

# New Mexico Nature and Culture | Dec. 4 – 11, 2022 | Trip Report | by Dave Mehlman



With guides Dave Mehlman and Kathleen Hall, and participants Dori, George, Janice, Kathy, Phil, Ron, Sandy, Steve, Susan, and Susana



## Sun., Dec. 4 Arrive in Albuquerque

Though the tour officially started today, Dori and Ron came in two days early and George, Janice, and Susan came in a day early. Kathleen and Dave picked up Kathy, Sandy, and Susana from the airport and we all convened at the Hotel Albuquerque near Old Town, along with Steve and Phil, who drove in from Tucson. After meeting up mid-afternoon, we visited the Rio Grande Nature Center, probably the top birding spot in the Albuquerque metro area.

The front pond at the Nature Center had a nice-sized flock of Cackling Geese, with a few larger and longer-necked Canada Geese mixed in, providing a nice comparison. The back pond, by the visitor center itself, was full of ducks including Wood Ducks, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Bufflehead, and a few Green-winged Teal in the back. The seed feeders scattered about the Nature Center offered great views of Red-winged Blackbirds (oddly, almost all female-type) and White-crowned Sparrows, with a few Black-capped Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatches, and Spotted Towhees thrown in. We then proceeded to hike the trail across the riverside drain, through the cottonwood bosque, to the Rio Grande. It was a lovely walk, but with few birds except for a Black Phoebe that showed nicely over the drain, and flyover Great Blue Heron and Cooper's Hawk. While walking around, we also noted Coyotes and a Desert Cottontail. A final stop at the feeders on the way out was fortuitous, as two different White-throated Sparrows foraged around the base, and a Downy Woodpecker made an appearance.

