

Sky Island Tours

Jeff Babson

Jeff@SkyIslandTours.com

www.SkyIslandTours.com

Phone: 520-488-8551

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The Sky Island News

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August 2015

Somehow it is August already. 'Fall' migration is already underway as evidenced by the number of shorebirds at Lake Cochise and the Western Tanager that are being seen outside of their pineland breeding grounds. Butterflies are conspicuous as their numbers swell with the continuing monsoonal moisture coming up from Mexico. Moths and beetles are covering blacklight sheets everywhere in southern Arizona.

August also means it is time for the Tucson Bird and Wildlife Festival, from the 12th to the 16th. I hope to see you there!

I hope that you all enjoy this month's issue of the newsletter.

August Field Trips

I also do private field trips for birds, butterflies, dragonflies, and general natural history. Give me a call (520)-488-8551 or visit www.SkyIslandTours.com for rates and more information.

Cienega Creek and Davidson Canyon. Fri., 8/14. 5:30-11:00AM. Part of the Tucson Birding and Nature Festival. Trip repeated on Sun., 8/16.

The perennial stream flow and lush riparian vegetation is an important nesting and migration corridor for a multitude of avian species. Home to Gray Hawk, Yellow-breasted Chats, Yellow-billed Cuckoos, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulets, Bell's Vireos, and Lucy's Warblers, the creek has also hosted of a number of vagrants. Under the shade of towering Fremont cottonwoods, we will explore this well-watered and increasingly rare habitat on a half-day outing. We will arrive back at the Riverpark Inn by 11:00am.

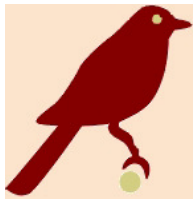
Lake Cochise Shorebirds. Mon., 8/17. 8:00AM-12:00PM. Cost is \$10/person. Call 488-8551 or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register.



August offers the opportunity for some of the best shorebird watching of the year in southern Arizona. On this trip we head east to Lake Cochise in Willcox, where we hope to see Long-billed Curlew, American Avocet, Baird's Sandpiper, Wilson's Phalarope, and more. With shorebirds you never know what might show up! Bring water, hat, sunscreen, and snacks. We will meet at the carpool area at I-10 and State Route 83 and carpool to the lake.

Monastery Mississippi Kite Trip. Wed., 8/19. 8:00AM-12:00PM. Cost is \$10/person. Call 488-8551 or email (jeff@skyislandtours.com) to register. Limit 10 participants.

Mississippi Kites breed in only a few locations in southern Arizona. The monastery in St. David is the best spot to look for this acrobatic raptor. We will also search for riparian birds like Summer Tanager, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Tropical Kingbird, among



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others. Bring water, hat, sunscreen, and snacks. We will meet at the carpool area at I-10 and State Route 83 and carpool to the monastery.

Pima County Classes and Trips

These trips are offered by the Pima County Department of Natural Resources, Parks, and Recreation. They are all free. Call (520)-615-7855 X3 for more information. Please note that some trips require reservations. For descriptions of these trips and other programs offered by the Environmental Education Division, visit <http://www.pima.gov/nrpr/educ/environ.htm>.

Starting in September online reservations and a \$5.00 fee will be required for all Pima County Natural Resources Programs. Registration will be through the Pima County NRPR website portal, which will go online this month.

Wake Up With the Birds. Every Thurs. 7:30-9:00AM. Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

Birding Sweetwater Wetlands. Tues., 8/4. 7:30-9:30AM. (2667 W. Sweetwater Dr.).

Nature Night: Bats in Flight. Fri., 8/7. 6:30-8:30PM. Rillito River Park (4200 N. Campbell Ave.).

Dragons and Damsels of Agua Caliente Park. Tues., 8/11. 8:00-9:30AM. Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

Butterflies of Agua Caliente Park. Tues., 8/18. 8:00-10:00AM. Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

Birding the Santa Cruz River. Fri., 8/21. 7:30-9:30AM. Meet at Wheeler Taft Abbett Library (7800 N. Schisler Dr.) in Marana. RESERVATIONS REQUIRED.

