

Arizona

24 July–8 August 2008

Participants:

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Elegant Trogon

Leaders: James P. Smith and Vaughan Ashby

A personal report by Harry Barnard.

Phoenix, Arizona, July 24th, 22:00 hours. Under the cover of darkness, shadowy figures quietly convened at the pre-arranged rendezvous point. The country, off guard and complacent, had been infiltrated on several fronts; a sleeper cell had been awakened. All were specialists bringing expertise essential for the success of the mission. Surveillance equipment had been smuggled past the prying eyes of customs and immigration. Eyebrows had been raised, but all were allowed passage. Dates had been hastily rearranged; times had been changed. Officials sensed nothing untoward. Acquaintance had, to date, been strictly on a need to know basis, but at this late hour all were assembled for the final briefing. The time had come. The morning would bring an all out assault on the unsuspecting avifauna of Arizona!

Day: The group was divided by separate flights, due to the popularity of the United States during the summer period. One half flew from Heathrow (where they were met by Vaughan) to Phoenix, via Detroit and the other followed, on a later flight via Minneapolis (met by Peter). Following a seven and a half hour journey, completing the formalities and relieving ourselves of our luggage in Detroit, we spent a lengthy spell within the terminal. During this time the group were able to spend some time getting to know one another and the birding commenced. Despite a thorough vigil of the airport complex (at least the parts which could be seen from the terminal windows!) the species logged were of a decidedly familiar nature, with Common Starling, House Sparrow and Barn Swallow noted, but Great Blue Heron and Cliff Swallow provided at least a sense that we had reached the U.S. An early evening flight to Phoenix saw us arrive at roughly 20.20, where we were met by our good friend James Smith and transferred to our Motel Six via our two mini-buses. Here we spent several hours of undisturbed sleep. Peter and the rest of the group who had taken a later flight, did not settle into the motel until much later and so a 07.00 start was a welcome proposition for everyone.

Day 2: Birding began early for several members of the group whose body clocks had not yet fully adjusted to the eight-hour time difference and they were rewarded with a gentle introduction to some of the area's avifauna: Verdin, Northern Mockingbird, Gila Woodpecker, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Bullock's Oriole, Mourning, Inca and White-winged Doves, House Finch and Lesser Goldfinch to name a few. The necessary introductions were made following the unification of the two groups and soon all were enjoying excellent views of the confiding Great-tailed Grackles, House Finches and Gila Woodpeckers before brief sightings of Curve-billed Thrasher were obtained by several members during the loading of the vans.

From our Mesa Motel we followed the B-Line Highway, observing our first Snowy Egrets and Double-crested Cormorants along the shores of some artificial lakes and the first party of Phainopeplas was noted. A stop at a gas station to collect consumables for the day ahead provided stunning views of over forty Gambel's Quail and our only Burrowing Owls of the tour were seen well,

with at least three enjoying the shade during the blistering heat, which had come as a climate shock to the majority of the group, while Black-tailed Prairie Dogs scampered across the sandy earth adding comedy value and our first significant mammal species.

From here we headed towards Sunflower, where a short deviation from the highway onto a small side road provided some excellent birding. The first birds of significance spotted by James as we approached, were a pair of Scott's Orioles, which were seen briefly before flying across the road and out of sight. The following vigil provided good views of our first Black-headed Grosbeak of the tour, a stunning male, which surveyed the surroundings with an imperious air from the top of a blossoming Guava. The other side of the road offered more open habitat and it was this, which provided our first Black-throated Sparrow sightings. These cracking little birds would become a familiar sight over the course of the tour! James had been listening intently since we arrived and it was not long before he located our target species, the highly-localised Gray Vireo which, with a little persuasion, eventually provided good views to the group, after initially poor views of a Blue-grey Gnatcatcher had caused brief confusion. By this time we were doing rather well and had all but exhausted this small area and as one of the day's key species was hopefully located but a few miles down the road it was for Sycamore Creek we headed next. James had discovered this site the day before our arrival and the group were soon enjoying views of a gorgeous juvenile Common Black-hawk in an extremely well camouflaged nest in the canyon below. Continuing the "Canyon" theme, it was not long before the descending "Willow Warbler-like" song of Canyon Wren drew our attention to several of these stunning little birds. There were several brief views of "whizzing" hummingbirds before a perched bird was located and sharply identified as a first year Costa's Hummingbird. A pair of noisy Rock Wrens chattered their way through the mesquite and down to the rocky slope adjacent to the road, affording the group spectacular views. With more target species on the 'hit list' we moved on, keeping an eye on the sky in the hope that a Zone-tailed Hawk would make an appearance.

Our next port of call was Mount Ord and straight from the car park we discovered several Western Tanager working the slopes, although many of the group were able to obtain only satisfactory views. However compensation was almost instant as a couple of raucous Western Scrub-jays soared across and perched up offering some good views to an appreciative audience. Along the road several smart Canyon Towhees were noted before a husky, descending chatter revealed several Rufous-crowned Sparrows. Several Juniper Titmice called briefly but were unresponsive, so we concentrated on our target species, Black-chinned Sparrow, which, with some effort, was eventually seen extremely well by the entire group and several people obtained good photos of this species. Flushed with success we headed for Roosevelt Lake reflecting on a superb morning's birding. Upon arrival at the lake "It all happened at once" so to speak!!! Andy and Caroline called Great Egret, just as a juvenile Gray Hawk took flight – an excellent record for the area – while a Belted Kingfisher was spooked from its fishing post and Greater Roadrunner burst from the roadside Mesquite and vanished into denser vegetation. This was clearly a superb vantage point and so we set about scouring the lake. For the time of year the water level was drastically high and so it wasn't long before Double-crested Cormorant had been located. However the stars here were the grebes! At least 10 Clark's Grebes were noted in this bay alone and vast numbers of Western could be observed right across the main body of water. Several Great Blue Herons and Snowy Egrets were observed before moving on to a vantage point further down the lake. From here large numbers of grebes and American Coots were noted as well as a stealthy Green Heron, which perched motionless in the low branches of dead tree. John excellently spotted a distant Osprey atop a Saguaro Cactus. A Brown-crested Flycatcher was located and the group were able to critically analyse the various identification features of this *Myiarchus* flycatcher.

Having enjoyed our food at a small picnic site and observed several Ash-throated Flycatchers and Hooded Orioles, fluids again became a priority and so many of the group purchased ice creams and cold drinks at the gas station in Winkelman, before moving to our next birding location. A small oasis along the course of the river provided our first Cliff Swallows, before Vaughan and James were able to coax a typically elusive Yellow-breasted Chat into view, although many of the group struggled to get outstanding views here. The first Common Yellowthroats of the campaign were noted and a couple of Plumbeous Vireos put in an appearance. An obscurely plumaged Broad-billed Hummingbird proved an interesting study, while a fly-over Yellow Warbler was all too brief.

After a comparatively lengthy drive we arrived in the Aravaipa Canyon. This area consisted of classic "Wild West" habitat, full of low growing mesquite and Saguaro cacti. These cacti provided a haven for bird life and both Gila Woodpecker and Ladder-backed Woodpecker were soon observed. Fine views were obtained of some confiding Cactus Wrens, while a walk along the road and a brief vigil from a prominent observation point above the wadi below produced good views of Bell's Vireo for many of the group and Northern Cardinals were seen well before a family of Collared Peccaries were found by Jayne, snuffling their way along the dry river bed. Scanning the other side, a Zone-tailed Hawk was soon located and then joined by another and a brief American Kestrel put in an appearance. Everyone achieved superb views of these birds, which were particularly meaningful to those who had failed to connect with these species elsewhere. James then successfully lured in a Gilded Flicker, which sat proudly upon a spindly Yucca stem for several minutes. A couple of Curve-billed Thrashers appeared, allowing some of those who had not yet noted this species to appreciate their "subtle elegance" before the most spectacular observation of the day was noted, a tremendous storm heading along the valley towards us and we realised as it became as black as night that it was a suitable time to depart. Huge forks of lightning streaked across the sky as we rushed to ford the river crossings, which were at this point accessibly dry, before the storm surge made them impassable. From here we drove the sixty miles to Tucson through a near constant deluge where, upon arrival, we were mercifully able to check in to our Motel Six in the dry. We descended on the local restaurant and reminisced about the day's successes during the log, before preparing ourselves for the key birds of tomorrow with a good night's sleep.

Day 3: Our birding began early, with Curve-billed Thrasher once again eluding some members of the group, but Inca Dove, Verdin and our first acceptable views of a superb Pyrrhuloxia provided ample compensation, though Pete was non-too convinced that the TV aerial made a suitably natural perch for photographic purposes! From here we travelled for a fortifying breakfast at Mickey D's, observing 8+ Red-tailed Hawks, several Gila Woodpeckers and two American Kestrels en route. Between breakfast and purchasing our lunch from Wal-Mart, Broad-billed Hummingbird, House Finch and Hooded Oriole were seen in the car park that was to become a premier birding site! From here we headed through the grasslands, interspersed with dense patches of mesquite to the base of Madera Canyon to a site known as "Proctor Road." Birding began in spectacular fashion with Say's Phoebe, Blue Grosbeak and best of all, superb views of Botteri's Sparrow, a bird far more difficult in other areas of its range within the United States. Several smart looking Lark Sparrows were soon located and iridescent male Vermillion Flycatchers positively glowed from their perches. Western Kingbirds were a prominent feature of this area and close scrutiny of some distant birds revealed our first confirmed Cassin's Kingbird of the tour. Time was of the essence as our target species of the day were widely distributed within the reaches of the Canyon and so we set about nailing our first, the Black-capped Gnatcatcher, which turned out to be extremely frustrating, being heard only briefly by James. This was one, which clearly had no intention of playing along. We did however, have greater success with superb views of numerous Bell's Vireos, before a female Varied Bunting was discovered on the path and Summer Tanager was heard way off across the valley. In a sense one of the highlights of this site would have been Roy and Linda's discovery of a potential Philadelphia Vireo, which was identified later from the footage Roy had captured of the bird, down by the stream crossing, as a particularly bright plumaged Warbling Vireo. Philadelphia would have been a real state rarity for Arizona. Another notable discovery was that of a lethargic Arizona Coral Snake, which crossed the path during our pursuit of the calling gnatcatcher, topped only by the appearance of a couple of cracking male Varied Buntings showing true colours in superb light and an inquisitive pair of Bewick's Wrens. Summer Tanager was also noted, being seen perched distantly on the way back to the vans. Although the gnatcatcher had been a minor setback we had plenty of target species to grill and so headed further up the Madera Canyon. Parking up, several Acorn Woodpeckers flew over followed closely by our first Mexican Jays, which crossed in a raucous clan. However our attention was soon drawn by the distinctive "rubber duck squeak" of Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, which proved tricky to observe, owing to the location of the bird and its all too brief appearance.

Pressing on up the road several of the group enjoyed terrific views of Bridled Titmice, while Sveta located a stunning Black-throated Grey Warbler, which foraged high in the pines above. We arrived at the feeders at Kubo filled with optimism that our target species would present themselves to us. Fine views were had of White-breasted Nuthatch and a small flock of Lesser Goldfinch before a cracking Arizona Woodpecker put in an appearance, providing the group with excellent views, while a very smart Hepatic Tanager appeared on the orange halves and a female Western Tanager decided to be particularly skulking, providing a brief impression of a candidate for female Flame-coloured. The main source of attraction at this site were the hummingbird feeders around the building and these provided a kaleidoscope of iridescent colours, with Broad-billed, Black-chinned and the Magnificent Hummingbirds providing the majority of the activity. However, close scrutiny of the feeders revealed our main target, the scarce Berylline Hummingbird, which showed intermittently during our time at Kubo and at times performed superbly. Another notable sighting was of a very brief female Blue-throated Hummingbird, which had no sooner arrived than departed. Other species of interest included several gorgeous Black-headed Grosbeak and Western Wood-pewees, which called from the tall canopy during our search for the other key bird at this sight, Flame-coloured Tanager. The tanager had gone quiet since the mid-morning, as we were informed by some other birders who had seen it earlier in the day and so we headed further up the canyon to the Upper Trail car park to enjoy our lunch of Sub-Sandwiches. Exactly how Roy and Linda's lunch ended up concealed under James's coat remains a mystery and between a make shift lunch and the final discovery of the sandwiches some wonderful theories were developed as to the reasoning behind their disappearance. Lunch came to an abrupt end as Caroline rushed up to tell us of Jared's discovery of a Painted Redstart no more than a few metres up the trail. Following a scurry to deposit unfinished lunches and seize optical equipment, everyone was soon assembled and spent several frustrating minutes trying to obtain good views before the bird finally gave itself up to reveal a spectacular combination of simple colours which provided what was surely one of the most eye catching species of the day so far!

Flushed with success we followed the route of the Upper Trail with the target in mind being the Elegant Trogon. We had not ventured more than a few hundred yards when it became obvious that there had been a sighting of some significance made further back down the trail. Rushing back we found Al and Jared unable to believe what they had just seen. I'm sure few will forget Al's discovery of the Black Bear so close to the trail! How unfortunate that it had passed out of view by the time the majority of the group assembled. But it was still a superb sighting and addition to the mammal list. Further up the trail a burst of Pygmy Owl call lured a flock containing several White-breasted Nuthatch, Plumbeous Vireo, Brown Creeper, Bridled Titmice, another Arizona Woodpecker and best of all Dusky-capped Flycatcher, which put in a brief appearance but time for most of the group to obtain good views. Prepared for a long walk for the trogons it came as some relief when James heard one from the exact location we had just been observing the mixed flock. Travelling swiftly up the canyon towards the source of the sound, we were able to pin the bird to a rough locality, although it was still not in view. Deviating slightly from the trail and walking down to the bolder-strewn stream channel the bird was eventually nailed sat high on a horizontal branch close to the trunk of a tall Sycamore. The bird then took off and flew across to our side of the river and so a few of us crossed to the other side from where we were able to get completely uninterrupted views of this stunning bird, which remained on its open perch for a full quarter of an hour, during which time most people joined us and those who remained on the trail also obtained good views if not slightly impeded by foliage. On the descent through Madera Canyon we tried again for the seemingly mythical tanager before being caught by a fairly sharp storm and retreated to the lower elevations into the grassland habitat known as the Florida Wash at the foot of the canyon. Here James soon located several Cassin's Sparrows by song and everyone enjoyed good views as, with a little persuasion the birds sang at close range from a variety of vantage points. Here too, Botteri's Sparrows gave superb views down to ten feet and several

Lillian's Eastern Meadowlarks sang and gave their "quail-like" flight views before a couple perched up and were appreciated by everyone. From here we moved further down to Continental School, a site known to the leaders as being reliable for the localised Rufous-winged Sparrow. It did not disappoint as we enjoyed some superb views of this neat little bird, which was evidently nesting in the vicinity, as the adult birds were carrying back bills full of insects to feed the youngsters. Other highlights at this site included close and prolonged views of Curve-billed Thrasher, which had finally been nailed by everyone, some fantastic Blue Grosbeaks, confiding Canyon Towhees, nesting Hooded Oriole and several chattering Cactus Wrens. A Lucy's Warbler darted across the road from the mesquite scrub and into the tall Cyprus trees at the back of the schoolyard, but could not be relocated. We headed back through Green Valley to our Tucson Motel, before spending a considerable time in the sub-zero temperature of a Denny's diner where we shivered our way through several courses and ultimately the log before heading back to our motel to defrost!

