

SoCal, 23-27th March 2011

When my student's visa failed to arrive in time for him to travel to give our paper at a conference in Santa Barbara, I had to step in at the last minute. To save on the airfare I had to stay over a Saturday night (more than quadruple the cost to return Friday or Saturday) so I hastily put together an itinerary for two days in the desert of Southern California where I had numerous potential lifers. I also took the opportunity to do a bit of birding around Santa Barbara itself in between sessions. The weather in SB was unseasonably poor. Two days before I arrived they'd had 7in of rain and apart from a few hours of respite, it wasn't a whole lot better for 23rd and 24th while I was at the conference.

23/3, Santa Barbara

After a successful talk in the morning I braved the poor conditions to drive north of SB in search of a California endemic, Yellow-billed Magpie. Conditions north looked even worse, so I side-tracked to Goleta Beach for a quick scan of the beach, yielding several **Elegant Terns**, various gulls (**Cal** and **Western**) and my first **Black Phoebe** of the trip, one of the commonest birds henceforth. Then as the rain got heavier I started back for SB, before changing my mind yet again and braving the elements in the hope the rain would clear by the time I got to Nojoqui Falls and beyond. Was still raining at Nojoqui and the birding was slow, but ok. A large mixed flock of finches and sparrow was foraging in the grass in the rain comprising **House Finches**, **White-crowned Sparrows** and lots of **Dark-eyed Juncos**. Lifer and target bird **Nuttall's Woodpecker** in the rain was the highlight, also **Acorn Woodpecker**. No birds but pleasant (but wet) walk to the falls, then I cruised around the car-park in the car, as the rain continued. **Western Bluebird** posed nicely, **Oak Titmouse** was new, **Brewer's Blackbird** and a few **Bushtits** performed.

A "flooding: road closed" sign on Alisal Rd looked ominous but the park host assured me this had been cleared so I drove on towards Solvang, reputedly a good road for YB (see Birdfinders tour reports). No sign of YB. I stopped in Solvang, an odd Euro town with an identity crisis – was it Danish, Dutch, or Austrian – for refreshment, as weather cleared. Unplanned detour looking for gas picked up **Northern Mockingbird**, then decided to travel the extra few miles north to the small town of Los Alamos. **Red-tailed Hawk** above the road as I entered the town then easily found the country park following directions from the excellent website <http://sbcobirding.com>. **Brown-headed Cowbirds** on the roadside, then **American Kestrel** posed by the park. Initially unpromising. **Acorn Woodpeckers**, **Starlings**, **Western Bluebirds** were common, then a magpie-like clacking attracted my attention in the NE corner of the park. Followed it and soon located 3 cracking **Yellow-billed Magpies**. Great stuff and job done! Stayed around a bit and found a few more birds including **Northern Flicker**, more **Acorn Woodpeckers**, **Western Scrub-jay**, **Pygmy Nuthatch**. Started back towards SB, finding a dozen more **Yellow-billed Magpie** in a field to the west of 101. With weather much better decided to call in at Nojoqui again, only a 5 min detour from 101.

Ridiculously close TV sat on the road hung about for a snap through the car window, then car-park alive with bird activity and I added **California Quail** (2 f, followed by 2 m), **Rufous-sided (Spotted) Towhee**, **Golden-crowned Sparrow**, lots and lots of **Acorn Woodpeckers**, more **Bushtits**, finches, etc, and a perched **Sharp-shinned Hawk**. Back to SB for evening session in conf.

24/3

Early morning walk along East Beach to Santa Barbara Harbour. Scored with 2 of 3 targets, Black Skimmer and Black Turnstone but no sign of Surfbird (others told me they can be hit-and-miss). 100s of **Western Grebes** on the water (also possibly Clark's, but I didn't try hard to look and they were distant in bins). Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warbler at an outflow seemed like a good find until I discovered them to be the commonest new world warbler – everywhere! **Coots**, **Kildeer**, **Cal Gulls**, then my main prize, 4 **Black Skimmers** on the beach at the end of the pier. I walked around for better light for photography and got some decent shots. Long walk to harbour breakwater, collecting **Anna's Hummingbird**, **Great-tailed Grackle** (another bird common henceforth), more grebes and a dozen or so distant scoters, at least one of which showed itself unequivocally to be **Surf Scoter** by its white neck patch. A walk along the breakwater produced immediate dividends in the form of two **Black Turnstones**, one of my target sp for the morning, with several more seen all along the wall. Sadly no sign of Surfbird today. **Brown Pelicans** cruised, a few cormorants swam, including s **Brandt's** which was close enough for good photos, and a single **Red-throated Loon** was found sleeping on the lee of the groyne. Walk back yielded **Bushtit** in trees near the marina, **Snowy Egret**, more (**Audubon's**) **Yellow-rumped Warblers** and a **Hooded Oriole** in a palm by the hotel. Morning session and working lunch at conf.

