

# Southeast Arizona: Winter Sky Island Sampler | Trip Report January 11 – 17, 2020 | Written by Bob Meinke



With Guide Bob Meinke, and participants Kelly, Susan, John, Bruce, Debra, Charlie, Martha, Hugh, Carol, and Beth





## Sat., Jan. 11 Arrivals and Rendezvous | Amerind Foundation

Many of our group stayed at or near the Hyatt Place Hotel by the airport, ahead of the tour, having arrived one or more days early to take advantage of the Sonoran Desert ambience than surrounds the Tucson area. We rendezvoused just ahead of our tour departure here. Hugh was picked up at the nearby Holiday Inn, and Susan and John were the last to arrive on Saturday, on a flight in from Denver a bit before noon. Peg Abbott (Naturalist Journeys owner) drove over from her home in the Chiricahua Mountains to join us, and after a quick lunch at the Hyatt, we were soon on our way.

Driving east from Tucson on I-10, our first destination was the acclaimed museum run by the Amerind Foundation, a group dedicated to the preservation and

interpretation of Native American cultures and their history. Located on an expansive, rural compound about 60 miles east of Tucson, near Dagoon, the Amerind Museum was designed by Merritt Starkweather, an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Tucson architect and civic leader. Among his many projects, Starkweather also designed the Arizona Inn in 1930, a well-known, Art Deco-inspired lodging complex of buildings and courtyards near the University of Arizona.

The Amerind Foundation grounds include walking trails and open fields, and after spending time soaking up the many exhibits in the beautiful museum, we ventured out for our first birding of the tour. Say's Phoebe, a western species that stays year-round in southern Arizona, was calling, and we soon saw several of these attractive birds flycatching from fenceposts and nearby treetops. Additional species here included Bewick's Wren, Chipping Sparrow, Northern Mockingbird, and Lesser Goldfinch. Peg soon detected a wren softly calling from a grouping of enormous boulders. Seeming more like Rock Wren habitat, we were a bit surprised when a Canyon Wren finally revealed itself after a bit of coaxing from playback. A pair of stunning Vermillion Flycatchers were then spotted in the low-growing mesquite trees as we made our way back to the vans—we still had a 90-minute drive to our lodgings, and it was time to move on.

It was nearly 4:00 PM when we departed Amerind, and we headed back west and then south, towards the town of Sierra Vista on the east flank of the stunning Huachuca Mountains. Covered with snow at the upper elevations as we approached, the Huachucas are one of several southeast Arizona ranges known as the Sky Islands. Physically isolated by surrounding desert, the high elevation Sky Island ranges support a fascinating array of plant and animal species otherwise unknown in the U.S., including endemic, near-endemic, and disjunct taxa.



Sierra Vista is a bustling town, home to Fort Huachuca, a still-active U.S. Army Base that is also a National Historic Landmark. Although not part of our itinerary on this trip, the base is an excellent place to bird the foothills and canyons of the Huachuca Mountains, and we do just that in the spring and summer. As we passed through Sierra Vista, Peg led us to an area known for roosting Prairie Falcons, on the outskirts of town, and some of the group was able to spot a falcon high on a power pole. A nice bird to pick up as we headed to our bed and breakfast.

We arrived just after dusk at Casa de San Pedro, a small inn well-known for its birding clientele. White-winged and Mourning Doves were everywhere, Canyon Towhees were singing, and we could hear the distinctive call of the Curve-billed Thrasher as we received our room assignments. The plan this evening was to relax, settle in, and enjoy a catered dinner at the inn, prepared by the owners. But then fate intervened, when a local utility line was knocked out by an errant driver on a nearby road, and just after sunset we lost all power! What about dinner?!

A hastily assembled wine and cheese spread on candle-lit tables was a good start, and then some quick phone calls helped us track down a country café a few miles away that mercifully still had the lights on. Just off an isolated a two-lane highway, in pretty much the middle of nowhere, we expected a quiet setting and a quick meal, and we'd be on our way. Who could anticipate it was Cowboy Karaoke Night at the Brite Spot Steakhouse, and the place was packed! But hey, the food was good, the evening far more entertaining than we'd expected, and in reasonably short order we returned to the inn. The electricity was back on, and we soon made for our rooms after a long day.



