



# the Cactus Wren-dition



VOLUME LXXV NO. 1

SPRING—2022



**Xavi Bou**  
pp. 22-23



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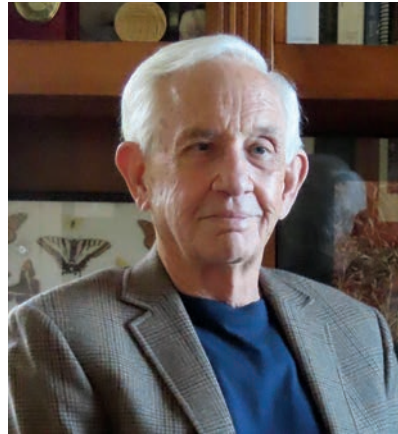
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### On the Cover

Ornithography #139 *Sturnus vulgaris*, Common starling, Ebro Delta, Catalonia

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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



**Charles Babbitt**

As I write this message it is early January, near freezing outside and I'm listening to a Curve-billed Thrasher singing in my yard. When you read this message, however, spring will have arrived and it will be time to get out and look for spring migrants and enjoy the return of many of our summer species.

Riparian areas in particular are a great place to watch this springtime show; places like Box Bar, Needle Rock and Sycamore Creek on the Verde River, and the San Pedro River. Here you can look for nesting Summer Tanager, Yellow Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat and Hooded Oriole. In early March you can watch the Zone-tailed Hawks as they begin their spectacular spring migration up the Santa Cruz River.

You might take time to reflect not only on the incredible diversity and beauty of the riparian area around you but also on just how much of this habitat we have lost and the extent that it is constantly under threat from groundwater pumping, water diversions for agricultural and municipal uses, and grazing. To appreciate just how much of Arizona's riparian habitat has been lost in the last 100 years, take a look at the map of significant riparian areas in the Arizona Breeding Bird Atlas p.25.

MAS has a long and distinguished history of protecting the riparian areas of the state including its successful fight to stop the construction of habitat-destroying Orme and Cliff dams on the Verde River. Unfortunately, each victory only seems to be temporary as the threats to riparian communities - be they along our desert rivers or high elevation mountain streams - are ongoing and severe.

At the present time MAS is in litigation to force federal land managers to protect three threatened and endangered species; a bird, a plant and a mammal. The western Yellow-billed Cuckoo, the Huachuca water umbel, and the New Mexico meadow jumping mouse are riparian obligate species in danger of extinction. The principal cause of their plight is the continued destruction of the habitat on which they and many other species depend as a direct result of grazing and trampling by trespassing cattle and horses.

We should also recognize the work that our conservation chair, Mark Horlings, his committee and other volunteers are doing for the famous "Thrasher Spot" west of Phoenix. This is where many birders from across the country come for their "life" Le Conte's Thrasher. A large 2000-acre solar farm is slated to be built there. MAS is sponsoring surveys to establish baseline data of the thrasher population and habitat to determine the impact the development will have, not only on the local thrashers but populations across much of western Arizona and southern California where solar farms are planned. 🐦

# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

by Laurie Nessel

I am grateful for all the contributors to this newsletter and want to encourage readers to consider submitting or referring articles, photographs, announcements- anything to continue creating the relevant, informative and entertaining newsletter that is the Cactus Wren-dition.

This issue features articles on birding- Margaret Dyekman's reflections on listing, Mark Horlings' Wings over Willcox Festival review, Kathe Anderson's enticing Christmas Bird Count adventures and Duane Morse's international birding during COVID. Bird behavior articles include Michael Plagens' nectar feeder survey (with a prize!) and In Praise of Gnats, with some important habitat tips, and Vicki Hire's article about nests, bird quiz and crossword puzzle – ostensibly for youth but of interest to anyone. David Chorlton's poignant poem considers simple desires and perspectives on a second homecoming after rehabilitation. Finally, I urge you to follow the link to our featured artist's webpage to see more of his amazing photographs and videos of birds in flight.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Banquet

The MAS board of directors has cancelled the 2022 annual banquet due to COVID. A regular members' meeting will be held at Church of the Brethren on May 3rd.

### MAS Annual Elections & Nominating Committee

MAS's annual elections will take place at the May member meeting. Any member in good standing is eligible. MAS members may submit nominations to the Nominating Committee:

Mel Bramley (Chair) (480) 969-9893 melbramley@cox.net

Tim Flood (602) 618-1853 tjflood@att.net

Brian Ison (602) 909- 0541 Lwrkenai@cox.net.

Nominations will also be accepted from the floor. All board positions are open for nominations. Contact any board member to learn about job descriptions. Please consider volunteering to benefit the Maricopa Audubon Society.

**Volunteers Wanted—we are looking for people to work with Excel files, our Facebook page, mailings, and other tasks. Monthly hours are flexible. If interested, contact any board member.**

**Open Board Positions-Programs & Membership. We could use your help. If interested, contact any board member.**

## COMMITTEES/SUPPORT

### Arizona Audubon Council Rep

Margaret Dyekman  
602- 620-3210

### Bookstore

Sochetra Ly  
503 860-0370

### Poet Laureate

David Chorlton  
480 705-3227

[www.maricopaaudubon.org](http://www.maricopaaudubon.org)

*"The idea of wilderness needs no defense, it only needs defenders."*

*Ed Abbey*

## An Investment in the Future

Bequests are an important source of support for the Maricopa Audubon Society. Your chapter has dedicated itself to the protection of the natural world through public education and advocacy for the wiser use and preservation of our land, water, air and other irreplaceable natural resources.

You can invest in the future of our natural world by making a bequest in your will to the Maricopa Audubon Society. Talk to your attorney for more information on how this can be accomplished.



GROCERY SHOPPING? Support Maricopa Audubon when you shop at Fry's Food Stores. MAS is part of Fry's Community Rewards Program. Register your Fry's VIP card and select Maricopa Audubon #89166 or #WW583 as your non-profit organization at no cost to you. Go to [www.frysfood.com/topic/newcommunity-rewards-program](http://www.frysfood.com/topic/newcommunity-rewards-program)

**Sign up for the e-newsletter!**

To subscribe, email:  
laurienessel@gmail.com

*Note: We do not use the email list for anything other than the described purpose.*



# MEETINGS . . .

We are conducting hybrid meetings, both in-person and via zoom. Zoom codes are posted on our website close to the meeting. In person, please follow the latest CDC guidelines regarding the wearing of masks and booster vaccinations.

MAS holds meetings (membership is not required) on the first Tuesday of the month from September through May at Papago Buttes Church of the Brethren, 2450 N. 64th Street, Scottsdale (north of Oak Street on the west side, between Thomas and McDowell roads). If southbound, turn right from 64th Street, ½ mile south of Thomas. If northbound, turn left (west) at Oak Street, ½ mile north of McDowell, and then right at the Elks Lodge. Continue past the lodge and turn right into the church parking lot. Look for the “Audubon” signs. Meeting starts at 7:30 p.m., come at 7 p.m. to socialize and browse the book table. Pre-meeting dinners are held at 6 p.m. at Saigon Bowl, 8213 E. Roosevelt Street, Scottsdale. Join us for a delicious meal, meet our guest speaker and say “howdy” to other birders. Meals average \$11. Our annual banquet has been cancelled due to COVID. We will hold a regular member meeting at the church in May.



