

'Other' Cave Creek a bird watcher's paradise

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If you want a break, why don't you go to Cave Creek?
(Go? I thought I lived there.)

There are two Cave Creek's in Arizona, the "other" one on the east slope of the Chiricahua Mountains in the southeastern part of the state. The creek has water all year around for most of its length and because the altitude ranges from about 5,000-9,700 feet, there is an immense variety of plant, animal and bird life in the five life zones. For naturalists, the area is a paradise teeming with unusual species rarely seen elsewhere in the United States.

In May a gorgeous bird, the coppery-tailed trogon, is a major drawing card for birdwatchers. Of the 50 or so pairs of trogons estimated to be in the United States, about seven pair are in the Cave Creek drainage basin.

Is it worth investing a few days to see? You bet! The male is nine distinct colors: emerald green back and throat, red breast, white breast bar and undertail, yellow bill, orange eye-ring, brown feet, black face and bars on the undertail, smoke grey wings and a metallic copper upper tail surface. He is 12 inches of elegance! One sight and you'll be addicted as a trogon watcher.



The delightful thing is, they are so easy to watch, even for rank amateurs. This is what happened to three local people who visited the other Cave Creek last week: Andy Romanyc, Gladys Nisbet and Corky Cockburn. They had been told a pair of trogons were nesting at Stewart Campground, so they asked a camper at a picnic table if he'd seen a trogon or knew where one might be. He replied, "Why don't you look right up there above my head?"

There sat a female trogon outside her nesting hole in a sycamore tree. Within minutes the male came to perch on a nearby limb. There were many places from which to view the birds without disturbing them, and dozens of people passed by, taking photos, watching for a few minutes or hours, and comparing notes with the other birders.

There were other attractions too, when the trogon view palled. Painted redstarts and bridled titmice were flitting above the creek and constantly hummingbirds zipped by to attend the many feeders hung in the trees. The campers are often professional wildlife photographers and writers, and use the feeders to lure the birds within range. The blue-throated, rivoli and black-chinned hummingbirds were most common.

About 75 different species of birds were seen by the birders during the five-day trip. Some were old stuff, like the Gambel quail and curved-bill thrashers. But the list also included a golden eagle, a pyrrhuloxia, rufous-sided towhees, rose-breasted and black-headed grosbeaks, red crossbills, western tanagers, and one red-faced warbler. There were lots of grey and brown birds, but only the really dedicated birders get excited about them.

Nature excels in variety of mammals, too. Many white-tailed deer were seen; a raccoon and dozens of squirrels kept the scraps picked off the feeding station. On one hike, a coati-mundi was scratching in the oak leaves alongside the trail. The coati is an uncommon red furry creature with huge grey eye-rings, looking sort of like a cross between a raccoon and a monkey with its long furry prehensile tail.

Returning home, the travelers stopped at Ramsey Canyon in the Huachuca Mountains to visit the nature conservatory's Mile Hi Ranch, a haven for hummingbirds. Broad-tailed and broad-billed hummers were in abundance there as well as the three species already seen. Andy almost stepped on a huge fat black rattlesnake, which was too lazy to move out of the path but with enough energy to rattle a bit.

There are a number of very nice guest ranches in the other Cave Creek. One is the Cave Creek Ranch, about a mile from the village of Portal. It is reasonable, with housekeeping facilities, right in the heart of the wildlife, and if the owners can't tell you where to find a particular bird, other visitors can. From your breakfast table or front patio, there is a constant stream of birds all day long, and a short stroll to the creek always turns up more birds. The experience of a few days will make a dedicated bird watcher out of the most blasé.