Eagle-Eye Tours



Arizona in Winter 2024 Trip Report (Jan 30 - Feb 7)

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Our tour began with a drive through the Sonoran Desert near Tucson, an otherworldly landscape dominated by the tall, strangely, hominid forms of the iconic saguaro cacti. At our first stop at a breathtaking scenic overlook, the first bird spotted was a Gilded Flicker, a species mostly restricted to these saguaro deserts and our main target bird for this location! We also picked up Black-tailed Gnatcatchers and several other desert species that would prove common on our journeys. We stopped for a picnic lunch at a city park in Tucson where a pond held several familiar duck species and an errant Snow Goose, but lest we forget what part of the continent we were visiting, there were also Neotropic Cormorants and our first shockingly vivid Vermilion Flycatcher. We then headed to a spot that harbors a population of Burrowing Owls and this somewhat diurnal species did not disappoint, with a few individuals giving everyone good scope looks.



Burrowing Owl © Skye Haas

Our next morning's birding began at a desert park near Green Valley, where we were dazzled by three species of hummingbirds, including our first Broad-billed Hummingbird, a dazzling green and blue male, and a tiny purple-gorgeted Costa's Hummingbird that would not leave us alone. As small groups of dapper Gambel's Quail sped along on the ground between displays of Sonoran Desert plants, the guides offered assurances that there would be plenty of photo opportunities for this species. We somehow managed to pull ourselves away and headed up the road to Madera Canyon where we birded the rest of the day. We took a few moderately short hikes in this gorgeous canyon, admiring the Arizona sycamore trees and alligator bark junipers and the gentle trickle of water in the boulder-strewn creek.



Exploring Madera Canyon area © Skye Haas

However, it was at feeding stations at private inholdings within the Coronado National Forest here where we saw most of the birds. Mexican Jays, Acorn Woodpeckers went from exciting lifers for most to just another part of the backdrop as we awaited the appearance of Hepatic Tanager and Arizona Woodpeckers. The first Bridled Titmice teased us by stopping only long enough to snatch a sunflower seed and fly off, but eventually everyone became familiarized with this common Sierra Madrean parid.



Hepatic Tanager © Skye Haas



Bridled Titmouse © Skye Haas

Juncos were numerous, including that Sierra Madrean specialty, the Yellow-eyed Junco. We were able to study three different forms of Dark-eyed Juncos among the Yellow-eyed. A highlight for many was great looks at a Canyon Wren, a species hit hard by recent drought years, and not nearly as common as they were formerly.



Yellow-eyed Junco © Skye Haas

The next morning's birding began with an obligatory stop at a small sewage pond, where we got nice looks at an overwintering Snowy Egret and an Eared Grebe among the Northern Shovelers,

Buffleheads and Ruddy Ducks. Then it was off to a park in Tubac that held five species of flycatcher, including a Gray Flycatcher and a handsome Cassin's Kingbird. Both Black and Say's Phoebes showed well, as did yet another male Vermilion Flycatcher. A hike along the Anza Trail beneath towering Fremont cottonwoods proved challenging for finding birds, as the flocks of Bridled Titmice and "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warblers stayed high in the trees.



Audubon's Warbler © Skye Haas

Then it was off to Patagonia Lake State Park, where we had a picnic lunch under a roofed pavilion while waiting for a light rain to subside. Feeding stations at the park revealed a wealth of bird life. Topping the list were Abert's and Green-tailed Towhees, a singing Anna's Hummingbird, great looks at Ladder-backed and Gila Woodpeckers, Northern Cardinals and their much sought after congeners, the Pyrrhuloxia. We had especially close studies of Verdin and Orange-crowned Warbler. A bright-plumaged White-throated Sparrow, a scarce visitor from the east, popped into view several times among the numerous White-crowned Sparrows.



