



The Cactus Wren·dition

VOLUME LXX NO. 1

SUMMER - 2024



Monument to a Brave Bird Watcher
p. 13

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Anne Peyton

On the cover

Thermoregulating Desert Nesting
Bald Eagle

Photograph by Paul Heveran

Bald Eagle trying to cool off by spreading her wings and raising her belly feathers, which reveals her brood patch.

Taken 14 April 2024, Sonoran Desert, Central Arizona. Story p. 13

MEETINGS by Loren Hupe

MAS meetings, open to the public, are via Zoom and in-person on the first Tuesday of the month, September through April at Papago Buttes Church of the Brethren, 2450 N. 64th Street, Scottsdale. Zoom links are posted online before each meeting. Meetings start 7:30 PM. Come at 7:00 PM to socialize. Pre-meeting dinners (September through April) are held at 6:00 PM at Saigon Bowl Restaurant, 8213 E. Roosevelt St., Scottsdale, AZ 85257. The May meeting is our annual banquet.

September 3

Fine Art Bird Portraits with Rodrigo Izquierdo



In this program, award winning photographer Rodrigo Izquierdo will dissect the avian side of fine

art photography. He has found great opportunity in capturing the precise moments needed to create compelling images. Rodrigo, of Reagle Photography, will expose the formula he uses, encourage others to take photography opportunities, and open up discussion on others' experiences.

Rodrigo's Barn Owl portrait "Nyx" is the October winner in National Audubon



Society's 2024 calendar. His book, *How to Photograph: Hummingbirds* is available on Amazon. Rodrigo is the artist who uses the camera as a brush and the world as a canvas.

Announcements

Volunteer Opportunity! Dragonfly & Butterfly Bash

Chandler Nature Center
4050 E. Chandler Heights Rd
Chandler, AZ 85249
Saturday, September 21
9:00 a.m. - noon.

We will be leading nature walks in Veterans Oasis Park and have a table inside the Chandler Nature Center, with hands-on activities for youth. If you can help with either activity, for 1-3 hours, contact laurienessel@gmail.com.



Veterans Oasis Park

28th Annual Herb Fibel Big Sit! Fundraiser

Granite Reef, Tonto National Forest
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 26, 7-9 am

MAS friends will gather to count bird species seen from a 17' diameter circle at Granite Reef Recreation Area. Funds raised this year will go to Youth Scholarships for the 2025 AZFO annual meeting. The main objective of this event is, and always will be, sitting out in nature with friends, and enjoying not only the wildlife, but the camaraderie, while raising funds for a worthy cause.

REGISTRATION IS REQUIRED. Contact Kathe.coot@cox.net. The Big Sit! is officially from 7-9am, but folks can arrive early and stay late. At 9am, we will have snacks, compare notes and make a list. Bring your coffee, breakfast and a snack to share. We'll collect cash or checks onsite (\$10-15 suggested donation). Please make checks payable to "Maricopa Audubon Society" with "Big Sit" on the memo line.

TO DONATE: Anyone can donate by cash, check or credit card at member meetings, online (MAS.org/big-sit) or mail checks payable to Maricopa Audubon Society, P.O. Box 65401, Phoenix, AZ 85082-5401. Write "Big Sit!" In the memo line. Donate a set amount, or per bird species seen (54 is average).

BONUS!!! Donate \$25 or more to the Big Sit! and receive a one-year membership to

Maricopa Audubon Society. To get your one-year membership when donating by check, please write "Auto Join – Big Sit!" in the memo line and mail to the above address. Please include your mailing address to receive the quarterly Cactus Wren-dition newsletter.



Committees/Support

Associate Editor Mark Larson
Poet Laureate David Chorlton

www.maricopaaudubon.org

"The so-called federal "Principles and Standards" guidelines now being refined will require federal dambuilding projects to meet uniform and accepted accounting standards. Such refinements will unquestionably take the Orme Dams of this nation off the drafting boards and into the waste bucket."

*-Bob Witzeman
Phoenix Gazette, Jan. 15, 1979*

AN INVESTMENT IN THE FUTURE

Bequests are an important source of support for the Maricopa Audubon Society. Your chapter has dedicated itself to the protection of the natural world through public education and advocacy for the wiser use and preservation of our land, water, air and other irreplaceable natural resources.

You can invest in the future of our natural world by making a bequest in your will to the Maricopa Audubon Society. Talk to your attorney for more information on how this can be accomplished.

Support Maricopa Audubon as part of Fry's Community Rewards Program. Register your Fry's VIP card and select Maricopa Audubon #WW583 as your non-profit organization at no cost to you. Please visit Fry's Community Rewards online or visit your local Fry's to register.



Sign up for the e-newsletter!

To receive meeting and field trip reminders, etc., subscribe to the monthly (September to May) e-Newsletter.

To subscribe, email:

Maricopaaudubonaz@gmail.com

Note: We do not use the email list for anything other than the described purpose.



Join or renew your
Maricopa Audubon
membership



Walter Thurber - In Memoriam

November 20, 1942 - December 21, 2023

By Doug Jenness, Laurie Nessel, Francis Thurber, and John Weser

Longtime Audubon member Walter Thurber passed away at 81 after a long and full life. Walter's true passion, since he was 13, was in nature, especially birds. Pictures from his childhood often showed him looking skyward. He was born in Brooklyn and raised mostly in Bethlehem, PA. He met Francis on a blind date in January 1967 when they went to the opera. Their second date was to observe shore birds in Bridgeport, CT. Fran passed the test and within a year they began a loving marriage that lasted 56 years.

Walter earned a degree in sociology at Moravian College and a master's in urban planning at Columbia University. He was an urban planner back east before moving in 1990 to Arizona where he worked at the Arizona Department of Water Resources. Many of his achievements targeted environmental issues of which he was a consistent advocate. Active Audubon members wherever they lived, Walter and Fran were MAS members before helping found Desert Rivers Audubon.

More than a lister, Walter volunteered untold hours surveying, organizing, enlisting others, writing, all to help bird conservation. He worked on the Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas, and was a top volunteer on the Arizona atlas, surveying over 20) 26 km² priority blocks. He was active in the AZFO - participating in annual meetings and field expeditions, compiling the south-central seasonal reports. He was a board member, editor of AZFO News, and contributor to Arizona Birds. Many may remember him as the 20-year compiler of the Carefree Christmas Bird Count, and long-time statewide CBC coordinator.

