

Whales and Dolphins of Monterey Bay

Naturetrek Tour Report

10 -18 September 2016



Humpback Whale breaching



Two Fin Whales



'Fat Fin' the Orca



Anna's Hummingbird

Report and images by Ed Drewitt



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Summary

The ultimate star of the trip was a Humpback Whale that breached over 30 times and continued at least another 20 after we left! From stunning scenery along the Big Sur, the picturesque rock coastline south of Monterey, to the big blue ocean of Monterey Bay itself, there was sea life everywhere from an Orca, Fin Whales and Humpbacks, to sea lions and elephant seals. Even two Blue Sharks showed on one morning. A school of dolphins comprised four species, Risso's, Common Long-beaked, Pacific White-sided and Northern Right Whale Dolphins. On land, California Condors flew straight over us, while Golden Eagles, Turkey Vultures and hawks soared over the rocky outcrops. Back at sea and the coastal zones, Sea Otters, the ultimate cute mammals with a serious taste for shellfish were abundant amongst the kelp beds and quieter lagoons. Seabirds from albatrosses, pelicans and shearwaters, to cormorants and Guillemots (and even Sabine's Gulls), provided an accompanying show – all part of the many animals and plants, big and small, that form such an important and special habitat in this area of deep sea. Our last spectacular sighting at sea was a Humpback Whale tail slapping a dozen times.

Day 1

Saturday 10th September

London to San Francisco

Most of the group of 16 met with Ian at Heathrow Airport, ready for flying on one of British Airways' Airbus, a huge A380. The flight headed across Manchester and on past the Outer Hebrides, Greenland and across the cold, far Arctic north of Canada (Fize Basin and Hudson Bay). Some had flown earlier to explore San Francisco for a few days or visit Yellowstone National Park.

The flight arrived at 5pm in San Francisco, eight hours behind the UK. Once through security we met with our other leader Ed who was already at the airport after leading the second holiday to Monterey Bay. It was still light and sunny with some low cloud over the mountains of the city. 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. Collared Doves, Mourning Doves and American Crows flying in groups to their roost were the only birdlife we saw along the route before it got dark. We arrived at our lodge around 9.15pm where most went to bed and some stopped to have a nibble of a delicious cold buffet.

Day 2

Sunday 11th September

Monterey Bay and headland

It wasn't long before we met again at 7am for breakfast and headed out at 7.50am. A male Anna's Hummingbird was already up and defending his territory in a magnolia tree outside the breakfast room. As we boarded the vans a group of California Scrub Jays were noisily foraging in the pine trees nearby. A Western Grey Squirrel was running along the road and then up a telegraph pole.

Half an hour into Monterey, we stopped in the car park at Fisherman's Wharf, our starting base each day to board our whale-watching boat. As we waited Western Gulls were calling from nearby roofs. Behind the wharf a dozen Harbour Seals were resting up; from a distance they looked like part of the rocky scenery. A Belted Kingfisher flew past flashing its wings and calling like a rattle.

We boarded our large catamaran, Blackfin, our boat for four out of our five boat trips during the holiday. At least three Sea Otters were swimming along on their backs— a juvenile Western Gull was harassing one. Every time it came up from a forage dive, the gull started pecking around its belly looking for food. Heading out at 9am, we manoeuvred closer to, and paused to watch, tens of male sea lions resting on the seawall. As we edged closer the strong, nasal-clearing smell of ammonia from the sea lions woke everyone up. Some sea lions were making their yelping sounds as they interacted with each other; some were simply fast asleep. The males were easy to see by their size and large domed heads. Brandt's Cormorants were busily preening and resting on the edge of the sea lion rookery where the odd Black Turnstone was feeding.

The sea was calm and despite sea fog, visibility at sea level was very good. There were plenty of seabirds during the first 45 minutes of our trip. Ed went on the microphone, accompanying Gregg, the boat's naturalist, to talk about seabirds. A flock of over a hundred Brandt's Cormorants were gathered together on the sea. A little further on hundreds of Sooty Shearwaters and one Pomarine Skua with fine tail spoons formed a long, continuous trail, travelling south. The Sooty Shearwaters fly here from New Zealand taking advantage of the abundance of food the bay has to offer. Guillemots were moving around in large rafts, formed of male birds with their now fully-grown chicks that could be heard squeaking. Small numbers of Red-necked Phalaropes were feeding on the sea's surface before flying away as the boat edged too close. As we sailed along the deeper water, a dozen Pink-footed Shearwaters, which nest in Chile, flew past in ones or twos. And the largest tubenoses here in Monterey, the Black-footed Albatrosses also made an appearance – at least three separate birds passed by the boat. Other seabirds included small numbers of Cassin's and Rhinoceros Auklets, Pelagic Cormorants, Elegant Terns, California Gulls, Heermann's Gulls, Brown Pelicans and a Fulmar. At one point two warblers migrating south passed close by the boat, a Townsend's Warbler and an American Redstart, the latter a rare visitor through this part of the USA.

