

## **Breeding Birds of the McCullough Mountains**

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During the summer of 2000, volunteers and researchers for the Great Basin Bird Observatory intensified their survey work in southern Nevada. The goal was to spend as much time as possible in “specialty” habitats during the final field season of the Nevada Breeding Bird Atlas project. Sites were surveyed all over Clark County, with habitats ranging from bone-dry Mojave Desert scrublands to lush riparian forests to high-elevation, mixed-conifer woodlands. The most unique and probably least explored of these areas were the McCullough Mountains, which are located just west of the town of Searchlight in southernmost Clark County. This area was worked intensively by GBBO researchers Jason Beason, Stephanie Jentsch, David Arsenault, and Ted Floyd.

The McCullough Mountains are an isolated mid-elevation mountain range with a summit (Black Mountain) of only 5092 feet (1543 m). The old mining town of Searchlight lies about 15 miles (24 km) to the east. The range forms a distinctive pinyon-juniper “sky island” in a sea of Mojave Desert that is characterized by a dense forest of large Joshua trees. The Joshua trees grow at the higher elevations in this range, making for some interesting mixes of vegetation. Seeing a large pinyon pine or juniper growing next to a Joshua tree is a memorable sight for any visitor to this range. A few springs at higher elevations in the mountain range were great spots to see birds desperate for water in this dry environment.

The unique blend of habitats found in the McCullough Mountains supports a highly distinctive community of birds. We observed numerous pairs of Gilded Flickers in the Mojave Desert - Joshua tree foothills. Prior to the Atlas, these birds were thought to be accidental in the state, and they certainly were not suspected to be Nevada breeders. That changed in 1999, however, when Atlas volunteer Joe Kahl found them in a Nevada Breeding Bird Atlas block north of Searchlight. Northern Flickers (the red-shafted subspecies) and possibly hybrid (Gilded x Northern) Flickers also were seen in this area. On one

occasion, we saw a Gilded Flicker exiting a cavity. We also learned that Gilded Flickers were observed watering at a game bird guzzler in this area (J.J. Eidel, *personal communication*). Another species in the Joshua tree forest was the Bendire's Thrasher, which we observed on several occasions. In addition to containing these unusual bird species, the McCullough Mountain foothills seemed to support high densities of other more common species, such as Scott's Oriole, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Anna's Hummingbird, Phainopepla, Cassin's Kingbird, and Great Horned Owl.

As we climbed higher, we entered the more mountainous pinyon-juniper habitat, where we observed a number of Black-chinned Sparrows, Gray Vireos, Canyon Wrens, and Pinyon Jays, several Peregrine Falcons, and a Rose-breasted Grosbeak.

By far the most exciting discovery we made was seeing numerous Rufous-crowned Sparrows. Approximately ten birds were seen. Although we did not confirm breeding, we believe that enough individual birds were seen to speculate that Rufous-crowned Sparrows do indeed breed in Nevada. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first record of an apparent breeding population of Rufous-crowned Sparrows in Nevada. We strongly encourage other birders to visit this area as soon as possible, and to try to confirm breeding by this species.

A total of 72 species, including 20 species of presumed non-breeding migrant birds, were recorded during our surveys of the McCullough Mountains. We spent a total of eight days surveying the mountains and surrounding desert areas, and we confirmed breeding for 17 species. Our work and the work of other birders revealed that the McCullough Mountains are a truly unique and interesting area that has gone virtually unnoticed. Exciting birds can be seen, the area is beautiful, and non-bird wildlife abounds as well. The large expanses of large, old Joshua trees are perhaps one of the most impressive stands of their sort in the country. Certainly, they make for one of the most thrilling natural spectacles in all of Nevada.