

# ROADRUNNER RAMBLINGS

Volume 23, No. 2. March/April 2001

# Oil and Gas Development Threatens Wildlands in South-central NM

by Greta Balderrama, Chihuahuan Desert Conservation Alliance

In response to increased interest by the oil and gas industry, the Las Cruces BLM office has issued a draft Resource Management Plan Amendment and Environmental Impact Statement (RMPA/EIS) for oil, gas, and geothermal resources in Sierra and Otero Counties. The area most at risk is southern Otero County where some projections include the development of three natural gas fields and associated pipelines. At present this area is undeveloped with relatively few roads and includes some of the best remnant grasslands left in the state. The Planning Area includes the Otero Mesa (pronghorn) Habitat Area, the Caballo Mountains and Sacramento Escarpment Deer Areas as well as prime habitat for Black-tailed prairie dogs and numerous raptors, including Aplomado Falcons. Several rare and endemic plant species are present and the area provides a wildlife corridor between the Sacramento Mountains and the Brokeoff and Guadalupe Mountains to the south. The Brokeoff Mountains and Jornada del Muerto WSAs are located within the Planning Area along with six Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). There are many other sensitive areas affected by this plan that are too numerous to mention in this summary.

The BLM has made an attempt with their preferred alternative (Alternative A) to address the sensitive nature of the area and has included some provisions to prevent habitat fragmentation. The modest protective measures proposed in Alternative A, which allows for leasing and surface occupancy in 89 percent of the Planning Area, are being blasted by oil and gas concerns as overly restrictive and unreasonable. The comment period on the RMPA/EIS has been extended until April 23, 2001 at the request of oil and gas operators. Industry prefers the No-action Alternative whereby environmental stipulations are addressed on a case-by-case basis and so have a better chance of being waived.

Please let the BLM know that you appreciate the environmental concerns addressed in Alternative A but that you support Alternative B. Alternative B provides more resource protection for this special area. Stress the importance of preventing the construction of new roads in the Planning Area. Alternative A requires the "maximum use of existing road and/or other utility corridors" to decrease habitat fragmentation but this wording leaves a lot of room for interpretation. Also suggest:

• Discretionary closure of all eight nominated ACECs and essential habitat for all Special Status Species.

Birdathon cometh!

by Storm Sermay

Yes, spring is nearly here and the time is coming for our yearly fundraiser, the weekend of May 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>. This is the event that raises the money to support our local educational projects such as Audubon Adventures. Also we have purchased bird books for the library and helped fund Randall Davey Audubon Center in Santa Fe (our State office and educational center.)

How does Birdathon work? Each participating birder collects pledges from sponsors. The sponsor can pledge an amount of money per bird species or pledge a flat amount. (All contributions are tax deductible.) Then on Birdathon weekend, the birder has 24 hours to count as many species as possible, either birding alone or with a team. Sponsors in the past have pledged \$.10 to \$1.00 a bird. And many teams see more than 100 species! Don't want to ask friends or coworkers for money? Pledge to yourself or ask relatives. A surprising number of people are happy to have been asked.

Although we have set the above weekend as the official Birdathon date for our chapter, you can do your count either before or after if it is more convenient. Also, Birdathon can be done in any location. If you expect to be traveling at that time, plan to set aside a few hours to bird. You probably will anyway. Right?

Please help support your chapter by birding and raising funds, or by pledging to someone you know. Contact Storm Sermay, 382-3348 if you would like to participate or if you want more information.

Teams are forming now! Don't be left out!

(continued on page 2) See Oil

## (continued from page 1) Oil

- No surface occupancy (NSO) within .5 miles of riparian areas, wetlands, or playas.
- No exceptions or waivers to the NSO stipulation in remnant grassland patches and surface use limited to within 492 feet of existing roads.
- Discretionary closure of all Visual Resource Management Class II Areas and VRM limited areas.

