



Natural Selections

BIRDING, WILDLIFE, AND PHOTO TOURS



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Black Rosy-finch

Winter in New Mexico, The Soul of Southwest Birding

7 Nights/8 Days

New Mexico is truly one of the best kept birding secrets in the Southwest. Logging an astonishing 546 species of birds, New Mexico ranks fourth in the U.S. for overall biodiversity. Many of New Mexico's best birding sites are located along the Rio Grande River—a green ribbon of riparian forests running through the middle of the state. Our tour takes us on an unforgettable journey along the Middle Rio Grande, from the dramatic Rocky Mountains outside of Santa Fe, to the state's largest lake in the heart of the scenic Chihuahuan Desert. We'll visit premier hotspots at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, one of the Top 10 best birding destinations in the country, and the infamous Sandia Mountains, the wintery home to all three species of rosy-finches. The unique blend of Wild West, Spanish influence, and American Indian presence creates an authentic spirit here with a palpable presence, which when combined with amazing birding, will leave lasting and enriching memories of this Soul of the Southwest.

Tour Overview

We offer this tour to individuals and groups throughout the winter season, with December to February being the best period for mild weather and maximum winter migration activity.

Day 1: Arrivals to Albuquerque International Sunport (ABQ), evening orientation

Day 2: Albuquerque- Sandia Mt. foothills and Rio Grande River bosque

Day 3: Albuquerque to Sandia Crest to Socorro

Day 4: Socorro to Bosque del Apache NWR

Day 5: Socorro to Elephant Butte Lake

Day 6: Socorro to the Estancia Valley to Santa Fe

Day 7: Santa Fe Ski Basin to Albuquerque, evening celebration

Day 8: Departures from Albuquerque International Sunport (ABQ)

7 Night/8 Day Itinerary:

Day 1, Arrive to Albuquerque International Sunport (ABQ), evening orientation:

After arrivals into Albuquerque this evening we'll have a meet and greet orientation over dinner to review the week's itinerary.

Meals: Dinner

Lodging in Albuquerque



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Ladder-backed Woodpecker

Day 2, Albuquerque to Sandia Mt. foothills and Rio Grande River Bosque:

This morning we'll begin in the foothills of the Sandia Mountains at Embudito Canyon in upland scrub habitat. During a short walk up the canyon bottom, we'll hope to see numerous desert species like Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Canyon Towhee, Curve-billed Thrasher, Cactus Wren and both Scaled and Gambel's Quail. As the canyon narrows, Rufous-crowned Sparrow and Woodhouse's Jay can be found on pinyon-juniper dappled slopes, while both Rock and Canyon Wrens perch along giant granite boulders.

For lunch we'll visit the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, a museum

complex collectively owned by the state's 19 distinct pueblos. These tribal communities descended from ancestral Puebloan cultures with origins from Chaco Canyon, Mesa Verde, and Bandelier. We'll have the opportunity to enjoy (pre- and post-contact) native fusion cuisine at the Pueblo Harvest Cafe and stay for a traditional Native American dance performance showcasing a dance group from one of the pueblos. After lunch we'll visit the Rio Grande Nature Center State Park, where more than 315 species of birds have been recorded in this small oasis due to the lush wetland habitats and prime location near the river. We'll see a sampling of wintering waterfowl, and should have great looks at Greater Roadrunner, Wood Duck, and Eastern and Western



Brown-capped Rosy-finch

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

Bluebirds. The park also has several seed feeders, which attract White-throated Sparrow, Black-capped Chickadee, and both Downy and Hairy Woodpecker. Later in the afternoon, we'll visit Albuquerque's newest gem, Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge, the first urban wildlife refuge in the Southwest. As we drive toward the river through the agricultural fields, we should have excellent side by side comparative views of Richardson's Cackling Goose and Canada Goose. A handful of Greater White-fronted Geese may be mixed in, and perhaps a rare Brant, which has been seen in recent years. A short walk through the cottonwood bosque will offer us our first encounter with the majestic Rio Grande River. In addition to wintering songbirds like Marsh Wren, Cedar Waxwing, and Brown Creeper, we'll hope to spot a sleeping porcupine up in the cottonwood trees. In the evening, we'll enjoy our first taste of delicious New Mexican cuisine in Oldtown Albuquerque, and have an opportunity for a Saturday night stroll along the historic plaza founded in 1706.

