SE ARIZONA 2021

12-22 July 2021

After canceling the 2020 tour we decided it was safe to travel to one of the most magical birding locations in the US, SE Arizona. We arrived in Tucson during a protracted drought that has affected bird numbers and bird distribution, mostly in a negative way. However, we did find many of the expected species and a few of the unexpected as well. We stayed in the lovely lodges that we have used in the past, Cave Creek Ranch in the Chiricahua Mountains, Ramsey Canyon Inn in the Huachuca Mountains, and finally Santa Rita Lodge tucked away in the Santa Rita Mountains. A day visit to Mt. Lemmon in the Santa Catalina Mountains rounded out the four “sky islands” we would visit on this bird filled tour. We also visited a few locations we have not visited on past tours, adding some additional fun for Brandon and myself.

After arriving in Tucson our first order of business was to make the one hour drive to WOW Arizona, a private property in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains, that upon arrival provided us with appetizers, a homemade meal, and numerous birds. We were entertained by Anna’s, Black-chinned, numerous Broad-billed and a few Costa’s Hummingbirds. The resident Harris’ and Cooper’s Hawks put on a show, but sent the Abert’s Towhee, Rufous-winged Sparrow and Hooded Orioles into hiding.

The next morning, we were off to Incinerator Ridge on Mt. Lemmon where we were fortunate enough, or was it skillful enough, to find the first of the many nests we would locate on this trip. After watching and photographing a Red-faced Warbler for a few minutes we found a delicately built Red-faced Warbler nest on the ground under the jutting edge of a rock and watched the adults feed their young. We did this from a safe distance allowing the parents to feed their growing young. After all we want more warblers to view next year. We eventually moved on to get good looks at Cordilleran Flycatcher on a nest, House Wren in a nest box, Pygmy Nuthatch, Mountain Chickadee, Grace’s Warbler, and quick looks at Black-throated Gray and Virginia’s Warbler. A stop at Rose Canyon Lake gave us perched and inflight looks at an adult Common Black Hawk, the Zone-tailed Hawk was seen from the parking lot before walking to the lake.

With the first of four sky islands behind us we worked our way to Cave Creek Ranch in the Chiricahua Mountains, however, we made the obligatory stop at Willcox where we were stunned to see very little water in the pond and almost no shorebirds. We did pick up the soon to be new species of meadowlark, the Lillian’s Meadowlark along with Mexican Duck and a perched lone Scaled Quail. A sack lunch in the small Arizona town of Willcox was rather pleasant and fortifying. Once we arrived at Cave Creek Ranch we settled into the Ranch House with its numerous feeders and ample supply of birds. The Blue-throated Mountain-Gems were present as were Bridled Titmouse, Arizona Woodpecker, Brown-crested Flycatcher at a nest, Pyrrhuloxia, Black-headed Grosbeak, and Hooded Oriole. A short walk along South Cathedral Road turned up the staked out Thick-billed Kingbird in the same location as in 2019. We then made the winding drive up to Rustler Park spotting three Band-tailed Pigeons along the way with one bird allowing scope views. Once at Rustler Park we watched a pair Greater Pewees, Stellar’s Jay, Yellow-eyed Junco, and worked hard for nice looks at Mexican Chickadee in the pines.

A stop at the Southfork of Cave Creek yielded a wonderful surprise, a pair of Elegant Trogon right along the path, as well as calling and visible Dusky-capped Flycatchers, and Painted Redstart. Trogon numbers were down from a 201 on the 2020 spring survey compared to 68 during the 2021 spring survey. We were pleased to be able to watch the two trogons along Southfork.

In the morning it was on to our third sky island, the Huachuca Mountains just south of Sierra Vista. We spent three lovely nights at the Ramsey Canyon Inn Bed and Breakfast which is under new management and improvements were evident right away. We arrived a bit before check in and was “forced” to maintain a feeder vigil, turning up nine species of hummingbirds while sitting on the front porch of the lodge in a light drizzle. The group watched Rivoli’s, Blue-throated Mountain-Gem, Black-chinned, Rufous, Anna’s, Costa’s, Broad-billed, Violet-crowned, and amazingly a Berylline Hummingbird. An early morning drive up to Reef Townsite Campground produced, after a bit of work, Buff-breasted Flycatcher, Hutton’s Vireo on the nest and a nice flock of Grace’s Warblers. A short walk up Ramsey Canyon gave us views of Painted Redstart, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Western Wood-Pewee on a nest, and Bridled Titmouse. After missing the Lucifer’s Hummingbird at Ash Canyon we tried again later in the day and had great looks at this stunning hummingbird with its purple gorget and drooping bill. A quick walk around San Pedro House along the San Pedro River, that actually had flowing water it in, produced Blue Grosbeak, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Yellow-breasted Chat, Yellow Warbler, Song Sparrow, and a few Gila Woodpeckers.

Our final destination was the Santa Rita Lodge in the Santa Rita Mountain, our last sky island of the trip. Here we had our meals while watching Mexican Jay, Arizona Woodpecker, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Bridled Titmouse, Bewick’s Wren, Scott’s Oriole, and plenty of hummingbirds including, Broad-billed galore, Rufous, Allen’s, and another Berylline. On our way to the lodge, we stopped in the small town of Patagonia for nice looks at Mississippi Kite, numerous Phainopepla, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, and the staked out Rose-throated Becards at their pendulous nest. We were able to watch at least one adult male and several other birds interacting at the nest.

While at the lodge we had nice looks at coatimundis and one night we had two highly visible Whiskered Screech Owls calling to us. A trip to a new location for us, Montosa Canyon, produced close looks at Five-striped Sparrow and the wonderfully colored Varied Bunting on an ocotillo stalk along the side of the road. A short hike up into Box Canyon produced a calling and soaring Gray Hawk, while a visit to Desert Meadows Park in Continental offered close up views of male Costa’s Hummingbirds, Vermilion Flycatcher and Rufous-winged Sparrows at seed feeders.

On our way to the airport we drove the nine mile loop through Saguaro National Park East looking for Gilded Flicker and only finding forest after forest of massive cacti and a few Gila Woodpeckers, no flickers with golden feathers this time.

David and Brandon plan to return to SE Arizona in the summer of 2022 for another four person tour that utilizes the same three lodges.