

Southeast Arizona Sky Island Sampler | Trip Report | May 1 – 10, 2022 | by Bryan Calk



With guides Jon Atwood and Bryan Calk and participants Cameron, Gus, Joan, Lou, Rob, Sheila, Sharell, Taylor, and Tina.



Sun., May. 1 Arrivals Tucson | Amerind Foundation | Willcox

On the first afternoon of our Sky Island Sampler tour, the group gathered in Tucson before setting off east. The first stop along the way was the Amerind Foundation Museum where we discovered the art, artifacts, and history of indigenous people from hundreds and thousands of years ago both local and abroad, and marveled at some more modern local artwork. The grounds treated us to a few of our first trip birds including Vermilion Flycatchers and Cassin's Kingbirds. After taking in this fascinating place, we continued to Willcox's Twin Lakes and boy did we wish we had more time to spend there! It was covered in birds from Wilson's and Red-necked Phalaropes spinning around like tops to a good variety of waterfowl and other shorebirds. But dinner was calling, and we arrived at our lodging, The Painted Pony, just in time to watch the sunset and the stars come out with a glass of wine and a delicious catered dinner.

Mon., May. 2 South Fork Cave Creek Canyon | SWRS | Pinery Canyon

A few birds were out and about at The Painted Pony this morning including Bullock's and Hooded Orioles, a Lazuli Bunting, and a resident pair of Great Horned Owls. After breakfast we headed up Cave Creek Canyon to the south fork, an incredibly special area for birding due to its variety and richness of native flora including Apache Pine, Arizona Sycamore, and Douglas Fir, as well as a nearly constant flow of water through the creek drawing in all kinds of wildlife. Here, we caught glimpses of some southwest specialties typical of the sky island mid-elevations like Painted Redstart and Hepatic Tanager. Next, we headed down for lunch at the Portal Cafe where birds entertained as we waited for our meal. After filling our bellies, we returned up the canyon to the Southwest Research Station of the American Museum of Natural History. After an impressive six species hummingbirds, we met up with a local expert Raymond van Buskirk. He led us up to some of the higher elevations of the mountains and found our first Buff-breasted Flycatcher, Red-faced Warbler, a Spotted Owl on



her nest, and after a picnic dinner at 9,000 feet, we encountered a calling Flammulated Owl and got great looks at a Whiskered Screech-owl as we made it back to bed. Quite a long day, but this was just the beginning!

Tue., May. 3 Portal | Rucker Canyon | Painted Pony

This day began with a leisurely breakfast including a delicious homemade quiche and fresh fruit. As we headed out, the winds picked up and quickly pushed us away from the low elevations up to the calmer conditions up the canyon. We spent much of the morning watching feeders set up by Portal locals who welcome birders to their yards. It was difficult to pull ourselves away for lunch when it came time! Highlights were an abundance of Bullock's Orioles and Western Tanagers, a Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and a stunning Lazuli Bunting.

We headed back to the Painted Pony for lunch, and our group split up with some folks driving out to Rucker Canyon at the south end of the Chiricahua mountains, and others staying at our home base to have a relaxing afternoon. For those of us who journeyed out, we were rewarded with impressive views as we drove into this beautiful remote canyon. When we arrived, we scored a half dozen Painted Redstarts, a Buff-breasted Flycatcher, and the star of the show and the reason for the trip - a Tufted Flycatcher! These birds do not typically range into the United States, but several have appeared and disappeared over the last 5-10 years, with some even attempting to breed. Quite the exciting encounter!

Back at dinner, we were treated with a visit from Christina and Tamara from the NJ office staff, as well as Tamara's husband Rich. As we ate dessert, Rich talked with us about his life growing up in southwest New Mexico and his current work with the Malpai Borderlands Group. The MBG is a grassroots, landowner-driven nonprofit organization attempting to implement ecosystem management on nearly one million acres of virtually unfragmented open-space landscape in southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico. With elevations ranging from 3500 to 8500 feet, the Malpai is a diverse area of mountains, grasslands, and riparian corridors and is home to several rare, threatened, and endangered plant and animal species. The organization brings ranchers, scientists, and key agencies together, and now carries out a series of conservation programs and activities, including land restoration; endangered species habitat protection; cost-sharing range and ranch improvements; and land conservation projects.

