

# California



USA



17<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> July, 2003





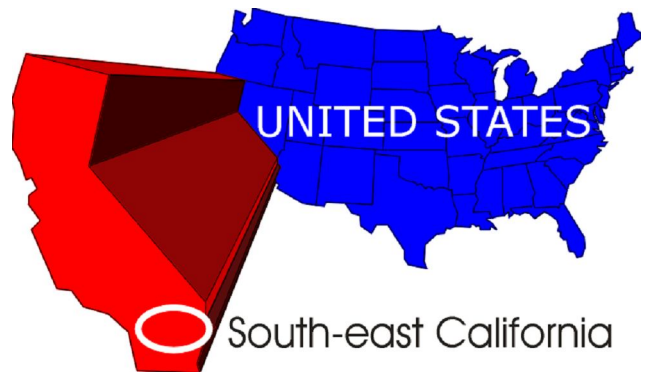
Tuesday, 22nd	San Jacinto mountains	6:15 – 11:15
Thursday, 24th	Robidoux Nature Centre	6:00 – 8:30
	San Jacinto wildlife area	9:30 – 11:00
	Joshua Tree NP	14:30 – 17:30
Friday, 25th	Palm Canyon	10:30 – 12:00
Saturday, 26th	Big Morongo Canyon NP	6:00 – 11:30

# SOUTH-EAST CALIFORNIA, USA

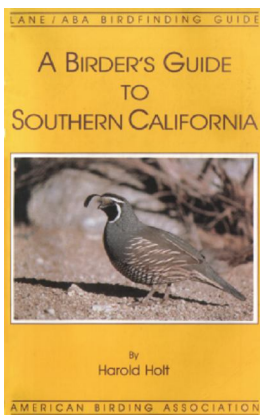
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## Introduction

A two week family holiday in California was based around three centres: Las Vegas, Palm Springs and Los Angeles. All components of the holiday were arranged independently, which meant an Air France flight from Newcastle to Los Angeles, connecting at Paris, hire car through Holiday Autos on the Internet (complete with full SLI insurance, which is a must in the US), large and comfortable hotels in LV and LA, and a villa with 2 bedrooms in the heat of Palm Springs. The design of the holiday was intended to sandwich the activities that were present in Las Vegas and Los Angeles around a "chill out" week in Palm Springs – a little bit of a misnomer in 105<sup>o</sup> plus temperatures. The timing was due to school commitments.



Las Vegas consisted of 2 full days in the money machine capital of the states, and no birding was done here. Birds such as Great-tailed Grackles and Mourning Doves can be seen around the city, and although there are undoubtedly some birding opportunities around (I had been told of Crissal Thrasher at Las Vegas Desert Park), the time was spent watching mugs greater than us losing money in the casinos. We had thought of making a pilgrimage to the Grand Canyon, but the journey to the interesting bit takes a total of 10 hours or so, hence a much shorter journey to the Hoover Dam was made. Less impressive here, and less birdy, but a single Western Grebe wallowing in the sunshine near the dam was my first, and a species that I had wanted to see for many years.



The time in Los Angeles (3 full days) was full to the brim of theme parks, Hollywood stars, and loonies on the beaches, so again no specific time was spent birding. 3 new species were seen there, however (Western, Heerman's, & Californian Gulls), which were plentiful on the beaches. A flock of Long-billed Curlews and sporadic Brown Pelicans also passed by. We did the touristy bit to see the Hollywood sign from Griffith Park, and this spot also seemed as if it could turn up a decent list of common parkland birds, such as Nuttall's Woodpecker and Steller's Jay, both of which were seen while passing through.

Palm Springs was the site for some quality birding. Despite the restrictions of time and temperature, I spent 3 mornings at sites no further than 1 hour from the villa, and all three were excellent. For information, I relied on the tried and trusted Lane guide (to Southern California), which pointed to some great birding. The sites visited were:

**San Jacinto mountains.** To the immediate West of Palm Springs, more than a day could easily be spent covering the whole of the loop around the mountains. A big plus of this area is that the height lowers the temperature considerably (although it does become hot through the day, and mosquitoes are more of a problem here than anywhere else). I covered 2 sites on the loop – the track up to the campground on Black Mountain,

and Pine Cove area, with a stop first thing at Lake Fulmor, and finally 10 minutes in the lower slopes (covering the Upper Sonoran Life Zone). The drive up the Black Mountain track is over 6 miles and has to be taken slowly, but is well worth the effort, with birds a plenty in the campground itself. The whole morning was good for experiencing the south-western birds of the upper elevations.

**Riverside area.** Riverside is reputedly a large city that is still growing, and the amount of traffic passing through even at 5:30am seemed to confirm this. It also offers some good birding, and quite a contrast to the mountain mix of San Jacinto. The 2 sites visited here were in themselves very varied. Robidoux Nature Centre offers many habitat types in a smallish area – riparian, woodland, overgrown grassland, and marsh/river. It is well signposted from the Highway (60), and can be accessed even before the official opening time of 10am. San Jacinto Wildlife area looks very purpose built, and is a very good site for waterbirds. In addition to 2 large marshland/lagoons, 4 artificial lagoons have been created, with surrounding reedbeds and wet fields. The main problem I had was that the northern approach along Davis Road was closed, so I had to make a detour to the east then through Lakeview.

**Big Morongo National Park.** I had been recommended this site by a couple of Californian birders I met in Arizona. I had toyed with the idea of making a trek to the Salton Sea, since there were potentially more new and varied species there. The Morongo decision was probably the best of the trip, since I chanced upon a once fortnightly hummingbird banding session, critters in the form of Bobcat and Banded King Snake, and some real quality birding during the whole morning. The preserve is not particularly large, but forms a bit of a vegetated (and wet in some places) oasis in the more barren mountain area. It is supposed to be a real gem during migration, but the breeding flycatchers, passing hummingbirds, and plentiful other species were good even during the height of Summer.

Although these were the specific birding areas visited during the holiday, mention should be made of two other, and surprising in one case, places of interest:

**Plaza Villas, Palm Springs.** Our squat for the week was almost in the centre of Palm Springs, but did have lawned areas throughout, with a lining of trees. Greatest shock was the lone Greater Roadrunner of the trip, trotting around one of the aforementioned lawns. Hummingbirds were also regularly seen (mainly Black-chinned, but also some Costa's), both on feeders, and often on exposed perches. Other common residents were Mockingbird and Mourning Dove (the latter included a nesting pair above our parked car), and Brewer's Blackbird over the villas.



**Palm Canyon.** I made a short trip to this  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the 3 Indian Canyons area, the main aim being to see the scenery. Binoculars were a bonus – Scott's Oriole was in the Canyon itself, with Sage Sparrows along the rock faces above. Although the Canyon is 15 miles long, birds can be seen in the area immediately down from the visitor centre – eg California Towhee, Verdin, Bewick's Wren.

