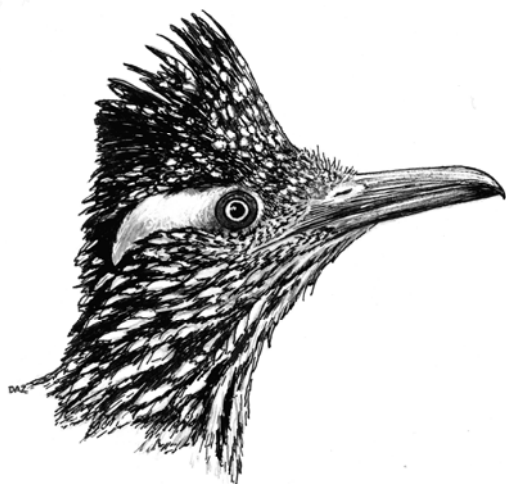


# NMOS BULLETIN



New Mexico  
Ornithological  
Society

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2009

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## **A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT**

As the days increase in length and the weather warms, signs of the upcoming spring are at hand. Bewick's Wrens and Northern Cardinals have been singing along the Gila River for the past month heralding a change in seasons.

I would like to draw your attention to the new NMOS web site ([www.nmbirds.org](http://www.nmbirds.org)) which has been completely remodeled and updated under the primary direction of Board Member Janet Ruth. I think you'll like the new look and feel of the web site. Suggestions and complements can be directed to Janet. Behind the scenes, Dillon Shook invested time and talent to make this project work. My thanks to both.

Coming up April 25, is the NMOS annual meeting being held this year in Los Alamos (see the web site or the current *NMOS Bulletin* for details). This is a great opportunity for members to renew acquaintances and hear presentations on avian research taking place in the state. The paper session is an ideal opportunity for undergraduate and graduate students to present before an audience of their peers. I would encourage all NMOS members to attend and get involved in the organization.

If you have comments or suggestions about NMOS, please contact one of the officers. Their names and addresses are posted on the web site and in the current issue of the *Bulletin*.

The very best to you and yours, and we look forward to seeing you in Los Alamos.

— Roland Shook

## RECENT NORTHERN HARRIER BREEDING RECORDS ON THE NORTHWESTERN TEXAS PLAINS

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**Abstract.**—Though considered rare to casual in Texas in summer, two Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) pairs successfully fledged young in Lamb and Castro counties, Texas near the New Mexico border in 2000. Males were first observed “sky-dancing” on 24 March, and by 8 and 12 April both had acquired mates. One male was carrying nesting material on 19 April and provisioning an incubating female in mid-May. The first noted fledged young was on 8 July and the first young left the nesting area on 20 July; both broods of four had dispersed by late July. The two nests were in Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) grasslands.

The Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) is a widely distributed North American breeding raptor; however, in Texas its summer status is classified as rare to casual (Rappole and Blacklock 1994), but it has nested as far south as the Laguna Madre along the southern Texas coast. Sporadic breeding records have included: in the north-central region a nest in Hill County (1980) and probably Palo Pinto County (1972) (Pulich 1988); in the coastal bend region in Kleberg (Laguna Madre) and Refugio counties (no dates) (Rappole and Blacklock 1985); and in far western Texas a historical record (no date) for Jeff Davis County (Peterson and Zimmer 1998). Oberholser (1974) also listed nesting records for Wise County (Decatur in 1889), Harris County (SE of Houston in 1973), Galveston County (Galveston in 1837, Hitchcock in 1971), and apparently in Travis County (Austin, no date). Furthermore, Oberholser (1974) reported summer records for the middle and western Texas panhandle, with nesting likely in the westernmost tier of counties, but stated actual harrier breeding evidence was lacking. Seyffert (2001), however, noted that nesting had occurred in the middle panhandle; a

nest was located in Randall County on 30 May 1941. In addition, Seyffert (2001) observed an adult female accompanied by a bird in juvenile plumage in the middle panhandle near Sanford Dam Marsh at Lake Meredith, Hutchinson County on 4 July 1985, and believed nesting had occurred nearby.

Adding to the 12 previous breeding records, I found two Northern Harrier nesting pairs on the plains of northwestern Texas in spring 2000. The two nested within 1.6 km of each other and were successful in fledging four young each. Though territorial “sky-dancing” displays (see Palmer 1988) had been noted in the past, and both adult males and females observed in summer, these were the first known harrier breeding records for the western Texas panhandle. The nearest known site where the species had previously nested was approximately 60 km WSW; a nest containing six small young was in a grassy drain southeast of Portales, Roosevelt County, New Mexico on 12 June 1951 (Ligon 1961). Compared with Texas, summer Northern Harriers are more frequent in New Mexico and have been increasing in recent years, including several pairs which have nested (e.g., Williams 2006, 2007).

