

Southeast Arizona TNC Legacy Club Trip Report August 11-18, 2012



By Peg Abbott, Naturalist Journeys, LLC

Sat, Aug. 11 Tucson / San Xavier del Bac / Arizona Sonora Desert Museum

We met today in Tucson, our first stop from the airport being the historic San Xavier del Bac mission. Peg described it as a living church, and we saw that on arrival, a wedding in progress for the next hour. We walked up to the sanctuaries on the hill, at a slow pace due to sun and heat, and were entertained by Greater Roadrunners, Cactus Wrens, and Round-tailed Ground Squirrels. Views of mountains all around were striking, but with no clouds in sight, we'd need to wait several days to see a real storm of the promised monsoon.

Everyone enjoyed our lodgings at the historic Arizona Inn, painted pink and blue, surrounded by tall trees; it created a sense of oasis. We left at 5:30PM to go to a special event at the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum, a Summer Saturday night special opening. We walked a loop trail, looking at Thick-billed Parrots, a Mountain Lion, a sleeping Black Bear, playful River Otters, a variety of small native cats, Coati mundis, and Prairie Dogs. Time passed quickly as we moved through a wide variety of native plants placed in zones representative of Baja California low-desert habitats to high Sky Island conifer woodlands.

Dinner was delightful, with a nice menu served on their open-air patio. We started with a round of appetizers and in total sampled a good deal of the entrees. Comparing notes on their taste and presentation made it fun. Such lovely, cool evenings are a great reward for making it through a hot day when expected monsoon season clouds do not appear.

Sun., Aug. 12 Sonoita – Patagonia TNC Preserve / Patagonia / Grasslands near Elgin

Some of the group met early this morning for a refreshing swim. After breakfast, we packed up and drove a winding scenic road that runs south from Interstate 10 to the little village of Patagonia. Matt Killeen, the TNC Sonoita-Patagonia Preserve manager, was waiting for us at the Visitor Center. A real treat was right-away seeing a Violet-crowned Hummingbird at the feeders there, just ahead of our walk.

Matt led us on the preserve's loop trail to a cienaga, a seasonal wetland we could map out in our minds by the presence of sedges, Yerba manza, and other indicative, wet-loving plant species. We got quick looks at Yellow-breasted Chats, an Indigo Bunting, several Bridled Titmice, and best of all – in the scope – a resting Western Screech Owl. It was hot, so the birds were overall quite quiet, but we admired the running waters of Sonoita Creek, the truly massive cottonwood trees, and had time to hear about a few of the challenges of running this riparian preserve.

We ducked out of the sun into cover at a fun, local restaurant for lunch, the Velvet Elvis. The proprietor and his staff took good care of us, and soon we were feasting on some upscale-ingredient pizzas and some fresh, innovative salads, a nice treat to find in a very tiny town.



There were no clouds in sight, oh elusive monsoon! We toughed it out and visited a few of the region's birding hotspots. The first was comfortable, seated in the shade, at the Patton's bird feeders, where we could watch several species of hummingbirds at close range, include an Anna's just back, signaling the start of fall migration. We then went to the Roadside Rest, where a few of the group glimpsed both Rock and Canyon wrens, a male and female Varied Bunting, our first Blue Grosbeak, and for everyone, scope views of a Black

Vulture.

We had plans to visit Patagonia Lake, but in the heat our energies were slim, and Matt was waiting to host us for a barbecue. Somehow thoughts of shade and a cold beer won out, and happily he had feeders off the porch that we gathered on, on which Violet-crowned Hummingbirds put in a good show during dinner. It was very special to be invited into the preserve manager's home, meet Matt's family, and sense all that TNC must take care of behind the scenes to keep its preserves running.

It has been a full day, so we left with the idea of doing the final leg of our drive at sunset, a pretty route that had us traveling across extensive grasslands, and through oak woodlands reminiscent of California's wine country. Indeed, this was Arizona's first wine growing region and we passed several vineyards on the way. We also passed a pond, and seeing interesting species using them, made a quick U-turn to pull out the scope for views of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, one of the regional specialty bird species.



We wanted to see if a reported rare bird might still be hanging out by a windmill, so after sorting out our Lower and Upper Elgin roads, we found the spot. Three White-tailed Kites and a Northern Harrier flying right overhead helped make up for the absent Scissor-tailed Flycatcher – can't have it all! We did get the scope on both Botteri's and Grasshopper sparrows, two grassland species that Raymond VanBuskirk had spoken to us about earlier in the day. He has worked two summers under researcher Janet Ruth, studying various aspects of grassland birds' ecology and relationship

with cattle, in the vicinity of the Babocomari Ranch, recently featured in Arizona TNC's publication *Field Notes*. The core of Janet's study area is Audubon's Research Ranch at Elgin.

