

Hi Birddos4Eric,

When you last saw your birder errant, he was on his way to Arizona with his birding pals from Australia, Tony Read and Nancy Bombardieri, after birding in Texas for two weeks. In Tucson they met their Southeast Arizona trip leader, Mark Pretti, and the six other members of their birding expedition, and the group then set off for Sweetwater, a wetland on the outskirts of the city. At Sweetwater we saw many of the desert species I had seen in Southern California in January: White-winged Dove, Gila Woodpecker, Verdin, Gambel's Quail, and the Greater Roadrunner. The year birds for that location were the Pyrrhuloxia (sort of looks like a female Cardinal) and the Mexican Duck, a newly recognized species and thus a lifer for me (both male and females look very much like female Mallards, except that the male has a plain yellow bill.)

We began the next morning by exploring a dry wash while en route to Madera Canyon. There we saw the first of what proved to be many flycatcher species on the trip (the Ash-throated) as well as the first of many Loggerhead Shrikes. I saw two familiar friends from the Southern California deserts—the Black-tailed Gnatcatcher and the Black-throated Sparrow. But I also saw two new species, the Rufous-winged Sparrow and Lucy's Warbler. These were both rather subtle birds. The sparrow looked, well, like a sparrow, with not much to distinguish itself, except for a rather tiny rust-colored patch on its shoulder. And after all of the colorful warblers of South Texas, Lucy was rather drab. A grey bird, she, too, had a tiny rust-colored patch—this on top of her head rather than her shoulder.

Most of the morning was spent at Madeira Canyon. Although I had visited SE Arizona three times previously, I hadn't been there before. We spent some time both hiking on the trails and sitting by the bird feeders, letting the birds come to us. We got our first woodpecker trifecta at the feeders: Acorn (very common for us in California), Ladderback (common in Southern California deserts and Arizona—much like our Nuttall's Woodpecker), and the Arizona—a target species (and life bird) for me, having missed it on my previous trips. Alas, no picture of that one!



Ladderback Woodpecker and Acorn Woodpecker, vying for "Best Haircut" award

Also at the feeders we began racking up Hummingbirds (locally common Broad-Billed and Black-chinned). And also Pine Siskins (a species we have in the Bay Area (but one that I hadn't seen yet this year) Bridled Titmice (Titmouses?) were also active at the feeders. While walking we continued to add to the flycatcher count, both the Dusky and the Dusky-capped (do you wonder sometimes who names these birds?) Both were year birds. Mark found us a Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet (one of the species we had worked so hard to see in South Texas) and we had flyovers by two raptors, a Cooper's Hawk and a Grey Hawk. And, as at Big Bend, the Mexican Jays appeared in full force here, too.

When we left Madeira Canyon, Mark warned us that we were going to take a shortcut over the mountains on a bumpy dirt road to that day's final destination, Patagonia. As we turned onto to the dirt road, I noticed the sign indicating we were driving up Box Canyon. I knew that name from the ABA rarity list which I follow daily—a Five-striped Sparrow had been seen regularly in Box Canyon for the past month or so. It was clear from the traffic on the road that people were looking for it. We pulled over at roughly the spot where it had been seen most often. Mark played the recording. Nothing. We walked up the road with Mark stopping every so often to play the recording. Nothing. We finally headed back to the van but, just before we arrived, a Five-stripe Sparrow flew in and perched on a cactus right in front of us. A delayed response, Mark termed it. Of course this would be one of the few times I had left my camera on the seat in the van.

Our final stop of the day was at the Paton Center for Hummingbirds where I'd been before. First we watched out front and got lots of birds. I was fortunate enough to see the Green-tailed Towhee, a bird nearly everybody else missed (and one that I'd seen only once previously.) But when we went around to the back of the house where the hummingbird feeders were, I was a little bit shocked—very few hummingbirds. I picked up a beautifully colored Anna's—much more orange-colored than the ones I see at home, a female Black-chinned, several Broad-billed. Mark then found a Violet-crowned—Paton's specialty hummingbird, Paton's being the only place in the U.S. where it's regularly found. This one was a little bit raggedy—a juvenile perhaps—but a bird with potential. (The next day I got a look at a mature one—wow!) Paton's proved to be a good end to a spectacular day of birding.



