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BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR, JULY 2013

Petri Hottola (University of Oulu, Finland & Finnish University Network for Tourism Studies)



Fig. 1. One of the common species of Baja California Sur, Northern Cardinal, at Sierra La Laguna.

In July 2013, 21st to 24rd July, I was finally able to visit Baja California Sur, Mexico, for three-and-half day's birding. It was a stopover on an OneWorld RTW journey, between Brisbane and Boston, and the idea was to locate eight species endemic to Southern Baja, or wider California, and as many subspecies as possible. The taxonomy of the region is in a flux, with proposals which have gone back and forth, without a definite end result. Well, there is no a 'definite end' in bird taxonomy, the field being based on approximations and agreements. The borderline between a species and a subspecies is a difficult one to define.

During information gathering process, it was discovered that there are only few recent trip reports on the region available for interested, and some of them reflect birdwatching activities which are secondary to beach-oriented vacation activities. I do not say the latter reports were not valuable, as well. Nevertheless, the limited information was a surprise, Baja California Sur being located so

close to the main concentration of birdwatchers on Earth, the United States. Southern Baja is also safe and far away from the current drug wars of Mexico, a relaxed place to spend one's birding vacation without any significant risks.

The present report has consequently been written, with up-to-date information and photographs, to help fellow birders to do the visit the region, in a short time if necessary. It is a description of situation in July 2013, as interpreted by a solo Finnish birder, his experiences, conclusions and advice. Another visit may well produce a different set of results. The list of sites is far from conclusive. On the other hand, these sites delivered pretty well at the time of the visit. The weather was predominantly fine, cloudless, dry and sunny, with midday temperatures around +30 to +34 C. On the Sierra La Laguna mountains, it was distinctively cooler and rainy, too, on the second visit, when I experienced a period of heavy rain with thunder, and the consequent floods.

My birding route was a simple one. From Los Cabos to Los Barriles via Santiago, birding around Los Barriles (Punta Arena, Sierra La Laguna), to La Paz (sewage works, Punta Coyote), back to Los Barriles, and finally, to Los Cabos. I recorded a total of 106 species, including all the ones I had been hoping to see. The eight target species included: Craveri's Murrelet, Least Storm-Petrel, Black Storm-Petrel, Baja Pygmy Owl, Grey Thrasher, Xantu's Hummingbird, California Gnatcatcher and Belding's Yellowthroat.

Among the subspecies/species, only Baird's Junco was missed. Le Conte's Thrasher, or whatever the eventual identity of the Baja subspecies/species (Vizcaino Thrasher?) may be, occurs only in the Central Baja. Baja California Sur is also relatively good for mammals. The following species were recorded: Black-tail Jackrabbit 1 Punta Arena, 2 Sierra La Laguna, Brush Rabbit 2 La Paz Sewage Works (LPSW), White-tail Antelope Squirrel 2 Punta Arena, 3 LPSW, California Sea Lion 2 at Punta Coyote, and 3 Sperm Whales, a Fin Whale and a pod of two hundred Bottle-nosed Dolphins also at Punta Coyote.

AIRPORT AND CAR RENTAL

There are many daily flights to Baja California Sur via the United States and one may also enter the region by car, crossing the California border at Tijuana, or by a ferry across the Sea of Cortez. The northern part of Baja being more populated and under influence of illegal activities (mainly because of proximity to the USA), the least complicated way to visit the South is by plane. The gateway to Baja California Sur is in San Jose del Cabos, the Cabos International Airport.

Personally, I flew across the Pacific, was processed by TSA at LAX, and took a connecting American Airlines flight to Los Cabos. Practically all the other passengers on board were US citizens on their vacations, many of them apparently from Mid-West. The departure flight was on another American Airlines plane to Dallas/FortWorth, with a connecting leg to Boston. All the flights and airport formalities went smoothly, without waiting in lines. Especially at Los Cabos, the spacious new airport had much fewer customers than it could handle. The transit in LAX was also relatively smooth, with short lines at immigration, customs and security.



