

Southeast Arizona: Sky Island Fall Sampler

November 2 – 9, 2025 | Trip Report

by James Petersen



Written by guide James Petersen with Rick Weiman. Our clients included Ralph, Regina, Barbara, Nancy, Robert, Albert, Sue, Robbi, Paul and Marc.



Sun., Nov. 2 Arrival in Tucson | Ash Canyon

Once everyone was picked up at their respective locations, we made the drive from Tucson south towards Sierra Vista. As we left Tucson, we all watched as the Catalina Mountains and Rincon Mountains faded from view along with the Tucson skyline. This also included the habitat changing as well, with one dominated by Saguaro Cactuses changing to one more dominated by mesquite and Ocotillo. Our only stop for the day was the Ash Canyon Hummingbird Center. As we got to the center, the feeders were a blur of activity. We had multiple species of hummingbirds feeding at the feeders. Our first hummingbird was an immature Broad-tailed Hummingbird. Its orange sides and greenish back giving it away, allowing everyone to get great looks as it perched next to the path. As we worked our way to sit in the shade,



multiple adult Anna's Hummingbirds visited the nearby hummingbird feeders. We all watched as the adult males buzzed around, their maroon red throats and heads flashing in the sunlight. Mixed in with the adults were numerous female and immature male Anna's; their small patches of red on the throat being the identifying field mark.

While we watched the nearby hummingbirds, Gila Woodpeckers called; their shrieking call in the background while Acorn Woodpeckers visited the nearby suet feeders. While all this activity was going, there was a small water feature that had attracted a few "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warblers, their dull winter plumage contrasting with their yellowish throats. This race is only found out west, mainly in the Rockies on southward. The warblers soon scattered and were replaced by large browner birds with crests—Cedar Waxwings. We watched as a few perched in a tree and came down to drink water before leaving.

Perched in the tree with the waxwings, were a few bright yellow Lesser Goldfinches—the green backed race. As we got up to head over to the Casa de San Pedro, a flock of birds was spotted in the distance and soon perched on a distant snag. With help from scopes, we got distant views of one Western Bluebird. By now, it was time to head to our lodging for the next few nights—Casa de San Pedro. After checking in and getting settled, we had a fantastic catered dinner at the Casa. After that and the daily checklist, we broke up for the evening to get ready for tomorrow's birding.

Mon., Nov. 3 Ramsey Canyon | Elgin Grasslands

After an early breakfast, we spent 45 minutes birding the grounds of the casa before heading out. At the nearby hummingbird feeders, Anna's Hummingbirds buzzed the nearby feeders, while Abert's Towhee called their sharp pick note in the distance. As we walked by the nearby pond, a flurry of activity was noticed on the other side, mostly sparrows flitting about. A larger dark bird with white breast and rufous sides was spotted—a Spotted Towhee, before it flew off into the denser vegetation. A Bewick's Wren briefly appeared from a shrub nearby before vanishing again.

We continued onwards, slowly working our way out to the grasslands. Here we came across a small continuous run of sparrows in a few of the closer mesquite bushes. As we tried to get on one, it would fly, only to be replaced by a different sparrow. The large, chunky, White-crowned Sparrows perched up for us, allowing everyone to see both the black and white striped crowns of the adults and the tan stripes of younger birds. A smaller sparrow then replaced the White-crowned Sparrows—one that was spotted by Rick. When in the scope, this sparrow had a lighter colored eye-ring and orangish breast—a Grasshopper Sparrow. This species perched in front of us uncharacteristically, allowing all to get fantastic views of it. Continuing onwards, we slowly worked our way further out into the grasslands.

Further out, a Loggerhead Shrike was spotted perched in a mesquite bush. This bird let all have fantastic views as we described its behavior of stabbing prey onto thorns or barbed wire fences, giving it the nickname of butcher bird. By now, it was getting time to head back to the van. As we were walking back, a gray ghost male Northern Harrier glided



past us, looking for his breakfast. A little bit later, a flock of Lark Buntings flew past us, their white wing bars giving them away.