Harriet and Dr. Andrew T. Smith

## The Sonoran Desert

May 3 (rescheduled from April)

Extending from the southwestern US into northern Mexico, the Sonoran Desert is an ecological hotspot of biodiversity due to its vast array of habitats. The Smiths will speak on the wonders of the Sonoran Desert and the importance of environmental education through books such as “The Astonishing, Astounding, Amazing Sonoran Desert”. They will sign copies with proceeds funding Friends of the Sonoran Desert (FSD), a nonprofit whose mission is to preserve and protect the Sonoran Desert.

Harriet Smith, Managing Director, FSD, is a retired clinical psychologist who grew up in Tucson, Arizona. She authored *Parenting for Primates*.

Andrew Smith, Director, FSD, is President’s Professor Emeritus and a Distinguished Sustainability Scientist in the School of Life Sciences at ASU. Books include *A Guide to the Mammals of China*, and *Lagomorphs: Pikas, Rabbits, and Hares of the World*.

Cathy Wise

## Saving the Blue Crow – How Community Science Helps Pinyon Jays

April 5

The Pinyon Jay, an iconic bird of western Pinyon-Juniper forests, has declined precipitously since the late 60’s. Drought, climate change, and habitat loss negatively impact the bird, and we are struggling to get an accurate picture of Pinyon Jay status due to the birds’ enormous range and nomadic nature. Enter community scientists and an ambitious monitoring plan! Learn about the program and how you can help.

Cathy Wise has a BS in Avian Sciences from UC Davis and has studied birds throughout the west. She is Community Science Manager with Audubon Southwest and has worked for the USFS, Utah DWR, and the AGFD. Cathy oversees Burrowing Owl relocation and Yellow-billed Cuckoo surveys, and promotes Audubon’s “Plants for Birds” intentional landscaping program. She is an avid hiker, climber, snowboarder, gardener and beer enthusiast.



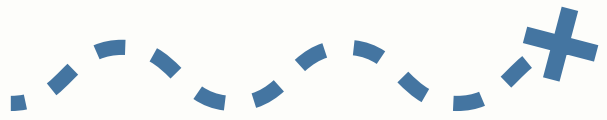
Maricopa Audubon Society is now registered on Amazon as a charitable organization.

Go to the MAS Facebook page for details or use the following AmazonSmile link for Maricopa Audubon Society: <https://smile.amazon.com/ch/86-6040458> Log onto your Amazon account and a percentage of your purchase will go to MAS!



# FIELD TRIPS

by Emily Thomas



- Please follow current **CDC Guidelines**. Participation in field trips comes with risk of exposure to infectious diseases. If you have any symptoms of illness or have been exposed to COVID-19, stay home. Please wear face masks (N-95).
- For Tonto **National Forests Day Use Passes** visit **USDA Tonto Pass**.
- If you **carpool**, please cover driver's gas—recommended 10 cents/mile per rider.
- The ABA has adopted principles of birding ethics. Check them online or ask your field trip leader
- **Wear** neutral colors and sturdy walking shoes.
- **Bring** binoculars, sunscreen, sunglasses, hat, and water.
- **Registration** required unless otherwise noted. Search Maricopa Audubon Ticketleap or follow the links on the MAS Field Trips webpage. To cancel a reservation, contact the leader (see Ticketleap) or Field Trip Chair Emily Thomas 602 574-4710 thomas.emily@asu.edu

## Flagstaff Area Lakes with Charles Babbitt Saturday, March 12

Meet at 8 a.m. at Denny's near I-40 and I-17 (2122 S. Milton Rd.). Bring lunch and warm clothing. We will look for waterfowl on the lakes and possibly Bald Eagle, Red Crossbill, Cassin's Finch, Pinyon Jay, and Rough-legged Hawk. Carpooling TBD.

Difficulty: 1

**Leader: Charles Babbitt**

To register, please visit Maricopa Audubon Ticketleap

## Sweetwater Wetlands Thursday, March 31

These north Tucson wetlands can be sweet indeed. Good days here can top 40 species, mostly waterfowl and water-related songbirds like Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbirds and Vermilion Flycatcher, but possibly resident bobcats. This trip is timed to see which neo-tropic migrants are already showing up; maybe flycatchers, vireos and warblers. Start about 6 a.m. in Scottsdale, return about 1ish. Lunch plans, meeting place and carpooling TBD

Limit: 6

Difficulty: 1-2. Paths are mostly level dirt and easily negotiated.

**Leader: Kathe Anderson**

To register, please visit Maricopa Audubon Ticketleap



Oak Flat photo by Laurie Nessel

## Oak Flat and Vicinity Saturday, March 19

Oak Flat, near Devil's (Ga'an) Canyon, is 60 miles east of Phoenix on US 60. In 1852, the U.S. gov't. promised to protect Oak Flat in perpetuity. President Eisenhower protected it from mining during an expansion of the Tonto NF in 1955. Oak Flat is now threatened by the Resolution Copper Mine. We will begin at the campground. After lunch, we head down FR 315 (4WD) towards Devils Canyon. This rugged landscape of hoodoos and other rock formations also hosts working drill rigs. We will hike old jeep trails for our target bird - Black-chinned Sparrow.

A 2017 Sonoran Audubon trip had 52 species. To caravan, meet 8 a.m. at the NE parking lot of Tempe Mills Mall,

or at Oak Flat at 9:30 a.m.

Bring lunch.

Start: 9:30 a.m.—near 3:30 p.m.

Limit: 12. Social distancing required. Difficulty: 3 (walking on 4WD roads and rugged terrain with cacti.)

**Leader: Robert McCormick**

To register, please visit Maricopa Audubon Ticketleap

## Salt River "Peregrine Cliffs"

Monday, April 4

AKA the Goldfield Recreation Site, the "Peregrine Cliffs" are a mile from the parking area, through mesquite, sand and cottonwoods. Over the past few years, Peregrine Falcons have nested on the cliffs, while snacks (Cliff Swallows) rather remarkably swirl below involved in their own nesting activities. On the way, we'll see water birds, common desert species such as Abert's Towhees and House Finches, and any number of early warblers, vireos, flycatchers and perhaps some tanagers and grosbeaks. Details TBD a few days before the trip.

Start about 6:15 a.m. -about 9 a.m.

Limit: 7 vaccinated participants

Difficulty: 2

**Leader: Kathe Anderson**

To register, please visit Maricopa

con't



Snowcap by Jim Burns

# REFLECTIONS ON BUILDING MY LIFE LIST

by Margaret Dyekman

My 2021 New Year’s Resolution was to bring my life list up to date in eBird by adding the species I documented in a hard-copy U.S. checklist I began in the ‘70s, plus those species I’d recorded from outside the U.S. I didn’t complete that resolution by December 31, 2021, much to my chagrin. Data entry is not my favorite thing to do. However, I was determined in early 2022 to make another try.

