

# **ARIZONA HUMMINGBIRDS**

**JULY 23 - 30, 2006**

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TOUR REPORT  
ARIZONA HUMMINGBIRDS  
July 23-30, 2006

By Brennan Mulrooney

Our Arizona Hummingbirds tour couldn't have a more appropriate name. No other North American VENT tour comes close to offering such a diversity and abundance of hummingbirds. But while southeastern Arizona is rightly famous for its hummingbirds, a host of other fantastic birds can also be seen there, many of which do not occur anywhere else. In addition, late July can be a great time for vagrants to appear on this already exciting bird scene. I'm pleased to say that this year's tour lived up to all of that; in fact, it exceeded any reasonable expectations! Here is just a sample of the fantastic birding we encountered.

With a bit of effort, planning, and luck, one might expect to find 14 species of hummingbirds in late July in southeastern Arizona. In some years 12 is probably a more realistic number. So seeing 14 in ONE DAY this year was a bit mind-blowing. And when you consider that we saw 13 of these species at one site in a little over an hour, you get an idea of just how good it was this year.

Perhaps the highlight of the group was a gorgeous adult Berylline Hummingbird coming to the feeders in Ramsey Canyon. This species isn't present every year, and even when it is present, it's not guaranteed that you will see it. A group arriving just as we left spent over an hour waiting without a sighting. This is the only species of hummingbird that we DIDN'T see at the Beatty's Guest Ranch in Miller Canyon later that afternoon. As we arrived it was just starting to rain, and the hummingbirds, perhaps anticipating the upcoming storm, were absolutely swarming! A quick scan across the lower feeders turned up a rough count of 70 hummers at one point. At any given time there were scads of Black-chinned and Rufous, and good numbers of Broad-tailed and Anna's. A continued vigil also produced a few Broad-billed and Calliope, at least one Costa's, one female Lucifer, one Violet-crowned, and one adult male Allen's.

Continuing to the upper feeders we were treated to both Magnificent and Blue-throated (the "mega" hummers) and a second strong contender for bird of the day, White-eared Hummingbird. This is another species that can easily be missed some years, and we had excellent looks at a male and a female coming to the feeders less than 15 feet away! The next morning, a break in the rain allowed us a visit to the feeders at the Ash Canyon Bed and Breakfast, and we were treated to repeated views of our first adult male Lucifer Hummingbird. The long magenta gorget, distinctly drooping bill, and long narrow tail really made this guy stand out (even among such flashy companions!). But as I said, this tour was outstanding for more than just the hummingbird show.

When you visit southeastern Arizona in mid to late summer, you can expect to see some strange things. This is prime time for Mexican vagrants to show up, and most years one or two "hotline birds" are around. But just because they're around doesn't always mean that you'll see them! Often they show up in remote areas that require four-wheel-drive and a long hike, or they show

up briefly and then vanish: the dreaded “one day wonder.” This year we were astoundingly lucky. We were able to successfully chase (and get great looks at) four birds that the American Birding Association classifies as “Code-4” rarities! “Code-5” is accidental and “Code-6” is extinct! So these were some pretty rare birds.

We began our amazing run of luck the very first morning with stunning scope views of a singing male Flame-colored Tanager in Madera Canyon. Even though it sang almost continuously, it took several minutes and about 20 pairs of eyes searching before we were able to spot it perched high in a dense sycamore. But once we found it, we all enjoyed lengthy views of this stunning specimen. It was definitely worth the effort.

Not ones to rest on our laurels (for too long), we met up following an afternoon break from the heat and were back on the trail of rare birds. This time our quarry was the diminutive Black-capped Gnatcatcher. A pair of this species has been seen with some regularity for the last few years in Montosa Canyon and we decided to test our luck. It didn't take long before we had outstanding close-up looks at a male Black-capped right next to a male Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, giving us ample opportunity to compare the different field marks separating these two very similar birds. Success again, but surely our luck would run out soon, right?

