



HASSAYAMPA RIVER PRESERVE

MARICOPA COUNTY PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT

JULY 2020

WINGED WANDERLUST

Over the past three decades, the Hassayampa River Preserve near Wickenburg, Arizona, has become well-known as a major destination for birders to experience our state's diverse birdlife, in part because of the nearly 300 species that have been recorded here so far.

The Preserve contains a desert oasis of some of the last remaining cottonwood-willow gallery forests in the state, along with extensive mesquite Bosque, and a historic stand of California fan palms, mulberries, and figs that have grown around the springs behind today's Visitor Center since the late 1800s.

Combined with the year-round presence of surface flow in the Hassayampa River and the impoundment of the springs that form Palm Lake, this lush habitat supports an

abundance of breeding and migratory birds throughout the year.

In addition to expected bird species using the riparian woodland or surrounding desert-scrub, the Preserve frequently attracts rare vagrants that either get off-track during the migration or that are wandering in search of new frontiers

Over the past century, dozens of bird species have been expanding their ranges northward in response to climate and habitat changes.

If you live in Phoenix, you're probably familiar with Great-tailed Grackles, the gregarious and noisy black birds with long tails, sharp beaks, and yellow eyes. But did you know that the species didn't enter the southwest U.S. until the early 1900s?



Arizona's first record was from Safford in 1935! And now they occur as far north as Oregon and as far east as Missouri! Just as the grackles have moved north, so have several species that have shown up at the Hassayampa River Preserve and now have local breeding populations, including Broad-billed Hummingbird, Gray, Zone-tailed, and Common Black Hawks, Tropical and Thick-billed Kingbirds, and Bronzed Cowbird.

Other species that are typically found only as far north as Sonora, Mexico, or southeastern Arizona that have appeared as vagrants here include Mississippi Kite, Green Kingfisher, Crested Caracara, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Rufous-backed Robin, and Varied Bunting.

Similarly, Red-shouldered Hawks from the Pacific Coast population have been expanding eastward into Arizona, with the Preserve having the longest-running and most consistent breeding location in the state.

An additional feather in the Preserve's cap is that its habitat supports breeding populations of the endangered 'Southwestern' Willow Flycatcher and threatened 'Western' Yellow-billed Cuckoo, both of which are struggling due to loss of riparian woodlands throughout the Southwest.

The latest entry to this list was just revealed to us this past week (late June 2020) and it was a surprise on multiple accounts.

For the past few weeks, visitors to the Preserve had been noticing an oriole building a long, pendulous, sock-shaped nest made of grasses on a cottonwood limb right above the Mesquite Meander trail. One of the observers posted the photos on social media and after an initial debate on its identification being between two expected oriole species (Bullock's and Hooded), an astute birder recognized it for what it was: a **STREAK-BACKED ORIOLE!**

This species had not been on anyone's radar, including birders such as Ranger Eric who had noticed an identical

nest in the same tree in the summer of 2019 but failed to realize what it was at the time. D'oh! Last year's nest is still suspended from a limb and is all the more obvious now.

The female Streak-backed Oriole is the primary constructor of the nest, indicating that undoubtedly this same female has tried nesting this year and last. What makes this so unusual is that the species has only been found nesting in the U.S. along the lower San Pedro River and one other location in southern Arizona.

This is now the northernmost breeding record for the entire species' range and the first breeding documented in Maricopa County, which had only three prior records of wandering vagrants in fall and winter.

Vagrants have also been noted across the western U.S. over the past few decades, but mostly outside of the breeding season. South of Arizona, Streak-backed Orioles breed along riparian areas in tropical thornscrub and deciduous forest from north-central Sonora, Mexico, southward.

These incredible bird movements over the years go to show the importance of habitat connectivity for wildlife, giving resident and migrant species corridors to travel between patches of intact habitat as human development continues to remove what's available to our wildlands.



This is a perfect example of why places such as the Hassayampa River Preserve, Maricopa County Parks, and the Maricopa Trail are vital to conserving regional wildlife populations and their habitat connectivity.

These protected areas also allow for people to connect with and learn about nature so that they can be better stewards of the land. For birders, although many may be focused on just seeing our celebrity Streak-backed Oriole, they also get to experience the array of other birds and wildlife that the Preserve hosts, and be exposed to the Preserve's and Maricopa County Parks' shared mission.



Over the past four days, somewhere between 100-150 people have traveled from as far as Texas, Nevada, and southern California to see the Streak-backed Oriole.



Despite the challenges and risks of traveling during a global pandemic, thankfully the vast majority of our visiting birders have been wearing masks and practicing social distancing.

Occurrences like this build and maintain a sense of community based on the love of nature, which strengthens the care for our shared natural resources and support of our Parks system.

Preserve staff has also created a buffer around the oriole's nest to minimize disturbance to the birds while allowing visitors to watch these nesting birds in action, for which we have received several positive comments.

We can't wait to see what crazy rare bird decides to call the Hassayampa River Preserve home next!



Maricopa County

Parks and Recreation Department

Hassayampa River Preserve

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