

Arizona: Sky Island Winter Birding with Naturalist Journeys



February 4 – 10, 2023

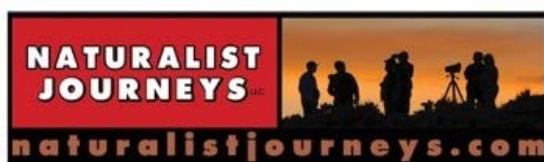
866.900.1146

520.558.1146

travel@naturalistjourneys.com

www.naturalistjourneys.com

or find us on Facebook & Instagram
at Naturalist Journeys, LLC



Arizona is a region marked by spectacular scenery and sharp contrasts. Towering saguaro cactus, sandy washes, and granite outcroppings typify the Sonoran Desert, while creosote and yucca dominate the Chihuahuan Desert landscape. These beautiful deserts are home to iconic desert species such as Greater Roadrunner, Cactus Wren, and Verdin. Rising from the desert like green islands, mountain ranges clad in Madrean pine-oak woodlands provide a habitat unique within the United States; between these fault-block mountain ranges expansive valleys provide prime winter habitat for sparrows and numerous birds of prey. Lakes and ponds attract wintering waterfowl, hummingbirds are present at feeders while woodpeckers delight in tall saguaro cactus forests as well as cottonwood groves where local rivers wind through the valleys. From two comfortable lodges we enjoy winter birding highlights of the region, taking in sunshine and scenic beauty. Where else in the United States can you take a time out from watching so many dazzling birds to simply enjoy the scenery? All of these factors contribute to Arizona being one of the most exciting regions for birding in the United States! All four seasons are good here, and different.

January hosts excellent winter birding, the mix of habitats we visit provide food and shelter for resident and overwintering species. Sandhill Cranes occur in the tens of thousands and a high diversity of raptors gather for fine viewing on power lines, ranch tree plantings and irrigation equipment in the agriculturally rich Sulphur Springs Valley. Enjoy a wonderful escape from cold weather that's timed for you to relax after the holidays.

What could be more rejuvenating than a stay at the welcoming Casa de San Pedro and the Amado Territory Inn? These two small, boutique hotels feature great hospitality and birding.

In addition to birding, learn a bit of history in the mining towns of Bisbee and Tubac. Sample regional wines as we enjoy fun local restaurants. While we can't promise to be back for the Casa's famous pies every afternoon, it is certainly our intention! We aim for great birding days afield, but this tour is paced so you can enjoy the inn and all its charms.

You can do as much or as little as you wish! If you'd like a longer vacation, we suggest you add extra time in Tucson to continue to enjoy the area's saguaros, sunshine, Mexican restaurants, art galleries, and museums.

Tour Highlights

- ✓ Visit hotspots like Ramsey and Miller Canyons, the feeders at Ash Canyon, the San Pedro River, and more
- ✓ Marvel at the spectacle of tens of thousands of overwintering Sandhill Cranes! Watch them fly in to roost at sunset and also observe them feeding during the day
- ✓ Experience prime time for finding a good number and variety of wintering raptors in the Sulphur Springs Valley around Whitewater Draw, including Ferruginous Hawk and up to four species of falcons
- ✓ Sparrows abound; once a small pond had three species of longspurs!
- ✓ Find hummingbirds, including Rivoli's, Costa's, Broad-billed, Anna's, Blue-throated Mountain Gem and hopes for the Violet-crowned Hummingbird that often overwinters at Audubon's Paton Center for Birds
- ✓ Meet local experts from the Southeastern Arizona Bird Observatory and learn about their research
- ✓ Explore Bisbee, a colorful, historic mining town; enjoy lunch and the chance to shop or check out the Smithsonian-affiliated museum
- ✓ Find camaraderie at catered meals and dining at our favorite local restaurants
- ✓ Extend your stay in Tucson among sunshine and saguaros

Tour Summary

7-Day / 6-Night Arizona Birding and Nature Tour

\$2690 from Tucson

Airport is Tucson International (TUS)

Day-to-Day Itinerary

Sat., Feb. 4 Arrival in Tucson | South to Amado

Our tour starts at 1:00 PM in Tucson where we can pick you up at the airport or a nearby airport hotel. We head south along the Santa Cruz River, a renowned birding corridor. We leave the city behind, and immediately the shapes of multiple Sky Islands appear — we are surrounded by a series of small, but fascinating mountain ranges. Most prominent are the Santa Rita Mountains which hold legendary birding hotspots like Madera Canyon.

Have your binoculars handy! We swing into the beautiful San Xavier de Bac mission, where some Sonoran Desert species dwell in the riverbed. It's a striking site of historical note we think you'll enjoy. We make a couple of other stops as well — guide's choice today depending on recent sightings in the Tucson area.

We reach the Amado Territory Inn in time to settle into our rooms, and then enjoy some social time with refreshments before heading to a local restaurant. Those driving may wish to just meet us at the Inn or at our first chosen birding location today.

