

Grand New Mexico

May 26 - June 5, 2006

Leaders: Barry Zimmer & Victor Emanuel

I always like to begin a tour report with a description of the most captivating moment of the tour: a sighting of a hard-to-find bird that blows your socks off, or one of those memorable moments that really stand out and grab you. So with that in mind, I should start with the absolutely stunning male Olive Warbler near Silver City that came down low in a small ponderosa pine tree right next to the road. It was literally within ten feet of our group, with the early morning sun making its pumpkin-orange head glow. For well over five minutes it foraged and sang at almost eye level, as we soaked in the beauty of this unique species. Of course, it would be hard to single that out as the premier moment when just a few minutes later we had a mixed species flock with gorgeous Red-faced Warblers, equally brilliant Painted Redstarts, Grace's and Black-throated Gray warblers, Magnificent Hummingbird, Pygmy Nuthatch, Mountain Chickadee, and Plumbeous Vireo all in view at once.

Hmmm, if not the Olive Warbler, then surely it was the male Blue Grouse near Santa Fe that strutted about through the aspens and firs, showing off every field mark for our group. This phantom of the forest is missed more often than not and is generally hard to see throughout its range. We were lucky indeed on the grouse, but it was nearly overshadowed an hour later by the male Pine Grosbeak that hopped about on the ground by the side of the road, and then flew up to eye level on a small spruce and sat for several minutes. This incredibly striking species is the one that got me started birding, and many people in our group listed it as their favorite bird of the tour.

So let me think—not the Olive warbler, not the Blue Grouse. Oh, I know, it must have been the family of American Dippers feeding in the crystal-clear waters along The Catwalk. With three babies in tow, the parents repeatedly dove down in the pools of water below us, swimming about underwater not unlike an alcid, and returning to the surface with a small goodie to stuff into one of the bright orange gaping mouths awaiting them. We watched this family of Dippers from about 40 feet away along an elevated walk, and were mesmerized by the behavior of these wonderful birds. Yes, that certainly was a great highlight, and yet it was somewhat overshadowed by the noisy flock of Pinyon Jays (a tough bird almost everywhere) a short while later along the highway, and, after that, the fly-catching Lewis's Woodpeckers that we studied for 15 minutes in the scope. Boy, it's getting hard to pick just one moment.

The tiny Elf Owl that eluded us for some time before posing nicely in a cottonwood right over our heads certainly got a big gasp from the group. This species has always been one of my favorites, with its chuckling laughter-like calls and it's ridiculously small size, but was it really better than the pair of Western Screech-Owls the night before that we eventually walked away from? Or, for that matter, the Whip-poor-will at 30 feet just above eye level, singing its heart out while we enjoyed scope-filled views? No, I don't think a nightbird was our one ultimate tour memory.

Raptors definitely deserve consideration. From the incredible Zone-tailed Hawk perched on the ground right next to the road eating a ground squirrel to the two wonderful Common Black-Hawks that soared lazily overhead, to the majestic Prairie Falcon near Apache Springs, we had our share of great raptor sightings. But I'm not sure one stands out above the others. I would have to consider the surprise sighting of four Black Swifts as a top moment, and what about our nine species of woodpeckers? With two male Three-toeds seen very well, and a stunning male Williamson's Sapsucker, we can't forget that group. And colorful birds? How about the Lazuli Buntings, Vermilion Flycatchers, three species of orioles, and three tanagers? Possibly the three Gray Vireos in view at once with a singing Black-chinned Sparrow in practically the same field of view? This is just too difficult.

I haven't even mentioned the bird chosen as the favorite of the tour. One night as we were beginning our owling excursion, a Virginia Rail sounded off in a marsh some distance away. I figured we had no chance of seeing it, but played some tape just in case. The rail came in on the run like a rocket and walked right up to our group, stopping just feet away to check us out. It stood in our light for a minute before disappearing via the same route in which it came. We were stunned by its beauty and its response. Momentary slack-jawed silence was followed by high fives and applause. Yes, this was definitely the most memorable moment of our tour. No doubt about it...or was it that Olive Warbler?

