

Sunshine Birding: California Coast to Cactus Trip Report | Jan 10-17, 2023 | By David Yee



With guides Jon Atwood & David Yee, and participants, Betsy, Drina, Gary, Jane, Lea, Nancy, Reginia, Rick, Robert and Tom



Tues, Jan 10

California had been experiencing severe weather for the two weeks prior to our tour. The northern part of the state was hit with widespread flooding and power outages, and the “atmospheric rivers” were making their way south. On Jan. 8, just two days before the start of our tour, torrential rains hit Santa Barbara, and we could only hope that San Diego County would be spared.

Light showers in the morning turned heavier in the afternoon, just as our guests’ flights were arriving. Rick Weiman, a Naturalist Journeys staff member who was joining the trip, let us know that some guests had arrived on time, but two flights were delayed. Jon made the first run to the airport and returned to the hotel joining four participants who had arrived on their own. I made the second airport run to pick up the two late arrivals. Despite the heavy rain, our group was now all together! To everyone’s surprise the weather cleared as we met



in the hotel lobby for introductions. We decided to visit the nearby San Diego River at Robb Field for some quick birding before dinner. After a 15-minute drive, we were scoping the mudflats for shorebirds and waders and marveling at the beautiful sunset painting the western horizon. In just two hours we turned up an impressive 45 species, highlights being four Reddish Egrets and two Little Blue Herons. Dinner was at Casa Guadalajara, a nice Mexican restaurant just across the street from our hotel. We'd gotten off to a great start with some unexpected afternoon birding, and the group was already showing signs of the compatibility that would continue throughout the week. We paused in the hotel lobby to review the day's birding as Jon handed out the wonderful checklists provided by Naturalist Journeys. This would be our nightly routine, a nice way to solidify so many great memories! We agreed to meet for breakfast the next morning at 6:00.

Wed, Jan 11

After a buffet breakfast, we loaded the vehicles and set out to our first destination, Quivira Pt. in Mission Bay, to look for a Yellow-billed Loon that had been reported, an amazing first county record for San Diego. Upon arriving, we saw another birder who was already on the loon. Perfect!! We all enjoyed great scope views of this rare visitor from the arctic coast. Our next stop was Vacation Isle, on the north side of the Bay, to look for another recently reported rarity: a wintering Long-tailed Duck. Good fortune was with us once again, as we found it within minutes! The birding here was excellent, with great looks at 50+ Black Skimmers, lots of Royal Terns and good numbers of scaup, Surf Scoters and diving ducks. Arriving at the Tijuana Slough NWR, we walked out into the estuary along a well-maintained path at high tide. This was Jon's plan as the rising water tends to push skulking birds out of the deep cover. Yellow-crowned Night-Herons were easily located, and soon we had brief but good looks at our main target for this location: Ridgeway's Rail. After about an hour, we drove down to the coastal road, threading our way between the beaches and the estuary. Roosting shorebirds and many egrets and herons were spotted on the drive in. The beach was not particularly birdy, no doubt due to the huge surf crashing the shoreline and occasionally flowing through the estuary and onto the streets. A stark reminder that California was still in the middle of a major weather event. At noon we visited the nearby Bird and Butterfly Garden where we enjoyed our boxed lunches and then did some birding afterwards. A pair of Hutton's Vireos were vocal, but surprisingly difficult to see. A bit further down the road, right along the U.S./Mexico border, we birded the boardwalks out onto the pond then returned to the hotel for an afternoon break. Later we visited Balboa Park to look for yet another rarity: a Greater Pewee that has been spending winters in the park for several years. While we struck out on the pewee, we did see many Cassin's Kingbirds and Nancy found a female Western Tanager.



Dinner tonight was at the lively and festive Coronado Brewery where we were joined by Brenda and Jim, friends of Peg who helped plan the itinerary for this trip. Then we gathered in the hotel lobby to review the day's birds, a most impressive 81 species! Jon gave a fascinating overview of his work that helped to differentiate California Gnatcatcher (coastal) from Black-tailed Gnatcatcher (desert). He also spoke about his involvement in helping to establish the California Habitat Conservation Program Laws.

Thurs, Jan 12

After breakfast in the hotel, we set out for Seawatch Point in La Jolla, just north of San Diego. Our route took us through some of the most expensive real estate in America and some rather posh shopping spots. But for birders, it's one of the better spots to observe seabirds in southern California, provided there are good, westerly winds. Not the case on this lovely, calm morning! In addition to a gorgeous sunrise, we enjoyed viewing nesting Brandt's Cormorants, which we were able to approach within feet, as well as Pelagic Cormorant, great looks at Black Turnstones and Royal Terns and distant looks at Black-vented Shearwaters. For many this was their favorite birding spot! We then drove north about 30 minutes to the San Elijo River estuary. Here we had great looks at the now-established Scaley-breasted Munias, several Wrentits, Red-throated Loon and Caspian Tern. Next up was a much-anticipated visit to the San Diego Zoo. We arrived at noon and the plan was for everyone to enjoy the attractions on their own and then meet up at 4:30. After a delightful and relaxing time at this wonderful zoo, we returned to our hotel with time to freshen up before dinner. We met in the lobby to go over the bird list, then made our way to the Baja Lobster, a very nice seafood-themed Mexican restaurant where we were seated in a private room.

