

# Arizona Monsoon Madness Trip Report | August 1-8, 2024 with Naturalist Journeys



Compiled by guides James Petersen and Brian Shirley. Our clients included Deanna, James, Katherine, Suzanne, Ted, Terrie, Charles, Tom, Toni and Anne.



## Thurs., Aug. 1 Lake Cochise Golf Course & Ponds

A few of the participants had arrived early, so James and Bryan picked them up at their hotels and we all met at the Tucson Airport. One participant had some issues with his flight and was not going to be arriving for a few hours, so we loaded all the luggage in James's vehicle and all the passengers into Bryan's. While James waited for the last passenger, Bryan and the group started out toward our first birding location in Willcox.

Willcox has a golf course and a wetland area that can be one of the best places in Arizona for shorebirds, waterfowl, and other waterbirds. It is still too early in the season for most waterfowl, but our important target here was Mexican Duck – a recent split from Mallard. Mallards and Mexican Ducks readily hybridize, and we had one bird today that showed some characteristics of both, but we had several that appeared to be pure Mexican Ducks. There were also a few winter-type plumage Cinnamon Teal and one sad-looking Wigeon.

There were lots of shorebirds for us to enjoy – several members of our group commented that they had never seen so many Avocets! The lake held several hundred Wilson's Phalaropes, and we saw lots of them swimming with their characteristic circular pattern. With careful study of the "peeps" we were able to see Least, Western, Baird's, and one Stilt Sandpiper. A few Long-billed Dowitchers were a nice find as well. Another exciting bird for everyone was a Chihuahuan Meadowlark perched and calling nearby.



After we left Willcox, our next stop was the town of San Simon. A pair of Harris's Hawks nested here and that was our main target bird, but a few miles before the town we saw 2 sitting on telephone poles just off the freeway and they were probably the pair from town. We did get nice looks at a pair of Swainson's Hawks though.

After we left the interstate, we headed south on a road just inside New Mexico (a new state bird list for several people!); we just missed what appeared to have been quite a storm. Every ravine and gully was flooded with muddy water. It was no longer raining, but the clouds made it so dark that we even had a few Lesser Nighthawks flying around!



We arrived at our wonderful accommodations in Cave Creek in the Chiricahua Mountains and were greeted by a bunch of the resident species like Acorn Woodpecker, Lesser Goldfinch, and even a Blue-throated Mountain Gem. We got settled into the rooms and just as we were going in for dinner, James arrived with the last member of our group. We had a great dinner at the lodge and went to bed excited for the next day to start our trip in earnest.

## **Fri., Aug. 2    Cave Creek Ranch | South Fork | Southwest Research Station | George Walker House | Bob Rodrigues Feeders**

We started the day with a pre-breakfast walk that took us around Cave Creek Ranch. We were greeted with several Gambel's Quail and the "who cooks for you" call of numerous White-winged Doves. Meanwhile, we had several Lesser Goldfinches and a Bridled Titmouse on the feeders while a Bewick's Wren sang. When a Coopers Hawk flew by, we decided to continue up to the drier areas of the lodge. In this Mesquite-dominated habitat, we had chattering Cactus Wrens and some Canyon Towhees calling. From the dense brush, a Bell's Vireo sang, eventually coming out to give us brief looks at this skulky bird before disappearing back into the thick habitat. At this point, it was time to head back for breakfast.

After a filling breakfast, we drove up into the canyon, stopping halfway up the road leading to South Fork to try to find a



late nesting Trogon. Although the Trogon was not around, we did have several Peregrine Falcons flying by the canyon rockface while Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers did their squeaky call. We continued up to the end of the South Fork Road and the start of the trail. Here, we walked down the road, going over some of the plants of the area while identifying the calling birds. While walking down, we had 3 of the 4 species of Oaks (Arizona White, Silverleaf and Net leaf Oak), while also showing the differences between Apache and Ponderosa Pines.

