



*Field Guides Tour Report*

**SLICE OF CALIFORNIA: SEABIRDS TO SIERRA 2012**

Sep 1, 2012 to Sep 10, 2012  
Chris Benesh

*For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please [VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE](#).*

This year's Slice of California trip once again proved to be a fine outing and introduction to the bird life of the west. We started off with a bang birding the lower end of the bay, building up an impressive list of ducks, shorebirds, and other waterbirds. Our second morning found us heading east to Mines Road, a wonderful, relatively secluded place loaded with western specialties. Among the many highlights were the colorful and charismatic Yellow-



*Sunrise on Mono Lake. (Photo by guide Chris Benesh)*

billed Magpies. We had great looks at others too, such as California Thrasher, Lewis's Woodpecker, and both Bald and Golden eagles.

From here, we crossed the central valley to the lower western slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains, our base for the next couple of days. Here we visited a grove of giant sequoia trees, impressive in their own right, and all of the attendant wildlife found there. Among the highlights were woodpeckers - lots of woodpeckers. We had White-headed and Pileated, and several Red-breasted Sapsuckers among them. It was also a great place for Pacific Wren and oh, did I mention Red-breasted Nuthatch?! We also searched some for the elusive Mountain Quail, and were rewarded with a couple that John spotted for us!

Then it came time to cross the spectacular crest of the sierras on our way to the Mono Basin, home to Mono Lake. As we descended into the basin, we started to hear the raucous cries of Clark's Nutcrackers and smell the fragrant sagebrush. Our explorations in the area provided good views of a number of things, including Sage, Brewer's, and Vesper sparrows, Sage Thrasher, Pinyon Jay, and along the shores of Mono Lake, lots of California Gulls, American Avocets, Eared Grebes, and various blackbirds.

Eventually, it was time to head west again across the central valley to Half Moon Bay, where we took a pelagic trip out of Princeton Harbor into the waters of San Mateo and San Francisco counties. The pelagic started out with quite a magical event. Many thousands of Sooty Shearwaters had come in close to shore (presumably to feed on schooling fish), and on our way out of the harbor, we must have passed some 20,000-40,000 of them. It was a great day for jaegers, tubenoses, a scattering of alcids, and a nice mix of storm-petrels. This left us one final day along the coast to enjoy a few more of the magical birds and places that make California such a fun place to visit.

Thanks to all of you for your participation in this great adventure. It was a pleasure traveling with each of you and I hope that we have the opportunity once again. Wishing you the best of birding.

--Chris

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**KEYS FOR THIS LIST**

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: \* = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

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**BIRDS**

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

**CANADA GOOSE** (*Branta canadensis*) –

**GADWALL** (*Anas strepera*)

**MALLARD** (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

**BLUE-WINGED TEAL** (*Anas discors*)

**CINNAMON TEAL** (*Anas cyanoptera*)

**NORTHERN SHOVELER** (*Anas clypeata*) – The "train" of feeding shovelers earned it a vote as trip favorite.

**NORTHERN PINTAIL** (*Anas acuta*)

**GREEN-WINGED TEAL (AMERICAN)** (*Anas crecca carolinensis*)

**HARLEQUIN DUCK** (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – One hanging out at Coyote Point was a bit unusual for this location and time of year.

**SURF SCOTER** (*Melanitta perspicillata*)

**RED-BREASTED MERGANSER** (*Mergus serrator*)

*Odontophoridae (New World Quail)*

**MOUNTAIN QUAIL** (*Oreortyx pictus*) – Great spotting on John's part added up to a quick study of this elusive species. Got a vote as trip favorite.

**CALIFORNIA QUAIL** (*Callipepla californica*)

*Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)*

**GREATER SAGE-GROUSE** (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) – Thanks to a tip by the park ranger we had good looks at 25 or so of these just after the rainstorm cleared.

**WILD TURKEY** (*Meleagris gallopavo*)

*Gaviidae (Loons)*

**RED-THROATED LOON** (*Gavia stellata*)

**PACIFIC LOON** (*Gavia pacifica*)

*Podicipedidae (Grebes)*

**PIED-BILLED GREBE** (*Podilymbus podiceps*)

**EARED GREBE** (*Podiceps nigricollis*)

**WESTERN GREBE** (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*)

**CLARK'S GREBE** (*Aechmophorus clarkii*)

*Diomedeidae (Albatrosses)*

**BLACK-FOOTED ALBATROSS** (*Phoebastria nigripes*) – We had a terrific showing of this species with multiples feeding together right alongside the boat as certain times during the pelagic.

*Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)*

**NORTHERN FULMAR** (*Fulmarus glacialis*)

**HAWAIIAN PETREL** (*Pterodroma sandwichensis*) – This was a crazy rarity that was spotted on our pelagic trip and most in our group managed to get at least quick looks at it. Still very few records for California of this species, though it will likely prove to be more common in future.

**PINK-FOOTED SHEARWATER** (*Puffinus creatopus*)

**FLESH-FOOTED SHEARWATER** (*Puffinus carneipes*) – This was another lucky find on the pelagic trip. This species is rare in general in California, and most sightings are about 2-3 weeks later in the year.

**BULLER'S SHEARWATER** (*Puffinus bulleri*) – One of the most beautiful of shearwaters.

**SOOTY SHEARWATER** (*Puffinus griseus*) – Perhaps the greatest spectacle of the tour was seeing the many thousand of these close to shore and even in the harbor at Half Moon Bay. Wow!

*Hydrobatidae (Storm-Petrels)*

**WILSON'S STORM-PETREL** (*Oceanites oceanicus*) – A rarity in California waters, we had two on our trip.

**FORK-TAILED STORM-PETREL** (*Oceanodroma furcata*)

**ASHY STORM-PETREL** (*Oceanodroma homochroa*)

**BLACK STORM-PETREL** (*Oceanodroma melania*)

*Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)*

**BRANDT'S CORMORANT** (*Phalacrocorax penicillatus*)

**DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT** (*Phalacrocorax auritus*)

**PELAGIC CORMORANT** (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*)

*Pelecanidae (Pelicans)*

**AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN** (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*)

**BROWN PELICAN** (*Pelecanus occidentalis*)

*Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)*

**GREAT BLUE HERON** (*Ardea herodias*)

**GREAT EGRET** (*Ardea alba*)

**SNOWY EGRET** (*Egretta thula*)

**BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON** (*Nycticorax nycticorax*)

*Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)*

**WHITE-FACED IBIS** (*Plegadis chihi*)

Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

**TURKEY VULTURE** (*Cathartes aura*)

Pandionidae (Osprey)

**OSPREY** (*Pandion haliaetus*)

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

**WHITE-TAILED KITE** (*Elanus leucurus*)

**BALD EAGLE** (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)

**NORTHERN HARRIER** (*Circus cyaneus*)

**SHARP-SHINNED HAWK** (*Accipiter striatus*)

**COOPER'S HAWK** (*Accipiter cooperii*)

**RED-SHOULDERED HAWK (CALIFORNIA)** (*Buteo lineatus elegans*)

**RED-TAILED HAWK** (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

**GOLDEN EAGLE** (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – Good views of as many of six along Mines Road!

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

**AMERICAN KESTREL** (*Falco sparverius*)

**PEREGRINE FALCON** (*Falco peregrinus*)

**PRAIRIE FALCON** (*Falco mexicanus*)

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

**AMERICAN COOT** (*Fulica americana*)

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

**BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER** (*Pluvialis squatarola*)

**SNOWY PLOVER** (*Charadrius nivosus*) – Great studies of this threatened species on the beach in Half Moon Bay where a small colony persists.

**SEMPALMATED PLOVER** (*Charadrius semipalmatus*)

**KILLDEER** (*Charadrius vociferus*)

Haematopodidae (Oystercatchers)