Afternoon session held no attractions for me academically, so birded Devereux Slough and Coal-Oil Point. Key target here was Snowy Plover which have relatively recently established themselves on the beach and have been afforded protection by the University which cordons off the breeding area in the dunes. Difficult to find parking and ended up paying at UCSB and walking. **Northern Mockingbird** sang from an "allotment" garden, then nice views of **Anna's Hummingbird** which proved common for the rest of the walk. Simply beautiful. 11 **Wimbrel**, **Snowy Egret**, **Great Egret**, 45 **Long-billed Dowitcher** (I can't id SB from LB but a local birder said they were unlikely to be Short-billed here), 40 **Willet**, 25 **Least Sandpiper**, a few **Western Sandpipers**, more **Yellow-rumped Warbler** and a lifer **Common Yellowthroat**. A **Belted Kingfisher** called and swept past at various points. Another target here was **California Towhee** and a few were wary but gave tickable views, and finally yielded reasonable photo opportunities. Weather was deteriorating and the local had said a few days ago there was no sign of the Snowies, but I pressed on. Scanned with scope from above the beach as the rain started to fall and a little bird got me going until I realised it was a **Sanderling**, before it took off with two others. But then lo!, there was one, then two fantastic little **Snowy Plovers**, recently split from Kentish and

looking very like this species to my eye. Even so, nice bird to see. Five **Willet** then flew by. A jogger looked likely to disturb the Snowies and I watched as they flushed up the beach, but then I realised as he continued that further down there were lots more. They also flushed as he ran by but settled back immediately to their favoured spot amongst pebbles just above the surf-line. As the rain got heavier and threatened a downpour (I could see a wall of water immediately north and approaching) I moved down onto the beach for a closer look, and counted 40+ but later reference to photos revealed 80. Well satisfied in spite of the weather, I retraced my steps, pausing to watch the shorebirds some more, digiscope the **Belted Kingfisher**, a more obliging California Towhee, and to observe the curious sight of a Great White Egret catching a rodent twice the diameter of its throat by the side of the road, then take it down to the water to drown before gulping it down. So unusual was this that a passing jogger stopped to watch as well. Additional birds on the way back were lots of **Violet Green Swallows**, more **Willet** and a few **Anna's Hummingbirds** that posed nicely for pictures. I returned to SB and got myself into bed early in prep for a very early rise tomorrow.

25/3

I was on the road by 4am, but still the weather was poor. In continuous rain and surprisingly heavy traffic given the hour, I made my way south to LA and through the maze of highways eventually leading me beyond suburbia. Only as I breached my way into the Imperial Valley surrounded by a massive wind farm by the Palm Springs turnoff did the rain abate. I turned towards 29 Palms and could look back on the dark clouds stopped in their tracks by the mountains even snowing on the peaks. I refuelled in the town of Morongo and grabbed water and a sandwich and headed straight to Big Morongo Preserve, arriving around 7.30. A few mins in the carpark and by the trailer feeders yielded lots of **House Finch**, tons of **White-crowned Sparrows**, **Hooded Oriole** and **Anna's Hummingbird**, as well as a tantalising finch that I later realised was **Lesser Goldfinch**. Walked the trails finding my first **Phainopepla**, noting **California Thrasher**, more **Anna's HB**, **House Wren**, then a cracking lifer **Bewick's Wren**. Lots of **Bushtits**, more **Lesser Goldfinch**, **Yellow-rumped Warbler**. **American Kestrel**, **Sharp-shinned Hawk** were the two raptors seen. Returned to spend some time at the feeders hoping for Costa's. Several more Anna's and a **Selasphorus HB** (i.e. either Allen's or Rufous,) were seen and **Bullock's Oriole** added to the list, but no Costa's. Chatted with the park host who said Costa's were not being seen at Morongo yet, but suggested a walk in Covington Park as best bet for Lawrence's Goldfinch.

