

NMOS BULLETIN



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CONTENTS

STATUS OF THE VIOLET-CROWNED HUMMINGBIRD IN NEW MEXICO Sartor O. Williams III.....	91
FAST FOOD: PREY NEST CARRYING BY CHIHUAHUAN RAVEN Steve West.....	97

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND INFORMATION

NMOS Officers for 2002/2004.....	90
New Mexico Bird Finding Guide, Third Edition..	99
Tee-shirt Sale.....	100
Reporting New Mexico Bird Observations.....	101
NMOS Web Page Address.....	103
Information on <i>NMOS Bulletin</i> , Dues, etc.....	103

THE NEW MEXICO ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY, INC.

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STATUS OF THE VIOLET-CROWNED HUMMINGBIRD IN NEW MEXICO

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The Violet-crowned Hummingbird (*Amazilia violiceps*) is one of 16 species of hummingbirds (Family Trochilidae) known to occur in New Mexico. The species was first found nesting in the United States in New Mexico's Guadalupe Canyon, and that locality remains the stronghold for the species in the state. Owing to identified threats to the state's population, the species is listed as threatened by the state of New Mexico.

CHARACTERISTICS

Size and Appearance: The Violet-crowned is a larger-than-average hummingbird species, measuring about 10-11.5 cm (4-4.45 in) in length. The species is characterized by its immaculate white underparts, including the chin and throat. The sexes are similar, but the crown is violet-blue or purple in males, dull greenish blue in females and immatures. The upperparts are a dull greenish or olive bronze as is the tail. The bill is red with a black tip. **Voice:** The male's song is a series of plaintive notes that, once learned, is distinctive; it can be described as a sibilant *t*, or *ting*, of *chieu*, this repeated 4-5 times. The call is a loud chattering. **Similar Species:** No other United States hummingbird has the throat and underparts entirely snowy white. The Violet-crowned is well-described in available North American (including Mexican) field guides.

DISTRIBUTION

Rangewide: Essentially a species of western Mexico (Howell and Webb 1995, A.O.U. 1998), the Violet-crowned Hummingbird occurs in the United States from southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico south in Mexico along the Pacific slope and in the western highlands to Oaxaca; it is found from sea level to about 2400 m (7900 ft). **New Mexico:** This species summers regularly only in Guadalupe Canyon in the southern Peloncillo Mountains, Hidalgo County (Figure 1), where first reported in 1957 (Levy 1958) and first documented as breeding in 1959 (Zimmerman and Levy 1960). For many years, the only state record away from Guadalupe Canyon was of a single that strayed far north to Water Canyon in the Magdalena Mountains, Socorro County (22 July-5 August 1981, photo P. B. Stacey). In 1996, however, birds were reported from two additional Peloncillo Mountains canyons: one in Clanton Canyon (5 July, B. R. Foy) and two in Skeleton Canyon (26 July, W. H. Baltosser). In 1999, one strayed very far north, to Arroyo Seco in northern Santa Fe County (21-26 June, photo J. R. Paule) and another was found much closer to the Peloncillos, along Double Adobe Creek, Animas Mountains, Hidalgo County (29 July, A. M. Craig). During the winter of 2001-02, two Violet-crowns occurred in Doña Ana County: one bird at Anthony 3 November-25 February, photo H. Bigelow) and another at Las Cruces (23-24 February, photo R. and B. Dickensied). **Subspecies:** Two subspecies have been described; the dull greenish/olive bronze-tailed *A. v. ellioti* of northwestern

Mexico is the one occurring in New Mexico and Arizona (Friedmann et al. 1950, Levy 1958, Phillips et al. 1964).

