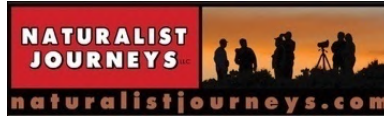


# Arizona: Sky Island Winter Birding | Jan. 18-24, 2025 | Trip Report | by Sharon Goldwasser



**NJ Guides: Chris Harbard and Sharon Goldwasser**  
**Participants: Warren, Anne, Victor, Betsy, Jane, Bob, Julie, Richard, Deirde and Ellen**



## **Sat., Jan. 18: Arrivals in Tucson | Mission San Xavier | South to Tubac**

Our group joined up at Mission San Xavier del Bac, the beautiful 18th century mission known as “The White Dove of the Desert.” Standing on the hill next to the mission grounds, we looked across the fields to the north for views of numerous Northern Harriers and Red-tailed Hawks as they foraged, perched and soared above us. A coyote hunted in the dry vegetation below us and, as we looked north through scopes, we counted 23 Crested Caracaras roaming through the field! Everyone enjoyed a lunch prepared over mesquite wood coals at a food



booth run by residents of the Tohono O’odham reservation - fry bread, Indian tacos and red chile burritos. There was time to explore the beautifully restored church before heading south.

At our second destination, Desert Meadows Park in Green Valley, we enjoyed delightful views of Costa’s and Broad-billed Hummingbirds coming in to feeders placed around the park. Northern Cardinals and Pyrrhuloxias gave us nice views along the edge of the wash, along with Verdins and wintering White-crowned Sparrows. A pair of Cactus Wrens showed off in and around the cacti for us. A Curve-billed Thrasher posed in the sun. A group of three Rufous-crowned Sparrows at the brushy edge of the rest area were a real treat.

The Amado Water Treatment plant has been hosting a selection of uncommon species for the area this winter. We were able to view them all: Ross’s Goose, Red-breasted Merganser, Greater Scaup and Hooded Mergansers, along with a great selection of more common ducks.

On our way to the Tubac Golf Resort, we made a stop at the Santa Cruz River at Bridge road in Tubac. A brilliant Vermilion Flycatcher and a flock of Western Bluebirds were getting our well-deserved attention, as some of the group glimpsed a female Hepatic Tanager more typically seen at higher elevations than Tubac. A Townsend’s Warbler alighted in a tree and we had a Black Phoebe calling and perching above the stream.

As we drove in to the resort to check in, we spotted a very handsome male Canvasback and a pair of Mexican Ducks on one of the golf course ponds. After check-in, it was time to head out for a delectable dinner at the unique and eclectic Elvira’s Restaurant in Tubac, and a chance to catch sight of a little herd of Javelina as we approached our lodgings for the night.

## **Sun., Jan 19: Green Valley WRF | Madera Canyon | Santa Gertrudis Lane | Tumacacori Mission | Anza Trail**

We had a chilly start to the day, but were treated to a great variety of dabbling and diving ducks plus a few shorebirds at the Green Valley water treatment plant. Highlights included two dazzling male Cinnamon Teals and great comparisons between Ring-necked Ducks and Lesser Scaup as they floated side-by-side.

We made our way from the water treatment plant to Proctor Road at the mouth of Madera Canyon. It was a short stop, but the Canyon Towhees could not have been more cooperative as they perched just a few feet from the parking lot. A Botteri’s Sparrow sang but never made itself visible to us. However, a few people glimpsed a Black-throated Sparrow and a Lincoln’s Sparrow here.



Our morning in Madera Canyon was especially rewarding. The Santa Rita Lodge never fails to provide close-up and often entertaining views of many species. While we watched, groups of Mexican Jays, Lesser Goldfinches and Pine Siskins came to dine at the feeders. A Rivoli’s Hummingbird visited frequently and an Arizona Woodpecker stopped by the feeders and water feature on repeated visits. The feeders brought in a brick red Hepatic Tanager and numerous other species. We continued up the canyon to the spot where a male Elegant Trogon, uncommon in winter, has been spotted regularly. We were fully rewarded with excellent views of this highly sought after species. As we awaited the appearance of the trogon, a Painted Redstart drew a lot of attention from the group. We had the opportunity to compare several types of Dark-eyed Juncos with their more southerly cousin, the Yellow-eyed Junco, at these two feeder locations.

It was time for a picnic lunch in the canyon, and then on to the Santa Cruz River at the Santa Gertrudis Lane stream crossing. We watched Lesser Goldfinches, a Gray flycatcher with its downwardly pumping tail, and got great views of a Black-throated Gray Warbler.

Our day together ended at the Tumacacori Mission, where we patiently waited for a Lawrence’s Goldfinch to appear and were not disappointed. A steady stream of birds came in to the courtyard and fountain as we sat. The group explored the mission grounds before heading back to the town of Tubac and the hotel.

