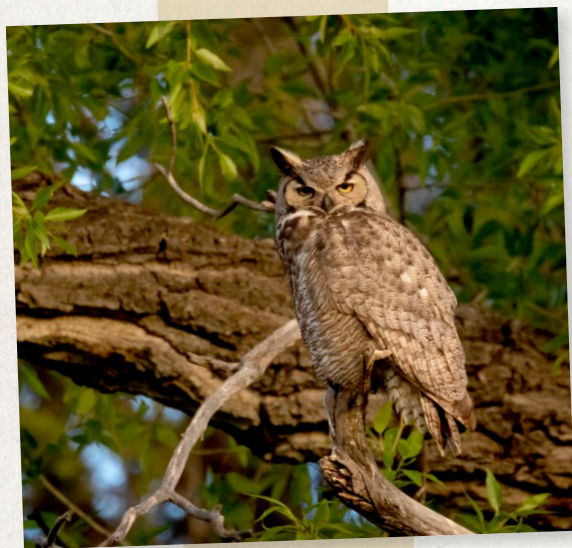


# Take FLIGHT



New Mexico has some of the best birding in the country, although challenges threaten many species and force others into unfamiliar habitats. Let your passion soar with our guide to backyard birds, must-visit hot spots, and more.

By **JIM O'DONNELL**

ADDITIONAL STORIES BY MARIA MANUELA AND CHRISTINA SELBY



001.

Among New Mexico's 500 species are (clockwise from above) sandhill cranes, cedar waxwings, and great horned owls.

002.

Among North America's smallest warblers, Wilson's warbler loves trees and woodlands, hunting insects from the ground.



**E**arly last September, I walked up from the wetlands at Río Fernando Park and onto the streets of Taos. I'd passed the afternoon photographing a pair of Cooper's hawks and a massive great horned owl along the banks of the little creek that cuts through the center of town.

The hawks didn't seem to mind. The male glanced my way, then returned his focus to the grassy bank of the creek, where, I was sure, he'd spotted dinner. I held my breath, waiting for the bird to pounce. He did, falling in a rush of brown and white into the grasses and lifting just as quickly to a scrag of Russian olive, where he dined on a plump mouse.

The owl seemed irritated. He glowered, flew to a cottonwood, and tucked himself between two massive limbs. He closed one of his enormous yellow eyes, while the other stayed focused on me.

I made my way among the willows. A deep, rich refuge of mostly native trees, flowers, and wildlife, the recently restored wetlands provide a refuge from urban life. For me, making pictures of birds is less about the photos and more a reason to be outside, breathe deeply, look closely, and tap into all my senses.

I was still in that reverie when I emerged onto the street and my eye caught a flash of olive green at the base of a bush next to the road. A MacGillivray's warbler

huddled in the foliage. I saw another one. And another. A Wilson's warbler lay dead at the edge of an acequia. By the time I arrived home, I had counted dozens of dead birds, and hundreds more struggling

to survive in the sprawl of weeds and brush along the roadway edges.

"Something bad is happening," I said to my wife.

**"The way we are situated on the continent makes us a funnel for all sorts of migratory bird species," says Jon Hayes, of Audubon Southwest.**

**WHEN IT COMES TO BIRDS,** New Mexico is rich. More than 500 species live in or pass through our state each year, third only to California and Texas. This extraordinary diversity

makes New Mexico one of the top spots in North America for bird-watching—the kind of place where enthusiasts complete

checklists and add once-in-a-lifetime sightings like the southwestern willow flycatcher or Lewis's woodpecker.

"It's the variety of habitat that does it," says Jon Hayes, executive director of Audubon Southwest. New Mexico has it all: snowcapped 13,000-foot peaks, rolling grasslands, forested mesas, jungle-like river bottoms, glistening lakes, and rolling desert dunes. The landscape diversity creates habitats rich with plant and animal species and a smorgasbord of food sources. That's not all, says Hayes. "The way we are situated on the continent makes us a funnel for all sorts of migratory bird species."

New Mexico is not some flyover state, a fact proved each winter as sandhill cranes, snow geese, and other waterfowl return to the Middle Río Grande Valley for a full-feathered display. The event, and its accompanying Festival of the Cranes, draws thousands of photographers, birders, and interested folks to the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge.

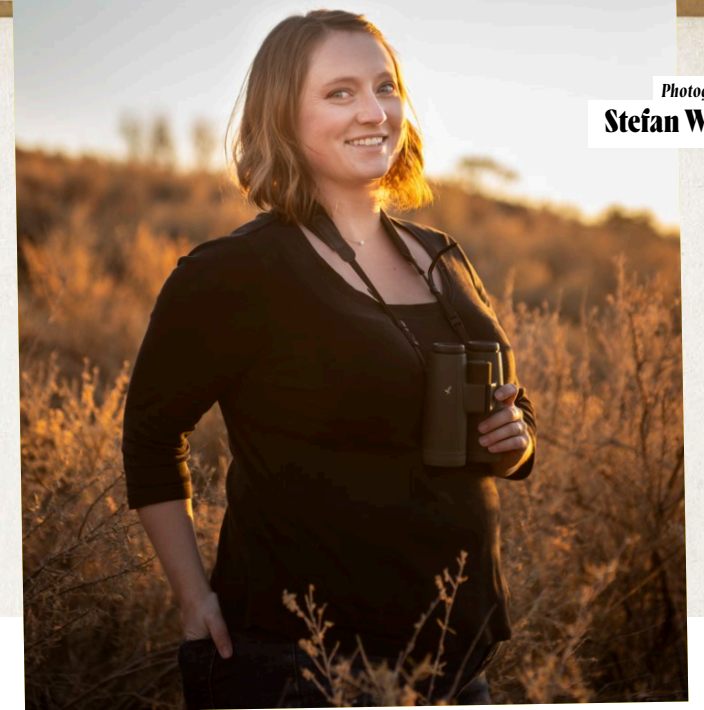
While it is difficult to quantify exactly how much bird-watching contributes to the state's economy, it is significant, says Hayes. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that some 47 million Americans participate in bird-watching, contributing more than \$41 billion in economic activity nationwide and supporting nearly 700,000 jobs. "Lots of those folks come to New Mexico every year," he says.

