



ROADRUNNER RAMBLINGS

MESILLA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

<https://www.mvasaudubon.org/> Vol. 43, No 4, Winter 2021

Letter from the president

Dear MVAS Members and Friends:

November is here, which means it's almost Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday...not because of the turkey (my diet is plant-based) or because of the history (we know now what I was taught as a kid back in the dark ages was fiction), but because I love that there is a day set aside as a holiday to reflect and be grateful.

Amidst the turmoil portrayed in the news each day, there is much for which to be grateful. For example, on a grander scale, the current U.S. presidential administration is taking steps to restore federal protections for birds. Closer to home, it appears that the Gila River will remain free and undammed (and un-damned).

Mesilla Valley Audubon Society had many accomplishments this year for which I am thankful. We constructed a beautiful, accessible bird blind at the Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park (for which we are working on signage and a grand opening). We have many new members, including NMSU students with so much to offer, such as sharing their research and leading bird walks. Our Keep Las Cruces Beautiful Adopt-A-Spot finally came through, and we'll help care for a beloved birding area, Sagecrest Park. We can show our MVAS pride by wearing our beautiful t-shirts! I am thankful that this year we'll be able to join together for the Christmas Bird Count.

I am always thankful for our members and friends that make us strong, thankful for the MVAS board members, and, of course, thankful for the birds that are our collective passion. It's a privilege to watch them, to advocate for them, educate others about them, and do what we can to protect them.

As we wrap up 2021, on behalf of the board of the Mesilla Valley Audubon Society, I wish you a wonderful holiday season of good health and much happiness. As always, good birding!

Elaine

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No bird walk at Tellbrook Park is complete without a Greater Roadrunner.

Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park Bird Blind Now Open



Step right up, the Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park Bird Blind and Wildlife Viewing Site is open! Marvel at the meadowlarks, Swainson's hawks, killdeer and all of the 265 species of birds that Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park protects. This viewing station is a gift of the Mesilla Valley Audubon Society (MVAS) and has a 20-year guarantee. The only things missing right now are signage and a grand opening, and those are works in progress.

How it came to be is a convoluted story. Initially, MVAS embarked on a bird survey on the Rio Grande where the USIBWC was planning a riparian transformation at the Las Cruces water effluent site just north of where I-10 crosses the river. We completed a bird survey to document conditions prior to construction, but



construction has now been delayed indefinitely. We had received a grant from Audubon and asked them if we could spend the money on this new project—a bird blind at the state park—and the idea took off at the beginning of this year. A second grant from Audubon added pressure for us to act. Coordination between the park rangers, an MVAS bird blind team, and the MVAS board kept the project stayed on track and it was completed on August 6, 2021.

It is not fancy, but its location is ideal for park visitors with physical challenges or those who use wheelchairs or other assistive devices. In

fact, accessibility was the priority. It is close to the parking lot, on level ground, and has some lower windows. It is in a quiet location right next to the park amphitheater, and a useful adjunct for groups of visitors. The blind faces a westerly direction, so morning photographers will have the sun at their backs. If over time additions or amendments are needed to help the blind serve its role, it is sturdy and easily modified.

Check it out! We will have a grand opening when the signage is ready and COVID is behind us.



Editor's note: This type of report below on ongoing NMSU research will raise the level of journalism for Roadrunner Ramblings by several degrees. Thank you Dylan and Kelly, and welcome to MVAS!

Shedding “light” on migration mortalities: New research underway at NMSU

by Dylan Osterhaus and Kelly Boland

Migratory birds complete some of the most amazing feats of travel and navigation in the animal kingdom twice each year, and primarily at night. During these impressive nocturnal travels, birds face a large cast of perils including starvation, predators, extreme weather, darkness, and human alterations to the landscape. Each year, many birds succumb to these perils along their migratory route and never reach their final destination. In recent years, we have seen multiple instances of large-scale mortality events occurring during these nocturnal migrations. Earlier in September of this year, [thousands of dead birds were found throughout New York City](#), with over 200 collected from the area around the World Trade Center alone. These birds all perished from collisions with buildings throughout the city during their nocturnal migratory flights. Extreme weather within the region likely reduced visibility to such an extent that these birds were not able to see the obstructions within their flight path before it was too late. These large-scale die-offs are occurring more frequently, which is extremely troubling as bird populations have experienced [widespread declines](#) in recent time.