So, there I was this January 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, inputting species to eBird that I saw in Africa in 2015 and in Costa Rica in 2018. The process got a little complicated because some of the birds’ names changed or were not

con’t on p. 7

con’t from p. 5

## Audubon Ticketleap Sunflower - Upper Sycamore Creek - Mt Ord

Saturday, April 30

Look for passage migrants and returning summer nesting species. We will look for Gray Vireo, Black-chinned Sparrow, Hooded and Scott’s Orioles, and Black and Zone-tailed Hawks. Going up Mt Ord, we will look for the six “Arizona Warblers” as well as migrating Hermit and Townsend’s Warblers. Details TBD a few days before the trip but wrap up about 1:30 p.m. Bring lunch.

Difficulty: 2-3

Limit: 8

**Leader: Charles Babbitt**

To register, please visit Maricopa Audubon Ticketleap

## Payson Area

Monday, May 9

We’ll bird south and north of Payson, starting in Round Valley, then Houston Mesa campground, ending up at Flowing Springs, hoping for lots of migratory birds – warblers, vireos, flycatchers,



Common Blackhawk by Laurie Nessel

grosbeaks – and summering Yellow Warblers, Plumbeous Vireos, Ash-throated and Brown-Crested Flycatchers, Black-headed Grosbeaks, and more. Part of the area is unfamiliar to the leader, so it’ll be an adventure and a chance to submit eBird data for under-birded spots! Details TBD. Start from Fountain Hills about 4:45 a.m. to about 2:30 p.m.

Difficulty: 2

Limit: 7 vaccinated participants

**Leader: Kathe Anderson**

To register, please visit Maricopa Audubon Ticketleap

## Mingus Mountain

Tuesday, June 14

Mingus Mountain is a 7,700 ft. peak in the Prescott National Forest near Jerome. We’ll start early (4ish) from Phoenix, explore several pine forest trails and a pond. Nuthatches, woodpeckers, Steller’s Jays and Western Bluebirds, high elevation warblers and tanagers are likely. Meeting place and carpooling TBD a few days before the trip.

Limit: 7 vaccinated participants.

Difficulty: 2

**Leader: Kathe Anderson**

To register, please visit Maricopa Audubon Ticketleap

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facebook.com/MaricopaAudubonSociety



consistent with my field guide or hand-written notes. The endeavor became more interesting, however, when I realized my total would exceed 700 species. Sometime in the afternoon of January 2, 2022, into eBird went the last species, #756, but with that last keyboard stroke I realized it was not the end, but another beginning. It renewed my appreciation for how fortunate I was to have the health and the means to go birding. It revived my gratitude for the friends I've made along the way on my journey to #756 and



eBird is an online data base, recording up to 100 million sightings worldwide annually, tracking trends in population and migration. It contributes to scientific research and conservation. Learn more at [eBird.org](http://eBird.org) and make it your 2022 resolution to be an eBirder!

delight in knowing the local birding guides in Florida, Texas, Oregon, or Southern Africa, who took as much thrill as I did when I saw a lifer, or any bird in fact.

But what hit me the most was the diversity and tenacity of the birds

themselves as I recalled as many of the species as I could. Each one had a unique coloration, song, mating display, nest construction, and approach to staying in place or migrating miles to perpetuate their circle of life. They have survived for thousands of generations, fighting against weather, predators, and sometimes just plain bad luck. As I recorded each species, I remembered exactly when and how I saw the Eagle Owl in South Africa, the Snowcap in Costa Rica, the Wood Stork in the Carolinas, the Pied Wagtail in Ireland. Then reality hit – we humans are pushing the environmental envelope over and over and making it harder for birds to survive. We take over the forests, rivers, prairies, deserts. and oceans, so often without any regard to the impact on birds, mammals, insects, fish, plants— all living things. We must not be complacent in protecting birds and all the natural world. The world is not ours to conquer without regard to consequences. The natural world is a gift we must share with all other creatures, whatever



**Eagle Owl** by Tom Cheknis

titles we label them. My life list became a reminder that I am only another name on a list and no better than every other creature on it.

Margaret Dyekman is MAS secretary and author of *Backyard Birding in Northern Arizona*.



**Wood Stork** by Gordon Karre



Sandhill Crane by Jim Burns

## WINGS OVER WILLCOX: A FESTIVAL REVIEW

by Mark Horlings

Willcox and the Sulphur Springs Valley celebrated the 28<sup>th</sup> annual Wings Over Willcox festival, January 14<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Local bird festivals, timed to coincide with migrations, have become a thing. The current issue of Living Bird advertises 11 festivals around the country, all occurring this spring or early summer.

Wings Over Willcox was bigger before Covid. Buses and vans provided transportation. Now, carpools are discouraged. Early registration dropped from over 500 to about 100 in 2022.

Sandhill Cranes were first observed in the Sulphur Springs Valley in the 1950s. Formal counts began in 1978, when 4,000 birds were tallied. Their numbers have risen steadily, with more than 40,000 seen today. Groundwater pumping and summer corn crops left corn stalks and other wastes that attracted wintering Sandhill Cranes.

Observers often note that cranes look and sound prehistoric, and they may be the oldest surviving bird family. Crane fossils have been dated to 16 million years ago. Today, Sandhill Cranes are the most numerous, with a population totaling about 600,000.

Most of the cranes at Willcox are Lesser Sandhill Cranes *Antigone canadensis canadensis*, about three feet tall and 6 pounds. Greater Sandhill Cranes *Antigone canadensis tabida* are heavier and a foot or more taller. The Lessers fly farther, from Arctic Alaska and Siberia; the Greaters travel less, from subarctic Canada and the U.S.

The festival organizes field trips, 20 this year, to see migrants and southeast Arizona resident species. Cochise Stronghold, on the West side of the Valley, offered good looks at habitats of varied elevation. Roper Lake, near Mount Graham and Safford, had a variety of ducks, grebes, and mergansers. Nothing rare, so we could relax and enjoy old friends. A Snowy Egret slowly descended, adjusting the angle of his legs and curvature of his wings to find a quiet landing, and a Belted Kingfisher perched, silent and unmoving, waiting.

For the sparrow fieldtrip we stayed near Willcox, visiting a lake, a golf course, and a tall grass cemetery. The trip leader was a professional bird guide, descended from 1880's Willcox homesteaders and wise



about local history as well as birds. We benefited from a mix of beginners - encouraging the leader to provide detail, and experienced birders - good at identification and intensely interested. You know you need your A game when a couple introduces their infant as "Cass," a name chosen to honor John Cassin, as in Cassin's Kingbird, Cassin's Finch, Cassin's Vireo, Cassin's Sparrow, even Cassin's Auklet. Serious birders!

Field trips to Whitewater Draw, 50 miles South of Willcox, were full. So I visited solo. About 30,000 of the cranes can be found there. They fly in staggered formations, sometimes only a few, often a hundred or so. I also saw thousands of Yellow-headed Blackbirds wheeling around small ponds. They would settle down in the cattails and when startled, turn and then turn

again, always in unison, swirling like alarmed baitballs of fish. In flight, it was hard to spot the color on their heads and throats, but when they settled down to face a setting sun, they showed almost as much gold as black.

The cranes of the Sulphur Springs Valley should still be there after you receive this Wrendition. If you can't make the trip in 2022, plan ahead - Wings Over Willcox in 2023.



