



Winter in Southeastern Arizona

December 9-15, 2025



Saguaro National Park East © Oscar Carmona

From December 9–15, 2025, we embarked on a week-long birding journey through the diverse landscapes of Southeastern Arizona. This region offers a remarkable blend of desert basins, riparian corridors, and “sky island” mountain ranges that rise dramatically from the surrounding Sonoran Desert. Even in winter, the area provides a rich tapestry of avian life, with resident desert specialties, wintering migrants, and occasional rarities that draw birders from across the continent.

The timing of the trip—early winter—proved ideal for experiencing both the quiet beauty of the desert and the spectacle of large-scale bird movements. Crisp mornings gave way to warm afternoons, creating comfortable conditions for exploring habitats ranging from saguaro-studded foothills to grasslands and wetlands. Seasonal highlights included vast flocks of Sandhill Cranes staging in the Sulphur Springs Valley, concentrations of waterfowl and shorebirds at Whitewater Draw and Willcox Twin Lakes, and a mix of mountain species in Madera Canyon and the Huachuca foothills.

The week highlighted why Southeastern Arizona remains a bucket-list destination for birders: the diversity of habitats, the abundance of species, and the unforgettable experiences that come from exploring one of the most biologically rich corners of the United States. Each day brought a balance of targeted birding goals—seeking out specialties like Arizona Woodpecker and Rufous-winged Sparrow—and unexpected discoveries, such as a Northern Saw-whet Owl in Tucson and a Surf Scoter in Willcox Playa.

Day 1: We arrived in Tucson and settled into the rhythm of the desert city, framed by mountain ranges and the iconic silhouettes of saguaros. The crisp December air carried a sense of anticipation as we prepared to begin our birding adventure. Our first destination was Saguaro National Park East where towering saguaros framed the landscape, each one a sentinel of the Sonoran Desert. Here we encountered Gilded Flicker, Gila Woodpecker, Phainopepla, Black-throated Sparrow, Cactus Wren, and Curve-billed Thrasher, all quintessential desert species. The combination of birds, scenery, and the quiet grandeur of the saguaros made this stop unforgettable. The late afternoon light painted the saguaros in golden hues, creating a dramatic backdrop for birding. As the sun set, silhouettes of saguaros stretched across the horizon, and the desert quieted into evening. It was a fitting introduction to Southeastern Arizona—an immersion in the landscapes and species that define the region.



Gila Woodpecker © Oscar Carmona

Day 2: Our first full day set the tone for the week, combining urban wetlands, expansive agricultural flats, iconic desert landscapes, and a world-class natural history museum. The morning began at Sweetwater Wetlands, a gem within Tucson city limits. The ponds and cattail marshes were alive with wintering waterfowl—Northern Shoveler, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, Mallard, and American Wigeon. The surrounding mesquite scrub



Gambel's Quail © Oscar Carmona

produced Verdin, Abert's Towhee, Say's Phoebe, and the ever-charismatic Vermilion Flycatcher. From there, we drove north into the Santa Cruz Flats, a vast agricultural landscape famous for raptors and open-country birds. The fields delivered in spectacular fashion: Ferruginous Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, and Northern Harrier patrolled the skies, while flocks of Gambel's Quail, Lark Buntings, White-crowned Sparrows, and Horned Larks

moved across the stubble. The flats also offered a chance to see Yellow-headed Blackbird mixed in with a large number of Red-winged Blackbirds, Brewer's Blackbirds, and Brown-headed Cowbirds. In the afternoon we visited the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, where natural history exhibits and live animal displays deepened our appreciation of the region's ecology. We closed the day at Saguaro National Park West, where the density of saguaros creates one of the most striking desert landscapes in North America. Here we saw Bendire's Thrasher, Cactus Wren, Gila Woodpecker, Gilded Flicker, and Greater Roadrunner – a wonderful way to end our first full day of birding in the Tucson area.

