

AZFO Field Expedition highlights - Greenlee/Graham Cos.

February 21-22, 2009

Since there is little information on birds wintering in Greenlee County and few winter reports come from Graham County, AZFO organized another Field Expedition to this area 21-22 February. Our base camp at Roper Lake State Park was rather cushy for our typical field camp standards. The Phoenix team arrived in the area late Friday afternoon and made a brief stop at the Reay Lane wastewater ponds in Thatcher. We found most of the cattails and bulrushes had recently been burned on most of the upper ponds, but still enjoyed good numbers and diversity of waterfowl. The highlight at this location was a SWAMP SPARROW, a rare winter visitor. We also noted many calling White-winged Doves in Thatcher indicating a sizable winter population there. Roper Lake State Park held nearly 70 COMMON MERGANSERS, BUFFLEHEADS, 2 GREAT EGRETS, and many roosting blackbirds and grackles. From my tent early the next morning with a temperature near freezing, I could hear SORA, VIRGINIA RAIL, COMMON MOORHEN, and several LEAST BITTERNS calling from these same marshes. The remaining field teams arrived from Tucson and Flagstaff soon after dawn.

We spent much of Saturday exploring the Gila River and farmlands near the small town of Duncan, just downstream from where the river enters from New Mexico. Typically, we divided our team of six into two so we could survey more area. Highlights of the nearly 75 species detected included 365 SANDHILL CRANES, a COMMON GROUND-DOVE, 2 BARN OWLS, an adult WHITE-THROATED SPARROW and all three species of bluebirds, including a small flock of EASTERN BLUEBIRDS. The birds of Greenlee County are so poorly known that many of these species could be the first reports for the county. We also had many White-winged Doves in the area, also suggesting that many of these eastern, smaller rural communities now have a sizable wintering population as they do in southern New Mexico. In the late afternoon our two teams divided again and surveyed different location in Graham County. One team found several hundred Sandhill Cranes in a field near Eden and the other team spent an hour or so in the higher elevations along Hwy. 266 in the Pinaleno Mountains. Highlights up there included many American Robins, Western Bluebirds, a Townsend's Solitaire and 9 Cedar Waxwings. There must have been a pretty good juniper and mistletoe fruit crop in these mountains this winter.

Teams organized early Sunday morning and added a lone adult RING-BILLED GULL which made a few passes over Roper Lake before heading west. This gull is considered rare in February in se. AZ. The field team once again split into two, with ours giving a fairly thorough search to the Reay Lane wastewater ponds again. We noted a concentration of 45 CINNAMON TEAL, 50 N. PINTAIL, and 275 N. SHOVELER, plus two migrant TREE SWALLOWS. The Swamp Sparrow was also detected again in the northwest most flooded, weed-choked pond. We then spent the remaining morning at Cluff Ranch Wildlife Area in the foothills of the Pinaleno Mountains near the small town of Pima. We found little of interest on Pond #3 other than a dozen foraging VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOWS, but the willow and mesquite thicket along the upper end of the pond produced a rare lowland GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLET. We also spend some time looking for a small olive-brown backed and tailed bird that was briefly viewed by Eric Hough as it walked under a dense canopy of bent over seep-willow. The bird's size, color and walking gate suggested a possible Ovenbird. Unfortunately, some identifications will always remain a mystery, as our effort to relocate it proved futile.

Back down near the main Cluff Ranch area along Ash Creek we noted some other rare wintering birds including a NORTHERN BEARDLESS-TYRANNULET and a DARK-EYED (SLATE-COLORED) JUNCO. At lunchtime, Eric Hough headed back to Flagstaff via a long-route through New Mexico, but added another 10 or so species to our Greenlee Co. list near Big Lue Mountains off of Hwy. 78. His list included a calling OLIVE WARBLER. Although not totally unexpected, there are likely few winter reports of this warbler for Greenlee Co. Our vehicle load also headed back to Phoenix after lunch picking up a rare WHITE-TAILED KITE along Hwy. 70 just se. of the small town of Bylas on the San Carlos Apache tribal lands. Although additional species were likely added by the Tucson team on Sunday, our species list for Graham Co. for the two days exceeded 100 species.

I want to thank the Field Expedition team which included Eric Hough, Justin Jones, Jake Mohlmann, Magill Weber and John Yerger. Their dedication and enthusiasm for surveying this seldom visited area of the state made this adventure quite enjoyable and successful. We now know a little more about the winter distribution and status of birds in these two counties.

Good Birding,
Troy Corman

Phoenix, AZ

www.azfo.org