

History of the White Mountain Audubon Society

It was in 1987 when Pinetop-Lakeside resident Cathy Steele first thought “wouldn’t it be nice if we had a local chapter of the Audubon Society here in the White Mountains?” She was a member of the National Audubon Society. Like other National members living here, she was by default a member of the geographically closest chapter, the Northern Arizona Audubon Society. Northern Arizona Audubon was based in Sedona, and attending regular meetings and activities was next to impossible.

Cathy was impressed by their local newsletter, and with their monthly meetings with interesting topics and speakers and their monthly field trips, as described in their newsletter. In addition, members participated in a host of local projects.

Cathy contacted Northern Arizona Audubon about the possibility of using their newsletter to solicit interest in developing a White Mountain chapter. They responded eagerly by printing such an article in their newsletter. Cathy had the same article printed in our local newspapers.

It wasn’t long before Cathy received at least 20 calls from people here in the White Mountains interested in forming a new Audubon Chapter. The next step was to hold a meeting to kick off this great idea.

The first meeting was held August 12, 1987 in the meeting room of the First Interstate Bank in Pinetop, Arizona. Imagine Cathy’s surprise and pleasure when nearly 50 people showed up! Virginia Todd, President of the Northern Arizona Chapter at the time, attended and explained what being a chapter was all about. She talked about the National Audubon Society’s mission and their various conservation activities, and also informed meeting attendees about the other Arizona Audubon Chapters. The discussion led to the criteria needed to be eligible for chapter status through National Audubon, and it was decided that the group would become a “satellite” chapter of Northern Arizona Audubon for the time being. One of the most amazing things that happened at the meeting was the number of people volunteering for the various officer and Board positions—all positions were filled!

The first field trip was on September 20, 1987, to Jaques Marsh. Again, the turnout with the new group was terrific—nearly 20 people! New chapter activities followed. The group worked to finish some construction at Big Springs Environmental Study Area, mixing concrete to set benches and educational sign posts, and hauling cinders along the trail.

By the winter of 1987, our new Chapter was well on its way to becoming an active and respected organization. On December 20, 1987, White Mountain Audubon participated in our first Christmas Bird Count of the Pinetop-Lakeside-Show Low area. Eleven people participated in the field, with 12 others watching their feeders. The Count total was 64 species (5,613 birds). Brian Heap, from St. Johns, started a St. Johns-area Christmas Bird Count earlier, and we continue to add to the incredible database that these counts across the world generate.

White Mountain Audubon soon was involved in local conservation issues. In 1988, the group joined with several other organizations, agencies, and individuals to oppose the placement of a radio tower on Cerro Montoso. Later, as the membership grew, the group agreed to initiate a regular newsletter. One of the first things needed was a logo for the new chapter, and a contest was held for drawings. At the March, 1988 meeting, all entries were presented. The unanimous winner was Maggie White’s rendering of an osprey landing on its nest. Even today, that logo remains a cherished part of White Mountain Audubon’s “signature”.

White Mountain Audubon held their first fundraising event, the annual Bird-a-thon. We won “best in state” as well as third place in our region in our membership category!

In spring and early summer, the group became excited about plans for the first White Mountain Audubon campout. This was an invitation to ALL Arizona Audubon Chapters to join us for some mountain birdwatching. Brian Heap and Gary Alves were the driving forces and organizers of this massive endeavor. They secured the Burnt Mill Springs campsite, arranged for speakers, workshops, and programs, and led birding hikes during the event. The campout was a hit, with about 75 people from around the state attending. One special guest was Bob Turner, Regional Vice-President of National Audubon, who traveled from Boulder, Colorado. We were delighted to show off our beautiful forest as well as share in some great birding fellowship.

From those beginnings, White Mountain Audubon Society has continued to thrive and prosper from this first generation. No longer a satellite chapter of Northern Arizona Audubon, we became our own chapter, and have continued to fulfill chapter obligations. We continue to host monthly meetings and

field trips. We participate annually in Bird-a-thons and Christmas Bird Counts, and have initiated several community projects to increase our exposure to residents of northeastern Arizona. One of our new traditions is hosting an annual Beginning Birdwatching Workshop, a one-day seminar teaching the basics of birdwatching. It is a very popular program for our chapter, and we encourage anyone interested in birds to attend.

Cathy Steele gave birth to a baby boy, Felix, who developed severe vision loss immediately after birth. Cathy is dedicated to teaching Felix about the natural world, and he enjoys identifying visiting feeder birds by their calls! Entered into a pre-reading contest hosted by the Foundation for Blind Children (Phoenix), he logged in the most books read to than any other student, and won the prize of any book he wanted. Felix selected the National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, a book that would be translated into Braille for him, and would come in eight volumes. This truly is a gift that will last a lifetime for Felix.

Such a unique story, but one that is representative of the love of birds members of White Mountain Society share. From Blue to Ganado, from Springerville to Heber and beyond, White Mountain Audubon Society is dedicated to exposing people to the enjoyment of birds. Our mission statement says it all:

White Mountain Audubon Society is dedicated to the enjoyment of birds and other wildlife by providing environmental leadership and awareness through fellowship, education, community involvement, and conservation programs in the White Mountains and surrounding areas.

We extend our thanks and appreciation to those who had the foresight and expended the tremendous amount of effort it took to develop and nurture the White Mountain Audubon Society. Among others, we thank:

Cathy Steele
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