



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 5/2014

MARICOPA, CALIFORNIA, USA IN JULY 2014

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In summer 2014, I did my fifth round-the-world solo birding tour, with a one-and-half day stopover in Los Angeles, California, between 16th and 17th July, in addition to visits in Japan, the Philippines, China, the Solomon Islands, Australia and Peru. The stop was made to stock up for Peru and to rest a bit in an easy destination. Driving through Los Angeles, twice, was a veritable vacation if compared with some other places en route, even though I had to do the first drive straight after a 26 hour transit between Brisbane and LAX, with a few hour stop in Nadi, Fiji. The long transit had been necessitated by a cancellation of all Fiji Airways flights between the Solomon Islands and Fiji, and the fact that we Fiji Airways customers had been left stranded in Honiara, Guadalcanal, to look for a way out by ourselves. In my case, this had required expensive rerouting via Australia.

More importantly, the short visit was a chance to score with two US birds not yet on my life and US lists: **Le Conte's Thrasher** and **California Condor**. For a Finn, I do not have that many missing resident bird species left in North America, my current 50 States total being 667 (ABA 608), but these two had eluded me. In regard to the latter species, the condor had not been countable for some decades, after becoming extinct in the wild. The situation did however change in the early 2000s, when the reintroductions started breed in California again. Of course, I was primarily looking for a **California Condor** without wing tags. The tags are indicative of a released captive bred condor, but individuals without them may well have been born and raised without assistance.

In the end I made it, scoring with both species at a single location in the Kern County of California, in the small town of Maricopa, in the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley. The following report explains the practicalities of finding the two species in a short time, in the middle of summer, from the subjective viewpoint of a visiting birder from Northern Europe. Following my example does not guarantee anything, but reading about it may give some ideas to increase one's success rate.

16th July

On the 16th, I arrived in LAX around 13.00 and took a shuttle bus to National rent-a-car, on Aviation Avenue. A grey Toyota Corolla with Nevada plates was soon picked out, to honor the high quality of these Japanese cars. The Corolla would not let me down and its fuel consumption was going to be low. I declined a navigator and took the easy route to Highway 405 (Isis Avenue – West Manchester Avenue – West Manchester Boulevard – exit to 405 north) , following it past Santa Monica and Beverly Hills, to Interstate 5 (Golden State Freeway), which was reached in an hour or so. There was a lot of traffic on the three to eight lane highways, but only fleeting traffic jams.

On the way north, it paid to stay on the center lane. Others who kept on changing lanes in hope of proceeding faster were soon left behind. I was tired but regular sips from a can of Chinese Red Bull helped. I do not know what has been put into it, but the Chinese version tastes better than the regular one. The red and gold cans are larger, too.

North of the Los Padres Range (mountains), there was a junction to the left, to Highway 166 straight (literally) to Maricopa, through extensive San Joaquin Valley citrus farms. The farms were decorated by signs with political slogans demanding more water. I wonder how long the farming is going to continue in this arid region, with the climate change and consequently increasing shortage of water in California? As the photos of the report will show, it was dry indeed there in July 2014.



Fig. 1. Searching for **California Condors** at Bitter Creek NWR, California. My telescope is ready, and stands under the camera.

Maricopa is a small road junction town with only few inhabitants and no grocery store. Shopping has to be done in the neighboring Taft, some 15 minutes north. In fact, parts of Maricopa resembled a ghost town, with empty buildings, the odd biker, dust and not much else. In the main junction, however, there was a petrol station and a Motel 8, with fine rooms for a right price (\$65/€44) for a tired traveler. The manager happened to be from Fiji. Bula!

After securing a ground floor double, I drove to Taft, to buy food and drinks there, at Albertson's Supermarket on the Kern Street, the best shop in town. Finally, fresh blueberries! It was blueberry season,

and a season for peaches and cherries, too. Unfortunately, the cherry harvest had been a meager one and they were rather expensive in summer 2014.

As soon as the shopping was completed, I returned to Maricopa, driving straight to the honeypot for **Le Conte's Thrashers** on the Petroleum Club Road, where I stayed between 18.00 and 20.00. The signposted junction is about 1.2 km north of the 166/33 Maricopa Junction, and the area is dotted by numerous oil wells (Texaco, Chevron). At first, I drove to Kerto Road junction and 200 meters further on, to have a look from there before I returned to Kerto Road, driving all the way (gated) down left, and then again back to the original entrance point, at Petroleum Club Road junction. It is a small area, and easily covered in few minutes to get a picture of the habitats.

