

# California

6–22 September 2005

## Participants:

**Maurice Charlesworth**

**Barbara Hallam**

**John Hallam**

**James Hamilton**

**Eric Holmes**

**Peter James**

**Valerie James**

**Alan Jones**

**Jaap Kooistra**

**Ron Shewring**

**Grahame Walshe**

**Kevin White**



**Black-footed Albatross**

## Leaders:

**James P. Smith and Peter Lansdown**

The Birdfinders group experienced birding in a great variety of habitats including at sea off Monterey, at high altitude in Yosemite National Park and below sea-level around the Salton Sea. We recorded a total of 258 species, ranging from a kinglet to two albatrosses, and numerous mammals, including Sea Otters and California Sea Lions, and the warm sunny weather for which California is renowned stayed with us almost throughout the tour.

**Day 1:** For us, this was, in reality, a thirty-two hour day, but a noon departure from Gatwick Airport, a change of flights at Minneapolis and the anticipated slow immigration check at Los Angeles International Airport meant that we did not collect our minibuses and hit the road until after dark. As a result, we arrived at our motel in Ventura Beach, west of Los Angeles, and retired for the night without the need to put pen to checklist.

**Day 2:** With enthusiasm running high, birding began in the motel car park where, in addition to the familiar Rock Doves, Eurasian Collared-doves, Common Starlings and House Sparrows, we saw an Anna's Hummingbird and several American Crows. A Turkey Vulture, a Red-tailed Hawk and Barn Swallows were spotted during the short journey to Ventura Harbour. We boarded the Island Packers' boat for its daily return-trip to the Channel Islands. Before we had even left the harbour we had seen impressive numbers of Brown Pelicans, Brandt's Cormorants and Heermann's and Western Gulls as well as Double-crested Cormorants, a Great Blue Heron, a Snowy Egret, Black-bellied (Grey) Plovers, Willets, Surfbirds and Black Turnstones. We enjoyed Red-necked Phalaropes and Caspian and Forster's Terns on the crossing, though the best bird, a Black Storm-petrel was seen by just a lucky few our party who just happened to be facing in the right direction at the right time during the rather rapid sea-crossing! There was no chance of slowing down for that one. Then we were put ashore at Prisoners' Harbour on Santa Cruz Island. The area just behind the beach was full of birds: a Northern Flicker, Black Phoebes, Bushtits, Common Ravens, House Finches, Orange-crowned and Yellow Warblers, a Western Tanager, Song Sparrows, Black-headed Grosbeaks and the endemic Island Scrub-jay, our primary target species, several of which showed well. A short walk added Killdeers, a splendid Wandering Tattler, a Hutton's Vireo, Common Yellowthroats and two each of the two other special birds of the Channel Islands: Allen's Hummingbird and Pacific-slope Flycatcher. The boat's horn signalled that it was time to leave, but Santa Cruz Island had more in store for us: a Black Oystercatcher from the boat on the island's rocky shoreline then an American Kestrel, California Gulls and Rock Wrens during our brief stop at Scorpion Cove. The return crossing produced Pink-footed Shearwaters, a Surf Scoter and a Pomarine Jaeger (Skua). Back on dry land, further birding at Ventura Harbour produced a Marbled Godwit, Hudsonian Whimbrels, a Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderlings,

Red-winged and Brewer's Blackbirds and Brown-headed Cowbirds before heading northwest to our next motel in Buellton and a memorable, traditional supper at Pea-soup Andersons.

