

# New Mexico Nature & Culture December 6-13, 2025 | Trip Report by Dave Mehlman



**Guides: Dave Mehlman and Bryan Calk, with participants: Carol, Constance, Dennis, Gerard, Jane, Linda, Moira, Susan, Tom K., and Tom L.**



## **Sat., Dec. 6 Arrivals in Albuquerque | Rio Grande Nature Center**

We started our New Mexico adventure with almost all of the group assembling at the Hotel Albuquerque in early afternoon for a birding outing to the Rio Grande Nature Center on a very pleasant afternoon. Bryan and Dave provided transportation to this local hotspot and we spent about 2.5 hours on the trails, eventually reaching the Rio Grande. Since it was our first outing, everything was new for the list, but highlights included a mixed flock of Cackling and Canada Geese in the front pond (providing a great lesson in how to separate these similar-looking species), Pied-billed Grebe, Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, single Hooded Merganser and Northern Shoveler,



Western Bluebird, Northern (Red-shafted) Flicker, and a Cooper's Hawk. Probably the top highlight, however, was a North American Porcupine sitting in a cottonwood right above a trail, just living its best life on a warm day!

By the end of the walk, Bryan had left early to do a final pickup at the airport, so Dave took everyone back to the Hotel Albuquerque for a short break. The entire group then met in the lobby for introductions and a tour overview before we all walked a couple of blocks to dinner at D.H. Lescombes. Due to the holiday crowds at dinner, we had to eat at two tables, so after dinner, we returned to the hotel and had another short meeting to go over the daily checklist and discuss plans for the following day, before turning in for the night.

## **Sun., Dec. 7     Sandia Mountains | Bernardo WMA | Socorro**

After a sumptuous breakfast repast at the Garduño's in the Hotel, we loaded up all our gear in the two vehicles and set off for adventure. Our first stop today was the very top of the Sandia Mountains outside Albuquerque, at an elevation of approximately 10,400 ft. Although one can see the top from downtown Albuquerque, the drive up there meant heading to the east and then north to get on the scenic byway that leads to the top. Finally arriving at the top, we found sunny, cold, and windy conditions and a pretty icy parking lot, pretty normal conditions at this time of year. Parking our vehicles, we got out, took shelter in the lee of the van, and began our feeder watch. At first, there were only a bunch of Mountain Chickadees constantly feeding, but soon we saw Dark-eyed Juncos come in (mostly of the Gray-headed form) plus a few White-breasted Nuthatch and Steller's Jay. However, about mid-morning, we were rewarded when a whirling and somewhat nervous flock of rosy-finches descended en masse on the feeder and surrounding trees. Though they periodically left, they returned often enough for us to get great looks at the two most common species, Black and Brown-capped, with careful observers digging up one Gray-crowned. In late morning, the birds appeared to have gone off for good, so we got back in the vans and began to head back down the mountain. A stop at Sulphur Canyon was oddly quiet, though we had nice looks at an Abert's Squirrel, plus Common Raven, more Mountain Chickadees, and Hairy Woodpecker.

We had time for one final birding stop in the morning, so Bryan and Dave opted to go to the Ojito de San Antonio Open Space for one more stop. Though most of the walk was very quiet, upon returning to the cars we found a very nice flock of birds, including Western Bluebird, Townsend's Solitaire, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, American Robin, and a Cassin's Finch mixed in with the House Finches. After that great conclusion to the morning, we headed north for lunch at the Lantern Ridge Market in the small town of Sandia Park. Suitably warmed up and full after lunch, we then headed south to our destination for the night, the town of Socorro, a drive mostly on the interstates. As we drove south, we had time for a short, but very pleasant stop, at the Bernardo Wildlife Area along the Rio Grande. As we pulled into the wildlife area, we first stopped to admire (visually and auditorily) the huge flock of Sandhill Cranes that is typically found there in the winter. Due to the rapidly setting sun, we then drove to where numerous other vehicles were parked watching an enormous flock of "white" geese and cranes in



a cornfield. The geese, for some reason, decided to flush up, providing a spectacular and memorable view of beating wings and calling birds as they whirled around and settled back down. With the scopes, Dave and Bryan picked out some Ross's Geese at the edge of the flock, confirming that both species, Ross's and Snow Geese, were present. Also around were quite a few Mule Deer, Red-tailed Hawk, a Killdeer, and some Mourning Doves. As the sun set, we said goodbye to this great place and finished our drive to Socorro, checked in at the Holiday Inn Express, and then drove to the nearby Socorro Plaza for a nice dinner at the Capitol Bar & Brewery. Returning to the hotel, we did our checklist, went over plans for the following day, and then said good-night.

