



Sunrise Birding LLC

Bosque del Apache & Arizona

Winter Specialties TRIP REPORT

January 6 - 13, 2018

Report by Luke Tiller



Photos: Black Rosy Finch and Sandhill cranes at Bosque del Apache by Gina Nichol.
Blue-throated Hummingbird by Luke Tiller.



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Some of the many group highlights and top sightings:

- Sandhill Cranes, Ross's and Snow Geese at Bosque del Apache
- Sunrise and sunset at Bosque del Apache
- Arizona Woodpecker
- Blue-throated Mountain Gem
- All 3 Rosy Finches up close!
- Prairie habitat and the Baird's Sparrow victory
- Four species of Thrasher
- All three species of Bluebird
- Perched Prairie Falcon
- Greater Roadrunner
- Pronghorns

Day 1

After our first night in Albuquerque, spent at a traditional New Mexican restaurant, we started the birding element of our tour at a site just south of the Sandia Mountains. Here among in the suburbs of Albuquerque we sought out a host of Pinyon-Juniper woodland species. On site we were greeted by several frugivorous species including numerous American Robins and Cedar Waxwings mainly flying high overhead. Soon though, we were stumbling upon more desirable species including our first Western Bluebirds of the trip and following hot on the heels of that a small group of Mountain Bluebirds: the females providing an interesting ID challenge to discuss.



Signs that local mountains harbored a poor winter food crop were evident in the numerous montane denizens down at these lower elevations. We had both Steller's Jays along with the expected Woodhouse's Jays and highly prized Cassin's Finches along with the expected House Finch. Another treat at our first stop were two Sage Thrashers and we got great scope views of this very mockingbird-esque thrasher species. It was nice to be able to compare this species with the much more typically thrasher-like **Curve-billed Thrasher** (Photo: Luke Tiller) spotted in a neighborhood yard as we headed to our next stop.

Our next stop of our tour is always a highlight: Sandia Crest. Making this beautiful destination even more arresting was an overnight hoarfrost that had coated all the trees at Sandia Crest with a twinkling coating of little icy crystals. The ice, some blowing snow, blue sky and the incredible soft pinks of arriving rosy-finches making this site even more magical than usual. Along with the numerous Black Rosy-Finches, we slowly



workshopped the identification of both Brown-capped and Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches (sometimes a harder ID than most anticipate). Just for good measure we even added at



least one of the striking “Hepburn’s” Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches to our sweep of these amazing birds. As well as these incredible birds we also managed to add an unexpected subspecies of Junco (Cassiar) to our previous tally of Oregon, Pink-sided and Gray-headed.



Photos: Gray-crowned and Black Rosy Finch, Brown-capped Rosy Finch by Gina Nichol.

After a well-earned lunch, the rest of the day was spent out picking up more woodland species. The lack of food at higher elevations meant that birds were harder to come by than on previous years but over the rest of the day we added a mix of new birds which were highlighted by another Sage Thrasher, several neat Townsend’s Solitaires, more Cassin’s Finches and a pretty Red-naped Sapsucker.

Day 2

Day two started with a trip to Petroglyph National Monument. The day was off to a real bang when we spotted our third thrasher species of the trip in the shape of a subtle but stunning Crissal Thrasher! As well as the thrasher this site held a host of stunning sparrow species and we slowly worked good views of Black-throated, Sagebrush and Rufous-crowned Sparrows. Jaunty Rock and Canyon Wrens sang out from the hillsides and we also picked up a bonus flyover Prairie Falcon. All experienced while being surrounded by a collection of interesting and sometimes odd historical rock graffiti.

On the drive out we spotted an introduced, but no less beautiful for that, Ring-necked Pheasant. Hot on the heels of the pheasant was a brief pause for a tick-and-run American Dipper that was out of place on a suburban drainage ditch. This charismatic species put on quite the show for us as it hunted prey items under water as we watched: a highly successful twitch.

Next stop was our first of many along the Rio Grande. Here along the river we found ponds with a mix of new duck species including many stunning Wood Ducks. As well as entertaining us, the collected ducks had predators interested too, including a Bald Eagle that was lazily soaring up river looking for an easy meal. The riparian area also attracted a nice mix of land birds, which allowed us to study both Yellow-rumped Warbler subspecies as well as add our first Bewick's Wren to the trip list.

