

Northern Arizona Grasslands (Coconino, Mohave, and Yavapai Counties) February 22-23, 2020

By Joe Crouse

Introduction

The grasslands surrounding Seligman are the northern limits of grasslands that begin north of Prescott and cover much of both Williamson and Chino Valleys. Patches of pinyon-juniper, chaparral and, on the Hualapai Reservation, ponderosa pine, create a mosaic of vegetation types that provide suitable habitat for a number of bird species (Figure 1).

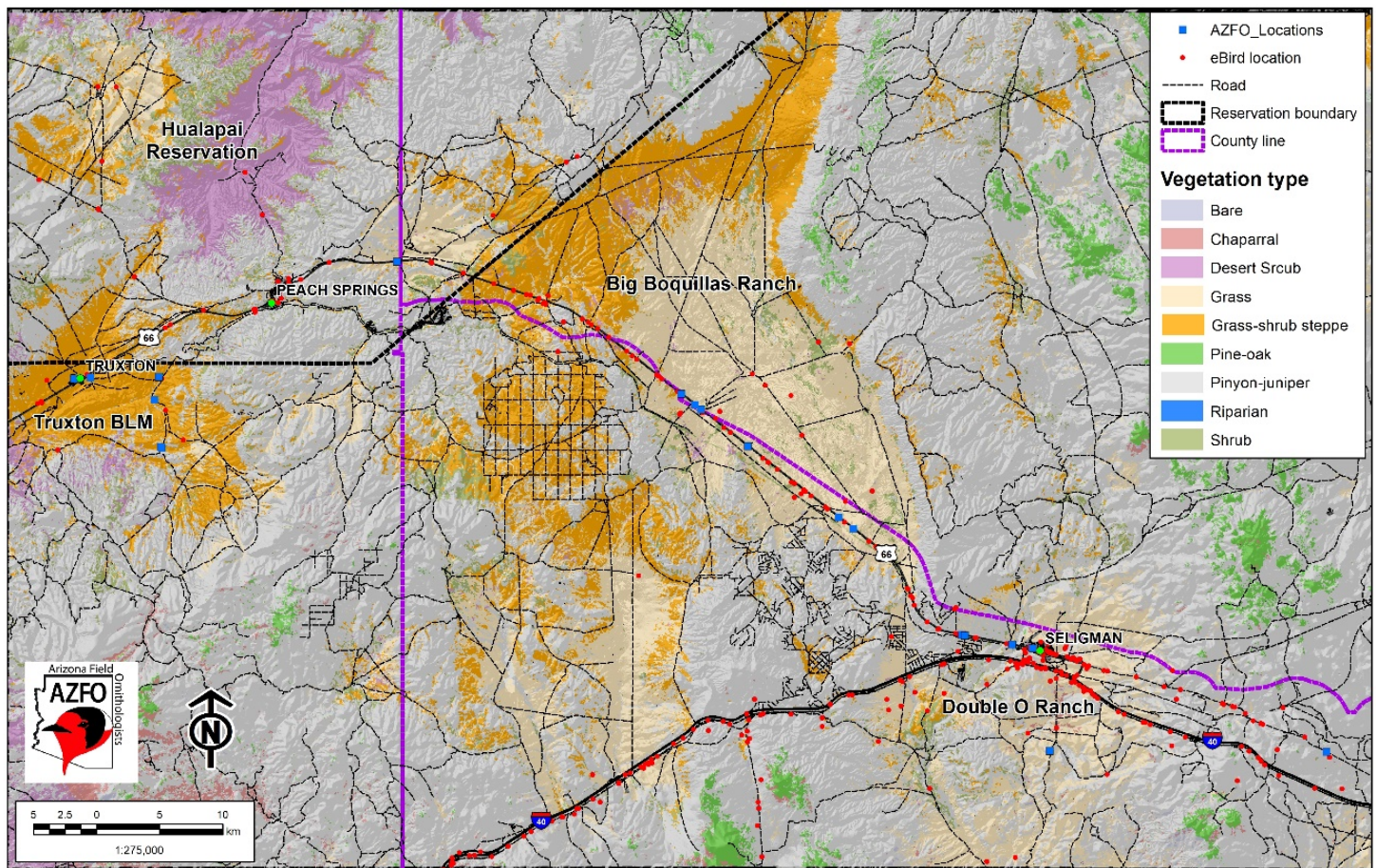


Figure 1 Vegetation types of survey area. Vegetation classification is adapted from the Southwest Regional Gap Analysis Project landcover data layer (Lowry et al. 2005).

