

WINTER NEW MEXICO

JANUARY 5-11, 2012

LEADER: BARRY ZIMMER

COMPILED BY: BARRY ZIMMER

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

TOUR REPORT
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By Barry Zimmer

We arrived at a small ponding area on the north side of Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in mid-afternoon to find roughly 2,000 white geese bathing and resting within a short distance of the parking area. We were able to walk out within 30 feet of some of the birds and had marvelous side by side comparisons of Snow Geese and the diminutive Ross's Geese. Small groups of Sandhill Cranes kept gliding in overhead, rattling and trumpeting as they sailed into the marsh. Suddenly all the geese erupted into the air, at first heading south, and then circling back and flying directly over our heads. The sight and sound of this avian explosion was quite memorable, and when we looked to the east we saw perhaps the cause of the fuss, as an immature Bald Eagle sailed lazily into view.

Heading further into the refuge, we encountered an excellent variety of waterfowl and numerous raptors as we navigated the tour loop. A Ferruginous Hawk just 20 feet outside the van atop a cottonwood was particularly memorable. As dusk approached, we headed back to the roosting pond and found a steady flow of cranes arriving (over 11,000 were estimated to be at the refuge this winter). They came in groups of threes, eights, and tens, and most flew right over us and landed maybe a hundred feet away in the shallow water. Spellbound, we enjoyed the crane spectacle until the rosy sunset faded to dark gray and we knew it was time to tear ourselves away for dinner.

The amazing goose and crane show at Bosque del Apache is but one of many spectacles and highlights of our Winter New Mexico tour. We began in El Paso with a visit to a huge Yellow-headed Blackbird roost. We estimated an incredible 10,000 birds seen (mostly males) as they swirled about in a kaleidoscopic display and rested on the rooftops of nearby horse stables. Other El Paso area highlights included a very obliging pair of Harris's Hawks, an estimated 1,200 Common Mergansers in one morning, two Cackling Geese and a close Ross's Goose, two locally rare Greater Scaup, great studies of a Common Goldeneye, a Golden Eagle, a flock of White-throated Swifts, and three adorable Burrowing Owls. In my yard we enjoyed Anna's and Broad-tailed hummingbirds, a pair of Curve-billed Thrashers, an Orange-crowned Warbler, and a nearby Cactus Wren.

Upriver in the vicinity of Las Cruces we visited the incredibly scenic Organ Mountains and tallied a stunning Prairie Falcon (circling right over our heads), prolonged studies of Scaled Quail, Townsend's Solitaire, Sage Thrasher, one of the most responsive pairs of Crissal Thrashers ever, and a bevy of interesting sparrows including Cassin's (rare in winter), Rufous-crowned, Brewer's, Black-chinned, Black-throated, Sage, and Lark Bunting.

Still further north in and around Percha State Park we added five more Ferruginous Hawks, two more Prairie Falcons, Red-naped Sapsucker, and loads of Western Bluebirds and Phainopeplas. Animas Creek produced the clownish Acorn Woodpecker and the crowd pleasing Bridled Titmouse among others.

Our final spectacle involved the amazing rosy-finches of Sandia Crest. Waiting on the deck of the Crest House with breathtaking (literally) views of the Rio Grande Valley below us, we marveled as the rosy-finches (all three species) appeared suddenly out of nowhere in a swirling flock, and then assailed the tray feeder with a frenzy for a few minutes before disappearing as quickly as they had arrived. We

witnessed this three times and had great views of the U.S. endemic Black and Brown-capped, as well as Gray-crowned rosy-finches. In addition, stunning Steller's Jays, frenetic Mountain Chickadees, and a bizarre Abert's squirrel visited the feeder as well.

In all we tallied 140 species of birds, including many highly-sought southwestern specialties, while enjoying the huge concentrations and spectacles of wintering birds in the Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico.

