Full Detailed Itinerary - Southeast Arizona: Birding the Sky Islands

Day 1: Tucson

The tour starts with an afternoon meeting at Tucson airport (1:30PM). Sitting on a plain in the Sonoran Desert, we'll be in good position to head right out as the afternoon starts to cool off, and start picking off desert species right off the bat. That is the beauty of Tucson – it is surrounded by excellent birding sites. Targets will include species such as Costa's Hummingbird, Gila Woodpecker, Gilded Flicker, Verdin, Canyon Towhee, and Rufous-winged Sparrow. The first two nights of the tour will be spend in Tucson.

Day 2: Tucson Hotspots and Desert Birding

Today we will spend the day searching for the common desert species of Arizona. We will explore city parks, spectacular desert landscapes, man-made wetland and farmlands, all in search of the more common but scattered birds of Southeast Arizona.

Day 3: Mount Lemmon to Green Valley

Less than 15 miles away from Tucson, this mountain and its extraordinary range of habitats illustrates why many birders choose to base themselves in the city. Leaving the city early, we not only avoid traffic, we get to experience the mountain waking up. We'll head straight for the top of this sky island, and then work our way down through the habitats and birds through the morning. Lemmon is the highest of the Santa Catalina Mountains, reaching an elevation of 9157ft (2790m) at its highest point. The forest-covered summit area is usually 20-30°F cooler than the deserts below, which will make for a welcome break of the heat of the desert visible at its base. In the ponderosa pine forest at the summit we'll be tracking down breeding Olive Warbler (in their own family, separate from all the other American wood warblers), Band-tailed Pigeon, and Cordilleran Flycatcher. We'll also check the hummingbird feeders at a local restaurant, where Rivoli's Hummingbirds are often present. Working our way down the mountain, we'll be birding within mixed forests of both open Pine-Oak and denser fir forests, at around 7,000 ft (2130 m). One of Arizona's finest birds occurs within the cooler, shadier areas; the mouthwatering Red-faced Warbler. The same areas are also likely to yield Greater Pewee, Pygmy Nuthatch, and both Grace's and Virginia's Warblers. Moving lower still there will be areas of alders, cypresses and sycamores, which could produce different species again, including Arizona Woodpecker, Mexican Jay, or even the pretty Painted Redstart. Woodland and chaparral in this area are also good for Black-chinned Sparrow and Bridled Titmouse. Once we reach the base, we'll have returned into desert once more. Here we will search for anything missed the afternoon before, which may include Cactus Wren, Hooded Oriole, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, and Curve-billed Thrasher. In the afternoon we'll make our way south, out of the Catalina Mountains, and into the Santa Ritas. The night will be spent close to Madera Canyon. On this evening there will be the opportunity to search for some of Southeast Arizona's famous nightbirds, as both Elf Owl and Whiskered Screech-Owl occur in this area. We'll spend three nights in Green Valley.

Day 4: Santa Rita Mountains

The Santa Rita Mountains lie just south of Tucson. They are rightly regarded as one of the most famous birding areas in North America, with both a long list of vagrants and a star case of breeding species. Targeting this second group, we'll spend some time in the lower canyons desert areas, looking for species like Scaled Quail, and Botteri's, Cassin's, Black-throated and Brewer's Sparrows. In the canyons themselves we'll search for Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Varied Bunting, and Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher among others. Madera Canyon will also offer up our first shot at the "Star of Arizona", Elegant Trogon, which occurs in the riparian woodlands here. Hummingbird feeders within the canyon are typically very productive, with a variety of attendants; regulars include Black-chinned, Broad-billed, and Magnificent Hummingbirds, while at other times, rarer species like Blue-throated, Berylline and White-eared Hummingbirds have been known to drop in.

Day 5: Santa Rita Mountains

The morning will see us target two of the most wanted birds of the tour. Five-striped Sparrow, a Mexican species that barely makes it into the US at all, is best found on the scrubby hillsides here. This part of the state is also arguably the best for the stunning Montezuma Quail, a scarce and inconspicuous species at the best of times! Keeping a close eye for imposters among the overhead Turkey Vultures might also reveal their chief impressionist, the Zone-tailed Hawk among them. We will also search around for species we might have missed up until now.

