Virgin Mountains and River (Mohave County)
17-19 February 2017

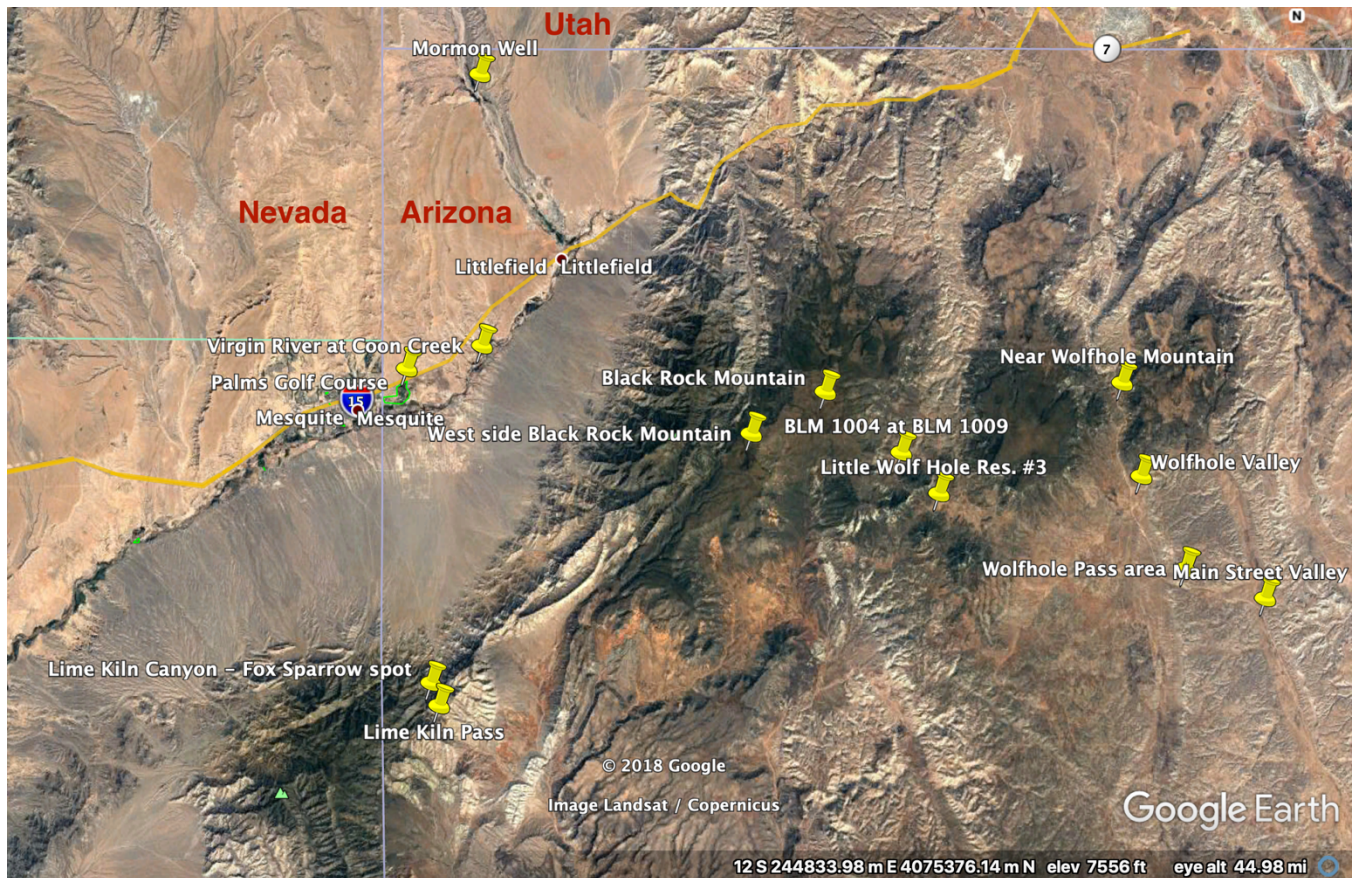By David Vander Pluym and Felipe Guerrero, edited by Eric Hough

Black Rock Mountain with dusting of snow (photo © David Vander Pluym).

The Virgin Mountains are located in far northwestern Arizona and are located in both Arizona and Nevada. While the mountains are primarily pinyon-juniper woodlands, the higher elevations also contain some ponderosa pine and mixed conifer forest. Along with the high mountain peaks, the range is located where the Great Basin and Mojave deserts come together.

As the winter was mild, we were hoping to explore the higher reaches of the mountains. This range is isolated and species such as Steller's Jay and Pygmy Nuthatch have only been recently discovered in these mountains (2013 and 2012 respectively) and we were hoping to see if they were resident. These mountains have been little explored in spring and summer, let alone winter. The Arizona portion of these mountains have largely only been covered by a single observer, Shawn Langston, who has used eBird to document his sightings. Our hope was to try to get up onto Black Rock Mountain (with an elevation over 7000 ft.) or to the trailhead and potentially hike up Mt. Bangs (elevation over 8000 ft., something we did not consider likely for this trip). Unfortunately, the weather forecast was not good and we experienced rain and even snow during the weekend making the higher elevations impassable, though we certainly tried to get there! On our second day, we wanted to explore the fields and patches of riparian woodland along the

Virgin River and Beaver Dam Wash near Littlefield, Arizona. Though we could see clouds in the mountains, we were pleased to finally have nice weather!

