

## A few days birding near San Francisco, June 2010

Attendance at a conference in San Francisco gave an opportunity for a bit of Californian birding the day before and the day after the conference. I started early on Mon 14/6 driving my rental car south from downtown San Francisco with one main target in mind: Condors at Big Sur. The weather had started well but as I approached Monterey I started seeing mist patches and by the time I got to the stretch of Hwy One south of Monterey where I was hopeful of this critically endangered vulture, the cliffs were shrouded in dense mist. I stopped once or twice and noted **Brown Pelican**, **Common Murre** and **Brandt's Cormorant** and digiscoped them in the dim diffuse light, but sped my way directly to Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park where my gen indicated Condors could be seen. Sadly the conditions here were also poor. I walked down to the famous waterfall into the Pacific, noting lifer birds **Western Scrub-Jay**, **Wilson's Warbler**, **Chestnut-backed Chickadee** and a very tame **Stellar's Jay**. Back in the car-park I found the ranger and asked him about Condors. He wasn't too helpful, but he was able to direct me to the excellent Deetjen's Inn for breakfast where his recommendation of eggs benedict was absolutely spot on; they were superb and gave me time to regroup and hope that the sun would eventually burn off the mist.

Having finished my breakfast the weather seemed to have cleared somewhat to the north, but remained foggy to the south. Hopeful that it would clear with time I went north to Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. As I parked an apparently wild **Turkey** was pecking around below the car-park, and an **Acorn Woodpecker** posed nicely for photos. A **Turkey Vulture** had me going for a minute, then I met a birder called Ben in the car park who greeted me with the gripping news that he had had a Condor minutes earlier. It turned out he was doing an internship with Ventana Wildlife Society tracking condors. He would be following up and down Hwy One with his radio equipment all day and therefore suggested I keep an eye out for his car, since that could well mean there were condors nearby.

With the mist still thick south of the State Park on higher ground I went for a walk instead at nearby Andrew Molera State Park. **Song Sparrow** and **California Quail** posed nicely, another **Chestnut-backed Chickadee**, then another new bird, **Spotted Towhee**. I also noted a female **Anna's Hummingbird** and later identified a **Pacific-slope Flycatcher** from my photographs of this member of the tricky *Empidonax* family. Down on the beach the gulls included **Western**, **California** and even a single **Heerman's Gull**. A pale-looking gull was probably a hybrid **Western x Glaucous-winged**. Off-shore a few **Western Grebes** and a **Double-crested Cormorant** floated around, on the beach a **Killdeer** scuttled about, and a few **Brent Geese** were in the stream close to the breakwater.

Leaving Andrew Molera State Park behind I drove south again and the mist had cleared, revealing stunning views along the coast. Hwy One really is one of the great scenic drives in the world and so it was no hardship to be driving back and forth along the 10 miles that separate Andrew Molera and Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Parks. With no new birds found I drove a couple of miles south of JPB before deciding to head north again to scan the famous "A-frame house". Just as I got there I noted Ben's car and pulled over. Ben calmly pointed out two brilliant **California Condors** on the rocky beach far below; he had suspected they would be here because a seal carcass was providing a regular source of food over the last few days. Although the Wildlife Society leaves dead cattle out

up in the hills for the Condors, the birds seemed to prefer this “natural” food, which is a problem because traces of various grim chemicals, including DDT and lead, are still present in the wild food chain, leading to eggs which are insufficiently strong to withstand the rigours of incubation in the wild. Indeed all but one of the entire population are untickable according to ABA rules since they were all born in captivity. The one bird that was wild-born was taken into captivity as part of the rescue programme in the 90s, but has subsequently been released.

ABA-tickable or not, this was why I was here – to see a fantastic, huge bird and a miracle of conservation efforts, and now the long drive down here was well and truly worth it. The view through the scope was quite good, but as I stayed around they took to the air and over the course of an hour or more I had eye-ball to eye-ball views of this prehistoric looking creature as at least three different individuals cruised by at less than 20m range. Each time one came past I held the shutter down and hoped, and while many of my shots came out poorly exposed, I managed enough to go away extremely happy, and even one that met the challenge laid down by some other English tourists, to get a picture in which you could see through the nostril (the connected nostrils being a key feature distinguishing new and old world vultures). Try telling the birds they are not truly wild. I will certainly be ticking it off without any qualms.

