

Bearded Tyrannulets Birdathon 2008

Riding for Rarities; low carbon-footprint birding

By Kendall Kroesen

Thank You

Thanks to all of you who contributed to Tucson Audubon's Birdathon 2008! And particular thanks for supporting our team, the Bearded Tyrannulets. Here's the full story of our 2008 Birdathon.

The Plan

"How do you see the most bird species without any carbon footprint?"

That was the question the Bearded Tyrannulets Birdathon team asked themselves when planning this year's Birdathon.

The question for next year is "How do you see the most bird species with no carbon footprint, without walking funny for several days after?" But I'm getting ahead of myself.

We were concerned that traditional Birdathons burn a lot of gasoline. Birdathoners may drive hundreds of miles in 24 hours, visiting as many different settings as possible (deserts, mountains, grasslands, rivers, etc.) in an effort to see as many species as possible.

After considering some options, like hiking, riding buses, or a hybrid of cycling and busing, we settled on a long bicycle ride. We quickly figured that the east side of Tucson had the most birding resources in the smallest area, and the least-busy roads.

Three of us live in central Tucson, so there was some logic to starting the Birdathon there and riding toward the east. This inconvenienced only Brian Nicholas, east side resident, who had to ride west to meet us at the starting point.

Brian is notorious for doing a great deal of riding, including at least part of the way to and from work each day. He met the other three of us, Randy Grohman, Scott Wilbor and Kendall Kroesen, at the north end of Tucson Boulevard where it intersects the Rillito. We were going to finish in his home territory, so he would have the advantage of being near home at the end. The rest of us faced a ride home after the Birdathon.

We knew we needed to gain some elevation to pick up some species that aren't found in the Tucson basin, so we considered riding up Mt. Lemmon. This was quickly rejected by those of us who aren't out of our minds (Scott and Kendall). Randy and Brian are in much better shape in addition to being out of their minds. But we agreed that we would at least try to make it to

Molino Basin (about five miles up from the base of the mountain, and a 1,600-foot elevation gain) which can have some species not found below.

And the best time to be in Molino Basin? Early in the morning, of course. Approximately sunrise. Ohmygod! We would have to leave very early in the morning to get there that early.

So, the final plan was concocted. We would start the Birdathon on Tucson Blvd. at 3 p.m. on Friday, cycling and birding our way east to Brian's house (near the intersection of Tanque Verde and Mt. Lemmon Highway). We would sleep there, wake up at 3 a.m., and start riding at 3:30 a.m. We figured that might get us to Molino Basin about sunrise (which is around 5:45 a.m. this time of year). We would ride down the mountain (that doesn't take long—wheeeeeee!). We'd head over to Agua Caliente Park for some birding and a Friends of Agua Caliente pancake breakfast, which just happened to be Saturday morning. Then we'd ride west to Sabino Creek for some species in the riparian area there. We'd finish around noon with a final sweep through Brian's neighborhood, which has some ponds and a nearby forested area. Noon would be late enough, since it would be hot by then.

The Ride

Only Randy made it to the meeting place on time. This seemed like a bad way to start.

I left too little time to pack the bike after being at work in the morning, and got a bit of a late start. I rode to Scott's house where he was packed and ready to go—just waiting for me to show up! However, upon climbing aboard his bike, he realized one of the toe clips he had installed the night before was upside down. Cursing himself, he quickly ran inside and found a screwdriver.

With the toe clip reinstalled, we started out. On Tucson Blvd, between Grant and Ft. Lowell, my cell phone rang and I valiantly and/or recklessly answered it while riding. It was Brian. He was running late too—a few blocks behind us.

We rolled into Rio Vista Natural Resource Park a little late, to find Randy relaxing in the shade of a tree. Moments later Brian arrived. We started the 24-hour Birdathon clock at 3:17 p.m.

The beginning of a Birdathon is often the most exciting time. You are full of energy, and almost every bird you see is a new species for the trip. We counted birds quickly as we took a walk around the park: Mourning Dove, Lark Sparrow, Gila Woodpecker, and so on. At first they were the usual "Friday-afternoon-at-the-natural-resource-park species." But then, a couple of surprises! A Lesser Nighthawk flushed out of a scrubby mesquite—a species usually seen at dusk or dawn. We figured we'd see that one later, in the evening, and we did. But it seemed like a good omen.