Itinerary:

- May 26 - west El Paso and Sunland Park areas, Border Hwy (28 species)
- May 27 - Wilderness Park Museum, Anthony Rest Stop, Aguirre Springs Recreation area, Holloman Lakes, White sands National Monument (50 species; 61 total)
- May 28 - Hwys 185 & 187, Percha Dam State Park, Caballo Reservoir, Hwy 152 over the Black Range (Emory Pass, Iron Creek), evening owling in Burro Mts (81 species; 104 total)
- May 29 - all day in Mimbres Mountains, including Pinos Altos, Cherry Creek Canyon, Greyfeathers Lodge, Gila Cliff Dwellings, evening owling north of Pinos Altos (73 species; 127 total)
- May 30 - Burro Mountains, Redrock, Bill Evans Lake, Mangus Springs, Little Walnut Picnic area, evening owling near Bill Evans (91 species; 151 total)
- May 31 - The Catwalk (Whitewater canyon), Luna, Apache Springs, San Augustin Plains (including the VLA) (68 species; 160 total)
- June 1 - Bosque del Apache NWR, afternoon shopping at Santa Fe Plaza (69 species; 175 total)
- June 2 - Jemez Mountains (Dome Meadow, Jemez Falls, Valles Caldera, La Cueva) (63 species; 192 total)
- June 3 - Bandelier National Monument, Jacona, lower portion of Santa Fe Ski Basin Road (66 species; 196 total)
- June 4 - Santa Fe Ski Basin Road to top, Rio Grande Nature Center, Sandia Crest (60 species; 200 total)
- June 5 - departures for home

Key:

- E = areas in and around El Paso
- L = Las Cruces, Organ Mts, Holloman Lakes, White Sands
- P = Percha Dam, Caballo areas
- S = Black Range, Mimbres Mts, Redrock, Burro Mts, Bill Evans, Whitewater Canyon
- R = Reserve, Luna, San Augustin Plains
- B = Bosque del Apache NWR, Socorro
- SF = Santa Fe and surrounding areas including the Jemez Mts, Jacona, Bandelier
- A = Albuquerque

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:

Pied-billed Grebe B,A---one on a nest at nature center
Eared Grebe L---pair of breeding-plumaged birds seen distantly at Holloman
Western Grebe L,P,B
Clark's Grebe P,B---including some displaying
Double-crested Cormorant S,B
Neotropic cormorant B
Great Blue Heron S
Snowy Egret B
Cattle Egret B
Green Heron P,B,SF
Black-crowned Night-Heron B
Turkey Vulture seen daily
Canada Goose B,A
Wood Duck A---great studies at the nature center
Gadwall B
Mallard seen all but one day, including several of the "Mexican Duck" subspecies (diazi) the first few days
Blue-winged Teal B
Cinnamon Teal P,A
Northern Shoveler L
Green-winged Teal B
Ring-necked Duck B---uncommon at this season
Hooded Merganser B---two females at the refuge; rare in summer
Ruddy Duck B
Mississippi Kite E---great flyover our first afternoon; extremely local in southwest
Sharp-shinned Hawk SF---pair near Dome Meadow
Cooper's Hawk SF,B---nest in the Burros
Common Black-Hawk S---one at Redrock and another near Bill Evans
Swainson's Hawk L,P---much scarcer than usual
Zone-tailed Hawk P,S,SF---great lucky with this uncommon species; especially notable was one on the ground just outside of Percha spotted by Valerie
Red-tailed Hawk almost daily
Golden Eagle S,SF---great spotting by Ben over Bill Evans
American Kestrel E,P,S,R,SF
Prairie Falcon R,SF---singles near Apache Springs and Valles Caldera; very uncommon at this season
Ring-necked Pheasant B---the "white-winged" race originally from Afghanistan
Dusky ("Blue") Grouse SF---incredible views of this phantom near Santa Fe; seen on fewer than half the tours; the Blue Grouse complex was recently split into two separate species by the AOU
Wild Turkey S,B---nice studies at Redrock and Bosque
Scaled Quail E,SF---right outside our hotel in Santa Fe
Gambel's Quail E,L,P,S,B
Virginia Rail S---an unbelievable nighttime show with the bird approaching to within twelve feet of the group; voted the favorite bird of the tour!
Common Moorhen P---only one seen on a small roadside pond near Hatch
American Coot P,S,B,A
Snowy Plover L---a pair of these declining birds at Holloman
Killdeer L,P,S,B
Black-necked Stilt L
American Avocet L
Spotted Sandpiper S,B,A---only three total
Franklin's Gull L---one very late bird at Holloman
California Gull L---rare was a second year bird at Holloman
Ring-billed Gull L---late