Day 3: The day began at Willcox Twin Lakes, a reliable hotspot for wintering waterfowl and shorebirds. The lakes shimmered in the morning light, hosting flocks of Snow Geese, Ruddy Duck, American Wigeon, Northern Shoveler, Cinnamon Teal, Gadwall, and the elegant Northern Pintail while Sandhill Cranes passed overhead in loose skeins. Raptors

were abundant: Ferruginous Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Northern Harrier, and Golden Eagle all made appearances in the surrounding desert scrub. We also discovered a lone Surf Scoter among the numerous waterfowl – a rare sight to see in Arizona. The diversity of ducks made this stop a perfect introduction to the richness of Southeastern Arizona's wetlands. Midday



Surf Scoter © Oscar Carmona

brought us into the dramatic landscapes of the Chiricahua Mountains, one of Arizona's famed "sky islands." Here we encountered Mexican Jays moving noisily through the oaks, Bridled Titmouse foraging along shaded trails, and a mixed flock that included Hutton's Vireo, Yellow-rumped Warbler, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Ruby-crowned Kinglet.



Mexican Jay © Oscar Carmona

From the Chiricahuas, we moved into the wide-open expanses of the Sulphur Springs Valley, a winter haven for grassland birds and raptors. Flocks of Lark Buntings rippled across the fields, shifting like waves in the grass while a covey of Scaled Quail scurried across the road. As the sun dipped toward the horizon, we arrived at Whitewater Draw Wildlife Area, the crown jewel of Southeastern Arizona's winter birding. Here, the spectacle of thousands of Sandhill Cranes unfolded in breathtaking fashion. At dusk, cranes poured into the wetlands in wave after wave, their bugling calls filling the air. Alongside them, Snow Geese, Ross's Geese, Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal, and Northern Shovelers crowded the ponds. The sheer abundance of birds, combined with the golden light of evening, created one of the most memorable experiences of the entire trip. We ended the day in the historic mining town of Bisbee, nestled in the rugged Mule Mountains. Strolling through Bisbee's winding streets, we were immersed in the town's



Sandhill Cranes © Oscar Carmona

vibrant art scene, with murals and galleries reflecting the eclectic spirit of the community. The town's mining heritage was evident throughout, from the well-preserved architecture to the stories embedded in the landscape. Experiencing Bisbee's unique blend of culture and history provided a rich conclusion to the day, making it a memorable addition to our itinerary.

Day 4: We started the day at the Ash Canyon Bird Sanctuary, a beloved site near Sierra Vista known for its feeders and intimate birding experience. The sanctuary was alive with activity. The feeders attracted Anna's and Broad-billed Hummingbirds, Lesser Goldfinch, White-winged Dove, Pyrrhuloxia, Spotted Towhee, Canyon Towhee, Mexican Jay, Dark-eyed Junco, and House Finch, creating a lively mix of desert



Pyrrhuloxia © Oscar Carmona

and garden birds. The sanctuary's quiet setting allowed us to linger, watching hummingbirds dart in and out of the feeders, a reminder of Southeastern Arizona's year-round hummingbird diversity. From Ash Canyon, we moved into the shaded forests of Ramsey Canyon Preserve, nestled in the Huachuca Mountains. The canyon's towering sycamores and oaks provided a cool refuge, and birding here felt like stepping into another world. Observed species included Bridled Titmouse, Acorn Woodpecker, Brown Creeper, Townsend's Warbler, and Red-naped Sapsucker. The preserve's combination of lush habitat and specialty species underscored why Ramsey Canyon is considered one of Arizona's premier birding destinations.



Acorn Woodpecker © Oscar Carmona

In the afternoon, we explored Miller Canyon, another Huachuca hotspot famous for its hummingbirds and forest birds. We encountered Western Bluebird, Spotted Towhee, and Dark-eyed Junco, all typical of the higher-elevation forests. The canyon's rugged beauty, with its steep slopes and flowing creek, provided a dramatic backdrop to the birding. We closed the day with a visit

to Tombstone, the legendary Wild West town. The focus shifted to cultural exploration as we walked past the iconic OK Corral and historic saloons. Experiencing Tombstone's storied

frontier history provided a striking contrast to the birding that filled the earlier part of the day. Tombstone made for a memorable and distinctive finale to the day.