First bird in the Park a cracking male **Vermillion Flycatcher**, what a stunner. Lots of **Black Phoebe**, **Western Bluebird** and **House Sparrow** but no sign of LG's as I walked fully around the park at least three times. Finally found two excellent **Lawrence's Goldfinch** on the very top of a dead tree, leaving only one target for Covington outstanding, **Cassin's Kingbird**. Another fruitless circuit and I returned to the car back in the Morongo Preserve car-park conscious that time was ticking and that I wanted to make it to Brawley by dusk. Re-reading Richard Hall's blog I noted his picture of Cassin's on a rusty

barbed wire fence so I resolved to do one more circuit of the park to check out this fence which I remembered as being on the boundary between Covington and Big Morongo. I drove the car the 200m or so to the Covington Park parking lot and slowly walked another circuit, checking out every conceivable kingbird perch, but yielding only more **Lesser Goldfinch**. With no sign of Cassin's I got into the car. Just as I turned the ignition on, movement caught my eye as something flitted down from a low fence next to the road. I raised my bins and f**k me if it wasn't a Kingbird that proceeded to behave extremely well for some photos through the car window. At the time I simply assumed Cassin's but need to do some more scrutiny of the pics to be sure. The line between success and dipping has never been so fine.

I now drove to Coachella Valley palms. Immediately found another target bird, **Cactus Wren** calling from a palm by the entrance. Then a long, hot, fruitless walk where a duff tip-off suggested roosting Great Horned Owl. Only compensation was more cracking views and pics of a very obliging Cactus Wren.

Another longish drive through uninspiring countryside (to say the least) to Mecca for my first taste of Salton Sea. Found Johnson St and travelled south in hope of finding the famed Whitewater River delta. Had to retreat a long way from any water because the track was flooded across by a creek and couldn't risk my 2WD vehicle through its unknown depths. Very disappointing. Compensation in the form of perhaps my most-wanted – having grown up on a diet of Roadrunner and Coyote cartoons (I always felt sorry for Coyote. How smug was that Roadrunner!) the bird had iconic status for me. As I drive slowly back a long-legged, long-tailed bird bounds out into the track briefly, then back into the mesquite not to be seen again. Neurons fire, cogs click over, and expletives are muttered, as I realise I've just seen my top target: **Greater Roadrunner**.

I stop on 111 at a sad, seedy looking truck stop to ask for directions to Whitewater River delta, but the proprietor has never heard of it, so I head south. Stopped at a few beaches and noted 100s of **White Pelican** with odd breeding knobs on their bills, as well as **California Gulls**, **Ring-billed Gulls**, 100s **Eared Grebes**, **Caspian Terns** and a few waders. Aiming for the famous Wister Unit I seemed to travel forever south, getting further and further from the sea. Wondered where all the roads heading west were. All I could see were tracks but I could have sworn on the map there were roads. Unfortunately the map I had was stored on my memory stick that suffered catastrophic failure the day before and I had not downloaded it again. Asked the satnav to find "Wister" but no dice. I was lost. Finally came to a sign that said "Wister Wash" and thought this must be it so I headed off along the track. A few interesting birds noted including **Merlin** and an inquisitive **Osprey**, lots of **White-faced Ibis**, hirundines, etc, but this couldn't be the place described in other trip reports. Backtracked to 111 and headed south again, now finding Wister Unit only a few miles on from my rather wasted diversion. Seemed most unpromising but suddenly I noticed movement on the ground in the machinery compound and to my delight there were about 20 **Gambel's Quail** there. Also a couple of doves which were distant but when they took off their

long tails and chestnut wings were enough to identify them (in retrospect) as **Inca Doves**. After trying to photograph the quails I was walking back to the car when from nowhere, only metres in front of me swooped a **Lesser Nighthawk**. This was another of my top targets but expectation had been low since I was fairly early in the season and perhaps they were not back yet. This bird proceeded to swoop around for a 15-20 seconds, but always too agile for the camera, before it disappeared. I hoped it had roosted in an obvious looking bush in the carpark (I couldn't see anywhere else it could have gone) but I failed to relocate it. This would be my only Lesser Nighthawk of the trip, but still a great bird to see in broad daylight. Also here my first **Abert's Towhee**, and the only **Verdin** of the trip, an all too brief view of a small bird with a yellow head before it dropped out of sight into dense cover. I drove about a bit but failed to find a more birdy area so I headed south again on 111 until I came to the turnoff to Sonny Bono National Wildlife Refuge and Red Hill Marina. Afternoon was drawing into evening rapidly and there was not much at the NWR. I missed out RHM and headed south again making for Brawley as the light faded. One last memorable birding moment as I am just about to give up and go flat chat to Westmoreland I spy a lump on a bank next to the road. Is it a lump? No, shit! It's a **Burrowing Owl**. It sat tight as I reversed up and took some record shots from the car window, then still sat tight as I approached for some frame-fillers. Magic. Now bombed to Brawley hoping for room at the inn. Fortunately there is! Brawley Inn a reasonably comfortable place, doing its best to be upmarket in what is a fairly isolated, down-market place. Settled in and drove around for some food. I'd asked for directions to a good Mexican place with images of a big meal washed down by several coronas and a margarita, but what I found was a seedy, unlicensed joint. The food was good though, and afterwards I contentedly settled back into my hotel to re-read reports to gen up for tomorrow. It hadn't felt like the bird-filled day I had been anticipating, perhaps because of my mistakes in navigation, and wasted time in the wrong places, but on reflection I'd missed very few targets and seen some belters. A great day after all.

