

Holiday Highlights
California
5 – 20 September 2009

Leaders: David Wimpfheimer and Darren Rees

Guests: John Duerden, John Ellis, Chris & Jean Parrott, Keith & Liz Barton, Pauline Potheary, Gary Heath and Alison Frogley

Day 1 It's a long transfer from Heathrow to California, but when we finally arrive at San Francisco we are met by our local guide David Wimpfheimer, a man who knows the way to San Jose, and lots of other places. We drive south through Silicon Valley and catch a few birds along the way: Red-tailed Hawk, White-tailed Kite, Turkey Vultures, Double-crested Cormorants, Mourning Doves and American Kestrel. After a short stop for a bite to eat at an American restaurant, we drive on further to our base for the next five nights, Monterey – it's been an exhausting travel day.

Day 2 Most people's body clocks are still on UK time so an early morning bird-watch is less of a chore than you might think. A quick visit to Laguna Grande at Estero Park kicks off the bird list with Black Phoebe, Scrub Jay, Pied-billed Grebe, Great-tailed Grackle, American Coot, Black-crowned Night Heron and lots and lots of Western Gulls. The east coast gulls are hip, I really dig the plumes they wear, and the southern gulls with their fancy curls, they knock me out when I'm down there. I wish they all could be California Gulls but they're not. They're Western Gulls! Elsewhere, migrants are passing through the bushes and trees and we see Yellow Warbler, Wilson's Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Orange-crowned Warbler (thanks Garry), Song Sparrow, Oregon Dark-eyed Junco and Anna's Hummingbirds. All before breakfast!

After coffee and muffins we drive along the coast to Moonglow Dairy where a series of cattle yards backs onto a salt-marsh accessible by a well-worn path. In the fields nearby are our first California (or Beechey's) Ground Squirrels and Killdeer. There are large groups of Blackbirds, or Icterids, around the dusty yards and we can separate Brown-headed Cowbirds, Brewer's, Bi-coloured and Tri-coloured Blackbirds.

As we approach the brackish pools there is still some morning fog around but we can see large groups of Red-necked Phalaropes present, busily feeding. There are also Least Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Willet, Marbled Godwit, Long-billed Curlew, Snowy Egret, Great Egret and a fantastic immature

Peregrine sat in the tree tops. Not to be outdone a young Red-tailed Hawk perches nearby. New birds abound with Pelagic and Brandt's Cormorant, Brown Pelican, Elegant Tern, Forster's Tern, Clark's Grebe and Western Grebe, but star attractions are the fantastic California Sea Otters that are working through the channel with some Harbour Seals – Alison can't take her scope off them.

Walking to the furthest pool we get looks at Cinnamon Teal, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Mallard and Greater Yellowlegs, and walking back we add Semi-palmated Plover and huge White Pelicans.

Our lunch stop is at nearby Moss Landing where the beach shelters a small harbour and marsh. The first pools are full of shorebirds at roost including Marbled Godwits, Willet and Long-billed Curlews. Further along we can look down to the mouth of the river where we get a real treat. A group of about twenty or so California Sea Otters are forming a large shaggy raft. There is much grooming and cavorting (the Sea Otters not the guests), and there is much 'oohing' and 'aahing'. Along the jetty there are lots of California Sea-lions and two Heerman's Gulls. Liz picks out three Brant Geese too.

From there we drive south along scenic route 1 that hugs the spectacular Big Sur coastline. Cue the Beach Boys! We certainly get around... We stop at various scenic pull-outs before getting the scopes out at Nepenthe where there is a gift shop and café with a deck that looks over a beautiful section of coastline. Lots of Turkey Vultures are in the air but we are looking for bigger things – much bigger things. We don't have to wait long either. Two big California Condors are circling over the distant hillsides and soon work their way over towards us. Fantastic! One of the rarest birds in the world and we have two individuals from the reintroduction programme, both showing wing tags.

We drive back along route 1, again stopping at scenic spots, like Bixby Bridge to photograph the splendid coastline. At one point we can look down at the twisted rocks and kelp forest, and Gary picks up a Black Oystercatcher and Alison finds a delightful Sea Otter that pulls itself out of the water and rests on the rocks. It's a fitting way to end the first day in the field, and so we wind our way back to Monterey for an evening meal at the local Mexican restaurant.

Day 3 After breakfast we drive the short distance to Monterey harbour for our first adventure at sea. We are booked on a whale-watch boat trip and we arrive at the harbour full of expectation. Monterey Bay is one of the richest areas

of water in the world, marked by deep underwater canyons that carve across the ocean floor bringing life-giving nutrients to the surface. The continental shelf is comparatively close to the California shore, and it's a bountiful feeding ground for Shearwaters, Storm Petrels, Albatrosses, Whales and Dolphins, so it's with great excitement that we take up our positions in the boat.

Leaving the harbour we pass by the protective breakwater that is stuffed with California Sea-lions and Brant's Cormorants. Smaller Black Turnstones and Surfbirds are feeding at the water's edge and close by are Pigeon Guillemots and Pacific Loon.

As we pass along the shore we can see the world famous buildings of the Monterey Aquarium and Cannery Row. Beyond is the pine clad rocky shoreline that makes up Pacific Grove and the Monterey Peninsula.

