



The Cactus Wrendition

May – June 2001

This page contains several articles from the July August 2000 Cactus Wrendition, the newsletter of the Maricopa Audubon Society. Not all articles are reproduced on this page. Fieldtrip information, recent rare-bird sightings, meeting programs/schedules, and general chapter information are presented elsewhere in this site.

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Notes & Announcements

Audubon Adventures: Give the gift of discovery and share your love of the environment. The program is designated for students in grades 4-6. Introduce an entire classroom (up to 32 students) to the wonders of nature for just \$35 (plus shipping charges). You can select your favorite school or let Audubon do it for you. For orders: call 800/813-5037.

Volunteer Opportunities: Tend a booth, lead a birdwalk or give a talk at the International Migratory Bird Festival at the Phoenix Zoo May 12 & 13. Celebrate the return of millions of birds from their wintering grounds in Central and South America. Help educate the public about the extraordinary phenomenon of migration and how they can help. Increase awareness of the importance of shade grown coffee in preserving habitat. Contact Laurie Nessel at (480) 968-5614 laurienessel@hotmail.com

Fiesta de las Aves International Birding Festival is a new event to be held May 11-13 in Bisbee, Arizona. Activities will include field trips to famous as well as lesser-known birding areas north of the border, as well as trips into Sonora. For more information, contact the event's coordinator, Southeastern Arizona Bird Observer: 520/432-1388; PO Box 5521, Bisbee, AZ 85603; www.sabo.org ; e-mail at sabo@SABO.org .

NEW Maricopa Audubon T-Shirts are available for sale at member meetings or by mail. They feature a Barn Owl primary flight feather overshadowing the common and Latin names of birds found in Maricopa County. Short sleeved shirts are available in Iris, Brick, Charcoal and Willow, large or XL for \$15.00. Long-sleeved shirts are available in Charcoal, Med, Large or XL, for \$20.00. Add \$4.00 shipping and handling for the first shirt, \$1.50 for each additional shirt. Please allow 3 weeks for delivery. Make checks out to: Maricopa Audubon Society, 1128 E. Geneva Dr., Tempe, Az 85282. For info, contact Laurie Nessel at (480) 968-5614, laurienessel@hotmail.com . Look for a future posting of the shirts on our website: <http://www.maricopaaudubon.org> .

Field Trip Leaders: I would like to encourage you to write up your field trips. I am sure MAS members would like to hear about what was seen.

The Web: The web site putting travelling birders in touch with each other all over the world has just been improved to make it easier to use. In North America you can find contacts in 57 states and provinces and if you travel overseas, find contacts in all major countries in Europe, The Middle East, Asia and South America as well as Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Bookmark the new improved <http://www.birdingpal.com> and meet a fellow birder next time you travel.

Do you have an interesting story to tell about birding? Please forward your **submissions** to the Editor—Deva Burns. Check the back page for address/e-mail. Actually, attaching an article to an e-mail is the absolute easiest way to submit an article. If you have pictures or slides, you do need to send those to me directly. I want to give everyone plenty of notice about a change in deadline for the July-August issue. Jim and I have a date with an Ivory Gull in the Arctic in mid-June, so I must move the **June 1 deadline back to May 25**. Thanks.

Our web site <http://www.maricopaadubon.org> has been updated. We owe a big Thank you to Michell Fulton (and her boss, Scott Burge) for all of the hard work and dedication she has put into it so far. If you have access to the web, please check out our site.

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From the Editor

Deva Burns

This issue marks the end of my first year as Wren*dition editor. I must say that it has been a challenge. However, I have met some interesting and dedicated people and have thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it. Well, maybe not every minute! In the past I have encouraged you to submit articles for publication. In this issue I would like to take the next step. I would like to encourage you to let me know how you feel about the Wren*dition: what are we doing right and what would you like to see in future issues? *Sports Illustrated's* Rick Reilly says of the correspondence he receives, "If it weren't for the letters, even the ones dripping hemlock, this job would be like hollering down a black, dry well." I can't promise you I will have room to publish your letters, but I can promise that I will read and consider every one of them.

