

Arizona Monsoon Madness | Trip Report | Aug. 6–13, 2022 | by David Mehlman



With Naturalist Journeys' guides David Mehlman and Robert Gallardo, and participants Buck, Cecilia, Diane, Jean, Juliana, Noel, and Susan



Sat., Aug. 6

Arrivals in Tucson | Drive to Portal

Dave, Robert, and Bryan (the guide from the first Monsoon Madness tour) met in late morning to transfer all the gear needed for the tour and then Dave and Robert headed into the Tucson Airport to begin the passenger round-up. By about 12:30, everyone was found and we loaded our large van, with Dave driving, and headed off to the east on I-10 for a week of Monsoon Madness.

Although our destination for the day was Portal, we stopped en-route at the Twinlakes Golf Course/Lake Cochise hotspot outside Willcox to break up the ride and find some species we were unlikely to find elsewhere. We were promptly rewarded when we pulled up to Lake Cochise (a saline lake with plenty of water after recent rains) and found a large flock of White-faced Ibis accompanied by several American Avocets and Black-necked Stilts. A drive around the pond perimeter produced several Long-billed Dowitchers to add to our “burgeoning” shorebird list. We then went to the freshwater pond near the golf course and found a lovely male, breeding-plumaged Ruddy Duck, a few American Coots, and several Black-crowned Night-Herons. Diligent searching by the group also turned up a Double-crested Cormorant (rare for the area) and a Western Tanager, along with the requisite Great-tailed Grackles and House Sparrows. On the way back to Willcox and the interstate, Dave spotted an Ash-throated Flycatcher in the mesquites. Continuing on our merry way, we stopped outside Lordsburg, New Mexico, for gas and a rest stop. At this point, everyone’s cell phones reset to the wrong time zone since New Mexico observes daylight savings time and Arizona does not, a small problem which would plague us for the next few days (but, we persisted!). We pulled into the lovely Cave Creek Ranch in Portal about 5:00pm and got everyone situated in their cabins on the grounds, before formally beginning the tour with an informal happy hour and introductions, followed by a tasty dinner of enchiladas, calabacitas, ensalada, and



cake/flan catered by Jackie. After that, it was off to our rooms (with the aid of flashlights), with Dave having sworn a solemn oath to have coffee ready in the kitchen by 6:00am!

Sun., Aug. 7 Cave Creek Canyon | George Walker House

Coffee did appear, as promised, as did Kylee with some actual breakfast! In the meantime, everyone explored the grounds admiring a beautiful desert morning (the first of many) and the typical birds of Cave Creek such as Acorn Woodpecker, Mexican Jay, Northern Cardinal, and Gambel's Quail. After polishing off our breakfast, we loaded into the van for a full morning exploring one of the top birding sites in the U.S.: the South Fork of Cave Creek Canyon. We drove to the end of the road and promptly found a very nice mixed-species flock to start the day off right (the Naturalist Journeys way!). Barely moving from the parking area, we found Black-throated Gray and Grace's Warbler, Plumbeous and Hutton's Vireo, Hepatic Tanager, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Bridled Titmouse, and a Painted Redstart. These were complemented by Arizona Sister and Two-tailed Swallowtail butterflies flying around.

After a brief break, the group headed down the road, alternating walking and driving, to fully explore this lovely canyon, remaining near the creek the entire time. The walk alternated being quiet and then quite birdy, but we found many of our sought-after species there, including Cordilleran Flycatcher, Hairy and Arizona Woodpecker, and Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher. The ever-vigilant Robert spotted a foraging Elegant Trogon (probably a female) off in the woods and most of the group got some kind of glimpse of it, though by no means a satisfactory view of this most-sought-after bird. After having had our fill here, we got back in the van and drove back to the road and then up the main canyon to the Southwestern Research Station. Just as we crossed over Cave Creek, Dave spotted a Trogon flying over the van, and we came to an immediate stop and piled out. This bird, perhaps a young male, was able to be glimpsed back in the trees by most in the group but it, too, failed to yield a really good view—apparently, today was “Shy Trogon Sunday”—who knew?! Pulling into the Research Station, we headed over to the blooming agave by cabin 9, where numerous prior birders had reported a Berylline Hummingbird. After a bit of a wait, during which we were entertained by a Western Wood-Pewee, this spectacular hummingbird put in several appearances, sipping from some of the remaining flowers at the top of the stalk. With the aid of the spotting scope, we could admire this bird's lovely rufous wings and bright green chest—a lifer for many in the group, for sure. We then returned to Cave Creek Ranch for a lovely catered lunch of BBQ brisket and salads, then took a short rest.