An hour into the trip the first blows of Humpback Whales were seen – we passed by the first one or two and headed for deeper waters where more whales would be feeding. In calm waters we had the second-largest whale in the world surfacing, the Fin Whale. At least two were surfacing in front of us several times before diving under to feed on shoals of fish or krill that were appearing on the boat's sonar. Over the next half an hour we encountered at least another two or three Fin Whales, easily told apart from the Blue Whale by their taller, curved or falcate dorsal fins (which are tiny in Blue Whales). A few Humpback Whales were briefly surfacing and deep diving, showing their fluke as they went down.

We searched across the deep waters of the Monterey Canyon searching for more baleen whales without any luck. However, as we headed in, we encountered at least four Humpback Whales, one of which was breaching several times in the distance before fin slapping the sea. The breaching and fin slapping is thought to be a means of communicating to other whales. They often form pairs for several hours or days. Other theories for the breaching are to remove parasites such as barnacles, to exercise muscles (especially for young animals) or simply having fun.

As we headed back in and passed the Monterey Bay Aquarium, a small group of Bottlenose Dolphins were surfacing near kayaks only ten metres from the shore. One was showing deliberate raised fluke movements, thought to be part of courtship. Bottlenose Dolphins are only spotted on about one out of ten trips so these were a good sighting to end our first boat trip. Amongst the kelp beds at least eight Sea Otters were resting, floating on the seaweed.

After a delicious lunch at a local restaurant, Abalonetti's, specialising in clam chowder in a bread bowl as well as chicken, aubergine, shellfish or squid sandwiches, we headed along the coastline along the popular 17-Mile Drive. This is a toll road around the famous Pebble Beach and Spyglass Hill golf courses which also includes cypress and Monterey Pine woodland and shoreline habitat. We stopped at one viewpoint looking out across the spectacular rocky coastline – five Black Turnstones were feeding amongst the rock pools. As we headed back to the vans a beautiful White-tailed Kite flew past, looking very much like a tern in flight. It joined another in two small cypress trees on the edge of the golf course nearby.

We then stopped at Bird Rock (Seal Rock) where tens of sea lions were hauled out on a big rock not far from the coastline – they were resting and gesturing to each other, accompanied by Brandt's Cormorants. Western Gulls and Heermann's Gulls were resting close by; others were feeding on bread thrown by local tourists. California Ground Squirrels were also on the case, coming out of the rocks to look for titbits, or chase each other away. The shoreline was subtly moving in places where a few Black Turnstones were feeding along the tideline turning over the seaweed. A Surfbird showed briefly in one cove where a Wandering Tattler gave prolonged views to the whole group as it dodged the waves and perched on algae-covered rocks. Behind us, on the edge of the xerophytic vegetation, some spotted a White-crowned Sparrow feeding like a Dunnock on the ground. Small squadrons of Brown Pelicans flew past in v-formation very close to the shore. And half a dozen Sea Otters were resting, wrapped up in the kelp on their backs.

Passing through cypress and pine woodland, we stopped briefly to look along the coastline – a mixed group of Brewer's Blackbirds were calling and singing in a nearby tree. We continued on past the Lone Cypress, a single tree which has been 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.

Black-tailed or Mule Deer were common on the golf courses we passed and a Killdeer was resting on one course close to the road. Overhead half a dozen Turkey Vultures were seen and a few Red-tailed Hawks.

We headed back to the Carmel Valley, stopping briefly at a supermarket to collect supplies, and arrived back at our lodge at 5.30pm. With the sun still shining on the gardens and pool, many of the group enjoyed swimming in the outdoor pool or enjoyed a cup of tea and entrées.

We met for dinner at 7pm, followed by the checklist and then an early night for many.

Day 3

Monday 12th September

Monterey Bay

After a welcome range of breakfast choices, we headed out along the Carmel Valley to Monterey – the cloud was still with us, though at a higher level than yesterday.

The wind was increasing a little and the sea choppy than yesterday. The wildlife was quiet for the first hour, although we passed a large flock of a few hundred Brandt's Cormorants. As we exited the harbour a Harbour Seal and a sea lion were lying together on a buoy. The sea wall covered in sea lions and cormorants was as alive and smelly as usual.

Suddenly everything changed as 300-400 Risso's Dolphins surrounded us, although only about 100 were visible at any one time, spread out over a wide distance. To our surprise, three other dolphin species were mixed in amongst them, at least two Pacific White-sided Dolphins, two Long-beaked Common Dolphins (uncommon here) and two Northern Right Whale Dolphins, not seen here for a while. The latter are black on top and lack a dorsal fin - these two swam over to do some bow riding. We enjoyed watching this big school of dolphins for a while and then headed on for whales.