**BLACK OYSTERCATCHER** (*Haematopus bachmani*)

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

**BLACK-NECKED STILT** (*Himantopus mexicanus*)

**AMERICAN AVOCET** (*Recurvirostra americana*)

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

**SPOTTED SANDPIPER** (*Actitis macularius*)

**WANDERING TATTLER** (*Tringa incana*)

**GREATER YELLOWLEGS** (*Tringa melanoleuca*)

**WILLET (WESTERN)** (*Tringa semipalmata inornata*)

**LESSER YELLOWLEGS** (*Tringa flavipes*)

**WHIMBREL (AMERICAN)** (*Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus*)

**LONG-BILLED CURLEW** (*Numenius americanus*)

**MARbled GODWIT** (*Limosa fedoa*)

**BLACK TURNSTONE** (*Arenaria melanocephala*)

**SURFBIRD** (*Aphriza virgata*)

**SANDERLING** (*Calidris alba*)

**WESTERN SANDPIPER** (*Calidris mauri*)

**LEAST SANDPIPER** (*Calidris minutilla*)

**DUNLIN** (*Calidris alpina*)

**SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER** (*Limnodromus griseus*)

**LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER** (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*)

**RED-NECKED PHALAROPE** (*Phalaropus lobatus*)

**RED PHALAROPE** (*Phalaropus fulicarius*)

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

**SABINE'S GULL** (*Xema sabini*) – The striking appearance of the many Sabine's Gulls seen on our pelagic out of Half Moon Bay earned it top honors as trip favorite!

**HEERMANN'S GULL** (*Larus heermanni*)

**RING-BILLED GULL** (*Larus delawarensis*)

**WESTERN GULL** (*Larus occidentalis*)

**CALIFORNIA GULL** (*Larus californicus*) – The sight of California Gulls racing after mats of alkali flies along the shore of Mono Lake was comical.

**COMMON TERN** (*Sterna hirundo*)

**ARCTIC TERN** (*Sterna paradisaea*)

**FORSTER'S TERN** (*Sterna forsteri*)

**ELEGANT TERN** (*Thalasseus elegans*)

**BLACK SKIMMER** (*Rynchops niger*) – A few at the Radio Road ponds. This species is a recent colonist to northern California.

*Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers)*

**SOUTH POLAR SKUA** (*Stercorarius maccormicki*) – We were fortunate to have one of these hefty birds come by on our boat trip.

**POMARINE JAEGER** (*Stercorarius pomarinus*)

**PARASITIC JAEGER** (*Stercorarius parasiticus*)

**LONG-TAILED JAEGER** (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) – It was a really great day for this species out of Half Moon Bay with several seen of various ages.

*Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)*

**COMMON MURRE** (*Uria aalge*)

**CASSIN'S AUKLET** (*Ptychoramphus aleuticus*)

**RHINOCEROS AUKLET** (*Cerorhinca monocerata*)

**TUFTED PUFFIN** (*Fratercula cirrhata*) – Always a bonus this far south, we had great looks at one, which was also a spanking adult too!

*Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)*

**ROCK PIGEON** (*Columba livia*) [I]

**BAND-TAILED PIGEON** (*Patagioenas fasciata*)

**EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE** (*Streptopelia decaocto*) [I]

**MOURNING DOVE** (*Zenaida macroura*)

*Strigidae (Owls)*

**BURROWING OWL** (*Athene cunicularia*) – Good views of this species near Alviso.

*Apodidae (Swifts)*

**WHITE-THROATED SWIFT** (*Aeronautes saxatalis*)

*Trochilidae (Hummingbirds)*

**ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD** (*Calypte anna*)

**RUFIOUS HUMMINGBIRD** (*Selasphorus rufus*)

*Picidae (Woodpeckers)*

**LEWIS'S WOODPECKER** (*Melanerpes lewis*) – Judy spotted this elusive species at our stake out spot along Mines Road. It eventually came pretty close for some great views!

**ACORN WOODPECKER** (*Melanerpes formicivorus*)

**WILLIAMSON'S SAPSUCKER** (*Sphyrapicus thyroideus*)

**RED-BREASTED SAPSUCKER** (*Sphyrapicus ruber*)

**NUTTALL'S WOODPECKER** (*Picoides nuttallii*)

**DOWNY WOODPECKER** (*Picoides pubescens*)

**HAIRY WOODPECKER** (*Picoides villosus*)

**WHITE-HEADED WOODPECKER** (*Picoides albolarvatus*) – Some great looks at this handsome species helped earn it a couple of votes as trip favorite.

