

Alamos, Mexico | Trip Report

November 27 – December 5, 2017 | Written by Peg Abbott



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**Guide David MacKay, with
Peg Abbott, and 7 participants: Mike,
Rebecca, Marybelle, Thomas, Steve, Regina, and
Ralph**

Mon., Nov. 27 Arrival & Meet-up in Tucson

As we had an early start tomorrow, we met up in Tucson the night before; our guide would meet us at breakfast the next day. Peg chose the historic Arizona Inn of Tucson for our welcome dinner. They had winter night was being able to sit outside. The Inn was decorated with luminarios atop the adobe walls. We enjoyed good food and good camaraderie, then returned to the Hyatt by the airport to get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow, off to Mexico!

Tues., Nov. 28 Tucson to Hermosillo

We enjoyed a healthy, hot breakfast early, and just on time at 7:00 AM packed up the van to head south on I-19, passing Green Valley and other USA birding hotspots. On the fly, David pointed out three Brown Pelicans at the Canoa Ponds, odd! There was no line at all at the border and we got right through; ditto at the office where we got tourist visas, nice! They inspected our load of luggage, tripods, and scopes and wished us well. Everyone from the clerks to the inspectors said with fondness, "Oh, Alamos, Hermosa, Alamos"



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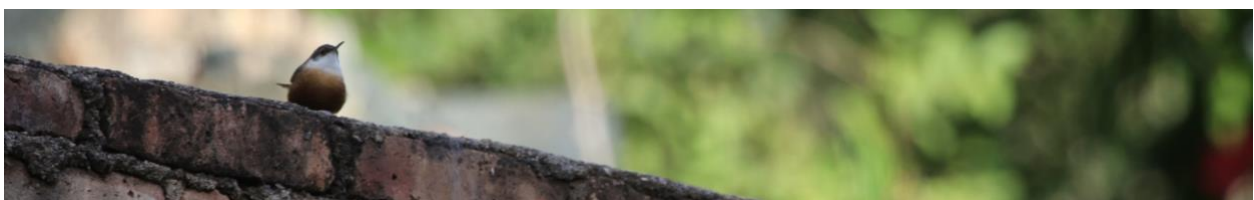
David had several bird stops in mind, and we enjoyed them both this morning. We traced the Rio San Miguel, lined with cottonwoods still a mix of green and yellow, and first pulled in to a spot with a long view of this perennial waterway. From 9:30 AM to 10:00 AM we enjoyed sightings of Vermilion Flycatcher, Black Phoebe, Cassin's Kingbird, Say's Phoebe, several sparrows, and Gila Woodpecker. It became a two-kingfisher day, with a Belted and a Green perching in view. We tallied 20 species and drove on to another river spot, the bridge at Imuris. We watched a Great Egret fishing, found seven Mexican Mallards, and hit the jackpot along a hedgerow with a group of songbirds including Green-tailed Towhee, Lincoln's Sparrow, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, several Yellow-rumped Warblers and cracking views of a Sinaloa Wren with its streaky cheeks. It gave us a nice long buzzy call to boot. The river was lush, with two water channels, massive cottonwoods, Gooding's Willows, fuzzy-seeded Bacharis, and other shrubs. This time of year, the cottonwoods shine gold, yet some were still green, a late fall this year!

We had passed a lot of construction, the highway being upgraded to reinforced concrete from asphalt, in time four lanes all the way. David talked about the strength of the Sonora economy as a train passed by loaded with Ford hybrid vehicles heading north to the US market. Construction vehicles entered our peaceful realm to pump water, and we headed on our way.

Next stop was lunch, at Elba's, a popular stop known for good food and the cleanest bathrooms in Mexico. We ordered enchiladas, tortilla soup, and guacamole, and tried local drink specialties, Horchata and Jimaca (hibiscus flowers). Fortified, our next stop was in totally different habitat — desert scrub.

We pulled off on a side road, the route to Carbo, famous for its horse racing track. Stepping out we were greeted by Bendire's Thrasher, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Canyon Wren, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Northern Mockingbird, and a variety of other sparrows: Vesper, Chipping, Black-throated, and Brewer's. The plant life was fascinating, with large Organ Pipe Cactus, Tree Ocotillo (in bloom), lots of plump Cholla, Bursaria, and more. Just down the road we spied a trio of Harris's Hawks, a Loggerhead Shrike, Verdin, and Phainopepla. We turned around by the race track and heard tell there were to be races on December 3 as we headed to San Carlos and Kino.

