

# **CALIFORNIA CENTRAL COAST: AN INTRODUCTORY BIRDING TOUR**

**DECEMBER 2-7, 2011**



LONG-BILLED CURLEW - PHOTO: KEVIN ZIMMER

**LEADERS:  
KEVIN ZIMMER**

**COMPILED BY: KEVIN ZIMMER**

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

**TOUR REPORT**  
**CALIFORNIA CENTRAL COAST: AN INTRODUCTORY BIRDING TOUR**  
**December 2–7, 2011**

**By Kevin Zimmer**

Early December proved to be the ideal time for the return of our California Central Coast tour. We enjoyed four beautifully sunny days of birding amid the varied habitats of San Luis Obispo County, and, in the process, saw 13 species of mammals and over 160 species of birds.

Our first day afield was spent mostly around the estuary of Morro Bay, one of the most important sites for wintering and migratory waterfowl and shorebirds on the entire Pacific Coast. We sorted through throngs of curlews, godwits, and Willets, and studied the field marks that differentiate basic-plumaged loons, grebes, and peeps. Among the masses of waterfowl were hundreds of Brant and a lone male Eurasian Wigeon. Other highlights were provided by a Golden Eagle being harassed by a Peregrine Falcon, a flock of Bushtits that were close enough to touch, minimum-focus views of Wrentits and California Thrashers, and a wonderful bobcat that was hunting pocket gophers in a state park campground. We put the exclamation point on this remarkable day by visiting a communal roost of White-tailed Kites at sundown, and counting more than 40 kites in view at once!

Our second day was in stark contrast to the first, as we headed inland to the eastern part of the county and an entirely different set of birds. Our first stop was in my yard in Atascadero, where we were treated to a few hundred Band-tailed Pigeons, cooperative Oak Titmice, and a lovely Red-breasted Sapsucker among other birds typical of the oak woodlands. From there, it was on to Bitterwater Valley and the Carrizo Plains, home to soda lakes, rolling tumbleweeds, and sprawling, sparsely inhabited (by humans) arid scrub that could hardly be more different from the coastal part of the county. But this lonely area, part of which is a National Monument, is the winter home to impressive numbers of raptors. During the course of the day, we tallied 10 species of raptors (including more than 50 Red-tailed Hawks and 40+ American Kestrels), highlighted by great studies of Ferruginous Hawks, Prairie Falcons, 3 Golden Eagles together in one spot, and scope views of a Merlin plucking some unlucky and unidentified passerine. Finding 3 Barn Owls roosting in a lone tree was a particularly pleasant surprise, as was seeing a flock of more than 150 Long-billed Curlews flying high above the Elkhorn Mesa. More expected were the Yellow-billed Magpies, bunches of Mountain Bluebirds, the ultimately very cooperative pair of Rock Wrens, and the last-minute Sage Sparrow. However, the top honors for the day had to go to the 25 Mountain Plovers that treated us to great views in the warm glow of the late afternoon sun.

Day 3 found us visiting the southern part of the county, but not before a stop at picturesque Morro Rock, whose resident pair of Peregrine Falcons showed nicely in our scopes. The rocks and cliffs at Shell Beach gave us our first exposure to the “rockpipers”—shorebirds who spend their winters clinging to the wave-battered and nourished rocks of the Pacific Coast. Black Oystercatcher, Surfbird, and Black Turnstone were all present and accounted for, but, alas, no Wandering Tattler could be found. Our next stop was Pismo Beach, where a short walk into a grove of eucalyptus trees revealed a winter staging site for masses of Monarch butterflies. On this particular day, the official count (conducted by docents and other volunteers) had tallied over 21,000 Monarchs, which is a spectacle that even the most tunnel-visioned birder could appreciate. Oceano Campground and Oso Flaco Lake produced a number of goodies, among them numbers of snazzy Townsend’s Warblers, dazzling male Cinnamon Teal, and a too-close-to-focus-on Hutton’s Vireo. But top honors belonged to the family

Rallidae, as we enjoyed binoculars-optional viewing of highly responsive Soras and Virginia Rails, both of which nearly walked across my feet in the process.

