

# Birds

Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve is an excellent destination for birders, especially those looking for typical Sonoran Desert species. The paths make getting around the preserve easy, and the homes nearby attract birds with feeders and water sources. The bird population in the preserve often seems denser than in nearby state and national parks.

Thank you to Tucson-based birder and fellow iNaturalist user **Andrew C. Core** for his extensive help in identifying birds in the preserve and also for reviewing this section.

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**Common name:** Gambel's Quail

**Scientific name:** *Callipepla gambelii*

**Sightings:** Abundant

**Notes:** These quail are extremely common throughout the preserve. The one pictured is an adult male. Females and juveniles have more understated plumage. Look for flocks with tiny chicks.





**Common name:** Cactus Wren

**Scientific name:** *Campylorhynchus  
brunneicapillus*

**Sightings:** Abundant

**Notes:** These are relatively large and loud wrens. Listen for their cacophonous calls.





**Common name:** Northern Mockingbird

**Scientific name:** *Mimus polyglottos*

**Sightings:** Abundant

**Notes:** Mockingbirds frequently perch on trees, saguaros, and rooftops and rapidly cycle through a range of mimicked songs and calls.



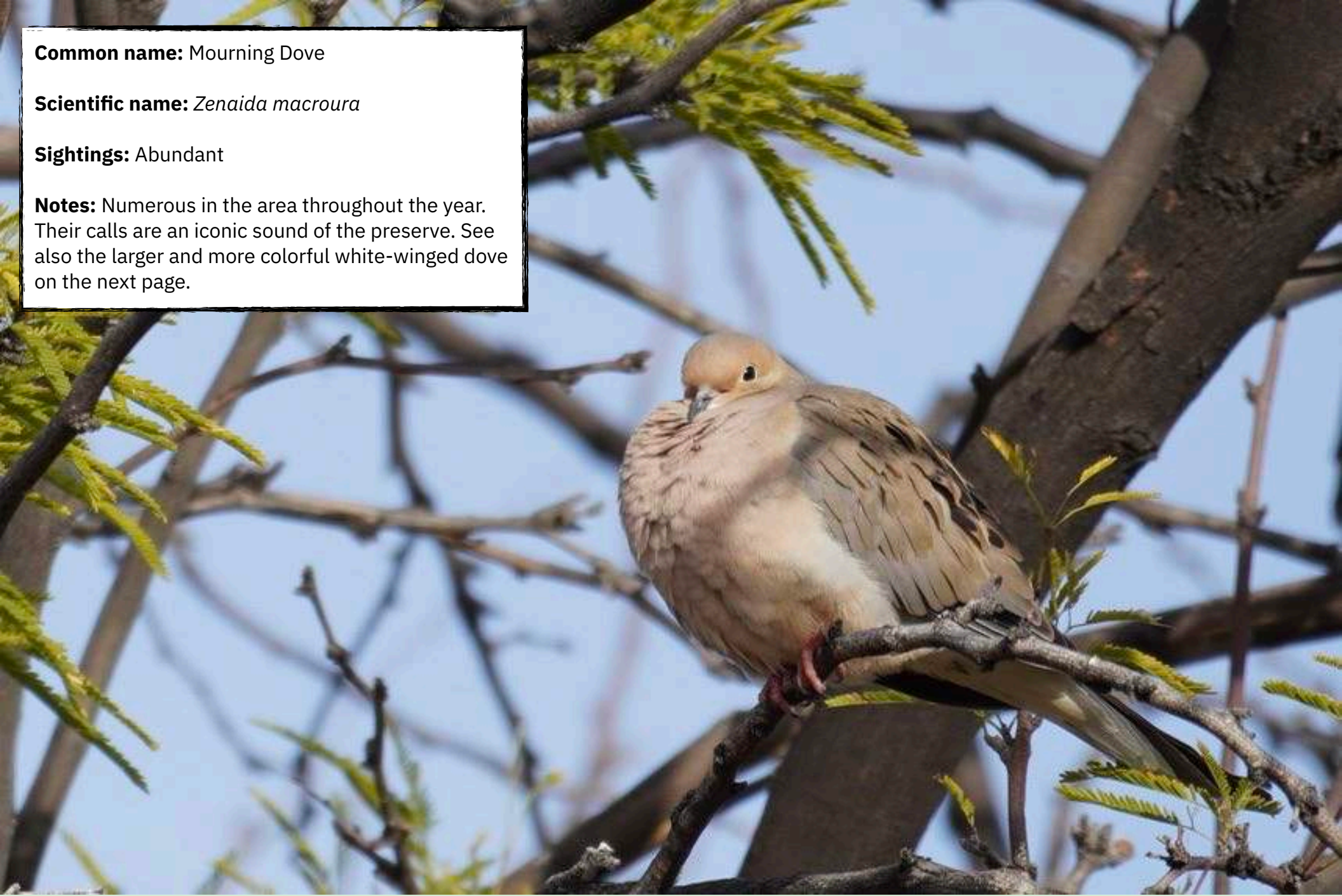


**Common name:** Mourning Dove

**Scientific name:** *Zenaida macroura*

**Sightings:** Abundant

**Notes:** Numerous in the area throughout the year. Their calls are an iconic sound of the preserve. See also the larger and more colorful white-winged dove on the next page.



