



Southern California: Sea, Mountains & Desert

Guide: Steve Huggins
Maximum 7 participants

February 10-18, 2025
From San Diego
Price: \$3625 per person
Single room supplement: \$830

Check out the trip website here: redhillbirding.com/California-south
To register, fill out the booking form here: redhillbirding.com/bookingform

California offers some of the best year-round birding (and some of the best year-round weather!) in the country, earning its place on the list of must-travel birding locales within the United States. From the Pacific Ocean coast to high mountains, vast deserts, and bird-rich wetlands, the state has more limited-range birds than another in the continental US, including two endemics. That geography, along with its massive size and many established exotics, help it to have the biggest bird list of any state.



This tour is focused the southern third of the state, SoCal, where the winters are warm and full of great birds. The trip will see many of the common and widespread specialties of California like California Scrub-Jay, endangered species like California Gnatcatcher, endemic species like Yellow-billed Magpie, and Island Scrub-Jay, and uncommon species like Lawrence's Goldfinch. We will also look for many more widespread specialties California Condor, LeConte's Thrasher, Mountain Quail and all of the countable exotic birds. The trip will also feature many coastal Pacific species like Black Turnstone, Surfbird, Brant's and Pelagic Cormorants, and Pacific Loon We will also enjoy the possibility for pelagic species on our boat ride to Santa Cruz Island.

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Day 1, Mon, Feb 10 – Arrival Day. No birding planned. Night: San Diego near airport.

This is an arrival day with no planned activities. Having an arrival day will ensure that we all arrive and settle in and can start birding in earnest the following morning. Nathan may come by for an orientation this evening, but hotel check-in and dinner is on your own (the hotel is included in the tour price; dinner is not). We will be in this hotel for three nights.

Day 2-3, Tue-Wed, Feb 11-12 – Full days in and around San Diego. Night: San Diego near airport.

We will spend two full days birding in and around San Diego. Among the main target birds will be California Gnatcatcher, Ridgeway's Rail, and Tricolored Blackbird, as well as a variety of chaparral and oak specialties like Wrentit, California Thrasher, Nuttall's Woodpecker, and Oak Titmouse. We will also pick up many of the more common California and West Coast specialties along the way, like California Scrub-Jay, Allen's and Anna's Hummingbirds, Western Bluebird, and California Towhee. We will also make some stops to look for wintering birds in and offshore San Diego like Brant, Black-vented Shearwater, Black Skimmer, and more. Perhaps a vagrant or two will be hanging around, as well. We will keep an eye out for countable exotics, in particular Scaly-breasted Munia and Red-masked Parakeet and will spend some time along the coast looking for Black Turnstone, Pacific Loon, Western and Clark's Grebe, Heermann's, and Western Gulls.

In the evening of one of the days, we will head to El Cajon to visit its famous parrot roost, where we are likely to find Red-crowned and Lilac-crowned Parrots. If we are still missing targets after these two days, there will be ample opportunities later in the trip to look for birds of the coast and chaparral that haven't crossed our paths yet.

Day 4, Thu, Feb 13 – Inland San Diego County to the Salton Sea. Night: Brawley

Today, we will get an early start and head inland to the mountains and Anza Borrego. In the mountains, we will make sure to stop at a feeder set up for California Quail, various hummingbirds, Acorn Woodpeckers, and more. We'll also bird a higher elevation grassland that is loaded with raptors, and many visits connect with Ferruginous Hawk, Prairie Falcon, and/or Golden Eagle. Heading into the desert, we will look for Bell's Sparrow (the closely related Sagebrush Sparrow occurs in small numbers some winters as well), Black-throated Sparrow, Say's Phoebe, and Phainopepla. Finding LeConte's Thrasher is always tough but they do occur here, in low numbers, along with Crissal Thrasher. Other species we'll keep an eye out for include Verdin, Gambel's Quail (hybrid California x Gambel's Quail are occasionally seen here as well), and perhaps even a wintering Long-eared Owl.

From the Anza Borrego area, we will continue east to the famed Imperial Valley, which contains the Salton Sea. This semi-man-made saltwater lake has a strange and twisted history and is rapidly shrinking in size, but is rightfully famed as an incredible birding destination. We will have the evening and full following morning for birding here.

Day 5, Fri, Feb 14 – Salton Sea to the mountains. Night Idyllwild or nearby.

We will have much of the morning to bird the Salton Sea, starting at the south end and working our way north along the east side of the lake. We will be birding in a mix of desert, agricultural fields, city parks, scrubby fields, and, of course, wetlands and the shores of the Salton Sea itself.

Wetlands here can be filled with birds, and we are likely to come across flocks of White-faced Ibis, Snow Geese, Sandhill Cranes, and a diversity of ducks and shorebirds. Vermilion Flycatcher likes well-watered areas, Gila Woodpecker prefers places with palm trees, and Burrowing Owl, Long-billed Curlew, and White-tailed Kite can be found in grassy agricultural areas.

