A Red-faced Warbler from Mt. Lemmon. Photo by Dave Ebbitt.

Arizona
Exploring the Sky Islands

Tour Leader: Eric Ripma
July 31-August 7, 2021
August 1 – Tucson Mountain Park, Sweetwater Wetlands, and Mount Lemmon

We started early to try to beat the heat of the Sonoran Desert. We began our birding on the west side of Tucson in some of the best desert habitat in the area. It wasn’t long before we'd seen many of the specialty species of this region including Gilded Flicker which we wouldn't come across again for the rest of the week. A brief stop at Sweetwater Wetlands provided us with close views of Lucy’s Warbler, a few Abert’s Towhees, Mexican Duck, and our first Tropical Kingbird. After a great lunch, we headed back up the Santa Catalinas. We ran into an even bigger flock than on the previous afternoon, and we had great views of many warblers, Greater Pewees, and Western Bluebirds. By the late afternoon it was time for us to drive to Tubac where we would be spending the next couple nights.

July 31 – Mount Lemmon

After some early arrivals and checking in at our hotel our group headed up into the Santa Catalina Mountains to beat the heat and look for some high elevation species. It wasn’t long before we were enjoying our first mixed species flock. We had some stunning looks at Grace’s, Townsend’s, Hermit, Red-faced, and Olive Warblers! We also enjoyed great views of more common species such as Acorn Woodpecker, Steller’s Jay, Mountain Chickadee, and Pygmy Nuthatch. After a couple hours of birding, we headed back down to Tucson (with nice looks at a Harris’s Hawk on the way) where we enjoyed a great Mexican dinner and some time at the hotel to prepare for the next week of birding.
August 2 – Montosa Canyon, Florida Canyon, Amado Water Treatment Plant, and Madera Canyon

This morning was spent birding in Box Canyon on the north side of the Santa Rita Mountains. Our main target in this canyon was the Five-striped Sparrow. We heard at least a few individuals, but it took lots of patience before one finally came up the slope and into view. While we waited for the sparrows, we were entertained by Hooded and Scott’s Orioles and the stunning Varied Bunting. A quick stop in Florida Canyon resulted in our only looks at a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet. After lunch in Tubac we headed into Madera Canyon and spent most of the afternoon birding around the feeders at Santa Rita Lodge. On our way into the canyon, we were delighted to see a Black Bear with 3 cubs! While enjoying the many hummingbirds visiting the feeders we were lucky enough to spot a Golden Eagle among many Turkey Vultures and a Gray Hawk soaring overhead. A White-nosed Coati that visited the feeders was also a nice sighting!

August 3 – Santa Cruz River, Patagonia, Las Cienegas NCA

This morning began along the Santa Cruz River where we saw many riparian species. Great looks at Common Ground and Inca Doves, our first Bridled Titmice, and a Lucy’s Warbler were among the many highlights. A stop at the Amado Water Treatment Plant resulted in our only views of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks during the trip and the first time we have recorded Ring-necked Duck on this tour.
August 3 – Continued

By late morning we headed towards the Patagonia Roadside Rest Area. We arrived at a Rose-throated Becard nest, but the chicks had already fledged and no becards were seen during our vigil. A cooperative Yellow-breasted Chat and Lucy’s Warbler were a couple of the highlights. After lunch in Patagonia, we stopped by the Paton Center for Hummingbirds where we enjoyed our first views of Violet-crowned Hummingbirds. In the afternoon we birded the grasslands of Las Cienegas National Conservation Area where we enjoyed great views of a Zone-tailed Hawk mixed with a few Swainson's Hawks as well as good views of both Botteri’s and Cassin’s Sparrows. We headed toward our hotel in Sierra Vista where we would be staying for the next two nights before being informed that they had cancelled our reservations and got us rooms in Tombstone instead. It was quite inconvenient but a big thanks to our group for dealing with it so well!

