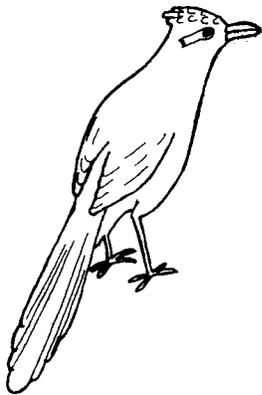


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N. M. O. S. BULLETIN

*incorporating the Newsletter of the
New Mexico Ornithological Society*

Vol. 3, Nos. 1 & 2

Spring 1975

Las Cruces

HARRY C. WILLIAMS, EARLY NEW MEXICO BIRDER

BY BILL PRINCIPE

When Harry Williams came to Las Cruces in July, 1920, he found a small, sleepy desert town of about 4,000 residents, certainly none of whom was a bird-watcher. But Williams had learned the local birds in Missouri and New Orleans, and he must have looked forward to the desert birds that would be his familiar companions for the next forty years. From his arrival until his death in the 1960's, Williams kept tabs on the changing birdlife of the Mesilla Valley. After his death, a lifetime's notes, filling a shopping bag, were donated to the Department of Biology, New Mexico State University, and it is upon those notes that this article is based.

Ironically, Williams had come west to work for the U. S. Bureau of Reclamation, an agency whose policies would in future years be blamed for the destruction of much wildlife habitat in the southwest. Williams' work took him out into the field, inspecting irrigation ditches and other waterways, and this was where much of the birdlife was. His notes document the establishment of several species in the Valley, notably Common Gallinule, Inca Dove, and Great-tailed Grackle. Like so many other early naturalists, Williams was a hunter, and many of his observations concern birds he had

shot, most of them raptors and waterfowl.

Most of his notes merely recorded the species and numbers of birds seen; descriptions are rare. For instance, he recorded, without comment, Red-headed Woodpecker and Louisiana Heron. The woodpecker especially would be difficult to misidentify, and yet neither species has been recorded in the Valley before or since. Whether or not he saw these, and other birds, we shall never know. Still, his notes contain much valuable information, and a paper was published based on his notes. (WILLIAMS, H. C. & R. F. JOHNSTON. 1957. Spring arrival of summer resident birds on the lower Rio Grande, New Mexico. *Southwest Nat.* 2(1):28-32.) For some rare birds, Williams wrote a description or drew a picture. In some places, he wrote just plain interesting narratives of his exploits.

On May 21, 1921, Williams wrote,

At Juarez, Mex. 5 Boat-tailed Grackles in little park.

This species had only been first recorded in New Mexico four years before. In later years, Williams would describe nesting of the species near Las Cruces, as it established itself in the Mesilla Valley and beyond.

In November, 1923, he and a friend took a deer-hunting trip to Hidalgo County. Three pages of notes describe what was in those days a major expedition, complete with mountain lions and cowboys carrying six-guns. Near Hachita, he describes a

. . . range with beautiful grass, waste (sic) high . . .

Today, the grasslands in southern New Mexico are seldom ankle high.

On January 12, 1924, he wrote,

Clear. Ice on ponds. 40 Red-breasted Mergansers, incl 2 collected.

A drawing below this entry shows that he could differentiate this species from the Common Merganser by the characters of the bill. Incidentally, I keep wondering what happened to the ponds that had the ice. I certainly can't find them today!

In 1928, Williams wrote,

Florida Gallinule. 1928. Saw 1 July 14 and July 18 in Chamberino drain west of Berino.

A sketch, clearly indicating the red forehead, brown back, and white streaks on sides, substantiates this first New Mexico record.

In December, 1928, Williams describes what are certainly Swainson's Hawks, for one of the few North American winter records. On December 18, he wrote about three near El Paso,

2 of them were rather heavily streaked with reddish brown on under parts. 1 was quite white with a few streaks except for a well defined collar under a white throat.

The entry of December 30, near Las Cruces, tends to corroborate the record,

*1 Swainson's Hawk L 22 1/2 Wingspread 53 weight 2# 9 oz
10 dark brown stripes 1/4" 10 light brown stripes 1/2"
primaries tipped with black, 3 outer cut out.*

Among North American buteos, only Swainson's, Broad-winged, and Short-tailed have 3, rather than 4, slotted primaries.

Other interesting birds make Williams' notes absorbing reading. Lawrence's Goldfinch, Clark's Nutcracker, and Lewis' Woodpecker are all entered from the Mesilla Valley. One winter, Williams wrote about a Dipper wintering at Leasburg Dam on the Rio Grande. Fascinating though his notes are, they are often made frustrating by the lack of detail and substantiating description. Did he ever imagine they would be read or published? What about you? Do you keep field notes? What do you suppose will happen to yours? We would all do well to keep Harry Williams in mind as we record our bird observations. Are your notes organized, or are they slips of paper in an old cigar box? Some day, 100 years from now, they may be rare and valuable documents of a changed or vanished wildlife, and we should all be aware of this possibility. Record in your field notes as much detail as you can so future readers can use and understand them. Take nothing for granted, especially for unusual birds, you may be sure you saw that rare warbler, but would someone else believe you from your notes? Date your notes; include descriptions of locality and conditions; describe the birds you see, don't just list them. Nevertheless, list them all; Western Bluebirds may be abundant, and not note-worthy, now, but in 100 years, they may be near extinction. It may seem like a lot of extra work, but what justification do we have for bird-watching? If we leave anything behind us, it is our written word. Some day, in a vastly changed world, our notes may be more precious than we can ever know.

