and **Savannah Sparrows** whilst **Collared Doves** were plentiful. Several **American Kestrels** and **Merlins** were also seen. Along one of the canals the trips first **Belted Kingfisher** was found sat on wires but didn't allow close enough approach for pictures. Many of the usual open farmland birds were also seen.

With time pressing on I headed north out of Brawley to Obsidian Butte. Here I got confused with directions and took a wrong turn and almost got stuck in the mud. It was a narrow call on wheel spinning out of the sludge, the car was a right state. I did eventually find the right place and finally I had some good Salton Sea birding. When the track opened out on the foreshore a flock of gulls needed to be searched with most being **Ring-billed** and **California Gulls** with a few **American Herrings Gulls** in there as well but hey hold on, bang on my target, a near-adult **Yellow-footed Gull**. It was scope job only with no hope of getting any shots and I didn't bring my digiscoping kit set up with me, still good to get the other main target bird and both before 8.30.

There was a large flock of **Brown Pelicans** fishing further along the foreshore and several waders could be seen; **Grey Plover**, **Least Sandpipers** and **Western Sandpipers**, so after scraping some of the mud off the car I drove further along the raised embankment. A pool at the crossroads held singlea of both **Greater** and **Lesser Yellowlegs** and three **Least Sandpipers** whilst in the dead snags was a **Peregrine**.

After a while and with the day really warming up I drove further along the Butte and found a flock of **Ruddy Ducks** close in the wall near a small outfall. There were at least 150 here. It also proved popular with a dozen or more **Black-necked Grebes** and a **Western Grebe** swam past whilst gulls flew over. I scanned the Ruddies again and then picked out something odd, the penny dropped, it was an **Ancient Murrelet**. This pelagic species shouldn't be anywhere near the Salton Sea and I was now thinking this was a site rarity. I stayed with the bird for over an hour as it gradually came in closer and closer until it was the closest bird right in the outfall. Reasonable pictures of this bird were obtained.

Eventually I dragged myself away and headed back along the Butte, stopping for more waders, **Willet** and **Marbled Godwits** as well as the common **Long-billed Dowitchers**, **American Avocets**, **Long-billed Curlews** and **Black-necked Stilts**. Back past the entrance to the Butte was the trips first **Roadrunner**, doing what Roadrunners do,

keeping in front of the car and not allowing itself to be photographed, still great bird. Lots of herons, egrets and Ibis in fields.

Next up was the visitor centre of the Sonny Bono NWR. Here I told the staff of the Murrelet and was advised that there had only been three previous Salton Sea records, sweet. SOG finds the birds. I somehow got the news out by phoning home to the UK and getting the wife to put the murrelet out on Calbirds to alert birders to its presence.

Outside **Gambel's Quails** and **Aberts Towhees** were new lifers whilst **Common Ground Dove** and **House Sparrows** were not. A **Verdin** showed very well next to the path here, lovely little birds.

Now really hot. Drove down to the end of Garst Road where the place was carpeted with birds but also plenty of hunters here. With the light now in the wrong place photography was difficult and I couldn't drive out to the water's edge for the dowitchers and peeps and even walking out there was slippery. Still managed a few decent **Long-billed Dowitcher** shots though. The place was carpeted with birds, i.e. 400 **American Avocets**, 500+ **Ring-billed** and **California Gulls**.

With exploration done of a few side roads that did not produce the same birding results I headed back to town via Ramer Lake. The viewpoints were restrictive but there were a few **Western Grebes**, **Lesser Scaup** and **Canvasbacks** at least here.

I then found a car wash and had the motor cleaned, it took some time to get rid of the clay/mud from in the wheel arches.

Once done I returned to the Plovers fields but I saw a flock of birds flying away a few miles from the site I suspected that these could have been the same birds. This seemed to be about right as the field was empty on arrival. Despite searching for Gila Woodpecker at Brawley I was not successful though I didn't mind so much, a much better day today.

#### **Day 8: 19<sup>th</sup> November, Thursday**

Early start at Finney Lake didn't produce the Crissal Thrashers but a handful of good birds were seen here including **Phainopeplas**, **Verdin** and so on.

I wanted to be at Garst Road relatively early so I was soon on my way. There weren't as many birds as yesterday at Garst Road but there was still a lot of them here. In the hour or so I was here I added three new birds to the trip list, **Bonaparte's Gull**, an **American Black Tern** and a couple of **Bank/Sand Martins**. The usual waders were still here but I spent much of my time photographing **Forsters Terns** and **Ring-billed Gulls**.

