

**BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR:
CAPE REGION ENDEMICS & GRAY WHALES
JANUARY 8-16, 2019**

The cape region of the Mexican state of Baja California Sur is probably not high on the bucket lists of many North American birders. Lying some 500 miles south of the US border, the cape region's remoteness and isolation is accentuated by the geographical barriers that restrict access for all but the hardest or creative travelers. Bounded to the north by mostly uninhabited and road-less desert and to east, west and south by the Pacific Ocean and Sea of Cortez, a visit to the cape region of BCS certainly requires more forethought and planning than the average birder is willing to put into a Mexico holiday. However this remote peninsula has long been a destination for naturalists and ecologists and birders have recently begun to discover its treasures. The cape region is home to four endemic bird species: Xantu's Hummingbird; Gray Thrasher; Belding's Yellowthroat and the recently split Baird's Junco (split from Yellow-eyed Junco.) Besides these four endemics, the region is home to several distinctive subspecies of birds that may warrant future splits including the "Cape" Northern Pygmy-Owl, the "Narrow-fronted" Acorn Woodpecker, the "San Lucas" American Robin and "Viosca" Band-tailed Pigeon. In addition to these species unique to BCS, the deserts and coastlines are home to an abundance of resident and migratory avian species including Zone-tailed Hawk, Ridgeway's Rail, Yellow-footed Gull, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Costa's Hummingbird, Gilded Flicker, Gray Flycatcher, Thick-billed Kingbird, Gray Vireo, Cassin's Vireo, California Gnatcatcher, Phainopepla, MacGillivray's Warbler, White-collared Seedeater and many more. Finally, Magdalena Bay on the peninsula's west coast is the wintering home for large numbers of Gray Whales that migrate from Arctic areas to calf in the warm coastal waters. Our boat trip into the bay should bring us within arm's reach of these gentle giants and is certain to be one of the most memorable experiences you will have on a birding tour.

The long peninsula also serves as a funnel for migrating birds and in late winter numerous rarities have been recorded including Ruff, Wood Sandpiper, Red-throated Pipit and Yellow-browed Warbler. The entire region receives very little coverage by visiting birders, so what might be present is anyone's guess and that uncertainty makes the trip even more exciting. If you're interested in being part of an exploratory venture to this remote area of Mexico, consider joining us as we go "where not many birders have gone before."

Tuesday January 8, Day 1, Arrival in San Jose del Cabo:

The trip will begin today with participants arriving at Los Cabos International Airport (airport code SJD). Most major airlines fly in and out of SJD and participants should plan to arrive no later than 2:00 PM. Upon arrival I will pick you up at the airport and drive you to our hotel in San Jose del Cabo. We will meet in the hotel lobby at 3:00 PM (earlier if everyone has arrived) and after a brief meeting we will spend some time birding at a nearby estuary. Night in San Jose del Cabo.

Wednesday January 9, Day 2, San Jose del Cabo to Los Barriles: We'll begin this morning with a visit to the San Jose estuary, a freshwater, marshy delta only about 15 minutes from our hotel. This will be our first opportunity to see the endemic Belding's Yellowthroat, which inhabits this estuary in varying numbers depending upon recent water levels. As is usually the case with wetland birding, there will surely be plenty to look at as the marsh is home to a nice variety of waterfowl, herons and egrets. Possibilities will include Cinnamon Teal, Reddish Egret, Neotropic Cormorant, Common Gallinule, Sora, Tropical Kingbird, Magnificent Frigatebird, Snowy Plover, Ruddy Ground-Dove and much more. Around mid-morning we'll begin driving northeast along the coastal road making stops along the way in areas where birds are congregating. Given the season, there should be large numbers of shorebirds, terns and gulls to sort through. The entire trip is a beautiful coastal drive and we will take it at a very leisurely pace with many stops for birding and photography. We'll also divert inland to check some of the desert scrub patches and anytime we do this there will be chances for Xantu's Hummingbird and Gray Thrasher. If we were unable to find Belding's Yellowthroat in the San Jose del Cabo area we will check a marsh south of Los Barriles where they are fairly regular. Night in Los Barriles.

