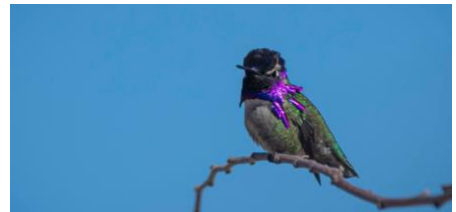


# Sky Island Winter Birding | Feb. 4 – 10, 2023 | Trip Report | by Bryan Calk



With guides Richard Fray and Bryan Calk and participants Randi, Jerome, Dick, Kay, Jody, Heidi, Mitch, Jean, Susan, and David



## Sat., Feb. 04

## Arrivals Tucson | Tucson Mountain Park | Amado

Today our group gathered in Tucson, and we hit the ground running with some birding in the low desert. At Tucson Mountain Park we got our first birds of the trip in the form of Black-throated Sparrow, Cactus Wren, Verdin, and even a Gilded Flicker. Then we headed over to a relatively new park in Green Valley, Desert Meadows, which was a vacant lot in the community that locals took upon themselves to convert into a beautiful community garden and native habitat. It and has of course become quite an oasis for many species, including Costa's Hummingbird and Rufous-winged Sparrow, both of which can be somewhat difficult to track down at most other parks birders tend to visit in this region.

Once we could finally pull ourselves away from the amazing birds, we headed south to get checked in at the Amato Territory Inn where we had a brief moment to get settled before heading to dinner at the unforgettable Elvira's in Tubac.



## Sun., Feb. 05 **Madera Canyon | Canoa Ranch**

As we were loading up our vans in the morning, we did a little bit of birding right around the parking lot of the inn, where there was seasonally rare Hooded Oriole plus the more expected Gila Woodpeckers. Our first stop on the road this morning was at the Amado water treatment pond where we got our first waterfowl of the trip, including some sharp looking American Wigeons and Ring-necked Ducks with a smattering of other species. Then we headed just up the road to Canoa Ranch, a property that has only been open for birding the past 5 to 10 years but has become a local must-visit hotspot thanks to some fantastic habitat management for wildlife. We spent the rest of our morning here walking around the main pond and the small cienega. We got just about every plumage of Vermilion Flycatcher possible and more waterfowl including a gorgeous Hooded Merganser and several Redheads.

After our little walk, we headed off to Madera Canyon for a picnic lunch. While we enjoyed our meal in the fresh air, we were treated to several A corn Woodpeckers and even a Red-naped Sapsucker. Just a bit further up the road at the Santa Rita Lodge feeders, we spent quite a bit of time just relaxing and enjoying the constant show as Mexican Jays, Wild Turkeys, a pair of Hepatic Tanagers, Rivoli's Hummingbird, and a Townsend's Warbler all came into the feeders periodically amongst the hordes of other more common species.

Back at the Amato Territory Inn, some of us did a short walk around to the grounds which rewarded us with a gray cat bird, quite the rarity for this area any time of year. Then headed to dinner at Stables, a restaurant at the local country club with exceptional food.

## Mon., Feb. 06 **Patagonia | Sonoita Grasslands | Casa de San Pedro**

We packed up and headed out from Amado and started our winding route east with an auto-tour of Nogales from Richard, a proud and local resident himself! It was remarkable to see this city with its blending of cultures, split by a border wall, as we learned much about its history and current status. Next, we headed to Patagonia Lake SP where we spent time watching feeders as new birds kept coming and going, like a rare White-throated Sparrow, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Broad-billed Hummingbird, and both Rock and Arizona Gray Squirrels. Out over the lake we had a brief study of the differences between the two cormorant species here as well as some very accommodating Ruddy Ducks in some interesting plumages.



In the town of Patagonia itself we enjoyed a great lunch at a local favorite diner, Gathering Grounds, before heading to the Tucson Audubon's Paton Center for Hummingbirds. Our main target here was the Violet-crowned Hummingbird which we got to see two of almost immediately upon arrival. A lone Lazuli Bunting hung out in the brambles, and a Bewick's Wren played hide-and-seek.

