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BLM/NM/GI-05-06-1210

Cover photo: Northern Flicker, M'Lee Beazley, BLM

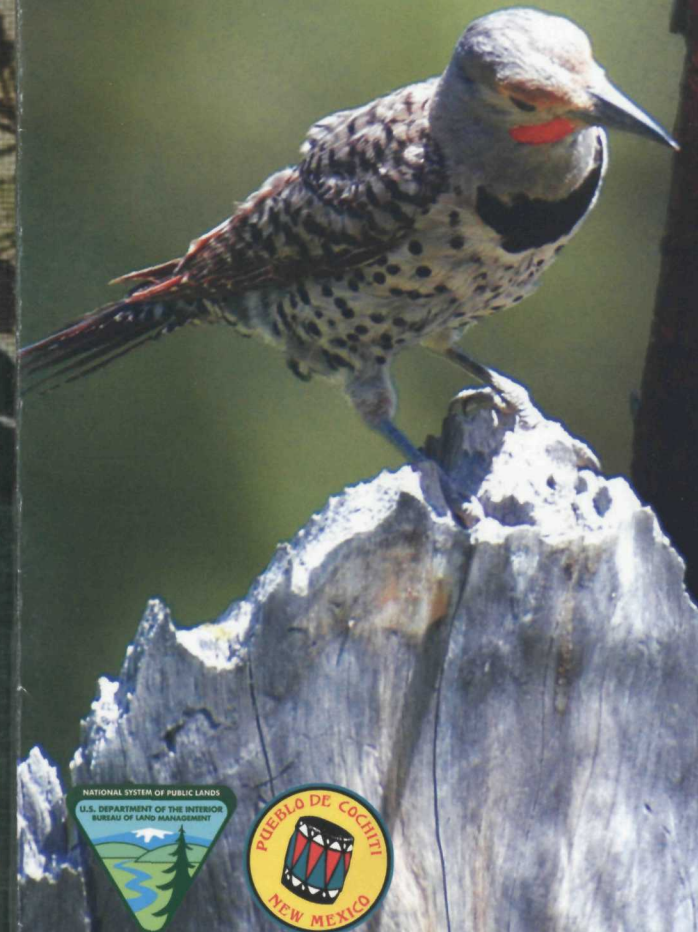
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TO:

NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS

Bird Guide

Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks
National Monument



THE BIRDS OF KASHA-KATUWE TENT ROCKS NATIONAL MONUMENT

INTRODUCTION: Wherever we are, there are birds to greet us. And any one particular area has its very own set of species occurring within a unique pattern of natural rhythms. No matter what brings people to this magical place of curious geological formations, many of them will have an interest in birds. This compilation of birds is intended to serve as an introduction to some of the common species in the Monument, in the hope that it will add an extra dimension of enjoyment to the visitor's experience.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE OF THIS LIST: Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument is relatively small—only about 4,100 acres, or a little over six square miles, covered by piñon-juniper woodland (but now mainly juniper) in a setting of cliffs, mesas, and valleys. This bird checklist is limited to only this little patch of land, even though the Rio Grande and Cochiti Lake with their much greater biological diversity are a mere six miles distant.

A FEW BIRDING TIPS FOR THE BEGINNER: The two essentials for good birding are binoculars and an up-to-date field guide. Without binoculars, most birds are but fleeting shadows, and without a trusty field guide that displays all the possible choices, birding is reduced to mere guesswork. Probably the best overall handbook available is the National Geographic "Field Guide to the Birds of North America," fourth edition. The bird illustrations in this checklist are taken from the National Geographic Guide. The various guides by David Sibley can be consulted for an even more varied array of fine illustrations. Although by no means intended as a complete primer on birding, the following points represent a good start.

1. Consult checklists (like this one) and field guide maps frequently to determine when and where a species is likely to be present. That way you won't be looking for warblers in the middle of winter.
2. Become thoroughly familiar with all the common birds first and avoid speculating on rarities. In other words, assume the bird you're looking at is common, or at least a regular visitor.
3. Observe the bird carefully and take notes on body size; bill shape; color on head, back, throat and belly; as well as special field marks, such as eye rings, wing bars, and white outer tail feathers.

