

# **WINTER NEW MEXICO**

**JANUARY 4–10, 2017**



**Brown-capped Rosy-Finch, Sandia Crest, New Mexico, January 9, 2017, Barry Zimmer**

**LEADERS: BARRY ZIMMER & ERIK BRUHNKE**

**LIST COMPILED BY: BARRY ZIMMER**

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**By Barry Zimmer**

We arrived at Percha Dam State Park around 10 AM having already had a stellar morning. The drive from Las Cruces had produced several good birds including wonderful scope studies of Ferruginous Hawk and Prairie Falcon, fields of Sandhill Cranes, and a close Greater Roadrunner among others. We had barely made it out of the cars when a Red-naped Sapsucker was spotted working some nearby pines. While enjoying prolonged scope studies of the sapsucker, a Phainopepla flew in overhead, and several Western Bluebirds appeared in a nearby mistletoe-laden tree.

A short walk down to the dam itself yielded a couple of Black Phoebes, a Spotted Sandpiper, an immature Bald Eagle sailing overhead, and more bathing bluebirds as close as fifteen feet away. Starting our walk south along the Rio Grande, we quickly encountered a singing Carolina Wren. This species is accidental in New Mexico (in fact, I had never seen one in the state in 40 years of birding there!), and we had lengthy scope views of the bird sitting right out in the open. We had not even finished looking at the wren when someone spotted a Fox Sparrow scratching in the leaf litter. We had excellent studies of this rarity as well before moving on. We had heard reports of a Great Kiskadee (a tropical flycatcher quite out of place here) that had been present at this site for the past few weeks and were hoping to stumble into this mega-vagrant. As we walked along, we flushed a group of mostly White-crowned Sparrows. Pishing brought several members of the flock up into a small mesquite—a very rare Golden-crowned Sparrow (normally found much further west) was among them! Our luck with finding rarities was getting to be ridiculous. This only increased moments later when a Harris's Sparrow was also found in the same flock!

As we were trying to improve on our views of the sparrows, the Great Kiskadee suddenly called from upstream! Quickly moving in the direction of the call, we spotted the kiskadee perched up high in a bare tree along the river. In the span of about an hour we had found five incredible rarities for the state and had scope views of all but the Golden-crowned Sparrow. I cannot remember having a more successful stretch of locating rare birds in such a short time before. As the day progressed, we added a pair of adorable Bridled Titmice and several Acorn Woodpeckers in Animas Creek. Two very rare Lesser Black-backed Gulls were found near the dam at Caballo, as well as a good mix of diving ducks including Redhead, Canvasback, and Common Goldeneye. We finished the day at Rock Canyon Marina, a part of Elephant Butte Lake State Park, where Clark's and Western grebes swam side by side, as the sun set in the western sky. This had been an amazing day filled with regional specialties and rare vagrants. Superb

weather (sunny skies, no wind, and temperatures in the low 60s) only added to the success.

In fact, our whole tour pretty much followed this recipe—great birds and great weather. We began in El Paso, where we tallied large numbers of roosting Yellow-headed Blackbirds and four Ross's Geese the first afternoon. The next morning, highlights included a pair of Burrowing Owls, a close, perched Merlin, several Hooded and Common mergansers, and a pair of Monk Parakeets at Ascarate Lake; Broad-billed Hummingbird (accidental), three Hooded Orioles, and a Scott's Oriole (a tour first) in my yard; Rock and Bewick's wrens, and Black-chinned and Black-throated sparrows in McKelligon Canyon; and a very rare Costa's Hummingbird at another private residence.

The following day was spent in the Las Cruces area, where we added Scaled Quail; Crissal Thrasher; Green-tailed, Spotted, and Canyon towhees; and Rufous-crowned, Cassin's, Brewer's, and Black-chinned sparrows; all while enjoying the incredible scenery of the Organ Mountains.

