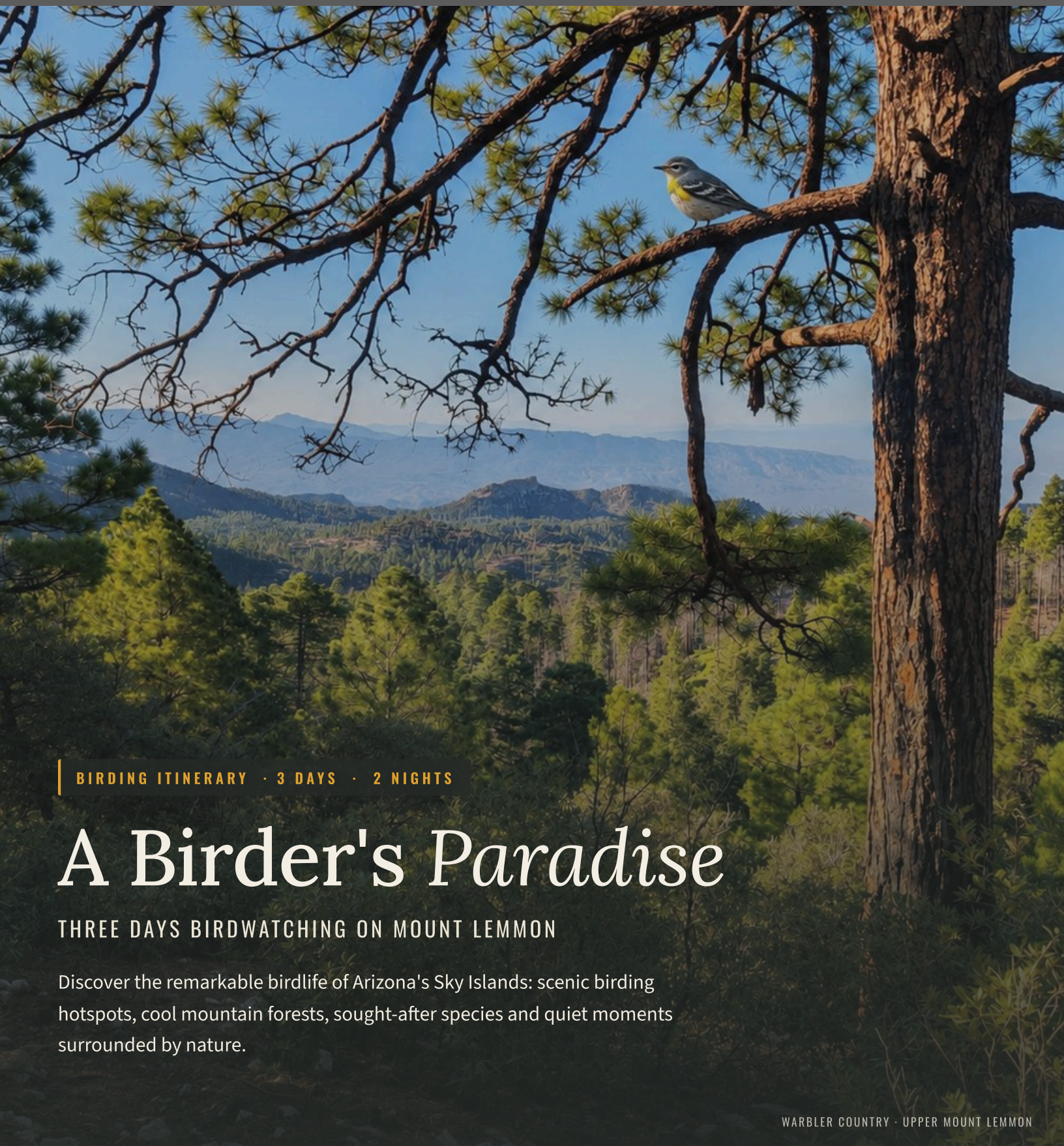


BIRDING ITINERARY · 3 DAYS · 2 NIGHTS

A Birder's *Paradise*

THREE DAYS BIRDWATCHING ON MOUNT LEMMON

Discover the remarkable birdlife of Arizona's Sky Islands: scenic birding hotspots, cool mountain forests, sought-after species and quiet moments surrounded by nature.

