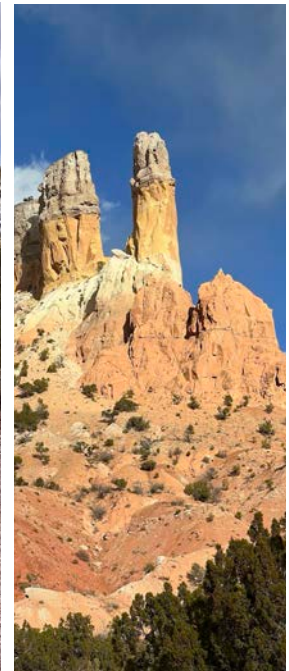


New Mexico Nature & Culture | Dec. 3 – 10, 2023 | Trip Report | by Bryan Calk



Guides Kathleen Hall and Bryan Calk with participants Karen, Ann, Lynne, Howard, Joan, Margaret, Charlotte, Bill, and Kathy



Sun., Dec. 3 Old Town | Rio Grande Nature Center

Today we met up at the Hotel Albuquerque at Old Town, a charming hotel with traditional southwestern flare, situated directly adjacent to Historic Old Town, Albuquerque's original (300+ years old) neighborhood. Many of our group arrived early and spent the morning exploring independently, and in the afternoon most of us headed to Rio Grande Nature Center State Park for our first bit of birding. Out on the ponds we found a variety of waterfowl, got to study the differences between Canada and Cackling Geese and admire the beauty of the Wood Ducks. We learned about how historical flooding along the banks of the river created important and fragile habitats that allowed for the growth of the Rio Grande (or Freemont) Cottonwoods forests along the river (locally called the bosque). We also learned how these trees send out branches that sprawl horizontally and don't get as tall as other varieties which helps to shade and cool their roots and prevent evaporation. Next, we headed over to Los Poblanos Open Space where we got to see some Sandhill Cranes feeding at close range in



the mowed agricultural field in front of a beautiful sunset. We then had dinner together at a local winery and bistro, sampling some local whites and reds and some great food with a New Mexican flare.

Mon., Dec. 4 Sandia Crest | Bernardo WMA | Socorro

We enjoyed breakfast at the hotel restaurant before packing our bags and heading out for a long day in the field. We started by heading up to Sandia Crest, the top of the Sandia Mountains right outside of Albuquerque sitting at 10,678 feet in elevation. Snow draped over the firs and spruces as wind swept up from the ridge with Albuquerque, sitting about 5000 feet below us. We sat and waited for a set of very special winter guests to this crest, and our patience was rewarded when all three species of Rosie Finch dropped in from the crisp blue sky! There were many individual Black Rosy-finches, including some stunning males with bright pink in the wings and belly. There was also a handful of Brown-capped and even a couple of Gray-crowned (one Hepburn's subspecies and one of the nominate subspecies). We sat and watched them come to visit a few times, and between their visits we were kept entertained by Mountain Chickadees, Dark-eyed Juncos (Gray-headed), and Red Crossbills.

After a couple hours at the crest, we headed back down the mountain, making a couple stops along the way which rewarded us with an Abert's Squirrel with its luxuriously fluffy coat of silver, white, and sooty gray and dramatic long ear tufts. Lunch was at a local café that doubled as a mercantile/nursery. They seated us in a heated tent all to ourselves that gave us a nice view of the bright, clear sky and we enjoyed a delicious meal with very fresh food with clever flavors. Then we headed on our drive south to Socorro, with detour to cruise through the Ladd S. Gordon Bernardo Waterfowl Management Area. Along the auto tour route here, we got our first taste of the large congregations of Sandhill Cranes and Snow Geese that can be found along the Rio Grande Valley corridor. Other highlights were a very cooperative Northern Harrier and some nice looks at dark and light morphs of the western subspecies of Red-tailed Hawks. Finally, we made it down to Socorro and got checked into our accommodations before heading out to dinner at a local bar and grill.

Tues., Dec. 5 Bosque del Apache NWR | Waterfowl and Cranes

Before the sun was up, we rallied ourselves and raced down to Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge where we set out to witness one of nature's grand spectacles: the pre-dawn fly-in and fly-out of the Snow Goose flock. The roosting geese all gather together about 30 minutes before sunrise, and we could watch as they came in from the horizon first in a few small groups, then in a massive wave that started as a distant rumble and climaxed in a chaotic swirling of geese. After settling in, they seemed like they were chatting with each other for a while about how their evenings went and spent while getting some good wing stretches in. We entertained ourselves during this period by watching a few American Coots that were foraging just a couple of feet away



from where we stood on the banks of the pond. A few blackbird flocks moved around the wetlands, and some crows and Great-tailed Grackles moved overhead. Then suddenly the mass congregation of Snow Geese decided it was time to head out to their foraging grounds for the day, and they left as if they were a single massive organism, creating a sound like a huge wave crashing or an airplane taking off.

