BIRDING TOUR USA: COMPREHENSIVE SOUTHEAST ARIZONA – THE DESERT AND SKY ISLANDS

12–21 AUGUST 2027
12–21 AUGUST 2028
12–21 AUGUST 2029



*The striking **Five-striped Sparrow** is one of many specialties of southeast Arizona.*

Overview

Southeast Arizona is a land of stark contrasts and spectacular scenery. In the lowlands, granite outcrops, towering **Saguaro** cacti, and sandy washes typify the Sonoran Desert, a landscape featured in so many 'Western' movies. The fabled Sonoran Desert is the home of such iconic species as **Greater Roadrunner** and **Gambel's Quail**. Rising from the desert, isolated mountain ranges, clad in beautiful Madrean pine-oak woodland, provide a habitat found nowhere else in the United States. At remarkably cool (compared to the very hot desert plains below) higher elevations on these sky islands, pine forests can also sometimes be found. These forested mountain islands, with provocative names such as the Huachucas and Chiricahuas, are the northernmost outposts for a long list of primarily Mexican species such as **Elegant Trogon** and **Mexican Chickadee**. The canyons surrounding these mountains carry ephemeral streams to the parched lowlands below, creating ribbon-like groves of cottonwood that act as a conduit for even more tropical birds to enter south-eastern Arizona, such as **Thick-billed Kingbird** and **Violet-crowned Hummingbird**.

Together, these contrasting habitats make southeast Arizona one of the most exciting regions to bird in North America, with more bird species than any other land-locked area of comparable size in the United States. With incredible birding areas like Cave Creek Canyon and the Ramsey Canyon Preserve and Nature Conservancy, it is no wonder why only California, Texas, and Florida have state lists longer than this relatively small region! The Arizona bird list boasts over 570 species! Of these species, 36 are only occasional anywhere else within the United States, making Arizona a must for North American birders.



Broad-billed Hummingbird *is only one of the many hummingbirds on display.*

We begin this tour in the city of Tucson, where we explore the Sonoran Desert via Saguaro National Park, as well as travel up the impressive peak of Mt. Lemmon. In the southeast corner of the state, the Santa Ritas will provide us with our first true taste of birding the Madrean sky islands, with specialties such as **Elegant Trogon**. Further east we will punctuate our time spent in the upper elevation of the Huachucas with vigils at lowland hummingbird feeders for **Violet-crowned Hummingbird** and **Lucifer Sheartail** (Hummingbird). Heading even further east, we straddle the border with New Mexico and explore the Chiricahuas, which hosts more specialties like **Mexican Chickadee** and **Olive Warbler**.

If you combine this tour with our northern Arizona and Grand Canyon tour, you'll be able to have the most comprehensive Arizona birding tour on offer and you'll also be able to see a host of typical western species. It should also be noted that we run our southeast Arizona birding tour dates so you can combine it with the famous Southeast Arizona Birding Festival operated by the Tucson Audubon Society.

Detailed Itinerary (10 days/9 nights)

Day 1. Arrival in Tucson and initial birding

After arrival at the Tucson International Airport, participants will transfer to the hotel to get checked in. From here, we will head out for our first dinner and a chance to get to know each other better. Following dinner, those who choose to, can go out exploring for several nocturnal species like **Lesser Nighthawk**, **Elf Owl** and maybe even a **Common Poorwill**.

Overnight: Tucson

Day 2. Birding Mt. Lemmon to Madera Canyon

We will start the morning heading up to the tallest peak in the Santa Catalina Mountains, Mt. Lemmon, which stands at an impressive 9,159 feet (2,792 m). We have several stops planned along the way as we reach different habitat types with the ascending elevation. First stop, a quick scan through a huge Saguaro forest looking for **Gilded Flicker**, **Black-tailed Gnatcatcher** and **Brown-crested Flycatcher**. Further up, we will reach Rose Canyon Lake to search for several great birds including **Common Black Hawk**, **Yellow-eyed Junco**, and **Pygmy Nuthatch**. Higher and higher we go until we reach the pines near the top for high altitude species such as **Broad-tailed Hummingbird**, **Hermit Warbler**, **Cordilleran Flycatcher,** and the special **Red-faced Warbler**. After lunch and a bit more birding, we will start our descent of the mountains and continue south for our next session of birding in the sky islands.

