

Southeast Arizona Fall Sky Island Sampler | Trip Report | Nov. 11-18, 2021 | Peg Abbott



With Guides Peg Abbott and Hugh Simmons, and participants Carolyn, David, David, Dottie, Ginni, Janell, Richard, Shubha, Tulja



Thurs., Nov. 11 Arrival in Tucson | Sonoita | Patagonia: Paton Center for Hummingbirds

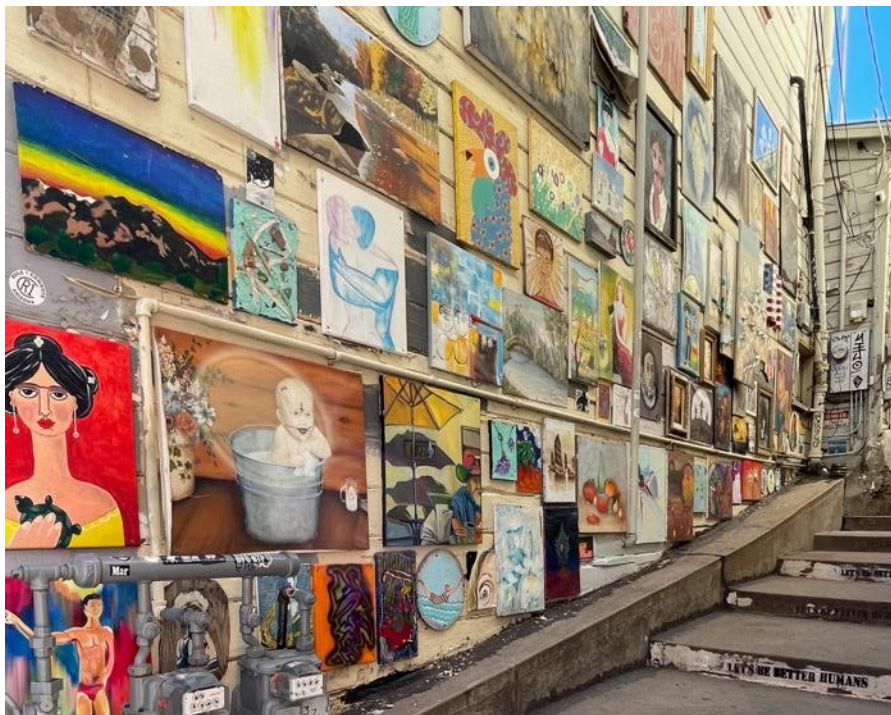
Peg and Hugh were smiling and ready to meet the second group of this fine fall season. Everyone seemed in good spirits and ready to explore. Conversation was already lively as we wound our way through the Cienega Hills, tracing the watershed and naming mountains that framed the desert and grassland expanses.



At Sonoita we took a short detour to visit the hamlet of Patagonia, an artsy town with an organic grocery and a western bar. We went right to the Patton Center for Hummingbirds where resident naturalist, Louie Dombroski gave us a nice welcome. Within seconds a stunning Violet-crowned Hummingbird came into one of the feeders, hanging out at eye-level and then posing on a nearby twig.

WOW, off to a good start. White-winged Doves strutted about, and we all realized just how pretty they are with close up views. For a travel day this was an ideal birding spot choice, some could sit on the benches, others roamed with their cameras, all to the background noise of energetic Gila Woodpeckers. But everyone got to their feet when Louie called out **"Rufous-backed Robin"**. He was still here, feeding on berries, and though an artful master of hiding, in time we all got good views. Broad-billed Hummingbirds in their jade-green and red attire inspired some "oohs" and "aahs" and the Bridled Titmouse won everyone over quickly as well. As we were leaving four Lazuli Buntings came in to view.

We wanted to save some time to go out into the grassland and take some sunset photos, also to look for Pronghorn. This week we were not successful on finding this distinctive ungulate, but we enjoyed a grand sense of space. Northern Harriers coming close by on the wing, and an American Kestrel on the wires above our parking spot. We had dinner tonight at the Sonoita Café, a delightful restaurant. The Café was packed as a local singer plays each Thursday, so we felt best to stay where we were, but by dessert our teeth were clattering. We did try some Arizona wines from a vineyard just down the street and some luscious desserts too.

