



AZFO Student Scholarship Recipient Essay 2023

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This past September, I had the privilege of attending the 2023 AZFO meeting in Payson as a Youth Scholarship recipient. Ever since I moved to Arizona in 2022, I've been looking to tap into the rich history of Arizona birding and meet some of the best birders in the state. One of these birders who I've known over the past year, Doug Jenness, encouraged me to apply for the youth scholarship despite having recently graduated from college. In fact, we carpooled to the conference together once I got the news that I had received the scholarship.

We arrived in Payson on a Friday afternoon and started off with a mini-expedition along the Verde River. Tommy DeBardleben was an excellent leader of our group and a great person to talk to. I especially appreciated his knowledge in birding by ear, which is still fairly new to me in Arizona. We found a few pockets of fall migrants along the way, including some good looks at the trickier vireos and flycatchers. Migrating raptors added to the day's variety, with a Swainson's Hawk looking out of place among the ravens in the mountains. It was great to chat with experienced birders like Dara Vazquez. Between enjoying a low-flying Common Black Hawk, several of us swapped stories about our travels in tropical Costa Rica.

After such a good walk, we all met up in town for an outdoor dinner and fellowship. I was fortunate to be joined at my table by two anchors of the Maricopa Audubon Society, Janet Witzeman and Laurie Nessel. Laurie and I, in particular, enjoyed sharing experiences monitoring breeding raptors and following along in the family's journey through a season. I also enjoyed hearing stories from Gordon Karre, the AZFO membership secretary, about showing birders of all skill levels the wonders of Arizona's birds.

Saturday morning was the "big day" for the main portion of the meeting. We arrived at the Eastern Arizona College campus early to help set up, enjoying a Wood Duck on the way in. Once all the participants had filed in, Troy Corman gave the welcome remarks and discussed some logistics for the day. Sue Drown showcased the beginnings of a brand-new AZFO website. The first round of scientific presentations was very interesting, especially Edwin Juarez' overview of the innovative MOTUS wildlife tracking network. I enjoyed hearing about the other AZFO youth participants from Chrissy Kondrat, and getting to meet them during the mid-morning break. After the break, Chrissy gave a fascinating talk showing the results of her Bendire's Thrasher work. I was surprised to see how far some of these birds traveled on migration, and how early they could leave the breeding grounds. Doug and I had a great lunch at a small business in Payson, returning to the college for the second half of the meeting. Diana Herron and Gordon Karre both had encouraging news in the finances and membership departments, especially the number of



new student members. Among the afternoon presentations, one of my favorites was Ryan O'Donnell's talk on how to avoid common data mistakes when using the eBird citizen science database. I could relate to this in multiple ways as a volunteer eBird reviewer, having seen these errors many times and made a few myself.

There were two additional rooms at the conference, with optics vendors and raffle merchandise, a poster on Burrowing Owl ecology by Doug Jenness, and lots of used books. I found a couple of excellent books and got to chat with more birders while perusing the rooms. One of my favorite parts of the meeting was the bird ID quiz near the end. Each photo would appear piece by piece, and participants were rewarded with more points the quicker they entered the correct answer. The photos got more challenging at the end, and I was fooled by more than one along the way. The sound ID quiz was great fun, too, although I had lower expectations for myself this time. I was way off on multiple species and recordings but still had a great time trying to use the given habitat clues to guess each species' sound. The quiz ended in a tie after two tie-break rounds, meaning both of the winners got a prize!

The final event of the day was the evening banquet and keynote presentation. Dinner was an excellent Mexican food buffet, and we enjoyed good company as usual. I was glad to catch up with Tice Supplee from Tucson Audubon, who is so knowledgeable and had taught me a lot during a winter raptor count in southern Arizona. The keynote speaker, John Moretti, gave an enthusiastic and detailed account of the history of Thick-billed Parrots in Arizona. It was particularly interesting to hear him approaching the subject from an archeological perspective, looking at the bones and fossil records of past Indigenous settlements.

Sunday began early with a mini-expedition to end my time at the meeting. I was happy to see several of the same participants from Friday's walk, this time led by Jake Thompson. We stopped at a couple of coniferous/riparian spots to watch and listen to some mountain breeders such as Painted Redstart and Hepatic Tanager. Migrant sparrows were plentiful in many spots, too. We ended among a beautiful mixed canopy of spruce, pine, maple, and more at the high-elevation Washington Park. Jake got us on a perched Band-tailed Pigeon, and I was thrilled to see my lifer Northern Pygmy-Owl! Mixed flocks up here contained montane species like Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, Hammond's Flycatcher, and a late Grace's Warbler.

I can't thank the AZFO enough for providing such a great experience for me and many others at the meeting. My special gratitude also goes to the Maricopa Audubon Society for sponsoring the youth scholarship and making it possible for me to attend this year. I'm excited to participate in more AZFO events and programs moving forward, and I can't wait to spend time again with the great birders of Arizona who keep the AZFO active and such a great resource for learning.