

California. Part Two.

Contributed by Jos
Last Updated Tuesday, 29 September 2009

The second half of my trip through California, including the amazing Salton Sea, the coastal districts in the south and north (Orange County, Ventura and Monterey Bay), plus trips to Santa Cruz Island, Mount Pinos and return visits to Yosemite National Park and West Pinnacles National Monument. Amazing birds throughout, from Burrowing Owls and Lesser Nighthawks at Salton to the Island Scrub Jay on Santa Cruz.

Daily Log

29 August - Salton Sea

I'd arrived at Salton late the previous night and camped in what basically felt like a sauna, temperatures remained near 35 C throughout the night, humidity was high and Salton sure ponged! Seventy metres below official sea level, this was a hot sweltering place! Two hours before dawn, giving up on sleep, I headed off to a small all-night grocery to stock up on orange juice!

Then I got myself to the Whitewater River Delta to await dawn. Some might place Salton as bordering on hell - none too attractive, sunbaked, humid and possessing an aroma that turns the nose. Me, I felt like I'd landed in heaven. Here at Whitewater, sandwiched between the hundreds of American White Pelicans and dozens of Great Blue Herons, plus countless Great White and Snowy Egrets, were waders scattered in their thousands. Sifting through, trying not to be disturbed by flights of White-faced Ibises overhead, passing Ospreys, returning Black-crowned Night Herons and gulls by the trillion, most waders thoughtfully turned out to be Western Sandpipers and Least Sandpipers, masses of them everywhere. Hundreds of American Avocets and Black-winged Stilts too, Marbled Godwits in sizeable flocks, both Long-billed and Short-billed Dowitchers to add challenge and plenty of assorted extras, such as Greater Yellowlegs, Willets and Wilson's Phalaropes, enough to keep me happy for a good hour and more.

However, for all the riches, I itched to get down to the south end of Salton Sea, true paradise would surely await me there. Amazing it was too, after a brief pause to scan tern flocks, I arrived at the Wester Unit, a fairly nondescript parking area with scrubby bushes to the side and some tracks leading off to the side. The temperature was climbing fast. The next 15 minutes were mind-blowing! Parked the car, walked across to an information board and two Lesser Nighthawks flitted up from the shade of the sign! Wow, I'd expected a dusk visit to Brawley to notch this one up, but now I had two hawking round my head, then four hawking round my head! Walked ten paces more and another two got up, another 50 metres and a total of eight were now flying about, absolutely superb! Then two Inca Doves flew in, a White-winged Dove sat on a fence and a Barn Owl peered down from a palm tree! Jeepers, what was going on here?! Half the Salton specialities and I had barely left the car park! Great-tailed Grackles strutted their stuff, Common Ground-Doves scattered from arid bushland and the first Abert's Towhee scrubbed about in the depths of the undergrowth. I was seriously beginning to think the sun had gone to my head, birding at its very best. I had now walked all of one hundred metres from my car. Turning down a track, I then wandered along a channel, various egrets scattering. I stopped, I simply could not believe it, there standing in front of me was a true American Superstar! I'd seen them many years back in Texas, but regardless it was very high on my list of 'must-sees'. Off it trotted, or better said, off it ran, legging it down the dusty track, top bird Greater Roadrunner. Super super super.

It was still only 10 a.m.! Could the day get any better ..oh yes it could!!!

Temperature were again nudging the 40 F mark. From the flurries of Lesser Nighthawks, now all straddled across low limbs, I returned to the car and began a meander towards Red Hill Marina. Saline pools dotted the roadside, some relatively barren of birds, but as for the others, jeepers, how they did squeeze in so many birds ! Absolutely packed - thousands of waders, American Avocets and Black-winged Stilts in particular abundance, then stuffed in amongst all

them, terns, gulls and skimmers in numbers to make you cry! Caspian Terns literally sat there in their thousands, plus too both California and Ring-billed Gulls. Add to those, hundreds of Forster's and Black Terns and, in the middle of that pickle, a total of about 60 Yellow-footed Gulls and the odd Laughing Gull. And then there were the Black Skimmers! Brilliant birds, startling black and white things with a gonk on steroids! About 250 of them sat there. Or rather sometimes sat there, every now and then all rising in unison to take dramatic circuits of the pools, slicing the water as they swept past.