Thursday January 10, Day 3, Sierra Laguna Highlands:

We'll leave the hotel very early this morning and plan to spend the entire day in the highlands of the Sierra Laguna. This will be our only day spent at high elevation and our only opportunity to find the scarce Baird's Junco. Road access to these mountains is extremely limited and reaching good habitat for Baird's junco may require a 6-8 hour round trip hike. It is difficult to predict exactly where the birds will be, but with diligence and persistence we should be able to find some. Other birds possible in the Sierra Laguna include Northern Pygmy-Owl (fairly common), Acorn Woodpecker, Xantu's Hummingbird, Band-tailed Pigeon, Cassin's Kingbird, California Scrub-Jay, American Robin (San Lucas form), Lazuli Bunting and a variety of wintering warblers. With an early start, we should be able to return to our hotel in Los Barriles by mid-afternoon to give everyone a chance to rest, relax and enjoy the seacoast. Night in Los Barriles.

Friday January 11, Day 4, Los Barriles to La Paz:

After yesterday's early start and vigorous hike, we will make today a slower and more relaxed affair. The arid interior regions and the coastal beaches and estuaries around Los Barriles will provide us with plenty of options for exploring and hopefully turning up a wayward vagrant (of the avian sort of course). The deserts in this part of the Baja are home to birds such as Greater Roadrunner, California Quail, Cactus Wren, California Gnatcatcher and Black-throated and Clay-colored Sparrows. Some years there are also Black-chinned Sparrows and Lark Bunting present as well. The coastal areas are always interesting during the winter and there will be a variety of shorebirds, terns and gulls to keep us occupied. We'll plan to arrive at our hotel in La Paz by mid-afternoon. The remainder of the day will be free for people to wander the streets of La Paz, walk to the malecon or simply relax. La Paz is the capital of BCS and is a slow-paced, delightful place to spend a free afternoon. Night in La Paz.

Saturday January 12, Day 5, La Paz area:

A large tidal lagoon on the outskirts of La Paz offers some of the very best shorebird habitat in all of Mexico and we will spend much of our day exploring it for regular migrant shorebirds with the hope of finding something unusual. Over the years quite a few Eurasian vagrants have turned up near La Paz and with good fortune we may find something special. In addition to visiting the tidal lagoon, we will make the birder's obligatory pilgrimage to La Paz's sewage ponds and visit the extensive irrigated agricultural areas outside the city. Some of the species characteristic of the La Paz area include Yellow-footed Gull, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Crested Caracara, Zone-tailed Hawk, Lark Sparrow, Hooded Oriole, Verdin etc. We'll plan to be back at the hotel by mid-afternoon for another few hours of free time on the La Paz waterfront. If interest exists, we'll make an early evening return visit to one of the most productive sites we visited earlier in the day. Night in La Paz.

Sunday January 13, Day 6, La Paz to Puerto San Carlos:

We'll spend a final morning birding an arid cactus grove north of La Paz where Gilded Flicker and Gila Woodpeckers are resident. We'll also check the rocky promontory where American Oystercatchers and other rock loving denizens are present. After an early lunch we'll drive northwest for 3.5 hours to the town of Puerto San Carlos for our impending close encounters with Gray Whales. Night in Puerto San Carlos.

Monday January 14, Day 7, Boat trip on Magdalena Bay:

We'll spend the entire morning on small boat in Magdalena Bay, the wintering grounds for large numbers of Gray Whales that migrate here from the Beaufort Sea to spend the winter. The whales are curious and extremely tolerant of human approach and sometimes come within an arm's length of the boat. Being so close to these massive animals is a humbling experience that will not soon be forgotten by tour participants. In addition to the whales, there will be an abundance of birds on the water including Brandt's Cormorants, Western and Heerman's Gulls, Eared Grebes, Magnificent Frigatebirds and occasionally large rafts of wintering Lesser Scaup. Morning fog sometimes delays the boat's morning departure time, but under any circumstances we should be back on land by mid-afternoon. We'll spend the remainder of the day checking a few sites around Puerto San Carlos with hopes of finding Ridgway's Rail. Night in Puerto San Carlos.

