

WINTER NEW MEXICO

JANUARY 3 – 9, 2009

LEADERS: BARRY ZIMMER & KEVIN ZIMMER

COMPILED BY: BARRY ZIMMER

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003
AUSTIN, TX 78746
WWW.VENTBIRD.COM**

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We stood on the dike of a large water impoundment at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, gazing out at a sea of white formed by a huge flock of geese. It seemed that every square inch of the pond was covered with birds (an estimated 24,000 were on the refuge) and some of them were literally 10–15 feet away. We had superb side by side comparisons of Snow and Ross's geese, and the photographic opportunities were unsurpassed. Sandhill Cranes began arriving at the pond as we stood watching the geese, a continual parade of small groups rattling as they descended to their roosting sites. The afternoon was warm (mid 50s) and sunny, as we enjoyed the avian spectacle. The sky was an incredible collection of pastel pinks, oranges, and yellows as the late afternoon sun began to set. Suddenly, something spooked the geese and thousands of birds rose as one into the air in a spectacle of sight and sound that we will never forget. Literally a blizzard of white covered the sky, and we stood in awe watching one of nature's great shows.

Our 2009 Winter New Mexico tour was possibly our most successful ever. From the deserts of El Paso through the irrigation impoundments and river valleys of the Rio Grande to the highest peaks of the Sandia Mountains east of Albuquerque, we scoured the region, tallying a very impressive 162 species of birds. Many southwestern/western specialties were seen including the likes of Harris's Hawk, Ferruginous Hawk, Prairie Falcon (an amazing 8 seen), Golden Eagle, Burrowing Owl (a pair less than 20 feet away), Red-naped and Williamson's sapsuckers, Bridled and Juniper titmice, all three bluebirds (does any bird top a male Mountain Bluebird?), Canyon Wren, the always elusive Crissal Thrasher, Sage Thrasher, Phainopepla, Green-tailed Towhee, and Rufous-crowned, Brewer's, Black-chinned, Sage, and Black-throated sparrows.

This area also plays host to huge wintering concentrations of birds (especially waterfowl, raptors, and sparrows) leading to great avian spectacles like the one mentioned above. In addition to the goose show, we watched over 1,000 Yellow-headed Blackbirds (all males) gathering to roost at sunset, studied a flock of 1,200 Common Mergansers to seek out the few Red-breasteds mixed in, and marveled at the Christmas tree appearance of an old bare juniper decorated in a kaleidoscope of colors with 40 or more bluebirds of two species, Pine Siskins, Lesser Goldfinches, and House Finches all mixed in. At 10,000 feet on Sandia Crest on our last day, we watched swirling groups of rosy-finches descend on feeders just 15 feet away. Blacks, Brown-cappeds, Gray-crowned, and "Hepburn's" were studied at length, as Steller's Jays, Red-breasted and White-breasted nuthatches, and Hairy Woodpeckers joined in the mix.

All the previously mentioned highlights are just the tour “regulars.” This trip was also characterized by an impressive list of rarities. In the El Paso area, we had a slew of unexpected species including two immature Black-legged Kittiwakes, an adult male Rufous Hummingbird, Northern Parula (a third county record ever), Rusty Blackbird, and three Hooded Orioles that were wintering in my yard. Near Las Cruces, a male Broad-billed Hummingbird and a lingering Plumbeous Vireo provided rare treats. Further upriver at Percha State Park, we found Hammond’s Flycatcher, Eastern Phoebe, Vermilion Flycatcher (a stunning male), and our rarest bird of the trip, an eastern Palm Warbler. Water Canyon yielded a small group of Band-tailed Pigeons. In all, we added 6 new species to the cumulative tour list—no small feat since this tour has been run 15 times. We also had very good weather overall (one windy day) with highs ranging from the low 50s up to 70 degrees, and nighttime lows around freezing or above. I can’t think of a better or more exciting place in the U.S. to bird in January than New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment.

Itinerary:

January 3 - Keystone Heritage Park, Sunland Park area, Border Hwy (37 species)

January 4 - Ascarate Lake, Border Hwy, Tornillo Reservoir, McNary Reservoir, FM 192, Hwy 20, my yard, drive to Las Cruces (77 species; 87 total)

January 5 - Jornada del Muerto grasslands, Aguirre Springs Recreation Area, Mesilla Park, Mesilla Valley State Park (72 species; 117 total)

January 6 - Jimmy & Marcy’s house near Radium Springs, Hatch, Hwys 185 & 187, Percha State Park, Caballo Lake, Animas Creek (83 species; 139 total)

January 7 - Elephant Butte State Park, Water Canyon, Bosque del Apache NWR (84 species; 153 total)

January 8 - Bosque del Apache NWR, Sandia Crest, Rio Grande Nature Center (72 species; 162 total)

January 9 - departures for home (162 species total)

Key:

E = all areas in and around El Paso, including the valley to the southeast from McNary back into town

