

Birding at Gabaldon and East Baldy, by Gaston Porterie

Our Audubon field trip leader Rob Bettaso and I recently met for a birding and stargazing campout in the Mount Baldy area mid-September. We scheduled the trip between my TRACKS hike at the Sipe White Mountain Wildlife Refuge, Rob's 3rd Saturday Birding outing, and the new moon. The prior Monday evening Mary Williams prepared me extremely well at her Show Low Library class about birding at Lee Valley Reservoir and Sheep Crossing, and sent her Ebird lists from her visit just before ours. I did not share with either of them my newbie fears of not being able to ID birds near as well as Mary or Rob can, saying I'll just take some pictures of the birds Rob spots. The Greer weather forecast ominously predicted as high as 95% chance of rain for our first day and night up there. Planning to campout on cots or in our tents, we almost called it off. Fortunately Rob has great pioneering spirit, we continued, and typical of this summer's El Nino non-monsoon, it rained very little during our trip.

We met at Sheep Crossing in beautiful weather, then drove to a nearby dispersed camping spot Rob knew about, near Gabaldón Horse Camp (pronounced gah-bahl-DOAN, accent on the last syllable, per Google Translate audio -- same way my first name Gaston is pronounced gah-STOHN in French :) The campground is named for Juan Gabaldón, who retired from the Forest Service after working on many of the trails in the area. Rob shared several other interesting Gabaldon stories from his avid searching and reading.

Escudilla view from our campsite:



closeup Rob at campsite:



Fortunately, our campsite was mostly covered with gravel that had low spreading vegetation allover, full of little flowers and seed-like buds that the birds were feeding on all day.

female Lazuli Bunting:



Dark-eyed Junco with beak full of seeds:



After waking up before dawn the next morning with dew and frost (it was a two sleeping bag night if you slept out on a cot!)

Venus over Escudilla at dawn:



Then juncos feeding under the Subaru:



Notice the 6 stars on the Subaru icon badge, The Subaru logo is a stylized representation of the star cluster known in the west as the Pleiades. In Japan, the carmaker adopted the name of this cluster of stars known as Subaru.

Below left is my very amateur handheld camera night photo of the Pleiades/Seven Sisters/Suburu constellation (the stars look like little white bird wings, due to camera shake during the long exposure). Below right is a much more professional version from NASA (there's many, many more stars than the 6 stars visible to the naked eye with 20-20 vision):



Back to birding, we saw a total of 7 species ground feeding around our camp.

White-crowned sparrow:



Chipping Sparrow with a hairdo:



Green-tailed Towhee:



American Robin:



also feeding, a Gray-collared chipmunk:



in the nearby trees, a Ruby-crowned Kinglet:



Hiking thru the woods to West Baldy Trail and Sheep Crossing, we saw a Dusky Grouse in a tree:



As the bow hunters started occupying the area before opening day for elk hunting, their dogs chased a herd out onto a nearby ridge, giving us great views from about 150 yards away:

6 point bull elk guarding cows & calves:



closer view 6 point bull elk:



All in all, a great birding and camping trip. Thanks to Mary and Rob for sharing some of your great birding expertise!

