



## JANUARY EDITION 2024; HAPPY NEW (BIRDING) YEAR!

**Out on a Limb by Gerry Hodge (WMAS member & retired Board Member):** Size, Shape, Habitat, Behavior, and the 95% rule: Keys to Identification

In the October 2023 edition of the White Mountain Audubon newsletter; *Osprey Overlook*, Rob Bettaso wrote a field trip report for one of his monthly bird walks. In that report he described the process that he and I engaged in to try and identify a “mystery” bird floating far off on the water’s surface of Scott’s Reservoir. Probably unconsciously, he was perfectly describing the process that birders use to filter through their mental data bank in figuring out the species of bird they are looking at (or not looking at). Here is a repeat of Rob’s description:

*“at one point, spying a misfit species swimming in the center of a flock of mallards far, far across the reservoir, we pondered its identity. At first, Gerry suggested a gull and I agreed that the mystery bird seemed big enough to be a large tern or a small gull; but then he wondered if it was a phalarope, which I doubted due to size and behavior; at last he ventured that it was an avocet and I concurred that it appeared to have the appropriate coloration (nonbreeding black and white). Suddenly, the bird took wing and flew directly toward us and eventually we could tell that it was, indeed, an avocet. It peeped at us as it landed in shallow water very close by and then proceeded to wade in the shallows and act like a proper shorebird.”*

As you can see, we used size (as it was in a flock of probable mallards and a smaller duck species) to include medium sized gull, tern, or avocet and eliminate the smaller phalarope. Shape included all 4 of those forementioned birds. We used habitat (swimming in deep water) to probably eliminate the phalarope and we used behavior (no impulse to ‘spin on the water’) to further eliminate phalarope.

The 95% rule is that what you are looking at has a 95% chance of being a species that is supposed to be there and less than 5% chance of being something uncommon or rare. This tended to eliminate the gull and tern, and forced us into specifically looking for the field marks associated with the avocet, a bird that fit within the 95% rule. As Rob stated, upon further squinting, the black markings on the mostly all white body were on upper wings (shown on the back of the floating bird) with no black markings on the top of the head (tern) or tips of wings (gull).

We were happy with our identification choice without being able to see the upturned bill when the darn bird suddenly rewarded us by flying toward us and landing 75 feet away.

This description probably fits under the umbrella of intermediate birding, but is a good guide for beginning bird enthusiasts to not just pay attention to the field marks on the bird you are looking at, but pay attention to the size, shape, habitat, and behavior of every bird you see and soon that habit will help advance your bird identification skills.

Authors note: The 95% rule is something I was taught many years ago when I was prone to look through the wrong end of the funnel while trying to identify unknown birds. Always begin the identification process by entering the wide end of the funnel, not the narrow end. Observing SSHB lets you move quickly toward the narrow end of the funnel where you can then use specific field marks to nail down that bird identification.

### **White Mountain Audubon Society (WMAS) 2024 Chapter Officers:**

President: Mary Williams	480-235-1792
Vice-President: Tom Jernigan	928-892-3004
Secretary: Ron Pedersen	505-313-9343
Treasurer: Tom Jernigan	928-892-3004
Field Trips: Rob Bettaso	928-368-8481
Newsletter: Rob Bettaso	928-368-8481
Membership: Susie Walker	480-205-6119
Webmaster: Alan Vickers	

### **2024 Board Members:**

Mary Williams, Tom Jernigan, Liz Jernigan, Mary Freemon, Susie Walker, Ron Pedersen, & Rob Bettaso.



### **President's Corner by Mary Williams:**

Happy New Year! Are you one of the many people who make New Year's Resolutions? Any plans about birds and birding? It's the time of year when I review my eBird stats, with pleasure, as I usually remember the places where I enjoyed each of my FOYs (First-Of-Years) and the people I was with when observing that species. And I remember that my 'goals' each year, and for 2024, are to exceed my own records of species sighted at the eBird regions and hotspots I enjoy.

Like many of us, my physical limitations mean that the way I enjoy birding has changed over the years. Most of my bird sightings are now from my van on slow country roads, or in parking lots, or on strolls nearby. It's interesting that I see almost the same number of species now as I did a

few years ago when I was able to take much longer birding hikes. More attentive? More strategic?

As of this writing on 12/20, I have recorded 198 species in Navajo County where I live, 166 in nearby Apache County, and 239 in Arizona. Last year's Navajo documentation was 196, but I recorded 204 in 2020. (Good 2024 goal!) I exceeded my 2022 all-time-high of 158 in Apache. My AZ stats are lower than expected because of trips cancelled in 2023, but I'm looking forward to visiting again with long-time Canadian birding friends in east Mesa in February and to an April trip to the Sierra Vista/Patagonia areas.

Putting my stats in perspective: our friend and scholarship awardee John Wilson was able to record 203 Navajo species as of 12/20, just on his trips back from NAU to visit family, and holds the County #1 status again. The #1 eBirder in Apache County logged 184 species, #2 175, #3 167 – none of whom live in the White Mountains. The #1 eBirder in AZ as of 12/20/23, Cathy Beck, has recorded 423 species! Wow!!