26/3

I devoted the morning to following, fairly closely the ordered site list on the excellent Southwest Birders web pages <http://southwestbirders.com>. Free wireless internet at the hotel had enabled me to download the pages and map again and even print them out while I took a pre-dawn breakfast. I was checked out and on the road as the sun was rising, first stop Cattle Call Park in the southwest corner of Brawley. As this took me through some pleasant looking suburbia I started to revise somewhat my harsh assessment of the town from the night before. In the NE corner I stopped and walked, noting **Mourning Doves**, **Collared Doves**, several **Mockingbirds** and a tantalising glimpse of a brown bird with a dark throat and down-curved bill. Fortunately it popped back up to join the Mockingbirds revealing itself as a **Cactus Wren**. As I drove slowly past the SW corner where there is a children's playground one of my targets popped into view near the apparatus: **Gila Woodpecker**. **Great-tailed Grackles** called from everywhere. Neither of my other targets here White-winged Dove or Common Ground Dove was apparent and after a while I headed north towards site 3, Finney Lake. Stopped en route next to

an immense flock of **Yellow-headed Blackbirds**, maybe 2000 birds, along with several hundred **Cattle Egret** and 100 or so **Great Egret**. Also **Kildeer** here.

Found approach to Finney Lake and noted **Inca** and **Common Ground Doves** on the track. Not much in the camping area so drove on beyond towards the mesquite area on the eastern side of the lake. The website's assurance that Crissal Thrasher was "expected" here gave me unjustified confidence this would be easier than is suggested in multiple trip reports. Unsurprisingly I had no joy despite spending a good bit of time in some of the denser mesquite occasionally playing its call on my mobile phone. Though the day had commenced calm, now powered by the sun, the wind was starting to pick up, not helping birding conditions. Best birds were some more **Abert's Towhee, Phainopepla, Northern Harrier**, and lifer **Black-tailed Gnatcatcher**. 100s of hirundines swooping over a smaller section of the lake were probably Tree Swallows but may have been Bank; like a dude I didn't stop to id and likewise I overlooked various species on the water when an overly quick scan of the buffeted reeds fringing the lake looked unpromising for least bittern. A final walk around the campsite in case I had missed a Lesser Nighthawk earlier (no, I hadn't) and I trundled the 2 or so miles north to Ramer Lake.

Here the 1000s of **Red-winged Blackbirds** were making a racket, but the undoubted stars were two **Greater Roadrunner**. Initially great views of one trotting along the track. I drove beyond where it seemed to have dived in for cover and pulled the car into a position where I had a good view and waited. Worked like a charm, the car providing an excellent hide. I snapped away and then tried the same again a little closer. Missed it as it came out ran and the dived for cover again but amazingly a second bird, much bolder came out and stood in the road for a good few minutes allowing excellent study and pics, esp when it gave splayed its feather, warming its body up..

Next was a quick recce of site 6, Sperry Rd, where the houses at the south end produced **Common Ground Dove**. Also **Western Meadowlark** fairly common from here on.