Added extras included a lone Black Brant, both White and Brown Pelicans in such densities that made me truly happy not to be a fish in those waters and plenty of waders not yet mentioned, especially numerous Marbled Godwits and Long-billed Curlews.

T'was now lunchtime, not that I had any food with me, but I marked the occasion with a short stop at the National Wildlife Refuge HQs ...two more Lesser Nighthawks greeted me. Plus a pair of Gambel's Quails, youngsters in tow and, at the end of a long hot walk, hundreds more Black Skimmers, all lined up on an island, lots of fledglings amongst them. I really did need a coffee, so after a brief skirt round Ramer Lake, where Green Herons were perhaps the highlight, I tootled on down to a petrol station for my daily refreshment. Still darn hot.

Now, for every birder in the Salton Sea area, I guess there is one species that must be pretty high on the wanted list ...it was in fact the species I most wanted to see in all California. Burrowing Owl. By mid-afternoon, I was right in the heart of the best areas for them - low-lying fields, devoid of anything growing, but boasting embankments at the edges where the owls like to nest. Evening is best for seeing them, but I had hoped to bump into the stupid one that liked sunbathing under a 40 C sun. None were quite so foolish, or so I thought.

There was another bird that I had desires to feast my eyes upon - Yuma Clapper Rail, an endangered race only occurring here. By 4 p.m., though the sun still sat high, I began to think the rail might just begin to creep about. Having parked the car by a favoured spot, I was just about to set off when I glanced left and spotted some blobs on a post. Eh, what're those? I thought. Quick scan with the bins and ...I think my heart went through my head, not a Burrowing Owl, but a whole family of them, five squashed onto just two posts! American lingo time, AWESOME!

After a half hour or more in the company of the Burrowing Owls, I decided it was time for the Yuma Clapper Rails. I walked a trail that supposedly had a hide overlooking a pool, but the only hide I found was by a dry reed-filled dustbowl, not ideal Yuma habitat I supposed. Back at the car, still stonking hot, I decided to climb a little tower to scope the distant shoreline. Pelicans and chums, all a bit distant and hazy, but two Northern Harriers drifted over, a nice addition to the day. Below the tower, however, there was a small pool surrounded by reeds, perfect looking habitat for Yumas! Conveniently someone had left a chair, so I sat back and waited - one White-faced Ibis paddled around, slowly edging away, eventually disappearing behind reeds in a bay further up. Moments later, it waddled out again, or did it? I gave it a quick look with the binoculars and the ibis had been replaced by a Yuma Clapper Rail!!! Very nice, but then three Green-winged Teal came splashing in, sending the rail diving for cover. Hhmp! Ten minutes later it was out again, then another, one working the reed edge a little closer. The sun was now edging down towards the horizon and, as it did, suddenly the rails began emerging all over the place, three standing on the road by my car! Best count, I had six out together, not something I had expected.

Fully content with my day, I decided to head back towards Red Hill Marina, a very good place to camp. Only a half hour of good light left, but still time for some last memorable sightings, the first being Burrowing Owls. I had been chuffed to encounter my family of five, but the route back across the wastelands of southern Salton took me right through their heartlands ...and every second mound or post seemed to have its own owl! By journey's end, I had counted an amazing 22 of them, plus of course the five that I'd photographed earlier! Also another Green Heron, a fantastic pre-roost gathering of about 2500 White-faced Ibis and, just as I drove over the causeway to Red Hill Marina, my last treat of the day - masses of swallows roosting on roadside wires. Given I had seen very few swallows on the trip so far, this had to be worth a stop - the vast majority turned out to be Tree Swallows, at least 300 of them, but repeated scanning notched up a few extras - Sand Martins, Cliff Swallows and a few Barn Swallows.

Got to the far side of Red Hill Marina, set up camp to a backdrop of the honking and wails of birds and jackals.

30 August - Salton Sea & Borrego Springs

In the sultry nights of Salton, there really is no need for a tent, but rather than wake with some Coyote licking my nose, I decided upon just the inner tent, which is basically mosquito netting suspended, perfect for letting the gentle breeze slightly offset the heat.

However, at 4.00 a.m., my world suddenly became rather bright! Flicking across the skies, bolts of lightning darted forth, illuminating all. Low thunder soon followed, followed by a sudden realisation on my part that the heavens were about to open and my tent, not having its roof, was hardly going to offer much shelter. On top of that, the track I had driven up

was almost certainly going to become a quagmire. Jumped up and stuffed the tent in the car and got off the Red Marina Island!

