



ROADRUNNER RAMBLINGS

MESILLA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

<https://www.mvasaudubon.org/> Vol. 42, No 3, Fall 2020



Photo: Tom Johnson—Gambel's Quail

President's Column

Dear MVAS Members and Friends:

Wow. It's hard to believe that we are in the second half of 2020. On behalf of the MVAS board, I hope that you and yours are staying safe and well.

Our old news is that the board continues to work via Zoom, and for the foreseeable future, MVAS meetings/programs will be via Zoom as well. We all look forward to the day when we can meet again in person, and the board is actively seeking a new meeting space for when that happy day comes. We anticipate that we may have to pay for space in one of the local hotels. Regardless, we intend to err on the side of caution when it comes to large-group MVAS gatherings.

Our new news is that we have welcomed Cheryl Fallstead as a board member! You might already know Cheryl—she is active in the community (Las Cruces Ukes, Las Cruces Press Women) and a lot of
Continued on page 2

New Mexico and Arizona State Audubon Chapters to become “Audubon Southwest”

The following is a letter written by Jon Hayes and released to all New Mexico Audubon members on 7/23/2020 announcing a major change in the administrative makeup of Audubon Society for New Mexico and Arizona:

Dear Audubon Member,

We are excited to announce a major advancement in our work to protect birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow. As of July 1st, our statewide programs in New Mexico and Arizona have joined to form a single regional program under the title of Audubon Southwest.

Audubon Southwest brings together a team of leading biologists, hydrologists, policy experts, and educators under a shared banner to advance the cause of bird conservation through on-the-ground conservation, scientific advancement, education, and policy change.

Continued page 3



Photo: Molly Molloy—Verdin

For more MVAS bird photos, see page 9

President's Column, continued from page 1:

fun to bird with, to boot! Nature journaling is one of her passions, so watch for stories, events, or (virtual) gatherings on this topic.

Other new news is that we heard back from the Keep Las Cruces Beautiful Adopt-A-Spot program, and our request to adopt Sagecrest Park was granted! It may be a little while until our sign is up and we can get in to pick up trash, but it's all ours.

On a personal note, some of you know that litter makes me see red. There's no easier way to do something positive for birds and the environment than pick up trash. I know, I've heard it before—“I'm not going to pick up *other peoples'* crap!” But that plastic bag floating by as you walk your dog could get blown by the wind into a tree or cactus and wrap around a nest. That tin can could end up stuck on the head of a fox. I'm willing to pick up trash to prevent that from happening, and hope you are, too! In fact, a group of us goes out into the county regularly to do litter pickup. Give litter-pickup a try next time you take a walk (Google “plogging”) or email me at mesillavalleyaudubon@gmail.com if you'd like to join our litter-pickin' group!

Finally, as we head into migration season (already?!?), it's a natural time to reminisce about the bird that started each of us off on our bird-watching path. In this issue, we share a story from Earl Williams about the beautiful bird that sent a very young Earl on his lifelong birding journey.

We'd love to hear *your* story for the next newsletter! Send your story to the MVAS email address and let us know which bird started it all for you! You'll see it in the next newsletter!

Until next time, good (safe!) birding.
Elaine Stachera Simon

Events Calendar: MVAS Meetings,

Bird Walks and Field Trips:

COVID-19 has totally disrupted scheduled activities for MVAS. Not only have all scheduled events been cancelled, we need to look for a new meeting locale for when conditions improve and public meetings are considered safe again.

In the meantime, MVAS has learned how to create virtual meetings with Zoom and the board of directors continues to work using Zoom. There have been presentations for membership: Jay and Judy Wilbur presented on their birding trip to Costa Rica earlier this year, and Wayne Treers presented an introduction to the birds of spring and summer in Doña Ana County. Both went very well.

Just before this newsletter goes to press, Mark Pendleton will have hosted a Zoom gathering for MVAS members and friends. “Birds and Bevvies” will have been an informal social hour and presentation on Mark's recent trip to his childhood home in Maine, where there are many new birds and more local breweries than can be found in any other state.

