



The Cactus Wrendition

July - August 2000

This page contains several articles from the July August 2000 Cactus Wrendition, the newsletter of the Maricopa Audubon Society. Not all articles are reproduced on this page. Fieldtrip information, recent rare-bird sightings, meeting programs/schedules, and general chapter information are presented elsewhere in this site.

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Notes and Announcements

Hummingbird banding in Southeast Arizona: Up to ten species of hummingbirds have been found along the San Pedro River, and the river's riparian corridor provides a good migration path for these and other species. As part of a continuing study, Southeast Arizona Bird Observatory (SABO) is performing hummingbird banding at the San Pedro House near Sierra Vista. Banding is conducted on Saturdays from 4 to 6 p.m. through early June, and again in July through September. The San Pedro House visitor center is located 7 miles east of Sierra Vista on Highway 90. Sessions are open to the public without reservations and at no cost. Donations are gratefully accepted. For more information, contact SABO at sabo@ASBO.org or 520/432-1388.

ABA's 16th Annual Convention will be held in Fort Collins, CO, June 26-July 2, 2000. If you are interested in attending this week long collection of birding and seminars, call the ABA office at 800/850-2473.

Planning ahead.

The **Monterey Bay Bird Festival** will be held October 6-8, 2000, in Monterey, CA. For information, contact the Elkhorn Slough Foundation at 831/761-1719; mbbf@elkhornslough.org ; www.elkhornslough.org .

Southwest Wings Birding Festival, August 16-19, 2000, Sierra Vista AZ: Southeast Arizona is a great birding spot any time of year; August is especially good. The festival offers a variety of field trips, lots of displays and vendors, and an interesting range of programs and speakers. Contact: Southwest Wings Inc., P.O. Box 3432, Sierra Vista, AZ 85636-3432; phone: 800/946-4777.

New officers—At the May meeting, five new officers were elected and the others were retained.

President—no change

Vice-President—no change

Treasurer—no change (Herb now has e-mailherbertsfibel@aol.com)

Field Trips—no change

Conservation—no change

Membership—no change

Secretary—Karen Kaiser [602/276-3312; 303 E South Mountain Ave #91, Phoenix, AZ 85040]

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From the Editor

Deva Burns

“Wanted: Newsletter Editor. . . . and we’re looking for a volunteer to serve as editor starting in June.” Such a simple statement—and Cliff said it only took about 8 hours per issue. Little did I know when I called Cliff about this announcement, what I was getting myself into. As it turned out, there were very few calls about this “job”, and it was mine.

I had always heard that you should be careful what you wish for—I am now finding out the true meaning of that saying. Truthfully, however, I am excited and anxiously looking forward to continuing what Cliff and Rich before him have started. I think we have a very fine newsletter with a variety of information for all levels of birders (well, maybe not the pros).

To add to the difficulty of a new undertaking, our creative graphic designer, Peggy Wang, was going on vacation (birding in Alaska) during a critical time in the monthly process and I was going to be gone for a week around Memorial Day. I certainly am not a graphic designer, so the first crisis was to try to work around her schedule. I needed to move the often elusive deadline up a little over a week. Deadlines are always critical to a newsletter but when you are talking about volunteer writers, what was the carrot going to be? Putting “my” first issue out late just wasn’t an option in my mind, although, Peggy thought that was probably the best idea.

I figured the *Photo Quiz* and *Arizona Special Species* articles would be easy. As Jim likes to say, he’s in bed with the editor now. He had just better produce on time—early if need be! I spent the first couple of weeks in May e-mailing and calling on the regular contributors, pleading with them to get their information into me before the regular deadline. My goal was to get everything to Peggy before I left. My original plan was to dribble it in to her in bits and pieces—but she informed me that this was an impossibility. Everyone was so wonderful and understanding. I can’t thank all of you enough.

Needless to say, everyone came through. There were a few computer related problems—like compatibility between Macs and PCs that had to be resolved. But I would sure like to talk to Cliff about that 8 hours he mentioned in his article asking for anyone interested in taking over the editorship of the newsletter!