We took a shortcut to Hermosillo as afternoon light got soft. Our incredible long stretch of sun was giving way to clouds, layered in stripes over the jagged hills that lined both sides of our route.



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We liked our hotel very much, some new construction with an older brick building as its core, very cozy as the Wine-Bistro Restaurant. Somehow, we got crossed signals as they have two restaurants, two subgroups started at each one, so we left it that way and met up for the bird list. A long but fulfilling day.

Wed., Nov. 29 Hermosillo to Alamos

We enjoyed a lovely breakfast served from Mexican crockery before heading out for the day. David proposed we bird more along the way rather than push to get there by lunch, for at this time of year some gravel pit/wastewater ponds just outside the city held many species in good number.

We spent about two hours at the ponds, with a steady stream of sightings. Regina found a Roseate Spoonbill just as she got out of the van; we saw herons, egrets, night-herons, and ducks galore. A Northern Harrier made a pass through, and we spied both Red-tailed and Harris's Hawks. A flowering composite attracted some lovely butterflies, ladies and a bright orange Julia or similar species. Peg found a turtle, most likely a slider, and a treat was having a Sora come out in plain view. There were loads of Black-necked Stilts, three American Avocets, Spotted Sandpiper, and Killdeer. Northern Shovelers and Green-winged Teals were the most numerous duck, we also had Ring-necked, Redhead, Ruddy, and Bufflehead. Finding four species of grebes was satisfying: Western, Pied-billed, Eared, and Least.



From here we drove about an hour to Guaymas and San Carlos, stopping at a very low tide view at a point across from the older beach town of Miramar. What a stunning place, with rugged rock features, abundant columnar cacti, desert shrubs, and extensive tidal flats. We spotted White Ibis feeding, and seeing a scarlet orange color nestled under a mangrove gave us a start. With binoculars it emerged as a ball, but one could have imagined it as a Scarlet Ibis! We watched Reddish Egret, Tricolored Herons, and David spotted a distant Roadrunner, not commonly seen from this spot.



Lunch at Los Arbolitos was next, a fun spot and obviously popular. They had very fresh fish and people thoroughly enjoyed octopus, scallops, shrimp, crab, and Marlin. David ordered some dishes to share on top of our own selections, shrimp wrapped in chiles, scallops, and ceviche. We should have been full, but they showed

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off their handmade ice-creams. We had to try them, and sent samples around. Becky had the most creative, a corn ice-cream made with fresh corn and wrapped up in a cornhusk, wow! Peg had coconut, Ralph mango, Regina coffee, and Mawby limon, pretty much covering the gamut.

We waddled out of the restaurant, but with luck David had a bird stop across the causeway for us to scan the mudflats. There was an inquisitive Yellow-crowned Night-Heron that seemed to watch our every move. We found a treasure trove of new species here, Black Skimmer, American Oystercatcher, Heermann's and Laughing Gulls, Dunlin, several plovers, Sanderlings, and more. We watched a man digging clams, his bike parked out on the mud. This was a quick stop as we still had 2.5 hours to go.

We followed the agricultural fields of the Yaqui River, passing through Yaqui lands, and through the city of Obergon. At Navajoa we began to climb; we said good-bye to Saguaro, and hello to a host of Tropical Deciduous Biome trees. The Sierras gave a lovely backdrop and in no time, we passed under the white arches on a high hill before down that mark the entry to Alamos.

El Pedregal was a most welcome sight after our days of travel. Our casitas were absolutely charming, friendly doggies were there to greet those that wanted to pet them, and soon we were gathered in the cozy library nook, kitchen, and dining area for margaritas, followed by a lovely dinner. We had chicken stuffed with spinach and topped with a mild chile poblano sauce, yum!

