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California Coast October 5 - 12, 2013 Trip Report

Greg Smith and Kelly Vandenneuvel, guides, with participants Joan, Margaret, Rosemary, Jean, Ilayna & Glenn, Carol & Eddie



Saturday, Oct. 5 **Arrival**

Those of us who had just completed the Eastern Sierra and Yosemite journey headed west through the Great Central Valley. We had some very good looks at Prairie Falcon, Say's Phoebe and other valley

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birds. We had a large flock of White-faced Ibis fly over as we drove west. Western Tanagers put in an appearance as did Wild Turkey. We arrived in Monterey in late afternoon where we caught up with Kelly who had picked up three more folks in San Jose. We ended up heading over to a fine Italian restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf for our welcome dinner where we were serenaded by busloads of California sea lions...

Sunday, Oct. 6 **Monterey**

Five of us were scheduled to take a Debi Shearwater pelagic trip today out of Half Moon Bay and headed out in the morning, more on this in a bit.



Kelly took the rest of the group on a wonderful hike to Point Lobos State Park, one of the prettiest coastal parks in the state. Trails wind along the edge of the ocean with lichen-festooned Monterey pine and cypress. Sea otters lounged in the kelp while Black Oystercatchers foraged on the rocks. Dolphins and humpback could be seen from shore, quite magical.

For those on that ended up being on the ocean for twelve hours with Debi Shearwater, it was spectacular! Glassy, calm seas with sunny

weather made for great viewing conditions. We started off with a few rocky shorebirds on the harbor jetties. Then paralleling the coast, we found numerous Marbled Murrelets in basic plumage actively diving and feeding. It didn't take long before we found some deepwater pelagic species. First up were numerous Pink-footed Shearwaters and then Buller's Shearwaters. Both Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers were out in force harassing gulls and terns. Common Murre were everywhere.

We got out to Pioneer Canyon where there was a significant upwelling. And where this is an upwelling there are usually whales. But I don't think any of us were prepared for what we



encountered over the canyon – every direction held numerous whales. Some in groups, others in just pairs. All told there were around 65 humpback whales and 25 of the world’s largest animals – Blue whales. Amazing! We had whales come at the boat and swim underneath. Everywhere we looked there were whales. And in that upwelling there were more shearwaters, lots of phalaropes, plenty of murre and one or two Tufted Puffins. All of this made for an outstanding twelve-hour trip as we motored back into the harbor at sunset...

Monday, Oct. 7 **Big Sur to Morro Bay**



We spent the morning at the world-class Monterey Bay Aquarium. Fish and sharks were in the large tanks, schools of anchovies in small tanks and a myriad of tanks held different species of jellyfish. The aviary had shorebirds and then there were the sea otters. There was the journey through John Steinbeck’s “Log of the Sea of Cortez” and a walk along “Cannery Row”. Touch tanks, tropical saltwater aquariums, a gift shop, microscopes, and finally lunch at Cindy’s Waterfront, a wonderful farm-to-table restaurant. A wonderful way to spend the

morning before we headed south on the famed Big Sur Highway – our quest were California Condor and some of that California coastline.

Big Sur Highway is a sinuous, narrow-lane road that hugs near vertical slopes of rock. It slips and slides in the most inappropriate places, but is still the only functional route anywhere along the coast. The north end of the drive is punctuated by rocky outcroppings filled with tide pools and sea otters. The south part of the drive is sheer cliffs, while the middle runs through the community of Big Sur. This drive is a must for anyone wanting to get to know a little bit about this piece of California history.

It was along the sheer cliffs that we stopped to look for condors. After about fifteen minutes we spotted our first bird, an adult that wanted to play hide-n-seek with the ridgeline. We did get good looks once it left the ridgeline alone. But we got much better looks at a sub-adult that came relatively low overhead moving to the south. Perfect!