Fresh-baked pie was waiting for us on our arrival at the Casa de San Pedro, and hosts Karl Schmitt and Patrick Dome welcomed us warmly. We spent the next four nights here.

Mon. Aug. 13 Ramsey Canyon TNC Preserve / Kartchner Caverns State Park / San Pedro River



We met at 6:30 AM for breakfast in the Inn's great room, with light streaming in the saguaro-rib shutters that adorn the dining room's large windows. While eating, we watched a family of Gambel's Quail waddle in to the feeders and lots of Lesser Goldfinches showing off their colors. *Eggs Casa* was on the menu today, and would keep us going on our walk up Ramsey Canyon, a premier preserve of TNC. We arrived as they opened, and were greeted by the preserve manager, Brooke Gebow.

Some of the group ventured off to cover the network of trails while another focused in on birding, but we all stalled out at a wet seep area that was attracting eight different species of butterflies, ones we could look at in detail. We did the upper shaded creek side loop, taking a look at a pond established as a safe haven for endangered Chiricahua Leopard Frogs. Several individuals rested at the surface, and we could get good looks in the scope. Mexican Jays kept up a noisy chatter, Painted Redstarts flashed white tail feathers as they fed, and Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers chased each other through the trees. We admired a HUGE Arizona Sycamore tree, and later learned that early canyon residents had placed a wooden dance floor around its base.

Brooke met us mid-morning under the shade of a ramada, to talk about her work with TNC. She introduced two researchers staying at the preserve to work on amphibians, specifically three species of



frogs. They were winding up their three-year project and felt they'd had great success based in the canyon. Another researcher was due in after them, all attracted here by the region's biodiversity. Brooke also talked about providing access for visitors to Ramsey, and highlighted their efforts to educate youth, the next generation to care for nature and TNC. She walked back to the Visitor Center with us, pointing out places their kid's camp had used to inspire students just the week before.

After enjoying some retail exuberance in the preserve's shop, we headed north to a cool place to spend a hot afternoon – the underground realm of Kartchner Caverns State Park. Dr. Robert (Bob) Casavant met us at lunch, and then accompanied our tour of the caverns. His lively commentary and insight into scientific work – from microbes to night skies – made for a great afternoon. The features of the cave are quite remarkable, but so is the story of the park's inception, fourteen years of silence about a world-class discovery. Two cavers started a chain of events that left a lasting legacy, and we enjoyed being a part of that story for an afternoon. We left feeling that Arizona State Parks recognized fully what a gem they have here, and were impressed at their commitment to make it both accessible but pure. For many this visit was a highlight of the trip, an unexpected and rewarding adventure.



On our return, several took a refreshing swim ahead of dinner, which was a catered meal of Mexican food served at the Casa. This evening, Holly Richter, a riparian ecologist working for TNC, joined us to talk about the complexities of managing the San Pedro watershed, across an International border. She described a Citizen Science effort, ongoing since 1999, to map wet and dry areas of the San Pedro at its lowest water mark each June. An ongoing benefit of that effort, which attracts some 200 volunteers each year, is the wide spectrum of local residents that feel a strong tie to the river. Again, this opportunity to understand in some detail just what it takes to keep the life-blood of water running in an arid realm was fascinating, and brought out how much TNC must do beyond just owning property.

Tues., Aug. 14 San Pedro River Walk / USFWS Bill Radke / Miller Canyon / Bisbee

This morning we enjoyed a walk on the San Pedro River, just out the door of the Casa. Sheri Williamson and Tom Wood of the Southeastern Arizona Bird Observatory (SABO) met us at 6AM and the birds were ready and waiting. A big flux of hummingbirds had arrived and we had good looks at a bright Rufous Hummingbird male and a couple of females and the first returning Anna's. Gila Woodpeckers vied for nectar doing woodpecker yoga to maneuver positions to let them drain the feeders. Tom gave an overview of the richness of this riparian area, the first declared National Riparian Conservation Area in the country, now managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The walk started out quiet, but soon arms were pointing out Blue Grosbeaks, Lazuli Buntings, a Vermilion Flycatcher family, and a very cooperative Yellow-billed Cuckoo. A Gray Hawk called, still to be revealed. TNC's Dave Mehlman was obviously happy to be pointing out the birds he works so hard to protect!