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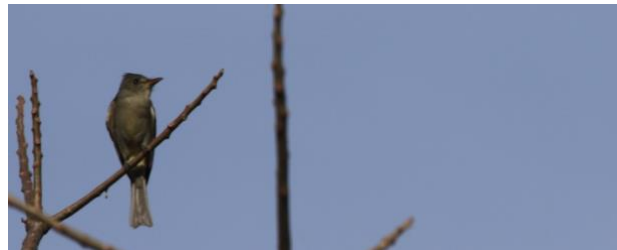
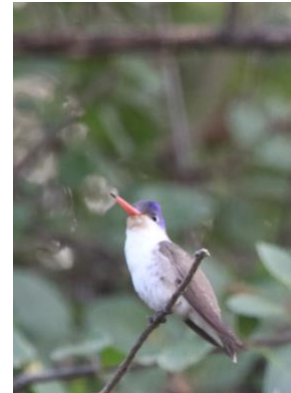
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Thurs. Nov. 30 Alamos: Aduana Village & Aduana Canyon

We had a leisurely rising time this morning, gathering for breakfast at 7:00 AM. As the winter sun did not rise until after 6:30 AM, no need to push hard. The coffee roasted by Jennifer's sister was delicious, a good strong kick-start to the day.

We drove just a short way to the site of the old silver assay office and one-time smelter. The church here is over 400 years old, very impressive. We had just missed the pilgrimage festival, second largest in Sonora, and were glad to have a very quiet morning, the only car in sight. We had birds right out of the van, a flock of Mexican Parrotlets and an entertaining Canyon Wren which was going in and out of a pipe and onto the roof of an old adobe building, calling and posing for us. We found a Violet-crowned Hummingbird also posing, and just as David named the four hummingbirds commonly found, including Berylline, Peg said, "here's one, over the water." We got repeated good views. Nice to have such sought-after species in Arizona become those commonly encountered. We walked slowly up the canyon, finding about 40 species over the course of the morning. There were interesting pairings showing how Alamos is a convergence of different biotic realms. Dusky-capped and Nutting's Flycatchers, Blue-gray and Black-capped Gnatcatchers. Seeing Elegant Trogons with White-throated Magpie Jays and a Squirrel Cuckoo in the same fruiting trees was exciting. We had Wilson's Warblers, Painted Redstart, and Greater Pewee to name a few more.

Ralph fashioned himself a walking stick to amble up the rocky canyon. We stopped often, at one point finding four different species of columnar cacti in view. There were Morning Glory Trees, Palo Pinto trees, fruiting native persimmon trees, and several very large spreading figs. This drainage continued way up into the high country, and



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during the Christmas Count a group scales the route up to some oak habitat. Today we were content for just one more “around the bend” and it turned out to be a good one, with two species of note: Scrub Euphonia and a prize — Golden Vireo. Peg worked hard to get a record shot of this, apparently it had returned to the same spot last winter, a notable record for Sonora.

The morning passed quickly and before we knew it, lunch was calling. We had homemade minestrone soup, a wonderful fresh salad, and pizza. For dessert, some decadent brownies. And the birds were there to greet us! Alicia and Jennifer had lunch set out under the palapa and in sight of the busy bird feeding area. The birds were more interested in water and bathing than any food, and within the hour we dined, we had great looks at Rufous-backed Robin, White-throated Magpie-Jay, and Blue Mockingbird. For anyone that has waited hour after hour for that skulker of a species, the Blue Mockingbird in plain sight was amazing. It also gave a repertoire of calls, fun to hear. Two different Hermit Thrush individuals came in, one a very dark form, and several Wilson’s and Yellow-rumped Warblers.

We had a little siesta time following lunch, then met at 2:30 to see a bit of the town of Alamos. David showed us the house his parents had on the square, the church, several of the lovely restored downtown hotels, the local school, the local municipality, and some of the quiet cobble-stone streets with restored houses and apartments. Some were bright colors, others had lovely tiles, and it was fun to see the layout of the streets. A few of us bought some embroidery in colorful frames as a memento of the region.

We had one more stop in mind, the local cemetery where there were fruiting figs. Cassin’s Kingbird, Social Flycatcher, Gila Woodpecker, and Rufous-backed Robins were all busy culling the crop.