Reconvening in mid-afternoon, we literally drove to Paradise to visit the George Walker House, site of another rare hummingbird. Arriving at the House, we were welcomed by Jackie (cook AND naturalist, it turns out) and Winston and took seats under the porch. After an orientation by Winston, we began to watch the feeder traffic. Many Broad-billed Hummingbirds were present, along with an occasional Rivoli's and Rufous. After a while, the eagerly awaited star of the show, a White-eared Hummingbird, put in an appearance, though most often at some flowering vines and Salvias, rather than at the feeders. A two-lifer-hummer day for many in the group! All this action was complemented by Wild Turkey, Mexican Jay, Lesser Goldfinch, assorted doves, and a Juniper Titmouse that made a brief appearance. Returning to Cave Creek Ranch, we found two guys on the road that had found a young Western Diamondback Rattlesnake trying to cross the road. Of course, we stopped and piled out to look at this one from a safe distance. We then enjoyed a second delicious dinner from Jackie and reconvened after dinner for an owling trip. Heading out in the dark, we ventured first to Herb Martyr Campground (past the Research Station where we had been earlier in the day), where only silence greeted our owl calls. Next, we stopped at the John Hands Campground where the previous tour had found an owl. Sure enough, despite a light rain which began to fall, a Whiskered Screech-Owl began sounding off, apparently close at hand. After some triangulation work with flashlights, we found the owl in perched in an oak, only about 20 feet up and everyone got great looks at it with the aid of the lights. What a fun find! We then returned to the Ranch and a well-earned night's sleep.

Mon., Aug. 8 Chiricahua Mountains | Drive to Hereford

After early coffee and another tasty breakfast from Kylee, we packed and loaded the van since it was time to head to our next destination. However, a full day of exploration of the Chiricahua Mountains stood between us and that destination and we were eager with anticipation. Today, we were to drive up and over the Chiricahuas to come down on the west side. We made a few short stops as we wound our way up the mountain, but did not begin to bird seriously until we turned off the main forest road onto the road to Rustler Park, at about 7700 feet. Up at this elevation, while stopping along the forest road, we found some of the unique species to be found here, including Mexican Chickadee (restricted to the Chiricahuas and only one other mountain range in the U.S.), Band-tailed Pigeon, Western Bluebird, and Yellow-eyed Junco. Continuing on to Barfoot Park, we first encountered a large flock of Band-tailed Pigeons before descending into the park, allowing everyone good looks at this elegant, western mountain pigeon. In the Park itself, we walked around for an hour or so, getting good views of more pine forest birds such as Pygmy Nuthatch, Northern (Red-shafted) Flicker, Hairy Woodpecker, and Brown Creeper. We then drove to nearby Rustler Park for more birding and a picnic lunch. While there, we encountered more bluebirds, Yellow-eyed Junco, Steller's Jay, and the usual chickadees, nuthatches, creepers,



and a Red-tailed Hawk. Keeping a wary eye out on the building storm clouds, we decided to continue on our journey, driving back to the saddle and then proceeding on the long drive down the west flank of the Chiricahuas. A stop at Pinery Canyon yielded some quick looks at a Red-faced Warbler, sought after by many in the group, as well as another Brown Creeper and Black-throated Gray Warbler. By now running a bit late, we continued on our drive to the Casa de San Pedro near Hereford, with a stop at the Safeway in Bisbee to pick up our lunches for the next day and sufficient supplies of essential beverages to last the next few days. When Dave and Robert went in to pick up the lunches, however, they were met by a food cart sufficient for a small army, with a croissant platter AND 16 two-foot long subs (“Portal, we have a problem”)!! But, this turned out to be only an order miscommunication, so we left with the platter, though Buck and Noel seemed somewhat concerned as the subs disappeared behind the counter. We arrived at Casa de San Pedro around 4:30pm and everyone settled into their comfortable rooms and some began some informal birding on the Casa’s grounds. We did our daily checklist, then tucked into a lovely home-cooked dinner by Karl and Patrick, our gracious hosts, followed by Robert leading an inspiring session with the group on how everyone got introduced to nature. A wonderful ending to a truly epic day!