Fig. 2. An American Airlines jet serviced at Los Cabos Airport, Baja California Sur.

The Mexican immigration formalities were fast and simple. I got my passport stamped, collected the luggage and walked out on the green lane, exchanging enough US dollars to Mexican pesos to cover the whole visit. Credit cards are accepted in hotels and there was therefore not as much need for cash as in my previous stops, Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste.

Timeshare people did not approach me at all, contrary to many Internet descriptions, being perhaps scared off by the binoculars and an outdoors attire. Well, the wear and tear of one month in the field probably helped, too. I guess they are after regular tourist couples on vacation. One of them, a rather sexy Asian American lady with an enlarged bust, had spent the whole flight meticulously selling a time-share to a guy next to her, with plenty of touching and posing, increasingly so towards the end of the two hour long sales speech. It was interesting to observe the carefully dictated process, the real content of which only gradually dawned to the manipulated man. In the end, lack of time finally forced the woman to put her cards on the table.

Tripadvisor has created a rather daunting image of car rentals in Los Cabos. The Internet has a plenitude of advice to avoid practically all the present companies and to rely on trusted solo operators, the 'honest guys', without whom one would be in trouble. The situation is not, however, quite that bad. Personally, I made my reservation with Sixt, which did not even exist at the airport, according to one Internet testimony.

Sixt is a German company, and therefore has an additional edge of being open for EU customer's rights lawyer's scrutiny, in case something unexpected happened. Recently in March, they made Europcar Martinique to pay me €100 for not fulfilling the contract between us (employee's mistake), after Europcar had declined my reclaim. The process was fast and did not cost me a cent.

At the restricted arrivals area of Los Cabos, there is a row of car rental booths, after you have passed a roomful of tour operators. Sixt is not among them. One needs to walk through the next sliding door, to the common arrivals area. Sixt representative was there, waiting for me, and we went to their office nearby, along the airport entrance road, next to a main north-south highway (1) junction, after finishing the paperwork at the airport.

The formalities were soon completed and I received a brand new Chrysler Aveo. The car proved to be quite adequate for birding needs, having enough clearance also for the rougher gravel roads. It cost MX2.740 (€155/\$205) for the three days, as agreed in the reservation, without any hidden costs. I returned the car a bit early (should have done more birding along the road), and had to wait for the office to open at 9 AM. The return went equally well, despite some accumulated dust. All in all, excellent service by Sixt Mexico, and their Los Cabos branch (david.campos@sixt.com.mx).



Fig. 3. Chrysler Aveo has a clearance suitable for Mexican topes and gravel roads.

A Sixt representative took me to the departure hall, a pleasant place to wait for a midday flight once the efficiently run formalities were completed. To my great relief, the departure area had some proper Italian food! I spent my last pesos on a chocolate bar, and the shopkeeper gave a 2 peso reduction to match the money I had left.

It was a pleasure to drive on good tarmac roads for a change, in a developed nation. The fact that I had not slept the previous night, had crossed the dateline and was going to be awake for 32 hours

in a row, did not bother me much. A can of Australian energy drink V helped. The highways of Baja California Sur are in a very good condition, even though a bit narrow and sometimes without shoulders. Two road works and a number of topes (speed bumps) were also encountered. The locals are polite drivers and I had no trouble mingling in. There is the occasional goat by the road but I had no close calls during the three days.

Petrol was very affordable in comparison with European rates, just like in the USA. In other words, at least 33% cheaper. The Aveo did not consume much and Pemex stations were regularly available along the route, mostly at larger villages, towns and cities.

ACCOMMODATIONS

In Los Barriles, I stayed in the peaceful Hotel Los Barriles, with plenty of private parking space, a pool, and spacious, comfortable doubles without television (silent nights). The room rate was MX800 per night, about €45/\$60. I had spotted the strategically well placed hotel in the Internet.



Fig. 4. The beds of my Hotel Los Barriles double; everything was neat, stylish and spacious.

