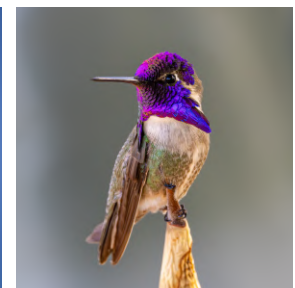
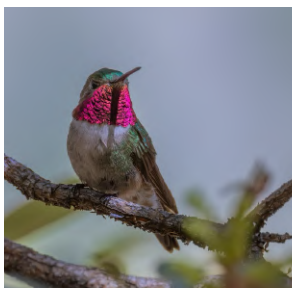


Southeast Arizona Sky Island Sampler | Trip Report | May 3 – 12, 2024 | by Mason Flint



Naturalist Journeys Guides: Mason Flint & Michael Marsden

Participants: Rebecca, Garry, Sandy, Bob, Ellen, Ted, Sandy, Meade, Elizabeth, Geoffrey



Fri., May. 3

Arrivals, Ramsey Canyon, Casa de San Pedro

Most of the group arrived early, but flight challenges delayed Ellen and Ted. We decided to divide and conquer: Michael stayed in Tucson to wait for Ellen and Ted, while Mason took the rest of the group to a nearby sandwich shop before heading straight to Ramsey Canyon. This Nature Conservancy Preserve on the east side of the Huachuca Mountains protects a riparian habitat with sycamores, maples, and conifers. We planned to return in a few days to walk the trails above the parking area, so today we enjoyed a picnic lunch by the active feeders. We saw hummingbirds, including Rivoli's, Black-chinned, Anna's, Broad-billed, and Violet-crowned, as well as many Acorn Woodpeckers, Mexican Jays, Bridled Titmice, Yellow-eyed Juncos, and Black-headed Grosbeaks.

After loading back into the van, we drove east across the San Pedro River valley to Casa de San Pedro, our home for three nights. The Casa is a charming bed and breakfast with spectacular views of the Huachucas and is surrounded by great birding. The innkeepers, Patrick and Karl, welcomed us and got us into our comfy rooms



before we headed out to explore the grounds and walk the trail to the river. Just outside the courtyard, we saw many noisy Gila Woodpeckers, Cactus Wrens, Curve-billed Thrashers, and a pair of Green-tailed Towhees. On the trail to the river, we added several more species, including Bell's Vireo, Lark Sparrow, Yellow-breasted Chat, Hooded Oriole, and close to a dozen Summer Tanagers. At the river, we spotted a pair of Mexican Ducks. Bob and Sandy also spotted a Zone-tailed Hawk along the way.

After freshening up, we met for dinner in the Casa dining room, where we were served a delicious catered meal and had our choice of desserts, including fresh pie.

Sat., May. 4 Casa de San Pedro, Miller Canyon, Ash Canyon

Some in the group slept in while others headed out before 6:00 AM for birding before breakfast. The sky was cloudless, and the temperatures were cool and comfortable. We took our time, spending about two hours walking less than half a mile between the Casa and the river. We added several new birds to the trip list, including Gray and Swainson's Hawks, Vermilion Flycatcher, Ash-throated and Brown-crested Flycatchers, Verdin (on a nest), Swainson's Thrush, Abert's Towhee, Lucy's and Wilson's Warblers, and Northern Cardinal.

After a delicious breakfast, we loaded up and drove back toward the Huachucas. On the way, we birded Bloomfield Road, where some in the group spotted a Greater Roadrunner and Black-throated Sparrow. One section of the road, formerly open to the public, was gated, but we found our way around to South Kings Ranch Road, where we spotted a Chihuahuan Meadowlark, a recent split from the "Lillian's" subspecies of Eastern Meadowlark. We arrived at Miller Canyon just after 10:00 AM and headed straight to the feeders near Beatty's Guest Ranch. The feeders are situated next to a small set of bleachers where we relaxed and enjoyed the spectacle. We practiced our hummingbird ID, using the numbered feeders to call them out: Rivoli's Hummingbird on 2! Female Black-chinned on 4! Broad-billed on 5! Blue-throated Mountain-gem in the bush left of 2! In all, we saw six species of hummingbirds and a few others, including our first Painted Redstart of the trip. Our next stop, Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary, was just a short drive north of Miller Canyon. We took our picnic lunch and spent about 90 minutes enjoying the many feeders. In addition to Acorn and Gila Woodpeckers, we saw a pair of Ladder-backed Woodpeckers that fed on oranges and a hummingbird feeder. At least a dozen Lark Sparrows hopped around close to the ground by the lower feeders, and another dozen or so Lazuli Buntings gave us great looks. We also saw Hooded, Bullock's, and Scott's Orioles, and Canyon and Abert's Towhees, among others. We didn't see the Lucifer Hummingbird, one of the prized birds at Ash Canyon, but we'd try again another day.