After shaking off the “goosebumps” the spectacle gave us, we headed back towards the refuge visitor center with a stop to view a pair of Bald Eagles that were surveying the pond from a picturesque perch. Around the visitor center we first had a tailgate hot chocolate party where we all warmed up a bit with a hot beverage in hand. On a walk around the grounds, we encountered a number of great birds like Gambel’s Quail and a Yellow-headed Blackbird hiding among the Red-winged. We took a moment to check out the visitor center itself and its exhibits on the refuge (and gift shop of course!). Then we headed back into the van to continue driving around the rest of the refuge, combing through its ponds and large flocks of waterfowl, finding Long-billed Dowitchers, Hooded Mergansers, and even a Long-tailed Duck, a continuing rarity. Besides the birds we also had a couple of exciting mammal encounters with a bobcat that darted away from us and a couple of lounging coyotes napping right next to the flocks of waterfowl and Sandhill Cranes.

Naturalist Journeys guide and lunch delivery hero Dave Mehlman met us with some yummy sandwiches from a local co-op. After eating, we headed back into the refuge to check one side road where we found the continuing White-tailed Kites, another rare bird for this area. We even got to watch it hunt over the field and successfully catch a small rodent, flying right over us with it in its grasp. We then took the scenic route back to Socorro, stopping for a nice Harlan’s Hawk. Dinner at the Jackson Ranch Steakhouse did not disappoint and was packed with the local crowd.

Wed., Dec. 6 Estancia Valley | Madrid | Santa Fe

This morning we started by making our way north along the scenic route to Santa Fe. At Bernardo we turned east and crossed over into the Estancia Valley, a hot bed for raptors in its sprawling short grass prairies. Almost immediately we were rewarded with a pair of Ferruginous Hawks sitting on the same pole, one a dark morph male and the other a light morph female. Just a little further down the road, a Prairie Falcon accommodated us for some nice views through the scope. As we drove along the valley, we passed many Red-tails, more



Ferruginous, and many American Kestrels, and enjoyed some surreal scenery. The morning light shone over the gently rolling hills with scattered junipers and pinons and the vast expanses of straw-colored grasslands dotted with cholla. After a couple more stops for things like Merlin and Loggerhead Shrike, we made it to the small artist community of Madrid, tucked into the foothills between Albuquerque and Santa Fe. Here, we enjoyed lunch at the Mineshaft Tavern, full of character and delicious food. The drive to Santa Fe continued through rolling foothills, covered in Pinon-Juniper Woodland, with dramatic vistas of the valleys and grassland below us. Finally we made it to our warm and inviting lodging at Hotel Santa Fe. Since we had a bit of time, we quickly went out to the Santa Fe Canyon Preserve to do a short walk to find some birds and were rewarded with Oregon, Pink-sided and Gray-headed Dark-eyed Juncos, Townsend's Solitaire, and Bewick's Wren in a flurry of activity. From the hotel, we caught a shuttle out to dinner at a classic New Mexican restaurant with delicious chile-smothered entrees and a robust drink menu. On the ride home, we passed by the Santa Fe Plaza and its beautiful light show and historic architecture dotted with glowing luminarias for the Christmas season.

Thurs., Dec. 7

Rio Grande Gorge | Millicent Rogers Museum | Taos Pueblo

After a hearty breakfast with options like blue corn pancakes and huevos rancheros, we headed out to spend the day around Taos. We started with a stop at the overlook of the Rio Grande Gorge, an 800 foot chasm where the river cut its course through the rift valley formed from the expanding continental plates. In the parking lot a few Canyon Towhees were hopping around, but we were all too busy marveling at the stunning beauty of this dramatic canyon cut out of an otherwise flat sagebrush plain. We stopped in at the Millicent Rogers museum, where her collection of Native American artifacts and art that varied pottery to jewelry to baskets from prehistory to modern day really gave us a beautiful insight into the rich, cultural heritage of this region. We then had lunch in a private dining room at a downtown Taos eatery before spending a little bit of time wandering around the plaza and its shops. Finally, we stopped in at the Taos Pueblo where a young Pueblo woman gave us a guided tour, covering the history of the Pueblo itself and its people, along with their struggles with colonization by the Spanish and the US. We also learned about how the Pueblo people live today, and how the Pueblo itself was physically created. As she spoke at one of her stops on the tour, a group of Pinyon Jays flew directly overhead calling loudly – a pretty fortuitous sighting as these nomadic birds are often hard to track down. We took the High Road back to Santa Fe to take in another beautiful sunset as we wound up and down through the mountains surrounded by pines and aspens. Back in Santa Fe, we went through our species list and headed out to dinner at La Plazuela.