Parties of fabulous **White-throated Swifts** kept us entertained while the Condors were not flying.

Just north of JPB it is possible to follow a track down to the water. Having left the Condors I drove a mile or two south and walked down to the water. I saw few birds on the walk down, but on the rocks at the bottom I noted a pair of **Black Oystercatcher**, and as I returned to the car my final **California Condor** of the day drifted lazily past at great range. Making my way north for the final time I called in again at Andrew Molero hoping to catch up again with the interns, but couldn't find them.

I made two further stops on my way back to San Francisco. First I pulled off at Point Lobos State Reserve and went for a quick walk. Lots of **White-crowned Sparrow** were in the car-park and I stopped to photograph these. They may be common-as-muck for locals, but having nearly died trying to see one two years earlier when Tom and I were involved in a head-on collision near Fakenham as we twitched the famous Cley bird, I was grateful to see these lifers. There were lots of **Pacific Harbor Seals** basking on the rocks and I also enjoyed finding 3-4 cute-looking **Sea Otters**, floating on their backs amongst the kelp. **American Goldfinch** was not new, but **California Thrasher** was a very nice find before I drove a little further north into Monterey.

It was tough to find parking and a viewing spot in Monterey proper, but I found a path down the western side of the Aquarium and scoped the bay, finding a few of the marine species I have been hoping for. **Pelagic Cormorant** and **Pigeon Guillemot** were the key species, before I finally bit the bullet for the journey back to San Francisco.

## **18<sup>th</sup> June**

Having genned up using “Where to watch birds in World Cities”, I had my hopes on an early morning walk around Lake Merced. I got a taxi there, but on arrival there was a gang of hooded youths hanging around the car-park. They may have been completely harmless, but I quickly decided that I did not want to risk being stranded here with 3K's worth of optics around my neck. Instead I instructed the taxi driver to take me to Golden Gate State park. Here I walked some of the paths for

an hour or so taking in some common birds such as **Black-crowned Night Heron, Great Blue Heron, American Robin, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Red-tailed Hawk, Pygmy Nuthatch, Tree Swallow**, as well as **Hermit** and **Wilson's Warblers**, before staking out a likely bunch of *Agapanthus* for hummers. My patience here was well rewarded with nice views of **Anna's Hummingbird**, and multiple visits from my top target here, **Allen's Hummingbird**.

As I walked east along the park edge hoping for a bus to take me back to the hotel, I stopped once or twice more, observing another couple of **Anna's Hummingbirds** (one fully gorgetted male proved impossible to photograph in a strong breeze, while a young male sat quite still on a thin branch and I was able to digiscope him but in the shade his small neat black bib never caught the sun to show its iridescent pink), **American Goldfinch, Black Phoebe**, and a **Song Sparrow**. 30 minutes at a lake on the south side of the park produced a **Pied-billed Grebe** with chicks, **Brewer's Blackbird** and **Red-winged Blackbird**, and lots of attractive **Violet-green Swallows** swooping over the water surface.

### 19<sup>th</sup> June

I had been looking forward to the final Saturday of my stay for some time. Current airline pricing policy makes it almost compulsory to stay a Saturday night, so though the conference was over I had 36 hours at my disposal before my flight on Sunday. Several weeks beforehand I had booked a trip whale-watching near the Farallon Islands, a trip that would pretty much guarantee some of the many auk species that inhabit this coastline, possibly even including the whacky-looking Tufted Puffin, Cassin's Auklet and Rhinoceros Auklet, all of which breed on the islands – as well, of course, as some whales! However at 7pm on Friday as I checked my email, one was waiting from SF Bay Whale Watching informing me that the forecast was bleak and they had cancelled the trip.

