

Southeast Arizona: Birding & Nature | Trip Report | Nov. 3-13, 2022 | by Peter Burke



With guide, Peter Burke, and participants Barbara, Freddie, Gordon, Joyce, Sue, and Will



Thurs., Nov. 3

Arrivals

Our group of six hailed from California, Texas, Vancouver B.C. and Nassau, Bahamas! We arrived in Arizona just as a cold front was moving in, and we were anxious to learn how this would affect birding for the week. After loading the van, we set off for Patagonia, just an hour south of Tucson and home to Paton's Center for Hummingbirds. There we were fortunate to find several Violet-crowned Hummingbirds along with many Anna's and Broad-billed. There were also warblers in the yard: a bright Orange-crowned, an uncooperative Black-throated Gray and several Yellow-rumps. A pair of Arizona Gray Squirrels were busy cleaning up the spilled seed. Other highlights included Abert's Towhee, a pair of Ladder-backed Woodpeckers and a small group of Gambel's Quail. Off to a good start! Next, we made a short drive to the Sonoito Inn where we checked in for the night. The plan was to take a nice drive through the Elgin Grasslands to search for Pronghorn, but the herd was right outside the Inn! We made a short drive to get better views of these beautiful "antelope," endemic to the Western Plains and the fastest land mammal in the Western Hemisphere. Having seen and photographed these beasts, the remainder of the evening was a leisurely drive through the grasslands to appreciate the vastness of the open space and take in the sunset. Dinner was at the Sonoita Café where we were treated to some fine picking and strumming and equally fine dining.



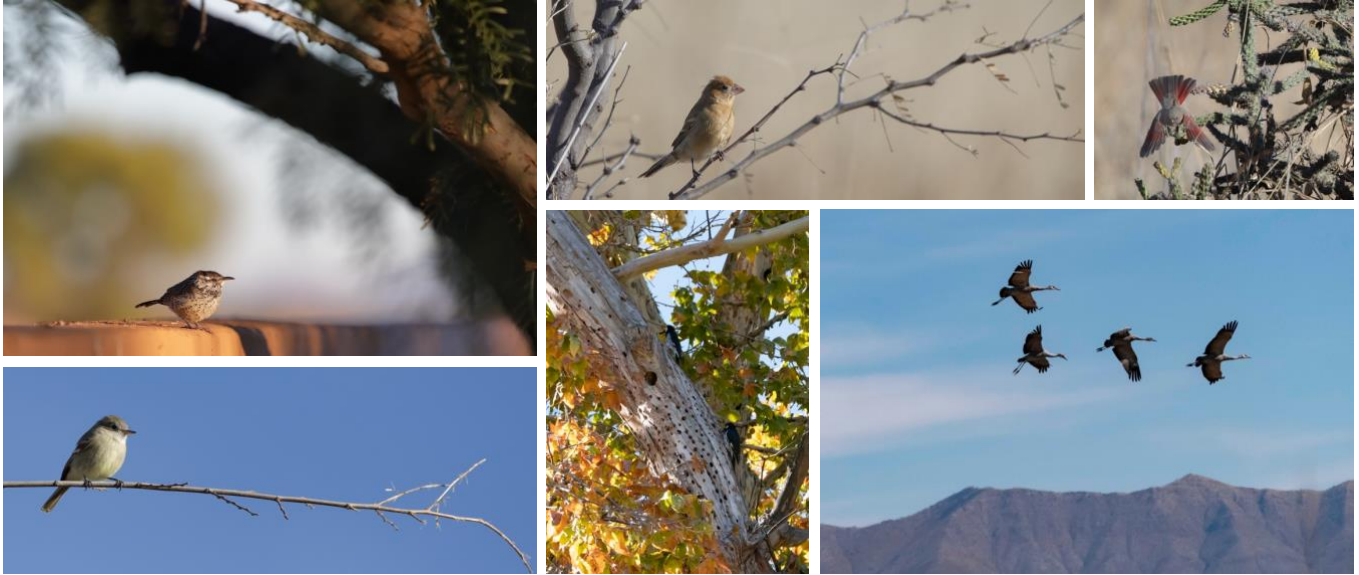
Fri., Nov. 4

Las Cienegas National Conservation Area

This was our morning to explore deeper into the grasslands. After a light breakfast, we once again loaded the van listening to Great-tailed Grackles, a calling Cassin's Kingbird and the ever-present chips of Yellow-rumps in flight. As we set out, we came upon a few Pronghorn glowing in the morning light and paused to appreciate (and photograph) them once again. Then we made our way to the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area. Red-tailed Hawks were conspicuous, perched around every bend it seemed. American Kestrels too were plentiful, and we took some time to study the plumage characteristics and flight style of this petit falcon.

