



Field Guides Tour Report

Slice of California: Seabirds to Sierra I 2018

Sep 6, 2018 to Sep 15, 2018

Chris Benesh

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



This juvenile Parasitic Jaeger appeared at the shell bar in Foster City to chase terns around some, providing terrific looks! Photo by guide Chris Benesh.

Few places in the United States have the diversity of habitats and experiences as can be found in California. Our Slice of California: Seabirds to Sierra tour is designed to maximize the birding experience while minimizing the distance covered to sample from a diversity of habitats. Our 2018 offering was another success. The weather was generally good as is usually the case this time of year. In fact, we saw first hand the effects of California's ongoing drought by way of another massive fire from earlier in the summer that had some of the higher sections of Highway 120 closed off. We also narrowly dodged a new blaze near Bridgeport that had our return route closed off until the day before we were set to head westward again. Yikes!

Fires aside, all was good. The birds were plentiful and some of our encounters were truly spectacular! The Mountain Quail encounter in Bear Valley was epic! The Laysan Albatross that appeared on the pelagic trip was a stunner, though it had to compete with Blue Whale for most exciting pelagic encounter. The graceful Buller's Shearwaters deserve a mention too, elegantly cutting through the air. While we saw all three jaegers, it was the Parasitic that provided some wonderful views, both at sea and in the harbor and San Francisco Bay! Back on shore, highlights included seeing both Bell's and Sagebrush sparrows (to contemplate the differences), seeing chickadees and nuthatches among Giant Sequoias, California Thrasher, Wrentit, Yellow-billed Magpie, Pinyon Jay, and a plethora of woodpeckers with the likes of Lewis's, Black-backed, White-headed, Nuttall's, Pileated, and two species of sapsucker. Seeing Greater Sage-Grouse in the setting of historic Bodie was a treat too, as was the huge flock of Vaux's Swifts coming to roost in San Rafael.

Thanks to all of you for making the tour such a success! I look forward to seeing you again on the next adventure! — Chris

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

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl).

CANADA GOOSE (*Branta canadensis*)

CINNAMON TEAL (*Spatula cyanoptera*)

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Spatula clypeata*)

GADWALL (*Mareca strepera*)

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

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

LESSER SCAUP (*Aythya affinis*)

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – Scope views of the long-staying male at Coyote Point. This male was first discovered here in August of 2002. The longest lived Harlequin Duck known was 17 years. I guess it is easy living on the bay, and avoiding the turbulent ocean scene is paying off.

SURF SCOTER (*Melanitta perspicillata*) – Seven were at Coyote Point and another at the Foster City shell bar.

RUDDY DUCK (*Oxyura jamaicensis*)

Odontophoridae (New World Quail)

MOUNTAIN QUAIL (*Oreortyx pictus*) – We hit paydirt at the Bear Valley Ski Area with as many as fifteen in a big covey that provided amazing viewing! WOW!

CALIFORNIA QUAIL (*Callipepla californica*) – After missing them on Mines Road we connected with a covey in Bridgeport. Whew!

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

GREATER SAGE-GROUSE (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) – After a bit of searching we connected with a couple of these in the ghost town of Bodie.

WILD TURKEY (*Meleagris gallopavo*) – A couple of coveys were along Mines Road.

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – A few were present along the coast.

PACIFIC LOON (*Gavia pacifica*) – One was seen off of the beach while looking for Snowy Plovers.

COMMON LOON (*Gavia immer*)

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

PIED-BILLED GREBE (*Podilymbus podiceps*)

EARED GREBE (*Podiceps nigricollis*)

WESTERN GREBE (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*)

CLARK'S GREBE (*Aechmophorus clarkii*) – We managed to connect with one at the Coyote Point Marina.

Diomedidae (Albatrosses)

LAYSAN ALBATROSS (*Phoebastria immutabilis*) – One of the most exciting moments of our Pelagic trip was seeing this species rise up off of the water and show well for us.

BLACK-FOOTED ALBATROSS (*Phoebastria nigripes*) – Up to four were recorded on the trip, though for most they kept their distance.

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

NORTHERN FULMAR (*Fulmarus glacialis*) – A really good year for these on the pelagic. There was a proposal to the AOS to split Pacific fulmars from Atlantic ones, so a potential armchair tick.

PINK-FOOTED SHEARWATER (*Ardenna creatopus*)

BULLER'S SHEARWATER (*Ardenna bulleri*) – Such an elegant species; we had some fantastic flybys on the pelagic trip.

SOOTY SHEARWATER (*Ardenna grisea*)

Hydrobatidae (Storm-Petrels)

FORK-TAILED STORM-PETREL (*Oceanodroma furcata*) – One quick flyby that not everyone was able to see before it departed.