Walter was executive director of the Monocacy Creek Conservation Association in Pennsylvania, research partner and principal investigator for ornithology with the Parsons Field Institute - McDowell Sonoran Conservancy, and helped establish an IBA in Carefree. During the two years he was bat-



Walter Thurber, 4 November 2014.
Photo by Frances Thurber

ting cancer, Walter birded 27 times with family and friends. He submitted monthly eBird reports for AZFO's eBird Gaps Project, primarily from the Cactus Forest area in Pinal County with John Weser.

Walter was a caring, kind, and sincere person whose passion for birding was contagious. He is survived by his wife, Fran, children Andrew and Amy, sister Elaine, and brother Douglas. The family requests that memorial gifts be made to Hospice of the Valley, 1510 E. Flower St., Phoenix, AZ 85014 or Mountain View Presbyterian Church, 8050 E. Mountain View Rd., Scottsdale, AZ 85258.



2024 ARIZONA FIELD ORNITHOLOGIST & WESTERN BIRD BANDING ASSOCIATION ANNUAL MEETING

SEPTEMBER 26 - 29, 2024 TUCSON, AZ

You do not need to be an ornithologist or bird bander to attend- just have a passion for birds! Enjoy meeting like-minded people, learn from presentations and workshops, and participate in field trips.

Visit AZFO.com or click on the QR code (right) to register.

Students may volunteer in exchange for meeting costs. Contact Chrissy Kondrat ckondrat@azgfd.gov.



Corrigendum: apologies to author Matt van Wallene and our readers for the incorrect image in Figure 17 on p.15 of the Spring 2024 Cactus Wren-dition Volume LXIX No. 4. We are printing the correct version here in full. -ed.

are generally agreed to be sound reflectors, dust protectors, and wind dampeners. Further research will show how various species have adapted to their sound environment and challenge the assumptions surrounding these unique feathers.

Barn Owl addendum

The findings of the Barn Owl feather morphology, especially on the microscopic scale, sonus feathers (Figure 14) show various radiates, shapes, and densities that obviously have a functional component. The Barn Owl's (BANO) sonus is open and clear of radiates on the barbs making them optimal for sound while the Curvebilled Thrasher (CBTH) has extensive barbule growth due to its dusty feeding methods.

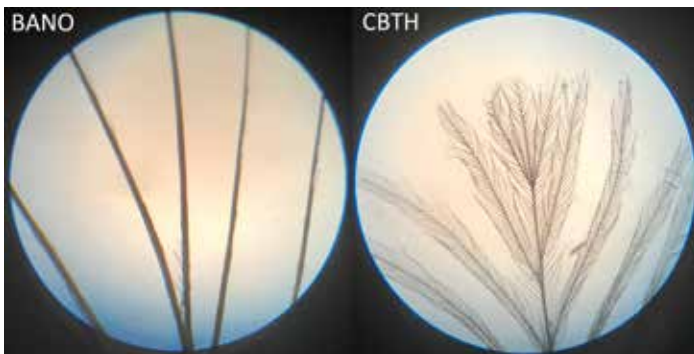


Figure 14. Sonus distal end at 50X magnification

The Ferruginous Pygmy Owl is a diurnal hunter so silent flight is not a requirement. Possible diverging evolution has



Figure 15 P10 serration comparison

nearly eliminated the serrated edge silencing feature. The Barn Owl P10 is same length as P9, Figure 16 illustrates the P10/P9 of the Great Horned Owl. Since P9 is longer than P10, P9 also has a serrated edge to ensure silent flight.



Figure 16 Great Horned Owl P10 top, P9 bottom serrations

Instead of an operculum, the other six owl species, to varying degree, employ feather tracks (pterylae). In the Western Screech Owl (WESO) example (Figure 17) is a series of five photos highlight the tracks with the meatus on the far right. Reiterating that birds can elevate their feather shafts, I imagine that these tracks work much like the operculum on the Barn Owl. All non-owl species in the study had unpatterned placement of the auriculars.



Figure 17. WESO meatus coverage

¹ Konishi, M. (2012) How the Owl Tracks Its Prey. American Scientific , Vol 100, Issue 6, pg 494

² Wagner H, Weger M, Klaas M, Schro"der W. (2017) Features of owl wings that promote silent flight. Interface Focus 7:20160078. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rsfs.2016.0078>

³ Bachmann, T, Klän, S, Baumgartner, W, Klaas, M, Schröder, W, and Wagner, H. (2007) Morphometric Characterization of Wing Feathers of the Barn Owl Tyto Alba Pratincola and the Pigeon Columba Livia. Frontiers in Zoology 4,23.

Southwestern Willow Flycatcher Court Victory

The Southwestern Willow flycatcher was listed as a federally endangered species in 1995. The Maricopa Audubon Society was a strong advocate for the listing and over the years has continued to vigorously fight to preserve the flycatchers endangered species status and critical habitat designation.

A lawsuit brought by the New Mexico Cattle Growers Association in 2021 asked a Federal Court to delist the Southwestern Willow flycatcher arguing it is not a valid subspecies and thus not protected under the Endangered Species Act. The Maricopa Audubon Society along with the Center of Biological Diversity intervened in the case in 2022 siding with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service which had denied the Cattle Grower's delisting petition. This past March the Cattle Grower's lawsuit was soundly rejected by a Federal District Court in Washington D.C.

The lawsuit was another attempt by the Cattle Growers to remove legal protection for the flycatcher so that critical riparian habitat could once again be used for cattle grazing. It is ironic that it was destruction of riparian habitat by cattle

grazing that was one of the major factors necessitating the need to protect the flycatcher and its habitat in the first place.

In court, the Cattle Growers argued that the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher (*E. t. extimus*) is not a valid subspecies. In making their argument they seized on an article published in the Condor by Robert Zink. Zink had analyzed existing taxonomic data and conducted an ecological niche analysis which he claimed demonstrated that the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher does not show a degree of ecological divergence that would support subspecies classification.