Hummingbirds: The Black-chinned, the Violet-crowned, the Broad-billed, and the Lucifer's

We spent the next morning birding Patagonia Lake State Park, the only body of water in the area. On the way in, we picked up another hard-to-see Sparrow, Botteri's, which responded to

Mark's recording. At the lake we saw lots of the usual suspects: coots and cormorants, grebes, herons and ducks (including a mama Mexican Duck with 11 small chicks). Around the edge of the lake, the woods were filled with flycatchers, orioles, warblers, and vireos—but no new species. I did, however, pick up a new one—the Olive-sided flycatcher—on our way back to town.



Mexican Duck and duckling

In the afternoon we once again visited the Paton Center, where I got a chance to work on hummingbird photography (I have the patience but lack the skill). I added the Rivoli's Hummingbird to my list, a bird I had seen before when it was known as the Magnificent Hummingbird but it underwent a split recently and the northern subspecies became the Rivoli's. There were also Broad-billed, Black-chinned, Anna's, and Violet-crowned for me to practice on.

I was surprised to find my attention drawn from the hummingbirds by some unlikely suspects—sparrows. Once again that Rufous-crowned was insisting I look at him. The Canyon Towhee (a bigger than average sparrow) was doing the same, trying to show me just how much he resembled the pair of California Towhees that are resident in my Berkeley garden. But most interesting were the Song Sparrow and the White-crowned Sparrow—birds that are very common in the Bay Area. The ones here were different subspecies and I was surprised at how different they looked from the ones at home. Sparrows are tough.



Song Sparrow

Rufous-crowned Sparrow

White-Crowned Sparrow

Canyon Towhee

The next morning we visited the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, a favorite place of mine in Arizona. It's 45,000 acres of rolling hills and grasslands. And it picked up where the previous day had left off with several species of sparrows: more Botteri's, several beautiful Lark Sparrows, and the rare Grasshopper Sparrow that I had seen back home at Garin Regional Park in April. But one of the creatures we had come there to see was nowhere to be found—the Pronghorn. This animal is neither deer nor antelope but a separate genus of which it is the only

species. It's the fastest mammal in North America—it evolved to outrun the American Cheetah which it obviously outlasted as well. Driving from Las Cienegas to Sierra Vista we finally managed to track one down, a very beautiful creature.



Pronghorn: Arizona subspecies

The major stop for the day was the Ramsey Canyon Preserve where Mark had once worked. This is one of my favorite places in the area—it's a great spot to see not only a wide range of bird species but also butterfly species. We saw more flycatchers here, including the Western Wood-Pee-wee (a year first for me) and more warblers, including the Painted Redstart, a lovely bird. But the star of Ramsey that afternoon was the Elf Owl. Mark pointed out a hole high up in a large Sycamore tree and told us that we'd be back in the evening hopefully to see the Elf Owl emerge from its home in the cavity. Just then the bird stuck its head out of the hole. So much for being a nocturnal species! This was the owl that Eddie Bartley had told me to seek out at Big Bend—that when he had been in Big Bend they were everywhere around the campground. Well, I didn't see one there, but I had a brilliant look at this particular individual.



Cavity nesters—and cavities—come in different shapes and sizes: Elf Owl, Fox Squirrel, Western Screech Owl

We made one final stop before dinner—at the Ash Canyon Bed and Breakfast, the other famous local spot for hummingbirds. We went specifically to see hummingbirds at the upper feeders. There were lots of Broad-Billed Hummingbirds throughout the garden, and I saw my only Rufous Hummingbird of the trip there that evening. The Lucifer's, too, finally put in an appearance, landing close by me but not staying long enough for a good, clear picture.