Alongside an empty coral, we noticed a nice flock of Horned Lark, mostly juveniles, scrounging for a meal in the manure. A Black Phoebe called and a Say's Phoebe sallied. A very cooperative pair of ravens perched on the fence, one giving the signature, crow-like croak that distinguishes Chihuahuan Raven from Common. A Lark Sparrow perched in some brush beside a Brewer's, and a Cassin's Kingbird perched up nicely, showing off the bright white malar patch on an otherwise darker gray head that separates this species from the very similar Western Kingbird. Soon we came upon an area full of meadowlarks and several sparrows. With patience, we were able to hear the buzzy call note confirming that these were Chihuahuan Meadowlarks, recently recognized as a full species. The sparrow flock included Vesper, White-crowned and Chipping.

A quick stop at a small watering hole proved to be a wise decision as Sue noticed a beautiful Black-throated Sparrow perched just beyond the American Pipit we had located. Then Joyce pointed out an empid that turned out to be a Gray Flycatcher doing its downward tail wags. After lunch at a surprisingly good Asian restaurant in Sierra Vista, Indochine, (thanks Peg!) we made our way to the Ramsey Canyon Preserve. In the parking lot we were immediately greeted by the busy Acorn Woodpeckers, actively stashing nuts. Feeders at the visitor center and the B&B just below the parking lot were active with Rivoli's Hummingbird and a Broad-tailed Hummer could be heard flying over as well. The hike to the ponds was a nice opportunity to take in the fall colors and a small feeding flock along the river included Bridled Titmice, White-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper and a Northern Flicker. The ponds are home to a small group of the endangered Chihuahuan Leopard Frog, and we were able to observe several, especially after Peter set up a scope! As we started back down the trail, a Painted Redstart made a brief appearance, and two Townsend's Warblers were spotted high in a Sycamore. Alas the preserve closes at 4:00, so we made our way to Casa de San Pedro, our home for the next two nights. We arrived in time to check out the activity at the feeders, where Gila Woodpeckers sparred with Curve-billed Thrashers as Cactus



Wrens filled the air with their haunting calls. A catered dinner was both delicious and convenient and I think many of us hit the sheets early.

Fri., Nov. 5

Whitewater Draw | Bisbee

In the morning we awoke to a chilly dawn, with temperatures near freezing. But hot coffee and busy feeders were a pleasant distraction. A pair of Canyon Towhees were active in the front, being watched by a shy group of Inca Doves. A female Lazuli Bunting worked the grasses as a grumpy Black Phoebe made disapproving calls, waiting for the pond to heat up and provide some insect activity for breakfast. Speaking of breakfast, it was time for some eggs! Patrick prepared a lovely breakfast to fuel a very full day of birding. Midmorning we drove about an hour to Whitewater Draw. This wetland, located in the Sulphur Springs Valley, has become an important wintering site for Sandhill Cranes, and we were greeted by small groups of these handsome birds bugling overhead. Here we met Peg Abbott who greeting the group and almost immediately got us on a Common Ground-Dove, an unusual sighting for the area. We spent the rest of the morning appreciating the natural beauty of this desert oasis, scoping our way through dabbling ducks, photographing a very cooperative male Vermilion Flycatcher all the while being serenaded with Crane song. Peter pointed out a few Snow Geese on the far side of the water, and Peg noted an early Bonaparte's Gull loafing among the ducks.

Midday we drove into the Valley, stopping in a park on the outskirts of Elfrida for a picnic lunch. After lunch we drove the dirt roads and found a few good birds like Clay-colored Sparrow, Scaled Quail, Prairie Falcon (thanks Sue!), many Chihuahuan Ravens and perhaps the bird of the day – Bendire's Thrasher. Then it was time to return to Whitewater to watch as the Cranes flew in, only the Cranes were already there. Peg suggested that food must be quite plentiful in the nearby fields, and thus the Cranes were remaining close to the wetland throughout the day. Instead of watching the Cranes at sunset, we were witness to an awesome spectacle involving thousands of Yellow-headed Blackbirds alternately roosting in, and erupting from, the reeds in murmuring waves.