After a fantastic breakfast, we gathered up and headed out to our first stop of the day, Ramsey Canyon. Everyone watched as the low desert soon fell away to the Oak dominated forest of the mid-canyon. As we drove up the first trees were the dark barked Emory Oak, which was soon replaced by the lighter colored bark of Arizona White Oaks.

Upon parking, the area was full of bird songs as a nearby Painted Redstart sang its sweet song while Yellow-eyed Juncos crept underneath cars. Upon entering Ramsey Canyon, the bird activity continued, with a small flock of birds high up in the canopy. We scanned as Yellow-rumped Warblers darted between openings while a Hammond's Flycatcher sallied out to catch bugs before returning to an unseen perch. As we ventured further up, we started hearing the scolding chatter of one of many Ruby-crowned Kinglets.

Further up, we pointed out the many oaks of the area, starting with a closer look at both the dark-barked Emory Oak and lighter colored Arizona White Oak. Close by, we had a Silver Leaf Oak, with its narrow leaves and light-colored undersides. As we worked our way further up, the large, white-barked Arizona Sycamores took hold of the creek bed, while a few Arizona Sister Butterflies fluttered close to the ground. We soon came across a second flock of warblers by a wetter area, dominated by many Ruby-crowned Kinglets. Mixed in we had a White-breasted Nuthatch. Further up, a yellow cheeked bird with a dark face—a cooperative Townsend's Warbler was spotted. We watched as it worked its way up the canopy, foraging as it went up. A little further up, we came across a swampy area dominated by Horsetail, one of the oldest plant families in the world.

Another small group of birds was observed nearby, with most of them being Ruby-crowned Kinglets. A little further up gave a good comparison of three of the pine species of the Sky Islands—a Pinyon Pine, a small, needled Chiricahua Pine and the very long needled Apache Pine. By now, it was time to turn back downwards to the entrance. Back at the entrance, Rick spotted two lizards, which turned out to be Yarrow's Spiney Lizards.

From the entrance, we continued down to the lower feeders, where we sat for 20 minutes. Upon getting to the feeders, the first species we had were a few enormous "Gould's" Wild Turkeys. This race is the largest of all the five Wild Turkey races with males weighing up to 25 pounds. Back to the feeders, we had multiple Anna's Hummingbirds present, as well



as several Painted Redstarts above us. Over the course of our time at the feeders, we had good looks at this red-bellied black bird as it fanned its white tail out, scaring insects up before trying to catch them. Back to the feeders, we had one other hummingbird come in, a large Rivoli's Hummingbird, its all-dark body and white dot behind the eye distinctive among the hummingbirds. We ended up with three of these impressively large hummingbirds, one male and two females, all visiting the hummingbird feeders.

While watching the hummers, a harsh chuck note was heard from down canyon, and soon a male Hepatic Tanager flew in to perch, giving good views as this dark red bird perched above us, before flying further up the canyon. By now, it was getting to be lunch time, so we loaded up and drove back out of the canyon, headed for a good lunch at Indochine, a local Vietnamese restaurant.

After a fantastic lunch, we drove up to the local grasslands. While driving into the grasslands, we had a good look at a herd of Pronghorn, North America's only antelope, near the side of the road. We stopped to watch as they slowly turned around and started walking away, grazing as they continued onwards. We then continued onwards to Curly Horse Road.

As we slowly drove the dirt road, we looked for sparrows, coming across a perched Horned Lark. A little further down the road, we came across a small sparrow group, made up of washed-out Vesper Sparrows, their white eye rings giving them away. As far as sparrows go, the identification was made easier as they looked like they went through a washing machine one too many times, giving them a washed-out appearance. We continued onwards, with this portion of the road being quiet. We then made the decision to head the second area, the south entrance of Elgin grasslands.