During all this, we spotted some high White-throated Swifts flying around a few Turkey Vultures. Continuing down the canyon, multiple Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers and a few Dusky-capped Flycatchers called while a low barking sound also sounded from the side of the road. This alerted us to our first Elegant Trogon of the trip. Once located, this stunning specialty of southeast Arizona gave great looks at both the back and the front of him as he continued calling. We finished up the walk, with a Grace's Warbler singing from high up in a pine as we headed back to the car to continue up the canyon.

Our last stop for the morning was at the Southwest Research Station, where we had amazing views of an active Broad-billed Hummingbird sitting on a nest. At the feeders, we had 4 species of hummingbirds including great looks at some more Blue-throated Mountain-Gems, Rufous and Black-chinned Hummingbirds. By this time, it was time for lunch, so we headed down for a delicious lunch and a siesta to escape the heat of the day.

Our first stop after the siesta was the George Walker house in Paradise. Here we had a few Lesser Goldfinches, Lark Sparrows and three species of Hummingbirds. The star hummingbird here was the continuing White-eared Hummingbird! The White-eared played cat and mouse with us as we tried to get good looks while he zipped in and out from one of the feeders. Eventually, all got good looks at this small green hummingbird with a giant white streak behind his eye. We ended the afternoon at the Bob Rodrigues feeders, where we had many of the lower desert species including several Black-throated Sparrows and Curve-billed Thrashers. Both species of Towhee also made an appearance; the more common Canyon Towhee as well as an Abert's Towhee (uncommon for the Chiricahuas). While all that was happening, we had both Northern Cardinals and Pyrrhuloxias coming in and out of the feeders, giving a good comparison between their bill size and color. After a delicious dinner, we went out one last time for the day and were able to hear several Whiskered Screech Owls to end the day.



### **Sat., Aug. 3 Portal | Barfoot Park | Rustler Park | Casa San Pedro**

We started out the day with some pre-breakfast birding. Our goal before breakfast was going to be to head down and bird South Cathedral Rock Road to look for the breeding pair of Thick-billed Kingbirds that we had missed the previous day. Unlike the day before, we hadn't even gotten all the way down the road before we saw these large kingbirds with massive bills. But, before getting out to see them, we flushed a sparrow with white outer tail corners and a brown harlequin facial pattern—a Lark Sparrow, that gave everyone in the van good looks. We proceeded to park and quickly re-found the kingbirds, spending 20 plus minutes watching one call, fly back and forth and endlessly chase a Cassin's Kingbird around. During this show, an adult Hooded Oriole came out to chatter in the sun, while a Bullocks Oriole again stayed low in the shrubs. It was later noticed that the Bullocks Oriole was feeding a fledgling that was also hidden in the shrubs—allowing us all to get good looks at the Orioles. On the way back to the car, we had some looks at a Bell's Vireo as it played hide and seek with us, giving some brief looks before ducking back into the thick vegetation, only to reappear singing moments later.

After a quick breakfast, we packed up and headed out for the day. Our first stop was the road between East Turkey Creek and Onion Saddle, where a Rufous-crowned Sparrow was heard singing on the rocky hillside above. After getting out of the cars, the bird was quickly located and gave great looks as he belted out his song from atop the vegetation. Meanwhile, multiple Band-tailed Pigeons flew overhead. We continued up, to try and maximize our high elevation time and got to our next stop, Barfoot Park. Here we wandered among the towering Ponderosa Pines, watching the multiple Pygmy Nuthatches as they foraged high above us. Nearby, bright Yellow-eyed Juncos both called and bathed in a nearby puddle of water. We were able to track down a small warbler flock further down the road, which consisted of a Hermit Warbler and 2 Grace's Warblers foraging high in the pines. Mexican Chickadee was soon located calling and foraging nearby as well. By this time, it was time to head up to Rustler Park for some lunch and more birding.

