

Southeast Arizona: Summer Monsoons Birding Tour Trip Report (Jul 24 - Aug 3, 2022)

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By Skye Haas Eagle-Eye Tours just can't stay away from Arizona these days, and there's a great reason for that; it is high quality birding year round set in some of the most gorgeous scenery the United States has to offer! Southern Arizona begins to cool off in the second half of summer as the monsoons start up from moisture carried over the desert from the Pacific Ocean. In addition to the cooler temperatures, this input of water into an overall arid landscape is a boon to the breeding birds of this region, who's nesting cycles are tied to the monsoons for young fledglings. Adam Kent and I led this year's summer tour dodging the rain and tallying in an impressive 149 species for the tour, as well as a wealth of other interesting sightings of various mammals, butterflies and herptofauna.





Round-tailed Ground Squirrel © Skye Haas

We begin the tour in Tucson where we explored the concept of Merriam's Life Zones as we spent our first morning starting in the saguaro covered desert zone of the base of Mount Lemmon, ascending up into the scrub chaparral to the pine-oaks and eventually up into fir-maple forests. First seeing the desert birds like Black-throated Sparrow, Gila Woodpecker, Hooded Orioles and Lucy's Warblers, giving way to species found more in the Rocky Mountains such as Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, Cordilleran Flycatchers and Pygmy Nuthatches. Up in the pine forest we did well for warblers with some great looks at Red-faced, Grace's and Olive Warblers as well as a classic SEAZ specialty, the Yellow-eyed Junco. We then had picnic lunch with a family of Western Bluebirds, and were off for a long afternoon drive to get out to the Village of Portal, tucked in at the base of the Chirachua Mountains. This didn't leave us with a lot of time for more birding, but we were delighted to have Broad-billed and Violet-crowned Hummingbirds coming into the feeders right at our lodge!



Red-faced Warbler © Skye Haas



Broad-billed Hummingbird © Skye Haas

The next morning we got up bright and early and started to trek up into the mountains to a fir-laden canyon where a family of Spotted Owls were raising their young. It only took us a few minutes of searching and much like every time I've ever looked for an owl, was pleasantly surprised to find them!



Spotted Owls © Skye Haas

We then headed up to the forested peaks where we chased a group of Mexican Chickadees through the tall pines. Unfortunately for us that afternoon, a powerful thunderstorm blew in so we packed it in early and returned to the lodge for lunch and respite until the rain passed. We pattered around the Portal area marveling at the way the rain had created some low-grade flash flooding and enjoyed looking at some Pyrrhuloxias, Gambel's Quail and Swainson's Hawks. A post sunset run up into the canyon wasn't quite the bonanza we had hoped for but still we saw a Great Horned Owl and a Gray Fox. We soon slipped into a routine of getting up early to beat the heat of the middle of the day and this morning we used the cool dawn temperatures to explore the Chihuahuan desert scrub below Portal. Here we had some great birds like a Zone-tailed Hawk still roosting from the night before and a singing Scaled Quail!



Scaled Quail © Skye Haas

We also had some great looks at the newly elevated to full species status, the Chihuahuan Meadowlark. Then as the sun started to creep over the mountains, we too started to travel upwards through the stunningly beautiful Cave Creek Canyon. It was a wonderful morning of birding with great species like Band-tailed Pigeons, Mexican Jays, Golden Eagle, Scott's Oriole, Blue-throated Mountain-Gem, Black-throated Gray Warblers and Painted Redstarts.



Scott's Oriole © Skye Haas

A brushy creek crossing not only held a family of Western Tanagers but we had three species of

Pewees- Western Wood, Olive-sided and Greater! And on our way back into Portal for lunch we had a fantastic look at a Gray Hawk circling overhead.



Gray Hawk © Skye Haas

As we headed back out for some late afternoon birding, we first encountered a family of Thick-billed Kingbirds that had nested up the creek from town. We then made our way to the George Walker House, a historic rural home turned B&B and birder friendly to boot! Here we enjoyed a nice showing of various hummingbird species with a special one in particular- a young male White-eared Hummingbird, a rare visitor from the pine forests of Mexico!



