

AZFO SHOREBIRD ID WORKSHOPS

Phoenix to Gila Bend, Maricopa County – 17 August 2019

By Troy Corman and Caleb Strand



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Several bird groups provide more ID challenges than others. These include sparrows, *Empidonax* flycatchers, female and juvenile hummingbirds, and of course the ultimate... Gulls! Continuing with this theme, many shorebirds can be tricky to ID, especially in fall. With that, AZFO decided it was time to organize another “in the field” shorebird ID workshop. To encourage more participation, we actually established one each in central and southeastern Arizona.

Late August provides the peak fall period when shorebirds are migrating in good numbers and variety in Arizona, plus you can often see adults and juveniles going through molt this time of year. An additional element adding to challenges in early fall shorebirding in southern and western Arizona, is the relentless sun and 100°+ temperatures. This uncomfortable environment

then leads to annoying heat distortion when viewing through scopes and documenting good finds with photographs. There is just not a lot of shade where most shorebirds congregate! Thorough shorebirding also takes extra time to carefully sort through the more abundant species to pick out similar, rarer species foraging or roosting among them.

One primary goal for the day was to observe and study 15 or more species of shorebirds. We met the nine eager workshop participants (Alex Balan, Carol Beardmore, Jared Conaway, Lorna Dyer, Brian Ison, Gordon Karre, Tom Locascio, Janine McCabe, and Rachel Stringham) soon after sunrise on 17 August at the Glendale Recharge Ponds. We were also pleasantly graced with veteran shorebirder, Kurt Radamaker, who co-led AZFO's previous shorebird ID workshop nearly a decade ago. As we approached the first pond, Caleb began pointing out and explaining the fine points of adult and juvenile plumage and molt characteristics of the peeps and other shorebirds we encountered. We also noted as with other bird species, most shorebirds also have unique calls to aid in their identification.



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We sorted through over 500 shorebirds and noted 10 species at this location. Most of these were just two species, LEAST SANDPIPER and BLACK-NECKED STILTS, a routine theme at all of



Semipalmated Sandpiper © Gordon Karre

the sites we visited through the morning. We had good comparisons of both GREATER and LESSER YELLOWLEGS and among the masses of Least Sandpipers, were a handful of WESTERN SANDPIPERS and Caleb discovered a rare, but regular, SEMIPALMATED SANDPIPER. As it foraged in shallow water, Kurt pointed out a good behavioral clue for Semipalmated Sandpiper, it often feeds by swinging its bill from side to side, much like a spoonbill or avocet when they

forage. Additional shorebird species observed included AMERICAN AVOCET, KILLDEER, WILSON'S PHALAROPE and SPOTTED SANDPIPER.

Other avian highlights here included the first Savannah Sparrow of the fall season, a Bald Eagle, and the ultimate shorebird terrorizer, a Peregrine Falcon. Also noted were nine species of waterfowl, not bad for mid-August in Arizona! This included, eclipsed-plumaged Gadwall, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, and a Mexican Duck keenly picked out by Caleb.

We said our goodbyes to Kurt and carpooled to our next shorebird site at the Lower River Road ponds near the rural community of Palo Verde. These set of ponds are notorious for either being dry or too full to attract good numbers and variety of shorebirds. However, we were pleasantly surprised to find one of the ponds to be just about perfect with a good mixture of shallow water and mud flats! We noted a concentration of over 400 shorebirds of 12 species. New species for the day included SEMIPALMATED PLOVER and our fourth peep species, BAIRD'S SANDPIPER. Caleb also pointed out the very tricky ID of an adult SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER and discovered yet another, rare Semipalmated Sandpiper.

With the sun getting higher and temperature climbing, we then proceeded to the Gila Bend area to a set of private, dairy sludge ponds (shorebird favorites in AZ!) where Caleb had previously obtained permission to access. We estimated about 375 shorebirds of 11 species here adding three new species: LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER, SOLITARY SANDPIPER, and a lone WILLET. As it was now late morning and temperatures were over 100 degrees, we said goodbye to some of our participants.



Wilson's & Red-necked Phalaropes © Troy Corman

Our final destination was visiting several nearby irrigation runoff ponds and drains on the Paloma Ranch complex. With over 330 individuals of 10 shorebird species, we added our final species, a lone RED-NECKED PHALAROPE darting and spinning among its fellow Wilson's Phalaropes (great comparison). Now that it was well past the noon hour, the remaining groups decided they were maxed out with the relentless sun, heat, and now hunger.

So how did we do with one of our main goals for the day? With only visiting four locations in southwestern Maricopa Co., we sorted through nearly 1,700 individual shorebirds of 17 species. We found shorebirds at many of the sites particularly cooperative, allowing closer than expected and leisure study opportunities. Most participants added new species to their year's list, some new County birds, and a few even added life birds!