Nature Night: Desert Night Shift. Sat., 8/22. 7:00-9:00PM. Agua Caliente Park (12325 E. Roger Rd.).

Nature Night: Desert Night Shift. Fri., 8/28. 7:00-9:00PM. Tucson Mountain Park Ironwood Picnic Area (1548 S. Kinney Rd.).

August Classes

North American Mammals Part 2: Hoofed Mammals. Mon., 8/10. 10AM-12PM. East Center (7 S. Abrego Dr. in Green Valley). Call 625-4641 to register. ***NEW***

This class looks into the biology, classification, and conservation of these familiar mammals. We look at the pronghorn, javalina, deer, elk, moose and wild sheep and goats of North America. Many of our hoofed mammals are famous for their grace and speed. They are also North America's most popular game mammals. Join us for a look into these wonderful mammals.



Lampetis drummondi, a member of the Buprestidae.

Bounteous Beetles. Thurs., 8/13. 6-8PM. Cochise College (901 N. Colombo Ave. in Sierra Vista). Call 515-5492 to register.

Welcome to the amazing diverse world of beetles, the single largest group of insects on the planet. They are also full of contradictions. Beetles can be pests or beneficial predators of pests. They can be brightly colored or dull. They range in size from the head of a pin to half a foot. Live specimens will be brought to class.

Caught in a Web: Amazing Arachnids. Thurs., 8/20. 6-8PM. Tucson Botanical Gardens (2150 N. Alvernon Way). Call 326-9686 X18 to register.

Arachnids include such eight-legged creatures as spiders, scorpions,



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and daddy-long-legs. Many fear these remarkable animals, however this class seeks to dispel any such apprehensions while introducing participants to the curious world of arachnids.

The Bizarre and Wonderful World of Flies. Mon., 8/24. 10AM-12PM. Las Campanas (565 W. Bell Tower Dr. in Green Valley). Call 648-7669 to register.

Flies make up the insect order Diptera. They are second only to beetles in terms of number of species. Unfortunately, most people think of mosquitoes, horse flies, house flies, and other pests when they think of flies. However, other flies are important pollinators, predators and parasites that are important for maintaining ecosystems in balance. Do you like chocolate? Thank a fly. Join us for a different look at these abundant insects.

In The Binoculars

This section highlights upcoming events.

Tucson Herpetological Society Monthly Meeting (8/12).

Don Swann, biologist at Saguaro National Park, presents '*Herpetofauna of the Rincon Mountains, a northern Sky Island.*' Meetings are held at the Ward 3 Office (1510 E. Grant Rd.) begin at 7:15PM.

The Tucson Herpetological Society is a great local organization 'dedicated to the conservation, education, and research of the reptiles and amphibians of Arizona and Mexico.' THS also publishes the bimonthly newsletter, *The Sonoran Herpetologist*. Visit <http://tucsonherpsociety.org/> for more information.

Search for the Five-Striped Sparrow Trip Report

One of the most sought-after birds in southern Arizona is the Five-striped Sparrow. I have seen estimates that only 10-20 pairs of Five-striped Sparrows occur in Arizona. Add to that the fact that the best place to see them is in California Gulch, a remote spot accessed by only one long dirt road that can be impassable if there have been heavy rains. Put it all together and you get a special bird!

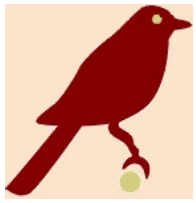


A group of adventurous birders joined me on a quest to California Gulch to try to find Five-striped Sparrows. On the road into the Gulch, we had a good omen- a Black Witch moth, one of the largest in the state, fluttered in front of the cars, before landing on a tree trunk and providing a photo opportunity. Always a good sighting! I was also encouraged as the road was in good shape with no standing water or wash outs.

After arriving at the Gulch, we grabbed water bottles, cameras, and walking sticks and headed down. I had told the group that even though we were going to the most reliable site for the bird in the country, it was no guarantee that we would see it. I had been to the Gulch more than once and come back empty-handed. So down we went, the group upbeat and optimistic.

