



ROADRUNNER RAMBLINGS

MESILLA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

<https://www.mvasaudubon.org/>

Vol. 42, No 1, Spring 2019

2020 MVAS Election

MVAS Elects Elaine Stachera Simon as New President

Mesilla Valley Audubon Society has a new president and vice president for the first time in three years. At the January annual membership meeting, Elaine Stachera Simon and Mark Pendleton were elected unanimously as president and vice president. Both are experienced administrators and have served as MVAS board members. Elaine is busy at New Mexico State University, and her contacts there have already been of benefit to MVAS. She has plans for an updated focus for this chapter that will reinforce its role as an advocate for the environment and habitat, and, of course, for birds in particular. She will continue with her role as Facebook administrator. Mark brings great experience as a long-time, expert birder and chair of the Field Trip and Climate Watch committees, as well as the energy of a newly retired gentleman. The board has a new member in Annie Mitchell. This quiet but experienced birder stepped up to volunteer for one of two empty board positions. Welcome Annie! Aaron Lucas moved back into his role as MVAS secretary, where he has been sorely missed for the last several months.

Board meetings are open to all MVAS members. The board currently meets the Thursday before the third Wednesday of each month at 5:30 PM at the Kiva Room of Good Samaritan, just beyond our regular general meeting room. If you have an issue or are just curious, check it out. There are still plenty of committee chairpersons needed. Be ready for a tap on your shoulder and a request that you help MVAS as the year progresses. As Elaine stated after the election, "2020 is going to be a good year!" It will be even better with YOUR participation in MVAS events and outreach!

For a complete list of the 2020 MVAS board and officers, see the last page of this newsletter.



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Prairie (Richardson's) Merlin. This bird is rarely seen in this area.

Photo taken during a raptor survey in southern Dona Ana County on 1/20/2020 by CJ Goin.

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Letter from our new MVAS President:

Dear MVAS members,

I hope you are looking forward to the events of 2020 as much as I am! So many good things are happening:

- For the first time in quite a while, MVAS has a full complement of officers and a new board member.*
- MVAS has become active in Audubon Council, the recently re-established group of representatives from all New Mexico chapters that works with state Audubon.*
- MVAS received a grant from the Audubon Western Waters initiative for a bird survey project along the Rio Grande where the City is doing habitat restoration (You can help! More on that elsewhere in the newsletter).*
- A fourth bird walk is being added to the monthly line-up.*
- We now have summer socials (Birds & Bevvies) so that members can stay connected during the quiet months.*

There's much more to come! By the time you read this, the MVAS board will have met to begin strategizing ways in which our chapter can contribute to the Audubon mission of conservation, advocacy, and education relevant to us at the local and regional levels. We hope that you (yes, you!) will join us as we use our individual and collective voices to make the world a better place for birds.

We also hope that you will join the flock at our monthly meetings and presentations and for bird walks. Sometimes the presentations are on serious matters (e.g., the "reinterpretation" of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act), sometimes they are identification classes, and sometimes they are about birding-adjacent issues. Regardless of the topic, come on out, make new friends, and bond over birds!

Until the next newsletter, be well, and good birding!

*Elaine Stachera Simon
President, MVAS*



Green-winged Teal, taken at MVAS Bird Survey site on Rio Grande. Susan Keller Photographer.

MVAS Calendar for February, March, & April 2020

February 2020

Wednesday, February 5: Bird walk—Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park. Mark Pendleton will be your guide. Meet at visitors center at 8:00 AM. State Parks usage fee (\$5 per vehicle) or annual pass.

Saturday, February 8: Bird walk—Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park. Tom Johnson will be your guide. Meet at visitors center at 8:00 AM. State Parks usage fee (\$5 per vehicle) or annual pass.

Wednesday, February 12: Bird walk—Tellbrook Park on Winchester Road. Wayne Treers will be your guide for a Beginners Bird Walk. Meet at entrance to park at 7:45 AM.

Wednesday, February 12: Monthly meeting—6:30 PM meet 'n greet, 7 PM presentation in the Creative Arts Room at Good Samaritan Village. Wildlife biologist Trish Cutler will present "The Migratory Bird Treaty Act and incidental take: What it is and what you can do."

Saturday, February 15: Monthly MVAS Field Trip. Sagecrest Park—7:30 AM. To participate in Great Backyard Bird Count. Field Trip leader: Mark Pendleton (mpndltn@gmail.com). Contact him if you are interested in participating.