A recording was played two or three times on the Petroleum Club Road, to help in remembering the song. A response was also heard, close to the start of the road, but I could not locate the bird. Next, I went off road around the Petroleum Club/Kerto junction, east of it, driving on the oil well service tracks. Then, I stopped to think: Considering how dry the creosote desert was, the birds would probably favor the thickest bushes, which stood right along the Kerto Road. The thrashers would be less likely in the rest of the area, where the stunted vegetation offered less cover.



Fig. 2. The Spot for **Le Conte's Thrashers** at Kerto Rd, Maricopa. Look for thick, green bushes such as these. At the time of the photography, the birds had already 'gone to bed' and I was about to do the same.

Before sunset, I parked to a promising spot (**Fig. 2**), to listen and to have a look around. Within minutes, a male **Le Conte's Thrasher** appeared on top of a bush, singing. Then the female joined it, and the birds became to inspect me, hopping on the ground and standing on the bushes. Instead of running away from me, they came to me!

The light started to fade away, but I managed to get one sharp photo, which I accidentally deleted the same evening. Bummer! Nevertheless, the thrashers were not skulking or shy at all at sunset, but showed well for half-an-hour, at close distance, the male singing now and then. There was a response also across the road, where another male appeared! I was a happy camper that night, making plans for the next day, to try to see the **California Condor**.

17th July

In the evening, I had been pondering between two tactics. On the one hand, Internet information had stressed that the Pinnacles National Monument, 274 km further northwest, was The Place to see soaring **California Condors**. On the other hand, there was the Wind Wolves Preserve, east of Maricopa along the 166, where a condor feeding station at least used to exist. The name of the reserve refers to the grassy hills above it – there are no wolves there. Additionally, some birders had seen condors at Los Padres National Forest, higher up in the same direction. As usual in the States, most of the information was rather vague.

It was a difficult choice. Driving to the Pinnacles and back would mean that I was going to spend seven hours in the car, rather than scanning the sky. I would probably arrive there too late to see the condors to leave their roosts, as well. Moreover, it was not possible not stay late enough in the afternoon, because I had to drive back to LAX, for a LAN midnight flight to Lima, with a connection to Chiclayo. Nevertheless, according to the information I had seen, spotting condors soaring somewhere above the vast San Joaquin Valley (= around Maricopa) would probably be a shot too long. At the Pinnacles, I would surely score. Or perhaps not, who knows? I had failed at Grand Canyon, too, years ago.

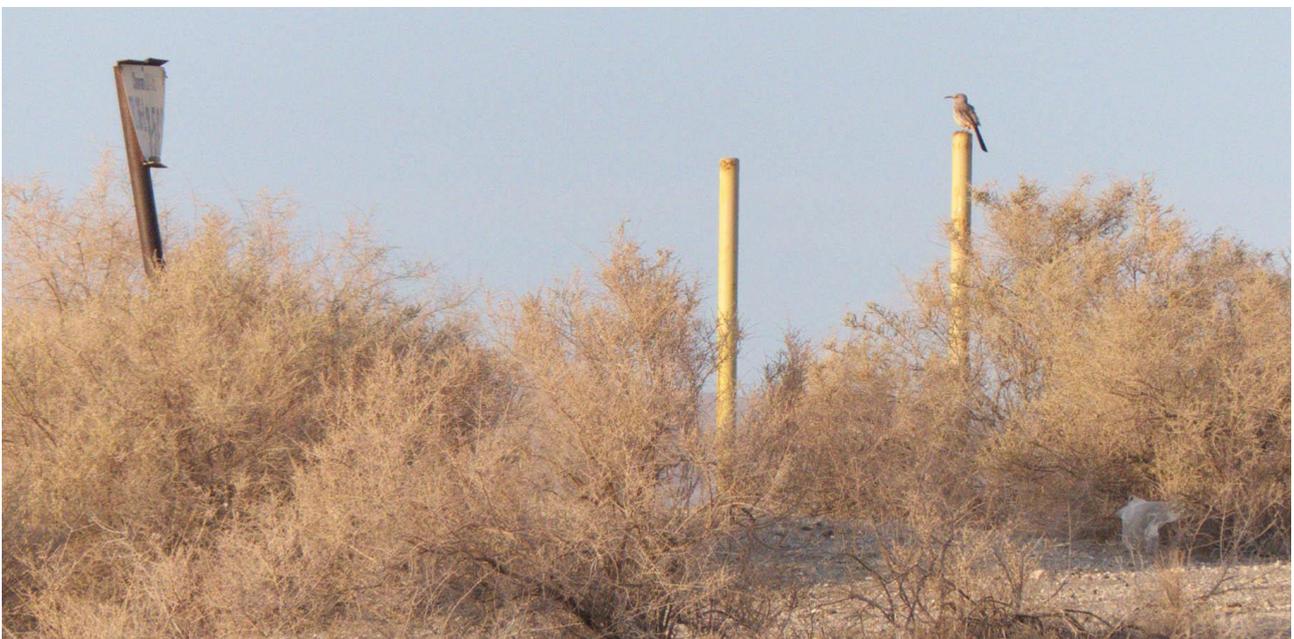


Fig. 3. A male **Le Conte's Thrasher** observes its territory at Kerto Rd, Maricopa. The birds were nothing but shy early in the morning and late in the evening.

