

Road Trip USA. Salton Sea to Arctic Ocean

Contributed by Jos

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Desert to tundra, Greater Roadrunner to Spectacled Eider, blistering heat in lands ninety metres below sea level to snow on the heights of the remote Brooks Range in Alaska, this trip was an ambitious undertaking not least due to the fact I was not sure how or if I could actually complete the last leg of the journey. The aim of the trip was simple, get from end to the other, enjoy a juicy bonanza of mammals, turning out to be over 60 species, along with oodles of birds.

Basic Plan Travelling from 27 June till 25 July 2013 and covering almost 12,000 km, this trip utilized rental car, Amtrak train, boat, ferry and a good deal of hitch-hiking, the basic idea being to voyage north from San Diego in southern California to the Arctic Ocean in northern Alaska. Flying into San Diego, I looped south-east by car to visit the superb Salton Sea a few kilometres north of the Mexican border, then moved north through the arid lands of the Mohave Desert and Death Valley. After exploration of Mono Lake and adjacent sagebush areas, I then climbed into the Sierra Nevada mountains to spend a couple of days in Yosemite before dropping down to the Pacific coast, focussing on the rich waters of Monterey Bay. Leaving the car in Sacramento, I then travelled north to Seattle on a 20-hour Amtrak train, picking up another car to spend the better part of a day exploring the North Cascades in Washington State. Then began the adventurous segment of the trip – four-and-a-half days on a ferry boat, travelling up the Pacific coast, initially via the Inside Passage through British Columbia and south-east Alaska and then via Yukatat across the open Gulf of Alaska. I really had no idea what to expect on this journey, parts I thought would be tedious, but elsewhere I hoped for rewards such as multiple species of auk, shearwater and albatross, plus hopefully plenty of whales. Docking at Whittier, my plans were then a little flexible, but I eventually settled on a couple of days of exploration of forests on the Kenai Peninsula before travelling north to Denali National Park a couple of days later, land of mega-fauna and excellent birding, a locality where I camped at a small campsite in the shadow of the mighty Mount McKinley. From Denali, a major question mark sat over the next step – a desire to reach the Arctic Ocean by land. The only land route is via the Dalton Highway, a remote gravel road running north from Fairbanks across the Arctic Circle, over the high mountains of the Brooks Range and onward to Deadhorse. A round-trip of over 1600 km, there are basically no settlements or services of note along its route, but plenty of Grizzly Bears and potential for good birding. At journey's end, Deadhorse – a settlement established a few kilometres from the Arctic Ocean, permanent population zero, transient population somewhat variable, all there to service the oil installations in Prudhoe Bay. The journey to Deadhorse promised to be the biggest challenge of this trip – most car rental companies do not permit their vehicles to use this road, too remote and the road in too poor condition they say. The couple of companies that do allow their vehicles to use the road charge extortionate fees that, coupled with the equally extortionate cost of petrol on this route, would lead to a bill of perhaps \$1500 for a short trip to this outpost. My solution was to stick the thumb out and hope for the best. All reports suggested it would be a hitch-hiking nightmare – not only the possibility of adverse weather and encounters with Grizzlies (and the guarantee of the biggest mosquito swarms on planet Earth!), but more critically very little traffic … and most of that being trucks servicing the oil stations that are forbidden to pick up passengers! At journey's end however, the rewards potentially included both King and Spectacled Eiders, though I was a little late in the season for these, plus a booty of Arctic-breeding waders and a lot of juicy maybes. From Deadhorse, my plans were always a little hazy, I was not able to pre-plan as I had no idea how long it would take to get there and to see my target birds. Options included hitch-hiking directly back to Fairbanks, flying to Barrow for a couple of days (an isolated community 150 miles further up the Arctic Coast and not reachable by road), or possibly just flying directly back to Anchorage, my final departure point for the long journey home. For convenience of reading, this report is divided into four parts: Part One. California & the West Coast. A loop of 4600 km from Salton Sea to Yosemite and Monterey Bay. [CLICK HERE TO READ.](#) b. Part Two. The Great Route North, Alaska. By sea and land, 6640 km from Seattle to the high Arctic at Deadhorse. [CLICK HERE TO READ.](#) c. Systematic List of Mammals. A total of 62 species of mammals were recorded on the trip, including 40 in California and 27 in Alaska. [CLICK HERE TO READ.](#)