Later that night we went by Mark's house (he lives on the outskirts of Sierra Vista) hoping to pay a visit to the Western Screech Owl that has lived now for several years in the owl box Mark installed in a tree behind his house. Thus far the owl hasn't had any luck finding a mate in the area. Mark tried coaxing him out but the owl wasn't having it. Then we realized why. In a tall tree nearby came a loud hooting—a Great Horned Owl. I had to admire the good sense of that little Screech Owl, not wanting to end up on the menu of a much larger bird.



Great-horned Owl

Before dropping us off back at the hotel, Mark made one last stop—a used car lot in downtown Sierra Vista. This looked like a decidedly unpromising stop for birdwatching. But Mark told us that he'd discovered it a couple of years ago and has been coming here regularly since. He instructed us to look above the bright lights surrounding the lot, and directly over our heads we began to see large birds swooping in to scoop up the insects illuminated by the bright lights. Lesser Nighthawks. We were able to see four of them as they feasted on the insects. An example of birds making the most of the constructed landscape and human technologies.

We spent most of the next day in Huachuca Canyon, located within the perimeter of the Fort Huachuca Army Base (the base is huge, comprising almost 120 square miles). Up in the canyon you'd never guess you're on an Army base. The canyon's most famous bird is the Elegant Trogon, a species found in Mexico and Central America. Each year, however, a small number of them nest in Huachuca Canyon. This was my third time in Huachuca Canyon and I had had no luck on the previous trips. But we were there at the perfect time of year—we saw four individual birds, including a male and female that seemed to have paired up. I had excellent looks through the binoculars and scope but they didn't cooperate to the extent that I got a good photo!

The walk in the canyon was one of the most productive of the trip; in addition to the trogons, we saw another 25 species of birds. There were five species of flycatchers, including a new one, the Buff-breasted. There were three species of vireos (Hutton's, Plumbeous, and Warbling), three species of tanagers (Hepatic, Summer and Western) and five species of warblers, including a new one, the Hermit Warbler.

That afternoon Mark offered us an optional walk up Miller Canyon. He had some pretty good intel on a Northern Pygmy Owl that had been seen regularly up there and he also thought we might be able to get a Red-faced Warbler or two. These two species were not only year-birds for me but also life birds, so there wasn't much question that I'd be going. And my pals Tony and Nancy are always up for some new birds. We were also joined by new friends Michele and Jerry Harrison and Ken Wahl, carrying the biggest camera west of the Mississippi. The afternoon

was warm (probably the reason for the other three in the group sitting this one out) and the hike was steep but beautiful. We saw another Elegant Trogon here—the first one Mark could remember seeing in Miller Canyon. Unfortunately no owls or Red-faced Warblers, but we did notch two more new species of flycatchers: Hammond's and Cordilleran.

That night we did a little more owling, heading back to Ramsey Canyon where we had seen the Elf Owl the day before. There was a group of people already at the Elf Owl tree, so we decided to walk down the road to see what else we could find. Mark played several owl calls and was able to get a response from a Whiskered Screech Owl, but it was far enough away that we didn't have much chance of seeing it. What did surprise us, though, was a Mexican Whip-poor-will flying right over our heads. Mark got it in his light several times and we were able to get great looks at this nocturnal species.

Our last full day in Arizona started with another nocturnal species—we made an early morning trip to visit Mark's Western Screech Owl, and this time he obliged us. Mark explained that Western Screech Owls need two things in life—a home and a mate. Mark had provided the home for his owl, but the owl had now been looking for a mate for three years without success. I had to wonder a little whether maybe he just found the bachelor life more appealing than the alternative in that snug little house of his.

Next we proceeded up Carr Canyon Road to the top of the Huachuca mountains. This is a road where I once cracked the axle on my Volvo, so I was very glad that someone else was driving. We spent most of our day at about 7,000 feet, hiking around a couple of campgrounds at that elevation, and then hiking down into a beautiful canyon that had a small stream running through it. At the first campsite we saw a wide array of birds, including a new warbler (Grace's), a new flycatcher (the Greater Peewee), and a new junco (the Yellow-eyed.)