After a great picnic lunch, we went to the start of the trail to Long Park in hopes that some Olive Warblers were still around. After some searching, we found a few warblers: Hermit, Townsends and a Black-throated Gray Warbler. A few more birds came onto the area with two that had dull yellow faces with darker auriculares—2 female Olive Warblers that were seen but stayed high up in the canopy. After the Olive Warblers moved off, we moved over to a narrow strip



of pines where a pair of Buff-breasted Flycatchers were quickly found, first by their double-noted call, and then one came out and actively flew around. We finally got looks at this hyperactive bird before we needed to start heading down the western side of the Chiricahuas on our way to Casa de San Pedro.

Once arrived at the Casa de San Pedro, we spent 30 minutes birding the feeders. We had some great birds, including a foraging Common Ground Dove, 4 species of hummingbirds including a Rufous, and multiple Gila Woodpeckers while a Yellow-breasted Chat called in the distance. After a delicious dinner, we gathered to hear Elissa's talk about how you catch and band a hummingbird, before heading to bed after a great day.

### **Sun., Aug. 4 Casa San Pedro | Miller Canyon | Ash Canyon**

Today we started out meeting early to bird the Casa San Pedro grounds before breakfast. As we walked around the building, a roosting Great Horned Owl was spotted by the pool area while a Common Ground Dove pecked at some seeds that were beneath the feeders. We moved on to watching the multiple hummingbird feeders, where several Broad-billed and Black-chinned Hummingbirds chased one another off the feeders. A single Anna's Hummingbird snuck in to drink and join the fray. Meanwhile, a hulking Great Blue Heron flew over and landed on the roof of the Casa, giving us a disdainful look before he flew off. All the while, we were surrounded with the calls of Gila Woodpeckers and a few Cactus Wrens. We started walking one of the trails that led around the pond that is on the property. Here, we had some massive Bullfrogs while 2 Vermillion Flycatchers (one male and one female) flitted about. An Abert's Towhee walked ahead of us and at the furthest point on the trail we heard the varied chatter of a Yellow-breasted Chat. After a few minutes, it worked its way up and out into the open, showing itself briefly before disappearing back into the mesquite. By this time, it was breakfast time, so we headed back to eat the outrageous breakfast provided by Casa San Pedro.

After breakfast, we headed out for the morning, with the first stop being Miller Canyon. We turned down the wrong road, and while backtracking, we stumbled upon two Cassin's Sparrows doing their flight song. Everyone watched as this sparrow flew up in the air, singing his high-pitched song before zooming back to earth, to perch on the top of a Mesquite bush and do it all again. Between his flights, we got the scope on this plain sparrow. We also had several Chihuahuan Meadowlarks with their large white tails and melodic singing in the distance as well as a distant Loggerhead



Shrike perched up on a Soap tree Yucca.

Shortly after, we made it up to the upper parking lot at Miller Canyon and proceeded to head up through Beatty's area to access the trail that takes us up the canyon. A few of us stayed at Beatty's Hummingbird feeders to enjoy the nonstop hummingbird show with Elissa. The remaining group headed up the canyon to search for a few species we had yet to see. While hiking up the canyon, we were greeted by the squeaky call of more Sulfur-bellied Flycatchers and saw/heard a Hutton's Vireo. A flock of Bushtits moved through the canopy while we slowly worked our way up, passing many Manzanita bushes and Arizona Madrone trees. At the highest point in the hike, we stopped to listen for birds and admire the cool creek that flowed next to the trail. Here, we had more Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers, along with an extremely brief look at our only Red-faced Warbler of the trip. A Western Tanager flew up the creek while Western Wood Pewees flitted about in the low branches.

