



# Arizona: Photo Tour

Tour Leader: Ben Knoot



Elegant Trogon - Photo by guide Ben

## *Introduction*

Southeast Arizona is one of those bird photography destinations that can be good at any time of year, although, it is arguably at its best during the monsoon season, usually its wettest and greenest. I have been photographing in this wondrous state for over 8 years now and each time has something different and exciting to offer. During this specific time of year, neotropical birds and the normal U.S residents are common and are beginning or in the midst of their breeding season, meaning that males are actively singing and defending territory, great for photographic opportunities. And just where are these birds? Well, they are surrounded by a vast array of habitats – the iconic rocky desert dotted in saguaros, arid grasslands, oak covered foothills and a few verdant oases wreathed in wetlands.

As the monsoons come with winds and rain that breathe new life into the arid desert, many bird species are at their most photographic. This is especially true of the hummingbirds, one of the key groups visiting photographers wish to spend time with, and there is no better area for this on the continent. On this tour we will visit feeder set ups where Broad-tailed, Rivoli's, Lucifer, Berylline Hummingbirds are all possible, in addition to North America's largest species, the bold Blue-throated Mountain-Gem, just to name a few of the possibilities. This area is also fantastic for species that just reach into the states. Birds like the gorgeous Five-striped Sparrow, Black-capped Gnatcatcher, White-eared Hummingbird, Elegant Trogon and the elusive Mexican Whip-Poor-Will. These rare and range restrictive birds really make this trip something unique and special for the guests and the guide. All of the special birds are surely found in very special locations.

Among the hallowed mountain destinations that will feature are Miller Canyon in the Huachuca's, Cave Creek Canyon in the Chiricahua's, and Madera Canyon in the Santa Rita's, which all have high value birds to photograph both at feeders and in the field. The forests in these sky islands are home to vibrant species like Elegant Trogon, Red-faced Warbler, and Painted Redstart, while the desert areas below host Gambel's Quail, Greater Roadrunner, Gila Woodpeckers, Varied Bunting and the difficult to pronounce, Pyrrhuloxia. This part of Arizona provides plenty of stunning landscapes in which to photograph too, an often missed feature of this destination. This tour should appeal to those from the east, wanting to experience the vastly different western birds, but also those who have visited Arizona in a different season, or in a different year. There is so much to offer in Arizona it justifies multiple visits, for no two single seasons are the same and neither the years.

### ***Top Five Birds***

1. Varied Bunting
2. Elegant Trogon
3. Scott's Oriole
4. White-eared Hummingbird
5. Pyrrhuloxia

### ***Top Three Other Animals***

1. Collared Peccary
2. Gila Monster
3. Desert Blonde Tarantula

## *Itinerary*

July 20th	Day 1: Arrival Day (Introductory Dinner)
July 21st	Day 2: Tucson to Portal and the Chiricahua Mountains
July 22nd	Day 2: Chiricahua Mountains, Portal
July 23rd	Day 3: Portal to Sierra Vista
July 24th	Day 4: Sierra Vista
July 25th	Day 5: Sierra Vista to Green Valley
July 26th	Day 6: Green Valley
July 27th	Day 7: Green Valley to Tucson
July 28th	Day 8: Tucson Area
July 29th	Day 9: Departures

## ***Tour Summary Day-to-Day***

**Day One (July 20th)** - After a personal pick up by myself in our rental van, the group got settled into their hotel rooms before our introductory dinner. After some delicious sushi and refreshing Japanese beer, we hit the sack, for we had a very early morning to start this 9-Day excursion.

**Day Two (July 21st)** - Our road today took us to one of the best locations for bird photography in southeast Arizona, ***Portal***. The road into Portal can be quite good for bird photography so it is essential we get there early for good light. We started with a quick stop at ***Texas Canyon*** as the sun rose over the gorgeous desert. Here we had a fun photoshoot with a **Hooded Oriole**, a female **Vermillion Flycatcher** and a **Say's Phoebe**. We then began our photographic journey just immediately off of the freeway with a gorgeous **Swainson's Hawk** on an old Yucca stalk. After this great start, we continued on towards Portal. On the road in we had a good photoshoot with **Black-throated Sparrow**, **Blue Grosbeak** and **Loggerhead Shrike**.