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Bob Bradely Honored at Annual Banquet Meeting

Herb Fibel

Bob Bradley was presented with a beautiful framed painting of Peregrine falcons by Roger Tory Peterson for his dedicated service to Maricopa Audubon and to the cause of birds and their habitats over the past thirty-two years. In addition to serving either as compiler or co-compiler for the Greater Phoenix Christmas Count for twenty years, Bob is in charge of the East Valley Region for the Breeding Bird Atlas. He has also done breeding bird surveys for the USGS for many years, served as field trip chairman for Maricopa Audubon, led countless field trips for the chapter,

and taught a birding class through the Desert Botanical Gardens. Our hats are off to dedicated and longstanding Maricopa Audubon member, Bob Bradley.

Over sixty people gathered at Aunt Chilada's on May 2nd not only to honor Bob, but to celebrate another successful Maricopa Audubon year. It was our 48th, but who's counting?

Plaques recognizing their service to our chapter were presented to departing board members Barbra Barnes, Janice Miano, Cliff Drowley, and Cindy West, who served respectively as education chair, publicity chair, Wren-dition editor, and in the case of Cindy first as secretary and then as program chair.

Ron LeValley presented a wonderful slide program about bird conservation in Humboldt County on the California coast north of San Francisco. He described his local birding community's heroic efforts to save the Marbled murrelet, which nest high in the giant redwoods about thirty miles from the sea, and the Snowy plover, which lays its eggs in open indentations right on the beaches of the county.

Thanks to Janice Miano who made the arrangements for the banquet, to Laurie Nessel who ran the raffle, as well as donating a beautiful stained glass plate as the main raffle item, and to Robin Silver for arranging the program.

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Sex And The City

by Jim Burns

Here's a dirty little secret. Birding in the Phoenix metro area just ain't very good. Once you've seen LeConte's Thrasher and checked out Boyce-Thompson Arboretum State Park, both of them an hour's drive from most parts of the city, its just low desert trash birds. I have always read with envy the tales in birding literature about other cities with exciting, in-close birds, especially raptors. In the past two years there have been accounts of Red-tailed Hawks nesting on an apartment ledge across from Central Park in New York and Peregrines working on the pigeon problem in downtown Kansas City.

Guess what. Things have changed. There was something in the air this spring, or maybe just more observers out there. Within the past two months I have seen a male Red-tail deliver a Starling to its mate incubating eggs on a window ledge and I have seen a Peregrine successfully stoop on a White-throated Swift. Both fifteen minutes from my door!

In January a pair of Red-taileds set up housekeeping at Scottsdale Health Care/Shea. The nest is on the third story of North Medical Plaza 3, 10210 N 92nd, and as of this writing two hatchlings were educating the medical personnel to the joys of birding. Thanks to Ella Jefferis for alerting MAS to this family and convincing campus maintenance workers not to evict. Thanks to our own Walter Thurber, who lives nearby, for keeping us apprised of exciting developments.

The nest is on the northeast corner of the building. The best vantage point is the parking lot across 92nd to the east, early morning the best time. The Starling was breakfast to go. After the delivery I watched the female hawk leave the nest with prey in talons, transfer it to beak directly over 92nd traffic, and carry it to a nearby lightpole for consumption while the male took over incubation duties. Pretty cool stuff. And I extrapolated 1200 cars/hour passing by. Obviously, as long as low desert trash birds remain abundant, these hawks are comfortable in the city.

If Phoenix has a landmark, it is Camelback Mountain which runs along Camelback Road east of 44th street. There are two ways to access the mountain's hiking trails, by far the most popular being Echo Canyon Park on the north side of the camel's "head." From the parking lot off McDonald the main trail climbs east around the sunrise side of the head. Primarily to avoid the hordes of hikers, our explorations have always taken us west below the imposing north wall, the 700 foot "headwall" made famous by all the novice climbers who rappel it with 500 foot ropes. We have often seen Prairie Falcons along the wall, but never any evidence of their nesting nor of Peregrines.

Early this spring a pair of Peregrines were reported cavorting around the east side of the head along the main trail to the top of the mountain. The day I went I was treated to an awesome display of falcon aerobatics culminated by the mid-air capture of the swift. "Swift" is all relative, isn't it, if your top flight speed has been calculated at 200 mph and the predator stooping unseen from above has been clocked at 275. After the feather explosion, the male Peregrine, pictured below, enjoyed breakfast on a rock ledge, as oblivious to the 150 hikers/hour passing far below him as they were to him.

