

New Mexico Birding & Culture

December 6 – 13, 2025 | Trip Report

by Bryan Calk



Dave and Bryan with Sarah, Jane, Gerard, Moira, Constance, Tom L., Linda, Dennis, Tom K., and Carol

Saturday, Dec. 6

Arrivals | Rio Grande Nature Center

The group gathered in Albuquerque on a cool and bright winter afternoon. Early arrivals had time to wander through Old Town, with its adobe storefronts, galleries, and quiet courtyards, before meeting to head over to the Rio Grande Nature Center to begin the tour. The ponds there were calm in the soft light. A pair of drake Wood Ducks glowed with color at close range as they drifted across the surface. A lone female Hooded Merganser stayed near the vegetation beside several Gadwall, raising her crest now and then as she fed.

We followed the trails through the Bosque, the broad Cottonwood forest that lines the Rio Grande through the center of Albuquerque. Winter can be quiet here, but we found one memorable moment when a Porcupine rested high in a Cottonwood, wedged comfortably between two limbs. It shifted slowly, quills catching the light as the group enjoyed long and easy views.

After birding we went to a small local winery near Old Town for dinner. The setting was warm and busy after the cool afternoon outdoors, and conversation came easily as the group settled in together for the first time.

Sunday, Dec. 7

Sandia Mountains | Bernardo WMA

We started the morning with breakfast at the hotel before heading straight up into the Sandia Mountains. These mountains rise sharply on the eastern edge of Albuquerque, a granite block lifted by faulting and capped in mixed conifer forest near the summit at roughly 10,700 feet. Winter settles in early at the crest, often leaving the upper slopes coated in snow while the valley below stays dry.

The road climbed into fresh snow under clear blue skies. At Sandia Crest the landscape was bright and wind shaped, with wind blowing over the ridge. The feeders near the Crest House were active almost immediately. Mountain Chickadees flashed in and out, their crisp faces sharp against the snow, and Steller's Jays moved through the trees.

Before long the main highlight appeared. The flock of Rosy-Finches swept in and settled around the feeder area. All three species were present, Gray-crowned, Brown-capped, and Black. Sandia Crest is one of the most accessible places in North America to see these alpine birds, which normally spend their summers on remote talus slopes high in the Rockies and Great Basin. In winter they descend to lower elevations in search of food, and the crest feeders give rare, close views of species that are otherwise tied to rugged country. The flock moved in bursts of motion, giving the group time to study the subtle differences among them through the scope.

We descended the mountain into Sulphur Canyon, where sunlight poured through tall Ponderosa Pines. Snow covered the forest floor and the air carried the warm resin scent of pine bark. A small flock held Mountain Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatch, and a Hairy Woodpecker tapping at the upper limbs of a tree. Nearby a beautiful Abert's Squirrel climbed a trunk with its characteristic ear tufts lifted in the breeze. This species is strongly tied to Ponderosa Pine forests and feeds heavily on pine seeds, inner bark, and fungi, making them a signature mammal of this habitat. From there we continued to Ojito de San Antonio Open Space, a historic site shaped by early Spanish settlement. Old orchard trees and remnants of early irrigation work still mark the landscape, bare and quiet in winter but full of human history. Birding was light on the trail itself, but the parking lot flock made up for it with Western Bluebirds, a cooperative Cassin's Finch, and our first Townsend's Solitaire perched in perfect sunlight.

Lunch at Lantern Ridge Market provided a cheerful break. A craft fair filled part of the yard and the holiday atmosphere matched the bright weather. Afterward we continued south to Bernardo Wildlife Area, part of the Ladd S. Gordon Waterfowl Complex managed to support wintering cranes, geese, and ducks. Seasonal flooding and crop fields here concentrate waterbirds and help reduce agricultural conflicts in the surrounding valley.

The evening light came in low and golden over the fields. Sandhill Cranes fed in loose groups, Snow Geese circled and settled in flashes of white, and Mule Deer moved quietly along the far field edge. As the sun dropped behind the mountains, long lines of cranes flew in steady waves toward their roost sites along the Rio Grande. Their calls drifted across the valley and closed the day in classic New Mexico style.

We arrived in Socorro just after dark, checked into the hotel, and ended the day with dinner in town.

