

## **ARIZONA WINTER SPECIALTIES**

*December 28, 2019-January 3, 2020*



*The Phainopepla is the only silky-flycatcher species to be found in the US. In winter, these birds may defend a tree that contains clumps of mistletoe, one of the primary winter food sources for these elegant birds. Photograph by participant Jonathan Slifkin.*

*We include here information for those interested in the 2019 Field Guides Arizona Winter Specialties tour:*

- a general introduction to the tour
- a description of the birding areas to be visited on the tour
- an abbreviated daily itinerary with some indication of the nature of each day's birding outings

*Those who register for the tour will be sent this additional material:*

- an annotated list of the birds recorded on a previous year's Field Guides trip to the area, with comments by guide(s) on notable species or sightings (may be downloaded from the website)
- a detailed information bulletin with important logistical information and answers to questions regarding accommodations, air arrangements, clothing, currency, customs and immigration, documents, health precautions, and personal items
- a reference list
- a Field Guides checklist for preparing and keeping track of the birds we see on the tour
- after the conclusion of the tour, a list of birds seen on the tour

**Southern Arizona** is a great place to bird in winter! Yes, the trogons and hummingbirds have largely departed (but not all of them), and the Hooded Oriole nests hang empty in the sycamores. But other species have arrived to take their place. The wide and scenic Sonoita and San Rafael grasslands secret away a multitude of pipits, larks, sparrows, and longspurs. Bendire's, Crissal, and LeConte's thrashers sing from mesquite trees on the sparse desert flats west of Buckeye. Sandhill Cranes, numbering in the thousands, rise bugling from protected roosting and feeding sites in the Sulphur Springs Valley. A plethora of raptors ply the vast blue desert skies searching for prey and thermals. Winter irruptives, including Lewis's Woodpecker, Mountain Bluebird, and Lawrence's Goldfinch, appear in varying numbers from year to year, brightening the subdued landscapes when they occur. And Mexican species regularly wander across the border to add a tropical twist to the triplist.

This short tour is designed to sample the riches to be found in the lowlands of Southern Arizona in the winter: several productive watering holes and desert haunts around Phoenix and Tucson, the extensive riparian areas around Patagonia and Nogales, the San Rafael Grasslands near Sonoita, and the consistently birdy Sulphur Springs Valley near the Mexican border southeast of Tucson. Among the many species we'll be looking for during our stay are Ferruginous and "Harlan's" hawks, Bald and Golden eagles, Crested Caracara, Prairie Falcon, Mountain Plover, Hammond's, Gray, and Dusky flycatchers, the notoriously difficult-to-see Sprague's Pipit, an impressive assortment of sparrows including Grasshopper, Baird's, Rufous-winged, Rufous-crowned, Sagebrush, Bell's, Black-chinned, and Brewer's, and large numbers of Chestnut-collared and smaller numbers of McCown's longspurs.

Additionally, this season has produced some very exciting finds from "south of the border." Ruddy Ground-Dove and Rufous-backed Robin are now annual in Arizona in winter, and Black-capped Gnatcatcher is now a rare year-round resident. Eared Quetzal, Short-tailed Hawk, Green Kingfisher, Nutting's Flycatcher, Rose-throated Becard, Sinaloa Wren, White-throated and Aztec thrushes, Blue Mockingbird, Crescent-chested and Rufous-capped warblers, and Streak-backed Oriole have also made recent appearances at this season. Who knows what it might be this year? Your guide is very experienced in the region and has plenty of local contacts, so we'll have up-to-the-minute information as to where and when any of these unusual species might be present. If you're looking to escape the winter 'blahs' and soak up some winter sun and see some exciting wintering birds, head to southern Arizona for a truly exceptional winter birding experience and see this wonderful state as you never have before!



