

ROADRUNNER RAMBLINGS

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20
years

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BURROWING OWLS ON THE EDGE

by Jennifer Atchley

If Las Cruces ever decides to adopt an official city bird, the Burrowing Owl would be a likely candidate. It seems a content inhabitant of our urban environment, dodging tennis balls at Lions Park while hawking for insects, nesting in culverts at New Mexico State University, and perching on road signs. Witnessing the antics of these long-legged, ground-nesting raptors is part of the pleasure of living in Las Cruces.

So when Canada recently rang the alarm bell of this owl's decline, many birders, naturalists, and researchers were skeptical. With seemingly healthy populations here in the Chihuahuan Desert, in Florida, and in California, how could the bird be endangered in Canada? Surveys conducted by the Canadian government confirmed their suspicions: Burrowing Owls are declining at a rate of 10% per year. Today there are an estimated 1000 pairs in Canada, down from 2400 pairs in 1988.

The Burrowing Owl is widely distributed in the Western Hemisphere, occupying grasslands and shrublands from Canada to Tierra del Fuego. The Canadian Prairies, the northern end of their range, were once their stronghold in Canada. Conversion of prairie habitats to agriculture has reduced the original prairie by 75%. This decline in grassland greatly diminishes the bird's ability to find prey, such as voles and deer mice. Equally important to this overall habitat loss, is the degradation of remaining habitat. Once the owl arrives in Canada to breed, it requires a burrow excavated by ground squirrels or prairie dogs, but with active prairie dog eradication programs in the U.S. and Canada, burrows are almost as hard to find as the prairie itself.

In Minnesota, south of the Canadian prairie provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan, Burrowing Owls have not bred since 1991. Minnesota marks the eastern-most extension of the owl's range, as well as the eastern-most range of Richardson's ground squirrel. In neighboring North Dakota, the owl's status has changed from "fairly common" to "uncommon to rare" in the best potential habitat: ground-squirrel burrows and prairie dog colonies. The owl is thought to be rapidly disappearing from this prairie state as well. Coincidentally, the North Dakota legislature has deemed the Black-tailed Prairie Dog to be a noxious mammal—which means if you have them, you are obliged to rid your land of

them. In Montana and Colorado, surveys indicate that Black-tailed Prairie Dog colonies are the primary habitat of the Burrowing Owl, and the owl is uncommon outside of the colonies.

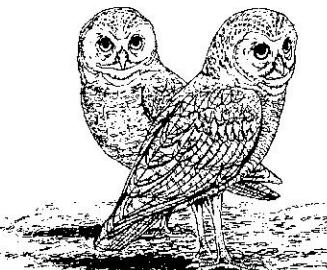
Arizona, Wyoming, and Utah are states that cannot currently report trends in population because the long-term data are inadequate and current surveys have just been initiated. In Utah, only 65 pairs have been documented this year.

In California, there are an estimated 9,000 pairs of Burrowing Owls, of which 70% live in the Imperial Valley, occupying burrows built by groundsquirrels along the maze of irrigation canals feeding agricultural crops. In Florida, Burrowing Owls have increased significantly with land clearing and wetland draining for urbanization. Though the owl has expanded its range here, there is a threshold to this increase and communities with increasing housing densities have begun to lose newly established nesting sites.

The owl is migratory in the Great Plains, Rocky Mountains, and Great Basin and resident in California, Florida, southern Arizona, New Mexico, and most of Mexico. Habitats used during migration are poorly known. The remains of one Burrowing Owl banded in Canada were recovered in south Texas in the Lower Rio Grande Valley where it appears to have been wintering within the culverts of agricultural fields.

Prey species across the range of the bird are not thoroughly documented, but it is known that in North America, the diet is primarily mammalian. Mice, voles and other rodents are the most common prey, but invertebrates such as grasshoppers, scorpions, and beetles are consumed regularly when they are available. In Mexico, reptiles have been documented as significant portions of the diet. In Colombia, the owl consumes a much higher portion of invertebrates, primarily dung beetles, than its North American counterparts.

Within North America, only 2% of prairie dog colonies remain. While all prairie states have suffered significant declines in prairie dog colonies, Texas once hosted more prairie dog colonies than the other states and has subsequently lost the largest proportion of these rodents. The loss of breeding and migration habitat for the Burrowing Owls in the Texas prairie dog colonies may play a significant role in the overall



(Continued on page 2) BURROWING OWLS

(Continued from page 1) **BURROWING OWLS**
status of the North American population. The dramatic decline in prairie dog colonies in all states has been caused by collective poisoning programs, hunting, and sylvatic plague (which is a strain introduced to North America).

