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Arizona Monsoon Madness: Birding and Nature

August 4-10, 2014

Trip Report

Guide Bob Behrstock, with 7 participants: Cathy, Mary, Mary Jane, Art, Sylvia, Lyle and Barbara

Mon., Aug. 4

Arrivals / Montosa Canyon / Amado



By 1:50 in the afternoon, we were loaded into the van and departing the Tucson airport. But before leaving the vicinity of the terminal, we made a quick stop to look for a family of resident Burrowing Owls. It was pretty toasty outside and I was afraid they might all be underground cooling off in their tunnel; but one was sunning by the sidewalk and a couple participants actually photographed it from the van.

From there, we drove south to our lodging in Amado, arriving at 2:40. After a half-hour stop to get into field clothes, we drove a short distance to Montosa Canyon, stopping first at the Amado water treatment pond for Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Ruddy Duck, Neotropic Cormorant, and a few other species. In the grasslands and the adjacent rocky slopes of Montosa Canyon, we made several stops to photograph flowering barrel cactus and other desert plants. We also encountered Desert Cottontail and the rather local Antelope Jackrabbit, as well as a number of birds including Rufous-winged and Black-throated sparrows, Canyon Wren, Varied Bunting, Phainopepla, Northern Cardinal, Bell's Vireo, and Blue Grosbeak. The Rufous-winged Sparrow was especially nice, as its nesting range is restricted to only three counties in the United States.

Returning to Amado, we enjoyed a glass of wine provided by our host, then drove south a few miles for dinner at Wisdom's, which seemed to be well received.

Tues., Aug. 5

Madera Canyon / Buenos Aires NWR at Arivaca

The day's activities began with a 5:30 walk - perhaps a bit ambitious on my part as it was just getting light. We had a nice breakfast at 6:00, saw some Broad-billed Hummingbirds at the feeders, had a quick look at Lucy's Warbler in the front yard, and left at 6:55 for Madera Canyon. We had barely gotten out of the driveway when a fine adult Zone-tailed Hawk was spotted as it circled just outside the van, remaining close enough to allow folks to jump out and get a good look at it. In the grasslands

approaching the canyon, we stopped for nice looks at Botteri's Sparrows and Swainson's Hawk. We then had a stroll at the Proctor Road trail, where we were surrounded by singing Bell's Vireos, and had looks at Warbling Vireo and a few other species. Continuing up to the feeders at Madera Canyon Lodge, we easily saw the star attractions there - two Plain-capped Starthroats (of perhaps six of these rare hummingbirds that were currently present in the U.S.) taking turns at the lodge's porch feeder. More common species there included Acorn Woodpecker, Black-headed Grosbeak, Mexican Jay, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Lesser Goldfinch. Moving up to Kubo B&B which is surrounded by Emory Oaks and huge sycamore trees, we added Spotted Towhee, House Wren, Magnificent Hummingbird and Bridled Titmouse. We then took a bit of a walk in the stream bed below the Amphitheater parking lot, getting excellent looks at Black-throated Gray Warbler, Hutton's Vireo, and three specialties of the border canyons, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Arizona Woodpecker, and a butterfly - the Golden-banded Skipper.



After a fast food lunch in Green Valley and an hour break, we departed westward for Arivaca Cienega, a part of Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. The *cienega*, a marshy area, is an uncommon habitat in the Sonoran Desert, and is always worth checking when one is in the area. Vermilion Flycatchers were numerous as well as Common Ground-Doves and Yellow-breasted Chats. Nesting American Kestrels and Red-tailed Hawks were present in the huge cottonwoods. Lazuli Buntings and Red-winged Blackbirds perched in the marsh grasses and a locally rare Indigo Bunting showed well as it sang in a tall mesquite.

After a cold drink at the store in Arivaca, we returned to Amado, finishing the day with dinner at the Cow Palace.

Wed., Aug. 6 Rio Rico & Lower Santa Cruz Valley / Kino Springs / Patagonia / Miller Canyon

After our 6:00 breakfast, we packed up the van, departing at 7:00. Our first stop was a bit south at the Rio Rico ponds just east of the Santa Cruz River. There, we encountered a couple of Tropical Kingbirds - a decidedly sparse and very local bird in Arizona, and had more looks at Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks and Mallards (Mexican Ducks), both rather uncommon in the Sonoran Desert.

After a gas stop in Nogales, we drove east to Kino Springs, another wet spot that should be checked if one's in the neighborhood. There we encountered Brown-crested Flycatcher, Gray Hawk, Western and Cassin's kingbirds, Lark Sparrows, hordes of Vermilion Flycatchers, and a Spotted Sandpiper. Moving a bit further east, we stopped at the famous Patagonia Roadside Rest. There, we saw Rufous-crowned Sparrow, and made it a four kingbird morning, by seeing the nesting Thick-billed Kingbirds, arguably the rarest breeding flycatcher in the U.S.

