

Las Vegas 11th - 21st May 2009

By Sue Cowie

Hubby Paul and I went to Las Vegas to celebrate our Silver Wedding Anniversary. I had not expected much birding action on 'The Strip' but had researched some suitable places with the local Audubon Society <http://www.redrockaudubon.org>. They were very helpful and sent me some suggestions and a scan of their leaflet. I knew that with Non-birding Paul in tow I would not be able to have much in the way of birding excursions but negotiated a morning at a reserve and took my bins in my hand luggage.

We flew with Virgin who is the only airline who flies direct. Possibly a bit more expensive but after just over 10 hours flying and the landing from hell I was really glad I did not have to board another plane! Our Hotel was Planet Hollywood; it's newly refurbished, not too expensive and located mid-strip to minimise walking. The bed was the biggest we have ever seen, Paul was able to lie in bed without his feet sticking out of the end for the first time since he was a kid!

When I came out of the airport I was on the lookout for my first US bird. At the taxi rank I spotted it sitting waiting to be identified. I came to a sudden halt, almost tripping Paul up, just to find it was a House Sparrow! Over the course of the week I soon learned where all our London sparrows are, they have gone off to Vegas to find some sunshine, they are everywhere out there! Oh, and talking of sunshine it was over 100 degrees everyday and there was never a cloud in the sky!

On and around 'The Strip'

I only saw four birds on 'The Strip' while I was there, House Sparrow, Brewer's Sparrow, American Coot and Great-tailed Grackle. I did hear something else singing but was unable to spot it. I have to confess I did not carry my bins in Vegas itself. Call me a wimp but it was too hot and they were too heavy! Also there were so few birds around apart from sparrows and grackles it did not seem worth it. The best places to spot birds seemed to be the little oasis of greenery and water that lots of the hotels have outside them. The Wynn hotel seemed really popular with the local birds; this is where I saw my first Grackle. The Bellagio which has a huge lake outside had the American Coot and possibly some Mallards but they were too far away without bins.



I did manage to see a Mourning Dove while visiting Siegfried and Roy's Secret Garden at the Mirage Hotel. They also had a pair of Mute swans in the Alpaca enclosure but I suspect they were as captive as the parrots. It's a nice couple of hours out, they have a dolphin pools included in the price and it was not mobbed with people so was very enjoyable.



Mourning Dove

The Hoover Dam

Our first day out in our rented car (from Avis in the hotel) took us to The Hoover Dam. What a brilliant place, totally recommended; it's about 30 miles from Vegas. If you do rent a car I would recommend you also hire Sat Nav. It was worth its weight in gold, I don't think we would have got anywhere without it! The first bird I saw at the Dam was an American Crow, quickly followed loads of White Throated Swifts and two Double Crested Cormorants. There were six large raptors circling on thermals in the distance on the Arizona side of the Dam. They were very distant and my raptor ID at that distance is not good enough but after doing some research at home I suspect

they were Golden Eagles. They are apparently common in the area. Whatever they were they were lovely to watch.



Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve

Our second trip was to my chosen birding site. Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve. I chose this because it's not far from Vegas and being a water treatment plant would hopefully have lots of Ducks and Waders which I am better at identifying with bins. Plus I thought that Paul would find it more interesting than foraging through undergrowth for warblers. It was about 30 mins drive from Vegas. There is a car park and small visitors centre with toilets. The advice given to me was to go early because of the heat and it was good advice. We arrived at 7am and it was already 100 degrees. There is little shelter and I think it would have been unbearable in the afternoon. They said allow two hours, I think we were there a bit longer, more like three and a half. Also take LOTS of water. I drank two pints and needed more.

The first thing I saw in the Car park was a Mourning Dove on the telegraph wires. It was my first so caused great excitement. The second bird was an Anna's Hummingbird on the nectar feeder outside the door of the visitor's centre. I was still in the car park and had two ticks! The centre itself is more of an office really. They are very nice and try to be helpful but to be honest, don't know anything about birds. I might as well have asked the tea lady, actually she might have known more! You have to register your details and sign in but it's free entry.



The first thing I saw once on the reserve was a Killdeer with young, about eight feet away from me. I then spotted a Gambel's Quail and had to go and have a sit down because of overexcitement! The reserve itself consists of nine pools. They have planted shrubs around them and some of them have islands as features. Pool nine was the best, with an island full of ducks and waders plus reed beds full of singing birds which I could not see to identify. There was a very welcome portaloo halfway round; I wish British reserves thought of things like that!

I managed to identify 25 species plus a turtle and some lizards while I was there (birds listed at the end) I am sure there were much more than that but I had to content myself with doing my best and knew I would not manage to ID everything that flew past me.

The Grand Canyon

The canyon is in Arizona not Vegas but is do-able in a day. There are lots of coach and air tours available but we preferred to drive ourselves. It was a long way, about 250 miles but they were good roads and fantastic scenery which changed all the time. We drove through Nevada desert, Arizona desert, hills and forests, under Route 66, and enjoyed all of it. There were lots of raptors enroute. The only one I was able to ID from a moving car was Red Tailed Hawk. I also saw something like a Blue Jay but there were several contenders for what it could have been so that bird remains a mystery. Sadly moving vehicles are not the best place to bird watch.

Entry into the National Park is 25 dollars per car. There were no queues and parking was ok. This was a surprise as it was a Saturday so I was expecting UK style chaos.



I will not try to describe the Canyon. It is beyond words. No photograph will ever do it justice. I will just say try and see it at some time in your life, you will not be disappointed. I was speechless when I saw it.



The first birds we saw were Ravens. They were everywhere and very low over your head. Fantastic. I had read that Californian Condor was sometimes seen although did not expect to have the luck to see it. I was told that the area of 'Bright Angel Lodge' was a good place and what a good place it was! We saw not only Californian Condor but also Turkey Vulture. The Condor was fantastic, so huge! It was being mobbed by Ravens which looked like pigeons next to it.

I also saw a Black Throated Gray Warbler in the trees at the side of the road. I am sure there was lots more birdlife in the area but time did not allow us to linger long to look. With hindsight I would have spent the night there, we really needed much longer. Actually several days would have been better!

It was a fantastic holiday and it was good to see that despite it being a mad and built up area in the middle of a desert there was still lots of wildlife to see.

Final List of Birds Seen

House Sparrow
Rock Dove
Great Tailed Grackle
Double Crested Cormorant
White Tailed Swift
American Crow
Raven
Californian Condor
Red Tailed Hawk
Turkey Vulture
Black Throated Gray Warbler
Brewer's Sparrow
Mourning Dove
Killdeer
American Coot
Ruddy Duck
Mallard
Redhead
Gambel's Quail
Gadwall
Eared Grebe
Cinnamon Teal
Verdin
American Avocet
Lesser Scaup
Red-winged Blackbird
Pied Billed Grebe
Black Necked Stilt
Shoveller
Moorhen
Ring Necked Duck
Black Phoebe
Black Tailed Gnatcatcher
Northern Rough Winged Swallow
Black Chinned Hummingbird
Anna's Hummingbird
Brown Headed Cowbird