

BIRDING SOUTHERN GREENLEE COUNTY



By Tommy Debardeleben

INTRODUCTION

Greenlee County is Arizona's second smallest county, the least populated, and by far the most underbirded. The latter aspect fired Caleb Strand, Joshua Smith, and I to focus an entire weekend gathering data about the birds of this county, as well as building our county lists. Starting Thursday night, 16 February 2017, and ending Saturday night, 18 February 2017, we covered a wide range of locations in the southern part of the county. Although small, Greenlee County has many habitats, with elevations ranging from just over 3,000 ft in Chihuahuan desert scrub to over 9,000 ft in spruce-fir forest in the Hannagan Meadow area of the White Mountains. On this trip we didn't go north to the White Mountains.



DUNCAN

We left the Phoenix area around 6 PM on Thursday night and arrived in Duncan after 10 PM. Duncan is situated at an elevation of 3655 ft and has a population of about 750 people, according to a 2013 census. We started owling immediately when we arrived. It wasn't long before we had our first bird, a Great Horned Owl in town. We stayed at the Chaparral Hotel, which is a small hotel with good rates that is close to any Duncan or Franklin birding location. After getting situated at our motel, we drove a short distance to the Duncan Birding Trail, perhaps the county seat of birding hotspots in Greenlee County. We owled there for about an hour and were rewarded with a second Great Horned Owl, a pair of cooperative and up-close Western Screech-Owls, and a stunning Barn Owl calling and flying overhead several times. As we shined our flashlights in the air, we could see that the Barn Owl was a ghostly adult male and looked almost pure white underneath. From the Birding Trail, we ventured southeast of Duncan for a few miles and into Franklin, where we tried owling the agricultural fields along Railroad Wash Road for close to a half-hour in hopes of finding more Barn Owls and perhaps a Short-eared Owl. We didn't detect any owls there, but discovered a roosting Red-tailed Hawk.

On Friday morning we covered a lot of ground, from the riparian corridors, agricultural fields, and Chihuahuan desert scrub and grasslands around Duncan and Franklin up to the coniferous forests in the Big Lue Mountains. Most of the day, we were near New Mexico's western border and even crossed the state line several times.

We started birding from our Duncan hotel the second we went outside. Birds were everywhere. Our first actual stop was the county's top birding spot, the Duncan Birding Trail, a half-mile from the hotel. To access the Duncan Birding Trail, take Highway 75 from Highway 70 for a short distance to the northeast from the town of Duncan. The trailhead is on the east side of Highway 75 at a dirt parking area. This little parking pull off is just south of the bridge that goes over the Gila River. On Facebook, a page on the Duncan Birding Trail is available here:

<https://www.facebook.com/duncanbirdingtrail>

The trail follows the Gila River riparian corridor, which is dominated by Fremont cottonwood and Gooding's willow. The river was flowing high and fast. The corridor is surrounded by agricultural fields and rural areas, creating habitat diversity that is attractive to many birds. Birds were in abundance here as we expected, and we counted 52 species in just over two hours. Highlights included: a pair of Wood Ducks, 3 American Wigeons, 18 Mallards (16 Northern, a pure Mexican, and a Mexican/Northern intergrade), a flock of 25 Green-winged Teals, 5 Cooper's Hawks, 11 Red-tailed Hawks, 96 Sandhill Cranes, 7 White-winged Doves, 2 Greater Roadrunners, 1 Merlin, 1 Peregrine Falcon, 1 Prairie Falcon, 3 Vermilion Flycatchers, 2 Hutton's Vireos, many Northern Rough-winged Swallow, 43 Western Bluebirds, and 1 Crissal Thrasher. White-crowned Sparrows were abundant; we estimated a total of 650 birds in the mile we covered. Most were "Gambel's", though we did have several of the dark-lored oriantha subspecies mixed in. We also observed two races of Song Sparrow (fallax and montana/merrilli), 31 Lincoln's Sparrows, 2 Green-tailed Towhees, and many Western and Eastern meadowlarks.

From the Duncan Birding Trail, we went as far south as we could go for the day, which was to locations southeast of Duncan and Franklin along US 70. The elevation steadily rose up to 3800' in these areas. The main attraction was Railroad Wash Road, where an Upland Sandpiper was found in July 2016. Before we hit Railroad Wash Road, we birded a private pond from the east side of US 70. This pond is 2.4 miles south of Duncan and is always worth checking when in the area. American Coots and a "Mexican" Mallard were the only waterbirds present, but the immediate area held two sapsuckers, including a definite Red-naped, in pines surrounding the pond. Other birds were an American Kestrel, Loggerhead Shrike, Verdin, and Crissal Thrasher.