After a somewhat quiet visit to Water Canyon, we ended our day at the ponds just north of Bosque Del Apache. Here we arrived just in time to witness the arrival of numbers of both Lesser and Greater Sandhill Cranes. We also arrived just in time to witness an incredibly spectacular and dramatic sunset. As the sun set the sky lit up with flaming reds and yellows and bruised purples, a simply stunning setting for an end to a fun day.



Day 3



We kicked off our third day about twelve hours later at the exact spot we ended day two; Bosque Del Apache. The very same ponds from yesterday were now covered with thousands of mainly Snow Geese but with many pockets of Ross's Geese too. There were also plenty of attractive 'Blue Geese' to enjoy as well. Once considered a separate species, these "Blue Geese" are now recognized as just a color morph of Snow Goose. We finally dragged ourselves away from the goose and crane show to check out the feeders at Bosque's wonderful visitor's center. From our warm perch inside the center we watched the crowds of White-crowned Sparrows under the feeders, picking out other species from the flocks. Highlights here included a Green-tailed Towhee, a pair of splendid Pyrrhuloxias and a couple of cryptic White-throated Sparrows teased out from the swarms of their White-crowned brethren.

A quick spin around Bosque heralded impressive numbers of Sandhill Cranes, geese and ducks. Among the hordes of waterfowl, we also found a few other interesting species ranging from the large (Wild Turkeys) to the tiny (Pine Siskins). We also completed our bluebird sweep when we added a half dozen Eastern Bluebirds to our expanding trip species list.

Our next stop on the day was a popular park along the Rio Grande River. Here at this river migrant trap we sought out winter songbirds. Highlights included a couple of locally breeding specialties: Verdin and Phainopepla however the star of the show was almost certainly a majestic Prairie Falcon that put on a show as it soared over our heads. We ended our day in Las Cruces seeking out sparrows at one of my favorite birding sites in the picturesque Organ Mountains. Though initially passerines were keeping their heads down thanks to the presence of a young Cooper's Hawk, we eventually managed

to run into a nice mixed flock of wintering sparrows. As well as the sparrows we enjoyed great views of Verdin and a pair of Ruby-crowned Kinglets that were busy chasing each other and furiously flashing their crimson headdresses. Investigating a large and varied flock of sparrows we uncovered a great mix of stunning sparrows including Green-tailed Towhee, **Rufous-crowned Sparrow** (Photo: Luke Tiller) and Black-throated Sparrow. New for the trip though were two spiffy Black-chinned Sparrows, these great sparrows look like weird hybrids between Dark-eyed Juncos and Chipping Sparrows.



After teasing out our prized Black-chinned Sparrows we moved to some slightly more open habitat where we picked up another group of wintering sparrows. Pick of the bunch here were a roving flock of Brewer's Sparrow, though just working through the identity of the various species: Savannah, Vesper, Brewer's was part of the fun too. As were a couple of jolly Cactus Wrens that were singing away and coming to a water bowl placed out for a camper's dog. We ended our day winging eastwards setting ourselves up for an adventure in deepest Southwestern New Mexico.

Day 4

Dawn on day four found us cruising along the quiet roadways of Southwestern New Mexico. Here among the gobs of Red-tailed Hawks we uncovered two beautiful Ferruginous Hawks. As well as the spectacular buteos we also added another Prairie Falcon and our first confirmed Chihuahuan Raven's complete with observed white base to feathers and more crow like call. We also got to hear some Eastern Meadowlarks for the first time on the tour too.

The renowned Willow Tank was quiet on the day, though the surrounding scrub provided thrasher species number four for the trip: Bendire's Thrasher. We even had views of the bird in close proximity to a Curve-billed Thrasher, allowing for a robust comparison of the two very similar species.

We then headed into Portal to check out some feeder action. At Dave Jasper's the quick of binocular spotted some Scaled Quail as they disappeared into the brush. We also added our first hummingbird's of the tour including the big, beautiful and recently split Rivoli's Hummingbird (until recently know as Magnificent) and a couple of Anna's Hummingbirds.

Next on the itinerary was a favorite stop of the tour: Cave Creek Ranch. This incredible site is seemingly always dripping with birds, including a host of new ones for the trip list: Inca Dove, Blue-throated Hummingbird, Arizona Woodpecker, Mexican Jay, Bridled Titmouse, **Yellow-eyed Junco** (Photo: Luke Tiller) and Scott's Oriole. The carefree titmice were a huge hit as were the woodpecker and the scary-eyed junco. Highlight of the stop though was perhaps the out of season Scott's Oriole – a real desert beauty.



