

Wrenegades 2021 Birdathon Recap

After being completely laid out on the couch by my second COVID vaccine shot the day before this Birdathon adventure, I was very grateful to be able to meet up with Jennie at 5:30 am to start the fun! The Wrenegades had split up into small teams to play it safe and to cover our usual areas at a more relaxed pace, and then we planned to meet up in Madera Canyon at the end of the day.

Our supporters went nuts with the challenge pledges this year, which added a lot of fun and new ways of looking at Birdathon. In addition to finding as many birds as possible, we were also looking for a certain number of hawks and owls, snakes, active nests, flycatchers, vultures, and one very lucrative roadrunner. We *had* to find a roadrunner! More on that later.



Lucy's Warbler, Gila Woodpecker, and White-winged Dove nests in my yard

So we began right in my yard where I currently have 5 active nests! Watching parents feed Lucy's Warbler nestlings and Gila Woodpeckers responding to the cries of their young was a great way to start the day. After a Great Horned Owl nest and a quick stop at some desert habitat, we arrived at the Amado Pond to the surprising sight of a small flock of Willets circling the water! This species has been popping up around Tucson recently but neither of us had seen any yet—highlight for me, I love Willets. We picked up some other good water birds there and then motored down to the Santa Cruz River in Tubac, our first major stop. The cottonwood/willow gallery forest is all leafed-out and alive with birds right now, so we quickly racked up all the usual riparian suspects. Song Sparrows, Yellow Warblers, Phainopeplas, Gray and Zone-tailed Hawks, and Northern Beardless Tyrannulets were mostly heard and not seen, but what I noticed most was the amazing number of woodpeckers and Summer Tanagers present. I don't think I've ever had so many in one spot. Our main target here, the one shared with all the other birders on the trail, was the Rose-throated Becard nest. This is now the most reliable nesting spot for this super rare, tropical flycatcher-like bird anywhere in the US, and it (or should I say, she) didn't disappoint. The female was busily nest building the entire time, and we happened to have situated ourselves right in her flight path as she made circles through the forest picking up materials and bringing them back to the bulbous nest she was creating. It was fascinating.



Summer Tanager and Rose-throated Becard peeking out of nest hole

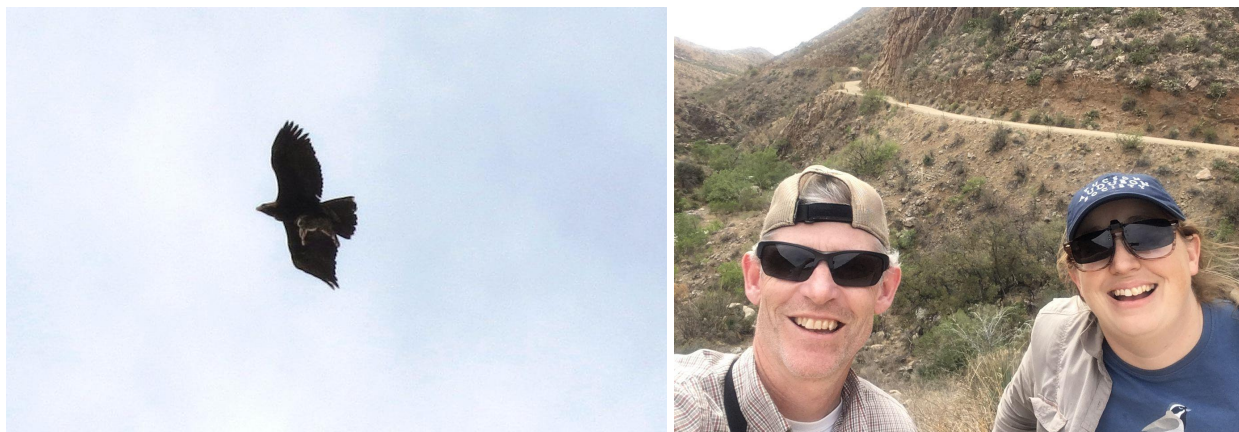
It was now getting hot in the lowlands, time to head up a little higher to Patagonia for new habitats and birds. We made the obligatory stop at the world-famous road-side rest where we picked up a couple of migrating warblers named Wilson and MacGillivray, White-throated Swifts, and a Plumbeous Vireo. No Thick-billed Kingbirds yet, but we managed a selfie with the ancient table. We were both looking forward to a relaxing lunch visit at Tucson Audubon's Paton Center for Hummingbirds, letting the birds come to us and catching up with Louie, the on-site birder extraordinaire. The Center is looking amazing, the vegetation is filling in and the new features are succeeding at drawing in more birds and wildlife. The new stream and pond are working wonders in the Richard Grand Memorial Meadow—Song and Lincoln's Sparrows, Yellow-rumped Warblers, and Common Yellowthroats now flit at water's edge in what used to be a dry horse pasture. We found two Broad-billed Hummingbird nests with Louie and then walked down the road to a tree cavity where a Western Screech-Owl was looking out with a sleepy one-eyed stare. Oh yeah, for those keeping score, we saw a Violet-crowned Hummingbird too.



Broad-billed Hummingbird nest at Paton's, at the ancient table, Western Screech-Owl

After Patagonia, we traveled through Box Canyon on the flanks of the Santa Rita Mountains where we hoped to pick up a rare Five-striped Sparrow. Well, the canyon had turned into a wind tunnel in the late afternoon and we barely managed to hear a singing Scott's Oriole high up on the hillside. It was beautiful, but we had to get to the rendezvous point in Madera Canyon soon. Right before getting into the car I heard a distant Rock Wren singing, and as I was listening, I happened to look up and see a giant raptor flying over with a heavy load. It was a Golden Eagle

carrying a rabbit right over us! It slowly drifted over and then out of the canyon on its way to some cliff-side nest. At least that's what we imagined.



Golden Eagle with rabbit, in the Box Canyon wind tunnel

So, the roadrunner. This was our last chance, we thought. We drove slowly, and scanned everything on the way to Madera. Nothing. We had a great meeting with the rest of the team, eating and swapping stories of the day at the Santa Rita Lodge feeders. We even managed to see the first Hepatic Tanager of the day, along with Wild Turkeys, Rivoli's Hummingbird, and Dark-eyed Juncos. But no Roadrunners. Then Chris remembered, there has been a roadrunner at the KERP site in Tucson, about an hour away! Did we have time? Jennie and I decided we did have time (and no other choice!), so while the rest of the team stayed in the mountains to find owls, we hoofed it back to Tucson.

With the sun setting and the wind blowing, we heard the familiar bill clack sound of a Greater Roadrunner right along the Loop path at KERP. Suddenly, it darted out of the brush and came right at us, seemingly knowing how important this moment was. We did it! Fittingly, our last bird of the day was a Vermilion Flycatcher, Tucson Audubon's mascot.



The Wrenegades in Madera Canyon, the Greater Roadrunner reveals itself!

The Wrenegades collectively had many stories like this and each team had an amazing day. Jennie and I found 118 bird species and a total of 11 active nests. The team's combined total was 196 birds! Maybe one of these years we can get that many together.

I'd like to thank you for reading this far and for supporting Tucson Audubon's Birdathon, especially if you've already given. I really appreciate it. It's for the birds!

I'm still trying to reach my goal. Use the link below to donate today.

Until next year...Good birding to you!

-Matt

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