Accommodations at the Amado Territory Inn (D)

Sun., Feb. 5 Santa Cruz Valley Birding Hotspots: Canoa Ranch, Madera and Other Canyons | The Santa Cruz River Trail

Ponds at Canoa Ranch Conservation Park are a magnet for wintering waterfowl and we should find a good mix of them here today. The backdrop views of the Santa Rita Mountains are grand in scale and we watch the sky for raptors as well.

Florida, Montosa, and Madera Canyons are carved out of the Santa Rita Mountains. Florida Canyon gives us the chance to look for Broad-tailed, Broad-billed, and Anna's Hummingbirds, Cactus Wren, Greater Roadrunner and Black-headed Grosbeak.

Madera Canyon, one of the most famous birding areas in the United States, is a north-facing valley in the Santa Rita Mountains with riparian woodland along an intermittent stream, bordered by mesquite, juniper-oak woodlands, and pine forests. Madera Canyon is home to over 250 species of birds, and in berry years a good spot to find wintering Elegant Trogon, possibly wintering Painted Redstart. Arizona Gray Squirrel can be found here, and Black-tailed Jackrabbit occur in the grasslands surrounding the peaks. Acorn Woodpecker call from their food-storage trees and Arizona Woodpecker may visit local feeders to join the array of hummingbirds. We may also see Common Bushtit and Hutton's Vireo and certainly Mexican Jay. Depending on what we find here, we may also venture in to Montosa Canyon, another productive birding hotspot.

We want to save time for the river trail near Tubac, where recent winters have had some great birds, Rose-throated Becard, Sinaloa Wren — who knows what we find! Every day birding here is a true adventure. Tubac also has some fun dining and artisan shops, as well as a historic presidio.

Lunch and dinner are at local restaurants.

Accommodations at the Amado Territory Inn (B,L,D)

Mon., Feb. 6

Patagonia Lake & Hummingbirds | Sonoita Grasslands | San Pedro River

After a great breakfast at the Inn, we pack up our gear, and head towards the Huachuca Mountains and our next lodgings at the Casa de San Pedro. We make this a full day, as we pass through prime birding areas along the way.

Our first stop is at Patagonia Lake, where the inlet to the lake often shelters an overwintering Elegant Trogon. They like to feed on Giant Water Bugs! A variety of ducks may be on the water, and in the shrubby vegetation rimming the lake we can find wintering warblers, vireos, and gnatcatchers. Then it's on to the hamlet of Patagonia. We enjoy lunch here at a favorite café and then check out what's happening at feeders at Tucson Audubon's Paton Center for Hummingbirds and other sites of interest. There is a nature trail winding through mesquite woodlands and riparian areas that connects to the local Nature Conservancy Reserve for those that wish to wander. Species we may see here include Violet-crowned Hummingbird, Cassin's Finch, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Canyon Towhee, and Lazuli Bunting.

From here it's about an hour and a half to our lodgings, and we stop at a couple of water features in lush grasslands that often attract a mix of sparrows and longspurs and pipits. Watch for Pronghorn, Prairie Falcon, and Golden Eagle that all live in this expansive terrain. A line of large cottonwoods along the San Pedro River and mountain views in three directions frames our backyard for the next three days.

Our wonderful hosts Patrick Dome and Karl Schmitt are waiting for us at the Casa de San Pedro.
Accommodations at Casa de San Pedro, Hereford (B,L,D)

Tues., Feb. 7 Sulphur Springs Valley | Whitewater Draw

Our focus today is on the grassland habitats of the Sulphur Springs Valley and the low wetland area of Whitewater Draw. After breakfast, we depart to explore areas productive for sparrows, longspurs, and raptors around Elfrida and north to Kansas Settlement. The entire valley is a major wintering ground for raptors, including Prairie Falcon, Ferruginous Hawk, and Golden Eagle — we may see ten or so raptor species today, with hundreds of individuals. With searching we could also find Long-billed Curlew feeding in agricultural fields and perhaps Mountain Plover, though over the years their numbers have declined — we will be watching!

Within this expansive valley is a wildlife area that wintering cranes use extensively called Whitewater Draw. We stop mid-morning when they come back in from feeding to take in the spectacle of seeing them by the thousands and to watch their behavior. There is a good variety of waterfowl here, shorebirds such as Wilson's Snipe, Long-billed Dowitcher, Least Sandpiper, and other species. There is often a Vermilion Flycatcher perched up for inspection, perhaps a Say's Phoebe and with luck a covey of Scaled Quail.

The valley is large, and in some years we go all the way up to Willcox Playa if we hear of species there that warrant the drive. Either way we aim to find a mix of wintering sparrows and longspurs, a good variety of raptors and always a few surprises. Plan for a long day, but this should be an excellent birding day on all accounts.

