Eagle-Eye Tours



Southeast Arizona Trip Report (Jul 15 - 25, 2024)

Link: Southeast Arizona Trip Report (Jul 15 - 25, 2024)

We began this tour with a drive up Mount Lemmon to get a sampling of the incredible diversity of habitats southeast Arizona has to offer. Our first stop was a vista overlooking a magnificent forest of saguaro cacti where we encountered our first Curve-billed Thrasher, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Black-throated Sparrow, and Verdin, all species that would soon become familiar.



Verdin © Brian Stamper

In the chaparral habitat at Molino Basin we found our first brilliant green and blue Broad-billed Hummingbirds, bright orange Hooded Orioles and flashy red Northern Cardinals. Numerous Bell's Vireos were singing here but mostly hiding from view. A real prize was a locally rare Gray Vireo that showed itself briefly. A tiny Blue-gray Gnatcatcher dive-bombing a perched Cooper's Hawk provided an entertaining diversion.



Broad-billed Hummingbird © Mark Siebers

As we gained elevation, oaks and pines began to replace the mesquites and manzanitas, and we began to encounter Acorn Woodpeckers, Mexican Jays and Bridled Titmice, the first of many for the tour! The secretive Bell's Vireos were replaced by more cooperative Plumbeous and Hutton's Vireos. The bird feeding station at the Palisades Visitor Center afforded us great views of Black-headed Grosbeaks and Pine Siskins, and Rivoli's and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds gave us a taste of the hummingbird diversity yet to come.



Bridled Titmouse © Brian Stamper

During our picnic lunch under towering ponderosa pines, we were serenaded by the whistled song of a Greater Pewee. Higher up the mountain, near Summerhaven, we had great looks at Red-faced Warbler, Mountain Chickadee, Western Bluebird and Pygmy Nuthatch.



Red-faced Warbler © Mark Siebers

The next morning we were off to the little hamlet of Portal in the storied Chiricahua Mountains! But first, we made the obligatory stop at Willcox to check out the migrant waterbird scene. Before even pulling up to the ponds we found Scaled Quail, Swainson's Hawk, Crissal Thrasher and a calling

Chihuahuan Raven. Among the dozen species of shorebirds greeting us was one Long-billed Curlew resting among dozens of stately American Avocets and Black-necked Stilts and a few White-faced Ibises. Wilson's Phalaropes twirled dizzily around Baird's, Least and Western Sandpipers. A flock of swallows, mostly Tree Swallows, numbering in the hundreds, swooped around us. Some eagle-eyed tour participants were able to pluck out a few Bank Swallows from the chaotic swarm. Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Chihuahuan Meadowlarks, and Say's Phoebes put in appearances, and we got useful experience in separating Western from Cassin's Kingbirds. On our first morning in Portal, we headed a few miles up the road to a stretch of Cave Creek Canyon renowned as one of the most reliable places to find Elegant Trogons. At one of our first stops, a cooperative male trogon was calling practically overhead when we got out of the van! Other birds of note here were Painted Redstart, Brown-crested and Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers, Brown Creepers, and eye-level Grace's and Black-throated Gray Warblers shaking off after bathing in a puddle in the creek.



Elegant Trogon © Mark Siebers

We also explored the desert scrub country below Portal, finding Loggerhead Shrike, Vermilion Flycatcher and Bendire's Thrasher. Two American Avocets still wearing their orange-headed summer plumage waded in a puddle in the road right in front of Willow Tank. We visited some feeding stations operated by kind local residents, getting great views of such species as Gambel's Quail, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Verdin, Pyrrhuloxia, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Blue Grosbeak, Abert's Towhee, Bronzed Cowbird and Hooded, Bullock's and Scott's Orioles.



Bronzed Cowbird © Brian Stamper

One of our two full days in the Chiricahuas involved a trip up to the high country where we encountered such species as Greater Pewee, Hepatic Tanager, Yellow-eyed Junco, Western Flycatcher and Steller's Jay along with Red-faced and Grace's Warblers. The only accessible spot to find Mexican Chickadees north of Mexico is here and we managed to find a few as well as a cooperative Olive Warbler.



