

Hockey and Birding in the Desert Southwest
January 2020
by
Jeff Hopkins



Watching ice hockey and going birding are two of my favorite activities, so when I learned that my alma mater, Cornell, would be participating in an ice hockey tournament in Las Vegas at New Years of this year, I knew it would be a great opportunity to do both. Considering that I hadn't done any birding in the southwest in many years, I decided to add a week in Southeast Arizona to the handful of days in Las Vegas, especially since I'd never been there in the winter.

There were two targets that would have been completely new to me: California Condor and Sagebrush Sparrow. The former had only recently been declared countable by the ABA and could be seen on a quick overnight jaunt from Vegas. The latter was the result of a recent split of Sage Sparrow into Bell's Sparrow - which I'd previously seen in California - and Sagebrush Sparrow which I never seen. In addition, there were a couple Mexican vagrants that I'd previously only seen in Latin America, that could be possible as new birds for me in the ABA region.

Since trip was more target birding rather than general birding, the result was a week-and-a-half trip that netted me over 130 species, two of which were world lifers and three of which were only ABA lifers. While I

would never recommend Las Vegas as a birding destination (quite frankly, I'd never recommend Las Vegas as a destination at all), I wholeheartedly recommend southeast Arizona – as many people already know.

Logistics

Flights - All of my flights were on Southwest and all were on time or early. I flew to Las Vegas on the first flight of the New Year, since that was the lowest cost flight I could find although it meant leaving for the airport at 2 AM. I chose to fly from Las Vegas to Phoenix and drive from Phoenix to the birding areas. First, because it faster – flights to Tucson would stop in Phoenix anyway – and second because I had friends in Phoenix that I wanted to visit. The only knock on Southwest is that I normally prefer to fly from Newark, but after I'd booked my flight, Southwest decided to eliminate all of their flights from Newark, so I had to re-book from Philadelphia. However, they allowed the change at no additional cost.

Rental Cars – I rented from Alamo in both Las Vegas and Phoenix. Both airports have a “Rental Car Center” where all of the rental companies are located. This means a bus disgorges 40-50 people who all go running to the rental counters to stand in line. However, Alamo lets you check in ahead of time on line and print off your confirmation. With that you can bypass the lines and go right out to the garage and get your car, even if you don't have preferred status with them. I highly recommend it.

Hotels – I booked all of my hotels through Booking.com. Outside of Las Vegas they were all standard US chain hotels.

In Las Vegas, I stayed at the OYO Hotel (formerly the Hooters Hotel – ugh!). The big advantage of that hotel is that they don't charge for parking. All other hotels near the T-Mobile Arena charged \$16/day for parking even though you were a guest. One other recommendation: arrive earlier than the official check-in time of 4 PM. They'll probably have rooms available, and you won't have to stand in a long line in the noisy, smoky casino while waiting to check in.

Trip Narration

I use the convention of putting the first sighting or a notable second sighting of a bird in bold and sightings of a lifer in red. I've also included a list of species with remarks at the end.

And now the details...

January 1st - I arrived in Las Vegas a little early, got my rental car, and immediately headed north to the Vermillion Cliffs in Northern Arizona. My target for the day was California Condor and barring any upsets, I'd get there just before sunset when they were coming back to roost.

Sadly, the first bird of the trip was a feral **Rock Pigeon** shooting across I-15 in Las Vegas, but soon I was in the open desert making my way from Nevada into Arizona, then Utah, and finally back into Arizona. Since it was New Year's Day, I was concerned about finding open gas stations, but I needn't have worried as everything in Hurricane, Utah (just off of I-15) was open. Even so, I topped off the tank and continued on to the Vermillion Cliffs. Along the way, I saw a few **Common Ravens**, an **American Kestrel**, a few **American Crows**, and a **Red-tailed Hawk**.

I was also worried about snow on the Kaibab Plateau through Jacob's Lake near the north rim of the Grand Canyon. That road was clear, but unfortunately, House Rock Valley Road, the dirt road that leads to the Condor Viewing Site had not been plowed. As far as I could see, it had been driven on and the snow was packed down, so I gave it a go. This was fine for the first two miles, but the last mile was a bit dicey. I began to bottom out on the snow in the last mile, but made it to the viewing site.

I pulled out the scope and rather quickly picked out a **California Condor** on the cliffs, then another. They were too far away to make out the tag numbers, but there was no mistaking they were condors. I continued to scope the cliffs, and found more condors. I counted a total of 26 of them! I even had one fly in while scoping so I could see the white underwings.

By now it was close to sunset, and I did not want to brave the road after dark. I turned the car around and before I could get up to speed nearly got stuck in the snow, but made it out to the pavement (Whew!) and headed to my hotel in Kanab, Utah.



January 2nd - I didn't really have any targets and just needed to be back in Las Vegas to check into my hotel and get to the first hockey game at 7 PM. I had to scrape snow off the car in the morning, but otherwise today was an easy day,

I thought I'd try for a couple higher elevation species while I had the chance, so I headed for the Ponderosa Grove Campground outside Kanab. That stop gave me a few **Woodhouse's Scrub-jays**, a **Pygmy Nuthatch**, and a **Hairy Woodpecker**, but not the hoped for Pinyon Jays. On the way out I spotted a **Bald Eagle** perched in a juniper tree, which I thought was quite interesting considering there was no water nearby.

Next stop was Zion National Park, which I entered through the back (east) entrance along Mount Carmel Rd. There were a few more Bald Eagles and ravens, as well as a couple **Golden Eagles** perched along the road. However, once I made it into the park, the crowds started. I drove into the park as far as the Big Bend but there wasn't much in the way of bird life. Too many people.

I made a stop at the visitor center, where I did hear some birds. I found a few **White-crowned Sparrows** and a **Spotted Towhee** in the parking lot, and heard more activity in the campground. This turned out to be a **Bewick's Wren**, flocks of "**Oregon**" **Juncos** and **Bushtits**, and a few species of sparrows: a couple **Song Sparrows**, a **Savannah Sparrow**, and more White-crowns.

