

Chuska Mountains (Apache County)

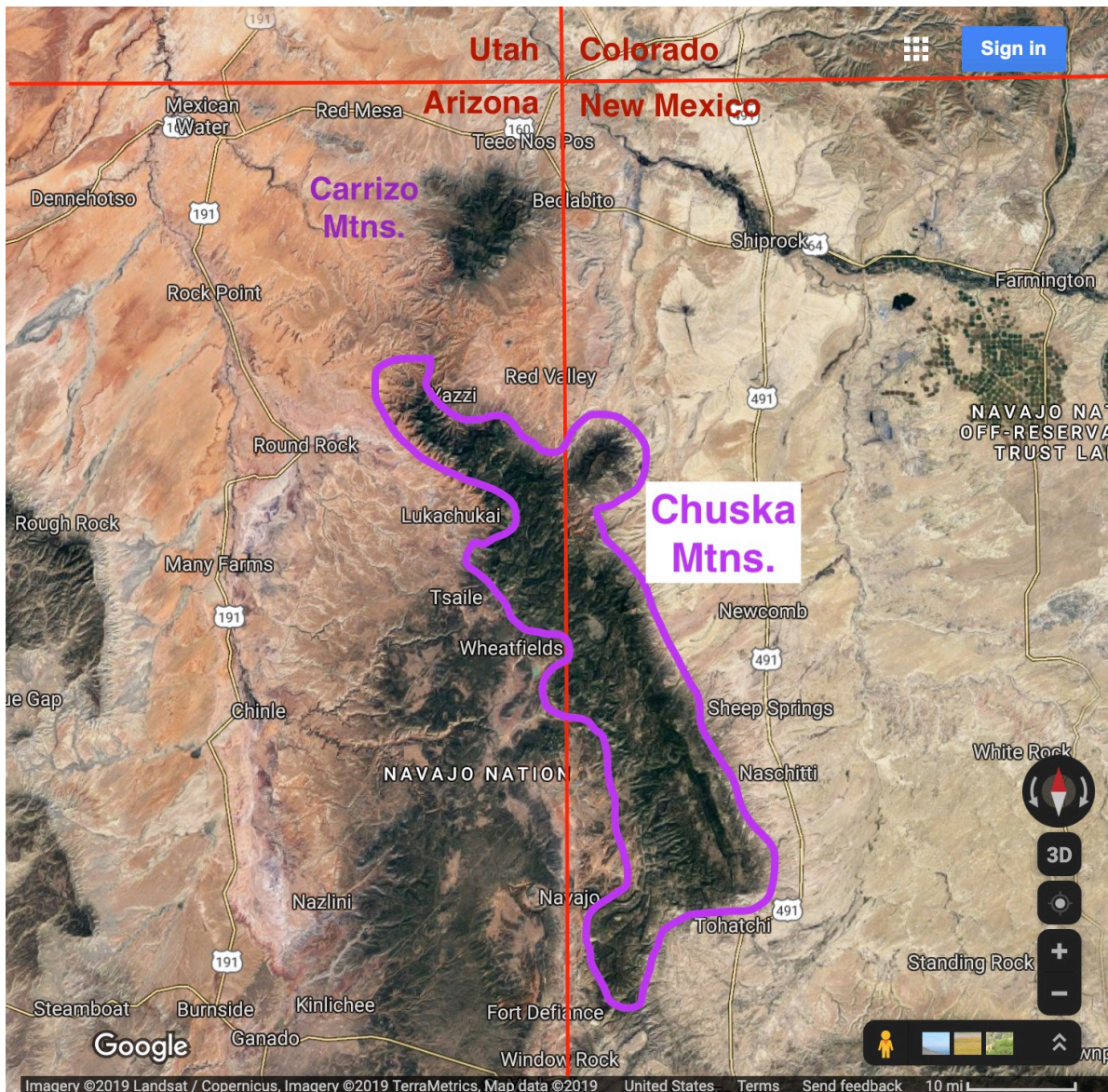
8-10 December 2017

By Felipe Guerrero, edited by Eric Hough



Spruce-fir and aspen forest of the high Chuska Mountains (photo by © Felipe Guerrero).

