

southern Peloncillo Mountains

July 29-30, 2007

Trip Report

Threats of abundant weekend monsoon rains, did not deter nine adventurous members of the AZ Field Ornithologists (AZFO) from conducting a field expedition to the southern Peloncillo Mountains in extreme southeastern AZ. The majority of this intrepid team rendezvoused at our base camp under some fine oaks at Miller Spring along Geronimo Trail by early Friday evening (27 July). A short evening hike up a nearby two-track produced a presumed family group of WESTERN SCREECH-OWLS and one or two WHISKERED SCREECH OWLS. Although not too surprising since they are found on the New Mexico side of this small range, I could find no previous popular literature that stated that Whiskered had been previously reported in the more arid AZ side of the Peloncillo Mountains. Likely due to surveys being conducted at slightly lower elevations within this range, they were missed during the AZ Breeding Bird Atlas (ABBA).

The next morning, we hiked up the headwaters of Cottonwood Canyon into the cool low clouds and mist above 6000 ft. At first, we were hiking in New Mexico where we encountered our only LUCIFER HUMMINGBIRD (a female) of the trip. We also found MONTEZUMA QUAIL (good looks at one pair), an adult GOLDEN EAGLE, many Rufous/Allen's Hummingbirds, and two GRAY FLYCATCHERS (in AZ). During the ABBA, these flycatchers were discovered nesting locally in similar habitat in the southern end of the nearby Chiricahua Mountains, so there is potential for nesting here as well. However, this species has been found as an occasional early migrant in the lowlands of southeastern AZ as early as the last few days of July so its true status here will remain uncertain.

Back at our base camp for lunch we watched our five temporarily placed hummingbird feeders in hopes of attracting an AZ Lucifer but had to settle with the still pleasing visits from BROAD-BILLED and BLACK-CHINNED HUMMINGBIRDS. We also confirmed ARIZONA WOODPECKER and DUSKY-CAPPED FLYCATCHERS foraging around our camp, which is two other species not reported in this mountain range during the ABBA. A rather quiet late afternoon hike up the unnamed, oak-filled drainage and 2-track near camp produced better herps and butterflies than birds, with the discovery of a large black-tailed rattlesnake (amazingly this was the sixth one for the day!) and a Yaqui black-headed snake (a lifer for all). The earlier hike had also produced an attractive rock rattlesnake. In the early evening, we could hear a Montezuma Quail calling near camp and after sunset, Common Poorwill with both screech-owls, a Great Horned, and a Barn Owls being heard calling outside our tents before sunrise.

We spent Sunday morning slowly exploring our way up Guadalupe Canyon from the Mexican border to the Baker Canyon confluence. Few of us had been here before and none of us within the past two decades! It was great to see that the cottonwoods, sycamores and lower shrubs and vegetation in this canyon are responding well with limited grazing activity. It was a much lusher location than my last visit in the mid-1980s. We observed most of the breeding birds that this canyon is known for such as VARIED BUNTING, VIOLET-CROWNED HUMMINGBIRDS, GRAY and ZONE-TAILED HAWKS, as well as many other more widespread riparian species. Surprisingly, we only noted one (silent) THICK-BILLED KINGBIRD which was at the mouth of Baker Canyon. It was quite warm by the time we made it back to the parking area for a quick lunch. Immediately adjacent to the walk-in gate we

discovered one of our better birds for the area, which was one or two singing RUFIOUS-WINGED SPARROWS. This species had only been documented in this canyon once before by Rich Hoyer a few years ago.

I want to thank the AZFO Field Expedition team who braved the unknown and assisted in exploring this seldom visited corner of the state. They were Carol and David Beardmore, Brian Ison, Doug Jenness, Philip Kline, Janet and Bob Witzeman, and Marceline Vandewater. A more detailed summary of the expedition with photographs will be placed on the AZFO web site at www.azfo.org in the near future.

Good Birding,

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