

Arizona Monsoon Madness | Trip Report

Aug. 14 - 21, 2023 | by Robert Gallardo

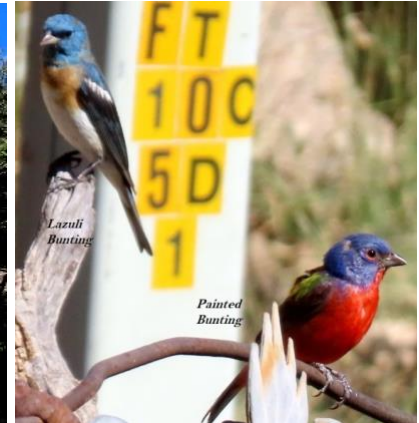


With Naturalist Journeys guides Bryan Calk and Robert Gallardo, and participants Celia, Mike, Arden & Arlana, Ann & Mike, Lin, Sheila, Pam, Frank & Anne.



Arizona: Hummingbird Galore

A bird watching trip in the U.S. wouldn't be complete without visiting southeastern Arizona. In a relatively small area, various major biomes converge, including remnants of the Madrean Highlands, as well as the Sonoran and Chihuahan Deserts. This combination of habitats has created the conditions where a wide range of flora and fauna can be found. In fact, the highest diversity of hummingbird species in the country exists there. This trip features visits to numerous sites in and around the Sky Islands and numerous well known feeder stations.



Mon., Aug. 14 Arrivals | Wilcox | Travel to Portal

Today the trip began. Bryan and Robert met most of the participants at the airport and we headed out in two vans. Our first stop was in Wilcox, where we visited a vernal lagoon and pond adjacent to a golf course. This would be our hottest day of the trip, but was well worth the stop as the lagoon was jam-packed with waterfowl and waders. We spotted numerous species of ducks including Redhead and one Ruddy. There were flocks of White-faced Ibis, Black-necked Stilt, and American Avocet. Some notable shorebirds included a Long-billed Curlew, a Semipalmated Plover, a Marbled Godwit, and one Stilt Sandpiper. A lone Black Tern also came bouncing in and was a surprise. At one point nearly all the birds flushed up, and with good reason! A Prairie Falcon came swooping in and made only a half-attempt at catching something. In the golf course itself we got distant views of the elegant Scaled Quail, Loggerhead Shrike, our first Vermilion Flycatcher, and Chihuahan Meadowlark. In the nearby fields we also saw our first mammals of the trip which included Desert Cottontail, Black-tailed Jackrabbit, and the tiny Spotted Ground-Squirrel.

After seeing this wide variety of birds we continued the trip and made our way to Portal. As we were reaching Cave Creek Ranch a Greater Roadrunner appeared in the road. Arden and Arlana really wanted to see one, and this would be the first of many. Then suddenly, three Collared Peccaries (known locally as Javelina) crossed the road. It was a stupendous way to start the trip. We reached the hotel and got settled in to our rooms. Afterwards, we had the welcome dinner and overview to what would turn out to be a spectacular trip. It was Arlana's birthday and during our stop at Safeway we secretly got her a cake and card. Surprise!

Tuesday August 15 Feeder Stations | S.W. Research Station

Our first full day afield would be packed with so many birds that it would be hard to remember them all. Before breakfast we headed to the Rodriguez residence to enjoy a nice collection of birds at feeders. The feeders were filled with many birds including Gambel's Quail, Curve-billed Thrasher, and Canyon Towhee. Today would be the only day we would see the Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay. Also seen there were Black-throated Sparrow, Hooded Oriole, Blue Grosbeak, and two green-colored Painted Buntings. We then headed to a nearby spot where a special bird was reported to be nesting in a large sycamore. It was a pair of Thick-billed Kingbirds and they showed up right on cue. It would be one of numerous species we would observe during the trip that barely reaches the U.S. in southern Arizona. We returned to Cave Creek for a full breakfast before heading out again.



