Cedar Waxwings: Beautiful Nomads

FIRST QTR 2023

Common Yet Unique: Red-winged Blackbirds
Winter Birding in the Mountains
Arizona's Important Bird Areas
Hello All,

Some exceptionally good things have happened since our last magazine. I’m so grateful, and when you hear the news I know you will feel the same way.

As 2022 was drawing to an end, we launched a big membership renewal drive. Many of you know this because you received our letter that your membership was expired or soon to be. I am fortunate to have a group of friends — some of them not even members — who assisted in getting out more than 200 personalized letters to members concerning their memberships. The response was gratifying. More than 100 of you renewed and a third of you included an extra donation with your renewal. Thank you for caring enough about this organization and its work to give those extra dollars.

To say I’m grateful is an understatement. We now have funds to meet our organizational obligations, including the cost of printing and mailing this magazine. We are by no means financially fat, but we are fit and trim. I’m especially thankful to the single donor who was moved to donate very nearly the entire amount needed to refurbish our trailer. We cannot thank you enough!

This past month at our Birds & Brew Coffee Break, I found myself reflecting on how much joy Desert Rivers Audubon brings me. Don Meas, a longtime member and one of our more experienced birders, was our speaker in January. He shared that birding is a passion for him and, he suspects, for a lot of us as well. He added that for him the appeal of birding is not only the birds he sees and learns about, but also the people he gets to know along the way. Don said that he has friends he met early in his birding experience that continue to be part of his life. When he bumps into them they pick up where they left off, as if no time had elapsed at all. These friendships are precious to him — for the memories made of experiences they shared, the birds they saw and the fun they had together.

Don has been birding far longer than me, but I understand what he’s talking about. I vividly remember trips to places where the birds were spectacular, but the warmest memories are of the people I shared them with and the fun we had. I’m still making memories while having fun doing things to help birds, nature, and places like the Riparian Preserve.

So many of you are part of those memories!
I am so warmly pleased to be part of Desert Rivers Audubon!

Theona Vyvial, President
tvvial@cox.net
DEPARTMENTS

1  Letter to the Membership
3  Birder’s Notebook
4  Conservation Commentary
9  Audubon At Home
11 Desert Rivers Audubon Activities
12 Notable AZ Sightings
13 Young Birders

FEATURES

5  The Christmas Gift  -  Jim Burns
7  Red Shouldered “Knights of the Marsh”  -  Jerry Lang
10  BBBBirding in Winter in the White Mountains  -  Kathe Anderson

Cover Photo: Adobe Stock
DIY Workshops: Make Your Windows Bird-Safe!

Have you ever heard that sickening thump – the sound a bird makes when it crashes against a window? Up to one billion birds die each year in the United States due to collisions with windows and 60% collide with residential windows!

But your windows do not have to be part of the problem. At a do-it-yourself workshop at Gilbert Riparian Preserve on March 12 we’ll show you how to make an attractive, durable and effective treatment for the killer window in your house. When you register on our homepage at desertvirensaudubon.org, you will record the dimensions of that problem window, and at the workshop our crafty committee will help you make a custom Acopian BirdSaver, ready to mount on your problem window as soon as you get home. Read more about the bird blind at www.birdsavers.com.

The workshop is the first of what we hope will be a series. Our goal is to reach as many residents as possible, birders and non-birders alike, working toward making the East Valley significantly safer for birds. If you’d like to help with this project, contact Karen Stucke-Jungemann, our conservation director, at kjstucke@gmail.com.

SB 1306, the bill we were at the capitol to support, would give rural communities some control at last over the water under their feet. The bill would allow those communities to establish Local Groundwater Stewardship Areas and decide on goals and conservation measures. Nowhere is the importance of water more evident than in the desert. Water is essential to people, farming and industry – and to year-round flow in the rivers and streams critical to birds and wildlife. Theona Vyrilis and Gwen Grace accompanied me to the event, and between us we were scheduled to meet with six senators and representatives. We couldn’t see everyone because of committee meetings and a joint session, but we made good use of our time to promote good water policy and to talk about its importance to the birds we love.

“It remains to be seen where SB 1306 will head, but we were glad to able to raise the issue with lawmakers,” Paul said. Passage of a bill often takes hard work and advocacy several sessions in a row, she explained. That means we need to stay on top of SB 1306 and other good environmental bills. Our legislative representatives need to hear our voices. The capitol is a hub of powerful competing interests and birds cannot speak for themselves. That’s our job!

First, be a student of the issues. You may join the Western Rivers Action Network and sign up for their alerts here: www.audubon.org/joinwra.

Watch Hailey’s blog for entries like this one: bit.ly/2023AudubonPriorities.

Then speak up. Relationships matter, so get to know the people who represent your district. Their email addresses and phone numbers are here: www.azleg.gov/memberroster. If you don’t know your legislative district or representatives, start here: www.azleg.gov/findmylegislator. If you want to voice your opinion on bills under consideration in the Arizona Senate and House of Representatives, the Request to Speak (RTS) system makes it easy to do from home once you are set up. Go to https://www.ceb.az/aztrs.html to get started.

