

Birds of the

[Flocks and Rocks 2018 Trek to Southeastern Arizona](#)

May 19-27, 2018

Part 1. Itinerary

By Arch McCallum, co-leader for Ornithology

Southeastern Arizona is the meeting place of two biological communities, the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Madre. The birds, trees, and everything else have evolved independently in these two great massifs. The “mountain islands” of southeastern Arizona are stepping stones between them, and comprise a physiographic province of their own, the Basin and Range Province. The ranges are fault blocks, the basins are the alluvial remnants of these mountains in their youth. Some are granite, some are rhyolite, while young lava flows and cinder cones lie on top of the older rocks. It’s complex, and we like that.

I have spent 27 of my many months in southeastern Arizona, in 1977-79 and 1999-2000. I lived in the Chiricahuas, hiked all over those mountains, and drove all over the rest of the region. I know it well, but my own personal experience is backed up by [Rick Taylor’s](#) superb *Birder’s Guide to Southeastern Arizona*. It’s available from Amazon, and is worth the price just for [Narca Moore-Craig’s](#) vibrant line drawings. It also features a few exquisite drawings by [David Sibley](#), worthy successor to Roger Tory Peterson as king of the field guide authors. It’s also worth the price just for the introduction. Read it to familiarize yourself with the lay of the land we will explore. The latest revision was published in 2005, so the excellent species accounts are somewhat dated, as several species have expanded their ranges or moved into the state for the first time in the past 13 years. (I used up-to-date eBird data to prepare the spreadsheets presented below.) Taylor’s discussion of the ecology of the area is concise and authoritative, and attention to it takes birding to a more sophisticated level. We’ll take that approach, talking about the biogeography of the plants that attract the birds to specific habitats.

To sign up for the expedition, go to [Flocks and Rocks](#). If you want a little more info on the enrollment process, email Kori at cottonwoodgulch.org. If you have questions about the actual expedition, regarding either process or content, fire them off to me, FR at archmccallum.com. The itinerary is below, and [Bird Lists](#) are separate.

Itinerary

This itinerary represents our intentions, if all goes according to plan. Closures, forest fires, and serendipitous opportunities are all developments that can lead to changes in plans, sometimes at the last minute. We’ll alert all enrolled participants to major changes in the itinerary.

I’ve subdivided the itinerary into 11 birding zones. I’ll work them into a narrative description of our itinerary below and present expected birds for each in the separate [Bird Lists](#) documents. The zones are introduced in the table below.

Zone	Location	Itinerary Days	Extent of Zone
00	AzSonora Desert Museum	1	On outskirts of Tucson, in Sonoran Desert
01	Organ Pipe	1-3	The drive out and back on Highway 86, focusing on the National Monument itself
02	Arivaca	3	Arivaca Road from Hwy 286 to I-19, with focus on the Cienega
03	Patagonia	3-4	Highway 82 from Nogales to Sonoita, focusing on Sonoita Creek
04	Huachuca Canyons	4-5	Miller Canyon, unless we decide to camp elsewhere
05	Huachuca Highlands	5-6	Carr Canyon Road, including Reef Townsite and Ramsey Vista Campgrounds
06	Ramsey Canyon	6	Hamburg Meadow down to Ramsey Canyon Preserve
07	Portal	6	From Rodeo, NM to mouth of Cave Creek Canyon
08	Cave Creek Canyon	6,7	Mouth of Canyon to Southwestern Research Station and up South Fork
09	Chiricahua Highlands	6-8	Rustler, Barfoot, Onion Saddle, Pinery Canyon
10	Kartchner Caverns	8-9	State Park grounds

The treatment below focuses on birds and ecology, because that's what I do, but geology and ecology get equal time on the trip. Contact Co-leader for Geology John Bloch for more on the rocks part. Some of the details below could change of course, but this is the itinerary we are aiming for as of January 2018. The temperatures are the long-term average for that date for the weather stations nearest to each location, from <http://www.intellicast.com/Local>.

May 18, 2018.

Trek participants from the East Coast often choose to make the long flight the day before we begin. If you choose to do that, we can pick you up at your hotel on the morning of the 19th.

Day 1, Saturday, May 19, 2018. Mid-afternoon temperature in Tucson 92. Overnight low at Organ Pipe 64.

