

Searching for wildlife, old friends and a decent meal in the -

United States of America

22nd April to 19th May 2004

Budweiser (n) – a clear tasteless fluid carried in large trucks and proof that Americans are not all that discriminating when it comes to what they put into their stomachs

I have met or entertained a number of Americans over the years. Many have asked me to visit their homes. I had never been to North America so I decided to burn some frequent flyer points and try my hand at observing the locals and finding critters in the US of A.



Outline of Trip

The plan was to spend a week in southeast Arizona to coincide with the spring bird migration, a week in Texas for the same reason, and two weeks in California. The first half of the holiday was hosted by the very pleasant Nancy Gallagher and her partner Larry Simpkins. The California experience was less structured but allowed me to spend a few delightful days with Allison Greenleaf and Scott Flinders, whom I met in Nepal and Thailand in 2000.

Actually the real reason I went to the USA was to get the beer that Allison Greenleaf owed me after buying her one in Chitwan National Park, Nepal.

Aside from a plan I also had a quest. This was to see:

A bear,
A fat Texan with a large hat,
A roadrunner,
A wetback,
An armadillo,
A skunk,
A Walmart,
A flying elk,
A coyote,
A rattlesnake,
George W. Bush being shot (or bitten by any one of the above except the roadrunner),
and
Australia again

My quest was quite successful but rattlesnakes are never a certainty.

Travel was by plane, private car or hire car. All were reliable and very inexpensive, although the hire cars assume you are a complete idiot judging by the array of alarms installed to tell you what you have failed to do, and in which sequence you have failed to do it in.



Sites visited

Arizona

Phoenix area, Coronado National Forest – Madera Canyon et al, California Gulch, Patagonia Lake, Sierra Vista area, Tombstone, Fort Huachuca, Phoenix (again)

Texas

Houston, Winnie (High Island), Galveston, Bentsen – Rio Grande Valley State Park, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, South Padre Island, Cancon, Lost Maples State Natural Area, Hunt (I kid you not!), Katy (!) rice fields, Houston area

California

Los Angeles, Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park, Andrew Moleno State Park, Point Lobos State Reserve, Monterey – including Monterey Bay, Yosemite National Park, McKinleyville (Arcata) area, Redwood National Park, Point Reyes National Seashore, Monterey (again) and Los Angeles



Some observations

American People

Just about everyone I met was helpful, generous and friendly. I was told this would be the case, but any country that re-elects George Bush, or for that matter a whole forest of them, gives reason for some doubt. It was not easy to reconcile the image that Americans have abroad with the domestic reality. Even in Texas the people were friendly, even if they couldn't count up to two. Texans would regularly ask me "how are you all" when I was the only person present.

I suppose that my unsolicited membership of "the coalition of the willing" didn't disenfranchise me with those that take the average American's view of world affairs. I guess I met many of these in Texas and Arizona. The folk living in California were much better informed in terms of world affairs and their place in it.

All the American pop culture stereotypes were possible to see without too much effort. My favourites were the rather laid back Texans that took up rather too much of the world's free space. When they got into their vehicles they took up considerably more.



I exploded a few of my preconceptions in that:

I didn't hear a single gunshot
Aside from one particular chap, I don't have a harsh word for anyone I'd met
There is still a lot of wildlife despite the local obsession with hunting
I didn't witness a road rage incident
I heard very few car horns
Not many Americans were loud
Many were well informed and many of the others wish they were, and
The youth showed more respect for adults (including me) than they do in
Australia.

Accommodation

I camped, stayed in other folks' homes and slept in hotels. Nothing too exciting to report here.

Campground fees in national parks were very high – in the order of \$US18 per site per night and the campgrounds could be quite noisy, what with screaming youth, dogs

and radios. In California, sites must be pre-booked by your grandparents when they are very young, or else forget it. The booking system is unusual. It is almost impossible to accomplish anything over the internet. Buying a phone card and calling from home seemed to work. Only thing – the very polite lass that will inevitably answer the phone will insist on reading you the park rules, the full transcript of The Declaration of Independence and what to do in case you are eaten by a bear before she will accept your booking – this can be time consuming.

Hotels need not be pre-booked, in fact this would be a very bad idea because the tariff on the day would often fall as the day progressed. I stayed in Hotel 6 chain hotels – consistent quality and not expensive – costing around \$US30, sometimes much less.

Roads / transport

Roads are what you would expect, with a reasonably high standard and motorways everywhere. Drivers are typically courteous and generally pretty good at what they do. This is probably because they don't want to be shot by one of their fellow road users. There are lots of variously plumed police, so it is a good idea for your car to have cruise control. The USA sets some sort of record for the number of different law enforcement types that can ruin your day on the road. Marshals, federal, state, county, town, village and hamlet police along with the NSA, CIA, DEA, FBI, PTA and the highway patrol.



Weather

Nothing to get excited about.

Insects

None, except for the odd mozzie in Texas, and some nasty ticks in California.

Food

Ah, here there is some need for comment. All food bought within half a mile of any highway is fit only for pigs, or, as it appears, the vast majority of the citizens of the USA. I could not believe how perfectly reasonable ingredients could be combined to end up so tasteless and boring. Even the Mexicans could do it. My well-founded theory is that the locals would complain if they could taste their food.

Of interest was a Mexican place in the town of Williams, California. The motel next door had advised me not to go there and being a contrary sort of bastard I went anyway. It was closing forever on the day of my visit and the large sweaty Mexican (who spoke no English) served me delicious food. And so it was that a sad chef in a lonely restaurant served its last customer – me.

Beer

I want to make it quite clear that I had a great time in America. I loved the people, the landscapes, the wildlife and the roads. I survived the food. Please respect that I have provided some balance here. Put simply, I fail to comprehend how any country can rise above feudalism or anarchy without having proper beer.

Given the hold that the roman catholic church appears to have over most of its highly superstitious flock, I suppose I shouldn't be all that surprised that the vast majority of the 280 odd million citizens of the USA can be similarly brainwashed into thinking that Budweiser is beer. It is not. Most people of voting age will tell you that nobody drinks it. Yeah, and nobody votes for George Bush either. Incomprehensibly, some even drink Bud Light. Imagine it – watered down water!

It seems that a few of the educated elite, including my host Larry Simpkins and many of the good citizens of California have discovered that they make some good beer in Mexico. American boutique breweries with nice labels on their bottles have sprung up, most likely to satisfy ex-pat Europeans, Australians and the small number of locals who have ventured outside their country's boundaries on anything other than a pointless military venture.



Wildlife (see full list in table at end of report)

Birds

I was thrilled with the variety, abundance and circumstances surrounding the sightings of 376 birds. Given the time of year and the locations visited, warblers were high on the menu. Looking in the field guide (Sibley's Guide to the Birds of Western North America, and later the other one - Eastern) I had imagined that warblers were at the dull end of the birding scale. They certainly are in Asia. Wrong again. These birds were charming and colourful, and worthy of high respect given the challenges presented to them in their migratory cycle.

My favourite birds were (in no particular order):

Green jay, roadrunner, elf owl, great horned owl, pileated woodpecker, black-footed albatross, wood duck, black-bellied whistling duck, northern cardinal and wild turkey.

Mammals

They do mammals quite well too. Some of the animals rate at the top of my all time list and the killer whale thing – see diary entry for 9th May – is up there with gorillas and the chimps in the silk purse of my mammal experiences.

Anyway my top ten (again in no order):

Grey whale, killer whale, black bear, sea otter, Roosevelt elk, nine-banded armadillo, bobcat, long-tailed weasel, coyote and raccoon.

Reptiles

Pathetic effort here – no gila monster or rattlesnake so I don't even want to write about it.



Diary

Day 1 – Thursday 22nd April 2004

I managed a lift to the airport with one of my resident lesbians on her way to work and arrived there obscenely early as a consequence. I was the first to check in. The check-in guy also lived in my home town of Jannali so we chatted for 20 minutes or so because this was my lucky day and the check-in guy had naught else to do! Every so often in the age of the computer, the electronic gremlins smile at you. In my case the silly machines had decided some months earlier that my Qantas flight from Sydney to LA was full, so they refused to book anyone on it. So not only was there no-one in my whole row from one side of the 747 to the other, there was no-one in the row in front, the row behind and very few people anywhere else.

Airport security was high with hand checking of checked-in luggage, extra hand checking of carry-on at the gate and for me I was selected at random (!!) to have a full body cavity search by two stern young ladies from an ex-Soviet country who were resplendent with a variety of implements, including something resembling a cattle prod. They took my shoes off anyway. Lucky them. Meanwhile, there were two guys who looked like Lebanese versions of John Travolta and they walked straight through. Go figure. The pilot announced that there were to be no groups loitering at the back of the plane. The only group large enough to loiter anywhere was the cabin crew. There weren't enough passengers to form a quorum of loiterers.

Day 1 – Thursday 22nd April 2004 (again)

The Qantas folk woke the John Travoltas, what other passengers could be located, and I, at 0200 for breakfast. Why they needed to wake us at that time when the plane didn't land till six is a mystery.

We arrived on time at LA and after a hassle free processing through the various barriers I caught the shuttle to my very cheap internet-acquired flight with South West Airlines to Phoenix. It was upon boarding this aged 737 that I thought I had gone to the wrong country. The boarding procedure started with a guy in overalls waving and calling to the hundreds of prospective travelers for various flights, who were all milling around with intent in the impossibly crowded and inadequate terminal. There was no seating allocation so all the people that charged the departure gate piled onto the seats at the front of the plane so that they could get off first. This naturally prevented the rest of us from getting in the plane at all.

The stewardess – who looked like a diminutive high school cheerleader – was so short that she had to leap in the air to close the overhead baggage compartment doors! This was comical, because as she leapt her skirt would fly up, which was rather erotic, causing many to laugh at her. She was also required to give us our flight refreshments – a small paper cup with some tepid coke.



Phoenix residents Larry and Nancy picked me up from Phoenix Airport. There was a small hiccup as my luggage went inexplicably to the wrong carousel. We then escaped the airport. A rather be-fuddled Larry bumped a motorcycle cop escorting a funeral procession. The policeman uttered a few short words and caused me to ponder whether I may have made a big mistake.....

Our first stop was the fabulous Desert Botanic Gardens where we started seeing birds and mammals, with 25 of the former and three different squirrels. After a lunch that I thought was unrepresentatively ordinary, we stopped outside the local zoo to look in a big duck pond but the ducks had gone north leaving us with a turtle pond. It contained red-eared sliders, western pond turtles, Sonoran mud turtles and Texas soft-shelled turtles.

Next stop was the Gallagher/Simpkins residence and then to the local version of an up market sewage farm. Here there were some great sightings – black-tailed jackrabbits, musk rat and lots of ducks and waders.