Driving to the next site, I was sitting in the middle in the row of seats behind the driver, looking out the front window. I got a look at a blue bird flying across the road that could only have been a Woodhouse's Scrub Jay. This bird was once called the Western Scrub Jay, but that species was split a few years ago with California getting its own scrub jay and the rest of the western states getting the Woodhouse's. Unlike the California Scrub Jay, however, the Woodhouse's can be a tough bird to see, so I felt fortunate in getting this sighting since even Mark who was driving had missed it.

The walk into the canyon proved to be another steep one. We were looking for the Red-faced Warbler, once more, one of my last target birds for the trip. As we neared the bottom, Mark heard one calling. When we reached the stream, we met a couple of birders who told us they had seen four of them. Mark led a bushwhacking party up the stream to look for the bird. When we returned, Nancy and Lisa, who had stayed behind, reported that a Red-faced Warbler had been perched over their heads, signing, and that it had headed downslope a few minutes earlier. We now went bushwhacking downstream where shortly afterwards Mark got onto the bird, followed by Tony and me. The others unfortunately missed it. It was gone—a beautiful bird and, like the Woodhouse's, one I felt lucky to see.

Our final piece of birding was back at Ash Canyon, this time watching the lower feeders for birds other than hummers. This session turned out to be a lot like my second one at Paton's—I wasn't seeing new birds but I was getting a good, close look at some familiar birds. It was a relaxed ending for my three-week trip.



White-breasted Nuthatch



Black-headed Grosbeak



Northern Flicker

When I got home, I had a week off from birding to catch up on the rest of my life. Then Birdathon reasserted itself. I was signed up for the last Birdathon trip, one called the Tule Transect; it was to take place over three days in Tulare County and we would bird a range of sites, starting at 700 feet in elevation and ending at 7,000. I had helped to design the trip and it would be based at the ranch of my friends Gary Adest and Barbara Brydolf and would be led by Joan Parker from the Tulare County Audubon Society.

I drove to our base, River Ridge Ranch, with my Berkeley friends, Mike Scott and Vicki Piovia, and by dinner time we were joined by Gary's wife Barbara and the rest of our group from the Bay Area: Phil Cotty, Julie Petersen, Daphne Byron (who was visiting from the East Coast), and my friend and fellow GGAS Board member, Bruce Mast. At dinner we discussed the weather—a storm was forecast in two days—meaning the day we were supposed to end up at 7,000 feet. We all agreed that it would be better to switch the two days around—we would go up the mountain the next day and stay down at the bottom when the storm came on Thursday.

The next morning I got my first new bird of the trip. Bruce Mast and I were drinking coffee and he exclaimed, "That's a Lawrence's Goldfinch singing in that sycamore tree." We wandered over, and I had an excellent look at the bird.

Joan Parker met us at 7 AM and she and Barbara, who is a plant expert, led us up the mountain. The birding was wonderful—I won't bore you with long lists of bird; I'll just say that for the record there were lots of good ones, many colorful. My favorite was the American Dipper that did a fast flyby under the bridge over the Tule River on which we stood. Near the top of the mountain we hiked through a large area that had burned last year, looking for a very elusive bird, the Black-backed Woodpecker. No luck. We did, however, hear a Mountain Quail which would have been a first bird for me had I seen it.

Digression of the Month (skip if you wish). Many birders will include heard birds on their lists. I sometime do. Usually, however, several conditions must be met for me to do this. 1) I have to recognize the call, having heard it before in the field (or having studied a recording of the call. 2) Or, in exceptional cases, the call is unique—one I would recognize again if I heard it. But for the purposed of my big year I set another criterion for myself—I actually have to see the bird. Thus I didn't list the Colima Warbler I heard in the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend NP nor the Mountain Quail on this day in the Sierra.

