

Whales & Dolphins of Monterey Bay

Naturetrek Tour Report

3 - 11 September 2016



Pink-footed Shearwater by Chrys Mellor



Sea Otter by Chrys Mellor



Breaching Humpback Whale by Peter Dunn



Blue Whale by Peter Dunn

Report compiled by Ed Drewitt & Peter Dunn
Images by Chrys Mellor, Peter Dunn & Ed Drewitt



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Tour participants: Peter Dunn & Ed Drewitt (leaders) with 16 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Saturday 3rd September

London to San Francisco

On a glorious day in London most of us gradually met together with Ed at Heathrow Airport, many excited at the prospect of flying on one of British Airways' Airbus huge A380. After a short delay we were up in the skies heading up across the East Midlands and then over the north-west, past Sheffield, the Lake District, Glasgow and the Outer Hebrides. After leaving the UK we flew just south of Iceland, then over Greenland and across the cold, far Arctic north of Canada (Fize Basin and Hudson Bay).

Ten hours and 25 minutes later, at 5.30pm and eight hours behind the UK, we arrived at San Francisco. Once through security we met with our other leader Peter who was already at the airport after leading the first holiday to Monterey Bay. We took our two vans down the Highway 101 and a few hours later arrived at our hotel in Carmel Valley, half an hour south of Monterey.

Various iconic landmarks were also noted along the way, including the headquarters of familiar computer and smart phone businesses in 'Silicon Valley'. And our nasal senses were put to the test as we passed Gilroy, the garlic capital of the west. We arrived at our lodge around 9.30pm and, although our bodies thought it was 5.30am UK time, we stopped to have a nibble of a delicious cold buffet before we retired to bed.

Day 2

Sunday 4th September

Monterey Bay and headland

There was little time to pause as we were up again at 7am for breakfast and headed out at 7.30am. Most of the group were up early and spotted Anna's Hummingbirds feeding around the lodge's assortment of planted flowers. During breakfast at least three Acorn Woodpeckers were perched up in pine trees, showing their white wing patches in flight.

Fisherman's Wharf, our starting base each day to board our whale-watching boat was 30-minutes' drive away. Arriving in good time, the distinctive and evocative marine smell of the sea, fish and sea lions filled the area. It wasn't long before we could hear the familiar 'yelping' calls of the California Sea Lions that hang out around the wharf. A Harbour Seal was relaxing in the shallow water near the wharf. Brewer's Blackbirds, the males with shiny, glossy black plumage, were on the scrounge for any titbit they could find. Around the harbour you had to be quick to spot a Belted Kingfisher flying between the sailing boats, along with the occasional Elegant Tern.

On the nearby restaurant buildings, Herring-Gull-like Western Gulls were loafing on the roofs. A juvenile was tackling a Pelagic Red Crab, a species that has appeared in plentiful numbers during the past year in response to the El Nino phenomenon. We boarded our large catamaran, Blackfin, our trusty boat for our four out of our five boat trips during the holiday. A few Sea Otters were swimming along on their backs in the harbour. On the sea wall tens of sea lions were hauled out resting – from a distance they formed what looked like a single honey-brown wall. As we edged closer, all sorts of noises, smells and behaviours emanated from the 'rookery'. Amongst

the sea lions and on top of the seawall, Brandt's Cormorants, Shag-like with a slimmer body and fine bill, were resting up.

There was quite a swell today (2.5 metres) making for a more bumpy ride than usual. However, we spent the next four hours searching for the rich areas of food, where Anchovies were providing a plentiful supply of food for whales and seabirds. During our trip we saw up to 15 Humpback Whales, at first the tree-like blows and gradually more rewarding views of their backs and dorsal fins. They were usually in twos or threes. A group of six had gathered together at one point, with three swimming towards the boat and diving simultaneously, showing their flukes at almost the same time. A few pairs of Humpbacks were lunge feeding, opening their mouths wide and scooping up tons of Anchovies in one mouthful. From the boat we watched as the whales revealed their heads and huge mouth, their pleated skin stretching to accommodate the water and food. Inside their mouths, plates of baleen made out of keratin (the same material as our hair) filter the water – and using their tongue they swallow the masses of fish.

While the whales were actively feeding, hundreds of Sooty Shearwaters, flying here from New Zealand, were flying low over the water looking for food while Western Gulls and Brown Pelicans swooped in to mop up any fish the whales had missed. Amongst the Sooty Shearwaters there were also many Black-vented Shearwaters, visiting from Mexico: a species we don't usually see here on this tour as they usually appear later in the autumn. Pink-footed Shearwaters were also flying amongst the Sooties. At one point the sea and air was filled with shearwaters!

Throughout the trip, many a small, white, flying or wading bird was a Grey or Red-necked Phalarope. A Great Northern Diver, with its trailing legs, was flying away from the boat. And later in the trip a Black-footed Albatross, with its long wings, flew round towards the back of the boat. Sally and Malcolm spotted a second albatross a little later. Chris had also seen an Ashy Storm Petrel; although regular, this was a new sighting for recent weeks.

