Bird Alliance
Central New Mexico
A Chapter of the National Audubon Society

BIRD ALLIANCE NEWSLETTER

November-December 2025

MIGRATION PRESENTS CHALLENGES

By Jason Kitting, Bird Alliance Board Member

It's the time of year when mixed sparrow flocks are on the move! Sparrows belonging to the *Spizella* genus generally are small-bodied birds with long tails and small bills. Six species belong to this genus, and, at first glance, they can look very similar but they are fairly easy to separate if you know what to look for in your identification quest. We regularly see three species at our Rio Grande Bird Research banding station.

Photos by Jason Kitting and Asher Gorbet.

The top left picture is of a Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*) which is the least common of the three we encounter. This species is known for its gray nape (back of neck), central crown stripe (not visible in this image), and bright facial features. We generally look for Clay-colored Sparrows (CCSP) mixed in with other sparrows and especially with flocks of the next species.

The top right picture is of a Brewer's Sparrow (*Spizella breweri*), which probably is the drabbest of the *Spizellas*. This species looks most similar to CCSPs, but lacks the central crown stripe and has much duller facial features. Some bright Brewer's Sparrows (BRSPs) may have a grayish nape but won't show the sharp contrast from the head to the gray nape that is seen in CCSPs.

The bottom two pictures are of the same species and show the two plumages we see of Chipping Sparrows (*Spizella passerina*). The right picture is of an After Hatch Year bird which has the distinct red cap, dark eyeline, and gray rump (not visible in this image) for which this species is known. The left picture is of a Hatch Year bird that still is mostly in juvenile plumage and lacks many of the field marks that the adult bird has. The important feature to look for on this bird is the dark eyeline that touches the beak. Young birds may or may not have a gray rump.

All banding by Rio Grande Bird Research is conducted in compliance with a federally authorized Bird Banding Permit issued by the U.S. Geological Survey's Bird Banding Laboratory.

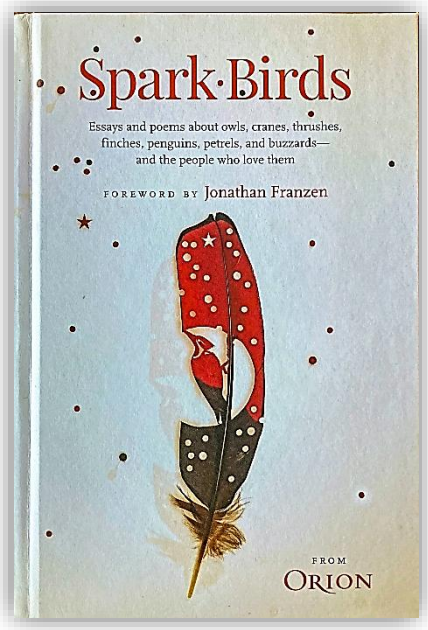
By the way: We have a friendly identification challenge about the sparrow image on Page 6 that was sent to the newsletter and identified as a juvenile of a specific species. Jason and Asher Gorbet agree that it's a different species. Take a look and identify it if you can.

Spark Birds Book Review

By Dana Loy

When I noticed the Bird Alliance Newsletter's series about spark birds, inviting readers to send in the story of the one special bird that forged their connection to birding, I thought about *Spark Birds*, a collection of narratives and poems about birds that have sparked an incident or memory in the lives of the authors. The book was published in 2023 by Orion, a quarterly magazine that supports care for the planet.

The writings are not about spark birds as one special bird, but a literary collection with birds in important roles.



Spark Birds' essays and poems display wonderful variety and surprise. Take, for example, Lia Purpura's "On Coming Back as a Buzzard." Buzzards, Purpura says, are "complicated by strangeness and ugliness. They intensify my thinking. They look prehistoric, pieced together, concerned." Throughout the essay she continues with clever observations about buzzards, such as, "A buzzard is expected at the table." And, "As a buzzard, I'd know the end of a thing is precisely not that."

Mary Oliver appears three times. In her "Owls" essay, she walks through the Massachusetts woods in search of the Great Horned Owl. I am more familiar with Mary Oliver's poetry than her prose, and for the pure beauty of words, this essay is a good place to linger. She seeks "the early nester, sitting upon her bulk of sticks, like an old woman on a raft." She writes, "I have walked with prudent caution down paths at twilight when the dogs were puppies. I know this bird. If it could, it would eat the world."

The birds in this book carry us to a variety of places and states of mind. In his essay "Learning to Surf," we drift alongside David Gessner (*All the Wild That Remains*) on the North Carolina coast. He paddles a surfboard amid the "huge and heavy" brown pelicans with their "deep, consistent lives." He compares the experiences of watching the pelicans to watching his infant daughter and says both help him fulfill Emerson's advice to "First, be a good animal."