Our final day found us working the north coast, beginning with stellar views of a skulking Wilson's Snipe at the Morro Creek mouth. Old Creek mouth and the ambient beach gave us bunches of Whimbrels and side by side comparisons of Royal and Caspian terns. The strand near San Simeon Creek mouth delivered more than 40 threatened Snowy Plovers, and the creek itself offered up a locally rare Common Gallinule that was inexplicably foraging out in the open over sun-bleached rocks. The rocky coast near Cambria allowed us more opportunities to study "rockpipers," whereas the beach at the mouth of Pico Creek offered up a large flock of gulls that were highlighted by no less than three Thayer's Gulls amid the masses of Western, California, Mew, and Ring-billed gulls. We also netted our last new mammal of the trip, with a visit to a rookery of northern elephant seals. It was early in the season for the seals, so most of the animals hauled out on land were small juveniles, but there were a few massive, battle-scarred beachmasters present as well. The day ended with a visit to Cerro Alto Campground, where a rare (in winter) Hermit Warbler, multiple Townsend's Warblers and Steller's Jays, and a pair of Brown Creepers seemed perfectly in keeping with the shaded canyon and the numerous redwoods (but not with the sunlit chaparral on the south-facing slopes above).

Along the way, we enjoyed some great meals, lots of laughs, and got quite a bit more familiar with the birds and the habitats that make California's Central Coast a birder's paradise. I greatly enjoyed birding with each of you, and thank you for providing me the opportunity to share the beauty and natural history riches of my "home" county.

### **Itinerary:**

**12/2** - Group arrives in Morro Bay. Meet for dinner.

**12/3** - Morning spent largely at a couple of spots in Morro Bay State Park, followed by the South Bay Overlook and the Elfin Forest trail and a visit to the Sweet Springs Nature Preserve. After lunch at the Bayshore Café, we headed to Montana de Oro State Park, where we birded the campground adjacent to Islay Creek before driving north on Hwy. 1 to San Simeon Creek and the White-tailed Kite roost.

**12/4** - From Morro Bay, we took Hwy. 41 east to Atascadero, where we spent an hour birding Kevin's yard. Afterwards, we drove north on 101 to Paso Robles, and then east on Hwy. 46 to Shandon, where we checked the city park (Crawford Clarke park) before continuing east on Hwy. 46 to Bitterwater Valley Road. We birded Bitterwater Valley ca. 36 miles south to Hwy. 58 and the Carrizo Plains (Elkhorn Road, Panoramic Road, Seven Mile Road, Soda Lake Road, Brentwood Road, etc.), where we stayed until dusk, returning west on Hwy. 58 to Santa Margarita. After dinner at AJ Spurs in Templeton, we drove back to our hotel in Morro Bay.

**12/5** - We started the day at the Morro Creek Mouth and the base of Morro Rock in Morro Bay. We then headed south to Shell Beach, where we checked the cliffs and offshore rocks, and then continued on to Pismo Beach, and the Monarch Butterfly roost adjacent to the state campground. After that, we headed to Oceano Campground of Pismo State Beach, where we spent the remainder of the morning. After lunch at Old Juan's Cantina in Oceano, we continued south to Oso Flaco Lake, where we spent the remainder of the afternoon.

**12/6** - Once again, we started the day at the Morro Creek mouth and the base of Morro Rock. We then headed north on Hwy. 1, with major stops at Old Creek mouth (Cayucos), Moonstone Beach Drive (Cambria), San Simeon Creek Mouth, the Elephant Seal Rookery north of San Simeon, Pico Creek mouth, and the kite roost site at San Simeon before stopping for a late lunch at the Main Street Grill in Cambria. After lunch, we returned to Morro Bay and headed east on Hwy. 41 to Cerro Alto Campground, and then drove on to Atascadero, where we checked out Atascadero Lake before returning to Morro Bay via San Luis Obispo.

**12/7** - Airport transfers for flights home.

### **Favorite Bird of the Trip (as voted by the group):**

- 1. Mountain Plover**
- 2. Virginia Rail and Barn Owl (tied for second)**

### **Birds:**

#### **Ducks, Geese & Swans (Anatidae):**

**Snow Goose** (*Chen caerulescens*) - 1 immature bird seen with 3 Cackling Geese near Cayucos (near Toro Creek) on 12/3 and again on 12/6, was in nearly the same place where I found them a week earlier.

**Brant** (*Branta bernicla*) - Nice studies of a few hundred birds on Morro Bay on 12/3.

**Cackling Goose** (*Branta hutchinsii*) - 3 individuals with a Snow Goose near Cayucos (near Toro Creek) on 12/3 and again on 12/6, were in nearly the same place where I found them a week earlier.

**Gadwall** (*Anas strepera*) - 2 (pair) seen from the South Bay overlook on 12/3.

**Eurasian Wigeon** (*Anas penelope*) - 1 male seen from the South Bay overlook on 12/3.

**American Wigeon** (*Anas americana*) -

**Mallard** (*Anas platyrhynchos*) - Common; seen daily in small numbers along the coast.

**Blue-winged Teal** (*Anas discors*) - 15+ at Sweet Springs Nature Preserve on 12/3.

**Cinnamon Teal** (*Anas cyanoptera*) - 10+ from the South Bay overlook on 12/3, and about the same number at Oso Flaco Lake on 12/5.

