



California Poppies

California, USA

Dates: 3rd to 17th March 2014

Summary

A trip to California was undertaken primarily to see and photograph Grey Whales and Bobcats.

Travel

Return flights were by Virgin Atlantic from Heathrow into San Francisco. Although the pre-flight service was second to none (two phone calls to ensure I was looking forward to the flight and asking if I had any questions) I did make a complaint about meals on board which has yet to be answered 5 weeks after returning. I hired a Ford Edge 4x4 vehicle via Virgin Atlantic with Alamo given we would be doing some rough dirt track driving. The car was excellent; but it should have been as it only had 10 miles on the clock when I picked it up. I wanted to bring it home. I also hired a Sat Nav. which was invaluable. An open boot space was frustrating as hire companies take out the rear boot cover. However I found space in the spare wheel well for things I wanted to keep away from prying eyes when I left the car unattended.

Weather

Weather was mild and warm. On the coast mist was an issue on one day but if I went a couple of miles inland this cleared. At Yosemite snow was limited to 5000 feet plus and none fell during my stay. In fact it was very warm in the mountains. It is likely if snow had fallen I would have needed to hire snow chains for the vehicle. Winds were fresh on occasion and although they did not cancel any sailings it made a couple of them 'interesting'

Accommodation

It was a three point location stay:

3rd to 8th Carmel - Enchanted Oaks - Self-catering. Well-appointed with washing and cooking facilities and free internet. The owners live on site. Plenty of eating establishments a short drive away. The rear of the property backed onto woodland where many birds could be watched. Local walks in semi residential area. 15 minutes drive from the Whale watching in Monterey.

<http://www.vrbo.com/352413>

10th to 12th at Point Reyes Station - Black Heron Inn - B&B American style

By far the best place I stayed. Microwave and fridge in room with items to make breakfast provided. Free Internet. Several restaurants and Stores a short drive away at

Point Reyes Station. Very rural location with birds everywhere. Plenty of semi-rural and rural walks.

<http://blackheroninn.com/>



Point Reyes looking north from near the Lighthouse

13th to 16th at Oakhurst on the outskirts of Yosemite National Park (15 minutes to south entrance) - Best Western Plus Yosemite Gateway - Hotel

Remote rooms with an indoor swimming pool and restaurant on site. Several other eating places within easy walking distance. Free internet. Limited bird watching locally in disused ground on opposite side of road. I found Yosemite too restrictive (do this, park here, don't go there) and a little busy for my taste but the scenery was to die for.

<http://www.yosemitgatewayinn.com>



Yosemite National Park



Monterey Harbour

Whale watching

I had pre-booked 4 whale watches 6 months previous to our visit with Sanctuary Cruises in Moss Landing <https://www.sanctuarycruises.com/> to take full advantage of my stay in nearby Carmel. On the day of arrival the owners of our residence had been given a message by Sanctuary Cruises asking me to telephone. When I phoned them I was told their boat was in dry dock and I should not have been offered bookings. He gave me the name of an alternative company which despite being 8pm answered the phone and

booked me in for the rest of the week. <http://www.montereybaywhalewatch.com/>. This was the company I originally wanted to use but they did not answer my emails 6 months earlier when I requested bookings.

Sanctuary Cruises contacted us later in the week to find out where I was as they were expecting us ... very confusing! I did after protestation get a no quibble full refund from them which also included a refund of credit card currency conversion charges.

Monterey Bay Whale Watch however was excellent. The crew and booking staff were informative, friendly and knowledgeable. Nancy Black who skippered the boat on two occasions was exceptional at getting the light on the correct side of the animals for photography and great viewing without getting too close. Note: Nancy had recently been fined for feeding Orcas to attract them close to the boat but we saw nothing but exemplary behaviour and seamanship.

The previous day to my first trip both unseasonal Orca and Blue Whale had been sighted.

Sightings and Locations

A full list of sightings is included within a systematic list at the end of this report. A full list of birds is included so you are able to see what I didn't see as well as what I did. Highlights are listed below.

