

Arizona: Sky Island Winter Birding Blitz February 21-27, 2026 | Trip Report by Bryan Calk



Guides Bryan and Barb and participants Dale, Barb, Roger, Phyllis, Bruce, Donna, Joel, Julia, Tom, and Evan



Saturday, February 21

Sweetwater Wetlands | Green Valley | Tubac

Because everyone arrived early, the tour began with a bonus morning of birding before the official start. The first stop was Sweetwater Wetlands. Tucson was celebrating its designation as an Urban Bird Treaty City, with Mayor Regina Romero present along with community partners and the Tucson Bird Alliance hosting a booth. The park was filled with locals gathered in support of birds and habitat conservation. It was encouraging to see such a broad cross section of the community showing up for birds and the protection of habitat. Sweetwater Wetlands was built as part of the city's reclaimed water system, the wetlands were designed to naturally treat wastewater and recharge the aquifer. Open water, cattails, mesquite, and desert edge habitat create a striking contrast against the arid surroundings and the mountain ridges encircling Tucson. Vermilion Flycatchers glowed along the trails, their reds electric against blue sky and green vegetation. Gadwall, American Wigeon, and Northern Shoveler fed close to the paths in beautiful light, allowing unusually intimate looks at plumage details. The colors of the morning stood out – green cattails, warm earth tones, distant brown mountains, and that wide Southwestern sky overhead.

From there we made a short drive to Sentinel Peak Park, stepping into classic saguaro habitat. A brief walk produced quick success. Gilded Flickers called loudly and worked high in tall saguaros across the hillside, flying between cactus columns. Below us, a pair of Black-tailed Gnatcatchers moved actively through desert shrubs, giving excellent looks as they foraged. After lunch at a local bistro, we headed south to Sahuarita and stopped at a Catholic church for one specific target – a rare Red-breasted Sapsucker. After some searching, we found it working fresh sap wells in a mesquite.



The afternoon continued in Green Valley at Desert Meadows Park, a remarkable community success story. What began as a vacant lot granted to a local garden club has, over roughly a decade, been transformed into a beautifully designed desert botanical garden maintained entirely by volunteers. Native plantings, thoughtful landscaping, and layered habitat make it both aesthetically impressive and productive for birds. Broad-billed Hummingbirds zipped through the garden, and the highlight was a male Costa's Hummingbird flashing its vivid purple gorget at close range. A Curve-billed Thrasher was found on a nest, and Gambel's Quail moved along the trails.

By late afternoon we arrived at the Tubac Golf Resort and Spa and settled into our lodging. The first full orientation and checklist review brought the day into focus. Dinner at the on-site restaurant allowed everyone to relax and connect. We sat outside as the light faded over the desert, temperatures dropping quickly in classic high desert fashion.

Sunday, February 22 Tumacácori

Montosa Canyon | Madera Canyon |

Breakfast at the Tubac Deli had strong coffee, fresh pastries, and was a relaxing start before heading out. While we were there we met up with Vernie, who joined us for the day. As a Tucson local and part of the Naturalist Journeys team, he brought an extra layer of regional knowledge and perspective that added a lot to the experience.

Montosa Canyon in the Santa Rita Mountains introduced us to classic Sky Island transition habitat. Ocotillo, Emory Oak, mesquite, palo verde, sotol, and agave mixed along the rocky slopes, showing that blending of desert and woodland that makes southeastern Arizona so ecologically rich. Canyon Wrens poured their cascading songs down the cliffs while Canyon Towhees and Rufous-crowned Sparrows sang from exposed perches. Mistletoe heavy with berries attracted Phainopeplas, and both male and female gave excellent looks moving through the canyon. A mixed flock included Hermit Thrushes, Dark-eyed Juncos, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Hutton's Vireos, and a standout Northern Beardless Tyrannulet that gave surprisingly open views. We eventually reached the sweat lodge site where we heard some of the local history tied to the canyon, adding another layer of human story to the landscape.