One of the key target birds here will be Mountain Plover; though some years they can be quite hard to find in the ever-expansive agriculture. Ferruginous Hawk and Prairie Falcon can sometimes be found around the sea in winter. More desert birds here include Verdin, Abert's Towhee, Greater Roadrunner, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Gambel's Quail, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, and Cactus Wren.

Salton Sea is a well-known as a vagrant trap as well, so if there is an interesting rarity around, we may look for that as well.

After spending most of the morning and mid-day in and around the Salton Sea, we will venture into the Coachella Valley and then to the San Jacinto Mountains for a high-elevation night in Idyllwild.

Day 6, Sat, Feb 15 – San Jacinto Mountains, through Los Angeles, to southern Central Valley. Night near Taft.

We will spend the early morning in the San Jacinto Mountains looking for Pinyon Jay, White-headed Woodpecker, and, if we still need it, Lawrence's Goldfinch. Williamson's Sapsucker winters here as well and we could find other birds typical of higher elevations, like Mountain Chickadee, Pygmy Nuthatch, Steller's Jay, and Band-tailed Pigeon.

After finishing up in the mountains, we will journey around Metro LA, stopping as you pass through the northern part to track down Yellow-chevroned and/or Red-masked Parakeets. You might also want to check a canyon or park in or near Pasadena for the "Thick-billed" subspecies of Fox Sparrow, a potential future split. Afterwards, as it gets towards later afternoon, you will find yourself in Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge, scanning the skies for the iconic and endangered California Condor. After a long day, you will end up in the small town of Taft, in the southernmost part of the Central Valley, for the night.

Day 7, Sun, Feb 16 – Full day: Condor, LeConte’s Thrasher, Yellow-billed Magpie. Night Ventura.

Having spent the night in Taft, we will have access to a variety of great birding areas, and where we go will depend on our needs. Near Taft, we have access to another great area for LeConte’s Thrasher (and Bell’s Sparrow). We can try again for California Condor, if we did not see it or have time to look the day before.

Eventually, we will take a detour through Santa Barbara County on our way to Ventura, where we will be spending the night, to look for Yellow-billed Magpie, a true California endemic that is readily found in the right areas. After finding the magpie, we will be passing through the southern end of the range of Chestnut-backed Chickadee and will have a good chance of finding it as well.

Depending on timing, and since we will end up on the coast, we may have time to look for coastal birds that are more common here than in San Diego, like Surfbird, Black Oystercatcher, and Snowy Plover. We might also scan from the shore in hopes for Black-vented Shearwater if we’ve missed it earlier in the trip.

Day 8, Mon, Feb 17 – Santa Cruz Island. Night Ventura.

Today we will head out aboard the Island Packer to Santa Cruz Island, where the endemic Island Scrub Jay lives. It shouldn’t be hard to find. We will also look for some of the Channel Island endemic subspecies, like Allen’s Hummingbird, Orange-crowned Warbler, and Spotted Towhee. On the boat ride to and from the island, we will watch the seas carefully, hoping for birds like Black-vented and Pink-footed Shearwater, jaegers, Scripps’s Murrelet, and Red Phalarope. We could also see some cetaceans like Gray Whale.

It's a pretty tiring day between the boat ride and hiking around Santa Cruz Island, but if we are still looking for other coastal birds, we can check the harbor and surrounding areas before or after the boat ride. This could include Snowy Plover, Pacific Loon, and any of the “rockpipers.”

Day 9, Tue, Feb 18 – Clean up and departure

Today you can plan your departing flight (from LAX) for the afternoon so that you have the morning to try and clean up any missing target birds, try to get some photos, and/or enjoy the sights of LA. This could mean one last effort for Lawrence’s Goldfinch, chasing down an exotic, scouring the coast for shorebirds, or something else, depending on what birds we have not seen yet. We will arrive to LAX by 1 pm.

IMPORTANT NOTES

Contact and registration information

To sign up, each participant should complete the [booking form](#). Once we receive the form, we will send you information about paying the trip deposit. If you have any questions before registering, please contact the office at info@redhillbirding.com.

Timing

The trip will begin in San Diego, California, on Monday, February 10, Day 1 of the tour. Day 1 is an arrival day with no activities planned, but we will reserve rooms for the group that night (you will also be staying there for a second and third night as well). The trip will end at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) by 1pm on Day 9, Tuesday, February 18. Please plan your departure flight for 2pm or later that day.

Physical difficulty

This trip is **physically easy**. Much of the trip is birding along roads or walking short distances on good trails at a “birding pace.” At times, we will be on our feet for long periods and may end up walking several miles over the course of a day.

