

By Matthias Benko

Heat. The first thing I noticed was the heat. I've been to mountains, to oceans, to plains; but nothing quite compares to the desert. And yet, in a land that is seemingly harsh and unforgiving, certain gems of nature thrive.

This past July, I was given the incredible opportunity to attend Camp Chiricahua, one of two young birder camps led by Victor Emmanuel Nature Tours. I experienced the incredible diversity of Southeastern Arizona for the first time with twelve other young birders from across the United States.

While waiting for the other campers to arrive at the airport in Tuscon, I was able to do some parking lot birding. The parking lot turned out to be surprisingly productive, as I picked up four life birds: Gila Woodpecker, Verdin, Broad-billed Hummingbird, and a brilliantly colored male Vermillion Flycatcher. A good omen for the rest of the adventure, I'd say.

On the first full of day of camp, we went birding at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, which is situated along Saguaro National Park. There, we were given an informative introduction to the ecology of the desert, while also enjoying our first views of birds like Cactus Wren, Brown-crested Flycatcher, and even a Gilded Flicker. After a few hours in the desert, we headed up to the Santa Catalina Mountains.

While camping at Mount Lemmon, we made several stops in the surrounding areas. Hummingbird feeders were a popular destination, where we were treated to views of a small number of Rivoli's Hummingbirds and several Broad-tailed Hummingbirds. One major highlight of camp occurred in our campground: the unexpected appearance of a pair of Common Black Hawks at Rose Canyon Lake, who actually stuck around for the duration of our trip in the Catalinas. However, the Catalinas were only a warm up of what was to come, Our next stop would be where the heart of the camp took place: the Chiricahua Mountains.

En route to the Chiricahuas, we made several productive stops. One highlight included a brief pause at an overlook that not only had an incredible vista of the valley below it, but also hosted Black-chinned Sparrows. We had one major stop in the middle of our drive: Lake Wilcox, a wastewater treatment plant. Lake Wilcox is truly a desert oasis, even if its stench would suggest otherwise, as it some of the only open water for miles around. When we arrived, the mudflats were covered with shorebirds. I saw more American Avocets than I had ever seen in my entire life (232!), and significant numbers of Black-necked Stilts, Long-billed Curlews, Wilson's Phalaropes, and a lone Marbled Godwit. After about an hour, we were off to the Chiricahuas!

The Chiricahuas were truly breathtaking. We stayed at Cave Creek Ranch in Portal, Arizona for four nights, a lovely location with stunning views of multicolored

rock faces, but also a birding hotspot of its own: while exploring the grounds on the first day, we stumbled upon a gorgeous male Montezuma Quail. The bird feeders also hosted an array of goodies: Arizona Woodpecker, Summer Tanager, Blue-throated Mountain-Gem, and our rarest bird of the trip: American Goldfinch. The American Goldfinch, although ubiquitous in the eastern United States, is rarely found in the Southwest. It was quite a surprise to see.

There's one bird that I've wanted to see ever since I've known about it. Without a doubt, it was my most wanted bird of this trip. The Elegant Trogon is a Southeastern Arizona speciality; the only place in the United States where they can be found. They are local but uncommon; their startling call, reminiscent of a barking dog, is unmistakable. We birded the South Fork area our first full day, excited to get a glimpse of this remarkable creature. Even though we looked for the bird intensely in the morning, we had no success. Worry among the campers started to grow when we kept checking the spots with no luck. However, on the third day visiting the area, my heart started racing and I had a feeling... all of a sudden, I see the group of campers vigorously waving me over, and I sprinted over and got my first glance at a juvenile Elegant Trogon. We had located the family group, and soon after, a striking male flew over the road and perched in a tree, allowing for only quick but satisfying views. It was a birding moment I will never forget.

Another unforgettable moment in the Chiricahuas was our afternoon visit with Spotted Owls. I vividly remember doing a report on Spotted Owls when I was in second grade, but nothing could compare to actually seeing them in the wild. We drove up to the location where they've been seen over the years. Our leader said something along the lines of "This is the Spotted Owl spot. Oh look, there's one." Immediately, we all scrambled out of the van. Not only did we get excellent views of two adults; we also saw two juvenile birds that were hanging out together on a branch, trying to look like fierce predators but failing to look anything but absolutely adorable.

At night in the Chiricahuas, we searched for nocturnal birds and other interesting creatures as well. We were treated to views of birds like Mexican Whip-poor-will and Whiskered Screech-Owls, and other creatures such as rattlesnakes, a coral snake, tarantulas, and scorpions. But perhaps the most incredible creature was quite massive. As we were driving along the road, I had a perfect view onto the side. All of a sudden, I see a sizable, shadowy figure moving into the brush on the side of the road; bright green eyes, long tail, and an unmistakable face. A mountain lion. I remember saying "Oh my God, Oh my God, Oh my God, mountain lion!" By the time we stopped and reversed, the cat was gone but not before one other camper was able to get a fleeting look at the catlike figure.

After leaving the Chiricahuas, the rest of the trip was split between the Huachuca and Santa Rita mountain ranges. At this point, the trip was focused on finding specialty birds. In the Huachuchas, we hiked a mile uphill at Hunter Canyon to find Rufous-capped Warblers. Luckily, we all got excellent views of at least two birds. We also made the harrowing drive up Carr Canyon to find Buff-bellied Flycatcher. Yet, perhaps the coolest birds of the Huachucas were two owl species: the Elf Owl and Northern Pygmy-Owl. We had excellent views of both species, the former at night and the latter in the day. The Elf Owl especially captivated us, as it is the smallest owl in the world.

The final day of Camp was spent at Box Canyon and Madera Canyon, a speciality day where we successfully picked up all of our targets: Five-striped Sparrow, Lucifer Hummingbird, and Black-capped Gnatcatcher. After enjoying our last views of trogons at the Santa Rita lodge, we headed back to Tuscon and spent the last afternoon together relaxing in the pool. It was an incredible trip, and, needless to say, everyone was sad to leave. As a group, we saw 196 species; 80 of those were life birds for me. It was not only incredible birding experience, but wonderful to meet and spend time with other young people who share my love for birds and form friendships that will hopefully last a lifetime. These camps are so important for our future; they help foster a deep love and passion for the environment in young people that will help create global citizens. I'd like to thank the leaders of the trip for their vast knowledge and wonderful

guidance, as well as the Central New Mexico Audubon Society for their monetary support through the Ryan Beaulieu Memorial Scholarship. Camp Chiricahua was an experience I will forever cherish.



**Rock face at  
Camp Chiricahua**



**View from Santa Catalinas**



**Spotted Owl (adult)**



**Spotted Owls (juveniles)**



**Elf Owl**



**Blue-throated Mountain-  
Gem**



**Broad-tailed Hummingbird  
(l), Rivoli's Hummingbird (r)**



**Broad-billed Hummingbird**



**Hooded Oriole**



**Elegant Trogon**



**Brown-crested Flycatcher**



**Cactus Wren**



**Greater Roadrunner**

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(All photos by Matthias Benko.)