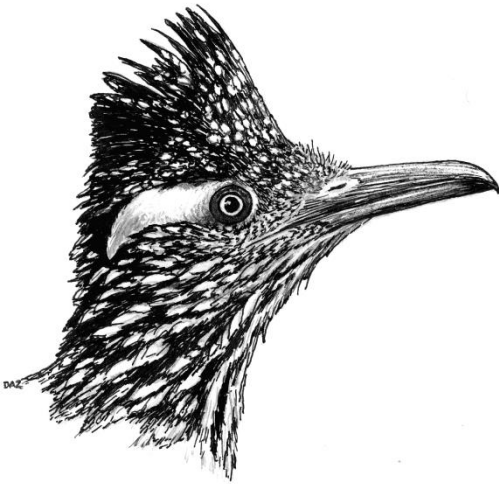


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GOLDEN EAGLE NESTING CHRONOLOGY IN THE SOUTHERN GREAT PLAINS

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INTRODUCTION

The Golden Eagle's (*Aquila chrysaetos*) current population stability in the western United States (US) is tentative, as increasing anthropogenic mortality may cause the population to decline (Millsap et al. 2022). If a decline occurs, significant opportunities for restoring population stability may be found in the eagle's range periphery (Channell and Lomolino 2000). In that vein, the Great Plains forms the eastern margin of the Golden Eagle's western US range. Knowledge of the eagle's ecology there could greatly influence how well regional opportunities to conserve Golden Eagles are recognized and seized. The Southern Great Plains region supports a moderately large breeding population of Golden Eagles, with 123 occupied nesting territories recently reported (Stahlecker et al. in press), but many basic facets of eagle ecology there remain understudied compared to populations in more westerly regions of the US.

Nesting chronology is one of the most fundamental aspects of avian breeding ecology and is vital to bird conservation planning. For Golden Eagles, knowledge of regional nesting chronology is critical in formulating strategies to minimize human activity near nests during periods when breeding pairs are particularly sensitive and, if disturbed, may fail to initiate nesting or abandon or reduce care of their eggs or young (reviewed in Katzner et al. 2020). Examples of such disturbance include frequent hiking, camping, and recreational rock climbing; recurrent, nearby use of off-road vehicles; and energy development and mining activities (Steenhof et al. 2014, Spaul and Heath 2016, Katzner et al. 2020). Familiarity with nesting chronology also is crucial for optimally timing surveys of raptor breeding populations (Steenhof and Newton 2007). Published, quantitative summaries of Golden Eagle nesting chronology are unavailable for the Southern Great Plains, however. Our objective was to help fill this information gap by summarizing chronology data collected during a recent study of Golden Eagle breeding distribution in the Southern Great Plains (Stahlecker et al. in press).

STUDY AREA AND METHODS

Our study area covered ~200,000 km² of the Southern Great Plains south of the Arkansas River (Figure 1). Nests of eagles mostly were on ledges of cliffs throughout the study area, and less frequently in eastern cottonwoods (*Populus deltoides*) along intermittent streams. Annually during late March or early April, 2015–2017, we located nests occupied by breeding pairs of Golden Eagles from the ground or via fixed- or rotary-