## **Mon., Dec. 8      Bosque del Apache NWR**

Today was our day devoted to New Mexico's best known and most visited birding site: the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. We started off with a sunrise visit to the refuge, so most of the group were up very early (along with a large crowd of other birders, mostly photographers) for some coffee and snacks at the hotel, then off we went down the highway. Entering the refuge, we joined the large crowd at a large pool of water with a flock of Sandhill Cranes in it, which provided a constantly changing tapestry of light and birds as the sun slowly rose behind us—magic! As we watched, large flocks of Snow Goose flew by overhead, heading out for a day of foraging in the Middle Rio Grande Valley, and other waterfowl, mostly Northern Pintail and Northern Shoveler, foraged in the shallow wetlands at the pond's edge. Though not as cold as it can be, we still marveled at the cranes as they stood in the water, ice apparently having formed around their legs! Finally, most of the cranes had flown out to begin their day, so we all returned to the hotel for breakfast (or, second breakfast!) and to warm up.

After the breakfast break, during which Dave picked up our picnic lunches from the caterer in town, we loaded back up in the vehicles and headed back to Bosque for the rest of the day. Our day started off fantastic with a perched Ferruginous Hawk near the highway leading to Bosque. Of course, we promptly stopped to admire this great bird, and found lots of other things, including Northern Harrier, American Kestrel, Western Meadowlark, Brewer's and Red-winged Blackbird, and a pair of Crissal Thrashers. As we continued on the highway toward the refuge, Dave's van noticed a large raptor perched on a phone pole which proved to be an immature Bald Eagle; a Loggerhead Shrike was also present at this location. We all then arrived at the Visitor Center, providing an opportunity to use the restroom, and then took a short walk around the native plant garden. Oddly, the garden



was very quiet, though some in the group noticed some Gambel’s Quail running around and there was an out-of-place Townsend’s Solitaire in the shrubs. As we prepared to depart for the wildlife drive, alert members of the group spotted a female Pyrrhuloxia lurking in a shrub by the parking lot, providing an opportunity for all to add the “desert cardinal” to their tour bird list.

We then spent the entire rest of the day out on the refuge, driving most of both the South and North Loops. About mid-day, we took a lunch break near the flight deck and enjoyed our sandwiches on a very pleasant and relatively mild afternoon. While in many ways the primary highlight of Bosque is the vast landscape and large numbers of birds in general, some of the highlights on the day included a huge flock of Snow Geese with many easily visible Ross’s Geese mixed in, a flock of American Pipits, lots of Bufflehead constantly diving, a single female Common Goldeneye, Ruddy Duck, a calling Marsh Wren in dense cattails which refused to show itself, a couple of Eastern Phoebes, and a small group of Redheads and Ring-necked Ducks toward the end of the day. As the afternoon drew to a close, we ended the day at the Flight Deck, watching the sun slowly set and the evening colors start to fall on the land- and waterscapes—magic. After dark, we drove to the nearby town of San Antonio hoping for dinner at the famed Buckhorn Tavern. Unfortunately, everyone else at Bosque that day had the same idea, so half the group squeezed in at the Buckhorn and the others went to the nearby (and equally famous) Owl Café to enjoy that highlight of New Mexican cuisine: the green chile cheeseburger. After eating, we returned to our hotel in Socorro, reviewed our daily checklist, and then called it a day.

## **Tues., Dec. 9 Highway 60 Grassland | Turquoise Trail | Santa Fe**

After breakfast at the Holiday Inn Express, we loaded up the vehicles and made our way to Santa Fe, albeit taking an indirect route to get there. First heading north, we then turned east on Highway 60 to ascend out of the Rio Grande Valley to the town of Mountainair, through a gap between the Manzano and Los Pinos Mountains. Most of this stretch, as it ascends to the mountains, is desert grassland which provides habitat for some unique birds. Apparently, today was “International Ferruginous Hawk Day” (who knew?) as we saw at least 5 separate hawks perched on the telephone poles providing for great viewing and photography. Additional driving and a couple of stops turned up a shy Prairie Falcon, Loggerhead Shrike, Say’s Phoebe, Chihuahuan Raven, Curve-billed Thrasher, and flocks of Western Meadowlarks and Horned Larks. After completing our drive through the grasslands, we passed through Abo Pass and stopped in Mountainair for a bathroom and fuel break. We then continued north through the Estancia Valley, though few raptors were out in this normally productive area. At the end of the morning, we arrived in Madrid for a nice lunch at the Mine Shaft Tavern, well-decorated for the holiday season.