From there it was back to Vegas with a few **Great Tailed Grackles** and some **Eurasian Starlings** at a rest stop along the way. More grackles awaited me at my hotel off the strip.

January 3rd – When the ABA split Sage Sparrow into Bell's Sparrow and Sagebrush Sparrow, it put a hole in my life list, since I had the Bell's and not the Sagebrush. So that was today's target. It had been reported in eBird recently at Corn Creek Visitor Center at Desert NWR, so that was my destination.

There was a lot of activity near the visitor center, which included the first **Phainopepla** of many, **Verdin**, **Black-tailed Gnatcatcher**, **Northern Flicker**, a lone **Mountain Bluebird**, **Northern Mockingbird**, **American Robin**, and a surprising **Pied-billed Grebe** on the little pond. I first walked the Birdsong loop, which added a few **House Finches**, juncos, and a **Bewick's Wren** along with Song and White-crowned Sparrows, but no Sagebrush.

I then tried the Bighorn loop, but that was fairly quiet, and I ended up walking along Alamo Rd. behind the refuge, where I saw a **Greater Roadrunner** doing what roadrunners do. A mixed flock added a **Ruby-crowned Kinglet**, and more Verdins, Phainopeplas, and gnatcatchers. So I tried driving Alamo Road as far as I felt comfortable with only more of the same, but the road quality gave out pretty quickly, and I chose to play it safe.



On the way back to town, I stopped at Floyd Lamb Park at Tule Springs. This park has several ponds so it so it attracts wintering waterfowl. The man at the entrance booth also advised that there is a nesting colony of Burrowing Owls. Most numerous on the ponds were **Northern Shovelers** and **American Coots**, but there were good numbers of **American Wigeon**, **Mallards**, and **Canada Geese**. I went looking for the owls, and while I couldn't find those, I found a dry wash that added **Anna's Hummingbird**, a flock of **Gambell's Quail**, a few **Mourning Doves**, and a huge flock of White-crowns, but again, no Sagebrush.

So with the hole in my list still in place, I headed to Chinatown in Vegas for a late lunch and then back to the arena for more hockey.

Jan 4th – eBird let me know that while I was out at Corn Creek, someone had found Sagebrush Sparrows at Valley of Fire State Park, so I gave that a try. I spent a while stalking a flock of sparrows through the brush, which added **Black-throated Sparrows** to the abundant white-crowns. I also heard a distant Cactus Wren while chasing the sparrows. I stopped at the Visitor Center (adding **House Sparrows**) for some advice on where to go, and the ranger recommended a trail through the brush. That turned out to be bird-free.

I next headed along the back road to Henderson on the southeast side of Las Vegas. The water treatment plant there has a series of ponds which again attract waterfowl. There were huge numbers of shovelers, coots, **Ruddy Ducks**, and Pied-billed Grebes, and scattered numbers of Canada Geese, **Lesser Scaup**, **Green-winged Teal**, a **Redhead**, an **Eared Grebe**, and a small raft of **Cinnamon Teal**. There were even a few **Ring-billed Gulls**.

Land birds were well represented, too. Both **Say's Phoebe** and **Black Phoebe** were common. There were a few **Tree Swallows** feeding over the ponds along with a single **Northern Rough-winged Swallow**. **Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warbler** were everywhere. The reedy edges of the ponds had both **Brewer's Blackbird** and **Red-winged Blackbirds** and many **Marsh Wrens**. There were a couple **Killdeer** working some of the drier edges of the ponds, and I even heard a couple of **Virginia Rails**, but the brush was way too thick to see them.

The best birds were at the far end of the refuge near the open desert, where I had a pair of **Crissal Thrashers** that came out and perched on the refuge fence and a few Gambell's quail. The thrashers were a species I hadn't seen in almost 20 years, so they were a nice find.

The refuge was closing at 2 PM, so once again it was time for another late lunch, the last of the hockey games, and to wrap up the Las Vegas part of the trip.

Jan 5th – A quick morning flight had me in Phoenix by 11 AM and on the road by noon. Today's stop was the Santa Cruz Flats between Phoenix and Tucson, another possible site for Sagebrush Sparrow. It's also known for a couple of sod farms where Mountain Plover is a possibility.

I wound up driving about 30 miles in the flats going back and forth over various roads in the area. The first new bird for the trip was a **Loggerhead Shrike**. One farm had a large flock of **Lark Buntings** with a lone **Brown-headed Cowbird** and a couple **Bendire's Thrashers** mixed in. One flock of Mourning Doves had a few **Eurasian Collared Doves** in it. A single **Great Egret** flew from a small pond. Numerous Red-tailed Hawks and kestrels were perched on the wires, and a lone **Peregrine Falcon** also put in an appearance. Both phoebe's were common. At one point, I walked a bit in a brushy wash hoping for sparrows, and found a few **Abert's Towhees**, some Gambell's Quail, Black-tailed Gnatcatchers, juncos, and Savannah and White-crowned Sparrows. Brewer's Blackbirds were also present in large flocks near there.

Late in the afternoon, I found another nice patch of saltbush and sage with a lot of birds. First to turn up were a couple **Western Meadowlarks**. As I drove along, hundreds of Mourning Doves started popping up, and then a flock of House Finches and sparrows. So I got out and started walking through the brush. As the finches started flying and diving back in the brush, one little sparrow sat up. It had a clean breast except for one little dark spot. Before I could get a really good look it disappeared, but my impression was a plain face, which would make it a **Sagebrush Sparrow**, not a Lark Sparrow. Not a great look, but certainly countable.

It was time to get back on the road, so to speak, so I made a quick stop at the turf farm. No Mountain Plovers, but a flock of **Horned Larks**, a few **American Pipits**, and a couple noisy killdeer.

As it started getting dark, I headed south to Tucson and my hotel in Green Valley.