Fri, Jan 13

After breakfast it was time to pack up and load the van for our first change of venue. Our first birding stop on the way to Mt. Palomar was Lake Murray, about 15 miles east of San Diego. Lots of waterfowl was on view, but our target bird this morning was California Gnatcatcher, and who better to lead us than Jon Atwood, who we now know literally helped to put this bird on the map! After a little searching, we located the first of four California Gnatcatchers, perched in coastal sage brush. Other notable sightings included a very rare Aleutian subspecies of Cackling Goose, several Redheads and some Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. When we arrived at Santee Lakes, we were greeted by the very rare, wintering Lewis's Woodpecker that was right at the entrance! We also had wonderful looks at American White Pelicans and several stately Wood Ducks. Then after a quick lunch we continued our drive to Mt. Palomar, pausing at an overlook to appreciate the view. Jon found a recently killed Acorn Woodpecker, but used the occasion to offer a lesson in bird anatomy. It was chilly when we reached the



peak. In our brief visit, we observed several high-elevation species including Mountain Chickadees and Cassin's Finches in addition to our first Golden-crowned Sparrows and Band-tailed Pigeons. Dinner at The Pub at Lake Cuyamaca was fabulous, with live music and excellent food. The music was loud, but the atmosphere was festive, and we all enjoyed the show. Our lodging, in contrast, was the Quiet Mind Lodge at Lake Cuyamaca, a yoga retreat that was clean and friendly with very comfortable rooms, but inconsistent hot water! Sometimes you just have to keep an open mind...

Sat, Jan 14

Breakfast wasn't until 8:00, so we met in the morning for a little pre-breakfast birding on the property. Our view of the lake was amazing, and so was the valley to the south. With sun rays peeking through morning clouds, we spotted a Bald Eagle, no doubt also with breakfast on its mind. A California Thrasher was conspicuous, as was a Peregrine Falcon. Cassin's Finches and lots of Band-tailed Pigeons rounded out the morning's list. After breakfast, we spent the morning in nearby Julian, birding on the outskirts of town near the cemetery where we found Oak Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch and Purple Finch. The big cones of the Coulter Pines were fascinating. Then we split up for lunch in town, which was a delightful way to break up the day. As we ate, the weather took a turn for the worse, with driving rain and wind. By the time we got back to the lodge, it was evident there would be no birding that afternoon. Who knows, maybe the yoga-themed lodge had something to do with it, but everyone took this in stride, enjoying the down time in such a peaceful location. At 6:00 we met to review the morning's bird list, surprisingly robust with 51 species with quite a few new birds for the trip! Dinner was in the Lodge, prepared by the chef, originally from Fiji, who now lives in San Diego, who specializes in vegan dishes. She served us a wonderful three-course meal that was absolutely superb. We retired to our rooms well fed and well rested, drifting off to sleep to the sound of the unrelenting rains. With most of the state under some level of flood watch, we were fortunate to be heading east to the Anza Borrego Desert in the morning. With an average annual rainfall of just seven inches, this was perhaps the best location throughout California to be during this once-in-a-hundred-years storm!

Sun, Jan 15

We awoke to light rains and heavy winds, surrounded by a ghostly and dense fog. Overnight the rains flooded the lower floor of the lodge, which included Regina's room. She said she got up to use the bathroom at 1:30 a.m. and stepped into three inches of water! Thankfully her bags were off the floor, so none of her possessions got



wet. She alerted security and then went back to sleep. What a trooper! In the morning she put on her boots, packed and met us upstairs without complaint, such a positive outlook! After breakfast, we quickly loaded the vehicles and headed east out of Julian. Within minutes the weather began to change, and it was evident we were now in the rain shadow of the Peninsula Ranges. The vegetation too had changed from coastal sage brush and tall trees to desert sage brush with cactus and succulents. We stopped at Shelter Valley to look for Harris's Hawks and soon found a family group, two adults and a juvenile, which was a highlight for many in the group. This is the only location in California where Harris's Hawks are found, a small colony with maybe 10 birds has been present within the past 25 years.

We had lunch at Scissors Crossing where we could hear both Rock and Cactus Wrens as well as Rufous-crowned Sparrow, but none appeared. We dropped our bags at La Casa Del Zorro, our hotel in Borrego Springs, then, dedicated birders that we are, visited the Water Treatment Plant. It wasn't very birdy, but we did pick up Lark and Savannah Sparrows. That evening we again were treated to a private dining room for dinner, which was extremely nice. Afterwards we reviewed our bird list and decided to head further east in the morning to avoid any residual weather effects.

Mon, Jan 16

By 7:30 we were on our way to the South End of the Salton Sea, crossing the Sonoran Desert, one of the most desolate landscapes in North America. We visited the Sonny Bono NWR and Obsidian Butte a very productive morning with many highlights including Abert's Towhee, Gambel's Quail, Verdin, Black-throated Gnatcatcher and Burrowing Owl. Waterbirds included Snow Geese and White-faced Ibis. We had lunch in Brawley at the local Carl's Jr, our only "junk food" stop of the trip, then headed back to the Anza Borrego Visitors Center. Here we had great looks at Greater Roadrunner, Gray Flycatcher, Costa's Hummingbird and Black-throated Sparrow. A quick stop in Palm turned up Mountain Bluebirds in a sea of desert blooming wildflowers. Our farewell dinner together at the Hotel was just wonderful. Jon invited everyone to share their favorite birds, moments, meals and any other memorable experiences. The dinner was one of the best of the trip and was just a perfect way to conclude a wonderful tour.



Tues, Jan 17

We were back on the road by 9 a.m. following a relaxing breakfast at the hotel. A dusting of fresh snow frosted the surrounding mountain ridges, sparkling against the azure skies. Ominous clouds were ahead, and it was clear that our return route would take us through some inclement weather. Within 10 minutes it started to rain, then snow! As we approached Julian, we saw a snowplow clearing the highway, an uncommon sight to be sure! In spite of the weather, we arrived to the airport by noon. A wonderful, memorable trip with every participant just a joy to be with!

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