

PRESCOTT AUDUBON SOCIETY

HISTORY OF WATSON-WILLOW LAKE ECOSYSTEM IMPORTANT BIRD AREA

Around 2002, Arizona began its Important Bird Area (IBA) program, first under the auspices of Tucson Audubon Society and shortly thereafter in partnership with Audubon Arizona. Once the criteria for designation of an IBA were established and a science committee was organized, a call went out to all Audubon chapters in the state to consider areas that might meet those criteria. Watson and Willow Lakes were considered right away by the then chair of the Conservation Committee of Prescott Audubon Society, Eve Gill. These lakes, which are owned by the City of Prescott, were believed to meet the criteria of significant concentration of wintering water birds (>2000) which includes swans, geese, ducks, grebes, coots, herons, cormorants, and shorebirds. Additionally, the uplands surrounding the lakes and the two miles of Granite Creek immediately south of Watson Lake (which includes Watson Woods Riparian Preserve) were believed to provide shelter to a number of raptors, especially in winter, including two species of conservation concern—Bald Eagle and Peregrine Falcon. (At the time, the Bald Eagle was on the Endangered Species list). Moreover, Watson Woods is known to provide breeding habitat for Lucy's Warbler, another species of conservation concern in Arizona.

In order to obtain the designation of Important Bird Area, there must be data available to support at least one of the criteria. At the time, other than Christmas Bird Counts, there had been no formal surveys of the lakes and only one survey of Watson Woods. However, many Prescott Audubon Society members frequently birded in Watson Woods and maintained personal records. Bonnie Pranter, a Prescott Audubon Society member, had conducted a census survey of the Woods. Additionally, an ardent birder, Bob Thomen, also a Prescott Audubon Society member, has for many years lived across Willow Lake Road from Willow Lake. He had personal records from 1975 to 1997. At Ms. Gill's request (in fact, urging), he assembled his records which spanned across all those years. Ms. Gill, who now lives out of state, in an email to this writer on Jan. 30, 2011, wrote, "It was a lot of work filling out the application, but it wouldn't have been possible without all of Bob's observations. Bob's dedication has been a tremendous service to the cause of conservation." The Christmas Bird Count data was compiled and shared by Roy Houser, another Prescott Audubon Society member.

The application was submitted and approved by the Arizona Important Bird Area program in 2004. The original application also included Granite Creek through Granite Dells. However, that area was excluded from final IBA designation by the Arizona IBA program. The data needed to support its inclusion had not been gathered, most of the property involved is privately owned, and this project had

not been discussed with the involved property owners. There has not yet been an effort to expand the IBA to include these areas.

At the request of the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AFGD) which also provided the funding, Archaeological Consulting Services, Ltd., completed an avian inventory and habitat mapping project for the Watson-Willow Lakes Ecosystem IBA. The area surveys for bird species were conducted from early August 2004 through mid-June 2005. A total of two surveys per season were conducted excepting summer during which one survey was conducted. The surveys were completed in three different habitat areas around the entire IBA: pinyon-juniper woodland, grassland, and riparian areas. These surveys were conducted by two experienced wildlife biologists. Specific surveys of the waterfowl on each lake were not conducted.

In November 2005, a planning group organized by Karen O'Neil, met with the Arizona IBA biologist, Scott Wilbor, and decided on the survey protocol to be used and how to best implement the survey process around both lakes. The first survey was conducted in December 2005. Four surveys, one per month, December through early March, have since been conducted annually since that time.

Surveys for Watson Woods were planned by Karen O'Neil with the assistance of the Arizona IBA biologist, Scott Wilbor, and the first survey was conducted in November 2008. Nine surveys are conducted annually across the year from January through November. Data from these surveys are also being shared with Prescott Creeks as a piece of the monitoring effort related to the effects of the restoration of Watson Woods, currently underway, with funding through a grant from the Arizona Water Protection Fund. All data from both the census surveys of the two lakes and from the various surveys conducted in Watson Woods can be obtained from the Arizona IBA program data base at www.aziba.org. For further information, please contact Karen O'Neil, Prescott Audubon Society IBA Program Coordinator at jk_oneil_9@msn.org.