Day 5: Our day started at Hereford Bridge, a well-known vantage point along the San Pedro River. The riparian corridor was alive with activity: Vermilion Flycatcher, Say's Phoebe, Green-tailed Towhee, Lesser Goldfinch, Lincoln's Sparrow, and Harris's and Red-tailed Hawks to name a few. The San Pedro's importance as a migratory flyway was evident even in winter, with bird activity concentrated along



Rufous-winged Sparrow @ Oscar Carmona

the lush riparian zone. Moving deeper into the San Pedro RNCA, the river corridor produced a mix of wintering and resident species: Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Phainopepla, Lark Sparrow, Curve-billed Thrasher, and Pyrrhuloxia. Among the specialty birds found in this area was the Rufous-winged Sparrow. This distinctive desert sparrow was one of the highlights of our exploration of the region's arid habitats. Observing this species was a rewarding experience – a local specialty but uncommon species seen year-round in Southeast Arizona.



Violet-crowned Hummingbird © Oscar Carmona

Late morning brought us to the Paton Center for Hummingbirds in Patagonia, a legendary site for close encounters with Southeastern Arizona specialties. Feeders buzzed with Broad-billed, Anna's, and Violet-crowned Hummingbirds, their iridescent flashes catching the sun. Other highlights included White-winged Dove, Lesser Goldfinch,

Pyrrhuloxia, Bewick's Wren, Gambel's Quail, and Abert's Towhee, all drawn to the sanctuary's welcoming habitat. The intimate setting allowed for prolonged observation, enjoying the chance to watch hummingbirds at eye level – a quintessential Arizona experience. In the afternoon, we visited the Sonoita Creek State Natural Area, adjacent to

Patagonia Lake. A brief stop at Kino Springs on our way to Tubac produced Cassin's Kingbirds flycatching from the top of the Sycamore trees. Although our time at Kino Springs was short, the presence of Cassin's Kingbirds added a rewarding highlight to our day's birding itinerary.

Day 6: Our first stop of the morning were the oak-pine forests of Madera Canyon, where mixed flocks included Bridled Titmouse, Painted Redstart, Olive Warbler, Townsend's Warbler, and White-breasted Nuthatch. At the Santa Rita Lodge feeders, birding was effortless yet rewarding, with Rivoli's Hummingbird, Mexican Jay, Wild Turkey, Hepatic Tanager, Yellow-eyed Junco, and Arizona Woodpecker providing close views. The crisp mountain air and canyon backdrop made this a classic Southeastern Arizona experience. Midday brought us into the rugged desert scrub near Box Canyon, where we continued to observe grassland and canyon birds. In the early afternoon, Amado WTP provided a surprising abundance of waterbirds in an arid setting. Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked and Ruddy Ducks, and American Wigeon were highlights. This stop underscored the importance of small wetlands for sustaining birdlife.



