

# ROADRUNNER RAMBLINGS

Volume 23, No. 1. January/February 2001

## *A great New Mexico birding adventure is about to begin!*

by Stephen Fettig

Birders of all interests and abilities are encouraged to take part, have fun, and contribute to mapping New Mexico's Breeding Bird Atlas Project.

The summer of 2000 was a trial year when 21 volunteers began observations for the New Mexico Breeding Bird Atlas Project. The 2001 breeding season will be the first full year for the atlas project. During the next five to seven years, observations will be collected in approximately 500 blocks to map New Mexico's breeding birds.

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In the summer of 2000, atlas volunteers reported more than 1100 observations involving 194 species in 34 habitats. Of the total, over 330 observations confirmed breeding and more than 190 indicated probable breeding. Volunteers contributed approximately 325 hours of bird observations. In addition, atlasers contributed more than 145 hours in transportation.

The Atlas project needs observers of all birding abilities, as well as regional organizers. As an observer, you will participate by surveying an atlas block and produce a comprehensive species list, and confirm breeding of at least 50% of bird species. This requires about 20-30 hours of careful bird watching and listening during several visits at different times within the breeding season. Most blocks in New Mexico are in rural areas, so be prepared to travel. The



## *President's Message*

by Ed Mayfield

Dear Audubon Members: Just a short message wishing everyone a wonderful holiday and a great 2001. I have had the honor to serve as your president for two years and I want to thank everyone in our organization for the effort and enthusiasm you have shown in those two years. Our chapter is the most active and fastest growing in the state. Our Audubon Adventures is the largest and most successful and has received national recognition.

Our national organization is undergoing a change that will affect each chapter. Audubon enters the new millennium with new growth goals and a revitalized focus on the Audubon mission, realizing that the strongest relationship is gained by working closely with the individual chapters.

We will have new goals to reach in the coming year. Politically, the Herp Bill, an act "Relating to Wildlife; Providing Protection for Amphibians and Reptiles; Amending and Enacting Sections of the NMSA 1978," will be introduced into the first session of the 45<sup>th</sup> state legislature. The bill will regulate or prohibit the taking or capturing of native, free-ranging amphibians and reptiles not specifically protected by law. This act will stop the taking of amphibians and reptiles out of the state for sale to pet stores around the nation. New Mexico is the only southwestern state without such protection, so this is a bill that we as an organization should support and promote to our state legislators this year.

Again, I want to thank the board and officers for the effort given to making the organization the most active and best in the state, and I want to thank all the members for your support. You all have made my job a pleasure.

(continued on page 2) See **Atlas**

atlas project will supply you with maps, field observation cards, and an atlas handbook.

Regional organizers are also needed who have good communication skills, good organizational skills, and who are willing to talk with 5-15 other birders in your area two or three times each month throughout the breeding season. Regional organizers will also be responsible for helping other volunteers learn atlas field methods. Overall, this means a commitment of about 4 hours per week during the breeding season.

The New Mexico Breeding Bird Atlas Project needs volunteers of all birding abilities. If you are interested in being a volunteer please contact Stephen Fettig at 505-662-6785 (osprey@cybermesa.com) or Jim Place at 505-883-1253 (placeabq@aol.com) for more information. Volunteers will be able to select atlas blocks on a first come basis starting in January 2001.

## Welcome New Members

Jay & Carol Fenberg  
Amanda Skarsgrad  
David McKee



### JOIN NOW!

I would like to join the **National Audubon Society** and **Mesilla Valley Audubon Society** for the introductory rate of \$20.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Q54  
7XCH

Membership includes the publications *Audubon* and *Roadrunner Ramblings*.

Send this application and your check (made payable to National Audubon Society) to:

Membership, MVAS  
P.O. Box 1645  
Las Cruces, NM 88004

## In Memoriam

Our community suffered a sad loss in December with the passing of Dr. Ralph Raitt. Dr Raitt was known to many members of MVAS as a volunteer who shared his expertise, helping out with the bird ID course, giving presentations, and leading field trips. He also shared his interest and expertise in biology with generations of students at NMSU, where he was an emeritus faculty member of the Biology Department. In addition to his teaching activities, his research was recognized locally and by the international scientific community. He was awarded the Westhafen Award, the university's highest award for research. He served as the editor of *The Condor* and *Studies in Avian Biology*, and he was awarded both Fullbright and Guggenheim Fellowships to support his research in Central and South America.

