

NOTABLE RECORDS OF BIRDS FROM EASTERN SONORA, MEXICO

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A literature survey of bird distribution in Sonora, Mexico, indicates a conspicuous lack of information from east-central portions of the state. Most ornithologists travel via Hermosillo to Guaymas, thence southeast along the coast to more tropically vegetated southern states (as outlined by Alden 1969). Exploring many areas of east Sonora requires a four-wheel drive vehicle because of rough mountainous dirt roads. This inaccessibility enhanced by poor maps, is a major reason for avoidance by ornithologists.

From 27 April to 8 May 1978, Dean Hendrickson and I observed birds in Sonora while on a trip to collect fish in the Río Yaqui drainage (itinerary and detailed maps in Hendrickson et al. 1980). Historical records are from van Rossem (1945), Friedmann et al. (1950), and Miller et al. (1957), unless noted otherwise. We found 102 species; accounts of the most noteworthy records follow.

On 29 April we observed an adult White-tailed Hawk (*Buteo albicaudatus*) for several minutes as it flew over oak (*Quercus* spp.) woodlands 20 km north of Nacozari de Garcia (30°29'N, 109°38'W, elev. 1500 m [Figure 1]). The white underparts and contrasting thin black terminal tail band of an adult were apparent as the bird soared in early morning thermal air currents. Although the White-tailed Hawk has been recorded farther north, sightings have been scarce, warranting its inclusion in this note.

The northernmost previous record of Military Macaws (*Ara militaris*) in Sonora is a 1931 sighting near Soyopa (van Rossem 1945). Don Ducote of the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum saw two Military Macaws in a Kapok tree (*Ceiba acuminata*) 11 km from El Novillo on the Bacanora-Sahuaripa road on 27 April 1977 (Gale Monson pers. comm.). On 7 May we observed and photographed two Military Macaws in a side canyon of the Río Yaqui (29°25'N, 109°15'W, elev. 500 m). We were first attracted by a flash of color and raucous calls when the birds flew over our vehicle. As we walked up the canyon, we saw two birds perched in an *Acacia*. The birds became alarmed at our approach, dove at us, and flew down the canyon. The sighting was approximately 5 km from the Río Yaqui along the Sahuaripa-Diviaderos road as it climbs west from the river. The side canyon contained a lush growth of vegetation consisting of Fremont Cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*), *Acacias*, fan palms (*Erythea aculeata*), Common Mesquite (*Prosopis juliflora*), seep-willow (*Baccharis salicifolia*) and numerous unidentified shrubs and forbs. We searched for a nest to determine if the birds were a breeding pair but found none. These recent sightings indicate that Military Macaws' northern range may follow the Río Yaqui canyon, and quite possibly the Río Moctezuma canyon between San Pedro and Moctezuma. Five other Military Macaws were seen farther south, near Nuri.

Blue Mockingbirds (*Melanotis caerulescens*) are fairly common in thick vegetation in the extreme southeast corner of Sonora. We observed a Blue Mockingbird on 6 May near Santo Tomás (28°57'N, 109°12'W, elev. 460 m). It was perched low on a branch in a mesquite thicket with a dense forb undergrowth along the Río Sahuaripa 10 km south of Sahuaripa. This species probably reaches its northern limits somewhere in the dense thorn forest between Nuri and Alamos. The bird sighted at Santo Tomás may have wandered down the south-to-north flowing Río Sahuaripa.

Tropical Parulas (*Parula pitayumi*) have been recorded in Sonora from the southeast corner and as an isolated population near La Chumata mine on 26 May 1905 55 km north of Ures (Thayer and Bangs 1906, van Rossem 1945). On 6 May we observed a group of 10-15 Tropical Parulas in early morning, foraging among mesquite along Río Sahuaripa 5 km south of Guisamopa (28°38'N, 109°07'W, elev. 690 m). This sighting, which may

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have been of late migrants going north, was within the large void between La Chumata and Alamos.