WARBLER COUNTRY · UPPER MOUNT LEMMON

3 days	9,159 ft	~1 hour	April – July
2 NIGHTS AT THE LODGE	SUMMIT ELEVATION	FROM TUCSON	PEAK FOR BREEDING BIRDS

OVERVIEW | THE MOUNTAIN IN LAYERS | DAY 1 | DAY 2 | DAY 3 | FIELD GUIDE | WHEN TO GO | PLANNING TIPS | WHERE TO STAY

WELCOME TO THE SKY ISLANDS

From cactus to conifers, a whole field guide on one mountain

Just an hour from Tucson, Mount Lemmon offers one of Southern Arizona's most fascinating birdwatching experiences.

Rising from the Sonoran Desert to more than 9,000 feet, the Santa Catalina Mountains hold a remarkable range of habitats, each with its own community of birds. In a relatively short drive you can travel from cactus-covered desert slopes to oak woodlands, lush canyons and cool conifer forests, with chances along the way to spot colorful hummingbirds and woodpeckers, elusive warblers and birds rarely encountered anywhere else in the United States.

What makes Mount Lemmon especially appealing is how easy it is to reach. You don't need to mount an expedition into the wilderness to experience its biodiversity. Many rewarding birding spots sit right off the Catalina Highway, while nearby trails lead deeper into the forest.

Whether you're an experienced birder with a growing life list or simply enjoy watching wildlife in its natural surroundings, this three-day itinerary lets you discover the mountain at a leisurely pace, with Mount Lemmon Lodge as your home base for two memorable nights.

AT A GLANCE

Your three days on the mountain

DAY 1

From Desert Birds to Mountain Forests

Molino Basin · Bear Canyon · Summerhaven

DAY 2

In Search of Mount Lemmon's Mountain Birds

Mount Bigelow · Marshall Gulch · Rose Canyon Lake

DAY 3

One Last Morning Among the Pines

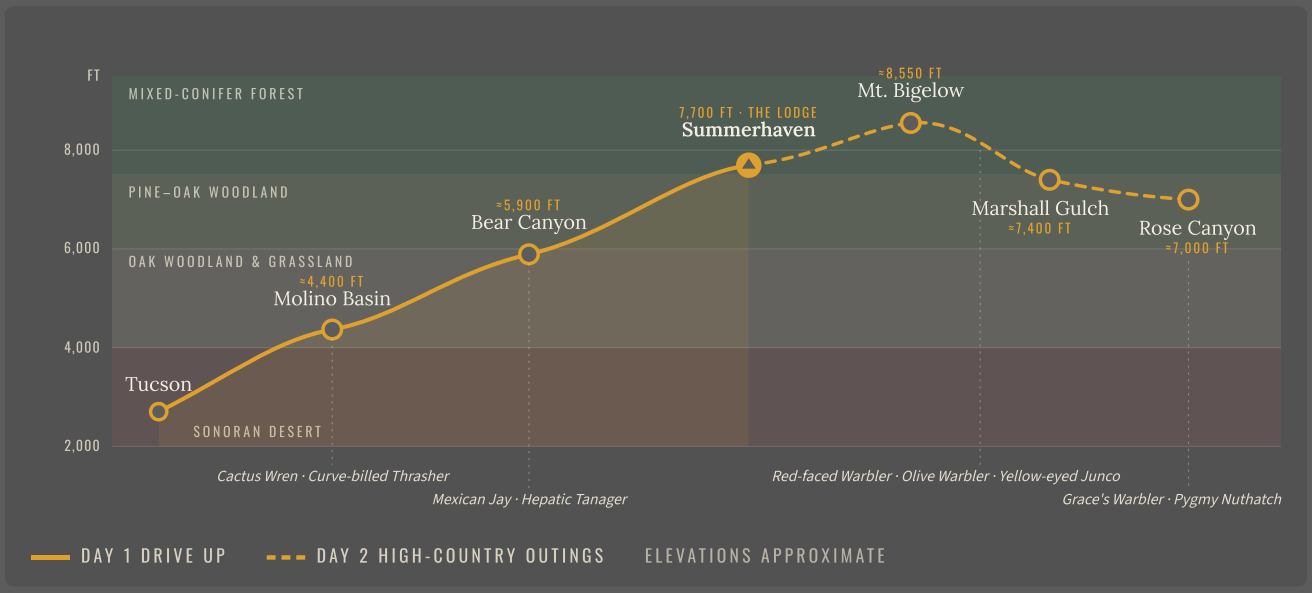
Summerhaven · Windy Point · Seven Cataracts · Gordon Hirabayashi · Babad Do'ag

CHECK AVAILABILITY

THE MOUNTAIN IN LAYERS

Every few thousand feet, a new set of birds

As the Catalina Highway climbs, towering saguaros give way to grasslands, oak woodland and finally forests of ponderosa pine and Douglas fir. Here's how this itinerary's stops stack up, and who you might meet at each level.



