

Southeast Arizona Sweetheart Birding | Trip Report

February 11-15, 2023 | by Dave Krueper



With guide Dave Krueper and participants Ann Marie, Debbie, Ellen and Mary



Introduction

Arizona! Just mentioning it brings images of saguaro cactus in the desert, magnificent mountains covered in conifers and oaks, and high elevation grasslands sprinkled throughout. Southeast Arizona is deservedly famous for its exotic and colorful spring and summer denizens, yet the winter season is just as special. Many migrants take advantage of the warmer temperatures, joining the year-round residents, and occasionally we'll see vagrants from the northern Sonoran regions of Mexico or even from the eastern U.S. This AZSE Sweethearts Birding Tour was designed to take advantage of all these events, but particularly to view and enjoy the Madrean woodland species as well as the Sandhill Cranes that flock to the Sulphur Springs Valley in winter. We planned this trip to cover all these habitats AND to enjoy the wonderful hospitality and food offered by one of the best bed-and-breakfasts in the American Southwest!

Sat. Feb. 11 Arrival in Tucson | South to Casa de San Pedro

Our tour started just before 1:00 PM in Tucson where we met at the designated hotel. Ann Marie drove her own vehicle, and Debbie and Dave were on site ready to pack and go. Once Mary and Ellen joined us, we packed our gear in a spacious 15- person van, with enough room for some serious "siesta time" and leg stretching as needed! The weather cooperated, with mild temperatures, a calm breeze and high overcast clouds. Driving east out of Tucson and then south on Hwy 83 through the Empirita Mountains toward Sonoita, we gradually transitioned from Sonoran Desert to low elevation oak grasslands, and then into the high desert grasslands near



Sonoita, for which this part of the world is famous. Passing through Sonoita, we headed southeast to the quaint town of Patagonia where we enjoyed a late lunch at The Gathering Place. Several pieces of delicious pie were consumed!! Our first birding stop was at the Paton Center for Hummingbirds, which is administered by the Tucson Audubon Society. Here we enjoyed closeup views of many of SE Arizona's specialty bird species such as Common Ground-Dove, Inca Dove, White-winged Dove, Gila Woodpecker, Abert's Towhee, singing Curve-billed Thrasher, Northern Cardinal and over-wintering White-crowned and Chipping sparrows. Amazingly we located an over-wintering mega-rarity for the area, a Northern Parula, which had been discovered the previous day. There are very few records of this eastern warbler from mid-winter in Arizona, and we all got great looks as it foraged directly in front of us. Although we did not find the over-wintering Violet-crowned Hummingbird, we did get great views of male and a female Anna's Hummingbirds coming into the front feeders. Needing to press onward, we peeled away from this wonderful area and headed southeast through the gorgeous Sonoita Grasslands, observing several Chihuahuan Meadowlarks flashing across the road ahead of us. To the south of Sierra Vista, we checked in with Patrick Dome and Karl Schmitt at the beautiful Casa de San Pedro, adjacent to the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area. Casa de San Pedro is a nationally acclaimed inn that is, "90 miles from Tucson and inches from heaven," and after seeing our rooms and touring the grounds, we couldn't have agreed more! It's the ideal location for our groups, with meeting space, incredible hospitality, active bird feeders, a small pond and, just a short walk from the yard, the San Pedro River. We enjoyed chicken cordon bleu with green beans, cauliflower, mushroom risotto and home-baked peach cobbler topped with vanilla ice cream!

Sun. Feb. 12 Sulphur Springs Valley | Whitewater Draw

Well, let's just get right to it! We did an early morning bird walk at the Casa de San Pedro that introduced us to some of SE Arizona's specialty birds such as Abert's and Canyon towhees, Gila and Ladder-backed woodpeckers, Northern Cardinal, Pyrrhuloxia and a very accommodating pair of Cactus Wrens sunning themselves. After a wonderful breakfast at Casa de San Pedro, we continued southeast through Bisbee on our way to the Sulphur Springs Valley (SSV). Although a bit cold in the morning, it did warm nicely. We picked up our "to go" box lunch of sandwiches and snacks for the day at a local deli and then made our way to the arid grasslands of SSV. We observed the many-layered limestone formations in the Mule Mountains where the unique ocotillo flourish on the south-facing slopes. We carefully scoured all potential habitat for Bendire's Thrasher along the way, but we were unsuccessful in finding this uncommon to rare permanent resident.



