



Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures
Arizona Monsoon Madness
August 7-13, 2016

Trip Report

Guide, Bob Behrstock with 6 participants:
Doug, Mike, Raynalda, Debbie, Lesa & Jane

Report by Bob Behrstock



Each monsoon tour is just a bit different, as unpredictable as the monsoon rains themselves. This trip had a couple of rainy days, preventing us from visiting two wetlands that would have been inaccessible due to muddy roads. That said, we were able to access most of the places we normally visit, and saw most of the birds we usually encounter. Hats off to the group for putting up with a few last-minute, weather-induced, itinerary changes.

August 7, 2016

By about 12:30, all the participants had arrived in Tucson. We departed the airport, had lunch at a nearby sandwich shop, then continued to the La Posada to check in and drop off our luggage. As most of the tour takes place in mountains surrounded by Chihuahuan Desert, we took the opportunity to visit the Sonoran Desert, looking as green as it gets from the recent monsoon rains.



Driving westward from the hotel, we entered Saguaro National Park West via scenic Picture Rocks Road, eventually arriving at the Park's Red Hills Visitor Center. As the afternoon was toasty, it turned out to be more of an excursion through picturesque hills clad with the vegetation that defines the Sonoran Desert (Saguaro, barrel, cholla, and prickly pear cactus), rather than an intense birding activity. Along the way, we stopped for a fine pair of Harris's Hawks perched on a cell tower. A bit of spishing near the hawks provided us with a nice introduction to

some of the common desert birds including Gambel's Quail, White-winged Dove, Verdin, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, House Finch, and Cactus Wren - Arizona's State Bird. The visitor center offers an unbroken vista of foothills cloaked in huge Saguaro cacti, as iconic a view as Madagascar's Baobabs, Kenya's Acacias, or California's Redwoods.



Arriving back at the hotel, we had time for a quick break (punctuated by brief but intense rain and a power failure) then made the short drive to *Wildflower*, where we enjoyed dinner at one of Tucson's top restaurants.

August 8, 2016

The hotel provided us with an early hot breakfast in their restaurant. Thus refueled, we packed the van, said good bye to city traffic, and drove south to the Santa Rita Mountains.



Pausing in the grasslands below Madera Canyon, we saw a number of birds as well as Mule deer and Desert Cottontail. Of particular interest was getting close looks at Botteri's Sparrows and displaying Cassin's Sparrows, both of which are most vocal and visible during the summer rains. Continuing to the Proctor Road trail, we saw Bell's Vireos, a Black-capped Gnatcatcher, Hooded Oriole, Varied Bunting, and got a quick glimpse of our first Gray Hawk.

As the mountain ranges of the Sky Islands rise rather steeply from the surrounding desert, short drives allow you to transition quickly from one habitat to another. Leaving mesquite grasslands, a several minutes' drive brought us to Madrean Woodland, here a mix of Emery Oak and Alligator Juniper with towering sycamores in the stream beds. A stop at the feeder array at Santa Rita Lodge yielded the trip's first rarity, a Plain-capped Starthroat, the only individual of this large hummingbird that was being reported in the U.S. New birds for the trip were coming fast and included Arizona and Acorn woodpeckers, Bullock's Oriole, Bridled Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Black-headed Grosbeak, Yellow-eyed Junco, and several other species of hummingbirds.

Ascending the hill a bit, we checked the feeders at a B&B, seeing quite a few Magnificent Hummingbirds, and a small flock of Wild Turkeys. By the time we drove to the top of the road, bird activity had waned, so we drove down to Green Valley for lunch at an Italian restaurant.

From there, we continued a short distance south, checking in at Amado Territory Inn, one of our favorite local family-run lodgings. From the Inn, we drove a short distance north to a water treatment pond that yielded "Mexican" and Ruddy ducks, Coots, and a Neotropic Cormorant.

Nearby Montosa Canyon is an attractive spot with a variety of riparian and rocky slope birds. Above us, the steep slopes bore a profusion of flowering Yellow Bells (*Tecoma stans*), a popular landscaping shrub that's native to rocky foothills in southeastern Arizona. In between monsoon showers, we saw such birds as Canyon Wren, Northern Cardinal, Varied Bunting, Blue Grosbeak, a couple fly-by Yellow-billed Cuckoos, Black-



throated and Rufous-crowned sparrows, and Phainopepla. Returning to Amado, we took a short break then went to dinner at the nearby *Cow Palace*.

