

Southern California, Arizona and a small bit of Nevada

Dermot Hughes & Colin Reid

18.4.18 – 17.5.18

Summary: Two birders, Dermot (Mr H) from Belfast, Northern Ireland and myself from Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. We had planned this trip for last year, but, due to an unforeseen accident, had had to put it off for twelve months. We're both 63 and been friends for 50 years and have birded together on and off during that time. Mr H has a background in conservation and eco-consultation. I'm just a birder.

We met in the airport at Los Angeles and headed south. We stopped off at two locations on the coast, before heading inland towards the Salton Sea. Moving on from there we stopped in southeast Arizona exploring country around Patagonia, Sierra Vista and, eventually, Portal.

Heading north we stopped at Flagstaff, the Grand Canyon and spent a couple of days around Las Vegas before heading back into California and the Kern region. After a few days there we returned to the coast at Monterey Bay. Our trip ended after we drove down the coast to Morro Bay and back to Los Angeles.

Mr H had visited the eastern states some years ago and so had a good grounding in some of the warbler species. My only prior experience in the States was in 1980 when I drove from New York to LA on my way to a new life in Australia. It hadn't been a birding trip back then and, although I had seen a few species, I decided to start this trip 'clean'.

Our final haul on this 30 day trip was 24,565 birds, **293 species** and I logged **244 lifers**.

Preparation: Mr H planned the details while I did what I could to read trip reports, check species availability on E-Bird and try to familiarise myself with the birds we were most likely to encounter.

We each took a field guide – *Sibley's* for me, *National Geographic* and *Audubon's* guide for Mr H. I also had the *iBird Pro* app on my iPhone for calls and a *Mammals of North America* app, which I had picked up some time ago, as we both have an interest in all wildlife. Mr H also had a *Guide to the birds of Southern California* which proved invaluable and, during the trip, picked up a copy of a *Guide to the birds of Southeast Arizona* – also well worth having.

I registered for the E-Bird rarity reports for Arizona and California and rec'd emails every day – when wifi permitted – to check for opportunities along our route. We only chased one rarity, while in Arizona, and that was on encouragement from another birder we met – but it was interesting to see what turned up where and debate the potential.

We had agreed to camp for the most part and we believe in being 'on site' first thing in the morning without having to drive too far from accommodation – and the latter was pretty limited in southeast Arizona. Some of the sites were pre-booked, some we were unable to do that as they were allocated on a 'first-come-first-served' basis. This didn't prove to be a major hassle, although it was nice to know your site was booked and took the pressure off arriving early enough to get one. In only one instance we couldn't get a site where we had hoped, but found an alternative which actually proved to be excellent.

We used State forest campsites and commercial sites, as they presented themselves, for 20 of the 29 nights. Most of the State Forest sites were pretty basic but all had water, a picnic table and toilets of some description. Showers were not always available. All had fire pits although we never bothered using them. The sites were, generally, very acceptable and well separated for the most.

I took along a single burner stove top that came with a pot and small 'frying-pan' type thing. We found the required removable cylinder at Walmart (\$US9) and it proved to be of excellent value – providing us with coffee and tea and boiled eggs every morning. We had also brought along eating utensils, cups and so on.

However, we needed some more 'stuff', so at Walmart we purchased a pair of camp chairs (\$US5 each), a pillow for me, (\$US6) a small camping lantern (\$US7) and a washing up basin (78 cents) - more for our personal use than actually washing up.

My self-inflating sleeping mat, which I had had for years, failed after about 5 nights, but I replaced it several days later at Flagstaff.

On the southern Californian coast and in the Las Vegas area we elected for Air BnB. These proved both 'interesting' in some cases and a great relief when the temperature reached 106°F/43°C in Nevada.

Mr H arranged for a Hyundai Tucson as he thought we might need a bit of ground clearance in some areas – and as we carried a fair bit of gear and it was for a month it meant we had plenty of room. It proved to be a reliable, economical vehicle, although a little high-g geared when it came to passing truck or climbing steep hills, but did give us confidence when it came to driving unsealed tracks.

We had requested a sat-nav with the car. It was a hand-held device – a TomTom – which we could mount on the windscreen. It wasn't very efficient and eventually the battery died despite recharging it and using it connected. We fell back on my iPad and the (free) MapsMe app which does not require wifi, provides a perfectly good sat nav and is quite intelligent (You do need wifi to download the maps, so it's best to do that before you go).

We both had 10x42 binoculars, (Zeiss for Mr H, Leica for me) of course, and 'scopes (Mr H-Kowa, me-Swarovski). I use a Panasonic Lumix FZ70 – with its X60 zoom - which I find delivers excellent quality and is easy to carry and handle. I also carry a Tascam recorder for recording bird calls and a blue tooth speaker for playing them.

Driving in the States: (Just a note for those who haven't driven there before.)

Both of us come from countries where we drive on the left. Mr H had some experience in the States and Europe in driving on the 'wrong' side of the road. I have been driven on the right, but had not actually done so myself since 1980.

After a few days I took almost complete responsibility for the driving as Mr H is a better navigator and I enjoy driving more. It's fast. That's the first thing I'd note. Everyone drove at least 10 miles an hour (note miles, not kilometres) over the speed limit – especially on the highways. Even in residential areas where the limit was 25 m/hr, the general trend was 30 m/hr.

We didn't see any speed cameras, but there were a few areas where road side signs stated that the authorities would take any infringements seriously. These were normally around larger cities or towns where the traffic density was much greater. We worked on the basis that keeping up with the traffic regardless of the speed was the best way to go – if everyone is doing it, it must be OK.

The roads were well marked and signposted and, in general, in good condition. One stretch heading north from Bakersfield towards San Francisco was pretty rough but otherwise they were good. No toll roads or bridges appeared on our route.

One area which did need watching concerned merging on to a highway. The merge lane and the next exit were sometimes very close. So, while we were hurtling down the entry ramp, looking left to merge with traffic passing at 70-80 m/hr, other cars were moving right into the exit lane – the same lane we were in trying to merge left. It was challenging at times, but apart from one near rear-ender we didn't have any nasty incidents.

The 4 way Stop sign crossroad thing was a different challenge. Everyone stops, whoever reaches it first has right of way. A bit unnerving in the beginning (is it my go now?) but after a few you get used to it....

Otherwise I found driving exhilarating and enjoyed it, especially coming in to LA on the last day from the north and hammering down the highway for an hour and a half, in six lanes of traffic, everyone doing at least 70 m/hr. Wow!

Buying fuel too was a new experience. If you don't use a recognised credit or debit card you have to pay the cashier **before** you put the fuel in. If you over-estimate the amount you collect the change. It threw us the first time but after that I made the journey to and from as required.

Weather: We were prepared for generally warm weather – similar to my current home town. Mid-twenties (centigrade) during the day to mid-teens overnight. We were aware it could be colder in some locations so I'd packed thermals, gloves and beanie, just in case. We also knew the humidity in the desert areas would be low, so believed higher temperatures would not necessarily be debilitating.

In the end one of the nights we camped in Portal the temperature dropped to -3 (C) and in Las Vegas it hit 43°C (106°F) which was pretty crippling. We had good quality down sleeping bags so the low temperatures didn't worry us and we were in AirBnB accommodation in Vegas with ducted air conditioning so we were OK there too. In the Salton Sea it was a different story - the temps hit approx 40°C and we were in a trailer with no air-con – but that part of the adventure will be told in due course.

We had no rain during our trip. We did have high winds on a couple of occasions which affected birding, but in the end, not too adversely. We were told that there had been a prolonged drought, but, surprisingly to me coming from Australia, we often found fresh, running creeks in places where we thought there would be no water.

Money: As we had pre-booked and paid for most of the accommodation, it was simply food, fuel, a beer or two and personal items we needed cash for. For the non-personal items we pooled equal amounts of money and simply paid for them from that. This saved any disagreement about who pays for what and when. We might be friends for 50 years but....

We found ATMs easily, but despite having a cash card we had to pay a fee every time we withdrew money. This varied from \$US2.50 at Walmart for a withdrawal of (max) \$US300 to a \$US5 fee from Well's Fargo for a withdrawal of (I think) any amount.

We did most of our shopping at Walmart simply because it was easy to find and when we needed gas cylinders for our single burner stove top we picked up food at the same place.

Charging stuff & the Internet: I, as usual, carried a lot of electronic gear that required re-charging – a laptop, camera battery, headtorch, iPad, iPhone, iPod (for music!), blue-tooth speaker etc. I took an in-car charger with 5 USB ports and had acquired a USB charger for my camera battery which proved invaluable – especially when we were continually camping in southeast Arizona for 7 days. The centre console in the car looked like part of the Space Shuttle some days, but everything charged OK. The laptop proved a bigger problem, but I managed to get access to power supply in MacDonald's or local caf  s that allowed it and we managed to do a log every night to record the day's sightings.

I also had a universal power board with, supposedly, an adaptor plug for the states. The three pin adaptor did not fit anywhere – everything was two thin pin. Luckily I had also brought a two pin adaptor purchased in Japan earlier in the year and so could use my 2 plug, 4xUSB powerboard wherever we had mains electricity.

We didn't always have access to wifi, which was a bit annoying as I couldn't update my blog (reidcolin55@blogspot.com) every day, but again, sooner or later, we found somewhere to do that.

I bought a phone SIM card in LA airport so that I would have access to calls wherever I was (dependent on signal of course) as I was expecting the arrival of my third grandson while I was away. It cost \$US87 for a month which I thought a bit on the

expensive side, but gave me unlimited data, phone calls and txt so was probably a bargain really. I had phone signal almost everywhere we went, while Mr H relied on the sporadic wifi availability.

Anyway – enough already – onto The Trip.....

Day 1 - 18.4.18

Gulzar, the Afghani, arrived in his Uber bang on 7am and, for \$A48.22, took me to the airport, arriving at 7.30. I queued up behind about 10 other travellers and was processed quickly despite the sudden need to find my first night's address in USA. This was a surprise and I had to access my emails on my phone to provide the details. I gave them the address in Oceanside where we expect to be on Friday as I couldn't find the Huntington Beach address. I'm hoping no one at the other end recognized the difference between my ESTA visa application address and this one. However, I'll deal with that if the need arises.

We landed in LA an hour late – which didn't make much difference to me, having a day-long wait for Mr H to arrive tonight. Immigration took an hour, which was, in fact, quicker than in Cairns a few weeks ago. Customs was non-existent, just collected my bags and walked out. The bags hadn't been opened behind the scenes either – my zip ties were still in place. Unless, of course, they cut them off and replaced them.....who would know? It is Trump-land after all. Maybe I'll open them later and find stuff missing? Or someone else's stuff instead? Or drugs? Or an immigrant?

The Border agent on the desk had the Oceanside address garnered from the Virgin desk in Brisbane, but other than that there were no surprises.

There's not much at LA airport. I arrived in Tom Bradley terminal and there were a couple of small, take-away coffee places and a 7-11 (Oh Joy, memories of Japan!!) So I walked 10 minutes to Terminal 2 where Mr H was due to arrive at 18.00.

There was even less there, but it was less busy and the Starbucks at least had coffee I was familiar with. I ordered a large skinny flat white, as usual, and paid \$US7. I don't think I'll be doing that too often.

I also bought a SIM card. I don't usually bother but with the pending arrival of my third grandson, I wanted to stay available as much as possible. It cost \$US87 (including tax) at an e-Savvy shop in T2. Much more expensive than I had expected, however, one does what one has to and as I'm unsure of the availability of wifi when we're camping– mind you, I'm not sure how good phone signal will be either – I thought it best to cover the bases as much as possible.

I had seen one bird.

And, literally, one bird only.

A lifer.

From the plane as it taxied into the terminal.

An **American Crow**.

At least I think it was an American Crow. It looked pretty much like a Torresian Crow rather than a Raven so I'm going with that.

Mr H was quickly off his flight and we met at the baggage collection carousel. Greetings over we loaded his bags onto the trolley and found our way outside to the car rental shuttle stop where we were in perfect time to be collected and shuttled to the Alamo car rental. We did the self service thing and were advised to 'walk to the fourth row of cars and pick one'. By the very helpful attendant. We did and, as there were no Rav4s as ordered, chose a Tuscon. Plenty of room in the boot, auto and in perfect nick we headed out of the yard – Mr H driving – collecting our pre-ordered Sat Nav on the way.

It was a 45 minute, 38 mile drive to our first night's stay in Pearce Drive, Huntington Beach, but we safely negotiated the very busy freeway and arrived without incident in, relatively, still sane condition.

The house appeared to be a collection of separately occupied rooms with the kitchen/living area as a common area.

Sounds normal, but was a little weird with the front door unlocked and unlockable, the large bedroom with twin double beds and the huge en-suite bathroom all in slightly shabby condition.

We dragged our bags in then went out for something to eat. Taco Bell was the easiest choice and we settled for a couple of basic tacos each - nothing to write home about.

On the way 'home' we visited Albertson's grocery store and bought some breakfast stuff. Then it was a wait until hot water finally flowed, or rather trickled, from the shower head in the spa bath sized shower cubicle before crashing around 10pm.

Trip List – 1

Lifers - 1

Day 2 - 19.4.18

We were up at 6 and had oatmeal and boiled eggs for breakfast. Out to the car and two lifers on the way – **Mourning Dove** and **House Finch**. Away before 7.

We drove to **Huntington Central Park** and started birding near the café on Goldenway drive. It was a dull wet morning and we had two showers of rain that we had to take shelter from during the morning.

But that didn't stop the birds coming. Probably the biggest day's birding I have ever had.

We saw over 50 species in the park and a total of 87 for the day. 62 were lifers for me.

The list was extensive, but some highlights were:

Unexpectedly, **Cedar Waxwings** – my third Waxwing species for the year.

Great Horned Owl perched up.

Allen's (& Anna's) Hummingbirds seen brilliantly.

White-crowned, Song & Chipping Sparrows.

Vaux's and White-throated Swifts.

Red-shouldered Hawk seen really well.

Cinnamon, Blue and Green-winged Teal.

Great-tailed Grackle.

Californian Towhee.

Green Heron.

Lesser Goldfinch.

Hairy & Nuttall's Woodpeckers.

It was an incredible morning with most species confiding and easy to photograph.

At 11.30 we went for lunch and ended up at a Mexican place – Hole Mole – where we had rositas. I don't know how to describe it but it filled the space. Then it was down to the coast to **Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve** where it started all over again....

Willetts and a **Marbled Godwit.**

Forester's, Elegant, Least & Caspian Terns.

Semipalmated Plovers and **Western Sandpipers** by the dozen.

Bonaparte's, Western and Ring-billed Gulls.

White and Brown Pelicans (a bit distantly)

Savannah Sparrow.

Ruddy Ducks and a very close fly by **Turkey Vulture.**

It was pretty windy and quite cold but we stuck it out till 15.30 then headed for a nearby Walmart and bought camping chairs, cooking gas and few other bits and pieces for camping, plus a couple of microwave meals before heading home and eating the latter.

Spent the evening sorting through 1,300 photos (reduced to 359) before crashing at 23.00.

Trip List – 89

Lifers - 63

Day 3 - 20.4.18

After an almost sleepless night for me, while Mr H snored away, it was a repeat of yesterday's getting up and getting out, except we took all our stuff with us as we were now moving on to a new Air BnB. There had been a temporary concern last night that we had taken over the wrong room and someone else was coming who had been promised it (?). Anyway, it all blew over and we had stayed where we were.