We saw a few Humpback Whales blowing and diving. And then found one was Humpback breaching half a dozen times in the distance. A smaller whale was nearer to the boat, jumping out of the water before diving. However, the other whale continued to breach, over 30 times while we were watching - it continued another 15-20 times more as we left it. The whale showed a mix of jumping out and twisting in a breach, belly flopping several times and pausing to fin slap the water.

A little further on from the Humpback we encountered up to six Fin Whales, four were most visible in pairs, sometimes surfacing together before deep diving, indicated by a gentle arch of their backs. They were feeding on krill 60-90 metres down and 30 metres thick/deep.

Half a dozen Black-footed Albatrosses, two Fulmars, small numbers of phalaropes, an Arctic Skua and a Sabine's Gull were also seen.

We stayed on the boat for our packed lunches in warming sunshine and headed out again just after 2pm. As we left, three Sea Otters were interacting with each other, climbing over one another. A lone female sea lion was laid out on a buoy with very obvious Great White Shark wounds on her rear end – a lucky escape no doubt.

The sea was more topsy-turvy than in the morning and, during the quieter period, Ed went on the microphone to talk more about seabirds. After an hour we were watching a Humpback Whale breaching in front of us, this time in the sunshine. The whale breached at least eight times and then was fin slapping upside down with both fins, looking as though it was trying to fly. It was probably the same animal we had seen in the morning. We passed a few other whales blowing; however, this was the main star this afternoon. A few Risso's Dolphins also made a brief appearance.

A supporting cast of birdlife included a few more albatrosses, shearwaters and pelicans. Out over the canyon we also spotted more Sabine's Gulls: a very pelagic gull that summers on pools and bogs in Alaska. From afar they looked very bright and through the binoculars their black leading wing edge was visible. Two passed by amongst some gulls, followed by a group of four.

As we sailed back in to the harbour we had lovely, bright views along the coastline of Pacific Grove and 17-Mile Drive. A few Sunfish (*Mola mola*) were at the sea's surface, one being followed by a juvenile Western Gull. We arrived back at 5pm and 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 13th September

Big Sur

After a clear, starry night, the morning was cold and fresh. After breakfast, at 8am, we headed across the road to an old airfield just behind. A Hairy Woodpecker was perched on a pinecone by our lodge and a Chestnut-backed Chickadee was foraging in smaller pines along the road. A few Anna's Hummingbirds zipped around, occasionally perching to sing. On the edge of the runway a Spotted Towhee was feeding on the ground, its ginger-red flanks striking. A California Towhee was also feeding nearby and often perched on the nearby garden fence. At least four California Scrub Jays showed off their stunning blue plumage on the top of some pines. Across the airfield a flock of House Finches were flitting around and a Black Phoebe flew across and started catching insects. Another Hairy Woodpecker, this one with a red crown, was drumming away on a nearby telegraph pole.

At 9am, as we headed out along the Big Sur for the day, a small group of American Goldfinches were feeding, like Siskins, on a pine tree opposite the entrance to our lodge.

The Big Sur, translated from the original Spanish for the big south, comprises beautiful, extensive rocky coastline where the Santa Lucia Mountains border the sea. As we headed along the coast the low cloud made for a cooler, more Scottish feel. However, by lunchtime it was warming up and our journey back was hot and sunny.

We travelled south along the Highway 1, pausing at the iconic Bixby Bridge for a group photo. The sun shone down to the bay just at the right moment for us to appreciate and enjoy watching seven Bottlenose Dolphins surfacing and diving in the clear water.

We continued on driving through the redwood forests of Big Sur Station, pausing to pick up our sandwich lunches at the bakery. Just up the road we stopped at a viewpoint, Grimes Point, looking out across the coastline and sea. There was low cloud over the mountains behind us while the sea gave good visibility. There was a light wind; Turkey Vultures were taking full advantage of any extra lift they could get. A Golden Eagle disappeared off south high above us. And then, to our surprise, an adult California Condor glided over our heads providing stunning views of its long, door-like wings and finger-like primary feathers. It was wing-tagged – a yellow tag with a black number 4. This condor is known as 204, 17-year-old male that was hatched in the San Diego Wild Animal Park and released in Big Sur in 2000. He is currently nesting on the Big Sur Coast in a trio with his foster chick 470 and 534. The nestling should be fledging within the next couple of months. A few minutes later, a second bird, an immature with darker feathers, also glided overhead. Meanwhile, a second Golden Eagle soared at a lower altitude, and then a Peregrine flew over the sea cliffs and landed in a dead tree. What a raptor fest! Our final raptor before moving on was a soaring Red-tailed Hawk.