Our next stop was Coronado National Memorial, which involved a steep, winding (but mostly paved) drive up to Montezuma Pass. The pass offers breathtaking vistas at an elevation of 6,575 feet. To the east, we saw the San Pedro River Valley; to the west, the San Rafael Valley; and to the south. We didn't expect great birding but added a few, including one White-throated Swift zooming above, Rock Wren, and a very accommodating Rufous-crowned Sparrow that posed for photos.

We arrived back at the Casa after 4:00 PM. Some in the group took time to relax while others walked the trail to the San Pedro River to enjoy the late afternoon sunshine and saw several species, including Swainson's Hawk (nicely photographed by Sandy and Bob) and Cassin's Kingbird. After another nice dinner at the Casa, we moved to the living room, where Elissa Fazio from Naturalist Journeys gave us a wonderful talk about her experience banding hummingbirds, complete with examples of the tiny bands.

Sun., May. 5 Casa de San Pedro, Ramsey Canyon, Ash Canyon

A few early birders walked the trails between the Casa and the river before breakfast. Then, we headed north to walk the trails around San Pedro House. San Pedro House is a historic ranch located on the San Pedro Riparian Conservation Area (RNCA). One of the most important riparian areas in the United States, the RNCA protects nearly 57,000 acres along a 40-mile stretch of the San Pedro River that runs through the Chihuahuan and Sonoran Desert transition zone from the Mexican border north to St. David, Arizona. The giant cottonwoods and scrub around the old ranch house were busy with birds, including Gila Woodpecker, American Kestrel, and Black Phoebe. During our walk along the river and grasslands, we spotted a Gray Hawk, several Vermilion Flycatchers, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Yellow-breasted Chat, Common Yellowthroat, Wilson's Warbler, and Summer Tanager.

With winds and temperatures increasing, we headed east for our second visit to Ramsey Canyon Preserve. After negotiating spots in the small parking lot, we ate our picnic lunch before walking the 1.3-mile loop trail above the small visitor center. The trail, which follows a spring-fed stream lined with Arizona Sycamore, is one of the best spots to see Elegant Trogon. During our slow walk up the well-maintained trail, we saw several birds, including Western Wood-Pewee, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Cassin's Vireo, Bridled Titmouse, and Painted Redstart. Everyone got great looks at a Plumbeous Vireo tending a nest close to the trail and, with a little work, Grace's Warbler flitting around higher up in nearby trees. Further up, we heard the croak of an Elegant Trogon and then spotted one across the shallow river valley! We continued around the loop, hoping for better looks and eventually saw the beautiful male perched on exposed branches. Satisfied, we walked slowly down to the



entrance, where we added a few new birds, including a Violet-crowned Hummingbird, before returning to Casa de San Pedro for a mid-afternoon break.

During our visit to Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary on Saturday, we didn't see the Lucifer Hummingbird, one of the most coveted Southeast Arizona specialties. The resident caretaker suggested we return late in the afternoon when the male usually returns for feeding before dark. Dinner tonight was at a favorite Italian restaurant just minutes away from Ash Canyon, so we arrived just after 5:00 and settled in chairs near the preferred feeders. While we waited, several other birds made appearances, including Rivoli's, Broad-billed, and Anna's Hummingbirds, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Bullock's and Scott's Orioles, and Western Tanager. Eventually, the star arrived – a beautiful male zipping between a perch and a nearby feeder. Success!

