



Patagonia-Sonoita Scenic Road



TUCSON & SOUTHERN ARIZONA

Patagonia-Sonoita Scenic Road by Rebecca I. Allen

The violet-crowned hummingbird's wings spin ceaselessly like a natural pinwheel of brilliant color. Its lively chatter and conspicuous behavior make it easy to spot for birdwatchers who travel great distances to reach this place in the desert where many species of birds and animals make their permanent and migratory homes.

As visitors traverse the winding highway, they reach an area marked by wildflowers and towering cottonwoods and sycamores. Sometimes you see them popping out of a car along the road as they catch a flash of color or flick of wing. Binoculars at the ready, these birders mine their field of vision well.

The experienced recite the characteristic of their visual prey while the amateurs juggle reference books. They all share a yearning to view, even if for a fluttering moment, the jewels that shimmer and glide through the Santa Cruz region of southeastern Arizona. And they take the Patagonia-Sonoita Scenic Road to get there. In this part of the Sonoran Desert, mountain ranges rise abruptly to separate the semi-arid valleys and narrow canyons along the desert floor of the Santa Cruz Basin.

The Patagonia-Sonoita Scenic Road takes motorists through 52 miles of southeast Arizona's natural beauty, which makes a manageable afternoon drive or side trip. The varied scenery along the road winds through rolling hills and grasslands shadowed by the Patagonia and Santa Rita mountains that rise to more than 9,000 feet. Miles of lush rambling hills shouldered by the Coronado National Forest lead to several natural destination points, havens for birds, butterflies, animals, blooming wildflowers and towering cottonwood trees, including the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, Patagonia Lake State Park and the Sonoita Creek Preserve.

Pick up the route of the Patagonia-Sonoita Scenic Road on State Route 83, which runs south from near Vail on Interstate 10 to the community of Sonoita where it intersects with State Route 82 leading to Patagonia and, finally, Nogales, the end of the official route as designated in 1985. Veteran birders call the area a hotspot and arrive loaded with binoculars and cameras, but Hollywood also likes to stop and shoot, albeit with a different kind of camera. The scenery serves as a backdrop in films such as *Oklahoma!*, *Hombre* and *Tom Horn*.

Long before the bird watchers, Indians traveled this passage centuries ago as they traded along the Rio Santa Cruz. In 1691 Father Eusebio Francisco Kino, a Jesuit priest, entered Arizona using the same path to establish missions at Guevavi, Tumacacori and San Xavier del Bac. Mission San Xavier, known as the "White Dove of the Desert" makes a worthy side trip. The impressive Spanish-style building's stark white walls stand out against the harsh desert. The mission, which still serves as a church, is decorated with art work, recently restored, detailing centuries of Christian history. To get there take Interstate 19 south of Tucson and follow the signs. On scenic State 83, ocotillos grow thick across the fields.

At the Empire-Cienega Resource Conservation Area, northeast of Sonoita, wildflowers dot grassy areas and huge cottonwoods line cienegas. Pronghorn antelope, deer, javelinas and more than 150 species of birds call the preserve home. The conservation area gets part of its name from its cienegas, or marshes, which support water-loving species such as Vermilion flycatcher and common yellowthroat in spring and summer. A variety of sparrows live here, including Cassin's and Chipping in summer and Brewer's in winter. Pronghorn gathered into large herds are commonly seen in the grasslands along both 82 and 83.

The tall grasses of Sonoita Valley lead into the town of Sonoita where 83 intersects with 82. Before taking the right turn onto 82, drivers can travel several miles east of Sonoita, turn left onto Upper

Elgin Road, which leads to Arizona's small wine country within about 5 miles. About a dozen wineries take advantage of the abundant sunshine, dry harvest, low humidity and cooler nighttime temperatures reminiscent of other warm-weather grape-growing regions in the world. Some use propane-powered wind generators to keep the frost from the vines at elevations reaching 4,700 feet. Back on 82 north of Patagonia a historical marker announces Camp Crittenden, established in 1867. The camp served as a base for soldiers to protect settlements against Indian attacks.

Just outside Patagonia, from a Spanish word, patagon, meaning "the place where the big-footed animals hold forth," the Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve, owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy, provides a lush riparian habitat for more than 300 bird species observed there, plus an endangered native fish and several species of frogs and toads. Many migratory birds from South America call this area in southeast Arizona home for the spring and summer. Gray hawks nest in the nation's largest Fremont cottonwood trees along the creek. The Conservancy records many of the cottonwoods at more than 100 feet tall and 130 years old. Careful watchers may also spot Cooper's and Swainson's hawks nearby. Recorders have spotted than 20 species of flycatchers on the 860-acre preserve, including the thick-billed kingbirds and the northern beardless-tyrannulets.

At Patagonia Lake State Park, located 7 miles west of Patagonia, visitors can camp, hike, fish, picnic, swim year round. Water skiing is restricted to weekdays during the busy summer season. Deer make their homes in the hills surrounding the 265-acre, man-made lake, established in 1975 as a state park. Great blue herons, pelicans and egrets grace the shoreline, and crappie, bass, bluegill catfish and trout swim the waters. The numerous species of birds, such as ibises, vultures, hawks, eagles, falcons, turkeys, quail, plovers and kingfishers, just to name a few, make this another birdwatcher's paradise.

Toward the end of the route, the imposing Patagonia Mountains rise on the east shadowing a few more vineyards among the lush green vegetation with occasional rock outcroppings. More rolling grasslands stretch across small canyons to complete the trip.

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ARTICLES FOR THIS SCENIC ROAD

▶ Arizona's Hispanic Pioneers

One September day in 1736, a prospector described variously as a Yaqui Indian or the mulatto servant of a Spanish settler was exploring near the mining district of Arizonac, just south of the present-day Arizona-Sonora border. Suddenly he stopped in astonishment.

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▶ Coatimundi

Hikers exploring the wet, wild canyons on the Mexico-Arizona border occasionally stumble across the grunting, chirping and squealing antics of one of the Southwest's most endearing animals. Banded together in extended social groups, coatimundis resemble a tribe of land-bound monkeys, as described by early explorers. They live together, forage together and raise their young together--all the while forming lifelong attachments in extended social groupings.

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▶ Mission San Xavier del Bac

Flashing in startling contrast to the blue skies and desert floor, Mission San Xavier del Bac, the "White Dove of the Desert," commands the attention of every person who passes. The 17th century mission rises from a flat plane, 7 miles south of Tucson, that the Tohono O'odham Indians (formerly Papago) have long called Bac; the "place where the water appears."

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▶ Oak Galls

Some look like tiny gourds, an inch across at most. Others resemble minuscule balls of pink cotton candy. A couple could be mistaken for undersized sea anemones, and one giant is nothing more than an amorphous blob of misshapen plant tissue -- a tennis ball-sized carbuncle weighing down the stem on which it has formed.

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▶ Ocotillos

Found throughout the well-drained, rocky slopes of the Southwestern deserts, ocotillos look dead most of the year with their dry woody stems studded with 2-inch spines sticking seemingly straight out of the ground, but they actually just don't store much water. Instead, they wisely use what little

water they hold.

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▶ **Patagonia Lake State Park**

It is a different shade of green in Patagonia Lake State Park. Located 12 miles north of Nogales off State Route 82, Patagonia Lake is one of the best-kept secrets of southern Arizona.

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