

Winter Birding in Southeast Arizona

This essay was originally published in the 2024 January-March issue of the [Brooks Bird Club](#) newsletter, "The Mailbag".

For this web version I added links to the Cornell University "All About Birds" web site for each species. Each "All About Birds" entry contains: Photos, and Overview, ID info, Life History, Range Maps and Sounds. The "All About Birds" portal is linked to the [Macaulay Library](#).

The Macaulay Library contains:

64,092,906 Photos, audio, and videos

10,056 Species of birds

2,674 Species of amphibians, fish, mammals, and more

80,129 Contributors

1,427 Scientific publications using the archive

Additionally, Cornell University has developed an app named "[Merlin](#)" that allows the user to identify bird songs and calls and, identify birds in a photo and other features.

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In the Beginning

As a child, being introduced to the wide, wonderful world of birds by my father, George H. Breiding (and, by extension the Brooks Bird Club), changed my life and continues to do so. Although I have always considered myself a casual and opportunistic birder, this has not in any way diminished the enjoyment and excitement of bird watching.

And who would believe bird watching could enhance a marriage? For Betsy and me, it certainly has and continues to do so.

And it all started on our Honeymoon, where one of the most exciting things we did outside of our tent was to seek out new birds we had never before seen, or in some cases, had never heard of.

I can remember like it was yesterday when, on one of our Honeymoon hikes, Betsy and I first heard and saw a Canyon Wren. We were hiking in Canyonlands National Park on the Syncline Trail.

At one point, we heard the most beautiful and melodic sound that I think either of us had ever heard. We listened and listened and finally pinpointed the sound to a tiny speck of a bird hopping, flying, and clinging to the sheer walls of Syncline Canyon. We were finally able to get the binoculars on it and see that it was a [Canyon Wren](#).

That call, a lovely series of sweet, liquid descending notes, held us entranced until we finally knew it was time to move on down the trail.

After the hike one of the first things we did when we got to a pay phone was call my dad and excitedly tell him what we had seen and heard. He was so delighted.

And how could we ever forget those mornings lying in the tent listening to the plaintive call of the [Gamble's Quail](#) as we waited for the sun to call us out for our morning coffee. Sweet memories...

Fast forward 42 years, and we are still loving and enjoying the birds, talking about birds, and thinking about birds. And reporting to each other a bird we have seen when the other was not there to enjoy it.

One of the most recent events that has happened to enhance and expand our love of birds is wintering in Tucson for six months every year.

This is now our 12th winter of hiking, biking, and bird watching in the Tucson area. The big difference, of course, is that the birds are (mostly) birds that we would never see back in Good Old West Virginia.

The Tucson Basin is adjacent to five mountain ranges: the Tortolitas, Catalinas, Rincons, Santa Ritas, and Tucsons. Within that area is Saguaro National Park with districts on both the east and west sides.

This adds up to a whopping 18,363,000 acres, or 28,692 square miles, of public lands that have developed outdoor recreation opportunities.

The area we chose for overwintering is on the west side of Tucson, where we live in a late 1950s-era development named Tucson Estates in the foothills of the Tucson Mountains. Directly behind Tucson Estates is the 20,000+ Tucson Mountain Park which has over 62 miles of non-motorized trails. We call this area our "Back Yard" and it is only a few minutes walk from our front door to access the trails. The 25,000+ acres of the Tucson Mountain District of Saguaro NP are contiguous with Pima County's Tucson Mountain Park. Bonus!

The Birds of Rancho Relaxo

Every day at 4:00 p.m., on the west side of Tucson, it is happy hour here at Rancho Relaxo. That is what we call our 16-foot-wide by 66-foot-long trailer we live in at Tucson Estates, a 1600-unit trailer park.

And during those happy hours, we sit on the porch and watch the birds coming into the feeding station we have set up.

The most abundant birds are [Mourning Doves](#), and we get them by the dozens. In addition to Mourning doves, we have [White-winged doves](#) and [Eurasian Collared doves](#) joining the other birds. And occasionally we get [Cooper's Hawk](#) visiting the feeding station as well, so they can have a snack. We have seen more than one Coopers Hawk make a strike and then watch as they carefully and patiently strip the bird of feathers and spend hours devouring the entire dove.

Some of the regular visitors we have at our feeding station are the [Curve-billed Thrashers](#) who their long probing bill to get seed out of the rock crevices and also poke holes into the fruits of the barrel cactus to extract the seeds and pulp. We have lots of [White-crowned Sparrows](#) with their beautiful song and white-striped faces as well as the diminutive [Lesser Goldfinch](#), which we hear more than see.

