

AZFO Field Expedition highlights - Sierra Ancha.

July 19-20, 2008

Trip Report

I returned yesterday from the latest AZ Field Ornithologists Field Expedition, with this one in the seldom birded Sierra Ancha. This beautiful sky-island mountain range is immediately east of Roosevelt Lake with access off of SR 288 (also known as the Young Road). On my way there on Friday (18 July), I was surprised to find Roosevelt Lake still very full and the Tonto Creek arm flooded. Because of the constant high-water levels this year, the WESTERN and CLARK'S GREBES were very successful in pulling off broods for a change at this reservoir. Nearly every pair seemed to have downy fledglings ranging in size from quarter to nearly adult sized, with a total of 200-300 birds just at the Tonto Creek end of the lake. From the Orange Peel site, I also noted a single gull...a yearling CALIFORNIA. There was only one GREAT BLUE HERON nest that was still active in the large colony, which held two large nestlings. As I crossed over the red, muddy Salt River on SR 288, I observed a hen COMMON MERGANSER quickly paddling her near-adult-sized brood of nine downstream toward Roosevelt Lake. Fishing for them in such turbid water must be very difficult at best!

It has been several years since I had driven SR 288 to the Sierra Ancha and I was surprised that it was now paved nearly the entire length at least past Workman and even Reynolds Creeks. I drove up the dirt Forest road along beautiful Reynolds Cr. and made camp. Camp was in a lush riparian mix of tall alder, sycamore, boxelder, oak, ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir at an elevation of approx. 5600 ft. Around sunset, the remaining Expedition team, John Jerger and Morgan Jackson, arrived and soon after their tent was up, a nearby WHIP-POOR-WILL briefly sounded off. This was followed by a calling FLAMMULATED OWL up the side of the drainage. An evening hike up the road to find additional nocturnal avian delights was unsuccessful, which is not surprising given the time of year! However, we did run across John and Morgan's first AZ Black Rattlesnake.

Saturday, 19 July

After breakfast we split-up for the morning, they covered upper Reynolds Cr. drainage and I surveyed the nearby road up to Center Mtn. The overlook view at the end of the road was simply breathtaking with the Mogollon Rim off to the north and Cherry Creek down below. One of the highlights for me were two fly-over RED CROSSBILLS, although Philip Kline noted flocks in this mountain range a week prior.

My other highlight was the juncos that are nesting up there. I heard an odd bird singing and was surprised to find it was a junco. Now I know junco songs can be rather variable, but this had no trill in it at all and reminded me of notes Yellow-eyed Junco sometimes make. Upon further scrutiny of the few pairs and juvenile juncos I noted up there, they appeared to be mostly of hybrid stock between "Red-backed" Dark-eyed Junco and Yellow-eyed Junco. Their plumage was very similar to Yellow-eyed with the rufous coloration extending onto the wing greater coverts. The eye coloration was somewhat intermediate, with it being a reddish brown! In late Sept. 2004 Rich Hoyer photographed a very similar bird in the isolated Pinal Mountains near Globe (where the most northern population of Yellow-eyed Juncos exists). The Pinal Mtns. can be seen to the south from the Sierra Ancha. See Rich's excellent article and junco photograph at

<http://www.azfo.org/birding/BirdingThePinals.html>. It would be interesting to determine if the entire Sierra Ancha population is derived from hybrid stock or simply hybrid pockets on the mountain. Later in the afternoon we heard another individual on the slopes of nearby Aztec Peak that gave a similar odd song.

We also noted several groups of MEXICAN JAYS in various areas during the morning. Just before heading back to camp for lunch, I surveyed just downstream of our camp along Reynolds Cr. Here I discovered an interactive pair of SULPHUR-BELLIED FLYCATCHERS among the sycamores. I heard a third bird calling nearby and upon investigating, I found it to be a bob-tailed fledgling with a much shorter bill. I was surprised to find that its call was almost identical to the adults! I soon heard a fourth nearby individual and I suspected it was its sibling. This species has been noted in the Sierra Ancha on occasion since 1977, but confirmed breeding records are very sparse.

During lunch Morgan and John also noted they observed two juvenile RED CROSSBILLS likely indicating local nesting. This nomadic species was not noted in this range during the AZ Breeding Bird Atlas. As we headed out, I made a brief stop at the private boy's camp at the lower end of Reynolds Creek where there were several long-term RV's parked with hummingbird feeders. I asked the two women seated in the shade if they ever see any large hummingbirds, and they said oh yes, just one which comes almost every day. One of the friendly campers further commented that others had told her it was a Majestic Hummingbird. I guess that is a good alternate name for a Magnificent!

We spent the remaining afternoon following the road along nearby Workman Creek and up above the falls and to the higher elevations of Aztec Peak. Much of the higher elevations had been burned by the Coon Fire sometime in the early 1990s I believe. The understory was growing back dense and thick with Gambel oak, locust, and other deciduous shrubs/trees. We camped at Sawmill Flat where we encountered several more flocks of Mexican Jays.

Sunday, 20 July

We spent much of the morning exploring Parker Creek and its nearby tributaries. As we drove past the first tributary, John heard a DUSKY-CAPPED FLYCATCHER. Through the morning, we eventually tallied an incredible 10 Dusky-capped Flycatchers, including three likely pairs, spaced along this drainage. This is likely the highest density of these flycatchers ever reported north of Southeastern AZ. It was odd that we did not detect them in any other drainage we surveyed. Other highlights in the area noted by Morgan and John included a likely nesting pair of LAZULI BUNTINGS, plus another singing male. Even though we were at 4800 ft. elevation at this time, we had several small groups of BAND-TAILED PIGEONS feasting on the young acorn crop in the abundant Emory oaks. John found the oddest nesting record of the weekend, when he discovered a pair of GRAY VIREOS tending a nest with young in a sycamore. I have never heard of them nesting in a sycamore before, plus the nest was exceptionally high for the species at over 15 ft!

I want to thank the Exploration Team for another fine weekend in a seldom birded area of Arizona. More details with photos will be published on line at AZFO.org. in the future.

Good Birding,

Troy Corman
Phoenix, AZ