



## **AZFO Student Scholarship Recipient Essay 2019**

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About a year ago or so my great friend Caleb Strand told me about AZFO's scholarship program. At the time the next AZFO meeting was to be held in Ajo, but I couldn't make it that time. I wanted to make sure I could on this one, which was in Flagstaff. I've become a bit of a sucker for the Mogollon Rim area of Arizona, despite large expanses of relatively low diversity (pure Ponderosa Pine woodland). Most of my lifer potential was vagrants, but this was also my first AZFO meeting. I was really excited when I saw the scholarship committee accepted my application.

I drove up to Flagstaff with Caleb early Friday the 20th to Mormon Lake overlook. Most kids wanted to go to Nevada to raid Area 51 that day, but I wanted to go birding. We talked to Dara Vasquez a little bit on the phone on the way there. The conversation ended on Northern Goshawks. Since we were going to Mormon Lake, I expected wind, and was hoping for the longshot Common Crane (I call it the Mormon Crane). We didn't get the crane, but we did see a Swainson's Hawk which was pretty cool. We also could see lots of swallows flying over the lake. We hit up another lake after that called Ashurst Lake. This place brings back memories for me, as just last year I had fun with confusing meadowlarks, Mountain Bluebirds, Common Black-Hawk, Merriam's Turkeys, Golden Eagles, a Prairie Merlin, and Purple Martins. This time around my highlights were Vesper Sparrows, Common Mergansers, a juvenile Peregrine Falcon chasing a Red-necked Phalarope, and an Osprey. The last of which is one of my all-time favorite species, as well as being the bird that essentially got me into birding. Caleb let me borrow his camera so I was able to get decent shots of the Osprey in flight.

Next up we stopped at Marshall Lake, which was the last of the Mogollon lake trifecta to bird. However, most of the highlights involved insects, such as Rocky Mountain Yellowjacket-Fly, Western Band-winged Hover Fly, Spotted Spreadwing, and Plains Forktail. Once again, we had a lot of swallows. I also interacted with Laurie Nessel and Janet Weitzman.

After the field trip Caleb and I headed back to Mormon Lake to bird the riparian sheltered by the cliff face. We didn't find anything too rare, but I got killer shots of a Townsend's Solitaire that stayed close, and I saw a Virginia's Warbler too. We also observed a Tundra Peregrine Falcon harass a North American Peregrine, which was epic. The Tundra subspecies is substantially lighter in color than the other subsp. A flock of White-throated Swifts was flying along the cliffs, sometimes above us, and over the lake. As usual I couldn't get pics of these lightning fast birds, and even worse Caleb's camera's battery passed away. So, no photos of one of my favorite species ever. Additionally, we had



Western Tanagers, Dark-lored White-crowned Sparrow, Green-tailed Towhees, and a Black-chinned Sparrow. The last of which was a county bird as well as one that I haven't seen much of. The riparian had a dense understory that looked good as habitat for potential vagrants like Worm-eating Warbler, Ovenbird, Swainson's Warbler, Mourning Warbler, and other terrestrial warblers. The habitat consisted of predominantly Arizona Black Walnut, plus Boxelder Maple, Gambel Oak; pockets with a few Fremont Cottonwoods & willows (Salix), and Arizona Wild-Grapevine, ferns, and grasses as the understory.

We met up with Dara Vasquez and Eric Hough at Lower Lake Mary. The highlight was 12 Forster's Tern, which were a lot of fun to watch in flight. Terns are among my favorite bird families- in fact my favorite species in the world is the Arctic Tern. That thing flies over 1 million miles in its lifetime, absolutely insane... We had about 1,300 swallows, mostly Violet-green - other than that was a couple hundred Barn Swallows and 500 swallow sp. Northern Harrier was another fun bird. The biggest highlight was that Dara gave me food; something I hadn't had since early morning. We then went over to Upper Lake Mary. There we had a pair of Caspian Terns ; basically, my second favorite bird (okay maybe Golden Eagle). The Caspian is the largest tern in the world, with a huge crimson bill, 4 ft. wingspan, black outer primaries, and a short square tail. Bald Eagle was pretty neat too, but I've seen countless in Alaska.

In the evening I got to meet Lauren Harter, Chrissy Kondrat, and other people. I was able to discuss how I got into birding, and I shared some of my memorable encounters. The highlight was Dara losing a foosball bet so she had to ca-caw at the meeting the next day.