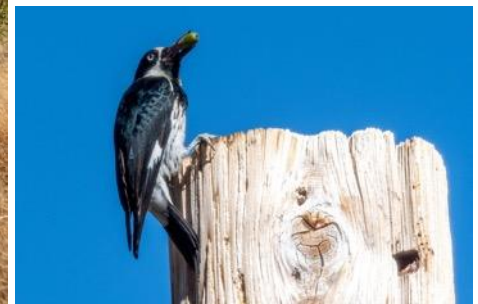


Fri., Nov. 12 Las Cienagas Grasslands | Huachuca Mountains: TNC Ramsey Canyon Preserve

Breakfast was a make your own from a wide combination of foods, and Peg brought some homemade jam for the bagels. After packing up we headed not far down the road to explore lands of the old Empire Ranch, now a conservation area. We had a spattering of birds, no large flocks or numbers as in some winters, but a steady flow. We followed a Loggerhead Shrike for a time, then an American Kestrel seemed to have caught wind that we had a photo-oriented group and posed for some time. Peg tried to teach all the finer points of Eastern vs Western Meadowlark identification as a Northern Mockingbird uttered its repertoire of calls.

We made our way to an impressive area of Giant Sacaton grass. Parking there, we walked down the road a bit and turned off into a picturesque wash, where ash and cottonwood trees were just ablaze with color. Out of one, to our surprise, flew a Great Horned Owl. It flew downstream and we followed, eventually putting it up again. Ruby-crowned Kinglets and a lone Green-tailed Towhee joined us in that dry riverbed. We checked the Cottonwood Tanks, not far away, and found both Say's and Black Phoebes, and the winter basic set of sparrows: White-crowned, Vesper, Brewer's and Chipping.

Lunch was an hour or so away, so we pushed on, and arrived at Indochine ahead of the regular crowd. They recognized us from the week before and as always gave us prompt, excellent service. And good food, a lot of time. With a few groans as we pushed back from the table, we headed to our next stop, the Nature Conservancy's Ramsey Canyon.



In all regards the canyon put on a show. Right out of the parking lot there were birds, a mixed flock with Brown Creeper, Bridled Titmouse and Yellow-rumped Warblers. Two **Arizona Woodpecker** at close range was a great find, and everyone marveled at the near-dozen Acorn Woodpeckers putting on a show as they harvested and stored acorns. Two Red-naped Sapsuckers were not to be outdone, giving us a four-woodpecker day along with Northern Flicker. Four species of hummingbirds in mid-November is always a treat, we got good views of Anna's, Blue-throated Mountain Gem, Rivoli's and a quick flyby with its characteristic sound, of Broad-tailed. We took several hours here to walk, Hugh, Ty and Shubha set off to photograph the spectacular **fall colors**, getting down low on rocks of the creek to get good photo angles. We birded, enjoyed conversation and a picture-perfect day threading our way between maples lit up by afternoon sun.

The preserve closes at 4PM and we were ready to settle into our lodgings at the Casa de San Pedro. Karl and Patrick are the consummate hosts and such wonderful people to spend time around. They somehow make everyone feel like friends and family in short order. Elvia was in the kitchen with her husband cooking away and soon the smell of homemade Mexican food was wafting through the courtyard and luring us to gather. Peg did the bird checklist with those that wanted to tally and soon we were all tucked in bed. A few went out to check out the stars – so clear and quite amazing.

Sat. Nov. 13 Casa de San Pedro | Bisbee | Whitewater Draw | Hawk Route

Breakfast at the Casa is an artform and today's offering was no exception. After breakfast one always just wants to linger in the lovely dining room, as sun pours through the cactus-ribbed shutters, but for us the birds and general exploring were calling!