We begin at the Tucson Airport, with participants flying in from both coasts and in between. New Mexicans will set their watches back an hour, while Californians won't touch theirs. East-coasters will set theirs back three hours. All of this because Arizona does not recognize daylight savings time. Early arrivals will be ferried to the [Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum](#) (Location **00** on the spreadsheet) to learn about the Sonoran Desert ecosystem, see captive animal exhibits, and ogle the striking male Costa's Hummingbirds that visit the feeders there at this time of year. Also likely to be seen are Curve-billed Thrashers, Cactus Wrens, and Gila Woodpeckers. Once everyone has arrived and the last arrivals have had a chance to see the Museum, we will drive straight through the desert to the **01-Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument** (a little more than 2 hours), where we will spend the night in the desert among a cornucopia of cacti unrivalled in the US. By the time we arrive, the afternoon heat will have abated, and we will witness the remarkable ability of the thin-aired desert to cool down in the evening. In our campsite at Alamo Canyon (if we aren't too numerous to camp there), we should be serenaded by Elf

Owls, which nest in woodpecker holes in the Saguaro Cacti, and perhaps we will be lucky enough to hear the toots of the rare *cactorum* subspecies of the Ferruginous Pygmy-owl, a widespread species that reaches its northern limit in Arizona. Unlikely but possible is another species from the south, the Buff-collared Nightjar. We'll be on alert for the poisonous Gila Monster, which isn't much of a threat to humans, and for Mojave Rattlesnakes and scorpions, which deserve a wide berth.

Day 2, Sunday, May 20, 2018. High temperature at Organ Pipe 90, low at Organ Pipe 65.

After an early morning bird walk to see the Gilded Flicker and a host of more widespread Sonoran Desert species (e.g., Verdin, Gambel's Quail, Phainopepla, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher), we will spend the day discovering the geological wonders of this botanical park. We'll use [A Guide to the Geology of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and the Pinacate Biosphere Reserve](#) as a clue to the best spots. Unfortunately, we will not be able to venture into Mexico to see the Pinacate volcanic field or Reina de la Noche (which blooms but one night a year), but we will be able to follow Part Two of the guidebook inside the park. We'll also visit the ponds near the headquarters to check for waterbirds. The luxury of a second night in camp should make for a great supper, not to mention plenty of time to pull out the folding chairs and sit a spell. If we haven't encountered a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl by this time, those who want to can try again, because this is for sure our last chance for this funny little bird, so common in Latin America, and so rare in the U.S.

Day 3, Monday, May 21, 2018. High temperature 88 near Patagonia, low at Patagonia 47.

Today we will eat early and move out quickly for a long day on the road. First, we'll retrace steps through the Tohono O'odham Reservation (01), keeping a wary eye out for a cluster of the group-hunting Harris's Hawk scanning for jackrabbits from the summits of saguaros. As it warms up, we will look for desert lizards taking the sun on the rocks. Many species are possible. When we reach Kitt Peak, with its world-class observatory clearly visible on top, we will turn right into the Altar Valley, with the Baboquivari Mountains up ahead. The vast [Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge](#) is ahead, with its miles of desert grassland. It was acquired to provide a home for restoration of the incredibly rare Masked Bobwhite. The reintroduction failed, and so we'll pass it by, hopeful that descendants of a captive population may someday return to the wild. Instead we'll turn left (east) onto Arivaca-Sasabe Road. After a bit we'll join (02) Arivaca Creek, a major lowland riparian corridor. We'll stop at (02) [Arivaca Ciénega](#) for lunch and one of our few chances at wetland birds. A ciénega is a special kind of wetland found only in the Southwest. The undamaged ones were characterized by valley-wide sheets of emergent vegetation, but most have been drained or at least ditched. Arivaca Ciénega is part of the Buenos Aires NWR and so offers complete protection for Vermilion Flycatcher, Lucy's Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat and many other species.