Dinner was at a Mexican restaurant. It was an interesting place with boring food.

Day 2 – Friday 23rd April 2004

At least it wasn't the 22nd of April any more.

We left very early for Madera Canyon in Coronado National Forest via Tucson. The local vegetation in the foothills of some small mountains is described as mesquite bosque in the lower parts with juniper, scrub oak and sycamore higher up. There were quite a few birds but these were well exceeded by the number of birders. Everyone was carrying binoculars – unbelievable! I picked up three mammals – Arizona grey squirrel, Botta's pocket gopher and white-tailed deer.



The day's entertainment was completed by an elf owl show. These much watched owls are the worlds smallest. At a pre-announced time they emerged from their woodpecker-created roost hole in a pine electricity pole and flew about devouring such un-owl like prey as caterpillars. There were far more people than owls, all ooohing and ahhhing. The owls made no sound.

Fortunately I had the foresight to purchase a large bottle of Scapa single malt whisky at the duty free shop in Sydney so we could all celebrate this marvellous day. Normally I would have carried a Jack with me but I thought of images of ice to Eskimos etc so Scapa to the USA, Jack to everywhere else.



We were camped at a free campground where Larry strategically located out tents in the middle of the road to prevent being over-run by the local hodads or other potential campers. I questioned this on the basis of fairness but Larry was implacable.

Day 3 – Saturday 24th April 2004

We struggled to break through the brilliantly plumaged local birders but managed to find a few gaps in the lower desert area to tick off a few new chooks before retreating to the mountains again. There was no chance of getting lost – what with birders surrounding every tree. There was actually a whole college class staring at a vireo. Inspiring.

We were back on the road, and after stopping at a rather crowded lake that nevertheless turned up a few stray birds and a few odd and rather optimistic fisherfolk, we headed into the relative wilderness of the curiously named California Gulch. This was not anywhere remotely near California and as I am not an expert on gulches, these being a local landform apparently not found outside of the USA, I was a little puzzled. Not so my hosts, who revelled in the remoteness of this part of extreme southeast Arizona, close enough to Mexico that the wetbacks are still wet.

We poked about but after setting up camp I was more interested in washing and drinking than birding. The evening saw us spotlighting for nightjars and heard the local speciality – the buff-collared. According to local rules, hearing this rare bird for the USA is acceptable for the purposes of one's list. Great.

Larry and Nance raved about the quality and quantity of the stars. I did my best to appear enthusiastic but my memories of Australia's Great Victoria Desert made the local mix of night sky things appear a bit lame. Maybe it was the alcohol.



Day 4 – Sunday 25th April 2004

After breaking camp we walked down the gulch – this was impressive. I could imagine Hoss Cartwright and Little Joe coming up the steep dusty trail with some poor little lost calf, stopping and asking whether we had seen the five-striped sparrow. And after we had responded in the negative Hoss would say that he would ask the boss whether he knew any other good spots when he got back to the ranch. They would ride off with a warning about a mountain lion with a thorn in its foot that had been making rude gestures at their cattle.

A day or two looking for mammals would have been nice but our schedule did not allow it, so after taking a few pictures of desert plants we left for Patagonia. It should be explained that this place is nowhere near South America and was most unlike the Patagonia there in every possible respect.

I had some “wrong side of road” driving experience with my first challenge being to avoid running down a wetback with a silly look on his face. Where he was heading none of us could guess – there were no people living nearby.

A birding trail system at a Patagonia reserve was awash with birders of all sorts, including young and attractive women! I can’t remember whether there were many birds. There might have been. There were certainly plenty of deer. We adjourned to a local house garden - “Paton’s”, where we sat with a troupe of other birders and watched the “hummer feeders”. These were not extra large fuel pumps that feed your gas-guzzling military style vehicle but bird feeders of all shapes and sizes. It seemed that a good proportion of the local population took a very active interest in bird feeding and that at any time of the day a gaggle of birders would be sitting in your

garden swapping notes. If a hummingbird of note turned up in someone else's garden then off you go. Different. We had close views of some lovely birds as well as a couple of hispid cotton rats.

We camped at Patagonia Lake next to a friendly colony of rock squirrels. Here I marvelled at one of the fattest men on earth. He was "camping" alone with his 40 foot long bus (nothing unusual in these parts), an SUV (ditto), a thumping big trailer boat (a bit indulgent I guess given the size of the lakes in the desert) and wait for it, a six-seater golf cart to take him to the toilet block!!! Go and get fucked – this isn't happening!! When you hear about the world's energy crisis I can honestly say I met the guy who caused it.



I went spotlighting in the evening but it was amazingly poor considering the location – zippo but a few rabbits. Maybe the guy with the golf cart had earlier organised for everything to be shot.

Day 5 – Monday 26th April 2004

We walked half way around the lake and saw a few new birds including black-capped gnatcatcher – a rare bird in the USA.

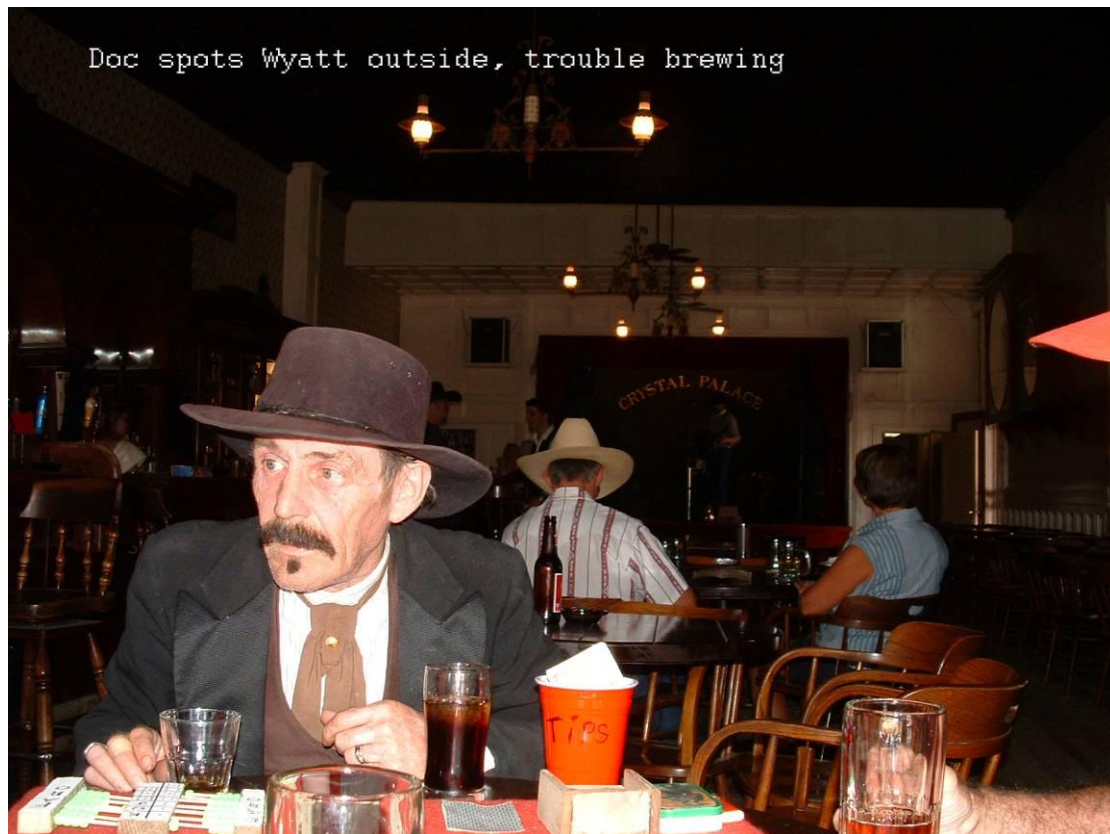
We left for Sierra Vista, a large town inexplicably located in a non-descript site in the middle of the semi-desert. Nearby there were huge mansions dotted on some of the dry hills looking over the harsh landscape. I can't think of any parallel in Australia – nobody would willingly live in such a place, especially if you were wealthy enough to build a giant house.

We visited another iconic birder hangout – “Beatty’s” - which was festooned with humming feeders and many attendant hummers. I picked up a couple of new ones before returning to Sierra Vista and checking into a motel.

The afternoon was spent at the famous town of Tombstone, which was well worth the trip. Not much had changed here. Many of the locals and visitors dressed up in traditional costume. I am not certain whether they actually shoot at one another but I wouldn’t have been surprised. We had a few beers, such as they were, at the Crystal Palace Hotel. Here it was possible to chat with Doc Holliday and chew the fat over matters OK Corral or perhaps the Vietnam War. An interesting chap, slightly pickled by his fluid intake, but interesting nevertheless. I had to remind Larry, who is a local history buff of some fame, that this probably wasn’t the real Doc Holliday. Larry was at his happiest.

Dinner was at a Vietnamese place – called “My Place” - that L and N raved about..... it was alright.

Nine hours sleep.



Day 6 – Tuesday 27th April 2004

Off to Fort Huachuca Army Base for a bit of birding in the forests there. Very odd indeed, what with military types checking passports and looking anal. After much waving of plastic they allowed us through. This was a great spot. Many fantastic birds – elegant trogon and spotted owl being the best, but picked up seven other new ones. Invigorating to do a bit of solo birding up Owl Canyon.

The afternoon was spent in other folks' backyards but the law of diminishing returns was starting to take effect. Larry was starting to get a bit tired and testy. Might have to take him to the vet.

Back to our motel in Sierra Vista and to our Vietnamese friends at "My Place". The servings were so large it reminded me of the "Magic Pudding". The amount on my plate never decreased no matter how much I dumped into the adjacent pot plants. My "refined" palate delivered a different opinion of the quality of the food than that of my dining company, who raved about it. I ordered a Mexican speciality. The menu alleged that it included chicken and beef. There was nothing on my plate that identified itself as belonging to any particular animal whatsoever.

Ah, Scapa.



Day 7 – Wednesday 28th April 2004

We found ourselves heading back toward Phoenix on the first of two days corrupted by much travelling. Willcox Playa provided a nice distraction along the way. There were many birds on and around this small lake. Waterbirds, gulls, phalaropes, quail, swallows – all manner of things and out of all proportion to my expectations.

We arrived in Phoenix a little after "lunch". I marvelled that so many can live in the desert. Lots of water was being wasted all over the shop – what with golf courses, large sprinkler systems and many artificial lakes. Everything comes to those who wait (and they won't like what's coming).

Day 8 – Thursday 29th April 2004

Larry took me to the Salt River, which, like other place names in Arizona, is misleading in that it is not salty. At least there was a river. There were a few birds in evidence including a pair of bald eagles. No mammals though.



I went back to the Gilbert Sewage Farm a.k.a. the Riparian Ranch. Although very windy there were lots of birds to see, amongst which were roadrunner and ring-necked duck.

