



inging It

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Birding the Gila National Forest, New Mexico

From Cottonwoods to Conifers, Varied habitats and Regional Specialties Are Easily Accessible North of Silver City

By Dale A. Zimmerman and Roland S. Shook

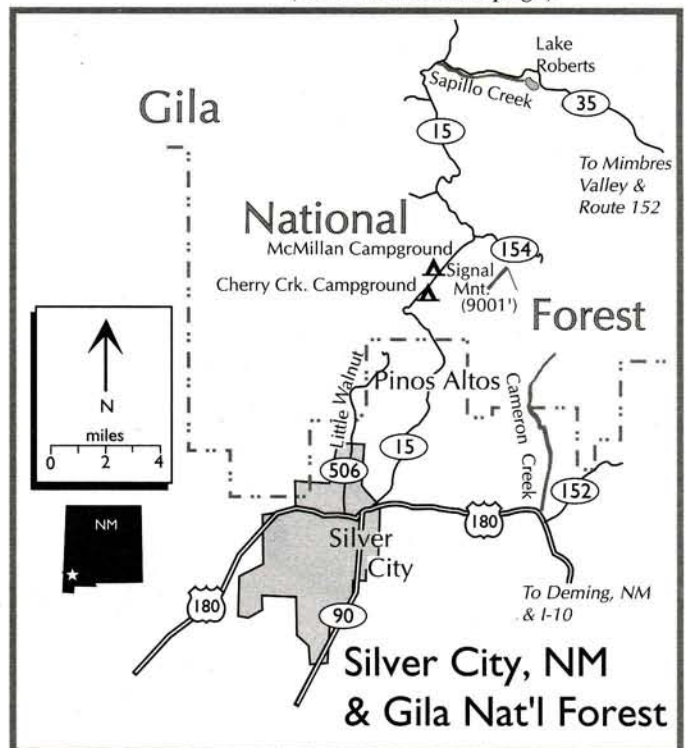
Situated in southwestern New Mexico, the modest university town of Silver City may not be as famous among birders as the legendary sites of southeastern Arizona, not far to the west. But bird life, including many southwestern specialties, is plentiful and accessible in the Silver City area, where varied habitats and elevations can easily be reached on state highways and U.S. Forest Service roads. Birders seeking an added incentive to visit Silver City might want to attend the joint Western Field Ornithologists/New Mexico Ornithological Society meeting, to be held 24-27 July 2003 (see sidebar on page 4). But this region offers outstanding birding at any time of year, and the following article introduces some of the most productive and birdable destinations.

Pinos Altos Mountains

Some of southern New Mexico's best birding is in the canyons of this low mountain range, accessible via New Mexico Route 15 branching north from U.S. Route 180 in Silver City at an elevation of 6,000 feet. This road passes through pinyon pine and juniper growth, entering the ponderosa pine zone at Pinos Altos (eight miles from Silver City and 1,000 feet

higher) and soon arriving at Gila National Forest. Mexican Jay, Cassin's Kingbird, Western Bluebird, and other common species may be seen from the roadway (as is, rarely, Montezuma Quail), but the best birding begins at Cherry Creek Campground (thirteen miles from Silver City) in a canyon where sheer cliffs and spectacular rhyolite spires rise above the steep, densely forested slopes. The campground vicinity is a traditional site for Painted Redstart, al-

(continued on next page)



though this species is uncommon in some years. Look for it in the strip of Arizona alders, narrow-leaved cottonwoods, and low willows along the narrow creek, which flows in all but the driest of years. Red-faced Warblers may be seen in this mixed riparian woodland as well as in the tall ponderosa pines above the creek on the canyon sides. In oak and pine/oak growth on the drier south-facing slopes, Virginia's Warblers breed, often singing near the road. Nesting among pinyon pines and junipers are a few Black-throated Gray Warblers. Grace's Warbler is widespread among the ponderosa pines.

