

# Southeast Arizona Winter Sky Island Sampler | Trip Report

January 5 - 11, 2018 | Written by Bob Behrstock & Peg Abbott



**Leaders: Bob Behrstock, Peg Abbott and Bob Meinke, with Sharon, Ken, Wynn, Christine, Turner, Pierre, Elisabeth, Cathy, Joe, Brian, Alison, Julie & Palmer, and trip photographer Hugh**



**Sat., Jan. 5**

## **Arrived in Tucson | Amerind Foundation | Casa de San Pedro**

All but one participant arrived a day early in Arizona; our meet-up plan was easy. It was simply a matter of meeting Sharon at the airport, stopping at a few nearby hotels to gather up the folks, and leaving Tucson. I (Bob B.) was at the wheel of one van and our tour photographer Hugh drove the other. Co-leader (Bob M.) was already at the Casa de San Pedro, as were participants Joe and Brian. During the previous week, southeastern Arizona had experienced a number of snow events, and although almost all of the snow had disappeared, participants experienced unusually cold temperatures, and occasional rain and strong breezes for much of the tour. Optimists this year who'd brought shorts and swim suits had little use for them during the next six days, but nature still brought us a good show.



Driving eastward for an hour, we transitioned from the Sonoran to the Chihuahuan Desert, making our first stop at the Amerind Foundation just north of the Dragoon Mountains. The foundation's museum and other historic buildings date to the early 1930s. Here, we perused the exceptional collection of artifacts from throughout the Americas, much of it amassed by Amerind's founder William S. Fulton.

After marveling at the displays, many of us went outside to the large yard surrounded by cottonwoods, mesquites, and the huge sculptured boulders of Texas Canyon. Birds were not numerous but by crossing the yard to the adjacent shrubbery, we found a calling male Phainopepla that displayed his white wing patches as he flew over us, as well as our first Black-throated Sparrow, Verdin, and a flock of Chipping Sparrows. Geology at this location is rather unbelievable, which huge rounded quartz monzonite porphyry rocks are piled atop each other in whimsical patterns. Winter light made for fun for our photographers.

Driving southwest, we reached Sierra Vista, and the Casa de San Pedro, our comfortable home for the next six nights. There, we were greeted by our hosts Karl and Patrick, and rendezvoused with participants Joe and Brian, who'd arrived previously, and co-leader Bob Meinke and his wife Kelly. After unpacking, we enjoyed appetizers, a glass of wine, and then a Mexican dinner prepared by a local caterer, Elvia and her daughter.

## **Sun., Jan. 6 San Pedro House | Bisbee**

We began the day with some window birding and a hearty breakfast at the Casa. Our plan was to go to Whitewater Draw, but dense ground fog and yesterday's report from other guests at the Casa, caused us to change our plan.

Instead, we drove north to the San Pedro House, a visitor's center within the Bureau of Land management's 40 mile-long San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area (SPRNCA). The cottonwood-lined SPRNCA is an

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important site for nesting and migrating birds and is constantly under threat from development that diminishes the San Pedro River's flow. A few people walked east to the river while the rest of us birded the feeders and mesquites around the house, and checked out the Friends of the San Pedro River's, very comprehensive bookstore/gift shop. Despite the light rain, we had nice looks at a variety of species including Inca Dove, Green-tailed Towhee, White-crowned and (locally scarce) White-throated sparrows, Gila Woodpecker, Pyrrhuloxia, and, happily, the trips only European Starlings. Folks who walked to the river added Loggerhead Shrike, some waterfowl, and several other species.

We returned to the Casa for some yard birding that included Gambel's Quail, the local, long-crested race of Northern Cardinal, and Spotted Towhee. We then drove into Bisbee for lunch at Mornings. At that point, we split the group – some returning to the Casa do some more yard birding or put their feet up, and my group (Bob B.'s) making a quick grocery store stop. Another stop at interpretive signage overlooking the monstrous Lavender Pit copper mine that supported Bisbee for decades, then checking out an oak and juniper-clad slope above Bisbee. The latter produced Rufous-crowned Sparrows, Mexican Jays, and three races of Dark-eyed Juncos. Pretty well chilled, we retreated to Bisbee to visit a few galleries and shops, and have a cup of locally roasted coffee.

Around 6:30, we joined the Casa group at Café Roka, arguably one of the region's best restaurants, for a very nice dinner.

