

Ramsey Canyon, Arizona

Saturday, May 23, 1992

Twilight at Ramsey Canyon, Arizona. From our cabin at the Ramsey Canyon Inn, right at the entrance to the Nature Conservancy's Mile-High Ramsey Canyon preserve, I can watch the Magnificent Hummingbirds dart back and forth between the feeders. The creek that flows past the cabin babbles loud enough to drown out most other sounds and nearly puts me to sleep. A few moments ago a Yellow-eyed Junco sat perched on a fence post just outside the window, singing his heart out...nobody ever answered him, probably because (according to Robert) he's a little low in his range and ought to be a bit further up the canyon.

"Up the canyon" was where we were this morning. We came out to southeastern Arizona on this Memorial Day weekend specifically to look for a few special birds. We got here at nearly 9:00 pm last night, and despite our obviously having not noticed the reservation card that said "registration 4 - 6 pm ONLY", the proprietress, Shirlene, was pretty cheerful about signing us in. How embarrassing...I wonder if the woman thought we were total idiots?

Figuring we'd be up early, we tried to go to sleep early.

We were awakened this morning earlier than I had bargained for (4:30?) by an insistent "whip-POOR-will, whip-POOR-will" that had to have been just outside our bedroom window. That had Robert up right away, of course, while I managed to stay in a groggy half-sleep until 6:30. By 7:00, though, we'd had our breakfast (black coffee and Hadley's coffee cake) and had peered out at an apple tree across from the cabin to spy a pair of Hepatic Tanagers. That was all we needed to get us out the door examining the bushes and hummingbird feeders up at the Inn and at the entrance to the preserve. We had wonderful early looks at the Magnificent, Black-chinned, Blue-throated, and Broad-tailed (female) Hummingbirds. Our first Yellow-eyed Junco - probably the one singing away a few minutes ago - obligingly met us at the preserve gate. Looked like it was going to be a good day!

Once the preserve opened, we started up the Hamburg trail in search of the elusive Elegant and Eared Trogons, not to mention some rare (in the U.S.) Flame-colored Tanagers. "Look for the tanagers near the fence at the start of the trail", advised the Nature Conservancy docent. She was right - only a short distance from the trailhead the tanagers and some Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers made their presence known. My third and fourth life birds in about 30 minutes! Almost seemed too good to be true.

The trail rapidly became steep, and there were a lot of switchbacks. We finally made it to the overlook (a mere 1 mile, altitude 6250 feet, up approximately 750 feet from the gate). What a view! Beautiful pinkish-green cliffs with a number of birds (mostly White-throated Swifts) darting about. I heard some cheeping in the bushes and managed to lure in a Hepatic Tanager for a closer look. Bridled Titmice scolded us here and there as we made our way up the trail. We could hear a Canyon Wren in the distance, too.

Despite all that, I was ill-prepared in my treadless tennis shoes and ready to pack it in. The trail had been steep and gravelly coming up, and I could just see myself slipping down the trail all the way back to the cabin. "If I fall and die, it will be your fault," I told Robert. "You can turn around," he said, but I couldn't stand the thought of him seeing the trogons without me. So I kept going.

The trail leveled out, and a great look at a Virginia's Warbler (another life bird) made me glad I had kept going. Painted Redstarts were everywhere, along with some vireos. Rough going, though -- the trail was rocky and we must have crossed the creek about 8 times (I hate creek crossings...wished I'd had my rubber boots from Costa Rica). Finally even super-Robert got tired of the rocks and crossings and said we should turn around. 3-1/2 hours up the trail and no trogons...oh well. We were certainly not only ones to come up empty.

I did make it back down the trail (it took 1-3/4 hours), only slipped once and managed not to fall completely. Wound up doing a little work (work on a vacation? I can hardly believe it either) while Robert drove out to the San Pedro River for a few hours. We were going to go out looking for owls and nightjars at twilight, but lack of energy has really gotten the best of me, so Robert has gone alone. Until he returns I'm snug in our cabin near the preserve, listening to the creek, thinking of the birds and scenery of the day, and wondering if the Yellow-eyed Junco will sing for me again tomorrow morning.

- Liza

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Along the San Pedro River where it crosses highway 90, a new preserve has been established, an oasis of riparian habitat in the middle of the dry desert scrub. The surroundings vaguely remind one of the Patagonia Sanctuary. Not surprisingly, the bird life is much the same too. In the open terrain adjacent to the woodland, many beautiful birds swooped and soared by. A male Vermilion Flycatcher alighted on a tall blade of grass showing off his deep red plumage. Nearby was a old barn surrounded by Fremont Cottonwoods. A Gila Woodpecker shuttled between the trees, cackling up a storm. Cassin's Kingbirds flitted among the creosote bush and mesquite, showing off a white chin against his chalky dark gray head and yellow belly. Blue Grosbeaks added to the colorful showing as did a Yellow Warbler and a pair of Summer Tanagers along the river itself.