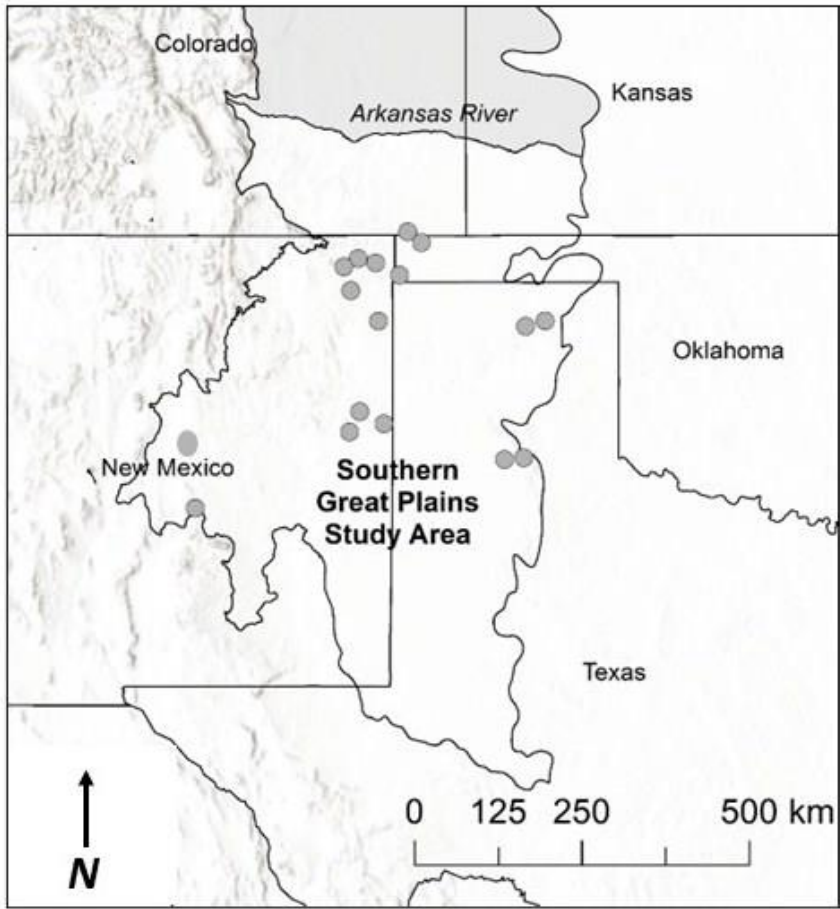


Figure 1. Distribution of Golden Eagle nesting territories in the Southern Great Plains at which nesting chronology was documented during 2015–2017.

wing aircraft. If we observed an adult eagle in an incubating-brooding position on a nest, we returned in May to observe each such nest from > 400 m away to confirm presence of nestlings and estimate their ages via photographic guides (Hoechlin 1976, Driscoll 2010). We returned to nests when, based on our initial estimates of age, nestlings would be roughly 50 to 55 d old and almost completely feathered as they neared fledging age (roughly 64 d of age but variable; Katzner et al. 2020). We entered the nests to band and attach transmitters to nestlings as part of another study and thus had opportunity to closely examine and more accurately estimate nestling ages. Golden Eagle nestlings exhibit distinct sequential changes in plumage characteristics as they grow, making it

relatively easy to determine their age (Driscoll 2010). Each of us estimated the age of a given nestling independently. We found our estimates to be within 2 d of one another and recorded the mid-point between our estimates in cases where our estimates were not identical. Hatching date for each nestling was determined by backdating from our estimate of age on the date of nest entry. We estimated date of nest initiation (i.e., laying of first egg) by backdating another 42 d, the species' approximate incubation period (Katzner et al. 2020). Last, we estimated fledging dates of nestlings by adding 64 d to their respective hatching dates. At some nesting territories we documented ages of nestlings in more than one breeding season. For each of these territories, our database entry included only the mid-point between or among estimated annual hatching dates, to maintain statistical independence among samples. Thus, each nesting territory was represented by only one hatching date.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We assessed Golden Eagle nesting chronology at 17 territories. The estimated median date of nest initiation was 2 March, but the mean was 6 d earlier (Table 1). About one-half of nests were initiated during only a 16-d period (interquartile range), but estimated initiation dates ranged from 28 January to 23 March. Estimated median hatching and fledging dates were 13 April and 16 June. Although each nesting territory was represented only once in our dataset, we estimated nestling ages at three territories in two breeding seasons and at another in three breeding seasons; in each of the four cases, differences in estimates of age between years differed by only 1–3 d.

We acknowledge that our sample size is not large, but the interquartile ranges we report encompassed relatively short periods (16 d), suggesting that we captured the peak period of nest initiation, hatching, and fledging reasonably well. Although we are unaware of other published, quantified documentation of Golden Eagle nesting chronology in the Southern Great Plains, there are miscellaneous anecdotal or qualitative descriptions including observations of individual nests. For example, a note by Stahlecker et al. (2010) that Golden Eagles in New Mexico begin incubation by the end of February included some nests in the Southern Great Plains portion of the state. The closest comparative data come from a study by Murphy et al. (2017) in the southern Rocky Mountains and Colorado Plateau regions, extending from about 250 km to 500 km west of our study area but at roughly the same latitudinal range. The authors reported 14 April as the estimated median date of hatching for 66 Golden Eagle juveniles at 53 nesting territories, which was practically identical to the estimated median hatching date of 13 April in this study. North of our study area, in the Central Great Plains region, Olendorff (1973) reported that hatching dates ranged from 21 April to 13 May for 11 Golden Eagle nests in northeastern Colorado, and Schmalzried (1976) reported that hatching at seven Golden Eagle nests in southeastern Wyoming occurred during 2–31 May.