Jan 6th – Today's first stop was Florida Canyon in the Santa Ritas. I headed to the parking Preserve at the Santa Rita Experimental Range (aka the Santa Rita Work Center). At that early (cold) hour, the only bird making noise was an Acorn Woodpecker on a telephone pole. I eventually found the western footpath, and made my way up that primitive trail past the water tank, the dam, and several stream crossings before making it all the way to the oak grove with wet feet, but without hearing a single bird.

I headed back down and as soon as I got to a patch that wasn't in the shade, I heard some activity up-slope. I tried a quick burst of tape, and in zipped the target for my hike, a **Rufous-capped Warbler**, which had been reported in the area. I got some close looks before it moved away, so I pushed a bit and he started singing from a yucca stalk. Then a second bird perched up in the same tree, before they both dropped back out of sight.

After that, the walk back down was fairly uneventful. I found a **Northern Cardinal** (much brighter red than our eastern birds), a **Hermit Thrush**, and a couple more Acorn Woodpeckers on the walk down, then back at the bottom found a flock of juncos, including "pink-sided" and "Grey-headed" subspecies, a **Ladder-backed Woodpecker**, the first **Bridled Titmouse** of the trip, and another Bewick's Wren. I also heard a Lesser Goldfinch.

I made a quick stop at the corral at the intersection of FR 62A and FR 488, but missed the previously reported Black-capped Gnatcatcher, then headed up into Madera Canyon and relaxed at the feeders at the Santa Rita Lodge. The feeders were teeming with **Pine Siskins**, Bridled Titmice, **Lesser Goldfinches**, House Finches, and a few **White-breasted Nuthatches**. The seed that fell from the feeders fed a flock of **Wild Turkeys** as well as **Yellow-eyed Juncos** and multiple subspecies of Dark-eyed Juncos



Lots of Acorn Woodpeckers were working on the suet feeders and every once in a while an **Arizona Woodpecker** would join them. Then a flock of **Mexican Jays** came in and spooked off all the tiny birds. When the finches all came back, a Hepatic Tanager was added to the day list. Lastly, an occasional **Rivoli's Hummingbird** (formerly Magnificent Hummingbird) came to the hummingbird feeders.

I checked out Madera Kubo for a short while, which didn't add anything new, then drove up to the upper trailhead. The trail was ice-covered, so I dropped down to Proctor Road. I had intended to actually drive some of Proctor Rd. itself, but the creek flowing over it was a little deep for my tastes, so I parked and walked the

trail. I heard a couple Bridled Titmice right near the road, so I crossed the creek to get a better look. I walked a little bit of Proctor Rd. but heard absolutely nothing, so went back to the trail and walked up to the White House Ruins hearing only a Ladder-backed.

I gave up and headed back to the parking lot, but on the way heard the “mewing” call of a **Black-capped Gnatcatcher**. I listened to my recording, just to make sure it wasn’t a Blue-grey, and it sounded just like the recording. That also got the bird’s attention and it came closer and started calling. So did it’s mate. One bird eventually came into the open, and it definitely wasn’t a Blue-grey. So another Arizona specialty bird down, although not a lifer.

I was planning on heading to Montosa Canyon to get the gnatcatcher, but since I’d seen that instead I decided to drive a bit of Box Canyon Rd, just to see what desert birds might turn up (even though it was late afternoon). There was pretty much nothing until I got to the upper part of the canyon. Down in a ravine, I had a nice flock of Bushtits, but couldn’t pull any other species out of it. A little further on, I had a small flock of Mexican Jays. But it was getting late, and I decided to turn around and head to Montosa anyway.



On the way, I drove past the Amado Water Treatment Plant, where I found a large raft of Ruddy Ducks, a few Bufflehead, and a couple Mallards. Moving on, I had a roadrunner shoot across Mt. Hopkins Rd. before I got to the culvert in Montosa Canyon where the gnatcatchers are usually found. Immediately, I heard a couple Black-tailed Gnatcatchers and a Verdin. I walked back-and-forth across the culvert a couple times, and eventually heard a couple **Black-capped Gnatcatchers**, too. By the sunset, I added a cardinal, hermit thrush, and kinglet, and heard a couple **Canyon Wrens**. But before I could find them, I decided it was getting too dark to see anymore, so I headed back to Green Valley for the night.

Jan 7th - Rose-throated Becard is a bird that had become a bit of a nemesis bird for me. I’d missed them on several previous trips to Arizona. They aren’t found anymore at the formerly reliable location near the “Patagonia Picnic Table”. But this past summer they bred along the Santa Cruz River near Tubac and had been

hanging around the area all winter. Post breeding, sightings were sporadic, but they were definitely on my radar.

I got to Tubac early and headed north on the de Anza Trail. I had read they were on the east side of the river, so I headed there following the trail markers but very quickly the trail turned onto a broad dirt road that led away from the cottonwoods. Since that wasn't likely to turn up the becards, I went back to the west side of the river and walked from there to the Tubac Golf Course. It wasn't very birdy, except for several **Gila Woodpeckers** until I got to the open area near the golf course. At that point, I had a couple **Blue-grey Gnatcatchers**, a kinglet, a black phoebe, and a house wren. On the walk back I added a flicker and a great egret.

When I got back to the fork in the trail I met a couple of other birders, who pointed out a **Wilson's Warbler** they were watching. They told me that the place to see the becards was definitely on the east side of the river, but not on the main trail. There's a foot path that parallels the river inside the forest. Together we walked that trail a bit (getting lost a time or two) until we came to a small mixed flock with titmice, woodpeckers, and nuthatches. There was also a call we didn't recognize, but we couldn't find it. At that point, I decided it wasn't to be, and I chose to move on.

My next stop was in Patagonia. After all the morning's walking, I needed a sit-down, so I headed straight to Paton's. There was a White-winged Dove calling in the parking lot, and before I had a chance to sit down, I had all three of the expected wintering hummers – **Violet-Crowned Hummingbird**, **Broad-billed Hummingbird**, and Anna's Hummingbird. The seed feeders were full of siskins, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Lesser Goldfinches, and House Finches as expected

I started talking to Louie, the naturalist there, and he pointed out a **Lincoln's Sparrow** and a **Chipping Sparrow** among the white-crowns at the wood pile. We also heard a Curve-billed Thrasher that he suggested was probably hidden on the far side of the woodpile, but it never showed itself. Louie also mentioned that **Lazuli**



Buntings come to the feeders in the front yard, and one turned up after a little time spent watching those.

