

Southeast Arizona Sky Island Sampler

May 2-11, 2026 | Trip Report

by David Jaffe



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Participants: Mike, Beth, Steve, Arne, Elizabeth, Leon, Mike, Cathy, Lisa and Dary



Southeast Arizona is known for being one of the most biologically diverse regions in North America. There are several factors contributing to the abundance and biodiversity occurring in the region. Southeast Arizona occurs at the confluence of four major ecosystems: the Sonoran Desert influences the region from the west while the Chihuahuan Desert influences the region from the east. Plants and animals from the Rocky Mountain region reach their furthest southernmost extent in the Chiricahuas, while plants and animals of the Sierra Madrean forests of Mexico reach their furthest northernmost extent in southeast Arizona. Therefore, it is possible to observe plants from the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts *and* the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Madre Occidental at the same time from on stationary position! This combination of ecological variables makes for a landscape that can support a great variety of plants and animals.

As if this weren't enough, another major reason for the biological has to do with the idea of the "sky Islands" that occupy the area. Sky Islands are mountain ranges that, similar to oceanic islands, are isolated from surrounding highlands by vast expanses of desert. These vast expanses of desert are dryer and hotter than the



cooler, more lush canyons that occur in higher elevations of these mountain systems. The Chiricahua Mountains have an elevation range of approximately 5000 feet, from about 4700 feet to just below 10,000 feet. This is significant because as you gain elevation, temperature drops while moisture increases. Therefore, organisms that can thrive in the warmer lowlands of these areas will not occur at higher elevations. Conversely, the organisms that cannot deal with the drier, warmer conditions of the lowlands can occur at the higher elevations. So, this provides for tremendous biological potential along this elevational gradient.

For folks that enjoy observing a myriad of wildlife and plants, there is no better place to do this than in southeastern Arizona, and this trip is designed to do exactly that!

Sat., May 2 Arrival in Tucson | Twin Lakes | Portal

After gathering everybody from the airport and from their respective hotels, we started our adventure by traveling east to our first destination: Willcox, Arizona. Just west of Willcox, we stopped to search for the Chihuahuan Raven. Unfortunately, we did not see any and so we continued onto our lunch spot, La Unica, a fine Mexican restaurant in Wilcox.

Following our first tasty meal in southeast Arizona, we made our way to the Twin Lakes Golf Course—a premier birdwatching destination in this part of the state.

The close-by Willcox Pond also delivered! Not a surprise, but always a pleasure to bird these locations. We saw 35 species with some highlights being the Hudsonian Whimbrel, Avocet in full breeding plumage, large flocks of Long-billed Dowitchers, and numerous many White-faced Ibis. After a very successful first birdwatching excursion, we continued to Portal—a gateway to the Chiricahua Mountains. We made a few quick drive-through's in Bowie and San Simon in search of the Harris's hawk, but with no luck. About an hour after a quick stop in Road Forks for gas, the last gas for many miles, we rolled into the lovely village of Portal.

This drive from Willcox into the Chiricahua Mountains is stunning and it was such a lovely way to end our day! Once we got checked in and settled, we met in the main ranch house for introductions, to go over our first bird list of the trip, and have a wonderful meal catered by Jackie Lewis, who resides up in Paradise at the George Walker house. Well-fed and content with our day, we settled in to our comfortable beds for a well-deserved rest.

Sun., May 3 High Mountain Birding | Owling

Several folks were out early to do some pre-breakfast birding about the ranch. Before breakfast we saw 27 species! Several new species for the trip included the Acorn Woodpecker, Inca dove and the Bridled Titmouse.



After a wonderful breakfast of quiche, potatoes, blueberries, granola, and yogurt, we met James, our local Portal guide, and began our trip up to the high country.

Stop number one was Turkey Creek, where we got some good looks of the Yellow-eyed Junco, the Western Wood Pewee, and some fleeting glimpses of the Spotted Towhee. We also got some really nice looks of the Golden Columbine growing along the banks of Turkey Creek. Exquisite!