Down towards the main Pacific Highway we decided to stop off at a different entrance to **Bolsa Chica** and check it out from a different angle. This proved worthwhile immediately as within 15 minutes we had our first **Black-necked Stilts**, a handful of **Short-billed Dowitchers** and a single very unexpected **Reddish Egret**. (This bird continued to be reported on the E-Bird rarity list so we were very lucky to get onto it.)

We continued on checking through the hundreds, literally, of **Western Sandpipers** and serious numbers of **Willetts**, **Marbled Godwits** and **Semipalmated Sandpipers**. A **Greater Yellowlegs** joined my lifer list before much longer, but then we had a 'break' from new birds for an hour or so....

We reached the 'end' of the long lagoon and said 'Good morning' to a passing female photographer who told us of a **Tricoloured Heron** a matter of meters away, hidden in a culvert. This was very welcome as, again, it was a bird we had not counted on.

Not long after THAT we found two **Least Sandpipers** among the Westerns at very close range.

Lots of other stuff around too, of course, **Blue-winged Teal**, **Ruddy Duck**, **Gadwall**, **Dunlin**, **Anna's Hummingbirds**, **Californian Towhees**, a very big female **Peregrine Falcon**, **Kildeer** and, on the return walk – **Western Kingbird** perched up on the fence.

Back at the car at about 10.45 and we headed south reaching **Upper Newport Bay** shortly afterwards. We drove along the southern side, a one-way road dominated by cyclists, which suited our desire for a slow passage and stopped when we saw stuff.

A pair of **Turkey Vultures** on the ground, heads showing above the low scrub. A **White-tailed Kite** hovering and looking remarkably like a Black-shouldered from home, tick, move on. A **Northern Mockingbird** singing loudly from a medium sized bush had us guessing and searching for a few minutes till we saw the sucker and just up the road from there Mr H brought us to a halt and we bailed out to the sound of a **Ridgeway's Rail** calling from right beside the road. A bit of judicious playback enticed him into the open long enough for a good, 3 meter distant, view and photos before he slunk back in to the reeds and continued to abuse all and sundry from the safety of invisibility.

We stopped again at a car park further on and had my first **Buffleheads**, 4 of them. We also had a **Slavonian** or **Horned Grebe**, **Western Grebes**, **Osprey** and small numbers of waders seen already this morning.

Right at the end of the road after a bit of cursing, driving, U-turning and parking Mr H found a pair of **Redheads** out on the water in scope view – again I logged a lifer.

It seemed it was time for a break, it was quite warm, bright and cloudless today so we found a café and indulged in a sit in the shade for 30 minutes or so before throwing ourselves back into it again.

Back to the Pacific Highway and south and we reached the north end of **Crystal Cove**. We pulled into the first parking area and stopped at the ranger's hut where he stood waiting for us. It was \$5 an hour or \$15 for a day-pass that would allow us access to all of Crystal Cove – so we paid the \$15, parked up and headed out towards the beach cliffs.

On the way we found our target bird – **Californian Gnatcatcher** – fairly easily. We also had **Costa's Hummingbird** perched up and after a bit of discussion and close scrutiny decided the Kingbirds we were seeing were **Cassin's Kingbirds**.

Overlooking the beach we scoped a flock of gulls – we didn't see much point in actually walking the beach to Pelican Pt as there were a lot of people already doing that and it seemed fairly pointless. In the gull flock we identified a number of **Californian Gulls** and further on a **Whimbrel**. **Brown Pelicans** floated along the cliff face at eye-level (strange word maybe to describe flying Pelicans but there ya are) or sat on the sea surface at some distance from the shore.

Out to sea numbers of **Divers** passed heading north. They were too distant to identify, but appeared to either Great Northern or Pacific. There were loads of **Western Grebes** out to sea too, but no seabirds as such.

We walked back to the car, eventually, checking **Bushtits** and **Californian Towhees** as we went. Just before we reached the car a perched up hummer attracted our attention and we strung it into a **Black-chinned Hummingbird** – no, it really was one!

Again before we could reach the car Mr H heard a high pitched singing which we tracked down to a **Bewick's Wren** pouring his heart out. A little bit of the ol' iPhone and he was at our feet, curiosity overcoming caution. He then sat up and declared himself the winner at full voice - brilliant!

We sat in the shade behind the toilet block in our new chairs and had some lunch while feeding grapes to a friendly **Californian Ground Squirrel**. He looked under-nourished.

Heading north again we pulled in at the last beach access parking area and started to walk down the track to the beach. A sudden burst of singing stopped us in our tracks and a **Californian Trasher** sat up on top of a bush right beside the track. Brilliant! I had just about written this thing off.

Down at the beach, nothing new, apart from a school of what looked like **Dolphins**, but had very triangular fins and I haven't been able to ID them positively yet. Mr H tried to make a **Whimbrel** fly to see its rump but it refused and just kept running away from him till he gave up.

We crossed the road and left the car in the **Crystal Cove State Park** parking lot and headed up the trail. It was 14.30, hot, clear, little breeze.

The trail wound up and up and up and we saw relatively little most of the way. Near the top a flock of at least 20 **Californian Quail** trickled across the road in ones and twos and perched up in a roadside bush. I tried really hard to get shots of the male, but only the female really obliged – things must be looking up for me!

We did have poor views of a fly-by **Spotted Towhee**, which, again was a lifer for me, but not happy with the views at this stage. We also saw several other **Californian Thrashers & Towhees**, **Bushtits**, **Vaux's** and **White-throated Swifts**, **Barn, Tree** and **Cliff Swallows**, but all in all it was a hot, dusky, 2.5 mile/4+ km walk.

Just before we reached the car a small long-tailed bird sat up and sang before darting out of sight. It re-appeared again on top of a bush and we had **Wrentit** in our sights.

We headed north still further, now only about 60 kms away from San Diego.

We stopped at **Dana Pt**, our last site for the day, grabbed a couple of large cold soft drinks from the concession stand and checked the birds on the beach at the mouth of an almost dry creek. **Californian Gulls** and **Black-headed Stilt** was all.

So, now, it was time for our accommodation in **Oceanside** and we headed straight there – well, sort of straight.....Mr H managed to take the wrong exit of the highway, not once, but twice and we had to circle back the both times with the ever patient Ms on the sat nav directing us...again. However, we did manage to get to our destination, to be met at the door by our host in a dressing gown, holding a brown chicken under her arm. The room only had one double bed, so, once we had established our friendliness did not extend to sexual favours, she provided a blow-up mattress and directed us in its inflation and coverings while feeding the chicken green leafy stuff claiming it wasn't feeling very well at present.

By now it was approaching 19.00 so we quickly headed out to get something to eat. Just down the road a Carl Jnr's appeared so we decided to give it a whirl.

I don't think we will be whirling the Carl Jnr thing again.

The burgers were a train wreck, falling apart, slipping and sliding, shit going everywhere. The fries were cold and scrappy looking. I didn't have the energy to complain so we just ate and left.

Getting fuel for the first time was our next mission. I couldn't get the pump to work, despite pressing all the right buttons – I thought. So I went in, vaguely remembering what Mr D had mentioned last week. It turned out I had to pay first, then the pump would deliver fuel but only up to the amount I gave the cashier (\$US40). If it was less she would give me change. Which is what happened. The half tank we'd used came to \$US23 (it was \$US 3.7 per gallon).

I hope it doesn't catch on at home.....

Back at chicken-land we showered, did the log and crashed. 579 photos became 141.

Day 4 - 21.4.18

We were up again at 6. Mr H dismantled his airbed before we headed down for a similar breakfast, this time courtesy of our host, including fresh eggs from aforementioned chicken's mates.

We left by 7, successfully escaping the mad chicken-woman's clutches, and headed south. We tried a lagoon area just down the road but they were doing some re-construction so we headed on.

Arrived at **Mission Canyon** late morning among the hordes of people out walking dogs, jogging, pushing prams, cycling and talking very loudly on mobile phones. It was, after all, a Saturday and the population of San Diego appeared to have migrated for the day to our chosen destination. We walked the 'Oak Loop' beside the visitor's centre but saw very little. We did have a nicely perched up **Cooper's Hawk**, **Bushtit**, **Wrentit**, **Lesser Goldfinch** and a **Californian Thrasher** and a couple of **Anna's Hummingbirds** but not much else.

You know things are good when it's 'just a couple of Hummingbirds'.....

Near the end in the distance we had our first **Western Scrub Jay**

The canyon road could be driven one way and so we did, stopping at pull-ins to check likely spots. At one spot we had **Townsend's** and **Wilson's Warblers** and a **Blue-gray Gnatcatcher** – really cute.

Stopping at the **Old Mission Dam** we managed a car park as someone was leaving and walked down through the barbeque area to the pond's edge. It was crazy busy with kids everywhere and adults talking at the top of their voices. However, Mr H managed to hear a **(Least) Bell's Vireo** on the other side and we eventually spotted it. This was a good tick, although not much to look at compared to the warblers.

We decided to cut our losses and headed off to the nearest shopping centre to stock up with food for the coming camp. Coffee in Macker's seemed a nice option when we finished shopping and we repaired there for an hour or so.

Heading east we got to our night's destination around 13.00 - **Cuyamaca Rancho State Park – Paso Picachup** campsite.

While Mr H sorted out the booking I picked up **Acorn Woodpecker** and **Yellow Warblers** in the car park. This was looking good!

And it proved to be so – the rest of the day turned into a regular tick-fest.

As we set up camp in a very pleasant campsite (no 83) a pair of **Steller's Jays**, a **Dark-eyed Junco**, **Western Bluebirds** and an **Oak Titmouse** kept us company. We had **White-breasted** and **Red-breasted Nuthatch** as we relaxed – although I didn't get onto the latter. **Nuttall's** and **Acorn Woodpeckers** flew through and a **Mountain Chickadee** put in an appearance.

We went for a walk to avoid the screaming crowds of campers and picked up **Violet-green Swallows**, **Nashville Warbler**.

American Robins, **House Wrens**, **Spotted Towhee**, **Turkey Vulture**, **Western Scrub Jay**, **Hermit Warbler**, **Ash-throated Flycatcher**, **Northern Flicker**, **Yellow-rumped Warblers**, **Bewick's Wren**, **Orange-crowned Warblers**, **Bushtits**, **Hooded Oriole**, a stunning male **Black-headed Grosbeak** (I do like Grosbeaks) and **Band-tailed Pigeon**.

Our biggest surprise was a dowdy looking female sparrow on the road above our campsite turned into two **Golden-crowned Sparrows**. A bird we had not really expected, it being a winter visitor to this area and, we believed, would be long gone. Further along while checking out the 6 **Acorn Woodpeckers**, **Oak Titmouse**, **Dark-eyed Junco** and **American Robin** on the road Mr H picked up **Purple Finches** in the trees above – at least 5 females, no male unfortunately.

Really pleased with our 'haul' we returned to camp and sat out the remaining daylight hour doing the log, sorting photos and having a dinner of 2 minute noodles.

After dark it was pretty chilly and we were sitting hunched up in jackets and fleeces. We decided to go for a walk down the road, out of the campsite away from the hordes.

We didn't see anything – only heard a Fox barking – but when we returned it was almost 21.00 so we tidied up and crawled into bed for the first night's camping.

Trip list – 136

Lifers – 106

Day 5 - 21.4.18

We went for a drive today around the hills.

First stop along the road on the way into the **Silvermine** we had a scattered flock of about 20 **Wild Turkeys**. A few **Mule Deer** in the background and a distant **Northern Flicker**. It was \$US10 to park and stay so we left.

Back on the road and an area of grassland produced **Western Meadowlark** – a beautiful big bird – for a lark. While checking one out in the scope a large drifting shape in the background turned into a distant **Bald Eagle**. Not the best view, but tickable.

Further on a flock of **Brewer's Blackbirds** stopped us again and we picked up **Lark Sparrow** as a bonus bird along with our second pair of **Great-tailed Grackles**, **Song Sparrows**, **Yellow-rumped Warblers**, **Ruddy Duck** and **Kildeer**.

Turning off we headed uphill towards **Mt Laguna** on the Sunrise Highway. Our next stop in open grassland produced **Horned Larks**. Continuing on we pulled in outside **La Cima Conservation Park** intending to walk in, however, quickly realized it was a prison as well, so instead went into the fields across the road and found **Western Tanagers**, **Hooded Orioles** and, among other previously seen stuff – a **Black-throated Gray Warbler**. Back at the road and a **Hermit Thrush** showed briefly before we moved on.

Another random stop and another lifer - on an overlook before the trees we pulled in and Mr H pulled a distant **Mountain Quail** calling from atop a rock on the other side of the valley.

The **Pioneer Mail Trailhead** carpark at the **Cleveland National Forest** showed potential so we stopped there too.

We didn't pay the parking fee figuring we'd leave quickly if the ranger appeared and, as we weren't 'leaving' the car, we didn't feel we needed to have the required pass displayed.

In the next hour in the picnic area we found **Cassin's Vireo**, **Olive-sided Flycatcher**, another **Black-throated Gray warbler**, **Purple Finches** (a male this time with half a dozen females) **Hermit**, **Wilson's**, **Yellow-rumped & Townsend's Warblers**, **Dark-eyed Juncos**, **Oak Titmouses**, more **Rufous-crowned Sparrows** and a **female Black-headed Grosbeak**.

Up to this point Mr H had been driving, now he suggested I might like a turn.

Ooookay, let's see how this goes.

On to the visitor's centre and trading post type shop at 6,000 feet where we stopped for coffee and Mr H bought a hat. We had a pair of **White-breasted Nuthatches** outside the toilet block.

We stopped again at the **Woody campsite** entrance and walked a bit for not very much – **Mountain Chickadee**, **Nuttall's & Acorn Woodpeckers** and a few other bits and pieces.

Down to the highway and before we could get there.....I'm on the wrong side of the road.....No drama, but I was so trying to avoid doing it. I was annoyed with myself.

We headed up **Kitchen Road** which, had it gone through, would bring us back to the top of Mt Laguna, but 5 kms in the road was closed – apparently to stop people smuggling.

However, we did have great views of **Rock Wren** along the road thanks to a bit of playback and as we returned back down stopped at a likely spot.

Mr H's ears told him there was a couple of potential harder-to-get-species up the hill. So we set off up the rocky, cactus-strewn, prickly scrub, almost vertical, hillside in the sun and heat. Eventually we got to a spot where we had a bit of a view and our endeavours were rewarded with fleeting glimpses of a continuously calling **Grey Vireo** and better, but distant views of **Black-chinned Sparrow**. Both good birds to get here. Oh, and a **Scott's Oriole** put in a brief visit while we waited.

We decided we had done enough today and so headed back towards our campsite. We passed it and went on to a restaurant where we sat on the verandah beside a fishing lake and watched **Brewer's Blackbirds** while consuming chicken potpie and salad (\$US40, including tip). Then it was back to the campsite for a rest.

The place was almost empty, all the weekend campers having departed. I went to the toilet and realized there was a power point for electric shavers, so.....grabbed the laptop, sat on the seat, plugged in and re-charged while I wrote up my notes.

We went down the road to the Trout Pond Trailhead and walked in looking for Grasshopper Sparrow in the surrounding grassland, but without success. We did see a **Greater White-fronted Goose** along with the **Canada Geese** – not really sure if it is the genuine article, but added it to the overall list anyway.

