

# Arizona Monsoon Madness | August 2 - 9, 2023

## Trip Report | by James Petersen



**Guides Robert Gallardo and James Petersen with eight participants: Dawn, Lois, Debbie, Glen, Julie, Donna, Jenny, John and Olivia**



### **Wed., Aug. 2                      Early Arrivals | Wilcox**

Debbie and Glen arrived early on August 1, while Dawn, Lois, Julie, Donna, John and Jenny were picked up at the airport by 12 p.m. on August 2. After brief introductions, we set off on the 90-minute drive to Lake Cochise. Birding started the moment we left the airport when the group spotted a Morning Dove nest in the crook of a saguaro cactus. The adult dove was on its nest, and we could see two chicks peering out at us. With afternoon temperatures in the 90s, we arrived at Lake Cochise in search of shorebirds who use the lake to rest and refuel during migration. Upon parking, a few Great-tailed Grackles were seen at the water's edge.

Nearby were a few Chihuahuan Meadowlarks, previously considered a desert subspecies of Eastern Meadowlark referred to as "Lillian's Meadowlark," but recently promoted to full species status. The most active shorebirds were a group of 50+ Wilson's Phalaropes that delighted everyone with their feeding method, spinning in circles to create small whirlpools to draw up little insects and plant material. There were large flocks of American Avocets, and Black-necked Stilts, and both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs. Observing the yellowlegs side by side provided a nice opportunity to appreciate the difference in size and compare bill structure. There were plenty of



peeps about, mostly Least sandpipers with their yellowish-green legs and short, droopy bills. Several Western Sandpipers, with longer, slightly drooped bills were mixed in, some still retaining the rufous breeding plumage that made identification easier. Five larger sandpipers stood out among the peeps, and after better looks, these were identified as Baird's Sandpipers, their longer primary feathers extending past their tails giving them a longer, more slender profile. Robert picked out a Willet that briefly gave decent looks and a Spotted Sandpiper did the same.

We stopped to scan two of the smaller ponds that bordered the golf course, finding an adult Black-crowned Night-Heron roosting in the reeds. Closer inspection revealed another four or five deeper in the vegetation. American Coots were feeding at the edge of the pond, and a large flock of swallows was flitting about above. With careful scanning, we identified Tree Swallows and Barn Swallows. After a 15 -minute stop at the Safeway in Wilcox for some air-conditioning and some ogling at a nest full of baby Barn Swallows tucked up against the side of the building, we were back on the road heading to Portal, a small town on the eastern side of the Chiricahuas. An hour later, we pulled into Cave Creek Ranch just in time to get everyone settled before an amazing dinner of Mexican food cooked by Jackie.

## **Thurs., Aug. 3                      East of Portal | Stateline Road | Southfork Road | George Walker House**

With a forecast for temperatures above 100 degrees, we got a very early start to beat the heat. The plan was to bird the grasslands east of Portal, have breakfast and then head up the canyon for some mid-elevation birding where it would be cooler. Our first stop after leaving Cave Creek Ranch was at "trash corner," as it's known locally, a great spot for some special grassland birds. As we drove down, we could see the habitat change from the oaks and junipers of Cave Creek Ranch to the shrubby mesquite and grasslands below Portal. As soon as we parked, the first bird we heard was a singing Botteri's Sparrow, one of the two sparrows in southeast Arizona that wait for the monsoons to breed. With the Botteri's Sparrow flying around us giving decent looks, there were also two male Blue Grosbeaks teed up singing in the bright morning sunlight. A Say's Phoebe flew in, giving great looks as it worked the fence line on the opposite side of the road. Then we noticed a Gambel's Quail, followed by at least 10 chicks, as it quickly crossed the road.





