

The Wildlife of Arizona's Sky Islands

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Phoenix, Arizona & overnight
Day 2/4	Tucson area & Santa Rita Mountains
Day 5	Patagonia
Day 6/9	Huachuca Mountains
Day 10/11	Chiricahua Mountains
Day 12/13	Willcox and Tanque Verde, Tucson
Day 14	Saguaro National Park, depart Phoenix
Day 15	Arrive London

Departs

July, August or September

Focus

The best of the birds, mammals, butterflies and reptiles of southern Arizona

Grading

A/B. Easy to moderate walks (see grading section)

Dates and Prices

See www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code USA14) or the current Naturetrek brochure

Highlights

- Incredible biodiversity in a small area, with 100 mammals, 450 birds and 300 butterfly species recorded
- Great wildlife watching from desert to high mountains!
- Visit the glorious Saguaro National Park



From top: Elegant Trogon, Saguaro National Park, White-nosed Coati



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Introduction

South-eastern Arizona's 'Sky Islands' are among the most biodiverse areas in the world and the meeting point of four major North American ecosystems: the Rocky Mountains to the north, the Sierra Madre Mountains to the south, the Sonoran Desert to the south-west and the Chihuahuan Desert to the south-east. These isolated mountain massifs, and the encircling deserts in which they are marooned, offer a wonderful blend of lowland and montane climates and habitats, harbouring a biodiversity unrivalled anywhere else in the United States! During the late summer rainy season the region's birds, reptiles and mammals benefit from a 'second spring' and a much-needed increase in food availability. Mammals, including Collared Peccary, White-nosed Coati, Cliff Chipmunk and Pronghorn, all take advantage of this, as do reptiles such as Western Diamondback Rattlesnake and Gila Monster. Since the rains also trigger a second flowering, this is the time to enjoy the greatest diversity of iridescent hummingbirds and colourful butterflies. In total, over 450 bird species (including a variety of Mexican vagrants), 3,000 species of plants, approximately 300 butterfly species and more than 100 species of mammals have been recorded in the Sky Island area!

Sonoran Desert



Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly Phoenix

We depart London on a direct flight to Phoenix, Arizona. On arrival in Phoenix, we will transfer a short distance to a convenient hotel for the night, where there is a restaurant for dinner and breakfast.

Days 2 – 4 Phoenix to Tucson (Tohono Chul) & Santa Rita Mountains

We'll spend our first day getting acquainted with the common wildlife and habitats of this desert state. We begin our trip in Phoenix, Arizona's capital, where we will visit Gilbert Water Ranch, a local nature reserve that is home to Desert Cottontail, Arizona Rock Squirrel, Round-tailed Ground Squirrel, and butterflies including Ceraunus Blue, American Snout, Empress Leilia and Fiery Skipper. We will also enjoy getting to know some of the birds of this desert area, including Gambel's Quail, Inca and White-winged Doves, Phainopepla, Cactus Wren, Great-tailed Grackle, Verdin, Curve-Billed Thrasher, and our first hummingbirds are also possible. Next, we will drive south with lunch along the way, and making a stop at Tohono Chul Gardens in Tucson which provides an excellent introduction to the plants and wildlife of this unique habitat. During the afternoon we continue south to our accommodation in the Green Valley area.

During the following two days, we will explore the Santa Rita Mountains and Madera Canyon. This Sky Island traverses 4 life zones and many habitats between the desert floor and the mountaintops. The zones are home to an array of unique and abundant flora, from Prickly-Pear cactus in the lower Canyon to Douglas Fir and Quaking Aspen on Mount Wrightson, and hence a diverse associated fauna.

We will spend time exploring these habitats, hiking the trails and driving along some of the roads looking for the special wildlife that makes this area their home. In particular, we will search for Elegant Trogon; with its brilliant metallic colours and odd croaking call, this is likely to be one of



Collared Peccary (Javelina)

the highlights of our visit to the Santa Ritas. We will also seek out hummingbirds: five species are common (Broad-billed, Rivoli's, Black-chinned, Anna's, and Broad-tailed) and there is a chance of an overshooting Mexican vagrant. Over 50 species of butterflies, including the Arizona Sister, have been

recorded in a day in Madera Canyon. Mammals also find the feeders appealing: as dusk falls, we will look for White-nosed Coati, Ringtail, and Northern Raccoon. Night birds (Whiskered-Screech and Great-horned Owls, Mexican Whip-poor Will) and mammals such as Arizona White-tailed and Mule Deer, Gray Fox, Collared Peccary (known locally as Javelina) and Coyote can be seen. American Black Bear, Bobcat, and Mountain Lion, although rare, have been seen in this area.

