



# ROADRUNNER RAMBLINGS

## MESILLA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

<https://www.mvasaudubon.org/> Vol. 45, Summer 2023 (May, June, July)

### President's Letter:

Dear MVAS members and friends:

I hope everyone is having a great spring migration!

Spring is the season of change, and there are a couple changes at MVAS.

First, Saturday, May 13 will be MVAS member and bird walk leader extraordinaire Joel Gilb's last bird walk for MVAS. He is graduating with his master's and will leave Las Cruces in June to make his way in the world. Thank you, Joel, best of luck, and keep in touch! (Stay tuned for the date and place of a goodbye gathering to send him off.)



Second, Sid Webb is stepping back from being newsletter editor and website manager. A million thanks to Sid for single-handedly wrangling the MVAS website and newsletter back to life! On behalf of all of MVAS, thank you! You've done a tremendous job and put your heart and soul into it, and it shows. Also on behalf of MVAS, thank you to Linda Miller (website) and Marcia Wilson (newsletter) who have stepped up to take over from Sid!

It was a year ago that CJ Goin stepped down as Education Chair after a long and excellent tenure working with local teachers to get kids out into nature and interested in birds. We'd still really love to find someone to fill that role—if you are a retired educator, perhaps you'd be willing to help out, even on occasion? If so, drop us an email and we'll get you underway! We are also looking to fill the recently vacated role of Field Trip Coordinator—I am especially interested in MVAS joining forces with our sister chapters and bird groups across southern NM and West Texas for birding adventures and mutual support.

Some of you know that at each program I make a point to thank the board members because they are, indeed, a working board, and each member generously shares their skills and talents not for the money (there is none), not for the perks (nope, none of those either), and not for the fame (well, maybe among us!), but for the love of birds and our birding community. Lots goes on behind the scenes, and I am grateful to MVAS board members past and present for their dedication.

Finally, a reminder to follow us on Facebook for Migration Mondays to learn more about—you guessed it—migration—with short and fun posts from Dylan Osterhaus—and updates from Trish Cutler and the Conservation Committee on Lights Out and other initiatives!

Good birding to all,

Elaine

## **Audubon Southwest Council Meeting | April 23-25, 2023 | by Sid Webb**

New Mexico Audubon chapters met Arizona Audubon chapters in Silver City at the first-ever joint meeting of the Southwest Audubon Council! All eight Arizona chapters and our four New Mexico chapters sent representatives to Silver City, where host chapter Southwestern New Mexico Audubon Society put on a great show. There were approximately 40 chapter representatives joined by administrators from the Audubon Southwest Council as well as representatives from National Audubon in New York City. The four participants from MVAS were Annie Mitchell, Sid Webb, Marcia Wilson, and Linda Miller.

The primary purpose of the conference was to allow members to become acquainted with each other and learn how we all respond to common challenges. Chapter presentations showed a great diversity in the scope of activities. The Tucson chapter, the nation's second largest, received a \$10,000 "Environment, Climate, and Social Justice" action grant to address inequities in conservation activities. Too often business or governmental "environmental" projects have an adverse impact on minorities and those in poorer communities. On a smaller scale, the Prescott Audubon Society showed us their bilingual brochure "Common Birds in Northern Arizona." It was initially created for Hispanic school kids going birding with Audubon reps from the Prescott chapter, but the response was so positive that they modified it to include English descriptions and make it available to everyone who goes birding with chapter leaders. Another Arizona chapter, Desert Rivers Audubon, is addressing issues related to bird migration in a much different way from our own "Light Out Las Cruces" initiative—we plan to get in touch with them to see what we can share. We had a lot of time to talk with attendees during the meetings and during breaks for meals and bird walks. It was a format that worked. We'll see what good things happen in the months ahead.