Tonight, enjoy dinner at the Casa, and for those that wish, a chance to catch up our species list around the fireplace. Casa de San Pedro is a nationally acclaimed inn; they say it is 90 miles from Tucson and inches from heaven. We agree! We find it the ideal location for our group, with meeting space, incredible hospitality, active bird feeders, a pond, and the San Pedro River right outside our door.

Accommodations at Casa de San Pedro (B,L,D)

Wed., Feb. 8 San Pedro River | Local Feeders of the Huachuca Mountains

Enjoy a lovely breakfast at the Inn today. Mid-morning, we drive a short way downriver to the Bureau of Land Management's San Pedro House, a visitor center with walking trails north of the Inn on the San Pedro River. Here we search for birds of the cottonwood riparian areas, adjacent mesquite woodlands and grasslands — Northern Harrier, Loggerhead Shrike, Crissal Thrasher, Lark Bunting, Lark Sparrow, Abert's Towhee, and other species occur here. Some years a Western Screech Owl likes to sunbath from his cottonwood-tree home.

We enjoy our lunch with the birds at some local feeders, then continue to the Southeastern Arizona Bird Observatory's Ash Canyon property to meet some of their staff and to look for hummingbirds such as Rivoli's, Anna's, and Broad-billed, as well as other specialties of the pine-oak woodlands. With luck Arizona Woodpecker come in, and Woodhouse's Scrub Jay. Our photographers are always happy here!

Tonight, enjoy dinner at a favorite local restaurant. Those that wish can tally up sightings of the day with your guide once back at the Casa.

Accommodations at the Casa de San Pedro (B,L,D)

Thurs., Feb. 9 Ramsey Canyon | Bisbee | Sunset with Cranes

Our early birds can check the Casa's backyard of riparian cottonwoods and mesquite grassland for species like Scaled Quail, Gila Woodpecker, Pyrrhuloxia and Abert's Towhee, while others can enjoy a more leisurely sleep in.

We have breakfast at 8:00 AM and then head off to The Nature Conservancy Preserve at Ramsey Canyon—one of the first well-known birding sites in Southeast Arizona. Here, Ramsey Creek descends through oak woodlands, its banks lined with massive sculptured trunks of Arizona Sycamores. We hope to see Wild Turkey, some wintering warblers such as Townsend's and Painted Redstart, perhaps Red-naped Sapsucker and Hutton's Vireo. Hummingbird feeders may delight us with a sighting of Blue-throated Mountain-gem, the largest hummingbird species in the United States. Walk the trails, browse the bookstore and gift shop, or park yourself under a tall, bending sycamore to wait for the birds to come to you! We may also stop at another favorite spot nearby if we know of good bird activity there in shrubs that can be loaded with berries.

This afternoon, after a nice break back at the Inn (they always have fresh-baked pies...) we return to the historic town of Bisbee and continue on to Whitewater Draw for sunset with Sandhill Cranes pouring in to roost in the ponds there — an unforgettable sight! If some want some "town time" we can send one van on ahead early.

It is your vacation and a bit of a splurge is in order! As we pass through Bisbee coming back from the cranes, we have reservations at Café Roka, one of Arizona's most well-loved restaurants. Luckily while the food is fine there is no need to dress up, which is a good thing as we'll be in crane-viewing clothes, celebrating a wonderful week in the wilds.

Accommodations at Casa de San Pedro (B,L,D)

Fri., Feb. 10 Birding & Breakfast | Departures from Tucson

Our plan is to offer optional birding along the river early, enjoy a nice breakfast, pack and to return to the airport by 10:30 for flights out after NOON. If some have flights a bit later and there's a bird calling to us at a nearby stop in Tucson, we give it a try! (B)

Tour Details

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Their website will show a grid of tour cost and your age category for you to make selections. As of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the journey is **\$2690 DBL / \$3250 SGL** from Tucson, AZ. This cost includes accommodations for six nights, meals as specified in the itinerary (B=breakfast, L=lunch and D=dinner), professional guide services, other park and program entrance fees and miscellaneous program expenses.

Cost does not include: round-trip airfare to and from Tucson, items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone, drinks from the bar, or gratuities for luggage handling or personal services.

Travel Information

The airport for this tour is Tucson International (TUS). Our tour starts 1:00 PM on February 4; we can pick you up at any of the airport hotels if you have opted to come in early, or we will pick you up at the airport. On February 10, after morning birding we head to the airport, arriving there by 10:30 AM for flights out after NOON.

Photo Credits

Cave Creek Canyon, Steve Wolfe (SW); Rivoli's (Magnificent) Hummingbird; Greg Smith (GS); Gambel's Quail, Peg Abbott (PA); Gila Woodpecker, Janice Petko, Bridled Titmouse, Barry Ramdass (BR); Burrowing Owl, GS; Sandhill Cranes & Snow Geese, PA.

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