This was a huge disappointment, but I would get a full refund, and fortunately I also had a Plan B, even if it was particularly mad, even by my own standards. I had been in touch with Gary Fregien of the Sacramento Audubon Society regarding their annual trip to the Sierra Valley, some 3-4 hours north-east of San Francisco, and to my delight though somewhat to my surprise, they were very happy to have me join them. This late in the day all the downtown rental car outlets were closed, so my only option was to pick up from the airport as the only 24 hour rental location. However with that booked over the phone, I pinged off email to Gary to say they should expect me, and wandered across the road to ferry terminal where I sat at the bar of the famous and truly excellent Slanted Door restaurant eating the real versions of several Vietnamese fusion dishes I had cooked myself frequently.

My alarm woke me at 2.30 and after a taxi ride to the airport I had picked up a Toyota Camry and begun the journey across the Oakland Bay Bridge and along I80. After an unscheduled encounter with the law in Yolo County (an infraction I subsequently challenged successfully) I arrived in Sierraville soon after 7am, well in advance of the scheduled meet time of 8am. I drove the few miles north-west along 49 to Yuba Pass and stopped after less than a mile at a stand of willows that I'd been told could be quite birdy. The advice was not wrong, and in 30mins I racked up a good list including some quality birds and all lifers: **Nashville Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Fox Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, Red-breasted Sapsucker, White-headed Woodpecker, Western Tanager**.

As I made my way back to Sierraville in time for the meet, I noted a couple of birders' cars parked and stopped to find Dan Tankerlsey with some of the group I'd be meeting, currently watching a pair

of **Sandhill Cranes**. This was one of my main targets so I quickly set up scope and had decent, though slightly distant views of two birds which I stayed to digiscope while the others drove back the two or three miles to Sierraville. It had been a great start and I had not even met up with main group yet!

After the long drive I was grateful to leave my car and join Scott Hoppe and Subhash Chand in Scott's 4x4, part of a convoy of 5 vehicles that would make a big loop around the valley throughout the day. We began with a quick recce of the area near the Sierraville aerodrome, where **Turkey Vultures** were numerous, **Horned Lark** posed nicely on a fencepost, and another slightly distant fence-post hosted the main target here, **Wilson's Snipe**. **Black-billed Magpies** fought over roadkill as we headed north to Loyalton where **Red-winged** and **Yellow-headed Blackbirds** and **Brown-headed Cowbirds** were common at the various feeders in town. We stopped on the outskirts for a "comfort" break and scanned to see more **Turkey Vultures**. A possible Golden Eagle was called but I concluded it was another TV through the scope.

Next stop was the Loyalton Rotary Club picnic grounds on Smithneck Rd, quite a birdy area which produced a cracking **Lewis's Woodpecker** as soon as we arrived, as well as a gorgeous **Lazuli Bunting**, **Western Bluebird**, **Yellow Warbler** and **Western Wood-Pewee**. I couldn't get onto a Bullock's Oriole that was seen by some. A Coyote on the hillside opposite trotted down giving excellent views and a huge raptor cruising above the ridge really was a **Golden Eagle** this time.

The drive up the rough Antelope Rd looping back over mountain was scenic and yielded some new birds in the form of **House Wren** and **Northern Flicker**. The local experts called an **Olive-sided Flycatcher** which I was able to photograph (though I would have been hard-pressed to make an ID myself) and we also added **Hairy Woodpecker** and **Pygmy Nuthatch**. A Mountain Quail called but could not be located. Undoubted start bird of the day for me was a cracking male **Calliope Hummingbird** which had become my top target. Initially one bird was seen all too briefly, but a second was found soon after at a stop for **Red-breasted Sapsucker**, and which obliged beautifully for both DSLR and digiscoped pictures. Marvellous!

Coming back to the flat valley floor we turned onto Harriet-Heriot Rd and cruised slowly along scanning the fields for a family of **Burrowing Owls** that Scott had checked out in his recce the previous day. Sure enough we found the head of an adult peering above the long grass buffeted in the wind, with two or three smaller heads nearby. As others arrived and people got out of their cars the young hunkered down out of sight but the adult stayed up allowing me to get a little bit of digiscoped video. This was only my second ever encounter with this charismatic species, the first having come at REGUA, SE Brazil in 2007.

