

# Southeast Arizona: Sky Islands | Trip Report

November 4 – 10, 2019 | Written by Michael Marsden



With Guide Michael Marsden, and participants Jean, Tracy, Tim, Jan, and George





## **Monday, Nov. 4 Arrivals | Lake Cochise | Reed Peter's Cave Creek Ranch**

Everyone stayed in Tucson hotels on Sunday night, so we were able to make a prompt 9:00 a.m. start on our journey to the Chiricahuas. Our first birding stop was at the Benson Sewage Treatment Plant and its deep-water lagoon, which attracts a variety of diving ducks otherwise scarce in the area. On our visit, these included a small flock of Buffleheads, a couple of Redheads, and 10 Canvasbacks. There were also 4 Mexican Ducks on the water—our first regional specialty. Other birds there included Wilson's Snipe, and Lark Bunting, but our most memorable sighting was of a Greater Roadrunner showing off its athletic prowess just by our van.

Our next stop was Lake Cochise, another wastewater wetland situated on the edge of the usually dry alkaline flats of the Willcox Playa. As we were driving in, we heard the evocative calls of Sandhill Cranes in the distance, and eventually were able to see small flocks of them as they settled in nearby fields. There were lots of waterfowl and shorebirds on the Lake, including American Avocets, and an even more welcome sight on one of the banks—an excited Rick Taylor, a leading birder in the region and the author of several of its best birding guides, who had just picked out a female Red-breasted Merganser, a rare visitor here, and was able to get everyone onto it.

It was then time for lunch at the Big Tex BBQ in Willcox (famed for both its food and its converted railroad-car premises), after which we drove straight to Bob Rodriguez's birding oasis just off the Portal road leading up to the Chiricahuas. Bob welcomed us warmly, and at his feeders we had our first views of several emblematic western species, including Gambel's Quail, Woodhouse's Scrub Jay, Cactus Wren, Black-throated Sparrow, and Pyrrhuloxia. A Crissal Thrasher called several times from the nearby brush, but we were never able to get a view of it. The only hummingbirds we saw were Anna's, and these were to prove the most frequent hummer species throughout our tour.

Our eventual destination was Reed Peter's Cave Creek Ranch, where we were to spend the next two nights enjoying its spacious comfortable cabins, birdy grounds, and spectacular setting in the awesome Chiricahua Mountains. Upon our arrival, we were fortunate enough to have a delicious Greek-inspired buffet dinner prepared for us by the nearby Sky Island Grill—a very welcome finale to our first day.

## **Tuesday, Nov. 5 Cave Creek Ranch | South Fork**

Breakfast at the Portal Café was not served before 9:00 a.m., so we were able to spend the early morning birding the grounds at Cave Creek Ranch. The feeders were very active with Rivoli's and Anna's Hummingbirds, Blue-throated Mountain-gems, Lesser Goldfinches, and Pine Siskins; in the trees were Bridled Titmice, White-breasted Nuthatches, and Acorn, Hairy, and Arizona Woodpeckers. Feeding on the ground were Inca



Doves, Dark-eyed Juncos, Spotted Towhees, and two unusual visiting sparrows—a White-throated, and a Fox Sparrow (a species Reed had never seen here before). Jean also saw what was, from her description, almost certainly a Juniper Titmouse. Mammal sightings around the grounds included White-tailed Deer, Striped Skunk, Collared Peccary, and best of all, close views of a White-nosed Coati as it tried to get to the seed in the bird feeders.

After breakfast, we made a brief visit to South Fork, stopping at the Stewart campground for a short hike on the Vista Point Trail on the way. There was very little bird activity—the only new species we came across were Northern Flicker and Hammond’s Flycatcher—but the memorable views we had of the breath-taking scenery was more than compensation.

in the afternoon we had the pleasure of birding with Dodie Logue, a guide with Naturalist Journeys who has the great good fortune of living in Portal. Dodie took us to the grounds of the Desert Museum in Rodeo and then accompanied in the van along Stateline Road to Willow Tank. It was a very enjoyable and productive afternoon with the highlights being two birds we saw along Stateline Road—a Bendire’s Thrasher and a very unexpected Rock Wren, first seen by Tim. Other birds included Say’s Phoebe, another Greater Roadrunner, and a probable Scaled Quail.

We concluded the day by having a wonderful dinner together at the Sky Islands Grill.