## Sun., Jan. 12 Coronado Memorial Hike | Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary | Pollination Corridors

Northern Cardinals (the distinctive Arizona subspecies), Lesser Goldfinches, Cactus Wren, Pine Siskin, Lark Sparrow, and Abert's Towhee were just a few of the birds that greeted early morning birders at Casa de San Pedro today. By 7:00 AM, breakfast was ready for Kelly, Peg, Beth, Susan, and John, the group that would be hiking the National Park Service trail that leads from Montezuma Pass to the visitor center at the Coronado National Memorial. Adjacent to the international border, the trail winds through beautiful Chihuahuan Desert landscape, and offers magnificent views into Mexico. Rufous-crowned Sparrows, an uncommon species, were detected by the hikers on the rocky slopes, and Red-tailed Hawks soared overhead.

Meanwhile, the rest of the group assembled for breakfast at 8:00 AM, and soon after, we departed to investigate the Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary, located at the base of the Huachuca Mountains. Until recently a private home coupled with a tiny birding bed and breakfast, the Ash Canyon property is now sustained by the Tucson Audubon Society as a small but important refuge, with a primary focus on hummingbirds. January is still a bit early for hummers, but we did manage to see a male Rivoli's, as well as a Broad-tailed and several Anna's. We also tallied our first Mexican Jays here, as well as Acorn Woodpecker, Curve-billed Thrasher, Northern Cardinal, Verdin, Cactus Wren, Canyon Towhee, White-winged Dove, and Yellow-rumped Warbler (Myrtle). At about noon we left to rendezvous with the hiking party, picking up a batch of pizzas for lunch on the way. We headed for the nearby home of Naturalist Journeys guide Bob Behrstock and his partner Karen LeMay, which doubles as the headquarters for Pollination Corridors, a non-profit association involved with the conservation of native plants and their pollinators. The plantings here attract a wide array of birds and insects, and we happily spent a couple hours munching pizza and birding the garden. We just missed Montezuma Quail, a regular visitor, but saw over 20 other species, including Gila Woodpecker, both Green-tailed and Spotted Towhee, White-breasted Nuthatch, Bewick's Wren, Say's Phoebe, Verdin, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, and Mourning Dove. We appreciated Bob and Karen for graciously opening their home to us.

We then returned to our bed and breakfast mid-afternoon, for additional birding, for those who hadn't had enough, as well as (for some) a slice of homemade pie offered every day at the inn. As the sun set, we drove the



short distance to the historic town of Bisbee, a 19<sup>th</sup> Century mining center now equally known for its restaurants, brew pubs, and arts scene. We settled in for dinner and some jazz at Café Roka, widely considered one of the finest restaurants in Arizona. We were back to the inn by 9:00 PM and reviewed our species list before retiring.

## **Mon., Jan. 13 Ramsey Canyon Preserve | Kartchner Caverns State Park | Local Birding**

Once again, those so inclined were up early (Charlie and Kelly never missed their sunrise bird walk). And despite the chilly temps (which reminded us it was still winter, even in Arizona), many of us caught our first good looks at the resident Pyrrhuloxias, a fascinating relative of Northern Cardinal that only occurs in southern Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona in the U.S. Breakfast today was at 8:00 AM for the entire group, and afterwards we headed west to Ramsey Canyon, site of a well-known preserve operated by The Nature Conservancy.



After checking in and briefly perusing the gift shop, we headed out on a gentle round-trip hike up the canyon. The morning chill kept most birds under wraps for the first 30 minutes or so, but soon we were picking up mixed flocks of Bridled Titmouse, Hutton's Vireo, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and (Mexican) Creeper, among others. Spotted Towhees were heard and then seen scratching in the leaf litter, and Mexican Jays started their chatter once the sunlight penetrated the shadows. The vegetation here is remarkably diverse, and during the occasional birding lull, Bob seized the opportunity to discuss the differences between the various species of conifers, oaks, and other hardwoods in the canyon. Once a botany professor, always a botany professor it would seem.

As we descended the trail back to the Visitor Center, we ran across Hermit Thrush in the undergrowth by the creek, and we encountered hordes of noisy Acorn Woodpeckers. We also located a small flock of Juncos. Most were Dark-eyed, but at least two Yellow-eyed Juncos, a largely south-of-the-border species that occurs in the U.S. just in extreme



southeast Arizona, were present as well. And then soon after, Kelly enthusiastically pointed out an Arizona Woodpecker, another largely Mexican species, which (despite its name) only occurs in Arizona (and the U.S., for that matter) in the very southeast corner of the state. Both the junco and woodpecker are target species for birders visiting Ramsey Canyon, and we were happy to add them to our list.