The continued existence of the birds we love to watch depends in large part on our vigilance.

It Ain’t Over ‘Til It’s Over

One sparkling morning a few weeks ago, three of us carpooled downtown for Western Rivers Day At the Capitol. This annual event organized by policy director Haley Paul from Audubon Southwest gathers representatives of Audubon chapters and other conservation groups for personal meetings with state senators and representatives about legislation. We were there during the final week of committee hearings, significant because without a hearing before a relevant committee, bills are unlikely to progress to the floor for a vote.

The legislation we supported, SB 1306, would address the groundwater crisis in rural Arizona. The 1980 Arizona Groundwater Management Act established Active Management Areas in the state’s most populous areas, where new developers must prove that they have access to an assured 100-year supply of water before breaking ground. It also set up Irrigation Non-Expansion Areas where groundwater is insufficient. And, cities were given a 2025 deadline to reach “safe yield” – where groundwater withdrawal does not exceed replenishment annually. Recharge facilities such as the Gilbert Water Ranch serve that goal.

Meanwhile, rural areas – 80 percent of the state – were left unregulated. The old code of neighborliness has been strained by the huge water demands of developers and industrial agriculture, who are not required to comply with any rules. Water tables are lower now, draining wetlands and riparian areas.
Arizona’s Important Bird Areas

Karen Stucke-Jungemann
Conservation Director

Excitement is in the air! If you’ve visited the Gilbert Riparian Preserve you’ve felt it. Noisy wintering waterfowl, secretive migrating songbirds and confident native birds are drawn to this human-made desert oasis. It’s a special place, but do you know that this is a designated Important Bird Area (IBA)?

What are IBAs?

Important Bird Areas (IBA) are places recognized for their outstanding value to bird conservation. Founded by BirdLife International, IBAs designate and protect geographic areas that are important habitats for birds around the world. Arizona has 48 designated IBAs, stretching from Marble Canyon and Grand Canyon in the north, to the southern border and the Sky Islands south of Tucson. In addition to being essential for bird survival, IBAs are key to the health of other wildlife and people.

How are they selected and managed?

Selection criteria for IBAs include presence of bird species of greatest concern such as the California Condor, species with small ranges such as Mexican Chickadee, and areas with large groups of birds such as Sandhill Cranes. At the Gilbert Riparian Preserve, public education was also a deciding factor in its selection.

After thorough scientific surveys and data collection, managed by Audubon Southwest and Tucson Audubon Society, an IBA proposal is submitted to the Arizona IBA Science Committee. Upon approval it is added to the program. Locations and information on all of Arizona’s IBAs are listed on the website www.aziba.org.

The IBAs are administered by Jennie McFarland, Arizona IBA Program Conservation Biologist and Tice Supplee, Audubon Southwest Director of Bird Conservation. Although they do not have direct control over these areas, mini-conservation plans guide the land managers and owners to implement protections for birds and their habitats. As migratory birds travel across Arizona or major flyways, IBAs give them the rest and recovery needed to continue their journey.

“Another major goal of Arizona’s IBA Program is to engage the public and create a higher awareness of the value of these habitats and the need to conserve them.”

Tice Supplee,
Director of Bird Conservation for Audubon Southwest

Can I visit the IBAs?

Most IBAs are open to the public, although some are remote. Start by visiting the IBAs close to home before the summer heat arrives! Familiar to Desert Rivers members, Gilbert Riparian Preserve is on the southeast corner of Greenfield and Guadalupe Roads. There are two other IBAs a short drive from the east valley. The east is Boyce Thompson Arboretum and Aremt Queen Creeks IBA. It is located about one hour from Mesa on Highway 60 a few miles west of the town of Superior. An entrance fee is required for the arboretum. If you are lucky, you might see some of the rare birds it attracts — Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Brown Thrasher, Gray Catbird, and Rufous-backed Robin. Northern Cardinals are commonly seen here and raptores soar along the cliffs.

Northeast of Mesa is the Salt and Verde Riparian Ecosystem. It stretches from Saguaro Lake to the confluence with the Verde River, the sections of the Verde River designated as Wild and Scenic by federal agencies, and Fossil Creek. To visit the areas that are most accessible from the east valley, drive north on Power Road until it becomes Bush Highway. Continue on Bush Highway to Phon D. Sutton, Coon Bluff and Goldfield recreation areas. The required daily permit or annual pass can be purchased through the Tonto National Forest website.

This scenic riparian area hosts up to one-third of Arizona’s nesting Bald Eagles and is an important seasonal stop-over for the Common Black-hawk. The mesquite bosques along the river are where the Lucy’s Warbler and Bell’s Vireo nest in abundance.