Then we found a Lark Bunting! This is a sparrow-like bird that winters in our area, often in large numbers. Some stay as late as the end of May, so it should not have been too unexpected.

But they form flocks and are seen irregularly, so it seemed a bit fortunate to run into one. A Green-tailed Towhee—another sparrow relative—was another good find.

By the time we left the park we had already seen over 20 species. We felt we were on track now. We set off riding slowly east along the Rillito linear park trail, alert for signs of an as yet uncounted species. This really beats trying to watch birds from a car. You should try bicycle birding some time! You cover more ground than you would on foot, yet you have approximately the same ability to see and hear birds that you would have while walking. This was the most fun part of the trip for me.

Many more species got listed along the Rillito: a Cooper's Hawk zipped across our path and headed right at a pedestrian on the other side of the Rillito—probably startling him as it veered off at the last minute. Killdeer, Harris's Hawk, Abert's Towhee, Red-tailed Hawk; all fell to our superior listing skills! We were riding high.

Then a bike malfunction—another toe clip! One of Brian's toe clips broke, the strap hanging down dangerously, threatening to get caught in the spokes of the rear wheel. We stopped and Brian removed the offending equipment. Ever resourceful, he called his wife Joni and asked her to pick up a replacement at a local shop. He would install it in the evening when we arrived at his house.

More species fell by the wayside: Brewer's Sparrow, Turkey Vulture, Northern Mockingbird. We turned away from the Rillito at Craycroft and went to Fort Lowell Park. We picked up some ducks at the pond (Mallard, Northern Shoveler, and American Wigeon) and several other species. And the park held Tucson Audubon's signature bird—the Vermilion Flycatcher!

After that we had to resort to busy streets for a while—south on Sahuara to Pima, and east to Tanque Verde, then east past the Pantano-Wrightston exit. But then we turned onto quiet Woodland Road. This is really Brian's home turf—located adjacent to the development where he lives. Woodland Road loops south of Tanque Verde through horse ranches with big pastures and big trees. Even though it was starting to get dark, we found 8 more species.

Then we entered The Lakes at Castle Rock, where Brian lives. He had erected an owl box there, which was inhabited by a Western Screech Owl. It always helps to have a teammate who has salted the landscape with birdhouses!

At the two ponds in the community we managed to find Great Egrets, Spotted Sandpiper and American Coot, in spite of the darkness that by now was almost complete.

After riding out to a restaurant on Tanque Verde for dinner, we bunked down at Brian's house. Then, minutes later it seemed, Brian was waking us up at 3 a.m.! Our plan was to start riding up Mt. Lemmon Highway at 3:30 a.m. It was closer to 4 a.m. by the time we had stopped at an all-night Circle-K for coffee.

This was our chance at a few night birds that might be singing (or hooting, or screeching or tooting) before dawn. We headed up the first five miles to the base of the mountain, a steady

but manageably incline. With Brian and Randy out front most of the way, we stopped when they heard something, or where Brian knew of a likely spot.

Probably the first bird we heard was the calm, steady trilling of the Lesser Nighthawk. The sound always gives me fond memories of summer crickets that sang me to sleep as a child. I'd like to have Lesser Nighthawks outside my window at night.

Great Horned Owl was the first bird we heard that we had not yet encountered on our Birdathon. Its hoots were coming from up a draw to the east of the road.

A little further up we heard the funny barks and yelps of Elf Owls. I recalled the owl exhibit at the San Diego Natural History Museum, with buttons to push to hear each species' calls. I remember being amazed then that most of them didn't sound like the iconic hoots of the Great Horned, but were a mix of toots, screeches and barks. More familiar now with the night sounds, I and my teammates recognized the funny screeches as coming from our smallest owl.

Although we were to see or hear them after dawn too, we heard a lot of other species making noises during the night. These included Gambel's Quail, Canyon Towhee, Black-throated Sparrow, Brown-crested Flycatcher, and Northern Cardinal.

Then we reached the base of the mountain—regretfully, at least in my case. This meant the beginning of a 1600-foot climb over the space of five miles. I had only attempted it once before, a couple weeks before—on fresh legs. Now my legs had over 20 miles on them during the previous 12 hours. Again, Randy and Brian sprinted out ahead. I followed, with Scott bringing up the rear—more to watch my back, I suspected, than because he was slower.