Once at the south entrance, it didn't take us long to find a larger flock of sparrows. As we got out and walked in the grasslands, we slowly worked through the sparrows, with many of them being Vespers. Perched in the distance a blueish bird was spotted, turning into a bright male Mountain Bluebird! This male glowed in the sun, and we spent quite a bit of time following the bluebirds, finding more females than males. Eventually, we worked our way out to a damp looking area (vegetation looked slightly less brown) and found a few Savannah Sparrows, their eyelines showing just the barest hint of yellow. Nearby, we finally had prolonged looks at a gorgeous male Mountain Bluebird. By now it was getting closer to sunset, so we headed back to the van and back to the Casa. Ready for a delicious dinner, followed by the daily checklist of birds and wildlife we had seen that day.

Tues., Nov. 4

Whitewater Draw | Sulphur Springs Valley | Bisbee | Whitewater Draw

We again started the morning with a short bird walk on the Casa grounds. This time, we headed east and walked along the San Pedro River. Once by the river, a small trickle was in the riverbed, and we were surrounded by massive Fremont Cottonwoods. High up in the cottonwoods, the raucous call of a Gila Woodpecker was heard, as well as the "ka-beer" of a distant Cassin's Kingbird. As we continued along the dry riverbed, we admired the huge, enormous cottonwoods towering above us. By now, it was getting close to breakfast time, so we turned around and slowly made



our way back to the Casa. On the way back, we did pick up two Lincoln's Sparrows as well as two more Green-tailed Towhees. After breakfast, we left for the day, with our first stop being Whitewater Draw.

Whitewater draw was absolutely loaded with wintering waterfowl. Upon getting there, we were greeted with the raucous bugling of Sandhill Cranes. At the start of the trail, we were greeted by a bright adult Vermilion Flycatcher, his red plumage glowing in the morning sunlight. At the first turn in the trail, we stopped to scan the wetter areas. Here we picked up multiple species of waterfowl, including Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, with smaller numbers of both Northern Pintails and Green-winged Teals. From behind us, we heard the laughing call of an unseen Virginia Rail. We slowly continued onwards, working the more open areas, and finding a few shorebirds. Further out in the flats, there were two lingering Black-necked Stilts while a small flock of Long-billed Dowitchers probed the mud nearby. Further down the trail, a few White-faced Ibis were observed while closer by some Black Phoebe flitted about, catching insects. After finishing here, we ate our picnic lunch, listening to the Sandhill Cranes nearby.

After finishing here, we slowly worked the dirt roads looking for any wintering raptors in the Sulphur Springs Valley. Due to the mild winter so far, birding was slow, but we did manage to find several species including a Say's Phoebe as it was working a fence line, as well as a Curve-billed Thrasher. The habitat here was endless farmlands, interspersed with a small number of pecan orchards. As the afternoon crept on, we worked our way to Bisbee. After some down time exploring Bisbee, we retraced our way back to Whitewater Draw. But first, we stopped over at the large open pit mine that explained Bisbee's history and the copper mining that put this town on the map.

We spent the rest of the evening watching sunset over Whitewater Draw. As the sun sank closer to the horizon, we picked out a few of the lower desert birds such as Ladder-backed Woodpecker that were in the nearby scrub. On the water, we were able to add both Mexican Duck and Cinnamon Teal to the day's list. As the colors deepened, we all gawked in awe at the large masses of Sandhill Cranes that started to arrive. At first there were smaller flocks, but with fading light, each flock seemed bigger and would announce their presence, many times flying directly overhead of us and landing with all the others. Among the landed birds, some were dancing, while others preened and seemed to settle in for the night. By the time we left, we estimated a total of 10,000 Sandhill Cranes had come into roost. As we walked back to the vans, more birds in almost complete darkness continued to fly over us, heading to the water. We were treated to one last surprise, with a Great-horned Owl that had come out to hunt, giving all great looks with the last of the fading light. From here, we drove back to Bisbee to have a delicious dinner at the Copper Pig, where all enjoyed a fantastic meal. We then continued our drive back to the Casa and went over our species list before heading to bed.