Saturday, January 29: Bird walk—Leasburg Dam State Park. C.J. Goin will be your guide. Meet at visitors center at 8:00 AM. State Parks usage fee (\$5 per vehicle) or annual pass.

March 2020

Wednesday, March 4, 2020: Bird walk—Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park. Mark Pendleton will be your guide. Meet at visitors center at 8:00 AM. State Parks usage fee (\$5 per vehicle) or annual pass.

Saturday, March 14, 2020: Bird walk—Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park. Tom Johnson will be your guide. Meet at visitors center at 8:00 AM. State Parks usage fee (\$5 per vehicle) or annual pass.

Saturday, March 18 Bird walk—Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park. Tom Johnson will be your guide. Meet at visitors center at 8:00 AM. State Parks usage fee (\$5 per vehicle) or annual pass.

Wednesday, March 18: Bird walk—Tellbrook Park on Winchester Road. Wayne Treers will be your guide for a Beginners Bird Walk. Meet at entrance to park at 7:45 AM.

Wednesday, March 18: Monthly meeting—6:30 PM meet 'n greet, 7 PM presentation in the Creative Arts Room of Good Samaritan Village. C.J. Goin presents a warbler identification class.

Saturday, January 29: Bird walk—Leasburg Dam State Park. C.J. Goin will be your guide. Meet at visitors center at 8:00 AM. State Parks usage fee (\$5 per vehicle) or annual pass.

April 2020

Wednesday, April 1, 2020: Bird walk—Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park. Mark Pendleton will be your guide. Meet at visitors center at 8:00 AM. State Parks usage fee (\$5 per vehicle) or annual pass.

Saturday, April 11: Bird walk—Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park. Tom Johnson will be your guide. Meet at visitors center at 8:00 AM. State Parks usage fee (\$5 per vehicle) or annual pass.

Wednesday, April 15: Bird walk—Tellbrook Park on Winchester Road. Wayne Treers will be your guide for a Beginners Bird Walk. Meet at entrance to park at 7:45 AM.

Wednesday, April 15: Monthly Meeting—6:30 PM meet 'n greet, 7 PM presentation in the Creative Arts Room of Good Samaritan Village. Annual education and scholarship meeting. Update from Dr. Wiebke Boeing on Girls on Outdoor Adventures Learning Science (GALS), winner of last year's awards, and meet 2020 winner of Bischoff scholarship.

Saturday, April 25: Bird walk—Leasburg Dam State Park. C.J. Goin will be your guide. Meet at visitors center at 8:00 AM. State Parks usage fee (\$5 per vehicle) or annual pass.

Friday-Sunday, April 24-26: Special event! Join us in Silver City for a meeting of the Arizona and New Mexico Audubon chapters. See below for more information.

Spring General Meetings and Special Events

At the **February general meeting (Wednesday, 2/19/2020)** Trish Cutler, wildlife biologist at White Sands Missile Range will talk about the “reinterpretation” of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and practical things you can do to help birds. At the **March general meeting (Wednesday, 3/18/2020)**, the talk will be a bird identification class by C.J. Goin featuring warblers, which will be sure to be returning by that time. At **April’s general meeting (4/15/2020)** we will have Dr. Wiebke Boeing and one of her grad students from NMSU talk to us about the GALS trip and project that we helped fund last year, and we'll introduce the 2020 Bischoff scholarship winner.

All general meetings are on the third Wednesday of the month in the Creative Arts Room of Good Samaritan Village. We begin at 6:30 PM with a meet & greet, followed at 7 PM by business and a presentation.

We hope to have Wyatt Egelhoff swing by during a brief visit he’ll be making to Las Cruces to tell us about his recent trip to Russia and his birding experiences there. Stay tuned! We’re hoping for April, probably outside of the general monthly meeting time.

Special event: April 24–26 (Friday–Sunday), Silver City, joint meeting of Arizona and New Mexico Audubon chapters.

Details to follow as they become available.... right now, Friday evening, 6 PM, the NM Audubon Council will meet (Sid Webb and Elaine Stachera Simon represent MVAS). Saturday will include bird walks and lectures on all things birding, natural history, and climate change, and on Sunday there will be another bird walk and a possible lecture to follow. All events (including the Council meeting) are open to Audubon chapter members in New Mexico and Arizona. Becoming acquainted with our neighbors in Arizona is one big goal. If interested, save date on your calendar.

