



## Arizona in Winter 2022 Trip Report

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Our winter birding tours of Southeastern Arizona took us through the Tucson deserts, the Santa Rita Mountains, the riparian lowlands of the Santa Cruz River watershed, and the wilds of the Chiricahua Mountains, and produced a combined total of over 170 species of birds! The tours began in the Sonoran Desert surrounding Tucson, an 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 Cactus Wrens, Black-throated Sparrows, Phainopeplas, Verdins, and that limited range specialist of the saguaro forests, the Gilded Flicker.



As the desert began to heat up we wandered into town, exploring one of the urban oasis parks of Tucson. Here, we marvelled at the flashy show of multiple Vermilion Flycatchers and ate lunch with a Williamson's Sapsucker, a rare winter visitor at this low elevation. An artificial lake held a good selection of ducks including Ring-necked and Ruddy Ducks, and Redheads. Looking through mixed flocks of blackbirds we were able to pull out some Bronzed Cowbirds from their brown-headed kin.



*Costa's Hummingbird* © Skye Haas

Then after a stop in a desert park on the outskirts of Green Valley to view delightful Costa's Hummingbirds, we began birding the Santa Rita Mountains, the northernmost of the "Sky Islands" - a term used to describe a group of isolated high mountains rising improbably out of the surrounding desert. 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.



*Bridled Titmouse © Skye Haas*



*Hepatic Tanager © Skye Haas*

Exploring both ends, we saw Mexican Jays, Arizona Woodpeckers, Townsend's and Black-throated Gray Warblers, Hutton's Vireos, and Western Bluebirds. Half way between is the Santa Rita Lodge, with its famous bird feeders that is a must-visit spot for any birder. There we saw clownishly costumed Acorn Woodpeckers and ridiculously cute Bridled Titmice dashing to and from the feeders. We discussed the field marks of the different forms of Dark-eyed Junco present, as they foraged on

the ground next to the easy to identify Yellow-eyed Juncos. The shockingly large and magnificent Rivoli's Hummingbird and the flashy Painted Redstart were among the highlights enjoyed by all.



*Yellow-eyed Junco* © Skye Haas



*Rivoli's Hummingbird* © Skye Haas

Our next stop in the Santa Ritas was Montosa Canyon, where we found Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet and one of very few Black-capped Gnatcatchers known to be present in the United

States! We then headed to the lush cottonwood groves along the Santa Cruz and searched through the Chipping Sparrows, Lazuli Buntings and “Audubon's” Yellow-rumped Warblers foraging in the treetops for a rare wintering Rose-throated Becard, a phoebe-sized bird that builds a huge pendulous nest that looks like an improbably high cache of flood debris. Near last year’s nest we were able to locate this odd subtropical bird and good looks were had by all.



*Ruddy Ground-Dove © Skye Haas*



*Rose-throated Becard © Skye Haas*

After a lunch stop that included for one group a view of a flock of White-throated Swifts, we were off to our next lodging in the friendly and funky town of Patagonia, a site in close proximity to a wealth of birding opportunities. 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. And of course we had excellent looks at Broad-billed, Anna's Hummingbirds and one group got to see a rare wintering Violet-crowned Hummingbird, while the other got to view an unusually cooperative male Ruddy Ground-Dove. We explored the extensive grasslands surrounding Patagonia, and found these rolling plains chock-full of sparrows, including Baird's, Grasshopper and Clay-colored Sparrows. Flocks of Chestnut-collared Longspurs were enjoyed, goodies like Golden Eagle and Mountain Bluebirds thrilled and we even enjoyed some great looks at the enigmatic Pronghorn.



*Broad-billed Hummingbird* © Skye Haas



*Pronghorn © Skye Haas*

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 in to roost every afternoon, a chaotic and almost deafening affair! Among the other waterbird species we saw were Mexican Ducks, Cinnamon Teals, and Long-billed Dowitchers. We were able to pluck out a few Ross's Geese by scoping the flock of Snow Geese present. A few Tree Swallows foraged for insects over the expanse of water and several Vermilion Flycatchers stood guard along the wooded edge. In nearby brushy habitat we managed to find 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, where the views are simply glorious in every direction! It is a stunning landscape, with huge red rock spires reaching upwards towards the clouds. And of course, the birds were fantastic, even just outside our lodge's door! Notable species seen right in town included Blue-throated Mountain-Gem, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Canyon and Green-tailed Towhees, Pyrrhuloxia, and Gambel's Quail. Further up in the mountains, we had Painted Redstarts, Red-naped Sapsuckers and one group was even treated to a Northern Pygmy-Owl out hunting in the afternoon sunshine.



*Northern Pygmy Owl © Skye Haas*

A major highlight for everyone on both tours was a rare wintering Elegant Trogon that chose to spend the winter just a few dozen steps from our lodge - one morning it was right out our front door! So cooperative was this stunning immature male bird that it was hard to decide when to walk away from it. This was a highlight for all, a life bird for many, and a great capper to both very successful tours.



*Elegant Trogon © Skye Haas*