

ARIZONA BIRD HIGHLIGHTS, FALL 2020

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The 2020 fall season, which birding organizations and publications define as 1 August-30 November, was particularly noteworthy in Arizona for the large number of rare birds reported and the unusually high totals for some migrants. Several factors likely contributed to this pattern, including weather conditions and scarce food resources in some areas. This report summarizes many of these sightings. All the rarities reviewed by the Arizona Bird Committee have been accepted unless otherwise noted (Rosenberg and Rademaker 2021). Data from reports of species not on the ABC's review list were found at the Arizona Field Ornithologists photo documentation page (AZFO 2020) and eBird (eBird 2020).

WOOD-WARBLERS

Remarkably, 39 species of wood-warblers (*Parulidae*) were reported during the fall, a 15-year high for Arizona. Most were resident, breeding, or expected migrants. However, an unusual number of rarities also showed up. The abundance of warblers reported may have been due to the extreme dry conditions in much of the state in 2020 that led to greater concentrations of migrant birds in parks, yards, and other locations providing water and food, where birds were more easily observed.

Most noteworthy were 3 reports of Canada Warbler (*Cardellina canadensis*; Figure 1). Two were in Maricopa County: one from Gilbert Water Ranch, 12-15 September and another from the Box Bar Recreational Site along the Verde River, 16 September. The second fall report came from Pima County at Brandi Fenton Memorial Park, Tucson, 21-24 October. There is only one previous fall record of this species in the past 15 years. A Cape May Warbler (*Setophaga tigrina*; Figure 2) was photographed and audio-recorded at a private residence in Surprise, Maricopa County, 28-30 September. This was only the third fall record in the past 15 years. A Bay-breasted Warbler (*Setophaga castanea*) and a Pine Warbler (*Setophaga pinus*) were both reported, each for the fourth time over the past 15 fall seasons. The Bay-breasted Warbler was observed on 2 November at Falbo Park near Lake Pleasant, Maricopa County, and the Pine Warbler was photographed by many observers at Jesse Owens Park in Tucson on 4 November. If submitted to and accepted by the ABC, it will be the state's seventh record (Rosenberg et al. 2017).

Amazingly, there were 4 reports of Blackburnian Warbler (*Setophaga fusca*), an infrequent eastern vagrant in Arizona. The earliest was at the Gilbert Riparian Preserve, Maricopa County 29-30 September. The second report came from the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, Coconino County, 18 October. The third was reported at Sweetwater Wetlands and Christopher Columbus Park, Pima County, 9-13 November, and the final sighting was at Santa Gertrudis Lane along the Santa Cruz River, Santa Cruz County, 13 November.



Figure 1. Canada Warbler, Gilbert Riparian Preserve, 13 September 2020. Photo by Muriel Neddermeyer



Figure 2. Cape May Warbler, Surprise, 30 September 2020. Photo by Christina Kondrat-Smith

Other casual or rare warblers not reported in the state every fall include 1 Blue-winged Warbler (*Vermivora cyanoptera*) in Navajo County, 26-29 August; 1 Worm-eating Warbler (*Helmitheros vermivorum*) 6 November in Pima County; 1 Kentucky Warbler (*Geothlypis formosa*) in the Chiricahua Mountains in Cochise County, 29 September; and 3 Black-throated Green Warblers (*Setophaga virens*), 2 in Santa Cruz County and one from Cochise County. Six Magnolia Warblers (*Setophaga magnolia*) from 3 counties made the highest number for the past 15 fall seasons. Thirteen Tennessee Warblers (*Leiostylyx peregrina*) were reported in 8 counties. Typically, 1 or 2 are reported every fall with the previous high of 8 in 2017. We typically expect 1 Blackpoll Warbler (*Setophaga striata*) each fall, but 2020 was one of the special years when 2 were reported, 1 from Springerville/Eager in Apache County, 5 September and the other from the Hassayampa Preserve in Maricopa County, 9 October.

INVASION OF THE FINCHES

One of the most remarkable bird movements in the fall of 2020 was the invasion of Pine Siskins (*Spinus pinus*; Figure 3) and higher than usual numbers of other finches and sparrows. As with a few other northern species, Pine Siskins can irrupt southward in years when food is scarce in their home range. This year a poor crop of conifer seeds across Canada's boreal forest caused the siskins to push south across the United States in unprecedented numbers (Del-Colle 2020). They were reported at low-elevation locations and in large groups with the biggest wave observed in late October and early November. Here are a few examples of exceptional reports in Arizona: up to 75 were reported 1 November at Dateland (Yuma County); 64 at Tres Rios wetlands (Maricopa County) 3 November; 32 were observed in wetlands on the Gila River Indian Community (Pinal County) 30 October; 30 were in a yard in Pima (Graham County) 8 November; and 25 were in a yard near Maricopa (Pinal County) 29 October.