BIOLOGY

Seasonal Occurrence: This is a late arriving hummingbird, typically returning to Guadalupe Canyon about the first or second week of June (Baltosser 1989). There is a single record for May (14 May), but all other New Mexico reports are from 5 June or later; this arrival tends to coincide with the blooming of Schott's agave (*Agave schottii*). Violet-crowneds are usually gone from Guadalupe Canyon by mid-September; a single record for 24 October is the latest there. Although two occurred in the Las Cruces-Anthony area during winter 2001-02 (and a third wintered at nearby El Paso during the same period), the closest area of regular wintering appears to be in southern Sonora (Russell and Monson 1998). **Breeding Season:** In Guadalupe Canyon, most activity occurs from mid-June through August, but active nests of this species occasionally have been observed there as late as early September (Baltosser 1989).

Habitat: In New Mexico and Arizona, the Violet-crowned is a species of broadleaf riparian woodlands typically consisting of sycamore (*Platanus*), cottonwood (*Populus*), hackberry (*Celtis*), and oak (*Quercus*) at low to moderate elevations. In Guadalupe Canyon (elevation about 1350 m [4430 ft]), Violet-crowneds prefer clumps of mature Arizona sycamores (*P. wrightii*) interspersed with relatively open areas; these may be near the stream bottom or bordered by xeric hillsides. Occupied habitats are characterized by large amounts of herbaceous ground cover, including seepwillow (*Baccharis*) and burrobrush (*Hymenocela*) near the stream bottom and algerita (*Berberis*) and sumac (*Rhus*) near hillsides (Baltosser 1989). Guadalupe Canyon typically is dry during the summer, although one or more small pools usually persist in the New Mexico portion; Violet-crowneds visit these pools, but whether surface water is required by them is unknown. **Nest:** The site is in a deciduous tree; all nests discovered thus far in New Mexico have been in Arizona sycamore (Zimmerman and Levy 1960, Baltosser 1989). The nests are placed relatively high: four nests in Guadalupe Canyon in 1959 (Zimmerman and Levy 1960) were 7.5-13 m (25-40 ft) above ground, and averaged 9.75 m (32 ft); 14 nests measured in Guadalupe Canyon in 1976-77 and 1980 (Baltosser 1989) were 4-13 m (13-43 ft) above ground, and averaged 7 m (23 ft). The nest is built entirely by the female; it is saddled to a horizontal branch or forked twig, typically in an open but shaded situation. **Eggs and Young:** The clutch is 2 eggs. Incubation and care of the young are by the female alone (Baltosser 1996). **Success and Productivity:** Nine of 16 nests (56 %) monitored in Guadalupe Canyon 1976-77 and 1980 successfully fledged young; productivity of those nests was about 1.43 young fledged per female (Baltosser 1986). Nest failure in Guadalupe Canyon often was attributed to avian nest predation (Baltosser 1986).

Diet: The Violet-crowned is a nectar feeder, but it also takes insects caught on the wing and insects and spiders gleaned from foliage. Agaves, especially the mid-summer blooming Palmer's agave (*Agave palmeri*) and Schott's agave, are important food plants (Baltosser 1989, Baltosser and Russell 2000). **Habits:** In Guadalupe Canyon, this relatively large species tends to dominate other species at the most productive and available nectar sources. Violet-crowneds usually feed and perch at mid- to upper levels in the riparian canopy; they visit agaves and other food plants on adjacent dry, rocky hillsides. The males sing from conspicuous perches, such as

an exposed treetop twig. As in other hummingbirds, these birds do not form pair bonds; males defend feeding territories, females defend feeding territories and the area around their nest.

STATUS

Numbers and Trends: The New Mexico population is small, since the mid-1980s rarely numbering more than a dozen individuals, these distributed among 2-5, rarely 7, locations within the New Mexico portion of Guadalupe Canyon, and showing no detectable trend (S. O. Williams). Occurrence at all but three locations in the United States date from the 1950s, suggesting a gradual range increase over the past half-century, especially in Arizona, where nesting has been documented at several sites away from Guadalupe Canyon (Monson and Phillips 1981). In New Mexico, occurrence in the late 1990s of individuals in two additional Peloncillo Mountains canyons plus one canyon in the nearby Animas Mountains may signal pioneering of new range, but to date no breeding or even consistent summering has been documented away from Guadalupe Canyon. **Threats:** The small New Mexico population is threatened by loss of broadleaf riparian and adjacent xeric habitat within its limited range; such losses may occur through clearing, overgrazing, or fire. The recent land management emphasis on introducing fire onto public and private lands throughout the Peloncillo Mountains poses a significant threat if scarce big-tree riparian habitats are burned or food sources such as agaves are destroyed by fire. Grazing in canyon bottoms may remove necessary dense understory vegetation and impede regeneration of riparian trees.

