SOUTHEASTERN ARIZONA

JULY 20 – 30, 2015

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After a six year hiatus, Penfeathers Tours returned to SE Arizona. This time there were a few new twists and upgrades. An early morning departure to Sabino Canyon found us in the Sonoran Desert walking among the hikers, joggers, bikers, Gila Woodpeckers, Verdins, Gambel’s Quail, and Black-tailed Gnatcatchers. An hour later we were on Mt. Lemmon slowly walking along Incinerator Ridge at about 8,000 feet enjoying mild weather and many Red-faced Warblers feeding their young in the oak-pine habitat. The opportunity to drive up a well maintained road to higher elevations was definitely appreciated. Along with the Red-faced Warblers were Grace’s, Olive, and Black-throated Gray Warblers. In the camping areas, we were able to study Hutton’s and Warbling Vireos along with many Painted Redstarts. After lunch and a short downhill walk some birders watched a Common Black Hawk soaring low in the sky and feeding along the shore of Rose Canyon Lake. The Steller’s Jays, Pygmy Nuthatches, Bushtits, and Yellow-eyed Juncos proved to be entertaining.

Later that day we traveled north of Tucson to our first new spot for this wonderful tour, WOW Arizona, a private property that has been painstakingly transformed from abused desert to a backyard loaded with native plants and bird feeding stations. Owners, Chris and Mary Ellen Vincent, have established a three acre natural property they call Wild Outdoors Arizona. They presented a backyard dinner for the group with wine and fine food. Here we received our first “taste” of what it would be like to sit and watch numerous birds coming to feeders very close at hand. We would use this tactic to our advantage throughout the trip. At WOW, many Broad-billed and Black-chinned Hummingbirds were actually too close to bring into sharp focus. The gorgeous male Costa’s hummers buzzed the sugar water while we ate fajitas and chips ladened with homemade salsa. Hooded Orioles coming to liquid feeders were a treat while the furtive Abert’s Towhees picked seed off the ground. Every now and then we did manage a bite of dinner when one of the resident Cooper’s Hawks got up to hunt, briefly slowing small bird activity. Western Diamondback Rattlesnakes are also a welcome native species at WOW and some of the group enjoyed great looks at a three footer.

After two nights in Tucson we made our way to the seven Burrowing Owls that had “set up shop” within a few miles of our hotel. After taking numerous photos and marveling at the nearby owls we were off to another first, Cave Creek Ranch, a lodging facility nestled within the Chiricahua Mountains very near the South Fork of Cave Creek. When we were not far afield, the group could be found watching the Blue-throated Hummingbirds and a plethora of other species at close range while I prepared dinner in the spacious Ranch House. Staying at Cave Creek Ranch and the two other lodges allowed us to dine in while enjoying the great outdoors. A hike up the South Fork yielded nice looks at more Painted Redstarts, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Arizona Woodpecker, Mexican Jay, Bridled Titmouse, and more Hutton’s Vireos. A trip to the high country to Rustler and Barfoot Parks in the Chiricahuas was not productive as the rainy season lived up to its name. Alas, there was to be no Mexican Chickadee sighting this tour.

Yet another first for us, our next three nights were spent in the comfort of the Ramsey Canyon Inn which is located just below Ramsey Canyon Preserve. Our first outing in the area was to a private residence of a Houstonian, transplanted to Sierra Vista, where we enjoyed our second Plain-capped Starthroat in his bird friendly backyard. We had previously seen another Starthroat that same morning at a private residence in Portal. Lucky for us, Plain-capped Starthroats had staged an impressive movement into SE Arizona this year. In Ramsey Canyon we did eventually tick the Elegant Trogon, but we definitely desired better views. One drawback to staying at this lovely facility is that we found ourselves gravitating toward the main lodge around 3pm each day, the time fresh pies were served to the guests. However, we were able to get out early most mornings and all eventually got to see the brilliantly colored male Flame-colored Tanager that was being seen along the Bledsoe Loop. Later, most of the group made the hike up to see the three Spotted Owls in nearby Miller Canyon. The owls were so quiet and well camouflaged we almost missed them. Following the owl hike a few adventurous folks made the long hike up the Hamburg Trail for the Tufted Flycatcher. It was also at Miller Canyon where we waited in vain for a White-eared Hummingbird to show. As I prepared dinner, well maybe it was the fine folks at the Fortune Cookie that prepared dinner, the group was watching Arizona Woodpecker and Violet-crowned Hummingbird at the feeders just outside the main building. Also coming to the feeders were Bridled Titmouse, Anna’s, Magnificent, Black-chinned, and our last three nights were spent at the Santa Rita Lodge high in the Santa Rita Mountains just south of Tucson where once again feeders and birds abounded. A long and pleasant morning hike up the Super Trail produced the much needed better views that were desired of the trogon. High on the trail we sat and watched as two adult Elegant Trogons attended to their nearby young. We spent just enough time to get great looks and a give a few high fives, then we moved on to the leave the family alone among the pines and oaks. In the lowlands of the Santa Rita Mountains we had scope views of Rufous-winged Sparrow, a sparrow we would see elsewhere as well. In Florida Canyon we were admiring a scolding Warbling Vireo when a male Black-capped Gnatcatcher came in to see what all the fuss was about and that is when the human fuss began. This was a life bird for most of the group. Later in the evening we watched and photographed more than thirty Lesser Nighthawks feeding low in the evening sky. And even later that evening, at our favorite owl location, we had Western Screech Owl just above our heads. One morning was devoted to another first, a hike into Pena Blanca Canyon where we had excellent views of perched and soaring Zone-tailed Hawk. Early in our easy hike along the dry streambed we located Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Varied Bunting, more Dusky-capped and Brown-crested Flycatchers, Gray Hawk, Painted Redstart, and Black-headed Grosbeak. On our way out of the canyon the Rufous-capped Warblers were first seen right at the base of a bush, at what seemed like a mile away and definitely backlit. As we were trudging back to the van they reappeared again, this time right in front of us and right out in the open. We spent a few minutes with three very cooperative birds of a species that has just recently increased in numbers in the area.

After a little rest and relaxation back at the lodge we headed out for an evening in the California Gulch area. This is a remote canyon very close to the Mexican border that is home to the highly coveted Five-striped Sparrow. We met our local guide at the appointed time and made our way along the newly improved dirt tract that leads to the famed gulch, however, this year we were not going to actually hike down into the gulch in pursuit of the elusive Five-striped Sparrow. This year, another first, they were signing and easily visible along the main road. Also right alongside the main road was a beautiful male Montezuma Quail begging to be photographed, and of course we pulled out the cameras. We just stumbled from the van and after a few tense moments, there were singing Five-striped Sparrows in our scopes and our binoculars. We enjoyed viewing three different pairs of this Mexican sparrow. The Buff-collared Nightjar that had been singing in the gulch since about March finally decided to call it quits tonight. We did not hear or see that Mexican denizen; however, we did have fantastic views of an Elf Owl right near our van as we were loading up for the night time drive out of California Gulch and right into the headlight beam of the ever present Border Patrol. We all appreciated that the US Government Border Patrol had our safety in mind and we did eventually make it back safely to the lodge, though we had to stop and photograph a tarantula in the road on our way back to civilization.

We were in SE Arizona during one of the wetter and cooler monsoon seasons and many plants were in full bloom, particularly noticeable were the century plants and ocotillos. The afternoon showers kept temperatures pleasant and the rain we encountered, except for the day in the Chiricahuas, was pleasant and refreshing, rejuvenating us and the birds.