Yellow-eyed Junco © Mark Siebers

The hummingbirds were of course a highlight of our time around Portal. The rarest were a Berylline

Hummingbird at the Southwest Research Station and a White-eared Hummingbird at the George Walker house. We saw the two super-sized members of this family, the magnificent Rivoli's Hummingbird and the spectacular Blue-throated Mountain-gem at several locations, both at feeding stations and "in the wild".



White-eared Hummingbird © Brian Stamper



Blue-throated Mountain-Gem © Mark Siebers

The hummingbird extravaganza continued as we moved to Sierra Vista at the base of the Huachuca Mountains. Among the eight species of hummingbirds we saw in Miller, Ramsey, and Ash Canyons in the Huachucas were our first Violet-crowned Hummingbirds of the tour and, after a patient vigil at Ash Canyon, stunning looks at a male Lucifer Hummingbird! Other highlights of our time in the Huachucas included Phainopepla, Arizona Woodpecker, Western Tanager, Lark Sparrow and a female Elegant Trogon. After leaving Sierra Vista for Green Valley, we birded along a creek in the Patagonia Mountains, getting great looks at Gray Hawk, Black Phoebe, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, a female Rose-throated Becard, and a locally rare Indigo Bunting. As we drove through the town of Patagonia we found a pair of Mississippi Kites soaring high overhead with a Black Vulture. On the grounds of Tucson Audubon Society's Paton Center for Hummingbirds we were treated to such delights as Inca Dove, Common Ground-Dove, Gila Woodpecker, Thick-billed Kingbird, and a normally secretive Yellow-breasted Chat feeding on elderberries.



Gray Hawk © Mark Siebers

We drove around Nogales and made a few stops that allowed access to the Santa Cruz River, where in the heat of the day we managed to pick up Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Tropical Kingbird and Green Kingfisher. The next morning we began our birding with a stop at a park in Green Valley where we saw Costa's Hummingbird, our twelfth hummingbird species of the tour! Then it was off to Canoa Ranch, where we were rewarded with a stunning male Lazuli Bunting and several Blue Grosbeaks, including one building a nest, and a close flyover of a Peregrine Falcon.



Green Kingfisher © Brian Stamper

We then drove up to Montosa Canyon, where upon exiting the van, we immediately heard the song of a Five-striped Sparrow and spotted it on an ocotillo up the steep hillside. Our other main target species here was Varied Bunting, and before we left we succeeded in seeing both male and female. We also encountered Hooded, Bullock's and Scott's Orioles, Western and Summer Tanagers, Canyon Towhees, Rock Wren, and we heard a singing Canyon Wren.



Varied Bunting © Brian Stamper

Next we headed up to Madera Canyon, stopping along the way at a small sewage pond where we

found a few Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks swimming with some Ruddy Ducks. From here we high-tailed it to the famed Santa Rita Lodge, where the feeding station attracted an array of Sierra Madrean specialty birds for close-up looks, including Arizona Woodpecker, Bridled Titmouse, Hepatic Tanager, and Rivoli's and Broad-billed Hummingbirds. After a rest in Green Valley during the hottest part of the day, we headed back up to Madera Canyon post-dinner. The hummingbirds at the Santa Rita Lodge were especially active as evening approached, with a rare Berylline Hummingbird joining the Black-chinned, Broad-billed and Rivoli's Hummingbirds. After darkness set in we heard Whiskered and Western Screech-Owls and an Elf Owl. For our last birding day of the tour, we headed out early in the coolness of the morning to seek out the specialty sparrows of the grassland and desert scrub habitat in the Santa Rita mountain foothills. We found Rufous-winged and Botteri's Sparrows on the road to Madera Canyon and on a side trip to Box Canyon found Rufous-crowned Sparrow and another Five-striped Sparrow. We also had good looks at such species as Rock Wren, Scott's Oriole and Varied Bunting.



Rufous-winged Sparrow © Mark Siebers

We returned to Madera Canyon for a picnic lunch and found cooperative Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers and Painted Redstarts. A Zone-tailed Hawk joined a small flock of Turkey Vultures before we left the canyon.



Painted Redstart © Brian Stamper

On our way back to Tucson in mid-afternoon we birded a stretch of saguaro-dotted desert scrub outside the city and succeeded in finding a few Gilded Flickers, along with family groups of Gambel's Quail with young of varying sizes, and a small flock of Purple Martins. Our last birding stop of the day was a brief visit to Reid Park to look for Mexican Duck and Neotropic Cormorant before meeting for our farewell dinner.