

Arizona: Monsoon Madness | Trip Report | August 11-18, 2024 | by Robert J. Gallardo



With Naturalist Journeys guides James Petersen and Robert Gallardo, and participants Kathi, Jim, Georgia, Martin, Cyndy, Carol, Tony and Tom.



Arizona: Sky Islands Galore

When most people think of Arizona, what comes to mind most often are hot, cactus-filled deserts. This is true, but there are also many other fascinating places to visit such as the Sky Islands, located in the southeast corner of the state. Jutting high above the surrounding flat plains, these 'islands' are remnants of a once-mighty mountain chain that stretched far down into Mexico. Their former connectivity with the Sierra Madre in Mexico, coupled with bordering two major desert ecosystems, set the stage for creating a fascinating mix of flora and fauna. A wide variety of wildlife finds their homes there, and nowhere else in the United States. This rewarding trip combines



visits to several sky islands and different lowland sites. Eight participants from the U.S. from all walks of life would experience much of what this area has to offer.

Sunday August 11 Arrivals | Drive to Portal & Cave Creek Ranch

Today the adventure began. Most of the participants were already in the Tucson area, some having attended the southeast bird festival in Tucson. After the last person showed up, we loaded the two vans and went on our way. It didn't take long to run into our first Greater Roadrunner, a Lifer for Tony from New York. We made our way east across the high desert to our first destination; the Willcox Twin Lakes Ponds. Along with a golf course, there is desert scrub and pools with reclaimed water. With not much surface water to be found elsewhere, this area usually attracts a lot of waterfowl.

The main pond was packed with birds. There were large numbers of Wilson's Phalaropes whirling around and feeding, but there were also three of the much less common Red-necked Phalarope. James and Robert put both scopes on the latter bird so everyone could see the difference. There were small numbers of ducks including a few Cinnamon Teal, small numbers of Mexican Duck, and one Northern Pintail. There were small numbers of Black-necked Stilt and small groups of the handsome American Avocet. There were a lot of shorebirds scattered around the pond, so we searched diligently and sifted through them all. There was one Long-billed Curlew, several Long-billed Dowitchers, and one Willet. Amidst some of the smaller sandpipers there were Spotted, Stilt, Baird's, Least, and Western. Three Great Blue Herons were scattered about, as well as three White-faced Ibis. One Chihuahuan Meadowlark was spotted not far away. A few Western Kingbirds and a Loggerhead Shrike were spotted on fences and utility wires. A small flock of Yellow-headed Blackbirds came zooming in and stopped close enough for a good look. One nabbed a giant moth caterpillar. A couple of Swainson's Hawks were spotted and had our attention until something much bigger showed up. It was a Golden Eagle! It was high, but we got quick looks before it soared away into the distance. We felt fortunate to have seen this uncommon species. Another rarity came bouncing in; a Forster's Tern that had wandered in. As we were leaving, James spotted a Botteri's Sparrow atop a small bush before it disappeared.

We made our way down the highway and fueled up. Close to the gas station was a Harris's Hawk perched on a pole. It often uses a nearby communications tower as a nest site.



By the late afternoon we reached Portal, gateway to the Chiricahua Mountains. The gold-colored, lichen-covered spires glowed in the late afternoon sun. We reached Cave Creek Ranch in time to catch some birds before they went to roost. The Gambel's Quail and Canyon Towhee were working a wood pile. On the feeders we got our first view of the lovely Violet-crowned Hummingbird as well as a male and female Blue-throated Mountain-gem. Other species we would see for many days were Acorn Woodpecker, Cactus Wren, and Black-headed Grosbeak. We did a trip orientation over wine and enjoyed a home-cooked meal by Jackie.

Monday August 12 Cave Creek Canyon area | Walker & Jasper House | Night Drive

We awoke to cool air and the sounds of being in the countryside. Right off, we heard a Gray Hawk calling nearby and those who rose early got to see it in the scope. Bridled Titmouse and White-breasted Nuthatch were already busy foraging. Curve-billed Thrashers belted out their song and other sounds. Many Lesser Goldfinches were rummaging through the seed that had fallen to the ground yesterday. Only a few hummingbirds were around, mostly foraging on flower nectar. The feeders were not out yet.

