



ROADRUNNER RAMBLINGS

MESILLA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

<https://www.mvasaudubon.org/> Vol. 44, Summer 2022



Western Meadowlarks enjoying spring at Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park

President's Column

Dear MVAS Members and Friends:

Time flies faster than the birds. The Western Kingbirds (always a harbinger of hot weather, not to mention my own personal version of the boys of summer, with somewhat ironic apologies to The Eagles) have already taken up their summertime patrol of my backyard.

It's also time for MVAS to go on our annual summertime hiatus—we'll have a May monthly program, but June and July will be devoted to socializing over frosty mugs and tales of birding adventures. Check out the calendar to find out where we'll be meeting!

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Bischoff Scholarship Awards 2021 & 2022

The April Mesilla Valley Audubon Society (MVAS) monthly program featured the annual presentation by the current Bischoff Scholarship winner and introduction of the new winner. The Richard Bischoff Graduate Scholarship is a one-year, \$1,500 scholarship to a graduate student at New Mexico State University, supported by MVAS dues and donations. The scholarship is available to graduate students in the Departments of Biology, Geography, or Fish, Wildlife and Conservation Ecology. The scholarship committee, chaired by Dr. Carol Campbell, accepts scholarship applications each spring.

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Continuation: President's Column

Before we take our summertime break, I'd like to recognize and thank board member CJ Goin, who in May is stepping down from his role as Education Committee chair and from his classroom volunteer work. CJ will continue to serve on the MVAS board.

CJ spent 20 years as a high school teacher on the Navajo reservation in Ganado, AZ, and we were fortunate he brought his expertise to MVAS. CJ has been involved with MVAS for about 12 years, serving for the past five as a board member and our liaison to area schools. Always in high demand as a classroom presenter and field trip leader, CJ earned the respect and gratitude of many area teachers. He has presented bird programs to thousands of kids over the years! "Watching kids learn and get excited about learning really kept me going," CJ said.

Thank you and muchas gracias, CJ, for your dedication and passion for educating young people about birds and the natural world.

Happy summer to all, and good birding.

Elaine



Black-headed Grosbeak, Leasburg Dam State Park,
by CJ Goin 4/30/2022

Continuation: Bischoff Scholarship Awards

The first half of the April Zoom program featured 2021's scholarship winner, Leah White, describing her work over the past year. Leah's research presentation was titled "The Influence of Wildfire and Forest Management on Large Mammal Distribution, Habitat Use, and Co-occurrence in the Jemez Mountains of New Mexico." The study site has been ravaged by wildfire frequently in the last decade, resulting in extensive habitat loss. Her project is designed to document the return of mammalian life to the area depending on the extent of habitat loss from fire and other variables. Leah chose four mammals for study: black bear, mule deer, coyote, and elk. She set up cameras throughout the fire-devastated range to document the animals over time. She placed a total of 154 cameras in areas with varying levels of habitat damage.

During 2021, her 154 cameras produced a total of 2,037,518 photos, of which 832,230 photos were of good quality and 16,694 showed animals. Initial review identified at least 27 different mammalian species. Data analysis is ongoing. Correlating presence or absence of study animals with the status of the terrain where the photo was taken is a major study goal and requires additional computer-assisted photo reviews.

Leah's presentation included photos from the field, showing study animals as well as birds and several other native fauna, sometimes in very dramatic settings. Her results will certainly be of interest to the general public as well as our stewards of national forest areas throughout the Southwest.

The second half of the Zoom program featured 2022 scholarship winner Dylan Osterhaus. His research addresses the impact of light on spring and fall nighttime bird migration, with data to be collected at White Sands Missile Range. He will update us a year from now on his findings.



Recap: Fall 2020 Avian Mortality Event

Dylan Osterhaus

Throughout the spring and summer of 2020, low precipitation, extreme wildfires, and widespread drought dominated the Intermountain West. As fall migration began, birds had to contend with poor migration conditions stemming from drought conditions including the reduced quality of stopover habitat. On 18 August 2020, biologists at White Sands Missile Range (WSMR) began receiving reports of dead birds on the missile range. Initially these were primarily granivores (mostly sparrows and blackbirds; Trish Cutler and Dr. Martha Desmond, unpublished data). At the time, we did not know that this was just a precursor to a large-scale event that would capture the attention of conservationists throughout the region and make national news. Now, more than 18 months after the event, we have a better understanding of what occurred and what this implies for the future of bird migration and conservation within the region.

