SABREWING
NATURE TOURS



Varied Bunting

Arizona

Exploring the Sky Islands

Tour Leaders: Eric Ripma and Janice Travis

August 3-11, 2026

August 3 – Mt. Lemmon

After all but one of our group had arrived in Tucson, we had lunch and made our way up Mt. Lemmon. Our first stop on Mt. Lemmon was at the Palisades Visitor Center situated at just under 8,000 feet. It was much cooler than the lowlands of Tucson. As soon as we got out, we spotted a Short-tailed Hawk flying over high above. A good start to the tour! Our first Yellow-eyed Juncos showed well and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds visited the feeders. In a nearby oak, we noticed some movement and it turned out to be two Virginia's Warblers! We had fantastic views as they foraged without paying any attention to us. A Western Flycatcher also allowed for some closeup views.



Virginia's Warbler

Next, we visited Mt. Bigelow, where we hoped to find some recently reported American Goshawks. The goshawks were a no show, but we did come across a large mixed flock. 30+ Pygmy Nuthatches lead the way, but we also had looks at our first Mountain Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Olive, Graces, Townsend's, Hermit, and Red-faced Warblers, and Painted Redstart. It was quite the flock!

Afterwards, we visited Butterfly Trail where Janice, who had picked up Kenny, our last participant to arrive, met us. The trail was extremely quiet at first, but luckily that changed before long. Some of the same warblers were seen, but we had better looks here. An especially confiding Painted Redstart flashed its tail and wings as it foraged right alongside the trail. When we were back at the parking lot, a Zone-tailed Hawk flew overhead, eventually grappling with a Red-tailed Hawk. It had been a great afternoon, but it was now time to head down the mountain to have dinner and arrive back at the hotel with some time to rest up before the next day of birding.



Painted Redstart

August 4 – Tucson Mountain Park, El Rio Preserve, Maraña, Lake Cochise

We headed out early this morning to beat the heat of the Sonoran Desert. The first couple hours of the morning in Tucson Mountain Park were quite pleasant and we picked up all of our hoped-for desert birds. Our first stop produced many good looks at Costa's Hummingbirds including one female that was so intent on catching a flying insect that she hovered a mere two feet over our heads! Cactus Wrens and Curve-billed Thrashers also allowed good views and we had our first of many looks at Gila Woodpecker. Pyrrhuloxias, also known as the desert cardinal, perched in the open, but always at a distance. As we arrived back at our vehicles, we found a small sparrow flock. A couple of young Black-throated and a Rufous-winged were cooperative.

After a short drive, we stopped at another spot within the park to look for Gilded Flickers. After a bit of walking, we spotted one, but it was at quite a distance, so we hopped back in the cars and drove over to where it had been perched up. It didn't take long before it popped up and we eventually had great looks at two individuals.

It had been a great morning in the desert, but it was now time to head back to the hotel for a quick breakfast and to pack up. Once we were all packed and ready, we drove up to El Rio Preserve, just northwest of Tucson. The main target here was a continuing Purple Gallinule - quite the bird to see in the middle of a desert. After some intel from a couple of departing birders, we quickly spotted the bird across the lake. Other highlights included Black Phoebe, Vermilion Flycatcher, and several species of hummingbirds. Afterwards, we made a brief stop in Maraña where we were happy to see a couple of Burrowing Owls in the mid-day heat.



Costa's Hummingbird

After a great lunch in Tucson, we started our drive to Portal where we would be staying for the next two nights. Along the way, we stopped at Lake Cochise to check the many migrant shorebirds here. We enjoyed good looks at 12 species of shorebirds including many American Avocets and Black-necked Stilts, a couple Stilt Sandpipers, and plenty of Wilson's Phalaropes. A couple of Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Chihuahuan Meadowlarks were also among the highlights.

After arriving in Portal, we checked into the lodge, pre-ordered dinner and breakfast, and spent some down time in our rooms. While having dinner, the lights flickered and then went out. I think we all thought it was no big deal. It would come back soon enough. Unfortunately, we got the news that there had been a microburst just east of Portal and it had knocked down 17 telephone poles! This was going to take a while. Most of the group was still up for some owling, so we headed up Cave Creek Canyon just before sunset. First, we heard and briefly saw a Mexican Whip-poor-will. Next, we heard a couple of Whiskered Screech-Owls very closely, but we were unable to get a look.