After a short hike, we reached the bottom of the Gulch. We quickly saw a pair of Brown-crested Flycatchers. But what was that sound we were hearing? At that same moment, we had a Five-striped Sparrow singing within 15 feet of our heads! The bird hung around for a couple of minutes, giving everyone great looks and photos. After more than an hour's drive and tempering expectations, we had our target within seconds of reaching the bottom of the Gulch!

It would have been crazy to leave so quickly after finding our target, so we continued birding. Eventually, we would see Bell's Vireo, Rock, Canyon, and Bewick's Wrens, Blue Grosbeak, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, and Ladder-backed Woodpecker, among others.



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Everyone was in good spirits as we headed back out of the Gulch to head home. At the parking area, we quickly added a gorgeous male Varied Bunting that put on quite a show, jauntily moving from perch-to-perch and posing for pictures! Shortly thereafter we spied an equally stunning male Hooded Oriole probing some ocotillo flowers. What a fantastic, and colorful, way to end the trip!

I thank everyone who came out on the trip. It was a great group and a lot of fun to spend time in the field with you. And thanks also go to that Black Witch for sending some positive karma our way!

National Moth Week Blacklight Nights Report

As part of National Moth Week, I hosted two blacklight nights- one in Madera Canyon, the other at Middle Bear Picnic Area on Mt. Lemmon. As with all National Moth Week events, these two nights celebrated the 'beauty, life cycles, and habitats of moths'.

The event at the Madera Picnic Area was, as things turned out, on a cool, damp evening that followed a rainy day. The rain had mostly stopped, however, by the time the festivities got started, so I decided to press on. Happily, I was joined by a dedicated group of moth-ers that wasn't about to let a little rain stop them from looking at moths!

One of the first moths to come to the light was *Scolecocampa atriluna*, a straw yellow beauty with bold black spots and blotches on the forewings. Soon to follow was *Dichagyris socorro*, a dark brown and black beauty with striking buffy orbicular and reniform spots and blaze along the leading edge of the forewings. Both of these moths are in the Noctuidae, or owlet moth, family.

It turned out that we got some good beetles, too- *Chrysina gloriosa*, a beautiful apple green and liquid gold scarab, and numerous Hammond's Lined June Beetles (*Polyphylla hammondi*).



The second blacklight night was considerably drier than the first. In fact it was a perfect evening for bugging- temperatures in the mid-70s with the ponderosa pines bathed in the glow of a half moon. One of the most plentiful moths on this night was *Virbia ostenta*, a tiger moth with orange forewings that hide scarlet hindwings with a broad black terminal band. To see the colorful hindwings, though, you have to be quick because they rapidly conceal them upon landing.

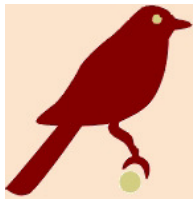
Also present were several *Diathrausta reconditalis*, a black, white, and orange beauty that always looks like its ready for Halloween. This moth is in the Crambidae, the snout moth family and is known as the Recondite Webworm Moth. We also had some *Phaeoura perfidias*, big geometers that look a lot like tree bark. They are among the largest geos in North America. A pair of *Datana integerrima*, a grayish-brown moth with paler lines that curve elegantly from the costa to the trailing edge of the wings,

graced us with their presence. This is a moth in the Notodontidae, popularly known as prominents.

There were many other moths, as well as, beetles including *Chrysina lecontei*, another sensational apple green scarab. Thanks go out to all who attended these events. It was fun celebrating National Moth Week with you!

It's That Time of Year Again- the 2015 AOU Checklist Update

Every July the American Ornithologists Union (AOU) Checklist Committee- North and Middle America publishes their annual supplement to the Checklist of North American birds. The 13 members of the committee review proposed changes to the checklist based on peer-reviewed research published in a variety of scientific journals. After review of the literature, committee members then discuss each proposal. Ultimately, each proposal is voted on and those changes that are accepted are published in the annual supplement. Each supplement is met with a certain amount of angst by some birders as these changes may require alteration of their life list.