Finding the hotel was not quite as easy as anticipated, even though Los Barriles is small town. Do not enter the beachside sandy alleys by the first Pemex station, like I did. Instead, continue forward for another kilometer or so, until arriving at a tarmac junction to the right, the main street of Los Barriles. Drive down past a supermarket (good for groceries) on the left, all the way to a T-

junction by a playfield, and turn left. Continuing forward, Hotel Los Barriles will appear on the left, partly obscured behind walls.

Check their Internet home page for more details and reservations. I had no pre-booked rooms in Baja, anticipating a need to be flexible, but found my accommodations on site, based on Internet information gathered at home.

In La Paz, I had problems with Google Maps. I was merely looking for a bed for a short night and therefore preferred a simple, cheap place with clean sheets. My two main candidates were, however, misplaced by about 10 kilometers by Google. Futile search and asking around preceded the realization of this. The following explorations focused on the beachside street and Pichilingue thoroughfare in La Paz, Carretera Transpeninsular (11), without an immediate result. The 'love motel' there appeared to be ok and I already contemplated on staying there as an easy solution, but nevertheless went to a Tourism Authority office in the beginning of the avenue. After some consultation, they proposed a few places.

Again, their main option could not be located in a maze of streets. I tried for one and half hours before giving up, having seen that there were many other hotels further away, and decided to hurry to Punta Coyote first, for seawatch. The room could be rented later, after sunset. This I did, arriving at a generic motel style Hotel Calafao (along 11). Only 10% of its rooms were occupied and I got a good one downstairs for MX400 (€23/\$30). It was a peaceful sleep until departure the next morning, before sunrise at 4.50 AM. These motel style establishments probably are the best deals in Baja, with their practical qualities suited for birdwatching, not to mention the competitive price range. If you are on a honeymoon, choose something more romantic...

SITES AND BIRDS

In the following descriptions, only the most interesting species will be mentioned, with a haphazard inclusion of the more common and widespread ones. The few references to 'Howell' indicate Steve Howell's (1999) *A Bird-finding Guide to Mexico*, still the main source of information for the region.

Santiago Reedbed

On the way to north from Los Cabos, to Los Barriles along Highway 1, one arrives in a left hand junction signposted to Santiago. Turning left, a bridge is crossed after a downhill drive. Immediately after the bridge, there is space to park on the right, on an embankment. A stream runs on the other side of the embankment and it has an area of tall reeds by the road. Belding's Yellowthroats have been recorded there, but not during the two visits I made in July, on the 21st (early afternoon) and 22nd (late morning).

There were, however, other birds in the adjacent garden with a water source. The best of them included a California Gnatcatcher, a lifer for me, and a Thick-billed Kingbird. The latter was in the

species' preferred breeding habitat (tall trees by a stream) and was not necessarily just a non-breeding vagrant (cf. Howell).

San Antonio de la Sierra (Sierra La Laguna)

The site was visited twice, on the 21st July, between 15.00 and 19.00, straight after arrival in Los Cabos and after having secured a room at Los Barriles, and on the 23rd, between noon and 18.45. I also made a few birdwatching stops on the way from Los Barriles to the San Antonio de la Sierra junction, which leaves the highway after Aqua Blanca. Mango trees in a riverside valley had produced a massive crop there, and fresh mangoes were sold along the highway by a bucket (e.g. San Bartolo), together with mango jam, mango tarts and other delicacies. Some of the larger trees carried at least 500 ripe mangoes, most of them probably too high to be collected.

The gravel road up to Sierra La Laguna is relatively easy to follow. Much of it is washboard, but I experienced no real problems driving up in a sedan, except after a period of rain during the second visit, and floods which cut the return way for two hours. Just follow the main signposted track, without turning to the ranches on the left or right, until you arrive in a farmstead with cattle and manure on the road. Do not be discouraged there, but continue uphill between the cows and follow the road up. A number of California Gnatcatchers occupied the lower approach, together with Blue-grey Gnatcatchers, which were particularly common higher up.