Continuing to Patagonia, we visited the Paton's yard, now a Tucson Audubon Society facility and renamed The Paton Center for Hummingbirds. As always, the place was hopping with dozens of Broad-billed and Black-chinned hummingbirds, as well as a couple of stunning Violet-crowned Hummingbirds, the stars of the show. Gila and Ladder-backed woodpeckers and Summer Tanagers took suet from the

feeders, and an Abert's Towhee, another rather local bird, foraged leisurely in the front yard. After a drive down Blue Haven Road, we had lunch at the gathering Grounds in Patagonia. Heading east, we stopped at the entrance to the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, where we had excellent looks at Grasshopper Sparrow, a bird in decline across much of the U.S. but profiting from grassland restoration at Las Cienegas. Botteri's Sparrows also showed well there and we saw the Lillian's race of Eastern Meadowlark - a potential split.



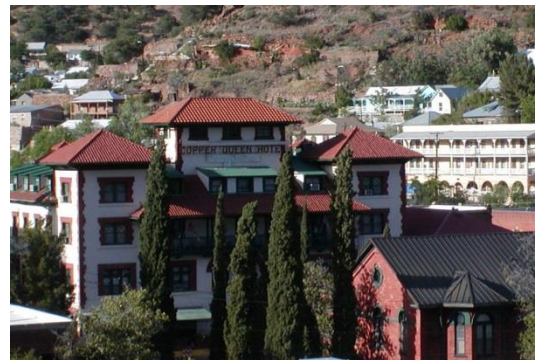
After driving through Sierra Vista, where we had a quick through-the-window look in town at a Zone-tailed Hawk, we headed south to Miller Canyon. At the top of the road, we spent some time at Beatty's B&B looking for the White-eared Hummingbird that had been visiting the feeders. Sadly, we missed the White-ear, but had very close looks at several Broad-tailed Hummingbirds and a number of Magnificent Hummingbirds, as well as the more common species.

From there, we made the short drive to Casa de San Pedro, arriving in plenty of time for the Mexican dinner provided by a popular local caterer.

Thurs., Aug. 7 Whitewater Draw / Bisbee / Hummingbird Feeders at Local Homes

The day began with breakfast at 6:30. After the fruit, juice, and muffins, everyone was surprised to see the "main course" come out. Nobody leaves the table hungry at Casa de San Pedro. We left at 7:20 for Whitewater Draw State Wildlife Area, cruising Double Adobe Campground en route. We walked the dikes at Whitewater from about 9:00-11:00 a.m., finding an interesting assortment of birds.

Although the Great Horned Owls roosting near the parking area were a treat for everyone, it's probably safe to say that the highlight at Whitewater was seeing somewhere between 500 and 1,000 migrating Lazuli Buntings in the grasses and knotweed emerging from the flooded impoundments. It was easy to see 6-10 at once in the spotting 'scope and now and then a wave of 25 or so would fly up from the grasses, briefly decorating a pond-side willow. Quite the eye popper! Southeastern Arizona is not a brilliant place to observe large wading birds; seeing several species of herons and egrets and a flock of White-faced Ibis was a welcome change of pace. Shorebirds in the ponds included Killdeer, Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, Long-billed Dowitchers - still in rich breeding plumage, and rusty-necked American Avocets. The viewing platforms that stick out over the water also provided us with close looks at a few dragonflies and the very rufous local race of Song Sparrow.



Departing Whitewater, we drove west to the historic mining town of Bisbee, pausing en route at the 900 foot-deep Lavender Pit, one of the country's largest open pit copper mines. In Bisbee, the folks were let go to have lunch and/or visit some of the town's many shops and galleries. Leaving town, we drove a short distance to nearby slopes clad in juniper and manzanita.

There, we had excellent looks at a Black-chinned Sparrow, a decidedly local and rather uncommon bird that we had little chance of seeing elsewhere during the tour. From there, we continued west to my home where the participants saw a variety of hummingbirds and many of the plants added and nurtured over the years by my partner Karen. A short distance from my home is Ash Canyon B&B where we spent some time feeder watching. There, we had several looks at a male Lucifer Hummingbird, a decidedly local bird with little presence in the U.S., as well as jays, nuthatches, titmice, woodpeckers, Wild Turkey, Gambel's Quail, and other birds attracted to the feeders provisioned by our host Mary Jo.

We returned to the Casa for a quick wash up then drove to the Mesquite Tree for dinner.

