

Arizona Monsoon Madness | Trip Report

August 10-16, 2021 | Written by Pat Lueders

With guides Pat Lueders & Carlos Sanchez, and participants: Jeff, Eileen, Cindy, Frank, Anne H., Beth, Steve, Joan, Ken, Jennie, and Anne S.



Tuesday, August 10: Tucson | Sweetwater Wetlands | Amado

We successfully gathered at the Tucson Airport, became acquainted at lunch, and began our week of birding at Sweetwater Wetlands Park in northern Tucson. This water treatment facility, which provides urban wildlife habitat by serving as an oasis in the desert, was a wonderful introduction to many Southeast Arizona species. Around the water, we saw Cinnamon Teal, Common Gallinule, and a surprise American Wigeon. Western Kingbirds were feeding young, Verdin moved quickly in the mesquite, Yellow Warblers showed off in breeding plumage, and Abert's Towhees were scratching the ground for seeds.

We traveled south through Tucson happily leaving behind the big city atmosphere for a week in the desert. We arrived at our lodging for two nights, the Amado Territory Inn, and quickly adjourned on their lovely back porch to have great views of Gambel's Quail, Vermilion Flycatcher, Broad-billed Hummingbird, Canyon Towhee, and a Bronzed Cowbird. After a delicious dinner in the charming town of Tubac, we gathered at the inn for our first checklist and more introductions, enjoying a successful beginning to our tour!



Wednesday, August 11: Box Canyon | Madera Canyon | Santa Rita Lodge | Canoa Ranch Conservation Park

After an early breakfast, we drove into the Santa Rita Mountain range to Box Canyon, marveling at the lush, green grasses that covered the desert floor because of the monsoon rains. Cacti were blooming and dramatic cloud formations filled the skies. As we approached the canyon, we stopped for good views of a perched, vocalizing Botteri's Sparrow and a lovely Black-throated Sparrow. We heard two Varied Buntings atop the mesquite and found them for great scope views. Swainson's Hawks were seen on utility poles waiting to hunt for breakfast. This lovely canyon was green with foliage, we watched Western Wood-Pewee, Blue Grosbeak, and Lesser Goldfinch move along the cliffs. A Golden Eagle was spotted soaring at the canyon top, and a female Lucifer Hummingbird was sitting patiently on her nest on a dry Agave. Rare Five-striped Sparrows were heard at the bottom of the canyon but were difficult to spot. Further along the road, we had a nice mixed flock which included a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, a Wilson's Warbler, a pair of Hepatic Tanagers, and Hooded Orioles. A cooperative Rock Wren also moved around on the rocks above us. We enjoyed our picnic lunch at the feeders at the Santa Rita Lodge while studying the male and female hummingbirds feeding within a few feet of us including Rivoli's, Anna's, and Broad-billed. Mexican Jays, Acorn Woodpeckers, and Lesser Goldfinch visited the seed feeders. A Yellow-eyed Junco perched on a feeder at the Kubo B&B for great looks.

Our next stop was the Canoa Ranch Conservation Park at the Historic Canoa Ranch. Another oasis in the desert, the park is excellent for birds, butterflies, and dragonflies. Redhead ducks and Pied-billed Grebe were on the water, Vermilion Flycatchers and Black Phoebe caught bugs in the air, and two stunning Lark Sparrows were seen well in the scope. Many Queen Butterflies had recently hatched on their host milkweed, and the pond was busy with dragonflies. There was a lovely, well-managed trail highlighting the native plants of the area. Stopping on our return at the Amado Water Treatment Pond, we had great looks at Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Mexican Ducks, Ringed-necked Ducks, and beautiful Ruddy Ducks in breeding plumage. After a delicious dinner at the Canoa Golf course, we gathered to list the wonderful sightings of the day!



Thursday, August 12: Montosa Canyon | Santa Gertrudis Lane | Paton Center | Las Cienegas NCA

As we left the inn to move to Casa De San Pedro, we found a small group of Lucy's Warblers in the parking area and Purple Martins flew overhead. With the monsoon rains occurring daily, we needed to detour around the swollen Santa Cruz River to drive to Montosa Canyon. We were rewarded with good scope views of singing Five-striped Sparrows upon our arrival. Additional sightings of Varied Buntings, Bell's Vireo, and Hooded Orioles made this stop very successful! We walked the Santa Gertrudis Lane section of the famous De Anza Trail. Stretching 1,200 miles, the trail roughly follows the historic route of the Anza Expedition of 1775-76. As we arrived, we heard the distinct vocalization of Thick-billed Kingbirds, our target species for this location. A Black Vulture was spotted soaring above, Yellow-breasted Chats flew around us, and a Yellow-billed Cuckoo and a Western Tanager moved in the Sycamores.

After a stop at the famous Patagonia Roadside Rest area, we had lunch in the quaint town of Patagonia before spending a productive time at the feeders at the Paton Center for Hummingbirds. A black bear, which had been raiding the feeders, caused the removal of the seed feeders, but the hummingbird feeders were active, and their resident Violet-crowned Hummingbirds showed themselves often for us all, a trip favorite for the group! A bonus was a Phainopepla sighting above the feeders. In route to the Huachuca Mountains, we visited Las Cienegas NCA for grassland species. A herd of Pronghorn was grazing in the plush grasses. A vocalizing Cassin's Sparrow showed well for great looks, Chihuahuan Ravens soared above us, and Horned Larks were found on the Black-tailed Prairie Dog mounds in the conservation area. We arrived at Casa de San Pedro, settled into our lovely rooms, and enjoyed a delicious dinner while watching the feeders outside the dining room's scenic picture window.