For more information, a copy of the RMPA/EIS, or to submit written comments contact:

Tom Phillips, RMPA/EIS Team Leader BLM 1800 Marquess Las Cruces NM 88005 505-525-4300

You may also comment at public hearings to be held on April 3 in Roswell, April 4 in Alamogordo, and April 5 in Truth or Consequences.

For more information, contact Greta Balderrama by calling 505-628-1727 or email gbalderrama@yahoo.com.



## Las Cruces to Develop Plans for River Corridor

by Carol McCall, Keep Las Cruces Beautiful

The City of Las Cruces has received a Sustainable Development Challenge Grant from the Environmental Protection Agency to create a long-range Comprehensive Plan for the development of an 11-mile corridor of the Rio Grande from Shalem Colony Bridge (Black's Bridge) north of Las Cruces to the Mesilla Dam. The planning process will bring together a broad array of governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations and the public who will identify potential areas along the river which might be appropriate for certain types of development, such as open space, bosque, trailways, parks, outdoor classrooms, etc.

In addition, two pilot projects will complement the larger objectives of the Comprehensive Plan. The first is the construction of a wetland that would enhance the riparian and aquatic habitat within the historic floodplain of the Rio Grande. The second is the completion of a 1.1-mile permeable surface pathway that would extend the existing river

pathway north from La Llorona Park and link it with the City's proposed east-west alternative transportation system for bicycles and pedestrians.

The 21st century will bring unprecedented growth to southern New Mexico. As the population increases, so will demands for fertile soil, clean and abundant water, healthy air, diverse wildlife, food, fuel and fiber. And as the stresses on the community increase, so too will the need felt by individuals and families to turn to the natural landscape for beauty, solitude, and personal renewal.

The EPA's Sustainable Development Challenge Grant program was created to assist communities "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." The award of this \$250,000 grant to the City will provide the community an opportunity to come together, find common ground and attain common goals. As this project gets underway, public input meetings will be announced.

# SCIAD: An Invitation to Participate

by Marie Haaland, Las Cruces Public Schools

# JOIN NOW!

I would like to join the National Audubon Society and Mesilla Valley Audubon Society for the introductory rate of \$20.

Address				
Address	50		77	16
City	_	_		_

State\_\_\_\_Zip\_\_\_\_Q54

Name

7XCH

Membership includes the publications Audubon and Roadrunner Ramblings.

Send this application and your check (made payable to National Audubon Society) to:

> Membership, MVAS P.O. Box 1645 Las Cruces, NM 88004

Are you

- Interested in making science fun for kids?
- Excited by seeing students understand a difficult concept?
- Wanting to give something worthwhile to our community?
- Glad to escape the office once in awhile?
- Bored with retirement? THEN JOIN US!

We will work with you so your talents and abilities are used to their best potential within the SCIAD Program. What is SCIAD? SCIAD stands for Science Advisors — The SCIADs are volunteers who are in fields related to math, science, and engineering.

These volunteers are committed to giving between 6 and 12 hours every month to the school where they're placed. A team of 2 volunteers can split these hours to better fit into each person's schedule. They bring expertise from their

professions, hobbies and interests to the teachers and to the students. Volunteers are often willing to work on topics which are not necessarily related to their areas of expertise. The important thing is inspiring the students with activities that make science interactive. SCIADs will give demonstrations, help develop hands-on activities with the teachers, arrange for guest speakers, and provide science information the teacher may need.

SCIADs serve as role models for the students, relating what they are learning in the classroom to everyday life experiences. The SCIAD Program is designed to help not just a special class of students, but EACH and EVERY STUDENT in the classroom. You'll get as much out of it as the students!

If you're interested in finding out more about the program or in joining us, please contact Marie Haaland, SCIAD Program Director, at 527-6057 or <a href="mailto:sciad@lcps.k12.nm.us">sciad@lcps.k12.nm.us</a>



## Field Trips

New Mexico's spring weather is variable. Please be prepared with layered clothing, sunscreen, and plenty of water.

