



Field Guides Tour Report

Arizona Winter Specialties 2015

Dec 27, 2015 to Jan 2, 2016

Chris Benesh

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A dusk flight of Sandhill Cranes. (Photo by guide Chris Benesh)

This year's Arizona Winter Specialties tour was a pleasure. Despite some cold weather for some of the time, we managed to dodge any significant rain and were treated to a nice variety of species. We started off in Phoenix, spending our first afternoon at the Gilbert Water Ranch. Lots of waterfowl, a few waders, and a smattering of Inca Doves were treats, and dueling Peregrine Falcons and a female Williamson's Sapsucker added to the excitement.

The following morning, we headed west to the thrasher spot, where we tracked down some Sagebrush Sparrows, Black-tailed Gnatcatchers, as well as Bendire's and Le Conte's thrashers. We then explored the Arlington Valley, where we came across some flooded fields filled with various blackbirds, White-faced Ibis, and Long-billed Curlews. We were entertained by a few Ferruginous Hawks along the way. In the afternoon, we tracked down Bell's Sparrows and Rosy-faced Lovebirds before heading to the hotel.

Our brief morning around Phoenix turned into a more involved deal while we waited for a courier to deliver our new tire. That gave us time to really enjoy the Glendale Recharge Ponds. We saw quite a few good waterbirds there, as well as some Bald Eagles, and two species of gull. Plane nerds picked up lifers too with sightings of F-35s from nearby Luke AFB. After lunch, we were finally free to continue on. While all small geese were elusive, we did see a nice Gilded Flicker before heading to the Arizona Flats. There we connected with some Mountain Plovers, Burrowing Owls, and a Sprague's Pipit.

The following morning, we headed up to Catalina State Park for a morning encounter with a Rufous-backed Robin. Once it warmed up a bit, conditions were perfect and we had quite a parade of birds coming to drink in the stream. We also had a fabulous view of a Great Horned Owl here. In the afternoon, we hit a couple of spots in Tucson, Tohono Chul, and Sweetwater Wetlands.

The last day of the year found us heading southeast to the natural grasslands of the Empire Ranch and the San Rafael Grasslands. We had a handsome family group of White-tailed Kites, and a beautiful male prairie Merlin. A Sora paraded in the open in front of us. In the afternoon, we visited Pena Blanca Canyon where our best sightings had to be a couple of coveys of Montezuma Quail.

After saying farewell to Hans and Ann-Margreth, the rest of us started in on some New Year's birding. Our first stop was in Continental. Despite the chilly winds, we had great views of swirling flocks of Horned Larks and a hunting Prairie Falcon. We then headed to Florida Canyon, where Golden

Eagle and Elegant Trogon stole the show. Then it was off to Whitewater Draw for the grand finale. We arrived in the afternoon to the sight of many thousands of Sandhill Cranes lounging around the wetlands. As the sun sank lower in the sky, the cranes began heading off to their night roosts, with large streams of birds flying past. Yellow-headed Blackbirds arrived by the hundreds, coming to roost in the cattails. What a climax!

Thanks to all of you for making the trip such a success! It was a pleasure birding with all of you and I look forward to seeing you all again on another trip!

--Chris

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

CANADA GOOSE (*Branta canadensis*) – This species has gotten quite common in the Phoenix area while still a rarity around Tucson.

GADWALL (*Anas strepera*) – We were able to enjoy the subtle beauty of this species.

AMERICAN WIGEON (*Anas americana*)

MALLARD (NORTHERN) (*Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos*)

MALLARD (MEXICAN) (*Anas platyrhynchos diazi*) – A couple of these were at Sweetwater Wetlands. Long thought to be Mallards, recent research has hinted they may be more distantly related.

CINNAMON TEAL (*Anas cyanoptera*) – A beautiful male was with some teal at Sweetwater Wetlands.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*)

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*)

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (AMERICAN) (*Anas crecca carolinensis*)

CANVASBACK (*Aythya valisineria*) – A drive by view in St. David on our way to Whitewater Draw.

RING-NECKED DUCK (*Aythya collaris*) – Stunning close up views in Phoenix where we were able to see the burgundy colored neck collars well.

LESSER SCAUP (*Aythya affinis*)

BUFFLEHEAD (*Bucephala albeola*)

COMMON GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala clangula*) – A couple at the Glendale Recharge Ponds and another at Riggs Road pond.