Least Tern B---a rare find at Bosque
 Rock Pigeon seen daily
 Eurasian Collared-Dove seen all but two days; amazingly this species has gone from being virtually nonexistent in the state five or six years ago to widespread and common
 Band-tailed Pigeon S,SF,A---seen best near Pinos Altos
 White-winged Dove seen every day but one, becoming scarcer as one goes north
 Mourning Dove seen daily
 Inca Dove E,P---two seen
 Greater Roadrunner P,S,B,A---a total of 16 seen!
Flammulated Owl S---unfortunately heard only
 Western Screech-Owl S---fantastic views
 Great Horned Owl S---our first spotted by Ben at the cliff dwellings
 Elf Owl S---superb views on our last attempt; a real highlight
 Burrowing Owl E,B---including four adorable babies at one nest hole!
Spotted Owl S---this very scarce bird was heard only
 Lesser Nighthawk E,L,P,S,B
 Common Nighthawk S---by Victor's van in the Burros
 Common Poorwill S---amazing in-hand inspection!
 Whip-poor-will S---unsurpassed views of the mexican subspecies (*arizonae*) already split off from the eastern Whip-poor-will (*vociferus*) by some authors
Black Swift SF---only a handful nest in the state and are hard to see; we had four in view at once!
 White-throated Swift E,P,S,SF,A---many great views
Magnificent Hummingbird S---female responding to owl whistle near Cherry Creek; very uncommon
 Black-chinned Hummingbird seen all but one day
 Broad-tailed Hummingbird S,SF---many great views at Greyfeather's feeders
 Lewis's Woodpecker R,SF---wonderful scope views of flycatching birds
 Acorn Woodpecker S
 Gila Woodpecker S---found in NM only in the Redrock area
 Red-naped Sapsucker SF
Williamson's Sapsucker SF---responsive male in the Jemez Mts
 Ladder-backed Woodpecker P,S
 Downy Woodpecker SF---nest at Bandelier
 Hairy Woodpecker S,SF
Three-toed Woodpecker SF---single males in the Jemez Mts and at Santa Fe Ski Basin; rare and local; seen on about a quarter of the trips only
 Northern Flicker S,B,SF---several at nests; red-shafted variety
Greater Pewee S---one in Cherry Creek was a real treat; not present in state every year
 Western Wood-Pewee seen daily
Willow Flycatcher S---the endangered southwestern subspecies; spotted by Ben
 Hammond's Flycatcher P,SF---late migrant at Percha
 Gray Flycatcher P,S,SF---our first spotted by Beth at Percha; nest found by Victor at Bandelier
 Cordilleran Flycatcher S,SF
 Black Phoebe P,S,B
 Say's Phoebe L,P,S,R,B,SF
 Vermilion Flycatcher P,S---unusual at Percha at this season; always spectacular
 Ash-throated Flycatcher E,L,P,S,B,SF
Brown-crested Flycatcher S---found only around Redrock in this state
 Cassin's Kingbird S,SF
 Western Kingbird E,L,S,B
 Loggerhead Shrike S,R
 Bell's Vireo S---three at Redrock
Gray Vireo L---three at Aguirre Springs; very uncommon, local, and irregular; seen on about half the trips here