The Fish and wildlife Service rejected Zink's analysis concluding that indeed there was sufficient scientific data and evidence to support the classification including among other things morphological and song differences and mitochondrial DNA analysis showing a highly significant degree of separation between *extimus* and three northern subspecies. The court noted that since 1949 ornithologists, including Allan Phillips (*The Birds of Arizona*), have considered the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher a valid subspecies.

Mount Graham Red Squirrel

The Maricopa Audubon Society has joined the Center for Biological Diversity in a lawsuit against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for unreasonable delay in proceeding with a proposed rule to revise critical habitat for the Mount Graham red squirrel.

The Mount Graham red squirrel is the most endangered terrestrial mammal in North America. Found only in the Pinaleno Mountains of Southeastern Arizona, it has been isolated from other red squirrel subspecies since the end of the last ice age over 10,000 years ago.

The squirrel was listed as endangered in 1987. At the time of its listing the squirrel population was estimated to be around 280 animals. The squirrels were found in highest densities in Engelmann spruce and Corkbark fir forest at elevations above 10,000 feet. They were also found at lower elevations in mixed conifer forest but in greatly reduced densities.

Critical habitat for the squirrel was designated in 1990 consisting of approximately 2000 acres of high elevation spruce-fir forest (see map). Since that listing, however, almost all of the red squirrels critical habitat has been destroyed or degraded by forest fires, telescope construction (including intentional back-burning to protect the telescopes), insect infestations, drought and other climate change-related causes.



Most all of the Red Squirrels critical habitat has been destroyed or degraded by forest fires, telescope construction including back-burning to protect the telescopes, insect infestations, drought and other climate change-related causes.

There were 680 acres of high-quality contiguous spruce-fir habitat at the time of listing. Today that habitat has been reduced to a mere 36 acres. As of 2023 the squirrel population has fallen to approximately 144 animals.



Mount Graham Red Squirrel
Photo by Bruce Taubert

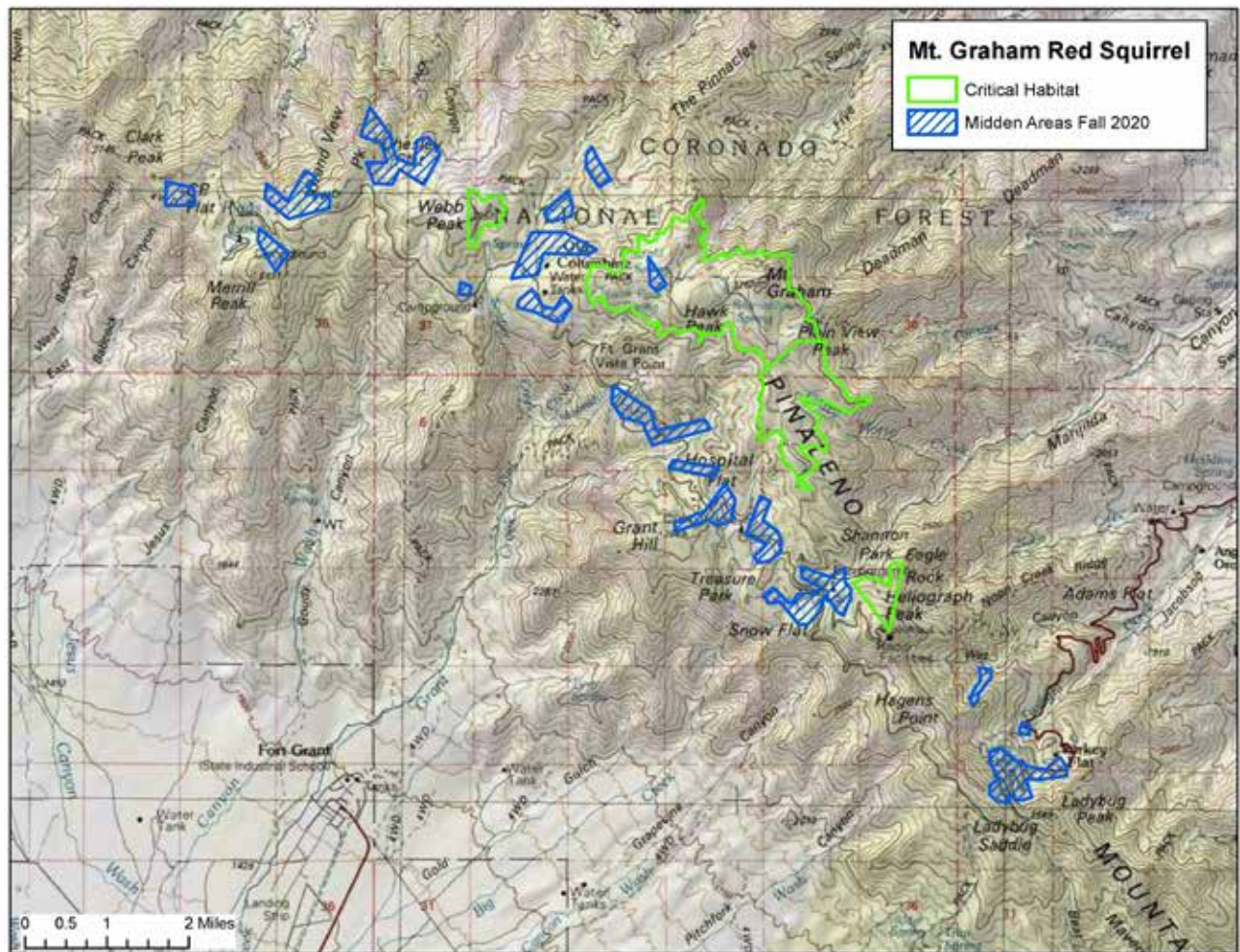
Today most of the squirrels are found outside the designated critical habitat area at lower elevations in mixed conifer forest. These occupied territories (middens) are widely separated from each other, in effect, isolated habitat islands. This separation makes surviving squirrels particularly vulnerable to predation as they

move across sparsely canopied and open areas from one habitat island to the next.

