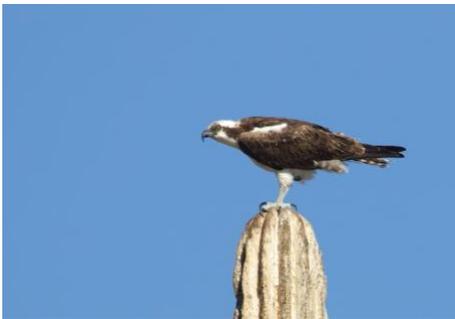


Mexico's Sea of Cortés | Trip Report

March 4-12, 2022 | by Greg Smith



With guide, Greg Smith, and participants Brian, Carol, Cathie, Gordon, Joe, and Karen.



Thurs., Mar. 3 Arrivals | San Jose del Cabo | Baja California Sur

Everyone arrived this day to sunny, high-70's weather. For those arriving from north of 37°N or inland areas of the U.S. this warmth was a welcome change. And it did bode well for our 7+ days here along the Sea of Cortés as we readied ourselves for natural history, marine mammals, birds and a wonderful taste of Mexico's culture!

Fri., Mar. 4 Birding the Tip

Maria Elena of Birding Cabo San Lucas met us at the entrance to the Grañ Barcélo at 0615 for 6+ hours of birding along the southern tip of Baja California Sur. We piled into the van and headed north to Todos Santos, our site for finding Grey Thrasher and Xantu's Hummingbird. The site is a shrubby row bordered on one side by a dirt road and houses, while the back side of this shrubby area widened in areas, where it was backed by organic farm fields.



It was almost rush hour for the farm workers heading to the fields, so a little dusty. But that certainly didn't seem to affect the birds. Lots of Orange-crowned Verdins and Hooded Orioles. And a couple of very cooperative Xantu's and one Grey Thrasher. Plenty birdy but we wanted to drive further north and explore while looking for raptors and other species. We found plenty of Red-tailed Hawks by the time we arrived at our breakfast location. After a quesadilla, some queso and refried beans, we birded out back of the roadside restaurant. We had Cassin's Kingbird, Gray Flycatcher, Yellow-rumped Warbler and another Xantu's. A birdy little farm... We headed south to Estero San Jose where we wanted to find the third of our target species, Belding's Yellowthroat. But first we had to take some great looks at Tropical Kingbird, some waterfowl and some different herons and egrets. The Estero was very flooded, more flooded than I had ever seen. This certainly limited shorebird habitat, but we were far enough upstream that we got very good looks at the yellowthroat! And at an overhead Zone-tailed Hawk. Nice couple of birds to end the day...

Sat., Mar. 5 **The Estero | Embarkation**

We wanted to give the Estero one more try, so we walked the kilometer down the beach to the flooded Estero where we were only able to bird the flooded coastal lagoon. We added Northern Shoveler and California Gull, but the abundance of water didn't seem to be attractive to too many other species. Still, it was a nice morning walk... The afternoon was devoted to having lunch and then boarding the bus to head to La Paz for embarkation on the Safari Voyager. Our ride took 150 minutes and by 6:30PM we were aboard and ready to start our trip.

Sun., Mar. 6 **Up Sea**

The winds were predicted to be a little bit blustery on Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday, so we were going to do this trip a little different than ones in the past. Usually, we would start at Los Isolotes after leaving the dock early the next morning. Because of the predicted winds, we left the dock at 9PM and headed north towards Agua Verde. When we awoke the first morning we were just south of Agua Verde on calm, flat seas. First it was a pod of long-beaked common dolphins breaking the surface of the dawn Sea, followed by a few Craveri's Murrelets and Cassin's Auklets.



Next up was a group of four blue whales sharing their blows and flukes as they fed in the deep abyss of the Sea. As we headed further north towards our afternoon destination of Isla Carmen some of us could see a fin whale doing multiple of their classic 45° breaches! Dolphins at lunch from the dining room and then our first landing of the trip on Isla Carmen. Punta Colorado on Isla Carmen gave some of us our first try at a skiff ride with a breeze. Our glassy waters of the morning had started to roil as the predicted winds of the afternoon suddenly took shape. For those of our group who went snorkeling it was nice to head into a cove that was warmer and calmer. For those of us who didn't, we took a few minor splashes. On the skiff ride we saw Yellow-footed Gull, the ubiquitous Brown Pelican, Brandt's Cormorant and a Solitary Sandpiper. Not overly productive, but the stunning blue water and the clear air made for a wonderful experience! We did some cruising the rest of the afternoon until it was time for dinner and a talk about Agua Verde and all of the options we had available to us.