**Northern Shoveler** (*Anas clypeata*) - Common; seen daily in small numbers along the coast.

**Northern Pintail** (*Anas acuta*) - Common; seen daily in small numbers along the coast.

**Green-winged Teal** (*Anas crecca*) - Abundant in Morro Bay (particularly from the South Bay overlook on 12/3), where seen at multiple locales on 3 of our 4 days; also seen in numbers at Oso Flaco Lake.

**Canvasback** (*Aythya valisineria*) - 10+ at Oso Flaco Lake on 12/5.

**Redhead** (*Aythya americana*) - 1 female at Oso Flaco Lake on 12/5 was our only record.

**Greater Scaup** (*Aythya marila*) - 1 male at Oso Flaco Lake on 12/5 was our only record.

**Lesser Scaup** (*Aythya affinis*) - 50+ on 12/3 (mostly at Sweet Springs), and 1 female at Oso Flaco on 12/5.

**Surf Scoter** (*Melanitta perspicillata*) - A flock of 30+ on the water offshore from Old Creek mouth on 12/6; also seen flying past Morro Rock on 12/5 by KJZ.

**White-winged Scoter** (*Melanitta fusca*) - 3 birds spotted by Ken, just offshore from Old Creek mouth on 12/6.

**Bufflehead** (*Bucephala albeola*) - Common; seen daily in good numbers along the coast (particularly in Morro Bay and at Oso Flaco).

**Red-breasted Merganser** (*Mergus serrator*) - Scattered individuals seen around Morro Bay (Morro Bay State Park, Morro Rock) and along the north coast.

**Ruddy Duck** (*Oxyura jamaicensis*) - Common in Morro Bay (particularly at Sweet Springs and from the South Bay overlook) and at Oceano campground and Oso Flaco Lake.

### **New World Quail (Odontophoridae):**

**California Quail** (*Callipepla californica*) - 20+ at Montana de Oro campground on 12/3; another large covey was seen en route to there just outside of Los Osos. Heard elsewhere.

### **Loons (Gaviidae):**

**Red-throated Loon** (*Gavia stellata*) - Small numbers (1–5) daily along the immediate coast, starting with the one we saw close to shore at Morro Bay State Park the first morning.

**Pacific Loon** (*Gavia pacifica*) - A few birds in Morro Bay on 12/3, and seen again near Morro Rock on 12/6 and along the north coast on 12/6.

**Common Loon** (*Gavia immer*) - Scattered individuals seen in and around Morro Bay on 12/3 and 12/5.

### **Grebes (Podicipedidae):**

**Pied-billed Grebe** (*Podilymbus podiceps*) - Several in Morro Bay on 12/3, and at Oso Flaco Lake on 12/5.

**Horned Grebe** (*Podiceps auritus*) - A few birds seen at Morro Bay State Park on 12/3.

**Eared Grebe** (*Podiceps nigricollis*) - Common; small numbers seen daily at coastal locales.

**Western Grebe** (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*) - Common; small numbers seen daily at coastal locales.

**Clark's Grebe** (*Aechmophorus clarkii*) - 2 at Morro Bay State Park on 12/3, and 1 at Oso Flaco Lake on 12/5.

### **Cormorants (Phalacrocoracidae):**

**Brandt's Cormorant** (*Phalacrocorax penicillatus*) - Common along the rockier coastline, with good numbers at Shell Beach, Morro Rock, Moonstone Beach, the Elephant Seal rookery, and other spots along the north coast.

**Double-crested Cormorant** (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) - Common; seen daily in large numbers at all coastal locales, and at Atascadero Lake.

**Pelagic Cormorant** (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) - Small numbers seen around Morro Rock, the cliffs at Shell Beach, and the rocky shoreline of the north coast.

## **Pelicans (Pelecanidae):**

**American White Pelican** (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*) - A couple of small flocks seen in Morro Bay on 12/3.

**Brown Pelican** (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) - Common; seen daily along the coast.

## **Hérons, Egrets & Bitterns (Ardeidae):**

**Great Blue Heron** (*Ardea herodias*) - Common; seen daily in small numbers (5–30 individuals) along the coast.

**Great Egret** (*Ardea alba*) - Common; seen daily in small numbers (10–50 individuals) along the coast, with 1 lone individual seen along Hwy. 46 on 12/4.

**Snowy Egret** (*Egretta thula*) - Fairly common; seen daily in small numbers (5–10 birds) along the coast.

**Green Heron** (*Butorides virescens*) - 1 spotted by Tom at Oceano campground on 12/5.

**Black-crowned Night-Heron** (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) - Several seen roosting in the cypress trees near the power plant in Morro Bay on three different days, and 1 juvenile seen at Oso Flaco Lake on 12/5.