Monday, Dec. 8

Bosque del Apache NWR

We devoted the entire day to Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, a broad mosaic of wetlands, fields, and desert along the Rio Grande south of Socorro. The refuge was established in 1939 to support wintering waterfowl and now functions as one of the most important wintering areas for Sandhill Cranes and Snow Geese in the Southwest. Through pumps and managed flooding, staff recreate the seasonal wetland conditions that the river once produced naturally.

A portion of the group made the pre-dawn trip for sunrise. Temperatures had dropped below freezing overnight, leaving a thin sheet of ice across the main roost pond. Sandhill Cranes had spent the night standing in the shallow water for safety. As first light touched the Chupadera Mountains the cranes began to move, walking gingerly across the brittle ice and breaking through it in small steps. Some carried little ice anklets from where water had frozen against their lower legs. Ducks were scattered across open leads of water and Western Meadowlarks called from the fields. Above us long lines of Snow Geese moved through the brightening sky. Color shifted constantly across the valley, pink giving way to orange and then to warm gold. Small groups of cranes lifted off one after another, their calls carrying across the frozen pond.

After sunrise we returned to Socorro for breakfast and picked up picnic lunches and the rest of the group. On the drive back toward the refuge we stopped for a Ferruginous Hawk perched on a roadside pole. It sat calmly and gave long views, showing its pale body and broad wings. Not far beyond that a Crissal Thrasher appeared briefly on top of a low desert shrub, tail slightly raised, the warm undertail catching the morning sun before the bird disappeared into the brush.

At the visitor center we took time to explore the garden paths and the small desert botanical section. Rows of cacti showed an assortment of forms and textures. Around the feeders we had Gambel's Quail moving through

in quick bursts and a Pyrrhuloxia perched calmly. After a short bit of browsing inside the center we began the refuge loops.

The first ponds held thousands of waterbirds. Snow Geese and Sandhill Cranes worked the edges while rafts of ducks fed across the open water. Northern Harriers drifted low over the fields in long, slow sweeps. The refuge's managed wetlands stood out clearly as we drove, with flooded fields and shallow marshes spread across the valley floor. Before the river was dammed and diverted for agriculture the Rio Grande would have flooded broadly each year, creating shifting wetlands and wet meadows. Today the refuge replicates those cycles through intentional flooding and drawdowns to maintain habitat for migratory birds.

At one of the marsh boardwalks we stepped out over still water. Long-billed Dowitchers fed steadily in the shallows and Northern Shovelers spun in their tight circles with heads down, filtering the surface. Lunch was a picnic on a deck overlooking one of the large ponds. Ducks surrounded us, geese passed overhead, and Western Meadowlarks sang from the fields. Sparrows worked the brush along the edges. Around the ponds we found all three phoebes, Black, Say's, and Eastern. Eastern Phoebe is only an occasional winter visitor in this region, so finding two individuals was a nice surprise.

As we continued the loop we spotted a group of Javelina moving through a ditch below the road. They drifted in and out of the reeds in their usual slow line. Two Coyotes appeared during the afternoon. One hunted far out in the fields, pausing to listen before pouncing high into the air after some small rodent. The other moved along the brush line near a distant pond. Red-tailed Hawks were scattered across the refuge in a range of light and dark color morphs, each perched or soaring in the warm afternoon air.

By late day the light grew soft and golden across the ponds. Cranes and geese continued moving in the distance as we wrapped up the loop and headed back toward Socorro. It was a full day in one of the most scenic and important winter refuges along the Rio Grande, full of birds, clear skies, and a community of people to share them with.

Tuesday, Dec. 9 Estancia Valley | Madrid | Randall Davey Audubon

We left Socorro on another clear winter morning and headed north before turning east toward the Manzano Mountains. Our route crossed Abo Pass, the historic gap between the Manzano and Los Pinos Mountains that has linked the Rio Grande Valley with the eastern plains for centuries. Today the pass is followed by U.S. 60 and designated as the Abo Pass Trail Scenic Byway. The road climbs through piñon and juniper, then opens onto the wide Estancia Valley.

Both sides of the pass are known for winter raptors, and today did not disappoint. We found multiple Ferruginous Hawks in light morph plumages, some perched and some gliding low over the prairie. A couple of Prairie Falcons cut across the fields with purposeful wingbeats. Chihuahuan Ravens drifted overhead and Horned Larks worked the road edges. The shortgrass prairie stretched out in wide open space with mountains on the horizon. We talked about grama grasses and other C4 prairie species that green up quickly with summer rains, then go dormant through much of winter and spring. The landscape felt expansive and cinematic, a classic New Mexico grassland scene.

