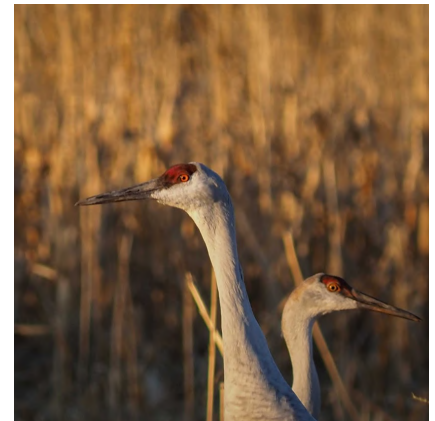


New Mexico Nature and Culture | Dec. 5-12, 2024 | Trip Report | by Dave Mehlman



With guides **Dave Mehlman** and **Bryan Calk**; and participants **April, Barb, Jill, Kate, Lloyd, Ralph, Regina, and Tyler.**



Thur., Dec. 5 Arrivals in Albuquerque | Rio Grande Nature Center

Our full group met in the early afternoon in the lobby of the Hotel Albuquerque and, after some quick introductions, we headed out for our first birding destination of the tour: the Rio Grande Nature Center a short drive away. We entered the nature center grounds on a sunny, fairly typical New Mexico early winter afternoon, and began to explore the area. A pond by the parking lot had several American Coots and a few Pied-billed Grebes in it while the fields nearby had quite a few Sandhill Cranes standing around, the first of many we were to see during the tour. We spent some time closely watching the feeders on the grounds and began to learn the diversity of Dark-eyed Junco races present here in winter, including Oregon, Pink-sided, and a Cassiar all present. Also around were many Red-winged Blackbirds and White-crowned Sparrows, along with Spotted Towhees and a



White-throated Sparrow. We looked at the pond by the Nature Center building itself (an architecturally important building designed by Antoine Predock) and found a bunch more duck species, including Wood Duck, American Wigeon, Gadwall, Bufflehead, and Ring-necked Duck. Our alert group also spotted an immature Cooper's Hawk sitting in a cottonwood, one of the most common raptors in the area, much to the dismay of all other local birds!

We then walked across the clear ditch and levee and strolled out to the Rio Grande through the forested habitat known locally as "the bosque." Although quiet in the bosque and on the river, we found a Hermit Thrush and several American Robins and some Neotropical Cormorants flew overhead. With Dave's help, we also spotted a few porcupines roosting high in the cottonwoods, apparently asleep as they always seem to be during daylight. We then returned to our vehicles and went back to the hotel for a quick rest. We met again in the lobby for more formal introductions and to do our first species checklist, then walked across the street for a great welcome dinner at the D.H. Lescombes Winery & Bistro. After dinner, we all turned in in great anticipation of the following day.

Fri., Dec. 6 Sandia Mountains | Bernardo WMA | Socorro

We were up in time to open the Garduño's at the Hotel Albuquerque for breakfast, after which we loaded all our gear into the vehicles and hit the road to start the tour! Our first destination for the morning was the Sandia Crest, located at over 10,000 feet right on top of the Sandia Mountains, which form the east flank of Albuquerque. The drive up was uneventful and the roads were in great shape, as we passed steadily through various life zones, eventually topping out in the mixed-conifer zone at the top. The weather was almost perfect, with cold temps and almost no wind, so we got out and began to study the bird feeder and the surrounding area. At first, little was present but a bunch of juncos (mostly of the Gray-headed form, but a few Pink-sideds as well). After a bit longer, Mountain Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Steller's Jay, and a Hairy Woodpecker appeared for short visits. While we were there, we walked up to the very top to admire the incredible view to the west, with essentially half of New Mexico laid out at our feet. Returning to our vehicles, we waited longer and, as if by magic, a large flock of rosy-finches appeared in the sky, flying around and around. When they finally landed in the trees and on the feeder, we got a chance to study them closer and saw about 60 Black and 20 Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches in the mix (with quite a few of the Hepburn's form of the latter present). Periodically leaving to fly



around and returning, we had great views and photo opportunities and even could see some of the individuals banded by the researchers of the Rosy-Finch Project.

