

Winging It

NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN BIRDING ASSOCIATION



American Birding
ASSOCIATION

Vol. 18, no. 2 • Mar/Apr 2006

CONTENTS

- 2 Birding Virginia Beach
- 3 Membership News
- 6 Serra Dos Tucanos
- 7 Pete's Tips
- 10 Books for Birders
- 12 Birding Japan
- 13 South Florida
- 14 Endorsed Tours
- 16 Sightings
- 18 Birding Landscapes
- 19 Birders' Exchange
- 20 Interview: Betty Anne Schreiber
- 21 New Mexico
- 22 Classifieds

Birding Arizona's White Mountains

Located in east-central Arizona along the New Mexico border, the White Mountains have some of the most beautiful scenery in the southwest. They are also one of Arizona's top birding destinations, with several breeding specialties found here and nowhere else in the state, including Gray Jay, Gray Catbird, and Pine Grosbeak. Every spring and fall, large numbers of migrants, including an impressive and growing list of eastern vagrants and other rarities, are attracted to the area's diverse habitats. For those planning a visit, a number of excellent and easily accessible birding locations can be found around the two small mountain communities of Springerville and Eagar.

Springerville and Eagar sit in a bowl-shaped valley appropriately named Round Valley. On the horizon, Escudilla Mountain—immortalized in Aldo Leopold's classic *Sand County Almanac*—rises to an elevation of nearly 11,000 feet. The Little Colorado River meanders through the valley, irrigating lush pastureland before turning north to its confluence with the Colorado deep within the Grand Canyon. In places, the river has cut through the basalt flows of the White Mountain volcanic field to form steep canyon walls. Some of the area's best birding spots

are along this willow-lined stream and South Fork, one of its small tributaries.

Becker Lake Area

From the intersection of South Mountain Street and US 60 in Springerville, take US 60 north. About half a mile from the intersection, you will pass a sign indicating Becker Lake Wildlife Area. This newly constructed site has a parking area, interpretive signs, and a short trail skirting the Little Colorado River. Look for Western Kingbird, Warbling Vireo, Northern Oriole, and Brewer's Blackbird in the large trees near the interpretive signs. Along the stream, watch for Belted Kingfisher, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Blue Grosbeak.

Across the highway and largely out of view are three large water treatment ponds. The road to the ponds is closed, but it is worthwhile to scan for circling geese, ducks, and shorebirds. In late summer, these ponds are sometimes visited by migrating Sabine's Gulls.

Another mile up the road is the turnoff to Becker Lake. The road leads to a boat-launching area and two small buildings. Pronghorn can often be seen grazing on the hillside behind the buildings. Scan the lake for grebes, ducks, and gulls. In fall, look for Common, Forster's, and Black Terns.

Follow the embankment around the lake to the opposite shore. Along the way, listen for Soras and watch for Yellow-headed Blackbirds, which nest in the emergent vegetation. On the

continued on page 4

BRUNTON

Partners In Birding

BRUNTON IS THE SOLE OPTICS SPONSOR OF WINGING IT

opposite side, make your way across the field to the island of tall cottonwoods and willows. Carefully search the gooseberry bushes and low willows for Gray Flycatcher, MacGillivray's Warbler, and Green-tailed Towhee. Birds of prey often perch and hunt from the taller trees; look for Bald Eagle (winter), Osprey, Peregrine Falcon, and American Kestrel. These trees and the cottonwood-willow grove near the highway have produced a number of eastern vagrants over the years, including Eastern Kingbird, Blackpoll and Worm-eating Warblers, and Bobolink. In late summer, the surrounding field is covered



Wenima Wildlife Area. Photo © Gary Crandall.

with bright yellow sunflowers and purple thistles, which attract Broad-tailed, Rufous, and Calliope Hummingbirds. This weedy field is the best place in the state to find Dickcissel, which migrates through the area like clockwork in mid-September.

Wenima Wildlife Area

From Becker Lake, take US 60 north to the intersection with Highway 191. Take Highway 191 to the right toward St. Johns. In about 150 yards, there is a sign to Wenima on the right. Follow the dirt road about a mile across the mesa into the small canyon. There is a parking area with a kiosk that provides trail directions and other information about this outstanding birding area.