Once we started heading down, we heard a similar check call coming from below us. It continued, with it either being a Western Tanager or one of the 2 summering Flame-colored Tanagers that were in the canyon. After about 15 minutes of looking, we located the bird making the call, seeing a mostly yellow bird with a thick dark beak and white wing bars—a Flame-colored Tanager!!! The second one came in shortly afterwards, and we got great looks at this unusual summering species of Southeast Arizona. Once back in Beatty's property, we went straight to the hummingbird feeders, where the rest of the group was. Here, we had amazing looks at a Violet-crowned Hummingbird and two Rivoli's Hummingbirds fighting while the rest of the feeders were awash with the buzzing of hummingbird wings. We had multiple Black-chinned Hummingbirds, Anna's and Broad-billed Hummingbirds. Mixed in was one lone Blue-throated Mountain Gem. By this time, all were hungry, and we headed down the mountain to lunch.

After lunch and a siesta, we continued birding by heading to the Ash Canyon bird sanctuary. Here, there were many feeders and benches that allowed us to stay out of the heat while watching the many hummingbirds zip around, both drinking nectar and chasing each other. The highlight bird here was the Lucifer Hummingbird, a small hummingbird with a stunning purple gorget and a curved beak, with an extremely restricted range in the US. It came in multiple times, buzzing us a few times while other perching high up on a bare branch. We also had many of the other species of hummingbirds here as well—from the red throated Broad-tailed Hummingbird to Broad-billed Hummingbirds to the many adult Anna's Hummingbirds buzzing around. After a few hours here, it was time to head back to the Casa and head out to dinner after an amazing day. Just before dinner, we were surprised with two Zone-tailed Hawks flying over the casa, pretending to be vultures. A cherry on top of an extremely fun day!



## Mon. Aug. 5 Casa San Pedro | Ramsey Canyon | Coronado National Memorial | San Pedro House

We again started the day with an early morning bird walk before breakfast. Instead of birding the feeders like we did the day before, we went out to bird the road and grasslands in front of the



hotel. The grasslands were productive with numerous White-winged Doves, a Swainson's Hawk and some stunning male Vermillion Flycatchers. As we were listening, we heard a short stutter call that ended in a bouncing ball like trill from out in the grasslands. With a little bit of looking, we spotted a Botteri's Sparrow singing in the grasslands. These sparrows are monsoon breeders and only sing during the monsoon season. Everyone was happy to get on this plain sparrow and hear his loud call as he claimed that patch of territory.

Our next stop after a delicious breakfast was Ramsey Canyon. Here, we slowly walked up the trail, listening to singing birds on our way up. At the hummingbird feeders we had a Rivoli's Hummingbird as well as the white breasted Violet-crowned Hummingbird again. Continuing further up the trail, we had a low Buff-breasted Flycatcher hawking insects just off the forest floor while several Phainopeplas called from overhead. Many Painted Redstarts flashed in the mid canopy, most of them young birds with no red bellies. At our furthest point up the trail we came across a fruiting Serviceberry tree that held several Phainopeplas, giving all great looks at this dark silky flycatcher. As we turned to head back down, a sharp chirp alerted all to a Canyon Wren that seemed to lead us back down the trail, giving brief looks at this ruddy brown, white throated wren as it bounced between the rocks.

Continuing from Ramsey, it was lunch time, so we elected to have our Picnic lunch at the Coronado National Memorial. Here, we learned about how this was a memorial to the Spanish expedition that searched most of the west—from Mexico to Oklahoma -- looking for gold that was never found. It was a dramatic landscape similar to the Chiricahuas. While packing up from lunch, a small flock passed by that contained Bridled Titmouse and a Black-throated Gray Warbler. While the birds were being seen, a Montezuma Quail called in the distance but remained unseen. It was time for a siesta before the afternoon's birding outing.