We caught a Continental Airlines flight to Houston, Texas. Houston had the most insanely busy and dangerous looking airport I've seen. Planes were closely chasing each other nose to tail all over the paddock at high speed. Almost all the planes belonged to Continental.

Larry enjoyed all the airport procedures and tried his best not to have a heart attack. He gets a little excited. He was also a master of asking questions for which there is no right answer. Must have something to do with being a retired history teacher.

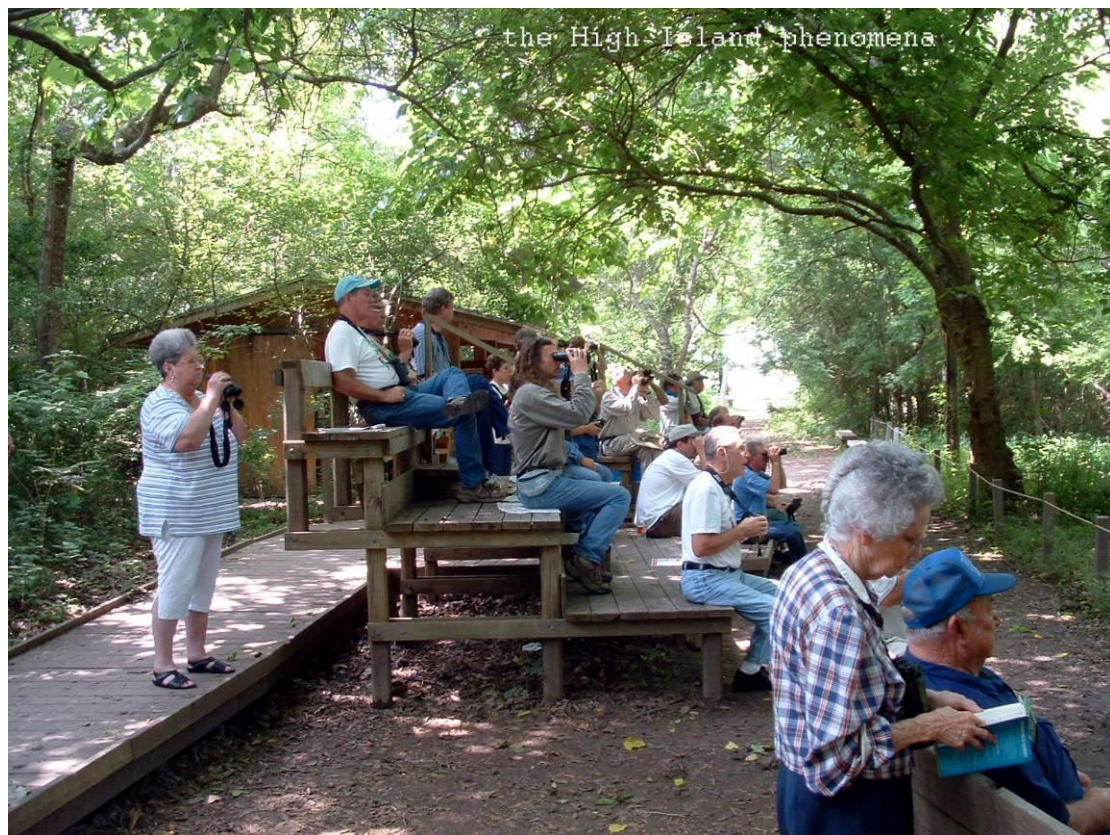
We hired a Dodge Shitbox and drove to the Ricelands Motel at Winnie. Our digs was something of a dump but I didn't mind – it was close to lots of good wildlife habitat.

We had dinner at "Al-T's", a Cajun restaurant with very helpful and friendly waiters who sat with you as you explored the exotic menu. I lumped for the alligator, crawdads, catfish and other local specialities. The plate seemed so good as it emerged from the kitchen – lots of great looking and great smelling food that tasted like

reheated road-killed cormorant, or at least what I expect cormorant, so prepared, would taste like. It was pretty abysmal.

Day 9 – Friday 30th April 2004

We were up before dawn to visit the famous “migrant trap” of High Island. Here again, names can be deceiving. It appeared that no Mexicans or other exotic folk were being trapped here by any means. The “trap” is a misnomer anyway because the trapees – in this case migratory birds – are very happy to be caught by this patch of rather ordinary scrub at High Island. Oddly, the forest here was not situated on an island nor was it in any way high.



Many small birds fly across the Gulf of Mexico in their northward migration only to be presented with contrary winds that can blow into their tiny faces and make them very tired or worse. When this happens they fall out of the sky at the nearest patch of green, or, failing that, anywhere that isn't water. Many drown. High Island is one such green place. When we visited there were no such animals present. Bummer. “You should have been here yesterday”, they said.

Never mind, there were plenty of other great sites nearby. I was thrilled to see lots of North American waders that sometimes occur as rare vagrants in Australia. We were to see 83 different birds on the day, 34 of which were new to me. Also seen were swamp cottontail and eastern grey squirrel.

We had a lovely dinner – see, that wasn't so hard, was it? A couple of gorgeous Amerindian hostesses didn't detract from the food either. As a bonus, Larry consumed a weird mix of alcohol, and became almost sociable.

Day 10 – Saturday 1st May 2004

After another slow hour or so at High Island we journeyed south via the Galveston Ferry, which proved to be a great ride. Lots of birds too – amongst which were a few frigatebirds.

The day fell over soon after as we hit a wind and rain front that tested my driving skills. Lunch was followed by Larry snatching the car keys. He had a driving style that can best be described as chaotic. We decided that as the weather was shit, we would keep heading south until we got to Harlington, where we checked into a Motel 6 motel, before quickly adjourning to the nearest bar and grill. Our host, Mary Lou, a Latin-American, was a scream. I dare say that items not printed on the menu could have been acquired following a discrete enquiry.

Nancy and I had a small Scapa while Larry scarpered off to watch TV with his friends.

Day 11 – Sunday 2nd May 2004

Coffee in America is compulsory. Every morning at all gas stations there are queues of people with a variety of containers in hand ranging in size from large to bucket. Local rules allow heavily discounted refilling of paper or plastic cups from like stores. The coffee is most un-coffee like. For a start it doesn't taste like coffee. I would not be surprised to learn that there was no coffee at all in most of it. But it was hot, it tasted pretty good, and it was available in a bewildering range of flavours.

So the day started with a gallon or so of coffee (as locally defined) as we tripped off to the Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park. Great place. It looked just like an enormous campground with no campers anywhere. That's because it used to be an enormous campground full of campers until they booted them all out for reasons that were never fully explained, but that's fine by me because there was wildlife everywhere - the land-based highlight of the trip to this point. Green jays – truly spectacular birds – were everywhere, as were golden-fronted woodpeckers and a host of others.



Mammals took a starring role with raccoon, bobcat, collared peccary and some gorgeous squirrels.

We adjourned to Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge and we picked up a few new warblers and a couple of other bits and pieces in the magic forests and other habitats on offer there. Then we got the word “FALLOUT at SOUTH PADRE ISLAND!” This startlingly boring island at the far southern end of Texas is notable for a few

reasons – it is startlingly boring to look at, it has no trees, it is connected to the mainland by a bridge about two miles long and it occasionally plays host to birders during optimal birding weather, ie awful.

So it was that at South Padre Island every birder in Texas had descended for one of the year's best bird crashes. After checking into our \$27.99 Motel 6 motel we went looking for the vegetatively challenged fallout site where a few shrubs and very small bushes grew near a conference centre. There were many hundreds of birds of perhaps 40 or so different species trying to find something to eat. Dozens of birders were busy comparing sightings, taking photos and racing about the island looking at shrubs in gardens or vacant lots. I think there were about 25 or so different warblers.



We had a great dinner of steak and many beers. The day would have been unblemished had the Dodge Shitbox not decided it didn't want to play any more. After playing swapsies with the fuses we managed to get it to perform after a fashion but an annoying number of lights were permanently illuminated from this point on. We ignored them with the permission of the hire car company.

Day 12 – Monday 3rd May 2004

We chased birds all over South Padre Island all morning. We must have passed into an alternative universe where everyone was a birder. Almost all the people on the island were looking for birds as we criss-crossed the island passing on information to each other as we winkled out every last warbler.

Larry got some hot tip about a place nowhere even remotely nearby so off we went to a facility named "Neale's Place" at Cancon, 350 miles northwest of the island. It was expensive, very ordinary, had awful food but was full of mammals. A late afternoon

stroll threw up nine-banded armadillo, eastern cottontail, white-tailed deer and striped skunks.

This was a rare day in its own way. You see this county in Texas is “dry” – no alcohol can be purchased there. I couldn’t believe it when they told me. I thought it must be some sort of joke they play on foreigners, but no, this was for real. I’m beginning to understand how Shrub can keep getting re-elected; the folk round these parts are none too bright. Spotlighting turned up more skunks and a few raccoons and deer but none of my targetted opossums.



Day 13 – Tuesday 4th May 2004

Breakfast lived up to my lowest expectations. We left Neale’s and arrived at Lost Maples State Natural Area. This was a very pretty part of the world. Lots of helpful local birders allowed me to track down the local specialities of black-capped vireo, golden-cheeked warbler and wild turkey. We left rather earlier than I would have wished but I got no say in these matters. Off we jerked.

Regrettably we dined in a pub at a place named Hunt. I’m sure that’s about all they did as well. At least they could have a beer afterwards. Larry got surly after I commented on the food. He then asked me what I’d like to do with the afternoon. Unfortunately for me I had an idea, so he got the total shits all afternoon. From this point on, having no opinion on anything highlighted my Texas experience. Never mind, we found some wood duck, and some pretty countryside along the riverbanks.

Fearing meal times, I drank beer instead. Stayed in a place named Kerrville.

Day 14 – Wednesday 5th May 2004

Mystery day. Who knew where we were going? Eventually Larry had a Blinding Flash of the Obvious and suggested we head toward Houston. Nancy and I thanked Larry for his perspicacity and decisiveness and off we went.

This part of Texas is incredibly lush and fertile. There are enormous fields of everything imaginable. It is little wonder that the USA is so rich.

We arrived at the Katy rice fields in the late afternoon and immediately picked up a few nice birds including buff-breasted sandpipers.

We dined at a tolerable Chinese restaurant as Larry took his gallon or so of medicine. This was after he put on a little performance because he didn't get to choose restaurants. Silly Nancy.



Day 15 – Thursday 6th May 2004

Welcome to Larry Theatre.