Whitewater Draw by Laurie Nessel



## Help MAS with an EMPLOYER MATCHING GIFT

Many Maricopa Audubon members aren't aware that their employers may include a matching gift program in their benefits package. Programs vary from business to business, but they generally offer a dollar-for-dollar match when an employee makes a personal gift to a nonprofit organization like Maricopa Audubon Society.

Please visit your human resources department or charitable giving department to see if this opportunity is available to you. Your employer may require you to fill out and submit a form, which is sometimes done online. If you have already made a donation to MAS in the past year, you may be able to get a matching gift after the fact from your employer for up to 12 months later.

# CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT ADVENTURES

by Kathe Anderson

About ten years ago, after a couple of adventurous forays counting birds, Lois Lorenz and I decided to help on every Arizona Christmas Bird Count (CBC). Since 2009, we've added one or more counts each year (except last year – we all know what happened, or didn't happen, then). With 25 CBCs down and about 16 to go, we picked up again in 2021-2022.

Our season started with the Gila River Indian Community (GRIC) Winter Count, in early December. COVID-19 continues to affect the count – no celebratory lunch, gifts or dancing again this year. But we were able to join ASU's Dr. David Pearson, plus ten community members, to Dave's usual GRIC haunts. Over the years, we've watched the community make wonderful improvements to MAR 5\* (Managed Aquifer Recharge). It's gone from bleak, unloved desert to lush wetlands with facilities that include an inspiring nature trail and bathrooms. Dave estimated that the mesmerizing flock arising from the cattails in the dawn chill included 150,000 blackbirds – Red-winged and Yellow-headed, plus Brown-headed Cowbirds and Great-tailed Grackles. Dave heard – then we all heard – the gargling of Sandhill Cranes – species #200 for the site!



**Pyrrhuloxia** by Tom Cheknis

Officially, the first CBC is the Salt-Verde Rivers Count, where our part of the circle lay entirely in McDowell Mountain Regional Park. Other than the stunning scenery in the early morning light, particularly the vista to the east dominated by the Four Peaks Wilderness- House Finches, Black-throated, White-crowned and Brewer's sparrows, Gambel's Quail and Mourning Doves drew our attention. A backlit, low-circling male American Kestrel and a Costa's Hummingbird with an exaggerated gorget topped us out at 26 species over four hours.

Our big adventure this year was a road trip, first to Nogales, then east to St. David, both new CBC's for us. We lodged in Nogales and started counting at 8 a.m. in 28 degrees. Our assigned area was Rio Rico, west of I-19, where designated hotspots included the Family Dollar and the local high school. Deborah, our leader, had scouted the area earlier and found one Greater Roadrunner in two hours. Our expectations were low, but our results were high! We checked one unlikely spot after another, stopping where there appeared to be bird activity, and were soon dazzled by eight charming Lawrence's Goldfinches and a trio of Lazuli Buntings. We puzzled over probable Chihuahuan Ravens, never stopped smiling at Northern Cardinals and Pyrrhuloxias that showed up, and were awed by a kettle of Black Vultures that floated leisurely above us.

*\*Tribal land – permit required.*



**Black Vulture** by Gordon Karre





**Harris's Sparrow** by Jim Burns

Another 8 a.m., 28° start the next morning, on Curtis Flats Road, two miles south of the Holy Trinity Monastery in St. David. Don't miss this eBird hotspot if you are in the area in winter! We had 41 species in less than two hours: a few waterbirds on ponds, ubiquitous White-winged and Mourning Doves, a variety of sparrows, and a lovely rainbow of Western Bluebirds, Eastern Meadowlarks, Lesser and Lawrence's Goldfinches, Northern Flickers, Vermilion Flycatchers and Northern Cardinals. Parsing through the sparrows, we encountered an unexpected Harris's Sparrow - a real treat and the first eBird record for the site! As we returned to our cars, a spectacular flock of more than 800 Yellow-headed Blackbirds descended. They swept silently into the adjacent field, leap-frogged across the cut hay in groups of 150 or more, then left - all in about one minute. Had we been looking the other way, we would have missed the entire spectacle.

On the day after Christmas, we headed to Queen Valley, a small golfing community three miles north of US 60, just east of SR 79. We counted birds as we drove into town, then started in earnest at the largest pond. The reliable Ring-necked Ducks were there, as well as three ghostly female Canvasbacks. Then we traipsed about, noting ubiquitous doves and starlings, plus the expected Vermilion Flycatchers, House Sparrows, Cactus Wrens, woodpeckers, and other denizens of the desert/suburban interface. Except for a bit of drama involving a Peregrine Falcon and Red-tailed Hawk, there were no surprises.

Jewel of the Creek, north of Carefree, was our next CBC site. We started at the adjacent stables, Arizona Horseback Adventures, where friendly folks allow us to wander around counting blackbirds. Brewer's Blackbirds are dependable, and this year there were 19 of them. Our journey along the Dragonfly Trail

was fairly quiet, punctuated by flurries of small, mixed flitting flocks. We could identify the Yellow-rumped Warblers and Ruby-crowned Kinglets by voice, but getting an accurate count as they darted about was challenging. Mixed in were a couple of Orange-crowned Warblers, Verdins, and Cassin's Vireos. More than a dozen Abert's Towhees were joined by one mewing Spotted Towhee but missing were White-crowned Sparrows. The golden cottonwood leaves began to glow as the sun broke through the leaden clouds, a lovely contrast to the desert greenery.

On January 5, the last official day of the 2021-2022 CBC, we were assigned to the town of Payson with its various parks and ponds offering a range of habitats. An early Bald Eagle helped us forget the cold - momentarily - as did the challenge of counting Canada Geese (over 400 this year), with a trio of Snow Geese mixed in. We got the usual ducks and coots before we turned our attention to the songbirds. Steller's Jays seemed more abundant than usual, but sparrows were few. We missed Western Meadowlarks but Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Yellow-rumped Warblers and especially Bushtits seemed to be everywhere. We parsed through American Crows and Common Ravens as best we could, but we were confident with the unusual sighting of a stately Ferruginous Hawk presiding over the high school playing fields atop a tall light post.

In addition to those mentioned above, partners in these adventures included the count compilers, team leaders plus Diana Doyle, Sue Moreland, Hinde Silver, Carlota Thorne, Cathie Galloway, Julie Clark and others. We couldn't do this without their help - their organization, spotting, identification, recording and eBird skills, not to mention their good company, make this so much fun! Thank you all!



**Jewel of the Creek, Carefree** by Kathe Anderson





# CONNECTING WITH NATURE MAKES ARI



Verdin and nest

## SPRING INTO ACTION - A TIME TO STUDY AND A TIME TO PROTECT BIRD NESTS!

Text and Photos by Vicki Hire

**During springtime** if you look closely, bird nests are everywhere, up high in a tree, down low on the ground, inside a barn, high on a rock ledge, and even upside down. Birds are busy building nests that will hold, incubate, and protect their eggs from predators and weather.

**Did you know** birds build nests in many shapes and sizes? Some birds build nests as small as a thimble, like that of the Bumblebee Hummingbird, or as large as a car like the nest of a Bald Eagle. Birds use twigs, leaves, fur, feathers, mud, or weave their nests with blades of grass and other organic material. Birds “glue” their nests together using many types of material such as spider webs, mud, animal hair, and even bird saliva.



