

Part One. California & the West Coast.

Contributed by Jos
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Skillfully managing to time my trip to coincide with record-breaking temperatures in southern California, this segment of the trip sweltered under temperatures reaching near 55 C and totalled 4600 km from Salton Sea in the south to Yosemite and Monterey in the north. An amazing array of wildlife recorded, including Bobcats, Black Bears and Blue Whales, as well as Burrowing Owls, Great Grey Owl and Black-backed Woodpecker.

Also included in this section, an Amtrak train from Sacramento to Seattle and a day in the North Cascades mountains, the highlights of which included Cedar Waxwing, Vaux's Swift and Pacific Wren. Daily Log 27 June. Trans Atlantic. Let the journey begin. With temperature alerts in place for the Mohave and Death Valley areas (forecast highs of 51° C), so I boarded my flights & a short hop from Vilnius to Helsinki, a rather longer leg to New York City, then another 6 hours to San Diego in southern California. Arrived at 9 p.m. local time, 22 hours of planes and airports now behind me, the open road ahead. 25° C, already dark and a light breeze drifting in off the Pacific Ocean, I picked up my rental car and set off eastward, departing the suburbs of San Diego to cruise Interstate 8. Two hours or so later, having skirted the Mexican border for much of the journey, I arrived at my destination for the night, the rather hot and humid town of El Centro. Wishing to wake up in a fit state for the onslaught of high temperature birding ahead, I decided it a good idea to spend this night in a hotel, the luxury of air-conditioning rather appealing. Managed a grand total of four species of this day & Skylark and Hooded Crow from the plane in Helsinki, European Starling and Feral Pigeon at the airport in New York!

28 June. Salton Sea.

Even under normal conditions, a summer visit to the Salton Sea is an assault on the senses & sitting in a depression in the deserts of southern California at an altitude of 70 metres below sea-level, the place festers under a relentless sun. Hot, muggy and a gentle saline aroma, the delights of Salton. For all that however, it is also an absolute haven for birds & pelicans, egrets and cormorants dripping out of the non-existent trees, a selection of arid county birds such as Greater Roadrunner and Lesser Nighthawk and a whole bunch of specialities found easier here than in many other parts of the USA & Yellow-footed Gull, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Burrowing Owl and Bronzed Cowbird to mention just a few. And so, with a regional heatwave making the news in southern California and Arizona, it was time for my Salton Sea to Arctic Ocean voyage to truly begin. Up an hour before dawn in the hope of seeing the Burrowing Owls before the heat sent them down their holes, I left El Centro and motored north to the southern end of Salton Sea, Mourning Doves and Great-tailed Grackles the first birds of the day as light etched across the horizon. Flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds next, plus squadrons of Cattle Egrets flying in, a few Northern Mockingbirds here and there, a Northern Harrier drifting along and, as the sun rose, Horned Larks scrubbing around on a dusty track. The owls nest in embankments that line many of the dirt roads that criss-cross irrigated farmland just south of Salton Sea, the area around Bannister and Vendel Roads seeming to be particularly good. With the temperature already 30 C, I wondered if the owls would still be up and about, but I did not need to worry & within ten minutes of arriving, two beady yellow eyes were peering at me from the top of a mud bank, my first Burrowing Owl of the morning. And then two more, then another three, then two youngsters & oodles of Burrowing Owls all basking in the morning sunshine! With about 20 owls seen over about five miles, I was feeling most chuffed, even more so when a Greater Roadrunner went darting down the road in front of me. Also my first mammals of the trip & first, two Coyotes and several Desert Cottontails, then a Muskrat taking a short cut across the road to get from one ditch to another. It was now 7 a.m., the temperature was already rising somewhat alarmingly, so I decided to backtrack a little and visit the small town of Brawley, a fairly non-descript sort of place, but situated just a few miles north of the Mexican border home to several key birds. The leafy suburbs on the southern side of town offer good possibilities of Gila Woodpecker, Ruddy Ground-Dove and Bronzed Cowbird, the latter two of most interest to me as I had missed both on my previous visit to this site. Brawley surely must be dove capital of the USA & Mourning and White-Winged Doves commonplace, Collared Doves too, but also a generous dose of Common Ground-Doves and Inca Doves alongside. With many folk out sprinkling their lawns, pools of run-off offered excellent drinking sources for all these species, and on the one of the first roads I ventured down, it was one such pool that provided my first target species in the town - Ruddy Ground-Doves, a pair plodding across the road to drink in the gutter. 8.00 a.m., it was now already stinking hot, I had yet to see Gila Woodpecker, nor Bronzed Cowbird, so I continued my cruise of the town, ending up at Cattle Call Park, a small area of pasture inhabited by horses, plus an assortment of trees, mostly palms and eucalyptus. A lot of Great-tailed Grackles strutting about, as well as European Starlings, House Sparrows and assorted doves. Several Desert Cottontails on the grass too, but even better were three Bronzed Cowbirds alongside, target bird number two. As for target number three, i.e. Gila Woodpecker, I could already see that the remainder of the day was going to be a battle with the heat & before it managed to knock me out, I decided to give up on the woodpecker and return to the Salton Sea for its feast of water birds. At Salton Sea, the temperature was now sitting at an incredible 48 C, Brown Pelicans sat panting on rocks in the shallows, White-faced Ibises paddled in irrigated areas and at a nearby breeding colony, heaving masses of Cattle Egrets and Double-crested Cormorants clambered for space with Great Blue Herons and Black-crowned Night Herons. My targets at this locality were Black Skimmer and Yellow-footed Gull, the latter a Salton Sea speciality, the birds moving up from Mexico in this mid-summer period to place Salton Sea as the only locality in the USA that this species can be seen. Got to rocky peninsula on the southern shore of the sea, a Turkey Vulture was picking at dead fish on the beach, a right royal racket kicked off when the local Black-necked Stilts and American Avocets saw me, their welcoming calls alerting yet more from down the beach to come and join the choral performance. In a shimmering haze mid-distance, a bunch of white blobs I assumed to be gulls, so parked the car and took a walk & indeed they were gulls, a couple of dozen only, but