From here, we went up and over Onion Saddle before dropping in to Pinery Canyon in search of several more high-altitude specialty species. Before we even got to our parking spot, we saw the Painted Redstart from the van. Immediately upon arrival, we got some looks of the Mexican Chickadee. We then searched for and found the Red-faced Warbler. A bonus surprise was hearing the Buff-breasted Flycatcher. After a few moments of hearing it, we were very pleased to get some really good looks at it as it perched in the open atop a close by Oak bush.

We continued to search a little bit longer for the Mexican Spotted Owl before we decided to head up the hill to Rustler Park. This would be our highest destination and lunch spot. On the way up the hill to Rustler Park, we heard a Greater Pewee calling. This was reason enough for us to stop and have a look to see if we could find this specialty bird. We did not see it at this time.

During and after our lunch stop, we continued to bird and got some great looks of a Pygmy Nuthatch gathering nesting materials. We also saw the Western Bluebird and some very close looks of the Yellow-eyed Junco. Before departing, we walked down the hill in search of the Rock Wren. We were successful in calling it in. In the process, we also got some good looks of a Green-tailed Towhee, another first for the trip.

Back in the vans and making our way down the hill, we stopped several times and finally found the Greater Pewee, as well as the Olive Warbler, both target species for the high country. Finding a lingering Williamson's Sapsucker was an unexpected bonus, along with a resident Hairy Woodpecker at the same spot.

We continued clockwise on our loop through the mountains and stopped at the George Walker house in Paradise to sit with the feeders for a few minutes. This place is always such an incredible birdwatching destination, and we got really good close looks of the Bridled Titmouse, the Scott's Oriole, the Black-headed Grosbeak, and the Arizona Woodpecker. We also took the opportunity to show some love and affection to Buster, the local "mascot" of the residence, a sweet pooch that did not mind the attention we showered upon him!



We continued down the hill to Cave Creek Ranch, where we all enjoyed a short break before reconvening to go over our species list for the day. This was followed by another delicious dinner catered by Jackie. To add a cherry to an already lovely day, we went out to search for owls. We were successful in hearing the Elf Owl and getting some short looks of the Lesser Nighthawk right at the start of the walk.

Before the night ended, we got some really good looks at the Chiricahua Leopard Frog while learning about their natural history from James. After this night walk, we all retired to our respective cabins after a huge first full day in the largest of the sky islands in southeast Arizona.

Mon., May 4 Bob Rodriguez Feeders | SWRS | Cave Creek Canyon | Portal

We were rolling by 6 AM for a bonus pre-breakfast birding session at Bob Rodriguez' place. We were immediately greeted by a great diversity of species, including a Pyrrhuloxia, Lazuli Bunting and Black-throated Sparrow, all new for trip. After about a half hour of fast and furious birdwatching, we peeled ourselves away from the seats and made our way back to the ranch for another wonderful breakfast before our day formally began.

After breakfast, we visited the Southwest Research Station to observe hummingbird banding. This was a great opportunity to see hummingbirds up close and learn how science gathers information for recording hummingbird migration. Elizabeth and Lisa each had the opportunity to actually hold and release one of these flying gems!! After about a half hour of watching the hummingbird banding, we birded along the massive old trees of the research station before making our way down to the South Fork of Cave Creek. Some highlights for this part of the morning included the Say's Phoebe and a very close look at the Summer Tanager.

On the way to the trailhead to the South Fork, we stopped at the bridge for a few moments. The highlight there was about two dozen White-throated Swift, flying very low to the ground. Some of the lowest flying swifts any of us have ever seen! We actually were able to see the top of the swifts, because we were above them, not because they were 'banking'. When does that ever happen? After birding the bridge for an 'appropriate amount of time', we made our way to the trailhead. Immediately upon exiting the vehicle at the parking lot, we heard the Trogon. It wasn't long before we all got eyes on it! What an amazing way to start a hike up an incredibly beautiful canyon. We walked about a mile and a half up into the canyon before turning around at the first crossing: A lovely way to spend the morning.

