

California. Part One.

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From the Californian Condors at West Pinnacles and a fabulous pelagic off Monterey, it was then across California for encounters with Black Bears and birds at Yosemite, before dropping into to the deserts beyond the Sierras. After thousands of Black-necked Grebes at Lake Mono and Sage Grouse at Lake Crowley, I travelled southward to Jawbone Canyon to see Le Conte's Thrasher in temperatures that touched 106 F! Onward, via Kern Valley and Big Morongo (for hummingbirds and Vermillion Flycatcher), I drove to Salton Sea and part two of my trip.

Daily Log

21st August

Shocking, but not a single bird! Having left Eastern Europe pre-dawn, then endured sixteen hours in the air and another on the five split between Brussels and Chicago, the setting sun saw me dropping over the High Sierras and into San Francisco. Zipped through immigration, got lucky with the car hire (free upgrade by two categories), then swept out onto the freeways in my nice plush air-conditioned auto-everything black number of a car, the USA was already looking fun. No point wasting time, so I cruised on down towards my first port of call - some hours south, West Pinnacles National Monument. Almost there, I missed a turning in Hollister, then did a couple of tours of the town before spotting the small sign conveniently hidden by a tree! Then blue flashing lights and I got stopped by the Highway Patrol - for driving too slow! That was a first for me! After an age trying to find my driving licence and answering 'no' to all the questions about drugs and guns, they politely explained that a lost tourist at 1.00 a.m. was not a usual encounter in that part of the world! I arrived at West Pinnacles ready for sleep, having lost track of how many hours it had been since my breakfast in another world in another time era, but I was immediately delighted by the middle-of-the-night atmosphere - wonderfully warm, insects churring away and the first bird voice of the trip - a Western Screech Owl calling nearby.

Found a nice parking place under a tree, slept by the car. Dawn would bring the start of my trip.

22nd August - West Pinnacles

Waking pre-dawn, cackling Scrub Jays and howling Coyotes made for a most delightful dawn chorus. Birds were flitting back and fro, but I needed a little more light, so jumped in the car and drove a mile further up the road. Pulled in under a big tree to a deep hoo-hoo of a Great Horned Owl, now that would be a fine bird to start the trip I thought, so I carefully circled the tree and gazed up in all directions, couldn't see a thing! Ten minutes later, the honours of first bird seen fell to Hairy Woodpecker, quite acceptable. Soon added Bewick's Wren, dozens of Scrub Jays, the first Dark-eyed Juncos (a species later to become common everywhere) and Californian Towhees, a most exotic sounding name, but rather quiet unassuming bird!

Birding had started, the sun was rising and I decided upon a hike - pure brilliance, everything new or nearly so, the first Black Phoebes being as welcome as the abundant Steller's Jays. Then I found a bird of right character, or rather a dozen of them - Acorn Woodpeckers. More like babblers than woodpeckers, these little stars were fabulous, noisy gangs of them roving the hillsides and not in the least bit timid, I did enjoy them. As the sun climbed, already it was 30 C by 8 a.m., out came the swifts to play - hurtling past, a dozen rather stunning White-throated Swifts, I enjoyed them too! Then a pair of Californian Thrashers, then a zoom-by hummingbird that could have been any species in the world for all I saw. Hike over, I retired to the car and settled down to take my first few photographs, snapping the Steller's and Scrub Jays, plus the Acorn Woodpeckers.

A few miles down, I pulled into a small car park and sat for a while enjoying the surrounds. Plain Titmice, Spotted Towhee, Western Tanager, the bird list climbed ever higher. I was already most impressed with the beginnings of my trip.

Pondering a little, I wandered over to read one information board that gave name to the high peaks that towered above me - Condor Crags they were called, named in the Old Days when Californian Condors used to roost there. Ah, I dreamed how nice it would be to see them above such majestic landscapes, but the reality was, I believed, the birds were long gone. With the population dwindling to a mere dozen or so birds in the early 1980s, conservationists saw the imminent extinction of this mighty giant, so took the drastic but necessary step of capturing all the remaining birds and taking them into captivity, thereby deeming the bird extinct in the wild. Captive breeding followed, highly successful and a decade ago the first birds were re-released back into the wild. My dream was to see some of these birds, now breeding and slowly increasing. I had not expected to see them at West Pinnacles, however, but either on the Pacific coast or way further south, both places I thought that would need some luck.