4. Pay close attention to bird vocalizations such as calls and songs. Many similar species can be told apart most easily by voice. It helps to listen to bird recordings, but it is even better to write down your own impressions of the song after you have made certain who the singer is.
5. Most important of all, remember that birding is an acquired skill, honed by years of experience. Thus, uncertainty is not resolved by snap judgments, but instead by more birding.

THE WORLD BEYOND MERE BIRDING: To be sure, birding, or the sport of identifying birds, can be an end in itself, just like collecting bottle caps or baseball cards. But it can also lead from an individual preoccupation to the collective concern for conservation and the health of the planet. Whether people realize it or not, we are losing birds. In 2002 the Audubon Society issued a Watchlist in which fully one fourth of our 800 species in the U.S. and Canada were listed in the "at risk" category. And that was twice the number of birds that were so listed only five years before! It is sobering to realize that what is happening to birds today will inevitably affect humans tomorrow. One way to learn more about birds and conservation is by attending an International Migratory Bird Day event—always on the second Saturday in May. International Migratory Bird Day has been celebrated at the Monument every year since 2003. Check with the BLM for details if you are interested in attending this event in upcoming years.

KEY TO THE BIRDLIST: More than sixty species were recorded at Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument during twenty-four visits in 2003 and 2004, but the true dimensions of the bird life here probably won't be known for many years. For the moment, however, the following designations of **Abundance** and **Seasonality** should provide significant identification clues. Many birds are defined these days as "neotropicals," a term that refers to species that spend winters in the tropics, but return to us in the summer to breed. Many birds designated as "S" or "M" are therefore neotropical birds.

- c = common; f = fairly common; u = uncommon; r = rare.
 R = Year-round resident.
 S = Bird is present only in summer.
 W = Bird is present only in winter.
 M/1 = Bird is a fall and spring migrant, spending its summers nesting near the Monument in suitable habitat.
 M/2 = Bird is a fall and spring migrant on its way to a place far from the local area.



Donald L. Mallick

Turkey Vulture (S-f): Why isn't this large, dark bird overhead a Golden Eagle? Well, it could be, but far more likely, it's the much more common Turkey Vulture. These two dark species are often confused unless one takes a closer look. When seen from below, the Turkey Vulture's flight feathers have a silvery hue, giving the wings a two-toned appearance. The Turkey Vulture also holds its wings tilted upward, forming a shallow "V," and rocks from side to side as though it were a little intoxicated. The eagle, on the other hand, soars on broad, steady wings that are uniformly dark.



Donald L. Mallick

Red-tailed Hawk (R-u): If a large, soaring hawk has a red or rufous (rust-colored) tail, then it's probably this hawk, but if your hawk is very small and also has a red tail, then it's a Kestrel. Therefore, identifying the Red-tailed could be very simple if it weren't for one little detail: young Red-tails, even well into their second year, do not have red tails. So it's necessary to look at another field mark—the dark patagial line just below the leading edge of the wing (patagium), which is easily seen when the bird is overhead.



N. John Schmitt

White-throated Swift (S-f): These little black and white darters are very swift indeed, swifter even than the swallows which they resemble and with whom they sometimes associate. Especially in spring, the swifts are conspicuous in screeching and careening flights above the cliffs and pinnacles of the Monument. While most eventually move higher up in the Jemez Mountains, a few probably stay on to breed here. Unlike swallows, swifts never stop to rest, except at night in well concealed roosts in the rocks.



Donald L. Mallick

Hairy Woodpecker (R-u): Woodpeckers probably were scarce at the Monument—at least until recently when so many piñons and ponderosas perished from bark beetle attacks and thus became hosts to a variety of insects, which then attracted the woodpeckers. So far, half a dozen woodpecker species have been recorded here, including the Downy Woodpecker, which is virtually identical to the more common Hairy—only smaller with a needle-like bill instead of a hefty awl-shaped tool. In recent years a Hairy nested in a dead ponderosa on the Canyon Trail.

