

SANTA CRUZ ISLAND, CALIFORNIA, IN JULY 2015



Petri Hottola (phottola@gmail.com)

On the 14th of July, 2015, I spent one day on a trip from Ventura, California, to Santa Cruz Island, Channel Islands. It was a stop-over with a Japanese Airlines arrival in LAX on the 13th, car rental at Alamo, and departure the next day, to Kansas City, Missouri, via Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas. The goal of the visit was to see an **Island Scrub Jay**, an island endemic not yet on my world or US list.



Fig. 1. The key bird located; an **Island Scrub Jay** with color rings on its legs, at Central Valley.

The following short report explains how I did it, and which species were recorded on the way. An update of the situation in July 2015 may be helpful for others with similar plans. For the locals, there is nothing new, but a foreigner may struggle to find out the basic information for a trip like this.

ORGANIZATION

After picking up my Alamo Nissan Sentra SV (USD 157 (€140) for two days, CDW, fees and taxes included) at LAX Aviation Blvd, I drove to Ventura, on the coast, via highways 405 (San Diego Freeway) and 101 (Ventura Freeway). Once again, slow traffic and downright jams (morning) occurred north of Santa Monica and especially around the main 405/101 intersection at Sherman Oaks. Otherwise, the traffic was fine.

There were many accommodation choices in Ventura and in the neighboring towns. Personally, I decided to stay at Motel 6 South Ventura, an affordable even though a bit basic option on the Johnson's Drive, just past the dry Santa Clara River. It is more geared towards truck drivers than families. A double room costs USD 72 (€64) per night, taxes included. In there, beware of an uneven walkway, next to the reception. I slipped and injured my knee and hand; plenty of blood, but no broken bones, fortunately.



Fig. 2. My Alamo Nissan Sentra, parked in front of Motel 6 South Ventura, along Johnson's Drive.

From the motel, I explored Ventura in search of food, with limited success. My basic requirements do not really agree with the processed ingredients in the US food. In that sense, there was little difference between Walmart and Trader Joe's. Both of them favor high fructose syrup (agent of metabolic disorders), trans fats (leading cause of coronary heart disease), GMO corn extracts and other cheap and harmful substances, and products predominantly composed of fat, syrup, salt and flour, with various artificial flavors. Nevertheless, I survived on fresh blueberries and cherries. Being hungry for a few days is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as there is enough fluid to drink.

I also went to Ventura Harbor to see where I should go the next morning. Parking space is limited there and it is good to know what the options are. So, first south on South Victoria Ave (101 intersection), then right on Olivas Park Rd, onwards on Spinnacle Dr, all the way to the lot number 4, where Island Packers is located.

For visiting the Santa Cruz Island, Island Packers is the only practical and affordable solution. They sail on a daily basis, starting at Ventura Harbor and landing first at Scorpion Anchorage, and then at Prisoners Harbor, the site for **Island Scrub Jays**. The return cruise was USD 59.00, paid

beforehand in the Internet. I had sailed to Anacapa Island with them in 1992, on board Sunfish and with only eight other passengers, and expected another quality experience. The standards had, however, fallen a bit, as the scale of the business had increased. Or perhaps it was just a bad day for them?

The next morning, I arrived at the harbor early, at 8.10, and got my parking space. The waiting hours went fast, as there were many birds to look at. There were also a surprising number of other passengers waiting to board our and other two vessels. They carried an amazing amount of equipment, food and drinks with them, too. It was a bit confusing. At one point, I was told to enter and board. Down by the ship, Islands Explorer, I was told to leave the area and wait. We were supposed to depart at 9.30 but were delayed, by 45 minutes.



Fig. 3. The Island Packers cruise fleet, early in the morning, at Venture Harbor (Spinnaker Drive).

This was not the only delay. Even though the weather was fine, it was not the estimated one hour to Santa Cruz, but three hours. At Scorpion Anchorage, plenty of time was spent unloading people (95% of the passengers) and their equipment, initially confused but eventually organized in a bucket brigade. It was a relief to start the last leg in the now spacious vessel. Before that, it had been rather crowded, especially because some of the passengers kept on running around. They often blocked my views of the sea, or collided with my injured knee. Hardly anybody else on board showed any interest in the birds and other animals at the sea, unless told to do so by the captain. We stopped for few minutes, to observe two **Humpback Whales** and 110 **Common Dolphins**. A close-by **Grey Whale** was missed (or dismissed) by the captain.

We approached Prisoners Harbor at 13.00 and were told to be at the pier at 16.00, or otherwise stay the night on the island. In other words, I had two hours and 45 minutes to find the target species, instead of the expected five hours. Fortunately, that proved to be enough. I was,

however, not very cooperative when we were told to wait till somebody would arrive and explain the walking restrictions on the island. As these had already been underlined, explained and repeated umpteenth times, I started my walk. The young lady arrived and I briefly told her, while walking, where the no-entrance Nature Conservancy area started, and she was satisfied with that. A search for an **Island Scrub Jay** could finally start!



Fig. 4. Scouts and day-trippers leave the ship at Scorpion Anchorage, with a lot of gear.

