



Arizona Sunshine & Saguaros March 5 – 12, 2016 Trip Report

With Guide Dodie Logue and participants Jane, Becky & Andy

Sat., Mar. 5 Arrivals in Tucson / Tucson Sonoran Desert Museum

We all met at the airport at 1:30 PM and headed off to the Tucson Sonoran Desert Museum. The moment we stepped out of our van we were greeted by the wonderful song of a Rufous-winged Sparrow! Cactus Wren and thrashers were nearby and singing as well, all getting ready for the nesting season. The gardens were lovely, and we visited the Hummingbird Aviary and the Southwest Bird Aviary.



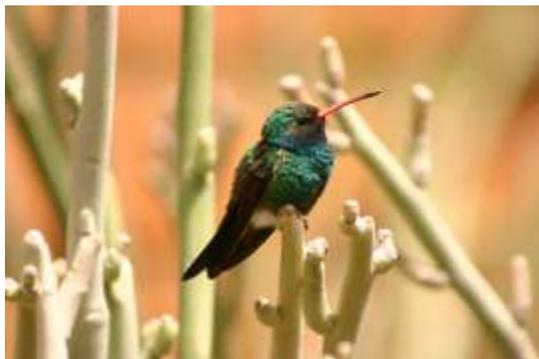
We passed by the Coyote

enclosure in time to see them get fed a quail, and watched as they marked their territory after the handler sprayed some floral scent on the ground. We saw a few lovely Black-throated Sparrow and Gila Woodpecker as we wound our way through the trails.



The drive back to Tucson through Gate's Pass was lovely, and we had a delicious Mexican meal at Teresa's Mosaic Cafe.

Sun., Mar. 6 Sweetwater Wetlands / Tucson Mountain Park / Saguaro West National Park / Rio Vista Natural Resource Park



This morning we started off at Sweetwater Wetlands, a wastewater treatment facility in west Tucson. As we crossed the little stream by the entrance we saw a very bright Orange-crowned Warbler, and just down the trail in a large Cottonwood there was a male Baltimore Oriole — very uncommon in this part of the country. Abert's Towhee was common in the low underbrush, and on the water



Cinnamon Teal were among the ducks. Andy later spotted a Black-throated Gray Warbler, and a Common Yellowthroat was heard, recently returned from its winter grounds.

Late morning we drove back through Gates Pass and stopped at one of the roadside pullovers to see what was around. There was a singing Canyon Towhee and a pair of Black-tailed Gnatcatcher. Just as we were about to head back to the car, Andy spotted a woodpecker atop a distant Saguaro. We got it in the scope and it was most definitely a Gilded Flicker! We moved on and drove through Tucson Mountain Park, then into Saguaro National Park, where we found a shaded picnic table to have our lunch. A very gregarious Rock Wren hung out with us for a while at lunch, jumping from rock to table to ground.

Moving on after lunch we did a short hike to see some petroglyphs. We made our way through the lovely Saguaro "forest" and took an afternoon break at our

hotel.
Late



afternoon we stopped at Rio Vista Natural Resource Park for some late afternoon birding before dinner. Here we saw a beautiful male Broad-billed Hummingbird, and sorted our way through a bunch of sparrows, including Brewer's and Vesper.

A real treat was timing our visit for a festive day, with a mariachi band playing at Saguaro National Park!

Dinner was at the trendy Kingfisher restaurant in Tucson.

Mon., Mar. 7 Agua Caliente Park / Catalina Highway to Rose Canyon / Pima Canyon

This morning, after breakfast at our hotel, we headed east across Tucson to Agua Caliente Park. Here we saw lots of Ring-necked Duck on the lake, and Lucy's Warbler and Bell's Vireo in the low trees. Unfortunately the Ranch house and gift store were closed on Mondays. Next we headed up the Catalina Highway and went part-way up Mount Lemmon. We went as high as Rose Canyon, which was closed, but we parked and walked in. This really worked in our favor; we could walk the road with no people (or cars) around. The birds here were lively, and we saw Olive Warbler, Pygmy Nuthatch, Western Bluebird, Hutton's Vireo, and others. We also stopped at Bear Canyon and saw Painted Redstart



and Yellow-eyed Junco; we found a sunny picnic table for our lunch and had a very colorful Red-naped Sapsucker at a nearby tree. It was lovely up in the Ponderosa Pines! On the way down we were making more stops, and had just seen Bridled Titmouse, when storm clouds moved in and it started sprinkling, so we made a hasty retreat to the car and decided to take an afternoon break.

