

Bird of the Month: August 2025

by Ryan Crouse



As I've mentioned in the past, birdwatchers 'bird' in many different ways. Some people simply enjoy seeing birds without worrying about identifying them. Some watch birds in their yards, while others travel the globe in search of rare species. Some capture birds in photographs, and others keep meticulous lists of every species they've seen.

A few years ago, I received an email from a man in Germany asking about birding in Arizona. Visiting a neighboring state can be daunting if you don't

know the best spots to find your target species; traveling to the other side of the world is an entirely different story. With the time, money and effort involved, it's important to make the most of every opportunity. After several emails, it was decided that Michael would join me on one of my guided bird walks. Although he was staying in the Phoenix area, he drove up to Prescott on a cool morning to attend a walk in Fain Park. At that point he had only spent a short time birding in Arizona, so almost every species we saw that morning was new to his list. There's not much overlap between the birds of Munich, Germany and those of central Arizona!

We kept in touch and I learned that he and his wife Magdalena make a trip to the US nearly every year. They find birds together while Magda takes stunning photographs with her impressive camera setup. I frequently use her images to accompany my monthly articles. Whenever they visit Arizona we make a point of meeting up for some birding and a meal together at our home. Over a few years our families have become good friends, and we always look forward to their visits.

This year they planned their trip for late April into early May. They always stay in Tempe, and with each visit they get braver about facing the Valley's triple-digit temperatures. Having visited Arizona several times, their list of unseen birds has gotten smaller, leaving only the more elusive species. One bird high on their target list was the Olive Warbler — beautiful, but notoriously difficult to find. Despite its name, the male's most striking feature is a fiery orange head with a contrasting black mask, though it does have olive-colored wings. It has

a limited range in the US, and even within that range its populations are sparse and localized. Prescott lies on the edge of its summer breeding territory, and they are found exclusively in high-elevation pine forests. Even in the right habitat, seeing one requires patience and a strong neck, as they tend to stay high in the crowns of tall Ponderosa pines.

Michael told me he'd read reports of Olive Warblers being spotted at the Groom Creek Trailhead. That surprised me, though it wasn't out of the question. Over dinner at our house, we decided to try our luck early the next morning. Though we arrived before sunrise, the forest was already alive with birds vocalizing. About 15 minutes in I heard the distinct note of an Olive Warbler high in a distant pine. We carefully moved through the forest and caught quick glimpses of a gorgeous male flitting from treetop to treetop. While we confirmed the ID, it wasn't the satisfying, prolonged sighting we'd hoped for. That's birding for you — they always give you a reason to come back.

Determined, I took them deeper into the woods. We birded along the Hassayampa River and took a gentle hike into the Kendall Camp area. Though we didn't get a better look at the Olive Warbler, the outing was still rewarding. We had incredible views of Painted Redstarts, Virginia's Warblers, Grace's Warblers, a Steller's Jay, and even heard some Wild Turkeys. The highlight, though, was a surprisingly cooperative Greater Pewee. While I had observed them at these spots before, it was usually fleeting or just by their distinctive call. This time one perched in plain sight, not 20 feet off the ground, allowing for excellent views and some fantastic shots through Magda's lens. It was their first sighting of the species, and it couldn't have gone better.

Although we ended the morning without a perfect Olive Warbler sighting, we all agreed it had been a great day. A few days later, however, I received a series of images in my inbox. From their base in Tempe, Michael and Magda had left at 3:30am and headed to Mt. Lemmon, near Tucson. At nearly 9,200 feet, the mountain offers ideal habitat for Olive Warblers and other Southwest-specialty species. Among Magda's photos were several clear shots of a brilliantly colored male Olive Warbler! She also captured an image of a Hermit Warbler, a life bird for her as well. I was thrilled that their persistence paid off. They continue to chip away at their Arizona bird list, and we're already talking about their next trip. Michael and Magda — seriously — visit Sierra Vista in early August!

Birding has given me so much: hours spent with friends and family in search of beautiful birds and the chance to form lasting friendships across the globe. All it takes is a shared passion to create connections that span continents. Plus, when we finally visit the dark forests of Bavaria, we'll already have guides! Get out there and birdwatch, it will almost certainly enrich your life in more ways than you can imagine.

Olive Warbler — photo by Magdalena Richter