

# Arizona: Sunshine and Saguaros | Jan 10-15, 2024 | Trip Report | by Chris Harbard



With guides Chris Harbard and James Petersen, and participants: Matt, Ellen, Ron, Dori, Steve, Pam, Barbara and Becky.



## Wed., Jan. 10                      Sonoran Saguaros

The group met at Tucson Airport and went on a short to visit Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum while James waited to pick up the others before heading over there.

Soon we were driving through a landscape of towering saguaro cacti, one of the typical Sonoran Desert plants. On arriving at the largely open-air museum, we were instantly greeted by a Cactus Wren, Arizona’s State bird. We followed a trail towards the cat exhibit where we saw Bobcat and Mountain Lion while also seeing our first Verdins and Phainopeplas. Curve-billed Thrashers put on a good show at one spot, where we also found Black-



throated and Rufous-winged Sparrows, but we were unable to locate any Gilded Flickers, a sought-after desert species. While most mammal species were sadly captive, we did see a delightful wild Harris’s Antelope Squirrel.

We soon had word that James and our remaining two members of the group had arrived, and we met them out at the parking lot. They had managed to see a Roadrunner at Tucson Airport and while we hoped we would find one, they hoped to catch up with what we had seen. We drove back towards Tucson along the scenic Gates Pass and made out way to La Posada Lodge where we would spend the next three nights. Dinner was booked for 6.30 at the Wild Garlic Grill.

## **Thurs., Jan. 11                      Tohono Chul Gardens | Sweetwater Wetlands**

We headed out straight after breakfast, stopping to pick up some pre-ordered lunch sandwiches from Beyond Bread, before arriving at our first stop, Tohono Chul Gardens, one of the world’s ten best botanical gardens based on the local Sonoran Desert. Here was a chance for another look for some species seen yesterday, plus a few new ones. We encountered Abert’s Towhee, a very obliging Black-tailed Gnatcatcher and an overwintering Ash-throated Flycatcher. Pride of place went to several Costa’s Hummingbirds, including one bright male, which posed perfectly for everyone with a camera.

Next, we visited Sweetwater Wetlands where we enjoyed our lunch while watching a whole host of waterfowl, including a delightful Cinnamon Teal, a surprise Sora which appeared several times quite close by and a bright male Vermilion Flycatcher also sallied for food while we ate. The wind had also picked up and we decided to drive the nearby Agua Nueva Park lakes rather than walk there. Among the Bufflehead and Ring-necked Ducks we managed to find a Common Goldeneye, rare in Arizona, and a Wilson’s Snipe was spotted at the lake edge as well as our first Black Phoebe. Our last visit of the day was the Saguaro National Park, close to the museum of yesterday. Here we hoped for a Gilded Flicker but the wind made birding very difficult and so we soon gave up and headed back to town. Dinner was at the Guadalajara Original Grill for some authentic Mexican fare, but before heading there we decided to do the list for the last two days.

## **Fri., Jan. 12                              Santa Cruz Flats**

After breakfast we once again (by popular demand) headed to Beyond Bread to collect our lunch order. Naturalist Journeys staff member Vernie also joined us for the day, being especially familiar with the area we would be visiting – the Santa Cruz Flats. This agricultural area is very flat, with a range of crops grown, from





alfalfa to grass sod, and is especially good for sparrows, thrashers and birds of prey. With a walkie-talkie in each van, we were able to communicate when making stops, like the first one when Vernie spotted a thrasher, which turned out to be a Bendire's. Nearby there was also a flock of Lark Buntings in their brown winter plumage and a couple of Northern Harriers could be seen quartering the fields.

Wires were worth watching and we soon saw several Loggerhead Shrikes, American Kestrels and Say's Phoebes. More stops also found us Vesper, Brewer's, Savannah and Lark Sparrows. Suddenly the radio crackled to life with a shout of "Roadrunner" and jamming on brakes we were soon watching an obliging bird quite close to the vans - high fives all round. Our lunch stop was by some field near a sheep ranch and we rapidly realized that the area, with many new-born lambs, was attracting one of our target birds – Crested Caracaras which were scavenging for scraps. While watching these magnificent raptors, James heard a Sagebrush Sparrow singing which sadly never showed itself. The last area we looked at were the sod farms where one spot had American Pipits and Killdeer, and another had Mountain Plovers, a little distant but still looking good in a scope!

We decided to head out from the flats and take a long desert road which would eventually lead us back to Tucson. Towering saguaros started to dominate the landscape and suddenly James' van screeched to a halt. He thought he had heard a flicker calling. After a while it called again and with a flash of yellow wings a Gilded Flicker bobbed its way across the road and perched atop a saguaro. Eventually we all got views of this local specialty and drove on ... until another shape on top of a saguaro stopped us in our tracks. Harris's Hawk! This almost black-colored bird of prey was the last special bird we were looking for and we walked through a patch of desert to get closer, marveling at the many cactus species. Back at the hotel in Tucson we counted up our list, which had grown considerably, and got ready to visit the delightful Wildflower Restaurant.