ASHY STORM-PETREL (*Oceanodroma homochroa*) – A fair number of these were present on the pelagic.

Sulidae (Boobies and Gannets)

BROWN BOOBY (*Sula leucogaster*) – One went flying quickly past the boat as we were heading back to shore.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

BRANDT'S CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax penicillatus*)

PELAGIC CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*)

DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax auritus*)

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*) – It was a good trip for this species, with several seen including two at the Murrieta's Well Winery, two wonderful ones at the McNear Brickyard, and another at Pillar Point.

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – Our only one was along Mines Road, but it was a great look!

NORTHERN HARRIER (*Circus hudsonius*) – The name here now reflects the recent (2017) split of this species from the Hen Harrier of Europe.

SHARP-SHINNED HAWK (*Accipiter striatus*)

COOPER'S HAWK (*Accipiter cooperii*)

BALD EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – A near-adult bird near Alviso was a bit of a surprise.

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

RED-TAILED HAWK (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots).

RIDGWAY'S RAIL (SAN FRANCISCO BAY) (*Rallus obsoletus obsoletus*) – Our second effort paid off with great views of this species at Byxbee Park.

AMERICAN COOT (*Fulica americana*)

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets).

BLACK-NECKED STILT (*Himantopus mexicanus*)

AMERICAN AVOCET (*Recurvirostra americana*)

Haematopodidae (Oystercatchers).

BLACK OYSTERCATCHER (*Haematopus bachmani*) – Beautiful study of this species at Pillar Point Harbor.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings).

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*)

SNOWY PLOVER (*Charadrius nivosus*) – We tracked some down on the beach in Half Moon Bay.

SEMIPALMATED PLOVER (*Charadrius semipalmatus*)

KILLDEER (*Charadrius vociferus*)

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies).

WHIMBREL (HUDSONIAN) (*Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus*)

LONG-BILLED CURLEW (*Numenius americanus*)

MARbled GODWIT (*Limosa fedoa*)

BLACK TURNSTONE (*Arenaria melanocephala*) – Some good views of this west coast specialty.

SURFBIRD (*Calidris virgata*) – We had a single bird at the start of our pelagic trip in Half Moon Bay.

SANDERLING (*Calidris alba*)

LEAST SANDPIPER (*Calidris minutilla*)

WESTERN SANDPIPER (*Calidris mauri*)

SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER (*Limnodromus griseus*)

LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*)

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus lobatus*)

SPOTTED SANDPIPER (*Actitis macularius*)

GREATER YELLOWLEGS (*Tringa melanoleuca*)

WILLET (WESTERN) (*Tringa semipalmata inornata*)

Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers).

SOUTH POLAR SKUA (*Stercorarius maccormicki*) – It didn't stick around for long but made an impressive entrance on our pelagic trip.

POMARINE JAEGER (*Stercorarius pomarinus*)

PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) – This was the species that provided the most memorable views for us, beginning with one that attacked terns at the Foster City shellbar. We motored up to one resting in the harbor at the start of the pelagic trip and enjoyed the antics of a few others inshore, one of which forced an Elegant Tern to cough up its meal.

LONG-TAILED JAEGER (*Stercorarius longicaudus*)

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins).

COMMON MURRE (*Uria aalge*)

MARbled MURRELET (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*) – After a bit of searching we spotted a lone bird close to shore in Half Moon Bay.

RHINOCEROS AUKLET (*Cerorhinca monocerata*)

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers).

SABINE'S GULL (*Xema sabini*) – We had but a single bird on our pelagic trip.

HEERMANN'S GULL (*Larus heermanni*)

RING-BILLED GULL (*Larus delawarensis*)

WESTERN GULL (*Larus occidentalis*)

CALIFORNIA GULL (*Larus californicus*)

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*)

COMMON TERN (*Sterna hirundo*)

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*) – A total of four migrants seen offshore on the pelagic.

FORSTER'S TERN (*Sterna forsteri*)

ELEGANT TERN (*Thalasseus elegans*)

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) [H]

BAND-TAILED PIGEON (*Patagioenas fasciata*) – Our best looks were at Coyote Point where there was a big flock of 16, but also seen in the Sierra and at the McClellan Ranch.

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

MOURNING DOVE (*Zenaida macroura*)

Cuculidae (Cuckoos)

GREATER ROADRUNNER (*Geococcyx californianus*) – Four seen along Mines Road and Del Puerto Canyon was a good total.

Strigidae (Owls)

WESTERN SCREECH-OWL (*Megascops kennicottii*) – Following up on a tip we had nice scope looks at a roosting bird at the McClellan Ranch.