August 5 – Cave Creek Canyon, Southwestern Research Station, George Walker House

Luckily our group was up for an early start and we met the following morning, still without power (and a/c, and running water), but excited for some new birds. After a restroom stop, we spent the morning birding along the South Fork of Cave Creek Canyon. This unbelievably beautiful canyon provided many good birds for us on this morning. A quick stop along the road to the parking area brought us great looks at as many as 8 Painted Redstarts in one bush! A Hutton's Vireo, while less colorful, was also a welcome sight. Our first Black-throated Gray Warbler bathed in one of the pools along the creek and our first Blue-throated Mountain-gems perched above the creek.

Once we reached the parking area, we had great views of our first Mexican Jay. Our main target on this walk were the resident Coppery-tailed Trogons. Along the way, we had good looks at our first Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Bridled Titmice, Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers, and plenty of Acorn Woodpeckers. Eventually, after a hiker had informed us that he had seen trogons up ahead, we started to hear their barking song. We had three males flying around us for about 10 minutes. Trogons are usually quite still, but these three never stopped, so while we had good looks, good photos were hard to come by. As we were turning around to head back, a White-eared Hummingbird provided good, but brief views as it foraged overhead.



Mexican Jay

Since it was now only mid-morning, we walked back to our vehicles and made a short drive to the Southwestern Research Station. Here, we would be looking for White-eared and Berylline Hummingbirds. It didn't take long before the White-eared made an appearance, but the Berylline was a no show during our visit. The power was still out here at the research station, so we headed back down to Portal to see if we could get any updates and find lunch. Luckily, Portal Peak Lodge had a food truck set up, so we were able to have lunch. We also heard that most of the poles had been replaced, but there was still no update on an expected time to be restored, so we would just have to keep our fingers crossed.

After lunch, we headed to Paradise to visit the George Walker House. We had a nice, relaxing visit watching their feeders. Our main target, Juniper Titmouse, made many visits and we also had good looks at Bridled Titmouse, Hutton's Vireo, many Acorn Woodpeckers, and plenty of Black-headed Grosbeaks. Birding in the late afternoon was rather slow. We slowly drove through some of the best Montezuma Quail habitat in the area without luck and eventually headed back to our lodge. While we were picking up our pre-ordered dinner from the food truck, the power came back on! We were

all very relieved to crank up our air conditioning and enjoy a much cooler night than the previous one.

With storms rolling in, our owling was rather unproductive, but seeing a Black-tailed Rattlesnake was a highlight!



Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher

August 6 – Southwestern Research Station, Rustler Park, Pinery Canyon, Lake Cochise, St. David

After packing our bags, we started our drive to reach the high elevations of the Chiricahua Mountains. Since we had missed the Berylline the previous day, we decided to make a stop at the same feeders as the previous day. Unfortunately, the Berylline was again not seen. Once we reached Rustler Park, the high elevations made for some very comfortable birding temperatures. Birds were quite active, and as we walked down the road, we came across a family of Greater Pewees. Slightly further down the road, Kenny called out a chickadee - our target species here! This Mexican Chickadee provided great views for about 10 minutes as it foraged in the needles and eventually a small oak. We all headed back to the vehicle quite happily! Several Red Crossbills, Western Bluebirds, and Steller's Jays were waiting for us back by our cars.

Now it was time to start heading down the mountain. A quick stop at Pinery Canyon provided more good looks at Mexican Chickadees but was otherwise quite quiet. The rest of the drive down the mountain is excellent for Montezuma Quail, but they didn't appear on this day. After making it to Willcox and having lunch, we made a return visit to Lake Cochise. There hadn't been much turn-

over, but we enjoyed looks at some of the species we had seen on our previous visit. We continued our drive towards Sierra Vista where we would be staying for the next couple of nights. On the way, we stopped in St. David. This town has a breeding population of Mississippi Kites, but we didn't have any luck seeing one on this afternoon. However, a Lark Bunting was a nice consolation. Eventually we made it to Sierra Vista, checked into our hotel, and enjoyed a delicious dinner at a nearby Italian restaurant.



Mexican Chickadee

August 7 – Miller Canyon, Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary, Carr Canyon

After a hotel breakfast, we drove a short distance to Miller Canyon. After a half mile hike up the canyon, we reached the location that is frequented by a Flame-colored Tanager. While waiting for the tanager, we had good looks at Hepatic Tanager, Bridled Titmice, Painted Redstart, and Bushtits. Unfortunately, the tanager didn't appear while we were in the area and we had to continue on at some point. We spent some time at the feeders at Beatty's Guest Ranch and enjoyed a good diversity of hummingbirds including our first Violet-crowned! Next, we stopped at Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary. It's been a strange summer here without Lucifer Hummingbirds coming into the feeders regularly. They weren't around on our visit either, but we did have good looks at Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Inca Doves, and Bewick's Wren.