Had dinner and sat it out until 21.00. Quite cold with a westerly wind blowing hard. Beanie and gloves put to use, but once in the tent, warm as toast in my down sleeping bag.

Trip list – 153

Lifers – 122

Day 6 - 23.4.18

Packed up in a cool morning – the wind blew all night and the tents flapped but survived. Had breakfast and were on the road by 6.45.

Drove through the mountains and canyons to **Anza Borrego Desert Park in Berrego Springs** where we went to a cross roads spot reputedly good for Crissal Thrasher. We thrashed the place but didn't find any hint of Crissal's. we did have our first **White-winged Doves** and **Black-throated Sparrow**, **Black-throated Gray Warbler** again, **Northern Mockingbird**, **Mourning Doves**, **Band-tailed Pigeons** and a couple of previously seen warblers.

Back to town and the visitor's centre. We birded the immediate surrounds getting plenty of **Verdin**, **Cactus Wren** really well, **Warbling Vireo** which took some work to ID, more **Black-throated Sparrows**, **Ash-throated Flycatchers**, and a **MacGilvray's Warbler**.

I asked in the visitor centre what the small stripped 'chipmunks' were but they didn't have a clue. Meeting a female ranger outside later I asked again and she identified them as **White-tailed Antelope Ground Squirrels**. I didn't manage to get any photos as the little buggers kept disappearing. There were also **Desert Cottontails** hiding in the bush.

Leaving the centre we went back into town and had a coffee while Mr H posted a birthday card.

We tried another place for Crissal's but again no luck – just an **Anna's Hummingbird**. Mr H had a **Black-footed Jackrabbit** and we saw a lot of metal sculptures representing dinosaurs – I think the desert heat must have got to someone.

Then we headed to another spot, supposedly excellent habitat for Le Comte's Thrasher. By now it was over 90 degree Fahrenheit or 30+ C and the desert was very exposed, hot and dry. We didn't see a thing at this place, literally nothing, so headed south for the Salton Sea.

We had a **Loggerhead Shrike** along the road and **American Kestrels** and our first **Burrowing Owl** closer to the visitor's centre where we arrived at 13.15 – to find the place wasn't open again until 15.00.

In the grounds we had lunch and **Common Ground Dove**, **Gambel's Quail**, **Abert's Towhee** and **Black-tailed Gnatcatcher** backed up by more **Verdin**, **Black Phoebe**s and more **Burrowing Owls**.

We also had poor, brief views of a **Greater Roadrunner**, a bird I want to see a lot more of.

Eventually 15.00 arrived, but no one else. We left the centre and drove to a nearby spot to see the Sea.

It was very hot and we were both pretty knackered. My eyes were playing up something awful, but we did manage to hear numerous **Marsh Wrens** and a pair of **Ridgeway's Rails** – but playback didn't bring them out. On a patch of water we had

Black-winged Stilts and **Short-billed Dowitchers** and on a reed-fringed part of the Sea we had **Black Tern** and **American White Pelicans**.

We gave it away after half an hour and tried the centre again. This time it was open but the info supplied was a waste of time – luckily the birding had been excellent or we would have been pissed right off,

We decided to head for our campsite and found it a **Wiest Lake** just outside Brawley. Pretty rough campground but quite pleasant location. The trees beside the campsite were a **Great-tailed Grackle** roost/nesting area and they were everywhere.

\$7 in total to camp, but the showers are outta water so – *you can have a dip in the lake to freshen up*, he says. We did because we were so sticky. The water was pretty green and the bottom of the chest deep ‘liquid’ was oozy mud, but it was quite cold and refreshing. Hopefully we won’t come down with anything permanent.

Back at the campsite we had **Inca Dove**, our last tick of the day.

We had dinner – 2 minute noodles supplanted with a tin of beans for protein - then we did notes, photos and crashed.

Trip List -171

Lifers - 137

Day 7 - 24.4.18

A comfortable night’s sleep despite some traffic noise from the nearby road. The temperature was warm without being hot and the thick grass under the floor made for a softer surface.

Up at 5.30, broke camp, ate and were away by 6.30. I discovered (luckily) that my binocular strap was worn to a single thread on one side and had to make an emergency sewing repair. Luckily or I would have dropped them for sure. Need to speak to Leica when I get home.....

We drove to the **Sonny Bono Visitor Centre** again stopping off at **Finney Lake** on the way.

We had 3 **Clarke’s Grebes**, a **Pied-bill Grebe**, two **Green Herons** and a few **American White Pelicans**. On the road from there to the visitor centre we had several **American Kestrels** and a **Greater Roadrunner** doing what it does best – i.e. run on the road....Cool bird!

At the centre we set off immediately on the **Rock Hill Trail**, about a half an hours walk out along a berm that provides an overview of the marshes and ponds. It ends at Rock Hill which is a low mound sticking up in the middle of nowhere – some volcanic thing.

On the way we had

Western Tanager, Western Kingbird, Kildeer, Northern Mockingbird, Abert’s Towhee, Gambel’s Quail, Western Meadowlark, Vaux’s Swift, Tree, Rough-winged and Cliff Swallows, Snowy Egret and, a trip tick, **Gull-billed Terns**.

At the end of the path on the right a pond provided further delights:

American Avocet, Northern Shoveler, Short-billed Dowitchers, Californian Gulls and 1 **Ring-billed Gull, Cinnamon Teal, Ruddy Duck, Great Egret, Great Blue Heron, Black-necked Stilt, Caspian Terns, Black-necked Grebe, Double-crested Cormorant** and, best of all.....

....a bird I have wanted to see for ‘evah’ – **Black Skimmers**.

Walking along the edge of the pond Mr H declared a **Marsh Wren** singing – a bit of playback and up he sat to declare his territory – brilliant! After our lack of success yesterday, brief though our efforts were, I was worried we wouldn’t see this, our fourth wren species.

We walked a little further once satiated and set up overlooking the beach. Immediately we had **Snowy Plovers**, a bird we hadn’t really expected. There were hundreds of **Western Sandpipers, Semipalmated Plovers, White-faced Ibis** flew in, a **Northern Harrier** glided over. Suddenly a pair of (**Western**) **Coyotes** appeared lopping north through the low bush.

We went up the Rock Hill, but, apart from the overview and scenery, didn’t see anything else.

Walking back we had **Song Sparrows, Common Yellowthroat, Hooded Orioles** and **Ash-throated Flycatcher**.

When we camped last night the ranger had told us to keep our receipt and, if we chose, we could visit another campsite near the visitor’s centre and use the showers there. So we drove around to the dilapidated, dusty campsite and without seeing anyone, got ourselves a surprisingly good hot, strong shower, our first in 4 days. Nice!

Back into the same clothes, back into the hot sun and we headed for some other side roads that led down towards the Sea. Exploring different pools and channels we found **Spotted Sandpipers, Least Terns, Northern Pintail, Blue-winged Teal, Long-billed Dowitchers** and, finally, **Wilson’s Phalaropes**.

By now it was 95’F – about 35’C – and we were in need of both a Park pass and food. We headed for El Centro and found the Land Department for the former (\$US80) and, on advice from the chick in the office, fish tacos across the road in *Marlyn*. \$US14 saw us with two tacos and a soft drink each and very nice they were too. We found our way to a Walmart and bought a second gas cylinder (\$US9), teaspoons and I bought a \$US6 pillow.

The Park Pass was actually issued as a Senior’s lifetime pass – but issued in Mr H’s name only. It’s not necessary but it did save us quite a bit of money, especially at the Grand Canyon where its \$US30 a day to enter.

We headed back to the SS area and this time went to **Ramer Lake**. We saw nothing new here, but I got the phone call I had been waiting on and found out I was grandfather to Patrick Thomas, born last night Australian time (24th) at 4.5 kgs or 10 lbs. Good news – both mother and baby doing well.

We birded a little bit more for nothing new and then headed for **Slab City** and our AirBnB accommodation for the next two nights.

If you haven't heard of Slab City – Google it. It's an amazing (?), definitely weird, alternative, off the grid, anarchic, creative, artistic place populated by people who want to avoid convention, can't afford a normal lifestyle or just want something alternative. Scattered tents, RVs, caravans, shacks across an area of desert that was an army base many years ago. No mains electricity, no running water, no garbage collection, no sewage management. Different? Definitely!

Trip List – 183

Lifer – 143

Day 8 – 25.4.18

I woke up at 6.30. Feeling much refreshed, but a little de-motivated and with a heavy head. Mr H wasn't much better, but we pulled ourselves together, more or less, had some breakfast, then drove to [Unit 1 of the Salton Sea refuge area](#). We had read a report from a few days ago on E-bird of a guy finding a Pectoral Sandpiper 'among the 60 or so Stilt Sands'. We weren't much interested in the Pec, but that number – in fact, ANY number - of Stilt Sands was of great interest! We got to site, seeing **Burrowing Owls** and **American Kestrels** along the way – and another **Greater Roadrunner** – and found the flat shallow pools behind the berm full of waders. The Sea shore itself was miles away, but these pools obviously held plenty of interest to masses of **Western Sandpipers**, **Black-necked Stilts**, **Long-billed Dowitchers** and about 30 **Stilt Sandpipers**. Unfortunately, they were all belly-deep in the water so I didn't get a chance to see the length of their legs, but they were distinctly marked. We didn't see the Pec, but then again we weren't really looking for it.

We headed back to Slab City as by now, mid-morning, it had got very hot again. We stopped off at Walmart to buy a washing-up bowl (all of 78 cents) and some food. We also filled up with fuel (\$US30) and dropped into Macker's for a coffee.

We stopped off to admire Salvation Mountain, a big attraction here for tourists. It, apparently, was made from straw bales, paper, paint and someone's off-the-wall imagination. Again, not my scene, but, hey, whatever turns you on! Back home we only wanted to relax and snooze (in Mr H's case) and update my blog, in mine.

Trip List – 184

Lifers - 144

Day 9 – 26.4.18

Up at 5 and away before 6. We were glad to shake the dust of Slab City off our feet. The smells had become over-powering and the heat unnecessarily debilitating.

I started the morning's drive and at 9.00 we stopped for fuel and coffee at Grand Bend and Mr H took over. Most of the day was through desert with the classic cowboy-style cacti scattered across the prairie. The Sonoran Desert included. We reached Madera Canyon south of Tucson around 12.30 and drove around looking for an empty campsite in Bog Springs. It was on a first-come first-served basis – i.e. we couldn't book ahead - and we were nervously hoping for a vacancy. We were in luck – Campsite no 9 (of 13) was ours for the next 5 nights – with our 'senior' discount it cost \$US25 in total!

We set up camp quickly and relaxed for a while in the shade of our tarp, while a pair of **Scott's Orioles** continued to build a nest in a Yuca palm a few meters away, while **Mexican Jays** flew by every now and again and a **Plumbeous Vireo** sang from a nearby tree.

Eventually we headed out to walk a nearby trail that appeared fairly easy. It left the site and curved up and around a hillside. Along the way the birds were fairly thin on the ground, but the quality was excellent.

Ruby-crowned Kinglet was the first to fall, followed by **Bridled Titmouse** – a bird I had doubts we would see. Just up the track an **Arizona Woodpecker** put in a confiding appearance. When we'd been in camp I'd mentioned the Trogon of these parts and played the call so Mr H would recognize it, now, as we walked, we started to hear the strong, barking call. With the help of my phone app we confirmed the call and hurried eagerly on.

Descending to the bitumen road, that actually passed the campsite and went to the head of the canyon, we tracked the noise down and, luckily, saw the **Elegant Trogon** on an electrical wire at about 30 meters range! Brilliant!

Overhead a raptor circled and, after some discussion, we agreed it was a **Zone-tailed Hawk**. Just after that a couple came down the road – obviously birders – looking for the Trogon. We explained what we had seen and then walked back up the road to a car park where, reportedly, Northern Pygmy Owls had been roosting. We searched the trees without success. While doing that a group of 4 other birders (2 women and 2 men) arrived and again we described the Trogon and where we had last seen it and they headed off to look for it.

We followed 15 minutes later, giving up on the owls, and saw the ET again, though not anywhere near as well.

As we parted with the group of 4, one of the women said she could hear a Pygmy Owl. After some eye searching of the surrounding brush, Mr H picked out a juvenile **Northern Pygmy Owl** and, shortly afterwards he found one of the adults! Congratulations all round.

We did finally part and we headed down the road towards the campsite entrance. We stopped off at Santa Rita gift shop where we watched **Broad-billed** and **Black-chinned Hummingbirds** at the feeders. Other stuff included – **Arizona Woodpecker**, **Lesser Goldfinch**, **Pine Siskin**, **Rufous-crowned Sparrows**, **White-winged & Mourning Doves**, **Black-headed Grosbeaks** and **Mexican Jays** and a few **Gray Squirrels**.

Arriving back at the campsite after a rather strenuous walk up the hill, we quickly had some dinner (boil in the bag rice, topped with half a jar of tomato-based sauce and a tin of beans) and drove back down to the car park at the picnic ground.

We met two other birders there from Ontario, Canada who helped us identify an **Elf Owl** which we had heard calling and then saw briefly as a silhouette.

Two owls in one day! Far Out!

We drove up the canyon stopping at likely places to listen in the pitch darkness. We could hear Whip Poor-wills and a Whiskered Screech Owl – all very distant though.

However, we reached the top carpark and parking up stepped out of the car – to be greeted by a **Whip Poor-will** calling loudly from a tree a few meters away! We searched and searched the tree while the bird continued to call and eventually picked up eye-shine and got views of the bird perched about 15 meters away.

Two Owls and a nightjar!

A Whiskered Screech Owl had been calling from some distance away and I had played a little feedback – unaware it was frowned upon in the canyon.

Suddenly a shape materialized and perched up on a dead branch stump above us – torches on and a **Whiskered Screech Owl** joined the list!

We returned to camp very happy with the day's haul – 13 lifers for me with three Owls, a Nightjar and a Trogon. Pretty happy with that!

Trip list – 197

Lifers - 157

Day 10 – 27.4.18

We were up at 5, after a restless night's sleep for me again, and headed up the canyon to the Old Baldy Trailhead. We started the morning with a tick – **Yellow-eyed Junco** in the carpark, then we started up the trail, but veered off after a couple of hundred meters to the right, to what we thought might be a quieter walk.

Within a few meters we wandered off track as we heard and saw a **Painted Redstart** male singing high in a tree.

We returned to the track and carried on up the canyon, but after a while having seen very little we decided to return to the lower reaches and so headed back to the car. We had **American Robin** and our second **Hermit Thrush** on the way back down.

Back at **Santa Rita Hummingbird Heaven** to check out basically the same species as yesterday and, as the gift shop was now open, to purchase our very own hummingbird feeder and sugar mix. Total cost \$US20 – we felt it was worth it to bring 'Hummers' into our campsite. Mr H also bought "*Where to find birds in Southeast Arizona*" – which proved to have a wealth of useful information.

We drove down past the campsite and parked in a carpark near Proctor Road turnoff. We walked the trail between two carparks picking up **Bell's Vireo** (the Arizona form, as opposed to the 'Least' form in California), **Cordilleran Flycatcher**, **Wilson's** and **Townsend's Warblers**, **Western Tanager** and, while walking back up the road, a pair of **Phainopepla** – and a handful of **White-tailed Deer**.

Then it was back to the campsite to install our feeder and sit out the heat in the middle of the day. Before I had even hung the feeder up, a male **Black-chinned Hummingbird** was flying around my head!