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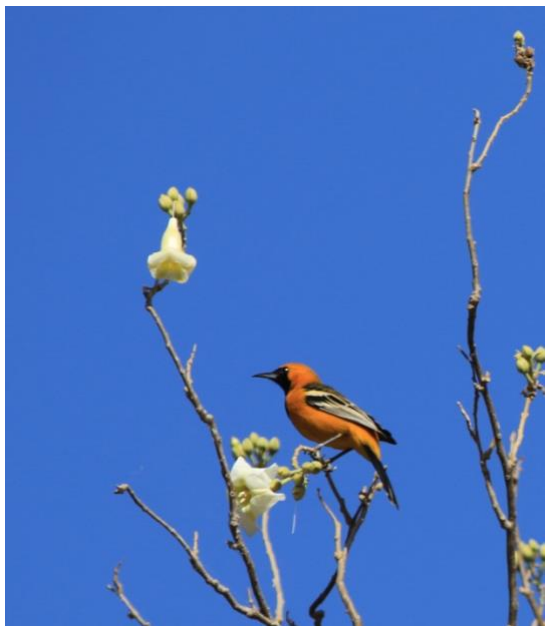
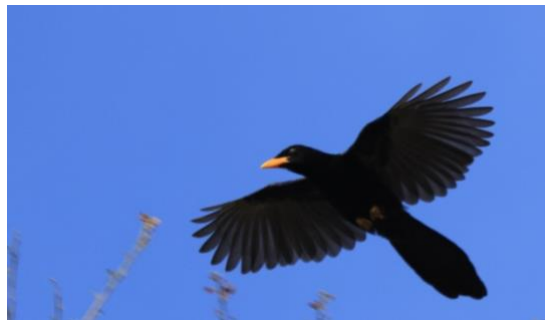
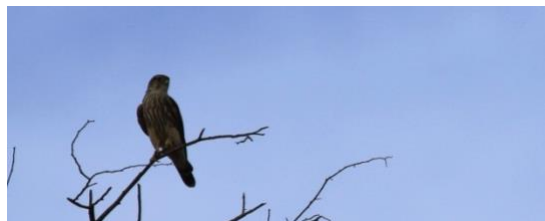
Back to El Pedregal with time for showers, note-taking, and getting ready to go back to town for dinner — this day was Jennifer's birthday and we looked forward to helping her celebrate! She picked an awesome restaurant, Charisma, and we sure had fun! We had Petite Sirloin, Becky tried Sea Bass on a bed of cauliflower and several had fresh salmon. Peg bought all wine, time for a toast! For dessert, a mix of decadents, including chocolate cheesecake.

Fri., Dec. 1 El Pedregal | Upper & Lower Río Cuchujaqui

We met for some early birding on the grounds, but did not find the roosting spot for the Great Horned Owl calling near the casitas the night before. After a good breakfast, we headed to the lower Río Cuchujaqui watercourse, into which drains the effluent from the city's treatment plant.

While the smells got a bit thick at times, all this productivity was causing a lot of aquatic insect life to thrive and the birds were there in profusion. We had about 50 species, including a Wilson's Snipe that Mike almost stepped on! Almost on arrival we caught site of a very dark Merlin, turns out there were two, and they caused quite a commotion among the flocks of sparrows and doves. We wrestled with flycatchers, Gray, Pacific-slope (calling) and "Western" (not calling). We had wonderful views of perched Plain-capped Starthroat, and other hummingbirds. Peg found a pair of Five-striped Sparrows, and we had at least glimpses of Happy and Sinaloa Wrens. A male Elegant Trogon could not have been more cooperative, and we finally got scope views of White-fronted Parrots. Over 100 Yellow-rumped Warblers were flycatching, joined by bright Vermilion Flycatchers. The morning passed quickly, a highlight was seeing Purplish-backed Jays, including a young bird with yellow bill, at close range.

We returned to El Pedregal for lunch outside by the feeders, entertained once again by Blue Mockingbird, Streak-backed and Hooded Orioles, Rufous-backed Robin, and today, a Plumbeous Vireo joined in to bathe.



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In the afternoon we headed to the Upper Rio Cuchujaqui, but on this December afternoon it was very quiet. We got quick glimpses at a Bare-throated Tiger-Heron, found a mixed flock with quite a variety of warblers, and best of all, got good looks at a Lesser Roadrunner, the prize of the day. We moved from an area of deep pools in the river to a bridge with an overview; stunning light played on the distant mountains, wow!

Dinner was provided for us at a local Mexican food place, the Mirador, with a nice array of dishes, including Barbacoa, Tacos Dorados, and Chile Rellenos that just melted in your mouth, yum!

Sat., Dec. 2 Arroyo Aduana & Fun in Town

We returned to an area of river and orchards this morning, wanting to be close as we had a home tour of Alamos scheduled for 10:00 AM, a great chance to learn more about how people lived in this town of colonial architecture. We had an early breakfast and stayed close to David as he tried to find a few we were missing.