A very small group decided to add on an optional “last-chance” birding walk along the De Anza trail. We couldn’t locate the Green Kingfisher but were excited to find two Rufous-backed Robins feeding in the hackberries.

Our day ended with everyone reconvening for an excellent dinner at The Stables, the restaurant at the Tubac Golf Resort where we were staying.

**Mon., Jan 20: Patagonia Lake State Park | Paton Center for the Hummingbirds | Sonoita Grasslands**

We departed Tubac and the Santa Cruz River Valley, and made our way to Patagonia Lake State Park, where we birded at the Visitor Center, the feeders at the Birding Trail and near the dam. We had distant views of some of the Eared Grebes, Common Mergansers and a Common Loon, but a closer fly-by of a Black-crowned Night Heron, stunning Anna’s and Broad-billed Hummingbirds in full sun, Mexican Ducks at close range, a bright Orange-crowned Warbler and Black-throated Sparrows were just a few of the great sights around the lake.



We spent the rest of the morning at the Paton Center for the Hummingbirds. Although we didn't see one of the usually reliable Violet-crowned Hummingbirds, there were close-up views of many other species at the feeders and in the yard. In the brush piles crowded with White-crowned Sparrows, we sifted out towhees (Abert's and Green-tailed) and other sparrows (Song, Lincoln and the uncommonly seen Fox Sparrows). A big crowd-pleaser was a male Lazuli Bunting. Some of our lucky participants enjoyed views of the local race of the Eastern Bluebird.

After lunching at Gathering Grounds, a bustling cafe in Patagonia with great food, we got a brief introduction to desert grassland birding along Curly Horse Ranch Road. A small group of Mountain Bluebirds, a Vesper Sparrow and a Loggerhead Shrike gave us a taste of what the grasslands have to offer.

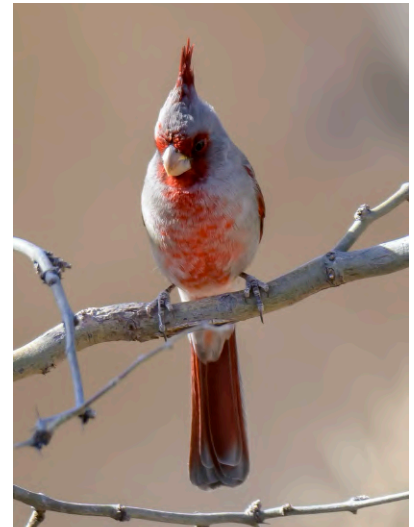
A home-style meal of traditional Mexican food, including albondigas soup, chile rellenos, and cheese enchiladas awaited us on our arrival at our lodging, the comfortable and picturesque Casa de San Pedro.

## **Tues., Jan 21: Whitewater Draw | Sulphur Springs Valley**

In spite of a very chilly wake-up call, our group loaded up for a drive into the Sulphur Springs Valley. Not far from our first destination at Whitewater Draw, we spied a Bendire's Thrasher foraging along the edge of the road for several minutes.

With that auspicious start we continued on to Whitewater Draw, where flocks of Sandhill Cranes had already begun returning to spend the day. We were all mesmerized by the sights and sounds of the cranes as they dropped out of the sky, giving their unmistakable trumpeting calls. Two Wilson's Snipes and a flock of Least Sandpipers fed along the water's edge and a brilliant Vermillion Flycatcher captured everyone's attention as it flew out and back repeatedly. Northern Pintails, Northern Green-winged Teals and Shovelers were plentiful and sporting their best spring plumage. One of the least expected sightings was a Marsh Wren that spent several minutes feeding on the ground in plain sight.

We explored the fields and brushy edges of the Sulphur Springs Valley south of Elfrida along Central Highway, along Lee Road and eventually north of Elfrida. Fields along Lee Road hosted two Mountain Plovers and several bright blue Mountain Bluebirds, and we ate our picnic lunches in the car while a Ferruginous Hawk soared overhead. Along Latimer Road, east of Central Highway, we spotted a small flock of Sagebrush Sparrows waving their tails as they came down from the brushy vegetation to feed along the roadside. Further north on



Rte. 181, we encountered an enormous flock of hundreds of Horned Larks as they zig-zagged over a freshly plowed field.

Our day ended with a tasteful meal at the Copper Pig in Bisbee.

