

Arizona: Sky Island Winter Birding | Feb 3-9, 2024 | Trip Report | by Chris Harbard



With guides Chris Harbard and Troy Corman, and participants Buck, Sandy, Melissa, Marcie, Mark and Toby.



Sat., Feb. 3

Hummingbirds, Flycatchers and a Dinner

We all met at Tucson International Airport and headed straight for Highway 19 that would take us south to Tubac. Our first stop was at San Xavier de Bac Mission, a beautiful historic Catholic Mission dating from the late 1600s. After a quick visit inside the church, we explored the small hill to the east and found a range of species including Gila and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, Northern Harrier, Say's Phoebe and Lark Sparrow. Heading further down the highway, we came to Green Valley where we stopped at Desert Meadows Park, a small botanical garden that attracts lots of birds. Here we had great views of Broad-billed and Costa's Hummingbirds, with the latter displaying. The tiny, desert Verdins put on a show, Abert's Towhees were evident and a surprise fly-over by a Prairie Falcon was a treat.



Next was a short stop at Amado Water Treatment Plant where we saw six duck species, Eared Grebe and Great and Snowy Egrets. We reached Tubac and went to look at the mighty Santa Cruz River, which is more of a stream. There were few birds at the bridge apart from a fly-by of 32 Common Ravens. Then close by we found a fenced area with Black and Say's Phoebes plus Vermilion and Gray Flycatchers... a real flycatcher-fest! Now it was time to check in at Tubac Golf Resort and Spa, set right by the river, with its own flock of American Wigeon and a few other ducks in the various water traps. We found our rooms and relaxed for a while before joining to compile our first bird list of the day, and then heading out for dinner at Elvira's. Usually described as "eclectic," this restaurant is exceptional in terms of its décor, atmosphere and menu. After a fantastic meal we were all tired and ready to retire.

Sun., Feb. 4 Waxwings, Woodpeckers and a Kingfisher

The day started out very cold! We joined for breakfast at 7 a.m. and enjoyed the delightful menu at The Stables Restaurant at the resort. By the parked van we found a lovely flock of Cedar Waxwings perched in a tree and feeding on nearby berries, and a few Phainopeplas were sitting up high. We jumped into the van, excited to be heading up to the legendary Madera Canyon. On the way we stopped in the lower grass and mesquite desert at Troy's suggestion, and he played a short song that immediately attracted a pair of Rufous-winged Sparrows, a local specialty that can be difficult to see, and which a few of us saw before they disappeared. Continuing up the canyon, we soon left the mesquite behind as we climbed into an area of oaks and junipers and sycamores as we reached the canyon proper. Stopping briefly at a picnic area rest stop, we saw our first Mexican Jays, Acorn Woodpeckers and Bridled Titmice. Just up the road we parked at Santa Rita Lodge, a birding hotspot if ever there was one. Settling into the chairs by the feeders, we were soon watching a bewildering selection of birds including Wild Turkeys (the large Gould's subspecies), a Rivoli's Hummingbird, often too close for a photo, Arizona Woodpecker, three races of Dark-eyed Junco, Yellow-eyed Junco, Spotted Towhee and a pair of Hepatic Tanagers. A drive to the upper parking area added nothing new, so we headed back down to Green Valley to have lunch at the Arizona Family Restaurant, and despite being quite full, we were soon served and enjoyed their lovely salads and sandwiches.

Next, we headed south to Tumacacori where we stopped at Santa Gertudis Lane, which leads down to the Santa Cruz River and the Anza trail. The trees along the trail were filled with pyracantha bushes, laden with berries, always attractive to a range of species. A Hermit Thrush proved elusive but was eventually seen well, and among a group of White-crowned Sparrows, a rare White-throated Sparrow was seen. Northern Cardinals looked at



home beside the bright red berries, and a Northern Mockingbird defended his stash. We reached the river where we saw a couple of pairs of Mexican Ducks, then suddenly Troy called out that he had seen a Kingfisher, and not just any kingfisher. Along the river in this area is a pair of rare Green Kingfishers, and one of them was perched just downstream. We quickly set up a scope and distant views were had by most before it flashed off. Up in the cottonwoods along the river, calling Gila Woodpeckers and several Yellow-rumped Warblers were found. It was now mid-afternoon, and we set off for a relaxing siesta at the resort. Suitably rested, we gathered to do the list before having dinner at The Stables Restaurant.

