

# **WINTER SOUTHERN ARIZONA**

**JANUARY 20-25, 2009**

**LEADERS: BARRY ZIMMER & BRENNAN MULROONEY**

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*We arrived at the parking area for the Florida Work Center in the mid-afternoon. A couple of weeks earlier someone had discovered a pair of Rufous-capped Warblers (an accidental U.S. visitor) about a half-mile above this area in a remote canyon. As we readied for our walk up the canyon, I noticed some bird activity behind us along the main road. We detoured to check out the small flock that was foraging along the creek bed. Some owl whistling quickly brought in a Gray Flycatcher slowly wagging its tail in an oak next to the road. Several kinglets followed and were joined by a Hutton's Vireo for direct comparison. "Peek" notes across the wash revealed a Hammond's Flycatcher in full view. A Spotted Towhee chimed in and was immediately followed by a Green-tailed in the same bush. Just then, Brennan spotted a pair of gnatcatchers quietly coming in to check out the commotion. Good looks and ensuing calls showed the birds to be the very rare Black-capped Gnatcatchers of which only a few pairs exist in the United States! This was certainly an auspicious start to our quest for the warblers.*

*We began our somewhat difficult hike up the canyon and passed several birders coming down who all gave negative reports—no Rufous-capped seen all day despite hours of looking. We were somewhat discouraged, but decided to continue on. A Black-chinned Sparrow, always uncommon and hard to find, flew in about halfway up and posed for lengthy, close views. Otherwise the area was quiet with little bird activity. We arrived at the area where the warblers had most frequently been reported and split up to look around. Three of us headed further up the stream bed to provide maximum coverage. As is often the case in late afternoon, there was precious little activity or sound. We were just ready to turn back when we heard the distinctive little ticking notes of a Rufous-capped in the wash up ahead. Some pishing, along with the alarm notes of a pair of nearby Rufous-crowned Sparrows, lured the bird into view. We called to the rest of the group and they came up to meet us. Soon the pair of warblers were foraging about within 15 feet of us, providing superb views for all. It had been 30 years since I had seen this species in the States, and it was a life bird for everyone in the group (including at least one person with a list over 700!). All this excitement was packed into just two hours of our wildly successful Winter Southern Arizona tour!*

*We had four full days of birding (all based out of one hotel) to cover a variety of different locations and habitats around Tucson. The morning of the same day of our Rufous-capped Warbler chase found us in nearby Madera Canyon. A mild winter had resulted in several species lingering later or in greater numbers than normal. We had a half-dozen Townsend's Warblers spread around in the canyon, along with at least four Painted Redstarts which obliged us with spectacular views. A male Olive Warbler with his pumpkin-orange head was a tour first, and a nearby female Hepatic Tanager was nearly as unusual. Regular species of this oak zone were very cooperative as well, with stellar views of Arizona Woodpecker, Magnificent Hummingbird, Bridled Titmouse, and Mexican Jays among others. Desert areas below the canyon yielded such goodies as Gilded Flicker, Phainopepla, and Rufous-winged, Black-throated, and Brewer's sparrows.*

*Our second day was spent northwest of Tucson in an area known as the Santa Cruz Flats. A combination of open agricultural lands and desert scrub here often produces a good variety of raptors and sparrows. Despite some challenging weather, we had a wonderful morning with four Ferruginous Hawks, two Prairie Falcons, a Merlin, a Peregrine Falcon, Burrowing Owl, Vermilion Flycatcher, three Bendire's Thrashers, several Sage Sparrows, Lark Bunting, and Yellow-headed Blackbird. In the afternoon we birded Sweetwater Wetlands where we had great scope views of Harris's Hawk, excellent studies of Sora and Virginia Rail, Cinnamon Teal, Abert's Towhee, and a rare Cassin's Vireo.*

