

# Bird Photography Site Guide - Madera Canyon (AZ)

## Overview

The isolated mountain ranges of southeastern AZ are world famous among birders, with a high number of species not seen anywhere else in the United States. Among the best known of these *sky islands* is the Santa Rita Range about 40 miles south of Tucson; the most often visited place in the Santa Ritas is *Madera Canyon*.

The approach to Madera Canyon crosses apparently barren grasslands, with sparse grasses and scattered low bushes on a rocky dry soil. The road gradually rises and enters open oak woods, as it continues to higher elevations with denser forest and very steep trails that reach the surrounding peaks. The paved road ends at a pair of parking lots where the formidable trails begin. A streambed (usually dry) parallels the road, and is accessed by a path from many points. Parking is available at paved lots at intervals in the open oaks area, at the Santa Rita Lodge, and at the trailhead lots. A Bureau of Land Management (BLM) fee station sits just before the oaks begin.

## Getting to Madera Canyon

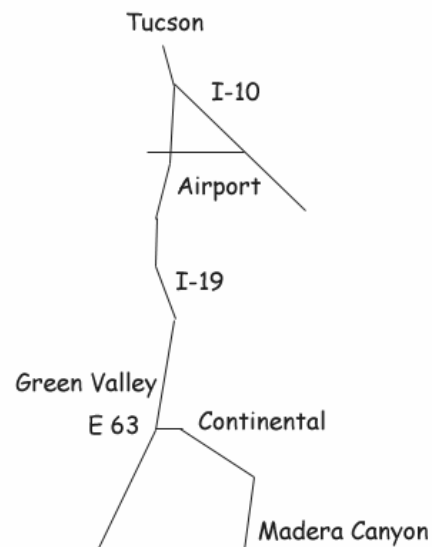
Just 36 miles south of the junction of Interstate 10 and Interstate 19, Madera Canyon is a fast and easy drive from Tucson International Airport (located just south of this junction). Take I-19 south about 23 miles to exit 63 (Continental).

Note that I-19 is signed in metric - the only major road in the US to be so. At least, the exit numbers correspond to kilometers from the AZ-Mexico border at Nogales. Turn east under I-19 on Continental Road, go 1.4 miles and turn right (south) onto East White House Canyon Road following the signs for Madera Canyon.

Stay with the main pavement, which becomes Madera Canyon Road when it bends right again. Cross a series of narrow bridges near milepost 8. Between mileposts 9 and 10 stop at the self-serve pay station.

The parking lot at the pay station gives access to the Proctor Road trail. This trail can also be accessed from additional lots beyond farther along the main road. Most bird photographers, however, continue straight on to the parking lot at the Santa Rita Lodge.

If coming from Phoenix Sky Harbor airport, add 115 miles and 1.75 hours to your travel time via I-10.



## Access

This is mostly BLM land, with private holdings such as the Santa Rita Lodge. The canyon is open every day of the year around the clock.

There is now a fee to enter the canyon above the open grasslands, payable at the toll station on the access road. This is a "parking fee" (\$5 per day, \$20 per year as of May

2003) for this BLM area. Be sure you have a proper pass or the receipt from the pay station envelop displayed on the dash of your car, and only park in designated spots throughout the Canyon. BLM personnel make regular checks. If you are going to privately owned land within the canyon (the three lodges) and park *only* at these places, you can skip the fee.

## Proctor Road Trail Location

Park at the paved lot at the pay station and walk the trail that starts by the rest rooms. This trail rises steadily but gently, with the main road on the left and a creek bed that is mostly dry on the right. A small waterfall between the parking lot and the place where the trail crosses Proctor Road (dirt) often attracts birds, especially when it is the only water around. In extremely dry periods it may be reduced to only a trickle. Getting near the waterfall is easy; getting to the open area below it is rather difficult and can be dangerous due to footing concerns. Try walking west along Proctor Road and bushwhacking down to the streambed from the other side (wear proper hiking shoes and watch for snakes).

Proctor Road can be driven if your vehicle has enough ground clearance. Some birds can be photographed from the car window. Conditions are typically very dusty, so protect sensitive gear any way you can.

The trail itself is a great place to walk and see many interesting birds, but photography along this trail can be difficult. Bird density isn't all that high, what birds there are generally are small and active, and they stay in leaf cover for the most part. Don't take too much equipment if you decide to try taking photos along this trail and be sure to carry water with you at all times. If you have spent most of your time in a low elevation part of the country with few elevation changes, you will certainly notice the grade and the elevation here.

There is sometimes water in the creek bed near the wooden footbridge, and it will attract birds in the dry periods. The best approach to bird photography here is to sit patiently and quietly until something shows up.



## Santa Rita Lodge Location

Most bird photographers head straight for the Lodge. Platform feeders here attract the very noisy Mexican Jays, as well as House Finches and White-breasted Nuthatches year round.



Acorn Woodpeckers fly from utility pole to tree trunk to feeder. Hummingbird feeders attract Broad-billed Hummingbirds, with their beautiful emerald bodies and brilliant red-orange bills.

These platform feeders are an approachable setup but are in shade most of the time, so you'll need flash. Also, the platform feeders have roofs - not the most photogenic setups. Instead, watch for birds approaching these feeders and stopping momentarily in the nearby trees.

Other birds commonly seen here are Black-chinned Hummingbirds, and occasionally Magnificent and Blue-throated Hummingbirds in season. Black-headed Grosbeaks nest in the canyon and often stop by the Lodge feeders. Scott's Orioles call from high perches, but seldom come near the feeders. Pine Siskins can be present in large flocks or not seen at all. In winter, Cassin's

Finches often mix with the House Finches. Yellow-eyed Juncos often feed on the ground under the platform feeders. Bronzed Cowbirds are frequent visitors to the platform feeders.

