Publication Preview

A Birder’s Guide to Southern California

Brad Schram and Jim Lane never birded together. In fact, they never met, even though in the late 1960s and early 1970s they birded Southern California with equal intensity—Jim to plan the routes and log the mileages that would make his second birder’s guide such a roaring success, and Brad to absorb SoCal birding like a blotter, turning him into one of the state’s most active and dedicated birders. We like to imagine Jim’s pleasure at reading this fifth edition of his little guide. Here is a wry sense of humor, an attention to detail, and a passion for Southern California birding to match—and exceed—his own.

“SoCal” was the first of the original seven Lane Guides to be revised and substantially expanded by the American Birding Association starting in 1990, and it is the first to require a third updating in 18 years—but that’s Southern California, ever expanding, ever changing, with its hundreds of dedicated birders ferreting out yearly surprises.

Like most of the other 18 titles in the ABA/Lane Birdfinding Guide series, A Birder’s Guide to Southern California is available online from ABA Sales <abasales.com>.

— Cindy Lippincott
Series Editor
Author's Note: The introductory chapter to A Birder's Guide to Southern California gives ample attention to Southern California's periodic natural disaster scenarios. Unless recently returned from self-imposed exile on a remote Micronesian atoll, you know that Southern California suffered significant fire damage during the October 2007 Santa Ana winds. Although most of the guide's birding locations remain intact, a few locations have been seriously affected in Orange, San Bernadino, and San Diego counties. While Ventura County endured much fire damage in the interior, its published birding routes were spared this time.

Orange County's Silverado fire destroyed most of the habitat in Silverado and Modjeska canyons, both comprising important segments in the Santa Ana Mountains chapter. Segments of the San Bernardino Mountains Loop underwent heavy damage; the region between Lake Arrowhead and Green Valley should be avoided for the foreseeable future. San Diego County had its heavily affected areas as well, but most areas remain as noted in the guide. The near-total obliteration of coastal sage scrub habitat at San Dieguito River Park at Lake Hodges destroyed a favorite birding destination there. Coastal Sage Scrub habitat takes five to ten years to thoroughly recover from devastation by fire, so one hopes for a return of the habitat and its attendant California Gnatcatchers in due course. Although fire blackened much just north of the Otay Lakes, important specific sites there described in the San Diego chapter remain birdable. Palomar Mountain State Park has sustained some fire damage, as has the immediate vicinity; however, the mountain's birding sites are still mostly intact. Because of the fire, the state park is currently closed. Other mountain sites burned in San Diego's interior in 2003 were noted in the 2007 edition and continue their recovery. No fire-related changes in pelagic birding are anticipated.

Birding routes described in the Death Valley chapter, which appears below in a form adapted for Birding, are basically as they have been for several decades, and they are not likely to change in the future. Although distant from Southern California's core, Death Valley offers the exotic, the historic, and frequently the unexpected.

Death Valley
Death Valley—Which other of North America's famous birding sites is blessed with such an extraordinary name? To be sure, certain place names evoke the spectacle of migration, exceptional natural beauty, and wondrous memories: Cave Creek Canyon, Point Pelee, Cape May, High Island, the Kougarok Road north of Nome. The Dry Tortugas may stand alone in competition with Death Valley for the birding destination whose very name is to be reckoned with—a name requiring a mental pause so one may simply
Death Valley is a classic vagrant trap, and many rarities have been spotted amid the artificial plantings of date palms (top photo) and other non-native plants found here. The list of vagrants to Death Valley is varied and impressive, including such goodies as Sprague’s Pipit (middle photo) and Ruddy Ground-Dove (bottom photo).

savor the words, the concept, the mythology of the place.

Wholly enclosed within Death Valley National Park, Death Valley is not dead. It is, however, a valley, and a fairly long one at that; it runs some 130 miles from Last Chance Spring in the north to Saratoga Springs in the south. Tucked in eastern Inyo County amid mountain ranges named Cottonwood, Grapevine, Panamint, Black, and—more picturesquely—Funeral, Last Chance, and Owlshead, the valley is a deep-faulted slash into Paleozoic rock punctuated with volcanism, latter-day stream-washed sediments, and the caustic mineral pans left by prehistoric lakes. It is an extreme place; therefore it is fitting that one can stand at the lowest spot in the United States near Badwater, 282 feet below sea level, and look west to Telescope Peak in the Panamints, at 11,042 feet elevation. The total distance is approximately 13 miles. Gazing upward from the chemical stew in company with Common Ravens at Badwater, you are looking toward nearby habitat whose breeding birds include Clark’s Nutcracker, Mountain Chickadee, and Mountain Bluebird. It is also much cooler up there.

