

# New Mexico Nature & Culture | Trip Report | Dec. 2 – 9, 2021 | by Dave Mehlman & Kathleen Hall



**Guides: Dave Mehlman, Kathleen Hall, and Bryan Calk; with participants: Anne, Charlene, Chris, Connie, Fernando, Gary, Gene, Jean, Kathy, Susan, and Vivian**



## **Thurs., Dec. 2 Arrive in Albuquerque**

The group was met by Dave in the lobby of the Hotel Chaco in early afternoon for a quick birding trip to the nearby Rio Grande Nature Center, a well-known Albuquerque area birding hotspot. The weather was unseasonably warm and close to balmy (which Dave complained bitterly about – it was supposed to be winter!) but as a result the afternoon was quite enjoyable. An early highlight of the trip was seeing a Greater Roadrunner right in the nature center's parking lot which everyone enjoyed (they sometimes can be quite hard to find when you want to see them!). A large flock of geese in one of the ponds allowed a nice chance to see the differences between Cackling and Canada Goose, both of which were present at very close distance. The nature center feeders provided close looks at numerous White-crowned Sparrows and Red-winged Blackbirds, along with intermittently visiting Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Spotted Towhees.



The group continued the trails to the Rio Grande itself, which was quiet, but we had great views of Western Bluebirds foraging in mistletoes in the cottonwoods along the river and an Eastern Bluebird along the riverside drain just outside the center. Returning to the car, Dave spotted a Porcupine high up in a cottonwood doing its normal daytime activity, which is not doing anything! A final look at the parking lot pond yielded Pied-billed Grebe and a diving Lesser Scaup to round out a nice afternoon of birding. Returning to the Hotel Chaco, the entire group met for a briefing and orientation and then we drove to the nearby D.H. Lescombes Winery & Bistro for our first dinner together. After dinner, those interested compiled the bird list for the day.

### **Fri., Dec. 3 Bernardo | Bosque del Apache | Cranes and Geese**

After a hearty New Mexican breakfast at the nearby Range Café (including breakfast burritos for some), the group boarded our two vehicles for a day exploring the Middle Rio Grande Valley. Heading south, our first stop was the Bernardo Waterfowl Management Area, managed by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. Here we encountered our first large flocks of Sandhill Cranes. Views of them standing around in the fields and flying overhead were magical. We were also joined at this time by Bryan Calk, an Albuquerque resident and one of our guides who joined us as the official “tour photographer” for a few days of our tour. On our way to view a large flock of Snow Geese that was also present, we noticed a Loggerhead Shrike perched in shrubs and on a phone line. With the aid of spotting scopes, we also identified an American Kestrel and a Peregrine Falcon perched on nearby telephone poles.





Continuing our way south, we arrived at the famed Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in time for a picnic lunch at the tables by the visitor center. Though the center itself was closed, the gift shop was open providing a short shopping opportunity. After a delicious picnic lunch from the Flying Star Café, we spent a bit of time watching the activity around the cactus garden feeders. Among the abundant Red-winged Blackbirds, White-crowned Sparrows, and Gambel's Quail, we were able to pick out a few Brewer's Sparrows at close range, a Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay flew into feed, and a Pyrrhuloxia flew by.

After this nice start, we spent the rest of the day out on the refuge's tour loop, gradually working our way around the entire extended North Tour Loop. The entire time we were serenaded by Sandhill Cranes in great abundance, with periodic flyovers by Snow Geese to liven things up. Out in the refuge pools, we picked out lots of Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, and Mallards. Among them, with the aid of the spotting scopes, we found a few Bufflehead, Redhead, and the ubiquitous American Coot. At the northern extent of the loop, we paused to admire a few Mule Deer grazing in the grasses then came to an abrupt stop as Dave had spotted a Ferruginous Hawk overhead. Making everyone get out of the vans, he "forced" our hardy group to admire extended views of this most beautiful North American raptor in the full afternoon sunlight—wow!

Continuing our drive, we arrived at the fly-in area for the rest of the afternoon through sunset. The area was easily found by both the presence of thousands of geese and cranes and numerous photographers, who occupied almost all available spots on the side of the road! While admiring the sight and sound spectacle, Dave was able to dig out a few smaller Ross's Geese from among the hordes of Snow Geese and continuing squads of cranes flew in from the north to roost in the pools for the night. All accompanied by flocks of several hundred Red-winged and Brewer's Blackbirds. A true visual and aural feast! Late in the day, all the Snow Geese decided to up and leave, leaving behind a rather confused and lonely Cattle Egret, a bit seasonally late, which had been completely hidden by the other white birds!