Table 1. Golden Eagle nesting chronology in the Southern Great Plains: summary statistics based on estimated ages of nestlings observed at 17 nesting territories during 2015–2017.

Nesting Stage	Calendar Date			
	Median	Mean (SE)	Range	Interquartile Range
Initiation ¹	2 March	24 February (3.5)	28 January– 23 March	18 February– 5 March
Hatching ²	13 April	7 April (3.5)	11 March–4 May	1–16 April
Fledging ³	16 June	10 June (3.5)	14 May–7 July	4–19 June

¹Forty-two days before hatching date.

²Determined by backdating from estimate of age on the date of nest entry by investigator.

³Sixty-four days after hatching date.

Many species of raptors can be sensitive to anthropogenic disturbance during the breeding season especially during courtship through incubation periods (Newton 1979). For Golden Eagles, this extends through the early nestling period; human disturbance may trigger reduced parental care (Katzner et al. 2020). In regions of the coterminous western United States where Golden Eagle pairs remain on nesting territories year-round, courtship, including selection and refurbishing of nests, is likely to be underway at least 1 mo before nest initiation (Katzner et al. 2020). Using the earliest date of nest initiation (28 January) that we estimated, Golden Eagle breeding pairs in the Southern Great Plains likely begin courtship by late December. Based on the latest date of hatching (4 May) that we estimated, the early nestling period could extend through late May. Thus, based on a liberal interpretation of our data, the sensitive period of the Golden Eagle’s breeding season in the Southern Great Plains may extend from late December through late May (about 5 mo). Based on a conservative interpretation, using interquartile ranges reported herein, the corresponding period would extend from mid-January through early May (about 4 mo).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We collected chronology data during Golden Eagle nesting ecology studies funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Division of Migratory Birds, Southwest Region. C. LeBeau of WEST, Inc., graciously provided the location of a nest that ultimately produced a nestling used for this study, and surveys by Apex Clean Energy helped confirm current occupancy status of several nests. We greatly appreciate assistance from students at Texas Tech University, staff of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and interested friends and landowners for ensuring safe recovery of large nestlings that

potentially could glide far away and escape as we entered nests. We especially thank C.W. Boal of the U.S. Geological Survey's Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit at Texas Tech University who, as co-researcher on related studies in the region, aided with access to and logistics of nest entries, organized volunteers, and was particularly helpful in handling of the eagles we aged. Our work in the field would not have been possible without permissions for access granted by many gracious landowners. We thank Kristin Madden and Jean-Luc Cartron for comments that improved our manuscript.

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* * *

ABSTRACTS FROM THE NMOS 59TH ANNUAL MEETING

The following abstracts are from the papers presented March 26, 2022 at the 59th annual meeting of the New Mexico Ornithological Society held virtually. Abstracts are given in the order of presentation with the presenter underlined.

THE BUFF-BREASTED FLYCATCHER RETURNS TO NEW MEXICO – S.O. Williams III, New Mexico Bird Records Committee, 1819 Meadow View Drive NW, Albuquerque, NM 87104

An enduring mystery as regards New Mexico ornithology concerns the disappearance of the Buff-breasted Flycatcher (*Empidonax fulvifrons*) from the state. Historically widespread in the state’s southwestern mountains north to the Zuni area and—judging by the number of records—apparently fairly common from the 1870s through the 1920s, the species went undocumented from 1929 (a specimen from near Reserve in the Mogollon Mountains) until 1995 (a photograph from Clanton Canyon, Peloncillo Mountains), a period of some 66 years. Following 1995, singles were found in the Peloncillo Mountains irregularly in Clanton Canyon and occasionally in Skeleton Canyon but without evidence of breeding. In May 1999, one was documented in the Animas Mountains, but subsequent surveys there were negative until, following a wildfire in 2006, one was photographed in 2007 and a nest was found in 2008; the summering population there has since grown in numbers and distribution, with multiple nests in some years. The species made a significant leap north in 2016, with one in the Burro Mountains, Grant Co., that year and at least one active nest there in 2017 and most subsequent years. More recently, in 2021 one was north to the Woodland Park area of the Gila Wilderness, Catron Co. In Arizona, a similar pattern has been seen, with range contraction after the 1920s and subsequent gradual repopulation of historic range. Possible factors driving these changes will be discussed.