We continued north into the Ortiz Mountains and stopped for lunch in Madrid, a small town on the Turquoise Trail. This scenic byway connects Albuquerque and Santa Fe through historic mining communities. Madrid began as part of a major coal mining district in the late 1800s and early 1900s. It later declined before being revived by

artists and new residents. Many old miners cabins have been converted into galleries and shops. We ate at the Mine Shaft Tavern, a historic roadhouse tied to the town's coal mining past.

After lunch we continued to Santa Fe and visited the Randall Davey Audubon Center at the end of Upper Canyon Road. The property was originally a sawmill site in the 1800s, then became the home and studio of artist Randall Davey beginning in 1920. Today it is a 135 acre sanctuary of piñon juniper woodland and riparian habitat managed by Audubon for conservation and education.

Birding around the headquarters feeders was excellent. We had all three expected nuthatches, Red-breasted, White-breasted, and Pygmy, visiting in steady rotation. A Juniper Titmouse perched close for great views and a pack of ravenous Bushtits descended upon the suet. An adult Cooper's Hawk sat above the yard and gave striking scope views in warm evening light. Woodhouse's Scrub Jays moved in and out, adding to the activity.

We checked into our Santa Fe hotel, a comfortable place built in the regional Santa Fe style. Dinner was at La Plazuela inside the historic La Fonda on the Plaza. La Fonda sits on a site that has held inns since Santa Fe's earliest days and the current building dates to the 1920s in the Pueblo Revival style. Inside the restaurant, painted windows and soft lighting created a warm atmosphere. We enjoyed a relaxed dinner with table-side guacamole and nicely presented dishes. When we stepped outside afterward, the Plaza was glowing with Christmas lights and adobe buildings lit softly in the winter night, a beautiful ending to the day.

Wednesday, Dec. 10

Ohkay-Owingeh | Los Luceros | Ghost Ranch

We left Santa Fe and headed north into the Rio Grande Valley for a day that blended birds, history, and classic northern New Mexico scenery. Our first stop was at Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, near the old San Juan mission bridge over the Rio Grande. Ohkay Owingeh, meaning Place of the Strong People, is the original Tewa name of the pueblo. The Spanish established their first capital here in 1598 and called it San Juan de los Caballeros. The pueblo officially reclaimed its original name in 2005. The area around the bridge has tall cottonwoods and open river views, and we found many Song Sparrows working the brush. A couple of Black capped Chickadees moved through the trees. Out on the river a mixed flock of Barrow's and Common Goldeneye dove in the current, giving great side by side study of both species.

From there we continued north to Los Luceros Historic Site, a 148 acre riverside property managed by New Mexico Historic Sites. The land has been used for more than a thousand years, from early Indigenous habitation to Spanish era farms and later Hispanic and Anglo ranching families. The grounds include a historic hacienda complex, an old chapel, orchards, large cottonwoods, and fields along the Rio Grande. In the orchard we found an abundance of Lewis's Woodpeckers, easily over a dozen birds. They were flying from the fruit trees to the giant cottonwoods in the courtyard, flashing their green backs, pink bellies, and gray collars in the sunlight. A small group of Sandhill Cranes walked across the orchard as well. As we explored the trails we added Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers in the trees along the river.

Late morning took us to Abiquiu for lunch at the Abiquiu Inn. Next door is the Georgia O'Keeffe Welcome Center, the starting point for tours of her Abiquiu home and studio. O'Keeffe first came to this area in the 1930s and made Abiquiu her primary home later in life. We spent time reading the exhibits, browsing the shop, and enjoying a relaxed lunch. A few people tried the chocolate piñon tart, which was a hit.

After lunch we continued to Ghost Ranch for the Georgia O'Keeffe landscape tour. Ghost Ranch sits among multicolored cliffs and mesas with layers of gray, red, orange, and yellow rock formed by ancient lakes and

desert ecosystems. O'Keeffe first visited in 1934 and began returning every year. She eventually bought a small house at the edge of the ranch and used it as her summer studio. Many of her most famous paintings of the red hills and of Cerro Pedernal were inspired by this landscape. On the tour we stood at viewpoints that match her paintings almost exactly, including single trees and specific ridgelines she returned to again and again. The light was clear, the colors intense, and the entire area felt almost unreal in its beauty. We saw Mountain Bluebirds in the fields and a Canyon Towhee greeted us in the parking lot.