The visiting [Cactus Wrens](#) are always fun to watch, and we even have them nesting in a yucca in our yard.

Part of the nesting material they gathered were threads stripped from our outdoor carpet and stuffed into their nest, along with many, many pieces of yarn scraps we set out for them, including a piece that was about 20 feet long, which I set up strategically so they could grab it and then fly it up to their nest.

The remainder of the yarn hung down out of the yucca and back onto the porch.

It was quite comical to watch as they tried to stuff the entire length into their nest, but of course they could not get it all in and eventually gave up.

And to our delight, we have [Northern Cardinals](#) here, which are always a reminder of home and sometimes cause a little bit of homesickness. For me, at least.

And there are the hummingbirds. We have three species here at Rancho Relaxo: [Anna's](#), [Costa's](#) and [Broad-billed](#). They are fun to watch as they feed and chase each other about, and of course the males are quite beautiful with their gorgeous gorgets flashing in the sun.

We also have the tiny, animated [Verdins](#) that come into the hummingbird feeder. The rapid fire "chip, chip, chip, chipping" is constant until the Verdin finally shuts its mouth when it gets its beak to the feeder.

We also have the occasional [Gila Woodpecker](#) coming into the hummingbird feeder, which is quite funny to watch as they are so huge they cause the feeder to sway back and forth erratically.

In October, upon our return to Tucson, we usually have non-bird visitors to our hummingbird feeders—the endangered [Lesser long-nosed Bat](#). They can drain a feeder in one night. The bats spend the summer here feeding mainly on Saguaro flower nectar, and then when the weather turns cool, they head south to spend the winter in Mexico.

Along with other ground feeders, we occasionally have a group of [Gambel's Quail](#) coming in as well. They are so comical with their high-speed, short bursts of running and the funny little calls they make.

And as of this winter, we have now had four species of Towhees at our feeder: [Abert's towhee](#), [Green-tailed](#), [Canyon](#), and [Spotted](#). The Abert's are regular visitors, the others occasional.

Other occasional visitors to our feeding station are always fun to see:

There is a Cardinal-like bird called the [Pyrrhuloxia](#) with its punk-looking crest. Pyrrhuloxias and Cardinals interbreed, and we are fairly certain we have seen the hybrid at our feeding station.

The previous owner of our trailer planted various species of aloe; some of them have flower stalks 3–4' tall. Occasionally, [Hooded Orioles](#) will light on the stout flower stems, and using their pointed beaks, they will pierce the base of the flower and extract nectar.

Warblers? Yes, we have warblers. [Yellow-rumped](#), [Black-throated Grey](#) and [Townsend's Warbler](#) sometimes visit.

Tucson Estates, the 1600 unit trailer park where we winter has 100s of utility poles. The [Great Horned Owls](#) make good use of these high perches to display themselves and call out to their ladie friends and rivals alike. They use the Allepo pines as perches as well. We hear the Great Horned Owls all through the winter and often wake up at night as a nearby owl calls out with its "hoo-h'HOO-hoo-hoo".

Last winter, we had some unexpected visitors to our feeding area: [Robins](#)! A small flock visited daily until they had gobbled down every one of the many hundreds of fruits on our Pyracantha.

The [Mockingbirds](#) are usually the ones to get all the Pyracantha fruits, but they had a lot of competition

that winter. Much to our delight, we also had [Cedar Waxwings](#) feeding on the fruits. It is always so very nice to see a bird from back home.

Another bird we did not expect to have in our feeding area was a [Roadrunner](#).

One afternoon, as Betsy was sitting on the porch enjoying the warm sun, a Roadrunner came into the yard and then hopped up the four steps to the porch, looked around, and then hopped onto the porch railing within two feet of her. At that point, a [Tarantula hawk](#) just happened to fly by, and Betsy watched as the Roadrunner plucked it out of mid-air right in front of her. Talk about exciting!!

Thankfully, we have no [Starlings](#) here at Rancho Relaxo; however, we do have plenty of [House Sparrows](#) and [House Finches](#).

The [Desert Song Sparrow](#), and [Ruby-crowned Kinglet](#) sometimes stop by, but not often. And, of all things, a [Hermit Thrush](#) turned up one day! It had wandered down from the mountains, where they spend most of the year.