*The Ruddy Ground-Dove (left) is an uncommon vagrant from Mexico, but we've been able to find them on several recent tours. Here, one is perched with a resident Inca Dove, for a nice comparison. Photograph by guide Chris Benesh.*

**About the Physical Requirements & Pace:** This short tour endeavors to see a thorough sampling of the species that are possible in this corner of Arizona at this season, a large number of which are absent on our spring and summer tours. Not all species occur in the same region or in the same habitat, so a fair amount of time in the vehicle is necessary to traverse the sometimes considerable distances between species and between our lodging and the right habitats. Hikes in most places will be along uneven, but mostly flat trails. All of the trails have common hazards such as protruding rocks, fallen limbs/tree trunks, and thorny plants, and some, especially in the mountains, can be steep in places. The roads that we walk are typically good, gravel roads.

If you are uncertain about whether this tour is a good match for your abilities, please don't hesitate to contact our office; if they cannot directly answer your queries, they will put you in touch with your guide.

## About the Birding Areas

**Phoenix Area**—The Phoenix area (ca. 1200 feet elevation) has long been a favorite for winter visitors (both human and avian!) and the "Valley of the Sun" boasts a number of fine birding sites within easy driving distance from the center of town. The primary site that interests us lies almost due west of town near the small farming community of Buckeye where the sparse vegetation in very alkaline soil hosts a few pairs of the scarce LeConte's Thrasher, which is often actively

singing at this season. The area where these birds are found often harbors a fine variety of other mimids at this season too, with Crissal, Bendire's, Curve-billed, and Sage thrashers all being possibilities. Sagebrush and Brewer's sparrows often abound in the sparse scrub here during the winter months as well, and small numbers of Bell's Sparrow can sometimes be found here (Sage Sparrow was recently split into two species, Sagebrush and Bells' sparrows, and both can be found wintering in Southern Arizona).



Weather at this season in the Phoenix and Tucson areas is typically great, with clear skies and highs in the mid-60's to low 70's (sometimes a little warmer, sometimes a little cooler) and lows in the upper 30's or low 40's. Winter in Arizona can be wet and cool, though, if Pacific cold fronts happen to be moving through the state. If this is the case, highs can drop to the 40's and 50's, light to moderate rain (or very rarely even snow) can be a nuisance all day long, and overnight and morning temperatures can drop to below freezing (that's *cold* for an Arizonan!). With this possibility in mind, please plan your birding attire accordingly.

**Santa Cruz Flats** – The agricultural area between Tucson and Casa Grande is an excellent area for wintering open-country birds. Raptors abound here including Ferruginous Hawk, “Harlan’s” Red-tailed Hawk, Prairie Falcon, and Crested Caracara. The Evergreen Sod Farm typically hosts a wintering flock of Mountain Plovers, and we sometimes find Great Horned Owls, Burrowing Owls, Bendire’s Thrashers, and more in the area. The few riparian shelter-belts near farmhouses here can host interesting wintering landbirds such as Ruddy Ground-Dove, Rufous-backed Robin, and eastern warblers.

**Tucson Area**—Flanked on three sides by high pine-covered mountains, the open desert of the Tucson Valley (ca. 2600 feet elevation) and the surrounding areas are the best places to find the local Gilded Flicker and Rufous-winged Sparrow. Numerous other species typical of the Lower Sonoran Desert can also be found here, including Gambel’s Quail, Gila Woodpecker, Costa’s and Anna’s hummingbirds, Cactus Wren, Verdin, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, and Pyrrhuloxia.

**Patagonia/Sonoita Creek and Vicinity**— Although the tall and sturdy Fremont’s Cottonwoods and Arizona Sycamores are leafless now and the kingbirds and orioles have long since departed for warmer climes, this area is still one of the richest in Arizona for birding at this season. Other than the Mexican vagrants that this area has attracted in recent years, three species of *Empidonax* flycatchers regularly winter here, as do a fine variety of woodpeckers, raptors, sparrows, and finches. We’ll devote most of our time to birding the beautiful stretches of riparian woodland, but we’ll also want to check a variety of other characteristic habitats of the area. The Patagonia area (ca. 4100 feet) is considerably cooler than the Phoenix and Tucson areas during the daytime, and it’s likely to drop below freezing during the night and early morning hours.

