



Our mission is to conserve birds and their habitats.

Chihuahuan Desert Grasslands Project Races against Time

By Arvind Panjabi, International Program Director

On January 29, 2008, I received an email from Pedro Calderón, a biologist with Profauna – Chihuahua, one of RMBO's partner organizations conducting winter grassland bird monitoring in Chihuahua, Mexico. The subject line read "PROBLEMS IN VALLES CENTRALES!" I swallowed hard and opened it to find out that six of our 21 sampling blocks established in this Grassland Priority Conservation Area in 2007 were no longer usable. The already limited grasslands within the six blocks had all been converted to croplands in the intervening months. In some cases, the conversion was being completed as the biologists arrived.

While we were able to compensate for the lost blocks in our sampling effort, these events brought home the urgency of RMBO's Chihuahuan Desert Grassland Bird Inventory and Monitoring Project.

Winter field work in Chihuahuan desert grasslands in 2007 and 2008 has provided measures of bird density and habitat conditions at nearly 500 sites across seven states in northern Mexico. These large-scale, coordinated surveys provided the first-ever snapshot of the distribution, abundance and habitat use of more than 30 grassland bird species across their core winter range. Ultimately, these data will



Lark Bunting. A North American breeding bird that winters in the Valles Centrales of Chihuahua. *Photo by Tony Lenkerling*

serve as a platform for a broader, multi-faceted Chihuahuan Desert conservation program combining science, education and stewardship.

Grassland species in decline

Grassland birds are among the most threatened birds in North America. Surprisingly, the reasons for most species' declines remain unclear. While many studies have been conducted on the breeding grounds, little attention has been paid to the wintering grounds, even though low overwinter survival could be driving many population declines.

The Chihuahuan Desert is a globally important wintering area for millions of migratory grassland birds from the western Great Plains. Although roughly equal in

size to the state of Montana, the Chihuahuan Desert is less than 15% grassland according to the latest available geographic information system (GIS) data. However, as we are learning from our field work, only about 5% actually appears to be suitable for most grassland-obligate birds. The rest has been highly altered by shrub encroachment, desertification, or conversion to cropland.

Despite their limited extent, these grasslands are a vitally important link in the life cycles of migratory grassland bird. They are the cornerstone of the ranching economy and way of life in the region. However, they are also highly vulnerable. Demand for food and bio-fuels is rapidly changing this ecosystem, threatening to wipe out some of the last best grasslands and many of the birds that depend on them.

The Valles Centrales of Chihuahua is the largest grassland area in northern Mexico. It supports many sensitive and declining species, including the only desert-dwelling population of the endangered Aplomado Falcon. North American breeding birds that winter there include Ferruginous Hawk, Long-billed Curlew, Grasshopper, Baird's,



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From the director... a reflection on 2008 and a look to 2009

Tammy VerCauteren, Interim Executive Director

As we wrap up the celebration of RMBO's first 20 years, 2008 has been a year to remember. We started out with the loss of a dear friend and colleague, Rich Levad. Rich touched so many lives and taught us the importance of sharing our passion and making a difference. His legacy lives on in many ways including the Levad Memorial Fund. Your generous contributions to the fund have laid the groundwork for carrying on the work Rich loved into the future. Jason Beason's article in this issue reports on what was accomplished in 2008 through the memorial fund.



Founding Director, Mike Carter and Interim Executive Director Tammy VerCauteren cut 20 year birthday cake at RMBO's annual Barbeque with the Birds. Photo by Julie Ruster-Price.

In a year of significant progress, one highlight was the award of a project by the Colorado Division of Wildlife and Natural Resources Conservation Service to house four private lands biologists throughout Colorado. This expands our Stewardship program from the prairie to the mountains and sagebrush communities. We also took the prairie into the classroom and engaged nearly 300 4th and 5th grade students in western Nebraska in their rich wildlife (see the article by Amanda Keep).

As the lead article in this issue reports, 2008 also saw a pilot project expand into a multi-year effort to learn more about critical habitat for wintering grassland species in the Chihuahuan Desert of Mexico. Changes in grassland habitat between the 2007 pilot project and this year's field season brought home the urgency of this work.