NATURAL HISTORY AND REINTRODUCTION OF WHITE-TAILED PTARMIGAN IN NEW MEXICO – J.B. Lee and D.J. Vargo, Department of Fish, Wildlife and Conservation Ecology, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM 88003; J.B. Bulger, C.J. Cardinal and E.J. Goldstein, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, 1 Wildlife Way, Santa Fe, NM 87507; M.A. Boggie, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 500 Gold Avenue SW, Albuquerque, NM 87103; and A.J. Lawson, U.S. Geological Survey New Mexico Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM 88003

White-tailed Ptarmigan (*Lagopus leucura*; hereafter ptarmigan) are an alpine-obligate grouse endemic to North America. New Mexico represents the southern extent of their range, where they are listed as state endangered. Ptarmigan are highly adapted to the extreme climatic conditions associated with alpine ecosystems. However, climate change is rapidly altering these ecosystems, potentially putting ptarmigan at risk of local extirpation. Small ptarmigan populations persisted across the northern mountain ranges of New Mexico until at least the late 20th century. In 1981, the New Mexico Department of and Fish (NMDGF) translocated 43 individuals from Colorado to the Pecos Wilderness Area in the Carson National Forest. By the late 2010s, this and other ptarmigan populations in New Mexico were functionally extinct. To better understand factors influencing ptarmigan demography and persistence in New Mexico, NMDGF recently initiated efforts to re-establish a population in the Pecos Wilderness Area, intending ultimately to translocate approximately 40 adult birds from Colorado. In 2021, spring capture efforts were unsuccessful due to adverse weather conditions, whereas 9 males and 15 females ($n = 24$) marked with VHF-necklaces were successfully captured and released in September. Here we will report on the current status of the reintroduced population and discuss planned research questions related to survival, habitat and nest-site selection, and foraging ecology in the context of New Mexico's changing climate.

SHEDDING “LIGHT” ON MIGRATION MORTALITIES: NEW RESEARCH UNDERWAY AT NMSU – D.M. Osterhaus and T.F. Wright, Department of Biology, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM 88001; and M.J. Desmond, Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Conservation Ecology, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM 88001

Migration has evolved in thousands of bird species as a strategy to maximize fecundity. Physiologically, avian migration is extremely demanding. Furthermore, during migration birds are exposed to a variety of novel stressors that may amplify the physiological demands and increase vulnerability to mortality. Artificial light at night (ALAN) may interfere with the celestial cues that birds rely on to inform geomagnetic navigation during migration. In recent years, multiple large-scale avian mortality events occurring during migration are hypothesized to be linked to the disorientation of migrating birds by ALAN, including an event that occurred in southern New Mexico during fall

migration of 2020. Using acoustic analysis of migrating birds and next generation weather radar (NEXRAD) data, we will be examining the potential impact of ALAN on birds migrating across the White Sands Missile Range (WSMR). While several studies have examined the impacts of large-scale ALAN (at the scale of entire cities) on avian migration, few have examined the effects of localized point-sources of ALAN on migrating birds. At this fine scale, we will be able to examine differences between lighting strategies and lighting types in terms of the impact on migrating birds. With many point-sources of ALAN spread across an otherwise dark environment, WSMR is an ideal location for this study. Findings from this research will serve to inform management decisions in terms of lighting implementation (i.e., recommendations for more “bird friendly” lighting strategies), and guidance for targeted “lights out” campaigns on WSMR and across the region.

COMPARATIVE NESTING HABITAT AND NEST SURVIVAL OF AVIAN COMMUNITIES IN THINNED AND UNTHINNED PINYON-JUNIPER WOODLANDS – T. Davidson, Texas Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409; **C.W. Boal**, USGS Texas Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409; and **C.C. Borgman**, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Migratory Birds, Albuquerque, NM 87102