The preceding examples illustrate his accomplishments at local, national, and international levels. However, these professional achievements are not what I most admired about him. What impressed me was that he had no interest in making me aware of these accomplishments. When he dropped by the Biology Department, he would always stop by for a chat; he was sincerely interested in what I and other members of the department were doing. He liked to talk about teaching, but he also liked to talk about taking friends and relatives on fly-fishing trips. I didn't know Ralph for very many years, but I do know that I always felt more relaxed and had a smile on my face after even the briefest of conversations. He was humble, kind, cheerful, and encouraging, and he will be missed.

*Ralph Preszler  
NMSU Dept. of Biology*

## Environmental Education—Fulfilling the Audubon Mission

by Wendy Davis

One of the most important goals of any Audubon Society chapter is to promote environmental education. As part of our Audubon philosophy, it is the role of Mesilla Valley Audubon Society members to "dedicate ourselves to the pleasant task of opening the eyes of young and old." We share with other conservation organizations the responsibility of teaching children and adults the importance of appreciating nature, preserving natural resources and protecting our natural habitats. A dedicated group of MVAS members is working very hard to fulfill this mission and is having a very positive effect on the growth of environmental education in the Las Cruces area.

Following are the projects on which we are now working:

- Presently, our most successful school program is Audubon Adventures, a natural history curriculum developed by professional environmental educators through the National Audubon Society. With MVAS funding, Audubon Adventures is currently made available to 84 fourth-grade classrooms in Las Cruces, Alamogordo and Truth or Consequences.
- Each spring, MVAS presents the Lorraine Schulte Excellence in Teaching Award to a local teacher, K-12, who
- For many years, MVAS members have visited classrooms and given presentations on a variety of natural history topics. The Las Cruces Public Schools Teachers' Center recently asked the chapter to participate in its SciAd (Science Advisors) program. This is a centralized listing of volunteers willing to go into the schools (grades K-12) during regular class time to give programs on the topic(s) of their choice.
- One of our newest Audubon activities is participation in the LCPS after-school enrichment program at the elementary school level. So far, two groups of Hillrise Elementary School students have enjoyed learning about "The Wonderful World of Nature" and the Chihuahuan Desert. We are helping to develop additional curricula to broaden the program, and training workshops are in the planning stage.
- Another school project in which we hope to be involved is the Federal Junior Duck Stamp Program and Scholarship

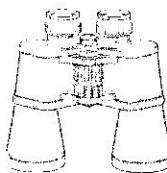
exemplifies excellence in educating and encouraging our youth to care for their environment. 2001 will be the 5<sup>th</sup> year for this award (see page 3).

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(continued on page 4) See **Education**



## Field Trips

New Mexico's winter weather is variable. Please be prepared with layered clothing, sunscreen, and plenty of water.

**Percha Dam, January 20.** On this mid-winter trip, we should expect to see woodpeckers, sparrows, blackbirds, kinglets, snipe, hawks, and a variety of waterfowl. If time allows, we will visit Animas Creek and Caballo Dam in addition to the Percha area. Meet at the K-Mart on Highway 70 at 6:30 AM, and plan on returning sometime in the early afternoon. Contact Ed Mayfield (382-0715 or [mayfield@zianet.com](mailto:mayfield@zianet.com)) for more information.

**Las Uvas Valley, Saturday February 24.** This broad valley, southwest of Hatch, is host to many raptors during the winter. At times, large flocks of sparrows, waterfowl, and shorebirds can be found as well. Walt Whitford will lead this trip, which will take off at 7:30 AM from the Chevron station at the Doña Ana Exit (this is the first exit north of Las Cruces on I-25, and the Chevron is on the north side of Thorpe Road, right next to the freeway). For more details, contact Walt at 646-8032 or [wawhiffo@nmsu.edu](mailto:wawhiffo@nmsu.edu).