We continued our way east, crossing through the Chihuahuan grasslands, we caught views of several pronghorn grazing before making it to Davis Pasture of Las Cienegas NCA. Here, a nice mixed flock Chestnut-collared and Thick-billed Longspurs intermingled with Horned Larks among the rolling hills of golden billowing grasses.

Finally, we made it to Casa de San Pedro where we got settled in and had a delicious catered dinner.

## **Tue., Feb. 07                      Sulphur Springs Valley | Whitewater Draw**

After a delicious homemade breakfast by our hosts at Casa de San Pedro, we started our day by heading out east past Bisbee into the Sulfur Springs Valley. This incredibly important area for wildlife is a section of the Chihuahuan grasslands situated between two sky island mountain ranges near the border of Mexico. Water is such a vital and usually rare resource in this habitat, so the flooding of ponds at Whitewater Draw Wildlife Area is the main attraction for an array of wildlife, including a massive number of Sandhill Cranes that stage here for the day after feeding all morning. When we arrived, the cranes weren't quite back in from their morning mealtime yet, so we explored some nearby dirt roads. We kicked up a few raptors including Northern Harrier and Merlin and several sparrows that had just arrived on a late cold front, including Vesper, Lincoln's, White-crowned, and Lark Bunting. As we turned a corner, we happened upon a very cooperative pair of Bendire's Thrashers with a Green-tailed towhee. As we were taking in some nice views of these often-shy passerines, we noticed off in the distance high in the sky were thousands upon thousands of Sandhill Cranes. They swirled in huge flocks slowly moving in towards Whitewater Draw, so we loaded back up in the vans and met them there as they descended upon the wetlands.

It is impossible to describe the cacophony that is 10-20,000 Sandhill Cranes all talking at once just yards in front of you. We spent plenty of time soaking it all in but were quickly distracted as around the water are many other species of waterfowl and including both Snow and Ross's Geese which gave us great comparison views, Greater



White-fronted Goose (rare for the area). Out in some distant trees surrounded by water, we found several Barn Owls roosting for the day in relatively plain sight for some excellent views through the scope. Suddenly it was afternoon and we realized we had been so engrossed in the birding we hadn't eaten lunch yet! So, we got back to the parking area and enjoyed our picnic under the warm sun and cool weather with Red-tailed Hawks and Cactus Wrens keeping us company. We then loaded back up into the vans and headed out to explore the rest of the Sulfur Springs Valley with its variety of agricultural areas patchworked into the desert thornscrub in grassland areas. The prize for the afternoon was no doubt a very cooperative flock of Mountain Bluebirds and some Chihuahuan Ravens and Meadowlarks.

Back in Hereford, we enjoyed an Italian dinner out.

## **Wed., Feb. 08                      San Pedro River | Ash Canyon**

As almost overwhelming as our adventure was yesterday, we decided to enjoy a much more leisurely day today (though no less full of incredible moments!). We headed just north/downstream from Casa de San Pedro to the San Pedro House, a National Conservation Area with beautiful grounds with lots of feeders, a visitor center, and a trail that takes you out to an ephemeral pond and the San Pedro River. We spent quite a lot of time poking around the visitor center area where Green-tailed Towhee and Pyrrhuloxias were coming in while a juvenile Cooper's Hawk cruised through looking for a meal, causing chaos among the White-winged Doves. We gazed up at two of the largest Fremont Cottonwoods in the world before heading down towards the water.

Northern Harriers and American Kestrels played over the open field, and as we approached the riparian area, we encountered a nice little flock that included Spotted Towhee and Gray Flycatcher. At the ephemeral pond, we could hear a Gray Hawk calling in the distance, and soon after, we had two of them soaring and calling straight above us. They were joined by a pair of Red-tailed Hawks which gave us a great comparison between these two species. Marsh Wren played hide-and-seek along with the local subspecies of Song Sparrows that were singing up a storm.

Thanks to Richard's local expertise, we found lunch at a delightful German café just outside of Fort Huachuca. After, we headed to Southeast Arizona Bird Observatory's Ash Canyon bird sanctuary property that has one of the most impressive feeder set ups in the region. We got great close views of Bridled Titmouse and Mexican Jay,



with Botta's Pocket Gopher and Yellow-nosed Cotton Rats scurrying around a brush pile. Soon though, everything got quiet, and we eventually discovered why... An adult Cooper's Hawk sitting and waiting for the right opportunity! Eventually, it took off through one of the feeding stations. It was unsuccessful in its hunt, but successful in scaring any remaining birds out of the area for a moment, just enough time for us to notice a group of Javelinas approaching from out of the woods!

