

Arizona: 2nd to 19th May 2015

Introduction:

Where

South Eastern Arizona is an area which is certain to appear on the itinerary of every world birder at some point, as this corner of the USA offers unrivalled access to a diverse set of desert and montane species, many of which are otherwise restricted to less hospitable regions, south of the Mexican border. The area is characterised by arid desert plains, from which the rugged Madrean Sky Islands of rock abruptly emerge, to climb thousands of metres into clear blue skies. These isolated mountain ranges have supported the development of unique communities of flora and fauna, and present some of the most exciting birding opportunities in the whole of the United States.

Arizona is not just about Sky Islands, however, and the State has been a magnet for sightseeing travellers ever since it's natural wonders were discovered by the first Wild West pioneers. From the swathes of giant saguaro cactus-candelabras, to the incomparable sight of the vast Grand Canyon and iconic red rock monoliths of Monument Valley, a journey through the State is a fascinating voyage of discovery which never fails to surprise and captivate the visitor.

In light of previous trips to both Texas and California, our birding focus for this trip was tightly constrained around a limited set of target birds. The luxury of a two-and-a-half week time-frame meant that we could be fairly relaxed with our itinerary, which also allowed us to pull in a significant amount of sightseeing around some of the State's unmissable areas of outstanding natural beauty.

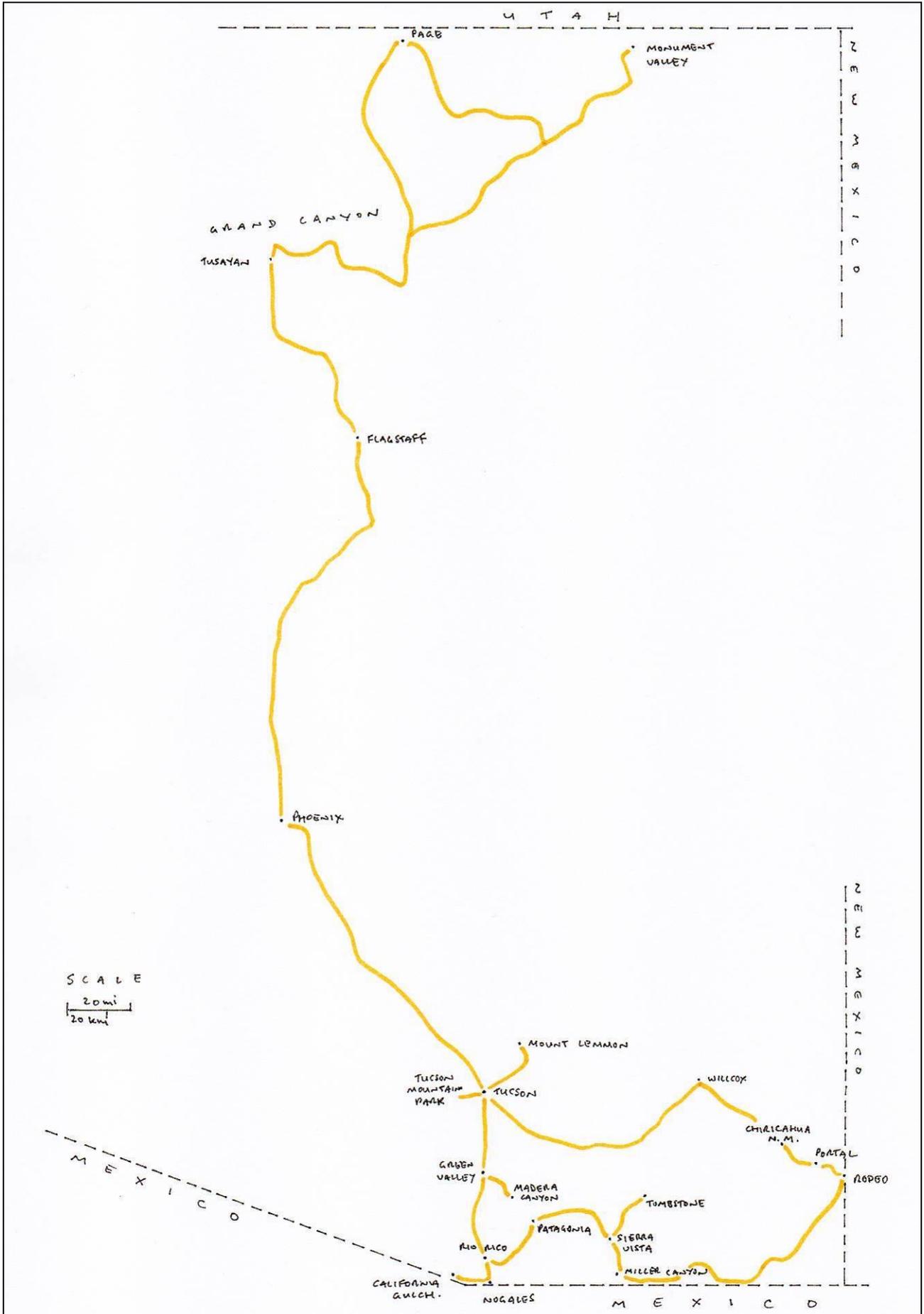
Personal birding highlights included Mexican Duck, Flammulated Owl, Western and Whiskered Screech Owls, Mountain Pygmy Owl and Spotted Owl, Violet-crowned and Costa's Hummingbirds, Elegant Trogon, Arizona Woodpecker, Gilded Flicker, Buff-breasted Flycatcher, Mexican Chickadee, Black-capped Gnatcatcher, Bendire's and Crissal Thrashers, Lucy's and Grace's Warblers, Rufous-winged, Botteri's and Five-striped Sparrows. Such ABA listing prizes as Magnificent and Broad-billed Hummingbirds, Northern Beardless Tyrannulet, Greater Pewee, Dusky-capped and Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers, Tropical and Thick-billed Kingbirds, Bridled Titmouse, Olive, Rufous-capped and Red-faced Warblers, Painted Redstart, Flame-coloured Tanager and Yellow-eyed Junco all added up to an ornithological feast of immense proportions.

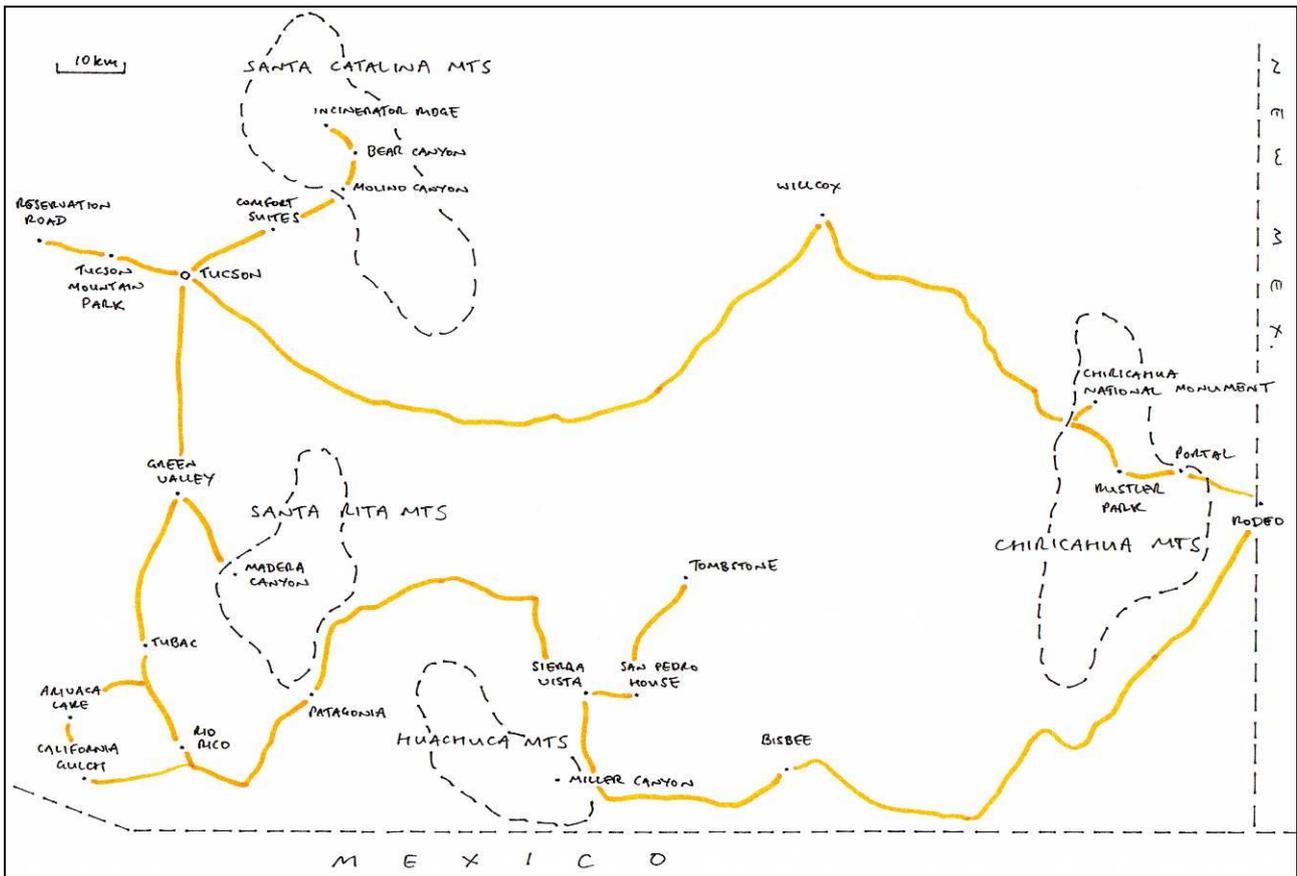
Mammalian encounters were equally memorable, and included the bizarrely proportioned Antelope Jackrabbit, handsome Abert's, Mexican Fox and Arizona Grey Squirrels, charismatic Gunnison's Prairie Dogs, Harris's and White-tailed Antelope Squirrels, Cliff Chipmunk, Striped and Hooded Skunks, and the regional endemic Coues White-tailed Deer.

Flying into Tucson, we began our circuit of Arizona in the Santa Catalina Mountains, conveniently located immediately northeast of the city. Next came a morning in the wonderful desert landscape of the Tucson Mountain Park, before we headed south for an extended stay in the scenic environs of the Santa Rita Mountains, which also incorporated a trip to California Gulch, close to the Mexican Border. Moving east, via the charming little town of Patagonia, we then based ourselves at Sierra Vista in order to explore the magnificent Huachuca Mountains and surrounding areas. Our final Sky Island destination was the Chiricahua Mountains, our personal favourite, where we were located at Cave Creek for the duration of our stay.

Having all-but completed the birding element of the tour, we then set off on a road-trip north, via the spectacular Chiricahua National Monument, and highly-recommended Phoenix Desert Botanical Gardens, to arrive at the Grand Canyon. From this point a succession of awe-inspiring natural landscapes stimulated our senses, as we savoured time at the Grand Canyon South Rim, Antelope Canyon and Monument Valley, each with their own spectacular appeal and photogenic splendour. Our flight home necessitated a return trip to Tucson, concluding a magnificent journey through one of the most rewarding and memorable destinations in all of North America.

Route and Sites Visited





Full itinerary:

- Day 1** Flight from London Heathrow to Tucson (via Dallas). Accom: Comfort Suites, Sabino Canyon, Tucson.
- Day 2** Tucson, Santa Catalina Mountains, Tucson. Accom: Comfort Suites, Sabino Canyon, Tucson.
- Day 3** Tucson, Tucson Mountain Park, Reservation Road, Green Valley, Florida Canyon, Madera Canyon, Rio Rico. Accom: Rio Rico, courtesy of Richard Fray.
- Day 4** Rio Rico, Sycamore Canyon, California Gulch, Arivaca Lake, Amado WTP, Rio Rico. Accom: Rio Rico, courtesy of Richard Fray.
- Day 5** Rio Rico, Madera Canyon, Tubac, Madera Canyon, Rio Rico. Accom: Rio Rico, courtesy of RF.
- Day 6** Rio Rico, Tubac, Patagonia, San Pedro Riparian NCA, Sierra Vista. Accom: Hampton Inn, Sierra Vista.
- Day 7** Sierra Vista, Miller Canyon, Ash Canyon, Carr Canyon, Sierra Vista. Accom: Hampton Inn, Sierra Vista.
- Day 8** Sierra Vista, Ramsey Canyon, Tombstone, Sierra Vista. Accom: Hampton Inn, Sierra Vista.
- Day 9** Sierra Vista, Hunter Canyon, Ash Canyon, Cave Creek. Accom: Cave Creek Ranch, Portal.
- Day 10** Cave Creek, East Turkey Creek, Rustler Park, Barfoot Park, Cave Creek. Accom: Cave Creek Ranch, Portal.
- Day 11** Cave Creek, East Turkey Creek, Rodriguez Feeders, McCord Trail, Cave Creek. Accom: Cave Creek Ranch, Portal.
- Day 12** Cave Creek, Portal, Rodeo, Chiricahua National Monument, Phoenix. Accom: America's Best Value Inn, Phoenix.
- Day 13** Phoenix, Phoenix Desert Botanical Gardens, Tusayan, Grand Canyon South Rim, Tusayan. Accom: Best Western, Tusayan.
- Day 14** Tusayan, Grand Canyon South Rim, Tusayan. Accom: Best Western, Tusayan.
- Day 15** Tusayan, Grand Canyon South Rim, Page, Antelope Canyon, Monument Valley. Accom: View Hotel, Monument Valley.
- Day 16** Monument Valley. Accom: View Hotel, Monument Valley.
- Day 17** Monument Valley, Grand Canyon South Rim, Tucson. Accom: Comfort Suites, Sabino Canyon, Tucson.
- Day 18** Tucson, Tanque Verde Wash, flight from Tucson to London Heathrow (via Los Angeles).
- Day 19** Arrive London Heathrow.