New Mexico birds are under threat, however. In fact, bird populations are crashing worldwide. Tragically, few people other than active bird-watchers notice. For birders, it is impossible not to worry about the species' future. And, with them, our own.

I've watched, recorded, and photographed New Mexico birds for almost two decades. Over the past five to seven years, I've noticed flocks are smaller, visitors to my yard are fewer, and birds are generally harder to find. Over the course of a week in mid-September, I found hundreds of dead birds in the Taos area. Hundreds more—weak, emaciated, and dehydrated—covered in the brush. Hardly an isolated incident, the mass die-off occurred nearly statewide.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 40

Photograph by Stefan Wachs



## Jenna McCullough

DOCTORAL STUDENT, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

*A third-generation birder and third-year doctoral student, Jenna McCullough spends her days sorting through cabinets of preserved birds at the University of New Mexico's Museum of Southwestern Biology, where she studies the colorful passerines of the South Pacific islands. But it was New Mexico's birds that flushed her out into the public eye. In September, she wrote about the mass die-off of migratory birds that sparked international media coverage.*

My grandmother was a huge birder all her life. She traveled all over the world birding. Growing up, I hated birds. When your mother is a bird-watcher and she stops to look at a sewage pond for 45 minutes, it's not fun.

I studied animals my first semester of college and volunteered for a scientist banding saw-whet owls. These owls are really small and cute. After that, I realized I really liked working with birds.

Last year, I was working as an associate editor of *North American Birds* magazine, when I started hearing about the die-offs. We collected a few dead birds in the Sandía Mountains for the museum and thought that was it.

Then I saw a Twitter post about dead birds in Velarde. My partner and I went up there to collect them. We got there at midnight and had to walk over a mile with the light from our headlamps. We found one on the early part of the trail, then we turned a corner and found piles of birds between a cliff and the Río

Grande. I'm someone who deals with dead birds a lot. I had never seen something like this. It was really upsetting. I was trying to hold back tears because I love birds, especially violet-green swallows.

Birds die every year during migration. Weather causes bird deaths. We have seen that climate change causes more frequent, more serious forest fires. This die-off event is important. It's serious. But there's no data pointing to millions of birds dying or linking forest fires hundreds of miles away to birds dying here. There were fewer than 2,000 birds collected in the state.

Once the story went viral, I thought, *This is an event that could have a significant impact on our lives.* It just felt so big. A lot of people started looking outside their window and thinking about birds. For me, birding is a way of communing with nature and my environment. Hopefully this has inspired people to support conservation and support wildlands and preservation. —As told to Christina Selby

“Our birds are facing an uphill battle,” says Hayes.

Steve Knox, a retired Los Alamos National Laboratory physicist and Audubon Christmas Bird Count leader, points to many threats. The mass die-off of violet-green swallows in 2020 was attributed to starvation. “They rely on insects as a food source, and insect populations are crashing due to pesticide use,” Knox says. “This year also had an early cold snap that killed many insects.”

Urbanization and development, oil and gas operations, expanding farmland, buildings lit at night, and wind turbines also contribute to the deaths. Domestic cats are another challenge. “Your cute little kitty is also a brutal hunter,” says Knox.

But by far the largest problem facing New Mexico’s birds is climate change.

“The underlying story here is drought and fire,” says Robert Templeton, a retired educator and avid birder from northern New Mexico. He points to the hermit thrush, a very secretive, medium-size bird with a melodic song that overwinters along the Río Embudo, south of Taos. “We’ve noticed some very unusual feeding habits this fall,” he says. “They were feeding in gardens and in trees, and they weren’t staying hidden.”

By mid-August last year, nearly 150,000 acres of land in Colorado were ablaze. A record 4.2 million acres of California also burned. As the migrating, insect-dependent birds headed south, they ran into burned-over habitat, says Templeton. “They didn’t have enough to eat.”

At the same time, an unusual dip in the jet stream blasted northern New Mexico with an early cold snap. The birds simply couldn’t handle all the hits.

“If a lack of food contributed to the mortality event, birds would have less fat and no protection against hypothermia,” wrote University of New Mexico researcher Jenna McCullough (see p. 39). “Indeed, of the hundreds of birds we assessed, none had fat stores on their bodies.”

New Mexico is warming and drying out. Our average annual temperature has increased by about 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit since the 1970s. Winter snowpack is declining, and summer monsoons aren’t delivering their former punch. Wildfire season has expanded from five to seven months, with blazes growing in size each year.