Rivoli's Hummingbird © Skye Haas

We poked around Portal the next morning, enjoying some easy birding at local feeder set-ups. Our target birds of Crissal Thrasher and Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay were difficult and showed only briefly for a few, but the more common Curve-billed Thrasher and Blue Grosbeak performed for the lens of the photographers! We then started off our trek to Sierra Vista, with stops for both lunch and Greater Roadrunner... you guessed it- running along the road! We checked into our hotel and took a respite then headed to a delight bird sanctuary of Ash Canyon. Here was the best place in the United States to see the stunning Lucifer Hummingbird, which after a long wait gave fantastic views to all! The next morning we explored the grasslands along the base of the Huachuca Mountains where we were treated to a wonderful experience with a Botteri's Sparrow. While not much to look at, their song is a delightful twitter that rang over the hillsides. We then headed up the canyon to the crown jewel of the Nature Conservancy- their preserve at Ramsey Canyon. This lush canyon is full of humungous sycamores lining (at this time of year) a rushing creek. It was here were we finally caught up with the typically more abundant Bridled Titmouse. Also in Ramsey, we got to see a nest full to the brim with itty bitty Violet-crowned Hummingbirds- just too dang cute! Later that afternoon, we headed up the twisty road to Carr Canyon- a bit of a trek, but just stunning views when we got to the top. But it wasn't just the views we had come up for, this was our big chance for Buff-breasted Flycatcher and after a little bit of searching we turned up one that showed itself rather well! We got going pretty early the next day so we could cover some ground and still get in some morning birding in. Red-tailed and Swainson's Hawks seemed like they were perched on every other telephone pole, and up on a golden-colored grassy hill we stopped for a beautiful herd of Pronghorns greeting dawn.



Pronghorns © Skye Haas

Here we also got our only Grasshopper Sparrows of the tour. We then rolled into the quirky little town of Patagonia where we would spend the morning at the Paton Center for Hummingbird Excellence. On our way in, we stopped at the infamous Patagonia rest stop (known for the Patagonia Picnic Table Effect). It was here that we waited patiently below a globular messy nest hanging up in a tree- the nest of a Rose-throated Becard!



Rose-throated Becard © Skye Haas

It took a while but eventually the female Becard showed up to work at the nest's construction and gave a good look for everyone! Over at the Paton Center the grounds and feeders were just chock-full of birds. Yellow-breasted Chats, Common Ground-Doves, Abert's Towhees, Phainopepla, and of course a lot of Hummingbirds were present. An exciting moment was when a pair of Mississippi Kites dive bombed a Golden Eagle overhead. We would stop by the Kite's nesting tree on our way out where we were lucky to see the young bird still in the nest! A break for a delicious lunch at the local coffeeshop and then we started to work our way up the Santa Cruz River to the Town of Green Valley. We spent a little time birding along the river, no luck on seeing a Green Kingfisher but we did have great looks at a family of Tropical Kingbirds. Stopping by a small sewage pond got us some of our only waterbirds of the trip including Mexican Ducks and Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks. A fun surprise was within the small handful of Lazuli Buntings feeding in the tall grass along the pond's edge was a flashy male Painted Bunting! We started the next morning in a rocky desert canyon with the range-restricted Five-striped Sparrow. We had amazing looks at this strikingly handsome sparrow as well as a stunning male Varied Bunting. An absolute feast for the eyes!



Five-striped Sparrow © Skye Haas



Varied Bunting © Skye Haas

On our drive out the canyon we had to turn the vans around to check out a Desert Blonde Tarantula! We then headed on over to spend the rest of our day at famous Madera Canyon to seek out one of the stars of any Arizona tour- a Trogon. We slowly crept up a trail, and before long there was flash of red among the oak leaves and out flew a male Elegant Trogon! The bird was far more interested in hunting for food than to worry about the group just marveling at his stunning colors.

We soon found out why he was so concentrated at his task, he had a brown scraggly baby following along hoping papa would bring him a juicy caterpillar! It was an amazing experience with a pair of special birds and we ooh'd and ahh'd as they flitted up the canyon.



Elegant Trogon © Skye Haas

Our final full day of birding we headed down to the rugged Atascosa Highlands where we took a lovely hike up Pena Blanca Canyon. We had some great looks at Rufous-crowned Sparrow and Arizona Woodpeckers, along with Cassin's Kingbirds and Dusky-capped Flycatchers. Butterflies were everywhere and it was a fun exploration of a remote area that doesn't see a lot of birder action. It got pretty hot that afternoon so we took an afternoon respite, but as the sun started to get low we crept back out to this whimsical town park full of beautiful ornamental plantings and artistic expressions. It was also full of birds including Costa's Hummingbirds, Gambel's Quails and a very cooperative Rufous-winged Sparrow. We decided after dinner to head back up Madera Canyon to try for night birds and I'm so glad we did! It was a surprisingly successful endeavor and we heard Mexican Whip-poor-wills, Whiskered Screech and Northern Pygmy Owls and had a good look at a Western Screech Owl! All just incredible sightings in what had been such a fantastic tour.