My other goal in Patagonia was to spend some time looking for sparrows and longspurs in the San Rafael Valley. That turned out to be a bit of a bust. The wind had picked up and most of the sparrows were in hiding – I saw three **Vesper Sparrows** and that was it. There were quite a few **Chihuahuan Ravens** and “**Lillian's**” **Eastern Meadowlarks**, a few American Kestrels, a

couple Say's Phoebes, and a small flock of Brewer's Blackbirds at a corral. The best moment of the afternoon, was when a **Sharp-shinned Hawk** took a run at a kestrel.

Since I was planning on staying in Sierra Vista, rather than go back to Patagonia, I took the Canelo Pass Rd toward Sonoita. On that road I made several stops when I saw or heard something. I had a large flock of juncos with a single **Eastern Bluebird** mixed in at one point, a **Hutton's Vireo** in with a group of Bridled Titmice, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and a House Wren, and a small flock of turkeys that crossed the road at another point.

I made a quick stop at the Las Cienegas Reserve near Sonoita just before dark, and found a large flock of Vesper Sparrows, but then moved on to Sierra Vista for the night.

Jan 8th – It had been many years since I'd been to Ramsey Canyon, so I made that my first stop of the day. I pulled up to the gate, where turkeys were milling about, to notice a sign which said it didn't open until 9 AM. So I drove back down the hill to Brown Canyon Ranch. There were mostly common species, but I did have my first Phainopepla for Arizona on this trip.

After 9, I drove back up to the reserve only to discover it was also closed on Wednesdays! So I drove back down again, and heard a cactus wren calling from the neighborhood at the bottom. Since I hadn't seen one yet – and it is the state bird of Arizona – I went for a drive in that neighborhood. First bird I found was a **Pyrhuloxia**, then I found a Northern Mockingbird and a **Curve-billed Thrasher** perched side-by-side on a prickly pear, a few Gambel's Quail, a **Canyon Towhee**, and eventually a couple of **Cactus Wrens** in a tree in someone's front yard. I also had a **Eurasian Collared Dove** mixed in with a flock of Mourning Doves.

I wanted to get into the higher elevations, so I headed two canyons south to Miller Canyon. Unfortunately the wind started to roar right about then, so by the time I got to Beatty's Orchard, everything was hunkered down. Tom Jr. pointed out a flock of juncos, another Curve-billed Thrasher, and a few Canyon Towhees, but even he noted that the wind was ridiculous. Even so, I walked a little of the trail up the canyon, but the trail was too icy for my tastes and with the high winds the only birds were a small flock of Mexican Jays and a couple Acorn Woodpeckers.



I figured maybe some feeder watching would change my luck, so I went to the Ash Canyon Sanctuary (formerly Ash Canyon B&B). The only hummingbird that came in was an Anna's (a Blue-throated was reported earlier in the week). The seed and suet feeders were very active with Pine Siskins, Lesser Goldfinches, House Finches,

Gila, Ladder-backed, and Acorn Woodpeckers, titmice and nuthatches, and occasionally Mexican Jays, and the trees were just full of Yellow-rumped Warblers. Surprisingly, there were very few juncos or sparrows.

After that, I still wanted to get to some higher elevation areas, so I tried Carr Canyon but the road was closed a little bit beyond the Visitor Center and the road was too icy to walk beyond that. A quick bathroom stop at the campground gave me a few Eastern Bluebirds, a large flock of juncos and a few more Mexican Jays, but I'd run out of options to get to the high forest, so I decided to head down.

I made a quick stop at the Sierra Vista water treatment ponds, but there was nothing visible from the

observation platform, so I continued on to the San Pedro House. There were lots of Doves at the feeders, most were **White-winged Doves**, but there were a couple **Inca Doves** and few Mournings. I walked through the grasslands, where there only a few Chipping Sparrows, to the Kingfisher Pond. I was hoping for some Mexican Ducks, but only turned up a couple coots and a Marsh Wren.

The walk back to the house along the river was quiet except for White-crowned Sparrows, so I sat for a while and watched the feeders (do we sense a pattern?) There were a few pyrrhuloxia, a couple Canyon Towhees, a Song Sparrow, more doves, and a large flock of Red-winged Blackbirds, but nothing novel.

Since I'd pretty much exhausted the options close to Sierra Vista and the wind wasn't letting up, I chose to quit early (that is, before dark).



Jan 9th – I figured I'd give Mexican Duck another shot, so I headed out early to get to Whitewater Draw Wildlife Area. The Coffman Rd. near the entrance had a large flock of grit-feeding sparrows. They all seemed to be Vesper and Savannah Sparrows, although I thought I had a brief look at a Lark Sparrow. As I parked at the reserve, I saw a Bendire's Thrasher that had been hanging around, a few Western Meadowlarks, and a couple Killdeer. I got out and walked the dikes and saw lots of Coots, Shovelers and **Northern Pintail**, several Cinnamon and Green-winged Teal, a few Gadwall and Eared Grebes, along with both phoebes and several **Northern Harriers**. I heard what sounded like Mallards, and they turned out to be true Mallards, not Mexican ducks. Whitewater Draw is also known for its **Sandhill Cranes** and I heard a few and saw a handful.

When I got back to the starting point, I decided to get out the scope to look at the far side of the main impoundment. There was a small flock of wintering **Snow Geese** (no Ross' that I could pick out at that distance), a few **Redheads** and **Canvasback**, and a large raft of Ruddy Ducks. As I decided to explore other areas in the valley and was heading out the gate, the cranes started coming in - in waves. I estimated a thousand of them. A last peek at the "sportmen's entrance" at the southern end of Coffman Rd. added a few Tree Swallows and a few more meadowlarks and the northern end of Coffman Rd. added a **Brewer's Sparrow** in a mixed flock with white-crowns.

