

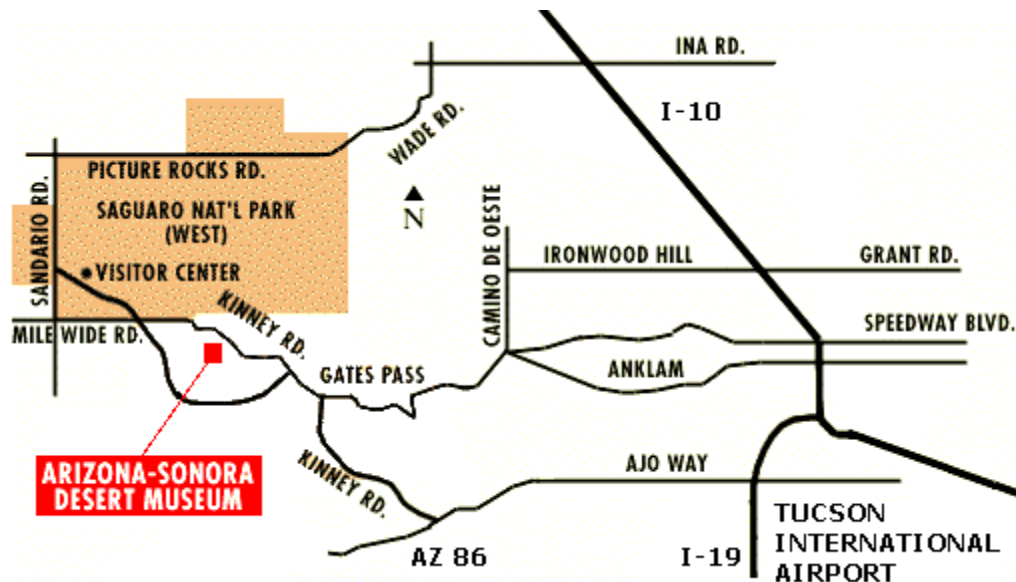
# Arizona Sonora Desert Museum (AZ) Bird Photography Site Guide

## Overview

The Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum is a unique combination of botanical garden, zoo and natural history museum. A visit here is an excellent introduction to the Sonoran desert. Exhibits feature exclusively species which are from the region. They are generally very natural looking and provide a good setting to photograph the captive animals and birds. The gardens themselves are full of subjects, and attract many wild critters as well.

The museum is located about 10 miles west of Tucson and just south of the West Unit of the Saguaro National Park.

## Getting to Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum



From Tucson, the most scenic route to the Desert Museum is through Gate's Pass. This narrow road winds up and over a desert mountain pass, offering views over Tucson to the East, and the Avra valley to the West. From the Tucson airport, take I-10 west, exit at Speedway and go west on Speedway. After about 5 miles Speedway becomes Gates Pass road. Continue until the road dead-ends at Kinney Road (about 10 miles total). Turn right; the museum is 2.7 miles on the left.

Gate's Pass is, however, unsuitable for larger vehicles including motor homes. The alternate route from the airport in Tucson is to take I-19 north and exit Ajo Way (SR-86) after 3 miles. Head west on Ajo Way for about 5 miles to Kinney Road. Turn right and continue 8 miles to the museum on the left.

From Phoenix, add 100 miles and about 1.5 hours to the drive.

## Access

The museum is open daily including holidays. Hours and admission prices change by season.

Admission:            Adults      Children (6-12)

May – Oct.            \$9            \$2

Nov. – Apr.            \$12                    \$4

Hours:

March – Sept.            7:30 am to 5 pm. Open until 10 pm Saturdays, June - August

Oct. – Feb.                8:30 am to 5 pm

Check their website (<http://www.desertmuseum.org>) for current hours and admission fees. The entire museum is handicap accessible.

## Captive Birds

There are two walk-in aviaries at the museum that provide excellent opportunities to practice techniques, and to observe many of the common desert species. Both allow tripods, although in nice weather the crowds can make their use problematic. Flash is pretty much a necessity in both. All of the birds are banded.



