



## Natural Selections

**BIRDING, WILDLIFE, AND PHOTO TOURS**



Vermillion Flycatcher

# Arizona's Sky Islands: A Birding Treasure Trove

8 Nights/9 Days

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Between the temperate Rocky Mountains of the north and the tropical Sierra Madre Occidental of the south lie the mountainous Sky Islands of southeastern Arizona. Like true islands, these isolated ranges rise above a sea of grassland and desert scrub, forming montane stepping stones which connect the Rockies to Mexico. From Tucson, our tour takes us "island hopping" on a loop across complex geography and elevational changes that make this one of the most biologically diverse regions of North America. Here, at the northernmost extent of their breeding range, species found nowhere else in the United States like Elegant Trogon, Rose-throated Becard and Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher make their homes. In southeastern Arizona alone nearly 500 species of birds have been reported, 80% of the state's herpetofauna, and more mammal species than in any other similar sized area north of Mexico. The varied geography of this region truly supports the richest abundance of both plant and animal life in the country.

## Tour Overview

Day 1: Arrivals to Tucson International Airport (TUS), evening orientation

Day 2: Tucson- Santa Catalina Mountains to Madera Canyon

Day 3: Madera Canyon to Tumacacori to Rio Rico

Day 4: Patagonia to Sonoita to Sierra Vista

Day 5: Sierra Vista- Huachuca Mountains and Canyons

Day 6: Sierra Vista to Whitewater Draw to Chiricahuas

Day 7: Chiricahua Mountains and Canyons

Day 8: Chiricahuas to Wilcox to Tucson, evening celebration

Day 9: Departures from Tucson International Airport (TUS)

## 8 Night/9 Day Itinerary:

Our tour is timed perfectly with the summer monsoons, which bring surges of wet tropical air and localized rainstorms that cool and freshen the hot afternoon days.

Desert-adapted plants and animals respond with a resurgence of activity that brings the landscape alive. Many local birds either delay nesting or nest a second time to take advantage of this moisture.

During this second spring, not only does hummingbird, butterfly, and dragonfly diversity peak, but streams surge and wildflowers bloom. Mexican birds also wander up from the south, while southbound migrants arrive from the north. Our tour aims to please by taking full advantage of this extraordinary seasonal spectacle.

As we hop between the Sky Islands of the Santa Catalina, Santa Rita, Huachuca, and Chiricahua Mountains we'll also visit the two great deserts of the Southwest, the Sonoran and Chihuahuan which overlap in this region. We'll immerse ourselves in a full range of habitats—from shady riparian river corridors to desert grasslands, pine-oak woodlands, and mixed conifer forests. Get ready to experience the incredible diversity of these biotic communities. For 9 days, we'll explore North America's premier birding destination to target the most infamous hotspots for the renowned rarities that give southeast Arizona its legendary reputation.

## Day 1, Arrive to Tucson International Airport (TUS), evening orientation:

Flight arrivals into Tucson. This evening we'll have a meet and greet orientation over dinner to review the week's itinerary.

*Meals: Dinner*

*Lodging in Tucson*

## Day 2, Tucson- Santa Catalina Mt's to Madera Canyon:

Our first Sky Island stop will be the Santa Catalina Mountains on the northern edge of Tucson. As we ascend the picturesque Mt. Lemmon Highway, we'll explore life zones from 2500 to 9000 feet in

*Elegant Trogon*



© Bob D'Antonio

elevation, encountering a range of habitats, each with a new community of birds. There are 20 birding sites available here, with over 230 species possible on the mountain. In the Sonoran Desert Scrub zone at lower elevations, we'll be targeting Harris Hawks, Cactus Wren, Verdin, Vermillion Flycatcher, Gila Woodpecker, Purple Martin, Scott's Oriole, and both Black-chinned and Black-throated Sparrows. Ascending higher into the Oak Woodland zone we may find Bridled Titmouse, Hutton's Vireo, Painted Redstart, and Arizona Woodpecker. Climbing further into the Pine Forest and Mixed Conifer zones we should see a mix of both northern Rocky Mt. and southern Madrean birds like Western Tanager, Steller's Jay, Plumbeous Vireo, Pygmy Nuthatch, Mountain Chickadee, Cordilleran Flycatcher, and Greater Pewee. Several species of warblers are possible here, including Olive, Grace's, Virginia's, Red-faced, and Orange-crowned.