So there I was dreaming about condors, when two almighty birds swung out over the ridge, massive birds that could only have been one thing, and they were ...two Californian Condors! I was astonished! Over the valley they cruised, two midget (by comparison) Turkey Vultures in their wake. Blimey I thought, what luck and so I sat down for a celebratory sandwich. Then I jumped up again, three more Californian Condors appeared over the crags!!! There they circled, two mobbing each other and giving views I could only have prayed for ...and then one landed on a boulder way up on the mountain side, a good part of a mile off and much higher than me. There it sat and did nothing, there I sat and watched, and longer there it sat and did nothing, then a bright idea bounced into my skull - leg it up the opposite side of the mountain, creep around the ridge and hopefully I would be at the same height and get some distant photographs. All very good, but the temperature was now 35 C, the mountainside was pure scree and scrub and that fantastic idea almost killed me! Got up there in record time, water pouring from my brow and my legs wondering what they had just been subjected to. Crept round, peeping over boulders here and there, then saw a feast for the eyes, the Californian Condor was still sitting there and just a mere few boulders away. I sat a while till my breathing returned to near normal, then clicked away to get the shots I wanted. Wonderful. Fight pictures would be nice too, presuming he was actually going to take to the air again that day, but my position was useless for that, I needed to be lower, so when he launched, he would go over my head. Twenty minutes later, I was sat peering up, waiting ...and wait I did, the bugger made me sit there half the morning in a scorching sun as American Kestrels and Turkey Vultures wheeled about.

A shuffle of position from the bird, then whoosh the skies almost darkened as wings opened and the Condor stepped off the boulder, soaring directly over, awe-inspiring. Four or five times round he swooped, then over the ridge and gone, the first magical moment of the trip over. It was not even mid-morning on the first morning!

Pleased with such success, it was then time to leave West Pinnacles. I needed to return to the coast - next day would be my first pelagic in Monterey Bay. My amble towards that way naturally included a number of diversions, the first to a small reservoir with White Pelicans, Pied-billed Grebes and assorted ducks and waders, and the next 20 miles up into the mountains above Paicines. Hot arid hillsides, a good covering of oaks, the area looked fantastic. Up along the windy road, I made many stops - for a Ladder-backed Woodpecker (further north than I had expected), for several Oak Titmice and for overhead Red-tailed Hawks. No hoped-for Golden Eagles, but my luck was in, an absolutely stunning Prairie Falcon did a fly-by! What a bird! Also more Acorn Woodpeckers, Lark and Song Sparrows, Black Phoebes and, best of the afternoon, relatives of waxwings, three super male Phainopepas feeding on roadside berries. A real gem of a bird, but I am glad I was alone, pronouncing that collection of 'p's and vowels might be problematic!

Then onward to the coast - Savannah Sparrows and Red-winged Blackbirds added, followed by a quick jaunt on Highway One which notched up Black Oystercatcher, oodles of Brown Pelicans pretending to be fighter-bomber squadrons, plus the first of billions of Western Gulls, fortunately punctuated with fair regularity by the most attractive of its cousins, Heerman's Gulls.

Evening approached, I had a 5.00 a.m. start next day, so decided upon the luxury of a motel that night, day one finished, California was beginning to impress me!

23 August - Pelagic birding

Day of the pelagic, my hopes were high. In front of me were 12 hours out to sea with Monterey Seabirds, the top pelagic operator in the area. From Monterey Bay to the offshore submarine canyons, the resultant upwellings would hopefully attract birds by the bucket load and, with extreme luck, maybe even a Blue Whale (though I had to be realistic, only two trips had seen Blue Whales so far that season!).

So there I was, 5 a.m. on the pier waiting the launch, huddled over a coffee listening to the weird wails and barks of the Californian Sealions giving an unearthly rendition of a morning chorus, what a din! At 5.30, under the cover of darkness, we slipped from the harbour and out to sea, the waiting game began, what would daylight bring? By the time the first hints of daylight lit the waters, we were already well offshore and birds were in our wake - phantom arcs of Sooty Shearwaters were our first sightings, thousands of them, streaming past, soon joined by exquisite Buller's Shearwaters, first the odd one, then a steady stream. Still in the gloom of dawn, a Humpback Whale appeared to our portside, a

breakfast whale it was announced.

Aboard a few were still slightly sleepily - that was about to change! At 7.30 a.m., the tannoy crackled "Ahead we have a Blue Whale". A ripple of excitement stirred the boat, all on board are wide awake and engaged! The tannoy crackles further "A correction, up ahead we have two Blue Whales!" And so there were, the biggest creatures the world has ever seen, and now it was my turn to see them!

Magical and the day had barely begun. Still Sooty Shearwaters swept past, Buller's Shearwaters becoming ever more common, but now another - the first of many Pink-footed Shearwaters! Stuff was coming thick and fast, birds everywhere. Next, a small pod of Risso's Dolphins put in an appearance, then the first Rhinoceros Auklet, what a super monster!

Elegant Terns screamed overhead, thereafter to be heard throughout the day no matter how far offshore we went. Then the first Sabine's Gulls, a flock of perhaps 15 or so. Birds were just getting more and more numerous, all the shearwaters ever-present, Sabine's Gulls every ten or fifteen minutes, then the skuas - Pomarine Skua the first of the day. Then the shout went out - "Albatross coming in, Black-footed Albatross to our right". Ah, what a super bird, as it effortlessly swung past giving views you could only dream about. Then another and another! Albatross heaven, from that moment on, we had small numbers with us all day.