Once we hit the open water, seabirds start passing to and fro. We see our first Common Murres, Sooty Shearwaters and Rhinoceros Auklets. But we are looking for bigger things... our first cetacean is a Harbour Porpoise that breaks the water by the side of the boat – a sign of things to come. The informative crew gives us a description of the bay and its watery inhabitants and before long we are working towards an area where the boat has seen Humpback Whales. Ahead are the distinctive bushy blows of two whales and they allow us to get quite close. It's a mother and calf pairing that are both feeding and shallow diving together. Every fourth or fifth time they submerge it seems they are diving deeper and they arch their backs, bring their tails aloft revealing the distinctive and unique black and white tail flukes. No matter how many times we've seen whales, and there are many on board who have never experienced watching whales at close quarters, the sight is arresting. Awesome.

After watching the Humpback pair for a while we move to an area where the crew have spotted some Dolphins jumping. As we near the area we can see several breaking out of the water in a series of spectacular leaps. Before we close in, a small group of black and white Dall's Porpoises join the boat and speed along close by. Then everything gets moving with both White-sided and Northern Right-whale Dolphins leaping around the boat and jostling for position at the bow, trying to catch the pressure wave at the front of the boat. It's a thrill for us as well as them – they must be doing this for pure enjoyment.

Already elated the crew announce they have seen the blows from mighty Blue Whales ahead so we move on, in a state of excitement and anticipation. The greatest living beasts ever to exist on the planet, and they are here

in Monterey Bay. We see two other boats ahead and just to the right of one vessel there are two huge blows. Another mother and calf are surfacing and as the whales are exposed we see two long pale grey backs roll into view. They go on forever! As we draw nearer to watch the animals from the side we can compare them directly with one of the boats. The largest whale must be nearly three times as long as the boat – maybe more than eighty foot long! Truly awesome!

We travel with the whales for quite a while, watching them shallow dive in the rich waters. At one time they defecate in the water leaving a large pink bloom behind, testament to the amount of krill they are consuming. Whale poo! Finally we leave the Blue Whales and steam back to harbour, feeling humbled by our day with these gentle leviathans. It's going to be a tough act to follow.

After freshening up (or snoozing) we decide to go out again to do some local birding. At Breakwater Cove we can get close to the sea-lion colony at the harbour which is a visual (if not smelly) treat. Lots of animals are honking and squabbling, sleeping and scratching. Stuffed alongside these are lots of Brandt's Cormorants with Black Turnstone and Surfbirds at the water's edge. A California Sea Otter is eating an Abalone after breaking the shell open whilst lying on its back. It's just feet away in the water and a very special sight.

Afterwards we drive to nearby Carmel, an up-market seaside community with a notable former mayor, Clint Eastwood. The shore road takes us past an exquisite beach and some fine residencies, all spotlessly clean and tidy (some looking a bit Hobbity). Thankfully there is a place at the mouth of the Carmel River where we can park and look over the marsh and sand bar. It's a wonderful way to end the day and we see Green Heron, Greater Yellowlegs, Semi-palmated Plover, Least Sandpipers, Killdeer, Spotted Sandpiper, countless Brown Pelicans and Western Gulls, and confiding Virginia Rails and Sora Rails. A beautiful family of White-tailed Kites is present with two adults and two immature birds flying and hovering around. We add California Quails before checking out the nearby Spanish Mission.

Day 4 We travel east towards Hollister to explore the drier interior regions of Central California, a landscape of scrubby hillsides and parched fields. Roadside birds include Yellow-billed Magpies, Scrub Jay, Northern Flicker and Nuttall's Woodpecker and John picks up a Coyote walking across a field. At Paicines Lake there is the only large body of water for miles and it is a major attraction for birds. Although the water level is lower than we've seen, it still acts as a magnet for many species. Birds include Clark's Grebe,

Pied-billed Grebe, Mallard, Shoveler, American Coot, Greater Yellowlegs, Red-tailed Hawk, Say's Phoebe, Western Kingbird, Western Bluebird, House Finch and Black-headed Grosbeak.

Further south we take off along a dirt track to fully investigate the dry hilly landscape. At a pond close to the road we watch birds coming in to drink. These include Bell's Sage Sparrow, California Towhee, Spotted Towhee, Lesser Goldfinch and difficult-to-see Lawrence's Goldfinch. All these birds attract a Cooper's Hawk that passes through a couple of times and alights in a tree for us to scope. At another water source, this time a leaky water tank, more birds are drinking. These include Steller's Jay, California Quail, Oak Titmouse, Fox Sparrow, Oregon Junco and Nuttall's Woodpecker. Back at the junction of the main highway we stop to see a group of pretty Lark Sparrows and whilst watching these, see two magnificent Golden Eagles lifting from the ground.

At Pinnacles National Monument we park at the campground to have lunch but before we get stuck into our sandwiches Garry spots a huge bird soaring in the sky – another Condor! After we eat, a brief explore around the nearby trees and bushes yields Bushtits, Orange-crowned Warbler, Western Tanager and Acorn Woodpecker. The park is named after the rock formations of red rhyolitic sandstone and we drive to the base of the pinnacles for a closer look. We track down one of the resident birds, a Canyon Wren, alongside Bushtits, Wilson's Warbler, Western Tanager, Steller's Jay and Pacific-slope Flycatcher.

On the route back we revisit Paicines Reservoir hoping for an eagle. We get another raptor instead – a Prairie Falcon is charging around the lake putting up the ducks and waders. As well as the same species as earlier in the day, we watch a beautiful White-tailed Kite hovering before us.

