A Tropical Birding Custom Tour

Fall Birding and Photography in Southern California

October 14-17, 2020

Tour Recap by guide Dorian Anderson

Bird photos by clients Jen and Danielle Wong

Introduction

The Shackleton Expedition, the first summit of Mount Everest, and the Apollo 11 Moon landing; incredible as were those adventures, none will live in comparable infamy to our four-day Southern California whirlwind, a custom tour designed to explore some of the most productive birding areas in Orange, Riverside, Imperial, and San Diego Counties. We explored tidal estuaries, freshwater marshes, oak woodlands, public parks, agricultural swaths, the Sonoran Desert, ponderosa forest, coastal chaparral, and the Salton Sea, and we found 155 species across those varied habitats. Most importantly, we had some excellent photographic opportunities while familiarizing the clients with the Southern California landscape, an area they will visit many additional times for familial reasons. This document will serve as detailed recap of our recent tour.

Wednesday, October 14th: Orange County Hotspots

We began our day at **Irvine Regional Park** where we absorbed close views of Acorn Woodpecker, Oak Titmouse, and other woodland/chaparral species. We survived the aggressive advances of a family of Egyptian Geese, and we captured some nice frames of the resident Wood Ducks (previous page), even if they were a bit skittish.

Our second stop was **IRWD San Joaquin Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary** adjacent to the University of California at Irvine. Our walk around the impoundments yielded a variety of dabbling ducks and shorebirds — all in either non-breeding (shorebirds) or eclipse (ducks) — and we had wonderful looks at rushing Clark's and Western Grebes (below) in between views of herons, pelicans, and cormorants.

High temperatures forcing us towards the coast after lunch, we skipped a closed Upper Newport Bay and proceeded to the **Huntington Beach Library**. Walking a loop around the eastern side of the park (don't bother with the western on return visits), we had crippling photographic views of a cooperative White-faced Ibis ahead of our encounter with a huge (and presumably female) Great Horned Owl. There was a nice movement of passerines, and we pulled Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Western Wood-Pewee, Townsend's Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, and Black-throated Gray Warbler from the tree tops. Lotta stuff in non-breeding plumage, but that's October in California!

Our final stop was at **Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve.** We had pants-wetting views of the world's most cooperative Say's Phoebe, and we watched an incredible interaction between a Peregrine Falcon and a Belted Kingfisher. The falcon repeatedly dove at the kingfisher, and the later only escaped by diving into the water at the last possible instant! We had distant views of Ridgway's Rail as the tide dropped, but the bird was too far away for photographs. That short-coming sat in Dorian's craw, and he vowed to avenge the poor view later in the trip.

Dorian anticipated we'd find upwards of 100 species on our first day, so the 98 we tallied was right on the money!

Thursday, October 15th: Riverside and Imperial Counties

An early morning start delivered us to **San Jacinto Wildlife Area** just after sunrise. Cruising the refuge roads for raptors, we observed White-tailed Kite, Red-tailed Hawk, Red-Shoulder Hawk, Ferruginous Hawk, Northern Harrier, American Kestrel, and Merlin, that last cooperating for close-range photos! We fought a protracted battle with several Soras but were afford only fleeting glimpses as the sneaky birds darted in and out of the reeds. We encountered some approachable Black-necked Stilts, watched Cassin's Kingbirds flycatching from telephone wires, and observed our only Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Vesper Sparrows of our trip. San Jacinto is an excellent place to photograph raptors between October and March, so keep it on radar during winter visits to SoCal. The ducks increase in number and molt into better plumage as the winter progresses, so there's that too. Be aware the refuge closes on Wednesday and Saturdays (I think) for hunting from Oct through March; plan your next visit accordingly. Here's our morning view at San Jacinto!

We departed San Jacinto, ate a huge Mexican lunch at Pueblo Viejo in Indio, and proceeded south along the eastern shore of the **Salton Sea**. The man-made body has undergone a marked contraction in the last five years, so it's good we saw it when we did. Gambel's Quail scampered around the Visitor's Center at Sono Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge, and we intersected a flock of well over a hundred Sandhill Cranes towards the end of the day. A lack of pelicans and cormorants was frustrating, but we redeemed those shortcomings with killer views of Burrowing Owl at day's end (below).

