

**Holiday Highlights**  
**New Mexico**  
**30 January – 10 February 2013**

**Leader:** Darren Rees

**Hon. Leader:** Garry Heath

**Guests:** Alison Frogley, Penny & Jon Lee, Terry & Sue Lee and John Duerden.

**Day 1:** **Arriving Safely**

We all meet at Albuquerque airport after what has been an exhausting travel day for guests. I'm only five days ahead and can identify with the feeling of body clocks being on different time zones. Thankfully we are speedily on our way to the old town in Albuquerque where our delightful guesthouse, the Casas de Suenos awaits. Time for a quick freshen up then it's down to Little Anita's for a meal before a well earned sleep.

**Day 2:** **The Rio Grande and Petroglyph National Monument**

After the rigours of yesterday's travels, a relaxing breakfast at 8.00am is called for. The menu includes eggs bacon and breakfast burrito, delicious. We leave just after 9.00am for the short drive to the Rio Grande Nature Center. Here along the banks of the river we can explore a mix of pools and riverine woodland bathed in glorious winter sun. We park and look over the first pool and start the species list. White-crowned Sparrows and Housefinches are in the bushes; waterfowl on the pond include Mallard, Green-winged Teal and Shoveler; in adjacent fields are our first Sandhill Cranes and Canada Geese. The trail takes us through tall leafless cottonwood trees towards the visitor centre and past some seed feeders. There are more sparrows and Housefinches and we start separating the races of Dark-eyed Juncos: Pink-sided and Oregon forms are there. All the activity attracts other birds and we see a tiny Bushtit, a handsome White-breasted Nuthatch and a fantastic Downy Woodpecker.

As we walk into the visitor centre we are greeted with warmth from both the staff and very efficient heating system. We settle in to the library area that has a huge panoramic window overlooking another pool, with the snow-dusted Sandia Mountains as a backdrop. The morning sun is picking out the colours on the heads of the drakes and we've never seen a finer collection of green-headed Mallard and purple-headed Shoveler. These are eclipsed though by stunning drake Wood Ducks and a fantastic Hooded Merganser male. Other waterfowl

include Gadwall, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Pied-billed Grebe and American Coot. To the left are more sparrows at a feeder with Song Sparrow and Red-winged Blackbird to add to the list. Then, one of the staff calmly announces that there is a Porcupine in a tree! There, in the higher boughs of a cottonwood is a large hairy ball. Through the scopes you can make out a tail and coarse spines too. What a start to the mammal list!

Eventually we pull ourselves away from the warmth of the building and venture outside into the cool. We walk a trail that takes us across a canal and into the woodland next to the river. The trees are largely empty of birds but we do see Western Scrub Jay and several American Robins before looping back to the canal. There, in one tree close to the path are seven Cedar Waxwings enjoying the morning sun. Garry spots a Black Phoebe hawking for insects and we walk close for a better look, gaining views of a group of Yellow-rumped Warblers in a nearby bush. Back at the car park we take a last look over the pool, now crowded with geese. In the distance an adult white-tailed Bald Eagle soars into the blue sky. A fitting end to the morning.

After lunch at Casas de Suenos, we venture out again to nearby Petroglyph National Monument. To the west of the city a dark escarpment marks the landscape. Formed from volcanic basalt, the dark rock has been eroded into boulders slopes and many are marked with carvings from the indigenous people of the Rio Grande. After checking out the visitor centre, we walk a trail that takes us through Rinconada Canyon. We can marvel at the drawings and we also manage to get a few new species. We see Canyon Towhee, a fantastic pair of Crissal Thrashers and see at least five ridiculously big-eared Black-tailed Jackrabbits. We then drive back to Albuquerque, checking out the dinosaur footprints at the Natural History Museum, before going back to our hotel. That evening we stroll into the old town and dine in a restaurant on the town plaza. A great first day!