Continued on page 14
The Christmas Gift

Longtime birders know if they are lucky or live long enough, what goes around comes around, and that reuniting with old avian friends conjures up fond and forgotten memories that new birding discoveries cannot. Though we were not traveling this year, the holiday season presented me with an extraordinary gift of great memories and a reminder of how wonderful an unexpected and inexplicable birding experience can be.

To begin at the beginning, as I was growing up in the Midwest, the very first species I remember actually seeing and hearing named was Cedar Waxwing. As I was only a preschooler at the time, I can certainly not claim these ethereal beauties were my “spark” bird because I did not become a serious birder until a young adult out of college and, in truth, never saw these frugivorous nomads again for over twenty years.

Through my school years, however, the bird with which I became most familiar was our common yard bird, American Robin. They nested in our next door neighbor’s huge elm tree, and all summer long we heard their joyous, rollicking vocals and watched them as they prospected for worms and visited our bird bath. So familiar and common in fact, that when I first began looking for birds I hardly gave robins a second glance.

Waxwings, of course, always get a second look here in Arizona because they do not breed in the state, are uncommon in winter, and being nomadic rarely show up in the same place two years in a row. In my forty years here I had records from only three disparate locations, all late summer and autumn—Oak Creek, Kitt Peak, and Boyce Thompson Arboretum.

Though robins began getting my attention when I took on a Breeding Bird Survey route in the White Mountains where their song can seem ubiquitous in May and June, I had only two records from here in the Valley. One was in winter as I bicycle commuted to work. The second was a single, seemingly lost individual in October of 2021 at my local patch, a sparse desert park where I had birded for forty years without seeing a robin. But, an irrigation canal runs through it.

Along the canal is a huge old Tamarisk which every winter attracts the local Cooper’s Hawks, both adults and juveniles, that hide out and loaf there before dropping into the water to bathe. At sunrise on December 10 I threaded my way slowly behind trees and rocks toward the Tamarisk hoping to catch a Coop at the water. No such luck, but as I sat down on a small rise overlooking a wide curve in the canal I heard a vaguely familiar call.
No one has ever accused me of being an ear birder, but if I hear vocalizations often enough they sometimes register, and for sure I am conversant with everything the common birds at my patch have to offer. This was different—*Shriek, cuk, cuk,* then a whirry. As I scrolled mentally through my rolodex of vocals trying to place this sequence, a robin dropped from a nearby Mesquite into a Creosote bush beside the canal. Of course, I thought, as recognition dawned.

Glancing up I saw there was a handful of robins at the top of the Mesquite basking in warmth of the rising sun along with the ubiquitous starlings. One by one both species dropped to the Creosote, then walked warily to the water to drink. Interesting, but since I didn’t need photos of these common species, and when a hiker spooked the small flock of robins, I headed home to record my third sighting of American Robin for the Valley.

I didn’t return to the scene until sunrise on Christmas Eve morning, not expecting much and knowing the park would soon be overrun with weekend fishermen and dog walkers. As I came over the hill, though, I heard robins again, recognizing the sound instantly this time, mainly because it was all around me—several in the treetop catching first light, a few already in the bushes above the canal, many flying back and forth over the hill.

There is nothing like the magic low light in the hour after sunrise to enrich and intensify the colors of nature, and what was happening around me was spectacular orange chaos. I sat down carefully on the rise, camera in hand and quickly realized, perhaps in their huge numbers and constant jousting with one another, the robins seemed largely oblivious of me.

At one point I counted fifty in the staging tree, another fifty strung out along the canal’s edge or splashing in the water, tens more passing overhead or preening in the bushes, some only yards away from me. I’d guessimate there were now several hundred robins in the park, drab females, some first year birds, others textbook mature males, spectacular with the contrast between orange breast and coal black heads.

Suddenly a large flock of starlings flew over, something—something smaller and brighter—strung out through the center of their dark cloud. I raised the lens and fired off “spray and pray” shots, looked at the back of the camera, and received a jolt of joy. Waxwings! In the Saguaro desert? I knew if I just sat and waited I might get every shot I’d ever imagined of these beautiful nomads. I did and I did.

This amazing avian spectacle lasted over an hour, robins and waxwings together, drinking, bathing, squabbling, preening. When the starlings would flush, the waxwings would leave with them, but the robins barely looked up. And the waxwings, perhaps two dozen, a few among them fully mature adults sporting the red wing appendages, always came back with their starling escorts.

Thankfully, as my legs began to cramp up, by late morning the action began to wane, and I staggered to my car knowing I didn’t need to unwrap any presents the next day. I had already received my Christmas gift. The joy of birding.
Red-winged Blackbirds, Agelaius phoeniceus, are one of the most common North American birds. During peak breeding years there may be over 250 million pairs across North America from Alaska to Newfoundland to Costa Rica and from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts.

Agelaius is from the Greek word for gregarious and phoeniceus from Latin for crimson. In the northern parts of their range, the early spring arrival of the males with their red epaulets calling conk-la-ree from perches across the wetlands is a welcome sound for winter-weary humans.

