

WINTER SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

JANUARY 25-30, 2009

LEADER: BARRY ZIMMER

COMPILED BY: BARRY ZIMMER

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

WINTER SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
January 25-30, 2009

Leader: Barry Zimmer

Few areas of the United States support the diversity of bird life in winter as does southern California. With hordes of wintering waterfowl, shorebirds, and gulls along the coast to resident chaparral specialties to montane species to the avian spectacle of the Salton Sea, our winter California tour offers an amazing array of birds. This was certainly evident on our 2009 trip.

We began with two days in the San Diego area. Our first stop, in the chaparral belt, yielded a great variety and excellent quality. A pair of generally skulky Wrentits provided wonderful views, as did a California Thrasher that sang from the top of a manzanita less than 20 feet away. Our primary target, the endangered California Gnatcatcher, put on a show with a pair actively foraging right next to the trail. Bewick's Wren, Bushtit, Western Scrub-Jay, and California Towhee followed, and a responsive male Nuttall's Woodpecker topped things off. The remainder of the day was spent along the coast where highlights included Brant; Brandt's and Pelagic cormorants; Wandering Tattler; Long-billed Curlew; Heermann's (perhaps the prettiest of all gulls), Mew, and Thayer's gulls; Black Skimmer; Cassin's Kingbird; and Tricolored Blackbird. Late in the afternoon we visited a spot where a very rare "Mangrove" Yellow Warbler (picture a regular Yellow Warbler with a chestnut red head!) had been found. Within a few moments we spotted the bird in a low eucalyptus and had prolonged scope views from about 30 feet! This was a life subspecies (some authors consider it a full species) in the United States for everyone in the group including me!

Our second day in San Diego was spent around San Diego Bay, Imperial Beach, and Point Loma. We started out the morning with 44 Snowy Plovers in view at once, followed quickly by Black and Ruddy turnstones and Surfbirds on the nearby jetty. A male Eurasian Wigeon (a rarity which has become virtually annual on our tours here), a vagrant Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, and a rare Green-tailed Towhee followed, but the real highlight of the morning was our up-close-and-personal experience with a Clapper Rail literally two feet away! The afternoon produced some distant Black-vented Shearwaters offshore, stunning Wood Ducks, White-throated Swifts, more close encounters with California Thrasher, Spotted Towhee, and Fox Sparrow among others.

On our third morning we headed eastward to the Laguna Mountains where an entirely different set of birds awaited us. Near Pine Valley we enjoyed Mountain Chickadee and Oak Titmouse at close range. Nearby Cuyamaca State Park produced stunning views of Pygmy Nuthatch, Steller's Jay, Brown Creeper, Acorn and Nuttall's woodpeckers, and Western Bluebird. In the mid-afternoon we descended toward the Salton Sea. We had about an hour to spend at an area called Unit 1 on the southern end of the sea. Here we found two Tundra Swans, Ross's and Snow geese by the thousands, thousands of White-faced Ibis, and 200 or so Sandhill Cranes; we also enjoyed good views of both Sora and Virginia rails, a flock of very uncommon Stilt Sandpipers, and nice studies of Abert's Towhee.

Our last full day was spent at various locations in and around the Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge. This area hosts an impressive quantity of birds each winter with waterfowl, shorebirds, and gulls numbering into the countless thousands of individuals. Our two prime targets were the endangered Mountain Plover and the highly sought Yellow-footed Gull (found nowhere else in the United States). Each can be difficult to find, and the pursuit of them often takes the entire day. We were blessed with good luck, however, and found a flock of 82 Mountain Plovers in a burnt field within the first hour of the day. After soaking up lengthy scope views, we headed toward Red Hill to begin looking for the gull. On the way we stopped for close studies of Burrowing Owls and a Prairie Falcon. At our first check of the seashore near Red Hill we spotted both an adult and a first year Yellow-footed Gull within minutes. By 9 a.m. we had seen both targets! During the rest of the day we scoured the shoreline and nearby fields and had Greater White-fronted and Cackling geese (both locally rare); Glaucous-winged and Thayer's gulls (both rare here); a field with 400+ Long-billed Curlews; great looks at Common Ground-Dove; five Greater Roadrunners; Eared, Western, and Clark's grebes; and three Peregrine Falcons among the more notables.

In all we totaled nearly 170 species of birds in our four days of birding and enjoyed generally very good weather (while much of the country suffered through cold and snow). In combination with our Winter Southern Arizona tour (these two tours run back-to-back by design) we tallied an impressive 240 species (approaching 40% of the regularly occurring birds of North America). As an added bonus, on the transfer drive in between the two tours we saw an adult Golden Eagle and had great views of Le Conte's Thrasher!

