



AZFO Student Scholarship Recipient Essay 2016

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When my good friend Joshua Smith offered to let me tag along on his adventure out to Yuma, AZ for AZFO's 10th annual meeting I didn't hesitate to answer him with an enthusiastic "Heck yeah!", especially after he mentioned that we'd have the chance at birding the Salton Sea - an overdue location lifer. Not only would I get the chance at birding some awesome areas with one of my best friends but I would also get to hang out with other awesome people and meet a few new birders. And to add onto all of the exciting reasons to go, I had never gone to an AZFO meeting, yet I have lived and birded in Arizona my whole life.

The meeting was to be held in the southwest corner of the state, an area I hadn't explored much, and one of my favorite things about birding is getting familiar with different areas and the status and distribution of each species in that region. However, other than the addition of having the Colorado River running through it, Yuma is very similar bird-life-wise to Buckeye, where I live.

To start off the trip, Josh and I met Lauren Harter and our fellow scholarship recipients at a Chili's in Yuma. During and well after dinner we discussed many common subjects to young birders such as how we got into birding, what we plan on doing with our lives, what we found fun about birding, and how it's affected our lives.

To start the first official day of the AZFO meeting, Josh and I got up early in the morning to head over to Mittry Lake, a location I hadn't been to before. Mittry Lake has some of the most extensive cattail/reed habitat in Arizona and is home to six species in the family Rallidae - Black, Ridgway's, and Virginia rails, Sora, Common Gallinule, and of course American Coot. Arriving at the "Rail Overlook" just above a very extensive river of reeds we could hear five of the six species of rallids calling in response to each other. Although we weren't in the peak calling time of year for Black Rails we managed to hear one distantly giving its growling calls. Before heading back to the hotel for the beginning of the meeting we drove further down the lake to where the water opened up where we noted cool things such as increasing numbers of waterfowl and seeing what was perhaps the last strong wave of Barn Swallows that came through the Lower Colorado River for the fall (including 80+ individuals).

Upon arriving back at the hotel I got to catch up with some of my good birding friends who I hadn't seen in a while and even meet some very cool birders who I hadn't met before including Janet Witzeman - who some might call the mother of Arizona birding! The meeting started with several presentations including one on hummingbirds and their mating



displays, the expansion of Gray Hawks in Arizona, and the current status of California Condors. After a break and some more presentation, Josh and I headed out to get lunch before more presentations started. After finishing lunch relatively early Josh said we should spend the hour we had left before the meeting's break was over birding! The enthusiasm of Josh is unlike that of any other birder I know. Josh doesn't get to go out birding very often but when he does he birds like it's his last day of birding, and that kind of birding is motivational and exciting! So Josh and I ran out to the Yuma East Wetlands where we spent the next forty minutes scanning through mixed feeding flocks of Passerines in the canopy of the large cottonwoods and willows. Upon starting our search we heard a late/wintering Yellow Warbler calling but things got a bit more exciting when I spotted Josh' lifer Black-and-white Warbler moving about quickly. A couple of other neat observations were a late/wintering Bell's Vireo and an Audubon's x Myrtle Warbler intergrade. Once we got back to the hotel we listened to a few more presentations before having a lengthy break. On our break birders sat back, had a drink, introduced themselves to new people, and shared their stories and experiences. Then came dinner, where Da Boyz prepared a great Italian supper for us, along with some delicious dessert! After enjoying our meals we listened to one last presentation by Dr. Osvel Hinojosa-Huerte on managing habitat along the Lower Colorado River Delta which was very informational. To end the night I sat around a table with a few other birders and had a good ol' time.

On our last day of the AZFO meeting we attended a trip to the Salton Sea, led by Kurt Radamaker. Josh and I were to ride out to southern California (where the Salton Sea resides) with Kurt and Doug Jenness. The Salton Sea is a spot where I had never been and always wanted to go to. It holds some awesome concentrations of shorebirds and gulls (for being inland at least) and has the only reliable population of Yellow-footed Gulls in the ABA area! Upon arriving at the sea at dawn, many Ring-billed and California Gulls were flying out for the day, some of the highest concentrations of Cattle Egrets and White-faced Ibis I had ever seen were flying out into the fields for the day, and some majestic Sandhill Cranes flew over. Our first stop of the day was to the Sonny Bono National Wildlife Refuge on the south side of the lake. Highlights at this spot included a continuing Lesser Black-backed Gull, a few Western Gulls (rare inland from the Pacific coast), and a "getting-late" Dark-colored White-crowned Sparrow (presumably of the oriantha subspecies). My highlight, however, was counting hard (including all birds but especially gulls and shorebirds), sharpening my ID skills. Working our way north up the lake we made a couple of other stops producing many more birds, including my lifer Yellow-footed Gulls, a Neotropic Cormorant (my first for California), and a rare (for the Salton Sea) Horned Grebe. We also heard some Ridgway's Rails in the nearby marshes which was a highlight for me because this is one of my favorite species of birds. After a couple more brief stops we called it a day and worked our way to Yuma and then home.

Overall the AZFO meeting was a great experience for me and I highly recommend going if you haven't! I learned a lot from the many presentations, I met some very kind birders, and it got me out into a part of Arizona (and California) I have seldom been to. Thank you Kurt Radamaker and Lauren Harter for making it possible for me, and the other young birders, to

go to this awesome meeting, it has sparked the beginning of what will no doubt be many more visits to ornithological meetings! I would also like to thank my good friend Joshua Smith for accompanying me on another awesome adventure!