## Driving

I found that driving in California was manic, but it didn't take long to step into their ways – understanding that undertaking is as acceptable as overtaking, as is turning right on most red lights, is advantageous. However, a major tip for any journey seemed to be planning. Knowing the roads, and in particular, the Interstate highways, that need to be taken are a must, since the turnings can easily be missed (knowing the name of a road as well as its number is useful), and sometimes getting back on the correct route can take some time – there are no roundabouts to do a U-turn on. Some of the birding sites

left the metalled roads, and the Lane guide does warn about their standard after rain, but the saloon car I had managed all reasonably comfortably, even if some of the mountain tracks had to be taken a little slowly.

## SITES VISITED

### San Jacinto mountains



The journey from Palm Springs by way of the fast Interstate highway, which even at 5:30 in the morning was very busy, to Lake Fulmor took about three quarters of an hour (half on the Interstate, and half on the winding roads ascending the mountain). I left Palm Springs in high temperatures, to reach much cooler and more temperate conditions at the small lake – it was quite cloudy, and around 60°. Stopping off at the Lake Fulmor parking spot, I had intended to look over the lake briefly for the presence of any water birds. It is a small lake surrounded by dense trees, which are quite mixed, probably containing an equal mix of conifers and deciduous species, and had no sign of birds on its surface, but this was compensated for by masses of birds in the trees and skies surrounding it. First and most obvious were copious Violet-green Swallows overhead, presumably attracted by the lake itself, and noisy Steller's Jays, which are a race with an unmarked head, appearing dark brown in most lights (quite different from the birds of the interior). Also noticeable by call were Mountain Chickadees, and Hummingbirds, the latter of

which seemed in the main to be Black-chinned, although an earlier individual had the appearance of an Allen's or Rufous.

To the rear of the car park, the exposed branches of fairly distant trees held two pairs of Woodpeckers, which all proved to be Acorn, and, on a much closer branch, a singing Lesser Goldfinch. Nearer to the parked car again was the bundle of colour (!!!) that is Oak Titmouse, which was actually not to be spurned, since it was the first new bird of the day for me, and the only representative of its species subsequently seen on the trip. The birding during the short stop at the lake is excellent, and it additionally offers the not unacceptable and strong smell of pine cones, coupled with a much fresher atmosphere than the lower and hotter altitudes. Just as I was about to leave the parking spot, the first few drops of rain began to fall, although the rain held off as the morning progressed. This was the only rain of the fortnight.

Just under 2 miles up from the lake was a turn off to the left for Black Mountain road. This proved to be quite a well made dirt track, with short stretches of tarmac on some of the acute corners, presumably to prevent excess wear. It winds up the mountain for about 6 miles, to eventually





reach the campground. More elevation was added with this track, but numerous stops were made on the ascent. First pause was about 1 mile up the track, with the window open listening for bird calls, where I came across my first "Oregon" Dark-eyed Juncos, which still emitted the characteristic "chip" call of its eastern counterparts. However, the look is quite different to that of "Slate-coloured", mainly due to the pinkish brown tones of the body and wings, but sharing the dark grey (or almost black) head and pink bill. Also in the clearing were quite a few Woodpeckers, again all proving to be Acorn, and some Western Wood-pewees.

During the next part of the drive, and just over a rise in the track, a Coyote appeared directly in front of the car, and almost nonchalantly disappeared again into the woods.

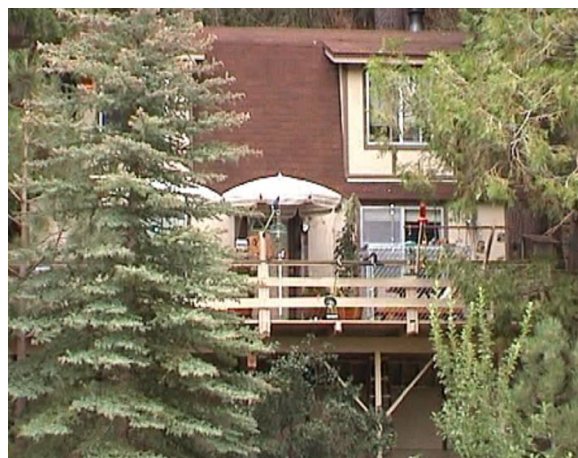
I stopped again about 1½ miles short of the campground, to the sound of more calling birds, at a reasonably open break in the trees, and this proved quite productive. First birds were Mountain Chickadees, and noisy Steller's Jays, but 1 single calling White-breasted Nuthatch was followed by a group of 5 Pygmy Nuthatches in the adjacent tree. Yet another tree to the side held a family of 5 Western Bluebirds. The conifers at this elevation, of 5000 feet or so, were now beginning to dominate.



The slow and winding drive to the campground itself was ultimately very productive. The campground is spread over quite a large area, with parking slots and picnics dotted between very large, but not densely packed, pine trees. As soon as I emerged from the car, birds seemed to be everywhere, with White-headed Woodpecker one of the first seen, flying briefly overhead. It is truly a stunning bird, and one that was high on the wanted list. A bit of walking around the camp eventually turned up about half a dozen of these, with a group of very approachable birds chipping away at the same tree. Nuthatches and

chickadees were abundant here – White-breasted Nuthatches seemed to be in singles, but Pygmy Nuthatches were present in large parties. Collections of both young and adult birds had congregated, with some trees containing up to a dozen birds. Mountain Chickadees were also common: very flighty, but again populating some trees with up to 10 birds. Dark-eyed Juncos were spread throughout the picnic tables early on, interspersed with Steller's Jays – it was nice to be able to watch 2 familiar bird species from previous trips of new races. Also more evident earlier were Western Bluebirds, frequently seen, and probably representing one or two family groups. One unwelcome presence at these altitudes was mosquitoes, not in their masses, but presenting a bit of a nuisance until the appearance of the "Off" bug spray. The general area seems to contain more campgrounds, and an overlook, which means that a lot of time can be spent here.