amongst the California Gulls and Ring-billed Gulls, three rather heftier individuals – Yellow-footed Gulls, two adults and one immature. Forster's Tern offshore, plus several Caspian Terns. A few photographs, then with my feet cursing that I'd not worn shoes, I tiptoed, jumped and hopped back towards my car, a small stream on route adding a few Killdeer and, unexpected bird of the day, a splendid Least Bittern. Shoved air-conditioning on at full blast, drank the little water I had, then carried on to the next bay. And glorious it was, not only more Yellow-footed Gulls, but also some rather stonking Black Skimmers on the beach – seven at close quarters, another 40 or so further off. A busy little beach this one, American Avocets seemed to be breeding, the Black Skimmers kept flying up and down and, tucked onto a little spit, a few unseasonal waders in the form of a flock of Willets, six Marbled Godwits and a single Whimbrel. Twenty or so White Pelicans paddled amongst the Brown Pelicans. At a nearby visitor centre, I added two more Greater Roadrunners, plus a third nearby, along with several Gambel's Quail, Abert's Towhee and, in an embankment nearby, a colony of Round-tailed Ground Squirrels. I also paused at a bunch of trees I'd found two years earlier with the express hope of finding Lesser Nighthawks – several birds had been roosting on that previous visit, and low and behold, there they were … seven Lesser Nighthawks on exactly the same branches! But jeepers, that sun was burning down, I decided it was time to leave! My original plan had been to spend the night in the Joshua Tree National Park, but with forecasts for the following day set to be even higher, I began to question the sanity of that idea. Instead, I hastily decided to pause at Big Morongo on the edge of the national park, thereafter to push on further. Visiting Big Morongo mid-afternoon on such a hot day is also perhaps of questionable intelligence – I expected to see very little. After a spell flopped in a chair at the hummingbird feeders near the entrance, watching Black-chinned and Anna's Hummingbirds zipping in and out, along with Oak Titmouse and California Towhees to an adjacent seed feeder, I decided to make the effort to walk one of the trails. Predictably, almost no bird activity, a couple Ladder-backed Woodpeckers on a tree, two Black Phoebes near a stream and a Cooper's Hawk overhead, but otherwise almost nothing. Had I been still questioning the point of walking a trail in the hot of the afternoon at 48 C, the answer came with a shock! As I stumbled towards the finale of the trail, me a virtual zombie at this stage, I suddenly became aware of another set of legs ambling along the trail …directly in front of me, one most magnificent Bobcat!!! Oo, that was a surprise. Without as much as looking round or changing pace, the cat continued to plod along, turning into scrub at the next corner. Ah, I felt much better. Almost trotted back to my car now, flicked on the air-conditioning again, stopped to get a coffee in the local gas station, then hit the road north, cruising through the arid lands of the Mohave Desert. Destination for the night was the Cima Dome area, a slightly higher altitude locality and hopefully a few degrees cooler at night. Arrived just before dark and selected a place to camp, Joshua trees dotted across a rocky hillside and a Great Horned Owl calling. A long hot day over, but as night fell, one last treat – hopping about, at least five Merrian's Kangaroo Rats, little beasties that I had hoped to find here.