We had an early breakfast then headed out to the nearby South Fork area. This beautiful mixed forest harbors a nice assortment of birds and today we would see many of them. On the road itself we found a Rufous-crowned Sparrow feeding on something. What luck! We began to hear and see Mexican Jay which is the most numerous species in the area. A Zone-tailed Hawk was spotted soaring high near the canyon walls. Near the parking lot there was a patch of blooming thistles and was attracting some showy butterflies. Feeding on the blooms were Two-tailed Swallowtail, Pipevine Swallowtail, Cloudless Sulphur, Dull Firetip, and Silver-spotted Skipper. We walked up the narrow trail and suddenly heard a familiar sound. It was that of the Elegant Trogon. This is the northernmost trogon species and breeds only in southeastern Arizona, usually retiring south for the winter. We crossed the dry creek bed to see if we could spot it, and we did. It was a vibrant, red male. We were able to get it in the scopes multiple times so everyone could see. It was nice to see this iconic bird early on in the trip. We continued the walk back and found a Brown Creeper, Plumbeous Vireo, several Painted Redstarts, and a pair of Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers. The latter bird is an austral migrant, which migrates north out of South America to breed. We also



spotted Arizona Sisters, Spring Azures on the wet cement, and several American Snouts. It was a good year for butterflies.

We headed over to the Southwest Research Station to see what was stirring. By the main buildings Robert spotted a Giant Swallowtail, apparently a rare sighting to that area. Later on, we found out that researchers there collected it! The hummingbird feeders were packed and there was non-stop action. Species found were Rivoli's, Black-chinned, Anna's, Rufous, Broad-tailed, and Broad-billed. Telling some of these apart takes some time and patience. One particular species we were waiting for was the Berylline Hummingbird which seems to show up each year. We were just about ready to leave when it suddenly appeared. Bingo! With that sighting, we called it a morning and headed back to Cave Creek for lunch.

After some downtime, we headed out to another destination; the Walker House. A thunderstorm was brewing and looked like it was heading our way but ended up skirting a bit to the east. There, different species of hummingbirds came and went, as well as the handsome Arizona Woodpecker. One species we really wanted to see was the White-eared Hummingbird and within a short time it came in. Apparently, this was the only one coming to feeders in the entire region this year! We departed and saw one Wild Turkey across the street. Along the drive we were keeping our eyes and ears peeled for Montezuma Quail, but none were to be found. Upon reaching the paved road, James spotted a lone Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay sitting atop a snag and would be the only sighting of the trip.

Nearby was Dave Jasper's house where he has feeders set up for people to come and see. His place is always a jackpot for so many birds. Inca Doves and Black-throated Sparrows were strolling around on the ground. A Ladder-backed Woodpecker and two Verdins also came into the feeders. A jelly feeder attracted three species of orioles including the Hooded, Bullock's, and Scott's. At least three Pyrrhuloxias were around, along with the Northern Cardinal. It was a good spot to differentiate between the two species. A cute Cliff Chipmunk also came in, trying to steal the show. We had a wonderful day and returned to Cave Creek for our checklist and dinner.

A few participants were interested in a night drive so we departed right after dinner. Just up the road a way we found an active Western Screech-Owl and got great, close-up views of it. We then drove down the main paved road to see if we could find reptiles. Robert spotted some eyeshine, so we backed up. It turned out to be a Bobcat



lying down, and quite close to the road. As we moved slowly along, we found a total of four baby Western Diamond Rattlesnakes, all spread far apart along the road. Where were their mothers? We spotted one last desert denizen; a large Tarantula. We tried to coax it off the road as other cars could likely smash it. It wanted nothing to do with us and held its ground. We returned to the hotel and called it a day. A successful one at that.

Tuesday August 13 Chiricahua Mountains | Travel to Casa San Pedro

It was time to continue on to our next destination, but we would need to cross over a mountain and see a lot of wildlife first. After breakfast, we headed out and began the ascent up into the Chiricahuas. Drier forest began to give way to high-elevation tree species. On the way up, a family of Gray Fox crossed the road right in front of us, including an adult with a large rabbit. What a great start! Some Bushtits were spotted before we made our first stop. We saw a pair of Grace's Warblers, Yellow-eyed Juncos, and a Spotted Towhee before moving on. At one point, someone spotted a Greater Roadrunner high up in a dead snag, sunning itself. We were high up in the mountains and no one expected to see it there. We made our way to Barfoot Park where typically there is a lot of bird action. Some black clouds quickly began moving in and it started to thunder. We weren't sure how long we could stay up there. A Band-tailed Pigeon was calling high up, but we got scope views of it in a clearing. As the thunderstorm got closer, we decided to have an early lunch in case we needed to start moving down the mountain. We then headed over to Rustler Park and fortunately for us, the storm skirted right past. While there, we had all the bird activity that was missing at Barfoot. Northern Flickers, Steller's Jays, Hepatic Tanager, and Western Bluebirds were all on the move and foraging. Along the road were a few Pine Siskins feeding on thistles and other seeds. A lone Lark Sparrow and Chipping Sparrow were also spotted. But we were still missing some of the stars of the show. We decided to check out a little dropoff by the bathroom and it paid off. Several Virginia's Warblers were bathing in the little creek. A small flock started to appear, and we found Mexican Chickadee and Pygmy Nuthatch. The action was picking up. Then, a Yellow-rumped Warbler, Townsend's Warbler, and several Hermit Warblers were also spotted. Tom then spotted a Red-breasted Nuthatch and appearing right in front of it were two Red-faced Warblers. What a wonderful combination of birds!