End of March is clearly still a transition time in the area. While some of the migrants and breeders have arrived, others have not (or at least not in great numbers), and there seemed also to be some winter stragglers around. For this reason I decided to follow on to sites 7, 8, 9, primarily sites for wintering Mountain Plover and longspurs, but had not joy at either. Best birds were **Long-billed Curlew** near Calipatria State Prison and **Savannah Sparrow** along Hooper Rd. I now bombed down Eddins Rd to Red Hill Marina, arriving around 11.30. I scanned across the shallow water (many meters from the road) noting various fairly distant gulls and waders, resolving to scope them on my return. An area straight ahead seemed promising also but initially I turned sharp left to up to red hill itself. There I found a single large gull that looked very good for **Yellow-footed Gull** eating away at a dead fish, as well as **Marbled Godwits**, peeps, Dowitchers, **Ring-billed Gulls**. It was getting quite warm now and I stopped again at the area of water immediately north of

the sharp-left to the red hill where two female birders were already scanning and scoping. There was lots of activity here with dozens of **American Avocet** and **Black-necked Stilts**, several nearby **Cinnamon Teal**, **Green-winged Teal**. 100s of **Northern Shoveler**, many **Least Sandpipers**, and a few **Western Sandpipers**. Scanning with the scope I picked out a single **Pintail**, and two **Gull-billed Terns** flew overhead. I walked on further to where the two women were standing but they didn't engage and when I heard one say to the other "well there's lots of those big black ones" (referring to a few hundred Double-crested Cormorants) as she leafed through a field guide I realised they could offer me nothing.

As I retraced my path in the car back to Shrimpf Rd I stopped again to scan across the "marina" shallows. The sun was now high and heat haze took its toll. The wind had also continued to pick up steadily and I sat on the ground using the car as a shelter. A large group of **Ring-billed Gulls** and various shorebirds, sat about 100m away, but nothing new.

I stopped again at SBNWR where I checked out the hummingbird feeder outside the (closed) visitor centre, but there was no activity and I pressed on to Obsidian Butte, another spot well known for Yellow-footed. This was a curious place next to one of the several thermal power generation plants but the birds were much closer here. The bird selection was similar, though closer, but I also added **Lesser Yellowlegs**, and a pair of **Say's Phoebe** was another nice addition as I left the site.

I now drove non-stop to Westmoreland for fuel and lunch. I bought food and water supplies at a grocery store and also grabbed a tasty Mexican lunch of rolled tacos, before making my way to SBNWR Unit 1 for the first time. I had got my timing wrong and should have come here yesterday evening (and would have had I not cocked up navigation and confused the two "Sonny Bono" sites) for Clapper Rail, but now as I arrived the wind was steady 20mph, gusting to 30 and the prospects for good new birds were bleak. The wind was so forceful that at times I had trouble walking into it and standing straight, and the noise from the reeds rustling in the gale drowned out any avian utterances. I cursed myself again for not coming here the previous evening for a decent crack at Yuma Clapper Rail. The trip wasn't entirely wasted because I saw hundreds of Dowitchers, **American Avocets**, and picked up **Horned Lark** in a field on Vendelx Rd as well as 3 lingering **Snow Goose**.

It had been a good morning, but the afternoon would not pan out so well. Delayed by a long queue at the US border control, I headed north-west to the Anza-Borrego Desert Park, about an hour away, with the intention of spending the afternoon and first few hours of Sunday looking for more desert birds, with Le Conte's Thrasher a high priority. The desert was certainly more aesthetically appealing than Salton Sea, with interesting cactus plants scattered about, and many wildflowers in bloom. I stopped a few times for photos and to look for birds but the wind was forcing everything to take cover. I saw nothing other than **Common Raven** all the way to the turnoff to Borrego Springs. At this point I decided to drive on to Julian in the hope I could see

some interesting stuff at the feeders at the famous Birdwatcher shop there. The road was scenic, but slow and windy, and by the time I got to Julian, an attractive historic town in the mountains it was cloudy and really quite cold, but still blowing a gale. After refuelling I popped in to The Birdwatcher for a quick look and a squiz at the feeders. Sadly there was no activity from hummingbirds but the seed feeders held a number of **Lesser Goldfinch**. With the afternoon slipping away birdless I decided to drive to Borrego Springs via Tamarisk Grove campsite and Yacqui Pass, and keep my fingers crossed the wind would drop. After the descent from Julian I pulled into a small parking lot by an attractive looking valley, Plum Canyon. I had intended only to take a photo but as I stepped out of the car I heard a hummingbird and realised that the wind here was mercifully just a stiff breeze. This was the best birding of the afternoon as I located several **Anna's Hummingbirds** buzzing around the place, several very smart lifer **Black-throated Sparrows**, another desert target, an unidentified Sparrow, and numerous *Selasphorus* Hummers (Allen's or Rufous). Sadly the wind started to pick up again as I left after about 30mins of really enjoyable birding in an unusual and beautiful environment.

Tamarisk Grove campsite was closed and a walk around yielded tons of **Yellow-rumped Warblers** but nothing else of note, and no sign of the famous Long-eared Owls. Yacqui Pass was scenic but at the few stops I made the wind was still hampering birding and I didn't find one of my targets, Rock Wren, here.

