

Arizona Spring Break Birding Trip April 1st - 8th, 2021 by Mark & Lucas Stephenson



Verdin

April 1: Lucas and I decided to return to Southern Arizona for his Spring Vacation the first week of April 2021 after not having been there for 5 years, when we visited the state during his 4th grade Spring Break in 2016. We loved our first trip and were hoping this trip would be just as much fun! On the drive to the Sacramento airport, **Swainson's Hawks** were soaring over a freshly cut hay field and a small flock of **Cattle Egrets** flew over; good omens for our trip! After flying into Phoenix and checking out a rental SUV we headed to **Monterey Park** where Ruddy Ground Doves had recently been seen associating with Inca Doves. As we pulled up a pair of **Rosy-Faced Lovebirds** flew up into a palm tree and a **Gila Woodpecker** called noisily

from an Oak. Sure enough, adjacent hundreds of Mourning Doves, and a few **Inca Doves** we found 3 **Ruddy Ground Doves** foraging for seeds in the park's green lawn. Their small size, rusty wings with jet black spots, and bright red eye made them stand out from the other doves. They readily fed on the ground in front of us and occasionally flew up into the nearby trees exposing their red wings and black tail edgings. They were a "lifer" US bird for us and a great way to kick off the trip! The grassy field also produced several **Chipping Sparrows**, **dark-ored White-crowned Sparrows**, and a **Lark Sparrow**. A cute yellow faced **Verdin** called from nearby mesquite along the roadside to make this a bountiful stop.



Ruddy Ground-Dove



Gila Woodpecker

Our next stop was the **Gilbert Water Ranch** another City Preserve. Although the mid-day sun kept many birds quieted down, we found our 1st of many **Gambel's Quail**, a **Black-chinned Hummingbird**, several **Verdin**, a **Curve-billed Thrasher**, and **Abert's Towhees** along with **Long-billed Dowitchers** and **American White Pelicans** chilling in the ponds. We rounded out the day visiting the **Santa Cruz River** along Ina Road where we found a **hybrid Mallard X Mexican Duck**, a **Spotted Sandpiper**, and a rare **Northern Jacana**. We had seen this bird in Costa Rica, and this resident of Mexico and Central America is a very rare visitor to Southern Texas and only occasionally to Southern Arizona. Their rich, chestnut-colored body, black hood, and bright yellow forehead and bill, with extra long blue legs ending in toothpick skinny toes that seem to go on forever, make this relative to Painted Snipes (a species found in S. Am., Africa, Asia & Australia), and superficially rail or coot-like in appearance, a fun bird to observe as it slinked through the cattails.



Northern Jacana

April 2: We awoke early and headed to **Madera Canyon** one of our favorite stops on our last expedition. We arrived at the Santa Rita Lodge at dawn to find a host of hummingbirds. Coming regularly to the 20 or more feeders were **Broad-billed Hummingbirds**, and with time, the **Rivoli's** (formerly the Magnificent), **Black-chinned**, **Broad-tailed**, and even **Anna's**. Many other feeders brought in **Scott's Orioles**, **Mexican Jays**, **Bridled Titmice**, **White-winged Doves**, **Arizona & Gila Woodpeckers**. Equally colorful were the warblers that fed in the Oaks overhanging the feeders. **Nashville**, **Virginia**, and **Black-throated Gray Warblers** along with **Painted Redstarts** were some of the highlights.



Rivoli's Hummingbird



Broad-billed Hummingbird

Just as amazing as sighting new birds, we randomly met the twin brother of a birding friend from Oregon, Chris Hinkle, and traveled with him to **Tubac** and the **De Anza Trail**. **Gray Hawks**, hidden by

the foliage, called loudly, and occasionally flew overhead throughout the riparian forest. We made it downstream to the **Rose-Throated Becard** nest and were treated to wonderful views of the preening female. We trekked through the underbrush and found **Bell's** and **Cassin's Vireos**, **Hammonds** and **Dusky Flycatchers**, and **Lucy's**, **Black-throated Gray**, **Yellow**, **Orange-crowned**, **Wilson's** and **Nashville Warblers** as well as our first **Northern Cardinal**. Next we visited **Santa Gertrudis Lane** along the river in the hopes of spying a **Green Kingfisher** or a **Rufous-backed Robin**, but we missed these rarities which had been seen earlier in the week but had close-up views of **Lucy's Warblers** and **Hutton's Vireos**. We ended the day back in the vicinity of Madera Canyon at **East White House Canyon Road** listening for **Cassin's Sparrows**, but unfortunately they had not yet arrived from their southern wintering grounds. However, we were treated to **Black-throated Sparrows**, **Phainopeplas**, as well as a passing **Lesser Night Hawk**.



