

Kotin 2017 Birdathon

Day One -- Friday May 26

Allan and Muriel Kotin's 2017 Birdathon: *The Kotin Birdathon, a 24-hour search for as many species of birds as we can find and identify is dedicated to raising money for San Fernando Valley Audubon's Sepulveda Basin Environmental Education Program (SBEEP). Allan and I leave home well into a leisurely morning on Day One, drive to Orange County and start the clock when we are ready to bird there. We drive home in the dark and resume birding the next morning in Los Angeles County until our 24 hours are up. We used to follow the typical pattern of starting before dawn and ending at dark in a single day. As we find that utterly exhausting, we devised this unique schedule a few years ago.*

Chica Ecological Reserve in Huntington Beach: *We left home around 11 AM and drove to this wonderful birding hotspot. At 12:40 PM our binoculars around our necks, our sun hats on our heads, and Allan's camera strap secured on his shoulder, his spotting scope in hand, the 24-hour clock was started. The skies were partly cloudy with a light breeze and temperatures around 70F.*

While we noted our first bird identification, a common Feral Rock Pigeon, our ears were filled with the sound of dozens of squeaky door hinges. These were the cries of flying Elegant, Forster's, Caspian and Royal terns. Many of the terns were carrying small wriggling fish in their beaks. Other fish eaters, a double-crested Cormorant and Snowy Egret flew past too. Willets and a Great Blue Heron stood on and near the plant-covered mud flats.

We were amused to see three Sea Hares, a sort of slug, stacked together from the boardwalk bridge. A Sea Hare group grope?



California Sea Hares

Little Savannah Sparrows flew heavily and low above the Pickleweed before disappearing into the plant cover. We could see two White Pelicans preening in the distance. A flock of endangered Least Terns flew by with tinkling calls, while a flock of their much larger cousins, Black Skimmers, rested on a distant mudflat. Skimmers are terns that, instead of plunge diving to catch fish, fly with their lower mandible (lower half of the beak) in the water. When they encounter a fish, the beak snaps shut. Birds have a varied assortment of techniques to nab fish.

A Reddish Egret and Whimbrel walked through the pickleweed, crossing paths. After we left the boardwalk, we could see a mixed group of Western, California and Ring-Billed gulls resting on a bare mudflat. A Red-tailed Hawk flew by. A Black-crowned Night Heron crouched in distant pickleweed, pointed out to us by a walker who asked us about the distant "hawk." Brown Pelicans flew in from the beach. A black-necked Stilt waded in shallow water. A few Semi-palmated Plovers and their larger cousins the Killdeer

walked the mudflats, along with a Ruddy Turnstone and some Black-bellied Plovers.

A solitary female Gadwall was the only duck we saw here, a consequence of our Birdathon being so late in the spring.

Harriet Wieder Park: We arrived at this small suburban park that overlooks the south end of Bolsa Chica at 2:20. A pair of Mallards, American Crows and Cliff Swallows flew past. A Turkey Vulture soared high in the sky. House finches sang in the park trees. The wetlands below produced American Avocets and a Green-winged Teal. It was better than last year's visit here. After leaving the park, we spotted European Starlings on the parking strip next to PCH.

San Joaquin Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary: Along Riparian View Drive, just short of the entrance we saw soaring Barn Swallows, a single Red-winged Blackbird and a Great Egret. Pulling into the parking lot of this other favorite OC birding spot at 4:10 PM, we immediately found a Spotted Towhee and Bushtit and soon a Common Yellowthroat.

Then *deja vu*. As soon as we left the parking lot an Osprey (AKA Fish Hawk) landed on a power pole, apparently its favorite dining spot, grasping an orange fish. If you compare this year's photo to last year's, you can see this is a different fish. It's the same power pole and likely the same Osprey as we reported last year.



Osprey with Fish (again)

Tree Swallows flew all around. They are the only swallows at San Joaquin. Apparently they chase all other species of swallows away. They are attracted here by the many nest boxes placed on posts for them above the ponds. Manmade nest boxes are important to birds like Tree Swallows, Bluebirds and other species that are secondary nesters. That is they nest in old nest holes drilled by woodpeckers in dead wood that are no longer used by the woodpeckers. That used to work well for the secondary nesters, but today there is much less dead wood and fewer old nest holes available. People tend to harvest dead wood or remove it as unsightly or dangerous, eliminating an important resource for some species of birds.

We found a Black Phoebe and Song Sparrow near the pathway. The swallows and Black Phoebe both specialize in catching flying insects. Swallows typically

fly for hours at a time, chasing their prey, while the flycatchers like the Black Phoebe wait on a perch for an insect to fly by before sallying forth do catch their snack.



Tree Swallow (They Do Rest)

On the ponds were two kinds of surface-diving birds, a Pied-billed Grebe and a flock of floating Ruddy Ducks, the males showing their cinnamon feathers and bright aqua bills of breeding season.

A bright Yellow Warbler and a female Anna's Hummingbird hung out in the bushes. In the general area where a visitor heading out of the Marsh said she had heard them, we found at least two of the birds: the elusive Yellow-breasted Chat. We got excellent looks at one of them. This songbird is

easier to hear than see. They tend to stay hidden but loudly chatter and sing, sort of a one-man (one-bird?) band.



Yellow-breasted Chat

On a distant island were some Canada Geese resting between skimmers and terns, and on the water were several Western Grebes and one closely related Clark's Grebe.

Another island view revealed a rather scruffy threesome of American White Pelicans. Although we saw the same species earlier at Bolsa Chica, their outstanding scruffiness warrants a photo.