Descending to Borrego Springs I discovered that this name refers to a fairly loose widely spread community and I had some difficulty locating a "town" centre, though a map kindly provided me by Nick Bonomo gave me a street name I could punch into the satnav to find my final destination of the day, Old Springs Rd at the end of Palm Canyon Drive, about 4 miles beyond what appeared to be the main settlement. I arrived thinking that I was unlikely to succeed with my target, Le Conte's thrasher, but planned a dawn assault. This evening I was here for want of any birds elsewhere. Fortunately the wind had dropped a bit by 17.30 as I arrived, but the area appeared as birdless as everywhere else. A **Northern Harrier** cruised in the distance, while a medium-sized long-tailed bird perched on a mesquite bush got my heart racing. It was a **Loggerhead Shrike**, a lifer, so this was good, but they were the only two birds I saw for 20 more minutes. Every now and then I played a burst of Le Conte's calling or singing on my mobile phone but had no response. I was now about 400m from the car when another long-tailed bird caught my eye soon after a short burst from the phone: I clapped bins on it and there it was, **Le Conte's Thrasher**, you bloody beauty. I fired off some record shots and then spent the next 15min stalking it and occasionally getting glimpses perched on the mesquite or running between bushes. Later reference to my photos shows it had just caught a lizard and was running around with that in its bill. As the sun set dropped behind the dark clouds the light faded and I headed back to the car well chuffed. A quick drive around the Roadrunner Club looking for houses with feeders yielded no hummers, but I hoped it would be useful recce for Sunday morning now that the specific target was in the bag.

Now I ran into another logistical problem. All the motels in Borrego Springs were fully booked. What to do? Take a chance on Julian, head somewhere else like Hemet (and try for Tricolored Blackbird the next day), or retrace my steps to Brawley? The kind motel owner in Borrego Springs helped me call the Brawley Inn and thankfully they had a room, so between 7.30 and 8.30 I bombed back along 78 to the same spot as last night.

27/3

Another dawn start saw me trying Cattle Call Park again hoping this time to pick up White-winged Dove and to try to find house with a feeder for my last crack at Costa's. As I drove through the suburbs a dove on the wires caught my eye and I stopped for photos. This seemed at first to be **White-winged Dove**, but then I started to doubt my own judgement. Was it just a collared sitting funny so as make the edge of the wing look white? No it wasn't, it was a genuine White-winged and I would find out later with a bit more experience – but the Nat Geographic illustration wasn't helpful in the slightest.

I started in the desert garden area at the top hoping the flowers might be attractive to hummers but this was devoid of birdlife so I headed down to the children's play area in the SW where I'd had Gila Woodpecker the day before, noting a **Cactus Wren** by the perimeter fence en route. Yet again the **Gila** was there and I snapped a couple of pics from the car window again before I realised there were three other birders there also grilling him. I parked and wandered over and asked if I would mind them joining them for a few minutes. They were very friendly and this was a huge stroke of luck for me, because the tall guy with the moustache was none other than Bob Miller, whose gen I had been using all weekend. I pointed out the Cactus Wren I'd just seen, and a couple of **Abert's Towhee's** also appeared. Bob said the big trees we were under were a regular roost for Great Horned Owl and I needed no further encouragement to join them scanning – unsuccessfully ☹. I picked up a **Wilson's Warbler** and Bob pointed out an **Orange-crowned Warbler** before picking a great find, **Green-tailed Towhee**. He concluded this must be a migrant because if it had overwintered it would surely have been seen by other birders. Bob gave me some gen for a house on Willard with feeders up, and also renewed my enthusiasm for finding a White-winged Dove. My (at the time) doubtful earlier one notwithstanding, I was beginning to think none were about, not having arrived back yet (the truth is a sizeable number overwinter, and I had already seen one – but would see more during the morning). He also showed me a proof is his forthcoming site-guide with Henry Deitweiler. Also here Bob pointed out a flock of 40-50 **Chipping Sparrows** feeding on the ground before I left the three and drove back up about a mile to find the house he'd described. I watched the comings and goings of a few Anna's from the car until another dove attracted my attention and I wandered down the road to see what I now concluded was an unequivocal **White-winged Dove** (in the process confirming the earlier one the life bird). As I walked back the very friendly owners of the house came out and invited me to watch from closer. **Anna's** were regular visitors but twice I had brief views of what I assume were male **Costa's**, though the views were so brief and