Gray Hawk



Rose-throated Becard

April 3: The next morning we arose in the dark to head to **Patagonia Lake State Park**. This turned out to be one of our favorite stops as we found a **Greater Roadrunner** perched up in a mesquite, **Mexican Ducks** associating with **Mallards** and **Cinnamon Teal**, **Neotropic Cormorants** sunning on the pond, and a **Black Vulture** soaring overhead. The tiniest flycatcher, a **Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet** was calling throughout the park, with their clear, 4-note, descending whistle. We were even lucky enough to find a nest! The willows along the ponds were filled with **Bell's Vireos** along with **Lucy's**, **Yellow**, **Wilson's**, **Nashville**, **Common Yellowthroats**, and **Yellow-rumped Warblers**. On the way back to the parking lot, we found a **Gray Flycatcher** hiding in the mesquite. This flycatcher pulls its tail down, instead of up like most other Empids. Hiking back to the car, we spotted **Rufous-winged Sparrows** singing on the hillside.



Northern Beardless Tyrannulet



Lucy's Warbler

Violet-crowned Hummingbird by Matthew Jolley



Next we headed to the **Paton Center for the Hummingbirds**, a preserve gifted to the Tucson Audubon from the Paton Family. It is one of the few locations where **Violet-crowned Hummingbirds** can be found. We also spotted **Broad-billed, Black-chinned, & Rufous Hummers**. Coming to drink at a small water pool down an adjacent wash were **Chipping and Rufous-winged Sparrows, Abert's, Canyon, and Green-tailed Towhees**, as well as **Lazuli Buntings**. As we walked back up the wash, we had a quick view of a **Hepatic Tanager** coming in for a drink.

After lunch we walked along the **San Pedro River at the RNCA** in the hopes of finding a Northern Waterthrush. At the feeders we had great views of a **Green-tailed Towhee, Northern Cardinals, and a Pyrrhuloxia**, along with a single, unlikely **White-throated Sparrow**.



Buff-breasted Flycatcher

flew by the cliff face, close enough for photos. After 6 miles of knuckle gripping driving, we arrived at the Carr Canyon Campground. This turned out to host a 3-ring circus! First, this is one of the few locations where you can reliably find **Buff-breasted Flycatchers**, and they didn't disappoint! Singing throughout the Campground the little flycatchers would occasionally perch on an exposed limb for great views and photographs. In the tree tops nearby sang **Olive & Grace's Warblers**. The Grace's with their bright yellow throat and supercilium, and black-lined flanks, and the Olive "Old

April 4: We arose early the next morning and headed to **Ramsey Canyon**, one of the many bird rich canyons in the **Huachuca Range west of Sierra Vista**, only to find it didn't open until 9:00 a.m. (We later learned that a short hike up the canyon would lead to hummingbird feeders filled with many hummers.) Instead, we drove up nearby **Carr Canyon** just to the south on a 7 mile narrow rutted dirt road with cliff faces descending hundreds, if not thousands, of feet on the side! In the grassy fields at the start of the road was a small flock of **Eastern Bluebirds**, told apart from their Western cousins by their rufous throats. As we ascended the canyon, we were rewarded with a **Zone-tailed Hawk** that



Zone-tailed Hawk

World” Warbler with their bright yellow-orange hood and black face patch were equally stunning. (This warbler should have a different name as there is very little olive found on this stunning warbler!) Further up the canyon we found a warbler flock with **Black-throated Gray, Hermit, Yellow-rumps, and Painted Redstarts**. Lucas spotted a **Williamson’s Sapsucker** and I found a close-up **Arizona Woodpecker**. All-in-all a magnificent drive with towering cliffs and magnificent rock formations.