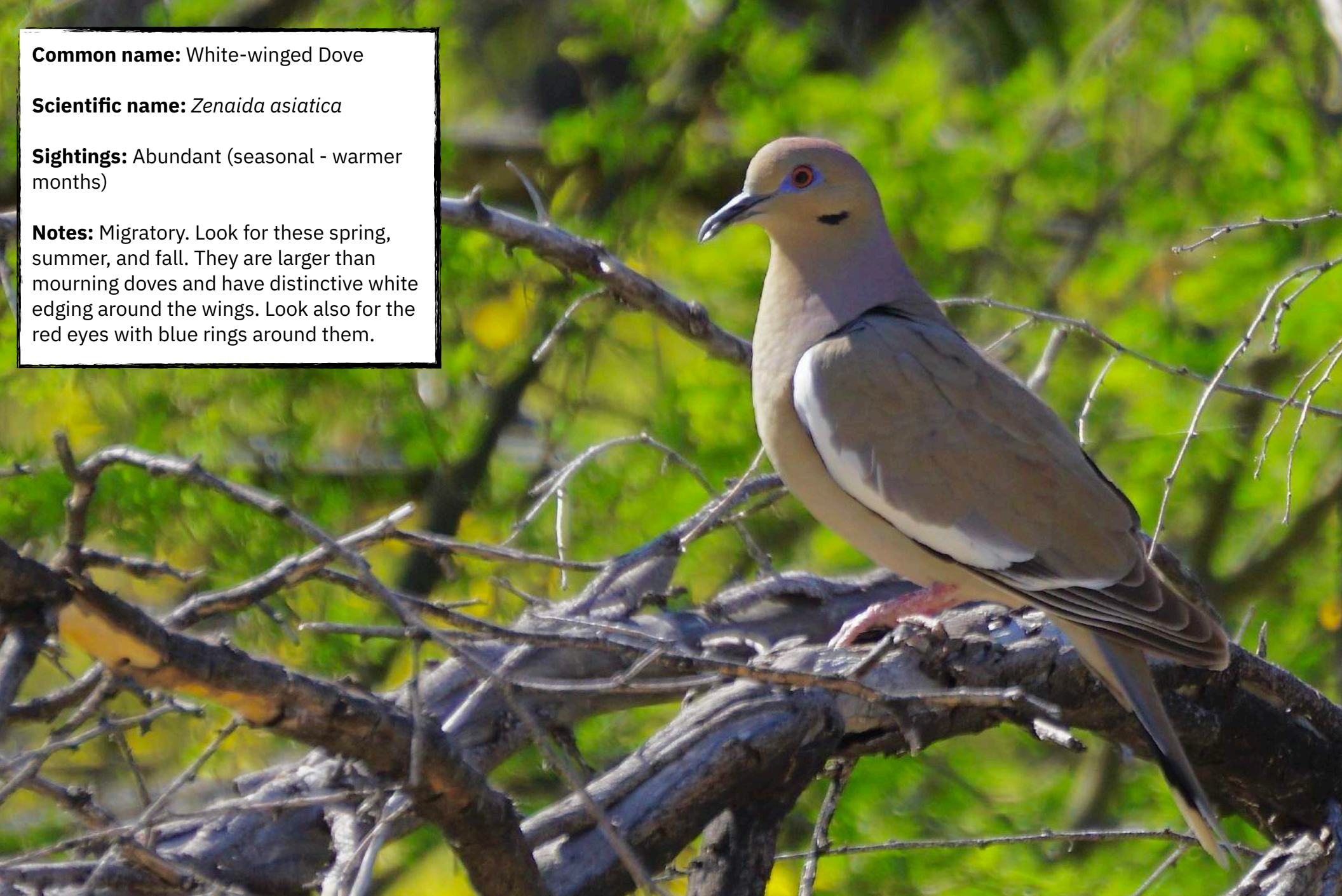


**Common name:** White-winged Dove

**Scientific name:** *Zenaida asiatica*

**Sightings:** Abundant (seasonal - warmer months)

**Notes:** Migratory. Look for these spring, summer, and fall. They are larger than mourning doves and have distinctive white edging around the wings. Look also for the red eyes with blue rings around them.





**Common name:** Curve-billed Thrasher

**Scientific name:** *Toxostoma curvirostre*

**Sightings:** Common

**Notes:** With yellow eyes and long, curved bills, these distinctive birds are easy to identify.





**Common name:** Gila Woodpecker

**Scientific name:** *Melanerpes uropygialis*

**Sightings:** Common

**Notes:** Look for the red caps on the males of these medium-sized woodpeckers. They often nest in saguaro cavities. The similar but larger gilded flicker has not yet been seen in the preserve but occurs nearby. It has a black chest patch and its wings flash bright yellow in flight. Another similar species, the ladder-backed woodpecker, has been seen in the preserve but is much less common. They are smaller with the black-and-white pattern covering more of the bird.







**Common name:** House Finch

**Scientific name:** *Haemorhous mexicanus*

**Sightings:** Common

**Notes:** Sonoran Desert natives, these finches have expanded their range over the past century across the country. The females lack the red seen on the pictured adult male.