Pace

The **pace** of the trip is **moderate**. A typical day will have us up early to catch the peak early morning bird activity, especially if the weather is predicted to be hot. We will generally be eating breakfast at the hotel before our departure, but we may take breakfast with us into the field some days. Likewise, we will sometimes be taking packed lunches into the field, other days we will eat in cafes or restaurants. Some days we will be in the field all day; other days will afford us the opportunity for an afternoon siesta. Our daily schedule will be dictated in part by recent reports; this is a heavily birded area and we will remain flexible so that we can chase any rarities that show up while we are there.

Price

The price of the trip is **\$3625 per person** based on sharing a room and the single room supplement is **\$830**. This price **includes** all meals (including soft drinks with meals), from breakfast on Day 2 to breakfast on Day 9; accommodations and transportation from Day 1 to Day 9; a Red Hill Birding guide; a boat trip to Santa Cruz Island; some snacks; and all park entrance fees, including to the Huntington Botanical Gardens & Library if a visit is necessary for finding certain birds. It **does not include** alcoholic beverages, optional activities not mentioned in the itinerary, laundry, tips (apart from meals), or other items of a personal nature.

A deposit of \$800 per person and the submission of the [booking form](#) will secure your place on the trip. Upon receiving your booking form, we will send you deposit details. Final payment is due three months ahead of the trip start date. We accept payment by Zelle, check, and bank transfer. We also accept payment by credit card with an additional 3.3% processing fee.

Hotels and Meals

We will be staying in high-quality, mostly chain hotels, throughout. There are not really birding lodges in the area, but there are many conveniently located hotels. We will generally be eating the breakfast provided by the hotel, but we will also have snacks along. Some lunches will be picnics, others will be eaten in local restaurants. Dinners will be in local restaurants or we will carry in to the hotel.

Photography

The **photographic opportunities** are **very good**. In general, the habitat in Southern California is fairly open, making for good photo ops. That said, this is primarily a birdwatching tour, so while there will be ample opportunities for photography along the way, we will not be making special considerations for photographers.

Weather

The winter weather in Southern California is generally, even famously, comfortable, with typical temperatures ranging from 45°-75°F. It can get hot in the desert lowlands around the Salton Sea, and cool in the mountains at night, but generally, Southern California has very comfortable winter weather. In Idyllwild, it can be as low as 25°F in the early morning and it will feel cool on the boat ride to Santa Cruz Island should you choose to be on the outside deck. Rain is possible, but is unlikely to be enough to impede on the birding. It is always best to check the long-range forecast before departing from home.

Packing considerations

You will generally want to wear **comfortable clothing** that you don't mind getting a little dirty. The dress for the tour is entirely casual. **Light weight clothing, with layers**, and long pants and long-sleeved shirts are recommended for protection from the sun and thorns and to be prepared for various weather conditions. Comfortable walking shoes are a must. Rubber boots are not necessary. An umbrella and/or raincoat in case of rain as well as a mid-weight jacket or sweater for cold mornings are also useful.

Some hotels will have a swimming pool and hot tub, so a bathing suit is recommended if you think you might take advantage of the pool.

In terms of gear, you will want the usual birding gear: binoculars, hat, field guide, etc. Most people appreciate having a camera along. Sunscreen is useful given the often sunny conditions. Biting insects are not an issue on this trip. Please bring a reusable travel bottle to reduce the

need for single-use bottles; a travel coffee mug/thermos is also useful if you'd like to bring coffee from the hotel for the morning.

eBird

Your Red Hill Birding guide and/or local guides will be eBirding the entire tour. If you have an eBird account, they will collect your username/email address in order to share those lists, and will share them when it is convenient. You are welcome to edit your lists to add/remove species, edit text, or change numbers as much as you would like, since any edits you make to your lists do not change others' lists. And we love it when participants add photos and sound recordings to the checklists!

The leader will also provide an eBird Trip Report after the tour and will add participants who have an eBird account to the report; this way, you can see your own personal trip details and those of the whole group. These trip reports are accessible to anyone who has the link, so participants who do not have eBird accounts can still view the report to see the trip list, photos, and any added text.

Tipping

We aim to provide **exceptional service**, using guides that are knowledgeable, interesting, personable, and experienced. While tipping is never expected, if you feel that your guides went above and beyond, you are welcome to leave them a gratuity. Tips at restaurants is included in the tour price.

Travel insurance

We do not require travel insurance for trips within the United States. However, we recommend purchasing it to help protect you against the unexpected. For your convenience, we offer travel protection through Travelex Insurance Services. For more information on the available plans or to enroll, go to www.travelexinsurance.com or contact Travelex Insurance Services at 800-228-9792 and reference location number 13-0441.

Travelex Insurance Services, Inc CA Agency License #0D10209. Travel Insurance is underwritten by, Berkshire Hathaway Specialty Insurance Company, NAIC #22276. 55Y

Note that to be eligible for some benefits, travel insurance must be purchased within 1-2 weeks of paying the trip deposit.



Island Scrub-Jay, shown here, is only found on Santa Cruz Island, which we visit on this tour. It's cousin the California Scrub-Jay is common on the mainland. Photo by Nathan Goldberg.