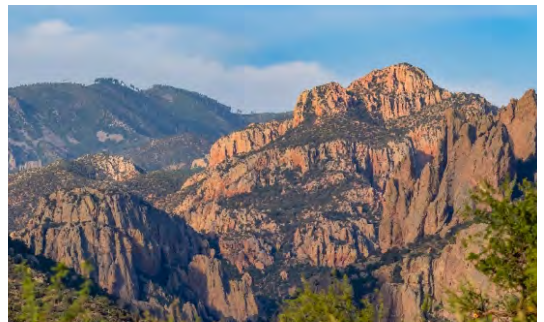


Arizona Monsoon Madness | August 4 – 11, 2026

Trip Report by David Jaffe



With guides David Jaffe & Troy Corman and participants Sandy, Bob, Jim, Allen, Donna, Frank, Ruth, Jen, Vince, & Lynn



Southeast Arizona is known for being one of the most biologically diverse regions in North America, and there's no better time to experience that diversity than during the summer monsoon, when dramatic afternoon storms transform the desert and draw wildlife into a frenzy of activity. One of the main reasons for this abundance has to do with the concept of "sky islands" that occupy the region. 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 drier and hotter than the cooler, more lush canyons that occur at higher elevations within these mountain systems.

The Chiricahua Mountains have an elevation range of approximately 5,000 feet, from about 4,700 feet to just below 10,000 feet. This is significant because as you gain elevation, temperature drops while moisture increases. Therefore, organisms that thrive in the warmer lowlands will not occur at higher elevations, while organisms



that cannot tolerate the drier, warmer lowland conditions find refuge higher up — providing tremendous biological potential along this elevational gradient, one that becomes especially vivid once the monsoon rains arrive and green up the desert floor.

As if this weren't enough, southeast Arizona sits at the confluence of four major ecosystems: the Sonoran Desert influences the region from the west, while the Chihuahuan Desert influences it from the east. Plants and animals of the Rocky Mountains reach their southernmost extent in the Chiricahuas, while species of the Sierra Madre forests of Mexico reach their northernmost extent here in southeast Arizona. It is therefore possible to observe plants and animals characteristic of the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts, the Rocky Mountains, and the Sierra Madre Occidental all from a single stationary position — and during monsoon season, this convergence explodes into one of the great wildlife spectacles in North America, as hummingbirds swarm feeders, breeding birds reach peak activity, and reptiles and amphibians emerge in response to the rains.

This landscape carries as much human history as it does biological richness. The Chiricahua Mountains and surrounding sky islands were the historic stronghold of the Chiricahua Apache, and this rugged terrain — including the dramatic rock formations of Chiricahua National Monument, sometimes called the "Land of Standing-Up Rocks" — played a central role in the resistance led by figures like Cochise and Geronimo before their eventual removal from the region in the late 1800s. Spanish exploration and later Mexican and American settlement layered further history onto the landscape, from mission routes to the mining boomtowns like Bisbee and Tombstone that sprang up around the region's rich mineral deposits. Fort Bowie, now a National Historic Site, stands as a reminder of the Apache Wars that shaped this borderland for decades. Today, the sky islands remain a meeting ground — not only of ecosystems, but of cultures — and traveling through them during the drama of the summer monsoon offers a rare chance to witness both the explosive vitality of the natural world and the deep, layered history of the people who have called this region home.

Tues., Aug. 4 Arrival in Tucson | Willcox Twin Lake Ponds | Portal

After collecting everyone from their hotels, save for the two arriving later, we guided the group out to the desert cactus loop of Saguaro National Park East. It was here we spotted some of our first southern desert species, such as the Brown-crested Flycatcher, the Cactus Wren and the White-winged Dove.

The desert was alive with color, as several barrel cacti displayed beautiful fuchsia blossoms, alongside Creosote and Rabbitbrush blooming in bright yellow. These vibrant displays were a welcome result of the few monsoon



storms the desert had already experienced. We traversed the loop, making several stops, knowing this would be our primary opportunity to explore and savor the Sonoran Desert. It truly is an amazing place, and we were grateful for the time to immerse ourselves in it this morning.