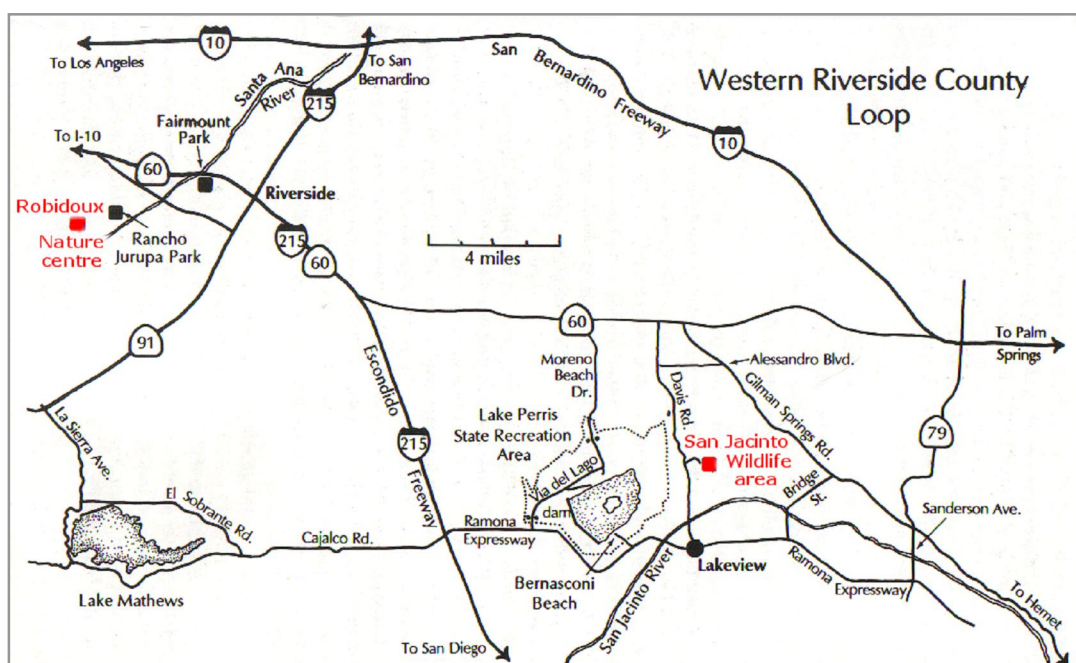
A little further up the mountain, just after the small community of Pine Cove, which apparently is the highest elevation of the road, is a small open meadow, bordered on the one side by woodland, and on the other Foster Lake Road, which is a line of spread out housing within more trees. On the opposite side of the mountain road is Buckthorn Camp. The main reason for this stop was the outside possibility of Lawrence's Goldfinch. Despite none being seen (some American Goldfinches were around) the area was once more excellent for birding. Some of the houses had quite thoughtfully erected feeders for my arrival, the mixed feeders seeming to produce the best birds. Most common on these were Black-headed Grosbeaks and House Finches, with one or two Purple Finches among them, as well as Steller's Jays and a single Band-tailed Pigeon. There was a regular traffic of birds across the clearing, usually with the feeders as the destination. In addition to the species mentioned, American Robins, which seem to prefer higher altitude in the west, were a regular sighting. In the centre of the meadow was a nest box mounted on a short pole, and a pair of Western Bluebirds had taken up residence in this, with what sounded like quite a well grown family within. On the opposite side of the meadow to the



housing, the first Spotted Towhee of the trip called out in the open briefly. Back to the car again, and a single Dark-eyed Junco was hopping on the track only feet away.

On the return journey down the mountain, a short stop was made in the Upper Sonoran zone, about half way between Pine Cove and Banning, to have a brief look for typical birds of this different habitat. Large pine trees had given way by this time to low deciduous bushes. Even in the 10-15 minutes available, quite different birds were seen as compared with the mountain birds of the earlier morning. Apart from the continuing presence of Mountain Chickadee, and following a couple of Western Scrub-jays, a Wrenit posed briefly at the top of a bush, and a Woodpecker I disturbed looked likely to be a Nuttall's or Ladder-backed, but was not seen clearly enough for identification. 3 Phainopeplas were quite obvious, if not confiding, with 8 Band-tailed Pigeons on the telegraph wires.

### Louis Robidoux Nature Centre, Riverside



I hauled myself out of bed and set off 40 minutes earlier this morning, which was just about the right time – 4:20 out of bed, 5am out of the door, arriving at the centre at 6am. Even at this time of the morning, getting through the highways of the fast growing town of Riverside was at times slow – some of the junctions were at crawling pace. As mentioned in the Lane guide, the centre opens at 10am, but the gate, which is merely a cross bar across a track, can be parked next to and easily circumnavigated. This was another site where setting foot outside of the car immediately found copious birdlife, and



this was around the roadside and housing, as well as the edges of the Centre. First and most obvious was the din from the nearby American Crow colony, but above that, Black Phoebes could be seen and heard feeding from the fences bordering the nearby allotment properties. House & Purple Finches were abundant, and 4 small Woodpeckers flew into a tree nearby. On the Centre side of the road, 2 Northern Flickers were at the top of tall trees, and were subsequently replaced by young Ash-throated Flycatchers.



I finally managed to tear myself away from the entrance area after about half an hour, but this was only after adding Western Bluebird, another Black Phoebe, and the final Towhee of the North American family, California, which obligingly landed and rooted around on a small drive just off the main road. Even before the visitor centre was reached (it is only about 100m from where the car was parked), the mystery of the earlier Woodpeckers was resolved. At least 6 Nuttall's were feeding along the main branches of trees. A couple of Black Phoebes also slowed up progress.

The first trail I took was the Willow Creek Trail, and this eventually turned into a full loop around the preserve. As soon as I rounded the first corner into a fairly open patch, a small collection of tall bare trees hosted Northern Flicker, Western Bluebird, and Ash-throated Flycatcher in a line. Common Yellowthroat flew from one dense thicket to another. This trail rounded to run parallel for a short way with a concreted watercourse, which actually contained some water and was quite well reeded, containing more Common Yellowthroats and Black Phoebes, with House Wren on the fenced boundary. A small collection of scruffy sparrows which kept fairly well hidden turned out to be juvenile Song Sparrows, with the odd Black-chinned Hummingbird passing by.



Shortly after this, an open expanse of grassland and bushes was reached, and this was surrounded by a perimeter of trees over a width of about 300m. A calling Blackbird could not be located, and could have been either Red-winged or Tricoloured. A Spotted Towhee did put in a brief appearance, but the first and most obvious poser was a California Thrasher, sat at the apex of a lone bush along the trail. They are reputedly a



skulking species, but it stayed put for about 5 minutes. It is a very impressive bird, quite large for the family, with a very long down-curved sickle bill. Time now was 7:20, and the sky was overcast with a sort of mist, which kept the temperatures reasonable. At the end of the track, I split off to the right, and there was a good splash of colour from sunflowers. If they were wild they were impressive. There were another couple of California Towhees at this part of the trail, but they were much more secretive than the initial bird near the car. A third bird was more confiding, feeding with the characteristic backward and forward hopping action of the family.

The trail continued on its circumnavigation of the more open centre, and turned under a thick canopy of trees, with a flowing stream along its length. This was initially very quiet, until the trail widened again, and more Black Phoebes were found, along with Black-headed Grosbeak and Nuttall's Woodpecker. The Grosbeak turned out to be the first of a fairly large party of mainly juveniles. They were flighty and kept to the bare branches of the outer trees. The trail started to liven up after these were seen, with Western Scrub-jay, yet another Nuttall's Woodpecker, a House Wren, and a Spotted Towhee calling directly above me. On the return to the visitor centre, a very loud screech call stopped me in my tracks. The culprit remained unseen, but was most likely a large squirrel, and did put me on to 3 more Spotted Towhees. One or two squirrels were subsequently seen further down the trail.