Mon., Mar. 7 Bahia Agua Verde

Bahia Agua Verde, a special place on the Sea. Intertidal hot springs, Roco Solitario, riding to interior ranchos on mulas, birding the oasis of the town, snorkeling, kayaking and just cruising the coast in a zodiac, lots to do here. We had the whole day to take it all in! All of us decided to bird the town in the morning with our ship-board birder Luis. He was with us on every outing that had any opportunity to bird, always sharing. And this morning we were going to do up the town. Prryhuloxia, Xantu's Hummingbird, both gnatcatchers, plenty of Hooded Orioles, Orange-crowned Warbler, Vermilion & Ash-throated Flycatchers, Semi-palmated Plover and Least Sandpiper, just a wonderful array of birds. During the afternoon, some went on a mula ride to the Ramona Ranch, while the rest joined Luis for a zodiac ride out Roco Solitario. The Roco had Brown and Blue-footed Booby, Magnificent Frigatebird, both cormorants and the local gull flock. A fine list of birds from a very sweet place!

Tues., Mar. 8 Isla Danzante | Isla Monserrat

Today the wind was going to be a little more expressive than yesterday afternoon's blow, so the ship's goal was to head north to Isla Danzante and hang out in a small natural harbor on the north end of the island. When we arrived at sunrise, it seems that all the kayak tours and more than a few sailboats had the same idea. It didn't take long for the expedition crew to determine that we would head to a less crowded isla. So off we went to the



south and east for about two hours where we anchored off the southwest coast of Isla Monserrat. Certainly, an isla I had never been to previously, so a life isla for all of us! We went ashore about 0900 that morning, with hikes and snorkeling being spaced out. Some of us went ashore early prior to our birding hike and explored the beach and rocky shoreline. Then we finished up the morning with some birding towards the interior of the isla. Gilded Flicker and Black-throated Sparrows were the first highlights, with some strikingly colored Red-tailed Hawks circling overhead. Lots of elephant trees on this isla, which seemed to be favored by the resident Northern Cardinal pair. The afternoon was spent cruising south towards Isla San Francisco, all with a tail wind and following seas, which made for a smooth ride.

Wed., Mar. 9 Isla San Francisco

Isla San Francisco, what a wonderful place to wake up to! The crescent beach, the turquoise waters, both with little to no wind. We spent the day here with some doing the ridge walk (getting to see American Oystercatcher and Costa's Hummingbird...), while the rest of us joined Luis for over the salt flats to the other side of the isla where we had the endemic whiptail lizard, Loggerhead Shrike, Black-throated Sparrow and Rock Wren. The afternoon was all about beach time and play. Snorkeling, and kayaking is what our group took on, and a few more bird species to discuss over happy hour later this afternoon.

Thurs., Mar. 10 Ensenada Grande | Los Islotes

Things had changed since Naturalist Journeys' last trip down here. Where before we anchored off Los Islotes and rode a zodiac tour, now we met pangas in Ensenada Grande who would take over to the rocks for snorkeling and a rock tour. Frigatebirds, both boobies, loads of Brandt's Cormorants and Turkey Vultures, and of course the herds of California Sea Lions. It was a three-loop ride around the rocks, but we still couldn't come up with any additional species. Back to the ship we went, as we had to head towards La Paz to meet up with the pilot for our ride into La Paz Bay before the tide changed.



Fri., Mar. 11 **Puerto Chale**

This was the morning we had been hoping, no, not because it would be our last full day, but because we were going to head to the southernmost location for gray whales! A day that could easily add close to fifteen additional species to our list. So, we were off the boat by 0730 and onto a bus heading north. Not much in the way of birds as we moved north, but as soon as we were in our life jackets and standing on the edger of the mangrove-lined channel, we started getting new birds. Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Willet, Long-billed Curlew, White Ibis and more. But it was time to go whaling, and off we went. We had Neotropic Cormorant, Elegant Tern and then the whales. Probably about six different individuals that would swim alongside of us for minutes on end. Surfacing and blowing with the mist sometimes landing on us. After about forty minutes, they disappeared as quickly as they had shown up. We moved over to the tip of the sandspit where there a huge flock of birds, mostly Brandt's Cormorants and Brown Pelicans, but there were enough gulls mixed in to making it very interesting!

Sat., Mar. 12 **Departures**

All went well and all of us were christened by the waters of the Sea as we turned our feet to the dock side and boarded the bus for the Cabo Aeropuerto...

Photo Credits: Sea of Cortez (Uncruise home), Osprey (Greg Smith - GS), Cacti & Flora (Uncruise), California Sea Lion (GS), Sea of Cortez Beach, Cassin's Kingbird, Dolphin (GS), Palo Verde flowers (NM), Ash-throated Flycatcher (GS), Brown Pelican (GS), Brandt's Cormorant, Magnificent Frigatebird, Isla Carmen Desert, Danzante Coast (GS), Crested Caracara (GS), Brown Pelican Group (GS), Group Photo (Carol Beasley), California Sea Lion, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Gray Whale (GS), Long-billed Curlew