



Winging It

NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN BIRDING ASSOCIATION



American Birding
ASSOCIATION

Vol. 17, no. 5 • Sept/Oct 2005

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Birds and Birders at Corn Creek Station, Nevada

A tiny oasis in Nevada's Mojave Desert, Corn Creek Station is a place where the birding has always been great fun—and often nothing short of surprising. The latest surprise came when I decided to write about this wonderful site. Conversations with members of the local birding community, the Range Manager, and the director of the riparian-restoration firm Otis Bay revealed that my all-time favorite migrant trap had become a magnet for controversy. And so, in addition to describing the trails and the birds that make this site so magical for birders at all levels of ability and mobility, my mission in this article is to present Corn Creek as a microcosm of the sometimes hotly contested balance between birders' interests in birds and an agency's need to preserve and sometimes to alter habitats to protect other species that depend on the same precious space.

The "Nature" of Corn Creek

The Desert National Wildlife Range, established in 1936 to protect the Desert Bighorn Sheep, is the largest US wildlife sanctuary south of Alaska, covering more than 1.5 million acres, or 2,200 square miles. Six of those acres make up Corn Creek Station, a natural spring and migrant trap in the desert a mere thirty minutes north of Las Vegas.

For birds on their northward migration, Corn Creek is one of the last major

stopovers before crossing the Great Basin Desert to their summering grounds. In the fall, untold numbers of juvenile birds join the adults on the reverse path; from mid-August to mid-October, you can stand at the edge of the dirt utility road that marks the division between the desert and the oasis and watch a steady stream of avian migrants flit into the vegetation along Corn Creek, waves of vireos, warblers, tanagers, grosbeaks, and others dropping in after their overnight flight.

While Corn Creek is at its best during migration, all four seasons can be productive. Altitudinal migrants from the nearby mountains join local desert residents in the winter, and exotic trees planted for fruit and shade during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries support a number of nesting species as well. The bird list for Corn Creek and the remainder of the Desert National Wildlife Range rivals those amassed in many states: it is not difficult to see Great Horned Owl, Western Bluebird, Lucy's Warbler, and Western Tanager all within a few steps.

Most of the birders who know and love this location want it to remain exactly what it is: a wonderful place to watch birds. But a closer look reveals that these few acres of oasis have not always been what they are today. Sheltered by old trees and altered by humans over three centuries, this green belt

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does not reflect the original nature of Corn Creek. The narrow stream we see today is a concrete culvert surrounded by other unnatural additions: introduced trees, housing and outbuildings, a fenced storage area (the “bone yard”), an orchard and lawn, an irrigated pasture. The three small ponds are man-made, the legacy of ranchers who altered the natural spring into ponds for irrigation, ponds that now harbor non-native bullfrogs, crayfish, goldfish, and other introduced species, all firmly established and hard at work making sure that the native mollusks, fish, and pond-nesting birds struggle to survive. Introduced and invasive black locusts threaten to choke out the fruit trees along with what little remains of the native underbrush, cottonwoods, and willows.

These long-term changes have been accompanied over the past few years by new alterations. Small projects were started but, it seemed, left unfinished; a tree was removed here and there, machinery was used to clear some areas for no discernable reason, an old house was removed and a new concrete pad appeared in the center of the oasis. Native vegetation was replanted one season, but most of the plants were dead by



the next year; a new refugium was built for the last of the endangered Pahrump poolfish that had been relocated to

Corn Creek in the 1970s, a refugium promptly invaded by introduced crayfish. There were rumors that the ponds were going to be drained, talk of an interpretive center to be built in the middle of the tiny oasis, speculation that picnic grounds and a bigger lawn would be added. And then, in spring 2005, puzzlement flared into a public-relations disaster when the Range Manager permitted a youth group to remove four large trees from the center of the refuge as part of a public service project—a project carried out within feet of an active Short-eared Owl nest.

Birders were irate, the Range Manager defiant and defensive, and the members of the youth group perplexed.

Realities and Prospects

Like other birders, I wondered just what was going on. When I asked about the circumstances of the tree removal, I found out that until a new staff member was added in June 2005, the entire team responsible for managing the Nevada National Wildlife Range had totaled one single person. Lack of appropriated funds, and allocation issues within the Department of the Interior, had meant that all planning, maintenance, law enforcement, public relations, and

Photos by Robert Waters.



other projects on the largest wildlife sanctuary south of Alaska were the responsibility of one individual. It was also explained to me that the mandate of the Fish & Wildlife Service at Corn Creek is both broader and more complex than the narrower focus of the birders who use and love the site. It is the job of the staff to manage the oasis for all the native species that use it, not just the birds.