Fri., Dec. 8 **Poshuouinge Pueblo | Abiquiu | Ghost Ranch**

The first stop of our outing today was in Espanola right along the banks of the Rio Grande to look for ducks in the river and in a nearby pond. We were rewarded with a smattering of waterfowl including some beautiful Buffleheads diving in the river and some Gadwall and a couple of Ring-necked Ducks. Next, we stopped at the Poshuouinge Pueblo ruins site and hiked the trail to the top of the mesa which overlooked the rubble that remained from this once bustling community. On this invigorating hike, we saw some dramatic low clouds looking as though they were grazing the earth, dusting it with the lightest snow. At one point along the hike, a pair of Townsend's Solitaires foraged in the fruiting junipers down the hillside below us.

Next, we stopped in at the Georgia O'Keefe Welcome Center and had a delicious lunch at the Abiquiu Inn right next door with dishes inspired by Georgia herself. Quickly though we were off to the Ghost Ranch where we were taken on a landscape tour of the painted desert area of the property. The stunning rock formations with shades of red and purple, white and yellow formed a dramatic scene that made it obvious why this place was such an inspiration to a number of artists over the years. Along the route, our tour bus was descended upon by a large and roving flock of Pin yon Jays that gave incredible views from every window around the bus - an incredible moment of serendipity! Thankfully we had the bus to ourselves, and our guide was more than happy to stop for us to enjoy the birds between stories of the history of the ranch and Georgia's life and inspirations. Finally, we headed back to Santa Fe where we had dinner at a local farm to table salad restaurant.

Sat., Dec. 9 **Bandelier National Monument | Los Alamos | Santa Fe**

Today we headed to Bandelier National Monument, situated in a steep canyon made of rhyolitic tuff from the explosion of the nearby Valles Caldera. In the sides of this cliff are the ruins of a variety of dwellings and other buildings from the Pueblo people who lived here full-time for centuries. To this day, the canyon still serves as an important cultural site for native people, and walking through the remains of these once-thriving communities really connected us to both the communities who used to live here, taught us how they lived, and reminded us of their deep connection to nature. Along our walk, we saw beautifully preserved paintings from the inside of their homes, we climbed ladders and checked out the cave Kiva, and saw some great birds like Canyon Wren, Pygmy Nuthatch, Bushtit, and Acorn Woodpecker, and Williamson's Sapsucker.



After lunch at a great trendy local café called Pig and Fig, our group separated into two different tracks for the afternoon with some of us heading back to Santa Fe to explore the plaza, shops, and galleries around downtown. The rest of us headed into Los Alamos where we explored the Bradbury Science Museum which covered the history and current research on nuclear energy and other projects run by the Los Alamos National Laboratory. As we checked out some of the historical structures around Bathtub Row and the Oppenheimer House, we were greeted by a herd of mule deer including a very impressive old buck with quite a rack of antlers! When we all gathered back together at the hotel, we enjoyed a nice final dinner together with a beautiful performance by a professional native flute player, dressed in all white regalia including a full feathered headdress.

Sun., Dec. 10 **Santa Fe | Albuquerque Departures**

This morning a few of us rose early for one more chance for some final birding back at the Santa Fe Canyon Preserve. The trails had gotten a bit icy, but we still managed to have a beautiful hike and even found one more new bird for the trip, a Cassin's Finch! We enjoyed one last New Mexican breakfast before leisurely making our way to the Albuquerque airport for departures, all too soon!

Photos: Group at Ghost Ranch (Bryan Calk - BC), Ghost Ranch rock formations (BC), Merlin (BC), Abert's Squirrel (BC), Red Crossbill (BC), Dawn at Bosque Del Apache NWR (BC), Sandhill Crane (BC), Snow and Ross's Geese (Charlotte Morris - CM), Northern Harrier and Red-tailed Hawk (BC), Scenic (CM), Canyon Wren (BC), Pygmy Nuthatch (BC), Taos Pueblo (BC), Pond scenic (CM), Pinyon Jays (BC), Abiquiu landscape (BC), Dinner ft. Native American flute (BC), Mule Deer (CM)

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