Fig. 5 The better forest started at an altitude of 900 meters...

One soon arrives in an area of undulating hills with dry natural forest, at an altitude of approximately 900 to 1000 meters. Birds are everywhere along the access road, but this forest is the beginning of the best area, at least during my visit. In there, I made my first attempt to find a Baja Pygmy Owl. I did not really expect to see it, but I had a recording (XenoCanto), and had to give it a try. Alas, the owl flew straight to me after the first hoots had been played, staying in the nearby trees for the next half-an-hour! Amazing! The owl was later celebrated by an El Jimador Vampiro cocktail, a strange mixture of tequila and sangria, with chili, overall another brutal attack on my taste buds during the RTW.

It was summer. The bird was clearly territorial, calling and defending its home turf, and this challenged the view of the owl being a species of higher ground, over 1.200 m. There were Xantu's Hummingbirds as well, one of them defensive towards the Baja Pygmy Owl on my video! What a pair of species to be seen and recorded together at this part of the world... The previous time I had seen the latter species, or something digital resembling it, was while watching *The Big Year* on dvd in Finland. One female was also observed soon after the junction at the main road, in roadside brush. The hummer is relatively common in Baja California Sur.



Fig. 7. ...and immediately produced the perky star species, Baja Pygmy Owl!

Forward on the road, there is a place with a fenced pasture on the left and a valley with palms on the right, before a hill with a pumping station behind its crest. There was a lot of bird activity at this spot, probably because there is a permanent water source hidden in the valley. The most numerous species included both the resident orioles, and a number of sparrows. Three *vioscae* Band-tailed Pigeons arrived to drink. The subspecies is isolated and rare. Grey Thrashers were

also present, with 2 individuals. A few had been recorded along the road earlier. Also before La Paz, I made a short stop on side road to answer the call of nature, and was soon accompanied by another pair. The thrasher is widespread but apparently has no specific stake-outs. One does not need one to score.



Fig. 8. The pasture, as seen going downhill, the valley with water and palms hidden on the left.



Fig. 9. A male California Quail provides security for its female companion down below.



Fig. 10. Hooded Orioles were abundant on the sierras, together with Scott's.



Fig. 11 One of the Grey Thrashers, endemic to Baja, in rain at Sierra La Laguna.

Around the pumping station track junction (on the right, at the same site), the cacti and other flowering plants attracted even more variety of birds, including woodpeckers, towhees and finches. A Greater Roadrunner (also seen at other locations) preferred this site, together with Xantu's Humminbirds, and many other species.

The next spot worth of noticing was close-by downhill, where a dry river-bed was crossed by the track. Normally, the creek was completely dry and easy to pass with a sedan. When it rained, on the other hand, it was soon cut by water. In that case, one may need to wait till the water level goes down again, as I did on the second visit. There were often clouds above the Sierra La Laguna, and some rain seemed to occur. There was regular traffic to farms on this road, mostly by 4x4 pickups with rancheros and their families, and help therefore readily available, if needed. A vagrant male Lucy's Warbler was a surprise by the river crossing.

Beyond the dry river, I climbed further up, driving to the highest point of the road, with an impressive view to the valleys in the middle of the Sierra La Laguna. The first 500 meters were productive, but not much was seen afterwards. The same applied to the valleys further on. On the second visit I drove, without problems, down to them, and across a wider river with a low bridge, and forward to some ranches, but decided to return to the higher ground as there appeared to be no drivable track up to the highlands on the other side. These roads were not shown in my National Geographic Baja Sur map.



Fig. 12. The flood; not much but enough to stop a sedan. The sand becomes soft when wet.

