

ITINERARY

SLICE OF CALIFORNIA: SEABIRDS TO SIERRA II

September 10-19, 2019



The handsome Bell's Sparrow is found in the coastal brushlands, while the related Sagebrush Sparrow occurs inland. We'll likely see both species on the tour. Photograph by guide Chris Benesh.

We include here information for those interested in the 2019 Field Guides Slice of California tour:

- a general introduction to the tour
- a description of the birding areas to be visited on the tour
- an abbreviated daily itinerary with some indication of the nature of each day's birding outings

Those who register for the tour will be sent this additional material:

- an annotated list of the birds recorded on a previous year's Field Guides trip to the area, with comments by guide(s) on notable species or sightings (may be downloaded from our web site)
- a detailed information bulletin with important logistical information and answers to questions regarding accommodations, air arrangements, clothing, currency, customs and immigration, documents, health precautions, and personal items
- a reference list
- a Field Guides checklist for preparing for and keeping track of the birds we see on the tour
- after the conclusion of the tour, a list of birds seen on the tour

Within the US, California has few rivals when it comes to habitat diversity. It seems that every few miles things change, which makes for a wonderful assortment of birds, from Marbled Murrelets nesting in old growth coastal forests, Sooty Shearwaters visiting from the southern hemisphere, and Black-footed Albatrosses on foraging runs from colonies in Hawaii, to enigmatic Wrentits, Nuttall's and White-headed woodpeckers, Williamson's Sapsucker, California Thrashers, Lawrence's Goldfinch, and Oak Titmouse. Even some species widespread elsewhere have California twists, such as "California Raven" (a potential split) and "Thick-billed" Fox Sparrow.

From the coast we'll cross the Diablo Range and the agricultural Central Valley on our way to the Sierra Nevada Mountains. We will spend a couple of days working different elevations in the Sierra Nevada, birding the conifer forests and the very productive deciduous riparian and meadow habitats.

We'll spend the remainder of the trip exploring the San Francisco Bay Area in depth. In summer, coastal fog comes in off the ocean and is caught by the coast slopes, only passing through the famous Golden Gate or low passes in the hills. This creates an incredible moisture gradient, giving each region of the Bay Area a different climate and habitat type. We will be covering the rocky coast, coast slope, the Bayside, and the bay itself, as well as the inland Diablo range—each with different avifaunas. The diversity within the Bay Area makes for great birding. A highlight will be a pelagic trip to the rich waters of the Pacific, where our main quest will be a diversity of seabirds, from shearwaters, to storm-petrels, phalaropes, and yes, maybe even a Black-footed Albatross. Most common at this time of year are Sooty and Pink-footed shearwaters, Common Murre, Cassin's (if there is krill) and Rhinoceros auklets, and who knows what else—the ocean always holds surprises.

About the Physical Requirements & Pace: Fall is a wonderful time to bird in northern California with its varied habitats ranging from coastal wetlands and high mountain conifer forest to interior sagebrush desert. In order to sample the rich assortment of habitats, we'll have several long drives, but we'll be birding and stopping along the way and taking in the great scenery. Particularly while in the mountains, we may undertake some short hikes on trails or logging roads but at a moderate pace. In the Sierra, we will reach elevations as high as 9700 feet. A highlight of our tour will be a pelagic trip out of Half Moon Bay; if you are prone to motion sickness, you should take the necessary precautions.

If you are uncertain about whether this tour is a good match for your abilities, please don't hesitate to contact our office; if they cannot directly answer your queries, they will put you in touch with Chris.

About the Birding Areas



The Diablo Range creates the eastern border of the San Francisco Bay Area. Unlike the coastal Santa Cruz Mountains, the Diablo is drier and therefore differs in its birdlife. The mix of grassland, chaparral, oak woodland, and Gray Pine stands makes for an exciting diversity of birds. Here we will be looking for Wild Turkey, Greater Roadrunner, Nuttall's and Lewis's woodpeckers, California Thrasher, Oak Titmouse, Phainopepla, Yellow-billed Magpie, Lawrence's Goldfinch, California Towhee, and the recently split Bell's Sparrow.

