Introduction

This little book is a guide to places in northeastern Arizona where birds are especially abundant or interesting in their variety. The geographic area is bounded on the north and east by state lines. Except for a foray into upper Oak Creek Canyon the south boundary is the Mogollon Rim, a topographic feature defining the southern edge of the Colorado Plateau. To the west we go only about 40 miles past a north-south line through Flagstaff, the area's largest population and commercial center.

The region is vast, larger than a handful of New England states. The elevation range is enormous, from 12,643 feet at the top of San Francisco Mountain to 2,400 feet at Phantom Ranch in Grand Canyon National Park. The terrain is marked by volcanic mountains, cinder cones, lava flows, mesas, buttes, spires, cliffs, basins, canyons and ravines. Lakes and reservoirs are few but the most stunning landscape feature is the Colorado River which sweeps down from the north and turns west through the Grand Canyon. Vegetation varies from alpine tundra to high desert scrub.

Given the broad range of options, how do you choose destinations interesting to local residents and visitors alike? We've attempted to include a good sampling from every habitat type. And we've looked for places which will provide our readers with a good chance to see the birds for which northern Arizona is well known. Many of the destinations are on land managed by the National Park Service. These sites have been better protected on the whole from the scourges of unsustainable timber harvesting and over-grazing and offer scenic, geologic, cultural and historical attractions as well. Other destinations on land managed by other federal agencies, private organizations or tribal governments are also of great interest.

All of the destinations are accessible by passenger car although in wet weather we advise telephoning ahead to ask about road conditions for unpaved roads. Many destinations suggest one or more fairly easy hikes. We suggest you slow your pace if unaccustomed to the altitude; use sun protection and carry plenty of water.

In general neotropical migrants arrive on the Colorado Plateau in May and depart in September. We also have abundant resident and wintering birds including raptors — especially Bald Eagles — and various ducks depending on the weather and food supply. Many of the destinations have interesting birds all year: where certain seasons are more productive this is noted in the text.
Unusual sightings are reported to the Northern Arizona Audubon Society website www.nazas.org. We hope you will use this site both for information and to report your best sightings to others. The website also offers other interesting information on local birding and conservation issues. Suggestions for the next edition of Birding the Flagstaff Area can be addressed to the authors in care of NAAS, P.O. Box 1496, Sedona, AZ 86339.

We hope this book will encourage you to take a birding sojourn in the greater Flagstaff area. Many pleasures await you.

**Other Sources**
We especially recommend two other guidebooks for the Flagstaff area available at local bookstores.


Marie Jackson's *Stone Landmarks, Flagstaff's Geology and Historic Building Stones*, Piedra Azul Press, 1999. This is the ideal guide for further geological exploration.

And need we add, “Ask around.” The staff at area visitor centers are often very knowledgeable. Ask any local birders you meet for suggestions. They may know other places of interest we left out because of space limitations, lack of knowledge, difficult access or other constraints.

**Habitat Types**
Following are brief descriptions of habitat types found in the region covered by this book. Elevations are only approximate and can vary widely given the many variables.

**Alpine** — The only well-developed alpine tundra in Arizona is on the San Francisco Peaks above treeline, about 11,500 feet. The easiest access is from the top of the Arizona Snowbowl ski-lift. American Pipits breed on the talus slopes.

**Spruce-fir forest** — Engelmann spruce and corkbark fir dominate the San Francisco Peaks above 9500 feet. Near 11,500 feet the vegetation becomes matted and windswept. Undergrowth is sparse in the dense forest but mountain meadows are common. Breeding birds include Northern Saw-whet Owl, White-crowned and Lincoln’s Sparrows and Golden-crowned Kinglet.

