

Southeast Arizona Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report May 1-9, 2021 | Written by Pat Lueders



With Guides Pat Lueders & Carlos Sanchez, and participants Debbie, Rachel, Linda, Don, Gay, Zosia, Joseph, Diane, Robbie, and Stephen





Sat., May 1 Arrival in Tucson | Amerind Museum | Willcox Playa | Cave Creek Ranch

We met at the Tucson Airport, and traveled in two groups to the renowned Amerind Foundation, a private, non-profit anthropological and archaeological museum about an hour east of Tucson. As we arrived, we spotted our first Vermilion Flycatchers and Western Kingbirds. A mixed flock of migrants were seen in the mesquite, including Lucy's Warblers, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Wilson's Warbler, Yellow-rumps, and a Bullock's Oriole. What a great start! The museum's exhibits of Native American cultures were impressive, and the gift store presented our first opportunity to purchase authentic souvenirs and gifts.

Our visit to the Willcox Playa was breathtaking! Hundreds of shorebirds and waterfowl included Cinnamon Teal, American Widgeon, Mexican Duck, Redhead, American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Long-billed Curlew, Long-billed Dowitcher, Willet, and a surprise Snowy Plover and Marbled Godwit. Hundreds of Wilson's Phalaropes were spotted on the sand bars and circling in the water. Wow, some life birds already for many in the group!

We departed the playa, arriving at our lodging for four nights, Cave Creek Ranch, and were greeted by Carrie and Peg with a delicious dinner served promptly on the lovely porch. We retired to our rooms anticipating the exciting adventures that lay ahead in the lovely Chiricahua Mountains.

Sun., May 2 Cave Creek Ranch | Zola's House | South Fork | Portal birding

Many of the group gathered around the Cave Creek Ranch feeders before breakfast. Collared Peccary were under the feeders, Blue-throated Mountain Gem, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, and Broad-billed Hummingbirds were seen at the feeders. Acorn, Gila, and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers were spotted as were Yellow-eyed Juncos, Cactus Wrens, Curved-billed Thrashers, Lincoln's Sparrows, and Cassin's Finches. We enjoyed a delicious breakfast at the home of a local resident, Zola, and then birded the famous South Fork, watching Painted Redstarts building cavity nests in the dirt cliffs along the road. As we walked the road, after finding a Hutton's Vireo from the bridge, we were startled and thrilled by a close-up view of a Red-faced Warbler only a few feet from us, slowly picking insects from the leaves. This sought-after species, a life bird for many, gave us great looks we would never forget! A mixed feeding flock over the bridge included a Townsend's, Hermit, and Black-throated Gray Warbler.

We moved towards the town of Portal, stopping at the feeders at Dave Jasper's house, and had our first looks at Pyrrhuloxia, Green-tailed Towhee, Verdin, and Inca Doves. Our walk into town was very productive with good looks at a Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, the little bird with a big name! At feeders we saw Lazuli Buntings, Mexican Jays, Canyon and Spotted Towhees, Bullock's Orioles, and Black-headed Grosbeaks.



After lunch in New Mexico, just across the Arizona state line road, we visited the Chiricahua Desert Museum that displays many of the reptiles and plants of the area and houses a delightful gift shop. We returned to the ranch to prepare for another delicious dinner prepared by local chef, Carrie, of PortalEats. After dinner, we enjoyed an owl prowl with Raymond VanBuskirk, hearing a Western Screech-owl and numerous Elf Owls, and we had great looks at a Whiskered Screech-owl, ending a productive and enjoyable day birding around Portal.

Mon., May 3 Cave Creek Ranch | Turkey Creek | Rustler Park | Barfoot

Today we traveled into the cool highlands of the Chiricahuas on a dramatic mountain road. We stopped at Turkey Creek and added Hammond's Flycatcher, Steller's Jay, Brown Creeper, and Bushtits to our sightings. The beautiful Rustler Park provided good looks at the sought-after Olive Warbler and diminutive Pygmy Nuthatches. We ate our picnic lunch at Barfoot Park and found a target species, the Mexican Chickadee. We heard, but couldn't spot, a vocalizing Greater Peewee.



Before dinner at the ranch, we returned to the town of Portal and found a Greater Roadrunner under the feeders as well as a pair of beautiful Western Tanagers and Bridled Titmouse, ending another successful day of birding!

Tues., May 4 Cave Creek Ranch | Sky Island Grill | State Line Rd. | Steve Wolfe's | Chiricahua National Monument | Whitewater Draw

This morning, we packed and left the Cave Creek Ranch after a delightful stay. We made an early morning visit to the area around Sky Island Grill and spotted a flock of Lark Buntings, an Ash-throated Flycatcher, and a vocalizing Say's Phoebe. Continuing along Stateline Rd., a Loggerhead Shrike was perched on a mesquite, and the target species, Bendire's Thrasher, was perched and observed well by all with scope views.



We stopped near Portal at Steve Wolfe's feeders getting good looks at Black-throated Sparrows and the striking Lark Sparrows. Breakfast, catered again by PortalEats at Peg Abbott's lovely home, was a delicious but bittersweet ending to four wonderful days in the Chiricahuas.

We enjoyed our picnic lunch at the Chiricahua National Monument, enjoying this dramatic rock wonderland, and stopped at Whitewater Draw on our drive to Bisbee. We had scope looks at Semipalmated Plover, Western and Solitary Sandpipers, and a surprise American Pipit. A Swainson's Hawk and Violet-green Swallows soared above the fields.