We stopped in the historic town of Bisbee for dinner on the ride back to Casa. However, The Table, our chosen restaurant that doesn't accept reservations, was backed up for an hour or more. But our nimble (and hungry) group located a nearby sandwich shop, so we brought our dinner back to the Casa!



Sat., Nov. 6

Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary | Cave Creek Ranch

Breakfast on Sunday was pancakes, served piping hot with plenty of strong coffee. Outside, the feeders were again hopping with the happy Gilas and the grumpy Phoebe. After our meal we ventured into the warm morning sunshine and found *Pyrrhuloxia* posing alongside several Curve-billed Thrashers and two pairs of Cactus Wren who were busy nest-building. In the back, a pair of Green-tailed Towhees were feeding by the pond as a Bewick's Wren circled warily. Each hummingbird feeder was being watched by a hungry Anna's Hummer, waiting for the sugar water to thaw after a second freezing night.

But it was time for our group to move on, so we packed the van and made a brief stop at the Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary to see what was coming to the feeders. Mexican Jays were plentiful, as were the dapper Lesser Goldfinch. Yellow-rumped Warblers, mostly Myrtle, mobbed the feeders in the back blind. Acorn Woodpeckers were busy here as well, not surprising with so many Oaks, and several butterflies were busy in the gardens including Southern Dogface, Cloudless Sulphur, Painted Lady and a fritillary that may have been a Gulf Fritillary with a broken wing. Lunch was at the historic Gadson Hotel located in Douglas, just miles from the border with Mexico. We paused for a group photo, not realizing that the mural over the stairs behind us was a painting of the view from Dave Jasper's home! After a nice meal, we completed our drive to Portal at the base of the Chiricahua Mountains and checked into Cave Creek Ranch, our home base for the next four days. Dinner that night was at the Sky Island Grill, followed by a fascinating talk on Sky Island Ecology by Peg. Peter led a few adventurous souls out to listen for Western Screech-Owl though none responded, perhaps due to the very bright full moon, which would be fully eclipsed that night!

Sun., Nov. 7

Chiricahua National Monument

An early breakfast was scheduled to give us time for the long, slow drive up and over the mountain on our way to the Chiricahua National Monument. Peter had shared an interesting [Youtube video](#) that described the cataclysmic volcanic eruption 27 million years ago that led to the formation of the impressive rock columns. On the way, Sue spotted a perched bird that turned out to be a Band-tailed Pigeon. We also came upon an active feeding group of Yellow-eyed Juncos and Peter was able to get one in the scope to give everyone the chance to see and study this small sparrow up close, including the namesake yellow iris. As we did, a Sharp-shinned Hawk exploded out of the dense vegetation and wound its way right through our group, showing off its agile flying ability as it sought breakfast.



As we continued our climb, a few Steller's Jays stayed frustratingly distant. Then we made our descent into the canyon and stopped at the Chiricahua Monument sign for a group photo before continuing on to the Visitor Center. Geology was the highlight as we toured the canyon. Watching as the light played on the delicate hoodoos, some defying gravity with their capstones precariously perched, was a treat. Yellow-rumped Warblers and Mexican Jays were the most numerous birds we noted. Massai Point was a nice place for a picnic. A Spotted Towhee, scratching the earth beside our table was the fourth species of Towhee for the trip. On our way home, we had to stop in the road to get a closer look at a Grand Canyon Tarantula. At another stop we came across several Red-naped Sapsuckers including one that was likely a hybrid Red-naped x Red-breasted. Joyce was riding shotgun on the way out, and at the last moment pointed out a beautiful Black-tailed Rattlesnake that was in the road, surprisingly high up for that time of year. A flock of Wild Turkey grazed its way across the road, giving us the chance to view this desert race of "Gould's" Turkeys. That evening we enjoyed a fabulous home cooked meal prepared by Jackie at the Ranch.

