

Trip Report: Mono Lake Basin & the Eastern Sierra Slope, July 29-31st2016



Dawn over Mono Lake from Conway Summit

Sixteen birders had an exciting and incredibly successful weekend visiting 6 of the premier birding areas in the Mono Lake Basin and along the Eastern Sierra Slope. The fast-paced trip explored a wide variety of habitats and focused on seeing specialized target species that are difficult to see elsewhere.

Friday 29th July

The group arrived in June Lake, checked into their motel and had dinner at a local restaurant. An early night was in order given the early start on Saturday!

Saturday 30th July: Morning

Since there was potential for 100-degree heat during the day, we headed out before breakfast to make the most of the cool morning. We started our birding day with a completely unexpected sighting – a female **Greater Sage-Grouse** leading her covey of 6 youngsters across the road! This was the first of our target species for the trip, and maybe it was a sign that we were in for an exceptional day.



Greater Sage Grouse and young, near Lake Crowley, July 2016

We continued on to Wildrose Canyon and arrived just after dawn. This location is one of the highlights of the area since several species of bird reach their most Westerly or Northerly breeding limit here. However, like most of the locations on this trip, birds are present at very low densities and can be incredibly difficult to find. After a few minutes walking up the trail we heard our first **Mountain Chickadees** and **Brewer's Sparrows**, birds that would become very familiar over the course of the weekend. Very soon afterwards we heard our first **Plumbeous Vireo** singing in a stand of aspens, a specialty of this Canyon and one of our target species.



Looking for Plumbeous Vireo and Virginia's Warbler, Wildrose Canyon, July 2016

We continued slowly up the canyon, noting both **Gray** and **Dusky Flycatchers** among many of the more common species. Individuals of both Empidonax species showed very well at various points along the walk, allowing us good opportunities to compare their identification features. We also got brief views of a Plumbeous Vireo as we progressed further up the canyon.



Dusky and Gray Flycatchers, Wildrose Canyon, July 2016

Our second surprise of the day was waiting for us at our hike's "turnaround point" – two juvenile **Long-Eared Owls**!

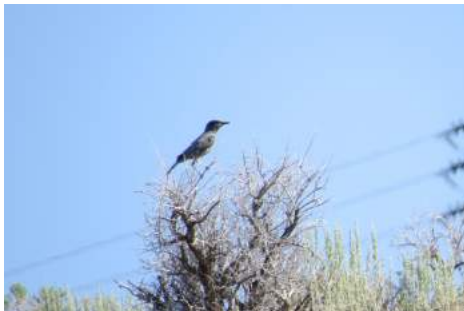


Long-eared Owl, Wildrose Canyon, July 2016

Two of our other target species at this site were more elusive – both **Virginia's Warbler** and **Juniper Titmouse** - were only seen by a few members of the group. However, the Canyon's reputation was well deserved with 34 species seen in total: other birds of note included Green-Tailed Towhee, Western Tanager, Black-Headed Grosbeak, Clark's Nutcracker, Cassin's Finch, Black-Throated Gray Warbler, and Townsend's Solitaire.

After two hours it was time to move on to nearby Chidago Canyon to look for other desert specialties not found in Wildrose. The heat had already started to build by the time we arrived but we started our birding with excellent views of two recently described species - **Sagebrush Sparrow** and **Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay**. Sagebrush sparrow was only elevated to full species status in 2013 when it was split from Sage Sparrow, whereas Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay became its own species only two weeks before our trip!

We made the most of the slow birding as the desert heat rose, locating all our likely target species including several flocks of noisy **Pinyon Jays**, a few **Black-throated Sparrows**, and **Loggerhead Shrikes**.



Pinyon Jay and the group looking for sparrows, Chidago Canyon, July 2016



Black-throated and Sagebrush Sparrows, Chidago Canyon, July 2016

We left Chidago canyon very happy to have seen such quality birds, and made our way to our lunch stop *via* the East side of **Lake Crowley**. Here we found an impressive diversity of both water and land birds, with highlights being 2 more species of sparrow (**Vesper and Savannah**), what looked like a family group of **Sage Thrashers**, 2 immature **Yellow-Headed Blackbirds**, a **Horned Lark**, and 5 **White-Faced Ibis**.



Looking for sparrows and larks, Lake Crowley, July 2016

By noon we were all feeling the effects of the early start, so we headed into Mammoth Lakes for lunch.

Saturday 30th July: Afternoon

After lunch, rather than head back to June Lake for a couple of hour's siesta to allow the heat of the day to pass, the group voted to keep on birding. We headed into the mountains to Inyo Craters, three north-south-aligned steam explosion craters at 8200ft above sea level. A drive along a bumpy dirt road led us to the trailhead, and we set off along the wooded path in the refreshingly cool breeze.

