



Arizona in Winter Trip Report Nov 2023

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Guides: Skye Haas and Kyle Schanta This tour seemed to fly by, which is always an indicator of how much fun people are having on an outing. Yet at the same time, like any action-packed, bird-filled tour, the trip quickly dissolved into this element of timelessness, where one could scarcely believe that we had been looking at a particularly good bird such as a Violet-crowned Hummingbird, just yesterday morning!



Violet-crowned Hummingbird © Skye Haas

The weather was simply delightful, warmer than typical at this time of year, yet never dipping into something that one would call uncomfortably hot; what I found to be particularly fantastic was the lack of wind, sometimes the breeze can blow a bit strong in these parts hampering the birding and that was never an issue. If there was any difficulty to the tour, it was that the fabled summer monsoons had not happened last summer (as most of the continent was gripped by an epic heat wave), so the countryside was much drier and devoid of food resources than normal. What this meant for us is birds were oddly concentrated in favorable locations as opposed to more evenly distributed across the countryside. Which in the end worked out great for us because while we would have to work it a bit to find a good gathering of birds, once found, they were pretty tied to that resource and allowed for great viewing. And of course when all of our travels are set against the backdrop that is the incredible Arizona landscape, there's never a stale moment!



Birding in Arizona © Skye Haas

We started our adventure in the desert town of Tucson. Surrounded by the Sonoran Desert with its iconic saguaro cactus, we began our birding at the absolutely stunning overlook that is Gate's Pass, which is a high rocky ridge that separates the town from Saguaro National Park. Here as the morning sun warmed the rocky hills we started to find our first birds of the trip; adorable little Black-tailed Gnatcatchers, confiding Rock Wrens, immaculate Black-throated Sparrows and after a bit of searching, our morning target, the range-restricted Gilded Flicker!



Black-throated Sparrow © Skye Haas

A “quick” bathroom stop ended up netting a bunch of birds like the silky Phainopepla, the thrasher-like Cactus Wren and our first Lesser Goldfinches and Canyon Towhees. We then headed back into town to grab some sandwiches to picnic and bird at Reid Park, a downtown urban oasis. I always enjoy this place, and as one birds here, there are families picnicking, kids playing sports, people stretching their legs in this extensive park. A couple of duck ponds were filled to the brim with both domestic cultivars as well as lots of wintering waterfowl like American Wigeon, Ring-neck Ducks and even a smart-looking male Wood Duck. “Audubon’s” Yellow-rumped Warblers were in every tree and everytime one turned around, there was ANOTHER Vermilion Flycatcher! We pulled out a few goodies as well; a couple Cassin’s Kingbirds were present as well as a Summer Tanager.



Cassin's Kingbird © Skye Haas

Much to the chagrin of a bunch of easterners hungry for western birds, we had a locally rare Yellow-bellied Sapsucker; I had to assure folks that we would get western sapsuckers soon enough. Indeed it was time to leave Tucson behind and drive down to Green Valley so we could start exploring the wilds of the Santa Rita Mountains the next day.



Pyroluxiua © Skye Haas



We spent the next morning in the enchanting Madera Canyon. For most, it was their first experience in this Mexican mountain woodland habitat and for the next few hours the lifers flowed for people. We started out at the base of the canyon in the scrub-brush where we had a pair of Rufous-winged Sparrows, another Sonoran specialty. We then settled in for a prolonged session at the Santa Rita Lodge where there is a first rate feeding station setup. Here we had a plethora of birds like Bridled Titmouse, Townsend's Warbler, Acorn and Arizona Woodpeckers, Mexican Jays, lots of juncos, the strange Yellow-eyed Junco, as well as a nice selection of western Slate-colored Junco subspecies like Pink-sided, Oregon and Gray-headed. And there were hummingbirds! Among the several Anna's Hummingbirds, we plucked out a Broad-tailed and a Rufous Hummingbird, and every so often a giant Magnificent Hummingbird would come flying in.



Townsend's Warbler © Skye Haas



Rufous Hummingbird © Skye Haas



Coati © Skye Haas



Magnificent Hummingbird © Skye Haas

We later checked out nearby Montosa Canyon, but as beautiful as it was, the canyon was pretty quiet that afternoon so we cut it short and finished up our day at a little park in Green Valley where we saw our only Costa's Hummingbirds of the tour.



