



*First published Oct. 1, 2016 ... Contact Hart at [hartrufe@gmail.com](mailto:hartrufe@gmail.com)*



*One of my early California photos, a California Quail (1) in the backyard.*

## **GRADUATION BIRDS**

My wife and I have been traveling to California for graduations regularly for more than 10 years now, ever since our daughter and her family moved there with our three grandsons. This year her youngest graduated from college, so our graduation trips to California are probably over. Her whole family is now 100 per cent converted, dedicated, card-carrying, certified, true-blue Californians, notwithstanding they still root for the Philadelphia Eagles and Phillies, as well as for our English son-in law's favorite, the Chelsea Football Club (English Premier League soccer). Even though they complain of the high taxes and higher cost of living there, none of them are ever likely to move back east, either to the ice and snow of Pennsylvania winters, or the blistering heat, humidity and hurricanes of sunny Florida summers.

They have finally settled in the San Diego area, with its year round 65 to 75 degree temperature range, nearby beaches, not too distant mountains, and the wonderful relatively undiscovered Temecula wine country, which, for many wine enthusiasts, rivals the Napa and Sonoma regions. We started years ago attending sixth grade graduation events, and moved through middle school, high school, and finally college graduations for all three grandsons. We enthusiastically look forward to the next phase: weddings and great-grandchildren.

While every trip was pretty well tightly planned and scheduled, we always managed to get in some birding, and my very first efforts at bird photography occurred at their first northern California home. As I reviewed some of those early photos, taken with elementary beginner level camera gear, and my boundless lack of photographic knowledge and technique, I debated whether I should inflict some of those early shots on you, dear reader, but then thought you might join me in determining whether or not my photography has improved. Certainly my camera gear has become more expensive, but I quickly acknowledge that I still have a long way to go.

My first photographic efforts began with an inexpensive Panasonic Point and Shoot camera which produced these two east San Francisco Bay back yard birds: the California Quail (1) and the Lesser Goldfinch (2). A nearby path ran along the edge of acres of preserved land that was mostly former farmland, but now wide open grass land, but including a couple of small wetlands that attracted the most variety of birds. Here we found the Black-headed Grosbeak (3); the very much threatened, if not endangered, Tri-colored Blackbird, distinguished from the Red-winged Blackbird by the white wing stripe instead of the Red-winged's yellow stripe (4); the Cinnamon Teal pair (5); a Black Phoebe sitting on a fence post designed to keep everyone out of the wetland area (6); and this cute collection of Bushtits, that travel in groups, but move around so much that it is difficult to get them to sit still for a portrait (7).

Several years later, after our daughter and her family moved to the San Diego area, and I had moved up to a mid-level Nikon camera and lens, I was able to capture this distant Spotted Towhee, a close relative of our Eastern Towhee, in a neighbor's back yard (8). See: <http://stlucieaudubon.org/hartBeat/hb2015/hb150801RedEyed.html>. Another path along another adjacent preserved small valley by our daughter's home afforded this Pacific Slope Flycatcher (9); a trip to a nearby Pacific beach produced this fly-by Heerman's Gull (10); and on a hike at Torrey Pines State Park we found this California Towhee (11).

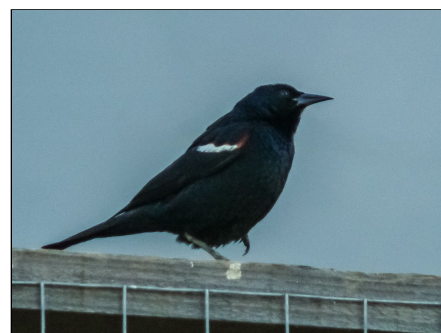
This May, at our grandson's graduation party, this Western Bluebird, with its blue throat, peered over the fence to see what all the excitement was about (12). Alas, with only a small camera to document the graduation activities, I had to settle for this heavily cropped photo. But in our daughter's back yard with heavy duty camera equipment, this Hooded Oriole (13), male Anna's Hummingbird (14), juvenile male Allen's Hummingbird (15), and beautiful adult male Allen's Hummingbird (16) all made it into my photo collection. Even with six hummingbird feeders and oodles of flowers in the back yard the hummers were constantly bickering and



***Lesser Goldfinch (2)***



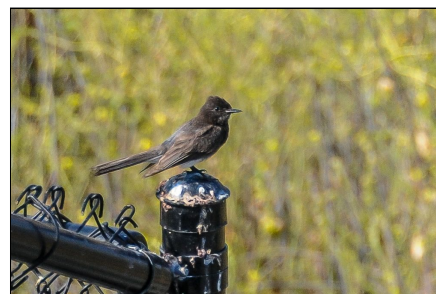
***Black-headed Grosbeak (3)***



***Tri-colored Blackbird (4)***



***Cinnamon Teal (5)***



***Black Phoebe (6)***



chasing each other all around, trying to protect their own private food source.

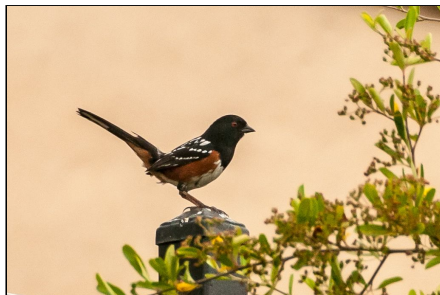
The point here is to demonstrate that year round, if you need to travel anywhere for any particular kind of non-bird related activity, with just a little spare time and effort you can find birds. And when you are fortunate enough to travel far afield, you can find birds that you are not likely to ever see in your home territory. Note that none of the birds displayed here are likely to be found anywhere on the east coast.

The second point to be made here is that even with a small point and shoot camera you can document birds that you see, which, while not of publication quality, still satisfactorily illustrate the birds seen. When I look at the difference between my earliest photo (Nos. 1 - 2) and my latest photos (Nos. 13 - 16), 12 years later, I wonder whether all the investment I have subsequently made in camera equipment has been worthwhile or not. No, no, no, don't contact me about selling or giving my equipment away. I've just come to the realization that I still need a lot more learning to properly use the camera and lens that I have. Maybe someday I will produce photos that satisfy me, but then, maybe that will be the day I say, "OK, come get the equipment." Not there yet, though.

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***Bushtits (7)***



***Spotted Towhee (8)***



***Pacific Slope Flycatcher (9)***



***Heerman's Gull (10)***



***California Towhee (11)***



***Hooded Oriole (13)***



***Western Bluebird (12)***



***Allen's Hummingbird, juvenile male (15)***



***Anna's Hummingbird (14)***



***Allen's Hummingbird, adult male (16)***

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