The best vantage point for the Peregrines is a long, narrow saddle on the west side of the trail just beyond the anchored railings which make the steepest section of the lower mountain possible. This is not a trivial hike, but anyone reasonably fit and without knee or hip problems should be able to negotiate it. To beat the heat and avoid the line-up for limited parking, arrive at sunup. The peregrines cannot be seen from the parking lot or the north side trails.

On the morning of my visit there were two males vying for the female's attentions. One, presumably a recent interloper, was harassed by a pair of kestrels as well as the other Peregrines. Having flown off his rival, the "home" male returned time and again to a small cave, calling repeatedly and joined periodically by the female presumably inspecting the nesting declivity he was proposing. Often both birds would course the south side of the head bringing them, at full throttle, stunningly close and directly over me on the saddle.

Twice I felt wind from their wings. I am not making this up. I can tell you for sure a Peregrine's speed at that proximity far outstrips Canon's touted autofocus capabilities. I can also tell you the female, our cover lady, was a third again larger than her mate and that it was she apparently molting those fourth and fifth primaries. How can I be sure of this? Well, I was there for five hours and witnessed every intimate detail of Peregrine life, including . . . copulation. I have pictures. Phoenix metro birding just got hot.

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Our Forests Can Be Saved

Bob Witzeman

Wild beasts and birds are by right not the property merely of the people who are alive today, but the property of unborn generations whose belongings we have no right to squander—President Theodore Roosevelt

Now that the fire season is again upon us, citizens must think of how to reduce catastrophic crown fires. Tom Ribe of Santa Fe, New Mexico says he has been studying the region of the Cerro Grande, Alamos, NM fire for many years: "Northern New Mexico was grazed heavily with sheep and cows in the 1880s. Spanish grazing at lower intensity began in 1600. When the railroads arrived in the once rural north, cows and sheep from Texas were set free across the mountains and valleys in droves. What is now Bandelier National Monument (managed by NPS) was grazed so heavily before the NPS got it, that all grass was gone from the lower mesas, and pinyon and juniper and sage replaced it. As a result, today the lower mesas have catastrophic sheet erosion in the spaces between the "trees".

"The NPS is working to reverse this erosion today. The fire has been up in the higher country within Bandelier NM and in the Santa Fe National Forest to the north of the Monument. The Cerro Grande Fire was in the middle elevations, which is mixed conifer (Canadian) and ponderosa pine. That area was also grazed heavily before the Forest Service took over as described above. Many sheep and cows ranged through the once open grass and old growth forest between 1880 and 1943. The grass was decimated by unregulated grazing. Grass was replaced by tree seedlings which grew in great thickets below the old giant trees.

"For the most part, the Forest Service has done nothing about this condition. In the 1950s the Forest Service removed grazing from this area but they kept a very tight lid on fire.

"The National Park Service has done extensive research on fire frequency which shows natural lightning fires running through most acres of the Jemez Mountains every 5 to 15 years before fire suppression in 1910. The result was the build up of tremendous loads of pine needles, dead logs, thickets of poles. Grasslands that used to be maintained by fire were lost.

NPS has been reintroducing fire on the 35,000 acre Bandelier National Monument. The prescribed burn which escaped was intended to restore montane grasslands and 9000 foot elevation mixed conifer forests. While the conditions were right for the fire in the area, unexpected winds blew embers into a canyon below, the humidity dropped, and the rest is history. The fire burned through Forest Service lands which have received no prescribed burning at all and no natural fire since 1910. The Cerro Grande Fire swept through this landscape, originally distorted by unregulated grazing and further distorted by fire suppression. Thus we can attribute the intensity of the blaze in large part to grazing."

Kieran Suckling, Director of the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson, Arizona also explains the public lands grazing and fire relationships: "Historically, cattle were the most important agent of fire suppression. By removing the grasses and herbs which are the primary vector for the spread of cool burning groundfires, overgrazing very effectively stopped fire from spreading through the forest. Tom Swetnam, Melissa Savage and others at the tree ring lab have repeatedly proven that fire disappeared from the forest as soon as cattle were introduced. This was typically in the 1860's to 1880's long before there even existed a U.S. Forest Service or active fire suppression policies.