We travelled to the nearby S.W. Research Station to see what was stirring. During the last Monsoon Madness trip we got a brief glimpse of a Beryline Hummingbird so we were hoping it was still around. We staked out the feeders and found a kaleidoscope of hummers including the dazzling Rufous and the battling giants; Rivoli's and Blue-throated Mountain-gem. Our patience paid off as the Beryline did show up and we were all afforded good views. On the white milkweed we saw some butterflies including Queen and Northern Cloudywing. A White-lined Sphinx also came zipping in, imitating a hummingbird.

We returned to Cave Creek for lunch and a bit of downtime. Toward late afternoon we went to the nearby South Fork Canyon close to where the road ends. We walked along the quiet road and saw the common Western Wood-Pewee, Mexican Jay, and Bridled Titmouse. We also found the first Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers of the trip; a large and beautiful flycatcher that makes its way north from South America and breeds there in Arizona. We saw the trip's first Brown Creeper and got our only look at a Canyon Wren which climbed high into a leafless tree. A pair of Yellow-eyed Junco was found along the road, but we would catch up to a lot more of them tomorrow. We also saw our first Painted Redstarts, a common but beautiful warbler in this part of the country. An adorable Apache Fox Squirrel finished off the visit to this cool canyon.

We went up different road that led to Paradise; home of the George Walker house and hummingbird galore. Jackie let us know who was around and today would be a star-studded lineup. We would add several more species there, including a Lucifer and White-eared, to give us a grand total of 12 species for the day. And if that wasn't enough. The parking lot in front would fill up with large numbers of Lark Sparrow and Lazuli Buntings. A couple of male Painted Buntings also showed up to add more color to the collage. What a show! Could it get any better? Well yes. At the same time, Bryan and Robert heard the faint call of the Montezuma Quail, and it really wasn't far away. Robert went down to the dirt road to look for it and found it perched atop a small rock near a ledge above a creek. The bird knew it had been spotted and dropped down behind the rock, but Robert knew it would remain close by. Bryan was nearby so he brought everyone down to the road while Robert went down to find the bird. He did, and it came walking up to the clearing below everyone just long enough to get a look before it disappeared over the same ledge. Score!

We headed down the hill thinking that the day couldn't reveal anything else better. Not. Just as we were approaching the paved road Bryan stopped the van and their group got to see a small Gila Monster before it disappeared into the mesquite thicket. Wowza! We continued on to one other feeder at the Jasper residence



Pygmy Nuthatch



Harris's Antelope Squirrel

before heading back to the ranch. We saw many of the species seen earlier that day, but also saw a Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Verdin, Bullock's Oriole, and a handsome Hooded Oriole (that really liked the grape jelly). Then we had an interesting, furry visitor. It was an adorable Harris's Antelope Squirrel which has a fairly restricted range in the U.S. and NW Mexico.

We were ready for some great food and drink so we returned to Cave Creek. After dinner Peg gave us a great talk on local geography and why this part of Arizona is so special. After this first full day we were starting to see this. We weren't quite finished yet as there was an owl we could possibly see. James Petersen, a new guide with Naturalist Journeys, knew where to find a pair close by so we headed out. We got to the spot and got in place. Lights out. Two Whiskered Screech-Owls called not far away in the pine-oak forest and with some patience one came into view. Being in the post breeding season, finding some owls in the area is quite tricky. We headed back to the ranch and just as we started to roll down the driveway was another surprise waiting for us. It was a large and beautiful Black-tailed Rattlesnake. The day could not have been any better.

Wed., Aug. 16

Chiricahua Mountains | Casa San Pedro

Today we would have the opportunity to experience where the term 'sky islands' came from. We did some early morning bird watching on the grounds of Cave Creek before heading out. Gambel's Quail and Curve-billed Thrasher were all busy around the brush piles. Lesser Goldfinch, House Finch, and White-breasted Nuthatch were all busy at the feeders. Numerous White-tailed Deer fed lazily in the fields. All against a gorgeous backdrop of sunlit cliffs.