*Day three found us in the vicinity of Nogales and Patagonia. Greater Roadrunner, Red-naped Sapsucker, Gray Flycatcher, and three species of towhees (including point-blank views of several Green-taileds) were found at our first stop. Patagonia Lake was next and we hit the jackpot, bird wise. Several rarities had been reported from here in the previous weeks, but the area is rather large, so finding one or two birds is often difficult. Luck was with us though, as many of our targets were concentrated into one small area. Most notable was the stunning male Elegant Trogon (not normally present in winter) that posed for over 15 minutes at 20 feet or less as it dined on a large grasshopper. An aseasonal Ash-throated Flycatcher and Plumbeous Vireo foraged in a nearby mesquite, as did another Black-capped Gnatcatcher which gave us lengthy views. Suddenly a male Hepatic Tanager appeared overhead, another unexpected rarity. Later on we visited some nearby feeders where we enjoyed four Lazuli Buntings among such regulars as Inca Dove, Anna's Hummingbird, Gila Woodpecker, Pyrrhuloxia, and Abert's Towhee. That evening an owling excursion produced fantastic looks at both Whiskered and Western screech-owls.*

*Our final day took us to the bird-rich Sulphur Springs Valley. An estimated 37,000 Sandhill Cranes were wintering in the valley this year, and I think we saw most of them! Most impressive was the sight of 10,000 or so bursting into the air at once when an adult Bald Eagle made a pass overhead. Four Tundra Swans, Ross's Geese, Scaled Quail, a rather ridiculous 23 Ferruginous Hawks, three more Prairie Falcons, roosting Barn and Great Horned owls, Crissal Thrasher, and 2,000+ male Yellow-headed Blackbirds rounded out the day.*

*In all we tallied 150 species of birds including many rarities and loads of southwestern specialties. With the exception of one windy, rainy day, we also had superb weather (reaching 80 degrees one day), when much of the country was gripped in cold and snow. This trip is a perfect mid-winter getaway!*

**Itinerary:**

January 20 - arrival in Tucson

January 21 - Green Valley, Continental, Madera Canyon, Florida Work Center (64 species)

January 22 - Santa Cruz flats, Redrock area, Sweetwater wetlands (70 species; 101 total)

January 23 - Amado Sewage Pond, Rio Rico pond, Kino Springs, Patagonia Lake SP, Patagonia, Sonoita Creek; evening owling (89 species; 134 total)

January 34 - Willcox, Sulphur Springs Valley to Whitewater Draw (74 species; 150 total)

January 25 - departures for home or on to Winter California (150 species total)

**Key:**

T = Tucson, Sweetwater, Santa Cruz flats

M = Madera Canyon, Green Valley, Amado

N = Nogales, Patagonia area

S = Sulphur Springs Valley, Willcox

**bold-faced species** indicate birds of rare, casual, or accidental occurrence

underlined species indicate birds of very uncommon occurrence or species which occur regularly but in such low densities as to be easily missed

**Birds:**

Snow Goose S---about 70 at Whitewater including two blue morph

Ross's Goose S---twenty or so in with Snows

Canada Goose S---lone bird at Kansas Settlement

**Tundra Swan** S---four at the Sunsites viewing spot were a tour first

Gadwall T,M,N,S

American Wigeon T,N,S

Mallard widespread, including some of the Mexican Duck subspecies

Blue-winged Teal T---very uncommon in winter

Cinnamon Teal T,S---gorgeous

Northern Shoveler widespread

Northern Pintail T,N,S

Green-winged Teal T,N,S

Canvasback M---one at Amado

Redhead S---three at Kansas Settlement

Ring-necked Duck M,S

Lesser Scaup M,S

Bufflehead T,M

Common Merganser T,N,S---51 on Patagonia Lake

Ruddy Duck T,M,N,S

Wild Turkey M---heard only in Madera Canyon

Scaled Quail S---flock of about 25 north of Elfrida by one van only

Gambel's Quail T,N,S---several great studies

Montezuma Quail N---six along Sonoita Creel were a surprise; great views for some, missed entirely by others