Out at sea we also saw small flocks Pelagic Cormorants, a few Arctic Skuas, Double-crested Cormorants, Elegant Terns, California Gulls and many pairs or groups of four, of Common Guillemots, mostly males with their single offspring, now almost the size of their fathers. The young birds could be heard squeaking away. A Sunfish was also seen before it disappeared under the boat.

As we headed back to land for 1pm, we stopped briefly to watch a male Sea Otter swimming on his back and washing his fur. Walking back to the vans, a few of the group spotted two Peregrines soaring and hunting over the harbour. On the edge of the harbour a number of Pelagic Red Crabs were hauled out.

After a delicious lunch at a local restaurant, the Abalonetti's, specialising in clam chowder in a bread bowl as well as shellfish or squid sandwiches, we headed along the coastline along the popular 17-Mile Drive, a toll road around the famous Pebble Beach and Spyglass Hill golf courses which also includes some nice woodland and shoreline habitat. Stopping by one of the spectacular white-sand beaches with impressive waves, we found a few Whimbrel and a Willet. Out at sea, on the edge of the seaweed, at least five Surf Scoters, fresh in from the north, were bobbing on the water. Further away three White-tailed Kites were swooping down towards a Red-tailed Hawk. We then stopped at Bird Rock (Seal Rock) where the smell of the California Sea Lions helped clear the nostrils. On a huge rock not far out to sea, tens of sea lions were hauled out resting and gesturing to each other,

accompanied by Brown Pelicans and cormorants. Closer by, a few California Ground Squirrels were coming to investigate us – one even climbed onto Graham's leg. Daphnia spotted a Black Turnstone feeding near a juvenile Western Gull. Closer to the car parking areas, 50 Western Gulls and 50 Heermann's Gull were sitting down, preening and sleeping.

Passing through cypress and pine woodland, we continued on to the Lone Cypress, a single tree which has stood on a rock for 250 years. Now supported by metal cables, locals hope it will continue to live to 300 years! It was busy today so we slowly drove past, giving everyone the opportunity to see the tree.

Along the coastline, we passed a few open areas of golf course where we saw Black-tailed or Mule Deer, including some males with antlers, and a Killdeer. As we left the coastline, Turkey Vultures soared overhead.

We headed back to the Carmel Valley, stopping briefly at a supermarket to collect supplies. Another Peregrine flew overhead, suddenly disappearing fast like a Cheetah as it unsuccessfully chased prey.

Arriving back at the Contenta Inn, up to four Western Bluebirds were perched on the wires and bushes. A pair of Hairy Woodpeckers was foraging amongst the cones of the pines trees – the male, with a red crown, came for a closer look. A California Towhee and American Bushtits were also sighted.

Day 3

Monday 5th September

Monterey Bay

After a clear starry night with Mars and Saturn visible alongside the Milky Way, the Carmel Valley was cool and bright in the morning. We headed out at 7.45am to Monterey where there was a little more cloud and plenty more sunshine. Various birds were perched on the electricity wires including Northern Mockingbird, Mourning Doves, Collared Doves, California Scrub Jay and Sharp-shinned Hawk. Despite a similar swell to yesterday, the sea was calmer and allowed for better sightings of seabirds, such as Guillemots, bobbing on the water. As we headed out of the harbour, another Sea Otter was swimming along. John, our skipper, manoeuvred the boat at the sea wall entrance so we had prolonged views of the immature sea lions sleeping or tussling, alongside plenty of Brandt's Cormorants. The calmer sea was dotted with Guillemots, fly-past cormorants and California Gulls, and a raft of at least 100 Brandt's Cormorants. Occasional phalaropes and Elegant Terns were seen throughout the tour.

At 10.20am we encountered our first whales, a female Humpback Whale and her 9-month-old calf; very soon it will become independent. The pair were logging on the surface, resting. We left them to it and continued to scan over the deep canyon beneath us. Further California Gulls and Guillemots were seen, plus two Arctic Terns and two Arctic Skuas. In the distance many of us spotted a Humpback Whale breaching, landing with a huge splash. Before we headed back to Monterey, we were rewarded with close views of at least six Humpback Whales, surfacing close to our boat. In the sunshine we were able to admire their dark, shiny backs, often interrupted with various barnacles. The group gradually dived, almost simultaneously, showing off their distinctly marked flukes as they went under off searching for fish, deep down.

Arriving back at 1pm, we paused for our packed lunches and tea on the boat before heading out again at 2pm. Although the sea was a little choppier than the morning, the sun was still bright. We saw another Humpback

Whale breach clear of the water before landing with a big splash. Two bushy blows revealed two whales, probably another mother and calf. As we travelled on another whale surfaced right in front of the boat giving very closer views. A number of other blows were also seen. Meanwhile, small rafts of Guillemots were often diving down away from the boat while flocks of Sooty Shearwaters struggled to take flight as their bellies were full of food. Halfway through, a number of Pink-footed Shearwaters, from Chile, flew gliding low over the water. Three Black-footed Albatrosses came to rest on the sea with some Western Gulls – their large, thick bill and tall necked help them dwarf the large gulls. A fourth, or repeat bird, was seen a little later. As we headed back into Monterey and glided along with the current, a small school of six to 10 Long-beaked Common Dolphins came to join our boat, briefly bow-riding before being distracted by some food which they pursued.