The area has been largely overlooked by birders. Records from eBird (Sullivan et al. 2009) show most of the reports along the main transportation routes. Due to the lack of reports in the area, Arizona Field Ornithologists conducted an expedition on February 22-23, 2020. Species of particular interest included Chestnut-collared, Lapland, and McCown's Longspurs, Sprague's Pipit, Northern Shrike, Burrowing Owl, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Rough-legged Hawk. These species prefer grassland habitat, with the exception of Northern Shrike which prefers pinyon-juniper.

The area of interest of the expedition is roughly 1.1 million acres. The decision was made to attempt to survey the grasslands and pinyon-juniper woodlands in the east portion of the Hualapai Reservation, as well as the extensive grasslands of the Big Boquillas Ranch. Requests for permits for both areas were submitted. There was no response from the Big Boquillas Ranch. Contact was made with Hualapai

Department of Natural Resources staff, but we were not successful in obtaining a permit. Analysis of maps showing vegetation type and land ownership revealed a large Bureau of Land Management (BLM) managed grassland area just west of the Hualapai Reservation and directly south of Truxton.

Saturday, February 22

Troy Corman, Jack Hallin, Tom Lewis, Tom Linda, Anne Pellegrini, Dara Vazquez and the author met at the west end of Seligman before sunrise on February 22. The weather forecast for the entire weekend called for rain showers, with some heavy rain expected. Troy had talked with an Arizona Game and Fish Department colleague that suggested the Double O Ranch directly south of Seligman. This area is privately owned but is open to the public. It was decided to go to the BLM grasslands and leave the nearby Double O Ranch for Sunday when only a half day was available.

The group arrived in Truxton roughly 45 minutes after leaving Seligman and soon found the main access road to the BLM grasslands. The goal was to reach Haskin Tank where we hoped to find water. The morning was overcast but remained dry. The first stop of the morning was at the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe railroad crossing. Several dozen Horned Larks, House Finches, White-crowned and Sagebrush Sparrows were found in the thick, dry weedy vegetation adjacent to the tracks. A single Ferruginous Hawk was circling the area.

We continued south toward Haskin Tank (Figure 2). Horned Lark was the only species seen until the tank was reached. Unfortunately, the tank was dry. Loggerhead Shrikes, Mountain Bluebirds and more Horned Larks were seen near the dry tank. The decision was made to split into two groups with one group heading east up the drainage and the other going west. The group going east located several Mountain Bluebirds, Horned Larks and a single Juniper Titmouse and Say's Phoebe. The group that went west had Red-tailed Hawk, Says' Phoebe, Common Raven, numerous Horned Larks, Mountain Bluebirds, Rock Wren, House Finches, and three varieties of Dark-eyed Junco; Cassiar, Oregon and Pink-sided.

Figure 2. Dara Vazquez, Jack Hallin, Anne Pellegrini and Troy Corman at Hasken Tank.





Figure 3. Troy surveying drainage to the west of Haskin Tank.

The weather was still cooperating so it was decided to head back north and bird the area around the railroad crossing. Several Loggerhead Shrikes and Horned Larks were seen on the drive back to the crossing. Again, it was decided to split into two groups with one group walking east and the other going west. The west group reported considerably more species with Northern Harrier, Ferruginous Hawk, American Kestrel, Prairie Falcon, Common Raven, nearly 300 Horned Larks, House Finch, White-crowned Sparrow, a single Vesper Sparrow, a half-dozen Savannah Sparrows and one Eastern Meadowlark. Troy mentioned to the group that Eastern Meadowlark was documented here when the area was surveyed for the Arizona Breeding Bird Atlas (Corman and Wise-Gervais 2005). The group that headed east reported Ferruginous Hawk, Common Raven, several dozen Horned Larks, House Finches, White-crowned Sparrows, and a single Sagebrush Sparrow (Figure 4).