Mon., Feb. 5 A Lake, Some Sparrows and a Birthday

After breakfast it was time to check out of the resort, but not before one last look at the bushes just opposite our rooms. Here Troy had seen a Rufous-crowned Sparrow the previous afternoon, and sure enough there it was, showing well in the mesquite along with several Lark Sparrows. We packed the van and began our journey across to the Huachuca Mountains, leaving the Santa Ritas and Santa Cruz Valley behind. We drove down the highway towards Nogales, on the Mexican border, then turned east towards Patagonia. We visited Patagonia Lake State Park where we spent a productive couple of hours. The feeders by the information center had Rufous-winged Sparrow, Anna's Hummingbird, Inca Doves and Pyrrhuloxia along with a lot of noisy Great-tailed Grackles. Down at the edge of the lake, we set up scopes and watched several groups of Eared Grebes, a beautiful male Cinnamon Teal, several Common Mergansers, some Neotropic Cormorants and a Great Blue Heron. Some feeders near the birding trail produced a Green-tailed Towhee and delightful Black-throated Sparrows, plus a White-throated Sparrow. Virginia Rail and Sora could be heard in the reeds, but never came into view. Some Tree Swallows made it seem like spring, and among the ducks we found Redhead and Gadwall.

We arrived in Patagonia in time for a delicious lunch at the Gathering Grounds. Then it was just a short ride to the Paton Center for Hummingbirds, a world-famous location that rarely fails to deliver. It lived up to its name with four species of hummingbird (good for winter) including a very early male Rufous Hummingbird, a couple of flashy Broad-billed Hummingbirds and the one the center is famous for: Violet-crowned Hummingbird. A Downy Woodpecker was feeding on a pecan tree in the parking lot, a rarity for SE Arizona, and was joined by several Ladder-backed and Gila Woodpeckers plus Pine Siskins and a couple of Orange-crowned Warblers. The feeders in the back had Curve-billed Thrasher, Song and Lincoln's Sparrows and both Abert's and Canyon Towhees. Arizona Gray Squirrels were feeding on the pecans and other delicacies available. Down the road we watched a privet bush in the hope that a Rufous-backed Robin might appear, but sadly it let us down.



On route to the Casa de San Pedro B&B, near Sierra Vista, we drove through the grasslands by Sonoita where some sharp eyes spotted a group of Pronghorns on the nearby slopes. Stopping quickly, we were able to pick out a few “pronged” males among the females. Casa de San Pedro is fabulously situated along the San Pedro River, with feeders and trails to explore. Right by the parking lot was a pair of Cactus Wrens, Arizona’s state bird. We were greeted by Patrick and Karl, the owners, who showed everyone to their rooms just off the central courtyard. While people were settling in, Chris spotted a Greater Roadrunner, a bird everyone wanted to see. Troy ran to tell get others and when Buck protested about his stocking feet, he declared, “You don’t need shoes!” This proved to be the case as the bird was just by the entrance to the Casa, and Buck, who just happened to have his birthday today, declared that this was the best possible present. Soon it was time for the wildlife list, followed by dinner, which was delightful and included something special for our birthday boy. Plans for tomorrow we left up in the air, as the weather forecast suggested that a trip to Whitewater Draw might have to change.

Tues., Feb. 6 Cranes, Buntings and a Gull

Thankfully the weather seemed pretty good, although wind was forecast for later. After a lovely breakfast, we selected our picnic lunch from a range of items the Casa had on offer and then jumped into the van to head for Whitewater Draw and the Sulphur Springs Valley. The drive took us east, past Bisbee, where signs of the old mines are everywhere. Out into the countryside, the hills are covered with ocotillos and mesquite. Soon we reached Central Road, a long, straight road with plenty of power poles, perfect for perching raptors. The first few were all Red-tailed Hawks, but then there was one that looked different, a Ferruginous Hawk. We pulled off the road and got the scopes out for a good look at this marvelous bird. Every winter they come down this far south, but you have to be lucky to find one. We continued to Whitewater but decided to explore some of the roads for sparrows and thrashers. This proved to be a good move as we found a Bendire’s Thrasher and a flock of 75 Lark Buntings, which posed well for us and included several fairly black males. In the fields were many meadowlarks, most of them Western, but also several Chihuahuan. All the while Sandhill Cranes could be seen and heard, circling and then landing at the back of Whitewater Draw, so we decided it was time to head there.