Friday, October 16th: Interior San Diego County

An early start delivered us to the **Anza Borrego Desert State Park** in warm morning light. We had brief looks at two Prairie Falcons en route, and we caught up with Black-throated Sparrow, Cactus Wren, Loggerhead Shrike, and Greater Roadrunner (next page, top). Darn Verdin wouldn't come down from the top of the tree though!

The heat gathering, we hopped in the car and gained elevation towards **Lake Cuyamaca** at 4,600 feet. The trail I wanted to walk was closed, presumable due to COVID, but we squeezed out 2 Bald Eagles and several Tricolored Blackbirds as consolation. We lunched in the company of several friendly Brewer's Blackbirds - that pie! - and we managed to find a tiny Hammond's Flycatcher (only one of the trip), some raucous Steller's Jays (next page, bottom), and a cooperative flock of Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Mountain Chickadees once we resumed birding.

Returning to the Coast at Mission Bay in downtown San Diego, we chased down a vagrant Buff-breasted Sandpiper at **Robb Field**, an upland/plains species which is very rare in California. Unfortunately some clown with a drone flushed the beautiful bird before we could photograph it, but we had confiding looks at Long-billed Curlew, the continent's largest shorebird, as consolation (below). After that close encounter, we proceeded to the adjacent **San Diego River mouth** for an extended photography tutorial. Danielle explored the mudflats while Jen and I worked on understanding exposure techniques in Aperture Prior (AV) and Manual (M) modes. Always watch that light meter!

We concluded the with a wonderful Thai dinner at a tiny, hole-in-the-wall restaurant (recommendation courtesy of Sonia). Jen and Danielle over-ordered, so Dorian was forced to open the auxiliary stomach to ensure we didn't waste any food! (Incidentally, Dorian consumed the day-old, unrefrigerated Pad Thai without digestive issues).

Saturday, October 17th: Metro San Diego

Fog engulfed our Mission Bay hotel at dawn, but it thinned as we approached **La Jolla Cove**. We had super close views of California Sea Lions as they lounged on the rocks, and the resident Brown Pelicans, Western Gulls, and Brandt's Cormorants offered the chance to practice some of the photo techniques we covered the previous day.

From La Jolla, we moved a few miles up the coast to **Torrey Pines State Reserve**. The place was mobbed, but we had several amazing encounters with California Gnatcatcher (next page) on the coastal trails. Bewick's and House Wrens were equally cooperative, and California Thrasher and California Towhee made cameo appearances as well! Thankfully, the $20 parking fee was worth it! We made a brief stop at **Mission Trails Regional Park** where we scoured loose scrub for a variety of ground dwellers - all of them brown (booo!). After lunch, Santee Lakes offered a variety of waterfowl, none more stunning or cooperative that the male Wood Duck with which we spent time extended time. I can't wait to see the photographic results!

Our last stop was **San Elijo Lagoon** where the spartina grass produced incredible looks at Ridgway's Rail. That close encounter redeemed the distant views of the same species at Bolsa Chica on Day 1. We also watched a Long-Billed Curlew eat a large fish; even Dorian had never seen them eat a vertebrate of that size before! From there it was back to Irvine to conclude our four-day adventure.

Full birdlist on following pages

BIRDLIST
Total number of checklists: 14
Number of species across the 14 checklists: 155

Checklists included in this summary:
(1): Irvine Regional Park - Oct 14, 2020 at 6:57 AM
(2): IRWD San Joaquin Marsh & Wildlife Sanctuary - Oct 14, 2020 at 9:42 AM
(3): Huntington Central Park - Oct 14, 2020 at 1:23 PM
(4): Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve - Oct 14, 2020 at 4:00 PM
(5): Salton Sea--south end - Oct 15, 2020 at 2:59 PM
(6): Torrey Pines State Reserve Guy Fleming Trail - Oct 17, 2020 at 10:08 AM
(7): Mission Trails Regional Park--Kumeyaay Lake & campground - Oct 17, 2020 at 10:51 AM
(8): Point La Jolla seawatch - Oct 17, 2020 at 12:05 PM
(9): Santee Lakes - Oct 17, 2020 at 1:45 PM
(10): San Elijo Lagoon--Rios Ave - Oct 17, 2020 at 4:00 PM
(11): Anza-Borrego Desert SP--Palm Canyon Campground - Oct 16, 2020 at 8:01 AM
(12): Cuyamaca Rancho SP--Paso Picacho Campground - Oct 16, 2020 at 1:21 PM
(13): San Diego River--tidal mudflats - Oct 16, 2020 at 4:01 PM
(14): San Jacinto Wildlife Area - Oct 15, 2020 at 7:01 AM