Moving northward from the Percha/Caballo area on Day Five, we found yet another rarity—a Brown Pelican hanging out with American White Pelicans on Elephant Butte Lake. Water Canyon, west of Socorro, yielded Golden Eagle, four Juniper Titmice, Townsend's Solitaire, and several flocks of Chestnut-collared Longspurs. In the late afternoon, we visited world-famous Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. There we encountered incredible numbers of white geese (Snow and Ross's) and Sandhill Cranes feeding in the agricultural fields at the north end of the tour loop. We watched and listened as flock after flock passed overhead heading to roosting sites against the backdrop of a wonderful rosy sunset. This was an experience of sight and sound that none of us will ever forget.

Our final day started back at the refuge with a dawn vigil, where we hoped to see a massive morning takeoff of geese. As the eastern sky turned to flaming orange, we could hear the loud cacophony of approaching geese. Suddenly many thousands were visible in the sky, and they were all headed our way. The vast majority of the birds landed almost right in front of us, settled in for ten minutes or so, and then burst into flight once again. The roar of the birds' wings combined with their deafening barking and cackling vocalizations, as well as the nearby guttural, rattling calls of Sandhill Cranes, created a symphony of the finest sort. Our group stood with jaws open and wonder in their eyes as this amazing event played out in front of us.

But there was still work to be done before this tour was over. Sandia Crest, sitting at over 10,600 feet in elevation to the east of Albuquerque, was next on our itinerary. Here we witnessed flocks of rosy-finches swirling about the feeders and nearby trees. All three species (Black, Brown-capped, and Gray-crowned) were

seen at close range, as well as the distinct “Hepburn’s” subspecies. Steller’s Jays also visited the Crest House feeders, along with the rosy-finches.

Our final stop was at the Rio Grande Nature Center. There, a dozen or more Wood Ducks lined the pond, a small flock of Cackling Geese fed in a nearby field, and Black-capped and Mountain chickadees visited the feeders.

All in all, we tallied an impressive 152 species of birds in our six days of birding, including 21 species of waterfowl, 13 species of raptors, and an unbelievable 20 species of sparrows. We had superb weather almost throughout, while much of the country was suffering from terrible winter storms. New Mexico certainly lived up to its billing as “the Land of Enchantment”!

### **ITINERARY:**

January 4 – El Paso Country Club areas, Sunland Park areas, Crossroads Pond, (34 species)

January 5 - Ascarate Lake, my yard, McKelligon Canyon, Kiseda home, Sunland Park bridge & stables, El Paso Country Club, drive to Las Cruces (66 species; 72 total)

January 6 - Jornada del Muerto, community near Organ, Aguirre Springs Recreation Area, return to Jornada del Muerto, Farm & Ranch Museum (53 species; 98 total)

January 7 – Highways 185 & 187, Caballo Dairy, Percha State Park, Animas Creek, Caballo Lake State Park, west side of Elephant Butte Lake (Rock Canyon Marina) (90 species; 126 total)

January 8 - Elephant Butte Lake State Park (Hot Springs Landing, Rock Canyon Marina), Water Canyon, Bosque del Apache NWR (82 species; 139 total)

January 9 - Bosque del Apache NWR, Sandia Crest, Rio Grande Nature Center State Park (72 species; 152 total)

January 10 - departures for home (152 species total)



## **KEY:**

E = all areas in and around El Paso

L = Las Cruces, Organ Mountains, Jornada del Muerto

P = Highways 185 & 187, Percha State Park, Animas Creek, Elephant Butte

B = Bosque del Apache NWR

W = Water Canyon

A = Albuquerque, Sandia Crest

**bold-faced species** indicate birds of rare, casual, or accidental occurrence

underlined species indicate birds of very uncommon occurrence or species which occur regularly but in such low densities as to be easily missed

## **BIRDS:**

Snow Goose    B----we had an amazing double takeoff of many thousands against a gorgeous sunrise back drop at dawn at the refuge; a fair number of blue morphs mixed in

Ross's Goose    E,B----four at the El Paso Country Club the first day allowed nice studies; several others mixed in with Snows at Bosque

Cackling Goose    A---about 40 the last afternoon at the Rio Grande Nature Center