Costa's Hummingbird © Skye Haas

The next day we started to work our way along the Santa Cruz River southward on our way to Patagonia. The riparian zone along the river had some neat new additions to our trip list like Abert's Towhee, Gray Flycatcher and Lark Sparrow. We had picnic lunch at Patagonia Lake State Park

which gave us a few waterbirds we wouldn't see again like Ring-billed Gull and Osprey (both surprisingly good birds on a winter tour!).



Lark Sparrow © Skye Haas

Back on the road again, some fast fliers along some roadside cliffs turned out to be a flock of White-throated Swifts! We checked into our hotel, and then after a quick turnaround, were back out the door to start exploring the vast Sonoita Grasslands. In addition to some quality western scenery, we had flocks of Horned Larks that held some Thick-billed Longspurs in it. Elsewhere we were treated to point blank looks of Grasshopper Sparrows and Chihuahuan Meadowlarks.



Grasshopper Sparrow © Skye Haas

We awoke in the delightfully quaint town of Patagonia where the birding begins the moment one steps out the door to Acorn Woodpeckers burying their stash into the utility poles and Cassin's Kingbirds sitting in the town square. After a fantastic breakfast at the little shop next to the inn, we then headed to the nearby Paton Center for Hummingbird Excellence for the morning. This birding sanctuary is run by Tucson Audubon and has restored an old homestead and some surrounding land into a wildlife paradise. In no small part due to the feeding stations, water features and extensive native plantings we had some of our best birding of the trip here with flocks of sparrows and doves holding all kinds of goodies within. We saw several Green-tailed Towhees here, along with a few Violet-crowned Hummingbirds and a Wilson's Warbler. But the real prize here was a legitimate rare bird for the US, a Ruddy Ground-Dove had taken up residence with the flock of Inca Doves and put on quite the show for us!



Ruddy Ground Dove © Skye Haas

For the final chapter of this already fantastic tour, we headed eastward towards the Chiricahua Mountains and the tiny village of Portal. Along the way we stopped in the San Simon Valley where a huge gathering of Sandhill Cranes roost. Water levels were low this winter so the flocks were only a couple thousand as opposed to the more typical tens of thousands. But still it is always a sight to behold that many birds at once. Lots of waterfowl had gathered there like Snow Geese, Mexican Ducks and Northern Pintail. In the brushy farmland nearby we saw some great birds like Bendire's Thrasher and White-tailed Kite.



Sandhill Cranes © Skye Haas

The village of Portal sits at the mouth of Cave Creek Canyon, one of the most gorgeous wild areas in all the American southwest. Birding right in the village is fantastic too, as many of the locals have bird feeders and welcome birders to their yards. Right within our first hour of being there we saw our first Gambel's Quail, Pyrrhuloxia and even a Blue-throated Mountain-Gem, the largest hummingbird in the US! We didn't even start the vans the next morning, but instead set out on foot to wander the town birding for a couple hours, and certainly it paid off with lots of birds including Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Spotted Towhee and at long last a cooperative Painted Redstart for the group. We only then started heading up into the mountains to some higher elevations to try for a different suite of birds than what we have been seeing. Not long into the drive, I heard some scurrying into the brush off the bouncy mountain road; we paused and much to everyone's delight there was a flock of Montezuma Quail! Further up Western Bluebirds, Band-tailed Pigeons and Steller's Jays were spotted. As we got up to 8000 feet into the fir forest, finches started to appear. Mostly Pine Siskins, but some pretty hefty flocks of Red Crossbills and even a pair of locally rare Purple Finches were discovered. Finally, at the end of the road, we were high enough that everyone had to put on their heaviest jackets to eat a picnic lunch. But by lingering here to eat, it gave us the time we needed to have Pygmy Nuthatches and Mexican Chickadees appear! For our final morning, again, we set out by foot, but this time up into the desert scrub to look for the highly localized Crissal Thrasher. These birds can be quite difficult to turn up, but thankfully not today, and the group got a good look at this normally skulky species. We then headed up to take a walk through the Cave Creek Canyon. It was a bit on the quiet side, a few sapsuckers and an Arizona Woodpecker were some of our only sightings, but the resplendent red rock canyon walls framed with pine and golden leaved sycamores made for our prettiest walk of the whole trip. We then checked out of the lodge after lunch to make the long drive back to Tucson, but on the way back, we had one final birding stop to make at Lake Wilcox, a naturalized water treatment pond. This provided one last birding bonanza where we got several more species to finish the trip on; birds like Scaled Quail, Cinnamon Teal, Western Grebe, American Avocet and at long last a cooperative pair of Chihuahuan Ravens. With that, we could call the trip a complete success and rolled back into Tucson for a final dinner and farewell!



Scaled Quail © Skye Haas