Olive Warbler



Grace's Warbler

At mid-day, we headed to **Upper Hunter Canyon** in search of nesting **Rufous-capped Warblers**. But alas, it was still too early in the year and they were nowhere to be found. We did however find a **Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay**, a **Hammond's Flycatcher**, **Cassin's Finches** and a small flock of **Chihuahuan Raven** to make the trek worthwhile. A warbler flock in a grove of trees near the spring included a **Virginia's, Black-throated Gray, Yellow-rumps, and a Painted Redstart**.

Next we visited the **Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary** a small B & B with a multitude of feeders, one of my favorite stops of the trip. We had magnificent views of Hummingbirds and other Arizona regulars that were pulled in by their numerous feeders. The highlights were rarities including **Lucifer's, Calliope, Costa's, and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds** feeding from flowers in their prolific gardens and feeders less than 5 feet away! My camera never stopped clicking! We also had more common species including **Broad-billed, Black-chinned, and Anna's Hummers**. Our first **Cactus Wren** and gorgeous **Scott's Orioles** along with **Canyon and Abert's Towhees** encouraged us to sit in the garden all afternoon.



Calliope Hummingbird



Lucifer Hummingbird

We ended the day at dusk visiting **Covey Run Terrace**, a small private community on the south side of Sierra Vista. By luck, a friendly resident let us through the gate. The grassy fields surrounding the homes were known for **Scaled Quail**. A number of these majestic golden scaled quail came into view as we approached one of the homesteads. They foraged in the fields near our car and even hopped up onto the fences surrounding one of the homes. Perhaps they had a feeder that the quails frequented. Another "Life Bird" for both Lucas and I! We continued down the road to a creek near a B & B and a Greater Roadrunner popped out in front of Lucas who snapped a wonderful photo!



Scaled Quail

Although dead tired, after a refreshing Pizza, we decided to go owling up Miller Canyon! We drove to the parking lot at the end of the road and stood outside the car. Within seconds, **Whiskered Screech Owls** began calling. After another 10 minutes, to our amazement, we heard the slow methodical hoots of a **Flammulated Owl**, our first for Arizona, but an owl we are very familiar with from the Northern Sierras. Many summers we've heard as many as 10 east of Lake Davis out of Portola, CA. What an incredible way to end the day!



Greater Roadrunner

April 5: Following our journey through the Huachuca's we headed to Portal and the **Chiricahua Mountains**. Along Historic Highway 80 Lucas spotted a couple of **Loggerhead Shrikes, Western Kingbirds**, and a solo **Golden Eagle**. Highway 80 passes through Bisbee, Lowell, and Douglas along the Mexican border before heading North and crossing for a short distance into New Mexico near Rodeo before you head back West on Highway 533 toward Portal. **Portal** is located at 4,800 feet above sea level in the extreme Southwestern corner fo Arizona, at the base of the Eastern slopes of



Arizona Woodpecker

of the Chiricahua Mountains. Chiricahua Peak is one of the tallest mountains, rising to 9,763 feet above sea level, and towering 5,000 feet above Portal. From Portal we drove up Cave Creek Canyon about 2 miles to **Cave Creek Ranch**, a birding B & B mecca with fantastic feeders. Sitting around the feeders with 10-15 other birders, we were treated to a host of Arizona birds: **Gila, Arizona, Ladder-backed, and Hairy Woodpeckers, Cassin's Finches, Canyon & Spotted Towhees, Scott's & Bullock's Orioles**. We were delighted to spot a **Virginia's Warbler** feeding a few feet away and visiting one of the water baths, along with the **Lucy's** and migrating **Yellow-rumps**, that are found throughout Arizona at this time of year, feeding in the overhanging willows.

Cardinals and Pyrrhuloxia's came to the feeders throughout the morning while we were there. What is most exciting about the Chiricahuas and this Ranch in particular is the array of Hummingbirds attracted to the shade, water and feeding stations found on the Ranch's 7 acres. Lucas quickly spotted our target hummer, the massive **Blue-throated Mountain-Gem**. It is the largest Hummingbird North of Mexico with males measuring from 4 3/4's to over 5 inches in length. Only Rivoli's Hummingbirds come close to this size ranging from 4 1/3 to a maximum of 5 inches. A male perched throughout our stay in a tree next to the feeders, it's bright cobalt-blue throat bordered by a dull gray breast, and it's dark olive-gray facial pattern set off by a bright white post ocular stripe and a duller white malar stripe colored this magnificent hummer. Its head and back feathers contain green, gray, and brown tones which show flashes of brilliant green in flight but change with the angle of the sun. While in flight, it sports a massive black tail, edged in white. Not to be out done by this massive hummer, the feeders also buzzed with **Broad-billed, Black-chinned, Calliope, and Rufous Hummingbirds**.