The year is not yet over! I would not be in the least bit surprised to see my FOY Zone-tailed Hawk or Prairie Falcon soaring overhead as I'm out and about, perhaps when I survey my assigned parts of our Timber Mesa circle on our December 30 CBC. Might be surprised by another rarity such as the recent Long-tailed Duck found at Rainbow Lake too. \*

More resolutions: Meet and make new birding friends with our monthly meetings in Pinetop-Lakeside and with classes again at the Library in Eagar, as well as at the Winslow and Holbrook NPC campuses, this spring and summer. Hoping to see some of our readers there and at our year-round bird walks too. Would be good to see you Thursday, January 4, 8:00 at the parking lot at Cottonwood Wash past the Hwy 77 bridge in Snowflake. (Weather permitting.)

Wishing you good birding and all of God's best for 2024, Mary



\*A distant, yet diagnostic, cell phone photo by John Shipley – who found a rare Long-tailed Duck at Rainbow Reservoir on December 8. It was enjoyed by many other birders and made local news with an article in the on-line Mountain Daily Star on December 14.

## WMAS CALENDAR:

For 2024 we expect that **all monthly programs** will continue to start at **6:30 pm on the first Wednesday of the month (except in January, February & March when there are no meetings)**. The programs are free and open to all. Monthly meetings are **held at the White Mountain Nature Center, 425 Woodland Road, Pinetop-Lakeside**.



**January through March 2024:** Remember, there are no monthly meetings/presentations during these 3 months.

**The Regular Monthly WMAS Birding Field Trip:** Monthly bird watching field trips on the **3rd Sat of every month**, alternating between Rob Bettaso & Jon Orona. If you're interested in attending, feel free to give me a call and leave a message so that I can return your call to give you the details for the upcoming trip. The **next outing is Jan 20<sup>th</sup>**. Also, on the **fourth Sat of each month** I lead a "Fitness Birding" outing that combines slightly strenuous activities (longer hikes, bicycling, paddling, X/C skiing) with birding. The next **Fitness Birding trip will be Jan 27<sup>th</sup>**. Feel free to give me a call if you're interested (Rob: 928-368-8481).

### **MOST RECENT 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> SATURDAY FIELD TRIPS:**

For our 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday of the month field trip, Ken gave 3 of us a tour of Concho Lake (~2.5 miles around the perimeter) where we saw many species of ducks and a surprising number of songbirds (see photos below). For the 4<sup>th</sup> Sat ("Fitness Birding") outing, I didn't have anyone sign up, so I took a solo hike (in wet weather) in the Woodland Park area (Big Spring, Walnut Ck, Hitching Post trails) and saw the common forest species in addition to many water birds. I also got an extra vigorous work-out due to the mud that caked up on my boots (which was fine, since I had worn the old boots that I keep especially for that purpose). –Rob

Dynamic, semi-aquatic photos below by **Gaston Porterie** (clockwise: American Pipit, meadowlark, Canyon Towhee, hen Buffleheads & a drake N. Shoveler)



## UPDATES & REMINDERS:

Have you paid your annual membership dues? If not, a friendly reminder that WMAS relies on membership dues for such important Chapter actions as our annual Scholarship Awards to White Mountain area graduating seniors who have expressed an interest in pursuing a career in natural history, conservation, and other related fields. Thank you for helping us to continue to make such programs a regular part of our Chapter mission. Note that the Donation form is at the end of every Newsletter. Dues are for the year in which they are paid and **not** good for 12 months following payment (unless you pay in January).

Also, if you are not a member of the National Audubon Society, we encourage all Chapter members to join the national organization. Information on joining the national organization is easy as you only need to type "National Audubon Society" into your internet search engine to obtain the simple instructions for joining.

And remember, you can always feel free to offer your assistance to the Board. For that matter, there are some on the Board who are interested in moving on from the Board to focus on other aspects of their lives, so, we are always interested in hearing from anyone who might want to accept the fun challenges of filling a Board position! **We are especially keen to recruit diverse candidates to be a part of WMAS, including more people below the age of 60 (so that we can plan for our Chapter's future) and also more people that are representative of the various demographic groups found in the White Mountains. And remember, you can be on the Board without being an Officer – in fact, you can even just attend a Board meeting as a guest. Please feel free to join us (call Rob: 928-368-8481).**

## BONUS PHOTOGRAPHS:

My brother, a wildlife biologist for the U.S. Forest Service, recently came upon a Merlin (aka: "Pigeon Hawk") that had just finished feasting upon its prey. After waiting for the Merlin to consume the last morsel and leave behind a pile of plucked feathers, my brother approached the kill-site to see if there were any clues as to what the Merlin had dined upon – sure enough, a tell-tale inedible head made it very clear what the Merlin had eaten. Can you identify the prey? If you are not a WMAS Board Member, you can email me with your answer and the first person to correctly identify the prey species will be eligible for an Audubon "prize" at our April 2024 presentation (Rob: rhlbe739@gmail.com).





Photos by **Jamie Bettaso** (left: Merlin; right: "mystery" bird remains)

**Membership/Donation Form**

White Mountain Audubon Society chapter membership dues are: Individual \$15 or Family \$25 per year. Please renew your membership every January. Your tax-deductible membership supports our on-going programs and activities, as well as future new projects. Your membership and donations do make a difference!

MEMBERSHIP \_\_\_\_\_ DONATION \_\_\_\_\_

Individual \_\_\_\_\_ Family \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

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Send this form and your dues or donation to: White Mountain Audubon Society; P.O. Box 3043; Pinetop, AZ 85935 You may use this form for either your Membership renewal or a Donation to WMAS. Please designate above which you are doing. Thank you very much for your support of White Mountain Audubon Society! LIKE US ON FACEBOOK and visit our website.

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.