Day 3, Albuquerque to Sandia Crest to Socorro:

After breakfast, we'll head down a section of "The Mother Road," historic Route 66, as we head to Sandia Crest near the peak of the Sandia Mountains. The winding road to the top passes through various habitats from pinyon-juniper at 6,500 ft to alpine spruce-fir forest just above 10,500 feet. In the lower mixed conifer forests we'll stop to target Pygmy Nuthatch, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Evening Grosbeak and both Red-naped and Williamson's Sapsuckers. Higher up the mountain we'll be looking for Cassin's Finch, Red Crossbill, Steller's Jay, Mountain Chickadee, and possibly American Three-toed Woodpecker. Sandia Crest is known to locals for its breathtaking, panoramic views of the Rio Grande Valley below, but it's best known to birders as the place to see the three species of rosy-finches (Brown-capped, Black, and Gray-crowned).

These incredible little birds favor the most inhospitable, vertical mountainous terrain in the world and are considered the hardiest of all songbirds—well adapted to the highest of elevations. From the warmth of the cafe, we'll see them in their wintery element on Sandia Crest as mixed flocks of all three species swarm the seed feeders outside. This is the only place in the country to view all three remarkable rosy-finches, including the Hepburn's subspecies of the Gray-crowned, on their wintering grounds so easily at once! As an additional treat, we'll see these birds up close in the hand as local ornithologists from the Rio Grande Bird Research team will be onsite gathering data for their ongoing rosy-finch banding project, now in its seventeenth year. We'll have the opportunity to learn firsthand about the fascinating natural history, population trends, and migratory dynamics of these unique birds.

After getting our fill of finches, we'll descend the mountain and have lunch in Albuquerque. From there we'll drive south toward Socorro, where we'll be based for the next few days. Along the way, our group will stop at the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area, a restored wetland complex adjacent to the Rio Grande, in hopes for good looks at wintering sparrows such as Song, Lincoln's, Swamp, and Savannah.

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

Day 4, Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge:

We'll get an early start to spend the entire day at the most famous birding hotspot in New Mexico, Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. Logging an impressive 375 species of birds,

this renowned refuge is both a birder's paradise and photographer's playground.

Situated at the northern edge of the Chihuahuan Desert along the Rio Grande floodplain, the refuge manages farm fields, woodlands, wetlands, and wilderness areas just for birds. Starting in the fall, flooded marshlands attract tremendous numbers of south-bound wintering waterfowl using the migratory river corridor of the Central Flyway. At night, tens of thousands of Snow geese, Ross's geese, and Sandhill Cranes sleep in the shallow wetlands to protect themselves from predators. Near dawn, against the dramatic backdrop of a mirrored horizon, the birds alight en masse to feed in fields throughout the Middle Rio Grande Valley for the day. This extraordinary spectacle- a symphony of cackling on a mesmerizing exodus of wings- truly captivates the senses and charms the spirit. We'll have the pleasure to witness both the "fly-out" at sunrise and the "fly-in" at sunset, as the birds return to their wetland roost. The opportunity to capture evocative imagery of shaded silhouettes and mass take-offs will be the photographic

highlight of the trip. During mid-day, our group will explore the refuge's two loop roads that border numerous agricultural fields and flooded wetlands, stopping at several overlook viewing platforms along the way. Over 20 species of diving and dabbling ducks are possible here, including Hooded Merganser, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, and even the rare Long-tailed Duck. In the fields we may see Tundra Swan, Ring-necked Pheasant, Wild Turkey, and American Pipit. And in the sky we'll be watching for Bald Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Northern Harrier, and Ferruginous Hawk, which are quite common. We'll also search the desert scrub for specialties such as Sagebrush Sparrow, Black-throated Sparrow, Crissal Thrasher, and Green-tailed Towhee, and stay watchful for often seen residents like mule deer, coyote, bobcat and javelina.

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

Ross's and Snow Geese



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Day 5, Percha Dam to Elephant Butte Lake:

This morning our group will head south along the Rio Grande River to

popular birding hotspots at Percha Dam State Park and Caballo Lake, in the heart of the Chihuahuan Desert. Percha Dam is a quiet oasis along the river's edge shaded by mature cottonwood trees with trails wandering through shrubby mesquite thickets. Here we'll be looking for resident Pyrrhuloxia, Phainopepla, and Verdin, as well as four wintering Zonotrichia sparrows. In recent years, rare birds such as Great Kiskadee, Purple Finch, Carolina Wren, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and Fox Sparrow have all been found, so we can undoubtedly expect surprises. Next, we'll drive to nearby Caballo Lake, a small reservoir fed by the Rio Grande, and an ideal place in winter to target loons, grebes, mergansers, cormorants, and pelicans.