The Little Colorado River flows through the canyon, irrigating several large fields. Lush vegetation grows along the stream and at the edges of the canyon. Many of the large trees are Arizona walnut, a favorite perching place for migrating Hammond's and Dusky Flycatchers. Above the river, the hillside vegetation is much drier, with scattered yucca and one-seed junipers.

About 100 yards up the road near a picnic table, two trails

follow the river. The trail to the south, along the east side of the river, hugs the canyon wall, which is covered with canyon grape vines. It continues along the dry hillside before gradually descending to the river. In this area, watch for Sage Thrasher, Juniper Titmouse, Townsend's Solitaire, Scrub Jay, Scott's Oriole (summer), and Canyon Towhee. Keep an eye out for Golden Eagle flying overhead.

The trail to the north follows the river on the west side through a wall of thick willows. At several points, the trail emerges to overlook long, quiet pools created by beaver dams. In the fall, deep red Virginia creeper and bright green hop add a splash of color. As you walk, watch for Willow Flycatcher, House Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and Lincoln's Sparrow. Keep an eye on the thistles and sunflowers for Pine Siskin, Lazuli Bunting, and Lesser Goldfinch. Prairie Falcons sometimes perch on the basalt cliffs high up on the canyon wall. About a mile upstream, there are petroglyphs on a rocky outcropping that date from about A.D. 1300.

Eagar

Just off US 60, to the south of Becker Lake, is Becker Lake Road. As you drive along the road to its intersection with Airport Road, watch the fence line for sparrows. Among the possible species are Lark, Vesper, Savannah, Chipping, Brewer's, and even Clay-colored Sparrow in migration. Continue left on Airport Road to the river. Pull off to the left near the bridge and check for Say's and Black

Phoebe, Northern Flicker, and Common Yellowthroat.

One of the area's more unlikely but best birding spots is in downtown Eagar. Take Main Street to where it makes a hard right-hand turn in front of the old sawmill. Here it becomes School Bus Road. A line of trees extends east and west along a dry irrigation ditch in front of the mill. An amazing number of rare vagrants have been found at this location, including Eastern Phoebe, Red-eyed Vireo, Hooded and Black-throated Blue Warblers, Northern Parula, Scarlet Tanager, and Common Grackle. Be sure to carefully check the trees and fence line to the east. This section is lined with Russian olive trees and can be literally dripping with migrants in the fall. Keep an eye on telephone poles for Lewis's Woodpecker, and watch for White-winged Doves, which seem to be expanding into the area.

South Fork

From Main Street in Eagar, take Highway 260 toward Greer. In about 4.5 miles, there is a sign on the left for South Fork. Follow the road into the canyon and park near the small bridge.

South Fork is a cold, clear mountain stream that alter-

nates fast-flowing riffles with quiet beaver-dammed pools. The stream-side is a dense tangle of willow, dogwood, and locust interspersed with ponderosa pine and cottonwood. The thick bushes along the road near the bridge are one of very few places in the Southwest where one can find breeding Gray Catbird.

