

Arizona: Sky Island Winter Birding | Trip Report

January 14 – 20, 2023 | with Naturalist Journeys



Guides Mason Flint and Richard Fray, with 11 participants: KT, James, Tad, David, Cyndy, Barb, Michael, Susan, Greg, Rod, and Doris



Saturday, Jan 14 – Meet-up in Tucson, Sonoran Desert & Santa Cruz Valley

After brief introductions outside the Hampton Inn, we headed to Tucson Mountain Park to look for a few Sonoran Desert birds that would be difficult to see elsewhere on the trip. Our first stop was the Gates Pass Viewpoint, which has great views to the west and easy birding close to the parking area. We soon had fantastic views of a very accommodating Black-throated Sparrow. A Cactus Wren played hard to get across the arroyo, but everyone got brief looks at this normally precocious species. We also saw the only Rock Wren and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher of the trip. We didn't see one of our targets for the stop, Gilded Flicker, so we drove a couple of miles west to the Brown Mountain Trailhead to try again. We saw and heard Curve-billed Thrashers and a pair of Cactus Wrens posed for the photographers in a nearby Saguaro. Finally, we heard a Gilded Flicker in the distance and then two flew down and gave everyone good scope views of this saguaro specialist.

From there, we drove east into the Santa Cruz River valley and visited Desert Meadows Park in Green Valley. This lovely community park was birdy and comfortably warm. We enjoyed fantastic, close looks at a perched male Costa's Hummingbird and a Broad-billed Hummingbird across the trail. We also saw our only Plumbeous Vireo of the trip but struck out trying to find Rufous-winged sparrow in the grassy edge of the park. Stay tuned!

With sunset approaching, we headed to the Amado Territory Inn where we relaxed before making the short drive to the Stable Ranch Grill for dinner. Oops! After seeing the error of our ways, we drove a few miles down

the road to Elvira's in Tubac, the *correct* restaurant. In addition to the rather avant-garde décor, many in the group enjoyed Elvira's famous Mole.



Sunday, Jan 15 –Santa Cruz Valley and Madera Canyon

Our second day was cold and blustery with a bit of rain late in the day, but we still enjoyed beautiful scenery and great birding. We made a quick stop at the Amado WTP, which had several species of ducks including Northern Shovelers, Canvasbacks, Ruddy Ducks, Lesser Scaup and one Greater Scaup, a southeast Arizona rarity. We also saw adult and juvenile Black-crowned Night-Herons, our only sighting of this species for the trip. Our next stop was Canoa Ranch Conservation Park, just up the road. This historic ranch, which used to cover thousands of acres (and was a film location for Oklahoma!) has a recently restored pond and wetlands. We enjoyed nice close-up looks at a Redhead in the pond and added Spotted Sandpiper, Loggerhead Shrike, Black Phoebe and Lawrence's Goldfinch to our trip list.

Before heading up Madera Canyon, we stopped in Green Valley to pick up our picnic lunches and warm up at Starbucks. Concerns about snow in the mountains turned out to be unwarranted. Our stop at Santa Rita Lodge was protected from the winds and the feeders were busy. Acorn Woodpeckers were everywhere, in almost constant motion, and a pair of Arizona Woodpeckers popped in and out. Mexican Jays, White-breasted Nuthatches, Bridled Titmice, Pine Siskins and Lesser Goldfinches flitted around. We enjoyed watching a pair of Yellow-eyed Juncos, comparing them to the nearby "Pink-sided" Dark-eyed Juncos. We also saw two pairs of Hepatic Tanagers, an increasingly regular wintering species in Arizona, and a few in the group got quick looks at a flyover flock of Western Bluebirds and a Painted Restart.



After lunch, we set out for Gertrudis Lane in Tubac, making a brief stop where we picked up our only Phainopepla of the trip. Santa Gertrudis Lane has become a hotspot for rarities and hard-to-see birds in recent years. Just after we parked, we met a friend of Richard's who had seen a Green Kingfisher by the river – promising news! As we made our way down the lane to the river crossing, Richard introduced us to a “unicorn,” possibly a life mammal for some in the group. At the river we scanned and listened and then played some audio of Green Kingfisher, but no response for several minutes. Then someone saw movement downriver, and soon we all got distant but satisfying looks at this uncommon bird as it flew from low perches above the river. As we made our way back toward our vehicles, we saw a small sparrow fly across the lane. Initially playing hard-to-get,

it eventually perched up nicely for us - Rufous-winged Sparrow! After missing this at Desert Meadows Park, we were happy to see this range-restricted bird.



