Winter in SE Arizona

1/6 – 12, 2024

When I heard the forecast was for a wintery mix in the mountains south of Sierra Vista, our destination, I call Scott and April, owners of Ramsey Canyon Inn Bed and Breakfast to see if it was alright if the group sat under the cover of their front porch to watch their numerous feeders. We were granted permission and spent about an hour watching Inca Dove, Rivoli’s Hummingbird, Acorn and Arizona Woodpecker, White-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, Yellow-eyed Junco, and a very cooperative Painted Redstart enjoying the feeders. As the weather continued to be disagreeable, we decided to head to nearby Ash Canyon and sit under cover and watch Anna’s Hummingbird, Gila and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, Mexican Jay, Bridled Titmouse, Bewick’s and Cactus Wrens, Pine Siskin, Lesser Goldfinch, Dark-eyed Junco, Abert’s Towhee, and Pyrrhuloxia come to the feeders a few feet from us.

However, let’s start at the beginning of the tour in Phoenix. Once Brandon and I had collected everyone from the airport we made our way straight to nearby Kiwanis Park, an area Brandon and I had recently scouted. Here we quickly refound the Rosy-faced Lovebirds we had seen during scouting, and they sure put on a show on a low hanging powerline and nearby tree. We rounded out the day with American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Cooper’s Hawk, Gila Woodpecker, a lovely Verdin, and the colorful Audubon’s subspecies of Yellow-rumped Warbler.

Our first full day of birding had us finding as many LeConte’s Thrashers as Brandon and I found during scouting, zero. We did refind the Bendire’s Thrasher and Sagebrush Sparrows, however, a persistent light rain had us retreating to a local diner for shelter and hot coffees. Once rejuvenated we made our way east to Gilbert Water Ranch to seek out the pair of Streak-backed Orioles that had been present for a few weeks. Once we broke out some sliced oranges the male and female oriole appeared and put on quite the show, pleasing our photographers. A walk around the birdy ranch yielded approximately twenty Abert’s Towhees, numerous species of ducks including Cinnamon Teal, Gambel’s Quail, Black Phoebe, Vermilion Flycatcher, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Curve-billed Thrasher, American Pipit, Green-tailed and Spotted Towhee, a rare in the winter Yellow Warbler and a skulking Wilson’s Snipe.

After two nights in Phoenix, we were off to Tucson, for four nights, with a stop or two along the way. Our first stop was at the Evergreen Turf Farm where we had fantastic views of over thirty Mountain Plover that kept walking in our direction until they were about thirty feet from us. We stopped to enjoy a perched and in flight Ferruginous Hawk, Rock Wren, Brewer’s Sparrow, and Western Meadowlark. The Chihuahuan Meadowlark would come later. A lunch stop at Picacho SP was refreshing and produced three Gilded Flickers cavorting about on a saguaro cactus, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Curve-billed Thrasher, Cactus and Rock Wrens, Verdin, the sharply marked Black-throated Sparrow, and numerous White-crowned Sparrows. A surprise requiring a written description ebird was the perched Bald Eagle we saw on our way to Tucson, that woke everyone up right quick.

We arrived in Tucson in time for an easy one mile walk around Sweetwater Wetlands just north of town and here we encountered numerous ducks, Greater Roadrunner, Red-naped Sapsucker, Say’s and Black Phoebes, a rare for the winter Barn Swallow, Abert’s Towhee, Black-and-white, Orange-crowned, Black-throated Gray, and Yellow-rumped Warblers. What a great way to wrap up an even better day.

Our first full day in the Tucson area found us at a, you guessed it, wastewater treatment facility. The Amado facility, south of Tucson, produced quite a few ducks including Hooded Merganser, Bufflehead, Eared Grebe, and a nice looking Black Phoebe. Desert Meadows Park in Green Valley served as our lunch stop and Rufous-winged Sparrow stop. After lunch we found a stunning male Costa’s Hummingbird, an equally stunning male Broad-billed Hummingbird (the photographers were loving this) Phainopepla, and another Black-throated Gray Warbler. A quick drive twelve miles up to Santa Rita Lodge put us at the lodge feeders where we dealt with ice under foot and Wild Turkey, Rivoli’s Hummingbird, the delightful Acorn Woodpecker, Arizona Woodpecker, Mexican Jay, Bridled Titmouse grabbing individual sunflower seeds, Yellow-eyed Junco, and a female Hepatic Tanager. We ended the day with a nice walk around a portion of Sahuarita Lake which did not produce any new species but gave fantastic looks at Vermilion Flycatcher and other already seen species.

The following morning found us heading toward the popular birding location of Patagonia. Our first stop was Patagonia Town Park where we found Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Phainopepla, Bridled Titmouse and Hepatic Tanager. What we did not find was the staked our Cape May Warbler in the town of Patagonia. At the Paton Center for Hummingbirds, we spotted Violet-crowned Hummingbird along with Anna’s and Broad-billed. Coming to the feeders were Arizona Woodpecker, White-breasted Nuthatch, Song Sparrow, Abert’s and Green-tailed Towhee, Inca Dove, Common Ground Dove, and finally male and female Ruddy Ground Dove. A quick drive along Blue Haven Road produced three Rufous-backed Robins and a surprise Green Kingfisher. What a day this was. Though I do wish we had found the reported Baird’s Sparrow along Curly Horse Ranch Road.

On our last day of birding, we headed east toward the Huachuca Mountains and the two aforementioned canyons, Ramsey and Ash along with what the weather person referred to as a wintery mix. At a lower elevation, with no wintery mix, the San Pedro House along the San Pedro River was rather birdy as the seed feeders and varied habitat attracted a good number of birds including numerous Gila Woodpeckers, American Kestrel, Gray Flycatcher, Canyon Towhee, Pyrrhuloxia and a hard won Louisiana Waterthrush we all enjoyed. Stops at the Benson STP and Sierra Vista EOP finally produced the newly split Chihuahuan Meadowlark, Canvasback, Common Raven, a rare all dark Northern Harrier, a rather cooperative Peregrine Falcon, and a wonderful flock of Yellow-headed Blackbirds.

This was our first winter tour to SE Arizona and we want to offer another in 2025. Though the weather could have been a few degrees warmer, says the guy who left his hat and gloves in Houston, the birds were plentiful with a nice mix of rarities. The habitat is varied and with so many feeders the birds are close and cooperative. We do get our and “beat the bush” as well, not just sit and watch feeders.