Itinerary:

January 25 - arrival in San Diego

January 26 - San Elijo Lagoon, Fairbanks Ranch, La Jolla, Crown Point Beach, Mission Bay, San Diego River Channel, Sunset Cliffs, Famosa Slough, Hancock & Channel dumpster spot (82 species)

January 27 - Mission Beach, Chula Vista (J Street Marina), Imperial Beach, Tijuana Estuaries NWR, Coronado Island, Mission gorge, Santee Lakes, Cabrillo NM, Robb Park (99 species; 119 total)

January 28 - Pine Valley, Cuyamaca Rancho State Park, Paso Picacho Campground, Lake Cuyamaca, Anza-Borrego desert, Unit 1 of Salton Sea NWR (80 species; 147 total)

January 29 - Salton Sea NWR (Obsidian Butte, refuge headquarters, Red Hill), agricultural areas between El Centro and the sea, Cattle Call Park, Sunbeam Lake (78 species; 165 total)

January 30 - departures for home (165 species total)

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:

Greater White-fronted Goose SS---lone bird at Sunbeam Lake that has taken up residence with domestics
Snow Goose SS---over three thousand, including two blue morphs
Ross's Goose SS---over 1000; great comparative views with Snows
Brant S---the western race *nigricans*, a possible future split
Canada Goose S,L
Cackling Goose SS---on with Greater White-fronted at Sunbeam Lake; rare
Tundra Swan SS---two at Unit 1 were at tour first!
Wood Duck S
Gadwall S,SS
Eurasian Wigeon S---male at Imperial Beach; always a treat
American Wigeon S,SS
Mallard S,L,SS
Blue-winged Teal S---uncommon
Northern Shoveler S,SS
Northern Pintail S,SS
Green-winged Teal S,SS
Canvasback L---about a dozen at Lake Cuyamaca
Redhead S,L
Ring-necked Duck S
Lesser Scaup S
Surf Scoter S
Bufflehead S
Red-breasted Merganser S
Ruddy Duck daily
Ring-necked Pheasant SS---spotted by Dorothy; uncommon
Gambel's Quail SS---great views
Common Loon S---not seen by all
Pied-billed Grebe S,L,SS
Horned Grebe S---distant
Eared Grebe S,SS
Western Grebe S,SS
Clark's Grebe S,SS---good comparative studies with Westerns
Black-vented Shearwater S---about 20 seen very distantly from shore off Point Loma (easily two miles out)
American White Pelican SS
Brown Pelican S,SS
Brandt's Cormorant S---great scope views of birds in full breeding color
Double-crested Cormorant S,L,SS
Pelagic Cormorant S---a couple on the rocks
Great Blue Heron S,L,SS
Great Egret S,SS
Snowy Egret S,SS
Little Blue Heron S---increasingly regular in this area
Cattle Egret SS
Green Heron SS
Black-crowned Night-Heron SS

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron S---stakeout bird in Imperial Beach
 White-faced Ibis SS---literally thousands
 Turkey Vulture SS
 Osprey S
 Northern Harrier S,L,SS
 Cooper's Hawk S
 Red-shouldered Hawk S---the first bird of the trip
 Red-tailed Hawk seen daily
 American Kestrel S,L,SS
Merlin S,SS---scope views in Mission Beach
 Peregrine Falcon SS---three total
Prairie Falcon SS---one near the refuge
 Clapper Rail S---unsurpassed views from two feet(!); WOW!
 Virginia Rail SS---nice views at Unit 1
 Sora SS---good views
 Common Moorhen SS
 American Coot widespread
Sandhill Crane S,SS---lone bird at Fairbanks ranch was a county rarity and a flock of 200 or so at
 Unit 1
 Black-bellied Plover S,SS
Snowy Plover S--- uncommon; we had one group of 44 birds at the secret roosting spot!
 Semipalmated Plover S,SS
 Killdeer S,SS
Mountain Plover SS---good views of flocks of 82 & 62 birds after some searching; tied for third
 favorite bird of the tour
 Black-necked Stilt S,SS
 American Avocet S,SS
 Spotted Sandpiper S,SS
Wandering Tattler S---only one found this year; uncommon
 Greater Yellowlegs S,SS
 Willet S
 Whimbrel S
 Long-billed Curlew S,SS---over 400 in one day!
 Marbled Godwit S,SS
 Ruddy Turnstone S
 Black Turnstone S---nice views after some searching
Surfbird S---somewhat distant views of this uncommon and easily missed species
Red Knot S---one close with dowitcher flock
 Sanderling S
 Western Sandpiper S,SS
 Least Sandpiper S,SS
Stilt Sandpiper SS---floc at Unit 1; very uncommon
 Short-billed Dowitcher S---at least one along river channel
 Long-billed Dowitcher S,SS
 Heermann's Gull S---one of the prettiest gulls
Mew Gull S---one in river channel late in afternoon; very uncommon
 Ring-billed Gull S,SS
 California Gull S,SS