Up to this time we were close to being on schedule. We got to the base of the mountain a little behind what we planned. But it was going up the mountain that put us way behind on our planned route. It wasn't so much the slow climbing speed, but all the stops we were tempted to make for all the singing birds we heard and flying birds we saw. It was quite light by this time, about 5:30 a.m., and there was a lot of activity.

All the stopping and starting was actually harder than just going up mountain. After the initial start up the mountain I had "become one with the pain." You can kind of zone-out through the exertion, get in a rhythm, and mentally filter out some of the feeling that the life-force was being sucked out of you. But that rhythm was broken every time we stopped, and I had to become one with the pain all over again!

Still, the birding was exciting. We heard Rock Wrens and Canyon Wrens up the hillsides, we heard or saw Bell's Vireos, Summer Tanagers, a Nashville Warbler and other birds in the trees along Molino Canyon Wash.

By the time we were approaching Molino Basin Scott had dropped pretty far back and I began to dream that I might really be in pretty good shape after all, notwithstanding the fact that my legs felt about ready to fall off. Then I realized, of course, that he the least efficient bike for this part of the trip—a mountain bike. My gearing and larger diameter tires probably gave me an

advantage there. Meanwhile Randy and Brian were still indefatigably and cheerily pushing ahead out front. Brian's speed up the mountain was all the more amazing for the fact that he had a spotting scope in his backpack and a tripod strapped to the frame of his bike!

After all that effort, Molino Basin was a bit of a disappointment. We only found 9 new species, in spite of taking a good deal of time walking around the campground. White-throated Swifts did tight circles far above, a Black-throated Gray Warbler hopped through the oaks, and Mexican Jays swept down from the slopes to cackle and hunt scraps at the camp sites. An amazing eagle-eye find was a Scott's Oriole singing from perch about a half-mile up the mountain. I think it was Randy that heard it singing. Brian managed to find and point it out. It was about twice as far away as I imagined anyone being able to find a perched bird.

Other than those and a few others, there weren't a lot of birds moving around or singing, in spite of the fact it was still early. We wondered if they had all been eaten by the Cooper's Hawk we found nesting in an oak near the campground road!

We did get another species at the Molino Overlook just down the mountain—Costa's Hummingbird. Then it was a thrill ride down the mountain, getting in a lot of miles with very little effort. It's hard to look for birds though when you're doing those speeds, watching for traffic and watching for stones on the road.

At the bottom we cut left on the Mt. Lemmon Short Road and headed for Agua Caliente Park. That would have to be our last big effort for riparian birds since we were now too far behind schedule to go to Sabino Creek. I was secretly happy about that since I could barely imagine my legs getting me back to Brian's house, let alone getting over to Sabino first. And it was getting hot. Along the road before the park we picked up Common Raven, Rufous-winged Sparrow, Gilded Flicker and Bronzed Cowbird.

At the park we stopped to partake in the Friends of Agua Caliente Park pancake breakfast—a welcome carb boost after the morning's trials. A walk around the park yielded about 8 new species, including a brilliant Lazuli Bunting, a Ring-necked Duck, a Yellow Warbler and a singing Song Sparrow.

We found five more species along the way back to Brian's house and at the ponds near his house. We had by then reached at 95 species! I thought that was pretty good!

After a break at the house we headed to a restaurant on Tanque Verde Road to eat lunch and total up our avian finds. But there was one more surprise in store. My phone rang. I thought about not answering it, but I did and it was Kathy, Scott's girlfriend.

It was a good thing I answered, because during the time when Scott was on the phone Brian and Randy made a slight detour to look at another little pond. Not usually a place that yields a lot of species, Brian had figured to pass it by. But it turned out there were about 40 Willets (a migrating shorebird) all lined up along the side of the pond. This was our final species, number 96. That made us very happy, and we won't ignore that pond the next time!

Wrapping it up

Well, the end of our story is that Randy had a migraine from being out in the sun too long, and we were all pretty exhausted. So we cancelled the carbon-free ideal and Kathy came and picked up Randy and Scott. Brian rode the mile back home. I rode about another 5 miles west (against a heavy headwind) to Tucson Country Club. My wife was holding a cello student recital there, and I was able to get a ride home from there, with the bike in our friends' van.

Still, although in the end it wasn't a no-carbon Birdathon, it was indeed a very low-carbon one. And it was a blast! I'm guessing we'll do it again next year (I'm sure we'll tweak our route). Tune in next year for the 2009 Birdathon. Thanks for your support!