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In the following paragraphs I discuss this year's supplement as it pertains to the birds of North America. Bear in mind that additional changes affect birds found in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean that I will not discuss here. Another important note for birders is that the AOU Checklist is not exactly the same as that of the American Birding Association (ABA), although in most cases the ABA follows the AOU decisions.

Zino's Petrel (*Pterodroma madeira*) is added to the checklist based on a record off the coast of Cape Hatteras in 1995. Pelagic birds are also the subject of a couple of splits that affect the AOU checklist. The Herald Petrel (*Pterodroma heraldica*) is split from Trinidad Petrel (*P. arminjoniana*), due to assortative mating where the two species overlap. Trinidad Petrel, which breeds on islands in the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans, has been regularly recorded off of North Carolina. The Herald Petrel has been recorded in Hawaiian waters, but breeds in the tropical South Pacific. Newell's Shearwater (*Puffinus newelli*) has been recorded in waters off San Diego and breeds in Hawaii is split from Townsend's Shearwater (*P. auricularis*) based on differences in plumage, morphology, breeding timing, and feeding ecology.

The Egyptian Goose (*Alopochen aegyptiaca*) is a non-native species but is added to the checklist based on the establishment of self-sustaining populations in Florida and California. This species is commonly exhibited at zoos, so it is not terribly surprising that it was able to get established.



American Tree Sparrow

The other changes in this supplement are more of the generic and family reassignment nature. Foremost is the movement of American Tree Sparrow from *Spizella* to its own monotypic genus, *Spizelloides*. Turns out that nuclear and mitochondrial DNA data indicate that the two groups are not closely related.

After the removal of the genus *Piranga* from the tanager family (Thraupidae) to the cardinal family a few years ago, Western Spindalis (*Spindalis zena*) was the only North American representative in the family. New research has removed this species from the Thraupidae as well, leaving North America with no tanagers! This research did not, however, indicate what family the Western Spindalis belonged. Currently it is considered *incertae sedis*, which means of uncertain placement.

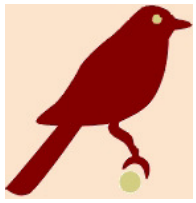
That is the 2015 update from the AOU Checklist Committee. Nothing monumental in this year's supplement, but I thought that I

would pass it on in any case.

Butterfly Profile: Many-spotted Skipperling

August is a great month for insects in Arizona. The monsoon rains bring with them the possibility of influx species from Mexico, species that are highly-sought after by insect aficionados. One of these is the Many-spotted Skipperling (*Piruna aea*). In fact, almost the entire flight period for the species in Arizona is this month.

The upper wings of Many-spotted Skipperlings resemble their cousin, the Four-spotted Skipperling (*P. polingi*), dark brown with conspicuous white spots. The namesake white spots for each occur on the under side of the hind wings. A further distinction between the two is that the spots of Many-spotted are outlined with distinct black borders. A look at the underside of these skipperlings is usually all one needs to correctly identify them.



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Many-spotted Skipperlings occur in grassy areas in oak woodlands. The larval food plant is side-oats grama, a common grass in southern Arizona. However, the caterpillars are seldom seen as they are green and closely match the leaves of the host plant. The adults frequently visit mud, but can occasionally be seen on nectaring at flowers.

The species was named in 1912 by the American lepidopterist Harrison Dyar from specimens collected in the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico. Mr. Dyar was independently wealthy and was an expert on the slug caterpillar moth family (Limacodidae). He also had a habit of digging tunnels in his neighborhood in Washington D.C. that were only discovered when a truck broke through into one in 1924.

Almost the entire range of this species is in Santa Cruz County. It does spill over into Cochise and Pima Counties.

Good luck if you attempt to search out this wonderful little butterfly!

Did you know?

... that a recent study suggests that the diversity of European butterflies could be seriously underestimated? A team of researchers sequenced the mitochondrial DNA of all 228 species of butterfly that are found on the Iberian peninsula, compiling more than 3500 genetic sequences. They then compared these sequences with those of other European populations. The surprising results of the study suggest that up to 28% of the species could be totally new to science. This diversity was hidden by the fact that they are morphologically very similar and hard to distinguish from each other. This makes me wonder if the same thing is happening in North America?!