

## North Central Arizona Wildlife Viewing by Month

### **January**

Winter in the in the central mountains can bring larger mammals into easier view: pronghorns and Rocky Mountain elk graze in the grasslands after leaving their high-elevation forests and meadows to seek food and water. Coyotes regularly stroll grassland areas throughout the day, seeking to make a meal of an unfortunate field mouse or ground squirrel. The Arizona Game and Fish Department's Grasslands Wildlife Area can often hold numerous pronghorn, horned lark and raptors, such as the occasional golden eagle, northern harrier and ferruginous hawk. The Department's Wenima Wildlife Area has a resident herd of mule deer that can often be seen at sunrise and sunset by walking the area's trails.

### **February**

Prescott's Audubon Society offers bird walks coordinated through the Highlands Center for Natural History; visit the center's Lynx Creek site—a beautiful 80-acre parcel on Walker Road near Lynx Lake with a range of habitat including ponderosa-pine valleys, chaparral and woodland covered hillsides, and shaded creeks and the associated wildlife.

The Arizona Game and Fish Department holds Bald Eagle natural history and viewing workshops in February, offering information and field observations of our national symbol.

### **March**

Springtime in the central Arizona high country means return of early summer migrants such as double-crested cormorant, turkey vulture and osprey circling over lakes and rivers. Ospreys frequent the more popular fishing waters (Woods Canyon Lake, Heritage Park/Willow Lake) seeking their own limit of trout. Visit lakes from Prescott to Payson and on to the White Mountains to seek Clark's and eared grebes; White-faced ibis, long-billed dowitcher and spotted sandpiper. Wetlands, such as Jacques Marsh in Pinetop-Lakeside and Tavasci Marsh near Cottonwood, may hold wandering black-crowned night-heron, marsh wren and Virginia rail. Melting snow and greening forage lure deer and elk from lower-elevation grassland wintering grounds back to the higher forests. Glimpse herds of elk feeding along edge habitat near dawn and dusk, where tree lines meet open meadows. Drive State Highway 260 close to the Sunrise turnoff onto State Highway 273, the forest road network around Big and Crescent lakes, and State Highway 373 into Greer – and watch for Merriam's turkey, too. Pronghorn can usually be spotted throughout the day in the grasslands between Springerville and Eagar and the Arizona Game and Fish Department's White Mountain Grasslands Wildlife Area. A casual drive on roads in the grasslands north of Prescott Valley is a good bet for pronghorn too.

### **April**

In the White Mountains above Springerville and the Rim Country around Payson, migratory breeding birds have returned to pine and aspen forests, establishing territories. Migrants such as yellow, Nashville, Townsend's, hermit and Wilson's warblers make a quick appearance in riparian and forest habitats along the Little Colorado River in Greer and in pine forests. Good places to look for migratory and breeding songbirds include South Fork and the Arizona Game and Fish Department's Wenima Wildlife Area located outside of Springerville and Eagar, the Blue River, Chevelon Creek, Walnut Creek in Pinetop-Lakeside, and riparian habitat with stands

of willows or narrow-leaf cottonwoods. Broad-tailed hummingbirds (our primary hummingbird breeder in the forest) announce their flights with the trilling sound from their split-tipped, outermost primary wing feathers. Migratory black-chinned and calliope hummingbirds, though fewer, may be spotted in forests, orchards and open meadows containing nectar-producing flowers.

### **May**

Around the White Mountains the resident and neo-tropical breeding birds are the forest's primary vocalists. Listen for Cordilleran flycatcher, western wood-pewee, plumbeous and warbling vireo, western bluebird, mountain chickadee, pygmy and white-breasted nuthatch, band-tailed pigeon, northern flicker; also yellow-rumped, Grace's and red-faced warblers. Walk the Springs Trail or the forest roads along Brown Creek outside of Pinetop, forest roads surrounding Greens Peak, and any other trail or road that takes you through ponderosa pine habitat. Throughout the high contry, look for violet-green swallows inhabiting large snags (standing dead trees), and listen for the faint trill of the brown creeper as it unobtrusively sneaks up trees, plucking insects from cracks in the thick plates of pine bark.

### **June**

In the pinyon-juniper forests look for black-throated gray warbler, juniper titmouse, blue-gray gnatcatcher, northern mockingbird, ash-throated and gray flycatchers, and scrub and pinyon jays as they claim territories and begin nesting. Nesting birds are quieter, concentrating on raising and protecting young – but early morning birdsong can help you spot parent birds hurriedly delivering food to hatchlings. Sky-blue mountain bluebirds flock in the high-elevation grasslands around Big Lake, Sheep Crossing and the West Fork of the Black River. Canada geese graze the wet meadows near the town of Alpine. Yellow-breasted chats reveal how they received their name with noisy outbursts from willow riparian habitats (again, visit the Wenima Wildlife Area). Both the western and occasional eastern meadowlarks sing at the Arizona Game and Fish Department's White Mountain Grasslands Wildlife Area, their different vocalizations being quite apparent more so than their plumage variations that differentiate them.