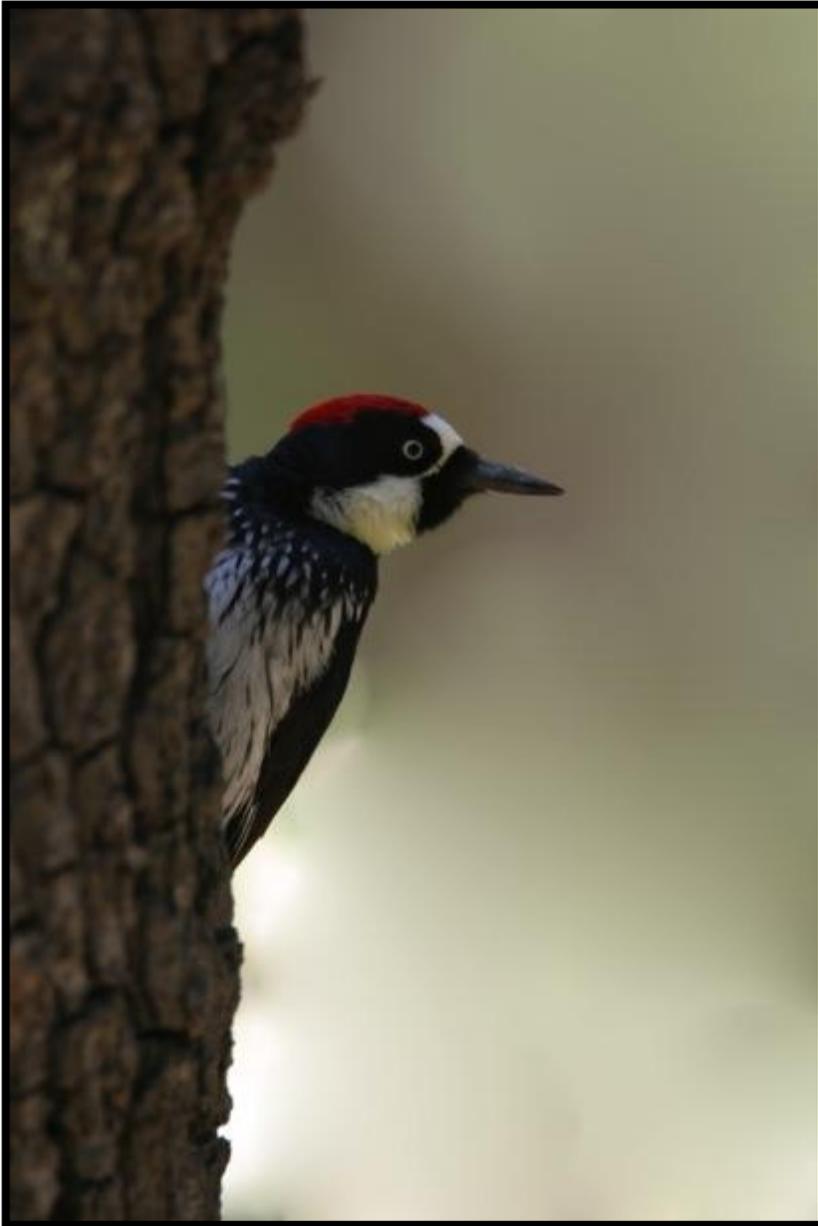


We finished our drive to the south where we checked into our lodging and then headed to over to The Naturalist Journeys, LLC PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632 PH: 520.558.1146 Toll free 866.900.1146 Fax 650.471.7667
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Gallery for some very tasty fish dinners...

Tuesday, Oct. 8

San Luis Obispo County



Today we were going to explore the eastern part of the county, areas where rainfall is minimal and the environment has adapted. October is about five weeks before the “rainy” season starts, so things are parched in this area. With that in mind, we headed to a reservoir that had some water and was an attractant to anything that needed to drink to survive.

Deer were fairly common along the shore and the small flocks of early arriving waterfowl allowed us to find a half-dozen of the more common waterfowl in the west. The only U.S. grebe we were missing was the Red-necked and we did manage to find a gorgeous adult-plumaged Bald Eagle perching high in a pine feeling the warmth of the morning sun. Just to make that much more special another flock of Yellow-billed Magpies put in an appearance. And in the early morning light, they were stunning!!!

We moved over to a picnic area with green grass and found a flock of Western Bluebirds that were associating with both races of the Yellow-rumped Warblers. An Oak

Titmouse put in a couple of appearances as we chased at least two Red-breasted Sapsuckers around to get a better look. Acorn Woodpeckers were cracking us up with their antics as we decided to head a little further east for a different type of cracking...