Tues., Aug. 9 Casa de San Pedro | Carr Canyon | Sierra Vista

We began the day with something we did every day we were at Casa de San Pedro: a walk outside the Casa along the nearby roads. Fortunately, the roadsides and surrounding fields and mesquites were full of birds, many perching obligingly in the lovely morning light. Highlights of our walk today included two young-of-the-year Swainson’s Hawks, Blue Grosbeak, Vermilion Flycatcher (of various ages and sexes), many Lazuli Buntings, Cassin’s Kingbird, and a Lark Sparrow. After that great start, we sat down to feast on the first of our three memorable breakfasts at the Casa. We then loaded up the van for a full day in the field. Heading west to the nearby Huachuca Mountains, we began the steep climb up the Carr Canyon road, with its hairpin turns and fabulous views (as long as you did not look down!) to the north and east. Stopping along the way to admire the view, we found a Black-throated Gray Warbler and a female-type Calliope Hummingbird (the only one of the trip) alongside the road. The group also spotted the famous “blimp” tied to its mooring post on Fort Huachuca, presumably taking a break from its surveillance activities.



Continuing up, we arrived at our first birding destination for the morning, the Reef Townsite Campground. At almost 7200 feet, this site typically produces interesting higher elevation birds. Today, however, it was pretty quiet, perhaps because of all the recent rain. Nevertheless, we were able to get good views of one of the Buff-breasted Flycatchers that frequent the area, another one of the Arizona Sky Island specialty birds. Also present were Grace's Warbler, Spotted Towhee, Western Wood-Pewee, and the seemingly ubiquitous Acorn Woodpecker. Numerous Arizona Sister butterflies were out and about, too. We then proceeded on to the end of the Carr Canyon road at the Ramsey Vista Campground, but that, too, was very quiet except for a colorful Yarrow's Spiny Lizard well seen and photographed on the side of an outhouse. We then returned to Reef Townsite for an enjoyable picnic lunch at the picnic tables, but headed back down the mountain soon afterward due to gathering clouds and ominous thunder.

After a short rest at the Casa, we reconvened for an afternoon outing. Since the nearby San Pedro River had been out of its banks recently, Dave decided not to walk to the river that afternoon to avoid mud, wet feet, and the numerous mosquitoes present. Instead, we drove north to the Sierra Vista Environmental Operations Park, which is part of Sierra Vista's wastewater treatment plant and a fabulous birding area. Expertly timing our arrival there at the exact time it was to close for the day (!), we met one of the plant workers who kindly agreed to dummy lock the gates behind us so we could spend an hour birding the site. Although few birds were present on the ponds, we did find both Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds, as well as Killdeer, a distant American Kestrel, and numerous Barn Swallows and Northern Mockingbirds.

Finishing here, and locking the gate behind us, we then proceed to the San Pedro House at the route 90 bridge over the San Pedro River for a short hike. The House itself, operated as an information center by the Bureau of Land Management's San Pedro National Conservation Area, had some feeders up which attracted Mourning, White-winged, and Common Ground-Doves as well as Black-chinned and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds. We took a short hike to the nearby San Pedro River, which was raging and out of its banks on the east side, and explored the mesquite bosque, finding Song Sparrow, many Yellow-breasted Chats, Abert's Towhee, and Bell's Vireo. After a while, however, the mosquitoes became too much so we returned to the van and the Casa. After a chance to refresh, we drove to the nearby Pizzeria Mimosa in Hereford for dinner (albeit with an incredible amount of noise inside due to the crowd there), then returned to the Casa for the checklist and a well-earned night's rest.