Day 5 It's an early breakfast this morning as we have a date with the appropriately named Debi Shearwater, a lady who likes to pack a lot of birding into the day. Debi has pioneered pelagic bird trips along the west coast, taking boats out in search of difficult-to-see oceanic species. It is just a short journey to the quayside where we meet the irrepressible Debi and board the vessel that is going to take us out into Monterey Bay.

The birding starts at the harbour with looks at Black Turnstone and Pelagic and Brandt's Cormorants along the jetty. Nearby are Pigeon Guillemots, Pacific Loon and a Peregrine perched on a tall radio mast. Within half an hour we are seeing large groups of Sooty Shearwaters, a bird that will prove to be a benchmark species, and we start noticing single birds differing

from the dark Sootys, adding lazy-winged Pink-footed Shearwater to the list. We also see our first auk species, adding Common Murre and the curious Rhinoceros Auklet.

The numbers of Shearwaters grow steadily and amongst a large raft of Sooty we see our first Pink-footed Shearwater that cruises by with a seemingly lazier wing beat. We are constantly coming across new things, with our first Parasitic Jaegers (Arctic Skuas) and dainty Cassin's Auklets. Then we see the first huge-winged Albatross that glides by in the wake of the boat. It's a large brown bird with a pale forehead and improbably long, kinked wings - a Black-footed Albatross, effortlessly cruising the ocean.

Later, we have more luck with cetaceans, enjoying fantastic views of a Humpback Whale that draws attention to itself by 'lob-tailing' when it effectively stands on its head, tail well above the surface, and repeatedly slaps its tail fins on the water. Pretty tricky when you weigh forty tons or more!

More new things cross our path – Blue shark on the surface, a close Tufted Puffin with a bright orange bill, striking Buller's Shearwater amongst the Sooty flocks, dusky Northern Fulmars, Pomarine Jaegers chasing gulls, and small flocks of bright-winged Sabine's Gulls. After a while we notice some disturbance in the water off to the right. The surface is bubbling with a big group of Dolphins leaping out and heading in our direction. The captain steers a course that brings us parallel to what we estimate is over 400 animals jumping and generally messing around. Groups go across our wake, dart to and fro, port to starboard, and those up front get a spectacular display of bow riding. From close up we can easily identify two species travelling and having fun together; both Pacific White-sided and Right-whale Dolphins are having fun and surf in' U.S.A. It's amazing.

Debi is keen to show us more and wants to locate the large groups of Storm Petrels that are in the area, and with patience we find them. Hundreds of Ashy Storm Petrels are dancing about and at least one white-rumped Wilson's Storm Petrel is present.

It's been an impressive tally and a bewildering day at sea, and we arrive back at the quay elated with what we've seen. There's still some time before our evening meal, so we drive along Pacific Grove and add more species including Wandering Tattler, Black Oystercatcher, Spotted Sandpiper, Black-bellied Plover and more Sea Otters, including a mother that carries and grooms her young cub on her belly. 'Awwwh!' Also there are Egrets and big groups

of terns that are resting on the kelp beds (Elegant, Common, and Forster's Terns). All this and a sunset too!

Day 6 Our travel day starts with an optional visit to Miranda Creek to catch any passerines on the move – we manage Bushtits, Orange-crowned and Wilson's Warbler, Acorn and Downy Woodpecker. After a final breakfast in Monterey we start our journey north. Our first stop is at Moss Landing, again busy with birds and otters (well we must take one last look!). We see Willet, Marbled Godwits, Short-billed Dowitchers, Long-billed Curlew, Sanderling and many Western and Least Sandpipers. We add Bufflehead, and Surf Scoter and a Red-throated Loon that are both sat on the sand at the water's edge.

At Struve Slough in Watsonville we stop to scan more wetland habitat. We see Red-shouldered Hawk, White-tailed Kite, Moorhen, Coot, Cinnamon Teal, Mallard, Violet-green Swallows, Belted Kingfisher, Yellow Warbler, Black Phoebe, Snowy and Great Egrets. At a second viewpoint we add more Short-billed Dowitchers and Green Heron.

Further north we visit Ano Nuevo State Park, well known for its colonies of California Sea Lion and Northern Elephant Seal. A walk through the scrub takes us to an elevated point above the cliffs where we can scan the bay, where there are lots of Brandt's Cormorants, Western Grebes, a Red-throated Loon, two Sea Otters and a White-crowned Sparrow. At the furthest point of our walk, North Point, we can view the beach that is busy with Northern Elephant Seals. On the sand in front of us are nearly a hundred or so female and immature male Elephant Seals. Some are testing each other and sparring, others laze around snoozing, some flick sand over their bodies to cool off.

Afterwards we drive north through San Francisco stopping at the iconic Golden Gate Bridge to wonder at the view across the bay to Alcatraz and the city skyline – a sight familiar through countless movies and TV images, yet as marvellous as we'd hoped for. Finally we arrive at our base for the next three nights and David's hometown, Inverness. It's been a long travel day so we take the easy option and eat at the Thai Restaurant next door – a new experience for many!

