

Avra Valley eBird Gaps Project Expedition

April 20-21, 2024

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Arizona Field Ornithologists conducted an expedition in Avra Valley (primarily within Ironwood National Monument) to contribute to the AZFO's eBird Gaps Project. Fifteen participants collected critical avian data missing from this part of Arizona. On the night of April 20, four sites were surveyed for nocturnal species, with a main focus on Elf Owls. The following morning another four sites were surveyed for migrating and resident desert species. Checklists were submitted to eBird to help fill in data gaps as part of AZFO's eBird Gaps project in Avra Valley.

Elf owls (*Micrathene whitneyi*) are listed as a species of conservation concern by the Arizona Game and Fish Department due to habitat loss from urban development, ecosystem modifications, invasive species, and climate change. The owls migrate to Arizona from Mexico to breed from late March until mid-July and are found in lowland riparian woodlands, pine/oak forests, and Sonoran desertscrub. Their range is in the southern part of the state from 470 feet up to 6,000 ft in elevation. Elf Owls use natural or abandoned woodpecker cavities in mature saguaros or trees such as Arizona sycamores to nest. Most Elf Owls in the state are found in Sonoran desertscrub with mature saguaros and scattered thorny trees (paloverde, ironwood, mesquite). When the expedition area was scouted in advance by coordinators, the high density of mature saguaros along the foothills of the West Silver Bell Mountains suggested that it would be an ideal location for nesting Elf Owls.

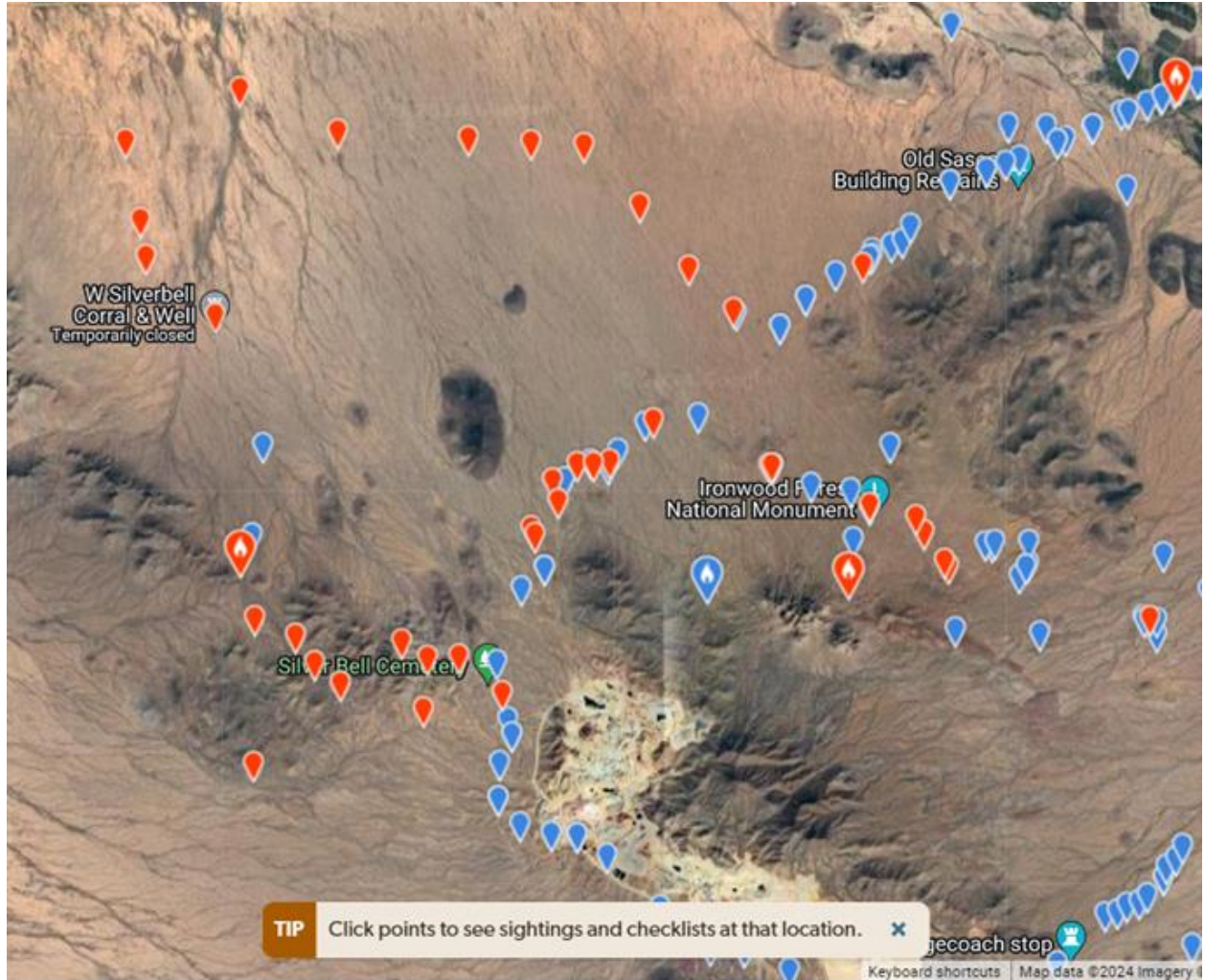
On April 20, leaders and participants met at Silverbell Group Campsite for a debriefing of survey protocols and safety concerns. Four groups split up and surveyed from dusk to 10 pm at four different sites using the "Elf Owl Survey Protocol Important Bird Area (IBA) Program" created by Tucson Audubon Society. This protocol uses the vocalizations of Elf Owls and Western Screech-Owls and also requires the documentation of other nocturnal species such as Common Poorwill and Lesser Nighthawk, though all species heard and seen were documented in eBird.

Most participants camped out at the Silverbell Group Campsite in Ironwood National Monument that was set in a beautiful location with a view of Ragged Top Mountain. The next morning, we split into four groups targeting locations around the West Silverbell Mountains, including washes, difficult roads, and general desertscrub habitat.

A total of 60 new checklists were completed with 74 species added to the list for this eBirds Gaps Area since 2020. During the nighttime Elf Owl surveys, all of the probable nocturnal species were seen or heard including Elf Owl, Western Screech-Owl, Great Horned Owl, Common Poorwill, and Lesser Nighthawk. Two Crested Caracaras were seen at Morris Tank north of Avra Valley in the Santa Cruz Flats on Saturday, but not relocated on Sunday morning. An Osprey flew over on Sunday. Some notable sightings included migrants: Cassin's Kingbird, Plumbeous Vireo, Townsend's Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Virginia's Warbler, Bullock's Oriole, Lazuli Bunting, Dusky Flycatcher, Hammond's Flycatcher, and Gray Flycatcher.

This was the first list for Avra Valley ever for April, adding critical data to the eBird Gaps Project.

New eBird checklists (in red) with Mourning Doves completed during the expedition:



References

Arizona Bird Conservation Initiative and Sonoran Joint Venture. 2023. Elf Owl (*Micrathene whitneyi*) Species Account. Available at <https://sonoranjv.org/accounts/elf-owl.pdf>

Flesch, A., Boone, J., Pluym, D., and Sabin, L. 2021. Factors influencing detectability and responses of Elf Owls to playback of conspecific vocalizations. *Journal of Field Ornithology*, 92(3): 246-259.

Arizona Important Bird Areas Project. 2011. About the Arizona IBA Program. Available at https://aziba.org/?page_id=32