SOUTHEASTERN ARIZONA

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Usually the first day of a tour is devoted to settling in to the hotel and preparing for a morning departure the following day, however, I decided we needed to bird the first day of our SE Arizona tour. And bird we did. We traveled northeast of Tucson to WOW Arizona where we feasted our eyes on numerous and up close birds, and our stomachs on finely prepared Mexican cuisine cooked by our hosts at WOW Arizona, life does not get much better than sipping homemade wine and watching 44 hummingbird feeders. While at WOW we had large numbers of Costa’s, Broad-billed, Black-chinned, Anna’s, and Rufous Hummingbirds all within about 30 feet or less. The Gambel’s Quail that scratched for seeds in the dirt below feeders did not seem to mind the nearby Harris’s and Cooper’s Hawks, and of course we did not mind them either. At WOW the Cactus Wrens, Curve-billed Thrashers, Northern-Beardless Tyrannulets, Phainopeplas, Lucy’s Warblers, Rufous-winged Sparrows, and Hooded Orioles, added enjoyment to our evening that ended all too soon. After all we needed to settle in to the hotel and prepare for a morning departure the following day.

The following day found us up early for our ascent of nearby Mt. Lemmon. En route to Mt. Lemmon we made an impromptu stop in a desert neighborhood where we found Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Gila Woodpecker, Curve-billed Thrasher, and Verdin. Stops higher up on Mt. Lemmon produced some sought after warblers, like Grace’s, Red-faced and Painted Redstart. In the pines we found a small flock of cooperative Pygmy Nuthatches, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Mountain Chickadee, Greater Pewee, Cordilleran Flycatcher and numerous Yellow-eyed Juncos. Our sack lunch today had added to the usual fare Dandelion Jelly brought all the way from Pennsylvania by a client. After a lovely sack lunch among the pines we strolled to Rose Canyon Lake and admired a soaring Zone-tailed Hawk above the lake. The requisite stop at Summer Haven produced Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Steller’s Jay, American Robin, Pine Siskin, and more Yellow-eyed Juncos.

After two nights in Tucson we were off early for Santa Rita Lodge, high in the cool of the Santa Rita Mountains. The absolute highlight of our three night stay at the lodge was the pair of nesting Elegant Trogons that were constantly calling just behind our lodge, and people certainly took the short stroll along the trail behind our cabins to view these magnificent birds. One afternoon the female trogon was in full view peering into the tree cavity while the male perched on a nearby limb, both offering great views and excellent photo opportunities. Another highlight had to be the Coatimundi that strolled around at dark near our lodges; a real treat was seeing a mother climb up a bank with three young coatis scampering along behind her. Yet another highlight had to the very cooperative Western Screech-Owl in Florida Canyon and very cooperative Whiskered Screech-Owl at Bog Springs Campground. However, I am getting ahead of myself here. Our main mission this morning was to head straight to Box Canyon for the two or three pairs of nesting Five-striped Sparrows that had taken up residence in this easily accessible canyon. After a few minutes of looking at Varied Bunting, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Phainopeplas galore, Bewick’s Wren, Western and Cassin’s Kingbird, Western Tanager, we spotted our target bird close to the road and showing off its five stripes. An attempt for Black-capped Gnatcatcher in Florida Canyon produced Bell’s Vireo, but no gnatcatchers. However, just down the canyon we encountered skylarking Cassin’s Sparrow and singing Botteri’s Sparrow in the scope. Eventually we worked our way up to the lodge where we sat and watched feeders, something we became good at during our trip. Straight away we were treated to feeding White-breasted Nuthatch, Bridled Titmouse, Arizona Woodpecker, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Mexican Jay, Hepatic Tanager, scads of Lesser Goldfinch, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, and the hummingbirds. Here we had more close up looks at Broad-billed, Black-chinned, and finally the truly magnificent looking Rivoli’s Hummingbird with its brilliant green gorget and stunningly purple head.

