



Arizona in Winter Trip Report (Jan 22-30, 2025)

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On our first day of the tour we visited a number of lowland habitats, beginning with the spectacular Sonoran Desert landscape of Tucson Mountain Park and Saguaro National Park, both dominated by the iconic saguaro cactus. Here we started to gain familiarity with some of the desert birds that would become old friends over the course of the tour such as Gila Woodpecker, Black-throated Sparrow, and Phainopepla. One of our main target birds in this habitat was the range-restricted Gilded Flicker, and we did manage to find one.



Phainopepla © Jan Kool



Birding in the Sonoran Desert © Louie Dombroski

As we headed north from this enchanted landscape, the saguaros and other cacti began to thin out as we entered irrigated agricultural country. Here we encountered our first Vermilion Flycatcher, an adult male at its brilliant best, and Say's Phoebe, with its delicate peach-colored belly. Two Mountain Bluebirds perching along the roadside were a special addition. A few Burrowing Owls, relocated from sites under suburban development around Tucson, stood outside their human constructed

burrows.

While heading back toward Tucson, we stopped at a park on the outskirts of the city for lunch, where we encountered a diverse array of species, including our first Abert's Towhee, a signature bird of desert oases in southeast Arizona. A lake held a wintering adult Snow Goose among a few domesticated geese and ducks as well as some wild Northern Shovelers, Ruddy Ducks, Pied-billed Grebes and a flotilla of American Coots. A Vermilion Flycatcher kept posing for photos in the outer edges of a mesquite, while a Black-throated Gray Warbler foraged in the canopy.



Vermillion Flycatcher © Jan Kool

On our way to our hotel in Green Valley we made an afternoon stop at some of the last saguaro desert we would pass through to seek better looks at a Gilded Flicker. We got glimpses of a few and were finally able to get one in the scope, and eventually it flew toward us and right over our heads. Too far and then too close for ideal photographs, but a memorable experience nonetheless. Our second day of birding began with a visit to Desert Meadows Park in Green Valley where we got great looks at males of three species of hummingbirds: Anna's with its awesome combination of red throat and crown, Costa's (like a miniature Anna's with purple replacing the red and sporting long purple sideburns), and Broad-billed with its stunning blue-suffused green plumage and bright red bill. We encountered Gambel's Quail running across the paths and a Green-tailed Towhee visiting a bird bath. We would stop at this park toward evening when we would be greeted by a flock of Lark Sparrows, and an Ash-throated Flycatcher.



Gambel's Quail © Jan Kool

We would spend most of this day in Madera Canyon in the Santa Rita Mountains. Our first stop would be at the Santa Rita Lodge to watch the action at their expansive bird feeding station. Here Acorn Woodpeckers call from the oak trees and Mexican Jays swoop into the platform feeders while Lesser Goldfinches and Pine Siskins work at emptying the thistle tubes. While we were there an Arizona Woodpecker visited the water feature while male and female Hepatic Tanagers sought out suet and peanut butter and Bridled Titmice flew in to snatch sunflower seeds.



Mexican Jay © Jan Kool



Hepatic Tanager © Jan Kool

On the ground, three wintering subspecies of Dark-eyed Junco (Oregon, Pink-sided and Gray-headed) were joined by a Yellow-eyed Junco, a sought after Sierra Madrean specialty that nests higher up the mountain. The sight of a Rivoli's Hummingbird dashing into a sugar water feeder brought gasps from those seeing one for the first time, either from its large size or the unexpected flash of emerald green and purple on its head.



Yellow-eyed Junco © Jan Kool

Elsewhere in the canyon we hiked along the creekside trail shaded by alligator bark junipers,

Arizona sycamores and several species of evergreen oaks, encountering such bird species as Red-naped Sapsucker, "Red-shafted" Northern Flicker, Hermit Thrush, Brown Creeper, Western Bluebird and Townsend's Warbler.

We began the next morning's birding at the Canoa Ranch Conservation Park where we were delighted to see a Virginia Rail venturing out into the open at the edge of a pond, and gain more experience with Verdins, Pyrrhuloxias, and Costa's Hummingbirds. Sparrows were a main focus here, and we were able to study twelve species. The most numerous of these, a bit unexpectedly, was the over-sized sparrow that goes by the name of Lark Bunting, present in flocks of as many as one hundred. They even outnumbered the White-crowned Sparrows, which was the commonest sparrow for the entire tour. Searching through a mixed species sparrow flock of on the ground, we found one that bore a superficial resemblance to a juvenile Chipping or White-crowned Sparrow, but under closer inspection proved to be a Rufous-winged Sparrow, a species with a very limited range making it a high priority target.



