

Southern California: Fall Coastal Birding

September 28 - October 5, 2025

Trip Report by Robert Petty



**With guides Greg Butcher and Robert Petty and participants:
Bill, Julia, Howard, Lynne, Linda, Janet, Loraine, Steve, Jean, Holly, and Tom**



The southern coast of California stretches from Point Conception to San Diego, forming a striking meeting of rugged headlands, sandy beaches, and coastal wetlands shaped by the Pacific Ocean. The coastline bends eastward below Point Conception, giving rise to sheltered bays and estuaries such as Bolsa Chica, and the San Diego River mouth, while offshore lies the Channel Islands—isolated remnants of the mainland’s mountains. Mediterranean in climate, the region experiences mild winters, dry summers, and the cool influence of the California Current, which sustains rich marine ecosystems. Coastal sage scrub and chaparral cloak the hills, giving way to tidal marshes and mudflats that serve as vital stopovers for migratory birds along the Pacific Flyway. Brown Pelicans glide low over the surf, Elegant Terns and Heermann’s Gulls gather in summer, and Snowy Plovers nest on protected beaches. Wetlands host egrets, herons, and Ridgway’s Rails, while rocky points like La Jolla and Point Dume attract cormorants, Black Oystercatchers, and wintering shorebirds. Inland oak woodlands and canyons shelter California Gnatcatchers, Wrentits, and the Oak Titmouse. Offshore, the nutrient-rich upwelling supports thousands of seabirds, from Black-vented Shearwaters to Elegant and Royal Terns. Together, the interplay of ocean currents, arid uplands, and diverse habitats make the southern California coast one of the



most ecologically varied and bird-rich regions in North America. This was our setting as we embarked on our tour to explore Southern Coastal California.

Sunday, September 28: Arrival in Los Angeles | Mugu Rock | First Dinner Together

Our Southern California journey began smoothly, with all participants arriving before noon at the Los Angeles airport. Once the group was assembled, we headed north along the scenic Pacific Coast Highway toward Santa Barbara, our base for the first three nights. We made a stop at Mugu Rock, a striking landmark where the cliffs drop to meet the Pacific. It was here that we enjoyed our first coastal birding of the trip. A Peregrine Falcon was spotted perched on a rocky outcrop east of the highway—our first raptor of the tour. We also observed Brown Pelicans gliding over the water and had good views of both Heermann’s and Western Gulls, species that we would continue to see throughout the week.

From Mugu Rock, we continued to Santa Barbara and checked in at The Milo Hotel, a great location just steps from the waterfront. That evening, we gathered for a welcome dinner at Flor de Maiz, where we enjoyed coastal Mexican cuisine. Following dinner, we gathered back at the hotel around a fire pit, got to know one another, and discussed the itinerary for the days ahead. It was a relaxed and promising start to our week exploring the diverse birdlife and landscapes of Southern California.

Monday, September 29: Ventura Harbor | Channel Islands

What better way to spend our first full day in Southern California than an excursion out to the Channel Islands? We started the day with an early departure to Ventura Harbor, where we enjoyed breakfast at Harbor Cove Café, just steps from the docks. After breakfast, we boarded the 9:00 AM ferry bound for Channel Islands National Park, a highlight of the trip and home to the largest seabird breeding colonies in Southern California.

As we cruised out of the harbor, birds were abundant. We spotted Black Oystercatchers, Black Turnstones, both Heermann’s and Western Gulls, and numerous Brown Pelicans—nearly 100 in total. We also had nice views of Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night-Herons, tucked into the rocky shoreline and harbor edges.

After a brief stop at Scorpion Anchorage, we continued west to Prisoner’s Harbor, located at the boundary between National Park Service and The Nature Conservancy lands on Santa Cruz Island. Not long after disembarking, we had excellent views of one of the day’s primary targets: the Island Scrub-Jay, North America’s only island endemic bird species, found only on Santa Cruz Island.



Our morning hike on Pelican Bay Trail offered sweeping views of the ocean and several more sightings of Island Scrub-Jays. We also encountered the Island Fox, a diminutive and charismatic mammal endemic to the Channel Islands. The birding along the trail was productive, with species like Hutton's Vireo, Acorn Woodpecker, Bewick's Wren, Bushtits, Orange-crowned Warbler, Spotted Towhee, and several Common Ravens.

