



## **AZFO Student Scholarship Recipient Essay 2022**

### **Abbie Brozich**

I was thrilled to have received the AZFO Youth Scholarship and be able to attend the 2022 annual meeting. For me, this meeting meant opportunities to become more involved in the community and make new contacts. Since being notified of my acceptance I had been counting down the days until my dad and I were to make the three-hour journey to Safford. I was looking forward to seeing many familiar friends and meeting some face-to-face for the first time. The first night started at the social hour chatting with experienced birders from across the state. It was a perfect start to the trip sitting in the light rain, exchanging stories and iNaturalist observations. We had amusing conversations about difficult pronunciations of bird species and the high activity of NFCs in the area. After socializing, the night ended with scouring dirt roads by a riverbed in search of new toad species for my life list. While there was no shortage of Woodhouse's Toad, it was my first time seeing wild kangaroo rats and a Couch's Spadefoot and a superlative first night of the event.

The next morning was the day of the meeting, and I arrived at the Discovery Park where other birders were already gathering. Right away I was introduced to people with the AZFO such as Troy Cormon, Kerrie Loyd, and Gordon Karre. Once the meeting began, we listened to many presentations covering studies on certain species in the state. I was able to learn about Purple Martins nesting in saguaros and the distribution of Pinyon Jays, as well as the migration habits of Bendire's Thrashers. During the break, we had an opportunity to explore the property and the birds that inhabited it. While the break may have been brief, one of the main highlights was the Crissal Thrashers heard singing in the distant brush. The presentations finished off with an exciting Kahoot quiz, a great way to test our knowledge and create some friendly competition. That evening it was time to attend the meeting banquet, held at a nearby golf course. The highlight of the banquet was certainly the birding beforehand, and while the birding itself was an incredible experience the people made it even better. Birding with Eric Hough and many others was such a fun experience, listening to them skillfully mimic bird calls and joking around with the group. Some species that are always a pleasure to see such as a Common Yellowthroat and Summer Tanager popped up as well. The banquet was another chance to socialize with people, but the main event was the presentation covering Arizona's six seasons, where I learned about our ever-changing state and birds' complex migration patterns.

Our last day in Safford started early in Greenlee County, where I joined a guided expedition in Duncan. This trip allowed me to bird with many friends for the first time, and the species we found were a great success. I was able to see my lifer Dickcissels and Common Black Hawk, as well as state lifer Painted Bunting. While birds were the trip's main focus, I was constantly distracted by other wildlife. Right away I saw Mexican Free-tailed Bats under a bridge, and Western Spotted Orbweaver spiders along the trail. I also got to see my first



Great Purple Hairstreak, a beautiful butterfly species. However, I was not the only one diverging from the group to photograph insects or plants for iNaturalist sightings. It was nice to see how so many of these people had such well-rounded knowledge of multiple areas of wildlife. At the end of the birding expedition, we finished off the day with lunch at the local diner, enjoying one another's company after a good day of birding.

This meeting gave me a unique experience that I will treasure for a very long time and opened up a whole new world of possibilities for me. Being approached by AZGFD for volunteer opportunities, talking with a reporter over a possible interview, and being invited to volunteer with a bird banding program were all new opportunities brought to me thanks to the new connections I was able to make. Even the birding in itself, and being able to bird in both Graham and Greenlee counties for the first time was a great opportunity. In the end, it was the people I interacted with, both new and familiar, that made this weekend special for me.