Day 4: We began in similar fashion to the day before, but with the exception of Common Ground-dove being recorded on our patrol of the Motel car park. The Mickey D's car park was on top form from the birding perspective and produced a rather unexpected covey of Gambel's Quail, which were photographed spectacularly by just about everyone! Broad-billed Hummingbird was again noted as were Lesser Goldfinch, several House Finch and the ubiquitous Mourning and White-winged Doves. Fortified by another stunning "Bacon McMuffin" we transferred again to the Madera Canyon observing Cooper's Hawk soaring across a Pecan Grove and Green Heron at the edge of the dry riverbed en route. As we pulled in at the Upper Rita car park a raucous party of Mexican Jays soared across and Roy was eventually able to find a suitably photogenic member of this species. However, the main focus of the exercise was to 'grill' the tanager as we had been tipped off that it had been extremely vocal in the early morning. Everything was much as it had been the day before around Kubo, Acorn Woodpeckers, Western Wood-pewee and then a fine Summer Tanager put in an appearance. A good start, which improved rapidly as a characteristic tanager call was soon heard from the top of Kubo's tallest Sycamore and there, not two metres from the top, sat an iridescent flaming apparition! This fantastic Flame-colored Tanager remained within the Sycamore for a good half-hour during which time everyone one was able to scrutinise it from virtually every possible angle. Coincidental species included several Painted Redstarts, Hepatic Tanager, Summer Tanager, a stunning male Black-headed Grosbeak and scores of Acorn Woodpeckers. The hummingbird feeders again produced Magnificent and the female Blue-throated Hummingbird, which was seen again briefly by the majority of the group. As we descended to the car park a bachelor group of six displaying 'Gould's' Wild Turkeys were observed down to a few feet while an innocent whistle would send them into a synchronised gobbling frenzy! Many of the group just had to try it!

Next, we paid a visit to the Santa Rita lodge feeders, where we enjoyed ice creams and close views of Lesser Goldfinch, House Finch, Black-headed Grosbeak, White-winged Dove, Broad-billed Hummingbird and the dreaded Wild Turkeys! However the real highlights of this stop were the Acorn Woodpeckers with a nest hole in the telegraph post above our seats, the Arizona Alligator-Lizard filmed by Roy and flight views of a soaring Northern Goshawk, a species which is not commonly recorded on the Arizona tour. From here we descended the canyon and returned to the Proctor Road trail where we had searched for Black-capped Gnatcatcher the previous day. Again everyone obtained excellent views of several obliging Bell's Vireos and across the other side of the ford a Greater Roadrunner was located, which was behaving decidedly more as a "Rock Sitter" than its name would suggest. A quick burst of gnatcatcher call captivated the local Bell's Vireos but appeared to be treated with indifference by the target species. That was until a small movement from low down in the scrub brought the attention of one member of the group to a small long tailed bird, which briefly flicked into view revealing the typical black cap, uniformly greyish appearance and distinctive white outer tail of the Black-capped Gnatcatcher before it plunged further down the valley and out of view, in which time Harry was the only one to observe this highly sought after species. All was not lost however, as James, Vaughan and Pete knew of other sites where the species had bred during the year and so could still be in residence. From here we again birded the Florida Wash, where we observed more Cassin's and Botteri's Sparrows, Verdin, both Western and Cassin's Kingbirds and more Lillian's Eastern Meadowlarks as well as Say's Phoebes and the stunning Blue Grosbeak. From here we transferred to the Mexican border town of Nogales, where we checked into our Motel Six at about two in the afternoon.

To maximise chances for the California Gulch target species we decided upon a skirmish around the Kino Springs area as good weather had been forecast for the next few days and there were a plethora of stunning birds to seek out around the pools and the golf complex. Approaching our destination we pulled up at what was usually a small wetland but the pool itself had contained only parched cracked earth. However, a festering feral cat carcass provided extremely close views of Turkey Vultures and our first good sightings of Chihuahuan Raven. The Aspens provided ideal perches for several Red-winged Blackbirds and an unusual thrasher was seen briefly in flight but could not be relocated. All along this stretch there were kingbirds and flycatchers aplenty, with high concentrations of Cassin's Kingbird in particular and smaller numbers of the exotic Vermillion Flycatcher and Western Kingbird. Upon arrival outside the Kino Spring Golf Club the first and highly significant species noted was an adult Gray Hawk perched high in the Aspens across the other side of the small pond. This highly-localised species was greatly appreciated, as it afforded everyone excellent scope views and enabled the majority of people to catch up on this species, which was sighted all too briefly at Roosevelt Lake. The target species of this site was the Tropical Kingbird and so we set about exploring some of the "waste ground" around the complex, which was in fact some extremely "birdy" habitat and promised to produce sightings of the kingbird. Here we noted our first Bronzed Cowbirds leisurely strolling around the tee, while the small reed-fringed pool to our left revealed an interestingly-marked Song Sparrow and the first good views of Common Yellowthroat for most of the group. Although Sora called a couple of times they remained firmly concealed but American Coots were far more obliging. Several smart looking Lark Sparrows sat unconcernedly in the closest bushes and an ant nest or two further along James spotted a Black Phoebe, which occasionally flicked from its post in classic flycatcher style. Scouring the main lake it soon became obvious that hirundines were in great prominence with vast numbers of Barn and Cliff Swallows, before several Northern Rough-winged Swallows were noted. The lake itself revealed our first Mexican Duck and the bushes, which had held the phoebe, produced a

cracking Yellow-billed Cuckoo, which skulked for prolonged periods before giving itself up with several good flight views. Again, watching the lake, a couple of people observed a stunning male Painted Bunting as it flew across the lake and disappeared into some tall "seedy" vegetation, where, with some patience, it was relocated feeding along the large seed heads and was joined by a female. This species is considered to be a state rarity and so photographic evidence of this discovery was essential when deciding to submit the record (although one could hardly mistake such a gaudy looking bird!). From this unexpected sighting we advanced further along the path to a raised area which made a large "set-aside field" the focus of our attention. From here Abert's Towhee was soon noted and two Yellow-billed Cuckoos were seen extremely closely in flight before a sizable covey of Gambel's Quail were noted strutting along the furrowed ground on the periphery of the field. As previously discussed, this area was something of an "ant haven" which was summed up by John's spectacular leap to safety as several of the creatures in question decided to nibble at his ankles leaving us in no doubt that further progress was going to be made difficult (and potentially fairly painful!) So we decided that the best way to search for the Tropical Kingbird was along our original route and were instantly rewarded by flight views of Common Ground-dove (although Vaughan was left greatly wishing for Ruddy Ground-dove, which would have been a new bird for his US list!). Yellow-breasted Chat again showed very briefly but eluded many of those still needing acceptable views, The Painted Bunting was stalked by a feral cat but fortunately managed to elude capture, while a retiring Green Heron was observed by Roy and Linda. Jared relocated the Gray Hawk, which returned to its favoured stand of Aspens and again showed nicely. Several Blue Grosbeaks diverted our attentions before an unsociable Yellow Warbler put in a brief appearance. Checking further kingbirds en route we returned to Nogales to reflect on the day's events and to enjoy a meal at the local Italian Restaurant!

Day 5: With a number of key birds holding "make or break" status during the course of the day and the fine weather holding for our trip into California Gulch it was imperative that we focused on nailing as many of the key species as possible. On our way to the Patagonia Lake state park we saw our first American Black Vultures sat on telegraph wires just above our heads and several Loggerhead Shrikes were also noted en route. We kept a look out for Montezuma Quail along the winding road to the Patagonia Lake, as this had been an area where the leaders had observed this species previously, but on this occasion we were unable to locate any.

On reaching Patagonia Lake State Park we began birding around the car park, which produced several Verdin and small party of highly vocal Bell's Vireos before James picked out the call of our priority species in this area of the park, the Northern Beardless-tyrannulet. This species is highly responsive to tape and after no more than a second this tiny little flycatcher whizzed into view and perched intrigued, not six feet above our heads! Continuing along we observed several Bewick's Wrens before a Greater Roadrunner justified its title by speeding along the tarmac. We headed a short distance along the trail, during which time a few Blue Grosbeak were noted and we began scouring the lake itself, where Neotropic Cormorant, Great Blue Heron and Mexican Duck were soon added to the day's list. Taking the descending trail into the denser mesquite scrub habitat we again began our search for the Black-capped Gnatcatcher. Listening constantly for its mewing call we were rewarded with several good views of Bewick's Wren and Bell's Vireo before a stunning Summer Tanager put in an appearance. Along the left hand fork of the trail was some decidedly more marshy habitat where we heard several Soras, located several American Coots and Mallard sbefore we again heard the strange call of Yellow-billed Cuckoo, which remained well concealed for a while but most of the group were able to obtain some views of this bird. Another species proving to be something of a nemesis to some of the group was the Yellow-breasted Chat which mewed loudly and with a little persuasion showed in the open on several occasions, allowing everyone to at last grill this skulking individual. In a more open grazed area surrounded by willow several cracking Vermillion Flycatchers were seen and another Arizona Coral Snake weaved its way through the thick grass. From here we hacked our way through the spiny mesquite to reach a high vantage point from where we could search for the gnatcatcher and although Caroline spotted something which looked alarmingly like our target species, it could not be relocated. However adequate compensation was provided by an obliging Lucy's Warbler, which despite remaining fairly stationary for a prolonged period was not located in a position conducive to easy viewing and so not everyone was able to come to terms with this sometimes tricky little wood warbler. The highlight of our return trip was a small feeding flock comprising at least five Bell's Vireos and a family party of very showy Summer Tanagers, before the Roadrunner put in another appearance scooting along the scorching tarmac in front of us.

rom here we transferred to the fabled Patagonia Roadside Rest Area, where we were able to get superb views of the famous Thick-billed Kingbirds. Andy then spotted our first White-throated Swifts soaring high above the towering rock face. With lunch and dinner organised (as we would be out to an unsociable hour searching for night birds) we began our assault on the route to California Gulch along the Ruby Road. The weather had held and the beautiful scenery could be appreciated with the fine vistas of rolling hills and vast arid scrub, which contrasted strongly with the lush grasslands interspersed with fine oak woodland along the gullies and extending up the hillsides. This area, we had been informed was prime Montezuma Quail habitat, and we had travelled perhaps twelve miles along the bumpy track when we encountered a truly phenomenal sight, a pair of Montezuma Quail feeding at their leisure in the taller roadside grass. Here they remained for several minutes during which time everyone was able to obtain highly acceptable views of this wonderful little bird, before they nonchalantly potted across the road right in front of us, stopping occasionally if something was to their interest, before strolling up the steep bank on the other side of the road and disappearing into the dense vegetation. A little further it got even better with another, pair of quail being flushed from the grass where they promptly disappeared, but then inexplicably flew back across the road providing excellent views in a more sparsely vegetated area of ground. From here we headed for the "gulch track proper" where after several bone jarring turns and the exciting fording of several mercifully shallow river crossings Andy located a pair of Killdeer striding across the rutted swampy ground. This area being a hotspot for illegal immigration, we were tailed by the border patrol for sometime before they addressed us briefly concerning our intentions. Upon discovering exactly what these were they drove away shaking their heads in disbelief and looking utterly bewildered! Several steep climbs later we arrived at the notorious California Gulch, whose lack of

accessibility has broken the heart of many a keen birder! From here we embarked on a fairly steep descent into the canyon along a small rocky trail. There were Varied Buntings aplenty looking highly spectacular in stunning light. But the real star here was the much sought after Five-striped Sparrow, which could be heard as soon as we descended and was spotted superbly by Chris. This charismatic little sparrow took some time for the entire group to see well, as the site where they were usually seen best was in shade, and so the birds had located further up the hillside. However everyone did eventually obtain stunning views of this extremely localised species and during our search, another pair of Montezuma Quail showed to extraordinary range as they wandered the trail just a few yards ahead of us. During our ascent of the canyon trail several of the group in the lower reaches of the canyon received close flight views of Sharp-shinned Hawk as it skimmed low across the stunning arid hillside, bathed in the last of the tangerine light. Returning to the top, we transferred to a slightly lower elevation to target the Buff-collared Nightjar, an exceptionally rare breeding species within the United States. As the sunset we stood quietly listening for the bizarre calls of the nightjar and enjoying our supper of Sub-Sandwiches. Unfortunately it appeared that the nightjars had either left the area or simply stopped calling, as we heard none during our search of the canyon. We had not been overly optimistic about our chances, as we had been informed that they had not been heard for over a fortnight, but that was no reason to stop us trying as any variable could have been responsible for their recent lack of vocalisation. Although probably the most plausible explanation was that they were no longer holding territory as the breeding season had finished. However it was not long before a large shape was observed atop a small bush on the darkening hillside. Scoping the shape revealed a huge powerful night bird, a cracking Great Horned Owl, which was observed by most people before plunging from its perch and sweeping across the blackened hillsides. Another distant Great Horned Owl then put in an appearance sitting silhouetted on a tall bush on the ridge. Good numbers of Common Poorwill began to give their echoing calls but despite a stunningly clear sky, totally unspoiled by artificial light pollution none could be located, Although Western Pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus hesperus*) and Big Brown Bat were noted. Western Screech-owl soon began to give its “pooping” call and with some impressive imitation the bird was coaxed into a position conducive to observation, where we were able to spot light it, affording everyone excellent views of this species. This rounded off what had been a fantastic day, reflecting perfectly, the concept of target birding but combining it with far more as well. Diversity, close views and breath-taking scenery—exactly what the birder and indeed, all round naturalist appreciates most highly. Our return through the gulch produced several more calling Common Poorwills, although they remained distant despite brief attempts to lure them into more open habitat. Another Great Horned Owl was spotted sat high upon a tall Guava, which sat temporarily bemused by the glow of the headlights before soaring away across the valley. Border Patrol were again keen to ensure we were not Mexican overshoots and asked us (almost pleading that we wouldn't) if we would be returning at any other time during our stay, which we informed them we would not, having nailed all the key species the area could realistically provide. Back on firm tarmac after the twenty-eight or so miles across along the Gulch road we began our way back to Nogales along the Ruby Road, several small rodents scurried across the road in front of us, whose tiny little frames could be seen fleeing from our approaching vehicle. Just a few hundred yards along we slowed down as the eye shine of a much larger creature was spotted in the headlights, initially expecting a prowling feral cat we were stunned to observe an extremely rare and unusual mammal. Decidedly feline, with short stunted legs, “squashed” looking face and overall rufous colouration and longish tail in comparison to the size of the animal. It was the rufous form of Jaguarundi (*Herpailurus yaguarondi*)! A real scarcity for Arizona and indeed for North America, north of the Mexican border, except for Southern Texas where Bentson State Park receives records on a virtually annual basis. Interestingly while most of the group's attention was drawn to this creature another Jaguarundi was observed sneaking away into the long grass by Jayne, which suggests that the species may potentially have bred in the area! From the perspective of rarity this species was unquestionably the scarcest noted on the tour and was to be considered one of the many highlights! With a very late finish and the day's spectacular finale, it is unsurprising that most enjoyed an undisturbed night's sleep!