In the late afternoon we ventured out again, this time to nearby Pima Canyon. We hiked up about a mile or so, and it was a lovely desert landscape. The birding was fairly quiet but we did get nice looks at a Golden Eagle soaring above the cliffs. We dined at our hotel this night.

Tues., Mar. 8 Avra Valley Sewage Ponds / Kitt Peak Observatory / San Xavier Mission



The day started off chilly and never really warmed up, crazy weather in an El Niño year! We headed west out of Tucson, stopping at the Avra Valley Sewage Ponds to see if there were any interesting shorebirds. We had American Pipit and Horned Lark, as well as a few ducks. Back in our vehicle we continued west toward Kitt Peak Observatory, when a Crested Caracara flew up and perched very close to the highway. We were able to pull over and we all got great looks!

As we neared the mountains the weather continued to be quite chilly; on the way up to the peak we had Rufous-crowned and Black-chinned Sparrow on a rocky slope. Once at the top it was very cold and windy and nearly birdless. Common Raven, Western Scrub Jay, and Spotted Towhee were the only denizens at the top this day. We made a quick stop at the visitor center then headed back down to find a lunch spot. On the way down we hit the jackpot with raptors, spotting a soaring Peregrine Falcon with a Red-tailed Hawk. A grassy pullover near the bottom served as a good picnic spot.



Next we visited the San Xavier del Bac Mission. The creatively painted church always surprises, and the grounds are lovely. Mid-afternoon was a good time to visit as the birding gets quiet. Later we walked around Downtown Tucson — 4th Avenue and the University area. We enjoyed dinner at a nearby restaurant, and Andy and Becky celebrated their 900th life bird!

Wed., Mar. 9 Red Rocks Feedlot / Santa Cruz Flats



Today we left our cozy Tucson lodgings at La Posada and headed northwest to the Red Rocks feedlot area. Pulling up by the cattle enclosures, we were surrounded by blackbirds of four variety! We also had a fly-by Caracara, and a bit further down the road a Harris's Hawk perched on a pole, giving us great views. We drove some of the roads into the general Santa Cruz Flats area where we had a "Prairie" Merlin, and a drop-in Burrowing Owl; also seen were Lark Bunting and Lark Sparrow. After exhausting ourselves here, we drove to Gila Bend where we were lucky to find Sophia's, a very authentic and delicious Mexican Cafe. This was a good place to spend the hottest part of the day.

We then headed to the “Thrasher Spot” by Buckeye, stopping at some ponds along the way where Becky and Andy got their lifer Snow Goose — we had five in a variety of plumages, as well as a huge flock of Long-billed Curlew. Thank you, Jane, for great help in the identification of these far away birds! Finally, by late afternoon we made it to the Thrasher spot, and fairly quickly got a Sage Thrasher and a singing Bendire’s Thrasher. Le Conte’s was eluding us, and we were about to leave when one was spotted running on the ground, then perching on a low Mesquite. All of us had brief back-lit views of it before it went to ground again and was not re-found.



We finally made our way to a very modern, three weeks up-and-running, Holiday Inn Express in Buckeye. After a long driving day, we were all very happy to be able to walk to dinner.

Thurs., Mar. 10 Gilbert Water Ranch / Phoenix Botanical Garden



We left the Buckeye area early and headed towards Phoenix at rush hour; what did people do before their iPhones?! We got to the Gilbert Water Ranch before 9:00 AM and enjoyed a mix of shorebirds, ducks, and passerines. Some of the highlights were Yellow Warbler, Black-necked Stilt and American Avocet in breeding plumage, Long-billed Dowitcher, and a myriad of Desert Cottontail under the brush surrounding the ponds. Just as we were heading towards the car, we scanned the last pond and Jane spied a couple of Lesser Scaup.