Following lunch and a spacious afternoon break, we went into the community of Portal to visit the different hotspots in the area. We started at the Portal store and birded our way through town, past the library and down to Bud and Deb's feeders with our final destination being what they call the Orchard Annex. Here we saw a distant flycatcher that may have been in Olive-sided Flycatcher, but it was so far that we were not able to distinguish whether it was this species or a Western Wood Pewee.



From here we went to search for the Thick-billed Kingbird down Cathedral Rock Road, but did not find it. We did find the Lucy's warbler, first for the trip! After a little more searching for the kingbird, we departed and went to Dave Jasper's yard to watch the feeders for a while.

Although we did not see anything new at Dave's, we did get some really good looks at the Broad-tailed Hummingbird for the first time this trip and the brilliant blue gorget of the Blue-throated Mountain Gem. We also got some nice looks at the Verdin, which is always a treat!

We made a few stops on our way down the hill in search of the Scaled Quail. However, we did not have any luck and continued on down to the Sky Islands Restaurant for our evening meal.

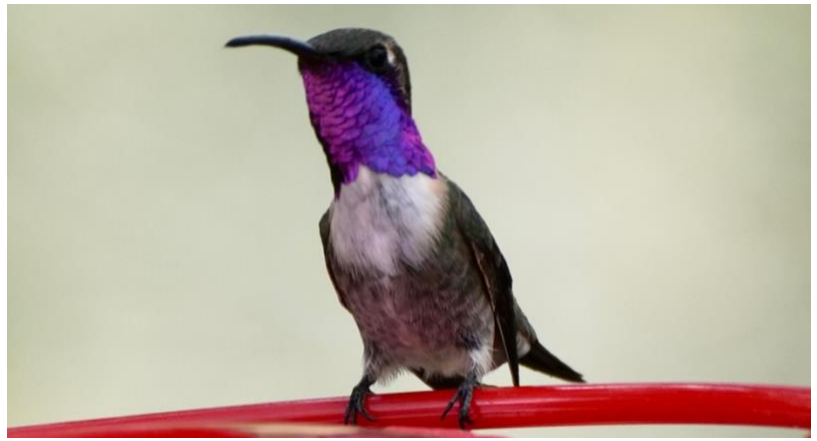
Tues., May 5 Southwest Research Station | Chiricahua National Monument | Casa De San Pedro

Our final morning in Portal started by sharing another a wonderful catered breakfast. We then packed up the vans and made our way up and over Onion Saddle again. Our first stop: Chiricahua National Monument visitor center where we gathered Information, had a little time for souvenir shopping, and learned more about the place we would be visiting.

The highest point on our drive was Massai Point, reached by traveling the scenic road that winds through the monument's spectacular formations. Beautiful Arizona oak woodland-forest coated the hills as we ascended to the top. Once at the summit, we had the opportunity to walk around and explore the dazzling rock features, marvel at the big views and the savor the vegetation of the high altitudes. After a lovely walk in this high-altitude environment, we slowly made our way down to one of the picnic areas where we enjoyed a lovely lunch with a nice breeze as we watched the clouds rolled by.

During lunch, the wind and gusty conditions picked up, making birding less than ideal. So we took the opportunity to make a quick stop in Tombstone, Arizona, to revisit the old west! After about a half hour of exploring the town, we visited Bisbee: a quaint, artistic, community where folks were able to visit the different shops, get some ice cream, and even pick up a capo to play music on a guitar that Sharon kindly brought from home for us to share. Then, after a day of sightseeing, we made our way to the land of some of the best homemade pie in the country, courtesy of Carl and Patrick, owners of Casa de San Pedro.

After an incredible dinner, Elissa, a Naturalist Journeys staff member, who has been banding hummingbirds for decades, gave us a presentation providing us some more insight into the process and the benefit of banding hummingbirds. Hearing her speak was a wonderful compliment to the banding we had all observed several days prior at the Southwest Research Station.



