

WINTER SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

JANUARY 21-26, 2008

**LEADERS:
BARRY ZIMMER AND STEVE HILTY**

COMPILED BY: BARRY ZIMMER

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

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.

Winter Southern California

January 21 - 26, 2008

Leaders: Barry Zimmer & Steve Hilty

Southern California offers what is arguably some of the best winter birding in the United States. This was very evident on our recent Winter California tour. Our trip started in San Diego, where we had two full days to scour the variety of habitats from coastal chaparral to rocky shorelines to bird-covered estuaries. We began north of San Diego, searching out the endangered California Gnatcatcher. A stroll through the chaparral here yielded not only great views of this highly sought species, but also scope studies of a pair of Nuttall's Woodpeckers, a California Thrasher at about 15 feet, and a very cooperative Wren Tit. Later in the morning we birded the scenic shoreline of La Jolla, which produced three Wandering Tattlers, a Black Turnstone, Pelagic Cormorant, Red-throated Loon, many stunning Heermann's Gulls, and about 50 distant Black-vented Shearwaters feeding offshore. After lunch we visited various areas around Mission Bay and saw a great variety of waterfowl, shorebirds, and larids including Brant, stunning Cinnamon Teal, 157 Black Skimmers in one flock, and a locally rare Glaucous-winged Gull.

The next day we visited inland areas east of San Diego in the morning. At Mission Gorge, we had another very cooperative California Gnatcatcher, lengthy views of a Golden-crowned Sparrow, and a responsive pair of Rufous-crowned Sparrows. Nearby Santee Lakes produced a stunning Lewis's Woodpecker, scope views of White-tailed Kite, numerous Cassin's Kingbirds, and about 100 White-throated Swifts low over the ponds. The afternoon was spent around San Diego Bay. Chula Vista yielded two male Eurasian Wigeon, another Glaucous-winged Gull, and many close Brant. Sites in and around Imperial Beach had Western and Clark's grebes side by side and three very rare Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, among others.

On our third day we headed east through the Laguna Mountains. Just before arriving at our first birding area we were met by a somewhat unexpected snowstorm! Despite the conditions, we got out and started birding the campground at Paso Picacho. Quickly we tallied Mountain Chickadee, Oak Titmouse, a wonderfully cute cluster of Pygmy Nuthatches, numerous Acorn and Nuttall's woodpeckers, and Steller's Jays. Our real target here, however, was the one remaining White-headed Woodpecker that had been seen sporadically at this spot. After some searching we found the woodpecker feeding in a large cedar. Eventually we walked to within 15 feet of the bird as it fed unconcernedly over our heads. This species proved to be the favorite bird of the tour! Side by side studies of Tricolored and Red-winged blackbirds were a real treat at lunchtime. Other highlights for the area included two wonderful Ferruginous Hawks, several Red-shouldered Hawks, and a flock of Purple Finches. Late in the afternoon we descended down from over 4,000 feet elevation to below sea level at the Salton Sea. Daylight was running out, but we had time for a quick stop at Unit 1 of the refuge. Thousands of white geese were feeding along the roadside, providing us with excellent comparative views of Snow and Ross's. A group of Sandhill Cranes flew by, as did hundreds of White-faced Ibis. The real star of the afternoon show, however, was a Virginia Rail in full view for several minutes about 20 feet away.

Our last full day was spent at various points in and around the Salton Sea itself. A rare Lesser Black-backed Gull, three "Large-billed" Savannah Sparrows, six Burrowing Owls, two more Ferruginous Hawks, a Peregrine Falcon, and several Greater Roadrunners were among our many nice finds. Despite no Yellow-footed Gulls (always the premier target here) having been reliably reported for over three weeks at the sea, a member of our group, Joe, spotted a full adult well out on the rocks from the Red Hill area. We were elated at our good luck! We briefly revisited the Unit 1 area and were rewarded with a rarely seen blue morph of the Ross's Goose. The remainder of the afternoon was devoted to the often time-consuming search for Mountain Plovers; after much searching and with daylight fading, we located a burnt field with 14 and enjoyed great scope studies!

In all, we tallied over 170 species including many highly sought regional specialties and several unexpected rarities. This tour is a must for beating the midwinter doldrums in much of the snowbound United States.