**Day 3:** The traditional early-morning fog had cleared by the time we started birding by the river in Alisal Canyon. New birds came thick and fast: a Great White Egret, Green Herons, Mallards, a wonderful Red-shouldered Hawk, a Peregrine, Band-tailed Pigeons, Mourning Doves, White-throated Swifts, Belted Kingfishers, Acorn and Nuttall's Woodpeckers, Violet-green Swallows, Bewick's Wrens, a California Thrasher, Western Bluebirds, an Oak Titmouse, Western Scrub-jays, Lesser Goldfinches, both Spotted and California Towhees and good numbers of Yellow-billed Magpies, a species we had been especially keen to see. Next we visited nearby Nojoqui Falls County Park, which produced a Cooper's Hawk, a Warbling Vireo, Purple Finches and the 'Oregon' form of Dark-eyed Junco. Along the road leading away from the park we saw a Sharp-shinned Hawk, a Hairy Woodpecker and a Loggerhead Shrike. After a solid morning of birding, we lunched in Buellton and then headed northwest to Montana de Oro State Park, which boasts an exciting mixture of coastal habitats. Western Grebes, great streams of passing Sooty Shearwaters, Pelagic Cormorants, Black Scoters, numerous California Quails, a Spotted Sandpiper, Townsend's Warblers and a White-crowned Sparrow were all seen here, as was the noisy but secretive and much sought-after Wrentit. We retired to our motel in nearby Morro Bay after supper at a local harbour side restaurant.

**Day 4:** An early-morning scan of the beach at Morro Bay gave us close views of Cinnamon Teals on a small tidal creak, Semipalmated Plovers, many Long-billed Curlews, Western and Least Sandpipers and Ring-billed Gulls. The tidal bay at Morro Bay State Park held several thousand birds, amongst which were American White Pelicans, Black-crowned Night-herons, Northern Pintails, an Osprey and Greater Yellowlegs, while we discovered a Swainson's Thrush and American Robins in an adjacent campsite. Next we saw a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and a Rufous-crowned Sparrow on a return visit to Montana de Oro State Park before we headed northwest along the famously spectacular California coast road, Highway 1. This was the first time that we'd tried this route on a Birdfinders itinerary and our first stop, near San Simeon, produced a good selection of shorebirds including a major surprise: a fine moulting adult Pacific Golden Plover!! Common Loons (Great Northern Divers) were seen from a small car park further on, while our third and final stop on Highway 1 was at Andrew Molera State Park. Here, in the late afternoon, we enjoyed good views of Vaux's Swift, a Black-chinned Hummingbird, and a Downy Woodpecker. An American Dipper, seemingly out-of-place on a tiny stream running through woodland next to the coast, was the big surprise here. We finished off with good views of Chestnut-backed Chickadees and Steller's Jays, and headed north to our fourth motel in four nights at Monterey Marina.

**Day 5:** Anticipating a big day at sea, we breakfasted early, and wisely, as this was to be the day of our pelagic adventure out of Monterey. We joined Debi Shearwater and many other birders on board, including arguably Israel's most famous birder, none other than Hadoram Shirihai!! Whatever was the man from desert doing on a boat in the Pacific? As it happens, Hadoram had been concentrating on photographing the World's seabirds and mammals for quite a few years and had lined up several pelagic trips in California for the forthcoming days. We slipped our moorings at 7.30am. The adventure began well with a female Harlequin Duck, which had summered amongst the boats in the marina, and Elegant Terns and Pigeon Guillemots close inshore, and several Common Murre's (Guillemots) only a little further out. Then we turned and headed for deep water, where things really began to warm-up. Over the course of the next seven hours or so we saw mighty Black-footed Albatrosses, Buller's Shearwaters, Ashy Storm-petrels, South Polar Skuas, Parasitic (Arctic) and Long-tailed Jaegers (Skuas), Sabine's Gulls, Common Terns, more Common Murres (Guillemots), peculiar Rhinoceros Auklets and arguably the best bird of the whole tour, a majestic out-of-season Laysan Albatross. One of the better birds of the day, a Flesh-footed Shearwater, was seen by numerous people on board but was missed by most of our group, perhaps understandable when one considers how easily this chocolate brown shearwater would disappear in amongst the tens of thousands of Sooty Shearwaters seen on this fantastic pelagic outing. Back on terra firma, we paid a late afternoon visit to Locke Fadden Park, where we logged a Pied-billed Grebe, Canada Geese, Gadwalls, American Coot and the desired Tri-coloured Blackbirds before returning to the motel, followed by supper, in Monterey Marina.