The wind was picking up and the sky was looking like it was getting ready to dump rain. We decided to check out the grasslands north of Truxton. The area was comprised mostly of large private parcels. A light rain began soon after we started surveying the area. The dirt roads quickly became very slippery. Species seen were Say's Phoebe, Common Raven, European Starling, Western Bluebird, House Finch and a couple dozen Dark-eyed Junco. The rain began to come down much harder and the roads were getting close to being



Figure 4. Anne and Jack surveying the area northeast of the railroad crossing.

undriveable. The group headed east of Route 66, through the Aubrey Valley and into Seligman. Highlights of the Aubrey Valley include Bald Eagle, Ferruginous Hawk, Common Raven, American Kestrel, Red-winged Blackbird and a large flock of Mountain Bluebirds. We stopped at the main gate of the Big Boquillas Ranch to see if it might be possible to access the area. The gate was locked and there was a sign saying no access was allowed. The short road leading to the gate was also so muddy that we wouldn't have gone any further even if access was allowed.

Sunday, February 23

The morning dawned wet and foggy. Dara Vazquez had to unfortunately head home the previous evening so we were down to six people. We decided to check out the Double O Ranch area as originally planned, but we felt the roads would be too muddy to allow us to drive on them without rutting them. The area is privately owned and we didn't want to destroy the roads. We drove less than 100 yards onto the westernmost access road and quickly realized we needed to rethink the day's plan.

The only dirt road in the area that seemed like it might be passable was Williamson Valley Road. This well-maintained County road begins on the south side of Interstate 40 at the easternmost exit. The southern end of the road is in Prescott. The road surface turned out to be surprisingly firm and we were able to drive on it without rutting it. Species seen along the first half dozen miles were Common Raven and Horned Lark. We stopped at a high point (Figure 5) where there was a sparse cover of pinyon-juniper. The sky was heavily overcast. Once again, the group split up. The group heading to the east saw Mountain Bluebird, House Finch and a single Eastern Meadowlark. The group that headed west reported a single Ferruginous Hawk, Common Raven, Horned Lark, Mountain Bluebird, House Finch, Canyon Towhee and Eurasian Collared-Dove.



Figure 5.

We continued south on Williamson Valley Road but it soon became extremely muddy and we turned around to avoid causing further damage to the road. It was still early and we wanted to continue surveying. It was obvious that the only area we could survey was Route 66 through the Aubrey Valley and we decided to drive to eastern edge of the Hualapai Reservation and see if we could survey along Indian Route 18. The drive through Aubrey Valley turned up several Ferruginous Hawks, numerous Common Raven and a flock of 17 *Spinus* sp. that were feeding in the dried sunflowers along the highway. They'd flush when we got too close so we couldn't positively ID them, but we all felt they were very likely Pine Siskins. We made it to the paved Indian Route 18 where we saw a sign informing us that we needed a permit to drive on the road. Northern Harrier and Horned Lark were seen in this area.

We decided to head back toward Seligman and call it a trip. We had several Ferruginous Hawks, an American Kestrel, and a Golden Eagle that was on the ground. We reported a total of 42 Common Raven along Route 66.