In the afternoon, we'll drive south of Tucson to our second Sky Island in the Santa Rita Mountains. Madera Canyon is one of the most famous birding locales in Arizona and always full of surprises. The popular feeders at Santa Rita Lodge attract many hummingbirds, like the common Broad-billed and Rivoli's, and even a rare Mexican species such as the Berylline Hummingbird or Plain-capped Starthroat may appear. Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Acorn Woodpecker, and Mexican Jay



Clifford Powell  
Montezuma Quail

regularly visit the seed feeders here, and Hepatic Tanagers Dusky-capped and Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers are usually nearby. Coatimundi can even be seen raiding the feeders for a sweet drink of sugar water. In the evening after dinner, we'll spend time owling farther up the canyon for Elf Owl, Whiskered Screech-Owl and possibly Mexican Whip-poor-will. If the group is interested, this is a great opportunity for a night drive to try our luck for Gila Monster, Black-tailed Rattlesnake, Tiger Rattlesnake, Desert Kingsnake, Green Ratsnake, and more.

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner  
Lodging at Santa Rita Lodge or  
Green Valley (depending on  
availability)*

**Day 3, Madera Canyon, Tubac,  
Tumacacori, Rio Rico:**

In the morning, we'll continue exploring the Madera Canyon area for Elegant Trogon and Montezuma Quail, then make a stop in the lush lower grasslands for Cassin's and Botteri's sparrows, which can often be heard singing near the road.

Next, our group will visit the Florida Wash and Proctor Road hotspots for lowland and foothill species, including Northern-Beardless Tyrannulet, Varied Bunting, Blue Grosbeak, Phainopepla, Pyrrhuloxia, Hooded Oriole, Bell's Vireo, Canyon Towhee, Rufous-winged Sparrow, and both Black-capped and Blacktailed Gnatcatchers. In past years, the riparian corridors of Madera Canyon have regularly hosted Elegant Trogons, so we will also target this species if there are

recent sightings.

After lunch, we'll drive south to Tumacacori to bird along the shady Santa Cruz River, where we should see Abert's Towhee, Yellow Warbler, Lucy's Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Summer Tanager, Cassin's Kingbird, and both Inca and Common Ground Doves. Special target birds here are Gray Hawk and Green Kingfisher, with the additional possibility Rose-throated Becard, which have recently been found breeding along the river and is the only known nesting locale in the United States. Farther south at Rio Rico, we have an excellent chance of locating Tropical Kingbird, Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Mexican Duck, as well as Bronzed Cowbird, Tree Swallow, Black Phoebe, Yellow-headed Blackbird, and a few species of herons and egrets. From here we'll continue south toward Nogales, where we'll spend the night.

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner  
Lodging in Nogales*

**Day 4, Kino Springs, Paton Center, Sonoita, Sierra Vista:**

Just outside of Nogales, our first stop on the way to Sierra Vista will be at Kino Springs, where we'll have a second chance for sightings of both Tropical Kingbird and Blackbellied Whistling-Duck, and an opportunity for new species like Lazuli Bunting, Lark Sparrow, and Black Vulture. Continuing east, our group will stop in Patagonia at the Paton Center for Hummingbirds where we'll relax and watch the



**Costa's Hummingbird**

feeders for Violet-crowned, Costa's, Calliope, Rufous, Black-chinned, Broad-tailed, and more! This is a premier place for hummingbird photography as there are comfortable benches for viewing the numerous feeders that are staged along the walking paths. After lunch in Patagonia, we'll stop in the Sonoita Grasslands for Swainson's Hawk, Lark Bunting, Loggerhead Shrike, Lillian's Eastern Meadowlark, Grasshopper Sparrow, and perhaps Common Nighthawk. We'll also be watching for Pronghorn Antelope, Black-tailed Prairie Dogs and Burrowing Owls.

In the late afternoon, we'll arrive at our cozy bed and breakfast in

Sierra Vista, where we'll spend the next two nights.

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner  
Lodging in Sierra Vista*

**Day 5, Huachuca Mountains and Canyons:**

We'll dedicate a full day of birding to our third Sky Island, the Huachuca Mountains, which provide excellent opportunities to find rarities, as well as an impressive variety of hummingbirds unrivaled anywhere in the United States- up to 14 species! We'll certainly check the infamous feeders in Ash Canyon for new species like Lucifer, Bluethroated, White-eared and

perhaps Berylline Hummingbirds. Today our schedule will be quite flexible depending on what rare birds are present. Rarities like Flame-colored Tanager, Aztec Thrush, and Slate-throated Redstart would be a welcome surprise. Miller, Hunter and Carr Canyons are options to visit on the east slope of the Huachucas within the Coronado National Forest. Montezuma Quail, Mexican Spotted Owls, Buff-breasted Flycatchers, Tufted Flycatchers, and Rufous-capped Warblers all nest here. And, if the nearby military base at Fort Huachuca is open, we'll visit Huachuca Canyon, where Elegant Trogon is a common bird.