Red-winged Blackbirds (RWBs) are territorial, polygynous (males take more than one mate), gregarious and short-distance migratory. The males’ distinctive red shoulders make them easily recognizable while the much subdued brownish/black females remain less visible. The red coloration on the males results from a mixture of several pigments that are both produced by the birds and consumed in their food, which is somewhat unusual in avian physiology. Males don’t fully develop their red markings until they are 13-15 months old, or after the first breeding season during which most of them are “floaters”, i.e., males without territory.

The red markings on males are apparently only for the purpose of defending territories from other RWB males. Color intensity indicates physical condition in male-to-male competition. Males will threaten and attack other conspecific males as well as many other animals including human intruders.

Older females develop some orangish red coloration and vocalize with mostly a scolding chatter. Females apparently aren’t impressed with the gentlemen in red and will mate with unmarked males. Males may fiercely defend a territory with multiple nesting females, but many females still mate with other males resulting in mixed paternity nesting.

RWBs go through a series of partial and complete molts with a significant molt from late August into September. This molt is usually complete by October when northern populations begin a southward migration. Some populations in Canada begin their southward migration while they are still molting in late summer. RWB populations in southern areas are, for the most part, non-migratory. Males and females of northern populations migrate in sexually segregated flocks with female flocks normally migrating farther and leaving breeding areas earlier in the fall and arriving later in the spring than do males.

RWBs are omnivorous with a diet composed roughly of 75% plant material (mostly seeds) and 25% insects and other small animals. The number of insects in their diets increases during breeding season when more protein is needed. Odonates (dragonflies and damselflies) are important insects in RWB warm-season diets. RWBs will also follow plows to feed on unearthed worms and larvae and will feed on a variety of small fruits such as blueberries and blackberries.

RWBs mix with grackles, cowbirds, and starlings in huge late summer and early fall flocks to feed on waste grain and field crops.

Wetlands, either freshwater or saltwater, are the preferred breeding sites for RWBs although they will also use upland areas such as old fields, meadows and prairies. It’s important to have upright residual vegetation from the previous year’s growth. In wetlands, females prefer broad-leaved rather than narrow-leaved cattails. This probably has to do with stronger support higher above water levels thus being safer from predators and more resistant to wind and weather.

In the western portions of North America, Yellow-headed Blackbirds compete with RWBs for wetland nest sites. Yellow-heads usually arrive after redwings have already staked out territory, but they may chase out the RWBs from prime breeding areas where the vegetation is stronger and the water levels are deeper. In these cases, the RWBs are relegated to less desirable peripheral wetland sites more vulnerable to weather and predators. Predators include snakes, raccoons, other birds, etc. Marsh wrens nesting nearby often depurate RWB nests. An estimated 30-50% of RWB nests suffer predation.
The reproductive season for RWBs is generally the end of April to the end of July. Females construct nests by themselves in three to six days. Nesting materials include grasses, sedges and mosses. The nest is lined with mud and bound to surrounding vegetation. There are usually 3-4 pale blueish-green eggs with brown, purple or black markings per nest. Incubation (solely by the female) is 11-13 days and hatchlings are ready to leave the nest in 11-14 days. Females can lay 2-3 clutches (always in a new nest) per season, and they can reproduce up to 10 years of age.

Males help with feeding of nestlings, and male territorialism decreases once nesting is underway when males focus more on defending nest sites from predators. Once secured, males have a fidelity to their territories year after year. However, an average male bird's lifespan is only between 2-3 years. Floaters (young males with no territory) are constantly searching for vacant territory, which is usually provided with the disappearance of defending males. Females have a much stronger wetland fidelity and a weak mate fidelity. In other words, once a female finds the right real estate, she doesn’t much care who the temporary owner is!

Migrating RWB populations may play an important role in spreading both St. Louis encephalitis virus and West Nile virus. The impact of these viruses on the birds themselves has not been extensively studied.

Large flocks of RWBs, especially during fall and winter months, can cause damage to various agricultural crops. During mid-summer nesting season, RWBs rely heavily on abundant insect populations for calories and protein. With the approach of fall in northern areas, gathering flocks of birds turn their attention to local agricultural crops. In the Dakotas, this often means sunflowers. Although corn is abundant, it’s not as attractive to RWBs once the kernels harden. In the southern areas where large numbers of birds overwinter, they can cause damage to sprouting rice and other ripening crops. The fact that public land and non-farmer-owned land near croplands are often RWB roosting areas can be frustrating to farmers since this limits potential control measures.

Control options are limited. In the 1980s and 90s, a surfactant (PA-14) was experimentally used. This material was aerosol sprayed on roosting birds most of which subsequently died from hypothermia. Obviously, this was a very non-specific approach and probably killed many non-target species. In fact, some of these operations have been blamed for locally reducing Rusty Blackbird populations – a species that has declined in number more than 85% in the past 40 years.