**Common name:** Lesser Goldfinch

**Scientific name:** *Spinus psaltria*

**Sightings:** Common

**Notes:** Small, yellow, and black, these birds are social and often seen in pairs or flocks. The “lesser” in the common name is simply there because they are smaller than American goldfinches.





A close-up photograph of a Verdin bird perched on a light-colored, textured tree branch. The bird has a bright yellow head and throat, a grey body, and a small red patch on its wing. It is facing left. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

**Common name:** Verdin

**Scientific name:** *Auriparus flaviceps*

**Sightings:** Common

**Notes:** These tiny birds are beautiful with bright yellow heads and red patches on their wings. They call loudly and frequently and are often heard before they are seen. Their small, round nests can be spotted throughout the preserve.





**Common name:** Black-tailed Gnatcatcher

**Scientific name:** *Polioptila melanura*

**Sightings:** Common

**Notes:** These small birds are tough to spot, but they are common in the preserve. If you look closely in areas with trees or shrubs, you are likely to find one flitting about looking for food.





**Common name:** Lucy's Warbler

**Scientific name:** *Leiothlypis luciae*

**Sightings:** Common (seasonal - warmer months)

**Notes:** Small and almost totally grey, Lucy's warblers are heard more than seen. They are by far the most common warblers in the preserve. Bell's vireos are somewhat similar and almost as common here, but they have a totally different song. Since both birds are easier to hear than see, this makes for a useful way to distinguish them.





