A Buff-breasted Flycatcher in the Huachuca Mountains. Photo by Cynthia Case.

Arizona

Exploring the Sky Islands

Tour Leader: Eric Ripma
August 9-16, 2021
August 9 – Mount Lemmon

Our tour officially started on this afternoon when our group headed up into the Santa Catalina Mountains on the north side of Tucson. Shortly after arriving in the high elevations, we were watching a Red-faced Warbler! It took some time before we ran into a flock but once we did, we enjoyed watching Plumbeous Vireos, Mountain Chickadees, Pygmy Nuthatches, and a few species of warblers. We had run out of time on our first afternoon, so we headed down the mountains and to our first dinner as a group.

August 10 – Tucson Mountain Park, Sweetwater Wetlands, and Mount Lemmon

We started early on this morning to avoid the high temperatures that usually occur in the Sonoran Desert; little did we know that we would be enjoying cool temperatures throughout our tour due to the monsoons and cloud cover that we would encounter. We started off in some Sonoran Desert habitat on the west side of Tucson where we had great views of many typical desert species. Gilded Flicker, Rufous-winged Sparrow, and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher were among the highlights. We paid a brief visit to Sweetwater Wetlands before a rain shower moved in. A family group of Tropical Kingbirds was the highlight among 30 species. After lunch we headed back into the high elevations of the Santa Catalina Mountains. We struggled to come across a flock but slowly built up a nice list of birds. We headed over to Bear Wallow to look for another flock and try our luck at a previously reported Short-tailed Hawk. It wasn't long before we had a Short-tailed directly above us and luckily for us, it made a couple of passes before drifting out of sight! It was time to drive to Tubac where we would be staying for the next couple of nights.
August 11 – Montosa Canyon, Florida Canyon, Amado Water Treatment Plant, and Madera Canyon

We began our morning in Montosa Canyon in the Santa Rita Mountains. As soon as we stepped out of our vehicle, we heard our first Five-striped Sparrow. Before long, one was spotted singing from an ocotillo on the top of the ridge. We had seen one, but a better look was definitely desired! While waiting for a better view of the sparrow we enjoyed looks at the beautiful Varied Bunting, Brown-crested Flycatcher, and a couple species of tanagers. A Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet serenaded us, but we were unable to get a view. Eventually one of the Five-striped Sparrows started singing along the road and we were able to enjoy great views of this rarity. While searching for the sparrows we also heard a Black-capped Gnatcatcher, which were rather scarce this summer, but we were unable to get a look at one. We headed over to Florida Canyon where the rushing creek (from the heavy rain the night before) made it difficult to hear birds but provided a beautiful sight! A flyover Gray Hawk was our highlight at this location. A quick stop at Amado Water Treatment Plant yielded a couple of Ring-necked Ducks, Ruddy Ducks, and Mexican Duck. After lunch we headed back into the Santa Rita Mountains to Madera Canyon. The many hummingbirds and some shopping at the Santa Rita Lodge gift shop were the highlights of the afternoon. On our way out of the mountains we had great views of a singing Botteri’s Sparrow which was a great end to our day.
August 12 – Santa Cruz River, Patagonia, Las Cienegas NCA

We started this morning along the Santa Cruz River to look for a previously reported Green Kingfisher. Only one in the group saw it flash by, but most heard the distinctive clicking call. Since Rose-throated Becard was a big target of our group, we headed towards Patagonia earlier in the morning than usual to give ourselves the best shot at seeing a becard. After a long wait at the nest (the chicks had already fledged), it seemed as if it wasn’t meant to be, and we walked back to the car for a breakfast/snack break and some birding on the other side of the highway. We decided to take one last look at the nest and within a few minutes we heard it! After a short search, we found the adult male which we enjoyed watching for almost 10 minutes! After some birding around Patagonia and a stop for lunch we arrived at the Paton Center for Hummingbirds. As usual, the Violet-crowned Hummingbirds were the stars! A Ruddy Ground Dove had been visiting some feeders just down the road, but it didn’t stop by while we were watching. However, we did enjoy watching a few Mississippi Kites soaring overhead with a Swainson’s Hawk and both species of vultures. A quick stop at Las Cienegas National Conservation Area provided us good views of Botteri’s Sparrows and a heard only Cassin’s Sparrow. Afterwards, we arrived in Sierra Vista where we would be staying for the next couple nights.
August 13 – Carr Canyon, Ash Canyon, and Beatty’s Guest Ranch

