



Bosque del Apache & Arizona Winter Specialties December 3 – 10, 2016 **TRIP REPORT**



Photos: Western Screech-Owl, Sandhill Cranes, Bendire's Thrasher by Luke Tiller. Group photo by Maggie Peretto.



Sunrise Birding LLC

www.sunrisebirding.com

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Leader: Luke Tiller

Pre-tour

Our tour started late day Saturday with an evening meal at a great New Mexican restaurant, kicking off our tour of the Southwest in an appropriate style. There we discussed plans for the week and birds to target.

Day one

Our first morning of birding began at a wonderful area of juniper habitat just south of Albuquerque. Here among the throngs of frugivores resided large flocks of bluebirds representing all three species of these beautiful azure birds. As well as a clean sweep of North America's bluebird species (**Mountain, Western and Eastern**) we also encountered a mixed bag of **Dark-eyed Juncos** that included **Oregon, Pink-sided** and **Gray-headed** varietals. Also exciting was ticking off our first thrasher of the tour, the dainty and mockingbird-like **Sage Thrasher**.



Next stop was an important one in terms of our New Mexican birding highlights: Sandia Crest. This gift shop and café at 11,000+ feet provides, through its winter feeders, a home to perhaps some of the US's most beautiful and sought after bird species: Rosy-finches. Here we quickly managed to pick up all three species of birds (**Gray-crowned** (photo), **Black and Brown-capped**) and some got brief views of

the Hepburn's subspecies. Thanks to the help of the crew manning the banding station there we got to learn all about these incredible birds and their lives and it was well worth the extra time taken to have lunch and wait for the banding traps to secure a couple of rosy-finches to be able to see the birds in the hand. One lucky participant even got to hold one during their release. All three species of these mountain top finches are stunning, though that evening at dinner the consensus was that the Black Rosy-finch was the jewel in the rosy-finch crown.

With Rosy-finches, **Steller's Jay** and warming chili under our belts we worked our way down mountain to search out a few more species for the day. We headed eastward from the Sandias searching out more juncos, bluebirds and got great views of **Townsend's**

Solitaire. The main target species for the afternoon was **Pinyon Jay**, a nomadic bird of raucous flocks. Just as our day was drawing to a close I heard their distinctive call and among a sea of **American Robins** a group of over 70 Pinyon Jays provided us with a lengthy flyover in beautiful light. An enchanted end to a great first day!

Day two

Our day started at Petroglyph National Monument. Here among ancient and fascinating graffiti we also found a wealth of highly prized, rocky desert bird species. We quickly found small numbers of jaunty **Rock Wrens**, which entertained us with their rock bouncing antics. Sparrows were high on the list of targets here too and we had soon winkled out a **Rufous-crowned Sparrow** (Photo) OF TWO from the flocks of more abundant **Black-throated Sparrows** and **Canyon Towhees**.



The two main targets here however took a little more effort and the group worked hard for their eventual views of the recently split **Sagebrush Sparrow** (was Sage) and most thrillingly thrasher number two for the trip: **Crissal Thrasher** (photo). It was interesting to note that both birds had long tails which they habitually cock while running through the



sagebrush (their preferred mode of escaping the prying eyes of birders). A wonderful start to the day!

We were now winging our way south towards the hallowed ground of Bosque Del Apache, but our next stop was just a short and sweet one as we peeled

off of the highway to a Burrowing Owl “Town”. **Burrowing Owls** (photo) usually depart New Mexico for the winter but at least one of these adorable little owls was hanging around, perhaps just to say hi to our group, before flying south for the winter. The van providing a great mobile hide for viewing this little bird on the edge of his burrow abode.



After a quick lunch stop our next port of call was Water Canyon. Apart from a beautiful in flight **Prairie Falcon** slicing through the blustery air on the road in, it wasn't quite as birdy as on past visits and some treacherously icy roads kept us from climbing to elevation. Still **Juniper Titmouse** along the entrance road was a welcome and cheery treat for everyone and a couple of groups of stunning **Pronghorn** added to the flavor of the western prairie vistas around us.

We ended our birding day with a perfectly timed arrival at Bosque Del Apache to watch as **Sandhill Cranes** and a plethora of waterfowl descended upon us as they each sought out their evening roosts. It would be remiss of me however not to mention the great food and craft beers we enjoyed at the Twisted Chile in Socorro at day's end. Another fine and memorable day!