After an ice cream stop in historic Bisbee, we arrived at Casa de San Pedro in time to unpack before a delicious dinner with Patrick and Carl, our hosts for the next two days.

Wed., May 5 Casa de San Pedro | Miller Canyon | Bob Behrstock's Patio | Ash Canyon

We began the day with an early morning bird walk around the Casa de San Pedro property. Gambel's Quail moved quickly under the bushes, Cassin's Kingbirds vocalized from the treetops, Brown-crested Flycatchers were seen well, and a Cassin's Vireo vocalized near the pool. What a delightful way to start the day!

Our first stop today was at Beatty's in Miller Canyon. We hiked the mountain trail finding Arizona Woodpeckers, Cordilleran and Dusky-capped Flycatchers, Plumbeous Vireo, a Hermit Thrush, and Spotted Towhees. The surprise of the day was found at the hummingbird feeders where the first of the season White-eared Hummingbird had just been seen. We observed Rivoli's, Black-chinned, Broad-tailed, and Broad-billed Hummingbirds while patiently waiting for the White-eared to reappear. We were rewarded after 20 minutes and enjoyed repeated visits by this very rare hummer!

We enjoyed our lunch on Bob Behrstock and Karen LeMay's patio, learning about the local desert pollinators and spotting our first Scott's Orioles. What a treat to spend time with this knowledgeable couple! We ended the afternoon at the feeders at the Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary. Today was Cinco de Mayo, and Peg and Carrie treated us to a delicious Mexican feast to end another delightful day! Right before dark, Lesser Nighthawks fed over the fields as the bats emerged from Casa's bat house.

Thurs., May 6 Casa de San Pedro | Patagonia Lake State Park | Patton's Yard | Tubac Country Club

After a delightful stay at Casa de San Pedro, we bid farewell and birded Patagonia Lake State Park. There, we found some new species, including White-faced Ibis, Bell's Vireo, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Phainopepla. We returned to the town of Patagonia and had lunch at the Gathering Grounds.

Our next stop was Tucson Audubon Society's Patton Center for Hummingbirds where we added Anna's, Costa's, and Violet-crowned Hummingbird as well as a soaring Gray Hawk. However, the shining star of this stop was the continuing Rufous-backed Robin that had been seen near the center. All had scope views of this Mexican species, a rare but annual visitor to Southeast Arizona, and it was a life ABA bird even for the guides!



We arrived at the last lodging of the tour, the Tubac Country Club, unpacked, and enjoyed dinner at their scenic Stables Restaurant adjacent to the golf course.

Fri., May 7 Madera Canyon

After breakfast, we drove to the Proctor Rd. area of Madera Canyon and enjoyed an early morning hike through the woods. Additional Phainopeplas gave us great looks as did Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, a Swainson's Thrush, Hooded Orioles, and Brown-crested Flycatchers. Wild Turkey continued under the feeders at Santa Rita Lodge's feeders. We had our picnic lunch at the top of the canyon and stopped at the Kubo feeders on our way down spotting a Bronzed Cowbird and additional Rivoli's Hummingbirds.

Dinner on Melio's Italian Restaurant patio in the quaint town of Tubac was highlighted by a beautiful desert sunset, the perfect ending to an enjoyable day.

Sat., May 8 Montosa Canyon | De Anza Trail

We spent our last full day of the tour birding the Montosa Canyon and the De Anza Trail. When departing Montosa, an Olive-sided Flycatcher was spotted at the top of a tree. We birded the Santa Gertrudis Lane section of the De Anza Trail near the historic mission at Tumacacori and heard and tracked the target species there, the Thick-billed Kingbird. Another surprise awaited most of us as we were leaving the area. A Barn Owl, roosting along the trail, flushed, startled us all but was such fun to see!



We then returned to the town of Tubac to walk the De Anza Trail/Tubac. The target species in this area was the Rose-throated Becard. Pairs of this species have been nesting along the Santa Cruz River for a few years. We walked the trail and used accurate directions to find the large, stocking-type nest built by the female. We watched the female work on the construction of the very impressive nest. Nest boxes are scattered throughout this area for nesting Lucy's Warblers, the only cavity nesting warbler besides Prothonotary in the U.S.

Our delicious farewell dinner at Elvira's in Tubac was bittersweet as we realized that our exciting week of birding, traveling, and friendship was coming to an end.

Sun., May 9 De Anza Trail/Tumacacori | Tucson Airport

After finishing our breakfast at the Tubac Country Club, we packed and made one last stop at the De Anza/Tumacacori Trail. Finding a fruiting tree, we enjoyed some new species for the trip including a Tropical Kingbird, a Gray Catbird, Rufous-winged Sparrows, and a Summer Tanager. What a successful morning to complete this very enjoyable tour throughout Southeast Arizona in the Spring!

Photo Credits:

Group at dinner, Pat Lueders (PL); Bridled Titmouse, Rachel Cameron (RC); Lazuli Bunting, RC; Wild Turkey, RC; Chiricahua Mountains, PL; Acorn Woodpecker, RC; Mexican Jay, RC; Red-faced Warbler, RC; Whiskered Screech-Owl, PL; Roadrunner, RC; Western Tanager, RC; Brown-crested Flycatcher, RC; White-eared Hummingbird, PL; Lunch break in the shade, PL; Lucy's Warbler, RC; Phainopepla, PL; Rabbit, RC; Birding in the mountains, PL.