On August 19, CJ Goin will be presenting a warbler identification class. Field biologist Rob Wu will present on butterflying in September, and Mesilla Valley Bosque SP Ranger Alex Mares will present on the importance of native plants to birds, butterflies, and other buggies in October. We hope to also bring an Audubon Survival by Degrees presentation, as well as have some mini-sessions that don't require a full hour's commitment

Have a suggestion for a topic, or want to be part of a production? Contact us at the MVAS email: mesillavalleyaudubon@gmail.com.

Unfortunately, bird walks and field trips are suspended indefinitely. MVAS members are encouraged to do their own birding while staying safe.

Future plans: We are hoping 2021 brings opportunities to bird walk and meet in T or C and Alamogordo with friends and members there.

Audubon Southwest, letter from Jon Hayes

Continued from page 1:

As fires burn and rivers run dry, it has never been more apparent that climate change has arrived in our communities and that sound management of our resources and our planet is becoming a fight for survival in a region where life already exists on the margins. The creation of Audubon Southwest is how we plan to rise to meet the urgency of this moment by becoming more efficient and more effective.

At our three Audubon facilities; Nina Mason Pulliam Rio Salado Audubon Center, Randall Davey Audubon Center & Sanctuary, and the Appleton-Whittell Research Ranch, we will forge connections between our communities and the natural world, engage in scientific discovery and education, and care for the wildlife habitat which we steward.

With this move we also form a membership base over 40,000 members strong while reducing overhead costs. This will allow us to invest in scaling our conservation programming to elevate the collective voice of our membership in order to meet the immense challenges faced by human and natural communities in the southwest.

COVID-19 has laid bare the consequences of disregarding sound science and public investment in human well-being. And the ongoing protests of systemic racism in our country following the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the racist incident against birder Christian Cooper provide further reminders that Audubon has to fight harder to make outdoor spaces safer for Black, Indigenous,

and People of Color. It is time to recognize that the environment – clean water, clean air, healthy land – and its enjoyment by all is a matter of social justice.

The recent [win for the Gila River](#) showed us that progress is possible when we invest our time and effort in making change happen. At Audubon we don't believe in sitting idly by as the world spins. Instead we will embrace change by adapting and transforming to meet the moment. The creation of Audubon Southwest will allow us to do just that. So please join us in this effort to restore and protect what makes the Southwest such an iconic and unforgettable landscape. Together we can ensure this place remains one where birds thrive and people prosper.

Sincerely,



Jon Hayes
Vice President and Executive Director
Audubon Southwest

Editor's note:

To learn more about what this might mean for us, the two old state office web sites are helpful resources: <https://nm.audubon.org/>, <https://az.audubon.org/>.



MVAS Bird Survey Update:

Have you ever been part of a team effort that encountered as many obstacles as the MVAS Bird Survey and Conservation Project? First, COVID-19 upset the plans for community outreach. Then La Llorona Park was closed for two months, preventing team members from conducting surveys at the study site. Next, NM State Audubon announced it was transitioning to Audubon Southwest and the contact people in charge of the grant would probably be in Arizona. This came after the shutting down of Western Rivers grants for the rest of 2020.

Now we find that the U.S. International Boundary Waters Commission has announced that it must reconsider all the Rio Grande construction projects previously approved for this section of the river, including our Water Effluent Canal Riparian Conversion Project. One problem is that the contractors have found the expected costs to be significantly greater than initially calculated, and also currently the Dept. of Justice will not allow the City to provide groundwater rights as an offset to increased evapotranspiration to the effluent as it flows through a new channel. The USIBWC has set a timetable to release its revised recommendations to the public for comments and recommendations in September of this year and to announce its final plan in November 2020.

So, the immediate challenge for us is to be ready for the public input planned for September. As a conservation-oriented organization, we can muster multiple reasons the project should continue, and we are sure there are several other groups and individuals who will join us in these efforts to make good things happen. The City of Las Cruces definitely continues to support the Riparian Conversion Project. MVAS members may be invited to town meetings (via Zoom) or invited to sign petitions in support of the project. Be ready!

