



Arizona in Winter 2024 Trip Report (Jan 22-30)

[Link: Arizona in Winter 2024 Trip Report \(Jan 22-30\)](#)

We started this year's run of Arizona tours with some weather that was more appropriate for the Pacific Northwest rather than the borderlands of the southwestern deserts. A few days in a row of cloudy cool temperatures with some significant rain greeted us, and with weather looming, I decided to really change things up from my typical opening day routine. I was glad I did because it brought us to a new park I had never birded before, and it proved to be an excellent addition to week where among the always popular Vermilion Flycatchers and Phainopeplas, we saw our only Mountain Bluebird of the tour as well as a Violet-green Swallow, a bird I've never recorded on a winter Arizona tour before!



Phainopepla © Skye Haas



Mountain Bluebird © Skye Haas



Violet-green Swallow © Skye Haas

From there we then headed up to a nearby colony of Burrowing Owls, of which we had some excellent looks at these fierce little owls roosting at the mouths of their dens. Unfortunately the rains that day cut short our time among the saguaro cactus, an iconic representative of the Sonoran Deserts. Still we were able to weave through the squalls enough that we were able to turn up a pair of Gilded Flickers, a bird who's range map is nearly identical to that of the saguaro. With heavy rains overnight, I had us out checking the local sewage ponds to see if any interesting waterbirds had dropped in. Nothing too wild was observed, but a nice selection of ducks including Mexican Mallard were seen as well as another winter tour first- a delicate Snowy Egret. We then headed up to the jewel of the Santa Rita Mountains, Madera Canyon. This was everyone's first taste of the pine/oak/juniper woodlands that make up the backbone of the Sierra Madre ecology of northern Mexico. The canyon was lovely as always, and due to the recent rains, the creek was running quite well, and made for a delightful backdrop as we hiked up the canyon lined with stately Arizona Sycamores. The birdlife included a host of new species for people, as several of the birds we saw just barely come north of the Mexican border into these small mountain ranges. We had great looks at Hepatic Tanager, Arizona Woodpecker, Magnificent Hummingbird, Bridled Titmouse, Yellow-eyed Junco and Mexican Jay. The clownish Acorn Woodpecker was abundantly common, and keen-eyed observers in the group noted that even the White-breasted Nuthatches "looked different", an accurate assessment as this mountain subspecies has a more extensively white face than the nuthatches from most of the rest of North America. We were even treated to an extended look at Canyon Wren who foraged for quite some time at our feet along a rock wall.



Hepatic Tanager © Skye Haas



Bridled Titmouse © Skye Haas



Canyon Wren © Skye Haas

We then moved on to the delightful town of Patagonia, always a favorite stop on this tour. Welcoming us to town was a Greater Roadrunner, one of many we would enjoy over the course of the tour. The next morning we started to bird on the outskirts of town. A pair of Rufous-backed Robins had been frequenting a fruit tree for the winter along Sonoita Creek so we made the effort to try to spy these rare visitors from Mexico. Alas we were unable to find them, but a roosting Western Screech Owl in a tree cavity was an excellent consolation prize!



Rufous-backed Robin © Skye Haas



Western Screech-Owl © Skye Haas



Exploring the Montosa Canyon © Skye Haas

We then moved on to spend the rest of the morning at the Tucson Audubon Paton Center for Hummingbirds. This wonderful sanctuary is a fantastic spot to spend birding. In addition to its flagship bird, the tropical looking Violet-crowned Hummingbird, we were treated to great looks at

Broad-billed, Anna's and Rufous Hummingbirds.



Violet-crowned Hummingbird © Skye Haas



Rufous Hummingbird © Skye Haas

But it's not just hummers here. We saw lots of Audubon's Warblers, Abert's and Green-tailed Towhees, Curve-billed Thrashers and due to the ripe pecan trees, an abundance of woodpeckers feasting on the fresh nuts. Dozens of Gila and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers were present, and a

couple rarities were here as well; an Arizona Woodpecker (normally not found as such low elevations) and a genuine goody and very rare to southern Arizona, a Downy Woodpecker! After taking some time after lunch to enjoy the quaint artist shops that line the main street in Patagonia, we then headed out to explore the extensive grasslands of the Sonoita region. Unfortunately, due to the long drought that ran spring through fall of the previous year, food resources were sparse and the normal robust sparrow flocks that can roam these plains seemed to be absent this winter. Still it was a treat to wander the grasslands and enjoy the plant communities of this habitat, punctuated by Kestrels and Red-tailed Hawks, and set against the snowy capped mountains on all sides of the valley.



Sonoita Grassland © Skye Haas

The next day we had a bit of driving to do, but still we all agreed we wanted another shot at the Rufous-backed Robin before pulling out of Patagonia. Without a lot of time to spare, I figured this would be a fruitless attempt, but much to our collective delight we were only there for a few minutes before a Rufous-backed Robin appeared, this handsome subtropical thrush looking so striking in the morning sun! We then were off to the Whitewater Draw, an expansive wetland in the Sulphur Springs Valley. This site is always a fun time due to the thousands of Sandhill Cranes that roost here daily throughout the winter. One of the hallmarks of these visits is the NOISE these magnificent beasts make, especially when the flock takes to the air en masse! But it's not just cranes here, we had some fantastic looks at Cinnamon Teal, Snow Geese, Least Sandpiper and a good showing of Northern Harriers coursing over the marshes.



Sandhill Cranes © Skye Haas



Northern Harrier © Skye Haas

We finished up our travels with a multi-night stay in the tiny hamlet of Portal. Set at the mouth of Cave Creek Canyon in the Chiricahua Mountains is without a doubt one of the prettiest, if not wildest regions in all of southern Arizona. And as it so often is, it is full of birds! We had fantastic looks at low desert land species like Gambel's Quail, Crissal Thrasher and Black-throated Sparrow.



Crissal Thrasher © Skye Haas

As we moved higher into the canyon, we got a chance to revisit species like Yellow-eyed Junco, Bridled Titmouse and Arizona Woodpecker, along with some new canyon species like Blue-throated Mountain-Gem (the largest species of Hummingbird in the US), Bushtits, Mexican Chickadee and the grand prize of the tour, an extended study of a multi-hued Elegant Trogon!



Elegant Trogon © Skye Haas



Group photo 2024

[Arizona in winter species list \(Jan 22 - 30, 2024\)](#)