We returned to a more than ample breakfast of *Dutch Babies*, a puffed, custard-filled concoction with fruit, a delight for which we did not want to add up the calories. Bill Radke of the US Fish and Wildlife

Service met us after breakfast to talk about the diversity of the Sky Island Region, in particular at two wildlife refuges he manages on the US / Mexico border. He told us that if we were fish-listers (similar to bird-listers) we could check off eight endemic fish there, the only place in the USA you could find species like Mexican Stone Rollers and Yaqui Chubs. The connection for his work and our group was that TNC stepped in and purchased both properties that Bill now manages, holding them in trust until the US government could acquire them.

He talked about impacts on the refuges, starting with Leslie Canyon, where the water this year is dry, despite it being monsoon season. He talked about putting in place conservation easements to shore up quality of that refuge's watershed, and the development of safe harbor agreements that covered the introduction of a half dozen endangered species, the Chiricahua Leopard Frog, a plant, and four species of fish including Yaqui Chub, Yaqui Topminnow, and Beautiful Shiner.

Putting all this in place, then to see the creek suffer periods of complete drought is tough for all who track this refuge. It is further complicated by the past year loss of higher elevation forests that act as a sponge to safeguard the watershed. Leslie Canyon's population of leopard frogs had to be moved, to a site up the South Fork of Cave Creek the group would visit later. As drought continues, moving some of the fish might be needed. Through his words, we began to understand the constant need for vigilance and flexibility in managing natural resources.

Bill spoke of W.L. Minckley's work on bees and other insects on the refuges in the 1960's, crediting him as a proponent of protection, ultimately resulting in purchase of the San Bernadino Refuge. No one thought when they declared the refuge as safe haven for fish, that they were simultaneously protecting 550 species of bees, the highest known diversity of native bees in the world! These bees are supported by a wide variety of plants, 70 species of native grasses, cacti, and forbs. He went on to briefly speak of border issues, TNC and USFWS partnerships, and other topics.



We could have listened to Bill all day, but adventures were calling, including a jaunt to Miller Canyon, where we hoped that we would align our visit with the feeder visits of a rare summer visitor, the White-eared Hummingbird. We did get great looks at Magnificent, Blue-throated, Broad-tailed, Black-chinned, Anna's and Rufous hummingbirds but the White-eared did not arrive on our watch.

We returned for a late lunch at the Casa, a very nice salad with chicken, and a too-decadent dessert – what a surprise! Some chose to relax for the rest of the afternoon, take a swim, while others went off to explore the historic mining town of Bisbee, about 12 miles away. As if making up for their absence all week, the monsoon rains arrived with vigor, absolutely pelting those out by the pool, and for those driving to Bisbee, making for some challenging conditions. Peg pulled over to let people see the open pit mine, and it was raining so hard we could not see it! Narca's van made a quick pass through town, went on for some supplies and returned to the Casa. Peg's crew made a dash for the museum, and spent a full hour or more learning a lot. This small museum is a Smithsonian affiliate and they pack a lot

of content into their displays. Afterwards, Meg took off for a photo shoot, finding some fun buildings and vistas to work with, and the rest of us ambled up the streets, watching White-throated Swifts in flight above the maze of brick buildings, and taking a peek at some of the local jewelry, art, and dining establishments.

We reunited at 6PM in the great room of the Casa, where TNC's Dave Mehlman was ready with a talk on migratory birds and the Conservancy's work throughout this hemisphere. He used a map as a prop and spoke fluidly with great concern. Dave is an obvious ambassador for wild places and his years of experience show. There was an opportunity for questions, and then we drove to a favorite local restaurant, the Mesquite Tree, a simple country steakhouse at the base of Carr Canyon in the Huachuca Mountains. Returning home one group had a Great Horned Owl fly right past their window, and all commented on the number of stars they could see in our Southwestern dark skies.

Wed., Aug. 15 Fort Huachuca / Ash Canyon B & B / Bob Behrstock / Hummingbird Banding with SABO

This morning we ate delicious oatmeal pancakes early, and then headed out to explore one of the cooler and more shaded canyons of the Huachuca Mountains, on Fort Huachuca. We had super looks at a group of Band-tailed Pigeons as we drove in. They seemed to pose to show off their intriguing patterns. At our restroom stop we heard two male Montezuma Quail calling (a bird Rich REALLY wanted to see) and spent a good deal of time looking for them – but they remained elusive. We did get great looks at a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, a couple of Painted Redstarts, and a Plumbeous Vireo.



Further up the canyon we ran into a couple with big smiles on their faces, having just stood among a family of four Elegant Trogons. Local birding guide and author Bob Behrstock was with us today, and both he and Narca smiled as one of the trogon adults came in to feed on a katydid, right on the road in the midst of the group! We got several great scope views and could study the difference between males, females and young – a marvelous encounter with Southeast Arizona's signature bird.

This was a nice send off for Dave Mehlman, who had to leave today for some professional meetings. Peg drove him to a shuttle, dropping three off at the excellent, local military history museum at the Fort, while the others continued their birding. This day the birds were hopping, and the group got good looks at quite a number of species. Narca pointed out many of the beautiful butterflies today as well.

We had lunch in town at the Landmark Café, and then went to two local resident's feeders. The first was Ash Canyon B & B, where the owner, Mary Jo Ballator, sat with us in her garden. Two Lucifer Hummingbird males were present, quite a good find but not totally unexpected in August, when they come to dine on nectar of blooming agaves. However, the appearance of a Plain-capped Starthroat, twice during our hour or so stay here, gave us a chance to study a real rarity for the U.S. Bob

Behrstock's home was next on the agenda, and in his stunning garden we had another good show of hummingbirds, including Costa's, new for our list.

One final hummingbird event drew us away, the chance to observe hummingbird banding by Tom and Sheri of SABO. This is a regular event, to monitor both the migration and the resident population, and they'd very kindly scheduled it during our stay – right at the Casa. So it made for a delightful late-afternoon as people could come and go, and participate – what a thrill to let a tiny hummingbird GO!

Dinner tonight was catered by our Casa hosts, Karl and Patrick, and they did a super job, making a couscous salad and a great combination entrée of steak and salmon, done on the grille. Brook Gebow of TNC's Ramsey Canyon Preserve joined us, to continue the conversations we'd started several days ago with our visit to Ramsey Canyon.

Thurs. Aug. 16 Whitewater Draw / Chiricahua National Monument / Chiricahua Mountains High Country Hiking and Birding

We left the Casa after a final breakfast of *Lavash Eggs*, their version of *Eggs Benedict* served on thin flatbread toast. We drove from the San Pedro River Valley to the next valley to the east, with Peg explaining Basin and Range geology. Whitewater Draw, in the Sulphur Springs Valley, is a state-managed wildlife refuge which sits in a low geographical area. It typically has water year round, with some help by pumping it to ponds in dry years. We found the resident Great Horned Owl in his normal spot, giving scope views for all. The ponds at Whitewater Draw were overgrown with cattails and vegetation, so we did not linger long. But driving in we had superlative views of a Peregrine Falcon, and driving out the first van spotted Scaled Quail, so it was worth the short diversion. We also got to see what the morning's wild rains had done to the road and adjacent lands, and we found Abigail a view of her coveted Lucy's Warbler, moving about in tall mesquite.



Our destination today was twofold, to see both sides of the rugged Chiricahua Range, crossing to Portal on a dirt road over the mountain. On the east side, in a dramatic volcanic rock setting is Chiricahua National Monument. The park staff greeted us here and showed us a short film. We ate our picnic lunch, and headed up the scenic drive, which to many looked quite austere as the result of expansive 2011 wildfires. The intrusive geologic feature of Cochise Head stood boldly above the stark landscape. What really drew our

eye though, was the maze of hoodoos seen from Massai Point. We walked a loop trail that put us right down in the center of them – wow!

We left the Monument in two groups, one with the intention of birding and the other intending to walk one of the high country trails, now ablaze with color from abundant wildflowers. We hopscotched our way up the road, the two vans passing each other, happily pointing out our treasured finds. The birding

group found some good mixed flocks, admiring the very local Mexican Chickadees hanging out with vocal Pygmy Nuthatches, and Brown Creepers. Narca pointed out that the creeper's white breast functioned like a flashlight as it fed in crevices on the trunk. Peg pulled out the field guide on the Barfoot Lookout hiking trail, where we identified several dozen species: various thistles, penstemons, vetches, bergemots, goldeneyes and others. The effect of a blanket of flowers flourishing under the stark black bark of standing dead trees was captivating.

Views of the Chiricahua Mountains with their rust-and yellow rock adorned with soft-green lichen hues were lovely as we descended to our lodgings for the next two nights. We did not expect to be greeted at Cave Creek Ranch by a Black Bear, in plain view for those in the creekside cabins! Several gathered in the central bird-feeding area, where two very tame White-tailed Deer were enjoying the leftovers. Massive monoliths of rock towered over tall trees surrounding the ranch, a very spectacular setting.

Dinner this evening was at the Portal Peak Lodge and Café. En route we got to watch a couple of Javelinas on their early evening patrol. Some missed them, but with luck the whole herd came through the yard adjacent to the restaurant, putting on quite a show.



**Fri., Aug. 17 Cave Creek Ranch and Canyon /
Southwestern Research Station / Chiricahua Desert
Museum / Final Catered Dinner at the Ranch**

We enjoyed breakfast at the ranch, with seating outside on an upstairs patio, breakfast with the birds. This morning we walked and looked for wildlife in the South Fork of Cave Creek, a watershed known for its rich biodiversity. Here in the Chiricahuas one finds an ample mix of flora and fauna of the Rocky Mountains meeting

those of the Sierra Madres. Around the flanks of the mountains one finds that elements of Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts meet, with an influx in winter of species from the Great Plains. The trails were lush, and many were surprised to find yucca growing tall underneath long-needled Apache Pines. Huge Arizona Cypress grew along the creek, alongside picturesque, white-barked Arizona Sycamores. Prize birds included Red-faced Warblers, and for some, another view of Elegant Trogons. Some of our group got to see the Apache Fox Squirrel, an animal more at home in Mexico that just edges into the US at this location. We all admired tall cliffs, singing Canyon Wrens and Hermit Thrushes, and the smell of pines.

Our next stop was the American Museum of Natural History's Southwestern Research Station (SWRS), established here over fifty years ago, with funding from David Rockefeller. We looked at some of the research labs and buildings from the outside, as inside they were busy with a Lepidoptera class cataloging their specimens. We



had lunch alongside the students, and then Geoff Bender, of SWRS, talked about the station, their work, and their role in the Chiricahua Leopard Frog recovery effort. His talk was interrupted suddenly by someone saying “the creek is up!” Indeed, heavy rain had fallen during lunch, and a large black cloud still hung above the high country part of the watershed of Cave Creek. We watched as a torrent came down, a muddy seething mass of water, filling a good portion of the channel. Amazingly, back at Cave Creek Ranch we arrived to see a dry creek bed, and within minutes got to see this rushing channel of water come through. Our own small flash flood in action!

After a break, we headed down to the Chiricahua Desert Museum, an impressive facility in the remote location of Rodeo, New Mexico, just seven miles from Portal. The museum’s exhibit themes were varied, with a strong emphasis on reptiles and amphibians of the region. They had live animals on display, so we saw many rare species we’d likely never see in the wild, including Gila Monsters. They hosted us with wine and cheese; we walked through the garden, and did a little retail therapy in their all-too-interesting gift store. Returning to the ranch we stopped to try for one more elusive species, the Crissal Thrasher, finding it perched up for scope views at our second location.

On to dinner and a fine one it was. Suzanne Apitz, of our host and Portal-based company, Naturalist Journeys, set appetizers out on the porch for us, but it was the smell of her entrée, a full beef tenderloin, that drew us inside. She served it with a reduction sauce, and had some vegetable dishes on the side for a memorable meal. We reminisced together about favorite landscapes and species of the trip. All found Southeast Arizona to hold many surprises and must feel good about TNC’s very strong presence in the area.

Sat. Aug. 18 Willcox Playa / Amerind Museum / Departures from Tucson

En route back to Tucson, we had a few more treats in store. The first was a birding frenzy at a golf course pond on an old playa lake, where shallow waters produced a lot to feed on for Black-necked Stilts, American Avocets, Long-billed Dowitchers and other shorebirds, including a large flock of Long-billed Curlews. And on a very quick stop, we spotted two rarities, Black Terns, a pair flying on the far side of the lake, and a Tropical Kingbird, perched and making its diagnostic trill.

The second was another remote museum, a gem of art and artifacts of Native American tribes. The Amerind Foundation is still active in research and education, and this museum and art gallery showcase much of what once was a private collection. Large rounded boulders of quartz-monzonite (similar to granite) surround a Mediterranean-style building in a most-unlikely spot.

Our most-companionable flock dispersed to flights, hotels and other engagements, but we certainly enjoyed our week together. Meg Thompson, the Legacy Club coordinator, was with us for the full week and very much a part of our adventure. Two local guides, Peg Abbott and Narca Moore-Craig of Naturalist Journeys, entertained questions and taught us quite a lot.

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Lucifer Hummingbird Pg. 1 and Botteri’s Sparrow - Bob Behrstock www.naturewideimages.com

Broad-billed Hummingbird Pg. 5 – Evelyn Earlougher

Other photos: Peg Abbott, and trip participants, Naturalist Journeys, LLC