The Lodge has created a "wildlife area" with a number of feeders of varying design and purpose grouped together near the cabins. Unfortunately, a recent alteration to this arrangement has made the feeders less suited to photography than they once were.



For as long as anyone can remember, an Elf Owl has roosted in the utility pole next to the highest cabin. It only comes out at dusk, so flash is necessary. The roost hole is rather high, requiring a lot of optical power. Whiskered Screech Owls often use other poles in this area as well.

Unless the lodge adds to their feeder structure in such a way that it is more shootable, the best recommendation is to plan to stay in the canyon at one of the lodges or the campground and make your own setups. Hummingbirds might be the easiest to go after: you can bring a feeder (a small, single tube like one is ideal, you want to control where the bird comes to), or a few 1 gallon flowering hummingbird-attracting plants, and get as simple or elaborate as you want. If you are staying at the lodge you should ask first if you can make such setups - they often have tour groups as guests and don't want to interfere with those setups.



For general birds you need 500 mm minimum. For hummingbirds you can use 200mm-500mm (with extension tube), they are so tolerant.

If you want to make your own setups bring bird-friendly peanuts or black-oil sunflower seed for the woodpeckers and jays; the siskin, house finch and goldfinch love niger seed of course. Bring your own sugar syrup for hummingbirds (you can expect Broad-billed and Black-chinned; there's a good chance at Magnificent, and smaller possibility of Blue-throated).

## Expected Species & Site Specialties

The Santa Rite Lodge maintains a bird checklist with seasonal information [www.maderacanyon.net/Bird List.htm](http://www.maderacanyon.net/Bird List.htm).

## Of Special Note

The sun doesn't come around in to the bottom of the canyon until about 2 hours after sunrise and it leaves about 1.5 to 2 hours before sunset.

The Canyon picnic areas are extremely popular and very noisy on weekends. Avoid if possible on major holidays.

There are no restaurants in the Canyon. Bring all food and water needed for your visit with you. Fast food and inexpensive restaurants are in nearby Green Valley. Gas stations are available at the Green Valley exits of I-19. These stations usually have a small convenience store with water, soda, and other essential items.

Like the rest of Arizona, humidity is very low here. Visitors need to have water with them at all times and need to drink it before becoming dehydrated.

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.

The risk of fire during dry periods in drought years can lead to closures of most public lands, including much of Madera Canyon. Be sure to check with your lodging about fire closures before arriving. *Exercise care when using a Better Beamer so you don't set the entire area on fire!*

## When to Visit

A visit at any time of the year will produce interesting birds. Hummingbird numbers are at their peak in August, but are also quite good in May. Acorn Woodpeckers are unavoidable on any visit.



## Places to Stay

The Santa Rita Lodge [www.maderacanyon.net](http://www.maderacanyon.net) (520.625.8746) consists of a number of cabins located right in Madera Canyon, and is an ideal place to stay for a multi-day visit. The Chuparosa Inn [www.chuparosainn.com](http://www.chuparosainn.com) (520.393.7370) is a bed and breakfast with a few rooms not far beyond the Santa Rita Lodge. The Madera Kubo Lodges [www.maderakubo.com](http://www.maderakubo.com) (520.625.2908) have cabins available. All are very popular with visiting birders and both require reservations far in advance of a visit.

The nearest motels are located in Green Valley on the west side of I-19. Advance reservations are highly recommended here as well, since golfers in addition to birders stay here.

The most facilities are located in metro Tucson and should be available well after rooms fill in the Canyon and in Green Valley.

## Weather

The operative word for Arizona is *hot*. Although the Lodge benefits some from its 5000 foot elevation, it is still hot here during hummingbird season. But it will be 15 degrees cooler at the Lodge than it is in nearby Green Valley. The monsoon season of July and August often brings heavy afternoon showers and dangerous lightning along with increased humidity. Winter is generally mild, although rarely snow will reach as far down as Proctor Road.

## Local Resources & Web Links

- You'll have a hard time finding film anywhere near Madera Canyon.
- The nearest real camera stores are in metro Tucson and in Phoenix.
- There's a well stocked drugstore on the west side of I-19 at the Continental Road exit where you should always be able to find AA batteries.
- Serious camera gear can be rented at Tempe Camera [www.tempecamera.com](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 [www.tucsonaudubon.org](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**

Madera Canyon is very popular and visitors are generally friendly (especially birders and other photographers). There is little risk from other people in the most visited areas along the main road and around the lodges. Avoid confrontations with noisy picnic groups; allow the Rangers to handle problems. Rangers patrol frequently. Exercise normal caution about expensive equipment left unattended in parked cars - always lock up.

Bears may come down around cabins during severe drought periods and should be avoided if encountered.

Rattlesnakes are present but rarely encountered. Be careful where you put your hands around rocks.

The biggest safety issue in Madera Canyon 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**

The Arizona Sonora Desert Museum [www.desertmuseum.org](http://www.desertmuseum.org) is located just west of metro Tucson and is very popular. Although it is a zoo, exhibits are often rather open. Plus, many wild desert species visit the grounds and can be photographed here.

Patagonia Lake State Park [www.pr.state.az.us/parkhtml/patagonia.html](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, Elegant Trogon in winter). Check either reference birding guide for more information.

Although not a bird photography destination, The San Xavier Mission [www.sanxaviermission.org](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.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **References**

- *Davis and Russell's Finding Birds in Southeast Arizona*, Tucson Audubon Society.
- *A Birder's Guide to Southeastern Arizona*, Richard Cachor Taylor, American Birding Association.