Mon 3rd March

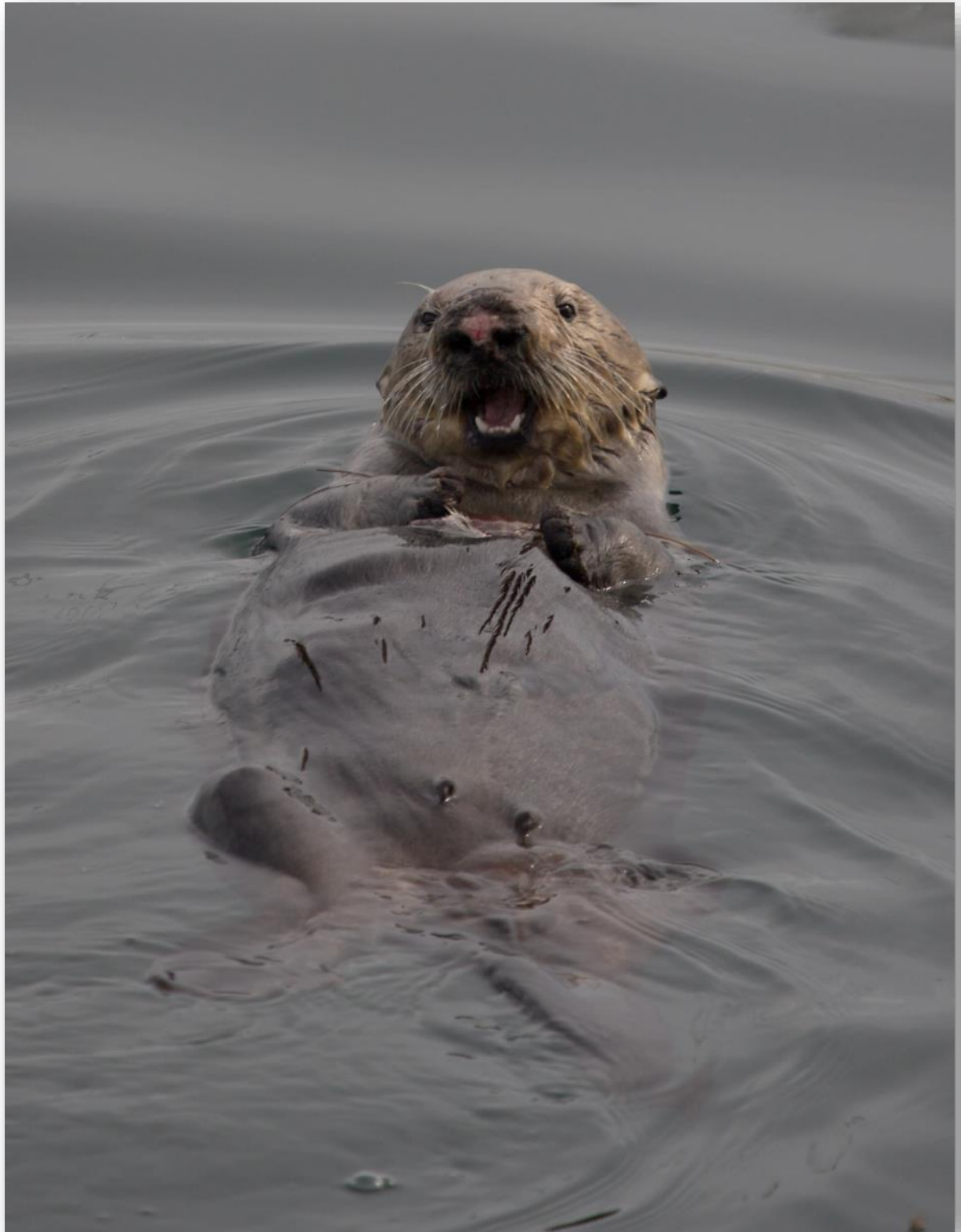
Flight landed at 3pm local time and I drove to Carmel in light showery rain. I called at a supermarket in Carmel to get stocked up with supplies for my stay and then went to Enchanted Oaks. By the time I arrived it was getting dark. The drive is really steep – and I mean REALLY steep. I only drove down it the once; after that I left the car on the road. Apart from obvious birds like Turkey vultures and American Crows seen on the drive down to Carmel the only other thing of note was a Great Horned Owl calling outside in the early hours of the morning.