At their March 1 meeting in Albuquerque, the Board of Directors took three actions that should be of interest to the general membership.

Barbara McKnight was awarded a life membership to the Society in recognition of her extraordinary efforts on its behalf. She has also been presented with a Certificate of Appreciation signed by the members of the Board.

The Board, with the approval of the general membership, voted to raise dues by 25%. Yearly dues are now \$5.00. Family memberships are \$7.50 per year, and student memberships are \$2.50 per year.

Finally, the Board appointed Bill Principe as Editor of the combined Bulletin/Newsletter. In the future, the Bulletin will be published in February (Winter), April (Spring), September (Summer), and November (Fall). Material for publication should be sent to Bill at the Department of Biology, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces 88003, and received no later than the first of the month of publication.

The Board of Directors wishes to sincerely thank Ro Wauer for serving as Editor of the Newsletter during its first two years of publication.

NEW MEXICO CHRISTMAS COUNTS - 1974

BY JOHN HUBBARD

Fifteen Christmas Counts were held in New Mexico between 14 and 31 December, 1974. These yielded a total of 187 species (plus 3 other forms) and 2,283,420 individuals. To gather this information, 167 observers labored a total of 512 1/2 party-hours (or about 21 1/2 party-days) in 12 of our 32 counties, giving us fair coverage of the state. The largest totals were from Roswell, with 103 species and 2,068,428 individuals; the smallest totals were from Clayton, with 36 species and 1350 individuals. The average for all counts was 67 1/2 species, with 158,895 individuals. The latter figure especially is skewed by the Roswell count. Over 90% of the individual birds recorded in the state were at Roswell; of these, almost 97% were Red-winged and Brewer's Blackbirds! The summaries of the counts follow:

Count	Date	Spp.	Individ's	Compiler	Obs.Py-hrs.
Albuquerque	22 Dec	58	25,494	Alan Engberg	19 63
Bosque del Apache NWR	14 Dec	83	104,528	C. Hundertmark	16 50
Carlsbad Caverns NWR	14 Dec	56	1,725	Karl Ellers	6 20
Clayton	15 Dec	36	1,350	Wes Cook	2 8
Española	29 Dec	72	17,687	Burt Lewis	16 65
Farmington	14 Dec	80	27,465	Alan Nelson	13 46
Gila Valley	14 Dec	81	3,858	Stuart O'Byrne	19 44
Glenwood	31 Dec	81	2,476	John Hubbard	7 36
Las Vegas	22 Dec	69	7,695	John Gavahan	3 10
Loving	28 Dec	64	1,743	Jim Cheek	4 23
Rodeo	28 Dec	63	4,089	Robert Scholes	5 15
Roswell	21 Dec	103	2,068,428	Jody corrie	16 35
Sandia Mountains	28 Dec	40	7,753	Ross Teuber	13 27
Santa Fe	22 Dec	55	4,418	Ro Wauer	10 26
Silver City	21 Dec	73	4,711	Stuart O'Byrne	18 43

Highlights of the counts include Cattle Egrets, White-faced Ibis, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Eastern Kingbird, and Short-billed Marsh Wren at Roswell; six *Empidonax* flycatchers at Carlsbad Caverns NWR and Glenwood; Winter Wrens at Las Vegas; and Grasshopper Sparrow at Silver City.

CONSERVATION COLUMN

BY HENRY ZELLER

As your Conservation Chairman, I am most anxious to fulfill your wishes on the subject. To do this, I must know what you want, and I also need information as the basis for action. For these reasons, I need communication with the members of the Society. Please do not hesitate to write or telephone when you wish to pass on information or a proposal. What do you know about that needs action?

In addition, I would like to develop regular correspondents in various parts of the state, perhaps making up a sort of Conservation Committee. We could even have a meeting of interested persons once in a while, if there should be

enough interest in conservation subjects. At any rate, such correspondents could certainly be valuable in turning up otherwise undiscovered information from different parts of the state, which no one person can cover comprehensively.

Concerning my own ideas as to a conservation program, I feel it should add up to an unemotional effort toward the welfare of birds and their habitat, based either on facts or on rational inference based on facts, and organized from a scientific point of view. Although birds are our subject, I don't feel we should avoid action from which all wildlife can benefit when that is the best way to get action, and I think that this will often be the case.

