

Central California: Yosemite to Monterey Itinerary

[Link: Central California: Yosemite to Monterey](#)

Tour Overview

Endemics, world-class pelagic, towering redwoods and Yosemite!

Our California birding tour will take you from the scenic Great Basin deserts to the magnificent high mountains of the Sierra Nevada, and from rocky Pacific Ocean shorelines and productive wetlands to the towering coast redwoods to world-class pelagic birding.

Pelagic boat rides out into Monterey Bay are among the most exciting in the world, for the cool California Current brings nutrient rich waters close to land and provide feeding grounds for many North Pacific species and large numbers of migrants from further south. Add to this a rich landbird fauna, including endemics and several near endemics, and great numbers of shorebirds migrating south from northern breeding grounds to Monterey Bay and Mono Lake. Throw in a visit to world-famous Yosemite National Park, plus the chance to see once again a California Condor soaring majestically in the wild, and we have a superb and spectacular tour.

Central California also hosts a remarkable array of mammals, from sea otters to marine mammals. Dramatic landscapes, superb pelagic birds and mammals and exciting birds on land make for a very enjoyable California birding tour.

Itinerary

Day 1: Arrival in Reno



Our California birding tour begins with our arrival in Reno, Nevada, and a meet-and-greet dinner. This will be a chance to meet the other participants and discuss the upcoming adventure. Night in Reno.

Days 2 & 3: Lee Vining



Today we head south across the Great Basin Desert on our way to Lee Vining, stopping to look at birds along the way. We'll look for some iconic western birds such as California Quail, California Gull, California Scrub-Jay, Black-billed Magpie, Great-tailed Grackle, Lesser Goldfinch, and Bewick's Wren. Lee Vining lies in a beautiful area where sagebrush desert meets mountains on the shore of Mono Lake, one of North America's oldest lakes. This ancient saline, alkaline lake is famous for its unusual tufa formations, many of which were exposed as water levels dropped following water diversions to Southern California. Birding around Mono Lake, we'll focus on lakefront and wooded habitats. At the lakefront County Park, a well-known migrant trap, we'll first bird the trees for migrant landbirds such as Northern Yellow, MacGillivray's, and Wilson's Warblers. From the park boardwalk, we'll look for Marsh Wrens and Virginia Rails. At the lake, we'll look for Red-necked Phalaropes, along with growing concentrations of Eared Grebes and California Gulls. Ospreys nest on some of the tufa formations. One of the highlights of a trip to the Mono Lake area is a visit to the sagebrush desert surrounding the ghost town of Bodie. On the way, we'll hope to find three species of jays: Pinyon, Steller's, and Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays. Closer to town we'll look for such sought-after sagebrush specialists as Sage Thrasher; Sagebrush, Brewer's, and Vesper Sparrows; and, with some luck, Greater Sage-Grouse. During our time in the area, we'll also visit higher-elevation forest to look for species such as Williamson's Sapsucker, Cassin's Finch, and possibly Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch in the mixed aspen-conifer forests above town. Two nights in Lee Vining.

Days 4 & 5: Yosemite National Park



After a morning birding around Mono Lake, we travel up the eastern foothills of the Sierra Nevada, crossing 9,945-foot-high Tioga Pass into Yosemite National Park for a two-night stay. Birding stops along the way include Tuolumne Meadows, where we will look for Mountain Bluebirds and Red Crossbills, and we should see Belding's Ground Squirrels near their burrows along the trail. Other high-elevation birding stops could turn up Mountain Chickadee, Dark-eyed Junco, Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Cassin's Vireo, and Clark's Nutcracker. Yosemite National Park is a vast wilderness with some of the most spectacular scenery anywhere; its forests span elevations from around 2,000 to over 13,000 feet, and the park encompasses huge waterfalls, deep valleys, grand meadows, and ancient giant sequoias. This superb park contains five major vegetation zones: chaparral/oak woodland, lower montane, upper montane, subalpine, and alpine. Breathtaking vistas combine with natural wonders such as Bridalveil Fall, Half Dome, Sentinel Dome, and Cathedral Rocks. Woodpeckers are particularly well represented, with possibilities including Red-breasted and Williamson's Sapsuckers and Hairy, White-headed, Pileated, and Black-backed Woodpeckers. White-throated and Vaux's Swifts are sometimes sighted soaring overhead, while songbirds we may encounter include Orange-crowned, Black-throated Gray, Townsend's, Nashville, and MacGillivray's Warblers. American Dippers may be seen along fast-flowing rivers. With luck, we may also encounter Mountain Quail and Sooty Grouse. Two nights in Yosemite.