### Day 3:

#### **The Sandia Mountains and Fun in the Snow.**

Another fantastic breakfast at Casas de Suenos and we are on our way shortly after 9.00am. Again it's a perfect winter's day with a crisp clear blue sky. We drive due west to the foothills of the Sandia Mountains and the small settlement of San Antonito. Behind the church we can park and explore a series of trails that wind through juniper bushes and an orchard of old apple trees. Around the car park are a few birds perched in bare trees: Pine Siskins share a tree with Western Bluebirds including some brightly coloured males. They move from tree to wires

and are lit by the morning sun – wonderful. Other birds are flying around including Western Scrub Jay and Townsend's Solitaire. We take an hour or so to walk along the snow covered trails covering a mix of habitat. Birds are few, but we do see Mountain Chickadee, Oregon and Gray-headed Junco, Raven, Steller's Jay and our first Juniper Titmouse. Star of the morning may well be a cute Tassel-eared Squirrel that sits on a branch eating an old apple. Might just be Alison's bird-of-the-trip!

Next, the road takes us higher through the juniper and oak woodland to taller pines and we stop at Doc Long trailhead to explore a new habitat. There is more snow on the ground at a higher altitude and it's crisp and crunchy underfoot. Walking through the tall pines and cedars we manage to find some quality birds: delightful Pygmy, Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches, Hairy Woodpecker and a fantastic male Williamson's Sapsucker. At Balsam Fir picnic site we have our lunch which is a chilly affair - by now the wind has picked up and it is uncomfortably cold. We take a short walk to the viewpoint that looks east over the grasslands below and further to the distant mountain ridges.

Afterwards, we drive to the summit at Sandia Crest. Here a team of researchers have been putting out feed to attract a flock of Rosyfinches and it is one of the best places to watch these difficult-to-see birds. No sooner have we got out, we see a Gray-crowned Rosyfinch on a tree close to the feeders. Then there are flurries of activity as small parties of finches visit. Most common are the smart Black Rosyfinches but occasionally these are joined by Gray-crowned including an unusual Hepburn's Rosyfinch (race of Gray-crowned). The third species, the Brown-capped Rosyfinch completes the set. Other birds take their turns to eat at the feeders: Gray-headed Juncos and Steller's Jay. Briefly overhead we see Red-tailed Hawk and a Peregrine.

The short walk along the Crest Trail gives us spectacular views from the escarpment to the desert plain below. All along the rim the trees that have been teased into shape by the ever-present wind, are frosted with snow. The path heads into the trees and we bump into a small flock of Mountain Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches and Pine Siskin. This area of stunted Engelmann Spruces is reputed home to Three-toed Woodpecker and we head back down the mountain a short distance to find a less windy area. We walk through the snow at Ellis Trailhead and we are very fortunate: there, low on a tree trunk is a busy female Three-toed Woodpecker. She is working the bark, picking flakes off

searching for grubs. She is very close and gives us wonderful looks through the telescope - we can even count those toes! We walk back to the vehicle elated and decide to celebrate and warm up with hot chocolate and cookies. What a great day!

#### Day 4:

##### **Manzanita, Quarai and Bernardo.**

After breakfast we say goodbye to the folk at Casas de Suenos and head for the hills. Our journey takes us east again to the Manzanita Mountains and we stop first at Otero canyon. The short walk takes us through a delightful limestone canyon with juniper clad hillsides. A Western Scrub Jay is perched on a tree as we start our walk and we immediately hear Juniper Titmouse calling. A small group of birds are moving through the trees with juncos. There are also Cassins' and Housefinches for comparison. A little further on the sun is catching one rocky slope and two chipmunks are running around – we try to scope them to gain some identity – they are Gray-footed Chipmunks. Further on still is a Townsend's Solitaire.

Driving further through the mountains we notice several Western Bluebirds on wires and near the village of Chillili Penny spots our first Mountain Bluebird. There is also a group of Horned Larks in one open field – a taster of things to come. We opt to take a gravel road that takes through the juniper scrub to the grassland beyond. We notice more and more flocks of Horned Larks, this time close to the road. For the next hour or so, we criss-cross a vast plain of grassland, fallow land and ploughed fields looking for birds. There are several raptors around: we see Red-tailed Hawks and Ferruginous Hawks in various plumages and forms, including unusual dark morph birds (both species). We also see American Kestrel, Northern Harriers, Rough-legged Hawk and Prairie Falcon. Other birds include Loggerhead Shrike, Western Meadowlark, and a flyover from a dark-bellied Chestnut-collared Longspur. There are some mammals around too, with corgis and a domestic cat doing an impression of a cougar. Thankfully Garry spots a group of Pronghorn Antelope to set the record straight. From the grassy plains we head for the hills and the ruins of the Spanish Mission at Quarai. It's a beautiful setting and an impressive collection of red stone buildings. The local ranger is so enthusiastic about her job and gives us a fine lesson in local history. We walk around the site and soon hear a Great Horned Owl calling! There it is in a distant cottonwood tree! We walk nearer and get good looks through the scope but as we approach for a clearer view it takes off for juniper trees.