ARRIVAL

DAY 1

From Desert Birds to Mountain Forests

Climb through four life zones in a single morning, then settle into the pines of Summerhaven.

MORNING · Allow 3–4 hours

Birding along the Sky Island Scenic Byway

Your birdwatching adventure begins on the Catalina Highway, one of Arizona's most remarkable scenic drives. As the road climbs through the Santa Catalina Mountains, the landscape transforms: towering saguaros gradually give way to grasslands, oak woodlands and eventually forests of ponderosa pine and Douglas fir.

For birders, these changing elevations offer an extraordinary chance to observe species from several distinct ecosystems in a single day.



The Sky Island Scenic Byway climbs from saguaros to fir forest in about an hour.

Molino Basin ≈4,400 FT · DESERT & FOOTHILLS

At a lower elevation along the highway, this area offers desert and foothill species. During spring and fall migration, the surrounding vegetation may draw additional species passing through.

Cactus Wren · Curve-billed Thrasher · Gilded Flicker · Sparrows

RECENT SIGHTINGS ON EBIRD →

Bear Canyon ≈5,900 FT · OAK & PINE WOODLAND

Higher up, the habitat shifts to oak and pine woodland. The canyon's trees and sheltered terrain make it especially good for morning birding.

Mexican Jay · Hepatic Tanager · Painted Redstart · Woodpeckers

EXPLORE EBIRD HOTSPOTS →

> *Take your time between stops. Some of the best sightings come when you simply pause, listen and watch the trees for movement.*



The Marshall Gulch picnic area doubles as a great birding area.

AFTERNOON · Check in & explore

Arrive in Summerhaven

Continue to Summerhaven, the charming alpine village nestled among towering pines at about 7,700 feet. Before checking in, spend a little time exploring its quieter streets and forested edges. Even within the village you may meet Steller's Jays, Mountain Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatches, woodpeckers and other resident birds.

Keep your binoculars close. The mountain's birdlife doesn't require an organized outing or a long hike to enjoy.

After settling into your room or cabin at Mount Lemmon Lodge, relax on the terrace or wander the peaceful outdoor areas.





Birding starts right outside the lodge. Summerhaven sits in the pines at about 7,700 feet, and the birds don't stop at the village edge.

EVENING · Dinner & dusk walk

Relax and review your sightings

Enjoy a casual dinner at **Beyond Bread**, right inside Mount Lemmon Lodge, with artisan sandwiches, soups, salads and other freshly prepared dishes.

As evening falls, take a quiet walk around Summerhaven and listen for the day's last calls as the forest settles into twilight. Back at the lodge, sort your photos, update your checklist and perhaps identify a few species you couldn't name in the field.

Tomorrow brings some of the mountain's most rewarding birding habitat.



An American Robin settles into a ponderosa pine at dusk, one of the forest's last voices of the day.

THE HIGH COUNTRY

DAY 2

In Search of Mount Lemmon's Mountain Birds

An early start in the upper forests, a shaded canyon trail and a slow afternoon by the lake.



EARLY MORNING · Sunrise to mid-morning

Explore the high-elevation forests

For serious birders, the early hours are often the most rewarding: birds tend to be most vocal and active shortly after sunrise. Head for one of the upper-mountain birding areas, such as the forests around **Mount Bigelow** or the trails near **Marshall Gulch**, when they're accessible.



Open ponderosa forest in the high country, where Grace's Warblers and Pygmy Nuthatches work the canopy.

These woods are home to some of Mount Lemmon's most sought-after species. Use the list below as your morning's targets. Tap a circle to check off each bird as you see it.

Today's target list

- [ ] **Red-faced Warbler**
  One of the mountain's most distinctive summer breeders, with a striking red face and gray body.
- [ ] **Painted Redstart**
  A lively black-and-red warbler with bold white wing patches, often moving through shaded woodland.
- [ ] **Olive Warbler**
  A distinctive high-elevation bird that works conifer branches for insects.
- [ ] **Yellow-eyed Junco**
  A mountain resident, easily told apart by its bright yellow eyes.
- [ ] **Mountain Chickadee**
  A small, energetic bird common among the pines.
- [ ] **Steller's Jay**
  A bold, crested jay that's usually heard before it's seen.

