

Arizona Monsoon Madness | Trip Report

July 31 – August 6, 2021 | By Guide Dave Mehlman

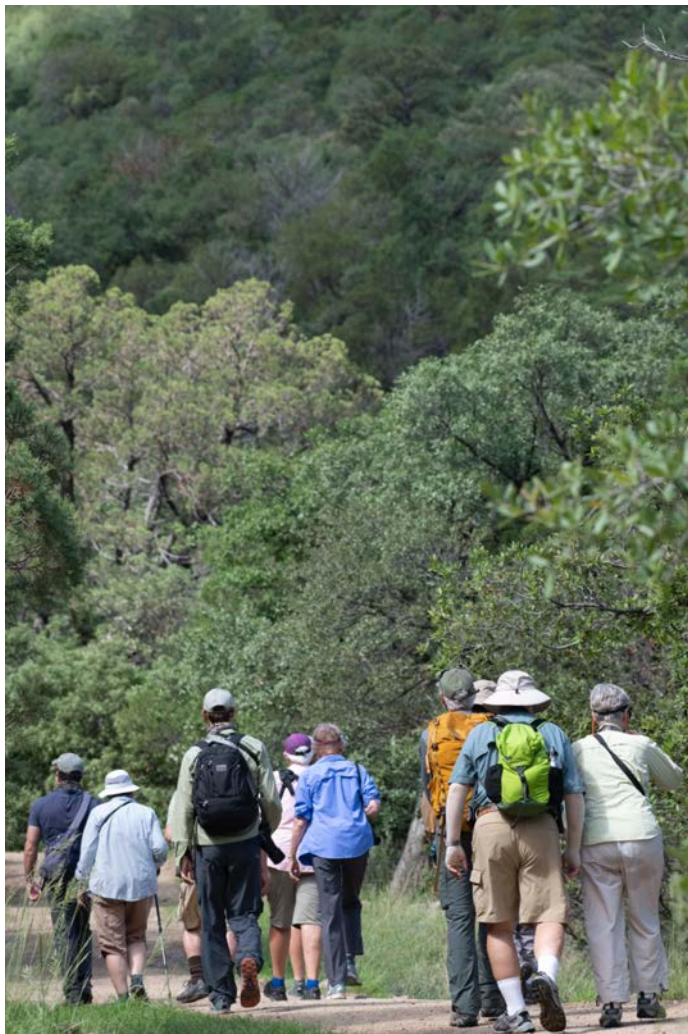


Guides: Carlos Sanchez, Homer Gardin, and Dave Mehlman, with participants: Barry, Dondi, Ellen, Fiona, Jeff, Judith, Kate, Marie, Phil, and Thomas



Sat., July 31 Arrival in Tucson | Sweetwater Wetlands | Amado

Our most excellent Arizona Monsoon Madness tour got off to a perfect start. Carlos and Homer picked up Barry, Thomas, and Judy and met Dave at Naturalist Journeys' go-to lunch place near Tucson airport: Baggin's Gourmet Sandwiches. After polishing off our tasty sandwiches, Carlos and his crew headed out in their spiffy Expedition for Sweetwater Wetlands, while Dave headed back to the airport with the trusty Chevy Express van to collect the rest of the group.



After finding Dondi, Jeff, Phil, Ellen, Kay, Fiona, and Marie, we headed over to Sweetwater Wetlands to join the rest of the group. Despite the early afternoon heat, Sweetwater was productive and the whole group got to see a selection of local Tucson wetland specialties, including Bell's Vireo (well, heard actually!), Common Yellowthroat, Verdin, Yellow Warbler, and Abert's Towhee. This being a true Naturalist Journeys trip, we also added the first mammals, Desert Cottontail and Round-tailed Ground Squirrel, to our list for the day.

Then it was a relatively short drive south to Amado, where we first made a roadside stop at the Amado Waste Treatment Plant (the first of many WTPs visited on the tour!) to admire the regularly occurring

Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, along with Ruddy Ducks and two Ring-necked Ducks (unusual at this time of year) that had been previously reported at that location. After this quick stop, we headed to the nearby Amado Territory Inn, our lodging for the next two nights, and settled into our rooms at this comfortable B&B.

