



SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA: CACTUS BLOSSOMS AND SPRING MIGRATION

10–16 March 2012

Shortly after I started birding in the late 80s, I took a keen interest in desert habitats. It didn't matter which desert – the Great Basin, the Chihuahuan, the Sonoran – I just admired the birds that thrived in these seemingly forbidding places. On my first visit to Southern California's Anza Borrego Desert, I found this arid valley alive with birds. Ever since, I have enjoyed a special fondness for this spectacular region of the Golden State. We return to "Borrego" annually in spring to experience the change of seasons across this memorable landscape; with all the cacti in bloom, this desert really sparkles. More recently, in the same region, we have discovered the bird-rich Salton Sea, the Laguna and Cuyamaca mountains and the gorgeous San Diego Coast. We have now combined these destinations into a sensational tour that offers some of the best birding on the continent. We are certain that you will agree!

Your Host and Lead Guide, Stephen Shunk

NOTE: For 2012, we are pleased to be joined by California naturalist David Wimpfheimer, one of Steve's birding mentors and a consummate professional. With decades of international birding experience and extremely well-rounded interpretive skills, David will bring a world-class touch to this adventure!

TOUR SUMMARY

From the San Diego Coast to the Imperial Valley, Southern California exhibits some of the broadest habitat diversity in North America. Owing much to its temperate climate, the region hosts a startling number of resident and migrant bird species. San Diego County alone boasts a bird list of nearly 500 species, the highest of any county in the U.S., which translates into world-class birding in all seasons. We will search for 5 thrasher species, 4 towhees, and 3 different gnatcatchers, plus more than 100 species of waterbirds. During our journey we will travel inland to the Salton Sea and Anza Borrego Desert, through the Laguna and Cuyamaca Mountains, and out to the San Diego Coast.

Borrego Springs, at the heart of the Anza Borrego Desert, will serve as the base of our desert explorations. Resident specialty birds of the Borrego Valley include Scott's Oriole, Costa's Hummingbird, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Phainopepla, Gambel's Quail, Common Ground-Dove, Greater Roadrunner, and Black-throated Sparrow. Our adventures around the valley and surrounding areas will take us in search of lingering winter sparrows and warblers as well as incoming spring migrants. While surrounded by carpets of spring wildflowers, we will listen for the songs of Lucy's Warbler, Bell's Vireo, and Ash-throated Flycatcher. We will make a special effort to find the resident and much sought-after Le Conte's Thrasher, and we will watch the skies for kettles of migrating Swainson's Hawks and the occasional Peregrine Falcon.

From Borrego, we will head east to the enigmatic Salton Sea. This giant alkaline lake hosts an amazing diversity of waterbirds. Some of the dozen species of waders to watch for will include Least Bittern, Tricolored Heron and Reddish Egret; among two-dozen possible waterfowl species, we will watch most closely for Fulvous Whistling-Duck. We will also hope to find the endangered "Yuma" Clapper Rail or one of the many rare waterbirds drawn to this desert oasis, such as Anhinga or Gull-billed Tern. Over 15 species of gulls and terns are possible, but we will remain particularly attentive for Black Skimmer and Yellow-footed Gull.

Land-birds we may see in the adjacent Imperial Valley include resident Gila Woodpecker, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Abert's Towhee, Cactus Wren and Verdin, as well as an abundance of Burrowing Owls and up to seven species of doves. Incoming and wintering shorebirds could number more than 20 species, including Solitary and Stilt sandpipers.

After birding across the eastern deserts, we will head west through the mountains toward the Pacific Coast. We will focus our limited time in this region on a handful of specialty birds. Lawrence's Goldfinch heads our most-wanted list, but we will also look for a number of other species, including Mountain Chickadee, Pygmy Nuthatch, Spotted Towhee, and Bell's Sage Sparrow. We will look returning Gray Vireo and Black-chinned Sparrow, as well as resident Mountain Quail, White-headed Woodpecker, and Williamson's Sapsucker.

The remainder of our journey will be spent birding a variety of coastal habitats, from inland lagoons to chaparral, and from protected bays to open shore. Our primary target bird of this region is the charismatic and highly endangered California Gnatcatcher. In or adjacent to gnatcatcher habitat we may see Cassin's Kingbird as well as Wrentit, Nuttall's Woodpecker, California Towhee, and California Thrasher. It will hard to ignore the abundance of waterbirds, including many that are unlikely at the Salton Sea. Nine species of waterfowl are much more reliable on the ocean, including Brant, Red-breasted Merganser, and all three scoters. Gulls and terns will again be abundant, and our coastal focus species will include Western, Mew, and Heerman's gulls and Elegant Tern. Our favorite "rockpipers" along the rugged shores include Surfbird, Black Oystercatcher, and Wandering Tattler.