The main issue presented by representatives from National Audubon and Audubon Southwest addressed "Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging (EBID)." Videos and discussions helped focus the debate about how we should respond to the suggestion that the name "Audubon" be removed from all the chapter names and other levels of what is now the National Audubon Society. This has become an issue following the realization that John James Audubon was not only a slave holder, but also participated in questionable acts related to collection of skulls of native American and African American people for the pursuit of some pseudo-science regarding racial intelligence in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. As a national organization working to promote equity and inclusion, those who promote the name change cite evidence that continuing to use "Audubon" will ultimately result in a marked decrease in support. Others believe that the strength of the National Audubon Society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a result of 100 years of promotion of strong conservation ideals and that to abandon that name will be a mistake. The council leaders urged us all to continue the debate on our own turf and make decisions that are most reasonable for us locally.

In addition to the business of the day, there were fantastic bird walks throughout the Grant County area. Local chapter members led the walks and introduced us all to what they have to offer. Many thanks to our sister chapter Southwestern Audubon, Audubon Southwest, and National Audubon Society for bringing us together.

## Audubon Southwest Council meeting, continued



These photos were taken at the River Ranch Wildlife Management Area between Silver City and Deming off Hwy 180: #1: Turkey Vultures #2: juvenile Common Black Hawk #3 Vermilion Flycatcher (photos by Sid Webb)

*From the Audubon*

*Southwest Council meeting description page:* "This recently formed New Mexico Game and Fish property contains a mature riparian corridor along the Mimbres River, as well as (now overgrown) pastureland. Gray, Common Black, and Zone-tailed Hawks

have all been regulars here recently. This area brings interesting finds almost every visit." Entry into this area requires a special pass.



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## Upcoming Events for MVAS: May, June, July 2023

**5/1/2023 Monday. Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park. 8–10 a.m. Bird Walk.** 1st Monday of the month. Meet at the visitor center. Your walk leader is Mark Pendleton. Contact Mark at [mpndltn@gmail.com](mailto:mpndltn@gmail.com) (please put 1st Monday bird walk in the subject line) or call 575.635.8711 by the preceding Friday to let him know you are coming).

**5/13/2023 Saturday. Sagecrest Park/East of Las Cruces Dam. 8–10 a.m. Bird Walk.** 2nd Saturday of the month. Meet by the MVAS Keep Las Cruces Beautiful sign. Your walk leader is Joel Gilb. The group will proceed to the trail leading west.

**5/14/2023 Sunday. 8–9 a.m. Sagecrest Park Adopt A Spot clean-up.** MVAS has committed to Keep Las Cruces Beautiful (for the Birds!). Join other birders every six weeks to make this happen. Aaron Lucas is our pickup leader. Supplies provided by MVAS.

**5/17/2023 Wednesday. Tellbrook Park. 7:45–10 a.m. Bird walk.** 3rd Wednesday of the month. Meet at the park entrance. Your walk leader is Mark Pendleton. Contact Mark at [mpndltn@gmail.com](mailto:mpndltn@gmail.com) (please put 3rd Wednesday bird walk in the subject line) or call 575.635.8711 at least three days prior to let him know you are coming.

**5/24/2023 Wednesday. 7:30 p.m. Nature Journaling with John Muir Laws.** This **Zoom** program will feature writer and naturalist John Muir Laws. There is no meet 'n greet because it is not hosted by MVAS. Please note the later time, and details will follow via email closer to the event.

**5/27/2023 Saturday. Leasburg Dam State Park. 8–10 a.m. Bird walk.** Last Saturday of the month. Meet at the visitor center and plan to carpool to the day-use picnic area on river. Your walk leader is Dylan Osterhaus. The walk goes along the Mogollon Trail for approximately one mile (flat) and based on sightings will return along the same trail or the upper road.