**San Rafael Grasslands**—Seemingly out of place in this land of high mountains and parched desert lands, the expansive San Rafael Grasslands (ca. 5000 feet) offer a pleasant diversion for birders during the winter months. In the rolling, virtually treeless grasslands here, a few birds are found during the colder months with relative ease. A walk through the knee-high grass will give us a chance to see such difficult birds as Sprague’s Pipit (rare), Grasshopper and Baird’s sparrows, and Chestnut-collared, McCown’s (rare), and possibly even Lapland longspurs. This is an excellent place for raptors as well, and we’ll stay alert for the likes of White-tailed Kite, Golden Eagle, Ferruginous Hawk, Merlin, and Prairie and Peregrine falcons.

**Sulphur Springs Valley**—Situated between the Chiricahua and Mule mountains, the Sulphur Springs Valley has long been a favorite winter haunt for Arizona birders. This flat land, devoted to cattle ranching and agriculture, attracts an

impressive variety of raptors, waterfowl, finches, and a host of open-country birds to the fields, pastures, open desert, and ponds that make up this land. One of the winter highlights is the large number of Sandhill Cranes that winter in the valley (tens of thousands in recent winters). At dawn and at sunset, thousands of these stately birds can be seen flying to and from roosting grounds and favored feeding sites, and the sound of their constant bugling is not soon forgotten. The Willcox area (including the famous Lake Cochise) should offer some quail, waterbirds, raptors, and shorebirds for us to study. Weather permitting, it should be a memorable day of birding for our group.



*We have the chance to see five species of thrashers on this tour, including the secretive Bendire's Thrasher.  
Photograph by guide Tom Johnson.*

## Itinerary for Arizona Winter Specialties

**Day 1, Sat, 28 Dec. Arrival in Phoenix; late afternoon birding nearby.** Please plan to arrive in Phoenix **no later than 2:00 p.m.** today. Complimentary hotel shuttles between Sky Harbor Int'l Airport and the Radisson Hotel Phoenix Airport North run every twenty minutes. We will plan to meet in the lobby of the hotel at 3:00 p.m. to start our birding at a nearby birding hotspot. Night in Phoenix.

**Day 2, Sun, 29 Dec. Buckeye and the greater Phoenix area.** After a 6:00 a.m. breakfast at our hotel, this morning we'll make the drive west of Phoenix to the town of Buckeye where LeConte's Thrasher awaits us. It's not unusual at this season to record up to five or six species of mimids at this site, so we should get our fill of thrashers today. We'll also search for Sagebrush and Bell's sparrows in the area. The area southwest of Phoenix is often productive for such wintering species as Ruddy Ground-Dove, a variety of waterfowl, shorebirds, wintering warblers, and the like so there should be plenty in this part of the valley to keep us busy for the morning, at least! We'll be sure to make a stop at a city park that hosts a good population of the introduced Rosy-faced Lovebird, a species just recently added to the ABA checklist.

After we have the LeConte's Thrasher and others in the bag, in the afternoon we might drive to the Boyce Thompson Arboretum, east of Phoenix near the copper mining town of Superior, which is often home to several exciting winter visitors. It's one of the more reliable spots in the state for the shy Rufous-backed Robin from south of the border, but it also often harbors the likes of Williamson's Sapsucker, Lawrence's Goldfinch, Varied Thrush, or some other rare winter visitor along with the more common desert-dwelling species. Some winters, the Arboretum isn't so productive, and we'll devise an alternative site should we hear that a visit there wouldn't be worth our while. Night in Phoenix.