Plumbeous Vireo S,SF
Hutton's Vireo S---one in Burro Mts, pair at The Catwalk; uncommon
 Warbling Vireo P,S,SF---one of the most common breeding birds of the high mountains
 Steller's Jay S,SF,A---subspecies *macrolopha*
 Western Scrub-Jay S,SF---subspecies *woodhouseii*
 Mexican Jay S
Pinyon Jay R---flock of about a dozen near Reserve were the only ones of the trip!
 Clark's Nutcracker SF---one in Dome Meadow was the only one
 Black-billed Magpie SF---a few around Jacona including a nest
 Chihuahuan Raven L,P---nest
 Common Raven S,R,SF,A
 Horned Lark R
 Violet-green Swallow S,R,SF,A---nests
 Northern Rough-winged Swallow E,P,S,B
 Cliff Swallow E,P,S,SF---nests
 Cave Swallow E---a few in west El Paso
 Barn Swallow E,L,P,S,B---seemed oddly scarce
 Mountain Chickadee S,SF---everyone's least favorite the last afternoon....
 Bridled Titmouse S
 Juniper Titmouse S,SF---several good views
 Verdin L,P,S,B---exceptional view near Hatch
 Bushtit S,SF---nest near Santa Fe
 REd-breasted Nuthatch S,SF
 White-breasted Nuthatch S,SF
 Pygmy Nuthatch S,SF---at nest; one of the cutest birds of North America!
 Cactus wren E,S---scarcer than normal but great views in El Paso
 Rock Wren S,SF
 Canyon Wren L,S,SF---nesting in the indian ruins
 Bewick's Wren L,P,S
 House Wren S,SF---nest at Dome Meadow
 American Dipper S---fabulous show of two family groups with fledged young in Whitewater Canyon; a highlight for many!
 Golden-crowned Kinglet SF
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet SF
 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher S---uncommon was a pair north of Pinos Altos
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher E,S---unexpected were pairs near Anthony and Redrock
 Western Bluebird S,R,SF,A
 Mountain Bluebird SF---gorgeous!
 Townsend's Solitaire SF---nice studies
 Hermit Thrush S,SF
 American Robin E,P,S,B,SF,A---nest with babies at the catwalk
 Northern Mockingbird almost daily
 Sage Thrasher R---great looks by the VLA
 Curve-billed Thrasher L,S,B---especially well at the Hilton!
 Crissal Thrasher E,S---great scope views of this desert skulker
 European Starling almost daily
 Phainopepla E,L,P,S---increasingly less common as we moved northward
Olive Warbler S---stunning male from about ten feet and another pair later; uncommon and local; voted the second favorite bird of the tour
 Orange-crowned Warbler SF
 Virginia's Warbler S,SF---only two seen, but one of those very well
 Lucy's Warbler P,S---up to twelve in one day
 Yellow Warbler S,B,SF