Outward we went, the odd Common Guillemot also putting in an appearance, along with dumpy Cassin's Auklets, dozens of the latter, another high on my 'hoped-for' list. Red-necked Phalaropes, till then just the occasional individual, began streaming by, flocks of ten or fifteen at a time, sometimes more, another Pomarine Skua buzzed the boat.

Next came an unexpected new bird for me - a little dot appeared in our wake, landbird coming in! Though at least 20 km offshore, a passerine was approaching the boat, some kind of warbler. In it flitted, dancing over the waves, dodging the gulls, onto the boat it landed and there it was, a Black-throated Grey Warbler, not a bird I had expected on this day! However, this little fellow then decided to take off again, out to sea once more - what a bad decision! Dodging the gulls and waves seemed an endless game, one it looked certain to lose. A gull grabbed it, all seemed doomed, my first ever Black-throated Grey Warbler was hanging by its tail in the mouth of a Western Gull, it about to die! A groan went up by those aboard, then a small cheer, the gull dropped it! This plucky thing then dodged a few more gulls and decided the boat was indeed a good place to be - it landed on one man's head and sat there, I presume thanking its lucky stars! Another man then grabbed it and put it in a bird bag, that little fellow got a free lift back to land for a safe release!

It was barely mid-morning, but already I had seen far more than I had expected, what a super day. And still all the shearwaters, albatrosses and phalaropes continued to pass in impressive numbers.

Our initial course had been westward, but as the day progressed, we took a more northerly heading that took us, I believe, over the deep underwater canyons. Northern Fulmars began to appear in small numbers, all dark phase birds, along with another mammal to add to the list - Northern Fur Seals, three seen, all adopting the typical 'teapot' position. Thanks to the steady chum being chucked off the back, we kept a flock of Western Gulls at our stern all day, those in turn attracting the Black-footed Albatrosses in particular. We began seeing Ashy Storm Petrels here and there, so the guys decided to lay down a fish oil slick to see what we could attract ...within minutes, the first of three Wilson's Storm Petrels flew in to investigate.

We sat on the slick for a spell, then just as we got underway, crossing over the Ano Nuevo Canyon, a mega of a bird appeared - LAYSAN ALBATROSS right up our wake. To say there was a lot of commotion on the boat is an understatement, cameras rolled and hoots went out. Truly brilliant, this is a rarity in Californian waters during the summer.

Eventually, as the Laysan Albatross wandered off, the excitement began to ebb ..not for long! When the leader of the boat starts to jump up and down with excitement, you just know something special is happening! He had scurried back to the stern, trying not to attract too much attention, but dribbling cod liver oil over the side, tossing a handful of anchovies too. A minute or two passed. Folks were watching him wondering what was going on and then...

"There it is! WEDGE-TAILED SHEARWATER!!!"

The light morph bird crossed our wake and swept parallel to the boat in its distinctive flight style, similar to Buller's Shearwater with nary a wingbeat. Round and round, the bird performed fantastically, everyone getting a chance to grab a few pictures of this extreme rarity to US coastal waters. Fourth ever for California I believe, maybe fourth for the USA barring Hawaii! The word 'awesome' gets repeated over and over, the leaders had smiles as broad as the Chesire Cat!

Phew, could it get any better? Hmm...

Southward, we found some small storm petrel flocks on the water, mostly Ashy Storm Petrels again, but at least a half dozen Black Storm Petrels too. Eventually, we found the 'big petrel flock' - a few hundred in all, virtually all Ashy Storm Petrels, but a shout went up for Least Storm Petrel - but the bird was brief and most on board, including me, never got to see this one. Onward we went, somewhere along the line achieving the "Skua Slam" with all four possible species seen - three South Polar Skuas, two Long-tailed Skuas, several Pomarine and a few Arctic, all added spice to an excellent day.

Eventually it was time to start heading back - Cassin's Auklets and Rhinoceros Auklets appeared in added abundance, Buller's Shearwaters in renewed numbers, but the stars on the way back were the mammals - playing with our boat, dolphins by the dozen - Dall's Porpoises, Pacific White-sided Dolphins and Northern Right Whale Dolphins, the latter a most unusual special with no dorsal fin! Brilliant they were too, you could lie on the front of the boat and see them a metre below your nose! Then more whales, a mother and calf Humpback Whale, the day was complete, an amazing event from start to finish.

But not quite finished - chugging into the harbour, with Californian Sealions everywhere and three Sea Otters in the kelp beds, we wrapped the day up with one Pacific Diver, several Pigeon Guillemots and Pelagic Cormorants (as well as numerous Brant's and Doube-crested Cormorants) off Cannery Row and a summering Harlequin Duck in the harbour!!!

Back on dock, staggered by the success, I stood and watched the sea a moment or two, Brown Pelicans and Heerman's Gulls loafing nearby. It was now early evening, what to do? Naturally, only one option - I jumped into my car, drove right across California up to the foothills of the Sierra Nevada and, arriving late, camped just outside Yosemite National Park, cue early start next morning.