The launch of RMBO's Avian Data Center this year made our bird point count data accessible via the web to aid in conservation planning and management.

As the year drew toward a close, many of you joined us at our 20th Anniversary BBQ with the Birds. Participation of members, friends and supporters made this our most successful picnic to date with 128 participants providing support through our silent auction, new memberships, and donations.

As we look ahead to 2009, recruitment has begun for a Director of Education and Outreach to strengthen RMBO's education program, better engage people of all ages, and help integrate our Science, Education, and Stewardship efforts. In addition, we will be focusing on improved external communications in 2009 and identifying the best methods for creating a more informed and engaged local, regional, and international audience.

We look forward to your partnership and continued support in 2009.

Levad Fund Supports Multiple Projects

By Jason Beason, *Special Monitoring Projects Coordinator*

The Richard G. Levad Memorial Fund for Special Species Research was created after Rich passed away in February. He and his family established the memorial fund held in trust at the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory to continue the following projects:

(1) DNA analysis of Purple Martin blood samples collected in Colorado during banding in 2006, (2) banding Purple Martins in Colorado and Utah, (3) monitoring data loggers in Black Swift nesting sites, (4) banding Black Swifts in Colorado, (5) establishment, maintenance, and monitoring of Long-eared Owl nest baskets on Brewster Ridge, (6) establishment of estimates of Black Rail populations and distributions in Colorado as well as raising awareness of the significance of this inland population.

During the spring and summer of 2008, work was conducted on projects one through five.

In July, researchers traveled to northeast Utah where we met our goal of capturing 20 Purple Martins from which to draw blood for the DNA analysis project. Those samples, along with the 23 collected in 2006 in Colorado, are now being analyzed by Dr. Allan Baker of the Royal Museum of Ontario.

For this project, the Western Purple Martin Working Group is attempting to determine the taxonomic relationship of eastern, west coast, and Rocky Mountain Purple Martins. There is a possibility that results of the analyses will show that these groups are different species, but most likely they will show that three unique subspecies exist. We are very pleased to announce that the U.S. Forest Service has recently agreed to pay for the costs of the analyses. The generous contribution was made possible by biologist Dennis Garrison of the Gunnison National Forest. We should learn the results of the analyses soon.

In August, funds were used to capture and band Black Swifts at Zapata Falls in

Alamosa County, Colorado, and at Fulton Resurgence Cave in Garfield County. These are among the few sites where capturing Black Swifts is possible. This was the fifth consecutive summer that we have banded at Zapata Falls. The most interesting recapture this year at Zapata was the first bird captured; this individual was also the first adult Black



Biologist Kim Potter examines banded Black Swift prior to release. *Photo by Todd Patrick.*

Swift banded by RMBO at this site in 2004. That makes this bird at least five years old. (The oldest known Black Swift was 16 years old.)

At Zapata Falls we caught a total of 11 adult Black Swifts. At Fulton Resurgence Cave we caught a total of 10 adult Black Swifts. Kim Potter has been banding nestlings at this site since 1998 and adults since 2006. This year at Fulton a very important discovery was made when an adult swift was recaptured that was originally banded as a nestling at this site in 2005. This is probably the first time that it has been documented that a Black Swift will return to the same colony where it hatched and attempt to breed.

Some of the funds were also used to place data-loggers (devices the size of credit cards that measure temperature and humidity) at a Black Swift colony in the Wet Mountains

of Pueblo County. We are placing these devices at isolated breeding colonies, like this one, to learn the specific site requirements needed by Black Swifts. Three nestling Black Swifts were also banded at the Wet Mountain site while we were present.

In spring of 2008, an exciting new project was initiated to create nesting structures for Long-eared Owls on Brewster Ridge in Mesa County, Colorado. There once existed an abundance of Black-billed Magpies on Brewster Ridge, and Long-eared Owls frequently used the abandoned magpie nests to nest. The reason for the decline of magpies in this area is not well understood, but the impact of West Nile virus is suspected. It was thought that 20 nest-shaped baskets in this area would provide platforms for the Long-eared Owls; however, 2008 was not a good year for Long-eared Owls in western Colorado.