I figured that I'd drive the Hawk-watching route provided in the Tucson Audubon's Guide to Southeastern Arizona. That would give me a chance at some additional sparrows and maybe some new raptors for the week. Raptor-wise, I had 15 red-tails, 2 **Ferruginous Hawks**, 2 harriers and a kestrel which I was later told is a really low count for the route. Sparrows proved much easier to find as I saw White-crowns (of course), Brewer's, Black-throated, Vesper, Savannah, and **Lark Sparrows** along with several large flocks of Lark Buntings. Non-sparrows included Loggerhead Shrikes, Curve-billed and Bendire's Thrasher, Red-winged and Brewer's Blackbirds, and a lone Cactus Wren.

I tried a little of Rucker Canyon Rd., hoping for something with "sage" in its name, but it was too windy and quiet. However, as I was driving back the Sandhill Crane show started. When I saw a huge flock in the distance, I wasn't sure what they were (I was thinking ravens), so I scoped them and saw they were cranes. I figure there were several thousand. Eventually a large portion of them started moving toward me. Just watching them and hearing them calling as they flew over was magical.



After that, I started the long drive back to Sierra Vista since I'd have an early start the next morning. It was pretty quiet other than a small flock of Chihuahuan Ravens on Gleeson Rd. and a lone Red-tailed Hawk at the San Pedro River Crossing on Charleston Rd.

Jan 10th – The initial goal for this morning was to give the becard at Tubac another go. However, a couple days earlier a Rufous-backed Robin was reported nearby. So I set out early to get to Santa Gertrudis Road in Tumacacori where it was being seen. When I arrived, there were already 10-20 birders already present, and of course I was told "You just missed it!" But nobody was leaving and neither was I. So people spread out along the road, mostly being distracted by numerous mockingbirds, and an occasional cardinal.

Suddenly, a shout went up. I thought they said “There’s a bird” but it was “There’s *the* bird!” Somehow it had snuck behind us and was sitting in a big leafless tree in a pasture across the road. Everybody ran over, and there it was...the **Rufous-backed Robin** sitting out in the open. It didn’t stay long and flew back across the road diving into the *pyracantha* bushes where it disappeared. I stuck around for another half hour or so hoping for another look but being frustrated by the numerous mockingbirds. I did add the only **Red-naped Sapsucker** of the trip, and a hermit thrush and hepatic tanager to the day list, but then decided to move on and chase the becard.

So once again it was up to Tubac and the de Anza trail. I immediately headed across the river and up the footpath on the east side. I saw something that I thought may have been a kingfisher but it disappeared before I could get a look. So I continued up the trail, losing my direction a couple times, until I got to a big open area in the cottonwoods near the golf course. It reminded me of a cathedral. At that point, I heard a mixed flock – titmice, nuthatches, and Gila Woodpeckers.

I started scanning the flock high in the trees and the first bird I looked at was a female **Rose-throated Becard**. Nemesis captured! She was very active and disappeared as quickly as she appeared. So I tried a little bit of tape, and got a couple distant responses, but she never came back.

I headed back to the trail head and came to the spot where I thought I had the kingfisher, and there it was – a **Green Kingfisher** sitting above a little temporary pool. I watched it for a little while until another group of birders came by and it spooked. I told them about the kingfisher and also where I saw the becard, and then moved on.

Next stop was Tucson and a couple of stake-outs. A Williamson’s Sapsucker had been visiting Kennedy Park. I didn’t find that but did see a nice **Vermillion Flycatcher** there plus a couple of Anna’s Hummingbirds. Then it was off to the other side of town to Reid Park. It took a while but with the help of some other birders I had great looks at the **Greater Pewee** that was wintering there.



Back on the road again, north to the Santa Cruz Flats and the Red Rock Feedlot. A couple of Ruddy Ground-doves had been visiting the lot. First I drove past the barns where I checked out the blackbird flocks. In addition to the Red-wings and Brewers, there were quite a few **Yellow-headed Blackbirds**, which I was surprised to have waited this long to see. They’re usually pretty common in SE Arizona. Then I went to the other side of the lot, where the **Ruddy Ground-doves** were mixed in with a flock of Inca Doves, along with trees full of Mourning and Collared Doves.

Further into the flats, I passed a soaring **Crested Caracara** which eventually settled into a tree with a bunch of Common Ravens. Then I came upon a huge kettle of **Black Vultures** and ravens soaring over one of the fields. Finally I ended up at my next target: a **Lewis’ Woodpecker** which was visiting the trees at an abandoned

house. While there, a couple of other birders pulled up and let me know what they'd seen at the Evergreen Sod Farm. So I drove over there and found the six **Mountain Plovers** they'd found earlier.

That wrapped up my birding day and I headed to Phoenix for the night.

Jan 11th – The “Baseline Thrasher Spot” was another place where Sagebrush Sparrow had been regularly reported in eBird, so it was off to the desert west of Phoenix first thing in the morning. I started wandering around and easily found a few of the common desert birds such as Black-tailed Gnatcatcher and several Verdins (the first I'd actually *seen* in Arizona on this trip) and a possible Sagebrush.

Soon I saw another birder with a scope. I tried to see what she was looking at, thinking it was a thrasher, but I couldn't see it. So once she stopped scoping I walked over as asked what it was. Her response was “Just a Sagebrush that perched up, but it's gone now.” Nooooo! I explained that's what I was looking for, and she told me that a Bell's Sparrow (the part of the Sage Sparrow split I'd already seen) had recently been reported there which was why she was out there. Since it was a big place, we decided to pair up to help each other out.

Unfortunately, the desert was unusually quiet that morning. We had another quick look at some skulky sparrows and a few more gnatcatchers. Then some more birders showed up looking for the Bell's. We all teamed up and continued our walk through the brush when a thrasher popped up. After a bit of a chase we concluded it was a Bendire's.

Later, as the morning wore on, one of the other birders saw a sparrow sit up. He got his scope on it, and called me over. I finally had killer looks at a **Sagebrush Sparrow**. We talked through all the field marks, confirming to the others it wasn't the Bell's. Once the bird dropped into the brush we continued our walk.