NEW: Changes to Bird Walks at Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park

Starting in January, birders at the Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park’s **Second Saturday of the Month Bird walk** were greeted by a new guide, **Tom Johnson**. Tom is a fantastic birder and bird photographer (!), and, having attended his January walk, I can attest he is a thoughtful, caring guide for those who join him for this monthly, Saturday event.

Starting in February, beginning birders will have a new **First Wednesday of the Month Bird Walk** to enjoy at the park. It will be led by MVAS Vice President **Mark Pendleton**. Mark is well known to MVAS birders as a seasoned and expert birder with a true knack for sighting and identifying birds no one else finds. He is an expert!

Anyone who wants to participate in either event should meet at 8:00 AM at the Visitor Center of Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park.

This makes four monthly bird walks that MVAS sponsors. They are as follows:

- 1) Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park at 8:00 AM the first Wednesday led by Mark Pendleton;
- 2) Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park at 8:00 AM the second Saturday led by Tom Johnson;
- 3) Tellbrook Park at 7:45 AM on the third Wednesday led by Wayne Treers;
- 4) Leasburg Dam State Park at 8:00 AM on the fourth Saturday led by C.J. Goin.

Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park is located at 5000 Calle del Norte Las Cruces NM. Tellbrook Park is about 6 miles due East of this at 4290 E. Winchester Rd, Las Cruces. Leasburg Dam State Park is approximately 15 miles North of Las Cruces in Radium Springs NM (exit 19 off I-25 or Valley Road to Fort Selden Road).

All of these are in addition to the regular monthly (generally on the third Saturday) MVAS fieldtrip. So, birders have five MVAS birding events on offer every month. And while we encourage anyone who is interested to join the chapter, memberships not a requirement to come out and enjoy birding with us.

Other Upcoming Birding Events: Non-MVAS

Operation Feeder Watch, November–April <https://feederwatch.org/> : There is still time to join this winter event, sponsored by Cornell Ornithology Laboratory and Wild Birds Unlimited. Its goal is to track changing bird populations at backyard feeders and to help individual participants to have a better understanding of their hobby. New participants receive a Research Kit with complete instructions for participating, as well as a bird identification poster, calendar, and more. To join the project requires a fee.

Great Backyard Bird Count Feb 14-17 <https://gbbc.birdcount.org/> : This event, sponsored by Cornell Ornithology laboratory, invites any individual to submit 15 minute observing lists on any of the observing days. You don't even have to be in your backyard! The purpose is to obtain as much data for that point in time from all around the world. More than 160,000 people of all ages and walks of life worldwide join the four-day count each February to create an annual snapshot of the distribution and abundance of birds. You must sign up in advance. No fee.

April 22, 2020 will mark 50 years of Earth Day. In Las Cruces this special year, events will be spread out during the entire month, with a downtown performance currently being scheduled for Friday, April 17. Various community not for profit organizations are asked to participate with events during the month being dedicated to earth day. MVAS may schedule a bird walk or other activity in associated with the sponsors at the Las Cruces Natural History Museum. MVAS members can participate in this activity, which has yet to have a final schedule developed.



40th Anniversary Celebration

Diane Moore and her team put together a fantastic 40th anniversary celebration for Mesilla Valley Audubon Society in November 2019. While much of the meeting was spent with old timers reliving some great birding expeditions, local business was addressed by then-acting MVAS president Elaine Stachera Simon. NM Audubon Executive Director Jon Hayes and National Audubon Network Action Manager Desiree Loggins joined us all the way from Santa Fe to share with us the ways that up north they are working to address climate change and how to mitigate its impact here in New Mexico. After business was finished, we had a delicious repast that everyone enjoyed.



Upper photo: Desiree Loggins and Jon Hays visited from Audubon Santa Fe to help celebrate with us, with John cutting the 40th Anniversary cake, which was delicious.

Left photo: Party goers waving to photographer Elaine Stachera Simon.

Jay Wilbur chose his best personal photos of birds from his website, which added to the happy, relaxed atmosphere of this historic event. Thank you everybody.