The book features many important nature writers. Jonathan Franzen writes the introduction. Poets include William Stafford, Li-Young Lee, and Mary Oliver. It has essays by Terry Tempest Williams, Brian Doyle, and Elizabeth Kolbert. The title essay, "Spark Birds," comes from Emily Raboteau and includes the only real spark bird, except that it's a "pair of burrowing owls, painted on the narrow storefront gate" and part of the Audubon Mural Project in New York City. Not a live bird, but the first of many bird murals in her neighborhood and the one that sparked her interest to photograph them all.

For me, the most impactful essay is J. Drew Lanham's "Forever Gone," which begins with the story of Incas, the last known Carolina parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*), that died in the Cincinnati Zoo aviary on February 21, 1918. He writes the extinction "grabs him by the heart." He writes, "We are all a part and parcel of nature, parakeets and people alike. How we treat one another determines who we all are—or might become." He says that when Incas died, "there was no policy demanding notice or care for Carolina parakeets as an 'endangered species.'" Today, our policies themselves are endangered.

Spark Birds is a worthy companion to the spark bird series now being published in this newsletter, and offers plenty of avian company and opportunities to think of each bird as special.

My Spark Bird by Asher Gorbet, Bird Alliance Board Member

At the end of my final year of undergrad, I took one of the last Wildlife Management courses of my program with a group of students with whom I had spent the previous several years. We all concurrently were taking Ornithology—learning about many of our local birds—an exercise I found to be really fun. I thought birds made interesting study and research subjects but didn't understand, or even know about, this thing called "birding." I was focused on my goal of becoming a mammalogist.

One of the last weekends of our Wildlife Management course, our group went to the famous Lake Erie Marshes for a camping trip. We visited numerous research stations that weekend but one of the most mind-blowing experiences came on the boardwalk at the renowned Magee Marsh. It was the peak of spring migration and birds were all around us. I turned to see an adult male American Redstart about eight feet from me, far too close for binoculars and there was no need for them. With open tail, he flamboyantly flashed this way and that as he made his way down an open branch.

Both American Redstart images by Asher Gorbet.

I had never seen anything like that before and was astonished that this tiny creature had been in the woods around me my entire lifetime—I simply had never been keyed into looking before.

That there was an entire world of birds that existed right alongside my own and completely beyond my knowledge was a wildly good lesson for me—you can be blind to things that are right in front of your face.

But that bird taught me even more than that! As I stared at him, I couldn't believe a bird could look like THAT! So small. So much personality. Such an interesting pattern of color in the most perfect Halloween palate. In an instant I was hooked! After that, I was a birder and it was a happy slippery slope from there to becoming the ornithologist I am today. I hope you had a happy Halloween and happy birding!

"I had never seen anything like that before and was astonished that this tiny creature had been in the woods around me my entire lifetime . . . "

In search of Northern Gannet Colonies: An adventure in Canada

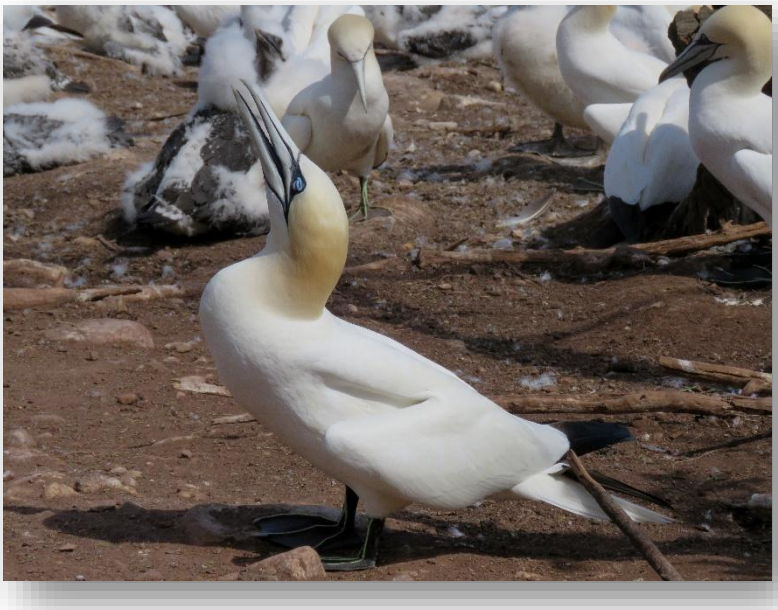
By Glenda Moore

In August a friend and I rented a car in Quebec City and drove around the Gaspe Peninsula in the province of Quebec. For those who don't know where that's located, the Gaspe is west of Newfoundland. The northern shore of the peninsula abuts the St. Lawrence River.

Both Northern Gannet images by Glenda Moore.

We visited four national parks. Bonaventure Island was one of those national parks. We wanted to visit the Northern Gannet bird colony on Bonaventure, just a 15-minute boat ride from Perce, Quebec. The Gannets can be found there from April to October. There are about 110,000 to 120,000 birds in this colony making it the largest seabird colony in the northern Atlantic. The island is located in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and is near the tip of the peninsula. It's the second largest Northern Gannet colony in the world, the largest being in Scotland.