Pyrrhuloxia © Jan Kool



Lark Buntings © Jan Kool

Brewer's Sparrow, a rather pale species with subtle markings proved to be an identification challenge, but we got lots of practice here, and participants were calling them out correctly when we encountered them on the remainder of the tour. Some of the sparrows at Canoa were easier on our eyes and brains, with boldly patterned Lark Sparrows and Black-throated Sparrows and colorful Green-tailed Towhees among the species we got great looks at. By far the most memorable part of the trip to Canoa Ranch was our close encounter with a Greater Roadrunner that appeared on the trail just ahead of us as we were getting ready to leave, giving us great looks as it nonchalantly went about its business.



Green-tailed Towhee © Jan Kool



Greater Roadrunner © Jan Kool

We stopped at a small sewage pond that held a few locally rare waterfowl, adding Ross's Goose, Greater Scaup and Hooded Merganser to our trip list. We searched unsuccessfully for a Rufous-backed Robin along a trail that follows the Santa Cruz River, but had to settle for sightings of Western Bluebird, Vermilion Flycatcher, Say's Phoebe and Loggerhead Shrike. We stopped for lunch at a park near Tumacacori known to attract Lawrence's Goldfinches in some winters. Though this winter had not been a particularly good one for this irruptive species, a patient vigil at a fountain at this site paid off with visits by a small flock of this unusual finch, including one stunning male. While we waited and hoped for the goldfinches to appear we got great looks at a flock of Lark Sparrows, a Plumbeous Vireo and a handsome adult male Black-throated Gray Warbler, and got buzzed a few times by a White-throated Swift.



Lawrence's Goldfinch © Jan Kool

We began our first morning in Patagonia by stepping out of our hotel and birding in the town park before breakfast, enjoying sightings of several Eurasian Collared-Doves, a flock of Black Vultures spreading their wings to warm up in the morning sun, American Robins flying overhead and four species of woodpecker, including Red-naped Sapsucker and "Red-shafted" Northern Flicker.



Red-naped Sapsucker © Jan Kool

Most of the day was spent at the Tucson Bird Alliance's Paton Center for Hummingbirds, where we saw the rare Violet-crowned Hummingbird, a largish hummer with a red bill and immaculate white

underparts, and a shockingly bright violet crown -- if you're lucky enough to see it at just the right angle. The Paton Center has so many birds besides hummers! Highlights included the rare southwestern race of Eastern Bluebird, sometimes called Azure Bluebird due to its slightly paler color. We also saw a superficially similar species with a pale blue and orange pattern, but quite unrelated -- the gorgeous Lazuli Bunting. Continuing with the blue theme, the group was treated to a male Indigo Bunting, familiar to many eastern birders but a rare winter visitor in Arizona.



Lazuli Bunting © Jan Kool



Indigo Bunting © Jan Kool

We also paid a brief visit to a nearby preserve where yet another Rufous-backed Robin stood us up, and drove a few miles into the forested foothills of the Patagonia Mountains, where we were treated to vibrant males of Western Bluebird and Pyrrhuloxia. The biggest treat on this side trip was the sight of a stunning Painted Redstart feeding at sap wells drilled into an oak branch by a Red-naped Sapsucker, and watching the sapsucker repeatedly chase off the redstart, only to have it return to feast on the sap and the small insects it attracted.



Painted Redstart © Jan Kool

The next morning we left Patagonia for the town of Portal in the Chiricahua Mountains. Along the way we stopped at a few spots in the vast grasslands that stretch between the sky island mountain ranges. We managed to obtain sightings of such species as Chihuahuan Meadowlark, Mountain Bluebird, Horned Lark, Chestnut-collared Longspur and Baird's Sparrow.

One of our destinations on this day was Whitewater Draw, where marshy ponds and an expanse of shallow water attract numerous waterfowl species and even a few shorebirds, but the main attraction is the sight of flocks of thousands of Sandhill Cranes. We had lunch here, serenaded by the trumpeting calls of the cranes. Typically a flock of Snow Geese is seen here close enough that we spend time looking through them in hopes of finding a diminutive Ross's Goose or two (or a dozen), but on this visit the Snow Goose flock was too distant, so we felt lucky that we had encountered individuals of both of these goose species at close range earlier on the tour. Flycatchers abound at Whitewater Draw, and we had close looks at both Black and Say's Phoebes as well as Vermilion Flycatchers. Several American Pipits offered great views at close range.



