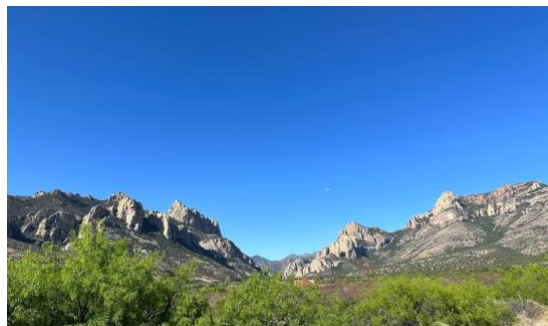


# Southeast Arizona: Spring Sky Island Sampler May 8 – 17, 2023 | Trip Report | by Bryan Calk



With guides Drew Haffenden and Bryan Calk and participants Pat, Dave, Betsy, Sandy, Fran, Doni, Ken, and Amelia



## Mon., May. 8 Arrivals Tucson | Willcox | Cave Creek Ranch

After we all arrived in Tucson, we began our adventure by heading west. We stopped at Texas Canyon to view the beautiful rock formations and get our first taste of some western birds, like Cassin's Kingbird, Curve-billed Thrasher, and Ash-throated Flycatcher. We then headed over to Willcox, home of Lake Cochise at the Twin Lakes Golf Course. This large playa is artificially fed by treated water, which, no surprise in the desert, attracts quite a lot of birds. We had a variety of waterfowl and shorebirds, including some beautiful Wilson's and Red-necked Phalaropes, and even a Willet. On our way out we got stunning views of a Chihuahuan Meadowlark – a very newly described species. Then we continued down the bumpy Foothills Road to Portal, AZ where we got settled



into our accommodations at Cave Creek Ranch before heading over to Naturalist Journeys founder Peg Abbot's house for a delicious dinner.

## **Tue., May. 9      South Fork Cave Creek Canyon | Portal | Paradise**

Little did we know just what an incredible day we had ahead of us today! We started before breakfast by driving up to the south fork of Cave Creek Canyon where local guide Jams Peterson got us onto a pair of Elegant Trogans almost immediately. We spent quite some time tracking them flying up and down the canyon, giving us views now and then as both the male and the female called back-and-forth to each other. Back at Cave Creek Ranch we ate some breakfast provided by Peg and Tamara of the NJ staff as we watched the birds on the feeders. Next, we packed up and headed out to continue our morning of birding, starting with Cathedral Rock Road right in Portal, where we nailed the pair of Thick-billed Kingbirds pretty much right away, so we headed over to some feeders in town. These were hopping with activity from tanagers, grosbeaks, towhees, and thrashers. Then we headed down to another residential feeder setup at the home of Bob Rodrigues. His home is in a lower elevation spot with some drier country birds, like Black-throated Sparrow and Pyrrhuloxia. We had to pull ourselves away to head over to lunch at the Portal Store, where we took a moment to check out some Great Horned Owls in a nest cavity that were almost old enough to be fledge.

After eating a delicious meal, we went down to the grasslands to cruise Stateline Rd. and see what the action was at Willow Tank. This provided us some views of an adorable family of American Coots and some brief views of Greater Roadrunner. Finally, we headed up to the George Walker House in Paradise to watch some more feeders, where things like Scott's Orioles, Rivoli's Hummingbird, and Juniper Titmouse all came down to eat. Back at the ranch, it was finally time for dinner, catered by Jackie from the George Walker House. Winston, Jackie's husband, gave us some history of the area over dinner, after which we completed our daily species checklist. Once the sun had fully set, we gathered back up to view a spectacular sky of stars, and head out for some owling. Right around the ranch, we tracked down an Elf Owl which gave us some nice views from close range. Then we drove back up the canyon targeting Whiskered Screech-owls, only found in the Sky Islands of Arizona and New Mexico in the US. When we first got out of the van, we were excited to hear not our target, but a calling Spotted Owl up south fork - a pretty special and purely serendipitous encounter! Shortly after, we





watched a border patrol helicopter make its way over us before we were able to quickly track down and get smashing views of our Whiskered target at close range.

### **Wed., May. 10 Portal | High Elevation Birding | Southwest Research Station**

This morning we began again before breakfast, this time to Jasper's feeders, another local residence with a great set up. A variety of colorful birds were coming in like three species of oriole, black-headed grosbeak, Northern Cardinal and Pyrrhuloxia. Under the feeders, we watched the adorable Hispid Cotton Rats and Harris's Antelope Squirrels chowing down on scraps dropped below the feeders. Before we knew it was time to head back up to the ranch for breakfast, and then head uphill for some high elevation birding.