American White Pelicans – Preen Baby, Preen

A Great-tailed Grackle flew into the bulrushes as we headed to our car, our last species at San Joaquin Marsh.

Crystal Cove State Park: We rued skipping this coastal bluff location last year, so this year we made it our last stop of the day, arriving there at 6:20 PM. We quickly found several species we were sure we would find again the next morning at inland sites: California Towhee, Northern Mockingbird, House Wren and Northern Rough-winged Sparrow. We were also pleased to find one of our targets birds here, a California Thrasher, a fairly common bird that can be difficult to see. Tired, we got in the car and drove slowly between the four parking lots. We were delighted to find a small family of California Quail, mom, dad and four youngsters.



Male California Quail (Dad)



Male and Female California Quail, Four Young Hidden by Plants

The family of quail crossed the road from Allan's side of the road to mine. Please don't ask why. I looked out the driver's window to get a good look at the babies. I did see the babies very well, but was shocked, absolutely shocked to see dad mount mom right in front of the four young ones. Poor Allan's view was blocked by the driver's car door. We both got good looks at the quail family, but only I got the X-rated part. After that we decided it

was time to head for dinner even though there was about a half hour of daylight left. We had "bagged" 61 species and were exhausted.

Dinner: As we learned last year that S Vietnamese Fine Dining in Westminster had closed, Allan did some research. We ate at a small, very authentic Vietnamese restaurant in Westminster called Mai's Kitchen. We had a very good meal with very friendly service. We will probably return.

Day Two -- Saturday morning, May 27, 2017

Starting Out Again: Allan moved faster than I after my alarm rang at 5AM. While I ate a hasty breakfast, he walked to a section of our townhouse development where he regularly sees Allen's Hummingbirds. No luck. We were on the road at 6:20. We stopped on Westward Beach Road as close as possible to Zuma Lagoon, where Allan checked off Bonaparte's Gulls. We drove past the Pavilion's parking where Nanday Parakeets often hang out. No birds at all there. So we headed to Sepulveda Basin, surprisingly adding no species at all along the way.

Lake Balboa (in Sepulveda Basin): We drove along Lake Balboa's access road, getting out of the car only once. We added Egyptian Goose, Brewer's Blackbird, Mute Swan, and the atypically elusive American Coot.

Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Reserve: Minutes later we arrived at the reserve at 7:32. A Western Kingbird and Bullock's Oriole hung out in the sycamore trees near the amphitheater where they probably nest. White-throated Swifts chased aerial insects as we walked toward the reserve fence. There was a gorgeous Western Bluebird on a low branch over the lawn and a flock of Lesser Goldfinches flew into the Cottonwood trees. Two Green Herons rested in the emergent plants along the lake's edge. Mallards were the only ducks. There were excellent views of Double-crested Cormorants on their nests in Cottonwoods on the island.



Double-crested Cormorant and Young on Nest

Malibu Creek State Park: *On the way to Malibu Creek SP we drove through two shopping centers at Las Virgenes and Agoura Road in search of House Sparrows who hang out at fast food restaurants. No birds, not even the lowly House Sparrow. We did see a Western Scrub Jay on our way from there to Malibu Creek SP, where we arrived at 9:14. Allan saw a soaring Common Raven. We walked the Braille Trail, finding an Ash-throated Flycatcher, Female American Kestrel (the male would show up a bit later), and Lazuli Bunting. Violet-green Swallows chased insects over the nearby field. MIA were the Oak Titmouse and White-breasted Nuthatch. We headed into the park on the main road. To our pleasant surprise we found a Yellow-breasted Chat below the road in old shrubs a bit above the creek. It had been something like twenty years since we had seen our first and previously last Chat at MCSP. We continued to the ford over the creek, where there used to be an Arizona crossing. We were delighted to see four Lawrence's Goldfinches land in a small sycamore for a brief showoff time before they moved on. It was only the second time we saw this species there. A Blue Grosbeak also showed up. We headed back toward the parking lot, adding Orange-crowned Warbler and Bewick's Wren along the way. The*

Orange-crown even showed a small orange patch on his crown, a mark rarely seen despite this bird's name.

Unintentionally Wasting Time: We drove the very short distance east to King Gillette Ranch and drove through its roads. We saw nothing new. So we drove back to the Albertson's parking lot to again search for the generally despised House Sparrow near the fast food joints: bingo! On to Cheeseboro Canyon, a waste of time given what we had already seen. Perhaps if we had hiked in we might have added Oak Titmouse or a White-breasted Nuthatch, but it would have been a longish hike for little payoff.

Zuma Canyon, Bonsall Drive Trailhead: We arrived here at 12:17PM, twenty-three minutes left. We found plenty of the noisy Nanday Parakeets that have become common in Malibu in recent years. At 12:30 with only ten minutes left we reached a fork in the trail. Allan took the high road and I took the low road. We each found a Wrentit before 12:40, our time to call it a day/Birdathon and turn around and head back to meet where the trail branches.

Summing Up: We found 88 species, well short of our goal of 100. The Yellow-breasted Chats and Lawrence's Goldfinches were very pleasant surprises. We missed a few very common species like Oak Titmouse, Dark-eyed Juncos which I have seen three times at our development since the Birdathon, White-breasted Nuthatch and Pacific-slope Flycatcher. The biggest dip in our number of species found was because of our timing. By May 26 and 27, almost all duck species had left Southern California, along with many of the shorebirds, especially sandpipers. Despite our tallying fewer species than we hoped, we visited many lovely locations in perfect weather, with temperatures in the high 60's to very low 70's throughout the expedition.