Wed., Aug. 10 Casa de San Pedro | Ash Canyon | Miller Canyon

We started off the day with another walk on the road near the Casa, this time making it only a little bit further due to all the avian distractions to be found! The Yellow-breasted Chats and Lazuli Buntings continued to put on a show for us and we also found Gambel's Quail, Cactus Wren, and a semi-cooperative Lucy's Warbler. This walk was, of course, followed by another excellent breakfast.

Loading up the van, we headed to our first destination for the day: Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary, located in the foothills toward the southern end of the Huachuca Mountains. This site has turned into one of the premier hummingbird watching destinations in Southeast Arizona and we were not disappointed. The star of the show here was Lucifer Hummingbird, which put in several appearances for us to admire the lovely color of a male. Also present were a Violet-crowned and numerous Anna's, Broad-billed, and Black-chinned Hummingbirds to provide a great opportunity for study. All these were complemented by the usual White-winged Doves, Mexican Jays, Acorn and Gila Woodpeckers, and Arizona Gray and Rock Squirrels. Finishing up here, we next drove a short way up Miller Canyon to Beatty's Guest Ranch, yet another famed hummingbird spot. We definitely got our fill of hummingbirds here, too, with a Violet-crowned coming in at very close range to grab hair, presumably for a nest, and more Black-chinned, Anna's, Broad-billed, Rivoli's, and Broad-tailed (the latter new for the trip) hummingbirds to round out the list and provide more learning opportunities.

When we finished here, we headed into Sierra Vista for lunch at the Indochine Family Restaurant with Peg Abbott (owner of Naturalist Journeys and just flown in from Oaxaca!) and good friends of Naturalist Journeys Bob and Karen. After lunch, unfortunately, we said goodbye to Robert as he was spirited away by Peg to attend the Tucson Audubon Festival; we missed his expertise and good sense of humor the rest of the trip. But, we quickly made up for our loss by heading back to Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary to get another fill. Interestingly, the hummingbird viewing, particularly of Lucifer's, was even better in the afternoon, with great extended views of male and female-plumaged Lucifer's engaging in long feeding sessions at some of the close-by feeders. Dave was of the opinion, in fact that there were four different Lucifer's visiting during this time, 2 adult males and 2 female types! We then returned to the Casa for a bit of a rest break. After break, we decided to brave the mud and mosquitoes and walk the trail from the Casa to the San Pedro River. Along the way, we had a great look at a young Swainson's Hawk, along with Inca Dove, Yellow Warbler, Lazuli Bunting, and Abert's Towhee. The trails along the river were passable, the river having receded back into its banks, albeit a bit muddy in spots. Although



quiet in the cottonwoods, we found a Black Phoebe along the river, Summer Tanager in the canopy, and a far off, perching Gray Hawk, well seen with the aid of the spotting scope. We returned to the Casa in time to scratch our mosquito bites and freshen up before doing the checklist and enjoying our final dinner there, this time catered by the wonderful Ginny & Janiese's Eclectic Kitchen (and, of course, unlimited pie for desert for those few who still had room!). Then off to bed for our final night at the memorable Casa de San Pedro.

Thur., Aug. 11 Casa de San Pedro | Patagonia | Drive to Amado

The entire group rallied for our final morning walk at Casa de San Pedro; this time, we made it quite a ways down the road! We enjoyed final looks at all our usual suspects in the lovely morning light, including Yellow-breasted Chat, Vermilion Flycatcher, Yellow and Lucy's Warbler, Loggerhead Shrike, Blue Grosbeak, and two Great Horned Owls in the big cottonwood! This was followed, with mixed feelings I have to say, by our last Casa breakfast, and then off we went toward the west in search of new adventures. After a drive through the lovely grasslands around Sonoita, we passed through the small town of Patagonia and arrived at our morning's destination: Patagonia Lake State Park. This lovely site features a lake and some easy trails around the edges which provide good birding. Some of the highlights for us included Great Blue and Green Heron, American Coot, Mexican Duck, and Neotropic Cormorant in the lake itself, plus a veritable feast of landbirds in the cottonwoods and mesquite surrounding it. Particularly memorable for the latter were a Verdin, Northern Beardless Tyrannulet (seen close enough to note its beardlessness, if that is at all possible!), Abert's Towhee, Bell's Vireo, and a flyover Black Vulture, the only one of the tour. On our way out of the park, we had a great view of one of its resident Greater Roadrunners along the side of the road—always a treat for visitors to the southwest.

