

Kotin 2018 Birdathon

Day One -- Friday May 5

Allan and Muriel Kotin's 2018 Birdathon: *Today was not only the Cinco de Mayo, it was the start of the Kotin Birdathon. This is our annual 24-hour search for as many species of birds as we can find and identify and is dedicated to raising money for San Fernando Valley Audubon's Sepulveda Basin Environmental Education Program (SBEEP).*

Allan and I left home in my small Lexus SUV (license MALBRDR the BRDR for "birder" and the MAL for "Malibu" or "bad" - your choice) around 10:20 this morning and drove to Orange County, aiming to be ready to bird there around noon when we would start the clock running. The plan was to drive home in the dark and resume birding the next morning in Los Angeles County until exactly 24 hours later. We devised this unique schedule a few years ago, abandoning the typical - and even more exhausting -- pattern of starting before dawn and ending at dark in a single day.

Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve in Huntington Beach: We arrived at this wonderful birding hotspot where we found screeching terns filling the sky. Ignoring them for the moment, we hung our binoculars around our necks, secured our sun hats on our heads, and further loaded up Allan with camera and spotting scope. Ready... Set... Bird! At 12:04PM the 24-hour clock was started. The skies were hazy and partly cloudy with a light breeze and temperature 69F.

The first bird identified was one of many Forster's Terns. Then common Feral Rock Pigeons sitting on the supports of the pier leading across the shallow water. A Snowy Egret flew by. A group of 2 Long-billed Curlews and 3 Marbled Godwits fed, probing the muds below the water. The

squeaky-door-hinge cries of flying *Elegant* and *Royal* terns joined the *Forster's*, while *Least Terns* made bell-like tinkling sounds. Many of the terns were carrying small wriggling fish in their beaks. A *Great Egret* flew past, headed for a fishing spot. One of surprisingly few *American Coots* swam in the distance. A *Western Gull* flew by, as we left the pier on the inland side of the main body of water. We were delighted to find 2 *Eared Grebes*, one with the golden "ear" plumes of breeding season, which we rarely see. These are surface divers who typically leave for nesting grounds to the north before they sprout their "ear" plumage.



Eared Grebe with "Ears"

On the mudflats inland of the pathway were hundreds of birds, including a Black-bellied Plover with a black belly. The Brits have a more sensible name for these birds, Grey Plover, as they breed in Arctic regions and are typically seen elsewhere as gray birds. Among other birds on the mudflats were resting California Gulls and Double-crested Cormorants. Savannah Sparrows intermittently zipped past us and landed in the low pickleweed, where they immediately became invisible.

Then a surprise. As we walked towards the promontory that affords the best views of the inland waters, a Horned Lark walked from under a bench, just ahead of us. It was the first Horned Lark we had seen in years. They were fairly common in the Sepulveda Basin when we started birdwatching around 30 years ago. There were a number of agricultural fields that were plowed periodically there and elsewhere in the San Fernando Valley in those days. With the disappearance of plowed fields locally, the Horned Larks are now very rare here.



Horned Lark Carrying Worm

Studying the mudflats again we found Caspian Terns resting and a Whimbrel using its long down-curved bill to probe out yummy snacks from the mud. We arrived at a long stretch with few birds.

After discussing whether to continue on quite a distance farther where there was a chance we might find a Reddish Egret or Tri-colored Heron, we decided to turn around. We did find more species. Flocks of sandpipers flew in,

landed and stayed varying lengths of time. They included a solitary Willet and a smaller Dunlin in non-breeding plumage, with flocks of Least Sandpipers and Long-billed Dowitchers. Our first Killdeer of the day wore a band around its leg. Swimming were a Canada Goose, of which we would see many, and the only 3 Ring-necked Ducks we would find. A Brown Pelican flew past us, as did several Northern Rough-winged Swallows. A Song Sparrow sang from a low perch, the last species we would add here.

Harriet Wieder Park: We left Bolsa Chica and arrived at this small suburban park just south of Bolsa Chica at 1:55. As I parked the car, we looked to see what 3 young women with binoculars were staring at. It was a beautiful Western Bluebird on the grass. Then I saw a bird fly into a bare tree beyond the grass, followed by a second one that did not land, except on the first. They were Tree Swallows which immediately began to mate.