Itinerary:

January 21 - arrival in San Diego

January 22 - San Elijo Lagoon, Fairbanks Ranch, La Jolla, Crown Point Beach , Mission Bay, San Diego River Channel, Sunset Cliffs (100 species)

January 23 - Mission Beach, Mission Trails Regional Park, Santee Lakes, Chula Vista, Imperial Beach, Tijuana Estuaries NWR (110 species; 128 total)

January 24 - Pine Valley, Paso Picacho Campground, Lake Cuyamaca, Anza-Borrego desert , Unit 1 of Salton Sea NWR (75 species; 157 total)

January 25 - Salton Sea NWR (Obsidian Butte, refuge headquarters, Red Hill), agricultural areas between El Centro and the sea (85 species; 174 total)

January 26 - departures for home or on to the Winter Southern Arizona tour

Key:

S = San Diego and surrounding areas

L = Laguna 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

Birds:

Snow Goose SS---over two thousand, including several blue morphs
Ross's Goose SS---over 500 including one **very rare blue morph**; great comparative views with
 Snows
Brant S---the western race *nigricans*, a possible future split
Canada Goose S,L,SS
Wood Duck S
Gadwall S,SS,T,N
Eurasian Wigeon S---two nice males in Chula Vista; always a treat
American Wigeon S
Mallard S,L
Blue-winged Teal S---uncommon
Cinnamon Teal S---gorgeous; superb studies in the river channel
Northern Shoveler S,SS
Northern Pintail S,SS
Green-winged Teal S,SS
Canvasback S,L
Redhead S
Ring-necked Duck S,L
Greater Scaup S---very uncommon
Lesser Scaup S
Surf Scoter S
Bufflehead S,L,SS
Common Goldeneye SS---immature male at Salton Sea
Red-breasted Merganser S
Ruddy Duck daily
Gambel's Quail SS---great views
Red-throated Loon S---uncommon; spotted by Marilyn
Common Loon S
Pied-billed Grebe S,L,SS
Horned Grebe S
Eared Grebe S,SS
Western Grebe S,SS
Clark's Grebe S---good comparative studies with Westerns
Black-vented Shearwater S---about 50 seen distantly from shore in La Jolla
American White Pelican S,SS
Brown Pelican S,SS
Brandt's Cormorant S---great scope views of birds in full breeding color
Double-crested Cormorant S,SS
Pelagic Cormorant S---only one quick fly-by in La Jolla
Great Blue Heron S,SS,N
Great Egret S,SS
Snowy Egret S,SS
Little Blue Heron S---increasingly regular in this area
Cattle Egret SS
Black-crowned Night-Heron SS
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron S---stakeout pair with one immature in Imperial Beach
White-faced Ibis S,SS
Turkey Vulture SS

Osprey S,SS
 White-tailed Kite S,SS---a total of 5 seen; exceptional scope views near Santee
 Northern Harrier daily
 Cooper's Hawk S
 Red-shouldered Hawk S,L
 Red-tailed Hawk seen daily
Ferruginous Hawk L,SS---a good year for this species with four seen; wonderful Questar views
 American Kestrel seen daily in numbers
Merlin SS
Peregrine Falcon S,SS---four total including one eating a coot!
 Gambel's Quail SS
 Clapper Rail SS---heard only
 Virginia Rail SS---incredible views at Unit 1; voted the third favorite bird of the tour!
 Sora SS---heard only
 Common Moorhen SS
 American Coot widespread
 Sandhill Crane SS---one flock of ten
 Black-bellied Plover S,SS
Snowy Plover S--- uncommon; we had one group of 76 birds at the secret roosting spot!
 Semipalmated Plover S
 Killdeer S,SS
Mountain Plover SS---good views of flock of 14; found with less than an hour of light left!
 Black-necked Stilt S,SS
 American Avocet S,SS
 Spotted Sandpiper S,SS
Wandering Tattler S---three seen; uncommon
 Greater Yellowlegs S,SS
 Willet S
 Lesser Yellowlegs S,SS---uncommon
 Whimbrel S---three total
 Long-billed Curlew S,SS---over 500 in one day!
 Marbled Godwit S,SS
 Ruddy Turnstone S---oddly, only one seen
 Black Turnstone S---nice views
Surfbird S---somewhat distant views of this uncommon and easily missed species
 Sanderling S
 Western Sandpiper S
 Least Sandpiper S,SS
 Dunlin S
 Long-billed Dowitcher S,SS
 Heermann's Gull S---one of the prettiest gulls
 Ring-billed Gull S,SS
 California Gull S,SS
 Herring Gull S,SS
Lesser Black-backed Gull SS---third year bird; a tour first
Yellow-footed Gull SS---prolonged scope study of adult bird at Red Hill thanks to Joe; none had
 been seen at the Sea in three weeks prior to our visit!
 Western Gull S
Glaucous-winged Gull S---adult at Mission Bay and first year bird in Chula Vista; very uncommon