## **Wednesday, Nov. 6 Southwestern Research Station | Rustler Park**

After more early morning birding at the Ranch, and breakfast at the Portal Café, we began our drive over the Chiricahuas and Sulphur Springs Valley to our eventual destination—the Casa de San Pedro in Hereford. The first part of our journey was driving along the 25 miles or so of Pinery Canyon Road—an often narrow and winding mountain road with its fair share of switchbacks—over Onion Saddle to the Chiricahua National Monument.

After a picnic lunch at the Southwestern Research Station we made a brief stop at a rather unproductive Rustler Park, which gave us good views of Steller’s Jay but not the hoped-for Mexican Chickadee. Other birds we came across on the way included Wild Turkey, Western Bluebird, and an overhead Golden Eagle. Chiricahua National



Monument has some of the most spectacular rock formations in the country—their effect is almost overwhelming as one drives Bonita Canyon Road to the almost 8000' elevation of Massai Point with its commanding views of the surrounding area. But again, the birds were slightly disappointing, the most memorable being a very cooperative Canyon Wren hunting for bugs on the steps of the Visitors' Center. The weather may have been partly to blame—just as we got to the (fortunately roofed) picnic tables at Massai, a torrential hailstorm started and continued for several minutes.



After leaving the Monument, we drove through the lowlands of Sulphur Springs Valley, the home of Chihuahuan Ravens and Canyon Towhees, to the Casa de San Pedro, where we were to spend the next four nights and enjoy the warm hospitality of innkeepers Patrick and Karl.

### **Thursday, Nov. 7 Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary | Pollinator Corridors Southwest**

Aside from the luxurious rooms and facilities, there are two delights in staying at the Casa de San Pedro—the trails leading to the San Pedro River, and Patrick & Karl's breakfasts! We were able to fully enjoy both on our first morning here. Many of the birds we had come across before, but three new ones were Gila Woodpecker, a late Cassin's Kingbird, and an American Robin first seen by Tracy.



After breakfast we drove to Miller Canyon, where we met Tom Beatty Jr. at his family's Ranch. This is a wonderful place for hummingbirds, but at the time of our visit, only an Anna's was coming to the feeders and there was little evidence of other birds around. Tom didn't think that birding higher in the Canyon would be any more productive, so after a stimulating talk with him about the area, we decided instead to head for the Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary.

The Sanctuary had been the home of Mary Jo Ballator, who for many years had maintained feeding stations for birds and other wildlife here and welcomed visiting birders from around the world. Sadly, Mary Jo died in June and the sanctuary had been run for a time since



then by a team of local volunteers. Recently however, the house and grounds had been purchased by an anonymous benefactor and donated to the Southeastern Arizona Bird Observatory, a non-profit run by Sheri Williamson and Tom Wood. The Sanctuary had, fortuitously for us, been reopened just three days before our visit.

Tom and Sheri were there to greet us, as enthusiastic and welcoming as ever, and everyone enjoyed the couple of hours we spent in their company. And there were lots of birds in and around the feeders, including a Bewick's Wren that perched on Tim's lap before deciding it preferred Tracy's hat, side by side Northern Cardinals and Pyrrhuloxia for comparison, and a presumed 'Gray-headed' Junco with a partially dark upper mandible suggestive of the rarer 'Red-backed' form.

We then visited Karen LeMay's house, from where she runs Pollinator Corridors Southwest, a non-profit set up to encourage the planting of native plants and so increase populations of bees, butterflies, moths, bats, and other pollinators. Karen showed us the plants in her garden, which teemed with butterflies, and gave us all packets of seeds to take home to plant.

The last destination on our schedule for the day was Fort Huachuca, with its historical museum and wildlife-rich canyons. The Fort had been established in 1877 during the Apache wars but was now the headquarters of U.S. Army Intelligence. As we parked by the Museum, Jan spotted a small flock of Cedar Waxwings flying over, but we then found that the Museum was just about to close! Happily, though, the helpful and very knowledgeable curator allowed us to stay an extra half hour or so to view the exhibits. After leaving we drove a short way into Huachuca Canyon, but then decided to head back to the inn—we had no wish to miss the dinner being prepared for us!

## **Friday, Nov. 8 Birding the San Pedro | Whitewater Draw Wildlife Area**

We followed another delicious breakfast at Casa de San Pedro with a morning of birding along the San Pedro. A stretch of some 40 miles of this gem of a river, together with much of its associated habitat of mature cottonwoods and sacaton grasslands, is protected as a National Conservation Area, and in 1995 was recognised by the American Birding Conservancy as its first "globally important bird area" in the U.S.