We set up the scopes and watched while we relaxed. We had **Broad-billed**, **Black-chinned** and a new one – **Rivoli's Hummingbird** (re-named from Magnificent) – just brilliant in the scope at 30 meters.

After a decent rest, we headed back down to the canyon floor, parked up and started a trail over the hill, heading away from the road. This got pretty tedious pretty fast and with nothing happening, we sat and reviewed our situation.

We decided to try the trail along the riverbed, where we had seen the Trogon and Pygmy Owls.

Although a few other non-birders were also walking this trail we had some success – **Summer Tanager**, brilliantly red male & a female, seen really well, another **Painted Restart**, **Dusky-capped Flycatcher**, **Yellow-eyed Juncos**, **Hutton's & Plumbeous Vireo**, **White-faced Nuthatch**, **Townsend's Warblers** and **Black-headed Grosbeak**.

There weren't large numbers of birds but as every bird was 'almost new' it was still an exciting walk.

Once again we stopped off at Santa Rita and were rewarded by having a single **Lincoln's Sparrow** pointed out to us. Never do like to have that happen, but sometimes you just have to take what you can get!

Back at camp the hummingbirds were still doing their thing on our feeder and while we sat, another **Arizona Woodpecker** came by, and a **Purple Finch** put in a brief stop-over.

Again, after we had rested a while, we decided we'd try for higher elevation and walked the trail to the Bog Spring itself. This took us from the 5,100 feet level we were camping at, to 5,900 feet over an hour's slog of approx 2 miles.

Bird-wise it wasn't really worth it. View-wise? Maybe? But probably not. I had visions of a clear sparkling pool, cool refreshing water, maybe a swim? Nope, it was simply a square cement 'box' full of water.

We did see several **Black-throated Gray Warblers**, **Brown-crested Flycatchers**, **Bridled Tit** and the ubiquitous **Mexican Jays**. I also found a **Greater Short-horned Toad** asleep in the sun - he needed prodding with a stick to ensure he was still alive – and a **Western Gray Squirrel** who posed very cutely.

We were pretty knackered by the time we got back to camp and so – rested again, had dinner and, at 18.45, went to our appointment with the **Elf Owls** in a tree hollow opposite Santa Rita. There were about 20 other people waiting for the show and, sure enough, just after 19.00 a head appeared. A second bird also had a look before pushing the first one out and away.

Show over, we headed down the road away from the campsite to Proctor Road where we drove in on the unsealed road hoping to see Common Nighthawk. We didn't have any success – the area was actually in use as a basic campsite, no

facilities and probably free. We didn't hang around long, but on our way out a low, grey, animal ran across the track ahead of us and we concluded it was a **Gray Fox**.

We tried again at the entrance to the old missile testing site (!), but nothing showed and we headed home to bed.

Trip list – 207

Lifers – 168

Day 11 - 28.4.18

The bunch in the closest campsite to us sat up talking, loudly, until 2.00am. They weren't really loud, it was just so quiet we could follow their conversation which seemed to have a lot to do with shooting things and the qualities of different firearms. Anyway we rose at 5 and generally banged around taking no particular care to be quiet as we had on previous mornings.

Off to Mt Lemmon. You can drive to the top of the mountain, to 9,000 feet, and thus get, hopefully, some higher elevation species. It took us an hour to get to the base of the mountain, then a total of about 27 miles to the top.

We took our time, stopping off at likely spots, overviews, walking down side tracks etc, but it wasn't until the third, or even fourth, stop that we got one of our target birds - **Red-faced Warbler** – stunner!

Eventually we found the birdiest place on an unnamed trail beside the Ski slope, entered at the end of the metal barrier on the left side of the road opposite the Iron Door restaurant. It didn't look like much at first, but we had some good birds – **Virginia Warbler, Red-breasted & White-breasted Nuthatches, Brown Creeper, Pine Siskin, Steller's Jays, Hermit Thrush, more Red-faced Warblers** (almost the commonest bird) and **Hairy Woodpecker**.

At the feeders in the restaurant a quick look saw **Broad-billed** and **Rivoli's Hummingbirds**. We should have spent more time with these feeders as Broad-tailed HB was a possibility, but we didn't 'cause we didn't think of it at the time.

It had taken most of the day and between the higher elevation, walking up and down slopes and the warm weather we were both pretty whacked so headed back towards Tucson and a Mackerel meal, devoured in seconds.

Then it was into Walmart and a big spend. More gas cylinders, a Styrofoam esky (\$US2), ice to go with it, beer to go with the ice, food for several days, a small camping lantern (\$US7), the wrong batteries, 2 mangoes at 50 cents each for which we were erroneously charged \$11 – for 22 – and a few other bits and pieces.

We thought **Sweetwater Wetlands** sounded nice so we found our way there and wandered around in the late afternoon, dusty heat. It's actually the water treatment plant for Tucson and probably has good potential – it was pretty quiet when we were there. We did have **Zebra-tailed Lizard** and a **Pond Slider** digging a hole on the bank.

We headed back to camp, arriving just before dusk. Having had a 'meal' we sat and drank coffee and watched over the valley for **Lesser Nighthawk** – we saw 5 fly by. The chances of us ever seeing one perched were pretty slim so had to be content with the silhouettes although one did turn and twist and white wing flashes were evident.

Probably could have done better at Mt Lemmon, but being a Sunday it was pretty busy and we just didn't seem to connect too well with those upper level birds we'd hoped for.

Trip List – 213

Lifers – 174

Day 12 – 29.4.18

Away again before 6, it had been a windy night and the flapping tents had not helped sleep. We headed over the Box Canyon road which is entered a few kms down-road from Madera Canyon. It's unsealed, but could be managed comfortably in a normal, non 4WD vehicle. It leads up and over the hills and cuts the, alternative, long drive via Nogales in half. It also gives you access to the narrowing canyon as you approach the top and then open farmland and grassland for other species, before dropping down a little into the valley where Patagonia town is located.

We had our second only **Loggerhead Shrike** not too far in, but little else until we were approaching the top of the canyon. We decided to stop as it looked good for **Canyon Wren** – and proved to be so. One of the little devils came very close in response to a bit of playback and showed well along the edge of the road - there were at least half a dozen singing in the area. We also had **Western Kingbirds, Purple Finch** and **Wilson's & Hermit Warblers** along the way. Out on the farmland a herd of cattle in a pen had a flock of what, at first appeared to be, Starlings, but we realized they were **Brown-headed Cowbirds** and stopped to have a look. While scoping part of the flock in a tree I noticed one with yellow on its face & chest and we then found at least 4 **Yellow-headed Blackbirds** among the 40 or so Cowbirds. This was very pleasing as we'd looked hard for this species in the Salton Sea area without success. Great views.

As we were looking at these Mr H picked up a **Say's Phoebe** in the background. A bit distant, but OK in the scope.

Moving right along we turned off at Las Cienegas – a reserve that is mainly grassland with clumps of bush here and there – especially around any water source. Our first hit here was **American Kestrel** followed by **Eastern Meadowlark**. While scoping the latter a car pulled up beside us with three young guys in it all dressed in camouflage gear. They were really friendly and we chatted for a while – they were out shooting Coyotes, but seemed reasonable enough despite the fact.

We continued on stopping here and there as something attracted our attention or a spot looked good – we had **Horned Lark, Summer Tanager, Black-throated Sparrow, Lark Sparrow** and, after a bit of work, a pair of **Lucy's Warblers**. Just along the road, no particular spot. It was just here that a Border Patrol guard turned up on his quad bike. He gave us the once over, nodded behind his mirror shades and chugged on over the hill.

We ended up at a riparian stretch of stagnant or overgrown pools alongside a short stretch of road. There was a car already parked, so we did too and started to walk along the road. A woodpecker called and after some searching we found a pair of **Gila Woodpeckers** showing well. Two other, older, birders came along and after we exchanged pleasantries, as you do, they showed us a **Great Horned Owl** perched up in the opposite field and told us they had had a great morning's birding along this stretch.

They went home and we continued. We didn't see an awful lot in fact, but did have a flock of 6 **Gould's Turkeys**, a race of **Wild Turkey** apparently, **Yellow & Black-throated Gray Warblers** and a **Cordilleran Flycatcher**.

Back on the main road we continued to the junction where we met the road to Patagonia. We stopped for coffee in the shop at the crossroads and tried to fix my reading glasses cause the right lens kept falling out.

Then it was on to world famous **Paton's Hummingbirds**.

It's a private house where the owners have allowed people to just walk in and sit and watch their feeders while the hummingbirds do their thing. It's very popular and all they ask is you donate something to the 'Sugar Fund'. Along with the hummers there were heaps of other birds. It took us 15 minutes just to walk from the car to the back garden - there were **Northern Cardinals**, **Summer Tanagers**, **Gila Woodpeckers**, **Inca Doves**, **Rufous-crowned & White-crowned Sparrows**, **Lesser Goldfinches**, **House Finches** and stuff just going off around the feeders in the front yard. Eventually we reached the hummingbird stuff and sat down to watch.

Over a period of an hour and a half we had dozens of visits from **Broad-billed**, **Anna's** and **Black-chinned Hummingbirds** and a couple of visits from a **Violet-crowned Hummingbird**. Along with these, the birds previously mentioned, a flock of **Brown-headed Cowbirds** and a couple of **Ladder-backed Woodpeckers**. It was pretty crazy.

We were starving by this time so pulled into The Wagon Wheel in main street Patagonia for chile hotdogs and beer. The 'dogs took ages to come and tasted like hotdogs from home. The beer made us a bit sleepy and de-motivated but we headed for **Patagonia-Sonoita Reserve** anyway. It was blowing a gale and hot and dusty, but while Mr H was checking for trail maps and I was having a smoke in the carpark a pair of **Vermillion Flycatchers** played around in the nearby trees – absolutely stunning in the sun.

We walked in along the creek trail, but it was less than inspiring, even though we saw more Vermillion Flys and got our second target bird – a **Gray Hawk**. Only briefly, but a good side-on view as it flew low over the woodland. Shortly afterwards a **Peregrine Falcon** passed overhead and we saw a few **Dusky-capped & a Cordilleran Flycatcher**, an **Abert's Towhee** or two, **Summer Tanagers** and a **Zone-tailed Hawk** overhead.

Back to the car and we decided to check out the Patagonia Lake State campground with thoughts of transferring a day earlier than planned from Madera. It was a long drive over the mountains and we wanted to do some more Patagonian birding so we started to consider the move.

We drove into the campsite, chatted to the warden at the gate, he assured us there would be plenty of sites tomorrow, although '*We're all booked up through to June – every weekend.*'

It looked OK so we decided to think some more and headed home via Nogales. Stopped there for a spare pair of reading glasses for me, then headed on up the highway to home.

Along the way we were stopped, as everyone else was, at the Border Patrol checkpoint and the heavily suited guy there checked our passports and asked a few questions before letting us go. Obviously they're pretty keen to keep other people out.

Getting home we had coffee and a rest before heading up the Box Canyon road again to look for Quail in the evening crossing the road. We didn't see any Quail but we did hear several **Common Poor-Wills** calling and, of course, used playback to see what would happen. What DID happen was a CP came flying up over the edge of the canyon, zoomed past my head and nearly took off Mr H's. Unfortunately, his back was turned and he didn't actually see the bird. We couldn't get any other responses despite trying several spots along the road. We did see a couple of **Lesser Nighthawks**, just briefly, here and there along the skyline.

We went home and crashed after making plans to move to Patagonia tomorrow.

Trip list – 225

Lifers – 186

Day 13 – 30.4.18

Up as usual – early. Drove down the road below the campsite to the carpark at the canyon end of Proctor Rd and walked the track down and back. This was reputedly a real hot spot.

It was hard work as the sun took a while to warm the area. We did have **Cordilleran Flycatcher**, **Brown & Dusky capped Flycatchers**, **Black-chinned & Broad-billed Hummingbirds**, heard **Bell's Vireo** and had the usual warblers. Finally we got the hirsute-challenged tyrant from the north or as it is known to the common people – **Northern Beardless Tyrant** - very well.

We decided to drop in on Santa Rita to see the hummingbirds again and have a cup of coffee. We had settled down in the chairs provided when a guy sat down beside us and we started chatting. Turned out he was from Flagstaff and had been a guide, researcher and traveller at different times in his life. Cutting a long story short – he offered to show us his favourite place in Flagstaff and even offered to put us up when he heard we were planning on camping - apparently it can snow in Flagstaff even into May. We swapped phone numbers and email addresses and promised to catch up. John Grahame seemed like a really nice genuine guy with similar views to camping, birding and travelling as us.

Back to the campsite and we broke camp quickly after a cup of coffee.

Heading down the road away from Madera Canyon a circling hawk brought us to a stop – **Swainson's Hawk** – brilliant! We drove down the highway towards Nogales and the Mexican border and turned off at **Tumacacori** to go to **Santa Gertrudis Lane** where we walked down from the car park. On the way a car of birders were coming out and we stopped them to ask directions to our target. They gave us something along the lines of 'walk 200 yards, look for a defined path on the right, go up two levels and look above you – it'll be in the mulberry tree'.

Sounded good so we walked on. Down to a shallow river. No sign of a defined path so we waded across the shallow river and continued on up the road for about another 100 meters finding a flock of **Cedar Waxwings**, a couple of **Summer & Western Tanagers**, but no path.

Back to the river again and back across to meet another group of birders who were as confused as we were. Lengthy discussion continued as we looked for a defined path.

Waded back across the river again as Mr H translated the instructions as describing the levels in the road. Still no sign of a path so..... back across the river again.

This time I did a bit of exploring back towards the carpark and found a gate with a sign that indicated it was a trail of some sort. I called Mr H and we walked in along this trail for about 200 meters but still no obvious location.

Back to and across the freaking river again. Still no path.

We were getting a little heated by now and our ideas of what the instructions actually meant were becoming more and more confused and exaggerated.

So I rang John from Flagstaff as he had suggested we try for this bird.

He confirmed the directions as going through the gate to the trail and walking down the trail until such and such a tree etc. So we did.

It was obvious THEN that the birders in the car had assumed we would walk this trail as their directions were approximately correct (it was 300 yards, not 200 as Mr H measured it out, but otherwise pretty close....)

Anyway we found the tree and almost immediately had our target bird – **Rufous-backed Robin** - and a **Swainson's Thrush** and a **Yellow-breasted Chat** as bonus birds.

Back on the highway and we stopped off in Nogales to get ice, then headed out the road to Patagonia and a superb lunch in *Gathering Ground* – another suggestion/recommendation from John and highly recommended for good food, excellent coffee and friendly service.

Then it was in to Paton's Hummingbird emporium again, but it was very quiet and we saw a lot less than yesterday and nothing new.

Down the road to the campsite at Patagonia State Park Lake and set up camp. (\$US27 per night – electric camp site) A shower was desperately needed after 5 days without one - the water was unlimited and hot and it was a sheer pleasure! It was great, too, to charge the laptop and phone at the power point.

We went for a short walk along the lake late in the evening – **Neotropic Cormorant** fell to our list, but other than that, and the hundreds of **Large-tailed Grackles**, we didn't see much else.

