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Abert's Towhee
(*Pipilo aberti*)

Status: ●

Population size: 230,000

With one of the smallest total distributions of any U.S. birds species, the Abert's Towhee is much sought after by birders who must travel to the desert Southwest to observe it. The greatest threat to the species in its limited range is the continued loss and fragmentation of its preferred desert riparian habitat. Abert's Towhee is often a rather inconspicuous bird because it forages in thick understory and seldom flies any great distance.



Photo by Glen Tepke.

Identification

Abert's Towhee is a large, plain sparrow with a long, rounded tail. It is a dull buffy brown with a rusty or rufous-colored undertail. It has a black face and contrasting pale grayish bill.



Distribution and Population Trends

Abert's Towhees are birds of dense vegetation in riparian woodlands in the Sonoran Desert zone, primarily in Arizona. They were originally found in the cottonwood-willow and mesquite riparian woodlands along the Colorado River and tributaries to the River which did not periodically run dry. The species is now found primarily in the Colorado and Gila River valleys in Arizona and parts of California, Nevada, Utah, and New Mexico. They can also be found in cities or suburbs in exotic plantings.

Destruction and fragmentation of riparian habitat has resulted in population declines in many areas, although there seems to be some range expansion in south-central Arizona along the Santa Cruz River and Sonoita and Oak Creeks. The paucity of Breeding Bird Survey routes means that there are no statistically significant population trends from that data set, but historical and anecdotal accounts indicate population declines of as much as 50%, attributable to habitat loss.

Ecology

This species is non-migratory, and is resident throughout its range. Abert's Towhees inhabit dense, shrubby streamside vegetation, preferring brushy habitats in cottonwood-willow forests or mesquite bosques. Nesting begins in March soon after the rainy season begins, and can continue throughout the summer into September if there are further rains. The nest is constructed in a shrub and placed under 2.5 m high, often close to the ground.

Threats

Destruction of favored riparian habitat has reduced populations. Agriculture and cattle grazing have destroyed streamside habitats, while groundwater extraction has lowered water tables and altered or eliminated streamside vegetation. Non-native salt cedar now occupies the margins of many streams and washes, and is less suitable than native vegetation. While Abert's Towhees can be found in non-native plantings in suburban yards, or along irrigation ditches, this has not made up for the habitat lost to agriculture and development. There is concern that global warming may significantly affect Abert's Towhee populations, as an increase in summer temperatures or rainfall amounts can have disproportional impacts on arid and riparian habitats.

Conservation

Preservation and restoration of riparian/streamside habitats is essential for the long-term health of Abert's Towhee populations. Populations increased dramatically over five years along the San Pedro River in southeast Arizona

following the removal of cows from the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area. More needs to be learned about how urban populations can be fostered with backyard plantings. The endangered southwestern Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii*) and the WatchListed Elf Owl (*Micrathene whitneyi*) both favor similar habitats; conservation measures for these species will probably benefit Abert's Towhee as well.

What Can You Do?

Audubon's Important Bird Area program is a vital tool for the conservation of Abert's Towhees as well as other species. To learn more about the Important Bird Area programs in states with breeding populations of Abert's Towhee, and how you can help, visit: <http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/>

Support local land trusts, government agencies, and other organizations working to preserve Abert's Towhees habitat in your area. Contact your state Important Bird Areas coordinator (http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/state_coords.html) to find out if there are sites in your area important for Abert's Towhees that need increased protection.

Information on where Abert's Towhees occur and in what numbers is vital to conserving the species. Help in monitoring this and other species by reporting your sightings to eBird. A project of Audubon and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, eBird is the world's first comprehensive on-line bird monitoring program: <http://www.audubon.org/bird/ebird/index.html>.

Volunteers are crucial to the success of programs that monitor the long-term status of wintering populations of Abert's Towhee and other bird species. Audubon's Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is one of the longest-running citizen-science monitoring programs in the world and has helped to follow changes in the numbers and distribution of Abert's Towhee. To learn more about the CBC and how you can participate, visit: <http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc>.

References

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