South from Flagstaff

It’s true that the Flagstaff area is pretty dry. But we do have some “big water,” or what passes for big water around here. The famous Oak Creek is as fine as any mountain stream you might see. It has a remarkable assemblage of riparian vegetation and wildlife, with dramatic scenery attracting visitors from all over the world. The constructed wetland complex at Kachina Village is very popular with local birders; you can get close enough to see the birds well even without a spotting scope. The Lake Mary reservoirs and Mormon Lake have variable water levels, but are often full enough to support ducks, grebes, waders, and even White Pelicans in migration. These are all sentimental favorites visited time and again by local birders.

Upper Oak Creek Canyon

Oak Creek Canyon is far and away the best riparian habitat in Northern Arizona. The famous red rock cliffs provide nesting and foraging habitat for a number of species. Remnant orchards also invite a wide diversity of bird species. It’s definitely on the must-see list.

Directions: From downtown Flagstaff take Route 66/Milton Road and transition to I-17 south. Take Exit 337, Oak Creek Canyon and Sedona, about 5 miles south of Flagstaff City Hall. Turn right at the top of the off-ramp, then left on US 89A south. From here to West Fork and back is about 30 miles round trip. Morning in breeding season is best. Plan your trip to reach Cave Springs Campground and the West Fork as early as possible for the best birding and to beat the crowds as these destinations are very popular.
Fees in Red Rock Country

Red Rock Country is one of our nation’s scenic wonders. It is visited annually by close to four million people. The U.S. Forest Service manages Oak Creek Canyon and other public lands surrounding Sedona with federal funding inadequate to preserve the resource under such heavy recreational use.

In order to address this problem the Sedona Ranger District, with input from Sedona citizen groups and others, has implemented a Congressionally approved Recreation Fee Demonstration Program. Under this program vehicles parked in the National Forest must display a “Red Rock Pass.” Passes are available at selected area U.S. Forest Service sites and other outlets. The pass is for parking, but amounts to a use permit for hiking, birdwatching, visiting Indian ruins and petroglyph sites and other recreational uses. The fees provide money for administration, maintenance and habitat protection projects.

So in Oak Creek Canyon you must be prepared to pay up. If you visit Cave Springs Campground, West Fork, and Slide Rock State Park you will pay about $15.00 in fees, less if you hold a National Park Service Golden Age or Golden Access Pass or have weekly or annual Red Rock or state park passes. For information about fees and Red Rock Pass sales see a ranger at Oak Creek Vista (below) or call the South Gateway Visitor Center at 928-284-5324. For information about fees at Slide Rock or other area state parks call 928-282-3034.

Oak Creek Vista, about 9 miles below the turn onto US 89A, overlooks the canyon. From here you look down from the Mogollon Rim which marks the southern edge of the Colorado Plateau. Birds you might see from here include Band-tailed Pigeon, Peregrine Falcon, Common Blackhawk, Townsend’s Solitaire and White-throated Swift. From here or from farther down in the canyon check out soaring Turkey Vultures in case a Zone-tailed Hawk is among them. Allow time to enjoy the truly spectacular views and read the signage interpreting the natural history and geology of Oak Creek Canyon.

The turnoff for Cave Springs Forest Service Campground is about 4 miles below Oak Creek Vista down the switchbacks. Park in the parking area immediately on your right and, if you don’t already have one, purchase a Red Rock Pass from the self-pay machine. Then walk down the gravel road to the campground. First walk the campground’s loop road starting on the
creek side. Then check the shaded base of the red sandstone cliffs just to the west. Look especially for Warbling Vireo, Painted Redstart, Lucy's, Grace's, and Red-faced Warblers, Bullock's Oriole, Black-headed Grosbeak, and Hepatic Tanager. In spring 2000 a vagrant singing male Kentucky Warbler remained near the low water crossing for several weeks.

Drive a little over a mile farther to West Fork (fee). The more colorful name is "Call of the Canyon" because it's connected to Zane Grey's novel of that name. This area is extremely rich habitat with riparian vegetation, abandoned orchards, grassy meadows and cliffs. First check the orchards between the parking lot and the creek. Check the streamside Arizona sycamores, alders and understory vegetation on the near side of the creek for Yellow and Lucy's Warblers, Warbling Vireo and Western and Summer Tanagers.