Pied-billed Grebe N,S

Eared Grebe N

Double-crested Cormorant N

Great Blue Heron T,N,S

Black-crowned Night-Heron N

Black Vulture N

Turkey Vulture N

**Bald Eagle** S---adult over Whitewater flushing geese & cranes; rare

Northern Harrier M,T,S

Sharp-shinned Hawk N,S

Cooper's Hawk M,N,S

Harris's Hawk T,S---great scope study at Sweetwater

Red-tailed Hawk seen daily with a high count of **167** in one day (!); strange bird at Evergreen Turf farms appeared to be a very rare light morph **Harlan's Hawk**

Ferruginous Hawk T,S---a good year for this species with an astonishing **23** seen in one day;  
 wonderful scope views; one rufous morph bird seen  
 American Kestrel seen daily; high count of 31 in a day  
Merlin T,S---three total  
Peregrine Falcon T---one near Cracker Barrel  
Prairie Falcon T,S--an impressive total of five seen  
Virginia Rail T---nice views  
 Sora T---superb views  
 Common Moorhen T,N  
 American Coot widespread  
 Sandhill Crane S---wonderful show of about **20,000+** birds at Whitewater Draw and surrounding  
 areas; voted the third favorite bird of the tour!  
 Killdeer T,S  
 Spotted Sandpiper S  
 Greater Yellowlegs S  
 Least Sandpiper S  
 Wilson's Snipe N  
 Rock Pigeon T,N,S  
 Eurasian Collared-Dove\_ seen daily  
 White-winged Dove M,T,N,S---uncommon in winter  
 Mourning Dove seen daily  
 Inca Dove N---ten in Patagonia were our only ones  
 Greater Roadrunner M,T,N,S---about 9 total  
 Barn Owl S---great study of roosting birds (2)  
 Western Screech-Owl M---very responsive bird for late winter  
Whiskered Screech-Owl M---fantastic views, especially for midwinter  
 Great Horned Owl S---three seen in one day, our first thanks to Billy  
Burrowing Owl T---from about ten feet at Santa cruz flats; unexpected in winter here  
Magnificent Hummingbird M---five in Madera; very high count for winter  
 Anna's Hummingbird M,T,N---particularly well at Patagonia  
**Elegant Trogon** N---absolutely stunning male at Patagonia Lake was voted the second favorite bird  
 of the tour; very rare in winter  
 Belted Kingfisher N---heard only  
 Acorn Woodpecker M  
 Gila Woodpecker M,T,N  
 Red-naped Sapsucker M,N  
 Ladder-backed Woodpecker seen daily  
Arizona Woodpecker M---uncommon; super views in Madera  
 Northern Flicker M,N---Red-shafted form  
 Gilded Flicker M---cooperative pair in Green Valley; one of our first birds  
Hammond's Flycatcher M---three  
 Gray Flycatcher M,N  
 Black Phoebe T,N,S  
 Say's Phoebe daily  
Vermilion Flycatcher T,N,S---stunning males  
**Ash-throated Flycatcher** N---very uncommon to rare in winter  
 Loggerhead Shrike seen daily  
**Plumbeous Vireo** N---nice looks at one at Patagonia Lake; rare in winter

