West Texas and New Mexico with the Three Rosy Finches

January 9-16, 2022

With Covid cases on the rise and finches showing up on Sandia Crest very sporadically if at all, I was tempted to cancel this tour. However, tour participants would have none of it, they were ready to go. We had cold mornings and mild afternoons missing some easy birds but finding some pretty good ones. This was an easy paced tour that involved many parks, many birds, and opportunities to walk along nice paths and easy trails.

Our first day in Albuquerque started out at Tingley Lagoon where we scoped numerous species of ducks up close and personal, something that would happen frequently during this tour. We had Wood Duck, American Wigeon, Mallard, Northern Shoveler, Redhead, and Canvasback. Tingley Lagoon is comprised of several bodies of water, used by numerous species of waterfowl, and has easy to walk paths with adjacent woodlands for birds other than waterfowl. We finally had to depart Tingley and work our way toward Petroglyphs National Monument where we saw two species of bird, this was a bust, so we moved on quickly to Balloon Park, a new stop for us on this tour. Three Brant had been reported from this area and when we pulled up, we had to sort through the numerous Canada and some Cackling Geese before getting distant views of the Brant. After a wonderful lunch at a wonderful park, the Brant had moved closer providing us more satisfying looks. The Rio Grande Nature Center never disappoints, here we added Bufflehead, Green-winged Teal, Mexican Duck, and the lovely Hooded Merganser. The woodlands added Ladder-backed Woodpecker, several Flickers, Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, and nice looks at our first of many Spotted Towhees. As always, Los Poblanos Open Space offered up several Greater Roadrunners numerous Sandhill Cranes and a pleasant walk through a relaxing part of New Mexico.

On our second day in Albuquerque, we visited Embudito Canyon for desert birds where it took a little hiking and some time for the sun to get up before birds began to move. Here we enjoyed a pleasant hike along with Gambel’s Quail, Woodhouse’s Scrub-Jay, Black-throated and Rufous-Crowned Sparrow, and a our first looks at Canyon Towhee. A quick stop at the Tijeras Ranger Station yielded Juniper Titmouse and Townsend’s Solitaire along with a pleasant desert type walk. From here we made the winding drive up to Sandia Crest to hope for rosy-finches, birds that had not really shown up yet this year. For some reason the finches were not at their historic wintering grounds this year. So, I went through the motions of spreading seed at the feeders in a rather perfunctory manner, know that nothing but Mountain Chickadees and Stellar’s Jay would show up. But after viewing Hairy Woodpecker and a few Dark-eyed Juncos in the woodlands around the parking lot, a swirling mass of finches materialized and descended on the seeds eventually resolving into Black Rosy-Finches and one cooperative Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, the Brown-capped never appeared, but that was ok, we got rosy-finches in a year when most people missed them. A little luck always makes for a better bird tour. Our picnic lunch was at the Tijeras Ranger Station where we enjoyed looks at Juniper Titmouse, Bushtit, Townsend’s Solitaire, Western Bluebird, Canyon Towhee, and a staked out female Williamson’s Sapsucker.

Our next two nights were in Socorro, New Mexico, the gateway to Bosque del Apache NWR. At Bosque del Apache we drove both the south and north loops, birded the always productive Visitor Center that was closed because of Covid. We had a fine picnic lunch at the Visitor Center picnic tables where we spied a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Brewer’s, White-crowned, and Black-throated Sparrow, along with Pyrrhuloxia. The two loops allowed us full coverage of the refuge adding a few more duck species, Bald Eagle, Lesser Goldfinch, Say’s Phoebe, Western Bluebird, Marsh Wren, a slightly out of range White-throated Sparrow and finally a very out of range White-tailed Kite. A quick visit to Turtle Bay Park offered a rather birdy 45 minutes with our first Black Phoebe, several Phainopeplas, a hard to see Verdin, and numerous Yellow-rumped Warblers, along with a nice variety of close at hand ducks.

Our final two days were spent seeking birds in and around El Paso, a city filled with numerous parks and scenic areas. Our stop a Keystone Heritage Park gave close looks at ducks, Least Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher, Ring-billed Gull, White-faced Ibis, scope looks at Crissal and Curve-billed Thrasher, a flock of Yellow-headed Blackbirds, but no interesting gulls as we had hoped. Ascarate Park, always birdy, added Greater Scaup to our list of ducks, Western Grebe, Burrowing Owl, extended looks at male and female Brewer’s Blackbird, and just a nice location to bird. Crossroad Ponds has become rather overgrown with reeds reducing the amount of open water and duck species; however, the reeds create nice habitat for the calling Sora and Virginia Rails we heard. A stroll around the El Paso Country Club area produced a Lewis’s Woodpecker, but no Acorn Woodpeckers, darn.

Our final morning, we visited Memorial Park in the very heart of El Paso where we had extended looks at Verdin and Plumbeous Vireo. A surprise find was a cooperative female type Townsend’s Warbler foraging in the trees. Nearby Arroyo Park gave us nice looks at Green-tailed Towhee and another Crissal Thrasher along with more Black-throated Sparrows. A surprise find was a Clay-colored Sparrow among the many Brewer’s Sparrows at Wilderness Park. Here we also had nice looks at Lark Bunting, Pyrrhuloxia and yet again, another Crissal Thrasher. Our final stop of the trip was the Rio Bosque Wetlands on the east side of El Paso where we found a feeding flock of about 250 Common Mergansers, over 100 Ring-necked Ducks and views of a smart looking Harris’s Hawk.

Brandon and I plan on a repeat of this same tour in 2023.