Then cross the footbridge looking up and downstream for American Dipper. Bullock's Oriole, Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting and Bridled Titmouse may be foraging in the old orchard. Brushy areas yield Spotted Towhee and House and Bewick's Wrens. You should hear the Canyon Wren's descending trill echoing from the canyon walls. Walk about one-quarter mile down the trail to the confluence of Oak Creek and its West Fork. Carefully examine the Arizona sycamores with cavities. The Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, well out of normal range, has nested here the last several summers. Magnificent Hummingbirds are also seen here and are believed to have nested.

From here one can hike and rock hop up the West Fork to get in touch with the canyon. Be forewarned, however, that the first mile or so is a very popular hike during the summer. If you have planned for this, the birding can be quite interesting. Northern Pygmy Owls are sometimes heard. Singing male Winter Wrens have also been heard and seen about two and a half miles up the canyon, but breeding has yet to be confirmed. Perhaps one of our readers will be able to confirm breeding here for this "skulker" of a species; only one breeding pair has been confirmed in Arizona.

If you're continuing down 89A and haven't yet seen the American Dipper we suggest checking under bridges for nests, especially the bridge adjacent to Slide Rock State Park about 3.5 miles below West Fork or the bridge at Indian Gardens across from Garland's store 6.5 miles below West Fork. If you want to explore lower Oak Creek and the Sedona area we recommend Virginia Gilmore's book *Birding Sedona and the Verde Valley*, also published by the Northern Arizona Audubon Society.
Kachina Wetlands

Kachina Wetlands performs multiple community and conservation functions. It is designed to:

- Carry out biological polishing of the treated wastewater;
- Retain nutrient-rich effluent which otherwise would end up in Pumphouse Wash, a tributary of Oak Creek; and,
- Provide habitat for birds and other wildlife in a semi-arid land where true wetlands are rare and often far apart.

The wetlands complex consisting of eight evaporative ponds was constructed in 1989. It receives wastewater from the Kachina Village Utilities District treatment plant about a mile south of the ponds. Since 1989 the vegetation has increased significantly, both with plants brought in by birds and planted by students from Northern Arizona University who study and conduct research here.

The checklist for Kachina Wetlands has over 125 species. This is the best, most accessible place close to Flagstaff for viewing ducks, waders, and shorebirds. Ruddy Duck, American Coot, Pied-billed Grebe, Cinnamon Teal, Mallard, Sora, Killdeer, Spotted Sandpiper, and Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds breed here.

The best time for migrating shorebirds is mid-March to mid-May and August to mid-September. Wilson’s Phalarope is the most often seen of the phalaropes. Both species of yellowlegs and Solitary, Western and Least Sandpipers are also seen in small numbers. Of the waders, Snowy, Great, and Cattle Egrets are seen along with a few White-faced Ibis. Depending on the season and weather Bufflehead, Redhead, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, Northern Pintail, Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, and Northern Shoveler can be numerous. Migrating Peregrine Falcon and Merlin are sometimes lurking about. Although there are no fish, migrating Osprey often swoop down to check out the ponds in the fall. There is often a Northern Harrier present in winter.

The “edge effect” between the ponds and the pine forest makes resident and migratory songbirds relatively easy to see. Large mixed swallow flocks often hawk for insects over the ponds during migration: Tree, Violet-green, Northern Rough-winged, Barn, Cliff and the occasional Bank Swallow.
**Directions:** Head south from downtown Flagstaff on Route 66/Milton Road. From the I-40/I-17 Interchange continue south on I-17 about 5 miles to Exit 333, Mountaineer/Kachina Village. Turn right (west) and make an immediate sharp right on Tovar Trail. Proceed north past Raymond County Park on the left paralleling I-17. Tovar climbs slightly into a wooded, manufactured home residential area and swings to the west. You will pass green tanks on your right. 1.3 miles from the exit you reach a fence across the road. Turn right and park in the unmarked, unpaved parking area. Walk north about 150 yards through a rail fence gate and a second gate to the wetlands. The wetlands are open and exposed, so dress for possible wind. The footing can be a bit muddy following heavy rains or snowmelt. Group leaders should make prior arrangements with the Kachina Village Utilities District, 928-525-1775.

As you reach the edge of the ponderosa pines you will be met with a panoramic view of the San Francisco Peaks. The first pond on the left is actually one of the last ponds to receive wastewater, which first enters the system several ponds to the north. Not all the ponds will have water. The several islands were built as nesting refuges for greater protection from predators.

This first pond is quite productive and has hosted breeding Sora and Pied-billed Grebes among others. On the island are several nest boxes which attracted pairs of Tree Swallows immediately after they were erected in the spring of 1999. In August 1998 two adults and a juvenile Sandhill Crane rested here for a day on their way south, greatly exciting local birders.