The walk around the preserve was very enjoyable, and although there is a good possibility that I missed some of the other trails or interest points, the mile or so circular route that I took passed various habitats and mixes of birds. When I arrived back at the car, the gate was open, and people were already milling around the centre, despite the time being just after 8am. However, arriving at the centre before opening does not seem to be a problem, due to ease of access and lack of people traffic.

### San Jacinto wildlife area



Someone had conspired to stop me getting here, since Davis Road – the rough track which leads to the wildlife area – wasn't signposted from the Highway, and when I doubled back and eventually found it, I was greeted with road closed signs, which led to a lengthy detour. However, even the detour was good. American Kestrels seemed to like the open expanses, with 5 flying from telegraph wires, and once I refound Davis Road, this time from the south, at least 5 Western Meadowlarks were very approachable. Loggerhead Shrikes were also on the fences, but not quite as confiding.

Once I pulled into the reserve, it was nice to find that the best way to see the birds was by a self guided auto tour, using provided laminated maps – a welcome finding with the temperatures beginning to soar. The first pull in was a little disappointing. It was a dry reed bed oasis, but a pair of Loggerhead Shrikes had decided to take up residence in the nest box here, and Common Yellowthroats could be heard calling in the reeds.

The birds became more plentiful at the first of the four artificial lagoons. All were of a similar size and shape, being more or less rectangular, with some open water and various amounts of reeds in the centre, leaving some muddy edges to the outside. A group of 6 American Avocets fed together, with one in full breeding plumage, and Killdeers were calling noisily on the separating embankments. A single Black Phoebe was feeding on the perimeter, and a juvenile Blackbird was either Red-winged or Tricoloured. A single Yellow-headed Blackbird was seen briefly flying over the reeds. The second lagoon was more open than the first, and had a much wider perimeter of open water than the first. More American Avocets were on here, small numbers of Black-necked Stilts, and 5 Wilson's Phalaropes swimming as a group. Half a dozen Cinnamon Teal flew off, along with a single Mallard. Lagoon 3 was dry, which left the larger lagoon 4. A lot of eclipse plumage Cinnamon Teal here, as well as more American Avocets, and a Prairie Falcon circling overhead.



A drive of about half a mile from the lagoons found the very impressive and more expansive wetland area. After parking next to a portalo, and walking up to a staged viewing area, the two lagoons could be seen. The one to the right of a bisecting path looked to be deeper, and more of a large pond, bordered by trees, and held mainly White-faced Ibis, Pied-billed Grebe, and American Coot. The one to the left was a larger and more open flooded marsh, with a depth presumably much less than the first. It also held a much more varied avifauna. After the first American Coots and Ruddy Ducks, it was obvious that White-faced Ibis, Cinnamon Teal, American Avocet and Black-necked Stilt were plentiful. A pair of Red-winged Blackbirds which flew over were the Californian red-winged form. Amongst the throng was a pair of Greater Yellowlegs. A walk along the bisecting path, which was bounded by trees, found a healthy population of Ash-throated Flycatchers and Black Phoebes. On the return along this track, a Northern Harrier flew overhead. These lagoons formed the final part of a loop of the preserve, and doubled back to return to the artificial ponds and entrance. It is very hot and dry at this time of the year, so must be even more spectacular in the winter months.

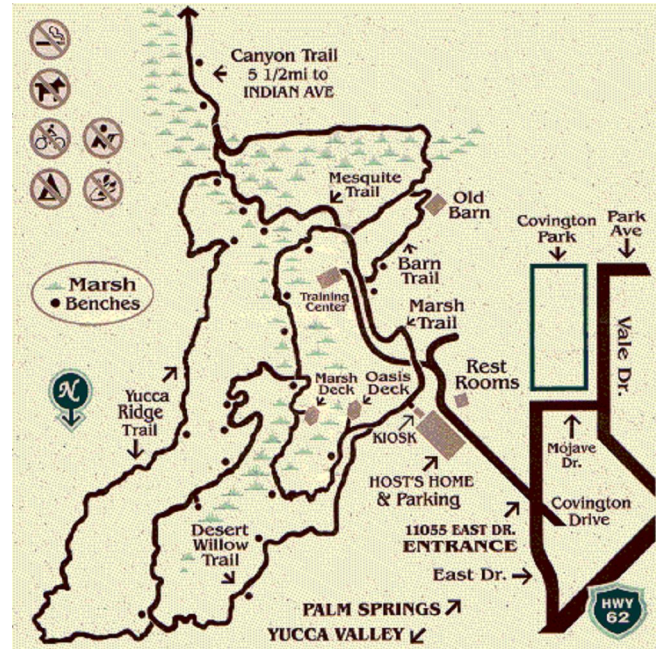
The return detour was made again back to the Interstate. The northern approach road might have been closed, but the wildlife area was eventually found, and very enjoyable. On leaving the reserve, there were 4 Western Meadowlarks in a line, and near to the main highway, 4 Red-tailed Hawks were perched on telegraph poles.

### Big Morongo Canyon NP

I arrived here at 6am, and was surprised and delighted to find that there was a group of hummingbird ringers already here, working a 6 hour shift from 5-11am. This was a larger stroke of luck than I had imagined, since they only have sessions once a fortnight.



It is part of the Hummingbird Monitoring Network, and one of the ladies at the processing tables was Barbara Carlson, the California Coordinator for the network ([bacrcy@pe.net](mailto:bacrcy@pe.net)). I was later told that the most active time for the hummingbirds is the hour or two after dawn. They had set up a couple of nets on the feeders, and were processing the trapped birds at lit tables just around the corner. As I approached them after leaving the car, they were somewhat excited, since they had what turned out to be a Broad-billed Hummingbird, which was quite poorly marked, save for the limited blue on the throat, and barely discernible red base to the bill. This is a very rare bird for these parts – the first caught here in 6 years of ringing.



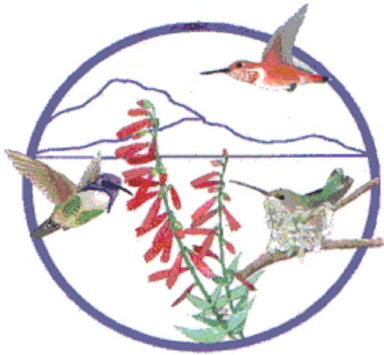
I spent about 1½ hours watching the processing of the hummingbirds, and also the feeders themselves. Most common seemed to be Black-chinned, but there were also occasional Costa's & Anna's coming through. I picked up a female Rufous Hummingbird approaching the feeders after about an hour, which was then caught and identified in the hand. A bagged male Rufous was brought to the table about 10 minutes later. There were also nut and seed feeders here. Lesser Goldfinches and House Finches were regulars to these, with a female Hooded Oriole and male Summer Tanager popping in briefly later.

I was about to cover the trails of the preserve, when I had a short chat with one of the wardens, who told me that a Black Bear had been in the vicinity that morning. These are not seen here often, but seem to be starting to come down from the mountains to raid the rubbish bins. While we were talking, a Bobcat crossed the open area adjacent to Covington Park.



