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Comments: I would like to call to your attention a resource that deserves special attention and perhaps a special administrative designation. I may have missed it, but in my reviews of the various resource reports I was unable to find any mention of Mt. Ord.

As a 5-decade resident of Arizona I only recently had the pleasure of driving the FS 626 dirt road up nearly to the top of this 7,128 foot tall mountain. The trip was in mid-February, a few days after snowfall, and the road was still snow packed in the shadows. The main purpose of the trip was to survey for birds. Our party set out on foot at the mid-level into the well-shaded mountain side. The ground was still frozen and snow had accumulated several inches deep. No birds were seen at first, but within an hour they awoke, sang and were flitting about searching for bugs in the pinon and juniper trees. Three hours later we completed the mile walk and headed toward the top. By then the snow was melting and the road was muddy and slick. We parked at the closed gate and walked up toward the towers. Again, we observed many birds mostly hunting in the Ponderosa trees but also scurrying in the snow and oak scrub.

Only on the drive down did I realize why Mt. Ord is so special: it is a "Sky Island" just 30 miles from Phoenix. The drive up the mountain demonstrates vertical vegetative regions, similar to the findings on the drive from Tucson to the top of Mt. Lemmon in the Santa Catalina Mountains. Mt. Ord is the closest big mountain within easy drive from Phoenix. That's a big deal. It has at least 5 of the vegetative zones, from desert to pine, noted in this link to a landmark study of the S. Catalinas:

http://www.saguaro-juniper.com/i_and_i/san_pedro/ecoregions/desert_to_skyisland.htm

Mt. Ord will become an important place to observe the effects of a changing desert climate. By studying the changes in the distribution of vegetation and animals we can better understand the impacts to our natural environment. From the birders perspective Mt. Ord is an extremely important site, with regular visitation from at least 4 local chapters of the Audubon Society. The birders website called eBird reveals 598 checklists that have been submitted and 166 species observed. This ranks it a respectable # 45 among hot spots in all of Maricopa County. And it could be an outstanding place to educate the public about the resources of the Tonto Forest, all on one mountain.

For this Tonto management plan period I ask whether the biologists (botanists and wildlife specialists) of the Tonto Forest would consider evaluating the status of Mt. Ord's biota in the near future (say, 1-5 years) with an eye toward making it a place to reference in future decades? Would some sort of administrative designation now, such as Biological Area, Educational Interpretive Area, or similar designation, help achieve this goal?