No sighting is guaranteed, which is part of what makes each one memorable.

The key is to slow down. Listen for calls, watch for movement in the branches and give the birds time to show themselves.

LATE MORNING · 2–4 hours on trail

Marshall Gulch or another forest trail

Marshall Gulch is a favorite with hikers, photographers and birdwatchers alike. When it's open, its shaded canyon, seasonal creek and surrounding forest make a peaceful place to watch birds. That mix of water, vegetation and varied terrain can attract a wide range of species, especially in the warmer months.

If you'd like to combine birding with hiking, the surrounding trail network can easily fill several hours.

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

The Cordilleran Flycatcher

Each May this small olive-and-yellow flycatcher returns from Mexico to nest in Mount Lemmon's moist, shaded canyons, from Willow Canyon and Rose Canyon up through Marshall Gulch, Summerhaven and the ski area. It heads south again in early August.

Since 2016 it has been the focus of a long-term study begun by the late Dr. Charles van Riper III of the University of Arizona's School of Natural Resources and the Environment, and carried on today by his successor. Researchers have banded more than 1,000 birds here, many with unique color combinations, so a flycatcher wearing colored leg bands may well be one of the study birds. Please watch from a distance.

Looking it up? Since 2023, eBird and Merlin list it as Western Flycatcher.

CHECK ACCESS BEFORE YOU GO

Marshall Gulch is undergoing a Forest Service improvement project, and upper-mountain gates such as Marshall Gulch Road and Bigelow Road typically close for winter. A newer public lot in Summerhaven along Sabino Canyon Park Road serves the area. If Marshall Gulch is unavailable, choose another accessible trail in the upper forests. Current Forest Service conditions.



Marshall Gulch's shaded creek draws birds, especially in the warmer months.

AFTERNOON · Picnic & lakeside walk

Rose Canyon Lake and forest birding

After an active morning, spend a more relaxed afternoon at Rose Canyon Lake, one of the most frequently birded hotspots on the mountain. Tucked among pine-covered slopes, it's a lovely setting for wildlife watching, photography and an easy walk.

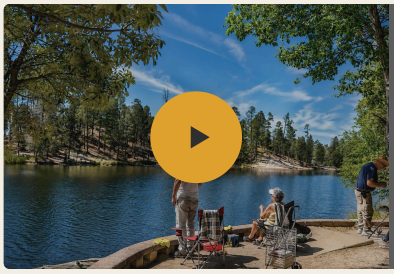
The lake may draw water-loving birds, but the surrounding forest is just as interesting. Watch for nuthatches creeping along trunks, woodpeckers hunting insects and small flocks of songbirds working through the branches. Depending on the season, migrating warblers, flycatchers and other passing species may turn up too.

Mountain Chickadee | Pygmy Nuthatch | Grace's Warbler | Yellow-eyed Junco



Rose Canyon Lake, about 7,000 feet up and ringed by ponderosa pine.

BIRDER'S TIP
Don't skip the walk in. Local birders often find the quieter trail down to the lake as productive as the shoreline. The recreation area is seasonal and charges a day-use fee.



WATCH THE VIDEO

Take a tour of Rose Canyon Lake

See the lake, its shoreline trail and the surrounding pines before you go.

WATCH ON YOUTUBE →

Bring a picnic, or pick up lunch from Beyond Bread before you head out.

EVENING · Back at the lodge

A peaceful mountain retreat

After a full day in the field, return to Mount Lemmon Lodge for a well-earned evening. Enjoy the terrace, unwind in the Swedish sauna when it's available, or settle into a comfortable chair with your field guide and photos.

> *For many birders, half the pleasure is the reflecting: the unexpected sighting, the call you finally placed, the fleeting glimpse of a bird you'd hoped to find.*

And with another morning on the mountain ahead, there's still time to add a few more to your list.

DEPARTURE

DAY 3

One Last Morning Among the Pines

Village birding over coffee, then a slow descent through every life zone you passed on the way up.

EARLY MORNING · Coffee, then binoculars

Birdwatching around Summerhaven

Your last morning is one more chance to enjoy Mount Lemmon's rich birdlife before heading home. Start with coffee and breakfast, then explore Summerhaven's wooded surroundings. The village and nearby forest roads can be surprisingly productive, especially in the quiet early hours.