I am sure you recall Jeanine Baker's plea for us to drink shade grown coffee in the November-December Wren*dition. Paul Baicich also addressed this topic in a great article in February's *Birding*. The theme for this year's International Migratory Bird Day is the importance of shade grown coffee. Please attend the IMBD Festival at the Phoenix Zoo May 12-13. You can also check out the following links on the web: 1) details of International Migratory Bird Day 2001 at <http://birds.fws.gov/imbd.html> and 2) organizations and businesses working on shade grown coffee at <http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/Canopy/1290/links.html>.

Steve Gallizioli, Arizona Wildlife Federation board member, adds his eloquent voice to Bob Witzeman's against livestock grazing in our state. After reading articles like these, I don't understand why all Arizonans don't actively join this cause.

Richard Kaiser and Troy Corman answered my pleas for reports on field trips and the Gila River Christmas Bird Count respectively. And speaking of field trips, I'm on my way out the door to study the *empidonaxes* passing through right now on spring migration. Wish me luck and get out there yourselves.

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Programs

Meetings are held the first Tuesday of each month, September-April, at the Phoenix Zoo Auditorium. Meetings start at 7:30, and feature a speaker, book sales, refreshments, and a chance to socialize with fellow MAS members. Non-members welcome!

Join us for a pre-meeting dinner at Pete's 19th Tee, 1405 N Mill Avenue, Tempe (at the Rolling Hills Golf Course) starting at 6:00 p.m. The May dinner and meeting will be held at the Shalimar Country Club, one block north of Southern, midway between McClintock and Price, in Tempe. The cost is \$20 per person.

Program topics:

May 1: Dr. George Archibald, International Crane Foundation co-founder.

September 4: Scott Anderson of the Gilbert Riparian Institute speaking about the Gilbert Riparian Institute and The Preserves at Neely Ranch

and Water Ranch.

October 2: Kenn Kaufman topic: TBA

November 6: Bob Stewart on the butterflies of Arizona.

December 4: Roseann Hanson from the Sky Island Alliance.

Speakers wanted: If you have ideas for speakers, or if you would like to make a presentation yourself, please contact Laurie Nessel, Program Chair, at (480) 968-5614 or lauriinessel@hotmail.com.

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FIELD TRIP REVIEW

Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Sunday, March 11, 2001

by Richard Kaiser

The weather forecast for Phoenix television during the week prior to the weekend field trip forebode rain showers throughout the state, as well as a cold front moving in. Although the Monument's weather during the Saturday scouting was mostly cloudy with a few light showers, our Sunday outing worked out to be beautifully sunny with some high puffy clouds. Our small group of only seven participants enjoyed the weather, and this National Monument in the southwest portion of our state; for some this was their first visit.

A rather remote and lesser-known birding area in the northern half of the Monument is Alamo Canyon, accessed by a three-mile road from State Highway 85 back to a primitive campground, and an old jeep trail, the latter which we walked along, pursuing birds. We heard more birds than observed. This included a Canyon Wren, several Gila Woodpeckers, and Cactus Wrens. We were able to get good views of a Loggerhead Shrike, Northern Cardinals (male and female), Black-throated Sparrow (probably more common than we realized, once we remembered its calls), and House Finches.

We stopped at the 12-mile point on the Puerto Blanco Drive, at a parking place for the Dripping Springs Mine Trail, for a beautiful view of the blooming flowers. But it was the red blossoms of the ocotillos that attracted a female Anna's Hummingbird, a female Costa's Hummingbird, and most notably, a beautiful male Rufous Hummingbird. Along different portions of the road, we saw Gambel's Quail, Red-tailed Hawk, Northern Mockingbird, and Phainopepla, which was especially abundant.

The 5.1-mile Puerto Blanco Drive is most known for its access to Quitobaquito Spring in the southwest corner of the Monument because it provides an oasis for birds and animals in a land mostly desolate and sparse desert. This day was no exception. It gave us sightings of two bright males of Common Yellowthroat and Wilson's Warbler, perhaps early migrants. Other birds at the pond, probably "residents", were Violet-green Swallow, Black Phoebe, American Coot, and Ash-throated Flycatcher. Six female Mallards were very nervous at human visitors at overlooks, and spent most of the time circling the area in the air. A Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Curve-billed Thrasher (with nest) were seen by some in different locations. Our trip bird list totaled thirty species.