Fri., Aug. 8 Sierra Vista / Fort Huachuca / Ramsey Canyon / Hummingbird Banding



After our 6:30 breakfast, we drove into Sierra Vista. There, we had close looks at a pair of beautiful Harris's Hawks that had just finished nesting. This species is more characteristic of the Sonoran Desert and is numerous further west around Tucson. Locally, it is rare and was a nice addition to the trip's bird list.

We then heading over to Fort Huachuca, a military base adjacent to Sierra Vista. The fort covers more than 70,000 acres and much of it is open to birders and other naturalists. This morning, we visited Huachuca Canyon, hiking just over half a mile up a gentle trail through oak/juniper woodland and sycamore-lined riparian corridor. The target bird in the canyon was Elegant Trogon. Although we were in the territories of several pairs, the birds must have decided to be invisible that morning and we settled for looks at one newly fledged youngster. Other species in the canyon included Plumbeous and Cassin's vireos, Brown Creeper (watch for the split), the rather local Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, and several of the more common woodland birds.

We then retired to Veteran's Memorial Park to eat our picnic lunch prepared earlier at Casa de San Pedro. The park provided us with picnic tables, washrooms, and a fine male Pyrrhuloxia that showed off as we ate our sandwiches.



From the park, we drove south then up Ramsey Canyon for a stroll at the Nature Conservancy's preserve. There were Painted Redstarts and a few of the more common woodland birds above the visitor's center, and several hummingbirds at the feeders - mostly Black-chinned and Broad-billed. Perhaps the highlight at Ramsey was a stunning Violet-crowned Hummingbird along the trail. After the obligatory pause at the preserve's nice gift shop, we returned to the Casa de San Pedro where Sheri Williamson, author of *A Field Guide to Hummingbirds of North America*, was banding hummingbirds. Sheri is a fountain of hummingbird information, working and answering questions simultaneously. Tour participants enjoyed very close looks at several species of hummingbirds as Sheri and her assistants weighed and measured the birds taken at a feeder trap, and then were able to hold

the birds when it was time for them to be released. At the end of the banding activities, we went to Pizzeria Mimosa for dinner. Owling afterward was, well, unproductive.

Sat., Aug. 9 San Pedro River / Carr Canyon / Final Feast at Casa de San Pedro

After our now customary (and filling) 6:30 breakfast, we headed north to the San Pedro House, which provides access to a portion of the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area. There, we walked through mesquite grassland and along the cottonwood-lined San Pedro River, an important migration corridor for birds moving in and out of western Mexico. During the walk, we saw a number of species we'd not encountered previously including Scott's Oriole, Chihuahuan Raven, Cassin's Sparrow, and Ash-throated Flycatcher. As well, we had nice close (but not threatening) looks at a fine Western Diamondback rattlesnake, and more distant looks at Red-eared Slider and Spiny Softshell Turtle.



After a stop at the House's fine bookstore, we left the valley floor and drove up to the Reef Townsite Campground at an elevation of 7,200 feet in Carr Canyon. There, shaded by oaks and tall pines, we enjoyed a picnic lunch. Afterward, we walked around the campground, encountering Arizona and Hairy woodpeckers, Grace's Warbler. We then drove to the end of the road, passing through patches of conifer forest spared by the Monument Fire three years ago. In one grove, we encountered a cooperative male Olive Warbler which remained long enough to provide everyone with good views. We also found a flock of Bushtits - our first for the trip. By then, the afternoon's

storm was approaching and we made it down the mountain just as things soured in the high country. By the time we got back to the Casa, the entire mountain range was being rained on. After a break, we had a delicious farewell dinner at the Casa prepared by Karl and Patrick, and featuring, among other things, a tasty salad, Chicken Cordon Bleu, chocolate pot de crème, and a couple of nice bottles of wine.

Sun., Aug. 10 Scenic Drive through Sonoita Grasslands / Departures

A 7:00 breakfast provided folks with a few more minutes to pack. We departed the Casa at 8:00 and cruised nearby Vista Montosa Road for Scaled Quail. We struck out there but tried again in lower Ramsey Canyon where we were successful. Because we weren't in a huge rush to get to the airport, we drove to Tucson via the Sonoita grasslands, now lush and green from the summer rains. A lovely way to end the trip.



Compiled by Bob Behrstock

Photos: Broad-billed Hummingbird by Evelyn Earlougher, Mexican Jay by Greg Smith, Boterri's Sparrow by Bob Behrstock, Gambel's Quail by Lynn Feryus, Olive Warbler, Bisbee and Mustang Mountain Scenics by Peg Abbott, Casa de San Pedro courtesy of the Inn.