The current chemical control of choice is Avitrol, 4-aminopyridine, applied to grain bait. Only small amounts are needed since birds consuming the bait exhibit alarm behaviors that frighten the entire flock. According to the manufacturer, Avitrol does not actually cause pain in the affected birds and, in most cases, the birds recover. Pyrotechnics and other scare tactics are minimally effective at dispersing flocks of RWBs.

Over most of their range, Red-winged Blackbirds are just one of those common birds for most birders. But just as with humans, even the most common of us, have unique and, if we take the time to learn, interesting lives.
Turning Your Yard Into An Oasis for Birds

In urban areas of the desert southwest, most of our yards fall into two categories: water-guzzling lawns and hot gravel beds. Neither are hospitable to our feathered friends. From a bird’s eye view, the sprawling metropolis of Phoenix and its suburbs is a vast inhospitable wasteland punctuated by a few usable spaces like parks and water reservoirs.

Most birds avoid the endless concrete expanses of the public spaces in our cities, and unfortunately, many private properties are just as bleak. This leaves little respite for birds, forcing most species to retreat to the city’s fringes. But there’s good news! Any backyard can be converted to a welcoming paradise for birds by making a few easy modifications.

First, you must think like a bird. A good habitat always includes water, food, or cover – and the best habitats feature all three. In the arid southwest, shade is a premium. Even the most desert-adapted birds will avoid open expanses during the hottest parts of the day. But, yards can be altered slightly to provide more resources for birds without a massive overhaul.

To start, break up one-dimensional spaces by incorporating more plants. Plants provide birds with cover, nesting sites, and food. Choosing native plant species benefits everyone involved, as they are more drought adapted and therefore require less water. Replacing a lawn – or even just parts of a lawn – with native plants saves you money on your water bill, helps reduce the burden on the southwest’s limited water supply, and creates habitat for desert bird species, many of which are specially adapted to Sonoran Desert plants. Even converting a little bit of your turf to native greenspace will make a huge difference in the lives of birds around you.

Many native plants are aesthetically pleasing, easy to keep, and instantly attractive to both residential and migratory birds. The Sonoran Desert is home to several species of prickly pear cactus, which feature beautiful multi-colored blooms and produce edible fruit – a favorite of native birds like Curve-billed Thrashers and White-winged Doves. As a bonus, they are tough as nails and require little water or care. Crotalaria cactus are another good choice, as they entice desert birds to build nests in their spiny centers. Adding even one cholla to a yard often brings a boisterous family of Cactus Wrens or Curve-billed Thrashers!

Offering plants in a variety of heights creates a more natural environment and increases shade, which benefits the birds, other plants in the yard, and even you. Shrub-like desert hackberry provide year-round resources in the form of dense cover, insect-attracting flowers, and delicious berries.

Others, like fairy dusters, supply nectar for hummingbirds as well as seed pods beloved by Northern Cardinals and Black-throated Sparrows.

Desert trees like palo verdes, ironwoods, velvet mesquites, and desert willows are all excellent additions to any Phoenix yard. Even a single mature tree will provide shelter, shade, food in the form of insects and seeds, and nesting sites for countless birds. Before long, Verdins will construct a ball nest in its limbs and fill your yard with happy chatter as they dangle from branches, glean insects or sipping nectar from flowers. Trees also shade the landscape below, making it easier to grow a greater variety of plants and even saving you money on your cooling bill if oriented correctly.

Supplement your cacti, shrub, and tree plantings with small understory plants like desert marigold – which brightens the landscape year-round with its yellow flowers before forming nutrient-rich seeds – and red penstemons and chuparosas, which are like candy for hummingbirds.

All of the plants mentioned are available at most of the valley’s nurseries and garden centers. As a bonus, most are affordable and require little supplemental irrigation which makes them easy to keep in the desert. They are also adapted to sandy alkaline desert soil, which means no amendment is necessary. You can do a complete yard renovation all at once or start small, incorporating a few plants at a time to a devoted section of your yard.

Also, consider offering water in the form of a bird bath as this will lure birds from near and far to your yard practically overnight.

With the higher temperatures created by urban heat islands, even the most desert-adapted birds quickly become parched during scorching summer days. Be sure to place your bird bath out of reach of roaming cats and clean it regularly to avoid spreading disease.

By making these slight changes, you can help return sections of Phoenix to the desert birds that were displaced as the city developed. You’ll be amazed at how fast they return! As a bonus, migrating birds will also view your yard as an oasis, stopping for a much-needed drink, rest, or snack before continuing on their long journeys. This means that your yard can play a key role in helping the world’s birds when they need it the most.
BRRRRd in Winter in the White Mountains

Kathe Anderson

Our attention turned to the lake. Unlike summer birding when musk ducks and American Coots have the lake to themselves, on this December morning, the lake was covered with ducks. There were too many to count accurately as they swam about languidly, changing positions and drifting in and out of low shoreline vegetation. Scores of Mallards and Ring-necked Ducks predominated, but as we walked and our view of the lake changed, we also spotted a pair of Redheads, Lesser Scap and Common Goldeneyes, mixed in with numerous American Wigeons, Gadwalls, Common Mergansers, and others.

