Snowy Egrets: Beauty and Cunning
SECOND QTR 2023
Hello All!

Spring has sprung everywhere! Let's go birding! But before we leave, let's take a moment to look back at some of our work over the past program year.

Our hybrid meetings and family bird walks have been well-attended, and our new Birds & Brew program is growing in popularity. We've joined in the effort to provide Lucy Warblers with a safe place to rest, nest and raise their babies. We've expanded the selection of birding and nature books our bookstore offers at our walks and meetings. We raised the funds to give our bookstore trailer a spiffy new look. And a well-known Arizona author made a smashing presentation on how to identify the hummingbirds that visit our state.

We also re-established communication with the other Audubon chapters in our area, enabling us to grow our efforts to help migrating birds pass safely through our skies. Because of that initiative, Desert Rivers is now working with the company that manages many of the buildings along Tempe Town Lake with the goal of making Tempe the first Light's Out City in the Valley! We widened the focus of our bird strike prevention efforts to include home windows by hosting Do It Yourself Workshops where residents can easily make attractive and efficient Acopian BirdSavers for their “killer” windows. And we've got more projects on the list! During all of this we have published four beautiful, impressive chapter magazines showcasing our work and illuminating important issues.

We've accomplished all of this with a loyal core of volunteers who have worked very hard. We've done a lot and we're all proud of what we've accomplished for birds and the environment. But we have lots of ideas for ways we can educate and inspire our community to protect and preserve birds, wildlife and their habitats if only more of us would volunteer to make it happen.

What would convince YOU to get involved as a volunteer?

This month we conducted an election for openings on the board of directors, but finding volunteers for those openings was, frankly, brutal, and we did not fill all vacancies. We are a nonprofit, but we are just like a business in that we need people to perform essential jobs. We need someone to manage our membership, including recruiting and record-keeping. We also need someone in the communications chair to help us with social media and public relations. And we need a field trip director to organize outings.

I'm sure many of you are experienced in these positions. A full complement of board members could help us become an even better organization. More gets done when many shoulders do the pushing. So I'm urging that you take the time to volunteer, to help us as all we can be.

_Theona Vyvial, President_
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They’re Still Having Fun Counting Black Hawks

If you’ve ever been to the Tubac Hawk Watch you’ve probably met Peter Collins. In fact, even if you’ve never visited that part of the Santa Cruz River during the raptor migration, you might feel like you know him. Collins is the site coordinator for the watch, and in his role he organizes the counters and greets the other watchers. He also informs the birding world about the doings at the site—both human and avian—through his entertaining daily email reports on the AZNM birds list serve (liz.arizona.edu/lympa/subscribe/aznmbirds).

The Tubac Nature Center Hawk Watch (tubacnaturecenter.com/hawk-watch-2023) is an annual event that runs for the entire month of March in the southeastern Arizona town 24 miles from the border with Mexico. Tall and friendly, Collins plays host to the birders that make their way to Ron Morris County Park for the thrill of watching hundreds of hawks, falcons, and vultures fly along the river on their way to breeding grounds further north. And every day he treats the rest of us with an email story spiked with humor, witty observations and music references, in addition to the count for the day. Here is a play-by-play from his entry for March 1, or as he calls it, Season 11 Episode 1:

“An eager Common Black Hawk popped up from the cottonwoods along the river at 9:36. Instinct kicked in and I hollered ‘Black Hawk!’ Two ravens thought this a call to arms and began their attack, refusing to let the Black Hawk gain any height. A third raven came in to assist, with a fourth nearby if needed. Strong south winds meant no thermals. The ravens meant no chance of flying south into the wind—the only other choice for lift. The Black Hawk maneuvered and bluffed and struggled north over the treetops. It made the golf course unsavable, and the ravens relented.”

I’m one of the people who eagerly anticipates those emails almost as much as my first cup of coffee. One morning I caught up with Collins at the park. He wasn’t hard to find. Everyone knew him.

Almost 20 years ago, Collins was on a bird walk in Arivaca when his good friend, Jim Karp, mentioned that he had seen five Black Hawks fly over his house in Tubac the day before. Intrigued, Collins decided to have a look for himself. He set up his scope on the famous bridge over the Santa Cruz River a bit east of downtown Tubac, and posted what he saw to the fledgling eBird database.