The number of Long-eared Owls in western Colorado fluctuates widely from year to year for unknown reasons, so we are not discouraged by the fact that none of the baskets were used this year. We will continue to monitor the nest baskets in the upcoming years to determine if this might be an effective conservation tool for this species. Thanks to Kim Potter and Todd Patrick, the creators of this project, funding was received from the Colorado Field Ornithologists Project Fund, so the memorial fund was not used to pay for the project this year.

We are pleased to announce that less than half of the donations received in 2008 were used to conduct field work this year. Currently, plans are being made and dates are being set for 2009 field work. If you are interested in making a contribution to continue this important research, donations may be sent to The Richard G. Levad Memorial Fund held at the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, attn: *Jim Pauley, P.O. Box 1232, Brighton, CO 80601-1232.*

Chihuahuan Grasslands (from page 1)

and Brewer's Sparrows as well as Lark Buntings, longspurs, Sprague's Pipits and many others.

Unfortunately, our surveys indicate that as much as 20% of these grasslands have been converted to cropland since 2003. Years of drought have forced ranchers to sell their most productive grazing lands. Local farmers pay top dollar for the land and illegal permits to pump ground water for irrigation. Not only is this practice destroying irreplaceable grasslands, but it is unsustainably draining the aquifer. RMBO's Mexican partners are pressuring the government to end this corruption, but it is an uphill struggle.

Fortunately, several Mexican, U.S. and Canadian non-government organizations (NGOs) and federal agencies share RMBO's vision of conserving grasslands in this region through a broad and multi-pronged strategy. Thanks to over \$350,000 in new funding, RMBO will be stepping up efforts to conserve grassland birds and their habitats in the Chihuahuan Desert through a number of related projects in 2009 and beyond.

A scientific foundation

RMBO's Chihuahuan Desert Grassland Bird Inventory and Monitoring Project focuses on Grassland Priority Conservation Areas (GPCAs) that have been identified for their extensive grassland habitats, high biological integrity, and important species. The standardized data we generate on grassland bird abundance, distribution and habitat use through this project provides a com-

mon scientific foundation for planning and decision-making within an existing conservation framework.

After two field seasons, we have a clear picture for the first time of where grassland bird species are wintering across this vast region in Mexico, and where they are not – important knowledge to have before investing resources into land protection.



Former Chihuahuan Desert grassland site converted to irrigated agricultural land. RMBO researchers had to find new transect sites. *Photo by Pedro Calderon.*

Several more years of monitoring are now needed to see how these patterns vary over time.

We have also learned that grassland birds are highly selective of which grasslands habitats they use in winter, strongly preferring sites with little or no shrub cover and high grass cover. Unfortunately, such conditions were only found on roughly 1/3 of sites surveyed. However, given incentives and some resources, these conditions can be improved through management. This represents an important opportunity that RMBO hopes to pursue in the coming years, as increasing the carrying capacity of existing rangelands could help mitigate ongoing losses to agriculture. Although labor-intensive, such projects will provide a win-win situation for both livestock producers and birds.

RMBO will be expanding the scope of its research on wintering grassland birds in 2009. In cooperation with the Na-



Grassland bird surveyors practice vegetation survey protocols near Janos, Chihuahua. *Photo by Eduardo Sigala.*

tional Park Service, The Nature Conservancy-Chihuahua, and the Canadian Wildlife Service, RMBO will lead a project using radio telemetry to better understand over-winter survival and spatial patterns in grassland passerines. The first task in this

long-term project will be to refine the techniques for capturing these birds in winter – sure to be a challenge given the open landscape and aerial tendencies of many species.

Raising awareness, building support

RMBO works almost entirely on private lands in the Chihuahuan Desert; thus, we obtain permission from landowners before conducting surveys. These visits provide an opportunity to interact with landowners and raise awareness of birds. Thanks to support from the U.S. Forest Service International Program and other partners, RMBO will produce and distribute 15,000 copies of a Spanish-language pocket guide to grassland birds of the Chihuahuan Desert. The "Guía del Bosillo para Aves de Pastizal" will feature color photos of roughly 60 grassland bird

Continued on page 5

Panhandle Eco-Extravaganza about Prairies (PEEP) bringing prairie and riparian conservation messages to students throughout western Nebraska