We found the group to be pleasant and eager, an enjoyable combination for a workshop. We hope everyone learned at least a few ID tips and will take these into the field and use them when they encounter future shorebird flocks. Also, don't miss the opportunity to share the new

knowledge with others. Another main goal was to have participants feel more confident and will never feel the need to utter the words, “Oh, I don’t do shorebirds, especially those little peeps.”

We want to thank all participants for their support of AZFO and its endeavors and look forward to seeing you in the field...

Associated eBird checklists with more details and photos:

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S59358526>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S59358521>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S59358518>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S59358516>

Lake Cochise and Twin Lakes Golf Course, Cochise County – 25 August 2019

By Doug Jenness and Keith Kamper

Not many easily accessible locations exist in southeastern Arizona where a wide diversity of shorebirds can be found. One of the most consistent is Lake Cochise and the adjacent Twin Lakes Golf Course at Willcox. That's why we selected this location for a shorebird ID workshop on 25 August. Ten participants, both from the Phoenix and Tucson areas, joined us for a rewarding morning studying more than 700 shorebirds of 12 species. The shorebirds included KILLDEER, BLACK-NECKED STILT, AMERICAN AVOCET, GREATER YELLOWLEGS, LESSER YELLOWLEGS, LONG-BILLED CURLEW, WESTERN SANDPIPER, LEAST SANDPIPER, BAIRD'S SANDPIPER, STILT SANDPIPER, LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER, and WILSON'S PHALAROPE. Most numerous were avocets, an estimated 300, and phalaropes, roughly 250. Many other birds were also enjoyed while we were there, totaling 57 species. The complete eBird checklist is at <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S59268846>



© Doug Jenness

When we assembled near Tucson to organize carpooling to Willcox, we gave each participant a flyer with the silhouettes of shorebirds, each with an identifying label. It was adapted from *The Shorebird Guide* (M. O'Brien, R. Crossley, and K. Karlson. 2006). We suggested that on arriving at Lake Cochise, we first scan with binoculars rather than with scopes to get a feel for the shape, structure, and size of the birds and to choose a familiar bird that could be used as a reference to comparing sizes with other nearby birds. We also encouraged looking at feeding behaviors. Getting a general impression of relative size, shape, and behavior (often referred to as *jizz*), we explained, is more reliable as a starting point than trying to sort out the wide variation of plumages found even in the same species at the same date during migration.

At our first couple of stops as we circled the lake, many birds were backlit, so observing shape, structure, size, and feeding behavior were important to getting a handle on what we were looking at. The larger birds—avocets, stilts, and yellowlegs—were the easiest to learn, as participants worked through the size variations and bill shapes and lengths. We observed the different feeding behaviors, including the avocets' side-to-side swishing of the bill and the dowitchers' "sewing-machine" bill movements. A more challenging task was working out the different feeding behavior of the phalaropes. On the water, their group spinning action was distinct, but

some participants were not as familiar with seeing them feed on land, where they walk quickly, picking and chasing with their heads held low.

When we got around to the southern and eastern edges of the lake, the lighting was better and we were fortunate that many of the smaller sandpipers were relatively close and not flying around a lot. Even the flyover of a Peregrine Falcon and a couple of Northern Harriers didn't disturb them. Least, Western, and Baird's Sandpipers were feeding side-by-side, so we were able to get excellent comparative views of their shape, size, bill structure, and relative wing length. One of the better moments of the day was observing a Stilt Sandpiper, in nearly full alternate plumage,



Baird's & Western Sandpipers © Doug Jenness

feeding next to a Long-billed Dowitcher. Stilt Sandpiper, was a "lifer" for some participants and having the opportunity to compare it directly with a dowitcher was highly appreciated. Seeing avocets in different stages of molt, from nearly complete alternate to basic plumage, gave everyone a chance to see the unevenness in the molting process.

Conditions at Lake Cochise were very good for shorebirds with ample mudflats, spits, and islands, as well as a large area of shallow water. Typically, the turnover of birds at the lake during migration is very high with birds changing every day. What we saw was a one-day, or actually, a half-day snapshot of what can be found there during the annual fall migration.

After completing the one-mile drive around the lake, we checked out the trees and ponds at the adjacent Twin Lakes Golf Course. A brilliant alternate-plumaged male Ruddy Duck was a high point, as well as a very noisy Loggerhead Shrike. A couple of Black-crowned Night-Herons flushed from the marsh. Near the golf course clubhouse, which graciously allowed us to use its lavatory facilities, we observed Rufous and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, as well as Blue Grosbeaks and a Vermilion Flycatcher. During the morning, several Swainson's Hawks soared high overhead.

Assembling at the end of the trip to go over the list of birds we had seen, we also reviewed the activities of the AZFO and distributed to all participants a flyer on the annual meeting in Flagstaff, 20-22 September. Two participants bought the AZFO's publication, *Field Checklist of the Birds of Arizona*.

We want to thank all the participants who were truly a fun group to be with: Nancy Abrams, Joe Aliperti, Jean Andrews, Becky Hiser, Daryl Hiser, Marcia Jepson, Kathleen McCoy, Bob Perna, Laura Royal, Tim Smith.