

# Winter Birding in New Mexico

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

### Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Albuquerque and stay the night
- Day 2/3** Sandia Crest, Rio Grande Nature Center, Valle de Oro
- Day 4** South via Bosque del Apache to Truth or Consequences
- Day 5/6** Percha Dam, Caballo & Elephant Butte Dams, Las Animas Creek
- Day 7** North to Socorro via canyons of Bosque del Apache
- Day 8/9** Bosque del Apache, Magdalena Mountains, Box Canyon
- Day 10** Morning in Socorro; depart Albuquerque this afternoon
- Day 11** Arrive London

### Departs

February

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code USA20)

### Grading

A. Easy day walks

### Focus

Birds

### Highlights

- Thousands of geese, cranes and wildfowl
- All three species of rosy-finches
- Superb desert birding
- Greater Roadrunner, Pyrrhuloxia



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

## Introduction

The Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico is a truly spectacular place to watch birds in late winter. The ribbon of green that follows the river through the Sonoran Desert is best known for the Bosque del Apache Wildfowl Refuge, but there are many hidden gems that dot the valley as it winds south from Albuquerque.

Starting in the forested mountains east of the city, where a well-studied flock of three species of rosy-finches wheel about the restaurant at Sandia Crest, we travel south, visiting several exciting refuges and canyons picking up all of the key species of the local biotopes. Most impressive are the wintering flocks of Sandhill Crane and Snow Geese for which Bosque is famous, but there are huge flocks of other wildfowl, including Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser and Cinnamon Teal. The surrounding desert may look barren, but in the local canyons are many exciting birds, including Pyrrhuloxia, Curve-billed Thrasher, Verdin, Bushtit, plus smart Black-throated and Sagebrush Sparrow. Mistletoe-clad riparian woodlands host Phainopepla, over-wintering warblers and neat Ladder-backed Woodpecker. Taken at an easy pace, with a chance to really enjoy the birds amongst a fine landscape, this is a great tour for photography, too.



New Mexico

## 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

### Flight from London to Albuquerque

We depart London on a British Airways flight to Dallas Fort Worth, Texas, for a connecting flight to Albuquerque, arriving late afternoon. On arrival, we will transfer a short distance to a convenient hotel – our base for three nights. We head for a good dinner at a local restaurant and introductory chat about the days ahead!

### Days 2 – 3 Sandia Crest & mountains; Forest Ranger Station, ; Valle De Oro; Rio Grande Nature Centre; Rinconada Canyon



Red-breasted Nuthatch

We start our first day with breakfast in the hotel, then take a drive up to the summit of Sandia Crest at c. 3000m, via Route 66. We rise up through a mix of Ponderosa Pine and evergreen oaks on the lower slopes, up to the mixture of Engelmann Spruce and White Fir near the top, where there is a restaurant (which opens c. 10am). At the car park, our eyes will be drawn to Mountain Chickadees, Oregon (Dark-eyed) Juncos, White-breasted and Red-breasted Nuthatches and Steller's Jays, but we are here for the

wintering flock of rosy finches. There are three North American species, each stunning in its own way, but the most numerous and smartest are Black Rosy Finch, followed by Grey-crowned (of two different forms) and the subtle Brown-capped Rosy Finch. After a warming hot chocolate, we slowly drift back down for lunch, stopping en route at various elevations, where different species occur including Pine Siskin, Townsend's Solitaire, and if we are lucky, American Three-toed Woodpecker or a day-roosting owl. After lunch we will have a walk close to the Rangers' Station for Western Bluebirds and Canyon Towhee.

Around the fringes of Albuquerque are several neat refuges that are managed for wintering wildfowl and cranes. To the west of the city, the Rio Grande Nature Center has some excellent pools that attract Wood Duck and Green-winged Teal; Greater Roadrunners creep about the site, and Bewick's Wren, Bushtit and Black-capped Chickadees form small flocks. A pair of Great Horned Owls can often be found near the reserve centre. The fields can often hold groups of Sandhill Crane and

Canada Geese and the small canal may give us our first views of Black Phoebe and the recently split Mexican Duck.

A short distance from our hotel, Valle de Oro is managed for Sandhill Cranes and an early morning here, as the sun rises, can be superb as they bugle to greet the day. This a good spot to see our first Say's Phoebe and bright, yellow-fronted Western Meadowlarks – two common species of the valley. Dinners are at a local restaurant.