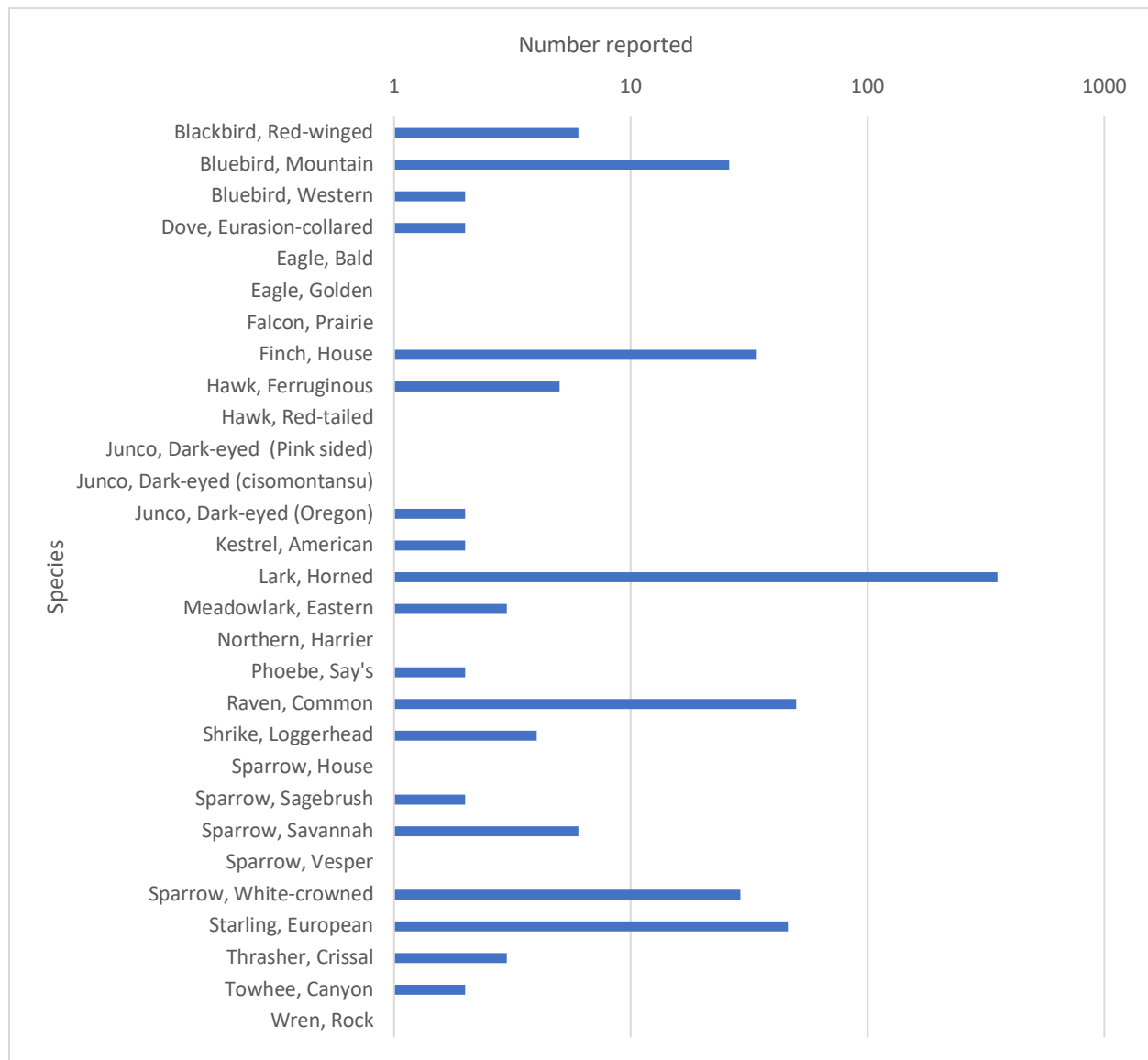
Tom Lewis, Anne Pellegrini, Troy Corman, Joe Crouse, Jack Hallin, Tom Linda

Summary

The weather and poor road conditions didn't allow for a very thorough survey of the area. The varied vegetation types, ranging from grasslands, grass-shrub steppe to ponderosa pine, provide suitable habitat for a wide range of bird species. The Hualapai Reservation and Big Boquillas Ranch, if permission to survey them could be arranged, provide exciting long-term monitoring opportunities.



Figure 6. Crucifixion Thorn (Canotia holacantha) which is typically found further south and west of this area.



Total number of species reported from February 22 and 23, 2020.

Literature Cited

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