



Arizona in Winter Trip Report (Nov 8-16, 2024)

[Link: Arizona in Winter Trip Report \(Nov 8-16, 2024\)](#)

We began the tour by taking a winding road through prime Sonoran Desert habitat to Gates Pass in the mountains just west of Tucson, entering an otherworldly landscape dominated by the iconic saguaro cactus. As the morning sun rose over the mountains, we concentrated on finding the range-restricted Gilded Flicker here, and did eventually track one down. Along the way we encountered other desert birds such as Gila Woodpecker, Curve-billed Thrasher, Black-throated Sparrow, and Cactus Wren. A Rock Wren played hide and seek on a rocky hillside, before eventually paying us a visit in the parking lot!



Curve-billed Thrasher © Tony Nastase

We made a few other stops in this habitat, encountering our first *Pyrrhuloxia* of the tour and a cooperative *Phainopepla*. We got our first taste of southeast Arizona hummingbird magic with sightings of Anna's and Costa's Hummingbirds.



Phainopepla © Tony Nastase



Costa's Hummingbird © Moti Hodis

We next drove through some agricultural country to the north, spotting Burrowing Owls, both Black and Say's Phoebes, and our first Greater Roadrunner of the tour. A retaining pond held a late lingering White-faced Ibis and a female Vermilion Flycatcher.



Black Phoebe © Debbie Ervine

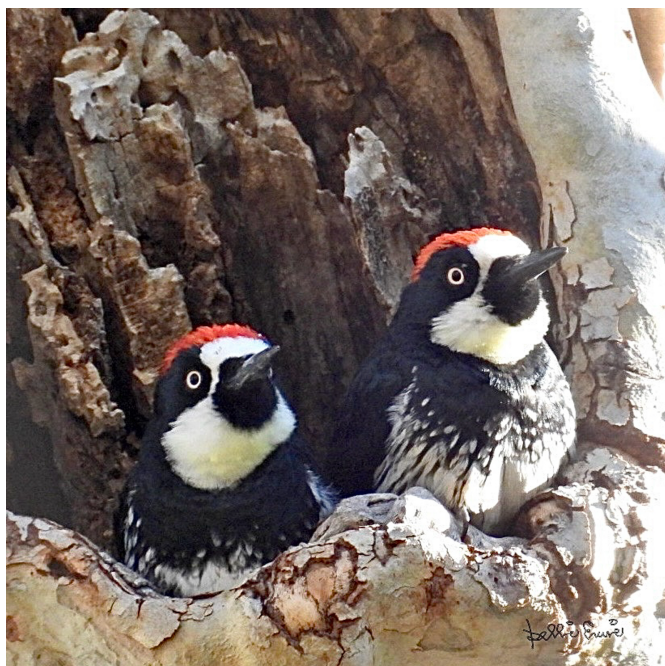
On our way back through Tucson we stopped at a city park for a picnic lunch and saw our first male Vermilion Flycatcher and several other notable southwestern specialties such as Neotropical Cormorant, Abert's Towhee, Bronzed Cowbird, and a lone Inca Dove. At Sweetwater Wetlands we

found a Mexican Duck among an assortment of Mallards and several other dabbling duck species. We were treated to sightings of Cassin's Kingbird, Verdin, Violet-green Swallow and a ridiculously cooperative Orange-crowned Warbler.



Vermilion Flycatcher © Debbie Ervine

We spent the next day in Madera Canyon in the Santa Rita Mountains. Though only a fourteen mile drive from our hotel in Green Valley, the 2000 foot elevation gain put us in an entirely different habitat with steep hillsides dominated by several species of oak trees and alligator bark junipers, with lovely pale-barked Arizona sycamores lining the canyon itself.



Two male Acorn Woodpeckers © Debbie Ervine

Our introduction to the birds of this habitat began at the famed Santa Rita Lodge and its wonderful bird feeding display. A major highlight here was the continuing presence of a late-lingering emerald-hued Berylline Hummingbird, a vagrant from Mexico that made several visits to its favored feeder while we were there. We also saw the magnificent and impressively large Rivoli's Hummingbird along with Anna's and Broad-billed Hummingbirds. After getting an eye-full of Acorn Woodpeckers, Mexican Jays, Bridled Titmice, Lesser Goldfinches, and many others we hit the trails for some leisurely hiking, where we encountered such specialties as Arizona Woodpecker, Greater Pewee, Olive Warbler, Painted Redstart, and Yellow-eyed Junco.



Greater Pewee © Debbie Ervine

We began the next morning lower down in the Santa Cruz River valley at a delightful park in Green Valley where we succeeded in finding a few Costa's Hummingbirds, including an adult male with its brilliant purple gorget extensions. We raced to catch up to a Greater Roadrunner that ran out of view ahead of us, and were surprised to find it hiding under a bush just off the trail where it remained for several minutes before speeding off.