After a scenic picnic lunch overlooking the Santa Barbara Channel, we returned to Prisoner's Harbor and boarded the ferry back to the mainland. The return trip added a few more sightings to the day's list, including several Red-necked Phalaropes and a couple of sub-adult Jaegers.

That evening we dined at Arnoldi's Café; an unpretentious entrance led to an excellent Italian dinner.

Tuesday, September 30: Coal Oil Point | Nojoqui Falls | Zaca Station Road

Today's focus was on several regional specialties—Snowy Plover, Oak Titmouse, and Yellow-billed Magpie—each with a limited range and strong ties to particular habitats in this part of California.

After breakfast, we began the day at Coal Oil Point Reserve, part of the University of California's Natural Reserve System and located adjacent to the UC Santa Barbara campus. Despite being situated within a densely populated stretch of coastline, the reserve protects a mosaic of beach, dune, and wetland habitats. Our visit began with a warm welcome and orientation from local docents, who provided an overview of the site's history and conservation efforts. On the beach, we quickly located several Western Snowy Plovers—part of a breeding population that persists in the protected dunes. Other shorebirds were abundant as well, including Black-bellied Plover, Whimbrel, Willet, Greater Yellowlegs, Sanderling, and Least Sandpiper.

From the coast, we turned inland to explore the oak woodlands, chaparral, and riparian corridors of the coastal foothills. Our next stop was Nojoqui Falls State Park, where the mix of habitats gave us our best opportunity to find an Oak Titmouse. Not long into our walk, we began seeing and hearing activity in the trees above—Black Phoebe, Hutton's Vireo, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Townsend's Warbler were among the first to appear. Although dense foliage made viewing a bit challenging, patience paid off. Eventually, we had excellent looks at an Oak Titmouse, including one particularly cooperative bird that landed on the ground not far from our group. While Nuttall's Woodpecker eluded us, several Acorn Woodpeckers were seen near the parking area.



After a stop for lunch at California Tacos Cantina in Solvang, we turned our attention to one of the day's most anticipated species: the Yellow-billed Magpie. Unlike its more widespread cousin, the Black-billed Magpie, this species is endemic to California's Central Valley and nearby foothills. Using recent eBird reports, we targeted Zaca Station Road, just off Highway 101—a spot known for reliable sightings. Sure enough, shortly after turning onto the road, we began seeing Yellow-billed Magpies near the irrigation lines along Andrew Murray Vineyards. For many participants, this was a life bird, and we had excellent, prolonged views. While watching the magpies, a Golden Eagle passed overhead across the road—an unexpected bonus.

We had time for a brief stop at Cachuma Lake Park on our return to Santa Barbara, where we spotted both Clark's and Western Grebes out on the water, though at some distance.

Dinner that evening was at Caya Restaurant, a quiet and comfortable spot that offered a relaxed end to the day. Afterward, several in the group enjoyed a spontaneous game of cornhole just outside the restaurant—thanks to the conveniently placed boards near the parking area. (Holly proved to be the best shot!)

Wednesday, October 1: Bolsa Chica | Crystal Cove

Today we departed Santa Barbara and made our way south toward San Diego. The majority of the day was spent on the road—first along Highway 101, then south on the 405 through Los Angeles, before reconnecting with the Pacific Coast Highway as we continued along the coast. We had a few planned stops enroute to break up the drive—Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve, a good spot for Reddish Egret, and Crystal Cove State Park, where we'll have our first good shot at finding the California Gnatcatcher.

Our first birding stop for the day was Bolsa Chica, a productive coastal wetland near Huntington Beach known for its tidal marshes, mudflats, and coastal dune habitat. Shorebirds and waterfowl were abundant along the boardwalk, and we quickly picked up a Reddish Egret. But the highlight came moments later, when a Ridgway's Rail flew across the marsh and landed just thirty feet away, in full view among sparse reeds. Rails are famously secretive, and even a brief glimpse is often considered a success. In this case, the bird remained in the open for nearly fifteen minutes, preening calmly and offering unusually prolonged views. Recently split from Clapper Rail, Ridgway's Rail is federally listed as endangered due to ongoing habitat loss. It was summed up best when Greg commented on the sighting: "That was likely the best view of any rail anywhere by anybody."

