

Birds of the Grand Canyon in March

By Robert Schell

When we set off to the Grand Canyon, I was excited at the diversity of both resident and migrating birds that we may see. Although I was unsure as to what specific species would be there, I had some expectations, some of which were exceeded and some of which fell short.

According to the National Park Service, 383 bird species have been seen in the park. March is well within the spring migration, so not only did we expect to see both summer and winter residents but also any and all species of transients and visitors. Any and all species could potentially be present.

During the hike down Bright Angel Trail, we observed Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Song Sparrows, Bushtits, a Western Bluebird, Common Raven, Spotted Towhee, Shipping Sparrow, Mountain Chickadee, Lesser Goldfinch and had an unconfirmed Black-chinned Sparrow sighting. On the river itself, we saw many species which are listed and discussed in detail below.

As the river's topography and Canyon changed from a steep-sided, deep gorge into a stairway of cliffs and vegetated terraces, the species composition shifted slightly.

At Phantom Ranch, the Canyon is extremely deep with near-vertical cliffs that seemed to touch the sky. In this reach of the canyon, riparian vegetation is relatively thin and sparse due to the rock constriction and the few beaches suitable for riparian growth. Thusly, rock and cliff dwelling species like Rock Wrens and Canyon Wrens were especially common in the upper parts of the Canyon and became decreasingly frequent as we progressed through the Canyon.

Inversely, as the Canyon opened up, green terraces became longer and the steep walls between them became shorter. Blooming desert vegetation, virtually unseen in the upper reaches, became common in the lower parts of the canyon. Densely vegetated beaches in the lower stretch were relatively wide compared to the upper region and open sandy beaches were less common. As the brittlebush became less common and was replaced with desert scrub and ocotillo, Cactus Wrens and Bell's Vireo were noticed.

I expected the number of waterfowl we'd see to be nearer to the Park Service's account of 139 ducks per river mile than the one or less per mile that we observed.

Lastly, one of the biggest disappointments of the trip was the absence of the California Condor, especially considering the group behind us saw one.

Below is a species list and a brief description of relative abundance and locations where we observed them.

Northern Shoveler – A mixed flock of 17 birds containing 10 Shoveler was seen near RM193.

Northern Pintail – 3 pintail were seen in a mixed flock containing Shoveler and Gadwall near RM193.

Gadwall- Gadwall were seen three different times. One larger flock of eight ducks was flushed from a backwater as we passed. A single bird was seen later and several individuals within a large mixed flock were seen with Northern Shoveler and Pintail.

Common Merganser- Mergansers were seen as individuals on two separate occasions. One was seen only a mile or two from Phantom Ranch, and the other was seen foraging on fish at the confluence of Tepeats (?) creek and the main stem.

Cinnamon Teal – This was the most common species of waterfowl we saw within the canyon. They were seen in small single species flocks up to 17 individuals; several flocks of five to seven birds were more common.

Green-winged Teal- Teal are clearly a migrant to this region. They were seen on three separate occasions - once was a single drake. The other two occasions were single male-female pairs. There was no clear distribution of Green-winged Teal.

Great Blue Heron- This large wading bird was seen four separate times; however, additional tracks were seen twice without any presence of the birds themselves.

These birds were seen throughout the Canyon, although they were absent from the more arid parts of the Canyon after about RM150.

Killdeer- This was the only species of plover seen along the river. They were seen on two occasions as individuals on open sandy beaches.

Peregrine Falcon – Only a single Peregrine was seen between Phantom Ranch and Diamond Creek at RM108 __. Although two other Falcons were also seen, due to light conditions, a positive ID could not be reached. This Falcon was observed preying on a bat.

Coopers Hawk- Only one Coopers Hawk was seen during the trip. It was seen flying over on the first day, within the first five miles downstream of Phantom Ranch.

Red-tailed Hawk – We saw two Red-tails, both were below RM150 soaring along open terraces.

Osprey – A single Osprey was seen gliding upstream along a terrace above the river corridor at about RM205.

Turkey Vulture- Turkey Vultures were not seen until beyond RM150. Shortly upstream of RM194, a large, mixed raptor flock of about 65 birds containing approximately 50 Turkey Vultures flew across the plateau from the south rim to the north rim.

Common Raven- Ravens were commonly seen soaring up near the rim; however, they are relatively uncommon near the river. They seem to only hover around during food preparation and meal time.

Common Poor-will- This night-hawk was not seen during our trip, but was heard once on the first night.

Canyon Wren- These wrens were very common all along the river. Their melodic descending calls could be heard resonating from the cliffs despite the fact that they were rarely seen.

Rock Wren- Equally common to Canyon Wrens above the river corridor; also rarely seen but their songs were commonly heard.

Bewick's Wren – Distributed similarly to Rock and Canyon Wrens but perhaps patchier. Not quite as common as the other two Wrens.

Cactus Wren – This species of wren wasn't seen until the camp at 220 where they were fairly common.

Black-chinned Hummingbird- This was the only species of hummingbird seen in the Grand Canyon during our trip. It was seen all along the river at fairly regular intervals. It was fairly common in tamarisk and old high water line vegetation. However, they are tiny birds that are almost impossible to spot from the river in a raft.

Lucy's Warbler- Lucy's Warblers were by far the most common birds heard through the Canyon and were fairly evenly distributed throughout. We could not go several minutes without hearing the song of the Lucy's Warbler from the river banks. These small gray birds seemingly preferred the declining old high water line vegetation.

Say's Phoebe- These were the most commonly seen birds along the river corridor. They were seen often from Phantom Ranch to Diamond Creek, although they seemed less common down beyond RM200. They were commonly seen foraging over and along the river banks, frequently flying from one bank to the other.

Black Phoebe- These Phoebes were uncommon along the main stem; however, they appeared to be more common along the tributaries and along the lower reaches, where riparian vegetation is more extensive.

White-throated Swift- A single swift was seen flying over camp at RM108 _ at dusk.

Ruby-crowned Kinglet- These tiny little birds were the most common birds seen among the new high water line vegetation (tamarisk). As woody vegetation increased, so did the presence of kinglets.

Song Sparrow – Song Sparrows were fairly common along Bright Angel Trail but rare along the river. Three or four individuals were seen only at RM123.

American Dipper- Dippers were fairly common along the tributaries but absent from the main stem. Three individuals were seen: One at the confluence of Shinamo Creek and the main stem, one at Deer Creek and one at Mat Katamiba Canyon.

Townsend's Solitaire- One Solitaire was seen on a Mesquite adjacent to Deer Creek.

Dark-eyed Junco- Although Juncos are supposed to be one of the most common wintering birds in the Canyon, they were rarely seen during our trip. We saw the slate-colored and the gray-headed races in very small numbers. They seemed to be erratically distributed and were all seen individually.

Lesser Goldfinch- Goldfinches were seen only at two locations along the river corridor. Only the sites at RM139 and RM194 supported Lesser Goldfinches. At each site, there were several male-female pairs; no single birds were observed.

House Finch – A single male House finch was seen at RM139 singing in the old high water vegetation.

Black-tailed Gnatcatcher- A single gnatcatcher was observed at RM139 in the new high water vegetation.

Ring-billed Gull- Two pairs of Ring-bills were seen and then a larger flock of nine gulls were seen near Mat Katamiba Canyon.

California Gull- Two California gulls were playing with fire above Lava Falls Rapid.

Bell's Vireo – This species wasn't seen until the camp at 220 where they were fairly common.