Feather Lake/Ft. Bliss Sewage Ponds, March 24. This field trip will explore these two diverse sites in the El Paso area: Feather Lake is managed as a wildlife refuge by the El Paso/Trans-Pecos Audubon Society, and the sewage ponds are a water treatment facility that also happens to represent some great bird habitat on the base. Time permitting (and depending on what birds have been showing up where), this field trip may also detour to some other birding spots around El Paso and the south valley. For more details, including meeting location and place, contact Ed Mayfield (382-0715 or mayfield@zianet.com).

Chiricahua Mountains, weekend of April 21. The Portal/Cave Creek area of southeastern Arizona is famous for a variety of specialty birds including Mexican Jays, Strickland's Woodpecker, Bridled Titmice, Painted Redstarts, Elegant Trogons, and numerous hummingbird species. It is also a place of amazing natural beauty, with scenery ranging from desert vistas to mountain forests; between the desert and mountain tops, the Cave Creek scenery is a study in contrasts, with imposing cliffs and rock outcrops watching over a small stream bordered by Arizona Sycamores and other riparian vegetation. Ed Mayfield will lead this trip, after camping the evening of the 20th at one of the Forest Service campgrounds in the area. If you don't want to camp, lodging is available at some small inns in the Portal area, such as the Portal Peak Lodge (520-558-2223) and the Cave Creek Ranch (520-558-2334). (For additional information on camping and lodging contact the Portal Ranger Station at 520-558-2221 or the Arizona Office of Tourism at 602-230-7733). To reach the Chiricahuas, go west on Interstate 10, and 17 miles past Lordsburg, NM, take the Road Forks exit. Head south from Road Forks on US 80, and after 27 miles, watch for the turn to Portal, Arizona. To sign up for the field trip and to find out exactly where and when to meet, contact Ed Mayfield (call 382-0715 or email mayfield@zianet.com).

## **Programs**



Programs and meetings are held on the 3rd Wednesday of each month, September—April, at the Village at Northrise, Hallmark Building, 2882 N. Roadrunner Pkway, Las

Cruces. Programs begin at 7:30 PM. News, announcements, and information begin at 6:45, preceding the program.

Birds of San Andres National Wildlife Refuge. March 21. Mara Weisenberger, Refuge Biologist, will describe the Refuge's ongoing efforts to monitor resident and migratory birds through its bird banding program. The program will include information about bird banding conducted at Rope Springs (an old sanatorium) and elsewhere on the refuge, as well as slides of many of the species that frequent the San Andres Mountains just northeast of Las Cruces. If you couldn't make our last field trip to the refuge (which is typically closed to the public), this will be a good opportunity to see what the area is like.

Wetlands of El Paso. April 18. John Sproul, of the Center for Environmental Resource Management at the University of Texas at El Paso, will speak to us about ongoing efforts to restore and maintain wetland habitats in southern El Paso. John has been working on the development of the Rio Bosque Wetlands Park and he has also worked with the El Paso/Trans-Pecos Audubon Society on their management program for Feather Lake (see Birding Hot Spots, page 4). John will share with us some of the history of the development of these sites, as well as highlighting some of the native species that inhabit them.

# **City Meetings**

The article (on page 2) about the river corridor plans is just one example of a local planning process that could be very important to birds and birders in the Las Cruces area. The City of Las Cruces has two other ongoing projects that MVAS is watching hopefully.

#### Las Cruces Dam Recreation Plan.

Sometime in March (exact date and time unavailable at press time) the Army Corps of Engineers will present a draft of their final report describing a potential recreation plan for the area behind the Las Cruces Flood Control Dam to the City of Las Cruces Parks and Recreation Advisory Board. Based on comments submitted by MVAS and many area residents, this plan has developed into a vision that would protect and restore some of the natural habitats and wildlife of this 800-acre site, and provide a trail system to allow pedestrians and bicyclists to explore the area. Following the presentation at this meeting, the Corps will be accepting additional comment on the plans, and later this spring, they will present the revised final report to the City Council for their consideration.