Figure 1. Railroad Wash Road. 17 February 2017. Photo by Tommy DeBardeleben

RAILROAD WASH & SCORDATO RANCH ROAD

Just south of the pond along US 70, we accessed Railroad Wash Road, which we drove 2.1 mi. east to County Line Road. This road traverses both Greenlee County and Hidalgo County, New Mexico. We took it south 0.27 mi. to Franklin Road, and then Franklin Road 2 mi. west back to US 70. Habitats in this area included riparian along the Gila River, farm fields, and desert scrub. Highlights were 4 Northern Harriers in one small areawith tall grassland habitat, 190 Sandhill Cranes, 1 Greater Roadrunner, 1 Loggerhead Shrike, 5 Chihuahuan Ravens (identified by higher calls than Common Ravens and also by smaller size). We had a view of both species perched side by side in a raven-filled cottonwood. Other birds included Vesper and Savannah sparrows, and both Eastern and Western meadowlarks.

From Railroad Wash and Franklin roads, we went 1.8 mi farther south on US 70 very close to New Mexico and accessed Scordato Ranch Road, a primitive dirt road just above 3800 ft., 5.2 mi south of Duncan. This area is dominated by desert scrub and semidesert grassland. The road, which is in decent shape with a few rough spots, goes into New Mexico after a few miles, but we stayed on the Arizona side. The grassland areas west of the road looked good for Scaled Quail, perhaps Bendire's Thrasher, or even Short-eared Owl. A half-hour of birding resulted in common desert birds such as 4 Verdins, 2 Black-tailed Gnatcatchers, 11 Black-throated Sparrow Sparrows, Abert's Towhees, as well as Crissal Thrasher, 4 Brewer's Sparrows, and 3 Sagebrush Sparrows. Two of the Sagebrush Sparrows were singing.

RETURN TO DUNCAN

After birding the locations south of Duncan around Franklin, we returned to Duncan where we drove north on AZ 75. We birded at a few stops around Duncan north of the Gila River, including Old Virden Road and the Stagecoach Loop. Along these roads we observed 195 more Sandhill Cranes and a flock of 45 Lark Buntings. At one point, Caleb saw a flock of about 60 Horned Larks flying in distant fields. Surprisingly, these were the only Horned Larks detected on the entire trip, despite scanning many fields.

We continued north of Duncan on AZ 75. On the way we scoured potential habitats along Apache Grove and the York Valley to bird in the future. Habitats consisted of more agricultural fields and land, desert scrub, and endless riparian habitat along the Gila River, very similar in habitat and elevation to Duncan. One could bird this area for days, but with only two days we kept it brief. We added 40 more Sandhill Cranes along this stretch.

BIG LUE MOUNTAINS

Once we got to the town of Three Way, located at the junction of AZ 75, AZ 78, and US 191, about 18 mi. north of Duncan, we headed northeast on AZ 78 towards the Big Lue Mountains. While scrutinizing a high-soaring Red-tailed Hawk, Caleb spied White-throated Swifts near the hawk. At least 25 distant swallows were also flying around but were too far away to identify.

Along AZ 78, we were amazed at the scenery as we rapidly rose in elevation from 3640 ft at Three Way to over 6000 ft in the Big Lue Mountains, a much underbirded mountain range (See 2014 AZFO Expedition report). Juniper- and chaparral-covered hills deserved a stop along the way, and we added species such as Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Canyon Towhee, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, and Spotted Towhee to our trip. Getting into the pine and oak forests in the Apache National Forest, our first stop was the Blackjack Canyon Campground and Picnic Area at roughly 6200 ft and about 14 mi from Three Way. In May 2014, the AZFO conducted a three-person weekend expedition into this area, and Eric Hough's summary of this trip inspired us to visit it at a different season, "The Big Lue Mountains," Hough wrote, "are a small mountain range at the southern tip of the Apache National Forest, situated south of the White Mountains and just north of the classic southeastern AZ 'sky island' ranges. From desert-scrub and semi-desert grassland at the base of the mountains, the life zones proceed up through chaparral to pine-oak-juniper forest topping at around 7,000 ft elevation on the tallest hills. The vegetation is an overlap of plant species found in both the 'Sky Islands' and White Mountains/ Mogollon Rim regions, with dominant tree species including ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*), Chihuahuan pine (*P. leiophylla*), two-needled Colorado pinyon pine (*P. edulis*) and apparent three-needled Mexican pinyon pine (*P. cembroides*), alligator juniper (*Juniperus deppeana*), and several oak species including silverleaf (*Quercus hypoleucoides*), netleaf (*Q. rugosa*), gray (*Q. grisea*), Emory (*Q. emoryi*), Arizona white (*Q. arizonica*), and Gambel's (*Q. gambelii*)."