The following morning we made a run to Pena Blanca Canyon south of Green Valley. Here we enjoyed the solitude and birds of a seldom birded canyon. In the parking lot the Brown-crested Flycatchers were flitting high in a sycamore, while a bit further along in the canyon Bewick’s Wrens flitted low in the mesquites and Acorn Woodpeckers sallied out for insects. The canyon was filled with the song of the ubiquitous Western Wood-Pewee and the occasional Sulphur-bellied and Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Hutton’s Vireo, and Phainopepla. After an afternoon nap, we ventured out in the evening for Lesser Nighthawks that were displaying their rounded wingtips as they foraged for insects. As Florida Canyon became darker we heard Mexican Whip-poor-will calling, saw Common Poorwill, and had stunning looks at a Western Screech-Owl just above our heads.

After a breakfast with the birds at our lodge we made our way to Proctor Road where we enjoyed very nice looks at the diminutive Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet and then back to Florida Canyon where we finally had close up looks at the family of Black-tailed Gnatcatchers, sans the adult male. The evening was set aside for the adventure into California Gulch for the elusive and sometimes silent Buff-collared Nightjar. With guidance from Laurens Halsey we made the arduous drive into the gulch and after viewing a Thick-billed Kingbird we had views of this Mexican nightjar in the flashlight beam as it flew past us. Our gulch experience made for a pleasant trip out and a late night arrival at the lodge.

Our next two nights would be spend in the comfort of the Ranch House at Cave Creek Ranch, where once again we found ourselves viewing birds like Blue-throated Hummingbird, Gambel’s Quail, Juniper Titmouse, Arizona Woodpecker, Black-headed Grosbeak, Summer Tanager, and Hooded Oriole from the shade of our porch. As we were viewing birds and Coatimundis from the porch we were stunned and amazed to see a Gila Monster amble along the rocks below the feeders giving us and Victor Emanuel great looks at this colorful desert denizen. A morning excursion into the Chiricahua Mountains produced more high elevation birds along with the highly sought after Mexican Chickadee that we worked hard to locate along with a lone Band-tailed Pigeon in our scopes. Lower in elevation, a trip to the Southwestern Desert Research Station allowed us looks at male and female Montezuma Quail walking in the road and up the bank at the side of the road. Desert birding in and around Rodeo, NM produced a pair of Great-horned Owls, Gambel’s and Scaled Quail, a pair of Bendire’s Thrasher, and Blue Grosbeak. An interesting sight in the desert was watching Lesser Nighthawks and bats drink water from a small pond.

Our last three nights in one of the three “sky islands” were spent at Ramsey Canyon Inn Bed and Breakfast high in the rugged Huachuca Mountains near Sierra Vista where pies are served at 3pm sharp, the birds come into feeders all day long, and rattlesnakes make their presence known. We ventured out on several excursions and had female Montezuma Quail and male Lucifer’s Hummingbirds at Ash Canyon, and a Goshawk in the scope in Miller Canyon. One morning we found ourselves on a winding road heading up Carr Canyon where we stopped at Reef Townsite Campground and quickly had calling Buff-breasted Flycatchers in our binoculars, a fleeting glimpse of Montezuma Quail, Northern Flicker, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Brown Creeper, Hepatic Tanager, and Grace’s Warbler. A short hike down toward Comfort Springs provided nice scenery and a chance to stretch our legs. Later in the cool of the evening we birded San Pedro House along the San Pedro where we viewed thunder clouds, Common Ground-Dove, Yellow-breasted Chat, Gila Woodpecker, Blue Grosbeak, and a small flock of Lark Sparrows. One evening, five “intrepid” souls where walking just downhill from the lodge, homing in on a calling Mexican Whip-poor-will, when they heard the distinctive warning sound of a rattlesnake. Once they returned to the pavement from their startled jumps they located the Black-tailed Rattlesnake that had sent them its warning rattle. At this point the whip-poor-will was all but forgotten and as the group regained their composure numerous photos were shot as the snake slithered up the slope off the road and out of harm’s way.

Our last night was spent in Tucson allowing folks the opportunity to take morning flights home, however, we did manage one more bird for the trip. Just a few days earlier a Fulvous Whistling-Duck graced the ponds at the Green Valley Waste Water Treatment Plant, and it continued allowing the group to tick a very rare for the state bird.

David and Brandon plan on returning to SE Arizona in the summer of 2019 with another small group not to exceed four clients. This is a rare opportunity to enjoy the “sky island” lodges and birds of SE Arizona in the comfort of a small group.