

WINTER NEW MEXICO

JANUARY 5-11, 2011

**LEADERS: BARRY ZIMMER
AND KEVIN ZIMMER**

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On the first afternoon of our Winter New Mexico tour, we were greeted by an incredible avian sight—an estimated 16,000 Yellow-headed Blackbirds coming in to roost at a marsh in west El Paso. The telephone lines were so tightly jammed with birds that it was hard to separate one individual from another. The wires were coated in yellow and black like some lengthy, bizarre string of yarn. The cattails and salt cedars had so many birds that it was simply impossible to count. Spectacles such as this characterize this trip. Whether it is large concentrations of blackbirds, geese, cranes, or sparrows, this area plays host to an amazing density of birds every winter. In addition, many southwestern specialties are readily seen, making for superb winter birding.

On our first full day we birded the Rio Grande Valley southeast of El Paso. Highlights were many, with close, side by side views of Cackling and Ross's geese, two Greater Scaup from about 20 feet, all three merganser species (including a flock of over 500 Common Mergansers), several Harris's Hawks, Prairie Falcon, Gambel's Quail, an adorable pair of Burrowing Owls, very cooperative Crissal Thrashers, Lark Buntings, and Brewer's Sparrows among the more noteworthy. Later in the day we enjoyed Red-naped Sapsucker and Red-breasted Nuthatches at a local park, and a Merlin, Anna's Hummingbird, and a very rare Hooded Oriole in my backyard.

We spent the next day in the scenically spectacular Organ Mountains east of Las Cruces. Sparrows were in abundance with Black-throated, Sage (amazing views from 15 feet away), Brewer's, Black-chinned, Rufous-crowned, Cassin's (very rare here in winter), Grasshopper (casual in this area), and Green-tailed Towhee (stunningly close studies) among the more noteworthy. Also seen were a magnificent pair of Golden Eagles, Scaled Quail, five Long-eared Owls, Hutton's Vireo, a fantastic Canyon Wren up-close-and-personal, Sage Thrasher, and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher among others.

Heading northward up the Rio Grande, we hit remnant cottonwood forests and sycamore-lined creeks in the vicinity of Truth or Consequences. A wonderful Ferruginous Hawk and another Prairie Falcon were enjoyed along the way. Sandhill Cranes began to appear in the agricultural fields. At Percha State Park we had Hammond's Flycatcher (rare here in winter), a spectacular male Vermilion Flycatcher, Western Bluebirds, a very rare Winter Wren, Phainopepla, Lincoln's Sparrow, and an interesting leucistic Ladder-backed Woodpecker. Nearby Animas Creek produced Acorn Woodpecker, Bridled Titmouse, and Eastern Bluebird. A late afternoon stop at Elephant Butte Reservoir was wildly productive with four very rare Brown Pelicans, two Lesser Black-backed Gulls, and five California Gulls among the more regular fare.

The next day we continued northward, birding the oaks and junipers of Water Canyon (Juniper Titmouse, Bushtit, Steller's Jay, Mountain Bluebird, Townsend's Solitaire) and then on to world-famous Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. We spent the late afternoon here watching group after group of Sandhill Cranes (an estimated 7,000+ were at the refuge) coming into a pond to roost, with an incredible rose and orange sunset as a backdrop.

Our final day was spent at the refuge in the morning (loads of geese—including a massive dawn takeoff, abundant close-up waterfowl, Ring-necked Pheasant, eight Bald Eagles, two more Prairie Falcons, and Great Horned Owl) before heading northward to Sandia Crest. Unfortunately, some snow moved into the higher elevations, causing slow-going up the mountain and difficult conditions at the top. Despite the challenging weather, all three rosy-finch species were seen. A final stop at the Rio Grande Nature Center yielded many Wood Ducks, in addition to Eastern Bluebird, Black-capped Chickadee, Downy Woodpecker, and a wonderfully close Greater Roadrunner for a send-off.

In all we tallied 158 species, with many rarities and lots of highly sought southwestern specialties. During every day but the last we enjoyed very nice weather with lows near freezing, but highs in the low 60s. At this same time much of the country was being pounded by either ice or snow and bone-chilling temperatures.