Among the Baja subspecies of debated status, the *confinis* American Robins (San Lucas Robin), were surprisingly rare. Only two birds were observed, one along the San Antonio de la Sierra road and another one along the road to La Paz, in the highest mountainous section around El Triunfo. A few kilometers later, a Zone-tailed Hawk crossed the highway. The confusing *lucanus* Cassin's

Vireos (San Lucan Vireo) were common on the higher areas of the Sierra La Laguna. I never, however, saw a *bairdi* Yellow-eyed Junco (Baird's Junco) there, even though I certainly made a good effort to locate them. Perhaps they are higher up in breeding season, as suggested by Howell's guidebook?

Punta Arena

The headland, located south of Los Barriles and north of Santiago, along the coastal road to Cabo Pulmo, looked promising on the map. It reached quite far into the Gulf of California (Sea of Cortez). In practice, the peninsula was discovered to be reserved by timeshare developments, gated and with guards around the 99% empty buildings. There consequently was no access to the point, which also was low and flat, as suggested by the Spanish name. Moreover, the surrounding sea was found to be relatively shallow, and empty of birds.

I did enter the shoreline just south of Punta Arena, where a track through bush took one on a public beach, deserted early in the morning. The bush was good for birds and mammals, but both the sea and the long shore were almost devoid of them. In the general area, there is a high risk to get stuck in sand. That happened to me once, but I eventually got the Aveo out of the soft spot. Accelerate slowly, support your tires with stones etc., and, if other things fail, let half of the air out, if there is nobody around to push the vehicle. The last measure usually helps and the tires may be filled again at the next Pemex or village tire repair shop.

On the north, at Punta Colorado, the same conclusion was made from a coastal vantage point. A Merlin was a bit unseasonal there. Having lost the good morning hours, I returned to Santiago for another search for Belding's Yellowthroats, in vain, before heading to La Paz. There was an hour or two left for birding before the hot hours, which are best reserved for moving from point A to B, shopping food and drinks and finding accommodation.

La Paz Sewage Works

The site was visited twice, briefly on the 22nd and on the 23rd July. The first visit was in the afternoon and the second between 8.30 and 9.00 in the morning. The main ponds had plenty of birds which were nevertheless soon identified and counted. There were many 'leftovers' of wintering shorebirds (e.g. Short-billed Dowitcher), ibises, egrets, herons, gulls and swallows. Among them were 12 Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, a supposedly irregular species in Baja, according to Howell, and 4 Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, ever rarer there. I used my car as a hide, driving just up to the embankments to get a view. The workers of the place did not object this, but welcomed me.

There are a number of evolving access routes to the site and I would recommend having a look at Google Maps. The sewage works (Planta de...aguas negras) are easily spotted west of La Paz centre, not far from the Highway 1 bypass. One may either try one of the sandy tracks off Boulevard Pino Pallas, the area being under construction, or try the main entrance, a non-descript sandy track veering left across the large intersection between La Paz and its airport. Both routes

are dusty to the extreme, but on the latter one does not need to drive across liquid sewage, as I did on the first visit, at one spot.

My only Belding's Yellowthroat was observed in a territory between the first and second sewage water pool (counting from the buildings), at the very beginning of the embankment, in rank vegetation under a tree with low branches. I was therefore relieved of the pressure to visit the San Jose Estuary at San Jose de la Cabo, a well-known stake-out, in the last morning before departure, the plan B. The bird was a *beldingi* male, with yellow band on its forehead.



Fig. 13 The home of Belding's Yellowthroats at La Paz S.W., and the man of the house himself.

Punta Coyote

Approaching La Paz, turn left on the Highway 1 bypass which follows a flood channel/dry river. At the end of it, avoid the large intersection and turn right to Carreterra Transpeninsular (11) and do the slow beach avenue drive through La Paz's main hotel area. After leaving the city, take the right at a Y-crossing, to a narrow road (the main road also goes to the right direction), and turn left at a downhill T-junction between hills, and follow the route east to beaches (playas) and to the commercial harbor of La Paz at Pichilingue. At the harbor, veer right, drive past some playas and follow the excellent tarmac to the last, often busy, beach of El Tecolote. In there, follow signs to Punta Coyote, on sandy tracks by the shoreline. The track is rough in places, but was passable in a

sedan. It takes about 30 to 40 minutes to drive from La Paz center to there. Notice that there are several Punta Coyotes in the region. Google Maps shows most of the way correctly.