We started to make our way down the mountain and stopped at Pinery Canyon. There, a pair of the Mexican race of Spotted Owls had been nesting and were still there. They were perched right alongside the road. We looked at them through the scopes for a while and got pictures. A Greater Pewee also made a showing before we moved



on. Upon reaching the lowlands, we spotted a pair of Mule Deer. We had experienced much of the grandeur these mountains had to offer.

We made the rest of the drive until reaching Casa San Pedro which would be home for the next three nights. This was THE place for all those homemade pies. Elissa was already there and a bit later she gave her talk about the years of doing hummingbird banding.

Wednesday August 14 Miller Canyon | Ash Canyon

Some of the guests rose for an early morning bird walk. The pair of Great Horned Owls was by the swimming pool. A pair of Common Ground-Dove, Abert's Towhee, and Gila Woodpeckers were all by the feeders. Along entrance the road we spotted several pair of the distinct Vermilion Flycatchers. A lone Warbling Vireo was foraging in a small tree. Some male and female Blue Grosbeaks and Lazuli Buntings were feeding on seeding grasses in the field. We saw something on the road ahead of us and it turned out to be a Near Threatened Ornate Box Turtle. We made sure it got off the road before a car came.

We had a hearty breakfast then headed out to our first destination; Miller Canyon. A pair of Flame-colored Tanagers nested there again this year and it would be our main target species. Some guests decided to stay at the feeders with Elissa and enjoy the hummingbird show while we continued up the trail while it was still cool. We spotted a gorgeous, Red-spotted Purple butterfly and got some pictures. We searched for the tanager at a couple of different spots but had no luck. We did find another pair of Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers, a Plumbeous Vireo, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. We returned to the feeders and there was a lot of action. The large and handsome Rivoli's Hummingbird always steals the show, along with the vibrant Violet-crowned. There were no rarities there this year. Robert spotted a Wilson's Warbler foraging in the thick vegetation and then it disappeared.

We went to the nearby Coronado National Monument to have our sack lunch. This reserve sits right on the U.S.-Mexican border. After that, we went to the Ash Canyon bird sanctuary to see what was stirring. There were good numbers of most of the common hummingbirds, but we were on the lookout for the star species; the Lucifer. We



were told they were around. Good news. A bright male came in first, then a female, then a young male. Everyone got great looks at it and some wonderful photos as well. This is the only spot where it is regularly seen year after year during these monsoon trips. A large group of Bushtits came to bathe in the water feature where we could easily see the different colored eyes between the sexes. We returned to the hotel and got cleaned up before heading to the nearby town for an Italian dinner.

Thursday August 15 Coronado Nat'l Monument | San Pedro House

We did another early morning bird walk at the hotel before heading out. We found our first of several Lucy's Warbler, several vocal Yellow-throated Chats, and another Ornate Box Turtle. We got better looks at Blue Grosbeaks and Lazuli Buntings.

We headed out to the Coronado Nat'l Monument. We were again on the lookout for the Montezuma Quail, knowing that this bird can be anywhere in the hilly habitat. We arrived there right at opening hour and started to ascend the canyon. We found some Bridled Titmouse foraging in the oak trees. Part way up the road we stopped to look around. Some Bordered Patch butterflies were puddling on wet sand. We looked for signs of quail diggings in the shady, soft earth but could find none. We did encounter more Painted Redstarts foraging in the moist ravine. We reached the top of the road where there was a parking lot and surveillance tower. To one side there was no Wall, just open country and the border between Mexico and the U.S. A dirt road and small fence marked the border as far as we could see with our binoculars. It didn't take long until we noticed that five White-throated Swifts were feeding all around us and were literally skimming the surface of the parking lot. It is quite rare to actually see the upperside of this bird and its white rump patch. We enjoyed this rare show and the photographers tried their skills at getting sharp images of these little rockets. They got something. A Rock Wren also decided to come out and forage along the edge of the parking lot, so that was nice to see. A Cassin's Kingbird was also observed foraging atop the hill. We descended the mountain and had lunch at a nearby Bistro.

