



## Breeding Birds

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## RESOURCE BRIEF

### Importance

Hundreds of species of birds occur in the American Southwest, as do some of the best birdwatching opportunities. Birds are a highly visible component of many ecosystems. Because they can respond quickly to changes in resource conditions, birds are considered good indicators of ecosystem health. Monitoring changes in bird population and community parameters can be an important component of any comprehensive, long-term monitoring program. Monitoring birds is especially critical given population declines for some species in recent decades, especially neotropical migratory birds.

### Status and Trends

Habitats at Capulin Volcano National Monument (CAVO), in the northeast corner of New Mexico, include the cinder cone, covered with pinyon-juniper woodland; scrub oak and other shrubs; remnants of ponderosa pine forest; and over 200 acres of high plains short-grass prairie. The first thorough survey



PHOTO: ROB BENNETTS

Mountain chickadee

for breeding birds was conducted in 2002, by the New Mexico Natural Heritage Program (NMNHP). The inventory results provide baseline information: 1) on the current status of birds at CAVO, and 2) for future inventory and monitoring.

Fifty-six bird species (88.9% of those on a target list) were documented by NMNHP or park staff during the inventory. Three additional species were observed during the 2002 breeding season but are considered migrants. Surveys



PHOTO: DAVE MENKE

Pinyon jay

were conducted in grassland and pinyon-juniper habitat. The most frequently detected bird on point counts was the spotted towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*), with 25.8% of all detections, followed by the green-tailed towhee (*Pipilo chlorurus*) (11.7% of detections), and the chipping sparrow (*Spizella passerina*) (6.3% of detections). All three species were observed in both habitats sampled. The remaining 19 species (of those birds detected on point counts) each averaged less than 3.0% ( $\pm 1.8\%$ ) of all detections. Some of the other birds observed at CAVO include the American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), Northern flicker (*Colaptes auratus*), pinyon jay (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*), violet-green swallow (*Tachycineta thalassina*), mountain chickadee (*Parus gambeli*), and mountain bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*).

### Discussion

The absence of livestock grazing at CAVO has facilitated increased diversity of grassland birds (especially ground- and shrub-nesting birds such as vesper sparrows and lark sparrows), but grassland encroachment by conifers may decrease the area available to grassland species.



PHOTO: ROBERT SHANTZ

Spotted towhee