Hutton's Vireo is scarce but fairly regular here, mainly where gray and Gambel's oaks mingle with pines; the common vireos are Plumbeous and (in the cottonwoods) Warbling. Most years, the Greater Pewee may be heard singing in the mixed conifer woods near McMillan Campground, a mile or so farther along the road. The above-named warblers, plus Yellow-rumped and Olive, should be looked for in and above the small campground and up the adjoining wooded canyons. Northern Pygmy-Owl, formerly regular here, is now hard to find, but imitating its call to attract passerines sometimes stimulates the owl itself to call. Flammulated and Spotted Owls are also possibilities, especially in narrow McMillan Canyon. Both Whip-poor-will (on mesic, north-facing slopes) and Poorwill (on drier southern exposures)



Painted Redstart by Dale Zimmerman

may be heard here on warm summer evenings. Other regular breeding birds in the Cherry Creek-McMillan vicinity include White-throated Swift, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Acorn Woodpecker, Western Wood-Pewee, Canyon and House Wrens, Brown Creeper, Bridled Titmouse (scarce), Mountain Chickadee, Pygmy Nuthatch, Western Bluebird, Hermit Thrush, and Western and Hepatic Tanagers. A Zone-tailed Hawk occasionally joins the Red-tailed Hawks and Turkey Vultures sailing over the cliffs. Forest Service facilities at the Cherry Creek-McMillan Campgrounds consist of camping sites and restrooms. There is no potable water available.

Three miles beyond Cherry Creek Campground, Forest Road 154 branches to the right and ascends 9,000-foot Signal Peak. Narrow and steep, with sharp curves, this rough gravel road is not recommended for low sedans, although the first few miles usually present no problem. Sharp-shinned Hawk, Northern Goshawk, Wild Turkey, and Band-tailed Pigeon are sometimes seen along the road. Olive Warbler, more likely here than in Cherry Creek Canyon, is best located by its song, which in some years may be heard as early as February. Pairs may sometimes be found in the pine groves near the junction with New Mexico Route 15 during nesting season; later, mixed post-breeding parties are possible here or in the mixed conifers a few miles beyond. Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) and Grace's warblers are common breeders throughout, and Greater Pewee is occasional. Magnificent Hummingbird, Red-naped and (rarely) Williamson's Sapsuckers, Cordilleran Flycatcher, Pygmy and

Red-breasted Nuthatches, Townsend's Solitaire, Orange-crowned Warbler, and Red Crossbill are additional breeding species in the Signal Peak forests, although some of these are scarce or irregular. Northern Saw-whet Owl is known here, but its status is uncertain. Spotted Owls are heard on occasion, and Flammulated Owls are common breeders, albeit hard to see. Signal Peak often is productive during fall migration, often yielding moderate numbers of hummingbirds, sapsuckers, and vireos, and numerous wood warblers (including Nashville, Townsend's, and Hermit). Golden-crowned Kinglet and Clark's Nutcracker appear sporadically in late fall and winter.



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The American Birding Association represents the North American birding community and supports birders through publications, conferences, workshops, tours, partnerships, and networks.

The ABA's education programs promote birding skills, ornithological knowledge, and the development of a conservation ethic.

The ABA encourages birders to apply their skills to help conserve birds and their habitats, and we represent the interests of birders in planning and legislative arenas.

ABA Sales, the ABA's for-profit subsidiary, supplies birders with tools, equipment, and accessories to make their birding more enjoyable.

We welcome all birders as members.

You can join the ABA, learn more about us and our programs, or access a wide range of birding links on our web site, <www.americanbirding.org>.

Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument

From Cherry Creek Canyon or Signal Peak, continue north on New Mexico Route 15 toward Cliff Dwellings National Monument and Lake Roberts. About seven miles from the Signal Peak road junction, the highway descends in a series of switchbacks through mostly wooded habitat to shallow Sapillo Creek and its few large cottonwoods, and soon turns left at an obvious fork. From here it is fifteen miles north to the National Monument headquarters in Cliff Dweller Canyon, where White-throated Swift, Canyon Wren, Painted Redstart, and some of the other species listed for Cherry Creek Canyon are to be expected (bird diversity, though, is greater along Cherry Creek). An occasional Spotted Owl has been recorded along the foot trail to the cliff dwellings or elsewhere in the area. Along the cottonwood-lined Gila River below the canyon, Common Black-Hawk may be found in summer, Bald Eagle in winter. Both Peregrine Falcon and Northern Goshawk are possible at any season, and Montezuma Quail are infrequently seen in the hills and side canyons, typically in oak or open pine/oak woodland; their appearance is impossible to predict. The same is true of the Pinyon Jay flocks, which roam the countryside at most seasons (least commonly during early summer, when they are usually in pairs). Facilities at Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument include restrooms (handicap accessible) at the Visitor's Center.