From there we continued up toward Madera Canyon. Before entering the canyon proper, we stopped in the open grasslands at the base of the mountains where a Rufous-winged Sparrow was singing and showing beautifully, giving us extended looks as it perched up in classic fashion on the desert shrubs. Higher up in Madera Canyon we stopped at Santa Rita Lodge, one of the most famous birding stops in southeastern Arizona. The lodge sits in a beautiful oak woodland setting surrounded by towering trees and shaded slopes, and the feeders there have long been a gathering point for birders visiting the canyon. It was a nice change of pace to simply sit and relax for a while and let the birds come to us. Feeder activity included Gould's Wild Turkeys walking around the grounds, Mexican Jays moving through in vocal groups, Acorn Woodpeckers, Townsend's



Warbler, Bridled Titmice, Rivoli’s Hummingbird, and Arizona Woodpecker. The setting itself was just as enjoyable as the birds, cool shade, fresh mountain air, and the sense of being tucked into one of the most biologically rich canyons in the region.

After lunch in Green Valley, we visited the Santa Cruz River at Santa Gertrudis Lane, enjoying flowing water beneath Cottonwoods and more Hutton’s Vireos moving through the trees. Later in the afternoon the group split up. Some visited Tumacácori National Historical Park and explored the historic mission founded in 1691, learning about the early Spanish colonial period and the Indigenous O’odham communities that lived in the region long before European arrival. On the grounds, a Red-naped Sapsucker worked the trees.

Others spent time exploring Tubac, which has become one of southern Arizona’s most vibrant arts communities. Originally established as a Spanish presidio in 1752, the town has transformed into a lively arts district filled with galleries, studios, and artisan shops. The streets are lined with Southwestern paintings, sculpture, ceramics, jewelry, and handcrafted goods, and walking through the district gives a sense of the creative energy that now defines the town. Many of the galleries showcase regional artists inspired by desert landscapes, wildlife, and borderlands culture.

Dinner and our evening checklist wrapped up the day back at the resort.

Monday, February 23

Patagonia | Las Cienegas | Sierra Vista

After checking out of the Tubac Golf Resort, we returned once more to the Tubac Deli for breakfast, enjoying excellent coffee and pastries before heading east toward Patagonia. At Patagonia Lake State Park, set along Sonoita Creek, we walked the birding trail and spent time around the feeders. Sonoita Creek is one of the last perennial streams in the region, and its Cottonwood-Willow riparian corridor forms an essential wildlife artery through the surrounding desert. The lake itself, created by damming Sonoita Creek in 1968, now provides open water habitat for wintering waterfowl and migrants. Pyrrhuloxia and Black-throated Sparrow visited feeders. On the lake we enjoyed Pied-billed and Eared Grebes, Common Merganser, Bufflehead, Green-winged Teal, Double-crested Cormorant, and Vermilion Flycatchers. Soras called from the cattails as we walked. At the Patagonia Roadside Rest Area, long known among birders as a migrant trap along Sonoita Creek, red cliffs towered overhead while White-throated Swifts sliced through the air in tight arcs. Lunch in Patagonia was lively and relaxed, followed by a little time exploring town.

At the Paton Center for Hummingbirds, originally the private backyard of Wally and Marion Paton beginning in the 1970s and later preserved by Tucson Audubon, we explored at our own pace. Violet-crowned Hummingbirds



came repeatedly to the feeders, joined by Lazuli Buntings, Gila Woodpeckers, Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, Canyon Towhee, and Chipping Sparrows.

The afternoon carried us into Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, established in 2000 to protect one of the largest remaining intact semi-desert grassland ecosystems in Arizona. Rolling sacaton and native bunchgrasses stretched beneath expansive skies, framed by distant Sky Island ranges. Pronghorn stood alert in the grasslands, and we passed a Black-tailed Prairie Dog colony reestablished beginning in 2008 as part of a regional reintroduction effort. By evening we reached Casa de San Pedro along the San Pedro River, discussed Sky Island ecology, and enjoyed a catered Mexican dinner.