Curve-billed Thrasher and nest



# ZONA A FUN AND BETTER PLACE TO LIVE!

**Did you know** some bird nests are hollow spheres made of thorny twigs and insulated with feathers, leaves, and spiderwebs? A tiny bird called a Verdin builds nests like these, and both the male and female work together to create their nest. Appearing “upside down”, its entrance is at the bottom or low on one side of the nest and facing prevailing winds. Scientists believe this is to help keep the inside of the nest cool in a hot climate and to thwart predators. You can look for examples of these beautifully designed nests in parks and desert areas throughout Arizona, maybe even in your own backyard!

**Did you know** some birds love to build their “cup” shaped nests in desert cacti? Together the male and female Curve-billed Thrasher will often build multiple cup shaped nests in prickly pear and cholla cacti before they choose which one to finally lay their eggs. These nests are typically made using thorny twigs and lined with rootlets, grass, or hair. The male Curve-billed Thrasher defends the nest territory by singing a warning.

**Did you know** some birds build their “platform” nest high up a tree and near water? The Great Blue Heron often builds its nest 20-60 feet, and as much as 100 feet up a tree. The male Great Blue Heron chooses the nest site and gathers most of the nesting material, which is made up of branches and sticks, while the female constructs the nest. Birds of Prey such as Bald Eagles, Hawks, and Osprey also build platform nests. Many of these nests are freshened up with each use and reused year after year.

**Did you know** many ducks, shorebirds, and Gambel’s Quail create “scrape” nests? These scrape nests are shallow depressions measuring less than 2 inches deep, and lined with grass, leaves, and twigs. The Gambel’s Quail scrape nests are most likely found hidden beneath a shrub or cactus for protection from both predators and weather. Amazingly, the baby chicks can leave their nest soon after hatching!

*Vicki Hire is a retired accountant and longtime MAS volunteer.*



**Great Blue Herons and nest**



**Gambel's Quail and nest**





# GUESS THIS BIRD WITH ITS NEST!

Text and Photos by Vicki Hire



**Clue:**  
These shorebirds have the second-longest legs in proportion to their bodies of any bird except flamingos.

## Did you know...

Climate change and people are making it harder for birds to find places to build their nests and raise their babies? Have you heard about Greta Thunberg, the teenager from Sweden who is raising awareness and challenging people to stop climate change?

You can help by creating natural habitats for birds and other wildlife. You can also help nesting birds by asking your friends and family to:

- 🌿 plant native plants in their yards so the birds that live there will have food like seeds, fruit and nectar, as well as shelter to roost in at night and a place to build their nests
- 🌿 avoid trimming trees and shrubs until the fall, after baby birds have fledged; keep a patch of grass unmown to allow small birds to forage, hide, and rest

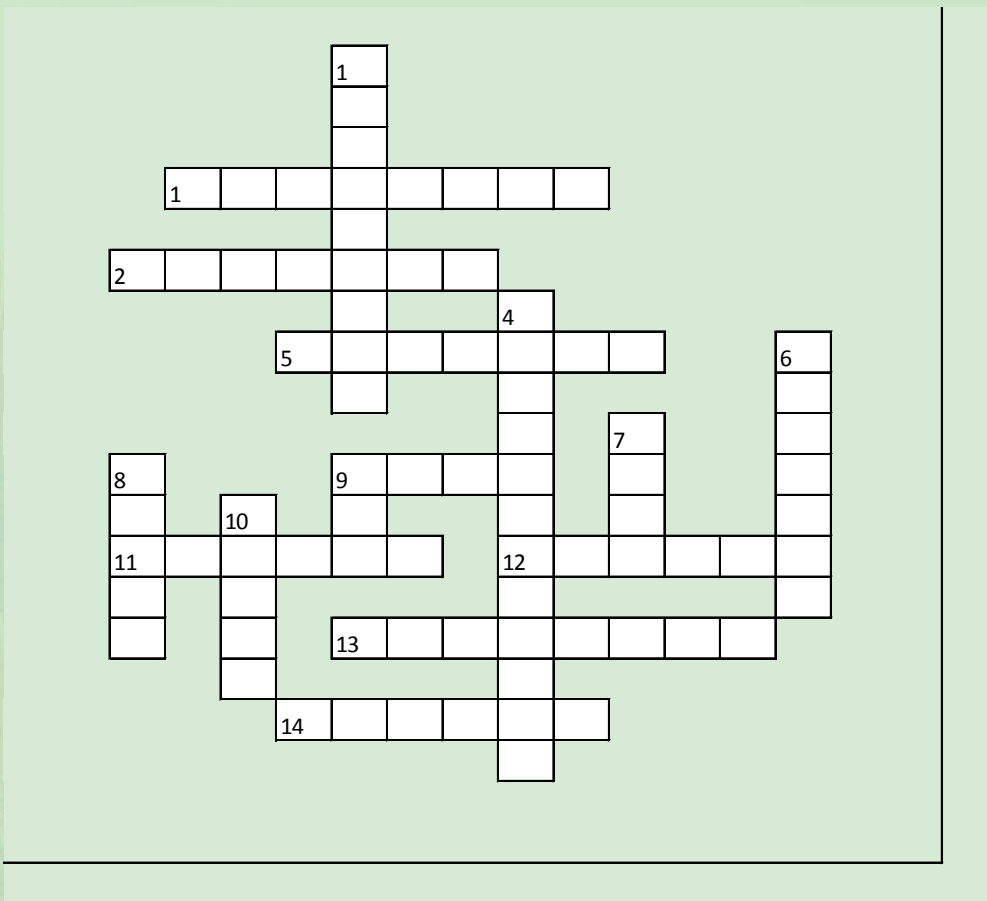
- 🌿 provide nest boxes as alternative nest sites for bird species that have to compete with invasive species such as European Starlings
- 🌿 set out clumps of pet hair for birds to use for insulating their nests, keeping the strands shorter than 2 inches in length
- 🌿 keep a “messy” yard. Leave twigs and leaves for birds to forage and gather for nest material
- 🌿 keep cats indoors

Black-necked Stilts are almost always seen near shallow water, especially mudflats and flooded fields. Their nests are on the ground, often on small islands of mud or vegetation. Both the male and female take turns making a scrape about two inches deep in the dirt, using their feet and their breasts. Clutch size is 2-5 eggs.

**Answer:**



# CROSSWORD PUZZLE



## ACROSS

1. Great Blue Heron and Birds of Prey both construct this type of nest high up in trees
2. Keep cats \_\_\_\_\_ to protect birds
5. Set out clumps of this so birds can use it for insulating their nests
9. The entrance to a Verdin nest faces prevailing winds to help keep it \_\_\_\_\_
11. These nests are shallow depressions measuring less than 2 inches deep
12. Greta Thunberg, a young teenager from this country is speaking out about climate change
13. Nests help to \_\_\_\_\_ and protect bird eggs
14. This tiny bird builds nests with entrances near or at the bottom

## DOWN

1. These discourage invasive species from taking over nests
4. These baby chicks leave their nest soon after hatching
6. Male Curve-billed Thrashers defend the nest by doing this
7. Birds use mud, saliva, animal hair, and spiderwebs as \_\_\_\_\_ to build their nests
8. Climate change is making it harder for birds to find places to build these
9. Curve-billed Thrashers build these types of nests often in desert cacti
10. Avoid trimming these until late summer after most bird eggs have hatched

Answers on page 20

These fuzzy spheres occur on saltbush and are the result of gall-gnats growing inside.