The word spread, and over time the number of hawk watchers on the bridge grew. Eventually the birders and their scopes were blocking the bridge so frequently that the local authorities took notice. So, on March 1, 2013, the vigil moved three blocks south to Ron Morris County Park.

There, the river is hidden by trees but the parking lot by the ballfield provides wide views of the sky and solid ground for camping chairs and tripods. That was Season 1.

This year daily attendance was strong, occasionally reaching 150 – far too many for the bridge! Bird attendance is strong, too. This year, 550 Common Black Hawks waved the watchers in the park, as did 71 Zone-tailed Hawks, 22 Gray Hawks, 10 Osprey and three Short-tailed Hawks.

HawkWatch International reported that from January through April this year, 23 species have been reported representing 2,800 individuals.

The definition of a hawk watch is “a systematic and organized effort to collect standardized migration count data about diurnal raptors.” At Ron Morris Park, watchers coordinate their efforts to count birds as accurately as possible as they pass overhead. Collins collects and reports the data. At the height of the migration mid-month, he’s joined by a group of expert counters—old friends, who work the Corpus Christi Hawk Watch every year. People who follow the raptor migration all over the country visit the Tubac event.

The migration experts mingle with more ordinary birders in the parking lot and Collins keeps busy helping everyone see the birds. Karp calls him the social director of the Tubac hawk watch.

Last year, the Tubac Nature Center, where Karp is president, began assisting Collins as the sponsor of the event. The center is focusing on administration and event planning, and as a result, this year the Tucson Audubon Society had a booth in the parking lot; one Saturday was designated children’s day, and four leading makers of scopes and binoculars displayed their products.

Now that the watch has accumulated more than 10 years of data, Collins said Tubac is eligible to be included in the Raptor Population Index, a collaborative effort that summarizes the continental and regional migration count trends for each species and highlights species of concern. Eventually he hopes to attract a researcher to attach electronic transmitters to passing raptors, to gather more complete data about where the birds travel and rest.

Season 11 of the Tubac Hawk Watch is in the books, but fortunately there’s always next year. As Collins wrote on March 31, “After all these years we’re still having fun counting Black Hawks. It’s only eleven months until March 1, 2024. See you then?”

Continued on page 14
What Alaska’s Willow Oil-Drilling Project Means for Wildlife

Rebecca Stephenson

On April 3, Judge Sharon Gleason of the U.S. District Court in Anchorage rejected requests from environmental groups to halt immediate construction work related to the controversial Willow Project in the western Arctic. This means ConocoPhillips Alaska may begin mining gravel in the area and using it to construct an access road to the site.

The ruling followed the Biden Administration’s approval of the massive and controversial oil-drilling operation in March. The Trump Administration green-lighted Willow in 2020, but the project had been banned from proceeding due to a lack of a proper environmental impact assessment. President Biden had vowed to put a stop to all new oil and gas mining during his campaign, but later elected to move forward, citing a legal inability to reject or significantly alter the previously approved project.

The Biden Administration did manage to reduce the operation from its original five drill sites to three, but environmentalists claim this isn’t enough to offset its catastrophic effects. The Willow Project promises to extract about 600 million barrels of oil from Alaska’s North Slope, providing many locals with jobs and reducing the United States’ reliance on foreign oil companies.

Once completed, the Willow Project will span some 68,000 acres in northern Alaska’s National Petroleum Reserve, even venturing into the ecologically sensitive Teshekpuk Lake area. It will feature hundreds of miles of roads and pipelines, a central processing facility, a gravel mine, three drill pads, a temporary island, an operations center, and an airstrip. During construction, frequent blast-mining will be required to forge roads. Later, chillers will be used to refreeze permafrost for easier drilling.

In addition to contributing to climate change, the project will directly impact native wildlife by bringing extensive human impact to a previously remote wilderness area practically overnight. Roads will interrupt the seasonal movements of caribou and musk oxen herds, disturb a major caribou calving site, disrupt anadromous fishes like trout, and salmon, and further reduce habitat for the region’s already threatened and endangered species, including ringed seals and polar bears.

Hundreds of thousands of migrating birds also rely on the western Arctic each year, meaning the operation has the potential to negatively impact bird species the world over. Some species, like the Dunlin and Yellow-billed Loon, nest in the area. It is also where most of the world’s geese come to molt, meaning thousands of Snow Geese, Brant, and Greater White-fronted Geese are flightless—quite literally “sitting ducks”—for several weeks each year. A major habitat disruption while they are at their most vulnerable could quickly push these species closer to extinction.