Texas Northern Harrier breeding accounts date to 1837, but to my knowledge there has been little documentation for pairs which have nested in the state. My objective is to provide a brief account for the two pairs which nested in 2000.

## STUDY AREA AND METHODS

Nesting sites were approximately 48 km east of the New Mexico border in Lamb and Castro counties, or about 22 km ENE of Muleshoe, Bailey County, Texas (34.217° N, 102.733° W). Both nests were on dry sites in Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) grasslands; vegetation height ranged between 45-60 cm. The dominant vegetation was residual big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardi*); Canadian horseweed (*Conyza canadensis*) was the dominant forb at the Lamb County site, but few forbs were at the Castro County site. The Lamb County nest was in the northeast corner of a 65-ha CRP plot within 100 m of a cotton field, whereas the Castro County nest was in the northwest corner of a 16-ha plot within 50 m of a winter wheat field. Most observations were in Lamb County, with limited observations in Castro County; the Lamb

County site was < 200 m from a farmstead where harrier activity could be monitored. To avoid disturbance and potential nest abandonment, nests were not visited, thus, clutch sizes, hatching success, and nestling survival rates were not known.

## OBSERVATIONS

**Nesting.**—Two Northern Harrier males together were first noted “sky-dancing” on 24 March 2000, approximately 1.6 km south and 2.4 km southwest of their eventual nesting sites. The Lamb County male was first seen on its nesting territory on 7 April. Females were first observed on territory on 8 and 12 April in Castro and Lamb counties, respectively. The Lamb County male was carrying nesting material on 19 April, and the pair consistently remained together near the site through 29 April. I observed the male provisioning the incubating female on 12 and 15 May. Both pair members were diving at an unidentified predator approximately 50 m southwest of the nest on 17 May, and the male evicted a Swainson’s Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*) from the area on 20 May. Except during aerial food exchanges, usually only the male was seen until 8 June when both pair members were flying together over the grassland, suggesting the eggs had hatched.

**Brood rearing.**—Because in the family Accipitridae males are smaller than females, I surmised that the smallest juvenile from the Lamb County nest was a male and the other three females (see MacWhirter and Bildstein 1996). The young male left the nest on 8 July and the other three on 11 July; however, the four stayed together through 19 July. The young male left the brood, flying away in a southerly direction during the late afternoon of 20 July and was not seen again. Its three siblings stayed in the field until it was mowed on 24 July. When last seen the three were still together, feeding on a vehicle killed eastern cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) 0.8 km NNE of the nest site on 26 July. The Castro County brood of four fledged on 10 July and had dispersed by late July.

## DISCUSSION

Since congressional passage of the 1985 Federal Food Security Act (Farm Bill), some 717,000 cropland hectares have been retired and converted to CRP grasslands on the Southern High Plains of northwestern Texas (see Haukos and Smith 1994). In many areas where little breeding habitat was available before, these usually tall and robust grasses now provide Northern Harriers with potential nesting sites. Locally, harriers have responded to some extent, as late spring and early summer occurrences have increased (pers. obs.). Thus, nesting perhaps may be more frequent than records suggest, but recently fledged young have not been noted except for the eight reported here.

Though potential breeding sites have increased, this nesting habitat is by no means secure as CRP grasslands are sometimes mowed during the peak of nesting. In fact, the two harrier nests discussed here were almost destroyed in June. After some 60% of the Lamb County plot had been mowed, on 16 June I discussed with the landowner the impending loss of the two harrier nests; totally cooperative he suspended mowing and left the field. Mowing was not resumed until 24 July after both harrier broods had fledged.

Total precipitation at the farmstead for April-July 2000 was 16.1 cm; however, there was no precipitation during May, but a thunderstorm on 1 June dropped 6.73 cm in 45-min. Daily maximum temperatures during the harrier's reproductive period generally ranged from 20° - 30° C, but a 40° C maximum occurred on 24 May; thus, heavy rainfall or high temperatures apparently had little if any impact on harrier nesting success and brood survival (at least for the eight that fledged).

An adult male harrier returned to the Lamb County site in April 2001, but drought conditions from the time of mowing in June - July 2000 through spring 2001 resulted in little vegetative regrowth and subsequently little suitable nesting habitat. The male had abandoned the area by mid-May; no female was observed at the Lamb County site and neither male nor female at the Castro County site during the 2001 breeding season.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I particularly would like to thank B. Branscum who kindly stopped mowing until after both harrier broods fledged; without his cooperation nesting efforts would have terminated in mid-June. I also would like to thank J-L Cartron, R. Doster, C. Hagan, and R. Scholes for helpful comments which improved the manuscript.