The Central Valley is thought to have once been a huge inland sea, which, as it dried up, left a large, flat expanse of nutrient-rich soil. Drainage was poor and huge marshes flourished, and it is in these marshes that the Tricolored Blackbird probably evolved. As is typical all over the world, most of the marshes have been drained for farming, and it is now a flat, hot, rather uninspiring set of farms and orchards. But don't despair; there are pockets of marsh habitat left where we shall look for the Tricolored Blackbird unless we've seen them already in their coastal wintering quarters. As we drive through we are almost sure to encounter Yellow-billed Magpies and perhaps a Swainson's Hawk or Loggerhead Shrike, and with luck White-faced Ibis.

The Sierra Nevada—The great Central Valley of California is circled by a ring of oak savanna on the slopes of the Diablo Range on the west and the Sierra Nevada on the east. A little higher up the forests are dominated by conifers, highlighted by Giant Sequoias in isolated groves on the west slope. To fully

appreciate the bird life of this zone we need to move up and down in elevation. We will visit the Calaveras Big Trees State Park where we will concentrate on finding White-headed Woodpecker. In the general area we'll look and listen for Mountain Quail (always tough), Red-breasted Sapsucker, Mountain Chickadee, Hermit and MacGillivray's warblers, and Western Tanager, among others. Venturing higher up on the Sierra Nevada we may see some of these same species, but we'll have a better chance at Williamson's Sapsucker, Clark's Nutcracker, Mountain Bluebird, Townsend's Solitaire, Cassin's Finch, and 'Thick-billed' Fox Sparrow. On our drive east across the Sierra to Lee Vining, we shall have another

chance to look for anything we missed. As we head east, it becomes drier and drier—the east slope of the Sierra is drier than the west slope—but birds here congregate in any good riparian zone. We will bird some conifer forests and a good riparian zone up above Lee Vining to find any forest birds that have eluded us so far. We may also encounter Say's Phoebe, American Dipper, Green-tailed Towhee, and Lazuli Bunting.



Mountain Quail can be difficult to locate, but we've had good luck on recent tours. Photograph by guide Chris Benesh.

California's Central Coast—Big Sur has nothing on the San Mateo coast, with its beautiful beaches, the Santa Cruz Mountains, seaside cliffs, and rocky shoreline, which all add up to a very pretty place to go birding. In the coastal chaparral we will look for California Quail, Bewick's Wren, Wrentit, "Nuttall's" White-crowned Sparrow, and Spotted Towhee. The coastal slope is moister than any other area we will visit on this tour, so there are plenty of creeks with great willow/alder riparian forests to bird. Here we will look for 'California' Red-shouldered Hawk, Band-tailed Pigeon, Vaux's Swift, Pacific-Slope Flycatcher, Western Wood-Pewee, Black Phoebe, Violet-green Swallow, "California" Common Raven, Steller's Jay, Bushtit, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Pygmy Nuthatch, Warbling and Cassin's vireos, Orange-crowned and Wilson's warblers, Black-headed Grosbeak, Purple Finch, and Lesser Goldfinch. At this time of year vagrant landbirds are found on the coast, most of which are eastern warblers, but sometimes it's a southwestern species. We will be alert and looking for any oddities.

Coastal birding throughout the county may find a lingering non-breeding Pacific Loon or Surf Scoter, or maybe some shorebirds such as Willet, Marbled Godwit, and Snowy Plovers. Other common coastal birds include Brown Pelican, Brandt's and Pelagic cormorants, and Western and Heermann's gulls. As shorebirds will be heading south at this time of year, we will make sure to visit some great shorebirding sites in the Bay Area depending, of course, on the tides.

Pelagic Birding—A highlight of any California birding trip is a pelagic excursion. The waters off Half Moon Bay have only been explored relatively recently, but have proven to offer exciting opportunities for pelagic birding. We will likely get at least twenty miles out, but this varies depending on sea conditions and where the activity is. September is the peak of seabirding in California, with the greatest diversity of any time of year. We expect numbers of Sooty and Pink-footed shearwaters, as well as some Buller's and maybe even the uncommon Flesh-footed. If we are lucky, we could encounter storm-petrels, with Ashy being the most common species. It is not the best time for the Black-footed Albatross, but previous trips have been successful in seeing them. Resident Common Murres shall be around as well as Rhinoceros and Cassin's auklets, although the latter is dependent on krill being present. The marine mammal show can be fantastic, with Humpback and rarely Blue whales, although numbers of the latter vary from year to year. But as is always the case on a pelagic trip, we may just run into something very surprising, and one often does in the fall in California. It promises to be fun!

