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**Monthly
Meet Our Makers Newsletter**



Meet Luke Safford

Since he was 5 years old, Luke Safford has been captivated by birds. He never imagined that lifelong passion would one day become his career - until he and his wife took a chance on Tucson. Today, as Engagement Director for Tucson Bird Alliance, he's helping others discover why Southern Arizona is one of the United States' premier birding destinations. Read on to learn more about Luke's story, or click on What's New for the latest media updates from Visit Tucson.

[What's New](#)



Elegant Trogon. Photo by: Shawn Cooper

Luke Safford didn't expect a 2015 hike in Ramsey Canyon to unfold quite like it did. He was hiking with his family in the Huachuca Mountains in Southeastern Arizona, searching for a Tufted Flycatcher, already a rare sighting in the United States, when the moment took a surreal turn.

"We found the Tufted Flycatcher, and then over to our left we had an Elegant Trogon that was calling and landed next to us. Then right in front of us we had a Red-faced Warbler," Luke recalled. "We had all three of these amazing birds all around us. All of those birds... they're just super rare for the United States, and just to have them all right next to us at the same time was outstanding."

Moments like these are part of what has made southern Arizona one of the world's premier birding destinations. For Luke, now Engagement Director at [Tucson Bird Alliance](#), they also reflect something more unusual: birding here doesn't start when you leave the city, it's already happening in it. Sites like Sweetwater Wetlands and other urban riparian corridors bring high diversity birding into Tucson, while places like Madera Canyon, the Huachuca Mountains, and the forests of Mt. Lemmon extend that range dramatically.

"If you look at a heat map of bird diversity in the United States, you'll see this little pocket in southeast Arizona and southwest New Mexico that is as high diversity as just about anywhere else in the United States," Luke said. "You have the Sierra Madre Mountains coming up from Mexico, the Rocky Mountains coming down, and then the Sonoran, Chihuahuan and Mojave deserts all come together. It creates a really unique set of circumstances for bird diversity."

Luke has been fascinated by birds since he was 5 years old, when his grandmother taught him how to identify species from her backyard in Washington. Birding remained a lifelong passion, but he never imagined it would become a career.

That changed after he and his wife visited Tucson in 2009 for their wedding anniversary.

"She wanted to go somewhere hot, and I wanted to go somewhere where there were some good birds," Luke said. "We just fell in love with Tucson. It was like, 'We're going to retire here. We want to move here someday.'"

They couldn't wait for retirement.



In late 2014, the couple packed up their lives, left Washington and moved to Tucson without knowing anyone or securing jobs first. Looking for community, Luke signed up for a Wednesday morning bird walk at Sweetwater Wetlands. By the following week, he was volunteering as a field trip leader. Before long, he was helping coordinate the [Southeast Arizona Birding Festival](#), eventually joining Tucson Bird Alliance full time in 2016.

"I never thought that I would have a real live working career in the bird world, but it just happened to come about all because my wife and I were drawn to the city," Luke, who is a former pastor, said.

Today, Luke oversees Tucson Bird Alliance's engagement team, coordinating events, field trips, educational programming and the annual Southeast Arizona Birding Festival, one of the country's premier birding events. The festival draws nearly 1,000 attendees from around the world each August, and this year will run August 12-16, when monsoon rains transform the Sonoran Desert into one of North America's richest birding landscapes.

Over five days, participants can choose from more than 150 field trips, ranging from van-based excursions to on-site walks across the region. Additional offerings include dozens of workshops, presentations and a large nature expo with more than 50 exhibitors. Raptors from organizations like the Arizona Raptor Center are often on display, and special programming, such as talks, social gatherings and community events, round out the schedule.

"August is a magical time to be here," Luke said. "You're never going to see the desert more green than in August after the monsoon rains. It's a convergence. The breeding birds, migration and food resources – it all comes together."

For those who can't make the festival but still want to birdwatch, he recommends visiting Sweetwater Wetlands, an urban oasis where beginners and seasoned birders alike can spot dozens of species along accessible walking paths. One of his most unforgettable moments there came on a guided walk with a large group just before Thanksgiving in 2019.

"We had almost completed our whole loop," he recalled. "We come up and see something on the ground in front of us... and it was a barn owl, just the head of the barn owl, intact."

The group was still processing the discovery when the scene shifted again.

"A great horned owl flies out with the rest of the barn owl in its talons and flew right over us," Luke said. "We were just dumbstruck. What did we just experience?"



Encounters like that are part of what draws birders to Southern Arizona's rich and varied landscapes.

From Sweetwater, Luke encourages visitors to venture to Saguaro National Park for sightings of Harris Hawks, Gambel's Quail and Curved-billed Thrashers, before heading out of town. Drive an hour south to the [Paton Center for Hummingbirds](#) (in Patagonia, Ariz.) for Violet-crowned Hummingbirds. Head to nearby Madera Canyon or the aforementioned Huachuca Mountains in search of iconic species like the Elegant Trogon. Ascend the city's Catalina Highway to Mt. Lemmon, where desert cacti give way to pine forests and bird species like Gila Woodpeckers and Gilded Flickers are replaced by Red-faced Warblers and Virginia Warblers.

Yet for Luke, these birding hotspots are more than a travel itinerary. They reflect a deeper purpose that has grown into his life's work.

"Our mission is to inspire people to protect and enjoy birds," he said. "If people can enjoy birds, they're going to be more likely to protect those birds."



Violet-crowned Hummingbird. Photo by: John Kramer

Luke's Top 5 (when he's not working):

[Baja Cafe](#) – Luke's go-to breakfast spot, where he always orders the Wolverine Benedict, A Southwestern-style Benedict featuring smoked chile cream cheese, fire-roasted poblanos, jalapeño bacon, and avocado-tomatillo hollandaise.

[Seis Kitchen](#) – Though there are now four locations in Tucson, Luke favors the downtown location at Mercado San Agustín. He admits the crispy avocado tacos aren't the healthiest option, but they're still his favorite lunch in town.

[Sonoran House](#) – His neighborhood coffee shop and go-to spot before a day outdoors, Sonoran House is known for its agave lattes and a curated selection of locally made goods and gifts.

[Sabino Canyon Recreation Area](#) – Tucked at the base of Tucson's Santa Catalina Mountains, a nighttime walk up the canyon road is one of Luke's favorite things to do.

[Sweetwater Wetlands](#) – Even when he's off the clock, Luke returns to the place where his Tucson story began. "I'll go there on a Saturday morning just because I love it."



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