

Western Field Ornithologists Fundraising Tour of the Coachella Valley

September 21-24, 2017 Leaders: Jon Dunn and Kurt Leuschner + 15 WFO members

Species total 156+. Monies raised will support our WFO general fund and our publications fund.

Thursday evening September 21

After checking in, the group met in the lobby of the Holiday Inn Express in Palm Desert, California, for a briefing and introductions. Most of the participants were from some part of California, and a few were from out of state (Colorado, Montana). In the spirit of bipartisans working together for a common goal, we welcomed folks from the Bay Area who happened to be Giants fans (there was much discussion of baseball behind the scenes...)! We all went over to Kurt and Candice's house down the street (adjacent to the Living Desert) for refreshments and hors d'oeuvres as we watched dozens of Costa's Hummingbirds at the feeders. Most were young birds and they were joined by a couple of Anna's Hummingbirds and one lone presumed Rufous. We could not decide exactly how many Costa's there were but estimates ranged from 40-80....or more? We proceeded to dinner at the Marriott at the Fisherman's Landing. A captive flock of Greater Flamingos from the Old World greeted us.

After dinner most of us went out to look for night creatures at a nearby sandy area. No sidewinders were seen but an abundance of scorpions were eeseen (two species) with Kurt's ultraviolet flashlights. We watched them grab and secure insects for fine-dining; we watched one scorpion slowly raise its stinger over its back and plunge it into the struggling insect.

Photo by Lily Douglas



Friday September 22



Great Horned Owl

Photo by Lily Douglas

The Living Desert opens early (7am) for members and for special guests and it's a great place to walk around and observe (along with the captive jaguars and cheetahs) local desert species such as Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher (excellent close studies), Phainopepla, Abert's Towhee (only heard), and Great Horned Owl. We also found some migrants passing through: a late Ash-throated Flycatcher, Black-throated Gray Warbler, Yellow Warbler and a lone Vaux's Swift. A group of late Hooded Orioles (along with two Bullock's) caught our attention too.



From there we rushed off to an appointment with Dr. Cameron Barrows (an active WFO member in the 1980's) and the endangered Coachella Valley Fringe-toed Lizard (*Uma inornata*). Dr. Barrows now heads the UC Riverside Center for Conservation Biology based in Palm Desert. He has permission to handle this endangered species and we were able to find a number of them on the active sand dunes with his help. Cameron explained all of the adaptations this lizard has which enables it to cope, even thrive, with the blowing sand grains. This lizard is found nowhere else on earth so it was a unique and memorable experience.

Photos by
Frances Oliver



Coachella Valley Fringe-toed Lizard
Photo by Lily Douglas



Our next destination was supposed to be Desert Center, but after consulting with our advance scouts (Chet McGaugh and Bob McKernan), they suggested after hearing recent news that we divert to the San Jacinto Wildlife Area in nearby Moreno Valley where a Chestnut-sided Warbler and a Blackpoll Warbler had just been seen in the past few hours. So we headed west and met up with Curtis Marantz who led us down the trail where we eventually found the Chestnut-sided Warbler, a new Riverside county bird for many. Many other warblers were present too including Nashville and Hermit. The Blackpoll Warbler had perhaps moved on, but on the way out as we were looking for Stilt Sandpipers Chris Wills spotted a juvenile Pacific-golden Plover. A very exciting bird that raised all kinds of alarm bells. The bird stayed for just five more minutes after we left, flew off to the east and was not seen again. Good timing on our part! While this species has been recorded on occasion (not annual) in the interior, to our knowledge this is the first interior record of this plumage. To celebrate the day dinner was at Don Diego's Mexican Restaurant – a short walk from our hotel. They served what had to be the world's biggest Margarita!



