

SOUTH-EAST ARIZONA HUMMINGBIRD TOUR

(August 2014)

by **Peter Hawrylyshyn** (epna AT rogers.com)

PARTICIPANTS: Peter Hawrylyshyn (Canada) and Robert Lewis (California-USA)

OBJECTIVE: On short notice, Bob suggested a quick trip to SE Arizona to catch the annual southward hummingbird migration. The main objective was to see and photograph a variety of hummingbird species with the key target species being the Lucifer Hummingbird which we had both missed on previous trips. Bob also wanted to find and photograph two specific warblers (Red-faced and Olive) and three sparrows (Rufous-winged, Botteri's and Cassin's) with ranges restricted to that corner of Arizona.

WEATHER: In general, we were lucky with the weather. July-September is traditionally the monsoon season in southern Arizona. Mornings were usually bright and sunny, but by late afternoon clouds would build often leading to heavy, localized thunderstorms by early evening. But overall, the weather did not restrict our birding objectives for the trip.

SITES - A brief description and location of the sites/lodges we visited :

Santa Rita Lodge (31° 45' 29.44"N, 110° 52' 51.51" W, 4900') – is located in the Coronado National Forest in the heart of Madera Canyon. It is the closest site to Tucson (13 miles south-east of Green Valley). Besides the lodge, there are camping and picnic areas, a variety of trails, and a visitor centre/store with 4-6 hummingbird feeders and various other seed feeders. All the feeders were well-maintained and quite active. The staff were very helpful and accommodating. Early morning visits will provide the best sun exposure for photography.

Patagonia/Paton Feeders (31° 32' 27.1"N, 110° 45' 13.6" W, 4055') – The former residence of Wally and Marion Paton who passed away in 2009, is now being managed by the Tucson Audubon Society. It has always been the most reliable site to see the Violet-crowned Hummingbird. Feeders still hang from the roof line, and a covered seating area has been built in the centre of the backyard. There is no formal entrance fee, although donations are requested to help maintain and improve the property.

Ramsey Canyon (31° 26' 58.85"N, 110° 18' 22.8" W, 5270') – is located in the Huachuca Mountains and is the first canyon south of Sierra Vista. The site is now maintained by the Nature Conservancy. There are 2 hummingbird feeders at the Nature Centre/Bookstore. Several other feeders were located along the main trail. Unfortunately, few if any hummingbirds were at the feeders which also had wire cages around them (to protect against bats feeding at night) and thus made photography very difficult. There is a \$6 entrance fee. Although the trail is quite scenic, this was the least noteworthy site we visited.

Miller Canyon/Beatty Ranch (31° 24' 50.73"N, 110° 16' 35.8"W, 5755') – Both Bob and I had visited here several years ago, and were surprised by the changes. The property was severely affected by the large Monument forest fire in 2011 and subsequent flooding. Although the owners were accommodating, the bleacher seating now installed at the Controlled Access Site (CAS) limited access, and location of the hummingbird feeders in heavy bushes made photography with telephoto lenses very difficult. Fifteen species of hummingbirds have been recorded here, and it is best location to see the White-eared Hummingbird. There is a \$15 entrance fee for the CAS. The property has become a site better suited to birders than photographers.

Ash Canyon/ Mary Jo's B&B (31° 23' 25.40"N, 110° 14' 20.42"W, 5200') – Although the arrangements for birders and photographers are now much more formal, this was still our favorite site. The property is the furthest south in the Huachuca Mountains, and the most reliable site in southern Arizona to see the Lucifer Hummingbird. There was even a hybrid Black-chinned x Lucifer male visiting the feeders. The setting and sun exposure angles were also ideally suited for photography. Besides the hummingbird feeders, there were

numerous other feeders attracting an interesting variety of birds. There is a \$5 entrance fee for birders and \$15 entrance fee for photographers with tripods.



CAS area at Beatty Ranch (Miller Canyon)



Feeder area at Mary Jo's B&B (Ash Canyon)

Red Mountain Cottages (31° 25' 3.1"N, 110° 0' 22"W, 4750') – The two fully furnished cottages at the foothills of the Mule Mountains across from Ash Canyon are a private retreat specifically designed for birders and bird photographers. Complete with numerous feeders and perch set-ups, it was the perfect home-base lodging located near Bisbee and the Huachuca Mountain canyons. Contact: www.redmountaincottages.com

Portal/Cave Creek Canyon (31° 54' 14.44"N, 109° 9' 30.38" W, 5000') – is situated further east near the New Mexico border in the Chiricahua Mountains. The most famous lodge is Cave Creek Ranch, although Bob stayed with friends in a nearby private residence in Portal. Recent rains had caused flooding and several sections of road were closed because of washouts which prohibited access to several key birding sites.