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner  
Lodging in Sierra Vista*

#### Bobcat



#### **Day 6, Sierra Vista to Whitewater Draw to Chiricahua Mt's:**

This morning we'll drive east through Bisbee to Whitewater Draw in the Sulphur Springs Valley. The wetlands here attract a variety of migratory waterfowl and shorebirds. Cinnamon, Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal are possible, as well as White-faced Ibis and several species of sandpipers and waders. We'll also look for Virginia Rail and Sora, while keeping an eye in the sky for Chihuahuan Raven, Peregrine and Prairie Falcon. Last but not least, the next stop of the tour will be to the western side of the Chiricahua Mountains, the largest of all the "Sky Islands" in the region. We'll first visit Chiricahua National Monument and walk the trails around the Visitor Center while taking in this awe-inspiring landscape of rock. Unusual spires of rhyolite are the park's biggest

attraction, but we'll also be looking for White-throated Swift, Golden Eagle, Zone-tailed Hawk, and both Rock and Canyon Wrens. Next, we'll ascend up and over the mountains via Pinery Canyon watching the habitat change as we gain in elevation from low Desert Scrub to Mixed Conifer forest at 9,000 feet. Along the way, our group will stop to target higher elevation birds in the cooler pine forests like Yellow-eyed Junco, Western Bluebird, Brown Creeper, Hairy Woodpecker and House Wren. We may even see early migrants like Cassin's Vireo, Townsend's and Hermit Warbler. Our next stop at Onion Saddle is a hotspot for the highly sought-after Mexican Chickadee, which can be seen on no other Sky Island in southern Arizona. Later in the afternoon, we'll descend down the east side of the Chiricahuas to the quaint mountain town of Portal, where we will be based for the next two nights. Our group will spend at least one evening looking for nightjars like Lesser Nighthawk and Common Poorwill, and depending on our past success in Madera Canyon, we may do more owling.

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner  
Lodging in/near Portal*

#### **Day 7, Chiricahuas and Cave Creek Canyon:**

In the morning, we will get our first taste of the Chihuahuan Desert in the lower valley below Portal as we search for Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Scaled Quail, Crissal Thrasher, and



Spotted Owl

possibly Bendire's. Next, we'll head back into the mountains to drive the stunning Cave Creek Canyon, where we'll make several stops in this rich riparian area for new species like Black-throated Gray Warbler, Brown-crested flycatcher and Warbling Vireo. Lower Cave Creek Canyon offers second chance looks at Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher and Montezuma Quail, while the upper canyons are our best backup locations for Elegant Trogon, if we have not seen it yet. In the afternoon, we'll ascend higher up the mountain where Pine Forest transitions into Mixed Conifer zones, our group will stop at both Rustler and Barfoot Park hotspots for montane species like Pine Siskin, Band-tailed Pigeon, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Red Crossbill, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and perhaps Northern Goshawk. Additional sightings of Mexican Chickadee will also be possible up here. On our way back to Portal, our last stop will depend on which rare hummingbirds are

being reported in the area. We may visit the Southwestern Research Station for a Blue-throated Mountain-Gem. Or, we may stop at the hummingbird feeders at the George Walker House in Paradise for one last surprise. After dinner we'll take a drive onto nearby roads to try our luck for any nocturnal bird or mammal species, as well as reptiles such as Mojave and Diamondback Rattlesnakes, Desert Kingsnakes, and more.

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner  
Lodging in Portal*

### **Day 8, Chiricahuas to Wilcox to Tucson:**

After a last morning in the Chiricahua Mountains to target any species we've missed, we'll continue back toward Tucson. The first stop of our return loop will be to the desert oasis of Lake Cochise outside of Wilcox, where rains will have filled the playa, concentrating a variety of migrating shorebirds, including Long-billed Dowitcher, Wilson's Phalarope, Black-necked Stilts, American Avocets, and Longbilled Curlew. Several species of sandpipers are possible, like Least, Western, Baird's, Stilt, Spotted and even Semipalmated. Later in the afternoon, if time allows, we may make an additional stop south of Benson at St. David, where Mississippi Kites are known to breed. Once back in Tucson, our tour will conclude in the evening with a special celebratory dinner.

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner  
Lodging in Tucson*

### **Day 9, Departure from Tucson International Airport:**

After breakfast our group will bid our farewells and board departure flights.

### **Included in this itinerary:**

In-country accommodations, ground transportation, tours, meals, soft drinks, guide and entrance fees.

### **Not Included:**

Personal items such as alcoholic beverages, gift shop, laundry, etc. are not included.

### **Travel insurance:**

We highly recommend purchasing travel insurance. In the event that you need to cancel your trip due to medical or other reasons, this insurance will protect you.



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