We travelled for another hour, passing a landscape of tough, succulent, xerophytic plants ideally suited to the hot, dry and often foggy environment. Flowering dill was plentiful alongside Hottentot Figs, shrub-like *Echium* plants and many other low-growing plants, described as a tapestry of colour and texture by Jill.

We stopped at Ragged Point for our packed lunch and a comfort stop – the gardens of the centre here are full of flowering plants attracting Anna's Hummingbirds and Monarch Butterflies. One male hummingbird was in full

splendour – in the right light his forehead and throat shone a glittery pink-red colour. One or two Steller's Jays called from nearby trees. Brewer's Blackbirds and a few Red-winged Blackbirds came down for titbits.

Having finished our lunch we boarded the vehicles for the remaining 12-mile drive to San Simeon, passing a few dolphins surfacing in the breaking waves, and 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 of various sizes, plus some older, 4-metre long males with huge noses and battle-scarred manes. One male, perhaps the 'beachmaster' was in full moult, with tatty bits of old fur hanging off and the new fur growing through. The seals were all snotty and hot, busily throwing sand over their backs to keep cool. As the air got hotter, many gradually moved down the tideline to lose heat, forming a long line. Others stayed right up near the board walk in the dry sand. Two sub-adult males were jostling with each other on the beach, making a fart-like sound from their noses and mouths, characteristic of the elephant seal. Most of the others were snoozing on the sand.

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.

During the hour here we walked along the boardwalk exploring some of the beach, rock pools and scrubby area off the paths. Even this far up, a couple of elephant seals were sleeping on the sand. In the rock pools Black Turnstones were foraging. Other waders included a washing Wandering Tattler, a Black Oystercatcher and a Long-billed Curlew. In the shallow water amongst the rock boulders a female Red-breasted Merganser was busy ducking her head and looking for food. On the drier rocky areas a Black Phoebe and at least three White-crowned Sparrows were foraging. There were other mammals around too including a Desert Cotton Tail Rabbit (with longer ears than the European Rabbit) and tame California Ground Squirrels. Amongst the kelp beds a Harbour Seal was poking its head up. A Great Blue Heron was walking amongst the kelp. And on a large white, guano-covered rock beyond, California Sea Lions and adult Brown Pelicans were resting.

After a day of beautiful scenery and wildlife we headed back north, stopping briefly at Ragged Point for ice-cream. A female Brewer's Blackbird was picking off splatted insects from the front grill of a red Mustang. Further along we stopped to check for condors again – two passed overhead. A flock of Vaux's Swifts were foraging over trees and other vegetation with the mountain backdrop. Out at sea, four Humpback Whales were surfacing and before we left we watched one dive, showing its fluke. Down below we could hear sea lions and see various gulls foraging on the edge of the kelp forest.

In beautiful sunshine we headed back to Carmel. The views were stunning and the sea was calm and blue. An American Kestrel flew over the road and many more Turkey Vultures drifted overhead along the way. As we turned into Carmel Road a Sharp-shinned Hawk circled overhead, near a vulture.

We arrived back at 6pm in time to refresh, have a swim and get ready to meet again for dinner at 7.30pm.

Day 5

Wednesday 14th September

Monterey Bay and Carmel Valley

We were greeted with a clear, cold morning; however, once the sun came up it was a bright day, and not just in the Carmel Valley. The whole of Monterey was bathed in beautiful morning sunshine.

We headed out on the Blackfin at 9am on calm, still, glistening water, stopping to admire the usual resting sea lions, cormorants and the odd Black Turnstone. The rest of the morning couldn't have been more different to our other trips out. What a stunning day! In glorious conditions we watched 100 or so Risso's Dolphins surfacing, their blows sounding like the release of gas from a soda bottle. The white, scarred adults were most obvious, though younger grey individuals were amongst them.

We then sailed on north-west towards Moss Landing, further up the Monterey Peninsula. The boat slowed down and for many minutes everything was quiet – the boat crew were scanning and scanning. Suddenly a passenger spotted a blow. A big male Orca, known as Fat Fin, was quartering the sea, looking for a seal to eat. He was surfacing in different directions making it difficult to follow him. He dived a few times with five-minute intervals or more of not seeing him. However, with some persistence he surfaced five times reasonably close, giving everyone nice views before he dived again.

The visibility today was incredible – we could see where we had been with the Big Sur, Moss Landing and Santa Cruz mountain range all in view. We headed out west to the deeper waters. All around, we could see Humpback Whales blowing or diving. After passing many, we stopped in an area where there were many whales, hundreds of dolphins and over 100 Sooty Shearwaters. As half a dozen Humpback Whales surfaced and dived around us, some quite close, Short-beaked Common Dolphins came to the boat. We were surrounded as some came to ride the bow waves while others surfaced in big numbers further away. Towards the edge of the school, over 100 Pacific White-sided Dolphins, more marked and black and white than the common dolphins, were surfacing. This was a real spectacle.