We headed out first to the historic section of Bisbee, where a Smithsonian-affiliated Museum is well worth a stop. Some walked about the town taking in its eccentric mix of buildings, many dating from the hey-day of mining here at the turn of the century. Several commented on how interesting it was and how much they learned about that period of Arizona's history. A few took their cameras and walked around town, dipping into galleries or just enjoying the feel of this eclectic western town. We met up at Noon at the Desert Market across from the courthouse (Bisbee is the county seat) and enjoyed fresh foods, salads, wraps and sandwiches and a few sweet treats. They had patio seating but at lunch it was great, warm and if anything, too sunny.

Then it was nature's turn, we headed off to Whitewater Draw. This watered area is the lowest point in the Sulphur Springs Valley, a state wildlife area important to wintering Sandhill Cranes, a host of waterfowl and other wildlife. A bright male Vermilion Flycatcher caught our eye right at the start of our walk. So did a little river of Yellow-headed Blackbirds, with some Red-winged mixed in that were circling the smaller of two ponds, wanting to go down to roost in the reeds. We made videos to capture the sounds of this fantastical murmuration. The photographers probably took hundreds of photos as the flock of blackbirds would erupt from the reeds and soar and sway as one above the pond. David found a Spotted Sandpiper bobbing along the near shore and several Marsh Wren gave their locations away by calling. Several ducks were close and made for good photos: Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal and Ruddy. Hugh set the scope first on Eared Grebe and then the 3500 plus Sandhill Cranes! What a spectacle, so full of sound, commotion, and energy.

We stayed almost until dark, so moving was this display. In time we peeled away and made a quick stop to change clothes, then ventured out to Mimosa Restaurant where delicious Italian food, rich and served with some nice red wines hit the spot. Retired Naturalist Journeys guide Bob Behrstock joined us for dinner, and it was fun to visit and catch up with him. Today was Dottie's birthday and David and Peg conspired with the waiter to bring a cupcake and candles and song – fun.

Sun. Nov. 14 Casa de San Pedro | Naco | Portal: Dave Jasper Feeders | Cave Creek Canyon Nature Trail

Just a few gathered this morning for a short spin about the property, but we were able to log sightings of House Wren and Abert's Towhee for our rewards. We walked down to the river, just lit up with color of arching huge



cottonwood trees, a wonder of its own to behold and a bit part of the magic of the Casa de San Pedro – this proximity to a river that is such a great migration corridor.

We packed up our gear after a delicious hot breakfast, and made a quick stop for gas and beverage supplies in Bisbee for our coming days ahead in Portal, so “Bisbee” to have a combo gas and beverage store!). We found a Northern Mockingbird on some pyracantha bushes there. A short way away Peg and Hugh showed the group the border wall, a captivating stop – seeing is believing and the context with so little population around, such vast open spaces for all was sobering. A Loggerhead Shrike posed for us and watched us take it all in.

From here we made a loop around the southern end of the Chiricahuas, stopping at the historic Gadson Hotel in Douglas, recently refurbished, for a coffee and pit stop. All were impressed with the stained-glass mural and ambiance of this grand old hotel set in what now seems an unlikely place. We were not able to find Pronghorn this trip, the week prior they had been near the road. But we made good time and were bound for a local event, the Rodeo Art Gallery’s Christmas Gathering, complete with music and artwork by local artists. And this was not just any music, this was Christina Hanisch from our office and her husband Dennis, who put on a wonderful show. Her voice rang out in perfect harmony with Dennis, who wrote many of the songs they performed. Serendipity that this event was on our route, but such is the fun of travels!



It was then time for some birds! We sought out a place where the birds would come to us and at the Dave Jasper feeders in Portal they did. Cactus Wren, Gambel's Quail, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Canyon Towhee, Northern Cardinal and Ladder-backed Woodpecker were among the species we spent time with. Everyone noted how orange and big-crested the southwestern race of Northern Cardinal appeared. We were feasting a bit too much and several of the group opted for a walk to get some steps in. Peg suggested the nearby Cave Creek Canyon Nature Trail. It was late in the day and quiet for birds but oh my, the play of light on the canyon walls was sublime and we stopped often just for beauty. The trail loops around through the Sunny Flat Campground, featured once in Sunset Magazine for its craftsman-level design. A near-full moon was rising as we wound our way back and Hugh shared some landscape photography tips to capture its essence above the canyon walls. Dinner was catered at the Inn by Carrie Miller of Portal. Tonight we had lamb ragout with polenta, grape and tarragon focaccia, grilled vegetables over salad and a pumpkin cheesecake with gingerbread crust.