From Quarai we drive south and west to Bernardo, a route that takes us slowly through endless juniper scrub and across vast open grasslands. Finally we drop into the Rio Grande valley where the vegetation changes dramatically and the bird count increases just as alarmingly. Next to the road is a large pool covered with thousands of Snow Geese, and more and more are coming in all the time. We get out and spend the next hour and a half transfixed as wave after wave of Snow Geese and Sandhill Cranes appear in the distance and fly in to the lake in front of us. All the while the setting sun is colouring the distant hills lilac, the trees orange, and lighting up the geese a brilliant white. With a supporting cast of Mallard, Pintail, Green-winged Teal, Shoveler, Canada Geese, Red-tailed and Ferruginous Hawk there is no better way to end the day.

#### **Day 5: Dawn til Dusk at Bosque del Apache**

It's still dark when we have a quick breakfast at the hotel. We are on our way south before sunrise for our big day at the world famous Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. As we approach the reserve from the north, a glow is highlighting the ridge of mountains in the east. We park at the North Pools and can make out masses of birds gathered in the water. Thousands of white Snow Geese are huddled together and to the left are larger Sandhill Cranes. Gradually the light lifts and illuminates the breathtaking scene. All the while more and more geese fly in from the east and south in noisy skeins.

After enjoying the early morning spectacle it's off to the visitor centre for some warming coffee. The well appointed building is full of exhibits, a gift shop and all important hot drinks. Another bonus is the big window that looks out over a feeding station where lots of sparrows are gathered. The majority are White-crowned Sparrows but there is a larger more unusual bird – a Harris's Sparrow. A Pyrrhuloxia visits followed by Spotted Towhee, White-throated Sparrow, Song Sparrow, White-winged Doves and several Red-winged Blackbird. It's a great place to sip coffees and warm ourselves.

Rejuvenated, we decide to walk one of the trails on the refuge. The Canyon Trail takes in a loop around the classic desert habitat that forms the huge buffer zone around the Bosque wetlands. The path winds through a tight eroded canyon and up to a viewpoint that gives us an appreciation of the size of the refuge. Birds are thin on the ground but we do manage Crissal Thrashers, Black-throated Sparrows, Raven, Loggerhead Shrike and a large flock of Lesser Goldfinches. Returning to the visitor centre we see our first Gambel's Quails in the

car park, picking at the salt and gravel.

Driving north to the village of San Antonio, we pass through fields and bushes and on one is a fantastic Roadrunner - another two are in a field. Lunch is at the local filling station and the fudge is a huge hit, particularly with birthday girl Alison! Returning to the refuge we see yet another Roadrunner as well as our first Savannah Sparrows, Say's Phoebe and fantastic Coyote. The tour loop takes in a most of the woodland and pools that form the all important habitat for waterfowl that visit the refuge. Lots of pools are busy with ducks: Gadwall, Shoveler and big groups of Pintail. We also see Ladder-backed Woodpecker and Loggerhead Shrike.

Along the South Loop there are more ducks including smart Redheads, beautiful Bufflehead and two magnificent Bald Eagles. Further on we see Mule Deer, Kestrel and Red-tailed Hawks, before our final stop at Willow Deck. Before us are masses of cranes, geese and ducks spread across a vista of pools and grassy fields hemmed by winter woodland and framed by blue mountains and a beautifully coloured evening sky. It's an arresting sight and will prove to be the place of the trip. We slowly take in all that is on show, savouring the sight and sound of so many birds. Cranes are picking around and squabbling, and some are practicing their leaps and wing flaps in an attempt to perfect their courtship dances. The Snow Geese are less busy but as eye-catching presenting themselves as a large block of textured white across the water. All the while the constant bugling and honking is accentuated by the still evening air and the natural amphitheatre of hills and trees. Then Garry finds two Coyotes crossing the grass meadow and these pause in their tracks and start howling together adding their voices to the evening soundscape. Their calls attract a third animal that trots across the scene scattering the Mallard and Pintails. John picks out a larger white bird within the geese - a long-necked Trumpeter Swan. There are also lots of Harriers, two Bald Eagles, Red-tailed Hawks, Coopers Hawk and a fantastic Merlin that perches just above our heads. Finally, two Great Horned Owls start calling and we see one fly by the bare trees. We leave the deck just as its getting dark and manage views of two Striped Skunks scurrying across the road - what an end to the day!