Pinyon-juniper woodlands are among the most diverse and widespread ecosystems in the western United States and provide habitat for a rich diversity of avian species. As the most common forest-type in the state of New Mexico, these semi-arid woodlands provide food and cover for a wide range of wildlife throughout the year. More than a century of livestock grazing and fire suppression, among other factors, has resulted in the expansion of pinyon-juniper woodlands into arid and semi-arid grasslands across the Southwest. On the Fort Stanton-Snowy River National Conservation Area (NCA) in Lincoln County, New Mexico, land managers are using mechanical thinning and prescribed fire to reduce fuel loads, increase forage availability for game species, provide ideal conditions for endangered flora in the region, and return pinyon-juniper woodlands to historic distributions and structure. However, the high proportion of avian pinyon-juniper specialists listed on national and state species of concern lists has urged the Bureau of Land Management to seek more insight on the effects of these prescriptions so that thinning targets may be updated with avian conservation in mind. Our investigation centers around how these varying forest management practices influence nest-site selection, nest survival, and productivity for the breeding bird communities. Since 2019, we have found, monitored, and documented over 700 nesting attempts of 30+ species within approximately 1,000 hectares of the Fort Stanton NCA. Data analyses are ongoing, but our results will provide valuable insight into population trends of pinyon-juniper birds in south-central New Mexico and provide pertinent feedback for land managers striving to provide high-quality nesting habitat while also considering other needs. Preliminary results from our research have yielded nest survival rates and

basic habitat associations with nest-sites for multiple pinyon-juniper obligate and semi-obligate bird species.

HABITAT: RETHINKING AN IMPORTANT CONCEPT – K. Granillo, 1124 Mesa Loop NW, Los Lunas, NM 87031

The term habitat is one of the most common terms heard or read in reference to wildlife and plant species research and management. It is also one of the most commonly misused terms. This presentation will delve into the origins and definition(s) of the term habitat, and will illustrate the myriad ways that the term is misused and the confusion this can cause. It will also highlight the link between the use/misuse of the term and paradigms that direct current research and management.

* * *

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!

Please welcome the following new members who have joined NMOS in 2022:

Clint Boal, Lubbock, TX
Silas Fischer, Toledo, OH
Tom Kilroy, Albuquerque
Kayla Liechty, Portales
Elizabeth Penland, Placitas

Nicolas Pulcinella, Green Valley, AZ
Mari Quillman, Ribera
Miriam Redleaf, Chicago, IL
Jeffrey Roth, San Angelo, TX
Anna Stearns, Clayton

* * *

NMOS FIELD NOTES

NMOS Field Notes, published quarterly, provides a seasonal overview of the changing patterns of New Mexico's birdlife, including unusual records, breeding and wintering range changes, and changes in seasonal occurrence and migration patterns.

All individuals interested in birds in New Mexico are encouraged to submit their observations to *NMOS Field Notes*. Especially solicited are records of uncommon species, nesting birds, and early, late, or out-of-season/range birds. Records should be submitted in taxonomic order and should include species name, date, exact location, numbers of bird(s), age, sex, and color morph (if applicable), and name and contact information (including e-mail address) of observer(s). Remember, unless field observations are properly documented and submitted for consideration, they have no

way of becoming part of the ornithological record. Reporting birds to eBird, Rare Bird Alerts, or on listservs does not constitute submission to *NMOS Field Notes*.

Please provide details for rare and unusual records. Details are usually needed for sightings of birds appearing on the Review List and the Sketch Details List (both lists at www.nmbirds.org/fieldnotes/). Written details and other documentation of very rare species will be circulated to the New Mexico Bird Records Committee (www.nmbirds.org/nmbrc/) for evaluation. Written details may be submitted using the New Mexico Rare/Unusual Bird Report Form (www.nmbirds.org/nmbrc/), although any written format is acceptable. If photographs are submitted (electronically or as slides, images, prints, or video), please include with the photograph the name of the species in question, date the picture was taken, exact location, and photographer's name.

The four reporting periods correspond to the four seasons of the year, which are:

- Winter (1 December – 28/29 February)
- Spring (1 March – 31 May)
- Summer (1 June – 31 July)
- Autumn (1 August – 30 November)

Please submit reports as soon as possible after the close of a reporting period.

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Assistant Editor: William H. Howe, whhowe.60@gmail.com

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MANUSCRIPTS NEEDED FOR NMOS BULLETIN

The *NMOS 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. Members are encouraged to submit articles, news, and announcements for consideration for publication in the *NMOS Bulletin*; all submissions are subject to peer review and editing. Published articles are noted in major abstracting services. Please submit articles in double-spaced electronic format, such as a Microsoft Word document, by e-mail to the Editor, David Mehlman (dmehلمان@centurylink.net). Refer to recent issues of the *Bulletin* for examples of style.