Lake Roberts

From the monument, follow the road back to its junction with New Mexico Route 35. Turn left, proceeding east toward Lake Roberts, an artificial impoundment popular with fisherman and birders. Near this junction, on the left side of the road, is Grey Feathers Lodge. Here, at feeders, one can observe Magnificent (fairly regular), Rufous, Calliope, Black-chinned, Broad-tailed, and (rarely) Blue-throated Hummingbirds. Seed feeders also attract other local birds throughout the year. Pro-

ceed on the road eastward around and above the lake, watching for Wild Turkey, Pinyon Jay (a few nest in pinyon pines on the nearby hills), and Purple Martin (nesting in tall dead ponderosa pines, an interesting sight for birders used to seeing this species using artificial housing). Beyond the upper campground is

Spirit Canyon Lodge, where feeders also lure numerous hummingbirds. Near the east end of the lake, turn right and drive through a small campground to a parking area not far from the water. There is a good mixture of habitats here including a cattail marsh, willows, juniper woodland, and extensive pine forest. A short boardwalk enables one to skirt the marsh and view the water for summering species such as Pied-billed Grebe, Ruddy Duck, American Coot, Sora, Virginia Rail, and Marsh Wren.

Broad-tailed and Black-chinned Hummingbirds, Black Phoebe, Steller's Jay, Plumbeous Vireo, White-breasted and Pygmy Nuthatches, Canyon Wren, Grace's Warbler, Chipping Sparrow, and Blue Grosbeak breed around the campground. During migration, Common Loon, Eared and Western Grebes, Double-crested Cormorant, various ducks, Osprey, Ring-billed Gull, and a few shorebirds are not unlikely. A few Bald Eagles winter here.

From Lake Roberts, continue south on New Mexico Route 35. The trip through the upper Mimbres Valley can be rewarding, particularly if one explores some of the primitive side roads, although parts of the area are privately owned: please respect posted property. Many of the land birds found around Lake Roberts are widespread in the valley, along with Gambel's Quail, Ladder-backed and Acorn Woodpeckers, Western Bluebird, Violet-green Swallow, Rock

Bridled Titmouse by Dale Zimmerman



Wren, Curve-billed Thrasher, Canyon and Spotted Towhees, and Rufous-crowned Sparrow, plus species typical of grasslands and pinyon pine-juniper woodland. During autumn, winter, and early spring, expect Mountain Bluebird in open areas, and Townsend's Solitaire and Pinyon Jay where there are trees. Some waterfowl visit the impoundment behind Bear Canyon Dam, about ten miles south of Lake Roberts and a short distance in along a side road, but the deep water is only marginally attractive to birds. A pair of Common Black-Hawks often nest nearby in the cottonwoods along the Mimbres River (on private land, but sometimes they can be viewed from the road). New Mexico Route 152 will return you toward Silver City. Forest Service facilities at the Lake Roberts picnic area include camping, picnic tables, restrooms (handicap accessible), and drinking water.

Little Walnut Picnic Area

About four miles north of U.S. Route 180 West in Silver City, on Little Walnut Road, is a small picnic area maintained by the U.S. Forest Service. It is a good destination for a short trip from town, especially on less crowded weekdays. Park in any of the designated spaces and investigate the ponderosa pine groves, the peripheral oak and juniper woodland, and nearby shallow arroyos (usually-dry creek beds), where low willows, oaks, cottonwoods, and conifers provide diversity. A marked

trail leads from the north edge of the picnic area through varied habitats.

An hour here in late spring or early summer typically reveals Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Hairy and Acorn Woodpeckers, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Plumbeous and Hutton's Vireos, Common Raven, Mexican and Scrub Jays, Bushtit, Bridled and Juniper Titmice, Bewick's Wren, Western Bluebird, Hepatic and Western tanagers, Virginia's, Black-throated Gray, and (sometimes) Red-faced Warblers, Lesser Goldfinch, and Bullock's Oriole. Violet-green Swallows nest in cavities in the cottonwoods near the road. Gray Flycatchers regularly breed in and near the picnic ground. Red Crossbill nests sporadically and may be present in winter, when one may expect Red-naped and Williamson's Sapsuckers, Steller's Jay, Pygmy and

Red-breasted Nuthatches, Ruby-crowned and (rarely) Golden-crowned Kinglets, Townsend's Solitaire, and Dark-eyed Junco. Among the many transient species are various warblers, Cassin's Finch, Pine Siskin, and Green-tailed Towhee. Forest Service facilities at the Little Walnut picnic area include picnic tables, restrooms (handicap accessible), and drinking water.

