

Wrenegades 2022 Birdathon Story



Madera Canyon afternoon, Box Canyon morning

Who would've thought slowing down during a Birdathon would be more fun? Well, a different kind of fun. After two years of modified Birdathons, it was great to have the Wrenegades team (Jennie, Sara, Tim, and me) together again in one vehicle spending the day talking about birds, movies, music, the plight of the world—you name it. Best of all, we saw a bunch of birds together, 137 different species in fact (check out eBird's new Trip Report feature, you can see [all of our birds, locations, and a map!](#) It's really cool). We decided to concentrate more on the birding experience this year, drive less, watch birds more, and not focus on going for a big species count. We even went out for a sit down lunch! Mt. Lemmon and the long drive to Willcox Lake were left out, and we did a classic loop of Madera Canyon, Patagonia, and the Santa Cruz River corridor. I think we made the right choices.

After meeting up dark and early, our first stop was Box Canyon—main target: Golden Eagle. A generous donor had tasked some of us with finding snakes, nests, butterflies, hummingbirds, and one very lucrative eagle. It was a fairly active morning in the canyon and we got off to a great start getting some birds that we normally don't find such as Crissal Thrasher and Black-chinned Sparrow, and a couple of migrating warblers in Wilson's and Hermit. This stop also kicked off a great day of finding 12 nests and nesting activities when we lucked upon a Rock Wren feeding hungry nestlings in a pile of agave debris! Orioles, tanagers, and grosbeaks abounded, but not the eagle that so often frequents this canyon. Oh well, we'd be back later in the day to try again!

On our way out of the canyon to the grasslands, we made a stop because we saw some birds and discovered that the flowering oak trees were filled with birds and the one we happened to investigate contained seven different warbler species plus a couple others! It was amazingly fun.

Now in the Patagonia area, the Paton Center for Hummingbirds always proves fruitful and we picked up 39 species in less than an hour, including the must-have Violet-crowned Hummingbird. Gray Hawk calling from the giant cottonwoods, colorful tanagers and buntings

right at the feeders, the Center was hopping this early morning. Always a treat to see birds at your feet instead of kinking your neck trying to find them high up in the trees, even a normally shy Yellow-breasted Chat came out to greet us, and we found a rare Ruddy Ground Dove.



The warbler tree, Paton Center for Hummingbirds

On to Patagonia Lake, our only marshy lake habitat of the day, and we got good stuff besides the “birding trail” seemingly always being less “birdy” than we expect it to be. It was great fun finding coastal birds like a Willet, five Ring-billed Gulls, a heron, grebes and cormorants right near arid land birds such as Black-throated Sparrow, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, and Loggerhead Shrike.

The Santa Cruz River near Tubac is always bustling with bird activity in spring, and this day under the tall, shady trees was no different. The habitat at Santa Gertrudis Lane is outstanding and many species were singing and nesting. We picked up a pair of Thick-billed Kingbirds, all the riparian residents, a migrating MacGillivray’s Warbler, and nearby, a Tropical Kingbird. Quick stops at a few ponds yielded Wilson’s Phalarope, Redhead duck, Northern Pintail, Black-necked Stilt, Great Egret, American Pipit, and our first of two snakes on the day, a gopher snake (the other being a coachwhip).



Patagonia Lake, Willet



Gopher snake, Santa Cruz River

Not surprisingly, our second visit to Box Canyon in the heat of the day was quiet and there was no eagle in sight. So, off to the famed Madera Canyon to spend the rest of Birdathon in the mountains, our first stop the Santa Rita Lodge. I don't know if they are putting a little something extra in their feeders now, but it sure is great that Hepatic Tanagers and Arizona Woodpeckers have been very easy to see there recently. A Rivoli's Hummingbird stopped by, and then we were out, looking forward to a nice birdy walk in the woods. All I can say is it's a good thing we found a lot of birds elsewhere, because it was very quiet for the rest of the afternoon.

It was during this lull that the excitement of the day took place, because, of course, we had split up! A big Birdathon no-no. Tim went to move the vehicle and meet us on the trail when he saw a Golden Eagle swoop over—our bird! Then he saw an ultra-rare Clay-colored Thrush, a bird normally found in south Texas and Mexico! So that'll teach us, but Tim got to see some cool birds.

Our Birdathon wound down with a picnic dinner at sunset while roughly 20 Lesser Nighthawks flew in from the valley up into the mountain canyons to feed for the night. We also did some bat tracking using a device that Jennie attached to her phone—it could identify the bats flying

around us by the echolocation patterns they make! Super cool. Last but not least, we went owling, one of my favorite things to do. We strained our ears to the max and for once we were all able to hear the mellow, super quiet hoots of a Flammulated Owl! We heard both screech-owls, Elf Owl, Common Poorwill, and Mexican Whip-poor-will as we stood around in the cooling darkness. What about Great Horned Owl and Barn Owl? We didn't get these, but we had aces up our sleeves and knew of locations back in Tucson. Both birds were present and Tim even recorded the [blood-curdling scream](#) of the Barn Owl at its nest site. The perfect end to another successful Birdathon!

Big thanks to my Birdathon donors this year, I really appreciate the support. In equal parts I participate each year for the birds and you, with just a little left over for my own personal fun. Also thanks to Jennie, Sara, and Tim, and Chris who couldn't be with us this year. And thanks to all of you for reading this far—don't stop now!



Using the bat ID app, dinner in Madera

There is still time to help me reach my fundraising goal, [check out my page here](#) if you'd like to donate. It's easy.

Thanks again, good birding, and see you next year!

Cheers!

-Matt