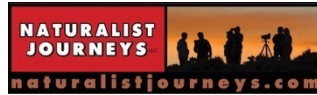


# Arizona: Sunshine and Saguaros

## November 11-17, 2024 | Trip Report

### by Sharon Goldwasser



**NJ Guides Sharon Goldwasser and Vernie Aikens  
with tour participants Matt, Carol, Dennis, Larry and Frank**



### **Mon., Nov. 11: Arrive in Tucson | Avra Valley | Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum**

Our group got a head start on our scheduled itinerary time, so we were able to add in two extra stops in the Avra Valley, where we enjoyed a nice selection of dabbling ducks, a few Killdeer, lots of Least Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitchers, and a quick view of a snipe. Some of the desert birds that we enjoyed were Cactus Wren and two Rufous-winged Sparrows. A highlight for everyone was viewing several Crested Caracaras - one seen from the ponds and later a group of three along San Joaquin Road. At the edge of their range, caracaras are seen a bit sporadically, so we were happy to get great looks at them. We made a brief stop for Lark Buntings and sparrows along Mile-Wide Road, then had a successful quest for Bendire's Thrasher in the sparse desert habitat along Reservation Road. We got great looks at a pair of the thrashers, first in a mesquite and then showing off on the road, tails held high.

After enjoying a quick lunch at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, the group had a chance to enjoy some of the extensive interpretive displays. We visited the pollinator garden and observed almost a dozen species of



butterflies. We wandered through the Hummingbird exhibit where Costa's, Rufous and Broad-billed Hummingbirds had staked out territories. Inside the walk-through aviary we got close up views of quite a few species including Inca Doves, quail, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and at least 10 Hooded Orioles. Surprisingly, there was a very late female Bullock's Oriole outside of the enclosure, trying to interact with the Hooded Orioles inside. The riparian corridor at the museum had two extra surprise birds not usually found in SE Arizona, a Gray Catbird and a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. The sapsucker was a bit coy, but the catbird offered great views out in the open for everyone to enjoy.

We finished the day with dinner at Guadalajara Grill where everyone enjoyed a meal of delicious Mexican food, accompanied by "table-side" salsa and guacamole.

## **Tues., Nov. 12: Catalina State Park | Tohono Chul Park | El Rio Preserve | Burrowing Owl Colony in Marana**

We started our day at Catalina State Park with delightful weather. We were treated to a show by a flock of Western Bluebirds snacking in a hackberry tree next to the parking lot. As we wandered up the desert slopes, we appreciated a majestic Saguaro, one of the largest I've ever seen, overlooking the desert floor. We enjoyed getting the "towhee trifecta" with Canyon, Abert's and Green-tailed Towhees. We got great views of sharp-looking Black-throated Sparrows as they posed, a busy pair of Black-tailed Gnatcatchers and almost side-by-side views of a Ruby-crowned Kinglet and its near look-alike, Hutton's Vireo.

After lunching at the Tohono Chul cafe, we wandered the grounds of the gardens, where Costa's Hummingbirds were plentiful, including several adult males, flashing their purple gorgets. The group added a Monarch to our tally of butterfly species. Then we continued on to El Rio Preserve for great views of many species of ducks, Belted Kingfishers and three species of herons.

Time permitted us to include a stop at the Burrowing Owl colony in Marana. We were treated to several enormous flocks of blackbirds. Over 5000 blackbirds streamed in from outlying agricultural land and clustered in a milo field. Although a majority sported bright yellow heads white in the wings, there were Starlings, Brown-headed Cowbirds and Red-winged Blackbirds mixed in among them. We counted over 12 Burrowing owls at the artificial burrows set up for them in the protected field.



## Wed., Nov 13: Woodland Road | Agua Caliente Park | Catalina Highway | Summerhaven

We changed our scheduled itinerary from Sweetwater Wetlands and Saguaro National Park due to an unforeseen closure at the wetlands. Instead, we re-routed our day to visit a couple of local hotspots in east Tucson before ascending the Catalina Highway to the forested top of Mount Lemmon.

We started our morning along Woodland Road, which runs through a section of shady irrigated pastures and a grove of pecan trees that attract numerous woodpeckers, ravens, blackbirds and raptors. We got great looks at Red-shafted Flickers, Brewer's Blackbirds, Western Meadowlarks, a close-up view of a Sharp-shinned Hawk and an unexpected lowland sighting of a White-breasted Nuthatch.