(Alternatively, start the drive by passing the Highway 1 bypass when entering La Paz, cross the dry flood channel/river by a bridge and veer right, to another bypass which circulates the city and eventually meets the first route between hills).



Fig. 14. The track to Punta Coyote, soon after El Tecolote, with a gated private house on the way.

The track eventually entered a tarmac access road of a gated timeshare community, the empty houses and guarded grounds occupying the better part of the headland, before turning left to the shore. The final part follows a fence line, ending by the sea, in a place overlooked by a small hill within the gated area. In there, a campervan stands, with some bored men, the vigilantes, who mostly lie on a sofa, but make sure nobody enters the privatized section of the coast uninvited.



Fig. 15. The access: a track with fence line, a hill with vigilantes and Isla Espiritu Santo.

There were roadworks along the sandy shoreline track during my visit, and the final part of the route may change in the future. Earlier, it did not meet the private tarmac road but went straight to Punta Coyote. In case of changes, follow the general directions. Once the current track to Punta Coyote is learned, one may consider driving the timeshare access road all the way back to the main road. That saves time and is a smooth ride compared with the track. I do not know if this was allowed, but I did it twice when the guards were not present in that direction. Keep in mind that it is a private road.

By the sea, the best observation spot is right at the bottom of the final steep descent. I parked my car there, and reversed it so that I could sit in the trunk, while scanning the sea with a scope. The site is ideal for four reasons: 1. Light conditions are good both in the mornings and evenings, 2. the site is on an ideal height in relation to sea's surface, with unlimited views, 3. the channel between the mainland and islands is very deep, suitable for large ships, and narrows in front of Punta Coyote, 4. the close-by island happens to be Espiritu Santo, with Isla Partida and Isla Cerralvo close by, and they support a few breeding Craveri's Murrelets, and the resident storm-petrels.

The six kilometer wide Canal de San Lorenzo between Isla Espiritu Santo and Punta Coyote forms a natural 'trap' for seabirds, caught in by the eight times wider northern access to the bay north of La Paz. There is a similar situation further north at Canal San Jose (Isla San Jose), but the access to that site appears to be more difficult. It probably is peaceful and beautiful there, though.



Fig. 16. One of the residents of Punta Coyote: an American Oystercatcher.

I went to Punta Coyote twice, on the 22nd and 23rd of July, and stayed four (15.00-19.15) and two-and-half (5.30-7.15) hours, respectively. On the latter visit, the 5.30 arrival was too early. There

was enough light for observations only at 5.45 and visibility started to deteriorate at 7 AM, because of haze. Nice views of two Lesser Nighthawks while waiting, however, and the atmosphere was great at sunrise.

It was a good idea to do both the evening and the morning. There were no murrelets in the evening and no storm-petrels in the morning. On the other hand, the evening watch produced a total of 32 Least Storm-Petrels and 9 Black Storm-Petrels, with many excellent scope views. In the morning, a lone Craveri's Murrelet arrived from south and flew towards Espiritu Santo, rising higher as it approached the shoreline. It looked like a bird on its way to a breeding site, perhaps to rest there as the breeding season was over. Or, perhaps it was a late breeder. Nevertheless, I had scored with all three target species with my chosen tactics.

Among the other seabirds, in addition to pelicans, frigatebirds and common coastal shorebirds, were an odd Pacific Diver, dozens of Brown and Blue-footed Boobies, two Red-billed Tropicbirds, a party of 5 Black-vented and a lone Sooty Shearwater, and a Least Tern. The arid bush was not without interest, either, the best discovery being a male Costa's Hummingbird. Black-throated Sparrows breed there.

About half way to Punta Coyote, there is an obvious large roundabout by the seashore, soon after leaving La Paz, after the T-crossing between hills. Driving right, one arrives on a bridge, before which it is possible to go off-road to the left, to check the shoreline. The open estuary was good for herons, such as Rufescent Heron, shorebirds and gulls (e.g. Yellow-footed).