By this point, I'd been out there about three hours, and there really wasn't much activity, so I decided that a LeConte's Thrasher – the specialty of that area - wasn't likely. In fact, some of the others felt they might already be nesting. So I went off to one last stake-out.

A nearby house was reported to have a flock of Ruddy Ground-doves. So I went over there for a look. Unfortunately, there were no small doves to be found, just the usual Mourning and Collared Doves and a flock of 15 Western Meadowlarks.

I had plans for the evening, so I stopped the birding part of the trip, and headed back to the hotel to relax before dinner. I flew home the next day without any hitches.

Taxonomic Trip List

Snow Goose – *Anser caerulescens* - A flock of about 20 at Whitewater Draw WR (AZ)

Canada Goose - *Branta canadensis* – Large flocks at Floyd Lamb Park (NV) and Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV)

Cinnamon Teal - *Spatula cyanoptera* – Small rafts at Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV) and Whitewater Draw WR (AZ)

Northern Shoveler - *Spatula clypeata* - Large flocks at Floyd Lamb Park (NV), Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV), and Whitewater Draw WR (AZ)

American Wigeon – *Mareca Americana* – A large flock at Floyd Lamb Park (NV)

Gadwall – *Mareca Strepera* – A few at Whitewater Draw WR (AZ)

Mallard - *Anas platyrhynchos* – A few at any larger pond or lake.

Northern Pintail – *Anas acuta* - Large flocks at Whitewater Draw WR (AZ)

Green-winged Teal – *Anas crecca* – A few at Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV) and Whitewater Draw WR (AZ)

Canvasback - *Aythya valisineria* - A couple at Whitewater Draw WR (AZ)

Redhead – *Aythya Americana* - A few at Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV) and Whitewater Draw WR (AZ)

Lesser Scaup – *Aythya affinis* - A couple at Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV)



Bufflehead - *Bucephala albeola* - A few at Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV) and a couple at the Amado Wastewater Treatment Pond (NV)

Ruddy Duck - *Oxyura jamaicensis* – 10-20 at any larger pond.

Gambel's Quail – *Callipepla gambelii* - A flock at Floyd Lamb Park (NV), and a few each at the Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV) and in the neighborhood below Ramsey Canyon (AZ)

Wild Turkey - *Meleagris gallopavo* - A large flock at the Santa Rita Lodge (AZ),

a few on the Canelo Pass Road from the San Rafael Grasslands (AZ), and a small group on the grounds of the Ramsey Canyon Inn (AZ).

Pied-billed Grebe - *Podilymbus podiceps* – One at Corn Creek Field Station (NV) and a few at Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV)

Eared Grebe - *Podiceps nigricollis* - One at Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV) and a few Whitewater Draw WR (AZ)

Rock Pigeon – *Columba livia* – Regular sightings in Las Vegas (NV) and a few in Sierra Vista (AZ)

Eurasian Collared-Dove – *Streptopelia decaocto* - Fairly common in open, lower elevation habitats in Arizona

Inca Dove - *Columbina inca* – A few at the San Pedro House (AZ) and the Red Rock Feedlot (AZ) and one at Santa Gertrudis Lane (AZ)

Ruddy Ground Dove - *Columbina talpacoti* – A couple at the Red Rock Feedlot.

White-winged Dove - *Zenaida asiatica* – One heard at Paton's (AZ) and a small flock at the San Pedro House (AZ)

Mourning Dove - *Zenaida macroura* – Large flocks in the Santa Cruz Flats (AZ) with scattered sightings elsewhere in Arizona.

Greater Roadrunner - *Geococcyx californianus* – One at One at Corn Creek Field Station (NV) and another on the road to Montosa Canyon (AZ)

Rivoli's Hummingbird - *Eugenes fulgens* – A few coming to feeders at the lodges in Madera Canyon (AZ)

Anna's Hummingbird – *Calypte anna* - A few coming to feeders at Floyd Lamb Park (NV), Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV), Paton's (AZ), and the Ash Canyon Preserve (AZ) with a couple others heard at parks on Tucson.

Broad-billed Hummingbird - *Cynanthus latirostris* – One or two coming to feeders at Paton's (AZ)

Violet-crowned Hummingbird - *Amazilia violiceps* – A couple coming to feeders at Paton's (AZ)

Virginia Rail - *Rallus limicola* – Two heard at Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV)

Common Gallinule - *Gallinula galeata* – One at Whitewater Draw WR (AZ)

American Coot – *Fulica Americana* – Large flocks at any reserve with open water (both NV and AZ)

Sandhill Crane - *Antigone canadensis* – Flocks in the thousands at Whitewater Draw WR (AZ) and in the Sulphur Springs Valley (AZ).

Killdeer - *Charadrius vociferous* - A few each at Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV), Santa Cruz Flats (AZ), Whitewater Draw WR (AZ), and in the Sulphur Springs Valley (AZ).

Mountain Plover - *Charadrius montanus* – A group of six at the Evergreen Turf Farm in the Santa Cruz Flats (AZ)

Ring-billed Gull - *Larus delawarensis* – Three at Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV)

Great Egret – *Ardea Alba* – One at the Santa Cruz Flats and one near the de Anza Trail at Tubac.

Black-crowned Night-Heron - *Nycticorax nycticorax* - One immature at Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV)

California Condor - *Gymnogyps californianus* - Lifer! A group of 26 at the Vermillion Cliffs Vulture Viewing Area (AZ)

Black Vulture - *Coragyps atratus* – A large kettle mixed with ravens at the Santa Cruz Flats (AZ)

Golden Eagle – *Aquila chrysaetos* - 2 seen along the Mt. Carmel Rd. on the way into Zion NP (UT)

Northern Harrier – *Circus hudsonius* – One on the way to the Vermillion Cliffs (AZ), several at Whitewater Draw WR (AZ), and a couple in the Sulphur Springs Valley (AZ).