After I emerged from the car and chatted with one of the young women, she pointed out a briefly perched Western Tanager in the willows and I identified a Pacific Slope Flycatcher for her. There were also the first California Towhee, House Finch, American Crow and Wilson's Warblers of the day. The wetlands below were dry and a birding bust. After leaving the park, we spotted European Starlings along PCH.

San Joaquin Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary: We reached this other favorite OC birding spot at 3:13PM and were greeted by a loud "Muriel!" Justine, her mom Wendy, Alexander and James of SFVAS's Young Birders were on their Birdathon and had just arrived here after leaving Bolsa Chica. We traded notes. At a birdbath and surrounding native flowers next to Sea and Sage Audubon's headquarters were an Anna's and an Allan's hummingbird with a Lesser Goldfinch.



Anna's Hummingbird



Allan found a Warbling Vireo (above) as we approached the first pond.

There was only very shallow water in the first pond, perfect for the Black-necked Stilts and Avocets that foraged there in the water.



Black-necked Stilts (a Bird with Appropriate Name)



American Avocet (Also Has LONG Legs)

A Turkey Vulture circled above the ponds, the second of which had ducks: a pair of Cinnamon Teal and a pair of Gadwalls. A small flock of tiny Bonaparte's Gulls included one with a black head, its breeding plumage. There was a Ring-billed Gull too. Mourning Doves flew about and a Western Grebe swam on the third pond. As we continued walking, a pair of Bushtits flitted in and out of the Mulefat bushes and a Common Yellowthroat posed briefly in a willow.

Tree Swallows - and no other species of swallow -- flew around us throughout our walk here. Apparently the Tree Swallows chase all other swallows away from this habitat which must be perfect for them: the ponds and insects attracted, the many nest boxes on posts above the ponds, and the good behavior of human visitors at this well-supervised nature reserve.



Tree Swallow

At one of the farthest ponds we saw an Osprey fly into its nest. We found a Pied-billed Grebe, swimming on a pond of course, and the flash of a male Red-winged Blackbird's bright wing patches as it flew. A Yellow Warbler sang and sang until we found it in a willow. We left San Joaquin at 5:00.



Red-winged Blackbird (at Sepulveda Basin)



Osprey on Nest (Commercial Building in Distance)

Crystal Cove State Park: We arrived there at 5:35PM. Oops, it wasn't the part of Crystal Cove we knew and planned to visit, but we walked to an overlook where we saw several Brandt's Cormorants on a rock in the ocean and heard Wrentits' distinctive song. After we drove to our normal entrance we found a singing California Thrasher perched on a large shrub and a Spotted Towhee. Disappointingly, no California Quail were here.

Dinner: After a pleasant dinner in a mall, entering our sightings on a bird list form, we headed back to Malibu.

Day Two -- Sunday morning, May 6, 2018

Starting Out Again: We got up when my alarm rang at 5AM, unsuccessfully watched the ocean and our balcony for new species while eating

breakfast, and were on the road at 6:15. We drove a quarter mile to Westward Beach Road and walked close to Zuma Lagoon, where we found our first Scrub Jay among the plants and Allan 'scoped Shearwaters, presumably Black-vented, skimming the ocean far out to sea.

Sadly we saw a dead juvenile Brown Pelican near the shallow foamy water of the lagoon. After two years when juvenile brown peli's weren't seen around here because these ocean-island nesters had unsuccessful nesting seasons, this spring saw many juveniles arrive on the mainland. It is thought the cooling of the ocean around here helped them. Strangely young pelicans have been spotted inland of late, even places so far from the ocean as Claremont. The most dramatic sighting was of two juvenile Brown Pelicans who invited themselves to the Pepperdine University graduation in late April. This is part of what bird expert Kimball Garrett wrote about them. "The two birds at Pepperdine were in an area often overflowed by Brown Pelicans, and their behavior might simply have been a combination of goofy adolescent hijinks and a total unfamiliarity with humans. After all, a crowd of humans on the Pepperdine lawn isn't too dissimilar to a huge roosting flock of pelicans. If you haven't seen the YouTube video, it is here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGBjIXMD_0s"