29 June. Mohave Desert, Death Valley and Mono Lake. Still in a time zone ten to the east, I awoke under my Joshua tree at 2.30 a.m, the night showing absolutely no hint of dawn. For some rather daft reason, I decided to get up, write my notes and then go for a walk …at least the temperature was bearable! Merrian's Kangaroo Rat still hopping along the tracks, plus one Black-tailed Jack Rabbit too. First bird of the day, quite some time later, a Great Horned Owl sitting atop a Joshua tree silhouetted against an approaching dawn. In the deserts of southern California, there was one bird I was particularly keen to see – a rare inhabitant of Joshua tree areas, the bird in question was Scott's Oriole. To my left, a granite dome of a mountain rose, its flanks a picture of Joshua trees, the area supporting one of the greatest densities of these prehistoric looking plants anywhere. I began my hike, the sun rising over the boulders of the hillside, Black-throated Sparrows immediately in evidence, Cactus Wrens providing noisy accompaniment, both birds fairly common. Red-tailed Hawks cried into the dawn, a pair of Ladder-backed Woodpeckers worked the trunks and branches of Joshua trees, another pair later on. Bar the Black-throated Sparrows and Cactus Wrens however, birds weren't exactly bouncing out of the bushes – the fairly tough climb in rapidly rising temperatures adding a mere handful of additional species, fortunately including both Gambel's Quail and Pinyon Jay. As I reached the base of the granite dome, with House Wrens churring and an American Kestrel doing a fly-by, I spotted two distant dots flying my way! Over the Joshua trees they skimmed, eventually passing just above me …and what were they? Yep, a pair of Scott's Orioles! On they flew, finally settling way down the hillside in a Joshua tree. Well that was a bit of luck …distant, but nice. And then they vanished. I returned to the car, a dead cute White-tailed Antelope Squirrel found whilst stumbling back down. From the Mohave, I wanted to visit Death Valley, not so much for birding, but for the spectacle. Looking at the map, the seemed to be a nice back road that I could take – and most amazing it was, an evolving desert of rugged beauty, temperature soaring and over 100 miles of gravel road without seeing another car. I did see several Say's Phoebes and another five White-tailed Antelope Squirrels though. After a while I reached a junction that I had not been expecting, a junction without any signs. Turn right, I thought. Half an hour later, I reached an asphalt road. Hmm, odd I thought, starting to drive along. A road sign … ‘Nevada Highway 95’! Bugger, somehow I had taken a wrong turning and I was not even in California anymore!!! A slight bit of reorientating, then a stop in a Wal-Mart's in a junction town, and soon I was back on track …but now I would hit Death Valley smack bang in the middle of the day. Death Valley was an experience …a surreal beauty, but I managed to time my visit to coincide with one of the hottest days ever recorded in the valley – an absolutely incredible 54.5 C (130F)!!! Effectively felt that I'd opened an oven door and walked straight in, it even shattered the glass in my thermometer! Needless to say, I did not undertake any major hikes and I also did not see any birds or any, not even one! Seeking cooler lands, I pushed on further north, reaching Mono Lake by late afternoon. Death Valley is 90 metres below sea-level, Mono Lake is almost 2000 metres above sea-level, but the higher altitude did relatively little to dent the temperature, it was still about 46 C. At Mono Lake however, plenty of birds – amongst weird tufa sculptures rising from the waters, oodles of California Gulls, the world's second biggest breeding colony here, plus Violet Green Swallows streaming past, a couple of pairs of Ospreys, a flock of American Avocets and Black-necked Stilts, plus small