Again, let me know what you think. I truly would like to make our conservation program a Society-wide effort. In that way, it would not only be more thoroughly founded on full knowledge of the whole state, but it would be much more effective.

THE OLD REFUGE

BY BILL PRINCIPE

As Harry Williams' field-notes suggest, the Rio Grande in pre-Army Corps of Engineers days used to course through a broad flood-plain with many cottonwood bosques and cattail marshes. Today, most of that is gone, and any habitat other than irrigated field or *Tamarix* thicket is a rarity. Of course, the Rio Grande is not alone in its plight, and today the Gila and other fine river systems are in danger of losing their lush riparian growth. For a thorough look at the situation on the Sacramento River, see Gaines, 1974 (A new look at the nesting avifauna of the Sacramento Valley, California. *Western Birds* 5:61-80).

One place near Las Cruces where both cattails and an extensive open cottonwood grove can still be found is the "Old Refuge", so named because the Game and Fish Department used to maintain it as a hunting preserve.

To get to the Old Refuge, drive west on N. M. 359 from Mesilla until you cross the Rio, about 2 miles. There is a locked gate, so park your car here. As you walk south, with the Rio on your left, there will first be a grassy field on your right. Along the ditches in the field, Burrowing Owls are sometimes seen. Next comes a large cottonwood grove. This land is under private ownership, so respect property rights. The grass under the grove has been regularly mowed, so salt-cedar and mesquite are present only in isolated clumps. The resulting open woodlot is a joy to bird! In summer, Ash-throated and Vermilion Flycatchers, Summer Tanagers, Western Kingbirds, Northern Orioles, flickers, and many raptors are here. A pair of Great Horned Owls is present (probably excluding small owls). Phainopeplas and, yes, Starlings breed here. Don't forget to keep one eye on the Rio. Probably due to the protection afforded by the refuge on the west, an unusually large number of waders and waterfowl are found on this stretch of the Rio Grande.

If you continue south on the levee, it will turn west and cross a drainage ditch. Look up and down the ditch with your scope for waterfowl and herons. Walk south along the west bank of the ditch. A cattail marsh (now dry) will be on your right. Yellowthroats, Long-billed Marsh Wrens, and Soras can be found in the marsh and ditch. Continue along the ditch until you come out at the Rio. On the way back, follow the sandy road along the west side of the

refuge. On your right will be the refuge with its cattails, salt-cedars and cottonwoods. On your left, will be desert vegetation spilling down from the mesa, with Chollas and other *Opuntia*, mesquite, and creosote. The junction of these two habitats attracts an unusually large number of birds, especially during migration.

Also to be looked for are the occasional rarities. Cattle Egrets have been found in the grassy field. Swamp Sparrow, Brown Thrasher, and Hermit Thrush have been found in winter. Rarer warblers, including Black-and-White, Black-throated Gray, and Northern Waterthrush, and perhaps an eastern vagrant, may be found.

Unfortunately, this choice spot has not been properly managed for many years, and every visit reveals further disintegration. Dune buggies, motorcycles, and other ORV's (off-road-vehicles) have free run of the adjacent mesa, and frequently enter the refuge. New swaths are occasionally found bulldozed through the bosques. The International Boundary Commission still insists on regular burning, to prevent "undesirable" thickets. But investigations are now being made into the possibility of preserving this remnant of what is certainly an "endangered species," the Rio Grande riparian community.

FIELD TRIP TO RATTLESNAKE SPRINGS

The Midland Naturalists wish to invite NMOS members to join them on a field trip to Rattlesnake Springs, Carlsbad Caverns National Park, on the weekend of June 7 and 8. The group will arrive at Rattlesnake Springs at about noon on June 7, and birders from New Mexico can join them then, or early on the morning of June 8. Turn off to Rattlesnake Springs from US 62-180 about 5 miles south of White City. Late May and early June always offer chances for rare vagrant birds from the east, and Rattlesnake Springs is one of the best spots in the state to find them. For further information, call Georgia Porter at (915) 694-8358.

NATIONAL FOREST MAPS

The U. S. Forest Service has just made available two new maps of National Forests in New Mexico and Arizona that may be of interest to NMOS members.

Maps of the Gila and Lincoln National Forests (1/2 inch = 1 mile) can be purchased by mail, at \$1.00 per copy, from the office of the appropriate National Forest. Send your orders to Gila National Forest, 2160 N. Silver Street, Silver City 88061, or to Lincoln National Forest, Federal Building, 11th and New York, Alamogordo 88310.

The new maps are larger and more detailed than earlier editions, and show ownership of land surrounding National Forests, a feature earlier maps did not have.

CALIFORNIA FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

The California Field Ornithologists solicits memberships from interested persons throughout the west. Membership includes includes the quarterly

journal *Western Birds*, which contains papers on field work on birds from the Rocky Mountain states westward, including western Mexico and Texas.

Memberships are \$5.00 annually. Send checks, payable to California Field Ornithologists, to Clifford R. Lyons, Treasurer, Box 321, Del Mar, California 92014.

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