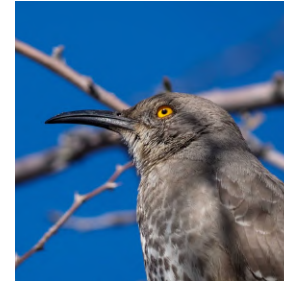
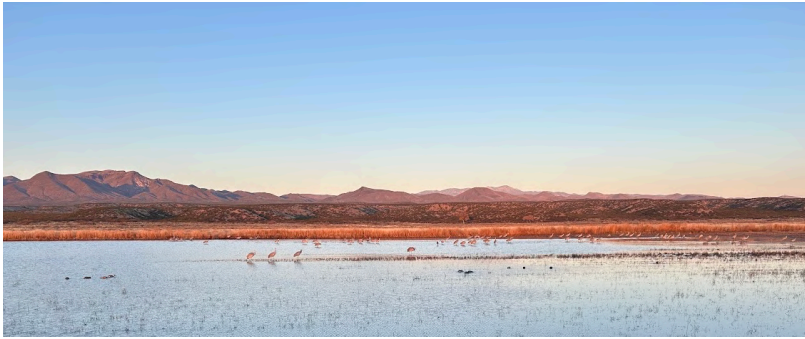
After finishing our stay at the Crest, we started back down the mountain, stopping first at the 10K Trailhead. Unfortunately, it was pretty quiet at this spot except for another Hairy Woodpecker and some Common Ravens. We then continued further down the mountain to the Sulphur Canyon picnic area in the Ponderosa Pine life zone, which had more activity. As we walked through the area, ace “bird-whisperer” Bryan worked his magic and we had some great mixed flocks including both Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets, Dark-eyed Juncos of pretty much every form, Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatch, Northern Flicker (of the Red-shafted form), and American Robin. A final walk around the parking area allowed us to have great looks at both Abert’s and Rock Squirrel and we heard a Spotted Towhee. At this point, the morning was pretty much over and we headed to the nearby Lantern Ridge Farm Market for lunch.

After lunch, we hit the road again, driving west and then south toward Socorro, making a stop at the Bernardo Wildlife Area along the way. This Wildlife Area has been an increasingly excellent birding area in recent years and this afternoon was no exception. Our first stop near the lookout tower allowed us to have the full Rio Grande Crane experience: thousands of Sandhill Cranes in the fields in front of us keeping up a constant cacophony. As we enjoyed this avian symphony, Dave and Bryan pointed out various other species present, including a Ferruginous Hawk perched in a far-away cottonwood, Loggerhead Shrike, Western Meadowlarks, and a few gliding Northern Harriers. We then drove around the wildlife drive and parked near another large flock of Sandhill Cranes and Snow Geese. As we watched, Dave and Bryan found a few Ross’s Geese mixed in with the large flock, but they were hard for others to find as they kept ducking their heads to feed! Anyway, they were convinced....

As the sun started setting, we reluctantly climbed back on board to leave, but, just as we did so, the geese all got up in the air with a great cry and wing noise and flew right over our heads—the classic snow goose experience! With that picture in our mind, we drove the short distance further to the Holiday Inn Express in Socorro and checked in. We found, unexpectedly, that our planned dinner spot was closed, so we hurriedly put together plan B and had an enjoyable dinner with live music at the Box Canyon Brewing Company on the Socorro Plaza and then called it a night.