**June and July: No bird walks. Too hot!** Instead, join us for Birds and Beers, no-host social gatherings.  
Wednesday, June 21: 6:00 p.m. Spotted Dog Brewery, 2920 Ave. de Mesilla (corner of University and 28/Ave. de Mesilla)  
Wednesday, July 19: 6:00 p.m. Ice Box Brewery, 3231 N. Main (across from Lowes)

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## La Mancha Wetlands: Earth Day 2023 | A New Beginning

“It’s like starting over. It’s a new beginning!” Earth Day 2023 at La Mancha Wetlands was celebrated by its new owner with a project to maintain a year-round source of water for the birds and beavers and all other wildlife that call it home. First, the good news. La Mancha has a new owner with lots of energy and ideas: Nuestra Tierra Conservation Project.

Nuestra Tierra Conservation Project is a nonprofit organization based in Las Cruces centered on ensuring that historically and deliberately excluded communities not only have access to the outdoors, but also that their histories, cultures, and values are reflected in the public lands management process and policies. Specifically, the organization wants to help disadvantaged Latino youth be part of the same sort of projects as their Anglo counterparts who have benefitted so

much from their outdoor experiences. Nuestra Tierra has promoted several initiatives in southern New Mexico and the Castner Range in El Paso, recently designated a national monument.

One Nuestra Tierra project involved the acquisition of La Mancha Wetlands, donated to Nuestra Tierra by the Southwest Environmental Center (SWEC) run by Kevin Bixby in 2022. La Mancha began with pond excavation in 2016 and wetlands restoration immediately thereafter. These manmade wetlands rely on groundwater. During scheduled water flow when water levels are high, it is a sizeable pond; when there is no water in the Rio Grande, water levels fall. One experienced observer noted water levels are lower now than he had ever seen them.



Earth Day visitors seen on far side of La Mancha's pond, which is at very low level in May 2023.

Nuestra Tierra's Earth Day event was an invitation to volunteer in the La Mancha spring cleanup. It began with an energetic call to work by Nuestra Tierra's executive director, Angel Peña. Much tumbleweed accumulated during the winter and needed removal to allow the beavers to swim. Clearing the pond's bank of cement-bound rebar that lay exposed by the very low water level was important to prevent injury to any human waders later in the season. Relocating a sign that had been located at the entry way was another task. There was enough work for everybody. Nuestra Tierra provided gloves, rakes, hoes, and shovels, as well as delicious burritos and bottled water. During my visit, there were about 20 volunteers, all active and happy and excited to be part of the project. One noted that a recent birder visiting La Mancha had identified 45 species of birds in one outing and they want to keep it that way!

Now, the bad news. La Mancha's borders have never been well defined. When it was built, it was embedded in a riparian area close to the west side of the Rio Grande in a minimally developed area. Even construction in the last decade did not impact it significantly. Now, however, further home construction has forced the exact legal borders to be defined, and La Mancha contains only four acres of land, significantly less than what visitors took for granted and fewer than the six acres that the new owner believed. Sadly, the western border has been cleared of all vegetation and La Mancha looks out at a barren space of land about to be filled with new homes.

It is in this setting that Nuestra Tierra is bravely moving forward with hope and enlisting a devoted crew to save this wetlands area. As proof that not all is lost, they point out that a kestrel nesting box erected in February of this year is now home to a pair of kestrels with their two eggs in the nest. They will do everything they can to make good things happen by keeping La Mancha alive and welcoming to wildlife and open to the human public. Find out more about Nuestra Tierra at <https://www.nuestra-tierra.org/> .



American Kestrel nest box with cleared area to the northwest of La Mancha Wetlands

## Richard Bischoff Scholarship Program Presentation | 2022 & 2023 Awardees

As we do each April, MVAS members were introduced to this year's scholarship awardee by the MVAS Richard Bischoff Scholarship Committee, which annually reviews applications and selects our scholarship winner. NMSU professor Carol Campbell, committee chair, describes the process as extremely rewarding. She enjoys not only the search for academic winners, she also enjoys the birds that enter into discussions as the committee does its work. Our April program featured both the 2023 award winner Whitney Watson presenting her work that our award will help fund and last year's winner, Dylan Osterhaus, updating us on his research so far.

