

Bird Hike to the Placitas Open Space on 5-21-2011

By Hart R. Schwarz

Short Summary for 2011: The Gray Vireo Returns: This vireo is a state “threatened” species and therefore of more than passing interest. We heard it as we were descending into Las Huertas Canyon, but could not catch sight of it. No Gray Vireo has been heard or seen on the Placitas Open Space for fifteen years! The first time I recorded this vireo there was on 6-15-96, the day the birding hikes began. We also had one other little highlight—the close flyby of at least three White-throated Swifts as they sliced through the air on scimitar wings. Their manner of flight is as dramatic as that of swallows is graceful. We had not seen this bird on our Placitas walks before, but they do nest high up in the Sandias.

The Great Horned Owls put on another good show, although they really don’t do anything! Ever since I conducted my bird inventory in 1997/1998, the Great Horned Owls have been the wildlife centerpiece of the Open Space. Almost every year they have successfully nested on the major sandstone cliff—except in 2008. We could already see partially hidden young on the cliff from below, but from above we saw all three clearly, and what had appeared as “ears” to people earlier, now resolved itself as part of the emerging facial disk. Thus one of the earliest lessons in birding was learned: not all is what it appears to be.

The Open Space Nest Boxes: Early in 1998 we put up four nest boxes because natural cavities are in short supply for several cavity nesters that include the Juniper Titmouse, the Ash-throated Flycatcher, the Bewick’s Wren and, very rarely, a bluebird. Two more nest boxes were put up in 2003, but the net total of boxes on the Open Space is still only four, because we did not replace the box that was destroyed by vandals. In 2010 we didn’t check the mesa-top boxes because of our reluctance to brave the swiftly moving waters of Las Huertas Creek., but in 2011 there was not a drop of water in the creek to stop us from getting to the boxes. Unfortunately, the box close to the lip of the cliff has fallen apart, but the one in the meadow had several tiny titmice. So far, it seems, that the Juniper Titmouse is the most frequent tenant of our nest boxes, while the next most likely tenant is the Ash-throated Flycatcher. The Bewick’s Wren has used a box once or twice, and each of the bluebirds once. Interestingly, the Mountain Bluebird seems to prefer water in the creek, whether it nests in a box or on the cliff. Our nest box project does need some maintenance, however, with the replacement of two boxes—the broken one on the mesa top and another original one (from 1998) in a little wash north of Las Huertas.

Species	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	Species	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11
01. Turkey Vulture	1		1		2	1	2	2	2	30. Rock Wren	5	4	6	6	2	1	2	1	4
02. Sharp-shinned Hawk							1			31. Bewick’s Wren		1	1				4		
03. Cooper’s Hawk			1		2	1		2		32. House Wren			2						
04. Red-tailed Hawk							2	2		33. Ruby-crowned King.		1							
05. American Kestrel						1		1		34. Blue-gray Gnatcatch.		2		1					
06. large falcon, species				1						35. Western Bluebird					2				
07. Scaled Quail	2		3		8			1		36. Mountain Bluebird			2					1	
08. Rock Pigeon		30								37. Townsend’s Solitaire		1						1	
09. Mourning Dove	10	6	7	12	20	5	6	4	10	38. Hermit Thrush			1						
10. Great Horned Owl	3	3	1+3	1+2	1+4		1+1	1	1+3	39. Northern Mockingb.			6			1			1
11. White-throated Swift									3	40. Curve-billed Thrash.	1			1	2			1	
12. Black-chin. Hum.	2	6	4	1	4	3	2		1	41. Virginia’s Warbler			1						
13. Broad-tailed Hum.	2		1	1	3	1	1	1		42. Yellow-rump. Warb.			50						
14. Ladder-back. Woodp.		2			3	1				43. Western Tanager			2				1		1
15. Gray Flycatcher (prob)			1							44. Green-tailed Towhee				3					
16. Say’s Phoebe	2	2	2	3	2	4	2	4	1	45. Spotted Towhee		2		1					
17. Ash-throated Flyc.					3	3		1	3	46. Canyon Towhee	1	5	4	7	2	4	2	2	2
18. Cassin’s Kingbird	2		3		1		2			47. Chipping Sparrow			8	4		2	6	5	
19. Western Kingbird								1		48. Brewer’s Sparrow			4	4		5	2		
20. Loggerhead Shrike				1						49. Vesper Sparrow				1					
21. Gray Vireo									1	50. Lark Sparrow		1	3		3				
22. Western Scrub-Jay	4		2	1	3	4	1	2	3	51. Black-throated Spar.	4	1	2	2	4				6
23. Pinyon Jay	6	40	8	4	10	6	3	50	2	52. White-crown. Spar.	1	1		2					
24. Common Raven	5	3	1	1	2	3	10	1	2	53. Black-headed Grosb.			1						
25. Violet-green Swallow		2	3			3	15		6	54. Brown-head. Cowb.			2			1			
26. N. Rough-w. Swal.	6		2		4				2?	55. Scott’s Oriole			2		1		1		
27. Barn Swallow		1	8			1	1		2	56. House Finch	4	8	10	9	10	12	4	4	2
28. Juniper Titmouse	3	7	3	1	4	4	4	6	1	57. Pine Siskin	1		1		1	1			
29. Bushtit				5	5	4			2										

NINE-YEAR SUMMARY

	4-28-07: 26 species and 104 individuals
5-21-11: 22 species and 58 individuals	4-22-06: 24 species and 73 individuals
4-24-10: 22 species and 94 individuals	5-07-05: 37 species and 160 individuals
4-25-09: 23 species and 76 individuals	4-24-04: 21 species and 128 individuals
5-03-08: 24 species and 72 individuals	4-26-03: 20 species and 65 individuals

Photo from the Placitas Bird Hike on May 21, 2011

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Participants from front to rear: Kevin Larson, Trish Bolton, Michelle Belill, Mark Belill, Cindy Mortensen, Steve O'Neill and Lolly Jones.