Trip list - 232

Lifers – 193

Day 14 – 1.5.18

We didn't get up too early, figuring we'd let the sun warm up before hitting the birding trail at the end of the lake. When we did it was very birdy. Along the way we counted 14 **Neotropic Cormorants** on the lake and a **Green Heron** flying over the reed beds. Once we hit the top of the lake we were birding in the flood zone – i.e. where the lake level rises during flooding. The track wound through piles of broken branches, trunks and general flood debris, chest high thick shrubs which had obviously sprung up since the last high water.

There were heaps of **Summer Tanagers**, **Vermillion Flycatchers**, **Wilson's**, **Yellow-rumped & Yellow Warblers**, a few **Black-throated Gray Warblers**, **Common Yellowthroat**, **Pied-billed Grebe**, **American Coots**, **Great Blue Heron**, **Northern Cardinal**, **House Finch**, **White-crowned & Rufous-crowned Sparrows**, **Lazuli Bunting**, **Brown-headed Cowbirds**, **Cedar Waxwings**, **Brown-crested & Dusky-capped Flycatchers** and **Black-headed Grosbeak**.

We also had one **Swainson's Thrush**, and, in an open area overlooking the lake and a muddy foreshore, a rather distant **Belted Kingfisher**, (the only kingfisher of the trip), two **Spotted Sandpipers**, 2 **White-faced Ibis** and a single **Killdeer**.

We looked hard for the reported 'daily sightings' of Curve-billed Thrasher, but saw no sign of any. We did have **Yellow-breasted Chats** and much to our surprise a **Black Vulture**.

Other raptors included a very close fly by **Cooper's Hawk** and overhead **Zone-tailed** and **Red-tailed Hawks**.

We headed back to camp and packed up after a coffee. Then headed back through Patagonia and north to Sonoita where we fuelled up (\$US37) and on to **San Pedro RCNA** near Sierra Vista – in the next valley.

Unfortunately, when we got there it was blowing a tornado and an absolute waste of time trying to see anything – which was a pity as this had been somewhere I had wanted to visit and this was our only opportunity.

We moved on to **Miller Canyon** where, at **Beatty's**, for \$US5 each we could sit and enjoy the Hummingbirds at the feeders. We had **Broad-billed**, **Rivoli's & Black-Chinned Hummingbirds**. There were a few 'older' people around and as we walked out two of these were looking up a tree. When we stopped to pass the time of day we found they were looking at a **Blue Grosbeak**. They were also waiting for two other friends who had gone up the canyon about three-quarters of a mile to see a Spotted Owl.

Did we have time?

We decided we did and headed up the canyon after them.

It was a long slog at whatever height we were at – probably at least 5,000 feet – in the hot sun on the rough stony track.

On the way we met a couple of birders coming down (not the owl people) and saw a **Dusky Flycatcher**.

Then a single guy and a **Greater Wood Peewee**.

Eventually we met the two 'owl' people - also coming down. They hadn't seen the owl, but did give us the info that they had regarding its location.

We struggled on.

We found the spot by the markers given, and present – a cairn of stones, a flat 'bench-like' rock -and searched the surrounding trees for the owl/s. We never did see them.

After half an hour or so, we gave it away and stumbled back down the track to the car where we devoured cheese sandwiches and an orange.

Next stop was **Ash Canyon B&B** – another well-known feeder location. This time it was \$US10 each to enter. Again no one around – and no birds on the feeders either. It was very windy and very quiet and we were, jokingly, discussing retrieving our twenty bucks from the jar I'd put it in.

Well, we were sort of joking.....

Then Mr H heard a call and we got excellent views of 2 **Cactus Wrens** in a cactus (where else?) scolding something below. The 'something' turned into a **Greater Roadrunner**, which didn't hang around long, but did a runner....ah ah aha ahaaaaaa.

We moved over to a different set of chairs that overlooked a couple of more sheltered feeders and, sure enough within a few minutes we had our quarry – a **Lucifer Hummingbird**. While we waited for its return a Towhee appeared. At first we thought it was a Canyon – in the bright sunlight it looked washed out – however, once we saw it properly we realized it was a **Green-tailed Towhee** – in fact a really attractive bird.

It got even better because 5 minutes later a larger brown bird appeared on the ground in the back and as it raised its head it was obviously a **Curve-billed Thrasher**. We got clear but brief views of it at about 20 meters over the next half an hour as it came and went.

No more talk of retrieving the money now!

We also had heaps of **House Finches, Pine Siskins, Lesser Goldfinches, Black-headed Grosbeaks, Gila & Acorn Woodpeckers** and our second **Lincoln's Sparrow**.

Once we finished there we had to move on. It was a longish drive to our next stop and we didn't have a campsite booked in **Portal**, as again it was first-come-first served.

We headed south to arrive at Douglas, right on the Mexican border.

We had a look at the border itself, with a line of cars heading into Mexico –and none coming out - and the fences and the walls and the border patrol dudes, then we went to Walmart and stocked up on gas and food before heading east again.

We arrived in **Cave Creek Canyon** at about 17.00 and drove the three campgrounds (each with about 10 camp sites) to find them all full.

What now? Says Mr H.

F...d if I know, says I. But – let's drive up the canyon and see what we can find?

The road quickly became unsealed and we turned off at the Research Centre with some vague idea of basic campsites in mind.

We found one – the John Landis camp/picnic site.

No toilet, no piped water, no bear box, no table (all standard at every other campsite incidentally). Just a flatish spot under the trees beside the creek, all alone. Brilliant!

We had to tote the gear down a rough slope from the car, we had to drive back to the campgrounds to use a toilet and we had to get our water from there too. We also had to put all the food in the car at night, or when we were away from site, in case of bears - but other than that it was great. In fact we found an empty campsite the next day in the campgrounds that we could have moved into – but decided to stay where we were.

And it was free.

By the time we had got the tents and tarp up and had something to eat we were knackered so settled down for the night.

Trip List - 241

Lifers – 202

Day 15 – 2.5.18

We got up fairly early and drove down to South Fork, a side shoot off the main Cave Creek Canyon. We parked at the front end and walked slowly up the road. It was very quiet and took a lot of work to see anything. It was cold, a little windy and very overcast.

After 40 minutes of this we met a lone female birder working her way down towards us. We fell into conversation and Leslie proved to be a total bonus in terms of local info and just genuinely nice.

She was from New Mexico and had travelled down to do a bit of birding. She showed us a **Blue-throated Hummingbird** on its nest in a semi-private location and gave us some great advice regarding the local hummingbird feeder locations and some other info which will come to light later in this ongoing saga.

We walked back to her car, parked at the end of the canyon and found about 30 other birders arriving - all seeking a Trogon that had been reported recently. Leslie had, in fact, already seen it, but as we had already had one in Madera Canyon we didn't bother looking too hard....

Leaving her we headed back down to our car picking up a very confident male **Hepatic Tanager** on the way, along with **Dusky Flycatcher**, **Black-tailed Gnatcatcher**, **Hairy Woodpecker** and **Plumbeous Vireo** among the usual mix of warblers. We drove down to Portal itself - which consists of a basic shop/café, library and Post Office – that's it, nothing else. We poked around the shop picking up a couple of things and had an excellent cup of coffee before heading out again.

This time we went to **Dave Jasper's Old house** – a well-known feeder hang-out.

On the walk in we had a **Curve-billed Thrasher** perched up, a **Canyon Towhee**, **Northern Cardinal**, and **Black-throated Sparrows**. At the feeders we had **Lazuli Buntings**, **Gambel's Quail**, **Pine Siskins**, **Green-tailed Towhee**, **White & Rufous-crowned**, **Lark & more Black-throated Sparrows**, **Brown-headed Cowbirds**, **Black-headed Grosbeaks** and best of all a couple of **Pyrrhuloxias** and a single **Harris's Sparrow**.

It rained for a few minutes while we sat, but quickly cleared and we dried out in a few more minutes. There were only a couple of Hummingbird feeders here, the focus was on the other species and we only had a couple of **Black-chinned Hummingbirds**. At one point a hawk – presumably **Cooper's**, flew in and everything vanished instantaneously.

After we'd spent an hour or so we headed out (leaving the requested donation to the 'Sugar Fund') and drove back to Portal 'city'.

Parking up we walked up the road to the post office and library and just past them, as advised by Leslie, we found a private garden with feeders where, apparently, the owner is happy for birders to bird. We didn't go in because everything was fairly easy to see from outside, and we had **Blue-throated** and **Black-chinned Hummingbirds**, **Hooded Orioles** and **Inca Doves** and, in the background several **Cliff Chipmunks** scampered around.

Back down the road – after I checked in the library, yes, they had free wifi and although the library shut at 14.00, the wifi was available outside until 19.00 – good to know!

Lunch in the Portal café was very good – and we had a **Red Crossbill** on their feeders and a flock of at least 5 **Cassin's Finches** outside while we ate.

Next stop was **Cave Creek Ranch**, drive in, park up, sit in the shade and watch the hummers – and other stuff.

Mainly **Black-chinned** here, but also **Broad-billed**, **Rivoli's**, **Broad-tailed** and **Blue-throated**. Some of the species listed earlier at Dave Jasper's and, after a while, a **Green-tailed Towhee** put in an appearance and a **Curve-billed Thrasher** came right out on the open ground under the feeders in front of us.

We were lowish on fuel and so had to drive about 20 miles across the border into New Mexico to Animas to fill up at an automatic service station, then drive back. I started my New Mexico list with 5 birds – **Common Raven**, **Red-tailed Hawk**, **Swainson's Hawk**, **Greater Roadrunner** and **Tree Swallow**.

We drove the **Stateline Road** on the way back – an unsealed but graded road that runs along the state border. A covey of quail lifted in front of the car and we pulled in to check out the surrounds. A little playback and we had superb views of **Scaled Quail** giving us the good news. Of course, the camera was still in the car so THAT went unrecorded, but it was an absolute corker of a view.

We drove on seeing heaps more **Scaled** and dozens of **Gambel's** running and flying back and forth across the road. Several **Swainson's Hawks** drifted overhead and one perched up briefly, before flying low across in front of us.

We went to the small wetland up a side road, but there was very little there, apart from two uncommunicative birders, so we headed back. We did stop off and have a walk through the thorny growth at one point about half way back where there was no fence along the road. We had hopes for Crissal Thrasher, but it was late in the day, very dry, very dusty, quite hot and nothing whatsoever showed.

We headed back to camp, did the log and crashed. It was very cold and windy. I had managed to take 985 photos during the day which were reduced to 253.... Which says a lot about my skills as a photographer!

Trip List – 250

Lifers – 233

Day 16 – 3.5.18

When we got up it was very cold – it had been a cold, windy night and, despite our down sleeping bags, we had had a disturbed sleep. When we started the car it was still only 33°F – i.e. one degree above freezing. We estimated it had been at least -3°C during the night. Washing naked in the creek was a sure-fire way to wake up....

Breakfast over we headed off up the unsealed rock strewn track towards the top of the mountain and **Onion Saddle**. We were on a mission based on information provided by Leslie from New Mexico.

We stopped at likely places - our targets Grace's and Olive Warblers and Mexican Chickadee.

At our first stop we had a **Red-naped Sapsucker** – my first sapsucker. We also had **Hutton's Vireos**, **Lazuli Buntings**, heaps of **Yellow-rumped Warblers**, a **Painted Redstart** or two, **Western Tanager**, **Scott's Oriole**, **Blue-gray Gnatcatcher** and **Bridled Titmouse**, but none of the target species.

Our birdiest stop off was at the corner with **Turkey Creek Rd** where we had most of the previous plus **Hepatic Tanager** and a **Western Wood Pewee**.

Eventually, after three hours of careful driving on the narrow, winding, rocky dusty road we went over the saddle at about 9,000 feet and down the far side. We were looking for a pull-in on the right. We found it a couple of ks down the hill and parked up.

Walking the road and looking on the left we sought our main quarry for the day. Mexican Spotted Owl. Leslie had described the location in detail but it seemed we were out of luck. We had separated to check the trees and met up again

close to the pull-in, a bit despondent, a bit doubtful. Had her description been accurate enough? Did we need to go down the valley further?

I turned round and glanced up a tree on the right side of the road and there they were – two **Mexican Spotted Owls** sitting half concealed in a deciduous tree, not a conifer as described. Brilliant! This was a bird I had been sure we wouldn't see.

Good one Leslie! All is forgiven!

We headed back up to the saddle again and turned off to **Rustler Park** camp ground – another 500 feet in height and a couple of miles up the road.

The place was, basically, deserted – no campers or picnickers. We wandered around looking for the three other target species but had no real luck. Mr H was sure he heard an Olive Warbler and we spent 30 minutes or so looking at a pine tree it appeared to be calling from – but nothing showed. We gave it away and headed downhill.

One thing we had forgotten from Leslie's advice was a location for **Lewis's Woodpecker**. We had visited **Cave Creek Ranch** yesterday, but had driven straight in to the feeders. She had described two power poles on the road in and the fact that the woodpecker was 'always' there flying from one to the other. After the Spotted Owls we were in total belief and so headed straight there.

We saw the poles – and immediately saw the woodpecker! Brilliant. It was easy to see, although the light was shit for decent photos but I made the best of it and was very happy to come away with good views and an acceptable photo or 100.....

We went for a late lunch at the Portal café again – a burger for himself and enchiladas for me – and spent a couple of hours sitting out of the heat while I updated as much as I could using the café's wifi.

Then it was back to the campsite and a walk back down the road to the research centre where we had heard there were active feeders - and the possibility of Sulphur-breasted Flycatcher.

We didn't have much along the road apart from a moving-ahead-of-us flock of **Chipping Sparrows**, a few of the usual warblers and another **Western Wood Peewee**. At the feeders we had a few hummers including **Blue-throated, Rivoli's and Black-chinned**, but no luck with the S-b Fly

We walked back to camp and relaxed for a while before completing the log and crashing. It was a much warmer night and sleep was a bit better, despite the hard ground under my deflated mat.

Trip List – 254

Lifers – 213

Day 17 – 4.5.18

Figuring we'd done all the damage we could do in Portal, we broke camp after breakfast and hit the road by 7.

It was a long drive to **Flagstaff**, our next destination, with a planned detour northwest of Phoenix to a non-descript spot in the desert reputedly excellent for Thrashers.

I drove and we reached the region near **Buckeye (corner of Baseline Rd & Salome Highway)** at, potentially the worst time of day – 13.30. However, we headed out into the desert mesquite, thorny, shrub in the 30C+ dry heat.

Within 100 meters we had a bird running from bush to bush, tail cocked, showing its buff under-tail coverts, curved billed head held erect. **Le Conte's Thrasher** – one of the harder ones.

We had brief but fairly close views of two birds going different directions before we lost them and moved on.

Ten minutes later and a **Lesser Nighthawk** lifted off the ground right beside me. Brilliant views in flight as it lopped around in circles before disappearing behind some distant ground cover. I didn't check for a possible nest – I should have because half an hour later it was flying around in circles again, which indicated to me it was keen to get back to where it came from. We walked on. A few minutes later and Mr H had a **Curve-billed Thrasher** fly and perch up briefly.

It was a while before we found anything else – and then it was a second pair of Le Conte's which we didn't see as well as the first pair.

By this time it was a long walk back to the car and we were happy to get back in the air con and head back towards the highway again.

Continuing north we stopped only for a burger at Burger King – spreading our largesse as it were – to reach **Flagstaff** at 18.00. Eleven hours on the road, at least 9 driving, I was pretty whacked but once I got out and started to put the tent up and the campsite together, I was OK again.