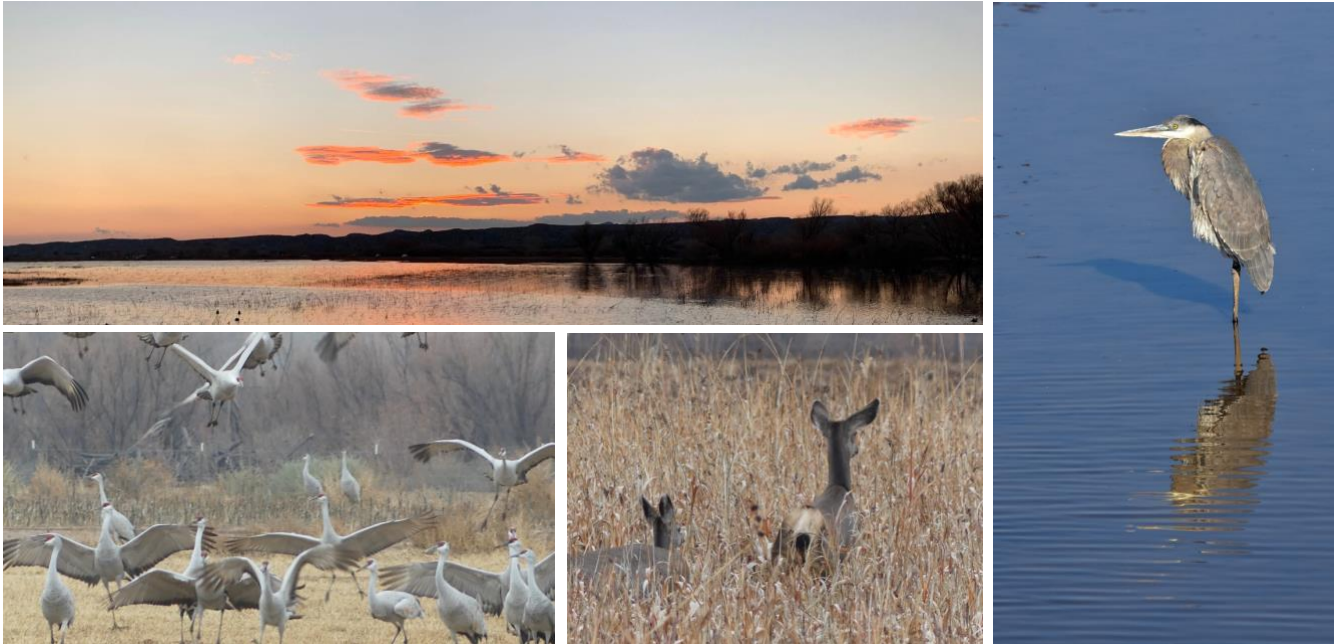


We returned to the Hotel Albuquerque for a brief break, then met in the lobby for introductions and an overview of the trip. Loading up the vehicles, we then headed north to El Pinto, a well-known New Mexican restaurant in Albuquerque's North Valley, for our first dinner. During dinner, everyone enjoyed learning the intricacies of red and green chiles, which would be a recurring theme throughout the trip! After a great meal we returned to the hotel to rest up for the following day.

## **Mon., Dec. 5                      Bernardo WMA | Bosque del Apache NWR**

After breakfast at the Garduño's we got prepared for a full day in the field exploring the middle Rio Grande Valley to the south of Albuquerque. Our first stop was the Bernardo Wildlife Management Area, part of the larger Ladd S. Gordon Waterfowl Complex, near the tiny town of Bernardo. Unfortunately, light rain in the area for most of the previous day had left the roads in very bad, muddy shape, and area managers had closed the gates to vehicle access. However, this didn't stop our group! We walked the muddy roads to the two viewing platforms that are closest to the entrance gate, all the while being serenaded by a chorus of calling Sandhill Cranes—thousands upon thousands of them all around us (and in the skies above). At the second platform, we could see large flocks of Snow Geese in the corn fields, which occasionally would get upset by something, putting them up in vast clouds before settling back down—a classic middle Rio Grande Valley winter wildlife experience. While walking the roads, we also noted many other typical avian specialties of the area in winter including Red-winged Blackbirds, Northern Harriers, Western Meadowlarks, and many Mourning Doves.

Then we continued to the famed Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge south of Socorro, stopping first at the visitor center for its bathrooms and feeders. A short walk around the visitor center revealed many Gambel's Quail, White-crowned Sparrow, a Pyrrhuloxia, and a somewhat out-of-habitat Townsend's Solitaire. A great start to the day! Heading out onto the refuge itself, we enjoyed a picnic lunch at some tables on a viewing platform by one of the large impoundments. As we ate, we also admired the many Northern Shovelers and Northern Pintails. Working the scope, Dave turned up other less conspicuous species including Ring-necked Duck, American Wigeon, Gadwall, Bufflehead, and a drake Redhead. Then for dessert, a spectacular Ferruginous Hawk soared directly over the platform, providing excellent views of this beautiful buteo!



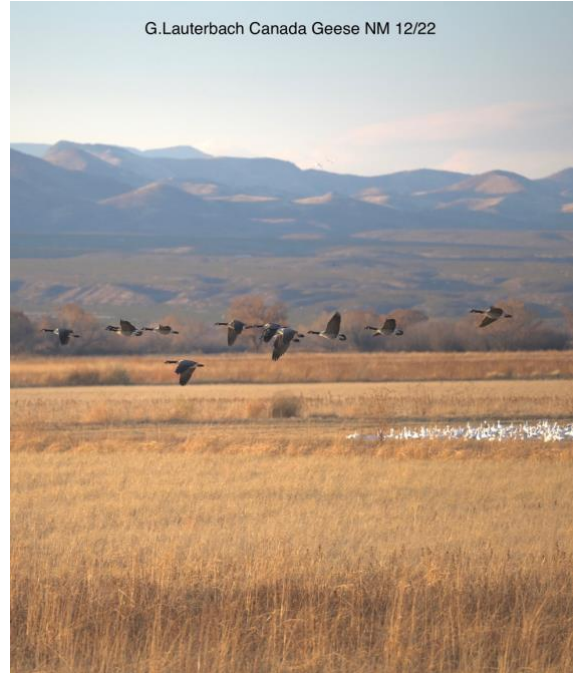
We continued our driving tour of the refuge, stopping occasionally at other platforms to admire the wildlife. Along the boardwalk we discovered several Great Blue Herons preening in the warmth of the afternoon, and a pair of Raccoons foraging in the muddy water. Driving north, we noticed a large crowd of people watching Sandhill Cranes, so we stopped, too, and noticed four White-faced Ibis (very unusual for this time of year) foraging in an impoundment, providing one of the better bird sightings of the tour. On the north loop, we stopped to scan a huge flock of Sandhill Cranes and white geese in a field, and Dave was able to spot a few Ross's Geese in with the Snow Geese. Alas they were so far away and buried deep in the flock, making it difficult for others to see them. We ended the day admiring the lovely sunset over the Flight Deck Pond, watching the constantly foraging Northern Shovelers and listening to the murmuring of cranes, geese, and ducks as twilight descended. Then, we reluctantly climbed back in the vans and drove to nearby Socorro for dinner at Bodega Burger, in a private dining room no less! On our return to Albuquerque, we appreciated the dark night sky, so far from city lights. We arrived back at the Hotel Albuquerque by 10:00pm to conclude a long, but very rewarding, day in the Rio Grande Valley.