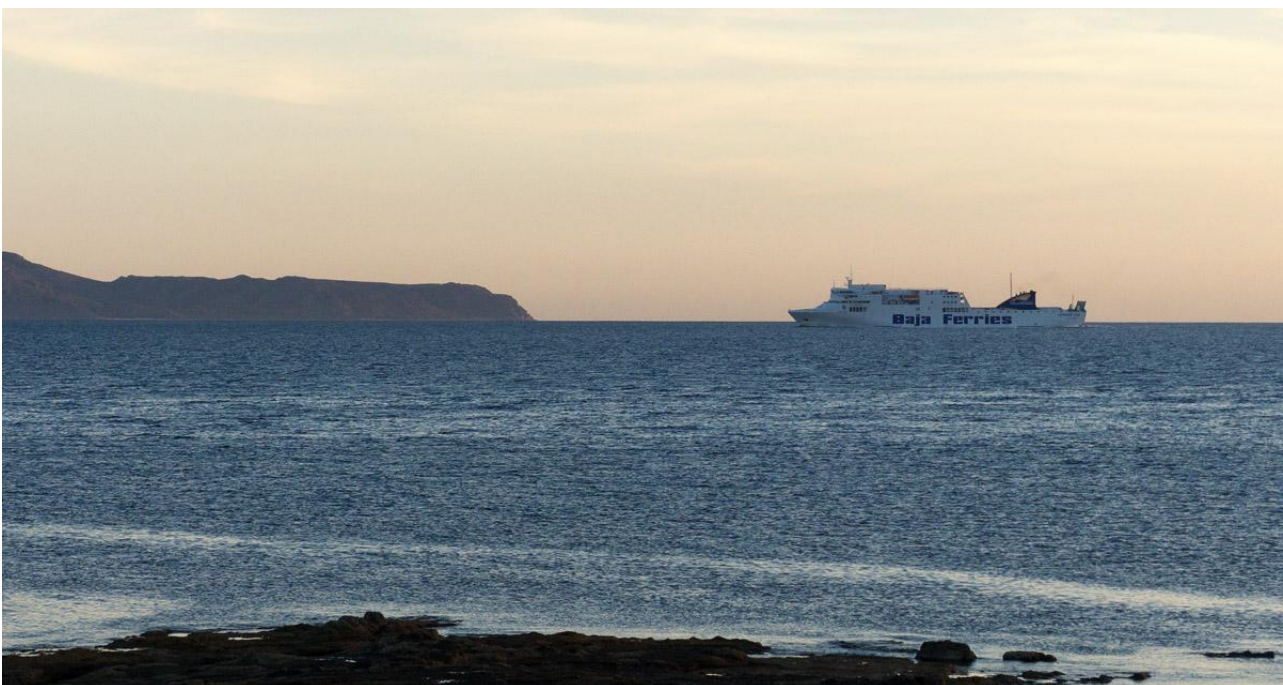


Fig. 17. Early morning ferry to La Paz at Punta Coyote, Isla Espiritu Santo in the background.

CONCLUSIONS

The short visit to Baja California Sur was a pleasant one, with good services and infrastructure, nice people and relaxed atmosphere. The crime and problems one may see in the news do not exist in this part of Mexico. Almost all the interesting species and subspecies were seen with relative ease. The endemic birds are interesting and seawatching could easily be extended to produce a few nice species on the Pacific coast of the peninsula.

With its dry and sunny climate and excellent food, Mexico was a real vacation in a vacation on a round-a-world birding tour, the other destinations (Sabah, Timor-Leste, Darwin, Port Moresby, New Britain) being more demanding, with exception of the last stop, the NE Kingdom of Vermont. I wish more birders would consider visiting Baja California Sur, especially from the USA, with its close proximity and affordable flight connections.

Hasta luego en México!