**Day 3, Mon, 30 Dec. Early birding around Phoenix; drive to Tucson via Santa Cruz Flats.** We'll have a couple of hours in the Phoenix area to search for anything that's eluded us up to this point before we start to work our way south along I-10. On our way south we'll check a couple of productive sod farms in the Santa Cruz Flats area south of Casa Grande for a wintering flock of Mountain Plovers, a group of Crested Caracaras or other wintering raptors, a variety of sparrows, and perhaps some wintering longspurs. Should we have missed the Bendire's Thrasher the day before in Buckeye, this area is quite good for the species, too. Night in Tucson.

**Days 4-6, Tue-Thu, 31 Dec. - 2 Jan. Tucson area.** We'll base ourselves in our comfortable hotel in Tucson for the next three days, making day trips to track down the local specialties present this year and also to see the fine variety of wintering birds in southeast Arizona at this season. "Mexican" specialties such as Rufous-backed Robin, Sinaloa Wren, Rufous-capped Warbler, Ruddy Ground-Dove, Black-capped Gnatcatcher, and Rose-throated Becard have all been reported at this season in the past several years, and the region might again be full of invading Western and Mountain bluebirds and Lawrence's Goldfinches—a rare winter event that occurs every few years in Southeast Arizona.

In addition to searching for the local rarities present, we'll also be able to devote some time to the rich grassland birding near Patagonia and the productive agricultural sites in the Sulphur Springs Valley southeast of Tucson. All of these sites are relatively easy day trips. Being based in Tucson for these three nights gives us a large degree of flexibility and we can revise our daily plans as needed just in case some other juicy waif makes an appearance during the course of the tour. Nights in Tucson.

**Day 7, Fri, 3 Jan. Departure.** If you are flying out this morning from Tucson, be sure to arrange for the courtesy van to the airport in plenty of time for your flight. Happy New Year!

## About Your Guide

**Chris Benesh** grew up studying natural history in California, where he was inspired by his father to take up birding as a teenager. After earning a degree in zoology from UC Santa Barbara in 1987, Chris moved to Austin to join the Field Guides staff. Since then, his life has undergone a wonderful transformation. The intervening years at Field Guides have taken him to many corners of the world and across both the Arctic and Antarctic circles!

Chris takes an interest in nearly anything that flies, and you might catch him sneaking a peek at a passing aircraft or stopping to examine a butterfly or odonate. You might also notice him getting especially excited at the sighting of a rare or wonderful mammal (heck, he can get excited about a squirrel).

Chris's passion for education has led to his serving on the Arizona Bird Committee, leading the occasional workshop, presenting at birding conventions, and—we must add—thoroughly explaining in admirable detail the nuances of flycatchers to tour participants and colleagues alike. These days, most of his "down time" is spent at home in Tucson watching his two wonderful kids, Sean and Linnea, grow.

*"I would travel with **Chris Benesh** anywhere, any time. He is calm, pleasant, and good-humored. He is not only brilliant at spotting and finding birds, but equally brilliant at ensuring that every member of the group gets a great look at the bird." B.M., Arizona's Second Spring*

Visit <https://fieldguides.com/guides> for Chris's complete tour schedule; just click on his photo.

## Financial Information

**FEE: \$2250 from Phoenix** (*Please note that the tour begins in Phoenix and ends in Tucson.*)

**DEPOSIT:** \$250 per person

**FINAL PAYMENT DUE:** August 30, 2019

**SINGLE SUPPLEMENT (Optional):** \$400

**LIMIT:** 7

## Other Things You Need to Know

**TOUR MANAGER:** The manager for this tour is Christine Boilard. Christine will be happy to assist you in preparing for the tour. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call her!

**AIR ARRANGEMENTS:** Please note that this tour begins in Phoenix and ends in Tucson; please plan to arrive in Phoenix no later than 2:00 p.m. on Day 1. Field Guides is a full-service travel agency and your tour manager will be happy to assist you with flights to join this tour. Field Guides does not charge a service fee for these services to clients booking a tour. However, we understand that tech-savvy clients often prefer to shop online or that you may wish to use

mileage to purchase tickets. Regardless of which method you choose, your tour manager will be happy to provide assistance regarding ticket prices and schedules, along with rental cars and extra hotel nights as needed.

