A Montezuma Quail in the Chiricahua Mountains

Arizona
Exploring the Sky Islands

Tour Leader: Eric Ripma
August 5-13, 2023
August 5 – Mount Lemmon

After everyone arrived in the morning and early afternoon, we headed up Mt. Lemmon for our first birding of the tour. We spent an hour and a half around the Butterfly Trail. While the birding was rather slow at this time of day, we did see a few highlights including a couple of Zone-tailed Hawks that put on a show! We had great looks and comparisons with nearby Turkey Vultures. The birding was over for the day, but is it ever really over? As we walked into dinner in Summerhaven, we saw our only Peregrine Falcon and while eating dinner we enjoyed hummingbirds, Yellow-eyed Juncos, and a Spotted Towhee. After dinner, it was time to head back down the mountain and get ready for an early start the next morning.

August 6 – Tucson Mountain Park, Sweetwater Wetlands, and Lake Cochise, Portal-Paradise Road

We started out early this morning to beat the desert heat that would be sure to come later in the day. We spent our time in Tucson Mountain Park and by the end of our walk, we had seen all of the main targets of the area! Gilded Flicker, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, and Rufous-winged Sparrow were all seen well. We also had our first looks at many other common desert species. After heading back to the hotel, having breakfast, and packing up, we made our way to Sweetwater Wetlands. Among the many highlights was a family group of Tropical Kingbirds, our only Harris’s Hawk of the trip, Lucy’s Warbler, and our first Abert’s Towhees. After a great lunch in Tucson, we began our drive to Portal. On the way, we made a stop at Lake Cochise in Willcox. As usual, the lake was full of
shorebirds. The highlight was an adult Black-bellied Plover among 11 species of shorebirds. An Eared Grebe swimming around in the lake was also a nice surprise. As we were driving over to check a different pond, a group of Scaled Quail made a brief appearance. Once we got out of the car, we were able to see the quail much better. Other highlights included a Bendire's Thrasher, Bullock's Oriole, and our first Lazuli Bunting. It was now time to continue our drive to Portal where we would be staying for the next two nights. After dinner, a few of us went out to look for owls and other wildlife. We had great views of Western Screech-Owl and heard a few Common Poorwills. We also briefly saw a Gray Fox and a tarantula!

August 7 – Portal, Stateline Road, Chiricahua Mountains

Our morning started out driving down to Stateline Road to bird the desert. As we made our way down, we came across more Scaled Quail, a few Swainson's Hawks, and our first Canyon Towhee. Our main target of the morning, Crissal Thrasher, didn't take long to find, and we all had scope views as it perched in the open. Many Western Kingbirds lined the road, and we had our first looks at a Cassin's Kingbird. Other highlights included Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Bendire's Thrasher, and Black-throated Sparrow. A brief stop at Willow Tank brought our first Black Phoebe and American Kestrel. From here we headed into the mountains to look for Elegant Trogon. Unfortunately, no trogons would show themselves, so we had to settle for good looks at Blue-throated Mountain-gem,
Acorn Woodpecker, Mexican Jay, and Painted Redstarts. It was time for lunch, so we started back to Portal. Before long we noticed QUAIL on the road! A family group of seven Montezuma Quail were crossing the road. We all got rather distant looks and once we drove up to where they’d gone into the forest, they had disappeared. It’s always great to see this species, but we were hopeful that we would have better views. After lunch we headed up to the higher elevations of the Chiricahua Mountains. Every stop we made was full of birds and we never ended up making it to our final destination. Too many birds is a good problem to have! On our way up we saw our first Arizona Woodpecker and Hepatic Tanager. Once we reached the higher elevations we ran into multiple flocks and saw many highlights including Band-tailed Pigeon, Greater Pewee, Mexican Chickadee, Olive Warbler, Red Crossbills, Grace’s, Black-throated Gray, Hermit, and Red-faced Warblers, and Painted Redstart. It was a great afternoon of birding! After dinner, some evening and nocturnal birding was productive. As it was getting dark, we enjoyed a brief look at a Mexican Whip-poor-will and heard a couple of Whiskered Screech-Owls.