Wed., May 6 Casa de San Pedro | Miller Canyon | San Pedro House

Although Steve and Leon were out birding by 6 AM, most folks were out for the formal and organized birding session that Sharon and David offered at 7 AM.

As the sun rose the day warmed up and we had perfect light to photograph many of the birds we were observing. Some of the highlights included Vermilion Flycatchers feeding their young, a Swainson's Hawk, and some good looks at a Wilson's warbler. And this was all before we returned to the Casa for a delicious breakfast!

Wheels were rolling a little before 9 am for our journey up into Miller Canyon. We hiked up the trail in search of a known Flame-colored Tanager nest. En route we got some really good looks at a Red-faced Warbler, a Plumbeous Vireo and a Hutton's Vireo.

Just a few minutes further up the trail, we located the Tanager nest, observed the female for a few minutes and settled in awaiting the return of the male. Patience prevailed, and we all got at least fleeting glimpses of the male Flame-colored Tanager as it returned to the nest and flew around the canopy a little bit. Wow!

And just to add a little more sweetness to the situation, on the rebound, we got some clean looks of both male and female Hepatic Tanagers.

Our final stop in Miller Canyon was at the hummingbird viewing area where we had some really good opportunities to see our "regular hummingbirds" such as the Broad-tailed, Rivoli's, Broad-billed and the Black-chinned. We also got some really good looks of the Calliope and the Anna's, the latter two each new for the trip.

From Miller Canyon, we had a wonderful lunch in town and then went to the San Pedro house along the San Pedro River. We spent a piece of the afternoon here first at the feeders by the visitor center, and then out to Kingfisher Pond. We returned along the river itself.

During this excursion, we found ourselves a Yellow-breasted Chat, and most all of us got some looks of a distant Grey Hawk. Both of these were new for the trip. An additional highlight of this part of the trip were the huge Cottonwoods that we wandered amongst while in the river basin in search of riparian dwelling birds. How lovely!!



After an incredible day in the field locating most of our target species, we came back to the Casa de San Pedro for a short break before engaging with the bird list and heading out to dinner at Pizza Mimosa.

Thurs., May 7 | Casa de San Pedro | Ramsey Canyon | Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary

About half the group met David and Sharon for a pre-breakfast birding session. Then, at about 7 AM we made our way to the dining room for another homemade breakfast at Casa de San Pedro and were driving by about 7:40 am en route to *another* premier birding destination of Southeast Arizona: Ramsey Canyon!

A Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher had been seen recently, and when we arrived at the parking lot, another visitor told us that he had just heard it. We searched for this bird in the parking lot for a little while. However, we did not see it and entered through the visitor center and into the preserve.

Low and behold, after a few minutes of searching, we heard and then found the flycatcher above us right in the open. Everybody got a really good look at it. Another highlight on our walk was seeing a Plumbeous Vireo actively building a nest at a very close distance from the trail. When we got up to the top of the trail at our uppermost point along the Bledsoe Loop, we heard and saw another Coppery-tailed Trogon. Then we got word on the location of a Northern Pygmy Owl. It didn't take us too long to find this bird at the top of a large cottonwood. Everybody got some good looks at this elusive little owl.

After a picnic lunch in Ramsey Canyon, we made our way down to Brown Canyon Ranch for a quick stop. The first birds we saw here was a brilliant Vermilion Flycatcher, a Ladder-backed Woodpecker, and a Lesser Goldfinch. We continued along the trail to the site of a known water feature to explore what might exploit this highly valuable resource in a Mesquite grassland. Unfortunately, due to a very dry winter, there was not much water and not much bird activity.

Following this short stop, we made our way on to the renowned Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary where we had an opportunity to sit at the feeders and hope for one more target species for the day: Lucifer Hummingbird. In addition to many other southeastern Arizona specialties such as the Scott's Oriole and the Broad-billed Hummingbird, we all got multiple looks at the Lucifer's Hummingbird. This was one more spectacular day on top of an already incredible trip!!