005.

Juvenile red-tailed hawks often have brown tails with darker horizontal bars. Redtails tend to be stockier than other raptors.



**For millions of people, bird-watching is also a stepping-stone to something greater. If you’ve ever spent time simply observing a place that pulls you back again and again, you know what I mean.**

“One in four birds in the western hemisphere have simply disappeared over the last 50 years,” says Knox. “That’s three billion birds. In New Mexico, we’ve seen a steady decline in numbers.”

Populations of the piñon jay, for example, are struggling, he says. Estimates from the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish indicate a decline of 80 percent or more throughout the West over the past 50 years. “This impacts the landscape,” Knox says. The jay is the primary disperser of seeds for our iconic state tree. Fewer birds means fewer trees, which in turn means fewer birds, and so on.

According to the Audubon Society, more than 150 New Mexico birds are at risk of extinction due to climate change in the next 50 to 70 years. Alpine species are perhaps most at risk. As environmental conditions change, birds that depend on high-altitude ecosystems are forced to higher elevations. But they can move up

for only so long. One of these mountain denizens, the brown-capped rosy finch, may have already stopped breeding in New Mexico, says Hayes.

Other species are on the move. Our state bird, the roadrunner, has hightailed it north and into higher elevations, as they warm. The white-winged dove and the common black hawk are both moving north through central New Mexico.

“The northern cardinal has started to show up in Taos,” says Chris Rustay, an eBird and Great Backyard Bird Count editor. “Chipping sparrows are overwintering as far north as Dixon.”

**DESPITE ALL THIS BAD NEWS, A NORTHERN flicker creeps toward the feeder. He sees me, but I’m still and patient and gain his trust. Soon he is just a few feet away, pecking at the suet. His partner arrives, and I can hardly contain my excitement.**

For millions of people, bird-watching is also a stepping-stone to something greater. If you’ve ever spent time simply observing a place that pulls you back again and again, you know what I mean. As you come to know the details of a place, you develop a sense of appreciation and understanding.

Art and science both tell us that nature in general offers calmness and renewal. Bird-watching can be a path into a different way of being with the world.

And it is fun. Getting in touch with our fellow animal passengers on this blue orb can be deeply satisfying. As you learn, a sense of accomplishment creeps into your outings. Plus, the birding community is full of friendly, thoughtful, and helpful people. Birding workshops, festivals, and meetups connect us to our world and to one another.

For more than a century, birders have made valuable contributions to our understanding of the world. Now, as bird populations struggle from a variety of threats, bird lovers can contribute more. We can protect the things we value.

“Get outside,” says Hayes. “Get outside and take a friend. Connect to nature, and then advocate for what you want to protect.”

Photograph by  
**Steian Wachs**



## Desiree Loggins

GRADUATE STUDENT, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

*When birds migrate thousands of miles, they follow rivers, flying along the water flow’s metallic gleam. As a birder and ecologist, Desiree Loggins has worked to protect those vital river and shoreline environments. A Sacramento native, Loggins landed at Audubon California after college, then moved to New Mexico in 2017, where she continued as a community organizer to benefit birds in the Southwest. In August, she left to pursue a graduate degree at the University of New Mexico’s R.H. Mallory Center for Community Geography. An advocate for Black representation in the world of birding, she was part of the first Black Birders Week in 2020.*

Birders have this concept called a “spark bird,” for the bird that really got you into birding because it was exciting or really special. My spark bird is probably the sandhill crane. Watching a flock fly in at sunset over flooded rice fields at a wildlife refuge is an incredible experience.

Birds need water just like people need water. In this region, we are part of the Central Flyway. As birds are migrating, they follow the river. It is their refuge—so it’s important to protect.

In conservation, the wins take a long time to manifest. But I can see progress being made that’s really exciting. An example of that is the Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge, an urban refuge in the bosque of Albuquerque. They had to build it from the ground up, and that’s really special, because so much open space has been lost. It’s

a beautiful story of reclamation. It’s expanding on a little sliver of habitat over time. The refuge is located five miles south of downtown Albuquerque on 570 acres formerly managed as Price’s Dairy. It serves as important stopover habitat for migrating shorebirds and waterfowl in the Central Flyway. If you go to Valle de Oro now, you can drive through these recently planted areas and see how it connects with the bosque behind the refuge. You will see meadowlarks and roadrunners, and also shorebirds when the area is flooded.

Black Birders Week showed there are all these Black birders who have resisted and persisted, making a path for themselves and changing these spaces. It’s really important for Black representation outdoors to show there are spaces where you can be your whole self in nature. —As told to Maria Manuela

# Garden Party

Look around. Some of the best bird-watching happens right outside your window.

By Jim O'Donnell

New Mexico is vast and ecologically diverse. The birds that frequent your Taos backyard will likely differ from those in Elephant Butte, Farmington, or Tucumcari. Still, for most fledgling birders, it's the environment most easily observed—especially during the past year of travel restrictions and working from home. “If you have created a good habitat—trees, bushes, flowers, water—you’ll get a greater array of birds,” says Robert Templeton, a retired educator and northern New Mexico birder. A feeder with a variety of seed and suet can help (see p. 49). “Sit still and quiet in different spots,” he says. “You’ll be surprised what shows up.”