Following lunch, Troy departed to collect the remaining guests from the airport. Meanwhile, David began heading east toward the Chiricahua Mountains. However, we would make a stop before the mountains at the Twin Lakes Golf course which has two bodies of water that are wonderful for waterfowl. Before reaching the main lake, we visited a smaller pond, where we enjoyed excellent views of Yellow-headed Blackbird, Barn Swallow, and immature, Black-crowned Night Heron. We then proceeded to the larger lake to try our luck with waterfowl. Through our scopes, the lake offered superb sightings of Baird's Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, and a couple of Long-billed Dowitcher. It was an undeniably productive stop!

As we neared the Chiricahuas, we were greeted by our first monsoon storm, complete with a vivid rainbow and the beautiful, earthy fragrance of Creosote in the rain. After an introductory briefing, we checked into our rooms and then set out to compile our first bird list of the trip before enjoying a delicious meal catered by Jackie.

Wed., Aug 5 Cave Creek Canyon | South Fork | Grasslands | Portal | Optional Night Birding

Our day commenced before breakfast with an early morning birdwatching session around the ranch. The clouds ignited in a beautiful pink glow just before the sun crested the horizon. We were rewarded with our inaugural sightings of the Mexican Jay, several White-winged Dove, and exceptional views of the Cactus Wren. We continued birding until breakfast was served, and after a delightful meal, we promptly reconvened to resume our observations. Our morning destination was the South Fork of Cave Creek Canyon—a location famed for the Coppery-tailed Trogon (formerly known as the Elegant Trogon). The was certainly a key target for the morning. Stepping directly from our vehicles, we immediately heard the calls of a Bridled Titmouse, a Painted Redstart, and a White-breasted Nuthatch. As we ventured deeper into the canyon, some of us caught glimpses of the Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, the Trogon, and the Black-throated Gray Warbler. While hiking, Troy and I discussed the profound significance of these 'Sky Islands' and what makes this particular canyon so extraordinary. The canyon itself is simply breathtaking to traverse, with its towering red cliff walls adorned with bright yellow lichens, and an abundance of venerable Sycamore and Cypress trees. Approximately two hours into our leisurely



stroll, we encountered a sign signifying our entry into true 'Wilderness' – specifically, the Chiricahua Wilderness. Here, by definition, humans are but temporary visitors, and the wilderness characteristics are congressionally protected. It is truly reassuring to know that such precious lands are safeguarded.

We had another excellent sighting of the Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, then made our way back to the vehicles and returned to Cave Creek Ranch for a short “break” at the bird feeders before lunch.

After a pleasant siesta to let the afternoon heat subside and the clouds build, we climbed back into the vehicles and headed for the Southwest Research Station in search of two specialty hummingbirds: the White-eared and the Berylline.

Upon arriving at the feeders, our first hummer of the afternoon was a Blue-throated Mountain Gem, followed by Broad-billed, Broad-tailed, a couple of Rivoli's, and — after a bit of patience — our first target, the White-eared Hummingbird, appeared. We'd heard the Berylline had been visiting a different feeder on the station grounds, so we located it and walked over. Literally the moment we arrived, the Berylline showed itself. Most of us managed to get good photos, though it only made a single appearance, so a few in the group missed it.

On our way out, we caught fleeting glimpses of a Montezuma Quail crossing the road into a fenced yard. After several minutes of searching, a few of us spotted the male — an extremely obscured view off in the distance. It lasted all of two seconds before it vanished into the vegetation, never to be seen again.

That was our call to return to Cave Creek Ranch to go over our bird list and feast on another delicious meal.

Following a brief break and the completion of our bird list, we savored another delightful meal, catered by Jackie, which culminated in a birthday cake for Sandy. After singing and celebrating, we embarked on an owling excursion with James Peterson, the local guide for Cave Creek Ranch and Naturalist Journeys.



Our initial stop yielded distant calls from the Mexican Whippoorwill. However, our primary objective here was the Western Screech Owl. Despite some playback attempts and no replies, we opted to proceed, hastened by the distant flashes of an approaching storm.