It is hard for a Northern European to be constantly lectured on regulations, penalties, no-entry areas and legal responsibilities, like in some kind of police state. In the Nordic states, private landowners do not as a rule have a right to prevent other people from entering their lands. That would be illegal, with consequences, and it therefore seldom happens.

Moreover, we do not sign papers of release when purchasing services. Papers like that are void, as the responsibilities have been listed in general laws which surpass such private contracts. If for example somebody would drown on a cruise to an island, it would be on his/her own responsibility, unless a staff member would have purposefully killed him/her or the company had failed to follow basic safety regulations, as stated by the government. If not, no court would open the case. It is possible to organize life in ways which do not breed an army of lawyers, not to mention all the red tape.

Our ship stayed at Prisoners Harbor, the staff resting on board. On our return, the sailing time was again three hours. In other words, we arrived at the Ventura Harbor at 19.00. It was a long but satisfactory day, despite all the whining in the above text.

BIRDS AND OTHER ANIMALS

Ventura Harbor and Beach

As already explained, the reconnaissance visit and waiting for a departure included some birdwatching at the Ventura Harbor and Beach area. The following birds were seen there:

Brown Pelican Common.

Double Crested Cormorant Common.

Brandt's Cormorant 1

Great Blue Heron 4

Turkey Vulture 2

Red-shouldered Hawk 2

Willet A party of 150 at high tide.

Ring-billed Gull 1 second calendar year bird, summering on the coast.

Heermann's Gull 25

Western Gull Rather common, >200.

California Gull 150

American Herring Gull 1 second calendar year bird, summering on the coast.

Glaucous-winged Gull 3 second to third calendar year birds, summering on the coast.

Royal Tern 150

Elegant Tern 80

Forster's Tern 1

Least Tern At least 6 pairs at a protected enclosure by the beach.

Feral Rock Dove 3

Mourning Dove 1

Eurasian Collared Dove 1

Black-chinned Hummingbird 1 adult male.

American Cliff Swallow 1

Barn Swallow 6

European Starling 50

California Towhee 5

Brewer's Blackbird 8

Great-tailed Grackle 4

House Sparrow 10

American Crow 30

The Cruise

Despite the above-mentioned problems, seabirds could be observed from the Island Packers vessel, particularly on our return trip, which was not quite as crowded as the morning cruise had been. The majority of the birds were located around the edge of the continental shelf, where the whales (and oil rigs) were, too. Around the Channel Islands, any time is good for seabirds, resident

and migratory, with seasonal variation in regard to species composition. On the 14th of July 2015, the following observations were made:

Sooty Shearwater >600, including several tight feeding packs.

Short-tailed Shearwater One party of 4 birds.

Pink-footed Shearwater About 50.

Black-vented Shearwater 22

Pigeon Guillemot About 45.

Cassin's Auklet 3

Scripp's Murrelet 3

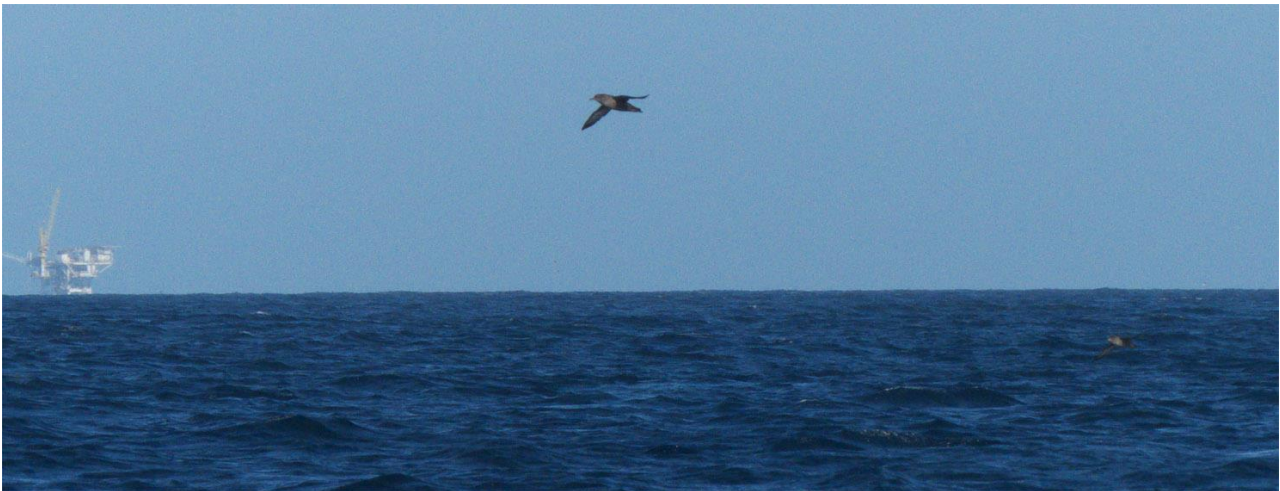


Fig. 5. Two **Sooty Shearwaters** pass the ship at the edge of continental shelf.

