Full Detailed Itinerary - Arizona: Photo Tour

Day 1: Arrival in Tucson

Clients should plan to arrive in Tucson by mid-afternoon so they can rest and recover ahead of a scheduled introductory dinner. There is a free shuttle from the airport to the hotel.

Day 2: Tucson Hotspots and the Sonoran Desert

This morning will be spent at various hotspots in and around Tucson. Moving between urban and suburban parks, we'll search for Harris's Hawk, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Greater Roadrunner, Abert's Towhee, and Vermilion Flycatcher. After brunch and our soon-to-be-familiar midday break, we'll visit some pristine Sonoran habitat outside the city. Key targets in those beautiful surroundings include Pyrrhuloxia, Curve-billed Thrasher, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Verdin, Lesser Nighthawk, Gilded Flicker, Purple Martin, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Black-throated Sparrow, Gambel's Quail, White-winged Dove, and Gila Woodpecker. This second night will be spent at the same hotel as the first.

Day 3: Catalina Mountains and Madera Canyon

We will use this morning to explore the slopes of Mount Lemmon to the northeast of Tuscon. Starting at lower elevations, we'll hope for Rock Wren, Hooded Oriole, Hepatic Tanager, Lucy's Warbler, and Blue Grosbeak. As heat grips those surroundings, we'll reach higher, into the cooler confines of oak and pine forests; there we'll try for Pygmy Nuthatch, Plumbeous Vireo, Yellow-eyed Junco, Painted Redstart, and Red-faced, Olive, and Grace's Warblers. It will be fun to watch the transition of plants and birds along the elevational cline. We'll have brunch on Mt. Lemmon before driving two hours to Green Valley, where we spend two nights. We'll check-in, rest a while, and return to the field at Madera Canyon. The road to that destination runs through oak woodland and hosts Mexican Jay, Bridled Titmouse, Elegant Trogon, Arizona Woodpecker, and Brown-crested and Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers. If the habitat is quiet, we can turn to the feeders at the Santa Rita Lodge, where seed/suet feeders bring in several species including Acorn Woodpecker, Canyon Towhee, and Lesser Goldfinch; nectar offerings attract Broad-billed, Black-chinned, and Rivoli's Hummingbirds. After dinner, and depending on energy levels, we might make an optional, nocturnal return to Madera to search for Whiskered Screech-Owl and Elf Owl.

Day 4: Box Canyon and Elephant Head Pond

We'll start the day at Box Canyon, where a narrow dirt road winds along a steep hillside. Because of this topography, birds will often assume eye level perches on the downhill slope. Ash-throated Flycatcher, Cassin's Kingbird, Bell's Vireo, and Canyon Wren patrol the rocky hillside, and — if we're lucky — we'll encounter Varied Bunting and Five-striped Sparrow, though those species generally nest later than the others we seek on this tour. The area has also hosted Gray Hawk and Thick-billed Kingbird in the past, so we'll try for those if they're being reported. When we're done at Box, we'll brunch and rest. The afternoon will be used for something different: set-up photography. At Elephant Head Pond, a private property where birds are regularly fed, we'll deploy customized perches onto which we'll lure a variety of desert dwellers for pre-composed pictures. Gambel's Quail, White-winged Dove, Cactus Wren, Curve-billed Thrasher, Northern Cardinal, and Pyrruloxia are usually obliging; Gila Woodpecker, Greater Roadrunner, and Hooded Oriole

make occasional cameos. After several bouts of field photography across the previous three days, this outing will be a refreshing change. If there wasn't energy for owling last night, we might try tonight.

Day 5: Green Valley to the Huachucas via Patagonia

This final morning around Green Valley will be used to mop-up whatever species we've missed during our stay. Depending on our successes (hopefully many!) and failures (hopefully few!) we could return to Madera or Box, or spend time exploring grassland areas for Loggerhead Shrike, Blue Grosbeak, and a variety of sparrows. Regardless, we'll return to Green Valley for a leisurely brunch when we're done shooting. Later, we'll head southwest to reach the tiny town of Patagonia, where the Paton's Center will offer us additional opportunities for hummingbirds, particularly Violet-crowned. Gila and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers frequent the property, and we could run into Bell's Vireo, Yellow-breasted Chat, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, or Thick-billed Kingbird in the surrounding habitat, a mix of riparian/cottonwood and mesquite. Other notable residents include Gambel's Quail, Inca Dove, Summer Tanager, and Phainopepla. When we've had our fill of those, we'll grab dinner in town and continue 45 minutes to Sierra Vista, where we spend the next two nights.

Day 6: The Huachuca Mountains

The spine of the Huachucas runs north-south, and we'll spend our time entirely on the eastern slope, where four huge drainages ('canyons') hold all sorts of feathery gems. We're likely to start our exploration in the upper reaches of Carr Canyon, where a primitive campground hosts Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Greater Pewee, Black-headed Grosbeak, Red-faced and Grace's Warblers, and the morning's most valuable bird, Buff-breasted Flycatcher. The birding is only half the fun on this morning as the steep mountain road we'll utilize is an adventure unto itself! We'll brunch and rest before returning to the field in the afternoon, most likely at Ash Canyon. Featuring umpteen feeders of various sorts, the property attracts Phainopepla, Bronzed Cowbird, Bushtit, and Scott's Oriole. Among Anna's, Black-chinned and Broad-billed, Lucifer is the hummingbird superstar. Ash Canyon is the premier place in the US to see this striking species, so we'll make a special effort to find and photograph it. And the best part? The property it well shaded; that makes it a great place to spend the hotter, second half of the day.