Protecting birds and the habitat they rely upon is the mission of Desert Rivers Audubon Society. If we are to be true to that cause, we cannot afford to take our eyes off conservation threats afar, such as the Willow Project, and near, such as mining proposals and other development here in Arizona.
Nests are small temporary homes that need to be kept as clean as possible for the health of nestlings. Routine nest cleaning takes a number of forms, especially among many passerine songbirds with altricial young (young that must remain in the nest until fledging).

One aspect of nest cleanliness is cleaning up eggshells after chicks hatch. Adult birds either carry the shells away from the nest or consume them. Birds will also remove other obviously foreign objects like leaves and twigs that might fall into nests, and a few birds (European Blue Tits) seem to pick through nest material to disturb or destroy ectoparasites like fleas.

**Avian Diapers**

The biggest challenge to nest cleanliness is nestling poop—and nestlings produce a lot of it. Baby birds need a lot of protein to grow, and a key waste product of protein metabolism is nitrogen, which needs to be excreted.

In mammals, nitrogen is excreted as urea, that can be stored diluted in the urinary bladder. This type of nitrogenous waste storage increases body weight and requires the animal to drink more water. Neither is ideal for birds, given their need for light weight and water conservation.

To get around these problems, birds convert waste nitrogen to uric acid, which is chalky white, non-toxic and almost dry. Uric acid and waste from undigested food are eliminated from the cloaca—the single posterior opening for a bird’s digestive, urinary, and reproductive tracts—which is used to expel feces and lay eggs. The cloaca of many nestling passerine birds form membranous sacs around the waste as it is eliminated, often called fecal sacs. These sacs can be easily removed from nests by feeding parents. Fecal sacs contain solid (dark) wastes and uric acid (white) that you may have noticed on your car hood. These sacs are essentially avian diapers. As nestlings approach fledging, they cease production of fecal sacs.

Fecal sacs are usually produced almost immediately after feeding and the adult birds will remove the sacs and drop them some distance from the nest. This disposal behavior by parent birds becomes part of their continuous foraging behavior to supply food for nestlings.
A Fresh Nursery Every Year

Building new nests every year or for every brood also has sanitation benefits. Old nests often contain numerous and dangerous numbers of ectoparasites (lice, fleas, mites, true bugs, etc.) that are detrimental to nestlings and adults alike. Male house wrens clean out old nest box material between each brood, thus creating “new” nests.

Some birds, like raptores, that continuously reuse nests, and secondary cavity nesters like European Starlings and Purple Martins add green plant material and cedar bark to nests, presumably for their pesticidal properties. Studies of Blue Tits in Europe and European Starlings in North American show that these species are selective in what plant materials they choose. If available, Starlings will use aromatic plants such as wild carrot or fleabane, which when it has dried out in the nests is broken up by nestlings, releasing volatiles detrimental to parasitic lice and mites.

An amazing adaptive aspect of “nest fumigation” is found in House Sparrows and House Finches, which weave discarded cigarette butts containing nicotine into their nests. Nests with the highest fiber densities have the lowest mite densities. The tradeoff may be that the adults and nestlings from the nicotine fumigated nests have blood cells with significantly higher DNA damage.

The “drug hypothesis” associates the incorporation of green plant material into nests with stimulating the immune systems of nestlings. Young birds from these nests also seem to have higher red blood cell counts and greater body mass. However, the true significance of these initial findings requires additional research.

Birds sometimes abandon a nest to escape brood parasites such as cowbirds, but a heavily infestation with ectoparasites may also cause them to move out. Argasid tick infestations have resulted in large-scale abandonment of seabird colonies. Whipping cranes introduced into esunies in Wisconsin have abandoned nesting areas because of blackflies. Nest desertion may work with longer-lived bird species, but the short lifespans of many birds would make the reproductive cost of such abandonment quite high. More research is needed to determine if nest abandonment is due to the impact of ectoparasites on nestlings or if it is more due to adult bird discomfort.

And you thought housekeeping was a drag!!!
The next time you mentally shrug as you glance quickly through the BWBs (big white birds) cavorting around the water at one of the local hot spots, please reconsider the Snowy Egret, a common but unique and beautiful wading bird, beloved by a few but overlooked and taken for granted by most, because of its abundance. There's a lot more there than the eponymous plumage and golden slippers that meet the eye.