**Cassin's Vireo** T,N---unexpected were singles at Sweetwater & Patagonia Lake  
 Hutton's Vireo M  
 Mexican Jay M  
 Chihuahuan Raven S  
 Common Raven daily  
 Horned Lark T,S  
 Bridled Titmouse M,N---great looks  
 Verdin seen daily, especially well outside of Continental  
 White-breasted Nuthatch M,N  
 Brown Creeper M  
 Cactus Wren M,T  
 Rock Wren M---heard only  
 Canyon Wren M---great views at the Madera Kubo  
 Bewick's Wren N,S  
 House Wren N  
 Marsh Wren T,N---mostly furtive  
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet M,T,N  
 Black-tailed Gnatcatcher T  
**Black-capped Gnatcatcher** M,N---pair at Florida Work Center and another lone bird studied at length at Patagonia Lake  
 Hermit Thrush M,N  
 American Robin M---a grand total of one seen (scope views)  
 Northern Mockingbird M,N,S  
Bendire's Thrasher T---three in the Santa Cruz flats  
 Curve-billed Thrasher daily---the western *palmeri* subspecies!  
 Crissal Thrasher S---fantastic scope views  
 European Starling seen daily  
 American Pipit S---seen poorly  
 Phainopepla M,N  
**Olive Warbler** M---a stunning male in Madera was a tour first!  
 Orange-crowned Warbler T,N  
 Yellow-rumped Warbler seen daily; mostly Audubon's subspecies, one Myrtle  
Townsend's Warbler M---an exceptional year for this species with about six seen in Madera Canyon (perhaps due to mild winter)  
 Common Yellowthroat T,N  
**Rufous-capped Warbler** M---pair above the Florida Work Center provided a tour first and only the second time Brennan or I had seen the bird in the U.S.; accidental visitor; great views eventually; voted the favorite bird of the tour  
**Wilson's Warbler** N---rare in winter; another tour first  
Painted Redstart M---nice views of four in Madera  
**Hepatic Tanager** M---female in Madera and male at Patagonia Lake; very rare in winter  
 Green-tailed Towhee M,N---excellent study at Kino Springs  
 Spotted Towhee M---oddly only two seen  
 Canyon Towhee M,N  
 Abert's Towhee T,N  
 Rufous-winged Sparrow M,N---great looks at this very localized species  
 Rufous-crowned Sparrow M---only by a few  
 Chipping Sparrow M,N

Brewer's Sparrow M,T,S  
Black-chinned Sparrow M---superb study in Florida Canyon; always tough  
 Vesper Sparrow T,S  
 Lark Sparrow M,T,N---unusually numerous this winter  
 Black-throated Sparrow seen daily---the most handsome sparrow?  
Sage Sparrow T---great views ever of the interior race *nevadensis*  
 Lark Bunting T,S---two small groups  
 Savannah Sparrow T,S  
 Song Sparrow T,N,S---southwestern race *saltonis*  
 Lincoln's Sparrow M,N,S---a few  
 White-crowned Sparrow seen daily  
 Dark-eyed Junco M---Oregon, Pink-sided, and Gray-headed varieties  
 Northern Cardinal M,N---the brighter, longer-crested race of Arizona  
 Pyrrhuloxia M,N,S  
Lazuli Bunting N---four in Patagonia; irregular in winter  
 Red-winged Blackbird T,N,S  
 Western Meadowlark T,S  
 Yellow-headed Blackbird T,S---amazing gathering of about **2500** males near Sunsites  
 Brewer's Blackbird T,S  
 Great-tailed Grackle T,N,S  
 Brown-headed Cowbird T  
 House Finch daily  
 Pine Siskin M,N  
 Lesser Goldfinch M,N  
 House Sparrow daily

total species - **150** (a new tour record)

**Transition Day list** (birds seen on drive Arizona to California---largely a travel day);

Turkey Vulture  
 Northern Harrier  
 Sharp-shinned Hawk  
 Red-tailed Hawk  
Golden Eagle perched adult at Tacna!  
 American Kestrel  
 Killdeer  
 Rock Pigeon  
 Eurasian Collared-Dove  
 Mourning Dove  
 Say's Phoebe  
 Loggerhead Shrike  
 Common Raven  
 Northern Mockingbird  
Le Conte's Thrasher---not to be expected, though always possible, on transfer day  
 Yellow-rumped Warbler  
 Sage Sparrow  
 Western Meadowlark

Great-tailed Grackle  
House Finch  
House Sparrow

total species - 21

**Mammals:** total species - 3

Arizona Gray Squirrel  
Desert Cottontail  
White-tailed Deer

**Reptiles & Amphibians:** species - 3

Red-eared Slider  
mud turtle species  
Spiny soft-shelled Turtle

**Butterflies:** species - 7

Mourning Cloak  
Red Admiral  
lady species  
Spring Azure  
Pipevine swallowtail  
Cabbage White  
sulphur species

**Significant others:**

pink rabbit statue  
Cafe Terra Cotta  
Evergreen Turf farm muddy road incident.....