From Bolsa Chica, we made a quick detour to a nearby residential feeder that had hosted several species of hummingbird. We found both Anna's and Allen's Hummingbirds there. While it was likely a bit early for migrating Calliope, Rufous, or Black-chinned, it was still a worthwhile stop.

Our final birding location for the day was Crystal Cove State Park, a stretch of coastal bluffs and inland chaparral south of Newport Beach. Time was limited, but we managed a short walk toward Pelican Point. Along the way,



we located a California Gnatcatcher—an endemic species with a highly restricted range—along with Wrentit, Bushtit, and California Towhee.

We arrived in San Diego by evening and checked in at Humphrey’s Half Moon Inn on Shelter Island, our home base for the remainder of the tour. Our evening dinner was at the Bali Hai restaurant which offered Pacific Island-style food with an amazing view of the San Diego coastline—ideal for relaxing after a full day of travel and birding.

Thursday, October 2: Point La Jolla | Lake Hodges | Avian Behavior Conservancy

Following breakfast at Humphrey’s, our first full day in the San Diego area began with a visit to Point La Jolla, a rocky coastal promontory known for its rich marine and intertidal ecology. Kelp forests and coastal upwellings offshore support abundant marine life, while the cliffs and shoreline provide habitat for seabirds and marine mammals. In addition to the ever-present Western and Heermann’s Gulls and Brown Pelicans, we observed Black Oystercatchers, Black Turnstones, both Elegant and Royal Terns, and numerous Brandt’s Cormorants. Harbor Seals and California Sea Lions were hauled out on nearby rocks, providing a memorable backdrop to the morning’s birding.

From the coast, we headed inland to Lake Hodges and the Piedras Pintadas Trail, which winds through coastal sage scrub—a characteristic habitat of inland San Diego County. Here we picked up California Towhee, Bewick’s Wren, Wrentit, Say’s Phoebe, and a few Cassin’s Kingbirds. The highlight of the stop, however, was spotting two Greater Roadrunners perched on distant rocks. Although views were brief, it was a treat to see this charismatic desert species in its native habitat.

Our primary destination for the day was the Avian Behavior Conservancy, a 20-acre facility in Escondido founded in 2013 to promote education and conservation through close-up experiences with birds. Founder Hillary Hankey and two of her team members welcomed us with a tour of the property, followed by an engaging and interactive program. Several participants had the chance to don a glove and experience a Harris’s Hawk, Barn Owl, or Crested Caracara landing directly on their arm—a memorable opportunity to observe these raptors up close.

The highlight of the program came when Hillary introduced us to the Conservancy’s Andean Condor—one of the largest flying birds in the world, with a wingspan of up to ten feet. This iconic scavenger plays a vital ecological role in nutrient cycling but is considered vulnerable due to habitat loss, poisoning, and low reproductive rates. Hillary demonstrated the remarkable flight of the condor by having it fly from ridge to ridge across a small ravine on her property.



We returned to Shelter Island in the evening and enjoyed a delicious Italian dinner at the Old Venice Restaurant. As on every night of the trip, we gathered afterward back at the hotel to go through the day's checklist and review our sightings.

Friday, October 3: San Diego River Mudflats | Whale Watch & Pelagic Birds | Birch Aquarium

Today we returned to the ocean—but before our whale-watching adventure, we had time for a brief morning visit to the mudflats along the San Diego River Trail near Robb Field. This estuarine habitat, where the river meets the Pacific Ocean, is a dynamic ecotone of tidal mudflats, salt marsh, and coastal dunes. Rich in biodiversity, it serves as an important stopover along the Pacific Flyway. Highlights here included Black-bellied Plover, Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwit, Willet, and a lone Least Sandpiper. Among the waders were Snowy Egret, Reddish Egret, and our first Little Blue Herons of the trip.

An unexpected bonus came when a local birder kindly tipped us off to a Tropical Kingbird spotted earlier in the eucalyptus trees surrounding the athletic fields at Robb Field. After a few minutes of scanning, we located the bird—a large, yellow-bellied flycatcher perched, offering good views.

