

Central California Fall, 1990

September 25, 1990

Piedras Blancas Lighthouse Motel

We left home a week ago today with little enthusiasm. The fall migration at home was in full swing right in our own backyard, and it seemed too much trouble to get ready to go. We might have stayed home completely if we had not had reservations on a pelagic birding boat out of Morro Bay plus campground reservations for a week at Morro Bay State Park.

We got to Morro Bay without incident, but when Jim looked at one of our trailer tires, he discovered that its tread had peeled off in a number of spots. These were the truck tires we had bought in Quebec in 1986. I read in Trailer Life that truck tires are made of a rubber less resistant to smog than trailer tires. Standing in one position all summer had probably made the rubber more vulnerable to cracking in the stressed spots. (Smog attacks stretched rubber much faster than relaxed rubber.) Anyway, we had to have at least one new tire and decided it would be prudent to buy a full set.

As soon as we got into the Morro Bay State Park campground, I called Karen and Jim Havlena, birders who moved up here from Orange Co. several years ago. (She had sent me the information about the Morro Coast Audubon Society's pelagic trip.) I got their answering machine and left a message giving our site number. We were just sitting down to dinner when Karen drove up. (She had already had dinner.) She visited with us all evening. It was fun catching up with their activities. (Jim H. was in L.A. for a couple of days on business.) I helped them get started birding a few years ago, but they've progressed greatly since then. Karen is a real lister, but still has time for such scientific endeavors as Breeding Bird Atlas, etc. She also runs the San Luis Obispo Co. Rare Bird Alert telephone number, so she knows of all the good birds in the area.

Wed. morning I took a long walk around the campground area, which is right on the edge of the salt marsh of the bay. Lots of regular birds--nothing rare. Jim drove around trying to locate tires. By this time we had discovered that the trailer batteries were really in poor shape. We had known it before, but had forgotten to do something about it. Jim made a couple of trips to San Luis Obispo--one to check out batteries, then back to the trailer to see if they would fit, then back again to Sears to buy them. He also located a tire store (recommended by Karen) and ordered tires--to be delivered Friday.

Thursday we went birding with Karen and Jim H. She knew of a couple of good spots in the Pismo Beach area. One is near the mouth of Arroyo Grande Creek. It's frequently a good spot for rare land birds in fall migration, but we saw nothing special. However, we did find a cooperative Common Tern and a flock of Long-billed Dowitchers (jv molting to basic), which Jim got good photos of. Neither did we have before.

From there we went to the Pismo Beach State Park campground area, where there is a lovely trail through the willows. Lots of common migrants, like Yellow, Wilson's, etc., warblers, Warbling Vireo--no rarities. Had lunch in a nice coffee shop (Melanie's), then back to Morro Bay.

Friday we went to San Luis Obispo for the tires, then picked up Karen and drove down to Montaña de Oro State Park for the afternoon. In the evening the Havlenas took us to dinner at the Galley Restaurant on the Embarcadero at Morro Bay--delicious.

Saturday was the boat trip. It left Morro Bay at 7:00 a.m. and returned at 4:00 p.m. Almost all day long there were lots of birds in view. It was especially interesting to watch the shearwaters as they almost sheared the water with their long stiff wings. Sooty Shearwaters were most abundant, with lots of Pink-footed as well. I also saw one or two Buller's and Black-vented. There were Sabine's Gulls in several places, as well as one Arctic Tern. These are the pelagic relatives of their more land-lubbing compatriots. At one place we had good looks at Cassin's Auklets. According to the

experienced pelagic birders on board, their behavior was most unusual. Usually they go screaming off if a boat comes anywhere near them. These did not leave until we were fairly close. I'm not sure we were close enough for Jim to get a really good picture, but I know he got something. Other good birds included Black Storm-Petrel, Pomarine Jaeger, Red Phalarope. I don't know if I got any lifers, because I left my list at home. (I had not been on a pelagic trip for at least 15 years.) [Later, after we got home: I got two life birds: Buller's Shearwater and Cassin's Auklet.]

In addition to the birds, we saw Common Dolphins a few times and Humpback Whales frequently. They really put on a show. We also saw some strange fish, called Bola-bola or Sunfish. They were rather weird fat creatures, lolling on the surface and forever sticking a fin above the water.