The most memorable part of our trip may not be nature-related at all. I scouted the Monument on Saturday and found the road called Camino de Dos Republicas east of Highway 85 along the international border, closed.

After talking to a volunteer ranger that the closure is due to drug traffic, I thought, "Oh well, a sign of the times..." In the past, this road had been good for birds amongst some historic buildings. Leaving Sunday afternoon, on the Puerto Blanco Drive, along the border, our group was stopped in our vehicles by National Park Service police due to "criminal activity" ahead by drug traffickers. Apparently, this happens too often. We can only hope that this does not prevent our enjoyment of cacti, flowers, and birds in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in the future.

FIELD TRIP REVIEW

Estrella Mountain Regional Park, Saturday, February 10, 2001

by Richard Kaiser

There were only six of us that braved the cold (for the Phoenix area) morning to Join park naturalist, Bob Gauden, as leader for this Maricopa Audubon outing. Sometimes it is the unexpected mammal sightings that produce more memories to the participants than the birds that we had set out to find. Such was the case on this day when we were lucky to watch a beaver swimming in and scratching by the Gila River, in a lesser-known part of Estrella Mountain Park to the east of the main public areas. In this area, from the riverbank, we were able to spot a Green Heron, American Coot in the water, and a Gila Woodpecker in the trees.

After checking for any raptors that might fly near the cliffs (Bob had seen a Peregrine Falcon in the recent past), we walked back to the main park and through the grassy picnic areas. A Northern Harrier flew across the road. We watched as a covey of Gambel's Quail ran through the grass near one picnic ramada, even on to a grill, the tables, and the roof of the ramada. We heard and saw a couple of Killdeer a little beyond, and Phainopepla started to appear and become common. We were lucky to have good views of a Loggerhead Shrike and Red-naped Sapsucker in different trees. But as we circled through the park, and back to our parked cars, the most memorable bird sighting may have been three Gila Woodpeckers, one Northern Flicker, and one Ruby-crowned Kinglet, all in the same tree! In this same area, the common Curve-billed Thrasher, European Starling, and Cactus Wren, were heard and seen. The temperature was warming, but we could not find a Gray Flycatcher this day, a well-known winter sighting for this park.

It was only midmorning when Bob had to leave us, and go about his work duties, so our group decided to do some more birding in this area. We drove outside the park, to the intersection of Estrella Parkway and Vineyard Avenue. Upon getting out of our vehicles, we spotted a pair of Greater Roadrunners on a wide dirt shoulder to the road, a species regularly seen by Bob in Estrella Park, but not in our early morning walk this day. I also confirmed Northern Rough-winged Swallows swooping around in flight in this area, and down over the river. We walked west across the Parkway and a guardrail, to view a variety of water birds on the Gila River. Through binoculars and telescopes, we were able to identify Pled-billed Grebe, Green-winged Teal, Cinnamon Teal, Redhead, Northern Shoveler, and Ring-necked Duck. But the ducks kept on taking flight, and moving further away from us; this may have been due to a coyote seen along the shore by some of us. An Osprey was also observed well on a distant utility pole. And in a field to the south, Killdeer and Homed Lark were spotted.

Our group next went on to 115th Avenue and the Gila River bridge, just east of Phoenix International Raceway, where we spotted Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Black-crowned Night Heron, and Spotted Sandpiper, in openings to water from the old road.

Our final stop was to the Tres Rios Wetlands Cobble Site, west of 91st Avenue, at the Salt River. Our greatest variety of birds was here. We were able to spot one bright male Yellow-headed Blackbird amongst mostly Red-winged Blackbirds in the reeds. As we walked along the marsh, we also saw White-crowned Sparrow, Northern Cardinal, Marsh Wren, Black Phoebe, and heard Sora and Song Sparrow. In flight over the area, and for varying lengths of time in the water, we also saw Double-crested Cormorant, Great Egret, Snowy Egret and White-faced Ibis; the egrets also perched in the trees over the Salt River. As we walked around the marsh, we added more bird sightings: Common Yellowthroat, Say's Phoebe, Belted Kingfisher, Common Moorhen, and perhaps, one Orange-crowned Warbler. We had a very fulfilling half day of birdwatching, and it is obvious the Tres Rios Constructed Wetlands Project, and along the Gila and Salt Rivers in southwest Phoenix can be quite productive.