On Stateline Road, we found three raptors perched on rock piles and calling. Scope views turned them into young Swainson's Hawks, recently fledged from a nearby nest. We made a few more stops, again hearing the stuttering songs of Botteri's Sparrows, and a small flock of Tree Swallows catching morning insects passed over. But with the heat coming on strong, it was time to head back to Cave Creek Ranch for a hearty breakfast. After breakfast, we headed to South Fork, slowly driving up the road looking/listening for birds. Our first stop yielded several species including Painted Redstarts. Most were immature birds, lacking the red belly of the adults, but after some hunting, we finally found an adult who eventually gave great views to all. Other sightings included Brown-crested Flycatcher, with its plaintive *whit* call, and Dusky-capped Flycatcher giving its mournful whistle. But the star of the show was a Sonoran Mountain King Snake that was spotted by Olivia as it slithered up a tree. The group watched in awe as the snake navigated its way up, around and back down a silver leaf oak. We reached the parking lot and slowly worked our way up the trail to the calls of Bridled Titmice, Brown Creepers and the Mexican subspecies of House Wren "Brown-throated House Wren." Spotted Towhees called from the dense underbrush and White-breasted Nuthatches crept up trees as we appreciated the unique plants such as the big, leathery leaves of netleaf oaks, whose acorns grow from the stem, and the common, white-barked Arizona sycamore that produces natural cavities that Elegant Trogons and Whiskered Screech-Owls like to nest in. We came upon two calling Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers on our way back, their squeaky, rubber ducky-like calls coming from the canopy above us. After a bit of searching, we were able to get brief views of the reddish tail and streaky breast from below. We returned to Cave Creek Ranch for lunch and a siesta, enjoying the birds that came into the feeders, especially the noisy family of Cactus Wrens!

In the afternoon we visited the George Walker House where we hoped to get our first good dose of the hummingbird action that southeast Arizona is known for during the monsoon season. We were not disappointed. The feeders were buzzing with territorial Rufous Hummingbirds and diminutive Calliope Hummingbirds that looked especially petit alongside the giant Rivoli's Hummingbird. In addition to hummingbirds, a flock of 20 Lark Sparrows, with their harlequin-brown facial patterns, and two Lazuli Buntings were mixed in as well. Returning to Cave Creek for dinner, we came across a three-foot-long black-tailed rattlesnake sunning itself on the side of the road. Though normally docile, this snake was not pleased to be the center of attention, slithering away into the brush with its rattling furiously. The last surprise was a Greater



Roadrunner perched in a tree alongside the road just as we turned onto the dirt road to Cave Creek Ranch. After a hearty dinner and the checklist review for the past two days, everyone turned in for the night.

**Fri., Aug. 4**

## **Portal | Southwest Research Station | Barfoot Park | Rustler Park**

Breakfast arrived early, then we headed out to the higher elevations of the Chiricahuas. We made a quick stop in Portal to see the nesting pair of Thick-billed Kingbirds and were fortunate to also see a pair of Phainopepla fly by, their black bodies and white wing patches dazzling and distinctive. Our second stop was to view some pre-Apache petroglyphs, difficult to interpret, but they included some lines that might indicate water and a other shapes that may have been big game. We stopped at the Southwest Research station for another whirlwind of hummingbirds, the star being the glistening-green Berylline Hummingbird, that came in briefly to the feeders. We made a few stops above Onion Saddle finding singing Red Crossbills perched at the top of a Douglas fir tree. Not to be outdone, Mexican Chickadees were calling, feeding on the other side of the road mid-canopy. As the group enjoyed the crossbills and chickadees, a dark raptor appeared, holding its wings in the telltale V-shape of a Turkey Vulture. However, upon closer inspection, it turned out to be a Zone-tailed Hawk, known to mimic the flight pattern of Turkey Vultures.