Sat., Dec. 7 Bosque del Apache NWR

Today was our day devoted to exploring New Mexico’s best-known birding and wildlife destination: the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. To start the day, a hardy subset of our group got up early, had some coffee,



and then drove down to the refuge to catch sunrise with the cranes. Arriving at the refuge, we pulled into the Wetlands Roost parking area and joined the crowd already present (most of them armed with huge telephoto lenses). We stood and watched as the slowly rising sun illuminated the large flock of Sandhill Cranes standing in the water, mesmerized by their reflections and the play of light on land, bird, and water. Along with the cranes, large numbers of Northern Pintails and Mallards were present, along with a few Northern Shovelers, Gadwall, and Buffleheads. We were also blessed by a fly-over Golden Eagle (one of two we would find on the tour) and a rapidly disappearing American Pipit. We also noticed very large flocks of Snow and/or Ross's Geese flying north in the far distance, presumably heading out for the day.

As the cranes slowly flew off for the day, we returned to our van and went back to Socorro for breakfast and to pick up the others in the group who had chosen to skip being frozen for an hour. Dave and Bryan also went off to get our picnic lunches from "Desert Badger" and we soon assembled the crew and headed back to the refuge for the rest of the day. Our first stop was the Visitor Center, where we could use the bathrooms and check out the feeders. Though less activity was present at the feeders than normal, we had great views of Gambel's Quail, Pyrrhuloxia, Red-winged Blackbird, Curve-billed Thrasher, Canyon Towhee, and a few Pine Siskins. Finishing our visit at the Visitor Center, we then headed out to the wildlife drive, first driving down the South Loop as far as the boardwalk, making many stops along the way. As expected, the ponds were full of birds, with hundreds of Northern Shovelers and Northern Pintails scattered about. As we looked closely at various spots, we also turned up American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, Ruddy Duck, Bufflehead, and plenty of American Coots. Northern Harriers, American Kestrels, and Common Ravens also flew by and careful work with the scopes turned up a Pied-billed Grebe.

We walked out on the boardwalk and found some of the better birds of the day, including a very late foraging American Avocet and a small flock of American White Pelicans, along with a Great Blue Heron and a few Hooded Mergansers. The group also had incredible views of a very cooperative Marsh Wren as it foraged at the base of some cattails right near the boardwalk! The weather had turned very pleasant, with little to no breeze and clear skies, so it was with some regret that we abandoned the boardwalk and returned to the visitor center for a picnic lunch at the tables there, followed by a bit more feeder watching. The sandwiches and company were great, though we could not find the Harris's Sparrow that had been reported earlier at the feeders.



After lunch, we headed back out to the refuge, this time to do the entire north loop, including the extension which is open in the winter. We alternated driving and stopping, constantly looking for new and interesting things. One pond yielded some Ring-necked Ducks and Redheads among all the shovelers and pintails. We spotted a pair of adult Bald Eagles soaring high in the bright blue sky and, at one point, a pair of Mexican Ducks in a ditch. We stopped at a flooded field chock full of pintails and mallards and were able to find both Lincoln's and Song Sparrow in the adjacent weedy vegetation, along with a few Brewer's Blackbirds mixed in with the numerous Red-winged Blackbirds. As we continued, Dave spotted a bird perched in a tree which proved to be the much sought-after White-tailed Kite! The scopes and cameras came out as we looked over this lovely bird, apparently an immature bird hatched earlier in the year. While watching, a Prairie Falcon flew over rapidly, providing our only sighting of this species for the tour. At a final stop late in the afternoon near a flooded field, we watched and admired a growing assemblage of cranes and geese as birds flew in for the evening. Bryan and Dave were able to pick out a few Ross's Geese among the Snow Geese, but (as before) it was hard for others to see them due to their constant head bobbing to feed. As the sun slowly set, we arrived at the Flight Deck to admire the end of the day, surrounded by crane and goose calls and the beauty of the surrounding landscape.

As twilight fell, we loaded back into our vehicles for the drive back to Socorro. We had a brief rest, then went to the nearby Jackson Ranch Steakhouse for a satisfying dinner, then turned in after a long, but very rewarding day.