Herring Gull S,SS
Thayer's Gull S,SS---first winter birds were a real treat
Yellow-footed Gull SS---generally very difficult at this season but we had perhaps our quickest success with an adult and a first year bird at red Hill and another first year bird at Obsidian Butte; tied for third favorite bird of the tour
 Western Gull S
Glaucous-winged Gull SS---first winter bird at the sea; very uncommon
 Caspian Tern S,SS
 Forster's Tern S,SS
 Royal Tern S
 Black Skimmer S---flock of 50 or more
 Rock Pigeon seen daily
 Eurasian Collared-Dove_ SS---this rapidly invading species is now common around SS
 Mourning Dove seen daily
 Common Ground-Dove SS---superb views
 Greater Roadrunner SS---five seen
 Burrowing Owl SS---three seen very well; seems to be declining in this area
 White-throated Swift S,L---great views at Santee
 Anna's Hummingbird S,L,SS---gorgeous
 Belted Kingfisher S,SS
 Acorn Woodpecker L
 Nuttall's Woodpecker S,L---five total; nice studies
 Hairy Woodpecker L
 Black Phoebe daily in numbers
 Say's Phoebe daily in numbers
Cassin's Kingbird S---excellent study at Crown Point Beach
 Steller's Jay L---pacific coast race *stelleri*
 Western Scrub-Jay S,L---*californica*
 American Crow S,L
 Common Raven S,L,SS
 Horned Lark SS
 Tree Swallow SS
 Northern Rough-winged Swallow SS
Barn Swallow SS---uncommon this early
 Mountain Chickadee L---subspecies *baileyae*
 Oak Titmouse L---nice views
 Verdin SS---heard only
 Bushtit S,L
 White-breasted Nuthatch L
 Pygmy Nuthatch L---very close views at Paso Picacho; voted the second favorite bird of the tour; the cutest bird in North America?
 Brown Creeper L---uncommon
 Bewick's Wren S,L---nice study
 Marsh Wren S,SS---seen with some effort
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet S,L
California Gnatcatcher S---great looks of this endangered species
 Black-tailed Gnatcatcher L---spotted by Dorothy
 Western Bluebird L

Hermit Thrush S,L
 Wrentit S---very good views of this skulker
 Northern Mockingbird S,L,SS
 California Thrasher S---superb views from about 20 feet!
 European Starling seen daily
 American Pipit S,SS
 Cedar Waxwing S---one flock seen poorly by a couple of us
 Phainopepla L---twenty in view at once!
 Orange-crowned Warbler S
“Mangrove” Yellow Warbler S---prolonged scope study of this extreme U.S. rarity; only the second record ever for California of this subspecies; voted the favorite bird of the tour
 Yellow-rumped Warbler seen daily; Audubon’s subspecies
 Common Yellowthroat S,SS
Green-tailed Towhee S---nice views of this San Diego county rarity
 Spotted Towhee S,L---especially well at Cabrillo
 California Towhee S
 Abert’s Towhee SS
 Savannah Sparrow S,SS---nice study of the Belding’s subspecies at Imperial beach
Fox Sparrow S---two of the “Slate-colored” race (schistacea) in Mission Gorge
 Song Sparrow S,L,SS
 White-crowned Sparrow daily
 Dark-eyed Junco L---Oregon subspecies
 Red-winged Blackbird daily
Tricolored Blackbird S,L--- nice views of this declining specialty
 Western Meadowlark SS
 Brewer’s Blackbird S,L,SS
 Great-tailed Grackle daily
 House Finch daily
 Pine Siskin L
 Lesser Goldfinch L
 House Sparrow S,SS

total species - 166

Mammals: total species - 3

Harbor Seal
 California Ground Squirrel
 Desert Cottontail

Butterflies: total species - 5

Mourning cloak
 Monarch
 Painted Lady
 white species
 blue species

Significant others:

Kemo Sabe