There is strong evidence supporting destruction of Burrowing Owl habitat through the conversion of grasslands to shrublands and agriculture, and the evidence also seems to support habitat degradation in the form of the loss of active prairie dog burrows. This habitat loss and habitat degradation impair the ability of Burrowing Owls to seek prey, avoid predators, and eventually raise a new brood to maintain or increase the population. Survey and population trend data are lacking but population increases outside of Florida have not been reported, and most prairie states indicate declining populations. There is a large breeding population in the U.S. and Mexico.

The evidence for a population decline at the edges of its range is dramatic and may indicate that the migratory paths are degraded (loss of prairie dog burrows), that breeding grounds overall are diminished in size and number, that prey base has been modified (through conversion of native grassland and shrubland to other uses) and that insecticides may impact a seasonally valuable food source (grasshoppers, etc). This is a bird we need to keep track of because it may teach us the importance of maintaining links between species and habitats over a wide range, and the consequences of virtually eradicating the prairie dog.

In New Mexico, we have an opportunity to contribute to the knowledge on Burrowing Owl distribution. In your travels about New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Sonora, or Chihuahua, you should record your Burrowing Owl sightings. A paragraph with date, location (highway mile marker, maps, or descriptions), number of birds, whether or not there is an obvious burrow, and general habitat type should be forwarded to rcampbell@zianet.com, or mail to Carol Findley 1941 Mahogany Drive Las Cruces, NM 88001.

Come to the November meeting and learn more about this charismatic creature.

(Jennifer is the Chihuahuan Desert Program Office for the World Wildlife Fund.)

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

Our annual Christmas Bird Count will be held Saturday, December 19. MVAS is just one of many Audubon chapters across the country participating yearly in this national count which provides data on populations of winter birds. This is very valuable data and we need as many counters as possible.

The areas to be covered are the Rio Grande, NMSU, parks in Las Cruces, Mesilla, Dripping Springs/La Cueva, the Jornada, and backyard bird feeders. There are a number of ways to participate in the count: join a team, count on your own in the field, or count at your bird feeder.

After the count, we will have dinner at the Dynasty Restaurant on El Paseo to compare and compile data.

Contact Tim Lawton, 522-2056 or Gordon Ewing, 522-3934 for more information and to sign up.

PROGRAMS

ANNOUNCEMENTS
Programs and meetings are held on the 3rd Wednesday of each month September through April at the Las Cruces High School Library, 1755 El Paseo Rd. Programs begin at 7:30 pm. Announcements, news, and information begin at 6:45 pm preceding the program.

Burrowing Owls of New Mexico.

November 18. Carol Findley, a graduate student in the Fishery & Wildlife Science Dept. at NMSU, will discuss Burrowing Owls and the population at NMSU. She will present a slideshow on their problems, status, and possibilities for future conservation.

Illegal Wildlife Trade. December 16.

Doug McKenna, Special Agent with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, will be discussing illegal wildlife trade along the U.S. -Mexico border. Doug is an investigator responsible for enforcement of criminal and civil violations of the Migratory Bird Act, The Endangered Species Act, and the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES).

Sex Lives of White Pelicans. January 20.

Ann Janik, a wildlife biologist based in Albuquerque, worked for 8 years monitoring the White Pelican population in northern Nevada. She has worked on national wildlife refuges in Alaska, California, Nevada, and New Mexico and has worked extensively with colonial nesting birds and shorebirds in California and Alaska.

FIELD TRIPS

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

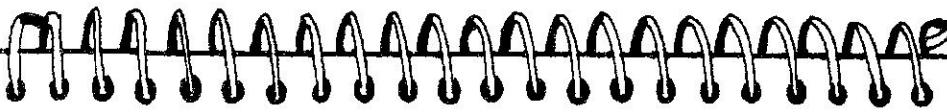
November 14. Bosque del Apache. Join Ann Heying for a great winter birding trip to see waterfowl, Bald Eagles and the always-spectacular Sandhill Cranes. The refuge staff will be providing a guided tour for our group. Contact Ann at 521-4215 for meeting place and time.

December 19. Christmas Bird Count.