We will stop in the town of Green Valley for dinner before heading back out for a relaxing evening watching the feeders at the Santa Rita Lodge in Madera Canyon. They regularly attract fantastic birds including **Hepatic Tanager**, **Arizona Woodpecker**, and **Rivoli's Hummingbird**. In the past, the feeders have hosted several amazing rarities and perhaps one might be hanging around! As the sun sets, we will travel up to the top of the canyon and try for **Mexican Whip-poor-will**, **Northern Pygmy Owl**, and **Whiskered Screech Owl**.

Overnight: Green Valley

Day 3. Santa Rita Mountains birding

Today we will explore the canyons of the Santa Rita Mountains. Recent reports may dictate where we visit first, however there are loads of amazing birding areas here such as Box, Florida, and Madera Canyons. The past several years Box Canyon has hosted one or two breeding pairs of the rare **Five-striped Sparrow**. With any luck we will be able to score at least one of these along with **Varied Bunting** and **Golden Eagle**. Then we will visit Florida Canyon, the most reliable location for the special **Black-capped Gnatcatcher**, plus other great species like **Northern Beardless Tyrannulet**. Of course, we cannot forget about exploring Madera Canyon itself where we will spend more time searching the riparian areas for **Elegant Trogon**, **Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher**, **Painted Redstart** and more! Another evening brings another chance at nocturnal species if we were unsuccessful the previous night.

Overnight: Green Valley



*The **Arizona Woodpecker** is one of the many specialty birds of the region.*

Day 4. California Gulch and more Santa Rita Mountains

Today starts off with some more morning birding in the Santa Rita Mountains targeting any species or locations we may have missed the previous day. Around midmorning, we are scheduled to make the journey to California Gulch. Until recently, this area was the only reliable and known spot to see the rare **Five-striped Sparrow**, of which it is estimated only 50 territorial males come to the US each year. Recently, a few more pairs have been discovered in easier-to-access locations, as the growing trend of southern breeding specialties shifting northwards continues. The other main attraction of California Gulch is the chance for **Buff-collared Nightjar** in the evening, as darkness engulfs the landscape. Our drive back out of this area will be a long one, but if the skies are clear we will be in for an amazing cosmic display as well as the chance for **Common Poorwill** on the

roadsides. If we manage to get lucky and locate these species elsewhere, we will spend the day exploring the canyons of the Santa Ritas and save ourselves the long journey to the gulch.

Overnight: Green Valley

Day 5. Tubac/Tumacacori and transfer to Sierra Vista

The morning will begin with some enjoyable birding in the lowland riparian areas along the Santa Cruz river in Tubac and Tumacacori, before it gets too hot. Many fantastic species can be found here including a few nesting pairs of **Rose-throated Becard** in recent years, as well as **Summer Tanager**, **Grey Hawk** and **Cassin's Kingbird**. We will continue our journey towards Sierra Vista with a few more stops along the way like at the relaxing Paton Center for various hummingbirds and the world-famous Patagonia Rest Area to search for specialties including **Violet-crowned Hummingbird** and **Thick-billed Kingbird**. We will also stop at Patagonia Lake State Park and the Sonoita Creek State Natural Area for a few water birds like **Neotropic Cormorant** and **Mexican Duck**, uncommon in the standard arid habitats surrounding it. Finally, we will arrive in the Huachuca Mountains where we will spend the remainder of the evening at the Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary feeders, a favorite hangout of the **Lucifer Sheartail** (Hummingbird).

Overnight: Sierra Vista

Days 6–7. Birding the Huachuca Mountains

Straddling the border with Mexico, the Huachuca Mountains are the second of the Madrean sky islands on our itinerary, offering a slightly different set of specialties from the Santa Ritas, such as the semi-colonial **Buff-breasted Flycatcher** and the charismatic **Spotted Owl**. A series of canyon outlets on the eastern flank of these mountains, such as Carr, Ramsey, Hunter, and Miller Canyons, provide access to the pine-oak woodlands where these species occur. Occasionally rarities such as **White-eared Hummingbird** or **Rufous-capped Warbler** appear and we will adjust our plans accordingly to target these birds. In addition to the amazing canyon birding, the Sierra Vista area hosts several fantastic grassland habitats for us to explore, like Las Cienegas National Conservation Area and the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area. As the scrublands begin to bloom with the rain, the fantastic **Cassin's** and **Botteri's Sparrows** begin singing and establishing territories. The grasslands are also full of other great wildlife such as **Burrowing Owl**, **Pronghorn Antelope** and **Black-tailed Prairie Dog**. We will have two amazing days to explore this region that are sure to be filled to the brim with birds and fun!