Virginia's Warbler



Blue-throated Mountain-Gem

Lucas met a friendly birding guide sitting on the ranches' porch, and goes out to hire when patrons are willing to pay for his services, but he kindly offered extensive knowledge and spoke at length about the area and the best places to find rarities. Following his advice, we decided to spend the rest of the afternoon heading slowly back down the canyon visiting 2 other homes with feeders put up by generous birding guides, in different ecological zones and habitats. Bob Rodrigues' feeders half way down the canyon to Portal, was located at the edge of the grassland zone, and Dave Jasper's feeders



Scott's Oriole



Curve-billed Thrasher

east of Portal is located further out on the Desert Floor with mesquite and cactus dominating the landscape. Although many similar Arizona birds were found at both locations, at **Bob Rodrigues' home** we found **Brewers Sparrows, Canyon Towhees, and Cassin's Finches** along with a **Scott's, Hooded, and Bullock's Orioles, and Curve-billed Thrashers**. At **Dave Jasper's** home there were

countless desert species including flocks of **Gambel's Quail**, **Black-throated Sparrows**, **Cardinals**, **Pyrrhuloxias**, and **White-winged Doves** that came to visit his feeders. **Bell's Vireos**, **Verdins**, **Cactus Wrens**, and **Blue-gray Gnatcatchers** were calling from the nearby mesquite.



Pyrrhuloxia



Gambel's Quail

Before dinner we headed out to the **Paradise Cemetery** to search for Pinyon Pine and Juniper habitat species. The Cemetery was relatively quiet as the wind had picked up so we drove a mile further along the road and encountered a **Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay** one of our targets. Before long we heard a **Juniper Titmouse** calling from the, go figure, Junipers. It came down near our car for magnificent views. Virtually identical to the Oak Titmouse, it is a rather plain gray bird, but it's raised crest, inquisitive behavior, and persistent calls give it quite a personality. On the trip back to Portal, a **Townsend's Solitaire** flew across the road with nice views of its buffy wing stripes.



Following Dinner, we followed the directions from a guide we met at Bob Rodrigues' home to the location of a **Western Screech Owl** nest past the Portal Post Office and Library at the end of **South Rock House Road**. It was poking its head out of a huge Sycamore Tree. At dusk and without warning, it dove out, nearly scraping our heads, as it flew toward the creek to feed. Shortly thereafter, the Sycamores were filled with the calls of 5 or 6 **Elf Owls**. Their soft calls are made to contact other and declare it's time to go out hunting for nighttime insects. A pair called back and forth congregating in a large Sycamore, and with the aid of a flashlight, we were able to see their beautiful brown

streaked breasts and glowing yellow eyes. Without warning, a **Common Poorwill** called from the nearby ridge ... another wonderful bird to cap off the evening! However, our night was not quite over as we decided to drive further up the canyon to see if we could hear other owl species. A new pair of **Western Screech Owls** were calling about every 100 yards up the Canyon as we made numerous stops to hear their bouncing hoots. A couple of miles past Cave Creek Ranch we took the **South Fork Road** a few hundred yards and were tickled to hear a **Northern Saw-Whet Owl** hooting away. Their rapid hoots are about twice as fast as a Northern Pygmy Owl and much faster than the Flammulated Owl we had heard in Miller Canyon. This bird was probably a migrant rarity that was undoubtedly headed further North. Excited by our owl encounters, we plopped down into our beds at the Portal Peak Lodge for a few hours of sleep before the next day's adventures.