The hummingbird aviary is the smaller of the two, and houses about two dozen birds of six or seven species. Hummingbirds are generally approachable birds, and in the aviary they are quite habituated, coming within inches to investigate brightly colored clothing or camera straps. You won't be able to set up high speed flash for flight shots here, rather this is an opportunity for perched birds. Hummers are territorial and even in this small space each bird has a territory staked out. Within its territory each bird has a few perches that it returns to. This is also true for wild hummers. Spend a few minutes in a given spot and find these perches. Move around the aviary for different species. You don't need a lot of lens here, 200-400 mm is sufficient, but you will need extension tubes and flash. With a relatively small space, clean backgrounds can be a challenge, but they are attainable.

The larger aviary houses numerous desert species, including some less commonly seen in the wild. Some of the birds here are rehabs that cannot be released to the wild, so you do need to pay attention that your potential subject doesn't have a broken wing or other noticeable problem. There are feeding stations and water sources that draw birds in to more open areas. The birds are fairly approachable and you can use 300-400 mm but with a bigger area to cover 500-600 mm is also useful here.



In addition to the aviaries, there are many raptors housed in separate enclosures. These enclosures are not well suited to photography as they are rather small. However there are regular stations around the grounds, including right at the entrance plaza, where docents bring these birds out for live demonstrations. This is an opportunity for close-ups and the docents are usually willing to comply with requests to position the bird with a suitable background.

In the cooler months from November through mid April, there are two daily "Raptor Free Flight" programs at 10:30 am and 1:30 pm. These programs are another opportunity to capture raptors in a natural setting, and in flight. Currently the birds used in this program are Greater Roadrunner, Barn Owl, Great Horned Owl, Harris' Hawk, and Ferruginous Hawk.

## Free-flying Birds

The museum grounds attract many desert species that you would find in the nearby Tucson Mountain Park and Saguaro National Park. With the amount of human traffic in the grounds, the birds are somewhat more approachable than in other places, although you will



still need 500-600 mm for most subjects. There are daily bird walks each morning. The strategy here is to walk the grounds and keep your eyes open. In the spring, watch for birds nesting in the various cacti, including Cactus Wren, Curve-billed Thrasher, and Verdin.



If you can brave the heat in mid June, the ripening fruit of the giant Saguaro cactus is a natural feeding station. Many species of birds are attracted to the bright red fruit, which can be a nice splash of color in your images. The only trick is to find an open fruit on an arm that's low enough to shoot!

Another food source that attracts birds is the outside patio at Phoebe's Coffee Bar right by the entrance. Cactus Wrens and Pyrrhuloxia join the usual House Finches and House Sparrows in scavenging crumbs and can be ridiculously approachable.

## **Expected Species & Site Specialties**

You will find most desert species at the museum. Cactus Wren, Curve-billed Thrasher, Gila Woodpecker, Pyrrhuloxia, Phainopepla, Northern Cardinal, Inca Dove and Gambel's Quail are easy to find. In the summer, Costa's and Black-chinned Hummingbirds, Hooded Oriole and White-winged Dove are numerous.

## **Other Photo Subjects**

Avian subjects are just one facet at the museum. Captive animals include reptiles, which can be photographed through glass, and mammals in fairly natural settings. The prairie dog community is a favorite stop. The coyotes have a large enclosure with an almost invisible fence. Mexican wolf, bighorn sheep and mountain lion are also in settings that can produce natural looking images. There is a large lizard enclosure outside the main entrance, and lizards and snakes can be found all around the grounds.

The cactus gardens provide opportunities for macro work, from the patterns in the plants to the brilliantly colored flowers. The torch flowers just outside of the Ironwood restaurant can be magnificent. The butterfly garden also has good flower subjects, as well as numerous butterflies.

## **Of Special Note**

There are two snack bars, a full-service (fancy) restaurant and a self-serve grill in the museum. Prices are reasonable and the food is good. There is also a picnic area near the entrance, and there are picnic areas nearby in Tucson Mountain Park. There are no other places to purchase food near by.