Tues 4th March

I set off to explore the Harbour at Monterey before catching my first Whale watching trip. Car Parking was easy pay on exit and nearby to the Harbour on Washington Street. To the North West of the Harbour there was a small colony of Harbour Seals hauled out on rocks and from the Pier I was able to see a large school of Risso's Dolphins out in the bay. Sea Otters, Surf Scoters and Eared Grebes were easily found in among the boats along with an occasional diver. Californian Seal Lions entertained me while waiting for the boat and on the Harbour mouth wall was a large nesting colony of gulls and cormorants of three species.



Eared Grebe



Sea Otter



Surf Scoter (Males and female)

On the sailing itself I saw a number of northbound Grey Whales as well as more Risso's Dolphins and Pacific White sides Dolphins and a single Humpback. It would be difficult to better the cetacean sightings we had on a relatively calm sea. Cassin's Auklets were relatively common at sea but numbers depreciated rapidly during the week.

I had a packed lunch on the quay while watching and photographing the sea lions and then drove to the nearby Monarch Grove to see over wintering Monarch Butterflies. This was not difficult to find but certainly not easy. It is a stand of trees among a residential area where Monarchs overwinter usually in the non-native Eucalyptus. I must have seen many many thousands.



Monarch Butterflies

I then went in the car down 17 mile drive. This is a toll road. Stopping regularly at pullovers we were able to view the beach, sea and rocky areas for my desired target of Surfbirds, Black Turnstone and Black Oystercatchers.



Black Oystercatcher and Black Turnstone



Surfbird

Weds 5th March

Another morning whale watch produced some excellent sightings of Grey Whales and other cetaceans but mist proved limiting out at sea. Horned Grebes were in the Harbour.





Horned Grebe

After lunch I headed for Moss Landing where I viewed the sea from south of the river. An obliging Say's Pheobe was in the beach area.



Say's Pheobe

I then headed inland to Elkhorn Slough but left it too late in the day to explore the reserve fully. It was here I saw my first Mule Deer, saw Raccoon Tracks and American Goldfinch.



American Goldfinch

Thurs 6th March

I made my way south on the main coastal Highway 1 in an attempt to see California Condor and Elephant Seal.

My first stop was at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park. A walk to the sea revealed just one Monarch, a painted Lady and a group of Stella's Jays but little else in the mist. A stop further south gave excellent views of Golden Crowned Sparrow and Orange Crowned Warblers but sadly no Condors due to mist.



Orange Crowned Warbler



Golden Crowned Sparrow

I continued south to Piedras Blancas an Elephant Seal rookery next to the road. Here were several hundred Elephant seals including some impressive males. I tried a few miles further south at Hearst Castle for the wild herd of Zebra without success.



Driving back north in the afternoon the mist had cleared and my very last stop one half mile south of the JFB State Park produced not one but two California Condors in a kettle of Turkey Vultures as well as my first Rufous Hummingbird. Subsequent investigation of the vulture wing tag revealed one of the birds was 'Kingpin' the alpha male of the coastal group.



California Condors

Fri 7th March

Back on the boat this morning I was disappointed to note that yesterday's sightings included a large number of Northern Right Whale Dolphins among the Pacific White Sides. I did see one animal as I searched through the dolphins but they are extremely difficult to spot. Not having a dorsal fin they can look surprisingly like a 'porpoising' Sealion.

The Pacific White Sided Dolphins were almost mobbing the Grey Whales which were seen mating and rolling in the water showing their pectoral fins.