COMMON MERGANSER (*Mergus merganser*) – Several female plumaged birds at the Glendale Recharge Ponds were in stealth mode at times.

RUDDY DUCK (*Oxyura jamaicensis*)

Odontophoridae (New World Quail)

GAMBEL'S QUAIL (*Callipepla gambelii*) – Quite a few of these were at the Gilbert Water Ranch.

MONTEZUMA QUAIL (*Cyrtonyx montezumae*) – Scott detected our first bunch of these in Pena Blanca Canyon and another covey was spotted closer to the lake. Always great to see this sought after species.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

PIED-BILLED GREBE (*Podilymbus podiceps*)

EARED GREBE (*Podiceps nigricollis*)

WESTERN GREBE (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*) – Two or three of these were at the Glendale Recharge Ponds.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

NEOTROPIC CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*) – Quite a few of these at Gilbert Water Ranch. This species has really exploded in population in Arizona in recent years.

DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax auritus*)

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GREAT BLUE HERON (*Ardea herodias*)

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*)

SNOWY EGRET (*Egretta thula*)

GREEN HERON (*Butorides virescens*)

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*)

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

WHITE-FACED IBIS (*Plegadis chihi*) – Dozens of these in the flooded fields in the Arlington Valley. I photographed one suggestive of the locally rare Glossy Ibis.

Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

BLACK VULTURE (*Coragyps atratus*) – A few of these in the Phoenix area.

TURKEY VULTURE (*Cathartes aura*)

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*) – A small number of these winter in the Phoenix area.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

WHITE-TAILED KITE (*Elanus leucurus*) – We had a family group of four birds in the San Rafael Grasslands.

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – Beautiful looks at two birds in Florida Canyon on our final morning.

NORTHERN HARRIER (*Circus cyaneus*)

SHARP-SHINNED HAWK (*Accipiter striatus*) – Best views were of the adult bird sitting in the stream at Catalina State Park.

COOPER'S HAWK (*Accipiter cooperii*)

BALD EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – Great studies to two immature birds at the Glendale Ponds.

HARRIS'S HAWK (*Parabuteo unicinctus*) – One seen in Tucson on our way north to Catalina State Park.

RED-TAILED HAWK (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

FERRUGINOUS HAWK (*Buteo regalis*) – Several seen including a dark morph bird. Most were west of Phoenix.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

VIRGINIA RAIL (*Rallus limicola*) – Mostly heard and briefly seen.

SORA (*Porzana carolina*) – Great looks at one at Bog Hole, making the bumpy ride worthwhile.

COMMON GALLINULE (*Gallinula galeata*) [*]

AMERICAN COOT (*Fulica americana*)

Gruidae (Cranes)

SANDHILL CRANE (*Grus canadensis*) – A spectacular display of some 15,000 birds at Whitewater Draw on our final afternoon of the trip.

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-NECKED STILT (*Himantopus mexicanus*)

AMERICAN AVOCET (*Recurvirostra americana*) – A small number of these were at the Gilbert Water Ranch.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

KILLDEER (*Charadrius vociferus*)

MOUNTAIN PLOVER (*Charadrius montanus*) – After some crummy distant views, we had some birds fly into a nearby field while we were looking for Sprague's Pipits, giving us great scope views.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

SPOTTED SANDPIPER (*Actitis macularius*)

GREATER YELLOWLEGS (*Tringa melanoleuca*)

LONG-BILLED CURLEW (*Numenius americanus*)

LEAST SANDPIPER (*Calidris minutilla*)

LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*)

WILSON'S SNIPE (*Gallinago delicata*) – Nice scope views of this well patterned species at the Gilbert Water Ranch.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

RING-BILLED GULL (*Larus delawarensis*)

HERRING GULL (AMERICAN) (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) – This was the larger gull seen at the Glendale Ponds.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) [H]

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) [H]

INCA DOVE (*Columbina inca*) – Our best views were at the Gilbert Water Ranch.

WHITE-WINGED DOVE (*Zenaida asiatica*) – We had a single bird fly past on the last day of the tour.

MOURNING DOVE (*Zenaida macroura*)

Cuculidae (Cuckoos)

GREATER ROADRUNNER (*Geococcyx californianus*)

Strigidae (Owls)

GREAT HORNED OWL (*Bubo virginianus*) – Terrific looks at a bird in Catalina State Park and a pair of unseen birds hooting just around sunset at Whitewater Draw.