I first met Larry at Fraser's Hill in Malaysia. He was drinking his humanising fluids so he appeared to be a normal human being. Larry is a very generous and intelligent chap but he does tend to lose it in simple situations. Today's simple situation was "flat tyre on car". Having assessed that the car's tyre had to be changed I starting removing the just-packed luggage from the boot when Larry arrived. He explained that changing the tyre was not necessary and proceeded to perform his impression of a windmill. I deferred to his obvious local knowledge on this trivial matter and reloaded

all the bags. The nice new tyre got to be intimate with the road pavement in a way the manufacturer had not imagined. Eventually Nancy prevailed upon her patient to stop. Once more I removed the luggage while Larry, foam streaming down his cheeks, destroyed the packaging that surrounded the jack.

Back on the freeway and I sat in the back while those up front had no idea where we were. I wasn't asked for an opinion and would not have expressed one if I had been. We arrived at a park (Deussen?), which was alive with woodpeckers – including pileated, red-headed and red-breasted. Another cameo site with a cypress swamp near the airport turned up a few more birds.

Larry panicked his way to and through the airport. Houston has only two million people, and no public transport that I could find, so everyone has a car or three. So the roads were packed with very large cars.

We returned to Phoenix.

Day 16 – Friday 7th May 2004

I slowly exhaled after my escape from Phoenix and flew to Los Angeles. I then caught the Fox Rent-a-Car shuttle to their yard. Shortly thereafter I was the proud driver of a yet to be registered Chevrolet Malibu Classic. And so I hit the LA freeways on a mission to get to my booked campsite at Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park before the gate shut. En route it was fun to see all the road and place names that featured in songs or movie titles.

Ventura Highway, in the sunshine, was stunning. The coastline was the best I'd seen for a long time - just incredible. In my haste I by-passed elephant seal colonies, grey whales and who knows what else.

The trees and scenery in the state park were great, my camping neighbours very friendly but the idiot teenagers and piss-heads nearby set a new standard for reasons that guns should be more freely available.



Day 17 – Saturday 8th May 2004

I rose from my planning of a better world without various local idiots in it, to walk up the nearest mountain. It was less than whelming.

As I left for Andrew Moleno State Park I gave the local dropkicks a long blast on the car horn and received a rousing cheer from those similarly affected by noise.

Andrew Moleno SP was rather good. There were many habitats and lots of birds. I chatted with some bird banders stationed there before hitting the trails toward the coast where I had good views of migrating grey whales. I could have spent more time in this reserve.

Next stop was the magnificent Point Lobos State Reserve. The scenery is wonderful and there was wildlife everywhere. In a very short time I had viewed the cormorant rookery, harbour seals, California sea lions, sea otters, Pacific white-sided and Risso's dolphins and grey and humpback whales.

I had booked into the Monterey Travelodge, which was not easy to find. Firstly I went to the wrong Monterey Travelodge, then I couldn't find my room, then I couldn't find the air conditioner switch. This last problem was resolved by opening the window. Despite the heat this alleged motel had no air conditioning. Silly me.

Fisherman's Wharf was next on the day's calendar. I wanted to leave nothing to chance and dry run my bird and sea monster watching trip for the next day. Monterey is a very attractive and interesting place. Most places I had been in the US that cater for tourists were pleasant, open and not too glitzy. I liked it. I bought the local take

away specialty of “clam chowder in a bread bowl” for dinner. This glug was quite okay, cost \$6 and didn’t kill much sea life in its preparation. I wouldn’t be surprised if the contents included no clam parts at all.



Day 18 – Sunday 9th May 2004

I woke too early but went to the wharf anyway. The boat, the “Point Sur Clipper” left half an hour late, which was frustrating given that there was no wind and these conditions did not last. The day was very exciting as I ticked off northern hemisphere seabirds. I had ensconced myself in the “crew only” area at the front of the boat when the call came through – killer whales!!

This account of the trip was stolen from the Monterey Seabirds website:

“It was pure pleasure to arrive at the dock on Mother's Day on a fog-free morning. Being May we knew in all likelihood the afternoon would bring wind so we planned accordingly to get out to an area of the Monterey Bay where we could bring it home with the wind at our backs. On board we had the legendary Aussie seabirder Steve Anyon-Smith who was chomping at the bit to get out in the bay to see some sea monsters (as he likes to call them); he would not be disappointed today.

*Still inside the harbour we had our only **COMMON LOON**. The breakwater was topped with more than 200 nesting **BRANDT'S CORMORANTS**. We found no rocky*

shorebirds along the jetty. **PIGEON GUILLEMOTS** were seen along Cannery Row, as were a few **PELAGIC CORMORANTS** and our first of many **PACIFIC LOONS**.

Off of Cypress Point there was a great deal of shearwater activity. Good numbers of **SOOTY SHEARWATERS** both in flight and resting on the water, looking a bit ratty in post migratory moult. Also making a good showing were an estimated 75 **PINK-FOOTED SHEARWATERS** and several small flocks of **RED-NECKED PHALAROPES**.

About mid morning things cut loose all at once when our first **BLACK-FOOTED ALBATROSS** appeared and a few moments later in came a very obliging **FLESH-FOOTED SHEARWATER**, our first of three on the day.

Some very full alcids were found attempting to fly away with full crops; several **CASSIN'S** and a few **RHINOCEROS AUKLETS** as well as a good number of **COMMON MURRES**.

At one point Steve Anyon-Smith hollers what sounds to our Yank ears like "Whyle!" and it takes a moment for us to translate from Aussie. Our first two **HUMPBACK WHALES** blow. As we approach I'm in the top drive when I hear folks in the back gasp. Leader Richard Ternullo says, "must have breached." Sure enough it does again, completely clearing the water, right side up like a giant dolphin! I've seen many humpbacks do this from a distance but this guy is only 50-75 yards away. Quite a thrill. This whale breaches a few more times much to the delight of all on board.



About this time we get a call from Killer Whale researcher Nancy Black of Monterey Bay Whale Watch that she has found a pod of **KILLER WHALES** attempting to separate a **GRAY WHALE** calf from its mother just off of Moss Landing. It is about 17 miles away but we decide to go for it. It's a bit of a haul as the wind begins to pick up. En route we come across a **BLUE WHALE** that dives and we are too impatient to wait for it to resurface as everyone on board really wants to see the Killer Whales in action. We also find a few **NORTHERN FULMARS** along the way.

Finally as we arrive just off of the harbour entrance to Moss Landing we see a great deal of commotion. A pod of 15 **KILLER WHALES** is playing tag team against the Gray Whale mother and her calf. Mom does her damndest to keep the calf out of harm's way. Rolling onto her back with the calf on her chest, she tries to protect it from the onslaught. But the KWs are determined and we see the calf take some intense head butts to the body.

These digital images were shot at 7.5 frames per second. This series shows the calf being butted by a female killer whale. Click on one of these images to see a larger version of the four photos in sequence.



Photos by Roger Wolfe

The KWs take turns in teams trying to slam into the calf or push it under the water to drown it. The mother and calf are blowing about every 15 seconds which is the whale equivalent of panting. There is one huge male KW that uncharacteristically takes part in the hunt; typically they let the female do the work, much like African Lions. The vertical height of his dorsal fin and overall size in comparison to the females is very impressive.

We see only a bit of blood coming from one of the pectoral fins of the calf otherwise the attack appears to consist of blows and attempts at separation. The mother Gray Whale does her best, placing her body between the KWs and the calf, and she slashes the water with her flukes trying to get a shot in. On the boat we are all in awe of the spectacle we are witness to. Veteran seabird leaders Don Roberson and Steve Bailey have never seen the likes of anything like this. I fill up the card on my digital camera all too soon.



Photo by Roger Wolfe



Photo by Jeff Poklen

All of us are on the bow listening to Richard Ternullo answer questions about Killer Whales and their attack strategies. They favour this particular spot in the Monterey Bay as the deep submarine canyon comes very close to shore here. The Gray Whale mothers and calves on their northern return from the Baja lagoons like to hug the

shoreline to avoid the KWs. Sooner or later they'll have to cross over the deep water of the canyon here and the KWs know that.



Photo by Roger Wolfe

To us it looks as if the calf has virtually no chance of surviving this attack given the intensity and numbers of KWs and by the time we have arrived this has already gone on for hours. Someone asks if they ever get away and Richard tells us if the mother and calf can get into water less than 60 feet deep they have a good chance of getting away. The next question is how deep is it here? About 60 feet is the answer.

Suddenly there is a break in the action as the KWs switch teams. The team resting on the sidelines is a little slow in reasserting the attack and the mother and calf head for shore. There is a brief flurry of activity and the KWs break off the attack and take off into the bay. The mother and calf get away. How appropriate for Mother's Day! We follow the fleeing KWs for a while and have great looks at them leaping beside the boat. Just an incredible experience to savour.

*Other birds seen but not mentioned above: **BROWN PELICAN, CALIFORNIA, WESTERN** and **BONAPARTE'S GULLS** and **CASPIAN TERN**.*

Read more about the Killer Whale attack and see additional photos on [Don Roberson's website](#).

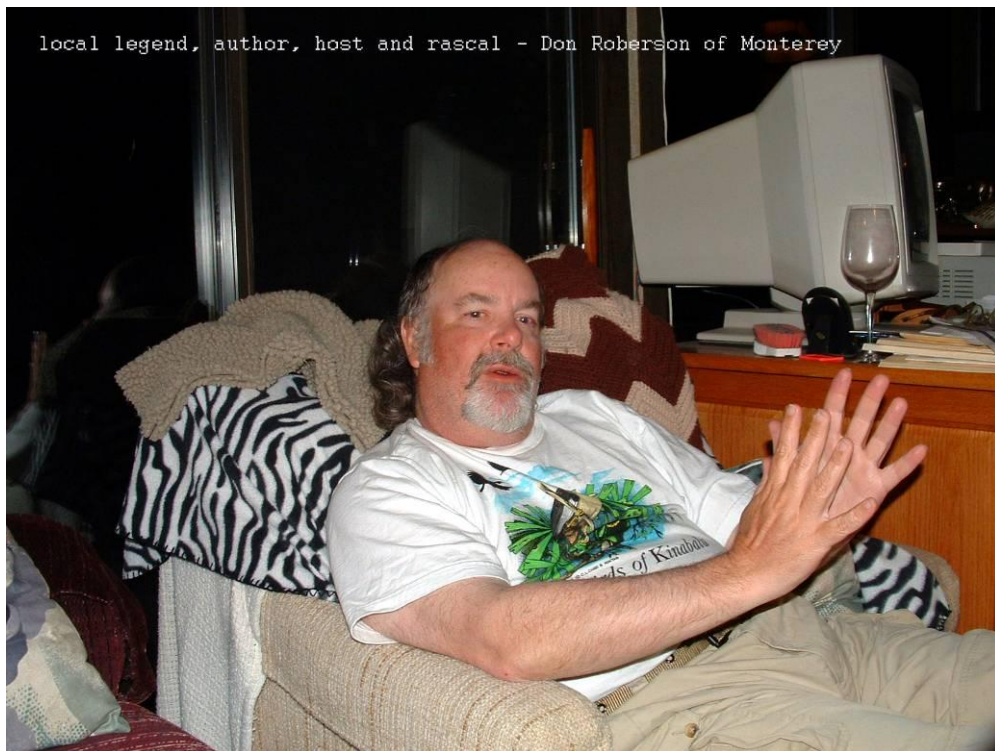
Roger Wolfe for [Monterey Seabirds](#)

Don Roberson, local seabirding legend, very kindly offered to take me birding around Monterey and to stay at his home overnight. We were accompanied by the interesting and talented Stephen Bailey, until recently the director of the local historical museum. So cream on top of one of the best days of my life was eight new land birds and a lovely dinner at a Mexican restaurant.