In the woods surrounding the lake, we were delighted to find and get excellent views of several Lewis's Woodpeckers. The lake is one of the areas where this woodpecker remains year-round; others migrate all over the American West. The Lewis's Woodpeckers were one of several woodpecker species: others were Flairy, Downy, Acorn and Northern Flicker.

In one patch of Ponderosa pine, there was a mixed flock of "little bitty fittles" which challenged our counting abilities. We tried to keep track of four species as they darted about, whispering among themselves—and perhaps laughing at us! Mountain Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatches, Pygmy Nuthatches and Dark-eyed Juncos were those we counted.

I didn't expect Red-winged Blackbirds at such a high elevation in winter, but there were plenty. They swept over us in small flocks of 8-15 birds, converging on the north side of the lake. There were 40 of them—no, 50, no, 60, no, more! We finally settled on an estimate of 90 birds.

After the bird-less afternoon walk the day before, the abundance of bird life at Woodland Lake Park was not just a pleasant surprise. It was an opportunity to help at still another Christmas Bird Count. While the location was not new, certainly the impetus to try truly winter birding was. The rewards were definitely worth the effort.

The White Mountain Audubon Society invites Desert Rivers Audubon members to any of their meetings, classes and field trips. See the latest newsletter at whitemountainaudubon.org/newsletters/or latest information about field trips and how to get involved.

Well-known as a cool escape from the desert heat in the summer, the White Mountains are cold and snowy in the winter. So what could entice two residents of the balmy Phoenix area to bird in Pinetop in December? Well, we'd never done it before, and the Timber Mesa Christmas Bird Count seemed happy to get help.

I contacted Mary Williams, president of the White Mountains Audubon Society and compiler of the CBC—to see if she could use a couple of experienced counters. The offer came with the caveat that if the weather was bad, we wimps would stay home. Mary graciously allowed us to participate—and back out at the last minute if snow was forecast.

About ten days before the count, I started the weather vigil. It looked unpromising from the start, with snow and winds (15-18 mph) that would make birding unpleasant at best—and likely unfruitful. Dire snow predictions wavered, but the wind didn't. Oh, well, last year's count hardly took place at all because counters were snowed in, so we better try it.

Lois and I drove up a day early, stopping in Payson to bird Green Valley Park and enjoy pizza at Pizza Factory before heading east. We arrived at the Best Western in Pinetop about 4am, early enough to walk the nearby Billy Creek Trail. We hoped to find woodpeckers and chickadees carb-o-loading before bedtime and the long winter night ahead. Nary a feather moved in an hour. This did not bode well. An unexpected treat, however, was a herd of about fifteen elk trotting through the forest, apparently oblivious of us.

The next day dawned gray and cold (37 degrees) — and stayed that way. Thankfully, the windy conditions never materialized. We arrived at Woodland Lake Park about 8am. Before we fully emerged from the car, three Bald Eagles flew by. Two appeared to be chasing the third. Later, two Bald Eagles perched for hours on a snag at the end of the lake—were they defending territory?

Once we emerged from the car, there was a commotion of both Common Ravens and American Crows near the homes adjacent to the park. Although intermittent croaks and caws punctuated the activity, we never figured out what drew the birds' attention.
**Monthly Speaker Series**

Reserve the second Tuesday of every month for our Monthly Speaker Series, on Zoom all year, in person September through April. In person meetings: At the Southeast Regional Library, corner of Guadalupe and Greenfield Roads, Gilbert. Doors open at 6:30 p.m. and the speakers begin at 7. Zoom meetings: Begin a 7 p.m. Sign up to receive the link at desertriveraudubon.org. Recordings of past speakers: desertriveraudubon.org/programs-events-archive.

March 14 – Dave Pearson - In Person or On Zoom. So many species, So little time. Can we save more by focusing on only a few? Effective conservation and habitat management depends upon understanding why a declining species is in trouble. Arizona State University Research Professor David Pearson will talk about using a few well-studied species as stand-ins for the troubled species. In person and on Zoom.

April 11 – Liberty Wildlife - In Person or On Zoom. Liberty Wildlife volunteers will introduce us to birds of prey—live and up close—including hawks, falcons, owls and more. Liberty is a non-profit wildlife rescue, rehab and educational nonprofit based in Phoenix. In person and on Zoom.

May 9 – Casey Youngflesh - Seasonal rhythms: Why timing matters for migratory birds

Casey Youngflesh is a quantitative ecologist and ornithologist at Michigan State University. He will discuss the importance of the timing of seasonal events, like migration and breeding, and why this matters for migratory birds in light of rapid global change. Zoom only.

