

# Southern California: Coastal Birding Trip Report | February 16-22, 2026 By Greg Butcher



**Compiled by guide Greg Butcher. Our clients included Susan, Shirley, Sharon, Gene, Emily, and Barbara**



“Southern” is a word most of us dream about in February, but the weather started out wet and chilly in Los Angeles and Santa Barbara. The rain chased us to San Diego, but then things got warmer and sunnier each day. We only missed one birding site because of rain, and we saw all the species we expected from that stop. We kept looking for signs of spring, and we discovered quite a few, while also enjoying many species that only spend the winter in Southern California. We divided our time between the ocean and inland and produced a very respectable bird (and mammal!) list in a fun week in the Southern California Bight.

## **Monday, February 16                      Arrival in Los Angeles**

Four of us arrived on Sunday. I picked up Susan at the airport this morning, then 3 folks at 2 hotels, and we met Sharon at the Proud Bird for an early lunch. We were close to the airport, so we picked up Barbara to head to Santa Barbara. Did I mention that it was raining? It was! We had a wonderful stop planned at Mugu Rock, but it was pouring there. We saw some clearing while we were driving, but . . . Luckily, there was some let up after we arrived at The Milo, our home for the first 3 nights. Most of us crossed the road to the beach for a nice assortment of coastal birds, including our only



Black Skimmers of the trip and a first look at adult and young Heerman's Gulls. There were 600 Brown Pelicans! My favorite meal of the entire trip was at tonight's dinner spot, Flor de Maiz, a Oaxacan restaurant with several different flavors of mole, a super-rich Mexican sauce.

## **Tuesday, February 17                      Santa Cruz Island**

With all the rain on Monday, most of us were convinced that our boat trip would be canceled today, as it had been on Monday. But we got to go! Most of us started out with Junior Breakfast Burritos at Harbor Cove Café; the café also supplied us with sandwiches and lunch boxes for the island. Last year we went to Prisoners Harbor, but this year we stopped off at Scorpion Anchorage and walked through a valley to the second campground for lunch. The boat ride out to the island was a bit rough, and a couple of participants paid the price. The folks on the bow saw 150 Western Grebes, 100 Brandt's Cormorants, hundreds of Common Dolphins, dozens of California Sea Lions, 30 Common Murres, 2 Red-throated Loons, and 2 Rhinoceros Auklets The island weather was mostly good, but there were intermittent showers, including of course while we were eating our lunch. We saw many seabirds from the dock, then quickly found the Island Scrub-Jays we were after, totaling at least 10, with similar numbers of the super-tame Island Foxes. We found Spotted Towhees, but surprisingly, there are no California Towhees on the island. We got our first looks at Allen's and Anna's Hummingbirds, White- and Golden-crowned Sparrows, Say's and Black Phoebes, Bushtit, Hermit Thrush, and Loggerhead Shrike. The two dominant vegetation types on the island were grassland and chaparral, dominated by shrubs. As in the rest of California, the eucalyptus trees were introduced from Australia. The boat ride back was much smoother, so we had more folks at the bow to enjoy a huge feeding frenzy with two Humpback Whales, hundreds of dolphins, dozens of California Sea Lions, and dozens of Heerman's and Western Gulls, plus all the Western Grebes and Brandt's Cormorants. We had our first Italian dinner tonight at Arnoldi's Café, an unassuming building, but luckily with good food.

## **Wednesday, February 18                      Coal Oil Point | Nojoqui Falls | Cachuma Lake**

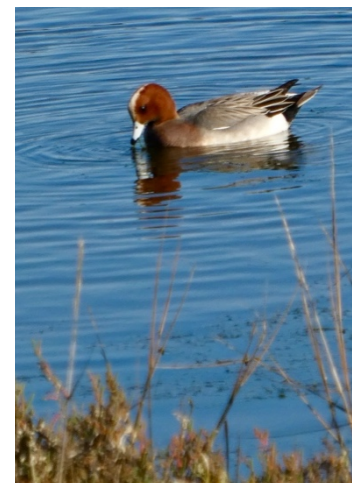
The University of California at Santa Barbara offered us a guided tour at Coal Oil Point starting at 8 am, so we got up a bit early to visit Lighthouse Coffee for a surprisingly good quick breakfast. Luckily, our guide was Kevin, a professor who has been involved in Snowy Plover recovery on the site for 20+ years. I told eBird that we had 30 Snowy Plovers, but that was a big underestimate because they are so well camouflaged in the sand and debris. We also had 30+ Sanderlings chasing the waves, both Least and Western Sandpipers, and Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plovers. We had a tricky walk along the beach since we were there at high tide. After our beach visit, we were off to Nojoqui Falls County Park, a completely different habitat dominated by oak trees. We enjoyed some of California's oak specialty birds there, including of course Acorn Woodpecker and Oak Titmouse, plus Western Bluebirds. We enjoyed our first California Scrub-