Driving in and out of Ghost Ranch was stunning in its own right, with broad cliffs and eroded formations in every direction. As we made our way back at the end of the day, snow capped mountains stood on the horizon. It was a day full of history, art, geology, and birds, woven together across the northern Rio Grande Valley.

Thursday, Dec. 11 Museum | Taos Pueblo

Rio Grande Gorge | Millicent Rogers

We left Santa Fe and drove north toward Taos, following the Rio Grande as the valley narrowed and dropped into the Rio Grande Gorge. For a stretch we followed the road along the bottom of the canyon beside the river. The gorge here cuts through the Taos Plateau Volcanic Field, where thick basalt flows, a few million years old, filled the Rio Grande Rift. Over time the river carved down through those dark lava layers, creating a canyon that reaches roughly 800 feet deep just west of Taos.

Eventually we crossed the river and began to climb out on a narrow mountain road that switchbacked up the canyon wall. Partway up we came upon a herd of Bighorn Sheep right beside the road. These are Rocky Mountain Bighorn, reintroduced to the Rio Grande Gorge beginning in the mid 1990s after native herds were lost earlier in the twentieth century. Multiple releases and careful management have built the herd back up so that today an estimated 225 to 275 bighorns use this stretch of gorge, making it one of New Mexico's most iconic populations.

We watched a family group with rams, ewes, and surprisingly one young lamb moving across the rocks. The animals were calm and gave outstanding views. Even as we eased the van past them they stayed in place along the slope, completely at home on the canyon wall and giving everyone time for photographs.

From the gorge we continued into Taos for a visit to the Millicent Rogers Museum. The docent led us through galleries that introduced Millicent Rogers herself and the collection she left behind. Born in 1902 into the Standard Oil fortune, she grew up in New York and Europe. After years of illness and high-society life, she came to northern New Mexico in the 1940s and connected deeply with the cultures and landscapes here. In Taos she shifted from fashion icon to serious collector and advocate, building a collection of Native American and Hispanic art that helped bring Southwestern design to a wider audience. The museum, founded by her family in 1956 using her collection as its core, now holds over 7,000 objects across multiple galleries. The tour of the galleries highlighted key artists whose work anchors the collection, including Maria Martinez of San Ildefonso Pueblo. The docent explained how Maria and her husband Julian developed the famous black on black pottery style in the early 1900s, combining polished and matte surfaces in bold, simple designs inspired by ancestral pieces. Her work helped revive Pueblo pottery traditions, supported her community, and became one of the most recognizable forms of Native art from the Southwest.

After the museum we headed into town for lunch near the historic Taos Plaza. The plaza, laid out in the early 1800s, has long been the center of town life and is still lined with adobe buildings, shops, and galleries. We enjoyed a relaxed midday meal, then had time to walk the surrounding streets, browse art and jewelry, and get a feel for Taos as both a historic crossroads and a modern arts community.

Later in the afternoon we visited Taos Pueblo. The village sits just north of town and is one of the oldest continuously inhabited communities in the United States. Its multi-story adobe houses have been lived in for more than 1,000 years, standing long before the Spanish arrived in the early 1600s. Taos Pueblo is both a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a National Historic Landmark, recognized as a remarkable example of traditional pre-Hispanic architecture that has remained in active use. We spent time simply watching the light change. As afternoon slid toward evening, the sun turned warmer and cast long shadows across the North and South House. Walls, ladders, and vigas turned into abstract shapes of light and dark, and the whole place seemed to shift with every few minutes of changing sun.

Then we joined a guided tour led by a Taos Pueblo resident. As we walked through the village we learned how the multi-story homes are still maintained with traditional earthen plasters, and how many of the historic structures in the core of the Pueblo remain without modern utilities, keeping continuity with older ways of living. We heard about the balance between civil leadership and religious leadership, and about community events like feast days. The guide spoke about the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and the community's long history of resistance and adaptation under Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. "rule."

One of the most powerful parts of the story was the return of Blue Lake in 1970, when 48,000 acres of sacred mountain land were finally restored to Taos Pueblo after decades of advocacy. We also heard how many families today balance life in the historic village with homes outside the core, and how traditional arts like pottery, jewelry, and drum-making support both culture and economy. The tour made it clear that Taos Pueblo is a living community choosing what to share and what to keep sacred.