**Field Trips**

Desert Rivers offers two ways to find birds: Guided Field Trips and Pop Ups. Join a field trip led by an expert guide and put your knowledge with others on unguided Pop Ups. Watch our email newsletter and web calendar for details. If you would like to become field trip guide, or if you want to organize a Pop Up, contact Lois Hammer at dsanbuls@cox.net.

**Make Your Windows Safe For Birds**

You can do your part to prevent fatal window strikes by addressing the killer windows at your home. Desert Rivers will host a workshop on Sunday, March 12 at 1 - 3 pm at Gilbert Riparian Preserve where you can make an Acpolian BircoSaver customized to your window for the cost of materials. Watch the newsletter and online calendar for more details.

**Family Bird Walks Create New Advocates for Birds**

Our Family Bird Walks at Veterans Oasis Park in Chandler on the first Saturday of the month through April and at Gilbert Riparian Preserve on the third Saturday through March build appreciation and support for birds and nature in the community. Please consider volunteering! The first walk steps off at 8 a.m. and the last one leaves at 11:30. Loaner binoculars are available. Check our web calendar for details.

**Birds & Brew Coffee Break**

Birds & Brew Coffee Break on the fourth Tuesday of every month starts your day with a field trip at the Gilbert Riparian Preserve and a cup of joe at Coffee Rush at Elliot and Val Vista. Meeting times depend on sunrise so keep an eye on our email newsletter and the web calendar. Birds & Brew Happy Hour is on hiatus for a review of format and timing.

**Young Birders Club**

The Young Birder’s Club is for people ages 6-17, meeting at 8 a.m. on the same day as the Gilbert Family Bird Walks (details above). Club members do fun, age-appropriate activities and go on a bird walk in the preserve. In April, the group enjoys a field trip to the Pinal Mountains. For more information contact Anne Leight (birdannabelle@hotmail.com).

**Volunteer!**

Desert Rivers offers many opportunities to roll up your sleeves on behalf of birds. Contact our Director of Volunteers, Trish Julian, at julianrsh@att.net for some ideas! If you are interested in leadership and committee positions, please send your ideas and background information to desertriveraudubon@gmail.com.

**Get Your Desert Rivers News Here**

Sign up for our email newsletter at https://bit.ly/DesertRiversNewsletter

Check our calendar at https://bit.ly/DesertRiversCalendar
Notable Sightings

Rough-legged Hawk (Buteo lagopus), Chandler: E. Ellsworth & Germann Rd. intersection, Maricopa County. This Rough-legged Hawk was photographed by Pierre Deviche on 16 January 2022. Rough-legged Hawk is a rare winter visitor to Arizona, and extremely rare anywhere in Southern Arizona. Note the black belly band and black markings on the wing.

Red-eyed Vireo (Vireo olivaceus), Santa Cruz River, Tubac, Santa Cruz County. This Red-eyed Vireo was photographed by Scott Olmstead on 29 May 2022. Rare migrant throughout Arizona, with fewer than 10 records per year and the majority of records coming during fall migration.

Elegant Tern (Thalasseus elegans), Amado sewage treatment pond, Pima County. This Elegant Tern was photographed by Dave Stejskal on 14 June 2022. Elegant Tern is a very rare visitor to S. Arizona from the Gulf of California, mostly in the spring and early summer when strong southwest winds out of the Gulf are common.

Upland Sandpiper (Bartramia longicauda), Twin Lakes Golf Course in Willcox, Cochise County. This Upland Sandpiper was photographed by Steven Tracey on 27 April 2022, and by Dave Stejskal the next day. A rarely reported species in Cochise County and Arizona, in particular in spring. This is only the 2nd modern Spring record for the state and only about the 15th record for the state overall.

American Tree Sparrow (Spizella arborea), Toh de Niihe Lake, Apache County. This American Tree Sparrow was photographed by Caleb Strand on 13 December 2021. American Tree Sparrow is a rare, but probably regular late fall and winter visitor to northern Arizona, but rarely reported.

Yellow-throated Warbler (Setophaga dominica), Lower Miller Canyon, Cochise County. This Yellow-throated Warbler was photographed by Christie Van Cleve on 09 July 2022. Yellow-throated Warbler is a casual spring and summer visitor to Arizona, with more than 30 total records.

White-tipped Dove, Scheelite Canyon Trailhead Parking, Cochise County. This White-tipped Dove was discovered on 29 April by Mark Otnes and Rick Bowers, and photographed by Janine McCabe on 01 May 2022, and by Sharon Goldwasser and Scott Olmstead on 01 June. First Arizona record.

Clay-colored Thrush (Turdus grayi), Madera Canyon along stream, below Santa Rita Lodge, Santa Cruz County. This Clay-colored Thrush was photographed by David Aramoto on 18 April 2022. Clay-colored Thrush is an accidental visitor in Arizona from Mexico. If accepted, this would represent a third state record - the other two records are from Portal and Anivaca Cienega.