Grey Whale

One sighting of a Black footed Albatross was extremely distant.

After lunch with the Sea Lions again I made our way out to Pacines Reservoir and then along Panoche Valley. This deserved a day trip of its own. At the reservoir I found a Loggerhead Shrike but little else. Heading along the nearby Panoche Road; 9.4 miles after

I had entered the road I stopped and searched the trees around the farm (mailbox 10251) for Lewis's Woodpecker which I duly found perched on a telegraph pole. This is a recognised stakeout. I also had nesting Western Bluebird here too.



Lewis's Woodpecker



Western Bluebird



Bobcat

At 11.4 Miles I stopped under some Red Rocks which held Peregrine and watched a Californian Quail. A Bobcat ran in front of me over the road taking me completely by surprise. The next farm up the valley held lots of California Quail and a little further on I heard Phainopepla in mistletoe covered trees but couldn't see it. Sadly I couldn't go further due to failing light. The area deserved a lot more exploration.

Sat 8th March

Out on the boat again this morning it was quite rough with a number on the boat feeling quite queasy. More Dolphins and Grey Whales plus excellent views of several Black footed Albatross'. The crew, knowing I wanted photos of the birds, left a couple of Grey Whales to investigate a group of three Black foots on the water - much to the surprise of all Whale Watchers on the boat!



Black footed Albatross



California Seals

I had lunch and then went to nearby El Estero Park opposite the quay. Here were Pied Billed Grebes and a number of Ruddy Duck.

I drove to nearby Carmel Beach State Reserve and walked along the beach. It was pretty busy here but still managed some good views of Red winged Blackbirds, Buffleheads my only White tailed Kite and fantastic views of Anna's Hummingbirds. I then went back to Enchanted Oaks to pack for my move to Point Reyes the following morning.



Anna's Hummingbird

Sun 9th March

I thought the drive up through the outskirts of San Francisco would have been a quiet one given it was Sunday. How wrong could I have been? Good views of the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz as I made our way north. Very quickly the area got rural. I did stop at Nicasio Reservoir just to the east of Point Reyes Station and this was only one of two places I saw Common Ground Dove. As always in California as soon as I stopped at a seemingly deserted good looking place to see birds others that were passing stopped and disturbed the area. On arrival at the Black Heron Inn it couldn't have been better placed. Walking in the garden and grounds there were American Robins, loads of Woodpeckers, Hooded Mergansers, Black crowned Night Herons, California Towhee and Hummingbirds. I ate that evening in Point Reyes Station.

Mon 10th March

On a bright but cool and windy day a morning walk saw me watching a flock of Turkey in the yard of the Inn. After breakfast I made my way to the lighthouse to see if I could see any migrating Grey Whales. I didn't see any as the sea was too rough but the accompanying Ravens, Peregrines and Turkey Vultures were entertaining. It's not possible to take your car to the lighthouse at weekends you have to catch a shuttle bus which is a bit of a palaver. I knew this from the parks website hence the weekday visits. A large Common Murre colony exists on the cliffs here. The approach area is also extremely good for Northern Harrier and Mule Deer. Tule Elk were further north and a few miles from the lighthouse was another Elephant Seal Colony but close approach is nowhere as good as Piedras Blancas. I saw my best views of Clarke's Grebe here.



Elephant Seals



Clarke's Grebe

Tues 11th March

I decided today to visit the Bodega Bay area to the north. Mainly to see Snowy Plover around the Russian river area but also to see Bodega Bay, where Hitchcock shot 'The Birds'. The Plovers were actually best seen this year in Bodega Dunes; by the time I found this out (from a seal monitoring warden) I had left it too late in the day. Six or seven miles further north I called at Sonoma Coast State Park which holds rocks that have been polished smooth by scratching mammoths – fascinating stuff.