Mon., May. 6 Chiricahua National Monument, Cave Creek Ranch

Today was a travel day. Our ultimate destination was Cave Creek on the east side of the Chiricahua Mountains in far southeastern Arizona. After early birding and breakfast, we loaded up and headed east, stopping to pick up picnic supplies near Bisbee, and winding our way north through agricultural land in the Sulphur Springs Valley. We didn't have time for stops but saw a few birds on the drive, including Loggerhead Shrike and (for some in the group) a small flock of Lark Buntings in breeding plumage. The agricultural fields gave way to dry scrub until we entered Chiricahua National Monument. The monument, located in the northern part of the Chiricahua Mountains, preserves the remains of an immense volcanic eruption about 27 million years ago. The ash spewed from the caldera cooled and hardened into rhyolite tuff that eroded into extensive "hoodoos" and balancing rock formations. Our first destination was Massai Point, a spectacular viewpoint reached by a road constructed in the 1930s. Breezy conditions made birding tough, but after eating our picnic lunches, we walked the trails around the viewpoint and spotted a few birds, including White-throated Swifts and a pair of Black-throated Gray Warblers by the parking area.

Next, we drove back down toward the entrance before turning onto South Pinery Canyon Road, which climbs up the west side of the Chiricahuas. A few in the group got quick looks at an American Goshawk that flew in front of one vehicle and then zoomed off. The climb up to higher elevations was bumpy in places, and when we arrived at Rustler Park, we were greeted by strong, gusty winds. We were able to spot a few birds up high but soon headed down the east side of the mountains to Cave Creek in search of calmer weather.



We arrived at Cave Creek Ranch, our home for the next three nights, with time to check into our cabins and enjoy the scenery and birding. Cave Creek Ranch is situated along the famous Cave Creek and has beautiful views of the cliffs of Cave Creek Canyon. Feeders and water attract birds, including as many as 12 species of hummingbirds. Soon after settling down outside the main ranch house, a Blue-throated Mountain-gem, nicknamed Blue-throated Mountain-jerk by the lodge staff because of its aggressive behavior, asserted control over one feeder close to the seating area. Several “Gould’s” Turkeys, the largest subspecies of Wild Turkey, strutted around, and other birds, including Inca Dove and Arizona Woodpecker, put on a nice show before dinner.

Tonight’s dinner, along with most other meals during our time in the Chiricahuas, was catered by Jackie. We’d visit Jackie and her husband at George Walker House in Paradise in a few days. Tonight, Naturalist Journeys owner Peg Abbott joined us for our meal before we retired after a long day.

Tue., May. 7 Cave Creek Ranch, Rustler Park, Barfoot Park

The hardcore birders in the group woke up early for birding around Cave Creek Ranch under cool temperatures and clear blue skies. We enjoyed many of the common birds found in the area, including Western, Ash-throated, and Brown-crested Flycatchers, and a flock of Band-tailed Pigeons. After a yummy breakfast, we headed out, joined by James Peterson, the talented guide at Cave Creek Ranch, and Naturalist Journeys friends and local birders Carol and Tamara. Our first stop was South Fork in Cave Creek Canyon. We heard an Elegant Trogon between the bridge and the parking area. James pointed out a Hammond’s Flycatcher, noting the short, notched tail. Several species were vocalizing, including Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Plumbeous and Warbling Vireos, and Grace’s and Black-throated Gray Warblers. After securing promises to keep the location secret, James took us to a shallow cave where we admired petroglyphs.

After about an hour, we loaded up and headed higher, making our first stop at East Turkey Creek. We spent about 45 minutes walking along the road. One of our first sightings was a pair of beautiful Painted Redstarts. Soon, Carol thought she heard a Buff-breasted Flycatcher, and eventually, we got decent looks at a pair. We also spotted a pair of Mexican Chickadees, a species only seen in the Chiricahuas in the United States. A bit further up the road, we stopped at a location where James sometimes sees Black-chinned Sparrows. Not long after arriving, we heard at least two, but they mostly stayed hidden, only giving us glimpses. Pushing higher, we arrived at Barfoot Park, where we had a picnic lunch before birding. Our main target was Olive Warbler, and we



eventually found one flitting high in the pines off the road. We also saw several other species, including Hairy Woodpecker, Pygmy Nuthatch, and Western Bluebird, all new for the trip.