## House Finch

Perhaps the state's most common backyard species, this small bird (about six inches from bill through tail) has a large beak and a warbly song. The male is rosy red, while females are brown, with streaked chests. “While this guy is native to the western United States and Mexico, it was introduced to Long Island, New York, in 1939 and is now found across the nation,” says Templeton.

## Dark-eyed Junco

When the snow flies, a small, somewhat dull-gray bird shows up at feeders, picking through seeds the finches toss to the ground. With 15 varieties of this ground feeder inhabiting the state, juncos can vary greatly in appearance, but sometimes feature a jet-black hood. “New Mexico hosts five subspecies of dark-eyed junco in the winter,” says Templeton. “But only one, the gray-headed junco, actually breeds in New Mexico—high up in the mountains during the summer.”



## Northern Flicker

With a flash of head-turning reddish orange from under the wings and tail, the flicker disappears. While one of the most common year-round birds in the state, these large, quick woodpeckers remain relatively unknown to the casual observer. Although their brown backs with black bars help them blend in with the bark on trees, look for the flicker—and its red or black whisker and black bib markings—along edges of fields, parks, or the open spaces in your yard.

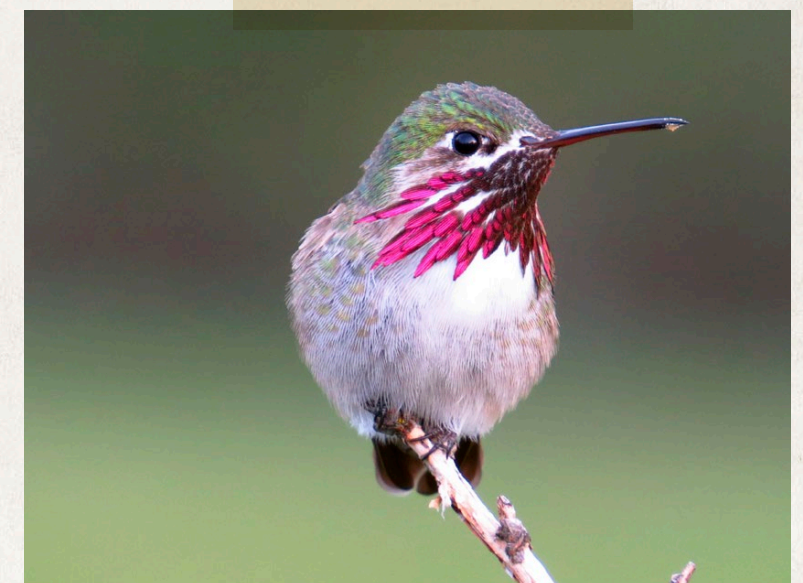


## Western Tanager

While the tanager spends the summer high in New Mexico's tallest peaks, the medium-size bird with distinctive coloration makes an impression against April's greening grasses. “People who don't think of themselves as birders end up talking about the gorgeous yellow bird with black wings and a red head,” says Templeton. “In spring, it passes through lower elevations searching out early fruits and, much to my beekeeping neighbor's chagrin, yummy honeybees.”

## Woodhouse's Scrub Jay

Large, lanky, and full of attitude, this mostly blue bird with a gray belly was known as the western scrub jay until recently. Loud and curious, it hangs out at the feeder or on a fence post even after other birds have scattered and will even talk back to you. Jays of all sorts turn up across most of the state, but which type depends on your location: Steller's jays in the north, blue jays in the east, Mexican jays near Silver City.



## Calliope Hummingbird

One of at least three hummingbird species seen throughout the state, the tiny calliope—the smallest hummingbird north of the Mexican border—has big, aggressive energy. Males, with a brilliant green head and back and a purple neck, often sit high up in a tree, surveying their realm and chasing off anyone they don't like. They take nectar from feeders and tubular flowers and even pluck small flying insects from the air.



004. Mills Canyon offers a rich environment for a variety of bird species, including the colorful Bullock's oriole.

## Trail Feathers

Take your experience to new heights on these bird-friendly hikes.

By Christina Selby

Birding on the trail generally means trading longer distances and rapid heartbeats for the mindfulness of sounds and sights in the surrounding environment—a rustle in the brush, exuberant birdsong, flashy plumage. These hikes allow you to enjoy the thrill of a slower chase.

### Paseo del Río Campground, Elephant Butte Historic District

Below Elephant Butte Dam, this easy one-mile dirt loop traverses a riparian canyon surrounded by desert shrubland. The tall cottonwoods and thick willows have a knack for concentrating migrating songbirds, including colorful Bullock's orioles. Year-round, find the silky black phainopepla, with its elegant crest. At the old fish hatchery ponds, watch the territorial antics of nesting vermilion flycatchers.

### Mills Canyon Campground, Roy

From the riverside campground, meander a few miles along old jeep roads and unofficial trails where the Canadian River cuts between the sloping 800-foot red sandstone canyon walls. Several side canyons harboring wildlife branch off from the main river canyon. In the cottonwoods and underbrush, watch for spring migrants like summer and western tanagers, Wilson's and yellow warblers, lazuli buntings, and Bullock's orioles. Year-round residents include golden eagles, vocal song sparrows, and rufous-crowned sparrows.



