

Arizona in Winter Itinerary

[Link: Arizona in Winter](#)

Tour Overview

Winter in Arizona is full of delightful birding opportunities! Many species of waterfowl, raptors, sparrows and flycatchers migrate into southeastern Arizona, including birds like Sandhill Cranes, Ferruginous Hawks, Mountain Plovers and Lark Buntings.

Huge flocks of wintering White-crowned Sparrows, Chipping Sparrows and juncos contain multitudes of rarer species like Rufous-winged Sparrow, Sagebrush Sparrow and Baird's Sparrow. Depending on berry crops, some years mixed flocks of all three Bluebirds, Townsend's Solitaires and Phainopelas roam the oak-coated hills.

Also present are year round species that are Arizona specialties like Olive Warbler, Bridled Titmouse, Crissal Thrashers, Montezuma Quail and living jewels like Violet-crowned Hummingbird, Broad-billed Hummingbird, Blue-throated Mountain-Gem, Painted Redstarts and Vermilion Flycatchers. And in most winters, a few Elegant Trogons will overwinter in the lower reaches of canyons.

A cohort of Mexican vagrants are more easily found in the winter than summer months like Rufous-backed Robin and Ruddy Ground-Dove. Black-capped Gnatcatchers and Rose-throated Becard have morphed into low density year round residents and exciting strays to the area in the last few winters include Northern Jacana and Streak-backed Oriole.

Day-time temperatures are very pleasant and dry. Occasional cold snaps do occur and the evening temperatures can dip below freezing but heat up by mid-morning. The tour is a relaxed pace with some light to moderate elevation walking through some incredibly scenic mountain canyons.

Itinerary

Day 1: Arrival in Tucson



Our winter Arizona birding tour begins today. We will meet at the hotel for a welcome dinner. Night in Tucson.

Day 2: Madera Canyon



Today we will spend the day exploring the beautiful Santa Rita Mountains. The centerpiece to these lovely mountains is Madera Canyon, a classic example of the oak/pine drainages that attract birds to the sky islands. Here we will get our first taste of the Sierra Madrean birds that make birding Southeastern Arizona famous like Mexican Jay, Arizona Woodpecker, Painted Redstart and Hepatic Tanager. The feeders at the Santa Rita Lodge will give us an excellent serving of the diversity of juncos with three different forms of Dark-eyed Junco (Oregon, Gray-headed and Pink-sided) comingling with the devilish-looking Yellow-eyed Junco. These feeders are also our best chance of seeing Rivoli's Hummingbird (formerly Magnificent), the largest species of hummer in North American. Most winters at least one to two Elegant Trogons roam up and down the canyon. We'll also visit Florida Canyon which can be a dependable spot for the highly localized Black-capped Gnatcatcher, Black-chinned Sparrow and, if luck is with us, we may find one of the resident pairs of Rufous-capped Warblers that nest here. Night in Green Valley.

Day 3: Tucson area and Santa Cruz Flats



We'll spend today birding the low country around Tucson ranging from the austere beauty of the saguaro desert looking for Gilded Flicker, Greater Roadrunner and Costa's Hummingbird to urban parks like the Sweetwater Wetlands, full of waterfowl and blackbirds including impressive numbers of Yellow-headed Blackbirds. We'll also travel to the Santa Cruz Flats to look for some specialty birds that are hard to find elsewhere like Crested Caracara, Prairie Falcon, Sagebrush Sparrow, Mountain Plover and, if present, Ruddy Ground-Dove. Night in Green Valley.

Day 4: Tubac and Peña Blanca Canyon



This morning we'll spend exploring the Santa Cruz river valley. Water is life in the desert and this relatively lush cottonwood woodlands that line the river are host to flocks of wintering warblers, sparrows, and flycatchers. Abert's Towhees are common here. A number of headline rarities are seen annually here including the snazzy-looking Rufous-backed Robin and Rose-throated Becard. We have a chance at lucking into the small and stealthy Green Kingfisher hunting along the river. We'll also dip down towards the border to check out the wild beautiful hills of the Atascosa Highlands. Peña Blanca Canyon can be a wonderful hike and is an excellent location for the handsomely patterned Montezuma Quail. On occasions the exotic looking Coati-mundis are spied creeping along the rocky cliffs. Night in Patagonia.

Day 5: Patagonia



We'll start the day early in the golden light of the grasslands searching for the elusive Baird's Sparrow in with the flocks of Savannah, Vesper and Grasshopper Sparrows. Several other open country birds can be found here like Chestnut-collared Longspur, White-tailed Kite and the range-restricted "Lilian's" Eastern Meadowlark. We have a good chance of seeing Pronghorns wandering over the hills here. We'll then head over to Patagonia Lake State Park. The hackberry/mesquite groves can be full of wintering passerines like flycatchers, vireos, and even Elegant Trogon in most winters. There is often a good selection of ducks on the lake, and Green Kingfishers can be found along the swampy edges on rare occasion. We'll spend the rest of the day birding the very relaxing grounds of the fabled Paton Hummingbird Center. A delightful place to slowly wander around or just linger in front of one of the many feeders or water features. The Paton Center is always full of birds including Violet-crowned and Broad-billed Hummingbirds, Lazuli Buntings, Green-tailed Towhees and Gambel's Quail. Often a Western Screech-Owl is roosting nearby, and recent winters have hosted Ruddy Ground-Dove and Rufous-backed Robins. Night in Patagonia.