 # species (checklist)
15 Snow Goose -- (5)
8 Egyptian Goose -- (1),(3)
6 Wood Duck -- (1),(9)
21 Blue-winged Teal -- (2),(4)
9 Cinnamon Teal -- (2),(3),(5)
17 Northern Shoveler -- (2),(3),(5),(9)
32 Gadwall -- (3),(9)
51 American Wigeon -- (3),(4),(9)
159 Mallard -- (1),(2),(3),(5),(9),(10),(14)
19 Northern Pintail -- (4),(5),(9)
8 Redhead -- (9)
20 Ring-necked Duck -- (9)
292 Ruddy Duck -- (2),(4),(5),(9),(14)
12 Gambel's Quail -- (5)
10 Pied-billed Grebe -- (2),(3),(4),(9)
22 Eared Grebe -- (4),(5),(14)
9 Western Grebe -- (2),(4),(5)
4 Clark's Grebe -- (2)
37 Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon) -- (4),(8)
3 Eurasian Collared-Dove -- (5),(10)
10 White-winged Dove -- (11)
157 Mourning Dove -- (1),(2),(5),(11),(12),(14)
1 Greater Roadrunner -- (11)
19 Anna's Hummingbird -- (1),(2),(3),(4),(7),(9),(10),(12)
2 Costa's Hummingbird -- (11)

2 Ridgway's Rail -- (4),(10)
10 Sora -- (14)
3 Common Gallinule -- (2),(9)
332 American Coot -- (2),(3),(4),(5),(14)
100 Sandhill Crane -- (5)
217 Black-necked Stilt -- (4),(5),(14)
36 American Avocet -- (2),(5)
44 Black-bellied Plover -- (2),(4),(5),(10),(13)
11 Semipalmated Plover -- (4),(10),(13)
17 Killdeer -- (2),(4),(5),(10),(14)
2 Whimbrel -- (10),(13)
8 Long-billed Curlew -- (4),(5),(10),(13)
19 Marbled Godwit -- (4),(5),(10),(13)
4 Ruddy Turnstone -- (4)
8 Black Turnstone -- (8)
2 Red Knot -- (4)
30 Sanderling -- (4)
2 Dunlin -- (10),(13)
48 Least Sandpiper -- (2),(4),(5),(10)
1 Buff-breasted Sandpiper -- (13)
135 Western Sandpiper -- (2),(4),(5),(10),(13)
15 Short-billed Dowitcher -- (4),(10),(13)
4 Long-billed Dowitcher -- (2)
1 Spotted Sandpiper -- (2)
13 Greater Yellowlegs -- (2),(4),(5),(13),(14)
31 Willet -- (4),(5),(13)
6 Heermann's Gull -- (8)
251 Ring-billed Gull -- (4),(5)
113 Western Gull -- (2),(4),(5),(8),(13)
38 California Gull -- (2),(4),(5),(13)
5 Caspian Tern -- (2),(4),(5),(13)
2 Forster's Tern -- (4)
30 Royal Tern -- (4)
1 Elegant Tern -- (4)
250 Brandt's Cormorant -- (8)
2 Pelagic Cormorant -- (8)
44 Double-crested Cormorant -- (2),(3),(4),(8),(10)
30 American White Pelican -- (2),(4),(9)
59 Brown Pelican -- (2),(4),(8),(13)
14 Great Blue Heron -- (2),(3),(4),(5),(10),(13),(14)
24 Great Egret -- (2),(3),(4),(5),(10),(13),(14)
11 Snowy Egret -- (2),(3),(4),(9),(10),(13)
1 Little Blue Heron -- (13)
2 Reddish Egret -- (4),(13)
22 Cattle Egret -- (5),(14)
2 Green Heron -- (2),(3)
14 Black-crowned Night-Heron -- (2),(4)