After enjoying breakfast at Le Buzz Cafe, we visited Agua Caliente Park. The park includes desert vegetation, several ponds fed by a natural spring, a grove of palm trees, and a grassy lawn. Western Bluebirds, Yellow-rumped Warblers and Gila Woodpeckers were feeding on the dates in the palms and beneath them on the grass, and there were more typical desert birds in the mesquites. A wintering Rock Wren was hanging out along the little stream that runs from the spring down to the upper pond. There was no shortage of introduced Red-eared Sliders (turtles) in the pond! A Curve-billed Thrasher foraging by the trail gave us an outstanding opportunity to take a close look at its feeding behavior as it used its long bill to turn over leaf litter and soil, looking for insects.

And then we began heading up the Catalina Highway, passing through almost every one of Merriam's life zones, from the deserts of the lower Sonoran to the firs of the Canadian zone. Our first stop was the site of a former Japanese internment camp, the Gordon Hirabayashi campground and entry point to the Arizona trail. Oaks with a grassy understory hosted a few flocks of Dark-eyed Juncos, Chipping Sparrows and a Rufous-crowned Sparrow. Several Woodhouse's Scrub Jays were keeping an eye on us as they perched on the tops of oaks. Our next stop was in the chaparral, in search of Black-chinned Sparrows, which we unfortunately couldn't find.

After taking in the view at Windy Point at nearly 7000 feet, we continued up even higher into the forests along Mount Bigelow Road. A busy flock entertained us - Brown Creeper, Pygmy and Red-breasted Nuthatches and Mountain Chickadees. After a late lunch in Summerhaven, we visited feeders with a late Anna's Hummingbird, numerous Pine Siskins and Yellow-eyed Juncos. Two quick stops later and we headed back down the mountain for our dinner of uniquely crafted pizzas at Falora Pizza.



## **Thurs., Nov 14: San Xavier del Bac | McGee Ranch Cemetery | Madera Canyon**

After exploring beautiful and historic Mission San Xavier south of Tucson, the group added in an extra stop at the McGee Ranch Cemetery. Located west of Green Valley in the Santa Rita Mountains, the cemetery is at the upper edge of desert habitat and lower limits of oak woodland. We were able to find recently reported Williamson's and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers in the cemetery, and a surprise Black-chinned Sparrow on the short walk from the van to cemetery.

After grabbing a picnic lunch, we headed up into Madera Canyon's sheltered oak and juniper woodland. The Sycamores lining the creek bed were laden with yellow leaves that were stunning against the background of the sky. We found a group of Bridled Titmice accompanied by a feeding flock with a Brown Creeper, Townsend's Warbler and Painted Redstart flashing its tail as it foraged on branches. We continued on to the feeders at the Santa Rita Lodge, where our patience was rewarded by views of an Arizona Woodpecker, and four species of hummingbirds including Rivoli's Hummingbird, and the big prize- a brilliant Berylline Hummingbird. Everyone got outstanding looks at the jewel-like Berylline, both at a feeder and perched in the shelter of a pyracantha bush.

Dinner was at Elvira's, a unique Tubac dining establishment with creative Mexican dishes including seafood and several varieties of mole - a sauce featuring chocolate, chiles, nuts and spices.

## **Fri., Nov. 15: De Anza Trail Tubac | Tumacacori Mission | Amado WTP | Montosa Canyon**

We started our morning along at Ron Morriss Park, adjacent to the Santa Cruz River in Tubac. This park hosts a spring Hawk Watch where as many as 60 Common Black Hawks can pass by in a single day, along with just about every other raptor that occurs in Arizona, but today we just saw the resident Red-tailed Hawk on his sentinel post. We found two of our most sought-after specialties of the trip along the De Anza trail through the riparian habitat: a Green Kingfisher and a Rufous-backed Robin, along with House & Bewick's Wrens, a variety of woodpeckers and the ubiquitous Ruby-crowned Kinglets.

We continued on to the historic Tumacacori Mission. The group finally got a long look at a Ladder-backed Woodpecker working in a mesquite tree. In the courtyard by the visitor center, a flock of Lawrence's Goldfinches perched in the trees above the courtyard, giving their delightful tinkling call notes. Finally, the flock got over its shyness to descend to the fountain to drink, where we had close views.