In addition to siskins, other finches moved out of boreal habitats due to cyclical shortages of food crops (Young and Spahr 2020). Most movements were eastward, but some finches found their way to Arizona with 2 fall reports of the eastern subspecies of Purple Finch (*Haemorhous purpureus purpureus*). The Purple Finch most often seen in Arizona is the western subspecies (*H. p. californicus*). *H. p. purpureus* had only been reported in the state once before 2020. Amazingly, 3 were reported in 2020, one in the spring. The 2 fall reports both came from the Meteor Crater RV Park in Coconino County 8 October and 24 October.

White-winged Junco (*Junco hyemalis aikenii*) is a subspecies of Dark-eyed Junco that is rarely reported in the state. Two were observed in the fall of 2020: One from the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, Coconino County, 1 November, and a second at Joseph City, Navajo County, 3 November. Birders also reported at least 11 Yellow-eyed Juncos (*Junco phaeonotus*) in Tucson. This species rarely drops to lower elevations, and the Bighorn Fire in the Santa Catalina Mountains in June-July likely reduced food sources and habitat cover at higher elevations, forcing the juncos to the valley below.

A nonboreal eastern sparrow also made a big splash. Three Field Sparrows (*Spizella pusilla*), a species which had not been reported in the state since 2012, showed up at 3 locations in November. The first report came from a private residence near Portal, Cochise County, 17 November; the second was observed in Tumacácori, Santa Cruz County, 19-20 November; and the final report was from Whitewater Draw, Cochise County, 20-25 November.



Figure 3. Pine Siskins. Part of a group at a yard in Pima, shown with Lesser Goldfinches, 21 November 2020. Photo by Diane Drobka

OTHER PASSERINES

More than 100 Dickcissels (*Spiza americana*) were reported in 10 counties during fall migration, the largest number from parks in the Tucson area. This was an unusually high number for this migrant, whose numbers can be erratic. An Eastern Wood-Pewee (*Contopus virens*; Figure 4) was photographed and recorded 21 October along the Colorado River at the 'Ahakhav Tribal Preserve, La Paz County (ABC 2020). If accepted by the ABC, this will be the eighth state record and the first since 2011. A casual Least Flycatcher (*Empidonax minimus*) was photographed and recorded on 19 September at Dateland, Yuma County.

Rare vireos also made a showing, including a Philadelphia Vireo (*Vireo philadelphicus*) documented 4 October from the Kino Springs area, Santa Cruz County. There are only about 20 records of this vagrant in the state. There were 5 reports of Red-eyed Vireo (*Vireo olivaceus*), another rarity, 2 from the Chiricahua Mountains, 8 September and 8 October; 1 from the Huachuca Mountains 26-29 August; 1 in Sierra Vista, 18 October; and 1 at Lakeside Park in Tucson, 18-20 September. A Yellow-green Vireo (*Vireo flavoviridis*), a Mexican species, was discovered along the Hassayampa River near Wickenburg, Maricopa County, 15 September. This is the fifteenth state record and only the second one in September. Four Scarlet Tanagers (*Piranga olivacea*) were reported from 4 counties the highest number for any fall since 2011. They were at the Paton Center for Hummingbirds in Santa Cruz County, 18-22 October; Portal in Cochise County, 26 October; Dateland, Yuma County, 31 October; and Rotary Park in Lake Havasu City, Mohave County, 16 November.

Three Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) reports from different counties were submitted in 2020. The first came from Joseph City WTP, Navajo County, 18 August, followed by a report from Whitewater Draw, Cochise County, 7-9 September. The third, photographed at Meteor Crater RV Park on 17 September, hasn't been submitted to or reviewed by the ABC. Only one Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*) was reported in 2020. It was also at the Meteor Crater RV Park, 21 September and continued to 18 October.

SHOREBIRDS AND WATERBIRDS

A few rare shorebirds also showed up in the fall. Rarest of all was a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*; Figure 5), discovered at Spot Road Farm, Yuma County, 29 October. This is the seventh state record and the first for Yuma County. Two Ruffs (*Calidris pugnax*) were reported, a species that is not seen annually. One was at dairy sludge ponds near Stanfield, Pinal County, 20 September – 7 October. The second bird was at Cochise Lake in Willcox, Cochise County, 29 September – 6 October. Another rare shorebird, Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*), was reported from Sam Lena Park in Tucson 20 August. On the same day, 2 birds were reported in Marana, Pima County, and up to 3 continued through 26 August. On 1 September, a Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*) was reported from a dairy in Pinal County, which, if submitted to and accepted by the ABC, will be the fourth Pinal County record. There were 3 reports of American Golden-Plover



Figure 4. Eastern Wood-Pewee, 'Ahakhav Tribal Preserve, 21 October 2020. Photo by Keith Kamper



Figure 5. Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Spot Road Farm, 29 October. Photo by Henry Detwiler

(*Pluvialis dominica*), a casual migrant not reported in the state every fall. This made the most fall records in the past 15 years. They were observed at Lyman Lake State Park, Apache County, 17 September; Rotary Park in Lake Havasu City, Mohave County, 22 September; and dairy ponds near Maricopa, Pinal County, 25 September- 4 October.