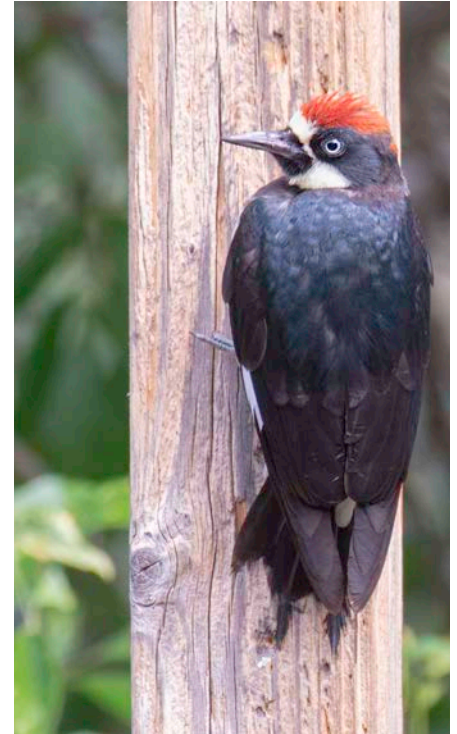
After meeting and loading up to head to dinner, we discovered a Desert Blonde Tarantula (*Aphonopelma tarantuloides*) walking across the driveway of the Inn! As Carlos' car (in the lead) stopped to look more closely at it, the tarantula decided to seek refuge under the front driver's side tire, causing a bit of a challenge. However, Dave and Carlos (employing the "other skills as assigned" that they had learned in guide training) quickly repurposed Kay's walking stick into a "tarantula prod" and were able to move the tarantula out of the way while moving the car forward for all to admire this characteristic desert species. After this exciting moment, the group had its first dinner together at the amazing Elvira's in Tubac, a short drive away, enjoying their interpretation of "nuevo Mexicano" cuisine—very tasty. We then returned to the Inn for the checklist and briefing for the next day's plans.

Sun., Aug. 1 Madera Canyon | San Pedro River at Tubac & Tumacacori

After a satisfying help-yourself breakfast at the inn and enjoying a few morning birds around the grounds (including a nice Tropical Kingbird, providing identification learning opportunities), we headed north. First stop was Green Valley to pick up our deli lunches, then we headed up the west flanks of the Santa Rita Mountains on our way to Madera Canyon.



The first side road visited was lower down in the grasslands and we got reasonable looks at Botteri's and Black-throated Sparrows, Phainopepla, and some javelina. Next stop was the famed Santa Rita Lodge where we spent some time at the feeders in hopes of seeing the Berylline Hummingbird that had been reported there. But the feeders were pretty quiet, with only Black-chinned, Broad-billed, and Rivoli's Hummingbirds seen, along with the ubiquitous Acorn Woodpeckers and Mexican Jays. We then headed further up Madera Canyon, where we parked and went for a short walk from the Mt. Wrightson trailhead.



Barry quickly earned bragging rights by pointing out a Zone-tailed Hawk flying over the canyon; otherwise, the hike was very quiet (much to Carlos' and Dave's surprise) with perhaps the best bird being several Dusky-capped Flycatchers. Many of us stopped to enjoy some of the other biodiversity present, including Yarrow's (or Mountain) Spiny Lizard (*Sceloporus jarrovi*), Firecrackerbush (*Bouvardia ternifolia*), and Drummond's Woodsorrel (*Oxalis drummondii*). A quick stop at the Madera Kubo B&B feeders yielded several Yellow-eyed Juncos, including a singing adult and several juveniles beginning to transition plumage. Another short hike from the amphitheater to the Madera Picnic Area yielded Bridled Titmouse and a very nice view of Hepatic Tanager, but not much else. The group then headed back up to the upper picnic area and enjoyed our deli lunch at one of the picnic tables.

On the way back down the mountain, we stopped again at the Santa Rita Lodge feeders, finding them occupied this time by a rogue band of Wild Turkeys. Alas, nothing new was spotted, so we returned to the inn for a brief rest. Later in the afternoon, we gathered and headed south to explore the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail along the Santa Cruz River. The first stop was in Tubac, where we parked at the trailhead and



walked into the cottonwood riparian forest in an attempt to spot the Rose-throated Becards that had been reported in the area. Unfortunately, very recent heavy rains appeared to have washed out the footbridge over the Santa Cruz River that we needed to cross, so we could not reach the spot where they had been reported. However, the walk in the riparian area yielded some very nice birds, including Gray Hawk, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Yellow-breasted Chat, Northern Cardinal, and both Tropical and Cassin's Kingbirds.