Sun., Dec. 8 Salinas Pueblo Missions, Abó | Turquoise Trail | Santa Fe

Today was a combination travel and birding day. We began with breakfast at the Holiday Inn Express in Socorro and then loaded all our gear into the vehicles. We headed north and then east to cross the Rio Grande on the US 60 bridge and then began climbing up the foothill grasslands to Abó Pass between the Manzano and Los Pinos Mountains. Spotting a Ferruginous Hawk perched on a pole, we turned around for a closer look. While watching this beautiful raptor, a Chihuahuan Raven flew by (the characteristic raven of the desert grasslands) and we spotted a flock of Horned Larks foraging on the ground. We then proceeded to make a brief stop at the Abó Ruins unit of the Salinas Pueblo Missions National Monument, located just north of the highway. This site had a large, occupied pueblo at the time of the Spanish entrada into New Mexico in the late 16th century and a large church was built there in the early 17th century. However, the site was completely abandoned by both the pueblo people and the Spanish by 1678 and the area was left to decay. We wandered among the walls of the old church and the low mounds of the pueblo, pondering the many changes that had swept over this landscape in the past centuries.



We then continued a bit east and north up the Estancia Valley, a famed place for wintering raptors in eastern New Mexico. A bit of a wind had kicked up, so not many were to be found, but we did encounter several Ferruginous and Red-tailed Hawks, American Kestrel, and a bunch of ravens. Arriving in the old mining town of Madrid, we enjoyed a great lunch at the Mine Shaft Tavern (plenty of local color in there!) and then continued our drive up the Turquoise Trail to Santa Fe, arriving at our final hotel of the tour, the Hotel Santa Fe, in mid-afternoon. After a quick break to unload our gear into our rooms, most of the group reassembled for an afternoon outing to the Santa Fe Canyon Preserve in the foothills. This lovely spot (and well-known Santa Fe birding area) produced some nice birds for us, including excellent views of Townsend's Solitaires, Western Bluebird, Mountain Chickadee, Pygmy Nuthatch, and a Ladder-backed Woodpecker. As the sun was setting, we returned to the hotel for a short break, then took the Hotel Santa Fe's shuttle to the historic La Fonda for a fine dinner at La Plazuela in the hotel's atrium. We then returned to the hotel for a well-earned night's rest.

Mon., Dec. 9 Poshouinge | Abiquiu | Ghost Ranch

After feasting on the very enjoyable continental breakfast upstairs at the Hotel Santa Fe, we gathered our gear and loaded up in the vehicles for a day to explore the Chama River valley as far as Abiquiu and Ghost Ranch. Our first stop (after visiting Bode's, of course!) was the Poshouinge Ruins, perched on a bluff overlooking the river. This ancestral pueblo ruin is estimated to have had 700 buildings and was built by ancestors of the modern-day residents of Santa Clara and Ohkay Owingeh Pueblos and abandoned by 1500. We walked up the trail to the pueblo site, admiring the view and the clear morning air. Most in the group continued up the trail all the way to the top of the hill overlooking the site to get the full overview. Birds were few, though we spotted a flock of Sandhill Cranes flying downriver and a few Townsend's Solitaires and Ruby-crowned Kinglets flew by. After finishing here, we went to nearby Abiquiu Lake to see if any birds were out on the water. Unfortunately, the lake itself had absolutely no birds except for a fly-by Bald Eagle; however, thanks to Bryan's diligent efforts, we found a few things in a side canyon that was sheltered from the wind out on the lake. Here, we had an incredibly close view of a Rock Wren (occasionally hopping around at our feet!), a group of Canyon Towhees, and a mixed flock of juncos and sparrows.