gatherings of Black-necked Grebes, a bird that will number the multiple thousands later in the season. Heat not really conducive to much exploration of the excellent sage habitats stretching off in all directions, but did manage a few wanders, the results of which included a number of Sage Thrashers, both Spotted and Green-tailed Towhees, a bunch of Brewer's Sparrows and a Rock Wren. As evening approached, I found a camping spot on the Bodie Road, a productive area of sage that should prove most excellent at dawn next day. Mountain Cottontails appearing from shrubs in the relative cool of evening, a Desert Kangaroo Rat in my camp after dark. 30 June. Bodie, Saddlebag Lake and Yosemite. High altitude brought a cool dawn, most refreshing. And on the Bodie Road, birds and mammals galore – Least Chipmunks scampering everywhere, Belding's Ground Squirrels standing alert on roadside embankments, California Ground Squirrels shuffling along. Bodie however is most famed for one particular bird – emerging from the sage bush at dawn in the atmospheric settings of a ghost town, Greater Sage Grouse are fairly reliable at this locality. Knowing the temperature soon to hit, I was on the road before the sun was up, plenty of Sage Thrashers, plenty of Brewer's Sparrows, Green-tailed Towhees on every other bush. At the gates to the ghost town, a point it is not permitted to pass until the rather late opening hour of 9.00 a.m., I stopped to photograph Least Chipmunks playing on a roadside fence, but soon my attention was straying to the verge on the opposite side - trailing four or five well-grown chicks, a female Greater Sage Grouse slowly made her way through the vegetation. Now 7.00 a.m., the temperature was already climbing again, but today I had a secret weapon – the snowfields of the High Sierra, temptingly close to my immediate west. Journeying back down the Bodie Road, past colonies of Cliff Swallows and Brewer's Blackbirds, I arrived in the Lee Vinings Valley and turned south to drive the few miles to the small town of Lee Vinings, gateway town to the Sierras and Yosemite beyond. Suddenly brought my car to a screeching halt, a big black blob was moving through a lush meadow in the valley beneath the road. One big Black Bear, magnificent. Munching what I presume to be flowers, she ambled on through the meadow, eventually entering forest at the opposite end. What a pleasant way to begin the day, I continued to Lee Vinings, pulling in at a gas station for morning coffee. Before dropping down to Yosemite on the other side, my destination for the morning was Saddlebag Lake, a pristine Alpine location sitting at an altitude of 3000 metres and surrounded by glacial peaks and bowls of snowfield. The climb up was dramatic, stops in areas of pine also productive – Red-breasted Sapsucker, Warbling Vireo, Mountain Chickadee and Western Wood-Pewee amongst the haul. At Saddlebag, my targets were three high altitude mammals, Yellow-bellied Marmot, American Pika and Alpine Chipmunk, all found here with relative ease. A crisp fresh bite to the morning air as I climbed from my car, Clark's Nutcrackers on stunted pines all around, Cassin's Finches present too. The Alpine Chipmunks were very easy to find, several in open pines just below the lake, but for the other mammals on my hit list, I would need to take a hike to scree slopes off yonder. Glorious beasts in a mottling of yellows, greys and golden browns, Yellow-bellied Marmots were the first to fall, four particularly lazy individuals sunning themselves on boulders aside the dam wall. Initially eyeing me with suspicion, soon this seemed far too much effort for them, marmots and I thereafter sitting enjoying the sun metres apart. A little further along, past patches of stony meadows favoured by singing White-crowned Sparrows, I arrived at a fairly extensive slope of loose scree, habitat of the American Pika. A shrill whistle, and there was one of the little animals – oversized ears on a biddy little ball of fur, sitting atop a rock looking at me. Soon found another, a rather more timid individual. Time to hit Yosemite, a locality hardly requiring an introduction – one of the USA's greatest of national park, a showpiece of spectacular landscapes, mega-fauna including Black Bears and Mountain Lions and a pretty impressive birdlist, topped by the highly elusive and almost mystical Great Grey Owls, Grey-crowned Rosy-Finch and Pine Grosbeaks. Entering from Saddlebag Lake end, my first concern was to travel to the slightly lower altitude near Yosemite Valley and find a campsite for the next couple of nights. Fortunately plenty of space at my preferred site – the quiet and undeveloped Tamarack Flat – so I slung up my tent, then took a wander to explore. Amongst the birds seen, White-headed Woodpeckers around the campsite, the much rarer Black-backed Woodpecker feeding a youngster just above, along with Yellow-rumped and MacGillivray's Warblers, Chipping Sparrows and abundant Dark-eyed Juncos. I however was more interested in seeking out mammals, Yosemite taking the day's total to 13 species – both Lodgepole and Yellow-pine Chipmunks seen near the campsite, four Belding's Ground Squirrels and another American Pika on the road back towards Toulime Meadows and California Ground Squirrels and a couple of Douglas's Squirrels along the road to McKirk Meadow. Best of the lot though was my second Black Bear of the day, a fairly small individual sitting behind a bush watching me for a while before ambling off up the slope. In past years, I have twice searched for Great Grey Owl in Yosemite, and twice failed. At their favoured localities of McKirk Meadow and Chevron Meadow, they periodically appear an hour or so before dark, hunting in the rodent-rich meadow edges. As both of my previous attempts had been at Chevron Meadow, I opted for McKirk Meadow this time, arriving far too early and merely presenting myself as fodder for the many mosquitos that also like this locality! With the appearance of a female Pine Grosbeak, a bird generally as elusive as Great Grey Owl at Yosemite, omens appeared good …but I have to confess I got bored of waiting about half an hour before the best period and departed, promising to return the next evening! Drove back to camp in growing darkness, a group of Mule Deer feeding in a meadow. Back at camp, one American Deer Mouse entertained during the night, plus a translucent ghostly cream snake slowly slithering along ...which I later identified as a Rubber Boa. 1 July. Yosemite. Yosemite, day two. Red-breasted Sapsucker, Orange-crowned Warbler, Black-throated Grey Warbler, highlights of an early morning wander from the campsite, but the better treat was awaiting just down the road! Mid-morning, I decided to have a quick look at the Chevron Meadow with a view to another attempt on Great Grey Owl in the evening – quickly became engaged with the multitude of butterflies active in the flower-rich meadow, an assortment of skippers, blues and browns. So engaged in fact that I largely overlooked birds – I do remember a Dusky Flycatcher and some Lincoln's Sparrow, but then all of a sudden, a big flap of wings from the forest edge, a big heavy bird launching from a spindly pine and appearing to land in the depths of the pine grove beyond. Ooo, giddy me, I knew what that was! I quickly changed track and circled round …and there, sat in the dark of the forest, one

