



ROADRUNNER RAMBLINGS

MESILLA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

www.mvasaudubon.org

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Education:



Dr. Carol Campbell, Scholarship Committee chair and Lauren Flynn, 2018 Bischoff scholarship recipient

April meeting with two award winners!

Mesilla Valley Audubon Society Richard Bischoff

Scholarship: Last year's recipient of the \$1,500 Mesilla Valley Audubon Society Richard Bischoff Scholarship was NMSU graduate student Lauren Flynn. She presented findings from her research on two species of trout in the Rio Grande. The first, the Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout (RGCT), is one of 17 species of cutthroat trout. It is now found in only 12% of its original range in western North America. The second, the Brown trout, was first introduced in 1893 and is now a dominant species in most of North America. Her research involved charting the water temperature, fish abundance and distribution in approximately eight streams of northern New Mexico. Warmer waters allowed both fish to thrive. Where the RGCT is the sole trout in a stream, it does well in growth, reproduction and survival. Where both

New Webpage for MVAS!!

Since March 2019 we have had a new web page (mvasaudubon.org). If you haven't already done so, check it out!

the RGCT and Brown trout live, there is a near absence of RGCT reproduction and growth. She speculates that the Brown trout probably dominate primarily due to usurpation of the food supply. It was a well-presented report followed by a lively question and answer session!

2019 Lorraine Schulte Excellence in Teaching Award and Bischoff Scholarship: Following the main presentation, Dr. Wiebke Boeing described the GALS (Girls on outdoor Adventures in Leadership and Science) program at NMSU. New to NMSU in 2018, it is designed to increase the opportunities for high school girls to succeed in STEM fields and leadership positions. It involves introducing 12 participants from southern New Mexico and the El Paso area to ecology and citizen science by trips into the great outdoors. This was led by four women graduate students, including Lauren Flynn (see above), who described how they introduced the high school participants to the Gila Wilderness with a four-day backpacking session and several day trips.

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Because there were no applicants for the Schulte award and no application that met the criteria for the Bischoff scholarship, the MVAS board of directors voted to present GALS with the 2019 Schulte and Bischoff funding, totaling \$1,050. This announcement was made at the meeting, much to the happy surprise of GALS director Dr. Wiebke Boeing! The spirit of the Schulte and Bischoff funds is well-represented by the excellence in instruction by Dr. Boeing and her graduate students who are encouraging young women to become involved in the science of nature.



New Mexico State Audubon Council Meeting

On 3/31/2019 the New Mexico State Audubon Council met at the Sevilleta Wildlife Refuge. The meeting was organized by Jonathan Hayes, executive director of Audubon NM and facilitated by Desiree Loggins, Audubon NM Regional Director for the Southwest. Attendees included board members from Southwestern New Mexico Audubon Society (based in Silver City), Sangre de Cristo Audubon Society (based in Santa Fe), Central New Mexico Audubon Society (based in Albuquerque) and Mesilla Valley Audubon Society board members Sid Webb and Elaine Stachera Simon.



There are approximately 5,000 members of the Audubon Society in New Mexico, divided between the four state

chapters. Given the descriptions provided by the meeting's attendees, each chapter functions very differently. While Silver City has a broad range of activities and attention to issues of conservation at many levels, Santa Fe's Sangre de Cristo branch seems to be forever confused with the National Audubon Society Center in Santa Fe (Randall Davey Audubon Center and Sanctuary). At the meeting, all of us shared ideas of how we could attract more members and become more involved in conservation issues. There were many good ideas. Perhaps the most important was the plea, "Don't forget the birds!"

Sorting out the relationship between individual chapters and statewide organization is complex. One take-home lesson from the meeting was that the Audubon Council serves as a forum to help chapters develop plans for activities and ideas about conservation. It is a platform that can advocate for local and statewide measures for conservation. It also helps allocate national resources that are available via grants to those chapters needing help with local plans.

The meeting served to emphasize that Mesilla Valley Audubon Society is not alone. We may call upon state and national resources to help with its ongoing conservation, education, and policy issues. It is reassuring to know that the larger organization is available to help.

Calendar: MAY

May 11 (Saturday): Bird walk at Mesilla Valley Bosque. Meet at visitors center at 8:00 AM

May 15 (Wednesday): Bird walk at Tellbrook Park. Meet at park entrance at 7:45 AM. Wayne Treers is your guide.

May 15 (Wednesday): Monthly meeting. Sid Webb will present slides from members for a fun ID session. The meeting will also include discussion of MVAS activities related to conservation and state Audubon business.

