

Arizona Monsoon Madness

August 25 – September 1, 2024 | Trip Report

by Bryan Calk



Guide Bryan Calk with participants Gary, Connie, Philip, Deb, Anne, Frank, and Susan



Sun., Aug. 25 Tucson | Wilcox | Portal

The saguaros of the low desert greeted us in Tucson as we began our adventure across southeast Arizona in the monsoon season! Our first stop was at the twin lakes of Willcox where piles of shorebirds had assembled on the flooded flats. Hundreds of American Avocets, phalaropes, and other sandpipers had us scanning back and forth for a while to find all the hidden goodies. Meanwhile, a young Peregrine Falcon buzzed the flock a few times to keep things exciting, and a Chihuahuan Meadowlark sang from the surrounding grasslands.



We continued on the road to Portal, which had many highlights! The most dramatic involved the monsoon show that was taking place in the afternoon. The clouds were bursting on the horizons like waterfalls from the sky, a rainbow appeared in patches, and lightning bolts flashed against the cool dark gray clouds. We crossed a few low water crossings that were starting to fill with muddy water from the monsoon rains on the mountains above. A Western Diamondback Rattlesnake was crossing the road, and allowed for incredible looks as we all got out to admire it. Finally, we made it to our lodging at Cave Creek Ranch at the heart of the Chiricahua Mountains. The setting couldn't be more picturesque, and we spent some time watching the feeders as Blue-throated Mountain-gems and Arizona Woodpeckers came in for dinner.

We had a yummy catered meal in the ranch house and went through our first checklist routine.

Mon., Aug. 26 Cave Creek Canyon | Paradise | Owling

We woke today to the sounds of acorn woodpeckers and the smell of sizzling bacon and eggs. After a nice hot breakfast, we headed up the canyon to the South Fork of Cave Creek. We hiked the trail here for about a mile as it followed the water upstream. Getting our first taste of madrean oak woodlands, we had highlights like Painted Redstarts, a surprise Greater Pewee, Grace's Warblers, and more, but the grand prize certainly was a beautiful male Elegant Trogon. We first heard his calls echoing from across the stream, but eventually we were able to track him down and get nice looks. It was truly a treat to have not only this bird but the whole canyon to ourselves on a beautiful cool monsoon morning.

After our hike we stopped in at the Southwest Research Station operated by the American Museum of Natural History. During our visit, hummingbird banders were conducting a training session, so we got to watch as traps were pulled and birds were processed in real time. A few from our group were even able to release Blue-throated Mountain-gems! After enjoying watching this process and watching the feeders for a while, we made one more stop for the morning at local legend Dave Jasper's feeders in his yard. The action was steady and we picked up new species like Rufous-winged Sparrow, two orioles, and Pyrrhuloxia.

After lunch, we headed up the road to Paradise where we sat on the porch of Jackie and Winston and watched their feeders for a while. Rivoli's and Rufous were competing with the Black-chinned Hummingbirds for space on the feeders, while Winston told us about the colorful history of the boom and bust of the community and its mining industry, among other fun local stories and tidbits. It is always a treat to connect with the locals!



We headed back to Cave Creek Ranch for a little downtime before heading to dinner at Peg Abbot's home in Portal. Her house is such a beautiful setting for taking in the grandeur of the mountains and sunset, and we shared stories over a delicious local dish. We took a short walk down the driveway after dinner to listen to the Common Poorwills singing and we found a couple of Mexican Spadefoot toads recently emerged from their burrows after the rains. Finally, local guide James took us back up the canyon in search of owls under a blanket of stars, and we had great success with a Whiskered Screech-owl, and as we pulled back into the lodge, a pair of Gray Foxes scampered off through the driveway.

Tues., Aug. 27

Chiricahua Mountains | Casa de San Pedro

Today we packed our bags and headed up the mountain leaving beautiful Cave Creek Canyon behind. Up near the top of the Chiricahuas we explored Barfoot Park; a forest of towering Ponderosa and Apache Pines and Douglas Fir. Soon after arriving we found our first mixed flock of songbirds and the action would continue to come in waves as we wandered up and down the slopes under the trees. Mexican Chickadees were one of our first highlights, mixing in with the Pygmy Nuthatches and Grace's and Hermit Warblers. There were a few small puddles of rainwater that were also attracting the birds, and Red-faced Warbler and Yellow-eyed Juncos were definitely our favorites we saw coming to get a drink!