superb Great Grey Owl!!!! I really had not expected to find the bird during the day, so I quietly backtracked out and resolved to return in the evening, surely it would be out hunting. A little bit of sightseeing during the day, White-throated Swifts, Peregrine Falcon and Mountain Quail as added attractions, then evening approached. An hour and a half before sunset, I returned to the meadow, thinking to conceal myself and await this spectacular ghost of a bird. Half way down the meadow, I stopped with a gasp, the Great Grey Owl was already out and hunting, currently perched on a snag of the roots of an upturned tree, intently peering at the meadow below. I sat myself on a stump and marvelled the moment. Seen several in Europe, but you can never tire of such a bird. Then it flew even closer to me, settling on a dead tree directly opposite, perhaps 100 metres distant. I thought it could not get any better …but then it did! Clambering onto a rotten trunk some way to my left, a magnificent blond Black Bear emerged from the forest and proceeded to claw into the decaying wood, termites clearly on his thoughts. Owl ahead, bear to the left, magic. And so it remained for the next hour, the bear slowly moving through the meadow, edging closer and closer to me and the owl, the owl moving from vantage point to vantage point, not in the least concerned by the presence of the bear or I. Just for good measure, three Mule Deer then also appeared in the meadow, the finale to the day now perfect, one species on each side, Black Bear to the left, Great Grey Owl directly in front, Mule Deer to the right, all within 150 metres of me. Can’t get much better than that.