Lurid tales of lost pioneers aside, Death Valley can be a pretty grim place. The birder, however, knows that it is rife with opportunity. The possibilities depend on two factors: water and migration. One does not bird Death Valley because it has rare or endemic residents not found elsewhere. There is no one standout species drawing birders the many long, dry miles to this remarkable place. Birders bird Death Valley for its migrants and the rarities that show up during mi-

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From below sea level at the Furnace Creek golf course, one looks west to Telescope Peak, more than 11,000 feet above sea level. Death Valley National Park, California; March 1998. © Brad Schram.


Death Valley National Park, California; October 1997. © Larry Sansone.

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Do not bother birding Death Valley in the summer (further elaboration should be unnecessary). Winter on the valley floor is delightful with cold nights, crisp mornings, and moderate daytime temperatures under clear skies; annual precipitation averages less than two inches. Winter also brings an interesting assemblage of ducks and wintering passerines to the verdant oases. Fall and spring migrations at the oases can produce wonderful days among western migrants leavened with vagrant surprises. Birding Death Valley is essentially a progress from oasis to oasis; thus the plan of this chapter.

You can reach Death Valley National Park (fee) easily (after a long drive) through entrances in the west, east, and south. Try to procure the AAA map to Death Valley before starting your trip. Many Southern Californians prefer the route through Trona and the Panamint Valley on Highway 178, continuing to Highway 190, turning there east toward Towne Pass and Death Valley beyond. However you approach the valley, be sure to arrive with as full a fuel tank as possible (gasoline is readily available in the park, but prices are steep); carry extra water and bring plenty of snacks. A broad-brimmed hat, lightweight clothes, and sun block are required equipment; in winter, bring a warm shirt or sweater and a windbreaker as well. If you intend to do any hiking, appropriate rugged footwear is necessary. People still occasionally go for a hike up a side canyon and disappear; take warnings about water and accurate navigation seriously.

Disclaimers notwithstanding, Death Valley is a wonderful place for exploring—best done from November through April when the temperatures are more reasonable. The birding, although good, is not as exciting at this time. The mornings can be given to birding while mid-day and afternoons can be spent exploring this fascinating place. A fairly extensive network of four-wheel-drive tracks provides access to hidden canyons and geological curiosities. The one-way drive through Titus Canyon in the Grapevine Mountains (accessed via Highway 374 just west of Beatty, Nevada) is justly famous. Travelers should check with rangers before driving this route, as it’s often closed due to snow, mud, or flash floods. As with all desert travel, one should stay away from canyons during infrequent storms in the mountains (especially in summer); carrying extra water inside the vehicle is only one of the traveler’s concerns at such times.

Our birding route starts at Furnace Creek Ranch in mid-valley, and will be completed in one day. Depending on your time available, you may wish to explore the Panamint Mountains or other byways on your second day here, redoing the valley on the third. This gives more migrants time to arrive (or leave), providing new possibilities. Furnace Creek Ranch can also serve as your overnight lodging destination with motel rooms (760-786-2345), swimming pool, store, restaurants, and a campground available. This manmade oasis also includes surface streams, small ponds, date palm groves, a golf course, tennis and basketball courts, a historic museum, a post office, and a gas station. You should stop at the Park W W W . A B A . O R G
Lying near the northern extreme of the Mojave Desert, Death Valley offers typical warm-desert species such as Greater Roadrunner (left) and Black-throated Sparrow (right).

Headquarters and Visitor’s Center on the northern edge of the Furnace Creek complex, pay your entry fee, and peruse the fine selection of books relevant to Death Valley, California desert history, natural history, and deserts generally. A Greater Roadrunner may be stalking nearby in front of the building, as White-winged Doves (or, lately, Eurasian Collared-Doves) call hollowly from the tamarisks. The improved campground (fee) is behind the visitor’s center.

Although much of interest and natural beauty lies south of Furnace Creek, this oasis forms the southern terminus of the birding route. The valley south of “The Furnace” is not very productive from a birding perspective; a morning sightseeing trip to Zabriskie Point four miles southeast on Highway 190 is, however, highly recommended after birding the oasis itself.

The golf course at Furnace Creek Ranch lives in California birding history as the source of many accidental vagrant records, including Mississippi Kite, Garganey, Purple Gallinule, Upland Sandpiper, Le Conte’s Sparrow, Smith’s Longspur, Streak-backed Oriole, and a host of others. It has also provided some very entertaining birder stories; maybe someone will write them down one day.