A Fulvous Whistling Duck (*Dendrocygna bicolor*) was at Canoa Ranch in Pima County, 8 September.

An amazing 6 Lesser Black-backed Gulls (*Larus fuscus*) were reported in 4 counties. The earliest was 22 September on Lake Havasu, Mohave County, followed one month later by more reports, possibly of the same bird, at the same location. Two reports came from Coconino County: Walnut Canyon Lakes, 15 October, and Meteor Crater Rest Area Lakes, 23-24 October. Two were reported at Lake Pleasant, including an adult in both Maricopa and Yavapai county parts of the lake, 24 September and juvenile, 6-13 November in Yavapai County. One report also came from the Glendale Recharge Ponds, Maricopa County on 31 October, which has not been reviewed by the ABC yet. This large number reflects the increased sightings of this species in the state in recent years. The first Arizona record was in 2006 (Rosenberg et al. 2011).

Two Northern Jacanas (*Jacana spinosa*) were reported at 3 locations in Pima County. These were the first reported in the state since 2008, and are the sixth and seventh state records. A juvenile, only the second reported in the state, was at Green Valley 8 September and Canoa Ranch 9-11 September. An adult was found along the Santa Cruz River in Marana just northwest of Tucson 26 September and was still being reported into 2021 at this location.

Purple Gallinule (*Porphyrio martinicus*) is not often seen in Arizona, and 4 reports from 2 counties in 2020 was more than any previous year. One was photographed along the Salt River in Maricopa County, 4 August, which hasn't been submitted to or reviewed yet by the ABC. Three were reported in Pima County in July and August. One discovered 27 July from the Santa Cruz River just south of Tucson remained until 2 August providing many birders with an opportunity to see it. The other 2 were in unusual habitats for this species. One was sleeping in a tree in a yard at the Buenos Aires NWR, 3 August, and the other was found on the University of Arizona campus in Tucson, 21 August.

The Common Crane (*Grus grus*) that first appeared at Mormon Lake in Coconino in 2017 and reappeared in 2019 and 2020 (Crouse 2020) continued until 1 August 2020. On 27 November, a Common Crane was reported at Lake Cochise in Willcox, Cochise County. It remained only one day longer. The ABC has determined that this crane was different than the Mormon Lake bird and is a second state record.

Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*), reported almost every year recently, had a report from Vicksburg, La Paz County, 26 September. Another report from Patagonia, Santa Cruz County, 19 October, is still being reviewed (ABC 2020).

OTHER NONPASSERINES

A Groove-billed Ani (*Crotophaga sulcirostris*) was reported 8 September at the Canoa Ranch in Pima County. Another was photographed 25 and 27 September at the Gila River Indian Community, Pinal County. The location has restricted access, and the bird was documented during a permitted bird survey. This report, if submitted to and accepted by the ABC, will be a second record for Pinal County. A Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*), video-recorded 17 September in Liberty, is a first record for Maricopa County. Two Eared Quetzals (*Euptilotis neoxenus*), an immature male and a female, were reported in Cave Creek Canyon in the Chiricahua Mountains, Cochise County, in June. Apparently the same 2 were discovered in Rucker Canyon, 16 August-7 September, and then returned to Cave Creek Canyon, 15 September. The male remained until 25 November. The ABC regards these male and female trogons moving around the Chiricahua Mountains in 2020 as a single record (Rosenberg and Rademaker 2021).

INFLUX OF RUFIOUS-BACKED ROBINS AND RUDDY GROUND DOVES

Rufous-backed Robin (*Turdus rufopalliatu*s) is no longer on the ABC's review list but is still rare and of great interest. At the northern edge of its range, this thrush's numbers in Arizona fluctuate from year to year with the greatest numbers in the fall and winter months. The fall of 2020 was a particularly good year with 25 reports by 1 December 2020 in 7 counties. The annual reports fluctuate as shown by the figures for the past 5 falls: 2019 (2), 2018 (1), 2017 (28), 2016 (5), and 2015 (3).

The Ruddy Ground Dove (*Columbina talpacoti*), another species with sporadic rises and falls of its numbers in the state, made one of its best showings ever in 2020. At least 104 Ruddy Ground Doves were reported from 12 of the state's 15 counties during the fall season. Particularly noteworthy were the reports from northern counties, including Coconino, Mohave, and Navajo, where they are seldom observed. One in Greenlee County may be a first for the county.

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