L = Las Cruces, Organ Mountains, Jornada, Mesilla Valley, Radium Springs

P = Hatch, Percha & Caballo State Parks, Animas Creek, Elephant Butte

B = Bosque del Apache NWR

W = Water Canyon

A = Albuquerque, Sandia Crest

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

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

Birds:

Snow Goose E,B---an estimated 24,000 at the refuge including many blue morphs
Ross's Goose E,B---several thousand overall; great comparative views with Snows
Canada Goose E,B,A
Cackling Goose A---flock of over 200 at the nature center
Wood Duck E,A---stunning views!
Gadwall daily
American Wigeon almost daily
Mallard daily, including some of the "Mexican Duck" subspecies
Northern Shoveler daily
Northern Pintail almost daily; over 1000 in one day
Green-winged Teal E,P,B
Canvasback L,B
Redhead B---one male at Bosque distantly
Ring-necked Duck E,P,B,A
Lesser Scaup E,A---only seven total
Bufflehead E,B
Common Goldeneye E---pair at McNary were the only ones
Hooded Merganser E,B---pair at Ascarate was especially nice
Red-breasted Merganser E---five at McNary in with Commons
Common Merganser E,P,B---flock of about 1000 at McNary
Ruddy Duck E,P,B
Ring-necked Pheasant B---spotted by Sandy
Gambel's Quail E,L,P,B---many wonderful views
Pied-billed Grebe E,B
Eared Grebe E---400 at McNary, but none elsewhere
Western Grebe E,P---many hundreds on three reservoirs
Clark's Grebe E,P--- good comparative views with Westerns
American White Pelican E,P
Double-crested Cormorant E,P
Neotropic Cormorant E,P---great views at Ascarate
Great Blue Heron E,L,P,B
Great Egret E,P
Snowy Egret E
Cattle Egret L
Black-crowned Night-Heron E---only one seen distantly

Bald Eagle P,B---six total
 Northern Harrier E,L,P,B---seen daily with unusual numbers of males
 Sharp-shinned Hawk P---oddly only one seen the entire trip
 Cooper's Hawk E,L,P,B---many nice views
Harris's Hawk E---nice scope study near Fabens
 Red-tailed Hawk seen daily including a couple dark/ rufous morphs, several of the Fuertes race, and a "Harlan's" Hawk
 Ferruginous Hawk L---oddly only one seen just outside of Radium Springs; this species seems to be declining steadily
Golden Eagle W---thanks to Libby
 American Kestrel seen daily
Merlin P,B---nice study of male at Percha
Prairie Falcon E,L,P,B---best luck ever with this generally uncommon species; we had eight total with many great views
 Virginia Rail L---heard only near Las Cruces
 Common Moorhen E
 American Coot almost daily
 Sandhill Crane E,P,B,A---an estimated 11,000 wintering at the refuge though we saw closer to 3000 or 4000 there; spectacularly close views; tied for third favorite bird of the tour
 Killdeer E,L,P,B
Black-necked Stilt E--- two at Keystone; only the third time ever for this tour
American Avocet E---only the third time ever for this tour; nice studies of one at Keystone
 Spotted Sandpiper P
 Least Sandpiper L---a few along the river near Las Cruces
 Wilson's Snipe P---our first at Swan Pond and several at Percha
Bonaparte's Gull E---several at Tornillo and two distantly at Caballo; uncommon
 Ring-billed Gull E,P
California Gull P---two at Rock Canyon Marina; rare
 Herring Gull P---eleven at Rock Canyon Marina
Black-legged Kittiwake E---pair of immature birds wintering at McNary were a real treat; very rare
 Rock Pigeon seen daily
Band-tailed Pigeon W---four over Water Canyon were a tour first
 Eurasian Collared-Dove seen daily---a rapidly expanding species
 White-winged Dove seen daily in numbers
 Mourning Dove seen daily
 Inca Dove E---six in my yard were the only ones
 Greater Roadrunner seen daily with a total of seven
 Great Horned Owl P---thanks to great spotting by Gary!
 Burrowing Owl E---fantastic studies of a pair
Broad-billed Hummingbird L---furtive male at Jimmy & Marcy's house was a rare treat
Anna's Hummingbird E---male and female in my yard; very uncommon
Rufous Hummingbird E---adult male in my yard; very uncommon to rare in winter