Arriving back in glorious later afternoon sunshine at 5pm, we headed back to the vans and then on to the Carmel Valley where we relaxed for an hour before dinner (lasagne) at 7pm.

Day 4

Tuesday 6th September

Big Sur

A cool, bright start made way for some lovely birds first thing after breakfast, at an old airfield just behind. At least half a dozen Western Bluebirds were fly-catching over the grassland – at one point they all came over towards us. A few males showed off their stunning blue backs. Three House Finches were feeding on the ground while 10 American Goldfinches were flitting around the grasses. Across the way, a male Lesser Goldfinch was singing from a grass stem. All around us were the mounds made by the Botta's Pocket Gopher, although none were to be seen. In the copse of trees in a small glen a Bewick's Wren was singing, and it came out onto open perches. A California Scrub Jay stayed more hidden and an Oak Titmouse, like a grey Crested Tit, perched out for a short moment. At least two California Towhees were calling – one perched on a fence post and came down the ground to feed on grass seeds. Back at our lodge, a Downy Woodpecker was calling and a Nuttall's Woodpecker photographed.

We headed off at 9am – today we were travelling south along the coastal road of the Big Sur. We drove through the redwood forests of Big Sur Station, pausing to pick up our sandwich lunches at the bakery – a Steller's Jay was calling from a tree just behind the store. Just up the road we stopped at a viewpoint, Grimes Point, looking out across the coastline and sea. We scanned around looking for condors. A Golden Eagle soared high above the hillsides against a bright blue backdrop. Helicopters buzzed overhead every few minutes collecting water from a nearby pond to help put out an extensive hillside fire that has closed most national park areas. It wasn't long before Peter shouted 'condor', and very quickly everyone was watching an adult California Condor soaring very high above the rocky outline. Its dark body and white underwing feathers were clearly visible. A Painted Lady butterfly was feeding on nearby *Echium* flower spikes. A Sachem Skipper was also nearby, while Black Saddlebag Dragonflies and Blue-eyed Darners hawked overhead. A few were lucky to catch sight of a Black-chinned Hummingbird that paused briefly to feed on the *Echium*. Down below, extensive kelp beds were slowly moving with the gentle waves while sea lions 'played' and porpoised on the edge of them. Many more sea lions rested on rocks, their dog-like yelps echoing up to where we were stood. The cool sea air also filtered up to us providing a welcome, refreshing blast in the hot sunshine – something a Western Fence Lizard was taking full advantage of on a nearby rock. Great and Snowy Egrets, and Heermann's Gulls, stood on the kelp beds looking for small fishes and crustaceans. Brown Pelicans were also numerous. The landscape also revealed rocky outcrops just off the coastline encrusted with white guano – the clues of summer and the breeding success of auks and

cormorants. We stopped for lunch at a picnic site at Sand Dollar Beach with some tree shade – a Steller's Jay came down to look for titbits, calling like a hawk. Some nearby grassland was busy with butterflies, including Common Buckeye, Cabbage White and Grey Hairstreak. A Northern Flicker called from the pines above and flew away across the road. And a few bluebirds were also feeding in the trees above.

Having finished our lunch, we boarded the vehicles for the remaining 20-mile drive to San Simeon, spotting a few Vaux's Swifts, two American Kestrels, two Peregrines, an Osprey, Turkey Vultures and Mule Deer on the way. At our destination we stopped in the car park next to a Northern Elephant Seal haul-out, part of the Piedras Blancas population. The beach was covered in young male seals, plus some older, more mature, 4-metre long males with their huge noses. These older, larger males had many a battle scar. One male coming out of the sea looked most beaten and experienced – his blubber on his neck and chest was thick and scarred, along with his long nose. Two sub-adult males were jostling with each other where the waves broke. Most were snoozing on the sand, flicking sand over their bodies and neighbouring seals.

Up to 23,000 elephant seals come to breed or moult along the Californian coastline, and thousands of seal pups are born here. By now, the only animals left on the beach are young animals trying out their display skills, and fasting mature individuals sunbathing on the beaches as they grow a new coat of hair. The hot sunshine brings the blood close to the skin's surface and helps with the development of the new hairs. The rest of the colony had departed, with the males heading north separately to Alaska where they feed up. Further along the beach a big half a dozen Grey Plovers, a Black Turnstone and a Killdeer were seen. Western, California and Heermann's Gulls were also resting up. A few California Ground Squirrels were looking for tasty morsels.

After a day of beautiful scenery and wildlife we headed back north, stopping briefly at Ragged Point for ice-cream. Here the abundance of flowers provided food for Anna's Hummingbirds and Monarch Butterflies. We also spotted some Red-winged Blackbirds and Brewer's Blackbirds. A Common Yellowthroat was skulking beneath a bush.

Further along we stopped to check for condors without any luck. However, just a little earlier as we were driving along, one was seen by many gliding below the road towards some trees. We stopped at Grimes Point again where we spotted an Osprey, juvenile Red-tailed Hawk and some whale blows out at sea.