When

The breeding season in Arizona spans from March to August, however the summer monsoons of July to September could play havoc with a late season birding trip. Some migrant species do not appear in Arizona until late May or even June, and attention should therefore be paid to the arrival dates of target species when formulating an itinerary. April and May tend to be the peak months for visiting birders and some accommodation will need to be booked well in advance for this period, in particular the highly recommended [Cave Creek Ranch](#) in the Chiricahua Mountains.

If one includes a visit to the Grand Canyon and Monument Valley, bookings should also be made in advance to secure accommodation at these sites, due to the intense tourist interest. Also note that the weather at the latter locations can be vastly different from the warm southern reaches of the State; we experienced snow on the Grand Canyon South Rim just a day after leaving the oppressive desert heat of Phoenix!

How

Our flight was with American Airlines, who were not particularly cheap but did offer the most flexible connection options. Unfortunately budget flights from the UK to Arizona are not available, so expect to pay a significant sum and probably also make a connection in the USA.

Car hire was provided by the highly recommended [Alamo](#), although the specification of the Jeep Compass which we were allocated was a little disappointing in light of the last couple of 'mid-range SUVs' we have hired from this company. The use of dirt roads in the vicinity of California Gulch, the Chiricahua Mountains and also Monument Valley make the selection of a high-clearance vehicle strongly advisable. In total we covered a fraction over 2,500 miles during our nineteen day circuit.

Accommodation and restaurants were all sourced through the invaluable [Trip Advisor](#) website, and every hotel we used proved to be worthy of commendation, with the exception of our choice in Phoenix. Details of individual hotels are included in both the itinerary above and the Daily Diary section of the report, plus comments on eateries in the latter.

The essential [Cloudbirders](#) trip report resource provided some useful information, however most of the Arizona reports listed here are written by commercial organisations and therefore offered only limited detailed assistance. The [eBird](#) online distribution mapping service proved to be as useful as ever, whilst the somewhat dated 'Finding Birds in South East Arizona', published by the Tucson Audubon Society, still provides some worthwhile advice and map coverage.

Several local birders offered useful support, namely John Higgins, Diana Herron, Steven Prager, Bob Rodriguez and Reed Peters, however it is my long-lost Leicestershire birding pal, Richard Fray, who deserves the headlines in the list of credits. Not only did Richard, now a resident of Rio Rico, accompany us on our travels for the best part of two days, he even put us up in his house for the Santa Rita leg of the tour.

Richard, who has honed his birding skills over twelve years of residency in the State, now operates as an independent bird guide [The Arizona Birder](#). His knowledge of not only the birds of the region, but also mammals, reptiles, dragonflies, butterflies and botany, is second-to-none and I would strongly recommend his services to anyone visiting the State. Book early to avoid disappointment, however, as not surprisingly he is very busy these days!

Daily Diary:

Saturday 2nd May

Arizona is neither the easiest or cheapest destination to which to travel from the UK, and the descent of our ageing American Airlines Boeing 757 over the Santa Catalina Mountains to Tucson Airport is therefore something of a relief. The farcical US Immigration rituals have already seen us clear customs in Dallas, which at least smoothes the process further down the line and soon we are loading the bags into the Alamo

Jeep Compass which is set to be our trusty steed for the next 2.5 weeks; it is something of an unrefined tank, in comparison with some of the rented SUVs we have recently driven, but it does feel sturdy enough to complete the task in hand.

The Tomtom ably guides us on the thirty minute ride through town to the [Sabino Canyon Comfort Suites Motel](#), where we step out into a beautifully warm desert evening and promptly go shopping at an adjacent store, to procure the next day's picnic fare. The Comfort Suites have a slightly quirky fake-rustic façade, but the rooms are great, staff incredibly helpful and it is perfectly placed for accessing the Santa Catalina Mountains, our destination for the following day.

Sunday 3rd May

In recognition of twenty-four relatively sleepless hours in transit, first-light birding is curtailed in favour of a 06.30 visit to our well-provisioned breakfast bar. Here, as we cook our blueberry waffles, an excited waitress congratulates us on the arrival of 'our' new British Royal baby; now there's a personal welcome for you!

The route out of town to the northeast is very straightforward from the Comfort Suites and soon we are ascending the Mount Lemmon Highway, which winds through a spectacular landscape of steep dry slopes, liberally dotted with towering green saguaro cacti. At the upper limit of the 'saguaro zone' is our first official birding site of the trip, and we pull into the Molino Canyon Vista parking area at 1200m elevation.

The draw of permanent water in the base of the canyon, plus a profusion of orange flowering Ocotillos, make for a particularly bird-rich area and nearly two full hours fly past before we drag ourselves away. In this time we notch up Rock Wren, Western Tanager, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Black-throated Sparrow, Verdin, Audubon's Warbler, Anna's and Broad-billed Hummingbirds, as I grapple to recall features and sounds of species I've not encountered in donkey's years! Undoubted highlights here are my two ticks, in the form of a spanking male Costa's Hummingbird, sporting his full iridescent pink beard and helmet, and a dainty little Lucy's Warbler, with his unique rusty rump and crown-patch.

Climbing ever-higher, under a clear turquoise sky and past ranks of lycra-clad cyclists, it is hard to avoid innumerable photo-stops of the stunning vistas looking all the way down to Tucson, which sprawls across the plain far below. Eventually the sweeping curves bring us into the relative cool of the Sky Island tree-zone, where we come to a halt in the fresh pine-scented air of Rose Canyon, and in particular the Lizard Rock Campground.

We are now at 2100m and the pine forest seems alive with birds. A new species is collected immediately upon exiting the car, as the first of many attractive little Grace's Warblers sings as it gleans the uppermost needles of the tall Ponderosa Pines. Family groups of Plumbeous Vireos call loudly and House Wrens sing from exposed understorey perches. Soon the distinctive song of Buff-breasted Flycatcher is heard, leading me to a fine example of one of the less-challenging *Empidonax* identification puzzles. This is my main target bird here and is a member of the newly established Mount Lemmon population of this high altitude pine specialist.

Pairs of smart Yellow-eyed Juncos feed at ground level, in contrast to the vocal Greater Pewee which chooses to call from the highest perches. Pine Siskin, Western Bluebird, Pygmy and White-breasted Nuthatches move through the fragrant needles, alongside another personal favourite, the luminous-orange and inappropriately-named Olive Warbler, a bird which is neither olive or a warbler! Broad-tailed and Magnificent Hummingbird wrap up the bird list at this outstanding location, with a new mammal added too, in the form of the chunky tassel-eared Abert's Squirrel, which is actually the only individual seen on the whole trip.

Rose Canyon Lake proves to be a magnet for Saturday fishermen and barbeque enthusiasts, so we vacate the area in favour of the excellent Incinerator Road and Ridge Trail, another highly scenic and bird-rich section of Mount Lemmon. Although they prove to be numerous in high elevation Sky Island pines, it is still

a pleasure to collect the first Painted Redstarts of the trip, alongside Hermit and Orange-crowned Warblers, more Western Bluebirds and Spotted Towhees. Steller's Jays chatter and Hermit Thrushes sing sweetly from dense cover, while both Tree Swallows and their beautifully iridescent Violet-green cousins perch on the fire-scorched corpses of ridgetop pines, alongside the ultra-numerous but extremely attractive Acorn Woodpecker. Last notebook entry is for the distinctive Virginia's Warbler, these being the only examples we find on the entire trip.

We feel we have earned our mountain-top picnic and siesta, savoured amongst the most dramatic views, in a spot almost devoid of other visitors in spite of the Saturday popularity of this highly appealing Sky Island. The remainder of the day is spent at lower altitude, where the General Hitchcock Campground adds Black-throated Grey Warbler, Northern Flicker and Mexican Jay to the list, while further down-slope in the desert habitat of the Babag Doag Viewpoint we encounter Bushtit, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Cactus Wren and the ever-charismatic cartoon star, the Greater Roadrunner.

As Victoria and I differ quite significantly in our level of enthusiasm for owling, the deal is that I drop her off at the hotel before commencing my nocturnal quest, hence I am alone when I return to Bear Canyon at 20.00. Mexican Whip-poor-wills are calling in the picnic area close by and I soon have one in the spotlight, although the only other night-time vocalisation at this location comes from a Flammulated Owl which is both frustratingly distant and highly intermittent.

In an attempt to find a more obliging Flammulated Owl I head much higher, to the Bear Wallows Road, however at this altitude the climate is cold, windy and very inhospitable, so I soon make a return to the relative sheltered climes of Bear Canyon. It is now 22.00 and things are clearly starting to warm up on the owl front, as multiple calling Flammulated and Whiskered Screech Owls can be heard. The Flammulated Owl calls remain either very irregular or rather distant, however, and it takes quite a hike up a steep hillside in order to get into the immediate vicinity of a continuously calling bird. This proves to be just the start of the duel, however, as the tiny owl chooses the tops of the tallest, densest pine trees from which to call, and hence leads me on a merry dance up and down steep slopes for the next two hours.

Finally the spotlight catches a tiny form, huddled close to the main trunk, and I have him! My photos won't win any prizes, but it is a huge relief to have secured the trickiest owl in Arizona on my first night and I happily commence my descent to the parked car, with my watch reading 23.58.

Nearing Tucson, I nonchalantly crawl over a stop sign rather than coming to the compulsory full halt, as surely no-one will mind at this time of night? A second later the blue flashing lights appear in the mirrors and I curse my lack of concentration. Next mistake is to open the car door, as instantly a command of 'close the door and put your hands on the wheel' is yelled over the police tannoy! It's all a little un-nerving and I expect to have the book thrown at me, however the Hispanic police officer is not only polite and understanding, but we actually get along so well that he leaves me the name of his favourite Mexican restaurant in town; it's been quite a day!

Monday 4th May

With a rather full itinerary ahead we pack our bags and check out of the Comfort Suites at 06.00, before breakfast has appeared, to head west on the commuter-laden Tucson streets. Emerging from the busy suburbs we enter another world, a land of steep hillsides clad with the majestic towering forms of saguaros, prickly pears, chollas and deciduous shrubs sporting a flush of spring greenery. This is the Tucson Mountain Park, which protects a pristine tract of saguaro desert habitat, an incredibly dry environment in which we find ourselves enveloped in a huge thunderstorm! The prevailing weather is something of a surprise, but the downpour has produced a vivid rainbow which arcs between the saguaro limbs to create a unique vision of precipitation-driven beauty in the normally barren environment.

Pulling into the David Yetman West Trailhead car park we snatch of series of images before the rainbow's colours dissipate, and find that the downpour has flushed a surge of avian activity into the desert. The valley echoes to birdsong, with Curve-billed Thrashers, Cactus Wrens, Pyrrhuloxias and Gila Woodpeckers

all competing for breeding space. The target bird in this habitat is the saguaro-dependent Gilded Flicker, and it doesn't take long before we are enjoying the flash of bright-yellow primaries, from which this distinctive desert woodpecker takes its name.

Before the temperature has climbed too high, we continue to the Mile Wide Road and latterly the Reservation Road, which are clearly prime habitat for both Gambel's Quail and Lark Bunting. I am armed with some advice on where best to search for the localised Bendire's Thrasher, amongst the arid brush and grassland, where it only takes a short time to locate this comparatively mini-billed dry grassland specialist.