NEW MEXICO BIRD FINDING GUIDE FOURTH EDITION

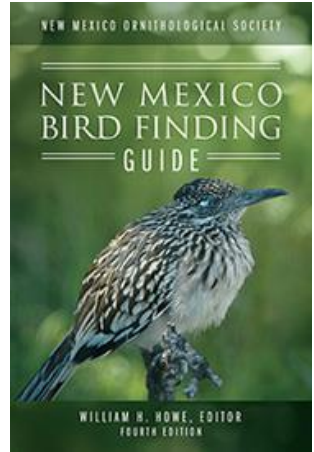
This 4th Edition of the New Mexico Bird Finding Guide (Guide) provides an expanded and detailed overview of the best birding locations within each of the state's 33 counties, as well as an updated Annotated Checklist of Birds briefly describing the status and distribution of all birds that have been recorded in the state. As of this writing, 549 species of birds have been verified within New Mexico, ranking fourth among all the U.S. states behind California, Texas, and Arizona.

This Guide breaks down the state into seven regions containing three to eight physiographically similar counties. Each county chapter contains an Overview Map showing roads and major features, plus, for most counties, additional detailed maps of some of the major birding sites discussed in the chapter. The chapters

mention some species one can expect to find at each location (with an emphasis on those out-of-state visitors may find of interest), a subset of the rarities that have turned up, and additional specifics on where to find highly sought-after 'specialties' as appropriate.

The state has a number of popular birding sites frequented by state residents and out-of-state birders alike, such as Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge and the Carlsbad Caverns area. Many parts of the state, however, are remote, difficult to access, and less well known ornithologically, with much yet to be learned at a time when species distributions and abundances are in considerable flux. Focusing on birds at a county level provides a convenient geographical reference for exploring the state's birdlife. It is hoped that the additional detail provided in this Guide may increase coverage by birders and continue to expand our knowledge of the avifauna statewide.

The book is available on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and also on the author website at outskirtspress.com/NewMexicoBirdFindingGuide for 10% off.



F.M. BAILEY LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

The New Mexico Ornithological Society (NMOS) recognizes those individuals who have made a significant lifetime contribution to New Mexico's ornithological knowledge; the promotion of the value of birds, both aesthetic and economic; effective conservation of the state's avifauna; and/or the New Mexico Ornithological Society. The F.M. Bailey Lifetime Achievement Award commemorates Florence Merriam Bailey, Ornithologist (1863-1948; www.nmbirds.org/fmbailey-award/).

Nominations for the F.M. Bailey Lifetime Achievement Award can be submitted by any interested individual(s) and will be accepted at any time. Nominations should be submitted to the current NMOS President or Secretary using the Florence M Bailey Award Nomination form. The Florence Merriam Bailey Lifetime Achievement Awards Committee may seek additional information about the nominee from the person(s) who submitted the original nomination. The Awards Committee will review the nomination and determine by majority vote if, in their opinion, a nominee meets the above criteria. The decision of the committee is final. Upon recommendation of the Awards Committee, awards will be presented at the NMOS annual meeting.

Previous recipients of the Florence Merriam Bailey Lifetime Achievement Award include:

- Dale Allen Zimmerman
- Patricia R. Snider
- Mary Alice Root
- John Hubbard
- Barbara C. Knight

Additional information on these awardees can be found at www.nmbirds.org/fmbailey-award/.

* * *

MEMBERSHIP DUES REMINDER

Please take the opportunity now to pay your 2022 NMOS membership dues. To join or renew your membership, go to our website (www.nmbirds.org/membership) and pay using PayPal (save a stamp, pay online!) or download the membership form, fill out, and mail to the following address, providing a check made out to "NMOS." Thank you!

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New Mexico Ornithological Society
— Founded 1962 —

The New Mexico Ornithological Society was organized to gather and disseminate accurate information concerning the bird life of New Mexico; to promote interest in and appreciation of the value of birds, both aesthetic and economic; to further effective conservation of the state's avifauna; to facilitate opportunity for acquaintance and fellowship among those interested in birds and nature; and to issue publications as a means of furthering these ends.

Membership and Subscriptions: 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 Membership \$20; Family \$30; Student \$10; Supporting \$50; Life \$500. Address for the New Mexico Ornithological Society: Post Office Box 3068, Albuquerque, NM 87190-3068.

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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED