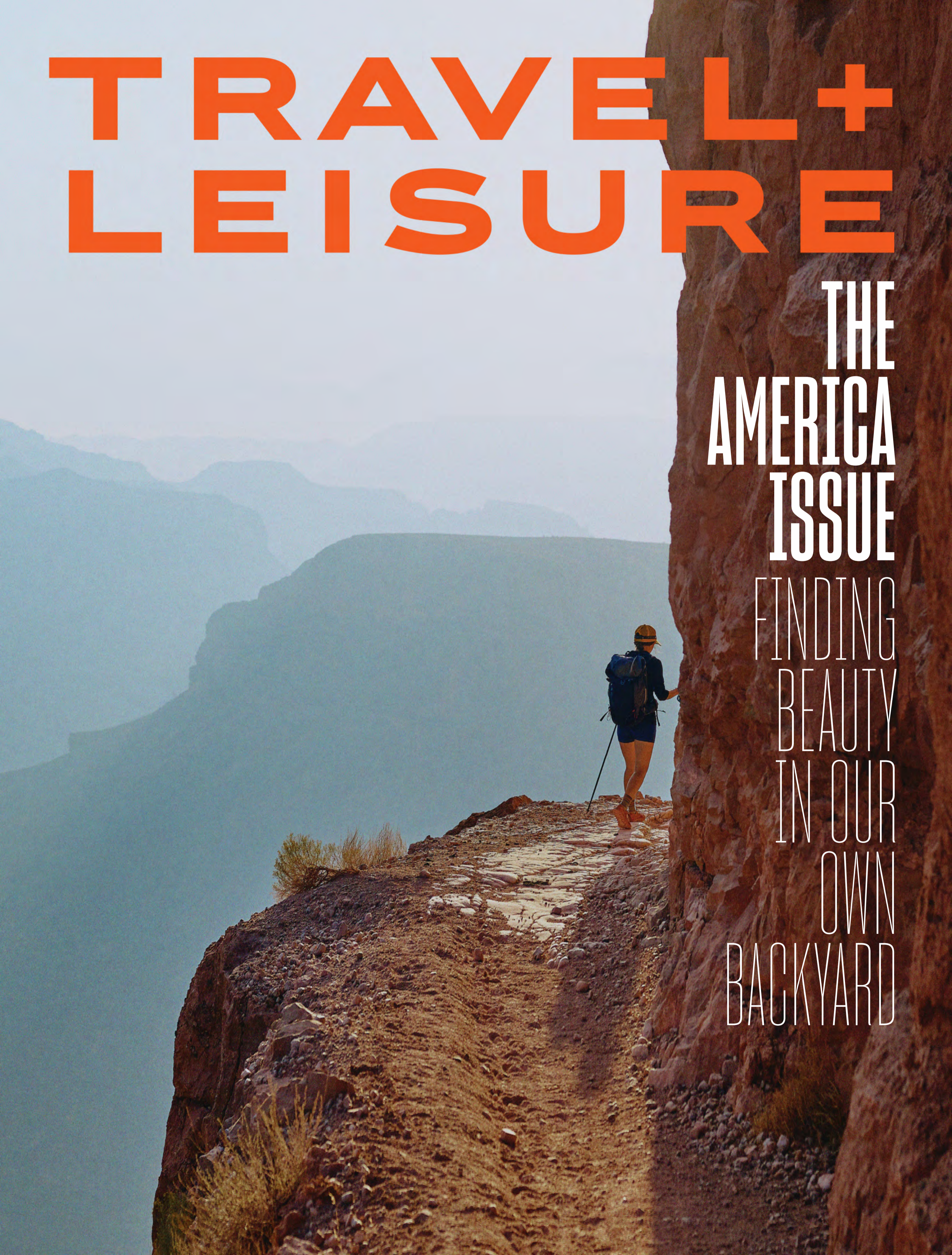


TRAVEL + LEISURE

THE
AMERICA
ISSUE

FINDING
BEAUTY
IN OUR
OWN
BACKYARD



California

on the

Wing



Look closely at the rugged, wintry landscapes of the Golden State's Central Coast, and you might be lucky enough to spot them: red-tailed hawks, yellow-rumped warblers, blue-gray gnatcatchers.

Betsy Andrews encounters these and many more on a bird-watching trip of a lifetime.



A great blue heron at Morro Bay State Park. Opposite: A turkey vulture soars over the Bluff Trail in Montaña de Oro State Park.



“It’s

GORY,” said the docent, a retiree volunteer. We were standing on a cliff at Point Lobos State Natural

Reserve, which occupies a peninsula shaped like a lion’s paw scraping the Pacific just south of Carmel, California. The winter sun glinted off waves that splashed rocks draped in harbor seals. The docent was describing the plight of a three-foot-tall, ear-tufted bird perched near a posse of avian toughs in black, gray, and white formalwear.