August 8 – Portal, Chiricahua Mountains

We began our morning watching the hummingbird feeders at the Portal Peak Lodge. 7 species were seen including an adult male Calliope and a Blue-throated Mountain-gem. Next, we visited Bob Rodrigues’ yard where we enjoyed good views at a number of desert species including Gambel’s Quail, Pyrrhuloxia, Curve-billed Thrasher, and Cactus Wren. It was time to try for Elegant Trogon again, so we drove up to South Fork. After a hike up the canyon and not hearing any trogons, we started wondering if we would see one. That’s just when an Elegant Trogon started calling from just a little way up the canyon! Once we had located the
trogon we had great views for the next 30+ minutes as it perched in the open and sang its bark-like song. We saw a good diversity of other species in the canyon as well, but the trogon stole the show and would easily become everyone's bird-of-the-day; or so we thought. We still had some time before we had to go back to Portal to check out of our rooms, so we made a stop at the Southwestern Research Station. A Berylline Hummingbird had been frequenting their feeders and it wasn't long before it made a brief visit. After another 30 minutes or so it made another, longer visit before we had to leave.

After lunch, we started our drive up and over the Chiricahuaas and over to Sierra Vista. It wasn’t long before Nancy and Dan both shouted out “Quail”! It was another family group of Montezuma Quail. We were able to watch these quail for a few minutes before they disappeared into the grass. What a highlight! Just a couple minutes down the road we came across a Black Bear. We were able to watch for several minutes as it foraged along the road. This was turning into a great afternoon. We continued up into the mountains where we saw more Mexican Chickadees, a few species of warblers, and heard our first Buff-breasted Flycatcher. As we were heading out of the mountains, yet again we came across a Montezuma Quail! This time it was a single male, but he foraged along the roadside for 15 minutes, and eventually we just had to move on since we still had a drive ahead of us. The birding wasn’t over yet though. Along the way we had a small flock of Lesser Nighthawks and a pair of Great Horned Owls in Tombstone.
August 9 – Miller, Ash, and Carr Canyons

On this morning, our first stop was at Beatty’s Guest Ranch and Miller Canyon. We spent a short time at the hummingbird feeders at Beatty’s Guest Ranch. Within a few minutes we had seen two new hummingbird species: White-eared and Violet-crowned. There had been a couple of Flame-colored Tanagers residing in the canyon that we were hopeful to come across. During our search we saw our first Virginia’s Warbler and had our first good looks at Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers. We also had a nice surprise when another group of birders told us they had seen a Rufous-capped Warbler and the bird started to sing just up the trail. It was moving quickly, but some of the group got views of the bird before it disappeared. Unfortunately, the tanagers were a no-show, but we still had a great morning. In the late morning, we made a stop at Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary to watch their feeders. Before too long, a continuing Plain-capped Starthroat made a visit, and we enjoyed many views of male and female Lucifer Hummingbirds. After lunch in Sierra Vista, we made an afternoon visit to Carr Canyon. On the drive up, we watched the spectacular views as rain showers moved across the lowlands and a migrant Olive-sided Flycatcher that was foraging nearby. Once we made it to the top, some of the rain caught up to us, but it didn’t take long to clear up. Our target, the Buff-breasted Flycatcher, didn’t make it easy, but eventually Dawn spotted one nearby. And, eventually we were all able to get nice views of this specialty. We also had nice looks at a couple of Virginia’s Warblers.
August 10 – Miller Canyon, Sierra Vista EOP, Las Cienegas, Paton Center