After the Water Ranch we went to lunch, stopped for some gelato, and checked into our hotel. We ventured out again around 4:00 PM, when we



drove to the Phoenix Desert Botanical Garden. We walked the trails and gardens for a few hours, enjoying the botanical life and relaxing.

We had reservations at Gertrude’s, a gourmet restaurant right at the gardens, where we relished a delicious meal while the sun was setting.

Fri., Mar. 11 Boyce Thompson Arboretum / Catalina State Park

This morning we checked out of our Hilton Hotel, picked up lunch, and headed east. It was a beautiful and easy drive through the desert. The Arboretum was wonderful; we walked through gardens with Sonoran, Chihuahuan, and Australian desert habitat. There was also a nice trail along the riparian area which had a bit

of water in places. We saw an uncommon Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and saw many species we had already seen. We enjoyed a picnic at a table under the tall cottonwoods where a Lucy's Warbler was singing. After a trip to the gift shop, we drove back to Tucson where we checked into our hotel.



Late afternoon we went to Catalina State Park in the hopes of getting a jump start on some of



the birds there, especially the Rufous-backed Robin. We saw a Black-and-white Warbler and a White-throated Sparrow; no Robin.

Dinner was a wonderful meal "al fresco" at Wildflowers, less than a mile from our hotel.

Sat., Mar. 12 Catalina State Park / Departures

Our last morning, and Rufous-backed Robin success! Greg Corman, a Tucson artist and botanist, met us this morning for our walk. He was able to answer some of the more botanical-type questions that I had been unable to answer. We had brief, but good, looks at a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, and good looks at Green-tailed Towhee. We had a late morning snack under some trees where a Great Horned Owl was nesting, and Andy and Becky saw an Ash-throated Flycatcher by the bathrooms. A nice ending to our week. We all headed off to the airport around noon, and said our goodbyes. It was a wonderful week with great birders!

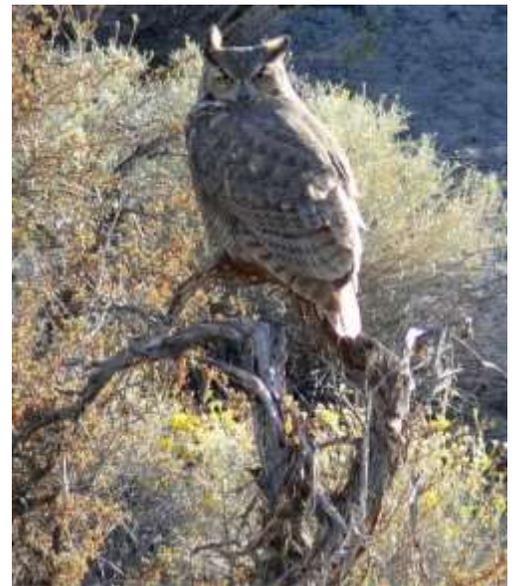


Photo credits:

Pg. 1: Cactus Wren, Peg Abbott (PA); Saguaros, PA. Pg.

2: Sweetwater

Wetlands sign, Andrew Steinmann, tour participant (AS);

Broad-billed Hummingbird, Evelyn Earlougher. Pg. 3: Gilded

Flicker, Pyrrhuloxia, Mariachi Band, AS; Ring-necked Duck,

Tom Dove. Pg. 4: Kitt Peak visit, AS; San Xavier del Bac, PA.

Pg. 5: Barn Owl, GS; LeConte's Thrasher, Dodie Logue. Pg. 6:

Botanic Garden sculpture, PA; Cactus, AS. Pg. 7: Lucy's

Warbler, PA; Boyce-Thompson Arboretum, AS. Pg. 8: Great

Horned Owl, Richard Becker, Catalina Sunset View, PA.