Mesilla Valley Audubon Society's (MVAS) 45th annual Las Cruces Christmas Bird Count (CBC)

Mesilla Valley Audubon Society's (MVAS) 45th annual Las Cruces Christmas Bird Count (CBC) was held on Saturday, Dec. 21, 2019. The weather could not have been more perfect for birding from sunrise to sunset! Here is a summary of the results of the CBC:

Observers: 53 (last yr. 51)

Total Bird Count: 30,652 (last yr. 27,261 - 10-yr. avg. is 32,453)

No. of Feeder Watchers: 6 (last yr. 5)

Other Modes of Birding (other than driving & walking): **by bicycle (2 people), by golf cart (2 teams)**

Unusual/Rare Birds: 5 (last yr. 5) - Carolina Wren, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Turkey Vulture

Count Week Birds (not seen on count day): 6 (last yr. 4) Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Turkey Vulture, Harris's Hawk, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Belted Kingfisher, Fox Sparrow

Total Species Count (includes sp., subsp.): 113 (last yr. 115)

White-winged Dove Count: 6,320 (last yr. 7,516)

American Crow Count: 11,505 (last yr. 4,823)

Total Sparrow Count (excludes towhees, dark-eyed juncos, & house sparrows): 578 (last yr. 1,079)

High Counts: 6 (last yr. 7) Gadwall, A. Wigeon, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, A. Crow, Curve-billed Thrasher

Low Counts: 31 (last yr. 17) including Great Blue Heron, Inca Dove, N. Flicker, Cedar Waxwing, W. Meadowlark, Pine Siskin, and most of our wintering sparrows (especially White-crowned and Black-throated)

Notable Absences: Common Merganser, Sandhill Crane, Burrowing Owl, Canyon Wren, Eastern & Western Bluebirds, Brown-headed Cowbird, and Black-chinned, Sagebrush, Swamp, and White-throated Sparrows

There were 4 different hummingbirds seen during our CBC and count week: Rufous, Anna's, Ruby-throated, and an unidentified hummingbird sp.

Our sparrow count was bleak. There were 5 low counts with Black-throated tying a record low and White-crowned setting a new record low. This is the 2nd year that we have had a 50% decline in the number of sparrows in our CBC circle (2017 - 2,157; 2018 - 1,079; 2019 - 578). However, this year's sparrow count set a new record low. The last record low was in 1976 - 822! At that time, the region was experiencing the last major long-term drought. Where are all of our sparrows? There seems to be a few theories floating around; however, the most plausible one is that the change in timing of our monsoon with rain later in the fall has caused seed production to decline. Therefore, less seed for foraging means birds migrate to other places to winter.

Surprisingly, of the 6 high counts, 4 were record highs - the 4 ducks mentioned above.

I would like to thank everyone for their hard work birding in this year's Las Cruces CBC. I hope to see everyone in December 2020.

That's it!!

Wayne Treers

coordinator and compiler for Las Cruces CBC

Mesilla Valley Audubon Society

1/7/2020

MVAS Bird Survey and Conservation Project

The MVAS Bird Survey is off to a great start. The process of charting the changing abundance of birds on the Rio Grande before and after government construction of an improved riparian habitat has met with widespread support. Our group list includes 22 enthusiasts, including several leaders of educational organizations that would like their members to experience this effort and learn about citizen science.

The first good news came when our Audubon Western Rivers Bird Grant was accepted, with the promise of \$3000 over the next year to help with outreach and other efforts to make our survey robust and significant.

Secondly, we had New Mexico Audubon ornithologist Amy Erickson come from Santa Fe to talk on Friday, January 17 about the particulars of bird surveys and how to optimize them. Amy's Power Point Lecture was perfect for the group. On Saturday, a cold but beautiful day in southern New Mexico, Amy and the group conducted a bird walk that led to some positive revisions in the observing protocol previously developed (the revised protocol is now on-line at mvasaudubon.org/conservation). She demonstrated how to use your mobile phone with the eBird app to collect data during the bird walk. A fantastic shortcut. Too easy! Just remember, only one person in the group should collect data. It can be shared with all others on the survey trip. This avoids duplication.

Finally, we have been able to attract some community leaders interested in educational activities to join us.



We anticipate that we will work together with groups of students in the classroom or in the field, with bird walks led by an MVAS member accompanied by the students' sponsors. These introductory walks would describe the nature of the government project to improve the habitat along the Rio Grande, the importance of water in our environment and how its access has changed in the last 100 years, and the various birds and their habitat that can be found in the survey area. Those individuals who find this especially interesting and fun will be invited back for future bird walks and probably more birds than initially seen.