Please be sure to check with your tour manager prior to purchasing your ticket to make sure the flights you have chosen will work well with the tour itinerary and that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. Once purchased, most airline tickets are non-refundable and carry a penalty to change. Field Guides cannot be responsible for these fees. **Also, it is imperative that we receive a copy of your comprehensive flight itinerary—including any and all flights not covered in the tour fee—so that we may track you in the event of missed connections, delays, or other mishaps.**

**LUGGAGE:** Please be aware that many airlines have recently modified their luggage policies and are charging additional fees for checked bags. Updates could easily occur before your departure, so you may wish to contact your airline to verify the policy. Additional charges for bags on any flights, whether these are covered by the tour fee or not, will be the client's responsibility.

**TOUR INCLUSIONS/EXCLUSIONS:** The **tour fee** is \$2250 for one person in double occupancy from Phoenix/Tucson. It includes all lodging from Day 1 through Day 6, all meals from dinner on Day 1 through dinner on Day 6, all ground transportation, entrance fees, and the guide services of the tour leader(s). Tipping at group meals and for drivers, porters, and local guides is included in your tour fee and will be handled for the group by your Field Guides leader(s). However, if you would like to recognize your Field Guides leader(s) or any local guide(s) for exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are optional and not expected.

The above fee does not include your airfare to Phoenix and from Tucson, airport taxes, any checked or carry-on baggage charges imposed by the airlines, any alcoholic beverages, optional tips to local drivers, phone calls, laundry, or other items of a personal nature.

The **single supplement** for the tour is \$400. If you do not have a roommate but wish to share, we will try to pair you with a roommate from the tour; but if none is available, you will be billed for the single supplement. Our tour fees are based on double occupancy; one-half the cost of a double room is priced into the tour fee. The single supplement is calculated by taking the actual cost of a single room and subtracting one-half the cost of a double room (plus any applicable taxes).

**TOUR REGISTRATION:** To register for this tour, complete the Registration/Release and Indemnity form and return it with a **deposit of \$250** per person. If registering by phone, a deposit must be received within fourteen days, or the space will be released. **Full payment** of the tour fee is due 120 days prior to departure, or **by August 30, 2019. We will bill you for the final payment at either 120 days or when the tour has reached sufficient subscription to operate, whichever date comes later.** Since the cost of your trip insurance and airline tickets is generally non-refundable, please do not finalize these purchases until you have received final billing for the tour or have been advised that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate by your tour manager.

**TOUR LIMITS:** Our limits are firm and we don't exceed the limit by one to accommodate a couple when only one space remains open. However, on occasion, we will send along a guide in training on a tour. In these cases, one seat in the van or bus will be taken by the guide in training. Our guides will have a rotation system within the vehicle so that clients share the inconvenience equally. We hope this minor inconvenience will be more than offset by the advantages of having another guide along.

**SMOKING:** Almost all of our clients prefer a smoke-free environment. If you smoke, please be sensitive to the group and refrain from smoking at meals, in vehicles, and in proximity to the group on trails and elsewhere.

**CANCELLATION POLICY:** Refund of deposit and payment, less \$100 handling fee, will be made if cancellation is received up to 120 days before departure. If cancellation occurs between 119 and 70 days before the departure date, 50% of the tour fee is refundable. Thereafter, all deposits and payments are not refundable.

This policy only applies to payments made to Field Guides for tour fees (and any services included in those fees). Airline tickets not included in the tour fee and purchased separately often carry penalties for cancellation or change, or are sometimes totally non-refundable. Additionally, if you take out trip insurance the cost of the insurance is not refundable so it is best to purchase the policy just prior to making full payment for the tour or at the time you purchase airline tickets, depending upon the airlines restrictions.