After lunch in the small desert resort town of Truth or Consequences we'll visit Elephant Butte Lake, the largest body of water in New Mexico. This enormous reservoir hosts impressive numbers of overwintering Clark's and Western Grebes, as well as an interesting variety of gulls. We'll visit two marinas at the edge of the lake where Lesser Black-backed, Glaucous, Iceland and Herring Gulls have been known to show up among the more common mixed flocks of California and Ring-billed Gulls. Depending on time and rare bird reports in the area, we'll have the option to stop for additional species such as Bridled Titmouse and Vermilion Flycatcher, which occasionally make an appearance.

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

Day 6, Socorro to the Estancia Valley to Santa Fe:

This morning on our way north from Socorro, we'll have a choice to visit either the La Joya Wildlife Management Area or Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge in the Middle Rio Grande Valley, for an opportunity to look for any further wintering waterbird and songbird species, like perhaps Long-billed Dowitcher or Northern Shrike.

En route to Santa Fe, we'll visit the plains-mesa grassland habitat of the Estancia Valley, which is designated as an Audubon Important Bird Area in New Mexico due to its high concentration of breeding Ferruginous Hawks and wintering raptors. We'll be looking for Merlin, Prairie Falcon, Rough-legged Hawk, Golden Eagle and both light and dark morph Ferruginous Hawks. Additionally, we'll have the chance to target Chestnut-collared and McCown's Longspurs, which can often be found foraging in the agricultural fields along with flocks of Horned Lark. This valley is also a prime location for Chihuahuan Raven and Lillian's Eastern Meadowlark.

Continuing north, our group will take the Turquoise Trail, a National Scenic Byway named for the rich turquoise deposits found in the area. This unique highway winds its way to Santa Fe through pinyon-juniper studded hillsides and historic mining towns now transformed into quirky art villages. We'll stop along the way hoping to find Juniper Titmouse, Pinyon Jay, Mountain Bluebird, Sage Thrasher, and Townsend's Solitaire.

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner Lodging in Santa Fe



Mountain Bluebird

Day 7, Santa Fe Ski Basin to Albuquerque:

After breakfast our group will explore The Nature Conservancy's Santa Fe Canyon Preserve, a peaceful sanctuary favored by locals. We'll hike the 1.3 mile loop trail through the Santa Fe River riparian area and historic dam site in search of Black-billed Magpie, Evening Grosbeak, and Winter Wren. Next, we'll drive the Santa Fe National Forest Scenic Byway into the majestic Sangre de Cristo Mountains, which are the southernmost sub-range of the Rocky Mountains, and home to New Mexico's highest peaks at over 14,000 feet. Stopping along this gorgeous highway offers a chance to see high-elevation species typical of the northern Rockies such as Red-breasted Nuthatch, Pine Grosbeak, and Dusky Grouse. We'll also explore the alpine spruce-fir forest near the Santa Fe Ski Basin for Canada Jay and Clark's Nutcracker. After a special lunch in Santa Fe, we'll have free time to wander and sight-see around the Santa Fe Plaza, a National Historic

Landmark constructed in traditional Spanish-American colonial style. Several museums, including the Georgia O'Keefe museum and the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts are centered here within walking distance. Historic chapels and cathedrals tower above the plaza, and welcoming boutiques, bookstores and art galleries line the streets. The mix of Native, Hispanic, Western and Bohemian cultures make Santa Fe the premier art capital of the Southwest. So, whether you're interested in browsing the impressive collections of Native American pottery, textiles and jewelry, or just content to relax on a park bench and people-watch, you'll be satisfied here.

Later in the afternoon on our way back to Albuquerque we may have time to stop at the Alameda Bridge and Open Space area for a last walk along the Middle Rio Grande. Several hundred Ring-billed Gulls winter inland along the river here. Mew Gull has been seen every winter in recent years, and Belted



Sandhill Crane

Kingfisher, Mexican Duck, and American Tree Sparrow are also possible. Once back in Albuquerque, our tour will conclude in the evening with a final celebratory dinner to review the week's notable highlights.

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

**Day 8, Departure Flights
Home from Albuquerque
International Sunport (ABQ):**

Meals: Breakfast

**Included for the duration of
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. Please see <https://www.naturalselectionstours.com/travel-insurance/> for details.



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