Mon., Nov. 15 Cave Creek Ranch | Chiricahuas: TransMountain Road | Chiricahua National Monument | Willcox Twin Lakes Ponds

Hummingbirds in winter are always a treat, and a Blue-throated Mountain Gem captivated those up and birding this morning, just outside the office. We loaded up for a very full but rewarding day.

A winding mountain road goes up and over the Chiricahuas, crossing a divide at Onion Saddle. We started up the road, stopping a few stops for species of interest. While a hoped for Rufous-crowned Sparrow did not emerge, we did find a flock of Western Bluebirds homed in on feeding on a mistletoe clump, four or five at a time. They put a on a good show, and we enjoyed the behaviors they displayed. Chipping Sparrows and Dark-eyed Junco, mostly the Pink-sided race, were present as well. At Turkey Creek we got onto a good mixed flock, with a good number of species and individuals. There were Brown Creeper, Yellow-eyed Junco, Hutton's Vireo, Spotted Towhee, Steller's Jays and more. A sudden commotion occurred when a large bird of prey made a quick short flight and then perched – Northern Goshawk! A little bit farther up the road we stopped when a flurry of Dark-eyed Juncos went by and got to see a flock of Bushtit and 7 Western Bluebirds feeding on a massive clump of fruiting mistletoe – fun! Peg spied an Olive Warbler, but it was quick, most got to see the noisy Steller's Jay.



Chiricahua National Monument was warm and inviting, this visit held a crystal blue sky. One group with Hugh hiked the Echo Canyon Loop trail, descending right down into the hoodoos and spires where a new photo opportunity presented at every turn. Peg's group did a shorter but very scenic loop walk, then enjoyed a picnic with the birds, some very cheeky Mexican Jays and one Spotted Towhee.

We had a new plan this week as we had crossed the west side of the Chiricahuas – Willcox was just forty miles away and there we could hear crane music at sunset, so magical, once again. We got there by mid-afternoon – in time to enjoy the new coffee shop in town before heading out. We were able to survey the lake for various ducks, two determined Snow Geese held their ground on a sandspit that would prove to be a good roost spot despite a lot of coming and going. There were ample cranes up close, but in the sky, we witnessed long lines, hundreds of them pouring down valley to the power plant ponds or perhaps Whitewater. For some reason they did not settle with us, though several passed close overhead and we could hear the high calls of juveniles. We added quite a few new birds to our tally, then fortified ourselves with good, filling local barbecue before heading around to Portal.

Dinner tonight was at a popular restaurant in Willcox, one in a Pullman Railway car. It was the perfect choice for dinner, both delicious and quick after a long day. We drove home satiated and stopped once to behold the brilliant night skies, though the full moon diluted the Milky Way it was still impressive.

Tues., Nov. 16 Cave Creek Ranch | Stateline Road | Willow Tank | Rodeo | Idlewild Campground

This morning several that got out early were rewarded with sightings of the lone Coatimundi that frequents the feeders before they get busy, and Javelina and White-tailed Deer. Carrie had breakfast set out for all, and Peg arrived and led out down the canyon to explore what is normally a very active winter birding route down Stateline Road to Willow Tank and return. It was eerily quiet today! We tried several known spots for Greater Roadrunner but no one was home. We scanned for big flocks of sparrows and Lark Bunting but came up with empty skies. We did have fine views of Loggerhead Shrike and Red-tailed Hawks, both posing close to the road



on prominent Yucca stalks. With the full span of the Chiricahua mountains on one side, and the Peloncillo Mountains on the other, our photographers were pleased with the backgrounds. At a local pecan grove, all were able to hear and study the smaller Chihuahuan Ravens that came and went, harvesting nuts and carrying them off to nearby field margins. Several Northern Harriers also flew by.