We packed the vans and headed up the road. We began the ascent up the Chiricahua Mountains where we would eventually reach about 8,000ft. The views down into the dry plains were spectacular and we would enjoy all the cool, fresh air.



We reached a plateau and Bryan spotted a lot of activity high in the pines. We piled out of the vans to a different world. Indeed, the canopy was full of birds and they were a mile up. Some of us lay back against a slope filled with pine needles to gain a better, and more comfortable, view. We were able to see Plumbeous Vireo, a Nashville Warbler, many Grace's Warblers, Mexican Chickadee, and Pygmy Nuthatch. Although these were the first views, we would soon see them much better. We reached Barfoot Park and the quietness was welcome. Only the gentle hissing of air passing through pine needles filled our ears. We saw more chickadees and nuthatches there but were still high up. A Greater Pewee taunted us from a distance, but we managed views

before it disappeared. A pair of Steller's Jays came skulking in. No handouts here. We heard the telltale sound of a bird high in the canopy. It belonged to the Olive Warbler. We first saw a young bird and eventually saw a stunning adult male. We came across more Painted Redstarts as they bathed in a puddle on the road. We decided to move on to the next stop to see what else we could find. Just around the corner was Rustler Park. It was quiet at first, so we decided to hunker down and stake out a spot. During the previous tour with James we saw a lot of birds coming down to bathe in a small pool behind some seeding Dock plants. They would then perch in two small trees, at eye level, of which we gave nicknames; Grace's Tree (a pine) and Bonanza Tree (a fir). It wasn't long before birds started trickling in. We spent most of our time there and before we knew it there was no more seating room. Pat Lueders group arrived as well as other visitors. We were able to see many warblers including Grace's, Hermit, Wilson's, and Townsend's. Other species that came in were Red Crossbill (both male and female), Pygmy Nuthatch, Mexican Chickadee, Hutton's Vireo, Hairy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, and Buff-breasted Flycatcher. Being able to see all these at eye level, and not scurrying a mile a minute, was worth every minute. Peg and Kathy had shown up as well to enjoy the show and brought our lunch. What more could we ask for? We also saw many Yellow-eyed Juncos, a Rock Wren, and Spotted Towhee to round out this wonderful morning.

By midafternoon we were ready to say 'goodbye' to the Chiricahua Mountains and continue to our next destination. Part way down the road we stopped at Pinery Canyon to see what was stirring. It was quiet, except for a lone Virginia's Warbler. We eventually reached the valley floor and made our way to the lovely Casa San



Pedro where we would spend the next three nights. Upon arrival, we saw a male Gambel's Quail leading three tiny chicks into the adjacent field. While there at Casa we would delight ourselves to the fanciest meals of the trip.

Thurs., Aug. 17 Miller Canyon | Ash Canyon

This morning we did a walk on the hotel grounds. The Great Horned Owl was at its usual day roost behind the swimming pool. It no doubt hunts in the large field adjacent to the Casa property. Cactus Wrens would be our constant companion while there, replete with their endless repertoire of sounds. Abert's Towhee, Gila Woodpecker, Northern Cardinal, and Inca Dove were all present at the seed feeders. The hummingbird feeders were always busy with Black-chinned, Rufous, a few Broad-tailed, and a few Calliope. The common, yet stunning, Vermilion Flycatcher would also be a daily sighting while at the hotel. We wandered down to the river which was dry this year. Nonetheless, we found a lone Dusky-capped Flycatcher and a pair of Summer Tanager. We also got scope views of the shimmering male Blue Grosbeaks in the field. We returned to Casa and had breakfast then got ready for our first outing.