Back to our story. We were all glad that we had changed the schedule. On Thursday, the rains came with a vengeance. Bruce was a little bit damp (and perhaps a tad crabby), his tent having leaked during the night. We headed west, away from the mountain and towards the Central Valley, but at Joan's first planned stop it was still raining heavily. At that point, she proposed throwing out the plan for the day and dropping down into the valley itself, to get out from under the rainclouds. Success came after about 50 minutes of driving. The rain let up and we explored several wetlands and some nice riparian sections of the Tule River that ran through the valley. In the riparian sections we had good looks at some colorful species (buntings, tanagers, and grosbeaks) and a wonderful time watching a pair of Swainson's Hawks that were calling to each other in flight. The wetland species held one surprise—Bruce spotted a Red-necked Phalarope, another year bird for me. At dinner that night everyone declared the trip a huge success and wondered if I would be organizing it again next year. "We'll see," was all I could manage to say.

It turned out, though, that there was one more new year species to see on the way home. Bruce had given me a very specific set of instructions (he had seen the bird on the way to the mountains.) Mike, Vicki and I were joined by Daphne on the trip home, and together we followed Bruce's directions to the outskirts of Los Banos where there were several old barns standing close to a wetland. I approached the one furthest east and looked through a hole in the wall. Nothing. I went to another hole further along. Success! Above me on a rafter a Barn Owl glared at me. The others came and had a look and reported that they saw no owl. I looked again. It had flown! But above the first owl on another rafter tucked in the corner by the roof was the first owl's mate. Group success!

Once I returned home, I did no birding for a week. Again, I was busy trying to pick up the pieces of my life. But I did manage to do a little bit of birding research—In the stack of mail that had arrived was a book, *Sibley's East Birds*. Time to start preparing for the next trip—a swing to the east coast that would take me through a corner of New Hampshire, across the coast of Maine to Bar Harbor, and then back down to Eastern Connecticut, visiting old friends and meeting new birds.

And the numbers this month? Not bad. A total of 190 species for the month, including 145 species in Arizona (and 97 species in Tulare country). Of that total only 36 species were new (and 16 were life birds.) Once again that asymptotic curve rears its ugly head. But my total is 441 on the year—still running ahead of schedule. And now that I've arrived in Maine (and will

be birding on the East Coast for the first time), I'm looking forward to seeing all of those birds whose first name is "Eastern."

Bird of the Month. May's Bird of the Month is the Yellow-eyed Junco. This bird is closely related to the Baird's Junco that I saw back in February in the Sierra de la Laguna mountains in Southern Baja. Both species live high up in the mountains. The one in Mexico required a strenuous hike. The one in Arizona required a strenuous drive. But once we arrived at the Reef Campground (elevation 7,200'), finding these birds was as easy as a walk through the campground. There were lots of them and they weren't shy. One bird in particular was rather bold. It landed at my feet, having a beak full of nesting material. It seemed to expect me to move for it. I snapped its picture and then quickly obliged it.



Yellow-eyed Junco

Once again, I'd like to end by thanking my readers (your numbers continue to grow for which I am humbled—and amazed). Thank you, my friends. I'd like to send my special thanks to my pal from the Baja trip, Patty Kline, who reported that she read all 13 pages of my last newsletter in one sitting, even though I had cautioned against it. And a special thank you to Bob Lewis for catching my ID error in my April newsletter—I'm sure he wonders sometimes how I passed the Master Birder class he taught when he sees me making such mistakes! (I blame it on a late night and a cut 'n paste job gone wrong. And I take solace in something that Eddie Bartley has told me—more than once—"All birders make mistakes!")

Finally thanks to those of you who continue to support GGAS with your generous donations, including my travel buddies Kris Johnson and John Braden, and my birding pal and GGAS Travel Desk colleague Dawn Lemoine who made a pledge per bird (email me if you'd like to do this.) And, finally, thanks to Bruce Mast who continues not only to be an inspiration in the field, but also to pay off his \$1 per bird pledge! Way to go, Bruce.