CONSERVATION

Because of identified threats, the Violet-crowned Hummingbird is listed as threatened under New Mexico's Wildlife Conservation Act (19 NMAC 33:1); the species was initially listed 24 January 1975 (NMDGF Reg. 563). Habitat preservation is critical to the conservation of this species in New Mexico, and the maintenance of suitable riparian woodland and adjacent xeric habitats in Guadalupe Canyon is essential. In addition, collecting and other forms of taking (e.g., banding) in New Mexico should be carefully regulated. The Violet-crowned Hummingbird is a neotropical species at the northern limit of its range in New Mexico, where it has been a unique and interesting member of the state's avifauna for over half a century; every effort should be made to perpetuate the species as a viable part of the state's biodiversity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I acknowledge the many contributions William H. Baltosser has made to our understanding of hummingbird ecology in New Mexico. I also acknowledge John P. Hubbard who, as head of the state's Endangered Species Program in the 1970s, recognized the vulnerability of this species and oversaw its listing. This review is one of a series of accounts being prepared on endangered and threatened birds for the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

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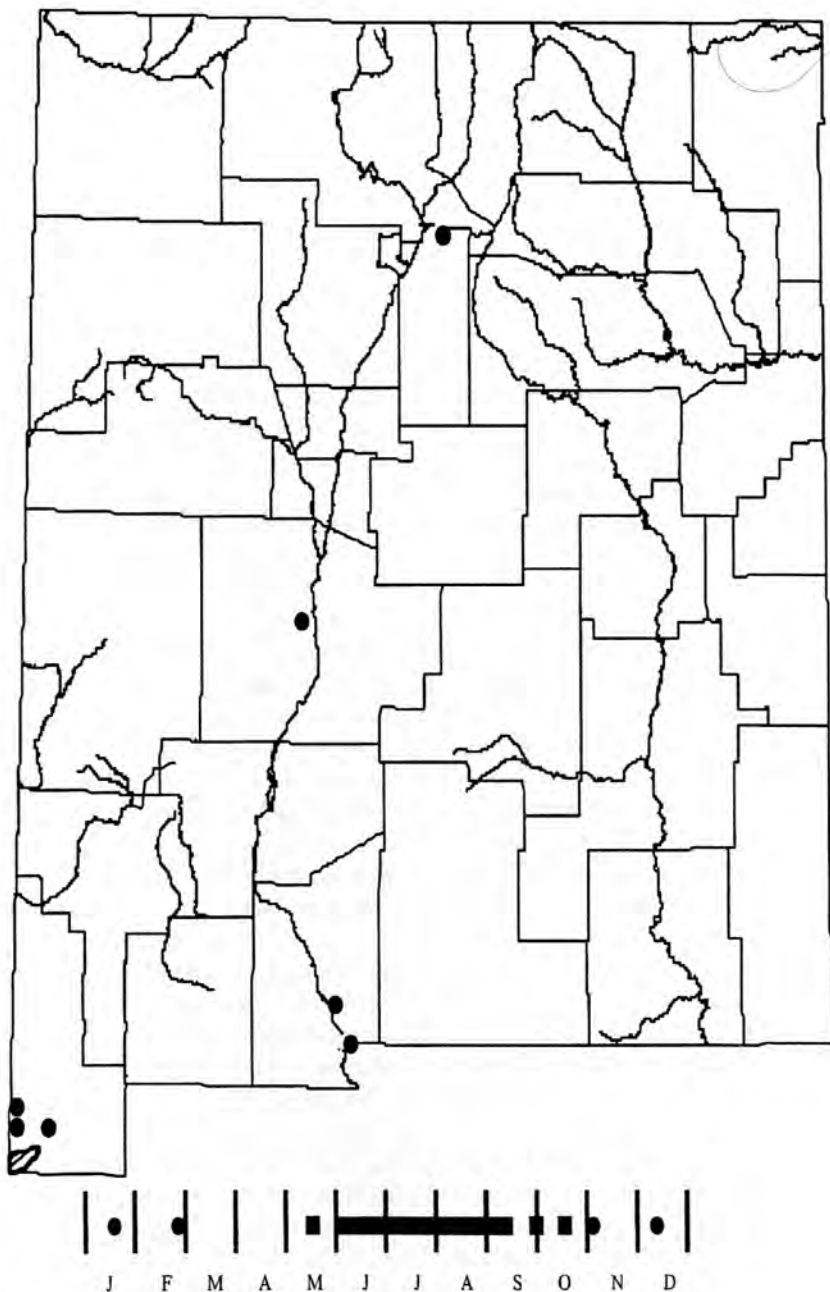