Tuesday January 15, Day 8, Puerto San Carlos to La Paz: After breakfast we'll begin the 3.5 hour drive back to La Paz. The road between Puerto San Carlos and Ciudad Constitucion passes through a large swath of well-watered agricultural land that harbors birds that are uncommon in this part of Mexico including Harris's Hawk, Western Meadowlark, Burrowing Owl and Lark Bunting. There are also several lush ejidos that we will pass through that can be filled with birds and we will poke around in a few of these places. We'll plan to arrive at our waterfront hotel in La Paz by mid-afternoon in order to have some time to wander around on the malecon before dinner. Night in La Paz.

Wednesday January 16, Day 9, La Paz to SJD & Flights Home:

After breakfast, we'll spend our final morning driving from La Paz back to San Jose del Cabo where the tour will end at the international airport. It's about 2.5 hours from La Paz to the airport and if time allows and we have the desire we can make a few final, short stops along the way. We'll plan to arrive at the airport by 10:30, so participants shouldn't schedule departure flights until 12:30 PM.

TOUR SIZE: The tour will be limited to seven participants.

COST: The cost of the tour will be \$2495 per person double occupancy and the single supplement will be \$500 per person. Price includes 7 nights lodging (January 8-14), all meals beginning with dinner on January 8 through breakfast on January 15, all park entrance fees, guide fee all ground transportation during the tour and the morning boat trip on Magdalena Bay. It does not include airfare to and from San Jose del Cabo, alcoholic beverages, tips or any optional activities engaged in that are not part of the tour.

PACE: This pace of this tour will be mostly conducted at a leisurely pace. Most birding will be done from roadsides or on relatively flat terrain. There will be one strenuous hike on the day we look for Baird's Junco, but that will be optional and anyone not wishing to participate can remain at the hotel in Los Barriles on that morning. We will do some walking through marshy areas looking for Belding's Yellowthroat and the level of exertion required for that will be determined by recent rainfall, but it shouldn't be too difficult. We will also walk through desert scrub where spines and thorny vegetation may be present. Despite those caveats, this will be a relaxed and slow paced tour with morning and afternoon excursions with mid-day breaks on most days. Though we will start early in the morning, the days will not be exceptionally long as there will be no evening excursions and we will generally be at our hotel by late afternoon with time to relax and rest before dinner.

CLIMATE: The weather during this tour will be very pleasant. Daytime high temperatures in January in BCS average in the mid-80's and rarely reach 90. Evenings are cool but the temperature rarely drops below 70. Given the aridness of the region one can expect low levels of humidity making for a very comfortable weather. It will be a bit cooler on the day we hike for the Baird's Junco, but still will be warm by mid-morning. Rainfall in January is unusual.

FOOD: Most breakfasts will be continental style at our hotel or of the picnic variety in the field. Lunches will be a combination of in the field picnics and sit-down restaurants. Dinners will be at restaurants and will range from casual to elegant, but in all cases casual dress will be appropriate.

BIRD LIST: I will provide everyone with a trip checklist upon arrival in BCS. Each evening prior to dinner we will tally our sightings for that particular day. Participants can expect to see 175-200 species during this tour.

ACCOMMODATIONS: I do not stay at cut-rate hotels on my tours. After years of experience I have concluded that a quiet and clean hotel with a comfortable bed is important in order for clients to cope with the physical and emotional demands of a serious birding tour. In Mexico I generally look for locally owned, independently operated hotels rather international chains. The cost of the tour is reflective of this decision that I have made. If you are seeking the cheapest tour available, then perhaps this is not the best choice for you.

INFORMATION: For further information on the tour contact Jan Hansen at 919-259-9423 or at otusasiotours@gmail.com
Details are also available at www.otusasiotours.com