**Day 6:** Journeying north once again, the small reed-fringed pools at Moss Landing Restoration Area turned out to be very productive. Here we saw Blue-winged Teals, Virginia Rails, Soras, a Common Moorhen, Black-necked Stilts, a Short-billed Dowitcher, a Lesser Yellowlegs and Marsh Wrens. The much larger and more well-known pools at Moonglow Dairy were well worth visiting and provided us with views of a Cattle Egret, White-faced Ibises, Northern Shovelers, a Ruddy Duck, a White-tailed Kite, attractive American Avocets, a Long-billed Dowitcher, a Baird's Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpipers, a Wilson's Phalarope and 50+ Red-necked Phalaropes, a Laughing Gull (locally rare), a Say's Phoebe and Savannah Sparrows. We found a Clark's Grebe on the sea at Elkhorn Slough and single Glaucous-winged and American Herring Gulls in a large rooftop gathering of Western and Heerman's Gulls at Moss Landing Harbour. After a steady drive north, we lunched in Santa Cruz and then added a slight diversion to our original plan by heading further north to Swanton Ranch to

see a seriously out-of-range Crested Caracara, which eventually obliged with good views, this being a state rarity in California. At nearby Davenport Landing, we discovered a Northern Harrier and two Marbled Murrelets on the sea under the cliffs, an adult and a juvenile, we gave some of the better views that we've had on recent tours. On that note, we turned away from the coast, driving east to begin the inland stage of journey. Our motel was in Mariposa close the fringe of Yosemite National Park.

**Day 7:** All day was spent birding in the breathtaking splendour of Yosemite National Park, where we marvelled over Half Dome, El Capitan and Bridalveil Fall. Our first stop in the park was along the Foresta Road, where a Red-breasted Sapsucker and Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) and MacGillivray's Warblers all showed well. Some Common Mergansers (Goosanders) were seen en route to our main birding area, though unfortunately we lost an hour waiting on the road for a minor traffic accident to clear. Eventually we reached the spectacular Glacier Point. Here we had staggering views of the often-alooof Blue Grouse, a couple of which wandered into the busy car park. Lewis's Woodpeckers, a Golden-crowned Kinglet, Mountain Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches, a Brown Creeper and a Hermit Warbler were also found here. We added a Nashville Warbler at McGurk Meadow and, towards the end of the day, saw a Chipping Sparrow at Crane Flats before leaving the park and returning to the motel in Mariposa.

**Day 8:** After we had paused at Slate Creek for a singing Canyon Wren, we enjoyed stunning scenery once more as we continued to head inland, passing right through Yosemite National Park. At Tamarack Flat we saw Williamson's Sapsuckers and Cassin's Finches, and at White Wolf, where we saw a flyby Clark's Nutcracker and an all-too-brief Black-throated Gray Warbler, eventually gave way to higher, more open areas. It was at one of these, Tuolumne Meadows that an initially distant Prairie Falcon nearly caused us to dive for cover as it swept low overhead, followed by audible gasps of appreciation! Just east of the park we explored the track to Saddlebag Lake, where Mountain Bluebirds entertained us. We dropped down from the mountains to the high sagebrush country and the day's last birding site was Mono Lake, where we were treated to views of many Black-necked Grebes, California Gulls, and a Sage Thrasher. A Common Nighthawk hawking over the road as we drove out from Mono Lake was good bird for this particular tour. From there we headed southwest across the high sagebrush desert to our motel in Mammoth Lakes, and pleasant supper at a local Italian restaurant

