

AZFO Field Expedition highlights - Greenlee/Graham Cos.

February 17-18, 2007

Trip Report

A section of AZ that receives little birding attention is the upper Gila River Valley in southern Graham and Greenlee Cos. This is especially true during the winter season. As part of the AZ Field Ornithologists (AZFO), Carol Beardmore, Marceline Vandewater, and I did a little exploration of this area between 16-18 February. These efforts produced some first winter county records for several species and likely a few first county records as well.

On 16 February, Marceline and I made the 3-hr. drive from Phoenix to Safford via Globe. We made a quick stop at Oak Flats above Superior and noted a (RED) FOX SPARROW immediately below the small dam. We also observed a (SLATE-COLORED) FOX SPARROW behind the Camp Host site where they have been reported periodically through the winter. Continuing southeast to near the town of Pima, we located a WHITE-THROATED SPARROW among White-crowns near the Gila River. There was also a single SNOWY EGRET along a nearby wet ditch. This species is considered casual during the winter in SE AZ. In nearby Bryce, we found the first of several groups of WHITE-WINGED DOVES, and later realized there were wintering populations in several communities there including Thatcher, Safford, and Duncan. This is a fairly new winter population shift for these doves that began in southern New Mexico and appears to be steadily spreading west into eastern Arizona towns with increasing numbers each winter. However, they are still greatly outnumbered by the ever increasing Eurasian Collared-Doves. At the Reay Road wastewater ponds in Thatcher, we found over 500 ducks of nine species with most being N. Shoveler but included 2 pairs of MEXICAN DUCKS and 2 female HOODED MERGANSERS. The extensive marshes there held many Sora and Virginia Rails, plus one to two SWAMP SPARROWS. We set up camp at the edge of a marsh in the early evening at Roper Lake State Park south of Safford.

The next morning (17 February) we woke before dawn to a chorus of wetland birds, including the first of five LEAST BITTERNs we detected at various cattail stands along the lake. This species is considered rare in winter in SE AZ, and my not have been previously detected in winter in Graham Co. Roper Lake State Park also held 65 COMMON MERGANSERS, 5 BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERONS, 2 GREAT EGRETS, 1 AMERICAN GOLDFINCH, more WHITE-WINGED DOVES, and 3 possibly early migrant N. ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOWS. We noted noisy mixed flocks of AMERICAN CROWS and CHIHUAHUAN RAVENS feeding on pecans in pecan groves in residential Safford. Compared to the many agricultural fields in southwestern AZ and to the south in the Sulphur Springs Valley, those around Safford were surprisingly quiet with very few raptors, sparrows, and meadowlarks. However, slightly east of Safford we discovered one field that contained 75+ MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRDS.

Carol Beardmore joined our team of two around noon and then we headed over to Duncan in Greenlee Co. On the way we stopped along Hwy. 70 to look at a road-killed LONG-EARED OWL. We greatly enjoyed our warm afternoon in and around Duncan discovering several good birding areas. We observed several small groups of SANDHILL CRANES in the air throughout the day and later observed a concentration of 1200 in fields on the northeast side of the Gila River. We spent a lot of time along a quiet back road called Foster Lane and ran into an owner of extensive property along the river who gave us his card and said that birders were welcome back there anytime. Along the river in this area, we noted more MEXICAN DUCKS, and single SPOTTED SANDPIPER and GREATER YELLOWLEGS. We also discovered a possible first County record of GOLDEN-CROWNED SPARROW and EASTERN PHOEBE. There were several pairs of VERMILION FLYCATCHERS near the river which were already searching for nest sites among the mesquite. We noted a single LEWIS'S WOODPECKER flycatching from the top of a very large tree at the edge of one field and small flocks of WESTERN and MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRDS.

Yesterday, we woke at Roper Lake State Park to cloudy skies and gusty winds and only managed to pad the Graham Co. list a

little before heading home around noon. However, we did make a trip to nearby Dankworth Pond and heard another LEAST BITTERN. I encourage birders to visit these and other areas of AZ that receive little ornithological attention as there is still so much to learn about seasonal bird distribution in the state. AZFO will plan several future Field Expeditions to this and other less known areas of the state.

Good Exploring!

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