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## NOTES ON SOME BREEDING RAPTORS OF CENTRAL AND NORTHERN LEA COUNTY, NEW MEXICO

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From 25 through 27 May 2008, we conducted raptor surveys along 520 km of paved and unpaved roads in central and northern Lea County, New Mexico. The landscape was characterized by a mosaic of natural vegetation communities, farmlands with irrigated wheat and other crop fields, oil fields, and semi-urban, residential areas (particularly near Hobbs and Humble City), with also a few excavated (caliche) pits. Natural vegetation communities consisted mainly of grasslands, cholla (*Cylindropuntia*) grasslands, honey mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*) grasslands

and shrublands, and shinnery oak (*Quercus havardii*). Black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) towns were common in the survey area, but few of them were large. Elms (*Ulmus*) and other trees were typically scarce, but other elevated vantage points and potential nest sites for raptors existed in the form of utility poles along many of the roads and in oil fields. Abandoned homesteads were particularly common in the Lovington and Tatum area. In addition to oil drilling and agriculture, land use also consisted of cattle grazing.

We detected 9 raptor species during our surveys: Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*), Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), Harris's Hawk (*Parabuteo unicinctus*), Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), Red-tailed Hawk (*B. jamaicensis*), American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*), Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*), and Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*). Notable was the absence of Ferruginous Hawks (*Buteo regalis*) during our surveys.

The most common diurnal raptor located by us was the Swainson's Hawk, with numerous sightings of single birds or pairs and a total of 16 occupied nests located. Of these nests, 8 were on power poles (Fig. 1), 6 in elms, 1 in a shinnery oak, and 1 in a locust (*Robinia* sp.). Two of three nests that were accessible had 2 eggs, while the other nest contained 3 eggs. Two of the nests were in oil fields; a third nest was in a small shinnery oak motte. Nests on power poles were placed on wooden double cross-arms, in overhead neutral brackets, or on nesting brackets below primary C8 (i.e., three phase double dead-end) units. We observed four additional Swainson's Hawk nests on double cross-arms in Chavez County, along Interstate Route 380 between Roswell and the Lea County line. The New Mexico Partners in Flight (2008) species account for the Swainson's Hawk states that nesting on poles is common in New Mexico but provides no details. Yet, the observation is interesting in light of previous studies and assessments making no mention of Swainson's Hawks nesting on poles in New Mexico (Pilz 1983, Bednarz 1988), or the Birds of North America's Swainson's Hawk species account (England et al. 1997: 13) stating that only a "small number of nests" have been reported on power-poles. Thus, the use of power-poles as nesting substrates may thus represent a recent shift in the nesting habits of the species.



FIGURE 1. Swainson's Hawk nest on a power-pole in Lea County, New Mexico, 26 May 2008.

Also common during our surveys were 2 owl species, Burrowing Owl and Barn Owl. Burrowing Owls were detected at 9 prairie dog towns, while we flushed Barn Owls (single birds or pairs) from 8 abandoned buildings or groups of buildings and from a burrow along the walls of an excavation pit. One additional abandoned building showed signs of prior Barn Owl occupancy: the floor of the building was strewn with food pellets and the skeleton of a dead owl was found. We discovered two active Barn Owl nest sites: one in the rafters of one of the abandoned houses, with 5 downy young staggered in age (Fig. 2); the other with 1 hatchling and 3 eggs on a shelf above what was once a closet in another abandoned house. The Barn Owl burrow at the excavation pit consisted of a tunnel leading to a chamber whose contents could not be observed; the entrance to the tunnel had many pellets and whitewash.

The high number of Barn Owls found during our surveys was unexpected. Ligon (1961) and Hubbard (1978) describe the Barn Owl as rare or uncommon in New Mexico, and the species had been reported only twice from Lea County, with no record of breeding (New Mexico Ornithological Society 2008). The species is known to nest in New Mexico along arroyo walls and cliffs, in hollow trees, mine shafts, cisterns, and nest boxes, as well as under railroad bridges (Ligon 1961, Martin 1973, Jorgensen et al. 1998, Havens 1998, Williams 2003, Cartron and Stahlecker 2007, Cartron and Cox *in press*, Walker unpublished data). Nesting in abandoned buildings is mentioned without details by Ligon (1961). Besides Lea Co., however, we have found 3 nest sites in abandoned buildings, one south of Bluit in southern Roosevelt Co. in 2006 (L. Sager, unpublished data), one north of Grenville in Union Co. in 2007 (L. Sager, unpublished data), and one just south of Wagon Mound in Mora Co. in 2008 (J-L Cartron, unpublished data). Additional nest sites in abandoned buildings – together with a relatively high density of pairs – have been observed in Bernalillo Co. by S. Cox (see Cartron and Cox *in press*). Although more research is needed, our survey and other findings suggest that the Barn Owl is more common than generally believed in New Mexico, and that abandoned buildings are particularly important to the species in the state.



