SOUTHEASTERN ARIZONA

July 15-26, 2019

Our four person tour to Southeastern Arizona started off on day one with an afternoon excursion to WOW Arizona where one of the first birds we ticked was a Peregrine Falcon that zoomed by rather close as we stepped from the van. Later we enjoyed Costa’s Hummingbirds a few feet away as Abert’s Towhees scratched at seed under the feeders. The Hooded Orioles coming to drink from the hummingbird feeders was a special treat as was the singing and posturing Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet. While we dined on our finely prepared Mexican dinner we had Costa’s, Black-chinned, Anna’s, and Broad-billed Hummingbirds dining on nearby feeders, Gila and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers working over the suet and trees while Cactus Wrens, Phainopeplas, and numerous Lucy’s Warblers made themselves visible. Harris’s and Cooper’s Hawk were present but not sending the passerines to cover for long.

Our first full day of birding found us heading toward Mt. Lemmon just northeast of Tucson, however, before starting our ascent we stopped at a desert location that produced more Gila Woodpeckers, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Verdin, Curve-billed Thrasher, Ash-throated Flycatcher, and the first of numerous Gambel’s Quail. We would eventually see more Gambel’s Quail than on any previous trip and what was so interesting was the numerous family groups with young the size of golf balls all the way up to almost adult size young. As temperatures began to rise we worked our way up to Incinerator Ridge were we had our first looks at Black-throated Gray, Grace’s, Yellow-rumped and Red-faced Warblers, Plumbeous Vireo, nesting House Wren, Black-headed Grosbeak, and Yellow-eyed Junco. A stop at the nearby Palisade Ranger Station gave us nice looks at Rivoli’s and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds along with a nesting Cordilleran Flycatcher. As we worked our way up the mountain we encountered Stellar’s Jay, Mountain Chickadee, Pygmy Nuthatch, Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatch, Violet-green Swallow, Acorn Woodpecker, Spotted Towhee, and Western Tanager. This year was to be the year of the Zone-tailed Hawk, and the show started with two birds today, but the star of the hawk show was the Common Black Hawk that we watched at close range make two missed attempts before it’s successful third attempt at snagging a dead fish from the surface of Rose Canyon Lake.

After our second night in Tucson we made a bee line for Box Canyon to seek out the Five-striped Sparrow, a bird that in past years required a long and bumpy ride almost to the Mexico border followed by a vigorous hike. However, the species has “set up shop” in the lowlands of the Santa Rita Mountains the past two years and all we had to do was tumble from the van and enjoy this sparrow that has an extremely limited range in the US. A look for the nesting trogons behind Santa Rita Lodge failed, but Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers abounded before we headed off to Cave Creek Ranch in the Chiricahua Mountains. In Rodeo we watched a pair of Great-horned Owls, Lesser Nighthawks and bats drinking from a small pond, and had nice looks at Phainopeplas. In the southfork of Cave Creek we had looks at Painted Redstarts, a bird we would see quite often during our tour, plenty of Acorn Woodpeckers, and other birds of the oak woodlands.

Time was spent watching the feeders at Cave Creek Ranch were we stayed for two nights enjoying birds and home cooked meals. When time allowed we watched the antics of a coatimundi, Arizona Woodpecker, Mexican Jay, White-breasted Nuthatch and the newly named Blue-throated Mountain-gem. The nearby nesting Brown-crested Flycatchers were entertaining as were the Whiskered Screech-Owl and Elf Owl we encountered during our owl prowl. In the high country of the Chiricahuas we had close looks at Mexican Chickadee and poor looks at Olive Warbler. After the two fires in the Chiricahuas a great deal of habitat has been lost, though it is slowly being restored as succession progresses. A drive along State Line Road at dusk yielded many Lesser Nighthawks and Bendire’s Thrasher. On our last morning we had a close encounter with a staked out Thick-billed Kingbird in the town of Portal.

We eventually made our way to Sierra Vista and the Huachuca Mountains where we spent the next three nights at Ramsey Canyon Inn Bed and Breakfast, where pies and birds abound. En route to Sierra Vista we made the obligatory stop at the Willcox Golf Course area, a rather large body of water surrounded by desert, and here we located Scaled Quail on the entrance road, Tropical Kingbirds in the willow trees, and shorebirds galore in the water. We tallied hundreds of Wilson Phalaropes, hundreds of American Avocets, hundreds of Black-necked Stilts, a solitary Solitary Sandpiper, Baird’s Western, and Least Sandpipers, both yellowlegs, and a few Marbled Godwits and Long-billed Dowitchers. Once we were settled into our rooms at the inn we went to a private residence where we hoped the only Plain-capped Starthroat being reported in the US would show up. After time watching hummingbird feeders and other birds we had excellent looks at the Plain-capped Starthroat. After that sighting a Lucifer’s Hummingbird made an appearance at the recently reopened Ash Canyon B&B. Later that evening we enjoyed dinner in the comfort of the lodge with Violet-crowned and Broad-billed Hummingbirds, Black-headed Grosbeak, Bridled Titmouse, and Arizona Woodpecker coming to the feeders as we dined.