The next morning, buoyed by our success with the tanager and the gnatcatcher, we set off for Sycamore Canyon in search of another great rarity, Rufous-capped Warbler. This was the first time in years, maybe ever, that this species had shown up and stayed in an area that was so relatively easy to access. I had said something earlier about a bird's presence not necessarily translating into seeing it. Well this one really came down to the wire. We were basically on our way out when an uncooperative Arizona Woodpecker ended up virtually dropping the bird into our laps. Once we found it (thanks to David) we watched for several minutes from about 10 feet as it first gathered nest material for an unseen nest, and then flew up to the tops of the low willows and started belting out its song—simply amazing.

Later that day we found out that our luck might have already run out. On the day we had been in Madera Canyon, somebody farther up the canyon had located an Aztec Thrush. People returning the following day had turned up no fewer than seven! We wouldn't be back in the area for four days; would the birds hold on that long? By the fourth day the count was down to three, but one was all that we needed. Upon our approach to the canyon it was evident that morning thunderstorms had caused creeks to wash over the road, but it was clear for us. As we hiked up the trail, we received positive reports from birders hiking out; the birds were still being seen! After a short vigil at a lower area, word came down that a bird had been located right over the trail and people were getting great looks. It seemed unlikely that the 20+ birders present would all be able to walk up there without flushing the bird, but that's just what happened. The bird sat tight and we all enjoyed leisurely views of this fantastic rarity. In fact, we finally had to walk away!

Should I quit now? Should we just stop offering this tour in the future? Surely we used up all of our luck for years to come. Nah...even without all of these amazing vagrants this tour was an unmitigated success, and certainly will continue to be so in years to come.

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**July 23-30, 2006**

**Leader: Brennan Mulrooney**

**ITINERARY:**

**July 23:** Tour orientation then an afternoon excursion to the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, then dinner in Tucson

**July 24:** Morning departure from Tucson; birding our way up from Continental into Madera Canyon; lunch in Continental followed by a post lunch break, then afternoon birding in Montosa Canyon; night in Green Valley

**July 25:** Early morning departure from Green Valley; birding and picnic breakfast along Ruby Rd then birding in upper Sycamore Canyon; pre-lunch visit to the Rio Rico ponds then lunch in Nogales; afternoon birding at the famous Patagonia Roadside Rest then a visit to the Paton's feeders in Patagonia, cut short by rising flood waters...can you say monsoon? Night in Sierra Vista

**July 26:** Morning excursion to Fort Huachuca with birding in Garden and Sawmill Canyons; picnic lunch followed by afternoon visits to the Nature Conservancy's Ramsey Canyon Preserve and the Beatty's Guest Ranch; **14** Hummingbird species this afternoon!  
Post-dinner owling in lower Carr Canyon

**July 27:** Drizzly morning visit to the feeders at Ash Canyon Bed and Breakfast followed by birding at the Sierra Vista Wastewater Treatment Facility and the San Pedro House before lunch at the historic Gadsden Hotel in Douglas; afternoon drive to Portal with evening birding at Dave Jasper's feeders and along the road in Cave Creek Canyon; night in Portal

**July 28:** Pre-breakfast birding around Rodeo, NM then birding our way up the Paradise Rd into the highlands of the Chiricahua Mts. where we were met with torrential rains; we worked our way down the west slope (passing through some really nice habitat) stopping for lunch at Chiricahua National Monument; afternoon return to the upper Chiricahuas, dodging showers, main stops at Onion Saddle and Rustler Park; post-dinner owling in Cave Creek Canyon

**July 29:** Pre-breakfast birding in downtown metropolitan Portal followed by a hasty exit, stage left; a brief stop in Wilcox at Lake Cochise was quite productive, then we were off for the main event and tour finale in Madera Canyon; night in Tucson

**July 30:** Departures for home

## **BIRDLIST**

Note: Species that are underlined are birds of special note that are either rare, local specialties, or are otherwise generally hard to find. Bird List order is according to the 45<sup>th</sup> Supplement to the AOU Check-list as published in *The Auk* 121:985-995 (2004).