Here in southern New Mexico, we are all well aware of these large-scale mortality events due to what occurred last fall. Early in September 2020, Trish Cutler of White Sands Missile Range (WSMR) documented hundreds of dead birds found in various areas of the missile range. In the following days, [thousands of dead birds](#) were reported throughout the Southwest. A team of scientists that included Martha Desmond, Allison Salas, Corinne Arthur and Tim Wright (all with NMSU), Trish Cutler (WSMR) and Mara Weisenberger (BLM) immediately began to collect and catalog hundreds of deceased birds from WSMR as well as Doña Ana and Otero counties. While collecting these birds, it was noted that many of the birds were found at or near areas that are illuminated at night by artificial light. It has been documented that during nocturnal migration flights, birds may become disoriented by bright lights. Therefore, the question has been asked, are the bright lights of WSMR (in an otherwise dark landscape), influencing bird migration and mortality?

To answer this question, a new research undertaking has begun on WSMR involving graduate students from NMSU and collaborators from institutions including Colorado State University, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and the Department of Defense. Below, meet the two NMSU graduate students who will be responsible for this project and learn a little about them and the research they will be conducting.

Dylan Osterhaus

Hello MVAS! My name is Dylan Osterhaus and I am a new Ph.D. student at NMSU. I am originally from Topeka, KS, but spent the last two years in central Iowa, where I completed my M.S. degree at Iowa State University. During my undergraduate education I was fortunate enough to enroll in an ornithology course and my love for birds has grown ever since. Over the past four years I have become an avid birder and enjoy spending time in nature observing birds, seeing new species, and photographing the beautiful diversity of avifauna we have in North America.

My research at NMSU will focus primarily on examining the potential impacts of anthropogenic light pollution on nocturnally migrating birds and how these artificial lights may contribute to large-scale mortality events. To

do this, I will be monitoring a variety of sites spread across WSMR and documenting aspects of migration at each site. My study sites will include a mix of sites with varying levels of light pollution as well as sites that are completely dark. Having a range of lighting levels will allow us to disentangle potential impacts of light pollution on bird migration. At each of these sites I will be using acoustic recorders to document the level of migration activity by analyzing the number of flight calls given by nocturnal migrants at lighted sites versus dark sites. To do this, I will be taking nearly 100,000 hours of acoustic recordings over the next four years! Also, I will be using Next Generation Weather Radar (NEXRAD) to document migratory pathways, as well as the timing of migration and the number of migratory birds passing through the Tularosa Basin during the past 20 – 30 years. My first field season is currently underway, and I have 55 acoustic recorders actively taking data at WSMR. I placed these recorders at the end of August and will have them out through the end of fall migration. I am really looking forward to the next four years in Las Cruces and am very excited to see where this research takes me!

Kelley Boland

Hi, I'm Kelley Boland! I grew up in San Diego, CA, and spent the past 10 years living on California's Central Coast. I earned my B.S. in Field & Wildlife Biology at Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo, and spent the last five years in research, restoration, education, and rehabilitation. I've always been interested in birds. While at Cal Poly and after graduating, I worked closely with Dr. Clint Francis studying how songbirds respond to their acoustic environment. In addition to the Cal Poly research, I worked on multidisciplinary projects doing terrestrial and intertidal fieldwork, restoration monitoring, and for the past three years, I worked at a wildlife rehabilitation center treating songbirds, raptors, seabirds, and terrestrial mammals.