In beautiful sunshine we headed back to Carmel, stopping briefly at Bixby Bridge for scenic photos and a group shot. We arrived back at 6.30pm in time to refresh and meet again for dinner at 7pm. Two Western Grey Squirrels were feeding in the cypress trees in the car park and a Hairy Woodpecker called. After a delicious pork rib meal with delicious vegetarian accompaniments, we completed the day's checklist and then headed for bed.

Day 5

Wednesday 7th September

Monterey Bay and Carmel Valley

A warmer morning in the Carmel Valley we headed out at 8am to Fisherman's Wharf in Monterey, ready for our boat at 9am. It was a beautiful day at the wharf – the water was calm and glistening. A kingfisher flew past noisily while Western Gulls rested on the quayside. As we headed out, we paused by the sea lions and cormorants – a Guillemot sat on the rocks with them. A few Black Turnstones were foraging and on the sea wall further round a pair of Black Oystercatchers were feeding. As we headed out into Monterey Bay, hundreds of Black-vented

Shearwaters were flying low over the water past the boat. Much further out, we began to see Sooty Shearwaters loafing in the sea – up to 500 were seen during the trip. Various Elegant Terns passed by, often swooping down to catch a fish calling like a Sandwich Tern. The odd Egg-yolk Jellyfish was floating by. Only an hour later, we stopped to watch a mother and calf Humpback Whale resting at the surface. They were soon to be upstaged by a breaching whale, leaping out of the water five times in front of us, showing almost all its body. It was covered in seaweed and barnacles. After a brief rest it started breaching again, at one point in front of another boat giving a scale of how big the animal was. Once resting, it swam on its back, slapping its long, white fins against the water, probably to communicate with other whales.

We continued on after this adrenalin-filled moment and, 45 minutes later, encountered another baleen whale, a Fin Whale. The world's second largest whale was swimming quickly along the surface, blowing every so often. It remained low in the water, just showing its small dorsal fin, before it went under. Suddenly a Humpback Whale appeared in front of the boat and joined the Fin Whale. They breathed for a short while and then dived together, heading down the deep sea canyon beneath us – we were just on the edge where the undersea mountain dropped away to thousands of feet. The sonar was revealing a dense cloud that was probably krill, the whales' favourite food.

As we sailed on, two separate Black-footed Albatrosses glided past. Two separate Arctic Skuas, a Cassin's Auklet, Pink-footed Shearwaters (20) and Guillemots were also seen. We continued on heading out over the deep sea canyon. The swell and choppier waves led to an exhilarating trip. Finally we reached our destination where another boat had been holding the fort. Suddenly in front of us we saw a Blue Whale surfacing, the largest mammal on the planet. It showed several times before diving and remaining under water for five or ten minutes. It reappeared and surfaced half a dozen times, providing an excellent opportunity to admire the animal's tall blow, large, domed splash guard (protecting its blow holes) and its long body that just kept going before a tiny dorsal fin appeared as it went back under. We were in water 4000 feet (1200 metres) deep, 12 miles out from shore. The Blue Whale deep dived again, and it was time for us to head back inland. A sea fog had appeared, cooling the air temperature as we sailed back.

Nearing the harbour at 12.55pm, we came out of the fog and encountered four Risso's Dolphins surfing the waves – their white bodies could be made out beneath the surface of the sea before they came up for air.

What a trip. Everyone was very happy and we enjoyed lunch by the harbour side in glorious sunshine. We popped back to the lodge and headed back out again at 3.10pm, travelling further into the Carmel Valley. The scenery was stunning with rolling, rocky hills and crisp, dry grasslands dotted with bright green vineyards. The area is renowned for its wines, many of which make it into our supermarkets in the UK. In 39°C heat we stopped at a junction, Tassajarra Road, looking into the long grassland and a big oak tree. Here an endemic bird to this part of California, the Yellow-billed Magpie was residing. It spent time sitting on a branch, showing us both its sides, and allowing us to admire its yellow bill and eye skin. Nearby a few Acorn Woodpeckers were resting while an American Kestrel often perched in different branches. A water trough was busy with Brewer's Blackbirds drinking, joined by a few Lark Sparrows with distinctive eye stripes. Acorn Woodpeckers joined in and perched on the nearby irrigation system. One or two Lorquin's Admiral butterflies flew past.

Heading down the road the temperature peaked at 42°C. We stopped by the roadside near Rana Creek Ranchland, where some spotted California Quail. We waited patiently for a California Thrasher to appear and

had brief sightings as it flew down to vegetation by the roadside. A Red-tailed Hawk circled overhead. By the roadside a few Woodland Skippers and a Common Buckeye lay almost pristine, despite being dead.

Further along the road we stopped briefly and spotted half a dozen House Finches on the wires with a bluebird. A Wren-tit called in the background.

Starting to wither in the heat, we headed back to our lodge where many of the group enjoyed the outside pool and relaxed before dinner at 7pm.

Day 6

Thursday 8th September

Moss Landing Area

We awoke to a misty Carmel Valley and headed out after breakfast to Moss Landing. Our first port of call was Zmudowski's State Park, where there is a small freshwater lagoon alongside the sand dunes. It is an oasis, edged by intensive agriculture on its other side producing strawberries, lettuces and artichokes.