Crissal Thrasher

from the mesquite. **Brewers Sparrows** were all along the roadside sitting on barbed wire fences and fence posts with their tumbling song. Suddenly, we heard the long, melodious call of a **Bendire's Thrasher** filled with a variety of jumbled warbles, squeaks and whistles. We located it sitting in the top of a mesquite out in the desert shrub. Before long a **Crissal Thrasher** answered. Its song is a bit more repetitive almost Mockingbird-like. To our amazement, the Bendire's flew in and chased the Crissal Thrasher from its perch. Two wonderful thrashers and it was barely past dawn! As might be expected for the desert floor habitat, we encountered **Loggerhead Shrikes, Western Kingbirds, and Vermillion Flycatchers** along the road. There were also plenty of **Brewer's, Black-throated** and a couple of **Chipping and Vesper Sparrows** mixed in. As we approached the spring, we found a large bush filled with **Lark Buntings**. Although most were in winter plumage, there were a few males showing their all black bodies with a dashing white splash on their wings and many females as well. An Eastern Meadowlark with its high song also called from the mesquite. The Spring was relatively quiet, but we found a few **Cinnamon and Green-winged Teal** along with a flock of **Snowy Egrets**.

April 6: Following the friendly bird guide's advice from Cave Creek Ranch we decided to spend the next day on a complete transect of the Chiricahua Mountains, beginning on the Desert floor along Stateline Road and heading slowly up Cave Creek Canyon Road (also known as 42 Forest Service Road), over the Chiricahua's crest at Onion Saddle to Highway 181 on the Western slopes near the Chiricahua National Monument. This is a long, windy 25 mile dirt road and not for the faint of heart, but worth it for visiting the different mountain ecological zone habitats and the wonderful birds along the way. We arrived at Stateline road at dawn and were met by a calling **Roadrunner**. Before long, the **Bell's Vireos** began singing. A small flock of **Chihuahuan Ravens** flew overhead, and **Black-tailed Gnatcatchers and Cactus Wrens** began calling



Bendire's Thrasher

We headed up Cave Creek Canyon and took the South Fork for a short distance to see what it was like during the day. Before long, Lucas spotted another **Hammond's Flycatcher** along with **Black-throated Gray** and **Hermit Warblers** and the relatively frequent **Painted Redstart**. Being relatively quiet, we backtracked and continued up **FSR 42 toward East Turkey Creek**.

Unfortunately the **Southwestern Research Station** was still closed due to covid as it is a great spot to have a chance to view Montezuma Quail. A short distance past the Research station we heard the unique descending trill song of the **Montezuma Quail** calling from south of us along the ridge. Within a minute, another male sang from the ridge to our North. Although we never were able to spot them, their unique call was very rewarding and often missed



Painted Redstart



Montezuma Quail by Jamie Baker

the road to Barfoot Spring. Within a short distance descending toward the campground we decided to walk down the road. We were rewarded when Lucas spotted a **Red-naped Sapsucker** sitting quietly high in a dead fir. Another few hundred yards, a half mile or so above the campground, we came to a large grove of tall firs. Sure enough, within a few minutes we heard a small flock of **Pygmy Nuthatches** and several **Brown Creepers**. Then without warning, we heard a **chickadee**. The only candidate at this location and elevation is the **Mexican Chickadee**. Very similar to a Black-capped, except with an overall gray back and gray wash on the flanks. With close inspection,

by most birders. We continued on to Paradise Road that runs along East Turkey Creek in the hopes of spotting Mexican Chickadees, a location where they have been spotted in the past. Although they were nowhere to be found, a **Grace's Warbler** was singing from the conifers along with a few **Hutton's Vireos** and **Cassin's Finches** and the predominant **Mexican Jays**, **Bridled Titmouse**, and **Ruby Crowned Kinglets**.

We headed up the road to the Junction known as the **Onion Saddle** and headed down the road toward **Rustler Spring** and **Barfoot Spring Campgrounds**. The wind was coming up strong, so we tossed a coin and decided to take



Mexican Chickadee

there is a small white spur that continues from the white cheek patch over the eye, and the black bib extends lower and wider on the breast. This chickadee has a distinctive call that is unlike any other chickadee and helps to seal the ID.

We descended down to the grasslands around Wilcox, but the high winds kept most bird activity to a minimum. When we hit the grasslands we were fortunate to see a flyby Prairie Falcon. Further down the road we encountered a pair of **Horned Larks** and at least 1 **American Pipit** and along the way a few singing **Eastern Meadowlarks**.