Rivoli's Hummingbird © Oscar Carmona



Arizona Woodpecker © Oscar Carmona

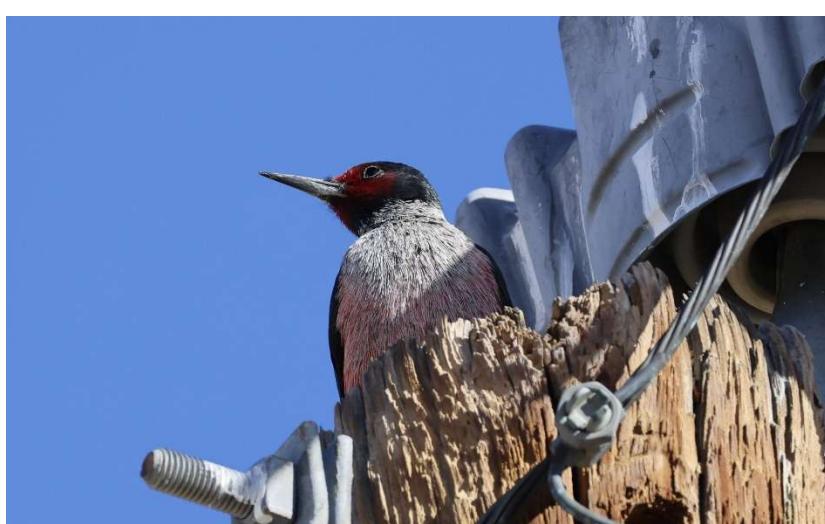
We also explored Montosa Canyon, a quieter but rewarding site in the Santa Rita foothills. Here we observed species like Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Canyon Wren, Black-throated Sparrow, Verdin, Pyrrhuloxia, and Black-tailed Gnatcatcher. The golden light of late day made this canyon especially memorable. We then shifted north to the historic town of Tubac.

Along the Santa Cruz River corridor, Vermilion Flycatchers perched brilliantly, Black Phoebes worked the river edges, and Black-and-white Warbler, Bridled Titmouse, Orange-crowned Warbler, Black-throated Gray Warbler, and White-breasted Nuthatch were spotted in the cottonwood and willow forests. The mission grounds at Tumacácori added a sense of history, with Gila Woodpecker and Curve-billed Thrasher calling from the surrounding mesquite. The open landscapes contrasted beautifully with the riparian corridor, highlighting the diversity of habitats within a short drive.

Day 7: Our final morning began at Agua Caliente Park, an oasis on the outskirts of Tucson. The spring-fed ponds and lush palms provided a striking contrast to the surrounding desert. Waterbirds were abundant, with Northern Pintail, American Coot, Mallard, Common Merganser, and Pied-billed Grebe dotting the ponds. The riparian edges held Verdin, Phainopepla, and Gila Woodpecker, while a Great Egret glided gracefully across the water. We were also able to observe the Northern Saw-whet Owl, uncommon in Tucson's lowlands. This is a species far more at home in the cool, shaded conifer forest of Arizona's sky islands rather than in a desert oasis. The park's tranquil setting offered a peaceful finale to the week's birding, a reminder of how even small pockets of habitat can host remarkable diversity.



Northern Saw-whet Owl © Gordon Karre



Lewis's Woodpecker © Oscar Carmona

From there, we visited East Lawn Palms Cemetery, a surprisingly productive birding site within Tucson. The manicured grounds and mature trees attracted species such as Western Bluebird, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Chipping Sparrow, Lark Sparrow, and Dark-eyed Junco. We also found a pair of Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays in the far northwest part of the cemetery, and a Lewis's

Woodpecker, right outside the cemetery along the perimeter road perched on a utility pole. This woodpecker is typically associated with open pine forests and post-fire landscapes – a high contrast to an urban cemetery in the Sonoran Desert. With these final stops, our birding journey through Southeastern Arizona came to a close.

Over seven days, we experienced the full range of habitats—from desert flats and saguaro forests to mountain canyons, riparian corridors, and grassland valleys. Highlights included rare winter visitors like Northern Saw-whet Owl and Surf Scoter, iconic Southeastern Arizona specialties such as Arizona Woodpecker, Rivoli's Hummingbird, Violet-crowned Hummingbird, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Yellow-eyed Junco, Painted Redstart, and Olive Warbler – and unforgettable spectacles like the thousands of Sandhill Cranes at Whitewater Draw. The trip underscored why the region remains one of North America's top birding destinations: its diversity of habitats, abundance of species, and the unique blend of natural and cultural landscapes. As we departed Tucson, the memories of these encounters lingered—each bird and each place a vivid thread in the tapestry of the journey.