We continue eastward, re-encountering civilization north of Nogales when we cross I-19. From there it's a few miles to (03) [Patagonia Lake](#), a popular camping spot for locals, but also a fantastic migrant trap for birds. After washing up and checking the lakeside for Black Phoebes, Bell's Vireos, and rare migrants, we'll drive 7 miles to the world's most famous (03) roadside rest area. Just across the road from storied Sonoita Creek, it was the best place in the U.S. to see Rose-throated Becard and Varied Bunting for generations. The buntings, males of which feature a mélange of blue, magenta, and red, are still there, as are Thick-billed Kingbirds and many other local specialties. Taylor's guidebook provides directions to the large, pendulous nests of the becards, which the birds, late migrants, will just be refurbishing. After this we'll swing by the (03) [Paton Center for Hummingbirds](#). The Patons were birders who attracted many species of hummingbirds with their feeders. They couldn't bear to keep other birders out, so their yard became a public place. Since their passing, Tucson Audubon has kept this institution going. The

hummingbirds are there in droves, but also, where else can one see a feeder tray full of Lazuli Buntings? Then, it's back to the campground for supper, followed by a night on the small town of Patagonia, for those who want a night on the town. The campground has another enticement—showers.

Day 4, Tuesday, May 22, 2018. High temperature 88, low 55 near Sierra Vista.

We'll have coffee and a muffin and head straight for Sonoita Creek, where early-morning birdsong will approach cacophony in late May. The Nature Conservancy's (03) [Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Reserve](#) is closed on Mondays and Tuesdays, but we can see the characteristic birds of the lowland riparian ecosystem by driving along Blue Heaven Road, which skirts the reserve's boundary. The slender and elegant Gray Hawk is the headliner here, but many, many other species are also present, including the very red Summer Tanager and the almost-as-red Northern Cardinal. Then, after a real breakfast, we'll head over to the Huachucas. The towering block of granite is only about an hour away.

Before heading into the Huachucas, though, we will stop in Sierra Vista (the largest town on our itinerary) for groceries and other supplies we might need. We'll camp in a primitive site in lower Miller Canyon (04), where we will set up hummingbird feeders and see how many species we can attract by dinner time. After the intensity of the first three days, we may just want to break out the folding chairs and sit around. Besides, John can regale us about the geology rising straight above us. After supper, screech-owls will probably summon us for a little birding as night falls.

Day 5, Wednesday, May 23, 2018. High temperature 87 before ascending to Reef, low at Reef possibly in the 40s.

The [Ramsey Canyon Preserve](#), with its legendary feeders, is closed on Wednesdays, so we'll save it for tomorrow. We'll take in the dawn chorus at camp (04), then eat a quick breakfast and leave camp set up so we can get to the San Pedro (**not included in our zones** but similar to Patagonia) before it gets too hot. Southeastern Arizona may look like a desert from the highway, but remember those mountain islands that dot the desert seas. They comb rain and snow from the westerlies in winter and benefit from the desert's thunderstorms in summer. The result is rivers, not mighty ones, but significant streams that provide lush riparian habitat along their banks. That is, if they're not overgrazed. The tales of the San Pedro, before the range cattle glut of the 1880s, put this northward-flowing river down as a paradise. There were beaver dams from the Mexican border to Benson, and of course the grass brushed the bellies of all the horses. Paradise was lost for some time after that, but private and public efforts involving land acquisition and management of grazing are restoring the San Pedro to its former grandeur as a permanently flowing tributary of the Gila. We'll take a walk to Kingfisher Pond in the BLM's [San Pedro RNCA](#) (Riparian National Conservation Area). We may not see any new bird species in this, our last foray into the desert riparian gallery forest, but we'll get a great feeling for this ecosystem in context. It's a ribbon of green through that desert sea of gray.

On the way back, we'll stop for a visit at the Murray Springs Clovis Site. Geology and Ecology come together here at one of the biggest assemblies of mammoth bones in North America. Murray Springs features a "black mat" at 12,900 ybp. Below it are Clovis points and mammoth bones galore, above it are the Younger Dryas cold snap, no Clovis artifacts, and no mammoth bones. If the in situ scientists are unwilling to, your in-house professors will share all the wild speculations and mind-expanding hypotheses scientists and others have offered in explanation of these highly nonrandom patterns. Hint: the Younger Dryas Boundary at 12,900 years before present is connected to the creation of the Carolina Bays in the southeastern coastal plain of the U.S.