After the siesta, we headed out to the San Pedro House and trails, a spot north of Casa San Pedro along the San Pedro River. Here we had many Gila Woodpeckers and Lesser Goldfinches. The best bird of the day, though, was a day-roosting Western Screech Owl who was half awake as we watched him open and then close his eyes. Moving on, we drove to an area overlooking the river, where we had fantastic looks at both the huge cottonwoods growing by the river and a nicely perched Gray Hawk. By this time, it was time to head back to Casa San Pedro before heading out to dinner at the Copper Pig in Bisbee. After finishing dinner, we came out to 3-4 floating white birds overhead, lit up by the lights. They turned into a few Lesser Nighthawks hawking insects in front of a receding thunderstorm. The way back from the Copper Pig was memorable, with a large lightning storm with many cloud-to-ground strikes off in the distance. We got



back just before a developing thunderstorm hit Casa San Pedro. After the evening checklist, we headed off to bed after a memorable day birding.

## **Tues., Aug. 6 Patagonia Lake State Park | Patagonia | Paton's Hummingbird Sanctuary | Tubac**

With a long day ahead of us, we left bright and early after a delicious final breakfast at Casa San Pedro. We arrived to start birding at Patagonia Lake State Park at 9:30 am. We immediately started scanning the pond and the birding trail and were able to pick up several waterfowl including a few new ones for the trip. We had a diving Pied-billed Grebe as well as numerous Mexican Ducks. A slow scan of the back half of the lake revealed some Coots along with a Ruddy Duck. Heading onto the trail, we had numerous Phainopeplas, some giving us great looks as they perched in the tops of the trees. Meanwhile, several Black Vultures passed by overhead, giving their quick snappy wingbeats. After finishing walking the trail, we went down to the beach area to scan for some more waterbirds. Here, we were rewarded with distant views of 3-4 Neotropical Cormorants as well as a very cooperative Lucy's Warbler. A distant call was heard at the same time, which turned out to be two distant Spotted Sandpipers flying on the other side of the lake. Once they landed, they were hard to track but we got distant scope views of these birds before heading to lunch at the Gathering Grounds in Patagonia.

After a delicious lunch, we hung around town and were able to catch good looks at the local Mississippi Kite as it cut through the air on pointed wings, hawking for insects. We moved on to the Paton's Center for Hummingbirds. The center was awash with the humming sound of the hummingbirds. Some of the most numerous ones were Black-chinned Hummingbirds followed by smaller numbers of Broad-billed Hummingbirds. The star of the show was the Violet-crowned Hummingbird, which showed amazingly well, showing off its pure white breast, red bill and violet crown as it came to the feeders multiple times. Here, we also had our first Black Phoebe of the trip, feeding in the nearby creek right as some weather seemed to be approaching. With a little extra time, we drove over to Harshaw Creek Road, where a female Rose-throated Becard was being seen. With a little patience, we had the bird calling and visible as it moved down the road, away from its nest.

After another lengthy drive, we ended the day birding the De Anza Trail by Tubac. Here we had 3-4 Tropical Kingbirds—an uncommon bird most years in Arizona. They had taken up residence and were seen flying around with a young bird that looked like it had fledged from the nest recently. We also had good looks at Vermillion Flycatchers and another Black Phoebe before ending the day with dinner at eclectic Elviras.





## **Wed., Aug. 7 Box Canyon | Madera Canyon**

We started out the day with an early departure to beat the heat and bird Box Canyon in the cooler morning hours. Joined by Vernie Atkins, we slowly worked our way up the grasslands below the canyon, stopping a few times to get great looks at the singing Cassin's and Botteri's Sparrows, the former still doing their flight dance. As we continued further into the canyon, we came across multiple Varied Buntings as well as a number of both Scott's and Hooded Orioles. We reached a wide turnoff where we stopped and started birding on foot, listening and seeing both Rock Wrens and Canyon Wrens. Multiple Phainopeplas also flew back and forth, their black plumage obvious against the dry canyon's wall. We finally heard a stuttering call, and located the bird against the canyon wall, one of the Five-striped Sparrows that had taken up residence in this canyon in the last few years. Everyone got amazing scope views of this bird as he perched on the Ocotillo, singing and claiming his territory. His black and white plumage with "5 stripes" reminding everyone of a very fancy Black-throated Sparrow. By this time, the canyon started to heat up, so we decided to continue to higher elevation. On the way back out, we came across Vernie, who had stopped after seeing a Coachwhip run across the road. Fortunately, the Coachwhip decided to curl up in a cactus, so we all got to enjoy the snake as well.