The good news, unheralded, unannounced, and unwelcome in some quarters, is that there is a plan for Corn Creek, and that many of the fits and starts regular visitors had witnessed were part of it. In the making since 2002, the Comprehensive Conservation Plan is designed to manage the interface between wildlife and the public at all four Fish & Wildlife refuges in Nevada, and to address the needs of all the organisms—birds, too—that inhabit them.

The conceptual plan for Corn Creek was developed by one of the foremost riparian-restoration firms in the western United States, Otis Bay Riverine Consultants, based in Reno, Nevada. Under the supervision of Otis Bay, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation will conduct work over the next few years intended to preserve the significance of the oasis and the Range for all the many species that depend on it.

Phase One of the site plan developed by Otis Bay has been completed. In 2003, the springhead, which had been buried decades ago, was uncovered and conduit pipes removed, so that the stream now flows from the uncovered spring along a natural bank. This action saved the desert mollusk that had been threatened with extirpation; now making a healthy recovery, these freshwater snails may once again become a source of food for birds and other native animals.

Phase Two will be more ambitious. It includes making Corn Creek accessible to those with disabilities and limited mobility, as required by law; adding site-appropriate trails and boardwalks in sensitive areas; installing a viewing platform; creating an understory of native plants in the current “lawn”; removing the bone yard; and undamming the smallest pond to replace the livestock pasture with a marsh. No trees will be removed under the conceptual plan except for the non-native and invasive black locusts; additional native cottonwoods and willows will be planted. During our conversation, the Director of Otis Bay was quite firm that there would be no disturbance to the habitat dur-

With a list of over 320 species, Corn Creek has hosted some amazing vagrants over the years, including:

- Broad-billed Hummingbird
- Acorn Woodpecker
- Gilded Flicker
- Yellow-bellied Flycatcher
- White-eyed Vireo
- Blue-headed Vireo
- Prairie Warbler
- Prothonotary Warbler
- Baltimore Oriole
- Painted Bunting.

While many such vagrants pause for only a day (or even less), the male Painted Bunting that appeared at Corn Creek in May 2002 stayed long enough for many birders to see him.

Corn Creek is a good place to be looking for southern species expanding their ranges as a result of global warming; maybe a Tufted Flycatcher will stray a tad farther north and west if the species returns to Arizona next spring. We'll be waiting for it!

—Carolyn Titus

ing the nesting season. And he was firm about birders, too, who can sometimes forget that insects, snails, fish, mammals, and a myriad of other species also depend on the natural spring at Corn Creek, and that habitat must be managed for them, too.

Visiting Corn Creek

Seen in the context of habitat improvement and preservation, the changes planned for the next few years should make Corn Creek an even more exciting destination to birders at all levels of experience and mobility. To visit the area, travel north from Las Vegas 27 miles on Highway 95. After passing the Las Vegas Paiute Indian Reservation (which offers fuel, a small convenience store, a restaurant, and some good birding), look for a small sign on the right reading “Desert Wildlife Range.” Turn right here and follow the dirt road three miles to the oasis. Birding along this road is almost always productive; one year we experienced the stunning sight of hundreds of “Western” Flycatchers clinging to every available stick in the desert, while another visit turned up Long-billed Curlews dotting the landscape north and south of the road. At Corn Creek itself, we have happened upon such vagrants as Worm-eating Warbler, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, American Redstart, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak, among others. Birding at dusk and at night is equally exciting, with Lesser Nighthawks (in season) swooping past at eye level. Water and bathrooms are near the kiosk with bird lists, descriptive brochures, and displays. If the road is open and you have a high-clearance vehicle, venture across the refuge to Highway 93 and Pahrnagat National Wildlife Refuge, where there is great camping and good birding (and bats, too). Be certain to bring plenty of water.

Excellent information for visitors to Corn Creek and other Las Vegas-area sites is available at the Red Rock Audubon Society's website, communitylink.reviewjournal.com/lvrj/redrockaudubon. Essential print references include *The Nevada Handbook* by Deke Castleman and *Nevada Wildlife Viewing Guide* by Jeanne L. Clark. The office of the Fish & Wildlife Service with overall responsibility for the Desert National Wildlife Range is in Sacramento, California (www.fws.gov); any comments or inquiries about Corn Creek or the Range should be directed to this office and/or to your U.S. Representative.

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