We began our day in the high elevations of the Huachuca Mountains in Carr Canyon. Our main target here, the Buff-breasted Flycatcher, proved difficult to locate. A couple species of warblers, a few hummingbirds, and Woodhouse’s Scrub-Jay kept us busy. As we were walking back to the car, a Buff-breasted Flycatcher popped up in front of us! Eventually it provided the group with some great photo ops. In the late morning we headed to the Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary to watch for the Lucifer Hummingbirds that visit their feeders. Before long, we were watching a couple males and a female. After lunch we made our way to Beatty’s Guest Ranch in Miller Canyon. The target here was the White-eared Hummingbird which made its first appearance not long after we arrived. 8 species of hummingbirds entertained us throughout the afternoon.
August 14 – San Pedro House, Ramsey Canyon, Lake Cochise

Our morning began along the San Pedro River where we saw our only Common Ground Dove of our trip. A little way down the trail we heard a Louisiana Waterthrush (a rare bird in Arizona) calling but we were unable to get a view. Before long, we drove across Sierra Vista to Ramsey Canyon. As soon as we opened the doors, we heard a couple Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers and with some patience we had great views. A long wait at the Ramsey Canyon Inn feeders for Berylline Hummingbird was unsuccessful but as we were walking back to the car, it appeared at one of the feeders. Unfortunately, it wasn’t seen by most of the group, and we would have to try for this species again in the Chiricahua Mountains. Another short wait at the feeders did result in great views of Painted Redstart and Arizona Woodpeckers. After lunch in Benson, we stopped by Lake Cochise in Willcox where the number of waterbirds was impressive! 5 species of ducks, 14 species of shorebirds, a Black Tern, and White-faced Ibis were some of the highlights. Our first Scaled Quail also provided us with great views. After arriving in Portal, it was quickly apparent that the recent monsoons were causing the creeks to rise, making many areas inaccessible. However, this made the temperatures quite comfortable even in the low elevations.
**August 15 – Stateline Road, Cave Creek Canyon, George Walker House**

We started this morning off in the lowlands along the state line between Arizona and New Mexico. Our main targets were Bendire's and Crissal Thrasher and before long we had many scope views of a couple of Crissal Thrashers. While we were looking for the thrashers, we were entertained by many Lark Sparrows, some Lark Buntings, and a couple Scaled Quail. We weren't having much luck with Bendire's but on our way out, one popped up on the side of the road and everybody had great views. We headed for the South Fork of Cave Creek to visit an Elegant Trogon nest, but it was quickly apparent that the chicks had recently fledged, and no trogons were showing in this area. After getting chased out of the canyon by a thunderstorm we knew we'd have to spend more time later, looking for a trogon. Before lunch we stopped by the Cave Creek Canyon Info Center for a little shopping, and everyone came away with something to remember this beautiful canyon by! In the afternoon, we headed back up Cave Creek Canyon but ended up having to turn around to avoid crossing any rushing creeks and we spent the rest of the afternoon along the Portal-Paradise Road and at the George Walker House feeders in Paradise. At the feeders at the George Walker House, we saw our only Juniper Titmouse of the trip.

**August 16 – Chiricahua Mountains**

It wasn't the original plan, but we started the morning in the South Fork of Cave Creek Canyon to continue looking for Elegant Trogon. After hiking up canyon, we had a quick glimpse of one as it flew down canyon! We followed but to no avail and continued back up canyon before running into a photographer with his camera aimed at a cavity. We learned that this was an active Elegant Trogon nest and before long we had great views of a male as it came back to its cavity! Afterwards, we drove over to a trailhead where someone had been maintaining a feeder that was attracting a Berylline Hummingbird. After a short wait, the Berylline zoomed in, and everyone had some great looks! Due to the high creeks, we hadn't been able to make it into the high elevations of the Chiricahuas, so we tried to spend a couple hours in the high elevations before we were going to have to drive back to Tucson. Before long, a thunderstorm came over and we were forced off the mountains. We did have a little time to bird before the storm and we were able to enjoy a flock of Band-tailed Pigeons, Virginia's Warbler, a couple heard Mexican Chickadees, and a mixed flock as the storm rolled in. As we headed out of the mountains, we were all happy with the many birds we had seen during the week. Luckily the weather improved as we drove west and before long there were a pair of MONTEZUMA Quail on the road! What a great way to end the tour!
Elegant Trogon

Montezuma Quail

Photos by Cynthia Case