Mon., Nov. 8 Rodeo

In the morning we met local birding guide Dave Jasper, a longtime resident of Portal, who took us birding in and around Rodeo, just across the border in New Mexico. It's a small town, just one restaurant, and when they decided to open a bit later than usual, well, what can you do? Dave took us out to a pecan grove and helped us differentiate between Common and Chihuahuan Ravens. Service was slow, but the breakfast was hot. Our next stop was the infamous Willow Tank, recently improved to a small pond with water year-round. There we found female Ring-necked Ducks, Killdeer and a few American Coot. A flock of Chestnut-collared Longspur wheezed and wheeled but never did make a landing. Two Sora were loud but otherwise invisible and a Savannah Sparrow perched patiently while we took turns appreciating its tidy steaked flanks, pink legs and yellow lores.

A relaxed walk through downtown Portal turned up a late-staying Cassin's Kingbird, a vocal Black Phoebe, several tooting Townsend's Solitaire and more Yellow-rumps than one could shake a stick at. Dave pointed out a nest built by the male Blue-throated Mountain-gem under the eave of a small shed. Small flocks of Cedar Waxwing circled. Just up the road at Dave's home, we were treated to a raucous scene at the feeders he



maintains. Several coveys of Gambel's Quail argued over territory, seeds, anything they could! A first-year female Broad-billed Hummingbird came in for a drink and a Cactus Wren sprinted along the fence line, impressively quick runner! Even though we were less than a mile from Cave Creek Ranch, here all the jays were Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays and Dave noted that he had only seen Mexican Jays at his feeders twice.

After lunch we returned to Cave Creek to relax and see what was coming to those feeders. A Hairy Woodpecker was a new addition to our trip list. It was then joined by an Arizona Woodpecker. In the center island, there was a Red-naped Sapsucker, several busy Acorn Woodpeckers and an occasional Northern Flicker, the western, red-shafted variety. Five woodpeckers! Bridled Titmice were nervously working the side feeders and a Curve-billed Thrasher made a dramatic appearance only to scurry back to the cover of the woodpile. American Robins were feeding on the pyracantha berries. Jackie cooked another splendid dinner for us, which was followed by a very informative talk on Sandhill Cranes by Cathie Sandell, a long-time volunteer at Bosque del Apache NWR.

Tues., Nov. 9

East Turkey Creek | Jackie's Feeders

Following a tasty breakfast, we drove up to East Turkey Creek to make one more try for Mexican Chickadee. It was a beautiful morning, but clearly the birds were sleeping in! After a bit we were able to get a small flock to come in and investigate Dave as he gave the gentle, two-syllabled call of a Northern Pygmy-owl. Yellow-eyed Juncos, a Pine Siskin, then a pair of Hutton's Vireos – best distinguished from Ruby-crowned Kinglet by voice as they look nearly identical! Even a Painted Redstart came in to see what all the fuss was about. But no chickadee, so we set out on the road to Paradise. The fall colors were gorgeous but the birding was slow. Peter pointed out a calling House Wren and then offered to go retrieve the van. Wouldn't you know it, on the way up a Mexican Chickadee was feeding right over the road! But when I got the van down to the rest of the group, everyone had their binoculars pointed straight up, and I know Dave had gotten them a chickadee! Several in fact.

Our next stop was Jackie's feeders a.k.a. the George Walker House. On the short drive down I asked Dave if we might find some Montezuma Quail, Zoomies he calls them. "Not on this road," he replied, but barely did he get the words out when his keen eyes noticed a bump on the side of the road ahead. "Stop the van." In fact, there were two female Zoomies barely visible in the shadows ahead. We quietly snuck out of the van and Peter set up a scope. As we took quick turns at the scope, the birds moved up the hillside, taking cover in the scrub. Peter



and Dave attempted to flush the birds back towards the road, but inadvertently flushed them along with two more unseen birds, males? This chance encounter, even if the views were fleeting, was truly a gift. As Dave pointed out, in his 31 years in Portal, he'd never found Montezuma Quail on the lower Paradise Road.