Yellow-green Vireo (Vireo flavoviridis), Leslie Canyon NWR, Cochise County. This Yellow-green Vireo was photographed by Steven Tracey on 27 August 2022. Yellow-green Vireo is a casual summer visitor to Arizona. All of the nearly 20 records come from late May to early September, with most from July and August.

Pine Flycatcher, Rose Canyon Lake Campground, Pima County. This Pine Flycatcher was photographed by Chris Benesh on 11 May 2022. Amazingly, this individual was discovered in mid April and originally identified as a Cordilleran Flycatcher, and re-identified as a likely Pine Flycatcher by Chris Benesh - but not until almost mid-May! If accepted, the second county, state, and country record of this species.

Blue-winged Warbler (Vermivora pinus), Gilbert Water Ranch, Maricopa County. This Blue-winged Warbler was photographed by Jason W on 10 August 2022, and again by Jim Burns on 24 August. There are now about 20 records for the state.
Meet the Red-tailed Hawk

A very accommodating bird is the Red-tailed Hawk (Buteo jamaicensis). Shaped somewhat like a football, these large birds are easily seen sitting atop telephone poles, wires, and tree branches. With a body length of about 20 inches and a wingspan up to 4 feet, at most they only weigh about 3 pounds. They can be seen on their perch for long periods, better for us to see them.

When soaring above open fields, these hawks are usually fly leisurely circles on their broad, rounded wings. Flying can be very tiring for such big birds. Flapping such big wings takes a lot of energy. To conserve energy these hawks wait for the sun to heat up the air, creating what’s called a thermal updraft, to give them a boost. They ride these thermals to launch from a perch or to help them spend a longer time in the sky while searching for ground movements of small mammals like mice, voles, and rabbits.

Red-tailed Hawks are considered one of the most common hawks in North America, and although identification seems simple (“look for a big bird with a short red tail”), know that although most often the adult tail is reddish and short, the red is not always visible.

Red-tailed Hawks also come in many ground colors, such as jet black, chocolate brown and rufous, to nearly white. The belly is usually streaked. The underside of the hawk has dark bars, stretching from the shoulder to the bird’s wrist. The hawk often, but not always, has a distinctive belly band that separates the top and middle part of its chest. A very dark variety of the Red-tailed Hawk is called the Harlan’s Hawk, a black and white northern breeder, which sports a white, brown, and gray tail...not one speck of red!

Red-tailed Hawks are considered one of the most common hawks in North America. They live in forests, deserts, prairies, and even cities! Red-tailed Hawks are year-round residents in Arizona. In late October, they seem more common because they are joined by the Harlan’s, who have migrated from Alaska, Canada, and the upper Midwest.

A fun fact: The Red-tailed Hawk is voice over movie star for the Bald Eagle. The call of eagles is not as impressive. The eagle’s call was replaced with the chilling, rasping scream of the Red-tailed Hawk. To hear the scream of the Red-tailed Hawk, go to bit.ly/Redtailedhawk

To learn more about Red-tailed Hawks see bit.ly/RedTailed-Field-Guide.
We promised.

Our mission statement promises to protect and preserve birds and wildlife and the habitats they need. Join us or renew your membership and help us fulfill that promise by making a difference for the birds we love. And please add a gift of your time and resources. The birds will thank you!

Membership:
Name: ____________________________
Address: __________________________
Email: ____________________________
Phone ( ) _______________________

☐ Student/Senior $25
☐ Individual $30
☐ Senior Couple $40
☐ Family $50
☐ Corporate $300
☐ Please contact me to discuss ways I can volunteer!

Giving
I want to help save birds with my gift of $_________
☐ Please contact me to discuss ways I can volunteer!
Make your check to Desert Rivers Audubon Society and mail to 137 E. Elliot Rd., #2298, Gilbert AZ 85298, or renew online at deserriversaudubon.org
WE FLOCK TOGETHER FOR BIRDS!

Our public education campaign to reduce bird deaths due to window strikes is an example of our commitment to take action to help birds survive a dangerous world. When you join, donate, volunteer or participate you become part of our growing flock of bird advocates. Thank you for everything you do!

How to Join Desert Rivers

The National Audubon Society and local Audubon chapters are separate entities. All Desert Rivers Audubon dues are dedicated to local programs. You may hold concurrent memberships in National Audubon and any number of local chapters. If you are a National Audubon member, you may assist this chapter by designating Desert Rivers (Chapter B08) as your assigned chapter by emailing chapter_services@audubon.org.

Membership in Desert Rivers Audubon Society helps support our chapter’s outreach activities and operating costs. Annual membership entitles you to our quarterly magazine, priority status for field trips and events, and discounts on products and services. See desertriveraudubon.org/membership.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Membership Type</th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Senior Couples</th>
<th>Corporate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| $200              | $30        | $50    | $40            | $300+

DONORS

LPL Financial

Bass Pro Shops