24 August - Yosemite National Park

If we go by landscapes, Yosemite is the cream of California, what a stunning place! Anyhow, much as I should have liked to join the gawping tourists and crawled through the main Yosemite Valley in an RV, I thought better of it and decided a touch of birding was in order! All had started well enough - being dark, I hadn't realised where I had camped out, but with dawn it turned out to be by the Merced River and right there, bobbing about on the rocks, were two American Dippers! Hmm, nice. Into the car and into Yosemite proper - I had planned a couple of days here, naturally hoping for a bear, but decided the first day should be spent up towards Glacier Point. Not a bad road up - vistas to die for (literally if you took a step too far) and birds not bad too. Scored early success with a covey of Mountain Quails scurrying across the road, pausing just long enough for me to get a photograph or two in the shoddy pre-sunrise light. Further along the road, at ever higher altitudes, stops became more and more frequent - birds including superb Green-tailed Towhees, the first White-headed Woodpeckers, frequent Northern Flickers and a couple of Orange-crowned Warblers (but a strange absence of other warblers). Mountain Chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatches became common, as did Golden-crowned Kinglets, though the latter were right hard gits to get good views of! Upward and upward, the scenery just got better, but as the heat began to build, so the birding slackened off ...but not before the star of the day! A little buzz of something went zooming past, vanished and then, from nowhere, suddenly buzzed back again and alighted upon a twig, a little midget of a bird! These hummingbirds could be a problem to identify I had thought, but not this one - it was another of my main target species - Calliope Hummingbird, the United States's smallest bird. Not a bad thing too, then buzz and it was gone!

Up at Glacier Point, the heat and tourists had beaten me - so I sat and gawped too, perched atop a 900 metre overhang, the domes and pinnacles across the valley standing sentinel. Lots of Lodgepole Chipmunks and California Ground Squirrels, a few Western Grey Squirrels too, plus, on the way back down, both Chickaree Squirrel and Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel ...five new squirrel species in just the morning, two more to come before Yosemite was over!

After a short wander into the Yosemite Valley, I then ambled over to the north side of the valley, trundling around a few places before ending up at 'Chevron Meadows', a small grassland known as an occasional haunt of Great Grey Owls. Though I have seen this species in Belarus, I would never complain at the possibility of more, so gave the little patch of meadow a good few hours as afternoon turned to evening. Lincoln's Sparrow was nice, following on from Chipping Sparrow and Rufous-crowned Sparrow earlier, but nicer still were the woodpeckers - no shortage of them! Naturally, as everywhere, a Northern Flicker popped out, as did a White-headed Woodpecker, but the honours of the evening fell to a Red-breasted Sapsucker and, a right headbanger, half demolishing a trunk, one smart Piliated Woodpecker. No idea where the owl sat, but Western Wood-Pewees and a pair of Hammond's Flycatchers did try to compensate (failing miserably - no flycatcher, least of all one of the lookalike American models, could ever match a Great Grey Owl!).

Then it got dark. Off I went to Tamarack Flat, an exquisite campsite in ancient stands of pine, almost deserted of persons, but sporting the latest in bear bins - lock your food away or have your car trashed by big furry bundles, the signs promised. I was half tempted to see, but decided responsibility was the better option for the night!

25 August - Yosemite National Park

I began to think I was on hallucinatory drugs, by 9 a.m. I was again on cloud nine! It had all started so peacefully, a short stroll from the campsite, admiring Mountain Chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatches. Then I started to get waylaid, first by a whole bunch of woodpeckers - another Piliated Woodpecker, half a dozen White-headed, one Hairy and, no surprise, four more Northern Flickers. Then the bushes exploded into action - warblers, warblers, warblers, dozens of them, a fast moving flock ranging from canopy to forest floor, flashes of brilliant yellow, bold black and hints of many a shade more. This was rapid fire action, identify each one before the next jumped into view. Hermit, Hermit, Black-throated Grey, darn what was that, hmm, ah Townsend's, a little corker, Hermit again, another, oo, low in the bush, Nashville, two Nashvilles, plus Orange-crowned, eeks, loads of Orange-crowned, and ..darn, missed, Hermit, blimey, what's that? Oo, brilliant MacGillivray's! And so it went on, flashes of this and that, Golden-crowned Kinglets coming through, a Brown Creeper too. Twenty minutes into this, the tally was something like 10 Golden-crowned Kinglets, 15 Orange-crowned Warblers, two Nashville, two Yellow-rumped, 15 Black-throated Greys, at least 20 Hermit, six Townsend's, a couple of MacGillivray's and four Wilson's Warblers ...plus dozens more that evaded my binoculars, pretended to be something else or simply moved too fast for me to see!

Oo er, I was in a good mood. I quietly wandered on ...then 'fwooorr', a sudden loud bow, something had made a funny snorting noise! Naturally this was of some interest to me, so I took a quick look to my left. Blimey, I said to myself for the second time of the morning, there happily clawing open a rotten tree trunk, blowing into cavities and sat not 15 metres away, was a Black Bear!!! Getting into American lingo, I could utter nothing but 'awesome', wondering whether this hunk of a beast would be terribly amused to have an interloper disturbing him from his trunk. Best moment of the trip so far, eye to eye with the animal I had most wanted to see! After what seemed forever, he took a mild interest in his admirer, galncing up and appearing totally unfussed. Off he ambled, rooting up the odd grub here and there, giving me the beady eye on occasion.