Day 6: We loaded the vans and departed from our Nogales motel, heading again for the Patagonia Roadside Rest Area, where we had another chance of Black-capped Gnatcatcher. Despite much searching, we were unable to locate this seemingly mythical species. We were however, rewarded with excellent views of several Bridled Titmice, which called from the tops of some tall trees across the road before another cracking Yellow-breasted Chat mewed from the denser undergrowth and with some persuasion was brought briefly into view.

From here we transferred to Paton's Yard, where the riverbed was again mercifully dry allowing us access to the site. Here we set up our scopes in the small viewing area around the feeders and sat comfortably in the shade waiting for our target species to appear. The feeders were alive with House Finches and Lesser Goldfinch. Black-headed Grosbeak appeared frequently and a pair of highly vocal Canyon Towhees frequented the roof of the residence alongside Northern Cardinal and numerous White-winged and Mourning Doves. The star attractions of Paton's Yard are its hummingbird feeders and they certainly lived up to their billing, with vast numbers of Broad-billed of every plumage variation imaginable. Black-chinned and most importantly, the highly-localised and very beautiful Violet-crowned Hummingbird, which showed exceptionally well, though its presence was far from constant. With patience however, everyone was afforded superb views by this superb little hummer. A smart Gray Hawk soared over the yard, surveying the scene with obvious contempt and promptly vanished behind the tallest trees. On leaving Paton's, Ken located an obliging Thick-billed Kingbird which could prove very approachable, allowing several of the group to enjoy excellent studies of this scarce bird. From here we hit the road again, our eventual aim being the small town of Benson, not more than twenty minutes from Sierra Vista. En route however, there were a number of extremely diverse “birdy” areas, which would potentially add numerous target species to the checklist. We found a suitable area in the Sonoita Grasslands, which was little more than a lay-by, but provided some really good birding. Other than ornithological interest there were several Pronghorn's (*Antilocarpa americana*) wandering nervously across the vast plains in front of us. Here we observed many singing Cassin's Sparrows, several stunning Blue Grosbeaks, American Kestrel hovering above a distant farmstead, and singing Lillian's Eastern Meadowlark perching up and providing excellent viewing. So did a number of Horned Larks, which seemed extremely out of place in the sweltering heat of south-east Arizona! Far removed by colouration and location to those one could expect on a bitter

mid-winter visit to the shingle beaches of Norfolk! The birding was brought to an abrupt end by a distant whirring and a frantic call of "bees!" As everyone "hit-the-dirt" a swarm of Africanised bees passed just a few feet over our heads. Allowing the bees to become nothing more than a wisp of dark cloud in the distance, we continued birding and were rewarded with some initially distant sightings of Grasshopper Sparrow, before a small burst of tape provided some much more acceptable views of this subtly-plumaged sparrow.

From here we headed for Sierra Vista making an unplanned stop for a trio of Swainson's Hawks soaring remarkably close along the side of the road. After enjoying a fortifying meal at Wendy's in Sierra Vista, we headed for the famous Beatty's Yard with high anticipation, as this place, we were assured, was *the* place for hummers and with White-eared being seen regularly we felt duty bound to give this gorgeous little hummer our attention. Upon arrival at Beatty's, activity was intense and we obtained our first acceptable views of the stunning Anna's Hummingbird at the small feeder outside the gift shop. From here we progressed through a sizable fruit orchard, across a small bridge and ascended to the main hummingbird feeder site. Settling on to the comfortable seating we began our vigil of the feeders and surrounding area. The site was thick with hummers! The distinctive whizzing of the Broad-tailed immediately caught our attention and several of these smart looking birds fed intermittently on the nearest feeders. Broad-billed Hummingbirds were abundant, with every well-marked female being thoroughly checked for White-eared. Anna's and Black-chinned hummers were seen well, and we were able to observe a vast array of plumage variation within each species. This gave us an appreciation of just how difficult the identification of hummingbirds can be!

After a while however, it was possible to sort out virtually all of the hummers frequenting the feeders, which was a great exercise for the group and allowed them to begin to confidently identify species in transitional plumages and establish some of their common call notes. It wasn't long before a pair of the huge and truly striking Magnificent Hummingbirds appeared, buzzing around the feeders and simply dwarfing even the largest of the other species. Unfortunately the White-eared did not put in an appearance during our visit. However, we were to have further opportunities to revisit this site and so decided to leave the Miller Canyon in order to try and nail our final target species of the day, the Lucifer Hummingbird. On our way out John located a Western Spotted Skunk corpse wedged high in the fork of a tree as though it had been dragged there by a large predator, (perhaps Cougar), although this may have been wishful thinking! We transferred the few miles to Ash Canyon where we observed several nery Coue's White-tailed Deer, which bolted away from the advancing vehicles across the pasture beyond.

We then headed for the Lucifer site. The guides paid our entrance fees and we began scouring the five or so feeders. The birds had been seen fairly consistently at around half past five so we were in plenty of time and sat in comfortable wicker chairs scanning the feeders. The first new species we encountered was a vibrant male Rufous Hummingbird, spotted by Vaughan, as it arrived on Feeder E before visiting virtually all the feeders, affording everyone good views. The next occurrence of note was the arrival of a calling party of some fifteen Bushtits, which worked their noisy way through the tall tree to which the feeders were attached. At least six boisterous Mexican Jays put in appearance, while House Finches visited the seed feeders before three more Wild Turkeys strolled nonchalantly across the yard. Suddenly, a call from the other end of the row of seats caught our attention as a female Lucifer Hummingbird darted in and out of view before coming to settle on the nearest feeder for several seconds, before working to the next, then remaining clearly visible for several minutes perched high upon the Guava previously occupied by the Mexican Jays, before zipping away over the wall. Ten minutes or so passed with little activity before Andy spotted a sleek small hummer atop the large tree with a superb violaceous gorget and oddly decurved bill, it was a magnificent male Lucifer, which put in only a short shift before promptly disappearing. During this time both Peter and Caroline also noted an extremely smart looking male Costa's Hummingbird. From here we headed off to our Benson Motel to freshen up before returning to The Golden Coral, the diner at Sierra Vista, which would soon receive legendary status. Here we enjoyed a substantial buffet meal (Jared ambitiously indulged in his avowed intent to sample everything available!) before transferring back to our motel for a good night's rest.

Day 7: The group was split into two for the day, as it was not possible for the entire group to access Fort Huachuca at a single time due to military restrictions. James and Pete took the first group over to the fort's main gate to meet our ex-military guide Ted, while Vaughan took the rest over to Wilcox Lake to look for shorebirds. Completing the necessary forms we were soon on our way through the military complex and heading for the canyons, with a few Coue's White-tailed Deer being noted as well as numerous kingbirds, several Lark Sparrows, Blue Grosbeak, singing Cassin's Sparrows and Lillian's Eastern Meadow Larks on our way through the well preserved pastures. Upon reaching the base of the canyon several Acorn Woodpeckers became apparent and a number of Western Wood-pewees were noted at the rest room stop during our ascent. Meanwhile Vaughan's group were enjoying close views of literally hundreds of Wilson's Phalaropes, with some maintaining their fine summer plumage, as well as at least ten Baird's and over a dozen Least Sandpipers. Two cracking adult Western Sandpipers were recorded and a pair of superb summer-plumaged Stilt Sandpipers were observed, an extremely good state record for Arizona. Several of the group were able to obtain views of Scaled Quail before these smart little game birds disappeared into the Sagebrush. While American Coot, Killdeer and some moulting Cinnamon Teal were to be expected, American White Pelican certainly was not and the group enjoyed watching this huge and confused bird paddling around in the centre of the lake, surrounded by at least four Redheads in eclipse.

Back with the other group, we had reached the Scheelite Canyon Trail, which we began to ascend eagerly, anticipating the prospect of locating the canyon's famous Spotted Owl. Although the quantity of birds was not drastically high during our walk the quality certainly was! The climb passed through some truly beautiful scenery, with bolder strewn streams cutting down through the canyon, verdant broad-leaved trees all around and spectacular rock faces on both sides. The rock faces echoing the descending whistles of the Canyon Wrens. Spotted Towhees sang from concealed locations, before a family group was spotted

(excuse the pun!) not far from the trail. Hutton's and Plumbeous Vireos called frequently but in this dense habitat it was difficult to observe these birds, although a number of Painted Redstarts were more conspicuous. Ascending the canyon, we located a stunning Splendid Royal Moth, which we photographed profusely. From here the habitat changed fractionally with the broadleaved trees becoming interspersed with coniferous pines which, Ted assured us, were favoured roosting spots of the Spotted Owl and that we should check each one as we headed up the trail. Reaching an area where the trail branched into two, we took the right fork in order to check some of the more reliable sights, although no one had seen the owl for almost a month, so we were not highly optimistic. From this more open position we heard distant phrases sounding suspiciously like Red-faced Warbler and some intensive scanning produced brief views of this stunning species to a couple of people, during which time Plumbeous Vireos were noted and a subtly-plumaged Hutton's Vireo appeared, proceeding to land in the pine above us. An *Empidonax* flicked into view and sat on a horizontal branch, providing our first views of the Cordilleran Flycatcher, which then gave its distinctive call clinching its ID, although Pacific-slope would have been highly unlikely in this habitat. Steller's Jay called raucously but could not be seen. Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler gave brief audience as well as a pair of Painted Redstarts before John discovered what was arguably the best bird seen in this small area, a fine Grace's Warbler, flicking its way through the highest part of the pine above. Ted had tried the likely sites further up this prong of the trail and there was no sign of the owl, so we focused our efforts on the left-hand fork, but not before observing a pair of Painted Redstarts entering a nest. Perhaps 200 yards along the left hand trail, Ted stated that the last time he had seen the owl it had been roosting in the deciduous trees not ten feet off the ground, and that he should really check the place just to make sure. What a good decision then, as no sooner had decided upon this strategy it than he spotted it not ten metres from the path and we were able to observe this bird ludicrously closely as it blinked sleepily back at us, blissfully unconcerned by our presence. Elated by our success, especially after almost a full month without a sighting, we began to descend the canyon, Jared and John adding several species to the dragonfly and butterfly lists before we were brought to a halt by a call from the back of the group. A large amount of earth was being hurled out of what was seemingly a small burrow right by the path and as we watched a tiny Botta's Pocket-Gopher poked its inquisitive little face out of the earth. Assessing correctly that there was no danger it persisted with its tunnelling project, but not before John had obtained some super pictures of this friendly little critter. On the return journey we also noted a highly spectacular Tiger Moth species amongst the leaf litter, which Ted had only seen once before and had no idea of its name. Fortunately Jared did some scouring of available literature and was able to identify this Mexican overshoot as a Northern Giant Flag Moth, *Dysschema howardi*, a fine moth and a fitting end to what could be considered a superb all round natural history walk, which had also produced a number of excellent target bird species. From here we left Fort Huachuca military base, reuniting briefly with Vaughan and the others whilst they picked up Ted and prepared to enter the canyon. We headed off for a Subway lunch, where we received high fives all round from a giant Sub-Sandwich, which was attempting to draw customers by performing on the roadside!

From here we headed for Ramsey Canyon, to enjoy more hummers and hopefully add some new birds to the list. We set up, observing the hummingbird feeders behind the gift store, the information board indicated that a number of good hummer species had been noted here, including regular Blue-throated, a species of which we were still keen to obtain good views. The feeders delivered! The first birds were the typical Anna's, Black-chinned, Broad-billed and occasional Broad-tailed hummers, but as we watched, a fine Magnificent Hummingbird put in an appearance and a gorgeous Violet-crowned soon followed. It was then that a resplendent male Blue-throated Hummingbird appeared on the farthest feeder and remained there long enough for everyone to get good views and for many to 'scope. A female Blue-throated soon gave away its presence with the characteristic shrill squeak, before paying a visit to several of the feeders in which time John and Harry observed a very brief male Costa's on the closest feeder. We had been informed that the feeders at the small accommodation just down from the visitor centre had been visited reliably by Berylline Hummingbird. We were more than keen to repeat our observation of this enigmatic little bird, but unfortunately it did not appear during our stay, though we did have a vast array of hummingbirds to look at including a pairs of Magnificent and Blue-throated, large numbers of Black-chinned, Anna's, Broad-tailed and Broad-billed. Other birds, which kept us amused included the cryptically-plumaged Brown Creeper, White-breasted Nuthatch and several noisy Acorn Woodpeckers. At this point we met with two birders, who were searching for the Blue-throats. They kindly informed us that they had just seen the White-eared Hummingbird over in Miller Canyon at Beatty's Yard. So it was there we went next and we were soon up by the hummingbird feeders, having just spoken to another group who had gained crippling views of the White-eared as well as a male Calliope. Twenty minutes or so passed with an increasing level of activity, the numbers of hummers were vastly more impressive than they had been the previous afternoon and the variety was far greater. Blue-throated, several Magnificent, a pristine Violet-crowned within touching distance, plus the constant whizzing of "clouds" of Broad-tailed, huge numbers of Anna's and Black-chinned as well. But the main problem were the Broad-billed, so great in number and plumage variation, that any number of them could be taken for female White-eared from some of the fleeting views we received. After about half an hour however, we were eventually treated to a marvellous display from our target species. The White-eared appeared seemingly from nowhere and then continued to feed, sitting on feeder six for a remarkable length of time, before retreating to a small bush, so close we literally had to move back to focus our optics on this super little bird. Pete was particularly pleased with this, as he was able to obtain some excellent photos of the bird on a natural perch. We deduced that it had been sat concealed within this bush during the past half hour and that it had never actually left the area since the other group had seen it. Flushed with success, we put in an unsuccessful stint searching for the Calliope, but James and Pete were confident we would have much better opportunities for this species later in the trip. Descending the trail we headed back through the orchard. Looking up through the canyon and over the ridges there was an impression of an almost mist-like quality to the air. Closer inspection with the bins revealed this to be festoons of large and spectacular dragonflies, hawking across the valley and providing a quite remarkable sight in truly stunning surroundings. From here we set off to rendezvous with Vaughan's group at the fabled "Golden Corral", where Jared was found to be once again in top form! The other group spent the afternoon birding the canyons of Fort Huachuca, where they successfully nailed the

Spotted Owl, Spotted Towhee, Cordilleran Flycatcher, Plumbeous Vireo, Hutton's Vireo, Steller's Jay and Painted Redstart. However they were unable to locate the Red-faced or Grace's Warblers we had seen earlier.