FIGURE 2. Active Barn Owl nest site in the rafters of an abandoned building in Lea County, New Mexico, 25 May 2008.

We found two more species to be breeding in the survey area. Two pairs of Harris's Hawks were detected, one just north of Hobbs, the other in mesquite shrubland about 12 km east of Buckeye. We discovered the nest, containing 3 eggs, of that second pair in a mesquite tree. We also detected Great Horned Owl fledglings at 2 locations between Caprock and Tatum. We did not find any nests for any of the other raptor species mentioned above. As stated already, no Ferruginous Hawks (*Buteo regalis*) were observed during our surveys. Ferruginous Hawks are detected in some years during Breeding Bird Surveys (BBS) in Lea County (Sauer et al. 2007). Sager observed several birds of this species during the 2003 breeding season in particular, at a time when prairie dog towns were much more extensive than now. A Ferruginous Hawk nest was reported from the Caprock BBS route in

Lea County on 9 June 1988 by S. Williams (Hubbard 1988). Sager (unpublished data) found a nest on a transformer pole with 3 fledglings on 25 July 2002 between Elida and Dora in Roosevelt Co., only 42 km north of the Lea Co. line, and another occupied nest in an elm tree on 24 June 2003 13 km southeast of Kenna in southwestern Roosevelt County, only about 30 km north of Caprock. These records seemingly point to southern Roosevelt Co and, less regularly, northern Lea Co. as lying along the southern edge of the species' distribution. Not only are prairie dogs an important component of the Ferruginous Hawk's diet in New Mexico (Ligon 1961, Cully 1988, Bak et al. 2001, Cook et al. 2003, Cartron et al. 2004), but prairie dog towns influence the distribution of nesting pairs in parts of the state (Cook et al. 2003). Whether the acreage and distribution of prairie dog towns play a role in determining the exact southern limit of the Ferruginous Hawk's breeding distribution in New Mexico has yet to be determined.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to Rick Harness for helping us describe power-pole configurations used by nesting Swainson's Hawks in Lea County; Jim Bednarz, for helping us place our observations of nests on poles in a historical context; and Carol Campbell and Rob Doster for their constructive comments on a draft of the manuscript. Our surveys were funded through a small contract with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

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## NMOS 47<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL MEETING

25 April 2009  
Fuller Lodge  
2132 Central Avenue  
Los Alamos, New Mexico  
(505) 662-9331

The New Mexico Ornithological Society will hold its 47<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting on Saturday, 25 April 2009 in Los Alamos. This meeting will include an NMOS business meeting, an NMOS general science session, and an evening banquet with speaker. Registration is required for all events.



There are several hotel options for out-of-town participants; information is provided on the NMOS website, [www.nmosbirds.org](http://www.nmosbirds.org), under Annual Meetings.

There will be a minimal registration fee for the Annual Meeting to cover meeting expenses. The abstracts for presentations at the NMOS General Science Session will be distributed at the meeting and will be published in the NMOS Bulletin.

The NMOS evening banquet will also be held at the Fuller Lodge. The keynote banquet speaker will be Dr. Natasha Kotliar Carr, Research Ecologist, USGS Fort Collins Science Center, speaking on forest fire ecology and effects on birds. The banquet will be New Mexican cuisine served buffet style. In order to know how much of each to provide, we

are asking you to select one of three primary menu items—beef enchiladas, chicken enchiladas, or vegetarian cheese enchiladas. The price is \$24. Payment for registration and the banquet are to be made through NMOS using the registration form below or printable from the NMOS web site.

NMOS will offer two organized, guided field trips (no charge):

Friday evening, 24 April – “Owling an Elevational Gradient” is a driving trip that will start in piñon-juniper habitat, and will gain elevation, ending in mixed conifer and spruce habitats near the Valles Caldera. Possible species include Western Screech-Owl, Great Horned Owl, Flammulated Owl, and Northern Saw-whet Owl. Car-pooling will be coordinated.

Sunday morning, 26 April – “Pajarito Ski Basin Loop” is a two mile hike of moderate difficulty and will explore habitats including aspen, mixed conifer, spruce, and montane meadow. Our target species will be Dusky Grouse. Although a bit early for migrant breeders, we hope to see Evening Grosbeak, Northern Flicker, Williamson’s and Red-naped sapsuckers, Pine Siskin, and any early-arriving migrants.