With most of its spruce-fir habitat now gone, the squirrels' best chance of getting through this recent habitat bottleneck and surviving is redesignation of critical habitat in remaining lower

elevation mixed conifer forest including the areas around Ash Creek drainage, Columbine, Riggs Flat, and Turkey Flat. In spite of a formal petition and two previous lawsuits the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service still refuses to finalize a critical habitat revision. Given this unreasonable delay the court in this lawsuit is being asked to order the Forest Service to either publish a final habitat revision rule or issue a final appealable decision not to revise critical habitat.

In a related development a US District Court Magistrate Judge in February recommended that the Fish and Wildlife Service redo its biological opinion and incidental take rules for the recreational campground and summer cabins located in the Columbine and Ash Creek Drainage area of Mount Graham. In 2002 the Center for Biological Diversity and Maricopa Audubon Society had sued to challenge the Forest Service's reissuance of a special use permit for the cabins and campground. Removal of the 14 recreational cabins and recreation camp will provide the most extensive amount of surviving mature canopied forest that can be restored in the short term to get the squirrel through the current habitat bottleneck.



Map showing the current middens outside the critical habitat due to multiple pressures.



FIELD TRIPS

- Participation in field trips risks exposure to infectious diseases. If you have any symptoms of illness or have been exposed to COVID-19, stay home.
- For Tonto National Forest Day Use Passes, visit [USDA Tonto Pass](#).
- MAS encourages carpooling. Please cover your driver's gas at the recommended rate of 10¢ per mile per rider.
- The ABA has adopted principles of birding ethics. Check them online or ask your field trip leader.
- Wear neutral colors and sturdy walking shoes.
- Bring binoculars, sunscreen, sunglasses, hat, and water.

Please visit the field trips page on the MAS website for the most recent listings.

Registration on Ticketleap required unless otherwise noted. Search Ticketleap online under Maricopa Audubon; or find links to the field trip you wish to attend on the MAS website. If you're concerned about online privacy or your computer skills, you may also register by contacting Field Trip Chair Robert Carter robert.carter@hey.com. If you cannot attend, please cancel your reservation so someone on the wait-list can join. To cancel a reservation, contact the leader or Field Trip Chair Robert Carter.

GILBERT RIPARIAN AREA

FRIDAY, JULY 5

We will take a leisurely stroll in the early morning to survey the ponds and grounds. The route will depend on where interesting birds have been seen, and with changes in water levels. We will likely head out along Cattail Crawl and choose directions further from there. Wear hat, sun protective clothing, walking shoes. Bring water, and snack if you like. Meet at the bathrooms by the parking lot at 2757 E. Guadalupe Road, Gilbert. Time: 5:30 AM to 8:30 AM.

Limit: 10

Difficulty: 2 (Paths mostly flat dirt, with slight inclines)

LEADER: JOY BELL

CHRISTOPHER CREEK

MONDAY, JULY 15

We'll start exploring Christopher Creek at the lovely Wooden Nickel subdivision, where folks have been very welcoming in the past. We should see the usual collection of higher elevation birds, including residents and summer visitors such as Steller's Jays, White-breasted Nuthatches, Robins, Western Bluebirds, various flycatchers, Western Tanagers and Broadtailed hummers. This site has included a Great Blue Heron rookery and a surprise Rosebreasted Grosbeak in the past. We'll continue to the Christopher Creek community and find a spot for a picnic lunch.

Time: Leave Scottsdale at 5 AM and return about 3 PM.

Limit: 7.

Difficulty: 2. Plenty of walking, but mostly smooth surfaces at about 6,000'. Restrictions: All participants must be fully vaccinated.

LEADER: KATHE ANDERSON

MOUNT ORD

FRIDAY, JULY 26

We will check different pull-outs along the road to the top of Mt. Ord, finishing around 11:00 AM-12:00 PM. We will take short walks from parking areas and also bird from the cars at various altitudes. Bring binoculars, field guide, water, snacks, hat, and extra layers since the mountain can get cool. Meet at 6:00 a.m. in the back parking lot of Denny's at 17053 Shea Boulevard, Fountain Hills. We will carpool from there.

Time: 6:00 AM to Noon

Limit: 10

Difficulty: 2 (Around one mile of walking, also in and out of cars)

LEADER: BRIAN ISON

OAK FLAT CAMPGROUND

FRIDAY, AUGUST 9

Oak Flat is an ecological treasure located east of Superior at about 4,000'. In late summer, songbird migrants from the north are just beginning to arrive. They mix with local breeding specialties such as Gray Vireo, Crissal Thrasher, and Juniper Titmouse, attracted to the shady Emory oaks in the campground as well as the surrounding scrub. A large vernal pond is dry for much of the summer, but could hold water and attract more species after the August monsoon. The Apache people

consider Oak Flat sacred and are fighting plans to develop a copper mine there. Our trip should give you a good sense of what the fight is about. We will walk up to 2 miles through the campground and up a small plateau, looking and listening for birds as we go. Bring lots of water, a hat, plus sturdy footwear. Meet at the Park and Ride lot, 440 E Main St, Mesa at 5:00 AM. We will carpool from there.

Limit: 10

Time: 5 AM to 10 AM

Difficulty: 3 (up to 2 miles on dirt trails, with some rocks and mild/moderate elevation change)

LEADER: PAUL HEVERAN

RIM LAKES

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 14

After a quick stop in Payson, we'll head east on Highway 260 to visit Willow Springs and Woods Canyon Lakes on the Mogollon Rim. This should get us a variety of summer birds— Osprey, flycatchers, tanagers, and warblers, as well as resident woodpecker and nuthatch species. Weather permitting, we'll plan a picnic lunch at one of the lakes.

Time: Leave Scottsdale at 5 AM and return about 3 PM.

Limit: 7.

Difficulty: 2-3. Lots of walking, with some uneven surfaces at about 6,000'.

Restrictions: All participants must be fully vaccinated.

LEADER: KATHE ANDERSON

MT. ORD AND SYCAMORE CREEK

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 21

Escape the Phoenix heat – we will visit areas 25 degrees cooler than Phoenix. In August we should encounter an interesting mix of summer and year-round residents, and a few fall migrants. We hope to see Blue Grosbeak, Gray Vireo, Zonetailed and Common Black hawks, Bullock’s and Hooded Orioles, Ash-throated and Brown-crested flycatchers, Violet-green Swallows, Cassin’s Kingbird, Lazuli Bunting, and others. Meet at Denny’s, 17053 E Shea Blvd, Fountain Hills.