As it was warming up I headed off to Obsidian Butte where I found a twitch for the **Ancient Murrelet** that I had found here yesterday. Unfortunately the bird was not present but I did learn that at least two other local birders had managed to connect with it yesterday afternoon once I got the news out. I also learnt from John Dunn, one of the birders



there, that this was only the third for the Salton Sea and the first record for Imperial County, SOG definitely finds the birds.

A fly over **Caspian Tern** was added to the trip list here with another seen further along the Butte a few hours later as were three **Goldeneyes**. The usual birds were present so I went off searching for the main prize, which didn't reappear. I did though find an adult **Yellow-footed Gull** further along which made me think of the bird yesterday, which looked nothing like this guy. I also remembered a note in the visitor centre book saying that there was a **Lesser Black-backed Gull** around with heavy neck streaking and this is what I now think that bird was, lucky to then have this bird.

The small pool by the butte crossroads again had the **Peregrine** and both the **Yellowlegs** which I stopped to photograph before trundling off to Borrego Springs which, for the first time this trip, didn't take half as long as expected. This however didn't really give much more in terms of birds as there was very little in the target birding areas, i.e. again didn't see the thrashers. Of the birds I did see around the roads and in the desert were a good **Prairie Falcon**, several **Ravens**, a couple or so **Brewers Sparrows**, the pale form of **Sage Sparrow**, **Say's Phoebe**, **Western Bluebird** and **House Finches** whilst at the motel were three **White-winged Doves**.

Early night as the light just went.

#### **Day 9: 20<sup>th</sup> November, Friday**

A slow day birding as this was intended on being a mostly travelling day to north of Los Angeles. Started off at the Le Contes Thrasher site but again diddly squat from these birds, these and the Crissal Thrashers just don't seem to be responsive at this time of year. What was probably yesterday's Prairie Falcon done another fly past whilst the only other birds seen were a few **Ravens** and **Crows**, a **Loggerhead Shrike** and a few fly over **House Finches**. Time to cut and run and not bother with the desert trail, there just doesn't seem to be anything worth staying here for.

On the drive a few **Scrub Jays** and **Kestrels** were seen along the road but I ended up losing a couple of hours when I made a pharmacy stop due to my leg that was bitten by some wee blighter for or five days ago had got the point that half my leg was inflamed and getting uncomfortable. I visited a walk in clinic and the consensus was that it was probably a spider bite and I needed antibiotics to stop the spread of the infection.

Eventually back on the road the traffic round LA wasn't too bad and I had by now decided to not go to Ventura but instead concentrate my next days efforts on Mt. Pinos and hopefully get Mountain Quail and Clarke's Nutcracker.

On the way I stopped off at Veterans Park, a woodpecker hot spot but I could only find **Nuttall's Woodpecker** and **Red-breasted Sapsucker**, the latter however being one of the three hoped for sapsuckers here. There were also plenty of **Yellow-rumped Warblers** as usual but more interesting was a **Hermit Thrush**. A few odds and sods that were not out of the ordinary were also seen before I headed off to Gorman where I would overnight. This section of the drive didn't take long and I could have gone up Mt. Pinos there and then but after a long day behind the wheel it was time for a rest.

#### **Day 10: 21<sup>st</sup> November, Saturday**

Awoke to mist and drizzle up the valley, not a good start but at least it's the first bad weather I've come across so far. I stopped off first at the Camp Site but there was no sign of any Mountain Quail. I could here several woodpeckers tapping away. I headed back along the road past Pine Mt and promptly saw some quail on the road side, unfortunately they were **California Quail** and not the wanted Mountain Quails, thus not a lifer.

I headed up the road to Mt. Pinos passing a 4x4 that was literally hanging off the side of the road, looked dumped I thought. On passing a bend the car began to behave very strangely, the steering was all over the place. It was then I suddenly realised why the 4x4 was hanging over the edge, there was sheet ice on the road and the car was sliding towards a large face of the mountain, crunch. I eventually got the car to a gravel lay-by, which was itself rather slippery, so I could inspect the damage. I washed off the mud from the bumper using one of the bottled waters I had and found that the low speed impact had resulted in only a few scratches. Still I decided to take it very very slowly the rest of the way up the road. Once I cleared the mist and reached sunlight the road was fine and there suddenly birds everywhere. One roadside stop produced a stunning **White-headed Woodpecker**, several **Northern Flickers**, a **Hairy Woodpecker**, many **Stellers Jays**, a flock of **Oregon Juncos** and a couple of pish responsive **Fox Sparrows**.

So it went like this up the hill, various stops with lots of birds. I made it to McGill Campsite, which was closed, so I walked in and spent a few hours searching for **Clarke's Nutcracker**. This however was fruitless. I did however see lots and lots of **Nuthatches** of all three species, **Red-breasted**, **White-breasted** and **Pygmy**. The tootling of the Red-breasted's again reminding me of a plastic toy trumpet.

There was also a lot of **Mountain Chickadees** and a **Brown Creeper** along with several **Northern Flickers**, several **Oregon Juncos**, **Oak Titmice** and a **Spotted Towhee**. The views were also spectacular.

Finally drove to the end car park where I again searched for the nutcracker, making it all the way to the meadow, where I hoped to get the Quail. Apart from several fleeting views of probable nutcrackers over the treetops I didn't find any. However the same species as seen earlier were again noted and again in large numbers.

After a quick refreshment back at the car I decided to head out again along a different path rather than calling it quits as this would be my last chance to get a **Clarke's Nutcracker** for the trip. After only about 100 yards and I got sight of one distantly in a tree and was partially obscured. I set off in the direction only to see it and another bird fly strongly into the forest. Not to give up I set off as quickly as I could in pursuit and came across one of the birds feeding in low branches, which I watched for about 20 minutes. With the day ticking away, I had spent six hours looking for this guy, I headed back to the car only to have a further four in the trees within 20 yards of it, oh well.

The drive was less skiddy on the way down but the road west got really bad as low cloud swept in reducing visibility to about 10 metres or less. With all the moisture there were rockslides on the road and I had to swerve around several large rocks. This continued for about 20 miles until I eventually came down in elevation, the resulting view was spectacular.

My plan was to stay at Maricopa and try the next morning for Le Contes Thrasher nearby but I decided to knock that idea on the head, the thrashers were just not being responsive at this time of year, and head towards the coast via the Carrizo Plain. This was not worth the effort really, a big wide-open place that had lots and lots of **Horned Larks** and not a lot else. A flock of **House Finches** and a few **Mountain Bluebirds** were all that were seen in 42 miles.

As the day was coming to close I had five **Yellow-billed Magpies** along highway 58 which I didn't stop for on this awkward road.

#### **Day 11: 22<sup>nd</sup> November, Sunday**

Looking forward to birding on the coast now. Started off at Morro Rock where it was fairly breezy and cold but sunny. From the northern car parks I scoped the bay and found several **Brown Pelicans** as well as a few **Ring-billed** and **Western Gulls**

however a few trip ticks were added with many **Pelagic Cormorants**, a single **Black Oystercatcher**, three **Great Northern Divers**, several **Red-breasted Mergansers**, a couple of female **Surf Scoters** and a few **Slavonian Grebes** along with a couple of **Black-necked Grebes**. Also in the bay were some distant **Buffleheads** but the highlight were the Sea Otters.

Drove round to the Marina at Morro Bay State Park where some good birding was to be had. There some very close **Western** and **Clarke's Grebes** in the bay here as well as a couple of **Pied-billed Grebes**, all the North American Grebes, except Least, in the space of an hour. There were several photogenic birds here with **Spotted Sandpiper** and **Lesser Yellowlegs** being very approachable. On the main Bay were a thousand or so **Black Brants** and numerous **Least Sandpipers** and **Marbled Godwits** with sea duck represented by several groups of **Bufflehead**.

**Greater Yellowlegs**, **Forsters Tern**, another **Great Northern Diver**, an **Osprey**, a **Belted Kingfisher** and the heron and egret roost kept the tally going.

From here it was a natural progression to Sweet Springs where there were plenty of **Mallards** with a few **Blue-winged Teals** mixed in and a flock of nine **American Wigeon**. Two more **Ospreys** were here and better views of the Brant flock. On the east side was a **Lesser Scaup** flock whilst other duck were represented by **Pintails** and **Ruddy Ducks**. A distant **Caspian Tern** was the only one of the day.

I returned to Morro Rock for the gulls but alas no Thayer's Gull today but I did spend time photographing **Western**, **Ring-billed**, **California** and **Heermann's Gulls** in the car park which was very busy with the locals.