The flooded meadows here were thronging with birds. **Black-necked Stilts** and **American Avocets**, a distant and barely tickable **Cinnamon Teal** added to the more common **Redhead** and **Mallard** and **Green-winged Teal**. **Willetts** perched on fence posts and gave wonderful display flights, **Cliff Swallows** and **Northern Rough-winged Swallows** buzzed around constantly.

As we left turned onto Co Hwy 23 I scanned the sky from the car and found a single **American White Pelican** in flight, the only one of the trip, and soon after we found a **Swainson's Hawk** on the deck that posed for digiscoped photos.

We then travelled to the Maddalena Ranch, where **Sage Thrasher** appeared on cue, and a **Tree Swallow** posed beautifully on the corral.

As the afternoon drew on we ended at the Marble Hot Springs Rd Wetlands parked up by the bridge, where the view was superb. The flat valley floor covered in wildflowers stretched out to meet the steep sides of the mountains. Swarms of **Cliff Swallow** swooped around visiting their nests in the bridge, **Yellow-headed Blackbirds** too numerous to count wandered around on the lily pads in the water, **American Coot** – a trash bird for the locals but a lifer for me -- and **Ruddy Duck**. It was great to see this smart American duck in its natural habitat instead of in its cull-induced endangered state on Farmoor Reservoir. Also here were lots of **White-faced Ibis** – according to the guides a wintering bird – were still present this late into June and proved very photogenic in the evening sunshine, with the valley floor covered in wildflowers. Star bird at this site was **Wilson's Phalarope**. Seeing the “real thing” at its breeding grounds was a very different experience from the 15min views I'd had at a very rushed twitch one afternoon just over the border in Bucks in 2006.

As we trundled back to Sierraville for me to pick up my car we immediately found another **Sandhill Crane** and a **Black-crowned Night Heron**, then noted another **Swainson's Hawk** before a final stop for a pair of **Sandhill Cranes** on the flats, perhaps the same two I had seen at 8am.

In spite of the late hour and the distance back to San Francisco, and the fact that Sierra City was several miles in the wrong direction, I decided to join the others for dinner in Sierra City in order to end the day on a relaxing note. A great meal outdoors also gave bonus sightings of **Common Nighthawk**, with several hawking in the evening light across the valley from the town. I then joined the convoy of cars heading back to a post-sunset lookout on Yuba Pass for a crack at another lifer nightbird. Just after we had left the village we pulled in unexpectedly to a layby with an interesting little memorial waterfall where Gary explained in the past Dipper has bred. Amazingly, within seconds of him saying this, an **American Dipper** appeared on cue in the spray jumping from rock to rock, even allowing some passable record shots with my inadequate built-in flash.

We finally reached the lookout and Gary played a tape of **Common Poorwill**. Sadly, all I saw of this bird was a shape that flew past right on cue, but that was all. Tickable -- just about – given the context and sounds, but will be struck off as soon as I have a better sighting ☺.

Now it really was time to tackle the long drive home, so after saying farewell to my new friends who had been so hospitable, I hit the road. After about 4 separate breaks for coffee and/or 40-winks, I finally rolled into a parking space outside the hotel at around 2.30am, almost exactly 24 hours after I had set out.

The following day I needed to make my way back to the airport, but had a few hours to spare in the morning. First I made my way down to Fishermen's Wharf and took some photos of the seals, then a drive around a few spots in Golden Gate Park hoping to find an obliging Anna's Hummingbird, before heading to SamTrans Marsh, a spot mentioned in “Where to watch birds in world cities” right next to the airport. My target here was Tricolored Blackbird. The site took some finding, and when I did finally pull up into the rough looking flat ground in front of the a boggy expanse littered with debris, I wondered if this was the “marsh”; it felt unsafe and looked unpromising. Maybe there was better

habitat further along past the bus depot, but I wanted to keep the car in sight, filled as it was with all of my luggage. I walked far enough along to note a **Snowy Egret**, a small flock of **Canada Geese**, a distant tern (probably Forster's), but not the endemic Blackbird, before turning back and calling it a day birding-wise.

