



Bird Alliance

Central New Mexico

A Chapter of the National Audubon Society

NEWSLETTER

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2026

I LIKE LARGE BIRDS: MY TRIP TO THE GREAT PLAINS

By Dr. Laura Banks, President, BACNM

I barely even need binoculars to have my best birding day. Of course I love the little guys, too. I delight in seeing flashes of color and hearing melodies in the trees. But for sheer birding joy, give me the deep thump of a huge set of wings powering over my head and a controlled crash landing in a corn field. There's just something about the silhouette of an egret on the water or the surprise of a heron that has hoisted itself into a tree that makes my heart sing.

When asked, as we always are, "what's your favorite bird?" my enthusiastic response is "Canada Goose," which always starts a whole conversation. And don't get me started on ducks. I love those little works of art floating and spinning and diving right there on the nearest pond, for all to see.

I fed my passion for big birds this spring with a trip to the Great Plains. Millions of birds use the interior wetlands and grasslands of the U.S. as stopovers on their migration journeys. They gather together and provide great opportunities to see stunning in-flight formations, mass gatherings, and interesting behaviors. I visited the Loess Bluffs National Wildlife Refuge and the Crane Trust.



Many, many, many Sandhill Cranes.

Photo by Janelle Schroeder-Audubon Photography Awards

The Loess (pronounced "luss") Bluffs National Wildlife Refuge is located in northwest Missouri along the edge of the Missouri River floodplain, south of Mound City. The refuge has a headquarters with a wonderful visitor center and a 10-mile tour loop that provides up-close viewing of the large, deep "pools." They have documented 310 species of birds and many species of mammals, amphibians and reptiles, including the endangered Massasauga rattlesnake. I didn't see a snake, but I laughed at a soaking wet River Otter scampering across the road from one pool to the other, looking like someone

who forgot to take a towel into the shower.

The refuge is a stopover for Bald Eagles on their way north. This season saw a historic high count of 1,012 eagles on the refuge on December 30, 2025. A few still remained when I was there in March. The refuge also serves as a Lesser Snow Goose stopover from mid-February through mid-March. The

aerial count posted during my visit was 598,510 birds, which was down slightly from the incredible February 24 total of 755,550 birds!

Visitors simply run out of words to describe the spectacle. "Amazing." "Incredible." "Sea of birds." "Vivid." "Awe-inspiring." The list goes on. The birds in flight, moving between the pools, literally block the sun. From a distance, it looks like the refuge has received a spring covering of actual snow. I was there on an exceptionally windy day, even for the plains. I'm accustomed to wind at Bosque del Apache and other wide-open spaces in New Mexico, as well as coastal areas that I enjoy visiting, so I always pack a snug knit cap to keep my hair under control. The Missouri wind blew it right off my head! What a great day!

My visit to the Crane Trust was equally spectacular. The Crane Trust is a nonprofit organization founded in 1978 based on the Platte River in Hall County, Nebraska. Birders have logged 215 species of birds on the protected 10,000 acres of habitat. The most visible beneficiaries of the Trust's work are the Sandhill Cranes.

The dominant subspecies in the area is the Lesser Sandhill Crane, but there also are Greater Sandhill Cranes and multiple documented visits of Whooping Cranes. During my visit, the crane



Photo by Luke Franke-Audubon Photography Awards

count, conducted via aerial surveys along the Platte between Chapman and Overton, was a spectacular 494,000 birds.

Although many birders visit areas along the Platte River in the spring, they soon discover that much of the adjacent land is privately owned farmland. The farmers in this area of Nebraska are active partners in the conservation of the cranes, which provides exceptional protection for the birds in this critical time of migration, but which makes viewing a challenge.

The Crane Trust provides protected viewing blinds that can be accessed via

reserved guided tours. I took advantage of this and was rewarded with an incredible experience. Wave after wave of Sandhill Cranes poured in from the farm fields throughout the area to land on the river right in front of our eager eyes and ears. We stayed until after the prairie sunset, which was itself a beautiful sight.

Another option for guided viewing along the Platte River is the Iain Nicolson Audubon Center at the Rowe Sanctuary. They also offer guided tours to their blinds and host an amazing Crane Cam. The webcam is active all year and provides peaceful prairie sights and sounds during the summer and winter and raucous viewing of cranes in the spring. You can find it [here](#).