44

### EAGLE EYES

You don't have to spend a small fortune on "bird-worthy" binoculars. Look for 8x42 or 10x42 models (the first number is the magnifying power, the second is the size of the front-facing lens in millimeters) to ensure a bright, wide field of view, which makes it easier to find birds and follow them in flight. "Anything higher than 12-power gets heavy in the field and prone to shaking," says New Mexico Game and Fish Department biologist Grant Beauprez (see p. 47), who uses the midrange 10x42 Vortex Viper binoculars (\$500). "They're not the top-of-the-line, but for the money, they're high-quality and pretty rugged." Good choices for under \$200 include the Vortex Crossfire, Nikon Prostaff 3S, and Bushnell Prime models. —Christina Selby

CHRISTINA SELBY

### Red Dot Trail, White Rock

One of the most scenic hikes in New Mexico, this two-mile round-trip trail also offers excellent birding. The trail drops from the canyon rim to the floodplain, passing petroglyphs, big sagebrush flats, and natural springs edged with lush riparian habitat. Along the steep descent, watch for ladder-backed woodpeckers, soaring golden and bald eagles, and owls in the cliffsides. On the river trail, turn left or right to find additional springs where migrating songbirds using the Río Grande flyway rest and refuel. Those streaks of color might be hepatic tanagers, indigo buntings, or common yellowthroats. On the river, shorebirds ply the sandy flats and North America's only aquatic songbird, the American dipper, dives for insects.

### Gila Lower Box Canyon, Lordsburg

A six-mile round-trip hike takes intrepid birders into a remote canyon in southwestern New Mexico with the highest bird diversity in the state. The trail starts on a wide, sandy wash and narrows into a steep-walled canyon where birds congregate, attracted by the constant presence of water. In spring, the Gila River runs high, Mexican poppies blanket the rim, and rare and unusual birds flit among the bosque's cottonwoods. Watch for Bell's vireos, yellow-billed cuckoos, Gila woodpeckers, zone-tailed hawks, gray hawks, and the elf owl (the world's smallest).



Illustrations by Chris Philpot

## Fly Byes (and Hellos!)

These migratory birds are only around for a season or two, so catch them if you can. By Jim O'Donnell

Each bird species has adapted to different ecological conditions based on the best habitats for feeding, breeding, and raising offspring. When conditions in one place aren't suitable anymore, it is time to fly the coop to a better spot. "The migrations follow a pretty predictable pattern," says Chris Rustay, of the Great Backyard Bird Count. "You'll know the time of year by the birds that show up in your area."

### SPRING

The **green-tailed towhee (1)** can be a bit hard to find. Come April, as the olive-colored bird with a white throat and a rufous-colored cap returns from northwestern Mexico, look for it in the shrubs or sage, digging through leaf litter seeking a tasty bug. During mating season, the males will top a shrub and sing out in a crisp, multi-note trill.

Often, the first bird to show up to a hummingbird feeder in spring, the bright-orange-and-black **Bullock's oriole (2)** arrives from western Mexico and eagerly sips on the sugar water between hunts for caterpillars and juicy bugs.

### SUMMER

The **black-crowned night heron (3)**, which can migrate from as near as southern New Mexico or as far as Central America, demands patience. These stunning black-and-gray creatures build their nests along New Mexico's waterways and wetlands, hiding most of the day before emerging to fish at night. Social with one another, they will even take in and raise chicks that are not their own.

The speedy **violet-green swallow (4)** migrates from Central America to feed and breed in every corner of New Mexico. Though they're fairly

common in the western U.S., the population declined 28 percent between 1966 and 2015 because of pesticides killing the insects that serve as their main food source.

### FALL

In spring, the coppery rufous hummingbird migrates 2,000 miles from Central America, along California's coast, to British Columbia. On the return south, they follow the Rocky Mountains into New Mexico for a July-through-mid-September stopover.

