

Field trip to Carrizo Plain and Morro Bay
February 26 and 27, 2011
By Gary Lindquist

This annual two day field trip to Carrizo Plain and Morro Bay will be best remembered for two things; the rumor about Kim Kuska's passing was greatly exaggerated and we didn't arrive at Carrizo Plain until 4:30 PM, a new TCAS record for arriving late. I explain the why to both.

Earlier in the week, Joanne Hoyt had *heard it through the grapevine* (made infamous in the 60's song by Marvin Gaye) that Kim Kuska had passed away. Joanne checked into the rumor by way of Facebook and not only did she find that Kim was alive, but also he would be going with us on our field trip.

Traveling with the Kim Kuska of San Mateo would be Mary Merriman, Margaret Schultz, Joanne Hoyt and Penny Stewart (from here on known as the 'girl's car'), David and Jeanine Gaylor, Gary and Marietta Lindquist, Frank Gibson, and Dane Fagundes. On Sunday we would be joined by Jennifer and Lauren Tucker of Visalia .

Never was it more true—so many birds and so little time. Our caravan across the sun-soaked valley to Kettleman never slows to view the American Crows, Common Ravens, Red-tailed Hawks and American Kestrels that line the power lines. In the adjacent canal are American Coots, Pied-billed Grebes, Common Mergansers and Double-crested Cormorants. Along the banks of the canal that is an extension of the King's River are Ring-billed Gulls, Great Blue Herons, Black-crowned Night Herons, Snowy and Great Egrets. Stopping at Kettleman to grab an Egg McMuffin (with sausage and hash browns) we add House Sparrows, Rock Doves, European Starlings, House Finches and Brewer's Blackbirds.

Our first organized stop would be a little side trip up Chalome Valley (Parkfield) Road in search of Rough-legged Hawks. We found Loggerhead Shrike, Western Meadowlarks and Vesper Sparrows. A real treat was the pale prairie race of Merlin hunting from the roadside fence to forage in the grasses. About one mile down the road we found that the Chalome Creek had escaped its banks after the week's rain, and this narrow road was underwater for ½ a mile. Seeing a raptor on a power pole about a mile down the road, we (everyone but the girl's car) elected to ford the stream. Our distant raptor was a dark morph of Ferruginous Hawk. This deep coffee-colored morph makes up less than 10 % of this hawk's population.

Retracing our watery route back to the highway we noted three groups of Tule Elk totaling about 40 individuals.

Stopping at the bridge on Bitterwater Road , the sun was disappearing behind ominous clouds that brought chilling winds. Mary found first one, then two, then three Sora in a bunch of broken off cat tails and a Virginia Rail, although not seen, was heard as a Marsh Wren gleaned from the brown stalks nearby. All our commotion on the bridge dislodged a Barn Owl from its day roost under the bridge. This monkey-faced owl flew up the creek to seek refuge in a small willow. Our enthusiastic behavior didn't seem to bother the Lincoln or Song Sparrows feeding in the rushes below.

The trip up Palo Prieto Canyon was abbreviated with stops finding more Barn Owls, Red-breasted Sapsucker, Yellow-billed Magpies, a Greater Road Runner, Western Bluebirds, White-breasted Nuthatch, Golden Eagles and California Thrasher.

Frequent stops along the upper canyon in the Temblor Range of the San Andreas Fault we found Lark and Savannah Sparrows, Horned Larks, very large flocks of American Pipits, a cooperative Prairie Falcon, a lone Northern Harrier, Say's Phoebe and a large flock of Mountain Bluebirds kiting and hawking over the rough grassy hills.

Well, all these little stops add up to a lot of time. Long gone was our usual lunch at the community center in California Valley around 2:00 PM. It is 4:30, dreary birders and dreary weather and there is even a little snow falling as we head down Soda Lake Road. The hopes of crossing the plain in search of Mountain Plover were long gone. The hour was late and the soft alkali roads were bottomless mud following the wet weather of the past week. We made it to the overlook and boardwalk with just enough light to strike out on foot in a broken line (except the girl's car) across the salt brush and grass to flush a least six Short-eared Owls. A little coaxing got a couple of Sage Sparrows up for all to see. The late hour and cloud-filtered light made for great mirror-like reflections of the cinnamon napped Avocets feeding on the full alkali lake.

It is now past 5:30 and time for the race into Morro Bay for dinner with our friends at the Great American Fish Co.

Sunday morning was glorious, gone were the clouds from the passing storm front. After a great breakfast at Carla's Country Kitchen, it was off to the Morro Bay State Park Marina. From our perch at the museum overlook, we would see the birds passing by on the retreating tide. With the light to our backs we found and compare Western versus Clark's, Eared versus Horned and Pied-billed Grebes. Several Common Loons were just starting to get their speckled backs were contrasted with a single Red-throated loon.

The exposed muddy shore had Willets, Marbled Godwits, Long-billed Curlews and a lone Spotted Sandpiper. An overhanging branch supported a female Belted Kingfisher above a couple of Turkey Vultures picking apart piscine carrion on the beach. Bufflehead and Red-breasted Mergansers would dive below the surface and pop up further down the bay as a passing flock of Forster's Terns and a single Caspian Tern dove on schools of small fish. Black Brandt occupied the uncovered sand bar in the middle of bay with a few American White Pelicans. The trees lining the shore held Red-breasted Sapsuckers, Red-breasted Nuthatch and Anna's Hummingbird.

We timed our visit to the Audubon overlook in Los Osos with the ebbing tide. Diving ducks are the first to float by. Greater Scaup, Ruddy Duck were followed by the puddle ducks; Green-winged Teal, Northern Pintails, Gadwal, American Wigeon and Northern Shovelers. Grazing in the grassy marsh were Canada Geese and a couple Snowy Geese.

At Sweet Springs we watch small numbers of Monarch Butterflies flit around as a large swarm of Honey Bees works its hive. Chestnut-backed Chickadee and Common Yellowthroat are at the

bridge over the spring. Twice we hear the hoot of a Great Horned Owl from the ticket of Cypress tress. A fresh water stream entering the bay entertain Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teal. Probing the sandy mud is a mixed foraging flock of Sanderling, Least and Western Sandpipers, Black-bellied and a number of Semipalmated Plovers and the occasional Greater Yellowlegs. The platform at the terminus of the board walk was a good place to watch an Osprey with fish in its talons escape the harassment of two Western Gulls. The budding Eucalyptus trees to our backs have Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Yellow-rumped and Townsend's Warblers. We didn't take time to hunt down the woodpeckers (Downy, Nuttall's and Northern Flicker) we heard calling in the distance.

At the base of Morro Rock, the local falcon expert Bob Isenberg regaled us with stories and action photos about the resident Peregrines now tending a nest in the 'mail slot'.

Lunch at the little mitigation fresh water pond at the Closters nets us California Thrasher, Tree Swallows, California and Spotted Towhee, a pair of territorial Wrentits, Lesser and American Goldfinches, White-crowned and Golden-crowned Sparrows.

Our last stop at the rocks and tide pools at the north end of Morro strand would not be disappointing. In the sand avoiding the lapping surf were six Whimbrel and on the dark lava rock avoiding the crashing waves were Black Oystercatchers and Black Turnstones.

Contrary to the weather forecast we had a great weekend with great weather. We found Kim Kuska alive and well, and made some new friends while tallying 128 bird species.