Next it was off to Barfoot for lunch, but we only made it a little way before stopping to view a feeding flock flying near the ground that turned out to be Pygmy Nuthatches, bird more often seen in the tops of the tall ponderosa pines. It was a treat to see these tiny nuthatches feeding just feet off the ground. This stop proved to be fortuitous as we heard another small flock of Red Crossbills doing their *kip kip kip* flight calls overhead, then spotted a Buff-breasted Flycatcher, a specialty bird of southeast Arizona, hunting for insects at eye level! Meanwhile, everyone got their first good looks at Yellow-eyed Juncos foraging on the ground. After that flock of birds, everyone was hungry, so we continued to Barfoot to enjoy a picnic lunch with sandwiches from Sky Island Grill.

Bird activity had slowed in the midday heat. Barfoot was quiet as we ate lunch, just a few Steller's Jays and a flock of Violet-green Swallows wheeling in the air above the pines. We decided to visit Rustler Park in the hopes





of finding warblers and other migrants. When we arrived, the birding SEEMED just as slow, but as we walked up the road, we noticed a mass hatching of insects that had attracted Western Bluebirds. We watched as the bluebirds sallied out, plucking insects from the air. Then a Grace's Warbler was spotted at eye level on the opposite side of the road. Suddenly, it seemed like every warbler appeared at once. We didn't realize it right away, but there was a pool of water just behind the tall grass that was a focal point of activity. A Hermit Warbler made an appearance; a dull, yellow-faced bird that breeds in the Pacific Northwest. Then the floodgates opened. Hutton's and a Plumbeous Vireos came in, then a bright "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warbler flashed in briefly, followed quickly by a Mexican Chickadee that dropped down for a bath, then preened in the open.

Someone spotted a warbler foraging in the distance beyond the "Grace's Warbler tree" that we eventually identified as a young Virginia's Warbler. In rather un-warbler like fashion, it posed in the same shrub for five minutes, giving all great scope views of this dull, gray bird with yellow undertail coverts and a white eye ring. Then an adult Red-faced Warbler came in, a charismatic warbler of southeast Arizona. Little did we know that this would be the only sighting for this species on the trip. We also had great looks at an adult Black-throated Gray Warbler, several Pygmy Nuthatches and another Buff-breasted Flycatcher! The Western Bluebirds were still flycatching like crazy, joined by some Pygmy Nuthatches, and a few Cassin's Kingbirds called from the hillside, zipping from perch to perch, eluding all attempts to get them in the scope. A Rock Wren was also calling on that bare hillside, which then obliged by perching in a dead tree for all to look at as a few young Red-tailed Hawks screamed and patrolled the air. We had to tear ourselves away to start the long drive to Casa San Pedro to get there by dinner time. It was hard to turn our backs on the sheer madness of the movement of birds that was happening, but we started down the west side of the Chiricahuas. Driving through extensive grasslands, we flushed Chihuahuan Meadowlarks along the fences and American Kestrels wagged their tails up and down balancing on telephone wires. Flocks of Mourning Doves took to the air, joining a few Swainson's Hawks searching for their supper.

## **Sat., Aug. 5 Casa San Pedro, Carr Canyon, Ash Canyon**

We woke early for some pre-breakfast birding. The feeders were awash with birds and the laughing call of Gila Woodpeckers filled the air as gray-billed Abert's Towhees scratched away below the feeders. Black-chinned and Broad-billed Hummingbirds came into the feeders, and a Great-horned Owl was found roosting in one of the large cottonwood trees, then a second not far away. A gorgeous, male Vermillion Flycatcher pulled the group



from the Great-horned Owls, its crimson-red feathers eliciting awe. A Swainson's hawk perched in the scrubby area by the road, and we could hear the distant chatter of a Yellow-breasted Chat. A Greater Roadrunner was seen down the road, as usual, just out of camera range. Time for breakfast. The Yellow-breasted Chat serenaded us as we ate, then surprised us by perching out in the open by the feeders.