San Geronimo Creek north of Morro Bay was hot but still had entertainment value, most notably a **Cackling Canada Goose**, an **American Pipit** on the beach and numerous **Yellow-rumped Warblers** which allowed their photos to be taken. The coastline was full of birds with three **Black Turnstones** and two **Black Oystercatchers** were the pick of the waders whilst there whilst **Heermann's Gulls** proved to be numerous but there were only singleton **American Herring** and **Mew Gulls** amongst the Westerns. **Surf Scoters** were scattered in the surf but I couldn't find any Harlequin's. Six **Royal Terns** on a rocky island were a trip tick as were **Semipalmated Plover** and **Sanderlings**.

After a clown and his dog put paid to the photography of an American Pipit, its always someone with a dog no matter where you are, they can see you are photographing something so they let their four legged shit machine run straight at you and flush the bird, I left and drove back to Pozo Road to try for Lewis's Woodpecker but after several stops along the road I had had no success. However the road was excellent birding anyway with many **Acorn Woodpeckers** seen along with perhaps a dozen **Yellow-billed Magpies**, 50+ **Band-tailed Pigeons**, numerous **California Quails**, **Lesser Goldfinches**, **Scrub Jays**, a **Ruby-crowned Kinglet**, **Mourning Doves** and some very nice but flighty **Western Bluebirds**. However the top spot goes to the two **Golden Eagles**, an immature flying from the direction of Lake Margarita and perched sub-adult, superb. A brief visit to the lake didn't yield anything new apart from a distant Black-tailed Deer.

It was now getting late and the light was starting to go, it was only 4pm, so I made my way the Laguna Lake in San Obispo but it was difficult to find and I got there to late in the day but could see several **American Herring Gull** and an immature **Glaucous-winged Gull**.

So a good, if sometimes frustrating, days birding with several good photo ops.

### Day 12: 23<sup>rd</sup> November, Monday

Back Morro Rock this morning where I was greeted by a **Pigeon Guillemot** in the harbour. There were three **Great Northern Divers**, a small flock of **Buffleheads**, two **Black-necked Grebes** and two **Black Oystercatchers** in the bay. I moved out of the strong wind to scope the sea for 20 minutes where there were a few hundred **Black-vented Shearwaters** moving north as well as three **Pacific Divers** and numerous distant auks, which were probably Guillemots. On the rocks here was a **Rock Wren** and a flock of **House Finches** but no sign of any White-throated Swifts. By the first car park were half a dozen Sea Otters, one with a pup on the belly, rather cute.

As the day started to warm up I headed off towards Morro Bay State Park stopping at the lay-by just before the museum where the flock of **Marbled Godwits** performed very well including a fighting pair. A male **Belted Kingfisher** also showed well for the camera further along the beach whilst there were a few more regular birds here, such as **Willet**, **Osprey** and **Spotted Sandpipers**. A nice stop.

Back the marina a Sea Otter was loafing around but was pretty camera shy as was yesterday's **Belted Kingfisher**. Whilst photographing the otter a flock of **Wrentits** moved through the bushes behind me, which was nice and an **American Goldfinch** perched up briefly. The mudflats had many birds, such as the flock of several hundred **Least Sandpipers** whilst there were many other birds present. The temperature was really getting up by mid morning so I eventually headed off the Elfin Forest on the other side of the bay but only managed a couple each of **Spotted Towhees** and **Golden-crowned Sparrows** before I called it a day, it was just too hot. It was time to head north to Monterey but not before stopping off at Laguna Park in San Luis Obispo to try for the gulls. This turned out to be a good move.

Whilst here yesterday's first-year **Glaucous-winged Gull** looked more like a hybrid due to primaries being a little too dark. A second bird also looked rather hybrid like. There were a number of various plumaged **Ring-billed** and **California Gulls** however gold was struck when one particular bird appeared on the wooden posts by the car parking area, a near adult **Thayer's Gull**. A great bird but it didn't hang around for long but long enough for some photos. So job done, I have my two new gulls.



The drive north was scorching with the sun blasting through the windows, I have toasty ears and burnt hands. Drove through Roberts Park on the way to the motel where there were many **gulls** present, mostly **Western** and **Californians** but also an adult **Glaucous-winged** and several first-winters. The drive around town was frustrating as it was very busy with pre Thanksgiving traffic.

### Day 13: 24<sup>th</sup> November, Tuesday

Up and out just as it was getting light so I could be a Moss Landing nice and early. I was looking forward to this part of the trip as it was the best thing on my last visit. However on arrival things were not as they once were. The place was the same just that there was a distinct lake of gulls and sea duck in the harbour. Last time there were thousands of gulls and the bay was full of point blank Surf Scoters however this time there were about 50 gulls across the whole bay and the only **Surf Scoters** were out beyond the surf, though there were a fair few of them.