August 4 – Carr, Miller, and Ash Canyon

We started our morning at the high elevations of Carr Canyon. We enjoyed cool temps and some nice birds such as Hutton’s Vireo, Bushtit, Eastern Bluebird, a fledging Hermit Thrush being fed by its parent, and good looks at Grace’s and Black-throated Gray Warblers. In the afternoon, we drove up Miller Canyon to Beatty’s Guest Ranch.
August 4 – Continued

The hummingbird feeders were great, as they always are, and we saw our first Blue-throated Mountain-gem and a couple more Violet-crowned Hummingbirds among others. A hike up canyon netted the group great views of our first Painted Redstarts and Arizona Woodpeckers. A brief look at a Virginia’s Warbler was our only sighting of the tour. In the evening we visited the Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary. A male and female Lucifer Hummingbird provided great views and a small flock of Bridled Titmice was another highlight for the group.
After a quick stop along the San Pedro River, we headed to Ramsey Canyon. After a short walk up-canyon we had great views of a few Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers and a nesting Broad-billed Hummingbird. Since there had been a Berylline Hummingbird visiting the feeders of the Ramsey Canyon Inn we set up close to the feeders and waited. The many Black-headed Grosbeaks kept us entertained but it wasn’t long before the Berylline made a brief visit to the feeders. This was our last morning in the Huachuca Mountains and we left a happy group. On our way to the Chiricahua Mountains, we stopped at Lake Cochise to look for shorebirds and other waterbirds. Ten species of shorebirds kept us entertained, especially the many American Avocets and Wilson’s Phalaropes. We finished our drive to Portal and enjoyed some laid-back birding around town, before dinner. Some of the group went out owling where we enjoyed a close (but not seen) Elf Owl and a few Common Poorwills. On our way back into Portal we came across our first rattlesnake (Northern Black-tailed) of our trip!
August 6 – Stateline Road, Cave Creek and Pinery Canyons, Barfoot Park

We started this morning in the lowlands below Portal. On our way down we had good views of our first Scaled Quail! While searching for thrashers, we enjoyed large numbers of Western Kingbirds, flocks of 10+ Lark Sparrows moving south through the valley, and our first good looks at Greater Roadrunner. With only brief looks at Crissal and Bendire’s Thrasher we headed to another location to try for better looks. Shortly after getting out of the car, we had great views of a couple of Bendire’s Thrashers that were in view for the next 10 minutes! By now it was mid-morning, and this brought us to the famed South Fork of Cave Creek. Before getting out of the vehicle we had already spotted a female Elegant Trogon. We walked down the road and quickly found the nesting cavity and had great views of the male as it made frequent visits to feed the chicks! After lunch we headed to the higher elevations of the Chiricahua Mountains. A quick stop at Pinery Canyon yielded a roosting Spotted Owl. Barfoot Park was quite birdy with a flock of 100+ Band-tailed Pigeons swirling around and ornamenting the many burned snags. Before long we were also enjoying a few Mexican Chickadees and a couple of Red Crossbills. It was a great afternoon of birding. In the evening we enjoyed fantastic looks at a Whiskered Screech-Owl.
August 7 – Chiricahua Mountains

This was our last morning of the tour before having to drive back to Tucson in the afternoon. We spent the morning birding from Portal to Paradise and visited the great feeders at the George Walker House. Some of the highlights included Blue-throated Mountain-gem, Arizona Woodpecker, Juniper Titmouse, and Hepatic Tanagers. After lunch we headed up over the Chiricahuas where we ran into rain and sleet so we headed on to Willcox for another look at Lake Cochise where many of the same species remained from our first visit. Our tour ended after a nice dinner in Tucson.

A total of 180 species were recorded on this tour with countless highlights. The mammals and reptiles also provided many highlights with three species of rattlesnakes, a family of Black Bears, and a few White-nosed Coati sightings being most interesting.
Northern Black-tailed Rattlesnake

Black Bears in Madrean Canyon

Photos by Dave Ebbitt

SabrewingNatureTours.com
White-nosed Coati

Mojave Rattlesnake

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