

West to Oracle: Samuel Rhoads in Arizona

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Hard as it is for my nonbirding friends to believe, summer is the season for out-of-state birders to visit southeast Arizona.

The tradition of warm-season visits to the state is a venerable one, antedating the first Lane guide by nearly three-quarters of a century. One of the earliest traveling birders to visit our area was Samuel N. Rhoads, a well-known New Jersey observer who spent five weeks in Pima and Pinal counties in the summer of 1891. Unlike most present-day visitors to the state, Rhoads not only observed the local birds but collected specimens for the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, where the nearly 400 skins he took can still be examined today.

Much has changed in the Santa Catalinas in the last century. Human intervention has altered habitats, and the ranges of certain birds have contracted or expanded in response. Early reports such as that published by Rhoads in the Proceedings of the Philadelphia Academy for 1892 provide an invaluable “baseline” for comparison — and a fascinating glimpse into what it was like to bird the Catalinas more than 100 years ago.

Rhoads left Texas on 6 or 7 June 1891, arriving in Tucson on 10 June. He described Oracle, his base for much of his stay in Arizona, as “a post-hamlet situated in the oak belt” of the mountains; in just over a month’s birding and collecting, he recorded 126 species, most of them represented by specimens secured in the canyons of the Santa Catalinas near Oracle.

Many of the birds Rhoads recorded are still common and expected in the area today. Others are much rarer



Scaled Quail
Photo by Jim Burns

than Rhoads found them, and a few appear to have actually increased.

The modern birder visiting Peppersauce Canyon and similar sites in the northern Catalinas will encounter many (but not all!) of the same birds as this ornithological pioneer — and will appreciate them more, perhaps, by recalling Samuel Rhoads's experiences with them more than a century ago.

California Condor: One was shot near the summit of Mt. Lemmon "several years" before Rhoads's visit.

Crested Caracara: Rhoads found this bird "occasionally" at Oracle. The species is now very local in Arizona.

Scaled Quail: Rhoads found mixed flocks of Scaled and Gambel's quail in the oaks, and collected a specimen of the former in Oracle.

Montezuma Quail: Rhoads found this bird as high as 7,000 feet in the Catalinas, where it is now much more rarely observed than in other ranges to the south and east.

"Gould's" Turkey: Rhoads never saw this bird in the Catalinas. Once common, he says, it was wiped out by a disastrous fire on Mt. Lemmon.

Spotted Owl: This bird can still be heard in the Catalinas, but is probably much less common now than when Rhoads saw several in the summer of 1891.

Magnificent Hummingbird: Rhoads seems to have been the first ornithologist to observe this species in the Catalinas, where it is now common at high elevations.

"Red-shafted" Flicker: Rhoads described this now-common species as rare even at high elevations.

Greater Pewee: Rhoads found this species to be abundant in the ponderosa pines of the Catalinas; if his identifications were correct, the bird has greatly

decreased since his time.

Gray Vireo: Now scarce and local in the area, this bird was listed by Rhoads as "frequent."

Botteri's Sparrow: Three were collected in "thick bunches of bear-grass" near Catalina, where the bird is now decidedly unexpected.

Canyon Towhee: Rhoads was the first ornithologist to note in print the "remarkable" similarity between the songs of this bird and the Northern Cardinal. Of equal interest are some species Rhoads did not find on his visit to Oracle:

Inca Dove: Now a familiar town bird, the Inca Dove had arrived in Tucson not many years before Rhoads's visit, and was still very local, if not rare.

Great-tailed Grackle: This abundant species did not arrive in Arizona until the late 1930s.

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