## **Day 6: Upwards to the Magdalena Mountains**

West of Socorro are the Magdalena Mountains and we plan a morning exploring the varying habitats on offer. The approach road is across a high desert plain and we stop to scan the wide vista: there are

Western Meadowlarks, Horned Larks and a Loggerhead Shrike on show. Also in the shimmering distance is a large herd of nearly forty Pronghorn Antelope. The road from the plain leads to Water Canyon and its entrance is marked by a huge cliff on one side of the road. We stop and walk around the juniper bushes in the strong morning light. There are lots of juncos, Western Scrub Jay, Juniper Titmouse and our first Chipping Sparrows. At the base of the cliff, around a ruined shack and car wreck is the unmistakable song of a Canyon Wren. At one point it calls from the window frame of the old Chevrolet. We can see its tongue vibrating as it sings through the telescope.

Driving a short distance along the valley we can look down on some bare trees. On one tall tree is a spectacular Acorn Woodpecker, its red cap illuminated by the back light. Other species include Hairy Woodpecker, Western Bluebird, Pine Siskin, Steller's Jay, Dark-eyed Juncos and charming Cliff Chipmunks scurrying around a wood pile. Shortly after, the road pavement ends and the gravel track starts to climb. We stop at one place in the tall conifers and have a cookie break, teasing out the local birds: Red-breasted and Pygmy Nuthatches and Mountain Chickadees. Further up we can look back at the lower part of the canyon and the desert beyond. There are more flurries of activities from nuthatches, chickadees and juncos. Finally we reach the highest point of the road, just short of the Langmuir Observatory. We are at the edge of the tree-line and there is a mix barren ground and high grassy slopes. There are more chickadees and nuthatches, a Red-tailed Hawk and Garry finds a group of Red Crossbills sat in a treetop. We walk the short distance to a small summit which has amazing views all around, looking over the steep forested slopes to the rocky lower canyon and beyond to the sprawling desert. It's a great place for lunch.

We wind our way back down the mountain and head for an afternoon at Bosque del Apache. The approach road takes us past the North Pools and there are big groups of geese already present. There is the same mix as yesterday with an even share of Greater Snow Geese and their smaller cousins Ross's Geese. The white plumages of both birds are broken here and there by darker 'Blue' Snow Geese and streaked juvenile birds. The tour loop takes us around the north section and there are new ducks on show: several Ruddy Duck are amongst the Bufflehead and other many ducks. An adult Bald Eagle is perched in the same large tree that it favoured yesterday. Garry finds a Greater Yellowlegs in one pool alongside the road, and in another there are three Olivaceous or Neotropic Cormorants. Back at Willow Deck

we can scan the meadows. There are masses of cranes again with fewer geese but two large white Tundra Swans. We also see Sharp-shinned Hawk, Merlin, and several Northern Harriers. Further along we see a large group of Elk from the Farm Deck. Finally, at the end of the day a large Great Horned Owl perches on a tree!

## Day 7:

### **Dawn at Bosque del Apache; South to Las Cruces**

It's a cold dawn at Bosque del Apache and with no cloud in the sky to keep any degree of warmth the temperature overnight has plummeted. Yet the first light on birds at North Pools is wonderful. There is a superb collection of geese and cranes and as we get out of the van wave after wave of snow geese come in to land. Clattering wings and lots of honking – a noisy blizzard of Snow Geese. The light paints the water a soft pink and gradually the mountains beyond are bathed in morning sun and their canyons defined with deep shadows. It's another perfect start to the day at Bosque del Apache.