“He’s a Brandt’s cormorant, and they’re western gulls,” she said. Come spring, they would all nest there, and the cormorant’s chin would turn blue to attract the ladies. “They’re neighbors, but their relationship is imperfect.” While the gulls’ call acts as a burglar alarm for cormorants by signaling predators, when the cormorant chicks hatch, the gulls are quite likely to eat them.

It’s dog-eat-dog in the bird world, I thought. But despite the neighborhood politics, I couldn’t



• Elinore Cottrell, an ambassador at Sweet Springs Nature Preserve, near Morro Bay.

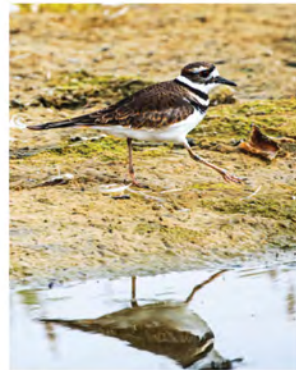
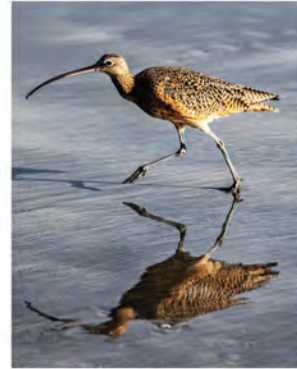
ILLUSTRATION BY MAY PARSEY

blame these seabirds for wanting to raise their young here. Millions of years ago, the North American and Pacific tectonic plates collided, creating the breathtaking, craggy coastline of Point Lobos we see today. And since it’s a nature reserve, it’s subject to stricter environmental protection than a state park, so the oceanfront real estate is about as pristine as it gets.

The first time I visited, in 2017, I was attending a food festival in

Carmel. During a mushroom hunt, Chuck Bancroft, a former ranger who’d spent 35 years working at Point Lobos, told me it was “the world’s greatest meeting of land and water.” But when I biked over to see it for myself, I discovered he’d neglected a third of it. For as the brown pelicans mobbing a rock named Bird Island and the black oystercatchers using carrot-like beaks to pluck limpets from tidal pools could tell you, Point Lobos is a trifecta, with the sky that crowns the land and water arguably the most significant part.

That’s why I returned. Since my initial visit, I’ve become a bird-watcher. It’s a way of balancing the incessant eating I do as a food writer with exercise, fresh air, and



Birds of Central California

TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT

A Steller's jay at Big Sur Bakery (bigsurbakery.com); a snowy egret at Morro Bay (parks.ca.gov); a western scrub jay in El Morro Elfin Forest (elfin-forest.org); a yellow-rumped warbler at Laguna Lake (slo.org); a long-billed curlew on the beach at Cayucos.

CENTER ROW

A white-crowned sparrow at Big Sur Bakery; a Townsend's warbler in Sweet Springs Nature Reserve (morrocoastaudubon.org); a juvenile red-tailed hawk in San Luis Obispo; a killdeer at Morro Bay; an American goldfinch at Laguna Lake.

BOTTOM ROW

A great blue heron at Morro Bay; a blue-gray gnatcatcher in El Morro Elfin Forest; a California quail in El Morro Elfin Forest; a western scrub jay at Laguna Lake; a Wilson's snipe at Morro Bay.

perspective. This time around, I was upending the equation: with the occasional delicious meal tucked in, I would feast primarily on bird sightings along California's Central Coast. Food writers may neglect this part of the state, but it's a cornucopia for bird-watchers, offering rare treats for East Coasters like me.

I planned to head south on a four-day, 170-mile sojourn on the Pacific Coast Highway, pausing at the crowdsourced hot spots on my eBird app and logging my own sightings along the way. My main destination: Morro Bay, a bird-silly spot I know well because my partner's mother, Penny, lives there. Well past autumn's ferocious fire season, the lush winter period is when birds flock to estuaries. Monterey pine and cypress forests, punctuated by massive coast live oaks, meet cliffides covered in flowering shrubs and California poppies.

The day before, I'd driven my rental car from San Jose's airport just over an hour to Mission Ranch, a cluster of sea-view accommodations on a 19th-century former dairy farm. After brunching on an omelette with shrimp and Anaheim peppers, I took a walk at Carmel River State Beach, where the

waterway pools into a sandy lagoon that serves as a bird sanctuary. The place teemed with web-footed life: ruddy ducks with powder-blue bills; American widgeons with iridescent eye shadow; northern shovelers, named for their impressive schnozzes.

In Mission Trail Nature Preserve, an Allen's hummingbird buzzed around my head before careening off toward the park's native-plant garden. Plump and golden, he had already returned from his annual winter sojourn in Mexico. The species' habitat is shifting northward as a result of global warming, and it's also shrinking. The National Audubon Society predicts that, 60 years from now, this tiny bird will have lost 90 percent of its range.

I thought of him as I drove on from Point Lobos, which was my third stop. Big Sur, the rugged region immediately to the south, has been clobbered by climate change. Between mudslides and wildfires, this part of the Pacific Coast Highway is often impassable, isolating its boho community, as well as fabled landmarks like the luxe Post Ranch Inn. I was lucky to find Highway 1 clear as I crossed Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge. In a cottage nestled beneath a redwood and a rare Santa Lucia fir, Big Sur Bakery bustled with locals eating avocado toast. Steller's jays—black and blue with pointy heads—loitered near my table, hoping for breakfast scraps.

Four miles south, I pulled into a parking lot high above a sea lion rookery dubbed Condor Overlook. North America's biggest birds, with their 10-foot wingspans, gather there in search of blubber-rich carrion. Most wear numbers, like race horses, as they've been tagged by conservationists. In 1987, the species became critically endangered when its population dropped to as few as 27 birds—primarily as a result of lead poisoning from hunters' bullets in their scavenged food. But that type of ammunition is now outlawed in California, and the condors are a resilient lot. Conservation has



4
Montaña de Oro's Bluff Trail, a bird-rich 4.6-mile loop located just outside Los Osos.

Exploring California's Central Coast

Where to Stay

Mission Ranch

Laid-back luxury and countryside views on the grounds of a 19th-century former dairy farm in Carmel. missionranchcarmel.com; doubles from \$130.

San Luis Creek Lodge

A boutique hotel in downtown San Luis Obispo that accents a modern farmhouse aesthetic with beachy bohemian touches. sanluiscreeklodge.com; doubles from \$169.

White Water Cambria

Designer Nina Freudenberger refurbished this 25-room inn near Moonstone Beach in Scandinavia-meets-California style. whitewatercambria.com; doubles from \$114.

Where to Eat and Drink

Aubergine

Chef Justin Cogley has adapted to COVID by taking his Michelin-starred Carmel restaurant outdoors. auberginecarmel.com; tasting menu \$205.

Bayside Café

Stop by this Morro Bay hangout for classics like crab Louie and tri-tip French dip sandwiches. baysidecafe.com; entrées \$11–\$29.

Dockside Too

A Morro Bay staple for oysters. morrobaydockside.com; entrées \$13–\$21.

Ember

The wood-fired pizzas and juicy rib eye are the standouts at this acclaimed Arroyo Grande eatery. emberwoodfire.com; entrées \$25–\$48.

Mistura

Don't miss Nicola Allegretta's organic Peruvian restaurant in San Luis Obispo. misturarestaurants.com; entrées \$30–\$35.

Ruddell's

Smokehouse

You won't find a more delicious quick seaside lunch than the tacos at this Cayucos stalwart. smokerjim.com; entrées \$6–\$14.

SLO Provisions

Snag artisanal sandwiches and baked goods from this popular San Luis Obispo purveyor. sloprovisions.com; entrées \$9–\$22.

The Black Hill Trail, in Morro Bay State Park.



A great egret takes to the sky in Morro Bay State Park.

increased Big Sur's wild population to 101, and while August's Dolan Fire destroyed the sanctuary, nestlings survived by hiding deep inside the hollows of old-growth trees.

About two hours later, I stopped in the surfer town of Cayucos for smoked-albacore tacos at Ruddell's Smokehouse and ate them on the pier. As the Morro Coast Audubon Society's online bird guide predicted, I spotted heads bobbing in the waves: surf scoters, an oceangoing duck with a crooked, clown-colored beak. Occasionally, they disappeared underwater, diving for food against the backdrop of Morro Rock.

FROM THERE I HEADED to Penny's house in Los Osos. She's a casual but particularly fortunate bird lover; her sunny, bloom-filled backyard fronts cliffside scruff that tumbles down to the ocean. It's a magnet for anything with wings. From her large picture windows, she can spy red-shouldered hawks alighting on utility poles,

Anna's hummingbirds zipping among her flowers, turkeys sauntering through her yard. "I don't have to move," she said. "They come to me."

As happy hour approached, Penny suggested we head to Morro Bay's Embarcadero for oysters at one of the seafood joints that line the working waterfront. Once we'd polished off our beers and bivalves, we strolled over to Morro Rock. The natural formation—remains of an ancient volcano—is a hunting perch for peregrine falcons, the world's fastest birds. It also forms the clasp of a carabiner-shaped inlet, where a stretch of dunes shelters one of California's last great estuaries. A designated Important Bird Area, Morro Bay is a major stopover along the Pacific Flyway migratory route. Over the course of a typical winter, its tidal mudflats lure 20,000 shorebirds to binge on small crabs and other invertebrates.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I felt like a giant amid the pygmy coastal oaks as I explored the bayside ecosystem of the Elin Forest, a 90-acre natural area named for the stunted height of its centuries-old California live oaks. Chasing ruby-crowned kinglets, hoping to glimpse their retractable flamelike crests, I flushed a covey of California quail, deeply boppers dangling from the adults' foreheads.

Five minutes south at the Audubon Society's Sweet Springs Nature Preserve—a compact paradise of marsh, woody ponds, and scrub—I found (Continued on page 103)



(California, continued from page 93)

Elinore Cottrell, a family friend, lingering beneath eucalyptus trees filled with snoozing turkey vultures. A preserve ambassador, Elinore noted that, while birds are certainly early risers, they're hardly the first animals on the scene each morning: "Before daybreak, I see deer, coyotes, and raccoons, but few birds. They get up at dawn."

I wandered along one of the trails lined with sparrow-filled scrub, under trees busy with Townsend's warblers, to the shore where, were it not for a duck blind, I would've run smack into a bald eagle on a low cypress branch. The eagle and I remained, breathing in air that smelled of evergreens and salt until I got distracted by a commotion in the water. The frenzy of upright fins disrupting the shallows turned out to be a fever of shovelnose guitarfish, a type of elongated sea ray with a sharklike dorsal.

After lunching on crab Louie at the Bayside Café, in the marina, I rented a kayak and navigated marsh-grass channels filled with wading birds. Great blue herons towered over willets and dunlins, western snowy plovers racing past on their long legs. I paddled into the bay for a look at the brants—Canada geese's smaller, fancier cousins—that had flown in from the Arctic Circle.

Later that afternoon, Penny joined me for a stroll through Montaña de Oro, an 8,000-acre state park with pristine peaks, miles of beach, and a songbird-filled canyon that leads to a treacherous surf break. We lingered on the Bluff Trail, a Cooper's hawk wheeling overhead as a scarlet sun dropped behind the ocean.

DESPITE BEING A CITY of nearly 50,000 people, San Luis Obispo is abundant with nature. I made the 20-minute drive from Morro Bay early the next day for a hike up 1,500-foot Bishop Peak. Like Morro Rock, it's one of the Nine Sisters, a family of volcanic leftovers that runs from the coast to 19 miles inland. Winding to the top for a vista of Bishop's siblings, I had the day's first encounter: a California thrasher. Bobbing his tail, whistling like a champ, the drab gray bird used his sickle-shaped beak to dig up dirt and uncover beetles.

Famished after climbing, I grabbed rotisserie *porchetta* and a ginger cookie at SLO Provisions to take with me to Laguna Lake Park, which abuts an area of sprawling scrubland. Hooded mergansers glided in the water, the male sporting a two-tone pompadour. Western bluebirds flew from fence posts in flashes of cobalt and crimson. Perched on a Frisbee-golf basket was the songbird I'd come for: the loggerhead shrike, gray-white in a black cape and bandit's mask. A diminutive carnivore, the aptly nicknamed "butcherbird" impales mice and lizards on barbed wire.

I recorded the sighting in my eBird app and drove south to Pismo State Beach, a hidden gem in Oceano that Elinore had mentioned. Twelve miles away, near the town of Pismo Beach, the sands are often disturbed by roaring ATVs. But Oceano's dunes

are protected. A butterfly grove offers respite to migrating monarchs, and campsites adjoin a wooded lagoon. The visitors' center highlights local history. Like many coastal birding sites, Pismo has abundant food sources that also drew Native Americans—the Chumash left shell middens after dining on clams.

In the 1950s, a group of bohemians known as the Dunites created Moy Mell, a utopian community that attracted the likes of Ansel Adams. Circumnavigating the ethereal lagoon on foot, I could see why the Dunites believed that the place had a mystical energy. According to eBird, 269 species have been sighted there. Double-crested cormorants roosted in trees. Green-winged teals, with their punk-rock feathers, swam by.

It was getting late, and I was hungry. Ember, where chef Brian Collins specializes in wood-fired, farm-to-table fare, was just 10 minutes away in Arroyo Grande. The food writer in me tugged at my shirtsleeve. Still, I lingered beside the lagoon, reflecting on the ways in which bird-watching expands my world, steering me from the news, menus, and my other human obsessions.

A common yellowthroat called from the thicket, its song sounding like *which-is-it, which-is-it?* A marsh-loving warbler that wears a black mask, it might have lived there, or it could have just been stopping to feast on bugs on its journey northward for the breeding season. *Which-is-it, which-is-it?* I wasn't sure, but I made a mental note to study up on its migration patterns and diet on my Audubon app during dinner. This bird was a tiny thing, weighing no more than a third of an ounce, but its travels and appetites, I understood, were no less urgent than mine. ♦

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