At our next location, we sought the Whiskered Screech Owl, a true specialty of Southeast Arizona. Again, after employing playback, its distinct call reached us from afar.

Our final stop of the evening led us to the South Fork Cave Creek parking area, where we hoped to find the Mexican Spotted Owl. Though all calls remained quite distant, we nonetheless considered the evening a resounding success!

Thur., Aug. 6 High Mountain Birding | San Pedro River | Bisbee | Casa de San Pedro

We began our day early with a dedicated birding session at one of the local feeders. Our primary target for the morning was the Crissal Thrasher, yet the feeding station also afforded us remarkable close-up views of several other species we had not previously observed with such clarity, including the Black-throated Sparrow, Pyrrhuloxia, Curve-billed Thrasher, and Canyon Towhee. New additions to our trip list included the Blue Grosbeak, Gambel's Quail, and Abert's Towhee. After a productive morning at the feeders, we journeyed to Jackie's in Paradise for an exquisite breakfast, all while continuing our birding at the feeders of the George Walker house. Here, our objective was the Juniper Titmouse, a mission we accomplished with great success! We all enjoyed excellent views of the Titmouse, complemented by Jackie's wonderful catered meal and superb birding, before ascending to Barfoot in pursuit of the Red-faced Warbler. Immediately upon exiting our vehicles at Barfoot, we were greeted by the sight of a Pygmy Nuthatch. Moments later, another target species, the Mexican Chickadee, appeared. We also had splendid views of the Olive Warbler, among other sightings like the Yellow-eyed Junco. Amidst these high-elevation specialties, the undisputed highlight and likely the rarest bird of our entire trip was the Tufted Flycatcher—a species that does not grace this area with its presence every year. Its sighting filled us all with immense excitement, as well as numerous other birders in the area that came up 'chasing' this rare bird.



Following an exceptionally fruitful session at Barfoot, we proceeded to Russell Park, still diligently searching for our elusive target species. We enjoyed some light birding during our lunch break. After our picnic, we descended the hill to Pinery Campground, ever hopeful in our quest for the Red-faced Warbler. Our patience and perseverance were ultimately rewarded with an excellent sighting of our desired species. Once everyone had ample opportunity to observe the warbler, we made our way down the hill, aiming to clear the dirt road before the impending rain. Upon arrival at Casa de San Pedro, we settled into the spacious and comfortable surroundings, reconvening for our bird list and a most delicious dinner, graciously catered by our hosts, Patrick and Carl.

Fri., Aug. 7 San Pedro House | Ash Canyon

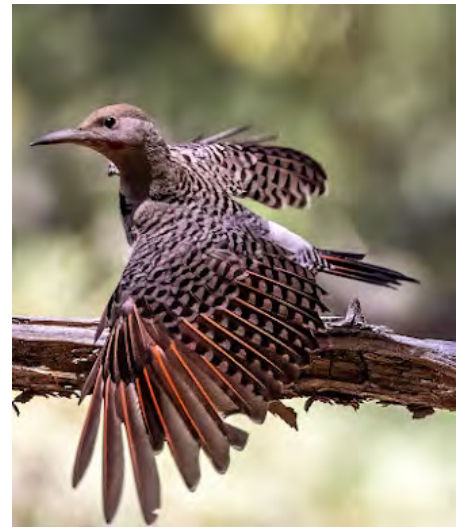
Eight companions joined Troy and me for a pre-breakfast birding excursion around Casa de San Pedro. Strolling along the quiet, unpaved road, we sighted another Blue Grosbeak and heard the distinct calls of a Great Horned Owl and several Gila Woodpeckers. Subsequently, we were treated to excellent views of a small flock of Lark Buntings, an observation that elevated Donna's trip life list to over thirty species! As we reached our turning point on the morning walk, we encountered our first Zone-tailed Hawk and male Vermilion Flycatcher of the trip. And all of these splendid sightings all occurred before a delightful breakfast!