Living in Alamos, he knew just the spot. We got very good looks at Elegant Quail, which we'd heard, seen briefly, but not really had a chance to study. We found a group of 13 Rufous-bellied Chachalacas, up feeding in fruiting figs, and only stopped watching when we got distracted by two Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls, in the scopes, fun! Red-billed Pigeons were abundant, Peg noted over 100 for her eBird list, and Ralph followed a pair of Elegant Trogons he called us over to, wonderful views. There was a stream with a bit of flow and a lot of gorgeous cacti on a warm slope above. We found Lazuli and Varied Buntings, also a Blue Grosbeak, taking advantage of insects hatching. Dusky-capped Flycatcher called and we finally got good looks at Rose-breasted Becard. Again, we tallied about 50 species and enjoyed our time.

David set his alarm so we'd not get so engrossed we'd miss the tour. This turned out to be really fun for all; we got to see three homes, all very different, in different areas of town. Jennifer MacKay is very well-



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connected in town and we are so glad she shared this. Also, this tour benefitted local scholarships, which we were pleased about.



The first home was up on Guadalupe Hill, and the owner, Jean Glake, greeted us with a warm smile. They had filled in a swimming pool with stone and tile, leaving a narrow strip as a reflecting pool. Amid a riotous profusion of bougainvillea, it was stunning. This house had a lot of history left from its original owner, and all through the home there were original furnishings, textiles, art, and many books, as the owner had been a bookbinder and collector. Woven in were her own collections of Mexican folk art, all displayed together. The kitchen was warm and inviting and oh, we loved her dishes.



The second home was owned by the Smallhouse family who have close ties to the University of Arizona. It was a spacious and gracious property, and the gardens were beautifully cared for. David and Jennifer had small children in Alamos at the same time this family did, so Jennifer shared some great stories. The outside rooms were as intriguing as the inside rooms, and the art was wonderful to see. We also met Armando here, who guides for David when guests want birding and he is not at home.



The third home and its gracious owner, Joan Gould Winderman, was just a treat to see. It had a lot of glass, inside and outside rooms, art, wonderful dishes and glassware, just so much fun to share and see. She had worked with the Tohono O'odham in Arizona and had some wonderful baskets and memories from them. Antiques, primitives, fun local art, so much to see — we had to tear ourselves away!

Teresita's was our chosen spot for lunch, and we enjoyed it thoroughly. Today was Regina's birthday so a good time to start the celebrations! She loves good coffee and here it was easy to find. There were locals and visitors all mingled together, and a nice mix of creative food.

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We lingered, enjoying the weather, the colors of the flowers and tastes of the food, so when we got back everyone chose down time. Peg went for a walk and enjoyed getting in the middle of a flock of Black-throated Magpie-Jays, such personality!

We had a special dinner, chicken mole, in honor of Regina's birthday. Peg and Jennifer had snuck back to Teresita's to grab yet another chocolate decadent for dessert. Big smiles all around. And we tallied up our bird list so far, closing in fast on 200

Sun., Dec. 3 Navojoa City Park | Shorelines & Estuaries | Beach Hotel & Jazz

We really hated to leave El Pedregal, the warm smiles of Angela and Jennifer, the delicious coffee in the morning, birds at the feeder, and our cozy rooms. We had a nice breakfast, settled up accounts, and began our return — this time breaking up the drive with a stay on the water.

Our first stop was Navojoa City Park, along the Rio Mayo, where David warned us some locals might be dusting off the party of the night before, or just continuing the party. We found some great birds right off the bat, a Common Black Hawk, Bare-throated Tiger Heron, and well over 100 Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks. We scanned the water areas (no luck with Northern Jacana that is often here) and then started in the shrubbery where Happy Wrens were happy to come out to see us, singing away — fun! We had a good mix of Verdin, several warblers, and Pyrrhuloxia. New for us was a bright male Summer Tanager and Ralph found a Great Kiskadee. Cars started arriving by mid-morning with a wild mix of music that was non-avian, and we were on our way.

We then drove through a lot of very large agricultural fields, a landscape not unlike Gila Bend in Arizona with irrigation and large machinery. A treat was finding White-tailed Kites, several of them, perched



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boldly on telephone wires close to the road. Peg spied a Western Meadowlark, and near a dairy farm we encountered a mixed flock of blackbirds that included Yellow-headed Blackbird and Brown-headed Cowbird as well as Red-winged Blackbird and Common Grackle. Northern Rough-winged Swallows flew over a pond.