Day 6: Patagonia to Sierra Vista

We will leave Green Valley early on this morning to reach the tiny town of Patagonia. Patagonia is located within the Sonoita Creek Valley, and is one of the most revered rarity locations in all of North America. Wetlands close to town could yield Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, while nearby partially wooded areas give us a shot at the weird and unique Phainopepla. Other local breeding species include Western Wood-Pewee, Band-tailed Pigeon, and Abert's Towhee. It is also a good area for Tucson Audubon's well chosen cover bird, the gaudy Vermilion Flycatcher. Another of our primary targets will take us on a visit to the famous Paton's feeders, where we'll keep a sharp eye out for the dapper Violet-crowned Hummingbird amid the more common (but no less good looking) Broad-billed. Switching habitats, we'll also head south out of the valley and onto the San Rafael Grasslands, where we'll look for the local race of Grasshopper Sparrow and Chihuahuan Meadowlark. In the afternoon, we'll make our way east to the city of Sierra Vista, an excellent base for exploring the Huachuca Mountains, which are clearly visible from within the city itself. We'll spend the next two nights in Sierra Vista.

Day 7: Huachuca Canyons

A full day will be spent birding the various canyons that cut the Huachuca Mountains. Carr Canyon, to the south of the city, will occupy much of our time. The pine-oak woodland here plays host to a number of high-value targets, including Buff-breasted Flycatcher, Greater Pewee, Red-faced Warbler, and Hepatic Tanager. Depending on the year, we may visit Ramsey Canyon, with its excellent birding and hummingbird feeders. Among the 14 species that have been reported here are regulars such as Blue-throated, Broad-tailed and Black-chinned, and the chance at rarities like Berylline, Lucifer, and White-eared Hummingbirds. As the hummingbird situation changes, both seasonally, and annually, the choice of which feeders to visit will be dictated by the latest news of sightings. There are also feeders and good birding offered at both Miller (which holds the single US day record for hummingbird species), and Ash Canyon (traditionally the best place to find Lucifer Hummingbird). Miller Canyon also gives us a shot at the iconic Spotted Owl.

Day 8: Huachucas to the Chiricahuas

A final morning will be spent in one or more of the local canyons (Ramsey, Carr, Ash, or Miller), chasing whatever we still need, before forging on east to Portal, in the Chiricahua Mountains, for a three-night stay. As we make our way across the flat desertlands between the sky islands of the Huachucas and the Chiricahuas we'll keep a keen eye on both the roads, and the surrounding desert, as we will be traversing prime roadrunner country. In the afternoon, we will stop briefly at a wetland hotspot in Wilcox for shorebirds, waterfowl, terns and other water related targets. When we pull into the tiny town of Portal, we'll check out some local feeders where birds like Scaled and Gambel's Quails, and Crissal and Curve-billed Thrasher can sometimes be found.

Days 9-10: Chiricahua Mountains

We'll have two full days to explore the diverse birding opportunities provided by the eastern Chiricahuas. While this is a tour of Arizona, we will make a brief foray over the state line into New Mexico, to the town of Rodeo, in search of the local Bendire's Thrasher, as well as another shot at Scaled Quail. The area around the nearby hamlet of Paradise provides some different habitats, and we'll check some well-placed feeders for Juniper Titmouse, and hummingbird feeders here give us our best shot at the diminutive Calliope Hummingbird. The higher reaches of the eastern Chiricahuas, where we'll spend a good deal of our time, provide both welcome relief from the heat of the lower elevations, and a different mix of birds. Nowhere else in the US offers as good a shot at Mexican Chickadee and Yellow-eyed Junco! We'll also have another shot at several birds we'd looked for in the Huachucas, including Red-faced and Olive Warbler, Greater Pewee, and Hepatic Tanager. And there is Cave Creek Canyon, one of the most illustrious birding sites in the country. Not only will this offer up an excellent chance at tracking down the iconic Elegant Trogon, a treasure trove of other birds occurs in this shaded canyon. Local and much-desired birds like Arizona Woodpecker, Painted Redstart, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, and both Plumbeous and Hutton's Vireos all call this gorgeous spot home. The Chiricahuas, like most sites visited on this tour, also boast a healthy crop of extreme rarities over the years too, and we'll keep an ear to the ground for anything that might have shown up.

Day 11: Portal to Tucson

After a few final hours birding in Portal we will once again check out wetlands near Willcox to see if we can pick up anything new. We will return to Tucson to sweep the area for any last birds before a farewell dinner and one last night in Tucson.

Day 12: Departure

The tour ends this morning in Tucson. A shuttle will be available to take you to the airport. No birding is planned for today.

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