Tuesday, February 24 Whitewater Draw

Casa de San Pedro | Sulphur Springs Valley |

A sunrise walk near Casa de San Pedro began the day, Cottonwoods glowing and the Huachuca Mountains catching early light. Cactus Wren sang, Loggerhead Shrikes vocalized, several sparrows moved through the grasses, a Northern Harrier preened in a field, and Chihuahuan Meadowlarks sang abundantly from shrubs and clumps of grass.

After breakfast of homemade oatmeal pancakes, fresh fruit, and hot coffee, we packed lunches and drove into the Sulphur Springs Valley. This broad basin, shaped by fault-block geology, is heavily influenced by irrigated agriculture relying on groundwater pumping. The valley sits along a major migratory pathway and retains managed wetlands and agricultural ponds that concentrate wintering birds.

At Whitewater Draw Wildlife Area, approximately 1,500 acres managed by Arizona Game and Fish, over 600 acres of intermittently flooded wetlands provide essential roosting and feeding habitat for Sandhill Cranes and waterfowl. We spent the morning watching cranes and admiring Cinnamon Teal glowing in morning light, Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal, Black and Say's Phoebes, American Pipit, and singing Marsh Wrens.

Driving north, a large flock of Lark Buntings showed males beginning to molt into breeding plumage. After a picnic lunch in Elfrida, we continued toward Kansas Settlement, where a dairy pond held American Wigeon, a rare drake Eurasian Wigeon, Redhead, Canvasback, and a variety of additional ducks. Eventually we found our main raptor target, a Ferruginous Hawk first sitting in a field, then lifting off beautifully and landing on a pivot irrigation system, allowing clear scope views of its fully feathered legs and broad pale form.



Returning to Whitewater Draw for sunset, the Mule Mountains glowed as hundreds of Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbirds rose from the reeds in shifting murmurations. Beyond predator avoidance, such flocking behavior also supports communal roost coordination, information exchange, and thermoregulation on cool evenings. On the drive back, a Great Horned Owl perched on a telephone pole in the last cool blue light. Dinner in Bisbee at the Copper Pig provided an exceptional meal in an intimate setting. Back at Casa de San Pedro, a brief glimpse of a Barn Owl moving ghostlike through the dark fields closed out a long and richly layered day in southeastern Arizona.

Wednesday, February 25

San Pedro River | Ash Canyon

The day began with another quiet walk at Casa de San Pedro, this time following the river itself. A narrow ribbon of water flowed north, catching the early light beneath towering Fremont Cottonwoods that were just beginning to bud. The San Pedro River is one of the last major undammed rivers in the Southwest and flows north from Sonora, Mexico into Arizona, an unusual direction in this region. It anchors the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area, established by Congress in 1988 to protect roughly 40 miles of riparian corridor managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Standing beneath those massive Cottonwoods, with their spreading limbs arching overhead, made it easy to understand why riparian habitat matters so much in arid landscapes. Gila Woodpeckers moved through the canopy, and Vermilion Flycatchers flashed red along the river edge. As we walked farther out into the adjacent grasslands, a pair of Northern Harriers engaged in aerial dogfighting, twisting and banking over the open field. Sparrows of several species posed in the crisp morning light. It was chilly at first, but the sun quickly warmed the valley.

Back at the casa, a hearty breakfast helped us thaw out. We packed lunches and loaded into the van for a full day exploring more of the San Pedro corridor. Our first stop was the Charleston Bridge area, historically significant as the site of the so-called Battle of the Bulls in 1846. Whether legend or history, it adds another layer of human narrative to this stretch of river. The setting itself was beautiful in morning light, chaparral vegetation hugging the riverbanks here instead of the more open grasslands closer to the casa, creating a subtly different feel.

