SPRING IN SE ARIZONA

May 7-14, 2022

After more than ten years I decided it was time to return to SE Arizona for a Spring trip, and we were not disappointed. Minimal wind one day, no rain, cool mornings, warm to hot afternoons, and plenty of birds marked our return to Arizona in the spring. I also shortened up the tour a bit this year and really liked the new itinerary, one I will probably repeat in the spring of 2024.

After working our way from the desert floor, past large saguaros, past the oak habitat we arrived at the pine/oak habitat surrounding the Rose Canyon Lake area where we found more Red-faced Warblers than on any previous tour. This ground nesting warbler proved to be all over the area and showing well, we even found a nest in the ground with young and attentive parents. Present and showing well were other warblers like Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Gray, Townsend’s, Wilson’s, and Painted Redstart. We also tracked down an uncooperative flyby Band-tailed Pigeon, Greater Pewee, Cordilleran Flycatcher, Plumbeous and Warbling Vireo, Pygmy Nuthatch, the ever so colorful Western Tanager, and the ubiquitous Yellow-eyed Junco. We were off to a good start.

Our first night of owling at Ramsey Canyon Inn Bed and B just south of Sierra Vista was a bust. However, the hike up the canyon earlier that afternoon produced a pair of Elegant Trogons, a pair we would see even better the following day.

After a peaceful night and hearty breakfast at the Ramsey Canyon Inn Bed and Breakfast we were off to the higher elevations of Carr Canyon, but first we had to endure a rather narrow, winding, bumpy and twisty road up to Campsite Town Reef where fleece jackets were needed. As the birds began to wake up, we heard and saw Greater Pewee, Hammond’s and Buff-breasted Flycatcher, Bushtit, Yellow-eyed Junco, and plenty of warblers including Grace’s, Black-throated Gray, Townsend’s, Wilson’s and finally one Hermit Warbler. Unfortunately, all the Hermits we saw during the entire tour were females. A little further up canyon we briefly spotted a Cassin’s Vireo and a flyby Woodhouses’s Scrub Jay. We once again negotiated the challenging road down and ended up at the Beatty’s hummingbird feeders in Miller Canyon. Here we had very close looks at Broad-billed, Black-chinned, Anna’s, Broad-tailed, and female White-eared Hummingbirds. Eventually the male White-eared made two appearances, with the second more pleasing than the first. After a nice sack lunch on the porch of Ramsey Canyon Inn we made our way up into the Ramsey Canyon Preserve enjoying the large sycamores and big tooth males that line the intermittent canyon stream. On our leisurely hike up canyon we encountered, once again, the pair of Elegant Trogons, our only Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher which is a very late migrant, Arizona Woodpecker, Plumbeous Vireo, Cordilleran and Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Bridled Titmouse, Brown Creeper, and for warblers, Grace’s, Townsend’s, Hermit, Wilson’s, and plenty of Painted Redstarts.

The following morning, we made our way to the riparian corridor of the San Pedro River and the San Pedro House BLM property in the lowlands. Just around the visitor center we had Gila Woodpeckers galore, Gambel’s Quail, Broad-billed Hummingbird, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Curve-billed Thrasher, Summer Tanager, and Blue Grosbeak. Along the river we encountered Olive-sided and Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Black Phoebe, Vermilion Flycatcher, a vocal Bell’s Vireo, the pale morph of desert Song Sparrow, Yellow Warbler and Yellow-breasted Chat. As the day advanced and heat waves developed, we headed back up Ramsey Canyon for lunch, allowing us to get recharged so we could visit Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary at the mouth of Ash Canyon later in the day. After sorting through the Anna’s, Broad-billed, and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds we spotted the male and female Lucifer Hummingbirds, our target for this outing. We also watched as Verdin, Bushtit, Cactus Wren, both male Scott’s and Bullock’s Oriole, Western Tanager, Bronzed Cowbird, and Lazuli Bunting enjoyed the seed, sugar water, jelly, and fruit put out for the birds.

After three wonderful nights in Ramsey Canyon, just a short hike from the preserve entrance and pies at 4pm, we headed off toward Madera Canyon, however, we stopped at Paton’s Center for Hummingbirds and watched Common Ground-Dove, Violet-crowned Hummingbird, Abert’s Towhee, Phainopepla, Yellow-breasted Chat and many others. The obligatory Patagonia Roadside stop was nonproductive, but the lunch stop at Patagonia State Park was refreshing and nice.

Upon arriving at the Santa Rita Lodge in Madera Canyon people descended on the feeders noting Hepatic Tanager, Arizona Woodpecker, Rivoli’s Hummingbird, Bronzed Cowbird and more.

The first order of business on our first morning in the Santa Rita Mountains was a trip to Montosa Canyon for Five -striped Sparrow, and after some walking and more walking we had a close encounter with a bird even our photography agreed was close enough for beautiful pictures. Also, in the canyon were Warbling Vireo, Canyon Wren calling and flying over our heads, Cassin’s and Western Kingbird, Lucy’s and Townsend’s Warbler, and Western Tanager along with our first look at the lovely Black-throated Sparrow. A flyby Elegant Trogon was in strange habitat for a bird that likes streams lined with sycamores. Time was set aside this afternoon for some much-deserved rest.

Our last morning of birding found us hiking along the Santa Cruz River where we located the female Rose-throated Becard attending to her nest, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks in trees, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Tropical Kingbird, Abert’s Towhees aplenty, Lucy’s Warbler and Song Sparrow.

We did spend two nights seeking owls in the canyon. Our first owl was a freebie, we showed up at the appointed time and had a look at the face of an Elf Owl, a life look for some, but not a totally satisfying. After our Elf Owl encounter, we visited the Amphitheater and had great looks and photos of a Whiskered Screech-Owl. The following night the reliable Western Screech-Owl proved not to be reliable at all, it’s favored patch had been taken over by a very cooperative Elf Owl. As we were heading back to the lodge eye shine alerted us to a Common Poorwill in the seldom used dirt road we were traveling. An abrupt stop led to folks quietly getting out of the Suburban and approaching within ten feet of the bird before it flew off to hunt insects. This was the most cooperative Common Poorwill I have ever encountered.

The following morning it was time for flights home. Brandon and I plan on returning the SE Arizona in the spring of 2024.