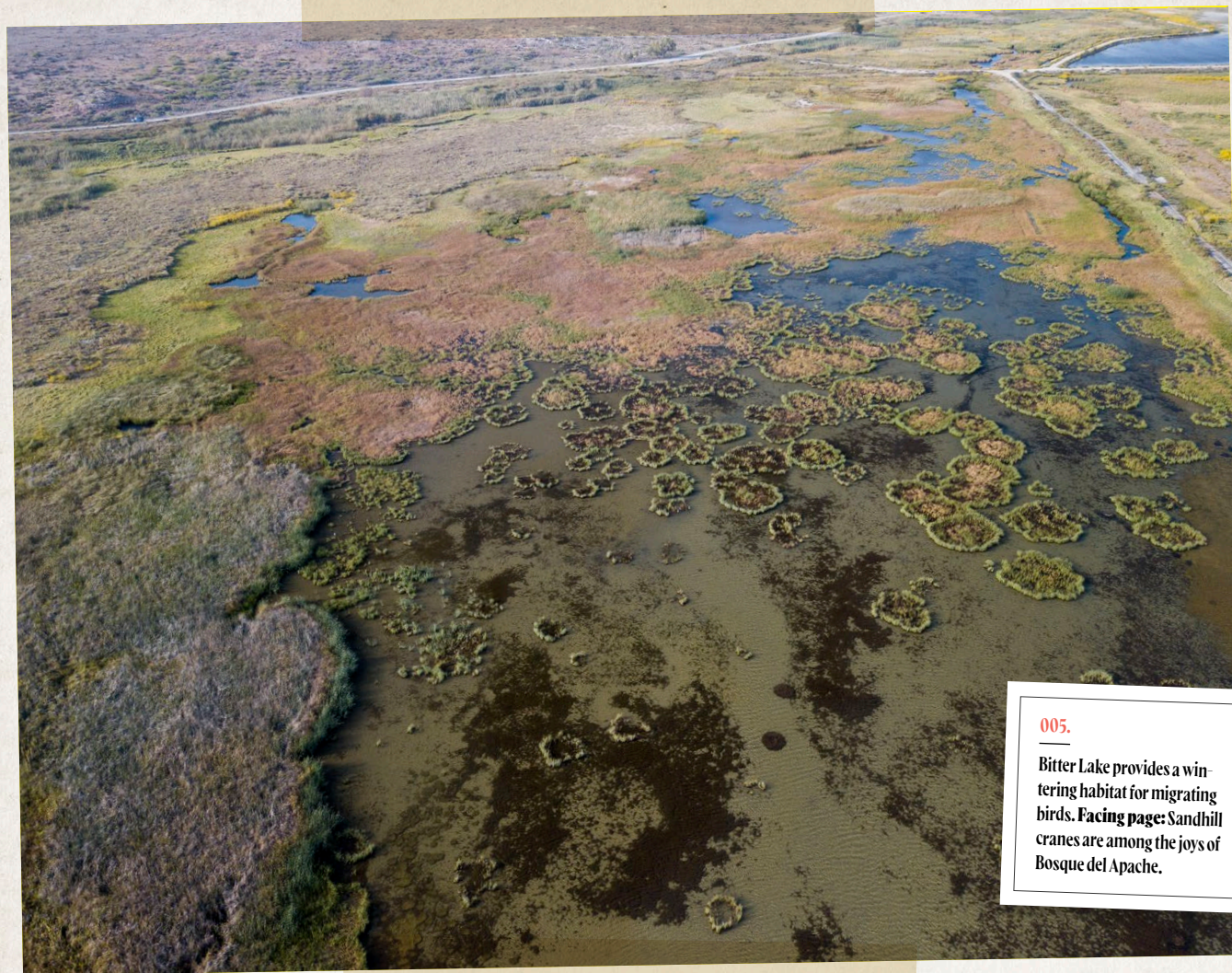
Warblers also make their way south come September and October. But be sharp: The **Wilson's warbler (5)**, a bright yellow bird with a black cap, rarely sits still. As one of North America's smallest warblers, they love trees and woodlands, hunting insects from the ground. The gorgeous gray-and-black **MacGillivray's warbler (6)** migrates from

Alaska to Costa Rica and back again. As it passes through New Mexico, it can be found hunting insects inside shrubs, willows, and other dense vegetation.

### WINTER

Winter has arrived in central New Mexico when the massive groups of sandhill cranes and snow geese wing across the blue sky. **Snow geese (7)** breed in the Arctic, so as that region has warmed, the populations have grown. Cranes and geese are often found together along the Río Grande. Look for them on lakes and in cornfields.

Not long ago, **bald eagles (8)** were absent in New Mexico. Now, thanks to federal protection, populations have recovered, and the massive bird of prey has reclaimed its traditional territory along our waterways, sitting high in trees or soaring over fields.



005.

Bitter Lake provides a wintering habitat for migrating birds. Facing page: Sandhill cranes are among the joys of Bosque del Apache.

## Rule the Roost

These hot spots offer some of the best birding in the state.

By Jim O'Donnell

“New Mexico is the perfect storm for birders,” says Jon Hayes, executive director of Audubon Southwest. Home to more than 500 species, New Mexico boasts environments ranging from high-elevation habitats to riparian forests, and desert scrub to rocky canyons. In a state bursting with awesome birding locations and opportunities, these five are must-visits for every serious birder.

### Mills Canyon

East of Springer, the Canadian River cuts a 1,000-foot-deep canyon through the grasslands of the northeastern

plains. “The elevation change makes Mills unique,” says Tony Godfrey, a New Mexico State Parks technician and author of several birding guidebooks. “You go from a montane environment on the rim to a desert environment at the bottom of the canyon.” This supports a range of habitats and food types that draw vireos, tanagers, grosbeaks, wrens, warblers, orioles, woodpeckers, hawks, sparrows, swifts, swallows, and the yellow-breasted chat.

### Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge

Probably New Mexico’s premier birding location, this 57,331-acre mix of riparian forests, wetlands, lakes, and Chihuahuan Desert near Socorro sports an array of birds throughout the year. The high point, however, comes when sandhill cranes, snow geese, and other migrating aquatic birds congregate in

the 70-year-old refuge. “In the winter, thousands of snow geese and sandhill cranes take off from large, shallow ponds in a dramatic morning ascent, and then return in waves later in the afternoon, with both events providing exceptional photography opportunities,” says Steve Knox, a retired physicist and Christmas Bird Count leader.

### Río Fernando Wetlands

The Río Fernando Wetlands cover a 30-acre area that includes Fred Baca Park and Río Fernando Park and straddles one of Taos’s most important waterways. In 2015, the Taos Land Trust purchased the long-abandoned Romo family farm and began restoring both the riparian area and the uplands. Now some 190 bird species, two-thirds of those that have been recorded in the whole county, can be found in the hot spot.