Some strong winds were starting to blow, but that didn't dampen our spirits! Our first stop was at Turkey Creek where we soaked in the beautiful scene of the stream flowing down across the road through the woods. It was mostly quiet, but we got some brief views of things like Bushtits and Plumbeous Vireos hopping in the trees above us. Then we continued up to the top of the mountain, starting at Barfoot Park. Despite some now truly ripping winds, we were mind-bogglingly successful in finding our target birds here like Greater Pewee and Mexican Chickadees. We then headed over to Rustler Park where we had planned to have a nice picnic. The winds were kicking up with lots of dust though, so we ate in our vans which ended up being a nice respite. As we birded out the windows, some Western Bluebirds came in to say hello! This got us all out of the vehicles again and before long we were seeing more great birds like Steller's Jays and even a pair of Olive Warblers!

Trying to get to calmer conditions, we made it back down the mountain to the Southwest Research Station of the American Museum of Natural History. Just after getting out of the vans, we immediately happened upon a "Nat Geo Moment" when we witnessed a pair of gophersnakes on the lawn go from one pursuing the other to copulation! The male was even biting onto the female as she tried to scrape him off her back. The bird feeders were a bit slow, but we still managed to find some action in the Sycamores and cottonwoods like Brown-crested, Flycatcher, Townsend's Warbler, and a male Lazuli Bunting. Then we headed back down to Cave Creek Ranch for some downtime during which a White-nosed Coati made some brief appearances at the peanut butter and jelly feeders. At dinner, Peg gave us a wonderful talk about the rich biodiversity of this area and the sky island concept.



## **Thu., May. 11 Pinery Canyon | Chiricahua National Monument**

Today we woke up and enjoyed our last look at the birds of Cave Creek Ranch, like the stunning Blue-throated Mountain-gems and Bridled Titmouse. As we were doing so, a remarkably tame White-nosed Coati came in to the feeding area to scarf down some jelly. We ate our own breakfast afterwards, got our bags packed, and headed back up the mountain, over Onion Saddle and down the west slope of the Chiricahua Mountains. Here we made our first stop of the day at Pinery Canyon where the action was intense, with birds singing all around us. We got great looks at things like Yellow-eyed Junco, Painted Redstart, Buff-breasted and Cordilleran Flycatcher. We happened to run into James, our local guide from before, who graciously pointed out where a Mexican Spotted Owl was on its day roost. We stood there enjoying the owl, grateful just for the views of it sleeping during the day. But as luck would have it, it actually stirred and started preening its feathers, giving us great views as it looked around in all directions.

The next stop of the day was Chiricahua National Monument, where the dramatic columns and hoodoos of rhyolitic tuff made for an almost otherworldly feel in a dramatic landscape. We happened to see a few great birds here, too, as we ate our lunch at Massai Point and walked a short trail of overlooks. Some highlights included nice views of Black-throated Gray Warblers and some very friendly Mexican Jays. From here, we mostly just made our way across the grasslands in Sulphur Springs Valley and over to Casa de San Pedro, where we got settled in and enjoyed a delicious catered meal.

## **Fri., May. 12 Casa de San Pedro | Carr Canyon | Miller Canyon**

We started this morning with a walk around the grounds of Casa de San Pedro where we checked out the river trail underneath the cottonwoods. Along our walk we encountered our first Abert's Towhee and Lucy's Warblers and enjoyed some stunning Vermilion Flycatchers. We then ate a yummy home-made breakfast fresh from the casa kitchen before heading up to Carr Canyon. The route up was quite the adventure, definitely highlighted by encounter with a gorgeous Black-tailed Rattlesnake crossing the road. Once we made it to the top, the birding was fast and furious right around the parking area with Grace's, Red-faced, Virginia's and Black-throated Gray





Warblers, Painted Redstarts, Hutton's Vireo, and Buff-breasted Flycatchers giving us some amazing looks. A Hermit Thrush hopped along the bare ground, and we even found a nesting Anna's Hummingbird.

Back down the mountain we had lunch at a local bistro before heading out to another of the fabulous canyons in the Huachucas - Miller Canyon, home of Beatty's Guest Ranch. We started here by getting a hard hike out of the way, targeting the rare Flame-colored Tanager which we all got to hear well, and a few got to glimpse before they snuck away down the creek corridor. For everyone who missed seeing them, we were treated to a fabulous consolation prize in the form of a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher who sang and sallied back and forth in front of us for several minutes giving killer views and photo opportunities. At Beatty's Guest Ranch, we stopped in at the hummingbird feeders where we immediately locked on to a gorgeous adult male White-eared Hummingbird who was terrorizing the feeders that were buzzing with 5 other species. Finally, we called it a day and headed back to the casa for our checklist before heading out to dinner at a local Italian place.