The vegetation was green and lush here, and plenty of birdlife with over 50 Barn Swallows hawking insects overhead. Song Sparrows were feeding or singing in the local area. Marsh Wrens were in the rushes and one or two showed themselves on the edges. The lagoon was home to Pied-billed Grebes, a Black-crowned Night Heron, a Great Blue Heron, Western Gulls and a Double-crested Cormorant. Four White Pelicans flew overhead.

It wasn't long before we found a few bright-green, stripy Pacific Tree Frogs sitting on the large rush stems. In the ground vegetation opposite, a female and later a juvenile Common Yellowthroat were spotted, followed by a male in a tree as we headed back. An Osprey passed overhead while a juvenile Red-shouldered Hawk devoured prey on a signpost. Meanwhile, a Red-tailed Hawk stood watch over the reserve from a nearby house. A calling Green Heron flew low and into the rushes calling and a pair of Great Egrets also flew across and round. A Virginia Rail made its way out to the edge of the rushes, slinking along. Back in the car park a White-crowned Sparrow was looking for titbits.

Next stop was Jetty Road, leading to the Moss Landing State Park. The tide was on its way in and we had excellent views of hundreds of Marbled Godwits, smaller numbers of Willets and a few Short-billed Dowitchers, many washing and preening. Some Long-billed Curlews, a Semi-palmated Plover, a Black Turnstone, Grey Plovers, Least Sandpipers and a Whimbrel were feeding in the saltmarsh. A Peregrine flew overhead, spooking some of the birds. At least 30 Elegant Terns flew overhead, juvenile birds calling with a thin whistle.

The highlight for everyone was watching a mother Sea Otter and her large cub feeding. The two were diving right in front of us, bringing back shellfish (perhaps mussels). The mother had half a dozen on her chest – she took one at a time and cracked the shells open with her back teeth. We could hear the crunching and cracking. Once she was in, you could see her teasing out the orange flesh. The baby was doing the same with smaller shells. Further out on the water three other mothers were tending their cubs, one very young.

Out on the sand banks of the harbour over 40 Harbour Seals were hauled out along with Western Gulls, Double-crested Cormorants and Brown Pelicans. At least 30 male Sea Otters were resting on their backs on the water, some tussling with each other.

Along the tideline a few Long-billed Curlews, Marbled Godwits and Willets were feeding. Two Western Grebes were sitting far out on the calm sea. On the shingle a small group of Sanderlings were mixing with four Snowy Plovers, a special bird that breeds here on the dunes. Some of the group had seen another six further up the coastline. A few Turkey Vultures were feeding on something dead on the beach too.

We stopped at Phil's Snack Shack for salads and sandwiches; in the nearby eucalyptus tree a Black-crowned Night Heron and a Great Blue Heron were hiding. House Sparrows fed nearby and Brewer's Blackbirds were looking for the moment to clear up after our eating. On the wires nearby Common Starlings and two scrub jays were perched.

The last birding stop of the afternoon was to Moonglow Dairy, near to the Moss Landing power station which had been our landmark for the week from the whale watching boat. As we entered the site a Say's Phoebe, a winter migrant, was seen by some of the group. As we got closer to the dairy and the cows, we spotted Red-winged Blackbirds, Common Starlings, and Tricoloured Blackbirds. There were also a few Brown-headed Cowbirds. The cows were in a large mud field and the birds were feeding *en masse* amongst them. Many of the birds were resting in small flocks. The juvenile blackbirds have finely light-brown-edged wing feathers.

We walked down to the slough, passing a slurry pond where Mallard, Shoveler, American Coot and a few Ruddy Duck were resting or swimming around. Out on the tidal slough a few hundred Least Sandpipers were resting – with the naked eye they resembled tiny pebbles on the saltmarsh edge. One Western Sandpiper was found amongst them - slightly larger with a rust-brown streak on their upper wings. Small flocks of sandpipers flew past, alongside Marbled Godwits and Grey Plovers. A few Long-billed Curlews were feeding on the mud. A Peregrine flew overhead and took a small wader for eating. At least four Sea Otters were seen on the water, moving with the tide up into the slough. Brown Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorants and at least six White Pelicans were resting in the water's edge. Out on the open water we had views of Western and Clark's Grebe side by side – with the two together we could really see the differences in head pattern and bill colour.

We headed back around 3pm, stopping in Monterey for some ice-creams before arriving back at just before 5pm to relax. We did the checklist before dinner and then headed down the road for a local beer to enjoy our penultimate evening together.

Day 7

Friday 9th September

Monterey Bay and Aquarium

It was another misty morning in Monterey, and we set off from Carmel at 7am, ready for an 8am whale-watching trip on the Sea Wolf, a smaller boat. The lack of wind meant the sea was calm and, as a result, hundreds of phalaropes were feeding in small groups on the surface. They were mixed, mainly Red-necked with some Grey. Small numbers of Black-vented Shearwaters were passing north to south across the bay while any Sooty Shearwaters we saw were just sitting on the water – the lack of wind meant it was a big effort for them to fly. A

highlight was seeing two and then 12 Black-footed Albatrosses sitting together on the sea – this is the most seen together on any of our tours in 13 years! Despite the fog, visibility at sea level was reasonably good.