Willow Tank was also quiet, we enjoyed a foursome of Ring-necked Duck, a feeding Black Phoebe, the ever-present Yellow-rumped Warblers and White-crowned Sparrows, but all in all were underwhelmed. We did admire all the work of local Friends of Cave Creek Canyon volunteers who planted native species now bright with fall color, and who had recently oiled the wood of the bird blinds. On to Rodeo and our date with the local Vegan Taco Truck – Migration Taco. What a fun place to have lunch, across from the local post office so a hubbub of activity. Normally just open on weekends, they opened just for us and brought out a fabulous sample of their hand-crafted foods. Christina from our office joined us, and we sampled away until we were FULL up. The fried avocado tacos rated high, and all enjoyed learning about this family who hosted us and the foods they create.

We then spend a couple hours at the local Chiricahua Desert Museum, where a small band of Scaled Quail put on a parade and Curve-billed Thrashers posed for our photographers. There were exhibits to see inside and out, and time passed quickly. Not to be deterred by a slow bird day, Peg suggested we stop at the Dave Jasper feeders. They were active with Verdin, Ladderback Woodpecker and hallelujah! A Greater Roadrunner, one of our most wanted species this day. For many this was a good time to quit, return home to enjoy the ranch, but a few joined Peg to search out the Painted Redstart hanging around Stewart Bridge, and look for the now-elusive Woodcock out of range but spending time here over the last weeks. We had good luck, with a male coming right in to investigate us. It sang and showed off its colors – nice!



Carrie fixed up a feast for us, which we enjoyed on the patio of the ranch house. Tonight, we had roasted turkey with mole, blue corn dressing-stuffed kabocha squash and green beans with hibiscus butter. Those still standing had Mexican spiced dark chocolate cake with buttercream frosting. We tallied up our sightings after dinner and turned in for a well-deserved sleep.

Wed., Nov. 17 Meteor Showers | Cave Creek Ranch | South Fork Cave Creek | Herb Martyr Campground | Vista Point | Stewart Campground

This morning was the peak of the Leonid Meteor Shower and Hugh offered to get up early for those who would like to photograph the night sky and perhaps capture some meteors. He and Shubha left at 4:30am and drove to a spot away from any houses and photographed until sunrise. The area around Portal is a “dark sky” location so the night sky is magnificent. Peg came up to lead a morning walk for those interested, her instincts headed her towards the sun as it was a bit brisk. We walked past a big brush pile that was alive with Gambel’s Quail, talking and popping up for a view or photo, a great start. We continued on through the residential area where at a road junction we stopped to admire cottonwood trees along the creek that seemed to be on fire – just gorgeous color in the morning light. Cactus Wrens came up for inspection, putting on a good show and lingering on Prickly Pear cactus and Ocotillo – iconic southwestern plants nice to capture them on. A Verdin was equally cooperative, as was a pair of Curve-billed Thrasher. We returned to the ranch for a parade of Javelina, a peek at a Phainopepla, and good views of a small group of Inca Dove. We had plans for the day but this was a quick good beginning.

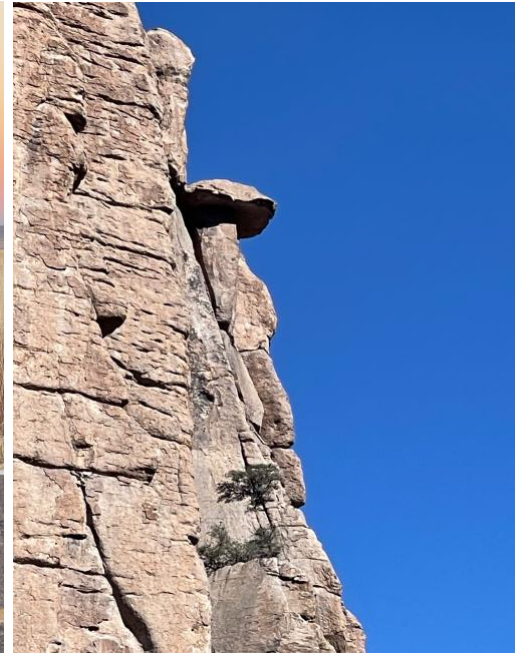
Peg and Hugh saved the best for last, as the South Fork of Cave Creek Canyon’s meandering walk up the creekbed is always intriguing. Decorated with fall color it’s absolutely splendid. We started out together, but



