

Organising a birding holiday – consider using “Birding Pal”

When it comes to arranging a birding holiday abroad then what are our options. No doubt there are many people who turn to the commercial companies such as Naturetrek, Tropical Birding and Ornitholidays to name just a few. Using these companies certainly takes all the stress out of arranging a trip as they take responsibility for sorting out everything including accommodation, flights, meals, transport and very importantly the nature guides. The obvious disadvantage is the cost of these holidays and one can arrange a similar travel itinerary and reduce the expense considerably. There is also the issue of the group size and you may be birding in a group of a dozen people who will all want to maximize their bird list. Having seen some of these groups arrive at lodges I have stayed at I often wondered if they were birding or on a survival training course!



Nutmeg Manakin – Also called the Scaly-breasted Munia is an endemic bird in Asia and introduced into North America and now an established breeder. Photographed at Lake Murray.



Allen's Hummingbird – An aggressive and territorial hummingbird commonly found in coastal California. Photographed at the Famosa Slough wetlands.

The issue with the DIY approach to a birding holiday is arranging local guides. In our experience many of the lodges we have stayed can arrange guiding and may have their own guides including the owner of the lodge in some cases. However, these guides require a fee that has to be budgeted for and depending on the country may be as much as £200 per day. Of course there is no guarantee that you will have the same quality of guiding that the reputable commercial companies offer although in our experience using the DIY option we have never been disappointed. Only once did we experience a problem with a guide in Costa Rica who turned up two hours late as his car had broken down but he managed to make up for it with a good days birding.

Recently, we visited San Diego for a week following a family visit to British Columbia and wanted to do just one or two days of birding. Instead of trying to find a professional guide we decided to try “Birding Pal”. This is website that requires a \$10 annual membership fee and enables you to contact experienced birdwatchers in many parts of the world. Once logged in with your password you can select the country you are visiting, in our case North America, and then the state (California). A list of birders appears giving their availability (some may only do weekends), the languages they speak and in some cases their experience and specific interests. A message may then be sent to any of these people you wish to choose letting them know when you would like to go birding. Although this site does provide access to professional birding guides many of the people offering guiding do it for free. They like to meet other birders from abroad and are more than happy to show you around their local patch. It is courtesy to offer payment for any fuel costs if you are using

their transport and also any permits if required to enter any grounds. The site also suggests that you offer to pay for any meals.



Pacific – Slope Flycatcher – Small flycatcher with an extensive range from Alaska right down the Pacific coast of North America. Photographed at Mission trails Park



Red-Masked Parakeet – A bird of Ecuador and Peru with feral populations in parts of North America. Photographed at Point Loma Nazarene University.

We organized a day out with a couple from San Diego, Bill and Jo Tweet (yes, that is their surname) and arranged to meet up at Missions Trails Park North East of San Diego. They also then contacted us later in the week to bird the cemetery at Point Loma, Famosa Slough (a wetlands area) and a few hotspots that they new of on the grounds of Universities. With their skill and local knowledge we managed to see 63 species and also get a few good photographs. We were not birding at the best time of year for San Diego and Bill and Jo advised a return trip when the migrant birds arrive with an offer to put us up. We will be considering returning to San Diego and using Birding Pal (birdingpal.org) in future. It was certainly worth the \$10 fee.



Western Bluebird – A small thrush with an extensive range from British Columbia down to Mexico. Photographed in the cemetery at Point Loma.



Western Scrub-Jay – Extensive range from Washington State down the West Coast of the USA into Central Mexico and Central Texas. Photographed at Point Loma.