Moreover, the Internet had painted a pretty unwelcoming picture of the Wind Wolves Preserve, where access would be possible on invitation only, unless one wanted to risk prosecution. I would have stop at their border fence and scan the area with a scope. Still, all things considered, I decided to focus on

Maricopa. Too many hours would be lost driving to the Pinnacles and back. But first, I would visit the Kerto Road again, in an attempt to get another perfect shot of **Le Conte's Thrasher**, to replace the deleted one.

At sunrise, the pair appeared at the same location again, but I did not get as close views as in the previous evening. The male was, however, singing actively on top of a pole across the road. Typical for desert birds, it barely opened its bill while emitting the sounds. I parked the car off road, on a maintenance track. Several Chevron workers saw me, on their way to work, and one of them apparently alerted the security.

When he arrived, I had driven 20 meters in on a service track, in hope to use the vehicle as a photography hide. Even though apologetic, after seeing that I was only birdwatching and had not caused any damage, the security patrol told me to stay away from the oil company land. It was not posted and I come from a part of where the concept of 'trespassing' does not exist, but I nevertheless did as I was told to do. The guard said that I was welcome to park by the Kerto Road, and watch birds from there. Walking in, as suggested by Internet birding sites, was however forbidden in the area, according to him. Then, the security left, after wishing me good luck with the birds. I, on the other hand, proceeded to the Wind Wolves.

The place had changed a lot since the outdated Internet information and was open for all visitors wishing to hike on the hills or in the canyons. There was no entrance fee. Few hours were spent at the Wind Wolves. The reserve had great vistas over the valley, and the hills and mountains north of it, but there was no sign of condors. It was time to return to Maricopa, to check out the motel room, and to continue higher up in the south, uphill towards Los Padres National Forest. After about 11 km on Highway 33 towards the coast, a tarmac road (Cerro Noroeste Rd) met the Highway 33. I turned left there. After a while, it was time to stop to scan the sky.