Wed., Nov. 5 Chiricahua National Monument | Pinery Canyon | Cave Creek Ranch

Our next day was a moving day. After a delicious breakfast and loading up the van, we started our drive over to the Chiricahuas. By the time we made it to the National Monument, we met up with Vernie and had a pleasant lunch up at Massai Point. As we ate lunch, we explained how the Chiricahuas were formed, it being a caldera from a large volcano. The hoodoos that are left were the result of erosion of the softer surrounding rock. After lunch, we all got one more look at the point, surrounded by massive hoodoos as we continued back out and then up and over the Chiricahuas towards Portal.

As we drove up the western side of the Chiricahuas, we watched as the desert turned to a scattered oak woodland and then finally, to the pine forest habitat. Our first stop was the Pinery Canyon campgrounds where we looked hard for Mexican Chickadees. Unfortunately, they eluded us, but we had a nice consolation bird of a Red-naped Sapsucker working on one of the sides of a tall Ponderosa Pinetree while a family group of Pygmy Nuthatches worked the pines, staying high overhead. We also had a few butterflies here, with good looks at a Red-bordered Satyr.

By now, it was time to continue heading up and over towards Portal. We made one more stop at the East Turkey Creek Junction, picking up both American Robin and Mexican Jay before continuing onwards towards Cave Creek Ranch.

Once arrived and settled at Cave Creek Ranch, we had a fantastic catered dinner. After the evening checklist, a few of the clients joined in an owl walk. Although nightbirds tend to be very hard to locate this time of year, we nonetheless knew they are out there and went to check a few reliable spots. Although they remained unseen, we had a fantastic time listening to two Whiskered Screech Owls as they called back and forth, their Morse code like call echoing in the canyon before calling it a night.

Thurs., Nov. 6 Portal Feeders | South Fork | Paradise

After a quick breakfast, we started the morning visiting Dave Jasper's feeders. Here we spent the next hour watching as the birds woke up and came in for their breakfast. We had all three species of jays here. This is unusual, because usually both Steller's and Mexican Jays tend to stay higher up in the canyon. But it gave us all a fantastic chance to compare the different field marks between Mexican and Woodhouse's Scrub Jay, as well as enjoy the large dark blue Steller's Jay. In addition, the hummingbird feeders here were full of activity, with fantastic looks at both Anna's Hummingbirds as well as a Blue-throated Mountain Gem, one of the largest hummingbirds in the United States. Underneath all the feeders, a large Spotted Towhee scratched at the ground, dwarfing the nearby Chipping Sparrows. Some movement off to the left caught our eyes, with it being a rare Rufous-winged Sparrow. Its black throat stripes telling it apart from the nearby Chipping Sparrows. This species is highly restricted in range, with it being most common in the Sonoran Desert over by Tucson. So, it was a treat to see one out here. Although, the feeder was still bustling with the activity of more Cardinals and Cactus Wrens, and the foraging Harris's Antelope Ground Squirrels, we had to pull ourselves away so as to have time to venture back up the canyon towards South Fork.



Upon getting to South Fork, we slowly drove up the road to park at the trail entrance. At the trailhead, we birded the nearby Arizona White Oaks, picking up a few species that included some Dark-eyed Juncos. Mixed in with the juncos was a Black-chinned Sparrow, which everyone was able to get looks at as it worked its way along the rock piles. This species is uncommon in the Chiricahuas, as a junco look-a-like, so it was nice to be able to see the dark streaking on the back and all dark breast that told it apart from the nearby juncos.