The originally planned Piute Canyon-Page Expedition scheduled for 8-10 December 2017 was postponed due to potential access issues, so we redirected to the subalpine conifer forests of the Chuska mountain range in the northeast corner of Arizona, Apache County, to search for northerly and high-elevation irruptive species. The Chuska Mountains span far northeastern Arizona and northwestern New Mexico, and technically comprise two conjoined mountain ranges, the Tunitcha Mountains on the south and Lukachukai Mountains on the north. The Chuskas range from pinyon-juniper woodlands up to pine-oak, mixed conifer, and spruce-fir-aspen forests, with the highest elevation being Roof Butte at 9,823 ft. The only paved road over the mountains is Route 13, which goes from the town of Lukachukai on the west side up and over Buffalo Pass, and out towards Shiprock, New Mexico. A series of other dirt forest roads traverse the mountains, including along Tsaile Creek on the southwest side where our expedition participants traveled.



Map of Chuska Mountains and Four Corners region (© Google Maps 2019).

The relatively close proximity to the San Juan Mountains in southwest Colorado suggests the possibility of finding similar species here as either local breeders or winter vagrants, including Boreal Owl, Brown-capped Rosy-Finch, Wilson's Warbler, and Fox Sparrow. Specific Boreal Owl surveys were conducted by researchers in the late 1980s in the Southwest which did not detect them in Arizona, but did find them in northern New Mexico and southwest Colorado. Past birding trips and surveys have detected breeding populations of Dusky Grouse, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Hammond's Flycatcher, Swainson's Thrush, Orange-crowned and MacGillivray's Warblers, and Green-tailed Towhee. This was the second AZFO expedition to the Chuskas, following one in June of 2010. Hardly anyone visits this area, let alone in winter, and we are glad we did!