Abbreviations:

SC - Sycamore Canyon

MC - Madera Canyon

PRR - Patagonia Roadside Rest

RC - Ramsey Canyon

BGR - Beatty's Guest Ranch, Miller Canyon

AC - Ash Canyon Bed and Breakfast

SVWTF - Sierra Vista Wastewater Treatment Facility

CM - Chiricahua Mountains

LC - Lake Cochise, Wilcox

### **SWANS, GEESE, AND DUCKS**

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck - several pairs of this handsome "tree duck" at the ponds along Rio Rico Rd

Mallard - we saw "Mexican Mallards" at Rio Rico as well as SVWTF

Cinnamon Teal - about 20 birds at LC, males were mostly in eclipse plumage

Redhead - a single in eclipse at LC

Ruddy Duck - about 20 at LC with males in striking breeding colors

### **PHEASANTS, GROUSE AND TURKEYS**

Wild Turkey - two birds along the road below Pinery Canyon as we fled the flood

### **NEW WORLD QUAIL**

Scaled Quail - our first looks were below MC, but our best looks were in Rodeo

Gambel's Quail - more widespread than the former, seen best at Jasper's feeders

### **GREBES**

Eared Grebe - unexpected at this season at LC

Western Grebe - same story as the former

### **BITTERNES AND HERONS**

Great Blue Heron - fairly common and widespread, for a desert...

Black-crowned Night-Heron - an adult and an imm. at LC

### **IBISES AND SPOONBILLS**

White-faced Ibis - seen first at Rio Rico, then surprisingly again in Rodeo

### **NEW WORLD VULTURES**

(Black Vulture) - leader only at PRR

Turkey Vulture - seen most days

### **HAWKS, EAGLES AND KITES**

Cooper's Hawk - several were seen well, a perched juvenile was especially cooperative

Gray Hawk - we found a couple of these handsome southwestern specialties

Swainson's Hawk - fairly widespread in the open country

Red-tailed Hawk - we saw a few of the pale bellied "Fuertes" race

Golden Eagle - a soaring adult along Ruby Rd showed nicely

## **FALCONS**

American Kestrel - a few scattered about

## **RAILS, COOTS, LIMPkin, AND CRANES**

(American Coot) - alas, leader only at SVWTF

## **PLOVERS AND SANDPIPERS**

Killdeer - a few scattered birds, maybe best at SVWTF

## **AVOCETS AND STILTS**

Black-necked Stilt - several seen well at LC

American Avocet - same as above, showing their lovely breeding colors

## **SANDPIPERS**

Spotted Sandpiper - a couple in breeding plumage at LC

Solitary Sandpiper - a flyover at SVWTF, then a couple at LC

Greater Yellowlegs - a few molting adults at LC

Red Knot - an adult in breeding plumage at LC was a huge surprise, this bird is very rare in Arizona and rapidly declining in the New World

Western Sandpiper - a few molting adults at LC

Least Sandpiper - more common than the former at LC

Baird's Sandpiper - surprisingly common at LC, most were adults in breeding plumage, but at least one was a fresh juvenile

Stilt Sandpiper - one adult in breeding plumage at LC

Long-billed Dowitcher - several adults in breeding plumage at LC

Wilson's Phalarope - mostly adults in all different stages of molt, including at least one in full winter plumage and also one fresh juvenile

## **GULLS AND TERNS**

Black Tern - one breeding plumage adult at SVWTF

Forster's Tern - one at SVWTF

## **PIGEONS AND DOVES**

Rock Pigeon - it's safe to call them pigeons again

Band-tailed Pigeon - seen well in Paradise at the Walker House

Eurasian Collared-Dove - a pair in Wilcox were getting ready to start their own invasion, these birds are getting more common in the west every year

Mourning Dove - seen daily

White-winged Dove - seen and heard daily, "who cooks for you?"

Inca Dove - seen only in Patagonia and the Paton's Yard

## **CUCKOOS**

Yellow-billed Cuckoo - seen well along Ruby Rd then again in MC on our last afternoon

Greater Roadrunner - we saw several of these charismatic birds along the road

## **OWLS**

Western Screech-Owl - unfortunately heard only in Carr Canyon

Elf Owl - This species showed particularly well for us and was accordingly voted favorite of the tour. First we found a bird on the ground in broad daylight being mobbed in Garden Canyon, and then we had great looks at a pair feeding young at a nest in Cave Creek Canyon.

Burrowing Owl - a bird perched on a yucca stalk in Rodeo was very cooperative

Spotted Owl - unfortunately this calling juvenile was quite mobile and we were never able to track it down for a look

## **NIGHTJARS**

Lesser Nighthawk - several flying through a Green Valley parking lot at dusk were our only ones

Whip-poor-will - a very cooperative perched bird in Cave Creek Canyon sang in our spotlight

## **SWIFTS**

White-throated Swift - we saw scattered flocks, but they were all quite high

## **HUMMINGBIRDS 14 SPECIES!**

These birds as a group were voted second favorite of the tour, and for good reason!

Broad-billed Hummingbird - these striking birds were fairly widespread

White-eared Hummingbird - great luck with this rare species, we had an adult male and female at the feeders at BGR

Berylline Hummingbird - we were very fortunate to have fantastic looks at an adult at the feeders in RC, this bird is not present every year

Violet-crowned Hummingbird - one of the more scarce breeding hummingbirds in southeast Arizona, we had great looks at several, first at Paton's before the deluge, then again at RC, BGR, AC, and Portal

Blue-throated Hummingbird - the largest of the bunch, the huge black tail is their most distinctive trait

Magnificent Hummingbird - aren't they all magnificent? but then again, adult males of this species are truly breathtaking

Lucifer Hummingbird - another very scarce hummer in Arizona, we had three, first a female type at BGR, then another at AC as well as a stunning adult male there

Black-chinned Hummingbird - perhaps the most common hummer we saw

Anna's Hummingbird - fairly common and widespread at the feeders

Costa's Hummingbird - fairly scarce this far east, we had a female at the Desert Museum, then another at RC and an immature male at BGR

Calliope Hummingbird - another bird we had to work at a little, we saw adult males at BGR and again in Portal

Broad-tailed Hummingbird - their metallic wing trill first drew our attention at BGR, we also saw them at RC, AC, and Portal

Rufous Hummingbird - quite common at all of the feeders, the adult males are stunning

Allen's Hummingbird - an adult male with a completely green back and very narrow outer tail feathers at BGR gave us 14 hummingbirds in one day, with 13 just at BGR!

## **TROGONS**

Elegant Trogon - an especially cooperative male in Garden Canyon gave us fantastic looks, we also heard them in CM, and on our final afternoon in MC

## **WOODPECKERS**

Acorn Woodpecker - these clowns of the oak woodlands were common in the canyons

Gila Woodpecker - fairly common at lower elevations

Ladder-backed Woodpecker - we had our best looks in SC

Hairy Woodpecker - a pair high in CM gave us a brief look between downpours

Arizona Woodpecker - formerly known as Strickland's Woodpecker, our first bird in SC slipped away, but we forgive him...

Northern Flicker - a red-shafted bird in SC seemed to be paired with the following  
Gilded Flicker - this sonoran desert specialty seemed to be out of place in SC

## **TYRANT FLYCATCHERS**

Western Wood-Pewee - fairly common in the canyons

Cordilleran Flycatcher - first in the rain in CM and then again in MC

Buff-breasted Flycatcher - this scarce breeder is limited to a few high altitude forests in southeastern Arizona, after much effort we were rewarded with outstanding looks at a very cooperative adult

Black Phoebe - one uncooperative bird at Rio Rico

Say's Phoebe - a few scattered about

Vermilion Flycatcher - just a few of these fancy little flycatchers

Dusky-capped Flycatcher - fairly common in the canyons, more yellow and less rufous than the following

Ash-throated Flycatcher - more a bird of open habitats

Brown-crested Flycatcher - fairly common in riparian habitats and near hummingbird feeders...

Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher - our first birds lead us to an Elf Owl, these strikingly patterned birds were uncommon in canyon riparian areas

Tropical Kingbird - a very localized breeder in Arizona, our only one was at Rio Rico

Cassin's Kingbird - fairly common and very vocal

Thick-billed Kingbird - a pair at PRR, another very localized breeder in the U.S.

Western Kingbird - quite common, with migrants out in the open desert

## **SHRIKES**

Loggerhead Shrike - several scattered sightings

## **VIREOS**

Bell's Vireo - very vocal, but not easy to see, "chibbity-chibbity-chee?"