PHOTOGRAPHS: A few photos from the trip can be found on the last page of the report. More extensive galleries of bird photos can be seen at:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/pahyyz/sets/72157647075194005/>

<http://www.pahphoto.com/nature> under the Arizona 2014 folder

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/boblewis>

DAILY REPORTS

August 12 & 13 - Bob spent a couple days exploring the area around Tucson. On Mount Lemmon along the Bear Wallow and Rose Canyon trails he found **Red-faced Warbler** and several **Broad-billed Hummingbirds** at the higher elevations, but mid-afternoon rains forced him to head back to town. On the second day he saw an **Olive Warbler** along the Incinerator Ridge trail, where Mountain Chickadees, Pygmy and White-breasted Nuthatches were also very common. Overnight at Ramada Inn on Tanque Verde Road.

August 14 - I arrived late from Toronto into Phoenix, and it was almost noon before we were enroute towards Sierra Vista (3 hour drive). We stopped to pickup groceries and a late lunch at a nearby sandwich shop. Around 4PM we decided to quickly check out Mary Jo's B&B at Ash Canyon. The mix of birds we saw was identical to what we saw on our return visit a few days later. We then drove on to our overnight lodgings for the next three nights at Red Mountain Cottages. That evening, we had a very pleasant dinner with Larry and Marti – our gracious hosts and owners of the casitas.

August 15 – A couple hours of early morning birding in the surrounding desert scrub, finally yielded good photos of Botteri's Sparrow which had been a key target bird for Bob. We also saw Varied Bunting, Blue

Grosbeak , numerous Black-throated sparrows, two Canyon Towhees, Curved-billed Thrasher, Pyrrhuloxia, Northern Cardinal, White-winged and Mourning Doves. With the full mid-morning sun, birding activity decreased, so we decided to tour the nearby Lodges, and also allow the birds get used to the feeder setups.

First stop was Beatty Ranch at Miller Canyon. We were both surprised how much the property had changed. The hillside was still scarred with burnt tress and much of the apple orchards had been lost. There was now a covered bleacher section with over 30 seats at the Controlled Access Site (CAS), which is the preferred location with about 8-10 hummingbird feeders. Black-chinned and Rufous Hummingbirds were the most common species with a few Broad-billed Hummingbirds, a pair of Magnificent Hummingbirds (male and female), and a single Broad-tailed Hummingbird. The White-eared Hummingbird which we had hoped to see had been absent for over a month. Our next stop was Ramsey Canyon. Although the location and trail were very scenic, birding was extremely slow. We saw only a single Black-chinned Hummingbird at the two feeder sites. An Elegant Trogon had been seen by other birders earlier that morning, but we decided against trying to find it, and instead returned to Red Mountain for a late lunch.

In the afternoon, we experimented with several multi-flash techniques for hummingbirds. By now several Black-chinned and Rufous Hummingbirds were coming to the setups. However, the bright overhead sun and lack of suitable shade from trees or bushes made it impossible to avoid ghosting of the hummingbird wings. As such we got a couple of cold beers, put some steaks on the BBQ and enjoyed the magnificent desert view.

August 16 – I spent the morning at the multi-flash setups intent on taking advantage of the favorable sun angle and lighting. It was apparent that Rufous Hummingbirds were migrating thru the area as 3-4 would arrive en masse, spend time at the feeders and then move on. A solitary Broad-tailed Hummingbird also appeared and visited the feeder setup several times. The same mix of other birds as yesterday visited the seed feeders and made for interesting photos on the perch setups. Bob had ordered a “dog-house” photo blind which he set up near a creek bed hoping to get improved photos of Blue Grosbeak and Varied Bunting.

In the afternoon we visited nearby San Pedro House to watch Sherri Williamson band hummingbirds. Staff and volunteers from the SE Arizona Bird Observatory co-ordinate the weekly sessions over the summer months (<http://www.sabo.org/photoalb/banding.htm>) . Size, bill length, weight, plumage changes, signs of egg-laying, presence of mites/parasites, ... are recorded. Birds are often recaptured up to 3-5 times during each season. That night we had dinner with our hosts , Larry and Marti, in downtown Bisbee. It was a really interesting old mining town that probably deserved a separate longer visit. We got lost enroute home in the dark and almost crossed into Mexico before realizing our mistake. When we arrived back at the casita, there was an intense thunder and lightning storm which made for some interesting night sky photography.



View towards Huachuca Mountains



Night sky during thunderstorm

August 17 – After cleaning up the casita, it was time to leave and we returned to Mary Jo’s at Ash Canyon. The hummingbirds were again very active. There were several Lucifer Hummingbirds (male and female) and a hybrid Black-chinned x Lucifer male which Bob managed to photograph. Other species seen included

Magnificent Hummingbird (1-2), Anna's Hummingbird (3-4), Black-chinned Hummingbird (4-6), Rufous Hummingbird (3-4), Broad-tailed Hummingbird (2), and Broad-billed Hummingbird (2). The seed and fruit feeders were attracting a variety of other interesting birds which included Acorn Woodpeckers, Gila Woodpeckers, Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, Mexican Jays, Scott Orioles, Western Kingbird, Bewick's Wren, Botteri's and Black-throated Sparrows. Without a doubt, Mary Jo's at Ash Canyon was the busiest and best place for hummingbirds in the Huachucas.