By late morning we'll be ready to head back to Miller, have a leisurely lunch, and break camp. Then we'll ascend the steep one-way road to a fine campground at the Reef Town site (05). It's at 7200 feet on, what else, the reef. This was a mining town at the turn of the 19th century. As we spin our wheels on the switchbacks, imagine the men who strung the telephone line up this slope and the women who survived in that grisly mining camp. It will be cool on top, and we'll enjoy sitting for a spell before driving the mile, on a level road, over to Ramsey Vista Campground (05). There we can stare into the yawning canyon and over at the exposed rocks on the far side of Ramsey Canyon while our geology prof tells all that happened to make that cliff. And, we can contemplate hiking into that maw tomorrow.

Back at Reef, we will find Buff-breasted Flycatchers everywhere underfoot. This widespread Mexican highland species occurs in the US only in the southernmost mountain ranges in Arizona. Reef hosted seven pairs in 2017, and they were constantly getting into each other's way, and jawing about it. We may also run into a Tufted Flycatcher or two. This cute little flycatcher with a pointed crest is expanding its breeding range from the Sierra Madre into the US—right here. No one knows how they found the Huachucas from the closest mountains of sufficient height, 130 miles to the southeast, but they did and they seem to like it here. Reef hosted a pair all last summer and others have successfully nested in Ramsey Canyon. At dusk the Mexican Whip-poor-will who lives in the Reef campground will start up, uttering his eponymous call just about every second. Luckily he moves around while doing it, so he's not always right in your ear. That's about all the nightlife up here, though, unless you want to look at the lights of Sierra Vista. If you do, you'll also see Tombstone across the San Pedro River, the Dragoons in the distance, and possibly a glow from Willcox overtopping them. Every ranch house in the Valley makes a starry night of the dark desert, and on the eastern horizon the Chiricahua Mountains loom. But they are a story for another day.

Day 6, Thursday, May 24, 2018. High temperature in Ramsey Canyon around noon 85, low at Rustler Park 33.

The same whip-poor-will is the Reef alarm clock. The result of Arizona's commitment to sun time is that the day birds start singing around 4:30 local, nearly an hour before the sun comes up. It's a great hour, though, regardless of where it is on the clock face, with Hermit Thrushes, Black-headed Grosbeaks, and Western Tanagers making it sound like Colorado, or for that matter Alberta, and Eastern Bluebirds, Greater Pewees, and Olive Warblers making it sound like Durango, . . . Mexico.

We'll briskly eat and break camp, and then those who want to hike will be ferried to Ramsey Vista, where they will depart on an easy 4.6 mile hike to the Ramsey Canyon Preserve (06), which sits 1850 feet below. Drivers, and those who don't care to hike, will meet them when the Preserve opens at 9 a.m., or whenever they arrive. There's no hurry. The trail descends 200 feet in 0.6 mile to Comfort Spring (06), a seep that has attracted several unexpected species from the south. Might the Pine Flycatcher be next? Another 1.7 miles will put the hikers at Hamburg Meadow (06), a glade in the cool canyon-bottom forest of Ramsey Canyon. Big-tooth Maples, Arizona Cypresses, Montezuma Pines, Douglasfirs, and Arizona Sycamores are among the trees that shade the permanent stream. They have hosted nesting Eared Quetzals, Tufted Flycatchers, and Flame-colored Tanagers in the past. Listening for the unfamiliar cries of these species while taking account of the numerous Red-faced Warblers will be an exciting challenge.

At the Preserve, one just finds a chair and picks a feeder to watch, or else bounces nervously around trying to see them all. Rick Taylor, master birder of southeastern Arizona, says to expect six or so of the 15 species that have been seen there. As at the Paton reserve, the glory at Ramsey is that they sometimes stay put at a feeder long enough to be viewed through binoculars and even photographed.

Many other species are viewable at the Preserve, and Zone-tailed Hawks may sail by overhead, unnoticed among the Turkey Vultures they appear to mimic. When we've had enough of that, we'll slip down the canyon and find a place for lunch.