In the weeks following this initial discovery, numerous additional reports of bird mortalities (still primarily granivores) were received at WSMR and the total number of deceased birds was nearly 100 (Trish Cutler, personal communication). Then, following days of record-breaking high temperatures, a massive early-

season weather system pushed through much of the American West bringing high windspeeds, rain, snow, and extreme temperature swings. In the days following the storm, large numbers of dead birds from a diverse range of species (no longer dominated by granivores) were found not only on WSMR but at many locations throughout New Mexico and surrounding states*. While the exact number of mortalities is unknown, given the expansive region in which birds were found and the densities at which they were discovered, it is likely that tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of birds perished during this event.

While large-scale avian mortality events have occurred many times in the past, these events are typically localized, directly related to extreme weather events, and have an obvious cause (such as building collisions in bad weather). However, with this event, mortalities were beginning to be reported three weeks prior to the extreme weather event, and deceased birds were found in large numbers over a large expanse of the American West. To determine the cause of death of birds during the 2020 event, many of the deceased birds were necropsied by the US Fish and Wildlife Service Forensics Laboratory in Ashland, OR and the US Geological Survey National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, WI. The results of the necropsies overwhelmingly indicated that the birds were severely emaciated, had atrophied muscles, reduced body mass, and fat scores of zero. Starvation was indicated as the cause of death in nearly all cases. While migration is physiologically stressful, and birds will naturally experience low fat scores and poor body condition during this life stage, the atrophy of flight muscles and general loss of mass is not normal during migration.

The large geographic and temporal scale of this event, as well as the extreme emaciation of nearly all deceased birds, indicates that these mortalities are the symptom of a more widespread issue. Given the extreme drought that was ongoing throughout the region during the breeding and pre-migration season, it is likely that birds struggled to find enough food during these periods to build up the reserves needed for their southward journeys. The lack of energetic reserves during the physiologically taxing period of migration appeared to result in the deaths of birds beginning as early as the first report on August 18. Then, when the storm system hit, birds were forced into an even more physiologically

demanding state, with no reserves to fall back on to get them through. As a result, birds succumbed to hypothermia and starvation from the combined energetic demands of migration and maintaining body temperatures in the cold.

As climate change progresses, leading to more frequent and widespread drought, it is likely that we will see large-scale mortality events like this again. Additionally, as the severity of extreme weather events (like the storm that occurred during fall 2020) is projected to increase with climate change, birds will likely be exposed more frequently to extreme weather during migration, which increases energetic cost and mortality risk. If birds are not able to build up sufficient reserves before migration due to a lack of food caused by drought, and if they cannot recoup energetic losses by feeding at stopover sites during their journeys, then the ability of birds to endure extreme storms will likely decrease.

So, what can we do to prevent events like this from happening in the future? At the local scale, we can work to identify and conserve important stopover habitats that birds rely on as refueling sites during migration. We are lucky, as we have many of these amazing stopover locations (such as Mesilla Valley Bosque and Leasburg Dam State Parks, Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, etc.) within close proximity to Las Cruces, and they provide exceptional bird habitat during migration. Many of these sites are located along the Rio Grande, and it is vital that the river valley and its aquatic resources be conserved to provide habitat and food for migratory birds. A multitude of plant and animal species (in addition to birds) rely on this imperiled ecosystem and would benefit from the conservation of its waters. In our own backyards we can enhance bird habitat by planting native shrubs, which also promote increases in insect populations. Additionally, while cats were not a major cause of mortality during this event, we should

advocate for all cats to be kept indoors and for a stoppage of the spay, neuter, release programs, as cats are the leading cause of human-induced bird deaths in the US. Finally, we can petition our local policy makers to put an end to activities that are outdated and extremely detrimental to bird populations and habitat, such as fogging for insects.

On a larger scale, we can advocate for the identification and conservation of a network of important breeding, stopover, and wintering habitats for the birds that migrate throughout the American West. We can also strive to improve water management practices within the American West so that river systems throughout the region can provide quality habitat year-round. At both the local and large scale, we can advocate for improved light management through “Lights Out for Birds” campaigns that limit the impact our lights at night have on migrating birds. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we can advocate for regulations and practices that limit increases in global climate change and reverse the impacts that we are already seeing.