Still to work. I started along the State Beach road where there were ten redhead **Red-breasted Mergansers**, several hundred **Least Sandpipers**, only one **Western Sandpiper** picked out, half a dozen or so **Dunlin**, five **Semipalmated Plovers**, numerous **Willetts**, **Marbled Godwits**, **Hudsonian Whimbrels**, **Stilts** and **Avocets** a couple of **Long-billed Curlews** and a bunch of **Short-billed Dowitchers**. Most of these were on the wrong side of the road thus were into the sun for photography but they were good all the same. There was a flock of **Bufflehead** on the north side of the road which were outnumbered by Mallard here and there were two **White-tailed Kites**, one of which perched distantly in a dead tree in the saltmarsh. There were at least a couple of dozen **Sea Otters** in the bay and a lot of Sea Lions on the far side by the marina where they seemed to have taken over the pontoons.



I drove round to the marina but there were no gulls on the building roofs and no scoters so rather disappointing. At the end of the road at the entrance the harbour were plenty of **Pelagic Cormorants** and with a few gulls on the other side so I chucked out some bread to see what happened. Not a lot however a probable adult **Western x Glaucous-winged Gull** came in which showed well but there were otherwise just **Western Gulls**. A couple of **Great Northern Divers** were the only other birds of note here really.

It was still early so I decided to try Salinas River mouth for gulls. I found the parking lot easy enough but the walk out the mass of gulls was long and hot along the beach though a dozen **Long-billed Curlews** showed well en-route. At the gull flock, which numbered several thousand spread over three main groups I started to pick out **Glaucous-winged Gulls**, mostly adults and first-years but try as I might I could not find any Thayer's Gulls here. The vast majority of the gulls were **Western** and **California Gulls** with a few **American Herrings** and **Ring-billeds**, as well aforementioned

**Glaucous-winged.** Surprisingly there was only one **Heermann's Gull** seen. There were several obvious hybrid birds mixed in.

I was still here at midday and it was really very hot and both ears, nose and hands were burning, the sun block was doing nothing. Even when I pulled the fleece over my hands to get them out of the sun the heat was so intense it made little or no difference. Yes it was baking hot and I was wearing a fleece, thought it would help prevent the rest of me from toasting up. By the time I got back to the car I was soaked through to the skin with sweat.

The walk from the beach to the car resulted in a couple of **Hermit Thrushes**, an **American Robin**, several probable **Sand Martins**, two **Townsend Warblers**, a **Yellow-rumped Warbler**, three **American Pipits**, a small flock of **House Finch**, **Meadowlarks** and the usual **White-crowned Sparrows** whilst the pool had **Lesser Yellowlegs** and several **Least Sandpipers**.

It was difficult driving to Roberts Lake with hands that were on fire. Roberts Lake was teeming with gulls again but most were more interested in bathing than coming to the bread I threw out for them however a couple of immature and adult **Glaucous-winged Gulls** were up for it as were several hybrids. I photographed several of the birds present and had a particular interest in a small bird which was delicately built and looked like a juvenile **Thayer's Gull**. I had time later that evening to review the images taken and seems very good for a *thayerii*.

A local birder appeared and according to him Thayer's Gulls have been late in arriving this year, there should be significant numbers around now but they are few and far between, same with American Herring Gull. I seem to be a little too early for these guys this year.

I decided to return to Moss Landing for the evening in the hope that the gull flock would have built up, I stopped off for a Sandwich on the way.

At Moss Landing the gull numbers have only marginally gone up and there wasn't anything immediately obvious. I spent a little time photographing the Sea Otters again as the light was now much better for them and moved to the end of the car park. It was here that I picked out a candidate Thayer's Gull. I managed to get some record shots as it was a little way off before the flock was flushed by people on the beach. It did seem very good for an adult **Thayer's Gull**, even managed the wing tip pattern. So they are around. Despite me not wanting to return to Salinas as it is a hike I will probably do so again in a few days.

One last stop at Roberts Lake on the way back to the Motel where the gull numbers were now right down but there was a second-winter **Glaucous-winged Gull** present. With traffic getting heavy I returned to base and went to the Pharmacy next door to get some stuff for my hands, which were by now agonising. Suffice to say the stuff really didn't help, same make as the sun block that didn't work. Typing this account up this evening has been a little uncomfortable.