Daniel Beaudin



Gray Flycatcher (S-f): It's the bane of birders because it's such a dead ringer for several other little flycatchers in the genus Empidonax. Somber hues of gray and small size almost render the bird invisible until it speaks up, but even then, one has to have to prick up one's ears to hear the short, burry little song that can be rendered as "syrup, syrup, sweet syrup," with the "sweet" being a very high, almost inaudible note. Luckily, the little gray bird has a helpful, if subtle, mannerism that can aid with identification. Unlike others in this group of midgets, it flicks its tail downward, while the others flick it up.

H. Douglas Pratt



Say's Phoebe (S-f): While the Gray Flycatcher may be a challenge to identify, the Say's Phoebe allows the frustrated birder to have an easy success. This flycatcher is not only larger than the Gray (about towhee-size), but can be recognized from afar by its mournful, down-slurred call. When seen, it is often out in the open hawking for insects, and sometimes even hovering! The only outstanding field mark is a peach-colored belly that is conspicuously set off by surrounding shades of gray. Look for this rather tame bird near the cliffs, where its nests are placed in little niches or recesses.

Peter Burke



Ash-throated Flycatcher (S-f): This elegant flycatcher is with us but a short time, arriving from Mexico in late April and then departing post haste in August. This leaves them scarcely enough time to raise a single brood, but fortunately, as cavity nesters, their success in raising young is fairly high. Although not gaudy, this neotropical species is not without some bright colors, especially its pale lemon-yellow belly and rufous (rusty) highlights in the tail. Often New Mexico mountain residents attempting to attract bluebirds to their nesting boxes will instead get the Ash-throated as their tenant.

H. Douglas Pratt



Western Scrub-Jay (R-f): Every blue bird you see is not a bluebird. While Western Bluebirds do occur at the Monument, especially in the winter, most of the blue birds one is likely to see here are jays—and primarily Western Scrub-Jays. They are noisy and conspicuous, often begging for food near the picnic tables. However, a large company of jays might turn out to be Pinyon Jays, but these are uncommon now that the drought has decimated the local piñons and taken all those delicious piñon nuts off the menu.

H. Douglas Pratt



Common Raven (R-c): This may be the most entertaining bird in the Monument. The resident pair can be seen on virtually every visit as they fly daredevil patterns in the sky and chortle, croak, and bugle to each other. One birder was overheard saying to his companions that the Tent Rock Ravens are "gatekeepers." After thinking about that, I concluded that they were more like "caretakers." Patrolling the area, they see all and know all—and they do a good job of cleaning up after us humans.

H. Douglas Pratt

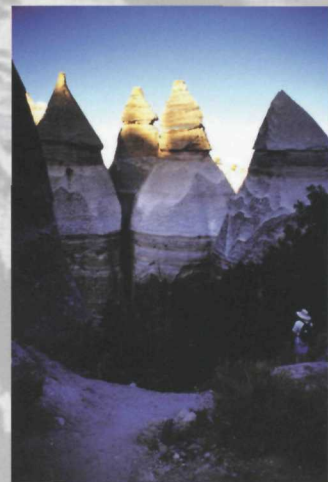


Violet-green Swallow (S-c): When the swallows return to Capistrano on March 19, they are Cliff Swallows, but when they return to Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks in early April, it's the Violet-greens. The violet is near the rump and an indescribable, brilliant lime-green adorns the back of adult males. This somewhat colonial swallow is a cavity nester, often choosing woodpecker holes in aspens or conifers, but here at the Monument they make use of potholes and niches found on cliffs and spires.

John P. O'Neill

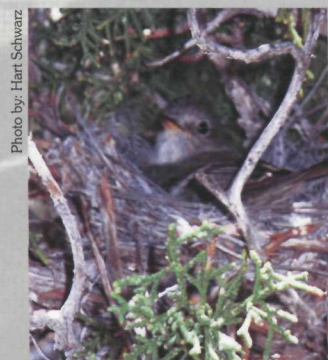


Juniper Titmouse (R-f): If your field guide is not up-to-date, you will not find this bird in it; instead, you'll find the Plain Titmouse, which recently has been split into two species: the "Oak" in California and the "Juniper" here in the Southwest. Look for a small, chunky, sparrow-size bird that is totally gray, but with a distinctive little crest on its head. These birds are real homebodies, seldom straying far afield, even as weather grows cold and food becomes scarce. If you hear a tap-tap-tapping sound, it could be a titmouse trying to break open a tiny seed.