By mid-afternoon we departed for the one hour drive to Santa Rita Lodge. We took the back roads along SR83 and Greaterville/Box Canyon road. We passed thru Elgin and would have liked to stop at some of the Arizona wineries located there, but had to leave that for a future trip. The scenery thru the canyon was quite spectacular. We arrived at Santa Rita Lodge by 4pm. Unlike most other sites we had visited, the lodge was quite busy because of a local Tucson Birding Festival. Our main target here was a male Plain-capped Starthroat which had been visiting the feeders periodically through the summer. Luck was on our side, as the bird visited the feeders behind the bookstore several times during the next couple of hours. The most prevalent species here was the Broad-billed Hummingbird, as well as Magnificent Hummingbird (1), Black-chinned Hummingbird (2), Anna's Hummingbird (2), Broad-tailed Hummingbird (2). The seed feeders set up on poles across from the hummingbird feeder area attracted an interesting mix of birds which included Arizona Woodpecker, Acorn Woodpecker, White-breasted Nuthatch, Black-headed Grosbeak, Hepatic Tanager, Painted Redstart, Although we would have preferred staying longer, the threat of a dust storm forced us to return to Tucson. That night we stayed at the Marriott Residence Inn, and had an excellent sushi dinner while a heavy thunderstorm passed thru the area.

August 18 – After dropping me off at a depot for the 2 hour mini-bus trip back to Phoenix and my return flight to Toronto, Bob headed to the grasslands of El Cienega hoping for photos of Cassin's Sparrow. Although Botteri's, Lark and Black-throated Sparrows were easy to find, no luck with Cassin's. He later heard and found one on the dirt road exiting the grasslands, but never got the photo he was hoping for. In the afternoon he drove on to Patagonia and visited the legendary Paton's property. An Eagle-eye Tours had just arrived as well, so the backyard was quite busy. Fortunately, a Violet-crowned Hummingbird also appeared amongst the more common Black-chinned (7) and Broad-billed(3) Hummingbirds. Other new birds seen included Lazuli Bunting, Yellow-breasted Chat, Yellow Warbler, Phainopepla, ... Overnight at a motel in Tombstone.

August 19-21 Bob spent several days on his own exploring the Portal area. Recent rains and flooding restricted access to many areas, and numerous people had to be towed out. The access to the Plain-capped Starthroat stake-out had been closed, so it was just as well we had seen it at Santa Rita. The residence where Bob stayed had over eight hummingbird feeders and Blue-throated Hummingbirds were very common. Other species included Black-chinned Hummingbird (2-3), Broad-tailed Hummingbird (2), Broad-billed Hummingbird (2), Magnificent Hummingbird (1-2), and Rufous Hummingbird (2). Other noteworthy birds which were seen and photographed included Sulfur-bellied Flycatchers, Hooded Oriole, Black-headed Grosbeak, Painted Redstarts, Mexican Chickadee, Black-throated Gray Warblers, Gambel's Quail, Inca Dove, Cactus Wren, Greater Roadrunner, ... The Portal area has different vegetation zones compared to the Huachuca Mountains which makes for different birding between the two areas.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS: Given the time constraints, it proved to be a very successful trip. The monsoon rains were never really an issue, nor did we encounter any safety concerns along the Mexican border. We saw and photographed 10 species of hummingbirds. Bob found all 5 of his sparrow and warbler target species. None of the established lodges in the Huachuca Mountains permit multi-flash setups for photographing hummingbirds, as such this requires visiting private sites with feeders, such as Red Mountain Cottages which proved ideal given its central location and numerous feeders and setup possibilities. Bob got to see some old friends, and as always it was nice to travel again together. Definitely worthy of a return trip.

BIRD PHOTOGRAPHS: Here are some photos of just a few of the species seen on the trip:



Black-chinned HB (Female)



Black-chinned HB (Male)



Lucifer HB (Male)



Black-chinned x Lucifer (Male)



Rufous Hummingbird



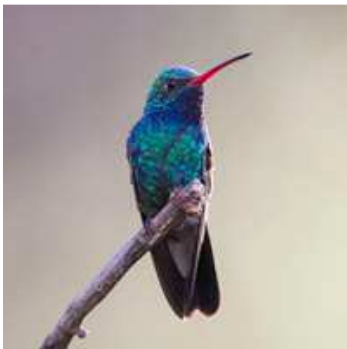
Broad-tailed HB (Male)



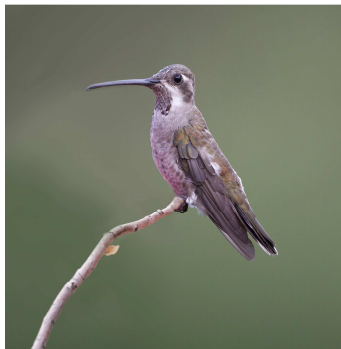
Blue-throated HB



Magnificent HB (Male)



Broad-billed HB (Male)



Plain-capped Starthroat



Red-faced Warbler



Olive Warbler



Botteri's Sparrow



Rufous-winged Sparrow



Black-throated Sparrow



Blue Grosbeak