

ARIZONA IN AUGUST

INTRODUCTION

There are two main times to visit Arizona. The first is in early summer for the special Owls and the second is after high summer for the Hummingbirds. Little has been written about the latter, when Hummingbirds are not the only attraction.

June and July are said to be the hottest months of the year. This was little consolation when the pilot announced our arrival at Phoenix at 20:00 with “and you’ll be delighted to know that the local weather conditions are clear and a balmy 113 degrees F !” Thank heavens its not high summer I thought. Mercifully the humidity, which is more important, was a mere 22%. There are many local jokes about the dry heat in Arizona. Suffice to say that the heat and lack of humidity make early acclimatisation a priority and water must be drunk in some quantity for the first few days or until the body stops losing fluids naturally-this too can be somewhat unnerving! On the whole there is little discomfort and air conditioning is never too far away, though prolonged exertion in the desert does require frequent topping up of the body radiator with water. In the mountains the conditions are excellent and a cool 70-80 degrees.

Phoenix and Tuscon are desert towns lying in the cauldron of the Sonora Desert plain between 1000 and 2500 feet above sea level. In south-eastern Arizona there are four major mountain ranges; Santa Catalina, Santa Rita, Huachuca and Chiricahua each of which ascends to approximately 9000 feet. This altitude results in a vertical passage through five life zones, the equivalent in sea level terms of a trip from Mexico to Canada and a temperature drop of 20 degrees F.

In the case of the Santa Catalinas and the Chiricahuas this journey can be made by car on good roads from the Desert floor to the pine clad mountain tops in an hour or so. This means that many more species find habitat to their liking in Arizona than its deserts alone could support and there is also considerable migration through the state at altitude.

SITES OF SPECIAL INTEREST

1] DUDLEYVILLE

The sleepy town of Dudleyville is situated to the west of Hwy. 77 between east Phoenix and Tuscon. Blink and you’ll miss it! On the west side the little town is bordered by the San Pedro river and a dirt road fords the river at a delightful spot where Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, Canyon Towhee and Vermillion Flycatcher were seen. However the main reason for stopping here is that Mississippi Kites breed in the town and these were seen from the main highway before entering the town itself where close views are possible.

2] ARAVAIPA CANYON

This piping hot little canyon is worth visiting for the chance of seeing Common Black Hawk. Unfortunately this is also good habitat for the superficially similar Zone-tailed Hawk. Try tall trees at the river side. Other species that were notable here were

Western Tanager and Greater Roadrunner. The latter was to become an almost daily entry in the notebook on the trip. Black Hawk was not seen here and they are not, as their name implies, common. If anything they are now more likely to be seen north of Phoenix not far south of Sedona..

3] THE SANTA CATALINA RANGE / MOUNT LEMMON

The state park to the west has many species typical of the Sonora Desert including Inca Dove, Phainopepla, and Pyrrhuloxia-which are common. There were also flocks of strangely “washed-out” looking Lark Sparrows and some migrants. Driving south this park is a nice introduction to the area and what is not seen here will probably be found at the Saguaro Monument west of Tuscon e.g. Gila Woodpecker, Black-throated Sparrow, Curve-billed Thrasher, Cactus Wren and Verdin etc.

The drive up into the mountains is extremely pleasant, not only for the views of the desert and Tuscon below to the west, but also the views to the east of the San Pedro River valley.

Birding excitement begins about half way up and a stop at Bear Canyon picnic area can be very rewarding indeed. This area is no bigger than a football pitch and consists of open pine woodland giving shade to picnickers. Also in the shade were Olive, Grace’s, Black-throated Gray, Townshend’s, Hermit, Nashville and MacGillivray’s Warblers, Painted Redstart, Yellow-eyed Junco, Black-headed Grosbeak, Cordilleran Flycatcher, Strickland’s and Acorn Woodpeckers ! Those birders in a hurry need hardly go anywhere else.

This amazing collection of western warbler species seemed to be ample reward for the trip but a little further up the mountain, at the San Pedro overlook, the icing on the cake was applied by no fewer than four Red-faced Warblers and yet another was at the Oracle Road where after a long wait a Virginia’s Warbler was also found.

Finally, almost at the top of the mountain and at the end of the road, the cafe at the foot of the ski lift provides sugar water feeders for hummingbirds. The cafe has no windows which allows guests to be buzzed by hummers which is rather amusing on times. A fluffy woollen jumper worn by one lady proved to be an irresistible source of nesting material for one of the birds which was literally hanging on by a thread as the owner walked about.