Figure 2. Blackjack Campground. 17 February 2017. Photo by Tommy DeBardleben

BLACKJACK

Once at Blackjack we birded the campground, the area north of the campground, and then farther east into canyons where there was flowing water. The highlights of our 1.5 hours in this area were: 2-3 Acorn Woodpeckers, 2 Red-naped Sapsuckers, 1 Hairy Woodpecker, 5 Mexican Jays, 4 Mountain Chickadees, 1 Bridled Titmouse, 12 White-breasted and 18 Pygmy Nuthatches, 2 Golden-crowned Kinglets, 5 Olive Warblers (2 adult males and 3 female types). The female types were noted traveling together in a group, and about 20 Dark-eyed Juncos (most of which were the “Gray-headed” race, but Caleb did pick out 2 of the similar, but bicolored bill, “Red-backed” race).

SEEP SPRING CANYON

From Blackjack Campground, we went 2 mi farther north to Martinez Ranch Road on the west side of AZ 78. From there we drove 0.7 mi along Martinez Ranch Road to access Seep Spring Canyon. This was another spot covered by the 2014 AZFO expedition and described in Hough’s summary. At about 6000 ft in elevation, this canyon was beautiful. An active creek flowed along the entire canyon that we had to cross multiple times. We spent over an hour at this location walking up the canyon about 0.7 mi.

As we followed the trail, we came upon the first crossing sooner than expected. Caleb was being loud, having fun, and even screaming as he was crossing the creek. I almost fainted when I looked just past Caleb to see an adult Northern Goshawk sitting calmly in an oak. The Goshawk continued to sit there, unfazed by our presence. As I crossed the creek, it didn’t mind me either. After a few minutes, the Goshawk flew a short distance to another spot along the trail and creek. Once again it didn’t appear to care about our presence, and we admired this gorgeous bird at a close distance, near eye level. We hiked farther up the creek in hopes of finding Montezuma Quail in good-looking habitat without luck. Other highlights here included 7 Acorn Woodpeckers, 9 Mexican Jays, 2 more Mountain Chickadees, and 2 Bridled Titmice.



Figure 3. Northern Goshawk. 17 February 2017. Photo by Tommy DeBardleben

COAL CREEK CAMPGROUND, BLACKJACK OVERLOOK & CLIFTON

About 2.4 miles north of Martinez Ranch Road on AZ 78, we made a short stop at Coal Creek Campground where the habitat looked promising, but the bird activity was low as the daylight was fading. On the way back to Duncan we stopped at Blackjack Overlook on AZ 78, which is an eBird hotspot. This scenic overlook is just south of the turnoff to Black Jack Canyon Campground and is 13.6 mi east of Three Way when traveling on AZ 78. White-throated Swifts and Canyon Wrens highlighted this stop, one of our last in a busy day of birding.

On Sunday, we got off to another early start and had another long birding day, before heading back west to Phoenix after dark. We had plans to bird along US 191 from the town of Clifton to the south and then the forested mountains to the north with the northern limit of the trek being Juan Miller Campgrounds. As we made our way toward Clifton on US 191, we made a quick stop at a desert area to add birds to the trip which were Curve-billed Thrasher (palmeri subspecies) and Cactus Wren. Once in Clifton, which is the county seat of Greenlee County, I was impressed with the mine there, the mining community, and the scenery that went along with it.



Figure 4. Eagle Creek Canyon. 18 February 2017.
Photo by Tommy DeBardeleben

LOWER EAGLE CREEK

We then drove down Lower Eagle Creek Road to access Lower Eagle Creek, our most anticipated stop of the day. Lower Eagle Creek Road was accessed on the south side of US 191, roughly 8.6 mi after heading through Clifton. In 5.5 mi the road descends from 5100 ft to 3600 ft at Lower Eagle Creek. The road is composed of dirt and is a little rough in a few places, but most vehicles can handle it. Lower Eagle Creek is a picturesque riparian area surrounded by tall cliffs and canyons, probably one of the neatest places we've seen in Arizona. The riparian area was dominated by willow, cottonwood, and sycamore, with some mesquite groves nearby. Although bird diversity wasn't huge, we had several highlights here. They included 2 White-throated Swifts, a first-year male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Gray Flycatcher, 4 Hutton's Vireos, 17 Bridled Titmice, 11 Canyon Wrens, 2 Hermit Thrushes, our first 2 Orange-crowned Warblers, and 2 Painted Redstarts.