May 18 (Saturday): Field Trip to Broad Canyon. Meet at old K-Mart parking lot at 7:00 AM to carpool. See notes below

May 27 (Saturday): Bird walk at Leasburg Dam State Park. Meet at visitors center at 8:00 AM.

June and July: No monthly meetings or scheduled bird walks, but watch our Facebook page for social get togethers.

Meetings, Field Trips and Bird Walks:

May

On Wednesday, May 15, the **monthly membership meeting** will have two sections. First, there will be an update on our conservation project (see below), followed by an “MVAS Bird Photos” display. All members are invited to submit their own photos of birds from here in southern New Mexico or anywhere else in the world. We already have some great shots. It should be a lot of fun. Bring your popcorn.

On Saturday, May 18 the MVAS **field trip** will be to Broad Canyon, approximately 10 miles north of Leasburg Dam State Park. Birders will have the opportunity to explore the bosque along the river, as well as the Broad Canyon wash and areas above the dam. This is an area being considered by the U.S.-International Boundary Water Commission for intervention to improve the riparian habitat along the Rio Grande. It may soon be considered as an eBird.org “Hotspot.” Let's see what we find! It should be interesting and a lot of fun. For more information, contact Mark Pendleton at mpndltn@gmail.com (MVAS Broad Canyon 2019 in subject line) or at 575.635.8711.

Bird walks in May following the usual schedule. See calendar and web page.

June and July: For the months of June and July, Mesilla Valley Audubon Society takes a vacation. There will be no scheduled bird walks, monthly meetings or scheduled field trips. IT IS JUST TOO HOT! If there are special announcements (e.g., a field trip to cool Cloudcroft or a social gathering for a cold beverage at a local pub to talk all things bird), we will notify members by email, Facebook and the web page. Have fun in the hot months!



Black-headed grosbeak at bird feeder, Cloudcroft, 7/29/2018

Conservation: Proposal for Research on the Rio Grande

In the [Winter 2018](#) issue of Roadrunner Ramblings, we reported on a meeting outlining potential plans for aquatic habitat restoration of the Rio Grande in the Doña Ana County area sponsored by the U.S.-International Water Boundary Commission (US-IWBC). A public meeting was planned for February 2019 but was canceled due to the government shutdown then in progress. It is to be rescheduled for May, with no date or venue yet announced. Of special note is the proposal to build a wetland habitat with ponds and riverways north of where Interstate 40 crosses the Rio Grande in the area where the wastewater treatment plant currently allows treated wastewater into the river. This project was one of the most popular options presented and has a reasonably high likelihood of being chosen for action before the end of

Several MVAS members have worked on a proposal to take advantage of the upcoming habitat restoration that would study the bird population before and after the work is completed. Expanding on our scheduled bird walks at Mesilla Valley Bosque and Leasburg Dam State Park, where we routinely submit our findings to eBird.org, we could add visits to work areas, documenting what we see. Data would show how much change occurred due to the government's intervention.

This is a project where Audubon could engage multiple parties. Developing a plan should include sharing ideas with experienced conservationists and researchers, including Audubon NM resources and local faculty at NMSU. Local stakeholders in Rio Grande habitat, such as the NM State Parks and conservation organizations such as SWEC will also have ideas to help with planning. The Las Cruces community, including experienced birders and newcomers, college students and high school students, and anybody else who finds this an interesting topic and wants to contribute, can also play an important role in data collection. It is a project that might continue for several years.

At this point, what the US-IWBC decides to do will determine the course we take.

The May 15 meeting of the Mesilla Valley Audubon Society will include a discussion devoted to this topic, with updates and an invitation for input from the audience. A more detailed description of current ideas appears on the MVAS web site: <https://www.mvasaudubon.org/conservation>.

FEATURED BIRD by Mark Pendleton

CURVE-BILLED THRASHER *Toxostoma curvirostre*

Of the several thrashers with decurved sickle-shaped bills found in the southwestern USA, the Curve-billed is the most common and widespread. It's a year-round resident across roughly the western half of TX, extreme western OK, southwest KS, eastern CO, almost all of NM, southern AZ and south into Mexico.

- Curve-billed Thrashers live in a wider range of habitats than other desert thrashers. You can find them in arid desert brush land, grasslands interspersed with cactus—especially cholla—edges of woodlands, pinyon-oak, anywhere creosote is plentiful, and dry cactus studded desert hillsides. They also do well close to human habitation, and readily become suburbanized where a fair amount of native vegetation remains and (especially) if people put out feeders and water.