We learned much at regional Audubon conferences

Bob Witzeman

In the relations of man with the animals, with the flowers, with the objects of creation, there is a great ethic, scarcely perceived as yet, which will at length break forth into light.

Victor Hugo 1802-1885

Prior to the time the National Audubon Society terminated their regional offices, Audubon us intermountain Audubon chapter folks from Montana, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho and Arizona would get together regularly for regional conferences. They were both informative events and a lot of fun. We learned how much our fellow intermountain colleagues here in the intermountain West shared similar challenges.

Time and again I remember our esteemed regional NAS intermountain states director Robert K. Turner, or some other equally articulate guest speaker, explaining to us bright-eyed Audubon novices what happens to the bird and wildlife habitat on our National Forest and BLM streams when cows get into them.

Cows are a species that evolved in the forested areas of Asia, preferring to linger by streams and wetlands. The conflict arises because 80% of vertebrate wildlife in the arid regions of the West are dependent at some time in their life cycles for access to undisturbed riparian ecosystems.

Cattle are attracted to National Forest and BLM streams where they preferentially target tree saplings and seedlings, and other streambank-stabilizing vegetation. Cattle also devour bulrushes, cattails and other marsh vegetation as if it were ice cream. This, for example, destroys bittern, heron, Marsh Wren, Sora, Black, Clapper and Virginia Rail habitats.

The result of this is that stream banks collapse both from cattle hooves and soil erosion. Deep, cool streams become silted-in, broad, shallow, warm-water moonscapes of algae, gravel, rock and sand. The resulting increase in sunlight upon the previously shaded streamcourse causes water temperatures to rise, alga bloom, evaporative losses to increase, and harm to fish species and the aquatic/riparian ecosystem. Fewer insects falling into the streams mean less prey for fish, and subsequently, less fish prey for our threatened desert-nesting Bald Eagles. Also fewer trees mean fewer trees for nesting, a substrate the eagles clearly prefer to cliff nest sites.

Cattle can produce 5.4 billion fecal coliform and 31 billion fecal streptococcus bacteria in their feces per day. Since cattle spend a significant portion of their time in or near streams, lakes and wetlands, and because they average 12 defecations per day, they cause significant water elevation of phosphorus and nitrogen. This results in widespread water quality degradation and eutrophication. The resulting lowering of oxygen degrades the aquatic ecosystem from invertebrates, to threatened native fish, to garter snakes, herons, kingfishers, otters, herons, bears, and raccoons.

Loss of the overhead tree canopy, and the vegetation along the streambank, causes a reduction in insects and available nesting habitat for birds. This impacts highly endangered breeding birds such as the Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, and our unique, highly threatened, desert-nesting Bald Eagle population. But stream treelessness also impacts our Neotropical migrants as well as our nesting warblers, orioles, grosbeaks, and tanagers.

People have often said: why don't we just fence the rivers off from cattle? The result is that displacing cattle to the upland soils results in newly overgrazed soils that are no longer capable of containing moisture when the rains come. This results in cavernous gullies and arroyos in our uplands, washing away irreconcilable amounts of topsoil. It also results in severe flooding downstream with the destruction of the riparian vegetation, and further soil loss there. Besides the cost of riparian fencing, the Forest Service and BLM must also build costly upstream stock tanks, windmills, and water catchments, as well as new roads and fences for them. Why? All of this is slavishly undertaken by the agencies in order to provide the equivalent animal/unit/month forage for the public lands permittees.