**Day 9:** An early start allowed us to be in the Crowley Lake area at sunrise. We saw the day's main target bird, Greater Sage Grouse, nice n' early, and through the course of the morning logged an amazing 45 individuals. As well as the 'hoped for' Black-billed Magpies, we also saw Violet-green Swallows, Brewer's, Vesper and Sage Sparrows and Western Meadowlarks. We also tried to get the entire group onto a flighty Townsend's Solitaire and skulking Green-tailed Towhees at the nearby hot springs. A noisy party of Pinyon Jays passed over the highway as we headed southwest. After brunch in Bishop, we diverted to picturesque Aspendell in the Sierra Nevada where we had excellent views of Green-tailed Towhees, before re-joining the main highway and travelling south to Tinemaha Reservoir, which was full of birds. These included American Wigeons, Redheads, Ring-necked Ducks, a Gray (Red) Phalarope amongst 100+ Red-necked Phalaropes, a Black Tern and a Cliff Swallow. A long southerly drive through the great Owens Valley gave us views of Mount Whitney, the USA's highest mountain south of Alaska. Eventually we left the mountains behind and reached the harsh desert regions of southern California; our motel was in Mojave where checked in for a two nights stay.

**Day 10:** Horned Larks and uncharacteristically showy Le Conte's Thrashers near California City were just reward for another early start. Next we drove off-road up Jawbone Canyon and into the hills, where we saw Golden Eagles and Cactus Wrens. We continued on dirt tracks to Butterbredt Spring, where Chukars and Gambel's Quails frequented the dry hillsides and Western Wood-pewees, Willow Flycatchers, a Wilson's Warbler and Black-throated and Lincoln's Sparrows were seen during a thorough search of the trees and bushes at the oasis itself. We had lunch at a well-known Omlet House in California City and then headed to Central Park where we found a very welcome Hammond's Flycatcher, an out-of-range Blackpoll Warbler, Lark Sparrows and Great-tailed Grackles. Our last stop of the day was at the Galileo Hill Silver Saddle Ranch Resort. Its still pools, manicured lawns and mature trees, all surrounded by desert, are a magnet for birds, and here we added Great Horned Owl, Ladder-backed Woodpecker and Vermilion Flycatcher to the list of species seen on the tour. As we drove out of the resort we found another Le Conte's Thrasher and from there it was only a short drive back to the motel in Mojave. It had been a fine day of desert birding.

**Day 11:** Heading east, then south, we spotted our first Northern Mockingbirds on the way to Big Bear Lake in the San Bernardino National Forest. Here we saw parties of Cedar Waxwings and, after a search, found both Pygmy and White-breasted Nuthatches but there was no sign of the hoped-for White-headed Woodpeckers. After a lunch in a quaint lakeside café, we dropped down from the mountains back into the desert where Joshua Trees, a member of the Yucca family, dominate the landscape. Dropping down to Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, among the many species flitting to and from the feeding station were Anna's, Costa's, Black-chinned and Rufous Hummingbirds, while a Verdin and a pair of Summer

Tanagers were discovered nearby. We journeyed through Palm Springs, where miles of giant wind turbines provided a surreal sight as we pressed onto to our motel and a night in Indio.

**Day 12:** Common Ground-doves, Cassin's Kingbirds and a Blue Grosbeak were all seen during a roadside stop near some citrus groves in Mecca. After this, most of the day was spent along the northeast and southeast sides of the vast Salton Sea. We began at Bombay Beach, where the day's most sought-after species, Yellow-footed Gull, was seen in good numbers and Caspian Terns, Tree Swallows and Bank Swallows (Sand Martins), and a few (American) Black Terns flew by along the shoreline. Niland Creek produced Green-winged Teals, a Clapper Rail, a Burrowing Owl and Western Kingbirds and we saw the rare Ruddy Ground-dove at a site near Calipatria. The Sonny Bono National Wildlife Refuge held Inca Doves, a hugely appreciated Greater Roadrunner, terrific views of Lesser Nighthawks, which zoomed low overhead, and several Abert's Towhees. We finished off at the always-productive Red Hill Marina where vast numbers of water birds gather providing a birders dream. Here, in the sticky heat, we watched Snowy (Kentish) Plovers, Black Skimmers and also discovered two scarce birds in California: a Franklin's Gull and a Ruff! As we headed south to our motel in El Centro, we noted huge flights of Cattle Egrets and White-faced Ibis heading to roost.