Friday, August 13: Birding at Casa | Miller Canton/Beatty's Guest Ranch | Bisbee

We birded the beautiful grounds of Casa de San Pedro with our delicious morning coffee. White-winged and Eurasian Collared-Doves were perched on the wires. A pair of Cactus Wren interacted with each other, Lazuli Buntings were perched in the field, Blue Grosbeaks sang their distinctive song, and Gila Woodpeckers were plentiful. What a wonderful way to start the day! A pair of Common Ground Doves fed under the feeders during our delicious breakfast.



Our main destination today was the Beatty's Guest Ranch in Miller Canyon, which has been available to birders for many years. We hiked the beautiful canyon getting great looks at Arizona Woodpeckers, Western Wood-Pewee, and the striking Painted Redstart. The hummingbird feeders were the highlight of this visit with great looks at the rarer White-eared Hummingbird and comparison views of Rivoli's, Black-chinned, Anna's, Rufous, Broad-tailed, and Broad-billed Hummingbirds. We hated to leave! Our lunch visit to the historical town of Bisbee was delicious, and afterwards we all marveled at the depth and size of the copper mine just east of town. When we returned to Casa, the resident Great Horned Owl, heard vocalizing every night, was spotted in the Cottonwood tree alongside the pool. We enjoyed dinner at the Italian restaurant in nearby Hereford, but rain canceled the planned owl prowl, so we returned to casa watching the impressive lightning show over the desert.

Saturday, August 14: Coffee with the birds | Ramsey Canyon | San Pedro House

We again began the morning with the desert birds at the casa. Gambel's Quail scattered as we began our walk, a Canyon Towhee visited the feeder, and a Yellow-breasted Chat showed its striking yellow chest. A Bewick's Wren, Bell's Vireo, and Willow Flycatcher were seen lurking in the willows. Our first stop today was in a residential area of Sierra Vista for great scope looks of a known pair of Harris's Hawks, not always seen on this tour. We arrived at the Ramsey Canyon Inn to watch their feeders and immediately had quick looks at the rare Berylline Hummingbird. Bridled Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Black-headed Grosbeak, and Western Tanagers were seen well in the area.

A pleasant hike on the Ramsey Canyon loop gave us good looks at the endangered Chiricahua Leopard Frog in the ponds where they are being protected. Western Whiptail lizards were numerous in the same area. We finally heard the distinctive call of the Canyon Wren, a species who's numbers have been hit hard by the extensive drought.

Our picnic lunch was enjoyed at the San Pedro House, which borders the now swollen San Pedro River. A cloudy walk through the prairie towards the river provided good looks at Varied and Lazuli Buntings, Blue Grosbeak, Summer Tanager, Vermilion Flycatchers, and Cassin's Kingbirds. When we returned to the casa, a pair of Gray Hawks was heard and spotted low over the patio. An early checklist and dinner at a local eatery ended another day in this delightful desert oasis!



Sunday, August 15: Sierra Vista EOP | Hunter Canyon | Ash Canyon Feeders

We started the morning with an unsuccessful stop to see the elusive Montezuma Quail but did get good looks at a family of Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays. Next was a visit to the Sierra Vista EOP for possible water birds. Yellow-headed Blackbirds were mixed with Red-wingeds, Verdins, and Lark Sparrows were seen in the mesquite. A large number of Northern Mockingbirds frequented this area. A Desert Blonde Tarantula crossing the road near the casa was photographed by many of the group.

We could not safely get up Carr Canyon today, due to record-breaking monsoon rains eroding the road with slippery conditions. Better safe than sorry! A beautiful hike in Hunter Canyon was offered instead, and it was very productive producing new species for the group; including a Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Scott's Oriole, Spotted Towhee, Plumbeous Vireo, and Brown Creeper. Another Canyon Wren was heard in the distance.

We ate our picnic lunch as guests of Bob Behrstock, a retired Naturalist Journey's guide, and Karen LeMay in their yard in Ash Canyon. The desert birds loved their native plant garden, and Costa's and Lucifer Hummingbirds were added to our lengthening list of hummingbirds seen on the trip. Karen showed us a Pipevine Swallowtail caterpillar that uses the pipevines in her yard as their host plant. Our final stop after a siesta break was a visit to the Ash Canyon feeders for even better looks at the male Lucifer Hummingbird with an impressive purple gorget - voted another group favorite! Our farewell dinner was catered at Casa de San Pedro, and the last checklist gathering was a bittersweet ending to a great week of birding and comradeship with new friends!

Monday, August 16: Return to Tucson | Benson STP

We enjoyed our last breakfast at the casa, hating the thought of leaving this beautiful lodge! We had time during the return drive for one last stop for birding near Benson at their sewage treatment plant. In this unique habitat, many new species were seen; including Northern Pintail, Ring-necked, and Ruddy Ducks. The highlight was over 40 Wilson's Phalaropes in breeding plumage and White-faced Ibis. An adult Swainson's Hawk was perched on the nearby utility pole. What a nice ending to this week of adventure and birding in the monsoon lush Arizona desert!

Photo Credits: Group Photo, White-eared Hummingbird (Jeff Hambleton – JH), Arizona Sister (Pat Lueders – PL), Varied Bunting (JH), Hooded Oriole (JH), Acorn Woodpecker (JH), group at Mountain (PL), Group on Trail (PL), White-winged Dove (JH), Thick-billed Kingbird (PL), Western Whiptail Lizard (PL), Cottonwood Tree (PL), Chiricahua Leopard Frog (JH), Great Horned Owl (PL), Phainopepla (JH), White-nosed Coati (JH), Desert Blonde Tarantula (PL), Pipevine Swallowtail caterpillar (PL)