## **New World Vultures (Cathartidae):**

**Turkey Vulture** (*Cathartes aura*) - Common; seen daily in numbers.

## **Osprey (Pandionidae):**

**Osprey** (*Pandion haliaetus*) - 1 distant bird teed-up in the South Bay on 12/3.

## **Hawks, Eagles & Kites (Accipitridae):**

**White-tailed Kite** (*Elanus leucurus*) - 40+ at the communal roost at San Simeon Creek at dusk on 12/3; 15 there in mid-afternoon on 12/6; and 1 individual along Bitterwater Road on 12/4.

**Northern Harrier** (*Circus cyaneus*) - 2 (Bitterwater Road & Carrizo Plains) on 12/4, and 1 at Oso Flaco on 12/5.

**Sharp-shinned Hawk** (*Accipiter striatus*) - 1 at Carrizo Plains on 12/4.

**Cooper's Hawk** (*Accipiter cooperii*) - 1 along Hwy. 1 near Cayucos on 12/3; 2 along Bitterwater Road & Carrizo Plains on 12/4; and 1 at Cerro Alto Campground on 12/6.

**Red-shouldered Hawk** (*Buteo lineatus*) - 2–3 individuals per day at scattered coastal locales.

**Red-tailed Hawk** (*Buteo jamaicensis*) - Seen daily, in good numbers, with highs of 50+ on 12/4 and 40+ on 12/6.

**Ferruginous Hawk** (*Buteo regalis*) - 5 between Bitterwater Valley and Carrizo Plains on 12/4. (Great looks at both perched and soaring birds.)

**Golden Eagle** (*Aquila chrysaetos*) - 1 over South Bay on 12/3 was being dive-bombed by a Peregrine Falcon! We also saw 4 between Bitterwater Valley and the Carrizo Plains on 12/4 (3 of them together at one spot).

## **Falcons & Caracaras (Falconidae):**

**American Kestrel** (*Falco sparverius*) - Seen daily, in good numbers, with a high of 40+ on 12/4.

**Merlin** (*Falco columbarius*) - 1 seen at Carrizo Plains on 12/4 was picking apart an unidentified passerine.

**Peregrine Falcon** (*Falco peregrinus*) - A pair of birds harassing a Golden Eagle over the South Bay on 12/3 provided our first encounter. We subsequently saw what could have been the same pair, perched and flying around Morro Rock on 12/5 and 12/6.

**Prairie Falcon** (*Falco mexicanus*) - 3 seen between Bitterwater Valley and Carrizo Plains on 12/4. (Great views!)

## **Rails, Gallinules & Coots (Rallidae):**

**Virginia Rail** (*Rallus limicola*) - Crippling views of one very responsive individual at Oso Flaco Lake on 12/5, where we heard at least 5 others.

**Sora** (*Porzana carolina*) - Our first was one that I taped in nearly to our feet at Oceano on 12/5. That was followed by another 7 seen and/or heard at Oso Flaco later that day, and by an individual foraging in the open at Atascadero Lake on 12/6.

**Common Gallinule** (*Gallinula galeata*) -

**American Coot** (*Fulica americana*) -

## **Plovers & Lapwings (Charadriidae):**

**Black-bellied Plover** (*Pluvialis squatarola*) - Numbers seen at various sites around Morro Bay on 12/3, and several more at Old Creek mouth on 12/6.

**Snowy Plover** (*Charadrius nivosus*) - 40+ at San Simeon Creek mouth on 12/6.

**Semipalmated Plover** (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) - 25+ at Old Creek mouth on 12/6.

**Killdeer** (*Charadrius vociferus*) - Seen/heard daily in small numbers.

**Mountain Plover** (*Charadrius montanus*) - 25 at Carrizo Plains (along Panoramic Road) on 12/4. (Great light and exceptional views!)

## **Oystercatchers (Haematopodidae):**

**Black Oystercatcher** (*Haematopus bachmani*) - 3 seen from the base of the jetty at Morro Rock on 12/5; 4 from the cliffs at Shell Beach on 12/5; and 3 at Moonstone Beach Drive on 12/6.

## **Stilts & Avocets (Recurvirostridae):**

**American Avocet** (*Recurvirostra americana*) - Large numbers at Morro Bay on 12/3.

## **Sandpipers & Allies (Scolopacidae):**

**Spotted Sandpiper** (*Actitis macularius*) - Scattered individuals around Morro Bay on 12/3, and 1 at Shell Beach on 12/5.