Time: 5:30 AM to Noon

Limit: 10

Difficulty: 3 (Moderate walking on flat paved surface for 3.5 miles up to 7,000’)

LEADER: ANNE WEBSTER LEIGHT

STEWART MOUNTAIN DESERT TORTOISE QUEST

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, AND WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11

Hardy souls willing to trek in the early morning heat and humidity of September with a slight chance of finding a desert tortoise can join leader Laurie Nessel as we traverse steep, rocky hillsides searching for tortoises that emerge during the monsoon season (hope we get one this year). We will discuss the behavior, life cycle, and status of this keystone species. Bring snacks, sun protection, hat, sturdy hiking shoes, walking stick, high power flashlight or mirror and lots of water.

Carpooling TBD.

Start: 5:30 a.m. - 11ish

Limit: 8

Difficulty: 4 (steep, rocky terrain, and hot, humid weather).

LEADER: LAURIE NESSEL



Stewart Mountain Desert Tortoise Quest.

Be Social! Find MAS on Facebook
facebook.com/MaricopaAudubonSociety

On April 17th eleven birders drove from the Phoenix area to arrive for my 7:30 AM field trip at Page Springs Bubbling Ponds. This was a first time for many, or they haven't been here in years. What a great morning it was. Highlights included First of summer Summer Tanagers, Osprey flying as well as on the nest, Bridled Titmouse, a calling Sora, a Wood Duck, a Ladderback Woodpecker in a nest cavity, and the iconic Common Black Hawk. The main attraction was the Great Horned Owl nest with two owlets on the nest observing us observe them. Everyone had a thoroughly enjoyable time and made some great memories.



(Clockwise from above) Summer Tanager, Common Black Hawk, Wood Duck, Bewick's Wren.





adult around the fishing pond, calling/begging frequently, to no avail. There was a migrating Western Wood-Pewee on the south side of Pond 7. An unexpected sighting was a very relaxed gray fox lying in the brush southeast of Pond 7 just five meters from the path. It preened and closed its eyes. We got good looks through the scope of a small flock of Northern Roughwinged-Swallows perched on the Pond 6 island.

From the library parking lot, at 0551, a Franklin's Gull was seen flying 250 meters over head from the northwest. Shortly after that, Cindy Marple got this excellent shot (above) as it flew up from pond 6, circled, then left. Other highlights included an emergence of 2 cm Woodhouse's Toads in several areas of the Preserve. We also saw a juvenile American Coot following an

Clockwise from top: Franklin's Gull by Cindy Marple; Juvenile American Coot; gray fox; Western Wood-Pewee; Woodhouse's Toad by Dalia Gonzalez.



The Western Wood-Pewee can be seen in spring and fall at lower Sonoran Desert riparian areas on their way to or from higher elevation breeding grounds - perhaps the oak/pine forests of Mount Ord, Slate Creek Divide, Four Peaks Wilderness or Reeves Creek.



Field Trip Report Dragonflies on Salt River 25 May

By Laurie Nessel

It was a good day to view odonata at several sites along the river. Perhaps the most unusual sighting, however, was an active Abert's Thread-waisted Wasp. She was removing something from a burrow - was it a pebble that sealed a chamber where her larva was awaiting provisions? A second wasp appeared and also entered and exited the burrow. Abert's are solitary wasps, why were two at one burrow? There was no aggression



(above) One Abert's threadwaisted wasp at the burrow entrance. (above right) A second wasp carries out a chamber "door" or perhaps a sandcovered prey.



Black Vulture

between them. Digging and provisioning a burrow is fulltime work. Was this kleptoparasitism, where one wasp was stealing the paralyzed caterpillar prey that the other wasp had laid her egg on and which would feed on as it grew? Or perhaps it was appropriating a chamber within the other wasp's burrow. Did the primary wasp not perceive this theft? Or calculate it wasn't worth the effort or risk to control? While observing this theft we witnessed a second insult when a bee fly hovered over the opening, dropped

(right) Bee fly Genus *Heterostylum* at Abert's burrow.

down several times, left, returned, and repeated this behavior. Bee flies parasitize wasps, so we could have witnessed a female flinging eggs that will hatch and feed on the provisions, intended for the wasps, and/or the wasp larvae themselves.



Adult thread-waisted wasps feed on flower nectar. They are beneficial to gardeners since they take caterpillars and grasshoppers to feed their larvae.

We found another Sphecid species - Parker's Thread-waisted Wasp - feeding on the desert milkweed (right) planted by the Forest Service along the parking lots at Phon D. Sutton.

Further reading:
Tinbergen, Nico, *Curious Naturalists*, 1958
Evans, Howard Ensign, *Wasp Farm*, 1963
Eaton, Eric R., *Wasps*, 2021



Parker's Thread-waisted Wasp *Prionyx Parker* feeding.



Flower-loving fly Genus *Apiocera*



Blue-ringed Dancer



Arroyo Bluet

Monument to a Brave Bird Watcher

By Kenn Kaufman



Bob Witzeman
Photograph by Laurie Nessel

*Originally printed in Kenn Kaufman's "After the Spark" column in Bird Watchers Digest, Jan-Feb 2015
Reprinted courtesy the author.*

If you go to the high desert east of Phoenix, Arizona, you have a chance to see something unique and worthwhile. Find your way to the spot where the Verde River flows into the Salt River, stand and look upstream along both rivers, and you'll see a monument to a friend of mine.

At first, it may not be obvious. Against the rugged outlines of the Mazatzal Mountains and the Superstition Mountains, against the cactus gardens of the desert hillsides, the courses of both rivers run lush and green. Stately cottonwoods tower above the willows along the riverbanks, and dense thickets of mesquites stretch away behind them. You'll hear the sharp ping of Abert's Towhees back in the thickets, you'll see Black Phoebes and Vermilion Flycatchers near the water's edge, and you're likely to see a Bald Eagle soaring in the distance. And after a minute you may turn to ask me, "Okay, where's this monument you mentioned?"