The boat was fairly well run, but as usual only the few who bunched up at the bow really knew what was going on. The captain (a woman) was quite good about turning the boat sideways whenever something good was in view, though. Usually everyone aboard got to see it. The water was like glass, so no one got sea-sick.

The literature about the boat had said, "There is a galley aboard, but should you wish to bring your own lunch, be aware that no ice chests are permitted." From this, I concluded that home-packed lunches were discouraged. Unfortunately the galley was zilch. They had a few cartons of cup-o-soup, but no one even heated water. Everyone else aboard brought lunches, having been on the boat before, I presume. Fortunately I had stuck in a full bag of trail mix at the last minute, plus a canteen of water, so we didn't starve. Someone gave me an apple and Jim a half of a tuna sandwich.

Jim took many rolls of photos. To get anything good of the moving birds from the moving boat, he knew that was necessary. He has a few apprehensions that the vibration from the boat's engine may make them all bad, but we'll just have to wait and see. Maybe the ones he took when the engine was idling will be OK, even if others are poor. [Later, after looking at the slides: They were just fine--as good as anything he could have gotten standing on firm ground. Of course, not all were outstanding, but he got a good image of nearly every species he tried for.] After standing at attention all day on that boat, he was really tired when we got back and immediately collapsed on the couch. Went to bed at 8:00.

The next day (Sunday) we decided to go back down to the Pismo Beach area to see if there were any new land birds. We were especially taken by the willows near the campground there. As we were driving on the freeway through Pismo Beach, Jim caught sight of thousands of seabirds over the ocean not far off shore. I took the next freeway exit and doubled back. From the cliff we could identify them with my scope. There were perhaps 100,000, perhaps 1,000,000--who knows? Close in most were gulls (Heermann's and Western mostly), cormorants (Pelagic, Brandt's, Double-crested), and Brown Pelicans. Farther out were an equal number of shearwaters--Black-vented mostly, with a few Sooties for size comparison. What a scene! Jim took quite a few pictures with his telephoto lens. They'll show the vast numbers of birds. Combined with the closer shots he hopes he got from the boat the day before, they should make a good section for our California Show--if we ever find time to put it together! [Later: The photos came out very well. We're really excited about the section of a slide show that we can make from them.]

We got to the willows about 11:30. Jim was hoping to photograph the rare Least Flycatcher, which was there. We did see it briefly, but then it disappeared and we could not relocate it. We went to lunch at Melanie's, then came back. Jim searched for it for a couple of hours, while I wandered the entire park. No luck. Yesterday, Monday, we drove up the coast as far as the San Simeon pier. We stopped several places where there were rock shore birds. We were hoping Jim could get pictures of Black Oystercatcher or Wandering Tattler--two species he doesn't have good photos of. No luck there, but he did get some nice Surfbirds, plus other species. A Pelagic Cormorant fishing right at the edge of the water paid no attention as Jim followed it back and forth. In fact, he thinks he got some really nice photos of quite a few species. The beaches and rocks were just teeming with birds wherever we went. It was mind-boggling.

Just south of the San Simeon Pier, we found a flock of Brown Pelicans in a feeding frenzy of diving. Splashes of water could be seen everywhere. Every pelican had a coterie of a dozen or so gulls--mostly Heermann's--ready to snatch each fish before it could be swallowed. They were close

enough to shore to be photographed, too, so Jim blazed away, of course.

The weather has been most cooperative--just a bit of morning fog which rapidly dissipates. The water is sparkly and pretty, and the surf, which was almost nonexistent on our boat ride day, has gotten more impressive.

It's fortunate that the seascapes are attractive, for the landscapes for the most part are not! The past several years of drought have really taken their toll. The grazing lands are brown and totally devoid of vegetation. If the first rains come with any vigor, I'm afraid an awful lot of top soil will be lost.

This morning we left Morro Bay Campground for good, but before leaving, Jim finally succeeded in photographing the Chestnut-backed Chickadees, which were eating his Magic Meal. It took a week to tame them enough--or perhaps it was just the time of day when they preferred to feed. [Unfortunately the photos were so-so at best. To this day we still need good pictures of this bird.]