Itinerary:

January 5 - El Paso Country Club, Sunland Park area (33 species)

January 6 - Ascarate Lake, Border Hwy, McNary Reservoir, Fort Hancock Reservoir, Tornillo Reservoir, Hwy 20, Memorial Park, my yard, drive to Las Cruces (73 species; 83 total)

January 7 - Jornada del Muerto, Organ, Aguirre Springs Recreation Area, NMSU campus, La Cueva (50 species; 105 total)

January 8 - Hwys 185 & 187, Percha State Park, Caballo Lake, Animas Creek, Rock Canyon Marina at Elephant Butte (74 species; 121 total)

January 9 - Elephant Butte Lake State Park (Rock Canyon Marina, Hot Springs Landing & Three Sisters Cove), Water Canyon, Bosque del Apache NWR (60 species; 128 total)

January 10 - Bosque del Apache NWR, Sandia Crest, Rio Grande Nature Center (52 species; 140 total)

January 11 - departures for home (140 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:

Greater White-fronted Goose B---one in with large white goose flock at Bosque; rare here
Snow Goose E,P,B---an estimated 20,000 white geese at the refuge; we had a great mid-afternoon takeoff; a fair number of blue morphs
Ross's Goose E,P,B--- great comparative views with Snows; a couple thousand total
Canada Goose E,P,B,A
Cackling Goose E,A---two at Ascarate where quite rare and a flock of 220 at the nature center
Wood Duck A---stunning views!
Gadwall almost daily; especially well at the nature center
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,A
Canvasback P
Redhead P
Ring-necked Duck E,P,B,A
Greater Scaup E---two females side-by-side with Lessers at Ascarate Lake; rare
Lesser Scaup E,A---thirteen total
Bufflehead E,P,B
Common Goldeneye E---close study of a female at Ascarate
Hooded Merganser P---three total
Red-breasted Merganser E---close female at Ascarate Lake
Common Merganser E,P,B,A---flocks totaling about **1200** birds between McNary, Fort Hancock & Tornillo
Ruddy Duck E
Scaled Quail L---great views on road to Aguirre Springs
Gambel's Quail ,P,B---wonderful views
Pied-billed Grebe E,B
Eared Grebe E---five total; best at Ascarate Lake
Western Grebe E,P
Clark's Grebe E,P--- good comparative views with Westerns
American White Pelican E,P
Neotropic Cormorant E,P---great views
Double-crested Cormorant E,P
Great Blue Heron E,P,B
Great Egret E
Snowy Egret E
Black-crowned Night-Heron E,P
Bald Eagle P,B---seven total
Northern Harrier E,L,P,B---23 total including three or four males
Sharp-shinned Hawk E,L,P
Cooper's Hawk L,P
Harris's Hawk E---five seen our first full day including a spectacular pair along I-10; localized
Red-tailed Hawk seen daily including a "Harlan's" Hawk at Fort Hancock and a rufous morph bird; an estimated 79 total
Ferruginous Hawk E,P,B---five total, including superb prolonged views of perched birds
Golden Eagle E---one distantly along Trans-Mountain Road
American Kestrel seen daily

Prairie Falcon E,P--three total including great flyover near Aguirre Springs and perched bird near Percha; voted the favorite bird of the tour!
 American Coot almost daily
 Sandhill Crane P,B,A---an estimated 11,000 wintering at the refuge and an additional 500+ seen in other areas; spectacularly close views; tied for second favorite bird of the tour!
 Killdeer E,P
Black-necked Stilt E---two along the Rio Grande the first afternoon; rare in winter; we left this one off the list!
Greater Yellowlegs E,P---one along the canal near Sunland Park and another at Percha; uncommon in winter
 Least Sandpiper E,P,B
 Long-billed Dowitcher E---uncommon in winter
 Wilson's Snipe E,P
 Ring-billed Gull E,P
California Gull P---one at Tornillo and another at at Rock Canyon Marina; rare to very uncommon
 Herring Gull P---seven at Three Sisters Cove
 Rock Pigeon seen daily
 Eurasian Collared-Dove seen daily---a rapidly expanding species
 White-winged Dove missed only one day with up to 200 in a day
 Mourning Dove seen daily
 Inca Dove E---Mountain Park
 Greater Roadrunner we nearly missed the state bird, getting our only one the last afternoon; fantastic views
 Great Horned Owl B---heard only
 Burrowing Owl E---fantastic studies of three at burrows
White-throated Swift E---flock of 25 over Sunland Park; very uncommon to rare in winter
Anna's Hummingbird E---my yard
Broad-tailed Hummingbird E---female in my yard; rare in winter
 Belted Kingfisher E,P---five total
 Acorn Woodpecker P---spotted by Trish; great views
 Red-naped Sapsucker P---nice views of a male at Percha
 Ladder-backed Woodpecker E,P---six total
 Downy Woodpecker A---at the nature center
 Hairy Woodpecker A---at the nature center
 Northern Flicker seen daily; the "Red-shafted" variety
 Black Phoebe E,P
 Say's Phoebe E,L,P,B
 Loggerhead Shrike E,L,P,B---only eight total; declining?
 Steller's Jay A---subspecies *macrolopha*
 Western Scrub-Jay W---subspecies *woodhouseii*; a likely future split from the one in California
 American Crow L,P,B,A
 Chihuahuan Raven E,L,P
 Common Raven P,W,B,A
 Horned Lark W
 Black-capped Chickadee A
 Mountain Chickadee A---about a dozen at Sandia Crest
 Bridled Titmouse P---nice views of this striking species at Animas Creek
 Juniper Titmouse W
 Verdin L---oddly, only one seen