Hikers enjoy birdwatching along the shaded Canyon Trail.

Photo by: Hart Schwarz



A fearless Gray Flycatcher incubates her eggs in a juniper at Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument.

John P. O'Neill



Bushtit (R-u): They are little (smaller than a chickadee); they are lively; and they move about in small flocks, gleaning microscopic tidbits from leaves and branches. A nearly constant conversational twitter helps identify them, together with the gray color of their plumage and their relatively long tails. Males have dark eyes, but in females they flash yellow. A Bushtit nest in a juniper or piñon is a true work of art, somewhat resembling the pouch-like nest of a Bullock's Oriole.

H. Douglas Pratt



Rock Wren (S-f): Few birds embody the spirit of the desert more than the Rock Wren, whose ethereal, wraith-like trills wafting down like falling leaves from a nearby cliff bespeak energy and fragility all at once. While some birds can easily be recognized by voice or bold markings, many wrens exhibit distinctive body language. The Rock Wren, for instance, is fond of doing quick knee bends, an antic which seems to convey a heightened state of attention. They also have the unsettling habit of keeping quiet and then exploding into a medley of trills, almost as if to startle the unwary wayfarer intentionally.

H. Douglas Pratt



Canyon Wren (R-u): The unique and easily remembered song of the Canyon Wren is legendary, providing a favorite sound effect in movies, especially Westerns. Listen for this song, particularly in the narrow canyon along the Canyon Trail, where the song, consisting of loud, clear notes cascading down the scale, is marvelously amplified. This wren can be amazingly bold. Once, in the tight narrows of the canyon, one appeared quite literally at my feet in pursuit of a lovely butterfly—a race which the butterfly finally won, but only barely.

H. Douglas Pratt



Bewick's Wren (R-f): The simple but cheery song of this wren is one of the first songs to break the silence of winter in March—long before migrants begin to arrive from the south. Only a few Bewick's remain in the Monument for the winter, with most probably going down to the river instead to find food. Good field marks for this bird are the white stripe over the eye and a white-fringed tail that is energetically flicked from side to side like a gnatcatcher's. The similar House Wren is only a rare migrant here.

H. Douglas Pratt



Ruby-crowned Kinglet (M/T-u): It's a tiny little thing, scarcely larger than a hummingbird, and, like a hummingbird, it can hover as it gleans microscopic food items from leaves and twigs. The olive-green plumage, together with other traits such as eye rings and wing bars and wing flicking often beguile the unwary into thinking it's a warbler or even a small flycatcher, but a loud "dzerret" note instantly gives it away. And don't look for the red crown to pop up to help you in your identification quandry—it seldom does.

H. Douglas Pratt



Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (M/T-u): About the same size as the Ruby-crowned, this little Old World warbler sports a longer and more expressive tail that is flicked from side to side. An explosive "cheee," often followed by a lower "chay-chay" makes this bird easily detectable as it forages in scrub vegetation relatively close to the ground. Also look for white outer tail feathers and white eye rings. Its nest is a beautifully wrought cup reminiscent of a hummingbird's—only a bit larger. With any luck at all, some fortunate birder may find this nest in the Monument one day.

H. Douglas Pratt



Townsend's Solitaire (W-c): Very few birds sing in the middle of winter—but the Solitaire does, and does so regularly and with the soulful intensity of a thrush, to which family it belongs. In winter these birds descend into the Monument's juniper-clad foothills to feed on juniper berries, often in the company of the slightly larger robins and the somewhat smaller Western Bluebirds. The all-gray Solitaire is as somber as a winter's day before a storm, but white outer tail feathers and a bouncy, erratic flight pattern help identify it.

H. Douglas Pratt



Wilson's Warbler (M/2-r): Dubbed "Tropical Butterflies" because they are such animated bundles of color and energy, our New World warblers normally attract considerable attention, but at Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks they keep a low profile, keeping their visits short and sweet. The Wilson's Warbler is one of six warblers that have been recorded here, but when it makes a pit stop in May or September, its golden-yellow plumage is so striking that even a preoccupied dreamer is compelled to take notice of the beautiful "canary."