Wed., May. 4 Chiricahua National Monument | Bisbee | Casa de San Pedro

We said goodbye to the Painted Pony this morning after another delicious home-cooked meal. Our first stop was Cave Creek Ranch, a beautiful property with very productive feeders. Highlights here included Blue-throated Mountain-gem, Band-tailed Pigeon at eye level, Bewick's Wren, and some up-close views of many other southeast Arizona specialties. Next, we headed to Paradise, AZ, home of the George Walker house. The property



hosts Jackie and Winston helped us find some spectacular birds in their yard while giving us a great history lesson on this mountain community. While learning about the rise and decline of the town, we watched a pair of Arizona Woodpeckers, Scott's Oriole, and Juniper Titmouse coming into the feeders just feet away from us. After a long drive up and over the mountain pass, we pulled into Chiricahua National Monument. Here we were greeted by a Rufous-crowned Sparrow at the visitor center, and at Messiah Point we had a gregarious posse of Mexican Jays eyeballing our lunch and Black-throated Gray Warblers floated around in the surrounding piñon pines. Several of us took hikes of various distances through the impressive lichen-covered hoodoos, a result of volcanic activity in the area some 27 million years ago. Too soon we had to leave and head over to the charming little hamlet of Bisbee, with its impressive strip mines for copper juxtaposed with a thriving art and tourism-driven community. While walking through downtown, a Zone-tailed Hawk soared low over us giving us naked-eye views of all its diagnostic features. Great birds are everywhere you look in southeast Arizona, even when you're shopping! Finally we made it to Casa de San Pedro, enjoyed an Italian dinner out, and the Lesser Nighthawks were a wonderful dessert for the soul as we all said good night in the parking lot.

Thu., May. 5 Carr Canyon | Ash Canyon

We all enjoyed a little bit of early morning nature around "The Casa" this morning, followed by our first of several meals catered by Casa. Once we got on the road, we headed up to Carr Canyon. The only way up is along a narrow and rocky mountain road with lots of switchbacks, but it is the best way to get up to the mixed conifer-oak woodlands in the Huachuca Mountains to search for some hard-to-see high elevation species. After some searching, we came across Buff-breasted Flycatchers, Virginia's, Grace's, Black-throated Gray, Townsend's, and Hermit Warblers, Greater Pewee, and several other fun species. The weather was absolutely perfect for our picnic lunch under the whispering Ponderosa Pines.

Back at the base of the mountain, we stopped in for a visit at Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary where the action at the feeders was rather quiet. A lone female Lucifer Hummingbird made a couple of appearances, a party of Lazuli Buntings came and went, and a Zone-tailed Hawk flew low overhead, circling around us for several minutes. This Cinco de Mayo, our hosts at Casa de San Pedro served a wonderful spread of traditional Mexican/Southwestern fare.