Map of Virgin Mountains and Virgin River region in northwest Arizona, southeast Nevada, and southwest Utah (© Google Earth 2019).

Virgin Mountains and muddy roads (photo © David Vander Pluym).

17 February

Micah Riegner and Felipe Guerrero were the first to arrive in the area and were able to check Lime Kiln Canyon and Pass. Here they discovered the first record of **"Slate-colored" Fox Sparrow** for the Virgin Mountains, as well as confirming that a small population of **Chukar** still exists in this area.

Meeting up with additional team member David Vander Pluym, they were able to discover a **Neotropic Cormorant** roosting at the Palms Golf Course near Mesquite along the Virgin River. Though there are records for Virgin River Valley in both Nevada and Utah, this was a first for the Arizona portion of the valley.

High clearance, 4WD vehicles are necessary for muddy conditions in the Virgin Mountains (photo © David Vander Pluym).

<u>18 February</u>
We split into two teams, one with the goal of trying to get to the higher elevation mountain forest of Black Rock Mountain. It was hoped that the road would be passable to one of the teams, unfortunately rains and red clay roads prevented either team from getting into higher elevation forests. However, despite this and regular rain showers, both teams had a productive day. One team composed of Felipe Guerrero, Micah

Riegner, and Brett Gleitsmann attempted to get there from the west via Lime Kiln Pass and the Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument. A second team composed of Autumn Amici, Michael Lester, Chris McCreedy, and David Vander Pluym attempted to get there from the east.

Michael Lester, Autumn Amici, and Chris McCreedy scanning for birds (photo © David Vander Pluym).

In order to access the east side of the Virgin Mountains, the second team had to enter via Utah and our first stops were along Quail Canyon (east side of Wolfhole Mountain) in pinyon-juniper woodland habitat. It was interesting to us that even on this early date we heard singing **Bewick's Wrens**. Entering the Wolfhole Valley, we were greeted with the sight of 38 **Sandhill Cranes** which included three "Lesser" (*canadensis*) and the rest being of the "Greater" (*tabida/ rowani*) subspecies group. This appears to be the 1st record for the Arizona Strip, though this is likely a result of how underbirded the region is.

Sandhill Cranes (photo © David Vander Pluym).

Small numbers of **Horned Larks** were also present in the valley and David was able to pick out in flight two **longspurs** among them. Unfortunately, the birds were not found on the ground and only called once, so were not identified to species. These also represent the first report of longspurs from the Arizona Strip, though they likely would be regular if the region received better coverage.

Tanks in the Wolfhole Valley (photo © David Vander Pluym).

Trying to move up into higher elevation, we made several stops at places such as Little Wolfhole Reservoir #3 and were only able to make it as far into the mountains as the

intersection of BLM road 1004 and BLM road 1009. This location had an interesting mix of chaparral, Gambel oak, some riparian shrubs, and pinyon-juniper woodland. Despite the rain, the location had good numbers of expected species, but a singing **Crissal Thrasher** at its upper elevational limit and a **"Slate-colored" Junco** were of interest. Descending back into the lowlands, we headed over Wolfhole Pass where we had an early migrant or overwintering **Sage Thrasher**. Checking the sagebrush steppe and grassland habitats of Main Street Valley, we had good numbers of **Horned Larks**, but a **Prairie Falcon** kept us from checking this flock for longspurs. Heading back, we made another stop in the pinyon-juniper woodlands where we had another Dark-eyed Junco flock which included a "Slate-colored".

Birding the sagebrush of Main Street Valley (photo © David Vander Pluym).

19 February
During the night at our campsite where Coon Creek meets the Virgin River, we heard a **Barn Owl** several times. This provides an apparent first winter record for the northwest corner of Arizona.

A quick check in the morning produced a **Snow Goose** on the Palms Golf Course and while we were meeting in a parking lot in Mesquite, Nevada a **Neotropic Cormorant** flew over. The full group headed to Littlefield, Arizona where checking fields produced a **Ferruginous Hawk**. We next headed to Mormon Well on Beaver Dam Wash, a nice stretch of cottonwood, willow and mesquite riparian woodland surrounded by Mojave Desert scrub close to the Utah border. A thorough check of the area produced good numbers of typical desert and riparian species with six **American Goldfinches** being the most interesting.

Mojave Desert scrub near the Virgin River (photo © Micah Riegner).

We returned to Littlefield and checked new fields, and after the group split up, Felipe Guerrero and Micah Reigner stayed in Littlefield. They had flyover flocks of 70 **American White Pelicans** and seven **Sandhill Cranes**, a first for the Virgin River in Arizona.

Sandhill Cranes (photo © Micah Riegner).

A group including Autumn Amici, Michael Lester, Chris McCreedy, and David Vander Pluym went to Lime Kiln Canyon and Pass and were able to refind **Chukar**, as well as the **"Slate-colored" Fox Sparrow,** which remained in the same location until at least 16 March!

'Slate-colored' Fox Sparrow (photo © Chris McCreedy).

Acknowledgements: many thanks to Shawn Langston for covering this unique area of Arizona and for helping us with the logistics of this expedition. We would also like to thank all of the participants for braving the inclement weather for this winter expedition:

Autumn Amici, Brett Gleitsmann, Felipe Guerrero, Michael Lester, Chris McCreedy, Micah Riegner, and David Vander Pluym.

Full species lists can be found on these eBird checklists:

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S34549172
https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S34775795
https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S34775759
https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S34775780
https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S34775765
https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S34549473
https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S34549640
https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S34749095
https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S34775786
https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S34549500