Whitney Watson is from Minneapolis and attended Macalester College where she was a biology major. She did some short-term assisting in biology research projects around the country and became focused on ecology, deciding to study for a master's degree at University of Wisconsin before coming to NMSU for her Ph.D.



Here in Las Cruces, she plans on continuing a study on Rosy-Finches (Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, Black Rosy-Finch, and Brown-capped Rosy-Finch) in northern New Mexico. Her study uses hydrogen stable isotope analysis to fill knowledge gaps in Rosy-Finch ecology with a goal of better understanding breeding distributions, migratory connectivity, and breeding site fidelity. The isotope analysis is a modern technology that helps determine where the various Rosy-Finches have been before coming to the study site. The study involves capturing birds at different locations and studying changes in the isotope concentrations. So far, there have been more than 4,500 birds in the study. From what we heard in her presentation, Whitney will have a lot of very interesting findings for us at next year's program! (And we look forward to updates along the way!)



The second presentation was by Dylan Osterhaus, who has become a favorite at MVAS activities over the last year. For his Bischoff Scholarship research update, he described his ongoing study of avian migration and small-scale artificial light at night. Most studies to date have demonstrated the serious problem migrating birds have with large-scale light pollution emanating from the skyscrapers of our largest cities, with large numbers of deaths from birds hitting windows and disruption of their usual migratory patterns causing further death down the line. Not much attention has been paid to the impact of light from smaller cities or individual buildings. Dylan's study uses acoustics technology and radar to track birds migrating at night over White Sands Missile Range. The

questions raised are: Does small-scale artificial light at night influence avian migration? And, are migration metrics from acoustic analysis and radar analysis comparable? To answer these questions, he has placed microphones and radar detection devices around the missile range, both close to bright buildings and in open, barren areas, over an area of 30 miles. To date he does not have a final answer to his questions and is working with Cornell University to help with analysis of the data collected. Dylan covered many aspects of bird migratory habits in North America while presenting his data in a very interesting presentation. Thanks for the update, Dylan, and thanks for all you do for MVAS and NMSU!

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## MVAS Conservation Committee | Lights Out Program Update

The Conservation Committee (CC) proposes to focus on the following areas in 2023.

Social media: Dylan Osterhaus's "Migration Monday," a brief paragraph highlighting an interesting factoid about bird migration, is a post that will appear via Facebook and our web page weekly throughout the spring migration season. After Dylan's initial effort, Trish Cutler is interested in creating a series of posts on beneficial lighting practices.

Partnering: At the Audubon Arizona/New Mexico meetup in Silver City (April 2023), initial contact with Arizona's Audubon chapters may lead to new approaches. The NMSU Astronomy faculty and staff have invited Trish Cutler to give an informal presentation on what MVAS has learned about artificial light and City of Las Cruces lighting codes. This could lead to further discussions and collaboration on the issue.

Potential partners include the new NM Chapter of the International Dark Sky Association (IDA), the NMSU Astronomy department, and the Astronomical Society of Las Cruces.

The committee will stay abreast of the Lights Out Texas (LOT) program, but we don't currently have the resources to duplicate their program. The Texas LOT program is focused on tall buildings and collisions with glass, which is a bit different than our situation in Las Cruces where impacts are more likely to be related to migration interference and impacts to bird fitness.

Lighting survey: A survey protocol was developed by MVAS member and NMSU graduate student Kelley Boland. She has created a data sheet in the Epicollect phone app that has been field-tested and updated. Members of the CC will collect data opportunistically, and survey training could provide an opportunity to educate the MVAS membership about the problem and enlist some help with the survey. Other groups may also be interested in helping to collect data. The goal of the survey is to record and understand examples of both good and bad lighting throughout Las Cruces. The data can be used for appreciation certificates and to convey the problem to the City Council and others so that the situation can be improved. The survey could also be used to track changes in lighting over time.

Education and awareness: The CC would like to use various methods to increase education and awareness on the topic, including social media posts, presentations, participation in local radio shows, the development and distribution of educational materials, certificates of appreciation to businesses, and letters to the editor. Assistance from our MVAS members will certainly be an appreciated part of this.