The preserve is known as an oasis in the desert, and this seems obvious as soon as it is entered. There are many trails through, which cover a variety of habitats – marsh, open grassland, mesquite thickets, desert scrub, and woodland mainly consisting of Fremont Cottonwoods and red willows. First trail to be covered was the Marsh Boardwalk, and a viewing point after only about 50m displayed the first Brown-crested Flycatchers. These are a bit of a local speciality, since this is one of the few places in the state that they can be found easily. Bewick's Wrens are numerous here, as they are through the reserve, as well as Western Scrub-jay, and Bushtits. The trail became enclosed very quickly, which resulted in fewer birds to see, but the calls of Brown-crested Flycatchers

## The Hummingbird Monitoring Network



In 2002, we began a hummingbird research project with the following goals: to determine the best long-term monitoring sites for hummingbirds in W USA and NWMexico, to learn how to effectively sample their population sizes, and to use the resulting information to assist in their preservation and protection. In North America, hummingbird diversity is highest in SW USA and most of these species are dependent on habitats in Mexico for their winter survival and, for some, breeding.

This research generates knowledge about hummingbird diversity, abundance, productivity, and survivorship in a variety of habitats. Study sites occur in vegetation zones at different elevations, longitudes, and latitudes. It is a systematic banding study that will detect movement patterns for many hummingbird species in western USA and eventually northwestern Mexico. It defines a methodology that when used by others will yield data that can be statistically compared. Thus, we can begin to understand how hummingbird diversity varies from place to place and from region to region and how hummingbirds move through these regions. The results of the research should provide land managers with information about which areas support a high diversity of hummingbirds, the timing of their occurrence, and seasonal movement patterns that may indicate the size of the areas needed to maintain hummingbird diversity and abundance. It also has provided and will continue to provide training for students, scientists, and members of the general public in the skills required for hummingbird study. Because hummingbirds capture people's imagination, they are excellent subjects for conservation education, one of our main objectives.

For this project, we band hummingbirds once every other week from mid-March to late October. Banding techniques allow researchers to assess population sizes of hummingbirds and other landbirds. Our banding occurs at multiple sites at different elevations, longitudes, and latitudes in a variety of vegetation zones. Each banding session lasts five hours and begins within one half hour of sunrise. Because banding at each site follows a standardized methodology, changes in species occurrence and abundance patterns can be compared among years and among sites. Analyses of these data will help identify important areas for hummingbird migration and breeding. At the end of a season, results from each site are evaluated to determine which sites are still contenders for long-term monitoring sites or if a



new site should be added and evaluated. Because hummingbirds have unique flight abilities and require specialized permits to work with them, other avian conservation programs such as MAPS (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship) fail to adequately sample hummingbird populations.

In 2003, we have expanded to 14 study sites in Arizona and 5 in California. This project is an extension of the Migratory Pollinators Program of the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum (ASDM) and has involved many partners of DSCESU. 2 of the primary investigators are associated with partners of DSCESU: Ms. Carlson is the Director of 3 Natural Reserves for the University of California at Riverside and Dr. Wethington is a research associate at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum. We are also working in 3 National Parks: Tumacacori National Historical Park, Coronado National Memorial, and Chiricahua National Monument, on BLM land in California, and will soon start a site on US Forest Service land. Additionally, we work with many private landowners as well as a prospective new DSCESU member.





were constant, with additional Summer Tanagers. This was also ideal habitat for Common Yellowthroats – seen but overall elusive. Water was eventually crossed on the



Marsh Trail, and this was a favourite with 2-3 Spotted Towhees, feeding in what seems to be a typical Towhee fashion – hopping back and forth to disturb insects. Soon after the boardwalk passed the Mesquite Trail and opened out, an impressive and impassive Banded King Snake was found sunning itself on the recycled boards. It stayed put for some minutes, before moving off into the surrounding marsh.

Shortly before the Barn Trail, the Marsh Trail opened up into a more open grassland area, with sparse mesquite bush. On the wooded side of this, a California Thrasher was feeding, spending most of the time out of sight in the bushes, but occasionally foraging in the open. One or two Summer Tanagers were in the bushes and trees overhead. In a bare tree nearby were 2 male Western Tanagers, perched in the highest of the branches. The short walk over the Barn Trail and open grassland only disturbed the numerous lizards. This gave way to open bush areas, bordered by enclosed mesquite thickets, with a family of Gambel's Quail and chicks at the base, as well as a single Common Ground-dove. Within the tree covered part of the trail was a small length of stagnant water, with a more or less predicted Black Phoebe. Next to the water was a conveniently placed bench, which was pleasant for a short rest, and to watch the first definite Nuttall's Woodpecker of the day in the tree above. As its name suggests, the Yucca Ridge Trail does actually follow a ridge for up to half a mile above the preserve. Even though the temperatures are a lot lower here than in Palm Springs, and the climb up to the ridge not too taxing, it still saps the energy. This is a much more open habitat of desert scrub, but it is particularly good for Sage Sparrow, with at least 3 pairs seen. As soon as I left the thickets of the lower preserve, 2 California Towhees flew into the trees. Another plus for this trail is the view of the whole of the preserve below.



The return along the Marsh Trail was uneventful, and certainly a lot quieter than earlier in the morning, although a Cooper's Hawk did fly out from one of the overhead trees, aiming towards Covington Park. A California Towhee was looking hot and bothered in the bushes which had earlier been host to the Thrasher, and the first Vermilion Flycatcher of the morning was in the bare tree about 30m in the distance. Above me, in some of the taller trees, and pair of Hooded Orioles were mating – seemed a little late in the season, but they obviously knew what they were doing! Covington Park was just a short walk through a gate from here, and was covered for a short time. This was probably a favourite haunt of the local families, with tennis courts, BBQ's and plenty of picnic tables, although this morning it was fairly quiet. A couple of the rubbish bins had been turned over, presumably by the visiting Black Bear. This is probably the best place to see both Vermilion Flycatcher and Black Phoebe. Both were almost constantly in view, and reasonably approachable.





The last half hour of the morning was spent in front of the feeders again – a very enjoyable way to finish off a visit to an excellent site. Hummingbirds were a little quieter at this time of the morning, although a few Black-chinned & Anna's did stop by, as well as a male Rufous Hummingbird very briefly. The feeders and water tap continuously attracted birds, with a pair of Black-headed Grosbeaks added to the list of attendees. A single male Western Tanager flew directly through from the woods, and landed opposite for a short time.