With the target birds in the bag, our breakfast picnic is consumed back at the David Yetman West Trailhead, whose unspoilt desert habitat has already established itself as a favourite location. With several bonus hours at our disposal, we explore the walking trails which climb the surrounding hillsides, sketching and photographing this fascinating desert environment, but carefully avoiding the cholla spines!

With our work done in Tucson, it is time to move south, and for a long-awaited rendezvous. In the 1980s and 1990s my Leicestershire birding exploits saw me become firm friends with Richard Fray, culminating in a fantastic birding trip around much of the southern portion of Mexico in 2002. Soon after this date Richard left the UK, for a new life in Arizona, where he quickly learnt everything there is to know about a huge spectrum of the State's flora and fauna, and more recently set himself up as the area's premier bird guide, [The Arizona Birder](#). After helping greatly in the planning of the trip, Richard has offered not only to put us up in his Rio Rico home, but also to take us out for a couple of days, in his beloved Southern Arizona.

Our meeting place is Green Valley, at the very pleasant [Miguel's Restaurant](#). Over some tasty fajitas we commence the catch-up of several years-worth of news, then it's out to the field to commence the afternoon's ticking session. Not far from Green Valley a brief stop at an area of dry riparian mesquite soon produces a pair of smart little Rufous-winged Sparrows, then we continue on to the Santa Rita Mountains and the locality of Florida Canyon to be precise.

Here Richard shows us a family party of newly-fledged Black-capped Gnatcatchers, an ultra-scarce species in Arizona, at a known nest site, where Bell's Vireo, Hooded Oriole and a very confiding Northern Beardless Tyrannulet are also present. Out in the nearby grassland Richard also has a stake-out for the much-wanted chunky Botteri's Sparrow, another bird which is photogenically obliging and has a tiny range in the USA

Travelling a short distance to Madera Canyon and the famous Santa Rita Lodge feeding stations for the last light of the day, Black-headed Grosbeak, Black-chinned, Broad-billed and Magnificent Hummingbirds all entertain. Here we are invited to tag onto Richard's nightbirding tour group, which opens the account with an Elf Owl peering from his nest hole in a telegraph pole beside the Lodge. It takes very little effort to tempt in a wonderful Whiskered Screech Owl from the oak woodland, with a few whistled notes, making for one very happy tour group.

At this point the heavens open, meaning that our attempts at the ever-elusive Proctor Road Buff-collared Nightjars are something of a write-off, so the group disbands and we go our separate ways. Following Richard back to his spacious home in the unspoilt suburbs of Rio Rico, we are introduced to Tuesday, the age-defying cat, and Minnow, the enthusiastic Chihuahua, before bedding down in anticipation of a long day to follow.

Tuesday 5th May

Dawn quite literally sheds a whole new light on Richard's magnificent property, and it isn't difficult to see why he chose to settle in this beautiful corner of the Sonoran Desert, complete with three-sixty-degree views to the four surrounding mountain ranges, plus ten acres of desert nature reserve to call his own.

Following a hearty breakfast we head to the south, then the west, following a birders' pilgrimage along the Ruby Road and into the rolling Atascosa Mountains. The further west we travel, the more undulating and imposing the scenery becomes, as the tarmac road gives way to a winding dirt track. At Playa Blanca

Canyon we note Lucy's Warbler, Dusky-capped Flycatcher and Rock Squirrel, plus the distinctive call of Montezuma Quail. Nearby a Zone-tailed Hawk drifts over the road, a species which I have not seen for many-a-long-year; it is amazing to note the uncanny Turkey Vulture mimicry of this crafty *Buteo*.

Next stop is at the more leafy riparian vegetation of Sycamore Canyon, which provides some welcome shade as the temperature begins to climb. As we make our way through this dramatic cleft in the orange rocks we record Summer Tanager, Yellow-breasted Chat, Vermillion Flycatcher and Northern Beardless Tyrannulet. The disjunct *fulva* race of Eastern Bluebird which occurs here lacks the blue chin of its more easterly counterparts and has been mooted as a separate species by some.

Hammond's Flycatcher, Painted Redstart, White-throated Swift, Lincoln's Sparrow, Bridled Titmouse and Warbling Vireo are added to the list in our prolonged exploration, along with our first Arizona Woodpecker and a rather brief view of a flushed pair of Montezuma Quail. Although Elegant Trogon fails to cooperate, some compensation comes in the form of the strikingly-marked Elegant Earless Lizard and the odd little warty Canyon Tree Frog.

After our picnic lunch in the shade of a huge sycamore, we venture further into 'smuggler country', moving to a spot just a few miles shy of the Mexican border and an area where the green-and-white 4WDs of the Border Patrol Agency are a regular reminder that this is a prime crossing point for migrants bound for new lives in the USA. In contrast, our goal here is not to make our fortune, however it is something quite high on the trip priority list, as we have arrived at the only location in the USA to support a population of Five-striped Sparrows.

The steep barren hillsides of California Gulch hold a stark beauty, though the desperate migrants who pass this way are no doubt less inclined to savour their surroundings in this dry and thorny environment. Descending the steep track into the Gulch, we pass the unfeasibly tiny nest of a Black-throated Hummingbird, whose two white eggs nestle like tiny peas in the mossy cup; both would happily rest on one fingernail! At the base of the Gulch, a narrow but permanent stream fuels a ribbon of green vegetation, which Richard informs us is the permanent residence of the Five-striped Sparrow. This takes quite a little demonstrating in the afternoon heat, but eventually the large and attractively marked sparrow is coaxed into view, to reveal its striking black-and-white face and distinctive black breast-spot.

Driving north and out of the dry border-country we call in at Arivaca Lake, a man-made feature which attracts an interesting set of species, most notably the hefty Thick-billed Kingbird at one of its few reliable sites in the USA. Western Kingbird, Cassin's Vireo and Yellow Warbler are added to our day-list, with Western Grebe, Ruddy Duck, American Coot and Killdeer all present on the lake. Highlight here, and possibly of the day, comes when Vic picks out a mega-mammal from the moving car and we make an emergency stop to savour the madly-proportioned Antelope Jackrabbit. These incredible creatures must possess the largest ears of all the *Leporids*, no doubt an adaptation of the need to keep cool in the Sonoran Desert, and we marvel at the roadside pair of this predominantly Mexican species whose range only just reaches into the USA, in southern Arizona.

Last stop of the day comes at the Amado Water Treatment Plant, a home-from-home for a wastewater engineer, and a site which provides an interesting final bird-injection for the day. Neotropical Cormorants dry their outstretched wings, a group of a dozen delightful Wilson's Phalaropes whirl on the still water and, most importantly, I get a tick in the form of Mexican Duck. In the distance Lesser Nighthawks are already active, and under a nearby freeway bridge is a nesting colony of 'Mexican' Cliff Swallows, of the *melanogaster* race which lacks a white forehead and no doubt gives rise to most of the Cave Swallow claims in this part of the world!

It's been quite an action-packed day, but we're not quite done and after a quick Rio Rico spruce-up we head out to celebrate our successes at the outstanding [Elvira's Restaurant](#) in Tubac. With the most friendly staff, fascinating décor and a mouth-watering Mexican menu, this is a must-visit location; my Mole Negro is undoubtedly the meal-of-the-trip, and Vic's Tamarind Margarita has to be the number-one cocktail!

Wednesday 6th May

Today Richard has departed well before dawn on a guiding appointment, leaving Vic and I to head out not-quite-so-early for a day at Madera Canyon. With more time on our hands we are able to savour this outstanding locality, starting at the head of the canyon and the Carrie Nation Trail.

In my experience, the Sky Island forests possess a real sweet-spot in terms of bird activity; arrive too early and things are yet to get moving, arrive too late and the heat has suppressed activity. As we walk through the beautiful oak and sycamore woodland we seem to have hit our timing right on the nose, and birdsong echoes through the branches. Mexican Jays, White-breasted Nuthatches, Yellow-eyed Juncos, Painted Redstarts and Hepatic Tanagers move amongst the fresh spring leaves and Magnificent Hummingbirds whirl past.

Our target at Madera Canyon is Elegant Trogon and not far from the head of the Carrie Nation Trail, a male begins to call. Following a frantic scramble up a steep hillside I catch a quick glimpse before he flies off, and then on our return walk it is Vic who picks out the same bird perched at head height right above the creek, from which spot he continues to call for the next half-an-hour. The iridescent green upperparts, yellow bill, bright red belly and intricately patterned undertail of this tropical beauty make him one of the most desired birds by visitors to the State, and viewed up-close it is easy to understand why.

Hermit Thrushes hop through darker tangles, Plumbeous Vireos call loudly and Western Wood Pewees hawk insects from exposed branches as we descend the lively trail. Arizona Grey Squirrel is a new mammal for us and the darker-throated, barred-flanked *Troglodites* singers are identified as Brown-throated Wrens, possibly a new bird and possibly not, depending on your taxonomic affinities.

Having enjoyed our early morning hike so much, we pick another trail on which to continue our Madera Canyon exploration. This time we take the unimaginatively-named Super Trail, which climbs more steeply through the deciduous trees and into open pine woods, providing spectacular views both up and down the canyon. Black-throated Grey, Grace's and Hermit Warblers gather in small treetop flocks, along with Bridled Titmice, Hutton's Vireos and Painted Redstarts. Amongst the many butterflies on the wing, we identify spectacular Two-tailed Swallowtails and the dashing Arizona Sister, on a diverse and very rewarding walk.

It would be rude not to spend a little more time at the famous Santa Rita Lodge feeders, so on the way back through the canyon we join the small crowd for a drink and a ringside seat at the feeding stations. Anna's, Magnificent, Broad-billed and Black-chinned Hummingbirds are all in attendance at the bottled 'nectar', whilst the fat and seed attract Pine Siskins and Lesser Goldfinches by the score, brutish Black-headed Grosbeaks, Hepatic Tanager and a constant stream of Acorn Woodpeckers.

Now in need of a bite of lunch, we take a short ride back south to Tubac, a pleasant little retirement town which sports some fine restaurants and more than its fair share of gift shops. We single out [Wisdom's Dos Café](#), which proves to be the perfect choice and we dine outdoors on the most scrumptious burritos and home-made ice cream.

A return evening visit to Santa Rita Lodge adds a larger-than life male Wild Turkey and some rather cute Yellow-nosed Cotton Rats, which are very approachable below the feeders, as the light starts to fail. Without the attendant tour group with which we shared our previous evening visit, it is much easier to get up-close and personal with the local owls and soon we have secured some very tasty images of both Whiskered Screech Owl and Elf Owl, although the Proctor Road Buff-collared Nightjars have clearly given up all interest in entertaining their fans, so we return to Rio Rico to share the day's stories with Richard.

Thursday 7th May

Having collected all of the area's key target birds in the last couple of days, we can afford to be a little more speculative this morning, so Richard and I leave behind our better judgement and depart early for Tubac and its notoriously difficult-to-see Sinaloa Wren. This Mexican vagrant, one of only four to have ever been

seen in the USA, has now been around for a couple of years, but has taken up residence on private land and shows itself at frustratingly rare intervals.

We assume a position next to a footpath leading from a small housing development, in a nice block of riparian woodland. Over the next two hours we note Abert's and Green-tailed Towhees, Rufous-winged Sparrow and Song Sparrow of the *fallax* race, a pale ruddy form which is sometimes referred to as Desert Song Sparrow. The Sinaloa Wren is actually heard to sing for a very short while, but predictably fails to show, though our prolonged vigil does give time for plenty more catching up and putting the world to rights!

Travelling a little further south, Richard takes me to his American Barn Owl roost, where we enjoy some spectacular looks at a pearly-breasted male, staring serenely down at us. At the Rio Rico Ponds we encounter a pair of Tropical Kingbirds, a species whose range just creeps into the USA in South East Arizona, plus Bullock's Oriole, and a fly-over from a pair of Grey Hawks. No less than forty-five comically-proportioned Black-bellied Whistling Ducks are also counted, and on a smaller water body we find a pair of subtly attractive Mexican Ducks.

And so ends the birding in this part of the State, as we return to Rio Rico to pack our bags and say our farewells to Richard, who has been so generous, entertaining and insightful over the last couple of days. We wish him continued success with his blossoming business and head for the mountains, or at least the low hills just a half-hour's drive away, and the charming little town of Patagonia.

Patagonia has a particularly relaxed and friendly small-town atmosphere which instantly appeals, as we visit a couple of shops, chat to the locals and stop for lunch at the highly recommended [Gathering Grounds Restaurant](#). The real reason for visiting Patagonia, however, is to follow in the footsteps of every other birder who has ever been to South East Arizona and pay homage to the famous Paton's House and its amazing feeding stations.