The Christmas Bird Count will substitute for our December field trip. Please see preceding article for more information.

December 26. La Luz Christmas Bird Count.

(See pg 3 for details)



BIRD NOTES

Townsend's Warbler
 Nashville Warbler
 Virginia's Warbler
 Common Yellowthroat
 Olive-sided Flycatcher
 Cordilleran Flycatcher
 Western Wood-Pewee
 Peregrine Falcon
 Hammond's Flycatcher
 MacGillivray's Warbler
 Clay-colored Sparrow
 Black-throated Gray Warbler
 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
 Semipalmated Sandpiper
 Dickcissel
 Whimbrel
 White-crowned Sparrow
 Yellow-headed Blackbird
 Mississippi Kite
 Osprey
 Lincoln Sparrow
 Field Sparrow
 Gray Vireo
 Williamson's Sapsucker
 Plumbeous Vireo
 White Pelican
 Ferruginous hawk
 Rock Wren
 Northern Goshawk
 Violet-green Swallow
 Scott's Oriole
 Rose-breasted Grosbeak
 Anna's Hummingbird
 Brown Thrasher
 Gray Catbird
 Virginia Rail
 American Wigeon
 Ring-necked Duck
 Ruddy Duck
 Western Grebe
 Costa's Hummingbird
 Common Ground-dove
 Bufflehead
 Horned Grebe
 Forster's Tern

Sept 2 Percha State Pk LS
 Sept 5 Dripping Springs TL/MVAS
 Sept 5 Dripping Springs MVAS
 Sept 5 Dripping Springs MVAS
 Sept 5 Dripping Springs MVAS
 Sept 11 Kingston GE
 Sept 11 Kingston GE
 Sept 11 NMSU TL
 Sept 13 Las Cruces TL
 Sept 10 Rio Grande HH,BH
 Sept 20 Old Refuge SS
 Sept 20 Old Refuge SS
 Sept 24 Percha State Pk LS,SH
 Sept 24 Mesilla Dam GE
 Sept 24 Mesilla Dam GE
 Sept 29 Las Cruces GE
 Sept 30 Percha State Pk GE
 Oct 6 S. Las Cruces BS
 Oct 6 Las Cruces LS,SH,WH
 Oct 6 Percha/Caballo LS,JS
 Oct 10 N. Las Cruces MO
 Oct 14-21 Las Cruces LS
 Oct 15 Las Cruces EM
 Oct 19 N. Las Cruces MO
 Oct 19 Percha State Pk GE
 Oct 20 Burn Lake L-JS,S-WH
 Oct 21 Las Cruces TL
 Oct 24 Las Cruces GE
 Oct 29 Holloman Lake LS,JS,SH
 Oct 29 Holloman Lake LS,JS,SH
 Oct 30 Burn Lake LS

Observers: Barbara Harrison, Harold Harrison, Sue Hill, Wally Hill, Ed Mayfield, Mary Anne Owen, John Schulte, Lorraine Schulte, Bill Seager, MVAS (Tim Lawton, Gordon Ewing, Cathie Sandell, Storm Sermay, Carol Anderson, Eleanor Wootten)

Please report any early, late, or unusual sightings to: Tim Lawton
 e-mail tlawton@NMSU.edu or 505-522-2056

New Mexico Rare Bird Hotline 505-323-9323

FIELD TRIP REPORTS

Holloman Lakes, September 19.

This morning, about 20 birders from Las Cruces and Alamogordo met at Holloman Lake (Holloman AFB) and had a nice morning birding. With our trip leaders John Mangimeli and Hildy Reiser, we were able to visit Lagoon G (which cannot be entered without permission) and the new ponding areas. The highlight of the trip were two Peregrine Falcons that sat on the playa along Highway 70 and allowed us excellent looks. Other great birds were Virginia Rails, four Soras, Franklin's Gulls, a Forster's Tern, and Green-tailed Towhees. Lots of waterfowl were already at the lakes including, Gadwalls, Blue-winged Teals, Mallards, Cinnamon Teals, Northern Shovelers, Northern Pintails, Common Mergansers, Ruddy Ducks, and one Lesser Scaup. *Gordon Ewing*

Chiricahua Mountains, October 24

The field trip to the Chiricahuas was very successful and attended by 13 people. With the help of bird guide Dave Jasper, we had the best information and sightings possible for this time of year. Accommodations were very nice and everyone in the Portal area was helpful and informative. We saw over 60 species including, Yellow-eyed Junco, Strickland's Woodpecker, Canyon Towhee, Prairie Falcon, Golden Eagle, and Blue-throated, Anna's, Calliope, Magnificent, and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds. *Ed Mayfield, trip leader.*

TIRED?

of the "day after Christmas blues?"