By Amanda Keep, Nebraska Prairie Partners Educator



Jeanine Lackey, a Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Education Specialist, talks with PEEP students about a Burrowing Owl. *Photo by Anne James.*

Nebraska Prairie Partners implemented a new program this fall titled Panhandle Eco-Extravaganza about Prairies (PEEP). This is a fun, interactive educational program that emphasized the conservation needs in the panhandle of Nebraska. PEEP focused on native prairie stewardship of western Nebraska and was offered to 4th and 5th grade classes. Students attended several activities including a food web activity, a Mountain Plover program, Critter Scene Investigator (CSI), and a Shortgrass Prairie Jeopardy game. Students also met a rehabilitated Burrowing Owl. Students and teachers enjoyed this up-close encounter with Nebraska's unique shortgrass prairie species.

Five schools attended this program with roughly 300 students. One teacher wrote, "The projects were all entertaining and made the students excited to learn new things about where we live. Every

activity was exciting and I do believe my students obtained new information at each one. There are a lot of things that they will be more aware of. I enjoyed it just as much as my students did!"



Andrew Pierson of RMBO, helps PEEP students in Critter Scene Investigator (CSI) activity. *Photo by Jeanine Lackey.*

Chihuahuan Grasslands (from page 4)

species of the Chihuahuan Desert, as well as information on their range, identification, habitat and conservation. We hope that landowners will use these guides to learn about the birds their lands support and develop positive attitudes toward birds. We will also distribute the guides through our Mexican partner networks to students and others who live in and therefore affect the future of grasslands in Mexico.

Broadening the scope

While RMBO is focusing mainly on existing GPCAs, other extensive grasslands do exist. Very few have been inventoried for birds, and surprisingly, some of these sites are in the U.S. RMBO is collaborating with Dr. Bonnie Warnock of Sul Ross University to

support a graduate student from Mexico who will conduct complementary investigations of grassland birds in West Texas and southern Chihuahua. The student will attend Sul Ross University in Alpine, Texas and eventually obtain a Master of Science degree. A second goal of this project will be to develop grassland bird bio-indicators for assessing ecosystem health. RMBO will also be expanding its winter grassland bird monitoring into U.S. National Parks in the Chihuahuan Desert and in private grasslands in northeast Sonora.

Achieving success in the Chihuahuan Desert will not be possible without the ongoing support and cooperation of our many partners. We wish to recognize our major financial backers: the U.S. Fish and

Wildlife Service Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, the U.S. Forest Service International Program, the U.S.F.S. Rio Grande Research Station, The Nature Conservancy, the National Park Service, and Sonoran Joint Venture. We also thank our contributing partners including the City of Fort Collins, TNC-Chihuahua, and Pronatura Noreste. We especially appreciate our project partners in Mexico, including the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo Leon, who coordinated all field activities in Mexico, and the Universidad Juarez de Durango, Profauna Coahuila, and Profauna Chihuahua who helped conduct surveys. Without their participation and the support of our members, this project could not succeed.



Ferruginous Hawk Nesting Platforms in Western Nebraska

By Bart Bly, Nebraska Prairie Partners Coordinator

It was an auspicious day this October when Larry Snyder and I arrived on the ranch of Rod and Debra Horst. We had arrived along with the Horsts to set up an artificial nest platform for Ferruginous Hawks, one of 20 being placed by Nebraska Prairie Partners (NPP) in the Kimball Grasslands and Niobrara River drainage. As we arrived at the site we considered suitable for Ferruginous Hawks to nest, we were greeted by one of the hawks soaring overhead.

Larry had contacted the Horsts earlier at the Sullivan Hills Lutheran Church Camp in northwest Cheyenne County and requested their permission to install a nesting platform on the property. At the site, in what we considered optimal habitat, we erected the platform after a lot of digging through clay and rock. We got the platform stabilized, and the landowners were very pleased and excited for the upcoming breeding season.



Rod and Debra Horst standing with their newly installed Ferruginous Hawk nesting platform at the Sullivan Hills Lutheran Church Camp. *Photo Bart Bly.*

Rod asked what results they should expect next year. Larry indicated, that any sort of stick piling or build-up on the platform should be taken as a good sign for future occupancy by Ferruginous Hawks, though nesting may not be observed in the first season after installation of the platform.