A few sprinkles were coming down as we climbed into the vans, but we decided to make one more stop before heading back to the Amado Inn. The course of the Santa Cruz River, one of only two major rivers that flows north into the U.S. from Mexico, changes when there are heavy monsoon rains. Richard knew a spot where it overflowed in recent years, creating ponds and wetlands. After winding our way through warehouses, we arrived at a good spot just as heavier rains started to fall. We kept our stop short but saw a handful of new birds including three Snow Geese, Blue-winged Teal, a pair of Mexican Ducks, Northern Pintail and a pair of Greater Yellowlegs. Then we retreated to the Amado Inn to warm up and rest before dinner at the Stables Ranch Grille – this time on the right day!

Monday, Jan 16 – Nogales, Patagonia, Sonoita & Casa de San Pedro

Our third day started with rain, so we took a detour through Nogales where Richard shared a little about the city, pointed out a favorite restaurant and took us to a spot that gave us a close-up look at “the wall.” Nogales is considered a transborder city with a U.S. population around 20,000. The rest of the city, Nogales, Sonora, is in Mexico and has a population of 230,000, about 10-times the population of Nogales, Arizona. Pushing on, the rain stopped briefly as we drove east, passing south of the Santa Rita Mountains toward Patagonia.

We decided to skip a stop at Patagonia Lake because of the rain and headed straight to the Paton Center for Hummingbirds, the former home of Wally and Marion Paton who began letting birders into their yard shortly after they moved there in the early 1970’s. “Paton’s Yard” became one of the most famous birding spots in Arizona, attracting birders from around the world. After Marion passed away in 2001, the property was acquired with funds from the Richard Grand Foundation and is now owned and managed by Tucson Audubon Society.

With steady rain falling, we took shelter under the steel pavilion and got busy birding. Our main target here was Violet-crowned Hummingbird, a species that often winters here and a few other spots in southeastern Arizona. Soon, a male arrived, perching above a feeder and, like us, was waiting out the rain. The yard was busy with birds including the ever-present and noisy Gila Woodpeckers, a pair of Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, several Chipping and White-crowned Sparrows and one White-throated Sparrow, uncommon in Arizona. We also saw a handful of Inca Doves, Abert’s and Green-tailed Towhees, Pyrrhuloxia, several Gambel’s Quail and a pair of Lazuli Bunting.

After a nice warmup and lunch at Gathering Grounds in the village, we birded Patagonia Town Park, which was crowded with at least 100 American Robins, dozens of Yellow-rumped Warblers and our first Townsend's Solitaire of the trip. Continuing east, we decided against driving the muddy dirt roads around Sonoita to look for longspurs, but still found good birds including Western Bluebirds feeding on the ground along the road, and good looks at a flock of 40+ Horned Lark and six Chihuahuan Meadowlarks before a cranky rancher encouraged us to move on. Our last stop before pushing on toward Sierra Vista was a roadside pond where a herd of curious cows walked over to moo at us while Northern Harrier's cruised over the grasslands.

Everyone was happy to arrive to a warm welcome at the cozy Casa de San Pedro where we were treated to a delicious meal of street tacos and yummy deserts.



Tuesday, Jan 17 – Sulphur Springs Valley, Whitewater Draw

Today was a full day in the Sulphur Springs Valley. On the way, we stopped at a Safeway on the outskirts of Bisbee to grab lunch as Mason and Richard discussed when the best time to view Sandhill Cranes at Whitewater Draw would be. The cranes typically return in large numbers late in the day, but during Richard's most recent visit they arrived at midday. We decided to head north first and return to Whitewater Draw around lunchtime. Stopping along Davis Road and US 191, we saw a few cranes feeding in the agricultural fields and several large flocks of Lark Buntings and other sparrows. At our third stop we saw our first Ferruginous Hawk and a Chihuahuan Raven, then noticed a flock of several hundred Sandhill Cranes heading south. And then another flock, and another. Scanning the horizon, we could see thousands of cranes heading south. Change of plans! We loaded up and hightailed it back down to Whitewater Draw.