Santa Cruz Island

It was the hottest time of the day, between 13.15 – 16.00, on the Santa Cruz Island. Land birds therefore tended to hide in the shadows of trees, in the vegetated ravines which form but a small part of the relatively barren landscape. At Prisoners Harbor, a rather good ravine exists right next to the pier, including a flat, bushy area by the sea, called Central Valley (see Google Maps). The place may be freely accessed along the track across the island, to a number of local destinations. Most of the ravine itself is, however, fenced off by Nature Conservancy, on the right hand side of the track.

So, turn left when leaving the pier, walk past some service buildings and forward for some 350 meters, to the other side of the Central Valley, and keep your ears and eyes open. The taller trees on the right, along three parallel side roads into the Nature Conservancy land, were especially good for smaller passerines. The birds moved around and could therefore be seen from the coastal track, without entering the private land.

An **Island Scrub Jay** was first encountered on the other side of the valley, among higher trees about 150 meters past an obvious left hand bend on the main track. A short play of its call made the bird to appear from the shadows, and it followed me afterwards for some time. The same bird, or another one, was later seen on top of a bush, at the above-mentioned three roads site.



Fig. 6. The grandiosely named Central Valley, a small delta of low trees and bush.

There was no sense in walking further on the main track, which became steep and increasingly dusty beyond the valley. In there, it entered some barren ground and the next ravine would have been some 650 meters further on. It was hot and I rather spent the little time available at the area of best habitat, close to the pier.

The following species were recorded during the short stay:

- Brown Pelican** Common.
- Brandt's Cormorant** 80
- Great Blue Heron** 1
- American Black Oystercatcher** 1 pair.
- Mourning Dove** 1
- Anna's Hummingbird** 1 female.
- Acorn Woodpecker** 1
- Red-breasted Sapsucker** 1 juvenile bird; rare in Santa Cruz.
- Barn Swallow** about 10
- Bushtit** 4
- Audubon's Warbler** 1, a summering individual?
- Ash-throated Flycatcher** 1
- Pacific Slope Flycatcher** 8
- Western Wood Pewee** 1, scarce visitor?
- California Towhee** 6
- Spotted Towhee** 1

Song Sparrow 8
House Finch 4
Island Scrub Jay 2
Common Raven 5

It was also great to see the only endemic predator of the Channel Islands, the diminutive **Island Fox**, at the Prisoners Harbor landing. It arrived at the spot 20 minutes before our departure and disappeared soon in the low bushes. The other mammals of the day included the above-mentioned whales and dolphins, a few **California Sea Lions** close to the Ventura harbor, and a **Harbor Seal** at the harbor itself.



Fig. 7. Island Foxes are so small that they are not easily spotted. Wait at a picnic table...

Driving back to LAX

In the next morning, I drove back to the LAX airport. Sitting in traffic jams was not all bad for me. During the stops, it was possible to make detailed observations of birds spotted along the freeway. Three observations were particularly interesting:

Harris's Hawk 1, an escapee, or perhaps a genuine vagrant?

Sharp-shinned Hawk 1

Vaux's Swift 1, slightly south of its normal range?

Otherwise, only common species already mentioned in this report were recorded. I reached the Alamo depot on time, could fill the tank up before that, and was immediately taken to the American Airways building by the Alamo shuttle. The check in, security and boarding processes were efficient and our flight to Dallas/Ft. Worth departed according to the schedule. LAX may be large but it also one of the better airports of the USA.

CONCLUSIONS

On a RTW trip, it is important to try to avoid flying too many flights in a row. For example, the symptoms of jetlag, even though not much of a problem for me nowadays, can be relieved by frequent stops. I had been flying across the Pacific, from Narita, Japan, to Los Angeles, USA, and needed a break before advancing further east, first to Kansas City, then Miami and then to Barbados. It was a bonus to be able to look for a lifer during the two day break and to add a small number of species on my 50 states USA list (today, after Missouri, 679).

The highways and cruise boats of California may be crowded and healthy food surprisingly difficult to find in a state with a reputation of people crazy about health food and dieting, but the bottom line is: California and the United States in general are easy on a birding traveler. The birdlife is there and protected, the cars and highways are in excellent condition and accommodation is easy to find. Outside popular destinations, such as Ventura, a room in a motel may be very reasonably priced. Gasoline certainly is, with rates less than 50% of the prices we pay in Europe. The nation itself may not be as entertainingly eccentric today as it has been during the periods of Republican rule (especially Reagan and Bush jr), but its nature has certainly not lost its charm.

The US bird list appears to be developing on a steady basis, with taxonomic splits and lumps, predominantly the former ones. Additionally, species such as **California Condor** are now again accepted on the lists, just like I anticipated in a 2014 California trip report. These developments guarantee that there will be something interesting to look for during US stop-overs also in the future. For somebody with a RTW ticket, the choices are plentiful, with chances to stop almost anywhere in the nation, for very little additional cost, when flying between the main international hubs of Los Angeles, New York and Miami.



Fig. 8. A happy **Island Scrub Jay**, after a discovery of a moist piece of bread, in the tinder-dry bush.