## **Sat., May. 13      Ash Canyon | Ramsey Canyon | Bisbee**

We headed out early this morning for some feeder watching at the Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary run by the Southeast Arizona Bird Observatory. The action was mostly from the songbirds this morning, with some exceptions like a Botta's Pocket Gopher eating breakfast and a pair of Cooper's Hawks in a dramatic courtship flight overhead. Then we came back to the Casa for some breakfast before visiting Ramsey Canyon for a stunningly scenic hike through this Nature Conservancy property. The towering Arizona Sycamores, maples, and Emory oaks shaded the path and almost immediately we were on our top target bird for the outing - a Northern Pygmy-owl! We got prolonged views through the scope as this owl surveyed his surroundings (and kept an eye on us below), and it was a joy to get to share this bird with other birders, hikers, and families passing by. The rest of the hike we spent botanizing and soaking in the beautiful scenery and weather, punctuated by exciting birding moments like finding a Painted Redstart busily nest-building.

Lunch was at a favorite local Vietnamese place before splitting into two groups for the afternoon. Some of us headed out to Bisbee, a nearby historical mining town where we perused their museum and shopped in the historical district filled with local artisans and galleries (and even saw a pair of Zone-tailed Hawks overhead). The



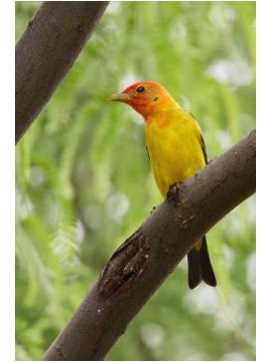
rest of the group popped back over to Ash Canyon where we scored looks at a Rufous-crowned Sparrow and even had stunning Lucifer Hummingbird at the last minute! Back at the casa, Elissa Fazio joined us for dinner and gave a lovely presentation about her work banding hummingbirds in southeast Arizona. Another lovely dinner was catered for us at the casa, and after which we popped out the back doors for a little owling which gave us stunning looks at a Western Screech-owl and a brief fly-by view of a Barn Owl.

## **Sun., May. 14 Patagonia Lake | Paton's Center | Tubac Golf Resort**

After one last Casa breakfast, we packed our bags, said goodbye to the Huachucas, and headed towards Patagonia. As we cruised through the grasslands around Sonoita, we stopped to admire a few pronghorns, including one mother taking care of four young, presumably on babysitter duty! Once we got into Patagonia, we went straight to Patagonia Lake State Park. Along the birding trail, we found ourselves in a mesquite-willow bosque (woodland) where Lucy's and Yellow Warblers dominated the soundscape, with Phainopepla dominating the air space. We finally got a view of two Gray Hawks soaring overhead, and a pair of Northern Beardless-Tyrannulets popped out to give us nice views. We happened upon a couple of mulberry trees hopping with activity, including a couple of Western Tanagers and stunning looks at Cedar Waxwings gorging on the fruit.

Our stomach started to grumble so we headed back to the van to load up and head back to Patagonia proper for lunch at Velvet Elvis, a local favorite pizza and salad joint in a historical church filled with beautiful art. Afterwards, we headed over to the Paton's Center for Hummingbirds run by Tucson Audubon. Once we settled into the feeding area, we started watching the hummingbirds come in and eventually were rewarded with great views of a Violet-crowned Hummingbird just feet away from us. The local subspecies of Song sparrow were singing and bathing, and we even got to see Bewick's Wrens hopping around in the brush piles with the adorable Gambel's Quail. Spring rain clouds were rolling in, so we boogied down the road (with a quick pitstop into the Patagonia roadside rest area) to the border town of Nogales. Here, we got a sense of what these fringe cities in Arizona are like and got to see firsthand the wall forming the international boundary. From here, we headed north to the Tubac Golf Resort and Spa where we got settled into our lodgings situated on the beautiful grounds, before having dinner at the restaurant on site where we had a nice show from the Lesser Nighthawks outside.





## **Mon., May. 15    Box Canyon | Madera Canyon**

This morning we were off to the Santa Rita mountains, the last of our sky islands to explore. We started off in Box Canyon, where an unexpected wind was tearing through the mostly bare canyon walls causing some difficulty in birding. We hunkered down along the bottom of the canyon in a low spot where water seeped up out of the ground. As we sat waiting, Black-chinned Sparrow and Rock Wren came to visit us. Back up on along the road on our way back out of the canyon, we were lucky that, despite the wind, we were able to get some nice views of a Five-striped Sparrow, a relatively rare bird highly localized within Arizona.