We parked and walked the trail around the raised bank overlooking the flooded area. On a fence post was a Loggerhead Shrike that gave us some nice views, and some Killdeer and Least Sandpipers were found along the water’s edge. Way at the back we could just make out hundreds of Sandhill Cranes, with more arriving all the time. A couple of Snow Geese were resting on the water, and a lone Coyote was observed stalking the perimeter, no doubt dreaming that duck was on the menu. Plenty of wildfowl were on show: Green-winged



Teal, Northern Shovelers, Northern Pintails and a few Cinnamon Teal. A couple of wintering Turkey Vultures flew lazily by, uncommon at this time of year. In trees at the back of a pond, a Great Horned Owl was roosting, and in the vegetation at the edge of the pond, among many White-crowned Sparrows, was a single Swamp Sparrow. We headed north towards the town of Elfrida and stopped at the park to have lunch, reflecting on what a good morning it had been while watching Black and Say's Phoebes pump their tails.

The plan for the rest of the afternoon was to visit Lake Cochise, near Willcox, watching for raptors and sparrows on the way. As we travelled north along Kansas Settlement Road, we stopped at a dairy farm with a couple of pools, just visible from the road. Hundreds of waterfowl were visible, and among 700 American Wigeon we managed to pick out a drake Eurasian Wigeon. Perched on the feed lots at the back on one pool were many blackbirds, including Yellow-headed, Red-winged and Brewer's, plus (appropriately) a few Brown-headed Cowbirds. Our last stop was Lake Cochise, always good for waterbirds. We stopped first at a small pool by the golf course, and nearby we spotted a group of Scaled Quail. We moved to the main pond, where some other birders had stopped, and looked out at the lake. A gull flew in front of the van, always worth checking as any gull is unusual in Arizona. Chris and Troy both exclaimed that it looked like a Black-legged Kittiwake and immediately tried to get photographs as the bird flew out onto the lake, almost invisible against the waves. It was still visible at the back of the lake, and so we drove up to the other group of birders to find out if they had seen it – they hadn't. As it turned and flew back towards us, one in their group shouted, "It's a Little Gull!" ...and so it was. With closer views, and better photographs, it was obvious that our first suggestion was wrong and that this was in fact Arizona's third record of Little Gull. The weather had started to deteriorate, with the wind picking up, and so we decided to head back to the Casa, very pleased with our day. Back at the Casa, we did the bird list and enjoyed another wonderful dinner, joined by Chris's wife, Mari.

Wed., Feb. 7 River Walks, a Harrier, and a Quail

After a wonderful breakfast, we headed into Sierra Vista to buy sandwiches for lunch, then continued down to the Environmental Operations Park where there is a viewing platform that looks over the Water Treatment Plant. Little water was visible, but there were several birds, most notably a couple of Northern Harriers, including a melanistic female. Some Yellow-headed Blackbirds flew around the areas of reeds, some Green-winged Teal and Gadwall passed by, and then a lovely flock of Horned Larks flew in and landed, giving nice scope views. Next stop was a few miles down the road at San Pedro House, an old ranch house next to some massive cottonwoods, with feeders, trails and a lovely gift shop. Around the feeders were Curve-billed Thrashers, Canyon and Abert's Towhees and lots of Lesser Goldfinches. We took the trail down to the river and explored to the



south, as far as the Kingfisher Pond. The tall cottonwoods along the river were just starting to form catkins prior to their leaves appearing, and we found Gila Woodpeckers, a Black Phoebe and a couple of Bridled Titmice. At the pond was a lone American Coot. Walking back through the grassland, we saw several Vesper Sparrows with their white-edged tails. Leaving the river, we drove back to Sierra Vista, passing through a suburban area where we failed to find the resident Harris's Hawks. We did, however, discover a family of Javelinas, a.k.a. Collared Peccaries, who often wreak havoc in gardens by digging up roots and eating cacti.

We decided to eat lunch at the Carr Canyon Picnic Area with views of the waterfall that flows when winter snows in the Huachucas are melting. Our last stop for the afternoon was the Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary, formerly famous as Mary Jo Ballator's home, and a mecca for birders. The weather was not in our favor, with the wind getting up and even a little sleet forming. We took shelter on the veranda and watched the feeders that were alive with birds. About 100 Lesser Goldfinches and Pine Siskins were perched in the trees, taking turns at the feeders. In a wood pile around back there was a sudden movement and a pair of Montezuma Quail slowly emerged, the female first, followed by a gorgeous male. A group of Bushtits arrived at the seed block and an Arizona Woodpecker hung from a log feeder. White-breasted Nuthatches and Bridled Titmice also joined the throng. In the same woodpile at the back, now devoid of quail, a White-throated Sparrow appeared, the third of the trip! Feeling cold but pleased with our sightings, we decided to call it a day and return to the warmth of the Casa with its never-ending supply of coffee, tea and pie!!

