

ROADRUNNER RAMBLINGS

Volume 26, No. 4. July-August 2004

Citizens Consider Future of the Gila River

M.H. Dutch Salmon

The Gila River is the last mainstem river in New Mexico without a major water development, a slim flow with big values inherent in its fish and wildlife resources, and recreation opportunities; it persists through drought and counts its floods as revival events. But much larger water developments are being considered for the Gila.

A 1968 Congressional Act (Public Law 90-537) authorized as part of the Central Arizona Project (CAP) 18,000 acre feet (af) of Gila River water for New Mexico, provided the project did not cause "economic injury" to downstream users in Arizona. To protect these downstream entities (mostly Gila River Indian tribes), Arizona users were to be compensated by 18,000 acre feet from the Colorado River, and only surplus "flood flows" from the Gila were to be captured in New Mexico. Many readers will recall the Conner Dam proposal of the 1980s, which sought to capture and develop this water while satisfying the economic injury clause and fiscal and environmental concerns.

Ultimately, this project was shelved by the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) and the 18,000 af, though technically still "authorized," was never funded. That could change with the current Arizona Water Settlements Act (S. 437) which has reached the U.S. Senate floor. Designed to settle long-standing water issues between Indian tribes and water users in New Mexico and Arizona, the New Mexico delegation is working hard to see that funding for the act includes money to build the New Mexico unit of the CAP.

It is worth noting why the Conner Dam proposal failed. I was a member of the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission at the time and I well remember when the BOR pulled the plug on the Conner Dam.

The agency, as required by law, did a cost/benefit analysis, comparing the feasibility of developing water on the river via the \$100 million Conner Dam vs. the possibility of local government purchase of existing water rights. They found that there were thousands of acre feet of unused water rights lying fallow in both the Mimbres and Gila basins and that purchase of such rights would be about half the cost per acre foot of developing river water. Where then was the rationale for a \$100 million water project?

Nearly 20 years later that rationale appears even weaker. According to the recently completed Southwest (NM) Regional Water Plan, Chino Mines (Phelps Dodge) groundwater rights in the Mimbres Basin total approximately 25,000 af; actual use in 2002 – about 5,000 af. Over the Continental Divide in the Gila Basin,

(continued on page 4) See Gila

GO BATTY! (for a good cause)

Armendaris Ranch Tour: July 10

Mesilla Valley Audubon has received permission to take a limited number of people on a field trip to Ted Turner's Armendaris Ranch near Truth or Consequences and to use that trip as a fundraiser. Other organizations such as the Nature Conservancy have used a trip to the Armendaris Ranch as a reward for donations of \$150.00 or more. Our field trip will be open to anyone who contributes \$100.00 or more to MVAS.

The highlight of the trip will be the opportunity to witness the spectacular bat flight from a lava tube cave on the northeast side of the ranch. The flight consists of close to a million Mexican free-tail bats emerging from both ends of the lava tube. The bat flight also attracts large numbers of Swainson's Hawks that capture some of the bats. Other highlights include visits to reintroduced prairie dog colonies inhabited by large numbers of burrowing owls, pronghorn antelope, North American Bison, and possible sightings of other grassland specialists such as kit fox. The Armendaris Ranch has some patches of Chihuahuan Desert black grama grassland that are a couple of hundred acres in size and presents an opportunity to see the kind of landscape that was once widespread in southern New Mexico.

The trip is scheduled for July 10 with a back-up date of July 24 in the event that the roads are impassable on July 10. The trip will be led by Dr. Walter Whitford, past president of MVAS. Walt has current research projects on the Armendaris and is familiar with the ecology and unique characteristics of the ranch.

For additional information and to reserve a place on the trip call Walt Whitford at 521-1358. Don't miss this opportunity to see and experience one of the most special places in southern New Mexico and to support MVAS.

Please help!

The Education Committee needs back issues of the following publications:

National Geographic,
Bird Watcher's Digest,
Audubon,
National Wildlife,
Ranger Rick,
Arizona Highways,
Birds and Blooms,
Living Bird, and
Wildbird.

We use pictures and articles for classroom outreach programs. Please contact Sylvia Bizzell at 993-0133 if you can help. Thank you.

JOIN NOW!

- National Membership: Join both the **National Audubon Society** and **Mesilla Valley Audubon Society** for the introductory rate of \$20 (a \$15 savings!). You'll receive both *Audubon Magazine* and *Roadrunner Ramblings*. Make check payable to National Audubon Society.
- Chapter Membership: Join just **Mesilla Valley Audubon Society** for \$15. You'll receive *Roadrunner Ramblings*. Make check payable to Mesilla Valley Audubon Society.

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Send this form and your check to:

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P.O. Box 1645
Las Cruces, NM 88004

Use this form for new memberships only.
Renewal notices will be sent to you.