As the wind picked up and the sun vanished behind a mountain of clouds suspended ominously, I knew it was time to head back to the cabin. Even as a light sprinkling of drops descended upon the windshield of the Jeep, I could still catch a glimpse of a Swainson's Hawk wheeling with the wind. The easy viewing of wildlife at the San Pedro River made up for the rough sledding in the dark woods up Ramsey Canyon. That would be it for the day as the night slipped over the landscape quietly and, aside from lightning in the distance, uneventfully.

- Robert

July 1-4, 1994

Two years since our last visit, late afternoon. We're staying *in* the Ramsey Canyon Inn this time, as opposed to in the cabins, and what a treat! We have a beautiful corner room with a big ceiling fan, luscious teal-and-pink quilt on the four-poster bed, and a big porch with a swing from which you can sit and watch the hummingbirds swarming the feeders.

It is raining now, as we sit outdoors waiting for Russ and Linda Wiles to arrive, and it is a good thing. Shirlene says it hasn't rained all winter, and the creek that babbled so noisily two years ago is now virtually dry. The dryness has brought the deer down the canyon to eat the plants around the house, much to Shirlene's dismay. But still the setting is green and peaceful, and I'm glad we came back.

The day started out warm and dry. We had an amazing breakfast (one of the benefits of staying in the house) with fruit, muffins, home-made strawberry preserves and apple butter, ham-and-cheese quiche, cranberry-orange juice, and coffee. Fortified, we then went out to rediscover the Hamburg Trail. The shorter Nature Trail loop is closed this spring and summer because Elegant Trogons are nesting just off the trail junction; we looked for them this morning but didn't find them. Did get good looks at Strickland's Woodpecker, though, and Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers.

The Hamburg Trail was as tough as I remembered, but this time I was better prepared with hiking boots. We made the climb up to the overlook, found a Hepatic Tanager or two, then cruised back down (slowly) to the Inn. Revitalizing ourselves with ice tea from the Inn's refrigerator, and enjoying a piece of home-baked cherry pie (yet another reason to stay here!) we drove out to the San Pedro Riparian Area. Amid the gathering thunderstorm clouds we searched the east side of the San Pedro river for the elusive Green Kingfisher. Getting to the water's edge was difficult, though, so we contented ourselves with good looks at Vermilion Flycatchers, Yellow Warblers, Summer Tanagers, and a pair of Gray Hawks.

The drive back to the Inn afforded us nice views of lightning over the mountains, and now here we sit, eating blueberry pie (two pies per day here at the Inn) and enjoying the non-stop hummingbird show. Black-chinned Hummingbirds predominate, but also present are Magnificent, Anna's, Broad-billed, a White-eared (female, new bird!) and Violet-crowned (seen only by Robert so far). Robert says we have 50 trip birds at present and we should get more tomorrow. That will be great, but for now I'm content to relax on the porch with my coffee, wondering what kind of pie we'll have tomorrow, and thinking about the pies I'll make at home now that I have Shirlene's pie crust recipe.

Following another scrumptious breakfast - pecan-stuffed French toast this time - and a pie-crust demo by Shirlene, I went into the preserve to look for the Elegant Trogon. Robert, Russ, and Linda followed after watching some hummers at the surveillance site near the preserve entrance. I spent a few minutes talking to some L.A. Auduboners (Bob and Darlene Johnson, Ned Harris) who are good friends with Olga and Herb Clarke, Paul Fox, and Bob and Ann Marcus, all of our 1991 Costa Rica trip. Small world! As we chatted, the trogon was heard and then spied briefly, but I missed it. Darn! I felt I'd never see the bird. But a little patience eventually paid off, and I was able to see the handsome bird in all his glory. And another bonus - baby hawks in a nest down the road were identified by Ned as being Cooper's Hawks.

After cooling off with some iced tea, the four of us drove out to the San Pedro Riparian Area again. Russ and Linda patiently and uncomplainingly waited for us while we searched fruitlessly for the Green Kingfisher in the heat.

Probably to Russ and Linda's collective relief, we got ourselves out of birding mode (although I did see Swainson's and a possible Golden Eagle from the car), and spent the afternoon exploring the "Old West" towns of Tombstone and Bisbee. Tombstone, of OK Corral fame, is a touristy, dusty little town working hard to make the best of its dubious place in history. Little signs on the street mark who killed whom when, while local shopkeepers stroll around in "authentic" western garb. A bit surreal, really. Bisbee, an old mining town, had infinitely more charm, with its colorful Victorian buildings across the way from a mine open for tours; the huge open pit copper mine nearby is conveniently out of sight from the town streets.

We wrapped up the afternoon ensconced once again on the porch at the Inn, enjoying coffee and raspberry pie (a peach pie still awaits our sampling), watching a brief but furious thunderstorm

drench the canyon, and dreaming aloud about moving to Arizona. All in all, a most pleasant way to spend a holiday weekend.