## Leasburg State Park Birdlist

MVAS has decided to help produce a birdlist for Leasburg State Park similar to what we did for Palomas Marsh. A major difference is that Leasburg S.P. is only a 15-minute drive from Las Cruces. The list can only be produced with your help. You are being asked to visit the park, record the species that you see, and forward that list to me. This should be done at least once during the month for which you sign up. Multiple visits are welcome but not required. A sign-up sheet will be circulated at the next general meeting. You may also contact me directly. Please send me a list whenever you visit the park. The object is to find out which birds use the park and at what times of the year. Bill Jacobson, 2424 Sunridge Dr, Las Cruces, NM 88012 at 382-6877 or [bfrog@zianet.com](mailto:bfrog@zianet.com).



## Programs

Programs and meetings are held on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of each month, September - April, at the Village at Northrise, Hallmark Building, 2882 N. Roadrunner Pkwy, Las Cruces. Programs begin at 7:30 PM. News, announcements, and information begin at 6:45, preceding the program.

**Exploring the Secret World of Bats, January 17.** Mark Haikila, Natural Resource Specialist with the Bureau of Land Management, will share some bat secrets and address many of the common misconceptions about them. Bats are not blind, they aren't flying mice, and they don't get tangled up in your hair. Unfortunately, we've let our ignorance jeopardize one of the earth's most valuable assets: bats play key roles in a wide variety of ecosystems around the globe, from rainforests to the deserts. They constitute almost a quarter of all mammal species and come in an amazing variety - big-eared, sucker-footed, ghost-faced, spotted, wooly, spectacled - from the world's smallest mammal to giant flying foxes with up to six-foot wingspans! At the meeting, you'll be able to place a bid on your own personal bat-house, proceeds to benefit MVAS.

**Alaska's National Parks and Wilderness, 21 February.** John Rosapepe, of the National Parks Conservation Association, will share with us some of the wonders of Alaska's National Parks, including creatures as diverse as humpback whales, grizzly bears, and tundra-nesting migratory birds. His slide show is part of a celebration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passage of the Alaska National Lands Act, one of America's most significant conservation laws.

## Upcoming Special Events

**Jim Rising to Visit Las Cruces.** In January, we'll have several opportunities to meet with and learn from sparrow expert Jim Rising, who is the author of *The Sparrows of the United States and Canada* and a professor of Zoology at the University of Toronto. At 4:00 PM on the 16th, he will speak in Room 190 of Gerald Thomas Hall at NMSU on "Geographic Variation in Sparrows: Studies and Problems." If you'd like to be able to meet with Dr. Rising in person, MVAS has made arrangements to have dinner with him on Monday, January 15, and we can also join him in the field on a sparrow-banding expedition early on the morning of the 16th. For more information, contact Ed Mayfield ([mayfield@zianet.com](mailto:mayfield@zianet.com) or 382-0715).

**NM Audubon Council Meeting.** The next statewide Audubon Council meeting will be held at Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge on Saturday, January 27<sup>th</sup>. The emphasis of the meeting will be on education, and our own Lorraine Schulte and Joy McFarland will be featured speakers, explaining how they have made the MVAS Audubon Adventures program so successful that they have earned national recognition for their efforts. For additional information, contact Ed Mayfield ([mayfield@zianet.com](mailto:mayfield@zianet.com) or 382-0715).

## Annual Award Available for Teachers

The Lorraine Schulte Excellence in Teaching Award is presented by MVAS annually to a teacher for his/her efforts in teaching children to care for the environment. The amount of the cash award was raised this year to \$200. Audubon members are encouraged to nominate teachers they know who have displayed their interest in environmental education. Applications will be available at the January and February meetings. March 1 is the deadline for completed applications. Call Joy McFarland, 522-7235, for more information.

## Birding Hot Spot: A & G Turf Farm and 2 South Valley Gems

Located west of El Paso, near Santa Teresa, the turf farms are an anomalous patch of green on the desert mesa. These irrigated circles attract birds year-round, though some of the best birding occurs in fall and winter. In winter, large flocks of Horned Larks, meadow-larks, Killdeer, blackbirds, and several sparrow species can be found, with Chestnut-collared and McCown's Longspurs showing up fairly regularly. Rarities like Sprague's Pipit and Baird's Sparrow have been reported in winter as well. In the fall, many migrants rest at these fields, including Long-billed Curlews, Upland Sandpipers, American Pipits, and Mountain Bluebirds.