Greater Roadrunner © Tony Nastase

We studied sparrows at Canoa Ranch, looking through numerous Brewer's and White-crowned Sparrows for anything different and were rewarded with a cooperative pair of Rufous-winged Sparrows, and the resident orange-tinged southwestern race of Song Sparrow, and our first Lark Buntings of the trip. One participant managed to take a photo of an otherwise uncooperative Cassin's Sparrow. An Osprey hovered over the large pond here looking for goldfish, while American Wigeons and Redheads swam around, but we had to travel to a nearby small sewage pond to find Black-bellied Whistling Ducks. We stopped at a historic site with a fountain being visited by a small flock of Lawrence's Goldfinches and hiked on the Anza Trail where a few participants got a look at a shy Rufous-backed Robin. At Ron Morriss Park near Tubac we saw Western Bluebirds, a Loggerhead Shrike, and more Vermilion Flycatchers. On our way to the quaint town of Patagonia we encountered a flock of Chihuahuan Ravens and made a stop in Nogales where we saw some harder to get waterbirds for the tour, including Great Egret and Green Heron, and were surprised to get buzzed by a Merlin of the pale "Prairie" subspecies that breeds on the northern Great Plains.



"Prairie" Merlin © Moti Hodis

Our first day in Patagonia began with a trip to Tucson Audubon Society's Paton Center for Hummingbirds, where we didn't have to wait long to spot that site's signature species, the fabulous Violet-crowned Hummingbird! The hummingbird feeders there also hosted several brilliant green and blue Broad-billed Hummingbirds, and a few Anna's Hummingbirds. A lot of activity was centered around the brush piles at the Paton Center, with large numbers of White-crowned Sparrows as well as a few Song and Chipping Sparrows, and a locally rare Fox Sparrow. We were able to study three species of towhees at close range: Abert's, Canyon, and Green-tailed. White-winged Doves walked around on the ground, looking like giants compared to the diminutive Inca Doves that were also present.



We took an afternoon drive to Patagonia Lake State Park, but found it quiet and didn't linger long, though we spotted our first Eared Grebes of the tour and got to see a Snow Goose both swimming on the water and flying overhead as it called. On the drive over we saw a few Black Vultures soaring overhead, and on the drive back we stopped at the Patagonia Roadside Rest where White-throated Swifts were engaging in aerial maneuvers above the rocky cliffs. The next morning we began the trek to Portal in the Chiricahua Mountains by exploring the vast grasslands of the San Rafael Valley, where we discovered that this was an irruption year for Mountain Bluebirds, with flocks of dozens foraging and perching. Vesper Sparrows and Horned Larks abounded, and occasionally a Red-tailed Hawk, Northern Harrier, or American Kestrel would be seen hunting over the grassy expanse. Then it was off to Whitewater Draw where even in this dry winter there were a few thousand Sandhill Cranes present, along with a few Snow Geese and a smattering of ducks, including a Cinnamon Teal. Some other water-loving species present included American Pipit, Least Sandpiper, Common Yellowthroat, and Marsh Wren. By slow-cruising through the arid, brushy habitat nearby, we were able to find a Greater Roadrunner, a few Lark Buntings, and one of our main target birds, a Bendire's Thrasher.



Sandhill Cranes © Moti Hodis

Then we were off to the magnificent Chiricahua Mountains. While we were settling into our lodging in the tiny hamlet of Portal, a few of us got a tantalizing look at a Blue-throated Mountain-Gem, North America's largest hummingbird species. Everyone would see them the next morning. If there was an award given for the "birdiest town in the USA" Portal would be a top contender. Some generous residents in and around town have opened up their yards to birders and we took advantage of their incredible hospitality. At such feeding stations we sat transfixed at a parade of such species as Gambel's Quail, Red-naped Sapsucker, Black-throated Sparrow, Cactus Wren, Verdin, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, and Spotted Towhee to name just a few. Everybody gained expertise distinguishing Northern Cardinals from Pyrrhuloxias.



Gambel's Quails © Tony Nastase

We took a leisurely hike up the South Fork Road, where we enjoyed the antics of a Painted Redstart foraging at sap wells drilled by a Red-naped Sapsucker, and also saw the gray-bellied southwestern race of Brown Creeper, and were able to study how to tell the difference between a Ruby-crowned Kinglet and a Hutton's Vireo.



Painted Redstart © Tony Nastase

Our last birding day began with a drive up the winding dirt road to Rustler Park, the highest point one can drive in this mountain range, where the wind made birding difficult. Fortunately, before we

made it that high, we found a few of our main target species, the Mexican Chickadee, along with several sizable flocks of tiny and cute Bushtits. A highlight of this drive was spotting a Golden Eagle soaring with a Common Raven. Later on we saw another eagle and were shocked when it proved to be an immature Bald Eagle, a rare bird in southeast Arizona.



Bridled Titmouse © Tony Nastase



Coati © Tony Nastase

After lunch in Portal we headed back to Tucson, making one last birding stop, the ponds along the edge of the Twin Lakes Golf Course in Willcox and adjacent Lake Cochise. A few distant Scaled Quail were spotted running across the golf course, while a few hundred American Wigeon waddled across the greens. The lake was host to a tight flock of a few thousand Sandhill Cranes, eight species of ducks including Ruddy Ducks, and two lingering American Avocets. We ended our birding for the day with a flock of stunning Yellow-headed Blackbirds in the late afternoon light..



Yellow-headed Blackbirds © Debbie Ervine



Our group in Arizona © Moti Hodis

[Arizona in Winter \(Nov 2024\) species list](#)