Day 7 It's an easy day planned with a leisurely breakfast at the local café – great coffee and pastries! We are on David's home patch and he is keen for us to explore Point Reyes National Seashore. We start in the south where close to the coastguard's station at Palomarin there is a banding operation at the bird observatory. We arrive and there are birds around the car park

including a Red-breasted Nuthatch. We are introduced to two researchers who are conducting banding operations, Ed and Natalia. They have been on the rounds of mist nets and show us Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Oregon Junco and Song Sparrow. We watch them weigh, measure, age and sex the birds before banding them and releasing them. We join them for a tour of the mist nets and see Natalia untangle another flycatcher from the fine mesh nets. It's a fascinating morning watching and learning from these experts. Before we leave we see our first Sharp-shinned Hawk and Ospreys flying over.

Lunch is at nearby Bolinas and we have the perfect place for our sandwiches. David's friend Keith Hansen has a boathouse with a view across the lagoon and sand bars to the distant hills. Keith is a colourful character with his flowing grey locks kept in check with a pony tail. Earring, shorts and sandals add to the mix, but hey, he's an artist and lives in California! We are charmed with tales of his yard list and start our own lunch list: Brown Pelican, Double-crested and Pelagic Cormorants, Marbled Godwits, Willet, Black-bellied Plover, Snowy Egret, Great Egret, Belted Kingfisher, Osprey, White-tailed Kite, Elegant and Caspian Terns along with others.

After lunch we have an hour to explore pretty Bolinas and its charming ramshackle array of shops and galleries, one of which doubles as Keith's studio. As well as being a fine bird artist with lots of t-shirts and prints adorning the walls, Keith also keeps those bird feeders well stocked, and both Anna's and Rufous Hummingbirds are at the feeders when we visit.

Leaving Bolinas we walk along the lagoon at Pine Gulch Creek where the path leads through some lush riparian woods. All seems quiet and there are few species but we do manage some special birds. In broad daylight, two Great Horned Owls are sat in some trees giving us wonderful views. Other species include Warbling Vireo, Northern Harrier, Osprey and Egrets.

At Five Brooks, a small freshwater lake, Mill Pond stands at the base of the hills surrounded by tall trees. The lake holds five Wood Duck including two smart drakes. We walk the circuit around the lake and see Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Bushtit, Warbling Vireo, Bewick's Wren, Townsend's Warbler, Scrub Jay and hear Pileated Woodpecker (sadly not seen).

The final stop of the day is at the visitor centre at Bear Valley – birds on the roadside on the way back include California Quail and Towhee, White-tailed Kites, Green Heron and a swimming dog (no otter!). This is not the last mammal though as on the way back from our evening meal we see a Striped Skunk crossing the road.

Day 8 After a stormy night we awake to a damp Inverness, but undeterred we venture out before breakfast to see what birds we can find. The Limantour road takes us over the high ridge that runs the length of Point Reyes. Tall Douglas Firs and Bishop Pines are festooned with mosses, lichens and ferns testament to the moist air that pervades here. We stop at the top and walk about in the misty conditions. Quail are feeding along the road with Juncos. The bushes hold some birds: Chestnut-backed Chickadees, Bushtits, Hutton's Vireos along with Townsend's and Wilson's Warblers. Some get a look at a Swainson's Thrush whilst others glimpse Winter Wren although they both soon disappear.

Breakfast is really welcome after the cool mist and drizzle, and afterwards we decide to drive further west to the outer reaches of the park (checking the local White-tailed Kites opposite the bakery first). Over the ridge the fog is thicker so we descend to Drakes Beach hoping for better visibility. It works a treat and we can scan the sand and calm water beyond. Out at sea are Surf Scoters, Western and Red-necked Grebe, Pacific Loon, Brandt's Cormorants, and Harbour Porpoise. We walk around the trees hoping to find migrants and instead we find owls! First, one Barn Owl, then another, and later, more – four altogether! They are sandier individuals than we are used to at home but equally as stunning. Next up, we walk through the reeds to check a small lake hidden from view. What a treat – Muskrat, Gadwall, Coot, Pied-billed Grebe, Northern Harrier and four River Otters! We watch them busy fishing along the reedy edge, oblivious to our presence.

From Drakes Beach we head further along the peninsula across the open fields that are still shrouded with low mist. It has grounded many of the raptors and lots of American Kestrels and Red-tailed Hawks are perched on posts. We stop next to one dairy ranch that has a stand of pines and a pool nearby. The water attracts Red-necked Phalaropes, Least Sandpiper and a Long-billed Dowitcher. David finds more owls in the trees – this time a family of Great Horned Owls – fantastic. Not to be outdone, four Barn Owls start flitting through the trees perching uneasily in full view – I've never seen so many owls in such a small clump of trees - blimey! Time for lunch at the Fish Docks.

By now the visibility has greatly improved and after our sandwiches we can scan the whole bay in front of us. There are lots of Loons, Grebes and Scoters, and to the left a beach with Elephant Seals. All the while Turkey Vultures and Red-tailed Hawks drift by. The nearby trees hold American Redstart, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow and Townsend's Warbler. At another view point we see Black Oystercatchers and Brandt's Cormorants on the rocks below and Chris picks out a Peregrine which races by. Our

furthest point is the lighthouse at the westernmost tip of Point Reyes and it is surrounded by fog. We walk from the car park and approach the visitor centre at the top of the cliffs. The path descends to the light below and the mist lifts enough for us to see the collection of buildings. Birds are few on the ground but we see a Surfbird (no close surf!), a Yellow Warbler and John finds a Rock Wren. Walking back to the vehicles we see Savannah Sparrow, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher and Say's Phoebe.