We headed out to the nearby Miller Canyon in search of more birds and feast our eyes on even more hummingbirds. Upon arrival, we decided to first walk up the trail while it was still cool. We came across more Painted Redstarts, Mexican Jays, Western Tanager, and Bridled Titmouse (or is it Titmice?). Bryan spotted something ahead in an oak. It was a female Flame-colored Tanager, a species that barely reaches and breeds in the U.S. It disappeared into the thick foliage, but we were able to catch up to it and get another brief look. We also came across another pair of Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher and we got great looks at them. At that very spot one of the clients accidentally kicked over a small, dead branch which revealed a special surprise. It was a Beyer's Scarab (*Chrysina beyeri*), a type of jewel beetle with much species radiation in the Neotropical highlands. We began to head back to the feeders and came across two colorful butterflies; the Red-spotted Purple and Arizona Sister. The feeders were blazing hot with hummingbird action. It was almost too fast to keep up with, but two of the key species we wanted to see again were the Violet-crowned and White-eared. We saw two of the latter.

We returned to Casa and received an informative presentation by Elissa on the work she did with hummingbird banding. We then had a light lunch and some downtime before going on our afternoon outing. We let it cool down



*White-eared
Hummingbird*



*Plain-capped
Starthroat*



then headed out to the Ash Canyon Sanctuary where we were hoping to locate one last hummingbird. The place was packed with visitors, many of them also wanting to catch a glimpse of a prized species that makes an occasional appearance in the U.S. The place was bustling with hummingbirds as we continued to practice our identification skills on so many of the look-alike species. Five Lucifer hummingbirds came in, which included two brilliant males. A small flock of the tiny Bushtit also came in to bathe in a small fountain. Behind the main feeder area a few participants got to see a Rufous-crowned Sparrow, the only one of the trip. The large crowds of people had left as the day drew to a close. Bryan announced that we would be leaving at 5 which, at that point, was only some five minutes away. Our hopes for seeing the last hummingbird were fading when right at 5 o'clock it appeared. It was the Plain-capped Starthroat which makes an occasional appearance in the U.S. We were rewarded with the 13th hummingbird on this trip.

We called it a day and returned to Casa for another scrumptious dinner.

Fri., Aug. 18 Ramsey Canyon

Today we had our sights set on a very special bird; the Elegant Trogon. Being part of mostly a Neotropical family, it is the only regularly breeding species at its northern range limit. Occasionally, the Eared Quetzal makes an appearance in southern Arizona.

After our early morning walk at Casa, we headed out to the nearby Ramsey Canyon. A few hummingbirds were busy at the feeders, but we were on a mission. We walked up to the spot where, during the last tour, we saw a male and two immatures. On our way up to the spot we saw a pair of Arizona Woodpecker inspecting a large sycamore tree. We reached the spot and there were only a couple of other people. No action was noticed. Robert walked up a couple hundred feet and heard one calling nearby. He signaled Bryan to bring everyone up and just as they reached the spot a bright male flew across with a big insect in its bill. Arlana spotted it perched further uphill and we got brief looks before it disappeared. Although it was heard several times afterwards, it would remain hidden from view the remainder of the morning. We went to a nearby bistro for lunch then returned to Casa for a bit of downtime.

Most everyone wanted to return to Ramsey for another shot at the trogon so we did just that. At the front door another visitor was kind enough to show us a nesting bird. It turned out to be a Berylline Hummingbird of all

things. What a treat! We continued up the trail to the trogon spot and it was very quiet. A Lazuli Bunting and a pair of Black-headed Grosbeaks came into some fruiting shrubs. It was getting late and just as we were getting to leave Robert spotted something moving upslope across the creek. The bird then appeared nearby in the creek, and it was one of the immature trogons. It landed nearby but took off after seeing us. Our trogon search was over. Just as we were starting to head down Bryan's keen eyes spotted something in a nearby tree. Lo and behold, it was a bright Red-faced Warbler.



A huge surprise and score! We got great looks at this very special bird. We had to get back down before staff locked the main gate and just as we were reaching the visitor center another visitor spotted something else. It was a Violet-crowned Hummingbird going to its nest. Nice!