Before we gathered to review our bird list, both Mikes, Leon and Sharon serenaded us with some songs with Mike Sturmak on guitar and Sharon on fiddle. Such a warm and lovely way to finish our field day and slide into the evening.

Fri., May 8 Patagonia Lake State Park | Paton Center for Hummingbirds

After an incredibly tasty, robust and final breakfast at Casa de San Pedro, we started early with our first adventure being a search for the Scaled Quail in a nearby neighborhood. After a valiant effort with no reward, we continued on to Patagonia Lake State Park, where we walked along the Sonoita Creek Trail in the early morning hours to see what we could see. The first bird we saw that was new for the trip and that everybody got good looks at was the Phainopepla. Up until this point, only one or two of us got a fleeting view of this bird in flight, but today was the quintessential view of the male perched on a treetop with good light so we could see his incredible red eyes and regal crest. While we were looking at a cormorant, trying to differentiate between a Double-crested and a Neotropic, we got eyes on a huge White Pelican, also new for the trip. Just left of the Pelican we were surprised to locate one solitary Gadwall, and not the pair. Before continuing on down the trail we found a Pied-billed Grebe. A little further on, we tried to call in a Sora, but without luck. As we turned and started to make the journey back to the van, we had two Gray Hawks fly overhead, one gave us some really good views. Quite lovely!! After about 3 1/2 hours of really productive birding, we reached the trailhead and went onto Patagonia for lunch.

Following lunch, we walked the streets of a nearby neighborhood in Patagonia in search of the Mississippi Kite. After a few moments of searching, we saw one kite fly overhead and then perch. Although it was slightly obscured by foliage, when the breeze blew just right and the foliage shifted slightly, we were able to see the entire bird. After a spacious viewing of the kite, we went to Paton's Center for Hummingbirds. In addition to some good looks at the Costa's Hummingbird, we got some really good looks of the Violet Crown Hummingbird, just a few feet away.

After some time with the feeders, we walked the Cuckoo Trail to test our luck in finding the Thick-billed Kingbird. After about a half hour of searching without luck, Sharon said, "Well, why don't we look up this creek bed just for three minutes." Just as we had given up on the Kingbird, and were about to head back to the vans, the bird alighted on top of a nearby snag-tree. Success!! This became a reference for us for the remainder of the trip: when one sincerely gives up on attaining some goal, the universe often times offers it. But the 'giving up' has to be sincere...you can't fake it! So, after this success we made our way to Tubac, our evening destination.

Sat., May 9 Box Canyon | Madera Canyon



We attempted to beat the heat with an early start. A nice cool morning is always pleasant. Our first stop was at about 8 AM looking for the Botteri's Sparrow, which we found immediately upon exiting the vehicle. After a little bit of chasing and some good looks, we loaded the vans and continued up into Box Canyon.

We stopped about 20 minutes up into the canyon to walk amongst the Ocotillo and Prickly Pear Cactus in search of our elusive Five-striped Sparrow. In the process, we saw a Verdin with nest materials on its nest, a possible Costa's Hummingbird, and a couple folks thought they spotted a Golden Eagle.

Although we tried to turn a Black-throated Sparrow into a Five-striped Sparrow it did not work! About an hour of searching for our target species, we turned and slowly made our way back to the van. We didn't make it back to the van as quickly as we anticipated due to the return of the Golden Eagle, with a squirrel in its talons!

Only 100 feet up the road, we stopped again. We spoke with some others on the road that had just heard a Montezuma Quail. So, again, we piled out of the van excited about the prospect of seeing another target species. After about 10 minutes of listening, we decided to continue on up the hill.

At our next stop, we dropped down into the canyon and walked along the creek bottom. Here we observed several species of butterflies puddling and a Bridled-titmouse bringing food to its nest. We also got some more good looks of the Thick-billed Kingbird and a Wilson's Warbler before we left the canyon bottom. Now, we returned to the van and started to head down the hill and loop back up into Madera Canyon for lunch and further exploration.

