

WINTER SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

JANUARY 24-29, 2010

LEADER: BRENNAN MULROONEY

COMPILED BY: BRENNAN MULROONEY

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TX 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

WINTER SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA **January 24-29, 2010**

Leader: Brennan Mulrooney

It's tough to beat winter birding in Southern California. You've got great weather, fantastic scenery, and tons of birds. Coastal Southern California harbors a tremendous number of birds in the winter; the San Diego Christmas Bird Count is always near the top in the nation, and San Diego is where this tour begins. After birding the coast we head inland through the mountains, into the desert, and finally to the oasis of the Imperial Valley and the Salton Sea. The diversity of birds and habitats is mind-boggling for such a short trip. This year we were very successful, logging 192 species of birds, a new tour record.

Like the other corners of the ABA area, Southern California is home to many birds that can't easily be found elsewhere, so any tour to this area must emphasize seeing as many of these target birds as possible. In this department we did quite well. The challenge with this tour is finding a way to see as many target birds as possible while saving time to chase the rarities that are so often in this area in winter.

We spent our first two days scouring the coastal lowlands and foothills with great success. We found a long list of birds highlighted by such things as a Prairie Falcon perched on a roadside rock at the same spot where we scoped a perched Ferruginous Hawk and watched a flock of gorgeous Mountain Bluebirds foraging over the grass. At another stop we were serenaded by multiple California Thrashers posing for scope views while a California Gnatcatcher darted furtively from bush to bush. Much more cooperative than the gnatcatcher was the normally skulky Wren-tit that gave us some great open views at close range. Another denizen of the chaparral that gave us uncommonly good views was a Rufous-crowned Sparrow that sat in the scope for several minutes. Tricolored Blackbirds were almost too easy as they competed with a crazed flock of American Coots for bread crumbs at a local park. At Mission Gorge a cheeky Canyon Wren had to almost land at our feet to tear our attention away from the Nuttall's Woodpecker that was posing in the scope.

Along the immediate coast we saw huge numbers of waterfowl, shorebirds, and other waterbirds. We found a Cackling Goose of the race minima, the true Cackling Goose, feeding on a mudflat with hundreds of shorebirds including Whimbrel, Long-billed Curlew, Red Knot, and Western Sandpiper. Elsewhere on the shore and in the water, we found a big flock of Black Skimmers; a mixed flock of gulls including Western, California, and Heermann's; and Western and Clark's grebes swimming side by side. Along the rocky coast we found Brandt's Cormorants, Pelagic Cormorants, Black Turnstones, and Surf-birds, while offshore we scoped Pacific and Red-throated loons. Still farther out we were able to scope Black-vented Shearwaters as they flew quickly across the water's surface. Later, in the southwesternmost city of Imperial Beach, we visited a well-planted yard that held an adult male Allen's Hummingbird, as well as Bullock's, Baltimore, and Orchard orioles. Along the shore of San Diego Bay we spotted the resident Belding's subspecies of Savannah Sparrow.

On day three we headed into the Mountains of San Diego where we found Pygmy Nuthatches, Mountain Chickadees, Oak Titmouse, Band-tailed Pigeon, Acorn Woodpecker, and Western Bluebird. The highlight was to come later that day when we found not one, but four Lewis's Woodpeckers right along the road. We watched them for about 15 minutes, getting stunning scope views of their pink bellies, cherry-red cheeks, and glossy green wings. Scope views of a perched Golden Eagle were also memorable, but soon we had to leave the mountains and drop all the way down to the desert floor. In fact, by the time we stopped dropping down we were more than 200 feet below sea level!

Our final day-and-a-half was spent birding the unique and totally bizarre Salton Sea. We found gulls and shorebirds on barnacle beaches, freshwater ponds full of ducks, and fields full of thousands of Snow and Ross's geese and hundreds of Sandhill Cranes. The sheer number of birds in this area was truly awe-inspiring. We saw massive flocks of Brewer's, Red-winged, and Yellow-headed blackbirds; flocks of hundreds of Long-billed Curlews looking like dust clouds on the horizon; and a shoreline turned white by over 10,000 Ring-billed Gulls. And while the spectacle of huge numbers of birds is worth seeing in itself, there are a couple of birds in particular that we make a special effort to find. First priority always goes to the Yellow-footed Gull. This species is endemic to the shores of the Sea of Cortez, but each year small numbers wander up to the Salton Sea. This is the only place where one can hope to add it to one's ABA list. It took a couple of hours of searching a few choice spots, but we eventually found three loafing on some rocks with a flock of Brown Pelicans (also wanderers from the Sea of Cortez).

