



Not all bird populations are dwindling at Los Alamos

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When he's out in the wild, Chuck Hathcock is a happy man. As a wildlife biologist with decades of experience at the Laboratory, Hathcock is deeply aware of the impacts of the ongoing drought affecting habitat and bird populations across the Southwest.

"For the last eight years we've been doing point count surveys at four different habitat types at the Laboratory," he explained. "We're not seeing changes due to Laboratory operations, but changes in the species composition at some sites."

Hathcock, who works in the Environmental Protection and Compliance Division, noted that in areas where piñon trees have been dying in significant numbers, more grassland species of birds are settling in. In other areas, such as the Sandia Wetlands where habitats are more robust, bird populations are diverse and healthy.

Some bird populations are thriving

"There are places at the Laboratory where birds are thriving," he said. "The Sandia Wetlands is really impressive and over the years we've seen increased diversity and increasing numbers of birds."

In the relatively lush habitat of the wetlands, Hathcock and his team use a technique called "mark recapture" to keep tabs on bird populations, their health, immigration, emigration numbers and diversity. By capturing birds year after year, biologists can learn more about the demography such as whether young birds are returning to the area and older birds are staying.

"We're trying to determine how the populations are doing and the way we determine that is we put up nets and we can actually band the birds with a little ring that has a unique number on it," he said. "So, when we recapture those birds with that ring, we have the data on when it was last caught, where, and that sort of thing."

Threatened Mexican Spotted Owls nesting at the Laboratory

Though the Sandia Wetlands is one of the most studied spots on Laboratory property, other areas are also proving a rich source of information on bird populations. One example is the Mexican Spotted Owl, a threatened species in New Mexico.

"When you look at the numbers of Mexican Spotted Owl nests in the Jemez Mountains, it's just not that high," Hathcock said. "I believe there are less than 20 in the Jemez and we have two of those here at the Laboratory."

All the information collected on bird populations around the Laboratory is shared with federal and state officials who track migratory movements, populations, health and diversity of New Mexico's avian community.

"I get asked the question sometimes 'are operations affecting this or that area of the habitat?'" he said. "You can't answer that question unless you have long-term data to back up the answer. We're collecting data so we can answer questions like that."

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