CHRISTINA SELBY

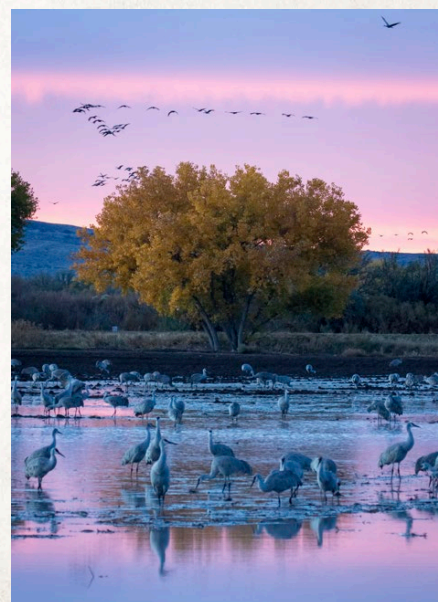
47

### Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge

In southeastern New Mexico, where the southern Great Plains and the Chihuahuan Desert bump up against each other, the Pecos River wends its way through the landscape, creating a tremendously rich, biologically significant series of lakes and wetlands that stretch into both ecosystems. Bitter Lake was established in 1937 to provide wintering habitat for migrating birds. Some of New Mexico’s most threatened species, including the least tern and the snowy plover, shelter in the refuge. “This is one of the best locations in the state to find white-rumped sandpipers in late spring,” says Godfrey.

### Gila National Forest

In the southwest, the Gila National Forest overlaps a number of ecosystems, creating an environment for high-diversity, high-elevation birding where you’ll find spotted owls, acorn woodpeckers, Mexican jays, Cordilleran flycatchers, vireos, and a host of warblers. High-elevation bodies of water like Lake Roberts are also a great place to catch sight of aquatic birds. “Lake Roberts has several distinct habitats, including a marsh that attracts a large number of different bird species,” says Godfrey, who notes it’s also the only place in the world where you can see the dashed ringtail dragonfly.



CHRISTINA SELBY



Photograph by Stefan Wachs

## Grant Beauprez

BIOLOGIST, PHOTOGRAPHER, AND ARTIST

*On the sweeping plains of eastern New Mexico, self-described wildlife and bird nut Grant Beauprez is the resident expert on the charismatic lesser prairie chicken and other grassland species. He began studying the greater prairie chicken—a once thriving grouse that has become threatened by habitat loss—while in graduate school at the University of Northern Colorado and got hooked on watching birds. “What drew me in was the fact they can fly,” he says. Beauprez, who moved to Clovis 14 years ago and now lives in Texico, has turned his love of birds into a career, a focus of his vacations, and, more recently, an art.*

At 51, I decided I wanted to try painting. I never picked up a paintbrush until then. I’ve always liked going to museums and looking at wildlife art and was impressed by people who can draw or paint. I watched a lot of YouTube videos and taught myself. It’s for fun, but I do participate in art shows and am planning to attend the next Festival of the Cranes to paint there.

Most people only think of the Bosque del Apache in terms of birding in New Mexico, but eastern New Mexico has some good hot spots. I used to take people out as part of the annual Lesser Prairie Chicken Festival in Milnesand. We had to cancel the festival when the numbers of birds declined. But they are recovering now, and we hope to start the festival again.

People passing through on I-40 can also find me on the BirdingPal

website. I’ll show them around the hot spots in the area, like the Melrose Migrant Trap. It’s a little island of trees and some water in the grasslands on state trust land. I go there every weekend when it’s open. It’s one of the best places in the country to see warblers. More than 40 species have been documented there.

I also chase birds on the weekends. The eBird app sends me alerts, so I get instantly notified when something rare pops up. Often, I’ll get to an eBird location and other birders will already be there. Right now, I’m in pursuit of Sprague’s pipit, which is my nemesis bird. It usually migrates through the eastern plains and is only here during a short window. It’s not a very exciting or sexy bird; most people haven’t even heard of them. But I need it. —As told to Christina Selby



Illustration by  
Chris Philpot

## Gathering Place

Join the flock of regular folks helping to advance avian research and science. By Jim O'Donnell

It's all about teamwork. Community science, also known as crowd-sourced science, citizen science, and volunteer monitoring, involves research and data collection conducted by folks who are not professional scientists.

While the primary goal is for scientists to accumulate data across a wider range of landscapes and ecosystems, community science also helps people get outside, meet new people, and grow their scientific literacy while improving reliability and openness in research. "We can do and learn so much more together than we can do on our own," says Steve Knox, leader of the Audubon Christmas Bird Count.

**Follow the rules:** To be effective, learn the protocols for gathering the best data and entering it into the appropriate database, says Cornell Lab of Ornithology's eBird editor Chris Rustay. For example, the eBird platform—among the world's largest community science projects—asks you to log the time spent birding, your location, and all the birds you saw or heard, not just unique species. Also, document your sightings, especially for rarities, by including photographs and other details.

**First, do no harm:** No matter our motivations, we all have the potential to harm the wildlife we are observing. Some species, such as the snowy plover, are so sensitive to human presence that they will abandon their young. So avoid the nest of any bird. Playing birdsongs to attract them can expose birds to predators. Study up on good birding ethics.

**Be a good teammate:** Avoid poking around on private land without permission. Be kind to fellow birders. The worst kind of birder is the one who doesn't share. "Get with other people who share your interest," suggests Knox. "Use social media to find people in your area and learn from one another."