Like the rest of Arizona, humidity is very low here. Visitors need to drink plenty of water before becoming dehydrated. Drinking fountains are located throughout the grounds but carrying a water bottle is recommended especially in the warmer months.

Sunburn is a common problem as well. Sun block is highly recommended. Sunglasses, and a hat with a good brim, will make life easier and more comfortable.

## **When to Visit**

A visit at any time of the year will produce interesting birds.

## **Places to Stay**

There are accommodations of all types in nearby Tucson metro area.

The nearest campground is Gilbert Ray campground in the Tucson Mountain Park, just a few miles from the park entrance. <http://www.co.pima.az.us/pksrec/natres/tucmts/tumtpk.html>

## **Weather**

The operative word for Arizona is *hot*. The monsoon season of July and August often brings heavy afternoon showers and dangerous lightning along with increased humidity. Winter is generally mild. An inexpensive foam cooler can be a good investment for keeping film safe in a hot car.

## Local Resources & Web Links

- You can find print film and batteries in the gift shops (for a price).
- The nearest real camera stores are in metro Tucson and in Phoenix.
- Serious camera gear can be rented at Tempe Camera (<http://www.tempecamera.com>) in the Phoenix East Valley. Tempe Camera also has an excellent repair facility. Reach them at 800.836.7374 or 480.966.6954.
- Jones Photo in Tucson does fast E-6 processing. They have a number of locations so check the Yellow Pages.
- The Tucson Audubon Society (<http://www.tucsonaudubon.org>) has a book store with lots of birding guides and binoculars.
- TAS also operates a Rare Bird Alert for all of southeastern AZ on 520.798.1005.
- Archives of all hotlines for Arizona and other western states are available at - <http://listserv.arizona.edu/archives/birdwest.html>

## Safety Issues

The grounds at the museum are well maintained, the trails are wide and easily navigated. It can be busy in the spring and fall with as many as 2500 visitors on a given day. Keep track of your gear as you would in any similar situation. It would also be advisable to not leave valuables in your parked car.

This is a natural desert area and it is possible to encounter rattlesnakes, particularly in the spring and fall months. In the summer they are most likely to be out in the early mornings or evenings, and hidden in shade under brush during hotter hours. Keep your eyes and ears open and don't put your hand under rocks or bushes without looking first.

The biggest safety issue in this area comes from the AZ sun. Use sun screen to avoid severe sunburn. Carry water with you and drink it regularly to avoid dehydration.

## Other Nearby Opportunities

Madera Canyon is located just south of Tucson and can be excellent for hummingbirds. See the Madera Canyon site guide for details.

Patagonia Lake State Park (<http://www.pr.state.az.us/parkhtml/patagonia.html>) is a few miles northeast of Nogales. Very popular for picnics and boating, it is also famous among birders for rarities (Nutting's Flycatcher, Black-capped Gnatcatcher, Green Kingfisher, and Elegant Trogon in winter). Check either reference birding guide for more information.

The western unit of Saguaro National Park (<http://www.nps.gov/sagu/>) is just north of the Museum and offers great opportunities for scenic photography as well as the chance to see some common birds in appropriate habitat.

Although not a bird photography destination, The San Xavier Mission (<http://www.sanxaviermission.org>) is well worth a stop. It dates from the late 1700's and is located on the Tohono O'odham Nation just west of I-19 just south of Tucson.

## References

- *Davis and Russell's Finding Birds in Southeast Arizona*, Tucson Audubon Society. <http://www.tucsonaudubon.org/>

- *A Birder's Guide to Southeastern Arizona*, Richard Cachor Taylor, American Birding Association. <http://www.americanbirding.org/>

### **Image Details**

- Juvenile hummingbird, captive, from Hummingbird Aviary
- Western Tanager, captive, from Main Aviary
- Cactus Wren, wild, from Museum grounds
- Hooded Oriole, wild, from Museum grounds

### **Credits**

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