A Flame-colored Tanager (*Piranga bidentata*) collected at Alamos on 30 March 1888 and two other southeastern sightings are the only Sonoran records for the species (van Rossem 1945). On 4 May we observed a single Flame-colored Tanager near Movas 40 km northwest of Nuri along a side canyon of the Río Chico (28°12'N, 109°28'W, elev. 300 m). The brilliant red individual was first seen 15 m away perched on a thorny tree. White wing bars and tail edges became evident as it flew 10 m to another tree. The habitat was thorn forest on volcanic ridges leading down to lush cottonwood (*Populus monticola*) and willow (*Salix* spp.) riparian woodland along Río Chico. Although there is one breeding record for Sonora (Miller et al. 1957), Flame-colored Tanagers are still rare in the state and sightings are probably of vagrants.

In the same canyon where we sighted the Military Macaws, we observed a solitary fully adult male Orchard Oriole (*Icterus spurius*). Orchard Orioles were unrecorded in Sonora (Miller et al. 1957) until specimens were taken from the southeast in late 1950s (Hubbard and Crossin 1974). During spring 1979 and 1980, Scott Terrill and Kenneth Rosenberg (pers. comm.) saw several Orchard Orioles in riparian vegetation along the Río Sonora near Ures. These sightings indicate this species may be expanding its range northwesterly from Chihuahua and Sinaloa, where nesting has been recorded.

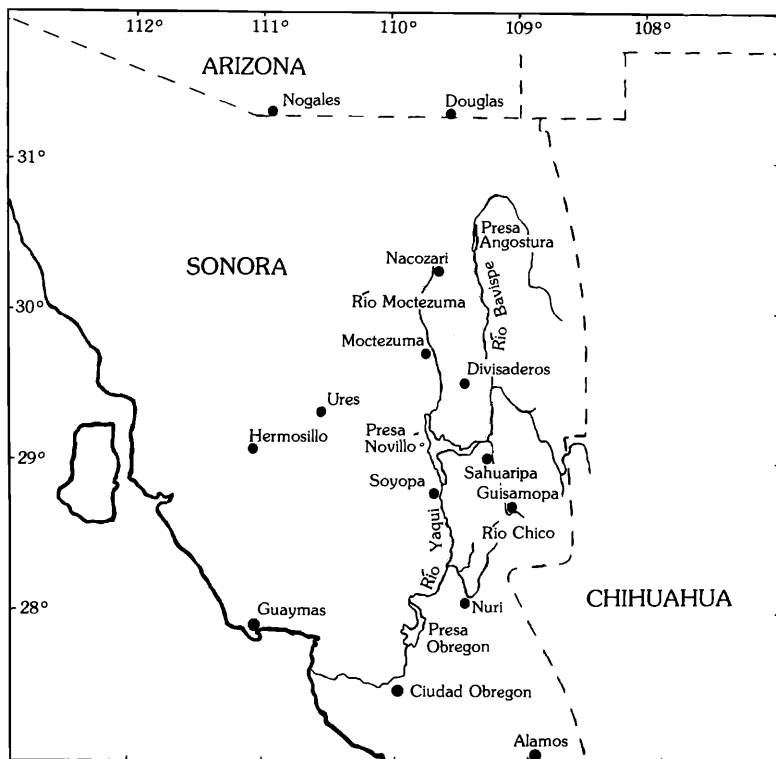


Figure 1. Map of Sonora, Mexico, showing place names mentioned in text.

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The east central portion of Sonora is very poorly known biologically; as evidence, several undescribed species and subspecies of fish were collected from the area during 1978 (Hendrickson et al. 1980). No undescribed species of birds are likely but many species reach their northwestern range limit in Sonora. Owing to the lack of information, evaluation of sightings of uncommon birds is difficult and based primarily on conjecture. Some species may be dependent on thorn forest and associated vegetation types but occasionally wander, whereas others could be in the process of expanding their ranges.

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Blue Mockingbird

Sketch by Narca Moore-Craig