Pairs of male Guillemots with the almost adult-size chicks were spread out across the sea and a single Rhinoceros Auklet was seen before it dived. Pelicans drifted past in small numbers while Sooty Shearwaters and a few Pink-footed Shearwaters streamed in from the east to take advantage of the abundance of food that the dolphins and whales had found. Elegant Terns were in bigger numbers today, individuals picking off small fish amongst the dolphins. Some were resting on the kelp when we headed back. A few Arctic Skuas were chasing the terns in the hope of getting a free fish meal. Two Marbled Godwits, with their cinnamon-brown wings, were flying over the deep ocean heading north towards Moss Landing.

We headed back just after midday on smooth, calm waters. It was an ideal opportunity to see pelagic tunicates floating at the sea's surface. Some looked a little like Egg-yolk Jellyfish. They are in fact salps: thick, jelly zooplankton with cylindrical bodies. To our great surprise and glee, the calm waters also meant a Blue Shark was spotted close to the boat – we could see the tops of its dorsal and caudal fins poking out of the water. With polarised glasses we could make out the long, moving shape of the shark as it swam like a snake through the water. A little further in we encountered a second Blue Shark, again just beneath the surface. Floating kelp was home to small fish, scuttling back under the fronds for cover as we sailed past.

Passing a very sunny, bright Pacific Grove and aquarium, we arrived back at 1pm and enjoyed our lunch along the harbour side. We popped back to the lodge and headed back out again at 3pm, 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 the enjoyable heat around 25°C, we stopped at a junction, Tassajarra Road, looking across the long grassland and large oak trees. A nearby water trough for horses was busy with thirsty Common Starlings, Lark Sparrows (at least 12), scrub jays, Brewer's Blackbirds and Acorn Woodpeckers. This site is special for an endemic bird to this part of California, the Yellow-billed Magpie. It is near threatened and recovering from the West Nile Virus which saw its population halve from 180,000 individuals in 2003 to 60,000 in 2006. After some searching, two flew across a far field into an oak tree where another few were spotted. Another five then flew into the tree. Through the scopes some of the magpies could be seen – their yellow bill and eye-skin very distinctive. They mostly had their backs to us, showing their long glossy green tails. At one point three flew down to the water trough giving everyone the chance to admire their colours. In a far oak we also admired a Red-tailed Hawk showing its red tail very nicely. Mourning Doves lined the metal fence of a nearby ranch driveway.

We stopped by the roadside near Rana Creek Ranchland where a few Mourning Doves flew by and an American Kestrel hovered high above us, with a stunning blue sky backdrop.

We arrived back at 5pm giving everyone the chance to enjoy cooling in the pool, socializing and relaxing before dinner at 7pm.

Day 6

Thursday 15th September

Moss Landing Area

Another bright morning awaited us and we headed out at 8am along a bright, sunny Carmel Valley. For a second day the Monterey Peninsula was bathed in sunshine with no sign of sea fog. We headed to Moss Landing, stopping at our lunch stop to drop off our food choices.

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. Along the way we passed fields covered in plastic – this is where cyanide is put into the soil to kill any invertebrates that might eat the plants. On one field 20 Semipalmated Plovers and a Least Sandpiper were resting on the plastic – on the way back there were over 100 plovers and two Ring-billed Gulls.

As we jumped out of the vehicles to explore the reserve, a Northern Harrier quartered over the sand dunes and then the rushes. The vegetation was green and lush. In glorious sunshine we saw over 100 Barn Swallows, many resting on the rushes and others on the high sand dunes near the car park. Amongst them were a Sand Martin and several Violet-green Swallows, one intent on catching a white feather over the water.

It wasn't long before the group were spotting Pacific Tree Frogs, tiny bright green or brown frogs that spend the day sitting on a rush stem. At first they were invisible and gradually everyone got their eye in on them.

Out on the water several families of Pied-billed Grebes with large young were sitting on the water. Two Double-crested Cormorants were upright on posts and a Black-crowned Night Heron was hiding in the reeds. Marsh

Wrens were nosily calling from the vegetation and on the edge of one area a Song Sparrow was singing beautifully. A Red-tailed Hawk stood watched over the reserve from a nearby house. On the plastic of a nearby field two Killdeer rested, and other flew over calling loudly. Before we left, a willow tree was hiding at least one or two Yellow Warblers, foraging like Chiffchaffs.