Our accommodation for these three nights is in the Green Valley area.

Day 5

Patagonia

Today we journey further south, to within a few miles of the Mexican border. Our destination, Patagonia, lies within a transition zone between the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts. On the way we will visit several excellent wildlife viewing areas, including the world-famous Patagonia Lake State Park and Paton Center for Hummingbirds, a unique opportunity to relax while looking for up to ten species of Hummingbirds at close quarters as they visit the huge variety of feeders. We will look for the Violet-crowned Hummingbird: this is the most reliable place in the USA in which this distinctive species can be regularly found. Mammals in this area include White-nosed Coati and a variety of squirrels. Butterflies include Tiny Checkerspot, Tropical Least Skipper, Arizona Metalmark, Golden-headed Scallopwing, Arizona Viceroy and Queen. Marine Blues may be abundant, and Arizona's three species of Emperors are often seen in hackberry trees.



Day 6 – 9

Huachuca Mountains



After breakfast today, we head east towards the Huachuca Mountains, via one of the most significant grasslands left in southeastern Arizona, Las Cienegas National Conservation Area. This landscape of desert grasslands and rolling oak-studded hills connects the Sky Island mountain ranges. Cienega Creek, with its perennial flow and lush riparian corridor, is a rare resource in a state where most desert washes and stream beds remain bone-dry for much of the year. Over 60 species of mammal have been recorded here: mammals include Mule and Arizona White-tailed Deer, Collared Peccary, Black-tailed Prairie Dog and Pronghorn – the fastest antelope in the world. Birds include Zone-tailed, Swainson's and Gray Hawks,

Vermilion Flycatcher, Chihuahuan Raven, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Lesser and Common Nighthawks and possibly up to 13 species of sparrow.

After lunch at a local café, we will drive to our base in the Huachuca Mountains, and aim to arrive by mid-afternoon at one of two nationally-acclaimed birding inns, Casa de San Pedro or Ramsey Canyon Inn, for a 4-night stay. These charming Bed and Breakfasts have butterfly gardens and hummingbird and seed feeders located adjacent to extensive national conservation areas.

This small Sky Island mountain range is one of the most famous of all locations in south eastern Arizona, and our days here will be spent walking trails in the many canyons of the Huachuca Mountains, driving the roads and relaxing while watching feeders. Unique species of birds that can be seen here include: Mexican Spotted Owl, Pyrrhuloxia, Grace's Warbler, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, up to 12 species of flycatcher including Sulphur-Bellied and Buff-breasted, Greater Roadrunner, and up to 8 species of hummingbird. Seasonal and annual changes in hummingbird activity will influence the choice of feeders we visit, as will the latest sightings. Multiple squirrel and rabbit species are possible, and up to three species of skunk could be encountered. Close-up looks at mint-green Arizona Hairstreak, Juniper Hairstreak and Zela Metalmark are common, and Two-tailed Swallowtail and Arizona Sister will dazzle us as they sail overhead. Pacuvius Duskywing may fly with a white-fringed population of Juvenal's Duskywing and the local Scudder's Duskywing. We will visit local restaurants and cafes for lunches, and dinners will be either at the accommodation or a local restaurant.



Vermilion Flycatcher

During our stay in the Huachuca Mountains we will also visit the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area (NCA), the best example of desert riparian ecosystem in the United States. With its 80 recorded species of mammals and 40 reptiles and amphibians, the San Pedro NCA is at the top of the list for diversity in vertebrate species in the continental United States, and second in the world for the highest diversity of land mammals. And not to be outdone, over 180 species of butterfly have been recorded in this reserve. It is also the first Globally Important Bird Area in the



Five-striped Sparrow

United States, creating a migratory corridor for an estimated 4 million migrating birds each year. We will spend our time here walking trails along the river and exploring the various habitats in the reserve. Common mammals include Collared Peccary, deer and squirrel species, but we could see almost any of the mammals of the region at this special reserve; even Jaguars and Ocelots have been seen. Common bird species of conservation concern

that occur here include Lucy's Warbler, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Botteri's and Cassin's Sparrow, Gilded Flicker, Chihuahuan Meadowlark, Bell's Vireo, Mississippi Kite and Varied Bunting. We may also encounter up to six species of hummingbird during our visit.