Jackie's feeders were humming. Our most-hoped-for bird here was Juniper Titmouse, and after a few minutes a nifty little gray titmouse started making regular visits to a feeder right by the porch and just as Jackie was serving up some homemade chocolate! Several Red-naped Sapsuckers were in the area, including one juvenile. Dave pointed out that only Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers retain juvenile plumage into the winter months, meaning this was a rare sighting. Not to be left out, a pair of Arizona Woodpeckers joined the party. Lesser Goldfinch, Pine Siskin, Townsend's Solitaire and then a Townsend's Warbler! A Painted Redstart made a quick and nervous appearance and then thought better of it. Some chose to linger and work on photography and Dave led the rest a bit further down the road. What a morning! We worked our way back down to Portal and enjoyed a lovely lunch outdoors at the Portal Café.

Our last afternoon at Cave Creek Ranch. Some chose to walk the grounds and Peter led the rest for one final attempt for Crissal Thrasher. We were extremely fortunate to get not one but TWO Crissal Thrashers. And one even took a perch and sang as our camera shutters whizzed away. Emboldened we decided to try for Black-throated Sparrow once again and were rewarded with a pair just a few feet in front of us. How about Verdin? Right on cue, a Verdin came in almost immediately! A quick stop back at Dave's feeders and then back to the Ranch to get cleaned up before our farewell dinner – another masterpiece from Jackie.

Wed., Nov. 10

Last-minute Birding | Departures

Kylee arrived early to make us breakfast (fresh cinnamon rolls!) at 6AM so that we could get an early start. We had to be at the Tucson Airport no later than 11:30 and there was one more stop – the Lake Cochise wetlands behind the Twin Lakes Golf Course in Wilcox. We made good time and arrived with the sun still low in the sky. In a small pond we were thrilled to find a pair of Cinnamon Teal including a snappy drake lit up by the morning sun. The same small pond had Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck, Ruddy Duck, Pied-billed Grebe and American Coot. A Cassin's Kingbird was heard, but seen only for a moment. A



very handsome female Vermilion Flycatcher perched in the reeds along with several noisy pairs of Marsh Wren. A Long-billed Curlew, unseen, gave its haunting flight call.

As we drove to the east end of the main pool, we heard distant bugling of Sandhill Cranes in the air. Several Northern Harrier were working the grasses and a Kestrel blasted through. Both Black and Say's Phoebe were about, and a few shorebirds like Killdeer, Greater Yellowlegs and a distant Wilson's Snipe. A group of eight American Avocet flew over, and then 20 minutes later made a second pass but never landed. Working clockwise around the water, we had the opportunity to watch and photograph several Eared Grebes diving just beyond the shoreline. Time to go, but on the way out there was more to see. Several swallows on the wires including Barn, Tree and possibly Cliff. A flock of Great-tailed Grackles was the perfect place for a few Brewer's Blackbirds to hide out, and several more Wilson's Snipe made short, awkward flights at the back of the marsh. TIME! We simply had to get on the road. Fortunately, the traffic was light, and we made it to the airport just one minute behind schedule!

I hope everyone had a great time in Southeast Arizona. I truly wish we'd had more time to spend together! Maybe we will meet again on another Naturalist Journeys trip in the future! More details on the birding locations and individual eBird checklists can be found on the [Trip Report](#). Photos from the trip are available in the [Naturalist Journeys Google Photos Album](#), and you are also welcome to browse [my Flickr album](#).

Group Panoramic (Peter Burke - PB), Red-tailed Hawk (Barbara Hamilton - BH), Vermillion Flycatcher (PB), Rattlesnake (William Hamilton - WH), Red-tailed Hawk (WH), Gambel's Quail (WH), Chiricahua Leopard Frog (WH), Pronghorn (BH), Chihuahuan Meadowlark (WH), Cactus Wren (PB), Dusky Flycatcher (PB), Lazuli Bunting (PB), Pyrrhuloxia (PB), Acorn Woodpecker (BH), Sandhill Cranes (BH), Yellow-headed Blackbirds (WH), Gila Woodpecker (PB), Mexican Jay (PB), White-breasted Nuthatch (PB), Butterfly (PB), Curve-billed Thrasher (WH), Virginia Rail (BH), Group Photo (PB), Scenic (PB), Wild Turkey (BH), Daily recap with Peg (PB), Acorn Woodpecker (BH), White-breasted Nuthatch (BH), Blue-throated Mountain-Gem (BH), Pyrrhuloxia (PB), Group (PB), Bridled Titmouse (BH), Hutton's Vireo (BH), Sunset (PB), Arizona Woodpecker (BH)