Eagle-Eye Tours



Arizona in Winter Trip Report (Jan 30 - Feb 7, 2025)

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Just before entering the vans for our first morning's adventure, we stopped to admire a bejeweled male Anna's Hummingbird on our hotel grounds. Then we were off to the cactus-studded hillsides of Tucson Mountain Park and Saguaro National Park to begin our familiarization with some of the desert birds that would become old friends over the course of the tour, such as Black-throated Sparrow, Verdin and Curve-billed Thrasher. We had to stop for several Gila Woodpeckers before we spotted our main target for the morning, the Gilded Flicker, when we were delighted to see an animated pair of this species that is almost entirely restricted to saguaro forests.



Gilded Flicker © Skye Haas



Curve-billed Thrasher © Skye Haas

We then headed north, passing through some agricultural country where our diverse bird list included Black-necked Stilt, Burrowing Owl, White-throated Swift, and Vermilion Flycatcher. Raptors put on a good show with Northern Harriers, Red-tailed Hawks and American Kestrels showing well. A few Loggerhead Shrikes and Say's Phoebes livened up the roadsides. Heading south on our way to our hotel in Green Valley we stopped at a few parks in Tucson where we spotted such

southwestern specialties as Neotropic Cormorant, Cassin's Kingbird and Abert's Towhee. We also enjoyed seeing many wild waterfowl species close up, including Canvasback, Northern Pintail, a rare Wood Duck and one Mexican Duck (formerly considered a subspecies of Mallard in which the male lacks the green head), as they mingled with some domesticated relatives in the park ponds. We enjoyed seeing Western Bluebirds foraging and watched a Sora walk out in the open along a. shoreline while three species of swallow including a Violet-green Swallow made repeated passes overhead.



Wood Duck © Skye Haas



Mexican Duck © Louie Dombroski

We began the next day with a morning visit to a desert park in Green Valley where we enjoyed delightful looks at males of both Costa's and Broad-billed Hummingbirds and had our first looks at Gambel's Quails running comically between displays of Sonoran Desert plants. Then as the warming sun was beginning to make its way over the Santa Rita Mountains to the east, we tore ourselves away and headed up to famed Madera Canyon, where we would spend the rest of the day.



Costa's Hummingbird © Skye Haas

One of our first stops was the Santa Rita Lodge, where we sat transfixed at their splendid feeding tableau as Acorn Woodpeckers and Mexican Jays were in almost constant view in the trees while Yellow-eyed Juncos walked amongst the Wild Turkeys on the ground beneath. Visitors to the feeders included Arizona Woodpeckers, Bridled Titmice and Hepatic Tanagers, and occasionally an impressively large Rivoli's Hummingbird would visit one of sugar water feeders or perch obligingly in a nearby oak or juniper.



Rivoli's Hummingbird © Skye Haas



Arizona Woodpecker © Skye Haas

Hiking different sections of the trail along Madera Creek we encountered Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Hutton's Vireo, Canyon Towhee and a rare wintering Greater Pewee. Our biggest prize was a spectacular male Elegant Trogon, one of the most sought-after of North American birds and always a bonus species on a winter tour, since most individuals depart Arizona in the fall.



Elegant Trogon © Skye Haas

We began the next morning's birding at Canoa Ranch Conservation Park where soon after proceeding on a wide trail, we froze in our tracks as a Greater Roadrunner greeted us and weaved its way tamely through an obstacle course of Eagle-Eye tour participants. After that surreal experience it was time to study sparrows. Eventually everyone caught on that this small dusty-looking sparrow with no eye-catching field marks was another Brewer's Sparrow, just like the last one we'd seen and the one before. Lark Buntings, in their streaky winter plumage that exposes their true identity as over-sized sparrows, were (somewhat surprisingly) the most numerous species, with White-crowned Sparrows a close second. We discussed how to tell Savannah and Vesper Sparrows apart, though the lesson sometimes got side-tracked by a colorful Pyrrhuloxia or a boldly patterned Black-throated Sparrow. Before we left we checked the edge of a pond where we got good scope views of a Virginia Rail.



Pyrrhuloxia © Skye Haas

After a brief stop at a small sewage pond to pick up a Greater Scaup and Red-breasted Merganser, uncommon winter visitors to Arizona, we headed to the Anza Trail along the Santa Cruz River near the town of Tubac. Luck was on our side as we soon saw our main target, a Rufous-backed Robin, and then a second one, high in a Fremont cottonwood tree. A little patience paid off as these colorful and unusually patterned robins descended to the ground to get a drink, giving nice views before disappearing into the brush.



Rufous-backed Robin © Skye Haas

Then it was off to Patagonia Lake State Park for a picnic lunch . . . and more birding. The Visitor Center feeders attracted a small flock of delicate Inca Doves and afforded us close-up looks at Gila and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers. A Violet-crowned Hummingbird, our fifth hummer species of the trip, stunned us with its striking combination of glaring white underparts and bright red bill and teased us with hints of its namesake iridescent purple crown as it paid several visits to feeders, often perching nearby afterwards. Patagonia Lake held numerous waterbird species. Eared Grebes and Ruddy Ducks showed nicely, but much more unusual for Arizona was the presence of two wintering loons, one Common Loon and one Red-throated Loon. We were able to view them both through spotting scopes; though distant the looks were satisfying -- it helped that they were sometimes together in the same field of view for a comparison of their relative size, shape and plumage. Our main birding destination while based in the delightful town of Patagonia was the Tucson Bird Alliance's Paton Center for Hummingbirds. We spent an entire morning there, seeing several new species for the trip including Plumbeous Vireo, Fox Sparrow and Lazuli Bunting. Three species of towhees (Abert's, Canyon and Green-tailed) sought shelter in the several brush piles on the grounds. We were treated to a small flock of the enigmatic southwestern subspecies of Eastern Bluebird, which is sometimes called Azure Bluebird.