Day 7: The Huachucas to the Chiracahuas

We'll use our second morning in the Huachucas to track down birds we've missed up to this point. We could end up at Miller Canyon, where a different set of hummingbird feeders attracts a variety of species. We could alternatively visit Ramsey Canyon, which has its own feeders and a series of wooded trails. Beyond the resident/expected hummingbirds, rarities like White-eared, Berylline, and Violet-Crowned can pop up anywhere, so we'll invest time in those if they're being reported. We'll begin the two-hour drive to Portal, the gateway to the Chiricahuas, after brunch in Sierra Vista. As we're likely to arrive in the heat of the day, we'll check-in and chill out a bit before exploring Cave Creek Canyon. Wandering through the mixed oak-pine-juniper woodlands in the lower throws of the massive drainage, we could encounter Bridled Titmouse, Montezuma Quail, Scott's Oriole, Blue Grosbeak, Mexican Jay, or Arizona Woodpecker. If the bird activity is slow, we could always head to to the Rodrigues feeders which receive nice light in the afternoon. It's worth noting that Cave Creek hosts fair numbers of nightbirds, so we can try for those after dinner if there's energy/enthusiasm. Three nights will be spent in Portal.

Day 8: Portal and the Chiricahua Mountains

Dropping elevation out of Cave Creek Canyon, we'll venture into the open expanses of the Chihuahuan Desert. A series of dirt roads cuts through that habitat, and we'll scour the roadside scrub for Greater Roadrunner, Scaled Quail, Cassin's Sparrow, Verdin, Lucy's Warbler, and Crissal and Bendire's Thrashers. Black-throated Sparrow and Ash-throated Flycatcher can usually be counted on, so we'll stay alert to those as we search for other species. As the temperature rises, we'll retreat to the canyon's shaded confines for brunch and rest. In the afternoon, we'll head towards the hamlet of Paradise and the feeding station it hosts. While the birds will be generally similar to those we've seen elsewhere, you never know what might turn up. The area has hosted White-eared Hummingbird some years, so we'll keep our fingers cross for that stunning species. We can also visit (or revisit) the Rodrigues feeders (Gambel's Quail, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Canyon Towhee, Hooded Oriole, Pyrrhuloxia, etc.) before returning to Portal in the evening.

Day 9: The Chiricahua Mountains

An early start will deliver us to Rustler Park near the top of the Chiricahuas. There, at 8,500 feet, we'll weave through tall pines as we search for Steller's Jay, Spotted Towhee, Western Bluebird, Band-tailed Pigeon, Hairy Woodpecker, and Western and Buff-breasted Flycatchers. Captivating as those can be, we will put special focus on Olive Warbler and Mexican Chickadee. The first is an adorable little bird sporting a unique, burned orange head; the second is a mostly Mexican species that reaches over the border only in the highest elevations of the Chiricahuas. Around the corner from Rustler, Barfoot Park offers additional opportunities for the above species. And who knows what we might find in feeding flocks during our descent back to Portal? Those can hold any number of interesting birds. Brunch and rest will be had as usual. Afterwards, and in the late afternoon, we'll try to clean-up whatever lower-elevation targets we may have missed up to now.

Day 10: Lake Cochise (Wilcox) and return to Tucson

We will have spent the entire tour chasing land birds, so we'll mix it up on this final morning. As we head back towards Tucson, we'll make a side trip to Lake Cochise in Wilcox. The lake is rarely full, so we'll take up positions on the desiccated shoreline and try for some low angle images of waterbirds. We could encounter Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, and Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teals paddling about, and we'll hope for American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Long-billed Dowitcher, Spotted Sandpiper, and Wilson's Phalarope. Eared Grebe and White-faced Ibis are also within the realm of possibility. While we'll spend most of our time stalking waterbirds, we'll also keep or eyes peeled for Scaled Quail, Western Kingbird, Horned Lark, and Chihuahuan Meadowlark. When we're done at the lake, we'll seek refuge in the cold AC of the vehicle and drive the final two hours to Tucson, where we'll have a late brunch / early lunch. Rest will be had through midday, and those that are up for it can return to the Sonoran habitat which we visited on the front end of the trip. This habitat is characteristic of southeastern Arizona, so it'll be a proper place to wrap the tour. This final night will be spent in a hotel near the Tucson Airport.

Day 11: Portal Area (Chiricahua Mountains) to Tucson

The last morning of your tour will be a 'clean-up' morning. You can spend it in the pine forest, Chihuahuan Desert, Madrean Oak Pine or wherever you may need. You'll spend the full morning here and after a last meal in the Portal area you'll take the 3hr drive back to Tucson for a roughly 3:30pm arrival. After check-in and a quick rest, if it is required/desired, you can spend one last afternoon around Tucson Hotspots and the Sonoran Desert chasing things you missed on the first few days…after all, one last spectacular afternoon in the Sonoran Desert is a pretty sweet way to end this incredible tour around AZ.

Day 11: Departure from Tucson

The tour ends this morning. The hotel offers a free airport shuttle so that you may leave at your leisure. A late evening departure on Day 11 may also be feasible depending on your flight schedules.

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