

Southeast Arizona: Sky Island Fall Sampler with Naturalist Journeys



November 9 – 16, 2023

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Fall is a stunning time to visit Southeast Arizona's Sky Island mountain ranges, when fall color decorates the stunning Chiricahua and Huachuca Mountains' canyons. As other parts of the continent turn towards winter, November here boasts perfect warm days as maples turn red, cottonwoods an ash yellow, and sycamores shine burnt sienna. Nights are crisp and dark skies have star views.

Southeast Arizona is home terrain for Naturalist Journeys and we're excited to share our favorite places. This year we've invited Hugh Simmons, an accomplished photographer specializing in landscapes, to join us. We plan to set the pace of this one to let you work on photo composition, or simply to marvel at beauty. Hugh provides photo tips for those that want to improve their skills; you can then practice on fall color landscapes and especially at feeders—brilliant birds. We begin at a fun western-themed hotel in Sonoita to have a chance to be in some beautiful grasslands at sunset, and to visit the famous hummingbird feeders at Patagonia. We follow with two nights at the delightful Casa de San Pedro and end with four nights in Cave Creek Canyon at Portal, truly one of the most scenic canyons in the state. This is home turf for guide Peg Abbott and she's eager to share her beloved terrain. Throughout our travels, we enjoy delicious, catered meals and dining at our favorite local restaurants.

This is not "normal" winter birding. Hummingbirds still linger at several popular feeder sites—sit awhile and let the birds come to you! Fruiting trees and shrubs attract thrashers, robins and sometimes, rarities, like the Eared Quetzal in the fall of 2020.

Wintering Sandhill Cranes number in the tens of thousands; we watch them fly-in at sunset to Whitewater Draw. Sparrows and allies winter in profusion, many from the Great Plains region. Southwestern mammals such as Coati, Javelina, and even Ring-tailed Cat can be found. Raptors abound: Red-tailed Hawk of varied color phases, Ferruginous Hawk, Prairie Falcon, Peregrine, Merlin, and more.

Tour Highlights

- ✓ Visit two famous birding lodges of Southeast Arizona.
- ✓ Find great fall birding at hotspots like the Paton Center for Hummingbirds, Ramsey and Ash Canyons, local feeders along 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 wintering raptors in the Sulphur Springs Valley.
- ✓ Let an expert teach you ID skills for abounding sparrows; last year a small pond had three species of longspurs!
- ✓ Spend time in the tiny village of Portal, a birding mecca and home to Naturalist Journeys
- ✓ Immerse yourself in color and improve your photo skills at Cave Creek Canyon
- ✓ Find winter hummingbirds, Vermilion Flycatcher and several species of quail.
- ✓ 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 (save room for homemade pie at the Casa)

Tour Summary

8-Day / 7-Night Arizona Nature Tour
\$2890 DBL / \$3440 SGL, from Tucson
Airport is Tucson International (TUS)

Day-to-Day Itinerary

Thurs., Nov. 9 Arrival in Tucson | Sonoita

Welcome to sunshine and saguaros as you land in Tucson, Arizona, where we can pick you up at the airport or a nearby airport hotel. We then head east, leaving the city behind. Shapes of multiple sky islands immediately appear—we are surrounded by a series of small but fascinating mountain ranges. We have a beautiful drive through rolling foothills that look more like California wine country than anything imagined for Arizona, with sky island mountain ranges on the horizon. Our first stop is a treat, easy birding at the famous Paton Center for Hummingbirds in Patagonia. We should find Broad-billed and Anna's Hummingbirds in good number, and with luck the rarer Violet-crowned.

We then check into our nearby lodgings at Sonoita, just 12 miles up the road. Sonoita is surrounded by grasslands and our goal is to be in a lovely spot for sunset, one where we might also see Pronghorn or some of the wintering sparrows. Tonight's dinner is at a fun local restaurant.