#### **Day 14: 25<sup>th</sup> November, Wednesday**

Was at Fisherman's Wharf early to look for Harlequin Duck but after half hour or so searching either side of the pier and in the bay there was no sign and there were very few **Surf Scoters** present. The usual coastal species were evident though and a **Yellow-rumped Warbler** at the end of the pier flycatching which was a little different.

I returned to the car and drove to the other side of the bay and turned right towards a parking lot that had a walkway to the sea lion viewing area. There were plenty there along with a few **Black Turnstones** on the rocks but again no Harlequins. I consoled myself by photographing some **Surf Scoters**, the closest and easiest birds of the trip.

Proceeding along the coastal road I made several stops, which were very productive as I came across the main target, Surfbird. I was able to photograph these cracking waders very well. Other waders were noted from the various pull ins and from the path that I walked for a few hundred metres beyond the lighthouse with 15+ **Willetts** roosting up together, three or more **Black Oystercatchers**, a bunch of **Black Turnstones**, a couple of showy **Hudsonian Whimbrels** and a lot of **Grey Plovers**. A first-year **Mew Gull** flew past but didn't settle with the other gulls gathered on an outcrop but a well marked adult was amongst them though but flew before I could get any shots. Along the coast were numerous **Glaucous-winged** and hybrid Gulls mixed in with the commoner **Western Gulls** whilst **Heermann's Gulls** were also pretty numerous.

After getting another dose of the intense sun I headed back along the coast path to the car where I scoped a dozen or so **Pink-footed Shearwaters** offshore whilst there were a number of unidentified distant auks.

A brief visit to the Monarch reserve saw a bunch hanging in the leaves of the Eucalypts but none feeding as in my last visit, time of year again I guess. There was also a smart male **Townsend's Warbler** here.



I plastered on the sun block and headed for Elkhorn Slough where it was fairly slow but I managed to photograph several **Song Sparrows** and one of the two **Hermit Thrushes** seen. Also here were **Northern Harrier**, **White-tailed Kite** and several **Red-tailed Hawks**,

whilst the rest of the reserve produced a distant flock of **Buffleheads** and an assortment of waders and egrets. A fine flock of 15 or so **Wrentits** moved through the scrub as I headed back to the car in the intense sun.

Not much happening at Moss Landing apart from the always fine Sea Otters and an **Osprey** was on a post by the main road bridge. It was still hot so I headed back towards Monterey and called it a day.

#### **Day 15: 26<sup>th</sup> November, Thursday**

I was really quite knackered after several days of constant heat blasting, up in the late 80's, so decided to have a lay in, the first of the trip, didn't get out until 10 o'clock. As it was Thanksgiving traffic was light but as the day worn on most people headed to the coast where I was.

Opposite the back of the motel was a **Western Bluebird** and a couple of **Oregon Juncos** and a **Red-shouldered Hawk** was on a post along Del Monte Boulevard.

Back along the coast at Point Pinos lots of birds around but also a lot of people, and a number of inconsiderate moron's. I pulled into one of the empty pull in's where a largish flock of gulls were present and tossed some bread out. I was happily snapping away at

the **Heermann's** and **Glaucous-winged Gulls** where a family pulled up and let the kids chase the gulls off. They could clearly see I was photographing them but the mother actively encouraged the little sods to chase them all off, inconsiderate.

So I moved on to another spot and away from the mentally deficient family and started again. Nice flock of gulls had an adult **Mew Gull**, at least 50 **Heermann's Gulls** and several **Glaucous-winged**, including second and third-year birds which I was keen to photograph. Some bread tossing had limited affect but a flock of waders flew in, seemed to have been disturbed from somewhere else along the coast. This flock was of about 30 **Black Turnstones** and 10 **Surfbirds**, excellent stuff.

As more people were now appearing I moved away from where the birds were and where families were rock pooling to further along the beach where no one was and tossed more bread. This time the birds reacted and they came to me. I was happily photographing the birds for about 40minutes or so when again an old git and presumably his grand daughter walked up directly towards me and eventually flushed the gulls. I was pretty close to the shoreline and there was plenty of room behind me to go around but oh no he had to flush the birds. He then started to talk about a washed up dead Sea Lion as totally oblivious to the fact he had flushed the birds I was so clearly and obviously photographing. I told the moron what I thought of his inconsideration and walked back to the car, it was time to leave. A **Yellow-rumped Warbler** perched up nicely close to the car so made up for losing the gulls I guess.

