



AZFO Student Scholarship Recipient Essay 2016

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Early this last summer, my friend Caleb Strand informed me that the AZFO offered a youth scholarship to the 2016 State Meeting in Yuma. Upon confirming that I would be attending the event, I applied for the scholarship. Soon after I had submitted my application, AZFO Scholarships Chairperson, Lauren Harter, sent me a congratulatory email to let me know that I had, indeed, earned the scholarship! I highly anticipated meeting the other scholarship recipients who would all be young birders as myself. I left for Yuma on Friday immediately after my classes had concluded for the day. Caleb Strand (who also earned the scholarship) rode with my family and I. At the Youth Scholarship Recipient's dinner I finally met Lauren; we spoke briefly about Nutting's Flycatchers. I discussed interests, experiences, and future plans with the scholarship recipients who were present that night. I was impressed by their knowledge.

As a frequent user of both eBird and the AZ/NM Listserv, I have learned quite a bit about other birders in Arizona. I had many opportunities to meet and speak with some of these people (including Troy Corman and Felipe Guerrero). Some of my favorite memories of the meeting were those times spent getting to know my fellow Arizona birders. Out of the dozen or so presentations we were treated to, a few stuck out from the rest. In the California Condor Recovery presentation, it was fascinating to see how telemetry was used to create condor 'pathways' for various months. In the presentation on Hummingbird Coloration and Courtship, the differences between various hummingbird species' courtship flight patterns and signaling tactics were stunning. Another study of interest was Gray Hawk Expansion in the San Pedro River Valley. I had never heard of the model that was used to measure the colonization of new areas by Gray Hawks. This model suggested that a species uses the best habitat until all territories are full and that subsequent populations will move into less-optimal habitat over time.

In addition to networking and learning, I was able to enjoy some excellent birding in a corner of the state which I had never visited before. At Mittry Lake, Caleb Strand, Gordon Karre, Jenny MacFarland, and I heard the muffled growl of an elusive Black Rail. At the Yuma East Wetlands, Caleb and I sifted through a sizeable flock of Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned Warblers and found a vagrant Black-and-white Warbler. We birded these two spots before the first presentation and during lunch break, respectively. In the AZFO room, there was a book sale and souvenir table. There was also a large poster board covered with birds for the identification quiz. I enjoyed attempting to determine the identity of each species on the board. Another exciting group activity was the audio quiz; different bird vocalizations were played over the PA system and we had to figure out what species produced the sound. It was quite difficult!



At the end of the day - after a lengthy afternoon break - our special guest speaker (Dr. Osvel Hinojosa Huerte) arrived at the meeting to share his story with us. Dr. Huerte, a good-natured man who is greatly concerned for the future of the Colorado River Delta, manages wetland restoration on behalf of the Mexican conservation agency, Pronatura Noroeste. It was absolutely incredible to see what he has accomplished. Essentially, Dr. Huerte reopened stretches of the Colorado River in Northwest Mexico in order to restore the river and wetlands to their natural states. I was pleased to learn that his team has recorded Yellow-billed Cuckoos along these reopened stretches. Dr. Huerte's work appears quite beneficial to these birds (which are of special concern). After our special guest's presentation had concluded, several birders and I shared stories and laughs around a table outside. Although I could have talked all night, I certainly needed some sleep if I wanted to be fully functional for the next day...

Just before 5:30 am on Sunday morning, Caleb and I met our trip leader, AZFO president Kurt Radamaker, at a predetermined meeting place for our half-day field trip. We and nine other birders departed for the Salton Sea promptly at 5:30. Caleb and I rode along with Kurt and Doug Jenness; I truly enjoyed hearing Kurt's many tales of past birding in the area. Doug, who served as the AZFO treasurer, was very kind and knowledgeable. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that Doug and I were both Eagle Scouts and Order of the Arrow members. Arriving at the Sonny Bono National Wildlife Refuge, we scanned through scores of gulls and shorebirds. I was probably the only birder who got their lifer Herring Gull that day (yes, it's ok to laugh). A great surprise came in the form of a Lesser Black-backed Gull which we separated from the similar Western Gull by a variety of features including the presence of pointed primaries and yellow legs. Although late October isn't the best time of year for Yellow-footed Gulls, we still managed to locate four individuals further north along the Salton Sea! As someone who has very limited experience with gulls, this field trip was an invaluable learning experience. I learned some of the finer details of larid identification and also practiced recognizing rails and Least Bitterns by ear. The Herring, Lesser Black-backed, and Yellow-footed Gulls were my three lifers of the day. Other species of interest included a Neotropic Cormorant, Horned Grebe, and some Snow Geese.

As we were headed back to Yuma after our Sunday field trip, Kurt stopped at the edge of a seemingly barren expanse of desert dunes and sparse creosote. He told us that he was in search of a lizard - the Yuman Fringe-toed Lizard to be exact. As we walked into the desert, Kurt pointed us towards some tiny tracks which were imprinted along the rippled surface of the sand and would end abruptly. He explained that these locations are areas where the lizards have buried themselves underneath the sand. After finding a suitable stick, Kurt probed the sand until a small lizard burst out and furiously ran to the shelter of a creosote. Kurt was ecstatic to have found his target so quickly! After thoroughly photographing the reptile and observing its specially-modified hind toes, we watched in awe as it sprinted across the dune and out of sight.



As my first experience with the Arizona Field Ornithologists, I was impressed by the level of organization and quality that was upheld throughout the event. In addition to being a time of fellowship and storytelling, it was also a valuable learning experience for me. The presentations, photo and audio quizzes, and birding trips were all very memorable and informative. I would like to personally thank Lauren Harter for extending this scholarship opportunity to me. I would also like to thank Doug Jenness for your accompanying us on the field trip and for managing the money well so that I could have a scholarship in the first place. President Kurt: thank you for driving us around the Salton Sea and for stopping to find the Yuman Fringe-toed Lizard. It was quite the experience! Finally, I would like to thank my good friend Caleb Strand for your undying enthusiasm throughout the course of this event and for "birding hard" as always! If you would like to hear more of my birding tales, you can visit my blog [here](#).