2 July. Yosemite, San Luis Refuge & San Simeon.

Plan for today was to visit Glacier Point at Yosemite at dawn, not only one of the singularly most spectacular landscape points in the world, but also a class one locality for Sooty Grouse if you get there before the mass of tourists arrive later in the day. Events transpired to deprive me of the grouse! Two years earlier I had arrived to find them wandering in the car park, today however I arrived to find a rather bigger beast wandering in the car park – one of the biggest Black Bears I have ever seen, a pure blond female at that. Quickly squatted down on the ground to watch her approach ...with a slow deliberate swagger she came straight forward. Cool, she was one beauty. She however had misdemeanours on her mind, bee lining directly towards a red SUV parked nearby, one of the only cars in the car park. A few sniffs into the air, then paws onto the wheels, then wing of the car, she was now a mighty-sized bear standing up on her back legs towering over the car, impressive. And then with a thud on the bonnet, she was on the car, angling to the side window, climbing onto the roof. What was about to happen next was blatantly clear, the side window was open a fraction and the fools who had left the car had also left a cooler box in plain view – another few seconds and the window would have been shattered. Not good for the owners for the car, but also not good for the bear – becoming a problem bear is effectively a death sentence, breaking into this car would take her one step closer to that end. Over the edge of the car the bear went, claws into the gap in the window, it was now or never. Rushing at the bear, shaking my camera and shouting, she stopped with a start and clambering back onto the bonnet, I fully expected her to continue going and run back into the forest. Instead, she grunted a warning and climbed back on the roof. Two other tourists arrived, they backed off and called 911 to get rangers to the scene. Paws back at the window, I rushed her again, but the bear stood its ground right until I was almost at the car, then jumping off the car completely and giving what I can only determine as a polite threat. I eyed my escape route, but decided against backing off. One big blondie, one little me, not a very fair match I thought. Then she took one look at me and clearly thought the same, back onto the roof she clambered. Stubborn bugger, I thought, and ran directly at her. No response at all, she was clearly pondering her next move. My car was adjacent, so I went to the car, reversed it out and then straight towards the car, hooting horn. She jumped off again and then proceeded to just sit there – if I backed off, she moved towards the car. If I stayed put, so did she. Stalemate. And so it remained until the big guns arrived. Alerted by the 911, a ranger arrived with a pepper gas gun …pooff pooff pooff, a rapid succession of shots and the bear was running, down the slope into the trees. A quick look at the car and the ranger was not impressed – a clear violation of park rules, it is drummed into tourists not to leave food in view and not to leave windows open. With the owner probably on a hike somewhere, the bear would just return if we left the car. Ranger’s response, call in the tow truck, the car was removed … the owner would pay a hefty fine and tow fee for return of his vehicle. Anyhow, as a result of all that action, any lingering Sooty Grouse were long gone by the time I finished my adventures, so I walked over to the viewpoint instead, admiring the views and photographing the various small mammals and butterflies present. Merriam’s Chipmunk was another addition for the trip list and a splendid Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel was also seen nearby. Not much in the way of birds though, two Red Crossbills flying over, one Calliope Hummingbird and a couple of White-throated Swifts about best. The weather forecast promised no let up on the excessive heat, high altitude Yosemite expecting 41 C on this day. Rather than spend the day wilting again, I decided to leave and head for the coast, relatively cooler conditions guaranteed. A fairly long drive, punctuated at a stop at the San Luis Refuge in the Central Valley. This wetland refuge is of primary interest in the winter months for mass congregations of Snow Geese and other water birds, but as it was on route, I decided to give it a go. Predictably, it was stinking hot and dusty, little open water was present, but still not bad at all – not only a selection of dry land birds such as Swainson’s Hawk, Northern Harrier, Lark Sparrow, Blue Grosbeak and Tricoloured Blackbird, but also a chance to have a gander at the herd of Tule Elk that reside in the refuge, big-antlered beasties! Didn’t stay too long however, the lure of the coast was calling. The Californian coast, especially around San Francisco, is famous for its fog, the cold Pacific waters hitting a hot land mass leaving a bank of fog that frequently shrouds the coast for up to a kilometre or two inland. And given the exceptional heat of the moment, it came as no shock to plunge into a thick pea soup just as I arrived in the Monterey area …not very good, I was scheduled to take a trip out into Monterey Bay the following morning. Ideas of looking for Californian Condors at Big Sur were duly cancelled – couldn’t see the sky, let alone any birds, so instead made a mad dash down Highway 1, the iconic coastal road that skirts the Pacific from start to end. Stunning scenery normally, but given (a) it was foggy and (b) I was driving like a loony to get to San Simeon before dark I can’t say I really lingered to appreciate the views.