Hugh set a faster pace with those that love to hike, and Peg kept a steady pace, a goal to get all 1.5 miles up the canyon to a small waterfall locally known as the bathtub, also a central place for colors of maples. We all made it and had a grand time doing it. There were some birds along the way, Dark-eyed Junco, Northern Flicker, Steller's Jay, and our first for the trip, a group of American Robins that enjoyed a lush crop of ripe Madrone berries. We got good views of Red-naped Sapsuckers. But we also just had fun taking photos, posing for photos, enjoying conversation among our most compatible group. Invigorated by our hike, we had an appetite and went to the picnic tables at Herb Martyr along the Middle Fork of Cave Creek Canyon to dine on a good field lunch prepared for us by Carrie. Peg and Hugh plated up a delightful salad with toppings and then passed around some decadent cookies, yum.

Returning down canyon, after viewing the American Museum of Natural History's field station from the road (it is closed for Covid), we did a high reward, short effort hike up to Vista Point where commanding views up and down Cave Creek were impressive. The day before a small group had luck with a Painted Redstart male at the Stewart Campground, and there were still chances to find the out-of-range Woodcock on the rare bird report here, so we unloaded to put in just a last effort as the daylight was fading. We invited the redstart in with some calls, but it must have been busy feeding and though we walked up and down the road a bit, it did not show. We had to be content with Bridled Titmouse and Brown Creeper, until all agreed it was time to call it day. Luckily the glow of the canyon off those orange and lichen-clad walls made the walk still memorable if quite on the bird front, still a pleasure.

We dropped back at the ranch for some down time, a chance to pack, and then reconnoitered at Peg's home for our final dinner. Carrie Miller and Kelly Brown were there cooking away and put on a wonderful feast for us. We sat on the patio with some libations and appetizers around the campfire it turned into a magical night for all. Peg showed everyone interested her baskets from around the world and the Naturalist Journeys office (in her home since 1998). Good food and good conversation concluded a delightful night. We started with a Moroccan lentil soup with flatbread, then a chicken almond and dried apricot tagine, with herbed couscous and roasted butternut squash.



Thurs., Nov. 18 Amerind Foundation | Return to Tucson | Departures

We had seen so much at the various feeders and special places of Portal that we decided to head on out the final morning, using the bit of time we had to experience a world-class museum near Dagoon. The museum provided a toasty warm, inviting space for learning about local, regional and western American Indian cultures. A few of us did some damage in the gift store as well, happy to support the mission of this non-profit gem. We had smooth driving and got to Tucson in a timely way for all to get to flights or head on to further adventures. Until the next adventure!

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Hugh Simmons - HS), Broad-billed Hummingbird (HS), Sunset (Richard Becker - RB), Ginny & David (Peg Abbott - PA), Lazuli Bunting (HS), Rufous-backed Robin (HS), Peg & Hugh (David Chan - DC), Street Art (PA), Whitewater Draw (PA), Las Cienegas (HS), David & Dottie at the Gadson (PA), Acorn Woodpecker (HS), Sandhill Cranes (HS), Vermillion Flycatcher (HS), Wilcox Sunset (PA), Scenic (HS), Yellow-headed Blackbirds (HS), Woodhouse's Scrub Jay (HS), Rodeo Gallery (HS), Cave Creek (HS), Bushtit (HS), Scenic Chiricahua (HS), Trans Mountain Road (HS), Scenic Chiricahua - 2 (HS), Red-tailed Hawk (RB), Scenic (RB), Lizard (HS), Scaled Quail (HS), Greater Roadrunner (HS), Taco Truck (HS), Duck Pond (RB), Group Hike (PA), Richard birding South Fork (PA), Cave Creek (PA), Leaves (PA), Group SF (PA), Inca Dove (HS), Red-naped Sapsucker (HS), Sunset "yoga" (PA), Chiricahua (PA)