Fri., May. 6 Ramsey Canyon | Miller Canyon | Casa de San Pedro

We headed back into the Huachuca Mountains, this time to Ramsey Canyon Preserve, a beautiful property defined by massive Arizona sycamores, big tooth maples, and a diversity of conifers. Our biggest target here was the Elegant Trogon, and just about as soon as we got into the right area for them, we heard one calling. Soon after, the male made an appearance giving incredible views as it moved through the upper branches of the cottonwoods in sycamores. It was so fun to get to share this with other folks visiting the preserve. Further up the trail, a pair of adorably hammy Painted Redstarts were building a nest under a gnarled tree root, and we sat and watched them frantically bringing leaves and twigs to fortify their home. On our way out, we ran into the female Elegant Trogon, Brown Creepers, and a Plumbeous Vireo also building its nest. Back at The Casa, we took a quick walk down along the river and had our lunch in the dining room. Then, Naturalist Journey's own Elissa Fazio stopped by to talk to us about her experience with the Hummingbird Banding Network in Southeast Arizona. She taught us about how the birds are captured and banded, what measurements are taken and how that is done, and how this data resulted in some fascinating discoveries. There are so many intricacies to hummingbird ID and they lead such fascinating and fast-paced lives, it was hard not to be impressed! Getting to see the bands and banding tools in our hands really put into perspective just how tiny they really are and how intricate working with these birds must be. Half of the group then took an afternoon break while the others went back to the mountains to check out Miller Canyon where a White-eared Hummingbird had been reported. Soon after we got to the feeders, the White-eared made an appearance alongside a host of other species. After dinner and our checklist routine, some of us walked out to the Cottonwood bosque along the river where we found a few Western Screech-owls singing away into the night, and we heard a barn owl give its loud eerie screech hunting somewhere in the distance over the fields.

Sat., May. 7 Patagonia Lake State Park | Paton Center for Hummingbirds | Amado Territory Inn

Leaving behind the lovely Casa de San Pedro this morning, we continued our journey west. Along the way, we spotted Pronghorn and marveled at the expansive grasslands and wine industry around Sonoita. The first stop of the day was Patagonia Lake State Park. With a light breeze at our backs and clear skies overhead, we set off down the birding trail where we stopped at a couple overlooks of Patagonia Lake and walked through the dense mesquite-willow bosque along the edge of the lake. Seeing the water birds here is always a rare treat in the desert, and the songbirds serenaded us with Yellow Warblers, Bell's Vireos, and Phainopepla taking the lead with a brief solo performance from a Northern Beardless Tyrannulet. We headed to lunch at the Gathering Grounds, a delightful local café, and then spent some time exploring and shopping the charming little town of Patagonia.



A trip to Patagonia is not complete without a stop at the Paton Center for Hummingbirds, a property now managed by Tucson Audubon. The stars of the show here were decidedly the Violet-crowned Hummingbird, Ruddy Ground-Dove, and the brush pile that held Lazuli and Indigo Buntings and a pair of Blue Grosbeaks. All too soon we had to pull ourselves away and head south. A white-nosed coati gave us a brief look as he crossed the road ahead of us which was an incredible jolt of excitement, and a quick stop at the Patagonia roadside rest area (of birding lore and legend) usually turns up at least one good find, and when Jon called out Gray Hawk, we all looked up to find a stunning adult coming in low right overhead! We finished looping our way around the Santa Ritas and got checked in to the Amado Territory Inn, followed by an unforgettable experience at Elvira's Mexican restaurant in Tubac.

Sun., May. 8 Montosa Canyon | Madera Canyon | Amado WTP

With a light and early breakfast at the Amado Inn, our group headed uphill to Montosa Canyon. Birding along the road here, there is an interesting transitional zone of habitats with a low and lush gully meeting dry desert slopes. The desert honeysuckle was blooming and a light breeze made the morning very pleasant. After a little while of waiting and searching, we eventually found our quarry... Five-striped Sparrows! A pair of them came down and gave us some incredible views for a few minutes. A Canyon Wren serenaded us while a male Costa's Hummingbird aggressively defended his territory.

After a great start to the morning, we made a quick stop to pick up lunch and started up into Madera Canyon. A quick detour led us to a very cooperative Botteri's Sparrow and an expansive ocotillo forest flush with blooms. Up in the higher elevations, we took a short walk up the hillside and observed Mexican Jays collecting nesting material and an Arizona Woodpecker foraging in an Emory Oak. We made our way back down to enjoy our picnic lunch under some shade, then sat a while at the feeding station watching the antics of the Wild Turkeys add an abundance of Black-headed Grosbeaks. With gusting winds and hot conditions, we took an indoors break in the afternoon before heading to the Amado water treatment ponds. Here there were several new species for our trip including Black-bellied Whistling-Duck and a Marbled Godwit that circled us for a few minutes before continuing on. After our evening checklist, we headed to the Longhorn Grill and Saloon, a truly local joint filled with character.