**Day 13:** Gila Woodpeckers at Brawley got the day off to a flying start, followed by another more satisfactory visit to Calipatria, where Ruddy Ground Doves put on a much better show, with four birds seen, including a good male amongst the Inca Doves. We then headed west to the desert settlement of Borrego Springs, well west of the Salton Sea. Here we caught up with White-winged Dove, Phainopepla, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher and a surprise Red-eyed Vireo on the outskirts of the town. Finally leaving the deserts, we climbed to historical Julian, set amongst woods and rolling green fields. Despite the large number of people who were gathering in the popular town for a folk festival, we enjoyed our visit, sampled the world famous apple pie and watched Wild Turkeys and a distant Olive-sided Flycatcher. Good numbers of Wood Ducks were seen at beautiful, cool Lake Cuyamaca to the south, which also supported two each of Redhead and Ring-necked Duck. From this rather rural setting we continued to the outskirts of urban San Diego and our motel in San Ysidro very close to the Mexican border.

**Day 14:** We began the day at Otay Lakes, where Northern Rough-winged Swallows, House Wrens and California Gnatcatchers, the day's main target species, were all seen as well as a couple of skulking Wrentits and plenty of Bushtits. Next we walked along Imperial Beach, south of San Diego, where had exquisite views of both Belding's and Large-billed Savannah Sparrows, two very distinctive races. When we reached Tijuana Rivermouth, we found that it was teeming with birds, amongst which were Red Knots, a Dunlin and Royal Terns and tens of Elegant and Common Terns. A massive flock of Brown Pelicans occasionally lifted up, clouding the sky with well over a thousand birds in the flock. We also found several Snowy Plovers and perhaps a little surprisingly, three Surfbirds. Short visits to Coronado Overlook, Dairy Mart Road Sod Farm and Border Fields State Park did not add any species to the tour list, but from the sod farm we saw a giant Mexican flag waving in the breeze south of the border and enjoyed excellent views of Red-shouldered Hawk and White-tailed Kite. We returned to our motel in San Ysidro.

**Day 15:** We drove northeast to Los Angeles in the first poor weather of the tour. In fact it was pouring and would have made birding anywhere in the region difficult at best. Our goal was to head for some sea watching from Point Vicente, on the Palos Verde Peninsula. It rained for a while but at least a few of us were seeing distant Black-vented Shearwaters, and at least one Pink-footed Shearwater. Compared to our experiences in the past, this was a disappointing seawatch and we closed for lunch with only nine Black-vented Shearwaters seen. The sun had appeared by the time we were watching migrants in Averill Park and Peck Park. We had some luck here finding a juvenile Black-crowned Night Heron, Swainson's Thrush, two Wilson's Warblers, three Townsend's Warblers, and at last, a co-operative Black-throated Gray Warbler which was much appreciated by the whole group. In the same area we had really excellent views of the locally endemic *sedentarius* race of Allen's Hummingbird. We finished off with a leisurely seawatch from Point Fermin Park, enjoying California Sea Lions, Pelagic Cormorants, Black Oystercatchers, and some 'close-and-personal' Racoons. Our motel for the night was situated in Los Angeles.

**Day 16:** The really keen ones spent an hour or so birding the busy streets around the motel hoping to see Spotted Dove, which was seen by just one of our leaders. This introduced Asian species is officially countable, though is currently through a sharp decline and maybe to be difficult to see on future California trips. By mid-morning, it was time to head off to Los Angeles International Airport for our flight back to Gatwick Airport, where we landed the following morning after a very successful tour.

James and Peter, this year's tour leaders, would to thank all participants for their excellent contribution to another wonderful Birdfinders tour of California.