After lunch, we continued our travels north on the Turquoise Trail to Santa Fe, where we went directly to the Randall Davey Audubon Center to do some birding there before it closed for the afternoon. We commenced



birding immediately upon arriving at the parking lot, quickly scoring the “nuthatch trifecta” as White-breasted, Red-breasted, and Pygmy Nuthatches were obligingly coming and going from the feeders. Also present were Woodhouse’s Scrub-Jay, Mountain Chickadee, various Dark-eyed Junco forms, Spotted Towhee, a vigilant Cooper’s Hawk, and, as we left, a pair of Juniper Titmice to send us off in style. From the Center, we drove to our hotel for the next several days, the Hotel Santa Fe, and had a chance to settle into our comfortable rooms, before we met for our daily checklist and then used the hotel shuttle for a group dinner at La Plazuela in the historic La Fonda hotel on the plaza. Upon return, we turned in for the evening in anticipation of a great upcoming day.

## **Wed., Dec. 10      Old San Juan Pueblo Bridge | Los Luceros | Abiquiu | Ghost Ranch**

We all met in the restaurant at the Hotel Santa Fe for breakfast, then grabbed our gear for a day exploring northern New Mexico. Heading north, our first stop of the day was the Old San Juan Pueblo bridge over the Rio Grande, a bit north of Española. The shrubs around the parking area here were loaded with Song Sparrows; among them were some White-crowned Sparrows, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Spotted Towhee. A few Black-billed Magpies flew by to add some color to the scene. Walking out onto the old bridge, we used the scopes to spot a large flock of goldeneyes upriver, among which were at least three male Barrow’s Goldeneyes and some Common Goldeneyes. We also attracted our first Black-capped Chickadee of the tour and some American Robins. Upon finishing our birding here, we returned to the highway and drove a bit further north to the town of Alcalde to visit the Los Luceros Historic Site. Almost as soon as we entered the driveway to the site, we spotted the first of many Lewis’s Woodpeckers, which congregate here for the winter, along with the odd sight of Sandhill Cranes wandering around the apple orchards. After parking, we received a short introduction to the site from the park ranger and then took a walk around the grounds to the Rio Grande. We admired the site’s flock of churro sheep, a heritage breed used for wool by Navajo weavers, the two donkeys, and some nice birds such as a Red-tailed Hawk, Hairy Woodpecker, numerous Northern (Red-shafted) Flickers, and a fly-by flock of Ring-necked Ducks.

As the end of the morning approached, we loaded up and headed for lunch at the Abiquiu Inn in the Chama River Valley. After lunch, we enjoyed a bit of free time to find the Canyon Towhees out front, peruse the gift shop, and visit the Georgia O’Keeffe Welcome Center nearby. Upon finishing browsing, we continued northwest along the Chama River, eventually emerging onto the famed Piedra Lumbre Grant, surrounding by spectacular sandstone walls and pine clad mountains. We soon arrived at the legendary Ghost Ranch, having to tear ourselves away from the magnificent scenery along the way. At the visitor center, we took a quick bathroom break and then met our Ranch guide, Julia, for an O’Keeffe Landscape Tour of the Ranch. Julia took us to the actual sites, cliffs, and even trees that O’Keeffe painted during her many years at the Ranch, literally putting us in her footsteps. We even had a chance to peer over the coyote fence at her Ranch house, which was not open to the public. Regretfully, this spectacular afternoon came to a close as we returned to the Ranch visitor center and had a final chance at the gift



store there. Then, we returned to Santa Fe for a short break and then dinner and our checklist in the Amaya Restaurant at the hotel. Then, off to our rooms for the night after a fabulous day.

## **Thurs., Dec. 11      Taos Gorge | Millicent Rogers Museum | Taos Pueblo**

Again, we met for the start of the day in the Hotel Santa Fe's restaurant for breakfast, then loaded our gear into the vans for another day in New Mexico, this time a trip to Taos. As we drove north, we made our first stop at the County Line Access in the Rio Grande Gorge, still in deep shadow due to the steep canyon walls and early hour. Little was stirring here, though Dave spotted a fly-over Common Merganser. Continuing through the gorge, we turned off the highway at the small community of Pilar to pass through the Orilla Verde Recreation Area right along the river. Due to time constraints, we stopped briefly when we spotted birds in the river or along the roadside. Sightings included several Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, and Mallards in the river, Townsend's Solitaire, American Robin, and Spotted Towhee in the brush, and Red-tailed Hawk overhead. Reaching the end of the recreation area, we crossed the Taos Junction bridge and began a short, but very steep, windy, and gravelly climb out of the gorge onto the mesa above. As we drove, alert viewers in the first vehicle spotted several Bighorn Sheep up ahead, so we promptly stopped on the hill and got out to admire this majestic sight: 3 rams and 4 ewes walking through the sagebrush-covered lava boulders without a care in the world! After we had our fill, we continued on and discovered the sheep literally walking right in the road—great photos and views without even leaving the cars! This was a memorable moment on the tour and both Bryan and Dave agreed that never before on this tour had we encountered Bighorn Sheep so close.

