

Sea of Cortes/Baja California Sur | Trip Report

February 9 – 16, 2019 | Written by Greg Smith



Guide: Greg Smith, with participants: Trisha, Steve, Brenda, Jim, Robin, Jean, Dennis, Chester, Jane, Holly, Thomas, Cathy, Phil, Stephen, and Gale



Saturday, February 9 | Estero San Jose/Embarkation

A fine-weather day for all of us who were in San Jose del Cabo and out to do a little birding in the Estero! A temperature of 77 degrees, a slight breeze out of the east, and just a few puffy clouds.

As we walked out of the HI, we had Hooded Oriole and White-winged and Common Ground-Doves in the stable, and a myriad of water-related birds on the Estero San Jose banks and mudflats. As with any desert setting, water attracts birds, a pretty amazing diversity of birds. Raptors, waders, shorebirds and passerines. Probably the highlight of birding the estuary was that there were birds everywhere.

We made our way to the hospitality room at the Hotel Barcelo Gran Faro after birding the Estero, where we met other ship mates before boarding our buses to the ship in La Paz. A fine welcome dinner with introductions and a list of what we were going to do were just the start. and then we set off a little later into the Sea of Cortez...



Sunday, February 10 | Cruising/Isla Espiritu Santo

There are drills that are required while on a ship and they took place this morning. So, when we awoke to jumping mobula on the far side of Isla Espiritu Santo, we knew that after breakfast we would be practicing the different regimens that were required.

After lunch we were ready to hit the beach on Espiritu Santo at Playa Bonanza. Different hikes in different directions took over the beach and split to the opposite side of the island. A Loggerhead Shrike, California Scrub-Jay, and a wild spider engulfed in its web, were a few of the highlights. A good-looking, male Costa's Hummingbird was as patient with us, as we were with our observations. The island must've gotten a bit more rain than other areas given that there were wildflowers, both annuals and perennials, in bloom.

Large groups of Turkey Vultures mixed in with Magnificent Frigatebirds circled overhead, competing for airspace with a pair of Osprey, whose nest was too close for their comfort. Piles of similarly sized pieces of corals were scattered on a hillside, leading us all to wonder what their basis was.

Monday, February 11 | Agua Verde

Agua Verde is always a treasure. With a mixture of stunning geology, human habitation, and a reliable water source, there was always something going on. We motored into the protected bay past Roco de las Solitario, and anchored. During breakfast we were offered four different activities: Birding in Agua Verde, a mullah ride into the

back country, snorkeling, or skiffing the bay. Each person got to choose two. So, for those of us that wanted to bird Agua Verde, we were pretty much the first ashore. With our landing, we started seeing birds: Verdin, Hooded Oriole, Vermilion Flycatcher, Yellow Warbler, and the two remaining endemics: Grey Thrasher and Xantu's Hummingbird! The Xantu's showed nicely and weren't found until we only had about twenty-feet of vegetation left to bird, before heading back to the boat!

Most went skiffing in the afternoon, which was out to the big Solitorio offshore. There were schools of bait surrounding the rock, and Brown Pelican, Blue-footed & Brown Booby, and Brandt Cormorant were wreaking havoc on whatever fish were in the area.



Tuesday, February 12 | Puerto Escondido/Loreto

The Sea of Cortes had a little bit of a blow the previous night, and when we arrived at our morning anchorage at Puerto Escondido, the bay was full, and so was our dock. Everyone had headed for cover. The two ships on the wharf were the SeaShepherd.org's Sharpie and the Farley Mowat. Both ships had been working with the Mexican government to remove illegal nets in the vaquita dolphin refuge in the north end of the Sea of Cortez's Vaquita Refuge. About twenty pangas of poachers were trying to douse the two ships with gasoline, and then started lobbing stones and Molotov cocktails at the ships. The Mexican Navy eventually drove them off and the ships were in Puerto to re-provision and add additional protective measures, to ensure crew and ship safety. Our expedition leader Jenny seized the opportunity and asked if they would do a presentation for the ship, which made for a packed room. They were well received.