# IN PRAISE OF GNATS

Text and Photos by Michael J. Plagens

Soon after you become an avid birdwatcher in the Sonoran Desert you will encounter the Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, a small bird, packed with energy, making raucous calls and flashing a long black-and-white tail. Focus now on the “Gnat”. For most people gnats are small, irritating insects that fly about the head and into the eyes, or into hair or near overripe fruit in the pantry. But for the gnatcatchers they are dinner, breakfast, lunch, and countless snacks in between. Energy and nutrition packed in tiny, mobile packages. Gnatcatchers and many other small birds like verdins, hummingbirds, swallows and warblers require great quantities for sustenance.

Clearly there must be a lot of gnats in the Sonoran Desert. Try this: Look in the direction of the sun with a dark hill in the background while holding your hand up to block the sun’s glare. Suddenly you will notice hundreds, perhaps thousands of animated specks moving about. Study more closely and notice that there are different magnitudes of tininess. Some of these flying insects tend to move straight along to some specific destination; others are seen to be gathered into swirling miniature flocks; still others seem to be placidly swept along on the breeze. You should even see some tiny spiders kiting on strands of silk!



There are hundreds, even thousands of gnat species even in our seemingly barren desert habitats. Each one with its own behaviors, motivations, biology and roles in the ecosystem. To biologists, gnats represent several families of flies. One group of these flies are known as “gall-gnats”. A dozen or more kinds live exclusively

insects, are by contrast an empty meal for a flycatching bird. The economics are such that a bird might expend more energy catching a male insect than is gained in return. If you are already familiar with gnatcatchers you know that they do not sally out to catch flies on the wing. Actual flycatchers, like the Tyrannidae, use high speed, nature-made algorithms to make rapid decisions about which gnats ought to be pursued and eaten.

Gnatcatchers glean insects already alighted on foliage. They too are choosy, preferring the fatter, more nutritious ones. Once you recognize that all those seemingly unimportant crawling and flying insects keep our birds flying and keep the ecosystem humming along, you will do your best to preserve the gnats.



A Verdin probes galls caused by gnats on mesquite. *Asphondylia prosopidis*.

upon the foliage of the ubiquitous creosote bush. Each of the gall-gnat species creates its own unique swelling on the stems or leaves of a specific kind of plant. The adult flies are much smaller than a typical mosquito. Inside the galls their young are nearly microscopic, orange-hued larvae. Protected from the sun and dry air, they feed on the plant from within. Many more kinds of gall-gnats are to be found associated with other desert plant species. In mid to late spring, eye-gnats, by virtue of their behavior and abundance, will get the attention of anyone outdoors. Into your eyes, up your nose, and lapping up your perspiration, annoying you with dogged persistence. When the vibrance of spring begins to wane, the larvae of these gnats gnaw through the pith or other parts of dying plants. A little extra moisture and salt is all these gnats need to boost their role in the recycling process.

Gnats and other flying bugs in that flotsam come in two basic flavors – male and female. Female bugs are carrying the eggs and stored fat energy for the next generation. Males, often the greatest portion of flying



This gall-gnat is much smaller than a grain of rice. The yellow color indicates stored fat for eggs. It's an undescribed species of *Contarina*.

Keep pesticides out of the natural environment, leave the duff, dead branches and native plants to grow in your yard, and appreciate the whole environment that makes gnats and birds possible. Maybe you will take the next steps by getting a hand lens, super close-focus binoculars or a camera and start making some great observations of gnats and other kinds of birds' food.

Please read about the author on page 20.





# INTERNATIONAL BIRDING DURING COVID-19

Text and Photos by Duane Morse

After a long hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries have re-opened for tourism, and professional birding companies have resumed some international tours. What changes should a birder anticipate when going on an international birding trip?

In April, 2021, I made a 1-week birding trip to Costa Rica with a private guide, and in July I participated in a 2-week trip to Uganda put on by Rockjumper Birding Tours. In August I spent 2 weeks in Guyana on another Rockjumper tour. Here are the COVID-19 changes I experienced on these trips.

## Changes common to any travel

Many of the changes I found on the international trips also occur in the US. Some hotels have gone out of business or are still closed thanks to COVID-19. Many others are short-staffed, so service might not be as good as before. Often the hotel doesn't provide room cleaning or new linen unless specifically requested in order to minimize contact between guests and the staff.

Similarly, some restaurants are closed, and others

are short-staffed. Many that are open only do take-out. Hotel restaurants may not have the variety of food they previously had, and the bars may be poorly stocked (or closed).

Masks are required in all airports and planes, and in many businesses, including most hotels. Some cities have a mask mandate in effect, and others do not, and how well the mandate is followed or enforced also varies, just as it does here.

## Changes specific to international travel

Many countries require proof of COVID-19 vaccination or a recent COVID-19 PCR test, or both, before you can enter the country. In addition, some countries require filling out a form related to your health and travel. Flying to Uganda, I had to fill out one form for Belgium (where I changed planes), and another for Rwanda, where my plane was landing on the way to Uganda, even though I never got off the plane.

Costa Rica required that I purchase a COVID-19 insurance policy beforehand. The US requires a



COVID-19 test with negative results within a day of your return flight. Businesses are making a great profit from this. In Costa Rica, I paid \$160 for a PCR test, and in Uganda, it was \$120. Currently the US only requires antigen tests, which are much cheaper (and significantly faster).

When I was in Uganda, a 7 p.m. to 5:30 a.m. curfew was in effect, severely limiting night birding. Travel between districts in Uganda was also restricted, though designated tourist vehicles were exempt.

Professional birding companies require that participants be fully vaccinated. They also require that birders obey the tour leader regarding when masks should be worn. In Uganda, we wore masks in the vehicle when going through towns that had a strict mask mandate and when going through police checkpoints, but we weren't required to wear masks in the vehicle otherwise. Occasionally, masks are required even when outside. For instance, all participants who trekked to see chimpanzees or mountain gorillas in Uganda were required to wear masks, and we wore masks on a canoe ride, though not on a subsequent ride on a large, flat-bottomed boat.

In Guyana, the primary birding hot spot in the capital, the National Botanical Garden, was closed due to COVID. All other birding destinations were open, though I've learned that some eco-lodges in other countries are still closed.

Many places in the countries I visited expected visitors to wash their hands or apply hand sanitizer regularly. Most restaurants, for example, had cleaning stations at the entrance, and some had staff that made sure guests used these stations before entering. Similarly,

park rangers in Uganda made sure visitors cleaned up before entering the parks. A couple of places in Guyana took the temperature of guests before allowing them in.

### Is it safe to do international birding?

I wouldn't have made these trips if I didn't think I could do them safely, and my experience justified my expectation. Though Uganda was a CDC code-4 (red) country when I visited, so were Florida and Texas, and the precautions being taken in Uganda to prevent the spread of COVID-19 were much better than those in Florida and Texas. While I was there, the spread of COVID-19 went down significantly.