Accommodations at Sonoita (B,L,D)

Fri., Nov. 10 Ramsey Canyon | Ash Canyon and Other Local Feeders

In the morning we explore a few areas of the grasslands in search of sparrows, before heading on to Ramsey Canyon, a place of great fall color and always a birding favorite. Just an hour's drive, this major drainage of the Huachuclas sits directly in view of Miller Peak, highest in the range. Set your pace to hike on up the trail or go at a birder's pace after some time at the hummingbird feeders. We have lunch with birds, bringing a delightful picnic to one of our field sites.

In the afternoon, we check into our wonderful lodgings at the Casa de San Pedro.— a beautiful B&B on the west bank of the San Pedro River. The Casa de San Pedro is a nationally acclaimed inn, described as "90 miles from Tucson and inches from heaven." Guests have labeled it the most upscale bed and breakfast in Southeast Arizona. 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. From the Casa we can explore cottonwoods that fringe the river, perhaps flaunting a little fall color, as well as surrounding grasslands and tall peaks of the nearby Huachuca Mountains, a mecca for hummingbird enthusiasts. You soon find out why so many guests return here again and again.

Those that wish can stay at this little paradise and relax, or visit local feeder sites, where hummingbirds linger through the winter. Often, we find Arizona Woodpecker, Woodhouse's Scrub Jay, possibly Wild Turkey and a host of resident species. If booked early, there may be a chance for you to spend time in a photo blind at one of the feeder sites—ask us for details and a booking (additional cost). Dinner tonight is catered at the Inn

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

Sat., Nov. 11

Whitewater Draw | Sulphur Springs Valley & Sandhill Cranes | Bisbee

This morning, after a scrumptious Casa de San Pedro breakfast, those that enjoy birding can head out to Whitewater Draw Wildlife Area. Many of the wintering Sandhill Cranes have arrived (numbering some 35,000 birds in the Sulphur Springs Valley at the peak of winter!), and we look for them in ponds and in farm fields where they feed on corn. Depending on water levels, Whitewater may be one of the only local sites hosting shorebirds and with luck we see the area's resident Great-Horned Owl. The entire valley is a major wintering ground for raptors and some of the northern species, like Ferruginous Hawk, can be found.

Mid-day, those that wish can take a break and explore Bisbee. Our keen photographers may prefer to stay at Whitewater where photo subjects are plentiful. We will have done some scouting for local raptors, and by 2:00 PM we meet back up to angle our way up to Willcox and the Twin Lakes ponds where ducks and cranes are plentiful.

We plan to watch the Sandhill Cranes come in to roost; this “fly-in” is typically active from about 4 to 5:30 PM. We then return to the Inn for another catered meal.

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

Sun., Nov. 12 Chiricahua Mountains | Cave Creek Canyon

Savor a southwestern breakfast before we head over to the small village of Portal, population 300, where Cave Creek presents a magical realm of massive, colorful cliffs that rise over 1,000 feet. Its vegetation is rich and diverse—here yuccas mix with pine. Thick stands of maple decorate the stream, while shrubs turn colors of the rainbow. Hummingbirds linger, some for the winter, and we may find late-season flowers, raccoon-like Coatimundi, or a herd of curious Javelina.

Mid-morning, we take a scenic ramble up South Fork, one of the Chiricahuas' most spectacular canyons. You may want to linger along the creek reveling in the maples' fall colors while others may want to ascend the trail to reach outstanding vistas. There are pools of water that make great hideaways for photographers, a couple of hours spent at one should net images of Canyon Wren, Spotted Towhee, Red-naped Sapsucker, and more.

There are wonderful feeders right at our lodge, with natural perches to delight photographers and observers alike. Blue-throated Mountain Gem often overwinter here; it's fun to watch them chase off Pine Siskin—a mix of northern and southern species for sure. In the afternoon head down to the grasslands of Stateline Road in search of Bendire's and Crissal Thrasher, a variety of sparrows, Scaled Quail, and other species. Dinner is at a favorite local restaurant with a fine view of the Chiricahuas.

In the evening, those that wish can do a “star stop” en route back to Cave Creek Ranch where our casitas stand among the shadows cast by the imposing, colorful rhyolite cliffs. Portal is also known for its dark skies and fabulous night sky viewing.