Green-tailed Towhee © Skye Haas

Our next day was spent in the Patagonia/Sonoita area, beginning with stellar looks at a Rufous-backed Robin, a rare winter visitor from Mexico, in a hackberry tree just outside of town. Then we spent three hours leisurely exploring the grounds of Tucson Audubon's Paton Center for Hummingbirds, a highlight of any trip to southeast Arizona.



Rufous-backed Robin © Skye Haas

The hummingbirds did not disappoint. Violet-crowned Hummingbirds, the flagship species of the center, made several appearances, as did Broad-billed and Anna's Hummingbirds. These were joined

by a rare early spring migrant or winter wandering Rufous Hummingbird -- an adult male with a bright orange gorget and ruddy-hued back.



Violet-crowned Hummingbird © Skye Haas



Rufous Hummingbird © Skye Haas

Speaking of ruddy hues, another highlight was the much-anticipated appearance of a pair of Ruddy Ground Doves, a species common in the American tropics, but irregular north of the Mexican border. This winter, the Paton Center was one of very few places in the U.S. where one stood a chance of seeing this small tropical dove, and we were able to study both male and female as they walked

around with a flock of related Inca Doves and a Common Ground Dove.



Ruddy Ground-Dove © Skye Haas

An afternoon drive through the Sonoita grasslands produced sightings of Brewer's and Vesper Sparrows, Horned Larks, and Chihuahuan Meadowlark, but the highlight was the herd of Pronghorn close to the road that we stopped to look at. On the next day, our first birding destination was Whitewater Draw, with its thousands of Sandhill Cranes and numerous waterfowl, but we began adding life birds for many before we got there. On a stop to admire a Peregrine Falcon perched on a power pole, we were delighted to hear the distinctive fast-paced song of a Bendire's Thrasher, which we were able to get good scope looks at. A stop for a perched white-chested raptor proved that it was not "just another Red-tailed Hawk" but a light morph Ferruginous Hawk, which showed nicely as it took to the air and circled around numerous times.



Ferruginous Hawk © Skye Haas

Once arriving at Whitewater Draw, we found our first Cinnamon Teals amongst the numerous Green-winged and Blue-winged Teals and Northern Shovelers. A Mexican Duck allowed for comparison with its close relative, the Mallard. We were able to pluck a few Ross's Geese out from the flock of over 100 Snow Geese. Then it was off to our final venue, the tiny hamlet of Portal, nestled along the South Fork of Cave Creek Canyon in the Chiricahua mountains. We began our birding with a visit to a feeding station just down the road from our lodging location before dinner. Not seen on every winter tour of Arizona, a beautiful male Elegant Trogon was a highlight of our visit to Portal. All of the tour participants got to see it well before it flew out of the orange-berried pyracantha bush it had been visiting.



Elegant Trogon © Skye Haas

We saw many other species in and around Portal including Hutton's Vireo, Bushtits, Arizona Woodpecker, Juniper Titmouse, Crissal Thrasher, and the two largest U.S. hummingbirds -- the Rivoli's (formerly called Magnificent) Hummingbird and the recently renamed Blue-throated Mountain-gem.



Rivoli's Hummingbird © Skye Haas

A Painted Redstart unexpectedly took a break from its usual frenetic schedule to perch long enough for everybody to get a great spotting scope look! Mammal highlights around feeding stations included Apache Fox Squirrels, adorable Cliff Chipmunks and a herd of javelinas.



Painted Redstart © Skye Haas

Our last birding day began with a visit to the grasslands just below Portal where we saw Scaled Quail and a perched Prairie Falcon. On our drive back to Tucson we stopped at the Twin Lakes Golf Course and adjoining sewage pond known as Lake Cochise in Willcox. Here we got great looks at a Wilson's Snipe and a variety of ducks including a large flock of American Wigeon, but the rarest bird of the trip was a shocking first southeast Arizona record (and third state record overall) of Little Gull! This most unexpected rarity, a primarily European species, made for an exciting capper for the tour!



Little Gull © Skye Haas



Group photo 2024

[Arizona in Winter birding tour species list (Jan 30 - Feb 7, 2024)]