It was about a forty-minute drive east to the Carizzo Plain National Monument with its amazing geologic features and vistas. During winter months the “Plains” are home to numerous raptors and flocks of Mountain Bluebirds and Plovers. But the rain had not started...



From a distance we could see the important womb-shaped archeological site known as Painted Rock. Home to hundred's of years of pictographs and petroglyphs, this was a significant site to all of the cultures that had ever inhabited this area.

We were headed to Wallace Creek, a world-renowned site known for its very obvious example of the earth moving. Wallace Creek is an ephemeral stream that only flows with the immediate runoff from a rainstorm. When the storm ends, so

does the flow. But through the eons it has eroded a channel into the friable soil of the Carrizo Plain.

At the junction of the creek were we standing, the downslope channel does an abrupt ninety-degree turn to the north. And it does it twice within in a couple of hundred meters. This offset is the result of the San Andreas Fault, California's long north-south junction of the Pacific and the North American plates. Massive earthquakes have shifted Wallace Creek at least ten meters twice during its life. It really does help you realize how the power of what lies beneath us...

Other than a few Sage Sparrows, the dryness had taken its toll on wildlife. With no other sightings we headed back to the coast. Kelly and Arent were going to host us at their ranch for a Santa Maria style BBQ, and we needed just a little time to get cleaned up.

We had an inordinate amount of great food and conversation the both of them shared ranch stories and all the birds on their property. A really sweet way to end the day...

Wednesday, Oct. 9

Morro Bay South to Ventura

First stop this morning was Morro Rock where we got to view sea otters up close. And with two of the females having young, it took a while to pull away. We could hear that Canyon Wren, but we couldn't seem to find him on the rocky face. But we did find the Southside Kids, the two Peregrine Falcons that call this part of the Rock home. They were out harassing anything that made the mistake of getting too close...





Various water birds were roosting or actively feeding on the ocean's abundant riches. Flocks of Brown Pelicans with their attendant Heermann's Gulls, mixed with the resident Western Gulls forming large, motionless rafts of brown and black. California sea lions were barking a up a storm as if a stranger was moving through their midst. A day in the life of Morro Rock that we had to leave, reluctantly...

Next up were a few other of the California specialties: Common Bushtit, Wrentit, and the

appropriately-billed California Thrasher. The California chaparral at Montana de Oro State Park holds all sorts of surprises, whether it is birds, plants or wildlife. All are adapted to the Mediterranean climate that makes California so livable for so many. It is a wonderful mix of wet and dry, warm and mild and weather worthy of shorts 90% of the year. And the birds know that feeling too...

We had lunch in San Luis Obispo at another farm-to-table restaurant, Eat-by-Design. And afterwards it was to head south to the Gold Coast. Point Conception, which lies west of Santa Barbara is one of those magical points on a map the denotes weather changes. Our climate, influenced by ocean water temperatures, is warmer on the south side of the point. The plant communities introduce new, more frost tender species. In winter, bird species show more diversity than to the north with the warmer temperatures. There can be some wild storms, but not with the regularity north of the point. That is one of the reasons it is called the Gold Coast...

We arrived in Ventura with enough time to enjoy the sunset from our harbor-view hotel...

Thursday, Oct. 10

Ventura and Environs

We were going to spend the day exploring Ventura and Oxnard for western migrant. The first two weeks of October are prime time for migration on the Pacific Flyway, what better way to catch up with the birds of the left coast that we had missed. And all the while looking for a few east coast vagrants to spice things up.



We took a walk along the beach and towards the jetty at the harbor entrance. Lots of Elegant Terns mixed in with a few Whimbrel and Black-bellied Plovers. There was a solo Brown Booby hanging out on the foghorn as we made our way back to the parking lot.

Remember those frost tender plants this far south? A number of them are from the southern hemisphere, and one in particular, the pineapple guava, puts out a smorgasbord of red flowers filled with nectar. That nectar draws hummingbirds and warblers alike! We had both genders of Anna's

feasting on this easy drip feeder. They were always on the move, but we got good looks at both male and female!