After lunch we may be ready for a little A/C and a snooze on the way down to historic Bisbee. Or we may hit Murray Springs if we didn't fit it into the schedule yesterday. Phelps Dodge's Lavender Pit is right by the road in Bisbee, and we'll stop to look into the 900-foot abyss. Then on to the border town of Douglas, for provisioning, and to Agua Prieta, if anyone wants to cross, before cruising through the San Bernardino lava flow on the way to Portal **(07)**.

Feeders around the Portal store may draw in a new species of hummingbird, but probably it will be hard to add to our list from the Huachucas. We'll drive slowly through the mesquite-catclaw thickets **(07)** and into the "Yosemite of the Southwest," Cave Creek Canyon **(08)**. Immediately the most diverse Madrean woodland you can imagine will appear. We will stop a time or two just to gaze at the rocks soaring straight up from the narrow valley floor, while John tells us about the volcanic activity that created thousands of feet of rhyolite tuff. This is what was left after 100 cubic miles of magma were expelled from what became the Turkey Creek Caldera 26.9 million years ago. The rhyolite component makes these mountains very different from the Huachucas in geology.

A few bends in the narrow paved road and we encounter a string of campgrounds -- Idlewild, Stewart, and Sunny Flat. All are birdy and have breath-taking views of the canyon walls. The sun will be behind the crest and cool air will have begun sinking into the canyon by the time we reach them. We may well decide to go no farther. If we do, we'll recognize the ecosystem from Miller Canyon, although Elegant Trogons are more likely here, in their U.S. metropolis. At dark both Whiskered and Western Screech-Owls could call, as could both Common Poorwills on the dry slopes and Mexican Whip-poor-wills in the timber. Rocks rolling down the slopes could come from Mule Deer, while tawnier Coues White-tails munch grass quietly in the canyon bottom. Everything seems to come in twos here, something from the north and something from the south co-existing at this great meeting ground of biotas.

But, our heart's desire is to get into the high country, specifically Rustler Park Campground **(09)**. The gravel road is tame compared to Carr Canyon Road, which we ascended in the Huachucas, but the curves are too tight for a semi-trailer. This is seemingly unknown to the occasional trucker who tries to take this route to avoid paying his highway taxes. It would not be a fun place to back down the mountain.

We transect rather boring oak-juniper woodland, much of it destroyed by the Horseshoe 2 Fire in 2011, as we climb half a mile vertically from semi-Tropical Mexico to the Rocky Mountains. The view behind us is not boring. From our vantage point on the side of the main ridge of the Chiricahuas we look down on Silver Peak to the left and Portal Peak to the right. Between them runs Cave Creek and its yawning canyon. How could this small range ever produce enough runoff to cut that gash? It brings to mind Frijoles Canyon on last year's trip. So maybe an ice dam collapsed and sent an entire lake down the chute. John will tell us.

We don't hit pines until we top out at Onion Saddle (09) at 7500 feet. The Trans-Mountain descends from there to the National Monument and on past Willcox Playa and the Dos Cabezas to Willcox, Rex Allen's home town. Rustler is up a ridgetop spur to the left. At 8500 feet, Rustler is quite a bit higher than our highest point in the Huachucas. It was once nestled in an extensive forest of Ponderosa Pine, commingled with Douglasfir, White Fir, and Southwestern White Pine, but today it is mostly bare of trees. The Rattlesnake Fire of 1994 burned 27,500 acres, but did not dip into Rustler. The Horseshoe 2 Fire of 2011, on the other hand, started south of Portal, swept to the crest, and over the other side to the National Monument, consuming 223,000 acres. Patches of living pines dot the burned landscape around the campground, but the place little resembles the dense forest some of us remember from decades ago. The Forest Service closed the campground in 2017 because of damage done to trees by winter storms. We will have to wait and see if it reopens in 2018. If not, another possibility is Pinery Canyon (09) campground, a little below Onion Saddle on the west side. We will see. Regardless, we will visit Rustler and the surrounding high country.

The signature bird of this forest is the Mexican Chickadee. It's a common species further south, but is found in the U.S. only here and on Animas Peak in nearby New Mexico. The Huachucas have no chickadee species, and farther north, Mt. Graham hosts the Mountain Chickadee, whose range extends all the way to the Yukon. There's a hint in this pattern. The Chiricahuas are much closer than the Huachucas to high ridges in Mexico that provide stepping stones for montane species to expand northward from the metropolitan populations in the Sierra Madre.

