

# Arizona Monsoon Madness: Trip Report

## August 8-14, 2018 | Written by Pat Lueders



Participants: Guides: Bob Behrstock & Pat Lueders, with 12 participants: Mark, Holly, Tom, Betsy, Pat P., Susan, Esther, Neil, Mary Jane, Bob, Cathy, and Sarah



### Wednesday, Aug. 8: Meet in Tucson; Visit Amado Pond & Montosa Canyon

As the group gathered at the Tucson Airport, arriving from Montana to Connecticut, the magic of 12 total strangers bonding together into a group of comrades began. We traveled south to our hotel in Green Valley where we stayed the first two nights while we birded the Madera Canyon area. Stopping first at the Amado water treatment pond, we were treated to four Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and two terns – a Forster's and a surprise Black Tern – the first one Bob had seen at this location, as well as a pair of Black-necked Stilts.

We journeyed to Montosa Canyon to look for high desert species that inhabit the canyons. We heard a Yellow-billed Cuckoo calling and had brief glimpses of this secretive species. Our first Phainopepla, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Canyon Towhee, and Canyon Wren delighted the group, and we worked hard to finally get good looks at Varied Bunting, a target species on this canyon's rocky slopes. As we drove down from the canyon, we saw a car stopped along the road, its occupants looking at a Gila



Monster which they happily shared--a first sighting for most of us. The excitement of that encounter had barely subsided when we stopped for a handsome Western Diamondback Rattlesnake sunning in the road, another life reptile. Unbelievable luck and a good beginning to our trip!

The group became better acquainted during a delicious dinner at the resort and slept well after the exciting first day of our Arizona adventure.

### **Thursday, Aug. 9: Box Canyon, Madera Canyon, Green Valley WRF, De Anza Trail**

After a delicious early breakfast, we began the day by driving through the grasslands to Box Canyon to look for a regional specialty, the Five-striped Sparrow. En route, several people saw Black-tailed Jackrabbit, but the spectacle of the drive (not equally appreciated by all participants) was a post-rain emergence of countless millions of winged ants that we drove through non-stop for perhaps five miles.

Box Canyon is a recently discovered location for Five-striped Sparrow, a locally rare Mexican species that can be seen at only three locations in Arizona and the U.S. As we left the vans, three flew across the road and several of us got quick looks. Below the road in the valley, others were vocalizing, and one soon landed in the open for great views by all. What a treat to see and hear this beautiful sparrow. Other species seen in the canyon included Cassin's Kingbird, Cactus Wren, Hooded Oriole, both Black-headed and Blue grosbeaks, and Varied Bunting. Wow!

We then moved to Proctor Road to walk the desert trail. Bell's Vireo was vocal but elusive. We persevered, and had close looks at one, as well as Verdin, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Mexican Jay,





Hooded Oriole, and Ladder-backed Woodpecker. A perched Rufous-winged Sparrow was seen singing near the parking lot as well as a colorful Western Tanager.



Traveling up the canyon, we stopped at Santa Rita Lodge's feeders to enjoy close looks at Rivoli's, Black-chinned, Anna's, and Broad-billed hummingbirds. Bob spotted an Arizona Woodpecker on a post, and a number of Acorn Woodpeckers frequented their nut storage holes on various poles. When a Cooper's Hawk scattered the birds, we moved up the road to the Amphitheater parking area. There we found a colorful Painted Redstart near the bridge and heard Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers. The noisy flycatchers foraged over us, providing good looks for all of these decidedly local birds. Bridled Titmice moved quickly through the trees sounding much like chickadees, and a Plumbeous Vireo posed in open branches. Continuing uphill, we took a quick look at the feeders at Kubo B&B, and then headed back down to the desert.



Returning to Green Valley for lunch, we detoured to the Green Valley Water Reclamation Facility, seeing a variety of small shorebirds including Baird's, Least, and Spotted sandpipers; "Mexican Duck;" and Black-necked Stilt. A nice surprise was over 200 Wilson's Phalaropes spinning circles on the pond.

After lunch, we traveled to the famous De Anza Trail where so many rare species have been found. We hoped to see the rare Rose-throated Becard, which has nested in this area for a few years – one of only two or three pairs known to breed in the U.S. Bob heard one, and eventually, we all saw the male moving through the cottonwoods and willows. At the Santa Cruz River, we found a few migrant Lazuli Bunting bathing near an Abert's Towhee. A Vermilion Flycatcher family was feeding in the field, and Black Vultures circled above.

A delicious dinner at Firefly Restaurant in Amado was the perfect ending to a truly successful day of desert birding.