It took us much longer to find the other target bird of the area, the Mountain Plover. This declining species breeds on the largely inaccessible short-grass prairies of the high western plains, and the vast majority of the population winters in the Imperial Valley. It took us until the very end of the day to find a flock, but when we did we were treated to excellent views. We saw great evidence of the effectiveness of their camouflage as they repeatedly disappeared in plain sight in a bare dirt field. Other birds we saw during our time at "the sea" included Gambel's Quail, White-faced Ibis, Inca Dove, Greater Roadrunner, several Burrowing Owls (voted favorite bird of the trip), Gila Woodpecker, and Abert's Towhee. All in all, it was a fantastic trip with great weather and phenomenal birding.

Itinerary:

January 24 - arrival in San Diego

January 25 - Mission Trails Regional Park, Brennan's mom's house, Santee Lakes Recreational Preserve, Lindo Lake County Park, Ramona Grasslands (Rangeland Road).

January 26 - Navajo Canyon Open Space Park, South Mission Beach, Crown Point (Mission Bay Park), La Jolla Cove, Imperial Beach, South San Diego Bay, Silver Strand.

January 27 - Sunset Cliffs, Descanso, Cuyamaca Rancho State Park (Paso Picacho Campground), Lake Cuyamaca grasslands (flooded), Julian, Mesa Grande, Lake Henshaw, Anza Borrego State Park (Tamarisk Grove campground), Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge (Unit 1)

January 28 - Cattle Call Park, residential Brawley, Southeast end of the Salton Sea including: SBSSNWR Head Quarters, Red Hill, Obsidian Butte, and miles of dirt fields!

January 29 - brief birding stop at Fig Lagoon en route to San Diego for departures for home

Key:

S = San Diego and surrounding areas

M = Mountains, Anza-Borrego Desert

SS = Salton Sea and surrounding agricultural areas

bold-faced species indicate birds of rare, casual, or accidental occurrence

underlined species indicate birds of very uncommon occurrence or species which occur regularly but in such low densities as to be easily missed

DUCKS, GEESE, AND SWANS

Greater White-fronted Goose S – a single bird slumming it with the feral geese at Lindo Lake

Snow Goose SS – thousands at Unit 1 and near the HQ, including several blue morphs

Ross's Goose SS – not nearly as common but easy to find, great comparative views with Snows

Brant S - the western race *nigricans*, known as Black Brant

Canada Goose S,L, SS

Cackling Goose S, SS – one of the subspecies *minima* (the form known as Cackling Goose before the split from Canada Goose) on Mission Bay and one of the subspecies *leucopareia* (known as Aleutian Goose before the split); Aleutian Geese are getting more common every year due to removal of introduced Arctic Foxes on their nesting islands, *minima* is still quite rare in SD

Wood Duck S

Gadwall S

American Wigeon S,M,SS

Mallard S,M,SS

Blue-winged Teal S – great look at Santee Lakes

Cinnamon Teal S,M,SS – gorgeous males at several locations

Northern Shoveler S,M,SS

Northern Pintail S,M,SS

Green-winged Teal SS

Redhead S

Ring-necked Duck S – we actually saw the ring around their necks at Santee Lakes

Greater Scaup SS – one seen in flight by Margaret and myself

Lesser Scaup S,SS

Surf Scoter S

Bufflehead S,M,SS

Common Goldeneye S, SS - females

Hooded Merganser M – females around Lake Cuyamaca

Red-breasted Merganser S

Ruddy Duck S,M,SS

GALLINACEOUS BIRDS

Wild Turkey M – introduced in the early 90's and now thriving on protected state and private lands

California Quail S – heard only at Mission Trails

Gambel's Quail SS – great views during lunch at SBSSNWR HQ

LOONS

Red-throated Loon S – scoped offshore

Pacific Loon S – scoped offshore

Common Loon S – close views in Mission Bay channel

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe S,M,SS

Eared Grebe S,SS

Western Grebe S

Clark's Grebe S,SS---good comparative studies with Westerns

SHEARWATERS & PETRELS

Black-vented Shearwater S – about 20 scoped very distantly from La Jolla

TOTIPALMATE BIRDS (PELICAN, CORMORANTS & ALLIES)

American White Pelican S, M, SS

Brown Pelican S,SS – acting like they were getting ready to nest at Obsidian Butte

Brandt's Cormorant S – great scope views of birds in full breeding color

Double-crested Cormorant S,M,SS

Pelagic Cormorant S – right where I said they'd be, just a little tardy is all

HERONS, IBISES, STORKS & ALLIES

Least Bittern S, SS – heard only at Santee Lakes and Fig Lagoon

Great Blue Heron S,M,SS

Great Egret S,M,SS

Snowy Egret S,SS

Little Blue Heron S – breeding in small numbers in SD

Cattle Egret SS

Black-crowned Night-Heron S,SS

White-faced Ibis SS

AMERICAN VULTURES & DIURNAL BIRDS OF PREY

Turkey Vulture S,M

Osprey S

White-tailed Kite S – we got very lucky seeing several of these uncommon, handsome raptors

