



Safe and Comfortable Birding in Southeast Arizona

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The “Sky Island” mountains, riparian corridors, and Sonoran and Chihuahuan desert habitats of Southeast Arizona provide ideal conditions for many unique animal species throughout the year. The climate can vary greatly across the calendar or even during one day, from cold mornings in upper canyons to scorching afternoons in the valleys. In particular, deserts can be difficult areas to survive in for all plants and animals, including humans! Monsoon rains, while a critical part of our ecosystems, can also produce dangerous flash floods across trails or even roads. Get the most out of your visit and avoid the SE Arizona climate pitfalls by taking a few easy precautions.

Clothing & Gear:

- Long pants are suggested; most desert plants have thorns and the brush can be thick. Light, nylon pants are preferred to help stay cool.
- Light, long-sleeve shirts are suggested; well-vented nylon shirts provide UV protection and can help prevent overheating.
- Wear a hat with a brim; the sun can be intense.
- Wear closed-toe shoes in all areas; hiking boots are best for mountain trails and rocky canyons. Stream crossings and mud are common, particularly from July-September; hiking boots with Gortex or other waterproof materials can come in very handy.
- Early mornings may be cool, or really cold in the mountains (especially late fall-early spring). Layers are the best strategy: wear lighter clothing under a long-sleeve shirt and/or a fleece jacket, and you can “peel off” layers as necessary. From late fall through early spring, you may want to bring light gloves or a warm hat that covers your ears.
- An outer rain shell jacket and/or a few cheap plastic ponchos is *absolutely critical during monsoon season*, which is generally from early July until the end of August. Don’t get caught unprepared out on the trail with a bunch of expensive gadgets when a downpour hits!
- Gaiters are NOT required, but provide extra protection against thorns and cactus around your ankles and lower legs; snake bites are very rare, but gaiters do add one additional layer.

Sun & Insects:

- The SE Arizona sunshine is wonderful, but it can be intense. Bring along appropriate products to protect exposed skin from sunburn: cream, spray, etc. with SPF 20 or higher.
- Insect Repellant – It’s a good idea to bring a spray bottle with you from April-September.
- Chiggers – Yes, we do have chiggers in SE Arizona. But the good news is, they are only a problem from late June through mid-September or so. They are uncommon, but can occur in various habitats. During this period, it’s always a good idea to tuck your pant legs into your hiking socks. I also suggest thoroughly spraying down that area with repellant after doing so, up to your calf. If you add gaiters to this combo, you’ll keep debris from getting in your boots.
- Ticks – Quite uncommon, but we do get a few in the warmer months.
- Mosquitos – May occur in various habitats in the warmer months, but are worst in low, riparian areas. Not usually overwhelming, but can become a problem when there’s no breeze.
- Ants – Circular patches of bare ground betray colonies of large, red “harvester ants.” They can be seen pouring in and out of the entrance in warm months, yet reside underground all winter.
- Bees – Stay away from ALL bee colonies or swarms/balls gathered in brush or trees: all of our bees should be considered Africanized and may become very aggressive if disturbed. Run as fast and as far away as possible if you are attacked.
- Wasps, tarantulas, scorpions, giant centipedes – Yep, we’ve got ‘em all! Luckily, these fascinating creatures generally don’t bother people unless we bother them.

Water:

- The “dry heat” factor is NOT a myth, and can make high temperatures feel deceptively comfortable... you’re still losing moisture, even if you’re not dripping with sweat!
- Bring plenty of water. Always have 1-2 gallons in your car to refill your bottles/water backpack bladders between birding spots.
- Carry 1 quart+ with you for most hikes, 1/2 gallon+ for an entire day on the trail.
- Water backpacks (such as Camel Paks) with a refillable bladder can come in very handy.
- Remember to drink the water you carry *before* you actually feel thirsty to avoid dehydration.
- Assume all surface water is contaminated; never drink directly from creeks or ponds.

Rain & Roads:

- Monsoon rains – typically from early July through early September – are usually short deluges that can range from something akin to a “pop-up storm” to slow-moving, rumbling water faucets pouring from the sky. These storms can be beautiful... but require extra precautions.
- Many paved roads have dips that may turn into rushing torrents of water; unpaved roads can turn into slippery mud or even develop wash-outs; trails may be blocked by rising water.
- If there is swift water running across a road, simply wait it out. Approach dips cautiously and with a sharp eye if there is any hint of a thunderstorm in the area; a wall of water from several miles away may be advancing rapidly. NEVER PARK IN A DRY WASH!!!
- Winter rains are typically sporadic, gentle and prolonged; spring and fall see very little rain.

Other Critters:

- Arizona is major reptile country; you may see them in the mountains as well as the desert. Their activity is temperature-dependent so they may be foraging at dawn and dusk in hot weather or resting in a shady crevice during the day. Actually seeing snakes is somewhat rare, but is an enjoyable experience if you give them the space and respect they deserve.
- Always watch where you place your hands and feet. You will be lucky to see a rattlesnake or even a Gila Monster, but if you do, admire from a distance: these are venomous reptiles.
- Scorpions are active at night in warm weather and hide under bark or rocks when the weather is cool; again, watch your hands and feet.
- Africanized bees are established in south and central Arizona; stay away from hives and swarms of bees. Run away as fast and as far as possible if attacked.
- SE Arizona is home to an impressive number of mammal species, including some predators. Examples include black bear, mountain lion, jaguar, bobcat, and coyote.

Crime & Personal Safety:

- Some of our best birding areas are near the Mexican border and/or on land that allows passageway through mountain ranges while avoiding major roads and towns.
- Illegal trafficking both of people and drugs in these areas is common; many areas have signage to this effect. However, actually *seeing* or having interactions with human beings participating in such activities is very rare. Despite the fact that real danger to birdwatchers is mostly “hyped-up,” vigilance and common sense must be the order of the day.
- Travel with a companion if you are heading out on a backcountry trail. Always lock your vehicle and keep any possessions of value, especially guns, out of sight. Some urban sites (such as Sweetwater Wetlands) have experienced multiple cases of vehicle break-ins.
- Be very cautious about camping outside established campgrounds.
- U.S. Customs and Border Patrol agents patrol backroads regularly; they may stop any vehicle or suspicious-looking people, sometimes including birdwatchers. Carry adequate identification and do not carry illegal substances. Be a good ambassador of the Birding Community: be polite and respectful, provide I.D. if asked, answer questions directly, and avoid having “attitude” or a “chip on your shoulder” – these men and women are trying to do their job and keep us safe.