

## **The Traveler**

*Jason Duxbury*

I had the opportunity to do a hike down into the Grand Canyon, Arizona. I thought it would be a great place to see how many species I could find down there while conducting my 2002 birdathon.

A quiet empty parking lot greeted me when I arrived at around 6:00 am. The only sounds were from crows and Lesser Goldfinches that were flitting about the trees of the Grand Canyon Village.

At around 500 ft down into the canyon, I came across some bushes that had a great deal of commotion in and around their bases. As I approached, birds of many species irrupted to fly up to the protection of larger trees. One started to sing the “*Drink-your-tea-hee*” song that is familiar to those living in southern Alberta. This was the Spotted Towhee. However, the scrimmage under the bushes included Green-tailed Towhees and White-crowned Sparrows as well.

Then I heard the song I was hoping to hear: The extremely loud, downward spiraling song of the Canyon Wren. This song echoed throughout the chasm we were hiking down into. When it came out of a dark fissure it sat on a rock and triumphantly announced its successful food delivery to its nest. A new species to add to my life list!



**Canyon Wren**

Another 500 feet down the chasm and I was halted by a streak of blue flying across my line of sight. What seemed to be a large Mountain Bluebird by colouration, turned out to be larger and a great deal louder. The harsh chatter was coming from a Pinyon Jay.



**Pinyon Jay**

Walking away from the rants of the jay, another more pleasant song became audible. This song sounded similar to the "sweet sweet sweet" song of the Yellow Warbler, only the second half of the song accelerated quickly and trailed off. Knowing this song was too different to be a Yellow Warbler, I scanned the brush to find the song-maker. A switchback below me, singing at the very top of a tree was the source of the song; a Virginia Warbler! This species is only found in the southwest United States, so it was a treat to find a new species of warbler that I normally would not have a chance to see.

Fast forward (and down) to 3000 feet below the rim. As the grade evened off, I approached the green oasis of 40 metre high cottonwoods. Flittering among the branches of the huge cottonwoods were Ash-throated Flycatchers, a large member of the flycatcher family. Walking amongst the cacti in around the Ranger Station were Black-throated Sparrows, a stunning species of what are normally thought of drab, brown birds. In the bushes surrounding the cacti were Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and Black-chinned Sparrows. A few more species added to my life list, and I was off again for the final walk out to Plateau Point.



**Black-throated Sparrow**

A kilometre and a half further along, I was at the viewpoint and I was not disappointed. Rumoured to be one of the best views of the Colorado River in the canyon, I could see the emerald-green river over 1500 feet below me. The river, which used to be a muddy red colour, was now green due to the lack of sediments that are being trapped by Glen Canyon Dam up river.



Flying around above the final drop to the river below were White-throated Swifts. Hopping about the rocks at the viewpoint was a Rock Wren and a Rock Squirrel, which gives you a sense of the terrain. As I turned to head back, a Turkey Vulture swooped passed.

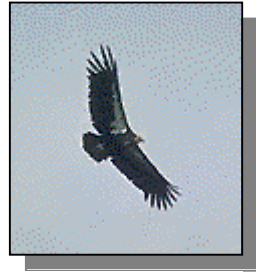
After the vulture was out of sight and I was heading back towards the hike back up, the full 3000 feet of canyon became a harsh reality. A journey that would take over 3 hours to make, bird watching became a secondary activity while I climbed back out of the canyon. That is until a bird with a 10 ft wingspan came into view.

I was told that it was unlikely to see a California Condor, but there it was, riding the thermals of the canyon rim over 1500 above me. These highly endangered birds have been part of a release program in the canyon that was initiated to repopulate an area where they once inhabited. The release area is some distance away, however 4 condors decided to fly to this area that day. Unmistakably large, this condor soared with some ravens that were dwarfed by the large condor. An hour later, and closer

to the rim, I could see the yellow wing tags that each condor wears that are used by researchers for identifying the individual birds. What a thrill to see a bird of a species that was on the brink of extinction!

Other than some Rufous-crowned Sparrows that kept running up the path in front of me, my bird watching was officially over until I reached the rim and had a big drink of water. I now had the time to record the species I had seen in the canyon that morning; 26 in total, but ten of those were lifers!

I still had the afternoon and evening to get more species. Back in Flagstaff, I was informed of a footpath that wound its way through the city. The path went through Ponderosa Pines and ended at a small slough at the base of a small rocky outcrop. These habitats would be different enough from where I had already been. I added species such as Pygmy Nuthatches, Lewis' Woodpecker and Lark Sparrows to name a few. In all, I found 56 species in approximately 12 hours. Not the highest total of species, but at least I was in Arizona counting them!



***California  
Condor***