We drove up Hwy. 1, not knowing how far we would go. We stopped for a couple of hours at a View Point not far above the water. Jim scrambled down to the beach and got a few pictures, including a fairly distant Wandering Tattler. We ate lunch looking at the beautiful surf.

The only campgrounds I saw listed in the book were in Big Sur--and back in the trees at that. We had been in the trees for a week and didn't really want more of that. Besides, our batteries needed some replenishing from solar energy. Each day they were lower and lower. Between the shade of the trees and the clouds/fog that we've had intermittently, they were not what they should be.

We drove by a motel overlooking the surf and caught sight of a sign: "RV Parking." Jim turned around a mile or so up the road, and we came back. Lo and behold, for \$5.00 we could have a parking spot right at the top of a cliff overlooking the surf. No hook-ups, not even a rest-room, but what a view! So far, we have the entire field to ourselves, but even if we do get neighbors, they can't possibly spoil our view. I've been enjoying it all the while I've been typing this.

Sunset State Beach, nr. Watsonville, CA
September 28, 1990

It's a foggy day and shows no signs of clearing off; it's 1:00 p.m. already. So I guess I'll bring this log up to date.

We enjoyed our night all by ourselves overlooking the surf. I timed dinner to be on the table just as the sun went down, so we could enjoy the twilight while we ate without having the sun in our eyes. It was lovely.

The next morning we decided to drive back down to the Vista Point where we had spent some time the day before. The Black Oystercatchers which had spent all afternoon the day before near where we were camped were nowhere to be found in the morning when the light was right.

Jim and I each found a suitable spot on the beach--I to record and he to photograph. I found a place in the lee of a little point beside a small cove, where I could aim my microphone along the line of the incoming surf. There wasn't too much surf there anyway, because of some offshore rocks. The narrow strip of rocky beach was littered with sea weed. Lots of birds were feeding on it. I recorded them off and on for a couple of hours and got some nice tapes (I think) of identified species. (It's sometimes not too easy to discern which bird is calling when a large mixed flock is milling around all together.) I got Willet, Black Turnstone, Whimbrel and Wandering Tattler. I don't think the surf on the tape will be a real problem. Besides, where can you find a Wandering Tattler without surf? I also got a couple of nice calls from Oystercatchers at another spot.

Jim didn't do so well. Unfortunately the Wandering Tattler, which he particularly wanted, chose to feed up-sun from him. No Oystercatchers came anywhere near him.

We ate lunch in our trailer, parked in the Vista Point lot, then decided to drive on up Hwy. 1. We ended up at Pfeiffer-Big Sur State Park--a lovely large campground among the redwoods. Our site was very dark, so we had to have the lights on all the time we were in the trailer. We knew we

couldn't spend very long there, if we wanted to have electricity. The needle showing solar electricity amperes coming in was barely to the right of zero.

Steller's Jays and American Crows were ubiquitous, but we saw no other species that day. The next morning there was more action. I took a long walk around the campground and saw quite a few birds. The place has 218 sites, lots of loops, etc, so it was a fairly long walk. Nothing out of the ordinary, but it was fun to renew my acquaintance with Winter Wrens. Jim stayed by the trailer and shot Steller's Jays! They in turn cleaned him out of peanuts.

We left the campground around 11:00, had lunch in Carmel, then, finding no campgrounds in the Monterey Peninsula area, came on up here. We were expecting just a bare parking lot by a sandy beach. To our pleasant surprise, we found that the campground was high above the beach on the back slope of some brush-covered dunes. Lots of northern coastal scrub (sort of like coastal sage scrub or chaparral, but with different plants) and many clumps of Monterey Pines.

Our site has a grove of pines on one side and a nice piece of scrub on the other. Jim set up his water drip and spread birdseed and Magic Meal under a wonderful hollow bush, which has an opening on one side. Yesterday only a couple of California Towhees found the goodies, but now other things have started to come in. Bewick's Wrens and Golden-crowned Sparrows would both make nice photo subjects. I finally got Jim off his duff and out setting up his blind, so we'll see. (He had a good excuse for not getting out before, because there was no sun. Now, at 1:20 p.m., it's finally starting to appear.)