Continuing southward, we found a much more productive spot at the Santa Gertrudis Lane access to the de Anza Trail and Santa Cruz River near Tumacacori. A couple of Thick-billed Kingbirds put on a show for the group as did many other nice birds, including Inca Dove, Common Ground-Dove, Abert's Towhee, Yellow Warbler, and Blue Grosbeak. After this rewarding stop, we returned to the inn to freshen up (during which time some folks found Hooded Oriole on the inn's grounds) followed by dinner at the Canoa Ranch Golf Club, allowing us to admire the magnificent skies of a monsoon summer evening. We returned, did the bird list, and went over plans for the next day prior to retiring to our rooms.

Mon., Aug. 2 Montosa Canyon | Patagonia Lake State Park | Paton Center

After another self-serve breakfast and room-made coffee, we packed the vehicles and headed off for another day of monsoon madness adventure. Our first stop was Montosa Canyon on the road to the Smithsonian Institution's Whipple Observatory. This well-known birding hotspot quickly yielded our goal for the stop: Five-striped Sparrow, a lifer for most of the group! Good views of a singing bird were had through the scope as it perched in ocotillos on the ridge above us. Other species there included the ubiquitously singing Bells' Vireos, Red-tailed Hawk, and a small group of migrating Warbling Vireos.

Stopping for gas, ice, and a break in Rio Rico, we then turned our vehicles toward the east. We visited Patagonia Lake State Park, enjoying the incredible green hillsides covered in blooming orange Arizona Poppy (*Kallstroemia grandiflora*) on the way in—a classic Arizona monsoon season visual treat. A walk on the birding trail near the lake was very productive. Among the species seen were Bronzed Cowbird, Verdin, Lucy's Warbler, Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, and a singing Yellow-billed Cuckoo. The State Park was followed by a visit to perhaps the best-known single birding site in the U.S.: the legendary Patagonia Roadside Rest Area. We stopped here primarily to find the regularly reported Rose-throated Becards that nest along the stream bed. Unfortunately, though the nest was easily seen, no actual Becards showed during our vigil. However, a few other things were spotted including Western and Summer Tanagers, Common Raven, and an Arizona Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus arizonensis*).



At this point hungry, the group headed into downtown Patagonia for lunch at the Gathering Grounds. Establishing ourselves at two tables, we enjoyed their tasty sandwiches and took a brief break. After lunch, we headed to a house in town a few blocks away that had some seed and hummingbird feeders. It took some effort, but Carlos was able to spot the previously reported Ruddy Ground-Doves sitting in a conifer on the property and, with the aid of the scope, everyone got a look at this rarity. These birds were of the duller, Mexican subspecies, but could be distinguished from the many Inca Doves present with the help of the scope. We also had great looks at our first Violet-crowned Hummingbird at these feeders, a nice “dessert” for the birding crew!

We then continued on to the nearby Paton Center for Hummingbirds to sit and watch the feeders there. Again, things were a bit quiet, but we did pick up Broad-billed, Black-chinned, and Violet-crowned Hummingbirds and a few other species. Having our fill at the Center, we went back to the rest area, determined to find the Becard! Success was had this time, with decent views of a male Rose-throated Becard high in the sycamores in the general vicinity of the nest. Continuing on our drive east through the scenic Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, we arrived at our destination for the rest of the trip: the very lovely and comfortable Casa de San Pedro. Hosts Karl and Patrick prepared a lovely dinner for us and most of us enjoyed the birds coming into the Casa’s feeders, such as Song Sparrow, Gila Woodpecker, and Lesser Goldfinch.

Tues., Aug. 3 Miller Canyon | Bisbee | Sierra Vista

The day started very promising, with a short group walk around the grounds of the Casa. It was a beautiful summer morning and we had great views of Cactus Wren, Loggerhead Shrike, and Lazuli Buntings, among numerous other species that are commonly found near the Casa. This worked up our appetites for the first of several awesome breakfasts that the Casa is known for.