I learnt a number of things:

- Americans are very often extremely welcoming, spontaneous and generous
- Good food is hidden from the general population, and
- Grey whales must be the toughest creatures on earth.

I stayed at Don and Rita's place. Wine and beer was compulsory as we gas-bagged about wildlife experiences we had entertained. Not a bad day all told.



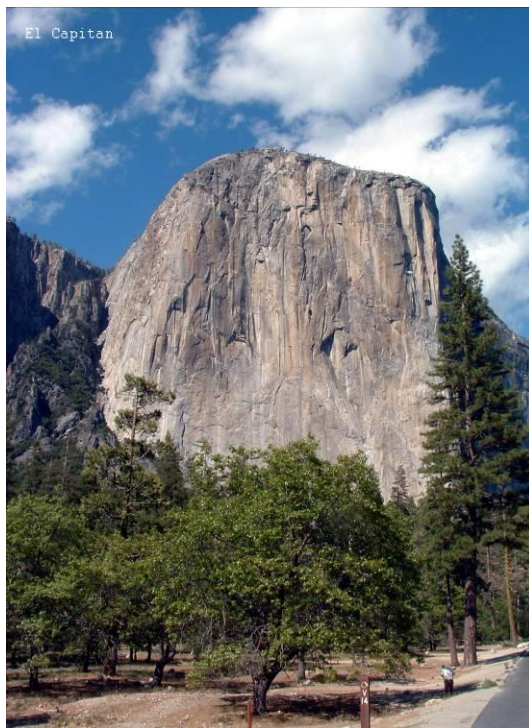
Day 19 – Monday 10th May 2004

Don showed me a few more birds and sites around Carmel before I left for Yosemite NP. I made heaps of wrong turns before arriving late in the afternoon.

Happily there was a coyote sitting in the middle of the road as I drove through the valley. Took a few pictures before making camp. The campground that I had arranged to be booked at the end of the last Ice Age was nothing like I imagined. It was much more forested. The scenery was truly stunning, as were the number of people looking at it.

It was bitterly cold at 1830 as I sipped my Coronas next to my neighbour in his 40 feet long bus resplendent with tow-along SUV, indoor garden and noisy generator.

The most bizarre thing about the large and expensive 600 site campground was that there were no showers. To have a shower you had to get in your car or take a very long walk to queue in a building that was hidden away and hardly referenced anywhere in any brochures to prevent too many people from finding it. Weird considering there was plentiful fresh water and all the other ingredients necessary for a shower block.



Day 20 – Tuesday 11th May 2004

I woke at 0430 and left shortly thereafter for the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias. I hoped to see nocturnal wildlife on the roads before anyone woke up. Incredibly there were already cars on the roads. Nevertheless I couldn't believe my luck when I spotted two adult bears off the side of the road. Unluckily the two cars that were behind me (that I had prevented from passing, for good result as it transpired!) flushed the bears as soon as I pulled over.



The first sight of the sequoias took my breath away. I was alone on the trails and spent most of the morning marvelling at these most impressive of plants. These trees were close to being immortal, one of which, the Grizzly Giant, is estimated to be 2700 years old.

A pleasant surprise was to see quite a number of birds and mammals. There were many squirrels, deer, chipmunks and woodpeckers.

After three hours without seeing a soul I began to wonder whether the site had been closed for some reason, not that I cared too much, but the absence of crowds started to puzzle me. The reason should have been obvious – like all good sheep the tourists all followed one another along the same circuiting path. As I was a good couple of hours ahead of the flock I had the place to myself until I reached the car park, which by this time started to resemble a vision from hell. I could have auctioned my parking space.

By late morning I found myself lurking at the locked gate to the road to Glacier Point. Greg, the Yosemite locksmith arrived with a set of keys. A very obliging Greg the YNP locksmith he was too as he took me to the top of the road where I spent a couple of hours birding and sightseeing.



Back to camp for some ice cold beers before adjourning to Crane Flat, a great grey owl stakeout site. A very pretty place with a large boreal meadow surrounded by pines. Lots of birds kept me amused until sunset. The owl was a no show as they so often are, so I returned to base, flushing a poorwill off the road but nothing else.

Day 21 – Wednesday 12th May 2004

Mirror Lake was my first stop after a blissful sleep in my little tent. A pretty lake but hardly “wow”. I caught the crowded shuttle bus to the visitor centre. It had been frustrating not being able to get to the park’s higher altitudes because the roads were still closed due to snow. At the visitor centre I was told that I was a bit silly because all I had to do to get to the critical wildlife zone at the 8000’ contour was ignore the signs that said ROAD CLOSED and STOP by driving around them. I couldn’t get out the door fast enough.

Just past the NO ENTRY signs partly blocking the road I spied a young bear, which I treed and studied with my camera until it started growling at me. A passing ranger questioned my sanity.

As soon as I reached the required altitude there were gorgeous yellow-throated marmots and golden-mantled ground squirrels running everywhere. A number of walking trails were taken from different points, all delightfully devoid of tourists. The ground in most places was half dry and half snow.

I decided to leave a day early from Yosemite, so I gave my site booking to a very pleasant German couple.

Day 22 – Thursday 13th May 2004

An early start looking along Tioga Road added a decreasing number of new birds. The highlight was a long-tailed weasel that I called in by imitating a bird call. It froze in front of me, as did a Douglas squirrel, so I managed nice pictures of both. The weasel is no heavier than a rat but is a skilled predator, hunting mainly voles and I guess young chipmunks. The Tolumne Grove of giant sequoias was visited. It runs a poor second to that at Mariposa.



I drove out of the park and then north through Lodi, Galt, Sacramento (which I saw more of than necessary as a consequence of getting lost) before stopping at the Stage Stop Motel at Williams. Chatted with a team of welders that must have been straight from a movie set. The Texan – “JC” – complete with ten gallon hat, five kilo belt buckle to hold his gut in, and a drawl that I’m sure was a put-on, kept saying to me “keep your powder dry”. He will never know why I laughed so much.



Dinner was at a Mexican place that was populated by a Mexican chef who spoke no English, and me. The lack of language skills were to be wasted on him anyway, as I was his last customer before the restaurant closed for good. So the food was great. I figured that's why he was going broke – he couldn't hear all the diners complain that the food was tasty. I received good service.

Day 23 – Friday 14th May 2004

I had been much looking forward to seeing my friends Allison and Scott who live in McKinleyville in northern California. Now that's a good ol' American name – McKinleyville. Anyway, I left Williams and stopped briefly at the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge just before sunrise and I'm so glad I did, seeing two great horned owls, ring-necked pheasants, hundreds of off-season ducks and geese and a few woodpeckers and other new birds. I could have spent the day there.

The road from Redding across to the coast was long and winding but there was not too much traffic and was really quite pretty.

My Chevrolet and I arrived at 1230 to the warm and ever-cheerful Allison. Scott and their flatmate Shanyin were not too far away. We went to a local headland to look for whales. Saw none but picked up a couple of birds and had a great chat with much banter and silly jokes. We then went hunting for Roosevelt elk up the coast a bit. It seems that there are no shortage of these beasts in these parts.

Dinner was at a boutique brewery at Eureka! And it was much enjoyed with good company and okay food and better than okay beer.



Day 24 – Saturday 15th May 2004

A day that rose to no great heights, but was nevertheless very relaxing. Allison had organised for us to go birding at Arcata Marsh. Scott was not originally planning to go with us but he decided otherwise as he didn't trust me alone with his girlfriend. Silly man.

The birds had made themselves a bit scarce in favour of their summer haunts. Aside from the company, a very much in child dusky wood-rat was the morning's best catch.

I had thought, after having watched too much television as a kid, that Americans were obsessed by eating "ribs". Given that I hadn't eaten any I asked my hosts where I could get some. We found some but I must say they were a tad disappointing. No sooner had we ordered eleven pigs' worth of ribs, they arrived at our table. Seems they are cooked the day (or week) before and all they had to do was count them into our shipping container.

Dinner was so much better. Scott showed his culinary skills with tasty pork chops, corn and mashed potato. The desert was spotlighting in the hills but our hearts weren't really in it. We saw two grey foxes.

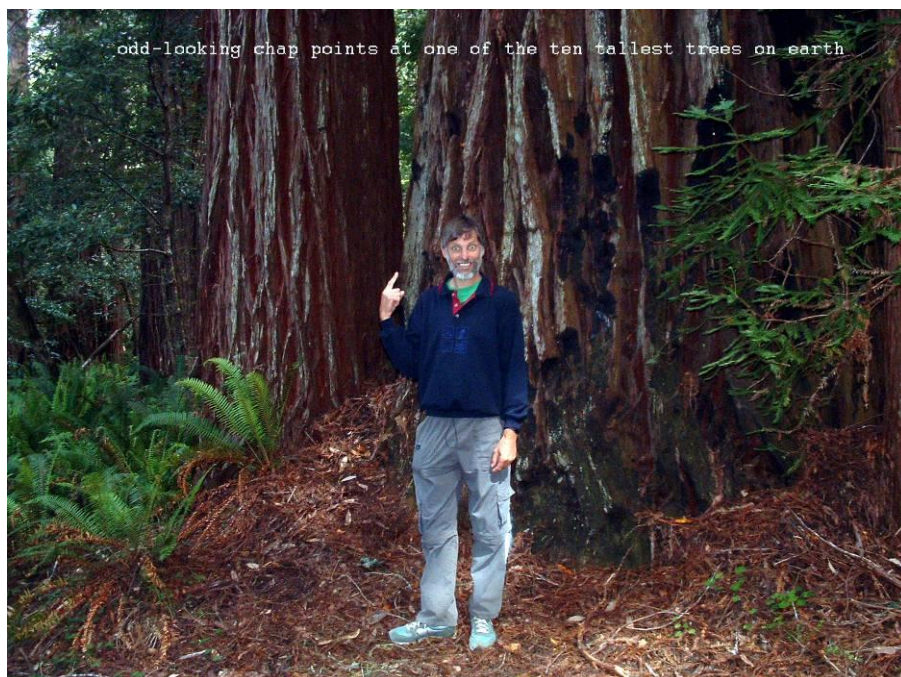
Day 25 – Sunday 16th May 2004

A superlative today with a visit to the world's tallest trees at Redwood National Park's Tall Trees Grove of California redwoods - truly stunning.