NPP had begun building and installing nesting platforms in western Nebraska in early fall to improve Ferruginous Hawk

numbers in the state. The platforms will provide suitable nesting substrates in ideal habitat.

Currently, Ferruginous Hawks are listed as a Tier I species of concern in Nebraska according to the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project. They are found breeding predominantly in two regions of the panhandle, the Kimball Grasslands in the southwestern panhandle and

the Niobrara River drainage in the northern panhandle. The latter runs adjacent on the southern side of the Pine Ridge.

NPP, a cooperative partnership between RMBO and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, has monitored Ferruginous Hawks throughout the panhandle since 2002. The NPP has nesting habitat and distribution data on over 100 nests.

Ferruginous Hawks prefer large blocks of relatively contiguous shortgrass prairie and also prefer the absence of any human disturbance. The goal of NPP was to build 10 nesting platforms for Ferruginous Hawks in each of the two breeding strongholds in western Nebraska. The project targeted areas where suitable habitat was available and hawks had been documented historically. In the selected areas, the hawks have been locally extinct in recent



Ferruginous Hawks. *Photo Michael Forsberg.*

years. Project Assistant Larry Snyder and I looked at historic distributions and landcover photos to identify areas that would provide optimal results. We then contacted appropriate landowners to secure permission and explain the project. We explained that the hawks can reduce habitat degradation and restore ecosystem balance by providing natural control of prairie dogs and other species that degrade the land when uncontrolled.

Materials and money for the nesting platforms were provided through a grant from the Nebraska Environmental Trust. While no funds were required from landowners for their involvement in the project, NPP personnel are training the landowners on Ferruginous Hawk identification. This way, in future years, NPP can still track Ferruginous Hawk population trends by having landowners report findings from their platforms and other lands. So far 10 platforms have been installed on the Kimball Grasslands. The other 10 were scheduled to be installed in early December before the ground freezes.

Meanwhile, Rod and Debra Horst also plan to develop an educational program for the church camp on hawks and eagles and use the nesting platform as a hands-on tool for teaching the future generations.



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Staff Migrations



Corey Kanuckel

Corey is one of RMBO's new Private Lands Biologists and is based in the Durango NRCS office. He received his B.S. in Biology/

Ecology from the University of Findlay (1997) and his M.S. in Environmental Studies/Cons Biology from Ohio University (2003).

A native of Ohio, Corey has worked on a number of wildlife research projects across the country. His avian work has included release and recovery of the San Clemente Island Loggerhead Shrike, radio-tracking Sharp-Shinned Hawks in PA, monitoring Bald Eagles in Eastern North Carolina, and breeding raptor survey and nest monitoring in Colorado and Utah. Corey had worked as a habitat biologist in Western PA where he planned native grass plantings, riparian buffers, and wetlands on private lands.

Laura Quattrini

Laura Quattrini recently began working as the Stewardship Biologist in RMBO's Stewardship Division. Laura was born and raised in Corning, NY, and received her B.S. in Wildlife Biology from Ohio University with an Environmental Studies Certificate.



Laura has assisted with numerous avian research projects with organizations including Whitefish Point Bird Observatory, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, HawkWatch International, Southern Sierra Research Station, and Humboldt State University. She also has experience organizing outreach activities with landowners in southeast Ohio. Laura is currently finishing her M.S. thesis at CSU involving a proposal for a community forestry project in northwestern California where a population of Northern Spotted Owl exists.

Brandon Miller

Brandon Miller is a new RMBO Private Lands Biologist based in Steamboat Springs. Brandon has a BS degree in Wildlife Resources from the University of Idaho and has gained his knowledge of wildlife and wildlife habitat working for the Colorado Division of Wildlife and the US Forest Service.



Most recently he was the lead wildlife research technician on a greater sage-grouse research project on the Roan Plateau. While conducting research and habitat improvement projects on private and public lands, it was his responsibility to keep good relations with landowners, land managers, and representatives of the oil and gas industry by communicating research objectives, gaining access to private lands, and conveying habitat improvement objectives.



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