These seabirds spend most of their lives at sea. During breeding, they come ashore to raise their young on the cliffs at Bonaventure Island. Adult male and female Northern Gannets look very similar with slight variations. The young are quite different looking from their parents, with brown or gray coloring (see in photos) These seabirds catch mainly fish and it's a sight to see when they "dive bomb" into the ocean for a meal.



Seabirds around the world are in danger with dramatic declines in population. According to a study done in 2015 (PLOS ONE article by Paleczny et. al., titled "Population Trend of the World's Monitored Seabirds, 1950-2010"), seabirds around the world have experienced a population decline of nearly 70% between 1950 and 2010.

We were told there's a small colony of Atlantic Puffins on Bonaventure Island but we did not see them. You can see Atlantic Puffin colonies in the Gulf of Maine but they also have experienced a severe decline. PBS did a brief clip on the work being done to restore puffin habitat in Maine.

IMAGES BY FELLOW BIRDERS (NOT ALL ARE BIRDS!)

→ ***On a Thursday Birders field trip in September 2025, Phil Trine captured eight American White Pelicans at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge.***

↓ **During a September 2025 trip with other birders and nature lovers, Connie Jo Baca came across this dazzling insect: A *Blue Fungus Beetle*! She saw this beauty on the Spring Creek Trail near Cuchara, Colorado.**

↑ ***Thursday Birders participant Tim Wallace played peek-a-boo with this Cooper's Hawk at the Rio Grande Nature Center in October 2025.***

← **Bird Alliance Board member Perrianne Houghton came across this splendid creature—a blacktail rattlesnake (*Crotalus molossus*)—during a Thursday Birders field trip to the Three Gun Springs area east of Albuquerque.**

TAKE A LOOK AT THIS BIRD:
CAN YOU IDENTIFY IT?


Photo by Phil Trine.

Thursday Birders participant Phil Trine sent this image—taken at Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge—to the newsletter and noted that fellow birders identified it as a juvenile **NAME WITHHELD**.

But two other experienced birders—members of the Bird Alliance Board—reviewed the image and reported that it was a different species than the one Phil had suggested, and both of them independently identified the bird as a juvenile **NAME WITHHELD**.

What's with the no-name designation? It's a quiz! How about trying to identify this mystery bird and then, to check your thoughts, click on this quiz link to learn what Asher Gorbet and Jason Kitting said about it? Go ahead: Give it a try!

DID YOU KNOW? The National Audubon Society has posted the winning images from The 2025 Audubon Photography Awards on its website. You can see remarkable birds and images here.

The Bird Alliance of Central New Mexico is a not-for-profit chapter of the National Audubon Society. Its mission is to protect and conserve birds and wildlife habitats in our region, support responsible stewardship of land, promote environmental education, and welcome all communities to join us in the love and appreciation of birds.

Please visit these websites: Bird Alliance and National Audubon Society

Upcoming field trips and the Christmas Bird Count (CBC)

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

The CBC is coming in December and we'll post details on the website and announce it via email in time for you to get involved in this historic event.
Click here for a history of the CBC.

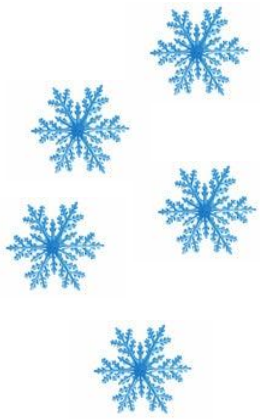
THURSDAY BIRDERS

November 6: Corrales Bosque – East Ella
November 13: Coyote del Malpais Golf Course – Grants
November 20: Pueblo Montaño Open Space
December 4: Bosque Del Apache NWR Festival of the Cranes
December 11: Annual Holiday Get-together
Click here for Thursday Birders details.

Sandhill Cranes on the Rio Grande in Albuquerque. Photo by Lefty Arnold.

MONTHLY FIELD TRIPS

November 22: USS Bullhead Memorial Park
December 13: Boca Negra Canyon Open Space/Petroglyphs National Monument
Click here for Monthly Field Trips details.



December 11: Save the Date

THURSDAY BIRDERS WINTER GET-TOGETHER

Everyone is welcome!

Join us for a year-end celebration on December 11, 2025. Please bring cookies or something else to share and the Bird Alliance will provide coffee, tea, and hot chocolate. The time and location will be announced via email and on the Bird Alliance website as the date approaches.

New Mexico Environment Department Holloman Lake Survey

The NMED is asking anyone who has visited or recreated at Holloman Lake, also known as Raptor Lake, to participate in a survey to determine potential exposure to toxic PFAS ("Forever Chemicals") in the area from firefighting foams, commonly called AFFF, used at Holloman Air Force Base. Please read more about these concerns here and complete the survey here .