Run by the Tucson Audubon Society, the extensive grounds of the large rural homestead are provisioned with all manner of bird feeders, and the avian action here is non-stop. From our comfortable shaded chairs we sit and observe for an hour-and-a-half, as Inca Doves, Gambel's Quail, Gila, Hairy and Acorn Woodpeckers, White-breasted Nuthatches, Summer Tanagers, Black-headed Grosbeaks and Song Sparrows come-and-go.

It is the hummingbirds which draw the crowds here, however, and amongst the many Broad-billed and Anna's Hummingbirds we are honoured with regular visits from a gorgeous Violet-crowned Hummingbird, at this site which is the most reliable place in the whole of the USA for this predominantly Mexican species. Bird food attracts mammals too, and several Yellow-nosed Cane Rats scamper below the seed feeders, while we also study the fascinating antics of a Botta's Pocket Gopher, which is engaged in the creation of an extension to his subterranean home and regularly shows himself above ground, between bouts of excavation.

Leaving Patagonia we head east, into a more open landscape of rolling grassy plains and cattle ranches, where careful scanning of roadside fences gives us a couple of Lilian's Meadowlarks, the distinctive *lilianae* race of Eastern Meadowlark which is certainly worth bagging in case of future taxonomic repositioning. As ever in the USA, the drive to Sierra Vista is scenic, relaxed, and very straightforward, and we check into the excellent [Hampton Inn](#) with daylight still to spare.

Sierra Vista is a modern city with a host of amenities, nestled at the foot of the imposing Huachuca Mountains, though tonight we do not linger with the dramatic views. Although Victoria's appetite for chasing owls is not quite up to my threshold, the successes at Madera Canyon have clearly raised her level of enthusiasm and she doesn't take much persuading to join me in a visit to the San Pedro Riparian NCA, which is located just twenty minutes down the road from the hotel. This is my local site for Western Screech Owl, a species which has driven me to despair on a winter visit to California just over a year before.

Behind San Pedro House we find a likely looking patch of trees, in which to wait for the daylight to dissipate and the last visitors to depart. Once it is truly dark, the iPod gives the briefest of Western Screech Owl renditions and instantly a bird responds from the nearby bushes. A matter of seconds later and I am five metres away from a stunning little Western Screech Owl, sitting at head height on an unobscured branch. His ear tufts are raised in defiance as he stares at us with blazing yellow eyes, showing clear indignation at the interruption of his early evening moth-chasing foray. Having secured a set of definitive images we leave him in peace; if only all owling was like this!

The Circle-K en route back to the hotel provides us with some celebratory wine and nibbles, with which to see out the remainder of the evening in our very comfortable suite.

Friday 8th May

Our civilised Hampton Inn breakfast is accompanied by a background of TV news, confirming the General Election result that the Conservative Party will be at the helm of UK government for the next five years, before we make the thirty minute drive south to Miller Canyon.

A birding trip to Arizona is all about owls, and they don't come much bigger and better than the Spotted Owl. With an estimated total population of just 15,000 individuals across its entire range, Birdlife classify the Spotted Owl as Near Threatened and declining. With a requirement for old-growth oak and conifer forests, this species has decreased rapidly in the north west of its range due to the controversial logging of native forests, while it is also being out-competed and displaced by the more aggressive Barred Owl.

Consequently, Arizona is the place where probably ninety-nine percent of the world's birders add Spotted Owl to their life lists, and today we hope to emulate this act. News in the months before our departure has provided something of an emotional owl rollercoaster, however, as the Miller Canyon Spotted Owls have changed nest site this year and have been absent from the usual roosts for weeks on end.

All seems positive enough at the famous Beatty's Guest Ranch, however, where Tom Beatty Senior gives us directions of where to look for both Spotted Owls and Flame-coloured Tanagers in Miller Canyon, which is most easily accessed via the Beatty Ranch, upon payment of a small fee. This is understandably a very popular site amongst the birding fraternity, and we make our way through the oaks, sycamores and pines of this extremely scenic canyon in the company of several other visitors from various corners of the States.

Little birding is done on the uphill leg, with a focus very much on the spotty *Strix*, which I still refuse to believe is present until I have my bins focussed upon it. A friendly American bird tour guide helps us out with the pinpointing of the easily-missed roosting tree, as although the bird often hauls up close to the trail it is easy to lose in the dense pine needles. And there it is, an absolutely gorgeous male Spotted Owl, staring down at us through slitted eyes and with a gentle expression that belies the strength of a huge pair of sharp talons and a powerful lemon-yellow hooked bill.

Following several frustrating efforts to catch up with this star species in California, and the anguish on the run-up to this trip, it is immensely pleasurable to just sit back on a rock and soak up every detail on this headline bird. Our owl lounges on a fully exposed branch to display white peppering around his warm brown facial disc and bold, elongated spots to darker underparts, distinctive of the southern race *S. o. lucida*, also known as Mexican Spotted Owl.

With a suitably full memory card, we set off to climb a little higher up the canyon to a locality where a pair of Flame-coloured Tanagers are alleged to be building a nest. It doesn't take too long for the gaudy male to appear, much to the pleasure of the assembled ABA listing crowd, then we make our escape to enjoy some more relaxed birding in a rather less congested part of the forest. Red-faced Warblers are in full song in the higher reaches of the canyon, where both Brown-throated and Canyon Wrens are also particularly vocal.

Hepatic Tanager, Greater Pewee, Arizona Woodpecker, Black-throated Grey Warbler, Painted Redstart and the other usual Sky Island forest fare grace our walk back down to ranch level, where we spend some time

with the hummingbirds at the Beatty's nectar dispensary. In a short time on the grandstand seating we notch up Anna's, Broad-billed, Black-throated and Magnificent Hummingbirds, plus a bonus male Costa's, a species which is something of a rare visitor to feeding stations.

Leaving Miller Canyon, we follow signs to the nearby Ash Canyon, where we intend to visit another private feeding station; it transpires that the Ash Canyon Bed and Breakfast isn't actually in the canyon and hence we fail to find any feeders, let alone birds! Final stop of the day is therefore Carr Canyon, which is reached via a dramatically scenic drive on a dirt track which weaves through dozens of switchbacks, on a route carved into the rock of the steep Huachuca Mountain wall. The views across the flat valley bottom, over which Sierra Vista city spreads, are quite breath-taking, whilst the ascent also provides a closer view of the huge white mass of the Border Agency airship, which hangs ominously over the landscape to provide a platform from which uninvited Mexican immigrants may be detected.

At an altitude of over 2100m, the temperatures at the Reef Townsite Campground are much lower than those at the previous destinations of the day and we add several layers of clothing before taking a short uphill hike through the open, willow-dominated landscape. At this time of day the birds are not particularly active, but we do encounter a couple of pairs of Buff-breasted Flycatchers, which are clearly contesting breeding rites, as they call and chase through the undergrowth.

Arizona Woodpecker is the only bird of note within the pines of the campground, before we slowly retrace our steps all the way back to our Sierra Vista hotel. Tonight's chosen dining venue is the [Pizzeria Mimosa](#), which is a fifteen minute drive from the Hampton Inn, south to the scattered settlement of Hereford. The short drive is well worthwhile, however, as the restaurant has a lively atmosphere, friendly staff and serves the most wonderful Italian cuisine.

Saturday 9th May

This morning's start is a rather sedate affair, with our 08.00 arrival at Ramsey Canyon timed to hit the Sky Island sweet-spot of bird activity. We pay our dues to the extremely welcoming volunteers in the visitors' centre and then head up-slope, through the most beautiful deciduous woodland which covers the floor of the wide canyon.

One of the first birds to appear is a very handsome Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, another sought-after ABA tick, whose range only just makes it into the USA in the Madrean Sky Islands; it is the only one we see on the whole trip. Following the line of huge sycamores along the crystal clear stream in the canyon base, we note Red-faced and Hermit Warblers, Painted Redstart, White-breasted Nuthatch and an Arizona Grey Squirrel. A calling Elegant Trogon soon leads us to his perch, with at least one other vocal bird noted close by. Coues White-tailed Deer, the small Arizona subspecies of this widespread ruminant, graze at the meadow edges and American Robins hop through the leaf litter.

After half a kilometre, the track bends to the south and rises more steeply through pines, eventually delivering us to the most magnificent viewpoint, which provides a panoramic outlook across a huge swathe of forested mountains, framed by a cloudless blue sky. It also provides us with an interesting identification challenge, as a sizeable rodent scampers between the boulders below us. The large ears make him a Woodrat, and subsequent study of photos put him most probably in the Mexican Woodrat camp; he's quite a charismatic chap, regardless!

After some socialising with the local Saturday morning hikers and the compulsory visit to the reserve gift shop, we make our way across Sierra Vista and to San Pedro House, where we consume our picnic lunch in the company of Gila Woodpeckers, Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Ground Doves. The gift shop fare is even more irresistible here, then it's time to put away the bins for a few hours as we head for the nearby town of Tombstone.

Made famous in a series of Wild West movies, Tombstone is the place where the Gunfight at the OK Corral actually took place, and is now something of a local tourist honeypot. Our first point of call is the OK Corral

itself, where every day of the year at 14.00, the gunfight is restaged by a group of Colt 45-toting actors. Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday and the gang are all present, and the half-hour reproduction is certainly an entertaining account of the events which took place on the fateful day, back in 1881.

We watch a filmshow recounting the history of the town, take a short ride in a horse-drawn stagecoach and eat ice cream as we wander the historic covered walkways and restored saloons of this quirky little insight into life in a frontier town, when the west really was wild. There are only so many Stetsons and spurs one can photograph, however, and we lose the crowds for the final hours of the day with a detour to Fairbanks, a local 'ghost town' which turns out to consist of a few tumbledown wooden sheds!

The walking trails around Fairbanks reveal Vermillion Flycatcher, Canyon Towhee, Black-throated Sparrow and a few other arid-ground specialists, then it's back to the Hampton Inn for a spruce-up and a return visit to our favoured local eatery, the Pizzeria Mimosa.

Sunday 10th May

After our final Hampton Inn breakfast we check out, and this time head for Hunter Canyon, probably the least visited of the Huachuca Mountain birding localities. Following a lengthy dirt road through dry grassland and mesquite, we arrive at an isolated car park from which a winding trail leads to the canyon proper.

Rufous-capped Warbler is another Mexican species which has expanded its range northwards in recent times, with a handful of pairs now resident in suitable Arizonan habitat. Hunter Canyon is one such site, though my directions have been gleaned from eBird just the night before and are correspondingly vague. It is therefore something of a surprise when a singing male Rufous-capped Warbler pops up on top of a bush, to display a humbug-striped rufous, black and white head, plus dazzling sulphur-yellow throat and upper breast; what a cracking little bird!

Moving further up-slope, we reach the wooded section of the canyon, where the trail starts to degenerate as we walk through tall, open pine forest. It's a great birding site, with Arizona Woodpecker, Cordilleran and Buff-breasted Flycatchers all noted, before I try a little *Glaucidium* on the iPod to see what else can be tempted in.

It is amazing how often, when birding, that you only seem to be able to find your target birds when you have forgotten that you are actually looking for them; this is probably the first time, out of the dozens of previous renditions, that I have played my Mountain Pygmy Owl recording without consciously trying to attract this species, and a real live Pygmy Owl immediately responds! Although close by, his tiny form takes a little picking out in the high pine tops, but eventually I spy the burning yellow eyes, streaked white breast and distinctive long tail of this fierce little owl. Mountain Pygmy Owl is firmly on the list, and the fifth and final owl tick of the trip has been secured.

This time we have some decent directions to the Ash Canyon B&B Feeders, which in our defence is located a little way short of the canyon itself! The array of feeding stations which surround Mary Jo's property are fantastic and the birdlife in the grounds nothing short of prolific. Scott's Orioles, Ladder-backed and Gila Woodpeckers, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Mexican Jays and a host of other Sky Island fare jostle for position on the seed feeders and fat dispensers, making it difficult to tear one's self away. The supermarket beckons, however, and we make our return to Sierra Vista for a basket-filling session of significant proportions, as we will be entirely self-sufficient for the next three days and nights in the Chiricahua Mountains.

With a bulging car boot we set off east, through another constantly-changing and ever-spectacular landscape; with a very appropriate country music channel on air and the cruise control set, one can never tire of a good old US road trip. As the miles click by, the outlook changes from mesquite to sparse yellow grassland, and the Huachuca Mountains give way to an equally splendid Chiricahua backdrop, as we almost enter New Mexico, then dogleg to the northwest.