Birds are a shared resource; they are for everyone and can be enjoyed by everyone. Birds also play vital ecosystem roles contributing to pollination, seed dispersion, and natural insect control. Therefore, it is our responsibility to conserve them for the enjoyment of future generations and the health of future ecosystems. If we hope to be successful in doing this, now is the time to act to reverse the stressors that caused the 2020 mortality event so that similar events do not occur in the future and birds can complete their migratory journeys unimpeded.

* In our region, Trish Cutler, Martha Desmond, Mara Weisenberger, and Allison Salas were instrumental in coordinating a quick response to the reported bird mortalities, organizing searches and an iNaturalist reporting program, and the collection, identification, and analysis of carcasses.

Editor's note: On April 20 and 25 the Mesilla Valley Audubon Society were presented with proclamations by the City of Las Cruces and Doña Ana County that MVAS had submitted advocating for dark skies to help birds with their annual spring and fall migrations. National Audubon Society launched the Migratory Bird Initiative (www.audubon.org/conservation/migratory-bird-initiative), which promotes improving the safety of bird migration with participation by all Audubon chapters. Of the many approaches to helping during migration, reducing excess external nighttime lighting is just one step. The essay below, written by board member Dana Loy, is what we would like all our members and friends to appreciate as part of the multi-step process that National Audubon is laying before us. It is the first of many articles that will surely follow. The full proclamation has been posted in the Conservation section of our webpage (www.mvasaudubon.org/conservation).

Lights Out Las Cruces

by Dana Loy

It's time for migrating birds to pass through southern New Mexico. We can help them stay safe by turning down the nighttime lights and keeping our beautiful skies dark.

The National Audubon Society promotes dark skies for migrating birds through its Lights Out program, and, locally, the Mesilla Valley Audubon Society is leading that effort for New Mexico. During April, at our request, the Las Cruces City Council and the Doña Ana County Commissioners issued a Lights Out for Birds proclamation, clearing the way to promote bird-friendly night skies in our region, especially during the spring and fall migrations.

When birds pass over cities and towns lit up by too many lights, they tend to fly toward the brightness, crashing into buildings or circling for hours, wasting energy and becoming vulnerable to other threats. Add glaring lights to the countless other dangers in the lives of birds, and millions more will die each year.

MVAS believes that if most people knew about the harms of excessive lighting, they would lower or turn off many of their outdoor lights to help save birds, reduce electricity waste, and see the stars. We advocate lowering the lights during bird migration and strong enforcement and strengthening of our city's lighting ordinances throughout the year.

By alerting our City Council and County Commissioners to the Lights Out issue and asking for the proclamation, MVAS has made a first step toward keeping our skies safe for birds while supporting Las Cruces' sustainability and climate goals through reducing energy use. The proclamation asks that lights be dimmed from April 22 to May 12 and September 6 to October 29 during the hours of 11:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m.

Dark skies not only help protect birds; they're also calming and beautiful. They let the stars shine through and are good for the physical and behavioral health of all animals, including people. But dark skies can disappear, as we've seen in much of the country. That loss is creeping into our region, too: aerial photographs show a persistent glare over Las Cruces. If we don't act soon, the beauty of the night in southern New Mexico will vanish, and once our beloved dark skies are gone, they won't be back.

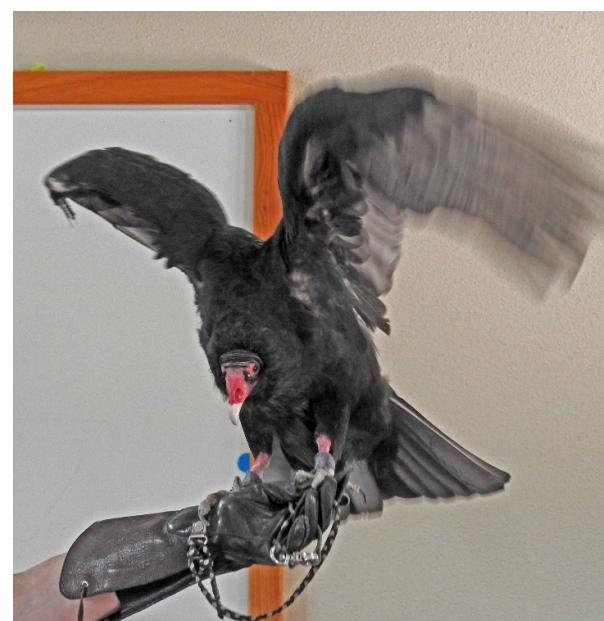
New Mexico Raptors Presentation at Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park

Sponsored by MVAS

New Mexico Raptors is a not-for-profit organization that introduces fascinating birds of prey to curious members of the public.