## **Tues., Dec. 6**

## **Sandia Mountains | Old Town Albuquerque**

Today we started with a fine breakfast at The Range Café, just up the road from the Hotel Albuquerque, and then we headed east for a day exploring the Sandia Mountains, which form the backdrop to Albuquerque. Driving east on I-40 through Tijeras Canyon, we exited and turned north up the windy Sandia Crest Road. As we gained elevation, the vegetation gradually changed from pinyon-juniper to ponderosa pine and finally to mixed conifer forest near the top. Stopping to use the bathrooms, we were fortunate to have great views of Red Crossbills, along with a few Mountain Chickadees and Hairy Woodpeckers. Some of the crossbills were gathering dirt or salt on the ground, allowing great photo opportunities for some. At 10,678 feet, the Sandia Crest parking lot was cold and windy, with rime ice coating the trees and buildings. We stationed our vehicles strategically to view the recently filled bird feeders and found three Black Rosy-Finches, including one striking adult male. We were fortunate indeed to have such great views of this hard-to-find species.

There wasn't too much else around other than some Dark-eyed Juncos (at this elevation, the Gray-headed form) and a Least Chipmunk. We stopped at the Sulphur Canyon picnic area on our way back down where some saw



an Abert's Squirrel. With a little effort we were able to find Townsend's Solitaire, Mountain Chickadee, Steller's Jay, and Common Raven. The nearby Lantern Ridge Farm Market served up a tasty lunch and then we returned with some free time to explore Albuquerque in the afternoon. Reconvening late in the day, we went over the bird list and then enjoyed a great dinner at the D.H. Lescombes Restaurant just a short walk from the hotel. Then off to our rooms to rest up for the following day.

## **Wed., Dec. 7                      Bandelier National Monument | Los Alamos | Taos**

Breakfast was at the Central Grill and Coffee House, right on old Route 66 in Albuquerque. Then we loaded the vehicles and headed out to explore northern New Mexico. Our first stop was the scenic Bandelier National Monument in the Jemez Mountains. We spent a few hours at this lovely site, walking among and learning about the old pueblo ruins and cave dwellings that make this place a national monument. It was cool but sunny, and bird activity was limited except for lots and lots of Townsend's Solitaires, which are always a treat. Several sharp-eyed members of our group noted a variety of carved designs high in the rocky cliffs, many of which appeared to resemble birds or other animals. After exploring the Monument, we drove to the nearby town of White Rock, a suburb of Los Alamos, for a delectable lunch at the Pig + Fig Café. Continuing into the city, we visited the Los Alamos Historical Museum, which has a great overview of the Manhattan Project and the famed scientists who worked there including Robert Oppenheimer. We learned about what Los Alamos was like before World War II, and how it grew into a "real" town in the years after the conflict. Several of the old Los Alamos Ranch School buildings, which were acquired by the U.S. Army to house the Manhattan Project, are still in use as houses, museums, or can otherwise be visited. After this thought-provoking tour of an important site in New Mexico and the nation's history, we continued our journey north, arriving at the Historic Taos Inn a little after 5 p.m. That evening we met and walked a short distance to the Plant Base Café for dinner. As we ate, the light rain turned to heavy snow and Dave volunteered to walk back to the hotel and retrieve the van. Way to go Dave and welcome to winter in Taos!