After lunch we made a brief stop to survey the Amado wastewater treatment plant, where several Black-bellied Whistling Ducks perched on a floating platform, and a single White-throated Swift zig-zagged above us.

Our destination was a trek to Montosa Canyon in the Santa Rita Mountains. Avian activity was a bit lower here due to the breeze and afternoon lull, but we got outstanding looks at a Canyon Wren here and abroad, scenic views looking west and east from the road leading toward the Mt. Hopkins Observatory.

An optional walk around the grounds of the Tubac Golf Resort on our return added an unexpected Ring-billed Gull flying over, a Cassin's Kingbird, and a very late Lesser Nighthawk near twilight.

Dinner at Wisdom's Cafe offered another local take on Mexican dishes.

### **Sat., Nov. 16: Patagonia Lake | Paton Center for the Hummingbirds**

We had a chillier start to the morning, but it warmed up nicely by the time we reached Patagonia Lake. The sight of five Western Cattle Egrets perched in a pine tree by the visitor center took us by surprise, as the species hadn't been reported previously at that location. There were rafts of Eared Grebes, a Common Loon, numerous ducks and coots, and both Double-crested and Neotropic Cormorants. The feeders along the birding trail were very busy with sparrows and finches, and the upper end of the lake had a few Buffleheads and Lesser Scaup. The riparian part of the trail was a bit quieter than usual but it's always a beautiful walk among the willow trees and on the path at the edge of the marsh.

Our afternoon was spent mainly at the Paton Center, where we leisurely watched a diverse group of birds dining at the feeders. The Violet-crowned Hummingbirds were the stars of the show here, and at one point we had three in a single tree! One was repeatedly calling from an exposed perch. We hoped to see a recently reported Fox Sparrow, very uncommon in SE Arizona. Eventually our patience was rewarded as we were able to spot the skulks sparrow in a brush pile, among a horde of White-crowned Sparrows and a Curve-billed Thrasher that seemed to be masquerading as a one of them.

Our final dinner was at The Stables restaurant on the grounds of the Tubac Golf Resort and the meal received high marks from all.



## Sun., Nov. 17: Sweetwater Wetlands

Having missed out on our previously scheduled day to visit Sweetwater Wetlands, we opted to go there for our final morning of birding.

We spent about 2 and a half hours at the Wetlands and the adjacent Agua Nueva Park, tallying almost 60 species for the morning. Some of the highlights were getting looks at 8 species of warblers - a surprisingly high number for mid-November! We got good views of a couple of rare visitors to SE Arizona - Chestnut Sided Warbler and Tennessee Warbler - as they actively fed in a cottonwood, and some lingering migrants - Black-throated Gray, and Townsend's, Yellow and Wilson's Warblers. Two Sora Rails offered us a chance to see them ambling out in the open, quite unconcerned about being visible. We added a few more species to the total for the week, including a cooperative Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in a brush pile, a Snowy Egret, and several Rough-winged Swallows.

Over our week together, we explored habitats ranging from the saguaro and palo verde community of the Sonoran Desert to pine-fir forests above 8000 feet above sea level and wandered through oak woodlands and cottonwood-willow riparian corridors. We took our leave around midday, after finding congeniality and mutual appreciation in discovering so much of the biological diversity that southern Arizona has to offer.

*Photos: Vermilion Flycatcher (VA), Berylline Hummingbird (Sharon Goldwasser - SG), Wilson's Warbler (SG), Gila Woodpecker (VA), Gray Catbird (VA), Gambel's Quail (VA), Black-throated Sparrow (VA), Saguaro Cactus (SG), Western Diamondback Rattlesnake (SG), Costa's Hummingbird (VA), Yellow-headed Blackbirds (SG), Western Bluebird (VA), Red-breasted Nuthatch (VA), Williamson's Sapsucker (VA), Bridled Titmouse (VA), White-nosed Coati (SG), Lawrence's Goldfinch (VA), Black Vulture (VA), Inca Dove (VA), Violet-crowned Hummingbird (SG), Wilson's Snipe (VA), Townsend's Warbler (SG), Ring-necked Duck (SG), Chestnut-sided Warbler (SG)*