Our access to the Chiricahua Mountains is via the little hamlet of Portal, whose name proves to be so apt as it acts as the gateway to the jagged peaks which flank Cave Creek and provides the most spectacular Sky Island vista we have seen to date. Our ultimate destination is [Cave Creek Ranch](#), a short drive beyond Portal, and rightly famed in birding circles as one of the most outstanding lodging localities in the State. We have booked our cabin a full six months in advance of the tour, but our endeavours are extremely worthwhile and we instantly fall in love with this secluded setting, in which all manner of wildlife abounds.

Laura at the front desk could not be a more helpful host and the Cave Creek Ranch proprietor, Reed Peters, is an absolute mine of local bird and mammal information. Our river-side chalet is equipped with everything one could desire from the perfect retreat, including seed and sugar water for its own private feeders. As Cliff Chipmunks and Rock Squirrels compete for the sunflower hearts and Blue-throated Hummingbirds chase around the nectar, it takes an absolute age to actually unload the car!

The Cave Creek menu has tonight earmarked for a barbeque, and it doesn't take long before the steak and sausages are sizzling, the beer and wine are flowing, and we savour the heavens full of stars in this perfect Sky Island setting. The ranch is remote, relaxing and an instant home-from-home, quite easily winning the accolade of our most favourite accommodation of the whole trip.

To help the food go down we take a little wander, finding several fearless Hooded Skunks roaming the grounds, a couple of vocal families of gorgeous little Elf Owls and, slightly further afield, another superbly obliging Whiskered Screech Owl. Fantastic home-cooked cuisine, a surfeit of beer and wine, and some sumptuous views of two different owls; what more could one desire on a trip?

Monday 11th May

Pre-breakfast, I can't resist a quick try for the Rufous-backed Robin which has allegedly spent the last couple of months in the vicinity of Portal Store, but neither I nor the other handful of assembled birders can catch sight of this notoriously elusive vagrant. So I return for my hearty Cave Creek breakfast, where at our outdoor table we dine with Cliff Chipmunk, Rock Squirrel and Coues White-tailed Deer, then we load up the Jeep for a morning in the mountains.

After a couple of miles on tarmac, following a valley-bottom route through oaks and sycamores, the road turns to gravel and begins to climb through mixed forest. At around 1800m we come to a halt at East Turkey Creek, where the Cave Creek Road meets the Paradise Road, to find some great forest and a good variety of birds. Red-faced Warbler, Arizona Woodpecker and Yellow-eyed Junco, plus all the other montane regulars are noted in an hour's wanderings, together with another brief look at a flushed pair of Montezuma Quail. There is a distinct lack of any Mexican Chickadees, however, now one of my principal Chiricahua targets at what is its only Arizona locality, and so we continue upwards in search of this high altitude specialist.

The views from the winding road become increasingly spectacular, as we weave through the pine forest and make occasional stops. Red-breasted Nuthatch and Grace's Warblers are noted, as we climb all the way to Rustler Park at the 2400m mark. The area around the Park has been ravaged by forest fires in recent years, making the habitat rather less inviting in this area, though we do note Red-faced Warbler, numerous Steller's Jays and a handful of Brown Creepers.

The nearby Barfoot Park still supports some pristine pine forest, but an extended search of this area still fails to reveal so much as a sniff of a Mexican Chickadee, and we retire for lunch somewhat bemused as to how to locate the bird which Mr Sibley's definitive field guide describes as 'common in high elevation pine and fir forest in the Chiricahua Mountains'!

A hearty late lunch back at Cave Creek Ranch serves to restore our slightly deflated spirits, as does a brief siesta in the heat of the day. Behind our cabin a tall Mulberry is coming into fruit and attracts a procession of hungry birds, including a much appreciated flock of twenty Cedar Waxwings. It also attracts our host,

who has come to check out the Mulberry-eaters, and Reed gives us a little bit of local advice on where best to look for Mexican Chickadees.

Our late afternoon birding destination is therefore the Greenhouse Trail, where chickadees are alleged to be breeding; a prolonged search provides Painted Redstarts, Cassin's Vireo and Hepatic Tanager, but once again no Mexican Chickadee. What are we doing wrong?!

The light is failing now, so in order to inject a little excitement into the end of the day we head back up-slope for a little high altitude owling. I have been told that Northern Saw-whet Owl is a likely possibility at Rustler Park, a species of which I would love to take a better photograph, but the lack of response to my recordings seem to indicate otherwise.

My park birding is interrupted by the arrival of a Field Guides tour group, and when I hear a Flammulated Owl responding their tapes I can't resist trotting down the road to check out what the group have tracked down. Fortunately John Coons is a very accommodating tour leader and welcomes me to the fold, which before long are enjoying fabulous views of a gorgeous little Flammulated Owl, a species which appears much more co-operative here than in the Santa Catalinas!

The day is concluded with a bottle of Smoking Loon Cabernet Sauvignon back at Cave Creek, where Hooded and Striped Skunks, plus three different families of Elf Owls continue to demonstrate what a true wildlife haven this location really is.

Tuesday 12th May

Leaving Vic to slumber, today I head out early with my mind firmly set on settling the Mexican Chickadee score. Climbing back up to the East Turkey Creek junction, I arrive at the same time as a car load of American lady birders and we chat about what we've seen. A minute later Jackie declares that she has a Mexican Chickadee in her view and soon I'm watching the distinctively large-bibbed conifer-specialist work its way through the high pine branches in the company of a small mixed party of warblers. So I spend an entire day searching for a bird to no avail and now an elderly lady shows me one in minutes; I clearly need to brush up on my field craft! Thanking Jackie profusely, I make an about-turn and head off downslope, to get the most from the spare morning which I suddenly have at my disposal.

Leaving behind the pines and oaks, my destination is Bob Rodriguez's house, located just north of Portal, in the flatlands of the valley bottom. In a natural clearing amongst the dry mesquite, Bob has created a very natural-looking feeding station which attracts a rather different set of arid-country birds and is undoubtedly the envy of every backyard birder in South East Arizona.

The massed ranks of hungry seed-eaters include spanking male Lazuli Buntings and Blue Grosbeaks, White-throated Sparrows, both Aberts and Canyon Towhees, Pyrrhuloxias, Woodhouse's Scrub Jay and Band-tailed Pigeon. In the company of Bob and a couple of other engaging local birders, it is easy to lose hours of the day, but I really must get back to Cave Creek Ranch and check up on the whereabouts of my wife.

Victoria has filled a few pages of her sketch pad in my absence, and now we fill a few plates, to dine on the veranda and soak in the Cave Creek ambience. The plan for the afternoon is to leave the car behind for a change, as we have some serious driving to do in the next few days, and head out on foot to explore the McCord Trail which heads for the hills to the east of the ranch.

The narrow trail weaves across dry hillsides dotted with juniper bushes and an occasional agave or cholla, and as we climb ever higher it reveals the most wonderful views into the Chiricahua Mountains proper. Birds are predictably thin on the ground, but the Scott's Orioles and Rufous-capped Sparrows which we do encounter are specialists of this sparse rocky landscape and add to the enjoyment of a truly excellent afternoon's hike.

With plenty more steak and sausages still in the fridge and a warm, still evening at our disposal, it would be foolish not to light up the barbeque and that is precisely what we do on our return. The Blue Moon and Smoking Loon flow, as we raise our glasses to our favourite spot on the whole Arizona circuit.

Wednesday 13th May

My previous day's birding discussions with Bob Rodriguez have given an insight as to when and where to search for the notoriously elusive Crissal Thrasher, and as I take up position in the valley-bottom mesquite, the sun has only just climbed enough to illuminate the highest of the Chiricahua Mountain peaks. The lifeless desert which I reced in the heat of the previous day is now alive to the sound of bird calls, as I slowly follow the dirt track through the low, dense bushes.

The iPod delivers the varied and tuneful notes of the Crissal Thrasher as I walk, and after just ten minutes of trawling, a large, long-tailed, curvy-billed bird hops up on a distant bush. As he moves in closer to the source of the recorded calls, binocular study reveals a bright cinnamon undertail, distinctive dark malar stripes and an absurdly down-curved black bill; the 'elusive' Crissal Thrasher has given himself up with scarcely a fight!

With the final target bird of the trip safely under the belt and something of a 'thrasher roll' starting to come together, I continue my downhill travels to the Stateline Road. Just short of the little border town of Rodeo, the dirt track follows the New Mexican state border, and this had been my backup site for Bendire's Thrasher. The early morning light is magnificent, with the views up to the Chiricahuas now at their finest, and following the State Line, a Bendire's Thrasher responds to playback at my second speculative stop. Whilst the Crissal Thrasher is perhaps the shiest member of the family, the Bendire's Thrasher is much less reserved and soon alights on a nearby bush to study the interloper in his territory. Close scrutiny reveals a very different bill shape to the regularly-encountered Curve-billed Thrasher, plus a pale base, and he does look somewhat smaller, but I'll be damned if I can make out those 'diagnostic triangular breast spots' cited by Mr Sibley!

With two species of thrasher nicely captured on the camera's memory card I head back towards Portal, with a pair of Scaled Quail being a welcome distraction along the way. I know it's futile, but I can't resist the umpteenth try for my ABA Rufous-backed Robin, en route back to the ranch, where a hearty cooked breakfast awaits.

After eating our scrambled eggs and mushrooms on the veranda, it's time to pack and check out, as we need to be in Phoenix by the evening. Cave Creek Ranch has such an appeal that we cannot drag ourselves away without a proper session at the feeders, however, where definitive images of White-breasted Nuthatch, Bridled and Juniper Titmouse, Black-headed Grosbeak, Blue-throated Hummingbird and Arizona Woodpecker are all secured. We also enjoy an encounter with a pair of Mexican Fox Squirrels, glorious beasts with huge bushy tails and a rich orange-red cast to the underparts. This is the *chiricahuae* race, endemic to just the Chiricahua Mountains, which is also the only locality outside Mexico where this species can be found.

The most direct route north is via the dirt road which winds up and through the mountains, so we retrace our tracks from two days previous, until we reach the turning to Barfoot Park, and thereafter tread an unfamiliar trail. The northern slopes of a huge portion of the Chiricahua Mountains have been decimated by fire in recent years, and our descent takes us through the skeletons of scorched pine trees, which hold their own stark, rather sad beauty.

Birds in this locality are understandably thin-on-the-ground, but the sudden appearance of a male Wild Turkey, in full display on the road, certainly enlightens the journey. This behaviour is something which I have never witnessed before, and the inflated red-and-blue wattles, huge fanned tail and strident calls would give any of the world's most spectacular gamebirds a run for their money! Interestingly, the birds here are of the *mexicana* race, known as Gould's Wild Turkey, which is the largest of the six subspecies and also one of the rarest.

Although we had originally planned to leave the Sky Islands behind at this point, Richard has tipped us off on the spectacular secret of the Chiricahua National Monument, and a few hours have been shoe-horned into the itinerary to explore yet another of Arizona's natural wonders. With all-too-little time on our hands we drive straight up to Massai Point, where an hour on the surrounding trails deliver the most dramatic views of a unique geological phenomenon, characterised by incredible vertical rock formations. It is unlike any landscape we have ever encountered before, and apparently represents the eroded remains of a twenty-seven million year old volcanic eruption; whatever its source, it is eminently worthy of our detour and should certainly be included on any Chiricahua itinerary.

Back down at the visitors' centre picnic area, we eat our lunch with absurdly tame Mexican Jays, before setting off on the next leg of our journey. It takes a full four hours to reach Phoenix, via a tapestry of sprawling urbanisation, saguaro desert, dry grasslands and agricultural irrigation, as we clock up the northerly miles.

Whereas Tucson instantly appealed, we find Phoenix to be congested, confusingly laid-out, and in the vicinity of our chosen motel, downright menacing! The America's Best Value Inn is clearly best value owing to the fact that it is located in a decidedly downtrodden neighbourhood. Vacating the air-conditioned comfort of the Jeep, we find that the climate has degenerated from warm and dry to hot and sweaty, while at reception the Asian staff seem to have customer service way down on the priority list. The room is shabby, the wash-basin cracked and the air-con unit has just two settings: off, or blowing with the force and volume of a small jet engine!

Even the evening's TripAdvisor-recommended eatery, the Pomo Pizzeria Napoletana, is disappointing. Our selected pizzas are nondescript and taste pretty much identical, in spite of a hefty price tag; we conclude that we don't care much for Phoenix.