**Mixed conifer forest** — This forest habitat is found between 8000 and 9500 feet. It is populated with white fir, Douglas-fir, and other conifer species found throughout the Rocky Mountains. Quaking aspen groves grow best in this habitat. The understory is a diverse mixture of shrubs,

**Ponderosa pine forest** — The long-needled ponderosa pine is called “blackjack” when young and “yellow pine” when the bark changes color as the trees mature. This is the dominant tree species around Flagstaff and in elevations from 6500 to 8500 feet. Gambel oak or quaking aspen add diversity especially attractive to birds. The understory is primarily bunch grass, especially Arizona fescue. Typical birds include Flammulated Owl, Steller’s Jay, Pygmy Nuthatch, Mountain Chickadee, Violet-green Swallow, Western Bluebird, Western Tanager, Grace’s Warbler and Broad-tailed Hummingbird.

**Pinyon-juniper woodland** — The short-needled pinyon pine provides abundant shelter, seeds, and insects. The berries of Utah, one-seed, Rocky Mountain and other junipers are an important winter food source. Moisture is typically the limiting factor in this habitat found between 4500 and 7000 feet. The understory is bunch grass and drought tolerant shrubs punctuated with cacti and yuccas. Typical bird species include Pinyon Jay, West-

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**Merriam's San Francisco Peaks Expedition**

A key development in the science of ecology took place in the Flagstaff area in 1889. In that year C. Hart Merriam, head of the United States Biological Survey, organized a survey of the region's plants and animals. He focused on the San Francisco Peaks “because of its southern position, isolation, great altitude, and proximity to an arid desert.” In the 80 mile distance from the Peaks' summit to the bottom of the Grand Canyon Merriam saw a 10,000 foot change in elevation and a range in animals and vegetation comparable to a trip from the Canadian Arctic to Mexico.

Merriam’s meticulous and thorough study brought national attention to the Peaks and the southern Colorado Plateau. Based on his observations Merriam mapped seven life zones on the San Francisco Peaks including characteristic plants, mammals and birds. He came to believe that temperature is the critical factor responsible for the geographic distributions of living things. This theory has since given way to a more complex model including moisture, soils, elevation, slope aspect and a host of other factors. Still, Merriam popularized the study of plants and animals in community, not just as individual species. This concept became a cornerstone of modern ecological research.
ern Scrub-Jay, Gray Flycatcher, Juniper Titmouse, Black-throated Gray Warbler, Scott’s Oriole and thrushes in winter.

**High desert scrub** — Widely spaced scrub including big sage, four-wing saltbush and blackbrush covers much of northern Arizona between the altitudes of 3000 and 6500 feet. Desert scrub tolerates climate extremes and poor soil. Although birds are sparse in this habitat look for Black-throated Sparrow, Horned Lark, Northern Mockingbird and Loggerhead Shrike.

**Grassland** — Grasslands vary considerably with elevation, available moisture, grazing history and other factors. Some cover vast areas; others, like moist mountain meadows and dry “parks,” occupy forest openings. Depending on the many variables you may find Western and Mountain Bluebirds, Lark and Vesper Sparrows, Western Meadowlark, Say’s Phoebe, and Golden Eagle.

**Marshes and open water** — The few natural marshes and lakes in northern Arizona are supplemented with man-made reservoirs, constructed wetlands and cattle tanks. In marshes you might see Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Marsh Wren, Great Blue Heron or Pied-billed Grebe. At the lakes look for Osprey, various ducks, Western and Clark’s Grebes and gulls and terns in migration.

**Riparian areas** — Riparian areas support abundant streamside vegetation. In Oak Creek Canyon for example you will see Arizona sycamore, Arizona walnut, cottonwood and willow species and other trees. A variety of shrubs, forbs, grasses and wildflowers fill any remaining pockets of soil. In most other riparian areas in northeastern Arizona exotic tamarisk or Russian olive predominate. Fortunately, pilot projects are being undertaken to restore native vegetation more hospitable to birds and other wildlife. Typical riparian species include Lucy’s and MacGillivray’s Warblers, Painted Redstart, House Wren, Summer Tanager and Bullock’s Oriole.

**Rocky cliff faces and outcroppings** — These are prominent features in our area and several bird species depend on this habitat for nest sites. Examples are Peregrine and Prairie Falcons, Rock and Canyon Wrens, White-throated Swift, Cliff Swallow and California Condor.

Frank and Linda Brandt, April 2001