Northern Harrier S,M,SS

Sharp-shinned Hawk M – a quick view of one spotted by Margaret along the road

Cooper's Hawk S

Red-shouldered Hawk S

Red-tailed Hawk seen daily – including a few rufous morphs

Ferruginous Hawk S – a very cooperative bird on the Ramona Grasslands

Golden Eagle S – first time I've ever confused one with a frigatebird, but I had a good excuse!

American Kestrel S,M,SS

Merlin M – scope views of a female Prairie Merlin near Lake Henshaw

Peregrine Falcon S, SS – an adult in Navajo Canyon made an impressive appearance

Prairie Falcon S – one perched on a pile of rocks in the Ramona Grasslands was very nice

RAILS CRANES & ALLIES

Sora SS – heard only at Unit 1

Common Moorhen S – Lindo Lake only

American Coot widespread

Sandhill Crane SS – a flock of 200 or so at Unit 1

PLOVERS & LAPWINGS

Black-bellied Plover S,SS

Snowy Plover S – a small group on the beach, snoozing in the sand

Semipalmated Plover S,SS

Killdeer S,SS

Mountain Plover SS – a real challenge this year, we didn't hit pay dirt (literally) until the very end of our day, but we had great looks in the scope and saw how amazingly well they blend in to a bare dirt field

STILTS & AVOCETS

Black-necked Stilt SS

American Avocet S,SS

SANDPIPERS & ALLIES

Spotted Sandpiper S,SS

Greater Yellowlegs S,SS

Willet S, SS

Lesser Yellowlegs SS – uncommon in winter, one of our last new birds

Whimbrel S

Long-billed Curlew S,SS – huge flocks of them flying around in the fields at SS

Marbled Godwit S,SS

Ruddy Turnstone S

Black Turnstone S – excellent looks at La Jolla and Sunset Cliffs

Surfbird S – somewhat distant, backlit views of this uncommon and easily missed species

Red Knot S – several with the shorebird flock at Crown Point

Sanderling S

Western Sandpiper S

Least Sandpiper S,SS

Dunlin S,SS

Short-billed Dowitcher S – good numbers in South San Diego Bay

Long-billed Dowitcher S,SS – the only dowitchers inland in winter

GULLS, TERNS & SKIMMERS

Bonaparte's Gull M,SS – several at Lake Henshaw and one at Fig Lagoon

Heermann's Gull S,SS – great looks at gorgeous adults in SD, a real rarity at SS

Ring-billed Gull S,M,SS

California Gull S,SS

Herring Gull S,SS

Yellow-footed Gull SS – generally quite hard to find in winter here, but we found two adult (or near adult) birds and an immature bird at Obsidian Butte

Western Gull S

Caspian Tern SS

Forster's Tern S,SS

Royal Tern S

Black Skimmer S – flock of 50 or more

PIGEONS & DOVES

Rock Pigeon seen daily
Band-tailed Pigeon M – a flyby flock in Descanso
Eurasian Collared-Dove SS – this rapidly invading species is now common around SS
White-winged Dove S – a rarity in winter in SD, one was at Santee Lakes
Mourning Dove seen daily
Inca Dove SS – very local at SS, we found a small group in Brawley
Common Ground-Dove SS – great views at SBSSNWR HQ

CUCKOOS & ALLIES

Greater Roadrunner SS – excellent views of the very charismatic bird

OWLS

Burrowing Owl SS – we had at least six at one spot and several other great looks throughout the day, voted favorite bird of the trip

SWIFTS AND HUMMINGBIRDS

White-throated Swift S – great views at Santee Lakes
Anna's Hummingbird S,M – many wonderful views of their amazing pink heads
Costa's Hummingbird S – a gorgeous adult male in Navajo Canyon
Allen's Hummingbird S – we were lucky to see an adult male that was wintering in SD

WOODPECKERS & ALLIES

Lewis's Woodpecker M – 4 in one spot in Mesa Grande, we had fantastic looks; pink, green, gray, cherry red, this is not your average woodpecker!
Acorn Woodpecker M – abundant at Paso Picacho, we saw several active granary trees
Gila Woodpecker SS – very local in CA, we found a couple in Brawley
Nuttall's Woodpecker S,M – great scope views at Mission Gorge especially
Downy Woodpecker S – once a rare bird in SD, now getting common in riparian habitat
Hairy Woodpecker M
Northern Flicker S,M,SS