Sandhill Cranes © Jan Kool

The little hamlet of Portal is one of the "birdiest" towns in the country and some residents who feed birds have opened their yards to share this bounty with the visiting birding public. In addition to in-your-face views of many by now familiar species such as Gambel's Quail, Cactus Wren, Lesser Goldfinch, and Verdin, we added a few more Arizona specialties. One of the most exciting was the remaining hummingbird on everybody's want list, the flashy Blue-throated Mountain-Gem. This large and vocal species often made lightning-quick visits to feeders, but eventually all got to see one perched at length. Having seen so many Mexican Jays up to this point on the tour (and we continued to see them during our time in the Chiricahuas), we easily recognized that the jays coming into the feeders in the scrubbiest habitat closest to the town of Portal were more boldly patterned -- they were Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays. Familiar as we were by now with Curve-billed Thrashers, we were prepared for the even "curvier"-billed Crissal Thrasher that showed up repeatedly at a bird bath at one of the feeding stations.

But all of our birding time in this fantastic area wasn't spent sitting down -- we took some pleasant short hikes while we found cool birds in some of the most spectacular scenery that Arizona has to offer. The South Fork of Cave Creek Canyon flows intermittently below towering Apache Pines and Arizona Cypress trees and much taller granite rock formations, making a splendid backdrop for birding. Here we saw numerous Spotted Towhees and an unexpected Black-chinned Sparrow, and were lucky to encounter the range-restricted "Red-backed" subspecies of Dark-eyed Junco. Colorful Western Bluebirds drinking from puddles in the rocky creek bed made for a memorable vision. A trip into the chaparral country on the road to the little town of Paradise produced a Townsend's Solitaire perched cooperatively on a snag for us; this had not been a good winter for this irruptive species, and even local birders were having a hard time finding them, so we were lucky to get good scope looks at this handsome thrush.



Red-backed Dark-eyed Junco © Jan Kool

We saw a few even more unexpected species during our time in and around Portal. An adult male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, a regular but rare visitor from the east, was seen chasing around a few of the regularly occurring and closely related Red-naped Sapsuckers. But by far our most exciting find was a stunning adult male Elegant Trogon -- though we were in prime breeding habitat for this species, they are rare here at this time of year, and while one was known to be roaming the canyon this winter, it was going to take some luck for us to see it. That luck was on our side as we watched this most spectacular bird for several minutes as it sallied out from perches to hover-pluck juniper berries and even descended to the ground to get a quick drink from a puddle.



After our last morning in the Chiricahuas we reluctantly headed back toward Tucson -- but not without making some stops to see more great birds! We first stopped in the small town of Rodeo, New Mexico to search for a Rufous-backed Robin, but struck out yet again. But we had good looks at another Greater Roadrunner and more Pyrrhuloxias, and an unexpected bonus in the form of a Sage Thrasher. We then drove through some agricultural country where we encountered several new species, including vocalizing Chihuahuan Ravens, a Bendire's Thrasher looking much like a tawnier shorter-billed version of a Curve-billed Thrasher, and a few Sagebrush Sparrows, the first of which teased us by running around on the road ahead of us, identifiable by its silhouette and behavior, flipping its long tail around and running fast for a stretch, then stopping abruptly like a tiny roadrunner. (We would later delight in seeing one perched on a fence where we could study its plumage.

Raptors were a main highlight here. We had small numbers of Red-tailed Hawk, Northern Harrier and American Kestrel, but the most numerous raptor here proved to be Ferruginous Hawk, with no fewer than four being spotted! The first two we saw were perched at some distance, but we got some great closer looks at a few beautiful adults of this species in flight. An examination through the scope of a large bird perched on a distant fence post proved it to be a Golden Eagle. We all enjoyed watching it, far away though it was, as ravens dive-bombed it in an effort to get it to move on. Our last birding stop was in Willcox where the Twin Lakes Golf Course and the adjacent "Lake Cochise" (actually more like a giant sewage pond) allowed us more looks at several duck species, including several Mexican Ducks and yet more thousands of Sandhill Cranes. A somewhat unexpected flock of Chestnut-collared Longspurs proved flightly, but the ten species of sparrow here were more cooperative. Among these was a pair of normally secretive Swamp Sparrows foraging together in the open at the edge of the parking lot. One streaky little sparrow that perched up near the top of a tall bush required a closer look when it proved not to be an expected species such as Savannah or Vesper Sparrow, but instead had the orange-tinged face and limited narrow breast streaking of a Baird's Sparrow, a species we had seen days earlier but not nearly as well. With that we headed for our farewell dinner in Tucson.

[Arizona in Winter Trip Report \(Jan 22-30, 2025\) eBird list](#)