Dawn broke, but still the rain had yet to fall - the thunderstorm, mighty in power, was basically stationary, just inching in from the north at a pace that put a tortoise to shame! Early birding was done within safe running distance of the car! But again I was to be left in awe - not at new species, but in sheer numbers. I parked at Obsidian Butte, a dead end road that abutted a small bay. But what a bay! Thousands of Brown Pelicans, hogging rocks, dead trees and water with equal glee, White Pelicans in their hundreds too, plus about 500 Black-winged Stilts, 200 American Avocets and Marbled Godwits and Long-billed Curlews to add another 250 or so birds. And, of course, Western Sandpipers, Least Sandpipers, Willets, yet more trillions of gulls, including 25 Yellow-footed Gulls and, all in a tightly packed flock, 300 Caspian Terns, 250 Black Terns and perhaps a minimum of 50 Forster's Terns.

Still the skies hinted at nasty things to come, but I decided to press on, first having a quick look at the Wister Unit again - Lesser Nighthawks on their perches again, Barn Owl tucked deep in his palm, another Barn Owl in another palm some miles away, plus a couple of Ladder-backed Woodpeckers. I was cutting it fine, the fine spots of rain were beginning to spit down, the darkness was developing overhead. I got as far as Finney Lake, a Belted Kingfisher sat lakeside, six Western Grebes out in the middle, then the heavens just opened, the rain was like torrent, absolutely lashing it down. Spun the car at a few nice angles, the top centimetres of these red clay roads simply gave no grip whatsoever. Slung the car in reverse and did a nice wheelspinning exit all half the mile back to a better track, thereafter back to the nearest asphalt! My nice little black car was caked in gunky Salton goo!

With the storm now smack bang over Brawley town, the one and only bird I really wanted to see might prove rather difficult! Gila Woodpecker, basically a Mexican species, but extending north just to this town (itself only a dozen miles from the border). Now hardly in conditions that reminded of Mexico, I basically kerb-crawled the best residential areas of town in the hope of spotting one without getting out of the car! Urban birding by car, cool! White-winged Doves two'a'penny, some Rufous Hummingbirds looking rather bedraggled, but not a hint of a woodpecker. Finally, I pulled over by a nice house with a feeder in their front garden - House Sparrows hopped about, not a lot else! A half hour of this and I decided another kerb crawl, purely in search of birds, was in order. I got to the first junction and, as I pondered which flooded road to try next, a loud yip yip yip yip got me looking right, it had to be a woodpecker. I reversed back, parked and braved the rain ... I ran round the back and up a service lane and there he was, vocal and showy, a Gila Woodpecker on a palm in the rain! Ah, super, my time in Bradley had found its reward.

Gila Woodpeckers look good, but rain in California doesn't! I celebrated by hitting the local MacDonald's for coffee and a good dose of fast food, the pleasant young lady didn't understand my accent - all I said was medium fires, burger and coffee!!! And then it was off to the west, I exited the Brawley city limit and so ended the rain, that storm had some grudge against Brawley, it just sat on top of it!

In front of me was open road, desertlands and my next destination... Borrego Springs, the meeting of desert and mountain, rugged peaks towering over cactus and sand. Ah, but cactus meant one thing, Cactus Wren!

A most stunning of birds, this mega wren took all of three minutes to find, a pair rooting about in scrub growth very near a paved walkway! Even better, they hopped up onto a cactus - Cactus Wren on a cactus, just what I wanted to scribble down in my notebook! I then did a long trudge off into what looked a good direction ...a good direction for seeing nothing! Almost back though, suddenly a whole bunch of birds popped up - striking Black-throated Sparrows, California Towhees, another Cactus Wren and, right by the visitor centre, a pair of Black-tailed Gnatcatchers, another bird I thought I might struggle with.

Next came the only real dip of the trip. Down some dusty backend of a road, at the far side of Borrego, there exists a depression in the land, a hot, arid expanse of dense mesquite stretching miles off into the distance, a monotony punctuated only by littered fridges, occasional overturned cars and the skeletons of trees long-since burnt. All gently stewing under a sun back to its best, climbing rapidly and settling just close to 35 C. My target bird, by all accounts, not only was secretive to the extreme, but occurred in densities that left the odds of finding one akin to that of the proverbial needle in a haystack. The name had an alluring name - Crissal Thrasher, but beyond that I cannot say, I saw not a hint of it! And, the thanks for two hours sweat - one Verdin, one more Black-tailed Gnatcatcher and one American Kestrel!