At this time, on the ground, what remains of the MVAS project is an incomplete survey that has been interrupted but is now open for further activity. By the end of October, we will have completed a year's worth of data collection, minus the 50 days of closure this spring. Up-to-date survey data are posted in the MVAS website at <https://www.mvasaudubon.org/mvas-bird-monitoring-project>.

Should we continue? Yes! Definitely! The survey accomplishes at least three objectives that I consider worthwhile. First, it provides a "before" set of data if the Riparian Conversion Project proceeds this year. Second, if the project is canceled or postponed by the feds, it provides data that can be used to compare how our urban bird environment compares with other cities in the West. Third, a year's database will be a nice starting point for public outreach, showing what birders can do working as a team.



Cliff Swallows under the I-10 bridge, 7/2020.

At the survey site, the Cliff Swallows have replaced most of the ducks. The American Kestrels are still around. There was a recent sighting of a Blue Grosbeak. Check out the floodplain. Thanks to work by Beth Bardwell and Gill Sorg, mowing of the area will be reduced to an annual winter effort, timed so that there will be no interference with nesting or migratory birds. Good work Beth and Gill!

Will we see some herons when the river runs dry? When will the warblers and sparrows arrive? When do the ducks return? Exciting times lay ahead.

Now, just for the fun of it...

Editor's note: Earl Williams submitted this nice piece describing how he was initiated into birding. It is a very personal account. If you have your own story on how you became a birder, we will welcome your own article. Submit to: mesillavalleyaudubon@gmail.com or sidwebb@gmail.com. In advance, thank you very much. Sid Webb

THE INDIGO BUNTING: THE SPARK BIRD FOR A BOY SCOUT

By Earl Williams

Many moons ago when I was a young Boy Scout, I went on an early morning bird walk with my troop. On that bird walk I saw an Indigo Bunting, and that one little blue bird led to a lifetime of birding!

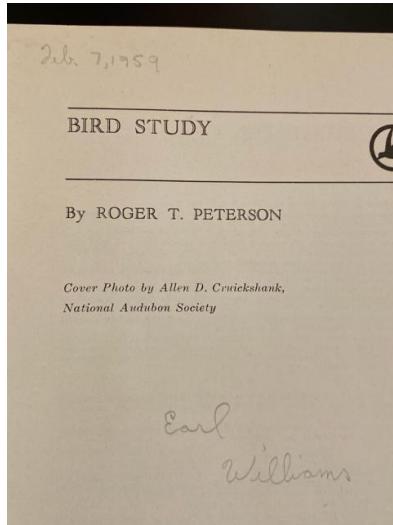
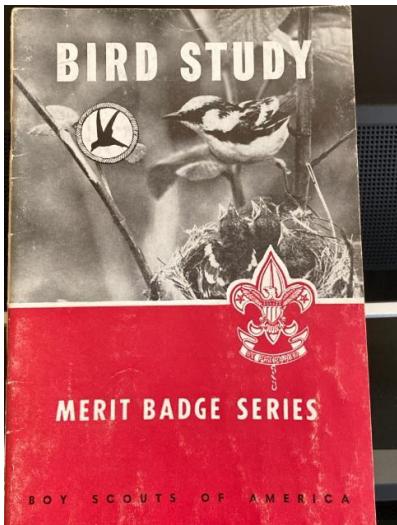
It was February 1959, and I saved up twenty-five cents to buy the "bird study" merit badge pamphlet. That was the equivalent of finding 13 good pop bottles and returning them to the grocery store for two cents each!

At the time, that copyrighted 1938 bird study merit badge pamphlet, written by Roger Tory Peterson, was the most current to be had. Peterson published that pamphlet when he was only thirty years old.

The bird study merit badge had specific requirements: (1) produce a list of forty species of wild birds that you have personally observed and positively identified in the field and tell how to differentiate each from those other species with which it might be confused; (2) describe at least two bird boxes or bird baths and two feeding stations that have been constructed by you, and (3) make a census of birdlife of a 25-acre tract by systematically covering the ground on three separate days and listing the species and number of individuals you have observed.