Mexican Jay | Mountain Chickadee | Nuthatches | Woodpeckers | Cordilleran Flycatcher (May–Aug)





Quiet forest roads near the village are worth a slow morning walk. Watch the forest floor, too.

If you missed a particular species over the past two days, consider revisiting a nearby spot where you saw promising activity. Birdwatching rewards patience, and sometimes a second visit makes all the difference.

LATE MORNING · The scenic descent

A scenic descent with a few final stops

As you head down the Catalina Highway, take advantage of the mountain's changing habitats one last time with a few stops you passed on the way up. Because different birds favor different elevations and vegetation, the drive down can turn up species you missed on your arrival.

Windy Point Vista ≈6,600 FT · GRANITE OVERLOOK

Perhaps the mountain's most iconic overlook, with granite hoodoos and panoramic views. Pause here to scan the sky for soaring raptors, ravens and swifts riding the updrafts.

Red-tailed Hawk · Common Raven · White-throated Swift

Seven Cataracts Vista ≈5,200 FT · CANYON OVERLOOK

A roadside pullout near milepost 9 that looks across Bear Canyon to the mouth of Willow Canyon, where the stream drops into Bear Canyon in a series of seasonal waterfalls, the Seven Cataracts, that run after heavy rain or snowmelt. Listen for wrens calling from the rocky slopes below.

Canyon Wren · Rock Wren

RECENT SIGHTINGS ON EBIRD →

Gordon Hirabayashi Recreation Site ≈4,800 FT · SCRUB OAK WOODLAND

The site of a historic WWII prison camp at milepost 7, now a favorite with local birding groups. Its scrub oak woodland holds species you won't find higher up. A day-use fee or interagency pass is required.

Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay · Bushtit · Scott's Oriole

RECENT SIGHTINGS ON EBIRD →

Babad Do'ag Vista ≈3,600 FT · SONORAN DESERT

One of the first overlooks above Tucson, with saguaro-dotted slopes and sweeping desert views. It's a fitting last stop to look for desert species before you reach the city.

Black-throated Sparrow · Verdin · Phainopepla



The overlooks on the way down are the place to watch for soaring raptors.

By the time you reach Tucson, you'll have passed through several distinct ecosystems and experienced one of the Southwest's most fascinating birding destinations. Chances are, your list of birds to find next time will already be growing.

FIELD NOTES

My Mount Lemmon sightings

SPECIES	WHERE	DATE & NOTES

FIELD GUIDE

Birds of Mount Lemmon: species worth watching for

Part of the excitement of birding here is the diversity across the mountain's elevations. Sightings depend on season, habitat, weather and a little luck, but these are some of the birds that make the Santa Catalinas special.

No. 01 — SPRING – SUMMER



Red-faced Warbler

Cardellina rubrifrons

COOL MIXED-CONIFER FOREST

With its brilliant red face and contrasting gray body, this is among the most memorable birds of the upper forests. Primarily a spring and summer visitor.

PHOTOS & SONGS →

No. 02 — SPRING – SUMMER



Painted Redstart

Myioborus pictus

SHADED CANYONS & WOODLAND

One of the mountain's most eye-catching birds, flashing bold white wing patches as it fans through the trees. Look in shaded canyons during the warmer months.

PHOTOS & SONGS →

No. 03 — MOSTLY SUMMER



Olive Warbler

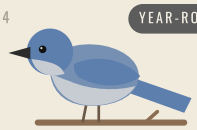
Peucedramus taeniatus

PONDEROSA & MIXED CONIFER

Despite its name, it belongs to a family all its own rather than the New World warblers. It favors conifer forests and can be tricky to spot high in the branches.

PHOTOS & SONGS →

No. 04 — YEAR-ROUND



Mexican Jay

Aphelocoma wollweberi

OAK & PINE WOODLAND

Common in the mountain's oak and pine woodlands, these social, inquisitive jays travel in noisy groups. You'll often hear them long before you see them.

PHOTOS & SONGS →

No. 05 — YEAR-ROUND



Yellow-eyed Junco

Junco phaeonotus

HIGH-ELEVATION FOREST FLOOR

A characteristic resident of the higher elevations, this ground-feeder is easy to recognize by its glaring yellow eyes and understated gray and rufous plumage.

PHOTOS & SONGS →

No. 06 — SPRING – SUMMER



Grace's Warbler

Setophaga graciae

TALL PINE FOREST

A small, handsome warbler of the pine forests, most likely in spring and summer. Look high in the branches, where it gleans insects among the needles.