Nourished and refreshed, we proceeded to the San Pedro House for a morning birding session alongside the San Pedro River. This riparian zone boasts some of the most immense cottonwoods we have ever encountered, with some trees exhibiting diameters of three feet or more. However, the monsoon's elevated waters necessitated our exploration of the grassland areas above the riverbanks. Here, we observed a vibrant array of butterfly species, including Pipevine Swallowtail, Queen, Cabbage White, and various Sulphur, diligently feeding on and subsequently pollinating the abundant colorful blossoms. After approximately ninety minutes of walking along the river, we turned back towards the trailhead, where participants had the opportunity to explore the visitor center and engage in some casual birding near the local feeders. Following a brief respite with snacks and water, our journey continued to the Sierra Vista water treatment plant. At this location, we had our first sighting of the Ash-throated Flycatcher, alongside a group of Western Kingbird. Troy also detected the distant call of a Cassin's Sparrow, though the bird itself remained elusive.

Having observed what felt like a comprehensive suite of species, we proceeded to a local restaurant in Sierra Vista for lunch, which was followed by a restorative afternoon siesta.

Afterwards we reconvened for our journey to the Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary, a location celebrated as one of the rare sites where the Lucifer Hummingbird can be observed in this country.

Our primary objective at Ash Canyon was to observe the elusive Lucifer hummingbird. While we were fortunate to witness numerous hummingbirds at the feeding station, our target species remained absent. Despite this, we were delighted to spot another remarkable species—the Costa's hummingbird—marking the first sighting of our trip! Even though Ash Canyon is well known for hummingbirds, I think a highlight for most of us was about 30 bushtit that all descended on the water feature, where about 10 would bathe at a time. A very sweet display! Following our time at Ash Canyon, we treated ourselves to an exceptional meal at Pizzeria Mimosa in Sierra Vista. The meal and conversations were both satisfying and memorable. Afterward, we returned to Casa de San Pedro, where we went over our bird list and indulged in an exquisite homemade pie that made for the perfect ending to our day.



Sat., Aug. 8 San Pedro River | Miller Canyon | Ramsey Canyon

Seven of us gathered for a pre-breakfast birding session at Hereford Bridge. The crisp coolness characteristic of mornings this time of year made it a delightful occasion to seek out birds amidst the beautiful landscapes of southeast Arizona.

Our ears were first greeted by the Yellow-breasted Chat, soon followed by a distinct call from a Northern Beardless Tyrannulet. Moments later, the Tyrannulet revealed itself, offering excellent views and opportunities for some truly fine photographs.

As the Tyrannulet departed, our attention smoothly shifted to a Yellow-breasted Chat, visible in plain sight— the first good sighting for this trip. Immediately following, our gaze was drawn to a sky-larking Cassin's Sparrow, engaged in a courtship display reminiscent of insect hawking. Remarkably, all these sightings unfolded within just five minutes of stepping out of the van!

While no new species were added to our list during the rest of the walk, we enjoyed excellent views of the Blue Grosbeak, the Common Ground Dove, and two juvenile Cooper's Hawks honing their nascent flight skills in the warm morning sunlight. The Bell's Vireo marked our final new sighting of the session. After this short yet productive birding, we returned to the Casa for another delightful breakfast. Soon after breakfast, we ascended Miller Canyon, embarking on a quest for another target species: the Flame-colored Tanager. We also hoped for better views of the Calliope and Costa's Hummingbirds at the feeding station. However, prioritizing our search for the Tanager, we headed directly to its last known sighting before the heat became too intense.

Following an hour and a half of diligent searching for the tanager and further birding in the vicinity, we began our descent. Though no new species emerged from this section, we encountered a pleasing flurry of activity halfway down, yielding excellent views of the Hutton's Vireo, Painted Redstart, and White-breasted Nuthatch. The sheer pleasure of being in the high-elevation forest of the Huachuca Mountains was an added bonus.

Before heading back to our vehicles, we paused at the hummingbird feeders, for which the Beatty Ranch is renowned. Soon after our arrival, we were treated to superb views of our first Violet-crowned Hummingbird of the trip.

After lunch and a siesta, our journey led us to Ramsey Canyon. While we had no specific new target birds for the trip, we had learned of a nesting Violet-crowned Hummingbird with two chicks located very near the visitor center, sparking our hopes of a sighting.