Figure 1. Map of New Mexico showing locations of Violet-crowned Hummingbird occurrences. Hatched area represents Guadalupe Canyon, where the species summers annually and breeds. Dots represent other localities where the species has been reported; see text for details. Bar graph: solid line represents rare but regular, dashes represent irregular, and dots represent isolated occurrences.



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FAST FOOD: PREY NEST CARRYING BY CHIHUAHUAN RAVEN

STEVE WEST
1105 Ocotillo Canyon
Carlsbad, NM 88220

Two species of birds have previously been reported as carrying nests of other species in order to feed on the nest contents or to use the contents as food for their nestlings. The Black Eagle, *Ictinaetus malayensis*, (Brown and Amadon 1968) and Swallow-tailed Kite, *Elanoides forficatus*, (Skutch 1965, Coulson 2002) have both been recorded exhibiting this type of behavior. In some instances this has involved taking a nest, feeding on the nestlings, and then dropping the nest while in flight. In the recent paper by Coulson (2002), 20 instances were recorded of Swallow-tailed Kites carrying nest and contents back to the kite nest and either devouring the contents en route or delivering it to the kite nest. Reported here is an account of a potential occurrence of this behavior in the Chihuahuan Raven.

On 30 July 1991, the author was driving east on US 380 just east of the intersection with Range Road 7 in Socorro County. This is the open, flat grassland area at the north end of the Jornada del Muerto and is largely enclosed within White Sands Missile Range. During the summer both Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) and Chihuahuan Raven (*Corvus cryptoleucus*) nest in this area, with nests most often being placed on power poles or low bushes. As I drove along, I noted two Western Kingbirds attacking and harassing a single Chihuahuan Raven as it flew east. The raven was carrying a relatively large object in its bill. As I drove ahead of the birds, I pulled to the side of the road in hopes of better seeing what the raven was carrying. The object resembled a nest of a kingbird in size and substance. The raven continued flying on with the kingbirds in pursuit.

While this may be just a single opportunistic event, I suspect that the ravens will take advantage of any situation that presents itself, and taking a nest with nestlings might be the best way to transport food to a raven nest or to consume the contents in peace away from the nest site. The most detailed study of food items taken by Chihuahuan Ravens by S. E. Aldous (Bent 1988) reported that in an analysis of 707 adult and 120 nestling stomachs, birds "were found in but a small proportion of the stomachs."

While a study undertaken sixty years ago may have indicated minor take of birds and eggs, Chihuahuan Ravens could probably be expected to take whatever is available, including a nest of nestlings or eggs that wasn't being adequately guarded. A similar analysis of Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*) by Boarman and Heinrich (1999) reported that Common Ravens have been recorded taking adult Rock Dove (*Columba livia*) and Northern Flicker (*Colaptes cafer*) from nests.