We explored Madera Canyon for a couple hours visiting the feeders and going to the top of the road to experience the high-altitude oak woodlands one more time. We then dropped down out of the high country to Desert Meadows Park in Green Valley. This is a community park that is a wonderful example of Sonoran Desert vegetation complete with botanical signs and other information to let us know what we were seeing. We saw some lizards, a few butterflies, and some of the birds that we have been seeing throughout the trip including the Gambles Quail, Curve-billed Thrasher, and another nice look at the Verdin...I don't think anyone can tire of good looks of this cute denizen of the desert!

Following this, we made our way back to Tubac where most took a little break. Some met up with Sharon for a quick jaunt to look for the Tropical Kingbird around the property. They were successful at this endeavor: another kingbird for the trip!

Sun., May 10 Montosa Canyon | Amado WTP | Canoa Ranch



An early start got him to Montosa Canyon by about 7 o'clock. We were fortunate that Vernie Aikins from the Naturalist Journeys office was able to meet and share some time with us. He is a local from Tucson and knows Montosa Canyon *very* well. We were lucky to have him. Immediately after our intros, Vernie brought us up the dirt road in search of a Five-striped Sparrow. Prior to our arrival, he had been staking out this bird for us.

We searched for about a half an hour, without success and we moved on. However, it wasn't all in vain since we got some looks at a Crissal Thrashers and a Townsend warbler, both new for the trip. Vernie then took us to the sweat lodge, which was a big part of this canyon being saved from development by Smithsonian. The American Indians fought for their rights to maintain a cultural site and save this canyon in perpetuity for themselves, as well as things like the Five-striped Sparrow, the Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, as well as myriad other creatures that depend on this relatively intact low-woodland habitat.

We returned to the van by way of the road. However, before we left the area and drove up the hill in search of the Rufous-crowned and Rufous-winged Sparrows, we tried to get one last look at the Five-striped Sparrow. We were not successful.

We were successful in spotting the Rufus-crowned Sparrow on a rocky, grassy hillside just up the road. And as we descended down the hill back into the lowland, we got some good looks of the Rufus-winged Sparrow as well.

From here we made our way to the Amado water treatment plant and Canoa Pond to see if we could find any water-fowl or other specialty water species. We picked up a few new species, including the Cliff Swallow, the Black-bellied Whistling Duck, and some really cute baby American Coots being fed by their parents.

After lunch, we made our way to Tumacácori National Historic site where we visited the old mission and learned about its history.

After a short siesta back at the resort, we all met for our final bird list and closing ceremony. Following the bird list, David facilitated an appreciation circle. He started by talking about the beauty of receiving a hand-written letter from another. Then he asked folks to imagine how a recipient would feel if they received a hand-written letter from 'you'. He read a short piece by Terry Tempest Williams about the act of tenderness that is letter writing. During the appreciation circle, one individual would start by choosing two items from the table: a

postcard and a pin. They would then present these two items to another member of the group and express something that they appreciated about that person or a reason that person enhanced their trip. After all the items were chosen and appreciations expressed, David shared a reading about the value of sharing nature with others and how important this is these days. A few more folks expressed gratitude to the group for various reasons.

The appreciation circle was followed by music being played by both Mikes taking turn on guitar and Sharon on fiddle. Several others joined in the singing. It was a very nice closing to a lovely week of birdwatching and sharing stories, adventures, and heartfelt experiences.

Mon., May 11 Departures from Tucson

After breakfast, we made our way north to Tucson with a stop at San Xavier Mission. This was a nice complement to our visit to Tumacácori the previous day. We were fortunate that there was a docent offering a tour sharing information about the mission. We joined the walk, learned a whole lot about the mission, its paintings and other nuances of the structure. We all found it very engaging.

From here, we said our goodbyes. Sharon shuttled folks to the airport and David took folks to their hotels.

It's always a bit sad to part ways when a group bonds so well. But there is also so much rejoicing to be done for having shared such a wonderful week together! Until next time...

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