We contacted John (Grahame, the guy we met in Madera Canyon) and he immediately suggested we meet him in town for a meal, however, having just consumed huge burgers and fries we weren't very hungry, but agreed to meet him at the restaurant. John is a 70 year old, this month, who looks younger than we do, has led an interesting life and is a confirmed bachelor with a penchant for young college girls – he's in the right place here at Flagstaff!

It's a college town and being the first Friday of the month, partying was in full swing. Restaurants, bars, galleries and shops all busy with, mainly, young people getting out and enjoying themselves. It was pleasantly cool, considering 2 inches of snow had fallen three days before, but there was no sign of that and the conditions were very comfortable.

We met up with John and his friend Erica, and, when Mr H mentioned I needed a new sleeping mat, headed straight away to a local sports store. We actually visited two before I settled for a Thermarest three-quarter length, 14 oz, mat for \$US50. Then it was on to a bar where a local band were playing Celtic tunes and John wanted to catch up with them. There we met Sue, a friend of John's, who immediately offered us a bed in her place and, when we said we would stay with John tomorrow night, invited us to her place for a small party she was having.

We were pretty wrecked by now and so after one drink, said goodnight and headed back to our campsite – at KOA caravan and camping.

We had expected it to be cold – everyone we had met had expressed concern – but the temp stayed above zero and we both slept well.

Trip List – 255

Lifers - 214

Day 18 – 5.5.18

Up at 6 and off to John's place for a promised breakfast – a nice break from oats and boiled eggs, scrambled eggs on toast was very appreciated.

After breakfast we headed down to Oak Creek Canyon, John's 'patch' and walked along the creek, through the camping sites, picking off some nice birds including **Pygmy Nuthatch**, **Bullock's Oriole** and **Grace's Warbler**, at last.

We also had **Anna's**, **Black-chinned & Broad-tailed Hummingbird**, **Northern Flicker**, **Black Phoebes**, **Warbling & Plumbeous Vireos**, **Brown Creeper**, **Yellow & Yellow-rumped Warbler**, **Painted Restart**, **Hooded Oriole**, **Black-headed Grosbeak**, **Spotted Towhee** and **Steller's Jay**.

We drove down the canyon for lunch at the very busy Indian Gardens in Sedona where the food and coffee were excellent. After lunch it was back up higher in the canyon and a bit of a scramble up a steep slope to get above the tree line. We didn't see a heap of stuff here – but did add **Red-faced & Virginia Warblers** to our day list and saw a **Black-chinned Hummingbird** building a nest.

We opted to return to our campsite to have a shower, break camp and meet John at Sue's place at 17.30. We did that and turned up on time. A number of people arrived, all carrying plates of Mexican style food. We brought beer.

We stayed until about 20.30, eating and having a couple of drinks, then left and headed back to John's. I sat up till almost midnight trying to get stuff updated before crashing on his couch. Mr H had the fold out bed in the spare room.

Trip List – 258

Lifers- 217

Day 19 – 6.5.18

John made pancakes for breakfast. They looked like bear shit – brown and full of berries – but they tasted very good and we ate all he could cook.

Then it was off to meet an 81 year old local – Les – who, last night, had asked to join us this morning as we headed for the higher country.

We met him then we went to **Kachina Village wetlands** to look for a Burrowing Owl – an unusual bird for Flagstaff. We didn't see it, but we did see several **Yellow-headed Blackbirds** with full yellow heads (as opposed to the ones we saw near Madera Canyon, which were only partially yellow). We also had 2 **Ospreys**, **Pied-billed Grebes** and a couple of scoped **Vesper's Sparrows**.

Moving on we followed Les and John off the bitumen and up a rugged dirt road to park up at the end at Hart's and start off across the open hillside, at about 8,500 feet.

Right away we had our first target species – **Clarke's Nutcracker**. A real cracker of a bird (how many times has that hoary old one been pulled out?) and great views perched up on top of a pine.

We also had a very confiding **Hairy Woodpecker**.

Walking up to Les's cabin took a while what with the height, side tracks for birds and the necessary slow pace to accommodate Les's age – well, our age too in reality. It's bloody tiring being at that height day after day climbing slopes!

Along the way we had a pair of **Mountain Bluebirds** and **Western Bluebirds** for comparison, **Red-tailed Hawk**, **Canyon Towhee**, great views of another **Vesper Sparrow** and found a couple of **Horned Toads**.

We sat at his cabin for a while hoping for Olive Warbler, but got only a **Yellow-rumped**. Then it was back down the trail and a **Dusky Flycatcher** the only bird of extra interest.

We left John and Les in the carpark and thanked them both very much for their generosity and friendliness – especially John. Don't give up what you're doing, John, you're never too old for an 18 year old!

Our destination today was not too far - only about an hour's drive – the south rim of the **Grand Canyon**.

I had seen the GC back in 1980 when driving across the states on my way to a new life in Australia. I remembered being impressed then and wondered would that feeling be repeated?

It's all very organised – much more than I remember from 38 years ago. Bitumen roads, signposts, parking areas, huge campsites – all very well maintained and facilitated.

Normal people have to pay \$US30 a day but with our Life-time Senior Pass we got in for nowt and drove around to find our campsite. \$US18 a night! It's for nothing really, considering the situation and surrounds. As we put up our tent a couple of **Elk** wandered past and we would see numbers of them during our 24 hours on site crossing the road or just hanging out chewing grass and bushes – very cool!

We decided to walk down to the rim from the campsite. It turned out to be a bit further than we anticipated and with our mountain hike behind us I was pretty knackered by the time we reached the edge.

It was much as I remembered it – spectacular, huge, awesome, mind-boggling. Like photographs we take of it – I don't think there is an easy way to describe the Grand Canyon in one sentence. It's just f.....g amazing!

We spent some time just looking and wandered along a short part of the rim – trying, in honesty, to get away from other visitors – an impossibility, unfortunately - but it's still brilliant.

We had **Woodhouse's Scrub Jay** at the edge and looked in vain for a Condor.

On the way back to camp we found a **Juniper Titmouse**, **White-breasted Nuthatches**, **Mountain Chickadees**, **Red Crossbill**, **Black-throated Gray Warbler** and **Dark-eyed Junco** (the lighter version than that we had seen before).

We drove along the rim towards the Desert Lookout, but quit at **Grandview Point** – possibly the best advantage point, where I rang my eldest daughter, and mother of the recent arrival, in Australia to share the view on Facetime.

Back again at camp we sat for a while chatting, during which Mr H calmly told me he had an **Evening Grosbeak** on the ground a few meters away – stunning, stunning bird and my third Grosbeak this year.

After we'd finished with it, we headed out of the park to a restaurant on the main road. The Yippe Hi Ho Steakhouse seemed a good option and we indulged in ribs for me, steak for him, a beer each and all the accompanying beans, corn, 'biscuits' (bread rolls) and corn bread we could eat for \$US50.

Back at camp we did the log and crashed around 9.

Trip List – 264

Lifers – 223

Day 20 – 7.5.18

We had only planned the one day at the Grand Canyon and, unless you're going to hike down to the bottom, a day is probably enough. There are only so many pictures and videos one can take, continually realizing that you just can't capture the sheer bloody, grandeur of it all.

However, we went for an early morning drive, avoiding, initially, most of the crowds but that didn't last very long. We checked out the visitor centre first – didn't open until 9 - but the **Colorado Chipmunks** were cute to boot!

We actually had Mather Pt to ourselves – its right beside the visitor's centre and probably the most popular lookout place – for about two minutes, before the hordes arrived. A **Rock Squirrel** also departed rapidly in the face of the masses.

We drove all the way to Desert Lookout and back without seeing any sign of a Condor – our primary target. Being early in the morning, however, it was not the best time as there were few thermals in the cool air to tempt one into flight, we assumed.

On the way back, Pinon Jay was in our minds and we stopped at a couple of places to look for them. At one we walked off road into the bush – very easy to get lost, similar to mallee in Australia - no sign of any Jays, but we did find a single **Gray Flycatcher**. At another spot – a picnic area – we found a couple of **Grace's Warblers**.

We broke camp and left at 11. Another big day's drive. I started off for the first two hours until, along part of the old Route 66, we reached the Hualapai Indian Reservation near Peach Springs where we stopped for lunch. I had the stew, Mr H had the taco – pretty average stew, much like I'd make at home, but the fry bread was interesting.

Back on the road we stopped for fuel at Kingman (\$US36) and then continued on towards Las Vegas.

It turned out that our destination at **Pahrump** was actually 50 miles past Vegas and so it was 18.00 before we reached our Air BnB address. We hadn't realised how far away it was. This put a different perspective on our plans. We had a show in Vegas booked for the next night and wanted to spend some time looking at the 'strip' and the shops so would have to curtail our birding activities somewhat tomorrow morning.

However, we settled in to our separate bedrooms, had some of the hosts' delicious coffee and I spent most of the evening updating this getting to bed at 11.

Trip List – 265

Lifers – 224

Day 21 – 8.5.18

We got up at 6 and headed out into the heat at 6.45. We hadn't any serious destination in mind, but thoughts of Crissal Thrasher were predominant. We drove back up the road towards Vegas and down a side road that showed promise. We pulled in and wandered around the desert for a while, but there wasn't much going on so continued on down that road to turn off at a small sign that pointed to Cathedral Canyon.

There really wasn't a lot going on down there either, but we gave it our best shot and found **Black-tailed Gnatcatcher**, **Horned Larks**, **Phainopeplas**, **Black-throated & Black-chinned Sparrows**. A low flying accipiter initiated some discussion, but we reluctantly accepted it as a probable **Cooper's Hawk**.

There really didn't seem much point in going further so, instead, we drove down the main road to Pahrump central – if there is a centre. It seemed to go on and on for ever, with huge billboards and open spaces between business buildings and shops. One thing that stood out was the number of places selling fireworks! I suggested we have a look and so pulled into the next warehouse and went in to look at the stock, before, as I said to the girl, the place blows up. I'm sure she thought I was very funny.....

Apparently Nevada is one of the few states that allows the buying and selling of fireworks – all made in China. That probably won't last long with Mr T in charge. Anyway, folk come from all over to buy the things here in Nevada and, presumably, smuggle them home to their own state. It's strange really considering they go off with a loud noise and bright light. You'd think people would get busted easily really? Then again I suppose the evidence is immediately destroyed. This looks like it might be the first tick-less day of the trip! They are certainly getting harder to come by!

So we went to Las Vegas that afternoon. Spent the daylight hours walking the strip, buying some take home stuff, watching the gamblers in the casinos, seeing the fountains outside the Bellagio, marvelling at the sights and sounds.

Then we went to *Ka* – a Cirque de Soleil production. It was absolutely amazing. Just incredible. We were spellbound for the 90 minutes. As always Cirque did not disappoint.

After we found the car.....we drove the strip in heavy traffic. The lights were incredible. The ads, the videos, the buildings, the signs – I've never experienced anything like it. The crowds, the cars, the trucks. Just mind blowing. I've run out of adjectives.

Then it was a fast 50 mile drive home across empty desert at 80+ miles per hour – stimulating!

Trip list – 265

Lifers – 224

Day 22 – 9.5.18

We left early and drove for an hour and 40 minutes to [Corn Creek or Desert National Wildlife Range](#). On the way we passed a military air force base and as we passed a full scale military Predator-type drone took off.

We reached the reserve and wandered around the tracks for about two hours as it got hotter and hotter.

A **Black-necked or Eared Grebe** on the small dam was a real winner and we had flocks of Tanagers and Orioles in the mulberry trees. The fruit is incredibly sweet, easy to pick and looks and tastes like small blackberries. The birds love it.

We had **Black Phoebe, House Finches, Lazuli Buntings, Phainopeplas, Western Tanagers, Bullock's Orioles, Cassin's Kingbirds, Cedar Waxwings, Yellow & Yellow-rumped Warblers, Pine Siskins, Lesser Goldfinch** and, finally, **American Goldfinch**.

Along the tracks we had a few bits and pieces, but most of the action was around the mulberries. **Verdins, Gambel's Quail, White-winged Dove** and a **Cooper's Hawk**. Several **Great Basin Whiptails** scuttled around or, in the case of one specimen, sat in a bush to get the sun.

We stopped to have a look at a hut that was an aquarium to preserve most of the living remnants of the **Pahrump Poolfish**. Difficult to see in the thick algae-encrusted windows but, presumably, the fish we saw were the real deal.

We headed towards Las Vegas and [Henderson Bird Viewing Reserve](#). Very organised, very informative.

We wandered around the pools, scoping this and that – and it just got hotter and hotter.....

Among the more common stuff we had several **Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Say's Phoebe, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Common Gallinule, Western Grebe, Cinnamon Teal**, lots of **Black-necked /Eared Grebes, Gadwall, Wilson's Phalaropes**, a single female **Canvasback** (a lifer for me, but it only felt like half a tick as it was the female....) and great scope views of a **Least Bittern**.

And it got hotter and hotter.....

We also had a **Greater Roadrunner** trotting ahead of us between patches of shade so at last I got some photos – nearly all the others we have seen have been from the car along the road. This one was sort of obliging, although I think the heat probably contained him more than anything else.

I was nearly fainting from the heat and, possibly, lack of food – I hadn't eaten a big breakfast. We got back to the reception area and drank fresh bottles of water (we had been drinking water as we went, but it just didn't keep up)

When we got in the car it was 103 degrees F = 41C. We drove back to the main drag and found a Mackerels where we quickly stuffed up on the usual fare and, in my case, a large coffee.

Then it was the hour drive back 'home' to Pahrump – during which the thermometer in the car reached 107°F.....

Trip List - 269

Lifers – 227

Day 23 - 10.5.18

We spent some time looking for one of Mr H's socks that appeared to have blown away or been pinched by the dogs during the night. They had been hand knitted by an old woman on Rathlin Island and one was pretty useless on its own, considering he still has two good feet.

We gave up, packed up and headed out – only to spot the missing sock on the driveway. Thank God for that – an old woman on Rathlin Is will be happy.

We headed west, towards, and ultimately into, Death Valley.

Mr H had made a specific request to visit the Valley of Death and it was impressive.

Stark rock, sand, more rock, more sand.

The road wound its way down into the valley proper, down to about 200 feet below sea level, then across a dried lake bed and up a series of switchbacks to cross a pass at the far side. It was relatively early in the day so the temperature only got to about 92°F (~33°C).

We stopped in an area with a lot of Joshua Trees – just for the photos, a la U2.

As we ascended from the valley floor we pulled in at a bar/restaurant place for coffee and, while we were indulging, three or four military jets flew through the valley – pretty cool! China Lake testing ground was just over the hills – a secure military area facility for testing and training.

We went down the far side of the rim of the valley and were confronted by the 'back' of the Sierra range – some snow topped – a pretty impressive sight stretching north and south in front of us. Our road took us to the south, round the lower

end of the range and into the Kern area - a narrow valley of some length between medium height rocky slopes. We found our camping ground – KOA again – and checked in, set up camp and sat for a couple of hours reading in the shade. It was pretty windy and quite hot.

Later in the afternoon we went for a drive to check out potential birding sites for the next two days. We drove to Lake Isabella, 4 miles down the road and birded around the river flowing out of the main dam. We immediately had a lovely pair of **Goosanders** (trip tick) and searched in vain for American Dipper.

8 miles up the mountain beside the lake we stopped near the top and went for a stroll up a roughish track. The wind was still blowing hard in the tops of the tall pines and we didn't hold out much hope, however, 50 meters in a **Townsend's Solitaire** gave itself up to crippling views. Unexpected!