Around the corner at Rustler Park we had a picnic lunch as the afternoon clouds began to build keeping us cool, and Western Bluebirds kept us entertained while we ate. Down the hill in Pinery Canyon, we spent a while wandering through the trees searching for the endangered Mexican Spotted Owl. After a while we finally had to call the search off and continue down the road, but not long after departing, James and Carol (locals who were along with us for the day) chased us down to tell us they had found the owls shortly after we left!! We turned around and there they were, two young siblings hatched this spring that only had a few tufts of down left on them.

After enjoying the owls, we continued down the road eventually making it across to the Casa de San Pedro B&B where we were welcomed by our hosts Karl and Patrick and ate another delicious catered meal (and pie!). After we ate, Elissa from the Naturalist Journeys office came to give a presentation going over her work with banding hummingbirds and some key points for hummingbird ID. What a full and exciting day!



Wed., Aug. 28

Miller Canyon | Bisbee

We started birding before breakfast at the grounds of Casa de San Pedro to see what might be found around the grassland habitat surrounding the property. We started off strong with some Lazuli Buntings and Blue Grosbeaks, Swainson's Hawks were zipping around, and a few Vermilion Flycatchers dazzled us. A Cassin's Sparrow was a nice monsoon season specialty find, and just as we were sitting down to breakfast, we had to head back outside to get a look at the roosting Great Horned Owls in the cottonwood just outside of the Casa. After breakfast we headed to Miller Canyon and the hummingbird feeders at Beatty's Guest Ranch. The feeders were totally buzzing like a bee hive of hummingbirds. Our standout favorite was our first Violet-crowned of the trip that was posing really nicely for the camera. Rivoli's fought off the smaller species and Elissa taught us more about their behavior and ID, great reinforcement after her talk the night before. The hike further up the canyon was scenic and peaceful, with some nice sightings like Western Flycatcher and we admired the beautiful flora like the manzanitas and madrone.

Back at Casa we took our lunch and relaxed a bit for the afternoon before heading to Bisbee for a tour through the mining and history museum and a walk through the historical downtown main street with its shops and art galleries. This quaint town captures some of the local charm and unique culture of southeast Arizona and is settled in the picturesque foothills of the Mule Mountains. After exploring we headed to the Copper Pig, a local gem of a restaurant with unique and delicious entrees and specials.

We went through our checklist at the casa before heading outside to wander a bit looking for owls. We were successful in finding a pair of Western Screech-owls duetting, and we even saw a pair of ghostly Barn Owls floating over the grassy fields hunting for mice.

Thurs., Aug. 29

Ramsey Canyon | Ash Canyon

Being at Casa de San Pedro there is a lot to explore, so this morning we took another walk before breakfast this time down to the riverbanks to bird under the shade of the cottonwood trees. We stopped to let the cows go by and watched the Gila Woodpeckers fly back and forth from the trees. Our big goal of the morning though was to catch a glimpse of the Gray Hawks that hunt from the dense canopy. After whistling and screaming up a storm we eventually got to see them flying through and above the trees. Scratch pancakes and hot coffee called us back to the kitchen though!



We then headed out to the Nature Conservancy's Ramsey Canyon Preserve - the crown jewel of the Huachuca Mountains. The stream here provides moisture and abundance year-round for a variety of wildlife species. In our walk we enjoyed the trees themselves with ancient sycamores, long-needled Apache Pine and the unexpected Bigtooth Maples, one of which had an old Violet-crowned Hummingbird nest. We did luck into a few flocks of birds along the way, giving us a beautiful Black-throated Gray Warbler, Buff-breasted Flycatchers, and Hutton's Vireos. After our beautiful hike, we stopped at the feeders at the Ramsey Canyon Inn and watched as Hepatic Tanagers and Bridled Titmice came in. Suddenly, a "herd" of turkey came running towards the feeding station and an operator of the inn came out and called the turkey over for some fresh peanuts! What a hysterical show and finale to a beautiful morning.

We then had a yummy lunch at a little bistro nearby with some delicious coffee, then headed back to the casa for downtime in the heat of the day where you can enjoy the lap pool, read by the fountain, watch the feeders, or walk through the trees. Late in the afternoon we gathered back up to head to Ash Canyon in the low foothills of the mountains. The Southeast Arizona Bird Observatory has done an outstanding job of creating wildlife habitat and viewing opportunities for birders here. We almost immediately saw our main target for our visit, the Lucifer Hummingbird. Several individuals were visiting the feeders and perching just inches above our heads. A young male Rufous dominated some feeders, and the constant action was almost overwhelming at times. One of the staff showed us a couple of Allen's Hummingbirds (a tough ID challenge) and we enjoyed the Arizona Gray Squirrel show as well.

As the sun set, the monsoons were building, and during dinner and on our way home we had a nice lightning show on the horizons around us.