The drive up Carr Canyon was slow going, with hair pin turns on the one-lane road heading up to what is known as the "reef," an area of the Huachucas formed by millions of years of sand deposits that were thrust upward by tectonic activity. We found Yellow-eyed Juncos around the campground along with Bewick's Wrens and two Virginia's Warblers. A Zone-tailed Hawk flew over, our second of the trip! As we unpacked our sandwiches, a Warbling Vireo flew into a nearby tree, and the juncos approached, hoping for some crumbs. After a relaxing lunch, we returned to the Casa for a break during the heat of the day before heading out to Ash Canyon. After a midday siesta, some opted to stay at the Casa while others headed to Ash Canyon to bird the feeders. The feeders were a whirlwind of hummingbird activity, with Black-chinned, Anna's and a few Rufous Hummingbirds. It only took a few minutes for a male Lucifer Hummingbird to show up, giving everyone point blank looks at this specialty bird of southeast Arizona with its characteristic long, curved bill. A second male appeared, and we watched the two chase each other off feeders while a female watched from a nearby perch. A Violet-crowned Hummingbird perched on one of the feeders, taking drinks and giving all great looks. A Bushtit came in too, and Gray Hawks screamed overhead. Suddenly, a long-billed hummingbird came in and went to feeder number three, a rare Plain-capped Starthroat, one of our hoped-for targets on this trip.

## **Sun., Aug. 6 Casa San Pedro | Ramsey Canyon | Miller Canyon**

In the morning, we took a short walk through the grasslands to the dry creek bed with towering cottonwood trees before breakfast. A Song Sparrow and a Common Yellowthroat were singing somewhere deep in the grasses. A male Blue Grosbeak landed in a low bush, then flew off carrying food. Behind us, a Lucy's Warbler briefly perched, then disappeared into the vegetation. We continued along the riparian corridor, tracking down some calling Summer Tanagers. With a little bit of work, we got the Summer Tanagers to come down and watched them forage on the ground.

After a hearty breakfast, we left to spend the morning at Ramsey Canyon, spending a few minutes at the hummingbird feeders when we arrived to admire the Black-chinned, Broad-tailed and Broad-billed Hummingbirds. We slowly birded our way up to the research cabin, enjoying the flitting of Painted Redstarts and



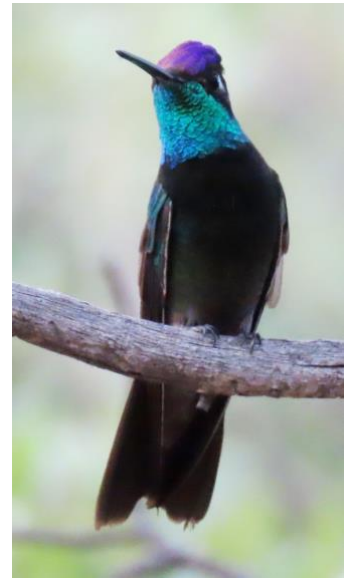
the soft chuck of Hepatic Tanagers. An adult male Summer Tanager with that huge almond of a bill made an appearance, and Sulphur-bellied flycatchers called as we continued up the trail. At the research cabin, Robert spotted an Elegant Trogon, a juvenile with a brown back and gray breast. A second immature trogon showed up and start feeding on some berries near the trail. Everyone was getting close views of this bird when the adult male showed up, perching a short distance away.

We stopped at the hummingbird feeders on our way back. Another Violet-crowned Hummingbird gave great looks. Then a Blue-throated Mountain-gem came in, an uncommon sighting outside of the Chiricahua's. Even more surprising was a Berylline Hummingbird! Unlike the one we saw in the Chiricahuas, this Berylline Hummingbird was much more cooperative, not only giving great looks, but also perching right above us! After a nice lunch, we visited Beatty's Ranch, considered one of the best hummingbird spots in southeast Arizona. The feeders were busy and almost immediately a White-eared Hummingbird was spotted. This is another SE Arizona specialty whose breeding range extends just barely into the U .S., We were dazzled by this gorgeous, small hummingbird with its thick, white eye stripe, and then a second male showed up at the same time! The rumble of storm clouds was a sign that we should return to the Casa. We gathered before dinner to hear Elissa's talk about hummingbird banding. Everyone was amazed at how small hummingbird bands are, and learning how difficult it is to age and band them. Then, after a very filling dinner, we enjoyed Robert's talk about the birds and butterflies of Honduras.