(Azure) Eastern Bluebird © Skye Haas

We took a short drive into the foothills of the Patagonia Mountains where we had great looks at Red-naped Sapsuckers and Western Bluebirds, but a rare and unprecedented wintering Buff-breasted Flycatcher eluded us. Some javelinas foraging not far from the road were worth a stop on our way back into town. During a late afternoon run into the vast grasslands outside of Patagonia, we added our third bluebird species, when we spotted a flock of Mountain Bluebirds along the road. We were witness to a large mixed murmurating flock of Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Brown-headed Cowbirds preparing to roost and added Chihuahuan Meadowlark to our trip list. At another spot we were able to pick out some Thick-billed Longspurs among the more numerous Horned Larks. We opted for a little more grassland birding the next morning as we headed toward our next destination. We watched a flock of Chestnut-collared Longspurs descend on a cattle pond, but they were very flighty and didn't linger. Some Mountain Bluebirds proved more cooperative and we also got great looks at a herd of Pronghorns.



Pronghorns © Skye Haas

Our main birding stop on this day was Whitewater Draw, where thousands of Sandhill Cranes congregate along with many waterfowl species. The cranes did not disappoint and we saw nine species of ducks, including a Cinnamon Teal, over 20 Mexican Ducks and an out-of-place Common Merganser. We plucked a diminutive Ross's Goose out of a flock of over a hundred Snow Geese.



Ross's Goose with Snow Geese © Skye Haas

Our destination for the next two nights was the tiny town of Portal nestled in the foothills of the Chiricahua Mountains. The town itself is one of the "birdiest" in the country, and the list of birds we

saw within walking distance of our lodging was impressive. In addition to in-your-face views of many species we were now familiar with, such as Gambel's Quail, Cactus Wren, Lesser Goldfinch, and Verdin, we added several Arizona specialties. Among these were a locally rare Rufous-winged Sparrow modestly revealing its subtle field marks to us as it hopped around on the ground amongst more boldly patterned Black-throated and White-crowned Sparrows. With a lot of Mexican Jays under our belt, we were easily able to distinguish between them and the Woodhouse's Scrub Jays that came into feed. We were awestruck to see a normally skulky Crissal Thrasher repeatedly fly up to hanging seed feeders and to a bird bath to eat and drink completely in the open.



Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay © Skye Haas

We had great experiences with our sixth hummingbird species of the trip, the Blue-throated Mountain-Gem. We saw them zip into feeders, flashing their tails open revealing distinctive white corner patches; we saw a male standing guard over its domain, chasing away any other Mountain-gems that invaded its territory; and we saw one dive-bombing an Acorn Woodpecker perched atop a snag. Short hikes along the scenic South Fork of Cave Creek Canyon underneath tall Apache Pines and Arizona Cypresses and much taller granite rock formations turned up a secretive male Williamson's Sapsucker and an unexpected veritable flock of Black-chinned Sparrows. Olive Warblers teased us with their call notes from high in the pines, but were too busy to pose for photos or even good views. Spotted Towhees were more eager to show off their handsomely patterned plumage.



Seeking out birds in the Chiricahua Mountains © Louie Dombroski



Williamson's Sapsucker © Skye Haas

Finally, we had to put the Chiricahuas into the rear-view mirror and began the trip back to Tucson, but our birding was far from over. We drove through some agricultural country that abounded with birds including several new species for the trip. At one stop a Sagebrush Sparrow kept darting out into the open like a miniature roadrunner and eventually everyone got decent looks. There was also an actual Greater Roadrunner, the third one of the trip. Western Meadowlarks and Brewer's

Blackbirds abounded, and we determined that at least some of the ravens we saw were Chihuahuan Ravens. A Bendire's Thrasher, like a tawnier short-billed version of a Curve-billed Thrasher, perched on a fence along the road. It was the raptors that really stole the show here though. American Kestrels showed nicely, though we couldn't say the same for the Peregrine Falcon that gave one brief good look before zipping away. We had better luck with the Prairie Falcon we found perched on a wooden pole that put on a show by dive bombing a ground perching Northern Harrier that inexplicably brought on the falcon's ire. We got great in flight looks at light morph Ferruginous Hawks and were very lucky to encounter a rare dark morph adult of this species, which we saw well both perched and in flight.



Dark morph Ferruginous Hawk © Skye Haas

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, yet another view of a Sora, and another assemblage of thousands of Sandhill Cranes. We got close looks at Yellow-headed Blackbirds and a Great Egret before driving the final stretch to Tucson, where the last species for the trip, a pair of Harris's Hawks, flew over the road in front of us.



Surveying a flock of Sandhill Cranes at Wilcox © Louie Dombroski

Arizona in Winter eBird list (Jan 30 - Feb 7, 2025)