Jack Musgrove, curator of the State Historical Museum of Iowa, signed off on my bird study merit badge. That day, he took me through trays and trays of bird skins, asking me questions. One that I could not name was the Yellow-headed Blackbird. I am still embarrassed about that! And then I had to wait ten years to see my first one in the field.

That's my story about my spark bird!



Memorabilia from Earl's scouting days

Backyard Romance

By Nena Singleton

Jim Mulhauser (my husband and resident carpenter) likes to build birdhouses—single family, triplexes, condos, and high rises! Most of the time, the houses stand empty for quite a while before the locals decide they are safe enough to take up residence and start a family.

In early May 2019, Jim finished what I call the Bauhaus birdhouse—a three-story multi-unit apartment building, handsome in its severely modern design. Two months later, a male House Sparrow showed up and began to pace nervously from unit to unit as he called out for a mate. All summer long he called, to no avail. His desperation became palpable. We began to wonder, and worry. Why was he rejected? Then winter came, and the drama ended.

In April this year, Jim was inspired by Italian and Asian design to build the Colosseum, a round two-story structure with large pie-shaped apartments, individual perches, and a roof like a rice-paddy hat. Almost immediately, a robust male House Sparrow claimed a perch and began singing. Day and night. Frantically. Oh no, not another bachelor bird case of unrequited love!

Meanwhile, the Bauhaus bachelor bird had returned and begun HIS solos all over again. Dueling duets! But this time, his incessant singing paid off. In late May, a female began to inspect the Bauhaus. She agreed with his choice of an end unit, and they went to work building their nest. First, they hauled in twigs and dry material, then downy feathers and leaves. By late June, they were working feverishly to feed three very demanding babies who soon successfully flew the coop!

As for the Colosseum bachelor, no luck this year. Maybe this time, next year.



Bauhaus birdhouse



Female feeding babies at Bauhaus



Colosseum

Backyard Birding

Why Feed the Birds?

Kristi Lane, owner
Wild Birds Unlimited

Backyard bird feeding is a great hobby the entire family can enjoy. Bird feeding is a way to connect with nature, preserve green spaces and help wildlife. Birds are essential to a healthy ecosystem, and birds' population growth, decline and migration patterns are key indicators of nature's balance. Bird feeding benefits people too—it brings joy, entertainment and relaxation.

A bird-friendly yard that provides food, water, shelter and a place to raise young can attract up to 60 or more different species. Providing an easy-to-find reliable source of supplemental food not only gives birds nourishment, but it also gives them more time to find mates, build nests, raise their young and perform other duties that are key to their survival. Using native plants in your landscape can also provide food and shelter in your backyard. Reducing or eliminating the use of pesticides increases the beneficial insects and provides food for the birds and their nestlings.

Feeding birds all through the year can be very beneficial for the birds. In the spring, birds are busy migrating, finding mates and building nests. Summertime brings lots of nestlings and fledglings for the parent birds to feed and protect, and watching the fledglings learn how to forage for food can be hilarious. Birds utilize bird food in the fall to grow new feathers and migrate. Of course, in the winter food can be harder to find and is crucial for warmth and survival.

According to a three-year study*, the general health of birds improved with supplemental feeding, including increased antioxidant levels, reduced stress and more



rapid feather growth. Birds were also found to have improved body condition and innate immune defense. A negative factor of bird feeding, easier transmission of disease between birds at feeders, can be easily mitigated by keeping feeders clean and not using too many feeders in one space creating overcrowding and stress.

It's now more important than ever to save the songbirds: 2.9 billion breeding adult birds have been lost since 1970, including birds in every ecosystem (published in *Science* by researchers at seven institutions). Simple actions to help songbirds include: make windows safer, day and night; keep cats indoors; reduce lawns, plant natives instead; avoid pesticides; drink organic fair-trade

Smithsonian bird-friendly coffee; protect our planet from plastic; and watch birds and share what you see.