At this point, the sun had set, and the temperatures were dropping, so we somewhat reluctantly loaded back up to head out. Since it was still relatively early in the evening and we were still full of our picnic lunch, the group



decided to head right back to Albuquerque to find dinner there. Some stayed behind and had dinner from room service, while a few hearty souls went with Dave and Kathleen as we wandered around, as if re-enacting Las Posadas, trying to find an open restaurant that could hold our group. We ended up at the Albuquerque Tomasita's for a nice, quiet, comforting (albeit late) dinner.

### **Sat., Dec. 4 Sandia Mountains | Old Town Albuquerque**

Today, we started off with another fine breakfast, this time at the Central Grill, right on old Route 66. Appropriately fueled by breakfast burritos and coffee, the group was then joined by Bryan for another day and headed east through Tijeras Canyon, up into the Sandia Mountains. Our first stop as we ascended the mountain was the Cienega Canyon picnic area, in an area with a small stream dominated by Ponderosa Pine. Despite the early morning chill, a few birds were found, the most interesting of which were many Townsend's Solitaires, along with Steller's Jay, Mountain Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and a few Ruby-crowned Kinglets.

We then drove all the way up to the top of the mountain to Sandia Crest, elevation 10,679 feet. Most of us felt the elevation change but were able to admire the incredible views to the west from the top, while trying to shelter from the wind. Another small birding group was there and filled up the famous bird feeders and a few of us mounted a short vigil for Rosy-Finches, unfortunately without success (Albuquerque had had many, many weeks of unseasonably mild, dry weather prior to our visit, weather which is just not conducive to having Rosy-Finches). In fact, the only bird seen up on top was a Red-tailed Hawk, though a few hang gliders were wheeling about, so at least there were some flying objects to look at!

We then headed back down the mountain with a quick stop at Capulin Spring. Although it, too, was quiet, we stumbled across a large group of Dark-eyed Juncos of the Gray-headed variety, which is quite handsome. At this point, it was time for lunch, so we drove to the nearby town of Cedar Crest for a nice lunch at the Greenside Café. We returned to the Hotel Chaco, and all had the afternoon off to explore Old Town, following which we reconvened for dinner at the nearby Seared Bistro.





## Sun., Dec. 5 Jemez Mountains | Bandelier National Monument | Taos

In a slight change of routine today, we loaded up the vehicles and then headed north along the pre-1937 alignment of Route 66 to have breakfast at the El Camino Dining Room. After breakfast, we continued our journey north to the Jemez Mountains via the Jemez Pueblo. Since the pueblo itself, like all the others in New Mexico, was closed to public entry, we made a quick stop at the Pueblo's Walatowa Visitor Center to use the facilities and learn about pueblo life and history from the very informative exhibits inside.

We drove the scenic road up through San Diego Canyon into the high country of the Jemez and then continued east across the fabulous vistas of the Valles Caldera. We pulled off at a roadside stop with great views over the Valle Grande and Redondo Peak. In the middle of the caldera, Dave spotted a faraway herd of about 200 Elk in a large bunch in the center of the grasslands. Due to the skepticism of some in the group that this herd was, in fact, Elk, he set up the spotting scope so everyone, skeptics and believers included, could see the mostly bedded down cow Elk, part of the famous Valles Caldera herd.

Continuing, we arrived at the prime attraction for the day: Bandelier National Monument in the bottom of Frijoles Canyon on the east flanks of the Jemez. At this point, Bryan, who had been dispatched on the critically important sandwich run to the Los Alamos Cooperative Market, returned, and we gathered around the picnic table for our second tasty picnic lunch of the trip. While munching, Bryan discovered a female Williamson's Sapsucker busy working a string of sap holes in a Ponderosa Pine right in the picnic area! All the birders in the group promptly left their lunches behind to observe this unique bird (in which, unlike many other woodpecker species, the female is quite distinct from the male) and its foraging/drilling behavior—a lifer for some! We then enjoyed several hours exploring the ancient cave houses of the former inhabitants of Bandelier on a very warm and sunny afternoon. Various members of the group went shorter or longer distances, depending on



preference, but all admired the incredible setting and wondered what life was like for hundreds of people who once made their homes in the canyon and cliffs.