Evening was approaching, but where to go? My instinct was to push on, next morning I wanted to hit the L.A area, but couldn't see camping on Mailibu Beach was much of an option, so pondered it as I drove west. Plenty of time to waste, I stopped a few times in the high mountains, scanned in vain for Bighorn Sheep, but added a bunch of Rock Wrens and the odd bit and bob. I drove too far, late evening saw horribly bright lights illuminating the skies unfolding in front, great L.A.land was threatening to swallow me up! Eeks, I did a U-turn and retreated to the mountains. My assault upon the City of Angels would commence at dawn.

31 August - Los Angeles, north and south

Hollywood, Malibu Beach, Paris Hilton, fourteen-lane highways, no surely this couldn't be where I was headed for the next installment of my Californian Birding Roadshow!

Ahhh, what happened to the open expanses, the miles of open desert and the towering peaks? Cruising down the highways and wide expressways, birding seemed a distant memory - Pixiebell was walking her little poodle, palms swayed from manicured lawns, the skies overhead zigzagged with Boeings. Though I confess to actually finding it great fun, I did question as to what the hell I was doing there!

Then I arrived at Upper Newport Bay, an estuarine reserve. Smart residential housing both sides, swarms of early morning joggers competing with cyclists in lycro, more pixiebells sauntering along, damn I was actually enjoying it!

Trying not to squash any of the cyclists, I pulled into a parking bay and wondered if I would actually see any birds this day. Of course, yet again California was going to impress me! The bay did hold birds, actually many, many birds - in the lower quarters, all the usual waders and gulls congregated, saltmarshes supporting Long-billed Curlews and Willets, a couple of hundred Western Sandpipers, etc, etc. Atop a pole, one Belted Kingfisher and, peering at canoeists, loads of Great Blue Herons and Snowy Egrets. Off, chugging down the main channel, 50 or so Brown Pelicans packed a tight flock, while an Osprey swung low, before vanishing off over some millionaire's mansion on the far shore. Further up, 150 Black Skimmers sat upon a sandbank, while Turkey Vultures and a Northern Harrier drifted over.

All nice stuff, but for all the waterbirds, my real reason for visiting the bay was the passerines that also occur. Had hoped for California Gnatcatcher, but try as I might, I didn't see one. But no space for gloom, plenty of other treats - both Rufous and Anna's Hummingbirds, at least 15 Bushtits and, all on or around the saltmarsh, plenty of Belding's Savannah's Sparrows, several Common Yellowthroats and one Marsh Wren, another corker. Better still, emerging from a dense patch where much squawking had just subsided, one Clapper Rail.

Newport Bay had been enjoyable, but the next stop was even better. Now the height of the Labour Day weekend, the sun was shining and the coastal highway was packed! Bikini babes strutted beach sidewalks, Armani man in tow, but a wandering foreign birder had a better place to stop - Bolsa Chica. Another place that packed a wow above its size. I had not really expected much here, but stopping in the little car park, it soon became apparent this was a good birding place - Elegant Terns screeching over, a very good assortment of waders, including my first Ruddy Turnstones, Knots and Sanderlings of the trip, plus Semi-palmated Plovers, Marbled Godwits, very photogenic Willets and Long-billed Curlews and much more too. By now, hot as usual, I decided to walk the trail that stretched off between two major pools - a good decision, very soon I was overlooking an island, where amongst the waders, sat masses of terns and buddies. Scoped through, as well as perhaps 80 Black Skimmers, the flock totalled about 50 Elegant Terns, 35 Caspian Terns, 40 Forster's Terns and, a bonus for me, six Royal Terns, super!

Then did a rather long walk in the hot sun, adding not much more, but snapping many nice photos, then eventually got back to the car, a few House Finches in the scrub nearby, a White-winged Dove flying past and, on adjacent saltmarsh, two American Pipits, rather early in the season I presume.

Next came Los Angeles, could I get through without being accosted by Ms Hilton or attracted by the lure of fame and fortune in Hollywood? Or perhaps, more to the point, without getting lost?!