Days 6 - 7: Monterey area



After some early morning birding, we drive to Monterey for a two-night stay. On the drive from Yosemite, we pass through foothill woodland and oak savannah that supports Greater Roadrunner, Lewis's and Acorn Woodpeckers, Oak Titmouse, and Say's Phoebe. Lower down we'll cross flat open basins where Prairie Falcons and Golden Eagles hunt. The Monterey Peninsula supports groves of coast redwoods and cypresses, rocky and sandy shores, and mudflats. Rocky shores are frequented by Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants, and our scan of the rocks may turn up Black Oystercatcher, Black Turnstone, Wandering Tattler, or Surfbird. On offshore rocky outcrops, California Sea Lions loaf, while nearby Sea Otters can be found among the kelp beds. Oak and conifer woods and chaparral support Acorn and Nuttall's Woodpeckers, Wild Turkey, Bushtit, Western Tanager, and Purple Finch. Range-restricted Tricolored Blackbirds are often found in small marshy areas or around local dairies. Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve is a fine reserve of estuary, coastal marsh, and oak and pine woodlands, supporting egrets, herons, waterfowl, shorebirds, Red-shouldered Hawk, and Hutton's Vireo. One day we travel to Pinnacles National Park, an area of riparian woodland, canyons, and chaparral dominated by spectacular eroded volcanic rock formations. Here, we look for the endemic Yellow-billed Magpie, as well as Prairie Falcon, Say's Phoebe, Oak Titmouse, California Thrasher, Rufous-crowned and Bell's Sparrows, Lawrence's Goldfinch, and Phainopepla. Pinnacles is also an important site for the recovery of the California Condor, and we will look for these magnificent birds soaring over the canyons—an exhilarating spectacle. The Monterey Peninsula extends into the Pacific Ocean, sometimes allowing excellent views of shearwater concentrations offshore, while closer inshore we'll look for Pigeon Guillemot and Pelagic Cormorant. Oak and conifer woodlands and riparian thickets provide shelter for resident and migrating landbirds, including Anna's Hummingbird, Band-tailed Pigeon, Steller's Jay, Western Flycatcher, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, and Bushtit. We'll look especially for warblers, including Hermit, Townsend's, and Wilson's. California Quail scurry across clearings, White-tailed Kites hover overhead, and Black Phoebes and Western Bluebirds are also found here. In drier chaparral, another distinctive group of birds occurs—the elusive Wrentit, along with Spotted Towhee and California Scrub-Jay. Two nights in Monterey.

Day 8: Monterey to Half Moon Bay

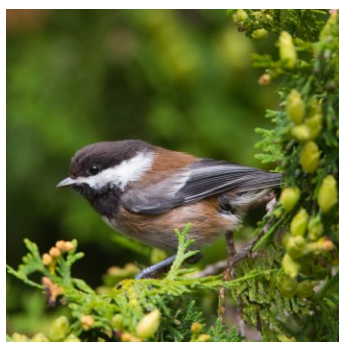
After some final birding in the Monterey area, we make our way north along the Central California coast toward Half Moon Bay. Along the way, brackish lagoons, estuaries, beaches, and sandbars provide excellent opportunities for shorebirds. Western and Least Sandpipers, Marbled Godwit, Long-billed Curlew, both species of dowitchers, Willet, and Hudsonian Whimbrel are among the possibilities. Elegant and Caspian Terns can occur alongside Western, Heermann's, and California Gulls, while Snowy and Semipalmated Plovers and Sanderlings forage along beaches and sandbars. We'll arrive in Half Moon Bay ready for the following day's offshore adventure. We spend the next two nights in Half Moon Bay.