Post lunch we added our first Brown-headed Cowbirds for the trip, loitering ominously around town and had further good looks at Greater Roadrunner.

Our day ended in wonderful Willcox. A seemingly inauspicious golf course provided for a wealth of brilliant birds: In amongst the blackbirds coming to roost were a small flock of lovely Yellow-headed Blackbirds, the flocks of American Wigeon yielded one rare Eurasian Wigeon among them and flying over were a rare group of twenty Greater White-fronted Geese. One of the real highlights of the spot though had to be the calling

Long-billed Curlews that flew in to at dusk. All this accompanied by the constant calls of multiple Sandhill Cranes as they headed to roost.

Day 5

Again, we started our day as we ended our previous one, on a golf course in Willcox. The site yielded little different than the night before, beyond some beautiful but untickable Peafowl, though a lone Gambel's Quail did increase our tour species list by one. Driving local agricultural fields yielded several common open country species, but no views of the rarer ones we had hoped for. That said a brief stop to enjoy some more Yellow-headed Blackbirds uncovered a roosting Great Horned Owl and a stunning Vermilion Flycatcher.

After a brief stop at a quirky small-town coffee bar for an invigorating cup of joe and some homemade cookies we were back on the road looking for more birds. A quick stop at a waste water treatment plant (a mainstay of any arid region birding) yielded some beautiful Cinnamon Teal and our first Eared Grebe of the tour. Our next stop was another water treatment plant which provided more productive for passerines around the edge of the ponds, as we picked off both Black-tailed Gnatcatcher and the highly localized Rufous-winged Sparrow.

We ended our day looking for, but not finding, a couple of rare Mexican vagrants in Tubac though we did at least manage to get everyone looks at both Green-tailed and Abert's Towhees.

Day 6

We started our day in the beautiful surroundings of the Las Cienegas. Here we were seeking out perhaps one of North America's most sought after and hard to find sparrow species: Baird's Sparrow. Surrounded by stunning mountain vistas amid a golden expanse of grassland we waited patiently for the birds to appear. Initial views were fleeting at best however and we eventually turned to a more proactive approach to finding the birds as the morning wore on. This manhunt approach, proved successful, eventually garnering amazing scoped views of this stunning sparrow species. In the fields around



us flocks of Chestnut-collared Longspurs wheeled away and a cute little Grasshopper Sparrow popped up to try steal some of the Baird's limelight.



Baird's Sparrow Victory!

The next field on our tour yielded a puddle of dirty water, a bunch of cowpats and more excitingly a group of beautiful Pronghorn. Targets here were the mixed flocks of larks, pipits and longspurs coming in to feed and drink at the pool. Though birds were swirling around and disappearing behind the cowpats as they landed we were soon able to uncover both Chestnut-collared and McCown's Longspurs and some of the group were able to briefly get on the 'rarer' Lapland Longspur (though rare in AZ, it the world's most abundant longspur species). As we got back on the road again, an eagle-eyed participant pulled out a pair of White-tailed Kites from amid the heat haze of a nearby field.

A stop at the renowned Paton's Hummingbird Feeders provided at least one beautiful **Anna's Hummingbird** (Photo: Gina Nichol) which put on a real show for the group. As well as the expected Red-naped Sapsucker we also had what is being identified as a Red-breasted Sapsucker, though to my eye it looks more like a hybrid.



Most of our afternoon was spent back at Santa Gertrudis Lane. Though there were a lot of birds to

look through (unlike the previous day) we still didn't add any of the Mexican vagrants to our list. We did however uncover a bunch of new and somewhat uncommon species to our list including **Wilson's Snipe** (Photo: Gina Nichol), Plumbeous Vireo, Black-and-White Warbler and Pacific-slope Flycatcher.



We ended our tour with a quick stop at our final wastewater treatment plant of the trip. Here we added a rare, but long staying, Brown Pelican as well as a bunch of egrets and herons and a southern specialty in the shape of a Bronzed Cowbird.

In the end we had a great trip with incredible scenery, beautiful birds and a variety of amazing birding spectacle. Highlights included ice dusted mountains, golden grasslands and spectacular fiery-skied sunsets. We had stunning Rosy-finches that rarely stray from their mountaintop homes and clouds of incredible geese at Bosque. It was a wonderful week with an equally wonderful and interesting group of birders from across the US.