### Palm Canyon



The 3 Indian Canyons on the outskirts of Palm Springs (excluding Tahquitz, which is separated from these) are only a 5 minute drive from the town centre. After paying a \$6 entrance fee, Indian Canyon is only a 3 mile drive from the toll booth. It reputedly contains the largest amount of palm trees in the world. After passing a mile or two of barren and open land, surrounded by sparse, mainly bare mountains, the visitor centre overlooking the canyon was reached. This was only a short visit of 1½ hours, with the main aim of sightseeing, but optics were very useful. Single California Towhee was flitting around the picnic area at the start of the canyon, with Mourning Doves and House Finches as numerous as elsewhere. 2 Purple Finches were among the House Finches. After a short hike along the trail, one of the palm trees was found to contain a preening male Scott's Oriole, and 2 females, also presumably of this species. It was sat in the same spot for at least 10 minutes. After crossing a small stream, some passerines could be seen and heard flitting around on the slopes above. All that could be seen clearly from the trail were black under tails, but a much closer bird revealed that they were Sage Sparrows. Overhead at this time were a pair of American Kestrels. On the return, and back at the picnic tables, a single Bewick's Wren was hanging around a large rock, and a small family of quail were among the sage brush – they showed too briefly to reveal specific identification. The canyon is also good for reptiles – plenty of lizards, including a large Chuckwalla.



## Joshua Tree NP



When in Palm Springs, this is one of THE places which has to be visited, not so much from the birding aspect, but to see the Mohave and Colorado deserts, with their copious Joshua Trees, at their natural best. Despite the first entrance to the park from Palm Springs, at the town of Joshua Tree, being closer to us, we drove a full hour to the 29 Palms entrance, and the main visitor centre. This forms the beginning of a 26 mile loop drive, which comes back to Joshua Tree, and then to the return highway. As a spectacle, it is recommended, since the driving trail passes through a small portion of the national park, and holds high concentrations of Joshua Trees, which are actually an overgrown lily, not a tree. Some of these can be seen from the main highway, but it is only when the park proper is entered, after paying a \$10 car entrance fee, that they really start to increase in density and height. Animals and birds are present within the park, and presumably many more can be seen on a proper birding visit, but as a family outing, we drove around with occasional stops only. The birds that we saw were Western Kingbird, Hooded Oriole, a trio of Black-throated Sparrows, Northern Mockingbird, and one or two Ravens. The only raptor was a lone Turkey Vulture. Animals were seen, with a few lizards, and mammals in the shape of ground squirrels, and singles of Kangaroo Rat and Jack Rabbit.

## Plaza Villas, Palm Springs

The Villas which we called home for 5 days and 6 nights at Palm Springs were almost in the centre of the town. However, there was some vegetation throughout the complex, and this seemed to be to the liking of some of the commoner town birds, such as Mockingbirds and Mourning Doves, as well as some surprises, chief of which was Greater Roadrunner. Some of the residents within the complex had also put out a supply of hummingbird feeders, which was the probable explanation for a constant traffic of hummingbirds around the villas. Most common of these seemed to be Black-chinned, but some subadult Costa's were also found. Even though the feeders provided the obvious place to look for these, they could also be found perching on exposed branches throughout. There were even some signs of breeding activity within the villa complex – at least one family of Northern Mockingbirds was bumped into on regular occasions, and a pair of Mourning Doves had bizarrely nested on one of the eaves of the concrete and metal car park cover.



## SPECIES SEEN

### **Pied-billed Grebe** *Podylimbus podiceps*

~10 were on the deeper lagoon at the north-eastern end of San Jacinto wildlife area

### **Western Grebe** *Aechmophorus occidentalis*

A single bird was directly behind the Hoover Dam, remaining in almost the same spot for up to an hour

### **Brown Pelican** *Pelecanus occidentalis*

Small numbers passed Santa Monica beach regularly

### **Great Blue Heron** *Ardea herodias*

1 seen from car on approach to Las Vegas from Los Angeles, and 1 on the lagoons at San Jacinto wildlife area

### **Great Egret** *Ardea alba*

2 were together in a wet field on San Jacinto wildlife area

### **Snowy Egret** *Egretta thula*

1 with the Great Egrets at San Jacinto wildlife area

### **White-faced Ibis** *Plegadis chihi*

There were very good numbers at San Jacinto wildlife area, with probably at least 50 birds spread over the 2 marshy lagoons



### **Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*

~10 on the artificial pools at San Jacinto wildlife area

### **Cinnamon Teal** *Anas cyanoptera*

This was the most common of the few species of duck seen. All birds seen were still in eclipse plumage, and showed a wing pattern very similar to Blue-winged Teal. At least 50 were on the San Jacinto wildlife area

### **Ruddy Duck** *Oxyura jamaicensis*

A single pair in breeding plumage were at San Jacinto wildlife area

### **Turkey Vulture** *Cathartes aura*

Seen sporadically, with most in the Palm Springs area. Peak was ~10 over the San Jacinto wildlife area

### **Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus*

A single bird flew over the natural lagoons at the San Jacinto wildlife area

### **Cooper's Hawk** *Accipiter cooperii*

A single bird was seen briefly flying through the Big Morongo Canyon NP. Apparently, a pair had recently bred in the preserve

### **Red-tailed Hawk** *Buteo jamaicensis*

Only 5 were seen, 4 of which were on telegraph posts within a quarter mile distance from the highway 60 on the way to Riverview. The fifth bird was over the San Jacinto wildlife area

### **American Kestrel** *Falco sparverius*

The best area for these was just to the NE of San Jacinto wildlife area. 4 were seen on the roads while trying to find the preserve, with the last one just outside of the park entrance. 2 brief birds were also seen from the car on the journey through San Bernadino, on the road from Las Vegas to Palm Springs

### **Gambel's Quail** *Callipepla gambellii*

A family party of 2 adults and 5+ immatures were in the low bushes at San Jacinto wildlife area, on the Yucca Ridge trail. Another party of Quail, which is likely to have been this species on distribution, were in Palm Canyon



**American Coot**

*Fulica americana*

Numbered probably into 3 figures on the natural lagoons at San Jacinto wildlife area

**Black-necked Stilt**

*Himantopus mexicanus*

At least 40 spread throughout the wetland areas of San Jacinto wildlife area



**American Avocet**

*Recurvirostra americana*

At least 80 birds spread over the wetland areas of San Jacinto wildlife area

**Killdeer**

*Charadrius vociferus*

~10 birds on the dykes between the 4 artificial pools at San Jacinto wildlife area



**Long-billed Curlew**

*Numenius americanus*

A group of 8 birds flew south over Venice Beach

**Greater Yellowlegs**

*Tringa melanoleuca*

2 birds together on the marshy lagoon at San Jacinto wildlife area

**Wilson's Phalarope**

*Phalaropus tricolor*

A group of 5 birds in mainly non-breeding plumage were swimming amongst American Avocets on the second of the artificial lagoons at San Jacinto wildlife area

**Heerman's Gull**

*Larus heermanni*

Only seen at Santa Monica Beach, where there were quite good numbers resting on the sand



**California Gull**

*Larus californicus*

The least common of the 3 species seen. Apart from a few at Santa Monica Beach, one or two were also possibly seen over Los Angeles



**Western Gull**

*Larus occidentalis*

The most common of the Gulls seen. They were very common on the beaches, and also regularly seen over Los Angeles