Fortunately, about 30 km short of San Simeon, I broke out of the fog, spectacular blue skies and a sparkling sea in its place. Arrived at San Simeon just in time, a sun setting over the Pacific, a hundred grunting Northern Elephant Seals plastered across the beach, the massive males sparring, younger animals shuffling to get out of the way. Nice end to the day, I motored back towards Monterey, camping somewhere near the Big Sur, hopefully no fog the next day. Californian sunset 3 July. Monterey Bay & West Pinnacles. Day of my first venture onto the Pacific Ocean for this trip, a morning in Monterey Bay aboard a whale-watching boat. Fog at dawn was a little disheartening, but as we sailed out from dock, honking Californian Sea Lions alongside, it was to a glorious backdrop of blue skies and a sparkling sea. It didn't last long! Pigeon Guillemots at the harbour's edge, Western and Heermann's Gulls drifting about, but ahead an ominous bank of fog waiting to swallow us up. And so we sailed into it, visibility rapidly dropping off and my hopes of big whales and super seabirds fading equally rapidly. As it turned out however, it was not so bad - Sooty Shearwaters were already milling through the fog, the ghostly shapes sweeping past the boat in droves, a few Common Murres on the water and fog periodically lifting to reveal expanses of sea. In previous days, a number of Blue Whales had been feeding at the edge of the continental shelf some miles south, a mouth-watering incentive to push on through the fog. As we headed that way, the number of seabirds began to climb significantly, the Sooty Shearwaters now in their thousands, a few Pink-footed Shearwaters amongst them. Then the heavyweights - four most resplendent Black-footed Albatrosses cruising aside the boat, drifting in and out of the mist, super birds. And then a little miracle - just as we reached the designated spot, we happened upon a curious hole in the fog, a patch of blue sky and good visibility. And there they were, whales ahoy! Not just a couple of whales, but loads of them! And stonking great giant ones at that, a pod of 12 Blue Whales lunge-feeding at the surface, unbelievable! For the next half hour, we just sat there, the world's biggest creatures all around us, massive gaping mouths assaulting surface shoals of krill, a show indeed. And just for good measure, two Humpback Whales too, plus oodles of seabirds snapping up food around the whales. Sooty Shearwater a plenty, but also a few most welcome guests joining the party - 12 Cassin's Auklets in the immediate vicinity, one Rhinoceros Auklet flying past and, a totally unexpected addition, two Scripps Murrelets, the latter a new species for me. Ah, it was time to head back to land, back through the fog to sunny Monterey. One South Polar Skua, one Red-necked Phalarope, several Brown Pelicans and two Caspian Terns, and then we were in port. Not a bad morning on the water! For after-sea adventures, I spent a while at Moss Landing, a small inlet a few miles north of Monterey - a selection of early returning waders, including Marbled Godwits and Long-billed Curlews, but better were the mammals present - a mega raft of 70 Sea Otters all floating on their back, plus about 50 Harbour Seals on the sand bank adjacent. Nearby scrub also revealed a Brush Rabbit. Enough of the relative cools of the coast, time to head back inland for a little more exploration. One of my favourite localities in California is the Pinnacles National Monument, a land of canyons, monoliths and spires rising out of arid chaparral. A quaint campsite sits on the east side, my destination for the evening, but I began on the less visited western edge. Superb for raptors, a swirl of Turkey Vultures hugged the higher peaks, a pair of Prairie Falcons in their midst. American Kestrels and a White-tailed Kite hunted the lower slopes, Red-tailed Hawks too, plus a Golden Eagle over a low hillside. Pinnacles however has an even bigger star - one of the sites for the reintroduction of Californian Condors, several now reside in the area and it wasn't long before one of these mighty birds drifted into view, circling with the Turkey Vultures and turning them into virtual midges. Impressive bird. White-throated Swifts also zoomed about. A little extra exploring added quite a number of additional dry country species - Californian Quails, Acorn Woodpeckers, Oak Titmice, Wrentits, etc, as well as one Greater Roadrunner and my first Bewick's Wren of the trip. It was now approaching sunset, so I began the relatively long drive round to the west side. Good for mammals on route - Brush Rabbit, Desert Cottontail, Black-tailed Jack Rabbit and, trotting across the road, three Feral Hogs. Perfect look-alikes for the Wild Boar of Europe, these are apparently fairly common in parts of California now. At the campsite in East Pinnacles, now completely dark, a Raccoon rounded the evening off, a lone individual sniffing around.

4 July. Pinnacles & Ano Nueva.

4th July, American Independence Day and my final day in California. To celebrate, I was up at dawn enjoying a splendid Bobcat sitting in the grass taking in the first sun rays of the morning. That was pleasant, the cat simply gazing across at me with barely a care in the world. Desert Cottontails hopping about too, along with Black-tailed Jack Rabbits, Californian Ground Squirrels, a pair of Merriam's Chipmunks on the rocks and, at the smaller end of the scale, one Brush Deermouse and a surprisingly chunky Dusky-footed Wood Rat. Not bad for birds too, a Northern Pygmy Owl had been calling prior to dawn and now the campsite was full of California Quails, Acorn Woodpeckers and Western Bluebirds, with Wild Turkey, Ash-throated Flycatcher and numerous Western Scrub-Jays also seen. A hike up a mountain trail in the already burning Californian sun added a few more birds, including White-breasted Nuthatch, Rock Wren, Black Phoebe and Wrentit, while Yellow-billed Magpie was added in pastures as I departed the area mid-morning.

Needing to dump my car in Sacramento in the late evening, I had ideas of doing the touristy thing in the afternoon and paying a visit to San Francisco and the famous Golden Gate Bridge. I had not taken account of the date - on the 4th July, every Tom, Dick and Harry of the country takes to the roads, pouring out onto the beaches and generally revelling in the enjoyment of sitting in traffic queues. As I neared San Francisco, in already fairly heavy traffic along the scenic Highway 1, radio stations were falling over themselves to detail the tailbacks and delays in almost all quarters of the city, not least on the bridges into and out of the Bay area. Na, thought I, that is not for me. A rapid change of plan and instead I turned into the Ano Nuevo State Reserve, another key breeding site for Northern Elephant Seals. What I did not know however was that it also supports a massive colony of Steller's Sea Lions too - several thousand individuals strong, the colony is situated on a large island a little way offshore and is the only breeding site for this species south of Alaska. A fantastic sight it is, Elephant Seals on the lower portions of the island, a scrum of Steller's Sea Lions on the top, complete with thousands of breeding Brandt's Cormorants and a bevy of