We returned to Casa in time for everyone to see hummingbird banding in action. Sherri Williamson and her crew were trapping and banding there for the afternoon. Most of us had the chance to release banded hummingbirds which was a huge delight.

We had dinner then Robert gave a presentation on the birds and butterflies of Honduras to end a great day.

Sat., Aug. 19 Lake Patagonia | Paton Center | Green Valley

We did a little walk this morning in front of Casa before hitting the road once more. An Ash-throated Flycatcher made a brief appearance and more Vermilion Flycatchers. A Coyote crossed the road and a heavily panting dog not far behind it. A young Swainson's Hawk was still hanging around since the last trip. We had breakfast then said 'bye' to this wonderful lodge.



We made our way toward Patagonia Lake for our first stop. En route, however, we came across a nice surprise. It was a small herd of Pronghorn in a grassy field close to the road. We had to stop to get some photos of this unique mammal. We reached the lake and found that a massive rainstorm the day before left a muddy mess for the maintenance people to clean up. We started our walk and stopped at a spot that overlooked a corner of the lake. We saw a few Mexican Ducks, Pied-billed Grebes, Neotropic Cormorants, and a few Northern Rough-winged Swallow. Suddenly, some movement in the shrubs just below us caught our attention. We saw numerous, small, gray birds moving about. It ended up being a Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, a Lucy's Warbler, a Bell's Vireo, and a Warbling Vireo. We got good looks at all of them before moving on. We got down the trail a bit and realized that the storm had made a huge mess of the trail in the low-lying area. We saw a lone Black Phoebe before turning around.

We continued down the road and arrived at Patagonia where we had lunch at a local dive. After that, it was a short drive to the Paton Center where we check out the feeders for a while. There were a lot of familiar birds around including Inca Dove, Lazuli Bunting, Song Sparrow, and a Violet-crowned Hummingbird. We were about to leave when Bryan noticed something small amidst some shrubs behind us. Turned out to be a MacGillivray's Warbler and it was moving fast. We caught up to in another part of the garden before it disappeared. We headed out and around the corner found a Mississippi Kite perched high atop a tree.

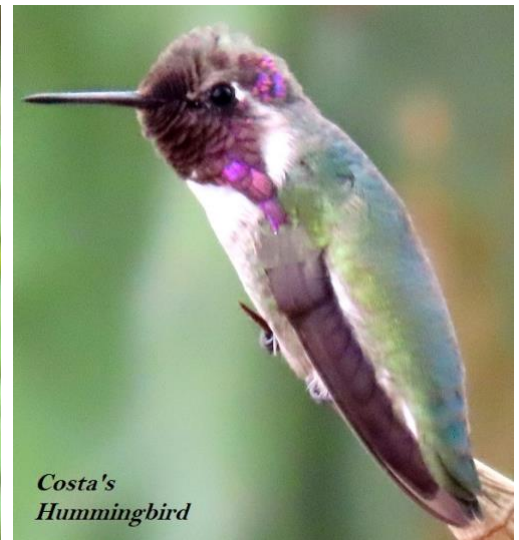
We stopped at the Patagonia Picnic bench stop to see what was stirring. It was fairly quiet but we did turn up a female Varied Bunting. We continued down the highway and ate dinner at a Mexican restaurant before reaching our last hotel. After this delicious dinner we reached Green Valley, checked into the hotel, and called it day.

Sun., Aug. 20 Box Canyon | Madera Canyon | Canoa Lagoon | Desert Meadows

Today would be jam-packed with numerous sites and quite a few more new trip birds. We made our way to Box Canyon and as we approached we could see that the winds were picking up. By the time we got further up into the canyon the winds were really howling. We parked and did the best we could to see if any birds were stirring.