If you encounter Curve-billed Thrashers in an area, you should also find several other bird species there. Harris's Hawks, Greater Roadrunners, White-winged Doves, and Cactus Wrens are the most likely ones.

Cactus Wrens and Curve-billed Thrashers are both partial to building their nests in cholla cactus. Both species also will build multiple nests and use one for raising young and others for roosting spots for the adult birds. Competition is so intense sometimes between these species that two Arizona scientists witnessed these birds destroying each others' nests, albeit the roosting, not the breeding ones. Attempted nest destruction is much less frequent in breeding season, as both birds vigorously defend their nests during this time. In fact Anderson and Anderson observed that many times these two species built nests and raised young within a few feet of each other, and sometimes as close as six inches.*



*Anderson and Anderson, 1972, *The Cactus Wren*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press

If you're fortunate enough to have these birds around your house or yard, chances are you've seen them chasing each other, or Northern Mockingbirds or doves, away from your feeders. One Saturday morning I watched a Curved-bill and a "Mocker" spend about 45 minutes chasing each other through the foliage and branches of two trees in the lower picnic area at Leasburg Dam State Park. As near as I could tell, both birds had nests in one of the trees. I finally tired of watching their antics and left, but they were still going at it.

Curve-billed Thrashers are slightly smaller than most other desert thrashers and have large, round-topped heads. They appear robust with a moderately long tail, but that, too, is rather smaller than that of other desert thrashers. What distinguishes them is their namesake, the signature down-curved black sickle of a bill that is nearly as long as the head is wide. However, it's not the exaggerated bow of, say a California, Crissal, or LeConte's Thrasher.

As with most desert thrashers, Curved-bills are dusty grayish brown above with grayish underparts spotted with brownish gray. Males and females are similar, and juvenile birds appear paler and in contrast to the adults with their yellow to bright orange eyes, have clear eyes.

There are five or six Curve-billed subspecies in the U.S. and at least one in Mexico. In south Texas, the *oberholseri* subspecies has a lighter chest and is more clearly spotted on the underparts, tends to have whiter wing bars, more extensive white spots on the tips of the tail feathers, and a striking orange-red iris. Traveling further west, these characteristics change little by little until in central and western Arizona one encounters the *palmeri* subspecies with duskier breasts, less distinct breast spotting, fainter more yellowish wingbars, less white on their tail feather tips, and irises that tend to be more clear to yellow rather than orange. Since we are about midway between, we may see either subspecies, or an intergrade between them. Recent genetic studies suggest that, in fact, the *oberholseri* (sometimes called Texan or Chihuahuan) group and the *palmeri* (or Arizonan or Sonoran) group may be separate species. The jury is still out on that question, however.



It might just be possible to confuse a Curve-billed with a Crissal's Thrasher at first glance. However, the latter's bill is longer and more strongly decurved, and it's a clear dusky grey overall with no spotting on the underparts. Also, its "mustache" stripe stands out more distinctly, with rich chestnut under tail coverts and a different song than the Curve-billed.

Juvenile Curve-billeds may be mistaken for Bendire's Thrashers, as their bills are shorter—about the same size as those of Bendire's—than their adult counterparts, and their irises are a pale yellow, as are those of Bendire's. Bendire's Thrashers are, however, 9.75" (25cm) to a Curve-billed's 11" (28 cm). Also, in fresh plumage, the spots on a Bendire's breast are distinctly wedge or arrowhead shaped. This becomes less apparent as the season progresses, and in their worn summer plumage is hardly noticeable at all.

All thrashers forage mostly on the ground, flipping over and sweeping aside small stones, sticks, leave, and other debris, or "thrashing" in their search for insects, spiders, centipedes, snails and sowbugs. Hence their name. They consume large amounts of berries, plus the fruit and seeds of cactus, especially cholla, prickly pear, and, in the Sonoran Desert, saguaro. They also frequently use their bills to hammer away at hard, dry soil in their search for food.

Believe it or not, the Curve-billed has a more extensive repertoire of calls and songs than the Northern Mockingbird. "Mockers" lives up to both their common and scientific name *Mimus polyglottos* (multi-lingual mimic) with their

amazing ability to imitate so many different sounds. Hence their reputation.

The Curve-billed's two note sharp whistled call of "Whit-WHEET!" with the second note sharper, louder and higher in pitch is diagnostic the American Southwest. If you spend any amount of time at all outside in the Chihuahuan and/or Sonoran Deserts, you will certainly hear it. If you want to listen to it, or any other bird vocalizations, for that matter, before you go out into the field, there are a number of apps and sites online where you can do so. Audubon Birds is one, another is Merlin (available free at Google Play and the App Store). You can also go to the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology web site and click on the Macaulay Library's link.