Thursday 14th May

Our original itinerary has me watching the sun rise at the Baseline Road multi-thrasher stake-out, an hour's drive west of Phoenix, but the success of the previous morning entitles me to a hotel breakfast, followed by an early check-out and half-hour congestion-battle to the [Phoenix Desert Botanical Garden](#). It transpires that this is an excellent move, as the contemporary style of the botanical gardens offers meticulous design, and informative interpretation, on a vast scale. It is cleverly laid-out to incorporate natural saguaro desert, interwoven with a huge selection of introduced species, all of which has been adopted by a wealth of native fauna. Winding trails take the visitor on a journey through a variety of constructed desert environments, which the garden designers have seamlessly blended into the natural cacti-covered slopes. Both the artist and the birdwatcher can lose themselves in their favourite pastime, so for us it is a perfect location!

Anna's Hummingbirds are numerous around the floral sections of the garden, especially the Desert Wildflower Loop, with a single female Costa's Hummingbird singled out, to give my only decent image of this species taken on the trip. Along the Sonoran Desert Trail, the giant saguaros are in full bloom, being crowned with pale yellow flowers, which attract a surprising secession of birds to enjoy the rich source of nectar; sugar-sipping visitors including White-winged Doves, Curve-billed Thrashers and Gila Woodpeckers, all in abundance. Three different Gilded Flickers are also noted, one pair at a saguaro nest-hole, with most of the above species habituated to the presence of visitors, and hence providing great photographic fare.

It is, however, the desert mammals which invariably take the leading role at the DBG. Inquisitive Round-tailed Ground Squirrels scamper up to the visitor and rise onto their haunches to quizzically view the giant invaders of their desert world. Harris's Antelope Squirrels scamper energetically amongst the prickly pears with seemingly boundless nervous energy, and Desert Cottontails search out the shade as the sun begins to climb high above their desiccated home.

At the conclusion of our individual painting and photographic missions, the outdoor café provides a first-class lunch, shared with Cactus Wrens and Curve-billed Thrashers, which hop across the table-tops in

search of scraps. By the time we have toured the gift shop and are finally ready to depart, we have used up the best part of seven hours at this wonderful location, which we agree is one of the most enjoyable of the trip.

Now we have another decent drive on our hands, as the Tomtom tells us that the Grand Canyon South Rim, set to be our home for the next two days, is four hours to the north of Phoenix. In the course of the journey the outlook from our air-conditioned cocoon changes from saguaro desert to dry grassland then, as we climb in altitude, to juniper forest and finally tall ponderosa pines. The passing of the miles also sees a deterioration in the prevailing weather conditions, with thick grey cloud replacing the blue skies enjoyed for the last week-and-a-half.

As we approach Tusayan, our tourist-town destination which is actually a few miles short of the Canyon itself, the heavens open to release a terrific introductory downpour to our new, high altitude home; when we step out of the car at the 2000-plus metre altitude, and are hit by the icy-cold air, it is a real shock to our desert-acclimatised systems! The next two nights will be spent at the [Tusayan Best Western Inn](#), a brilliantly appointed establishment but one which inevitably suffers from the very hefty 'Grand Canyon Mark-Up', magically applied to the cost of all accommodation and eateries in this corner of the State.

In spite of the cold air and a feeling of Jeep-lag, we are determined not to miss out on every available minute of daylight, so dig out our warmest clothing and head straight up to the South Rim. The Grand Canyon National Park entrance kiosks sit astride the highway just a mile north of Tusayan where, for the bargain price of \$30, we are granted a seven-day pass. The lady park ranger in the kiosk advises us to head straight to Mather Point, where we take a slot on the vast, though largely empty, visitors' car park.

As we walk through the stunted pines to the South Rim, an unexpected feeling of apprehension prevails, as everyone has read so much and seen so many images of this site, yet never knows quite what to expect. Reaching the point where the ground drops away, to the unseen Colorado River a full mile below, the vision which greets us does quite literally takes away our words. For several minutes we stand dumb-struck, as we soak in the immensity of the most amazing natural feature on our planet; one's first vision of the Grand Canyon is actually nothing short of a spiritual experience.

In thirty years of criss-crossing the world in search of birds I have been lucky enough to encounter many, many impressive natural landscapes, but none come close to the jaw-dropping splendour of the Grand Canyon and it seems rather pointless to try to sum up the scene in a few paragraphs, or even a set of images; I really think that to grasp the magnitude of this natural phenomenon, one really has to see it with one's own eyes.

It is late in the day and the weather is rather cold, hence other visitors are relatively scant and we are able to quietly soak up the Grand Canyon experience in a slow walk to Yavapai Point, as the sun closes on the western horizon, to slice thick banks of cloud and cast a burning orange hue over the immense rock walls below.

Back at the Best Western we settle down next to a raging log fire, drinks in hand, to review what has been a decidedly full and incredibly varied day. Having starting off in the intense heat of the Sonoran Desert, we spend the last hours huddled beside a fire in order to keep warm; sightseeing travel doesn't get more diverse than this.

Friday 15th May

The Tusayan Best Western wins the award for best breakfast of the trip, with an outstanding all-you-can-eat hot buffet, which will undoubtedly see us through a day in the field. And we're in no rush to leave, as it is now actually snowing outside!

Our intention is to take a hike down into the canyon, from the South Rim, but instead of donning our walking attire we find ourselves sitting in the Jeep in the Mather Point car park, in pouring rain and low

clouds. In order to try to locate a break in the inclement weather, we take a punt on heading east, following the Desert View Drive past a series of roadside viewpoints which are revealing panoramas of nothing but impenetrable mist.

Our arrival at the Desert View observation point is thankfully timed to coincide with a break in the gloom, and even a few windows of blue sky. We hastily scamper to the lookout point and impressive observation tower, where the next hour provides some fantastically moody views and photographic opportunities, as bellowing masses of low cloud lift in and out of sections of the canyon, magically revealing and then obscuring elements of the incredible vista.

Leaving the Desert View, we work our way back west, capturing more images at various dramatic outlook points en route, before stopping for a car picnic as another snow shower peppers the windscreen with white flakes. Unprepared for such adverse weather, we only have one waterproof coat between the two of us, however back at the Visitors' Centre we find that many are even more inadequately attired and the shop is doing a roaring trade in fleeces, woolly gloves and plastic ponchos!

We drink hot chocolate to warm our rain-sodden cores, then I spend a while harassing the local Dark-eyed Juncos from beneath the brolley as Vic peruses another extensive gift shop. It is actually notable how few birds I have seen in the course of our wet day out, and the scant entries in my notebook are limited to Brewer's Blackbird, Dark-eyed Junco (of the *caniceps* race, known as Grey-headed Junco), Audubon's Warbler, White-breasted Nuthatch and Common Raven, plus a smattering of sodden Elk, Cliff Chipmunks and Rock Squirrels.

The weather deteriorates still further and we call it a day well before sunset, something unheard-of under normal circumstances, to enjoy the warmth and comfort of the Best Western. TripAdvisor struggles to recommend a decent eatery in Tusayan, and in desperation we plump for the short walk to the [Big E Steakhouse](#) for our evening meal. Walking through the swinging saloon door, we are greeted by a lively atmosphere, smiling staff and an amusing fake Wild West façade, which instantly brings a smile back to our rain-weary faces. What is more, the food and draft beer is first class, giving a real lift at the end of what we have to admit has been a somewhat disappointing day.

Saturday 16th May

Stealing an early look around the curtains, it is a huge relief to see that yesterday's rain seems to have passed through. Although it is initially overcast, but by the time we have devoured a hearty breakfast and checked out of the hotel, the clouds are already beginning to dissipate and a half-decent day looks like a genuine possibility.

Owing to a forthcoming two-and-a-half hour drive to Page, where we have a slot pre-booked for a tour, we now only have a couple of hours on our hands to enjoy the Grand Canyon in some decent weather. We concentrate our efforts on Mather and Yavapai Points in the west and Desert View in the east, where we really cannot soak up enough different angles and photographic depictions of this awe-inspiring location, taking advantage of the much-improved conditions.

There is a bit of a scare when the Tomtom is activated, in order to plan the next leg of the journey, and it tells us that we are heading into a different time zone which will leave us late for our appointment. A rapid check through the Antelope Canyon booking information reveals that although the Navajo Nation adopt the Daylight Saving Time used in States further to the east, our tour departure uses Arizona's favoured Mountain Standard Time and we are actually aligned; future visitors be warned!

Leaving the Grand Canyon National Park, the next two-and-a-half hours are spent in transit through today's selection of inspiring desert landscapes, to deliver us to the town of Page and the offices of [Antelope Slot Canyon Tours](#) to be precise; if you perform a Google Images search on Antelope Canyon, you are presented with the most amazing section of images, which have inspired us and countless others to travel to this rather remote location in Northern Arizona.

It's a funny old place. The Antelope Slot Canyon Tour Company has taken over a disused petrol station, filling the shop area with an array of distinctly tacky Native American Indian memorabilia. As it is close to our pre-booked tour departure time, many other folk are now arriving and we are asked to assemble below the canopy which once covered the petrol pumps. A Native American Indian appears in full tribal attire, turns on a large PA system and commences a 'hoop dance' to a Navajo background beat. It is actually a wonderfully acrobatic and skilful performance, well deserving of our applause, then we throw a few Dollars in a collection tub and are shepherded to our awaiting transportation.

Half-a-dozen matching turquoise-blue 4WDs are then packed with the fifty-or-so guests booked onto the tours, we buckle-up into rear bench-seats and set off in a rather bizarre convoy down the main street of Page town. It takes around twenty minutes to vacate the urban zone and travel through the desert to a point where we leave the smooth tarmac and hit the orange sand. The bevy of blue 4WDs vie for position in an exciting off-piste sprint over the undulating sand of the wide canyon, then we round a bend and see that another dozen-or-more 4WDs are already parked at the mouth of the slot.

The impact of the number of other visitors present at the same time is apparent when we dismount and are shepherded towards the narrow Upper Antelope Canyon entrance, in which there is actually a queue of other sightseers waiting to advance; if one imagines a line of people waiting in a long corridor, all trying to get a photo of a light fitting at the far end, then you get the picture.

Varying from a maximum of five metres wide to a minimum of no more than one metre, Antelope Canyon has been sliced through thinly layered orange sandstone, by millennia of seasonal water erosion, to result in an undeniably beautiful geological wonder. It is, however, totally unsuited to mass tourism, as not only does one have to contend with the queue going forward, the canyon is dead-ended and all the visitors in front will have to file back and past the next crowd, at some point on the tour!

Perhaps the oddest aspect of a visit to the site, however, are the photographic outcomes. Our guide is well versed in camera settings and angles to obtain the best images, whilst omitting the heads of the other 150 people who are in the canyon at the same time. What is totally weird is the fact that the images on the back of the camera are ten times more impressive than the canyon itself. In real time, the ground colour of the rock is a rather dull rusty-brown-orange, whilst the camera back images reveal all manner of dazzling sunset-orange tinged hues; so in summary, the place looks amazing when you get home and show your mates your photos, in reality it's like queueing down a crowded, dull and narrow corridor!

Canyon sightseeing over, we grab a quick sandwich and then reset the satnav for the two-hour drive east, to Monument Valley. The journey is again predictably dramatic, in terms of its scenic appeal, but it really is just an entree to the treat which lies in store as we approach the Daddy of all iconic desert landforms.

Clearing a highway brow, we catch our first views of the towering orange buttes and mesas which have played backdrop to so many cowboy movie scenes, advertisements and magazine covers. In stark contrast to Antelope Canyon, however, Monument Valley does indeed live up to every description and image which goes before; in the evening light, this location is simply astounding.

In order to enjoy this unforgettable setting to the absolute optimum, we have splashed out and booked two nights in the Navajo-run [View Hotel](#), located right at the head of Monument Valley. It's not cheap, but the view from our balcony, bang down the centre of the Valley and overlooking the famous East and West Mittens and Merrick Butte, must rival any hotel outlook on the planet.

As the name of the hotel implies, there is nothing else to do this evening but fill the fridge with wine and beer, sit back on the balcony, watch the sun go down and the stars appear, and soak up the unforgettable view.

Sunday 17th May

At 06.00 the curtains are pulled back, to reveal an orange sun emerging above an arid eastern horizon, framed by vertical rocks which are the buttes of Monument Valley. This place is all about savouring the outlook, and a feature of the dining room, where we take breakfast, is the large amount of glass and constant access to the changing light in the valley.

Having eaten up the miles in the last few days, we decide on a change of tack from the original itinerary and abandon the car, in order to explore Monument Valley in a more intimate way, on foot. The Wildcat Trail leads east from the hotel, through a variety of subtly changing desert habitats, to loop right around the West Mitten. In the relative cool of the early morning it offers a superb alternative to the Seventeen Mile Loop Drive which every other visitor seems to have as their immediate priority, and as a consequence we have the walk to just ourselves and the wildlife.