There are a few birds we have seen in the neighborhood that we have not seen at the Rancho Relaxo. Sometimes we see [Great-tailed Grackles](#) scrounging for food scraps in the parking lots of shopping centers. We have also seen three species of flycatchers—the [Black](#) and [Sayes Phoebe](#), as well as the striking [Vermillion Flycatcher](#). The latter we often see perched on the fences that surround the tennis court and swimming pool. The phoebes will often sit on the fence posts they use for their insect forays out into the grassy areas.

The Birds of Our "Back Yard"

When hiking or taking morning walks in our Back Yard there are some birds we see who visit Rancho Relaxo, and others we only see in the open desert, rocky foothills, or canyons.

In the open desert and on the rocky slopes, we usually see the [Black-throated Sparrow](#), the [Rock Wren](#), and on rare occasions, the [Canyon Wren](#). We often see a Phainopepla perched at the top of a mesquite tree heavy with mistletoe growth. The [Phainopeplas](#) feed mainly on mistletoe berries and will guard their favored food trees. We will see them perched at the very tops of trees when engaged in sentinel duty. The Phainopepla is a brilliant sight in flight. The males are silky black and slender, with an elegant crest and bold white wing patches that appear when the bird takes flight.

Other birds we have seen and heard in our Back Yard are [Gilded Flickers](#), [Gila](#), and [Ladder-Backed Woodpeckers](#), all three species make use of the towering saguaros for their nesting cavities. [Common Ravens](#) are usually seen or heard on our hikes, and [Black Vultures](#) make an appearance once in a while. It is worth mentioning that we are on the very western edge of the Black Vultures's range. This was another bird we were surprised to see in the Sonoran Desert.

Some of the smaller birds we see in our Back Yard are the [Black-tailed](#) and [Blue-grey Gnatcatchers](#) and the [Lawrence's Goldfinch](#). And then there are the lumbering [Turkey Vultures](#) we sometimes see flying overhead. A two-mile hike from our house, we spotted the whitewash of a Turkey Vulture nest over 100 feet up a cliff face.

Are there non-birds in our Back Yard? Yep. [Javelina](#), [Coyote](#), [Jack rabbit](#), [Cottontail rabbit](#), [Mule deer](#), and [Western diamondback rattlesnakes](#) are all common here. And if we are lucky, we will spot a well-camouflaged [Horned lizard](#), a [Coati](#) or even a [Desert tortoise](#) or [Gila monster](#). The latter spend almost all of their lives under ground in burrows or rocky shelters, so we rarely see them.

The Sky Islands: Madera Canyon in the Santa Rita Mountains

Bird watching is enhanced in this area by the variations in elevation and vegetation types. The elevation of the Tucson basin is around 2100', and within an hour's drive, we can be at over 9000' in the Catalina or Santa Rita Mountains.

Needless to say, the mountain birds are different from what we get in the often hot, dry basin. The shady and cooler upper regions of these Sky Islands, as they are called, are forested with oaks, conifers, ash, and sycamore. The Sky Islands we spend the most time in are the Santa Ritas, which are about 50 miles to the south of Tucson.

The Santa Rita Mountains are home to heavily wooded, north-facing Madera Canyon, which is a local birding and hiking hot spot.

We have been fortunate to see the [Elegant Trogon](#), [Painted Redstart](#), [Bridled Titmouse](#), [Mexican Jays](#), [Acorn](#), and [Arizona Woodpeckers](#), as well as the [Slate-colored](#) (Dark-eyed) Juncos, and the striking [Yellow-eyed Junco](#). We often see flocks of the giant [Goulds Turkey](#) when hiking in Madera Canyon. They move slowly while feeding on acorns and pine nuts, so we usually get a good look at them. We saw a bunch of them on Thanksgiving Day last year. Good timing!

The gregarious [Acorn Woodpeckers](#) are especially fun to see. Their clown-like facial features and some of their antics with each other are quite humorous. They are busy, busy birds! One of the activities that keeps them busy is collecting countless numbers of acorns and carefully fitting them into the cavities they have made. It is not uncommon to see both trees and utility poles with hundreds of these cavities where the acorns are cached.

As much as we love the birds and birding in Southeast Arizona, we are always happy to get back home to our beloved West Virginia mountains, hear the song of the [Wood Thrush](#) and see our [Towhees](#) scratching in the leaf litter.

Soon we will be there...

14 February 2024

If you are interesting in reading more about our feathered and non-feathered freinds, you might enjoy this:

[Birds and Bats and Lizards - Oh My!!](#)

See you next time...

Mike and Betsy