After lunch, we went to the San Pedro House, located along the San Pedro River. This section still has running water. We reached the river and found a Great Blue Heron, Black Phoebe, and Yellow Warbler. A couple of bathing



birds included the Lark Sparrow and Orange-crowned Warbler. It was kind of slow, so we decided to head over to Ramsey Canyon only to find out that due to staffing issues they were closing early. Ugh. So, a few guests returned to Miller Canyon with James for another shot at the tanager while the remainder returned to the hotel. At the hotel, Robert gave a presentation on the birds and butterflies of Honduras.

Friday August 16 Patagonia Area | Travel to Green Valley

After breakfast we headed out to the last area of the trip, but there would be multiple stops along the way. We arrived in Patagonia, a quaint community located near the Mexican border. We first went to the Sonoita Creek Sanctuary, a Nature Conservancy reserve. Where we had to sign in, we saw a Black Vulture and Say's Phoebe. There was a nice, raised trail that lead through the forest. Two birds we quickly encountered were Dusky-capped and Brown-crested Flycatchers. A Bell's Vireo foraged in the thick vegetation. We came across a small flock that had Lucy's and Virginia Warblers. At the end of one trail, a tiny bird made its presence known. It was a Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, another specialty and target bird. We waited and with patience, it came and landed right above our heads. This is the smallest flycatcher that occurs in the U.S. Down by the creek we noticed that some birds were bathing. There, we saw another Orange-crowned Warbler and a Wilson's Warbler. Then, someone spotted a female American Redstart which is a good sighting for this area. On the way back to where we were parked we would get lucky once again. Tom spotted the first of two Yellow-billed Cuckoos, an endangered western race. We also noticed a lot of little, black-colored butterflies zipping around. They turned out to be Golden-headed Sootywings.

We then drove over to the nearby Paton Center. There are always a lot of birds there and one never knows when something uncommon will show up. We saw more of the Inca Dove and Common Ground-Dove. A Violet-crowned Hummingbird was working the feeders, and we observed another Ladder-backed Woodpecker. A species that was new for the trip was Song Sparrow and we got good looks at it.

We had lunch at a local diner in Patagonia before continuing on. We drove to Patagonia Lake to see what waterfowl could be seen. At a high lookout point we saw a few more Cinnamon Teal, Mexican Ducks, and an American Coot. A few Red-winged Blackbirds flew quickly through. A big storm was brewing so we went to another



lookout spot. There, we were able to see some Neotropical Cormorants and a Pied-billed Grebe right before it started to rain. We departed and just as we were reaching the main highway, we could see that we were right on the leading edge of a big thunderstorm. We drove westward and escaped another one!

We continued the drive and spotted a resting Pronghorn in a field. As we were approaching the Green Valley area we could see a huge storm. It appeared that we weren't going to skirt around this one. And we didn't. We drove straight into a mega rainstorm and traffic crawled at a snail's pace. Many people just pulled off the road. We crept along, and after about 15 minutes reached our exit to the Tubac Golf Resort. Robert was so relieved to get off the highway.

We checked in to our rooms then had dinner at the nearby eclectic Elvira's restaurant. As we were leaving, Robert spotted something moving in the dark by the van door. Thinking 'snake,' he turned on the cell phone light and found a large Sonoran Desert Toad. Everyone was happy to see this native species.

Saturday August 17 Box Canyon | Madera Canyon | Local Hotspots

Our last full day on the trip would be full of adventure and visiting different sites.

After an early breakfast, we headed toward the Santa Rita Mountains. We got onto a dirt road en route to Box Canyon but had to pass through some desert lowlands first. One species we were on the lookout for was the Cassin's Sparrow and we were able to see several, most of them singing. We reached the steep canyon road and drove up to a good spot to pull over. We searched and searched for one of the most sought after birds of the trip; the Five-striped Sparrow. Finally, one was heard calling, and it sounded like it was on the other side of the canyon, but we weren't sure. It was a long way over to the other side. Quite often they sing from atop the abundant Ocotillos plants. No one could find it. Robert walked down the road a bit to try and get a different angle and bingo, he found it. At least everyone got to see it through the scope. This bird barely makes it into the U.S. in this part of Arizona. We were about ready to move on when we heard a Varied Bunting singing above us on the rocky slopes. It also evaded us for some time until it finally flew to an Ocotillo and perched in view. We also got scope views of this colorful male. We were just about ready to leave again when a Harris's Antelope Squirrel went scrambling up

the steep bank. We moved up the road a bit and found a pair of Phainopepla and a Rufous Hummingbird feeding on blooming century plants. Some Thick-billed Kingbirds had been reported in that area and we ran into quite a crowd of people also looking for them. There were, in fact, four of them perched high on utility lines. From there, they sallied out to catch insects being blown up the canyon. A pair of American Kestrel was present as well. Kathi also found a Willow Flycatcher, representing the only *Empidonax* flycatcher of the trip.