Just 45 minutes in to our trip a Humpback Whale appeared, chin slapping against the water, shortly followed by a full breach very close to the boat, and a resulting huge splash. Half an hour later, a Blue Whale was in sight and we saw the animal blow a few times before disappearing under water. Meanwhile, over half a dozen Humpback Whales were feeding, diving and surfacing all around us. Another began breaching and continued to slap its fins in front of us. The breaching and fin slapping is thought to be a means of communicating to other whales – and indeed another whale swam over and joined it. They often form pairs for several hours or days. Other theories for the breaching are that it is to remove parasites such as barnacles, to exercise muscles (especially for young animals) or simply to have fun.

The Blue Whale reappeared and for some time was seen lunge feeding at the surface, taking big gulps of water and krill. It disappeared for a while and was spotted again surfacing close to the boat – there was lots of opportunity to admire its size, particularly its girth as it swam facing away from us. As we began to leave the Blue Whale, a Fin Whale appeared and surfaced several times in front of us before going under to feed.

While all this excitement was happening, the fog had disorientated a number of migrating warblers and at least two Yellow Warblers and three Townsend's Warblers flew around the boat a number of times before continuing their journey south.

As we continued along the edge of the canyon, three or four Risso's Dolphins appeared briefly, unusually surfing a wave. Various seabirds were flying past and a sharp-eyed member of the group spotted something unusual being harassed by two Western Gulls. It was a Brown Booby – a species that lives further south towards the tropics.

As we started to head back in, another Humpback Whale surfaced 30 metres from the boat. The engine was turned off and we all watched as the animal surfaced half a dozen times as it swam by, providing amazing opportunities to see it up close and hear it blow. You could see its tubercles on the front of its head – bumps that grow hairs allowing the whales to feel things deep down in the underwater canyons where it is very dark.

During the journey single Rhinoceros and Cassin's Auklets were seen, along with brief sightings of Harbour Porpoise and Dall's Porpoise.

We arrived back just after midday and headed back to the vehicles. The group were then dropped off at the world-famous Monterey Bay Aquarium where they spent the afternoon enjoying the hands-on rock pools, jellyfish displays, a huge tank with Hammerhead Sharks and wading birds such as Tufted Puffin. Some of the group were picked up early by Peter to collect their hire cars from the airport for their extensions, while the rest were picked up by Ed at 4.30pm. After checking in for flights, and with the checklist completed, we drove to the Fishwife restaurant back in Pacific Grove for a delicious sea-themed final dinner together before our travels back to San Francisco and London the following day.

Day 8

Saturday 10th September

With an earlier returning flight at 4.30pm, we decided to delay our departure from Contenta Inn until 9.30 giving everyone time to pack and relax before the journey home. We said goodbye to those who had hired cars and were extending their stay for another week and dropped two off at their hotel on Cannery Row before setting off north towards the airport.

The journey to the airport was good and we arrived in plenty of time. Peter was flying home with the remainder of the group whilst Ed was to meet a new group with a new leader, arriving later that day.

A smooth efficient flight back over the Atlantic followed.

Day 9

Sunday 11th September

We arrived into London early after having a strong tail wind and we said goodbye at the gate or in immigration as travellers headed home after another wildlife tour crammed full of excitement.

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Western Fence Lizard by Ed Drewitt



The group at Bixby Bridge

Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; D = dead)

	Common name	Scientific name	September					
			4	5	6	7	8	9
1	Botta's Pocket Gopher	<i>Thomomys bottae</i>					D	1
2	Virginia Opossum	<i>Didelphis virginiana</i>	2D		D	D		
3	Western Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus griseus</i>			2		1	1
4	Eastern Fox Squirrel	<i>Sciurus niger</i>	3				3	2
5	California Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus beecheyi</i>				2	✓	✓
6	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	1					
7	California Sea Lion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Northern Elephant Seal	<i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>			130			
9	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	6	✓		✓	✓	✓
10	Sea Otter	<i>Enhydra lutris</i>		8		4	40	✓
11	Common Raccoon	<i>Procyon lotor</i>	D			D		
12	Mule Deer	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>	✓			4		
13	Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>				1		1
14	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>				1		1
15	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	14	12		10		20
16	Long-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus capensis</i>		12				
17	Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>						5
18	Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>						2
19	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>						1
20	Dall's Porpoise	<i>Phocoenoides dalli</i>						3

Birds (H = Heard Only)

1	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓	✓		4	✓
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	3	✓			✓	
3	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		1			10	
4	Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>	5					
5	Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>					3	
6	California Quail	<i>Callipepla californica</i>	20			20		
7	Great Northern Loon (Diver)	<i>Gavia immer</i>	1					
8	Black-footed Albatross	<i>Phoebastria nigripes</i>	2	6		3		14
9	Ashy Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma homochroa</i>	1					
10	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Ardenna grisea</i>	800	1000		400		150
11	Pink-footed Shearwater	<i>Ardenna creatopus</i>	50	30		20		15
12	Black-vented Shearwater	<i>Puffinus opisthomelas</i>	40	2		200		80
13	Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>		2			10	
14	Western Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>					4	
15	Clark's Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus clarkii</i>					1	
16	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>				1	2	
17	Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>					1	
18	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	1	1	1		2	1
19	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	6	✓	4	4	✓	✓
20	Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>	4	4		3	3	✓
21	American White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>					10	
22	Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	20	60	✓	✓	✓	
23	Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>						1
24	Brandt's Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax penicillatus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>	60	120		20		✓