Sponsored by MVAS, on April 23, Laura McCann with New Mexico Raptors introduced a Red-tailed Hawk, a Great Horned Owl, and a Turkey Vulture during an educational demonstration at Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park. All birds responded to the respectful, informed, and loving introduction by Laura. She has been the caregiver for these birds of prey that faced almost certain death consequent to injuries such as a broken wing or eye injury; however, now they will live long lives as ambassadors for their species.

Each of her birds is obviously her friend. During her talk she discussed how to deal with an injured bird if we find one (her instruction page has been added to the MVAS website at mvasaudubon.org). She shared anecdotes about each species and highlighted differences between vultures, raptors, and other birds of prey. Thank you Laura McCann for a great presentation and thank you Jon Samuelson for sharing your photographs.



4-24-2022: Bird Walkin' With Our Friends in El Paso!

Report from Judy Wilbur: Our El Paso bird walk on April 24 was a great success! El Paso birder extraordinaire John Groves led a dozen MVAS members to several El Paso hotspots: Ascarate Park, Memorial Park, and Keystone Heritage Park. We saw more than 50 species! The highlights of our trip were a Townsend's Warbler, a Hermit Warbler, a Semipalmated Plover, and three Burrowing Owls. Photos courtesy Jay Wilbur.



Some of the 12 birders



Burrowing Owl



Semipalmated Plover



Townsend's Warbler

Field Trip to Hueco Tanks in El Paso: Culturally, Anthropologically, Biologically, and Geologically Important

Judy Lazarus Yellon

Photo courtesy of Norman Legault



the park, there were vantage points from which we could still see the Organ Mountains.

Although most of the programs and guided hikes I have attended with Alex have been at MVBSP or Leasburg, I learned that Alex's first years as a ranger were at Hueco, where he lived on site with his family. Alex is always able to explain much about the land, plants, and animals, and for this trip he did so from a Native American perspective based on his Navajo heritage. Alex's descriptions led to a better understanding of the sacredness of this land to his ancestors across thousands of years. I appreciated that Alex invited one of his good friends from high school, Shorty, who is Tiwa and lives at the pueblo in El Paso, to join the hike. Shorty led us in a Native American prayer before the walk began.



Photo courtesy of Martine Dumont

The rock formations are dramatic and stunningly beautiful, but the fact that water has been able to accumulate in natural rock basins called huecos has drawn people to this desert area for thousands of years. The park hosts more than 200 bird species, various animals, and reptiles. Around 1150 the Jornada Mogollon lived in the area, cultivated the land, and built pit houses. In 1858, for just one year, the area served as a relay station for the Butterfield Overland Mail. By 1898, Silverio Escontrias ran a ranch on the property, and in 1957 legislation passed for the land to become a state park, but the state did not take it over until 1969 and Hueco Tanks finally opened to the public in 1970.

Petroglyphs and pictographs from 10,000 years ago provide clues to the stories of the people who came to this location. Of these, there is the largest known group of mask or face designs in North America. Because of these, the rock images are now a National Historic Landmark, State Archaeological Landmark, and on the National Register of Historic Places. Some of the pictographs that Alex showed us were quite faded, but Shorty has an app on his phone that enhances them so that the images can be seen more clearly.

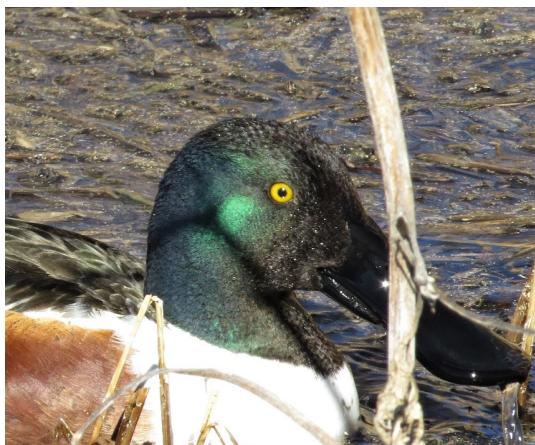
Visiting this park was a privilege. We saw the importance of this land being even better protected than it currently is.