At the southeast corner of the second pond on the right there is a large pine snag which has hosted Violet-green and Tree Swallows, Northern Flicker, Pygmy Nuthatch, and Western Bluebird nesting pairs. Amble along any of the dikes to get a sense of the species present and their complex feeding niches. Diving ducks and dabblers will be on the northern-most ponds. Shorebirds, herons, and egrets will be almost anywhere depending on season, water levels, and the amount of exposed surface on bars and mudflats.

**Mormon Lake and Lake Mary**

Large expanses of open water are uncommon in the Southwest. These lakes are strategically located to attract migrant and vagrant birds. At times the lakes are used by hundreds and even thousands of ducks, waders, shorebirds, gulls, grebes, and wintering raptors. At other times any of the lakes may be nearly dry.
Mormon Lake is an American Bird Conservancy National Important Bird Area. The checklist compiled by Northern Arizona Audubon Society members Elaine Morrall and John Coons has more than 230 species, representing nearly half of all bird species ever recorded in the state. It includes vagrants like Parasitic and Long-tailed Jaegers. Mormon Lake is the largest natural body of water in Arizona. However, in drought years, it can be almost dry by mid-summer as happened in the drought years of 1996 and 2000. The bordering marshes and forest margins shelter many residents and neotropical migrants. In winter, concentrations of Bald Eagles have been as high as 120, with the occasional Golden Eagle, Peregrine and Prairie Falcons, and Ferruginous and Rough-legged Hawks. Swallows, swifts, and raptors migrate along the northeast side. Birds ride the updrafts off the basalt escarpment of the prevailing southwesterly winds, especially in the fall. A Great Blue Heron rookery is close to Mormon Lake Village.

On the way to Mormon Lake it's often productive to scan Upper and Lower Lake Mary for ducks and other birds. Oddities show up at Lake Mary too. For example all three North American scoters have been seen here.

**Directions:** From City Hall go south on Route 66/Milton Road. At 2.1 miles turn right following the signs for Forest Meadows Street, US 89A and Lake Mary Road. Turn at the first left on Beulah Boulevard, go 0.6 mile and turn left again at the light onto Lake Mary Road/FR 3. (Coming from the south on I-17, turn off just before the I-40/I-17 interchange on Lake Mary Road, Exit 339.) Set your trip meter at the gas station on the left. From here the proposed loop is about 55 miles. If you arrive at Mormon Lake overlook before mid-morning you will have the advantage of better light and less wind. A spotting scope is very helpful.

The Mormon Lake Ranger Station, 928-774-1147, is on the right at mile 1. You can stop to ask for a Mormon Lake bird checklist and a Coconino National Forest checklist. Also inquire about camping, trails, and maps, and in winter about numbers of Bald Eagles.

Continue on FR 3 to Lower Lake Mary dam at mile 6.4. The Mary lakes are situated along a 15 mile fault with Anderson Mesa to the north represent-
ing about 400 feet of vertical displacement. Before the dams were built the runoff from this watershed periodically flowed into Walnut Canyon. Stop at the pullout at mile 6.7 to scan for waterfowl, especially in the late winter and early spring when water levels are up. Check the tall snags on both sides of the lake for raptors, especially Bald Eagles in winter. Adult and juvenile White-faced Ibis can often be seen probing the water's edge during late summer.

Continue to Upper Lake Mary dam at mile 10.2. Pull into the parking area and check for grebes, both Western and Clark's, and various ducks in migration. The boat launch ramp is a little farther at mile 11.1. Facing perpendicular to the lake at the ramp, you can look for an Osprey nest in a snag on the other side at about one o'clock. It's active from early April into mid-summer.

The best place for waterfowl is at the eastern end of the lake starting about mile 13. Use pullouts or pull well off the road as this is a favorite training route for cyclists. In spring and fall, this end of the lake can have hundreds of ducks, gulls and egrets, and both Common and Pacific Loons have been seen on rare occasions. Look for American Pipit in the fall. The grassy margins and forest edges have various sparrows in migration, Western Bluebird, and sometimes Pinyon Jay.

Continue straight on to the Mormon Lake overlook at mile 21.7. Mormon Lake is a broad, shallow lake occupying a basin formed as the limestone of the Kaibab Formation dissolved over the millennia. The basin is surrounded by lava flows which are particularly dramatic on the eastern side.

