



AZFO Student Scholarship Recipient Essay 2016

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I have been interested in birds for as long as I can remember, but my appreciation for birds bloomed into a passion when I was twelve. Reading the book called *Birding*, I became fascinated in the world of birds I had not known. Since then, I have participated in my local Audubon Society and other groups, meeting other birders and learning about birds. I met Lauren Harter at the 2014 Western Field Ornithologists Conference in San Diego, CA. We talked and she kindly suggested I apply for a scholarship to an annual meeting of the Arizona Field Ornithologists. Two years later, I gathered up the information and applied. Two weeks later, Lauren informed me that I was a fortunate recipient! Amid celebration and anticipation, I packed up and left with my mother for Yuma, driving several hours from Ventura County in California. The Imperial Dunes welcomed us as we crossed into Arizona. Throughout the meeting, my mother and I had some time to tour the local spots in Yuma – we birded Martha’s Gardens date farm while enjoying some of the famous date smoothies – the scent of dates pervaded the hot air as I watched a Roadrunner sample fermented fruit - and accidentally found a Northern Cardinal that regularly appears in West Wetlands Park.

I was one of five lucky scholarship recipients this year. Surprisingly, four out of the five of us were homeschooled. Lauren organized a “Young Birder” dinner that Friday at a restaurant, creating a great opportunity for us to meet with each other, Lauren, and some other influential people of the board of AZFO. This allowed us to get familiar with each other and become more comfortable in the setting of the AZFO meeting, with a few friendly faces to know. I spoke a lot with each of the recipients, especially Josh, Caleb, and Ruby, not only getting to know each other but also talking about birds and places we recommended to each other. Josh and Caleb were both into owls. Ruby liked owls and was also interested in the California Scrub-Jay. Sierra was an advocate for conservation work. The range of interests among us varied so much, and yet we had lots to share. I loved the people at the meeting. It’s wonderful when all these people with birds in common get together, because everybody has something to share and new ideas are always present. I cannot overstate the importance of making connections in the world of birding. So many marvelous people to know and share birds with!

On the first day, we met as a group outside the Best Western hotel many of us were staying in. We introduced ourselves around the circle and organized ourselves to carpool. I went with the leader, Henry Detwiler. Henry was a very knowledgeable man, and fact that he was well acquainted with the local birding spots made the trip great for all of us. The group of birders was overall very pleasant (birders tend to be), and I enjoyed discussing varied subjects, including botany, music, birds, Argentinean politics, and butterflies with Henry, Nancy, and Carl Tomoff, a Professor Emeritus at Prescott College. Henry drove us around



Yuma, walking us through West Wetlands Park, where I saw my first Common Ground-Dove, and various stops through desert and agricultural areas for raptors and Mountain Plover. The Mexican flag waved distantly at us from over the border, and we used it as a landmark to direct people's binoculars to birds, underscoring our proximity to the border. The trip brought me several new birds, and better, I enjoyed making new friends in the setting of the field trip.

On the second day, the grand meeting began! All the birders and ornithologists and biologists sat down together to listen to an assortment of scientific presentations by various people. One of my favorites was one studying the flight displays of several Western hummingbirds. The videos of displaying hummingbirds astounded me. Gorgetts flared, the tiny fierce creatures buzzed around the interested females in an unnatural blaze of neon and sound. The stark strangeness of the flared metal feathers making the hummingbird's head an alien shape neared a visceral quality, reminding me that although we share many traits with birds, there are sides to them that are inevitably strange and animal to us. All the presentations were interesting and enlightening in some way; a particularly interesting (not just in the way you think) presentation about Gray Hawks was given – virtually. Ariana LaPorte recorded her presentation and sent it to us, so that we could learn about Gray Hawk density dependence even though she couldn't be there! I introduced myself to the president of AZFO, Kurt Radamaker. It was fortunate that I would later go on a field trip led by him. We also did a bird audio and ID quiz contest, where I learned many calls and surprised myself with a few correct answers. That night, we had the keynote presentation and banquet. We all sat in groups at spaced tables, ate, and talked together. We then turned our attention to Osvel Hinojosa-Huerta, who presented on his efforts to restore the Colorado River Gulf, using a "pulse" of water every four years to keep riparian areas flourishing along the river. I was very impressed with the cooperation of many water districts and entities to keep the gulf blue, and felt that there was great hope for the river and for other diminishing resources with teamwork such as is done by Raise the River.

On the last day, we rose early to go birding at the Salton Sea. I rode with Ryan O'Donnell and Carl, discussing Ryan's work with reptiles in the FWS and the funny coincidence that each of us had Argentinean connections. We arrived at the well-known Sonny Bono Wildlife Refuge and started birding. An interesting find by Caleb was a leucistic White-Crowned Sparrow. Through a few stops on the shores of the Salton Sea, we picked up Lesser Black-Backed and Yellow-Footed Gulls! The other birders again demonstrated their kindness by letting me look in their scopes, sometimes before even they themselves had had a look. About halfway through the trip, we said a fond goodbye to the group and left for home. I am grateful to the AZFO and the Maricopa Audubon Society for their generosity – attending the meeting taught me more about birds, I had great fun, and best of all, I met lots of wonderful people! I hope many others can have the chance I was so fortunate to have and attend an AZFO annual meeting.