Information and directions for self-guided trips to several other birding areas in the vicinity will also be provided for those wishing to go out on their own on Sunday morning before heading home. Please fill in the information requested on the Registration Form if you are interested in either of the organized field trips. We will use this information to determine whether there are enough interested people to justify running them and to help in planning. Additional information will be posted on the NMOS website as it is available.

**REGISTRATION FORM**

Fees (payable to NMOS) are due by 17 APRIL 2009.

Number of Meeting Registrations @ \$20 \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Student Meeting Registrations @ \$10 \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Reservations for Saturday Banquet Buffet @ \$24 \_\_\_\_\_

Please select one entrée: Beef Enchiladas \_\_\_\_\_  
Chicken Enchiladas \_\_\_\_\_  
Vegetarian Enchiladas \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate if you are interested in either of the following organized, guided field trips:

\_\_\_\_\_ Owling an Elevational Gradient (Friday, 24 April)

\_\_\_\_\_ Pajarito Ski Basin Loop (Sunday, 26 April)

TOTAL AMOUNT ENCLOSED \$ \_\_\_\_\_

NAME(S) \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

E-MAIL \_\_\_\_\_

Please provide your e-mail address. It will enable us to contact you with last-minute information (e.g., confirmation of registration, emergency meeting cancellation, information about field trips, etc.).

Send payment and Registration Form to:

Roland Shook  
3306 Royal Drive  
Silver City, NM 88061

## RECENT ORNITHOLOGICAL LITERATURE

The following is a listing of publications pertaining to ornithology in New Mexico and adjacent areas that appeared in 2008. Efforts were made to provide a comprehensive listing, however it is likely that citations were omitted. To aid in the development of future annual literature compilations, please send relevant citations to the Editor.

- AGUDELO, M.S., M.J. DESMOND, AND L. MURRAY. 2008. Influence of desertification on site occupancy by grassland and shrubland birds during the non-breeding period in the northern Chihuahuan Desert. *Studies in Avian Biology* 37:84-100.
- BRAND, L.A., G.C. WHITE, AND B.R. NOON. 2008. Factors influencing species richness and community composition of breeding birds in a desert riparian corridor. *Condor* 110:199-210. (*Conducted on San Pedro River in southeast Arizona.*)
- CARTRON, J-L E., D. L. HAWKSWORTH, AND D. M. FINCH. 2008. First records of the Brown Creeper breeding along the middle Rio Grande in central New Mexico. *Western Birds* 39:176-178
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\* \* \*

**NEW MEXICO ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY  
FINANCIAL STATEMENT FOR 2008**

Balance as of 12/31/07:

Checking Account Balance	9,349.27
Petty Cash	32.29
Undeposited Checks	20.00
<i>Total</i>	\$9,401.56

Net Transactions from 1/1/08 to 12/31/08:

Dues	2,120.00
NM Bird Finding Guide Sales	2,864.50
NM Field Checklist Sales	66.50
Annual meeting	148.74
Postage and shipping	-830.89
Miscellaneous	11.50
Grants	-1,000.00
Printing	-4,083.36
Storage Unit Rent	-500.00
Interest	4.93
<i>Total Transactions</i>	-1,198.08

Total 2008 beginning balance plus transactions	8,203.48
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Balance as of 12/31/08:

Checking Account Balance	8,171.19
Petty Cash Balance	32.29
Checks outstanding	0.00
Undeposited Checks	0.00
12/31 balance	\$8,203.48

Petty cash income and disbursements (\$0.00 and \$(0.00)) are included in the income and expense categories above.

Submitted by:  
Jerry R. Oldenettel, Treasurer

Date: 29 January 2009

**NEW MEXICO ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY – MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION**

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.

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

CITY: \_\_\_\_\_ STATE: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

*Select membership category:*

Regular	\$20	_____	<i>Please send this form with check to:</i>  New Mexico Ornithological Society P.O. Box 3068 Albuquerque, NM 87190-3068
Family	\$30	_____	
Student	\$10	_____	
Supporting	\$50	_____	
Life	\$500	_____	





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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.

## ***NMOS BULLETIN***

The *Bulletin* is published quarterly; subscription is by membership in NMOS. The *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.

NMOS members are encouraged to submit articles and news. Articles received are subject to 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 (see inside front cover). Refer to recent issues of the *Bulletin* for examples of style. News items may be submitted to the Editor by way of e-mail.

**[www.nmbirds.org](http://www.nmbirds.org)**

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