Sharp-shinned Hawk – *Accipiter striatus* – One attacking a kestrel in the San Rafael Valley (AZ)

Red-tailed Hawk - *Buteo jamaicensis* – Seen in small numbers every day with 15 seen in the Sulfur Springs Valley (AZ)

Ferruginous Hawk – *Buteo regalis* - 2 seen in the Sulfur Springs Valley (AZ)

Green Kingfisher – *Chloroceryle Americana* - One along the de Anza Trail at Tubac.

Red-naped Sapsucker - *Sphyrapicus nuchalis* - One at Santa Gertrudis Lane (AZ)

Lewis's Woodpecker - *Melanerpes lewis* - A stake-out at the Santa Cruz Flats (AZ)

Acorn Woodpecker - *Melanerpes formicivorus* – Relatively common in both the Santa Ritas and Huachuclas (AZ)



Gila Woodpecker - *Melanerpes uropygialis* - Relatively common and noisy in wooded areas in Arizona

Ladder-backed Woodpecker - *Dryobates scalaris* – Scattered sightings (more often heard) in wooded areas in Arizona

Hairy Woodpecker – *Dryobates villosus* - One bird at the Ponderosa Grove Campground outside Kanab (UT)

Arizona Woodpecker - *Dryobates arizonae* – A couple birds at the feeders at the Santa Rita Lodge (AZ).

Northern Flicker - *Colaptes auratus* - Scattered sightings (more often heard) in wooded areas in both Nevada and Arizona

Crested Caracara - *Caracara cheriway* – One bird at the Santa Cruz Flats (AZ)

American Kestrel - *Falco sparverius* – Fairly common in the open farm and grasslands of Arizona

Peregrine Falcon – *Falco peregrinus* - One bird at the Santa Cruz Flats (AZ)

Rose-throated Becard - *Pachyramphus aglaiae* – Lifer! Finally caught up to a female along the de Anza Trail near Tubac (AZ)

Greater Pewee - *Contopus pertinax* – A stake-out bird wintering at Reid Park in Tucson (AZ)

Black Phoebe - *Sayornis nigricans* – A few at Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV) and fairly common at any location with water in Arizona

Say's Phoebe – *Sayornis saya* - few at Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV) and fairly common at the open farm and grasslands of Arizona

Vermilion Flycatcher - *Pyrocephalus rubinus* – One at Kennedy Park in Tucson

Hutton's Vireo - *Vireo huttoni* - One on the Canelo Pass Road from the San Rafael Grasslands (AZ),

Loggerhead Shrike – *Lanius ludovicianus* – One in the Santa Cruz Flats (AZ) and one in the Sulphur Springs Valley (AZ). Less common than I expected.



Woodhouse's Scrub-jay - *Aphelocoma woodhouseii* – A few near the Ponderosa Grove Campground near Kanab (UT)

Mexican Jay - *Aphelocoma wollweberi* – Common in the mountains of SE Arizona

American Crow – *Corvus brachyrhynchos* - One or two seen on the way to the Vermillion Cliffs (UT & AZ)

Chihuahuan Raven - *Corvus cryptoleucus* – A few identified in SE Arizona, but after a while I stopped trying to separate this from Common Raven

Common Raven – *Corvus corax* – Common in all three states

Bridled Titmouse – *Baeolophus wollweberi* - Common in wooded areas in SE Arizona

Verdin – *Auriparus flaviceps* – Fairly common in lowland scrub habitat in Nevada and Arizona

Horned Lark - *Eremophila alpestris* – A few in the Santa Cruz Flats (AZ) and in the Sulfur Springs Valley (AZ)

Northern Rough-winged Swallow - *Stelgidopteryx serripennis* – One at Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV)

Tree Swallow - *Tachycineta bicolor* – A few at Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV) and at at Whitewater Draw WR (AZ)

Bushtit - *Psaltiriparus minimus* – A flock at the campground at Zion NP (UT) and another in a ravine along the Box Canyon Road (AZ)

Ruby-crowned Kinglet - *Regulus calendula* – Fairly common in desert scrub and also wooded areas in both Nevada and Arizona.

White-breasted Nuthatch - *Sitta carolinensis* - Fairly common in wooded areas in Arizona especially at feeders.

Pygmy Nuthatch - *Sitta pygmaea* – One at the Ponderosa Grove Campground near Kanab (UT)

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher - *Polioptila caerulea* – A few along the de Anza Trail near Tubac (AZ)

Black-tailed Gnatcatcher - *Polioptila melanura* – Fairly common in desert scrub in both Nevada and Utah

Black-capped Gnatcatcher - *Polioptila nigriceps* – Two at Proctor Rd.in Madera Canyon (AZ) and another two heard at the at culvert at Montosa Canyon (AZ). A rarity that's becoming fairly regular in SE Arizona.

Canyon Wren - *Catherpes mexicanus* – Heard only at the colvert at Montosa Canyon (AZ)

House Wren - *Troglodytes aedon* – Scattered sightings in Arizona

Marsh Wren - *Cistothorus palustris* – Scattered sightings at large ponds in both Nevada and Arizona

Bewick's Wren - *Thryomanes bewickii* - Scattered sightings in both Nevada and Arizona although more often heard.

Cactus Wren - *Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus* – Heard at Valley of Fire SP (NV) then seen in the neighborhood below Ramsey Canyon (AZ) and in the Sulphur Springs Valley (AZ).

European Starling - *Sturnus vulgaris* – A few at Floyd Lamb Park (NV), then scattered sightings at the de Anza trail head in Tubac (AZ) and Santa Gertrudis Lane (AZ).

Curve-billed Thrasher - *Toxostoma curvirostre* – Heard at Paton's (AZ) then scattered sightings in the lowlands below the Huachucas (AZ) and in the Sulphur Springs Valley (AZ)

Bendire's Thrasher - *Toxostoma bendirei* – One at the Santa Cruz Flats (AZ), one at Whitewater Draw (AZ), and one at the Baseline Thrasher Spot West of Phoenix.

Crissal Thrasher - *Toxostoma crissale* – Two at the Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve (NV)

Northern Mockingbird - *Mimus polyglottos* – Scattered sightings in open lowlands in both Nevada and Arizona.