After this successful trip to Box Canyon, we descended and drove over to the nearby Madera Canyon. We hung out at the feeders for a bit, waiting to see if anything exciting came in. Many of the hummingbirds we have seen previously were present, including the snazzy Rivoli's. A nice surprise was our second Berylline Hummingbird. We had a picnic lunch at a nearby spot with tables. Everyone made their own sandwich, and we enjoyed our surroundings. A Cooper's Hawk lifted up above us in the afternoon heat.

We descended the mountain once again, making our way into the lowlands. We stopped at the Canoa Conservation Ranch to check out the lagoon. It was hot and not much was stirring, less some Cliff and Barn Swallows and Lazuli Buntings. We then swung over to the Amado Pond and found several Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks which was a nice sighting. Some Great-tailed Grackles were there as well. We had one last stop to see what we could find. We drove to a bridge on the Santa Cruz River and were hoping to find a Green Kingfisher. It wasn't around, but we did see some Tropical Kingbirds and several Say's Phoebes.

We returned to the hotel and later had a trip recap.

Sunday August 18 | Local Hotspot | Travel to Tucson for Departure

This morning some of us departed at 6:00 to go look for a couple more birds. We went to the Desert Meadows Community Garden in Green Valley. It is a manicured setting, but has feeders, and is often packed with birds. One species everyone really wanted to see was the Costa's Hummingbird. We were able to find two males which marked the 11th hummingbird for the trip. Also present was a Rufous-winged Sparrow, also being new for the trip. Gambel's Quail and many other common species were present. We returned to the hotel in time for breakfast. We packed and headed up the road to Tucson. Most everyone was dropped off at the airport, but a couple guests had later flights. We all said 'good-bye' and hoped to see each other again on another trip.

James, Martin, Tom, and I continued on to the Sentinel Peak Park on the outskirts of the city. We were after a gnatcatcher and a different flicker, both inhabiting the saguaro-filled desert landscape. We weren't able to locate either, but did see an Ash-throated Flycatcher and a Nashville Warbler. We returned to the airport and ended this monsoon madness trip, replete with a real monsoon.

Trip Highlights

Tony-Whiskered Screech-Owl, road cruising and baby rattlesnakes, Casa San Pedro, enjoyed the whole group.

Cyndy-Pies at Casa San Pedro, Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, calling Gray Hawk.

Carol-Tie between the Elegant Trogon and Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, family of Gray Foxes, Casa San Pedro, food overall was excellent, White-throated Swift show at Coronado.

Kathi-Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, female American Redstart, Cave Creek Ranch and Chiricahua Mts, Sonoran Desert Toad.

Martin-Hermit Warblers, family of Gray Foxes.

Tom-Tie between the Roadrunner in the tree and White-throated Swifts, Gray Foxes, favorite birding partner was Giz (Carol's new-found toy skeleton).

Jim-Roadrunner in tree and swifts. Time with Elissa. All lodges were nice.

Georgia-Spotted Owls, time spent with Elissa at Miller Canyon, beautiful drive to the top of Coronado Monument.

James-Showing everyone all the flora and fauna, road cruising for herps, female American Redstart.

Robert-Red-breasted Nuthatch and swift show, Bobcat.

Photos: Group Photo (Robert Gallardo - RG), Great Horned Owl (Kathi Marston - KM), Gambel's Quail (RG), Elegant Trogon (KM), Rivoli's Hummingbird (KM), Blue-throated Mountain Gem (KM), Scenic (RG), Elegant Trogon (KM), Whiskered Screech-Owl (RG), Baby W. Diamondback Rattlesnake (RG), Greater Roadrunner (KM), Steller's Jay (KM), Hermit Warbler (KM), Painted Redstart (KM), Mexican Spotted Owl (KM), Casa de San Pedro Pool (James Petersen - JP), Violet-crowned Hummingbird (KM), Wilson's Warbler (KM), Mexican Jay (KM), Lucifer Hummingbird (KM), Yellow-breasted Chat (KM), Birding (JP), Acorn Woodpecker (KM), Blue Grosbeak (KM), Yellow-billed Cuckoo (KM), Berylline Hummingbird (KM), Lunch! (JP), Tropical Kingbird (KM), Phainopepla female (KM)