

California: Birding Wine Country | Dec. 4 - 10, 2021 | Trip Report | by David Yee



With guide, David Yee, and participants Anne, Cathy, Debbie, Frank, Mike, Ray, and Thomas.



Sat., Dec. 4

Arrivals | Yuba City

After preparing the van for a relaxing trip in the California Central Valley, I scouted the wetlands east of the airport for waterfowl (perhaps an early adventure for the group!). Despite the fog, there were lots of birds to be found. The group arrived and we were off and running. With a smooth start, we were on our way down Elverta Road in about 15 min and there we got out of the van and enjoyed our first looks at swans, ducks and geese. The folks loved all of the swans, perhaps 300+. Very interesting was a probable Greater White-fronted Goose x Canada Goose hybrid, that I was able to put a scope on so all could see. We then started North up Highway 99 to Yuba City, known as the smallest mountain range in the world.

About halfway there, we pulled off on Oak Road, where we were greeted by a wonderful, flooded field on a small country road filled with shorebirds including a particularly camera-ready American Avocet. The group arrived at the Best Western in Yuba City and after settling in we gathered for dinner at Marcello's Italian – delicious! We had our own private room, which made it especially nice to get acquainted with new friends. As far as I could tell everyone loved it. We all got along great with lots of very pleasant conversations. With 36 species in just the first day, we were in for a great tour!



Sun., Dec. 5

Colusa National Wildlife Refuge | Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge

After breakfast, we gathered by 8:00 for departure. Our route to Colusa NWR was foggy but still enjoyable. Along the way, we stopped at a few water-hole spots that produced some waterfowl and shorebirds. By the time we got to Colusa NWR the fog was beginning to lift. The observation deck provides good looks at hundreds of birds and we spent over an hour enjoying them. No Eur Wigeon, but we got fantastic looks at a Sora, and sparrows and Marsh Wren. The auto tour took about 45 min and produced a lot of goodies including great looks at Tule Gr White-fronted Geese. Lunch at Taco La Barca in Williams was very well received and we ate outside as the fog had lifted, and the sun was now out. A short drive away, the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge is a breeding habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife, and it did not disappoint. The numbers of Snow and Great White-fronts was utterly spectacular. We had great looks at Ross's Geese at the observation deck. Left by 4:00 to be back at hotel by 5:00. Dinner tonight was at nearby Pete's, walking distance to our hotel. It was a real hit and everyone really enjoyed it.

Mon., Dec. 6

Jesse's Grove | Wine & Roses Hotel

We left the Best Western in Yuba City promptly by 8:00 am and birded our way to our next hotel. The group had incredible looks at a gorgeous Ferruginous Hawk perched on a power pole. We explored flooded fields along the way where shorebirds and waterfowl roamed including numerous gulls, including a Glaucous-winged and several Thayer's Icelands. Continuing our drive, we had good looks at a Prairie Falcon on a power pole and great success viewing California Thrasher and Lewis's Woodpecker on Rd 86 in Dunnigan Hills. Lunch was at Tower Café and was a total hit. We arrived at Jesse's Grove for our first wine tasting - YUM. Birding around the oak grove produced lots of Yellow-rumps, Crowned Sparrows and Western Bluebirds. The misty day ended with wine and an incredible spread for dinner at the Wine and Roses Hotel. This boutique hotel works with local farmers to source fresh and sustainable food right from the area!



Tues., Dec. 7

Lodi Lake | Heritage Oak Winery | Mokelumne River Fish Hatchery

Our first night in Lodi was pristine. The Wine and Roses hotel was beautiful, and the group agreed that the rooms took the cake. After a brief breakfast, we were off to Lodi Lake! Upon arrival, we parked at the visitor center area and explored the grounds. It was a total delight and produced Townsend's and Orange-crowned Warblers and a lone Cackling Goose mixed in with the domestic Canadas. From there we went to Heritage Oak Winery. This 106-acre property nestles up against the north bank of the Mokelumne River. The winery was built beneath a towering blue oak tree that dominates the landscape for miles around. Truly a stunning sight. While the birds were quiet, we enjoyed our beautiful walk and managed to get great looks at a juvenile Ferruginous Hawk, many Anna's Hummingbirds and a Chipping Sparrow (surprising to see in this season). We returned to the winery at noon where my wife, Sue, had her delightful lunch spread all prepared. All home-prepared, and everyone said it was the best kind of lunch to get on a trip. Our winery host brought out wine-tasting menus and most did some wine tasting while eating lunch. We ate in the covered courtyard with propane heaters...it was extremely comfy. After lunch, we briefly visited a small nearby pond where we got lots of Hooded Mergansers, and then went to the Mokelumne River Fish Hatchery - one of the best spots thus far of the trip. Lots of new birds including both goldeneyes, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Spotted Sand. But a real highlight was the spawning salmon and the River Otters feeding on them. Lots of Lewis's Woodpeckers. On the way back to the hotel stopped briefly by the Geradot Stable ponds which were devoid of birds but did have a Loggerhead Shrike. Back at the hotel, we took our time to get ready and joined for dinner at Casa Flores.

Wed., Dec. 8

The Crane Preserve | Michael David Winery

To start off this morning, we birded along Woodbridge Road. The weather was overcast with a slight breeze, so it felt wintery, but no fog or rain. The blackbird flock was in full force at the dairy allowing for good looks at Tricolored Blackbirds. The Crane Preserve was busy with ducks and other good birds, but the cranes were further down in flooded fields. They put on a great show for everyone. From there we went to the White Slough Water Treatment Plant and had a good assortment of divers including Canvasback and Scaup. Lunch and wine tasting was at nearby Michael David Winery, a 6-generation vineyard dating back to 1860! Their selection of quirky, unconventional wines was enjoyed by all, with the gardens appreciated. From there we drove to the green rolling hills east of Linden for a raptor run. The raptors weren't out in force, but had a few distant



Ferruginous Hawks and killer looks at Prairie Falcon. Anne noticed a flock of Horned Larks close to the road and all got great looks. We enjoyed dinner at the Lodi Beer Company and then turned in for the night.

Thurs., Dec. 9 Back to Lodi Lake | Pixie Woods | Viaggio's | Staten Island

In the morning we started our day at Lodi Lake, my favorite local birding spot. It had rained overnight, making for excellent birding conditions, and we were not disappointed! Sparrows were numerous as soon as we entered the Nature Area; White-crowned, Golden-crowned, a rare White-throated, Lincoln's, Fox, and Spotted Towhee. Hermit Thrushes were numerous. After two hours here we went to Louis Park/Pixie Woods in old part Stockton which was devoid of people and full of birds. Great looks at woodpeckers and sparrows, including Chipping and Juncos. Highlight here was the Acorn Woodpecker and the loads of Yellow-billed Magpies. Lunch and wine-tasting were at Viaggio Estate & Winery, a Tuscan-themed winery in the heart of Lodi. We enjoyed specialty pizzas and of course, wine. Then we took to birding the grounds. It was excellent, with more Lewis's Woodpeckers, Chipping and Lark Sparrows and Western Bluebirds. We arrived at Staten Island around 3:15 where we ended the day and trip. While there wasn't a great crane fly-in, there was enough of a show to make it worth-while. The weather was utterly perfect as we had our only clear afternoon with a spectacular sunset and high waterbird diversity. Dinner at Wine and Roses was superb. We stayed late visiting and having a wonderful time before departing. Until our next adventure!

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