I decided that a return visit to Salinas River mouth was in order as it was a little cooler this afternoon and my thought was that in the afternoon most people would be home having Thanksgiving dinner and not out on the beach disturbing the birds.

Thankfully it seemed my idea was right as there was virtually no one about past the lagoon, and eventually no one at the river mouth. There was a flock of **Horned Larks** along the track to the car park as I drove up.

Pretty much the same set of birds were noted along the walk out to the beach with the best being a **Hermit Thrush**. There were not as many gulls as two days ago but enough to keep me busy for a few hours with a fair number of variously aged **Glaucous-winged** and **American Herring Gulls** being the main prizes but again no Thayer's Gulls.

Looking out to sea I could see some weather coming in so it was time to return to the car, and pretty quickly as I didn't have anything water proof to put over the camera. It was amazing how quickly the fog bank came sweeping in but I was virtually back at the car by the time it reached me so my kit didn't get soaked.

A final stop at Roberts Lake yielded a fine juvenile **American Herring Gull** and the usual other suspects but kept me entertained until it was too dark to photograph much else.

#### **Day 16: 27<sup>th</sup> November, Friday**

Across the road at the back of the motel were **Acorn** and **Nuttalls Woodpeckers**, **Oregon Junco's**, **White-crowned Sparrows** and **Yellow-rumped Warblers**.

Headed north in the mist to Santa Cruz picking up a **Red-shouldered Hawk** perched in a tree at Moss Landing. I decided not to stop due to the very misty conditions. The rest of the journey was rather uneventful with little traffic on the roads though I still managed to miss the turning in Santa Cruz due to poor signage. It didn't take long however to get back on track and soon looking for the **Rock Sandpiper** on the rocks below the main coastal road. It actually didn't take long to locate the bird amongst the 50 or so **Black Turnstones** which was a surprise as this bird can apparently range widely along the coast here. Off shore were at least 80 **Mew Gulls** though the poor weather prevented me from getting the scope out.

Onwards and upwards. Two **White-tailed Kites** were along Highway 280 towards San Francisco. Stopped off to take a few quick pictures of the bridge before negotiating the winding Highway 1 towards Stinson Beach. Bolinas Bay at Stinson Beach was full of birds and I stopped numerous times at the various pull offs. There large flocks of **American Wigeon** with numerous **Pintail** and **Green-winged Teals** mixed in, flocks of **Surf Scoters**, **Bufflehead** and **Lesser Scaups** whilst other duck were represented by three female **Goldeneye**, **Mallard** and a female **Goosander**. There were large flocks of **Marbled Godwits**, **Willetts**, **American Avocets** and **Least Sandpipers** whilst **Western**, **Slavonian** and **Black-necked Grebes** were also here in reasonable numbers. Two **Belted Kingfishers** were seen whilst driving fishing from roadside wires but not from where there were any convenient pull offs. Several **Spotted Sandpipers**, **Red-tailed Hawks**, **Scrub Jays**, **Great Northern Divers**, **Long-billed Curlew**, various Herons and a couple of **Marsh Wrens** finished off a productive spell.

However all was not yet done. Further along the highway the road comes out next to the open bay where several fish restaurants and markets are located and here there were masses of sea duck. There were huge rafts of **Surf Scoters** but again I could not locate any Harlequins amongst them though they are meant to be regular. I did however pick out a few **White-winged Scoters** and a couple of **Red-throated Divers** were added to the trip list. Other sea duck in high numbers were **Bufflehead** and **Lesser Scaup**.

Eventually arrived at Bodega Bay and explored the southern side of the harbour. There was a distinct lack of large gulls. Of those found nearly all were **Western** or **California Gulls** with one adult **Glaucous-winged Gull**. There were large numbers of **Marbled Godwits** and **Willetts**. Further along the coast road were four or five **White Pelicans** and then a large gathering of gulls on the rising tide. Here most of the birds were **Mew Gulls** of various ages but also very numerous were **California Gulls** and **Western Gulls**, I still could not find any Thayer's Gulls. A large raft of **Bufflehead** were feeding further along the shore, about 500 or so, whilst towards the harbour mouth there were five **White-winged Scoters**.

I returned to the **Buffleheads** for some photography as these birds were by far the closest of the trip and even then they were not that close.



Ended up visiting the southern side of the harbour and same story, no Thayer's Gulls, well at least none close enough to confirm. A very pale and delicate looking first-year gull was along the breakwater near fishermen but was too far to positively identify and I wasn't going out there on the slippery rocks. A first-winter **Bonaparte's Gull** done

several fly bys which was only the second of the trip whilst **Slavonian Grebes** were fairly common on this side.