Next stop was Jetty Road leading to the Moss Landing State Park. The tide was very high in line with a full moon and we had excellent views of hundreds of Marbled Godwits and Willets roosting. 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 shellfishes mussels. We heard the mother crunching and cracking the shells with her teeth, then teasing the orange meat out to swallow. The baby was doing the same with smaller shells. Further out on the water three other mothers were tending their cubs.

As the group began to walk along the track a few Long-billed Curlews appeared showing metres away on the edge of the water. A few Harbour Seals noisily snorted out on the water. At the back of the lagoons hundreds of eclipse-plumaged Mallard and Shoveler were resting. A few Great Blue Herons, a Snowy Egret and a Great Egret were taking advantage of the high tide and looking for fish. Along the walk a Linnet-like male House Finch, White-tailed Kite and a Loggerhead Shrike were also spotted.

Out on the sand banks of the harbour over 20 Harbour Seals were hauled out along with Western Gulls, Double-crested Cormorants and Brown Pelicans. We spent 45 minutes watching the antics of 30 male Sea Otters resting on their backs on the water, some tussling with each other. A few times the whole group of otters suddenly back peddled through the water in synchrony. One younger male was systematically going around to the older, whiter-faced males, perhaps looking for food. Three males came to the bank of the lagoon and slept on the mud, rather like dogs. Out on a nearby seawall there were plenty more pelicans, cormorants and terns sitting. Other highlights included a fly-by Forster's Tern and a female Black Scoter sat on the lagoon bank.

On the shingle beach amongst the dried seaweed we found four Snowy Plovers, a special bird that breeds here on the dunes. They are a locally uncommon species, vulnerable to disturbance on the sandy beaches where they nest. As the name suggests they are a very white and pale grey species. One colour-ringed individual had been hatched and reared as a chick at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Another had been ringed as a wild chick at Salinas National Wildlife Refuge in 2011.

We stopped at Phil's Snack Shack for salads and sandwiches; on the weedy edges of the pool nearby a Spotted Sandpiper and a Lesser Yellowlegs were feeding.

The last birding stop of the afternoon was to Moonglow Dairy near to the Moss Landing power station which had been our landmark yesterday from the whale watching boat. As we got closer to the dairy and the cows, Red-winged Blackbirds, Common Starlings, and Tricoloured Blackbirds were swirling around in flocks amongst Feral Pigeons. There was also small numbers of Brown-headed Cowbirds. The cows were in a large mud field and the birds were feeding *en masse* amongst them. Near the vehicles a Black Phoebe and a Yellow Warbler were foraging.

We walked down to the slough, passing a slurry pond where Mallards, American Coots, a male Cinnamon Teal and a Ruddy Duck were resting or swimming around. As the tide was receding half a dozen Long-billed Curlews

and a Whimbrel were feeding nearby along with a Greater Yellowlegs and a small group of Least Sandpipers. Out on the edge of the estuary at least 10 White Pelicans were resting on the bank. As we scanned along the saltmarsh many more Least Sandpipers were feeding on the mud. Two American Avocets and a Grey Plover were sleeping. Where the water moves in and out on the tide like a river small numbers of Willets, Marbled Godwits, Least Sandpipers, a Grey Plover and a few Greater Yellowlegs were feeding. A Snowy Egret was looking glorious in the sunshine, and showing off its yellow feet and legs. Out on the water a Western Grebe and a Clark's Grebe were swimming together, allowing for us to see the bright white face and yellow bill of the Clark's Grebe. The Western has a smoky-yellow bill and black surrounding the eye. A squadron of Brown Pelicans flew over the water and a White Pelican flew right passed us, along with many Elegant Terns and a single Forster's Tern. Overhead small flocks of Tricoloured Blackbirds and a few Red-winged Blackbirds flew past. At least a dozen White-faced Ibises were seen flying over in small groups, over the dairy fields and the highway.

We headed back around 2.30pm, stopping in Monterey for some ice-creams before arriving back at 4.30pm to relax. Along the peninsula the sea fog was starting to drift in land. However, on the edge of Monterey and back in Carmel it was sunny and a comfortable 21°C. We did the checklist before dinner and after eating headed down the road for a local beer to enjoy our penultimate evening together.