I am very excited to be starting as a new M.S. student at NMSU! My research will be closely tied with Dylan's, although my focus will be on quantifying avian mortality across WSMR. We have already begun conducting carcass surveys, sending trained teams of undergraduate NMSU students to a series of sites across the base. We are collecting data on how many bird carcasses we find and if weather events and presence of artificial light effect the number of carcasses found. We are also studying the detection rates of the students to be able to have a better sense of how good humans are at finding carcasses. We plan to do carcass surveys during fall migration for the next several years. So far, no sign of a big mortality event like the one last fall.

I am happy to be here in Las Cruces, ready to explore the incredible landscape and learn many new birds. I will see you on the trails!



Project Feeder Watch

By Sid Webb, interviewing Annie Mitchell

Have you ever been tempted to join Project Feeder Watch? I've been debating the move for a couple years and finally took the plunge this year before the start of the winter season. Project Feeder Watch has a great website with lots of suggestions for all of us who have backyard bird feeders. Talking amongst the MVAS community, I learned that Annie Mitchell is a participant. What follows is a brief outline of what Project Feeder Watch is and some nuts-and-bolts descriptions by Annie of what is involved in being a participant.

Project Feeder Watch is a citizen science project sponsored by Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology, the same group that developed eBird (ebird.org). Focusing on the birds attracted to our backyards and feeders, the project has a specific protocol for participants, with data collection limited to two consecutive days per week during the winter months of November through April. They collect data to track bird distribution and abundance and determine if there is any disease that is spreading. Their data is shared with project participants via newsletter and has been published in scientific journals.

Now, some questions for Annie:

How long have you been a participant?

This will be my fifth year.

What do you like about Project Feeder Watch?

I've been watching the birds in my yard for many years now. Participating in Project Feeder Watch adds another dimension to the watching and makes me watch more carefully. I look forward to the arrival of the Yellow-rumped Warblers and Dark-eyed Juncos in the fall. It also makes me feel good knowing that my counts help scientists in their study of bird distribution and abundance over time. Another neat thing about PFW is that their website has a wealth of information to assist with the counting. I even found a great article about how to tell the difference between the Cooper's Hawk and Sharp-shinned. It has helped me to figure out which hawk is sitting up in my tree...most of the time. <https://feederwatch.org/learn/tricky-bird-ids/coopers-hawk-and-sharp-shinned-hawk/>

What don't you like about Project Feeder Watch?

I can't think of anything I don't like.

Describe your home bird feeder set-up.

I have various feeders in my yard. I have one area with nyjer feeders and another tree that has suet feeders. The tree in the back has a seed feeder. I used to throw seed on the ground, but then I got too many doves, so I stopped. However, last year I had a Spotted Towhee scratching around my bushes (where I put the leaves from my tree) so I started throwing a little seed under them and hoped the Towhee found it before the doves!

How do you collect and send data to them?

I created a tally sheet with the birds I normally see in my yard with blank spaces to add the extras that come by. I print up copies on the front and back of the paper. I keep track on the paper and enter the info online when I can...sometimes



two or three weeks at a time. (I read about someone who has a little chalkboard that they use to tally the birds they see.) I tried the Project Feeder Watch app last year but had problems with it so went back to the paper. I may try the app again this year.

Why do they collect data for only two days a week?

Since PFW is a citizens science project it is important that everyone counts the same way to not bias the count. They recommend that you leave at least a five-day gap between counts. They say that counting every five days gives them a good idea of the birds in our yards. If you decide to participate in PFW you can study the protocol of collecting data at this site: <https://feederwatch.org/about/detailed-instructions/>

How much time do you spend with this project?

I spent a lot more time last year than I had in the past. On my count days I would watch while I ate breakfast and lunch and any other time I had free. I would watch every week unless I was traveling or for some other reason. I count every week for the whole season – November through April.