**Band-tailed Pigeon***Columba fasciata*

These tend to be more a bird of the higher altitudes, so it was no surprise that the 9 seen were on the San Jacinto mountain loop – 8 were on wires about 5 miles to the South of Banning, in the Upper Sonoran chaparral, with the ninth on a bird feeder opposite Buckthorn Camp

**Mourning Dove***Zenaida macroura*

Probably the most abundant bird in the whole area

**Common Ground-dove***Columbina passerina*

Only 1 seen in the Palm Springs area

**Greater Roadrunner***Geococcyx californianus*

In a part of the country where roadrunners are renowned to be common in the desert, it was strange to see the only one of the trip feeding on the lawns of the Plaza Villas at Palm Springs, which are near the centre of the town. Apparently, it was a fairly regular visitor to this spot

**White-throated Swift***Aeronautes saxatalis*

A single bird was amongst the Violet-green Swallows over Lake Fulmor

**Black-chinned Hummingbird***Archilochus alexandri*

This was by far the most common of the Hummingbirds seen, almost all being either females or juveniles. All were seen in the Palm Springs area. Around the Palm Springs villas, they could be approached quite easily on some favoured perches: Palm Springs villas (at least 4); Lake Fulmor (2); Buckthorn Camp (3); Robidoux Nature Centre (4); Big Morongo Canyon NP (10)

**Anna's Hummingbird***Calypte anna*

1 appeared briefly at the feeders at Palm Springs villas, and 2 further birds were at the feeding station at the Big Morongo Canyon NP

**Costa's Hummingbird***Calypte costae*

The first birds seen were a couple of squabbling subadult males at the Plaza Villas in Palm Springs. All the 4 birds at Big Morongo Canyon NP were seen in the hand after being captured in the nets for ringing

**Rufous Hummingbird***Selasphorus rufus*

The first bird seen was a female, which was picked up flying to the feeders at Big Morongo Canyon NP, but was mercifully trapped and identified in the hand. A male was then brought to the ringing table, with a second male briefly seen approaching the feeding station before flying on

**Acorn Woodpecker***Melanerpes formicivorus*

All 7 seen were in the San Jacinto mountains, with 2 pairs at Lake Fulmor, and 3 at stops



made on the Black Mountain track

**Nuttall's Woodpecker**

*Picoides nuttallii*

A single bird which may have been this species was seen all too briefly flying away in the Upper Sonoran zone of the San Jacinto mountains. This escapee from the list was made up for during a visit to the Robidoux Nature Centre, with probably ~12 birds seen here, some with extended views and close up. A further bird was seen in Griffith Park in Los Angeles



**White-headed Woodpecker**

*Picoides albolarvatus*

A very characteristic Woodpecker, and probably the most memorable species of the trip. They were easy to see around the campground at the head of the Black Mountain track, with at least 5 birds present

**Northern Flicker**

*Colaptes auratus*

2 separate birds, of the red-shafted form, were seen on arrival near the road at the Robidoux Nature Centre

**Western Wood-pewee**

*Contopus sordidulus*

2 birds were on the Black Mountain track, high up on exposed branches at the first stop made

**Black Phoebe**

*Phoebe nigricans*

This was a very easy to see and approachable bird in both the Riverside area and Big Morongo Canyon NP. At Robidoux Nature Centre, up to 8 birds were seen, almost exclusively within about 100m of the visitor centre. 2 at the San Jacinto wildlife area were in the bushes along the walkway separating the two open marshes and lagoons. At Big Morongo Canyon NP, up to 8 birds were present – most approachable were those within Covington Park, but a few were also within the NP itself



**Vermilion Flycatcher**

*Pyrocephalus rubinus*

The place to see this species is Big Morongo Canyon NP, since this is at the north-western limit of its range. More specifically, the small park next to the main preserve (Covington Park) is where these birds are regularly seen, since it is likely that this is the breeding site. A mix of up to a dozen adults and juveniles were seen

**Western Kingbird**

*Tyrannus verticalis*

I was surprised to see only one bird during the whole trip, since it is supposed to be spread throughout the western states throughout the summer. The one seen was perched prominently in Joshua Tree NP

**Ash-throated Flycatcher**

*Myiarchus cinerascens*

When I arrived at the entrance to Robidoux Nature Centre, they were probably the most obvious and vociferous species present, although they were much less noticeable later when I left (~12 here, with a mix of adults and juveniles). The 6 or so at San Jacinto wildlife area were at either alongside the Black Phoebes at the marshes, or along the tree lined southern border of the reserve. Some were also present at Big Morongo Canyon NP (~6)

**Brown-crested Flycatcher***Myciarchus tyrannulus*

As with Vermilion Flycatcher, this is at the very north-west of the species range limit, and Big Morongo Canyon NP represents the best site in the state for it. It tended to be a very obvious bird towards the centre of the preserve, with what appeared to be up to 6 in a mix of adults and juveniles (although they were fairly mobile, and could have been counted more than once)

**Violet-green Swallow***Tachycineta thalassina*

The only site where these birds were seen was over Lake Fulmor, where there were ~50 or so birds

**Swallow***Hirundo rustica*

Only 3 seen – at San Jacinto wildlife area

**Phainopepla***Phainopepla nitens*

2 together and a separate single bird were in the Upper Sonoran zone, 5 miles or so to the South of Banning. Fairly typically for this species, they were perched prominently at the top of exposed bushes, but were not too confiding on approach

**Bewick's Wren***Thryomanes bewickii*

This seems to be one of the prominent wrens of the western states, since it doesn't seem to be able to keep quiet, and likes to pop out regularly into the open, although not staying in the same place for long - Palm Canyon (1), Palm Springs (at Plaza Villas); Big Morongo Canyon NP (6)

**House Wren***Troglodytes aedon*

Black Mountain campground (1); Robidoux Nature Centre (1); San Jacinto wildlife area (1)

**Northern Mockingbird***Mimus polyglottos*

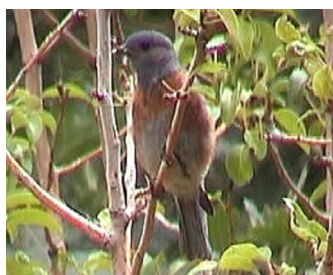
2 were seen on the first evening in Los Angeles, at the Buena Park Travelodge hotel in Anaheim; a pair with 2 juveniles were regularly seen around the Plaza Villas at Palm Springs; and 1 was at San Jacinto wildlife area

**California Thrasher***Toxostoma redivivum*

Despite this usually being a secretive member of the family, I was fortunate that the 2 seen were either at the top of an exposed bush in the first case (at Robidoux Nature Centre), or seen close in (in and out of cover) at Big Morongo Canyon NP

**Western Bluebird***Sialia mexicana*

The first birds seen were a family party on the ascent up Black Mountain track, with a lone juvenile at the campground. A pair opposite the Buckthorn Camp were nesting in a nestbox which was placed on wooden pole in the open grassy area. A further 5 or so were at Robidoux Nature Centre