For further information, stop by Wild Birds Unlimited at 2001 E Lohman, Suite 130, Las Cruces, New Mexico.

* *Effects of Bird-feeding Activities on the Health of Wild Birds* Millikin University, Wilcoxen TE, Horn DJ, Hogan BM, Hubble CN, Huber SJ, Flamm J, Knott M, Lundstrom L, Salik F, Wassenhove SJ, Wrobel ER. (2015) *Effects of bird-feeding activities on the health of wild birds*. *Conserv Physiol* 3:doi:10.1093/conphys/cov058.





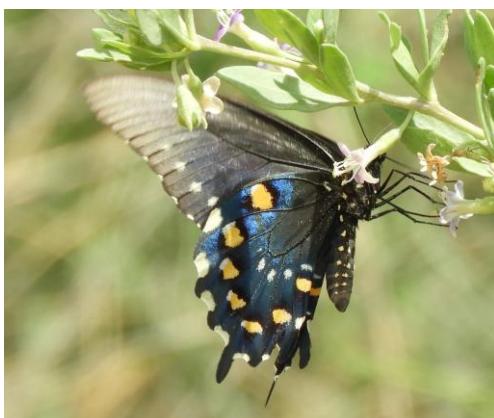
Buckeye



West Coast Lady



Two-tailed Swallowtail



Pipevine Swallowtail

Are you a Butterfly Enthusiast?

Mesilla Valley Audubon Society recently floated the idea with MVAS members and friends of having a “Butterfly and Moth” division, and the result was resounding enthusiasm! More than 20 people responded “yes!” to the email questions about whether this was a good idea and if you’d be interested in butterfly walks.

This new division will be led by board member CJ Goin, who has recently become interested in butterflies and is learning about them thanks to help from field biologist Rob Wu and New Mexico “Butterfly Guy” Steve Cary. According to CJ, “I’ve found butterflies to be just as interesting as birds and just as challenging!”

Potential MVAS Butterflies and Moths (MVAS-BaM) activities include butterfly walks, presentations, and butterfly photography, which is a real challenge. CJ notes, “They can be even more difficult than birds to photograph, but patience will often be rewarded.”

Clearly that’s the case, as you can see from some of CJ’s recent photos on this page.

Please stay tuned—and consider butterflying with us!



Bird Photography by MVAS birders in Doña Ana County . . .



Molly Molloy—Cooper's Hawk, unhappy with Northern Mockingbird behind it, in her backyard.



Molly Molloy—Verdin from her backyard (one of several beautiful photos sent to the newsletter). Thanks, Molly!



Tom Johnson—Black-throated Gnatcatcher



Tom Johnson—Night Heron

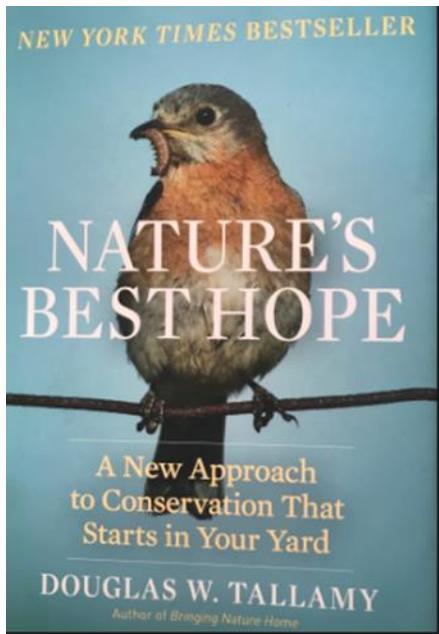
... and from around the world.

"I took this picture with my point and shoot Canon camera in 2013, while I was on a birding tour in South Africa. I believe the bird is the Egyptian goose, *Alopochen aegyptiacus*. Its ancestors can be found in Egyptian tomb paintings."

Sara Kay

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Book Report by Sid Webb

Nature's Best Hope: A New Approach to Conservation That Starts in Your Yard. Douglas W. Tallamy (2019)

Dr. Tallamy is a professor of Entomology and Wildlife at the University of Delaware.