Well, in reality it was a breeze - the maze of super highways so well signed that you'd be hard pushed to take a wrong turning. An hour or so later, I was well north of the city and approaching Ventura. My primary destination was the Casper Road area where reports said I might find 'sod farms' and, upon them, the chance of Pacific Golden Plover. What a sod farm was, I was not sure, but I am sure I have been called a sod once or twice, so I truly wondered what they might be!

Getting to Casper Road, it clicked - 'sod' means 'turf'! Both sides of the road, expanses of newly sown grass stretched and it was here that I hoped to find the birds. Overall bird numbers were low, a few Shore Larks, several Killdeers and an assortment of the usual bits and bobs. It got very windy, but from the shelter of the car, I eventually found a small flock of waders. Started a slow scan, mostly Grey Plovers, a few Western Sandpipers and then, padding across the short turf, my target bird - a fine Pacific Golden Plover coming right towards me. A few metres left and there was another, Casper Road had done its stuff. Just before I was to leave, I decided to check a little further up and there I found one more species to add to the tally, two Baird's Sandpipers, the only ones of the trip.

Super, with that I returned to Ventura. Next day promised to be another special affair, so in anticipation, I treated myself to a motel room, only the second time on the whole trip.

1 September - Santa Cruz Island

Out to sea again, not a pure pelagic trip, but over to Santa Cruz Island. These southern waters are not as renowned as the amazing Monterey Bay, so I really had little idea what would await me, my real reason for being aboard was Santa Cruz itself and its endemic bird.

'Island Packers' was the company, a very good set up operating out of Ventura Harbour. It was in Ventura Harbour that the morning's birding kicked off in style - all lined up on the harbour breakwater, 35 stonking Surfbirds and eight Black Turnstones, super start.

Out to sea, this was proper pelagic birding - find and identify yourself, or no birds! Though Island Packers are not birding specialists, but they happily detoured to feeding concentrations and slowed for birds whenever seen and I certainly had no complaints. Barely beyond the breakwaters and the first birds were passing by, a couple of Pomarine Skuas, a few dozen Red-necked Phalaropes, the first Pink-footed Shearwaters.

Sat up on the bow, soon I was joined by another birder and there we stayed for the two-hour crossing. One Rhino Auklet powered past, another Pomarine Skua, then an Arctic Skua, then we hit shearwaters, dozens of them slicing the waters across our port side. And then we saw a fantastic mass up ahead, a dense cloud of birds plunging and wheeling, our boat beelined for the spot, all the time the number of birds increasing. As we approached, several hundred Common Dolphins were at the heart of the feeding frenzy, concentrating and directing the fish. The aerial assault was heading by Brown Pelicans, plummeting in from all angles, but in the surrounding waters, I was most delighted to find two species not seen on the earlier Monterey pelagic - outnumbering the Sooty and Pink-footed Shearwaters, perhaps as many 40 Black-vented Shearwaters sat on the waters, flew round and generally kept the action going. And then, in amongst them, a rarity - at least one Manx Shearwater! Very nice quarter hour in this mass, then onward to Santa Cruz Island, a few Elegant Terns greeting us and a very fine adult male Surf Scoter a real added bonus.

Now, though the island has a number of endemic races, plus an endemic fox, Santa Cruz's fame amongst birders lies with its Island Scrub Jay, endemic and much desired. I had just six hours to find this sometimes elusive bird and chose to land at Prisoner's Harbour to begin my attempt, this locality generally being the best area to find the bird - it is even sometimes seen around the small quay itself. No such luck on my trip, but the guy on the Island Packers boat told me that birders had seen the bird in a valley about a mile to the south the day before. Off I went, a rapid hike up the speed tracks that lead off towards the hilltops, twenty minutes later I was overlooking a deep valley, good tree growth hugging the slopes and almost certainly the spot where the birds had been seen the day before. Loads of Orange-crowned Warblers, this being the endemic race, two Black-headed Grosbeaks, one Western Kingbird, one distinctive call that just had to be a jay! Sat and waited, and waited ..and waited! Whatever had called did not call again and nothing remotely jaylike had the good grace to appear. I decided to hike to the next valley a mile or so further - again over steep rugged paths, though very pleasurable with good numbers of Savannah and Rufous-crowned Sparrows, the first of about ten island race Allen's Hummingbirds and a Loggerhead Shrike.

