Eagle-Eye Tours



Southeast Arizona: Summer in the Sky Islands Trip Report 2023

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Normally I title this Southeast Arizona tour the second spring, but with most of North America in the grips of an epic heat dome, the characteristic monsoon rains that fall this time of year were sputtering to a start. While it did create some hot afternoons for us, overall, the birding was still fantastic and even I was a bit surprised when at the end of the tour, we had tallied in 181 species of birds including a shocking 15 species of hummingbird! Numerous other species of wildlife were observed such as Gray Fox, Black Bear, Pronghorn, Black-tailed Rattlesnake and not one but two of the legendary venomous and gorgeously marked Gila Monsters!



Rivioli's Hummingbird © Skye Haas



Gila Monster © Skye Haas



Sonoran Desert © Skye Haas

We started our tour in the desert town of Tucson, but due to the excessive heat in the lowland, we headed straight up Mount Lemmon for the cooler temps of the higher elevations. Once up above 7000 meters, the temperature was actually quite pleasant and we ended up taking a couple mile hike under the douglas firs with some first rate birding with species like Mountain Chickadees, Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, Western Flycatchers, Black-headed Grosbeaks and several family groups of the striking Red-faced Warbler.



Red-faced Warbler © Skye Haas

We had a delicious picnic lunch up on a pine-laden ridge while Yellow-eyed Juncos flitted about. I could have stayed up there all day but we had a long drive to get our lodge in Portal in the Chiricahua Mountains for the evening. We did stop midway at Wilcox at a marshy lake that was chock-full of shorebirds and other waterbirds along with a bunch of Scaled Quail. The water's edge was teeming with flocks of Baird's, Western and Least Sandpipers as well as Wilson's Phalaropes and the elegant looking Black-necked Stilt and American Avocet. A small flock of Mallards held our only Mexican Duck of the trip as well.



American Avocets © Skye Haas

We spent the next few days in one of my favorite places ever, the tiny village of Portal perched on the edge of the glorious Cave Creek Canyon. It's hard to even get out of the parking lot of our lodge with Broad-billed Hummingbirds whizzing around, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays and Hooded Orioles bouncing overhead. Just up the road was a Thick-billed Kingbird, a species that barely enters into the US, with only a handful of pairs nesting on a few watersheds.



Thick-billed Kingbird © Skye Haas



Cave Creek Canyon © Skye Haas



Birding in Cave Creek Canyon © Skye Haas

We wandered up into Cave Creek Canyon for the morning, with its incredibly beautiful red rock walls towering over our heads. This is a lush forested canyon full of oaks, pines and sycamores, and lots and lots of birds that are more typical of the Sierra Madrean Mountains of Mexico. We birded this area for the morning and were treated to Blue-throated Mountain-Gems, Painted Redstarts, Acorn Woodpeckers, Scott's Orioles, Dusky-capped Flycatchers and the ubiquitous Mexican Jay.

Moving higher up as the heat of the day picked up, we encountered new species like Hepatic Tanager, Buff-breasted Flycatcher and Mexican Chickadee; a species that is range-restricted to the Chiricahuas in the US. Higher still among the Ponderosa Pines were Western Bluebirds, Greater Pewees and the enematic Olive Warbler (neither olive colored nor a warbler!).

In the drier hills of the Turkey Creek we stopped by the historic George Walker House where there was a really nice feeder set-up bringing in quite a few species of hummingbirds, most notably the rare visitor from Mexico a White-eared Hummingbird. Here we were also treated to nice looks at both Bridled and Juniper Titmice.



White-eared Hummingbird © Skye Haas



Grace's Warbler © Skye Haas

For the middle act of the tour we moved over to the town of Sierra Vista, a modern military town set at the base of the Huachuca Mountains, a rugged wildland set right on the Mexican border. We started at our birding at the Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary, another fantastic hummer feeder set-up. This spot is the best spot in the US to see the gorgeous Lucifer Hummingbird, and today was no exception! We had 3 males and a female show very well among the hordes of Broad-billed and

Anna’s Hummers present.



Lucifer Hummingbird © Skye Haas

We then headed over to a grassland right along the borderwall. Here we had birds like Chihuahuan Meadowlark, Greater Roadrunners, Pyrohuloxia and Lark Sparrow. But most thrilling of all was an incredible look at a male Montezuma Quail that came out right to the side of the road!



Greater Roadrunner © Skye Haas



Montezuma Quail © Skye Haas

The next morning we explored Miller Canyon, hoping to connect with the pair of Flame-colored Tanagers that had spent the summer here. We had no luck with them, but had Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, more White-eared Hummingbirds, and a delicate little Calliope Hummingbird.



Calliope Hummingbird © Skye Haas

In nearby Ramsey Canyon we were treated to another rare hummer, a Berylline Hummingbird had a nest with a young nestling in it! We then went up to the high plateau of Carr Canyon where we had a nice flock of birds like Black-throated Gray Warbler and Virginia’s Warbler.



Berylline Hummingbird © Skye Haas

We arose early the next morning and headed out of Sierra Vista to the Sonoita Grasslands. A trio of interesting sparrows were easily found- Grasshopper, Cassin's and Botteri's. A small "flock" of Pronghorn Antelope showed off as well. A highlight of our time here was a family of Burrowing Owls with four little ones that had just emerged from their lair.



Pronghorn © Skye Haas



Burrowing Owl © Skye Haas

A stop at the Paton Center for Hummingbird was always excellent, with Violet-crowned Hummingbirds, Phainopepla, Inca Doves, Yellow-breasted Chats, Summer Tanagers, and Lucy's Warblers all posing for photos, and then for our afternoon we did a stake out for a major rarity from Mexico, a large hummingbird called a Plain-capped Starthroat. It took a long wait, over an hour but eventually the bird came into the backyard feeder of the home-owners who were hosting it!



Violet-crowned Hummingbird © Skye Haas



Plain-capped Starthroat © Skye Haas

For our final act of the tour we landed in the retirement community of Green Valley located along the western side of the Santa Rita Mountains. Night birding can be excellent in the nearby Madera Canyon and we headed up after dinner where we heard several Whiskered Screech-Owls and some great looks at Western Screech-Owls.



Western Screech-Owl © Skye Haas

The next day we started out in the scenic Box Canyon where we had dynamite looks at a Five-striped Sparrow. While we were there, I got a message that yet another rare hummer was coming into a

feeder back over in Patagonia, a Allen's Hummingbird, a stray from southern California. Already at 14 species, we decided to try for one more of these feathered jewels and headed down to my friend's feeder where unlike the Starthroat from the day before, we walked right up to it, no waiting required! As an added bonus, a rare Mississippi Kite flew right over our heads!



Five-striped Sparrow © Skye Haas

We then returned back to the Santa Ritas to do some daytime birding in the legendary Madera Canyon. We had a specific mission, to get a good look at an Elegant Trogon. A few had some brief looks back in the Cave Creek, but I wasn't going to let folks leave Arizona without a quality experience with this iconic bird. It took a bit of a hike, but then the magic happened. A male trogon flew down the canyon and ended up perching right in front of us where it proceeded to preen for over 20 minutes! I think people got calluses on their camera shutter fingers from all the pictures they took!



Elegant Trogon © Skye Haas

As always the tour ended with happy people, just full to the brim of the amazing wonders that Arizona has to offer. From birds to butterflies, monsters and magic, this is a place I'll always return to and hope others will join us as well to explore the enchanting mountains of the Sky Islands.

Southeast Arizona 2023 eBird checklist