Our morning started out back in Miller Canyon looking for Flame-colored Tanager without any luck. However, it was still a nice morning in the canyon, and we enjoyed excellent views of Canyon Wren, Hepatic Tanager, Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers, Bridled Titmice, Painted Redstarts, and our only Wilson’s Warbler of the trip. Afterwards, we made a stop at the Sierra Vista EOP. Unfortunately, there was no water viewable from the viewing platform, but we did see Mexican Ducks in flight, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, and our first Ash-throated Flycatcher. From here, we started our drive west towards Tubac where we would be spending the next couple of nights. Along the way we would make several birding stops. Our first stop was to look for Burrowing Owls. Unfortunately, they were likely in their burrow during our visit. After lunch, we spent some time birding in Las Cienegas NCA where we saw our only Grasshopper Sparrows and Solitary Sandpiper. Other highlights included Zone-tailed Hawk, Ash-throated Flycatcher, and Botteri’s Sparrow. Next up was the Paton Center for Hummingbirds which brought our first looks at Thick-billed Kingbirds and Costa’s Hummingbird. We also enjoyed good views of Violet-crowned Hummingbirds, Lazuli Bunting, and Yellow-breasted Chats. We still had a drive ahead of us, so we began our drive to the Tubac Golf Resort where we would be staying for the next two nights. While at dinner at the resort, we saw our first Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and Mexican Ducks behind the restaurant.
August 11 – Amado WTP, Box Canyon, Canoa Ranch Conservation Park, Agua Caliente Canyon

On our way to Box Canyon, we made a quick stop by Amado WTP. Our first Ruddy Duck, Neotropic Cormorants, and Great Egret were all present. We also had good looks at Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and an American Avocet. It was pretty chilly and windy when we arrived in Box Canyon and the bird activity was low, but we quickly spotted a pair of Golden Eagles that allowed for great perched and in-flight views! With a tip from a group from the Southeast Arizona Birding Festival led by Tyler Ficker (another Sabrewing guide) and his fiancé Mollie Langdon, we were able to view a nesting Five-striped Sparrow! We also saw many other species in the canyon including Willow
Flycatcher, Thick-billed Kingbirds, Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Rock Wren, Hooded and Bullock’s Orioles, MacGillivray’s Warbler, and Varied Bunting. After lunch we stopped at Canoa Ranch Conservation Park to let some rain showers pass our intended birding destination, Agua Caliente Canyon. Both a Redhead and a Pied-billed Grebe on the pond here were new for our list. Before long, we headed up to Agua Caliente to look for Black-capped Gnatcatchers that had been frequenting the area. On our way we saw our only Common Ground Dove along the road. Once we had reached our destination, we heard Montequma Quail vocalizing and saw a couple of Rufous-crowned Sparrows. Eventually, we heard the call of the Black-capped Gnatcatcher. But a brief view of the bird in flight was all we could muster before it disappeared down the wash. Eventually it was time to head back to the lodge for dinner and to get some rest before our last day of birding.
On our last full day of the tour, we had a handful of species that we still had a good chance to see. First up were Rose-throated Becard and Green Kingfishers along the Santa Cruz River. After just a few minutes drive to the river, we were ready to get birding. As soon as we got to the bridge, we spotted a Green Kingfisher quietly perched above the water. Great views were had by all! We started walking the trail up to a couple of becard nests, but before we had gotten too far a becard started vocalizing. After a couple minutes we had nice views of a male! As we headed back to the car, we stopped on the bridge where we had great looks at 2 Green Kingfishers. After packing up at the hotel, we continued on to Santa Rita Lodge. On our way we had a bonus Northern Goshawk soar overhead, a species that is typically at higher elevations at this time of year. The feeders were busy, and we had great views of Arizona Woodpeckers, Hepatic Tanagers, and many hummingbirds including a Costa’s. Since we had missed Burrowing Owl earlier in the trip, we decided to drive north to Marana. After spending some time scanning, we eventually spotted one! Eventually we had seen as many as six. The heat had caught up to us, so it was time to head up to higher elevations. We spent our afternoon in Bear Wallow on Mt. Lemmon. Our hoped for Short-tailed Hawk never made an appearance, but after a walk with practically no birds, we found a flock, a very big flock! For the next hour or so we enjoyed repeatedly great views of a number of warblers including Red-faced, Townsend’s, Hermit, Black-throated Gray, Grace’s, and Painted Redstart, Mountain Chickadees, Pygmy Nuthatches, and Warbling and Plumbeous Vireo. As we headed down the mountains, through the rain, we came upon a double rainbow; a great way to end our trip to this special location.

All in all, we ended up with 198 species, lots of great wildlife, and many great memories!