### **July**

In the White Mountain region, ospreys continue to soar over Woodland Lake Park in Pinetop. At nearly any lake edged by cattails or other shallow vegetation, look and listen for the call of red-winged and yellow-headed blackbirds. Across U.S. Highway 180 from Luna Lake, a great blue heron rookery exists among the snags, giving keen observers the view of lanky young herons sitting oddly among the topmost branches. Belted kingfishers can be found traveling up and down rivers such as the Blue and Black, the East Fork of the Black near Diamond Point Campground, the Joy Fish Hatchery along the Blue River, and along the White River at the Alchey National Fish Hatchery. Other riparian birds include black phoebe, purple martin, and common yellowthroat. In higher-elevation, colder rivers, watch for the American dipper. July 4th is the typical "opening day" for the start of the southward migration of the rufous hummingbird. They make the Arizona Game and Fish Department's annual High Country Hummers bird-banding event, held every year on the last Saturday in July, a huge success, drawing hundreds of visitors to the Department's Sipe White Mountain Wildlife Area to witness the capture, data collection and banding of these and the other hummingbirds. A summer visit to Sipe may also bring observations of lazuli bunting, blue grosbeak, Virginia rail, maybe even an occasional

indigo bunting, along the bottomlands of Rudd Creek. In deeper forests stay alert for northern goshawks – at this time of year their young are fledging and defensive adults will be sure to let you know if you've treaded into family territory.

### **August**

Visit the community of Pinetop-Lakeside to seek Lewis' woodpecker. Lakeside Campground and the orchards and oak trees around the Post Office are good places to check for these strawberry-red and iridescent-green woodpeckers (which can also be found at Woodland Lake Park). Permanent forest residents, such as acorn woodpecker, are found in family groups caching food in snags riddled with holes. Look along Walnut Creek or along the Springs Trail in Pinetop and listen for woodpecker calls. Spruce-fir and aspen forests are colder in spring and warm-up by summer, providing excellent opportunities for resident birds such as golden-crowned kinglet, red crossbill, Clark's nutcracker, olive warbler, red-breasted nuthatch and hermit thrush. Walk the Benny Creek and Little Colorado River trails in Greer for these birds while also checking the river for American dipper or the trails around Hannagan Meadow. Look in aspen groves for blue (now known as "dusky") grouse foraging on the ground.

### **September**

The Arizona Game and Fish Department holds public elk-viewing tours at their Sipe White Mountain Wildlife Area in September; however, any open meadows throughout the forests in the central Arizona high country may offer glimpses of these tawny brown animals. Also around the White Mountains and Rim Country, fall bird migration begins in late August and can last through early November. Bald Eagle sightings increase with the wintering population of approximately 200 birds. Virtually any open body of water with good perching trees or snags can hold one or more eagles, as they appear to patiently await their opportunity to feed on some unlucky waterfowl. Look for eagles at River Reservoir in Greer, Luna Lake in Alpine, Becker Lake in Springerville, the myriad of lakes in the Pinetop-Lakeside and Show Low areas, and at any of the Mogollon Rim lakes and lakes in the Prescott area.

Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep are also one of the White Mountain's signature big game species. Forest Road 25 descends from Wildcat Point to Wildcat Crossing; look in the canyons and along slopes for the white rumps of sheep as they feed among the trees. Travel the scenic Coronado Trail (State Highway 191) from Clifton to what remains of the old town of Stargo (located a few miles north of Morenci) and you can spot sheep close to the roadway along the slopes of the vast open-pit copper mine that wraps around Morenci. Drive slow - during the sheep rut in November and December, the large, 300-pound rams are constantly on the move as they seek receptive ewes.

### **October**

White Mountain and high country lakes can sport rafts of American wigeon, northern shoveler, mallard, gadwall, cinnamon teal and redhead. Deeper waters hold scores of bufflehead, ring-necked duck, ruddy duck, common merganser and canvasback, along with fewer numbers of common goldeneye, lesser scaup, western grebe, northern pintail and the elegant hooded merganser. Best bets include Fool Hollow, Show Low, Becker, Concho and Woodland lakes, and River and Scott reservoirs. Fall can also see the arrival of high-elevation birds migrating downwards into the ponderosa pine forests or pinyon-juniper woodlands for more optimal food

supplies. Red-breasted nuthatch, Williamson's sapsucker and even Clarks' nutcracker are found in these habitats at this time.