Every birder sooner or later realizes that birds are opportunists and their survival depends upon foraging with energy efficiency, but for me this raised a question one morning as I watched some riveting inter-specific action between several Snowies and a flotha of Double-crested Cormorants at a fishing pond. On this day a handful of Snowies were standing on the rocks at the edge of the water intently watching as the cormorants quartered back and forth through the waters, diving and coming up with small fish.
This pond was 100 yards long and half that in width, and the moment a comorant would emerge with a fish, one or more Snowies would launch, fly to the successful bird, and attempt to steal the catch by hovering and/or swooping onto it feet first. The attacked comorant would submerge as it saw the egrets converging, and the action was frenetic, splashy, and only occasionally successful. It seemed to me that flying from the shore, often halfway across the pond and back, for minimal rewards couldn’t be as efficient as the Snowies doing their thing in shallow water, fishing by themselves.

Subsequently, a fairly thorough search through the literature aided to answer my question, but it turned up many fascinating “life hacks” employed by Snowy Egrets that were unknown to me. Basically I went down a Snowy Egret “rabbit hole” and emerged with a greater appreciation for these common waders and a resolve to observe their behavior more closely and never be dismissive of them again.

There are many species about whose habits ornithologists still know very little. Snowy Egret is not one of them. The North American heron family employs thirty-four different foraging strategies that have been described and given a name. Birders often observe many of these without realizing each is an evolutionarily discrete behavior serving a distinct purpose tied to habitat, heron species, and prey species. Snowy Egrets display the broadest repertoire of any of our herons, employing twenty-one of the thirty-four behaviors, apparently because they have been proven to possess the best visual acuity of all our wading birds.

So, within their own large heron family, Snowies are unique! Unique, mostly self-explanatory, and just plain fun too, are the names of some of the different fishing behaviors of Snowy Egrets.

Here is a partial list: standing; slow walking; quick walking; running; head shaking; tongue flicking; canopy feeding; and disturb and chase (akin to what mockingbirds do with their wing flashing). And, yes, four of the Snowies’ foot movement behaviors directly benefit from those bright “golden slippers,” one being the strategy birders most often observe—foot striking.

Nonetheless, I could not find in my reading any mention of stealing from comorants and, because the comorants are quick to submerge with their catch if they see, or sense from experience, that Snowies will pounce if a fish appears, getting photographic evidence of what actually happens proved difficult. I would guess that the egret success rate was about one in twenty tries, and when a Snowy would come away with a fish I could never quite be sure whether it snatched the prey from the comorant’s bill or scooped the catch from the water when the harassed owner lost its grip.

The little white herons’ visual acuity was on full display, though, because no matter how intently I concentrated on an individual comorant’s activity, the vigilant Snowies were always in the air on their way to the attack before I could get the camera on the right spot. They were either seeing the fish itself or somehow sensing the comorants’ success from the latter’s movements in the water before I could, and this greatly added to the difficulty of trying to document the actual point of attack and the tactics employed.

On several occasions as a successful comorant submerged it appeared an egret would drop out of its hover, descend legs extended, feet first, and try to land literally on the diving comorant’s back. And every now and then a successful egret would emerge from the splash and spray of the conflict with a fish in its bill.
Audubon at Home

The Stealth Bird Killer at Your Home
Liz Farquhar

You are a bird’s best friend. You filled your yard with native plants appealing to pollinators as well as our feathered friends. You manage ‘pests’ without pesticides. You turned off the outdoor lights, and you trim, prune and mow with care. Your cat named Walter stays indoors.

You deserve a pat on the back, right? The irony is that by creating an oasis that attracts birds you may actually have put them in jeopardy, unless you have disarmed an invisible killer: your windows.

Approximately one billion birds per year die after slamming into glass, and buildings four stories and lower account for 60% of the deaths. Windows are deceptive killers. First they fool birds by masquerading as a clear path through your house. Then they fool us into thinking that the thump we heard signified nothing, because many window-collision injuries do not kill the bird until it has flown to a tree or bush. As a result, you might think you don’t have a bird strike problem. But if you look at your windows from your yard you will see the hazard. Or view this video: bit.ly/HowBirdSeeWindows

Desert Rivers Audubon Society has accepted the challenge of educating our members and the public about the dangers of glass and how we can make windows safe. We brought Global Bird Rescue to the East Valley in fall 2021, and last year the Sonoran and Maricopa Audubon chapters joined in, expanding the effort to downtown Phoenix. This year Desert Rivers was invited to work with National Audubon and the company that manages most of the Tempe Town Lake property in an effort to make Tempe a Lights Out city.

