



AZFO Student Scholarship Recipient Essay 2014

Ameya Thatte
Middle school student, Mesa

In 2014, I was one of the three people accepted for the AZFO youth scholarship to attend the annual AZFO conference, and the youngest of them all. This meant I had the opportunity to attend the AZFO annual meeting, which was held in Globe-Miami this year. I learned of this scholarship from my mentor, Joy Dingley from Desert Rivers Audubon. I applied, and a few weeks later, I got a reply from Lauren Harter of AZFO saying I have been accepted, and I accepted the offer right away.

The annual conference was from October 3-5, but I missed the field trips on Friday the third of October, because I had school. I was able to attend the conference on the fourth, and go to a field trip into the Pinal Mountains with ASU's Dr. David Pearson on the fifth.

Finally, there I was on October 4, 2014, at the Bullion Plaza Cultural Center, surrounded by experienced birders, researchers, professors, and others. Except for a couple of people, I had not met anyone at this conference before. I took my nametag, and was greeted by Lauren Harter and Kurt Radamaker. Soon after, the conference began and I took my seat. Several experts from different backgrounds and places were all prepared with the latest birding news. I had a lot to learn!

Kurt Radamaker started off the meeting. He was followed by Dr. Pierre Deviche of ASU who spoke about the Gale Monson Research Grants. The next two speakers were recipients of the Gale Monson Research Grants; Ariana LaPorte, who used the grant to study Gray Hawk nesting on the San Pedro River and Chris McCreedy who used it to study Sagebrush and Bell's Sparrow differences. The following speaker was David Vander Pluym who spoke about birds at Lake Havasu. During the subsequent break, I was able to grab a snack and talk with some of the people at the conference. After the break, a familiar face was up to present. It was Chrissy Kondrat-Smith, who I had met at few years back on a Christmas Bird Count. She spoke about Gray Vireos at Kofa National Wildlife Refuge. After that presentation, there was a presentation on Mexican Ducks coming into Arizona by David Brown. The subsequent presentation was a report from the Arizona Bird Committee by Kurt Radamaker, followed by the finances of AZFO. After all the information, there was a change in activity for everyone. A very difficult quiz on bird calls was conducted by Dr. Deviche. I didn't get anything right! It was noon by this time, so lunch break was announced.

After a meal, I returned to the meeting. Next up there was a report on visits to the AZFO website. It was interesting how so many people as far as Mumbai visited the website. The following presentation was Dr. Deviche talking about a study on psychological effects of capture for banding on Rufous-crowned Sparrows. This was done testing hormones in



blood samples taken from the birds, and there was clear indication that this process is not easy for the sparrows. Next up was a video on Lesser Nighthawks nesting in Larry Arbanas's yard, but because of technical difficulties, the schedule was switched around a little. There was a break half an hour early during which the technical issues were resolved and the video was presented. I would have never guessed that nighthawks are ground-nesters, or that they blend in so well with the dirt. The following presentation was on a possible AZFO project by Carol Beardmore followed by an in-the-experiment study on Purple Martins by Jennie MacFarland. I learned two important things in that presentation; one was that there are Purple Martins in the Sonoran Desert, and the other was the Martins breed in the Sonoran Desert, in Saguaro cavities. The next presentation was on citizen science data by Doug Jenness, one on the AZFO newsletter by Pierre Deviche, and finally, a talk about the field expeditions the next day by Eric Hough. After that were raffle drawings and results on the photo and audio ID quizzes.

After the presentations, there was a trip to a new saloon for a social hour, but with my twenty-first birthday years away, I didn't go. I went back to the motel room for a little bit, but I was back at the banquet that evening with Dr. Charles Van Riper III as the keynote speaker. Dr. Riper spoke about a very important topic right now, changing bird populations due to factors like climate change and habitat loss. After a day of great presentations, I said goodbye to the wonderful people at AZFO including Kurt Rademaker and Lauren Harter before returning to the motel to get some sleep. I had to wake up early the next morning to go on a birding trip to Pinal Mountain.

I woke up the next day and quickly got ready to meet the group for the field trip. After everyone got there, we took a drive up the mountain, with many stops along the way. We were led by Dr. David Pearson. It was a 7500 foot climb on narrow dirt rows, but it was worth it! I saw three birds for the first time: Red-breasted Nuthatch, Northern Flicker, and Townsend's Warbler. The trip was a great experience, one that I will always remember.