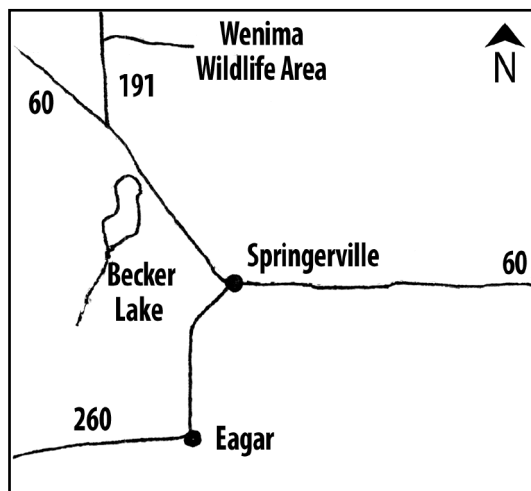
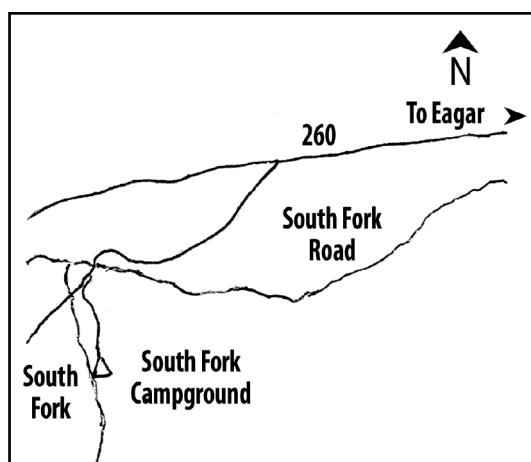
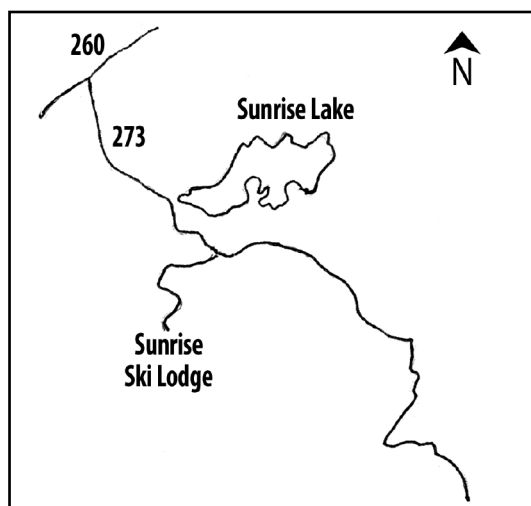
Small trails on both sides of the bridge wind through knee-deep yellow clover. You can follow them for about 200 yards upstream to fenced private property. As you walk along, listen for the descending whinny of Downy Woodpecker. Noisy flocks of Pinyon Jays often fly along the hillside. Look for Violet-green Swallows, Pygmy Nuthatch, and Western Bluebirds on tall pine snags. Many spring and fall vagrants have been found here, including Yellow-throated Vireo, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Orchard Oriole, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and even a White-eared Hummingbird.

From the bridge, follow the road another half mile to the South Fork campground. Check the big ponderosa pines for Steller's Jay, Brown Creeper, Mountain Chickadee, Evening Grosbeak, and Hepatic Tanager (uncommon). Both Northern Pygmy-Owl and Northern Sawwhet Owl have been seen and heard around the campground. American Dipper can sometimes be found along the stream.

Sunrise

From South Fork, continue on highway 260 past Greer Junction to the intersection of Highways 260 and 273. As you travel south on 273, you cross mountain meadows fringed with blue spruce. This area is part of the White Mountain Apache Reservation; visitors must be certain to comply with all tribal rules and regulations. This is also wolf country. Endangered Mexican Gray Wolves have been reintroduced into part of their historic range in east central Arizona, and they have been welcomed by the Apaches onto reservation lands. Aldo Leopold would be proud.

Seven miles from the intersection is the turnoff to Sunrise ski area. There is a store at the turnoff where you can purchase



The White Mountains are located in east-central Arizona along the New Mexico border.

overnight camping permits. Behind the store is Sunrise Lake. Scan it for ducks, cormorants, and stray gulls. In fall, you can sometimes see migrating American White Pelicans.

On the left, just down the road toward the ski area, a road leads to the campground, situated in some of Arizona's most beautiful spruce-fir habitat at an elevation of 8,000 feet. In late summer you can often hear bellowing bull elk. Among the birds you should see are Olive-sided Flycatcher, Gray Jay, Clark's Nutcracker, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Golden-crowned Kinglet.

From the campground, you can hike out into the surrounding forest and meadows following roads with names like "Apache Dream" and "Long Trek"; these are actually cross-country ski trails. Listen for drumming Three-toed Woodpeckers and the "kip, kip" calls of Red Crossbills. Pine Grosbeaks are present in the area, but their low numbers make them difficult to find; watch for them at the tops of spruce trees or in forest openings along small streams. Blue Grouse, another sought-after bird, is easier to find. Look for grouse early in the morning on open or logged slopes with a cover of shrubs such as gooseberry and common juniper.

More about the White Mountains area

The White Mountains are an easy four-hour drive from Phoenix or Tucson. There are motels, restaurants, and other accommodations in Springerville, Eagar, and Pinetop. There are several campgrounds in the area in addition to those at South Fork and Sunrise.

The locations discussed in this article can easily be covered in two days or a weekend of birding. Besides these areas, there are several other good birding spots in the Springerville-Eagar area that are easily accessible by car. They include Lyman Lake, Sipe Wildlife Area, Concho Lake, Nelson Reservoir, and Sheep's Crossing.

Charles J. Babbitt is a Phoenix attorney, avid birdwatcher, and past president of the Maricopa Audubon Society.