Day 7

Friday 16th September

Monterey Bay and Aquarium

Waking up early today we met for breakfast at 6.15am and headed out at 7am. The cloud had come back in and the air was cool. We headed out in Sea Wolf II - the first 75 minutes were quiet. The sea was a little more like the UK, cold and a little rough. Then we started seeing lots of Sooty Shearwaters, and then blows of Humpback Whales. We spent over an hour watching at least ten Humpbacks surfacing close to the boat and shallow diving. We could hear them make a trumpet sound as they blew. Seabirds were everywhere and Pink-footed Shearwaters were in greater abundance today, plus the odd Black-vented Shearwater. A few Black-footed Albatrosses and half a dozen Rhinoceros Auklets were also around. Sea lions and dolphins were also taking advantage of the fish not far beneath the surface. Pacific White-sided Dolphins and Short-beaked Common Dolphins came to the boat, porpoising out of the water. Frequently a common and a white-sided dolphin surfaced together giving the ultimate comparison. The white-sided had distinct hooked dorsal fins. The whales were breaching around us, usually just the once each time. We saw half a dozen breaches including two breaching together in synchrony. To our amazement a female Humpback breached and then tail slapped the sea at least 15 times. With her body pointing down we watched as she put immense muscle effort into pointing the tail upwards and then slapping it down on the sea, at first upside down and then upright. When she finished and breached, just after 11am we headed back in, very pleased with this new behaviour for our trip and a great finale.

We headed up to Cannery Row and all enjoyed the spectacular world renowned Monterey Bay Aquarium. We enjoyed everything, from touching sea urchins and rats to watching huge Yellow-fin Tuna and Hammerhead Sharks. A Laysan Albatross helped show everyone how long albatross wing are, while the Sea Otters were sleek and streamlined underwater. From fascinating talks to beautiful surroundings looking out across the bay, everyone enjoyed exploring the centre and finding out more about what was beneath the sea where we had been watching whales. We headed back down Cannery Row, past buildings that were once sardine factories, and met together at 4.30pm. Once back at our lodge we checked in, had a breather and covered our checklist at 6.30pm.

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. Kate Spencer, a local naturalist who runs another whale watching company, joined us and enjoyed hearing about our experiences and telling us about her stories, from Great White Sharks in the bay to breaching whales removing their barnacles.

Day 8

Saturday 17th September

After breakfast at 7am, we had a casual few hours to pack and relax around our lodge. The Anna's Hummingbirds were very obliging for photos, feeding on the tubular flowers around the garden. A few California Towhees were feeding and calling in the garden and a House Wren sang nearby. We headed off to San Francisco at 9.30am with plenty of time ahead. We got a little held up on the way, spotting a few Mule Deer and ground squirrels while we were stationary. We still made the airport in good time for around 12.45pm. We bid farewell to those not on the same flight and headed through security.

Day 9

Sunday 18th September

Despite a slight delay on the flight we arrived in the UK at 11am and travelled on to our various homes and destinations.

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The group at Bixby Bridge

Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>					2+		
2	Desert Cotton Tail	<i>Sylvilagus audubonii</i>			1				
3	California Sea Lion	<i>Zalaopus californianus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Northern Elephant Seal	<i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>			100+		H		
5	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	12	12	1	2	20+	8+	
6	Sea Otter	<i>Enhydra lutris</i>	20+	5		3	40+	4+	
7	Mule Deer	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>	8	5	1			1	2
8	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	5	6					
9	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	12+	6+	4	12+		12+	
10	Long-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus capensis</i>		2					
11	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>				300+		100+	
12	Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>		300+		100+			
13	Pacific White-sided Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus obliquidens</i>		2		100+		100+	
14	Northern Right Whale Dolphin	<i>Lissodelphis borealis</i>		2					
15	Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>				1			
16	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	8		10				
17	Western Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus griseus</i>	1		2	2	1		
18	California Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus beecheyi</i>	6		4		2+		6
19	Little Brown Bat or Fringed-tailed Bat	<i>Myotis lucifugus</i> or <i>Myotis thysanodes</i>			1				

Birds

1	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	2		6				
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>					200+		
3	Cinnamon Teal	<i>Anas cyanoptera</i>					1		
4	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>					200+		
5	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			1				
6	Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>					1		
7	Black Scoter	<i>Melanitta americana</i>					1		

	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			11	12	13	14	15	16	17
8	Black-footed Albatross	<i>Phoebastria nigripes</i>	4	6				2	
9	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	1	2					
10	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>	✓	100+		200+		300+	
11	Pink-footed Shearwater	<i>Puffinus creatopus</i>	12	10		6		15+	
12	Black-vented Shearwater	<i>Puffinus opisthomelas</i>	12	20				2	
13	Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>					12		
14	Western Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>					1		
15	Clark's Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus clarkii</i>					1		
16	White-faced Ibis	<i>Plegadis chihi</i>					12		
17	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>				1	1		
18	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>		1	3	1	2	1	
19	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	6	2	✓	2	4	2+	
20	Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>		4	✓	2	2		
21	American White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>					12		
22	Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
23	Brandt's Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax penicillatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
24	Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>	5						
25	Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>	1	6			50+		1
26	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	8+	4+	20+	12+	8	2+	12+
27	California Condor	<i>Gymnogyps californianus</i>			4				
28	White-tailed Kite	<i>Elanus leucurus</i>	2						
29	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus hudsonius</i>					1		
30	Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>			1				
31	Cooper's Hawk	<i>Accipiter cooperii</i>					1	1	
32	Red-shouldered Hawk	<i>Buteo lineatus</i>		1			1		
33	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	3	2	4	4	6	1	8+
34	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			2		1		
35	American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>			1	2	1		1
36	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1				
37	American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>					12+		
38	Black Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>	4		3				
39	American Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra americana</i>					2		