### **Weds., Jan 22: Sierra Vista EOP | San Pedro House | Ash Canyon**

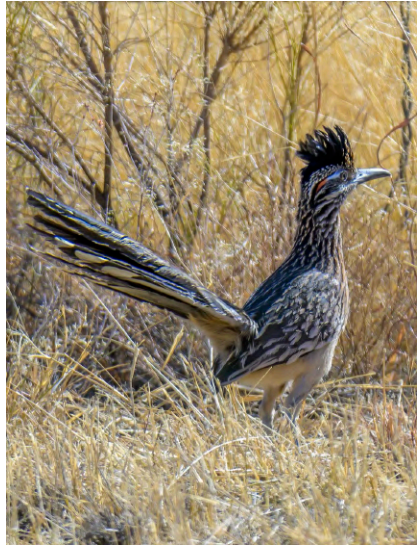
Once again, we woke to a frigid morning. We headed to the platform overlooking the Environmental Operations Plant before descending into the cold air drainage in the San Pedro River Valley. We were surprised and delighted to spy an adult Bald Eagle on a distant power pole. Everyone got a look before it dropped down into the basins and out of sight. We then turned our attention to look for the very rare and melanistic Northern Harrier that has returned to the EOP for at least the second winter. The harrier is a common wintering species, but dark morph individuals have been recorded only a handful of times in North America.

As it warmed up, we drove to the San Pedro House feeders and trails. We enjoyed close views of White-crowned Sparrows, including dark-lored individuals, Green-tailed Towhees, Lesser Goldfinches, Gila Woodpeckers and a Gilded Flicker, which gave very close views as we ate our picnic lunch under the ramada behind the San Pedro House.

Our afternoon stop at the Ash Canyon Sanctuary feeders was also very rewarding. We enjoyed great views of Acorn and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, Anna's Hummingbirds, finches and Mexican Jays as they came in to dine. We tallied all of the possible goldfinches for the week's itinerary when a surprise American Goldfinch came in as well.

Our final birding stop was to look for flocks of quail that visit yards and feeders in a neighborhood not far from Ash Canyon. The foray was a great success and everyone was able to get extended looks at both Gambel's and Scaled Quail, plus a bonus Chihuahuan Meadowlark.

For the dinner hour, we ventured out to enjoy the wonderful, authentic Italian food at Mimosa Pizzeria in Hereford.



## **Thurs., Jan. 23: Ramsey Canyon | Casa de San Pedro**

We spent the first hour of our birding day driving through neighborhoods south of Sierra Vista in search of the elusive Greater Roadrunner. We got some of our final views of desert birds in the yards but eventually it warmed up enough to go to our primary destination, Ramsey Canyon. A wintering Violet-crowned Hummingbird put in a few appearances and the whole group got the opportunity to observe this beautiful hummingbird at the feeders at the visitor center. Our walk up the trail in the canyon encountered a mixed-species flock including Bridled Titmice, White-breasted Nuthatches, Painted Redstarts and the Mexican subspecies of Brown Creeper, which is noticeably darker than the other forms found in North America. A Hammond's Flycatcher kept its distance across the creek but offered a chance to watch the typical flycatching behavior. A few lucky group members spied a Townsend's Solitaire in the upper branches of one of the giant Arizona Sycamores in the canyon.

On our way back to for lunch, multiple sets of eyes landed on a Greater Roadrunner as we passed. Everyone in our group was hoping for a good look at this iconic species and it gave us an extended view before heading into the brush beyond the road.

Our final planned outing was a chance to wander the trails adjacent to Casa de San Pedro. On our relaxed and casual walk, we flushed many sparrows, watched a distant flock of Lark Buntings, got a slightly closer look at a Hammond's Flycatcher, watched a Wilson's Snipe flush and head downstream, and a few of the group watched a Sharp-shinned Hawk as it sped away from the riparian habitat.

Before our final dinner at the Casa, we tallied the final checklist together. After the meal, we gathered in the great room of our lodge and shared some highlights of the trip.

## **Fri., Jan. 24: Return to Tucson**

We added one last species as we left Sierra Vista, when one of the vans got a quick look at a Peregrine Falcon. The falcon brought our group total to 145 bird species for the week.

We made our way back into the Sonoran Desert around Tucson and by mid-morning, it was time for our travelers to say their last farewells before parting ways.

*Photos: Group photo at Casa de San Pedro (Chris Harbard - CH), Sandhill Crane (Robert Befell - RB), Vermilion Flycatcher (RB), Elegant Trogon (Richard Fichera - RF), Costa's Hummingbird (RF), Broad-billed Hummingbird (RB), Ruby-crowned Kinglet (RB), Cactus Wren (RB), American Wigeon (RB), Arizona Woodpecker (RB), Mexican Jay (RF), Phainopepla (RB), White-crowned Sparrow (RB), Orange-crowned Warbler (RB), Anna's Hummingbird (RF), Wilson's Snipe (RB), Snow Geese & Sandhill Cranes (RB), Pyrrhuloxia (RB), Red-tailed Hawk (RB), Gilded Flicker (RB), Painted Redstart (RB), Greater Roadrunner (RB)*