April 7th: The following day, after a drive into the Tucson area, we stopped at **Sam Lena Park and KERP**. There were a number of colorful waterfowl including **Blue-winged, Green-winged and Cinnamon Teal, Northern Shovelers, Ring-necked, and Ruddy Ducks, along with Neotropic Cormorants**. In the willow thickets there were **Cardinals, Pyrrhuloxias, Verdins, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Bell's Vireos**, as well as **Vermilion and Hammond's Flycatchers**, the ever present **Gila and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers**, and an occasional **Curve-billed Thrasher** joined by **Lucy's, Common Yellowthroats and Yellow Warblers**. As we approached a Sycamore grove, out flew a **Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawk**, and much to our surprise we were joined by a small group of **Harris's Hawks**. Cutting across a playing field we found a sparrow flock that included **Chipping, White-crowned, Lark** and a single **Vesper's Sparrow** along with a bold **Greater Roadrunner**.



Harris's Hawk



Harris's Hawk

Our next stop was **Sabino Canyon National Recreation Area**, a spot I wanted to show Lucas that I had visited years ago. The hillside and canyon is filled with all varieties of cactus, from Barrel, Fish Hook, Teddy Bear and Jumping Chain to the giant Saguaro Cactus. It was truly a delight as many were still in bloom. Along the trail we found a number of **Cactus Wrens, Abert's Towhees, Phainopeplas, and Black-throated Sparrows** and were startled by a singing **Rufous-winged Sparrow**. We hiked down into the river bed near the dam bordered by towering rocky cliffs. A **Rock Wren** called from a perch high on the cliff and several



Rufous-winged Sparrow

hummingbirds zipped by including a **Black-chinned and Costa's**. At the creek we found a female **Broad-billed Hummingbird** building a nest. **Lucy's, Yellow, Wilson's and Orange-crowned Warblers, Bell's Vireos and Black-tailed Gnatcatchers** called from the thickets, a **Lawrence's Goldfinch** gave it's characteristic high, metallic, flight call notes as it flew off, and a single migrating **Cassin's Vireo** foraged for insects amongst the willows.

We stopped by for a brief visit at **Saguaro National Park** in the hopes of locating a **Gilded Flicker**. After playing it's call a few times, we were treated to a gorgeous male landing on top of a nearby Saguaro who posed for photos! Next, we headed out I-10 west to a location given to us from a birding friend we met in years ago in Madera Canyon who was doing bird surveys and located a nesting **Crested Caracara**! A female was hunkered down incubating the eggs, when suddenly, in flew a male. After observing them for some time, the male climbed high in the sky and was joined by a 3rd Caracara! What an amazing bird!



Crested Caracara



Gilded Flicker

April 8th: We had just enough time to scoot over to the California Border before boarding our plane home on the 10th. Lucas thought it would be a good idea to drive the Arizona border county roads near the Colorado River. Sure enough, we were treated to a number of new birds feeding in flooded fields. We viewed a number of **Long-billed Curlews, Killdeer, and Wilson's Snipe** that were feeding near the road edge, when we came upon a flock of **White-faced Ibis** feeding with **Cattle Egrets**. Lucas was determined to scope over the flock, in the off chance of finding a Glossy Ibis mixed in. Sure enough, tucked back within the flock was a gorgeous **Glossy Ibis** with a pale blue outline of its dark face that distinguishes it from a White-faced. A few **Yellow-headed blackbirds** flew out of the tall grass for quick views that made this jaunt a success! When we came to the Colorado River in Parker, AZ we found **Redheads, Buffleheads, Common Goldeneye, Ruddy Ducks and Lesser Scaup** feeding with **Mallards**. It was a nice stop that brought our total species count for this Spring Arizona Trip to 214 species. We hope to return one day soon during the monsoon summer months to see more of the Arizona breeding birds like the Beryline and White-eared Hummingbirds, the Five-striped, Cassin's, and Botteri's Sparrows, the Elegant Trogon, Eared Quetzal, and the Red-faced and Rufous-capped Warblers. We took another day to explore the Palo Verde Ecological Reserve near Blythe, CA, but that's another story! ...



Glossy Ibis lifting its light blue outlined face, feeding in flock of White-faced Ibis