This book is written for an audience already tuned in to the perils of global warming and species extinction. While reviewing much of the data already confronting us, Dr. Tallamy develops an approach for all of us to follow that he calls “the Homegrown National Park.” While the front cover shows a bluebird with its caterpillar, most of the book describes how native plants are the required basic building blocks for our man-made landscapes.

He makes his case by first describing how we have come to appreciate the science of ecology in the 21st century. Starting with Aldo Leopold (his ultimate hero) and following up with modern conservationists, he describes our current understanding of how interconnected our environment is. He cites many examples of how the loss of one small member of our local environment, or the addition of non-native plants or animals had a devastating impact on everything else that was there. While much of our environmental loss comes from

easily identified human behaviors, such as introducing agriculture to much of the continent, or clearing native forests, a surprising and important component to environment loss has been the introduction of foreign flora. Most plants in America’s backyard gardens are imported and their presence necessarily destroys the ability of native plants to survive. This in turn leads to the loss of vast populations of our smallest animals whose evolution caused them to be totally reliant on the specific natural environment where they are found. He strongly believes that proceeding with a new ethic, restoring native plants to the American home landscape, can lead to a dramatic change in our future natural world. By starting at home, the movement can spread to a community and then to even larger regions. While the U.S. National Park system is the model of retained natural environments and has been highly successful, he believes the same concept can be applied by individuals, who will build their own “Homegrown National Parks.”

This book has been preceded by prior publications and by online promotions by the same author. *The Living Landscape*, a book he co-authored in 2014, is available via online libraries. It describes in detail how the different layers of the natural environment work together. The National Audubon website section on Native Plants (<https://www.audubon.org/news/why-native-plants-are-better-birds-and-people>) has a video by him with similar content. Also, on this site one may use an algorithm to help find native plants for the area where he lives.

The author lives and works in Delaware, where the lush, multi-layered natural landscapes he describes are very apparent. It is much different from the drought-stricken Southwest. Nonetheless, he makes a good case for using native plants in New Mexico as we plan our gardens.

FEATURED BIRD: BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAK *Pheucticus melanocephalus* BHGR

by Mark Pendleton © 2020 Illustration Copyright 2020 © Mitch Waite



Both the common and scientific names of this medium-sized western songbird are eminently sensible. The color-based and anatomically descriptive parts of the former are straightforward and obvious. The first element refers to the male's breeding plumage, while "grosbeak" is from the French *grosbec*, or "large beak."

Pheucticus is probably from the Greek *phycticos*, "painted with cosmetics." This is more fitting for the closely related Rose-breasted Grosbeak (*P. ludovicianus*), which is mostly found in the eastern U.S. and Canada. Greek also supplies the specific name with *melanos*, translating into English as "black" and *cephale* as "head."

In the Great Plains states, the two species' ranges overlap. Some experts think this began in the early 1800s when towns and homesteads started to dot this hitherto mostly treeless area. As the number of towns and later cities increased, so did the number of trees, and there was no longer a tree-free grasslands buffer zone between them. Today, grosbeaks sometimes hybridize.

Breeding male Black-headed Grosbeaks display an unmistakable burnt orange body, a black head, wings, and tail, and white slashes on the wings. Non-breeding male, female, and immature birds of both sexes have a paler, muted rendering of this same plumage. They also show bright yellow under-wing linings.