## **Friday, Aug. 10: Rio Rico ponds, Kino Springs Golf Course, Patagonia Roadside Rest Area, Paton Center for Hummingbirds**

Today we traveled to the Huachuca Mountains area. First, we drove south (in a cloudburst) to the Rio Rico ponds not far north of the border town of Nogales. As we stopped to view a perched Harris's Hawk, across the road we spotted a newly mowed field covered with perched Swainson's Hawk – migrants that had just passed the night there. We counted 32 on the ground and in surrounding trees. Additionally, Vermilion Flycatcher and Blue Grosbeak were with them, as were Tropical and Cassin's kingbirds. Quite a spectacle to see!



At the Kino Springs Golf course we added Common Ground-Dove, a family of Say's Phoebe, Yellow Warbler, and many perched Cliff Swallows.



The famous Patagonia Roadside Rest Area has been a summer breeding spot for the rare Thick-billed Kingbird, one of only a handful of pairs breeding in the U.S. We quickly heard the male vocalizing and got a number of unobscured looks and pictures as it perched in the high branches.



Next, we visited the Paton Center for Hummingbirds, now owned and managed by the Tucson Audubon Society. Here we found the very local Violet-crowned Hummingbird, the only hummingbird in the U.S. with snow white underparts. We also saw a Bewick's Wren, Curved-billed Thrasher, and a nesting Bell's Vireo. Bob escorted the group through the butterfly garden to identify the large number of pollinators found utilizing the numerous blooming, native plants, some of which came from his garden.

After lunch and a few minutes of shopping in Patagonia, we stopped just before a thunderstorm to see a tiny Lucy's Warbler in the mesquites. Our planned short foray into the grasslands was rained out, but eventually we saw the birds we missed there. Stopping at the main gate at Fort Huachuca, we obtained our passes needed to visit the base

later in the trip. Bob invited the group to his yard in Hereford, and, with his help, we studied the large number of hummingbirds including Calliope, a rare Lucifer, and beautiful Rufous, and Costa's.



In late afternoon, we arrived at the Casa de San Pedro B&B, our home for the remainder of the trip. After checking in, we enjoyed a delicious dinner, reminiscing about the wonderful day we had just experienced. Peg Abbott, Naturalist Journeys' owner, joined us to introduce herself and welcome us to her home, Southeast Arizona.

### **Saturday, Aug. 11: Miller Canyon Trail, Whitewater Draw**

After some early morning birding around the Casa, where we enjoyed our first Roadrunner carrying a lizard to his young, and delightful Gambel's Quail, we had our first home cooked breakfast, and then left for a trip to Miller Canyon. Northern Goshawk had nested there this year, and we soon hear the juvenile vocalizing and spotted it perched in the tall conifers across the canyon. Hepatic Tanager, Spotted Towhee, and both Plumbeous and Hutton's vireos were found as we hiked along the trail. Some turned back to study hummingbirds at the feeders, while the rest of the group hiked a bit further and found a Red-faced Warbler, Steller's Jay, and Brown-crested Flycatcher.



We returned to Bob's yard with pizzas and salad for lunch and studied the continuing large number of feeding hummingbirds and butterflies. After lunch, some rested at the Casa and some journeyed eastward to Whitewater Draw Wildlife Management Area, a well-known wintering location for thousands of Sandhill Cranes. Susan found 19 White-faced Ibis feeding in a pond. We heard a Sora in the wetland and Esther spotted a female Yellow-headed Blackbird. Hundreds of migrating Lazuli Buntings were seen feeding in the marsh, and a large mixed flock of male and female Lark Buntings was found along the roadside near a perched Loggerhead Shrike.

After another delicious dinner, many enjoyed a slice of homemade pie before retiring and dreaming of all the spectacular birds we'd seen so far.

## **Sunday, Aug. 12: Huachuca Canyon, San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area, Lehner Road**

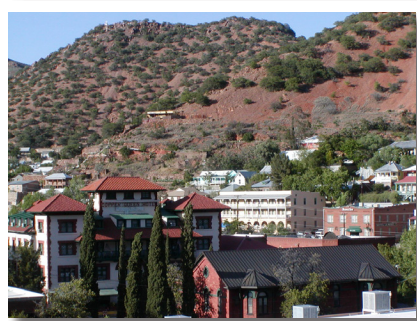
As we birded around the Casa before breakfast, we heard about a juvenile Great Horned Owl perched in a tree near the pool. Moments later, we were enjoying scope views and pictures. We spent the morning in Huachuca Canyon on Fort Huachuca. As we arrived, we were greeted with the barking vocalizations of an Elegant Trogon! Southeastern Arizona is this beautiful species' primary summer breeding location in the U.S.