Next on the agenda was a visit to Kartchner Caverns, a cave complex situated about 40 minutes north of Sierra Vista. A few of the group (Beth, John, and Susan) decided to pass

on the cave tour, and on their way back to Casa de San Pedro (where they would spend the afternoon), they came across a group of White-nosed Coatis and several Wild Turkeys crossing the Ramsey Canyon access road. What a find! Evidently good things come to those who skip cave tours! Meanwhile Kelly, who had taken the group back to the inn, soon joined the others at the caverns, just in time for lunch. The tour began mid-afternoon, and we were impressed not only by the amazing formations, but also with the conservation efforts of Arizona State Parks, showcasing interpretative displays both in the visitor center and (especially) inside the caves. Once completing the tour, we briefly birded the local area just for good measure, getting some additional looks at Verdin, Cactus Wren, Curve-billed Thrasher, and also (new for our list) a Gray Flycatcher.

Returning to our lodgings by 5:30 PM, we swiftly re-convened for refreshments and a quick review of our species list. We then enjoyed a relaxed Mexican dinner, catered at the inn. Tomorrow we would head east for our first visit to Sandhill Crane habitat.

## **Tues., Jan. 14 San Pedro House | Lunch in Bisbee | Whitewater Draw State Wildlife Area**

After our now customary early morning birding, followed by an 8:00 AM breakfast, the group took a 30-minute drive north to San Pedro House, a well-known eBird hotspot located near the San Pedro River riparian corridor, several miles east of Sierra Vista.

Bob and Kelly had scouted the area the week before the tour, hoping to find (among other species) a Western Screech Owl said to be frequenting an enormous Fremont Cottonwood tree. While not seen during the scouting trip, the owl had reappeared in time for our group visit, conveniently perched inside a cavity in the cottonwood trunk, with lighting that seemed perfect for photos. But perfect light or not, picture-taking proved to be a challenge. The bird stayed scrunched in its hole the entire time, keeping its eyes tightly shut, and any hopes we may have had for a prize-winning shot were soon dashed! But there were other, more cooperative, species to be seen, and we eventually turned our attention to the Abert's and Canyon Towhees, Common Ground-Doves, Vermillion Flycatchers, Loggerhead Shrikes, Gila Woodpeckers, Cooper's Hawks, and Northern Flickers that



populated the Visitor Center grounds. We then walked along the San Pedro River, searching in vain for a reported Louisiana Waterthrush, while keeping ourselves busy with House and Bewick's Wrens, a Northern Harrier, and some brightly plumaged Lesser Goldfinches. We soon headed back to the van for our drive to Bisbee.

We arrived in Bisbee just in time for lunch. There were shops and museums that required evaluating, and after our meal we spent an hour or so walking the streets of the historic town. By mid-afternoon we departed for Whitewater Draw State Wildlife Area, a large wetland complex northeast of Bisbee, hoping to find Sandhill Cranes and perhaps watch them come in to roost for the evening. The fields surrounding Whitewater Draw are devoid of crops in January, perfect for overwintering songbird flocks—as we drove in, fencerows and furrows were populated with flocks of Vesper, White-crowned, and Lark Sparrows, and Eastern Meadowlarks, Say's Phoebes, and Northern Harriers were also common.



Arriving at the refuge, we immediately spotted a large flock of Sandhill Cranes near the main lagoon, no more than 100 meters from the small car park. We were disappointed to have arrived too late to see the birds fly in for their overnight stay at the refuge—a flock of Sandhill Cranes in flight is quite impressive. Over 200 birds were feeding in an open field just across a shallow inlet, and we spent considerable time taking photos and getting close-up views through the scope.

We eventually tore ourselves away from the cranes, and ambled down the gravel access path, quickly adding Eared and Pied-billed Grebes, American Coot, Redhead, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Northern Pintail, and Green-winged and Cinnamon Teal to our list for the day. Along the shoreline we watched a flycatching Black Phoebe and a pair of Least Sandpipers, while both Song and Lincoln's Sparrows, Common Yellowthroat, Sora, and Marsh Wren were seen moving through the emergent vegetation bordering the smaller ponds. And as we scanned

the far side of the lagoon, we were surprised to see what looked like a raft of Snow Geese (white phase), about 200 meters out—but this species is considered rare in southeast Arizona. The scope confirmed our tentative ID, and we also picked up Ring-necked Duck and two Black-necked Stilts while we watched the geese.

We then turned our attention back towards the Sandhill Cranes and the noise of an approaching helicopter. Plainly not Border Patrol or Arizona Fish and Game, it was unclear what the helicopter was doing or who it belonged to. In any case, the now agitated cranes were having none of it, and lifted off en masse, heading straight towards us. Not really the way we wanted to see the birds in flight, but we had some spectacular views as they passed by just a few feet overhead!