Bear Mountain

Another profitable short trip north of Silver City is to the vicinity of Bear Mountain. From U.S. Route 180 West, turn north on Alabama Street (0.3 mile west of Little Walnut Road), which becomes Cottage San Road and finally Forest Road 853 (unpaved). Five miles from U.S. Route 180, turn onto poorly maintained Forest Road 858, the first mile of which

accesses a ponderosa pine/Gambel's oak community interspersed with pinon/juniper and oak woodlands. The bird species are much the same as those at Little Walnut, including Gray Flycatcher and (sometimes) Hutton's Vireo. Rufous-crowned Sparrow is uncommon on the more open, rocky slopes. Western Screech Owl is resident in oak and pine-oak woods. There are several potential mud holes and often deep ruts on this road, so drive carefully during the summer rainy season or after winter storms. There are no Forest Service facilities on Bear Mountain.

An annotated checklist of the birds of Gila National Forest, published in July 1997, is available at the Silver City Ranger District office, 3005 E. Camino del Bosque, Silver City, NM 88061, (505) 388 8201, as well as at the Gila Cliff Dwellings visitor center.

A noted author (Birds of Kenya and Northern Tanzania and Birds of New Guinea), artist, photographer, botanist, ornithologist, lepidopterist, and naturalist, Dale Zimmerman holds the title of Professor Emeritus of Biology at Western New Mexico University. Both he and his wife, Marian, have birded extensively throughout the world. They have lived in Silver City since the late 1950s. Roland Shook is a Professor of Biology in the Department of Natural Sciences at Western New Mexico University. He is currently involved in a long-term study involving bird populations along the Gila River near Silver City. Roland and his family have lived in Silver City since 1992.

Birding the Borderlands

Western Field Ornithologists (WFO) and **New Mexico Ornithological Society (NMOS)** will hold a joint meeting in Silver City, New Mexico, 24-27 July 2004. Convening on the campus of Western New Mexico University in southwestern New Mexico, this joint meeting, with the theme of "Birds of the Borderlands", seeks to promote the exchange of biological information among amateur and professional ornithologists from both sides of the border. The meeting is the twenty-eighth annual gathering for WFO and the forty-first for NMOS.

"The joint WFO/NMOS meeting will focus on the bird life "of several major ecosystems (Sonoran Desert, Chihuahuan Desert, Sky Islands, Rio Grande and San Pedro River drainages) that straddle the international border", says *Birding* editor Ted Floyd, a WFO board member and one of the conference organizers. Brief oral and poster presentations will address topics such as borderland bird ecology and conservation, systematics, study methods, and identification problems of western United States and eastern Pacific birds. Half-day field trips will provide excellent opportunities to observe many of the special species of this region, including Common Black-Hawk, Montezuma Quail, Flammulated Owl, Greater Pewee, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Crissal Thrasher, Olive and Red-faced Warblers, and Abert's Towhee. The meeting falls at the peak season for hummers in this region, and ten or more species are likely within striking distance of the meeting. For more information on this meeting, go to <www.wfo-cbrc.org/confer.html>.

One of North America's most important bird-related organizations, **Western Field Ornithologists** focuses on field-oriented descriptive ornithology and is relevant to both amateur and professional observers. WFO activities include pelagic trips, annual meetings, and the refereed quarterly journal *Western Birds*. The WFO home page can be found at <www.wfo-cbrc.org>.

Services of the **New Mexico Ornithological Society** include supporting the state bird records committee and rare bird alert (505/323-9323), the *NMOS Bulletin* and *NMOS Field Notes*, and occasional publications including *New Mexico Birdfinding Guide* (the 2002 revision by John Parmeter, Bruce Neville, and Doug Emkalns is ABA Sales item #330) and "Field Checklist of New Mexico Birds" (ABA Sales #334). For more information on NMOS, write to PO Box 3068, Albuquerque, NM 87190-3068.



Montezuma Quail by Dale Zimmerman