I consider myself very lucky that several members of my family have made Nebraska their home, and I plan many future visits. My challenge will be to convince them that I have come to visit them, so as not to hurt their feelings. I should probably not wear my binoculars on the plane, as that will raise suspicion. 🌀

WHAT BIRD IS THAT?

Hint: It's a mystery! Or is it? Can you identify this bird?

Who doesn't love a mystery? If you have an interest in identifying birds, we've put together some fun bird facts from the Cornell Lab's [All About Birds](#) website about a bird that can be seen in Albuquerque and elsewhere in New Mexico.



Photo by Lefty Arnold.

- **FUN FACT 1:** Adapted to arid environments year-round (sagebrush in summer; desert grasslands in winter), these MYSTERY BIRDS can go weeks without drinking.
- **FUN FACT 2:** While large wintering flocks usually communicate with soft call notes, a rare occasion might inspire a male to sing his "long song." This spurs on other members of the flock, and soon, there's a veritable chorus.
- **FUN FACT 3:** The oldest known MYSTERY BIRD was at least 5 years, 2 months old when it was recaptured and rereleased at a banding site in Colorado.
- **FUN FACT 4:** In spring and early summer, male MYSTERY BIRDS sing a long, rich, trilling song that can last 15 seconds. Roger Tory Peterson wrote that they sound like "a Chipping Sparrow trying to sing like a canary." Once the males pair

up with their mates for the season, they switch to a much shorter, three-second song consisting of two trills.

• **FUN FACT 5:** *These MYSTERY BIRDS are so unremarkable looking that they're remarkable.* In 1923, the naturalist William Dawson wrote that Nature had "done her utmost to produce a bird of non-committal appearance... Mere brown might have been conspicuous by default, but brownish, broken up by hazy streakings of other brownish or dusky... has given us a bird which... may be said to have no mark of distinction whatever—just bird." Later researchers noted that they preferred to describe the bird as "subtle."

• **FUN FACT 6:** These MYSTERY BIRDS' lives are intimately tied to the sagebrush: It's where they eat, sleep and nest. But there's an exception: the "Timberline" form lives in an entirely different habitat at high elevations in Canadian mountains, where there's little or no sage. 🌀



The MYSTERY BIRD answer is on Page 9.





EVENTS ON THE HORIZON



Wildlife Zone Family Adventure

September 26, 2026

9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.

Bosque del Apache Visitor Center 🌀

Mindful Birding Retreat

Cultivating Authentic Presence in the Wilderness

Master the art of embodied presence through attunement to nature

Each bird becomes a mirror, each step a grounding breath

Carry the clarity of connection into your life!



Sept. 29 – Oct. 1

Silver City, NM

Voice of the Turtle Retreat Center

\$290 - \$450 (Based on lodging)

Your Co-facilitators:

Kim Score ~ Nature-Connected Coach, Birding Guide, & Field Ornithologist

Chris Chappell ~ Nature-Based Therapist, Birding Guide, & Mindfulness Instructor



Take Flight Counseling
Healing with Nature

Register Now!

Email Kim for info:

BirdingPalNewMexico@gmail.com



**Check
Page 9
for another
birding event,
this one
in Baytown,
Texas!**

BIRD ALLIANCE SCHOLARSHIPS ARE AVAILABLE!

If you know of a young person between the age of 6 and 20 who has their heart set on a camp, program or course to learn about birds, wildlife or conservation, please guide them to the [Ryan D. Beaulieu Youth Memorial Scholarship](#) information on our website. They'll be glad you did! 🌀

August Birds, Where Are You?

By Robert M. Wilcox

Enjoyment changes with the seasons for birders. For me, the month of August is the low point of the year. Even arriving at a spot by 6 in the morning does not guarantee that you'll hear many birds singing. The trees stare back at you in silence. Maybe a mallard or two on the ponds, but that's it. By 10, it's too hot to keep looking—better go back inside.

Where are all the birds, and what are they doing? Only a few weeks ago there were signs of life everywhere. Now it's hard to see a bluebird or even an Ash-throated Flycatcher. Western Wood-pewee and Lesser Goldfinches seem to be the only birds singing. How could all the Yellow-breasted Chats be quiet? How about the Spotted Towhees? Barely a sound from them.