As we headed back to the van, we paused to look at a pair of Long-billed Dowitchers and a Wilson's Snipe, perched low in a wet, grassy depression, nearly undetectable in their winter plumage. What a productive day! We then headed back to celebrate, finishing the evening off at Pizza Mimosa, an Italian restaurant and wine bar not far from Casa de San Pedro. Arriving back at the inn, we were greeted by a Great Horned Owl.

## **Wed., Jan. 15 Birding Near the Inn | Raptors (and More) in Sulphur Springs Valley**

Breakfast was again served at 8:00 AM, and today we had a bit of extra time afterwards to bird near the inn. Some of us watched the feeders, while others scattered along the San Pedro River. A flock of Gambel's Quail was heard and seen, Gila Woodpeckers were once again abundant, a beautiful Cooper's Hawk was stalking the feeders by the back gate, and several ground-feeding songbirds, including Vesper, Chipping, and White-crowned Sparrows, Abert's Towhee, and White-winged Dove, were quickly spotted.

We headed east to Bisbee at about 10:00 AM, where we met up with local birder Tom Wood, who is one of the directors of the Southeastern Arizona Bird Observatory, a nonprofit scientific and educational organization that promotes the conservation of birds and their habitats. Tom had offered to share his knowledge of Sulphur Springs Valley with us today, where we hoped to see some interesting raptors and various migratory species that overwinter in the valley's dry agricultural fields.

We stopped very briefly on our way north at Whitewater Draw State Wildlife Area, once again, looking to pick up any additional species we may have missed the day before. A Great Blue Heron was added to our tally, as was Lazuli Bunting, and a small flock of very early migrating Tree Swallows was seen over the water. But for the most part we saw the same species as previously. We then drove on towards the agricultural hamlet of Elfrida, stopping along the way when we spotted Chihuahuan Raven, Brewer's Blackbird, Brown-headed Cowbird, and Lark Bunting. The buntings were flocking and very abundant, and a number of males were already starting to



transition to their distinctive black-and-white plumage, ahead of their return to spring breeding grounds in the Midwest.

After lunch at a quirky little café in Elfrida (featuring great comfort food, and a server with a sly sense of humor who did a marvelous job, despite the size of our group), we headed to the east side of Sulphur Springs Valley. Ferruginous Hawks, the largest *Buteo* species in North America and also the rarest, spend their winters here. With Tom Wood leading the way, we soon spotted several of these impressive birds, which were using irrigation equipment as perches as they scanned dormant alfalfa fields for prey. As long as we stayed in the vehicles, we were able to approach close enough for some reasonable photos. In the same fields we also saw several Red-tailed Hawks, and a single Peregrine Falcon.

Moving on, Tom pointed out an adult Great Horned Owl roosting in a mesquite grove, and we all had excellent views. Unlike the earlier Western Screech Owl, this bird was perched low and mostly in the open, providing photo ops for those willing to creep in close enough.

The farmlands were being used by Sandhill Cranes, as well, which spend their days hunting for prey here before returning each evening to gather together by the lagoon at Whitewater. The dry fields also had numerous overwintering songbird flocks—although we did not find any species of longspurs, as we'd hoped, we did add Brewer's and Savannah Sparrows to our trip list (spotted in mixed flocks dominated by Vesper Sparrows and Lark Buntings), and we also saw numerous Eastern Meadowlarks. Perhaps our best encounter was with a male Bendire's Thrasher (a very uncommon species throughout its limited range), which sat singing in full view on a fencepost. Rounding out our day in Sulphur Springs Valley was a restive flock of Scaled Quail, which most of us finally at least glimpsed as the birds skittered between scattered roadside shrubs.



On our way back in the late afternoon light, we saw additional sparrow flocks and a few Horned Larks, a pair of Roadrunners, and several Phainopeplas, and in just over an hour of driving time we counted 101 Red-tailed Hawks sitting on telephone poles. The rabbits out there don't stand a chance. We met Peg Abbott at our lodgings this evening, and she brought along a delicious buffet supper of home-made soups and salads, that we of course topped off with a slice (or two) of the famous pie made (from scratch) each day by Carl and Patrick, proprietors at Casa de San Pedro. Hard to believe our last full day of the tour would be tomorrow.

### **Thurs., Jan. 16 Las Cienegas National Conservation Area | Paton Center for Hummingbirds**



Breakfast this morning was early, at 7:00 AM, and we departed by 8:00 AM for the Patagonia area, about an hour's drive (with no stops) to the west. But we planned a few stops, of course. Peg Abbott joined us today, and we stopped first at the crossroads village of Sonoita, to fuel up and grab a few snacks. We then drove to the nearby Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, a federal grassland reserve managed for migratory birds and vulnerable species, such as Chiricahua Leopard Frog and Black-tailed Prairie Dog.