We can only drive north from here, and we choose to go to the far end of Point Reyes at Tomales Point. Here a herd of endangered Tule Elk has been established and now numbers over 150 animals. As we approach we see groups of females watched over by large bull Elks. We get out and watch the strutting and posturing, and occasional bugling of the dominant males – a great way to end a wonderful day in the mist. Our evening meal is at Point Reyes Station and we see yet another Great Horned Owl on the way back to the hotel.

Day 9 After breakfast we start our long transfer to Yosemite, a journey that will take us through the Coastal Range, across the Central Valley to the Sierra Nevada. En route we have a couple of bird watching stops planned, the first of which is the sewage treatment pools at Las Gallinas. We see Nuttall's Woodpecker, Mockingbird, American Avocet, Long-billed Dowitcher, Least Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs, Killdeer, Black-necked Stilt, Vaux's Swift, Violet-crowned swallow, Rough-winged Swallow, Mallard, Gadwall, Cinnamon Teal and lots of Pintail.

We drive further east passing over the Richmond Bridge with views of San Quentin, the Oakland Bridge and the city of San Francisco. Beyond in the central valley we've seen Burrowing Owls and again we are in luck enjoying fantastic sightings of these charming birds. Two birds are on show and we also see Loggerhead Shrike and our first Swainson's Hawk - Garry also finds another pair of owls a little drive further. Close by is a marina, our lunch spot and as we approach there are Cooper's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk and White-tailed Kite – obviously rich pickings for raptors in the area. We even get a pale Swainson's Hawk as we eat our sandwiches, along with perched Violet-green Swallows on the wires overhead. After lunch we drive further into the foothills of the Sierra noting lots of Red-tailed Hawks and some Meadowlarks as we cross the dry grasslands. At Joe Domecq Wildlife Preserve on the Merced River we pause for a search around the Oaks and wetland. David has seen Phainopepla here and although we fail with this species, we do see Cinnamon Teal, Woodduck, Gadwall, Moorhen, Great Blue Heron, Mockingbird and Scrub Jay. As we climb higher and higher, the scenery gets ever more dramatic particularly along the Merced Canyon.

Finally we enter Yosemite National Park and the wider pre-glaciated valley of steep granite cliffs. We can't resist stopping at the base of El Capitan, the largest of the rock faces, and can't help but wonder at the rock climbers making their 3000 ft ascents. It's a great spot to celebrate Liz's birthday with champagne no less! Finally we check in to our rooms after a tiring but bird-filled travel day.

Our evening meal is an alfresco affair, choosing the nearby pizzeria take away. While we're sitting outside enjoying our beers and pizzas we are entertained by the local nightlife. First two Raccoons are on a table tidying up, and later four start enquiring after any left-overs. We watch them climb the wooden walls and scurry around on the roof. Then John spots a squirrel with a Raccoon's tail – that ain't no Squirrel, that's a Ringtail! Two of these difficult-to-see mammals are moving around the tree above us then climb down to the roof. There's a bit of a stand off between Raccoon and Ringtail before they go about their foraging – fantastic!

Day 10 We have a pre-breakfast walk around the lodge but any birds are hard to find and there is a hint of drizzle, so we opt instead for breakfast. After eating we drive south to walk through the higher forests dominated by Lodge-pole Pines. Appropriately, Lodge-pole Chipmunks are around and we see Mountain Chickadee for the first time. Our walk is along a trail where we have seen Great Gray Owl before and we start checking the clearings. Birds are quiet with some Chickadees, Juncos, a Cooper's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk and Audubon's Warbler. Highlights are some confiding Red-breasted Nuthatches, a Brown Creeper and two Pine Grosbeaks – difficult birds to see.

We drive to our lunch spot but have to stop short when we see two White-headed Woodpeckers by the road side. Lunch is taken at the spectacular Washburn Point with views across the wild high country to Half Dome and Nevada Falls. After checking the view at Glacier Point we opt for a change of scenery and we drive to Mariposa Grove to wonder at the stand of giant Sequoias. Tree-gazing doesn't feature on many Speyside holidays but this is California and these are the largest living things on the planet. We wander through the appropriately named giants – the Fallen Monarch, the Three Graces and the mighty Grizzly Giant. To think that these have been standing here for thousands of years, and will for years to come. It's not bad for birds either with John finding a Black-backed Woodpecker, more White-headed Woodpeckers, Northern Flicker, Hairy Woodpecker and a fly over from a Pileated Woodpecker.

We are driving back towards Mariposa when we notice a car slowing down on the opposite side of the road... BEAR! A large Black Bear is wandering through the trees close to the road – everybody out! We assemble then cross to view down the slope and watch the brown or cinnamon Black Bear walking about along the tree trunks and forest floor. Amazing!

Day 11 After an early breakfast we walk around the stables along the Merced River. From the bridge we can see along a length of the river and two American Dippers are swimming and bobbing between the rocks. At the nearby apple orchard we check the trees, many of which are scarred by Sapsuckers. Gary can hear one tapping and it flies in as if on cue. Wonderful views of a Red-breasted Sapsucker. Other birds include Nashville Warbler, Black-throated Gray Warbler, Wilson's Warbler and Steller's Jay.

After some time at the visitor centre and the Ansel Adams Gallery, we have one last lunch in the impressive valley floor, then start heading for the high country. At Crane Flats we work a circuit around the meadows but failed to locate a group of Mountain Quail that have spooked as we arrive. At Olmstead Point the view across the high country is magnificent, taking in Half Dome and the rugged peaks to the east. We also get two new mammals when first a Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel scurries along the path, then a cutesy Pika pops out from amongst the rocks. Also, a pair of Clark's Nutcrackers fly over and land in a dead tree in front.