For more details on MVAS activities visit the website: <https://www.mvasaudubon.org/conservation>

### C.J. Says: Butterflies will soon appear in the Mesilla Valley! A few tips...



Sulphurs are a large family of butterflies. Most are some shade—or a combination—of green, orange, or yellow. They can be difficult to identify because many species are similar, and they always perch with wings closed, making it difficult to see the upper-side pattern. Three common sulphurs in our area are the Cloudless Sulphur (left), Sleepy Orange (center) and Southern Dogface (right). Cloudless Sulphur females are greenish white and males are bright yellow. Both sexes have cell-end spots on forewing and hindwing. The Sleepy Orange (orange in winter, yellow in summer) has brick

red markings and a black spot in the forewing cell. The Southern Dogface has a dog-face pattern on its upper-sides (visible in the backlit wings in the photo) and pink veining. These are not the only sulphurs found in our area and, again, they can be difficult to identify. If you see a sulphur and are not sure of the ID, you may send me a photo and I'll try to help you with it. C.J. Goin ([cjgoin11@gmail.com](mailto:cjgoin11@gmail.com))

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## MVAS Photographer Matches Award-winning National Audubon Photo of Cactus Wren in Action:

Mike Henry's award-winning photo



Sara Kay Walker's photo



### “Face Full of Feathers”

*Audubon commentary:* “For Cactus Wrens, nest construction is a big deal. The nest itself is substantial: a large, globular structure of twigs and dry stems, with an entrance on the side, and lined with an abundance of feathers. Cactus Wrens make nests not only for raising young, but also for roosting in at night, so each individual may be involved in building multiple nests every year. Pairs can usually find materials for the outer structure very close to the nest site, but they may have to range much farther to find the soft lining, so it’s not unusual to see a Cactus Wren flying through the desert with its bill stuffed full of feathers.”

To see all the National Audubon award-winning photos, visit: <https://www.audubon.org/news/our-favorite-fascinating-bird-behaviors-2022-audubon-photo-awards>.

*Sara’s commentary for the 2020 Holi-birdy Photo Party:* “The Cactus Wren was very busy on 12-02-2020 by the road to Aguirre Spring. I can’t believe he/she was building a nest. Perhaps the bird feathers were being collected to repair an existing nest and insulate it to protect from the cold weather. Where did they come from?”

### *Editor’s note:*

*The following is the description of Cactus Wren and nest building from eBird’s All About Birds: “No bird exemplifies southwestern deserts better than the noisy Cactus Wren. At all hours of the day they utter a raw, scratchy noise that sounds like they are trying to start a car. Cactus Wrens are always up to something, whether hopping around on the ground, fanning their tails, scolding their neighbors, or singing from the tops of cacti. They build nests the size and shape of footballs which they use during the breeding and nonbreeding season. Cactus Wrens are true desert dwellers; they can survive without needing to drink freestanding water.”*

Way to go, Sara Kay Walker!

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*Editor's note: This article was posted on "Newsletter Supplements," a new section of the MVAS website on the home page. "Newsletter Supplements" will be used for important articles that missed Roadrunner Rambler publication deadlines or posts following Zoom meetings, answering questions that may have arisen. Check it out from time to time to be sure you are not missing something of interest to you.*

## **Upper Rio Grande Citizens forum 2-23-2023 | Good News for Las Cruces**

At a Zoom meeting on 2/23/2023, the US International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC) Upper Rio Grande Citizens Forum addressed multiple issues in a very positive way. The first speaker was Elizabeth Verdecchia, who spoke about the "USIBC Update on Habitat Restoration Activities in the Rio Grande Canalization Flood Control Project." She announced that plans for the Las Cruces Water Effluent Riparian Rehabilitation Project would be complete and available by August of this year, with action on the ground to follow. Little more was said, but this is the first mention of the project in over two years and was therefore very exciting. She had a lot to report on how busy the USIBWC has been with other projects to fulfill its goals of water delivery and flood control. Habitat restoration has been completed at 22 sites since 2009. Monitoring to detect the multiple challenges to restoration has revealed significant trash dumping, vandalism, unauthorized hunting, and unauthorized vehicle tracks at many sites. Projects include many different forms of aquatic habitat restoration, including salt cedar removal and willow transplantation, sediment removal and efforts to acquire surface water rights to meet commitments. It is no wonder that the Las Cruces water effluent project was put on hold. I can't wait for the August announcement.