Burn Lake Master Plan. The City of Las Cruces has initiated a planning process for Burn Lake (see this issue's Birding Hot Spots on page 4), which could represent an opportunity to improve the habitats around the lake; for instance, there has been some discussion of the possibility of constructing a permanent wetland at the site to improve water quality and wildlife habitat. Later this spring (again, the exact date and

(continued on page 5) See Meetings

# **Upcoming Special Event**

On Sunday, April 8, 2 PM, at Enchanted Gardens, 413 West Griggs, Las Cruces, Lorraine Schulte will show slides of birds seen migrating into this area in Spring as the highlight of a promotion for Audubon Adventures. Enchanted Gardens will be donating a percentage of the day's sales to Audubon Adventures, so spread the word and encourage your friends and neighbors to make their spring gardening purchases during this event.

## Birding Hot Spots: Ponds and Lakes

by Storm Sermay, Bill Jacobson, and Nancy Stotz

Historically, the riparian corridor of the Rio Grande teemed with birds and other wildlife, attracted to both the waters of the river and the numerous ponds, oxbows. and marshes that occurred within its floodplain. Since the vast majority of these native habitats have been destroyed in the past century and a half, the scattered aquatic habitats that exist today are concentration points for remaining wildlife. Even the smallest man-made ponds, such as the pond in Young Park (off of Walnut Avenue, southwest of Smith's Grocery) and the "Aggie Pond" (just west of the Educational Services Building on the NMSU campus) can have interesting birds on them; both these ponds regularly support divers such as Canvasbacks and Ring-necked Ducks in winter, and during migration, the Aggie Pond has even merited a quick visit from wandering Osprey and Peregrine Falcons. This installment of "Birding Hot Spots" details three larger bodies of water that represent important aquatic habitats in our region.

#### **Swan Pond**

If you are heading north (particularly if you are birding Leasburg Dam; see the Nov./Dec. 2000 issue of *Roadrunner Ramblings*), an excellent addition to the trip is a stop at Swan Pond. The pond, about 20 miles north of Las Cruces, is on private land but is visible from the highway. Although it is close to the Rio Grande it attracts many species that like its calm water more than the rapid river currents. The pond covers several acres, but its size and water level depend on the water level in the Rio Grande.

In a brief stop at the pond to check mileages for this article, I saw Cinnamon and Green-winged Teal, Mallards, Northern Pintails, Northern Shovelers, Gadwalls, Great Blue Herons, Greater Yellowlegs, Killdeer, Least Sandpipers, Red-winged Blackbirds, a Say's Phoebe, Dark-eyed Juncos, and Long-billed Dowitchers. Many interesting birds have been seen at the pond over the years, including Vermilion Flycatcher, Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Cardinal, both Neotropic and Double-crested Cormorants, Buffleheads and Western, Piedbilled, and Eared Grebes. This is also a great place to see Black-crowned NightHerons, both adults and juveniles. Bring a spotting scope, as the pond is large and birds tend to congregate on the far shore.

Directions: To reach the pond from Las Cruces, go north on I-25 to exit 19 (Radium Springs). Turn west on NM 157 and drive 1.7 miles to the intersection with NM 185 (North Valley Dr.). This will be just after the road to Leasburg Dam. Turn north on NM 185. At about 2.1 miles from the interstate, as you cross the Rio Grande, look for an irrigation ditch at an RV park on the right. This can sometimes be good for winter ducks. Swan Pond will be on your left at 6.7 miles from the interstate exit at mile marker 19. Since you do not have access to the private land, park in the large highway pullout at the south end of the pond and walk back along the shoulder looking for the best views. Since this is a main highway, please be careful of the traffic, which often travels at high speed.

After you have birded the pond, you may want to return to Las Cruces on Highway 185 and bird the pecan orchards and agricultural fields on your way home. (Thanks to Sue and Wally Hill for their list of birds seen at the pond.)