On to Tuolumne Meadows and we stop to check a dark shape on the far tree edge. It's only a Mule Deer but John is on fine form and announces he has a Marmot – wow! I've never seen one in California! We get the scopes out and find two more, along with several Belding's Ground Squirrels. The final descent from the Sierra Nevada is truly spectacular and takes us through the more arid terrain that lies on the leeward side of the range. We check in at our new base but quickly re-assemble as we can't wait to bird watch in the new habitat.

David takes us to the shores of Mono Lake, a place close to his heart and an area that he knows better than anyone. He was part of the pressure group lobbying the Los Angeles authorities to cease water extraction from this fragile and unique eco-system. In a David v Goliath legal battle, the City of Los Angeles was taken to court and found guilty of diverting water from Mono Lake, an important triumph for California's fledgling conservation movement.

We first visit the southern shore where the landscape is marked by a forest of strange Tufa rock columns, evidence of the volcanic activity in the area. It's

a remarkable sweeping landscape of Sage and Rabbit Brush, perfect calm water and pinnacles, with a backdrop of the mighty Sierra Nevada. Walking to the shore we see our first Least Chipmunk, mixed flocks of blackbirds including two Yellow-headed Blackbirds, and lots of California Gulls. The water itself is alive with birds with a continuous flotilla of Eared Grebes including one pale, leucistic bird. Garry spots a Nighthawk flying over and two Brewer's Sparrows land close by. We also see another target bird when a Sage Thrasher perches on a Tufa pillar. Rock Wren is also seen.

The drive back is along a gravel track which has attracted two Common Poorwills and we get views in the headlights. Our evening meal is an experience to behold as we dine at the Whoa Nellie Deli and are kept in check by the ebullient Matt. He tells us of his hectic weekend watching Bruce Springsteen – OK for some!

Day 12 After breakfast at 7:00am we drive north to the County Park at Mono Lake. It's quiet and birds are slow to appear but we gradually start seeing new birds. In the tall trees around the car park we see Cedar Waxwing, Downy Woodpecker, Cassin's Vireo, Northern Flicker, Lincoln's Sparrow and Red-breasted Sapsucker. Walking towards the shore of Mono Lake we start seeing the masses of birds attracted to the water. A bewildering number of Eared Grebes are joined with big numbers of Ruddy Duck, California Gulls, Avocets, and mixed waterfowl.

Driving a little further north we climb into the mountains at Virginia Lakes. A trail takes us around the small lake, through pines and along scree slopes. Clark's Nutcrackers are vocal and flying around, Mountain Chickadees busy and the scree slope proves productive for Pika and Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel. Back in the woods we glimpse Hermit Thrush and back at the feeders we enjoy fabulous views of Cassin's Finch and Belding's Ground Squirrel.

After lunch we drive back down the valley but have to stop when we see a dark bird fly-catching from a dead snag. It lands back on the tree and it is green and pink – it's a Lewis's Woodpecker. We watch for a while then another juvenile bird flies in – two birds! Elated, we drive across the high Sage plain to Bodie State Park where there is a ghost town, testament to the great gold rush of the mid 1800's. We walk the evocative streets lined with wooden shacks and even manage a few birds. Some of the resident birds of Bodie include elusive Sage Grouse – that's elusive for most of their range but not at Bodie. David finds our first bird, then we walk towards the main street and nearly stumble over three birds next to the path – superb views.

We also see Mountain Bluebird, Sage Thrasher and on the road back, two handsome Pronghorns.

David suggests we drive north to Bridgeport for ice-creams and to view the large lake there. We arrive and can't help notice that the water is stuffed with birds. Masses of Coots, Grebes and Ducks are on the water with shorebirds in the shallows and Geese on the weedy edges. All this bird life has attracted a Peregrine and we get wonderful views of a bird on a telegraph pole close to the road. Other birds include White Pelican, White-faced Ibis, Mallard, Gadwall, Pintail, Shoveler, Cinnamon Teal, Ruddy Duck, Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Greater Yellowlegs, Forster's and Common Terns. Further along the shore we stop at a marina where there are some confiding Wilson's Snipes.

It's time to leave and drive back to Lee Vining and the views in the evening light are stunning, taking in sweeps of Sagebrush and open meadows to the rugged backdrop of the Sierra Nevada. As we approach a still Mono Lake, the reflections of the sunlit hills are breathtaking – it's a perfect scene to end the day. We enjoy our last evening meal at Whoa Nellie Deli then some folk wander off into the desert for some star gazing. Holy Galaxies!

Day 13 After breakfast, we check a nearby stand of gentle Jeffery Pines where David has seen Pinyon Jays on several visits. Bingo! A small group are flying around and croaking – another new species for us. Back close to Lee Vining we stop to check the Sage brush and see Violet-green Swallow, Orange-crowned Warbler, Green-tailed Towhee (for some), and a soaring Prairie Falcon. After a last look around the feeders in town (Cassin's Finch, Pine Siskin, Spotted Towhee) and a t-shirt buying session at the visitor centre, we start heading for the coast.

