



## Sonoran Audubon Society

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Chris Horyza  
BLM Phoenix Office  
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Phoenix, AZ 85027-2099

Dear Mr. Horyza:

We of the Sonoran Audubon Society (SAS), a chapter of the National Audubon Society, are strongly committed to protect and improve wildlife habitat. Our special interest is birds, but our reach is all wildlife. Locally, that commitment has led our chapter to several projects including: building and maintaining a Butterfly Garden at the Desert Outdoor Center at Lake Pleasant; participating in the Upper Agua Fria Watershed Partnership; developing an official birding list for Arcosanti; and actively participating in the planning of Tres Rios, Rio Salado and now their extensions.

The chapter's biggest commitment has been, and continues to be, the assessment of bird life on the Agua Fria National Monument. About two years ago SAS approached BLM offering our volunteer assistance on the Monument. It was agreed that the best fit of Monument need and SAS expertise was to quantify the Monument's bird life. We developed the protocol, carried out the research, and are now in the process of compiling the results. More than 55 counters from three Audubon Chapters have participated. These counters have spent more than 850 combined hours on the Monument in all four seasons and covered 580 kilometers of transects; i.e., most of the monument has been evaluated. The total count of species for all seasons is 177 species.

The Agua Fria National Monument is indeed a rich habitat for birds, and by inference, all wildlife common to such habitat. We as an organization, and as individuals, are deeply concerned about the final plan with which BLM will operate the Monument. Upon examining the four proposed management alternatives in *Proposed Alternatives for the Agua Fria National Monument/ Bradshaw-Harquahala Planning Areas* we find that none of them fully protect the birds and other wildlife. The closest approach to what we view as meeting bird and other wildlife needs is found in Plan Alternative D, but this still falls short. We recommend the following enhancements and changes to the management plan.

### THE RIPARIAN CORRIDOR

**1) The highest level of protection must be accorded the riparian corridor of the Agua Fria River and its tributaries. This includes protective designation of the Agua Fria Riparian Corridor, at least as shown in Alternative D of the preliminary plan, whatever the final selection among the alternatives. The corridor is also the Back Country Zone of Alternative B.**

Our study has found that more than 169 species of birds make use of the riparian corridor – at least 131 in spring migration, 85 during the summer, 119 during fall migration and 98 winter here. More than 62 species nest on the Monument, most along the river. A number of species of concern, as defined in the Arizona Partners in Flight plan, by other agencies and by NGOs, are confirmed or probable nesters along the river – for example, in 2003 we found four Zone-tailed Hawk nests, a territorial pair of Common Black-Hawks, and nesting Lucy's Warblers there. A count by the Arizona Game and Fish Department in summer 2003, in which SAS participated, located twenty Yellow-billed Cuckoos along the corridor, with one confirmed active nest.

These numbers indicate unique bird richness for Central Arizona due in large part to the high quality of the riparian forest and its diversity ranging from riparian forest in the Sonoran Desert near Black Canyon City, through middle elevation, to higher altitude sycamore dominated forest on Sycamore Creek near Dugas. The Agua Fria River flood-cycle helps to maintain the quality of the ecosystem in spite of overgrazing and other threats. In many ways, we feel that the riparian corridor is a Central Arizona version of the beautiful San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area in Southeastern Arizona – an incredibly successful BLM project that also began with a strong bird emphasis.

- 2) Water flows through the Monument must be maintained at no less than their present levels. Hence, we are concerned about any land trades which might lead to upper water shed development, but would be supportive of any trades which would provide or increase protection.**
- 3) As in Alternative D, cattle must be permanently removed from the riparian corridor in any management plan.**
- 4) ORV and other vehicular access to the riparian corridor must be restricted to designated crossing points in any management plan.**

#### **THE GRASSLAND MESAS**

- 5) The grassland mesas must be managed for maximum protection of the birds and other wildlife found there and the various habitats within the ecosystem that sustain them.**

While the grasslands are not as visually dramatic as the riparian corridor, they still support an extensive avifauna, and by inference other wildlife, and have been badly damaged by overgrazing. Our bird counts on the grasslands identified 134 species: 68 winter, 100 spring, 39 summer and 93 fall. A great many of these birds were found in small pockets of habitat – mesquite, cottonwood, chaparral – within the larger ecosystem.

- 6) Cattle must be removed from the grassland areas in any management plan.**
- 7) The grassland habitat must be restored using appropriate native plants.**
- 8) While we would prefer a total restriction of ORV activity on the Monument, in general we can support the limited routings of Alternative D away from the riparian corridor for any management plan.**

#### **FRONT VERSUS BACK COUNTRY ZONES**

- 9) The Back Country Zone must be managed to provide the greatest protections for wildlife and the habitats that support it.**
- 10) The better protected Back Country Zone in Alternatives B, C and D must be expanded, using the BCZ area in Alternative D as a starting point.**

#### **NON-EXPLOITIVE ACCESS**

- 11) Trails and viewpoints must be added to the plans to maximize educational and recreational bird- and wildlife-watching, while minimizing this impact on wildlife and its habitats.**

Thanks to the efforts of SAS, the Agua Fria National Monument is being considered as an Arizona Important Bird Area (IBA). Final confirmation awaits one more count by SAS this winter 2003. That designation will publicize to birders worldwide that this is a special place to view and enjoy birds and other wildlife.

It is not generally known, but bird and wildlife watching is the largest contributor to the Arizona recreational economy, bringing in over \$820 million per year to the state economy (data from U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service). As the Phoenix Metro expands to the north along the I-17 corridor, the need for this form of recreation and educational opportunities for the community at large, and schools in particular, will greatly expand. A trail and viewing-point system, properly supported by educational materials, would serve specialist birders, as well as butterfly, animal and plant enthusiasts, and provide an opportunity to expand the role of the Monument locally and even internationally.

On behalf of the Sonoran Audubon Society Governing Board

Charles J. Kangas  
President