Belted Kingfisher E---scarcer than usual with only four seen
 Acorn Woodpecker P,W
 Red-naped Sapsucker P,W---nice views of three
Williamson's Sapsucker W---fly-by of female in Water Canyon; rare
 Ladder-backed Woodpecker L,P,B---several nice views
 Downy Woodpecker A---at the nature center
 Hairy Woodpecker A---at Sandia Crest feeders
 Northern Flicker L,P,B; the "Red-shafted" variety
Hammond's Flycatcher P--- rare in winter
 Black Phoebe E,P,B,A
Eastern Phoebe P---a nice find at Percha
 Say's Phoebe E,P,B---scarcer than usual
Vermilion Flycatcher P---a gorgeous male at Percha; unexpected
 Loggerhead Shrike E,L,B
Plumbeous Vireo L---a nice rarity in Mesilla Park
 Steller's Jay A---subspecies *maculophya*; very close studies
 Western Scrub-Jay W---subspecies *woodhouseii*; much scarcer than usual
 American Crow L,P,B,S
 Chihuahuan Raven E,L,P,B
 Common Raven P,W,B,A
 Horned Lark L,B
 Black-capped Chickadee A
 Mountain Chickadee W,A---great views
 Bridled Titmouse P---fantastic views of this striking species at Animas Creek at the last possible minute; voted the favorite bird of the tour!
 Juniper Titmouse W---after some effort we had great views of one in Water Canyon
 Verdin E,L,B
 Bushtit W---oddly, only one seen
 Red-breasted Nuthatch A---only at Sandia Crest feeders
 White-breasted Nuthatch W,A
 Cactus Wren E,L,P---great views, especially in my yard
 Rock Wren L
 Canyon Wren L---wonderful view of singing bird at Aguirre Springs; tied for third favorite bird of the tour!
 Bewick's Wren L,P
House Wren P---uncommon in winter
 Marsh Wren L---heard only
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet seen daily
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher E---unexpected was one near Fabens
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher L---uncommon
Eastern Bluebird L,P---an invasion year for this rare species
 Western Bluebird L,P,W,B---very common in this bluebird invasion year
Mountain Bluebird P,B---flock of 20 near Elephant Butte and 8 more at Bosque; only occurs in invasion years
Townsend's Solitaire L,A---one at Aguirre Springs and another in the Sandias; erratic

Hermit Thrush L
 American Robin L,P,W,B
 Northern Mockingbird E,L,P
Sage Thrasher P---superb views of one bird at Rock Canyon Marina
 Curve-billed Thrasher E,P---excellent views, especially in my yard
 Crissal Thrasher E,L,P---great studies near Fort Hancock
 European Starling seen daily
 American Pipit P,B
 Cedar Waxwing P
 Phainopepla E,L,P,B---nice studies
 Orange-crowned Warbler E,L
Northern Parula E---a tour first and only the third Hudspeth County record ever!
 Yellow-rumped Warbler E,L,P,B---the Audubon's subspecies
Palm Warbler P---one of the eastern race *hypochrysea* found at Percha by Sandy was the rarest bird of the trip and another tour first!
 Green-tailed Towhee L---a lone bird seen well on the Jornada
 Spotted Towhee L,P,B---down in numbers
 Canyon Towhee L
 Rufous-crowned Sparrow L---fantastic studies
 Chipping Sparrow L,P,B---more common than usual
 Brewer's Sparrow E,L,P---a good year for this species (like most sparrows) with over 100 in one day
 Black-chinned Sparrow L---fleeting views of three of this localized species
 Vesper Sparrow L
 Black-throated Sparrow L,P---the handsomest sparrow?
 Sage Sparrow L--- nice scope views of the interior race *nevadensis*; voted the second favorite bird of the tour!
 Lark Bunting L---quick views of a couple on the Jornada; irregular
 Savannah Sparrow P---only one seen; spotted by Liz
 Song Sparrow E,L,P,B
 Lincoln's Sparrow E,L,P---numerous this year
 White-crowned Sparrow seen daily in numbers
 Dark-eyed Junco almost daily, including Gray-headed, Oregon, and Pink-sided races
 Pyrrhuloxia E,L,P---many good views
 Red-winged Blackbird E,L,P,B
 Western Meadowlark L,P,B
 Yellow-headed Blackbird E,B---incredible sight of about 1000+ gathering to roost in west El Paso
Rusty Blackbird E---our second rarest bird of the tour was one in with Brewer's near Sunland Park; yet another tour first
 Brewer's Blackbird seen daily
 Great-tailed Grackle daily
 Brown-headed Cowbird E,L
Hooded Oriole E---three birds (including one stunning male) wintering in my yard provided another tour first

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch about 8 seen on Sandia Crest, including one of the Hepburn's race; as with all the rosy-finches may not be seen on future trips due to road conditions or the birds just not being present

Black Rosy-Finch about 8-10 seen very close at Sandia Crest feeders

Brown-capped Rosy-Finch about 25 seen at Sandia Crest, almost at arm's length!; tied for third favorite bird of the tour!

House Finch seen daily

Pine Siskin E,L,P,B---a good year for this species

Lesser Goldfinch E,L,P,B---ditto

American Goldfinch P,B

House Sparrow seen daily

total species - 162 (our third highest total ever)

Mammals:

Desert Cottontail

Black-tailed Jackrabbit

Rock Squirrel

Texas Antelope Squirrel

Gray-footed Chipmunk

Tassel-eared (Abert's) Squirrel---great views of several in the Sandias

Red Squirrel

Mule Deer---great studies at Bosque

total species - 8

Significant others:

Alex's cookies

Yvonne's pretzel mix