PHOTOS & SONGS →

No. 07 — YEAR-ROUND



Steller's Jay

Cyanocitta stelleri

CONIFER FOREST & VILLAGE

With its dramatic crest and deep blue plumage, this is one of the most conspicuous residents of the conifer forests, and a regular around Summerhaven.

PHOTOS & SONGS →

No. 08 — SPRING – SUMMER



Hepatic Tanager

Piranga flava

OAK & PINE WOODLAND

The male's rich, brick-red plumage makes this a rewarding find. Look in oak and pine woodland during the breeding season.

PHOTOS & SONGS →

Illustrations are stylized field marks, not to scale. Tap any species for photos, songs and range maps from the Cornell Lab's All About Birds.

SEASONS

When is the best time for birdwatching on Mount Lemmon?

The mountain offers birding all year, but the variety of species and the viewing conditions change considerably with the seasons.

MOST REWARDING

Spring
APRIL – MAY

Migrants arrive and breeding activity ramps up. Warblers, flycatchers such as the Cordilleran Flycatcher, and other seasonal visitors return to the forests.

Summer
JUNE – AUGUST

Cool high elevations offer an escape from Tucson's heat, and breeding birds stay active, especially in the morning. Monsoon storms can build quickly, so plan outings for early in the day.

Fall
SEPTEMBER – NOVEMBER

Migrants pass through, the foliage turns and conditions are generally pleasant. Some summer species depart while others stop by on their way south.

Winter
DECEMBER – MARCH

Resident species remain, but snow and temporary closures can limit access up high. Lower and middle elevations still make for enjoyable birding.

To see the greatest variety of mountain breeding birds, **late spring through early summer** is an especially good time to plan your visit.

BEFORE YOU GO

Planning tips for your birdwatching getaway

Start early
Birds are usually most active in the first few hours after sunrise. Save your most important outings for the morning.

Bring binoculars
A good pair makes a tremendous difference. A field guide or an ID app like Merlin helps with unfamiliar species.

Dress in layers
Temperatures vary dramatically between Tucson and the upper mountain. Even summer mornings can be cool.

Take your time
Birding is as much listening as looking. Stop often, stay quiet and watch for movement in the trees.

Stay on trails
Protect habitat by watching from a respectful distance. Don't disturb nests or overuse recorded calls to attract birds.

Check recent sightings
eBird shows recently reported species and the most productive local hotspots.

Verify access
Trails, recreation areas and roads can close for weather, construction or season. Check AZ 511 and the Forest Service before you go.

Go midweek
Quieter roads, trails and picnic areas make for more enjoyable birding.



WHERE TO STAY

Mount Lemmon Lodge, your birding base camp

For birders, location makes all the difference. Rather than driving up from Tucson each morning, staying on the mountain lets you start earlier, explore several elevation zones and enjoy the forest when day-trippers are few.

In the heart of Summerhaven at about 7,700 feet, the lodge offers 16 beautifully appointed guest rooms and four spacious private cabins for couples, solo travelers, families and small groups.

- 16 rooms & 4 private cabins
- Beyond Bread café on site
- Steps from forest trails
- Terrace & Swedish sauna

STAY ELEVATED. LEAVE ELEVATED.

EXPLORE ROOMS & CABINS

VIEW LODGE EVENTS

HELPFUL LINKS

Resources for your trip

EBIRD · CORNELL LAB

Pima County sightings

Recent checklists, hotspot maps and rare bird alerts.

MERLIN BIRD ID

Free ID app

Identify birds by photo or sound, right on the trail.

TUCSON BIRD ALLIANCE

Local field trips

Guided walks, including regular trips to Rose Canyon.

CORONADO NATIONAL FOREST

Trail conditions

Current status for Marshall Gulch and nearby trails.

AZ 511

Road conditions

Check the Catalina Highway before you drive up.

MOUNT LEMMON LODGE

Plan your stay

Rooms, cabins, packages and upcoming events.

YOUR BIRDWATCHING ESCAPE AWAITS

Few places pack so many habitats into such a short distance

From desert birds and oak-woodland residents to colorful warblers in the upper forests, Mount Lemmon rewards birders of every skill level. Three days gives you time to explore without rushing, revisit promising spots and soak in the beauty that makes this Sky Island so extraordinary.

Whether you're adding new species to your life list or simply want a peaceful escape surrounded by birdsong, make Mount Lemmon Lodge your mountain home base.

PLAN YOUR STAY AT MOUNT LEMMON LODGE