Ending bird strikes one window at a time

In March we took our campaign to the people. At our DIY workshops (the next one is May 6), members and residents can make a customized solution to their bird strike problem. Among the many window strike solutions on the market, we chose the Acopian BirdSaver because it is inexpensive to make, attractive and one of the most highly rated for effectiveness.

Jeff Acopian invented the BirdSaver when the birds visiting his feeders continually smashed into his windows. It became a family project. First they tried hanging bead curtains across the windows but didn’t like the hippie vibe. Eventually the family tried lengths of paracord attached at four inch intervals. The result was the Acopian BirdSaver. The paracord looks contemporary, and because they sway in the breeze the BirdSaver has earned the nickname Zen Curtain. Best of all, the BirdSaver curtains work. The cords break up that deceiving reflection, and the four inch gap is narrow enough that even hummingbirds do not try to fly through.

Building a BirdSaver takes about an hour. We ask folks to bring the measurements of their problem windows and at the workshop we help them to build an Acopian BirdSavers ready to hang. The Acopian BirdSavers website provides detailed instructions, but if you would rather buy one ready-made you may order at birdsavers.com/order.

Arlene Gilbert is “fairly new” to and enjoys watching the feathered visitors at the bird bath and feeders she added to the shady parts of her Gilbert yard. One day I heard a thump on my window, and my favorite Albert’s Towhee had lost its life,” she said.

“More strikes occurred throughout the summer, but fortunately I had heard that Desert Rivers Audubon was hosting a DIY workshop to build Acopian BirdSavers for house windows. The workshop was fun, easy, and it was also simple to install.”

You are invited to the May 6 workshop at the Southeast Library from 1 p.m. Register by downloading the printable form or sign up online.
Before Dawn in the McDowell Mountains

Kathe Anderson

Abert's Towhees were calling well before sunrise but burst into a melody reminiscent of a Song Sparrow with a sore throat when the sun rose. Also vocalizing before sunrise was a nonstop Northern Cardinal, although it stayed hidden for most of our field time.

Both Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks sailed over us, as did three unexpected Double-crested Cormorants. Reflecting the irruption of American Robins in the Phoenix metro area this winter, one perched high and chuckled at us. The usually abundant Mourning Doves and House Finches were few and far between.

The count for the next site was postponed. It is another off-trail transect, but an easy-to-follow wash about a mile from the Brown's Ranch Trailhead. With the late winter storm that dumped two inches of snow in Cave Creek, we worried that we'd be wading along our transect. Thankfully, on the new date, the morning dawned bright and beautiful, with no wind and high wispy clouds. The schlep into our transect takes about 40 minutes, interrupted by bird sound that didn't quit until we did.

As we entered weather data and noted the start time, we seemed to be encroaching on vocalizing Gambel's Quail without seeing even one. Two Ladder-backed Woodpeckers were early entries on the list, both seen and heard then, and not again.

Like the Troon count, one of the first birds was an incessantly singing Northern Cardinal that stayed out of sight—until he didn't. Also like Troon, an American Robin (or two or three) appeared, but the usually abundant Mourning Doves and House Finches were mostly absent.

Every step of the way we were serenaded by Verdins, Curve-billed Thrashers, Gila Woodpeckers and Cactus Wrens—sometimes all at once. They teased us with different calls and sometimes sang with enthusiasm. At different spots on the transect, Canyon Towhees called but remained hidden, while Hermit Thrushes allowed glimpses of their skulking behavior without saying a word.

Was it the same American Kestrel we saw time and again, or were there a handful of them? It was hard to know for sure. We were intrigued by an odd standoff between a kestrel and a thrasher in the same cactus, and later by the same behavior between a kestrel and a Loggerhead Shrike.

While we didn't add any new species to the current list of about 185 varieties of birds in the McDowell Sonoran Preserve, we tried hard to capture an accurate snapshot of what's showing up on the days we count. Each count is different, and each offers some new insight into bird behavior, vocalization, population and appearance. Many thanks to Jane Brady, Linda Holman, Phil Teitelbaum and Brian Amon, the teams of hard-working, reliable, and very fun companions on these counts!