Back at the Inn we had some downtime before dinner. Just as we were about to start going through our checklist for the day, we were interrupted by a calling Great Horned Owl! We all ran outside to get a look as it flew low over one of the fields adjacent to the casa and up into the cottonwood trees. Finally, we headed to dinner at a local bar and grill.

## **Thurs., Feb. 09                      Ramsey Canyon | Bisbee**

On our last full day of the tour, we started with another gourmet breakfast at Casa before heading up to the incomparable Nature Conservancy's Ramsey Canyon Preserve. It was a very cold start to our day with the high canyon walls and tall sycamore trees enveloping us and blocking out the early morning sun. At the start of our walk the birds were quiet, presumably they were hunkered down just as chilly as we were. But soon enough, the sun broke over a ridge warming us almost instantly. Almost just as instantly the bird activity began, which was magical to see happen before us. We ran into Bridled Titmice, Hutton's Vireo, Hammond's Flycatcher, and the prize of our hike, the brilliant Painted Redstart. A near constant was the gentle flow of the snowmelt-fed stream and the Acorn Woodpecker's chattering high in the trees. The mother Coue's White-tailed Deer (with obvious bedhead) and her fawn came to drink from the stream and a couple of rascally Arizona Gray Squirrels were persecuted by a pair of very upset acorn woodpecker's guarding their acorn granary. Back at the bottom of the canyon we watched some feeders for a moment and learned about Pine Siskin and other western birds with interesting geographical distributions. As we returned to the parking lot to head out, we noticed that the feeders were being visited by Violet-crowned Hummingbird and a few Yellow-eyed Juncos played in the dense tree above us.

Urbano Bistro was a brand-new lunch option at the bottom of the canyon we decided to check out, which had delicious food and coffee. For the afternoon, some of us visited the historical mining town of Bisbee where we did some shopping and exploring of its rich downtown area. The town has a variety of shops and galleries stocked and staffed by local artisans, set in the foothills of the Mule Mountains. Others of us headed back to Ash Canyon preserve for more time at the feeders where we had a great look at Hepatic Tanagers, Anna's



Hummingbird, and even a couple of Western Bluebirds on the drive in. A Greater Roadrunner was a ham for the camera. And finally, we enjoyed perhaps our best meal of the entire trip, a catered dinner in the Casa's lovely dining room with the company of friends. We wrapped up with a prize ceremony hosted by participant Jean that was truly a delight and a fantastic way to reflect on our experience. And as if it couldn't get any better, the grand finale was an impromptu piano recital by participants Mitch and Susan in the casa living room, featuring some jazz improv and Vivaldi.

## **Fri., Feb. 10 Casa de San Pedro | Departures from Tucson**

This morning we had only a moment to say goodbye to Casa de San Pedro with another great breakfast and some last-minute birding right around the grounds before we had to load our bags for flights out of Tucson, with one last look at the saguaros and palo verde trees!

*Group Photo (Bryan Calk - BC), Hooded Mergansers (BC), Vermillion Flycatcher (BC), Costa's Hummingbird (BC), Cactus Wren (BC), Javelina (BC), Hooded Oriole (BC), Rufous-winged Sparrow (BC), Ruddy Duck (BC), Townsend's Warbler (Richard Fray - RF), Group Birding (BC), American Coot (BC), Bendire's Thrasher (BC), Broad-billed Hummingbird (RF), Violet-crowned Hummingbird (BC), Harris's Hawk (BC), Yellow-nosed Cotton Rat (BC), Bridled Titmouse (BC), Pied-billed Grebe (BC), Pyrrhuloxia (BC), Marsh Wren (RF), Acorn Woodpecker & Arizona Gray Squirrel (BC), Cactus Wren (RF), Gray Hawk (RF), Bridled Titmouse (RF), Cooper's Hawk (RF), American Kestrel (RF)*