We moved on a little further and stopped again. As we checked out a **Dark-eyed Junco** beside the track a ringing call dragged our attention to a large dark bird over flying the track – **Pileated Woodpecker!** A totally unexpected bonus – we thought we were too far south to get this, so it was very rewarding. We didn't see much of the bird and it didn't respond to playback – hopefully in the next few days we'll have a repeat encounter.

We drove back down the mountain and found another first – our first American diner - and with a cute waitress. I had another first – meatloaf, while Mr H settled for beef strips.

With an hour or so of daylight left we checked another couple of birding spots then gave it away for the night.

Trip List – 272

Lifers – 229

Day 24 – 11.5.18

We were up at 5 after a restless night – flapping tents and disturbed mind.

We headed for the **Migration Corner** as it's called and walked in to an area off the very busy, fast road to some ponds. The area was generally very dry, but a couple of overgrown ponds were still in existence, despite the on-going drought.

We had Rails in mind, but failed to find or hear any. We did, though, get frustrating views of **Tri-coloured Blackbirds** among the **Red-winged** flying into the reed beds, finally getting views of one individual male perched up. We also had **Western Meadowlarks**, **Brewer's Blackbird**, a **White-tailed Kite**, **Western Wood Peewee** and, at last, great views of perched up **Tree Swallows**. (We've seen a lot of these, but none perched close, till now)

Leaving there we headed 9 miles up the road to **Kern Reserve**. Driving in slowly, as directed, we had birds on the track in front of the car – **Swainson's Thrushes**, **American Robins**, a **Mule Deer**, **Dark-eyed Junco** and, briefly, a female **Lawrence's Goldfinch**. (The area is renowned for this bird and it was our number one target for the day – we now have the double = Lincoln's Sparrow for my eldest grandson and Lawrence's Goldfinch for Mr H's!)

Walking the track we had **American & Lesser Goldfinch** and, eventually, a family party of **Lawrence's Goldfinch**, which were quite obliging.

While checking flycatchers we wandered a little off track and as we headed back a medium sized, dark, short-tailed cat stepped out in front of us about 20 meters away. For about 5 seconds it stood and stared - didn't get either bins or camera onto it – but it was a great surprise – a **Bobcat!** Brilliant – I had never expected to get this lucky, but, as they say – unlucky in love.....

We continued on after it vanished and finally got prolonged views of **Willow Flycatcher** - our second target bird for the site. We also had **Gold-crowned** and **Song Sparrow**, **Spotted Towhee** and another **Western Wood Peewee**.

We moved on up the road and finally found our third destination for the morning – **Cane Brake Reserve**. It was about a mile west of the, apparently defunct, Cane Brake Café.

We parked up and walked in. It was very dry and very dead. All we found here was a **Kildeer's** nest near the stone hut, **Oak Titmouse** and a possible fly-away **Cooper's Hawk**.

By now the wind had picked up again and was blowing a gale so we decided to go back to last night's diner for a late breakfast. I had poached eggs, bacon and the American form of hash browns. I also asked for 'biscuits and gravy' to see what exactly that was. It was a soft, cake like bread roll smothered in a white sauce - I didn't eat much of it.

Leaving there we fuelled up (\$US40) and headed off to try for Bendire's Thrasher at a location on Kelso Rd.

We wandered around the desert – again – with no thrasher in sight. We did have **Black-throated Sparrows**, **Horned Larks**, **Cactus Wren**, **White-tailed Antelope Squirrel** and a **White-tailed Jackrabbit**.

Back in the car, now close to midday, we decided to drive to the top of **Puite Mountain** in search of Pinon Jay.

It was a long winding drive up an unsealed, but recently graded, sandy track. The car handled it well, but it had its moments with no barrier and drops into the valley below that wouldn't have made the car rental company happy if we'd gone over.

We failed on the jay front but Mr H managed to pull a **Brewer's Sparrow** out of a bush and, with playback, we got a calling **Mountain Quail** to give itself up really well. The Quail here are stunning – they put Australian and European quail to shame.

By the time we got back down it was mid-afternoon and the wind was even worse. I retired to the bar attached to the campsite to update my photos and stuff while Mr H did some laundry.

At 17.00 we drove to the migrant corner again and went for a walk along the track above the river. We didn't see anything new, but more **Lawrence's Goldfinches** and **Western Wood Peeweese** were the highlight.

It was free ice cream night at the camp ground so we went.

Well, what can I say?

Anything for nothing!

Trip list – 276

Lifers – 233

Day 25 – 12.5.18

The wind had dropped, but we'd had a very disturbed night with the other occupants of the camp ground behaving noisily into the early hours of the morning.

Up the mountain as soon as we could get going. Our targets today were White-headed Woodpecker and better views of Pileated and, hopefully, more Townsend's Solitaires.

It was very cold, in relative terms, when we reached the top at 5,000 feet and we rugged up with jackets, beanie and gloves. We started at the top of the unsealed road leading off the junction to the right, beyond this point the forest was badly damaged by fire and only skeletal pines remained.

Mr H was puzzled by a singing bird he couldn't find and we poked around for a while looking for it before driving back down to the junction and up to the ski area carpark. With a bit of effort, we had a couple of **Hairy Woodpeckers** respond to playback for White-headed – the call is similar – and a distant **Townsend's Solitaire** perched on top of a pine. Apart from that it was only **Mountain Chickadees**.

We went back to the top of the unsealed road and looked again for the mystery songster. Eventually we did find it – **Fox Sparrow**. A remarkably large sparrow with streaked breast, dark face and rufous wings – it was surprising we hadn't been able to find it on our first visit.

I played Pygmy Owl and the reaction was enormous – **Lawrence's Goldfinch**, **Western Tanager**, **Wilson's**, **Townsend's & Yellow-rumped Warbler** and **Mountain Chickadees** all appeared as if by magic. However, the **Fox Sparrows** remained in thick bush and I didn't get any photos. A **Hammond's Flycatcher**, however, sat up well.

We decided to walk back along the track towards the road as Mr H felt we stood a chance of seeing more stuff on foot. Correct, of course, but it seemed like nothing was happening for several hundred meters. Then a loud tapping started right beside the track and a female **Pileated Woodpecker** was found half hidden behind a pine trunk. We had crippling views for quite some time, but photos were difficult due to intervening branches.

Walking on, leaving her to her business, a hundred meters further down the track I checked a hole in a dead pine and found the male sitting inside – he stuck his head out and looked around and eventually flew out to glide away through the trees to join his mate. We were at almost the most southerly point of their range so to find them breeding and see them well made the day worthwhile.

We decided to follow the road to Kernville to see if the forest was any better and reached the small well developed township around 11. Stopping at Cheryl's Diner we sat at the counter and ordered a large stack of pancakes each. The waitress said that was a pretty big meal and were we sure? We accepted the challenge and got stuck in. Neither of us completely finished, but we made a good effort and staggered out stuffed with carbs and sugar. A walk around the town didn't help a lot, but we set off up the road beside the river stopping at likely spots to check for Dipper.

The river was impressive, fuelled by snow melt, it would have taken a strong Dipper to contend with the current. White water rafting and kayaking seemed to be the main business for the town and the river access points were pretty busy – especially being a Saturday. We drove for miles up the valley, but saw little of interest until we gave it away and turned back.

We took the back road round the lake and stopped off at one high point when Mr H spotted a gull. There were 7 **Western Gulls** loafing around the edge of the lake, about 15 **Western** and 2 **Black-necked Grebes** and a single **Bonaparte's Gull**. Three **Spotted Sandpipers** fed along the shore and a **Rock Wren** popped up on the edge of the carpark to check us out. We headed back to camp and had a microwave dinner nuked in the microwave in the camp kitchen area.

As darkness approached we headed the 24 miles back up the mountain to go owling.

The wind had picked up during the day and it was only about 7°C when we parked up back at the end of the unsealed road. We started there once darkness fell and tried for Western Screech, Northern Saw-whet and Flammulated at several locations down to the first houses without any success. I don't know if it was too cold, too windy, the wrong time of year or the woodland is too degraded by fire, but we came away disappointed.

Trip list – 277

Lifers – 234

Day 26 – 13.5.18

Another big day driving. We left Kern at 6.45 and headed west. It had been over two weeks since we'd seen the sea and spent a lot of time in the desert in the meantime, so we were looking forward to seeing the ocean again.

The road from Kern to Bakersfield, incidentally, is very scenic. It runs along the side of the Kern River and is winding and narrow, full concentration and focus required – not recommended for larger campervans, but a delight to drive if you enjoy driving – I do.

From Bakersfield up Hwy 101 it was pretty flat and boring, but we turned off after an hour or so and headed towards Colinya. The road after Colinya is again winding and narrow and, again, a sheer enjoyment to drive though this time through more open pasture/grassland. It was while I was negotiating a particularly nasty little set of three tight corners at about 90 k/hr with Pink Floyd blasting on the stereo that Mr H half-shouted "MAGPIE, MAGPIE! IT'S A **YELLOW-BILLED**

MAGPIE! We got quite a good view, despite the timing and speed, of a bird landing on top of a solar panel on a pole. I had nowhere to pull up *'and'*, we said, *'we'll see plenty more I'm sure'*.

Another half an hour and I saw one drop into a field, this time I managed to stop and we walked across to flush three birds from the field and I got very basic shots of one.

We carried on and found our campground in Carmel at 12.30. Our campsite was half way further up the hillside up a very steep unsealed road, but we set up camp then headed down to the coast.

We reached the sea a few miles south of our target area – Pt Pinos – and drove around for a while tied up in the Mother's Day/Sunday afternoon crowds.

We eventually managed to find our way north to where we thought Pt Pinos was and found ourselves in a queue to drive the 17 Mile Drive through private property. We THOUGHT this was Pt Pinos and so paid the required \$US10.25 entrance fee. It turned out NOT to be Pt Pinos but by then it was too late and we carried on.

It actually proved to be quite successful as we stopped at a lookout point and immediately had **Sea Otters** loafing in the floating kelp. This was a prime target for me – I have always wanted to see these guys and they were just as I had imagined. Cute to boot!

Bird-wise we had **Pelagic** and **Brandt's Cormorants**, dozens of Diver sp fly bys, some definitely **Pacific Divers**, **Brown Pelicans**, **Western** and **Californian Gulls** and a couple of **Black Oystercatchers** put in an appearance.

Further along at a beach we had heaps of **Sanderling**, **1 Wandering Tattler** and more **Black Oystercatchers**. We stopped at 'Gull Island' and viewed the nesting 300+ **Brandt's Cormorants**, with their bright blue gular pouches, in the scopes. There were also about 100 **California Sea Lions** on the rocks and in the water. At another stop we had a handful of **Harbour Seals** on the rocks of the 'Seal Pupping Beach' and a **Whimbrel** on the rocks.

Eventually we quit the pay-as-you-go peninsula and headed round to **Pt Pinos** itself. We had promised ourselves not to stop as we planned to come here again tomorrow anyway and we hadn't eaten anything all day. It was approaching 17.00 and we were pretty famished, however, half way round the headland Mr H saw a dark bird with a whitish head sitting on a rock and we stopped to make sure it wasn't Heerman's Gull. It wasn't – it was a juvenile Cormorant, but we grabbed the scopes and checked out the area anyway. More Sea Otters, some quite close and a single female **Surf Scoter** – yet another lifer for me, hopefully there'll be some males around in the next day or two.

We did a drive by of Cannery Row and Fisherman's Wharf, but didn't stop or try to park among the hordes of tourists, but headed back towards our campsite. We stopped off at a local Safeways for some food, then asked about a place to eat?

We ended up in the Trailside Café in the local village which suited us very well – heaps of coffee, fish and chips for me and a beer and fish tacos for Mr H then it was time to go home, shower, do the log and crash.

Trip list – 285

Lifers - 238

Day 27 – 14.5.18

We woke to the sound of crows going off in the trees on the slope above our campsite. Soon afterwards the deep hoot of a **Great Horned Owl** sounded. We never saw the bird but it was pretty close until we started moving around then it moved off, still calling.

A seawatch off **Pt Pinos** was our first objective. We were on site at 7, the sun had risen, but there was a slight mistiness about the morning. The sea was almost flat calm with just a lazy swell disturbing the surface. It was quite cold, less than 10°C – gloves, beanies & jacket time.

We set up and started watching – hundreds of **Brandt's Cormorants** flew right, heading into the bay to feed. Hundreds, again literally, of **Divers sp**, mostly **Pacific**, with a few **Great Northern**, heading the same way. Unidentifiable (for the most part) **Auks** in small numbers, mostly far out, hurtled past on a similar mission. **Brown Pelicans**, also in relatively small numbers, were scattered from here to the horizon, gliding and flapping slowly requiring constant verification – i.e. that they WERE just Pelicans. **Sea Otters** were continually in view lounging around on the weed mats floating on the sea surface. **Harbour Seals** called mournfully and frolicked around in the shallow waters between the rocks. Small numbers of **Surf Scoter**, mostly female, also flew past. Further out, almost on the horizon it seemed, small numbers of **Sooty Shearwaters** moved back and forth. Around our feet the cutest **Rock Squirrels** scampered looking for hand-outs and of course, there were dozens of **Western Gulls** of all ages and moults to confuse and mislead....

It was all going on!

A trio of small Auks flew in closer and landed a few hundred meters off the rocks. We determined they were **Cassin's Auklets**, probably the commonest Alcid in the area. **Common Guillemots** were the next commonest on our seawatch, passing singly every now and again.

A large dark bird a long way off initiated discussion – it really was a long, long way away and in the haze....however, during the course of our three hour seawatch we saw a couple much closer, but never 'close' – **Black-footed Albatross** – Mr H's first albert! It may have been the same bird moving back and forth, but we saw 'five'.

Much later a large, paler brown, slower flapping, shearwater was spotted – we're pretty sure it was a **Flesh-footed Shearwater**. Finally, Mr H spotted a single small Alcid sitting on the surface some way to our right. We moved to get as close as possible and had reasonable views of a **Marbled Murrelet**.

Cetacean-wise we saw large numbers of huge curved triangular fins, the animal itself appeared grey and the few brief views we had of the head suggested Risso's Dolphin – but we still had to confirm ID – hopefully on Wednesday when we go on our whale-watching pelagic.

Meanwhile the divers, cormorants, scoters, pelicans and other stuff continued. There was always something to watch – it was just extraordinary.

We sat for three hours as rugged up as possible as it was quite cold and there was hardly any wind – just a gentle sea breeze. The sea remained fairly calm, just the same swell and we were pretty low relative to the sea level, probably only a few meters above, so losing birds between the swells was annoying, but it was still a pretty exciting three hours! If only we'd had the strong wind of yesterday.

We decided to try for Black Turnstone and Surfbirds along the rocks. An E-bird report had indicated somebody had had one BT on a beach nearby yesterday. We searched every rock between Pt Pinos and the beach and most of them the other way too, but could not find a single bird of either species.

Near The Cannery, as we checked a beach full of sleeping Harbour Seals, I collared a local birder as he tried to get away in his car and we interrogated him in relation to our target species.

He suggested a couple of sites 30 miles north at Moses Landing and we let him go once he had coughed up the information.

By this stage we were dying on our feet for food and coffee and repaired to First Awakenings in The Cannery for a superb breakfast.

Then it was on the road north for 30 minutes or so.