**NORTHERN FLICKER** (*Colaptes auratus*)

**PILEATED WOODPECKER** (*Dryocopus pileatus*)

*Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)*

**OLIVE-SIDED FLYCATCHER** (*Contopus cooperi*)

**WESTERN WOOD-PEWEE** (*Contopus sordidulus*)

**WILLOW FLYCATCHER** (*Empidonax traillii*)

**GRAY FLYCATCHER** (*Empidonax wrightii*)

**PACIFIC-SLOPE FLYCATCHER** (*Empidonax difficilis*)

**BLACK PHOEBE** (*Sayornis nigricans*)

**SAY'S PHOEBE** (*Sayornis saya*)

**ASH-THROATED FLYCATCHER** (*Myiarchus cinerascens*)

**WESTERN KINGBIRD** (*Tyrannus verticalis*)

*Laniidae (Shrikes)*

**LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE** (*Lanius ludovicianus*)

*Vireonidae (Vireos)*

**HUTTON'S VIREO** (*Vireo huttoni*)

**WARBLING VIREO** (*Vireo gilvus*)

*Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)*

**PINYON JAY** (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*)

**STELLER'S JAY** (*Cyanocitta stelleri*)

**WESTERN SCRUB-JAY (COASTAL)** (*Aphelocoma californica californica*)

**WESTERN SCRUB-JAY (WOODHOUSE'S)** (*Aphelocoma californica woodhouseii*)

**BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE** (*Pica hudsonia*)

**YELLOW-BILLED MAGPIE** (*Pica nuttalli*) – This might just be the coolest bird out there, period! I suppose not everyone would agree, but it did receive a couple of votes as trip favorite. One of two California endemics. [E]

**CLARK'S NUTCRACKER** (*Nucifraga columbiana*)

**AMERICAN CROW** (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*)

**COMMON RAVEN** (*Corvus corax*)

*Hirundinidae (Swallows)*

**NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW** (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*)

**TREE SWALLOW** (*Tachycineta bicolor*)

**VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOW** (*Tachycineta thalassina*)

**BARN SWALLOW** (*Hirundo rustica*)

**CLIFF SWALLOW** (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*)

*Paridae (Chickadees and Tits)*

**MOUNTAIN CHICKADEE** (*Poecile gambeli*)

**CHESTNUT-BACKED CHICKADEE** (*Poecile rufescens*)

**OAK TITMOUSE** (*Baeolophus inornatus*)

**JUNIPER TITMOUSE** (*Baeolophus ridgwayi*)

*Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)*

**BUSHTIT** (*Psaltirparus minimus*)

*Sittidae (Nuthatches)*

**RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH** (*Sitta canadensis*) – Not normally a species that makes it on to the favorite list, but seeing so many of these at each of the mixed flocks we encountered in the sierras was certainly memorable!

**WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH** (*Sitta carolinensis*) – We saw two different forms of this species. These two differ mostly in voice and habitat preference. Potential future splits are involved here.

**PYGMY NUTHATCH** (*Sitta pygmaea*)

*Certhiidae (Treecreepers)*

**BROWN CREEPER** (*Certhia americana*)

*Troglodytidae (Wrens)*

**ROCK WREN** (*Salpinctes obsoletus*)

**BEWICK'S WREN** (*Thryomanes bewickii*)

**HOUSE WREN** (*Troglodytes aedon*)

**PACIFIC WREN (WESTERN)** (*Troglodytes pacificus pacificus*) – Recently split from the Winter Wren of eastern North America.

*Poliophtilidae (Gnatcatchers)*

**BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER** (*Poliophtila caerulea*)

*Cinclidae (Dippers)*

**AMERICAN DIPPER** (*Cinclus mexicanus*) – A good showing of these on the west slope of the sierras this year.

*Regulidae (Kinglets)*

**GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLET** (*Regulus satrapa*)

*Sylviidae (Old World Warblers)*

**WRENTIT** (*Chamaea fasciata*) – A wonderful species with a distinctive sound well seen near Half Moon Bay this year. It's closest relatives are in the old world.

*Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)*

**WESTERN BLUEBIRD** (*Sialia mexicana*)

**MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD** (*Sialia currucoides*) – Always a treat to see these wonderfully colored birds!

**TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRE** (*Myadestes townsendi*)

**AMERICAN ROBIN** (*Turdus migratorius*)

*Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)*

**NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD** (*Mimus polyglottos*)

**SAGE THRASHER** (*Oreoscoptes montanus*)

**CALIFORNIA THRASHER** (*Toxostoma redivivum*)

*Sturnidae (Starlings)*

**EUROPEAN STARLING** (*Sturnus vulgaris*) [I]

*Ptilonotidae (Silky-flycatchers)*

**PHAINOPEPLA** (*Phainopepla nitens*)

*Parulidae (New World Warblers)*

**ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER** (*Oreothlypis celata*)  
**NASHVILLE WARBLER (WESTERN)** (*Oreothlypis ruficapilla ridgwayi*)  
**MACGILLIVRAY'S WARBLER** (*Geothlypis tolmiei*)  
**YELLOW WARBLER** (*Setophaga petechia*)  
**YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (AUDUBON'S)** (*Setophaga coronata auduboni*)  
**BLACK-THROATED GRAY WARBLER** (*Setophaga nigrescens*)  
**TOWNSEND'S WARBLER** (*Setophaga townsendi*)  
**WILSON'S WARBLER** (*Cardellina pusilla*)