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| 1. <b>Western Grebe</b>          | a few off the beach at Julia Pfeiffer Burns park                        |
| 2. Pied-billed Grebe             | one with chicks in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco                      |
| 3. <b>American White Pelican</b> | I found one in flight in the sierra Valley                              |
| 4. <b>Brown Pelican</b>          | fairly common at Big Sur  |
| 5. Double-crested Cormorant      | lots at Monterey  |
| 6. <b>Brandt's Cormorant</b>     | lots at Monterey  |
| 7. <b>Pelagic Cormorant</b>      | several at Monterey and Big Sur   |
| 8. Black-crowned Night-heron     | Golden Gate Park, San Francisco   |
| 9. Snowy Egret                   | one at Sam Trans Marsh near SFO airport                                 |
| 10. Great Blue Heron             | Golden Gate Park  |
| 11. <b>White-faced Ibis</b>      | lots still in the Sierra Valley   |
| 12. <b>Sandhill Crane(8+)</b>    | seen in various places in the Sierra Valley                             |
| 13. Canada Goose                 | flock at Sam Trans Marsh  |
| 14. Gadwall                      |   |
| 15. <b>Cinnamon Teal</b>         | distant views on Dyson Rd barely tickable                               |
| 16. Northern Shoveler            |   |
| 17. Northern Pintail             |   |
| 18. Green-winged Teal            |   |
| 19. <b>Redhead</b>               | Dyson Rd wetlands   |
| 20. Ruddy Duck                   | Marble Hot Springs Rd wetlands  |
| 21. [Mountain Quail]             | heard calling once or twice but this desirable potential lifer not seen |
| 22. <b>California Quail</b>      | seen well at Andrew Molera State Park near Ranger Stn                   |
| 23. <b>American Coot</b>         | Marble Hot Springs Rd wetlands  |
| 24. <b>Black Oystercatcher</b>   | several at Big Sur  |
| 25. American Avocet              |   |
| 26. Black-necked Stilt           |   |
| 27. Killdeer                     |   |
| 28. Willet                       | fairly common in the valley   |
| 29. <b>Wilson's Snipe</b>        | two or three on fence-posts near the Sierraville Airstrip, early am     |
| 30. Wilson's Phalarope           | two at Marble Hot Spring Rd great to see                                |
| 31. <b>Heerman's Gull (1)</b>    | at Andrew Molera SP on the beach  |
| 32. Ring-billed Gull             |   |
| 33. <b>California Gull</b>       | common on the Big Sur coast   |
| 34. <b>Western Gull</b>          | ditto   |
| 35. {Forster's Tern}             | one at SamTrans Marsh probably this species but UTVs                    |
| 36. <b>Common Murre</b>          | hundreds at Big Sur   |
| 37. <b>Pigeon Guillemot</b>      | lots at Monterey Aquarium   |
| 38. Turkey Vulture               | common at Big Sur and Sierra Valley                                     |
| 39. <b>California Condor (4)</b> | at least 4 of the #1 target species                                     |
| 40. <b>Northern Harrier</b>      |   |