From the standpoint of health, it is still more dangerous to travel than it was before the pandemic, but international travel is no more dangerous than domestic travel. Some sites are relatively safe, and some are not, just as in the US. Most birders are in the "at-risk" group due to age (the average age of the Uganda participants was 68), but we're also typically in good shape, so that compensates a bit. Also, the places we birders visit are usually not common tourist sites, so we spend most of the time away from crowds, limiting our exposure.

Health requirements and other travel restrictions can change rapidly, so be flexible with your travel plans. And though airlines and travel agencies are more generous with their cancellation policies, purchase trip insurance for your peace of mind. Some birding companies now require it. Safe birding!

*Duane is a retired computer programmer who looks at birds during the day and the stars at night, leaving little time to sleep.*



Great Curassow at Arenal Observatory, Costa Rica



Rufous Potoo in Guyana

# WHO IS AT YOUR NECTAR FEEDER?

Text and Photos by Michael J. Plagens

We are conducting a survey for people who set out hummingbird feeders. I put my feeder up in late December 2021, and an Orange-crowned Warbler showed up very soon after the first hummers. I wonder if the warblers are watching where hummers go to feed.

All respondents will be entered into a drawing for the book *Birds of Phoenix and Maricopa County*.

- \_\_\_\_\_ One or more Orange-crowned Warblers visit my hummingbird feeder
- \_\_\_\_\_ I have not seen any Orange-crowned Warblers visit my hummingbird feeder
- \_\_\_\_\_ My hummingbird feeder lacks a perch

What other birds visit your hummingbird feeder?

\_\_\_\_\_

Additional observations of hummingbird feeder activity:

\_\_\_\_\_

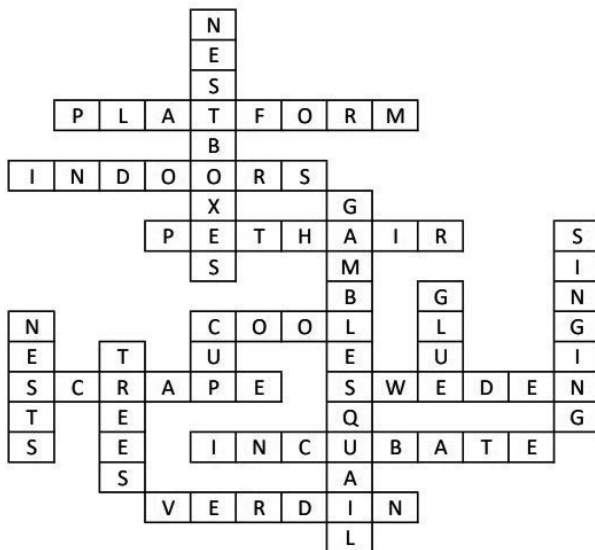
Please email your survey responses to:  
[mjplagens@arizonensis.org](mailto:mjplagens@arizonensis.org).



They will be tabulated and published in the Summer Cactus Wrendition.

Michael Plagens joined Audubon soon after taking ornithology in 1978 under Stephen Russell at UofA and has continued to study all facets of natural history in Arizona, Florida and Kenya. His first interest is entomology (PhD @ U. of Fla) and is especially interested in the layered relationships between all the species in our ecosystems.

## SPRING INTO ACTION CROSSWORD ANSWERS



## ARE YOU A FRIEND?

Members of National Audubon Society who reside in our chapter's territory are assigned to our chapter and receive the Cactus Wrendition as a courtesy. NAS does not share dues with MAS unless you join NAS through our chapter (see backpage). MAS gets a set disbursement from NAS regardless of our membership. However, 100% of Friends dues directly support our chapter's activities and help offset the costs of the Wrendition. For as little as \$20/yr (\$10 for youth and students), you can become a Friend and keep your dues local! Please see back cover.





Mark Larson

# MARK LARSON RETIRES

President Mark Larson officially retired on 31 December 2021 after 11 years as President of Maricopa Audubon Society and three years as Education Chair before that. Mark used his encyclopedic knowledge of birds as a tireless advocate for habitat protection, knowing that when habitat is lost, so are birds and other species. Mark supported all of MAS's programs but especially conservation and education. He didn't shy away from controversy especially when it came to fighting mining or grazing that violated the Endangered Species Act. Mark believed that the more birders there were, the stronger the force for preservation, and so he created a powerpoint for beginning birders he presented often to the public. But more than that, Mark just has an overwhelming desire to share the joy of birdwatching. He led many field trips, especially to places with a tropical influence such as the Chiricahuas, southern Texas and his favorite – Costa Rica. Mark was a guiding force at both board and member meetings. He was especially compelling when he elaborated on the significance of bird sightings during the "Seen Any Good Birds Lately" segment.

Mark started birding at age 12 with the Scouts. He got his graduate degree from U of A where he met Gale Monson and joined him on research trips to underbirded areas of southern Arizona and Sonora, Mexico. These experiences helped to forge Mark's lifetime quest to observe, learn about, and protect birds and other species.

Mark retired from environmental planning, writing and editing. He's had two kidney transplants. His gratitude to just being alive is heartwarming and gives one perspective. He volunteers with Donor Network of Arizona, encouraging people to donate - organs if you can, money if you can't, and is a role-model for organ recipients connecting to their donor's families.

Mark has been with MAS since the 1980's and says it was an exceptionally rewarding time of his life. Indeed, he retires at the peak of his influence, having recently led a group of agency personnel on a tour of prime Yellow-billed Cuckoo habitat in the Coronado National Forest sadly degraded by overgrazing. Not unexpectedly Mark delivered a lecture on the life history, and the survival and recovery requirements for the Cuckoo. And not unexpectedly, it will require more than facts to convince the agencies to treat the Cuckoo fairly. So the struggle to save habitat continues.

Mark thanks the membership for their support. He praises both Bob Witzeman and Herb Fibel, key MAS leaders who have since passed on, as his role models and mentors, and his intention was to hold the organization together during all times, including difficult ones.

Mark continues to participate. Stop and say Hi and Thank You! when you see him at MAS events.

## BACK

by David Chorlton

The backyard swing seat rises to touch the mountain ridge and swings back down toward the freshly watered grass with its burden of one who wants no more than to feel the sunbeams part as he passes between them. What a journey

it has been to get back, while the goldfinches kept returning until the seed was all gone and the thrashers lost hope at the edge of drinking dishes run dry. Empty, empty, empty,

the world a hollow bowl with disappointment's finger circling the rim. The days belong to chance and good luck. There's afternoon enough for the verdins and mockingbirds. Listen:

a lost sigh runs down the mountain slope, coming home to rejoin the routine with its scars shining.



# NATURE THROUGH THE ARTIST'S EYE: ORNITOGRAFIAS OF XAVI BOU

by Laurie Nessel

Qu'est-ce que l'Art, monsieur? C'est la Nature concentrée\* -Honoré de Balzac

A birder since childhood, Barcelona-based photographer Xavi Bou strove to capture the “tracks” of birds in flight by superimposing thousands of high-resolution (60 frames/sec) cinema camera images. The resulting “ornithographs” depict both the exquisite rhythm of flight as well as bird behavior, such as the moment Black Kites are compelled to migrate across the Straits of Gibraltar (bottom image).