An afternoon trip into the Sawmill Canyon added some excellent birds to the tally, with the colonial-nesting Buff-breasted Flycatcher being seen well, a species whose range within the US has reduced significantly, and so is now a speciality of the pine covered mountains and canyons of south-east Arizona. An early Cassin's Vireo was an extremely good find and the group enjoyed some good views of this subtly-plumaged bird as it flicked through the foliage. American Robins were observed in some numbers, as well as numerous Western Wood-pewees, but the Greater Pewee was neither heard nor seen. Eastern Bluebird was seen well although the Olive-sided Flycatchers remained quiet. The group were also treated to prolonged views of Dusky-capped Flycatcher, which can sometimes be problematic. Once everyone had dined (Jared taking full advantage of the time between the groups arriving to build on his already formidable record!) we headed back to Miller Canyon to search for owls. First we stopped in some grassy habitat interspersed with trees for Common Poorwill, but despite some intense listening we were not rewarded with a response. Further up the canyon we tried the "pooping" calls of Whiskered Screech-owl, receiving a distant response. We then tried for Elf Owl, and who knows? There may have been a response although the echo on the tape provided some confusion. Further down the road there was a closer pair of Whiskered Screech-owls calling and with some gentle persuasion and some excellent spotlighting from James, we obtained some superb views of this bemused little owl, blinking down from a roadside tree. Several Western Screech-owls gave their distinctive calls, which echoed through the Canyon before we tried some more open habitat at the foot of the canyon for Elf Owl. Though we were unsuccessful in luring this tiny little owl we were able to spotlight a Black-tailed Rattlesnake as it slithered its way through the dry grass by the roadside. So concluded an extremely productive day's (and night's!) birding with a trip back to Benson before crashing down for the night.

Day 8: The morning brought more fine weather, so we decided to take this opportunity and head out for the Chiricahua Mountains, which would offer our only chance for the localised Mexican Chickadee. We birded the Fort Bowie Road en route passing through some truly spectacular scenery and noting the classic soaring "TVs", Red-tailed and Swainson's Hawks. We spent a few minutes birding at one of the rest room stops. This provided several Verdins and we witnessed some bizarre flocking behaviour being displayed by in excess of fifteen Northern Mockingbirds. Whether or not this was evidence of short range or even altitudinal migration is unclear, though it made for decidedly interesting observation. From here we transferred across true mesquite scrub habitat and pulled onto a small track opposite an extensive pecan grove. The first species of note was an Ash-throated Flycatcher sitting up high. James played Bendire's Thrasher song across a highly suitable looking patch of mesquite but received the characteristic response of Crissal, which popped up onto a tall strand of mesquite and sat calling for several minutes, before flying away across the small track and up onto a telegraph wire right above Sveta's head! The thrasher was then promptly joined by another and the pair dropped down and skulked low in the scrub but with a persuasion continued to show intermittently. During this time a pair of noisy Ladder-backed Woodpeckers also showed very well and a number of both Western and Cassin's Kingbirds surveyed us with polite interest from the telegraph wires above. Black-throated Sparrows were observed in some numbers and a gleaming Blue Grosbeak was spotted atop a distant shrub. Delighted with the thrasher sighting we pressed on, this species is notoriously difficult during the summer months and the level of responsiveness to the tape was most irregular. Vaughan was particularly pleased, as this was only the second time he had ever observed this scarce and smartly-plumaged bird.

Next we headed off again observing numerous Lillian's Eastern Meadow Larks, American Kestrels, Loggerhead Shrikes and Lark Sparrows in the grasslands at the base of the Chiricahuas. From here we headed for the Pinery Canyon Picnic Ground and were soon out birding the immediate area, where we quickly recorded Brown Creeper, Steller's Jay and White-breasted Nuthatch. Our main target in this area however was the Yellow-eyed Junco. A smart little sparrow with a range limited to the south-east of Arizona in the US. It was not long before we were enjoying some fine views of this little bird as it hopped across a small stream and along the bank carpeted with pine needles. The other significant species recorded here was Cordilleran Flycatcher and we observed these birds for some time as they gave their distinctive calls and hunted from exposed posts in classic *Empidonax* fashion.

From here we took the vehicles and headed further up the canyon road. A sudden stop was made when a feeding flock were heard right above our vehicles and we jumped out hopeful to connect with our target bird the Mexican Chickadee. Sifting through the flock we grilled many a White-breasted Nuthatch, a very brief Black-throated Gray Warbler, at least half a dozen Bridled Titmice and a couple of Brown Creepers. Al and John then located a chickadee though unfortunately it was so brief that many of the group were unable to pick up on it. Our intention was to head up to the Barfoot Junction as this area of relatively open and viewable habitat also provided a splendid place to enjoy our Subway lunches. Looking across at truly wonderful scenery we enjoyed a highly productive hour or so birding the area around the Junction itself. Large numbers of Pygmy Nuthatch were present and these afforded some excellent views, while Steller's Jays were extremely numerous and Chipping Sparrow was noted. A ludicrously confiding Yellow-eyed Junco hopped around at our feet and a couple of Band-tailed Pigeons were seen in flight. Surveying the view below Vaughan heard the "kip, kip" of Red Crossbill and quickly located the bird as one sat atop a small dead pine below us, where several of the group got good views before it plunged out of sight. James spotted a very dark looking Swainson's Hawk before a distant Olive Warbler was heard.

Now we drove further along the road, where a fine Hermit Thrush foraged along the rutted fringes of the track and finding a suitable parking place we headed back to relocate this bird. This stretch proved to be highly productive with Northern Flicker, Brown Creeper and both Pygmy and White-breasted Nuthatch being noted before a tiny movement lower down the slope drew our attention to a House Wren. A Hairy Woodpecker then called and glided into view and began working the moss-covered trunks of the ancient pines. Meanwhile James had been playing the strange calls of Red-breasted Nuthatch, which was unable to

suppress its' curiosity and we were treated to great views of half a dozen of these chirpy little birds. A Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler was observed briefly by some of the group but we abandoned the search when a chattering flock of chickadees flew right into the trees above us and we were all treated to fine views of our target species. We tried several times for Mountain Pygmy-owl during our time in the Chiricuhuas and although the lure provided marvellous opportunities to observe mixed flocks we were unable to stir an owl into some form of response. Still this species was only ever an outside chance so we pressed on to more realistic goals.

We returned to the Barfoot Junction, where we stood surveying the area hopeful that we would perhaps observe a soaring Short-tailed Hawk. We were not in luck here but we did have excellent views of Zone-tailed Hawk and James put the group on to a Peregrine that swooped purposefully across the canyon soon vanishing behind the distant hillside. Vaughan soon radioed through that he had located an Olive Warbler, so we rushed across the road to join him. The bird was elusive during its stay and we watched it briefly before having to wait for further movement expecting the warbler to reappear. However what did show was most unexpected. A first year Hermit Warbler popped into view from the area where the Olive Warbler had been seen. No sooner had this bird appeared than it also disappeared. Mercifully the female Olive Warbler, which we had initially been observing, was relocated and remained in the area for some time gleaning spiderlings from the needled branches of the pines in front of us. Unfortunately though, it infrequently showed clearly enough for everyone to gain satisfactory views before it flicked away over the pines and was lost to view. Returning to our raptor watching we were rewarded with several Canyon Towhees and a gaudy Rufous Hummingbird before deciding to call it a day and descend the mountain track once more from where we were provided with some exceptional views of a pair of Cooper's Hawks perched by the roadside, before they took off and soared around right above our heads! On our way back through the grasslands we pulled off the road and jumped out to view a slovenly rattlesnake which James had somehow managed to avoid crushing, when the vehicle had gone straight over it as it lay basking on the warm tarmac. Its credentials however were never fully established, as it appeared to show the tail bands of Western Diamond-backed, but its unusual golden-olive tone made for inconclusive identification.

We headed through some classic western American towns, with the whistles of *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* ringing in our ears and our eyes focusing on wires and posts searching unsuccessfully for Harris's Hawk. The route to White Water Draw across open, dry grassland habitat provided some excellent sightings of Scaled Quail with one oddly positioned atop a telegraph pole, providing a non-typical silhouette. The White Water Draw itself produced large numbers of Black-throated Sparrows and several Curve-billed Thrashers. But the mesquite interspersed with lower growing shrubs seemed ideal for Bendire's and it was soon proved to be just that! A distant bird was spotted and we were all afforded increasingly excellent views of this usually highly skulking species as the group advanced upon it. Several Blue Grosbeaks and Lillian's Eastern Meadowlarks were noted while James found a covey of Gambel's Quail quietly feeding their way along the fringes of a cultivated field. The lake itself was not in best light by the time we arrived, although we were able to make out several Killdeer, Black-necked Stilt and several Spotted Sandpipers as well as several Mallards and American Coot. The best find here was a distant Great Horned Owl, found by James, which sat in the shaded rafters of a distant barn. From here we decided to head back as the sun had all but set and the only real potential candidate to add to the list was Barn Owl and we still had a long drive back. We drove back in the darkness through the historic town of Tombstone and upon reaching Benson headed straight off to Denny's for our evening meal, where we completed our checklists, polished off our comestibles and located a truly impressive Rhinoceros Beetle on the curb just outside the door before heading to the motel with another great day's birding under our belts.

Day 9: The day began with a hearty breakfast in Benson's MacDonald's before we headed for Carr Canyon on the other side of Sierra Vista. Here we took the steep track and parked in one of the canyon's campsites for a brief rest room stop, as the breakfast of McMuffin's and milkshake had proved rather a challenge for some to keep down when climbing the steep bumpy trail by vehicle! We found this campsite to be a particularly birdy area, with Northern (Red-shafted) Flicker being noted along with large numbers of American Robins and Steller's Jays. We found several smart Buff-breasted Flycatchers flicking around in the low bushes giving excellent close views, which delighted those who had not visited the Sawmill Canyon. Jared then located a Hermit Thrush picking its way delicately across the carpet of pine needles. Vaughan had wandered ahead to identify a small wood warbler, which kept flicking tantalisingly out of view. He eventually managed to pin it down and our first Virginia's Warbler was noted, although this particularly elusive individual disappeared before many of the group could observe it. Here too several Western Wood-pewees were present and a burst of tape lured a Greater Pewee into a brief flyover, before being lost behind the tall pines. Deciding that we had better move, as we had far more reliable sites for the pewee, we attempted to entice a small feeding flock into view on our way back to the vehicles and were rewarded with good views of a smart Black-throated Gray Warbler, Hutton's and Plumbeous Vireos, Painted Redstart and Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler. The next location decidedly further along the canyon, gave some staggering panoramic views and by watching the slopes we soon located several Western Scrub-jays, Acorn Woodpeckers and Western Wood-pewees. The Greater Pewee was still proving problematic. Much scouring of dead pines revealed nothing except American Robins. Stepping round the corner however, James located one of these highly-prized birds perched on a horizontal branch above the trail, which showed for a prolonged period before flicking back into some taller pines. Whilst attempting to relocate the pewee we also noted another cracking Buff-breasted Flycatcher and Sveta briefly observed an interesting wood warbler before it disappeared down the slope. Whilst watching the flycatcher, another small warbler appeared low down in the same bush and it continued to show well for some time. With a modicum of patience everyone was treated to superb views of Virginia's Warbler, a species which, at this time of year, is highly unpredictable and so we were delighted to add it to the tally.

We headed deeper into the pines along a side trail and another Virginia's Warbler was spotted flicking high in the canopy before plunging low into some distant bushes. A small movement revealed the first of several Brown Creepers and White-breasted

Nuthatch was also noted before a single Pygmy Nuthatch was observed, which in itself was quite an unusual sighting. Odder still was the feeding gait of a juvenile Western Bluebird, which scuttled across a fallen log and then flew high into a tall pine where it was joined by a vibrant adult bird. The find of the excursion into Carr Canyon was undoubtedly Jared's superb Short-tailed Hawk which soared across the mercifully clear sky. Despite being stood beneath tall trees we were all able to gain superb looks at this extremely rare bird and James got some excellent photo's using his perfected technique of digi-binning! From here we headed back to Sierra Vista where James phoned in our sighting of Short-tailed Hawk, which is considered not only a state rarity but also a real rarity within the US. Schlotzsky's Sandwich Bar was the site of our lunchtime meal on Harry's recommendation, but we all saw the disappointment in Jared's face at the concept of a lost opportunity to conquer the Golden Corral menu once and for all!