Day three

Day three started with a pre-dawn run down to Bosque Del Apache to watch the morning lift-off of cranes and waterfowl. The crack of the morning sun provided great lighting for photographing both **Greater** and **Lesser Sandhill Cranes** and waterfowl including huge numbers of both **Snow** and **Ross's Geese**. Other early morning highlights included a stunning dark morph **Red-tailed Hawk** that was almost completely black apart from a rufous wash on its under tail coverts as well as a pretty **Harlan's Hawk** (another distinctive form of Red-tailed Hawk that was once considered its own species). Other raptors here included **Bald Eagles**, **Northern Harriers** of all ages and sexes and large numbers of **American Kestrels**.

Our next stop was a deep-water reservoir along the Rio Grande (which was snaking along beside us as we winged our way south), here we found a few species that are more at home on deep water lakes like **Double-crested Cormorants**, **American White Pelican's** and a couple of gull species: **Ring-billed** and **California Gulls**. We also had the opportunity to do a little workshop on separating **Western** and **Clark's Grebes**, looking carefully at flank and bill coloration in our scopes as well as the color of the feathering around the eyes.

Our next stop was a well-known migrant trap along the river which seems to act as a trap for birds coming from almost all point of the US. It is often possible to find all three phoebes here (though we missed Eastern on our visit) and flocks of bluebirds involve

Eastern and Western nuthatches can be both Red-naped and Yellow-bellied. Highlights of our stop included the ever present **Phainopepla** and a vagrant from the south in the shape of a long-staying **Great Kiskadee!** The Kiskadee was a real crowd pleaser and a brightly colored bonus that made most people's "bird of the day" list! The more prosaic **Carolina Wren** though equally rare didn't share quite such high billing.

We ended our day in Las Cruces at Dripping Springs. The springs at this time of year are seemingly dripping with sparrows and we soon added juncos of many flavors, **Lincoln's Sparrows** and multitudes of Chipping Sparrows. Among the waves of birds we also picked out **Spotted Towhees**, **Pyrrhuloxias** and a couple of sought after target species: **Black-chinned Sparrow** and **Brewer's Sparrow**. The Brewer's were numerous but initially elusive and the Black-chinned singular but very accommodating. We ended our day at a charming little hole-in-the wall Mexican Restaurant in Las Cruces – another great meal to round out the fantastic day.

Day four

Our day started with a pre-dawn drive to set us up for our first foray across the border into Arizona. As the sun started to creep above the horizon, a brief stop to scrutinize a couple of **Chihuahuan Ravens** led us to our first encounter with a **Golden Eagle** - a beautiful adult. A couple of miles down the road we came into a juvenile bird too. This was another great kick-off to the day's activities.

You never know quite what might show up in Arizona in winter and to highlight that our next stop was at a set of feeders outside Portal where a Streak-backed Oriole had been showing up for the past month. Here among a crowd of common feeder birds we picked up a nice mix of new and exciting species for the trip including **Green-tailed Towhee**, **Gambel's Quail** and eventually a rare and colorful **Streak-backed Oriole**. We thanked Bob Rodrigues for his hospitality and headed out to "downtown" Portal to pick out a **Western Screech-Owl** (photo) at his daytime roost!



Next stop was another exciting and opportune one as we spotted a small thrasher perched out on a roadside fence which quickly became thrasher species four for the trip: **Bendire's Thrasher**. This generally secretive bird allowed close study and posed for photographs. Our next regularly scheduled stop was a migrant trap that had produced a rare Gray Catbird during scouting but turned up a couple of more expected but perhaps more dazzling species this time around in the shape of a couple of **Lark Sparrows** and a **Vermilion Flycatcher**.

Next stop on our action-packed day provided for a mass of new species for the trip. On the grounds of Cave Creek Ranch several hummingbird species lingered into winter including **Anna's, Broad-billed, Blue-throated** and **Rufous Hummingbird**. The seed feeders produced juncos of many flavors including our only **Yellow-eyed Junco** of the tour as well as a host of sparrows that included a locally rare **White-throated Sparrow**. Other feeder denizens included a bunch of fantastic birds: **Arizona Woodpecker, Mexican Jay, Bridled Titmouse** (photo) and more. It was hard to drag ourselves away from this special place especially when we were treated to the sight of a group of rowdy **Javelinas** that included an incredibly cute baby!