Due west of Navojoa we stopped at a boat haul out spot near Paredoncito where we had a picnic lunch watching LOTS of birds. In fact, the bird life here was remarkable. So was the view we had of fisherman returning with their catch, and watching a patient, impeccably well-trained horse plunge into the surf with its cart in tow, directed by a very young boy. The horse would line up with the boat, men in waterproof gear were in the water, moving heavy crates of fish, then off the horse would go to deliver to a large shed on shore before returning for another run. It was a scene out of a movie from another era.



We had a great mix of shorebirds here, including Long-billed Curlew, Ruddy Turnstone, and Snowy and Wilson's Plovers. At one point many took flight and in came two Peregrine Falcons. They perched on rocks out in the water, waiting and watching, a pair obvious by size. With so many birds around life was probably pretty easy for them, and behind them a courasing Northern Harrier kept the pressure on. David called out two groups of flying Brant, and there were several hundred Northern Shovelers, American Wigeons, and Green-winged Teals feeding in the salt waters. In the distance we spied a Tricolored Heron and seven Roseate Spoonbills. Our count of American Oystercatchers reached 24, and close at hand we had good looks at the Large-billed race of Savannah Sparrow, new for most of the group.



We then went north to the old causeway to Tobari Huivulai, and the sheer number of birds was mind-boggling. Even diligent Peg gave up counting here, looking out to thousands of Western Sandpipers, countless ducks, gulls beyond measure. There were about 600 American White Pelican resting on a sand

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island, flanked by Double-crested Cormorants. We noted all the major herons and watched a Black-crowned Night-Heron gulp down a crab way too large to seemingly fit down its gullet. We got good looks at Reddish Egret, Sanderling, and Dunlin. With still a long drive ahead we gave up the quest — but what an inspiration to see so much coastal productivity!

On to Guaymas and our colorful digs by the beach. We rolled in right at sunset and wanted to watch it, margarita in hand ... this was Mexico, after all! David graciously offered to deal with check-in and luggage, and we abandoned him to smell the sea, watch the sunlight play on water and coastal islands. He made it out to join us just in time for the sun to go down. And... we had a good Green Flash — yeah!

Tonight was to be the full moon, a Super Moon, and indeed, it was a big one. What a magical place to be for it. We had a fun evening planned at a restaurant with an open-air music venue, tonight playing some jazz. The food was good, the moon was out, and the music was energetic with a Latin twist to some old favorites.



Mon., Dec. 4 Return from Guaymas to Tucson

We knew we were in for the long haul today, so we got up to enjoy our spot on the sea, meeting for coffee on the pool patio with scopes trained on the bay. It was a lovely morning. Snowy Egrets and Spotted Sandpiper were feeding intently on a small tidal pool nearly at our feet, while rafts of Eared Grebe bobbed up and down. We heard the lonely call of a Common Loon at some distance, and found two Pacific Loons not far from the shoreline. No Blue-footed Boobies or Magnificent Frigatebirds, they must have been feeding elsewhere on this wintry morning. While we were in T-shirts, we heard that Tucson's temperatures were to only reach the 60s, the end of a very long warm fall this year.

We made a couple of birding stops along the way, and in one park with large cottonwood trees netted another species, our first Northern Flicker of the trip.

The border crossing went smoothly, but with winter short days we rolled into Tucson after dark, about 6:00 PM. Those living locally headed on home, while the rest of us stayed on at the Hyatt, enjoying dinner there before getting some rest.

Great memories of a fun trip!

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Photo Credits

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Resset-crowned Motmot
Bougainvillea Flowers
Black-bellied Whistling Duck
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Group at Rio Cuchijaqui
Inn in Tucson
Birding Rio San Miguel

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Vermilion Flycatcher
Canyon Wren

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Becky at Breakfast in Hermosillo
Black-necked Stilts
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Regina with Coffee Ice Cream **by**

Ralph Anavy

El Pedregal Scenics

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Aduana Village
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Golden Vireo
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Regina at Teresita's for Birthday Lunch

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Birthday Cake
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Fishermen & Horse
Shorebirds
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Guaymas Sunrise with
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TV Interview in Alamos **by Mike Byers**