That's the tricky part: the monument is the absence of something terrible. You are not standing here staring at the stark concrete wall of a huge dam. You're not looking at the inevitable surroundings of artificial reservoirs in desert country, with bathtub-rings of barren ground from rising and falling water levels, with skeletons of dead trees scattered across the cracked flats of dried mud. You're not seeing the destruction of this place. The rivers still flow, birds and wildlife still abound here. And that's partly owing to the bold actions of a bird watcher who took a stand.

I first met Robert A. Witzeman, M.D., when I was a teenager, hitch-hiking around North America in pursuit of birds. I already knew him by reputation. Bob and his wife Janet were among the leading birders in Arizona, very active in the Maricopa Audubon Society in the Phoenix area. They made up what might have been called a "power couple" in a later era, but they were so thoroughly friendly and kind and generous that everyone loved them. When we met, I was just a kid who didn't know the Arizona birds very well, but they immediately invited me along on Christmas Bird Counts and other field trips and helped me learn about the local birdlife.

Bob Witzeman already had a stellar reputation as an expert birder, the discoverer of reliable locations for rarities like gray vireo and LeConte's thrasher. He was especially interested in migratory shorebirds, and he loved watching them and photographing them at the water-treatment plants around Phoenix and on the beaches of Sonora, a few hours away. He had already found and documented things like Arizona's first sharptailed sandpiper and wandering tattler.

But about the time we met, he was starting to be distracted in a major way by something else. Something big. Increasingly, he was focused on the imminent destruction of habitat that was going to be caused by the building of Orme Dam.

Of course, in the right places, dams can be good things. Dams and reservoirs in many areas have done a lot of good, providing water sources in parched areas, allowing for irrigation and flood control, and (at hydroelectric plants) creating clean and renewable energy. So of course not all dams are bad.

But Orme Dam would have been bad.

It was planned as a part of the Central Arizona Project—a colossal project of canals, tunnels, pumps, dams, and reservoirs, designed to pump water uphill from the Colorado River to the vicinity of Phoenix and Tucson. Orme Dam, at the confluence of

The reservoir above Orme Dam would stretch for miles upstream along the Verde and the Salt, drowning out some of the best streamside habitat remaining in the southwest.

the Salt and Verde rivers just east of Phoenix, was intended to create a huge storage reservoir for some of this water after it had been pumped uphill.

According to the plans, the reservoir above Orme Dam would stretch for miles upstream along the Verde and the Salt, drowning out some of the best streamside habitat remaining in the southwest. It would take out the nest sites of three of the seven pairs of Bald Eagles in the entire desert region. We had all heard about this, but it was assumed that the project was unstoppable. Powerful forces were behind it—people with a lot of clout and a lot of political influence who wanted to see tax money spent right here, right now, in this district. It was blatant pork-barrel politics, and it looked like a done deal already.

Bob Witzeman was bothered by the whole thing, and he couldn't get it out of his mind. It wasn't just the loss of some fine birding areas: it was the loss of a whole ecosystem, the loss of endangered Bald Eagles, and the sense that ordinary

continued on page 14

It would take out the nest sites of three of the seven pairs of Bald Eagles in the entire desert region.

citizens were powerless to do anything about it. Bob was the conservation chairman of Maricopa Audubon Society; it was hardly a position of power, but he decided to see what he could do about it.

At the time, I assumed he was crazy. *You can't stop this project, I thought. No one can stop this project. Who's going to listen to a bird watcher? You should stick to something where you have some chance of success, like finding rare shorebirds.*

But Bob was determined. It turned into an epic struggle, one that would go on for eight years. I'm afraid that I did very little to help with the effort, but I did get to observe how it was done, and I absorbed valuable lessons in how an individual can make a difference.

One of the first things that Bob did was to reach out and find allies outside the birding community. It seems an obvious tactic now, but at the time it struck me as totally novel. Bob Witzeman knew that the news media would make fun of any activism carried on by mere bird watchers, so he looked for people with different backgrounds.

One of his first major allies was Frank Welsh. Frank wasn't a bird watcher at all; he was trained as an engineer and had been to law school, and the Central Arizona Project offended his sense of good engineering. He had calculated that local changes in water use could save more water than the entire project could bring in, and for a tiny fraction of the cost. The Central Arizona Project, he said, was a huge waste of money and waste of water, so it wasn't an honorable use of engineering principles.

Frank's issue with Orme Dam wasn't about the wildlife, but about basic science. This big reservoir under the desert sun would serve as a vast evaporation pool. In other words, Arizonans would pay big money to pump water uphill so that much of it could sit there and evaporate before it could be used. So Bob was focused on saving birds, Frank was focused on saving money and water, but they both opposed the dam.

Both of them also understood the power of organizations. Frank was mostly operating independently, but he communicated as the representative of a group, the CCAP: Citizens Concerned

About the Project. Bob was mostly working on his own, but he channeled his efforts through the Maricopa Audubon Society. It wasn't a large Audubon chapter, but its ties to National Audubon were useful. Bob and Frank realized, perhaps instinctively, that politicians may pay scant attention to individual citizens (except wealthy ones), but that they're much less likely to ignore an organization, regardless of its size.

Bob found another set of allies in a Native American tribe. The Fort McDowell Yavapai community lived on the banks of the Verde River. According to plans, the reservoir above Orme Dam was going to flood out their entire community and the land where they grew their crops. Not surprisingly, the Yavapai were wary of outsiders. But Bob won their trust with his sincerity, and



The Salt River below the Verde confluence.

... the reservoir above Orme Dam was going to flood out [the Yavapai's] entire community and the land where they grew their crops.

soon the Yavapai were working with Audubon and the others who opposed the dam.

It was an uphill battle. At the time, Orme Dam and the rest of the Central Arizona Project had the support of senators and congressmen from both major parties, as well as from many leaders of the business community. Spending federal money here in Arizona—that was the focus, and never mind the question whether the project was a good idea or not.

Nothing in Bob Witzeman's training as an anesthesiologist had prepared him for these efforts. He essentially taught himself how to be an activist. He learned how to write press releases, and how and when to send them out. He learned how to write an effective appeal letter to raise funds and raise awareness. He taught himself to be a better public speaker, so that he could make a stronger impact at meetings and hearings, or during radio or television interviews.