Day 6: Patagonia/Sulfur Springs Valley



We'll start our day with some more birding around Patagonia, and then start heading east towards the Chiricahua mountains. Depending on what is being seen we may head towards the Huachuca Mountains for some staked out rarity or wander the expansive grasslands looking for raptors. We'll bird Whitewater Draw where tens of thousands of Sandhill Cranes come into roost in the large wetland complex. Snow Geese can gather in large numbers here and Vermilion Flycatchers patrol the shores. Large numbers of ducks attract predators like Golden Eagle and Ferruginous Hawk. The surrounding Chihuahuan desert scrub can be good for Lark Buntings, Sagebrush Sparrows and the uncommon Bendire's Thrasher. Night in Portal.

Day 7: Chiricahuas



There are few places in North America as stunning as the towering red rocks of Cave Creek Canyon. The tiny village of Portal is nestled at the gates of the Cave Creek Canyon on the eastern side of the magnificent Chiricahua Mountains. We'll spend our day birding around Portal and the surrounding desert scrub and work our way up the mixed oak-sycamore-pine forest of Cave Creek Canyon. We'll try for Crissal Thrasher and Scaled Quail in the low country, and enjoy the bird-friendly atmosphere in the village itself. Green-tailed Towhees, Townsend's Warbler, and Blue-throated Hummingbirds are regularly sighted here. As we work our way up the canyon into the oak-pine forests we'll get into various mixed flocks of birds- Mexican Jays, Red-naped Sapsuckers, Olive Warblers, Bridled Titmice and Yellow-eyed Juncos are all frequently encountered here. Depending on road conditions, we may try to get to a high enough elevation to find Mexican Chickadees, Steller's Jays, and Pygmy Nuthatches. Night in Portal.

Day 8: Chiricahaus and return to Tucson



We'll spend the morning continuing our explorations of the Portal area. We'll likely head to the Paradise area where we have a chance of Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Juniper Titmouse, Williamson's Sapsucker, Black-chinned Sparrow and Western Bluebirds. For the afternoon we'll start back to Tucson, stopping for a birding break at the famous Wilcox Ponds, which are full of wintering ducks and cranes with often a surprise or two. Night in Tucson.

Day 9: Departure

Our winter Arizona birding tour concludes today. You can depart for flights home anytime today.

What to Expect

Overview

Our Arizona in Winter Birding tour will focus on finding a diversity of species with an emphasis on regional and local endemics. The daily travel schedule varies to account for weather, bird species and habitat, but is a fairly moderately-paced tour, due to having a few longer days with early mornings and four drives of 45 minutes - 2 hours.

Food

Breakfast will usually be at the hotel or at a local cafe. Lunch will be out in the field, picnic style, or maybe at a restaurant. Dinner will be at the hotel or a restaurant. Each evening after dinner we compile the day's checklist, review the day's activities, birds, mammals and other observations, and

plan the next day's activities.

Accommodation

Accommodations during the stay vary from comfortable three star hotels to rustic birding lodges.

Walking

The walking on this tour is generally relatively easy. Most of the walking will be on level terrain. The longest hike is at Madera Canyon at 1.34 miles (2.2 km) and 2.25 hours on a moderately steep trail, with some rocky or uneven stretches. There is an option to opt-out of this walk. The maximum elevation on this tour is 8000 feet (2400 m).

Driving

Every few days we will drive to a new location. The drives will be approximately a couple hours, with rest stops and some birding stops.

Climate

Temperatures will vary widely over the course of each day, and over the course of the tour. Some early mornings, especially whilst in the mountains, will be pretty chilly, around freezing temps, possibly even just below freezing. The weather tends to rise throughout the day to a comfortable 15-18°C (60-65°F) average daytime temperature. It's best to dress in layers, including a warm jacket, and a hat and gloves for the mornings. T-shirt weather is possible!

What's Included

Tour Price Includes

- Good quality accommodation
- Includes all breakfasts and lunches
- *NEW 2026* Tour includes evening meals
- Ground transportation (15-passenger vans)
- One EET guide with 4 - 8 participants, 2 guides with 9 - 12 participants
- All park, conservation and entrance fees

Tour Price Does Not Include

- Flights to and from start of tour
 - Travel Insurance
 - Evening meals (*2025 Departure)
 - Items of a personal nature
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