41. <b>Swainson's Hawk (2)</b>	singles on Co Hwy 23, Sierra Valley
42. Red-tailed Hawk	common. Seen at Muir Woods beach, GG Park and Big Sur
43. Golden Eagle	nr Rotary Picnic site
44. American Kestrel	
45. <b>Wild Turkey</b>	one at Pfeiffer Big Sur
46. Rock Dove	
47. <b>Mourning Dove</b>	
48. <b>Burrowing Owl</b>	a family party on Harriet-Heriot Rd
49. <b>Common Nighthawk</b>	several hawking above Sierra City as we took dinner
50. <b>Common Poorwill</b>	poor views of a fly-past in response to tape just about tickable
51. <b>White-throated Swift</b>	seen regularly along the Big Sur coast
52. Anna's Hummingbird	common in Golden Gate Park
53. <b>Allen's Hummingbird</b>	ditto
54. <b>Calliope Hummingbird</b>	two on Antelope Rd, Sierra Valley
55. Northern Flicker	Antelope Rd, Sierra Valley
56. <b>Acorn Woodpecker</b>	Pfeiffer Big Sur
57. <b>White-headed Woodpecker</b>	Yuba Pass
58. <b>Lewis's Woodpecker</b>	Rotary picnic grounds, Smithneck Rd
59. <b>Red-breasted Sapsucker</b>	Yuba Pass and Antelope Rd
60. <b>Hairy Woodpecker</b>	Golden Gate Park and Antelope Rd, Sierra Valley
61. <b>Black Phoebe</b>	Golden Gate Park
62. <b>Pacific-slope Flycatcher</b>	Andrew Molera State Park
63. <b>Western Wood-Pewee</b>	Rotary picnic grounds, Smithneck Rd
64. <b>Olive-sided Flycatcher</b>	Antelope Rd
65. Horned Lark	common, Sierra Valley
66. <b>Tree Swallow</b>	Golden Gate Park, Sierra Valley, etc
67. <b>Violet-Green Swallow</b>	Golden Gate Park
68. <b>Cliff Swallow</b>	Sierra Valley, Hot Springs Rd
69. <b>Northern Rough-winged Swallow</b>	Sierra Valley
70. Barn Swallow	
71. American Crow	
72. Common Raven	
73. <b>Western Scrub-Jay</b>	Julia Pfeiffer Burns SP
74. <b>Stellar's Jay</b>	ditto
75. <b>Black-billed Magpie</b>	Sierra Valley
76. <b>Chestnut-backed Chickadee</b>	Andrew Molera SP, Golden Gate Park and Sierra Valley
77. <b>Bushtit</b>	Golden Gate Park
78. <b>Pygmy Nuthatch</b>	GGP, Muir Woods, Andrew Molera, Antelope Rd
79. <b>Brown Creeper</b>	Antelope Rd
80. <b>House Wren</b>	ditto
81. Winter Wren	Muir Woods
82. <b>Western Bluebird</b>	Rotary picnic grounds, Smithneck Rd
83. American Robin	GGP, Sierra Valley
84. <b>California Thrasher</b>	Point Lobos, near Monterey
85. <b>Sage Thrasher</b>	Maddalena Ranch, Sierra Valley
86. <b>American Dipper</b>	Yuba Pass, near Sierra City
87. European Starling	
88. <b>Orange-crowned Warbler</b>	Antelope Rd
89. <b>Nashville Warbler</b>	Yuba Pass
90. <b>Yellow Warbler</b>	Yuba Pass, Rotary picnic grounds
91. <b>Yellow-rumped Warbler</b>	

<b>92. Hermit Warbler</b>	Golden Gate Park
<b>93. Wilson's Warbler</b>	JFB, Sierra Valley
<b>94. Western Tanager</b>	Yuba Pass
<b>95. Spotted Towhee</b>	Andrew Molera State Park
<b>96. Lazuli Bunting</b>	Rotary picnic grounds
<b>97. Brewer's Sparrow</b>	at Maddalena Ranch
<b>98. Vesper Sparrow</b>	brief views at the end of the day
<b>99. Fox Sparrow</b>	Yuba Pass, Antelope Rd
100. <b>Song Sparrow</b>	GGP, Sierra Valley
<b>101. Dark-eyed Junco</b>	
102. <b>White-crowned Sparrow</b>	Point Lobos
103. Red-winged Blackbird	
104. Western Meadowlark	
105. <b>Yellow-headed Blackbird</b>	Sierra Valley
<b>106. Brewer's Blackbird</b>	
<b>107. Brown-headed Cowbird</b>	
<b>108. American Goldfinch</b>	
<b>109. Purple Finch</b>	
110. <b>Cassin's Finch</b>	Antelope Rd
<b>111. House Finch</b>	
112. House Sparrow	