Red-breasted Nuthatch W,A---one in Water Canyon was unexpected
 White-breasted Nuthatch P,A
 Cactus Wren E,L---seen best in Mountain Park
 Rock Wren L---great study at La Cueva
 Canyon Wren L,W---unfortunately heard only
 Bewick's Wren L,P,A
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet L,P,W,A
 Western Bluebird P,W---many spectacular views
Townsend's Solitaire L,W---eight total with many great views
 American Robin E,L,P,B,A
 Northern Mockingbird E---scarcer than usual
Sage Thrasher L---sporadic; we had two at Aguirre Springs
 Curve-billed Thrasher E,L,A---best in my yard
 Crissal Thrasher L,P---unsurpassed views on the Jornada; voted the third favorite bird of the tour!
 European Starling seen daily
 American Pipit E,P,B
 Cedar Waxwing P---two at Percha
 Phainopepla E,P---many nice studies
 Orange-crowned Warbler E---one in my yard eating suet; very uncommon in winter
 Yellow-rumped Warbler E,P---mostly the Audubon's subspecies, but one Myrtle in my yard as well
 Spotted Towhee L,P,B,A---several great views
 Rufous-crowned Sparrow L---only one seen
 Canyon Towhee L---four at Aguirre Springs
Cassin's Sparrow L---rare in winter; a good find
 Chipping Sparrow L,P
 Brewer's Sparrow L,P---a down year but we had about 130 total (most at Aguirre Springs)
Black-chinned Sparrow L---great views of about five at Aguirre Springs; uncommon
 Vesper Sparrow L---about 16 on entrance road at Aguirre Springs
 Black-throated Sparrow L---the handsomest sparrow?
Sage Sparrow L--- nice views of the interior race *nevadensis*
 Lark Bunting L,P---lucky to find this species in a down year for sparrows; five total
 Savannah Sparrow E,P
 Song Sparrow P---three at Percha were our only ones
White-throated Sparrow B---one a Bosque by Carolyn and I was a rarity
 White-crowned Sparrow seen daily in numbers
 Dark-eyed Junco daily, including Gray-headed, Oregon, and Pink-sided races
 Pyrrhuloxia E,L,P,B---many good views
 Red-winged Blackbird E,L,P,B,A
 Western Meadowlark E,P,B
 Yellow-headed Blackbird E---incredible sight of about **10,000+** gathering to roost in west El Paso
 Brewer's Blackbird E,L,P
 Great-tailed Grackle almost daily
 Brown-headed Cowbird E,P
Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch two seen on Sandia Crest in with rosy-finch flock
Black Rosy-Finch about a dozen at Sandia Crest as close as fifteen feet away!!!!; tied for second favorite bird of the tour
Brown-capped Rosy-Finch about 18 at Sandia Crest; spectacular views
 House Finch almost daily

Pine Siskin B---one fly-by for some
Lesser Goldfinch E--- in my yard
American Goldfinch P---uncommon
House Sparrow seen daily

total species - 140

Mammals:

Desert Cottontail
Rock Squirrel
Tassel-eared (Abert's) Squirrel---wonderful study of this bizarre creature at Sandia Crest
Mule Deer---La Cueva

total species - 4

Significant others:

“Doug” the dog