A word about Furnace Creek Ranch and the golf course. It is private property and birders are not welcome on the course while others commit golf. Compared to conditions in the 1970s, it now appears that they spend more money on Keep Out signs than they used to on greens maintenance! You may, however, bird from the fringes and among the date palm groves that intrude into the course plan from the eastern edge like peninsulas bordering a lake.

The Furnace Creek Ranch and golf course complex is a large area to bird, but you will be amply rewarded following a good flight night (conversely, after a night when few migrants are moving through, birding can be quite dull). Put yourself in a nocturnal migrant’s place: You have been flying all night and as the stars begin to fade, the terrain some few thousand feet below becomes clearer. And that is precisely what comes, clear ground—hundreds of square miles of inhospitable, desiccated, rocky, sandy, mineral-encrusted, treeless, hot wasteland. To the west are the 9,000–11,000-foot Panamints, to the east the lower but still formidable Blacks and Funerals. Yet there before you, illogically, are a few hundred acres of trees, green grass, and running water. Where would you choose to alight?

Western Kingbird, Warbling Vireo, Orange-crowned, Yellow, and Wilson’s Warblers, Western Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak, and Bullock’s Oriole will be among the most common migrants found here and throughout the Death Valley oases. Wintering species dominating the scene include Ruby-crowned Kinglet, American Pipit (on the lawns and fairways), Yellow-rumped Warbler, White-crowned Sparrow, and Brewer’s Blackbird; there is usually an Accipiter or two lurking somewhere nearby. Although migrants and the occasional vagrant can be anywhere (California’s first known Common Grackle was found on the small lawn by the sign at the entrance to the tourist complex), there are a few areas that have proven especially good through
the years. Strange things happen during migration at Furnace Creek Ranch—a Cape May Warbler was once found among cattails in a golf course pond in late May.

Bird the tamarisk trees (or saltcedars as they are sometimes called) lining the fairways from the fringe, the ponds, the date palm groves, and around the public areas. You are likely to come across a Greater Roadrunner hunting the golf course and fringing areas (they have been seen snatch- ing exhausted migrants from the lower branches). The cacophony of Great-tailed Grackles and pessimistic notes of Eurasian Collared-Doves will be among the dominant sounds. Bird the date palm groves and public areas last.

Start your morning at dawn—or as soon as you have birdable light before dawn in the heat of late spring or early fall. Begin by driving a tenth of a mile north of the tourist center (store, restaurants) to the Chevron gas station, turning left onto the road along its south side. Bear left toward the end and park in the golfers’ parking lot; do not bear right onto the road to the airport runway. Bird the surrounding tamarisks and shrubby edges by the parking lot. Walk north- west through the shrubs to the paved road running west from the campground along the northern edge of the course. A sometimes-damp fringing ditch parallels the 10th fairway. Walk along the ditch on the paved road, birding the tamarisks and shrubs, and the catclaw across the road. The ditch can be accessed through the tangled greenery at many points. Bird the shrubs and scan the fairway and patches of fringing weeds; many vagrant birds have turned up here, including more than one Le Conte’s Sparrow. There is a small pond with cattails that attracts birds about half way down the fairway adjacent to the ditch, although a recent redirection of Furnace Creek has dried up the ditch and pond. This may prove a permanent or temporary condition.

Continue west to where you can see the fairly large pond inside the northwest corner of the course. In winter this pond consistently holds wintering ducks and geese; it is a good place for Snow and Ross’s Geese if any are around (and have not been grabbed by one of the aggressive local coyotes). A high berm at the course edge just north of the pond allows viewing without trespassing on the verdant fairway. When you reach the northwest corner of the golf course you will find that another large, more-extensive, earthen berm has been pushed up. Walk along the top of this berm as it curves south to what used to be the Furnace Creek Ranch sewage ponds. When damp, the ponds attract migrant and wintering shorebirds, as well as insects and in-
sectivorous birds. Because the ponds are no longer used as settling ponds they are now seldom “ponds,” but rather weedy bowls. They still attract migrants, however. Eastern vagrants—most commonly Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, and Bobolink—are sometimes close by here and elsewhere on the course in late spring and in fall. Lucy’s Warblers breed in the Catclaw Mesquite just outside the oasis. The tangles of catclaw and larger mesquites just outside the course can be good for migrants as well.