## Day 4 Drive South to Truth or Consequence – via Bosque Del Apache

After breakfast, we depart the hotel and perhaps after a second visit to Valle de Oro, we head south on the I-25 that follows the Rio Grande en route to Truth or Consequences, our base for another three nights. Today is our first chance to visit the famous area of fields, wetlands and canyons at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. This 57,331-acre reserve was established in 1939 to provide a critical stop-over site for migrating waterfowl and is especially well known for the thousands of cranes, geese,



Ross's Geese

and ducks that spend the winter. Set against a backdrop of distant mountains, the open wetland areas and flooded *bosque* are a haven for wildlife; as well as Sandhill Crane, hundreds of Snow and Ross's Geese can be seen on the fields and wetlands – the sight of a cackling mass of white geese as they whiffle into land against snow-dusted mountains and aquamarine blue sky is one not to be missed! Bobcats are sometimes seen along the tracks, though we would be very lucky to see one.

Mid-afternoon, we continue our journey, arriving at Truth or Consequences. After checking in, we head out to a small park known as Paseo del Rio, where amongst the scrub bordering the river, we may find our first Vermilion Flycatcher, Verdin and Northern Rough-winged Swallow. Dinners in Truth or Consequences will be taken at a good local restaurant, Los Arcos, offering a fine menu!

## Days 5 – 6 Percha Dam & Percha Flats; Mim's ox-bow lake; Cabello Res; Elephant Butte State Park; Las Animas Creek

We have two days to explore the diverse habitats a short distance north, south and west of Truth or Consequences. To the south, our morning visit to the small Percha Dam recreation park is at an exciting time of year. In March, the first signs of spring – lime-green leaves and Mistletoe clumps – adorn the trees. Strolling around the park will allow us to watch numerous Audubon's Warblers and

Cedar Waxwings catching insects, as well as shiny black male Phainopeplas, whilst noisy Ladder-backed Woodpeckers can be seen on the gnarled trees. American Robin, American Kestrel and Belted Kingfisher are all in the park; on the stony riverbed Spotted Sandpiper and Killdeer can be found too.



Clark's Grebe

At nearby Caballo Reservoir, we will look for both Clark's and Western Grebe on the water, and hope for a dazzling male Vermilion Flycatcher in the park below the dam. Our first American White Pelican and Goosander (Common Merganser) can often be seen on the water.

The hidden valley of Las Animas is not to be missed for the dramatic, weather worn and contorted Arizona Sycamores; the birdlife is great too. As we slowly walk the quiet road, we check the fields, gardens

and scrubby valley sides for a variety of new species. Birds can include Great Horned Owl, Cactus Wren, comic-looking Acorn Woodpecker, Hammond's Flycatcher, Curve-billed Thrasher, plus Rufous-crowned Sparrow and Canyon Towhee. The list will go on, but we should not forget to mention Greater Roadrunner and perhaps a Coyote or two. Butterflies are frequently seen, but this early in the season are mainly limited to Orange and Clouded Sulphur, Checkered and Small White, Desert Orange-tip, Little Yellow and Mourning Cloak; Tailed Orange can sometimes be found in warm weather.



Acorn Woodpecker

Elephant Butte State Park dominates the Rio Grande north of 'T or C', and a drive up to the dam will get views north across the water. Rock Wren pop about the stony slopes and on the marina by the dam we hope to see both Double-crested and Neotropic Cormorants, Ring-billed Gulls and more Western Grebes. Driving to the various spots along the western shore of the reservoir, we'll look for large wildfowl flocks, American White Pelican, Osprey, Gambel's Quail and Northern Harrier.

## Day 7

## Drive North to Socorro via Bosque Del Apache

Today we head back north towards Socorro, where we spend the last three nights of the tour. Our destination this morning is one of the trails that form part of the Bosque del Apache refuge – Canyon Trail. Walking the easy trail through the sagebrush, we will pick up one of smart Black-throated Sparrow, which sit atop the bushes wheezing out its song. Brewer’s and Vesper Sparrow can also be found, but the target here is the elusive Sagebrush Sparrow, a neat pastel blue and ochre-brown bird. Crissal Thrasher and Loggerhead Shrike are possible here too, and Peregrine Falcon hunt the canyon; there is a chance that a Prairie Falcon may pass over.



Black-throated Sparrow

After lunch at the Owl Bar in San Antonio and before we head to our hotel, we will drive back to the refuge and follow one of the loop trails in the reserve, checking the flooded pans and the wealth of wildfowl: Ruddy Duck, Cinnamon and Green-winged Teal, dapper Buffleheads, Lesser Scaup are but a few of the ducks to be seen. Dinners are at the best restaurant in town, Bodega, where a wide menu is much appreciated.