Canada Goose    E,P,B,A

**Tundra Swan**    B----two at Bosque; rare here

Wood Duck    E,A---stunning; 14 at once



**Wood Duck, Albuquerque, New Mexico, January 9, 2017, Barry Zimmer**

Gadwall E,P,B  
 American Wigeon E,P,B  
 Mallard E,P,B,A  
 Northern Shoveler E,P,B,A  
 Northern Pintail B  
 Green-winged Teal E,B,A  
 Canvasback P,B---ten total, including great studies of males at the refuge  
 Redhead E,P,B---thirteen total  
 Ring-necked Duck E,P,B  
 Lesser Scaup E,B,A  
 Bufflehead E,B  
Common Goldeneye E,P----four total; very uncommon  
Hooded Merganser E,P,B---an impressive twenty total  
 Common Merganser E,P,B  
 Ruddy Duck E,P,B  
 Scaled Quail L---two coveys on the road into Aguirre Springs, one covey seen very well by the front van; uncommon  
 Gambel's Quail E,L,P---100+ in one day alone  
 Pied-billed Grebe E,B  
 Eared Grebe E,P,B---seventeen total  
 Western Grebe P---many hundreds  
 Clark's Grebe P---good scope views of at least five  
 Double-crested Cormorant E,P---only two  
 American White Pelican P---a dozen or so at Rock Canyon Marina  
**Brown Pelican** P---very rare, and a tour first, was one at Rock Canyon Marina

Great Blue Heron    E,P,B

Great Egret    E,P---very uncommon in winter here, but we had singles at Sunland Park & Percha

Snowy Egret    E---as with Great Egret, this species is very uncommon here in winter; we had four at Ascarate

Bald Eagle    P,B---10 total, including two stunning adults perched on a snag at dawn at the flight deck



**Bald Eagle, Bosque del Apache NWR, New Mexico, January 9, 2017, Barry Zimmer**

Northern Harrier    L,P,B---twelve total, including at least four striking males

Sharp-shinned Hawk    E,L,P,A---six total

Cooper's Hawk    E,L,P,B---thirteen total

Red-tailed Hawk    seen daily in numbers (86 total); including a rare "Harlan's" Hawk near Percha

Ferruginous Hawk    P,B---superb studies of this elegant raptor; four total; tied for third favorite bird of the tour!



**Ferruginous Hawk, Percha Dam, New Mexico, January 7, 2017, Barry Zimmer**

Golden Eagle B,W---immature bird along I-10 and adult over Water Canyon; very uncommon

Virginia Rail B---heard only the last morning

American Coot E,P,B,A

Sandhill Crane P,B,A---an estimated 6,000 wintering at the refuge this year and an additional 1000+ seen in other areas; spectacularly close views

**Black-necked Stilt** E---eight at the Sunland Park bridge; rare in winter

Killdeer E,P,B

Spotted Sandpiper P---uncommon in winter; one at Percha

Greater Yellowlegs B---nine at the refuge; uncommon in winter

Least Sandpiper L---flock of 30 on the Rio Grande near Sunland Park

Long-billed Dowitcher E---uncommon in winter

Wilson's Snipe B---at goose take-off site; uncommon

Ring-billed Gull E,P

Herring Gull P---three total

**Lesser Black-backed Gull** E---two first year birds at Caballo Lake; accidental

Rock Pigeon seen daily

Eurasian Collared-Dove seen daily---a rapidly expanding species

**Band-tailed Pigeon** W---flock of eight found by the group while we were retrieving vans in Water Canyon; quite rare in winter (only the second time ever for this trip)

White-winged Dove seen daily with many hundreds total

Mourning Dove seen daily

Greater Roadrunner L,P,B---nine total with several excellent views



Great Horned Owl L---adult roosting at the Farm & Ranch Museum; fantastic views

Burrowing Owl E---great scope views of pair at burrow at Ascarate ; uncommon & declining

**Broad-billed Hummingbird** E---immature male in my yard made several appearances; very rare (second time ever for this tour)

Anna's Hummingbird E----four total including one brilliant adult male at the Kiseda house