**Greater Yellowlegs** (*Tringa melanoleuca*) - Scattered singles at various spots around Morro Bay on 12/3.

**Willet** (*Tringa semipalmata*) - Common along the coast (seen daily), where we saw mixed flocks of curlews, godwits and willets totaling several hundreds of birds at Morro Bay on 12/3.

**Whimbrel** (*Numenius phaeopus*) - 15+ along the north coast on 12/6 (Mostly at Old Creek mouth).

**Long-billed Curlew** (*Numenius americanus*) - Seen daily in good numbers, including a few hundred in Morro Bay on 12/3 and a flock of 150+ at Carrizo Plains on 12/4.

**Marbled Godwit** (*Limosa fedoa*) - Common along the coast (seen daily), where we saw mixed flocks of curlews, godwits and willets totaling several hundreds of birds at Morro Bay on 12/3.

**Black Turnstone** (*Arenaria melanocephala*) - 5 seen from the cliffs at Shell Beach on 12/5, and 20+ seen at Moonstone Beach in Cambria on 12/6.

**Surfbird** (*Aphriza virgata*) - 2 seen from the cliffs at Shell Beach on 12/5, and 3 seen at Moonstone Beach in Cambria on 12/6.

**Sanderling** (*Calidris alba*) - Common along the coast (where seen daily).

**Western Sandpiper** (*Calidris mauri*) - Studied nicely at the mudflats at Sweet Springs Nature Preserve on 12/3. Large flocks could be seen distantly from several spots in Morro Bay.

**Least Sandpiper** (*Calidris minutilla*) - Common along the coast (where seen daily), including at Morro Bay, Sweet Springs, and Morro Creek mouth.

**Dunlin** (*Calidris alpina*) - Good numbers seen at various points around Morro Bay on 12/3, including excellent comparisons with Least and Western sandpipers and Sanderlings at the mudflats at Sweet Springs.

**Short-billed Dowitcher** (*Limnodromus griseus*) - We saw and heard a few of these from the *Salicornia* marsh along the hike out from the marina in Morro Bay on 12/3.

**Long-billed Dowitcher** (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) - Most of the dowitchers that we saw in Morro Bay on 12/3 were not identified to species, but we had some nice scope studies of obvious Long-billeds at Sweet Springs,

**Wilson's Snipe** (*Gallinago delicata*) - 1 seen nicely at the Morro Creek mouth on 12/6, thanks to good spotting by Tom.

## **Gulls, Terns & Skimmers (Laridae):**

**Heermann's Gull** (*Larus heermanni*) - 1 seen by Morro Rock on 12/5, and scattered singles seen along the north coast on 12/6.

**Mew Gull** (*Larus canus*) - Seen in small numbers at Morro Creek mouth (5–12 birds) on 12/5 and 12/6, and in larger numbers along the north coast (e.g., 40+ at Pico Creek mouth) on 12/6.

**Ring-billed Gull** (*Larus delawarensis*) - Seen daily along the coast in small numbers.

**Western Gull** (*Larus occidentalis*) - Common; seen daily in large numbers along the coast.

**California Gull** (*Larus californicus*) - Common; seen daily in large numbers along the coast.

**Herring Gull** (*Larus argentatus*) - 5+ seen with the gull aggregations at Moonstone Beach and Pico Creek mouth on 12/6.

**Thayer's Gull** (*Larus thayeri*) - Three 1<sup>st</sup>-cycle birds seen nicely at Pico Creek mouth on 12/6.

**Glaucous-winged Gull** (*Larus glaucescens*) - Unusually scarce this winter. We saw only 3 individuals along the north coast on 12/6, starting with a bird at Old Creek mouth.

**Caspian Tern** (*Hydroprogne caspia*) - Scattered individuals around Morro Bay on 12/3, with a couple of birds at the Morro Creek mouth on 12/5, and at least 6 individuals at Old Creek mouth on 12/6.

**Forster's Tern** (*Sterna forsteri*) - Scattered individuals seen around Morro Bay on 12/3.

**Royal Tern** (*Thalasseus maximus*) - 4+ at Old Creek mouth on 12/6.

## **Pigeons & Doves (Columbidae):**

**Rock Pigeon** (*Columba livia*) - Common; seen daily, with a flock of 100+ along the freeway in Atascadero and other small flocks in Bitterwater Valley adding up to over 200 birds seen on 12/4.

**Band-tailed Pigeon** (*Patagioenas fasciata*) - 300+ in Atascadero (mostly in Kevin's yard) on 12/4, and a big flock at Atascadero Lake on 12/6.

**Eurasian Collared-Dove** (*Streptopelia decaocto*) - Small numbers (up to 30+) seen daily, at scattered locales (including the parking lot of our hotel).