Half an hour of this, then the warblers came back, total distraction, back to the i.d. medlam. Gee, it was hard being on holiday!

Back to camp for breakfast, the bear box had worked, no demolished car! A couple of peanut butter sandwiches later and it was time to begin my trundle towards Toulumne Meadows, about 40 miles or so to the east, but much higher altitude. Stunning drive all the way with many stops for scenery, if not birds.

Up at Toulumne, certainly the most picturesque locality in the whole of Yosemite, the birding was a simple pleasure - a gentle stroll across alpine meadows cut by a blue stream with towering peaks all around. Dotted about, stately Mule Deer, plus Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels on rocky slopes, colonies of Belding Ground Squirrels in the meadows, the latter real characters, all peeking out of their burrows, ducking down at the first hint of danger - especially if a raptor! In blue skies, Prairie Falcon, Northern Harrier, Swainson's Hawk and Northern Goshawk all put in appearances, along with Crossbills overhead, American Dippers on the river and a Hermit Thrush in a bush, the last quite a surprise. Despite my best attempts, however, I could not find a single Mountain Bluebird. Still, 30 or so Yellow-rumped Warblers and flocks of Brewer's Blackbirds, not so bad.

The sun went down, the temperature dropped, high altitude stuff. Under the cover of darkness, I left Yosemite and drove a few miles, ever higher, to the nearby Saddlebag Lake.

26 August - Saddlebag & Lake Mono

Jeepers, thought I was in California! I awoke in the morning to temperatures just a single degree above freezing and the car beeping an ice warning! Yup, over 3000 metres into the sky, the standard fare of tee-shirt and slacks was going to leave me a tad chilly!

As the pre-dawn twilight revealed a landscape beyond belief, I decided the far end of Saddlebag Lake, a couple of miles distant, looked the best destination. It appeared to be a mosaic of alpine meadows, scattered pines and scree slopes stretching up to the snow and jagged peaks, truly a sight to behold so early in the morning. Shivering, off I went, Dark-eyed Juncos the only bird to mark the beginning of my walk ...but a few hundred metres on and loads of weird little

mammals kept popping up - little truncated rabbit-like things, dead tame too. It transpired they were Pika, very nice and probably tasty to passing raptors no doubt. On cue, the first raptor went sailing past - a Prairie Falcon catching the first rays of the sun now breaking the high tops. Yellow-bellied Marmots trotting across the rocks too, two new mammals in the matter of minutes!

Miraculously, the second the sun hit me, the temperature rocketed ...relatively. Feeling very good, I got to the far meadows and immediately birds were bouncing about - the starters being White-crowned Sparrows, Rock Wrens and plenty of warblers (which surprised me for so high - Yellow-rumped Warbler the most common, a few Orange-crowned and Nashville too). Up on these high slopes, I had set my heart on one bird, one that I had not seen in Yosemite in the previous days, my target was Clark's Nutcracker. Krraaaa krraaa echoed across from the pines, that had to be them! Ten minutes later, I was sat on a rock admiring them sitting in a pine five metres away! Superb birds, totally unfussed by a tourist clicking a camera in their face, they took the trophy for best bird of the morning. Alpine Chipmunks scampered about. I then pondered climbing to the high slopes for Ptarmigan, but had heard stories of a good tea-shop at the other end of the lake, so strolled back there instead! More Clark's Nutcrackers on the way, plus some very photogenic Rock Wrens, flitty Chipping Sparrows and roving flocks of Mountain Chickadees ...and of course the daily Northern Flicker!

Tea in the tea-shop was indeed good, as was the berry pie, but with that done, off I then tootled down the valley. With mid-morning approaching and the temperature now climbing up over 30 C, I stopped a few times in the hope of finding Mountain Bluebirds, still none, but more Clark's Nutcrackers, taking the morning total to 12, and a very fine Swainson's Hawk.

Onward, I fancied the deserts, eastward-bound and down, down, down...

With the High Sierras now my backdrop, yet again the Golden State was about to leave me in awe - the destination was Lake Mono, a saline lake shimmering in the 41 C heat and totally mindblowing. Almost alien in appearance, calcium carbonate from underground springs has created towering 'tufa', strange natural sculptures that create a landscape like no other. Mad dogs and Englishmen came to mind, the heat was incredible, but rather to my liking, so down to the lakeside I went.

Wow, two things sat there in numbers beyond imagination. The first was brine flies, literally millions, creating a metre-wide layer of seething black along the shoreline - fortunately these flies were most friendly, not even landing on you, let alone feasting. The second was the birds feeding on the flies - at my first stop, a single flock of 350 Wilson's Phalaropes spun on the water just offshore, countless California Gulls surrounding them, sitting atop the tufa and just about everywhere else too. But over and above, the birds that you just couldn't ignore were the Black-necked Grebes, bobbing about as far as the eye could see ...in this bay, in every bay! At a conservative guess, I'd say I saw more than 150,000 that day, but autumn counts can exceed one million, just incredible! American Avocets, Killdeer, Ospreys nesting on a tufa, the spectacle continued.