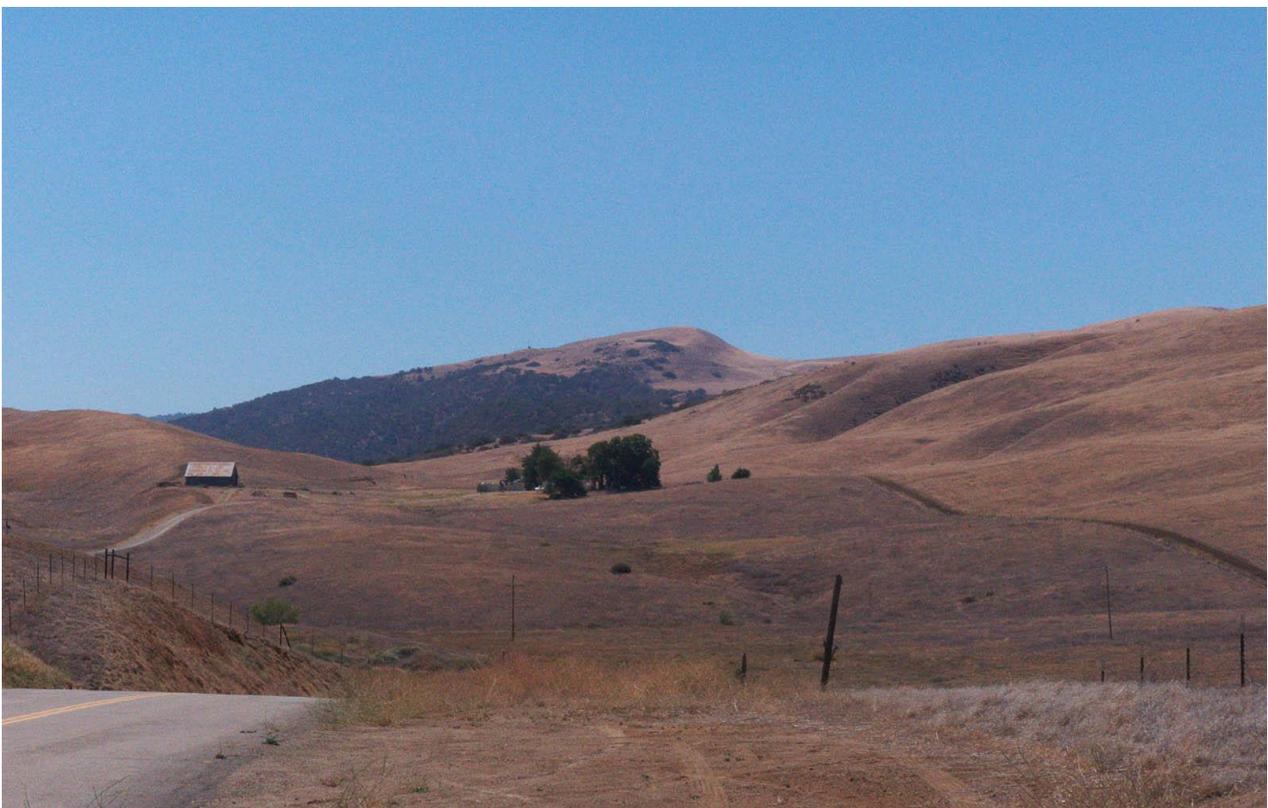


Fig. 4. Bitter Creek NRW, on the way to Los Padres National Forest.

At Bitter Creek NWR, I scored. An immature **California Condor** was soaring low over a ridge, before disappearing down in the valley. It had no tags on its wings! I stopped, and saw a small information table across the road, explaining condor identification features. After 15 minutes, an adult **California Condor**, also without tags, appeared over the valley, soaring there for quite a while, before gliding southwest. Perhaps there was a feeding station somewhere close by? I do not really know, but the main thing was that I had succeeded again.



Fig. 5. An informative sign helps in **California Condor** identification.

A trip higher up followed, with a smatter of year list additions, before I returned to Taft. It was time to do the last shopping at Albertson's. I also managed to find pepper spray at Rite Aid, the next door. It would be nice to carry the spray in Northern Peru, where a state of emergency had ended only six months earlier, just in case somebody tried to rob me. I could however not import it to Finland, where such weapons need a license and are treated like hand guns. Instead, I could give the can to somebody in Peru. At Rite Aid, the blonde cashier instructed me: *You use this first, and finish it with a knife.* Well, I did not, because there was no need for it. At some vigilante road stops, I gave the militia some coins for M16 bullets, but that was voluntary.

A late afternoon visit to Kern NWR finished the day, in vain hope of observing some wildfowl there. The extensive wetland was just as dry as most of the San Joaquin Valley, without a drop of water. Only in the California Aqueduct I had seen water. The drive to LAX was longer than expected, thanks to several roadworks which reduced four lanes into one, and stopped the traffic. In between the bottle necks, I had to overspeed. At a LAX gas station, there was no time to line up again for my change.

CONCLUSIONS

Le Conte's Thrasher proved to be much easier to see than I had expected. The birds could be seen at Kerto Road, Maricopa, at sunset and sunrise, when they liked to sit on top of the dry bushes, or on oil field structures, claiming their territories and enjoying the last and first rays of the sun. In regard to Bitter Creek NRW, I would try to see the **California Condors** there, if I already was in the vicinity for the thrashers.

The area is relatively close to Los Angeles International Airport, and well connected to it. If I had had one more day in California, I would have returned to LAX via Ventura, visiting the Channel Islands National Park for **Island Scrub Jay**, the target of my next LAX stopover. There are daily cruises to the islands from Ventura harbor. I have already once been there, but did not leave the boat, focusing on seabirds and whales because nothing new was supposed to be on the islands themselves. Then, the taxonomy changed...

On the whole, it was an in and out mission, time well spent to find the two target species and explore a corner of California I had never been to. The food I bought in Taft helped in the beginning in Peru, before I discovered my way to their fresh chicken empanadas and fruit.

At the above-mentioned LAX gas station, a man with a military posture followed me in and asked what I had been doing in California. I told him about my success with the two species. Perhaps an accidental encounter with a naturally talkative Californian, but one never knows... In Peru, I found a TSA note inside my suitcase, which had been manually searched, once again. A world lister may have a somewhat curious profile as a traveler, with itineraries which may not make sense to all observers.

A day later, I crossed the 7.000 species line at Bosque de Pomac, North of Chiclayo. It was a modest **Grey-and-White Tyrannulet**, a pleasantly common species in the dry forest.