For more information, see Biodiversity-Birds - McDowell Sonoran Conservancy.

The Parsons Field Institute at the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy has been collecting data on birds, animals, plants and more for years. I've had the privilege of being on two bird survey teams, helping to do our scientific best to observe and record birds for counts in the winter, spring and summer.

The protocol for the counts requires us to start within thirty minutes of dusk. Since the transects do not start where we park, we need to calculate the time required to hike to the survey area. For both teams, we meet when there's just a blush of light on the horizon, silhouetting the saguaros in an Arizona Highways photography moment. The first count for the winter was the Troon Drainage court. Finding the assigned transect in the off trail, bushwhacking event is always a challenge. We recorded the temperature at 37 degrees, but there was frost on the plants at our feet telegraphing ice to our toes.

One focus of this count is a Red-tailed Hawk nest in the only tall trees on the entire preserve—cottonwoods watered by the runoff from the adjacent Troon golf course. While we don't know whether it's the same pair of hawks every year, they thrilled us again in February. We tried to keep our distance, but the hawks were disturbed anyway. We surmised that it was the male that came from elsewhere to post vigil while we were close, and the female that flew off the nest. They reconnoitered on a huge powerline tower, then one returned to the nest and was well-settled by the end of our count.

In between, we counted several Verdins, some chasing one another: love or war?
**Monthly Speaker Series**

April is the last of our in-person Monthly Speaker Series meetings until September. From May through August speakers present on Zoom only, at 7 p.m. Sign up to receive the Zoom link at desertriversaudubon.org. In September we return to the Southeast Regional Library in Gilbert for in-person meetings. All speakers, 12 months of the year, are offered on Zoom. Watch any speakers you missed on our website at desertriversaudubon.org/programs-events-archive.

**May 9 – Researcher Casey Youngflesh** - Seasonal rhythms: Why Timing Matters for Migratory Birds

Quantitative ecologist and ornithologist Casey Youngflesh 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.


In the early years of the 20th century, many bird species were under threat due to the popularity of feather-trimmed hats and other apparel. Author Will McLean Gleeley will tell us how his great-great-uncle Senator George P. McLean and others pushed for the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which saved many species from extinction. Zoom only.

**July 11 – John Moretti** - Arizona - Once Home to Thick-billed Parrots?

When an ancient Thick-billed Parrot ankle bone was found among archeological artifacts in Arizona and New Mexico, geosciences doctoral student John Moretti began to question the assumption that all parrots at that time were imported from Mexico. Come hear a detective story about our state’s natural history. Zoom only.

**Family Bird Walks and Young Birders Club**

Our Family Bird Walk at Gilbert Riparian Preserve and Veterans Oasis Park in Chandler are on summer break until November. Young Birders Club, which meets in Gilbert, is also on break for the summer after April.

**Birds & Brew Coffee Break**

Birds & Brew Coffee Break continues on the fourth Tuesday of every month; starting with a birding trip at the Gilbert Riparian Preserve and followed by a cup of joe at Coffee Rush, corner of Elliot and Val Vista. Meeting times depend on sunrise so keep an eye on our email newsletter and the web calendar.

**Do You Have a Favorite Birding Spot?**

Getting out in the field with a group is a fun way to see more birds. Desert Rivers offers formal, guided bird walks as well as informal trips. Our guided trips are led by experienced birders. Most require registration and they fill up fast. We also offer Pop Ups, where birders tap the wisdom of the flock on unguided birding expeditions. Trips are announced in our email newsletter and posted to our web calendar. If you would like to join our cadre of field trip guides, or if you want to organize a Pop Up to your favorite spot, contact Lois Hammer at dearliss@cox.net.

**Let's Close the Blinds on Bird Strikes!**

No matter where you live, your windows are a hazard to birds (see page 9). The next Desert Rivers Audubon workshop is Saturday, May 6 from 1-3 p.m. at the Southeast Regional Library, 775 N. Greenfield Rd, Gilbert, where you can make an Acopian BirdSaver customized to your window, for the cost of materials. Watch the newsletter and online calendar for more details.