The access to the park was achieved in a rather unusual fashion. First we had to go to the park visitor centre (which is strategically located outside the main area of the park) and get a permit along with the day's combination lock numbers. There is limited parking at the sites so visitor numbers are kept very low. A refreshing change from Yosemite.

On the way back from the Tall Trees Grove we had a ruffed grouse sitting in the middle of the road – a nice bonus. After a few cameo stops to see whether the silly Australian tourist would get killed by an elk after ignoring all the warning signs we slothed about in Allison's back garden eating beer and talking rubbish.



Allison and Scott surprised me by explaining that the elk around their parts could fly. I think Scott's words were that there was an "elk flying around over there". My mind lurched back a few days when Shanyn said she saw "some whales by those trees over there". I researched the subject and uncovered a very unusual natural history for the whole area. The result of my effort is reported below:

The Flying Elk – a natural(ish) history

Pre-history and the elk wars

The earth has seen few more beautiful or enigmatic creatures than the flying elk. Whilst little has been published on this remarkable animal, it deserves its place in history as the most highly adapted of the bovines.

The story of the flying elk is shrouded in half-truths, superstition and bullshit, particularly where elks and bulls share habitat.

The Asthetic Indians had lived peacefully with the elk for millennia. That was until the great elk wars - what has become known as the “have you seen any Indians lately?” period. It is believed that the normally placid elk got a bit pissed off and engaged in a bit of prey-switching.

This, of course, threw the local ecosystem completely off-balance. Where elk and man had co-existed since prehistory now there was only the elk.

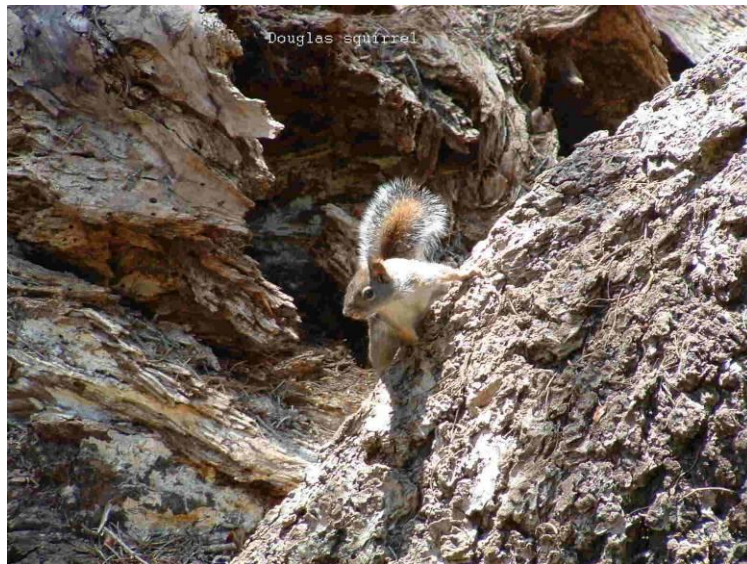


flying elk (take note of the grass)

The rise (and fall) of the squirrel

The demise of the Asthetics brought about rapid violent change in the redwood forests. Other animals quickly tried to fill the void left by the Indians. The most successful was the Douglas squirrel. Many would be surprised to learn that this

relatively small squirrel was once a 600 hundred pound monster that, in packs of up to sixty, would bring terror to the ancient forests while hunting the hapless elk. The squirrels strategy was brilliant in its simplicity – it would wait for the elk to look the other way then fall from the highest trees in the forest, which were quite high as it turns out, onto the largest of the elk herd. The other elk, understandably shocked, would be slaughtered at will by the predatory squirrels. This wasn't good for the elk - only the rapid advent of flight would save them.



aggressive Douglas squirrel

Elk take to the skies

In 1978 an old lady was collecting firewood with her dog when she witnessed an event that had hitherto only been the subject of improbable speculation. She was approaching a forest clearing when “Kevin” her dog began to whine pitifully. She (Kevin) – for she was a bitch of a dog – lay prone with her eyes glazed (having sat too close to the campfire the night before) staring at the glistening, drying wings of a herd of flying elk in the late afternoon sunshine. The old lady took out her sketch pad and scribbled a few details as elks’ wings hardened before they took to the skies for their annual dusk mating orgy. Nobody believed her at the time and they still don’t.

The elks’ wings quickly become brittle, fray at the edges, and then fall off completely well before midnight. The elk then rapidly consumes these. This is necessary to satisfy the elk’s slightly unusual digestive system, or lack thereof. It seems that the flying elk has done away with a complex and irritating digestive tract in favour of a system of direct assimilation. The fossil record shows that the flying elk has not had a stomach, intestines or anus for tens of thousands of years. Many tourists dispute this and will quickly point to grazing herds in what is now Redwood National Park. However, the competent observer will soon notice that after a herd has moved on, there is no difference to the grass cover! Incredibly, there is just as much, if not more, grass after the herd has grazed.

The miracle of flight saved the elk from the predations of the Douglas squirrel. Although, as shown, the elk only fly for a few short hours each year, the squirrels were perspicacious enough to realise that they could never fly. I refer the reader to "Bullwinkle: My Life was Rocky" (Bench press, 1985) who suggests that Rocky, one of the more celebrated flying squirrels couldn't fly to save his life. The only reason he persisted for so long, according to Bullwinkle, was that he was a fictional character in the first place! So the squirrels saw the writing on the wall and decided to leave the elk well alone.*

**the wall still exists but the writing has long since faded. Interested researchers only should contact the author for details, or alternatively, they could ring Scott or Allison on 206 579 9757 and arrange for a private viewing. A small fee is usually charged and please, no cameras.*

Flying elk today

Today the flying elk is little more than a tourist attraction. Travellers often blatantly ignore warnings, walk up to the elk pointing and waving excitedly, taking crass pictures and departing, blissfully ignorant of the elks' history and their cannibalistic mating and breeding practices which are far too horrible to recount here. Some visitors laugh at an establishment that offers elk steaks, without realising that these are steaks that the elk have acquired during one of their periodic rampages through local villages and not steaks derived from the elk themselves. Although they lack many skills that other animals take for granted, elk are generally surprisingly good business managers, and good at dressing up.

Known predators

The flying elk has no known predators. Their population is more or less stable for the reasons discussed above. The only documented fatality due to accident or misadventure to occur was in 1993 when a rare tree-dwelling whale overbalanced whilst trying to reach the outer branches of a fruiting tree and plummeted some three hundred feet onto a sleeping elk. Fortunately the CITES Cat III listed whale was uninjured. The same cannot be said of the elk, which was soon consumed by its relatives.

A little more on the tree-dwelling whale

Except for aggregations at fruiting trees or vines, these shy and beautiful animals are rarely seen. For a relatively large animal, assumed to weigh in the vicinity of 70 tons, they can be frustratingly difficult to see in their preferred habitats of orchards and vineyards. Occasionally they stray into mature pine forests, causing havoc for foresters. They are finely camouflaged to avoid detection by their primary predator, the osprey. This bird can lift 60,000 times its own body weight, so full adult tree-dwelling whales are generally safe, unless the osprey are hunting in tandem. This has never been witnessed but it can be assumed by analysing rib bones in boluses regurgitated by the birds.



lost tree-dwelling whale – these are surprisingly good swimmers

Osprey generally target the weak, the hungry or the clinically insane, and sometimes all three if they are feeding chicks. Photographers are known to gather at osprey nests to catch a glimpse of a tree-dwelling whale before it is dismembered by the voracious osprey. Amazingly the osprey also eats fish.



hunting osprey

Drugs

Natural history researchers in northern California often require performance-enhancing drugs to enable them to study the wildlife of this hostile but alluring region. I know I did. Thanks Scott and Allison!

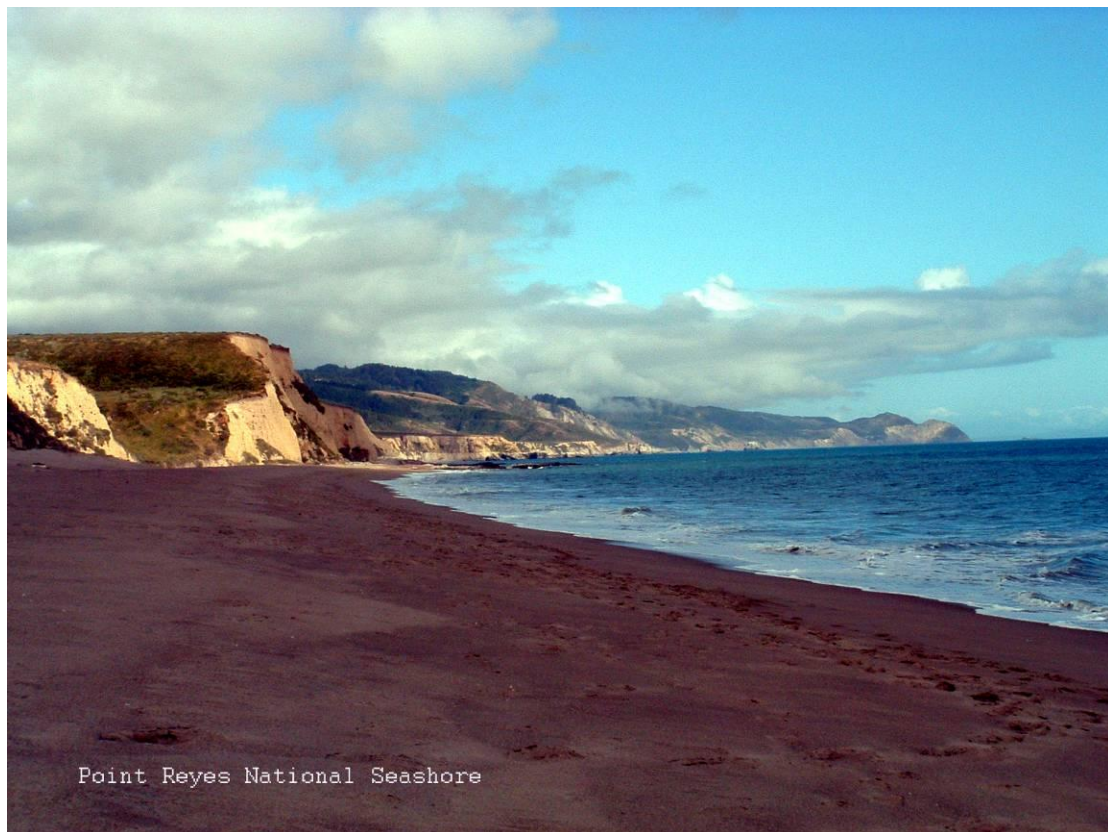
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Day 26 – Monday 17th May 2004

Sadly I had to leave my friends (*who in 2008 spent the first part of their honeymoon in our home in Sydney*) and make the long journey south to Point Reyes National Seashore. I was a bit miserable to leave Allison but all the new scenery and the kind of car radio music that is made only for those radio stations with no coverage kept me awake.