And his conviction was enough to draw others in. Maricopa Audubon had been pretty much like any other Audubon chapter when I first encountered them. Gradually, though, many of the bird watchers in the group began paying more attention to policy and politics, to the consequences of action and inaction. They became bolder, more willing to speak up when habitat was threatened. They became better citizens.

Throughout this time, Bob kept his spirits up by staying connected to birds and the birding community. It helped that his wife Janet was the compiler of bird records for the local area, regional editor for American Birds magazine, and coauthor of the local bird-finding guide. When he needed a break, Bob would still go out birding, proving that he could find and identify rare birds with the best of them. But then there would be another setback, another hearing to attend, another meeting, another press release to write. Sometimes I could do something to help; I did pen-and-ink drawings of birds for some of his mailings, and wrote letters to various birding organizations to rally support.

Most of the time, however, I watched from a distance, and worried about how Bob would take it when the effort failed and Orme Dam was finally built.

A funny thing happened, though: the good guys won. Parts of the Central Arizona Project were built, eventually (and created problems almost as soon as they were completed), but Orme Dam was not. It was permanently removed from the plan by the Interior Department on 12 November 1981.

Bob Witzeman never got the credit he deserved for his role in stopping Orme Dam. But I don't think credit was what he was looking for. After the dam was scrapped, he barely paused before launching into other battles: fighting to save old-growth forest on top of Mount Graham, fighting to keep a copper mine out of Oak Flat, fighting to save essential streamside habitat all over the southwest. Beginning activists came to him for guidance, tapping into his expertise and energy. He didn't always win, but he never backed down in the face of powerful opposition.

Bob passed away last August at the age of 87, slipping away peacefully one evening after a day of photographing his beloved shorebirds. I believe that he was at peace with himself, too, knowing that he had fought a good fight and made a positive difference in the world. The Salt River and the Verde River still flow together, and Bald Eagles still soar over the confluence. And



Bald Eagle carrying prey to nest.
Photograph by Laurie Nessel

Bob's many friends and admirers still think of him, remembering his example, whenever we decide to speak up on behalf of the natural world.

Bob's many friends and admirers still think of him, remembering his example, whenever we decide to speak up on behalf of the natural world.



Photograph by
Kimberly Kaufman

Ornithologist Kenn Kaufman has contributed ceaselessly to the birding world - as a guide (on all seven continents), artist, conservationist, magazine contributor (Bird Watchers Digest, Birds and Blooms, etc), editor and consultant for NAS, Fellow of the American Ornithological Society, multiple honoree of the American Birding Association, film consultant and narrator, and prolific author of his Focus Field Guides and other nonfiction books from his captivating memoir

Kingbird Highway to his just released, The Birds that Audubon Missed. Kenn lives in Oak Harbor, Ohio, with his wife, Kimberly Kaufman, who is also a dedicated naturalist and the director of Black Swamp Bird Observatory, where Kenn volunteers.

Epilogue - It's been 43 years since Orme Dam was defeated sparing the land and culture of the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation from total inundation, and ten years this August since Bob left us. To this day, the Yavapai Tribe holds a special place of honor for the Maricopa Audubon Society, and others who fought alongside Bob Witzeman against Orme Dam, during the annual Orme Dam Victory Days Parade each November. Look for details in the next newsletter and on our website and consider joining in this joyous celebration.

-ed.



In the corporate world, businesses create logos to help consumers identify their products. If I mention Coca-Cola, I'll bet your mind immediately envisions that company's logo. What about McDonald's, Amazon, Google, or Starbucks. Pretty easy, right?

Now visualize a bird with a black bib and distinctive red mustache flaring across its cheek like Nike's famous swoosh? If you're a bird enthusiast, you'll immediately know it's a male Gilded Flicker – one of the most distinctive birds in the Sonoran Desert. If Gilded Flickers were a corporate franchise, their bib and red mustache would be their logo.

Gilded Flickers make their homes in the desert's magnificent Saguaro cacti. Saguaros are like condominiums for many birds of the Sonoran Desert with Gilded Flickers and Gila Woodpeckers being prolific condo builders. They peck away at the saguaro's outer skin to punch through to the interior where they excavate their nests. Once they've raised their young and abandoned their nests, other birds will quickly fill the vacancy - Elf Owls, Screech Owls, Purple Martins, and finches. European Starlings and Rosy-faced

Lovebirds also take over these cavities, displacing native species.

While Gilded Flickers are not an endangered species, their populations are threatened by habitat loss – most notably

from human development – a common threat to the survival of many desert creatures. Climate change also contributes to habitat loss. Last summer's lack of rain and high temperatures were the harshest in recorded history here in the greater Phoenix area, with another low rainfall predicted for this year's monsoon. This assault as well as invasive grasses that ignite massive wildfires kill or damage many saguaro condos. Unfortunately, such disruptions seem likely to continue.

Tom Mangelsdorf is a retired information systems manager/web content developer living out his dream of being a photographer. His bird photographs are featured in the soon-to-be-released Birds of Arizona and New Mexico: A Photographic Guide to Birding the Borderlands by Steven Prager and Melissa Fratello.

He's been featured in three AGFD wildlife calendars, Arizona Highways, and he is a regular contributor to the Cactus Wrenition. He is the author of A History of Steinbeck's Cannery Row and Henry Ossian Flipper: First Among Equals.



Singing

By David Chorlton

A Few Fun Flicker Facts

What do Gilded Flickers and anteaters have in common? Long sticky tongues for extracting ants.

Gilded Flickers will empty hummingbird feeders in record time. They are also good pollinators, just like the tiny hummers.

How did the Gilded Flicker get its name? Some say “flicker” is similar to the bird’s call (flicka-flicka-flicka), and “gilded” refers to their gold-colored underwing.

Male woodpeckers, including Gilded Flickers, will hammer repeatedly when marking their territory or seeking a mate. They prefer the excellent acoustics of metallic surfaces that are found atop your roof.

What’s a group of Gilded Flickers called? a “guttering”, “menorah” or “Peterson” - as in Roger Tory Peterson. The flicker held a special place in his life as a naturalist, ornithologist, illustrator and educator.