BURROWING OWL (*Athene cunicularia*) – Two birds well seen in the Santa Cruz Flats.

Trochilidae (Hummingbirds)

ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD (*Calypte anna*)

COSTA'S HUMMINGBIRD (*Calypte costae*) – The best we could muster was a female bird at Tohono Chul Park.

Trogonidae (Trogons)

ELEGANT TROGON (*Trogon elegans*) – Thanks to a tip from a helpful birder, we had great views of a male bird in lower Florida Canyon.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

BELTED KINGFISHER (*Megasceryle alcyon*) – One seen in the distance at Glendale.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

ACORN WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes formicivorus*) – Small numbers were in Harshaw Canyon.

GILA WOODPECKER (*Melanerpes uropygialis*)

WILLIAMSON'S SAPSUCKER (*Sphyrapicus thyroideus*) – This female was a surprise find on our first afternoon at the Gilbert Water Ranch.

RED-NAPED SAPSUCKER (*Sphyrapicus nuchalis*) – This one was notable in being Ann-Margreth's 6000th lifer! Congrats!

LADDER-BACKED WOODPECKER (*Picoides scalaris*)

NORTHERN FLICKER (RED-SHAFTED) (*Colaptes auratus cafer*)

GILDED FLICKER (*Colaptes chrysoides*) – A close study of a male at the Riggs Road pond.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

CRESTED CARACARA (*Caracara cheriway*) – Distant flight views in the Santa Cruz Flats were made up for with the two we saw well just south of Tucson.

AMERICAN KESTREL (*Falco sparverius*)

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*) – We had a beautiful male prairie form in the San Rafael Grasslands, and a female prairie form at Whitewater Draw.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – At least four different birds seen on the trip.

PRAIRIE FALCON (*Falco mexicanus*) – Nice look at one perched near Buckeye, and another seen hunting on the final morning of the trip near Continental.

Psittaculidae (Old World Parrots)

ROSY-FACED LOVEBIRD (*Agapornis roseicollis*) – Quite a few seen at Encanto Park in Phoenix. This species has been breeding in the valley since in 1980s. [I]

Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)

GRAY FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax wrightii*) – A couple of good studies at Catalina State Park.

BLACK PHOEBE (*Sayornis nigricans*)

SAY'S PHOEBE (*Sayornis saya*)

VERMILION FLYCATCHER (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*) – Birds that make you say "oh!" Some good views of this species.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE (*Lanius ludovicianus*) – Quite a few of these winter in southern Arizona, giving the false impression that this species is still doing well.

Vireonidae (Vireos, Shrike-Babblers, and Erpornis)

HUTTON'S VIREO (*Vireo huttoni*) [*]

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

MEXICAN JAY (*Aphelocoma wollweberi*) – Small numbers of these were in Florida Canyon.

CHIHUAHUAN RAVEN (*Corvus cryptoleucus*) – Our best views were on the final morning near Continental.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*)

Alaudidae (Larks)

HORNED LARK (*Eremophila alpestris*)

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*) – Several of these were at the Gilbert Water Ranch.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

BRIDLED TITMOUSE (*Baeolophus wollweberi*)

Remizidae (Penduline-Tits)

VERDIN (*Auriparus flaviceps*)

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

ROCK WREN (*Salpinctes obsoletus*)

CANYON WREN (*Catherpes mexicanus*)

HOUSE WREN (*Troglodytes aedon*)

MARSH WREN (*Cistothorus palustris*)

BEWICK'S WREN (*Thryomanes bewickii*)

CACTUS WREN (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*)

Poliophtilidae (Gnatcatchers)

BLACK-TAILED GNATCATCHER (*Poliophtila melanura*) – Quite a few of these were in the thrasher area west of Phoenix.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus calendula*)

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

HERMIT THRUSH (*Catharus guttatus*)

RUFIOUS-BACKED ROBIN (*Turdus rufopalliatus*) – One of the trip highlights for all, we had terrific views of this colorful and rare visitor at Catalina State Park.

AMERICAN ROBIN (*Turdus migratorius*) – A few of these shared the spotlight with the Rufous-backed.

Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)

CURVE-BILLED THRASHER (*Toxostoma curvirostre*) – We did see a couple of these near Green Valley one afternoon.