**Common name:** Rufous-winged Sparrow

**Scientific name:** *Peucaea carpalis*

**Sightings:** Common

**Notes:** These plainly feathered sparrows are the most common variety in the preserve. Similar looking house sparrows are abundant around homes in the area. Black-throated sparrows and white-crowned sparrows have also been observed here. The former are fairly common year-round, and the latter in the winters.



**Common name:** Abert's Towhee

**Scientific name:** *Melospiza aberti*

**Sightings:** Common

**Notes:** A medium-sized, plain brown bird with a black “mask.” Abert’s towhees are most often seen foraging on the ground or in low shrubs. See the next page for notes on a similar cowbird.





**Common name:** Brown-headed Cowbird

**Scientific name:** *Molothrus ater*

**Sightings:** Common (seasonal - warmer months)

**Notes:** Similar to Abert's towhees but with blackish bodies and brown heads, these cowbirds are common in the preserve. Their calls sound metallic and are quite distinctive. The bronzed cowbird is less common but still a regular sighting in the preserve. They are all black with red eyes. Both species are brood parasites; they lay their eggs in the nests of other bird species.





A photograph of a Brown-crested Flycatcher perched on a thin, brown branch. The bird has a brownish-grey head and back, a white underbelly, and a distinctive white patch on its wing. Its tail is long and features a prominent orange-buff band. The bird is facing left, and the background is a clear, bright blue sky. Some green, feathery foliage is visible on the right side of the frame.

**Common name:** Brown-crested Flycatcher

**Scientific name:** *Myiarchus tyrannulus*

**Sightings:** Common (seasonal - warmer months)

**Notes:** Brown-crested flycatchers and ash-throated flycatchers are both quite common in the preserve. They also look extremely similar and are best distinguished by call or by observing the undersides of the tail feathers. On this bird (a brown-crested flycatcher) the rufous middle section extends to the end of the tail. On an ash-throated flycatcher it will not. Western kingbirds are also in the preserve and look somewhat similar, though lacking the rufous coloring on the tail and wings.



**Common name:** Vermilion Flycatcher

**Scientific name:** *Pyrocephalus rubinus*

**Sightings:** Common

**Notes:** An unmistakable resident of the preserve, the bright red males (as pictured here) are seen and commented on frequently by visitors to the preserve. Females have much plainer plumage, largely gray and white with speckled breasts. The females are frequently misidentified as completely different species.





**Common name:** Northern Cardinal

**Scientific name:** *Cardinalis cardinalis*

**Sightings:** Common

**Notes:** The Sonoran Desert is home to two species of cardinal, the northern cardinal and the pyrrhuloxia (see next page). The latter is more common, but the northern cardinals are larger and more brilliantly colored.







**Common name:** Pyrrhuloxia

**Scientific name:** *Cardinalis sinuatus*

**Sightings:** Common

**Notes:** Also called the desert cardinal, these slightly smaller relatives of the northern cardinal are quite common in the preserve.





**Common name:** Phainopepla

**Scientific name:** *Phainopepla nitens*

**Sightings:** Common in the winter, occasional in the summer

**Notes:** A silky flycatcher with no other close relatives in Arizona, phainopeplas look similar to cardinals in that they have crests. Despite that commonality, they are not close kin. Adult males are jet black with bright red eyes. Females and juvenile birds have a duller gray plumage.





**Common name:** Broad-billed Hummingbird

**Scientific name:** *Cynanthus latirostris*

**Sightings:** Common (especially in the warmer months)

**Notes:** Males have a bright red bill and vivid green and blue feathers. Females are more plainly colored but can be differentiated from Anna's or Costa's by their broader bills. Other hummingbirds are also likely visitors to the preserve, but have not yet been documented on iNaturalist.



**Common name:** Costa's Hummingbird

**Scientific name:** *Calypte costae*

**Sightings:** Common

**Notes:** The bright feathers on these birds' throats flash a vivid purple when the light hits them right. They are very common. Anna's hummingbirds are closely related and just as common here. The females of the two species are nearly indistinguishable, but male Anna's flash bright pink instead of purple.