Once back on the main road, we continued up to the very top of Madera Canyon. Here, we parked and slowly walked up the trail towards Mount Wrightson, stopping every little bit to admire the mix of Arizona White Oak and listen for birds. There were several Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers making their squeaky calls, while a House Wren chattered among a brush pile. There was also an amazing number of Ladybugs all grouped up every so often going up the trail. These large groups were around our whole time on the trail. At the furthest point, we had the distant barking of an Elegant Trogon. As we waited, it came closer and soon we were greeted with a male Elegant Trogon flyover as he continued up canyon, barking away!

By this point, it was close to lunch time, so we headed back down to the Madera Canyon feeders for some pre-lunch feeder watching. The feeder watching was good, with numerous Broad-billed Hummingbirds as well as a number of both Lesser Goldfinches and Acorn Woodpeckers. We left to set up the picnic lunch at the lower campground and were soon joined by hungry clients. Everyone enjoyed this field picnic with discussions of that morning's sightings.

After the picnic, with a slowly developing thunderstorm, we packed up and continued back up to the Santa Rita Lodge feeders to look for the reported Berylline Hummingbird. Having received word that said hummingbird was at the next feeding station, we walked/drove up and sat down. It did not take long for the green Berylline hummingbird to show up, and when it did, it perched cooperatively as it started to drizzle. By this time, it was time to head down and get a well-

earned siesta before the end-of-trip dinner that night.

At the end-of-trip dinner, we all marveled and talked about our favorite birds/mammals and moments of the past 8 days, with some of the more common favorites being: seeing Five-stripe Sparrow and Becard, the native American paintings in the Chiricahuas, Violet-crowned Hummingbirds, the master class Elissa taught while sitting at the hummingbird feeders, seeing the lighting on the walls at the Chiricahuas. Some more highlights were birding at Willcox, both species of owls, including the Great-horned Owl that had perched on the lawn chair, and lastly Varied Buntings. By this time, dinner was over, and it was time to get ready for birding on our last half day together.

## **Thurs., Aug. 8 Desert Meadows Park**

With a late breakfast, we had an early morning start for one last birding foray. We chose to head to the Desert Meadows Park in Green Valley. Here, we had hoped to find two species: Costa's Hummingbird and Rufous-winged Sparrow. These two are more common in the nearby Sonoran Desert, one we spent little time in on this trip. Everyone was lost in all the labeled native plants and cacti that makes up this small park. The birding was fantastic as well, with a covey of Gambel's Quail and some more close looks at a Lucy's Warbler. The desert birds also did not disappoint, with fantastic looks at several male Costa's Hummingbirds, their throats gleaming purple in the morning light as they both called and perched. On the way out, we had several looks at two Rufous-winged Sparrows as they foraged between some cacti.

After the last breakfast, we all left to finish packing and head to the airport after an awesome and memorable trip through southeast Arizona.

Photo Credits: Group, Bryan Shirley; Group; James Petersen; American Avocets & Black-necked Stilts, Anne Leong; Acorn Woodpeckers, Anne Leong; Sonoran Spotted Whiptail, Bryan Shirley; Northern Cardinal, Bryan Shirley; Curve-billed Thrasher, Bryan Shirley; Blue Grosbeak, Bryan Shirley; Group, James Petersen; Dull Firetip, Anne Leong; Violet-crowned Hummingbird, Anne Leong; Ornate Box Turtle, Anne Leong; Black-chinned Hummingbird, Anne Leong; Group, Anne Leong; Rivoli's Hummingbird, Anne Leong; Group, James Petersen; Bridled Titmouse, Anne Leong; Broad-billed Hummingbird, Anne Leong; Coachwhip, Anne Leong; Group, James Petersen.