Adventures in Birding

by Nancy Stotz,
Newsletter Editor

We've all had them--those memorable moments that enrich our expeditions--bizarre events, encounters with colorful characters, even a sublime sighting or two that we just can't wait to tell others about. Well here's your opportunity.

If you've got a story to tell, from your most recent birding trip or from an outing years ago, we'd love to hear from you. Over the next several issues of *Roadrunner Ramblings*, we'd like to feature the adventures of local birders, telling the stories they love to share. Anything is fair game--Big Days, interesting natural history observations, humorous stories, hair-raising adventures--anything you think other birders would get a kick out of (or be jealous of, as the case may be).

In searching my own memory banks for a good story to inaugurate this series, an apocryphal family story from my childhood immediately jumped to mind. It's been told so often that I'm not sure whether any of us actually remember the event itself, or if we've simply hardwired the well-worn (and doubtless refined) story of the event, but to this day, at our family get-togethers, I guarantee you that somebody will find an excuse to call out the phrase:

"You know, people have been killed..."

It all started innocently enough, with a phone call announcing that a Harris's Sparrow had just been sighted down along Cherry Creek, near Denver. My older brother, a hard-core lister even in his teens, carefully recorded the directions to the site and goaded us all into the car to help him track down this unexpected summer visitor, which would be new for his county list. Unfortunately, we were over an hour and a half away from Denver, so it was noon before we reached the site, a little undeveloped patch of scrub behind the Martin Marietta plant.

We fanned out and pushed up the west side of the creek--lots of finches and towhees, but nary a sparrow to be seen. We worked our way back down the east side--more finches and a blackbird, but not even a House Sparrow to get our pulses racing. We were standing near the

car, deciding what to do next, when my brother heard a promising chip back to the north.

He wordlessly directed the troops into a semi-circle, and we moved northward, binoculars at the ready. We all heard the rustling in the bushes just ahead, so we moved in and started to lean and peer around the vegetation, each hoping to be the first to catch sight our quarry. Suddenly, there he was, an adult male--human. Shirtless, and pulling up his trousers, he glowered at us as his female companion quickly wrapped herself in the blanket the two had been using for their "picnic."

As he got his plant uniform back on, the Martin Marietta employee took in the scene--a binocular-laden troop encircling his lunch-hour haven--and screamed "What are you people doing here?" My dad answered, simply and honestly, "We're looking for a Harris's Sparrow." Mr. Martin Marietta took a deep breath, looked Dad right in the eye, and replied, "You know, people have been killed looking for Harris's Sparrows."

The couple then strode off, hand-in-hand, with as much dignity as they could muster, and we returned sheepishly to the car, sparrow-less but with a classic tale for the family album.

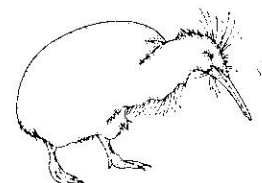
To submit your own Adventure in Birding: email nstotz@zianet.com or call 521-8087 for mailing information.

Programs



*Have a great summer!
Programs will resume
in September.*

Welcome New Members



Sam Palm
John Hyndman
Michael J. Turner
Julie Woody-Harris

Field Trip Report

Percha Dam. June 19. Thanks to Jackye Meinecke's blurb in the newspaper, a small group of MVAS members was joined by six visitors who were most anxious to see Vermilion Flycatchers at Percha Dam State Park. They went away with good memories of the beautiful little bird, as we saw three or four males, some of them doing their high-in-the-air fluttering display. Some other crowd-pleasers were Bullock's and Scott's Orioles, Ash-throated Flycatchers, Black-headed and Blue Grosbeaks, lots of Phainopeplas, Lucy's and Yellow-rumped Warblers, and several gorgeous Summer Tanagers, along with one Sharp-shinned Hawk. Due to the heat the birds found refuge rather early, and the group disbanded about 10:30 AM.

Sue and Wally Hill

Bird Notes

Since Burrowing Owls have been rather scarce this year we would like to report 5 individuals seen by Guy Powers in the vacant lot behind Spanish Kitchen and/or Wells Fargo Bank near N. Main and Madrid.