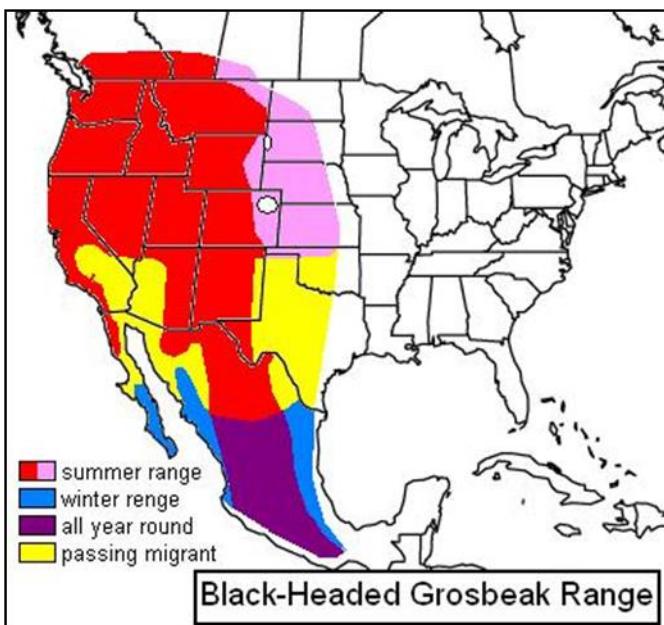
The Black-headed Grosbeak is a habitat generalist, but there must be some form of woodland to attract it. It's commonly found in riparian woodlands, mature pine and pine-oak forests, the pinyon-juniper zone, deciduous groves, mountain canyons, and oak savanna. It avoids desert areas away from rivers, pure grasslands, and dense coniferous forests. If the surrounding area is suitable, it will even show up at backyard feeders. So, you stand a very good chance of seeing these birds in large areas of southern New Mexico.

Spring migration for "Black-headeds" takes place in April and May, while the fall journey begins in early July. It lasts through early October and peaks in August and early September. Winter finds virtually all of them in Mexico.

Feeding Black-headed Grosbeaks appear parrot-like at times. They frequently use their gigantic bills to grab hold of branches and pull themselves along to the next perch. They even sometimes hang upside down and reach out their long necks for the next morsel in the manner of parrots. Whether upside down or right side up, this bird is a slow and deliberate feeder, hopping from branch to branch, pausing to turn its head slowly from side to side in its search for fruit, berries, or insects.

Speaking of insects, this is one of the few birds that can eat Monarch butterflies. Monarch larvae consume milkweed, which contains poisons known as cardenolides. Monarchs have developed a tolerance for them, and they remain in the butterflies as an evolutionary defense

Black-Headed Grosbeak, continued



significant nest predators in some areas, and grosbeaks will attack them vigorously, as they also do to Brown-headed Cowbirds attempting to parasitize their nests. At the same time, both adults are tolerant of non-threatening birds such as warblers and bushtits that come close to their nests.

Black-headed Grosbeak nests are generally so thin that eggs are visible through the bottom. In warmer parts of its habitat, this may provide some ventilation and help keep the eggs and later fledglings cool. In Northern California, the nests are thicker, which tends to suggest that this may be the case.

A group of grosbeaks of any species are collectively known as a "gross" of grosbeaks, and the oldest Black-headed Grosbeak on record was a male that was 11 years and 11 months old when he was recaptured in a bird banding operation in Montana.



Officers and Board, MVAS 2020

President: Elaine Stachera Simon

Vice-president: Mark Pendleton

Secretary: Aaron Lucas

Treasurer: Diane Moore

Directors (7 elected, with three-year terms, two being elected each year. Two openings as of 8/1/2020)

Director 2018–2021: vacant

Director 2018–2021: vacant

Director 2019–2022: Sid Webb

Director 2019–2022: Gill Sorg

Director 2020–2023: CJ Goin

Director 2020–2023: Annie Mitchell

Director 2020–2023: Cheryl Fallstead*

*elected by Board 7/9/2020

Last year's president—vacant

Committee chairs:

Conservation: vacant

Education: CJ Goin

Field Trips: Mark Pendleton

Programs: Vacant

Newsletter: Sid Webb

Website: Sid Webb

Membership: Diane Moore

Christmas Bird Count: Wayne Treers,

Facebook administrator: Elaine Stachera Simon

Climate Watch Coordinator: Mark Pendleton

Finance Committee: Diane Moore, Aaron Lucas

Roadrunner Ramblings is published quarterly and is distributed via the web, with a copy e-mailed to all MVAS members. and posted on the MVAS website (www.mvasaudubon.org). All members of MVAS are encouraged to submit any article 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, 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.