Caspian Tern S,SS
 Royal Tern S
 Black Skimmer S---flock of 153
 Rock Pigeon seen daily
 Band-tailed Pigeon L---only a few this year
 Eurasian Collared-Dove_ SS---this rapidly invading species is now common around SS
 Mourning Dove seen daily
 Common Ground-Dove SS
 Greater Roadrunner SS---four seen
 Burrowing Owl SS---six in one day
 White-throated Swift S---great views at Santee
 Anna's Hummingbird S---including nests by some at the hotel
 Belted Kingfisher S,SS
Lewis's Woodpecker S---fantastic scope views in Santee; rare
 Acorn Woodpecker L
White-headed Woodpecker L---prolonged scope study in the Laguna Mountains; what luck!; voted the favorite bird of the tour!!!!; #600 for Don & Sally
 Nuttall's Woodpecker S,L---six total; nice studies
 Hairy Woodpecker L
Downy Woodpecker S---very uncommon to rare here
 Northern Flicker L,SS---Red-shafted form
 Black Phoebe daily in numbers
 Say's Phoebe daily in numbers
Cassin's Kingbird S
 Loggerhead Shrike L,SS
 Steller's Jay L---pacific coast race *stelleri*
 Western Scrub-Jay S,L---*californica*
 American Crow S,L
 Common Raven daily
 Horned Lark SS
 Tree Swallow S,SS
 Mountain Chickadee L---subspecies *baileyae*
 Oak Titmouse L---very close!
 Verdin SS
 Bushtit S
 White-breasted Nuthatch L
 Pygmy Nuthatch L---very close views at Paso Picacho, including a very unusual display of four birds together in a square shape; voted the second favorite bird of the tour; the cutest bird in North America?
 Brown Creeper L---uncommon
 Bewick's Wren S
 Marsh Wren SS---heard only
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet S,SS
California Gnatcatcher S---great looks of this endangered species
 Black-tailed Gnatcatcher L
 Western Bluebird S,L
 Hermit Thrush S,L
 American Robin SS---one spotted by Sean at the Salton Sea was unusual
 Wrentit S---the original apricot-tinged bird!

Northern Mockingbird SS
 California Thrasher S,L---superb views from about fifteen feet!
 European Starling seen daily
 American Pipit S,SS
 Cedar Waxwing S---one flock at Santee
 Phainopepla S,L
 Orange-crowned Warbler S---heard only
 Yellow-rumped Warbler seen daily; Audubon's subspecies
 Common Yellowthroat S
 Spotted Towhee S,L
 California Towhee S
 Abert's Towhee SS
 Rufous-crowned Sparrow S (coastal form)
 Vesper Sparrow L
 Lark Sparrow S---one flyover flock of ten near Santee
 Savannah Sparrow SS---superb views of the "large-billed" subspecies (*rostratus*) near Obsidian
 Butte---a possible future split
 Fox Sparrow L---one seen by Joe in Pine Valley
 Song Sparrow daily
 Lincoln's Sparrow S---not seen by all
 White-crowned Sparrow S,L,SS
Golden-crowned Sparrow S---very close views of this uncommon species at Mission Trails
 Dark-eyed Junco L,M,H---Oregon and **Slate-colored** (rare) varieties
 Red-winged Blackbird daily
Tricolored Blackbird S,L--- excellent views of this declining specialty
 Western Meadowlark S,L,SS
 Brewer's Blackbird daily
 Great-tailed Grackle daily
 Brown-headed Cowbird S,SS
 Purple Finch L---uncommon; subspecies californicus
 House Finch daily
 Pine Siskin L
 Lesser Goldfinch S
 House Sparrow daily

total species - 174

Mammals:

Harbor Seal
 California Ground Squirrel
 Western Gray Squirrel
 Round-tailed Ground Squirrel
 Desert Cottontail
 Coyote---thanks to Lang!
 Mule Deer

total species - 7

Significant others:

the amazing ancient puli
 apricot colored birds
 outdoor dining on San Diego Bay....
 an Elvis sighting