**American Robin***Turdus migratorius*

In the eastern states, this is an incredibly common and easy to see species. In the California and Arizona sites I have been to, it seems to be a bird of the upper altitudes, and the only ones seen were about half a dozen of various ages at the Buckthorn Camp



area, usually seen flying across the open grassland

**Wrentit** *Chamaea fasciata*

Only 1 seen briefly on an exposed perch at the Upper Sonoran zone just south of Banning

**Bushtit** *Psatrisparus minimus*

~5 birds at Big Morongo Canyon NP

**Mountain Chickadee** *Poecile gambeli*

Common in the upper altitudes of the San Jacinto mountains, with ~30 or so around the Black Mountain campground, 6 at Lake Fulmor, and 4 opposite Buckthorn Camp



**Oak Titmouse** *Baeolophus inornatus*

Only 1 seen, at Lake Fulmor

**Pygmy Nuthatch** *Sitta pygmaea*

These were very common at the Black Mountain campground, with numbers difficult to count – probably around two to three dozen birds. They seemed in the main to be feeding in parties, with some juveniles amongst the more numerous adults, with most feeding on the lower branches of the confers



**White-breasted Nuthatch** *Sitta carolinensis*

1 at Lake Fulmor, and 5 at the Black Mountain campground

**Verdin** *Auriparus flaviceps*

1 was seen at the Plaza Villas in Palm Springs; 1 at Palm Canyon, feeding in the palm tree canopy; 1 at Big Morongo Canyon NP. They are usually heard before (and constantly during) being seen

**Loggerhead Shrike** *Lanius ludovicianus*

Only at San Jacinto wildlife area, where a pair were nesting in the nestbox at the centre of the first scrape in the reserve, and 2-3 were on wire fences on the southern approach to the reserve

**Steller's Jay** *Cyanocitta stelleri*

Very easy to see in the San Jacinto mountains, with about 20 around the Black Mountain campground, 4 at Lake Fulmor, and 6 around Buckthorn Camp. The form found here has a plain head, seeming dark brown as opposed to black in some lights (interior form has white streaks on the forehead)



**Western Scrub-jay** *Aphelocoma californica*

Buckthorn Camp (2); Robidoux Nature Centre (2); Big Morongo Canyon NP (2)

**American Crow** *Corvus brachyrhynchos*

Very common

**Raven** *Corvus corax*

Hoover Dam (2); San Jacinto wildlife area (6)

**Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris*

Abundant

**House Sparrow***Passer domesticus*

Abundant

**Purple Finch***Carpodacus purpureus*

Buckthorn Camp (2); Palm Canyon (2); Big Morongo Canyon NP (2)

**House Finch***Carpodacus mexicanus*

Very common throughout the Palm Springs area, and seen on most days, with a maximum of ~100 at the Big Morongo Canyon NP

**Lesser Goldfinch***Carduelis psaltria*

The place to see these was at Big Morongo Canyon NP, where they were very common around the bird feeders, with probably up to 30 individuals, and 4 on a single nut feeder at one time. A single bird was singing next to the car park at Lake Fulmor

**American Goldfinch***Carduelis tristis*

Definites of this species only seen on 2 occasions – 1 at the feeders opposite Buckthorn Camp, and 2 at Robidoux Nature Centre

**Orange-crowned Warbler***Vermivora celata*

2 of these very yellow individuals were seen – 1 at Lake Fulmor, and 1 sharing a bush with Mountain Chickadees in the Upper Sonoran zone to the south of Banning

**Common Yellowthroat***Geothlypis trichas*

4 individuals at Robidoux Nature Centre, and 4 at Big Morongo Canyon NP

**Summer Tanager***Piranga rubra*

8 birds were at Big Morongo Canyon NP

**Western Tanager***Piranga ludoviciana*

The only birds seen were at Big Morongo Canyon NP, with 2 on trees within the preserve, and a third bird flew through the feeding area, landing briefly about 50 metres away

**Spotted Towhee***Pipilo maculatus*

First bird of the trip was singing opposite the feeders at Buckthorn Camp. Another singing bird was above me at Robidoux Nature Centre, with 3 more near the visitors centre, and 4 separate birds were at Big Morongo Canyon NP

**California Towhee***Pipilo crissalis*

The first sighting of this species completed the set of North American Towhees, and it came just after arriving at the Robidoux Nature Centre, feeding on dirt allotments on the opposite side of the road to the preserve. Another 3 birds were subsequently seen on the preserve, followed by a single around the picnic tables of Palm Canyon, and 3 flying across the Yucca Ridge trail at Big Morongo Canyon NP

**Black-throated Sparrow***Amphispiza bilineata*

A group of 3 birds were in the scrub of Joshua Tree NP

**Sage Sparrow***Amphispiza belli*

The first half dozen or so birds were in the distance, feeding noisily along the slopes at Palm Canyon near Palm Springs. On the walk back, a single bird was seen much more closely, before flying up to the slopes. They were much closer at Big Morongo Canyon NP, where 3 groups of 2 were along the slightly higher elevation of the Yucca Ridge trail

**Song Sparrow***Melospiza melodia*

Robidoux Nature Centre (~20); Big Morongo Canyon NP (1)

**Dark-eyed Junco***Junco hyemalis*

All birds seen were of the pink-brown bodied "Oregon" variety – quite a contrast to the "Slate-coloured" birds that I was more familiar with from the East coast. They were very obvious around the Black Mountain road and campground, at least 6 birds at the latter, and a further individual was near the car at Buckthorn Camp

**Black-headed Grosbeak***Pheucticus melanocephalus*

The largest collection was up to 20 birds in a flock at Robidoux Nature Centre. Up to 10



were around the Buckthorn Camp area, and 4 at the feeders in Big Morongo Canyon NP

**Red-winged Blackbird** *Agelaius phoeniceus*

Only 2 definite birds were seen (flying over the open marsh at San Jacinto wildlife area), and were of the red-winged variety that is apparently common in California. A single female on one of the artificial pools could not be separated from Tricoloured Blackbird

**Western Meadowlark** *Sturnella neglecta*

8 birds were on the fences and telegraph wires along the Davis Road, near to the entrance of San Jacinto wildlife area

**Yellow-headed Blackbird** *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*

1 was seen briefly flying over the artificial pools at San Jacinto wildlife area

**Brewer's Blackbird** *Euphagus cyanocephalus*

Probably quite common in the Palm Springs area, with one feeding on the grassy verges bounding the outside of the Plaza Villas, and a few small groups flying over the town



**Great-tailed Grackle** *Quiscalus mexicanus*

Common in Las Vegas and in parts of Los Angeles

**Hooded Oriole** *Icterus cucullatus*

A female was in bush next to the road through Joshua Tree NP, and 3 were in Big Morongo Canyon NP (a mating pair within the park, and a female at the feeders)

**Scott's Oriole** *Icterus parisorum*

A male, and possible female, were watched within the palm trees for some time at Palm Canyon, Palm Springs



**TOTAL SPECIES = 90**