Rustler is 1500 feet higher than Reef, so it has higher elevation species, such as Cordilleran Flycatcher, Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warblers, and Red-breasted Nuthatch. Not far from the campground is a grove of old-growth Engelmann Spruce very near the southern top of its range. Despite similar elevation, the Zuni Mountains do not host this cold-hardy species.

If we choose to hike up to Barfoot Lookout, only a 30-minute climb from the nearest place on the road, either at sunset or dawn, we will be able to see 70 miles in almost every direction. This is an old fire lookout like the one Gary Snyder manned in his youth. It sits on bare granite. Below it an aspen-clad scree slope descends into Barfoot Park (another meadow), Barfoot Peak on the edge of the bowl reminds one of Half Dome, and a few miles north is Cochise Head, a collection of rocks whose outline suggests to some the silhouette of the great chief. Out of sight behind Cochise are the hoodoos of the National Monument, which we shall see two days hence.

We are finally in the haunts of the little hooter, the Flammulated Owl. At this time of year there is a good chance those who sit quietly for a few minutes will hear its monotonous hoot penetrating the darkness every 10 seconds, perhaps all night long. By then the temperature will be in the forties, which will not dissuade this owl (which survives on a diet of cold-hardy moths), but it will probably send us into the sack early.

Day 7, Friday, May 25, 2018. High temperature in Cave Creek Canyon around noon 85, mid-afternoon high at Rustler Park 75. Low at Rustler 33.

Regardless of where we camp, Friday is for South Fork (08). If we're on top, we'll get in the vehicles and drive back down the Trans-Mountain after breakfast. Individuals will have the option of pattering around the canyon floor in the campgrounds or at the South Fork Picnic Ground, which once was a campground, or they can hike a mile or two up South Fork. The trail is mostly flat. It's worth it just to see the Bigtooth Maples, which are distributed here and there in canyons of the Southwest, most notably in Oak Creek Canyon between Flagstaff and Sedona. They are perfectly respectable trees during the summer, but in autumn they become nonpareils, so intense is the redness of their leaves. If case you didn't know, red is a rare color in autumn woods of the west. This maple is the major exception to that rule. The place abounds with birds, the Elegant Trogon being the headliner. And reptiles; look for Clark's Spiny Lizards on every other rock by the trail. An Arizona Mountain Kingsnake would be a nice find, and there are half a dozen species of rattlesnakes here, although we are likely to encounter none of them.

We'll have a late lunch in the canyon and then head for the highlands. This will be the occasion to hike from Rustler toward the spruce forest on the Crest Trail, for those who are game. It will have splendid views of the high country on both sides of South Fork, and a Peregrine Falcon, or one of the recently-arrived Short-tailed Hawks, might fly by.

Day 8, Saturday, May 26, 2018. High temperature at Katchner 90, low at Kartchner 52.

Today is geology-day supreme. After breaking camp we will descend the west side of the range to [Chiricahua National Monument](#). The same tuff responsible for the massive cliffs of Cave Creek Canyon is here carved into thousands of free-standing columns. Some of them appear to be boulders balanced on pedestals. We'll find out why this area has columns and the east side doesn't, then head on over to [Kartchner Caverns State Park \(10\)](#). On the way, the interstate passes through Texas Canyon, which some of us will recognize as the location for numerous cowboy movies of the fifties. We'll stop at the rest stop, or perhaps at one of the vintage tourist joints, to get a close-up view of the gigantic granite boulders.

Discovered in 1974 by two cavers, Kartchner Caverns has been carefully protected from the outset. We will take a tour in the afternoon that will show us the world's longest known soda-straw stalactites and the world's most extensive formation of brushite moonmilk, among many attractions. Not to be outdone by rocks, the flocks component has saved something for last too, as the campground and surrounding trails are the best site on the trip for some nine species, most notably the Greater Roadrunner.

Day 9, Sunday, May 27, 2018. Temperatures presumably irrelevant, but hot.

The TUS airport is a little more than an hour away. Depending on departure times, we'll have a quick or leisurely breakfast and head home. For those who haven't had enough, more birding with Arch is a possibility. Stay tuned for details.

[On to the Bird Lists](#)