

## A Sister's Visit by Sue Sitko

I am fortunate in that I have a sibling—my sister Mary—who is a relatively new birder. How fun is that? Well, as it turns out, REALLY fun. She lives in Las Vegas, Nevada, and visited me at the end of August; it would be her first time birding the White Mountains. I had to make a plan! She reviewed our local eBird lists, and made up her own bird “wish list.” It was up to me to determine birding locations for the five days we had dedicated to this endeavor. I asked myself what places would offer the best chance to see the most species on that wish list? How should we arrange our available birding days? The greater White Mountains region offers a multitude of habitat types, elevations, and, of course, birds, so this was a daunting task.



First stop on our high elevation birding day, the restroom pullout at the Reservation / Forest boundary. Mountain bluebirds and one peregrine falcon welcomed us. Little did we think we'd see another hungry peregrine later!

My dilemma: do we focus on a handful of challenging birds that often need lots of time (and mostly luck) to stumble across (i.e. Dusky Grouse, Northern Goshawk, Northern Three-toed Woodpecker), or try to find more species that, while still special to our region, may be slightly easier to find (i.e. Red-faced Warbler, Painted Redstart, Lewis's Woodpecker, Lazuli Bunting). Included on her wish list besides the above were warblers like MacGillivray's, Black-throated Gray, Grace's, and Virginia's; could we find American Dipper, Red-naped and Williamson's sapsuckers, and Western Tanager? How about some hummingbirds (Broad-tailed, Rufous, Black-chinned, and Calliope)? Can we toss in some high-elevation birds like Red Crossbill and Clark's Nutcracker as well? Mary had a long wish list!



Mary scouting at the Famous American Dipper Bridge in Greer

I invite all of you to stop here and think about what areas do you know that offer enough diversity of habitats that intersect with a certain confidence level of finding the majority of birds on her Southwest Mountains bucket list. All this during the last week in August, when summer breeders are quietly packing up to fly south, and migration is not quite at peak. Birding is also more fun if others come along, so let's plan our sites accordingly—who among a few birding buddies would like to join? Where and on what days?

Mary's visit ended up being a pretty near-perfect storm of available birding buddies, great weather, enough migrants to keep things interesting, and enough summer birds to prove to myself (and Mary) that I may actually know a little something about birding this area after living here 30 years.

So let's go on a little journey, shall we?

My choices for birding locations over our five days were: 1) Local, including our backyard (all the hummingbird species and band-tailed pigeon were checked off that first morning); the Lakeside Campground and Big Springs; 2) Los Burros campground, a personal favorite; 3) Greer area, focusing on the Butler Canyon Nature Trail (woodpeckers) and south end bridge and trail (Dipper); 4) Sheep's Crossing and other adjacent high-elevation spots; 5) Alcheyay and William's Creek fish hatcheries within the Fort Apache Reservation; and 6) incidental birding along the East Fork of the Black River and Wenima Wildlife Area from other excursions. I thought those areas, combined, would give Mary birding experiences in a variety



A great view of a Western Tanager made for a memorable life bird for Mary

of habitats that could provide her with the best chances to see many of her wish list species. Friends Ann, Hinde, Rob, and Suzanne joined us for two of the five birding days, making our outings extra enjoyable.



Plenty of Painted Redstarts at William's Creek Fish Hatchery!

What happened? We were very fortunate that in nearly all places, mixed flocks of both resident breeders and migrants crossed our path, offering up multiple viewings of numerous species. Highlights included warblers such as Painted Redstart (our first warbler spotted, at Big Springs, then later at the fish hatcheries), Red-faced, MacGillivray's, Virginia's, Townsend's, Hermit, Orange-crowned, Black-throated Gray, Grace's, and then some. I was surprised and pleased to observe a Cassin's Vireo at Los Burros, clearly different from the more common Plumbeous. Lazuli Buntings graced our views at nearly every site. The "new" recently-designated species, the Chihuahuan Meadowlark, flitted across the road into a green meadow near Winn Campground. And surprisingly, a female Dusky Grouse with two older poultz nearly as large as her flushed near the trail at Alchesay Fish Hatchery.

One of the most memorable bird-action scenes occurred at the tail end of our Sheep's Crossing exploration when our group of five saw two Clark's Nutcrackers fly over and away. Watching them through binoculars as they grew smaller in the distance, we all gasped when a peregrine falcon flew into view, attacking one of the nutcrackers. Bam! A poof of feathers exploded with the falcon's hit. We could also see that this was not fatal to the nutcracker, as it continued to fly off with its buddy. The falcon turned around and flew back towards us, giving us a closer view of its empty talons. Now THAT is some birding excitement!



Williamson's Sapsuckers showed up at Los Burros and Butler Canyon

Mary's and my total species count was 78 for the five days. Not bad! What did we miss? Well, we had hopes, and tried valiantly, to find American Dipper at its known locations, but were unsuccessful. Red-naped Sapsucker, Canada Jay, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Three-toed Woodpecker were on our list but neglected to make a showing. Hopefully that will bring Mary back again soon! Thanks go to Rob, Suzanne, Ann, Hinde, and Karen for joining in to make our group outings really fun. For me, it was special in that I rarely have the time to spend 5 solid days birding in any given week during the crazy period that is summer in the White Mountains, let alone having the time to watch many of the same birds over and over, getting to know them better. But the hours and hours spent in the field, with my sister, just looking, watching, observing, talking, and soaking in every bird certainly was the greatest treasure of all.



A few more photos of the Big Birding Week (L to R: Lazuli Bunting, Green-tailed Towhee, and the continuing unsuccessful search for dippers):