From here we headed back to Ramsey Canyon, hoping to re-find the Blue-throated Hummingbirds seen on our previous trip, as some members of the group, who had visited Sawmill Canyon, were yet to have satisfactory views of this species. We arrived at the visitor centre and were amazed to find a vast array of huge and spectacular moth species resting around the building lights. Several of these species were excellently identified by Jared and John, who managed to obtain some relevant literature in the visitor centre itself, which revealed the two star species to be the hugely impressive Glover's Silk Moth and a Big Poplar Sphinx. We were fortunate enough to find the Blue-throated Hummingbirds again as well as another cracking Violet-crowned hummer, with the added bonus of further Magnificent and large numbers of Broad-billed, Broad-tailed, Black-chinned and Anna's thrown in for good measure! A short walk up the canyon was arranged, as there had been a brief sighting of White-eared Hummingbird earlier in the day. Although we were unsuccessful in locating the White-eared, we did see several White-tailed Deer extremely close to the trail as well as Brown Creeper, Mexican Jay, White-breasted Nuthatch, numerous Acorn Woodpeckers and several spectacular looking Painted Redstarts. Descending the canyon and returning to the vehicles we took a democratic vote on the next location, the general consensus being that people were more than happy with their hummingbird lists and were keen to try a different habitat which may produce some different species and for some potential lifers. Leaving Ramsey Canyon we headed for the approach road to the Coronado National Monument, which provided some nice semi-cultivated grassland habitat in which White-tailed Kite had been seen on previous tours. This area provided excellent views of both Western and Cassin's Kingbirds, a number of Blue Grosbeaks and significant numbers of Lillian's Eastern Meadowlarks. From here we could also view the huge fence lining the border with the Mexican province of Sonora. Jared located a Northern Harrier quartering over distant fields and James was able to entice a Grasshopper Sparrow into full view so that everyone finally achieved good scope views of this bird. A female Bullock's Oriole was noted and several American Kestrels were also seen but we were unable to locate any White-tailed Kites. From here we headed back into Sierra Vista and paid our final visit to the veritable Mecca that was the Golden Corral, where, somewhat anticlimactically, Jared informed us he was not all that hungry, before shovelling down another six plates of Golden cuisine and finally achieving his goal!

With it becoming a case of last chance saloon as far as Common Poorwill and Elf Owl were concerned, we felt duty bound to give them our best shot and headed for the Joe French Canyon on our return route to Benson. To say that the accessibility of the canyon was slightly problematic was something of an understatement, but it was not long before we were out and listening as James' van had caught a pair of Common Poorwill in the headlights as they flushed from the stony trail ahead. A short time was spent calling and listening before the two birds flew back across and we were able to get some nice flight views as James followed their course with the spotlight. The intensity of the darkness out in the mesquite was truly amazing as the stars seemed to literally rain down on us despite the proximity to major settlement and the expected effect of artificial light, which was somehow lost just a few hundred yards from the main road. Leaving the canyon was even more logistically complex than entering, as there were few, if any, suitable turning places. Several tense minutes followed of delicate reversing over treacherous boulders in the darkness and wielding of flashlights, interspersed with calls of "steady!" But eventually the vehicles were expertly manoeuvred out of the canyon and back onto the tarmac. We tried a metalled road up to a picnic site, which looked ideal for the Elf Owl and indulged upon a lengthy and attentive wander in the darkness playing and listening for a response but sadly none came. With the prospect of a long journey the following day we headed back to the motel, delighted with the number of quality additions we had made to our growing checklists during the day, but with a tinge of sadness that we would be leaving the exotic birding of the south east behind.

Day 10: The day began with a fairly rapid departure from Benson, as we had a large distance to cover and a variety of sites to try en route. Our first port of call was the St David Road, which was to provide our only opportunity for Mississippi Kite. The first birds to appear were large numbers of Cassin's and Western Kingbirds, but despite much searching we were unable to locate any Tropical Kingbirds amongst them. Several smart Vermillion Flycatchers kept us entertained while Verdin chipped from the bushes. Raptors were at first fairly distant, with numerous "TV's" being noted before our first Mississippi Kites were located, gliding along the distant tree line. Fortunately they then began to appear in considerable numbers and much closer to hand with one individual passing right over the road from which we were viewing. A small long-tailed bird perched high on an exposed post (much to the disgust of the Vermillion Flycatcher!) was quickly identified as a Black-tailed Gnatcatcher and some people were able to enjoy brief scope views of this bird before it dropped from its perch and vanished from view. This incidentally, was the only sighting of this species during our time in Arizona and had the bird known this to be the case it would surely have behaved far more sociably!

Moving on we headed for the Wilcox Twin Lakes, stopping en route for an imperious Harris's Hawk, surveying the land below from a roadside telegraph post, this was an excellent addition as it has a highly-localised distribution within Arizona and is far from reliable. Reaching Wilcox, the temperature was decidedly warmer than it had been back in Sierra Vista and the morning's birding also seemed to be really hotting up! Jared's wish to see Wilson's Phalarope was very much granted as there were easily five hundred of these tiny waders "spin-feeding" in the shallower reaches of the lake. Here too the famous American White

Pelican was located and as Pete put it, it was indeed a “whole one!”, a full adult bird that looked severely out of place. We began scanning the shoreline and soon located more shorebirds (surprisingly enough...). Significant numbers of Baird’s Sandpipers were noted with at least twelve individuals being present. The three Western Sandpipers of the previous trip were still around and these showed nicely the majority of the time. In excess of twenty Least Sandpipers were noted including several on small scrapes surrounding the main lakes. Six Killdeers were recorded and three very approachable Long-billed Dowitchers were in residence alongside a remaining Stilt Sandpiper, which still retained its summer plumage. At least four eclipse Redheads dozed in the centre of the main lake and several Ruddy Ducks and American Coots were also present. Spotted Sandpipers bobbed their way along the shoreline and three Black-necked Stilts fed nonchalantly whilst a couple of Eared Grebes surfaced from time to time. The grassland habitat beyond the pools provided further sightings of Horned Larks and large numbers of meadowlarks. Jared and John had located several Cinnamon Teals on the other significant pool. We headed off back round the track in the vehicles and parked by the trail leading to the pool in question. Upon arrival a pair of adult Black-crowned Night-herons put in an appearance, followed by a juvenile, which skulked around the marshy fringe of the pool for some time before retiring to an exposed wooden perch. The Cinnamon Teals were feeding unconcernedly in the top right hand corner of the pool and a Mexican Duck was also present, showing great disdain for the Mallard, which were feeding in loose association with this bird. The small swampy pool on the other side of the track produced several singing Sora but none could be seen, so we decided to change vantage point. No sooner had we done so than a Pied-billed Grebe was spotted and decided to play the role of a submarine, with just the head periscoping inquisitively interestedly in our direction as James managed lure it down to a couple of feet with the tape. A Sora was then observed briefly under the overhanging branches of a tall willow, but with the presence of exceptionally loud, large and brightly adorned golfers just across the pond there was little hope of its reappearance!

Highly satisfied that everyone who had not made the previous visit had caught up with virtually all the birds present we began our long journey to the White Mountains. Stopping briefly at the Safford MacDonald’s we scoffed lunch and watched as the giant L.E.D screen revealed a temperature of ninety-nine Fahrenheit, which sadly never reached one hundred during the time we watched, much to our disappointment! From here we headed north through some genuinely breath-taking scenery, before reaching a vast area of tin and copper mining, where the American corporations proved only too strongly that they do nothing in moderation with a vast mountainous area being simply “torn out by the roots!” Fortunately, after perhaps forty minutes, we were out of this somewhat depressing locality and on our way into the coniferous forests of the Apache National Forest. With the winding road totally devoid of other traffic we were able to appreciate the “best of Arizona” in a panorama of spectacular views across the seemingly endless lands below. The sense of vast open spaciousness that the US provides was tangible, when presented with such dramatic, and truly awe-inspiring scenery. As we stared across the plains below to the incalculably distant rocky peaks silhouetted along the horizon, the line “There’s Indians in them there hills” entered my mind and left me truly believing that we were experiencing the very best of the Wild West. Perhaps fitting then that our next stop was in keeping with the classic Western theme, a beautiful Black-tailed Rattlesnake spread casually along the tarmac of the road ahead. Here we were able to photograph this creature as it retreated rattling its tail in warning. Obviously the inspiration was not mutual! A brief rest room stop provided a chance to stretch our legs and enjoy the tranquil scenery, although the only birds of note here were Spotted Towhees and a distant Western Scrub-jay. We continued our journey until we entered the White Mountains, where the coniferous forests were much denser and alpine flora became prominent. Now in suitable habitat we were keeping our eyes peeled for Clark’s Nutcracker sat atop any of the roadside pines, but a brief stop in a small picnic site revealed only Western Bluebirds. It appeared that quite extensive damage had been caused by fire, as large swathes of forest had adopted highly unnatural-looking charred trunks and bronzy-rufous needles – evidently trees not in best health! The recovery was quite amazing however as even as we travelled we discerned new branches and green needles sprouting from the seemingly lifeless trees. Fortunately we soon returned to more pristine habitat where we again began scouring for the nutcrackers. We soon reached an area, which had previously fallen victim to fire but had begun to regenerate. An area of lifeless and comparatively sparsely distributed trees had allowed the formation of an alpine meadow. Quite a change from the deserts of the south east and far removed from the average perception of the Arizona climate, it was cold! Being on “nutcracker finding mode” meant that we were closely checking any distant silhouettes for this smart American corvid. Pulling over and scooping a candidate we found it to be an American Robin and there were numerous Northern Flickers working the trunks of some of the taller dead pines on top of the ridge. Despite the decidedly cool temperature and light drizzle we soon added another target species, with James luring in a small party of Mountain Chickadees, which buzzed from some low saplings on the slope below and afforded everyone good views of this smart member of the Paridae genus. A little further along, in another open field, we observed in excess of fifty American Crows, the first sighting of this species during the trip, although it would become an extremely familiar sight over the course of the next few days. Moving on we came to an area where regeneration of fire-damaged forest was in still very much in progress, with numerous dead trees standing amongst the re-growing alpine meadow and providing a sense that this area needed more time to be productive. How wrong this perception was however as the birding was something else! Vast numbers of Violet-green Swallows were taking advantage of the available perches provided by the bleached branches of the dead pines. Here too were a number of Western Bluebirds and everyone finally achieved good views of a couple of the Audubon’s form of Yellow-rumped Warbler, as well as our first ‘Gray-headed’ Dark-eyed Juncos, which were extremely common in this area. Several Northern Flickers appeared but James then heard a distant Williamson’s Sapsucker, which after several minutes of searching was brilliantly spotted by Al, as it climbed the trunk of a particularly rufous pine, which served as an ideal point of reference. This was a terrific find and a really smart bird, which showed very well for some time before flying out of the clearing and into the deeper forest beyond. We then heard drumming from across the road and a pair of Hairy Woodpeckers, were soon located while a female Western Tanager showed well. Another woodpecker was then spotted by Harry, assuming it was one of the Hairy Woodpeckers but closer inspection revealed it to be one of our target birds for the White Mountains, American Three-toed Woodpecker, which showed extremely well before dropping onto a pine lower down the slope where it was joined by another four! A party consisting of a male bird, a female and three juveniles diligently worked the branches and trunk of this particular pine for several minutes affording everyone exceptional scope views.

A bonus as this species is usually extremely tricky. From here we pressed on as we still had some distance to cover, we were very much in Dusky Grouse habitat by now and our attentions turned to scouring the forest floor as we drove along. A party of ten Elk entertained us during the journey but we were unsuccessful in locating any Clark's Nutcrackers.

We arrived in Springerville just as the sun was setting and received only a half-light impression of the surrounding habitat, before the glorious sunset died behind the distant ridge and we checked into our hotel just as the last of the days natural light died. A quick shower and down to dinner. As the drivers were tired after such a long journey it was essential that we managed to eat swiftly and get some rest. We enjoyed a meal in the restaurant right outside our hotel and tried valiantly to complete the log whilst being serenaded by Johnnie Cash from the back room!

Day 11: Our plan for the morning was to explore the South Fork area where a number of our White Mountain target species could be located. The South Fork Road was something in itself and the surrounding countryside could have easily been taken for areas of continental Europe, perhaps Switzerland, with its extensive flower-filled alpine meadows surrounded by coniferous forest. The birds certainly seemed to like it and it was not long before we made an unscheduled stop for a first year Mountain Bluebird, blissfully unconcerned sat on the telegraph wires running closest to the road. Here too were several Say's Phoebes and large numbers of Western Kingbirds and the attractive Lark Sparrow. We then took a side road and began to leave the main road behind. Here we found several hunting American Kestrels, more Say's Phoebes, a family of Mountain Bluebirds amidst large numbers of Western, which included a stunning adult male bird and our first Western Meadowlarks, as they whizzed low across the tall grass, before finding suitable perches on distant low growing shrubs.

From here we headed for a small picnic site, from where it was possible to walk a portion of the South Fork Trail. The area had previously produced Gray Jay so we were hopeful that this species may put in an appearance. The first species to draw our attention here were several 'Gray-headed' Dark-eyed Juncos, but within a short time a smart Red-faced Warbler had been located flitting through the pines, although it was some time before everyone eventually managed to obtain satisfactory views of this highly-attractive bird. In an attempt to draw the Red-faced in, James played the monotonous calls of Northern Pygmy-owl, which successfully interested the bird as well as creating an agitated flock of mixed species. This flock contained several White-breasted Nuthatches as well as half a dozen Pygmy Nuthatches, Brown Creeper, a couple of Western Wood-pewees and in excess of ten excitable Mountain Chickadees, which were responsible for the majority of the buzzing issuing from the surrounding foliage. From here we progressed further up the South Fork Trail and Vaughan soon located a smart MacGillivray's Warbler, which was only seen extremely briefly and despite much searching could not be relocated. The habitat was perfect however, with low growing bushes surrounding a well-developed stream and this made one feel reasonably confident that we would locate another at some point. The next bird of significance was an extremely obliging Clark's Nutcracker, which descended from high on the pine clad ridge to peer curiously down from a dead branch not more than thirty yards ahead of us. As the bird departed, giving its wonderfully subtle and distinctive call, it was joined by a second and they were soon lost to view. Some distance further along we came to an abrupt stop when James heard a distant Townsend's Solitaire. With a little persuasion this subtly-plumaged bird was coaxed into a suitable viewing position atop a tall dead pine just across the stream, affording excellent views to everyone. A short walk round the corner brought us to the edge of a clearing and here we observed numerous Western Wood-pewees, before a juvenile Hepatic Tanager put in an appearance. This bird initially seemed quite unusual and close scrutiny led to the discovery of another major target species, a smart Olive-sided Flycatcher, which sat not three feet from the Hepatic Tanager on a dead fork in the tree and sallied for insects before darting away into the forest. The primary target remaining was Red-naped Sapsucker and we spent some considerable time attempting to locate this highly-sought-after species. During our vigil we noted at least three Williamson's Sapsuckers, with an adult male and female bird being noted, before a first year male was located across the stream working along one of the closest pines. Here we had further remarkable fortune with American Three-toed Woodpecker, which we located as result of a Williamson's flying across and joining a party of four of these birds working the trunk some half way up one of the closest pines on our side of the stream. Flushed with success, but still missing the sapsucker, we headed back along the trail, spotting 'Gray-headed' Dark-eyed Junco and a perched American Kestrel on the return journey.