ITINERARY:

January 5 - Crossroads Pond, Keystone Heritage Park, Sunland Park area (40 species)
January 6 - Ascarate Lake, Border Hwy, Tornillo Rest stop, Tornillo Reservoir, McNary Reservoir, Hwy 20, Memorial Park, my yard, drive to Las Cruces (88 species; 96 total)
January 7 - Jornada del Muerto, Organ, Aguirre Springs Recreation Area, La Cueva, NMSU (58 species; 116 total)
January 8 - Hwys 185 & 187, Percha State Park, Caballo Lake, Animas Creek, Rock Canyon Marina at Elephant Butte (100 species; 141 total)
January 9 - Elephant Butte Lake State Park, Water Canyon, Bosque del Apache NWR (73 species; 150 total)
January 10 - Bosque del Apache NWR, Sandia Crest, Rio Grande Nature Center (62 species; 158 total)
January 11 - departures for home (158 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

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,P,B---an estimated 37,400 at the refuge; we had a great dawn takeoff due to some lucky timing; a fair number of blue morphs

Ross's Goose E,P,B--- great comparative views with Snows; a couple hundred total

Canada Goose E,P,B,A

Cackling Goose E,P,A---two at Ascarate where quite rare, seven near Percha, and a few at the nature center

Wood Duck E,P,A---stunning views!
 Gadwall almost daily
 American Wigeon almost daily
 Mallard almost daily, including some of the “Mexican Duck” subspecies
 Northern Shoveler E,P,B,A
 Northern Pintail E,P,B
 Green-winged Teal E,P,B
 Canvasback P,B,A
 Ring-necked Duck E,P,B,A
Greater Scaup E---two females f(rom about twenty feet) side-by-side with Lessers at Ascarate Lake; rare
 Lesser Scaup E,P,B,A---seven total
 Bufflehead E,B
 Hooded Merganser E,B---nine total
Red-breasted Merganser E,P---three at tornillo & two at Caballo
 Common Merganser E,P,B,A---flocks of about 500 at McNary & **2000** at Caballo were impressive
 Ruddy Duck E---thirteen total
 Scaled Quail L---good views on road to Aguirre springs
 Gambel’s Quail E,L,P,B---many wonderful views
 Ring-necked Pheasant B,A---only two seen this year; this species seems to be declining in the area
 Pied-billed Grebe E,P,B,A
 Eared Grebe E,P---mostly at Tornillo Reservoir
 Western Grebe E,P
 Clark’s Grebe E,P--- good comparative views with Westerns
 American White Pelican E,P
Brown Pelican P---four at Elephant Butte provided a tour first!
 Neotropic Cormorant E,P,B---great views at the Crossroads Pond
 Double-crested Cormorant E,P
 Great Blue Heron E,P,B
 Great Egret E
 Snowy Egret E
 Cattle Egret E---about 35 at Keystone the first evening; uncommon
 Black-crowned Night-Heron E,P,B
Turkey Vulture E---two seen by some along I-10; very rare in winter in this area
Osprey P---one at Elephant Butte Dam was aseasonal
 Bald Eagle P,B---thirteen total
 Northern Harrier E,L,P,B
 Sharp-shinned Hawk L,B,A
 Cooper’s Hawk E,L,P,B---many nice views
Harris’s Hawk E---five seen our first full day; localized
 Red-tailed Hawk seen daily including a “Harlan’s” Hawk at Percha; an estimated 97 total
 Ferruginous Hawk P---only one seen, but superb prolonged views of that individual
Golden Eagle L---pair over La Cueva were magnificent
 American Kestrel seen daily
Merlin E---one blasting through my yard was the only one of the trip
Prairie Falcon E,P,B---four total including great views of perched birds; voted the favorite bird of the tour!
 Common Moorhen E---five the first afternoon
 American Coot almost daily

Sandhill Crane E,P,B,A---an estimated 7000 wintering at the refuge and an additional 200-300 seen
 in other areas; spectacularly close views
 Killdeer E,P,B
 Spotted Sandpiper E,P
 Greater Yellowlegs E---one along the canal near Sunland Park
 Least Sandpiper E
 Long-billed Dowitcher B---uncommon in winter
 Wilson's Snipe E,P
 Ring-billed Gull E,P,B
 California Gull P---five at Rock Canyon Marina; rare to very uncommon
Lesser Black-backed Gull P---adult and first winter bird at Rock Canyon Marina; a tour first!
 Herring Gull P---five at Rock Canyon Marina
 Rock Pigeon seen daily
 Eurasian Collared-Dove seen daily---a rapidly expanding species
 White-winged Dove seen daily in numbers
 Mourning Dove seen daily
 Inca Dove E---my yard & Memorial Park
 Greater Roadrunner six total; several fantastic views
 Great Horned Owl B
 Burrowing Owl E---fantastic studies of pair at burrow; voted the second favorite bird of the tour!
Long-eared Owl L---five birds flushed from roost seen in flight; not present every year
Anna's Hummingbird E---my yard
 Belted Kingfisher E,P---only two seen
 Acorn Woodpecker P,W
 Red-naped Sapsucker E,L,P
 Ladder-backed Woodpecker E,L,P,B---several nice views including a leucistic bird at Percha!
 Downy Woodpecker A---at the nature center
 Hairy Woodpecker W
 Northern Flicker seen daily; the "Red-shafted" variety
Hammond's Flycatcher P---nice views at Percha; rare
 Black Phoebe E,P,B
 Say's Phoebe E,L,P,B
Vermilion Flycatcher P---stunning male at Percha; rare here
 Loggerhead Shrike E,L,P,B---only seven total; declining?
Hutton's Vireo L,P---Aguirre Springs & Percha; rare
 Steller's Jay W,A---subspecies *maculophya*
 Western Scrub-Jay L,W---subspecies *woodhouseii*; a likely future split from the one in California
 American Crow L,P,B,A
 Chihuahuan Raven E,L,P,B
 Common Raven P,W,B,A
 Horned Lark P---Caballo
 Black-capped Chickadee A
 Bridled Titmouse P---nice views of this striking species at Animas Creek after some effort
 Juniper Titmouse L,W
 Verdin E,L,B---only three total
 Bushtit W---two large herds
Red-breasted Nuthatch E---Memorial Park
 White-breasted Nuthatch P,W,A
Brown Creeper P,A---our first spotted by Marilee