**Costa's Hummingbird** E----immature male at the Kiseda house; only the second time ever for this tour!



**Costa's Hummingbird, El Paso, Texas, January 5, 2017, Barry Zimmer**

Belted Kingfisher E,P---one seen at Ascarate, another heard at Percha

Acorn Woodpecker E,P,W---several nice studies (best was a group of four clustered together at the El Paso country Club); thirteen total

Red-naped Sapsucker P----three total, but one particularly well at Percha; first spotted by Mark



**Red-naped Sapsucker, Percha Dam, New Mexico, January 7, 2017, Barry Zimmer**

Ladder-backed Woodpecker E,L,P,B---twelve total

Downy Woodpecker A---one at the nature center

Hairy Woodpecker W,A---singles at each location

Northern Flicker L,P,B; the "Red-shafted" variety

Monk Parakeet E---pair at Ascarate; expanding in this area

American Kestrel seen daily; up to 20 in one day

Merlin E,P---single females at Ascarate, & Animas Creek

Prairie Falcon P,B---superb scope views of one on road into Percha and another near Bosque; uncommon

Peregrine Falcon P---adult perched high over Sunland Park; very uncommon in winter

**Great Kiskadee** P---incredible record of one overwintering at Percha; this tropical flycatcher seemed so out of place here; obviously a tour first



Great Kiskadee, Percha Dam, New Mexico, January 7, 2017, Barry Zimmer

Black Phoebe    P,B---four total  
 Say's Phoebe    E,L,P,B---fourteen total  
 Loggerhead Shrike    L,B---only three seen this year; declining  
Steller's Jay    A---subspecies *macrolopha*  
 Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay    W,A---great views in Cedar crest of this recently split species  
 American Crow    L,B,A  
 Chihuahuan Raven    E,L,P,B  
 Common Raven    P,W,B,A  
 Horned Lark    P,W  
 Black-capped Chickadee    A  
 Mountain Chickadee    A---one at the Rio Grande Nature Center feeders  
Bridled Titmouse    P---after much effort we had wonderful views of this species at its very eastern limit; voted the favorite bird of the tour!  
Juniper Titmouse    W---nice studies of two pairs in Water Canyon  
 Verdin    E, L---best in my yard feeding on orange slices; four total  
Bushtit    A---flock of eight at the Rio Grande Nature Center (an unusual location for this species)  
Red-breasted Nuthatch    W---one in water canyon was our only one of the trip  
 White-breasted Nuthatch    P,W,A  
 Rock Wren    E---great views in McKelligon in the wind storm!  
House Wren    P---by George only; very uncommon in winter  
Marsh Wren    E,,B---one seen at Bosque at dawn and another heard at the Crossroads Pond



**Carolina Wren** P---one at Percha was a real rarity; a tour first and a state bird for me!  
 Bewick's Wren E,A---one at McKelligon and another at the nature center  
 Cactus Wren L---four in the Organ Mountains were our only ones of the trip  
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet E,L,P,W,B  
 Western Bluebird L,P,W,A---stunning views at Aguirre springs & Percha  
Townsend's Solitaire W---only one this year  
Hermit Thrush L,P---very uncommon this far north in winter; four total  
 American Robin seen daily  
 Curve-billed Thrasher E,L,P,B---excellent views of several; thirteen total



Curve-billed thrasher, McKelligon Canyon, Texas, January 5, 2017, Barry Zimmer

Crissal Thrasher L,P---scope studies on the Jornada after much effort, then another at Elephant Butte; always tough  
 Northern Mockingbird E,L,P,B  
 European Starling daily  
 American Pipit P,B  
 Cedar Waxwing E,A-----one in the El Paso Country club was our first bird of the tour; another flock of a dozen or so at the nature center  
 Phainopepla E,L,P---our first thanks to George; five total  
Chestnut-collared Longspur W---several flocks over a water tank in the grasslands; good views in flight right overhead, but not seen on the ground; very uncommon  
 Yellow-rumped Warbler E,L,P,B,A---the Audubon's subspecies



Green-tailed Towhee L,W---five total; nice studies  
Spotted Towhee L,P,W,B,A---sixteen total