Coming out on top of the mesa, we hit pavement again and continued our journey north. Arriving at the highway, we turned east for a planned stop at the rest area along the edge of the gorge, one of the most spectacular views in all of New Mexico. However, the rest area was closed due to an "incident," so we continued on to the Millicent Rogers Museum on the outskirts of Taos for the rest of the morning. Arriving at the museum, we went in, used the facilities, and then joined a docent for a tour of the museum holdings. The docent told us about Millicent Rogers' life (back in the day, she was a daily fixture of the east coast social pages), how she came to New Mexico, and her efforts as a collector and sponsor of native American art and culture. This museum has excellent examples of New Mexico pueblo pottery and a super-informative display dedicated to the legendary potter Maria Martinez from San Ildefonso Pueblo who recreated the lost art of black-on-black fired pottery.

Our tour over, we drove into Taos for a very nice lunch at Martyr's Steakhouse, very close to the center of town, followed by a bit of free time to wander and explore Taos. After we all reconvened, we went to Taos Pueblo itself to explore this famed place. After paying our entrance fees, we wandered around the pueblo's plaza for a while until an official tour started. To be standing in the middle of the oldest inhabited structures in North America is a powerful experience; particularly so when the back-drop is the snow-capped Sangre de Cristo Mountains. When the tour ended, we had a bit more free time to explore and then it was time to return. We loaded up the vehicles



again and made our way back down the Rio Grande Gorge, arriving in Santa Fe in time for a short break. For dinner, we met in the lobby and took the hotel shuttle to Santacafé for an amazingly good dinner in a private dining room. While there, we also did our daily checklist and discussed plans for the following day before returning and calling it a night.

## **Fri., Dec. 12      Bandelier | Los Alamos Nature Center | Los Alamos**

Once again, we started with breakfast at “our tables” in the Hotel Santa Fe restaurant, after which we prepared for our final day in the field. We loaded up and departed for Los Alamos today, an adventure in the mountain range which had previously been observed, but not visited. Heading north and then west, we climbed “the hill”, eventually arriving on the top of the Pajarito Plateau, with its numerous canyons carved into volcanic tuff. Passing through various pueblo, national lab, national forest, and private lands, we arrived at the turn-off into Bandelier National Monument’s Frijoles Canyon. Our first stop was at the canyon overlook, on top of the mesa with a fantastic view looking west and northwest up the canyon toward the peaks of the Valles Caldera rim. A few birds were present here, too, to start our day off right, including Mountain and Western Bluebird, Juniper Titmouse, various junco forms, and Townsend’s Solitaire. We then dropped down into the canyon to the Monument’s visitor center. After arriving there, we checked in with the rangers, used the facilities, and then went on a lovely walk in the morning sun to see the canyon and its famed cave dwellings. As we walked the trail, climbed the steps and ladders, and watched the trees, we found some great wildlife, including Abert’s Squirrel, several Brown Creepers, Cooper’s Hawk, Hairy Woodpecker, and a female Williamson’s Sapsucker for some in the group. The group reluctantly returned to the vans—it was just too lovely a morning, but we had to continue the tour. After loading up, we drove to the nearby community of White Rock for a great lunch at the Pig & Fig Café.

After lunch, we drove to the nearby Los Alamos Nature Center for our last birding opportunities. Both from outside and inside the nature center, we enjoyed many sightings, including our only Acorn Woodpeckers of the tour, many Pygmy Nuthatches, Pine Siskins, a pair of Cassin’s Finches to compare with the many House Finches, Colorado Chipmunks, and Canyon Towhee. After finishing up here, the group split into two: one group went back

to Santa Fe early and the remainder drove into Los Alamos for a short tour around Bathtub Row followed by a visit to the Bradbury Science Museum. Though late in the day, the museum folks had time to watch the introductory movie and explore the exhibits enough to get their Manhattan Project and Oppenheimer fix. As the day ended, the museum group made it's way back to Santa Fe. After a break, we all met in the lobby and then walked the short distance to an excellent final dinner at Paloma where they kindly accommodated our group at one table. We then returned to the hotel, did our final daily checklist, went over departure plans for the following day, and turned in for our last night.

## **Sat., Dec. 13      Departures from Albuquerque**

A small group left with Bryan for a very early departure from Santa Fe to Albuquerque, while the remainder enjoyed a final breakfast at the Hotel Santa Fe. A few folks stayed behind to enjoy a bit more time in Santa Fe



while Dave took everyone else in the big van directly to the Albuquerque airport, where we all scattered to the four corners of the country, carrying great memories of the Land of Enchantment with us.

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