The rapid storm runoff from overgrazed uplands and the loss of plant root structure results in a landscape-wide reduction in groundwater recharge and falling water tables. Lowering the upland groundwater tables means fewer seeps and springs, - habitat vital for birds and wildlife in the arid regions of the West. Wildlife seeking water is then compelled to penetrate a gauntlet of vegetation-free terrain around stock tanks. This makes them vulnerable to predators as well as to disease from polluted stock tanks.

It was at one of these unsightly, fecal-splattered, sacrifice zones around a stock tank in Cochise County where Janet and I saw our first McCown's Longspur in Arizona. Like the Horned Lark, the McCown's accepts such barren, cattle-nuked habitats. But we would have gladly foregone that bird if the American people could just have back all their streams, springs, lakes and seeps destroyed by cattle on OUR public lands.

Remember, all BLM and USFS public lands grazing produces only 2% of this nation's beef despite the below-market, giveaway-priced federal fees and the host of other subsidies given to those permittee beneficiaries! Iowa produces more beef than all the federal public lands in the West. Termination of public lands welfare grazing, like public lands welfare logging and mining, is long overdue.

Arizona's desert-nesting Bald Eagle. Less than 40 pairs of these geographically and genetically isolated eagles exist in the world. Their survival threats include public land grazing and stream flow diversions.

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ANDERSON MESA PRONGHORN IN SERIOUS TROUBLE

Steve Gallizioli

Pronghorn antelope on Anderson Mesa southeast of Flagstaff have been on a downward spiral for 50 years or more. Poor fawn survival seems to be the trouble. Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD) biologists have found an average of about ten fawns per 100 does during the past decade. Twenty years ago Dr. Don Neff, research biologist with AGFD found a ratio at birth of 150 fawns per 100 does. Apparently fawns are being produced but most do not survive more than a couple of months. Wildlife biologists believe we need a ratio of 30-40 fawns per 100 does simply to maintain population levels. If the downward trend of this herd isn't reversed soon, this population may vanish, as have other local populations in the state.

The problem? The short answer is coyote predation: Neff found no evidence of fawn mortality other than predation by coyotes. Knowing that, however, raises another question: Why are fawns now so vulnerable to coyotes? Early travelers in Arizona found large numbers of pronghorn wherever there were grasslands. Apparently predation by coyotes, and even wolves, was not then a limiting factor. Today, many of those areas are devoid of antelope. Others with some antelope need frequent coyote control efforts, involving shooting from a helicopter immediately prior to the fawn drop in April, in order to maintain minimum numbers. The Anderson Mesa antelope population has been as high as 5000 and more; today, AGFD estimates about 150. Numbers have gotten so low that the Coconino National Forest (CNF) felt compelled to recommend no hunting in Unit 5B (which includes Anderson Mesa) for at least a couple of years. AGFD refused to stop hunting but reduced the number of rifle hunters last year to 12. That number itself is significant, indicating that the Department is aware of the problem of low pronghorn numbers even though they seem unwilling to pressure the CNF to face up to a problem that only CNF can resolve.

Both AGFD and CNF do recognize a variety of factors they think may be responsible for alarming status of this antelope population: fences, highways, scarcity of water, weather, juniper encroachment and, especially, coyote predation. Near the bottom of the list grazing is mentioned. While the Arizona Wildlife Federation (AWF) recognizes that other factors cause mortality among both adult and younger animals, we believe abusive livestock grazing over many years is mainly responsible for the currently low population. No other explanation seems to fit the facts.

The facts are these: Prior to the introduction of livestock around the middle of the 19th century, there was an abundance of pronghorn in Arizona, from the Mexican border to the Utah line. Many of these areas are now devoid of antelope. The Arizona Strip between the Colorado River and the Utah border is a case in point. Nothing has changed there except one thing: For the last 100 years or more livestock have been competing with antelope and mule deer for forage and space. Livestock won out and antelope disappeared. Deer are still present but numbers are low. Other historical antelope areas suffered a similar fate or managed to hang on in token numbers.

THE BIG QUESTION IS: WHY ARE ANTELOPE FAWNS TODAY SO MUCH MORE VULNERABLE TO PREDATION BY COYOTES THAN THEY WERE IN PRE-LIVESTOCK DAYS? THE ANSWER? FAWNS HAVE NO GRASS COVER TO CONCEAL THEM FROM HUNGRY COYOTES!