One thing that wasn't here was the Red-necked Phalaropes that I'd been expecting ...I'd read reports of flocks of 5000 and more, I saw the grand total of one single bird! Strange given the hundreds on the coast, but maybe they arrived a few days later.

As the heat began to drop, ie. to less than 40 C, I decided it was time to seek out the specialities - Pinyon Jay, Sage Thrasher and Sage Sparrow. Stopped to fill up with petrol in the nearby town and was just about to head out of town when I spotted a feeding station in the hotel garden opposite - time for a short break! A conveniently placed bench proved most inviting, so there I sat for 20 minutes - Rufous Hummingbirds at their feeders, Cassin's Finches, Pine Siskins and tons of American Goldfinches at theirs. Maybe a siesta under that shady tree would have been nice, but instead I traipsed out to the scant pine forests that grow to the south of Lake Mono.

Very quiet they seemed, not a peep of a bird for quite some time, then a distant qwaaa, hmm, that sounded familiar, more Clark's Nutcrackers I thought, and so they were, another four (bringing the day's total to 16!). A lot more trudging across the unforgiving gravels and slowly birds began to appear - Hairy Woodpeckers, White-breasted Nuthatches, Mountain Chickadees and finally a call that suggested my main target might be nearby. They appeared to be coming my way, so under a tree I sat, the shade most welcome. Then one flew across, burying itself in the foliage of a stumpy pine, then another joined it, and another. A whole flock of them, large birds and they were all just brilliant at hiding in branches that didn't seem fit to conceal a warbler! And then, one by one, out they all popped, Pinyon Jays in all their glory, very nice.

What with that and evening creeping in, it was time to return to Lake Mono, back to the brine flies and tufa towers. I tried another bay famed for its Red-necked Phalaropes - not one! Still, Ospreys sat upon a nest, American Avocets waded the shallows and passerines appeared in abundance. No shortage of sparrows - about 15 Savannah Sparrows for starters, at least five Brewer's Sparrows and nearby two Sage Sparrows, quite possibly more, but all fed on the edge of some rather dense scrubby stuff, I presume sage. Ah sage, there was still one bird to seek out - Sage Thrasher. At this

particular location, the Sage Thrashers are said to abandon their usual reclusive ways and feed on the brine flies at the water's edge ...a couple of kilometres I walked, Brewer's Blackbirds two a penny, some Brown-headed Cowbirds too, but not a sign of a thrasher anywhere! Back to the car I walked and up popped the thrashers - four Sage Thrashers atop the sage! Green-tailed Towhees too, not quite so bold.

Another very successful day was drawing to a close. Dawn next day, I decided, would better be spent a few kilometres south where one very special bird might greet me, so off I drove, purposely arriving after dark in the hope of a nightjar of sorts. Nope, but I did see several Kangaroo Rats hopping across the tracks. Slept under a sky of very bright stars.

27 August - Lake Crawley and south, Jawbone Canyon

Big travel day, but quite superb throughout. Woke pre-dawn to hints of a frost and endless sage in all directions and a distant Lake Crawley to my south. Sage Grouse was much desired this morning and, having slung all my eggs in the single basket by skipping Brodie, it was here or nowhere for this bird. Jumped in the car, turned on the heater - the only time in California - and began my search. With mist hanging over a pool, my first birds of the day were a half-score of American Avocets wading the shallows, a few Red-necked Phalaropes their backdrop. Hoping for the grouse, I gazed around - with high sage growing virtually from horizon to horizon, it was almost certain this was going to be a tricky task!

Hoping for a bit luck, I decided the most effective approach was probably the lazy way - a random slow drive along the endless tracks that wound through the area in the hope that a bird or two might cross the track before the sun got too high, thereby pushing the birds back into cover. Several Sage Thrashers later, with perhaps 20 miles covered, I finally got to the banks of Lake Crawley itself. Wow, I had not expected anything here, but it was packed with birds! Sixty or so American White Pelicans for starters, an assortment of waders loads of little dots scattered across the lake. Stopped and began a scan - very nice indeed, perhaps 300 Black-necked Grebes, mere crumbs compared to the day before, but even better, some rather super larger ones - at least 80 Western Grebes. Hhm, I thought, I wonder ...80 Western Grebes, maybe... Got out the scope and, sure enough, there were six Clark's Grebes in amongst them, yet another new species for me. Plenty of other stuff too - Canada Geese, Ruddy Ducks, Red-necked Phalaropes, etc. plus Northern Roughwing Swallows hawking the shallows.

Lakeside vegetation was alive - scrub bending under the weight of Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Sage Sparrows and Chipping Sparrows popping up amongst the numerous Savannah Sparrows, Loggerhead Shrike giving them a menacing look, a Northern Harrier drifting over.