The U.S. International Boundary Water Commission will soon release its final plan for creating the riparian environment designed to attract avian visitors and will probably announce a work schedule that will begin sometime after the flow from Elephant Butte Dam is terminated this summer. It will be up to us to continue our survey to document all the birds we find this year, to have that data available for years to come, and to allow others to repeat the study and document any changes.

Anybody who is interested in participating in this survey is welcome to join us. The protocol on the website is open to all (<https://www.mvasaudubon.org/mvas-bird-monitoring-project>). Most bird walks will be conducted by individuals or small groups. Enquire at any MVAS event (other bird walks, meetings, field trips) or email Sid Webb at sidwebb@gmail.com if you would like to join an adventure in community science.



Southwestern NM Raptor Count Mark Pendleton

For about 25 years, our sister chapter, the Southwestern New Mexico Audubon Society (SWNMAS) based in Silver City has conducted an annual Raptor Count. For four or five years, a group of MVAS members has participated as well.

Participants drive the roads of Southern NM counting hawks, eagles, vultures, owls, and falcons, plus roadrunners and shrrikes. Yes, I know that the last two are not your “traditional” raptors, but they do seize their prey, and a rough and ready definition for a raptor is a bird that seizes and carries away its prey.

This year saw some changes in the both count itself and the MVAS count team. This year, SWNMAS began submitting the count results to the Hawk Migration Association of North America (HMANA). According to HMANA, mid-January is a better time to witness raptor migration than early December when the count was done in the past. So, it was moved from the first Saturday of December to the weekend of 18, 19, and 20 January.

This year also saw the largest MVAS contingent in the count. We had two vehicles with four birders in each. Molly Molloy, Mark Pendleton, Sid Webb, and Marcia Wilson comprised Group A. Group B was C.J. Goin, Sue Keller, Annie Mitchell, and Evelyn Treiman. Between the two groups, we saw 9 species and 112 individual birds.

The table below details these results in taxonomic order:

SPECIES	GROUP A	GROUP B	A + B
Golden Eagle	1	—	1
Northern Harrier	2	2	4
Cooper’s Hawk	1	2	3
Ferruginous Hawk	1	3	4
Red-tailed Hawk	35	19	54
American Kestrel	15	9	24
Merlin	1	1*	2
Prairie Falcon	1	—	1
Loggerhead Shrike	12	7	19

=====

*the pale “Prairie” subspecies

A hearty thanks to our sister chapter; the count coordinator, Linda Moore; and all the MVAS members who helped make this an outstanding day of “windshield birding”! Let’s do it again next year.

Featured Bird by Mark Pendleton © 2020

Northern Harrier *Circus hudsonicus* When I started birding at about 11 or 12 years old, this owl-faced hawk was called a Marsh Hawk. Northern Harrier is probably a more accurate name because, while marshland is one of its habitats, it isn’t the only one. Also, it typically courses low over open ground, teetering back and forth on long, slender wings, harrying its prey out into the open.

In New Mexico, *C. hudsonicus* is, according to eBird, a winter resident, so now is a good time to get out and look for them. In the Las Cruces area, some likely places are Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park, Tellbrook Park on Winchester, Leasburg Dam State Park (Radium Springs), La Llorona Park where E. Picacho/US 70 crosses the Rio Grande, and the La Llorona trail that connects the Park to the parking lot on the E. Side of the Rio Grande just N. of the Calle del Norte bridge in Mesilla. But you don’t have limit your search for Northern Harriers to these sites. Just about anywhere that there’s open land is attractive to them. So, you can see these graceful hawks out in agricultural land, or along the Interstate, or really almost anywhere that isn’t tree covered.



Female Northern Harrier in flight

Their diet is mostly small mammals and birds. As with most raptors that eat a wide variety of prey, a Northern Harrier's diet varies with locale and time of year. Rats, voles and other small are often staples, supplemented by other mammals up to the size of small rabbits. Insects (grasshoppers are a favorite) snakes, frogs, toads, and lizards, plus from songbirds, flickers, doves, small ducks, plus carrion in winter round out the menu. I once saw one eating a beaver carcass on the dry riverbed in January at Leasburg Dam State Park.