We arrived and paused to admire a Cooper's Hawk near the parking area, but the spectacle of the cranes flying in drew us toward the main pond. At that moment, thousands of cranes exploded into the air. We scanned the sky and found the cause – an eagle cruising high above the water. Our first thought was that it was a juvenile Bald Eagle but after looking at photos we realized it was a Golden Eagle. Great bird! But the cranes demanded our attention. The sight and sound of 20,000+ Sandhill Cranes is something none of us will forget.

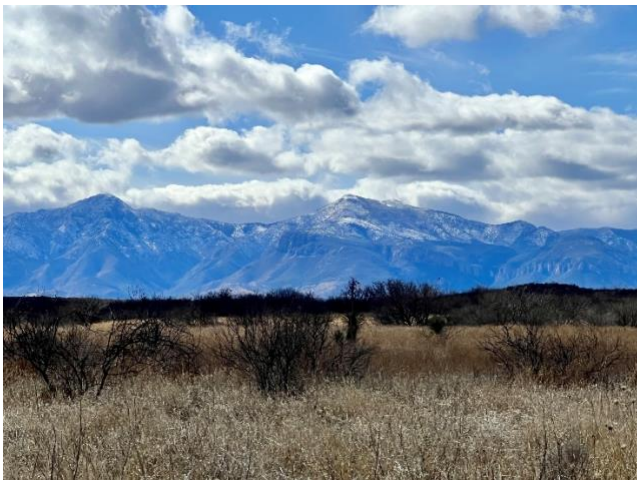
Once the cranes settled down, we continued our walk around the wildlife area. There were hundreds of Snow Geese and several species of ducks with Northern Shoveler the most numerous. Northern Harriers and a Red-tailed Hawk cruised above the fields. Black and Say's Phoebes, Vermillion Flycatchers, American Pipits and several sparrows including Brewer's, White-crowned, Vesper and Savannah fed along the edges of the pond. We found one Barn Owl hunkered down in the cottonwoods to stay out of the wind.



Also seeking shelter from the wind, we headed to the vans where we scarfed down our lunch. Afterwards, we headed north birding the roads around the agricultural fields. We made several stops and were rewarded with great birds including a Crested Caracara (uncommon in this area), flocks of Horned Larks and Mountain Bluebirds, two Bendire's Thrashers, a Peregrine Falcon and countless Red-tailed Hawks. Before returning to Casa de San Pedro, we decided to brave the mud and made another stop at Whitewater Draw. Things had quieted down, but we noted at least three Barn Owls in the cottonwoods and were treated to another Ferruginous Hawk perched on a utility pole.

Wednesday, Jan 18 – San Pedro RNCA, Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary

The fifth day of our trip included stops at San Pedro Riparian Conservation Area (RNCA) and Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary. Finally, a day with great weather! It was still a bit chilly, but the sun came out and the winds died down. San Pedro RNCA is one of the most important riparian areas in the United States. At more than 50,000 acres, the preserve follows the San Pedro River about 50 miles north of the border with Mexico and is one of only two major rivers (the other being the Santa Cruz) that flows north from Mexico into the U.S. The San Pedro RNCA provides critical stopover habitat for millions of migrating birds each year and supports a huge variety of species typical of both the Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts. We spent a few hours walking the trails from San Pedro House, an historic ranch house, enjoying the birds and spectacular views of the snow-capped Huachuca Mountains to the west. Raptors were soaring or perched everywhere we looked with many Red-tailed, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks, at least seven American Kestrels, three Gray Hawks (uncommon in winter) and a Harris's Hawk, rare in this area. One of the ponds had several species of ducks and Michael found a Sora peeking out from the reeds. After our walk, we had a picnic lunch by the old ranch house before heading to Ash Canyon.