When we arrived, the weather was completely different. The sun was out, so we decided to explore one of the trails heading north from the Casa. We met another birder who suggested a few places we could check. The walk was very pleasant, and we found Vesper Sparrows, Curve-billed Thrashers and in the cottonwoods lots of Gila Woodpeckers. We ventured toward the river and soon heard a flicker, then another. We located the birds just as two more joined them. Although distant, it was possible to confirm, with a scope, that there was actually a pair of red-shafted Northern Flickers and also a pair of Gilded Flickers, with their golden-yellow shafts. There are one or two pairs of this desert specialty along the river, and we had luckily found one of them. Back at the Casa we compiled our day's list and enjoyed another marvelous dinner, once again joined by Chris's wife plus a couple of local birding friends.

Thurs., Feb. 8 Cold Canyons, Creepers and a Warbler

Today was our last day and looking out of the dining room window just before breakfast, yet another White-throated Sparrow was seen. After a splendid breakfast, we headed up to explore the Nature Conservancy's Ramsey Canyon Preserve. Parking outside the Visitor Center, we immediately heard a Painted Redstart, a



beautiful black, white and red warbler that overwinters in small numbers, and we were able to watch it actively feeding in the oaks and junipers. It was still cold, and the sun was only just starting to shine into the canyon as we walked up the trail. We were lucky to be joined by Dan Hoobler, one of Ramsey's volunteer docents who told us all about the amazing history of the inhabitants who mined there. A trio of Brown Creepers put on a great show, and a roosting Great Horned Owl was spied up in a tree. A couple of Red-naped Sapsuckers were seen, although they always seemed to hide at the back of the trunk. It was nice to see the very tame deer, the diminutive "Coue's" White-tailed Deer subspecies. Lunch at the Casa beckoned, and we were pleased to get in from the cold to enjoy a lovely meal with more pie for dessert!

The afternoon was open for a visit to Bisbee, and instead of going to look for more cranes at Whitewater Draw, everyone opted for a second visit to Ash Canyon. Bisbee is a historic mining town and tourist attraction. One street in Lowell, just outside the main town, is like stepping back into the past, complete with old store fronts and gas pumps, with old vehicles parked in front. Driving on, we passed the "Lavender Pit," a huge hole in the ground, part of the copper mining that Bisbee was famous for. The town is built along the steep slopes of the canyon with original miner's houses still perched high above the road. In town there are still many old buildings, including hotels with balconies, and a huge stairway up the side of the canyon with hundreds of steps. Hoping that slightly better weather would mean more birds, we left Bisbee behind and returned to Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary. The previous day's bad weather must have pushed the birds out as there were relatively few present. We managed great views of Anna's Hummingbird, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Bridled Titmouse, Orange-crowned and Yellow-rumped Warblers, Pyrrhuloxia and of course, White-throated Sparrow. Back at the Casa it was time to start packing and get ready for dinner at Mimosa Pizzeria, a few miles up the road in Hereford. We had dropped Chris off at his house to change and would meet him at the restaurant later. It was a delightful farewell meal, and we all reminisced about the trip and its highlights before it was time to head back to the Casa.

Fri., Feb. 9 Farewell

Chris joined us for the last breakfast, and afterwards we said goodbye to him as co-leader Troy was driving everyone back to Tucson. Ever vigilant, Troy managed to add two more birds to the list while driving through Sierra Vista: Peregrine Falcon, and the very tricky Chihuahuan Raven, which likes to hang out near the malls. The drive back to the airport was otherwise uneventful, and soon it was time for everyone to say goodbye and make

their way back home. The final tally for the trip was a very satisfactory 130 bird species, plus nine mammals and one amphibian.

Photos: Group (Chris Harbard - CH), Gila Woodpecker (CH), Verdin (Mark Martin - MM), Bridled Titmouse (CH), Hepatic Tanager female (MM), Rivoli's Hummingbird (MM), Montezuma Quail (MM), San Xavier del Bac Mission (CH), Vermilion Flycatcher (MM), Prairie Falcon (CH), Mexican Jay (MM), Lark Sparrow (MM), Hepatic Tanager (CH), American Coot (MM), Phainopepla (MM), Pyrrhuloxia (MM), Group at Patagonia State Park (Toby Ditz - TD), Violet-Crowned Hummingbird (MM), Anna's Hummingbird (MM), Pronghorn (TD), Greater Roadrunner (MM), Sandhill Cranes (TD), White-winged Doves (Troy Corman - TC), Pintail Duck (MM), Carr Canyon (TC), White-breasted Nuthatch (MM), Rainbow (TC), Acorn Woodpecker (TC), View from Ash Canyon (TC), Great Horned Owl (MM), Coyote (TD), Mountain views (Marcie Finlay)