We returned to the campsite, where we observed a couple of Steller's Jays moving surprisingly stealthily through the high branches of some nearby pines before we headed back to Springerville for lunch. En route, we birded the grassy alpine habitat and were rewarded with large numbers of Say's Phoebes, Lark Sparrows and a pair of Rock Wrens on the road out from South Fork. We also enjoyed crippling views of a juvenile Red-tailed Hawk, which had perched in a low growing tree only a few metres above our heads! It took several deviations onto minor roads and much scouring of potential perches before we managed to obtain good views of a close Western Meadowlark. We were also keeping an eye out for Lazuli Bunting, a species to be expected, but by no means guaranteed and to accentuate this premise they continued to elude us despite several excellent views of more Western and Mountain Bluebirds.

We soon descended on the Springerville Subway, where Jared had his photograph taken next to one of the Subway posters, which featured his name and a once extremely sizable man, who had supposedly slimmed on Subway food! Eating swiftly we headed outside to find a number of Common Ravens giving their raucous calls from the top of some tall aspens across the road from our parking lot. From here we pressed on, the weather seemed to be steadily worsening, so we decided to try a small site called the Sipe Wildlife Management Area, which local information indicated had been fairly consistent in attracting Calliope Hummingbirds to the feeders outside the visitor centre.

The drive to Sipe seemed to take a considerable amount of time, along a fairly uneven track, which we would probably not have bothered to explore had we not been able obtain the local information regarding the area's potential. The approach road offered

the usual Western Kingbirds, a few Western Meadowlarks, good numbers of Lark Sparrows and several Western Bluebirds. Nearing the centre however, the small ponds provided several Mallards and a smart Black Phoebe sallied for insects from a stunted willow overhanging the far side of the weedy pool. The small visitor centre was surrounded by hummingbird feeders and it was these which we were monitoring particularly vigilantly, hoping to locate the recently reported Calliope Hummingbirds. The hummingbird activity was nothing short of spectacular, particularly around the feeders just outside the visitor centre entrance. Almost all of the frenzied activity was caused by the Rufous Hummingbirds, which, were adorned with virtually every plumage variation imaginable, were a constant presence, while Broad-tailed and a single Black-chinned were also noted. The dominant Rufous Hummingbirds seemed to be preventing a deal of other species from accessing the feeders and it seemed unlikely that the Calliope would visit. Fortunately though there were numerous other interesting species to be found around the dusty road from the centre, along and beyond an old farm building. Here we had some superb views of half a dozen Pine Siskins, which showed just a few metres away on the seed feeders. Here too were good numbers of American Robins, striding nonchalantly across the sandy road in front of us, while several inquisitive Chipping Sparrows fed unconcernedly as we strolled across the car park. Several Say's Phoebes were perched up along the fence line, which bordered some nearby open fields and here too was a stunning male Western Tanager, which positively glowed in the bright sunlight. Our first really *blue* Mountain Bluebird was located amongst large numbers of extremely confiding Westerns. A local birder told us that we should check the hummingbird feeders in the front yard of a nearby house. His description of "clouds of hummers" was extremely accurate, with large numbers of Rufous and a couple of Black-chinned being present. Some small shrubs revealed a party of juvenile Audubon's Warblers and after some intensive searching a stunning male Calliope Hummingbird was located on the left-hand feeder. The Calliope with its distinctive "shaggy" gorget returned to pay brief visits for the next ten minutes or so, during which time we all enjoyed some fine views of this wonderful little hummer.

A meteorological degree was not necessary to assess the outcome of the ominously black clouds rolling in from over a distant ridge. We soon retired to the vehicles in the hope of reaching Alpine before the bulk of the poor weather arrived. A brief search for a Green-tailed Towhee was brought to an abrupt end owing to a sudden crash of thunder and the first spots of rain. This prompted a frantic rush across the meadow back to the vehicles, as the weather began to take a decided turn for the worse. From here we drove towards Nelson Reservoir and a brief stop revealed little except a fly over Osprey, as the weather was not conducive to scouring the reeds for the tiny movement of a Virginia Rail or scrutinising distant ducks. We headed on and mercifully the weather began to improve. We made a short stop at Alpine Lake where several Ruddy Ducks and at least 60 Canada Geese were noted grazing in the fields. Our first Brewers Blackbirds were observed feeding around the raised bank of the lake. A pair of Spotted Sandpipers whizzed across and several American Coots were present. A female Wood Duck was located, though certainly not the most thrillingly-plumaged bird, it was another addition to our checklist and a lifer for a few members of the group. Fine views of a perched American Kestrel were appreciated, before the bird sailed over the embankment of the lake and disappeared from view. Another successful stop en route and plenty still to come, we decided to push on to Lunar Lake, where we were assured that the "hummingbird experience" would be truly spectacular. First of all though there was the lake itself, which had potential to add plenty of new species to the checklist. Another cracking male Western Tanager was located in a low growing shrub by the entrance to the car park and several people took the opportunity to photograph this extremely confiding bird. Scouring the reeds across on the far side of the lake, we soon found several female Yellow-headed Blackbirds, which kept disappearing into the taller reeds and proved a challenge for everyone to achieve satisfactory views. The lake was also full of wildfowl, with large numbers of Ruddy Duck, Mallard and Northern Shoveler, which could have been taken for a very modest days tally at English reservoir! However, Double-crested Cormorant and a pair of American Wigeons were soon located on the far shore, while large numbers of Green-winged Teals were noted before three Blue-winged Teal were spotted on the far bank. A Sora scuttled tantalisingly across the mud, but again eluded the majority, before a fairly uninspiring, eclipse Ring-necked Duck was identified as it bobbed across in front of several Pied-billed Grebes. Eared Grebes were present in extremely good numbers, with over thirty being recorded. Our wildfowl list was starting to become fairly impressive by this point and it was not long before we had made another addition with Jared's discovery of a Lesser Scaup. Half a dozen Cinnamon Teals were present and an Osprey flew low across the water seizing a fish in its talons before gliding away over the pines. Possibly the most impressive "non-hummingbird-related sighting" at Luna Lake was the appearance of a fine adult Bald Eagle, which soared straight across the water and perched in full view atop one of the dead pines on the other side of the road, from where it surveyed its surroundings with a decidedly imperious air. I'm sure no one was offended by this attitude as we all achieved superb scope views of this majestic creature. A rather interesting find, quite apart from the excellent birds on offer, was a small inquisitive creature with bright eyes and a bushy tail (insert your own jokes here!); it was a Golden-mantled Ground-squirrel, a stunningly patterned and decidedly cute addition to the mammals list, which simply didn't seem to grasp the concept of "fear of man" and provided a quite memorable performance, including sitting, starring straight into the lens of Pete's camera!

From here we made a very short journey to the fabled Lunar Lake Hummingbird Feeders, and they really did live up to all our expectations! To say there were clouds of Rufous Hummingbirds would be a decided understatement. There were flocks of these gorgeous little hummers alongside the occasional Anna's and Black-chinned. In excess of eighty Rufous Hummingbirds were present and despite a highly-focused search we were unable to pull any Allen's Hummers from the frenzy! What we were treated to however was a spectacular, if not intermittent performance by both male and female Calliope Hummingbirds, which capped off arguably one of the most memorable spectacles of the entire tour. Another highly auspicious sighting was of an adult Eared Grebe carrying a single tiny chick on its back, before the second adult came across to feed the youngster not more than ten feet out from the shoreline. Time was pushing on and we still needed to try for one of the most sought-after White Mountain birds, the Lewis's Woodpecker. A brief snack stop in Alpine itself, James had informed us, could easily provide sightings of this bizarre species, as they had previously frequented telegraph poles around the town! We enjoyed our snacks along with some fine views of some inquisitive Brewer's Blackbirds before James called us over. We rushed across the gas station to find him pointing

to a nearby telegraph pole right outside the local school (lucky young birders!) where arguably the most peculiar of the North American woodpeckers lethargically worked one side of the pole and then the next before flying over the school building and landing a couple of streets down the road. Fortunately the openness of the town made the bird reasonably straightforward to follow and we enjoyed phenomenal views before it was joined by another and then another. This was becoming somewhat unbelievable as a further five Lewis's soon appeared bringing the number of birds present to eight! These birds remained for perhaps a quarter of an hour, with some showing extremely well and others intermittently, before the whole lot took off in their corvid-like flight and disappeared into the forest. A truly marvellous target bird under our belts we began to head back, paying a short visit to Nelson Reservoir en route. The reservoir was far more productive this time, with over one hundred and twenty Violet-green Swallows hawking insects low across the water, mixed in with Barn Swallows and Northern Rough-wings. Several eclipse Redheads were present and another group of half a dozen Cinnamon Teals were discovered, before five Gadwalls were added to our substantial wildfowl list, and another female Wood Duck was located drifting stealthily amongst the reeds alongside a number of Ruddy Ducks. At least ten Common Nighthawks appeared swooping and twisting across the surrounding area in the late evening sunshine and displaying their subtle plumage features as they darted just a few feet above our heads. A Great Blue Heron was noted drifting across the lake, before fading light and a desire for food finally ended our days birding. We returned to the hotel for a quick change of clothes and a wash and then returned to our faithful restaurant, where we were able to reflect on another highly diverse and successful days birding, with large numbers of new and target species being added. We were treated to another sterling performance from Johnny Cash in the room opposite before retiring for a well-deserved night's sleep.

Day 12: The day began with the loading of the vehicles. Packed and ready, to go we prepared to head out to Greer to do some target birding during the morning. The first bird of note was a fly over Band-tailed Pigeon, noted above the hotel car park and the usual White-winged Doves and Brewer's Blackbirds were also in attendance before we headed for Greer. The Greer area was truly beautiful, with small wooden alpine chalets surrounded by meadow and coniferous forest. Our destination was the most reliable site available for American Dipper, but during the busy summer months our odds seemed only even of coming across one. The stream seemed quiet enough upon arrival and the habitat perfect. Ever alert we were also listening for a variety of smaller birds and it was not long before Vaughan discovered a Red-faced Warbler flicking through the middle of a tall spruce. The bird then flew lower down and continued to show intermittently. Then came calls from John and Jared They had wandered a little downstream and had discovered an American Dipper feeding along the edge of a fallen log, which had caused a diversion in the course of the stream. A juvenile bird with a pale bill and generally lead grey plumage tones, slightly untidy scaling and a hint of olive to the grey. All these features could be easily appreciated as the bird simply sat and fed only looking up casually to peer at the clicking cameras. It then took off and whizzed back up stream to the point from which we had been watching the Red-faced Warbler and continued to show for another ten minutes or so before zipping away upstream and out of sight. An excellent target bird under our belts we concentrated our search for the more typical White Mountain species. Andy noticed a small movement in a low fir and another cracking Red-faced Warbler put in an appearance, while a Bewick's Wren worked the higher branches of a neighbouring tree. Andy then spotted another small movement in some low growing riverside vegetation. A small beady eye with greyish head and the faintest trace of an eye crescent, it was a first year MacGillivray's Warbler! The bird showed well for only about forty five seconds before plunging back into the vegetation. From this point we took a brief walk, which produced a family party of Bewick's Wrens including young being fed. Several Mountain Chickadee's buzzed from the pines and a number of Pygmy and White-breasted Nuthatches put in an appearance. A party of Steller's Jays were seen in flight and a Hairy Woodpecker was also noted before a female Williamson's Sapsucker was located and we enjoyed some crippling views of this bird as it progressively worked several of the closest tree trunks. There was a small feeding flock, which passed through, containing reasonable numbers of Plumbeous Vireos, Audubon's Warblers and a very obliging Black-throated Gray Warbler, which gave an excellent show. Several American Robins put in brief appearances, soaring high over the tall pines.

Although the quality of birds was excellent, it seemed we had all but cleaned up on the species in the immediate vicinity. James and Vaughan knew of an area, which had previously produced Dusky Grouse amongst others, so we decided to transfer to this site, making a brief stop en route. The stop in question was exceptionally productive. Feeders, for both hummingbirds and other species, had been placed outside one of the wooden chalets and a whole host of bird activity was being generated by the opportunity of an easy meal. Several Steller's Jays gave exceptionally close views, and we were then visited by the occupant, who kindly allowed us onto the property to watch the hummingbird feeders as well. He had told us that the "snowbirds" were his favourites and that he was used to seeing them much further north. The snowbirds, it turned out, were the hugely impressive Clark's Nutcrackers and as we watched, a pair of these terrific looking corvids descended on the peanuts left out for them. A Hairy Woodpecker was caught stealing sugary refreshment from the hummingbird feeders while the property owner explained that this didn't bother him half so much as when the bears dislodged the feeders entirely! The hummingbirds present were diverse and numerous. Again good numbers of the gorgeous Rufous were present alongside several Black-chinned and then a huge Magnificent Hummer came, in casting the other birds in its shadow. The real star however was another stunning male Calliope, whose distinctively striated gorget stood out in the strong sunlight and we were treated to a truly spectacular show by this tiny little bird. Thanking the property owner profusely and explaining ourselves to several utterly confused looking locals, we headed out for the site where Dusky Grouse had previously been recorded. Upon arrival a couple of Western Wood-pewees put in an appearance as we overlooked the tangle of dense vegetation below us from the advantageous viewpoint provided by the roads' route along an elevated embankment. Ken then had brief views of a Gray Catbird, which flicked into view before plunging deep into the undergrowth. An *Empidonax* flycatcher was then observed sallying for insects from a prominent post and was critically analysed for some time before James identified the bird as Dusky Flycatcher. A few minutes later it was joined by a second bird and the two chased and weaved through the tallest extremities of the scrub below, providing some fine viewing opportunities. A high pitched squeaking from high in a nearby pine revealed Ruby-crowned Kinglet, which proved difficult to see for much of the time. James then played the tape for Red-naped Sapsucker, as this was one of our remaining White Mountains target birds. The

response was distant at first, but with a little persuasion the bird began to draw in closer. The bird was spotted climbing the trunk of a distant pine and then working around a twisted knot in a horizontal branch where many people enjoyed scope views of what turned out to be a male in cracking plumage! With more persuasion the bird drew in ever closer, to the point where it was no more than twenty feet away, in full view on a dead trunk, from where it looked around suspiciously before being joined, as if from nowhere, by a female bird. The two then flew up into the pine, which had held the kinglet and proved, from several angles, to be just as difficult. However, the pair then flew back, briefly revisiting their previous perch, before plunging away into the forest. There were high-fives all round as we acknowledged our success with this highly-prized creature, before continuing to bird the area, confident that we could locate more of our quarry. A small movement on the fringe of the willow thicket below provided another small and subtly plumaged *Empidonax* flycatcher and though the sighting was only brief, James was able to identify this as a Pacific-slope Flycatcher. Another fine addition to the checklist and one whose identification is always a real challenge! We had particularly good fun at the expense of the poor flycatcher's name and Margaret and Harry never did quite decide whether "Specific-Sloth Flycatcher" was regional variation of Pacific-slope, or in fact a full species! Jared then located another Ruby-crowned Kinglet whilst a Gray Catbird mewed from the dense thicket but could not be located. However, one species which we had been unable to nail due to the adverse weather conditions of the previous day, put on a tremendous show: Green-tailed Towhee was grilled by everyone, as it sat on a nearby log from where it called with seemingly endless enthusiasm.