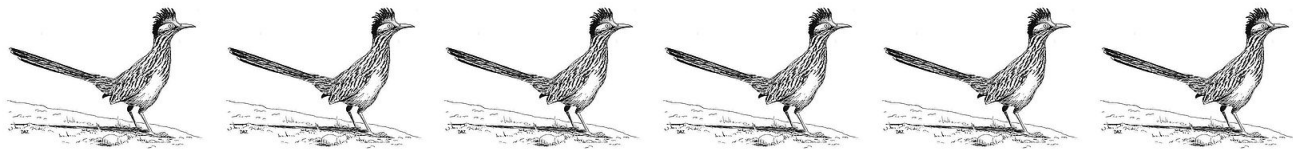
Has it taught you much about winter birds?

Yes, I've had many new birds (for me) come by and I've had to study them and my field guides to identify them. Also, I've learned the different varieties of Dark-eyed Juncos even though I just report them as DEJU.

Would you recommend it to others?

It seems to me that if you are watching the birds in your yard, you might as well participate in Project Feeder Watch. There is a small fee and if you are a member of Cornell Lab it's an even smaller fee. It's ideal to count every week, but if you can't it's okay, anything you enter is valuable to the Lab.

If this sounds interesting, go to their website (<https://feederwatch.org/>), and check it out. The 2021-2 winter season starts November 12. It's not too late to join!



MVAS Education with CJ Goin at the Mesilla Valley Bosque SP



On Saturday, September 11, Cub Scout Pack 173, led by Sean and Sheryl Barham, went to Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park for a birding program led by MVAS board member CJ Goin. It was a large group with *many* Cub Scouts and adults! The Scouts learned basic bird identification and calls, how to use binoculars, and then went on a bird walk. The Scouts enjoyed it and learned a lot!

Introduction to a little-known entity working for conservation in Doña Ana County

by Gill Sorg

The New Mexico Soil and Water Conservation District Act provides for flood control, wildlife preservation, protecting the tax base, and promoting the health, safety, and general welfare of the people of Doña Ana County.

The Doña Ana Soil and Water Conservation District (DASWCD) is authorized by the Soil and Water Conservation District Act. Its purpose is to protect and preserve the natural resources of the district. Those resources are soil, water, air, flora and fauna; in other words, wildlife and its habitat.

DASWCD comprises seven Supervisors. The Supervisors are residents and/or landowners of the district or appropriate zone. The board meets the second Thursday of each month at 9:00 a.m. at the USDA Services Center Conference Room, [760 Stern Drive in Las Cruces](#). DASWCD works in partnership with NMDA, other state and federal agencies, and various organizations to advance conservation on private and public lands.

DASWCD was first started in the 1930s as a result of the Dust Bowl and primarily worked for agricultural interests. Through the years, it has changed and evolved to include working for all natural resources.

Editor's note: There are many entities working for conservation in southern New Mexico. We hope this is the first of several articles from past MVAS president Gill Sorg to enlighten us on the good work of this under-appreciated governmental entity

Upcoming Events for Members and Friends of Mesilla Valley Audubon Society

Just as October ended with a flurry of activity for us birders, the last two months of the year should prove very interesting.

Saturday, November 6, 8:00 – 10 am. Birds No Boys Bird Walk at Sagecrest Park. A chance for women and nonbinary MVAS members, friends, and guests of all skill levels to come out for a low-key, friendly, and birdy morning! Outstanding birder Judy Wilbur will lead the walk, to be followed by (no-host) brunch at Sunset Grill. **(Note: as of press time, this bird walk was full.)**

Saturday, November 13, 8:00 – 10 am, Bird Walk at Sagecrest Park led by Joel Gilb. Meet at 7:45 am at the MVAS Adopt A Spot sign for a walk along the dam and to the wetlands. No registration required.

