

AZFO Field Expedition - Gila Co. Mogollon Rim Drainages

26-28 April, 2008

Over this past weekend, the AZ Field Ornithologists organized our first Field Expedition to northern Gila County. Eight members from Pine, Flagstaff, and the Tucson and Phoenix areas surveyed several creeks draining the southern slope of the Mogollon Rim which receives very little attention from birders. Our base camp was near the See Canyon Trailhead (headwaters of Christopher Creek). Late on Friday afternoon, 25 April, our drive up to the camp from the town of Christopher Creek produced several WILD TURKEYS and the only MEXICAN JAYS we detected the entire weekend. Regular camp area visitors included singing RED-FACED, GRACE'S, VIRGINIA'S and BLACK-THROATED GRAY WARBLERS, PAINTED REDSTARTS, HERMIT THRUSH and BROAD-TAILED HUMMINGBIRDS. At over 6000 ft. elevation, the early mornings at camp were cool, with dawn on Saturday in the upper 30s.

The morning of 26 April, we broke into three teams and thoroughly surveyed the upper four miles of Canyon Creek in the extreme northeast corner of Gila County. Although the area was ravaged by the extensive Rodeo-Chediski fire in 2002 and subsequent drainage scouring, some great riparian habitat remains. The cottonwoods, willows, and other deciduous trees were just beginning to leaf-out at this elevation. We detected over 60 species with highlights including COMMON BLACK-HAWK, 3 DOWNY WOODPECKERS including a pair constructing a cavity, 3 singing GREATER PEWEES, a pair of AMERICAN CROWS, 4 PURPLE MARTINS, 4 GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLETS, and 3 HEPATIC TANAGERS. Seemingly odd at this location and habitat, were two migrant LEAST SANDPIPERS. Even at this elevation, nesting activity was well underway for some species. We found a BLACK PHOEBE nest with 4 eggs and of the 94 HOUSE WRENS counted all appeared to be paired with several females observed taking nest lining into cavities. Some of the abundant VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOWS (over 375 counted!) were doing the same.

At our base camp for lunch, Jeff Estis proceeded to find a male MAGNIFICENT HUMMINGBIRD which was photo documented by several folks. Soon after, this individual was observed chasing a second male Magnificent Hummingbird in the same area. This hummingbird is considered rare along the Mogollon Rim with no confirmations of breeding. To my knowledge, this is the earliest date for this species in the region as well. We spent the late afternoon hours hiking up See Canyon in an unsuccessful attempt to find American Dippers and Winter Wrens. We did find SHARP-SHINNED HAWK, COMMON BLACK-HAWK, PEREGRINE FALCON and DOWNY WOODPECKERS. Slightly early, particularly for central AZ, were observations of both Red-faced and Grace's Warblers constructing nests.

The cold winds were fierce through the evening and into early Sunday morning hampering our efforts to not only take down our tents but conduct surveys in upper Tonto Creek. By mid-morning the winds had subsided to a cool periodic breeze. Highlights along upper Tonto Creek included COMMON BLACK-HAWK, ZONE-TAILED HAWK and a pair each of DOWNY WOODPECKER and RED-NAPED SAPSUCKER. There are very few nesting records for either of these two woodpeckers on the southern slope of the Mogollon Rim, so it was good to find them in several drainages over the weekend. Later in the morning we explored Little Green Valley Road down to Bear Flat trailhead along Tonto Creek just before it enters into the rugged Hell's Gate Wilderness. A final lunch in the Christopher Creek (town) area produced a singing CASSIN'S FINCH, BLACK-CHINNED HUMMINGBIRDS, and many BAND-TAILED PIGEONS and BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAKS.

I want to thank the AZFO Exploration team of Jeff Estis, Eric Hough, Brian Ison, Morgan Jackson, Doug Jenness, John Jerger, Marceline VandeWater. A summary of this Expedition with photos will be prepared for the AZFO web site (www.azfo.org).

Good Birding,
Troy Corman