We flew down Highway 1 to a wetland area. Our targets were the ever elusive Virginia and Sora Rails.

We tried. Oh did we try.....

...several locations based on the local birders suggestions, with no luck whatsoever.

He had also suggested a tidal estuary type place just north of **Moses Landing** itself for Black Turnstone at low tide. It seemed strange to us that a rock-type bird might go to mud flats at low tide – however, we followed his directions, and Ms Sweet-knees on my iPad (I think I'm in love), to **Jetty st** and easily found the exposed mud banks as described.

No sign of any bloody Turnstones, but we did have **Western Sandpipers, Long-billed Curlews, Marbled Godwits, Dunlin** and a **Grey Plover**.

As we left and were passing Moses Landing itself Mr H spotted the harbour rock walls so we turned off to investigate those. We didn't find any Turnstones there either, but there were numbers of **Brown Pelicans** perched on the rocks and I got some great video and shots of a feeding **Sea Otter**. Offshore there was also a large flock of **Surf Scoter** some way out and dozens of **Black-necked Grebes**.

We headed back to Monterey and Pt Pinos and set ourselves up for an afternoon seawatch – it was now 17.00, dark at 20.00.

We sat for an hour or so. The local birder turned up again so we obviously hadn't scared him off this morning. He was, in fact, a part of the Black Oystercatcher protection mob and had been out on the rocks setting up warning signs to keep people away from a BO's nest with two eggs. We could see her sitting on them.

He and an older guy chatted for a while until we knew all there was to know about the BO protection scheme, the numbers of birds, the numbers of successful chicks last year and the size and shape of their territories. It was all very interesting.

Meanwhile the local birder told us he had had a Black Turnstone on the rocks in front of us 'thirty minutes' ago.

After we had stove his head in with a tripod and fed his body to the ever-hungry Rock Squirrel who kept eyeing us off, we went down on the rocks and tried to find the dam bird – no luck again. Incidentally, while we were sitting we had (illegally) fed the dam Squirrel a few grapes. This encouraged its boldness and, as Mr H was not wearing his squirrel-repellent trousers, it ran up his leg, almost into his lap. It's lucky it didn't get kicked into the sea but it was just too fast....

They really are far too cute though – who can resist?

We finally gave it away at 18.00. The only birds doing much moving around were hundreds if not a thousand or more, **Sooty Shearwaters** way, way out now heading south, presumably to roost. The 'Risso's Dolphins' (and I use that term loosely, still not proven) were also in evidence again, their massive curved fins cutting across the ocean like sabres.

We thought we'd check out a park close to where we were staying for a potential owling visit after dark. So we rocked up at **Garland Ranch Park** and walked in across a lovely dipper-friendly-looking river. Almost immediately we had a number of **Cedar Waxwings** fussing around in some low scrub, then Mr H spotted one of our last potential target land birds – **Chestnut-backed Chickadee**. We moved around to the far side of the belt of trees and had excellent views.

Happy with that we drove on down the road to have dinner at the Trailside Café again. The owner welcomed us back and made sure the coffee was fresh. I made sure his time wasn't wasted and drank three cups.

Then it was home to do the log and.....take a walk up the hill above our tent to try to locate the possible Flammulated Owl Mr H thought he had heard at 3am this morning when he had had to get up and out of his tent before he made a mess of himself.

We tried for all 3 species again but the only 'response' we got was a pair of **Great Horned Owls** hooting away out of sight above us. Whether they 'rule the roost' and other owls don't venture in or whether there just weren't any of the other species around tonight I don't know, but we got no other response. However, it's not every day one starts and finishes the day with a GHO.

We also found a **Pacific Banana Slug** *Ariolimax columbianus* - the slug to give all cabbage growers the willies.....

We were keen to do another seawatch – I mean who wouldn't be? - and hoped the wind had improved so headed down to **Pt Pinos** again after the usual morning rituals.

On the way I spotted a **Gray Fox** in a field beside the road and stopped to take photos.

At the Point the wind was non-existent – it was even calmer than yesterday. Oily calm. There was bugger all happening so far as passing birds were concerned – yes, the 'usual' **Brandt's Cormorants**, but only a few, mostly distant, **Divers, Auks** and very distant numbers of **Sooty Shearwaters**.

We gave it an hour and as Mr H had worn his Squirrel-repellent trousers we didn't even have the excitement of one attempting to get at his nuts.

We decided to drive the Big Sur. Unfortunately, due to mudslides the road was closed, so we knew we couldn't drive the whole way to Morro Bay tomorrow instead we'll have to use the inland road. Strangely enough there are no side roads accessing the coast road so you can drive to the closure, but then have to turn and drive back.

So we drove the 67 miles (~130 kms) to the end of the open road, had a coffee and drove back. We looked in vain for Condors but found only **Turkey Vultures** and **Red-tailed Hawks**.

It was interesting, but I wouldn't say it was very exciting. The Great Ocean Rd in Victoria or the Atlantic Way in Ireland would give it a run for its money, but it is scenic and as we were doing it early we had the road almost to ourselves. The return journey was a bit different but the traffic then going out was endless, so if you're ever doing the Big Sur, drive it early in the morning.

Back at camp we had some lunch, then cleaned out all the stuff from the car except the bins and scopes – and went to a local carwash where for \$US23 + \$US5 tip, we had it cleaned to within an inch of its life.

Then we went down to do another seawatch at **Pt Pinos** as the wind seemed to have picked up.

It hadn't really, and the ocean was still very quiet. It looked like our second tick-less day had come around.

Then Mr H spotted two white-headed, dark gulls flying purposefully south. At last – and much to our pleasure – we had two adult **Heermann's Gulls**. They winter about as far north as Monterey, then move south to breed in Mexico, so we had almost given up thinking we would get this one, but got it we did.

We sat on for a while then drove along the coast looking for the gulls. Luckily we found them not far away and I struggled manfully across the rocks to get some poor photos.

We went to do some shopping, happy with our successful twitch, then headed home and put all our stuff back in our now spotless car then we just relaxed at camp, had dinner and a couple of beers.

Trip list – 295

Lifers – 243

Day 29 – 16.5.18

We were up bright and early, breakfasted, broke camp and were on Fisherman's Wharf by 7.30 for a 9.00 sailing. Keen? We were ready to rock 'n' roll, bins cleaned, warm clothes on, camera battery charged, even a tablet taken – just in case.

The boat sailed on time with about 70 non-birders on board. It was, after all, a whale watching pelagic, not a birding pelagic. Still, we had high hopes. If we could only get far enough offshore we were sure to see good stuff, we thought. The biologist/ host dude on board identified us as birders and spent some time talking to us about what he had seen, what we might see and what we probably wouldn't see while the boat boarded and set sail.

At the end of the pier he pointed out a large colony of **California Sea Lions** frolicking around the rocks. We pointed out immature **Heermann's Gulls** in the same area.

We headed out into the bay in search of whales and within 5 minutes had identified our probable Risso's Dolphins as definite **Risso's Dolphins**. We saw about 40, but none really breached.

It was flat calm – perfect for the non-pelagic punters on board, but worrying for us as not much was in the air.

We continued on seeing some **Harbour Porpoises** porpoising past, then the first **Humpback** was sighted.

And that was really that so far as birding was concerned. We spent the next two hours hanging around watching Humpbacks dive to feed, coming back to the surface among a huge herd of feeding Sea Lions and diving again.....right beside the boat, mind you. As a whale trip it was pretty good, but as for birding? It was pretty shit.

We saw a couple of **Common Guillemots**, several **Pigeon Guillemots** and a handful of both adult and immature **Heermann's Gulls** which I spent my time taking photos of.

By 13.00 we were back in port.

We did a bit of shopping, then had lunch in a restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf – fish and chips of course, what else do you have on Fisherman's Wharf?

Then we headed south on the first leg of our journey to LA and home.

We had to use the inland road because, as I mentioned earlier, the Big Sur was blocked halfway down, but following up on a tip from a friend we turned off early and then headed north back up the coast to **San Simeon**, another 7 miles and we were at the **Elephant Seal** beach viewing area – very well signposted!

Amazing to see so many pulled out on the beach, sleeping, occasionally arguing, flipping sand over themselves and making, apparently pointless, efforts to get a better position – even if it meant climbing over their neighbour.

We stayed for a half an hour or so, then moved on south to Morro Bay.

Good tip Mr D, thanks!

Black Bloody Turnstones were still on our minds so we stopped off at a spot Mr H had researched just north of the Bay and checked out a patch of rocks – nothing.

I tell you, I am over these freaking Turnstones. If I have looked at one rock, I've looked at a bloody million and I'm really starting to doubt they even exist.

Anyway, we went on and stopped off at another spot - this time for rails. Another two species that have frustrated the hell out of us. Sora and Virginia Rail (almost like two sisters when you say it like that). I've played the tape so many times I could do it in my sleep. All, so far, to no avail. Maybe this time will be different?

Nope. It wasn't.

The info for this spot had claimed that Soras were used to coming out to be fed bread, for God's sake. We didn't have any bread with us, but they still didn't come out just to check, I mean, we *might* have had some bread..... A sign on the fence advised against feeding the wildlife. Maybe this has stopped the process.

On again and by this time we were both fairly knackered, so we found our campsite at 19.30, the Morro Bay State Park, on the peninsula. No one was there to check us in, but we found our, pretty rough, table-less, campsite and set up. I mention the lack of table cause everyone else seemed to have one except us and its pretty important when you don't have your own.

I mean where do we put the tablecloth now?

We had researched – or Mr H had, as I drove – a potential owling spot, but it was 28 miles away and we decided '*f..k it, we've done enough*' and crashed.

Another, but only our second, tick-less day. Bird-wise anyway. We did get a mammal tick.

Trip list – 295

Lifers - 243

Day 30 – 17.5.18

The last day - and then it would be back to the realities of life at home.

We had three target species we thought we might have locations for in a last ditch, roll of the dice, attempt on our way back to LA.

But first we had to pack up and get rid of the extra stuff we had bought along the way – the camp chairs, the washing up bowl, the camp light and my pillow. The remaining food we dumped into the large waste bin at the campsite, Mr H packed the lamp to take back to Belfast with him and the seats, pillow and bowl we left at the dumpster for someone to find a use for. We had already given the Hummingbird feeder to a Dutch family we met in Monterey who had a few days more than us left on their holiday with the request they pass it on to someone else when they left.

So we tidied up, packed everything away in preparation for the airport and headed south.

First up – the Black Bloody Turnstone. The end of the peninsula was noted as a reliable spot so we headed there. We stopped at a small cove on the way – **Spooner Cove**. No Turnstone but heaps of **Pigeon Guillemots**. And, as we left the parking area, two **California Thrashers** ran across the road.

We parked up again on the cliff top and walked out along the **Bluff Track**. Quite birdy – **California Towhee, Song & White-crowned Sparrows** and heaps of **Brown Pelicans** flying low along the cliff line provided ample opportunity for the camera.

At the edge of the cliff an overview of the weed and mussel encrusted rock platform was daunting. How could one find one bird among all this? As Mr H put it – why would you leave all this? (meaning the BT of course).

We scanned and searched with the time we had, but no sign of any of these mythical (?) birds. A pair of **Black Oystercatchers** were the only real interest on the rocks.

We moved on.

A couple of hours later and 100 miles further south we ended up at **Oso Flaco Reserve**. It was accessed along dirty, narrow roads running through endless agriculture. But it was surprisingly birdy – maybe because there wasn't anywhere else for the birds to go in the immediate vicinity.

The trees dripped warblers – **Yellow, Townsend's & Wilson's** - a **Cooper's Hawk** fly low and a **Downy Woodpecker** fed in a nearby tree. **Bushtits, American Goldfinch & Robin** and **Song Sparrows** all in the first 100 meters of the track.

Our target here were the two rails – Sora and Virginia - so the ponds were the main area of interest.

We turned left and started out across a boardwalk checking off **Marsh Wren, Cinnamon Teal, Gadwall, Pied-billed Grebes** and **Ruddy Duck**. Two birders were coming back towards us and we stopped to ask if anything was about.

They listed a few things we'd already seen but when Mr H mentioned the rail sisters, they said a Sora had been out on the mud just a bit further along. They said some other stuff too, but all we heard was '**Sora, Sora, Sora**' (like the movie but with an S instead of a T). Eventually we managed to detach ourselves and pushed on the 50 meters or so to where we could see a small beach of mud. At first it looked like nothing was there, but then a shape materialized on the right hand end and we, finally, had one of the sisters in the bag. *Hallelujah! Saints be praised!* I know it's not a rarity, but when you've tried for these things for a month.....

We hung around for a while, but it didn't reappear and we had to go.

Next stop – another mountain top, this time near Santa Barbara at the now closed **Condor research/rehabilitation centre**.

We turned off the highway at A street in Fillmore and drove up the narrow, twisting, part dirt, part broken bitumen road to an unsealed carpark, 4 miles up the mountain.

We followed two hikers up a side track past the Do Not Enter sign and found ourselves on a small plateau with a grand vista. It was Condor-perfect.

An hour later and it had become the worst Condor lookout in the known universe.....

Yep, another one to come back for...

We headed back down the hill and on towards LA. Hitting the early afternoon, or maybe it's always like that, traffic was a test of nerves.

Six lanes, everyone doing at least 70 miles an hour, swapping and changing lanes, turning off, merging, trucks, motorbikes, big F Off 4WDs, small saloons.....wild!

I took us into the Car Pool lane as the only requirements were that at least 2 people were on board. We made some progress but soon enough the whole freeway ground to an almost halt and we crawled along then for another 45 minutes or so.

It was getting late now.

We needed to eat. I wanted to go to a Walmart to try and get a camo shirt and we needed to refuel the car before dropping it back – by 18.00. Mr H's flight was scheduled for 19.50 so we needed to make sure he checked in in plenty of time.

It was 16.15 by the time we got to the Walmart – 5 minutes and we started to walk out – no camo shirts.

Where to eat? The only option seemed Macker's in the Walmart – so we ate there as our final meal in USA.

Then it was on to drop the car off – back onto the freeway and it was slowing. I changed three lanes in one fell swoop and got us into the car pool lane again, which luckily was doing 80mph. This lasted for about 10 kms, then it was back across 5 lanes to the exit at a ridiculous rate of knots to find a service station, fill up (\$US47) and up the road to the drop off depot. The usual chaotic fuss of getting everything out of the car, listening to the dude regarding whatever about the car, getting everything onto the shuttle bus and then sitting back and waiting to get to the airport going over in your mind – did I take everything out? The iPod? The charger cables? The iPad? Have I got my passport? What time is it? The usual mayhem...

Mr H checked in quickly then left to go through security – it was 18.30. My flight didn't leave till 22.30 so, once again, I had a few hours to kill in the airport.

I checked in and went through security, where they checked my 'scope for explosives, and then settled in for the wait.

Eventually I boarded and the flight left at 22.55. The plane was half empty and I had my three seat window row to myself which made the flight a lot more comfortable, being able to stretch out and sleep at times.

We landed 20 minutes late at 5.50am on Saturday 19th (Brisbane time & date) and Mr P picked me up as planned which was also great!

Trip List – 293

Lifers - 244

We drove 5,069 miles (8,448 kms)

We put the tents up 9 times.

We camped 20 nights out of the 29.

Coincidentally, we took the tents down 9 times too.

We survived -3°C and +43°C.

I lost my spoon.

I ended up with 3,100 photos saved from the 10 million I took.