Though the biggest flocks appear in fall and winter, a trip to the turf farms can be productive during the warmer months too, especially if you take the scenic route (see *Alternate Directions* below) and visit the heron rookery and swallow colony on your way.

**Directions:** The fastest way to get to the turf farm is to take advantage of the brand new highway to the border crossing at Sunland Park. Drive south toward El Paso on I-10. Leave the interstate at Exit #8, Artercraft Road, and turn right to head west on Texas Highway 178 (which eventually turns into New Mexico Highway 136). About 6 miles west of the interstate, the highway begins to climb out of the river valley; about 7 miles from the freeway, take the first right on the mesa top (Airport Road). From Airport Road, take the first left (Industrial Road). In six-tenths of a mile the pavement turns left heading toward the port of entry; you want to go straight on the dirt road, past the water tower. To turn into the fields, take the first major dirt road to the left (about .3 mile after you leave the pavement). There are three grass circles, one to the left of this entrance road and two more up on the hill to the right. When you visit the turf farms, please keep your vehicle on the main roads and stay off the grass; also be aware that you may need to move your vehicle out of the way of heavy machinery that needs to reach the fields.

### Alternate directions to include

**South Valley Gems:** A more leisurely route to the turf farms that will let you enjoy the agricultural vistas and small historic towns in the river valley starts by following Highway 28 south from Mesilla. As you follow Highway 28 south, watch out for the tricky intersection about 1 ½ miles south of La Mesa (home of Chope's, a popular destination for home-made Mexican food); to stay on Highway 28, make sure you veer right at this intersection, instead of heading straight (east) on Highway 189. About 7 miles south of this intersection, you'll hit the first South Valley Gem, a heron rookery. Just south of the intersection of Highway 28 and Highway 186, there's a stand of large trees on the west side of Highway 28, easily observed from the highway shoulder. A variety of nesting herons and egrets can be observed in late spring and early summer.

The second South Valley Gem, a swallow colony which includes both Cave and Cliff Swallows, is less than two miles south on Highway 28. A mile and a half south of the rookery, you'll encounter a stop sign at Gadsen High School. Continue south ¼ mile, watching for a lone pine tree on the east side of the highway. When you reach the pine, you should see a bridge over the irrigation ditch that parallels the highway. The colony is under this bridge and should be active starting sometime in April. To observe the swallows, it seems to work best if you stay in your car, since the swallows often perch on the wires near the bridge when undisturbed.

To reach the turf farms from the swallow colony, continue south on Highway 28 for 5.7 miles. At the Y intersection with Highway 273, veer right, and follow Highway 273 for 4.7 miles as it zig-zags south and west. At Highway 136, turn right, climb up out of the river valley, and turn right onto Airport Road. Consult the preceding *Directions* to get from Airport Road to the turf farms.

*Nancy Stotz (with contributions from Cathie Sandell and Tim Lawton)*

(continued from page 2) **Education**

Competition which promotes "conservation through the arts" for children K-12. In this contest, budding artists submit their own artwork of waterfowl in hopes of it being chosen the illustration for the annual junior duck stamp.

• Each spring and fall, MVAS participates in the Doña Ana Branch Community College Community Education Program by offering an adult course in bird identification. Taught by our experienced members, it is geared toward beginning birders (for more information, see page 3).

Whether we are helping a first grader cut and paste a paper bird, contacting fourth grade teachers about their Audubon Adventures kits or leading a group of adults birding along the Rio Grande, we are increasing their exposure to the natural world. MVAS should feel proud and gratified that we are performing this much-needed service in our community. By fostering respect and appreciation for nature, we are building greater public awareness of the environment and the importance of preserving natural areas. Conservation and concern for wildlife are especially critical in an environment as delicate as our Chihuahuan Desert.

If you want to be part of this important effort, please join the MVAS Education Committee. You don't have to be a teacher or even a bird expert to participate in our education programs. Long-time as well as new members are always welcome. There will be a general Education Committee meeting on Monday, January 8, at 7:00 PM, at the downtown office of Steinborn Realty (south end of the Downtown Mall). If you would like to participate in any of the above activities, share ideas, or develop new projects, please plan to attend. For more information, or if you want to join the Education Committee but cannot come to the meeting, please call Wendy Davis (527-4551).

