

AZFO LAKE HAVASU PELAGIC SURVEY

27 January 2024

BY KEITH KAMPER and CALEB STRAND

On January 27, the Arizona Field Ornithologists organized a half-day survey of waterbirds at Lake Havasu, one of Arizona's largest bodies of water. Created in 1938 by constructing Parker Dam across the lower Colorado River, this reservoir has become an important migratory stopover and wintering site for many species of waterbirds. On Arizona's western border, it's 220 miles east of California's Pacific coastline and 195 miles north of the Gulf of California. This creates potential to draw gulls, terns, loons, and other waterbirds inland, as well as offering an optimal landing site for pelagic species blown in by storms, including hurricanes. Many rare species have shown up, including Yellow-footed Gull, Arctic Tern, Glaucous Gull, and Little Gull. In the fall of 2023, three species of storm-petrel, and a Red-billed Tropicbird were blown in by Hurricane Hilary ([See Arizona highlights: fall 2023](#)). Species often difficult to find elsewhere in the state, such as Common Tern, Sabine's Gull, Herring Gull, Barrow's Goldeneye, and three species of scoter, are fairly regular at Lake Havasu, during the right season.

Up until a few years ago, David Vander Pluym and Lauren Harter lived in Lake Havasu City and surveyed the lake regularly for about 10 years. They substantially increased the knowledge of birds and their movements on the lake. Since they left, the lake has been covered irregularly, and naturally there are questions about how many rarities are going undetected. Moreover, most observers look for birds at the lake from vantage points along the shore, such as Pittsburgh Point, Windsor Beach, and the North End Viewpoint. However, when birds are a long way from shore documenting and identifying them is difficult. The need for a full coverage survey of the lake prompted AZFO to organize a winter pelagic survey.

Twenty-four participants, divided between two tritoon boats, set out from the Wet Monkey Motorsports launch site in Lake Havasu City to spend four hours surveying the lake and noting anything exceptional. We first did a slow loop around the north end of the lake where many of the gulls and pelicans were at rest. We observed several California Gulls, Ring-billed Gulls, Common Loons, American White Pelicans, and both Western and Clark's Grebes. With the relatively low diversity of gull species, we started working our way south across the lake close to the state line and were pleased to have a group of four White-winged Scoters and a Horned Grebe on the California side of the lake and close to 600 Common Goldeneyes.

We headed back towards the Arizona side of the lake where we had a quick flyby of a Herring Gull and a flock of 30 Bonaparte's Gulls (almost doubling the previous January high-count for the lake). Near the fuel dock by Rotary Park, we had a surprise Short-billed Gull in flight foraging with a flock of Ring-billed Gulls. This rarity was clearly distinguished from the Ring-billed Gulls by its darker rump and darker inner wing primaries. It was highly responsive to chumming of popcorn and sardine mixture. Though hard to find in the state, Short-billed Gull is reported every couple of years along the lower Colorado River.

On the last portion of the trip, south of Lake Havasu City towards Thompson Bay, we saw fewer birds than expected.

Overall, we observed 2,433 birds of 33 species. Particularly outstanding was more than 700 Common Goldeneyes, a very large number even for this location, many of which would not have been seen or identified to species from shore. In addition, 30 Bonaparte's Gulls, 515 Ring-billed Gulls, 4 White-winged Scoters, 18 Common Loons, and the Short-billed Gull was a good showing. The complete list can be found on our four checklists below. This field expedition provided a snapshot of what might show up at the lake in January. By using watercraft to cover much of the lake our numbers of positively identified species was greater than it would have been with only shoreline observation. Many participants were inspired by this experience to consider joining other AZFO field expeditions.

Species and Numbers of Birds Observed

American Wigeon	2	Rock Pigeon	9
Mallard	22	American Coot	795
Canvasback	1	Bonaparte's Gull	30
Ring-necked Duck	7	Thick-billed Gull	1
Greater Scaup	3	Ring-billed Gull	515
Lesser Scaup	20	California Gull	6
Greater/Lesser Scaup	45	Herring Gull	1
White-winged Scoter	4	Common Loon	18
Bufflehead	32	Double-crested Cormorant	4
Common Goldeneye	715	American White Pelican	62
Common/Barrow's Goldeneye	30	Great Blue Heron	1
Common Merganser	2	Great Egret	1
Red-breasted Merganser	8	Osprey	3
Pied-billed Grebe	52	Belted Kingfisher	1
Horned Grebe	1	Peregrine Falcon	1
Eared Grebe	81	Great-tailed Grackle	16
Western Grebe	7	Yellow-rumped Warbler	2
Clark's Grebe	13		
Western/Clark's Grebe	15		

[eBird Checklist - 27 Jan 2024 - Lake Havasu—Windsor Beach to north end by boat - 18 species \(+1 other taxa\)](#)

[eBird Checklist - 27 Jan 2024 - Lake Havasu \(CA\) - 12 species \(+2 other taxa\)](#)

[eBird Checklist - 27 Jan 2024 - Lake Havasu—Thompson Bay vicinity - 17 species \(+1 other taxa\)](#)

[eBird Checklist - 27 Jan 2024 - Lake Havasu south by boat \(CA side\) - 11 species \(+2 other taxa\)](#)