The young had fledged, and there was great activity as the adults called to them and brought them food. We counted about 10 adults and juveniles as we wandered up the lush canyon, learning the difference in the calls of the males and females. What a treat! New birds we saw included migrating warblers such as Townsend's and Hermit, among the locally nesting Black-throated Gray. We picnicked in this lovely canyon, and Holly spotted another male trogon, apparently flycatching from an oak in the nearby meadow.

In the afternoon, we visited the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area on the San Pedro River, an important site for nesting and migratory birds. Inca Doves were at the feeders with Common Ground-Dove for a helpful comparison. The visitor's center and gift store was well supplied with many educational items and unique souvenirs.

Our last stop was an overlook surrounded by creosote and mesquite on a side road near the Casa. There, we got great views of a Black-throated Sparrow and a vocalizing Cassin's Sparrow.

Our departure for dinner was in a crushing rain storm that cleared not long afterward. We drove to the charming town of Bisbee (very crowded with the annual Pirate Festival) and enjoyed a delicious meal at one of the best restaurants in SE Arizona. What a wonderful ending to a successful day!



## Monday, Aug. 13: Carr Canyon, Ramsey Canyon, private residence

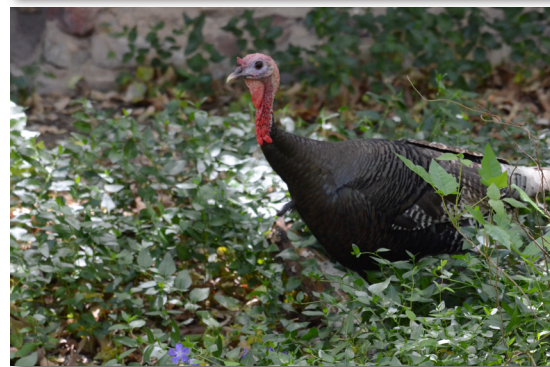
After some yard birding and another great breakfast at the Casa, we departed for our final day of afield, beginning in Carr Canyon. Reaching upper Carr involves a dramatic drive with frequent breathtaking views of the town of Sierra Vista, Hereford, and the San Pedro valley. On the drive up, Bob's van stopped for a Black-tailed Rattlesnake sunning in the road. How lucky to see two species of rattlesnakes on the same trip!



As we departed the vans, we saw our first target bird for this area, a Yellow-eyed Junco. Bob heard another local specialty, a Buff-breasted Flycatcher, which nests in Carr Canyon's high elevation oak-conifer woodland. Although numerous in spring, we encountered only one individual. We watched this colorful tiny flycatcher feeding and vocalizing. Grace's Warbler also breeds in these high forests and we got nice looks at several of them.



After a picnic lunch, we visited the renowned Ramsey Canyon Preserve, operated by the Nature Conservancy. A large flock of Wild Turkey greeted us at the entrance. Some enjoyed watching the feeders and others took a short hike along the trail. We heard Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay and got great looks at the Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher.



On the return to the Casa, we stopped at the home of a friend of Bob's and enjoyed a Roadrunner perched in a tree and a male Lucifer Hummingbird as we awaited the arrival of a Grasshopper Sparrow – which eventually perched on the barbed wire in front of us.



Our farewell dinner at the Italian restaurant in Hereford was bittersweet. Together, the group had enjoyed many experiences which they will never forget, and forged friendships with members who were strangers only a week earlier. We left Arizona with wonderful memories, and with hopes that our paths will cross again in the future!



Photo credits: Saguaro landscape, Peg Abbott (PA); Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Tom Dove (TD); Group at Montoya Canyon, Pat Lueders (PL); Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, PL; Five-striped Sparrow, PL; Western Tanager, Greg Smith (GS); Painted Redstart, PA; Bridled Titmouse, Barry Ramdass (BR); Vermilion Flycatcher, TD; Say's Phoebe, Sandy Sorkin (SS); Curved-billed Thrasher, PA; Peg and Pat; Gambel's Quail, PA; Red-faced Warbler, PA; Butterfly, Mahlon Hale (MH); Great Horned Owl, PL; Elegant Trogon, PA; Historic Bisbee, PA; Blacktailed Rattlesnake, PL; Yellow-eyed Junco, PA; Wild Turkey, BR; Roadrunner, Evelyn Earlougher (EE); Group shot.