**Mourning Dove** (*Zenaida macroura*) - Small numbers seen daily, with a high of 200+ in Bitterwater Valley & Carrizo Plains on 12/4.

## **Cuckoos (Cuculidae):**

**Greater Roadrunner** (*Geococcyx californianus*) - 1 in Bitterwater Valley on 12/4.

## **Barn-Owls (Tytonidae):**

**Barn Owl** (*Tyto alba*) - 3 on a day roost in Bitterwater Valley on 12/4 was an unexpected treat.

## **Typical Owls (Strigidae):**

**Great Horned Owl** (*Bubo virginianus*) - Heard only; at San Simeon Creek on 12/3 and at Oso Flaco Lake on 12/5.

## **Swifts (Apodidae):**

**White-throated Swift** (*Aeronautes saxatalis*) - Heard above Morro Rock on 12/6, but never seen.

## **Hummingbirds (Trochilidae):**

**Anna's Hummingbird** (*Calypte anna*) - Seen daily in small numbers (1–8/day).

## **Kingfishers (Alcedinidae):**

**Belted Kingfisher** (*Megaceryle alcyon*) - Scattered singles around Morro Bay and other coastal locales on 12/3,5 & 6.

## **Woodpeckers (Picidae):**

**Acorn Woodpecker** (*Melanerpes formicivorus*) - Several seen around KJZ's yard in Atascadero, and at the city park in Shandon on 12/4, and at Cerro Alto Campground on 12/6.

**Red-breasted Sapsucker** (*Sphyrapicus ruber*) - 1 in Kevin's yard in Atascadero on 12/4 and 2 more at the city park in Shandon later that morning. 1 seen by Amy in the willows at Oso Flaco on 12/5.

**Nuttall's Woodpecker** (*Picoides nuttallii*) - A few seen/heard daily. We saw them particularly well at Montana de Oro campground on 12/3, and at the city park in Shandon on 12/4.

**Downy Woodpecker** (*Picoides pubescens*) - Singles seen at Montana de Oro campground on 12/3, and at Oceano campground on 12/5.

**Hairy Woodpecker** (*Picoides villosus*) - Singles seen at Oceano campground on 12/5, and at Cerro Alto campground on 12/6.

**Northern Flicker** (*Colaptes auratus*) - Scattered singles seen daily. These were all “Red-shafted” types.

### **Tyrant Flycatchers (Tyrannidae):**

**Black Phoebe** (*Sayornis nigricans*) - Seen daily in small numbers at scattered locales.

**Say’s Phoebe** (*Sayornis saya*) - A few seen daily at scattered locales, with a high of 8 seen in Bitterwater Valley and Carrizo Plains on 12/4.

### **Shrikes (Laniidae):**

**Loggerhead Shrike** (*Lanius ludovicianus*) - 25+ seen in Bitterwater Valley and the Carrizo Plains on 12/4.

### **Vireos & Allies (Vireonidae):**

**Hutton’s Vireo** (*Vireo huttoni*) - Singles seen nicely at Montana de Oro campground on 12/3, and at Oceano campground on 12/5.

### **Crows, Jays & Magpies (Corvidae):**

**Steller’s Jay** (*Cyanocitta stelleri*) - Several at Cerro Alto campground on 12/6.

**Western Scrub-Jay** (*Aphelocoma californica*) - Common; seen daily in numbers.

**Yellow-billed Magpie** (*Pica nuttalli*) - 3+ birds seen in Bitterwater Valley on 12/4.

**American Crow** (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) - Seen daily in small numbers, although seemingly less common than usual.

**Common Raven** (*Corvus corax*) - Common inland, from Paso Robles to Bitterwater Valley and the Carrizo Plains on 12/4.

### **Larks (Alaudidae):**

**Horned Lark** (*Eremophila alpestris*) - Flocks of hundreds in Bitterwater Valley and the Carrizo Plains on 12/4.

### **Swallows (Hirundinidae):**

**Tree Swallow** (*Tachycineta bicolor*) - 3 seen from the South Bay overlook on 12/3 and 10+ at Oso Flaco Lake on 12/5.

## **Chickadees & Tits (Paridae):**

**Chestnut-backed Chickadee** (*Poecile rufescens*) - Seen daily at various locales, including the Elfin Forest at Baywood Park, KJZ's yard in Atascadero, Montana de Oro campground, Oceano campground, and the willows at Oso Flaco Lake.

**Oak Titmouse** (*Baeolophus inornatus*) - First seen in Kevin's yard in Atascadero on 12/4; a few seen daily thereafter at scattered locales.