By about 3 in the afternoon, Dave decreed it was time to hit the road again, so we bid farewell to Bryan and then continued north on our trip to Taos through Santa Clara, Española, and the lower Rio Grande Gorge to arrive at the Historic Taos Inn a bit after 5:00pm. After getting checked in to our rooms and a bit of time to relax, we enjoyed a nice dinner at Doc Martin's in the Inn, a well-regarded Taos restaurant and at our hotel, a nice change from having to drive somewhere for dinner.

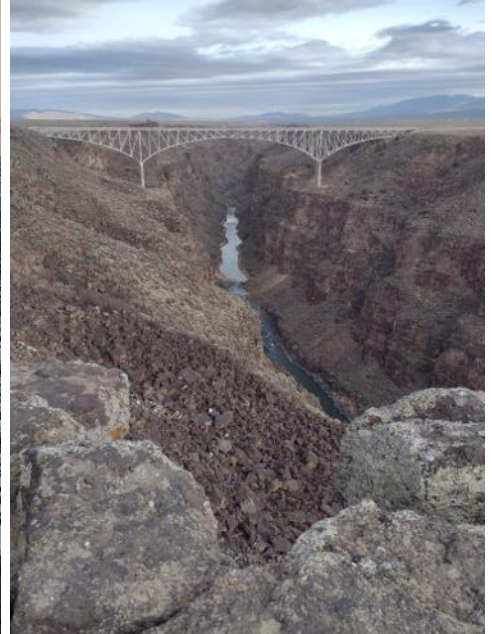
## **Mon., Dec. 6   Abiquiu | Ghost Ranch**

Despite the high-teen temperatures this morning, (Dave was getting his winter now) most of the group walked a few blocks to the Bearclaw Bakery & Café, our breakfast destination that morning. Despite nearly filling this small eatery, we had one of the best breakfasts of the trip here, all the time listening to old rock classics on the sound system—a trip down memory lane for most! After breakfast, we loaded up the vans to spend a full day in the Chama River Valley and Abiquiu area.

Our first stop was the Poshuouinge Pueblo ruin, perched high on a hill above the Chama River. This impressive ruin (believed to have had 700 rooms!) is unexcavated, but the outlines of the buildings are clearly visible from the overlooks higher up the trail at the site. It is thought that the site was occupied from about 1375 to 1475 and its inhabitants were the ancestors of the people living in the modern-day Santa Clara and Ohkay Owingeh (formerly San Juan) Pueblos. After this hike and exploration, we drove to the nearby town of Abiquiu for lunch at the Abiquiu Inn. Following lunch, we continued northwest along the Chama River to the famed Ghost Ranch associated with the art of Georgia O'Keeffe. Driving into the ranch, we stopped to admire a stunning male Mountain Bluebird on a fence post and some Western Bluebirds coming into drink from the birdbath at the Welcome Center.

Once there, we met Julia, our guide for the afternoon, and set off in one of the Ranch's buses for the O'Keeffe Landscape Tour, designed to show many of the places and settings that Georgia O'Keeffe worked in and on during her long tenure living at Ghost Ranch. It was quite a thrill, especially for O'Keeffe aficionados, to





simultaneously see her art, a photograph replicating her point of view, and the actual landscape all at once. Julia also had tons of information and back story about “Ms. O’Keeffe’s” life and history at the Ranch and the many other things that had happened there over the years.

After the tour ended, we drove back to Taos via Ojo Caliente and the west side of the Rio Grande. This meant that we crossed over the Rio Grande Gorge in the darkness; no one believed Dave’s wild tales of an 800-foot-deep gorge right beneath the wheels of the vans, which was invisible in the dark! After a brief rest, we reconvened and drove a short distance down Paseo del Pueblo for a very interesting and tasty dinner of Peruvian food at Ají Restaurant (and some enjoyed their Pisco Sours!).

## **Tues., Dec. 7 Taos Culture: Museums, Downtown**

We started the day with a breakfast at Taos institution El Taoseño, noting the reassuring presence of some Taos County Sheriff’s Deputies eating there, too! Our first stop on this day largely dedicated to activities in town was to drive back out to the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge to see it in the early morning light. We stopped at the rest area on the southwest side of the gorge and walked out the short trail through the sagebrush to admire this impressive, though not well known outside of New Mexico, geological feature carved through layers of lava flows. It’s an 800-foot drop from the bridge to the Rio Grande below; the river itself was still in shade in at that early hour. Numerous photos later (and with a shopping opportunity at the tables of a few artisans from Taos Pueblo who had set up there) we started back into town for our primary destination that morning: the Millicent Rogers Museum.