**Desert Rivers Flies High Thanks to Our Hard-working Board**

Our officers and board members serve two-year terms, which means half are up for election every year. In April we voted in four experienced, dedicated individuals to serve from 2023 to 2025. Our congratulations to:

- Theona Vyvial, President
- Anne Koch, Secretary
- Kathleen Debiak – Program Director
- Patricia Julian – Volunteer Coordinator

**Volunteer!**

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

Fan-tailed Warbler (Basileuterus lachrymosa), Granite Reef, Maricopa County. This Fan-tailed Warbler was photographed by Brian Johnson and Jim Burns on 13 November 2022. Originally found by Torin Waters. This will represent a 12th Arizona record, and a first record for Maricopa County. Almost all other Arizona records are from late spring and summer, this representing by far the latest record in the state.

Kentucky Warbler (Geothlypis formosa), Jewel of the Creek Preserve, Maricopa County. This Kentucky Warbler was photographed by Pierre Doviche on 05 November 2022. Found originally by Tommy DeBardelleben on 3 November. Kentucky Warbler is a casual visitor to Arizona, with many more records from the late spring and early summer. It is considerably rarer.

Iceland Gull (Larus glauercoides), Mohave Lake, Mohave County. This Iceland Gull was photographed by Keith Kamper and Chris McCreedy on 15 November 2021. State review species. Iceland Gull (Thayers) is a casual late fall and winter visitor to the state, with about 20 records from the state.

Blue-headed Vireo (Vireo solitarius), Jewel of the Creek, Maricopa County. This Blue-headed Vireo was photographed by Marceline Vandewater on 04 November 2022. This apparent Blue-headed Vireo was found and photographed by Tommy DeBardelleben on 03 November 2022, at Jewel of the Creek. There are few accepted records of the Blue-headed Vireo in Arizona. The Arizona Bird Committee takes a conservative approach to reports of this species, which is indistinguishable from the regularly-occurring Cassin’s Vireo. If accepted by the ABC, this would represent only a seventh accepted record for the state.

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (Nyc-tanassa violacea), Seneca Lake, Gila County. This Yellow-crowned Night-Heron was photographed by Gary Rosenberg on 12 September 2022. Juvenile bird found by Janine McCabe on 1 September 2022. This would represent a 6th or 7th Arizona record, and first Gila County record.

Groove-billed Ani (Crotophaga sulcirostris), Quitobaquito pond, Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Arizona, Pima County. A Groove-billed Ani was photographed by Eric Rizzo on 26 July 2022. There are now nearly 40 records for the state.

Philadelphia Vireo (Vireo philadelphicus), Pena Blanca Lake, Santa Cruz County. This Philadelphia Vireo was photographed by Caleo Strand on 20 October 2022. Philadelphia Vireo is a casual fall migrant, with about 25 total records for the state. Most of the records are from late September and October.

White-winged Crossbill (Loxia leucoptera), Kaibab NF, FR 22, Coconino County. This White-winged Crossbill was photographed by Patricia Isaacson on 14 September 2022. Mega Rare to Arizona. Third record for Arizona if accepted. For several days, no fewer than birds were observed in the Demotte Campground using a drip for water.

Parasitic Jaeger (Stercorarius parasiticus), Bill Williams River NWR Delta, La Paz County, La Paz County. This Parasitic Jaeger was photographed by Keith Kamper on 07 September 2022. Parasitic Jaeger is a rare, but regular early fall migrant at large lakes, particularly on the Lower Colorado River. There are now more than 20 records from the state - almost all from early-mid-September.

Great Crested Flycatcher (Myiarchus crinitus), Old Beeline Highway, Maricopa County. This Great Crested Flycatcher was photographed by Benjamin Guo on 03 September 2022. This Great Crested Flycatcher was found by Tommy DeBardelleben along the Old Beeline Highway (north of Sunflower) by the Sunflower Workstation on 03 September 2022.

Arctic Tern (Sternia paradisae), Rotary Park, Lake Havasu, Mohave County. This Arctic Tern was photographed by Keith Kamper on 13 July 2022. Arctic Tern is a casual migrant anywhere in Arizona, with fewer than 10 total records for the state. Short legs, a short, mostly straight black bill, black trailing edge to the primaries, and no dark “wedge” as would be present in Common Tern.
Young Birders

Kathleen McCoy

Bottoms Up: Wigeons Are Dabbling Ducks

Did you say pigeon? No, I said wigeon. Although the names sound alike, the pigeon is a dove while the wigeon is a duck. To be more precise, the American Wigeon is a dabbling duck, which means it stands high in the water, feeding on aquatic vegetation and small invertebrates (which have no backbone) on or near the surface.