Arriving at Whitewater Draw Wildlife Area before noon, we took a walk around some of the trails that overlook the wetlands, ponds, grasslands and Chihuahuan desert scrub habitats. We had a flash fly-by of more than a dozen Chestnut-collared Longspurs as we approached the parking area, accompanied by beautiful Loggerhead Shrikes and Red-tailed Hawks perched on barbed wire fences and electric lines. The impoundments held a good amount of water and hosted numerous waterfowl species including Snow and Ross's geese, a single Greater White-fronted Goose (rare in winter), Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal and Gadwall. A single Sora and a female Vermilion Flycatcher were a delight! Of course the roosting Sandhill Cranes were on site, resting after a morning feeding session in the nearby agricultural fields.

A local birder informed us of additional rarities in the area, so we scanned the nearby alfalfa fields and were rewarded with stunning views of >60 Mountain Bluebirds, Killdeer and some more distant views of at least six highly localized, wintering Mountain Plovers! Celebrating, we enjoyed our lunches and tried to stay out of the wind as we viewed these special birds along with numerous Red-tailed Hawks and Loggerhead Shrikes in the area. Since the gusty winds presented a challenge, we opted for a longer return route to the Casa, with a "cultural" stop in Tombstone, the "town too tough to die." We walked the streets, and photographed iconic buildings like the Bird Cage Theater, the Crystal Palace Saloon and Wyatt Earp's Oriental Saloon and Theater, with the OK Corral in the distance down Allen Street. Then we took the back way from Tombstone down to the San Pedro River to view the remains of the silver crushing mill at Charleston, which processed the silver ore for shipping to Tucson. Returning to Casa de San Pedro, several of us opted for a late afternoon walk along the San Pedro River before dinner. We were rewarded with 21 species in about an hour of birding, including Pyrrhuloxia, Abert's Towhee, Say's and Black phoebes, Gila and Ladder-backed woodpeckers, Bewick's Wren, a calling Gray Hawk (not seen however) and the local, very rusty-colored "fallax" subspecies of Song Sparrow. Then we enjoyed a traditional western dinner at a local restaurant (can anyone say baby-backed ribs?) After catching up on our birding checklist, we retired to our comfortable rooms for a well-deserved rest.

Mon., Feb. 13 Ramsey Canyon | Local Feeders of the Huachuca Mountains

After a cup of hot coffee, several of us ventured out at dawn to see what was around the Casa and along the San Pedro River. Although quite cold, we still enjoyed seeing the local birds frequenting the feeders. Following a big breakfast, we then headed toward the Huachuca Mountains (Huachuca is the Chiricahua Apache word for



“thunder”) and into the pine-oak zone where we visited The Nature Conservancy Preserve at Ramsey Canyon, one of the most famous birding sites in SE Arizona. We walked through the preserve along Ramsey Creek, enjoying the massive Arizona sycamore trees, the flowing creek and cascades, and viewed Arizona cypress, pinyon, Chiricahua and Apache pines, and even Arizona gray squirrel and Coue’s white-tailed deer (2nd smallest subspecies of white-tailed deer behind Key West deer in Florida). We also observed 15 Wild Turkeys, Bridled Titmouse, a family group of comical Acorn Woodpeckers, a stunning and very cooperative male Arizona Woodpecker, and both Rivoli’s and Violet-crowned hummingbirds frequenting the feeders. We opted for a Vietnamese restaurant for lunch in Sierra Vista, then headed to the Southeastern Arizona Bird Observatory’s Ash Canyon Preserve to meet co-owner Tom Wood and to learn the natural history of the area and enjoy the birds coming into the feeders. Before it started to snow (yes, really!) we had great, closeup views of Anna’s and Broad-billed hummingbirds, a family group of beautiful Mexican Jays, Bridled Titmouse, a female Cassin’s Finch and several snappy Pyrrhuloxias. Looking to warm up and refresh before dinner, we headed back to the Casa for tea and fresh-baked peach, cherry, pecan and mixed berry pies! Then to a local Italian restaurant for a delicious and filling dinner followed by our evening bird checklist. Quite the day!