August 9, 2016



The day began with ominous skies filled with dense gray clouds. We did a bit of birding around the Inn, seeing Lucy's Warbler, Abert's Towhee, Inca Dove, Broad-billed Hummingbird, and a few other species. As we sat down to the Inn's typically hearty breakfast, thunder and lightning to the south and west suggested that the day might be troublesome for birding. Checking the weather app on my phone, the jumble of reds, greens, and yellows looked like an angry Kandinsky had used all of southeastern Arizona as his canvas.

Forging onward, we packed the van and drove south to Rio Rico where we were to check a small, roadside pond for ducks. Unfortunately, the very recent rains had caused the pond to spread out over the adjacent agricultural land, and now formed an extensive lake. At any rate, the rains prevented us from leaving the van so we drove south to Nogales for gas and a bathroom break. From there, we drove east to the golf course at Kino Springs, where, thankfully, the rains began to diminish. There, we picked up a variety of birds that included Cassin's Kingbird, a pot-full of Vermilion Flycatchers, Spotted Sandpiper, Lazuli Bunting, Yellow-breasted Chat, Killdeer, a Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, American Kestrel, Lark Sparrows, and a number of Common Ground-Doves.

From the golf course, we drove east to Patagonia. A quick stop in light rain at the Patagonia Roadside Rest was more for birding history than birds, but we did see the trip's only Black Vultures, curiously local around Patagonia and Nogales.

From there, we continued into town, ostensibly to visit the Tucson Audubon Society's Paton Center for Hummingbirds, the area's most predictable location for Violet-crowned Hummingbird. On Pennsylvania Avenue, we were met by another tour leader and two clients as they watched the muddy, churning torrent that filled the low-water crossing and separated the Paton Center from any birding activity. The previous night's rains, that had actually flooded some of the local houses, had fallen with a ferocity not recalled by local residents. For the next several hours, the water continued to flow into washes from the hills nearby.

After a tasty lunch at the *Gathering Grounds*, we visited the entrance to Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, getting looks at members of the colony of Grasshopper Sparrows that nest there, as well as Botteri's Sparrow, the Lilian's race of Eastern Meadowlark, and a small herd of Pronghorn.

Continuing to Sierra Vista, we ducked into Fort Huachuca to get our security passes enabling us to bird the Fort the next day. The entire operation took just a few minutes, as the clerks seemed almost pathologically intent on processing us as quickly as possible. After a stop for wine, we proceeded to the delightful *Casa de San*



Pedro. The lodge, a favorite among birders, is adjacent to both the San Pedro River and a National Conservation Area that protects the San Pedro, one of the Southwest's few undammed rivers and an important migration corridor for birds moving to and from western Mexico.

There, after a short break and some yard birding, we enjoyed a catered Mexican dinner.

August 10, 2016

We began with one of the Casa's filling breakfasts, accompanied by a bit of window birding, and roosting Great Horned Owls by the swimming pool. We then drove back to Fort Huachuca, a 76,000 acre military base, and a long-time destination for birders in southeastern Arizona.



Our first stop was in Huachuca Canyon, whose sycamore-lined riparian area is home to several pair of Elegant Trogons. We found the canyon to be a bit dark and drippy and bird activity was somewhat diminished but we saw trogons both in the canyon, and from the van on the drive out. We then continued to the Lower Garden Canyon Picnic Area to eat lunch. There we were joined by a variety of birds including Bushtits, a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Bridled Titmice, and a family group of squeaky Sulphur-

bellied Flycatchers.

Leaving the Fort, we drove south to Ash Canyon B&B, a popular spot to view hummingbirds. Here we enjoyed looks at a number of species including males and females of the very local Lucifer Hummingbird, as well as a quick and unexpected visit by Violet-crowned Hummingbird. Between hummers, there were many species of songbirds and woodpeckers to view at the yard's many feeders.

We returned to the Casa in time to join Sheri Williamson, author of *A Field Guide to Hummingbirds of North America*, and her small army of trappers, bird handlers, and data recorders, for their weekly hummingbird banding session. Besides giving us very close looks at several species, Sheri provided guests with a nearly continuous lecture on the biology, longevity, behavior, and anatomy of hummingbirds, making for an extremely informative experience. This particular afternoon, there were many hummers trapped at the feeders, so viewers had the opportunity to see her band and measure many birds.



After the banding ended, we drove to *Pizzeria Mimosa* for a nice dinner, then detoured a short distance to Carr Canyon where, with a little coaxing, we had nice looks at a Whiskered Screech-Owl, a Madrean Woodland species that barely enters the U.S.