Identification of the wigeon can be tricky, but the medium-sized male, about 18 to 23 inches long with a wingspan of 33 inches, provides some hints. His stout body is basically black. His round head has a white crown and forehead. He has an iridescent green patch, looking a little like a fat comma, which runs over his eyes to the back of his neck.

The slightly smaller female has a brownish gray head and mottled brown body. Both have bluish gray legs and feet and a bluish gray bill with a black tip. Although the bill may be stubby and short, its black tip is very strong and is used to yank the stems of plants or leaves on land or roots and plants growing under the water’s surface. The wigeon enjoys eating tasty aquatic plants either by skimming the surface with its beak for delicious tidbits like elgrass and sedges from the bottom of the water. Sometimes only the ducks bottom is in sight when dabbling for food under water. Ironically, this cheeky little duck can sometimes be found in deep water where it follows diving ducks like coots, stealing their food. Excellent at foraging, it often treks on land or water searching for tender grass shoots, seeds, and waste grains. Insects provide a source of protein for the ducklings.

The mother typically lays 8-11 whitish eggs in a nest—really a shallow depression on dry land. The nest is filled with green grass and lined with down and concealed by tall vegetation. The nest is located usually about 100 feet from the water but can be up to a half a mile away. In about 24 days, the eggs will hatch. The mother stays with the ducklings until they are ready to fly. She then migrates, but the fathers migrate earlier, waiting only until the ducklings are hatched. Migration occurs mostly by day and in flocks.

In Maricopa County, starting in the fall, the American Wigeon is one of the most common and numerous ducks. The American wigeon stays in this area for most of the spring. Just in case you missed them, the good news is they will be seen again in large numbers during the following autumn. You can also check out the YouTube video at bit.ly/American-Wigeon.
Burrowing Owls Are Back!

Continued from page 3

Marking the official start of spring, two new pairs of Burrowing Owls arrived at ASU’s Polytechnic campus in March! The translocated owls are currently settling into their underground homes, covered by tents and feeding on mice delivered each day by students in the College of Integrated Sciences and Arts. If they lay eggs while they are confined, the birds may remain in the tents until summer, longer than the usual month-long setting-in period.

The colony, which was constructed in May 2021 on the west side of the Mesa campus, was declared vacant last November. Summer 2022 had been rough on the small raptors. Waist-high invasive weeds had blanketed the site, and powerful monsoon rains had swamped some of the burrows with dirt. Student researchers who monitored the trail cameras had seen skunks and coyotes prowling near the burrows. And birders had spotted hawks and falcons—which enjoy a tasty Burrowing Owl when they can grab one—perched on the high transmission poles surrounding the colony. The owls may have decided the site was too dangerous for their families.

After a couple months of no sightings, Desert Rivers suspended its monthly Owl Watch in September. Our chapter has a history with this species that goes back to the construction of the burrows at Sanjero Park more than a decade ago, so it was a reluctant decision made with sadness. When Wild At Heart scoped the burrows in preparation or banning a couple months later, our suspicions were confirmed. Whether by inevitable mortality or because of weeds, predators or floods, no owls remained.

Assistant Teaching Professor Adam Stein said that the faculty is working with the university to come up with a plan to keep weeds from hemming in the burrows without resorting to herbicides. Slinkit and other non-natives move in when desert soil is disrupted for construction or roadbuilding, he explained. If the invasives become established, a "regime shift" in the habitat occurs, and when that happens it’s nearly impossible—and extremely expensive—to restore the land to its original condition. One solution under consideration is to lay plastic below the top layer of soil three meters around each burrow, preventing the invasives from germinating there and protecting the sightlines that the owls need to feel safe.

That’s just one of the concepts that students majoring in wildlife and habitat restoration are observing at the site, which is arguably an outdoor classroom. The goal, Stein said, is to make the site a showpiece with trails, a pollinator garden and the owls. That goal appears to be within reach, at least as far as the owls are concerned. When the burrows were being repaired recently, a Burrowing Owl was spotted nearby. Stein speculated that it may have found a suitable home outside of the artificial burrows. Proof that the neighborhood can be good for owls.

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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 desertriversaudubon.org/membership.

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