Back to our day in Puerto Escondido. We had three options, with most all of us going for a skiff ride where we added to our species list. Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Little Blue Heron, Lesser Scaup, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Whimbrel, and Say's Phoebe were all new for the trip,

and a surprise given that the mangroves in this newly created port were less than ten years old. Great weather, as the wind had died down, and the seas were numbing down to very feeble swells.

A surprise in the afternoon was a trip to the coastal town and the Las Garzas estuary. In town we got good looks at common Ground Dove, Pyrrhuloxia, and Hooded Oriole. At the estuary, we added Black-bellied Plover, Marbled Godwit, Forster's Tern, and other water birds. A quick trip out to the marina produced another feeding frenzy, with plenty of Blue-footed Booby, Royal Tern and other diving, fish-eating birds. A lot of culture mixed in with a lot birding.

Wednesday, February 13 | Bahia Magdalena

This was our gray whale day, and what a super day of weather. After our two-hour drive to the other side of the peninsula, we were greeted by the flattest of seas, a six-knot breeze & whales visible from the dock.



From the start it was all about whales, with spy-hopping, logging on the surface (one giving about half of our group a very up close and personal experience), a cow swimming with its calf on its back, and a number of adults swimming up to some of the pangas. A really special treat, and a fine example of eco-tourism working at its best.

There were also plenty of birds, with our group adding Long-billed Curlew, Green Heron, and a number of gull species. For many, the highlight beyond the whales, was a juvenile Peregrine Falcon (mostly adult plumage, but with a few brown feathers tucked in), finishing up with a California Gull it had taken as a prey item.

We also added Western Meadowlark on our drive back. After boarding the ship, we left port to the flattest seas, all of which we experienced for the last three days of the trip.

Thursday, February 14 | Los Islotes/Cruising

Those sweet seas were still with us when we awoke off of Los Islotes. Red rocks formed these jagged pinnacles



jutting out of the sea, and they were splashed with guano from roosting and nesting seabirds. Not too much going on in the way of bird calls, but that was made up with the large colony of California Sea Lions. Young of the year, along with adults, were yapping up a storm, all while cavorting around our skiffs. The water was clear and there was no wind, not even a breeze, so we got to watch the young sea lions put on a somewhat clumsy compared to the adults, underwater ballet. It was interesting that there were so many fish in the area with all the pinnipeds.



The lack of any breeze had another consequence, the Magnificent Frigatebirds were grounded. In previous trips down here, these birds were in the air prior to sunrise, but not this morning! There were a few attempts to take flight, but the birds just lit on another rock. This gave some fine, up close looks, of these master aerialists.

Other birds of note were half-grown Brown Pelican young, on the SE face of the rocks. Nobody on the ship could recall having seen pelicans nesting on these rocks before. Gangly and all white, with just the start of growth of the primary feathers, they were very odd-looking.



A final highlight for Los Islotes, were a couple of different Brandt's Cormorants in absolutely stunning alternate plumage.

Our afternoon was the captain's cruise, where we spent time sailing the waters looking for wildlife, and we were very successful! We had two large pods, and three smaller groups of common dolphin. We had at least 15 green turtle sightings, and a raft of about 125 Black Storm-Petrels. A female minke whale, with a newborn calf was a treat, but the highlight of the trip for many, was everyone's first sighting of two pygmy sperm whales...

Friday, February 15 | Isla San Francisco

Again, another dawn with flat seas and little wind. It

makes one of the most picturesque bay/beaches that much more stunning! The half-moon bay on the west shore of this island is a favorite for boaters, and there were a few yachts there to greet us. But mostly everyone was not ashore, so for the three activity choices in the morning, we had the island to ourselves. Some took the ridge hike, others the exploratory, while the third choice was the salt flats. Everyone got to see some of the species, including: Savannah Sparrow, nesting Verdin, Black-throated Sparrow, and more.

Our final afternoon was the beach party, where we kayaked, hiked and snorkeled. Perfect weather and a sunny 79-degrees to explore.

Saturday, February 16 | La Paz/Departures

We had one more tasty breakfast before saying goodbye to the crew, the Safari Endeavor, and to our traveling buds. It had been a fun week, with lots of new experiences and sightings, definitely something to share with family and friends when we returned home.

Special thanks to Greg Smith for photographing the tour and for providing photos for the report.