That was Neff's conclusion after a ten year study on this area. In his own words here's what he wrote in one of his final reports: "It must be concluded that coyote predation on neonatal fawns is the **major** (emphasis added) cause of the high rate of fawn loss in the Anderson Mesa antelope herd. . .Factors contributing to this excessive coyote predation include lack of tall cover in which fawns can bed and hide." Later in the paragraph he says "The . . .grasslands on Anderson Mesa provide antelope with excellent spring forage, but poor escape cover for young fawns. Today after more than 100 years of livestock grazing, there isn't enough ground cover on Anderson Mesa to conceal an emaciated cottontail!"

AWF has been trying for the past couple of years to convince the CNF to do something about this declining pronghorn population . The Forest Service is clearly derelict in making no effort to comply with several federal laws charging the Forest Service with maintaining viable populations of indigenous wildlife on all national forests. On the CNF antelope have even been designated a Management Indicator Species, but none of this has seemed to matter to CNF.

Down the years AGFD and the Forest Service have accepted a division of responsibilities for wildlife. Game and Fish would regulate the hunting of game, and the Forest Service would be responsible for wildlife habitat. At least that's what the two agencies pay lip service to. In practice CNF traditionally has ignored the adverse impacts of livestock grazing on wildlife habitat, being largely concerned with the welfare of livestock. The Department in turn has been unwilling to rock the boat and hold the CNF accountable for the degraded wildlife habitats caused by livestock grazing.

AWF has been urging, (actually DEMANDING!) that CNF take whatever steps are necessary to help this antelope population. We have provided them reams of published data from scientific studies to support our position; we've hired a botanist to compare plant species today to what was recorded by the CNF 30-40 years ago. In doing so we've demonstrated that the habitat has seriously deteriorated and that there are fewer species today. We have also appealed Allotment Management Plans because they continue to stress livestock while ignoring the needs of antelope and other wildlife.

While the pronghorn is the most conspicuous member of the grassland habitat, a variety of other species have also been adversely impacted. The black-tailed prairie dog has disappeared completely from the state; the Gunnison's prairie dog is still hanging on in a few areas in greatly reduced numbers. The black footed ferret associated with the Gunnison's, disappeared from Arizona long ago and is now being reintroduced with uncertain results. Other species that also used prairie dog burrows and that have suffered accordingly include burrowing owl, kit fox, prairie rattlesnake. Various song birds are also impacted as is the ferruginous hawk. Needless to say, the small mammals that serve as prey for a variety of raptors have also suffered from the degraded habitat, as have many insects important in various food chains.

In AWF's efforts to stop the imminent extinction of Anderson Mesa pronghorn we've written lengthy letters, met with Coconino officials on several occasions in Flagstaff and in the field; we've flown to Albuquerque and urged the Regional Forester to become involved in this issue; as mentioned above we've hired a botanist; we've paid an attorney for legal advice. We are now prepared to take the CNF to court to force them to take whatever measures are necessary to cope with this issue.

We are now appealing to all conservationists in Arizona to help put pressure on both ;the Coconino National Forest and the Game and Fish Department to urge them to get off their collective duff and move quickly to address this critical issue. And, while making fences antelope-friendly and reducing juniper stands is worthwhile, more important is rectifying the damage to habitat from prolonged abusive grazing. If this herd of pronghorn is to be saved from extinction, those agencies will have to confront the fact that a problem resulting from more than 100 years of grazing is not going to be corrected by "resting" the area for a few months or reducing the AUMs by ten or fifteen percent. It calls for a large scale reduction in livestock, or, better yet, the total exclusion of livestock. If it took more than 100 years of grazing to destroy this habitat it is sure to take at least 50 to restore it to a healthy condition. The time for talk and buck passing is past ; the time for action is NOW! Concerned readers should let the Coconino N.S. and Game and Fish Department know how they feel.

Steve worked for Game and Fish for 33 years and retired as Chief, Wildlife Management Division. Currently he is a board member of Arizona Wildlife Federation and edits their quarterly, Arizona Wildlife News.

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