EXTRA, EXTRA!! Article from the Las Cruces Bulletin, Friday, March 29, 2019

An uncommon visitor lands at Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park

By ELAINE STACHERA SIMON

Photos courtesy of Jay Wilbur

For the Bulletin

Nothing gets the birding community all aflutter as the appearance of an uncommon species. A White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*) has been spotted at the Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park (MVBSP), perched on the treetops along the entrance road looking for its next meal.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology database (eBird.org) describes the kite as a "[m]ostly white, small hawk. Gray wings and back with black shoulders. Hovers over open areas in search of mice, snakes and other prey. Perches atop tall vegetation in open landscapes including coastal plains and agricultural areas."



This rather dry description certainly does not capture the elegance of this creature, with its creamy white breast and graceful lines.

According to the New Mexico Ornithological Society (NMOS) database, the first verified sighting of a White-tailed Kite in New Mexico was in Roswell in 1973. The first verified sighting at the MVBSP was in 1985 by New Mexico conservationist Eleanor Wootten. In 2011, a breeding pair took residence. Many birders at the MVBSP have reported seeing the kite in March, including a group participating in a Mesilla Valley Audubon Society bird walk.

According to avian researcher (and spring 2019 graduate in Wildlife Ecology from New Mexico State University) Wyatt Egelhoff, since that first recorded sighting the kites have been “sporadic” visitors. Despite regular sightings over the years, they are far from common here, as they prefer lower-elevation grassland areas in Hidalgo, Luna and

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Grant counties, as well as in Arizona, California, Oregon and Texas.

What makes the MVBSP attractive to the kites? Egelhoff says that in addition to “pretty good grassland along the entrance road,” MVBSP still has some cottonwoods, even though most in Doña Ana County were lost long ago. In fact, Egelhoff says, cottonwoods and grassland once extended up to a mile on either side of the river, and the entire river valley stretched from the Organs to the West Mesa.

He notes that grazing, fire suppression and the depletion of megafauna have all contributed to desertification, allowing the ubiquitous creosote to prosper.

Egelhoff adds that the Rio Grande corridor in general has become increasingly fragmented and degraded by human use. Although nothing is pristine, the MVBSP is, at least, a “recovering shred of bosque habitat” in an area surrounded by agriculture that is often “hammered with pesticides.”

In fact, the MVBSP is a designated Important Bird Area (BA). IBAs are “places of international significance for the conservation of birds and other biodiversity” based on standard criteria, and as part of a wider, integrated approach to conservation (birdlife.org).

BirdLife International started the IBA program in Europe in 1985 and the National Audubon Society implemented it in the United States in 1995. The IBA network now comprises 12,000 sites through 200 countries and territories.

Since the New Mexico IBA program began in 1999, 63 IBAs have been identified statewide. Four are a “global” priority and 59 are a “state” priority. In New Mexico, 375 species of birds make New Mexico their home for at least part of the year, in addition to 140 classified as vagrants or irregular. The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish has categorized 139 species as Threatened, Endangered, or of conservation concern. The Audubon Society hopes to add sites along major New Mexico rivers and begin working with landowners to implement conservation species and monitoring (Audubon. org).

As of March 17, our uncommon visitor was still spending time at MVBSP. Seeing the White-tailed Kite is just one more reason to enjoy our closest New Mexico IBA.

Elaine Stachera Simon is a Las Cruces freelance writer who may be reached at goodwordforyou@yahoo.com.

Annual dues:

Thank you to all members who paid their annual MVAS dues in April. If yours are still pending you may go to the webpage and pay via credit card or download a form and pay by check. Again, thank you very much.



Roadrunner Ramblings is published quarterly and is distributed via the web, with a copy emailed to all MVAS members. and a copy is posted on the MVAS website. All members of MVAS are encouraged to submit any article of interest to the group and any bird photograph recently taken. Please email a copy to sidwebb@gmail.com, (575) 915 5017. To be added to the distribution list, contact Diane Moore, hiplibrarian8090@gmail.com or (575) 528-9164.

Mesilla Valley Audubon Society, a chapter of the National Audubon Society, is a conservation and natural history organization in southern New Mexico that promotes appreciation and conservation of birds, other wildlife and habitat, through environmental education, issue advocacy, and natural history experiences.

Board meetings are held on the Thursday before the 3rd Wed at 5:30 pm at the Southwest Environmental Center on the downtown mall. All Audubon members are welcome.

Mesilla Valley Audubon Society
A Chapter of the National Audubon Society



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