By now, however, it was almost 9 a.m. and temperatures had gone from near zero to up towards 30 C, my chances of the Sage Grouse seemed to be fading. Time for change of tactics - forget hoped-for luck, begin the legwork. After finding an area that 'looked good', I began a very long hike through super habitat - quickly found Shore Larks, had nice views of an American Kestrel, saw more Sage Thrashers, plus four Western Meadowlarks, but not a whiff of a grouse. Oh well, I thought, can't win them all, back to the car I went. Deciding it a lost cause, with many many miles to cover that day, I began to drive back towards the main highway. Coo, another car, my first of the day, so I decided to be the polite driver and pulled over to let him past. Waved as he went, so there I was sat about to go again when an almighty flap of wings went up from aside the car and I was left watching the backside of a Sage Grouse disappearing over the brow! Blimey, my favourite phrase of the trip I think. Jumped out of the car to watch him go ...and up flapped another 45!!! Jeepers, I'd spent the morning criss-crossing the hills trying to find one and here, thanks to being polite enough to stop, was a whole flock of them hurtling across the slope. All swooped down and landed in sage a few hundred metres off, that was luck indeed.

Next came the drive south. My eye kept wandering to the thermometer ...being an American car, t'was of course in fahrenheit, so it began soaring - 85 F, 90 F, southward 92, 95, 98, bam 100 F, ...a cool 38 C.

Just as it hit 102 F, I got to my next stop - a short excursion into the White Mountains. By now midday and scorching hot, I did not expect big things here, but got lucky with a surprise flock of Chukurs, about 30 of them scurrying down a rocky slope towards a spring. The spring itself offered a shady retreat, a fifteen minute pause here adding another Pinion Jay, plus three overhead Turkey Vultures, but otherwise just sun and shimmering slopes. Up higher, but no less hot, I wanted to find one particular bird. I stopped in stony juniper forest, jumped out of the car to total silence, not a single bird calling and not a single thing moving. Almost 40 C, but nothing to do, I had to lock the car up and begin another hike, a very hot hike! One hour later I had seen a grand total of one bird, a Pinyon Jay, oh dear! Then, sod's law, just as I got back to the car, I heard a little trill some way off, walked off in pursuit ...and immediately bumped into another bird, not the one calling. Up there though, beggar's couldn't be choosy, anything was a bonus - and it was, a rather nice Warbling Vireo.

Almost as soon as I had pinned that one down and more birds appeared, a little flock containing two Black-throated Grey Warblers, two Brewer's Sparrows and, the very reason I was up in those mountains, no less than five Juniper Titmice, super ...if not for the birds themselves, but that I could then retire to the comfort of the air-conditioned car!

Southward more, up went the temperature, even the local radio talked of 'temperature alerts' ...mid-afternoon, with the temperature now sitting at 106 F (41 C), I finally pulled in at my main destination for the afternoon ...Jawbone Canyon, rattlesnake haven, burning desert, home to one special bird.

But disaster, this particular bird is a bugger to see at the best of times, and best of times is not in the middle of the day, particularly when temperatures are soaring so high. The target was Le Conte's Thrasher, a bird best found, by all accounts, by imagining you are looking for a mouse - the bird occurs at very low densities in the vast arid wastes of canyon bottoms, normally thicker scrub and preferring to run away if approached, rarely showing itself other than occasionally at dawn.

So, back to the mad dogs and Englishmen school of birding - the walk began. Actually, putting myself in the bird's position, I somehow decided which patches looked slightly better for the bird. Walked for over an hour and saw precisely three birds. Two of them were Sage Sparrows. The third bird was somewhat a miracle - I had followed a likely-looking route, but hesitated to actually wade through dense scrub, not wishing to kick a rattlesnake. Then a bird flitted onto the ground from one bush, then ran to the next bit of scrub, before flitting across to the next. Interesting, very interesting. Before I had time to wonder, I saw it again, darting across to a small side wash. I walked over and almost missed it - it was not on the ground, but sat atop a twiggy shrub! And there it was, performing absolutely not how I had dared to hope, one smart Le Conte's Thrasher! I walked closer, the bird popped onto the next bush, giving even better views, top bird.

Back at the car, slung the conditioning on again and got going, Rock Wrens, Common Raven and Loggerhead Shrike were added to the tally high on the canyon slopes. Stopped to take a self-portrait, see picture! Not far from Jawbone Canyon, I pulled into Butterbredt Spring, a little oasis of greenery in the otherwise hopelessly arid mountains. Primarily a migration hotspot, I fancied a short stop just to see the place - quite amazing it is, a tiny cluster of trees in a gully with a small pool and that was that, not a hundred metres from end to end, but by all accounts absolutely stuffed full with birds on a good spring day, must be amazing.

I had no such expectations, but still was not disappointed - a Desert Cottontail greeted my entry, a good bunch of Sage and Black-throated Sparrows drank at the pool and, top of the lot, a most impressive Great Horned Owl resided in the canopy, the first actually seen on the trip. Overhead a Sharp-shinned Hawk passes over.

