

## Southern Patagonia Mountains, Santa Cruz County – 26-28 April 2019

By Jennie MacFarland



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The dedicated crew of six birders (Joe Aliperti, Carol Beardmore, Jennie MacFarland, Roy May, Linda Pfister, and Josh Stewart) surveyed the southern portion of the Patagonia Mountains over the weekend of 26-28 April 2019. Surprisingly, this was AZFO's first Expedition in Santa Cruz Co. These mountains are one of the classic 'Sky Islands' of southeast Arizona and, even though it is part of an Important Bird Area, the southern Patagonia Mountains are not high on the radar as a birding destination. This range has extensive areas of Madrean oak woodland, lush sycamore-lined drainages with native grasses favored by species like Montezuma Quail and Elegant Trogons, stands of pines in cooler canyons, and the high point of Mount Washington surpasses 7200 ft. in elevation. This timing of this expedition was also designed for helping to fill in data gaps in eBird for late April, a time when many breeding species begin nesting and spring migration of songbirds is peaking.

In addition, this expedition was interested in exploring this range to see if any Mexican borderlands species have expanded here as they have in nearby ranges, as well as detecting any spring overshoots from south of the border. It seems possible for Buff-collared Nightjars to be in some of

the lush washes in this range with its close proximity to the US/Mexico border. It also seems possible for Rufous-capped Warbler to be found in a spring-fed canyon sections that look very much like some of their habitats in SE Arizona. Black-capped Gnatcatchers were also a species that we could potentially find as they are sometimes found in similar habitat.



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The crew camped off of Duquesne Road in lower Sycamore Canyon. This area generated an excellent camp species list due to its abundant oak stands with large mesquite trees with adjacent ocotillo and yucca covered slopes. A Cooper's Hawk was nesting in a nearby oak tree and we heard many Lucy's Warblers singing both from the mesquites and flowering oak trees. This also turned out to be a great spot for Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Vermilion Flycatcher, Eastern (Azure) Bluebird and many other classic oak species such as Bewick's Wrens and Black-headed Grosbeaks.

For our first evening from base camp we did some owling with an emphasis on searching lush washes that may harbor Buff-collared Nightjars. We didn't manage to find this species, but did find some very suitable looking habitat that should be checked again in the future. The team did have very nice looks at a pair of Elf Owls, heard and saw Western Screech-Owls, and found a Common Poorwill on the road while driving.



Ash-throated Flycatcher © Joe Aliperti

On Saturday morning, the team traveled through upper Sycamore Canyon, parallel to Dusquesne Road towards the entrance to Strix Canyon. The birding here was great with lots of migrants such as Townsend's Warbler and Warbling Vireo, as well as 'sky Island' oak nesters like Bushtit. Lucy's Warblers were also singing due to the presence of some large mesquites in the drainage. After an uphill climb, we came to a lovely stand of oaks where we found a pair of Spotted Owls. There were also several Elegant Trogons calling throughout the morning as we traveled through these lush canyons. We worked our way up Strix Canyon to a spot with a spring-fed creek flowing over large rocks. This area does look perfect for Rufous-capped Warblers and very similar to other habitats such as Florida Canyon in the nearby Santa Rita Mountains where they have been found. We didn't find any, but this is an area that should be checked periodically as it seems a likely spot for them to turn up in the future. On our way back through Sycamore Canyon we found other migrants such as Hermit Warbler and Wilson's Warbler.

After lunch it was getting quite hot, so we decided to go up on elevation and do some afternoon birding in Upper Humboldt Canyon. Lower Humboldt, a favored birding spot in the past, is now extremely difficult to access due to a road blockage from a mining company. This throws into the spotlight a major issue of this 'sky island', a recent uptick in mineral exploitation that has changed the face of this range, especially along Harshaw Road. Upper Humboldt was pretty quiet this late in the day, but we did have a few warblers, the only Steller's Jay of the expedition, and several species

of woodpecker in a heavily burned stand of trees. We closely checked a large nest that has consistently had Northern Goshawks nesting in the past, but with no current sign of activity. We wondered if perhaps they had moved to another nearby canyon that has not been so damaged by the fire several years ago. On our way out, we were treated to excellent looks at a calling male Elegant Trogon.



Elegant Trogon © Joe Aliperti

The morning of the last day of the expedition, we did a one-way hike down through upper Finley and Adams Canyon. This is an excellent drainage with lovely tall trees and a lush drainage. We heard and then found a calling Northern Pygmy Owl and watched a whole troop of small birds find the owl and then mob it aggressively. Early on, we heard a calling Elegant Trogon and also detected Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay. After scooting down a smooth waterfall section of rock, we continued through the canyon and then found a probable pair of Elegant Trogons. Some of the oak trees were blooming and attracting flocks of warblers, both migrants and resident birds. This was a lovely morning of birding and I highly recommend this area to others, especially if you use a two-car system as we did.



Northern (Mountain) Pygmy-Owl © Joe Aliperti

The Patagonia Mountains are under-birded as a whole and the southern end is especially neglected by the birding community of SE Arizona. I would encourage everyone to get out there and try this area out. There is a very fun Christmas Bird Count that happens here every year and Tucson Audubon's spring Elegant Trogon survey of this range in May, is another chance to get better acquainted with this area.

Below are the eBird checklists generated during this trip for each location, date, and time:

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S55530850>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S55530862>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S55530904>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S55531064>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S55531121>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S55531201>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S55531250>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S55531345>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S55531383>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S55531458>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S55531533>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S55531594>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S55531677>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S55531909>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S55532663>

Thanks to all of the participants who helped make this a memorable and rewarding expedition! We hope to see you on the next one!



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