To a certain extent, ornithologists understand this. They often divide the bird's year into blocks of energy expenditure. In the spring, our perching birds are migrating north from the tropics and establishing territories to pair up on. This is a huge energy expense. In May and June, they're brooding eggs and feeding chicks. Another huge energy expense. By July there are juvenile birds everywhere demanding attention. In August, though, feeding fledglings is over. Most breeding birds will abandon their young, leaving them to fend for themselves or pay the price.

In August, a new energy expense is calling. It is firmly fixed on the agenda—no getting around it. All songbirds are required to molt into their winter feathers. They will need to spend energy and mineral resources to grow a bunch of fresh feathers. One big question is: "Where do the birds go to molt into their basic (winter) plumage?"

In the past it was often assumed that birds hunkered down inside their breeding territory for the prebasic molt. Information coming

out of eBird and banding groups, however, has cast some doubt on this deduction. In 2018, Peter Pyle and two colleagues decided to examine the banding data to help answer this question. They checked all recaptured birds from 1980s to present to find birds that had shown both signs of breeding and signs of molting in their captures. Then they measured how far apart, and in what direction the two capture points were. Since the data points included more than 500,000 individuals, the number of recaptures was considerable. Pyle et al. were able to develop charts for many species giving the likelihood that that species was molting in or near its breeding area.

They found that birds could head in any direction, or up- or down-slope to relocate for molting. Many birds in the west relocated to monsoon rain zones in the southwestern United States and northern Mexico to molt. Traveling to new areas to molt is a strategy even employed by resident birds like cardinals.

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Pyle's charts note that a number of species are likely to be well distant from their breeding zone when found molting. These include: Lucy's Warbler, Western Tanager, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Bullock's Oriole, Cedar Waxwing, Lesser Goldfinch, and House Finch.

Western species that were found likely to molt nearer their breeding grounds were: Spotted Towhee, Common Yellowthroat, Song Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, Green-tailed Towhee, Yellow Warbler, and White-crowned Sparrow.

Dr. Peter Pyle is the well-known author of identification handbooks for birds in the hand. These books are used as reference by all banders in North America. The meta-analysis of banding data done in this paper is one example of how banding information can generate useful information.

References: Pyle, P. (1997). Identification Guide to North American Birds, Part 1: Columbidae to Ploceidae. Slate Creek Press, Bolinas, CA, USA.

Pyle P, Saracco JF, DeSante DF. 2018. Evidence of widespread movements from breeding to molting grounds by North American landbirds. Auk., 135, 506-520 🌀

Annual Membership Meeting Wrap-up

By Dr. Laura Banks, President

We found ourselves at a wonderful new venue this year for the annual membership meeting of the Bird Alliance of Central New Mexico. We met at the Sandia Mountain Natural History Center in



***What's a Bird Alliance annual meeting
without a bird walk?
Photo by Lefty Arnold***

Cedar Crest, which is owned by Albuquerque Public Schools and managed by the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science. If you were not able to attend the meeting, I highly recommend that you take a few hours to visit the center and its museum and do some birding.

As always, our annual meeting was an opportunity to connect with each other and talk about the great things you all do on behalf of the Bird Alliance. We introduced our Board members and honored our other hard-working volunteers. We learned from our board members that our chapter is growing with many new members and supporters and is in good shape financially. We benefit from working with many partners, including other non-profit conservation organizations and city, county and state agencies. Our community science work produces valuable species counts across multiple census projects, and we support conservation through habitat management, guided bird walks, and community education.

The attendees at this year's meeting were able to learn about one of our flagship conservation projects—bird-safe windows—from our expert, Sara Jayne Cole. We had a drawing for a personalized window treatment provided by our window strike team (congratulations to Lefty Arnold, who won the treatment). Also, we re-visited the wonderful Audubon Mural Project that was dedicated at the

Albuquerque BioPark Zoo just after our annual meeting last year. You owe it to yourself to check out the murals, highlighting New Mexico birds at risk from climate change, in the Raptor Roost area of the zoo—they are magnificent.

The meeting began with a lovely bird walk and ended with free giveaways of BACNM swag—what a day! We thank the staff of the Sandia Mountain Natural History Center for their hospitality and assistance. See you all next year! 🌀

How the **HOODED WARBLER** Became My Spark Bird

By Phil Dickinson

When I was a kid, I watched the wren boxes my dad built. I could identify cardinals, robins and jays. I even studied by the hour Dad's hardbound National Geographic "Birds of North America." However, this early interest in birds then lay dormant for decades until I was a 40-year-old father myself living in Clearwater, Florida. It was only then that new sparks created a passion that continues today another 40 years later.