As part of our explorations of the area, we will have the option to visit historical Tombstone, the most authentic Western town left in the United States where we'll step back in time and walk the streets that were home of the famous gunfight at the O.K. Corral, whiskey and Faro games, Wyatt Earp, and Doc Holliday. Alternatively, we'll drive high in the Coronado National Monument to Montezuma Pass, for incredible views of the Mexican borderlands along the western slopes of this impressive mountain range. We may be lucky and find Greater Short-horned Lizard, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, or White-throated Swift at these high elevations.

Day 10 – 11

Chiricahua Mountains

Our destination today is the largest of the Sky Island mountain ranges, the Chiricahua Mountains, where we will be based for the next two nights. This mountain range supports six basic plant communities, including the only place in the United States to find high-elevation Mexican pine-oak woodlands. The six areas support a unique subset of wildlife and mark the northern limits for several species of Mexican birds and butterflies. We will spend our two days exploring the multiple trails, feeders and roads in this remote corner of Arizona and New Mexico. We will look for Elegant Trogon (this is the only other site in the United States where they occur regularly) as well as other speciality birds such as Blue-throated Mountain-gem, Mexican Chickadee, Painted Redstart, Buff-breasted Flycatcher, Red-faced Warbler and Bullock's Oriole. Hooded, Striped and Spotted Skunks join White-nosed Coati and Ringtail as mammalian visitors to feeders in several locations, and other mammal species include Squirrels (including the range-limited Mexican Fox Squirrel, Spotted Ground-Squirrel and Harris's Antelope Squirrel), Collared Peccary, Grey Fox, and Bobcat. Over 140 species of butterfly have been recorded in the area, including Mormon Metalmark, Elada Checkerspot, Tropical and Common Buckeyes and Great Purple Hairstreak. We will also have the option of doing night drives to search for Whiskered and Western Screech-Owls, and Great Horned Owl. Mexican Spotted



Owl is also seen on occasion, and for the herpers there is good chance for a variety of rattlesnakes which venture out onto the roads at night. We may also find Common Poorwill nearby. Our two nights in the Chiricahua Mountains will be spent at the wildlife-centric Cave Creek Ranch, near Portal. We will visit local restaurants and cafes for lunches, and dinners will be at a local restaurant too.

Day 12 – 13

Willcox and Tanque Verde

We will descend the slope of the Chiricahua Mountains and continue towards Tucson. We will stop at the ponds in Willcox, where we may find a variety of migrant shorebirds including Baird's Sandpiper and Wilson's Phalarope. A stop in the small town of St David could produce breeding Mississippi Kites. Our final two nights in Arizona will be on a ranch property near Tucson.

On our last full day in Arizona, we explore the highest peak in the Santa Catalina Mountains, Mount Lemmon. Our drive from the Sonoran Desert at the base, to cool, shady Rocky Mountain forest near the top at 9,157 feet, is like traveling from Mexico to Canada! We will look for Steller's and Mexican Jays, Pygmy Nuthatch, Acorn Woodpecker, Yellow-eyed Junco, Greater Pewee, Grace's, Red-faced and Olive warblers, Painted Redstart, and Hepatic Tanager. We will also check the feeders at various points along the road to look for up to five species of hummingbird. Mammals are well represented on this mountain, and we will be on the lookout for Arizona Grey, Rock and Abert's Squirrels, Cliff Chipmunk, plus Arizona White-tailed and Mule Deer. Butterflies too are plentiful, with each elevation hosting a variety of different species including Texan Crescent, Empress Leilia, Arizona Powdered-Skipper and Violet-clouded Skipper. We will have lunch on the mountain, and dinner back at the accommodation.