*Emberizidae (Buntings, Sparrows and Allies)*

**GREEN-TAILED TOWHEE** (*Pipilo chlorurus*)  
**SPOTTED TOWHEE** (*Pipilo maculatus*)  
**RUFIOUS-CROWNED SPARROW** (*Aimophila ruficeps*)  
**CALIFORNIA TOWHEE** (*Melospiza crissalis*)  
**CHIPPING SPARROW** (*Spizella passerina*)  
**CLAY-COLORED SPARROW** (*Spizella pallida*)  
**BREWER'S SPARROW** (*Spizella breweri*)  
**VESPER SPARROW** (*Pooecetes gramineus*)  
**SAGE SPARROW (INTERIOR)** (*Amphispiza belli nevadensis*) – After a bit of searching, we ended up seeing this species well near the south shore of Mono Lake.  
**SAVANNAH SPARROW** (*Passerculus sandwichensis*)  
**FOX SPARROW (THICK-BILLED)** (*Passerella iliaca megarhyncha*) – This population breeds in the mountains of California.  
**SONG SPARROW** (*Melospiza melodia*)  
**WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (NUTTALL'S)** (*Zonotrichia leucophrys nuttalli*)  
**DARK-EYED JUNCO** (*Junco hyemalis*)

*Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)*

**WESTERN TANAGER** (*Piranga ludoviciana*)  
**BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAK** (*Pheucticus melanocephalus*)

*Icteridae (Troupials and Allies)*

**RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD** (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)  
**TRICOLORED BLACKBIRD** (*Agelaius tricolor*) – We finally connected with this species near Pigeon Point.  
**WESTERN MEADOWLARK** (*Sturnella neglecta*)  
**YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD** (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) – Great looks at this species at Mono Lake.  
**BREWER'S BLACKBIRD** (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*)  
**BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD** (*Molothrus ater*)

*Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)*

**CASSIN'S FINCH** (*Carpodacus cassinii*)  
**HOUSE FINCH** (*Carpodacus mexicanus*)  
**PINE SISKIN** (*Spinus pinus*)  
**LESSER GOLDFINCH** (*Spinus psaltria*)  
**AMERICAN GOLDFINCH** (*Spinus tristis*)

*Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)*

**HOUSE SPARROW** (*Passer domesticus*) **[1]**

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## **MAMMALS**

**NUTTALL'S (MOUNTAIN) COTTONTAIL** (*Sylvilagus nuttalli*)  
**DESERT COTTONTAIL** (*Sylvilagus audubonii*)  
**BLACK-TAILED JACKRABBIT** (*Lepus californicus*)  
**LEAST CHIPMUNK** (*Tamias minimus*)  
**MERRIAM'S CHIPMUNK** (*Tamias merriami*)  
**LONG-EARED CHIPMUNK** (*Tamias quadrimaculatus*)  
**LODGEPOLE CHIPMUNK** (*Tamias speciosus*)  
**CALIFORNIA GROUND SQUIRREL** (*Spermophilus beecheyi*)  
**GOLDEN-MANTLED GROUND SQUIRREL** (*Spermophilus lateralis*)  
**EASTERN GRAY SQUIRREL** (*Sciurus carolinensis*)  
**WESTERN GRAY SQUIRREL** (*Sciurus griseus*)  
**CHICKAREE** (*Tamiasciurus douglasii*)

**PACIFIC WHITE-SIDED DOLPHIN** (*Lagenorhynchus obliquidens*)

**HUMPBACK WHALE** (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)

**CALIFORNIA SEA LION** (*Zalophus californianus*)

**STELLER'S SEA LION** (*Eumetopias jubatus*)

**HARBOR SEAL** (*Phoca vitulina*)

**MULE DEER** (*Odocoileus hemionus*)

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## **ADDITIONAL COMMENTS**

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**Totals for the tour: 205 bird taxa and 18 mammal taxa**