### Bird Notes Change

Please note that Sue Hill will be taking over as the collector and compiler of early, late, and unusual bird sightings. Effective December 20, call Sue at 382-9758 or email [hillco@zianet.com](mailto:hillco@zianet.com) to share your discoveries.

**Las Cruces Dam. December 2.**

Although the field trip was advertised as a chance to see lots of sparrows, the sparrows apparently don't read *Roadrunner Ramblings*, and they didn't show. Ten birders joined me on this futile search for sparrows during which we saw only a single individual of three sparrow species (Black-throated, Song, and White-crowned). However, the gorgeous weather and other critters we saw more than made up for the lack of sparrows. We ended up with 20 species of birds, including lots of raptors. Three Red-tailed Hawks posed all around us throughout the morning, allowing us to examine their plumage from front, back, and side, as well as in flight. A Cooper's Hawk crashed into a flock of Red-winged Blackbirds and we had a good enough look we could tell she failed to capture a meal. As we digested that bit of excitement, a Prairie Falcon flew in, letting us compare the falcon's powerful flight pattern to what we had just seen from the Cooper's Hawk. Not to be outdone by the avian predators, a coyote also made an appearance and loped along the top of the dam where we could see it clearly.

**Christmas Count. December 16.**

Though complete results of this year's Christmas Count have not yet been compiled, some preliminary numbers were produced at the compilation dinner where we all compared notes on our day's observations. Based on a rough tally of species seen, it appears that we saw about 131 species, which is short of our all time record, but should still be enough to give us second in the state, behind the Caballo count (not that birders are a competitive breed who would care about such things...).

Sparrows were hard to come by, with numbers and diversity down in many count territories, but montane species like Mountain Chickadees and Red Crossbills were relatively abundant. One party even observed Red Crossbills acting like experienced locals, feeding on pecans in an orchard. Other highlights included Gray Catbird, Yellow-throated Warbler, Harris' Sparrow, Swainson's Hawk, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher.

Nancy Stotz

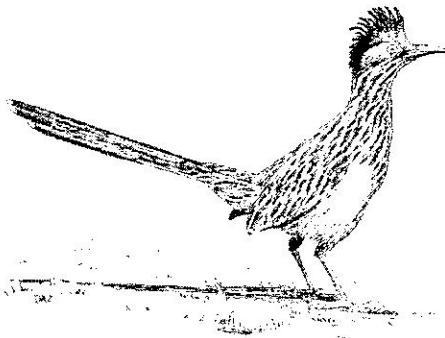
## Bird Notes

Species	Date	Location	Observer
Surf Scoter	Oct 18	Holloman AFB	GE
Brown Thrasher	Oct 19	Las Cruces	EM
Black-headed Grosbeak	Oct 19	Las Cruces	EM
Bridled Titmouse	Oct 20	Percha	LS, SH, WH
Hairy Woodpecker	Oct 20	Percha	LS, SH, WH
White-tailed Kite	Oct 20	South Valley	BZ, JZ, MS
Pygmy Nuthatch	Oct 25	Mesilla Park	CB
Juniper Titmouse	Oct 25	Mesilla Park	CB
White-eyed Vireo	Oct 26	Las Cruces	BJ
Harris Hawk (2)	Oct 27	Las Cruces	SH, WH
Sage Sparrow	Oct 27	Las Cruces	NST
Red Crossbill	Oct 27	NMSU	RH
Grtr. White-fronted Goose	Oct 30	Swan Pond	SH, WH
Evening Grosbeak	Oct 30	WSTF	HH
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	Oct 30	WSTF	HH
Steller's Jay	Oct 30	WSTF	HH
Ring-necked Pheasant	Oct 31	Missouri Ave	MLW
Lesser Goldfinch	Nov 1	Las Cruces	NSi, JM
Greater Scaup	Nov 4	Burn Lake	MVAS Bird Class
Osprey	Nov 4	Burn Lake	MVAS Bird Class
Common Loon	Nov 4	Burn Lake	MVAS Bird Class
Canvasback	Nov 4	Burn Lake	MVAS Bird Class
Prairie Falcon	Nov 4	Burn Lake	MVAS Bird Class
Bonaparte's Gull	Nov 8	Burn Lake	KS
Rose-breasted Grosbeak	Nov 9	Dripping Springs	Anon from MN
American Goldfinch	Nov 12	Las Cruces	NSi, JM
Lewis's Woodpecker	Nov 16	Burn Lake	SH, WH, LS
White-breasted Nuthatch	Nov 16	North Valley	SH, WH, LS
Hooded Merganser	Nov 16	Swan Pond	SH, WH, LS
Common Merganser	Nov 16	Swan Pond	SH, WH, LS
Mountain Chickadee	Nov 21	Mesilla Park	CB
Rough-legged Hawk (dark form)	Nov 22	Las Cruces	BS
Cassin's Finch	Nov 23	Mesilla Park	CB
Rufous Hummingbird	Nov 25	Animas Creek	FL, RB
Whimbrel	Nov 28	Yuma	BJ
Pinyon Jay	Dec 8	Mesilla	SH, WH, TL
Horned Lark	Dec 14	Hatch	CT
Harris Sparrow (2)	Dec 16	North Valley, La Cueva	CBC-TS, GE
Dark-eyed Junco (White-winged)	Dec 16	North Valley	CBC-TS
Gray Catbird	Dec 16	Mesilla	CBC Mid Valley
Yellow-throated Warbler	Dec 16	NMSU	CBC University
Cassin's Vireo	Dec 16	Las Cruces	CBC Jornada
Anna's Hummingbird	Dec 16	Las Cruces	CBC-LS