We got up early in the morning to arrive at NAU before the meeting and bird. We had highlights like Mountain Chickadees, Wilson's Warbler, and Pygmy Nuthatches.

Before the meeting started, I was able to meet the other young birders and talk to people. During the meeting we covered topics such as Yellow-billed Cuckoos in SE AZ, Golden eagles breeding in Arizona, the ongoing habitat restoration project at Kachina Wetlands, Pinyon Jays, and Hairy Woodpeckers' preference to a specific Ponderosa Pine environment. Dara also stayed true to the bet, she even ca-cawed twice! What a champ! Lunch was interesting as I helped Dara with spruce & fir identification. These different genera of trees often get misidentified for each other. During our break, I talked to Richard Fray about guiding. This is something I've been intrigued by since becoming a more knowledgeable birder. Considering my comfort around a good size group of people, I feel the profession would fit me well. Richard told me that you either love it, or hate it, and you really have to experience it to come to the decision. After the meeting, I met up with Caleb and the other young birders for a visual identification team competition. This was actually the first year that people were split up into teams. Our name was the September Sabine's Gulls, since most Sabine's Gulls seen that month in Arizona are juveniles, which is what we are (I don't think anybody got the reference though). Our team actually won, and I was surprised at how well I did. I was frequently able to put a name to species before Caleb,



and explain field marks pretty well. We then did a raffle that was hosted by Gordon Karre. I won a fluffy stuffed animal Cardinal (thanks to Dara's help), who I named Brad. I also was able to take a box full of magazines and some books for free afterwards.

We enjoyed a social hour and banquet in the evening. I mainly talked to Ryan O'Donnell, Lauren Harter, and Eric Hough. I talked about my home county- Matanuska Susitna, AK- and its potential for certain birds, as well as the rarities it's had in the past. The banquet had good food, dessert, and the topic was on Native Americans' relationship with birds. It was fascinating despite pictures of dead birds (as blankets).

On the last day I did another field trip with Caleb; working our way east in Coconino County. At our first stop I received my best views, and first photos of a Marsh Wren. It was hopping around on rocks along the shoreline of a small pond, and jumped in the water for a quick bath. At the same spot I got sick flight shots of a Northern Pintail. Another highlight was Bank Swallow. We drove up the road to a narrow riparian spot in midst of One-seed Juniper woodland. Here I finally got pics of Gray Vireo, and received another county bird in Cassin's Finch (still a heard only species).

Our next stop was Babbitt Tank, and our best bird was a Loggerhead Shrike. Shrikes are a predatory passerine that I never get tired of seeing, and I've had the epic experience of 2 Northern Shrikes fighting right above my head in my Alaskan yard a few years ago. In the Raymond Ranch area, I finally got an overdue lifer: Sage Thrasher. Other highlights were Yellow-headed Blackbird, Sharp-shinned Hawk, and Western Wood-Pewee.

We had a bunch of cool migrants at Meteor Crater RV Park, but nothing rare unfortunately. Many Western Tanagers, Western Wood-Pewee, Hammond's, Gray, Western, and Willow Flycatcher, Yellow-breasted Chat, Red-naped Sapsuckers, Hermit Thrushes, and Green-tailed Towhee highlighted our lists. We also had a hummingbird that was likely Costa's.

Our last stop that was a part of the field trip was a hotel with a gorgeous garden in Winslow. We were here to look for a Blackpoll Warbler that Richard Fay found on the Navajo County field trip. We didn't find it, but I got my best photos of Plumbeous Vireo, and got White-winged Dove, which is local in Coconino.

Caleb, Keith Camper, Tracy McCarthey, and I went to Cholla Lake, in Navajo County, where we found 3 Sabine's Gulls! They were flying around, showing off the black "M" on the wings. We also had Caspian & Forster's Terns. Eric Hough joined us to get Sabine's for Navajo.

Our final stop was Tucker Tank Flat, which didn't have much, but we did find a Black-and-White Warbler, my 5th one for Arizona, and first for Coconino County.

I really enjoyed my first AZFO expedition! Special thanks to Lauren Harter, Chrissy Kondrat, and Erika Wilson for accepting me for a scholarship. Thanks to Caleb Strand for letting me

borrow his beastly camera and driving me there. Thanks to everyone who was able to make the conference happen, and putting all the hard work and research to be able to present! I am very excited for the next meeting!