Jays for mental comparisons to yesterday's Island Scrub-Jays. Some of us got a good look at a Nuttall's Woodpecker, a Bushtit, and a Lesser Goldfinch. We drove by a small cattle feedlot and picked up our best looks at Brewer's and Red-winged Blackbirds and Brown-headed Cowbirds; we also found our first Cassin's Kingbird and California Towhee of the trip. We were constantly searching for signs of spring, and we found a male donkey who was sure it was spring and a female donkey who declined his explicit overtures. Naturalist Journey's office manager (and dedicated birder) Vernie Aikins told me about Yellow-billed Magpies along Ballard Canyon Road, and we picked up a dozen of them. We added two important species at Cachuma Lake Park: Greater Scaup and Clark's Grebe; thank goodness for some sunshine! We also found our first Great-tailed Grackles here. When we returned to the hotel, one of the valets pointed out the roosting Black-crowned Night Heron. For dinner, we had a chilly hike on the pier to our first seafood restaurant, Moby Dick.

## **Thursday, February 19      Drive to San Diego | Bolsa Chica | Hummingbirds**

Monday's rain (on arrival day) had been widely predicted, but I missed the news about today. One of our group said that the storm was tracking south at the same pace we were. We started out with breakfast at Chad's next to The Milo, our Santa Barbara hotel. We had a long drive south to Bolsa Chica, a wonderful birding site right next to the Pacific Coast Highway. Unfortunately, it was raining when we arrived and, if anything, got worse while we were there. Our group was undaunted! We picked up a flock of half a dozen Brant, 10 species of ducks, and an amazingly close and confiding Ridgway's Rail. There was a big roosting flock of Marbled Godwits and dowitchers. (All the dowitchers I could see well were Long-billed.) We saw our only Caspian Tern of the tour and our first Forster's Tern, plus a pair of Horned Grebes. A couple of Yellow-crowned Night Herons were scrunched up in the vegetation. We were pretty wet in the end, but buoyed by 29 species of birds. I was embarrassed when my chosen restaurant wasn't open for lunch and a bit nervous when the next-door place was called Jan's Health Bar. But they had tuna salad, and everyone seemed to find something to their liking. The hummingbird feeder was still active two blocks away, and we had great looks of male Anna's and Allen's Hummingbirds at point-blank range through the (continuing) rain. The low point came a few minutes later when we arrived at Crystal Cove State Park as the rain intensified. Gene and I took a quick look outside – maybe a minute – before we jumped back in the van and continued south. We would have to look elsewhere for California Thrasher, California Gnatcatcher, and Wrentit – and we did! As we arrived at Humphrey's Half Moon Inn, the rain started diminishing, and we were able to walk to Bali Hai, my second favorite restaurant of the trip because of the great views of



San Diego and the Pacific Islands / Asian Fusion menu.

## **Friday, February 20                      Point La Jolla | Lake Hodges | Raptor Flights**

After a substantial breakfast at the hotel, we went on a detour to South Clairemont Community Park to chase reports of a Red-throated Pipit hanging out with a flock of American Pipits. We found the flock – we counted 23 – and carefully picked out one with blackish instead of brown streaks. Gene got definitive photos. Then we were on to the regularly scheduled Point La Jolla. We had seen California Sea Lions swimming through the water, but at Point La Jolla, we got to see them lollygagging on the rocks. They were accompanied by large flocks of Brandt’s Cormorants, Brown Pelicans, Royal Terns, and Western and Heerman’s Gulls. Our most definitive sign of spring for the entire trip was seeing several Brandt’s Cormorants incubating eggs. We found a Hudsonian Whimbrel snuggled in the vegetation, ticked the expected Black Turnstones, and enjoyed our first Black Oystercatchers. After La Jolla, we headed inland to a coastal sage-scrub habitat near Lake Hodges. (We never did see the lake.) Our targets here were clear: California Thrasher, California Gnatcatcher, and Wrentit. We had great looks at the thrasher (4 individuals), good looks at the gnatcatcher, and mediocre looks at the Wrentit, but they were all here! Other scrub birds included California and Spotted Towhees, White-crowned and Golden-crowned Sparrows, Bewick’s Wren, Cassin’s Kingbird, and both Roadrunner and Coyote, although no pursuit was seen. After a good lunch in Escondido, we drove uphill to the Animal Behavior Conservancy, where we were treated to aerial performances by a Crested Caracara, a Harris’s Hawk, an American Barn Owl, and an Andean Condor. In addition, we got to see a number of exotic birds that Hilary keeps on the property. After experiencing San Diego traffic, we enjoyed dinner at Old Venice Restaurant, even though the Friday night crowd was pretty noisy.