From there, we made our way to Mission Bay to board our boat with Legacy Whale Watch for an afternoon on the open water. The harbor was full of activity, with good looks at Western and Heermann's Gulls, Elegant Terns, Brandt's and Double-crested Cormorants, and both Snowy and Great Egrets. Not long after departure, Greg spotted a Sabine's Gull flying over the channel—a real surprise. This striking gull, with its distinctive gray, black, and white wing pattern and forked tail, breeds in the Arctic and winters at sea in tropical waters. We had excellent looks at two individuals as they moved through the area.

Once offshore, we encountered several groups of Black-vented Shearwaters and a few Red-necked Phalaropes. Although we were hopeful for views of migrating Blue, Humpback, or Fin Whales, they remained elusive. One possible Minke Whale was called out by the boat's naturalist, but unfortunately, it remained out of sight for most of the group. That said, we were far from disappointed—several pods of Short-beaked Common Dolphins appeared throughout the afternoon, riding the bow of the boat and putting on a great show. We also spotted a few flying fish skimming across the surface and had a brief but clear view of an Ocean Sunfish (*Mola mola*), a large, uniquely shaped fish with a rounded body and truncated tail.

We would be remiss without visiting San Diego's world-class aquarium. A short afternoon visit to the Birch Aquarium gave us a chance to experience the full scope of the ecology of this coastal region, from a two-story kelp forest and coral habitats to an outdoor tide-pool plaza overlooking the Pacific.



Dinner that evening took us to Point Loma Seafoods, a local institution right on the pier. The walk-in-style restaurant offered a variety of fresh seafood and a chance to enjoy a relaxed meal overlooking San Diego Bay—an appropriate way to end a day on the water.

Saturday, October 4: Tijuana River Valley | Seacoast Drive

Our final full day of the Southern California: Fall Coastal Tour began with a drive south to the Bird & Butterfly Garden in Tijuana River Valley Regional Park, within sight of the Mexican border. This small, cultivated area—just four acres—is densely planted with native vegetation chosen to attract birds and butterflies. The winding path took us through a variety of the plantings where we found Mourning Doves, Anna’s and Allen’s Hummingbirds, a couple of Red-shouldered Hawks, Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel and a good look at a Cooper’s Hawk perched in one of the small trees.

We also spotted a couple of non-native bird species that have established through escaped or released caged birds from the pet trade—Swinhoe’s White-eye and the Scaly-breasted Munia (both species native to Southeast Asia). We also saw or heard a variety of native songbirds including Marsh Wren, Northern Mockingbird, House Finch, Lesser Goldfinch, California and Spotted Towhees, Common Yellowthroat, and Yellow-rumped Warbler, among others.

From there, we headed to the southern end of San Diego Bay, where the Otay River empties into a wide expanse of tidal flats and open water. This habitat, shaped by salt evaporation ponds and marsh, attracts a large number of wetland birds. Highlights here included dozens of Black-necked Stilts and over 300 Black-bellied Plovers, joined by the usual mix of gulls, terns, cormorants, and egrets. We spent some time scanning the flocks carefully, hoping to pick out a Pacific Golden-Plover, but all proved to be Black-bellied. That said, we were able to pick out a half-dozen Red Knots in the group, and we had excellent comparative views of a Lesser Yellowlegs standing among several Greater Yellowlegs.

After lunch at Mike Hess Brewing, we made our way down Seacoast Drive, where a narrow spit of land separates the ocean from the Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge. This stop gave us good looks at Willets, Marbled Godwits, Whimbrels, and a Long-billed Curlew, as well as over 200 Brown Pelicans.



We ended the day with a farewell dinner at Jack and Giulio's in San Diego's Old Town, a classic family-run Italian restaurant. Over good food and conversation, we reflected on the week—sharing highlights and favorite moments from our time together exploring this rich and diverse stretch of the California coast.

Sunday, October 5: Hotel del Coronado Beach | Departures

One species we had hoped to find during the tour was the Surfbird, which can occasionally be seen along rocky coastal shorelines. While some of our group had to head to the airport to catch their morning flights, a few took advantage of their somewhat later flights to make one last attempt to find the Tattler by scoping the beach in front of the Hotel del Coronado. No Tattlers this time! But this final checklist of birds for the tour included both Ruddy and Black Turnstone, Sanderlings, some Elegant Terns, and of course Heerman's and Western Gulls as well as one Brown Pelican! By late afternoon, all members of our Southern California tour were on their way home, taking with them great memories from a full week of birding and discovery along this beautiful stretch of coast.

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