



Colorado's Wildlife Company

White spots on wings,
blackhead, red sides
Almost robin-sized

A BIRDING PRIMER

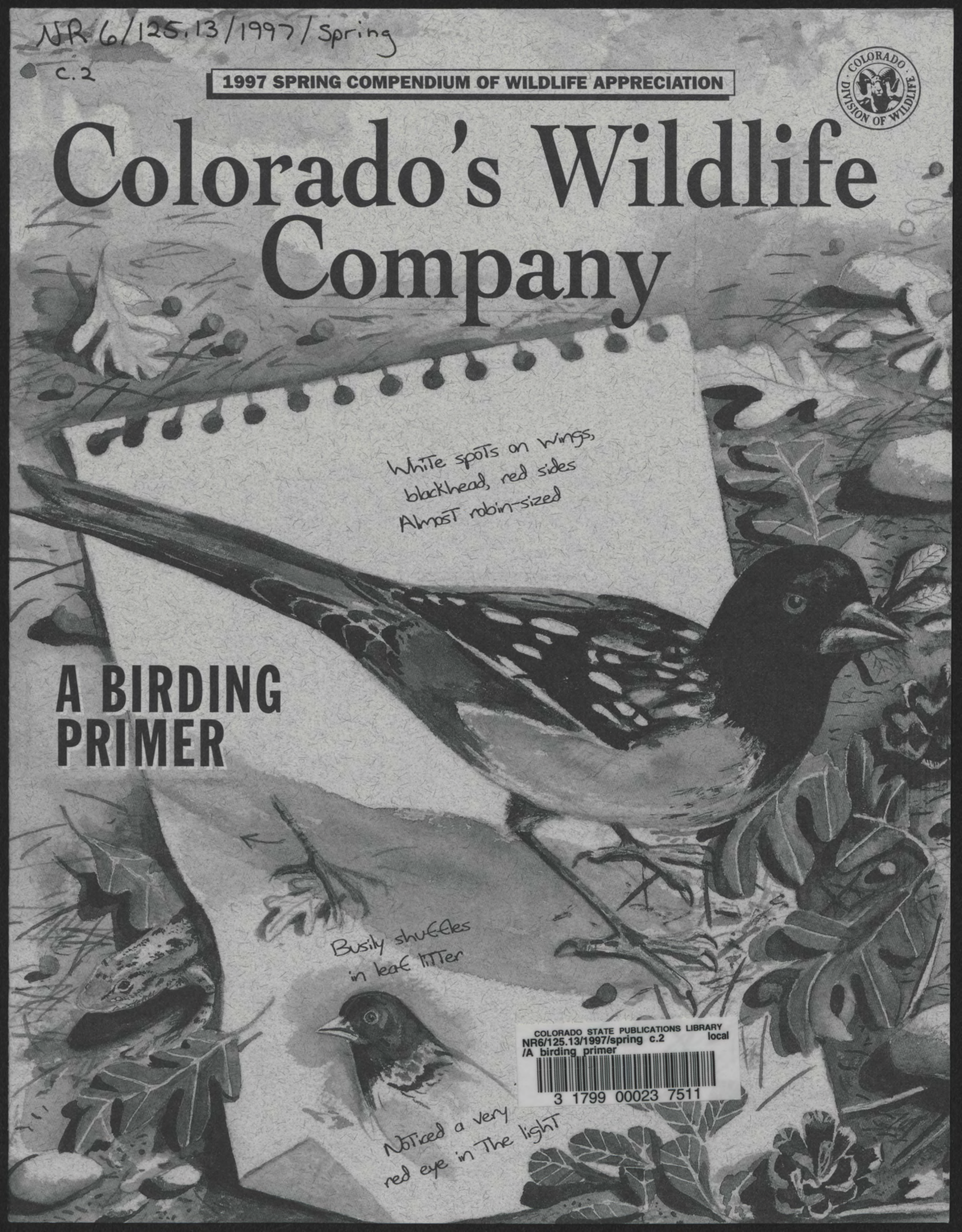
Busily shuffles
in leaf litter

Noticed a very
red eye in the light

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A Beginner's Guide To Bird Watching