## **Thur., Dec. 8                      Abiquiu | Ghost Ranch**

This morning, after a hearty breakfast at the Taos Up Front Café, we proceeded down the Rio Grande through the lower part of the Taos Gorge, stopping briefly at the County Line River Access to look at the river. Although some in the group saw a Bald Eagle on the drive there, the river itself was quiet, with only Common Ravens calling. Continuing our drive, we crossed over into the Chama River drainage and proceeded upstream into this beautiful river valley. We stopped at the Poshouwingeh Pueblo Site, perched on a bluff overlooking the Chama. This ancestral Puebloan site was built and used in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and its descendants are now thought to be living in Santa Clara and Ohkay Owingeh Pueblos nearby. The pueblo is thought to have had 700 rooms with some buildings up to three stories tall. Observing it now gives one a great perspective on pueblo life at that time, prior to the arrival of Spanish colonists. The more adventurous of the group climbed all the way up to the top of the small mesa behind the pueblo, which provides a spectacular view over the pueblo, river, and the valley all the way down to the Rio Grande and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains behind.

We then proceeded to the Abiquiu Inn and visited the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum. An intriguing movie contained interviews of people who knew or worked with, or for, Miss O’Keeffe back in the day. Our next stop was the Inn itself for a very nice lunch served in their dining room. After lunch and a bit of browsing the Inn’s shop, we continued to Ghost Ranch where we met local guide Susan for a Georgia O’Keeffe Landscape Tour. In this dramatic tour, we got to travel to some of the back parts of the Ranch, including near Miss O’Keeffe’s house, to see the actual landscapes, cliffs, hills, and even individual trees that so inspired the artist during her long stay in the Abiquiu area. A fun part of the tour was when Susan produced copies of her paintings, letting us directly compare them to the exact landscapes she painted! It was fascinating to see how Miss O’Keeffe both captured the natural beauty of the area, and modified the scenes to accentuate certain aspects. Of course, this group was not completely distracted by the scenery, and we noticed a few birds along the way, including the only Mountain Bluebird of the tour, plus more Townsend’s Solitaires and a Woodhouse’s Scrub-Jay. Then it was back to Taos for a short break before dinner at one of Kathleen and Dave’s favorite restaurants in town: Ají, serving Peruvian cuisine. Another fabulous day!



## **Fri., Dec. 9**

### **Taos Culture: Gorge, Museums, Pueblo, Downtown**

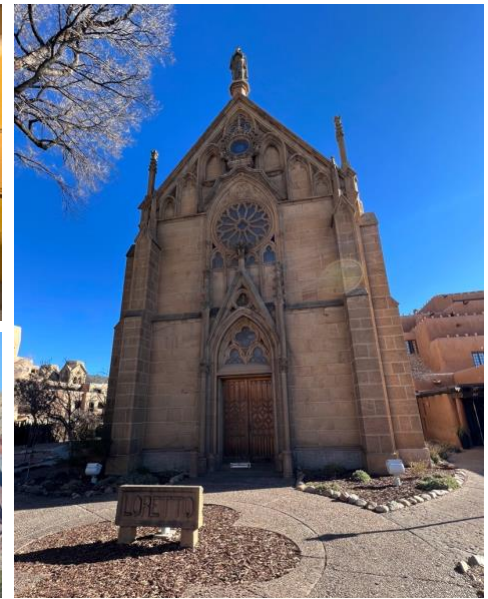
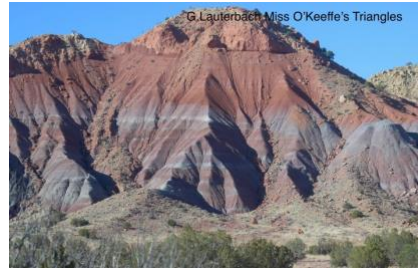
After another nice breakfast at Taos Up Front Café, we headed directly west on the highway to the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge, the best-known bridge in the entire State of New Mexico. On our way there, Dave noticed a small herd of Bighorn Sheep with four rams and 11 ewes right next to the highway, so we pulled off to get good views. The bridge itself carries Highway 64 over the gorge, 600 feet above the river, and is the tenth highest bridge in the United States. On a very chilly morning, we took a short walk to the edge of the gorge overlooking the vast sagebrush plains surrounded by tall peaks in all directions, many covered with snow. As we admired the view, we noticed several more Bighorn Sheep scattered about, their white butts making them easier to spot among the lava boulders. One pair, in fact, were in quite the amorous mood that morning!