BURROWING OWL (*Athene cunicularia*) – We did manage to tease out one from all of the ground-squirrels at the Arnizo Ranch near Alviso.

Apodidae (Swifts)

VAUX'S SWIFT (*Chaetura vauxi*) – We took a detour on our way back to the coast and paid a visit to the McNear Brickyard in San Rafael. While an estimated 1480 was well below the highest counts here, it was nonetheless quite a sight to see!

WHITE-THROATED SWIFT (*Aeronautes saxatalis*)

Trochilidae (Hummingbirds)

ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD (*Calypte anna*)

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

BELTED KINGFISHER (*Megaceryle alcyon*)

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

LEWIS'S WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes lewis*) – Relatively numerous this trip. We saw a few sighted along Mines Road and a few more in the Jeffrey Pines south of Mono Lake.

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*) – Always a crowd pleaser. We had several nice encounters in the Sierra, beginning at Calaveras Big Trees SP.

BLACK-BACKED WOODPECKER (*Picoides arcticus*) – With the uptick in fires and disease killing conifer forests in the west, this species has been sighted with greater frequency in the past several years.

NORTHERN FLICKER (*Colaptes auratus*)

PILEATED WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus pileatus*)

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

AMERICAN KESTREL (*Falco sparverius*)

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – Five different ones seen, beginning with one right in the REI parking lot in San Carlos after our visit.

Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)

WESTERN WOOD-PEWEE (*Contopus sordidulus*)

HAMMOND'S FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax hammondi*)

BLACK PHOEBE (*Sayornis nigricans*)

SAY'S PHOEBE (*Sayornis saya*)

WESTERN KINGBIRD (*Tyrannus verticalis*) – One was at Coyote Point, getting toward the tail end of their migration.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE (*Lanius ludovicianus*)

Vireonidae (Vireos, Shrike-Babblers, and Erpornis)

CASSIN'S VIREO (*Vireo cassinii*) – We encountered a couple of singing birds at Cascade Campground on the west slope of the Sierra.

WARBLING VIREO (*Vireo gilvus*) – Seen along Mines Road and a couple more in Strawberry.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

PINYON JAY (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*) – We had a small flock of these in the Jeffrey Pines near Mono Lake. Most were on the move but we did see a few stop and perch for us.

STELLER'S JAY (*Cyanocitta stelleri*)

CALIFORNIA SCRUB-JAY (*Aphelocoma californica*)

BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE (*Pica hudsonia*) – This species occurs east of the Sierra in California and we saw a few near Bridgeport.

YELLOW-BILLED MAGPIE (*Pica nuttalli*) – One of my favorite birds; we enjoyed this species near Livermore. [E]

CLARK'S NUTCRACKER (*Nucifraga columbiana*) – A few of these were hanging around in the Mono Basin.

AMERICAN CROW (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) – All of those we saw were west of the Sierra.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*)

Alaudidae (Larks)

HORNED LARK (*Eremophila alpestris*)

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOW (*Tachycineta thalassina*)

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*)

CLIFF SWALLOW (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*)

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

MOUNTAIN CHICKADEE (*Poecile gambeli*)

CHESTNUT-BACKED CHICKADEE (*Poecile rufescens*)

OAK TITMOUSE (*Baeolophus inornatus*)

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

BUSHTIT (*Psaltriparus minimus*)

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta canadensis*) – One of the really common flock species anywhere in the Sierra.

WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH (INTERIOR WEST) (*Sitta carolinensis tenuissima*) – We bumped into this subspecies on the east slope of the Sierra. They have a call quite different from the Pacific birds.

WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH (PACIFIC) (*Sitta carolinensis aculeata*) – We had nice looks at this form at the McClellan Ranch on our final day.

PYGMY NUTHATCH (*Sitta pygmaea*)

Certhiidae (Treecreepers)

BROWN CREEPER (*Certhia americana*)

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

HOUSE WREN (*Troglodytes aedon*)

PACIFIC WREN (PACIFICUS GROUP) (*Troglodytes pacificus pacificus*) – Wonderful to see this little tyke at Calaveras Big Trees.

MARSH WREN (PALUDICOLA GROUP) (*Cistothorus palustris paludicola*)

BEWICK'S WREN (*Thryomanes bewickii*)

Cinclidae (Dippers)

AMERICAN DIPPER (*Cinclus mexicanus*) – Good looks at this species in the higher stretches of Hwy 120 on the west slope of the Sierra.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus satrapa*)

Paradoxornithidae (Parrotbills, Wrentit, and Allies)

WRENTIT (*Chamaea fasciata*) – One of the more iconic birds of the far western US, this species was well seen on a few occasions with perhaps the best being the ones near Half Moon Bay.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

WESTERN BLUEBIRD (*Sialia mexicana*)

MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD (*Sialia currucoides*) – Wonderful to see this species among the buildings at Bodie.

TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRE (*Myadestes townsendi*) – We connected with a vocal bird in the high Sierra near Sonora Pass.

AMERICAN ROBIN (*Turdus migratorius*)

Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)

CALIFORNIA THRASHER (*Toxostoma redivivum*) – Good scope view of a vocal one along Mines Road.

SAGE THRASHER (*Oreoscoptes montanus*) – A few at Mono Lake and Bodie.

NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD (*Mimus polyglottos*)

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) [I]

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

AMERICAN PIPIT (*Anthus rubescens*) – One was at South Tufa.

Ptilionotidae (Silky-flycatchers)

PHAINOPEPLA (*Phainopepla nitens*)

Parulidae (New World Warblers)

ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER (*Oreothlypis celata*)

NASHVILLE WARBLER (RIDGWAYI) (*Oreothlypis ruficapilla ridgwayi*)

COMMON YELLOWTHROAT (*Geothlypis trichas*)

YELLOW WARBLER (*Setophaga petechia*)

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (AUDUBON'S) (*Setophaga coronata auduboni*)

BLACK-THROATED GRAY WARBLER (*Setophaga nigrescens*) – A couple of these were seen in the Sierra.

TOWNSEND'S WARBLER (*Setophaga townsendi*) – Both in the Sierra and along the coast.

HERMIT WARBLER (*Setophaga occidentalis*) – We bumped into two of these at Calaveras Big Trees.

WILSON'S WARBLER (*Cardellina pusilla*)

Passerellidae (New World Buntings and Sparrows).

CHIPPING SPARROW (*Spizella passerina*)

BREWER'S SPARROW (*Spizella breweri*)

LARK SPARROW (*Chondestes grammacus*) – Noteworthy; one stray at the Coyote Point Marina.

FOX SPARROW (THICK-BILLED) (*Passerella iliaca megarhyncha*)

DARK-EYED JUNCO (*Junco hyemalis*)

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (NUTTALLI) (*Zonotrichia leucophrys nuttalli*)

SAGEBRUSH SPARROW (*Artemisiospiza nevadensis*) – After some unsuccessful searching early, we hit paydirt on our second morning effort with as many as 10 along Pole Line Road.

BELL'S SPARROW (BELLI) (*Artemisiospiza belli belli*) – Some handsome ones along Mines Road.

VESPER SPARROW (*Pooecetes gramineus*)

SAVANNAH SPARROW (*Passerculus sandwichensis*)

SONG SPARROW (*Melospiza melodia*)

CALIFORNIA TOWHEE (*Melospiza crissalis*)

GREEN-TAILED TOWHEE (*Pipilo chlorurus*)

SPOTTED TOWHEE (*Pipilo maculatus*)

Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies).

WESTERN Tanager (*Piranga ludoviciana*) – One was hanging out at the McClellan Ranch.

Icteridae (Troupials and Allies).

WESTERN MEADOWLARK (*Sturnella neglecta*) – Three of these at Bodie were interesting.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)

TRICOLORED BLACKBIRD (*Agelaius tricolor*) – We had a tightly bunched flock of these roosting in a tree along Mines Road near the big pond.

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD (*Molothrus ater*)

BREWER'S BLACKBIRD (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*)

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies).

HOUSE FINCH (*Haemorhous mexicanus*)

PURPLE FINCH (WESTERN) (*Haemorhous purpureus californicus*)

CASSIN'S FINCH (*Haemorhous cassinii*)

LESSER GOLDFINCH (*Spinus psaltria*)

AMERICAN GOLDFINCH (*Spinus tristis*)

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows).

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) [I]

MAMMALS

BRUSH RABBIT (*Sylvilagus bachmani*)

DESERT COTTONTAIL (*Sylvilagus audubonii*)

BLACK-TAILED JACKRABBIT (*Lepus californicus*)

LEAST CHIPMUNK (*Tamias minimus*)

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*) [I]

CHICKAREE (*Tamiasciurus douglasii*)

PACIFIC WHITE-SIDED DOLPHIN (*Lagenorhynchus obliquidens*)

HARBOR PORPOISE (*Phocoena phocoena*)

BLUE WHALE (*Balaenoptera musculus*) – Stunning to see this magnificent whale on the pelagic!

HUMPBACK WHALE (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)

COYOTE (*Canis latrans*)

BOBCAT (*Lynx rufus*) – One blasted past us near Sonora that appeared to be making off with a small house cat.

CALIFORNIA SEA LION (*Zalophus californianus*)

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*)

MULE DEER (*Odocoileus hemionus*)

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 195 bird taxa and 19 mammal taxa