Other speakers followed. Recently, the USIBWC has been placing signage on its property to control prohibited public use. Permitted recreational uses include walking/jogging, bicycling, horseback riding, and bird hunting in designated areas in certain seasons. Prohibited uses include motorized vehicles of any kind. Signs have worked significantly! However, vandals have been responsible for much signage degradation and sign replacement is costly. It is a work in progress.

*Photo from Rio Bosque Wetlands Park*



The final talk during the Zoom meeting was a presentation by John Sproul about Rio Bosque Wetlands Park in El Paso. This area is one of El Paso's favorite birding areas and has quite a history. It was initially conceived in 1934, before the canalization of the El Paso stretch of the Rio Grande. In steps deftly described and illustrated, development of this wetlands park came to life during John's talk. In the setting of a maturing El Paso and a Rio Grande undergoing dramatic changes, much has been

required. Water diversions, dams, accessing underground water via new wells, and much being requested of the El Paso City Government as well as the USIBWC, so that now it has water 12 months a year. This area is open year-round, seven days a week. The park has 7 ½ miles of trails. The final slide in John's presentation was of a beaver in front of one of the seven dams he built, probably working harder than any of us could imagine.

USIBWC webpage with full reports outlined above: [https://www.ibwc.gov/Citizens\\_Forum/CF\\_URG.html](https://www.ibwc.gov/Citizens_Forum/CF_URG.html)

Sid Webb  
Member, Upper Rio Grande Citizens Forum



**White-breasted Nuthatch, photo credit Molly Molloy**

*Editor's note: This will be the last issue of Roadrunner Ramblings with Sid Webb as editor. All of you at MVAS have helped me with every issue we've published. Thank you very much. It has been an honor to fill this role, but it is time for change. The new editor will be Marsha Wilson, a skilled birder and wildlife conservationist with a fresh perspective on all things birding. We wish her well. Sid Webb 5/1/2023*

## **Current Officers and Board Members for Mesilla Valley Audubon Society 2023**

**President:** Elaine Stachera Simon

**Vice-president:** Mark Ryan

**Secretary:** Cheryl Fallstead

**Treasurer:** Diane Moore

**Directors** (seven elected with three-year terms, two elected each year)

Director 2021-2023 Dylan Osterhaus

Director 2021-2023 Trish Cutler

Director 2022-2024 Sid Webb

Director 2022-2024 Gill Sorg

Director 2023-2025 CJ Goin

Director 2023-2025 Annie Mitchell

Director 2023-2025 Marcia Wilson

Director 2023-2025 Linda Miller

### **Committee chairs**

Conservation: Trish Cutler

Education: vacant

Field Trips: vacant

Programs: vacant, currently managed by president

Newsletter: Marsha Wilson

Website: Linda Miller

Membership: Annie Mitchell

Christmas Bird Count: Mark Pendleton

Facebook admin: Elaine Stachera Simon

Climate Watch Coordinator: Mark Pendleton

**Roadrunner Ramblings** is published quarterly and is distributed via the [MVAS website](#), with a copy emailed to all MVAS members and friends. All members of MVAS are encouraged to submit articles of interest and any bird photograph recently taken. Please email your contributions to Marsha Wilson at [sleepingsafe@yahoo.com](mailto:sleepingsafe@yahoo.com). To be added to the distribution list, contact Elaine Stachera Simon at [mesillavalleyaudubon@gmail.com](mailto:mesillavalleyaudubon@gmail.com)

**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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