



Southeast Arizona (A19A)

For my first trip of 2019 I planned to head to Las Cruces, New Mexico via southern Arizona, a 9-day road trip on which I could visit some sites in that part of the country. Although I did get some of my planned sightseeing in, the trip did not go according to plan.

Even before I left. I had originally planned to include a few nights in Phoenix at the start of the trip, but something was going on there that drove hotel rates way up. So I skipped that. And due to a bothersome foot, I dropped a planned hiking day from the itinerary. Thus nine days instead of thirteen.



It had been an unusually cold February by Las Vegas standards, and it even snowed here the night before I left. But I was heading south and expected to put this behind me for a while.

I headed south on US 93/I-II, the direct route from Vegas to Arizona. I'd stay on US 93 all the way to Wickenburg.

The snow had hit northern Arizona, too, so the drive looked a lot different than it usually does.



Snow in the desert along US 93



More snow in the desert

Wickenburg is the first town of any significance along US 93 past Kingman, Arizona. It was named for Henry Wickenburg who established a gold mine in the area in the 1860s.



This is Wickenburg's world famous "Jail Tree". In its early years, Wickenburg didn't have a proper jail, so prisoners were chained to this tree. I understand that parents use it for their unruly teenagers today.

I continued on to Gila Bend, Arizona, to position myself for the next day's sightseeing plans.



A friendly Gila Bend resident

Because I got to Gila Bend quite a bit earlier than I had estimated, I used the time to check out some of the scenery in Sonoran Desert National Monument, just to the east of town.



View towards the Table Top Wilderness Area.

The next morning I continued on my way, heading southeast past Tucson to get to the first of the day's sightseeing destinations.



More fresh snow, this along Highway 83, Arizona's Patagonia-Sonoita Scenic Road.

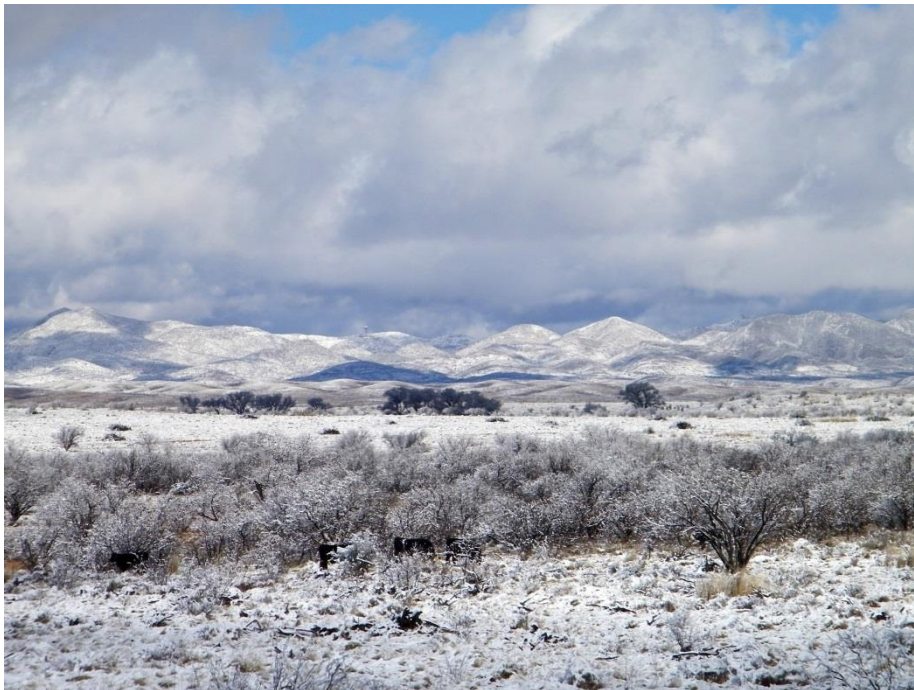


Las Cienegas National Conservation Area

Cienegas Creek flows year-round, making this an important riparian zone. A couple ranches were established here, and the site continues to function as a working cattle ranch today. The area is also along the transition zone between the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts, adding to its diversity of plants and animals.



Part of the historic Empire Ranch headquarters.



More of Las Cienegas National Conservation Area



My next stop was the disappointing Lehner Mammoth Kill Site. Several years ago the landowner noticed mammoth bones becoming exposed in the creek pictured here. Excavations turned up the bones of 12 mammoths, a camel, a horse, a tapir and other animals, as well as assorted Clovis culture tools. It was the first Clovis culture site found to have fire hearths – these helped scientists date the site to approx. 9000BC. Unfortunately, the one sign at the site doesn't add anything else to this, and there really wasn't anything for the visitor to see other than the creek itself from behind the fenced-in parking lot.



Whitewater Draw is an Arizona state wildlife area, and a major wintering area for sandhill cranes as well as some geese. More than 20,000 cranes typically winter here.



I made a short stop at nearby Leslie Canyon, a small National Wildlife Refuge created to protect the Yaqui Chub and the Yaqui Topminnow, both found in the creek below. There is one hiking trail that follows the creek bed upstream to an old mining site, but much of the rest of the refuge is closed to visitors to protect the fish and other listed species.



The Cochise Stronghold in Arizona's Dragoon Mountains provided protection for Cochise, chief of the Chiricahua Band of Apaches, and his followers during a period of raids on settlers and battles with the US Army that began after an army officer falsely accused Cochise and his people of kidnapping the son of a settler. Cochise died in 1874 and was buried at an unknown site in the Stronghold.



I spent the night in Willcox, Arizona, probably the widest spot along I-10 east of Benson, Arizona to Deming, New Mexico. It was hometown to Rex Allen, “The Arizona Cowboy”, who recorded several songs and appeared in a number of westerns. After he died, his ashes were scattered at this site, Willcox’s Railroad Park. His horse Ko Ko was buried near the base of this statue of Allen.



Willcox is also home to the Rex Allen Museum and Willcox Cowboy Hall of Fame.



That evening I discovered that Willcox Playa National Natural Landmark was just south of town, so I made a quick photo stop there first thing in the morning. Willcox Playa is the largest dry lake/sink in Arizona, although water is often found here in the winter time, making it another important wintering area for sandhill cranes. Arizona's Willcox Playa Wildlife Area is a good place for checking out the playa and the cranes. The playa itself was used for bombing practice. I don't know if unexploded ordnance remains a concern out on the playa itself.

And that was the last of my sightseeing on this trip. My engine started acting funny – and not in a good Carol Burnett kind of acting – yesterday off and on. Although it stayed normal the rest of the day after I tried something, it started up again on my drive out to the playa. So I decided to head home – or at least to Tucson, Phoenix, Flagstaff or Kingman if the problem got worse along the drive. The Check Engine light came after a while, but I made it back home.

So in three days I drove over 1200 miles to see some snow, check out some birds, and visit the burial site of Ko Ko the horse.

But I did manage to get some good pictures and visit all but one of my planned southeastern Arizona stops, so the trip wasn't a total loss.