Got to the next valley and nothing much stirring, it looked right naff in comparison to the first - if I was a jay you'd find me back in the oaks where I had been half an hour earlier! So back there I went! Red-tailed Hawks appeared overhead, a Northern Flicker entertained, but still no sign of any jays! I had spend over half of my time and not found anything with bright blue flashes yet, I began to comprehend that I could miss this enigmatic species. My coffee was finished, and another hour had passed, little to show for it - a Pacific-side Flycatcher, a few Spotted Towhees and that as that.

However, I had a sneaky suspicion that I knew where the birds might be lurking - the bottom end of the valley, hidden by the lay of the land, looked rich in oaks .but totally unviewable. I had two hours left and it was my last chance, so I sneaked over the rickety fence and trudged along the perilous slope, also not entirely sure whether you were allowed to wander from the paths! Anyhow, fifteen minutes on, I reached a crag that overlooked the valley, a fine vantage point with superb habitat in all directions. There I sat, vowing to stay till the last possible minute, legging it for the boat if need be. I didn't need to worry, within minutes blue and white sailed across the valley, YIPPEE enormous relief as a super Island Scrub Jay did a fly-by, unfortunately plunging right into the depths of the trees opposite. Wow, I really had given up on the bird, but at least I had seen one ..and I was also surprised how truly different the bird was from the Western Scrub Jays on the mainland, bigger and much brighter! And then I heard another calling, somewhere to my left, up he popped and right on the top on a small tree, my second Island Scrub Jay, giving views really was content with.

Enjoyed the valley for the next half hour, seeing the jays several times more, then thought it prudent to begin my stroll

back towards the harbour ...a rustle in the bushes and out strolled a Channel Island Fox, WOOH, I sure didn't expect that!

So the day was coming to an end, two Lark Sparrows hopped about near the quay as I awaited the boat back. As for the return crossing, hundreds upon hundreds of Common Dolphins, truly memorable. Also a Grey Phalarope amongst the many Red-necked Phalaropes.

Back at Ventura, I decided to drive into the darkness towards my next destination to ensure a dawn start. Zigzagging up the mountain roads to the north and east of Ventura, I began the drive towards Mount Pinos. Always hoped for an owl when driving at night, maybe a nightjar, but none seen - about an hour before Pinos, a fox went trotting out into the road. I stopped and it stopped, peering at the car, lit in the headlights, there stood a Kit Fox, another new species for me!!!

Got to the top of Mount Pinos rather late, another night under the stars.

2 September - Mount Pinos

Another case of dawn in paradise! Having arrived late the night before, I'd slept out near the top of Mount Pinos and woke to a truly beautiful setting, ancient pines bathed in an early morning sun and alive to Western Bluebirds perched all over the place, at least 35 in all. True stunners of birds - and in good company too - flocks of Mountain Chickadees, Yellow-rumped Warblers in abundance, plus two splendid Black-headed Grosbeaks. Wiggling out of my sleeping bag, I decided a brisk hike up to the summit would be a nice way to get the day going ...indeed it was. Along with the numerous Scrub and Steller's Jays, showy Green-tailed Towhees and assorted woodpeckers, I then found the one bird I really wanted to see, Pygmy Nuthatch. Amazing little bird, all the character of a nuthatch packed into a bite-sized portion! And another, and another, saw eight in all, certainly my favourite bird of the day. White-breasted Nuthatch appeared for comparison, Common Crossbills zoomed overhead distracting my attention.

Right up at the summit, as the tree cover gave way to low wind-blown shrub, the views were impressive - half the world seemed to stretch away across hazy vistas. Kaarr kaaaar, Common Ravens put pay to any trance that I might have been lulled into, my alertness fully restored by the appearance of a familiar friend - my old favourites, Clark's Nutcrackers. Twelve of them, hopping about on the ground, up onto stunted pines, over my head and just about everywhere else too!

Very nice morning it was turning out to be! Back down the mountain I strolled, plenty to slow me down - Turkey Vultures riding the thermals developing, a Hermit Warbler amongst the Yellow-rumped Warbler, one Olive-sided Flycatcher in the pines. Back at the car, I drove a few miles back down the road, stopped at a random clearing and promptly found another of the birds that I was seeking - chunky Fox Sparrows, rather common as it turned out, but nice all the same. More Green-tailed Towhees, oodles of Dark-eyed Juncos.