**Common name:** Ruby-crowned Kinglet

**Scientific name:** *Corthylio calendula*

**Sightings:** Common (in the winter only)

**Notes:** These are very small birds that flit about tree branches much like Verdins. They are mostly gray with yellow and white stripes on the back. Males have a bright red crown that is difficult to see outside of the breeding season (when these birds are less common in Vistoso Trails).



**Common name:** Yellow-rumped Warbler

**Scientific name:** *Setophaga coronata*

**Sightings:** Common (in the winter only)

**Notes:** These gray, black, and white warblers feature bright patches of yellow, especially breeding males. They are larger than the Ruby-crowned Kinglet and forage both in trees and on the ground.



**Common name:** Greater Roadrunner

**Scientific name:** *Geococcyx californianus*

**Sightings:** Occasional

**Notes:** These are large, fast, and primarily ground-dwelling birds. They are in the cuckoo family. Greater roadrunners hunt for lizards and other small prey.







**Common name:** Common Raven

**Scientific name:** *Corvus corax*

**Sightings:** Occasional

**Notes:** Ravens are sighted regularly in the preserve, most likely all common ravens. They are surprisingly large and have deep, carrying voices.



**Common name:** Turkey Vulture

**Scientific name:** *Cathartes aura*

**Sightings:** Common (seasonal - warmer months)

**Notes:** If you see a large bird slowly circling over the preserve, it is likely one of these. Bright red heads and grayish white sections on the underside of the wings are good features to look for. On the ground these birds are likely scavenging or resting.





A photograph of a Cooper's Hawk perched on a thick, dark tree branch. The hawk is facing left, looking off-camera. It has a brown and white mottled pattern on its chest and belly, with darker feathers on its wings and back. Its eyes are a striking orange-brown color. The background is filled with green foliage and a clear blue sky, suggesting a natural, wooded environment.

**Common name:** Cooper's Hawk

**Scientific name:** *Accipiter cooperii*

**Sightings:** Occasional

**Notes:** Smaller than red-tailed hawks and with longer tails, Cooper's hawks prey primarily on birds. When flying overhead, doves and other birds will scatter in alarm. These hawks nest in and around the preserve. The American kestrel is somewhat similar but much smaller and much less common in the preserve.