Continue birding the fringing line of tamarisks and accessible ponds nearby. Yellow-headed Blackbirds are often found among the cattails. The golf course pond and tamarisks immediately behind motel unit 700 near the south edge of Furnace Creek Ranch consistently turn up unusual birds. The stables across the parking lot from the motel complex regularly have a mixed flock of blackbirds.

For reasons unknown, Furnace Creek’s course has recently (as of 2006) been re-routed. It now trickles in a new channel outside the fringing edge of tamarisks along Furnace Creek Ranch’s southern border. Furnace Creek is probably best accessed by using the path along the western edge of the stables, across the parking lot from motel unit 700. A route through the trees deposits one in bare desert through which trickles Furnace Creek. Cattails, tamarisks, and catclaw mesquite are growing along the channel, which along with the mature tamarisks behind provide cover for migrants. Walk this channel; in its brief history it has shown birding promise.

After birding the route noted above, bird the date palm groves, especially those being watered at the moment. The date palm groves—formerly irrigated by flooding and therefore attractive to migrants—now have manicured Bermuda grass beneath: a fine place for Eurasian Collared-Doves, Eurasian Starlings, assorted blackish icterids, and House Sparrows. But you never know.

If the dates are ripe, watch for birds in the fronds, hunting insects attracted to the dates. The palm groves are especially good for wintering birds, and in migration regularly produce many species of migrant flycatchers, warblers, buntings, and icterids. Be careful where you step among the date palm fronds; sidewinders can show up here and elsewhere around the golf course. Barn and Great Horned Owls are occasionally found roosting among the date palm crowns. Do not neglect the tamarisk row separating the date grove’s eastern edge from the highway, although here as elsewhere the rerouting of Furnace Creek has lessened local bird activity.

When you have completed birding Furnace Creek Ranch, probably by mid-to-late morning, drive north up the valley to your next birding destination, Stovepipe Wells. Turn west on Highway 190 at its right-angle turn 18 miles north of Furnace Creek, and continue to the village of Stovepipe Wells (7 miles farther) where there is a motel, store, and gas station. Watch the House Sparrows in the parking lot fly up under your vehicle’s grill to pick insects off the radiator. Although not a good birding spot normally, ignore it at your peril during migration. Many species of eastern vagrants have been found here, and waterbird surprises occasionally occur. Birders once found a Least Bittern wandering the broken center-line on Highway 190 here—you just never know. Bird the tamarisks and shrubs around the motel for migrants.

A small settling pond enclosure about 400 yards northeast of the gas station is possibly the most interesting birding spot at Stovepipe. A multi-strand wire fence atop the berm surrounds the area. When the ponds (there are two) were improved in the mid-1990s, a new fence along the western edge made birding difficult because of the viewing angle. Birding is likewise difficult from the other three sides because the fence is below the surrounding berm. By experimenting with location—and maybe mounting one of the fence posts—you will be able to see part of the pond and far shore. Ducks, gulls, and shorebirds are usually seen here, as the seasons dictate. If there are only a few birds around, you will be able to bird Stovepipe Wells in 10 minutes, although you may want to linger in the shade with a cold drink before the 45-minute drive north to the next stop.

Leaving Stovepipe Wells, retrace your steps east to the road turning north (7.1), following the signs up the valley toward Scotty’s Castle. Turn left here and settle in for the drive north (32.9 miles) to the Mesquite Spring turn-off. By now it will be quite warm, a good time to be out of the sun in an air-conditioned car. During the 1970s a hard core of California birders ran this route every Memorial Day weekend (usually without air-conditioning). They played a game: How many species will we see on the drive from Stovepipe to Scotty’s? Two species formed the base number: Common Raven and Horned Lark. Beyond that, it was sparse. Very low numbers (the expression “on the fingers of one hand” comes to mind) often won. Make your own prediction before starting out.

Take the turnoff to Mesquite Spring campground on the left (32.9); drive down the gentle slope to the small natural oasis adequately described by its name. Park in the shade and bird around the mesquites. The draw here is the same as elsewhere in the valley: the possibility of migrants at an oasis in the midst of desolation. One never knows, on driving in, what will be there. California’s first Varied Bunting since 1914 was found here in November 1977.
Leave Mesquite Spring; return to the main road and turn left (north). Follow this road as it turns east into the lower reaches of Grapevine Canyon (0.5), and continue to Scotty’s Castle (2.9). You are now at 3,000 feet elevation, having climbed gradually since leaving Stovepipe Wells; but it is still warm—or worse. Relax on the lawn under the cottonwoods, a good place for a mid-day siesta. If you’re curious enough to pay the entry fee, now would be a good time to tour the castle; it’s cooler inside and birding will improve in mid-afternoon. There is a small restaurant, gift shop, and gas station here but no lodging is available.