## **Sat., Jan. 13                      Catalina State Park | Santa Cruz Valley**

Our last breakfast in Tucson, as we checked out from La Posada, and our last Beyond Bread lunch, collected on the way to the nearby Catalina State Park. Here we got lucky with an over-wintering Painted Redstart with its dazzling black, white and red plumage. Woodpeckers featured with good looks at Ladder-backed and Gila Woodpeckers, a Northern Flicker and a glimpse of a rare (for Arizona) Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. A lovely male Anna's Hummingbird teased us with looks, but stayed in the shade where we could not see its true colors. A Gray Flycatcher was at its tail-dipping best, and we also had good views of male and female Pyrrhuloxias, and a delightful Green-tailed Towhee. We now began to head south, stopping at a couple of Tucson parks. At Christopher Columbus Park, we tracked down a female Mountain Bluebird feeding out on some grass among



some weekend sunbathers. At the lake there we found Neotropic Cormorant, Canvasback and Redhead, Belted Kingfisher and a Peregrine Falcon perched on a pylon. We were less lucky at Reid Park, where some flycatchers eluded us, but it made a nice lunch stop with lots of waterfowl.

Next we headed down to the Santa Cruz Valley at Tubac, stopping at the Amado Water Treatment Plant where several ducks included a Greater Scaup among the Lessers, and a couple of Eared Grebes. To finish off the birding before checking in at our next accommodation, we went to Tubac Bridge, over the Santa Cruz River. We looked down on the less-than-mighty Santa Cruz and suddenly two Mexican Ducks flew over, a pair, looking like the real deal. Hurrah! In the vegetation there were Song Sparrows and in a stand of trees next to a house there were several White-winged Doves. As we walked back across the river to the vans, and small black-and white shape sped along and around out of sight. "Green Kingfisher", yelled James in time for a lucky few to glimpse this diminutive piscivore.

The drive into the Tubac Golf Resort is long, winding past several small ponds with Buffleheads and Northern Shoveler. We checked in and made our way to our sizeable chalets to get ready for dinner at Elvira's. After a quick run through the checklist, we headed into Tubac. Elvira's is a renowned local eating place, which can only be described as interestingly eclectic. From the ceilings dangle glass balls and other shapes, with spotlights which illuminate them in ever-changing colors. Live music plays a selection of oldies (but goodies). The menu is also full of interesting dishes with a Mexican flavor. After a very enjoyable evening we headed back to the resort, looking forward to visiting Madera Canyon in the morning.

## Sun., Jan. 14

## Madera Canyon | Santa Rita River

After a good breakfast we collected our lunch from the Tubac Deli and headed up into Madera Canyon. We made straight for Santa Rita Lodge, with its feeders, as these attract a wide range of special birds. Soon we were watching a brilliant male Rivoli's Hummingbird coming to nectar feeders right in front of us. At the many seed and fat feeders were an almost bewildering assortment of species. Pine Siskins among the Lesser goldfinches, on the ground were three races of Dark-eyed Juncos, plus several Yellow-eyed Juncos a high elevation specialist. Comical-looking Acorn Woodpeckers hung on fat feeders, and one of our targets, an Arizona Woodpecker (a female) put in an appearance. A bushy-tailed Arizona Gray Squirrel and its slimmer relative, the Rock Squirrel could be compared. We drove up to the higher Mt Wrightson Picnic Area, hoping to find some Steller's Jays but instead found a Red-naped Sapsucker. Back at Santa Rita Lodge we ate our lunch and watched as a group of more than 30 Wild Turkeys invaded the feeding area, these are the largest race known as Gould's Turkey.

Leaving the canyon, we headed down to the Santa Rita River again, to Santa Gertrudis Lane, well known as a birding spot, where we found Hermit Thrush and American Robin, plus Inca Doves. Then there was just time for a look around the many special artisan shops in Tubac, famous for its art and its history, before returning to our accommodation. Before dinner we ran through the checklist for one last time. We had a very good day, adding many new birds to the list. Dinner was at the Restaurant at Tubac Golf Resort, so there wasn't far to walk. And as we approached the restaurant there was one last surprise in the form of a small group of Javelinas. We all updated our checklists!

**Mon., Jan. 15**

## **Desert Meadows Park | Departures**

After breakfast we said goodbye to Tubac and headed for one last stop at the Desert Meadows Park in nearby Green Valley, where we hoped to get better views of a couple of species we had previously only glimpsed. We were soon rewarded with a group of Gambel's Quails (males and females) and several bright male Broad-billed Hummingbirds, a real southwestern specialty with its brilliant bright blue and green plumage and red beak.

All too soon we reached the airport, and it was time to say our goodbyes. In six days, we managed to see an impressive 126 bird species, plus 11 species of mammals, three species of reptiles/amphibians and one species of butterfly. From the Santa Rita Mountains and its canyons to the Sonoran Desert and Santa Cruz Valley, we saw some wonderful wildlife and much amazing scenery and sampled what Southeastern Arizona has to offer, even in the middle of winter.

*Photos: Group (Chris Harbard - CH), Cactus Wren (CH), Vermilion Flycatcher (CH), All smiles! (Dorianne Kalish - DK), Group Birding (JP), Costa's Hummingbird (CH), Northern Shoveler (Ronald Gangnon - RG), American Kestrel (Vernie Aikins - VA), Group Birding (Barbara Silver - BS), Sheep (VA), Phainopepla (CH), Harris's Hawk (VA), Scenic (DK), Crested Caracara (VA), Canvasback (CH), Acorn Woodpecker (Matt Adams), Mexican Jay (RG), Gopher (CH), Broad-billed Hummingbird (CH), Verdin (RG), Costa's Hummingbird (JP)*