**Common name:** Red-tailed Hawk

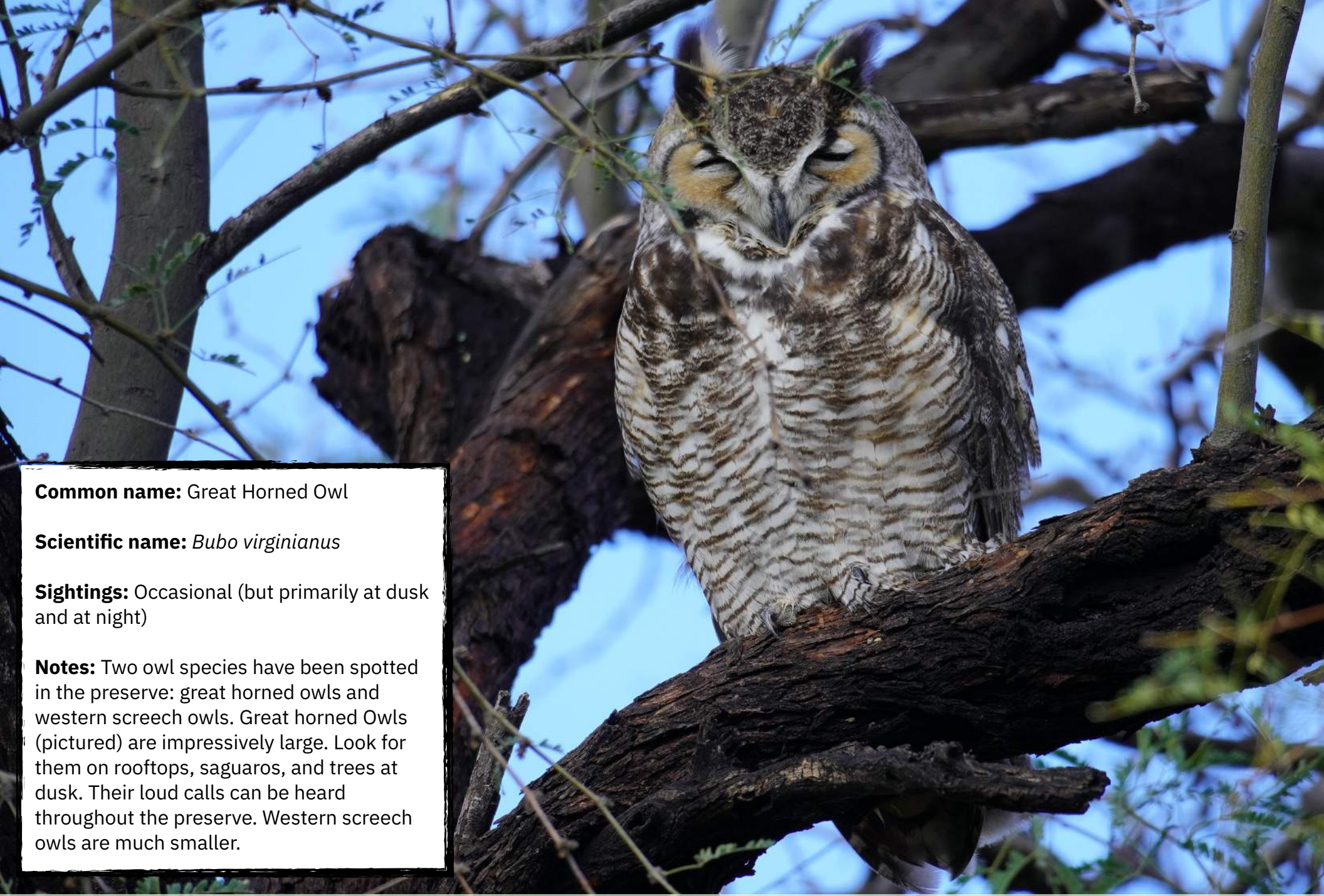
**Scientific name:** *Buteo jamaicensis*

**Sightings:** Occasional

**Notes:** A large hawk with a white chest and speckled brown band across the mid-section, these raptors are often seen soaring above the preserve, or perched high in trees or on houses. They are much larger than Cooper's hawks. The hawk pictured here was being harassed by a hummingbird and a mockingbird upset at its presence. Harris' hawks are similar in size but brown/rufous all over. They also visit the preserve from time to time, but are less common.







**Common name:** Great Horned Owl

**Scientific name:** *Bubo virginianus*

**Sightings:** Occasional (but primarily at dusk and at night)

**Notes:** Two owl species have been spotted in the preserve: great horned owls and western screech owls. Great horned Owls (pictured) are impressively large. Look for them on rooftops, saguaros, and trees at dusk. Their loud calls can be heard throughout the preserve. Western screech owls are much smaller.



## Not Pictured

At the time of writing, 61 bird species had been observed in Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve and attained Research-grade status on iNaturalist. Of those, only 30 are featured in this guide. A small subset of those not featured are waterfowl that likely used the former golf course's lake. They are no longer present. Others are uncommon-to-rare visitors. A few, however, are common/regular, but simply could not be included in this guide because of space constraints. Those are:

- Black-throated Sparrow (*Amphispiza bilineata*)
- Anna's Hummingbird (*Calypte anna*)
- Lesser Nighthawk (*Chordeiles acutipennis*)
- Hooded Oriole (*Icterus cucullatus*)
- Western Screech-Owl (*Megascops kennicottii*)
- Bronzed Cowbird (*Molothrus aeneus*)
- Ash-throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens*)
- House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)
- Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii*)
- White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*)

There is almost certainly a further set of birds that live in or visit Vistoso Trails, but simply have not been observed here yet on iNaturalist. Findings may differ on other birding websites and apps.

We encourage you to check the appendix at the back of this guide for a full list, and to use [iNaturalist](#), [eBird](#), or other apps to track what you see (or hear) while in the preserve.