Day 9: Half Moon Bay Pelagic



Today we take a pelagic boat trip from Half Moon Bay, heading offshore toward the productive deep waters associated with Pioneer Canyon. Upwelling of nutrient-rich water attracts a wide variety of pelagic seabirds. Black-footed Albatross, Northern Fulmar, Sooty, Pink-footed and Buller's Shearwaters, Ashy Storm-Petrel, Sabine's Gull, Arctic Tern, South Polar Skua, jaegers, auklets, murrelets, and Red and Red-necked Phalaropes are among the many possibilities. Whale watching can also be excellent, with various dolphins and other cetaceans possible. The pelagic is approximately 10 hours. Night in Half Moon Bay.

Day 10: Transfer to San Francisco



Today we head up the coast to explore a beautiful grove of coastal redwoods, including some spectacular old growth trees. While appreciating the beauty of the tallest trees in the world, we may also spot some Pacific Wrens, Townsend's Warblers, or Chestnut-backed Chickadees. We then continue to San Francisco. Arriving in San Francisco early enough to beat the traffic, we should have time to stop by a wetland near our hotel and look for shorebirds we might have missed up to this point, as well as Ridgway's Rail. Shorebirds we may see include Willets, Marbled Godwits, American Avocets, Black-bellied Plovers, and Short-billed Dowitchers. Night in San Francisco.

Day 11: Departure

Our Central California birding tour ends today, we can depart anytime for our flights home.

What to Expect

Overview

The California tour is a moderately paced birding tour. You can expect early mornings and long days in the field or driving.

Food

We generally have breakfast at the hotel before we head out for the day. Sometimes we will have optional pre-breakfast walks. We often take a picnic lunch in the field, but will occasionally stop at a restaurant for lunch. Dinner is usually at the lodge or a nearby restaurant. Each evening after dinner we compile the day's checklist, review the day's activities, birds, mammals and other observations, and plan the next day's activities.

The tour cost includes continental breakfasts and lunches. Picnic lunches will be supplied on most days, and box lunches will be provided for the pelagic trip.

Accommodation

We stay at comfortable hotels or motels for the duration of this tour.

Walking

Walking will be easy to moderate. At Año Nuevo and Andrew Molera State Park, we could walk up to a total distance of around 3km (just under 2 miles). Año Nuevo may involve walking on sand. Apart from these two walks, most birding locations will involve much shorter forays away from the van.

Driving

Most days have a small to moderate amount of driving on good quality highways.

Climate

Temperatures are highly variable on our California birding tour. At San Francisco and along the coast, we can expect lows of around 10° - 12° C (mid-50's F) and highs of around 22° - 26° C (mid-70's F), with frequent coastal fog. At higher elevations in the mountains, morning temperatures may be as low as 4° or 5° C (mid-40's F), and at lower elevations away from the coast, it will be warm, with highs of up to 30°C (86° F). Rain is a possibility along the coast and at higher elevations, hence rain gear is advised.

Boat Trip

Our tour includes a full day pelagic boat trip. Plan to wear sneakers or boat shoes and a rain jacket and pants to protect from spray. It may be quite cool on the water, so dress in layers. Boat trips are occasionally canceled due to weather; if so, we bird alternative locations.

What's Included

Tour Price Includes

- All accommodation
- All meals
- Ground transportation
- One guide with 4 - 8 participants, 2 guides and 2 vans with 9 - 12 participants
- All park, conservation and entrance fees
- One pelagic trip

Tour Price Does Not Include

- Flights to/from San Francisco
 - Travel Insurance
 - Items of a personal nature
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