Next we went hunting pipits and raptors with all of the western species seen well. Then it was time for the Laguna tams, a row of tamarisk trees that for whatever reason this year, was playing host to all of the western warblers!

We started at one end of the trees and slowly birded our way to the south end. Yellow, Nashville, Townsend's, Hermit, Yellow-rumped, Wilson's, Black-throated Gray, Common Yellowthroat and Orange-crowned Warblers along with Pacific-slope and Willow Flycatchers and Western Wood-Pewee. Throw in a Prothonotary Warbler and you have a pretty spectacular day of birding all wrapped up in a couple of hours.

We headed to lunch and then back to the beach where we got good looks at Black Oystercatcher, Black Turnstone, Ruddy Turnstone and Wandering Tattler. We called it in late afternoon so everyone could have a couple of hours prior to dinner and a night before tomorrow's boat ride to the land of the Island Scrub Jay.

Friday, Oct. 11

Santa Cruz Island

The weather when we awoke was sweet and the forecast for our boat ride out to Santa Cruz Island was for calm seas – perfect! After breakfast we headed to the Island Packers dock and boarded the boat.

First up was that Brown Booby, still perched on the Fog horn at the harbor entrance. Then as soon as we left the harbor there were large rafts of Western Grebes just outside the breakers. As we got further out in the Santa Barbara Channel we started running into loose flocks of foraging terns, mostly Elegants. And with those flocks were the Northern Hemisphere's pirates of the seas – jaegers. We got very good looks at both Parasitic and Pomarine of all age groups. They would just disconcert any tern with a fish in its bill until the harried bird dropped its catch where it was gobbled up by the jaeger.



There were also small groups of Black-vented Shearwater, with a few solo Sooty Shearwaters mixed in. Then Buller's Shearwater mixed in with the groups giving us a three-shearwater trip. We motored over a deepwater shelf where Common Murre and Cassin's Auklet were common. And this where were saw small pods of Common Dolphin and even smaller groups of Rizzo's Dolphin. It wasn't until we got pretty close to Santa Cruz Island that

we saw gray whales. They were loping along near the surface as they made their annual trek to the warm waters of Baja Sur. There they would breed and calves would be born, the next generation for eastern population of this species.

This year was the first in decades that numerous Blue-footed Boobies had made the unusual trek to California waters. The Captain knowing there were birders on board made a detour so that all of us could see a group of these wanderers perched on Anacapa Island. There were at least twenty on this rock face and he got us close enough to get really good looks!

Now for Santa Cruz Island, home to the extraordinarily deep cobalt blue Island Scrub Jay. We landed, walked to the end of the pier and it was too easy. Within a very short time we had a couple of these well-built jays posing for pictures. They were docile and didn't seem to mind close approach, so we got very good looks!



We spent the rest of our time seeing more western migrants and another island endemic, the Island fox. A little larger than a big house cat, these animals had evolved into

smaller versions of their mainland cousins. The hypothesis on the size is that they had no mammalian or avian predators. There are no mountain lions, coyotes or bobcats on the island and there are no Great Horned Owl or Golden Eagles either. The owls don't migrate, so apparently never made it out to any of the islands in Channel Islands National Park, while Bald Eagles have made it inhospitable to any Golden Eagles that have tried to gain a foothold. Hence the foxes small size was not needed to ward off predators, more likely it is based on the size of their small rodent and insect prey.

After boarding the boat for the trip back over the channel, we saw more of the same species. Making landfall just before sunset, we headed to our lodging to get ready for our really fine farewell dinner at

Café Fiore. A very flavorsome meal, some great wine and discussions about our day and our trip were a fitting end to our California Coast sojourn...

Saturday, Oct. 12

The Malibu Coast and Home...

It was time to head to LAX, but we had about a ninety-minute drive to get folks there on time. In California, you always have two choices, and given that it was another stunning day, we drove south on the Pacific Coast Highway through Malibu and Santa Monica. Hugging the coast, it didn't take too much imagination to experience why in the 1960's, the Beach Boys had so many hits describing these length of beaches. A great way for those who had been traveling all over the State of California to finish their California experience...