Hard to believe that it was still only just time for lunch, which we enjoyed back across the New Mexican border at the Rodeo Grocery LLC (highly recommended for birders in the area). A quick spin around town on the way out produced our first great looks at **Greater Roadrunner**, a highly sought prize for at least one participant.

We ended our day out in Willcox, Arizona where we picked up a few new water birds near a town golf course including **American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt** and an unexpected **Bonaparte's Gull**. As we lingered towards dusk the little lake came wonderfully alive with large numbers of **Long-billed Curlews** flying in from nearby fields to roost, **Scaled Quail**

nervously edging towards the water for an end of day drink and a magnificent flyby of hundreds of **Sandhill Cranes**, all beautifully silhouetted against a bewitching golden sky.

Day five

Our day started with another fly out of thousands of **Sandhill Cranes**. A cacophony of ancient bird sounds surrounding us as they headed out from their marshy roosts to fields near and far to forage for the day. Raptors were our other main target for the morning and we were not to be disappointed when we turned up a couple of roosting accipiters and two magnificent **Great Horned Owls**.

As we worked our way north through surrounding agricultural fields we were treated to sightings of a multitude of Red-tailed Hawks and lurking among them two splendid **Ferruginous Hawks**. We were treated to both in flight and perched views of both light and dark morphs of this attractive and highly sought raptor.

From there we were halted in our search for one particular species by cows in the road and a flooded wash but still managed to add some wintering **Gray Flycatchers** to our growing list of trip species. A stop in a suburban neighborhood that was loaded with incredible Saguaro Cactus provided for a handful of desert species that find their homes among them: **Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Verdin, Cactus Wren** and **Gila Woodpecker**. With a little more work, we also managed to eke out sightings of the much more localized and highly prized **Gilded Flicker** here. This beautiful bird incorporates wings like a yellow-shafted flicker; the facial pattern of a red-shafted and a brownish cap all of its own.

We rounded off our day exploring an area west of Tucson where we encountered another **Bendire's Thrasher, Phainopepla** by the score and another localized and prized sparrow species: **Rufous-winged Sparrow**. A Chipping Sparrow copy-cat that allowed the group appreciated close study.

Day six

We started our day with an early morning run out to the grasslands of San Rafael. Here we found **Savannah Sparrows** by the score and scattered among them were a number of other species including a handful of beautiful **Grasshopper Sparrows**. Our quarry at the site however was another secretive little ammodramus sparrow: **Baird's Sparrow**. Unfortunately, though we searched thoroughly, and it did put in a brief appearance, only a few of the group got definitive looks at the bird. As if to make up for that minor disappointment an equally secretive (and bizarre looking) species decided to sit right in the middle of the road for us to enjoy as we headed back to Patagonia to continue our day: **Montezuma Quail**. A species that I had hardly dared wish for!

Our day continued apace at the Paton's Feeders as we added magnificent **Magnificent Hummingbirds, Inca Doves** and a host of other neat species. Most exciting however was finding a rare **Golden-crowned Sparrow** hiding out among the feeding flocks of White-crowneds in the wash behind the center. On our way to lunch we managed to stumble upon a large group of soaring **Black Vultures** and were successful in pulling a couple of **Turkey Vultures** and a Red-tailed Hawk or two from the impressive kettle of birds. After lunch, we headed to Amado Water Treatment Plant where we added **Bronzed Cowbirds** and **Neotropic Cormorants** to our growing haul of sightings. It hardly feels like a real birding trip if a sewage plant or dump isn't included somewhere on the itinerary! Here we shared our Golden-crowned details with a couple of local birders and they

shared some information about an intermittently seen and illusive Rufous-backed Robin with us. We finished our day seeking out the robin without joy, though we did turn up a couple of additional species for our ever-increasing haul including some expected **Abert's Towhees** and a rather less expected **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker**. We ended our day with the sun setting around us and winged our way back to Tucson for another good meal and a celebratory beverage.



Black-throated Sparrow. Photo by Luke Tiller.

This brought an end to a wonderful tour that provided gorgeous scenery, stunning sunrises, glorious sunsets, fantastic spectacle and a host of beautiful and highly prized bird species. There is a reason they call New Mexico the Land of Enchantment and our time in Arizona just added to the magic of this wonderful tour!



Photos: Scaled Quail and Sagebrush Sparrow by Luke Tiller.

Report and photos by leader, Luke Tiller