Many ornithologists believe that, just like owls, Northern Harriers locate much of their food by sound. This makes sense, as they *do* have pushed in looking faces as do owls. And if the facial disks of owls help concentrate sound into their ears, the same should work for Northern Harriers.

How can you tell that you're looking at a Northern Harrier? They range in size from 41-61 cm (16-24") with a wingspan of about 1.1 meters, or 3'6". Most of the time, they fly low and slow over open country with wings held in a shallow dihedral V reminiscent of a Turkey Vulture. They also teeter from side to side as do TUVUs; neither their V or teetering is as pronounced as the Vultures, though.

Adult males, sometimes referred to as "grey ghosts" are grey (upper and under wings and head—although this can be shading into brown) with black wingtips. Their underparts vary from whitish to white with a differing amounts of orange barring/spotting.

Adult females are brown with brown streaking/spotting on their undersides and have brown horizontal banding on their underwings.

Juvenile birds of both sexes resemble adult females, except that they are solid rufous or cinnamon colored underneath. Also, the banding on their underwings is limited to the primaries.

All adults and juveniles have barred tails and a conspicuous white rump patch. This patch is the bird's *sine qua non* feature. It's diagnostic. Whenever you see raptor you think might be a Northern Harrier, look for the white rump patch. If you see it, you're seeing *C. hudsonicus*.

Sometimes, they'll soar at heights similar to Cooper's or Red-tailed Hawks. The first time I saw one do so, I was puzzled for a few seconds. What was this strange bird? But then I saw the white rump patch and knew.

If you're similar to most birders, you'll see considerably more adult females and juvenile birds of both sexes than adult males. Obviously, there *are* more adult females and juveniles than adult males. But the disparity in numbers is larger than this imbalance would lead you to suppose. I once heard an experienced birder advance a theory for this. The idea was that since adult females are larger and stronger than adult males, they claim the best hunting territories for themselves, leaving adult males to make do with less than ideal territories, many of them further away from humans. I don't know, but at least it sounds plausible.



Male Northern Harrier on the ground

Both photos for this article were kindly provided Jay Wilbur from his web site: Jaysplanet.info, which features beautiful bird photographs of his, from all over the country.

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BOOK REVIEW ©2019 Mark Pendleton

Dunne, Pete. *Pete Dunne's Essential Field Guide Companion: A Comprehensive Resource for Identifying North American Birds*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006). 681 pp + index.

Let's be clear about one thing right from the start—this is *not* a book you stick in the pocket of your birding vest as you head off into the field! For one thing, it's heavier than many binoculars, plus, it's just too bulky to easily carry around. Some birders, though (I'm among them) include it in their box of indispensable reference works that goes with them on almost every field excursion.

In print for thirteen years, *Pete Dunne's Essential Field Guide Companion* is just as essential to a well rounded birding reference collection today as it was when it came off the press. Even the minor outdated parts—some range information, “lumped” and/or “split” species, and changed common or scientific names—have historical value.

Dunne is a master of description and here his prowess is on display. Thankfully, there are no illustrations to distract a reader's attention from the flow of that description. If you want visual confirmation of the descriptions, it's always easy enough to read *PDEFGC* in tandem with a field guide and/or your favorite birding app.

Be sure to read the eleven pages of instructions on how to make the book work for you (“A Guide to the Guide”) before you actually start reading. You'll get much more from the book if you do.

Driving the whole enterprise is Dunne's focus on the process of telling one species of bird from another. Very simply, he tells you how to do this and what to look for while doing so.

Dunne uses the same template for each species. First comes the common, then the scientific name, then Dunne's own nickname for the species. Many of these are witty, some descriptive, and all instantly fix some characteristic of the bird in your mind. For example: the Scarlet Tanager is *Black-winged Red Bird*; the American Wigeon is *The Happy Whistler*; the Barn Owl is *Golden Monkey-faced Owl*; the Canyon Wren is *Cliff Nuthatch*, and the Yellow-headed Blackbird is *Saffron-hooded Cacophony*. This is a mere smattering these descriptive delights.

STATUS, DISTRIBUTION, HABITAT, COHABITANTS, come next. They tell how abundant and where each bird is, what habitat it prefers, other birds found there with it plus its patterns of migration. The **VAGRANCY INDEX** or **VI** (part of **DISTRIBUTION**) is an extremely useful component of this first part of the template. It's a number from 0 to 4 that gives a rough idea of how closely each species sticks to its normal range.