Painted Redstart

Day 14

Saguaro National Park, then Fly London

After a relaxing night and breakfast at our accommodation, we will spend our last morning in Arizona either relaxing around the pool in the hotel, or exploring the trails around the ranch which merge into the eastern unit of Saguaro National Park. These trails, deep in the Sonoran Desert, combine dense thickets along washes with beautiful, saguaro-studded vistas. We will walk paths through mesquites looking for birds like Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Harris' Hawk, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Pyrrhuloxia and Curve-billed Thrasher, but just about the entire variety of desert birds is found along the trails in these world-famous parks! Whatever our morning activity, after freshening up and lunch at the hotel, we will drive north to Phoenix International airport in time to check in for our flight home.

Day 15

Arrive London

We are due to arrive back in London in the early afternoon.

Itinerary images courtesy of Jane Dixon and Adam Dudley. Cover images courtesy of Shutterstock.

Tour grading

Grade A/B. We will make an early start most days in order to make the most of the wildlife, relaxing or driving during the middle of the day to avoid the heat, before taking late afternoon jaunts to enjoy more wildlife. The tour is comprised mainly of short walks, of easy to moderate level. Some of the walks will be at elevation, but on marked trails. Some trails are hard-packed/gravel with just gentle slopes, other trails are rocky with moderate elevation changes. Hikes will be 1 – 3 miles in distance. Driving time between locations will be on average 1 – 2 hours; one drive will be up to four hours with a break at a local wildlife reserve.



Focus

The best of the bird, butterfly, mammal and reptile life of southern Arizona, which also offers diverse scenery and some historical and cultural interest.

Accommodation and food

We stay in comfortable accommodation throughout, including the beautiful Tanque Verde Ranch in Saguaro National Park and nationally acclaimed birding inns, Casa de San Pedro or Ramsey Canyon Inn, in the Huachuca Mountains (subject to availability). All rooms have en-suite facilities, except at Cave Creek Ranch where one cottage has two rooms with a shared bathroom, which may



be allocated to members of our group on occasion. Cave Creek Ranch is the most basic accommodation that we use, because of its remote location; it is comfortable and clean. Single occupancy is available at a supplement, though many rooms do have two queen sized beds, making sharing a room a

comfortable experience! The inns are well set up for birders and natural history enthusiasts, with easy trails, feeders and sometimes butterfly gardens too. Some of the inns also have swimming pools.

We will enjoy breakfast at our accommodation each morning, and eat dinner either here or a nearby restaurant in the evening. During the day, we will enjoy a mixture of local restaurants and the occasional picnic.

Extra Expenses

You will need to budget for just the following additional expenses on this tour:

- All breakfasts are included. Lunches and dinners are not included, in order to give you the freedom to sample Arizona's excellent Mexican food and other specialities. Drinks, should also be budgeted for. Please remember that a service charge of 15-20% is expected at restaurants.
- ESTA (visa waiver programme) fee – currently \$41 and valid for two years (or until your passport expires, if sooner). Please check you are eligible for the ESTA scheme at <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov/esta/>
- Tips, souvenirs and items of a personal nature

Weather

June to September in south and southeast Arizona is the summer rainy season. Rain doesn't occur every day, all day, but usually falls intermittently in the afternoon in the form of heavy downpours. Skies range from overcast to clear, depending on the day. Temperatures will be warm to hot, rising up to 38°C during the hottest days, and it can be humid before thunderstorms. Nights are cooler, dipping to 18°C, and lower at elevation. All hotels have air conditioning.

Flights

We aim to fly directly to Phoenix, Arizona from London Heathrow with British Airways. We are also able to add connecting BA domestic flights from UK regional airports; please contact Naturetrek for timings and prices. If you would prefer an alternative route, please let us know and we can look into options for you.

Extension

There are no set extensions for this tour, however we would be happy to arrange some additional days in country for you to explore further. You may like to consider doing some self-driving or taking a city break, such as a visit to the Grand Canyon in the north of the state, spend time in Las Vegas just over the Nevada border or explore Monument Valley. You are very welcome to contact the Naturetrek office to discuss options.

Your Safety & Security

You have chosen to travel to the USA. A visa, or ESTA, is required for entry. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice> regularly prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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