## **Long-tailed Tits (Aegithalidae):**

**Bushtit** (*Psaltriparius minimus*) - Flocks of 10–20 individuals seen daily, most memorably the group that approached to within touching distance at the Elfin Forest on 12/3.

## **Nuthatches (Sittidae):**

**White-breasted Nuthatch** (*Sitta carolinensis*) - At least 2 birds seen nicely in Kevin's yard in Atascadero on 12/4.

## **Creepers (Certhiidae):**

**Brown Creeper** (*Certhia americana*) - 2 seen nicely at Cerro Alto campground on 12/6.

## **Wrens (Troglodytidae):**

**Rock Wren** (*Salpinctes obsoletus*) - 4 seen in Bitterwater Valley on 12/4, including a responsive pair that showed nicely.

**Bewick's Wren** (*Thryomanes bewickii*) - Seen daily in small numbers (1–5 birds) at scattered locales.

**House Wren** (*Troglodytes aedon*) - Heard at a couple locales around Morro Bay, with 1 seen briefly at the Elephant Seal boardwalk on 12/6.

**Marsh Wren** (*Cistothorus palustris*) - Several seen & heard at Oso Flaco Lake on 12/5.

## **Gnatcatchers (Poliophtilidae):**

**Blue-gray Gnatcatcher** (*Poliophtila caerulea*) - A responsive individual was seen nicely at the Elfin Forest in Baywood Park on 12/3, and another was heard at the base of Morro Rock on 12/5.

## **Kinglets (Regulidae):**

**Ruby-crowned Kinglet** (*Regulus calendula*) - Seen daily in small numbers (2–15/day) and at several locales.

## **Old World Warblers (Sylviidae):**

**Wrentit** (*Chamaea fasciata*) - Multiple individuals seen beautifully at Montana de Oro campground on 12/3, with another seen at the Elfin Forest that same morning. Heard at Oceano campground and Oso Flaco Lake on 12/5, and at Cerro Alto campground on 12/6.

## **Thrushes & Allies (Turdidae):**

**Western Bluebird** (*Sialia mexicana*) - 1 spotted by Ken in Atascadero on 12/4 got away before we could the group on it; another spotted by Kevin along Hwy. 41 on 12/6 could not be stopped for because of traffic.

**Mountain Bluebird** (*Sialia currucoides*) - 50+ in Bitterwater Valley and the Carrizo Plains on 12/4.

**Hermit Thrush** (*Catharus guttatus*) - Scattered singles seen nicely at the base of Morro Rock on 12/5-6, and at Oceano campground on 12/5; more fleeting looks at other locales on 12/5 and 12/6.

**American Robin** (*Turdus migratorius*) - Only a few scattered individuals seen on 12/3 and 12/4, and heard on 12/6.

## **Mockingbirds & Thrashers (Mimidae):**

**Northern Mockingbird** (*Mimus polyglottos*) - Scattered individuals seen on 12/4 and 12/5.

**California Thrasher** (*Toxostoma redivivum*) - Point-blank views of a pair at the Elfin Forest at Baywood Park on 12/3; also seen at Montana de Oro campground later that same day; and seen nicely in Kevin's yard in Atascadero on 12/4.

## **Starlings (Sturnidae):**

**European Starling** (*Sturnus vulgaris*) - Seen daily in numbers.

## **Pipits & Wagtails (Motacillidae):**

**American Pipit** (*Anthus rubescens*) - Scattered singles seen and heard, with the best views coming at the Elephant Seal Beach and San Simeon Creek mouth on 12/6.

## **New World Warblers (Parulidae):**

**Orange-crowned Warbler** (*Oreothlypis celata*) - Singles seen at Montana de Oro (12/3) and Oceano (12/5) campgrounds, and at Oso Flaco Lake (12/5).

**Common Yellowthroat** (*Geothlypis trichas*) - Scattered singles seen on all three days along the coast (Morro Creek mouth, South Bay, Oceano campground, Oso Flaco Lake).

**Yellow-rumped Warbler** (*Setophaga coronata*) - Seen daily in small numbers, with a high of 30+ on 12/5 (mostly at Oceano campground and Oso Flaco Lake). We saw both "Audubon's" and "Myrtle" types.

**Townsend's Warbler** (*Setophaga townsendi*) - Several individuals seen nicely at Montana de Oro (12/3), Oceano (12/5), and Cerro Alto (12/6) campgrounds, and at Oso Flaco Lake (12/5).

**Hermit Warbler** (*Setophaga occidentalis*) - 1 found by Ken at Cerro Alto campground on 12/6 was a treat. They are uncommon at best in winter.