We drove inland, up Busch Drive to the Zuma Canyon Overlook at its top. On the way to the overlook we saw Dark-eyed Juncos near the street, a noisy flock of Nanday Parakeets overhead, and a Eurasian Collared-Dove perched on a power pole. At 7:00 we drove downhill a block to Carole Hill's lovely, expansive yard where many birds typically congregate, attracted by her feeders and many plants. The only new species there were a Black-headed Grosbeak sitting above a seed feeder and the hardly rare and elusive Northern Mockingbird. The other target species recently there seemed to be playing "Frustrate the Birdathoners." However we did find some of them in the neighborhood, as we backtracked down to Rainsford and crossed over the now dry creek to Bonsall Drive. On Bonsall we found trees with a Nuttall's Woodpecker and at least 2 Acorn Woodpeckers. We got to the lower Zuma Canyon Parking lot where we found a pair of California Quail and a soaring Red-tailed Hawk.

Malibu Lagoon: *We got to Malibu Lagoon at 8:05 and walked the path between the education node and bird viewing area near the main channel of Malibu Creek. We found noisy Great-tailed Grackles in goodly numbers, Barn Swallows flying over the water and a White Pelican resting on a sandbar with a flock of the expected brown peli's. Surprisingly the only duck we saw was a Ruddy Duck on the water. Allan 'scoped the beach and ocean from our inland position and found one Snowy Plover on the beach and a Common Loon on the ocean beyond. We decided that the mile round trip walk to the beach would take too long for the number of additional species, so left the lagoon at 8:25.*



Great-tailed Grackle, a Very Noisy Member of the Blackbird Family

Malibu Creek State Park: *We got to Malibu Creek SP at 8:55 and set off toward the Braille Trail. We found an Ash-throated Flycatcher and tiny*

Oak Titmouse, and finally saw one of the many House Wrens we had almost been certain we had been hearing during almost all of our earlier stops. Yes, that was what we had been hearing. We did not see the other birds we expected in that area, so keeping in mind that friends had found the park quiet earlier in the week, we left. We detoured through the parking lot at the shopping center closest to the McDonalds at Las Virgenes and Agoura Road in search of House Sparrows. We found plenty of them, unlike last year.

Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Reserve: We arrived at the reserve at 10:07AM. Between the fairly late hour on a pleasant weekend morning that had already brought lots of visitors to the park and the dense leaves of the sycamore trees near the amphitheater, of the expected birds we saw only a Black Phoebe. This resident species of flycatchers has been nesting under the eaves of the storage building for several years. A flock of Cliff and Violet-green swallows chased aerial insects at high speed a few feet above the lawn.

Once inside the natural area of the reserve we found several Bullock's Orioles, mainly in the Cottonwood trees. A pair of Egyptian Geese flew over the Wildlife Lake as did a Green Heron. An immature Sora rail walked near the emergent plants. There were many other water birds, but all of species we had already tallied, including Double-crested Cormorants on their nests in Cottonwoods on the island. We added a tiny Orange-crowned Warbler to the list of warblers already seen.

The Avery Yard: Birdathon Chair Pat Avery invited us to the wonderful yard she and her husband Richard have at their home in Calabasas. We arrived at 11:40 AM. There must be a reason for the similarity in sound between "Avery" and "aviary." Located above a small canyon of mature Coast Live Oaks, Pat and Richard have a bird-inviting yard with many bird feeders and a few nest boxes. In the 23 minutes we were there before the clock struck 12:04PM, we watched Black-chinned Hummingbirds (and other hummers already counted) and a Hooded Oriole at nectar feeders, a Bewick's

Wren in a tree, and a White-breasted Nuthatch at a suet feeder. With a little more time we might have been able to positively identify one of the hummers as a Rufous, but the clock ruled.



Female Hooded Oriole, Another Member of the Blackbird Family

We headed to Agoura Hills for lunch, deciding on a Persian restaurant. After an excellent meal, we almost stumbled over a Brewer's Blackbird, one of the "easy" species we had been seeking, right in front of my parked car. And so it goes.

We arrived home at 1:50 PM, 248 miles added to the odometer since setting off the previous morning. We were exhausted but had enjoyed our bird search efforts.