## **Mon., Jan. 7 Ramsey Canyon | Kartchner Caverns State Park**

Again, we began with a bit of yard birding and a fine breakfast at the Casa. We then drove west into the Huachuca Mountains for a visit to The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Ramsey Canyon Preserve. Some of the hard chargers quickly proceeded uphill for a brisk hike and a couple people parked themselves at hummingbird feeders. The trail ascends a canyon bottom where we were surrounded by Emory Oaks, Bigtooth Maples, Alligator Junipers, and huge white-trunked sycamores. In aggregate, we saw a number of birds' characteristic of the Sky Island's Madrean Woodlands, some barely entering the U.S. These included Arizona Woodpecker, Painted Redstart, Olive Warbler, a male Hepatic Tanager,



Ruby-crowned Kinglets, White-breasted Nuthatches, Brown Creeper, Acorn Woodpeckers, Hutton's Vireo, and Bridled Titmice, as well as the Coues race of White-tailed Deer and rather local Arizona Gray Squirrel.

From Ramsey, we drove north into Sierra Vista for lunch at the Landmark Café. A half hour's drive north took us to Kartchner Caverns State Park. There, we split the group. Some people birded at Kartchner, picking up Gray Flycatcher, then the Brown Canyon Ranch near Ramsey Canyon where Western Bluebirds made an appearance, and then returned to do some birding around the Casa. The rest of us (10 folks), checked out the park's interpretive displays, and took the hour and three quarters cave tour.

Kartchner Caverns is one of the most visited sites in southeastern Arizona, and is a world famous model for cave eco-tourism, supported by extraordinary levels of protection of both the cave's delicate geological features, and the huge bat colony that summers in the caverns. Our guide was amusing and well informed and the caves features, created by little more than dripping water, were spectacular. At the trip's end, many commented this visit remained as one of the highlights of the journey.

We then returned to the Casa, meeting the rest for a catered dinner. At dinner, we were joined by Naturalist Journey's owner Peg Abbott, who took over from Bob Meinke, to co-lead the rest of the tour. She had been touring with Martyn Kenefick who was chosen as the key note speaker this year at Yuma, Arizona's annual birding festival.

After dinner Martyn, field guide author, tour leader, board member of Trinidad's Asa Wright Nature Center, and friend of Naturalist Journeys/Caligo Ventures, gave us a lively presentation on The Birds of Trinidad. He was livelier than the group after a long field day, but it was nice to have a chance to remember the tropical realm he portrayed.

## **Tue., Jan. 8 Elgin, Sonoita | Paton Center for Hummingbirds**

After breakfast, we hit the road, driving westward to the town of Elgin, now part of Arizona's "wine country." Stopping at a wash that runs through town, we saw a number of birds including a beautiful Barn Owl, spotted by Martyn, that perched in plain view in a roadside cottonwood.

We continued into some vineyards, where a group of Chihuahuan Ravens were foraging among the grape vines. Here, we also encountered

several Pronghorn that were close to the road, allowing everyone to get good looks at North America's only antelope. Continuing to Sonoita, we visited a small pond that yielded an American Pipit, but not the hoped-for longspurs; however, the ride in provided us with a Rough-legged Hawk, a very sparse bird in southeastern Arizona.





In Patagonia, we had lunch at the Gathering Grounds, a spot that's popular with visiting birders. We then visited Tucson Audubon Society's Paton Center for Hummingbirds, arguably the best site in the U.S. for finding Violet-crowned Hummingbird (even on a chilly winter's day). Besides seeing a very crisply-plumaged Violet-crown, we found Broad-billed and Anna's hummingbirds, Red-naped Sapsucker, Lesser Goldfinches, Abert's Towhee, Curve-billed Thrasher, Song Sparrow, and several other species.

Departing the Paton Center, we again split the group. Some folks heading back to the Casa, while the balance of us visited a private residence in Patagonia where the owners, friends of Peg, had constructed a lovely straw bale home and built a trail through the mesquite woodland they protect on their property.

Leaving there, we tried for a couple birds on the east side of Patagonia but found the cold, late afternoon unyielding. My van went straight to Pizzeria Mimosa in Hereford where folks enjoyed a glass of wine as we waited for Peg's van to arrive. Peg got distracted and took her van on a tour of Sierra Vista (missing the restaurant turn), so the group had time for another round of drinks. Dinner was a bounty of pizza, chicken, salmon, and pasta and nobody went home hungry.

## **Wed., Jan. 9   Whitewater Draw | Elfrida**

After the usual satisfying breakfast, we headed east to Whitewater Draw. The site, an Arizona Wildlife Management Area, is a drainage sink (low point) in the Sulphur Springs Valley, and is used as a roosting area by part of the area's wintering population of some 35,000 Sandhill Cranes. Most of the cranes were still out feeding (we would see them shortly), but we enjoyed a diversity of waterfowl including Snow Geese and a gleaming Cinnamon Teal, several species of flycatchers, and for a few, looks at a shy Virginia Rail.