	Common name	Scientific name	September					
			4	5	6	7	8	9
26	Neotropic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax brasilianus</i>		10				
27	Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>	✓				✓	✓
28	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	California Condor	<i>Gymnogyps californianus</i>			2			
30	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>			1		2	
31	White-tailed Kite	<i>Elanus leucurus</i>	2		1			
32	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			1			
33	Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>		1				
34	Red-shouldered Hawk	<i>Buteo lineatus</i>			2	2	1	1
35	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	8		4	4	4	
36	Virginia Rail	<i>Rallus limicola</i>					1	
37	American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>	1				8	
38	Black Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>				2		5
39	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>			6		50	
40	Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>					10	
41	Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>	1	1	1		8	
42	Snowy Plover	<i>Charadrius nivosus</i>					✓	
43	Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>					2	
44	Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>					✓	
45	Whimbrel (American)	<i>Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus</i>	1				3	
46	Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>					✓	
47	Wandering Tattler	<i>Tringa incana</i>		1				1
48	Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>	1				✓	
49	Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularius</i>		1				
50	Black Turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>	4	4	1	4	2	5
51	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	6					
52	Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>					1	
53	Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>					✓	
54	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	100	40		20	1	150
55	Red Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>	10	10		1		20
56	Heermann's Gull	<i>Larus heermanni</i>	✓	40	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>				1	6	
58	California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Western Gull	<i>Larus occidentalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Elegant Tern	<i>Thalasseus elegans</i>	✓	10	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>		2				
62	Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>	1			1		1
63	Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua)	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	1	4		1		1
64	Common Murre (Guillemot)	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓
65	Pigeon Guillemot	<i>Cephus columba</i>		1				1
66	Cassin's Auklet	<i>Ptychoramphus aleuticus</i>		1		1		1
67	Rhinoceros Auklet	<i>Cerorhinca monocerata</i>		1				1
68	Rock Dove (Feral)	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
69	Band-tailed Pigeon	<i>Patagioenas fasciata</i>	2	1	2			2
70	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
71	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>		4	6		✓	✓
72	Vaux's Swift	<i>Chaetura vauxi</i>			2			
73	Black-chinned Hummingbird	<i>Archilochus alexandri</i>			1			
74	Anna's Hummingbird	<i>Calypte anna</i>	4	4	8	4	5	4
75	Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>		2			1	3
76	Acorn Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes formicivorus</i>	6	4	✓	✓	✓	✓