Next morning it was up early for the long winding drive up Carr Canyon to about 7,200 feet in elevation where morning temps hovered in the low 60s, as they did most mornings in the mountains. Our first stop was Reef Townsite parking area where we watched numerous young Eastern Bluebirds feed, Band-tailed Pigeon, Cassin’s Kingbird, and Hepatic Tanager. Moving to the nearby picnic area produced the sought after Buff-breasted Flycatcher, Western Wood-Pewee, Plumbeous and Hutton’s Vireo, Black-throated Gray Warbler, and Painted Redstart. A quick trip up to Ramsey Vista Campground produced a lot of bird activity with a posing young Calliope Hummingbird and a pair of Zone-tailed Hawks at eye level and below eye level as we hiked along a pleasant trail.

The following morning found us up early preparing for our rigorous hike into Hunter Canyon in search of the reported Rufous-capped Warbler, a bird we only heard last year. The approach to the canyon requires a bit of a hike on a rather exposed trail. Luckily we had plenty of cloud cover going in both directions so we were able to view a small flock of Bushtit and Scott’s Oriole while on the trail. Once in the shadow of the large trees of the canyon we had stunning looks at a singing Rufous-capped Warbler and watched a Band-tailed Pigeon pick berries from a tree. After a little rest and relaxation we went out to San Pedro House where we did not see the staked out Gilded Flicker, but we did see numerous Blue Grosbeaks, even more Gila Woodpeckers, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Yellow Warbler, and Vermilion Flycatcher.

After three lovely nights at Ramsey Canyon Inn Bed and Breakfast high in the Hauchuca Mountains we made our way toward the Santa Rita Lodge, high in the Santa Rita Mountains. After an aborted attempt to get onto Fort Huachuca we soldiered on to the Sonoita Grasslands right behind the Sonoita Post Office where the group had a close encounter with a singing Grasshopper Sparrow and I was able to mail a package. In the town of Patagonia the requisite stop at the Paton Center for Hummingbirds in the small town of Patagonia which produced Abert’s Towhee , Phainopepla, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, and more looks at Violet-crowned Hummingbird. The less famous Patagonia Roadside Rest Area produced Thick-billed Kingbird and little else, well maybe a Black Vulture and Gray Hawk.

It was behind the Santa Rita Lodge that we were able to watch male and female Elegant Trogons make exchanges at the nest cavity and half the group was later entertained by the male as it perched on a very low powerline as the group members relaxed on the patio of the lodge, quite a show. One morning we worked our way into Florida Canyon to watch a small family of Black-capped Gnatcatchers, Bell’s Vireo, skylarking Cassin’s Sparrow, and later at night Lesser Nighthawk, and a very close by Western Screech-Owl. Another morning we made the muddy hike in Tubac for the reported Rose-throated Becard, and we were not disappointed. The female and young were still actively feeding high in the sycamores near their hanging nest they used this year. We were pleased when the female finally perched in full view for an extended period allowing all a fine look at this odd big headed flycatcher. Each day while at the lodge we had close looks at soaring and calling Zone-tailed Hawks.

For our final morning in the Santa Rita Mountains, three members of the group took a relaxing hike up the Carrie Nation Trail in the very heart of the Santa Rita Mountains getting more looks at Painted Redstart, Black-throated Gray, Red-faced, and Grace’s Warblers. We heard a calling Northern Pygmy Owl, but never were able to locate this small diurnal owl. After another fine lunch on the patio of Santa Rita Lodge we made our way to Tucson, and our final destination in Tucson was Saguaro National Park East, where after what seemed like forever we had satisfactory looks at Gilded Flicker, a bird we missed in two other locations.

Though we were in SE Arizona during the height of the rainy season we encountered very little rain, but there was the usual afternoon cloud cover that kept temperatures reasonable throughout the trip. Well temperatures in Tucson proper were unpleasant, though we spent as little time as possible in Tucson. One fascinating sight in Tucson was seeing the Airplane Boneyard and Davis Monthan Airport Base Aircraft Boneyard, the largest airplane storage facility in the world. Though we ended up missing Montezuma Quail, we did see several nice rarities this year, and definitely enjoyed the small group experience.