After booking a campsite at Point Reyes I went in search of the local elephant seal colony. These things are large but not very interesting. My campsite was located at the end of a two mile hike from a car park. I had the delightful company of four students from Penn State University who were on a road trip. We enjoyed each other's company as we sat by a fire on the beach. These two "couples" were charming, intelligent (even if they still didn't believe there were no raccoons in Oz – what do you do for varmints?, they asked), and very happy to chat with a slightly depressed middle aged collection of contradictions.

A short spotlighting session illustrated that I was camped in raccoon heaven. One even came into my open tent at night judging by the dirty footprints it left everywhere.



Day 27 – Tuesday 18th May 2004

The hike back to the car produced a bobcat, brush rabbits and so many quail it looked like a biblical plague.

I drove to Monterey via the Golden Gate Bridge, which warranted a short stop and photo shoot.

There were an amazing number of beggars on the streets of San Francisco, mostly middle class and camped at every set of traffic signals. On the subject of traffic signals, they displayed no co-ordination whatsoever.

I checked into the Steinbeck Lodge at Monterey (\$US53.50), with a good room and few people. I went to the wharf to book a whale watch boat trip for the next morning and purchase some alcohol, which I consumed with relish (not tomato relish, but beer relish).

Day 28 – Wednesday 19th May 2004

A fully loaded ship went to sea on a calm start to the morning. What I didn't know is that I was just about the only person paying for the cruise – something of a change. Word had been sent that a rent-a-crowd was needed. A CBS film crew was on board to film the work of Nancy Black, local marine biologist. This was a mixed blessing due to the sighting of a pair of humpback whales feeding on anchovies. So that was it for searching for anything else. We had a few reasonable views of harbour porpoises but that was all.

I calculated that this four week holiday had cost me \$A4000. Good value.



Don Roberson picked me up from the hotel and we dined at a local seafood place, which had excellent food. We had sand dabs, whatever the hell they are.

Day 29 – Thursday 20th May 2004

I drove to Los Angeles via Malibu. I booked into the Adventure Hotel, which was fun and very close to the car hire place. Walking the streets was interesting. Lots of ethnic folk with smiles on their faces. The USA – at least the parts I saw – seemed more racially peaceful than back home.

I gravitated towards the hotel bar and drank lots of beer and chatted to tourists. I even showed some young boys how to chat to girls. They were amazed. One young lady even said I was a real gentleman!! True, of course. They had all sorts of promotions

at this hotel. One was 99c beer with free food. I thought beer *was* food? Anyway the food was the same quality as the beer and the beer was Budweiser. So the beer I drank cost more than 99c.

Another Aussie, Damien, and I held court telling jokes and keeping everyone else entertained. Now this doesn't often happen, but perfect strangers kept buying us drinks. Normally the loud re-telling of ethnic jokes would have you arrested, but not round these parts, apparently.

So the holiday effectively ended with a moderate degree of intoxication, but hey, it's got to be a good week when you are described as a legend and a gentleman! Now all I had to do was to get some real talent, and drop the bullshit. Not much chance of that.

Steve Anyon-Smith
67 Wattle Road
Jannali 2226 NSW
Australia

steveas@tpg.com.au

1st January 2006

Birds seen (and in one case – heard)

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna autumnalis*
Fulvous Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna bicolor*
Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*
Snow Goose *Chen caerulescens*
Ross's Goose *Chen rossii*
Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*
Wood Duck *Aix sponsa*
Gadwall *Anas strepera*
American Wigeon *Anas americana*
Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*
Mottled Duck *Anas fulvigula*
Blue-winged Teal *Anas discors*
Cinnamon Teal *Anas cyanoptera*
Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*
Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*
Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca*
Redhead *Aythya americana*
Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris*
Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*
Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*
Surf Scoter *Melanitta perspicillata*
White-winged Scoter *Melanitta fusca*
Bufflehead *Bucephala albeola*
Common Merganser *Mergus merganser*
Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis*
Plain Chachalaca *Ortalis vetula*
Ring-necked Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*
Ruffed Grouse *Bonasa umbellus*
Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo*
Mountain Quail *Oreortyx pictus*
Scaled Quail *Callipepla squamata*
California Quail *Callipepla californica*
Gambel's Quail *Callipepla gambelii*
Northern Bobwhite *Colinus virginianus*
Pacific Loon *Gavia pacifica*
Common Loon *Gavia immer*
Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps*
Eared Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*
Western Grebe *Aechmophorus occidentalis*
Black-footed Albatross *Phoebastria nigripes*
Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*
Pink-footed Shearwater *Puffinus creatopus*
Flesh-footed Shearwater *Puffinus carneipes*
Sooty Shearwater *Puffinus griseus*
American White Pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*
Brown Pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*
Brandt's Cormorant *Phalacrocorax penicillatus*
Neotropic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax brasilianus*

Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus*
Pelagic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pelagicus*
Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens*
American Bittern *Botaurus lentiginosus*
Least Bittern *Ixobrychus exilis*
Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*
Great Egret *Ardea alba*
Snowy Egret *Egretta thula*
Little Blue Heron *Egretta caerulea*
Tricolored Heron *Egretta tricolor*
Reddish Egret *Egretta rufescens*
Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*
Green Heron *Butorides virescens*
Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron *Nyctanassa violacea*
White Ibis *Eudocimus albus*
Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*
White-faced Ibis *Plegadis chihi*
Roseate Spoonbill *Ajaia ajaja*
Black Vulture *Coragyps atratus*
Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*
Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*
White-tailed Kite *Elanus leucurus*
Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*
Northern Harrier *Circus cyaneus*
Cooper's Hawk *Accipiter cooperii*
Gray Hawk *Asturina nitida*
Harris's Hawk *Parabuteo unicinctus*
Red-shouldered Hawk *Buteo lineatus*
Broad-winged Hawk *Buteo platypterus*
Swainson's Hawk *Buteo swainsoni*
White-tailed Hawk *Buteo albicaudatus*
Zone-tailed Hawk *Buteo albonotatus*
Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*
Ferruginous Hawk *Buteo regalis*
Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*
Crested Caracara *Caracara cheriway*
American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*
Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*
Clapper Rail *Rallus longirostris*
King Rail *Rallus elegans*
Sora *Porzana carolina*
Purple Gallinule *Porphyrio martinica*
Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*
American Coot *Fulica americana*
Black-bellied Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*
Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus*
Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus*
American Oystercatcher *Haematopus palliatus*
Black Oystercatcher *Haematopus bachmani*

Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus*
American Avocet *Recurvirostra americana*
Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca*
Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*
Willet *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*
Wandering Tattler *Heteroscelus incanus*
Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularia*
Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*
Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica*
Marbled Godwit *Limosa fedoa*
Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*
Sanderling *Calidris alba*
Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla*
Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri*
Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla*
Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*
Dunlin *Calidris alpina*
Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis*
Short-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus griseus*
Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus*
Wilson's Phalarope *Phalaropus tricolor*
Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*
Red Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicarius*
Laughing Gull *Larus atricilla*
Franklin's Gull *Larus pipixcan*
Bonaparte's Gull *Larus philadelphia*
Heermann's Gull *Larus heermanni*
Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*
California Gull *Larus californicus*
Western Gull *Larus occidentalis*
Glaucous-winged Gull *Larus glaucescens*
Gull-billed Tern *Sterna nilotica*
Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*
Royal Tern *Sterna maxima*
Forster's Tern *Sterna forsteri*
Least Tern *Sterna antillarum*
Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*
Black Skimmer *Rynchops niger*
Common Murre *Uria aalge*
Pigeon Guillemot *Cephus columba*
Cassin's Auklet *Ptychoramphus aleuticus*
Rhinoceros Auklet *Cerorhinca monocerata*
Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*
Band-tailed Pigeon *Patagioenas fasciata*
White-winged Dove *Zenaida asiatica*
Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*
Inca Dove *Columbina inca*
White-tipped Dove *Leptotila verreauxi*
Yellow-billed Cuckoo *Coccyzus americanus*
Greater Roadrunner *Geococcyx californianus*

Great Horned Owl *Bubo virginianus*
Elf Owl *Micrathene whitneyi*
Burrowing Owl *Athene cunicularia*
Spotted Owl *Strix occidentalis*
Lesser Nighthawk *Chordeiles acutipennis*
Common Nighthawk *Chordeiles minor*
Common Pauraque *Nyctidromus albicollis*
Common Poorwill *Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*
Buff-collared Nightjar *Caprimulgus ridgwayi*
Chimney Swift *Chaetura pelagica*
Vaux's Swift *Chaetura vauxi*
White-throated Swift *Aeronautes saxatalis*
Broad-billed Hummingbird *Cynanthus latirostris*
Buff-bellied Hummingbird *Amazilia yucatanensis*
Violet-crowned Hummingbird *Amazilia violiceps*
Blue-throated Hummingbird *Lampornis clemenciae*
Magnificent Hummingbird *Eugenes fulgens*
Ruby-throated Hummingbird *Archilochus colubris*
Black-chinned Hummingbird *Archilochus alexandri*
Anna's Hummingbird *Calypte anna*
Costa's Hummingbird *Calypte costae*
Broad-tailed Hummingbird *Selasphorus platycercus*
Allen's Hummingbird *Selasphorus sasin*
Elegant Trogon *Trogon elegans*
Ringed Kingfisher *Ceryle torquata*
Belted Kingfisher *Ceryle alcyon*
Green Kingfisher *Chloroceryle americana*
Red-headed Woodpecker *Melanerpes erythrocephalus*
Acorn Woodpecker *Melanerpes formicivorus*
Gila Woodpecker *Melanerpes uropygialis*
Golden-fronted Woodpecker *Melanerpes aurifrons*
Red-bellied Woodpecker *Melanerpes carolinus*
Williamson's Sapsucker *Sphyrapicus thyroideus*
Red-breasted Sapsucker *Sphyrapicus ruber*
Ladder-backed Woodpecker *Picoides scalaris*
Nuttall's Woodpecker *Picoides nuttallii*
Downy Woodpecker *Picoides pubescens*
Hairy Woodpecker *Picoides villosus*
Arizona Woodpecker *Picoides arizonae*
White-headed Woodpecker *Picoides albolarvatus*
Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus*
Pileated Woodpecker *Dryocopus pileatus*
Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet *Camptostoma imberbe*
Olive-sided Flycatcher *Contopus cooperi*
Greater Pewee *Contopus pertinax*
Western Wood-Pewee *Contopus sordidulus*
Eastern Wood-Pewee *Contopus virens*
Acadian Flycatcher *Empidonax virescens*
Hammond's Flycatcher *Empidonax hammondi*
Dusky Flycatcher *Empidonax oberholseri*