From there we moved to the San Pedro House, originally constructed in the 1930s as part of a working ranch and later incorporated into the conservation area. Today it functions as a visitor center and interpretive hub for the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area, offering trails, feeders, and educational displays. We walked across open fields toward the dense riparian forest, transitioning from sunlit grass into the cool shade beneath large Cottonwoods and Willows. The understory was lush and green thanks to the reliable moisture along this



stretch of river. Flocks moved intermittently through the brush. Chipping Sparrows and Lesser Goldfinches worked the scrubby edges. Green-tailed Towhees and Spotted Towhees played hide-and-seek in the thickets. We enjoyed a picnic lunch there, watching Pyrrhuloxias and Curve-billed Thrashers come to the feeders.

The afternoon brought us up into Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary. Originally established by Mary Jo in the late 90s as a private sanctuary and backyard feeding station, Ash Canyon became renowned among birders for close encounters with specialty species of the Huachuca Mountains. After her passing, the Southeast Arizona Bird Observatory assumed stewardship, maintaining the site as a public birding sanctuary complete with blinds, feeders, and habitat plantings. The setting feels almost like a desert oasis amphitheater framed by rocky slopes.

Feeder activity was phenomenal. Anna's Hummingbirds zipped in and out. Wild Turkeys wandered the grounds. Rock Squirrels and Arizona Gray Squirrels provided constant entertainment. Yellow-rumped Warblers in various plumages came and went in waves, allowing detailed study of molt and seasonal variation. Acorn and Gila Woodpeckers flashed through the trees. A few fortunate observers glimpsed a Lawrence's Goldfinch, a species that breeds primarily in California but occasionally irrupts into Arizona during winter. A Mexican Jay with a pronounced bill deformity stood out among the flock, an intriguing reminder of how individual birds carry their own stories.

Back at Casa de San Pedro, we enjoyed some downtime before gathering for our checklist and discussion. We talked about the historical context of Sandhill Cranes in the Sulphur Springs Valley, where wintering populations have fluctuated with changes in agriculture and wetland availability. The valley's Basin and Range geology created broad sediment-filled basins that historically supported cienegas and seasonal wetlands. As agriculture expanded and groundwater pumping intensified in the twentieth century, hydrology shifted, yet managed wetlands like Whitewater Draw now play a key role in sustaining crane roosts. The interplay between geology, water, farming, and conservation continues to shape how cranes and other migratory birds use this landscape today.

Dinner took us to Pizzeria Mimosa, where good food and relaxed conversation closed out the evening. Afterward, a quiet stroll under a sky full of stars and a bright moon provided a fitting end to another full day along the San Pedro corridor.

Thursday, February 26 Bisbee | Whitewater Draw

Ramsey Canyon Preserve | Miller Canyon |

A few of us met before breakfast while the sky was just beginning to brighten. We drove a short distance into one of the nearby neighborhood roads, really more of a loose collection of small-acre properties tucked against



open country. Soon enough, a pair of Scaled Quail came running in. The male moved toward us with confidence, clearly in territorial mode, calling and posturing. There is something undeniably charismatic about Scaled Quail, a kind of punk attitude in their carriage, and this encounter gave us unusually detailed looks. Back at Casa de San Pedro, another delicious breakfast awaited, warm and comforting before a full day in the mountains. After eating, we loaded up and headed west toward Ramsey Canyon Preserve in the Huachuca Mountains.

Ramsey Canyon Preserve is owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy and protects roughly 380 acres of riparian woodland and montane habitat in one of the most biologically diverse mountain ranges in North America. We began hiking up the canyon trail, gradually gaining elevation. Almost immediately the habitat shifted from lower foothill vegetation into Madrean evergreen oak woodland, a distinctive ecosystem characterized by a variety of oaks mixed with Arizona Sycamore, Bigtooth Maple, and Arizona Walnut. The stream flowed steadily beside the trail, lined with horsetails and budding Willows. Some of the fruit trees were in bloom, buzzing with bees, and the entire canyon felt alive. Acorn Woodpecker granaries were visible high in sycamore trunks, dense clusters of carefully drilled holes packed with stored acorns. The massive sycamores themselves stood out the most, their pale, sculptural limbs twisting overhead like living works of art. Along the trail we paused frequently to discuss plants and ecological transitions. Ramsey Canyon sits within a mixing zone where species from different elevations and biogeographic regions meet.