Plumbeous Vireo - great looks at this split off of the "Solitary Vireo" group, including an adult feeding a nest full of large chicks

Hutton's Vireo - good looks at this drab little vireo

Warbling Vireo - heard more than seen in Garden Canyon and CM

## **CROWS AND JAYS**

Steller's Jay - a few birds in the upper CM gave glimpses in the rain

Western Scrub-Jay - best at Jasper's feeders, not as common as the following

Mexican Jay - "wink! wink!" these vociferous jays were common in the canyons

Chihuahuan Raven - we saw why they used to call it the White-necked Raven

Common Raven - seemed to be more common than the former

## **SWALLOWS**

Tree Swallow - just a few

Violet-green Swallow - good looks at this western specialty, though often high with the swift flocks

Northern Rough-winged Swallow - only on our first morning

Cliff Swallows - common breeders under the bridges in the area

Barn Swallow - seen most days

## **CHICKADEES AND TITMICE**

Mexican Chickadee - CM is the only spot in the U.S. where you can find this species and

we were very fortunate to get a break in the rain just long enough to track down several of them in a very productive mixed flock

Bridled Titmouse - a strong candidate for cutest bird in North America, we saw several in the lower canyons

Juniper Titmouse - we had to work a bit, but finally found a very responsive bird above Paradise, formerly part of Plain Titmouse, an unusually apt bird name

## **VERDIN**

Verdin - the only member of its family in the New World, we saw several of these cute little guys in the drier areas

## **BUSHTIT**

Bushtit - sorry grandma, these little puff balls are another species that are the sole representative of their family in the New World; seemingly always in a flock, we ran into a couple of different groups

## **NUTHATCHES**

Red-breasted Nuthatch - if only they could all be this easy (just kidding Simon), we had a couple in "the flock" in CM

White-breasted Nuthatch - fairly common in most of the canyons

## **CREEPERS**

Brown Creeper - great looks at one of the "Mexican" race in Cave Creek Canyon

## **WRENS**

Cactus Wren - AKA the giant desert-squirmy, they were quite common

Rock Wren - great looks along Ruby Rd and in Montosa Cyn

Canyon Wren - great looks at a very responsive bird in Montosa Cyn

Bewick's Wren - seen or heard most days

House Wren - a couple in MC and CM

## **GNATCATCHERS**

Black-tailed Gnatcatcher - seen well at the Desert Museum and again in Montosa Cyn giving fantastic comparisons with the following species

Black-capped Gnatcatcher - a very rare bird in the U.S. and not present every year, we were very fortunate to have a responsive male give us great looks at all the features that separate him from his relatives

## **THRUSHES**

Western Bluebird - a great look at a family group near Paradise

Hermit Thrush - mostly heard in the upper CM and again in MC

American Robin - just a few scattered birds

Aztec Thrush - perhaps of the rarest bird of the trip, at least in recent years; we had phenomenal luck with a single bird perched motionless in MC allowing us to admire her for at least 30 minutes, which was nice since we'd driven over 3 hours!

## **MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS**

Northern Mockingbird - fairly common at lower elevations

Bendire's Thrasher - a cooperative pair in Rodeo showed well for us

Curve-billed Thrasher - common in the lower elevations

Crissal Thrasher - a very cooperative bird showed up at Jasper's feeders

## **STARLINGS**

European Starling

## **PHAINOPEPLA**

Phainopepla - fairly common the first few days

## **WARBLERS**

Lucy's Warbler - a sneaky family group along Ruby Rd were seen by some

Yellow Warbler - at PRR, unfortunately feeding a cowbird chick!

Black-throated Gray Warbler - first in Cave Creek Canyon then again in CM and MC

Hermit Warbler - an immature female in "the flock" in CM

Grace's Warbler - our first really made us work in Sawmill Cyn, better looks in CM

Common Yellowthroat - a few perched up at SVWTF

Red-faced Warbler - tied for 3<sup>rd</sup> favorite bird of the trip, we were fortunate to find a few of them in "the flock" in CM

Painted Redstart - fairly common in the canyons we saw adults and immatures

Rufous-capped Warbler - it wasn't looking good, we were past our deadline when David spotted this little guy right where the Arizona Woodpecker was supposed to be! we were all then treated to phenomenal views as he gathered nest material practically at our feet for about 5 minutes then flew to the tops of the willows and started singing!