This morning we drove down to the beach, and I tried to get Jim to photograph a few immature gulls, but neither the light nor the gulls were very cooperative. They wouldn't let him get anywhere near. We didn't have any bread with us. It might have worked had we had some, but the light was too poor anyway. [Actually, the gull shots came out quite good. Overcast weather made their colors more even and better for ID.]

It was so gloomy that we decided to drive inland a ways and try to find some sun. We drove clear over to Hwy 101, but to no avail. Saw lots of nice willow bottom lands near the roads. Again the dry barren overgrazed pasturelands were quite depressing.

Near Santa Nella October 2, 1990

Saturday, Sept. 29 dawned foggy. The place was overrun with campers and kids. So we decided not even to inquire if we could stay over that night. We drove up Hwy. 1, but the drive wasn't especially enjoyable because of the fog. It was not so thick that it interfered with driving, but it certainly interfered with viewing the sea. So we just kept on going. The traffic through freeway-resisting San Francisco was awful--even at mid-day on a Saturday. We crossed the Golden Gate Bridge and settled in the last available site in the closest RV park north of the bridge (Marin RV Park). It was on the southern edge of San Rafael. It was pretty awful--12 ft wide sites and mostly occupied with old trailers that families were living in! Fortunately we had quiet neighbors. Our site was better than most: it backed up to a wooden fence with a pretty bottle brush bush next to it. Most of them backed up to other sites! It was a place to park and no more.

The next day was only partially foggy. So we proceeded with what had brought us there in the first place and drove back to Golden Gate National Recreation Area. By taking the last road before the Golden Gate Bridge and driving westward, one reaches Pt. Diablo, probably the best spot on the west coast from which to watch migrating hawks. This day was a good one. There were lots of hawks passing through. Sometimes one could see a dozen or more in the sky at once. Most were Turkey Vultures and Accipiters, but there were also American Kestrels, Northern Harriers, Red-tailed Hawks and even 4 or 5 Broad-winged Hawks. Jim shot two photos from fairly close range of one of the Broad-winged Hawks. He had to shoot quickly, so may not have gotten the focus, but he thinks there is hope that he got something nice. [Later: One did come out quite good, but not perfect.] It was the first Broad-wing he had ever seen. Of course, he doesn't consider it a life bird unless he gets

a recognizable photograph. I'm sure he got a "countable" photograph, focus or no focus.

There was a group of local people counting the hawks at the site. I've visited other hawk watches, including this one on a previous trip, and never have I seen a group of people so unsure of their hawk ID's. Everyone seemed to be hoping someone else would make the definitive call on nearly every Accipiter that passed by. Finally a few people decided no one else would, so they stalwartly started calling them off. Personally I disagreed with quite a few of their calls. Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks are tricky. It's too bad they had no expert there. The expertise we saw in the wilds of New Mexico a year ago outstripped this group's completely.

Around 12:30 p.m. the fog started coming back in. Shortly it became so bad that we couldn't see any distance at all down into the valley, just overhead. The hawk counters were still hard at work when we gave up. Just before we left, we happened to look toward the Golden Gate Bridge and saw the definitive sight of the morning--a dozen or more Buteos and Turkey Vultures circling round and round on a thermal near the top of one of the towers of the bridge that was barely visible above the fog. Jim took lots of pictures. A few minutes later, there was a group around the other tower, and the fog parted enough to show just the tower and the water below it--and those hawks. The slides will be marvelous in our California show--if we ever find time to put it together.

The fog horns were wonderful, too, and I recorded them--plus a fair amount of traffic on the road, unfortunately.

We headed back toward the trailer, had a late lunch (good hamburger and fries) in a Sausalito restaurant.

The next morning we decided to see if the hawk watch was free of fog. No luck. In fact the last 1/4 mile of road was gated off, and the visibility was no more than 40 ft. Since no one was on the road, I walked up it a ways and re-recorded the fog horns minus the vehicular traffic. I think I got some nice stuff. There were two close-up fog horns, one that gave a single note on one pitch, and one which tooted twice in succession on another. In the middle distance I also got a few bird sounds--Wrentits mostly, but also White-crowned Sparrows, Flicker, etc. They should go well with Jim's pictures from the day before. Jim got a nice moody photo of a Fox Sparrow through the fog.