From here, we slowly made our way up the trail, identifying the different plants and trees of the area, while also admiring the tall, sculpted sides of the canyon. Going up, we had a handful of Mexican Jays, as well as some Painted Redstarts, their black and white plumage combined with their white tail feathers and red bellies stunning in the morning sun. The trees were made up of lots of Arizona White Oak, with their whitish gray bark, with Arizona Sycamore Trees growing out of the creek bed. Many of these trees were scarred with grainery cavities from the many family groups of Acorn Woodpeckers that call the area home. Continuing onwards up the trail, we came across some Apache Pine trees, towering above both the Sycamores and the Oaks. Here we came across a mixed flock that included both Hutton's Vireo and a close calling Olive Warbler. We stopped, trying to follow the Olive Warbler and doing our best to get as many clients on it as possible. It was hard as it never stood still long enough and was chased away by a nearby Ruby-crowned Kinglet. After the bird flew off, we slowly worked our way further up to the old parking lot, where we had a fantastic view of both sides of the reddish-green, lichen-colored cliffs of the canyon.

We stopped to rest at the old parking area, an area you used to be able to drive up to before Hurricane Odile came through, re-routing the creek and destroying the upper half of the road. After a break, we slowly worked our way back down. By the time we had gotten back down, we had also picked up an over wintering Plumbeous Vireo. It was nearing lunch time, but we had one more stop. Closer to the main road, we pulled over and after a short walk, were greeted by some old native American pictographs painted by the Mogollom tribe. Here we observed many that seemed to be made up of lines and different animals of the area, one of which looked like a bighorn sheep—possibly meaning the tribes moved between mountain ranges as the Chiricahuas don't have sheep.

By now it was lunch time, and we headed back for a fantastic catered lunch. After lunch and a siesta, we slowly worked our way up the road to Paradise, stopping to search the drier rocky hillside for Townsend's Solitaires. This side of the Chiricahuas wasn't part of the volcanic explosion so the rock here is more limestone type. Due to this, the soil is poorer and hence it's a drier habitat. This causes the plants here to be more of the high desert area, with stringy barked One-



seed Junipers, spiny Centaury Plants and Ocotillo taking over. As we worked our way up, we did come across a Townsend's Solitaire perched up in one of the junipers. We continued onwards to the Walker House. Unfortunately, due to bear activity, the feeders were taken in, so bird activity was low, but it was nice birding the drier side of the Chiricahuas. By now, it was getting closer to dinner time, so we worked our way down to dinner and our daily species checklist before bed.

Fri., Nov. 7

Grassland & Portal | Chiricahua Desert Museum

After a delicious breakfast, we left for the morning. The goal was to work our way down to the grasslands below Portal. Our first stop was a large dirt turnoff just below Portal. Here, we were able to find a Greater Roadrunner.

While stopping and listening, the “wheet-o-weet” call of a Crissal Thrasher was heard. Thankfully, it was across the road and scope-able. Everyone got great looks at this shy thrasher, its dark gray plumage combined with long tail giving it away. Usually, these birds are shy and don’t come out for long, but this one perched out long enough for some to try their hand at digiscoping it as it was perched up. Once it dropped down, we continued onwards, pulling off every so often to scan the small sparrow flocks that worked the edges of the road. Within the flocks, we eventually got good looks at Brewer’s Sparrows, the sparrow that lacks a field mark, while we also briefly had two larger, white winged Lark Buntings.

We continued onwards, working our way to and down Stateline Road. The road was slow birding, but everyone got good looks at Brewer’s Sparrows as they flushed from the sides of the road, flying off into the grasslands. Mixed in a few times were larger Black-throated Sparrows, their black and white plumage making identification easier, while a few Vesper Sparrows were spotted as well. These sparrows looked like they went through the washing machine one too many times, their field marks faded when compared to more well marked sparrows. Towards the end of the road, we were treated to both a perched Merlin as well as a flock of 140 Lark Buntings, all streaky but their white wing slash and large bill showing well when perched.

From here, we turned down the road and visited Willow Tank, a small body of water among the desert. This birding area was slow, but we did pick up two Song Sparrows in the wetter sections as well as two American Kestrels hunting the nearby grasslands. As it was getting closer to lunch time, we headed out, with one final stop in Rodeo, New Mexico, at the Little Birding Trail. Here, it was dry, but we did have two Chihuahuan Ravens fly overhead as well as two Red-shafted Northern Flickers working the trees. By now, it was lunch time, so we headed over to Sky Islands for a delicious lunch.