On our way back into the town of Patagonia, we stopped at the legendary Patagonia Roadside Rest Stop birding site. Dave led the group carefully across the highway and along the narrow trail to the nest site of the Rose-throated Becard. Alas, despite careful watching, only Dave saw a female make a brief appearance at the top of the nest, but could not get the others on it in time. While waiting, a Gray Hawk flew into a cottonwood in the back across the Creek which was visible through the scope. After waiting without success, we returned to the van and then drove the short way into town for a lovely lunch (including desert treats!) at the Gathering Grounds right on main street.



After lunch, we drove through town to the Paton Center for Hummingbirds for another feeder session. The Paton Center is always rewarding and we had consistently good views of many Broad-billed, Black-chinned, and Violet-crowned Hummingbirds, as well as the usual doves, Abert's Towhees, Song Sparrows, and other feeder birds. To our surprise, a male Wilson's Warbler (an early fall migrant) appeared foraging in the trees behind the feeders, too! Before leaving Dave led the group down the dry wash of nearby Sonoita Creek to a point where a small amount of treated sewage water flows into the creek bed. The pools here are heavily used by birds for bathing and the group, aided by the scope, got wonderful views of Blue Grosbeak, Phainopepla, Lucy's Warbler, and Vermilion Flycatcher and heard a Yellow-billed Cuckoo call. Leaving here, we drove down Sonoita Avenue in Patagonia and found a young Mississippi Kite perched in a tree (they had nested here this year) accompanied by an adult soaring overhead. It's always a treat to see this elegant and graceful raptor! After this, we stopped again at the Patagonia Roadside Rest Stop to try again for the becard, but we came away disappointed yet again. By this time, we were running late, so we headed directly for our final destination, the Amado Territory Inn, and a nice dinner at the very elegant Stables Ranch Grille in the Tubac Golf Resort. This was followed by the bird checklist, discussion of plans for the next day, and then yet another well-earned rest.

Fri., Aug. 12 Montosa Canyon | Madera Canyon | Tubac

To make the most of our last full field day of the tour, we were up earlier than usual for a "continental" breakfast at Amado Territory Inn and then loaded up for a full field day. Our first stop was Montosa Canyon on the west flanks of the Santa Ritas, a well-known hotspot for some of the lower elevation specialties. It was a beautiful morning and the birds happily participated in it, with a male Varied Bunting singing at the top of a mesquite at close range, Five-striped Sparrow (the real specialty of this site) seen many times in various ocotillos up the canyon walls (but easily viewable with the scope), Bell's Vireo, Hooded Orioles (with a nest by the stream), and a very unexpected Yellow-billed Cuckoo. After enjoying this wonderful spot, we continued north on I-19, stopping at the Safeway in Green Valley for our lunch platter (this time only what we needed!) and a few supplies.

Then, we headed the van toward the Santa Ritas and the famed Madera Canyon. Our first stop was in the lovely Santa Rita foothill grasslands, at an elevation where grasses predominate with a scattering of mesquites. Dave played a tape of our target here, the Botteri's Sparrow, and was surprised and amazed when one almost immediately came right in! Unfortunately, it came and went so fast that not everybody could locate it, but it was