Blue Grosbeak - Photo by guest Kim

Before we started exploring this lovely part of the state, we enjoyed a nice meal at one of the newest restaurants in town. And when I say town, I mean in Rodeo New Mexico, right on the border of Arizona. After a terrific burger, we checked into our accommodations for our time in portal; the lovely ***Cave Creek Ranch***. Here we were treated to **Blue-throated Mountain Gem**, **Black-chinned Hummingbird**, **Rufous Hummingbird**, **Bewick's Wren**, **Acorn Woodpecker**, **Arizona Woodpecker**, **Ladder-backed Woodpecker**, **Lesser Goldfinch**, **Canyon Towhee**, **White-winged Dove**, **White-breasted Nuthatch**, **Summer Tanager** and **Curved-billed Thrasher**. After a quick break to escape the heat and harshness of the midday sun, we spent the afternoon wandering around looking for some portal specialties. We were able to find; **Greater Roadrunner**, **Scott's Oriole**, **Rufous-crowned Sparrow**, **Thick-billed Kingbird** and **Bushtit**. This included the really cool subspecies, the "Black-eared" Bushtit. A great afternoon and we called it a day with a nice dinner.



Scott's Oriole - Photo by guide Ben Knoot



"Black-eared" Bushtit - Photo by guide Ben Knoot

**Day Three (July 22nd)** - Today we had one target. One of the biggest targets of the tour, a single species of a neotropical family that is a southeast Arizona specialty, the **Elegant Trogon**. I made a stop to check a spot I had seen them before and a few short minutes later, I was able to find the group a female sitting pretty in an Alligator Juniper. However...females do not make the specific call that I heard a few seconds prior so I kept looking and few more minutes of searching and wow did we find our target!



Elegant Trogon - Photo by guide Ben Knoot

We continued searching for more of what the morning light could provide. We added **Brown-crested Flycatcher**, **Western Wood Pewee**, **Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher**, **Mexican Jay**, **Black-headed Grosbeak** and a lovely **Painted Redstart**.



Painted Redstart - Photo by guest Phyllis

We hit the road towards one of my favorite places in Portal, ***Pinary Canyon***. This is a great place to escape the heat and sun during the early afternoon. It also holds some pretty epic birds. These birds include; **Yellow-eyed Junco**, **Hermit Thrush** and by far the highlight of this location, the **Mexican Spotted Owl**. Sometimes these birds are in good photographic positions but unfortunately not this time. Having spent a little bit of time waiting to see if the pair would move, we finally called it an afternoon in this location and started our journey back to Cave Creek Ranch.



Mexican Spotted Owl - Photo by guide Ben Knoot

On the way back, we stopped off at a spot coequally known as “*Onion Saddle*”. We ran into several birds that included our already seen **Painted Redstart** but also included several new birds like **Blue-gray Gnatcatcher**, **Plumbeous Vireo** and **Black-throated Gray Warbler**. Photography here was tricky but we were able to get good photos of these tiny and quick little birds. After this fun little photoshoot, we called it an evening.



Black-throated Gray Warbler - Photo by guide Ben Knoot



Plumbeous Vireo - Photo by guest Phyllis

**Day Four (July 23rd)** - Well, the original plan for the day was to spend the morning driving down Stateline Rd. looking to photograph several key birds but a massive storm system had moved right over portal and a quick look at the radar indicated it wouldn't be passing anytime soon. So, I made the executive decision to move on early. We started our journey towards Sierra Vista making several great stops along the way. On the road, we saw **Swainson's Hawk, Eastern Meadowlark, Loggerhead Shrike, Western and Cassin's Kingbird** and the highlight of the road trip, several really nice **Burrowing Owl**.



Burrowing Owl - Photo by guest Phyllis

Our first stop was in *Miller Canyon, Beatty's Guest Ranch*. On the way up the canyon, we had a lovely photoshoot with a male **Vermillion Flycatcher**. Beatty's hosts a variety of hummingbird species and provides a few excellent photographic opportunities. The photography area is tight and the subjects are quick but with a bit of luck you can get some great pictures. Highlights here included; **Broad-billed, Rivoli's, Rufous, Broad-tailed, Black-chinned, Anna's** and the star of the day, the **White-eared Hummingbird**.