From there, we retraced part of our route from yesterday, driving down Pinery Canyon to look for Mexican Spotted Owl. James knew a spot where this sensitive species has been seen regularly in recent years and soon found one sleeping high in a pine. We spent almost half an hour watching and photographing the beautiful owl from a respectful distance. Eyeing the clock and knowing we had a long, bumpy ride ahead of us, we loaded up and drove back up and over the mountains to Cave Creek Ranch. Some in the group took a much-needed rest while others enjoyed the feeders or walked the grounds before we loaded up for the short drive to Peg Abbott's house, where she, with help from Naturalist Journeys staffer Christina, served us a delicious dinner and gave us a short talk about the ecology and biodiversity of the Southeastern Arizona sky islands. Before heading to bed, we drove back to the South Fork to search for Whiskered Screech-Owl. We heard at least three but unfortunately didn't see any.

Wed., May. 8 Paradise, Stateline Road, Portal

The early-birders Sandy, Bob, and Mason walked the Cave Creek Ranch grounds before breakfast while the others slept in before our last full day around Portal. Joined by James, we departed Cave Creek Ranch early and headed to George Walker House in Paradise, where Jackie and her husband live. We enjoyed breakfast while watching the feeders. Blue-throated Mountain-gem, Rivoli's, Broad-tailed, and Broad-billed Hummingbirds zipped around. Soon, an Arizona Woodpecker arrived, and eventually, a Juniper Titmouse popped in. Just before we left, a Cooper's Hawk soared over the parking area.

When we departed George Walker House, our group was briefly separated. Mason's van retraced our route back toward Portal and paused at Paradise Cemetery to wait for Michael's van, which never appeared, causing some concern. It turned out that Michael took a different route, but we reunited back in Portal. Our plan for the morning was to bird along Stateline Road, which follows the border between Arizona and New Mexico. Unfortunately, conditions were windy, making birding difficult. We made one stop next to a dilapidated ranch where a friendly donkey came to the fence to receive pats on the head. We turned west off Stateline Road onto Sulphur Canyon Road and got brief looks at a Bendire's Thrasher. With winds picking up, we headed back toward Portal but picked up a few more birds on the way, including Greater Roadrunner, Black-throated Sparrow, and Chihuahuan Meadowlark.



Our last stop before lunch was Bob Rodrigues' yard, a home and popular birding spot on the edge of Portal. While there, we enjoyed the feeders, which were hopping with several species, including Verdin, Curve-billed Thrasher (including recently fledged young), Black-throated Sparrow, Hooded, Bullock's, and Scott's Orioles, Lucy's, Yellow-rumped, and Wilson's Warblers, and Pyrrhuloxia. We heard a Crissal Thrasher calling from a nearby wash but weren't able to lure the bird in.

After lunch back at the ranch, we made the short drive back into Portal and birded around the Post Office. A Western Screech-Owl often found by the Post Office wasn't there when we arrived, but a walk down the road to the "Jelly Bar" feeders revealed birds, including Thick-billed Kingbird, Hooded Oriole, and great looks at three Western Tanagers. As we were loading back into the vans at the Post Office, James called out that he found the Western Screech-Owl, perched low in the big Cottonwood.

After reloading into the vans, we decided to return to the South Fork in hopes of seeing an Elegant Trogon. Soon after we arrived, we heard the croaking call of the trogon well up the canyon. We walked a ways up the riverbed, hoping the trogon would come closer, but no luck. Mason hustled further up to see if it was close enough to walk and eventually got a quick look, but with the day getting long, we headed back to Cave Creek Ranch to relax and freshen up before dinner. Tonight, dinner was at the Sky Island Grill in Rodeo. Despite being just a few miles away, the drive involved a one-hour time change. On the way, some in the group caught glimpses of several Scaled Quail before they scurried into cover. On the drive back to Cave Creek, we stopped to enjoy a spectacular sunset over the mountains and spotted several Lesser Nighthawks as they zoomed over the desert.