It is unsurprising that such a dry and hostile environment does not abound with fauna, however we do note numerous singing Black-throated Sparrows and House Finches, plus Rocks Wrens, Ash-throated Flycatcher, migrant Wilson's Warblers and a surprise transitory flock of fifteen Pinyon Jays. From a mammalian perspective the diversity is similarly limited, however Desert Cottontails are not uncommon here, and a single White-tailed Antelope Squirrel scurries past all-too quickly.

What the trail lacks in birds and mammals it more than makes up for in aesthetic appeal, as it leads past orange sand dunes, blooming wildflowers and flushes of greenery, eroded rock structures and, of course, a constantly changing viewpoint on the buttes and mesas which now surround us on all sides. It takes a full three-and-a-half hours to explore the trail, which does include numerous photo-calls and exploratory halts, and we conclude that the Wildcat Trail provides one of the most pleasurable hikes of the entire trip.

The mid-section of the day is taken up with photo-editing, note writing, painting, and a little eating, then at 16.30 we set off for our turn on the unmissable Seventeen Mile Loop Drive. The dusty, bumpy dirt road drops down the valley just beyond the hotel, to guide the visitor through a landscape whose splendour must be difficult to surpass in the whole of the USA. We seem to stop every few hundred metres to steal images of the immense monoliths set amidst the orange sand and contrasting fresh green shrubs of the valley floor, below a turquoise blue sky liberally dotted with atmospheric white cloud. This late in the day the visitor numbers are low and we can soak up the evocatively-named outlooks such as Elephant Butte, The Totem Pole and John Ford Point, all in relative solitude.

Returning to the hotel balcony for the last light of day, we look down Monument Valley washed with an orange sunset cast and raise a glass to such a fitting location in which to conclude our Arizona tour. Our only evening visit to the 'dry' dining room (note that no alcohol is on sale in the Navajo Nation) is not quite such an experience to savour, as although the Native Indian staff are trying hard, the cuisine is distinctly ropey; but then we aren't really here for the food, are we?

Monday 18th May

Although today is essentially the start of the long trek home, our previous poor-weather Grand Canyon experience has prompted us to hatch a plan which will permit some extra time at another of our favourite locations. So after an early breakfast we immediately check out and set off on the three hour journey back to the South Rim, hoping to make the most of the fair weather which has prevailed since our arrival at Monument Valley.

The miles click by, and the closer we get to the Grand Canyon the more unsettled the weather conditions become. Blue sky turns to scattered white cloud which, and by the time we enter the Grand Canyon National Park for the second time on the trip, has built into banks of foreboding thick grey raincloud. A brief forest birding foray made at a toilet stop produces Mountain Chickadee, Black-headed Grosbeak, Hairy Woodpecker, Pygmy Nuthatch, Grey-headed Junco and Western Bluebird, easily my most productive twenty minutes in the field during the whole two days spent in the Grand Canyon; it seems that there really are birds here, if the weather actually permits one to look for them!

Our goal for the day is to take our previously-aborted hike down the South Kaibab Trail, and below the canyon rim, so we park up at the most conveniently placed parking area, just as the first raindrops fall! As large drops ping on the roof of the Jeep we weigh up our options and then, after twenty minutes of procrastination, we set off for the rim.

After half a mile in the shelter of the pines, passing several very wet and dejected Elk, we emerge at the South Kaibab Trailhead and the vastness of the Grand Canyon again opens up before us. Although we only follow the trail downhill for just over an hour, it proves to be one of the most exhilarating walks imaginable, as the well-maintained track snakes downwards in a series of switchbacks, being cut directly into the orange rock of the canyon wall and with nothing to separate the walker from a thousand-metre drop.

The outlook changes constantly, is always spectacular, and helps to take one's mind of the decidedly grotty weather. The return uphill leg gets the pulse racing as we negotiate the steep slopes, at one stage having to step aside as a mule train passes by. When we get back to the Jeep we agree that we have earned a cup of hot chocolate at the Visitors' Centre, then we point our trusty steed southwards for the last big drive of the trip.

The Tucson-bound return leg is pretty uneventful, save the chance discovery of one of the mammalian highlights of the trip. We stop for gas at the Red Lake Hostel Texaco Station and Vic pops round the back to the toilet block, returning with intriguing tales of several small burrowing mammals. Further investigation reveals that the trailer park behind the Hostel buildings is occupied by the suburbs of a vast Gunnison's Prairie Dog town, with numbers of visible animals running into three figures. What is even more exciting is the fact that the trailer park Prairie Dogs have clearly become habituated to human presence and happily walk right up to the budding wildlife photographer. I have never been anywhere close to a Prairie Dog of any description and hence the opportunity to study and photograph these endearing mammals at minimal range is a real privilege.

The next four-and-a-half hours are distinctly less exciting, and it is quite a relief to roll back into the familiar Sabino Canyon district of Tucson, grab some fast food and check back into our favourite local hotel, the good old Comfort Suites.

Tuesday 19th May

The early afternoon departure of our flight home doesn't allow the scope for anything too adventurous this morning, so I leave Vic slumbering and set out at dawn for my final couple of hours of Arizona birding. The chosen venue is the Tanque Verde Wash, which at this season is a dry riverbed winding through the northern Tucson suburbs, edged by a thin ribbon of riparian woodland.

My chosen access point is via Houghton Road, about fifteen minute's drive from the hotel, and this is where I park up at 06.00. My two hour walk in the mesquite, along the line of the white sand of the dry river, proves to be very birdy, with Warbling Vireos, Ash-throated and Vermillion Flycatchers, Lesser Goldfinches, House Finches and Lucy's Warblers all proving to be common at this locality. The latter species is particularly welcome, as it allows me to finally secure some images of Lucy's Warbler, a bird which had been one of my first ticks during the inaugural hours of the trip. Western Tanager, Verdin, Phainopepla, Abert's Towhee, Broad-billed and Black-chinned Hummingbirds, Sharp-shinned Hawk and a Rock Squirrel complete the list, then I shoot back for a slap-up Comfort Suites breakfast with my well-rested wife.

And that pretty much concludes two-and-a-half weeks in this magnificent State, leaving just a flight to LA and hence on to LHR. The birding has been outstanding, the weather generally kind and the sightseeing opportunities second-to-none. As with all visits to the USA, we have found the navigation to sites and location of individual bird species to be quite straightforward, the accommodation and food of a very high standard and the local population as agreeable and welcoming as anywhere in the world. So if you fancy a taste of some first-class North West Mexican birding, without having to venture beyond the 'Tortilla Curtain', combined with some of the most spectacular scenery on the planet, then Arizona is worthy of some very serious consideration.

Notes on Key Target Bird Species and Local Specialities:**Mexican Duck** *Anas diazi*

Variously split and lumped over recent years, but currently a recognised species by the IOC at least. We recorded a single, in the company of three Mallards, at Amado Water Treatment Plant on 05/05/15, and a pair at Rio Rico Ponds on 07/05/15.

Montezuma Quail *Cyrtonyx montezumae*

This spectacular quail, of grassland and open oak woodland, is something of an Arizona speciality. We saw a pair at Sycamore Canyon on 05/05/15 and a pair at East Turkey Creek, Chiricahua Mountains, on 11/12/15.

Flammulated Owl *Psiloscoops flammeolus*

In Arizona this small migratory owl is restricted to mid elevation Ponderosa Pine forests, at an altitudinal range of between 1800 and 2800m, meaning that paved road access is limited to relatively few sites. Three heard with one seen and photographed, after some considerable effort, at Bear Canyon, Santa Catalina Mountains, on 03/05/15 (N32°22'28", W110°41'18"). One seen and photographed, plus another heard, just below Rustler Park, Chiricahua Mountains, on 11/05/15 (N31°54'29", W109°16'36").

Western Screech Owl *Megascops kennicottii*

Although literature states that this resident owl species is 'at home in any kind of woodland', it is largely found at lower altitudes than the Whiskered Screech Owl, meaning that the two species rarely overlap; riparian cottonwood, willow and sycamores, or mesquite, are generally the best places to commence one's search for a Western Screech Owl. After our ludicrously good views of a calling bird at San Pedro House, San Pedro NCA, on 07/05/15 (N31°32'52", W110°08'30"), we made no subsequent visits to suitable habitat at the correct time of day.

Whiskered Screech Owl *Megascops trichopsis*

This resident species is found in Madrean evergreen oak woodland on the lower Sky Island slopes, between an altitude of 1500m to 2300m. Three heard at Bear Canyon, Santa Catalina Mountains, on 03/05/15. Two heard and subsequently seen at Madera Canyon, in the vicinity of Santa Rita Lodge, on 04/05/15. Two seen very well and photographed, plus several more heard, in the vicinity of Santa Rita Lodge, on 06/05/15 (N31°43'61", W110°52'48"). One seen very well and photographed, plus several more heard, at Cave Creek Canyon in the vicinity of Sunny Flats Campground, on 10/05/15 (N31°53'02", W109°10'41").

Mountain Pygmy Owl *Glaucidium gnoma*

Most regularly encountered in tall pines, or pine-oak forest, Mountain Pygmy Owl inhabits an altitudinal range of between 1100m and 3200m. Controversy reigns over the precise status of this species, however the birds resident in the more southerly Sky Islands give the double-noted call of the species which many taxonomic authorities split as *G. gnoma*. One at Hunter Canyon on 10/05/15 (N31°23'59", W110°16'25").

Elf Owl *Micrathene whitneyi*

Although this migratory owl is traditionally linked to saguaro deserts, it is in reality much more liberal in its habitat preference, with foothill canyons dominated by sycamores being another favoured habitat type; this is precisely the area in which we found our birds. Two nesting pairs at Madera Canyon, in the vicinity of Santa Rita Lodge, on 04/05/15 and 06/05/15. Three separate pairs in the grounds of Cave Creek Ranch on 10-12/05/15, were seen extremely well and photographed extensively.

Spotted Owl *Strix occidentalis lucida*

In south east Arizona the preferred habitat of this extremely rare and localised species is narrow shaded canyons of either evergreen oak or oak-pine forest; sightings away from the well-documented Miller Canyon nesting site are decidedly unusual. Unsurprisingly, our only encounter was of a male seen in the daytime at its regular Miller Canyon roost tree on 08/05/15.

Mexican Whip-poor-will *Antrostomus arizonae*

Recently split from Eastern Whip-poor-will, this bird is a widespread and not uncommon summer visitor to forested mountain slopes and canyons. Up to ten birds heard and one seen in the Santa Catalina Mountains on 03/05/15. Also heard at Madera Canyon and in the Chiricahua Mountains.

Magnificent Hummingbird *Eugenes fulgens*

Not uncommon in high altitude pine forests and seen in small numbers in Santa Catalinas, Santa Ritas, Huachucas and Chiricahuas.

Blue-throated Hummingbird *Lampornis clemenciae*

This species is restricted to forested mountain sites, where it favours moist, shady canyons with permanent water. Up to six were seen daily at Cave Creek Ranch on 10-13/05/15.

Costa's Hummingbird *Calypte costae*

Having nested in the Sonoran Desert as early as mid-January, when nectar is most plentiful, Costa's Hummingbirds have generally dispersed by the spring and are often found at higher altitude. We saw a male at Molino Canyon Vista, Santa Catalinas, on 03/05/15 (N32°19'33", W110°42'07"), male at Beatty's Guest Ranch feeders, Miller Canyon, Huachucas on 08/05/15, and a female at the Desert Botanical Garden, Phoenix, on 14/05/15.

Broad-billed Hummingbird *Cynanthus latirostris*

Being something of a habitat generalist, this species was the most widespread and numerous hummingbird seen on the trip, being commonly noted at all Sky Island sites and also some lowland areas.

Violet-crowned Hummingbird *Amazilia violiceps*

A species whose range barely enters the USA, Violet-crowned Hummingbird favours riparian habitats dominated by cottonwood and sycamores. A single adult bird was frequenting feeders at Paton's House, Patagonia, on the afternoon of 07/05/15; this is the definitive site for this species and few birders seem to record it elsewhere.

Elegant Trogon *Trogon elegans*

This rather exotic migrant species seeks out forested mountain canyons in which to breed, specifically where large sycamores meet Madrean pine-oak woodlands. A male was heard and seen on the Carrie Nation Trail, Madera Canyon, on 06/05/15 and a further two were heard and one seen at Ramsey Canyon, Huachucas, on 09/05/15.

Arizona Woodpecker *Picoides arizonae*

Widespread in areas where Madrean evergreen oaks predominate, this species is often rather quiet and therefore quite easily overlooked. Seen at Sycamore Canyon, Miller and Hunter Canyons in the Huachucas and at several locations in the Chiricahuas, including nesting birds in the grounds of Cave Creek Ranch.