Join John Mangimeli for the

La Luz Christmas Bird Count

on Saturday, December 26. Anyone interested should call John at 679-2599, ext 230 (day) or 505-479-4102 (eve).

NEW MEXICO AUDUBON COUNCIL

The date for the next council meeting is December 12 at the Sevilleta Refuge north of Socorro. Please call Storm Sermay, 382-3348 for more information. Audubon Members are welcome.

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.

OFFICERS AND BOARD

President	Bill Jacobson	382-6877
Vice-president	Tim Lawton	522-2056
Secretary	Sue Hill	382-9758
Treasurer	Mary Lou Wallace	522-0684
Board (96-98)	Lorraine Schulte	524-7029
Board (96-98)	Margaret Morey	527-1155
Board (97-99)	Ann Heying	521-4215
Board (97-99)	Maxine Perkins	524-1529
Board (98-00)	Ed Mayfield	382-0715
Board (98-00)	Jennifer Atchley	526-1320

COMMITTEE CHAIRS

Audubon Adventures	Lorraine Schulte	524-7029
Audubon Council	Jennifer Atchley	526-1320
Delegates	Storm Sermay	382-3348
Conservation	Margaret Morey	527-1155
Education	Maxine Perkins	524-1529
Field Trips	Vacant	
Membership Records	Mary Anne Thibodeau	524-4126
Membership	Ed Mayfield	382-0715
Newsletter Editor	Storm Sermay	382-3348
Programs	Jennifer Atchley	526-1320
Publicity	Ann Heying	521-4215

Board meetings are held, September through May, on the Thursday before the 3rd Wednesday at 5:30 pm at the Southwest Environmental Center, 1494A S. Solano Dr., Las Cruces NM 88001. All Audubon members are welcome.

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 NAS) to:

**Membership, MVAS, PO Box 3127,
 Las Cruces NM 88003**

NOTES FROM THE PRESIDENT

by Bill Jacobson

Our chapter finished second nationally among chapters with fewer than 300 members in last spring's Birdathon. Congratulations to all participants. Thanks also to those individuals who volunteered to survey at Palomas Marsh; we are covered through April. You can still volunteer for late spring or summer months. The Board has sent a letter to the International Boundary and Water Commission supporting the Southwest Environmental Center's position to use the Rio Grande channel to deliver water to El Paso instead of pipelines or ditches.

The Board has scheduled a retreat for the evening of November 13. We will be discussing the results of the questionnaires. If you have not returned yours, please do so right away. Lorraine Schulte's presentation on Audubon Adventures at the Enchanted Gardens Nursery on October 4th was well received. Not only did Audubon Adventures get some excellent publicity in the Sun-News, but we also received some monetary donations. This is important as our program is growing rapidly. We have budgeted to support 81 classrooms this school year. Please remember this when you receive our fundraising request in January. Donations and/or fundraising ideas are welcome anytime.

Something to look forward to is the Christmas Bird Count on December 19. Tim Lawton and Gordon Ewing are in charge of this event and would be glad to hear from those that wish to be either leaders or participants. All levels of birding expertise are welcome. This is one of my favorite events and Tim has promised no rain this year. After a day of birding we all gather for dinner at a local restaurant to share and brag.

Please check out the list of upcoming programs. Jennifer Atchley has done an excellent job of lining up speakers on a wide variety of topics.

NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING

The annual meeting of MVAS for election of officers and board members for the coming year will be Wednesday, January 20 (our regular meeting night). We will be electing two board members, president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and an Audubon Council delegate. A slate will be presented and nominations will be accepted from the floor. If you are interested in running for office or being on the Board, please contact Ed Mayfield, Sue Hill, or Storm Sermay (phone numbers at left). Joining the Board is an excellent way of learning more about Audubon and participating in the day to day operations of your chapter.

Roadrunner Ramblings is published six times a year: January, March, May, July, September, and November. Contributions are welcome. Please e-mail copy to: ssermay@zianet.com, or call for mailing information. **Next deadline: December 19.**

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