### **November**

Icy lakes and early snow prompt migratory bald eagles to descend on Arizona's high country to spend the winter, making for some spectacular easy winter wildlife photography. Winter is anything but desolate. Hardy permanent resident birds include white-breasted and pygmy nuthatch, mountain chickadee, Steller's jay, dark-eyed junco, northern flicker, and acorn, hairy and downy woodpeckers; all of these populate the pine forests and are active throughout the day. In the pinyon-juniper woodlands, American robin, western and mountain bluebirds and white-crowned sparrows flock to feed on leftover seeds and berries. Townsend's solitaire can often be found at the tops of large juniper trees, and are often located by their monotone, single-note call before they are seen. Also arriving in winter is the Oregon strain of the dark-eyed junco and house and Cassin's finches, which can be found in hedgerows, scrubby vegetation and now-leafless willow thickets. Did you realize the Grand Canyon state has badgers? Oval-shaped den openings are a clue to their habitat. Look for activity to/from the dens.

### **December**

The Arizona Game and Fish Department coordinates the national mid-winter Bald Eagle survey throughout the state in January. Telephone, Fool Hollow and Show Low lakes in the Show Low area, as well as Woodland Lake, Lake of the Woods, Rainbow Lake and Scott Reservoir in Pinetop-Lakeside harbor several eagles throughout the winter, especially when extreme cold temperatures render higher-elevation lakes completely frozen.

### **Other Wildlife Viewing Sites**

Don't Miss These Outstanding Wildlife Viewing Areas and Many Others Highlighted in The Arizona Wildlife Viewing Guide

#### **Dead Horse Ranch State Park and Surrounding Region**

Despite its distinctive name, Dead Horse Ranch is situated amidst an abundance of life along the Verde River. A six-mile reach of the river is known as the Verde River Greenway. Its unique ecosystem, the Cottonwood / Willow riparian gallery forest, is one of less than 20 such riparian zones in the world. Life along the river changes with the seasons, giving visitors a glimpse of the numerous species of raptors, neo-tropical migrants, resident songbirds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fish.

The developed portion of Dead Horse Ranch State Park covers 423 acres. The 3,300 foot elevation accounts for the mild temperatures that are ideal for camping, mountain biking in the Coconino National Forest, hiking along the Verde River, canoeing, picnicking, fishing, or just wading in the cool water.

#### **Upper Verde River Wildlife Area**

The nearly 180-mile long Verde River is a significant resource in Arizona. It is one of the desert's last free-flowing rivers sustaining a large regional wildlife population and a lush riparian community.

The Arizona Game and Fish Department's Upper Verde River Wildlife Area (north of Prescott) serves as home to some wonderful wildlife watching opportunities. The 3,300 foot elevation means mild temperatures for hiking along the Verde, canoeing, picnicking, fishing, or just wading in the cool water. Life along the river changes with the season, giving visitors a glimpse of great blue heron, black hawks, coyotes, raccoons, mule deer, beavers, ducks, frogs, and toads. You might be lucky enough to see progeny of reintroduced river otters. You can't miss the evidence of their presence – crayfish-laden droppings perched conspicuously on top of rocks along the river.

The Verde River and surrounding riparian corridor is also host to nearly twenty threatened or endangered species including southwestern willow flycatchers, and lowland leopard frogs. The belted kingfisher, yellow-billed cuckoo, and Bald Eagle all call this property home. The river itself is home to longfin dace, razorback suckers, and roundtail chub, all native to Arizona.

The most significant natural resource in the Upper Verde Greenway, besides the year-round flowing river, is the dense forest of riparian trees and shrubs along its riverbank. This Fremont Cottonwood/Gooding Willow Riparian Gallery Forest is one of five remaining stands in Arizona and one of 20 such stands in the world.

*Note: High clearance vehicles are recommended*

#### Bonita Creek/Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area

One of only two Riparian National Conservation Areas (RNCA) in the country, Gila Box RNCA, near Safford, is a unique desert oasis with four perennial waterways: the Gila and San Francisco Rivers and Bonita and Eagle Creeks. The area consists of patchy mesquite woodlands, mature cottonwood trees, and buff-colored cliffs. The abundance of water and diversity of habitats attract many neotropical migrant birds. Walk along Bonita Creek to see the many signs of beaver that flourish here. Bighorn sheep are common along cliffs within the Gila Box. Troops of more than 50 coatimundi can be spotted, and watch for large herds of javelina too.

Just above the confluence of Bonita Creek and the Gila River, a short, paved trail leads from a parking area to a wildlife-viewing platform; the sidewalk is wheelchair accessible but has a gentle slope. Safford-Morenci Trail is 18 miles long between the Clifton and Safford areas. It can be accessed from a primitive road near Bonita Creek and Midnight Canyon; it is a moderate two-day hike. Primitive roads along Bonita Creek also provide hiking access.