### JOIN A COMMUNITY SCIENCE PROJECT

1. Cornell Lab of Ornithology's eBird, [ebird.org](http://ebird.org)
2. Audubon Christmas Bird Count, [nmmag.us/birdcount](http://nmmag.us/birdcount)
3. Great Backyard Bird Count, [birdcount.org](http://birdcount.org)
4. Project FeederWatch, [feederwatch.org](http://feederwatch.org)
5. Taos Land Trust and Cornell Lab of Ornithology, [nmmag.us/taoslandtrust-science](http://nmmag.us/taoslandtrust-science)

### PALM PILOTS

We rarely leave home without our phones, which means a robust birding tool can be as close as a finger swipe.



#### MERLIN

Drawing on more than 900 million eBird project sightings, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's bird identification app offers a quick three-step process or photo-upload feature to make an ID and easily start creating a community science checklist. **Best feature:** "It allows you to set location, time, and date," says retired physicist Steve Knox of Los Alamos. "It will show you the most likely birds to be seen along with photos and other information."



#### AUDUBON BIRD GUIDE

The big name in birds packs its app with more than 800 North American species, 3,000 photos, range maps, interesting facts, and more than eight hours of song and call audio clips.

**Best feature:** "It allows people to get involved in conserving birds by making a donation, signing up for newsletters and action alerts, or learning how you can help birds in your own backyard," says Jon Hayes, executive director of Audubon Southwest.



#### BIRDSONG APPS

A number of apps aim to help you identify birds by the sounds they make. **Song Sleuth**, for example, listens to birdsongs and suggests three possible matches from more than 200 species. **Best feature:** To be determined. Experts remain cautious about these apps, because even birds of the same species have their own culture and dialect depending on location. "This is the next big challenge in birding," says Knox, "getting an ID from sound that varies seasonally, geographically, and by age of the individual bird." —Jim O'Donnell

Photograph by  
Stefan Wachs



## Anne Schmauss

AUTHOR AND FORMER OWNER OF WILD BIRDS UNLIMITED

*Avian appreciation is a family affair for Anne Schmauss. She opened her Wild Birds Unlimited store in Santa Fe in the early 2000s, inspired by her sisters, Geni Krolick and Mary Schmauss, avid birders with a successful Wild Birds franchise in Albuquerque. Schmauss started sharing her birding knowledge in a weekly column for The Santa Fe New Mexican. She has written two books, including a monthly guide to attracting backyard birds. In January, Schmauss sold her shop, turned the column over, and set off for a life of travel (when it's possible) and relaxation, where she hopes to see many birds.*

People are intimidated by the whole "being a birder" idea, like you have to be some sort of expert. You really do not. It can be as simple as making sure that when you plant your backyard, you plant native, berry-producing and seed-producing varieties of plants and trees. Bird-friendly plants make a big difference.

Adding a birdbath and a variety of feeders is huge. But if you do that in a barren yard, you're not going to get much variety of birds. You have to create the oasis and habitat for them to come.

A lot of birds nest in shrubs and trees—and even on the ground. A lot of our native grasses have these seed heads at the top of them later in the summer, and birds eat that. You will sometimes see birds clinging on to these grasses blowing in the wind—they're plucking those seeds.

You don't want to have the same

kind of food in five different feeders. You want a good-quality mix of birdseed: heavy in sunflower, sunflower chips, and maybe some nuts. Look at the label. Grain and milo are fillers, and many birds don't eat them. Not all birds eat seeds. Some are suet-eating birds, mostly insect-eating birds like woodpeckers and warblers.

I had a hanging geranium plant on the back of my portal. A Bullock's oriole, this really beautiful orange bird with black wings, landed on the geranium and just started plucking the petals off.

They are nectar eaters and fruit eaters—you can attract them with oranges and things. But I hadn't had any luck attracting them, so I just froze when I saw that. If you saw one fly in front of your window, you would be excited, too. They are really stunning birds. —As told to Maria Manuela

### READY TO SOAR

Everyone likes birds. But how do you hatch a bird-watching hobby? Don't just wing it—follow these tips instead.

**Gather the right tools.** Bird-watching is a pretty inexpensive activity, but you need some essential tools, including a notebook, a good set of binoculars (see p. 44), and a field guide to help identify the birds you see. Every New Mexico birder should own *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, by David Allen Sibley, and Stan Tekiela's *Birds of New Mexico Field Guide*. While many comprehensive field guides can be overwhelming for beginners, Tekiela focuses on the most common birds and organizes them by color.

**Take it slow.** Looking and listening closely are probably a bird-watcher's most valuable tools. "Slowing down is an essential feature of bird-watching," says Robert Templeton, a northern New Mexico birder. Your actions in the field impact what birds you see. Because birds are on constant alert for predators, rapid movement or loud noises will send them flying for cover.

**Find your flock.** One of the best ways to learn birding is with others. Bird-watchers tend to be friendly, inclusive folks, so it's easy to find a mentor or group to help you learn. There are two very active local birding groups on Facebook: Birding New Mexico and New Mexico Bird Watchers. The New Mexico Ornithological Society lists activities, field expeditions, and more on its website. Call or drop by the Randall Davey Audubon Center & Sanctuary, in Santa Fe, for more on birding throughout the state. —Jim O'Donnell