At this point, the morning was over so we went to the Abiquiu Inn for a tasty lunch in their dining room. Some took the opportunity during or after lunch to admire the spectacular photos on the wall and browse the gift shop. We then got back in our vehicles and drove up to the famous Ghost Ranch, which Georgia O'Keeffe made famous through her many paintings done in the area. We arrived at the Ranch visitor center, used the facilities, and then met our guide Julia for a Georgia O'Keeffe Landscape Tour. We spent about an hour with Julia in one of the



ranch's buses as she drove us to various spots on the ranch which were known to have been visited and painted by O'Keeffe, including her house. For some of the spots, Julia had a copy of the original artwork and a photograph of the scene that we could compare while looking directly at the same spot—a marvelous overview of what inspired Miss O'Keeffe to spend her life in this amazing landscape. After the tour, we returned to the visitor center for a quick browse of the gift shop, then drove back to Santa Fe. We met later in the day to do our daily checklist and discuss plans for the following day and then walked across the courtyard to have dinner at Amaya in the Hotel Santa Fe.

Tues., Dec. 10 Taos Gorge Bridge | Millicent Rogers Museum | Taos Pueblo

Overnight, a cold front moved through northern New Mexico, dropping temperatures and leaving a light dusting of snow on the ground in Santa Fe. However, this was not enough to deter our hardy crew, so we enjoyed another fine breakfast in the top floor dining room and then bundled up and got into our warmed-up vehicles for a day in the Taos area. Driving north along the Rio Grande, we entered the incredible Rio Grande Gorge south of Taos for the drive right next to the river. A quick stop at the Stateline River Access to clean our windshields did not lead to any birds—the valley bottom was still in shade. Much to our delight, however, it had not snowed this far north, so we continued our way north through Taos itself to our first destination: the Rio Grande Gorge bridge spanning the canyon just west of Taos. We got out and admired the view under clear skies but very cold conditions. The best find was a nice buck Bighorn Sheep spotted by Bryan to the north of the highway; many of us took photos with cameras or the scope. The only other birds to be found in the chilly temps were a Rock Wren, totally in its habitat in the rocky canyon, Common Ravens, and a junco or two.

We finished here and, in need of warmer temperatures, went to the Millicent Rogers Museum in town for a tour. Our docent guide Martha was excellent, full of enthusiasm and knowledge of Millicent Rogers herself and the extensive holdings of this fascinating museum. Of particular interest to many of us here was the extensive overview of modern pueblo pottery, including an entire room devoted to the well-known black-on-black pots made by Maria Martinez of San Ildefonso and her family. Especially intriguing to the technical geeks in the tour was the description of the process whereby these pots are formed and then fired, a process which turns a red pot black! Upon completion of the tour, we browsed the gift shop, then drove into town, parked the vehicles, and had a nice lunch at Bent Street Grill very near the Taos Plaza. After lunch and a brief stroll by all the shops, we headed to nearby Taos Pueblo to look at one of the oldest, if not the oldest, inhabited places in North America.



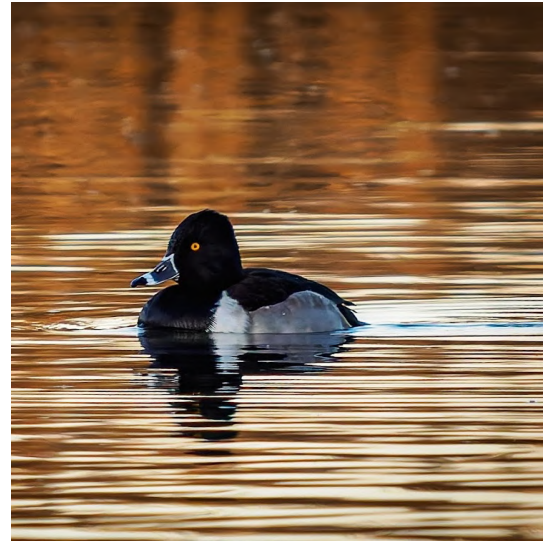
Unfortunately, though the sun was out, temperatures had not budged a whole lot so the group took a short walk around the main plaza of the pueblo, admiring the ancient architecture and all the kivas out front. The smell of pinyon wood fires was in the air to add to the interesting atmosphere.