## **Mon., Aug. 7                      Patagonia Lake State Park | Patagonia | Paton Center for Hummingbirds | Patagonia Rest Stop**

After an early breakfast, we were on the road by 7:30. The birding spots for today were in the Patagonia area, including Patagonia Lake State Park, Paton Center for Hummingbirds and the Patagonia Rest Stop. On the way there, a medium sized raptor with pointed wings was spotted flying above us. With a quick pullover, and with everyone out of the car, we were able to watch a Mississippi Kite fly above us, an uncommon sighting in





southeast Arizona. We had parked alongside a bush that was full of ripe berries, and a family of Phainopeplas were feasting on them, their dark red eyes visible. A Western Tanager was spotted in the same bush, the first of the trip. At Patagonia Lake State Park, we went straight to the trailhead and found the first waterfowl of the trip, a couple of Mexican Ducks loafing on the far shoreline. A Double-crested Cormorant swam by, and a Pied-billed Grebe was diving nearby. We continued down the trail with the songs of Common Yellowthroats and Bell's Vireos in the air. Then we had a few interesting encounters. First, we bumped into some folks from Tucson Audubon who were searching for a good place to release several Black-crowned Night-Herons that had been rehabbed. Next, we were stopped at a trail junction by an angry bull, snorting and blocking our way. After 15 minutes of waiting, the bull continued down the trail that went towards the lake, so we took the other trail, arriving in a clearing where more Yellow-breasted Chats were singing. Here we saw our second Thick-billed Kingbird of the trip, high in a cottonwood. At this point we needed to head back for lunch.

After a hearty lunch, we visited the Paton Center for Hummingbirds where we observed multiple Broad-billed Hummingbirds, a Black-chinned Hummingbird and a Violet-crowned Hummingbird, which everyone got good looks at. We also saw Blue Grosbeak and a young, red-eyed Bronzed Cowbird. Just as we were leaving, a Song Sparrow came into view. Our final stop for the day was the famed Patagonia Rest Stop where we found a young Summer Tanager and a Warbling Vireo. We finally had great looks at two adult Gray Hawks calling and soaring overhead. Above them, a few White-throated Swifts could be seen, the first of the trip. A few vultures soared overhead, both Turkey with their silver looking primaries and smaller Black Vultures. We then continued to the Best Western in Green Valley and had a delicious dinner at the restaurant.

## **Tues., Aug. 8                      Box Canyon | Madera Canyon | Canoa Ranch**

In the morning we visited Box Canyon, starting with a few stops in the grasslands below the canyon where we found more singing Botteri's Sparrows and had tantalizing glimpses of Verdin and Black-tailed Gnatcatchers. Loggerhead Shrikes were seen perched on the power lines and even vocalizing for the group. In the distance, we could hear the songs of Chihuahuan Meadowlarks. In the canyon we heard the distant calls of Rock and Canyon Wrens bouncing off the steep rock walls. A dark bird flew up out of the canyon and perched long enough for us to identify it as a Varied Bunting. Thankfully it perched a bit further, giving us time to get it in the scope so





everyone had the chance to view this bird. We watched as a young Red-tailed Hawk flew below us, then dove out of sight. With a bit of patience, we at last came upon a singing Five-striped Sparrow that eventually emerged, giving everyone a gorgeous view of this iconic SE Arizona specialty as it perched atop of one of the many ocotillos in the canyon. It was then joined by Canyon Wren that obligingly perched in front of us. Many of us got great looks at this long-billed, boldly colored, reddish wren with a brilliant white throat as it foraged next to the road.