Pacific-golden Plover
Photo by Chris Wills

Saturday September 23

Our Salton Sea Day! Unfortunately Guy McCaskie could not join us but he still was a great help in planning our route. We headed straight to the North Shore Yacht Club where a juvenile Sabine's Gull had been seen the day before. We were able to study a number of gulls there and everyone got a great scope view of the Sabine's as well as an adult Yellow-footed Gull. Later at Ramer Lake we found many Neotropic Cormorants including one on a nest with two young. It was a little too late in the day for Least Bittern, but Lesser Nighthawks were easily seen as well as Common Ground Dove and White-winged Dove. Before lunch we visited Cattle Call Park and found at least one Gila Woodpecker. In the afternoon we stopped at a flooded field where many Long-billed Curlews and White-faced Ibis were present along with a good number of Laughing Gulls. The Imperial Valley is the only regular location in California where this species can be found. Next, we drove along the seawall scoping the gulls and shorebirds. Interesting birds included a Common Tern, another juvenile Sabine's Gull, and good numbers of Yellow-footed Gulls. On the way back to Palm Desert we stopped at the International Banana Museum for the best frozen banana west of the Mississippi Flyway. The lizard enthusiasts bypassed the hotel for a chance at seeing Banded Rock Lizard in nearby Carrizo Canyon. In the waning sunlight we were only able to find a small tarantula. A group of us had dinner near the hotel at Eureka, while others couldn't resist going back to Don Diego's.



Yellow-footed Gull
Photo by Chris Wills

Sunday September 24

After an early check-out we headed straight to the Whitewater Canyon Preserve – managed by the Wildlands Conservancy. They have protected and restored an important riparian corridor habitat that connects the San Bernardino Mountains with Joshua Tree National Park. We heard a late Summer Tanager the minute we arrived and soon located it, an adult male. This species (subspecies *cooperi*) breeds very locally in the deserts, including here at Whitewater. Gene Cardiff and Dori Myers (former Treasurer and Membership Secretary), long-time WFO members, joined us as the places we were visiting on this day are located along their regular breeding bird survey route. We obtained special access to the lower wetland area and found a number of interesting species: Two California Thrashers, Lincoln's and Black-throated Sparrows, a lost Acorn Woodpecker, Golden Eagle (flew overhead), Lazuli Bunting, Sora, Sharp-shinned Hawk, a single Vaux's Swift and also small numbers of White-throated Swifts, and a Hermit Thrush (a paler and duller interior subspecies from the normal wintering birds) on its way to Mexico. Just as we were about to leave the Peregrine Falcon made an appearance on the cliff above the parking lot.

Our next stop was the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve in Morongo Valley – another important riparian habitat. Originally protected by the Nature Conservancy, it is now managed by the BLM. We found another Summer Tanager and also a male Vermilion Flycatcher in nearby Covington Park. We studied the sparrow flocks and came up with at least one Vesper Sparrow. On our way to lunch in Yucca Valley we stopped at the Yucca Valley Golf Course – the most interesting bird there was a very cooperative Greater Roadrunner posing for photographs high in a pine tree. No ducks on the pond today.



Greater Roadrunner
Photo by Chris Wills

After lunch our last official stop was the Blackrock Campground in Joshua Tree National Park. We were hoping to see Pinyon Jays (they frequent the area). We hiked around and saw a number of high desert birds (Black-throated Sparrow, California Scrub-Jay, Cactus Wren...) but no Pinyon Jays. We did run into Cameron Barrows on the trail and soon after we found a Patch-nosed Snake – a rarely seen “life snake” for the group. Wouldn’t you know it – we found out later that a few minutes after the bulk of the group departed the Pinyon Jays showed up in force...!



Patch-nosed Snake
Photo by Frances Oliver

Many of the group had to hit the road as it was getting late, but a few of us who were not in such a hurry pushed on to the Twentynine Palms Inn, where there is always a chance of some interesting birds in migration. We were welcomed by the Innkeepers with a free drink on the house! Talk about birder friendly. We found mixed flocks of warblers near the organic garden including 6 or more species. We also saw Western Tanager and one Hooded Oriole. It was a great place to end the day and the weekend. The weather was perfect all four days, we enjoyed each other’s company, saw some amazing places and a wide variety of quality birds (and lizards!), and we raised money to support the great work of the Western Field Ornithologists!

Postscript:

On Monday morning Cynthia Hudson (who stayed an extra day) and Kurt Leuschner had some unfinished business to take care of – we returned to Carrizo Canyon in the morning and (this time with plenty of sunshine) were able to find the Banded Rock Lizard clinging to the granite walls. This local species of lizard is primarily found in Baja (Mexico) and only ranges as far north as Palm Springs. As a bonus we also found a nice adult Chuckwalla as well as a Thistle-down Velvet Ant (it has one of the most painful stings in the insect world). We ventured further up the highway to the Pinyon-Juniper belt and found a few Granite Spiny Lizards to top off our lizard list.