BENDIRE'S THRASHER (*Toxostoma bendirei*) – Great views of this species near Buckeye at the thrasher spot.

LE CONTE'S THRASHER (*Toxostoma lecontei*) – Nice views of this furtive species running along on the ground at the thrasher spot.

NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD (*Mimus polyglottos*)

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) [I]

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

AMERICAN PIPIT (*Anthus rubescens*)

SPRAGUE'S PIPIT (*Anthus spragueii*) – After a bit of searching we did discover one walking around in a field in the Santa Cruz Flats.

Ptilionotidae (Silky-flycatchers)

PHAINOPEPLA (*Phainopepla nitens*)

Parulidae (New World Warblers)

ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER (*Oreothlypis celata*)

COMMON YELLOWTHROAT (*Geothlypis trichas*)

YELLOW WARBLER (*Setophaga petechia*) – A single bird was at the Gilbert Water Ranch.

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (AUDUBON'S) (*Setophaga coronata auduboni*)

PAINTED REDSTART (*Myioborus pictus*) – One or more were in Florida Canyon on the final morning of the tour.

Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

RUFIOUS-WINGED SPARROW (*Peucaea carpalis*) – Some great studies of this species at Catalina State Park. We saw a "flock" of six there, the most I have ever seen traveling together.

BAIRD'S SPARROW (*Ammodramus bairdii*) – The best we could muster were some flight views.

CHIPPING SPARROW (*Spizella passerina*)

BREWER'S SPARROW (*Spizella breweri*)

BLACK-THROATED SPARROW (*Amphispiza bilineata*)

LARK SPARROW (*Chondestes grammacus*)

LARK BUNTING (*Calamospiza melanocorys*)

DARK-EYED JUNCO (*Junco hyemalis*) – Some of us observed a white-headed bird (partial albino) in Pena Blanca Canyon.

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (GAMBEL'S) (*Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii*)

SAGEBRUSH SPARROW (*Artemisiospiza nevadensis*) – Some nice studies of this species west of Phoenix. Hans spotted the first, which also happened to be his 9033 life bird! Impressive!

BELL'S SPARROW (CANESCENS) (*Artemisiospiza belli canescens*) – We had a good scope view of this species at Robbins Butte west of Phoenix.

VESPER SPARROW (*Pooecetes gramineus*)

SAVANNAH SPARROW (*Passerculus sandwichensis*)

SONG SPARROW (*Melospiza melodia*)

LINCOLN'S SPARROW (*Melospiza lincolni*)

CANYON TOWHEE (*Melospiza fusca*)

ABERT'S TOWHEE (*Melospiza aberti*)

RUFIOUS-CROWNED SPARROW (*Aimophila ruficeps*)

GREEN-TAILED TOWHEE (*Pipilo chlorurus*) – Some nice views of this handsome species.

SPOTTED TOWHEE (*Pipilo maculatus*) – One in Florida Canyon.

Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)

NORTHERN CARDINAL (*Cardinalis cardinalis*)

PYRRHULOXIA (*Cardinalis sinuatus*) – Eye popping views at Catalina State Park.

Icteridae (Troupials and Allies)

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)

WESTERN MEADOWLARK (*Sturnella neglecta*)

EASTERN MEADOWLARK (LILIAN'S) (*Sturnella magna lilianae*)

YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) – A few impressive encounters with this species. Many hundreds were in the giant blackbird flock seen in the Arlington Valley and thousands came to roost at Whitewater Draw at dusk on the final evening of the tour.

BREWER'S BLACKBIRD (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*)

GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE (*Quiscalus mexicanus*)

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD (*Molothrus ater*)

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

HOUSE FINCH (*Haemorhous mexicanus*)

LESSER GOLDFINCH (*Spinus psaltria*) – Our best views were those at Catalina State Park.

LAWRENCE'S GOLDFINCH (*Spinus lawrencei*) – Nice views of a pair of birds at Catalina State Park.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) [H]

MAMMALS

DESERT COTTONTAIL (*Sylvilagus audubonii*)

BLACK-TAILED JACKRABBIT (*Lepus californicus*)

ROUND-TAILED GROUND SQUIRREL (*Spermophilus tereticaudus*)

ARIZONA COTTON RAT (*Sigmodon arizonae*)

COYOTE (*Canis latrans*)

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 153 bird taxa and 5 mammal taxa