Loading into the vehicles for the day’s outing, we drove a short distance up the Miller Canyon road on the Coronado National Forest in the nearby Huachuca Mountains and visited Beatty’s Guest Ranch, renowned for its hummingbird feeders, followed by a short hike further up the canyon on the trail. Dave took advantage of the opportunity to head to town to replenish our supplies, which had mysteriously been demolished by suddenly famished birders! The group did very well on hummingbirds, finding six species in total (Rivoli’s, Black-chinned, Anna’s, Broad-tailed, Broad-billed, and Violet-crowned), but, alas, could not locate the White-eared Hummingbirds previously reported along the trail. Other southwestern specialties found included Red-faced Warbler, Painted Restart, Bridled Titmouse, and Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher.

Reluctantly, we tore ourselves away from this famed birding spot and drove east to the historic mining town of Bisbee for lunch. Fortunately, our favorite restaurant Le Cornucopia Café had just enough tables and seats for the whole group to squeeze in at the same time and we had some delicious sandwiches, though many made the happy mistake of ordering a full sandwich when a half was more than sufficient. After lunch, the group was let loose to explore a bit of the historic downtown; Carlos and Dave were greatly relieved when all returned to the vehicles without having gotten into any mischief.



We then loaded up again and headed for the Sierra Vista Environmental Operations Plant, where numerous interesting waterbirds had been reported recently. Unfortunately, our timing was a bit off and we had to walk in to the bird viewing platform since the road gates were closed. Doubly unfortunately, it appeared the prime bird viewing wetland had very recently been drained and burned, so only a few blackbirds and a lone Mexican Duck were seen (though the afternoon storm clouds building over the mountains were fabulous!). The walk back to the cars, however, was very productive with great view of several Lucy's Warblers and Hooded Orioles.

We went back to the Casa for a short break, then drove to dinner at the nearby Pizzeria Mimosa, which was enjoyed by all. After dinner, we drove back to Miller Canyon after dark for some owling. Although the skies were clear and Jupiter was putting on a show (with four moons easily visible), the owls were hard to come by, with only a distant Whiskered Screech-Owl heard calling. But that's the way it is sometimes. We then returned to the Casa for our well-earned rest.

Wed., Aug. 4 Carr Canyon | San Pedro River at Casa de San Pedro

Due to the relatively late night, no pre-breakfast activities were planned, though many enjoyed the early morning activity at the feeders on their own. After a delicious breakfast, we loaded up and headed to the Huachuca Mountains again, this time to Carr Canyon. We spent a bit of time driving the interesting road in Carr Canyon all the way up to the Reef Townsite Campground at 7190 feet elevation. The climate here was delightful and we spent the entire morning walking around the area, occasionally mingling with other birding groups who had the same idea. Probably the highlight bird here was Buff-breasted Flycatcher, which we had really nice looks at on two occasions. However, numerous other species were seen that we were unlikely to see elsewhere such as American Robin (hey, it counts for the list!), Hutton's and Plumbeous Vireos, Brown Creeper, Hermit Thrush, Eastern Bluebird (of the Mexican subspecies), Arizona Woodpecker, Grace's and Black-throated Warblers, and

Zone-tailed Hawk at pretty close range. Naturalist Journeys' owner, Peg Abbott, met us mid-morning, carrying our delectable picnic lunch and helped us look for more avian goodies in the area.

After lunch we continued further up the Carr Canyon road, birding along the way, finally reaching the end of the road at the Ramsey Vista Campground at nearly 7400 feet, though it was pretty quiet there. Retracing our drive down the Canyon, we returned to the Casa for a rest, then went out for a late afternoon walk along the San Pedro River near the Casa. This walk yielded some nice views of Gray Hawk (including in the scope), Yellow-breasted Chat, Black Phoebe, Summer Tanager, a calling Yellow-billed Cuckoo, and an Ornate Box Turtle. We then returned to the Casa, freshened up a bit, then drove to the nearby Brite Spot for steak dinners (at least for the carnivores in the group). Returning, we reviewed the bird list, discussed plans for the next day, and got our night's sleep.