From Whitewater, we continued north to a known wintering site for two Ferruginous Hawks. Happily, one of the birds was present and, though distant, showed reasonably well in our telescopes. Moving east, we drove to



some cropland, stopping for a group of Lark Buntings foraging at the roadside. Just over our heads was the breathtaking spectacle of thousands of Sandhill Cranes, bugling in swirling flocks, as they made their way back to Whitewater Draw and their evening roost. Focusing our binoculars north toward the mountains, we could see flock after flock of these majestic birds heading toward us. Here, we also found a Prairie Falcon which, along with the Lark Buntings, was a nice addition for the Easterners in the group.



Lunch was at the Kountry Kafe in Elfrida (my spell checker just exploded) where we and a few locals stretched available seating and the one waitress to capacity, as she plied us with sandwiches, smothered burritos, and for some, Grandma's carrot cake.

After lunch, Peg's van returned to Whitewater Draw so that her folks could watch the cranes returning to roost, and to drop Hugh off to get better photos of the cranes. My group explored some farm roads and then returned to Whitewater by way of a field full of foraging cranes. At Whitewater, we picked up Hugh and hit the late afternoon jackpot, standing mesmerized as thousands of

noisy Yellow-headed Blackbirds perched in the reeds, took to the air, coursed back and forth, then repeated the drill over and over.

As the light faded, we returned to the Casa. After a quick break, we drove a few minutes to the Brite Spot, a local steak house.



**Thurs., Jan. 10**  
**Montezuma Pass or Ash Canyon B&B | Bob and Karen's | Casa or local birding**

Peg's after-breakfast plan was to take part of the group to Coronado National Memorial at the south end of the Huachuca Mountains. Several of the group die-hards joined her call to keep to the group's hike plans, despite the government shut down of the park (trail still open, visitor's center and washrooms closed) and despite mist and potential for rain. Bob and his birding crew dropped them off at Montezuma Pass, overlooking the Mexican border, a high perch that allowed them to take in one of the region's most expansive views. Miles and miles of grand nothing.

*Peg writes: We spotted a distant train in Mexico, marveled at more southerly Sky Islands that we would love to explore, and walked up to an even higher viewpoint. There, we took a couple panoramic shots and chatted with the only two other people we'd see this day. We kept up a gentle, steady pace, found a few flocks of sparrows but mostly enjoyed the plants. There were so many sotol, yucca, agave and nolina - certainly we were in the Southwest. We photographed one that Karen identified as quite local, a Pine-leaf Milkweed. It seemed to hug the trailside rocks as we descended through them. This was the birdiest part of the hike, with a Canyon Wren calling, and a Spotted Towhee joining two Canyon Towhees in the oak-leaves cast about the slopes. We were out about 3 hours, and yes, it rained. Cathy was happy to have her rain pants. We had to watch our footing on the last part, descending a rocky trail, but all were smiling at the bottom, where Hugh met us with the van.*



The rest of the group went to Ash Canyon B&B, where our host Mary Jo attracts birds with a variety of different feeders. Sitting at the edge of her backyard, we enjoyed a procession of jays, sparrows, woodpeckers, wrens, siskins, nuthatches, titmice, thrashers, Rivoli's and Anna's hummingbirds, Arizona Gray Squirrel, and even a pocket gopher.

Leaving Ash Canyon B&B, we returned to Pizzeria Mimosa and picked up a selection of pizzas and cold drinks for the group's lunch. A quick drive took us to me and my partner Karen's house. Karen had already prepared a salad to go with the pizzas, all we lacked was the balance of our participants. Eventually Peg's group arrived – a bit wet, but apparently no worse for the wear, still all smiles. This was Cathy's highlight of the trip. During lunch, a variety of birds including Bushtit, Cactus Wren, Spotted Towhee, Acorn Woodpecker, Mexican Jay, and several species of sparrow paraded past the windows.



After lunch, part of the group returned to the Casa, while others continued to seek birds. About a block from my house, a staked-out Rock Wren popped up for the folks to study. Driving towards the San Pedro, a Cooper's Hawk dashed across our windshield, but there was little else to report except some common birds. Before dinner, Peg put out some Arizona wines for people to sample and the group tallied their final bird list, before tucking into a catered dinner that featured lamb, game hen, a variety of roasted vegetables, and wild blueberry pie.



## **Fri., Jan. 11 Return to Tucson**

The last morning began cold and foggy. Most people concentrated on packing but Peg, Pierre and Elizabeth took a brisk walk into the adjacent San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area, accompanied by the Casa's energetic and beloved dogs, Woody and Bella. After enjoying a final breakfast together, the vans were packed for the last drive, and the group departed around 9:15. Heading north west toward Tucson, the features of the landscape began to appear as we escaped the San Pedro River valley's carpet of ground fog, providing nice views of the various mountain ranges north and south of the interstate.



Special thanks to Hugh Simmons Photography for photographing the tour and for providing photos for the report.