a great view for those that did. Also found here were Black-throated Sparrows, a fledgling Brown-headed Cowbird being fed by an adult sparrow, Verdin, Common Ground-Dove, and a lovely Zone-tailed Hawk, circling close overhead, first spotted by Jean (our designated primary spotter for the tour). Continuing on up the mountain, we entered the cool, beautiful Madera Canyon and drove to the top trailhead. Dodging the bible-thumpers, most of the group took a relatively short hike further up the canyon to see what could be found. Although pretty quiet, the group was finally rewarded (TBH, after we had decided to turn around and come back down) with amazingly good views of a singing, adult male Elegant Trogon! At last!! With that reward in hand, we returned to the van and enjoyed a picnic lunch at the tables, while admiring a small flock of Bridled Titmice and a Painted Restart. After lunch, we started back down the mountain with a stop at the Santa Rita Lodge for some hummingbird watching, now that parking spots were available there. These feeders are always reliable and this year had another Berylline Hummingbird, reported for several weeks. It was complemented by Rivoli's at extremely close range and the usual Broad-billed and Black-chinned Hummers. Other birds coming in and out from the feeder area included Wild Turkey, Hepatic Tanager, and many Acorn Woodpeckers and Mexican Jays.

We went back to the Inn for a short rest, then headed out for a short final afternoon of birding. Our first stop was the Amado Wastewater Treatment Plant, very close to the Inn, where we found a pair of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks with a brood of seven of the most incredibly adorable ducklings in the entire world (this opinion was confirmed by a unanimous vote of tour participants!). Also present were three Ruddy Ducks and a few Great-tailed Grackles. From here, we headed south to the small town of Tubac, where we parked by the Santa Cruz River and took a short walk. The birding from the bridge over the River was great, with super views of a Tropical Kingbird family, Song Sparrow, Black Phoebe, Yellow Warbler, Blue Grosbeak, and a Lucy's Warbler. We then took a short walk north of the bridge (downstream, given the way the river flows) on the east bank to try to find the other becard nest Dave knew about. However, after dodging mud and numerous mosquitoes, we realized we would not make it to the nest in time, so we turned around, got back in the van, and returned to the Inn to freshen up for our final dinner together. We then proceed back to Tubac for dinner at Elvira's, an always popular (and always eclectic!) restaurant for a great meal, then came back to do the checklist and discuss final plans for the next day.

Sat., Aug. 13

Sweetwater Wetlands | Departures from Tucson

Our departure today was late enough that we were treated to an actual, real breakfast at the Inn, cooked by Teah and Doug, and then we loaded the van and headed straight to the Tucson International Airport, less than an hour away. Arriving there, we dropped off the earliest departures (Cecilia, Noel, Susan, Buck) and then the remaining three (Juliana, Diane, Jean), who had slightly later flights, went with Dave for a final, final birding trip at Sweetwater Wetlands, right in Tucson. These lovely wetlands produced many familiar friends, including Bell's Vireo, Abert's Towhee, Tropical Kingbird, and a Great Blue Heron, but we also found a young Common Gallinule, new for the trip list! After that, we returned to the airport and everyone began their trips home.

Photo Credits: Cactus Wren (Noel Capestany - NC), White-tailed Deer (Robert Gallardo - RG), Cave Creek Ranch Scenic (NC), Birding by the van (David Mehlman - DM), Two-tailed Swallowtail (RG), Red Columbine (RG), Group Birding (RG), Western Wood-Pewee (DM), White-nosed Coati (NC), Black-headed Grosbeak (NC), Snake Catchers (Susan Steingraber - SS), Blue-throated Mountain-Gem (NC), Orange Sulphur (RG), Band-tailed Pigeon (RG), Birding (SS), Great times! (SS), Blue Grosbeak (NC), Curve-billed Thrashers (RG), Climbing Huachucas Scenic (RG), Pipevine Swallowtail (RG), Lucifer Hummingbird (NC), Lazuli Bunting, Violet-crowned Hummingbird (RG), Panoramic Scenic (DM), Lunch with Peg (RG), Arizona Poppy (SS), Phainopepla (NC), Swainson's Hawk (NC), Greater Roadrunner (NC), Montosa Canyon Birding (DM), Black-throated Sparrow feeding young Brown-headed Cowbird (NC), Juan Bautista De Anza trail marker (SS), Elegant Trogon (NC), Spotted! (SS), Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (NC)