Pacific-slope Flycatcher *Empidonax difficilis*
Cordilleran Flycatcher *Empidonax occidentalis*
Buff-breasted Flycatcher *Empidonax fulvifrons*
Black Phoebe *Sayornis nigricans*
Say's Phoebe *Sayornis saya*
Vermilion Flycatcher *Pyrocephalus rubinus*
Dusky-capped Flycatcher *Myiarchus tuberculifer*
Ash-throated Flycatcher *Myiarchus cinerascens*
Great Crested Flycatcher *Myiarchus crinitus*
Brown-crested Flycatcher *Myiarchus tyrannulus*
Tropical Kingbird *Tyrannus melancholicus*
Couch's Kingbird *Tyrannus couchii*
Cassin's Kingbird *Tyrannus vociferans*
Western Kingbird *Tyrannus verticalis*
Eastern Kingbird *Tyrannus tyrannus*
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher *Tyrannus forficatus*
Loggerhead Shrike *Lanius ludovicianus*
White-eyed Vireo *Vireo griseus*
Bell's Vireo *Vireo bellii*
Black-capped Vireo *Vireo atricapilla*
Gray Vireo *Vireo vicinior*
Yellow-throated Vireo *Vireo flavifrons*
Plumbeous Vireo *Vireo plumbeus*
Cassin's Vireo *Vireo cassinii*
Blue-headed Vireo *Vireo solitarius*
Warbling Vireo *Vireo gilvus*
Philadelphia Vireo *Vireo philadelphicus*
Red-eyed Vireo *Vireo olivaceus*
Steller's Jay *Cyanocitta stelleri*
Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata*
Green Jay *Cyanocorax yncas*
Western Scrub-Jay *Aphelocoma californica*
Mexican Jay *Aphelocoma ultramarina*
Yellow-billed Magpie *Pica nuttalli*
American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*
Chihuahuan Raven *Corvus cryptoleucus*
Common Raven *Corvus corax*
Purple Martin *Progne subis*
Tree Swallow *Tachycineta bicolor*
Violet-green Swallow *Tachycineta thalassina*
Northern Rough-winged Swallow *Stelgidopteryx serripennis*
Bank Swallow *Riparia riparia*
Cliff Swallow *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*
Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*
Carolina Chickadee *Poecile carolinensis*
Mountain Chickadee *Poecile gambeli*
Bridled Titmouse *Baeolophus wollweberi*
Tufted Titmouse *Baeolophus bicolor*
Black-crested Titmouse *Baeolophus atricristatus*
Verdin *Auriparus flaviceps*

Bushtit *Psaltriparus minimus*
Red-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta canadensis*
White-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta carolinensis*
Pygmy Nuthatch *Sitta pygmaea*
Brown-headed Nuthatch *Sitta pusilla*
Brown Creeper *Certhia americana*
Cactus Wren *Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*
Carolina Wren *Thryothorus ludovicianus*
Bewick's Wren *Thryomanes bewickii*
House Wren *Troglodytes aedon*
Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*
Sedge Wren *Cistothorus platensis*
Marsh Wren *Cistothorus palustris*
Golden-crowned Kinglet *Regulus satrapa*
Ruby-crowned Kinglet *Regulus calendula*
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher *Poliophtila caerulea*
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher *Poliophtila melanura*
Black-capped Gnatcatcher *Poliophtila nigriceps*
Eastern Bluebird *Sialia sialis*
Western Bluebird *Sialia mexicana*
Townsend's Solitaire *Myadestes townsendi*
Veery *Catharus fuscescens*
Gray-cheeked Thrush *Catharus minimus*
Swainson's Thrush *Catharus ustulatus*
Clay-colored Robin *Turdus grayi*
American Robin *Turdus migratorius*
Varied Thrush *Ixoreus naevius*
Wrentit *Chamaea fasciata*
Gray Catbird *Dumetella carolinensis*
Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos*
Long-billed Thrasher *Toxostoma longirostre*
Curve-billed Thrasher *Toxostoma curvirostre*
Crissal Thrasher *Toxostoma crissale*
European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*⁷
Cedar Waxwing *Bombycilla cedrorum*
Olive Warbler *Peucedramus taeniatus*
Blue-winged Warbler *Vermivora pinus*
Golden-winged Warbler *Vermivora chrysoptera*
Tennessee Warbler *Vermivora peregrina*
Orange-crowned Warbler *Vermivora celata*
Nashville Warbler *Vermivora ruficapilla*
Lucy's Warbler *Vermivora luciae*
Northern Parula *Parula americana*
Yellow Warbler *Dendroica petechia*
Chestnut-sided Warbler *Dendroica pensylvanica*
Magnolia Warbler *Dendroica magnolia*
Cape May Warbler *Dendroica tigrina*
Black-throated Blue Warbler *Dendroica caerulescens*
Yellow-rumped Warbler *Dendroica coronata*
Black-throated Gray Warbler *Dendroica nigrescens*

Golden-cheeked Warbler *Dendroica chrysoparia*
Black-throated Green Warbler *Dendroica virens*
Townsend's Warbler *Dendroica townsendi*
Hermit Warbler *Dendroica occidentalis*
Blackburnian Warbler *Dendroica fusca*
Grace's Warbler *Dendroica graciae*
Palm Warbler *Dendroica palmarum*
Bay-breasted Warbler *Dendroica castanea*
Blackpoll Warbler *Dendroica striata*
Cerulean Warbler *Dendroica cerulea*
Black-and-white Warbler *Mniotilta varia*
American Redstart *Setophaga ruticilla*
Prothonotary Warbler *Protonotaria citrea*
Ovenbird *Seiurus aurocapilla*
Northern Waterthrush *Seiurus noveboracensis*
Kentucky Warbler *Oporornis formosus*
MacGillivray's Warbler *Oporornis tolmiei*
Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*
Wilson's Warbler *Wilsonia pusilla*
Painted Redstart *Myioborus pictus*
Yellow-breasted Chat *Icteria virens*
Hepatic Tanager *Piranga flava*
Summer Tanager *Piranga rubra*
Western Tanager *Piranga ludoviciana*
Olive Sparrow *Arremonops rufivirgatus*
Green-tailed Towhee *Pipilo chlorurus*
Spotted Towhee *Pipilo maculatus*
Canyon Towhee *Pipilo fuscus*
California Towhee *Pipilo crissalis*
Abert's Towhee *Pipilo aberti*
Rufous-winged Sparrow *Aimophila carpalis*
Rufous-crowned Sparrow *Aimophila ruficeps*
Chipping Sparrow *Spizella passerina*
Clay-colored Sparrow *Spizella pallida*
Brewer's Sparrow *Spizella breweri*
Lark Sparrow *Chondestes grammacus*
Black-throated Sparrow *Amphispiza bilineata*
Savannah Sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis*
Song Sparrow *Melospiza melodia*
Lincoln's Sparrow *Melospiza lincolnii*
Swamp Sparrow *Melospiza georgiana*
White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys*
Dark-eyed Junco *Junco hyemalis*
Yellow-eyed Junco *Junco phaeonotus*
Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis*
Pyrrhuloxia *Cardinalis sinuatus*
Rose-breasted Grosbeak *Pheucticus ludovicianus*
Black-headed Grosbeak *Pheucticus melanocephalus*
Blue Grosbeak *Passerina caerulea*
Lazuli Bunting *Passerina amoena*

Indigo Bunting *Passerina cyanea*
Painted Bunting *Passerina ciris*
Dickcissel *Spiza americana*
Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*
Tricolored Blackbird *Agelaius tricolor*
Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*
Western Meadowlark *Sturnella neglecta*
Yellow-headed Blackbird *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*
Brewer's Blackbird *Euphagus cyanocephalus*
Common Grackle *Quiscalus quiscula*
Boat-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus major*
Great-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus mexicanus*
Bronzed Cowbird *Molothrus aeneus*
Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater*
Orchard Oriole *Icterus spurius*
Hooded Oriole *Icterus cucullatus*
Bullock's Oriole *Icterus bullockii*
Altamira Oriole *Icterus gularis*
Baltimore Oriole *Icterus galbula*
Scott's Oriole *Icterus parisorum*
Purple Finch *Carpodacus purpureus*
Cassin's Finch *Carpodacus cassinii*
House Finch *Carpodacus mexicanus*
Pine Siskin *Carduelis pinus*
Lesser Goldfinch *Carduelis psaltria*
Lawrence's Goldfinch *Carduelis lawrencei*
American Goldfinch *Carduelis tristis*
House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

376 seen

304 new to me

Mammals seen (in order of first sighting)

Round-tailed ground squirrel – Phoenix desert botanic garden
Spotted ground squirrel - Phoenix desert botanic garden
Harris's antelope squirrel - Phoenix desert botanic garden
Eastern cottontail – common
Musk rat – Gilbert (Phoenix) sewage farm
Black-tailed jackrabbit – common
Arizona grey squirrel – Madera Canyon
Southern pocket gopher - Madera Canyon
White-tailed deer – common
Rock squirrel – common
Hispid cotton rat – common
Swamp rabbit – High Island reserve
Eastern grey squirrel – common
Raccoon – common

Bobcat – Beltsen SP and Point Reyes National Seashore
Eastern fox squirrel – common
Collared peccary – Beltsen State Park
Nine-banded armadillo – Cancon, Texas
Striped skunk – Cancon
California ground squirrel – common
Grey whale – common
Harbour seal – common
Sea otter – common at Monterey Bay
California sea lion – common
Pacific white-sided dolphin – Monterey Bay
Humpback whale – Monterey Bay
Risso's dolphin – Monterey Bay
Blue whale – Monterey Bay
Killer whale – Monterey Bay
Mule deer – common
Coyote – Yosemite NP
Black bear - Yosemite NP
Douglas's squirrel - Yosemite NP
Allen's chipmunk - Yosemite NP
Yellow-pine chipmunk - Yosemite NP
Long-eared chipmunk - Yosemite NP
Deer mouse - Yosemite NP
Golden-mantled ground squirrel - Yosemite NP
Yellow-bellied marmot - Yosemite NP
Least chipmunk - Yosemite NP
Long-tailed weasel - Yosemite NP
Roosevelt elk – Redwood NP
Dusky-footed woodrat – Arcata
Grey fox – Arcata
Northern elephant seal – Point Reyes NS
Brush rabbit – Point Reyes NS
Harbour porpoise – Monterey Bay

46 seen

43 new to me