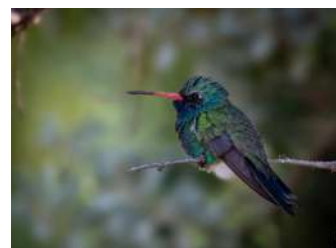


Arizona: Sunshine & Saguaros | Nov. 4 - 9, 2023

Trip Report | by Troy Corman



With guides Troy Corman and Hugh Simmons and participants Barb, Carol and Paul, Jean, Laura and Karl.



Sat., Nov. 4

Arrival in Tucson | Arizona-Sonoran Desert Museum

After meeting at the Tucson International Airport, we drove northwest to the Arizona-Sonoran Desert Museum for the afternoon where bright sun and above normal temps greeted us. This is a living museum with many birds and other creatures that are found in Arizona and adjacent Mexico are on display. The museum is set in a scenic Sonoran Desert landscape that attracts desert and wintering species to the spacious museum grounds. We encountered our first desert species here including Costa's Hummingbird, Gila Woodpecker, Verdin, Cactus Wren, Phainopepla and Curve-billed Thrasher. An unexpected find was a rare (for AZ) migrant from the Eastern U.S., a juvenile Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. We also encountered several Rock Squirrels, our first wild mammals of the trip.



Our first dinner was at the wonderful Wild Garlic Grill, which everyone enjoyed, though few could finish the large portions! With several folks coming from the Northeast U.S. that morning, it was a long day by the time we reached the hotel for much needed rest.

Sun., Nov. 5 Tohono Chul Park | Sweetwater Wetlands | Saguaro National Park

After an early breakfast, we picked up our boxed lunches and traveled north to Tohono Chul Park, just east of the Santa Catalina Mountains, to experience more Sonoran Desert species. As we wandered the beautifully landscaped park with patches of flowering plants, we encountered numerous Costa's Hummingbirds and added a few showy Broad-billed Hummingbirds to our list. Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Abert's Towhee and Orange-crowned Warbler were also found. Here we also encountered our first herp in the form of young desert spiny lizards.

As the morning warmed, we traveled to Sweetwater Wetlands where areas of shade and open water were welcomed. Near where we parked we encountered such iconic southwestern species as Greater Roadrunner and Pyrrhuloxia. Any water in the desert attracts birds, and we noted Cinnamon Teal and Mexican Ducks, a semi-cooperative Sora, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Black Phoebe and our first Vermilion Flycatcher. The riparian vegetation also attracts rare (for AZ) migrant and wintering warblers, and in a single big mesquite we noted Northern Parula and Black-and-white Warbler.

Later in the afternoon, with the temperatures well into the 80s, we took the scenic drive west to Saguaro National Park enjoying the pristine desert landscape and adding Harris's Hawk, Gilded Flicker and Black-throated Sparrow mostly from the comfort of the climate-controlled vans. At one stop, we also found our second lizard species, a common side-blotched lizard. We met for dinner at the La Posada Lodge, then reviewed the day's species list before bedtime.

Mon., Nov. 6 Santa Cruz Flats | Red Rock | El Rio Open Space Preserve

With local guide Vernie Aikins, we took an early morning drive to various sites in the Santa Cruz Flats area northwest of Tucson, with its low desert scrub and agricultural lands. The best birds we encountered while searching for thrashers were the sparrows including Brewer's, Black-throated and Sagebrush. With the temperature rising quickly, we then traveled on numerous agriculture roads, birding from the vans, finding



several raptors including Crested Caracara (eight in the air together) and Ferruginous Hawk. Also notable were Common Ground-Dove, Western Meadowlark and Greater Roadrunner. After a boxed lunch, one van headed back to cool down at our lodge, while the other van birded along the roadways scanning the rows of pecan trees and noting Merlin, Vermilion Flycatcher, Mountain Bluebird, Lark Sparrow and over 60 Gila Woodpeckers!

As the sun was getting low, Vernie suggested we stop at El Rio Open Space on our way back to our lodge. Standing at the water overlook, we enjoyed 10 species of waterfowl including Mexican Duck, Canvasback, Redhead and Bufflehead. Other waterbirds observed included Pied-billed Grebe, Green Heron and Belted Kingfisher.

Back to the lodge to cleanup and head to the popular Wildflower Restaurant for another wonderful dinner.