Our long drive takes us across Tioga Pass and we can't resist stopping at Tuolumne Meadows to check out those Marmots. It's an inspired choice for lunch with Marmots, Ground Squirrels and an Hawaii license plate, we are nearly there John! We have a few more stops along the route through Yosemite – at Olmstead Point (nice Pikas again), Mary Lake (no Williamson's Sapsucker), and Evergreen Road. At the latter we take a walk around the forest and clearings along the Hetchy Hetchy River.

We drive towards the setting sun and stop at Tracy for an evening meal. Eventually we arrive at our last base at Half Moon Bay at 10:30 p.m. Phew!

Day 14 It's our last full day, and we leave after an early breakfast, driving north on route 1 bound for San Francisco. There is no time to stop though,

as we have a date with the Hawks at the appropriately named Hawk Hill on the Marin headlands. We take an alternative route through the city taking in both Golden Gate and Lincoln Parks that affords wonderful views across the elegant red bridge. We are soon crossing the span and climbing up to the highest point on the headland that lies across the bay. Hawk watchers are already here dutifully counting the Hawks that are flying over. However, the first group of birds we see racing over when we arrive are Vaux's Swifts. David gives us an account of the accipiter passage, at this, the best spot to witness Hawk migration on the west coast, and gives us pointers on how best to separate the two closely related accipiter species, or as we soon learn, Sharpies and Coops.

Over the next hour and a half we watch Hawks fly past this way and that, some passing underneath and giving wonderful views. Most are young birds of the year, though we do get a few adults. We all soon get the hang of telling the birds apart, and in with the mix are lots of Red-tailed Hawks, Red-shouldered Hawks, Turkey Vultures, Northern Harrier, Osprey, Kestrel, Merlin and lots more swifts. All the while the view behind over the bridge to the San Francisco skyline is magnificent.

There is one thing that isn't so good however. We can't help notice that there is a lot of activity below the hill where a fire is pumping smoke into the air. A helicopter is buzzing around assessing the situation, sirens wailing from fire trucks and it seems that matters are causing concern. Then we get the call – an officious ranger orders us to evacuate the hill, just as we were enjoying the Hawk migration. Speyside gets caught in our very own Californian wildfire!

After the commotion we take lunch at a nearby picnic site and watch as the low flying plane dumps water on the hill. Perhaps we were best being out of there after all... There are a few birds around the trees at lunch and we see Townsend Warbler, Bewick's Wren, Chestnut-backed Chickadees and some passing Caspian Terns. At Rodeo Lagoon we see Marbled Godwit, Killdeer, Great and Snowy Egret and Brown Pelicans, before ending our birding – it's time to sight-see in the city by the bay.

We drive back over the Golden Gate bridge for the Wimpfheimer whirlwind tour of San Francisco, taking in the historic Golden Gate Fort, the bright residential districts of Presidio, the steep gradients of Lombard Street complete with hairpin turns, Coit Tower and its beautiful murals, and finishing at the western lighthouse with sunset views over the ocean.

Day 15 We plan a morning bird-watching on this our travel day. The weather is not as clear as the day before and there is some mist lingering. Around the Pines in the grounds of the hotel are some birds including a delightful flock of Pygmy Nuthatches. At the nearby marina we scan from three viewpoints and clock a good assortment of birds. On the muddy beach are Western and Least Sandpipers, Sanderling, Willet and Killdeer. On the sheltered water are Greater Scaup, Western and Clarks Grebe, three Loon species, Surf Scoter and Sea-lions. On the breakwaters are lots of Brandt's Cormorants, Brown Pelicans, Black Oystercatcher and a Black Brant. A Belted Kingfisher is perched on the mast of a yacht.

Along the edge of the small airstrip are perched Red-tailed and Red-shouldered Hawks and on the runway are Black-bellied Plovers taxiing for take off. We drive to Moss Beach, checking the bushes for migrants and see Common Yellowthroat, Spotted Towhee, Chestnut-backed Chickadees, Bushtits, Anna's Hummingbird and our first House Wren.

We return to the hotel, load up the vans and travel towards the airport, stopping at the Redwoods park on the skyline ridge. Some Band-tailed Pigeons fly over while we have our lunch though they fail to perch in the treetops. At the airport we say our final thanks and farewells to David, who has shown us so much. California is a fabulously rich and varied place, and David has enabled us to see more than we had hoped for.

California Top Ten:

- 1 Northern Right Whale Dolphins
- 2 Black-footed Albatross
- 3 Lewis' Woodpecker
- 4 California Condor
- 5 Ringtail
- 6 California Sea Otter
- 7 Black Bear
- 8 Great Horned Owl
- 9 Pika and Blue Whale (Little and Large)
- 10 Burrowing Owl

Favourite Place - It's difficult to choose one place from so many fabulous landscapes: Bolinas and Keith's deck, the giant sequoias in Mariposa Grove, Monterey Bay. All are fondly remembered but it's the granite cliffs of Yosemite Valley and desert vistas around Mono Lake that get the vote.

Magic Moment - Again so many to choose from: Mother sea otter grooming her cub, sunset across Mono Lake, star-gazing in the desert, Raccoons and Ringtails with the pizzas. But the winner by a large margin is the ebullient bow-riding from White-sided and Northern Right Whale Dolphins.

Many thanks to all, and a special thanks to David Wimpfheimer whose knowledge for all things Californian knows no bounds.