Juniper Woodland: Favored by the Gray Flycatcher and the Bewick's Wren in summer and by fruit-eating birds like the Townsend's Solitaire, American Robin, and Western Bluebird in winter.

Peter Burke



Hepatic Tanager (S-u): Many former Easterners lament the absence of Cardinals in central New Mexico, but if it's red birds for which you yearn, a "fix" is close at hand—though, regrettably, not as close as your back yard feeder. To find the all-red male Hepatic, one must travel to piñon-juniper woodlands where occasional ponderosas stand out like exclamation marks, usually along dry washes. The females are yellowish and olive, but without the wing bars featured by the female Western Tanager. Their song is actually sweeter than a cardinal's—more like that of a grosbeak, a fellow neotropical traveler.

Peter Burke



Spotted Towhee (S-f): In older field guides this large sparrow is known as the "Rufous-sided Towhee," but then science intervened and declared it two species—the "Spotted," which has lots of white spots on its wings and back, and the "Eastern," which has no spots. Both kinds have rufous or rust-colored flanks and both invite everybody to "Drink your tea." Sometimes when standing too far away from the bird, you only hear the trilled "tea," which can be confusing. Oddly, the expected Canyon Towhee seems to be absent here in the foothills of the Monument.

Diane Pierce



Chipping Sparrow (S-f): The word "sparrow" conjures up the House Sparrow, the little tramp of cities and farms that immigrants brought from the Old Country for nostalgia's sake. It belongs to a family that is quite distinct from our own native sparrows, many of which, unlike the House Sparrow, possess the true gift of song. But, alas for the poor Chippy, even though it is a true native sparrow, it can only manage a languid, monotonous trill that sounds more like an insect than a bird. A rusty cap, a white eyebrow, and a black eye-line help to identify this dapper little don.

Diane Pierce



Dark-eyed Junco (W-c): Labeled as a "snowbird" by many, this little sparrow is confusingly but correctly called "junco." Once upon a time there were many species of junco, all of which (except the Yellow-eyed Junco) were then lumped together as a single species called the Dark-eyed Junco. And yet they are a motley looking crew. Our breeding New Mexico birds are gray all over except for a bright rufous patch on the back. Oregon-type juncos from some Northwestern states have black or charcoal heads and often bright pinkish flanks. All these different types can be seen at Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks in winter—snow or no snow.

Diane Pierce



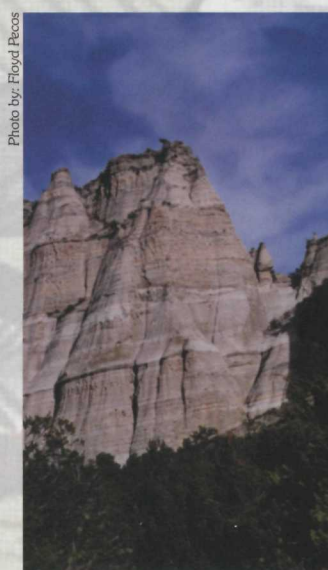
Black-headed Grosbeak (S-u): Like the Hepatic Tanager and some others on this list, the grosbeak is a neotropical migrant, bringing a touch of visual and acoustic glamour from the New World Tropics to the more weather-challenged Continental US. They come in late April singing songs of hope and revival, but depart quietly in September for their winter homes in Mexico. "Grosbeak" apparently is derived from a French word, but it might also be German, since "gross" also means large in that language—and large, indeed, is this bird's beak!

Diane Pierce



House Finch (R-f): Familiarity may breed contempt, and certainly, here in the Southwest, there is scarcely a bird more common or more familiar to city dwellers. At home we may tune them out, but when the warbling strains of the House Finch are heard in the wild places of the Monument, it's like hearing them for the first time with wonder and appreciation renewed. The males are emblazoned with bright red chests, while the females are brown and boldly streaked below.

Photo by: Floyd Pecos



Cliffs: The perfect summer abode for swallows and swifts, as well as Rock and Canyon Wrens.



Ponderosa patches: Ponderosas provide excellent homes for cavity nesters such as the Hairy Woodpecker. The colorful Hepatic Tanager hides its nest in the green canopy, while the Grace's Warbler sometimes sings from its branches during spring migration.