#### Burn Lake

A City of Las Cruces storm water control facility/park, Burn Lake is unique as the only deep water site in the area. As such, it hosts a variety of birds not always seen elsewhere in the area. This variety is constantly changing (depending on both the season and the water level in the lake) and birds uncommon in southern New Mexico are sometimes seen here. Birds to look for are grebes, Neotropic and Double-crested Cormorants, Common Loons (November), gulls, and a variety of geese and ducks (including many diving species). Unusual birds that have been spotted include Lewis's Woodpecker, Brown Pelican, Bonaparte's Gull and others. A flock of Common Grackles is fairly regular in the winter months. (The City has begun developing a Master Plan for future developments at this site; see City Meetings on page 3).

**Directions:** Burn Lake is situated just to the south of Amador Avenue between Main Street and Motel Boulevard. From Main Street go west on Amador 0.5 miles

and turn left (south) at the Burn Lake sign. Proceed approximately 0.3 miles and you are there. From Motel Boulevard go 0.8 miles east on Amador to the Burn Lake turnoff. Go right. In addition to birding the lake, the fields adjacent to the entrance road are worth a look, as are the trees on the west edge of the lake.

#### Feather Lake

Located in southern El Paso, Feather Lake is another storm water control facility which the El Paso/Trans-Pecos Audubon Society manages as a wildlife refuge. The site includes a 40-acre wetland, which can host numerous ducks, shorebirds, and other water-associated species. On a field trip there last spring, MVAS members observed American Avocet, Black-necked Stilts, Greater Yellowlegs, Long-billed Dowitchers, White-faced Ibis, Black-crowned Night-Herons, and Cinnamon and Green-winged Teal.

Green-winged Teal.
Feather Lake is open to the public on weekends, October through April; hours are 8 AM to noon on Saturdays and 2 PM to dusk on Sundays.

Directions: Take I-10 to Exit 34 (Americas Avenue), then turn right (south) and go just over a mile to North Loop. Turn right (north) onto North Loop and go 0.4 miles to Bordeaux Street. Turn left to enter Feather Lake.



Percha Dam, 20 January. At 6:30 AM, nine people gathered at the K-Mart on Highway 70 to begin a very good day of birding. We were counting and identifying birds at Percha State Park. The identification and counting was not only for the participants, but also for the State Parks program, because MVAS is helping them to develop a display about the birds that can be found in the park during different times of year.

We also journeyed to Animas Canyon

and the Caballo Dam area. Our sightings at the three sites numbered over 50 species. At Caballo Dam, a Bald Eagle caught and ate a fish right in front of us, without offering us a bite. Some of the other species we saw were Downy, Ladder-backed, and Hairy Woodpeckers; White-breasted Nuthatches; Starlings; Brown Creepers; several different races of Juncos; and many types of hawks and waterfowl.

Ed Mayfield

time were unavailable at press time) the City's Planning Department will host another public meeting to collect public input on potential developments for the site.

Announcements about both these meetings (as well as the meetings associated with the Sustainable Development project along the river corridor) should eventually appear in the Las Cruces Sun News and The Bulletin, although they may not appear until a few days before the meetings. A City of Las Cruces meeting schedule (for the upcoming week only) can also be accessed at the City's website at www.lascruces.org/. With all these planning processes underway, this is a critical time for conservationists to speak up and make sure that the needs of native wildlife are considered; while MVAS, as an organization, is contributing to these processes, it is also important that individuals contribute their own ideas about what should (or should not) happen at these sites. If you would like to be included on a phone or email list for notification about any of these meetings, please contact Nancy Stotz (521-8087 or nstotz@zianet.com).