inconclusive I am loath to tick it as a lifer. The first one, I locked bins on a visitor to the feeder just as the gorgette caught the sun for less than a second, and here the colour was purple, not pink, though not as dark a colour as I was expecting, more lilac. Even before the pulse could start racing it had gone. The second bird arrived with its side to me so the gorgette appeared all dark – but this was different from all the Anna's before because here I could see the white face behind the eye, between the metallic feathers above and below, almost like a white stripe from the eye leading backwards. I knew this was different from all the Anna's I'd seen, but not if it was a significant field mark. In any case the view again was incredibly brief, before this candidate, like the first, was chased off by an aggressive Anna's. Later reference to Nat Geog does show a gap in the gorgette of Costa's, but no mention is made in the text. In retrospect, having consulted other texts and looked at photos on the web, I am now sure these were both Costa's, but really want better views for a life tick.

Bob and the New Jersey birders drove past and said they'd had some Western Kingbirds back down at Cattle Call so I drove back down for this potential lifer. First up a **Say's Phoebe** performed well next to the horse pens, then four stonking **Western Kingbirds** on the fence as described by Bob. I returned to the house for final crack at the feeders and looking up found 4 more Western Kingbirds on wires behind the house. Nice one. It had been a good morning in calm conditions, and though I had spent much longer in Brawley than intended, it was well worth it.

A quick stop at RHM yielded my first Salton Sea **Snowy Plovers**, and many of the same birds as yesterday, and final port of call on my way north was Wister Unit again. I had hoped to find the nighthawk again, but he was nowhere to be seen. A couple of **Gambel's Quail** strutted about, **Black-tailed Gnatcatchers** were cute and a **Hooded Oriole** added colour. As I was about to leave, loud calling from dense reeds near the track revealed the presence of a very close **Yuma Clapper Rail**, but I could get no view to it, and it would not be budged from its complete concealment less than two or three metres away, reminding me of our encounter with Brush Turkey in New Ireland.

I bade goodbye to Salton Sea and let the Satnav guide me along the highways to LAX, fortunately not encountering any notorious LA traffic, because I had used up all my buffer on the Clapper Rail. All in all, in the words of local resident Larry David: "Pretty good. Pretty, pretty good."

Full list

Red-throated Loon	SB
Clark's Grebe	SB
Western Grebe	SB
Eared Grebe	lots at SS
American White Pelican	100s, 1000s Salton Sea
Brown Pelican	many in and around SB

Double-crested Cormorant	100s
Brandt's Cormorant	one photographed at SB Harbor
Black-crowned Night Heron	several roosting at SB Harbor marina and a couple at Devereux
Cattle Egret	100s with Yellow-headed Blackbirds nr Finney Lake
Snowy Egret	common
Great White Egret	common
Great Blue Heron	common
White-faced Ibis	100s at Salton Sea
Snow Goose	3 lingering at SBNWR (Unit 2, south)
Mallard	do you care?
Gadwall	2 at Devereux, SBA, and 2 at SS????
Green-winged Teal	several picked out at Red Hill Marina
American Wigeon	a couple at Devereux
Pintail	2 lingering at RHM
Cinnamon Teal	several seen well at RHM, unticking distant stringy views from Sierra Valley last year
Northern Shoveler	1000s at Red Hill Marina and others about the SS
Ruddy Duck	a few at Devereux and 100s (1000s?) at SS
Surf Scoter	at least one picked male out with white neck from a distant scoter raft at SB Harbor; others unidentified
[Yuma Clapper Rail]	one called loudly but hidden from a few metres away at Wister Unit on am of 27 th
American Coot	enjoyed this sp as a lifer in Sierra Valley last year, but now a trash bird for me too ☺
American Avocet	100s, maybe 1000s at RHM and SBNWR Unit 1 (south)
Black-necked Stilt	a couple at Devereux, dozens at RHM and elsewhere SS
Snowy Plover	80 at Coal-Oil Point and a few at RHM
Semi-palmated Plover	1 at RHM
Kildeer	SB Harbor and various other places
Black-bellied Plover	10 at Deveraux, dozens at Obsidian Butte and RHM
Marbled Godwit	dozens at RHM
Wimbrel	one on East Bach then several at Devereux
Long-billed Curlew	2 near Calipatria State Prison
Willet	Coal-Oil point and a few other places
Lesser Yellowlegs	a few at Obsidian Butte
Spotted Sandpiper	one at Devereux
Long-billed Dowitcher	45 at Devereux, and 100s at SBNWR Unit 2
Black Turnstone	12 at SB Harbor
Dunlin	10 at Devereux coming into summer plumage
Sanderling	Coal-Oil Point, SB
Western Sandpiper	12 at Deveraux, more at SS
Least Sandpiper	25 at Devereux, 100s at SS
Bonaparte's Gull	SB
Ring-billed Gull	common