Our next stop was Santa Rita Lodge where we found a female Scotts Oriole, a Western Tanager and an Arizona Woodpecker who was coming to the peanut butter feeder. The Lesser Goldfinches seemed to prefer the nyger seed feeders, and of course the hummingbird feeders were busy, with Broad-billed the most numerous. After a picnic lunch, we drove back to the hotel to wait out what we thought would be a small monsoon rain. When it passed, a few of us headed to Canoa Ranch for some afternoon birding, but after just a few minutes of birding, a second storm swept in, but not before we saw a Pied-billed Grebe and a Redhead on the lake. Our farewell dinner was at Wisdom's Café, offering great Mexican food. Tomorrow Julie Hagen's birthday, so we surprised her with a card and cake after dinner. They had to roll out the door after all the good food!

Back at the hotel, we gathered to share everyone's favorite bird/moment of the trip. For some, like Debbie, John, Dawn and Glen, it was Casa de San Pedro and birds like Rufous and Calliope Hummingbirds and Painted Redstart, and the Black-tailed Rattlesnake. Lois liked the Gambel's Quail and all the hummingbirds. Dana liked the roadrunners, rattlesnakes and all the hummingbirds, while Julie liked the Yellow-breasted Chat, Vermillion Flycatcher and her birthday cake! For the guides, Robert's favorite moment was the Canyon Wren in Box Canyon while James's was the Five-striped Sparrow singing from the Ocotillo. Olive voted for the Gambel's Quail, Mexican Chickadee and the brilliant Red-faced Warbler.

## **Wed., Aug. 9                      Green Valley Desert Park | Canoa Ranch, Goodbyes**

Robert took half the group to the airport for early flights, while those with later flights started off the morning at the Desert Meadows Park in Green Valley. Run by the community, all the native plants are labeled, and we noted



several Broad-billed Hummingbird's buzzing by while White-winged doves called. Curve-billed Thrashers took cover in the gardens, and when we reached the furthest end of the park, we finally had a good look at an adult Verdin. Seeing its yellow head and chestnut wing patch was a treat. Verdins aren't normally shy, but they had been this whole trip. We paused at the hummingbird feeders and were rewarded when a Costa's Hummingbird came in, then perched in the mesquite. We spent some time admiring this tiny hummingbird with its brilliant purple gorget as it preened in the sun. On the way back to the van, a large accipiter with a rounded tail buzzed by, one of the local Cooper's Hawks looking for its breakfast. In the parking lot, a Lucy's Warbler flitted about in the mesquite, giving us much better looks of this dainty gray warbler.

Our last stop was the Canoa Ranch conservation area where had been rained out the day before. Both the Redhead and the Pied-billed Grebe were still on the pond and Western Kingbirds and Vermillion Flycatchers flitted by while a Spotted Sandpiper tittered by the water's edge. Then we returned to Tucson, dropping everyone off and wishing them well.

*Photos: Group Birding (Robert Gallardo - RG), Butterfly (Julie Hagen - JH), Hooded Skunk (JH), Rufous Hummingbird (RG), Gambel's Quail (JH), Western Tanager (JH), Curve-billed Thrasher (JH), Lizard (JH), Red-faced Warbler (JH), Cave Creek Scenic (RG), Group Photo (RG), Black-tailed Rattlesnake (RG), Group at Russell Park (RG), Dull Firetrap (RG), Yellow-eyed Junco (RG), Chiricahua Scenic (RG), Broad-billed Hummingbird (JH), Lucifer Hummingbird (RG), Red Crossbill (RG), Mexican Chickadee (RG), Group at dinner (RG), Female Northern Cardinal (JH), Group Birding at Patagonia Lake (RG), Phainopepla (RG), Rivoli's Hummingbird (RG), Group at Box Canyon (RG), Female Elegant Trogon (JH), Fatal Metalmark (RG), Butterfly (JH), Cactus Wren (JH), Broad-billed Hummingbird (JH), Blue Grosbeak (JH)*