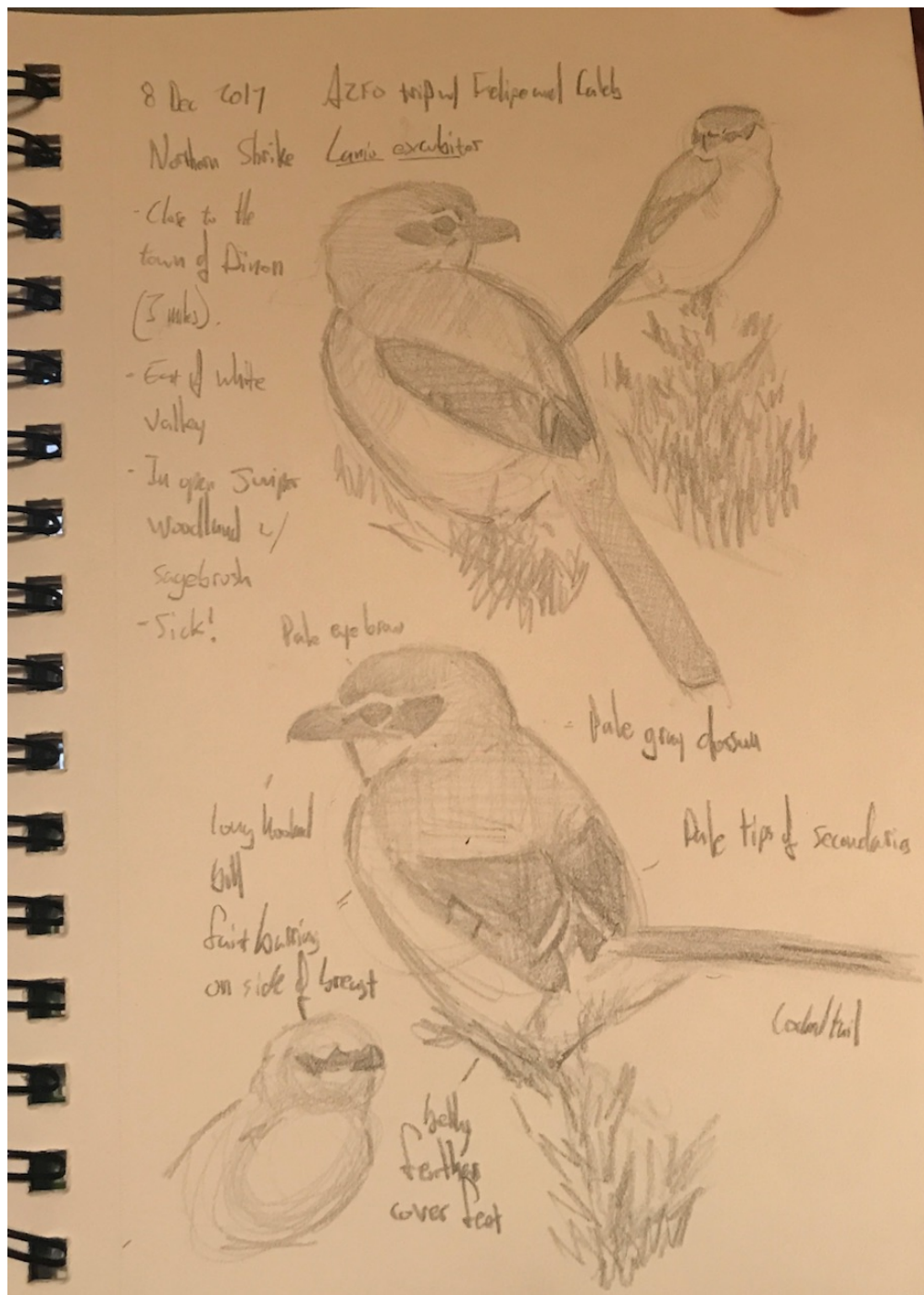


Rez birding near Piñon, Navajo Co. (photo © Felipe Guerrero).

On the evening of 8 December, while in transit to Chinle, we were fortunate to cross paths with a Northern Shrike west of Pinon, Navajo County. The adult bird tolerated close approach, perched atop junipers and sagebrush, allowing for photos and field sketches as sundown neared.



Northern Shrike near Piñon, Navajo Co. (photo © Felipe Guerrero).



Field sketch of Northern Shrike by © Micah Riegner.

The following morning, we were thrilled to find a flock of 10 Pine Grosbeaks feeding on aspen buds and spruce seeds along upper Tsaille Creek in the Tunitcha Mountains, Apache County. The group of males and females foraged long enough for us to obtain photos and recordings. Pine Grosbeaks have only been known to breed in Arizona only in the White Mountains, but have also been found on the Kaibab Plateau and San Francisco Peaks where they may breed. Given the habitat present in the Chuskas, they may also be resident rather than a winter migrant.



Pine Grosbeaks in the Tunitcha Mountains, Apache Co. (photos © Felipe Guerrero).



Spruce-fir-aspen forest habitat near Tsaile Creek (photos © Felipe Guerrero).

On the afternoon of 10 December, after a second full day of surveying in the Tunitcha Mountains, a flock of Red Crossbills containing two White-winged Crossbills left us awestruck and euphoric in the final hour of our expedition. The birds were thoroughly documented with photos, recordings, and field sketches. This is only the second state record for White-winged Crossbill.



White-winged Crossbills (photos © Felipe Guerrero).



Celebrating a 2nd state record! (photos © Felipe Guerrero).

Other birds of note over the weekend were Northern Pygmy-Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, American Three-toed Woodpecker, and multiple Red Crossbill types.



Northern Saw-whet Owl (photo © Felipe Guerrero).



American Three-toed Woodpecker (photo © Felipe Guerrero).

A special thanks to our participants, Micah Riegner and Caleb Strand, for a particularly memorable expedition!

Here are the eBird lists with the most notable species found:

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S40982908>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41029184>

<https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S41029232>

We hope you will join us on one of our future expeditions to document Arizona's amazing avifauna!