After breakfast we pack our bags and leave the hotel, southbound. We pick up lunches in Socorro then join the interstate for the spectacular drive south paralleling the Rio Grande. We can see fully the extent of the refuges along the way before entering a more arid zone of Chihuahuan desert. We leave the highway at Elephant Butte State Park - a long section of protected land that includes the largest lake in New Mexico. As we drive towards the shore at Three Sisters point we can see the water level is very low revealing large scrubby beds of gravel. A preliminary scan is something of a surprise. The north section of the lake and grassy edge is stuffed with more duck than we've ever seen... eagles are dotted across the panorama and one in flight is putting up a cloud of Northern Pintail and American Wigeon. We drive closer and walk to the water's edge. As we approach forty White Pelicans are disturbed from their resting place on the beach. For an hour or so we just look and marvel at the show; dense rows of pintail; packs of coot, wigeon, mallard, gadwall, shoveler in vast numbers. A brick red Cinnamon Teal stands out and we see our first Clark's Grebes. All the while Bald Eagles are causing havoc with the ducks flying low across the edge of the water and putting up masses of ducks that explode with noisy wingbeats. Red-tailed Hawks and Northern Harriers criss-cross the scene and we haven't mentioned the spectacular backdrop of mountains that plunge steeply to the lake on the east shoreline.

Leaving the area we get good looks at a group of Horned Larks on the ground. We then move to the southern section of the park where we have our lunches overlooking the marina. After eating we drive



to the shore where we can scan the large group of grebes on the water. We are now close enough to easily separate Clark's Grebes from the more abundant Western Grebes. A small Eared Grebe is in the flock too. We also see Double-crested Cormorant, Ring-billed Gull, and White Pelican.

The final exploration of Elephant Butte Park is at Paseo Del Rio at the base of the dam. Crossing the river Garry spots two Goosander – new for the list. We can walk along the river bank and we see our first Mexican Ducks in the water. Along the edge of the path are Bewick's Wren and a Pyrrhuloxia. Gradually as the afternoon temperatures drop the birdlife creeps out of the bushes and we enjoy a superb leisurely stroll adding birds along the way: Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Black-throated and Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Rock Wren and fly-catching Ruby-crowned Kinglets. Penny finds a Cactus Wren that repeatedly scurries up a bare tree to pick off bees that are flying around a nest. A Verdin shows well and the late light on a group of Gambel's Quail is wonderful. We are reluctant to leave, so stay on until dusk and watch a series of pools that show the tell-tale markings of beavers with gnawed twigs and stumps of trees. Sadly, we have no luck with these, but we do enjoy looks at two muskrats.

## Day 8:

### **Mesilla Valley and the Organ Mountains**

After a leisurely breakfast at 8.00am we are on our way at 9.00am to the nearby Mesilla Valley. Here in the rich and fertile flood plain of the Rio Grande we check some open fields after passing through several pecan groves. A tractor is ploughing one field and there are lots of American Crows foraging. A closer look reveals a busy field full of Killdeer and American Pipits. On the other side we see Says Phoebe, Brewer's Blackbird, and a Phainopepla scolding a Red-tailed Hawk.

Driving over the river we enter the Mesilla Valley State Park and we scan around from the approach road. There are Shoveler and Gadwall in the trickle that remains of the river; a Western Meadowlark sings in the morning sun and Northern Harriers quarter the fields. We park at the visitor centre and say howdy to the volunteer who seems happy to see some visitors! After looking at the exhibits we start the trails around the site. Things are quiet but we do tease out a few birds including Says Phoebe, White-crowned Sparrows, Housefinch, House Wren, Verdin and a spectacular Northern Harrier that perches in front of us. On the exit route we even bag our daily Roadrunner.

Before lunch we drive to Burn Lake which is sadly dry due to the

drought - there's always the pecan gift shop though (good spot Sue). After picking up lunches we drive to the spectacular Organ Mountains to take our lunch with a view. There's lots of new ground to explore and we start at the Cueva Trail that winds along the base of a huge volcanic tufa buttress. Immediately, as we leave the car park the birds start coming thick and fast: Bewick's Wren, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Black-throated Sparrow, Rufous-crowned Sparrow and a fly-through from a Sharp-shinned Hawk. A little further is a bigger group with lots of Pink-sided Juncos joining the White-crowned and Black-throated Sparrows. A handsome Green-tailed Towhee sits up with light illuminating its vivid tail and two Spotted Towhees dive for cover in the arroyo. Nearer the cliff face a Black-tailed Gnatcatcher approaches, showing off its long tail. The trail finally ends at a cave at the base of the rock that was home to early indigenous people – and now a geocache for Penny and John!