Accommodations at Cave Creek Ranch, Portal (B,L,D)

Mon., Nov. 13 Chiricahua High Country | Chiricahua National Monument

Early this morning we offer an optional birding walk down the main street of Portal, a simple walk with stunning vistas, bird feeding stations, and a picturesque library and post office. Then, enjoy a hearty breakfast at the Portal Café.

Today we discover a wonderland of rock at Chiricahua National Monument. We reach the high country by crossing the spine of the range on a winding road with spectacular views amid patches of fir, spruce, and Ponderosa Pine. This is the realm of the Mexican Chickadee, Yellow-eyed Junco, and other bird specialties. Listen for raucous Steller's Jay and look for the small resident Coue's Whitetail Deer.

On the other side of the mountain, we enter the Monument's rugged terrain, where the Apache leaders Cochise and Geronimo took their last stand until the late 1800s, when cattle ranching became a way of life. Today we gawk at huge pillars of rock in the realm of Rock and Canyon Wrens, a jagged rock landscape that was born of

explosive volcanic activity. We have a picnic lunch near the visitor center, and then you can choose to do a loop walk through the wonderland of rock or to visit the historic Faraway Ranch and do some birding.

Watch the late-day feeding frenzy at our lodge's feeders as you return, freshen up, and then enjoy a catered meal at the ranch.

Accommodations at Cave Creek Ranch, Portal (B,L,D)

Tues., Nov. 14 Grasslands & Local Feeders | Chiricahua Desert Museum

This morning we explore the lower elevations near Rodeo, New Mexico, a wetland oasis and a grassland area that is usually very productive. Following local sightings from previous weeks, we plan our route. A dedicated following of local birders is always on the lookout for rare Crested Caracara, and a variety of sparrows and longspurs, as well as Horned Lark and up to three species of thrashers. This is a region of open vistas, fabulous for landscape photography.

Enjoy lunch in the Sky Island Grocery and Grill, with a fine view of the mountains, and Greater Roadrunner and Lark Bunting coming into the feeders. A local rancher invites us to his home to see birds at the feeders and with luck to hear some of his stories.

Finally, we enjoy time at the Chiricahua Desert Museum where live animals in natural habitats are displayed and make for some wonderful photo subjects. And, for the history buffs in our group, a fantastic exhibit on Geronimo and the Chiricahua Apache. We enjoy dinner at the Portal Café as we return home.

Accommodations at Cave Creek Ranch, Portal (B,L,D)

Wed., Nov. 15 Fall Color in the Canyons | Paradise

Enjoy another chance to immerse yourself in the color of fall on a walk up the canyon while birding with Peg, or positioned with Hugh as you try to frame up memorable images. There are any number of trails and scenic campgrounds that let us wander with ease.

We make a loop drive today, on the prowl for Mexican Chickadee, Apache Fox Squirrel, and other species. We visit the smaller village of Paradise, once a thriving mining community, to learn a bit of history and visit the feeders of a local hummingbird expert who has participated in banding and monitoring projects for many years. She often has Juniper Titmouse and several hummingbirds coming in to feeders even at this late date in the year.

Tonight, enjoy a catered dinner with time to celebrate highlights of the great week we've had.

Accommodations at Cave Creek Ranch, Portal (B,L,D)

Thurs., Nov. 16 Departures from Tucson

After a final delicious breakfast, we head to the airport, with plans to arrive by 11:00 AM for flights out after 12:30 PM. (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 is **\$2890 DBL / \$3440 SGL** from Tucson, AZ, and includes accommodations for seven nights, meals as specified in the itinerary (B=breakfast, L=lunch and D=dinner), professional guide services, 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, time in the photography blind if scheduled, 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 at 1:00 PM on November 9; 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 November 16 we plan to have a nice breakfast, then head to the airport, arriving there by 11:00 AM for flights out after 12:30 PM.

Photo Credits

Fall Arizona, Peg Abbott (PA); Canyon Wren, PA; Mexican Chickadee, PA; AZ Group, Hugh Simmons (HS); Sandhill Cranes, PA; Western Meadowlark, HS; Violet-crowned Hummingbird, HS.

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