Just before getting to Madera Canyon, we made a brief stop and snagged Botteri's Sparrow out of the grasslands before heading up into the Madrean oak woodland habitat further up the canyon. Surrounded by oaks and canyon walls, we enjoyed picnic lunch punctuated by views of White-throated Swifts and Gray Flycatcher. Just uphill at the Santa Rita Lodge feeders, our patience was rewarded when a Berylline Hummingbird came into feed. We also got a nice looks at Arizona Woodpecker and Hepatic Tanager, and a Bronzed Cowbird was trying his hardest to impress a small harem of females on the ground below us. We then made it back to our rooms for a little bit of downtime in the heat of the afternoon before doing some birding around the grounds of the golf resort. Our highlights on the walk included some stunning looks at Tropical Kingbird and Gray Hawks. We completed our checklist for the day and headed over to dinner at the Italian Peasant (not Pheasant), a low-key local spot in Tubac that we thoroughly enjoyed!

## **Tue., May. 16    Tubac | Tumacácori Nat. Historical Site | Desert Meadows**

After breakfast at the golf resort, we headed out to hike along the Santa Cruz River on the historic De Anza Trail in Tubac. Under the shade of the towering Fremont cottonwood trees, we spotted Lucy's Warblers, various flycatchers, and Tanagers before eventually coming across our main target of the walk, Rose-throated Becard! This rare resident gave us nice views from the canopy as she foraged for insects. Since we were so quick in finding the becard, we had some time to stop in at the Amado Water Treatment Pods where we spotted a few Black-bellied Whistling-ducks hanging out on the equipment, some swallows were sweeping down across the water, and a gorgeous Ruddy Duck in his breeding plumage showed off to a couple of hens.



Since we had cleaned up very well on our target birds, we decided to head down to Tumacácori National Historical Site, which proved to be quite the gem of a spot with stunning architecture and a wealth of historical information in a great museum, covering the native peoples and colonialism in the area. On the grounds, we were excited to find the nest of a pair of Vermilion Flycatchers, and a nest overflowing with two baby Broad-billed Hummingbirds getting very close to fledging. Then we had lunch at the Tubac Deli and got to spend some time shopping around Tubac itself, with a growing community of talented local artisans.

As some rain clouds rolled in (rare for this time of year!), we headed over to the lodging for a little bit of downtime before birding at the Green Valley Garden Club's crown jewel property, Desert Meadows Park. We were all blown away, and camera shutters were firing on all cylinders when a stunning Costa's Hummingbird came down to eye level, showing us how their gorget feathers can make them appear either dark at one angle, then suddenly glowing shades of pink, purple, and indigo at another. As we walked around the gardens, a Rufus-winged Sparrow was singing and we were captivated by the wide variety of flora, as many of the cacti in the garden were in bloom. Clark's Spiny Lizards played around under our feet with males strutting their stuff for the girls. Some of us bought some pottery from local artists, and before we knew it, we had to head back to the resort for dinner where we were treated to another show of Lesser Nighthawks feeding above the golf course pond, gorging on insects that were swarming in the air.

## Wed., May. 17 Canoa Ranch | Departures from Tucson

Our last morning together, we celebrated Pat's birthday over breakfast at the resort. Just before heading to the airport for our departures, we made one final birding stop at Sentinel Peak in Tucson. As the temperatures were rising, we didn't wander far, but still managed to get nice scope views of Gilded Flickers working the saguaros up the hill and a couple of female-type Black-tailed Gnatcatchers, an awesome conclusion to the tour!

*Photo credits: Group Photo (Amelia Morrow - AM), Costa's Hummingbird (Bryan Calk - BC), Gambel's Quail (Sandy Robinson - SR), Mexican Spotted Owl (BC), Cave Creek Canyon (AM), Grace's Warbler (BC), American Avocet (Dave Beebe - DB), Great Horned Owls (DB), Elegant Trogon (DB), Chihuahuan Meadowlark (BC), Mexican Jay (DB), Whiskered Screen-owl (BC), Rose-breasted Grosbeak (SR), Female Broad-billed Hummingbird (DB), Snake (DB), Group Birding (AM), Hepatic Tanager (BC), Stellar's Jay (DB), Birding Chiricahua National Monument (AM), Mexican Spotted Owl (Andrew Haffenden - AH), Gila Woodpecker (SR), Curve-billed Thrasher (AH), Rivoli's Hummingbird (DB), Casa de San Pedro at night (AM), Red-faced Warbler (DB), Black-tailed Rattlesnake (BC), White-eared*



*Hummingbird (BC), Northern Pygmy-owl (BC), Cassin's Kingbird (BC), Entrance to Casa de San Pedro (AM), Greater Roadrunner (DB), Female Broad-billed Hummingbird (BC), Blue Grosbeak (DB), Group birding (DB), Cedar Waxwing (DB), Amelia & Betsy (DB), Pronghorn (BC), Western Tanager (DB), Young Hummingbird in nest (DB), Bronzed Cowbird (BC), White-winged Dove (BC), Costa's Hummingbird (DB), Lesser Nighthawk (BC), Group Birding (AM)*