Thurs., Aug. 5 Ramsey Canyon | Behrstock/LeMay House | Ash Canyon

After being treated to yet another excellent breakfast at the Casa, we loaded the vehicles and headed to Ramsey Canyon (another of the famous Huachuca Mountains' canyons). Our primary destination was the legendary Ramsey Canyon Preserve of The Nature Conservancy, though we also visited the next-door Ramsey Canyon Inn's feeders. The feeders were not super busy, though we did get great looks at a male Blue-throated Mountain-Gem on our second try, along with many Black-headed Grosbeaks and a few Yellow-eyed Juncos. The main group also walked upstream along the Ramsey Canyon trail on the preserve (the creek was



flowing nicely) and had fine looks at Red-faced Warbler, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Arizona gray squirrels, and white-tailed deer.

Bringing our wrap lunches with us (which Peg had kindly picked up and stashed at the Casa for us the day before) we



proceed to the lovely home of retired Naturalist Journeys guide Bob Behrstock and Karen LeMay for lunch. Although the yard and feeders were pretty quiet bird-wise, we had a nice time sitting in the shade and admiring the very pollinator-friendly yard, including its water feature. After lunch, we returned to the Casa for a rest and then headed to Ash Canyon to sit for a while at the feeders of the Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary. The sanctuary was full of visiting birders, but fortunately there were two parking spaces and a

few chairs left, so we settled in. After a bit of a wait, the star of the sanctuary, a female Lucifer Hummingbird, made an appearance offering good views of this lovely southwestern specialty. Other hummers observed included Anna's, Broad-billed, Black-chinned, and Rufous. We then returned to the Casa for our final, catered dinner in its dining room, cooked by Elvira and Felipe—wonderful posole to start, tacos, and flan for dessert! After dinner, we adjourned to the Casa's living room, where "Professor Sanchez" gave a brief, but quite detailed, overview of southwestern life zones, sky islands, and global avifaunal regions. Then, we did our final bird list, discussed plans for the day, and everyone provided input on their top three birds of the trip (Red-faced Warbler,

Blue Grosbeak, Vermilion Flycatcher) and best experience (evenly split between Ramsey, Carr, and Miller Canyons and the Casa de San Pedro). Several folks, stepping outside at dusk, noted a Great Horned Owl perched in a dead tree right next to the Casa, providing a lovely good-bye.

Fri., Aug. 6 San Pedro House | Benson WTP | Departures from Tucson

Despite this being a travel day for everyone, Carlos and Dave offered (and most accepted!) an early, pre-breakfast birding trip to San Pedro House on the San Pedro River a few miles north of the Casa. In the early sunrise, we admired lots of Blue Grosbeaks, Bell's Vireos, Vermilion Flycatchers, and a Gray Hawk. We then returned for our final breakfast (cue the sad faces all around), packing and loading vehicles, and hitting the road back to Tucson. We did make one final stop on the way at the Benson Waste Treatment Plant ponds. Though perhaps not the most scenic, everyone agreed they had birded worse-looking places, and the ponds yielded many waterbird species, very hard to find in this part of the world. The highlights, new for the trip list, included Wilson's and Red-necked Phalaropes, Cinnamon Teal, Ruddy Duck, Spotted Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs, Killdeer, and a fly-over Belted Kingfisher (flagged by eBird, oddly enough). A great final stop on the tour! We then headed directly to Tucson International Airport for departures, where we said our final good-byes and closed out Naturalist Journeys' first Arizona Monsoon Madness tour of the season.

Photo Credits: Group, Barry Ulman (BU); Olive Warbler, Homer Gardin (HG); Steller's Jay, HG; Red-faced Warbler, HG; Group Walking, HG; Group w/ Binoculars, HG; Phainopepla, HG; Broad-billed Hummingbird, HG; Acorn Woodpecker, HG; Yarrow's Spiny Lizard, BU; Field Lunch, HG; Group Walking Canyon, HG; Group Watching Feeders, HG; Violet-crowned Hummingbird, HG; Pizza for Dinner, HG; Field Lunch, HG; Guides, HG; Rivoli's Hummingbird, BU; Arizona Ground Squirrel, BU; Carlos Teaching, HG; Meals at Casa de San Pedro, HG; Oriole with Flowers, HG; Box Turtle, HG; Vista Birding, HG; Swallowtail, HG; Sky Island Scenic, HG.