Some miles more and I decided to take a drive into the hot arid plains that extend north and east of Mount Pinos, no real targets, the area is really at its best during the winter, but still American Kestrels, Turkey Vultures, Red-tailed Hawks and flocks of Shore Larks made for a nice drive. Occasional stops added more Western Meadowlarks and Lark Sparrows, some roadside water channels providing Pied-billed Grebes and both Great Blue Heron and Great White Egret, but I was now at a dilemma.

With my days now running short, time was becoming ever more precious, so making the best of it, I decided on another dash right across California back to Yosemite! Needless to say I arrived exceedingly late and was then rather surprised to find the nearest campsite to Glacier Point closed for the year, so I drove a little bit further up the road and slept right there, wondering if I might get any bear visitors.

3 September - Yosemite National Park

Survived the night, no bears had stuck their nose in my sleeping bag, no peeved park rangers had woken me up. So, being right there on site at the first rays of the morning, Glacier Point was almost deserted, the tourist hordes were still tucked up in bed many miles back down the road. Towards the mighty overhang I wandered ...and then I stopped in my tracks! Not one, but a whole bunch of them, Sooty Grouse were nonchalantly ambling down the track! Jeepers, I had held secret desires to find one of these, but never imagined they would be quite so brazen! I squatted down and let them wander straight past, stunning males, impressive females, all strolling as close as two metres away!!! Super. Then I spotted a birder, another British equally as impressed as I with the grouse ...we got speaking and, as things usually do in

Yosemite, the conversation turned to bears. It transpired he had spent the entire previous day on a fruitless search of a bear to satisfy his wife, who incidently was still back at the hotel in bed.

Conversation went approximately as so...

Him: 'So have you seen a bear?'

Me: 'Yes, but a couple of weeks back, way over at...'

Him: 'Oi, there's one, behind you!'

Me [swinging round]: 'Where?'

Him: 'Just walked behind that rock, five metres behind you!'

I clamber up on the rock and look down, the bear looks up! Three metres separate us, fantastic. The bear seemed not to be fussed either way. Eyes parted, off he strolled.

Only 8.00 a.m., another amazing start to a day in California! Thoroughly impressed, I then took a wander over to the point to scan across the valley - hoped for a Solitaire, but much as I tried, no sign. Nevertheless, plenty to see - White-rumped Swifts rising into the morning skies, three Clark's Nutcrackers, my second Calliope Hummingbird of the trip and my only Violet Green Swallows.

Then tragedy struck - perched atop a sheer cliff that plunged 900 metres, I was amazed by the Lodgepole Chipmunks and California Ground Squirrels that scampered about, seemingly totally unphased by the fate that would result by a slip of the foot. I felt giddy simply by edging too close to peer down! Anyhow, as I turned, I startled a Ground Squirrel. It jumped, missed its footing and fell, bounced off a rock and went straight out ...etched into my mind is the look of surprise that appeared upon its face. 900 metres below were rocks. Right spoilt my morning and I feel guilty to this day.

Fox Sparrows and Lincoln's Sparrows on the way back towards the Yosemite Valley. Western Tanager and Black-throated Grey Warblers amongst the tourists in the village area, then went back to Tamarack Flat for a very pleasant afternoon - nothing new to add, but the forests there probably rate as my favourite in the whole park, warblers galore, Mountain Quails scurrying along and plenty of other bits and bobs. Decided to spend another evening in the Chevron meadow - yet again no Great Grey Owl, but one Sharp-shinned Hawk, plus Western Wood Pewee, etc.

Way after dark, left Yosemite one last time, another night drive across California and dawn was to see me in place for a fantastic last full day in this great state.

4 September

T'was the last full day sadly, but amazingly it also turned out to best in terms of numbers of mammals! Where better to start than back at West Pinnacles, my starting point two long weeks earlier.

To a wonderful backdrop of a Western Screech Owl and the yodelling of Coyotes, I had slept outside again. Woke to see three Coyotes standing peering at me! Super, they even let me get a few photographs in the pre-sunrise light, what a pleasant start to the day. Pinnacles was every bit as good as the time before, minus the Californian Condors, but plus loads of Western Bluebirds, presumably migrants, and a fantastic flock of about 45 Californian Quails, very photogenic ones at that. Added Western Tanagers, my first-ever Yellow-billed Magpies and stacks of other birds, but then decided to head off towards the coast.