California Gull	many
Yellow-footed Gull	a single bird at RHM looked very good for this bird which winters scarce wintering bird
Western Gull	a few in amongst the Cals at Goleta Beach
Caspian Tern	several at SS
Elegant Tern	several at Goleta Beach
Gull-billed Tern	2 at RHM
Black Skimmer	4 at SB East Beach / Harbor
California Quail	4 Nojoqui Falls
Gambel's Quail	20 Wister Unit and a few at various other spots around SS
Osprey	a distant bird north SS, then one inquisitive bird at Wister Wash
Red-tailed Hawk	common raptor
American Kestrel	common but beautiful dainty raptor, seen at most sites
Sharp-shinned Hawk	one perched at Nojoqui Falls , one at Big Morongo and another at SS
Inca Dove	Wister unit, Finney Lake, a few other spots around SS
White-winged Dove	Brawley
Common Ground Dove	Finney Lake, Cattle Call Park
Lesser Nighthawk	1 at Wister Unit, 4pm
Burrowing Owl	1 on Gentry Rd a few miles north of Westmoreland
Northern Flicker	Los Alamos CP
Gila Woodpecker	1-2 Playground at Cattle Call Park 26 th and 27 th
Nuttall's Woodpecker	1 in the rain at Nojoqui Falls CP
Acorn Woodpecker	12+ at Nojoqui and several at Los Alamos CP.
Violet-Green Swallow	lots at Devereux
Western Bluebird	Nojoqui Falls and thereafter common
Brown-headed Cowbird	lots in Los Alamos and various other places
Brewer's Blackbird	Los Alamos and other places
Yellow-headed Blackbird	2000 in an impressive flock nr railway before Finney Lake
Red-winged Blackbird	1000s all over, esp at Ramer lake
Greater Roadrunner	Johnson St, Mecca, and 2 at Ramer Lake
Yellow-billed Magpie	up to 6 at Los Alamos CP, 12 off 101
Northern Mockingbird	common
Western Scrub-jay	Los Alamos CP and SS??
Common Raven	various
Cassin's Kingbird	Big Morongo
Western Kingbird	4 Cattle Call, and 4 in Willard, Brawle, 1 at Wister Unit on 27 th
Vermillion Flycatcher	Covington Park
<i>Empidonax</i> Flycatcher	Finney Lake, unidentified
Black Phoebe	one of the commonest birds of the trip
Say's Phoebe	Gentry Rd, nr Obsidian Butte, Cattle Call Park
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher	Finney Lake and Wister Unit
House Wren	Big Morongo
Bewick's Wren	Big Morongo

Cactus Wren	Coachella Palms and Cattle Call Park, Brawley
Pygmy Nuthatch	Los Alamos CP
Bushtit	Nojoqui Falls and various other places. Quite common
Oak Titmouse	Nojoqui Falls
Yellow-rumped Warbler	first at East Beach, then everywhere
Common Yellowthroat	one at Devereux, another couple at Big Morongo
Wilson's Warbler	2 at Cattle Call Park
Orange-crowned Warbler	at least one at Cattle Call Park
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	one photographed at Big Morongo and identified later; several at Cattle Call Park
House Sparrow	at the hotel and various other places
White-crowned Sparrow	common
Golden-crowned Sparrow	Nojoqui Falls
Chipping Sparrow	Cattle Call Park
Black-chinned Sparrow	Plum Canyon, Anza-Borrego
Rufous-sided Towhee	Nojoqui Falls (also called Spotted)
California Towhee	common at Devereux and also seen at Morongo
Abert's Towhee	Wister Unit, Cattle Call Park and Finney Lake
Green-tailed Towhee	Cattle Call Park, a great find by Bob Miller
Phainopepla	Big Morongo and SS
California Thrasher	Big Morongo
Le Conte's Trasher	1 at Borrego Springs. Cracker!
Lesser Goldfinch	Big Morongo and Covington Park, Julian
Lawrence's Goldfinch	Covington Park
House Finch	Nojoqui Falls, Big Morongo, Cattle Call Park
Loggerhead Shrike	Borrego Springs, Old Spring Rd

112 trip birds
40 lifers