180 White-faced Ibis -- (3),(4),(5),(9),(14)
4 Turkey Vulture -- (2),(3),(4)
5 Osprey -- (4),(8),(10)
1 White-tailed Kite -- (14)
7 Northern Harrier -- (10),(12),(14)
2 Cooper's Hawk -- (5),(12)
2 Bald Eagle -- (12)
4 Red-shouldered Hawk -- (3),(7),(14)
14 Red-tailed Hawk -- (2),(4),(5),(7),(14)
1 Ferruginous Hawk -- (14)
1 Great Horned Owl -- (3)
8 Burrowing Owl -- (5)
3 Belted Kingfisher -- (4),(5)
50 Acorn Woodpecker -- (1),(12)
3 Downy Woodpecker -- (3),(10)
6 Nuttall's Woodpecker -- (1),(3),(9),(12)
4 Northern Flicker -- (1),(3),(12)
18 American Kestrel -- (1),(3),(5),(7),(11),(12),(14)
2 Merlin -- (8),(14)
2 Peregrine Falcon -- (4),(6)
2 Prairie Falcon -- (11)
1 Western Wood-Pewee -- (3)
1 Hammond's Flycatcher -- (12)
26 Black Phoebe -- (1),(2),(3),(4),(5),(9),(12),(13),(14)
15 Say's Phoebe -- (1),(4),(5),(13),(14)
9 Cassin's Kingbird -- (2),(9),(10),(14)
2 Hutton's Vireo -- (3)
2 Loggerhead Shrike -- (11),(14)
2 Steller's Jay -- (12)
5 California Scrub-Jay -- (9),(12)
5 American Crow -- (1),(9),(10)
23 Common Raven -- (1),(5),(6),(7),(12)
6 Mountain Chickadee -- (12)
6 Oak Titmouse -- (1),(12)
3 Verdin -- (5),(11)
6 Horned Lark -- (13)
5 Tree Swallow -- (5)
101 Barn Swallow -- (4),(5)
37 Bushtit -- (1),(2),(3),(9),(10)
6 Wrentit -- (6),(7),(10),(12)
4 Swinhoe's White-eye -- (3)
7 Ruby-crowned Kinglet -- (2),(12)
3 White-breasted Nuthatch -- (1),(12)
4 Pygmy Nuthatch -- (12)
10 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher -- (2),(3),(5),(7),(10),(11)
12 California Gnatcatcher -- (6),(7)
11 House Wren -- (3),(4),(6),(7),(10),(12)

2 Marsh Wren -- (14)
6 Bewick's Wren -- (6),(7),(11)
2 Cactus Wren -- (11)
26 European Starling -- (1),(14)
3 California Thrasher -- (6),(10)
6 Northern Mockingbird -- (2),(5),(11),(14)
17 Western Bluebird -- (1),(3),(4),(9),(11)
2 Hermit Thrush -- (3),(12)
1 American Robin -- (12)
2 Phainopepla -- (1)
1 House Sparrow -- (9)
11 American Pipit -- (5),(8),(13)
24 House Finch -- (1),(6),(10),(11)
6 Lesser Goldfinch -- (1),(3),(7),(10)
1 American Goldfinch -- (3)
6 Black-throated Sparrow -- (11)
2 Fox Sparrow -- (12)
2 Dark-eyed Junco -- (12)
47 White-crowned Sparrow -- (1),(2),(3),(4),(5),(6),(7),(8),(10),(11),(14)
2 Vesper Sparrow -- (14)
4 Savannah Sparrow -- (14)
4 Song Sparrow -- (4),(8),(14)
3 Lincoln's Sparrow -- (4),(7),(12)
21 California Towhee -- (1),(2),(3),(4),(6),(7),(10)
5 Spotted Towhee -- (6),(10),(12)
10 Yellow-headed Blackbird -- (14)
22 Western Meadowlark -- (5),(14)
53 Red-winged Blackbird -- (5),(9),(14)
2 Tricolored Blackbird -- (12)
6 Brewer's Blackbird -- (12)
51 Great-tailed Grackle -- (5),(9),(12),(14)
6 Orange-crowned Warbler -- (1),(3),(5),(8)
9 Common Yellowthroat -- (3),(4),(9),(14)
21 Yellow-rumped Warbler -- (1),(2),(3),(9),(10),(14)
2 Black-throated Gray Warbler -- (3)
2 Townsend's Warbler -- (3)