MVAS offers many opportunities for group activities around birding, but I appreciate that additional activities such as this guided hike are being made available. It's obvious that we birders appreciate much about the environment and history of our area.



Photo courtesy of Martine Dumont

A few of the photos submitted by David Coalson





From top to bottom: Stellar's Jay, Mallard Duck, Red-tailed Hawk.
Thank you very much, David. Nice to have you back. Great pics!

Activity at Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park Bird Blind



On April 20, approximately 100 students from Tombaugh Elementary School attended a program at Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park. The students, divided into groups of 20, rotated between five stations: reptiles, native plants, wildlife and tracking, a pine cone bird feeding activity, and a birding station with MVAS's CJ Goin. CJ taught the students bird identification, bird calls, and how to use binoculars to look for birds.



Editor: Thank you, CJ

Upcoming Events

Editor's note: Traditionally during the months of June and July there are no scheduled MVAS bird walks or monthly programs. If this changes, emails will be sent and they will be added on the Calendar and Activities pages of the MVAS website.

May

May 2: Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park: 8–10:00 a.m. First Monday of the month beginners' bird walk. Meet at the visitor center. Your walk leader will be Mark Pendleton. Contact Mark at mpndltn@gmail.com (please put first Monday bird walk in the subject line) or call 575.635.8711 by the preceding Friday to let him know you are coming.

May 7: Sagecrest Park/East of Las Cruces Dam: 7:30–10 a.m. Second Saturday of the month bird walk. Your walk leader will be Tom Johnson. Meet at Sagecrest Park by the MVAS "Adopt A Spot" sign. The group will proceed to the trail leading west.

May 8: Global Big Day: Be a part of birding's biggest team! [Global Big Day](#) is an annual celebration of the birds around you. No matter where you are, join us virtually on 8 May, help celebrate [World Migratory Bird Day](#), and share the birds you find with eBird. For details, ebird.org/globalbigday

May 14: Percha Dam Bird Walk: The Percha Dam birding area is one of the most interesting birding locations along our section of the Rio Grande. The plan for this field trip/bird walk is to meet at the old K-Mart parking lot at 6:30 a.m. to carpool. (The old K-Mart building is at 1900 Bataan Memorial East, by Sam's Club and the Telshor 12 movie theater. Access to the parking lot is from Northrise or from the Del Rey exit on highway 70). All those interested should contact Mark at mpndltn@gmail.com or call 575-635-8711 to let him know you'll be there.

May 18: Tellbrook Park: 7:45–10:00 a.m. Third Wednesday of the month beginners' bird walk. Your walk leader will be Mark Pendleton. Meet at the park entrance. Contact Mark at mpndltn@gmail.com (please put third Wednesday bird walk in the subject line) or call 575.635.8711 at least three days before the event to let him know you are coming.

May 21: Wild Photography Workshop: 2–5 p.m. Dripping Springs Natural Area. Sponsored by BLM–Las Cruces Office. Instructor: Khandan Nirmalakhandan. See below.

May 22: Birds No Boys: Your walk leader is Elaine Stachera Simon. Details to follow.

May 28: Leasburg Dam State Park: 8–10 a.m. Last Saturday of the month. Your walk leader is CJ Goin. Meet at the visitor center at 8 a.m. and plan to carpool to the day-use picnic area. We'll walk the Mogollon Trail (approximately one mile) and return to the picnic area via the upper road or trail.

May 29: Adopt A Spot Cleanup: 8–9 a.m. Keep Las Cruces Beautiful (for the birds!) at our MVAS adopted spot, Sagecrest Park. Trish Cutler is your cleanup leader. Meet at the park entrance on Frontier. Grabbers and trash bags are provided.

June

June 15: Birds and Beers: 6:30 p.m. Spotted Dog Brewery, 2920 Avenida de Mesilla. A no-host good time for conversation and socializing.

July

July 20: Birds and Beers: 6:30 p.m. Icebox Brewing—North Main Taproom, 3231 N. Main St. A no-host good time for conversation and socializing.

WILD BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP

SPONSORED BY BLM LAS CRUCES OFFICE



Where: Dripping Springs Natural Area

When: 2:00 PM to 5:00 PM, Saturday 5/21/22*

Who: Limited to 10 participants*

What: This workshop will provide participants hands-on field experience in photographing wild birds in the canyon close to the visitor center at Dripping Springs Natural Area, access to which is normally restricted. Feeding stations and perches will be set up in the canyon in advance to attract the Spring migrants and get them accustomed to the location. Participants will be able to photograph the birds from about 15-20 ft. Participants are expected to be fully familiar with their photographic gear. To get the most out of this workshop, DSLR/mirrorless body with a 300 mm or longer lens and a tripod are suggested. More details will be provided to the registrants in advance of the event.