## **Saturday, February 21                      San Diego River | Whale Watching | San Elijo Lagoon**

One of the best birding spots in San Diego looks pretty unassuming: the San Diego River mudflats at Robb Field. At first it looked like the Saturday morning crowd was going to scare away all the birds, but then we found the mudflats where the people and dogs couldn’t go. We enjoyed Reddish Egret, Little Blue Heron, and Eurasian Wigeon on the mudflats and Tropical Kingbird and Swinhoe’s White-eye (a non-native species) in the park. We picked up California Gull and Greater Yellowlegs on the mud, surprisingly our only sightings of these two otherwise common species. We had to leave sooner than we wanted to board our boat for a three-hour pelagic trip into the Pacific. It was worth it though, because the sky was sunny and the ocean produced three Gray Whales swimming together on their spring migration and a Humpback. We saw mostly single Black-vented Shearwaters flying by the boat throughout the ride, totaling 25, and were rewarded by a group of three Pink-footed Shearwaters (larger and paler than the Black-vents). On the way out, we noticed a Surfbird on the jetty. Because of the beautiful weekend weather, the boat was full, and everyone headed to lunch at the dock. One of our enterprising participants found a good taco restaurant a couple of miles away, a great solution to the long wait we were expecting. Next, we were off to perhaps the birdiest place on the whole trip: San Elijo Lagoon (west).



We picked up 14 species of ducks, including our second Eurasian Wigeon of the day, a lone Redhead, our only Green-winged Teal of the trip, and a female Common Goldeneye. We had the usual group of dowitchers, but this time they were in the sun, and we could see both Long-billed and Short-billed. Luckily, they flew after that, and we could hear both Long-billed and Short-billed calls simultaneously. We enjoyed a Merlin fly-by and rejoiced when it landed on a fencepost for scoping. As we were walking out of the lagoon, we were distracted by a number of songbirds. The most obvious were both non-native species: Swinhoe's White-eye and Scaly-breasted Munia. Tonight's dinner was at the most unassuming dinner restaurant of the trip: Point Loma Seafood. It looks like the kind of place where you pick up fish to take home to cook yourself, but the fish is fresh and the menu options are good. They have very casual indoor and outdoor seating. It was warmer than earlier in the trip, but still cool enough that we ate indoors.

## **Sunday, February 22**                      **Tijuana River Valley**

After breakfast this morning, we headed towards Mexico. We saw parts of Tijuana and lots of the wall. But our destination was the Bird & Butterfly Garden in Tijuana River Valley, still in California. The garden has both dry and irrigated parts. The dry parts produced first, with three White-tailed Kites, a Red-tailed Hawk, a Red-shouldered Hawk, and a Northern Harrier. As we walked through the irrigated portion, we picked up an American Kestrel, a Lesser Goldfinch, a Hermit Thrush, a Wrentit, a pair of Northern Rough-winged Swallows, a female Western Tanager, and a big display involving five Nuttall's Woodpeckers in one dead tree. We added two Marsh Wrens from the bulrushes. Then we drove to 10<sup>th</sup> Street Pond for our appointed views of a dozen American Avocets and 200(!) Black-necked Stilts. There were 50 Royal Terns and 10 Forster's Terns. In San Diego, when you go for lunch at a beer joint, you aren't surprised when the tacos are great. We had other plans, but we went back to the Bird & Butterfly Garden to see what birds would be attracted to the water drips. We weren't disappointed! We added a Rufous Hummingbird along with Allen's and Anna's, Hutton's Vireo, and Black-throated Gray, Townsend's, and Wilson's Warblers for a total of 6 warbler species. On our way back to the hotel, we tackled Cabrillo National Monument in a vain attempt to find the Wandering Tattler that folks had been seeing. We saw a likely spot, but couldn't get there since the monument closes surprisingly early. Then we had our farewell dinner at Jack & Giulio's in San Diego's famed restaurant district.

## **Monday, February 23**                      **Departure from San Diego**

We had our final breakfast in the restaurant and our final views of the Red-crowned Amazons in and around the hotel, then it was off to home for most, even though several of us were returning to a significant northeastern snowfall. And just when San Diego was beginning to warm up! The Southern California Bight had produced a healthy bird list, some great views of whales, and a potential roadrunner and coyote standoff – lots to remember from the week!

*Photo Credits: Group on Santa Cruz Island by Shirley Devan, Loggerhead Shrike by Greg Butcher, Santa Cruz Island Fox by Greg Butcher, Island Scrub Jay by Julie Schneider, Ridgway's Rail by Greg Butcher, Hudsonian Whimbrel by Shirley Devan, Brandt's Cormorant by Shirley Devan, Anna's Hummingbird by Shirley Devan, Eurasian Widgeon by Shirley Devan, Black Oystercatcher by Julie Schneider.*