- 0 Almost no chance of seeing this bird outside its range.
- 1 Some wandering, but almost never very far from normal range.
- 2 Possible, but not likely to find this bird outside its normal range.
- 3 Vagrancy is norm not exception; ignore range map; could be seen anywhere.
- 4 So widespread that has been seen just about everywhere in North America

After this brief introductory biographical sketch, as it were, of each species, comes the **DESCRIPTION**. This section is full of such gems as “With its slouching upright stance and head drawn down to its shoulders, the bird [Black-crowned Night Heron] seems like a thug hanging out on a street corner.” (p.138). Or, of the Blue Jay, “A curiously shaped bird that looks like it was assembled from leftover parts. The head is long and wedge-shaped, wings are short and paddle-like, and the tail is long, narrow, ovate, (with a white trim), and slightly wilted (p. 438) or “Black-capped looks like a scruffy ruffian of a chickadee; Carolina looks like a nice, well-groomed, well-bred chicka-dee.” (p. 463) “The adult male, [Painted Bunting] with colors that make the bird look like it was painted by a crayon-wielding three-year-old, is unique.” (p. 640)

Sections on **BEHAVIOR**, **FLIGHT**, **VOCALIZATIONS**, and sometimes **PERTINENT PARTICULARS** round out the individual species accounts. **BEHAVIOR** focuses on how social or solitary the species is, or any characteristic behaviors helpful in identifying it (a Spotted Sandpiper's teetering, bobbing walk, for example). In **FLIGHT**, Dunne uses a well defined vocabulary to describe how buoyant, choppy, undulating, rapid, labored or direct each bird is in the air. Plus he deftly describes its flight silhouette, which is extremely useful to know.

This useful knowledge is presented systematically, with verve and an obvious love for his subject making Dunne's book very special. So, if you're serious about improving your birding skills, appreciate precise well written prose and enjoy being entertained with wit and deft turns of phrase on every page, then this book is for you.

It isn't perfect, though. **VOCALIZATIONS** is for me the weakest section. After all, how do you put into words the songs and calls of birds? But any attempt to do so is subjective and a weakness not just of this book, but any system for transliterating bird voice to human speech.

Unfortunately, the *Essential Field Guide Companion* is no longer in print, but one can find copies available online. Field Guides are periodically updated and revised, and I at least, believe that it should be also. Incorporating recent taxonomic changes shouldn't be overly difficult. Switching to standard ZIP code abbreviations for states and provinces would likely save a not inconsiderable amount of space. In the thirteen years since publication, research on distribution patterns and other matters has provided much new information; using such would only improve this classic reference source. With birding's popularity at an all-time high, one hopes the publisher will seize this opportunity to bring out a new and revised edition.



Officers and Board, MVAS 2020

President: Elaine Stachera Simon

Vice-president: Mark Pendleton

Secretary: Aaron Lucas

Treasurer: Diane Moore

Directors (6 elected, with three year terms, 2 being elected each year)

Director 2018–2021: vacant

Director 2018–2021: vacant

Director 2019–2022: Sid Webb

Director 2019–2022: Gill Sorg

Director 2020-2023: CJ Goin

Director 2020-2023: Annie Mitchell

Last year's president—vacant

Committee chairs:

Conservation: vacant

Education: CJ Goin

Field Trips: Mark Pendleton

Programs: Vacant

Newsletter: Sid Webb

Website: Sid Webb

Membership: Diane Moore

Christmas Bird Count: Wayne Treers,

Facebook administrator: Elaine Stachera Simon

Climate Watch Coordinator: Mark Pendleton

Finance Committee: vacant

Join Us!

For visitors who have not yet joined, or old timers needing to renew their membership, April is the time of year we all pay our dues. Dues help with annual expenses relating to web page management, scholarship funds and other classroom educational expenses, monthly program costs, publicity (pamphlets, flyers, etc) and any unexpected expenses. For help with any payment (national or local, dues or donation), visit our website "Join" page (<https://www.mvasaudubon.org/join>). In advance, thank you very much.

Roadrunner Ramblings is published quarterly and is distributed via the web, with a copy e-mailed 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, hplibrarian8090@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.

Mesilla Valley Audubon Society
A Chapter of the National Audubon Society



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