Black-tailed Gnatcatcher



Costa's Hummingbird

There wasn't much. Some movement just upslope did catch our attention and it turned out to be one of today's target species; a Five-striped Sparrow. We descended a bit to a more protected spot and encountered the other one we were looking for; an adult Varied Bunting. A bit further down Bryan heard a bird calling from the van window. It was a Cassin's Sparrow. Then a Rufous-winged Sparrow was heard and we saw that one too. We were on a roll. Twice, Bryan stopped the van to catch two small Sonoran Whipsnakes. They were feisty.

Just around the bend was another famous destination; Madera Canyon. We parked and walked to the feeders. The gift shop was popular with everyone. A small group of Wild Turkeys dominated the spot below the feeders. Many familiar hummingbirds were zipping to and from the feeders. An occasional Mexican Jay would pop in as well. Robert showed everyone a nice Golden-banded Skipper feeding on a red *Salvia* near the front door. Not long after that, someone pointed out that something else was in the same planter where the skipper was. It was a baby Black-tailed Rattlesnake (cover page photo). Yikes! Fortunately, no one sat there. A staff member caught put it in a big bucket and a forest ranger came to get it. It was lunchtime so we found some picnic tables nearby. Some Painted Redstarts welcomed us there.

After a delicious picnic lunch we descended the mountain. We made our way to the Amado treatment ponds hoping to find some whistling-ducks but none were present. We continued on to the Canoa lagoon to see what was present. The wind was howling there too, but we did see a lone Redhead, Pied-billed Grebe, Green Heron, a couple Cliff Swallows, and Black Phoebe. A flowering shrub attracted a few butterflies including the Western Pygmy-Blue, one of the smallest butterflies in North America. We had one more place to check out before calling it a day. In a residential area we ended up at the Desert Meadows Community Park; a green area put together by the local community. It was a nice park environment that also had a few hummingbird feeders. It was there that we were after one last hummingbird. After some careful searching, Bryan heard it. Perched atop an agave leaf was a gorgeous Costa's Hummingbird. Our 14th, and final, hummingbird of the trip.

With this sighting we called it a day and returned to the hotel. We had a bit of downtime before catching up on the trip checklist and having our closing words. We had a delicious Italian dinner just around the corner to end the night.

Mon., Aug. 21

Sentinel Peak Park | Departures

All good things usually come to an end. And so did this trip. We made our way to Tucson and Bryan wanted to make one last birding stop before heading to the airport. We went to Sentinel Peak Park and strolled down a nearby trail. We spotted two Gilded Flickers, a couple Black-tailed Gnatcatchers, and three Ash-throated Flycatchers. It was a nice way to end a wonderful trip. Before we knew it, we were at the airport saying 'bye' to new friends and would hope to all see each other again.

Favorite bird, moment, hotel, experiences of the trip as follows:

Frank-Calling Screech-Owls, Red-faced Warbler.

Anne-The two hummingbird nests, Whiskered Screech-Owl.

Sheila-Whiskered Screech-Owl, large Black-tailed Rattlesnake.

Pam-Red-faced Warbler.

Mike-When Robert went into the gulley to flush the quail and flushed out a lot of other birds, Rose-throated Becard quest, great to meet Peg.

Lin-All hummingbird, both Cave Creek and Casa hotels, huge Rock Squirrel at Paton Center, geography and mountains, Elissa's talk and banding.

Gary-Five-striped Sparrow, Casa San Pedro, Vermilion Flycatcher.

Ann- Lucifer Hummingbird, Berylline Hummingbird on nest, Casa San Pedro, hummingbird banding.

Celia-Whiskered Screech-Owl, Painted Buntings, Casa San Pedro, Ramsey Canyon.

Arden-Greater Roadrunner, Javelinas, Doe with fawn, skunks, so many good birds, new experience with birding.

Arlana-Casa San Pedro, Robert flushing out Montezuma Quail, Bryan spotting the Gila Monster and searching for it in the brush, Greater Roadrunner, Javelinas, Black-throated Sparrow, Berylline Hummingbird on nest.

Bryan-Long-billed Starthroat; only second time seeing it.

Robert-Costa Hummingbird, Jewel Beetle, sharing time with everyone.