Mammoth Rocks



The surrounding area was boggy but full of wild flowers. Northern Harriers abounded. I drove a little further north to Fort Ross to see a small colony of Stella's Sea Lions. The park has no set opening hours and unfortunately it was closed but on Google Earth I had seen some styles that enabled access from the coast road just in case this happened. I parked up and walked over the grassland to view the Stella's hauled out on distant offshore rocks.

I saw my only Pacific Tree Frog here.

Weds 12th March

Another visit to Point Reyes Lighthouse and some excellent views of migrating Grey Whales in calmer conditions. I picked up the first when I had my eyes half shut sleeping in the sunshine - I heard it blow below me!

A walk north from the Historic Pierce Point Ranch gave me my best views of Tule Elk and my only snake of the trip. This area is worth exploring further. The Tomales Bay follows the San Andreas Fault and I felt a tremor the previous evening which was well covered by the media.

A visit to Bear Valley Visitors Centre gave excellent views of California Quail walking around the car park.

I went for a night drive to see if I could pick up on Bobcat. Point Reyes is supposed to be the best place in the US to see them. All I saw were Mule Deer and a Raccoon plus some Cinnamon Teal, my only ones of the trip.



Tule Elk



California Quail

Thurs 13th March

Reluctantly I moved on. I had only a few roadside stops on my way across the state to Yosemite and we checked in to the hotel around 3:30pm and immediately went up into the park to Maripossa Grove. The park did a five day permit for around \$20 which we paid on entry and showed my passes each time I went into the park. There are several hundred Sequoia within the grove and they are absolutely awesome!



Late evening as the crowds were diminishing was an excellent time to visit. The only birds of note here were American Robins.

Fri 14th March

An early morning walk around waste ground opposite the hotel was productive for Sapsuckers and in the hotel grounds around the bird feeders there were Juniper Titmouse and several sparrow species.

After breakfast I drove back into the park and up to Badger Pass; a ski paradise. Here I eventually saw Mountain Chickadee but birds were scarce.



Mountain Chickadee

A walk in the Yosemite valley gave White headed Woodpeckers, Stella's Jays and American Dipper. A walk through forest gave Kinglets and Red breasted Nuthatch but few if any Warblers.



White headed Woodpecker

Sat 15th March

I went North from Oakhurst to Maripossa and took the Old Highway to White Rock road to West Westfall Road 6.5 miles to Preston Road, turned left in Preston Road 5 miles which ran into Ben Hurr Road. I kept on this road which turned into road 613. I carried on

to Raymond turned right onto road 607 opposite the road to Knowles. I continued on this road until the end around 7 miles further then took a right to Eastman Lake – entry fee. Many of these roads were rough dirt tracks and were excellent for birds but the car needed a good wash when I'd finished. Care is needed but there are few houses and I only saw two other cars. It's a long way – allow all day for frequent stops. I came across some migrating Cliff Swallows and loads of Western Meadow Lark plus a few Humming Birds and Lark Sparrows. Raptors were disappointing and I never did see the target Roadrunner. I did however get great views of Phainopepla.



Phainopepla

Sun 16th March

Back into the park today and immediately came across a Bobcat my second sighting of the trip; again crossing the road about half a mile south of the historic railway as we drove up the approach road. I stopped and followed it into the trees and managed to get a few shots.



Bobcat – my second

The day was otherwise somewhat uneventful as I walked in the more remote areas around the park that were still accessible and snow free. Lots of Western Bluebirds moving. On reflection I should perhaps have done a repeat of the previous day.

Mon 17th March

Up early and made my way to San Fran Airport for late afternoon flight home. I made one stop about 20 miles from the airport at Shoreline, Mountain View. This is a park area with a golf club and lake. Excellent for birds. The kite flying area is well marked and peppered with artificial nests for Burrowing Owl. I saw just a single in bright sunshine - an evening visit would have been more productive. The car park held Brown headed Cowbirds, Mourning Dove, Hummingbirds etc

Car returned to the rental company without incident and the flight home to the UK was uneventful.



Grey Whale taking a peep at us!



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