We retrace our steps, then drive to the visitor centre at Dripping Springs. The assistants there regale us with tales of cougars in the mountains and we start our walk with some excitement. The first section of the walk is really busy with birds: sparrows, juncos and Pyrrhuloxia. Further, where the view opens out, we see Canyon Towhees and our first Black-chinned Sparrow. The path now swings towards the cliffs and the view is breath-taking. Huge great cliffs reach up in a series of pinnacles or stacks that give the Organ Mountain range their name. The path winds its way through an ever narrowing ravine, eventually arriving at the eponymous Dripping Springs. A short distance away is the Boyd Sanatorium, the dishevelled remains clinging to the steep slopes. Around is a huge natural amphitheatre of rocks, however hard we scan those ledges for cougars this is sadly not the evening to watch these enigmatic big cats. On the way back we see Black-tailed Jackrabbit and two Coyotes in the bus headlights.

## Day 9:

### **Aguirre Springs and White Sands National Monument**

Breakfast is at 7.30am and walking across to the cafe we notice a male Great-tailed Grackle displaying from a tree top – the warmth has got the urge to show- off going! We leave at 8.30am for a short drive across town to an area of wasteland where there have been consistent reports of Burrowing Owls. We park and walk to view the open space marked with a few dusty tracks and sparse vegetation. A short walk around the perimeter is all that's needed: Garry announces 'there's one!' Standing at the entrance to a burrow is a delightful long-legged little owl basking in the morning sun. What a start to the day!

We pick up sandwiches and drive the twenty or so minutes to the eastern slopes of the Organ Mountains. The view across the Tularosa Basin beyond to the Sacramento Mountains is fantastic. A quiet road winds across the chaparral to Aguirre Springs and we stop to scan the area marked with scrubby bushes and agaves. Lots of sparrows are popping up and a Cactus Wren starts to gurgle from an exposed perch. Amongst the sparrows are Brewer's, Chipping, and Black-throated, as well as lots of juncos. The road continues through juniper trees and boulder fields to the picnic area and Pine tree Trailhead, set beneath the splendour of the jagged Organ Mountain peaks. We slowly walk the path that picks through the trees and crosses a few ravines. Birds start to pop up: the first are two Ruby-crowned Kinglets and we are lucky to have disturbed a courting couple. The male is showing off his vivid red crest and the light is catching it brilliantly. Lots of juncos are joined by Chipping Sparrows and at one gully a Townsend's Solitaire makes an appearance. The next bend overlooks another ravine and across the plain we can make out a pale band that marks White Sands National Monument, our destination for the afternoon. Birds in the ravine include a difficult-to-see species: Black-chinned Sparrow. The highest point we reach on the path looks down on a small pool where several juncos are bathing. From there we head back down the hill to the car park and our lunches.

The route for the afternoon takes us from the Organ Mountains, across the expansive Tularosa Basin to White Sands. Driving across the arid plain we notice several Red-tailed Hawks perched on utility poles. Finally, one that is a far larger bird catches the eye – it's a superb adult Golden Eagle. We get looks through the scope before it flies off with huge wingbeats. At Holloman Lakes we scan the water that holds assorted ducks: Pintail, Gadwall, Shoveler and a neat male Bufflehead. In the surrounding sage brush we see an appropriately named Sage Sparrow. From our second vantage point we add Least Sandpiper, Killdeer and Crissal Thrasher. A final look is over a channel of water that is busy with ducks that include Redhead, Ring-necked Duck and Green-winged Teal,

The final destination for the day is the incredible White Sands National Monument where the forces of nature have conspired to create a landscape like no other. Bounded by the San Andres Mountains in the west and the Sacramento Mountains in the east, the floor of the Tularosa Basin is marked by a vast mineral deposit. Exposed after tectonic upheaval the pure white gypsum has been eroded and shaped into a massive field of pristine, brilliant dunes. Driving from the visitor

centre we first encounter a buffer zone of less than white dunes where hardy pioneer plants are trying to reclaim the desert floor. Going further we enter a sea of white sand, the late afternoon sun casting the alternate sweeps of dunes shining white and cool blue. We park and walk within the fantastical landscape, rising to the first crest where the views across the seemingly endless undulating white dunes is compelling. Everyone reaches for their cameras in an attempt to capture the wonder. For an hour or so we are lost in the magic of the dunes.

