

WINTER SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

January 24 – 29, 2010

© 2009

Southern California offers what is arguably the best winter birding in the United States. This tour covers the two southernmost counties of the state and encompasses a tremendous variety of habitats as well as bird species. Scheduled during the late winter months, the tour is generally conducted under comfortable, mild conditions, which is especially enticing to many birders who at home normally experience snow, ice, and freezing temperatures at this season. A large percentage of the California and southwestern specialties are resident and readily found at this season. In addition, winter is the time for finding large numbers of raptors, waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls, and sparrows. The overall trip list should approach 170 species. On the picturesque shores of the Pacific Ocean near San Diego, we will search out rocky coast shorebirds such as Wandering Tattler, Black Turnstone, and Surfbird. Nearby coastal estuaries should harbor numerous gulls, including the beautiful Heermann's, the dainty Mew (scarce), and perhaps, the rare Glaucous-winged. Further inland, dense chaparral should produce Wrentit, California Thrasher, California Towhee, and the endangered California Gnatcatcher. In the pine/oak forests of the Laguna Mountains, Nuttall's and Acorn woodpeckers, Steller's Jay, Pygmy Nuthatch, Mountain Chickadee, Oak Titmouse, and Western Bluebird should be encountered. Other possibilities include White-headed Woodpecker (rare) and Lawrence's Goldfinch (sporadic). The spectacle of the Salton Sea in winter must be seen to be believed. The shoreline of the southern end of the sea, as well as the nearby vast expanses of agricultural fields, is the winter home to tens of thousands of waterbirds. Egrets, ibis, geese (including the tiny Ross's), ducks, curlews, and gulls occur in astonishing numbers. Our prime targets at the sea will be the Yellow-footed Gull, a species found nowhere else in the United States, and the threatened Mountain Plover.

This tour combines fabulous and diverse birding with beautiful landscapes and pleasant weather. It's an experience you won't want to miss.

****Note:** This tour may be combined with our "Winter Southern Arizona" tour, January 19 – 24, 2010 which precedes this trip with four days of fabulous birding in southeastern Arizona.

January 24, Day 1: Arrival in San Diego. Participants may plan to arrive in San Diego at any time today and transfer to our hotel where rooms will be reserved in your name. We will meet in the hotel lobby at 5:30 p.m. for a brief introduction followed by dinner.

NIGHT: Mission Valley Resort, San Diego

January 25, Day 2: Laguna Mountains, Anza-Borrego Desert. We will be up early this morning to work our way through the Laguna Mountains and on to the famed Salton Sea. Various stops in the upper elevations (above 4000 feet) of the Lagunas could produce Red-shouldered Hawk, Band-tailed Pigeon, Acorn, Nuttall's, Hairy woodpeckers, Steller's Jay, Mountain Chickadee, Oak Titmouse, Pygmy Nuthatch, Hutton's Vireo (uncommon), Western Bluebird, Spotted Towhee, Purple Finch, and Lesser Goldfinch. Though less likely, Red-naped and Williamson's sapsuckers, and the rare and declining (in this region) White-headed Woodpecker, are

Winter Southern California, Page 2

also possibilities. Lawrence's Goldfinch is very unpredictable in southern California (in some winters numerous, in many entirely absent), but we will listen closely here for the tinkling, bell-like notes of this erratic species.

Our descent from the mountains to the Salton Sea will take us through a portion of the Anza-Borrego Desert. In this starkly beautiful area we will search out such species as Verdin, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, and Phainopepla. If Costa's Hummingbirds have arrived back on their breeding grounds, this is a good place to look for them. As a final bonus, some years (about half) small numbers of Long-eared Owls roost in a nearby oasis of salt cedars. If any are present this winter we will make a special effort to seek them out.

If there is still any time left in our day, we will stop at the area of the Salton Sea known as Unit 1. Here large numbers of geese (both the tiny Ross's and Snow) gather along the roadsides and are often joined by a few Sandhill Cranes. Other birds to look for as we head into El Centro include White-faced Ibis, Mountain Plover, Long-billed Curlew, and Burrowing Owl.

NIGHT: Brawley Inn, Brawley, CA

January 26, Day 3: South end of the Salton Sea. The entire day will be devoted to birding the southern end of the Salton Sea. This unique body of water lies in a desert "sink" with its' only outlet through evaporation. Consequently, the water is saltier than the ocean and supports only a few species of introduced fish. However due to its unlikely location in the middle of the desert, the sea functions as a natural magnet for waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls, and other species. Many vagrants and accidental species have been recorded at the sea at this season, with each year bringing new surprises.

Although quite rare at this time of year, the Yellow-footed Gull will be our main target for the day. Found nowhere else in the United States (otherwise endemic to the Gulf of California in Mexico), this species has become a regular visitor to the Salton Sea. Numbers appear in late summer and slowly decline over the ensuing fall and winter months. Although always a challenge to find the remaining one or two individuals, we have managed to see this species in 18 of the past 20 trips here.