Ash Canyon, on the lower slopes of the Huachuca's, is a former B&B that was purchased by the Southeast Arizona Bird Observatory in 2019. The sanctuary has many feeders and was bustling with activity. Highlights included a Greater Roadrunner (finally!), Rivoli's Hummingbird, a noisy flock of Mexican Jays, Bridled Titmice and dozens of sparrows (mostly Chipping) and warblers (mostly Yellow-rumped plus a few Orange-crowned). We also enjoyed watching a cute Bott's Pocket Gopher.

After getting our fill at Ash Canyon, we returned to comfy Casa de San Pedro for a little rest before dinner. Another great day!



Thursday, Jan 19 – Ramsey Canyon Preserve, Casa de San Pedro

After a leisurely breakfast at Casa de San Pedro, we drove to Ramsey Canyon Preserve, a Nature Conservancy property on the east slope of the Huachuca Mountains just north of Ash Canyon. When we arrived at about 10:30, it was still cold with the canyon floor in shadows. After a brief orientation by one of the staff members at the visitor center, we birded our way up the canyon, following the creek lined with Arizona sycamores, waiting for the sun to warm things up. Our first sightings included Acorn Woodpeckers, Mexican Jays and Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches. We saw an Empidonax flycatcher that was kind enough to call, helping us identify it as Hammond's Flycatcher. When we reached a spot with remnants of an old structure, we played a snippet of a Northern Pygmy-Owl call, hoping to entice a few passerines to come in. The playback worked better than expected – bringing in an owl and a stream of songbirds including Ruby-crowned Kinglets, White-breasted Nuthatches, Bridled Titmice and a Hutton's Vireo. The owl gave us a real show – perching almost directly above us and flying a couple of times to nearby trees.

We meandered back down to the visitor center and the B&B where we saw Violet-crowned and Rivoli's Hummingbirds, a Red-naped Sapsucker and a Painted Redstart, giving those who missed the one in Madera Canyon nice looks.



Then we returned to Casa de San Pedro for lunch and the rest of the afternoon was free time. Some decided to relax at the Casa and others walked the lovely trails that follow the nearby San Pedro River. We heard a Gray Hawk calling from the cottonwoods and enjoyed seeing Black and Say's Phoebes, Vermilion Flycatchers, House and Bewick's Wrens and many sparrows including White-crowned, Vesper, Song and both Abert's and Green-tailed Towhee's. After returning to the Casa, Mason and Greg made a "gas station wine run" and then we gathered for our final delicious group dinner at the Casa.



Friday, Jan 20 – Casa de San Pedro, Tucson

After our last breakfast at the Casa, we loaded up, said goodbye to Doris and Rod who had their car, and drove back to Tucson where some in the group flew home and others stayed for a few more days on their own. Just before we left the Casa, a few of us saw small flock of Red Crossbills that briefly landed in a cottonwood by the entrance.

Photo Credits:

Group Photo, Patrick Dome; Tucson Mountain Park, Michael Carey (MC); Black-throated Sparrow, Mason Flint (MF); Verdin, KT Valsaraj (KT); Costa's Hummingbird (KT); Loggerhead Shrike (KT); Redhead (MF); Hepatic Tanager (MF); Yellow-eyed Junco (MF); Townsend's Warbler (KT); White-breasted Nuthatch (KT); Rufous-winged Sparrow (MF); Richard Fray with Unicorn (MF); Violet-crowned Hummingbird (MF); Gambel's Quail (KT); Townsend's Solitaire (MF); Casa de San Pedro, Richard Fray (RF); Snow Geese and Cranes (MF); Sandhill Cranes (KT); Bendire's Thrasher (MF); Group at Whitewater Draw (MF); Red-tailed Hawk (MF); Group at San Pedro RNCA (MF); Huachuca Mountains from San Pedro RNCA (MF); Huachuca Mountains from Ash Canyon (MF); Huachuca Mountains Panorama (MF); Orange-crowned Warbler (MF); Greater Roadrunner (RF); Northern Pygmy-Owl (KT); Pyrrhuloxia (KT); Group at Casa de San Pedro (MF); Vesper Sparrow (MF).