Mon., May. 9 Tubac | Peña Blanca Lake

First thing on our itinerary today was the De Anza trail in Tubac. This stretch of the Santa Cruz River has flowing water on the surface and some huge cottonwoods that shade the paths along the stream. On this walk we found a nesting pair of Northern Beardless-Tyrannulets while Abert's Towhees and Summer Tanagers darted through the understory. After about 3/4 of a mile, we came across the active nest of a female Rose-throated Becard. We waited for several minutes until the bird appeared, bringing back little bits of fluff to line her nest. Eventually she settled in and it was another half hour before she made another appearance outside the nest, giving us a second round of really great views.

On the way back we found a Broad-billed Hummingbird working on her nest, Lucy's Warblers, and a calling Pacific-slope Flycatcher. Next, we explored the old town of Tubac itself with its collection of art galleries and shops. The town has really become quite the little eclectic place with an upscale vibe. We enjoyed a delicious lunch at the Tubac Deli and Coffee Company, and then headed over to the White Rock Campground and Peña Blanca Lake just southwest of town. Another Gray Hawk greeted us immediately as we exited the van giving us incredible views as it perched in trees up the hill from the campground. A family of Dusky-capped Flycatchers Bushtits and Bewick's Wrens also entertained. Over at the lake, we sat and enjoy the beautiful scene of a clear sky with beautiful water and lush vegetation surrounding it. A few Green Herons waded through the edges of the cattails, two Black Phoebes played along the rocky shoreline as they caught a variety of insects, and a pair of Zone-tailed Hawks lifted out of the trees on the far shore giving quite incredible views as they circled above us. We returned to the Inn to prepare for dinner at Stables Grille at the country club. We had a delicious meal and reminisced about the trip. A hardy group headed out in search of night birds once we returned to the inn, and we succeeded in finding Elf Owls and Common Poorwills vocalizing up and down the canyon, with a waxing gibbous moon and a sky full of stars.

Tue., May. 10 Canoa Ranch | Departures from Tucson

Our last morning together started with some optional early birding at the Historical Canoa Ranch Conservation Park. On a walk around the small lake and wetlands, a Redhead that decided to spend all summer here was still hanging out with the domestic Mallards, a family of Lucy's Warblers were tending to a nest cavity, and an Ash-throated Flycatcher called out. The group met one last time for a hot breakfast at the Inn before heading up to Tucson for departures. Just before heading to the airport we made one final birding stop at Sentinel Peak in Tucson. As the temperatures were rising, we didn't wander far, but still managed to clearly hear Gilded Flickers working the saguaros up the hill and a few other desert specialists.



Photo Credits: Blue-throated Mountain-gem (Bryan Calk - BC), Red-faced Warbler (BC), Pyrrhuloxia (BC), Group Photo (), Western Tanager (BC), Thick-billed Kingbird (BC), Harris's Antelope Squirrel (BC), White-winged Dove (BC), Lazuli Bunting (BC), Yellow-eyed Junco (BC), Bullock's Oriole (BC), Tufted Flycatcher (BC), Hooded Oriole (BC), Arizona Woodpecker (BC), Buff-breasted Flycatcher (BC), Black-throated Gray Warbler (BC), Lucifer Hummingbird (BC), Elegant Trogon (BC), Painted Redstart (BC), Desert Honeysuckle (BC), Gray Hawk(BC), Scenic (BC), Broad-billed Hummingbird (BC), Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet (BC), Five-striped Sparrow (BC), Marbled Godwit (BC), Zone-tailed Hawk (BC), Lucy's Warbler (BC), Northern Mockingbird (BC), Redhead (BC), Black Phoebe (BC), Group Birding (BC)