Brown Pelicans too. On the waters around, a Sea Otter was bobbing in the surf, a few Western Grebes sat and a pair of Pacific Loons completed the picture. Elsewhere on the reserve, a small cliff held Pigeon Guillemots and a few pairs of Pelagic Cormorants, while the coastal scrub supported Californian Thrasher, White-crowned Sparrows and a White-tailed Kite. Also, Tree Swallows, Spotted Towhees, Song Sparrow and Brewer's Blackbird. And with that, the Californian leg of my journey was over, plenty of birds logged and a splendid 40 species of mammal recorded. Three hours later, I had dropped my car off in Sacramento and was heading for the Amtrak station, a train would take me far to the north. 5 July. Amtrak North. Boarding a little after midnight, a 20 hour sedate trundle up the Pacific coast on an Amtrak train from Sacramento in California to Seattle in Washington. With panoramic windows and even an observation coach, this was no naff train - a rather more pleasant affair than I had been expecting. Passed through northern California during the hours of darkness, then the meadows, marshes and endless forests of Oregon from early morning, entering Washington mid-afternoon. Picturesque throughout. Not too bad for spotting birds too – a total of 25 species noted, the highlights being White Pelicans, a couple of Bald Eagles and a Mountain Bluebird in Oregon, plus Wood Duck, Belted Kingfisher and Cedar Waxwing in Washington. Arrived in Seattle just before 9 p.m., zipped up to the airport and collected a rental car for the next mini-segment of my trip, a one day stop in the North Cascades. 6 July. North Cascades. Cruising the Cascades in an open convertible, what luxury! I had actually booked an economy class car, but the rental office only had a ‘truck’ or convertible, so imagining a truck was some seven-ton monster, I opted for the rather low-slung convertible, not a car I would normally choose. So, with top down, out onto the mountain roads I went, a positive traffic hazard I’m sure I was, now able to scan the skies in all directions. I did pick up a few good birds this way though – several Vaux's Swifts, a day-flying Common Nighthawk buzzing around a cliff top and a Band-tailed Pigeon amongst the haul. First stop for proper birding however was in a patch of deciduous woodland aside a river in the relative lowlands. Following a gravel track, there were many birds of interest: Rufous Hummingbirds zipping about, Swainson's Thrushes singing from the undergrowth, a pair of MacGillivray's Warblers active, a single American Redstart and a Cedar Waxwing for starters, plus a whole bunch of other birds including both Olive-sided and Hammond's Flycatchers. The bird I had been seeking though was a far more humble affair – for some reason I particularly wanted to see a Pacific Wren, a recent split and a bird essentially identical to the species found in Europe. It took quite a while, but then I heard a characteristic trill flowing from a dense tangle of fallen trees and, after a few minutes of stumbling across slippery trunks and moss-covered rocks, I was standing beneath a tree with the Pacific Wren in full voice just above. Success, a nice bird indeed, but I’m not sure I would give it a second glance if it were to turn up in Europe! From there, I turned my attentions to the higher altitudes, a scenic tour taking me towards the snow-capped peaks and forested slopes. No particular birds on my radar here, but I did have desires to find Townsend's Chipmunk, Hoary Marmot and Mountain Goat. I soon found that the road didn't go high enough and the latter two would need a hike to high altitude pastures, something I did not have time to do, but the chipmunk should have been easy enough. It wasn't! After numerous stops and several checks of campsites and picnic areas, I was close to giving up when finally I heard the chirp of a chipmunk in a parking area close to Washington Pass, the highest point on the road. Several Grey Jays were patrolling the car park, a Clark's Nutcracker too, but very quickly I located my little beastie, rummaging round under some pines, one Townsend's Chipmunk. Atop a pine adjacent, a splendid male Western Tanager added a positive splash of colour. Returning to my car and driving back down the road, another Townsend's Chipmunk darted across in front of me and I also found two American Picas (as well as an American Marten dead on the road). My time was up however, I needed to drop the car off and get to the ferry port. My travels in the Lower 48 had reached their end, ahead the real adventures were about to begin, the great journey north through Alaska. For part two of the journey, ... [CLICK HERE](#) ...The Great Route North, Alaska