Yellow-rumped Warbler L,P,S,SF,A---Audubon's subspecies
 Black-throated Gray Warbler S,SF---especially well near Pinos Altos
 Grace's Warbler S---several excellent views
 MacGillivray's Warbler L,S,SF---a late migrant at Aguirre and the Catwalk and breeding birds in the Jemez
 Common Yellowthroat P,S,B
 Wilson's Warbler P,S---late migrants
 Red-faced Warbler S---always spectacular; ten seen; a tie for the third favorite bird of the tour
 Painted Redstart S---as stunning, if not more so, than the previous species; seven seen including a pair at a nest!
 Yellow-breasted Chat P,S,B,SF
 Hepatic Tanager L,S,SF---excellent study of a pair at Aguirre Springs
 Summer Tanager P,S,A
 Western Tanager P,S,SF,A
 Green-tailed Towhee SF---great Questar views near Dome Meadow
 Spotted Towhee S,B,SF
 Canyon Towhee L,S,SF
 Abert's Towhee S---another Redrock specialty
 Rufous-crowned Sparrow L,S
 Chipping Sparrow S,SF
 Black-chinned Sparrow L,S---two fantastic views of this localized species
 Vesper Sparrow S---heard only
 Lark Sparrow S,B
 Black-throated Sparrow L,S,B---the most handsome sparrow?
 Lincoln's Sparrow SF---after much searching
 White-crowned Sparrow P,S---late migrants; *oriantha*
 Dark-eyed Junco S,SF,A---Gray-headed types
 Northern Cardinal S---yet another Redrock specialty
 Pyrrhuloxia E---one at the Wilderness Park Museum was the only one of the trip
 Black-headed Grosbeak P,S,B,SF
 Blue Grosbeak L,P,S,B---stunning
 Lazuli Bunting SF---possibly the prettiest bunting
 Red-winged Blackbird E,P,S,B,SF,A
 Eastern Meadowlark R---*liliana* subspecies
 Western Meadowlark B
 Brewer's Blackbird R,SF---nest in Luna
 Common Grackle SF---thanks to Val's last minute spotting
 Great-tailed Grackle almost daily
 Bronzed Cowbird S---female at the Catwalk
 Brown-headed Cowbird almost daily
 Hooded Oriole S---two nice males at Redrock
 Bullock's Oriole E,P,S,B,SF
 Scott's Oriole L,SF---seen best at Aguirre Springs
Pine Grosbeak SF---stunning male from about twenty feet; tied for third favorite bird of the tour
Cassin's Finch SF---thanks to Victor
 Red Crossbill SF---small flock at Dome Meadow and a few more seen very well at Bandelier
 House Finch seen every day
 Pine Siskin P,S,SF
 Lesser Goldfinch S,SF
 American Goldfinch B---by Val
Evening Grosbeak SF---pair in the Jemez Mts; uncommon
 House Sparrow seen daily

total species - 200

Leader only birds:

Least Bittern
Brown Creeper

Mammals:

Arizona Gray Squirrel
Abert's (Tassel-eared) Squirrel---amazing!
Rock Squirrel
Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel
Spotted Ground Squirrel
Black-tailed Prairie Dog
Gray-necked (Gray-collared) Chipmunk
Cliff Chipmunk
Least Chipmunk
kangaroo rat species
Black-tailed Jackrabbit
Desert Cottontail
Eastern Cottontail
Mule Deer
Elk
Pronghorn
Coyote
Gray Fox
Kit Fox---very unexpected was a mother with pups near Redrock
Bobcat---fabulous views on a night trip near Silver City
Striped Skunk
Collared Peccary (Javelina)---another unexpected find near Greyfeather's
bat species---at least two sizes involved

total species - 23+ (smashing the previous tour record!)

Reptiles & Amphibians:

Desert Grassland Whiptail
Sonoran Spotted Whiptail
Checkered Whiptail
Tree Lizard
Eastern Fence (Southern Prairie) Lizard
Clark's Spiny Lizard---in the bathroom!
Striped Whipsnake
Black-tailed Rattlesnake---at the cliff dwellings
Canyon Tree Frog---The Catwalk
Bullfrog---heard only
Red-eared Slider
Painted Turtle
Spiny Soft-shelled Turtle

total species - 13

Butterflies:

California Sister
Two-tailed Swallowtail
Western Tiger Swallowtail
Giant Swallowtail
Black Swallowtail
Red-spotted Purple
Mourning Cloak
Monarch
Queen
Variegated Fritillary
Canyonland Satyr
Cabbage White
Silver-spotted Skipper
Marine Blue

total species - 14 (plus many more left unidentified)

Significant others:

Tarantula Hawk
scorpion
the Anasazi Restaurant
the colorful and sordid tales of Baird, Hammond, Cassin, Bell, Cooper, Abert , Lucy, Grace, Virginia, Theodora,
and the rest of the gang