Thur., May. 9 Wilcox, Patagonia, Tubac

We started with an early breakfast to get a head start on our drive west. With help from a map drawn on a napkin by James the prior night, we found a pair of Harris's Hawks tending a nest on the edge of San Simon before continuing to Lake Cochise. This famous birding destination is just south of Wilcox at the north end of the Sulphur Springs Valley. The shallow wastewater pond is one of the best places in southeast Arizona for ducks and shorebirds. We saw ducks including Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teal, Mexican Duck, and Ruddy Duck. Dozens of Wilson's and at least one Red-necked Phalarope spun around parts of the lake, and we saw several other shorebirds including Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Long-billed Dowitcher, Spotted and Least Sandpiper, and Willet. We got our best look of the trip at a Chihuahuan Meadowlark walking through the grass.



After loading up, we hopped onto I-10 to Benson and then zig-zagged southwest to Patagonia. On the way, some in the group caught glimpses of Pronghorn. We ate sandwiches from Gathering Grounds before making the short drive to the Paton Center for Hummingbirds. The Paton Center is the former home of Wally and Marion Paton, who welcomed birders into their yard shortly after moving to Patagonia in 1973. After Marion's death in 2009, donated funds made it possible for Tucson Audubon to acquire the property. It's one of the best places in America to see Violet-crowned Hummingbird but also a magnet for many other species. During our short visit, we saw Violet-crowned Hummingbird and two dozen other species before driving the last leg of our drive to Tubac on the west side of the Catalina Mountains. After checking into our lovely bungalows, we soon discovered the "magic tree" just across from the office. This out-of-range Mulberry tree was filled with fruit and birds every time we stopped for a look. This evening it held Cassin's and Western Kingbirds, Phainopepla, and Western Tanager. We pulled ourselves away for a short drive to an Italian restaurant in Tubac before heading to bed after a long day.

Fri., May. 10 Madera Canyon, Desert Meadows Park, Tubac

We birded the Tubac Golf Resort grounds before breakfast and added more while we ate. The magic tree was again filled with birds, this time with as many as 10 Western Tanagers. Amazingly, we added another 15 Western Tanagers nearby on the resort grounds. Another surprise was a Redhead in the pond outside the dining room. After loading up, we headed toward Madera Canyon, one of the most famous birding spots in Arizona. On the way toward the valley, we spotted a Greater Roadrunner. We headed straight to the Mt. Wrightson Picnic Area where we walked about a mile up the trail. On our way up, we spotted Western Wood-Pewee, Dusky-capped and Brown-crested Flycatchers, and possibly the first Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher of the season in the area. Other birds along the trail included Hutton's, Plumbeous, and Warbling Vireos, Bridled Titmouse, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Swainson's and Hermit Thrushes, Grace's Warbler, Red-faced Warbler (seen by a few in the group), Painted Redstart, and Hepatic and Western Tanagers. When we arrived back at the parking area, we lucked out with incredible views and photo opportunities of a male Elegant Trogon!

Next, we stopped at Madera Kubo, a small B&B just down the valley. We hoped to see an elusive Berylline Hummingbird that visits the feeders there but weren't lucky. We headed down and grabbed sandwiches for a picnic at Desert Meadows Park in Green Valley. This park was originally proposed in 2014 with a plan to establish a botanical garden over a 10-year period, but success in securing grants expedited the project, resulting in a lovely mix of walking trails, native plants, and great habitat for desert birds. Highlights included as many as 24 Gambel's Quail, including many recently fledged young, Verdin, Abert's Towhee, Hooded Oriole, and Lucy's



Warbler. Mason had made several prior visits to the park and successfully predicted the tree where a lovely male Costa's Hummingbird perched for the group.

With temperatures rising, some in the group decided to relax at the Tubac Golf Resort while the rest of us tried our luck at Santa Gertrudis Lane, just south of Tubac. We walked the short private lane down to the Santa Cruz River and found several birds, including Gray Hawk, Black Phoebe, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Lucy's Warbler despite the heat. After returning to the resort to freshen up, we headed to dinner at Elvira's, a favorite restaurant in Tubac. Those making their first visit to Elvira's were surprised by the rather over-the-top décor, and we all enjoyed a delicious meal.