As soon as we turned off the main road we spotted a group of 12 Pronghorns, including males and females. Although often referred to as antelope, Pronghorn are not true antelope, and represent a unique family of hoofed mammals (Antilocapridae) that have been isolated in North America for over a million years. Their closest relatives are Giraffes and Okapis! Unperturbed by our presence, we watched the herd for several minutes as the animals grazed nearby. A coyote was then seen by some of the group, but the Pronghorn seemed unconcerned.

Moving further into the reserve, we stopped briefly at a pullout where we spotted our first Black-throated Sparrows of the trip. Western Meadowlarks (an overwintering species in southeast Arizona that is often found in dense flocks) were also seen perched in low mesquite. We passed a small pond as we moved on, where a



pair of Greater Yellowlegs that had stopped off on their way north to their breeding grounds was feeding. We soon arrived at Cottonwood Tank, two artificial ponds (fed by a natural spring) that were established for the benefit of the Chiricahua Leopard Frog, a rare, regionally endemic species. We didn't see any frogs, but we did spot several birds here, including American Pipit, Black Phoebe, Vesper Sparrow, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Say's Phoebe, and Northern Flicker. This is a known winter location for several longspur species, but none had yet been reported here for 2020, and we didn't find any during our walk around the ponds.

It was time for lunch, and we headed west to the small town of Patagonia, situated south of the Santa Rita Mountains (another of the Sky Islands ranges). After sandwiches and salad at the Gathering Grounds Café, we drove the short distance to the Tucson Audubon Society's Paton Center for Hummingbirds. Formerly the home of the Paton family, who for many years were known for welcoming the public in to enjoy their gardens and bird birders, the original house is still present on the site, as is much of the original landscaping.

Our visit here yielded a number of new species for our list, and one of the first was Violet-Crowned Hummingbird, the "poster child" species for the Center. Very rare in the U.S., the Paton homestead has always been considered the only really reliable place to view this



beautiful species outside of Mexico. Violet-crowned is the only hummingbird occurring in the U.S. with a white breast and underbelly.

Another special find here was Broad-billed Hummingbird, an exquisitely-colored species that, although not as rare in the U.S. as the Violet-crowned, is still only found in the U.S. in extreme southeast Arizona and adjacent New Mexico, right along the Mexican border. Anna's Hummingbird, beautiful in its own right (even if it's not so uncommon!), was also seen here during our visit.

The Paton Center is known for more than just hummingbirds, of course, and soon we were picking up additional species, including Lincoln's and White-throated Sparrows (the latter rare in Arizona), Green-tailed Towhee, Plumbeous Vireo (thanks to Kelly), Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Bridled Titmouse, Pine Siskin, Lesser Goldfinch, Bushtit, Orange-crowned Warbler, Northern Cardinal, and a stunning Blue Grosbeak (among many others). By 3:00 PM we were ready to head back, and after a quick stop at the home and gardens of a local birder in Patagonia, we were on the road, arriving at Casa de San Pedro at dusk.



As usual, a Curve-billed Thrasher was waiting to serenade us with his distinctive call, just as the sun was setting. Our farewell dinner this evening was a catered affair at the inn, and we had time before sitting down to

complete a final review of our species list. We totaled 123 species of birds, a very respectable number for six days of winter birding in southern Arizona.

## **Fri., Jan. 17 Final Morning of Birding | Return to Tucson for Flights Home**

Another crisp morning, and one final opportunity to bird in Arizona before heading home. Breakfast was served at 8:30 AM, and we were packed and ready to leave about an hour later. We had a beautiful, sunny morning for our drive back to Tucson, and the group arrived in plenty of time for their afternoon flights. A wonderful trip—see you in Arizona again soon!

**Photos Credits:** Casa de San Pedro B & B (CDSP Stock); San Pedro River (Kelly Amsberry); all others (Bob Meinke)

**(Front cover):** Mourning Dove; Broad-billed Hummingbird; Red-tailed Hawk; Ferruginous Hawk; Santa Rita Mountains; Greater Yellowlegs; Black-throated Sparrow. **(Main report):** Bewick's Wren; Casa de San Pedro; Canyon Towhee; Acorn Woodpecker; Mexican Jay; Ladder-backed Woodpecker; Gila Woodpecker (female); Pyrrhuloxia; Western Screech-Owl; Abert's Towhee; Sandhill Cranes feeding; Northern Pintail; Redhead; Sandhill Cranes (in flight); Sand Pedro River riparian corridor; Vesper Sparrow; Great Horned Owl; Black-throated Sparrow; Violet-crowned Hummingbird; Broad-billed Hummingbird; Curve-billed Thrasher.