The museum, named after its founder, an heiress of the Standard Oil fortune, has an amazingly comprehensive collection of fine art. It is particularly strong on Native American art, with a comprehensive collection of Pueblo pottery from all the current Pueblos and many historical pieces. In fact, an entire room is devoted to the legendary potter Maria Martinez from San Ildefonso Pueblo, who almost single-handedly re-discovered the technique of black-on-black pottery and produced many superb pieces. Another fascinating part of the collection were several 19<sup>th</sup> century Navajo blankets, which are extremely rare and hard to find.



We then returned to the Taos Inn for a quick break, then walked to the nearby Martyr's Steakhouse for lunch. After lunch, most of the group joined Dave and Kathleen for a visit to the Martinez Hacienda, a restored hacienda from the Spanish colonial era, which also serves as a living history museum of Spanish colonial life from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. We received a guided tour from Roger Martinez, who is a descendant of the family, and examined many of the different rooms that served household functions at the time. We then returned to the Inn and gave everyone the rest of the day and evening off to explore downtown Taos.

## **Wed., Dec. 8   Chimayo | Santa Fe via the High Road | Albuquerque**

We began today by loading the vehicles and then heading off for another fine breakfast at El Taoseño. Finishing breakfast, we bid "hasta luego" to Taos and headed south via the High Road to Santa Fe and on to Albuquerque. Our first stop was a slight detour to visit the well-known San Francisco de Asís Mission Church in the small community of Ranchos de Taos just south of Taos itself. Dating from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, this Church has been made famous (at least outside of New Mexico) by its depiction in numerous pieces of art and photography by luminaries such as Georgia O'Keeffe, Ansel Adams, and Paul Strand. After admiring this beautiful structure, we continued our way on the High Road to Santa Fe through the Sangre de Cristos, the southern end of the Rocky Mountains. This winding, scenic road passes through numerous small Hispanic villages such as Peñasco, Las Trampas, and Truchas and through the Picurís Pueblo before arriving at our next stop: the legendary Santuario de Chimayó.

The Santuario is a National Historic Landmark and an important pilgrimage center and was constructed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In some years, an estimated 300,000 people make a pilgrimage to the site during Holy Week, some from as far away as Albuquerque ( $\pm$  90 miles!). A small room in the back of the church houses a small hole in the ground ("El Pocito") which contains dirt with curative powers (or so it is said). In any case, we admired the structure and the setting, then continued our way to Santa Fe, where we had lunch at the Museum Hill Café.





After lunch, the group self-divided into three smaller groups. Some remained on Museum Hill to explore the collection of museums there (Museum of Spanish Colonial Art, Museum of International Folk Art, Museum of Indian Arts & Culture, Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, and Santa Fe Botanical Garden); others went with Kathleen on a shuttle to the Santa Fe Plaza for an opportunity to walk around that area, exploring its museums and landmark cathedral; and a third group went with Dave up to the head of Canyon Road to do a little birding at the Randall Davey Audubon Center and adjacent Santa Fe Canyon Preserve of The Nature Conservancy. This, the last birding opportunity of our tour, yielded a few additions to our bird list, including great views of Juniper Titmouse at the feeders, a wide variety of forms of Dark-eyed Junco, and Bushtits, to name a few. Everyone reconvened from their explorations late in the afternoon, and we drove the final leg of our trip south to Albuquerque to our destination for the evening: the Hilton Garden Albuquerque Airport. After everyone got checked in, we reconvened for the final time and Dave and Kathleen took the group to our farewell dinner at M'Tucci's Twenty-Five, a short drive north on I-25.

## **Thurs., Dec. 9 Departures from Albuquerque**

Left to their own devices, everyone returned home at various times using the hotel shuttle to get to the airport, hopefully replete with the nature, culture, and food of the Land of Enchantment!

*Photo Credits: Group photo (David Mehlman - DM), Bighorn Ram (Brian Calk - BC), Jemez/Bandelier NP (BC), Sandhill Crane (BC), Waterfowl scenic (BC), Closeup waterfowl at sunset (BC), Ferruginous Hawk (BC), Northern Pintail (BC), Sandia Mountains (BC), Mexican Chickadee (BC), Group birding (BC), Group photo 2 (BC), Elk (BC), Bandelier NP (BC), Mountain Bluebirds (BC), Ghost Ranch (DM), Rio Grand Gorge at White Rock (BC), Rio Grande Gorge Bridge (Charlene Heinen - CH), Grasslands (BC), Chimayo (DM), Juniper Titmouse (BC), Common Goldeneye (BC), Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep (BC)*