Along the trail, several mixed flocks moved past. Dark-eyed Juncos, mostly the Gray-headed subspecies, traveled in loose groups with Bridled Titmice. In a couple of flocks, additional species filtered through as we worked them carefully. An Arizona Woodpecker moved methodically through the trees, calling as it worked its way down canyon, a species tightly tied to these oak woodlands. We paused at a series of small ponds along the trail where Chiricahua Leopard Frogs have been reintroduced as part of recovery efforts for this federally listed threatened species. The frogs were out in good numbers, taking advantage of the bright, warm day to bask along the edges of the pools.

The undeniable highlight of the hike was a pair of Painted Redstarts. They were already singing, delivering their rich, warbled songs in full voice as if spring were firmly underway. Their plumage was every bit as striking as their song, glossy black above, bold white wing panels, and glowing red underparts that seemed to light up



when they moved. They flicked their tails constantly, flashing white outer tail feathers in classic fashion and giving prolonged, satisfying views. It was a spectacular encounter with one of the canyon's signature birds.

Back at the visitor center, we lingered at the feeders. Gould's Wild Turkeys marched in, immediately causing a commotion. The males were clearly charged with early breeding energy, posturing, chasing, and displaying in bursts of testosterone-fueled bravado. We were impressed by the hummingbird diversity, especially for February. Violet-crowned, Anna's, Broad-billed, Rivoli's, and Rufous Hummingbirds all made appearances. None were coming in huge numbers, but the steady trickle of different species rotating through was remarkable for late winter and a reminder of how special these Sky Island canyons are.

We descended the mountain and returned to Casa de San Pedro for a delicious lunch of soup and salad, taking a short rest before the afternoon activities split in two directions.

One group headed to Miller Canyon and up toward Beatty's Guest Ranch. The walk was quieter but still rewarding. More Bridled Titmice moved through, Rivoli's Hummingbird made appearances, and Dark-eyed Juncos included both Oregon and Gray-headed subspecies, offering nice comparisons. Even when bird activity slowed, the value of being immersed in the habitat – the textures of oak woodland, the slope angles, and the light – made the outing worthwhile.

The other group ventured into Bisbee. Once one of the richest mineral sites in the world, Bisbee rose to prominence in the late nineteenth century as a major copper mining town after the discovery of high-grade ore in the Mule Mountains. The Lavender Pit and other large open-pit mines reshaped both the economy and the geology of the town's surroundings. At the museum, visitors learned about the town's mining history, labor struggles, geology, and the waves of boom-and-bust cycles that shaped its character. Today, Bisbee has reinvented itself as an arts and cultural hub, with galleries, shops, and preserved historic architecture lining the steep streets. The group experienced that pulse firsthand, with live music spilling out of a bar, people dancing, and a lively, eclectic energy that defines modern Bisbee.

Later in the afternoon, some of us returned to Whitewater Draw for another sunset. The wetlands once again delivered that expansive basin feel, cranes and ducks scattered across the water as the light softened. It was a fitting way to wind down the final full day of the tour, standing in a place that had become familiar over the week yet still felt expansive and alive. Back at Casa de San Pedro, an incredibly delicious catered dinner awaited, full of fresh ingredients and creative dishes.



Friday, February 27 Departures

Our final morning was a relaxed one. We gathered at Casa de San Pedro for breakfast and spent some time reflecting on the week together, sharing favorite moments from the trip – cranes at Whitewater Draw, Painted Redstarts in Ramsey Canyon, hummingbirds at the feeders, and the many landscapes we explored along the way.

After breakfast we loaded up and began the drive back to Tucson. The route carried us once more through the wide grassland valleys, with the Sky Island mountain ranges rising in the distance. Watching the mountains pass by was a fitting way to end the trip, a final look at the landscapes that shaped so much of the wildlife and habitats we experienced during the tour.

By late morning we arrived back in Tucson where everyone departed for their onward travels, taking with them memories of southeastern Arizona's birds, habitats, and remarkable Sky Island country.

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