	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			11	12	13	14	15	16	17
40	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>					2		
41	Semipalmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>					100+		
42	Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>	1				6+		
43	Snowy Plover	<i>Charadrius nivosus</i>					4		
44	Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>				2	100+		
45	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	1				1		
46	Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>			1		8+		
47	Wandering Tattler	<i>Tringa incana</i>	1		1				
48	Willet	<i>Tringa semipalmata</i>	1				100+		
49	Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>					4+		
50	Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularius</i>					1		
51	Black Turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>	9	2	4	1			
52	Surfbird	<i>Aphriza virgata</i>	1						
53	Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>					100+		
54	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	50+	30+		6		6	
55	Grey Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>						3	
56	Sabine's Gull	<i>Xema sabini</i>		6					
57	Heermann's Gull	<i>Larus heermanni</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
58	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>					3+		3
59	California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
60	Glaucous-winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>							
61	Western Gull	<i>Larus occidentalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
62	Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>					2		
63	Elegant Tern	<i>Thalasseus elegans</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
64	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		1		3			
65	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	200+	50+		100+		50+	
66	Cassin's Auklet	<i>Ptychoramphus aleuticus</i>	12						
67	Rhinoceros Auklet	<i>Cerorhinca monocerata</i>	6			1		6+	
68	Common Pigeon/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>			✓	✓		3	2
71	Vaux's Swift	<i>Chaetura vauxi</i>			10+				

	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			11	12	13	14	15	16	17
72	Black-chinned Hummingbird	<i>Archilochus alexandri</i>			1				
73	Anna's Hummingbird	<i>Calypte anna</i>	3	2	6+	3+	2+	1	2+
74	Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>	2	2					
75	Acorn Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes formicivorus</i>	2	2	✓	✓	✓	2	4+
76	Nuttall's Woodpecker	<i>Picoides nuttallii</i>		1		H			
77	Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides villosus</i>			2				
78	Black Phoebe	<i>Sayornis nigricans</i>			2		3		
79	Loggerhead Shrike	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>					2		
80	Steller's Jay	<i>Cyanocitta stelleri</i>			2				
81	California Scrub Jay	<i>Aphelocoma californica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Yellow-billed Magpie	<i>Pica nuttalli</i>				9			
83	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			3				
85	Chestnut-backed Chickadee	<i>Poecile rufescens</i>			1				
86	Violet-green Swallow	<i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>					8		
87	Northern Rough-winged Swallow	<i>Stelgidopteryx serripennis</i>					1		
88	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>					100+		3
89	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>					1		
90	Wrentit	<i>Chamaea fasciata</i>			1				
91	Marsh Wren	<i>Cistothorus palustris</i>					✓		
92	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			100+	20			2
93	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>					✓		
94	American Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis tristis</i>			6				
95	Lesser Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis psaltria</i>				6			2
96	House Finch	<i>Carpodacus mexicanus</i>			6		8+		
97	Townsend's Warbler	<i>Dendroica townsendi</i>	1						
98	American Redstart	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>	1						
99	Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>					1		
100	American Yellow Warbler	<i>Dendroica aestiva</i>					2+		
101	Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>					20+		
102	Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>			6		200+		
103	Tricolored Blackbird	<i>Agelaius tricolor</i>					100+		

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			11	12	13	14	15	16	17
104	Brewer's Blackbird	<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	100+	✓	1
105	Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>					6+		
106	White-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>	1		3		1		
107	Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>			6				
108	Lark Sparrow	<i>Chondestes grammacus</i>			8				
109	Spotted Towhee	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>			1				
110	California Towhee	<i>Melospiza crissalis</i>		1	1				2

Other Taxa

1	Western Tiger Swallowtail	<i>Papilio rutulus</i>				1			
2	Cabbage White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>					✓		
3	Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>		6		1			
4	Fiery Skipper	<i>Hylephila phyleus</i>	1			1	1		
5	Ten-lined June Beetle	<i>Polyphylla decemlineata</i>			1				
6	Pelagic Tunicate	<i>Thetys vagina</i>				✓			
7	Blue Shark	<i>Prionace glauca</i>				2			
8	Ocean Sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>	2						
9	Western Fence Lizard	<i>Sceloporus occidentalis</i>			✓				
10	Pacific Tree Frog	<i>Pseudacris regilla</i>					✓		
11	Pacific Forktail Damselfly	<i>Ischnura cervula</i>					1		



Pacific White-sided Dolphin



California Ground Squirrel