The workshop is offered free, but pre-registration is required by 5/15/22.

Contact for registration: Pat Driscoll

email: pdriscoll@blm.gov (preferred); phone: (575) 525-4389.

**If more than 10 register by the due date, a second session will be offered on 5/22/22 at the same time.*

Articles for Local Birders in Neighbors Magazine

MVAS Secretary Cheryl Fallstead is also the editor for *Neighbors*, a regional publication featuring articles highlighting the best of our area. Cheryl kindly provided links to articles of interest to birders and others who like to explore our natural community.

<https://lascruces.com/how-to-attract-hummingbirds-to-your-yard/>



[Attract Hummingbirds to Your Yard - LasCruces.com](#)

<https://lascruces.com/combating-climate-change-starts-in-your-garden/>



[Fight Climate Change in Your Garden | Tips for Gardening in the Desert | LasCruces.com](#)

<https://lascruces.com/top-10-places-to-go-bird-watching-around-las-cruces/>



[10 Places To Go Birding in Las Cruces | Outdoor Things to do in Las Cruces | LasCruces.com](#)

<https://lascruces.com/birding-hotspots/>



[Outdoor Things to Do | Birding Hot Spots - LasCruces.com](#)

<https://lascruces.com/explore-nature-through-journaling/>



[Explore Nature through Journaling - LasCruces.com](#)

<https://lascruces.com/new-mexico-national-wildlife-refuges-snow-geese-and-herons-and-cranes-oh-my/>



[How to Help Migrating Birds - LasCruces.com](#)



Links to the above collection of articles has also been added to the MVAS website at www.mvasaudubon.org/resources. Thank you very much, Cheryl!

Fire at the Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park 4-25-2022



A fire raged at Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park on 4/25/2022, the second in two years. This time, 50 acres of parkland to the west of the Elephant Butte Irrigation District-owned canal was the site of the fire. The damaged area starts at the park's northern limit and runs almost to the southern end of the canal. No park structures were burned and the recently constructed bird blind was not affected. The park rangers have closed the area to the public, anticipating it will be safe to reenter after approximately one month.

The burn was not as extensive or as severe as the fire two years ago. Most of the flora lost to the flames were invasive plants, as there were few native plants in the area. With plans for the annual water release from Elephant Butte Reservoir into the Rio Grande to begin on June 1, there is hope that the rise in the water level will stimulate growth without extensive delay. Water flow will take place for only a month, unfortunately.

It is nesting season now, and any bird nests in the fire area were surely destroyed. The extent of the loss of bird population, both in terms of species and numbers of birds, is unknown. The impact of the fire on birds populating the Resaca Trail area, close to the river, compared to the Upland Trail, is also an unknown.



Dear MVAS members,

Great news. A combination of new members and early payment of annual dues by established members resulted in more beginning-of-year support for Mesilla Valley Audubon Society than has been recorded in five years! Thank you!

Your dues support educational programs, sponsored programs, the Bischoff scholarship, the cost for Zoom, insurance, and necessary administrative expenses. All officers and board members are volunteers.

If you have not paid dues for 2022, now would be the perfect time to do so. You can pay your dues via the [MVAS website](#).

Thank you all very much!

Yours,

MVAS Dues Hawk

Officers and Board MVAS 2022

President: Elaine Stachera Simon
Vice-president: Mark Pendleton
Secretary: Cheryl Fallstead
Treasurer: Diane Moore

Directors

Director 2020–2023: CJ Goin
Director 2020–2023: Annie Mitchell
Director 2021–2024: Trish Cutler
Director 2021–2024: Tracy Patrick
Director 2019–2022: Sid Webb
Director 2019–2022: Gill Sorg
Director 2022–2025: Dana Loy

Committee chairs

Conservation: Trish Cutler
Education: vacant
Field Trips: Judy Wilbur
Programs: vacant, currently managed by president
Newsletter: Sid Webb
Website: Sid Webb
Membership: Diane Moore
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 sidwebb@gmail.com. To be added to the distribution list, contact Elaine Stachera Simon at 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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