Mountain Bluebird - *Sialia currucoides* – Just one at Corn Creek Field Station (NV)

Eastern Bluebird - *Sialia sialis* – One along the Canelo Pass Road from the San Rafael Grasslands (AZ) and another couple at the Carr Canyon campground.

Hermit Thrush - *Catharus guttatus* – One in Florida Canyon in the Santa Ritas (AZ) and one at Santa Gertrudis Lane (AZ)

American Robin - *Turdus migratorius* – A few at Corn Creek Field Station (NV)

Rufous-backed Robin - *Turdus rufopalliat* – Lifer! An unexpected rarity at Santa Gertrudis Lane (AZ)

Phainopepla - *Phainopepla nitens* – Common at Corn Creek Field Station (NV). One each at Valley of Fire SP (NV), in the neighborhood below Ramsay Canyon (AZ), and at Santa Gertrudis Lane (AZ)

House Sparrow - *Passer domesticus* – Small flocks around civilization

American Pipit - *Anthus rubescens* – A couple at the turf farms in the Santa Cruz Flats (AZ)

House Finch - *Haemorhous mexicanus* – Fairly common at both brushy and wooded habitats in both Nevada and Arizona

Pine Siskin - *Spinus pinus* – Flocks at Feeders in the Santa Ritas, Patagonia, and the Huachucas (AZ)



Lesser Goldfinch - *Spinus psaltria* - Flocks at Feeders in the Santa Ritas, Patagonia, and the Huachucas (AZ)

Chipping Sparrow - *Spizella passerine* – Several at Patons (AZ) and a few at the San Pedro House (AZ)

Brewer's Sparrow - *Spizella breweri* – Just a few in the Sulfur Springs Valley (AZ)

Black-throated Sparrow - *Amphispiza bilineata* – A large group in a mixed flock with white-crowns at Valley of Fire SP (NV) and a few in the Sulfur Springs Valley (AZ)

Lark Sparrow - *Chondestes grammacus* – One or two in the Sulfur Springs Valley (AZ)

Lark Bunting - *Calamospiza melanocorys* – Large flocks near farms at the Santa Cruz Flats (AZ) and in the Sulphur Springs Valley (AZ)

Dark-eyed Junco - *Junco hyemalis* – Common in brushy habitats in all three states. Only “Oregon” ssp. seen in Nevada and Utah. “Oregon”, “Pink-sided”, and “Grey-headed” all seen in Arizona.

Yellow-eyed Junco - *Junco phaeonotus* – A couple at the feeders at the lodges in Madera Canyon (AZ)

White-crowned Sparrow - *Zonotrichia leucophrys* – Common in all habitats except in the cities.

Sagebrush Sparrow - *Artemisiospiza nevadensis* – One seen at the Santa Cruz Flats (AZ) then a couple more at the Baseline Thrasher Spot west of Phoenix.

Vesper Sparrow - *Pooecetes gramineus* – The most common sparrow in the SE Arizona grasslands.

Savannah Sparrow - *Passerculus sandwichensis* – A few seen at Zion NP (UT), Whitewater Draw WR (AZ), and in the Sulphur Springs Valley (AZ)



Song Sparrow - *Melospiza melodia* – Scattered Sightings in all habitats but desert saltbush.

Lincoln's Sparrow - *Melospiza lincolnii* – One bird seen at Paton's (AZ)

Canyon Towhee - *Melozone fusca* – A few at Beatty's Orchard in Miller Canyon (AZ) and another couple at Whitewater Draw WR (AZ)

Abert's Towhee - *Melozone aberti* – A few in a mesquite wash at the Santa Cruz Flats (AZ)

Spotted Towhee - *Pipilo maculatus* – A bird at the campground at Zion NP (UT)

Yellow-headed Blackbird - *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus* – Several birds at the Red Rock Feedlot (AZ)

Western Meadowlark - *Sturnella neglecta* – Several at the Santa Cruz Flats (AZ) and a large flock near a ranch outside Phoenix. Some birds in the Sulfur Springs Valley left unidentified.

“Lilian's” Eastern Meadowlark - *Sturnella magna lilianae* – Definitely identified in the San Raphael Valley (AZ). Probably also present in the Sulfur Springs Valley but left unidentified.

Red-winged Blackbird - *Agelaius phoeniceus* – Large flocks around wetland parks and rural habitation (especially cattle ranches) in both Nevada and Arizona

Brown-headed Cowbird - *Molothrus ater* – Just one picked out from a flock of Lark Buntings at the Santa Cruz Flats (AZ)

Brewer's Blackbird - *Euphagus cyanocephalus* - Large flocks around wetland parks and rural habitation (especially cattle ranches) in both Nevada and Arizona

Great-tailed Grackle - *Quiscalus mexicanus* – Common around city habitation. Large flocks in the evening in Las Vegas.

Orange-crowned Warbler - *Leiothlypis celata* – Just one at the Ash Canyon B&B in the Huachucas (AZ)

Yellow-rumped Warbler - *Setophaga coronata* – The most common wintering warbler in all three states usually found where there were trees. Only “Audubon’s” ssp. seen.

Rufous-capped Warbler - *Basileuterus rufifrons* – Lifer! A pair seen in Florida Canyon in the Santa Ritas (AZ)

Wilson's Warbler - *Cardellina pusilla* – One seen along the de Anza Trail in Tubac (AZ)

Hepatic Tanager - *Piranga flava* – One at the feeders at the Santa Rita Lodge (AZ) and another at Santa Gertrudis Lane (AZ)

Northern Cardinal - *Cardinalis cardinalis* – Scattered sightings at Santa Cruz Flats (AZ) and at Santa Gertrudis Lane (AZ)

Pyrrhuloxia - *Cardinalis sinuatus* – One in the neighborhood below Ramsey Canyon (AZ) and a few at the feeders at the San Pedro House (AZ)

Lazuli Bunting - *Passerina amoena* – One at Paton’s (AZ)