Species	Date	Location	Observers
Franklin's Gull	4-23;4-26	Burn Lake;Holloman	MS/JZ;GE
Eared Grebe	4-24	Holloman Lake	GE
Blue-winged Teal	4-24	Holloman Lake	GE
Sora	4-24	Holloman Lake	GE
Lesser Yellowlegs	4-24	Holloman Lake	GE
Willet	4-24	Holloman Lake	GE
Long-billed Dowitcher	4-24	Holloman Lake	GE
Bank Swallow	4-24	Holloman Lake	GE
Lazuli Bunting	4-28	MVB Park	NS
Band-tailed Pigeon	5-1	Radium Springs	MS/JZ
Eurasian Collared-Dove	5-1	Snow Road	BG
Rose-breasted Grosbeak	5-6	Radium Springs	MS/JZ
American Redstart	5-7	Radium Springs	MS/JZ
Virginia Rail	5-8	Leasburg	BR
Common Ground Dove	5-9	Broad Canyon	MS/JZ
Olive-sided Flycatcher	5-22	La Mesa	RWD, AK ,SH,LS
Osprey	5-26	Percha	GE
Bell's Vireo	5-26	Percha	GE
Prothonotary Warbler	5-26	Percha	GE
Hooded Oriole	6-2	Las Cruces	LS
Redhead	6-14	WSTF	HH
American Avocet	6-23	Isaack's Lake	SWCH
Black-necked Stilt	6-23	Isaack's Lake	SWCH
Wilson's Phalarope	6-23	Isaack's Lake	SWCH
Redhead	6-23	Isaack's Lake	SWCH
Ruddy Duck	6-23	Isaack's Lake	SWCH
Northern Shoveler	6-23	Isaack's Lake	SWCH
Franklin's Gull	6-23	Isaack's Lake	SWCH
Cassin's Sparrow	6-23	Isaack's Lake	SWCH

Observers: Rob/Wendy Davis, Gordon Ewing, Steve Ewing, Bill Glenn, Jannette Hale, Harold Harrison, Sue/Wally/Collin Hill, Alan Krueger, Barbara Rodriguez, Marcy Scott/Jimmy Zabriskie, Lorraine Schulte, Nancy Stotz

Please report early, late, or unusual sightings to Sue Hill at
505-382-9758 or hillco@zianet.com

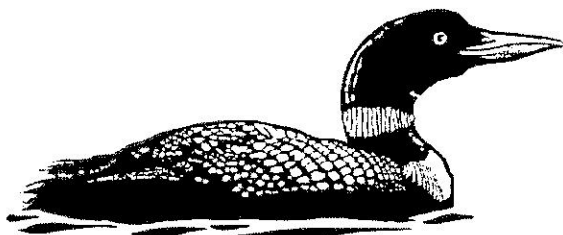
New Mexico Rare Bird Hotline 505-884-3269
or <http://www.nmosbirds.org>

Rare Bird Alerts for NM and other states: www.birder.com

LOST BIRD



- Hand-raised, pet African Pied Crow.
- Hand tame but only a couple of months old so not much training yet.
- Last seen at Carver Road and Hwy 28 on the 22nd of June.
- Please contact Milette Lanphere
via e-mail
buteo2u@aol.com
by phone 520-229-3367
or locally in Las Cruces at 505-524-3647



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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Board meetings are held, September through May, on the Thursday before the 3rd Wednesday at 5:30 PM at the Southwest Environmental Center (on the downtown mall). All Audubon members are welcome.

Visit our website at www.cybermesa.com/~mvas/.

(continued from page 1) *Gila*

Tyrone Mines (Phelps Dodge) holds nearly 11,000 af of water rights (plus 2100 af in the Mimbres basin for a total of 12,825 af); actual use at their mine and Gila farm – about 6,000 af. Indeed, there are more local water rights lying fallow than could be provided by the New Mexico unit of the CAP.

Meanwhile, the cost of new water development has jumped. In a statement to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee in September, 2003, New Mexico State Engineer John D'Antonio said: "We believe we can build a suitable project for approximately \$220 million . . . In the settlement, New Mexico has proposed and Arizona is considering \$150 million in funding for the New Mexico unit . . . New Mexico would have to make provision for at least \$70 million in construction costs plus substantial annual costs." Seventy-plus million dollars is a very substantial sum in the state budget of New Mexico!

A discussion of possible environmental conflicts and concerns would take another column. I will note here that a mainstream dam is not being considered, but rather an offstream reservoir in Mangas Creek with a large pumping station on the river to capture the occasional flood events. Mangas Creek is a perennial flow in its own right, a prime riparian area that holds one or more threatened or endangered species, including spike dace, loach minnow, and Willow Flycatcher. A more serious concern may be the "capture" of flood flows by a large pumping station. It is well known that flood events rejuvenate riparian habitats and thereby species up and down the food chain. The Gila River is the only river in the state where flood flows operate naturally.

For more information contact the Gila Conservation Coalition by email: Dutch@High-LonesomeBooks.com.

Roadrunner Ramblings is published six times a year: January, March, May, July, September, and November. Submissions are welcome; please email copy to nstotz@zianet.com, or call for mailing information. **Next deadline: August 23.** Printed by **insta-copy printing** on 30% kenaf, 70% PCW recycled chlorine-free paper. Images, except Dale Zimmerman's roadrunner, are from IMSI's Master Clips/Master Photos® Collection.

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