Overnight: Sierra Vista

Day 8. Birding Portal and the Chiricahua Mountains

We will be up early this morning as we leave the Huachucas behind and head towards the final range of the sky islands. The Chiricahua Mountains, which means "Big Mountain" in Opata, rise spectacularly out of the surrounding desert as the single-largest mountain mass south of the Gila River in Arizona, while also boasting the most diverse land-locked plant and animal community in the United States. Starting in the lower-elevation desert valley around dawn, we explore the area around Big Thicket while we straddle the border with New Mexico searching for the ridiculously

curve-billed **Crissal Thrasher**. As the day heats up, we retreat to the cooler forests along the South Fork Cave Creek Trail – a trail renowned for its breeding population of **Elegant Trogon**, the star of any birding trip to Arizona. More common specialties such as **Bridled Titmouse**, **Mexican Jay**, and **Painted Redstart** also occur here. Near the top, the Chiricahua Mountains claim the only accessible population of **Mexican Chickadee** on public lands in the United States, so we make a special effort to see them on this itinerary. The higher elevations also give us a nice opportunity for other great species such as **Olive Warbler**, **Red Crossbill** and **Steller's Jay**. In the afternoon, we will drive up to the Paradise Road junction around East Turkey Creek in search of the above species. A little further along this road the old mining town of Paradise hosts excellent feeders, which attract the localized **Juniper Titmouse**.

Overnight: Portal



*The charismatic **Greater Roadrunner**!*

Day 9. Portal to Tucson

The next morning will be spent exploring the Chiricahuas a bit further in search of species missed the day before while also enjoying the incredibly scenic views these mountains have to offer. Driving the canyon roads early in the morning yields a good chance for a wandering **Montezuma Quail** to make an appearance. Another visit to local feeders is sure to produce the stellar **Blue-throated Mountaingem**, yet another hummingbird specialty of this region.

After a successful few days birding in the Chiricahua Mountains, we will say goodbye to the sky islands and start our journey back to Tucson, stopping at a few places along the way. First stop is Lake Cochise in Wilcox, a true water oasis in the middle of the desert, stocked with plenty of thankful shorebirds and waterfowl. **American Avocet**, **Wilson's Phalarope** and **Cinnamon Teal** are a few of the potential species here. After an enjoyable time scanning through these birds, we'll

continue on to St. David. This small town is known to host a few pairs of **Mississippi Kite**, the most westerly known population of this species. After dinner in Tucson, we will enjoy our final Sonoran Desert sunset as well as have a chance to track down any missing nocturnal species.

Overnight: Tucson



A classic Sonoran Desert sunset, a seemingly every-night occurance.

Day 10. Tour concludes

For some, the Desert and Sky Island Arizona tour concludes this morning after a successful run through the southeastern portion of the state. You will be dropped off at the Tucson International Airport for your flights home. For others, it may be the start of an exciting second itinerary, to northern Arizona. Participants joining the second tour will be transferred from Tucson to Phoenix for Day 1 of that itinerary.

Overnight: Not included

Please note that the itinerary cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides, and other factors. In addition, we sometimes have to use a different guide from the one advertised due to tour scheduling or other factors.

Tour Details

Duration:	10 days
Group size:	4–8
Dates:	12–21 August 2027 12–21 August 2028 12–21 August 2029
Start:	Tucson
End:	Tucson (Transfer to Phoenix is provided to those joining the Northern Arizona Tour).
Prices:	US$ 4,595 per person sharing, assuming 4-8 participants (2027) US$ 4,690 per person sharing, assuming 4-8 participants (2028) US$ 4,850 per person sharing, assuming 4-8 participants (2029)
Single supplements:	US$ 808 (2027) US$ 870 (2028) US$ 890 (2029)

Price includes:

Meals/Water
Accommodation
Transport
Guiding fees

Price excludes:

Flights
Personal insurance
Alcoholic beverages
Gratuities (please see our tipping guidelines blog)
Laundry service
Personal expenses such as gifts