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REPORTING NEW MEXICO BIRD OBSERVATIONS

It is common knowledge that birders have added greatly to our understanding of the bird life of New Mexico. In fact, birders now account for the majority of new data on species distribution and field identification of North American birds generally. However, unless field observations are properly documented and submitted for consideration, they have no way of becoming part of the ornithological record. For New Mexico, bird records are published seasonally in Field Notes, the National Audubon Society's journal dedicated to documenting the continent's bird life, and in the NMOS Field Notes, published quarterly by the New Mexico Ornithological Society.

Sandy Williams is New Mexico's Regional Editor for the NAS Field Notes; he is also responsible for maintaining the NMOS Archives, including all written bird sighting submissions as well as the Photo/Tape File. Contributors are asked to submit their records to Sandy by (AND PREFERABLY BEFORE) the deadlines listed below. After the information has been summarized for the NAS Field Notes, it is used by the NMOS Field Notes Committee to compile the more detailed NMOS Field Notes. All submissions become part of the NMOS Archives; even if all your reports are not published, they remain on file and available to future workers.

All New Mexico birders are encouraged to submit their sightings, especially of uncommon species and early, late or out-of-range birds. Please submit your records in taxonomic order and make sure all records include date, exact location, numbers of birds, age and sex/color morph, if applicable, and name(s) of observer(s).

Please provide details for unusual records. Details are usually needed for sightings of birds appearing in light-faced type in the NMOS Birds of New Mexico Field Check-list. Details can be submitted on a Rare/Unusual Report Form available from Sandy Williams. A copy of this report form can be found in most issues of the NMOS Bulletin.

If slides are submitted, please be sure to include ON THE SLIDE your name, date the picture was taken, and the exact location. Your original slide will be returned to you, while a duplicate will remain in the Photo File.

NAS Field Notes and the NMOS have the year broken down into four reporting periods:

Season	Period	Due
Autumn	1 Aug-30 Nov (=4 months)	31 Dec
Winter	1 Dec-28 Feb (=3 months)	31 Mar
Spring	1 Mar-31 May (=3 months)	30 Jun
Summer	1 Jun-31 Jul (=2 months)	31 Aug

Records should be submitted to Dr. Sartor O. Williams III at the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, P.O. Box 25112, Santa Fe, NM 87504.

NEW MEXICO RARE/UNUSUAL BIRD REPORT

Please be as complete as possible, as this may be the most complete report available to users of the record. Its future acceptability may depend on how well it is detailed here. This report and any photographic or other documentation will be placed in ornithological archives and otherwise appropriately used.

Species.....Number/Age/Sex.....

Reporter.....

Address.....

Other observers.....

Date/time of record.....

Locality.....

Habitat.....

Conditions (e.g. weather, lighting).....

Optical aids.....

How long was bird(s) observed?.....

How far away was bird(s)?.....

Size and shape of bird.....

Description of bird(s), including overall coloration (upper and under parts, wings, tail, etc.), and any patterning (on head, under parts, wings, tail, etc.)

What was bird(s) doing?.....

Basis for identification.....

Have you previous experience with species?.....

Were photos or recordings obtained?.....

Other comments.....

NMOS BULLETIN

The *Bulletin* is published four times a year; subscription is by membership in NMOS. The *Bulletin* serves two primary purposes: (1) to publish articles of scientific merit concerning the distribution, abundance, status, behavior, and ecology of the avifauna of New Mexico and its contiguous regions and (2) to publish news and announcements deemed of interest to the New Mexico ornithological community.

NMOS members are urged to submit articles and news. Articles received are subject to review and editing. Published articles are noted in major abstracting services (e.g., the AOU's "Recent Ornithological Literature" section of *The Auk*). Please submit news and articles (**double-spaced**) (hard copy, disk, or email) to Mary Alice Root (maroot@unm.edu) or Bruce Neville (bneville@unm.edu).

ANNUAL DUES

Membership in the New Mexico Ornithological Society is open to anyone with an interest in birds. Memberships are for a calendar year and annual dues are payable 1 January.

Dues are: Regular \$10, Family \$15, Student \$5, Supporting \$35 and Life \$300.

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NEW MEXICO RARE BIRD ALERT

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NEW MEXICO RARE BIRD ALERT

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