Tues., Feb. 14

Birding the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area | Bisbee | Sunset with Cranes

Happy Valentine’s Day!!! The early birds had coffee and then ventured out for some quick (and cold) birding before breakfast at the Casa. Out the door by 9:15 am, we headed north and made a quick stop at the Sierra Vista Wastewater Treatment Plant where we admired >100 male Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Red-winged Blackbirds, Great-tailed Grackles, several over-wintering Brown-headed Cowbirds and of course a few European Starlings thrown in. Then east and downslope to the San Pedro House, the main public contact point for the Bureau of Land Management’s San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area (SPRNCA). The San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area encompasses almost 57,000 acres of public land in Cochise County, Arizona, between the international border and St. David, Arizona. Congress designated the area as a Riparian National Conservation Area on November 18, 1988, and some 40 miles of the upper San Pedro River meanders through



the area. The primary purpose for the special designation is to protect and enhance the desert riparian ecosystem, a rare remnant of what was once an extensive riparian network throughout the American Southwest. The San Pedro River runs through the Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts in southeastern Arizona and contains one of the most important riparian areas in the United States. More than 80 species of mammals, two native species and several introduced species of fish, 40+ species of amphibians and reptiles, and 100 species of breeding birds depend upon the water, cover and feeding areas along the river. It also provides valuable habitat for an additional 250+ species of migrant and wintering birds and contains archaeological sites containing remnants of human occupation from 13,000 years ago.

Although windy with some blowing dust, we birded the feeder area and then ventured down to the San Pedro River to see what was around. With the cold wind, bird activity was limited so we retired back to the San Pedro House and visited the interpretive center and gift shop (quite impressive!). Then we drove through historic Bisbee and viewed the impressive Copper Queen Mine (a super big hole in the ground!) before continuing to the Sulphur Springs Valley for our last afternoon with the cranes. We again visited the agricultural fields to admire the Mountain Bluebirds and Mountain Plovers, and we walked some of the trails at Whitewater Draw WMA. Even with the persistent winds, we were pleased to observe 38 species of birds including Sora, several stunning male Vermilion Flycatchers, five species of waterfowl, 3,400+/- Sandhill Cranes, a very rare White-faced Ibis flyover, seven species of sparrows, Common Yellowthroat and Pyrrhuloxia.

Heading back to Casa de San Pedro for our celebratory Valentine's Day dinner, we admired the beautiful views of Mt. San Jose (Sonora) to the south and the Huachuca Mountains to the west during the golden hour just before sunset. Our final dinner at the Casa was quite special... shrimp and avocado salad on greens, lobster, filet mignon, scalloped potatoes and asparagus followed by cheesecake with home-made strawberry sauce. Spectacular day, special trip and a wonderful meal to round it out! Final checklist and then we retired to our rooms for to pack before departure tomorrow.



Wed., Feb. 15 Birding & Breakfast | Departures from Tucson

Light snow overnight! We finished packing and then enjoyed a wonderful breakfast dish, a pastry and fruit compote, along with applewood sausage, juice and fresh fruit. Wow, gonna have to start that diet soon after returning home to New Mexico... We loaded the van and headed northwest to Tucson and our flights home. But first we got sidetracked by a detour as Hwy 10 was closed for four miles in both directions for painting! Still, we made it to the airport on time AND added one more bird species for the trip list along the detour route: PHAINOPEPLA!! A great way to end the trip. Everyone made their flights, and we reflected on the wonderful Arizona Sweetheart Birding trip with Naturalist Journeys. Hope to see you all again soon!

Photos by Dave Krueper