Shortly after we left the trailhead we located the first of our target species, **White-Headed Woodpecker**. This bird was quite elusive, foraging high in the pine trees and moving rapidly between them. Eventually everyone had great looks at this stunning woodpecker. We carried on along the trail, and almost immediately located a yellow flycatcher with a distinctive oval eye-ring that 'bulged' towards rear of eye, an obvious crest at rear of its crown, and a yellow lower mandible. This was our 3rd species of *Empidonax* flycatcher for the trip, identified as either a Cordilleran Flycatcher or a Pacific-Slope Flycatcher. Unfortunately since this bird never called, we couldn't identify it to species so we have to resort to its old name, **Western Flycatcher**. Nevertheless, it was an unexpected surprise for the group!



White-headed Woodpecker, Inyo Craters, July 2016

We arrived at the rim of the crater and marveled at the view! It was fantastic! Unfortunately so was the wind – it was very gusty at this altitude and so we had to take care as we made our way around the crater rim searching for birds. It was amazing watching **Western Tanagers** heading into the crater for a drink!



Western Tanager & view over Inyo Crater, July 2016

We headed to an area where finches sometimes congregate to gather gravel that helps them to digest seeds. **Cassin's Finches** were much in evidence, and the group had excellent views of a male **Red Crossbill** who perched at head-height in a nearby tree.



Male Red Crossbill, Inyo Craters, July 2016

We retraced our steps and found an area between the 2 main craters that was out of the wind. Here we were lucky to find a mixed bird flock containing Cassin's Finches, a **Thick-Billed Fox Sparrow**, Western Wood-Peewees, Dusky Flycatchers, Brewer's and **Chipping Sparrows, Pine Siskins**, and a highly-sought after Sierra endemic: the distinctively small-billed *californica* subspecies of **Pine Grosbeak**. We were extremely fortunate to locate a very distinctive green-and-gray female who only allowed a brief view for a lucky few before flying away.

By now time was running out and so we started to head back down the trail towards the cars. However, Inyo Craters had one last surprise for us, a very confiding **Williamson's Sapsucker** which sat very still for us high up in a pine tree!



Male Williamson's Sapsucker, Inyo Craters, July 2016

After all the excitement we were ready for dinner and a beer before heading out for an evening excursion to look for night birds.

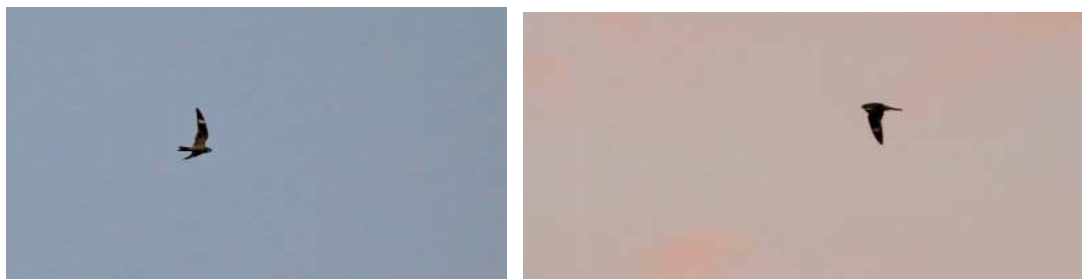
Saturday 30th July: Evening

After dinner a few of us returned to the hotel for a relaxing evening, while the rest continued on towards Mono Lake, South Tufa area. We took a brief stroll along the nature trail to the shoreline, looking for birds around the Tufa in the amazing evening light.



Violet-green Swallow and Green-tailed Towhee, South Tufa, July 2016

As the sun dropped below the Sierras we left South Tufa for a nearby rise that provided an excellent vantage point to look for nocturnal birds as they emerged from their daytime roosts. We parked our cars and immediately heard **Common Nighthawks** calling, right above the cars! Over the next half an hour we were treated to a fantastic show as the birds tumbled and chased and dived at each other, sometimes right over and alongside where we were standing. We had excellent views of one bird catching a moth in mid flight! Just as we were preparing to leave, we were delighted as a **Common Poorwill** flew past the cars and landed on the dirt road, allowing us to get 'scope views of this beautiful nightjar. Once it was dark, we drove back towards the highway along a dirt road and saw several more Poorwills hunting and feeding along the road.



Common Nighthawks, near South Tufa, July 2016

We made it back to our beds by 9:30pm after a very long and highly enjoyable day.

Sunday 31st July

Our good luck in seeing Greater Sage-Grouse yesterday meant that we didn't need to get up before dawn today, something that the group was thankful for! Instead we had a later start and made our way towards our final birding site of the trip, a resort at 10,000 feet near Virginia Lakes. On the way up the mountain we stopped near a stand of Aspen and managed to see several new birds for the trip: **Mountain Bluebirds**, a **Black-billed Magpie**, **Red-breasted Sapsuckers**, some more red crossbills, and 2 **American Kestrels**.

