

Superstition Mountains Wilderness (Maricopa & Pinal Counties)

6-8 May 2016

By Troy Corman, edited by Eric Hough



Pristine grassland and oak-juniper woodland in the Superstition Wilderness (photo © Troy Corman).

Felipe Guerrero and I led an AZFO backpacking expedition into the Superstition Wilderness, located in the south half of the Tonto National Forest. Our goal was to explore some of the higher elevations and canyons where stands of ponderosa pine and oaks occur within the Superstition Mountains in Maricopa and Pinal counties. This habitat is very limited in both of these counties, and we documented the breeding birds and spring migrants in the area. Apparently, birders have not explored this area much since the 1970s, and we generated the first eBird reports in this mountain range for many species.

Our access point was Rogers Trough Trailhead which is situated in a mix of chaparral, juniper, and small stands of evergreen oaks at 4,800 ft. elevation. This is where the team of seven met late on 6 May 2016. The next morning, we hiked into the wilderness area through beautiful chaparral, along drainages, and with breathtaking vistas on a section of the Arizona Trail (Trail 109) for about five miles until we reached Reavis Pass at 5,200 ft. elevation. The team cataloged the

abundant birdlife as we went, all in Pinal County. From there the habitat soon changed as we hiked north along the Reavis Creek drainage, apparently the only perennial flowing creek at the top of the Superstitions. We encountered towering ponderosa pines and huge junipers and oaks, interspersed with bunchgrass-filled meadows. Tall, dense stands of coyote willow filled the crystal-clear creek in many areas.



Dusky-capped Flycatcher (left) and Olive Warbler (right) (photos © Caleb Strand).

We were all blown away by how similar this habitat looked to the sky islands in southeast Arizona. Plus, without any grazing activity for likely 50+ years, it was a rare opportunity to see what such habitat should look like in pristine condition... it was simply amazing! We set up a base camp in Maricopa County north of the Long Trough Canyon mouth, and periodically broke into teams in the afternoon and again Sunday morning to explore this pine/oak wonderland. By the time we hiked out Sunday afternoon, we had documented nearly 100 species, with all of us seeing one or more species we had never observed before in Maricopa and Pinal counties.



Painted Redstart, left (photo © Caleb Strand) and Indigo Bunting, right (photo © Ryan O'Donnell).

Highlights were many, including 13 species of warblers, with numerous pairs of nesting **Painted Redstarts** and **Grace's Warblers**; a migrant male **Calliope Hummingbird** giving us a rare opportunity to see (and hear) its courtship flight in Arizona; many pairs of **Dusky-capped Flycatchers**; and hearing **Flammulated** and a pair of **Spotted Owls**. Other breeding species seldom or only locally documented in these two counties included **Acorn** and **Hairy Woodpeckers**, **Steller's Jays**, **Olive Warblers**, **Hepatic Tanagers**, and **Indigo Bunting**. As we hiked out Sunday, we added three **Red Crossbills** and three **Wild Turkeys** (likely of the Merriam's race). Another outstanding sighting was an apparent intergrade 'Red-shafted' x 'Yellow-shafted' **Northern Flicker**.



Apparent intergrade ‘Red-shafted’ x ‘Yellow-shafted’ Northern Flicker (photo © Caleb Strand).



Ponderosa pine forest in the Superstition Wilderness (photo © Troy Corman).

Felipe and I want to thank the very enthusiastic and energetic team that ranged in age from 16 to the mid-50s, some of whom had never backpacked before or had not done so in over 25 years (me!). The fun crew included Tommy DeBardeleben, Tom Lewis, Dee O'Connell, Ryan O'Donnell, and Caleb Strand.

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