Darren

BIRDS

Red-throated Loon
Pacific Loon
Common Loon
Red-necked Grebe
Eared Grebe
Pied-billed Grebe
Western Grebe
Clark's Grebe
Black-footed Albatross
Fulmar
Buller's Shearwater
Pink-footed Shearwater
Sooty Shearwater
Ashy Storm Petrel
Wilson's Storm Petrel
Brown Pelican
American White Pelican
Double-crested
Cormorant
Pelagic Cormorant
Brandt's Cormorant
Great Blue Heron
Great Egret
Snowy Egret
Green Heron
Black-crowned Night
Heron
White-faced Ibis
Canada Goose
Black Brant Goose
Wood Duck
Green-winged Teal
Cinnamon Teal
Bufflehead
Mallard
Gadwall
Northern Shoveler
American Wigeon
Northern Pintail
Ruddy Duck
Surf Scoter
Greater Scaup
California Condor
Turkey Vulture
Northern Harrier
White-tailed Kite
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Red-shouldered Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Golden Eagle

Osprey
American Kestrel
Prairie Falcon
Peregrine
Merlin
California Quail
Sage Grouse
Wild Turkey
Common Moorhen
American Coot
Virginia Rail
Sora
Black-bellied Plover
Semi-palmated Plover
Killdeer
Black Oystercatcher
American Avocet
Black-necked Stilt
Greater Yellowlegs
Willet
Spotted Sandpiper
Whimbrel
Long-billed Curlew
Marbled Godwit
Black Turnstone
Wandering Tattler
Surfbird
Sanderling
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Long-billed Dowitcher
Short-billed Dowitcher
Wilson's Snipe
Red-necked Phalarope
Red Phalarope
South Polar Skua
Pomarine Jaeger
Parasitic Jaeger
Bonaparte's Gull
Ring-billed Gull
California Gull
Western Gull
Heermann's Gull
Sabine's Gull
Caspian Tern
Elegant Tern
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Forster's Tern
Common Murre
Pigeon Guillemot
Cassin's Auklet

Rhinoceros Auklet
Tufted Puffin
Mourning Dove
Band-tailed Pigeon
Collared Dove
Feral Pigeon
Barn Owl
Great Horned Owl
Burrowing Owl
Common Nighthawk
Common Poorwill
Vaux's Swift
White-throated Swift
Anna's Hummingbird
Rufous Hummingbird
Belted Kingfisher
Acorn Woodpecker
Lewis's Woodpecker
Red-breasted Sapsucker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Nuttall's Woodpecker
Black-backed
Woodpecker
White-headed
Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Pileated Woodpecker
Western Wood Pewee
Pacific-slope Flycatcher
Hammond's Flycatcher
Black Phoebe
Say's Phoebe
Western Kingbird
Loggerhead Shrike
Warbling Vireo
Hutton's Vireo
Cassin's Vireo
Steller's Jay
Western Scrub Jay
Pinyon Jay
Clark's Nutcracker
Yellow-billed Magpie
Black-billed Magpie
Raven
American Crow
Rough-winged Swallow
Violet-green Swallow
Tree Swallow
Barn Swallow
Oak Titmouse
Mountain Chickadee

Chestnut-backed	Western Meadowlark	Brush rabbit
Chickadee	Brown-headed Cowbird	Pygmy Rabbit
Bushtit	Yellow-headed Blackbird	Montane Vole
White-breasted Nuthatch	Tricolored Blackbird	
Red-breasted Nuthatch	Bicolored Blackbird	34 Species
Pygmy Nuthatch	Brewer's Blackbird	
Brown Creeper	European Starling	
Bewick's Wren	Purple Finch	
House Wren	Cassin's Finch	
Winter Wren	House Finch	
Marsh Wren	Pine Siskin	
Canyon Wren	Lawrence's Goldfinch	
Rock Wren	Lesser Goldfinch	
American Dipper	American Goldfinch	
Wrentit		
Golden-crowned Kinglet	215 species	
Townsend Solitaire		
Mountain Bluebird	MAMMALS	
Western Bluebird	Blue Whale	
American Robin	Humpback Whale	
Swainson's Thrush	Pacific White-sided	
Hermit Thrush	Dolphin	
Northern Mockingbird	Northern Right-whale	
Sage Thrasher	Dolphin	
Cedar Waxwing	Harbor Porpoise	
Orange-crowned Warbler	Dall's Porpoise	
Yellow Warbler	Northern Elephant Seal	
Nashville Warbler	California Sea Lion	
Audubon's Warbler	Harbor Seal	
Black-throated Gray	Coyote	
Warbler	Black Bear	
Townsend's Warbler	Tule Elk	
Hermit Warbler	Black-tailed Deer	
Common Yellowthroat	Mule Deer	
Wilson's Warbler	Pronghorn	
American Redstart	Raccoon	
Western Tanager	Ringtail	
Black-headed Grosbeak	Striped Skunk	
Pine Grosbeak	California Sea Otter	
Spotted Towhee	River Otter	
California Towhee	Muskrat	
Green-tailed towhee	Sonoma Chipmunk	
Bell's Sage Sparrow	Lodgepole Pine	
Brewer's Sparrow	Chipmunk	
Savannah Sparrow	Least Chipmunk	
Lark Sparrow	Western Gray Squirrel	
White-crowned Sparrow	Eastern Fox Squirrel	
Fox Sparrow	Douglas Squirrel	
Song Sparrow	Beechey Ground Squirrel	
Lincoln's Sparrow	Belding's Ground Squirrel	
Oregon Junco	Pika	
House Sparrow	Black-tailed Jack Rabbit	