Cactus Wren E,L---seen best in my yard
 Rock Wren L---one distantly at La Cueva
 Canyon Wren L---superb, close study at Aguirre Springs; tied for third favorite bird of the tour!
 Bewick's Wren L,P,A
Winter Wren P---the newly split eastern variety at Percha was a total surprise; great views
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher L---uncommon
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet E,L,P,W
Eastern Bluebird P,A---generally rare here
 Western Bluebird P,W---a down year for this species but good views at Percha
Mountain Bluebird W---small flock foraging somewhat distantly off the road at Water Canyon; not
 an invasion year for bluebirds at all this year
Townsend's Solitaire W---one seen very well in Water Canyon was our only one
 Hermit Thrush P---scope views of one
 American Robin E,L,P,A
 Northern Mockingbird E,L,P
Sage Thrasher L,P---sporadic
 Curve-billed Thrasher E,L,P
 Crissal Thrasher E---great study near Fort Hancock
 European Starling seen daily
 American Pipit E,P,B
 Cedar Waxwing P---small flock at Elephant Butte
 Phainopepla E,L,P,B---many nice studies
 Orange-crowned Warbler P---not seen by all
 Yellow-rumped Warbler E,P,B---the Audubon's subspecies
 Green-tailed Towhee L---fantastic, close-up studies in the Organs; tied for the third favorite bird of
 the tour
 Spotted Towhee E,L,P,B,A
 Canyon Towhee L---oddly only one seen and not by all
 Rufous-crowned Sparrow L
Cassin's Sparrow L---rare in winter; a good find
Grasshopper Sparrow L---another tour first; great views of two plus another dead on the road;
 very rare here
 Chipping Sparrow L,P
 Brewer's Sparrow E,L,P---quite numerous this year
 Black-chinned Sparrow L---great views of about six at Aguirre Springs
 Vesper Sparrow E,L
 Black-throated Sparrow L,P---the handsomest sparrow?
 Sage Sparrow L--- superb views of the interior race *nevadensis*
 Lark Bunting E,P
 Savannah Sparrow E,P
 Song Sparrow E,P,B
 Lincoln's Sparrow E,L,P
 Swamp Sparrow E---one near Tornillo; very uncommon
 White-crowned Sparrow seen daily in numbers
 Dark-eyed Junco daily, including Gray-headed, Oregon, Pink-sided, and Slate-colored races
 Pyrrhuloxia E,L,P---many good views
 Red-winged Blackbird E,L,P,B
Eastern Meadowlark W---one seen by one van; uncommon
 Western Meadowlark L,P,B

Yellow-headed Blackbird E,L,P,B---incredible sight of about **15,000+** gathering to roost in west El Paso

Brewer's Blackbird E,L,P

Great-tailed Grackle seen daily

Brown-headed Cowbird E,L

Hooded Oriole E---only the second time ever for this tour; my yard

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch about 8 seen on Sandia Crest (including two Hepburn's) despite near blizzard like conditions that caused the closure of the Sandia Crest House and very difficult driving conditions; 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 one in with Gray-crowneds seen by some

Brown-capped Rosy-Finch two in with the flock seen by some

House Finch seen daily

Pine Siskin P,W

Lesser Goldfinch E,P---best in my yard

American Goldfinch P,B

House Sparrow seen daily

Total species - 158 (our sixth highest total ever)

MAMMALS: total species - 7

Desert Cottontail

Rock Squirrel

Muskrat---two at Ascarate Lake

Raccoon---a rare find at McNary

Coyote---heard by everyone; seen by some

Mule Deer---La Cueva

Pronghorn---herd of about 8 near Water Canyon

SIGNIFICANT OTHERS:

"Doug" the dog

the lucky cotton ball