Yellow-breasted Chat - one in SC gave great looks for most as it sang in the open

## **TANAGERS**

Hepatic Tanager - it eluded us for quite a while, then we finally had great looks at a pair in MC on the last afternoon

Summer Tanager - good looks in SC and Garden Canyon

Western Tanager - we saw several of these handsome birds

Flame-colored Tanager - a rather auspicious beginning to the tour, we were successful with this very rare bird on our first morning in MC; it took some work, but after we found it we were happy to share it with the other tour group present; tied for 3<sup>rd</sup> favorite

## **SPARROWS AND ALLIES**

Spotted Towhee - heard more than seen, but they were fairly common in the canyons

Canyon Towhee - more common below the canyons, sharper looking than...

Abert's Towhee - more localized than the former, only at the Paton's

Rufous-winged Sparrow - a very cooperative bird our first morning below MC

Cassin's Sparrow - the song makes up for the drab plumage, we saw them doing their skylarking flight displays at several locations

Botteri's Sparrow - a single briefly responsive bird below MC was our only one

Rufous-crowned Sparrow - great looks at Jasper's feeders

Chipping Sparrow - a couple of early migrants outside Rodeo

Lark Sparrow - who said sparrows are drab? we had great looks at several locations

Black-throated Sparrow - even better looking than the former? perhaps

Lark Bunting - a small group of these at Montosa Cyn must have just arrived from their breeding grounds to the north

Song Sparrow - heard only at SVWTF

Yellow-eyed Junco - fairly common in the higher elevations of CM and Sawmill Cyn

## **CARDINALS AND ALLIES**

Northern Cardinal - fairly common and widespread

Pyrrhuloxia - not as common as the former but we had several good looks

Black-headed Grosbeak - seen daily

Blue Grosbeak - seen or heard daily

Lazuli Bunting - only Penny glimpsed a pair at SVWTF

Varied Bunting - we truly suffered for our first looks below MC, but we were rewarded with outstanding looks later at Montosa; a truly stunning bird in the right light

## **BLACKBIRDS AND ALLIES**

Red-winged Blackbird - scattered birds where we found water

Eastern Meadowlark - the distinctive southwestern form, "Lilian's Meadowlark"

Yellow-headed Blackbird - several in the marsh at SVWTF

Great-tailed Grackle - these big brutes are common, especially around towns

Bronzed Cowbird - many seen, showing their glowing red eye

Brown-headed Cowbird - common and widespread

Hooded Oriole - many great looks at males and females

Bullock's Oriole - not as common as Hooded, but we saw several

Scott's Oriole - we had multiple great looks at this distinctive yellow and black oriole

## **FINCHES**

House Finch - common at seed feeders

Lesser Goldfinch - same as above

## **OLD WORLD SPARROWS**

House Sparrow

## **MAMMALS**

Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*)

Desert Cottontail (*Sylvilagus audubonii*)

Black-tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*)

Rock Squirrel (*Spermophilus variegates*)

Arizona Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus arizonensis*)

Mexican Fox Squirrel (*S. nayaritensis*)

Cliff Chipmunk (*Tamias dorsalis*)

Harris's Antelope Squirrel (*Ammospermophilus harrisi*)

Coues' White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus couesi*)

Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*)

## **HERPS**

Mountain Spiny Lizard (*Sceloporus jarrovi*)

Chihuahuan Spotted Whiptail (*Cnemidophorus exsanguis*)

Coachwhip (*Masticophis flagellum piceus*) - the dark morph that we saw at the Desert Museum is also referred to as Western Black Coachwhip

Western Lyre Snake (*Trimorphodon biscutatus*) - crossing the road at night in Carr Canyon

Black-tailed Rattlesnake (*Crotalus molossus*) - this guy gave us quite a show in MC

## **BUTTERFLIES**

Pipevine Swallowtail (*Battus philenor*)

Two-tailed Swallowtail (*Papilio multicaudata*)

Sleepy Orange (*Eurema nicippe*)

Red Satyr (*Megisto rubricata*)

Queen (*Danaus gilippus*)