## Day 10:

### **Cranes and Geese for the last time.**

We leave Las Cruces at 8.30am after breakfast and head north along the Rio Grande. Our first birding stop is Percha Dam State Park which offers a mix of lush growth along the river and some adjacent fields. Indeed, it is as we approach the park that we see a star bird: a Prairie Falcon is swooping low attracted by a group of Gambel's Quail that are feeding on a field margin. We park amongst some tall cottonwoods marked by growths of parasitic mistletoe. As soon as we get out of the vehicle we notice the distinct call of Phainopeplas. Several are in the treetops attracted by the berries of the mistletoe. We get fantastic looks at these strange birds with their glossy plumage and tufts. The males are chasing each other around revealing their white wing patches. Other birds are likewise attracted to the food bounty and we note Western Bluebirds in the mix. Lots of Yellow-rumped Warblers (both white and yellow throated forms) are dropping from trees and feeding on the field edge. We also see Say's and Black Phoebe towards the river, then continue our walk around the perimeter of the parking area as the taller cottonwoods seem most busy. We see more Phainopeplas, a Hermit Thrush and one tree is alive with Western Bluebirds and Cedar Waxwings. At another stretch of the river birds are coming to drink: Song and White-crowned Sparrows, Oregon and Pink-sided Juncos, Bewick's Wren, and Northern Flicker. There are two hole-dwellers: in one large hole is the masked face of a Raccoon and in another purpose built hole a Ladder-backed Woodpecker is housekeeping. Other birds include Housefinch, White-breasted Nuthatch, Red-tailed Hawk. Leaving the park the birds just keep coming: two Prairie Falcons are together in the air in a food pass and one lands on a utility pole giving wonderful looks through the telescope.

Lunch is at nearby Caballo State Park with views across the water to Caballo Mountain. We manage to get out of the wind to enjoy our sandwiches and there are some birds in view also, albeit far away: White Pelican, Bald Eagles, Pintail, Gadwall, Mallard, Coot, Double-

crested Cormorant. After a detour to check the El Camino Real Heritage Museum we arrive at Bosque Del Apache for our last evening. After saying hello to the folks at the visitor centre we start the loop. In the first pool are four female Canvasbacks and Mexican Duck with Mallard. In the following pool are many waterfowl including Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck and another male Canvasback. We drive along the south loop looking at more waterfowl and at its southernmost point we find a big group of Snow Geese with Canada Geese. At the same point two Cinnamon Teal drop in view showing their beautiful blue wing pattern. Around the loop further Penny finds another Canvasback and we see two Goldeneye that are new for the species list. We end the day at the now familiar Willow Deck that looks over the crane roost. The sun is setting behind the Magdalena Mountains painting the sky yellow, pink and red. It's an unforgettable sight with so many birds in front of us. Our last meal together is at the Old Town Bistro in Socorro – a fitting place to end a wonderful trip.

#### **Day 11: North to Albuquerque.**

The final day in New Mexico wouldn't be complete without a last visit to Subway for our packed lunches. We load the van and head north to Bernardo Wildlife Management Area for one last look at the gees and crane flocks. There are cranes dotted around the stubbly fields but the geese numbers have dropped considerably. It's still very windy and cool as we scan from the series of hides and platforms. We get our last fix of Roadrunner when one runs along the path towards us. We also get a new bird when we sift through the sparrow flocks feeding on the path: amongst the many White-crowned Sparrows is a Golden-crowned Sparrow from the Pacific coast – an unusual record. We also see Chipping and White-throated Sparrow.