We hung around the area an hour or so, but there was no sign of the fog clearing or of anyone coming by to open the gate, so we finally left. The weather map the night before showed the entire coast of Northern Calif. fog-bound, so we decided to head inland, despite the fact that the forecast for the interior was for 90° heat. Jim's old LAPD friend, Al Proudfoot, and his wife Vicki have visited us several times in Huntington Beach and keep inviting us to come by their place in Lake County. (Jim visited them once there before I knew him.) So we decided to go up there and see if they were home. (They, too, have a trailer and are on the road a lot.) We found a place in an awful trailer park in Clearlake (called Albatross Acres for some strange reason) and Jim called the Proudfoots. As luck would have it, they were home and immediately invited us out to their home. As it turned out, we stayed for a delicious dinner--"left-overs" she called it. We had a nice conversation, and Al took us for a drive around their Hidden Valley development. It's in the hills about 10 miles south of Clear Lake. The hills are sparsely wooded with live oaks and digger pines. Lots of chaparral in between. Jim and I honestly told them that we felt they had selected the nicest home site in the whole development. They bought 4 1/2 acres when the development was first started and built a home which uses their view beautifully. In the near foreground are their oaks and pines. In the far distance are the hills. Lots of birds in the area, but they don't know them at all. Despite the heat, we saw Calif. Quail, Calif. Towhee, Scrub Jay, Acorn Woodpecker, etc. Lots of deer live there too, and we saw a few on our drive. Al and Vicki say they pass through their property daily and sometimes on hot days bed down under their porch overhang. (Jim has photos to prove it from his last visit there.)

This morning we thought we might spend the night in Williams or Willows and visit the Sacramento Natl. Wildlife Refuge, even though the day promised to be a scorcher. We drove slowly down to the valley pausing occasionally to take a few more scenics for our Calif. show. When we got down into the valley, not only was it hot, but the wind was blowing a gale. We decided to give up and head for home. The tail wind would give us better mileage, and who wants to go birding in a hot

wind? Even if we got a picture, a wind-ruffled bird looks like heck.

So we headed down I-5 and ended up at a very nice RV park out in the country about 3 miles south of Santa Nella on SR 33. It's actually on the corner of SR 33 and SR 152. The name is San Luis Rey RV Park, for the nearby reservoir. The park has a nicely placed shade tree in nearly every site. Our trailer has been in full shade ever since we got here.

We'll probably drive on home tomorrow, but may stop at Buena Vista Lake in Kern Co. if we get a late start.

Home

October 9, 1990

At dinner in Santa Nella, we were reflecting about the various places we had stayed on this trip and agreed that the Piedras Blancas Lighthouse Motel with its field overlooking the surf had been the highlight. So we decided then and there to go back! The next day we drove on down I-5 to SR 46, which crosses over to the coast via Paso Robles (We switched to SR 41 part way across.)

It was interesting to watch the change in vegetation as we crossed several ranges of hills from the San Joaquin Valley to the coast. Grassland gradually changed to savannah, and finally to chaparral with pines as we neared Cambria. Jim stopped and took a number of scenics to document the habitats. Of course, there was a lot of overgrazed land. He took a few shots of fence-lines near the road, showing the dry grass outside the fence and the bare dirt inside.

Despite the fact that the TV news had predicted almost no fog on the coast, we hit fog before we got to our destination. The next day there were only a couple of hours of sun. Jim took a few pictures, but nothing special. Since the forecast was for more of the same foggy weather, we stayed two nights there and came on home--this time for sure.

CAMPGROUNDS

9/18-9/24	Morro Bay State Park, CA
9/25	Piedras Blancas Lighthouse Motel, ca. 10 miles N of San Simeon, CA
9/26	Pfeiffer-Big Sur SP, CA
9/27-9/28	Sunset Beach SP, nr. Watsonville, CA
9/29-9/30	Marin RV Park, nr. San Rafael, CA
10/1	Albatross RV Park, Clearlake, CA
10/2	San Luis Reservoir RV Park, nr. SR 33 x SR 152, nr. Santa Nella, CA
10/3-10/4	Piedras Blancas Lighthouse Motel again.
10/5	Home