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### **Bird Notes**

Species	Date	Location	Observer
Bonaparte's Gull	Jan 5	Burn Lake	SWH
Anna's Hummingbird	Dec 14-Jan 17	Las Cruces	LS
Harris's Sparrow	Dec 1-Feb 26	Las Cruces	TS
Dark-eyed Junco	Dec 2-Jan 24	Las Cruces	TS
(White-winged)			
Golden-crowned Sparrow	Jan 11	Near Salem	JZ, MS
Rough-legged Hawk	Jan 11	Near Salem	JZ, MS
Sprague's Pipits	Jan 11	Near Salem	JZ, MS
Yellow-throated Warbler	Jan 18	NMSU	RH, JZ, MS, TL
Lewis' Woodpecker	various	Burn Lake	Many
Great Horned Owl	various	Home Depot	Many
Red Crossbills	various	Several locations	Many
Wood Duck	Jan 20	Near Vado	HH, BH
Violet-green Swallow	Jan 20	Near Vado	HH, BH
Osprey	Feb 3	Burn Lake	HH, BH
Golden Eagle	Feb 3	Calle del Norte	DW, BR EM, HH
N. Rough-winged Swallow	Feb 10	Called del Norte	Bird ID Class
Cassin's Vireo	Feb 11	Mesilla Park	JZ, MS
Plumbeous Vireo	Feb 11	Mesilla Park	JZ, MS
Hutton's Vireo	Feb 11	Mesilla Park	JZ, MS
Golden-crowned Kinglet	Feb 11	Mesilla Park	JZ, MS
Rufous-crowned Sparrow	Feb 15	Dripping Springs	TL, LS, SWH

Observers: Barbara Harrison, Harold Harrison, Richard Hermosillo, Sue and Wally Hill, Tim Lawton, Ed Mayfield, Barbara Rodriguez, Lorraine Schulte, Marcy Scott, Tara Shelton, Donna Wood, Jimmy Zabriskie

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

New Mexico Rare Bird Hotline 505-323-9323

## Welcome New Members

Anne Lyman Bob Tafanelli



Mesilla Valley Audubon Society, a chapter of the National Audubon Society, is a conservation and natural history organization in southern New Mexico that promotes appreciation and conservation of birds, other wildlife, and habitat, through environmental education, issue advocacy, and natural history experiences.

#### OFFICERS AND BOARD

President	Bill Jacobson	382-6877
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Board (01-03)	Nancy Stotz	521-8087

#### **COMMITTEE CHAIRS**

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Newsletter Editor	Nancy Stotz	521-8087	
Programs	Nancy Stotz	521-8087	
Publicity	Charles Townley	526-8705	

Board meetings are held, September through May, on the Thursday before the 3rd Wednesday at 5:30 PM. All Audubon members are welcome.

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

Mesilla Valley Audubon Society P.O. Box 1645 Las Cruces, NM 88004

Address Service Requested

### Newsletter Business

Internet Users. If you're a regular web user and you would like to save MVAS a few dollars, you might consider getting your newsletters off our website (www.cybermesa.com/~mvas/) instead of having a printed copy mailed to you. At the same time that each issue of *Roadrunner Ramblings* is mailed (roughly the first of January, March, May, July, September, and November), a printable version of it appears at the website (in PDF form). Before you decide, go to our site, print one of the old newsletters that's there, and see if you like what you get. If you do, contact Nancy Stotz (521-8087 or nstotz@zianet.com) and I'll take you off of our hard-copy mailing list.

Snowbirds. The mailing information that we receive from the National Audubon Society can't seem to keep up with your seasonal migrations, so in order to make sure you receive your newsletters throughout the year, we need to know what address to use during which months. Please contact Nancy Stotz (521-8087 or nstotz@zianet.com) so we can take note of your seasonal addresses.

## Herps Bill Update

Once again a bill affording protections to reptiles and amphibians in New Mexico has been introduced into the New Mexico legislature, which has previously failed to pass similar bills. New Mexico is the only southwestern state that does not have some legislative protections for reptiles and amphibians, and as such, many populations are threatened due to unregulated harvesting for the commercial pet trade. This year, the herps bill passed the House, and it was scheduled for consideration by the Senate Conservation Committee on February 27. For an update on the bill's progress, visit the website http://www.rt66.com/peacmyer/herps/herps.htm#current.

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