Our final stop is near the airport, at Rio Grande Nature Centre, where our tour started some ten days ago. On the pool at the car park, Garry finds a Canvasback amongst the Green-winged Teal and Mallard. At the feeders in the woods is the same selection of species as before with the addition of Spotted Towhee. Inside we scan across the main pool watching the Hooded Mergansers, Wood Duck and Lesser Scaup – sadly there's no Porcupine to gawp at!

After lunch we drive to the airport to check in for the long flight back to London. We say our goodbyes to Penny and John who are staying in the USA for an enviable extended stay in Colorado. And so begins the journey home, with memories of what's been a fantastic first-ever trip to New Mexico, many thanks to all.

Species of the Trip: Roadrunner (meep, meep!)

Place of the Trip: Bosque Del Apache

Magic Moment: Sunsets at Willow Deck

## BIRDS

Pied-billed Grebe  
Eared Grebe  
Western Grebe  
Clarks Grebe  
Neotropic Cormorant  
Double-crested Cormorant  
White Pelican  
Great Blue Heron  
Great Egret  
Trumpeter Swan  
Tundra Swan  
Snow Goose  
Ross's Goose  
Canada Goose  
Wood Duck  
Mallard  
Mexican Duck  
Pintail  
Gadwall  
Green-winged Teal  
Cinnamon Teal  
Northern Shoveler  
American Wigeon  
Ruddy Duck  
Ring-necked Duck  
Lesser Scaup  
Redhead  
Canvasback  
Goldeneye  
Common Merganser  
Hooded Merganser  
Northern Harrier  
Cooper's Hawk  
Sharp-shinned Hawk  
Ferruginous Hawk  
Red-tailed Hawk  
Rough-legged Hawk  
Golden Eagle  
Bald Eagle  
American Kestrel  
Merlin  
Peregrine  
Prairie Falcon  
Gambel's Quail  
American Coot  
Killdeer  
Greater Yellowlegs  
Least Sandpiper  
Feral Rock Dove  
Collared Dove  
White-winged Dove  
Mourning Dove  
Greater Roadrunner  
Great Horned Owl  
Burrowing Owl  
Acorn Woodpecker  
Ladder-backed Woodpecker  
Hairy Woodpecker  
Downy Woodpecker  
Three-toed Woodpecker  
Red-shafted Northern  
Flicker  
Black Phoebe  
Say's Phoebe  
Horned Lark  
Steller's Jay  
Western Scrub Jay  
American Crow  
Chihuahuan Raven  
Common Raven  
Mountain Chickadee  
Juniper Titmouse  
Verdin  
Bushtit  
Red-breasted Nuthatch  
White-breasted Nuthatch  
Pygmy Nuthatch  
Brown Creeper  
Cactus Wren  
Canyon Wren  
Rock Wren  
Bewick's Wren  
House Wren  
Ruby-crowned Kinglet  
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher  
Western Bluebird  
Mountain Bluebird  
Townsend's Solitaire  
American Robin  
Hermit Thrush  
Northern Mockingbird  
Crissal Thrasher  
Phainopepla  
Loggerhead Shrike  
European Starling  
Yellow-rumped Warbler  
Pyrrhuloxia  
Green-tailed Towhee  
Spotted Towhee  
Canyon Towhee  
Chipping Sparrow  
Brewer's Sparrow  
Black-chinned Sparrow  
Black-throated Sparrow  
Rufous-crowned Sparrow  
Savannah Sparrow  
Song Sparrow  
White-crowned Sparrow  
Golden-crowned Sparrow  
Harris's Sparrow  
Dark-eyed Junco (Pink-sided)  
Dark-eyed Junco (Oregon)  
Dark-eyed Junco (Gray-headed)  
Red-winged Blackbird  
Brewer's Blackbird  
Great-tailed Grackle  
Cassin's Finch  
House Finch  
Black Rosyfinch  
Gray-crowned Rosyfinch  
Brown-capped Rosyfinch  
Pine Siskin  
American Goldfinch  
Lesser Goldfinch  
House Sparrow

## MAMMALS

Coyote  
Striped Skunk  
Rock Squirrel  
Tassel-eared Squirrel  
Cliff Chipmunk  
Gray-footed Chipmunk  
Elk  
Mule Deer  
Pronghorn  
Oryx  
Desert Cottontail  
Black-tailed Jackrabbit  
Muskrat  
Porcupine