Itinerary for Slice of California

Day 1, Tue, 10 Sep. Arrival in San Francisco. Upon arrival in San Francisco you may take the hotel courtesy bus from the airport. Please plan to arrive in time to meet in the hotel lobby at 6:00 p.m. for our get-acquainted dinner. Night near San Francisco Airport.

Day 2, Wed, 11 Sep. Bay Area birding. The schedule today is not set in stone. Our options in and around the Bay Area are many. Perhaps we will venture to the crest of the Santa Cruz mountains and then descend to the south bay near San Jose looking for lingering shorebirds, Forster's Terns, Black-necked Stilt, Black-throated Gray Warbler, Western Bluebird, or a dizzying number of other species that make the San Francisco Bay Area their home. Night in Half Moon Bay.



*Black-footed Albatross is just one of the spectacular seabirds we are likely to find on our pelagic trip out of Half Moon Bay.
Photograph by guide Chris Benesh.*

Day 3, Thu, 12 Sep. Pelagic trip. After an early breakfast, we'll head to the harbor and board our boat. We will join Tom Johnson and the Slice of California I group to embark on our pelagic adventure together. We should be at sea for at least eight hours, possibly more. Night in Half Moon Bay.

Day 4, Fri, 13 Sep. Coastal birding. Today we will visit the coastal chaparral, marshes, rocky coasts, and willow thickets of San Mateo County. The habitat is diverse and so will be the species we see. We will keep our options open and visit several areas that have proven to be recently productive. Night in Half Moon Bay.

Day 5, Sat, 14 Sep. Central Valley; drive to the Sierra Nevada. After an early breakfast, we will head east to the Sierra with many stops in-between. First we'll explore the scrubby chaparral zone of Mines Road in the Diablo Range, winding our way through to the Central Valley, and searching for Yellow-billed Magpie, California Thrasher, Lawrence's Goldfinch, Lewis's Woodpecker, and more along the way. We will continue across the Central Valley, heading east to the foothills and into the west flank of the Sierra Nevada where we will get back into the forests again. This will be a long, but birdy and enjoyable day. Night in Sonora.

Day 6, Sun, 15 Sep. West slope of Sierra. Today we'll concentrate on birding the conifer forests of the western Sierra. This will mean working Highway 4 with a productive stop at Calaveras Big Trees State Park to walk through the Giant Sequoias and search for woodpeckers. We will continue to higher elevations if time permits. Night in Sonora.

Day 7, Mon, 16 Sep. Sierra to Lee Vining. This morning we'll cross the Sierra Nevada on Route 108, cresting at Sonora Pass. We'll bird along the road and at the pass in search of Sierran specialties. Night in Lee Vining.

Day 8, Tue, 17 Sep. Lee Vining. We'll devote a full day to birding environs near Mono Lake and the town of Lee Vining. In the afternoon we will visit the ghost town of Bodie, where we can enjoy the place and look for sage species such as Greater Sage-Grouse. Night in Lee Vining.



*Greater Sage Grouse is a sagebrush species that we'll find in the Lee Vining area near the ghost town of Bodie.
Photograph by guide Chris Benesh.*

Day 9, Wed, 18 Sep. Return drive to San Francisco. Today is a travel day; however, we will be watching for any species that may have eluded us so far and will make an effort (time permitting) to find as many of them as we can. If conditions allow, we might finish the daylight hours in San Rafael watching Vaux's Swifts go to roost. Night in San Francisco.

Day 10, Thu, 19 Sep. Departure for home. You may plan to depart for home at any time today; the hotel has a free shuttle to the airport. Have a safe trip!

About Your Guide

Chris Benesh grew up studying natural history in California, where he was inspired by his father to take up birding as a teenager. After earning a degree in zoology from UC Santa Barbara in 1987, Chris moved to Austin to join the Field Guides staff. Since then, his life has undergone a wonderful transformation. The intervening years at Field Guides have taken him to many corners of the world and across both the Arctic and Antarctic circles! Chris takes an interest in nearly anything that flies, and you might catch him sneaking a peak at a passing aircraft, or stopping to examine a butterfly or odonate. You might also notice him getting especially excited at the sighting of a rare or wonderful mammal (heck, he can get excited about a squirrel).

Chris's passion for education has led to his serving on the Arizona Bird Committee, leading the occasional workshop, presenting at birding conventions, and—we must add—thoroughly explaining in admirable detail the nuances of flycatchers to tour participants and colleagues alike. These days, a lot of his “down time” is spent at home in Tucson watching his two wonderful kids, Sean and Linnea, grow.