White-eared Hummingbird - Photo by guide Ben Knoot



Broad-billed Hummingbird - Photo by guide Ben Knoot



Black-chinned Hummingbird - Photo by guide Ben Knoot



Broad-tailed Hummingbird - Photo by guide Ben Knoot

After this great stop for these special birds, we made our way up another very special canyon, ***Carr Canyon***. This canyon holds very special “higher altitude” birds and one of particular interest. On the way up to our final destination, we stopped for a young **Cooper’s Hawk** that initially gave me a bit of trouble as I considered it a Northern Goshawk but in the end, the facial patterns, size and the call (the final ID clue) lead me to conclude it was a young Cooper’s Hawk. Our main target here is a southeast specialty, Buff-breasted Flycatcher. As a storm thundered over head, the winds really picked up and this made the photography next to impossible. The real joy for the evening was the spectacular post-storm sunset, stunning rainbow and sensational light that struck the adjacent mountains.



Arizona Sunsets - Photos (both above) by guest Kim

**Day Five (July 24th)** - We reserved the morning for a very special location, *Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary*. Here we had several targets that we were able to see and photograph in between some fairly epic rain storms. These included; **Lucifer's Hummingbird, Mexican Jay, Black-headed Grosbeak, White-winged Dove, Bronzed Cowbird, Phainopepla, Gila Woodpecker, Canyon Towhee, Arizona Woodpecker, Ladder-backed Woodpecker and Lesser Goldfinch.**



Lesser Goldfinch - Photo by guide Ben Knoot



Lucifer's Hummingbird - Photo by guide Ben Knoot



White-winged Dove - Photo by guest Bob

Once the rain had stopped, the sun appeared and the heat began to intensify. We had our lovely brunch and took our afternoon break before heading back out for the afternoon. Our stop for the afternoon was again, **Miller Canyon**. Though this time, we went on the great hike up the canyon.

Here our target was simple, Lazuli Bunting. I had heard him singing when we were here the day before photographing the hummingbirds. Usually, when you hear a male bunting singing all day, they are on a territory so it is very likely to photograph well. The first few feet up the trail yielded some nice looks at; **Ladder-backed Woodpecker**, **Mexican Jay**, **Summer Tanager**, **Bridled Titmouse**, **Western Tanager**, **Black-headed Grosbeak** and of course our main target, the gorgeous **Lazuli Bunting**. The sun set on another great day so we returned back to our haunt in Sierra Vista for a good night sleep.

**Day Six (July 25th)** - For our last morning, in Sierra Vista, I took the group another lovely photography destination, **Batiste's B&B Bird Garden**. Tony has done a great job of setting up his garden for birders and bird photographers alike. Here we enjoyed **Violet-crowned Hummingbird**, **Anna's Hummingbird**, **Acorn Woodpecker** and **Cactus Wren**.



Anna's Hummingbird - Photo by guide Ben Knoot

We left Sierra Vista for our next photography area, *Paton's Center for Hummingbirds*. Here we were treated to **Violet-crowned Hummingbird**, **Gambel's Quail**, **Rufous Hummingbird**, **Northern Beardless Tyrannulet** and **Yellow-breasted Chat**. We continued on towards *Patagonia* to look for Common Black Hawk but unfortunately, no luck there. We did run into a **Canyon Wren** which was quite fun. We checked into our hotel in Green Valley, took a few hours rest and then left for our afternoon location, *Madera Canyon*. This included the fantastic road in to the main area of this wonderful birding location. Species we found were; **Botteri's Sparrow**, **Black-throated Sparrow**, **Cassin's Sparrow**, **Rufous-winged Sparrow**, **Blue Grosbeak** and **Varied Bunting**. After a nice evening and a great field dinner, we began our night-time activity.