## **Buntings, Sparrows & Allies (Emberizidae):**

**Spotted Towhee** (*Pipilo maculatus*) - Seen daily in small numbers (2–6 birds) and at scattered locales.

**California Towhee** (*Melospiza crissalis*) - Scattered individuals and pairs seen on three of the four days of birding.

**Lark Sparrow** (*Chondestes grammacus*) - Good numbers seen from Shandon to Bitterwater Valley on 12/4.

**Sage Sparrow** (*Amphispiza belli*) - 1 of the inland subspecies *canescens* seen nicely at Carrizo Plains on 12/4.

**Savannah Sparrow** (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) - 100+ between Bitterwater Valley and Carrizo Plains on 12/4.

**Fox Sparrow** (*Passerella iliaca*) - A couple seen nicely, and several more heard at Montana de Oro campground on 12/3.

**Song Sparrow** (*Melospiza melodia*) - Seen daily (and at scattered locales) in small numbers (5–15 birds).

**Lincoln's Sparrow** (*Melospiza lincolni*) - 1 seen at Oceano Campground on 12/5.

**White-crowned Sparrow** (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) - Common; seen daily in numbers.

**Golden-crowned Sparrow** (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*) - Several seen at Montana de Oro campground on 12/3, and in Kevin's yard in Atascadero on 12/4.

**Dark-eyed Junco** (*Junco hyemalis*) - Seen in small numbers and at scattered locales 12/4,5 & 6.

## **Orioles, Blackbirds & Allies (Icteridae):**

**Western Meadowlark** (*Sturnella neglecta*) - 100+ between Bitterwater Valley and Carrizo Plains on 12/4.

**Brewer's Blackbird** (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) - Common; seen daily, and at most locales, in good numbers.

**Great-tailed Grackle** (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) - 1 female at the Morro Creek mouth on 12/5.

**Brown-headed Cowbird** (*Molothrus ater*) - 1 female at the base of Morro Rock on 12/5.

## **Siskins, Crossbills & Allies (Fringillidae):**

**Purple Finch** (*Carpodacus purpureus*) - A couple seen nicely at Montana de Oro campground on 12/3, and two males seen at Kevin's feeders in Atascadero on 12/4, were our only records.

**House Finch** (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) - Common; seen daily in numbers, including some rather large flocks along Bitterwater Valley Road.

**Lesser Goldfinch** (*Spinus psaltria*) - Seen only in Kevin's yard in Atascadero, on 12/4.

**American Goldfinch** (*Spinus tristis*) - Seen in Kevin's yard and at the city park in Shandon on 12/4, and at Oso Flaco Lake on 12/5.

## **Old World Sparrows (Passeridae):**

**House Sparrow** (*Passer domesticus*) - Seen daily in small numbers.

**Total = 163 species**

## Mammals:

**Harbor Seal** (*Phoca vitulina*) - Common; seen daily along the coast.

**Northern Elephant Seal** (*Mirounga angustirostris*) - Dozens of mostly juveniles (with a couple of massive beachmasters) hauled out at the rookery north of San Simeon.

**Sea Otter** (*Enhydra lutris*) - Scattered individuals along the coast.

**Bobcat** (*Lynx rufus*) - A fabulous individual that was hunting pocket gophers in the Montana de Oro campground.

**Coyote** (*Canis latrans*) - Carrizo Plains.

**Mule Deer** (*Odocoileus hemionus*) - Scattered individuals and small groups.

**“Tule” Elk** (*Cervus elaphus*) - Carrizo Plains.

**Nelson’s (“San Joaquin”) Antelope-Squirrel** (*Ammospermophilus nelsoni*) - Carrizo Plains.

**California Ground-Squirrel** (*Spermophilus beecheyi*) - Seen everywhere, but particularly abundant in Bitterwater Valley and the Carrizo Plains.

**Western Gray Squirrel** (*Sciurus griseus*) - Seen in Kevin’s yard in Atascadero.

**Black-tailed Jackrabbit** - Carrizo Plains.

**Desert Cottontail** (*Sylvilagus audubonii*) - Singles seen in Bitterwater Valley (by Claire) and Carrizo Plains.

**Botta’s Pocket Gopher** (*Thomomys bottae*) - Montana de Oro (Almost ended up as Bobcat food!)

**Common (Burchell’s) Zebra** - Introduced on the Hearst Ranch.

## Significant others:

**Monarch Butterfly** - 20,000+ roosting at Pismo Beach; scattered singles seen elsewhere.

**Unidentified stick insect (Phasmatidae)** - 1 found by Amy & Tom (I think) at the Inn at Morro Bay.

**Starfish sp.** - Several seen around the base of Morro Rock and on rocks at Shell Beach and Moonstone Beach.

**Mr. & Mrs. Camera** - Don’t ask! (And no, they are not a couple!)