After birding Lower Eagle Creek, we made a few stops along Lower Eagle Creek Rd. on the way out, where we birded juniper, desert scrub, and chaparral habitats. Highlights included Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Bridled and Juniper titmouse, Bushtit, Rock and Canyon wrens, a singing Sage Thrasher, Canyon Towhee, and Rufous-crowned Sparrow.

APACHE NATIONAL FOREST

After the Lower Eagle Creek area, we drove for over an hour into the Apache National Forest to access our northernmost birding spot of the day, the Lower and Upper Juan Miller Campgrounds. From Clifton, we drove 30.6 mi on US 191 to the turnoff to Juan Miller Road, where the campgrounds were accessed a few miles to the east. As we drove along the highway, one of the most common birds in the high elevations was Mexican Jay. We were impressed with the mixed forested habitat at the Juan Miller Campgrounds as we birded it for just over an hour. This area consisted of pine, oak, and Arizona sycamore at an elevation of roughly 5800 ft. Highlights included 3 Acorn Woodpeckers, 2 Hairy Woodpeckers, 6 Mexican Jays, 2 Brown Creepers, and a flock of 18 Pine Siskins.

GRANVILLE CAMPGROUND

While working our way back south on US 191, we stopped at several coniferous habitats. A particularly productive stop was a drainage with ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, Arizona sycamore, and Gambel's oak at an elevation of 6680 ft. It didn't seem busy on the west side of the highway, but to the east activity was hopping. This drainage was about a fourth of a mile north of Granville Campground and can be birded easily from the campground or roadside. It is found when the highway takes a sharp turn to the west. Caleb scanned a Dark-eyed Junco group to find a surprising Yellow-eyed Junco. This discovery may be a first record for Greenlee County, and it was certainly the most significant find of our trip. We worked hard to successfully document it with photos. This highlight was also joined by other great finds: 2 Acorn Woodpeckers, 8 Mexican Jays, 2 Mountain Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and 2 Olive Warblers. One of the Olive Warblers was a stunning male, which gave us up-close views while we were standing on US 191 above the drainage. The drainage was 20.3 miles north of Clifton and was accessed where the highway sharply turned west. This is 0.3 miles north of the turnoff to the nearby Granville Campground.



Figure 5. Yellow-eyed Junco. 18 February 2017.
Photo by Tommy DeBardeleben

We then went stopped at Granville Campground for a few minutes, where we saw 4 Acorn Woodpeckers, 4 Steller's Jays, 4 Mexican Jays, Canyon Wren, and another Olive Warbler. After slowly making our way back to Clifton, we birded the San Francisco River in the late afternoon. We covered mostly riparian habitat along the Frisco Avenue side of the river after turning onto Frisco via Zorilla Street. This area is between 3400 and 3500 ft. Activity wasn't very high as it was nearing dusk, but we did find Common Merganser, Sharp-shinned Hawk, 38 White-throated Swifts, and Caleb spotted a Wilson's Snipe.

The final stop of our trip was along AZ 78, just east of Three Way. We birded a desert scrub and grassy area just off of the highway that turned out to have a lot of bird life. Several mesquite-surrounded tanks were also in the area, one with enough water to attract a flock of 13 Green-winged Teal. In this area we also had Loggerhead Shrike, Rock and Bewick's wrens, Loggerhead Shrikes, 2 Crissal Thrashers, Brewer's, White-crowned, Black-throated, and Vesper sparrows; and both Western and Eastern meadowlarks.

CONCLUSION

Our evaluation was that the trip was a great success and added to the knowledge about species and birding locations that had been gained by five AZFO field expeditions to parts of Greenlee County since 2007. Combined, we detected 106 species. We had a few misses that we consider surprising, such as no heron species, no Ferruginous Hawks in all the fields and grassy areas, and a few other birds. Greenlee County doesn't have many sources of open water, so it's tough to find waterbirds there. Our favorite bird was the Northern Goshawk. The rarest bird of the trip was the Yellow-eyed Junco, which is probably a first Greenlee County record. Greenlee County is an epic county that needs to be covered more often. There is a lot to be discovered, and there are many habitats to bird in. I highly recommend Greenlee County birding.

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