## Day 8 – 9 Bosque Del Apache; Box Canyon & Magdalena Mountains; Turtle Bay, Socorro



Pyrrhuloxia

We end our tour at Socorro and allow one whole day to explore Bosque del Apache, focusing our time on getting good views of the Snow and Ross’s Geese. There is never a dull moment in Bosque, from the bustling blackbird flock and feeders at the centre to the open wetlands. We will have time to explore the gardens at the refuge centre, where we will gain good views of flocks of White-crowned Sparrow, Red-winged Blackbirds – occasionally joined by Yellow-headed Blackbird

and Brown-headed Cowbird, Pyrrhuloxia, Say’s Phoebe, Gambel’s Quail and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. The specially cultivated fields can hold strutting groups of Sandhill Crane, and maybe, Turkeys.

At the shallow lagoon at the Wetland Overlook, as cargo trains rumble past, the water's edge can be lively with Least Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs and Buff-bellied Pipit, while numerous Western Meadowlark sing about the grasses. This is a good area for Mule Deer and Coyote, too. The nearby Chupadera Canyon Trail gives further chances of Sagebrush Sparrow. Back driving another trail around the lagoons, we'll check a reed-fringed lake for Marsh Wren, whilst others host Canvasback and Redhead. Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk and Northern Harriers hunt their prey, causing havoc amongst the flocks.

West of Socorro, we drive out to Box Canyon amongst the Juniper scrub, where early morning is the best time of the day to find both Rock and Canyon Wren amongst the sepia cliffs, whilst Canyon Towhee and Dark-eyed Junco pop about the rocks. Mobile flocks of chattering White-throated Swift wheel above the canyon, before heading off to feed. As we cross the grasslands towards the Magdalena Mountains, we will search for Pronghorn Antelope and Horned Lark, before



Woodhouse's Scrub Jay

turning off onto the dead straight road into Water Canyon. The Pinyon-Juniper woodland and Ponderosa Pine forest here holds Townsend's Solitaire, Juniper Titmouse and Woodhouse's Scrub Jay. In Socorro itself, the oddly named 'Turtle Bay' park, close to the golf course, offers close views of various wildfowl, notably American Wigeon and Ring-necked Duck, plus Black Phoebe, Brown Creeper and often Mourning Cloak (Camberwell Beauty) settle on the ground.

## Day 10 Socorro; Drive to Albuquerque; Fly London via DFW

After a spell of final local birding in or near Socorro, where we might pick up a Chihuahuan Raven or scarce, over-wintering Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, we head back to the hotel, freshen up, then drive north late morning to Albuquerque. After lunch we start our journey to London via Dallas Fort Worth.

## Day 11 Arrive London

Arrival in London late morning.



Snow Geese

## Accommodation & Food

We stay in three comfortable, modern hotels throughout – at Albuquerque, the oddly named Truth or Consequences and Socorro - for easy access to all the best sites. All rooms have en-suite facilities; there is an indoor swimming pool available in each, should you wish to have a quick dip at the end of the day! Single occupancy is available at a supplement, though many rooms have two queen sized beds, making sharing a room a comfortable experience!

We will enjoy breakfast at our accommodation each morning, before heading out for daily excursions. During the day, we will enjoy a mixture of local restaurants and sandwiches picked up as we head out. Dinners are at carefully selected and good restaurants, offering a wide menu, including vegetarian.





## Tour Grading

Grade A. It doesn't get light until c. 7:00am, so after a relatively early breakfast, we depart from the hotels c. 7:30 to make the most of the day; we will return to the hotel at least one hour before dinner. With so much to see, the tour will be at a relaxed pace. In each park or reserve we are likely to walk between 1 and 3 miles, on trails that are generally flat; there may be a little snow on the ground at Sandia Crest - though we don't get far from the van here, walking sticks may be helpful. Most drives between the various destinations are short, with the longest drive being just over 1 hour.

## Flights

We fly to Albuquerque, New Mexico from London, via Dallas Fort Worth with British Airways or American Airlines. We are also able to add connecting BA domestic flights from regional airports; please contact Naturetrek for timings and prices.

## Climate

Late February/early March in the Rio Grande Valley experiences varied and changeable weather. Temperatures during the day are generally 15-20°C, but if the winds are from the north it can be colder; at Sandia Crest, 3200m, it will be much colder in the morning and can be below 0°C, so warm clothes are essential. It is often dry, but rain or snow showers are possible.

## 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](http://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.