

Vekol Valley Survey Summary

2 February 2008

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On 2 February 2008, nine members of the Arizona Field Ornithologists (AZFO) gathered to survey [tobosa](#) grassland habitat in the Vekol Valley, located in Maricopa County southwest of Casa Grande. Though the intent of the trip was to focus on raptors and passerines in the grasslands, we found very little of that habitat. Creosote bush flats dominated the lower valley with legume-lined washes draining saguaro-clad bajadas on its east and west flanks. The effects of drought were evident throughout the region. Virtually no herbaceous plants or their remains were found between creosotes or under mesquites. Some mesquites even had dead branches and several of the few mistletoes present were also dead.

About 12-15 miles south of Interstate 8, dense, nearly monospecific thickets of mesquite have developed around a series of constructed berms, providing habitat strikingly distinct from the adjacent shrublands. Ponds form in depressions behind the dikes when sufficient runoff occurs. The few that contained water held a handful of waterfowl and shorebirds. Since we found only small patches of [tobosa](#) grassland at the south end of the survey area, we explored mostly mesquite habitat. We could see more extensive grassland south and east on Tohono O'odham lands. (Our Expedition did not survey these lands, as they are inaccessible without prior permission from the Tohono O'odham.)



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We divided into two groups. One group worked south, starting near the north end of the system while the other group drove south to the grassland mosaic and moved north. Most of the birds the “north team” found were at this first site, including 2 male **Cinnamon Teal**, 9 **Northern Shovelers**, 1 **Killdeer**, 1 **Greater Yellowlegs**, 1 **Wilson’s Snipe**, a **Greater Roadrunner**, **Gila** and **Ladder-backed Woodpeckers**, **Black** and **Say’s Phoebes**, **Ruby-crowned Kinglets**, and **Yellow-rumped Warblers**. An **Ash-throated Flycatcher**, **Northern Mockingbird**, **Crissal Thrasher**, **Chipping**

Sparrows, and an “**Oregon**” **Junco** were nearby. Jenness and Yerger found a **Sharp-shinned Hawk** here during their reconnaissance trip on 15 January.

After finding the first three tanks without water, the “south team” encountered one tank with single **Killdeer** and **Greater Yellowlegs** and another pond with 4 **Killdeer** and a **Wilson’s Snipe**. A flock of 12 **White-crowned Sparrows** foraged with 18 **Dark-eyed Juncos** (1 “**Gray-headed**”, 2 “**Pink-sided**”, and 15 “**Oregon**”). A **Bewick’s Wren** briefly scolded then emerged from dense mesquite. **Canyon** and **Abert’s Towhees** flushed near water edged with seep willow where a solitary **House Wren** skulked. Tomoff heard one of the **Canyon Towhees**, slightly darker than most, exclaim alarm notes much like those of **Abert’s Towhees**. (This observation stimulated some interesting questions. Could this bird be an intergrade? How does the island-like isolation and small area of these mesquite thickets influence interaction between these two species? See this link to Rich Hoyer’s website showing a presumed hybrid at Catalina State Park: <http://personal.riverusers.com/~calliope/hybridtowhee.html>). Another surprise was an adult **Ferruginous Hawk** that flushed from a stand of tall thick mesquites.



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The groups met, returned to their cars, and joined for lunch at the starting point to recount the morning’s observations. An unidentified **hummingbird** and 2 **Mourning Doves** flew by. One group

then stopped at another tank north of the starting point, finding an adult **Red-tailed Hawk**, while the other rechecked the duck pond and watched an **American Kestrel** fly overhead.

Finally everyone visited a pond near corrals and a large abandoned building, presumably a never-used meat-packing plant, where we found probable **Great Horned Owl** pellets and **Barn Owl** feathers as well as a **Rock Wren**. On February 1 Tomoff had found a **Great Horned Owl** in dense cover along a nearby wash and watched an adult **Harris's Hawk** circle above. We discussed the plumage of a female **Ring-necked Duck** while **Black Phoebes** darted about the pond. **Ruby-crowned Kinglets** and **Yellow-rumped Warblers** danced among mesquites where 2 **Phainopeplas** called. Four male and 1 female **Lawrence's Goldfinches** delighted everyone as they slipped to water's edge and drank in full view.

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Overall, the group tallied 248 birds representing 44 species. The most abundant insectivorous passerines were **Black-tailed Gnatcatchers** and **Ruby-crowned Kinglets**; 6 **Crissal Thrashers** were widespread, but only 3 **Verdins** were found. Five **Gray Flycatchers** were restricted to edges or openings in dense mesquite stands. Granivores were generally scarce. The four most common were usually in single flocks: **Chipping Sparrows** (20), **Black-throated Sparrows** (14), **“Oregon” Dark-eyed Juncos** (14), and **White-crowned Sparrows** (12). **Vesper** and **Savannah Sparrows** flushed only from patches of tobosa grass at the south end of the survey area. **Horned Larks**, **Sage Sparrows**, a **Loggerhead Shrike**, and a **Sage Thrasher** occurred there but also in open habitat near the mesquites.

Most of the birds we observed (60%) were concentrated at ponds or in mesquite habitat. Only 7 species (11% of birds) were found in creosote bush flats: Sage Thrasher, Crissal Thrasher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Black-throated Sparrow, Sage Sparrow, and White-crowned Sparrow. Six species (5% of birds) flew by or overhead.

Birds observed in the Vekol Valley, 2 February 2008

Species	total	pond	mesquite	creosote		gr/op/edge	air
Cinnamon Teal	2	2					
Northern Shoveler	9	9					
Ring-necked Duck	1	1					
Killdeer	6	6					
Greater Yellowlegs	3	3					
Wilson's Snipe	3	3					
Red-tailed Hawk	1						1
Ferruginous Hawk	1		1				
?harrier/accipiter?	1	+					1
American Kestrel	1						1
Gambel's Quail	6		1			5	
Mourning Dove	5		1				4
Greater Roadrunner	1		1				
hummingbird sp.	1						1
Gila Woodpecker	3		3				
Ladder-backed Woodpecker	7		7				
Gray Flycatcher	5		5				
Black Phoebe	6	5	1				
Say's Phoebe	2					2	
Ash-throated Flycatcher	1		1				
Loggerhead Shrike	2					2	

Horned Lark	17				2	15	
Verdin	3		3				
Common Raven	4						4
Rock Wren	1					1	
Bewick's Wren	2		2				
House Wren	1		1				
Northern Mockingbird	1		1				
Sage Thrasher	5			2	1	2	
Crissal Thrasher	6		5	1			
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	14		13	1			
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher	21		17	4			
Phainopepla	2		2				
Yellow-rumped Warbler	7		7				
Abert's Towhee	4		4				
Canyon Towhee	2		2				
Chipping Sparrow	24		4			20	
Vesper Sparrow	2				2		
Black-throated Sparrow	15		1	14			
Sage Sparrow	7			1	2	4	
Savannah Sparrow	2				2		
White-crowned Sparrow	18		14	4			
"Oregon" Dark-eyed Junco	15		15				
"Pink-sided" Junco	2		2				
"Gray-headed" Junco	1		1				
Lawrence's Goldfinch	5		5				

Total	248	29	120	27	9	51	12
Species	44	7	25	7	5	8	6

AZFO thanks team members for contributing their time and expertise to explore this interesting area and document its late winter residents. They were: Eric Hough, Brian Ison, Morgan Jackson, Doug Jenness, Diana Stuart, Carl Tomoff, Marceline Vandewater, and John Yerger. Pictures 2, 3, and 5 were provided by Marceline Vandewater; pictures 1 and 4 were provided by John Yerger.