After this great start to the day, we returned to town to visit the Millicent Rogers Museum with its extensive collection of Native American art such as weavings and pottery. One of the museum's docents was available to answer questions about specific pieces. Following our museum tour, we returned to our hotel and then walked to the nearby Martyr's Steakhouse for lunch. After lunch, we drove to the Taos Pueblo to visit this historic place, estimated to have been constructed between 1000 and 1450. We were joined by Ariana, a local guide, who described aspects of the Pueblo, its people, and some of their customs. After finishing here, we returned to the Taos Inn for a free afternoon and evening, and the group dispersed to various places in town (or stayed right at the Inn)!

## **Sat., Dec. 10**

### **San Francisco de Asis | Chimayo | Santa Fe**

This was our final morning in Taos, so we met early and loaded all our gear in the vehicles before starting our journey south. Our first stop was breakfast at Taos Java before continuing to Ranchos de Taos to visit the San Francisco de Asis church. This is probably the best known of the old Spanish churches in New Mexico, having been painted by Georgia O'Keeffe and photographed by Ansel Adams. It was constructed between 1710 and 1755 and still retains its original form, including the mudded adobe walls. To our surprise, the small plaza out front had a few birds present, including a Black-billed Magpie, several Dark-eyed Juncos, and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet spotted by Dave in a nearby conifer.



Continuing our drive, we took the High Road from Taos to Santa Fe, passing through numerous old Hispanic villages such as Trampas and Truchas and the Picurís Pueblo. We stopped for a short walk at the Santuario de Chimayó, a famous Catholic pilgrimage site known for the healing power of its miraculous dirt. After admiring the area, we continued south into Santa Fe to visit the Randall Davey Audubon Center at the top of Canyon Road. We all needed a “bird fix” and the feeders here were just the ticket! Highlights included close-range Juniper Titmouse, Pygmy Nuthatch, and Mountain Chickadee, along with several junco forms (Gray-headed, Pink-sided, and Oregon). After having our fill, we enjoyed lunch at the unique Tesuque Village Market, with its very interesting bathroom décor! After lunch, we made our way to the Hotel Santa Fe near the Railyard District. That afternoon we were free to explore Santa Fe. Many used the hotel shuttle to visit the Santa Fe Plaza for some shopping. That evening we met in the reception area by the fireplace, which, oddly, was full of dogs! We reviewed our final bird list and discussed plans for the next day. Afterward we adjourned to the Amaya Restaurant for our final dinner of the tour.

## Sun., Dec. 11 Departures from Albuquerque

We all came together one last time for breakfast at the Amaya in the Hotel Santa Fe, then Dave took a large contingent in his van straight to the Albuquerque International Sunport for the earlier flights out. He also dropped Steve and Phil back at the Hotel Albuquerque where their car was parked. Kathleen followed a bit later with the rest of the group who had later flights. With that, we all made our way home with great memories of a wonderful tour of the Land of Enchantment.

*Photo Credits: Group Photo (Dave Mehlman - DM), Dark-eyed (Gray-headed) Junco (Ronald Gangnon -RG), Bosque del Apache Sunset (DM), Sandhill Crane (Susana Tamayo - ST), Group Walk (ST), Wood Duck (RG), Mallard (RG), Red-winged Blackbird (ST), Bosque del Apache Sunset (DM), Sandhill Crane (RG), Mule Deer (RG), Great Blue Heron (ST), Douglas Fir cone (ST), Moon (ST), White-breasted Nuthatch (ST), Canada and Snow Geese (George Lauterbach - GL), Bandelier National Park (DM), What a view! (RG), Group Birding (RG), Rio Grande Gorge Bridge (DM), Common Raven (RG), Santuario de Chimayó (Dorianne Kalish - DK), Taos Pueblo (DM), Ferruginous Hawk (GL), Final Night (RG), Georgia O'Keeffe's Triangles (GL), Church (RG)*