A few miles off, I decided to stop at the Paicines reservoir - plenty of waders, from Red-necked Phalaropes to Greater Yellowlegs, a good variety of ducks, including Canvasback, Cinnamon Teal and Ruddy Duck, plus a Clark's Grebe, three White Pelicans and a few other bits and bobs. Turkey Vultures were dropping down to drink, so there I stood, casually perched against a gate when ...jeeppers almighty!!! A BOBCAT walked straight past! Not straight past like a few hundred metres, but right the other side of the gate ...one metre from my astonished eyes!!! He gave me a glare, a right scrawny

brute he looked, and on he sauntered. I dashed back to my car to grab the camera, just 15 metres, turned back ...and he had simply vanished! Not a hiding place in sight, but he'd gone, to where I have no idea, but that was an incredible moment - just pictureless unfortunately..

Down at the coast, I really only had two targets - Black-winged Kite and Red-shouldered Hawk, saw both fairly quickly at a nice enough place called Elkshorn Slough, also adding Hutton's and Warbling Vireos, a few Bushtits and a pair of rather nice Chestnut-backed Chickadees, another new species for me.

With that done, I really didn't expect any more surprises - stupid me, this was California! The next place was Moss Landing, what an amazing spectacle! Birding was good, but this semi-developed little inlet, bordered on all sides by roads, car park, jetty and public beach, was absolutely buzzing with sea mammals! Unearthly wailing of Sea Lions plastered along the length of the jetty, not an inch left unoccupied, neighbouring waters bubbling to their play. Directly opposite, a bunch of Common Seals were hauled out, blubber across a sandbank! However, the biggest surprise of the lot was about 100 metres to the left - at first glance, I'd assumed them to be Common Seals, little did I expect the 36 animals to be what they were - Sea Otters! Never would I have imagined 36 would be in a single place, but here they were, all wallowing in the shallows, sleeping or gently cruising about, amazing!

And, naturally, plenty of birds too - waders galore, a smart Snowy Plover the tops, but also at least 60 Red-necked Phalaropes, a good mix of Western and Least Sandpipers, plus all the usual Willets and Marbled Godwits, etc. A wonderful place all in all, also very photogenic Heerman's Gulls, one Common Guillemot, a Red-breasted Merganser and dozens of Snowy Egrets, Great Blue Herons, Brown Pelicans, etc.

Next, and last stop of the day, was a little further north - winding up the scenic Highway One, edging ever closer to San Francisco, I arrived at Ano Nuevo, one more special mammal here. Hmm, there was only an hour of good light left and the reserve was closed! Darn! Well, no chance of returning the next day, I'd be up in the sky by then, so I decided on a mad two mile dash along the beach to get out to the headland and hopefully find my desired grand finale to the trip. A Black-winged Kite flew past, Song Sparrows, White-crowned Sparrows and California Towhees jumped about in the scrub, Scrub Jays and Bush Tits flitted about and, puffed out, I finally got to the headland. An island offshore seemed abuzz with birds -Brown Pelicans, Brant's Cormorants and Western Gulls - but not a wiff of what I had hoped to see. Onward I walked and then I saw them, massive creatures bigger than me, slumped into the sands ahead. Gruff groaning, deep calls, about 60 lay there, absolutely stupendous animals, Northern Elephant Seals. Into the approaching sunset, a huge bull lifted his head to complain to neighbours all around, my photographs were taken. I sat and watched, the end of my last full day in California.

5 September - San Francisco

Boo hoo hoo, time to leave California, a State that had exceeded all hopes and expectations!

Being a right scrooge, I had decided the car was far better than a San Francisco hotel to spend my last night, so I'd woken to Brown Pelicans drifting by, Double-crested Cormorants sat atop rocks and the inevitable gloom that meant I was going home!

With the flight mid-morning, I stocked up with a coffee in a petrol station, then motored off towards the airport. Great location has SF International - right on the bay and waterbirds minutes from the runways! Parked up just south of the airport ...American Avocets by the dozen, hundreds of Grey Plovers, numerous other waders. Lots of airplanes taking off!

Chucked my bread to the scrounging gulls - mostly Ring-billed Gulls, but a nearby assortment included Western, Herring and Californian, then went to the airport.

Up in the air, Golden Gate bridge below in the morning sunshine, it was all over. Farewell.