*“I would travel with **Chris Benesh** anywhere, any time. He is calm, pleasant, and good-humored. He is not only brilliant at finding and spotting birds, but equally brilliant at ensuring that every member of the group gets a great look at the bird...”
B.M., Arizona's Second Spring*

Visit <https://fieldguides.com/guides> for Chris's complete tour schedule; just click on his photo.

Financial Information

FEE: \$4075 from San Francisco

DEPOSIT: \$400 per person

FINAL PAYMENT DUE: May 13, 2019

SINGLE SUPPLEMENT (Optional): \$925

LIMIT: 7

Other Things You Need to Know

TOUR MANAGER: The manager for this tour is Caroline Lewis. Caroline will be happy to assist you in preparing for the tour. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call her!

A NOTE ON ALTITUDE: We will reach an elevation of nearly 10,000 feet on this tour.

AIR ARRANGEMENTS: Field Guides is a full service travel agency and your tour manager will be happy to assist you with flights to join this tour. Field Guides does not charge a service fee for these services to clients booking a tour. However, we understand that tech-savvy clients often prefer to shop online or that you may wish to use mileage to purchase tickets. Regardless of which method you choose, your tour manager will be happy to provide assistance regarding ticket prices and schedules, along with rental cars and extra hotel nights as needed.

Please be sure to check with your tour manager prior to purchasing your ticket to make sure the flights you have chosen will work well with the tour itinerary and that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. Once purchased, most airline tickets are non-refundable and carry a penalty to change. Field Guides cannot be responsible for these fees.

Also, it is imperative that we receive a copy of your comprehensive flight itinerary—including any and all flights not covered in the tour fee—so that we may track you in the event of missed connections, delays, or other mishaps.

LUGGAGE: Please be aware that many airlines have recently modified their luggage policies and are charging additional fees for checked bags. Updates could easily occur before your departure, so you may wish to contact your airline to verify the policy. Additional charges for bags on any flights, whether these are covered by the tour fee or not, will be the client's responsibility.

TOUR INCLUSIONS/EXCLUSIONS: The **tour fee** is \$4075 for one person in double occupancy from San Francisco. It includes all lodging from Day 1 through Day 9, all meals from dinner on Day 1 through dinner on Day 9, all ground transportation, boat trips, entrance fees, and the guide services of the tour leader(s). Tipping at group meals and for drivers, porters, and local guides is included in your tour fee and will be handled for the group by your Field Guides leader(s). However, if you would like to recognize your Field Guides leader(s) or any local guide(s) for exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are optional and not expected.

The above fee does not include your airfare to and from San Francisco, airport taxes, any checked or carry-on baggage charges imposed by the airlines, any alcoholic beverages, optional tips to local drivers, phone calls, laundry, or other items of a personal nature.

The **single supplement** for the tour is \$925. If you do not have a roommate but wish to share, we will try to pair you with a roommate from the tour; but if none is available, you will be billed for the single supplement. Our tour fees are based on double occupancy; one-half the cost of a double room is priced into the tour fee. The single supplement is calculated by taking the actual cost of a single room and subtracting one-half the cost of a double room (plus any applicable taxes).

TOUR LIMITS: Our limits are firm and we don't exceed the limit by one to accommodate a couple when only one space remains open. However, on occasion, we will send along a guide in training on a tour. In these cases one seat in the van or bus will be taken by the guide in training. Our guides will have a rotation system within the vehicle so that clients share the inconvenience equally. We hope this minor inconvenience will be more than offset by the advantages of having another guide along.

TOUR REGISTRATION: To register for this tour, complete the Registration/Release and Indemnity form and return it with a **deposit of \$400** per person. If registering by phone, a deposit must be received within fourteen days, or the space will

be released. **Full payment** of the tour fee is due 120 days prior to departure, or **by May 13, 2019. We will bill you for the final payment at either 120 days or when the tour has reached sufficient subscription to operate, whichever date comes later.** Since the cost of your trip insurance and airline tickets is generally non-refundable, please do not finalize these purchases until you have received final billing for the tour or have been advised that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate by your tour manager.

SMOKING: Almost all of our clients prefer a smoke-free environment. If you smoke, please be sensitive to the group and refrain from smoking at meals, in vehicles, and in proximity to the group on trails and elsewhere.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Refund of deposit and payment, less \$100 handling fee, will be made if cancellation is received up to 120 days before departure. If cancellation occurs between 119 and 70 days before the departure date, 50% of the tour fee is refundable. Thereafter, all deposits and payments are not refundable.