During the course of the day we should see enormous numbers of birds, including spectacular displays of thousands of geese and flooded fields filled with ibis, egrets, and curlews. Careful searches of recently burned fields may reveal the endangered Mountain Plover which winters in this area. Other possibilities include American White Pelican, Eared Grebe, Clark's Grebe, Ferruginous Hawk (declining here), Peregrine and Prairie falcons, Gambel's Quail, Greater Roadrunner, Common Ground-Dove, Cactus Wren, and Abert's Towhee. In addition, rarities such as Ruddy Ground-Dove and a variety of odd gulls have made increasingly regular appearances over the past few years. It should be a productive day filled with surprises.

NIGHT: Brawley Inn, Brawley, CA

January 27, Day 4: Lake Henshaw, Santa Ysabel Mission, San Diego Bay. Our schedule on this day will depend in part on what we did or didn't see yesterday before we head back towards San Diego via Lake Henshaw and Santa Ysabel Mission as we work our way back to San Diego Bay. Birds possible along the route this morning include Bald Eagle, Ferruginous Hawk, Golden Eagle, Merlin, Prairie Falcon, Lewis's Woodpecker, Red-breasted Sapsucker, Western Bluebird, and Tricolored Blackbird.

On returning to the coast here will also be a variety of stops along the edge of San Diego Bay and, time permitting, around the town of Imperial Beach. Red-throated Loon, Western and Clark's grebes, Surf Scoter, Clapper Rail, and the distinctive Belding's race of Savannah Sparrow are all possible. In addition the San Diego area plays hosts to rarities every year which, time permitting, we will seek out if present.

NIGHT: Mission Valley Resort, San Diego

January 28, Day 5: San Elijo Lagoon, Coastal San Diego County. We will likely start the day at the chaparral bordered edges of San Elijo Lagoon north of San Diego. A nice trail through a preserved patch of native chaparral should yield a good variety of birds. Typical species of this area include White-tailed Kite, Anna's Hummingbird, Say's Phoebe, Wrentit, Bushtit, Bewick's Wren, California Thrasher, and California Towhee. A special effort will be made to locate the endangered California Gnatcatcher which frequents the brushy slopes and ravines.

By mid-morning we will head back south toward the scenic coast of La Jolla. If tides are favorable, a wide variety of rocky coast shorebirds may be present in the tide-pools. Black and Ruddy turnstones, Surfbird (uncommon), Wandering Tattler (uncommon), Spotted Sandpiper, Sanderling, and Whimbrel are all likely. In addition Brown Pelican, Brandt's Cormorant, Heermann's, California, and Western gulls, and Royal Terns should be in evidence. With patience, off-shore scoping often yields distant views of Black-vented Shearwater as well.

The remainder of the day will likely be spent around Mission Bay, the San Diego River Channel, and Point Loma. Targets in these areas include Western, Horned, and Eared grebes, Pelagic Cormorant, Little Blue Heron, Brant (the western subspecies *nigricans*), Cinnamon and Blue-winged teal, Eurasian Wigeon (rare but pretty much annual now), Snowy Plover, Long-billed Curlew, Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, and Mew Gull (scarce this far south) among others. Land birding on Point Loma could produce Western Scrub-Jay, Hermit Thrush, more chances for California Thrasher, Spotted Towhee, and Fox (Sooty) and Golden-crowned sparrows. All in all, it should be a great day with upwards of 100 species possible!

NIGHT: Mission Valley Resort, San Diego

January 29, Day 6: Departures for home. This morning we will get up early to look for any coastal targets we may have missed. Flights should not be scheduled any earlier than 11:30 a.m. as we intend to arrive at the airport around 9:30 a.m.

EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS: Should you wish to make arrangements to arrive early or extend your stay, please contact the VENT office at least two months prior to your departure date. We can very easily make hotel arrangements and often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 5 participants.

TOUR LEADERS: Brad Schram

Brad Schram became fascinated with birds as a child in the mountains of California, the start of an enthusiasm that has modified and enriched his life. He has birded on all the continents and scores of the world's oceanic islands. Since his early retirement from the business world in 1996, he has led birding tours in much of the American West, as well as Alaska, Antarctica and the subantarctic islands, Hawaii, Iceland-East Greenland, Kenya, and Trinidad and Tobago. While serving as bird-naturalist on adventure cruise ships, his travels have included Kamchatka, the Aleutians, and the Bering Sea; numerous islands throughout Micronesia, Polynesia, and Melanesia; the Canadian High Arctic; and Antarctic voyages. He is author of the latest edition of the *ABA/Lane Guide: A Birder's Guide to Southern California*. He lives with his wife Dianne in Arroyo Grande, California.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the tour is **\$1915** per person in double occupancy from San Diego, California. This includes all meals from Dinner on Day 1 to Breakfast on Day 6, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to San Diego and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$315**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

TOUR REGISTRATION: To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$300** per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit by check, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, your deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. The VENT registration form should then be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office. Full payment of the tour fee is due 120 days prior to the tour departure date.

FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES: In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

TOUR REGISTRATION: To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$300** per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit by check, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, your deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. The VENT registration form should then be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office. Full payment of the tour fee is due 120 days prior to the tour departure date.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made 120 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$150** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$50** per person. If cancellation is made between 120 and 90 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 90 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre-trip and post-trip extensions. ***We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance for your protection.***

<u>If you cancel:</u>	<u>Your refund will be:</u>
120 days or more before departure date	Your deposit minus \$150*
Between 120 and 90 days before departure	No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance will be refunded
Fewer than 90 days before departure date	No refund available

*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$50 per person.

TRIP INSURANCE: A brochure and application form for optional coverage for baggage, illness, and trip cancellation can be obtained through the VENT office. **We strongly recommend that you purchase trip cancellation insurance as soon as possible to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness.** VENT recommends *Travel Insured International* as our preferred insurance provider. Check with your insurance agent regarding coverage you may presently have via other insurance policies that may cover illness during your trip. **Waiver for pre-existing conditions is available; however, stipulations apply, usually requiring the purchase of the insurance soon after registering.** Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as work-related cancellation, medical upgrade, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” clause among others. Contact *Travel Insured International* prior to registration for details. Not all insurance providers provide the same levels of coverage. If you purchase insurance through a company other than *Travel Insured International*, please be advised that rules and stipulations may be different.

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.

AIR INFORMATION: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

CLIMATE AND ALTITUDE: The weather in southern California is generally quite pleasant during this season. Daytime highs average in the low to mid 60s and nighttime lows in the mid 40s. In the Laguna Mountains, the temperatures will be cooler and often fall below freezing overnight, so expect a cold morning that day (our 2008 tour experienced a snowstorm on this day!). Temperatures at the Salton Sea are usually a little warmer than San Diego, but cool mornings are still the norm. Rain is possible as is snow in the mountains if it gets cold enough. Altitudinal changes will vary from about sea level to well over 4000 feet elevation. Most walks on this tour will be over short distances (mile or less) and will be conducted at a moderate to leisurely pace.

CLOTHING: Basic field clothing is appropriate for this tour. A combination of long-sleeved and short-sleeved shirts may be useful given the widely varying temperatures. Cool mornings will call for sweaters, light jackets, and possibly a heavy jacket, gloves, and a warm hat up in the mountains. Be sure to have a comfortable pair of walking shoes or hiking boots and a second pair of lightweight shoes. Casual attire is acceptable for all restaurants in which we dine. Lightweight raingear is also recommended.

EQUIPMENT: You should pack a pair of binoculars that are in good repair, along with a belt pack or day pack (for carrying books, sunscreen, extra film, etc.). As a precaution, it is a good idea to pack your binoculars, a change of clothing, toiletry items, any medications and travel documents in your airline carry-on bag. Sunglasses, lip-balm, and an alarm clock are recommended. Your leader will have a spotting scope, but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so.

HEALTH: If you are taking prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication. As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with tetanus shots.

INSECTS: Insects should not be a problem (and in fact may be nearly nonexistent) in late January; however if you wish to take precautions we suggest bringing one bottle of Cutter's or Off.

SCHEDULE: Most mornings we will have breakfast between 5:30 – 6:00 a.m. Birding will generally conclude in the afternoon by 5:00 – 5:15 pm.

SUGGESTED READING: Our website, www.ventbird.com offers an affiliated online store that carries a wide variety of items for birding and nature lovers, including over 6,000 books. A portion of the sales from this store benefits the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. You can also visit such other online stores such as www.amazon.com, and for those out-of-print or hard-to-find titles, www.abebooks.com or www.buteobooks.com which specializes in ornithology books.

Field Guides and General Reading:

Beadle, David and James Rising. *Sparrows of the United States and Canada; The Photographic Guide*. Academic Press. London, 2002

Dunn, John L. *A Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. 4th ed. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2002.

Winter Southern California, Page 6

Kaufmann, Kenn. *Mammals of North America*. Houghton Mifflin, 2004

Sibley, David. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. New York: Knopf, 2000.

Sibley, David. *The Sibley Guide to Birds of Western North America*. New York: Knopf, 2003.

Twiet, Susan J. *The Great Southwest Nature Factbook*. Alaska Northwest books. Washington, 2002.

Wheeler, Brian K. and William S. Clark. *A Photographic Guide to North American Raptors*. Academic Press, San Diego, California, 1995

Zimmer, Kevin J. *Birding in the American West*. Cornell University Press, 2000.

TIPPING: Tipping (restaurants, porters, drivers, local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are not expected and are entirely optional.

RESPONSIBILITY: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. Where this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect April 28, 2009 and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change therein. The right is reserved to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely. The airlines concerned and their agents and affiliates are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their aircraft. The passenger ticket in use by said airlines, when issued, shall constitute the sole contract between the airlines and the purchaser of these tickets and/or passenger. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for these tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airline Reporting Corporation.