Deciding that Dusky Grouse was really a very long shot, as it had not even been reported by locals for some time, we headed back to Springerville to have our lunch. En route however we came across some swampy ponds surrounded by small willows. Here a Belted Kingfisher was spotted as it whizzed across the road in front of us, coming to rest on an ideal perch on the far side of one of the pools. A quick stop allowed us all to gain some fine views of this spectacular kingfisher, whilst more concerted searching of the willows surrounding the pools, produced several good birds. Al located a fine Song Sparrow, right down at the base of one of the shrubs, feeding along the fringes of the pool. Several Western Wood-pewees and Western Bluebirds were noted before yet another *Empidonax* flycatcher was located, this one being a Willow Flycatcher, a reasonably smart looking species, which was previously lumped with Alder under the name Traill's Flycatcher, although the bird didn't seem too concerned with its past history, as it snatched flies from the surface of the pool. A small movement in the bottom of the willow turned out to be another Green-tailed Towhee and a smaller and indeed altogether less brightly-plumaged apparition proved to be a western Orange-crowned Warbler. Whether it impressed many is questionable, although it was our only sighting of the species during our time in Arizona and so this maybe improved our impressions of the bird, decidedly mundane though it was by American wood warbler standards! A lunch of Sub sandwiches to be eaten-on-the-move and we were off.

Leaving the White Mountains behind we headed for Flagstaff via a couple of reasonably well known national parks! The change in scenery was dramatic. From alpine meadows and pine covered slopes, with Western Bluebirds, Western Meadowlarks, Say's Phoebes and American Crows dominating the roadside avifauna, to the classic west, with dry arid terrain complete with low growing sage scrub, craggy ridges and wide horizons (not yet complete with sunset, as it was just gone midday!) where Turkey Vultures, kingbirds and Black-throated Sparrows took over as the most frequent sightings. After about an hour and a quarter we arrived at the Petrified Forest, a site that the group were keen to explore. We first paid a short visit to the gift shop where many of us purchased cut pieces of petrified wood, which had fortunately been collected from private land and not the national park itself! Outback, several of the group were birding and James wandered into the shop to tell us that there was a Gray Flycatcher on show, "if anyone was interested". They certainly were! We collected our 'scopes and hurried over to find that the bird had disappeared into a thick patch of mesquite. With a little patience however, it soon reappeared and provided some fine viewing opportunities perching motionless on the outermost extremities of the bushes. This was a superb sighting, as last year's group had failed to connect with this species at all. A small covey of Scaled Quail were then located, with an adult and three juveniles popping up onto a petrified log surrounded by dry grass, to stare around inquisitively at the familiar calls issuing from the trusty Radio Shack speaker.

From here we headed for the entrance to the national park where we were granted entrance following a lengthy discussion with the "lady on the door". We began to drive slowly through the park and soon appreciated the scale and sheer dramatic beauty of this almost Martian landscape. Once inside the park we paid a quarter of an hour visit to the Visitor Centre at Long Logs, where several people were able to purchase souvenirs and others wandered around the trails examining the Petrified Forest. The only bird sightings here were of a Rock Wren, concealed inside the hollow centre of one of the petrified logs, which was sheltering from the midday sun and a couple of cracking Black-throated Gray Warblers flitting around the only bushes in the area. From here we progressed into the park, stopping at several locations including the Crystal Forest, where the preserved wood was especially impressive.

We also paid a visit to Newspaper Rock to admire the petroglyphs and here we also noted several American Kestrels, which we checked for Prairie Falcon, as well as a couple of Red-tailed Hawks. Then we headed into the Painted Desert, surely one of the most stunning and recognisable of the North American geographical features. A truly wonderful place, with open horizons and spectacular rock formations. We stopped at several of the viewpoints and this area provided some decent birds. Nizhoni Point produced good numbers of Black-throated Sparrows, which were scrutinised to ensure there were no Sage Sparrows lurking in the scrub, but this would in truth, have been a most unexpected discovery so we were not surprised that none were present. We then stopped to enjoy the views from Pintado Point, from where we were able to overlook the rugged wilderness beyond. A small movement in the scrub down in the gully below produced yet another *Empidonax* flycatcher. After several minutes of scrutiny we were able to obtain sufficient views to identify it as another Gray Flycatcher and welcomed another opportunity to study this potentially tricky species. Just before reaching the "Entrance Station" (ironic as we were leaving the complex) we discovered a sizable pair of ears poking from some nearby shrubbery. These were connected to a decidedly nervous Black-tailed Jackrabbit,

which soon bounded out of site and into the nearest available cover. The entrance station was to provide a rest room stop and an opportunity to stock up on food as we would not reach Flagstaff until late and we would probably need something to sustain us in the meantime. The short break however was soon to become decidedly longer! Vaughan had been for a wander around the waste ground at the back of the centre and witnessed a considerable fall, with over fifty Bullock's Orioles descending on some nearby bushes. Unfortunately, by the time the group had reassembled the vast majority of these birds had moved on, with only perhaps a dozen lingering in the area. A brief Lucy's Warbler was noted seeking refuge in some nearby scrub before a cracking male Western Tanager sat right on the edge of the concrete-fringed pool in the middle of the centre's courtyard. Deciding that this had sufficient promise to warrant further investigation, we headed for the waste ground around the back of the centre and discovered another pair of Gray Flycatchers, which whizzed from bush to bush before being hustled from their perches by a Black-headed Grosbeak. There were a small number of trees within the complex and we turned our attention to these hoping to locate a few more note-worthy passerines. We were rewarded with a very yellow Yellow Warbler, which moved quickly through one of the nearest trees. Several Brown-headed Cowbirds were also noted before a Warbling Vireo was located, as it worked the tops of a pair of sizable nearby trees. Another Yellow Warbler was observed at the very far end of the complex, where it showed briefly but extremely nicely before plunging away and out of sight behind a ten-foot concrete wall!

The light was beginning to fade, and feeling that we had intercepted the majority of the remaining birds in the area, we began to head back to the vehicles, being harassed by biting winged insects and stepping through mine fields of ants in the fading light. We were soon on the road again and with some distance to go we experienced an horrendous downpour. We just about regained the light we lost to the storm clouds, when the sun finally set and we were left to travel the last stint of the journey in the dark. Arriving in Flagstaff we followed a complicated route, through town, over town and under town but with some extremely sharp navigation we passed the fabled Red Lobster restaurant before arriving at our Motel Six. Once the usual formalities were completed we were able to wash and change before winding up at Wendy's for our evening meal, as the Pizza Hut we had all agreed upon decided to stop serving early, when it saw a party of seventeen descend on its clearly understaffed premises. We ate quickly and returned to the motel with the mouth-watering prospect of visiting the Grand Canyon the next morning.

Day 13: The day began with a breakfast beneath the "Golden Arches" in Flagstaff before heading off towards the Grand Canyon. En route however, there were a couple of areas we intended to try for some of the remaining target species. First up was a visit to Red Mountain Trail Head where we made a concerted effort to locate Juniper Titmouse. The area was also a potential site for Pinyon Jay, so we were particularly vigilant in checking all distant, large-sized birds. In this way we soon located several Western Scrub-jays, with John being particularly attuned to these distant corvid sized birds. We also enjoyed further views of a pair of Clark's Nutcrackers, which were a really good find. The smaller birds were represented predominately by Lark Sparrows, easily the most common species in the area. Three Red Crossbills were noted flying over, before our persistence with the titmouse eventually paid off. At least fifteen of these inquisitive little creatures were seen as a party descended on the nearby juniper bushes, how appropriate!! This was particularly satisfying for Andy who was able to add another of this family to his life list. To him the Paridae hold a special significance, as he was responsible for producing the text concerning this genus for the *Handbook of the Birds of the World*.

Following this success we headed back to the vehicles this feeling positive. James spotted a distant Townsend's Solitaire, which proved to be a highly scopable individual. A couple of Common Nighthawks were also located before a distant falcon was spotted. Scoping this bird as it soared across the distant skyline it was soon identified as Prairie Falcon. Although the views were brief, most of the group were able to observe the brown tones of the back and a peregrine like structure before it was lost to our view over the distant trees. From here the group divided. Those who had decided to take the scenic flight over the Grand Canyon would head off with James and Pete, while those content to view from the safety of the ground would explore the canyon rim in the hope of finding the legendary California Condors, as well as a host of more familiar bird species. James' group then headed off to book their flights for later in the morning, while Vaughan and Pete's group enjoyed some time birding along the canyon.

Having booked our trip and been fortunate enough to all fit onto a single flight, we decided to spend an hour birding in the Kaibab National Park. Here we located a smart Audubon's Warbler, which became progressively more dishevelled as it bathed in a small puddle in the centre of the road. 'Gray-headed' Dark-eyed Juncos were decidedly numerous here, foraging amongst the pine needles, whilst American Robins also hopped along beneath the pines. Several smart Steller's Jays were noted and a couple of buzzing parties of Mountain Chickadees put in an appearance, before a cracking Ash-throated Flycatcher was observed at extremely close range. Checking our watches we decided that we had better head back to the airport to ensure we arrived in time for our flight with Grand Canyon Airlines.

Half an hour later we boarded the aircraft, but not before posing for a quick snap of the group alongside a mysteriously unnoticed pilot, who attached himself to the line up without any of us noticing! From here we enjoyed a truly fabulous fifty-minute tour over the Grand Canyon. Looking down to the Colorado River we could appreciate the true scale of this remarkable landform. As we headed over the pine woods on the rim of the canyon Harry spotted a Black Bear, but unfortunately we passed over it too quickly to enable people to locate this impressive creature as it wandered between the pines below. We made our return to the airport after making several passes over the canyon and concluded the experience by purchasing the available photos, which showed the "flying team" in all its glory! We then headed off for the Canyon Rim in order to rendezvous with the other group and hopefully observe some of the area's California Condors. In our absence, the other group had been birding the Canyon rim and had seen plenty of Black-throated Gray Warblers, 'Gray-headed' Dark-eyed Juncos and Western Scrub-jays, a party of at least fifteen Bushtit, Rock Wren and Warbling Vireo. They had also had exceptional views of at least five California Condors, some of which, according to Pete, had soared so low overhead that it was possible to feel the draft from their wings! Now it was our turn

to catch up with the condors, so we scoured the area in which they had been seen previously. We soon located plenty of Turkey Vultures and Common Ravens but there were no condors to be seen. A few Western Scrub-jays put in an appearance and we also had ludicrously close views of a Black-throated Gray Warbler as we surveyed the canyon below from our vantage point. Suddenly there came a call of "condor!" from inside the observation building, rushing over, several of the group were able to gain brief views of this enormous creature as it perched on the extreme edge of the canyon, fanning its wings, before it plummeted from its perch and out of sight.

James was certain that our best viewing opportunities were to be had further along the canyon at Bright Angel Point so it was too there we headed next. We stood overlooking a truly fantastic vista across the canyon and checked some distant soaring birds as we scanned for the condors, which tended to visit the cliffs at about four o'clock in the afternoon. By this time it was about three twenty-five, which maximised our chances of sightings, as we would be there in plenty of time should they appear early. A group of extremely cute California Ground-squirrels patrolled the wall on which we were leaning, peering through beady eyes in the hope that we would provide them with some form of sustenance; cute as they were, they were sadly mistaken! We had a more pressing objective on our hands and as the minutes ticked by it seemed we were perhaps not going to be fortunate. It came as an immense relief when Jayne spotted a distant "light aircraft" sized bird, soaring over a distant ridge. Mercifully it started to come closer and closer and we were soon enjoying views of surely one of the most enigmatic species on the tour. The most impressively-sized bird species at the most impressively-sized landmark visited on the tour! A true memory to treasure, as it was followed by another, and then another until we had eight individuals, circling literally right above our heads, swooping down to eye level and briefly perching on the cliffs. Every feature could be appreciated even with our eyes and all too soon these stunning birds began to leave as suddenly as they had arrived.

We regretfully began to head back to the vehicles, having witnessed a true "condor moment" as Roy put it! With Pinyon Jay still missing from our checklist, we left the canyon behind and headed back into Kaibab National Park, in search of this highly unpredictable species. En route the traffic was brought to an abrupt stop by a pair of Elk, which had decided that there could be no better alternative than a leisurely amble across a busy main road. The first tract of forest we explored was broken by a scrubby sagebrush habitat. It produced several good birds, if not exactly the species for which we were searching. A Black Phoebe flicked up onto some nearby shrubs as we approached. We soon located a Plumbeous Vireo working a tree on the other side of the clearing, and a 'Red-shafted' Northern Flicker perched high upon the peak of a distant pine. Several Pygmy and White-breasted Nuthatches put in an appearance before a distant, decidedly blue looking bird was spotted, which on closer examination turned out to be the most smartly-plumaged Mountain Bluebird we noted on the entire trip! A small sparrow flicked across and landed at the base of a nearby pine. Closer inspection revealed another addition to the checklist in the form of Brewer's Sparrow which as seen well by virtually everyone, though it proved difficult at times as it opted to bury itself in a particularly dense patch of sage and showed only intermittently.

Deciding that we should try elsewhere, we headed down another forest road. Here we stopped and listened for the distinctive cries of the jays echoing across the forest. At first we saw Western Bluebirds and Western Wood-pewees aplenty, but no trace of Pinyon Jays. But then, out of nowhere, came the distant calls of a travelling party, which soon began to respond to James' tape. Though they were responding, they were still probably over a kilometre away, and it was a slow and tense search as we hoped for them to pass through an area conducive to viewing. As they drew close we headed quickly down a sidetrack and suddenly one of these potentially awkward birds popped up high in the tallest pine across the clearing. Whilst we were waiting for the rest of the flock to arrive we located a smart Virginia's Warbler and better still a "flock" of seventeen Common Nighthawks passed over, which was quite an experience in itself; but what followed was truly mind-blowing. We had been told that these birds travelled in flocks. They certainly upheld their reputation! As more and more flitted across the clearing, the area became festooned with foraging Pinyon Jays with over 100 being recorded. The scale of both the sound and foraging frenzies was something else entirely. It was reasonable to suggest that we had been treated a truly spectacular performance by these potentially, problematic corvids. Elated by our success we began our steady hour or so journey back to Flagstaff as the light began to fade. We stopped en route, while several people photographed a herd of Pronghorn right by the roadside, before heading back into town for showers and change of clothes ready for our evening meal. Half an hour later we found ourselves at the legendary Red Lobster restaurant, which didn't disappoint as the meals were excellent and we were able to relax and complete our checklists before returning contentedly for a good night's sleep in readiness for our last full day of birding in the US.