Varied Bunting - Photo by guest Phyllis



Botteri's Sparrow - Photo by guest Phyllis

The night was looking great so I took the group out for some owling. We had several targets for the evening and we were able to get great shots of **Common Poorwill**, **Great-horned Owl**, **Western Screech Owl** and **Whiskered Screech Owl**. We would have to save Elf Owl and Mexican Whip-Poor-Will for another night as not only did they evade our cameras, but my flashlight as well.



Whiskered Screech Owl - Photo by guest Phyllis



Great Horned Owl - Photo by guest Kim



Western Screech Owl - Photo by guest Kim

**Day Seven (July 26th)** - Today is an exciting day. Today we visit ***Elephant Head Pond***, Dano Grayson's masterful creation that has been featured on a variety of network presentations and countless photographers social medias and images. Here we had; **Northern Cardinal, Pyrrhuloxia, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Curve-billed Thrasher, Lucy's Warbler, Hooded Oriole, Canyon Towhee, Gambel's Quail, White-winged Dove** and by far the highlight of the day, "Rodie", the local **Greater Roadrunner**. We also had a fun photoshoot with a **Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, Desert Toad** and the fun **Umbrella Paper Wasp**. We then set up our cameras for an evening of **Mexican Free-tailed Bat** photography and called it a night while the camera trap did the work for us.



Gambel's Quail - Photo by guest Kim



Umbrella Paper Wasp - Photo by guide Ben Knoot



Greater Roadrunner - Photo by guide Ben Knoot



Western Diamondback Rattlesnake - Photo by guest Kim



Mexican Free-tailed Bat - Photo by guest Kim

**Day 8 (July 27th)** - Today I brought the group to one of my favorite spots; **Box Canyon**. The road to the canyon provided excellent photo opportunities for **Blue Grosbeak**, **Black-throated Sparrow** and **Cassin's Sparrow**. When we arrived in the canyon, we had a fun time with; **Black-tailed Gnatcatcher**, **Cassin's Kingbird**, **Rock Wren**, **Canyon Wren**, **Ash-throated Flycatcher** and the highlight for this canyon, the incredibly lovely, **Five-striped Sparrow**.



Black-throated Sparrow - Photo by guest Bob



Five-striped Sparrow - Photo by guide Ben Knoot

After a quick break in the afternoon, we returned to the same area but instead of Box Canyon, we checked **Florida Canyon**. Here we aimed to photograph another southeast specialty, the **Black-capped Gnatcatcher**. After a bit of a hike, we returned down to the parking lot to find our target in a mixed flock of small passerines. After an early and quick bite, we returned to the same area (THIS IS A REALLY GOOD AREA) for more owling. We skipped the owls we had already seen the night previous and focused our efforts on the Elf Owl and the Mexican Whip-Poor-Will. I was able to locate an **Elf Owl** but even though we tried very hard, it was difficult to capture a great photo of this secretive little owl. I later heard our next target and gave chase. It was dark and the bird was being very elusive and uncooperative but eventually, I had found the **Mexican Whip-Poor-Will** perched perfectly on an open branch. It was tough going and very dark but what a great bird! Even though we missed photographing the Elf Owl and Mexican Whip-Poor-will they were still great to see.

**Day 9 (July 28th)** - The last day is always a sad one but we had a great day planned. We began by returning to **Florida Canyon** to try our luck again with the Black-capped Gnatcatcher and Rufous-capped Warbler. Again, no luck with the warbler but a nice view of the female Black-capped Gnatcatcher. We then had another fantastic photoshoot with a **Varied Bunting, Canyon Wren and Rock Wren, Hooded Oriole and Bullock's Oriole** when we returned to **Box Canyon** immediately after.



Canyon Wren - Photo by guide Ben Knoot



Varied Bunting - Photo by guest Kim

We traveled up to Tucson so I could take the group into ***Saguaro National Park (east)***. This is a great spot to see what makes Arizona so unique, the vast expanse of multiple deserts. Saguaro NP is set in the Sonoran Desert which hold the famous Saguaro Cactus. Among the cactus infused hills, we also saw **Gilded Flicker and Purple Martin**. A great dinner and some goodbyes later, we returned to the hotel for our last night. Guests departed early the next morning.

*Guests Top Five Images*