The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute in case of emergency another guide for the original one.

**TRIP CANCELLATION & MEDICAL EMERGENCY INSURANCE:** We strongly recommend you consider purchasing trip cancellation (including medical emergency) insurance to cover your investment in case of injury or illness to you or your family prior to or during a trip. Because we must remit early (and substantial) tour deposits to our suppliers, we cannot offer any refund when cancellation occurs within 70 days of departure, and only a partial refund from 70 to 119 days prior to departure (see CANCELLATION POLICY). In addition, the Department of State strongly urges Americans to consult with their medical insurance company prior to traveling abroad to confirm whether their policy applies overseas and if it will cover emergency expenses such as a medical evacuation. US medical insurance plans seldom cover health costs incurred outside the United States unless supplemental coverage is purchased. Furthermore, US Medicare and Medicaid programs do not provide payment for medical services outside the United States.

When making a decision regarding health insurance, Americans should consider that many foreign doctors and hospitals require payment in cash prior to providing service and that a medical evacuation to the United States may cost well in excess of \$50,000. Uninsured travelers who require medical care overseas often face extreme difficulties. When consulting with your insurer prior to your trip, please ascertain whether payment will be made to the overseas healthcare provider or whether you will be reimbursed later for expenses that you incur.

US citizens will receive from us a brochure regarding optional tour cancellation/emergency medical insurance. Our agent, CSA, will insure for trip cancellation and interruption, medical coverage, travel delay, baggage loss and delay, 24-hour accident protection, and emergency medical transportation. If you purchase the insurance when making final payment for the tour, and cover all non-refundable parts of the trip (including any non-refundable flights), pre-existing conditions are covered. The CSA brochure includes a contact number; you may also purchase your CSA policy on-line by visiting our website at <https://fieldguides.com/travelinsurance.html> and clicking the link to CSA. **Currently we are unable to offer CSA insurance policies to residents of New York and Hawaii.** We have had clients provide positive feedback after acquiring insurance with InsureMyTrip ([www.insuremytrip.com](http://www.insuremytrip.com)) in the past, and would suggest that company as an alternative. Please let us know if you have any questions about this. Please note, once the insurance is purchased it is non-refundable, so please check with your tour manager prior to making the purchase to assure the tour will operate as scheduled. Citizens of other countries are urged to consult their insurance broker.

**RESPONSIBILITY:** For and in consideration of the opportunity to participate in the tour, each tour participant and each parent or legal guardian of a tour participant who is under 18 agrees to release, indemnify, and hold harmless Field Guides Incorporated, its agents, servants, employees, shareholders, officers, directors, attorneys, and contractors as more fully set forth in the Release and Indemnity Agreement on the reverse side of the registration form. Field Guides Incorporated acts only as an agent for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, or other means, and assumes no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity caused by defect in such vehicles or for any reason whatsoever, including the acts, defaults, or bankruptcies of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. Field Guides Incorporated accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. The tour participant shall bear all such losses and expenses. Field Guides Incorporated reserves the right to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. Field Guides Incorporated reserves the right to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely.

Participants should be in good health and should consult a physician before undertaking a tour. If you have questions about the physical requirements of a tour, please contact our office for further information. Participants should prepare for the tour by reading the detailed itinerary, the information bulletin, and other pertinent matter provided by Field Guides. Each participant is responsible for bringing appropriate clothing and equipment as recommended in our bulletins.

**THE RECEIPT OF YOUR TOUR DEPOSIT SHALL BE DEEMED TO BE CONSENT TO THE ABOVE CONDITIONS. EACH TOUR PARTICIPANT AND EACH PARENT OR LEGAL GUARDIAN OF A TOUR PARTICIPANT WHO IS UNDER 18 SHALL SIGN AND DELIVER THE RELEASE AND INDEMNITY AGREEMENT AT THE TIME OF REGISTRATION.**

DS 2/8/19

Peg 3/18