Prior to visiting the Ramsey Canyon visitor center, we were all treated to extraordinary views of the hummingbird nest, home to two tiny chicks. The visitor center had a scope set up, and we eagerly took turns peering through it as well as our binoculars, many of us capturing photographs of these adorable little ones. While the adult remained unseen, it was a truly splendid introduction to our walk into Ramsey Canyon.

Less than a minute onto the trail, we spotted an adult deer with her fawn, its coat still charmingly speckled with spots. A little further along, we paused to admire a vibrant Arizona Sister butterfly and several Sulfur butterflies, whose hues so perfectly resembled leaves turning yellow in the fall that they were quite camouflaged and initially difficult to discern.

Our journey continued up the trail, where we passed massive Arizona Sycamores. Along the way, we observed several Western Wood-Pewees, a Hepatic Tanager, and a few White-breasted Nuthatch. After approximately an hour and a half of exploring the canyon, we began our slow



descent eventually making our way back to the Casa where we completed our bird list and were treated to a history lesson about the lodge by Patrick, one of the owners. This was such a wonderfully personal tale of his and



Carl's adventure that has turned into such an incredible destination for so many visitors to the area...not just bird watchers. We all felt very honored and grateful to have been able to spend so much time here!

Sun., Aug. 9 Sonoita Grasslands | Patagonia | Tubac

Our morning commenced with an exploration of the quaint neighborhood roads within the grasslands surrounding Sierra Vista, as we sought the elusive Scaled Quail. While this particular quest did not yield a quail, our adventure nonetheless presented us with our first Say's Phoebe of the trip.

Following this initial exploration, our journey led us west towards Patagonia Lake, with a short side trip to search the Sonoita grasslands for Pronghorn. While a few were sighted from the highway, we chose to explore the back roads around Sonoita which would afford us greater space and time to stop should we spot more. Our quest for the quail also continued here.

Though neither Pronghorn nor new bird species materialized, the landscape itself was captivating, with its verdant grasslands and picturesque ranches, imbued with a palpable sense of exploration. From this scenic expanse, we proceeded to Patagonia Lake, hoping to encounter waterfowl yet unseen on our journey. Once on the trail, our initial stop revealed numerous Coot, a new species for the trip.

After this preliminary survey of the lake, we ventured into the forest to explore the riparian zone bordering Sonoita Creek. Here, we observed and heard many species previously encountered during our trip, enjoying further immersion in yet another beautiful habitat.

Returning, we paused once more at the lake, where we were rewarded with our first Mexican Duck and a Gray Hawk of the trip. While the hawk's calls had been heard earlier, this marked our initial visual confirmation.

Extending our time at the shaded lake overlook with our scopes, we identified our first Double-crested Cormorant. After a few more minutes, we moved to another lake spot near the visitor center. This area, bustling with people and boats, proved rather quiet for bird activity. From here, we made our way to Patagonia for lunch.

Following lunch in Patagonia, we visited Paton's Center for Hummingbirds, where we had the opportunity for close observations of Broad-billed and Violet-crowned Hummingbirds. A notable new sighting for the trip was the Thick-billed Kingbird.

Paton's marked our final destination before journeying to our accommodation in Tubac for the next two nights. We enjoyed a pleasant break prior to convening for our penultimate bird list compilation and dinner in town.



Mon., Aug. 10 Montosa Canyon | Madera Canyon | Amado Treatment Pond

As the sun crested the Santa Rita Mountains, we departed Tubac, heading towards our first morning destination: Montosa Canyon. Known for hosting the Five-striped Sparrow and the Varied Bunting, these species were our primary targets for the morning. The numerous vehicles already present by 6:30 AM quickly revealed we were not alone in our pursuit.

Our first target was spotted remarkably quickly! Just ten minutes up the dirt road, we were treated to excellent scope views of the Five-striped Sparrow. Soon after our encounter with the sparrow, we successfully tracked down a Varied Bunting, marking a first for the trip and a life bird for many in our group.

Following a flurry of other avian observations, our morning culminated with a decent look at the elusive Crissal Thrasher. Another lifer for many, this sighting capped off a remarkably productive morning in Montosa Canyon. We then proceeded to Green Valley for a late breakfast before continuing our journey to Madera Canyon.

Our afternoon pursuit began before fully ascending Madera Canyon, as we paused at the transition between grassland and open woodland in search of the Botteri's Sparrow, our afternoon target. A brief search, yielding only a distant song, prompted us to re-enter the vehicle and continue our quest further into the canyon.

While our next stop did not reveal any sparrows, it did uncover some fascinating leaf-footed bugs that captivated our attention. These large insects boasted beautiful patterns on their backs and distinctive sail-like features on their legs, for which they are named.

Hoping for a clear view of the Arizona Woodpecker, we then spent some time at the Santa Rita Lodge feeders. Initially we managed a brief glimpse of the woodpecker, but were then treated to long views with the bird fully exposed in various locations around the feeders. We also enjoyed excellent views of hummingbirds and caught sight of a pair of Hooded Orioles and a pair of Black-headed Grosbeak.

After approximately two hours at the feeders, we descended back to Green Valley for a very late lunch, a necessary stop to sustain us until dinner. On our return to Tubac, we made a quick stop to search for the Black-bellied Whistling Duck. This endeavor proved successful, and we also caught our first glimpse of a pair of Neotropic Cormorant. All these observations were made from the vehicles as an afternoon thunderstorm swept across the landscape.

Upon returning to the resort, we all enjoyed a welcome break before reconvening for the bird list and a closing appreciation circle, facilitated by David. He opened by reflecting on the beauty of receiving a handwritten letter, prompting everyone to imagine the feeling of someone receiving one from them. He then read a brief passage by Terry Tempest Williams on letter-writing as an act of tenderness.



For the circle, each person selected a notecard from the table and presented it to another group member, sharing something they appreciated about that person or how they had enriched the trip. After everyone had shared, David offered a final reading on the value and growing importance of sharing nature with others.

Tues., Aug. 11 Birding & Breakfast | Departures from Tucson

Our final morning commenced even before breakfast, with Troy's keen eye adding two new species to our trip list: the Bronzed Cowbird and the Tropical Kingbird. This lifted our total to 173, yet our adventure was not complete. Having set an ambitious goal of 175 the previous night, two more species now remained tantalizingly within our grasp, especially with intelligence on a nesting pair of Harris Hawk and a known haunt for Gilded Flicker.

The Harris Hawk proved an effortless triumph, spotted almost immediately beside a neighborhood road in Green Valley; one perched openly, while its mate sat somewhat obscured on the nest in a nearby pine. Our attention then turned to the elusive Flicker. This pursuit demanded a bit more patience and keen observation, but our persistence paid off as we finally pinpointed one in the distance, silhouetted atop a Saguaro Cactus. Through the powerful scope, however, every member of our group enjoyed magnificent, detailed views of the bird. With that sighting, we reached 175! Mission accomplished, indeed.

With a morning both brief and bountiful behind us, we proceeded to the airport, exchanging heartfelt farewells and wishes for safe journeys, our minds brimming with stories to recount to family and friends.

Photo Credit: Group shot (David Jaffe, DJ), Hepatic Tanager (Bob Sipe, BS), Cactus blooms (DJ), Flying Black-chinned Hummingbird (Sandy Sipe, SS), Close up Agave (DJ), Cave Creek Canyon (DJ), Black-chinned hummingbird at flower (BS), Cactus loop (DJ), Verdin (BS), Broad-billed Hummingbird (SS), Harris's Hawks (SS) Queen Butterfly (David Jaffe, DJ), Rufous Hummingbird (BS), LIZARD (Allen Foley, AF), Arizona Poppy (SS) Black-crowned Night Heron (BS), Red-faced Warbler (SS), Broad-billed Hummingbird (BS), Tufted Flycatcher (BS), Varied Bunting (SS), Juvenile Swainson's Hawk (DJ), Arizona Woodpecker (DJ), Gambel's Quail (BS), Northern Flicker (Red-shafted) (BS), Western Tanager (BS), Black-chinned Hummingbird (BS), Violent-crowned Hummingbird (BS), Coppery-tailed Trogon (BS), Painted Redstart (BS), Cooper's Hawk (BS).