

Birding Tucson By Bike-Wrenegade Bike Brigade Birdathon

My plans were simple: go to Sweetwater Wetlands, then make my way east across Tucson with a couple of short stops. Next I'd ride up Mt. Lemmon (like going from Mexico to Canada in 25 miles!) finding the birds of many habitat types and finishing with a nice take out lunch on the top of the mountain. Of course, it didn't end up that way.

The day started out great as I stepped out the front door and heard our resident Hooded Oriole singing! Then had a perfect time at Sweetwater finding most of the birds I went there for and could be found nowhere else on my route. I got water-loving birds such as Gadwall, Cinnamon Teal, American Wigeon, Ruddy Duck, Pie-billed Grebe, Green Heron, and even saw a Sora rail (a rare sight!).



I could have stayed longer, but it was time to move on. I left there with about 40 species and then managed to hear Killdeer calling as I rode along the freeway frontage road. This is one of the true gifts of a birdathon by bike: you can pick up new birds while riding and not even have to stop! I wouldn't have heard those guys if I was in a car.

My next stop was a Great Horned Owl nest in the Winterhaven neighborhood that a friend let me know about (Thanks Dan!). Sure enough, I found 3 big fluffy chicks exploring their pine tree surroundings. Actually, I found their groupies first—these birds seem to be pretty popular with the local humans. After that I had fairly uneventful stops at two local parks but did manage to pick up a few new birds: Lark Sparrow, Harris's Hawk, American Kestrel, Phainopepla, and more. The birding seemed to be going down already, and I knew why—the heat was already picking up.

On the way to Mt. Lemmon I purposefully rode through more desert habitat to see what I could hear. Worked out pretty good as I got Pyrrhuloxia, Cactus Wren, Gilded Flicker, and Rufous-winged Sparrow with no effort!

I was getting to the mountain a little later than I wanted and immediately the heat and the weight of my old touring bike combined to put the hurt on me. I knew right away that I would be making a lot of stops (to rest *and* bird) and that I probably wouldn't be making it to the top of the mountain and would miss out on a lot of species. I got a singing Scott's Oriole and Rock Wren on the way to Gordon Hirabayashi campground where I took a much-needed long break under the oaks and cottonwoods. This spot is usually full with hikers, bikers, and campers, but today it was closed due to COVID 19. It was so peaceful, and I heard a scrub jay!

I hit the climb in Bear Canyon and the wind suddenly picked up, and I really started to think about needing a proper lunch and that there was no way I would make it to Summerhaven for that. It was taking too long and I was running out of food. So I decided to turn around at the Hitchcock campground after sitting in the woods for a while and getting Dusky-capped Flycatcher and Acorn Woodpecker.

I made it down to the valley and 98° temps and had a decision to make after lunch: head home or keep birding? I didn't really feel like riding all the way home in the heat, and there were still birds to get! So the answer was easy to come by. First stop was the Tanque Verde Wash where I picked up Zone-tailed Hawk, Gray Hawk, Northern Cardinal, and Eurasian Collared Dove under the massive cottonwood trees. What a great spot! Then I ran into a friend who is an expert on the birds of northeast Tucson who helped me have the perfect end to my day in his amazingly birdy neighborhood. The lakes there had Great Egret, Black-necked Stilt, Spotted Sandpiper, Ring-necked Duck, Western Kingbird, and a Greater Roadrunner, my final bird. Thanks Brian!

My Birdathon was a great success. I rode 80 miles around Tucson and up Mt Lemmon over 14 hours and found 93 bird species! (stats on the ride here: www.strava.com/activities/3388547355) I identified 36 species by sound only and 3 owls for a couple of my supporters who challenged me on those items. Thank you!!

Thanks again to all my supporters—the birds of southeast Arizona are better for it! Thoughts of your generosity kept me going when the road got tough. There's still time to help me reach my goal—I'm getting so close! You can donate on my page at tas.z2systems.com/np/clients/tas/campaign.jsp?campaign=83&fundraiser=12725&

Until next year...