I am here in
the morning
in the sunlight and the same bird is
singing

W. S. Merwin

The grass is weary but the Curve-billed
Thrasher likes
to peck the bare spots for what
lies beneath the surface. Outside the bedroom
window the branches
on the plant that courted death last summer
are thickly leafed and breaking
into a blue-flowered spring. The array
of common species runs
to doves and finches, sparrows, starlings, all
making of their modesty a show
that plays between lantana
and the lizard’s stony ground. Brittlebush
in bloom and the nest a hummingbird
left behind last year when her hatchlings
fledged.
A woodpecker still taps
against the house wall asking
for fate to come out and be seen.
The ocotillo answers at the tips of its stems
when they redden, and the nearby
mountain turns its dark face to the sky.
That time of day the clouds
are luminous. Light wind, the shift
from season to season, hawk
gliding on an updraft of memory,
desert climbing shadows in Mesozoic time
and in the morning
a mockingbird sings, always the same
one, but singing.

Nature Through the Artist's Eye

Anne Peyton

Anne Peyton has always painted birds. Her grandfather had a number of feeders at his Fort Collins, Colorado home and he was very proud of the birds that visited his yard. Anne would spend hours sketching and painting the birds she saw.

Anne is no lister. She is an astute observer of birds, their behavior and environment. She expresses her passion with accurate plumage as well as the attitude, habitat, the Gestalt of each bird she portrays on canvas. Paramount for Anne is to show respect for the birds and to serve a purpose beyond the singular beauty of each canvas.

“Observing birds and their habits is a way to discover more about their nature – the motions a Sandhill Crane makes during preening, the way a Golden Eagle walks along the ground instead of hopping or taking a short flight, or the frantic scolding of a House Wren guarding its nest hole,” she said. “Each of these actions means something for the bird and it is these actions and their meanings that I want to convey to the viewer.”



“Maggie” Great-horned Owl
16”H x 16”W, Acrylic



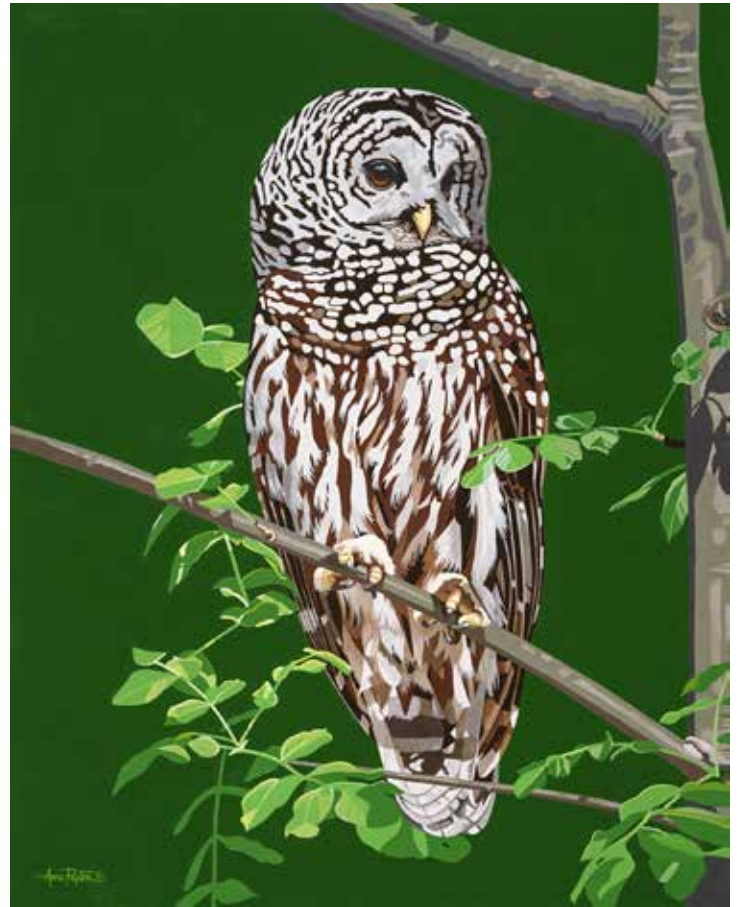
“Dawn's Early Light”
Snow Goose
20”H x 16”W
Acrylic



“Fixation”
White Hawk
20”H x 16”W
Acrylic

You may see Anne at one of the public presentations of unreleasable avian ambassadors from Liberty Wildlife where she volunteers. Anne also trains - both birds destined as ambassadors as well as other volunteers, and cares for the birds daily needs. Of this experience, Anne says, "Each bird is an individual and behaves differently. Even among the same species, each bird has a distinct personality. That surprised me when I first started working with these amazing creatures, but it is an aspect that has served me well in the field and in my artwork."

Anne's work can be seen at www.annepeytonart.com



"Interloper"
Barred Owl
20"H x 16"W
Acrylic



"Distracted"
Barn Owl
12"H x 16"W
Acrylic

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MONTHLY MEETING

Please see meeting information on page 2 or maricopaaudubon.org. For questions or speaker suggestions, contact a Board member.

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1. National Audubon Society - For dual membership in NAS and MAS call (844) 428-3826 and ask to be assigned to MAS chapter B00. You will get The Cactus Wren•dition as a courtesy. To be guaranteed a subscription, please consider joining MAS as a Friend.

2. Maricopa Audubon Society Friend dues go directly to MAS and support our mission. Friends are guaranteed a print subscription to The Cactus Wren•dition, and discounts on books and merchandise. Dues are \$10/year student/youth, \$20/ year individual. MAS is a non-profit 501(c)(3). All dues above \$20 are tax deductible.

You can join at a monthly meeting; online at maricopaaudubon.org/join; or send your name, address, phone or email, and a check payable to Maricopa Audubon Society to the MAS President (right). All Friends memberships now renew annually each year on April 1st. Subscriptions are pro-rated.

SUBMISSIONS

Copy for The Cactus Wren•dition must be received by January 15, April 1, July 1, and October 1. Articles not received by the deadlines may not appear in the upcoming issue. Some issues feature a theme. Feel free to enquire and take the theme into account. Editor: Laurie Nessel laurienessel@gmail.com

OPINIONS

The opinions expressed by authors in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the policy of NAS or MAS.

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