

28 June 2011

## Assessing Birdwatching Ecotourism in the Chiricahua Mountains After the Horseshoe Two Fire: Some Early Glimpses

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On 28 June 2011 we were able to spend five hours doing a rapid survey of some of the most popular birding areas in the Chiricahua Mountains. This grew out of a concern that people were cancelling visits to the area on the assumption that the area is a lost cause, and that better knowledge of the birds and habitats would assist visitors. Webster initiated an application to visit these areas, and when permission came, invited several to join, collectively representing business permittees of the forest for guiding (on a local basis and external tour groups) and a local business offering lodging (collectively also representing considerable birding expertise), and promised to report widely our results so that all can share as best as possible in our impressions.

Thanks go to the District Ranger, Bill Edwards, for arranging access, and to Marilyn Krause and Duane Harp (Information Officer and Safety Officer, respectively, for the Incident Management Team) for making it happen.

Summary: There is still enough to enjoy in the Chiricahua Mountains (whew!).

We would like to say "come on down" but obviously there are several caveats. First, the Coronado National Forest is still closed, and lifting of closures depends on reduction in fire danger (primarily meaning the rains start). Second, with sufficient rain, within the area of the Horseshoe Two Fire, opening will occur piece by piece, depending on many factors, particularly safety. Third, with yet more rain, there will be new challenges to access in the form of flooding, and it will be a challenge (or impossible) to keep some areas open.

Obviously, many of these decisions will be made by the Forest Service. To stay informed, the Coronado N.F. website is <http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/coronado/> (Douglas District). Further, if you are planning to stay at a local establishment, the owners will doubtless stay very well informed about access. Other road decisions may be made by Arizona's Department of Transportation.

General Impressions: There is no getting around the fact that 222,954 acres burned, including parts of all habitats and most of the mountain range. This has had a major effect on the soil, flora, and fauna, and will have a major effect for a long time to come. Some areas are ghastly, although the majority of areas are not. Most areas are unattractive, which will start to change

when the first rains come, and the lightly burned areas (probably a majority of the fire) will start to recover rapidly if we can have decent rains both this summer and the following winter (e.g., some parts of Horseshoe One, which burned last year, were already looking better in upper South Fork).

What has us encouraged is that the scale of "the good, the bad, and the ugly" was finer than we had realized. For instance, as reported, Rustler and Barfoot Park areas had burned badly, but as it happens, the dividing line between intense and light/none went through both spots, and while both have been severely affected, there were nice patches of conifer forest in both that were good birding. Standing in either meadow, the glass-is-half-full view is that one sees a good number of green, healthy trees. In fire terminology, in these areas there is a mosaic (in this case simply the way the fire burned, rather than managed by the firefighters). In most other areas we visited, the mosaic was less extreme in its variation, with areas of light to medium burn juxtaposed (some managed by firefighters). Each turn of the road is different; we did not see huge areas of devastation. The largest area (and it is large) of devastation we saw was in upper Pinery Canyon (which we did not bird, and only covered quickly by car from Onion Saddle down to the Campground, where there is a patch of green).

Birds: We saw most everything that we expected to see. Our birding consisted of a number of quick stops from 1,900 to 2,500m in elevation (6,300' to 8,300'). It was already warm and windy, but we spread out a little and were focused in our searching. Some areas may have more birds because of the fire (the islands of habitat are packed), but overall the birding seemed quite normal in the remaining areas of better habitat, including several nice mixed-species flocks.

The most range-restricted species for the U.S. is Mexican Chickadee, and after we saw them at four of our first five stops, we relaxed! (We are not providing specific spots because we think that that will be too much focus on those chickadees when there are probably many more around; in general, while there are some chickadees below Onion Saddle, when Onion Saddle to Barfoot Junction becomes available, there will be plenty of chickadees).

We also saw Olive Warbler (four spots), Red-faced Warbler (three spots), and Greater Pewee (one spot; never common here anyway). Yellow-eyed Juncos were throughout, and at most stops we found Magnificent Hummingbird, Cordilleran Flycatcher, Plumbeous Vireo, House Wren, Hermit Thrush, Grace's Warbler, and Hepatic and Western Tanagers, along with a few Warbling Vireos and Yellow-rumped Warblers. Widespread montane species such as three nuthatches, Brown Creeper, and Steller's Jay were also encountered. It was a truly representative birdlist that we would not ordinarily report, except that this time it is good news that one can still have an "ordinary" birdlist in the Chiricahua Mountains, the kind of "ordinary" that draws visitors from afar.

In conjunction with the results from the Trogon Census on 26 June organized by Rick Taylor and reported to the AZ-NM birding listserv on 28 June, while numbers of Trogons are very low, and perhaps some other species as well (Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher?), the diversity of species we have seen the last three days is excellent. Narca Moore-Craig's Blog at <http://www.narcamoorecraig.blogspot.com/> provides the account and photographs of her participation in the trogon survey. As access to the habitats is gained, it should be possible to see a typical range of species, although you will have to pick your way past the bad and the ugly to get to the good! (222,954 acres burned!). And if you are interested in fire ecology, and comparing past and present, it is fascinating (we VERY much hope that one result of this fire will be serious long-term study of fire in the full range of Madrean habitats).

A few notes about specific areas: Along E Turkey Creek, we made only one stop, but drove from FR 42 (the main Trans-Mountain road) down FR 42B to Paradise, and found the riparian lightly touched, or not touched at all, and Paradise looking normal at first glance, which doesn't mean that some backyards above the left bank aren't scorched! Along FR 42B from Paradise to Portal, it is entirely normal (the fire did not reach this area). Life in lower Cave Creek Canyon [Portal and the Southwestern Research Station (SWRS)] is illusory, without fire damage in the backyard (dwellings south of Portal toward Sulphur Draw, Rodeo, and lower Horseshoe Canyon face some of the more intense fire damage from the very beginning of the fire, and also face some of the greater potential flood damage). In South Fork, most of the canyon floor has burned, although much of it lightly to medium, especially from control burns. The South Fork trail has already been rehabilitated for almost two miles, and the road is in good condition (indeed, all roads we have traversed were OK, but in some areas falling trees will remain a danger for months to come, and heavy rains will cause problems). The riparian of the main canyon of Cave Creek is its normal lush green, including the three popular campgrounds (Idlewilde, Stewart, and Sunny Flat), although the slope above Sunny Flat has had a controlled burn.

In Conclusion: You doubtless realize that reports about difficult subjects like fires are emotionally tinged, and that is true here, and that impressions are greatly influenced in relation to expectations. As people living here (and with some vested interests and conflicts of interest), we have been on an emotional roller coaster, and went out this week with some lingering doubts about how living here would be in the future. Hence we were relieved to find on our two recent trips into the burn areas sufficient areas of habitat and enough birds to feel better about the future, while not being comfortable with what has happened. As guides and lodge owners, we can imagine still having excellent days afield. For us and many others there will be plenty of pain (there are places that will not recover in our lifetimes), but we are feeling good enough about the habitat to be entirely comfortable saying to our readers that you, too, should be able to find many birds and much pleasure here.

Photographs from our trip can already be found at the Facebook page for the Friends of Cave Creek Canyon (FOCCC) under the album entitled "Chiricahua Post Fire Assessment". Especially for those without Facebook access, in the near future there will also be similar photographs on the Portal/Rodeo web site ([http://web.mac.com/htopoff/Site/Horseshoe\\_2\\_Fire.html](http://web.mac.com/htopoff/Site/Horseshoe_2_Fire.html)) (along with some lovely photographs of the fire itself).

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