The species of hummingbird seen here were the belligerant Rufous, the whistling Broad-taileds, Black-chinned and the “large” Magnificents.

4] THE SANTA RITA RANGE

These mountains lie to the south of Tuscon and are the setting for the internationally famous Madera Canyon, a location of legendary reputation if ever one existed. To find it go east at Continental, Madera is signposted from there. At the crossroads where Madera traffic goes to the right there is a road to the left which is lit at night by overhanging lamps on the central reservation. In the evening, just after dark Lesser Nighthawks hunt beneath these lamps. The combination of close approach and lighting makes the views of this species here as near to perfect as I have found.

Madera Canyon has plenty of interest around the famous lodges and along the stream in the thickly wooded valley behind them. The birds of this area are Painted Redstart, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, Broad-billed Hummingbird, Gray-breasted Jay, Black-headed Grosbeak, Acorn Woodpecker, White-breasted Nuthatch and Greater Pewee.

However the main attraction is the Elegant Trogon that appears magically in the valley and around the lodges at various times but especially mornings and evenings. These birds often startle their observers by arriving “unanounced” in a secretive fashion seemingly inquisitively checking them out. Jaw-dropping views can be obtained of close birds at head height so don’t forget the camera, as most people do!

The Hummingbird feeders at Palisport, a little further up the road, are well worth a visit and have a slightly different mix of species.

The trails to Josephine Saddle and Mount Wrightson should not produce species that cannot be seen elsewhere and are not easy in August due to the heat. The Old Baldy trail is narrow and steep and my trip up was curtailed by a rather large excitable Rattlesnake that claimed “right of way”, I gladly obliged. Rattlesnakes can be relatively active in August and whilst few will strike, the threat from the large ones is pretty impressive!

Just to the south of the Madera Canyon road is a good (when dry) dirt track called the Box Canyon Road. This passes a dry-wash habitat which is right for Lucy’s Warbler, Crissal Thrasher and Rufous-winged Sparrow with luck.

5] PATAGONIA

This small town lies to the east of Nogales and is home to the large Sonoita Creek Sanctuary. Unfortunately August is too late for seeing the breeding Rose-throated Becards which have dispersed earlier. A major attraction is “Paton’s”. This is a private home that backs on to the creek. “Hummingbird Haven” is proclaimed on the gate. Following the path to the right, around the rear of the bungalow one arrives at a large lawn. In the middle of the lawn is a blue and white striped “tent” in which are placed, in rows, around twenty chairs. The rear of the bungalow has seven feeders hanging down. All but one of the feeders is smothered in hummingbirds, the odd one out having been commandeered by enormous black and yellow bees-hummingbirds are not keen on large insects. “Hummingbirders” we are informed, are invited to sit and marvel at the display. At any one time there were 50 or more actually on the feeders and just as many resting in the garden’s bushes and trees. The activity is amazing and the fighting and squabbling of these “mini dynamos” frequently spills over into the tent. The species identified were Black-chinned, Rufous, Broad-tailed, Blue-throated, Magnificent and maybe Allen’s, Anna’s, and Costa’s as well with luck. This was far and away the best hummingbirding of the trip.

6] HUACHUCAS

At the town of Sierra Vista it is possible to gain access into these wild mountains in several ways. From the main road on the west side of town there are three roads to the west, each in turn allowing access to Ramsey, Miller and Carr Canyons. In each, the car parking is strictly limited but the birding is excellent. Ramsey is as big a Mecca as Madera. Parking at weekends should be booked in advance. There is a long trail to hike (numbers are limited) where the prize for some lucky souls has been Eared Trogon . Others though have had to abandon hikes after Black Bear and Rattler encounters! Though the hike may take all day it is said to be worth it if one has the time. The Trogons apparently breed and there is a 50/50 chance of seeing them.

Another way to access the Huachucas is through Fort Huachuca. Permits for birding may be obtained at the gate of this military base-don’t forget your passport. Access to

the sites is via Garden Canyon. From here one can drive up to the entrance to Scheelite Canyon (track only) and beyond to the Crest Trail. During weekdays this is a lonely place. The road has many storm water dips which become raging torrents after heavy rain, which is not uncommon at this time of year. Very long wheelbase vehicles are not suitable.

Garden Canyon begins by crossing an area of tall grass. By parking and watching the comings and goings across the road both Greater Roadrunner and the lovely Montezuma Quail may be seen-eventually.

The thirty minute hike up the Scheelite was rewarded by close views of Spotted Owl, Dusky-capped Flycatcher and Montezuma Quail again.

7] SAN PEDRO RIVER