With that on I went, finding a nice place to camp just near Kern River, my birding destination for the next day. Great Horned Owls hooted all night!!!

28 August - Kern River Preserve and the Big Morongo

It was always interesting waking at dawn, I had usually chosen a camping place after dark, so never really knew what I would be seeing come light. This was a good morning - having heard the Great Horned Owls virtually all night, I was pleased that they'd had the decency to keep up their racket even as the first hints of day began to creep in. I was surrounded by rocky slopes, massive boulders and scattered trees - and somewhere amongst these, two owls were calling against each other. It took a while, but finally I got to see the first owl sitting way up on a rock, but the second was almost magical - atop a boulder silhouetted against the sky, this most mighty of owls just sat there, lurching forward to launch its deep hoo hoo into the gathering dawn. Very nice start to the day.

Thereafter, probably due having hyped myself up for the Kern Valley, I found myself rather disappointed - though its true glories come with migration season, I hadn't expected to find myself struggling to find any birds! Early walks produced almost nothing, a few House Wrens, a Downy Woodpecker, then a Hairy Woodpecker, but really the going was quiet.

Oh well, head off to the Kern Valley Reserve HQ I thought, can't be bad there, turned to walk back to the car ..and there, scooting off up the track, a Bobcat! Brilliant, this was very high on my wish-list, a true saviour of the morning! Can't say the views were stupendous, but fabulous ears!

Anyhow, that Bobcat did seem to denote a turning point, birding thereafter returned to normal and birds crept out from the woodwork, left and right. The park HQs were fantastic, not for the flocks of Lesser Goldfinches or California Quails, but for the hummingbird feeders. Stunning, dozens of Rufous Hummingbirds, dozens of Black-chinned Hummingbirds and no shortage of Anna's Hummingbirds too, a right hive of activity, buzzing midgets going everywhere. Sat and enjoyed that for a good hour or so, even better with an adjacent seed feeder pulling in Oak Titmice and Black-headed Grosbeaks, plus California Quails. Though rapidly turning into another real scorcher of a day, I thought it wise to quickly walk the trails - not bad, a stunning male Summer Tanager the highlight, though a selection of warblers also made for pleasant birding, notably Orange-crowned, Nashville, Yellow and Wilson's Warblers. One Willow Flycatcher too.

Abandoning my plans to spend two days here, I decided to push on - a few hours drive and I could be at Big Morongo, a small reserve on the edge of the Joshua Tree National Park. In an attempt to find Greater Roadrunner, I took a very weird route, cutting through desert all the way and avoiding major roads, though I did at one stage somehow manage to get lost in some suburban spillage that blighted one area of desert. No Roadrunners and basically no birds - three Shore Larks, the odd Turkey Vulture here and there, one immense flock of about 80 Common Ravens and that was that. But the temperature! Throughout the day, it just kept getting ever higher, the reading proudly sitting at 112 F (45 C) by mid-afternoon!!! I struggled to remind myself that I was not back in Africa!

Arriving at Big Morongo, I was bowled over - if the hummingbird feeders at Kern had been impressive, these were just stupid, absolutely heaving, dozens and dozens and dozens of hummingbirds, four species in all. Spoke to one guy there and he said numbers were higher than usual and ringers a few days earlier had caught more than 80 Rufous Hummingbirds alone. I hate to try to estimate the numbers, but I'd happily put it at about 80 for the Rufous Hummingbirds on my visit, perhaps 40-50 Black-throated, at least 30 Anna's and a handful of quaint Costa's, quite a collection! One Nuttall's Woodpecker came to peanuts.

It was quite difficult to drag myself off the comfy deckchairs that had conveniently been left for visiting birders, but I really had to walk the Big Morongo trails. Though the heat was stifling, one bird in particular resided here and basically nowhere else on my planned route. Shouldn't be difficult to find, I reasoned - I mean, who could miss a bright scarlet red blob flycatching off exposed snags! Fortunately it wasn't, a bare ten minutes into my walk, I was watching a stunning male Vermillion Flycatcher, soon after adding a couple of Verdins to the list, whist waiting for a squawking Virginia Rail to appear, which it didn't! More Lesser Goldfinches, heaps more hummingbirds, but dusk was approaching - I decided to travel ever further south.

My last sight that excellent day, just as it began to get dark and I was hitting the freeways around North Palm Springs, was more like a nightmare than an attraction - a windfarm of monstrous size and design, literally hundreds of turbines hogging every ridge across the valley, lined up row after row and, surely guaranteed to cut every flying thing from the air, the worst was that there seemed to be every size and height of turbine all adjacent. Should some hapless raptor manage to avoid one, the next should certainly swat him out of existence, how depressing.

Didn't stay there long, arrived late night at Salton Sea, camping in what basically felt like a sauna, temperatures remained near 95 F through the night, humidity was high and Salton sure pongs!

And so ended Part One of my trip, dawn would bring the beginning of Part Two, Salton Sea and the Coastal Loop. Click [HERE](#) to read.