Sat., May. 11 Montosa Canyon, Santa Gertrudis Lane, Madera Canyon

Until recently, seeing Five-striped Sparrow in the United States meant going to California Gulch, a remote canyon accessed by very rough roads that could take up to three hours to reach from Tubac. Thankfully, in recent years the sparrows can be found at Montosa Canyon, just 30 minutes from Tubac on mostly paved roads. Still, seeing the sparrow isn't guaranteed. We arrived early and joined other birders who were already looking. We started on the main road and soon spotted a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, a new bird for the trip. A Rock Wren popped out for views, and we heard a Canyon Wren higher up in the rocks. Next, we walked up a primitive road and joined a few other birders who spotted the sparrow. Our first looks were fleeting at best, but eventually, one perched up on bare branches and sang for us. Happy after seeing this beautiful desert sparrow, we returned to the resort for breakfast and another visit to the magic tree.

With cooler morning temperatures, we decided to make another visit to Santa Gertrudis Lane. The birding was fairly quiet, but we spotted a Mississippi Kite, a few Gray Hawks, Thick-billed Kingbird, and a Rufous-winged Sparrow that sang for us. From there, we found a nice sandwich shop in Tubac and headed back to Madera Canyon and slightly cooler temperatures. Again, we spotted Greater Roadrunner on the road below the canyon. After we reached the canyon, we split up. Some in the group enjoyed the feeders at Santa Rita Lodge while a few of us hiked back up the trails above the Mt. Wrightson Picnic Area. We didn't see anything new for the trip but enjoyed the beautiful oak woodlands before heading back to Tubac and our last dinner together. Our dinner coincided with a well-attended Quinceañera being celebrated at the resort, so dinner was a slow-motion affair, helped by outdoor dining with mild temperatures.



Sun., May. 12 Tucson Mountain Park, Departures

Sandy and Bob got up for early birding before the rest of the group woke up and met for breakfast. With a deadline to get to the airport in Tucson by 11:00 am, we decided to squeeze in a couple of short stops at Tucson Mountain Park, just west of Tucson. This 20,000-acre park is one of the largest natural resource areas owned by a local government in the United States. The park sits near the edge of the Sonoran Desert, the only place in the world where Saguaro cactus grow. The saguaros and other desert flora, including Creosote Bush, provide great habitat for a few birds we didn't see elsewhere on the trip. We spent about 20 minutes at the Brown Mountain Trail and soon found two of those – Gilded Flicker and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher – along with Costa's Hummingbird and a somewhat surprising Purple Martin. We made another quick stop at the Gates Pass Viewpoint to enjoy the spectacular views and take photos before we headed to the airport and said our goodbyes.

Photo Credits: Group (Mason Flint - MF), Elegant Trogon (MF), Costa's Hummingbird (MF), Broad-tailed Hummingbird (MF), Western Tanager (MF), Vermilion Flycatcher (Sandy Sipe - SS), Cave Creek Ranch Scenic (SS) Gambel's Quail (MF), Broad-billed Hummingbird (MF), Zone-tailed Hawk (SS), Summer Tanager (Bob Snipe - BS), Rivoli's Hummingbird (SS), Lazuli Bunting (SS), Scott's Oriole (BS), Ladder-backed Woodpecker (SS), Elegant Trogon (MF), Yellow-breasted Chat (MF), Lark Sparrow (MF), Chiricahua National Monument Scenic (MF), Townsend's Warbler (MF), Painted Redstart (MF), Mexican Spotted Owl (MF), Arizona Woodpecker (MF), James Petersen with Donkey (MF), Western Screech-Owl (MF), Wilson's Phalarope (MF), American Avocet (BS), Ladder-backed Woodpecker (BS), Violet-crowned Hummingbird (SS), Elegant Trogon (BS), Tropical Kingbird (BS), Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet (BS), Gray Hawk (SS), Brown Creeper (SS), Phainopepla (BS), Gilded Flicker (MF), Group (MF)