We stopped briefly to view the cottonwoods by Hereford Bridge, and then drove to San Pedro House, where we walked the shorter of the trails that traverses all the characteristic riparian habitats of the area. The birds we saw were those expected in such areas, including Belted Kingfisher, Gila Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Song Sparrow, and Abert's Towhee. More of a surprise was a female Lazuli Bunting, a species that seems increasingly to winter in Southeast Arizona.

We then headed for Tombstone, where Tim particularly wanted to view its splendid Court House built in the 1880's when a then thriving Tombstone was the County seat. Appropriately we had lunch at the Longhorn



Restaurant, which claims to have been in business at the same premises continuously since the town's heyday. From Tombstone we drove to the Whitewater Draw Wildlife Area in the heart of Sulphur Springs Valley. The land here was acquired by the State of Arizona to protect a major Sandhill Crane roost, and what were formerly seasonal ponds are now managed to provide year-round wetland habitat. There were already some cranes present when we arrived, but numbers increased throughout the afternoon to a total we guessed very roughly to be at least 12,000 (probably an underestimate - up to 25,000 have been counted here in the past). But however many thousands, the sight and sound of so many cranes together is one of the most memorable experiences of North American birding.

There were lots of waterfowl on the ponds, including Cinnamon Teal and Gadwall which we hadn't come across before, and a small flock of Snow Geese flew in during the afternoon. Other notable sightings were a perched Grasshopper Sparrow as we drove into Whitewater, a juvenile Merlin that landed in a nearby tree for great scope views, and a half dozen Yellow-headed Blackbirds that came in to roost with many hundreds of Red-winged Blackbirds.

In the evening we enjoyed some of the best dining in the region at Bisbee's Café Roka—the perfect end to a productive day.

## **Saturday, Nov. 9 Ramsey Canyon | Kartchner Caverns State Park**

A morning at the Nature Conservancy's Ramsey Canyon, the most venerable of birding locations in the Huachuca Mountains, is always special. As we walked up the main trail by the sycamore-lined creek and through expanses of pine-oak woodland, we came across many of the Canyon's typical birds such as Hammond's Flycatcher, Hutton's Vireo, Red-naped Sapsucker, Arizona Woodpecker, Bushtit, and Brown Creeper. Best of all, especially for being so unexpected at this relatively low elevation, was a male Olive Warbler showing off his uniquely colored tawny-orange head and breast. A small flock of (not very!) Wild Turkeys was by the road to bid us farewell on our way out.

The highlight of the afternoon was a tour of the Rotunda and Throne Room at Kartchner Caverns State Park in the Whetstone Mountains. The Caverns contain what are surely the most impressive limestone formations in the U.S. An awe-inspiring forest of stalactites, stalagmites, and other speleothems (a word we learned on the tour!), all built up from layers of calcite deposited through the action of water drips and seepage. Memorable images from the tour were the still-intact footprints of the two discoverers from the time they first entered the caverns in 1974, thick deposits of 45,000 year-old bat guano on the cavern floors, and the 58' high limestone column known as 'Kubla Khan', the tallest in Arizona. Jean decided against taking the tour and spent the time in the State Park's Hummingbird Gardens—sadly hummingbird-less on this visit.

Our last dinner was at the Brite Spot in Palominas, a favorite with those living in the area. We hoped for some local color, but perhaps got a little more than we bargained for—it was karaoke night, and we were entertained throughout by the regular and very enthusiastic participants. It was great fun and the food was excellent!

## **Sunday, Nov. 10 Departures**

Our last morning, and a sad goodbye to the San Pedro River and to Patrick and Karl at the Casa. After a leisurely breakfast, there was still time for just a little more birding before we had to leave to ensure everyone got to Tucson Airport by 11:15 a.m. We left with fond memories of the spectacular landscapes of Southeast Arizona, its wealth of birds and other wildlife, the magnificent lodgings at Cave Creek Ranch and the Casa de San Pedro, and some outstanding meals and, not least, enjoyable company.

### **Photo Credits:**

Group Photo, Michael Marsden (MIMA); Gambel's Quail, Lynn Feryus (LYFE); Say's Phoebe, Hugh Simmons (HUSI); Lark Bunting, HUSI; Gila Woodpecker, Sandy Sorkin (SASO); Wilson's Snipe, Steve Wolfe (STWO); Bridled Titmouse, HUSI; Greater Roadrunner, Peg Abbott (PEAB); Arizona Woodpecker, HUSI; Snow Geese, HUSI; Abert's Towhee, Marleigh Fletcher (MAFL); White-breasted Nuthatch, Doug Greenberg (DOGR); Cinnamon Teal, HUSI; Red-naped Sapsucker, HUSI; Sandhill Crane, HUSI; Sandhill Cranes, HUSI.