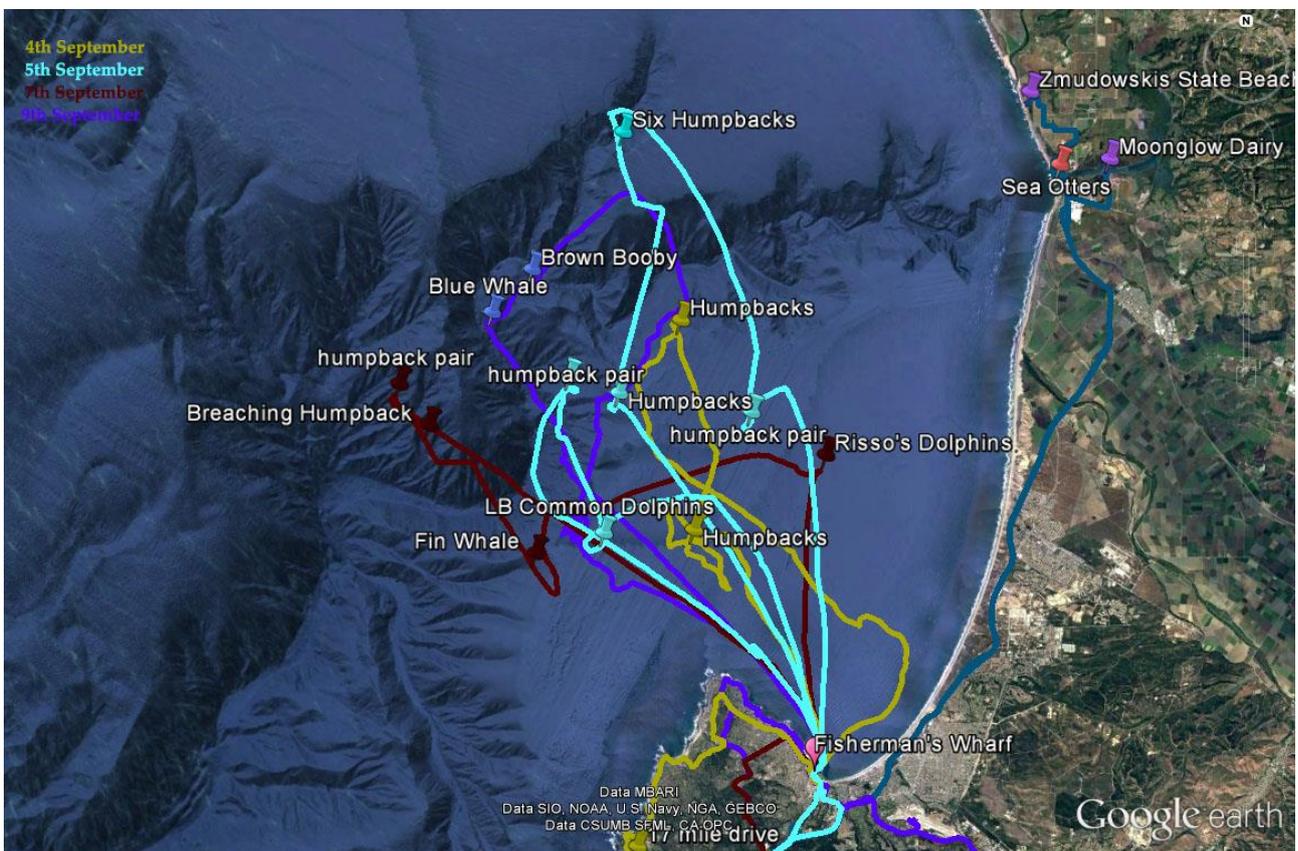
	Common name	Scientific name	September					
			4	5	6	7	8	9
77	Nuttall's Woodpecker	<i>Picoides nuttallii</i>	H		H			
78	Downy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides pubescens</i>		H	1			
79	Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides villosus</i>	2		H	H		
80	Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>			1			
81	American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>			3	1		
82	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	3		2		1	
83	Black Phoebe	<i>Sayornis nigricans</i>			1	2	5	1
84	Say's Phoebe	<i>Sayornis saya</i>					1	
85	Loggerhead Shrike	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>					1	
86	Hutton's Vireo	<i>Vireo huttoni</i>				1	1	1
87	Steller's Jay	<i>Cyanocitta stelleri</i>		1	8			
88	California Scrub Jay	<i>Aphelocoma californica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
89	Yellow-billed Magpie	<i>Pica nuttalli</i>				2		
90	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
91	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			4			
92	Oak Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus inornatus</i>			2	2		1
93	Chestnut-backed Chickadee	<i>Poecile rufescens</i>		H	✓	✓	✓	
94	Violet-green Swallow	<i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>		1				
95	Northern Rough-winged Swallow	<i>Stelgidopteryx serripennis</i>			1		1	
96	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	American Cliff Swallow	<i>Petrochelidon pyrrhonota</i>					1	
98	American Bushtit	<i>Psaltriparus minimus</i>	5		6	6	✓	✓
99	Wrentit	<i>Chamaea fasciata</i>		1	4	2	2	
100	Marsh Wren	<i>Cistothorus palustris</i>					4	
101	Bewick's Wren	<i>Thryomanes bewickii</i>		H	2	1		1
102	California Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma redivivum</i>				1		
103	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
104	Western Bluebird	<i>Sialia mexicana</i>		✓	10	✓	✓	✓
105	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>					6	✓
106	House Finch	<i>Haemorhous mexicanus</i>				✓	✓	✓
107	American Goldfinch	<i>Spinus tristis</i>			8	✓	✓	✓
108	Lesser Goldfinch	<i>Spinus psaltria</i>			1			
109	Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>			1		4	
110	American Yellow Warbler	<i>Setophaga aestiva</i>					3	1
111	Black-throated Grey Warbler	<i>Setophaga nigrescens</i>				1		
112	Townsend's Warbler	<i>Setophaga townsendi</i>						3
113	Wilson's Warbler	<i>Cardellina pusilla</i>						1
114	Tricolored Blackbird	<i>Agelaius tricolor</i>					✓	
115	Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>			✓		✓	
116	Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>					✓	
117	Brewer's Blackbird	<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
118	Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>				1	✓	
119	White-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>	1				✓	
120	Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>	1		1	3	✓	
121	Lark Sparrow	<i>Chondestes grammacus</i>				4		
122	Spotted Towhee	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>						1
123	California Towhee	<i>Melospiza crissalis</i>	1	2	3	3	✓	✓

Other Taxa

Western Pygmy-Blue, *Brephidium exile*
 Grey Hairstreak, *Strymon melinus*
 Common Buckeye, *Junonia coenia*
 Monarch, *Danaus plexippus*
 Fiery Skipper, *Hylephila phyleus*
 Sachem, *Atalopedes campestris*
 Black Saddlebags, *Tramea lacerata*
 Pacific Tree Frog, *Pseudacris regilla*
 Ranchman's Tiger Moth (woolly bear caterpillar), *Platyprepia virginalis*

Cabbage White, *Pieris rapae*
 Gulf Fritillary, *Agraulis vanillae*
 Lorquin's Admiral, *Limenitis lorquini*
 Propertius Duskywing, *Erynnis propertius*
 Woodland Skipper, *Ochlodes sylvanoides*
 Blue-eyed Darner, *Rhionaeschna multicolor*
 Western Fence Lizard, *Sceloporus occidentalis*
 Egg-yolk Jelly, *Phacellophora camtschatica*

Map of Whale Watch Routes



Sea Wolf II – with Brown Pelicans by Peter Dunn