We took our son and his buddy on an April camping trip to Fort Desoto Park at the mouth of Tampa Bay. We were thinking about the beach, paddling our canoe and maybe some fishing. I knew we would see gulls and terns, maybe a shorebird or two. However, it never dawned on me that it was Spring migration time—until several little yellow-and-black birds began flitting about the tree over our campsite. I had never seen this bird before, and it wasn't until I checked a bird guide back home that I discovered they were HOODED WARBLERS!

Eventually, I came to know that, despite its bold colors, the Hooded Warbler is pretty much a "stealth" bird hiding out close to the ground in moist thickets. Even when it bursts into song, it can be difficult to see. And, there on the Florida Coast they were in a small flock hopping all over this tree without regard for secrecy as they traveled northward. What a spark for my love of birds!

Not long after, my son Andrew fanned that spark into a flame. That summer, or perhaps the next, we sent him north to visit my wife's father and stepmother. Here were two people who loved nature. Not knowing what else to do with a preteen, they dragged him along on walks to a local game land preserve. There, they showed him bluebirds, eagles and more. His spark was lit. One day the next spring he hurried down from his room to declare, "I just saw six warbler species in the bottle brush tree!" From then on, we chased birds together on local walks and camping trips. At age 12, Andrew talked me into taking him on the Audubon Christmas Bird Count. At 50 and 81, we continue to do it. I still have those National Geographic books, too.

What is your Spark Bird? 🌀



Hooded Warbler by Phil Dickinson.

AUTUMN MIGRATION: IT'S CIRCULAR

Story and images by Jason Kitting

It's that time of year again! Although it is not officially autumn yet, late summer is the start of fall migration for many bird species. For most of our familiar migrants, we see them on their way north in spring, and on their way south in the autumn.

But that's not how all bird species work! Some species actually have circular migrations meaning they take different routes depending on whether it is spring or fall. This process is probably more

common than we think, but it is most obvious in species that we only see during one migration period.

Here in central New Mexico, our most familiar circular migrants include the [Rufous Hummingbird](#) (top left), the [Calliope Hummingbird](#) (top right), and the [Townsend's Warbler](#) (bottom). These three species occasionally pass through in spring in small numbers, but the overwhelming majority of them pass through in the fall. This seems like a waste of energy, but when you look at the food resources available to these birds during spring and fall, the extra effort makes sense. All three of these species spend the winter in Mexico and Central America. In early spring, they move north along the west coast where it is warm and there are plenty of flowers and insects

to eat. At the same time of year in central New Mexico, it can still be quite cold and dry, resulting in very little food that is available for these birds.

After the breeding season, this situation switches. The birds then move south along the Rocky Mountains, which are now warm and full of flowers and insects. The southwestern monsoons are another driver of this circular migration as they provide abundant food for all migrants throughout the southwestern US and northern Mexico, which isn't available in spring. This is particularly true for the Rufous and Calliope hummingbirds that rely on the flowers that require the monsoon rains to bloom.

Other familiar species with circular migrations include birds like Sooty Shearwaters, Blackpoll Warblers, American Golden-Plovers, and certain populations of Brant. All banding is being conducted under a federally authorized Bird Banding Permit issued by the U.S. Geological Survey's Bird Banding Laboratory. 🌀



2026

BAYTOWN BIRDING WEEK

NOVEMBER 18-22, 2026



Join fellow birders for a relaxing experience with a stay at the Baytown Hyatt and **free** shuttle service to birding spots around the area.

Special Birding HOTEL rate:
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ITINERARY INCLUDES:

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- Jocelyn Nungary Nature Refuge
- High Island Sanctuaries
- Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary
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REGISTRATION CLOSES

NOVEMBER 3, 2026

or as soon as the vans are full.
Only 26 committed attendees
will be accepted.

visitbaytown.com/birdweek



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Looking for the mystery bird?

Click on the link to learn about the [Brewer's Sparrow!](#)

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. 🐦

For more information, please visit these websites:

[Bird Alliance](#) and [National Audubon Society](#).