August 11, 2016

After another hearty breakfast at the Casa, we visited the Nature Conservancy's *Ramsey Canyon Preserve*, the drive there highlighted by a perched roadside Peregrine Falcon. The canyon is a lovely place to walk, lined with Big-tooth Maples and Sycamores, but the drippy skies and threatening storm

suppressed the bird activity to the point where we were happy to see House Wrens and yet another Painted Redstart. There were a few hummingbirds at the feeders, mostly Broad-billeds, Black-chinneds, and Magnificents, but some of us had a surprise look at a Violet-crowned. From Ramsey, we checked the pond at Brown Canyon Ranch, but aside from a number of Blue Grosbeaks, and a few kingbirds, few other birds braved the threatening conditions.



Leaving the ranch, we stopped at *Pizzeria Mimosa* and picked up pizzas for a picnic lunch at our (Bob and Karen's) house. The light rain had the hummingbirds packed at the feeders so we enjoyed the pizzas and the attractively planted yard accompanied by the continuous flashing of iridescent gorgets and buzzing wings. Additional bonuses were the trip's second Hooded Oriole and first Scott's Oriole. When we'd finished eating, the weather map looked like the wrath of the heavens was about to impact us in a very unpleasant way.

Avoiding the canyons, we drove northeast through the almost freakishly-green Chihuahuan Desert to the *Holy Trinity Monastery* in St. David. This area hosts one of Arizona's few small colonies of Mississippi Kites. Near the entrance to the Monastery, a kite, on cue, perched at the top of a roadside cottonwood. Unexpectedly, the Monastery was hot and sunny, so there was some bird activity for us to pursue. Another very local U.S. breeder that can be found at the Monastery is Tropical Kingbird and, before long, we had one trilling nearby for nice 'scope looks and comparison with the Cassin's and Westerns, also close at hand. Checking ponds at the Monastery, we saw several species of attractive dragonflies, a Gray Hawk, Yellow Warblers, and the trip's only Green Herons.

Returning to the Casa we took a break for a shower then drove to Bisbee for dinner at *Café Roka*. Sandwiched in among a variety of eclectic galleries and second-hand stores, *Roka* is invariably a surprise to trip participants, as it's one of the area's nicest restaurants. There we were joined by Peg Abbott, owner of *Naturalist Journeys*, who would bird with us tomorrow.

August 12, 2016

After the usual tasty breakfast at the Casa (Where do they find all those ripe melons?), we drove up the road in Miller Canyon. Peg took most of the group up the trail for the morning, searching for Red-faced Warbler and Spotted Owl. I took two participants to the feeder array at Beatty's B&B, and then we drove up to Montezuma Pass in the Coronado National Memorial. This overlook provides an immense view of Mexico just to the south, as well as the San Rafael, San Pedro, and Sulphur Springs valleys, the northernmost Sierra Madres, and the Baboquivari Mountains to the west. It also provided us with fly-by White-throated Swifts.



Joining the group back at the hummingbird feeders at Miller canyon, we finally had close looks at male and female Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, mixed among the more common species. We were pleased to

hear of the successes of Peg's group. Although the Spotted Owls had chosen an invisible roost site, the group saw a number of other birds including Red-faced, Orange-crowned, Virginia's, and Black-throated Gray warblers, Greater Pewee, Warbling Vireo, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Steller's Jay, and Hepatic Tanagers with young.

We ate our picnic lunch next to Beatty's orchard and garden, awash in singing Lesser Goldfinches. There, a surprise female Lucifer Hummingbird joined us briefly. After lunch, we swapped canyons, descending Miller and ascending Carr Canyon.



Aside from its excitement factor, the ride up Carr is especially scenic, providing views of colorful lichen-covered rock faces above, and the San Pedro Valley and settlement below. At the Reef Campground, we saw a few high elevation birds such as the Azure form of Eastern Bluebird, Arizona Woodpecker, Grace's Warbler, Brown Creeper, Hutton's Vireo, Painted Redstart, and a fly-by Montezuma Quail. Continuing along to the end of the road, we picked up a flock that included at least five Olive Warblers and a pair of Dusky-capped Flycatchers. Along the road, we also encountered a Northern Pygmy-Owl and several Woodhouse's Jays, recently split from Western Scrub-Jay.

With some success under our belts, we then drove back down to the valley floor to enjoy a delicious dinner prepared by the Casa's owners Karl and Patrick.

August 13, 2016

A slightly later breakfast gave participants a chance to pack or do a bit more yard birding. Then, after the usual hearty breakfast, we packed the van for the trip back to Tucson. Not far from the Casa, a flock of Lark Buntings crossed the road in front of us, our last addition to the trip list. We arrived at the airport by 10:00 a.m. for curbside farewells.