After lunch in Sierra Vista, we drove to the cool temperatures at the high elevations of Carr Canyon. On the way, we drove a neighborhood road that is typically good for Scaled Quail. It definitely was this time! One bird gave us great looks for several minutes and at one point we thought it was going to run under the car. Once we arrived at Carr Canyon, it was eerily quiet, but after a short time, we came across a Greater Pewee. A Zone-tailed Hawk flew over shortly after. Buff-breasted Flycatcher

was our target here, so a Western Flycatcher made us feel like we were at least moving in the right direction. Eventually, we drove down the road a bit further to bird in another patch of pines. Here, a couple of us had very brief looks at a Buff-breasted Flycatcher and all of us heard a couple of them many times, but they were just not all that cooperative. Afterwards, we drove back down the mountain. Once we were at lower elevations, we stopped when we heard a Botteri's Sparrow. We eventually had some great looks at this specialty sparrow. A male Blue Grosbeak also gave us good views here too. It was nice to end the day on a high note!

August 8 – Las Cienegas NCA, Harshaw Canyon, Paton Center, Amado WTP

After breakfast at the hotel and loading up the vehicles, we started our drive west to Las Cienegas. Cassin's Sparrows were our main target here and it didn't take long before we heard many and saw some. As soon as we were watching our first Cassin's Sparrows, a large flock of black and white birds flew in. Lark Buntings! Our only Northern Harrier of the trip, lots of Lark Sparrows, and a heard only Grasshopper Sparrow were among our other highlights. Afterwards, we drove to Patagonia, where we encountered a large kettle of Turkey Vultures with one Mississippi Kite. Our stop for bathrooms here was also good for birds. We had better looks at another Mississippi Kite, a Say's Phoebe, and our only Black Vultures of the trip.



Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet

A short drive south brought us to Harshaw Canyon where we would be looking for a Rose-throated Becard that has been present in the area for the last few years. Other birding groups had seen it earlier in the morning, but it had flown into an inaccessible area. While waiting on the becard, we enjoyed our first Bronzed Cowbird, a very cooperative Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, and an unusually arboreal Canyon Wren. Eventually, the becard flew across the road, but the sighting was

extremely brief and we were unable to relocate it. We decided to take a drive around the canyon and come back to see if our luck would change. The highlight of our drive was a young Golden Eagle! While it was distant, we still had some decent looks at it as it soared high above the canyon. Back at Harshaw we had about the same luck with the becard. We heard it twice, but it just wasn't cooperative for views. As we were driving back towards Patagonia, a Rock Wren started singing near the road and we were able to track it down for our only views of this species.



Canyon Wren

After lunch in Patagonia, we made a short stop at the Paton Center. As soon as we got out of our vehicles, we heard our first Thick-billed Kingbird. It didn't take long before we had good looks at two! Other highlights while we were here included good looks at Yellow-billed Cuckoo, a couple Yellow-breasted Chats, a pair of Abert's Towhees, and the beautiful Violet-crowned Hummingbird. Afterwards, we drove towards Tubac where we would be staying for the next two nights. A quick stop at the Amado WTP added quite a few birds to the list such as Mexican, Ruddy, and Ring-necked Ducks, Bank and Cliff Swallows, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks (including a family group!), and good looks at Lazuli Bunting. It was a great way to end this day of birding.

August 9 – Montosa Canyon, Madera Canyon, Box Canyon

Our first stop this morning was Montosa Canyon where we would be looking for two specialty species, Five-striped Sparrow and Varied Bunting, both of which have very limited ranges globally. On the way, we were stopped by several sightings of Greater Roadrunners. We had somehow only managed a glimpse at one up to this point, so good looks were very appreciated! Once, we made it to Montosa, we started walking towards the Five-striped Sparrow area and before long, we could hear a couple singing. After walking closer, one of the sparrows flew up to a trail-side tree and started

singing. Great views were had by all over the next 10 minutes or so. We had heard Varied Buntings on the way up, so we headed back down to look for them. Our first bird was a female, always nice to see, but with Varied Buntings a look at the male is usually hoped for. After a fruitless search for a vocalizing Crissal Thrasher, we walked back to the cars and there they were. A male Varied Bunting spent several minutes perched right above our vehicles!



Varied Bunting



Arizona Woodpecker

Next, we drove north to Madera Canyon. While we had seen Coppery-tailed Trogons earlier on the tour, we decided to look for them again and see if we could get better photos. However, the canyon was very quiet and we only ever heard a trogon from the distance. A stop at the Santa Rita Lodge feeders was quite productive. Up to this point, we had only heard Arizona Woodpeckers, so great views of at least two individuals were much appreciated. Good looks at Hooded Orioles, Bridled Titmice, and several species of hummingbirds rounded out our highlights.