DAILY ACTIVITIES

Extensive birding experience is not required for this week-long adventure. Birders with more advanced skills may be able to identify more of the anticipated species, and those with less experience will delight in greater numbers of life-birds. Your guides, Steve and David, are patient, professional educators, and they will work diligently to help each participant learn bird songs and visual identification, as well as general natural and cultural history of the region.

This tour is for moderately active people in good health. Every day will involve considerable walking, and we may hike up to three miles per day. Most individual walks will be short and at a "birdwatcher's pace," but a few routes may take us up steep hills or over rough terrain. Throughout the tour, we will bird mostly on foot, with very little of our birding to be conducted from the vehicle. We will start birding early each morning and will often bird until sunset. However, we might break up the day with an extended lunch or travel between sites.

The group will travel in a large passenger van or sport-utility-vehicle with easy viewing for all participants, and we will take a maximum of seven birders plus your guide. We will repeatedly enter and exit the vehicle from an entrance that is high off the ground, although running boards or step-stool will assist with this process. This is a non-smoking tour; we stay in non-smoking rooms and eat in non-smoking areas whenever possible.

CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT

Warm temperatures and low humidity predominate in Southern California. You should be prepared to be outside for up to three hours at a time. We will have plenty of room for multiple pieces of small luggage and larger soft luggage (such as duffle bags), but we request that you avoid large rigid suitcases. Please do not compromise your ability to be comfortable in a wide variety of field conditions.

We recommend that you bring your own binoculars and field guide. You also may bring a spotting scope, although we will have at least one spotting scope available for the group. We also carry an extensive birding library for reference and learning.

We encourage you to take photos as souvenirs, but this is not a photography tour. If you wish to focus on photographic opportunities, we ask that you remain sensitive to the group's needs. Ensuring that everyone in the group gets their binoculars on a bird will take precedence over shooting photos, and it may not be practical to stop just for photos. You are welcome to bring along any camera you can tolerate carrying, and you may at least want to carry a small camera to capture images of wildflowers and spectacular scenery.

LODGING, MEALS & REFRESHMENTS

We will spend each night in comfortable motels, and we will stay in most locations a minimum of two consecutive nights. Your tour fee gives you the option of single or double occupancy. If you are traveling with a birding partner or if you are willing to share a room with another birder, you may initially pay the double-occupancy rate, but if we cannot match you with another participant of the same gender, you will be responsible for the single rate.

Your tour fee includes all meals from dinner on March 10 through lunch on March 16. We will eat most meals in restaurants that appeal to a wide variety of food preferences, but it may be difficult to accommodate the most restrictive diets. If you maintain such a diet, remember that appropriate foods may not be available at restaurants or local grocery stores. To prepare for these contingencies you may wish to pack such specialized foods from home.

Most breakfasts will be early to allow us an early start to our birding day. Some will be continental-style while others will be complete meals. Regardless of the breakfast meal served we will ensure that coffee and tea are available for the earliest risers. We will eat some lunches in restaurants and some in the field. Dinners will be eaten together at casual local eateries, and they will often be held around sunset.

In addition to restaurant meals, we will provide food and beverages for snacks and a few meals in the field. One of our goals is to keep you pleasantly fueled and hydrated to help you get the most of the long birding days. The survey included in your registration materials asks your dietary restrictions and preferences. While we cannot honor every food and drink request, the more detailed your response, the better we can serve you on the road.

TRAVEL ITINERARY

Your trip fee includes transportation from San Diego International Airport. We request that you arrive in San Diego by 2 p.m. on Saturday, March 10, and that you plan your departure no earlier than 2 p.m. on Friday, March 16. If you plan to drive to San Diego, we will send you directions to the rendezvous point as the trip date approaches. If this schedule is difficult for you, let us know and we will do our best to help with your travel plans. If you need assistance with travel, we recommend DTR Travel of Colorado: www.dtrtravel.com.

Our daily travel will generally follow the itinerary below. However, we may adjust some of our specific birding destinations depending on a number of factors, including tides, local bird reports, weather, and our success at finding certain species. If you have additional questions about the route or certain birding spots, please do not hesitate to contact us.