Day 14: The day began with the loading of the vehicles, whilst observing a few House Finches and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, which whizzed around the feeders in the motel car park. This was essentially designed to be a day of travel, taking in as many habitats and potentially birdy areas as possible en route. Although there was a possibility of some additions to the checklist during the course of the day, the final outcome was to be unprecedented! We began again beneath the Golden Arches of Flagstaff where, apart from a fortifying breakfast, we also enjoyed views of some ridiculously tame American Crows and Brewer's Blackbirds. From here we headed out of town and began our day's birding in earnest along the roadside of Lower Lake Mary. It was soon found to be a really productive area, with flocks of Lesser Goldfinches feeding along the grassy slope below us. These were soon joined by a party of at least five bedraggled looking Audubon's Warblers. The lake with its reedy fringes provided a whole host of species, including numerous calling Sora, a sizable flock of Red-winged Blackbirds interspersed with the occasional stunning male Yellow-headed. The nearby Pine belt provided some superb views of a Black-throated Gray Warbler, while James picked up two flyover Red Crossbills. A Rock Wren appeared on a distant pile of rocks (which seemed somewhat fitting), before Vaughan called the group across, as he had found a Virginia's Warbler which was showing exceptionally well and at times was perching on the fence wire as it worked its way along a narrow belt of pines. More searching of these trees revealed a juvenile Hepatic Tanager. A Green-tailed Towhee was heard, then a Red-faced Warbler appeared moving stealthily along the higher branches of

the trees, before crossing the road and plunging deep into the dense woodland and out of sight. An adult male Black-headed Grosbeak sat high in the end tree and as we were trying to get decent looks at this we located another small wood warbler, which was quickly identified as Grace's. This was a real bonus, as up until this point we had noted only one of these birds was found by John in the Scheelite Canyon. Fortunately it remained in the area long enough for everyone to see it, a really smart little warbler; much more elegant, if not quite so vibrant as its close cousin the Yellow-throated Warbler.

Having done extremely well here, we decided to try the Upper Lake Mary, but not before noting numerous American Coots and a single Black Phoebe on our return to the vehicles. The Upper Lake Mary was more like a classic reservoir, with slight muddy fringes, which one would have assumed could have drawn in a plethora of waders. The first bird we saw was a distant Osprey, oddly situated upon a sandbar, where it was sat with a fish in its talons. A single eclipse Redhead was present bobbing in the centre of the lake and Neotropic and Double-crested Cormorants were noted before we located a couple of waders on a distant spit. Killdeer and Spotted Sandpiper were duly added to the days' list before pressing on. From here we drove through some extensive pastures constantly looking out for Vesper Sparrow and Lazuli Bunting, but being rewarded mostly with Western Bluebirds, Lark Sparrows and Western and Cassin's Kingbirds, with the occasional Loggerhead Shrike and American Kestrel thrown in for good measure. We had purchased lunch from a garage en route and so we were set for the day and ready to put in some time at the largest expanse of water we were to visit during our trip, Mormon Lake. It had been a "reasonable stop in the past" according to James, and this time it was to prove to be "fairly reasonable" as well. We stood upon a high viewpoint overlooking the lake and several miles of highly "birdy" wetland habitat. The weather was fairly miserable, but it couldn't have been more of a contrast to the birding! Within perhaps a minute of arriving Vaughan called us over, having located a Virginia Rail in the open area of mud between innumerable tussocks of sedge below us. With patience virtually everyone enjoyed fine, if not brief, views of this highly elusive species. During our wait for the rail's reappearance it became apparent that there were enormous numbers of Soras present and at least five could be viewed in a single scope. The day's count of this species became greater and greater as virtually every patch of mud seemed to be crawling with Soras of every plumage and age imaginable. This was something which, clearly excited Vaughan as he persisted in counting until he had totalled well in excess of fifty individuals!

The lake itself held more wildfowl than had been observed on the rest of the trip combined. Hundreds of Green-winged Teals dabbling around the reedy fringes interspersed with a few Blue-winged Teals, while larger numbers of Redheads and Ruddy Ducks were noted. Cinnamon Teals were present, with a tally of at least fifteen and the diversity of wildfowl didn't stop there, as we also noted Lesser Scaup, Mallard and Mexican Duck. Herons and egrets were well represented with Great Blue Herons, at least three Black-crowned Night-herons, Great Egrets, in excess of fifteen Snowy Egrets and Cattle Egrets all being found. Four American White Pelicans were located sitting in a channel running through the reeds on the far side of the lake. Western Grebes were present in significant numbers and we recorded at least forty of these highly impressive birds. Several Northern Pintails were picked up by Jared which was another good find. A party of at least eight Long-billed Dowitchers probed the shallows and Common Yellowthroats sang continuously from the reeds, revealing themselves occasionally. A distant party of birds foraging in a grassy field in loose proximity to a herd of over two hundred Elk proved to be White-faced Ibis. There were over one hundred and fifty of these birds feeding in the fields before a party of half a dozen put down in the nearest patch of shallow water below us. James then located a distant gull, which he soon identified as California Gull, a species, which could to be expected but with which one would not necessarily connect during a trip to Arizona. Jared then located another pair of California Gulls on a distant pool near to where the ibis flock had been and as time went on these drifted into the centre of the lake and we were eventually able to obtain some acceptable views of these fairly distinctive looking birds. James then located an adult Franklin's Gull, a real scarcity and a "write-in" on our checklists. Though initially distant, the bird eventually began to drift into a more central position in the lake from where we received far more satisfactory views. As we were watching a party of eighteen Black Terns soared across the lake, promptly followed by the brief appearance of a Black-bellied Whistling-duck, which whizzed low across the reeds before dropping down on a concealed pool. We had added an unprecedented number of birds to the checklist and so were keen to spend some more time here in the hope of further additions. We received the response we desired almost immediately, as Vesper Sparrow was located and with gentle persuasion sat atop a small shrub, from where it sang profusely and was enjoyed by everyone. This was a species for which we seemed to be seriously running out of chances. Now it had been nailed we felt sure the site had still more to offer. It did!

Following a hurried lunch so as to get back to the birding we came across a fall of migrants working the scrubby slope and nearby hedgerow, which ran along as a division between a weedy field and the slope. Here we first noted at least five Black-headed Grosbeaks, which performed magnificently, before a pair of Plumbeous Vireo's were noted and an extremely brief MacGillivray's Warbler. Several Hepatic Tanagers passed through with a couple of Yellow Warblers. John then located another species, which we had looked destined to miss... Lazuli Bunting! At least six of these magnificently plumaged birds worked the hedge and occasionally made forays into the seedy field in search of food. This species brought us level with the previous greatest total recorded on past Arizona tours of two hundred and forty seven. We were not finished yet! A few Blue Grosbeaks appeared and one bore closer inspection. Our suspicions were proven to be valid, as a moulting male Indigo Bunting perched upon some nearby dead twigs. This species, which is regarded as quite a state scarcity enabled us to break the record, and it was fitting that we then located another finely plumaged Indigo Bunting reminding us that the quality of the birding is always far more important than the total, although it's always extremely satisfying to record a good total, let's be honest!

With a considerable distance to go and having seen nothing new during the past twenty minutes we decided to head out leaving behind the site what was probably most pivotal to our success in achieving a new record. We indulged in a short rest room stop. The birding was fairly impressive, with numerous Pygmy and White-breasted Nuthatches, as well as a flock of at least eight Plumbeous Vireos and several Brown Creepers. Western Bluebirds were extremely prominent in this area as were the particularly

obliging Lark Sparrows. From here we headed to Payson where we fuelled up on an afternoon snack at Mickey D's before pressing on towards Phoenix. The landscape began to change dramatically. As we left the pine forests and open meadows, we now found ourselves once more surrounded by craggy hillsides adorned with Saguaro scrub. As we approached a turn off from the major road, there was a decided feeling of déjà vu as we approached the parking space from which we had noted both Gray Vireo and Scott's Oriole on the first day of the tour. We continued down to the bottom of the road to Sycamore Creek where the weather was wonderfully warm. We enjoyed a gentle stroll around the area where the Common Black-hawk's nest site had been (the bird itself had fledged), but we enjoyed views of numerous Phainopepla, Black-throated Sparrows and Canyon Wrens, whose familiar song continued to echo through the canyon. A pair of Gray Vireos were heard but not seen during the afternoon heat and a cracking Ladder-backed Woodpecker was noted as it climbed a nearby Saguaro. From here we transferred to urban Phoenix, visiting Fountain Hills briefly in order to collect some items from James' in-laws' home, during which time we were entertained by the antics of the local Gila Woodpecker.

Deciding that it would be the most efficient plan to bird a local site during the course of the evening in order to give us time to collect ourselves for the next morning, we headed for Gilbert Water Ranch in the centre of Phoenix, which has turned up a number of significant state records over the years. Upon arriving at "Gilbert" the weather was unbearably warm, being the hottest we had encountered during the fortnight, despite it being late afternoon. The scrubby parkland was connected by excellent gravel paths, enabling access to the variety of ponds and scrapes on which we hoped to locate some more species to our impressive checklists. The first scrape revealed numerous Killdeers, Black-necked Stilts and Spotted Sandpipers as well as in excess of twenty Long-billed Dowitchers and amongst them a dozing Greater Yellowlegs. An Abert's Towhee was located as it hopped around the churned and parched soil on the fringes of the pool. At least ten Killdeers were strolling the cleared field searching for morsels of food amongst the earth. The scrubby patches of vegetation lining the track produced good numbers of Verdins and more Abert's Towhees as well as Northern Mockingbirds and Pyrrhuloxia. Several Great Egrets flew over and a pair of Black-necked Stilts erupted from a concealed pool. We headed to a small bridge and from here it was possible to observe a small area of a sizable pond. Setting up scopes we quickly located Al's most wanted bird of the trip American Avocet. He originally thought we were joking, but they were very much there and a total of nine of these impressive birds were present. We followed a trail round the edge, which brought us right into perfect view of the pool, from where we could appreciate for the first time the sheer numbers of wading birds and waterfowl present. Over 150 Long-billed Dowitchers were present feeding casually alongside several fragmented parties of Least Sandpipers whose numbers exceeded 30. A pair of Wilson's Phalaropes was present, as well as several Mexican Mallards alongside their slightly less mundane cousins. Another Greater Yellowlegs was located and several Black-necked Stilts fed in the deeper water. At least 25 Killdeers occupied the drier cleared area of open ground at the far end of the pool and it was this that also proved immensely popular with Red-winged Blackbirds with a flock of at least 100 being logged along with a pair of gaudy Yellow-headed Blackbirds.

We left this pool to try a smaller one on the opposite side of the park. Here we found numerous Curve-billed Thrashers as well as Loggerhead Shrike and more Verdins. Several Great Blue Herons were present as well as Great and Snowy Egrets. A very smart Green Heron was located sat on some dead vegetation, right on the edge of the creek, and a few Double-crested Cormorants flew over as the light began to fade, although the temperature remained swelteringly warm. On our return to the vehicles a Black-tailed Jack Rabbit was found looking decidedly panicky as it sprinted away across the gravel path before us. A small movement in a nearby willow proved to be a Pacific-slope Flycatcher. A fine ending to what had been a truly remarkable days birding. As the sun set we drove on for Mesa, but not before spotting a Black-crowned Night-heron sat atop a roadside levee. We arrived, as we had the first time we had been here- in the dark, our first and last evenings accommodation was the trusty Mesa Motel Six. Following some lengthy negotiations we received our room numbers and headed off to freshen up for our "final supper" Our plan was altered considerably as the Mexican restaurant we were planning to dine in decided to close perhaps two minutes before we arrived. We eventually wound up in a Sushi Bar where perversely not one of us actually consumed any sushi! Completing our final day's checklist and rounding off a spectacular tour total of 250 with three cheers all round, we headed back to our Motel to prepare our cases for the flight home the following morning.

Day 15: A brief bit of birding outside the motel ended the tour as it had started with the usual suspects being noted: White-winged Doves, Great-tailed Grackles, Lesser Goldfinch, House Finch and other expected species. We then headed to Burger King for breakfast before saying our goodbyes to Margaret and Ken, who were to be staying on in the US for a while. We packed the vehicles and headed for the airport, where we were dropped off while James and Vaughan returned the trusty "Churches of France and England" We then waited by check-in for them to return. We thanked James for what had been a phenomenal tour and said our goodbyes before he headed off for his flight back to Massachusetts. We checked in and travelled through the various checkpoints and security procedures before arriving in the departure lounge. Our flight was called and we headed off to board, bidding fond farewells to Jared who was unfortunately unable to travel back with us, due to our flight being sold out so far in advance. We arrived back at Detroit rather later than planned and so to ensure we successfully reached our connections the aircraft docked right next to our transfer, which was all rather exciting! We then embarked on a rather less eventful overnight return to London where our tour concluded on day 16 with many fond farewells and reflections on an exceptional tour.

Special thanks to **Vaughan and Svetlana Ashby, James Smith and Peter Basterfield** on behalf of the group excellent leadership and birdfinding ability and especially for co-ordinating such an immensely successful and enjoyable tour. The group as a whole had chemistry, which is a real virtue and an integral part in the success of such a trip. The group's diversity in their areas of expertise within the natural world, made for this to be an all round naturalists holiday, as well being immensely successful from an avian perspective. **Jared Tibbetts and John Sirrett** for identifying and recording butterfly, dragonfly and moth species. An extended thank you to **Jared** for kindly producing trip lists, recording each of the previously discussed families. Special

thanks to everyone for contributing to the mammal list, which was formally recorded by Jared and Caroline Jackson-Houlston. **Roy and Linda Harvey's** dedication in acquiring footage for the 'Birding In Arizona DVD' which deserves great credit, as it is an excellent production, which serves as a wonderful record of our sightings during the trip. Thank you to **Andy Gosler, Caroline** and **Jared** for identifying innumerable plant species of interest and though we have no official list, I'm sure you both have records of the flora we encountered during the trip. This just goes to show how successful the tour was as an all round natural history experience.

Finally, a special thanks to **Jayne Barnard** for such a superb post exam reward and for being such a great mum!

Harry Barnard