After lunch in town, we headed back to our hotel for a midday, heat break. In the mid-afternoon, with a to-go dinner packed in the back, we headed back up to Madera Canyon. We still hadn't seen a Berylline Hummingbird, so that would be our target for the evening. While we waited, we enjoyed much better numbers of hummingbirds than earlier in the day. A continuing Berylline X Broad-billed Hummingbird made a couple of visits, several Rivoli's, and lots of Broad-billeds made for some fun activity. Eventually, we brought out our dinners, and it was almost time to drive to Box Canyon where we would be spending some time listening for nocturnal species, when the Berylline appeared! It came in a couple more times after its initial visit and allowed for some photos.



Rivoli's Hummingbird

Off to Box Canyon we went, happy with our Berylline sighting. When we arrived, we listened to the last songs of some of the diurnal species in the area such as Varied Bunting (seen as well), Blue Grosbeak, Gambel's Quail, Black-throated Sparrow, and a Crissal Thrasher. As it was getting darker, we saw our first Lesser Nighthawks, and it wasn't long before we heard Common Poorwills singing from the hillsides. A longer wait finally yielded our target, a Buff-collared Nightjar. One started singing from right next to the road and while we didn't see it, we enjoyed the beautiful and unique song of this rare breeder to the U.S. On our drive out of the canyon, we came across an Arizona Blonde Tarantula and Western Diamondback Rattlesnake. While most of our group stayed in the vehicles, everyone enjoyed seeing these desert creatures.

August 10 – De Anza Trail, Canoa Ranch, Mt. Lemmon

We began our morning by birding along the De Anza Trail along the Santa Cruz River. Our first stop was at the Santa Gertrudis Lane access. As we walked in, there were quite a few birds. We heard Tropical and Thick-billed Kingbirds, a couple Abert's Towhees, and Bewick's Wren. As we got closer to the river, we noticed it was quite flooded, so we were unable to walk much of the trail or really have any chance of looking for the local Green Kingfishers. We would have to be happy with more good views of Thick-billed Kingbirds. As we walked out, Cathy got a photo of a small gray bird - Lucy's Warbler. This was one of our targets, so we tracked it back down and everyone was able to get a look at it and eventually a second. Afterwards, we headed to the Tubac Bridge. The birding from the bridge was quite good and we had more looks at Lucy's Warblers, a couple Northern Beardless-Tyrannulets, Lazuli and Varied Buntings, a migrant Wilson's Warbler, and our only European Starlings of the trip (not really a highlight, but they were our only sighting of the trip).

After a delicious breakfast at a local coffee shop, we headed back to our hotel, packed up, and started our drive to Mt. Lemmon. A brief stop at the pond at Canoa Ranch added a Pied-billed Grebe, but there wasn't too much activity overall. Our first stop on Mt. Lemmon was for lunch at the Iron Door. The lunch (or just pie for some) was delicious and we enjoyed watching their busy hummingbird feeders. Rivoli's, Broad-tailed, Anna's, and Rufous all visited and we had a brief look at Calliope several times. We also saw our only Yellow-rumped Warbler of the trip here. Our next stop at Mt. Bigelow was rather quiet. A quick stop at the Palisades Visitor Center for restrooms provided us with up-close views of Grace's Warbler. Our next stop, Rose Canyon Lake, was also very quiet. Where were all the birds? My complaining must have helped. Two Common Black Hawks started calling and perched across the lake! While watching the Black Hawks, a Peregrine Falcon came buzzing by and circled the lake many times! A couple of migrant Olive-sided Flycatchers were also a nice sighting. We still had some time before we needed to head back down to Tucson, so we went back to Mt. Bigelow to look for a couple of continuing American Goshawks. When we arrived, there were some storms rolling in, so we didn't have much time. We did hear a goshawk but ran out of time to see one. However, a Short-tailed Hawk came soaring right overhead, in front of the storm!



Grace's Warbler

Afterwards, we headed down the mountain, through pouring rain and sometimes hail, until we made it into Tucson. A delicious dinner at El Charro Cafe was a perfect way to end our Arizona tour. All in all, we recorded 192 species of birds. Plenty of other wildlife including two species of rattlesnakes, a tarantula, and several species of mammals added some extra excitement. Despite some unfortunate circumstances (such as losing power) our group always kept a positive attitude. Thank you to everyone in the group for helping make this a relaxed and memorable tour!

August 11 – Departure from Tucson




Tubac Country Inn