



Arizona in Winter Trip Report 2023 (combined)

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Our winter birding tours of Southeastern Arizona took us through the Sonoran Desert near Tucson, the Santa Rita Mountains, the riparian lowlands of the Santa Cruz River watershed, and the wilds of the Chiricahua Mountains, producing a combined total of over 169 bird species! The tours began at a city park in Tucson a short distance from our hotel, where we found a diverse assortment of birds including the first of many flashy Vermilion Flycatchers, Western Bluebirds, and a locally rare winter visitor, a cooperative Lewis's Woodpecker. Along with a varied assortment of herons and waterfowl at the ponds were several Neotropical Cormorants that allowed a close approach. We then pulled ourselves away and headed to wilder country on the outskirts of Tucson, trading the bird-rich urban park for the equally bird-rich Sonoran Desert, with its otherworldly landscape dominated by the towering forms of the iconic saguaro cactus. This arid yet surprisingly lush landscape, where temperatures seldom dip below freezing, introduced us to Gila Woodpeckers, Cactus Wrens, Black-throated Sparrows, Phainopeplas and a family group of four Harris's Hawks. A cottonwood grove along a running stream produced one of the best birds of the tour- a handsome Rufous-backed Robin that foraged out in the open!



Rufous-backed Robin © Lori Mainland

Then it was on to a desert park on the outskirts of Green Valley to be entertained by repeated looks at our first hummingbirds -- the tiny and delightful purple-gorgeted Costa's Hummingbird, and the bright green and turquoise Broad-billed Hummingbird. Curve-billed Thrashers and Gambel's Quail showed well and the only Rufous-winged Sparrow and Plumbeous Vireo of the tour were observed here.



Costa's Hummingbird © Robert Scheer



Curve-billed Thrasher © Robert Scheer

Our next lodging base in Green Valley put us within easy range of the Santa Rita Mountains, one of the "Sky Island" ranges -- a term used to describe a group of isolated high mountains rising improbably out of the surrounding flatter desert country. We spent a day in Madera Canyon, a lushly vegetated jewel that is home to flora and fauna akin to the nearby Sierra Madre of northwest Mexico. This famous birding destination is lined with lovely Arizona sycamore trees from our first access point at the mesquite dominated habitat at Proctor Road to the higher elevation forest of oak and alligator bark juniper at the end of the road. We divided our time between the very active feeding station at the famed Santa Rita Lodge, a must-visit spot for any birder, and the trail that follows Madera Creek. Mexican Jays and the clownishly costumed Acorn Woodpeckers were all over, and we also got great looks at colorful Townsend's Warblers, stunning Painted Redstarts, and ridiculously cute Bridled Titmice. The large and magnificent Rivoli's Hummingbird showed itself at the lodge's feeders, as did other Sierra Madrean specialties such as the Arizona Woodpecker and Yellow-eyed Junco.



Townsend's Warbler © Robert Scheer



Painted Redstart © Robert Scheer

On our way south from Green Valley we visited Montosa Canyon where we enjoyed views of Verdin, Spotted and Canyon Towhees, and Townsend's Solitaire.



Abert's Towhee © Lori Mainland

After getting a taste of the remote Atascosa highlands by birding Pena Blanca Canyon, where we observed Common Ground-Dove, Hutton's Vireo, Gray Flycatcher, and colorful Lark Sparrows mixed in with a flock of Chipping Sparrows numbering in the hundreds, we headed to our next lodging base in the friendly and funky town of Patagonia. The centerpiece of our stay here is the Paton Center for Hummingbirds, a former private residence that had opened its doors to visiting birders and is now owned by Tucson Audubon. In addition to Broad-billed and Anna's Hummingbirds, we had excellent looks here at the species that put this site on the birding map, the stunning Violet-crowned Hummingbird, with its gleaming white underside, bright red bill and a crown that shines shockingly vibrant purple when viewed from just the right angle. Another highlight here was a rare over-wintering Gray Hawk sharing the skies with the more expected Black Vultures. A male Williamson's Sapsucker that had taken up residence right outside our hotel was a nice after-breakfast treat. One evening we were treated to a large flock of Cassin's Kingbirds gathering in the town square for an evening roost. Our explorations of the extensive grasslands around Patagonia and the open country on the way to our next destination produced Chestnut-collared Longspurs, Loggerhead Shrikes, the recently split Chihuahuan Meadowlark, and looks at many raptors including Prairie Falcon and Ferruginous Hawk.



Grasslands near Sonoita © Lori Mainland

Not to be missed in winter is the large wetland complex of Whitewater Draw north of the border town of Douglas. The stars of the show here are the 20-30,000 Sandhill Cranes that come into roost every afternoon, a chaotic and almost deafening affair. Other waterbird species abound here, and we were treated to close-up looks at Cinnamon Teals, Ruddy Ducks, and many other duck species. A mixed flock allowed us to compare the field marks of the numerous Snow Geese with several of the rarer Ross's Geese. Anyone wishing to take a break from scanning through flocks of hundreds of waterfowl and cranes could train their eyes on Black and Say's Phoebes and Vermilion Flycatchers foraging for insects from exposed perches along the water's edge.



Vermilion Flycatcher © Robert Scheer

Careful scanning of a nearby woodland provided improbable looks at a Barn Owl roosting in the sunshine, and in nearby brushy habitat we succeeded in finding Brewer's Sparrows, Lark Buntings, and the highly localized Bendire's Thrasher. The grand finale of the tours was our stay in the tiny village of Portal. Set in the mouth of Cave Creek Canyon in the Chiricahua Mountains, the views are spectacular in every direction, with huge red rock spires reaching upwards towards the clouds. The birds here were fantastic, even right outside our lodge's door! Notable species seen in and near town included Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Crissal Thrasher, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Black-throated Sparrow, Spotted, Canyon, and Green-tailed Towhees, Pyrrhuloxia, and a rare wintering Blue Grosbeak.



Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay © Lori Mainland

It was an irruption year for such montane species as Townsend's Solitaire, Cassin's Finch and Evening Grosbeak, all of which we saw and enjoyed around Portal. A highlight of the tour for all was the opportunity for repeated looks at the large and dramatic Blue-throated Mountain-Gem, the largest hummingbird native to North America, some of which reside in the Portal area year-round. The temperatures higher up the mountains still leaned towards winter, but that didn't matter to the pair of Mexican Chickadees we discovered on the edge of the fir zone, or to the Juniper Titmice lower down in the tiny village of Paradise. And an exciting find before leaving Portal was a roosting Western Screech snoozing away in its sunny cavity in a mighty sycamore tree! Without a doubt it had been a fantastic pair of tours and many participants remarked how this wouldn't be their last visit to the Sky Islands of Arizona.



Mexican Chickadee © Robert Scheer