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Black Phoebe daily in numbers
Say's Phoebe daily in numbers
Vermilion Flycatcher S – a stunning male was in SD where unexpected
Cassin's Kingbird S

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike - SS

VIREOS

Plumbeous Vireo S – Tara spotted one at Santee Lakes
Hutton's Vireo S – we had a very vocal bird in Mission Gorge that only gave us distant looks

CROWS, JAYS & ALLIES

Steller's Jay M---pacific coast race *stelleri* has baby blue markings on the forehead
Western Scrub-Jay S,M – we saw the subspecies *californica* which is a potential split

American Crow S,M
Common Raven S,M,SS

LARKS

Horned Lark S,SS

SWALLOWS

Tree Swallow S,SS

CHICKADEES & TITS

Mountain Chickadee M – excellent views, subspecies *baileyae*
Oak Titmouse M – fancy new name, but still plain

PENDULINE TITS

Verdin SS

LONG-TAILED TITS

Bushtit S – where there's one there's a flock

NUTHATCHES

White-breasted Nuthatch M
Pygmy Nuthatch M – very close views at Paso Picacho

WRENS

Cactus Wren SS – heard only in Brawley
Canyon Wren S – incredible looks at a bird maybe only 20 feet away in Mission Gorge
Bewick's Wren S,M
House Wren S
Marsh Wren SS – Heard only

KINGLETS

Ruby-crowned Kinglet S,SS

OLD WORLD WARBLERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher S – what a tease! it did a perfect CA Gnatcatcher imitation, but our views were too good to be fooled
California Gnatcatcher S – unfortunately not seen by all, these guys were really tough this year
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher SS – good looks at Unit 1

THRUSHES & ALLIES

Western Bluebird seen daily – stunning views
Mountain Bluebird S,SS – great looks, not around every year
Hermit Thrush S
American Robin S,SS – actually an uncommon bird around here!

BABLERS

Wrentit S – surprisingly good views of this super skulker, the voice of the chaparral...

MOCKINGBIRDS & THRASHERS

Northern Mockingbird S,M,SS

California Thrasher S – we saw our first ones so well that we almost totally ignored the next one, of course it had some pretty tough competition

STARLINGS

European Starling seen daily

PIPITS & WAGTAILS

American Pipit S,SS

WAXWINGS

Cedar Waxwing S,M,SS

SILKY-FLYCATCHERS

Phainopepla S,M – we had excellent scope views in perfect afternoon light

NEW WORLD WARBLERS

Orange-crowned Warbler S

Yellow-rumped Warbler seen daily; Audubon's subspecies

Townsend's Warbler S – great views in Imperial Beach

Common Yellowthroat S

SPARROWS & ALLIES

Spotted Towhee S,M

California Towhee S,M

Abert's Towhee SS

Rufous-crowned Sparrow S – excellent looks at Mission Trails

Chipping Sparrow M

Vesper Sparrow M,SS – great roadside looks

Lark Sparrow M,SS – some excellent views of these striking birds

Savannah Sparrow S,SS – nice study of the Belding's subspecies at Imperial beach

Song Sparrow S,M,SS

White-crowned Sparrow daily

Golden-crowned Sparrow S – a couple different birds at Mission Trails

Dark-eyed Junco M - Oregon subspecies

BLACKBIRDS, ORIOLES & ALLIES

Red-winged Blackbird daily

Tricolored Blackbird S,M - nice views of this declining specialty

Western Meadowlark S,M,SS

Yellow-headed Blackbird SS

Brewer's Blackbird S,M,SS

Great-tailed Grackle S,SS

Orchard Oriole S – a young male in flowering *Erythrina* trees in Imperial Beach

Bullock's Oriole S – 2 males and a female in the same trees in IB

Baltimore Oriole S – a single female in the same trees in IB, this is the same yard that had the Allen's Hummingbird, the homeowners have been very welcoming to birders all winter

SISKINS, CROSSBILLS & ALLIES

Purple Finch M – a single male at Lake Henshaw

House Finch daily

Pine Siskin L

Lesser Goldfinch L

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow S,SS

BISHOPS, WEAVERS & ESTRILDID FINCHES

Nutmeg Mannakin S – an unestablished (non-countable) exotic that seems to be gaining a toe hold in CA, we saw a small flock in Navajo Canyon

total species – 192: A new tour record!!!

Mammals: total species - 9

Coyote

California Sea Lion

Harbor Seal

Common Dolphin

Pacific White-sided Dolphin

Bottle-nosed Dolphin

Mule Deer

California Ground Squirrel

Desert Cottontail

Significant others:

Kemo Sabe

Exotic Thai (Best restaurant in the Imperial Valley!)