After lunch, we went to the Chiricahua Desert Museum. Here, everyone got time to wander about, looking at the well-kept snakes. This museum has almost every snake that is found in the Chiricahuas as well as a fantastic exhibit explaining the Geronimo conflict in the 1800s. Basically, Geronimo hid out in these mountains, forcing the US Cavalry to come

down and try to get them to surrender. After surrendering, they were first sent to Florida and then Geronimo was sent to Fort Sill in Oklahoma where he spent his remaining years. The museum also had an outside garden which was full of butterflies. The rosemary bush near the entrance was covered with Western Pygmy Blues, while Variegated Fritillaries flitted about. Further down the short trail, a Texas Brown Tarantula was spotted enjoying the bit of warm weather we were having.

After finishing up in the museum, we drove back up to Portal. Here, we took a short walk through downtown Portal—seeing the old schoolhouse which is now the current day post office. While in Portal we had a small wave of species move through—a few “Audubon’s” Yellow-rumped Warblers as well as a Pyrrhuloxia and another Red-naped Sapsucker. Once done here, we continued onwards back to our nightly checklist and a fantastic catered dinner.

Sat., Nov. 8 Willcox | Tucson

This was our last full day of the trip. We started out after breakfast by driving east into New Mexico and driving the road up to I-10. This afforded us fantastic looks at the departing Chiricahuas as well as the Pencillo Sky Island Range in New Mexico. Our first stop of the day was on the outskirts of Willcox, where we ran across three Harris's Hawks perched on a nearby telephone pole. This is an uncommon resident of the area and are typically group hunting birds. It wasn't surprising to find two others nearby as they seemed content to stay perched, giving all fantastic looks. We continued onwards to Lake Cochise. Lake Cochise is a wastewater retention pond, but in winter can attract a large number of wintering waterfowl. Upon reaching the lake, we were greeted with scores of waterfowl that included many American Wigeon, Green-headed Northern Shovelers, and Green-winged Teals. Further out in the water bobbed a dozen Lesser Scaups as well as 25 blue-billed Ruddy Ducks. With some careful scanning, we had two Eared Grebes in their black and white winter plumage diving as well. As we continued along the circle drive, we scanned the edges for any remaining shorebirds. We were rewarded with looks at a dozen Long-billed Dowitchers as well as smaller, yellow-legged Least Sandpiper scurrying along the edge. We rounded out the area by stopping by one of the smaller retaining ponds which gave us point blank looks at a Sora.

From here, we continued onwards to lunch at the Roadrunner Café. After a quick lunch, we continued onwards to Tucson and to the hotel. We had a delicious final dinner at the Locale Italian Restaurant. Here, we enjoyed the food and talked over all the many highlights of the trip, of which there were many. Following dinner, we had our last checklist of the trip before wandering off to bed.

We had one final outing for those who joined and had later flights. We were off after breakfast to Canoa Ranch and Green Valley Desert Meadows Park. At Canoa Ranch we were treated to Lark Sparrow, Vermilion Flycatchers, and many of the similar desert bird species from earlier. Overhead we had a very late Swainson's Hawk cruise by. Our surprise bird was after the Swainson's Hawk, where we had a flock of Lawrence's Goldfinches by the parking lot. Everyone got good looks at these gray and yellow goldfinches. Some years we have large flocks of this species and some years there are none.

Our last stop was the Desert Meadows Park in Green Valley. Here, we wandered among all the native desert vegetation that Green Valley had planted—all of the plants having name plates telling what they were. Here we had two Abert's Towhees as well as multiple Gambel's Quails scurrying between the many species of cactuses. We also had very good looks at a few Costa's Hummingbirds, watching as the males would perch out in the open before zooming off only to return to the same perch. By now, it was unfortunately time to drag ourselves away from the park and head back to the airport to say our goodbyes after an amazing trip through southeastern Arizona.

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