**Spotted Towhee, Aguirre Springs, New Mexico, January 6, 2017, Barry Zimmer**

Rufous-crowned Sparrow L---cooperative birds (five total) at Aguirre Springs  
Canyon Towhee L---only one the entire trip  
**Cassin's Sparrow** L---rare was one along the entry road into Aguirre Springs  
Chipping Sparrow L,P,W  
Brewer's Sparrow L,P---a good year for this species with 86 seen  
Black-chinned Sparrow E,L---three at Aguirre Springs and one in McKelligon  
Canyon; uncommon  
Vesper Sparrow L---one along Aguirre springs entry road  
Black-throated Sparrow E,L---nineteen total; the best looking sparrow in the  
US?  
Sagebrush Sparrow L--- great views of this recently split species (formerly  
called Sage Sparrow); three total; Mike's 600<sup>th</sup> bird!!!!  
Savannah Sparrow P,B  
**Fox Sparrow** P---one of the *iliaca* subspecies (Red Fox Sparrow) at Percha;  
rare  
Song Sparrow B---oddly, only three seen on the trip  
Lincoln's Sparrow L,P---almost none around, except in Animas Creek where  
we had fifteen or more  
White-throated Sparrow B,A---one each at Bosque and the nature center;  
generally rare to very uncommon in the Southwest  
White-crowned Sparrow L,P,B,A

**Harris's Sparrow** P---great views of this rarity at Percha; tied for third favorite bird of the tour

**Golden-crowned Sparrow** P---in same White-crowned flock as Harris's Sparrow, but seen only by a few of us; very rare in the state

Dark-eyed Junco L,P,W,B,A----including Gray-headed, Oregon, and Pink-sided races

Pyrrhuloxia E,L,P---sixteen total

Red-winged Blackbird E,P,B,A

Eastern Meadowlark L---one flushed along the entry road into Aguirre Springs by the first van; uncommon

Western Meadowlark P,B

Yellow-headed Blackbird E,P---about **1,000+** gathering to roost in west El Paso

Brewer's Blackbird E,P

Great-tailed Grackle E,L,P,B

Brown-headed Cowbird P---two at the Caballo Dairy

**Hooded Oriole** E---two males and one female overwintering in my yard made repeated appearances; accidental in winter here

**Scott's Oriole** E---hanging out with the Hoodeds for the winter; accidental and a tour first

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch A---four at Sandia Crest, including two of the Hepburn's race; spectacular!

Black Rosy-Finch about 6-8 at Sandia Crest; close & repeated views; voted the second favorite bird of the tour!



**Black Rosy-finch, Sandia Crest, New Mexico, January 9, 2017, Barry Zimmer**

Brown-capped Rosy-Finch 25+ at Sandia Crest with the other rosy-finches;  
many superb views  
House Finch daily  
Pine Siskin W----two fly-bys in Water Canyon; not seen by all  
Lesser Goldfinch E,L,P,W,A  
American Goldfinch P---generally uncommon & easily missed  
House Sparrow daily

**Total species – 152**

**MAMMALS:**

Texas Antelope Squirrel----cooperative individual at John's house  
Rock Squirrel---three total  
Desert Cottontail---five seen  
Black-tailed Jackrabbit---three total  
Coyote---one seen wandering through huge goose and crane flock at Bosque  
Mule Deer---two in my yard, three at Aguirre Springs and herd of nine at Bosque  
that included a big buck  
Pronghorn---herd of 30 or more on way out of Water Canyon; uncommon

**Total species – 7**

**HERPS:**

Red-eared Slider

**Total species – 1**

**BUTTERFLIES:**

Two-tailed Swallowtail----seen by Mark in El Paso  
Sleepy Orange  
Unidentified medium, dark butterfly in John's yard that may have been a Red  
Admiral

**Species - 3**

**SIGNIFICANT OTHERS:**

two escaped Red-crested Pochards at Ascarate  
Bigfoot (& his impressive salmon) sighting near Elephant Butte  
Bacon wrapped jalapenos & Wisconsin cheese curds at The Block  
The dancing lady of Elephant Butte  
Temperatures ranging from 27 – 64 (overall superb weather)