Bird the willows along the small stream just below the castle grounds, the lawn and cottonwoods by the parking lot, and the tangle of mesquite, catclaw, and other growth along the stream above the parking lot. Chukars are sometimes seen nearby in morning or evening as they come down the rocky slopes to the stream. Watch for rattlers; birders have encountered the unusually aggressive, highly venomous Mojave rattlesnake here. This particular species has no sense of humor.

Park administration occasionally succumbs to an impulse to tidy the rank desert plant life upstream from the castle, cleaning out the undergrowth. This is unfortunate for migrants and breeding species alike, which depend on the cover and its abundant insect life. During winter 1997–1998 the Park Service yielded to temptation, thus spoiling nesting habitat for the endangered “Least” Bell’s Vireo. Once the habitat restores itself, looking hopelessly untidy, the upstream tangle will be a fine place for birds and birding again.

If you find that the castle area has lots of birds, you may profit by driving farther up the canyon and parking where you can to bird the small mesquite thicket that winds up-canyon a short distance. Passerine migrants are occasionally abundant here. Even farther up-canyon, in the narrows, chuckwallas (large, flattish, prehistoric-looking lizards) are often seen sunning on flat rocks.

On finishing your birding of Scotty’s Castle you can retrace your route, possibly to lodgings at Furnace Creek one hour south, or you may want to continue north through Nevada, west to the Owens Valley and eastern Sierra Nevada, or return to Southern California.

In any case, you may choose to leave the park through Towne Pass (elevation 4,956 feet) on Highway 190 west of Stovepipe Wells. If so, stop briefly to bird the sparse tamarisks at Emigrant before continuing on. Panamint Springs, a tiny settlement in the north end of Panamint Valley just west of the junction of Highway 190 and Panamint Valley Road, contains ornamental plantings. Bird Panamint Springs carefully during migration. A small RV park across from the store and small motel has spaces divided by irrigated native desert shrubs in its eastern segment. The palo verdes, mesquites, and desert willows here attract migrants, sometimes containing more than would be reasonably expected. A walk through this part of the RV park can be productive.

If you choose to leave through the eastern entrance to Death Valley Junction, and drive from there south to Baker and the Mojave National Preserve route, be sure to stop at the Tecopa marshes described on page 159 en route.

Furnace Creek Ranch is approximately 113 miles north of Baker, 176 miles north of Barstow, 40 miles southwest of Beatty, Nevada (a handy nearby motel alternative to Furnace Creek Ranch), and 106 miles east of Lone Pine. It is a 3½-hour drive from Mojave in the Eastern Kern County Loop. There are facilities at these locations as well as in Death Valley. Campgrounds in Death Valley National Park include those at Furnace Creek, Mesquite Spring, Stovepipe Wells, and Panamint Springs, and in the Panamint Mountains at Wildrose, Thornridge, and Mahogany Flat.

The Southeastern California RBA website regularly reports rarities known to be in the Death Valley region <virtualbirder.com/vbirder/realbirds/rbas/CASE080305.html>.

**Tecopa – Inyo County**

If your birding route includes Highway 127 between Baker and Death Valley Junction, the eastern gateway to Death Valley National Park, you should take a quick side-trip to the Tecopa marshes—the map refers to them as “Grimsaw Lake.” The tiny town of Tecopa, formed around mineral hot springs, offers little in the way of services. It is essentially a desert getaway for a hardy few, but an impressive marsh forms west of town. There is very little passerine habitat in the vicinity.

The marshes can be sampled from the northern access road approaching town from Highway 127, 63 miles south of Furnace Creek Ranch. Drive into town (notice the large wooden cut-outs of stylized Red-headed Woodpeckers in some of the yards—if you see the real thing, shoot up a flare!), turning into the private campground on the right. Drive to the back side of the upper section overlooking the marsh and you will see Tecopa “Sewage Lagoon” below. Bird this small pond from your vantage above. It produces wintering and migrant ducks and, occasionally, a selection of migrant shorebirds. You may work your way out to the marshes from below the lagoon’s southern edge—but scouting from the overlook here is probably sufficient.

The Tecopa area has produced vagrants on occasion; on surveying this remote location one suspects that more rarities would be reported given better coverage. It is truly an oasis.