Fri., Aug. 26 Patagonia | Nogales | Tubac

We gorged ourselves on one last meal at Casa before setting sail to the west. We popped back in to Ramsey Canyon to retrieve a lost item on our way out, and a Painted Redstart attacking his reflection in the vehicle mirrors of the parking lot was worth the trip anyway. Then onward we pressed across the grasslands and over to Patagonia. We started out on Harshaw Creek Rd. This stream often has flowing water and the large sycamores and oaks that thrive along it are a refuge for many birds. Today, we lucked into a rare Rose-throated Becard, one



of the species that originally put Patagonia on the map for birders. We also had a nice little flock that included Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet and MacGillivray's and Black-throated Gray Warblers. Next we headed to a few feeders in town, at the Arizona Birding Guides HQ and the Paton's Center for Hummingbirds. A skulking Bell's Vireo gave brief views and cooperative hummingbirds posed for photos, but an abundance and diversity of butterflies may have stolen the show.

We had a pleasant lunch at one of town's favorite sandwich joints, then spent a little time exploring the shops while a monsoon dumped heavy rain outside. On the way to Tubac, we pulled into the Patagonia Roadside Rest Area, famous for its "picnic table effect," and drove through Nogales to get a sense for the local international culture, including a look at the infamous border wall.

Finally we arrived at our lodging at the Tubac Golf Resort and settled into our rooms on the beautiful grounds. We then met for a brief walk around the property and our species checklist before heading to dinner at Wisdom's, another local favorite spot.

Sat., Aug. 31 Box Canyon | Madera Canyon | De Anza Trail

This morning after picking up some lunch, we met up with Vernie from the Naturalist Journeys staff who lives in Tucson. He was able to show us around some of the highlights of the Santa Rita mountains this morning, starting off in Box Canyon. This small but dramatic canyon was lined with ocotillo and mesquite with a bit of water and some ash and oak trees at the bottom. One of our big targets here was cooperative and in view within a few minutes of arriving - the Five-striped Sparrow. This rare and highly localized breeder is actually quite handsome for a sparrow! Next we headed to a spot where we could walk along the bottom of the canyon and find some water, and here we found a couple small flocks and some great new species for us, like Phainopepla and Varied Bunting! Along one of the rock faces, we caught our non-bird highlight of the day, a beautiful black-necked Garter snake. Who was very calm and allowed for some nice studies. As the sun was starting to warm up, we headed up to the feeders at Santa Rita Lodge in Madera Canyon. The hummingbirds and Mexican Jays were constantly looking for the next bite, with dazzling views of Rivoli's Hummingbirds up close. Another Painted Redstart entertained us with its antics, this time ruthlessly chasing any Lesser Goldfinch that came too close. We then enjoyed a peaceful picnic lunch under the shade of the oaks before taking some time off at the resort to let the clouds build up to start cooling things off.



For the afternoon, we took a little time to explore Tubac’s art and shopping district before taking a short walk along the De Anza historical trail through the cottonwood gallery forest and along the Santa Cruz River. It was impressive to see the massive piles of debris that the huge amounts of monsoon water can move, as well as the towering cottonwood trees themselves. We had some great views of Tropical Kingbirds and bathing Blue Grosbeaks here, as well as Black Phoebe and a pair of Gray Hawks that allowed nice views in the scope.

Back at the resort we went through our checklist one last time as a group, then headed to dinner.

Sun., Sept. 1 Desert Meadows Park | Sentinel Peak | Departures

On our last morning we made the most of the final hours in the desert with stops at Desert Meadows community garden in Green Valley and Sentinel Peak Park in the saguaro desert of Tucson. We were very lucky in being able to find our final target species, including Costa’s Hummingbird, Gilded Flicker, and Black-tailed Gnatcatchers. But too soon (or maybe not, it was starting to get hot being down low in the desert) we said goodbye and headed home.

Photos: Group Birding (Debbie Ellinger - DE), Acorn Woodpecker (DE), Lucifer Hummingbird (DE), Mexican Spotted Owl (DE), Greater Roadrunner (DE), Rattlesnake (BC), Arizona Woodpecker (DE), Blue-throated Mountain-gem (DE), Mexican Jay (DE), Gambel’s Quail (DE), Rivoli’s Hummingbird and female Rufous Hummingbird (DE), Lesser Goldfinch (DE), Bridled Titmouse (DE), Whiskered Screech-Owl (DE), Mexican Owl (DE), Great Horned Owl (DE), Violet-crowned Hummingbird (DE), Flame Skimmer (DE), Yellow-eyed Junco (DE), Broad-billed Hummingbird (DE), Broad-billed Hummingbird (DE), Black-necked Garter Snake (DE), Tropical Kingbird (DE), Black Phoebe (DE)