"Secondly (and most interesting), native bunchgrasses are much more vigorous than ponderosa pine seedlings. If the grass is lush, therefore, it will prevent the establishment of pine trees. Numerous studies, including a study site in Zion National Park, have shown even with the complete exclusion of fire, pine thickets [sometimes called pole thickets or dog-hair thickets] will not develop if the grass remains ungrazed. A paired study site with the same fire suppression history developed typical thickets because it was grazed.

"It is often said, that this occurred before the growth of these young trees, and so at this point removing the cattle won't do any good. There is probably some grain of truth in this, but on the other hand there is strong research showing that when cattle are removed from even quite dense forests, fire gradually returns to the system and thins the trees.

"If it is true that the public will never tolerate the return of a completely natural fire regime (too much smoke too often), then it is imperative that we remove cattle because sheer presence of grass will keep the thickets at bay."

Subsequent to these recent fires, former NAU professor Wallace Covington has been appearing in the media promoting his method of fireproofing our forests. Covington's idea is excellent in theory. He cuts down the "laddering" intermediate sized "cow-thickets." 120 years of cattle grazing and fire suppression created these thickets. The pole cutting and debris clearing is paid for by allowing industrial logging of "some" of the old-growth. Maricopa Audubon visited one of Covington's Mt. Trumbull fireproofing sites and was distressed to observe vast, open baseball fields and stumps of 16-18-24 inch and larger old-growth matriarchs.

One should not blame Covington. He was an NAU professor born and bred to commercial logging. It was the duty of that generation of professors to find ways for logging companies to harvest the old-growth on our public lands; just as professors of range management are put there to find ways for cattlegrowers to make money grazing cows on our public lands. If a 12 inch maximum tree diameter limit could be placed on the "Covington" fireproofing, it just might save our forests, and the homes of our cavity nesting and canopy-requiring wildlife species.

The \$64 question is, can we ever allow cattle to return to such fireproofed lands? Controlled burning, probably yes, cattle probably never. Elk, deer, antelope, insects, rabbits and the like made it work for centuries before cattle came to Arizona. Remember, all FS and BLM lands in the West only provide 2% of U.S. cattle forage, and they do so using below-market grazing fees in unfair competition with the vast majority of cattlegrowers throughout the nation.

Some alert readers pointed out that in the last Cactus-Wren-dition I stated that public land grazing was "the single most significant cause of bird species extinction." I should have said "endangerment" not "extinction." The many birds I listed came from the Arizona Game and Fish Department's T&E publication. It shows grazing as a factor in 22 of the 26 birds listed (only 3 of the 26 had logging as a factor!). We can be proud of our highly professional state wildlife agency's biologists who are factually classifying our state's biodiversity. A Ft. Collins, Colorado, U.S. Forest research study concluded that grazing was the single largest resource-extractive cause leading to species being threatened or endangered in the U.S.

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Mittry Lake Wildlife Area

Dick Todd

The "Laguna Division" is a stretch of the Colorado River between Laguna and Imperial Dams, east of Yuma. The winds were light and the skies were clear the April morning we met on the Yuma Proving Grounds. We spent six hours on the Arizona side of the Colorado primarily within the Mitty Lake Wildlife area. This area is the "Rail Capital of the Southwest"! Six *Rallidae* species were detected, although only two were actually seen. We saw American Coot and Common Moorhen. Heard were Yuma Clapper Rail, California Black Rail, Virginia Rail and finally at the last stop we heard a Sora. The Black Rail was a life bird for several of the fourteen participants who were fortunate to hear it as it seems to be much scarcer than in the 1970's. It is possible that this species may well deserve Federal threatened species attention throughout its range.

Sixty-six species were recorded for the day. The Great Blue Herons were on their nests in dead cottonwood trees, killed by irresponsibly caused fires. Great Egrets were commonly seen, and three other *Ardeidae*, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Snowy Egret and Green Heron were more infrequently observed. *Empidonax* flycatchers were the high point of our stop at "Betty's Kitchen", which is adjacent to Laguna Dam. There was some debate as to whether one of the flycatchers was either Cordilleran or Pacific-slope. Other *Empidonax* included Hammond's and Dusky flycatchers. We found two vireos, Bell's and Hutton's, and eight warblers, including Nashville, Yellow, Wilson's, Black-throated Gray, and Yellow-breasted Chat. Finally, we also found Bullock's Oriole and Blackheaded Grosbeak.

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