Ornithography #178  
Common Starlings and Peregrine Falcon, Roses, Catalonia

Each bird's body morphs into an abstraction. Indeed, some ornithographs evoke the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock or Robert Motherwell, himself inspired by automatism, a technique used by Surrealists to tap into their unconscious. And so, we realize a beautiful nexus between art and nature.

Bou's art includes video of mesmerizing starlings evading raptors in *Murmurations*, and a collection of species, their primaries weaving hypnotic trails in the sky, in *Ornithographies* ([xavibou.com/films](http://xavibou.com/films)).

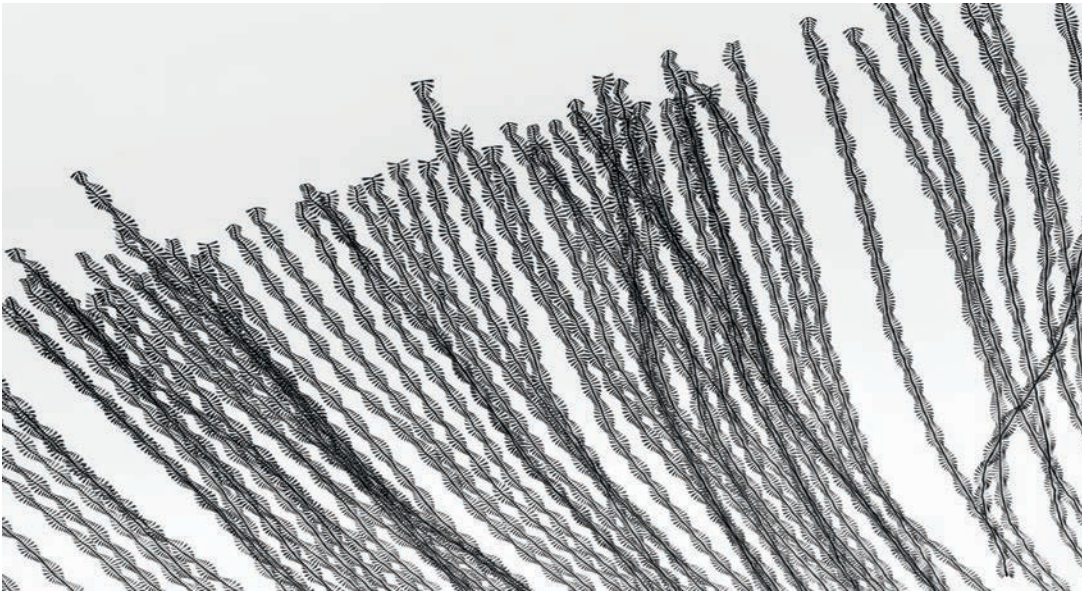
Bou notes that his work doesn't depict the bird's shape, but the shape of life. He hopes to instill a sense of awe in the viewer and be a catalyst for conservation.

\*What is Art, monsieur, but Nature concentrated?"

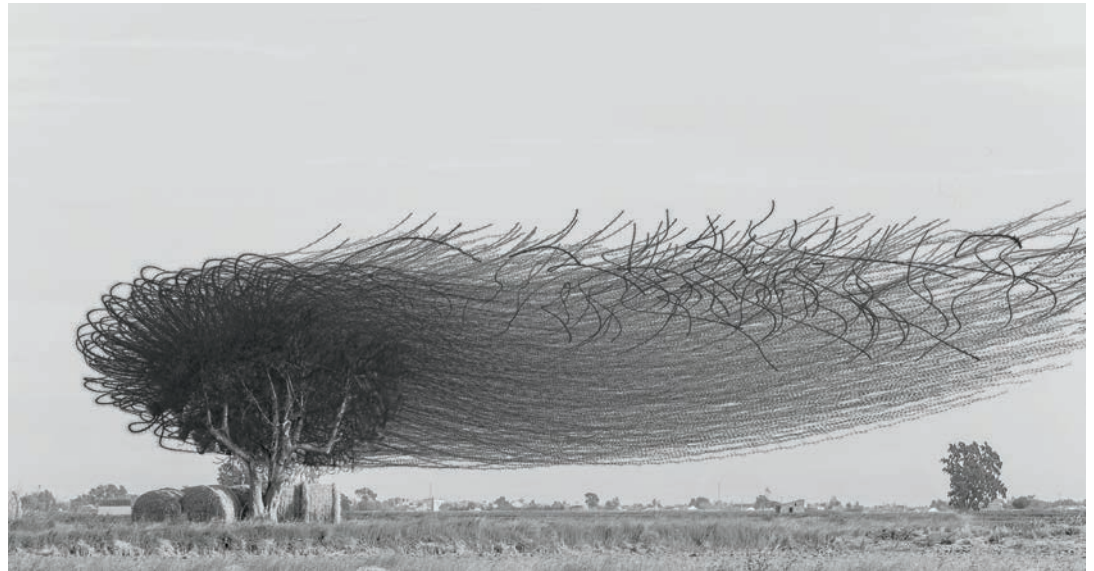


Ornithography #112  
*Milvus migrans*, Black Kites, Tarifa, Spain





Ornithography #41  
*Vanellus Vanellus* ,  
Northern lapwing,  
Ibars d'Urgell, Catalonia



Ornithography #152  
*Sturnus vulgaris*,  
Common Starling  
Ebro Delta, Catalonia



Ornithography #185  
Common Swift,  
Barcelona, Catalonia

See more of Xavi's images and films at [xavibou.com](http://xavibou.com)



# Maricopa Audubon Society

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Please see meeting information on page 4 or [maricopaaudubon.org](http://maricopaaudubon.org). For questions or speaker suggestions, contact a board member.

## MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION AND HOW TO RECEIVE THE CACTUS WREN • DITION

There are two distinct memberships: National Audubon Society (NAS), and Maricopa Audubon Society (MAS) Friend memberships.

If you join National Audubon Society through our Chapter, MAS will receive your first year's NAS dues to help offset The Cactus Wren•dition costs. Or you may call NAS direct at 1-844-428-3826 and ask to be assigned to MAS Chapter B00. Currently NAS members assigned to MAS receive The Cactus Wren•dition as a courtesy.

Annual membership in MAS as a Friend gives you discounts on merchandise and books at our meetings, and guarantees a print subscription to The Cactus Wren•dition. 100% of your dues goes directly to MAS and its mission.

To become a Friend of MAS sign up at our Book Table at a monthly meeting; join online at [maricopaaudubon.org/join](http://maricopaaudubon.org/join) ; or send your name and address, phone or email along with a check to the MAS treasurer (right). We offer student/youth memberships for \$10/year, and base memberships for \$20/year. All dues above the base fee are considered tax-deductible donation.

## SUBMISSIONS

Copy for The Cactus Wren•dition must be received by January 15, April 1, July 1, and October 1. Articles not received by the deadlines may not appear in the upcoming issue. Some issues feature a theme. Feel free to enquire and take the theme into account. Editor: Laurie Nessel [laurienessel@gmail.com](mailto:laurienessel@gmail.com)

## OPINIONS

The opinions expressed by authors in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the policy of NAS or MAS.

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