As evening fell we drove back to Santa Fe for dinner at Santacafe. The restaurant sits in a historic adobe home built between about 1857 and 1862 and has been carefully restored, and is known for its New American menu with Southwestern influences.

Friday, Dec. 12 Bandelier National Monument | Los Alamos

We started the day at Bandelier National Monument, a place where geology, ecology, and human history come together in a remarkable way. Bandelier protects much of Frijoles Canyon, carved into soft volcanic tuff formed by massive eruptions from the Valles Caldera about 1.2 million years ago. Over time, water and erosion shaped the canyon walls, creating the cliffs and alcoves that people later used for shelter.

We began at the canyon overlook, where the morning was already alive with birds. A mixed flock moved through the piñon and juniper, with Townsend's Solitaires perched up, and Juniper Titmice working the branches. From there we descended into the canyon and gathered near the visitor center before starting the Pueblo Loop Trail.

The trail winds through the heart of the ancestral village of Tyuonyi and along the base of the canyon walls. Between about 1150 and 1550 CE, Ancestral Pueblo people lived here, building freestanding masonry pueblos on the canyon floor and carving rooms, storage spaces, and ceremonial areas into the soft volcanic rock. Along the trail we saw cliff dwellings tucked into alcoves, along with petroglyphs and pictographs etched and painted into the rock. Ladders lead up to cavates and kivas, allowing visitors to climb into the spaces where people once lived and gathered. Inside, beam holes in the walls still mark where roofs and upper floors were supported.

The trail itself winds through a striking contrast of habitats. Dry, pale canyon walls rise above a cooler, wetter canyon bottom lined with large Ponderosa Pines and a flowing stream. The walk was surprisingly accessible, with narrow passages cut through rock and elevation changes. Canyon Wrens sang from the cliffs, their voices echoing through the stone. We picked up Williamson's Sapsucker in the pines, Brown Creeper spiraling along

trunks, and Golden-crowned Kinglets flitting in the brush at eye-level. Walking through Bandelier made it easy to connect the natural setting with the people who lived here. The stonework, wall art, and carefully chosen locations all spoke to a deep understanding of the landscape. After Bandelier we headed to lunch at a local spot known for its bakery items and creative ingredients, a welcome break after the morning's walking.

In the afternoon we visited the Los Alamos Nature Center. Right away Acorn Woodpeckers greeted us around the feeders, their calls carrying through the trees. The feeder area was busy with activity, giving us time to study the differences between Cassin's and House Finches, look closely at the variety of Junco subspecies, and watch Colorado Chipmunks darting around the base of the feeders.

From there the group split for the late afternoon. Some visited the Bradbury Science Museum, whose interactive exhibits explore the history and current work of Los Alamos National Laboratory, from the Manhattan Project through present day research in physics, engineering, and national security. Others returned to Santa Fe to spend time around the Plaza, wandering galleries and shops and enjoying a quieter afternoon in the historic heart of the city.

To wrap up the day, the group came back together in the evening and walked from the hotel to one of the city's premier Mexican restaurants nearby. The desert air had chilled after sunset, and the short walk felt like a gentle transition from a full day outdoors to a relaxed night in town. Over dinner we reminisced about the tour as a whole, sharing favorite moments and stories from the week. It felt like a fitting finale, a warm and unhurried evening that brought the experience to a close.

Saturday, Dec. 13 Departures

The final morning began with breakfast and goodbyes. Bags were loaded, hugs exchanged, and the easy familiarity that had built over the week was suddenly clear in the small moments. With the tour officially wrapped up, we drove south toward Albuquerque, watching the landscape roll by one last time.

The road carried us past mesas and distant mountain ranges, winter light catching soft reds, grays, and golds in the rock and soil. Cottonwood lines marked the rivers, and open country stretched between towns. After days spent moving slowly through canyons, pueblos, museums, wetlands, and forests, the drive felt like a chance to take it all in one last time. The birds, the plants, the art, and the stories of the people who have lived here all seemed tied together by the land itself.

Arriving at the airport brought the trip to a close, but not the feeling of it. Everyone left carrying more than just photos and species lists. There were shared moments, new friendships, and the enchanting color and spirit of New Mexico.