Gilded Flicker *Colaptes chrysoides*

Essentially dependant on extensive tracts of saguaros in the Sonoran Desert, there is little point in searching for this species beyond the bounds of this habitat type. We saw a pair at the David Yetman West Trailhead, in the Tucson National Park on 04/05/15 (N32°13'05", W111°06'14") and three birds, including a nesting pair, at the Desert Botanical Garden, Phoenix, on 14/05/15.

Northern Beardless Tyrannulet *Camptostoma imberbe*

This unobtrusive tropical flycatcher, whose range only just touches the USA, was only really seen due to RF's familiarity with its calls. Noted at Florida Canyon, Santa Rita Mountains, on 04/05/15 and Sycamore Canyon on 05/05/15.

Greater Pewee *Contopus pertinax*

This largely tropical migrant flycatcher favours montane pine-oak forests. A pair was seen at Rose Canyon, Santa Rita Mountains, on 03/05/15 and single at Miller Canyon, Huachucas, on 08/05/15.

Buff-breasted Flycatcher *Empidonax fulvifrons*

A true Sky Island specialist, this species spends the summer months in the region's Madrean pine-oak woodlands. Two seen at Rose Canyon, Santa Rita Mountains, on 03/05/15, four at Reef Townsite Campground, Carr Canyon on 08/05/14 and one at Hunter Canyon on 10/05/15.

Dusky-capped Flycatcher *Myiarchus tuberculifer*

Although generally a Sky Island endemic in terms of its USA range, this species is not uncommon in a variety of dense forest types. Seen at suitable wooded sites in Santa Ritas, Huachucas and Chiricahuas.

Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher *Myiodynastes luteiventris*

A very localised summer migrant to the Sky Islands, this species is usually found in canyons dominated by Arizona Sycamores. A single bird was seen at Ramsey Canyon, Huachucas, on 09/05/15.

Tropical Kingbird *Tyrannus melancholicus*

With a rather limited range in southern Arizona, this species prefers lowland riparian woodland edge habitat. A pair was recorded at Rio Rico Ponds on 07/05/15 (N31°28'20", W110°59'16").

Thick-billed Kingbird *Tyrannus crassirostris*

With a requirement for lowland cottonwoods along permanent streams, this species is best searched for at a handful of well-known breeding sites in South East Arizona. A single was recorded at Arivaca Lake on 05/05/15 (N31°31'34", W111°15'14").

'Mexican' Cliff Swallow *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota melanogaster*

A widespread species in North America, *P. a. melanogaster* only reaches southern Arizona. A colony of this Mexican race, with red instead of white foreheads, were nesting below the Interstate 19, close to Amado Water Treatment Plant, on 05/05/15.

Mexican Chickadee *Poecile sclateri*

In a USA context, this species is restricted to the Chiricahuas and the nearby Animas Mountains of New Mexico. Having struggled to find the high altitude pine specialist at a variety of Chiricahua Mountain sites the previous day, one was seen at the East Turkey Creek on 12/05/15 (N31°54'31", W109°15'04"). Local birders suggested that they were nesting and therefore particularly quiet and elusive at this season.

Bridled Titmouse *Baeolophus wollweberi*

This predominantly Mexican species is a Sky Island specialist in the USA, where it is a relatively common resident of oak woodland. We encountered it regularly in the Santa Ritas, Huachucas and Chiricahuas.

Brown-throated (House) Wren *Troglodytes aedon brunneicollis*

This controversial little bird was noted in the Santa Ritas, Huachucas and Chiricahuas, though whether it is a full species, race of House Wren, or an intergrade, remains up for debate amongst the taxonomists.

Sinaloa Wren *Thryophilus sinaloa*

A Mexican vagrant, with a couple of long-staying birds currently residing in Arizona. Apparently typical of this individual, heard only at Tubac on 07/05/15 (N36°36'10", W111°02'41").

Black-capped Gnatcatcher *Poliophtila nigriceps*

A species on the very northerly fringe of its range in Arizona, the Black-capped Gnatcatcher is attracted to riparian hackberry thickets in arid canyons. We saw a pair feeding newly fledged young at Florida Canyon, Santa Rita Mountains, on 04/05/15 (N31°46'76", W110°50'46").

Eastern Bluebird *Sialia sialis fulva*

A bird of open wooded habitat, we encountered a pair of this disjunct and largely Mexican-centred race at Sycamore Canyon on 05/05/15.

Bendire's Thrasher *Toxostoma bendirei*

This localised species is tightly restricted to its preferred habitat of arid grasslands with sparse brush and yuccas. Heard from the Mile Wide Road and subsequently a pair seen alongside the Reservation Road, a little way west of the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, on 04/05/15 (N32°15'30", W111°16'43"). Also a pair seen adjacent to the Stateline Road, Rodeo, on 13/05/15 (N31°51'33", W109°02'56").

Crissal Thrasher *Toxostoma crissale*

This surprisingly widespread species, of mesquite and other dry, dense brush habitats, is notoriously difficult to locate. A single was seen from the West Canadian Lane, north of Portal, in the very early morning of 13/05/15 (N31°55'05", W109°07'26").

Lucy's Warbler *Oreothlypis luciae*

Not uncommon in suitable riparian mesquite habitat. Birds were noted at Molino Canyon Vista, Santa Catalinas, on 03/05/15 and Playa Blanca Canyon on 05/05/15. The Tanque Verde Wash, Tucson, accessed from Houghton Road (access: N32°14'09", W110°46'20", wash: N32°14'17", W110°46'20"), held as many as ten pairs on 19/05/15.

Virginia's Warbler *Oreothlypis virginiae*

A bird of mountain brushlands which appears to have a widespread if somewhat localised distribution in Arizona. Two on the Incinerator Ridge Trail, Santa Catalina Mountains, on 03/05/15.

Grace's Warbler *Setophaga graciae*

Restricted to high altitude tall pine forests. Seen and heard quite commonly in suitable pine habitat in the Santa Catalinas, Santa Ritas, Huachucas and Chiricahuas.

Rufous-capped Warbler *Basileuterus rufifrons*

A relatively recent arrival to the Arizona breeding bird portfolio, this species only occurs at a handful of suitable riparian brush locations. A male was seen at Hunter Canyon, Huachuca Mountains, on 10/05/15 (N31°24'03", W110°16'22").

Red-faced Warbler *Cardellina rubrifrons*

Another true Sky Island specialist in the USA, restricted to shaded canyons along streams in pine-oak and fir forests. For some reason not encountered at the first two Sky Islands, but seen quite widely in Huachucas and Chiricahuas.

Painted Redstart *Myioborus pictus*

On the northern limits of its Mexican range, this species is found in Sky Island canyons, frequenting Madrean oak and oak-pine forests. One of the most regularly encountered 'warblers', seen at most suitable sites in the Santa Catalinas, Santa Ritas, Huachucas and Chiricahuas.

Rufous-winged Sparrow *Peucaea carpalis*

Restricted to low elevation mesquite grassland. We saw a pair at Continental, close to Green Valley (N31°50'42", W110°58'07"), on 04/05/15 and a single at Tubac on 07/05/15 (N36°36'10", W111°02'41").

Botteri's Sparrow *Peucaea botterii*

This species requires extensive dense grassland, with scattered mesquite or other shrubs. A single singing bird was seen between Green Valley and Madera Canyon on 04/05/15 (N31°46'37", W110°53'15").

Five-striped Sparrow *Amphispiza quinquestriata*

One of the most range-restricted breeding species in the USA, the Five-striped Sparrow has a habitat requirement of dense brush on steep slopes above permanent streams. Three birds were seen at the classic California Gulch site on 05/05/15 (N31°25'12", W111°14'16").

Dark-eyed Junco *Junco hyemalis caniceps*

A conifer forest specialist, 'Grey-headed Juncos' were not uncommon at various sites around the Grand Canyon South Rim on 15/05/15 and 18/05/15.

Yellow-eyed Junco *Junco phaeonotus*

Another Mexican species branching north as far as the Madrean Sky Islands, this species is not uncommon in open pine forest habitat. Seen at a number of sites in the Santa Catalinas, Santa Ritas, Huachucas and Chiricahuas.

Flame-coloured Tanager *Piranga bidentata*

This Mexican tanager is something of a vagrant in the USA. A male seen at Miller Canyon, Huachuca Mountains, on 08/05/15, was one of a pair which were said to be nesting at the site.

Eastern (Lilian's) Meadowlark *Sturnella magna lilianae*

A bird of native desert grasslands. Two were noted on roadside fences between Patagonia and Sierra Vista on 07/05/15

Mammal Species Recorded:**Desert Cottontail** *Sylvilagus audubonii*

The most frequently encountered mammal on the trip, with sightings in suitably arid areas between Rio Rico in the south and Monument Valley in the north.

Antelope Jackrabbit *Lepus alleni*

A pair seen close to Arivaca Lake on 05/05/15, with further sightings at Rio Rico on 05/05/15 and 06/05/15, the latter being on the road after dark

Black-tailed Jackrabbit *Lepus californicus*

Singles seen at Ash Canyon on 10/05/15 and in the lower valley east of Portal on 13/05/15.

Mexican Fox Squirrel *Sciurus nayaritensis chiricahuae*

Just one record of a pair of these spectacular squirrels, at the Cave Creek Ranch feeders on 13/05/15, in the early morning only; the race involved is endemic to the Chiricahua Mountains.

Abert's Squirrel *Sciurus aberti*

Just one individual recorded, at Rose Canyon in the Santa Catalina Mountains, on 03/05/15.

Arizona Grey Squirrel *Sciurus arizonensis*

Four individuals noted in Madera Canyon, Santa Rita Mountains, on 06/05/15 and a single in Ash Canyon on 09/05/15.

Gunnison's Prairie Dog *Cynomys gunnisoni*

By pure chance, on 18/05/15, we discovered a huge prairie dog town behind the Red Lake Hostel Texaco Station, north of Valle (N35°22'44", W112°09'40" – the excavations are actually visible on Google Earth!). At least 100 individuals noted, residing in widely scattered holes.

Rock Squirrel *Otospermophilus variegatus*

A widespread Arizona resident, noted in the Atascosa Mountains, Chiricahuas and Grand Canyon.

Round-tailed Ground Squirrel *Xerospermophilus tereticaudus*

Only seen at the Desert Botanical Garden, Phoenix, on 14/05/15, but common and approachable at this site, with at least twenty recorded.

Harris's Antelope Squirrel *Ammospermophilus harrisi*

Seen only at Rio Rico and in the Desert Botanical Garden, Phoenix. Particularly numerous and approachable at the latter site, with around thirty individuals noted.

White-tailed Antelope Squirrel *Ammospermophilus leucurus*

One brief sighting in Monument Valley on 17/05/15. We were horrified to see rodenticide dispensers located around the View Hotel, Monument Valley, a practice which no doubt impacts upon the mammal species recorded in the vicinity of this establishment.

Cliff Chipmunk *Tamias dorsalis*

A single pair at Molino Canyon Vista, Santa Catalinas, but found to be quite numerous in the Chiricahuas, with many close encounters at Cave Creek Ranch. Also seen at the Grand Canyon on 15/05/15.

Botta's Pocket Gopher *Thomomys bottae*

A gopher watched and photographed excavating a burrow at the Paton's House, Patagonia, on 07/05/15, is assumed to have been this species

Mexican Woodrat *Neotoma mexicana*

A lone individual watched and photographed at the Ramsey Canyon Preserve, on 09/05/15, is assumed to have been this species.

Yellow-nosed Cotton Rat *Sigmodon ochrognathus*

This species was regularly seen below the Santa Rita Ranch Lodge feeders, in Madera Canyon, being most active in the last hour of daylight, on 06/05/15.

Arizona Cotton Rat *Sigmodon arizonae*

A single individual of what is assumed to have been this species was seen and photographed at the Rodriguez Feeders, Portal, on 12/05/15.

Striped Skunk *Mephitis mephitis*

A single nocturnal record at Cave Creek Ranch, Chiricahuas, on 11/05/15

Hooded Skunk *Mephitis macroura*

The common skunk species at Cave Creek Ranch, Chiricahua Mountains, with up to three seen nightly.

Elk *Cervus canadensis*

Commonly seen in the Grand Canyon National Park, with up to ten noted daily during our extended stay.

'Coues' White-tailed Deer *Odocoileus virginianus couesi*

This small subspecies was commonly seen in the Santa Ritas, Huachucas and Chiricahuas, with Cave Creek Ranch being the location of our most intimate encounters.