Observers: Craig Benkman, Richard Bischoff, Gordon Ewing, Richard Hermosillo, Sue Hill, Wally Hill, Bill Jacobson, Tim Lawton, Frankie Lerner, Ed Mayfield, Jim Mulhauser, Jerry Oldnette, John Parmenter, Lorraine Schulte, Marcy Scott, Bill Seager, Tara Shelton, Nena Singleton, Ken Stinnett, Nancy Stotz, Charles Townley, Mary Lou Wallace, Jimmy Zabriskie, Barry Zimmer, Christmas Bird Count

Please report early, late, or unusual sightings to Sue Hill  
505-382-9758 or [hillco@zianet.com](mailto:hillco@zianet.com)

New Mexico Rare Bird Hotline 505-323-9323



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(continued on page 2) See **Atlas**

### *Through Audubon Adventures Students Will Explore Topics like:*

Rivers • Schoolyard Habitats • Wetlands  
Animal Communications • Wildflowers • Migration  
Sea Turtles • Recycling • Bats

*Topics change every year!*

The logo for Audubon Adventures is a stylized graphic. At the top, a sun with rays is positioned above the word "Audubon" in a cursive, handwritten-style font. Below this, the word "Adventures" is written in a large, bold, sans-serif font that is slanted and has a distressed, hand-drawn appearance. To the right of "Adventures", the text "National Audubon Society" is written in a smaller, standard font. Below the main title, the words "and Only Everglades" are written in a smaller, bold, sans-serif font. A small illustration of a bird is placed next to the word "Audubon".

surviving at the top of the world

## AUDUBON ADVENTURES UPDATE

Currently Mesilla Valley Audubon Society has eighty-three fourth grade classrooms enrolled in National Audubon Society's excellent nature study program called Audubon Adventures. These classrooms are in Las Cruces, Truth or Consequences and Alamogordo.

The Association of Educational Publishers has named Audubon Adventures as a finalist for two "Distinguished Achievement Awards for Excellence in Educational Publishing". Audubon Adventures also received an APEX 2000 Award for Publication Excellence in the category of Education and Information Programs.

The 2000-2001 Audubon Adventures program features all new topics and a video. These topics include The Living Ocean, Nature's Bouquet (plants, fruits and seeds), From Dying to Thriving: Endangered species, and Owl Prowl. This year's video is Dolphin Adventures.

Each kit contains newspapers for students use on the subject matter. Included in the teacher's manual there is excellent resource material including websites.

Forty dollars will bring this program to one teacher and her students for one year. Funding for next year must be submitted before the end of the current school year. Please send your donation to Lorraine Schulte, Audubon Adventures chairman, 1740 Mariposa, Las Cruces, N.M. 88001 by May 1, 2001. Checks should be made out to Mesilla Valley Audubon Society.

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### AUDUBON ADVENTURES DONATION

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

AMOUNT \_\_\_\_\_

