

Springerville Mountain Plover Surveys

May 31 – June 2, 2024

Tracy McCarthy (all photos by Tracy McCarthy unless otherwise noted)

Mountain Plovers have long been suspected to be a potential breeding species in the short-grass prairies of northeastern Arizona, especially after a nest was documented in 1978 in New Mexico, just east of Springerville, Arizona. In June 1994, during surveys by the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD) for the Arizona Breeding Bird Atlas, field biologists observed four adult Mountain Plovers northwest of Springerville in Arizona. Follow-up surveys in May 1996 documented a few pairs and one female on a nest with three eggs. This was the first nest for this species recorded in Arizona. Mountain Plover populations have experienced a significant decline in recent years, and this species is listed as an AZGFD Species of Greatest Conservation Need, as well as on the Partners in Flight Red Watch List. However, a proposal to list the species under the Endangered Species Act was rejected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2003.

Following the discovery of the first Arizona nest, no attempt was made in subsequent years to monitor this small breeding population, while several large energy projects were, and are currently, being proposed in the area. Arizona Field Ornithologists organized this expedition to determine if Mountain Plovers are still nesting within the historic locations or other suitable habitat in the area, and to help inform the need for conservation measures for future energy projects.

Methods

Dividing into three teams, 12 participants completed road surveys near Springerville for Mountain Plovers within accessible suitable habitat (Intermountain Basins Semi-Desert Grassland, and Intermountain Basins Semi-Desert Shrub Steppe), including all historic locations where they had been previously observed.

The surveys took place on June 1 and 2, within the nesting period of Mountain Plovers. Surveys were completed by driving dirt roads, stopping every $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ mile (or at any prairie dog colony) and glassing with binoculars in all cardinal directions away from the vehicle. After the initial survey with binoculars, participants walked away from the vehicle in different directions and circled back to the vehicle, hoping to flush any hidden plovers. Most of the participants camped at Lyman Lake State Park, which was conveniently close to the survey area.



Photo by Jelena Grbic

Results

Unfortunately, no Mountain Plovers were detected in the two-day survey effort. However, over 40 eBird checklists were submitted by the group, filling in gaps in a very underbirded area. Some of the birds observed included Burrowing Owl, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Horned Lark, Lark Sparrow, Scott's Oriole, Pinyon Jay, Chipping Sparrow, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Canyon Towhee, Bushtit, Dark-eyed Junco, American Kestrel, and Western Tanager.



Partial group photo: From left to right - Rob Bettaso, Tracy McCarthey, Ashley Lauria, Lin Piest, Jose Tovar, Aliya Venezuela, Brian Sanchez-Fishback, Jelena Grbic, Robert Carter (missing: Marceline VandeWater, Christine Jenkins, William Harmon).

In addition, our group located two active Kit Fox dens, one with pups, and a number of other mammal species, including: Elk, Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep, American Pronghorn, and Gunnison's Prairie Dog (see photos below).



Kit Fox



Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep



Photo by Jelena Grbic

American Pronghorn



Gunnison Prairie Dog

The group also located several lizard species, with many being lifer herps for the participants. See photos of lizard species below:



Greater Short-horned Lizard



Eastern Collared Lizard



Southern Fence Lizard



Western Earless Lizard



Plateau Striped Whiptail