Tue., Nov. 7 Catalina State Park | San Xavier del Bac Mission | Madera Canyon

This morning, we visited scenic Catalina State Park where we spent a leisure hike in comfortable temperatures due to the higher elevation, walking among the oak, hackberry, mesquite and other foothill vegetation. On the drive in, one van saw a pair of coyotes. Avian highlights were many including our first Gambel's Quail, displaying Cooper's Hawks, Gray Flycatcher, Hutton's Vireo, Bewick's Wren, Rufous-winged Sparrow and three species of towhees: Abert's, Canyon and Green-tailed. The most memorable encounter, however, was watching a Tarantula Hawk (a large, 3+ inch wasp) dragging a tarantula that it had stung to some unknown hole where it would eventually lay eggs. The wasp larvae then feed on the unfortunate spider as they develop.

As we drove south in the late morning, we stopped at the cultural site of San Xavier del Bac Mission. Locally known as the White Dove of the Desert, some participants wandered into sections of the mission and photographed it against the deep blue sky. As we arrived, an unexpected Crested Caracara soared over. There was also a very visitor-friendly Greater Roadrunner to keep the photographers in the group entertained.

After lunch, we went to the higher elevations of Madera Canyon where we enjoyed the birds and AZ Gray Squirrels coming to the Santa Rita Lodge feeders situated among the tall oaks and sycamores. Four species of hummingbirds were noted at the feeders including several Rivoli's and Anna's. Always entertaining Acorn Woodpeckers were joined by an Arizona Woodpecker and a Red-naped Sapsucker. Noisy Mexican Jays, active



Bridled Titmice and a flashy Townsend's Warbler and Painted Redstart brightened the feeder watch. Among three subspecies of Dark-eyed Juncos were several Yellow-eyed Juncos, with their bright, glowing, orange eyes. We also observed the southwestern race (Coues) White-tailed Deer, the second smallest of the white-tailed deer, only the Key Deer in the Florida Keys are smaller.

Wed., Nov. 8 Tubac – De Anza Trail | Amado Pond | Montosa Canyon

After a wonderful breakfast at the Tubac Golf Resort and Spa, we visited a section of the nearby De Anza Trail which parallels the Santa Cruz River with its towering stands of cottonwoods and willows. These tall trees challenged us in identifying and pointing out the intermittently encountered foraging flocks of passerines. Among the typical "gang leaders" (Bridled Titmice), we picked out Hammond's Flycatcher, Hutton's and Cassin's Vireos, Black-throated Gray and Wilson's Warblers and a Hepatic Tanager. The best birds of the walk were a pair of timid Green Kingfishers, with only the female perching in view long enough for most to see.

At mid-morning we planned to meet up with Vernie again and bird in Montosa Canyon. He suggested that we stop at the Amado Wastewater Pond to see a reported Heermann's Gull, rare for Arizona. Other birds at the pond were Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Eared Grebe and Neotropic Cormorant. A Merlin hunting dragonflies over the pond was an interesting observation.

Then we continued to nearby Montosa Canyon, a unique mountain canyon containing large mesquite and hackberry. It was rather quiet during our late morning visit, but we had several highlights including a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Dusky Flycatcher, Rock Wren, Crissal Thrasher, Canyon Towhee and Rufous-crowned Sparrow.

Some folks decided to relax back at the Golf Resort in the late afternoon while a few of us ventured back to a section of the De Anza Trail. It was definitely quieter than in the morning, but we picked up White-winged Doves and had better views of one of the Green Kingfishers.

Our final dinner was at the spectacular Elvira's Restaurant, with its incredible décor and special cuisine.



Thur., Nov. 9 Green Valley Wastewater Treatment Ponds | Departures

We enjoyed another beautiful sunrise as we ate breakfast at the resort, then packed the vans and headed to the Tucson Airport where we would say our goodbyes. However, another rarity had been reported at the Green Valley Wastewater Treatment Ponds, which were on our way! Once again, we joined many local birders to view a totally unexpected visitor in the desert...a Pomarine Jaeger! Other new birds included Least Sandpiper, Prairie Falcon, Tree and Violet-green Swallows and American Pipit.

Photos by Hugh Simmons: Group, Greater Roadrunner, Lesser Goldfinch, Broad-billed Hummingbird, Cactus Wren, Acorn Woodpecker, Cassin's Vireo, Black-throated Sparrow, Arizona Woodpecker, American Coot, Catalina State Park, Cinnamon Teal, Brown Creeper, Group in Catalina State Park, Dark-eyed Junco, Desert Spiny Lizard, Desert Scene, Costa's Hummingbird, Troy guiding, Pomarine Jaeger, Pyrrhuloxia, Madera Canyon Scenic