I ended up at the Bodega Harbour Inn which was the second most expensive motel of the trip. Probably most expensive as I got the last room which was for a four people. Still plenty of space to put all my kit in.

#### **Day 17: 28<sup>th</sup> November, Saturday**

Penultimate day and still to find a confirmable immature Thayer's Gull. Had a quick look at the gulls around the harbour but nothing amongst them, 500+ roosting **Marbled Godwits** were impressive though.

Continued along the coast north, passing **Bluebirds** flushing from the roadside fence. Came across a flock of gulls on the beach at Goat Rock which held several **Glaucous-winged Gulls** and **Heermann's Gulls** amongst the usual **Western** and **Californians**. Then a juvenile bird appeared close to where I was lobbing out bread and it came across as a **Thayer's Gull**. It was small and relatively pale. I took many pictures and went to and fro on the ID of the bird, and later when reviewing the images, and finally settled on it being a small pale American Herring Gull (post script, I should have stuck with my original in field ID as it was a Thayer's Gull). However I did find a genuine adult **Thayer's Gull**, though it was a little less than helpful when photographing it. I spent a few hours here with these birds until the beach got too busy with people and all the gulls got flushed.

From here headed south to look for Harlequin Ducks stopping at various advantage points though all I could find were **Buffleheads** and **Surf Scoters** with a few **Lesser Scaups**. Back where I had the huge rafts of **Surf Scoters** yesterday at Mitchell I added two female **Black Scoter** to the trip list.

Ended up in the evening, how the day flew past, on the north side of Bodega Harbour where I was merrily getting frozen photographing **Mew Gulls** that were gathered in force again. The flock of **Buffleheads** were still here and there were a scattering of **Surf Scoters** and various grebes. An **Osprey** flew over. Back along the road I stopped to look at another sea duck flock, which contained mostly **Lesser Scaups** but also **Buffleheads** and **Ruddy Ducks**. A group of 12 **Great Northern Divers** here was nice.

Well to the motel to pack for the last day.

#### **Day 18: 29<sup>th</sup> November, Sunday**

Awoke to an increase in back pain, this had been going on for about four days now but it was getting unbearable. Stuck some painkillers down my neck and headed to the beach at Goat Rock. It was chilly and there were few gulls around but after a little while birds came and went. All in all there far less birds than yesterday but there were four first-year **Glaucous-winged Gulls**, a couple of first-year and adult **American Herring Gulls** and a fine first-winter **Ring-billed Gull**.

With my back starting to really play up, I suspect hand holding the 500mm the past week was the cause, I headed south with the intention of birding stops along the way. The north side of Bodega Harbour had the same species as before though **Surf Scoter** numbers were well up and the **Brant** flock was again present.

Continued onwards stopping at Marshall where a few **Black** and **White-winged Scoters** were picked out from the hordes of Surf's. At Point Reyes I took a right turn with the intention of visiting the lighthouse for one last crack at Harlequin but a sneeze stopped all that. The pain in my back as a result was ridiculous and I had to pull over immediately. It took at least 10minutes before the pain went away but I had by now almost passed out in the car, all life just went from me, ouch.

I gave it half an hour to get myself together before heading towards San Francisco and the airport, further birding was now out of my mind and just getting home. Crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, toll southbound only at \$6, and was at the airport a good 6 hours early. My back was feeling only a little better but still twinging so after getting something to eat, more tablets I found a seat by a window to wait in, last bird of the trip, Western Gull. Flight home painful.

For the trip several things didn't go well; binoculars not close focusing from day one, tripod leg clip snapping in half meaning I had to tape the leg up at the permanently extended position, the set button on the camera becoming stuck thus I had to switch live view off to prevent it being accidentally knock on. Being bitten by a spider, having severe sunburn, having a severe muscle pain in the back. Did I let this get to me whilst I was out there, no surprisingly it didn't as there was some excellent birding going on.

So what was bird of the trip. There are some contenders and I don't think I can choose between them: Clarke's Nutcrackers, Yellow-footed Gull, Thayer's Gull, Surfbird, White-headed Woodpecker, Roadrunner, Ancient Murrelet, Sandhill Cranes, American Buff-bellied Pipit, Gambel's Quail but I think the prize must go to, I can't choose.

Species total = 193



Thayer's Gull, Goat Rock Beach, Jenner, Sonoma Coast 28<sup>th</sup> November 2009