On arriving at the resort we noted that the seed feeders hadn't yet been filled. Nevertheless many Pine Siskins and Cassin's Finches were in the nearby trees, and the Eastern Sierras form of **Rufous Hummingbirds** (which have a green back) frequented a hummingbird feeder. While we waited for the feeders to be stocked, we explored the resort area and noted another Red-Breasted Sapsucker, several Clark's Nutcrackers, and an immature Thick-Billed Fox Sparrow. Amazingly, we found another Cordilleran Flycatcher, and this time the bird was calling!



Rufous Hummingbird and Cordilleran Flycatcher, Virginia Lakes Resort, July 2016

This resort is famous for the possibility of seeing our last target bird of the trip, the elusive Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch. These beautiful finches can be difficult to see in their mountain environment, but if you have luck on your side, you may be able to catch a glimpse at the seed feeder. After an hour's birding around the resort, we went into the lodge and had brunch while waiting for any sign of the Rosy Finches.

During brunch, one of the party headed out of the dining area to check the feeders - and located one of these gorgeous **Gray-Crowned Rosy-Finches!**



Gray-Crowned Rosy-Finch, Virginia Lakes Resort, July 2016

This final sighting completed the trip and consolidated our extraordinary run of good birds for the weekend! We had managed to see all of the birds we had hoped for, and enjoyed a fantastic tour around birding sites that were new to many on the trip.



Our fantastic group!

Trip List of species seen (total 99):

	Wildrose Canyon	Chidago Canyon	Lake Crowley	The Stove	Inyo Craters	South Tufa Area	Virgnina Lakes
Canada Goose			x				
California Quail	x						
Greater Sage- Grouse			x				
Eared Grebe			x				
Western Grebe			x				
Double-crested Cormorant			x				
American White Pelican			x				
Great Egret			x				
White-faced Ibis			x				
Turkey Vulture	x	x	x				
Osprey						x	
Cooper's Hawk	x	x					
Accipiter sp.							x
Red-tailed Hawk							x
American Coot			x				
Killdeer			x			x	
Least Sandpiper						x	
Ring-billed Gull			x				
California Gull			x			x	x
Caspian Tern			x				
Eurasian Collared-Dove				x			
Mourning Dove	x	x	x	x		x	x
Long-eared Owl	x						
Common Nighthawk						x	
Common Poorwill						x	
Rufous Hummingbird							x
hummingbird sp.	x	x			x		
Williamson's Sapsucker					x		

Red-breasted Sapsucker							x
Downy Woodpecker							x
Hairy Woodpecker	x				x		
White-headed Woodpecker					x		
Northern Flicker		x			x		x
American Kestrel							x
Western Wood-Pewee					x		x
Gray Flycatcher	x	x					
Dusky Flycatcher	x				x		x
Cordilleran Flycatcher							x
Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher (Western Flycatcher)					x		
Say's Phoebe		x					
Loggerhead Shrike		x					
Plumbeous Vireo	x						
Warbling Vireo	x						x
Pinyon Jay		x					
Steller's Jay					x		x
Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay		x					
Black-billed Magpie							x
Clark's Nutcracker	x				x		x
Common Raven	x	x	x			x	
Horned Lark			x				
Tree Swallow			x				
Violet-green Swallow					x	x	
Cliff Swallow			x				

Mountain Chickadee	x				x		x
Juniper Titmouse	x						
Bushtit	x						
Red-breasted Nuthatch							x
White-breasted Nuthatch					x		x
Brown Creeper	x				x		x
Rock Wren		x					
House Wren	x						x
Bewick's Wren	x						
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	x	x					
Mountain Bluebird							x
Townsend's Solitaire	x				x		
American Robin	x	x			x		x
Sage Thrasher			x				
European Starling			x				
Orange-crowned Warbler	x				x		x
Virginia's Warbler	x						
Yellow-rumped Warbler	x				x		x
Black-throated Gray Warbler	x						
Chipping Sparrow	x				x		
Brewer's Sparrow	x	x	x		x	x	x
Black-throated Sparrow		x					
Lark Sparrow		x					
Fox Sparrow					x		x
Dark-eyed Junco					x		
White-crowned Sparrow							x

Sagebrush Sparrow		x					
Vesper Sparrow			x				
Savannah Sparrow			x				
Song Sparrow	x						x
Green-tailed Towhee	x	x			x	x	x
Spotted Towhee	x	x					
Western Tanager	x	x			x		x
Black-headed Grosbeak	x						
Red-winged Blackbird						x	
Western Meadowlark			x				
Yellow-headed Blackbird			x				
Brewer's Blackbird			x	x		x	
Brown-headed Cowbird			x			x	
Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch							x
Pine Grosbeak					x		
House Finch				x			
Cassin's Finch	x	x			x		x
Red Crossbill					x		x
Pine Siskin					x		
Lesser Goldfinch	x	x					
House Sparrow				x			