This policy only applies to payments made to Field Guides for tour fees (and any services included in those fees). Airline tickets not included in the tour fee and purchased separately often carry penalties for cancellation or change, or are sometimes totally non-refundable. Additionally, if you take out trip insurance the cost of the insurance is not refundable so it is best to purchase the policy just prior to making full payment for the tour or at the time you purchase airline tickets, depending upon the airlines restrictions.

The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute in case of emergency another guide for the original one.

TRIP CANCELLATION & MEDICAL EMERGENCY INSURANCE: We strongly recommend you consider purchasing trip cancellation (including medical emergency) insurance to cover your investment in case of injury or illness to you or your family prior to or during a trip. Because we must remit early (and substantial) tour deposits to our suppliers, we cannot offer any refund when cancellation occurs within 70 days of departure, and only a partial refund from 70 to 119 days prior to departure (see CANCELLATION POLICY). In addition, the Department of State strongly urges Americans to consult with their medical insurance company prior to traveling abroad to confirm whether their policy applies overseas and if it will cover emergency expenses such as a medical evacuation. US medical insurance plans seldom cover health costs incurred outside the United States unless supplemental coverage is purchased. Furthermore, US Medicare and Medicaid programs do not provide payment for medical services outside the United States.

When making a decision regarding health insurance, Americans should consider that many foreign doctors and hospitals require payment in cash prior to providing service and that a medical evacuation to the United States may cost well in excess of \$50,000. Uninsured travelers who require medical care overseas often face extreme difficulties. When consulting with your insurer prior to your trip, please ascertain whether payment will be made to the overseas healthcare provider or whether you will be reimbursed later for expenses that you incur.

US citizens will receive from us a brochure regarding optional tour cancellation/emergency medical insurance. Our agent, CSA, will insure for trip cancellation and interruption, medical coverage, travel delay, baggage loss and delay, and emergency medical transportation. **Currently we are unable to offer CSA insurance policies to residents of New York and Hawaii.** We have had clients provide positive feedback after acquiring insurance with InsureMyTrip (www.insuremytrip.com) in the past, and would suggest that company as an alternative. Please let us know if you have any questions about this. If you purchase the insurance within 24 hours of making final payment for the tour, and cover all non-refundable parts of the trip (including any non-refundable flights), pre-existing conditions are covered. The CSA brochure includes a contact number; you may also purchase your CSA policy on-line by visiting our website at <https://fieldguides.com/travelinsurance.html> and clicking the link to CSA. Please note, once the insurance is purchased it is non-refundable, so please check with your tour manager prior to making the purchase to assure the tour will operate as scheduled. Citizens of other countries are urged to consult their insurance broker.

RESPONSIBILITY: For and in consideration of the opportunity to participate in the tour, each tour participant and each parent or legal guardian of a tour participant who is under 18 agrees to release, indemnify, and hold harmless Field Guides Incorporated, its agents, servants, employees, shareholders, officers, directors, attorneys, and contractors as more fully set forth in the Release and Indemnity Agreement on the reverse side of the registration form. Field Guides Incorporated acts only as an agent for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, or other means, and assumes no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity caused by defect in such vehicles or for any reason whatsoever, including the acts, defaults, or bankruptcies of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. Field Guides Incorporated accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. The tour participant shall bear all such losses and expenses. Field

Guides Incorporated reserves the right to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. Field Guides Incorporated reserves the right to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely.

Participants should be in good health and should consult a physician before undertaking a tour. If you have questions about the physical requirements of a tour, please contact our office for further information. Participants should prepare for the tour by reading the detailed itinerary, the information bulletin, and other pertinent matter provided by Field Guides. Each participant is responsible for bringing appropriate clothing and equipment as recommended in our bulletins.

THE RECEIPT OF YOUR TOUR DEPOSIT SHALL BE DEEMED TO BE CONSENT TO THE ABOVE CONDITIONS. EACH TOUR PARTICIPANT AND EACH PARENT OR LEGAL GUARDIAN OF A TOUR PARTICIPANT WHO IS UNDER 18 SHALL SIGN AND DELIVER THE RELEASE AND INDEMNITY AGREEMENT AT THE TIME OF REGISTRATION.

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