The overlook is the prime observation point for the lake, the surrounding grassland, and for anything moving along the escarpment. Take your time here as you never know what will show up. Golden Eagle, Peregrine Falcon and other raptors are often seen year-round. This is the best spot for counting Bald Eagles on the ice and lakeshore in winter. In migration American White Pelican can be seen even at a distance and American Avocet and White-faced Ibis can occur in the hundreds, even thousands. Smaller numbers of California, Franklin's and Bonaparte's Gulls also migrate through. Check below the overlook and either side for Rock Wren, American Kestrel, Western Meadowlark, and various sparrows and neotropical species during migration. Both Western and Clark's Grebes have been confirmed to breed here in years when water levels are sufficient. Soras nest in the marsh below.

At mile 25 a paved road turns right to the base of the escarpment. This road leads to a small parking area a quarter mile from the turn. Park well off the main road or if the cinder road is dry drive down to the small parking
area. This is a good spot for migrating songbirds both spring and fall. The Gambel oak and elderberry also attract and shelter breeding songbirds. Peregrine Falcon and American Kestrel may be around, and usually Acorn Woodpeckers.

Return to the main road and continue to mile 26.5; turn right toward Mormon Lake Village. Approaching the village you will see a pond worth checking just past the fire station. If you stop at the colorful Mormon Lake Lodge, mile 28.5, be sure to check around the village for juncos and Acorn Woodpecker. Sometimes Lewis's Woodpeckers are seen here or farther on around the numerous snags.

From the village continue to mile 29.4 where there is a fence on the right (private property). Here the pines open out and you will see snags on both sides of the road. Pull safely off the road and check the tall pines on the right about 100 yards away for the Great Blue Heron rookery occupied from April into July. The snags host Violet-green Swallow, but check for Tree Swallow also, and for Purple Martin. This is usually a reliable place for them. Note that the western race of martins will not use martin houses as the eastern race so readily does, so these large pine snags are extremely important for cavity nesters. It is said that Purple Martins were quite common around Flagstaff before extensive logging and felling of snags.

Continue to mile 31.3 with the entrance to Double Springs Campground on your left. Camping (fee) is available during the warm months. Park safely off the road. This area is excellent for breeding birds May into early August. The willows, scattered snags and small spring-fed riparian area attract a nice suite of species like swallows, House Wren, sparrows, juncos, Brewer’s Blackbird, Western Bluebird, and Red-naped Sapsucker which may come to forage in the willows. You can also walk into the campground and along the spring-fed creek. Check with the campground host about whether there is a fee for birding: probably not if you walk in. Cordilleran Flycatcher, Red-shafted Flicker, Steller’s Jay and Red-faced Warbler breed here. Check the skies for Red-tailed Hawk and Band-tailed Pigeon streaking over.

The next stop on this clockwise route is Dairy Springs at mile 32.4. In years when the water level is high waders are often present into early June, and Sora breed in the marsh. Even when the waterline is well out, this area still warrants a brief stop if only for the possibility of breeding songbirds in the locust and pine-oak below the basalt escarpment. Black Phoebe have nested under the eaves of the stone pumphouse.

Continue to the “T” intersection with FR 3 at mile 36 and turn left to return to Flagstaff.
If you still have time and energy we suggest a side trip to Marshall Lake on Anderson Mesa. Allow at least an hour, or make this a separate day trip. This is a beautiful area, but small and vulnerable to overuse. It’s popular for camping and letting dogs run on weekends between Memorial Day and Labor Day. For the best birding and fewer people go on weekdays or during late spring or early fall.

To visit Marshall Lake on your return trip to Flagstaff on FR 3 watch for a paved road with the sign “Observatories, Marshall Lake” on your right (north) about a mile past (west of) the dam for Upper Lake Mary. Turn right. One year in late winter we saw a flock of 30 to 40 Red Crossbills picking at the Kaibab limestone halfway up to the second switchback. At the second switchback continue straight a short distance onto a gravel road. A gate here is used to close the road in winter during heavy snows. Continue a little over a mile to Marshall Lake. You can park at the small boat launch or along the gravel road on the south side of the lake.

Expect to see Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds, ducks in migration, and Pied-billed and Eared Grebes. The latter have attempted to nest here as have Pintail, Mallard, and Cinnamon Teal. But the presence of fishermen, other recreationists and dogs leaves only the north end of the lake secluded enough for nesting. Check the forest edges for songbirds like Plumbeous Vireo, Western Wood-Pewee and Grace’s Warbler. The Arizona Trail is accessible on the west side of the lake, and a walk into this area could yield nuthatches and woodpeckers as this area has mature pines, oaks, and plentiful snags.

By the time you return to Flagstaff you will have had a full day of birding.