Wednesday, November 17, Holi-Birdy Zoom Party, 7 pm. Meet 'n Greet beginning at 6:45 pm. All MVAS photographers are invited to provide their best bird photos taken in 2021. The program will be a presentation of these photos accompanied by comments by the photographer and audience. It should be fun for all. Send photos to sidwebb@gmail.com. For details, see the MVAS website (<https://www.mvasaudubon.org/2021-mvas-community-photography>).

Sunday, November 21, 8:00 am: Sagecrest Park Keep Las Cruces Beautiful Adopt A Spot cleanup and bird walk. Following MVAS applying to help the City of Las Cruces keep Sagecrest Park spiffy, we are introducing a monthly clean-up and bird walk for interested members. It will be a casual affair, with cleanup of the park followed by birding for those who wish to stay. After a December hiatus (for Christmas Bird Count) it will continue in 2022 with scheduling to be determined in the new year.

Saturday, November 27, 8:00 am bird walk at Leasburg Dam State Park led by CJ Goin. No registration required. Meet at the visitors center. Our winter birds should be present in abundance! Dress warmly. CJ's walk is canceled in December, but will resume January 29, 2022 and continue monthly through May of next year. If you have questions for CJ, you may call him at (575) 202-1354.

Finally, the annual **Audubon Christmas Bird Count** will be the major event in December. Mark Pendleton takes over this year from Wayne Treers as the Las Cruces compiler. Details are yet to be developed, but will be shared via MVAS emails and the Bird Walk section of the MVAS website as soon as possible. Also, we may issue a special CBC edition of *Roadrunner Ramblings* to be sure to attract as many local birders as we can.

Also, for those interested in a bit of travel, John Douglas organizes the **La Luz and Caballo Christmas Bird Counts**. The La Luz count will be Monday, December 27 and the Caballo count will be Sunday, January 2. You can reach John via email at jlddouglas@zianet.com for more information or to let him know you'd like to join. Please let him know no later than December 1 if you will participate in the La Luz or Caballo count.

Invitation to join Southwestern New Mexico Audubon (Silver City) for a Zoom Conference:

Hello friends at MVAS,
We have a program this Friday that we thought your members might be interested in!
Thank you,
Rachelle Bergmann for SWNMAS

The next Southwestern New Mexico Audubon Program is coming!

Time: Nov 5, 2021, 6:00 PM (MDT)
Topic: El "Rito" Grande; Conserving a Once Mighty River
Speaker: Paul Tashjian

Please join us using this Zoom link

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84668279010?pwd=MzFra0dhaDA0aWZZUEczd0x1NWtpQT09>

For a description of this event, you may go to their website
<https://swnmaudubon.org/programs/>

Have you paid your MVAS dues?



If your dues are due, you can go to the MVAS website and pay today!

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

Officers and Board MVAS 2021

President: Elaine Stachera Simon

Vice-president: Mark Pendleton

Secretary: Cheryl Fallstead

Treasurer: Diane Moore

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

Director 2019–2022: Sid Webb

Director 2019–2022: Gill Sorg

Director 2020–2022: open

Director 2020–2023: CJ Goin

Director 2020–2023: Annie Mitchell

Director 2021–2024: Trish Cutler

Director 2021–2024: Tracy Patrick

Committee chairs:

Conservation: Trish Cutler

Education: CJ Goin

Field Trips: Mark Pendleton

Programs: vacant

Newsletter: Sid Webb

Website: Sid Webb

Membership: Annie Mitchell

Finance Committee: Diane Moore

Christmas Bird Count: Mark Pendleton

Facebook admin: Elaine Stachera Simon

CBC compiler: Mark Pendleton

Roadrunner Ramblings is published quarterly and is distributed via [the MVAS website](#), with a copy emailed to MVAS members and friends. All members of MVAS are encouraged to submit articles of interest to the group and any bird photograph recently taken. Please email photos to sidwebb@gmail.com (575) 915 5017. 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.

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National Audubon Society



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