After finishing our walk, we met at the vehicles and then loaded up for the drive back to Santa Fe. We had a bit of down time after getting back to the hotel, then met for our checklist and then took the Hotel Santa Fe shuttle to the nearby Paloma Restaurant. Unfortunately for us, this was our farewell dinner with Kate and Tyler, who had to leave the tour one day early due to other commitments. After enjoying a very nice, Mexican-themed meal there, we returned to the hotel, tired but happy after a great day.

Wed., Dec. 11 Bandelier NM | Los Alamos | Santa Fe

After enjoying another lovely buffet breakfast on the 3rd floor, we loaded into our vehicles and set off to explore the Jemez Mountains and Los Alamos. Our first destination was the lovely and interesting Bandelier National Monument. At least 3,000 archeological sites are known in the entire monument, but the main attractions are the remnant cliff dwellings and pueblos in Frijoles Canyon. It is thought that peak occupation by many hundreds of people occurred in the canyon from the 1200’s to mid-1500’s, at which point the area was abandoned as inhabitants moved to the modern-day pueblo locations closer to the Rio Grande. After checking in at the visitor center, we slowly walked the canyon trail, through the Tyuonui pueblo ruin to the fascinating cavate cliff dwellings near Talus and Long Houses. Along the way, we enjoyed the sun and quite a few birds, including Pygmy Nuthatch, numerous juncos, Townsend’s Solitaire, Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets, a nicely posing Canyon Wren, Lincoln’s Sparrow, and Hairy Woodpecker.

Finishing our walk, we loaded back up in our vans and drove to the nearby town of White Rock for a lovely lunch at the Pig + Fig Café. After lunch, we went to the Los Alamos Nature Center in town to see if any interesting critters were around. Indeed there were, as we spotted a few Acorn Woodpeckers flying about the dead trees that were around, a small flock of Red Crossbills landing in the same trees briefly, and the usual complement of juncos, nuthatches, Mountain Chickadee, and a Red-naped Sapsucker. The feeders at the nature center also attracted a large number of apparently ravenous Colorado Chipmunks and a pair of apparently amorous Abert’s Squirrels! After adding to our species list here, we returned to Santa Fe, had a bit of an afternoon break, then met again for our checklist on the 3rd floor before departing to dinner with the hotel shuttle at the Coyote Café.



Thur., Dec. 12 Departures from Albuquerque

We began with our final excellent buffet breakfast on the 3rd floor, then met in the lobby with all our gear to begin the trip back. Bryan took Jill and Lloyd to get a rental car so they could explore New Mexico further. Dave took April, Barb, Ralph, and Regina directly to the Albuquerque Sunport and dropped them off for their trips home at various times during the day. And that was end of a fabulous New Mexico Nature and Culture tour!

Photos: Ghost Ranch Scenic (Lloyd Delaney - LD), Snow Goose (LD), Group (Bryan Calk - BC), Sandhill Cranes (April Rohlich - AR), Say's Phoebe (LD), Cooper's Hawk (LD), Wood Ducks (AR), Black Rosy-Finch (AR), Ferruginous Hawk (David Mehlman - DM), Sandhill Cranes (LD), Bosque del Apache scenic (DM), Ducks at Bosque del Apache NWR (DM), Curve-billed Thrasher (AR), Group (DM), White-tailed Kite (LD), Flock (AR), Northern Pintail (AR), Abó Scenic (AR), Loggerhead Shrike (LD), Group (BC), Townsend's Solitaire (LD), Ghost Ranch Scenic (AR), Canyon Towhee (LD), Rio Grande Gorge Bridge (BC), Rock Wren (AR), Bighorn Sheep (DM), Taos Pueblo (DM), Rocks with lichen (BC), Golden-crowned Kinglet (AR), Lincoln's Sparrow (LD), Dark-eyed (Gray-headed) Junco (AR), Acorn Woodpecker (AR), Ghost Ranch Scenic (LD), Ferruginous Hawk (LD), Mirrored Tree (LD), Ring-necked Duck (LD)