By Mary Taylor Gray

So ya wanna look at birds? Well, you're not alone. Some 70 million Americans participate in bird-watching, or birding, which ranks behind only gardening as the most popular hobby in America. The reasons are many. Watching birds gets you outdoors, connects you to nature, sharpens your senses and observation skills, brings you in contact with others of similar interests, introduces an entire new base of knowledge, and is lots of fun! It requires little equipment and as little or as much time, energy and exertion as you wish to invest. Birdwatching is a hobby for everyone and can be enjoyed in your backyard or in exotic places far from home.

HOMEWORK

A knowledge of the lifestyles of different birds will help you look for them and understand their behavior. Knowing what birds eat and how they find food—tapping into tree bark like a woodpecker, foraging on the ground like a towhee, grabbing aquatic prey from shallow water like a heron—is key to finding birds. Begin learning which birds live where and who to expect at what time of year. You don't need to memorize details for every species, but learn generalities that will lead you to logical conclusions. Start with the obvious, like looking for ducks and geese on ponds and lakes. Hawks that eat mice and rabbits will be found in open country where they can see

their prey. Don't expect insect-eating songbirds at your bird feeder and remember that in winter when insects are not available, many of those bug-eaters migrate. Learning these sorts of habits equips you to be a savvy bird detective. To begin learning, visit local nature centers, go on guided bird walks, talk with experienced birders and observe the birds around you.

OPTICS

Though you can look at birds with the naked eye, binoculars greatly enhance the view. They come in all qualities and prices, ranging from under \$100 to many thousands of dollars. Binoculars are labeled with a pair of numbers such as 7x35 or 8x40. The first number is the magnification (7x = seven times). While 7x doesn't magnify images as large as 10x, lower power binoculars generally focus closer than higher power ones, making it easier to see birds close to you.

The second number, the diameter of the objective lens, reflects the amount of light entering the binoculars. The larger the number, the more light, so the better the viewing in low light conditions such as dawn or dusk.

Find a knowledgeable sales clerk and learn as much as you can, then buy the best pair of binoculars you can afford. Wait on investing in a spotting scope. Scopes are wonderful tools for birding but also expensive and cumbersome and generally not a good idea for beginners.

FIELD GUIDES

To help identify the birds you see, a field guide is an important aid. The most popular among birders are the *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America* and *Peterson Field Guides Western Birds* (for our region). The new *Stokes Field Guide to Birds* is gaining followers—see the review, "The Stokes Guide: Good Bet for Beginners," in this issue.

The first time you open a field guide you may

BIRDER OR BIRDWATCHER?

Many definitions and debates are offered over the differences between a birder and a birdwatcher. Generally, a birder is a birdwatcher with a more intense interest and higher knowledge level. If you are interested enough in looking at birds that you want to call yourself a birder, you are one!

feel overwhelmed. There are, after all, more than 800 species of birds in North America. How will one ever learn the difference between a song sparrow, a Lincoln's sparrow or an American tree sparrow? The answer is, don't worry about it. Just start looking through the guide, finding those old familiar birds like robins and chickadees and jays, and finding others to watch for. As your skills and interest grow, so too will your familiarity with the guide, and the birds. Field guides are organized by bird families with those considered more primitive, which usually means larger, at the front of the book and the more evolved species, generally the small songbirds, at the back.

IN THE FIELD

Armed with binoculars, a field guide and some knowledge of bird habits, you're ready to look at birds. First, plan to venture out at the times of day when birds are most active—morning and evening. Head for places that offer good bird habitat—waterways, undeveloped land, edges of farm fields, woodlands. Wear clothing of muted colors like brown or

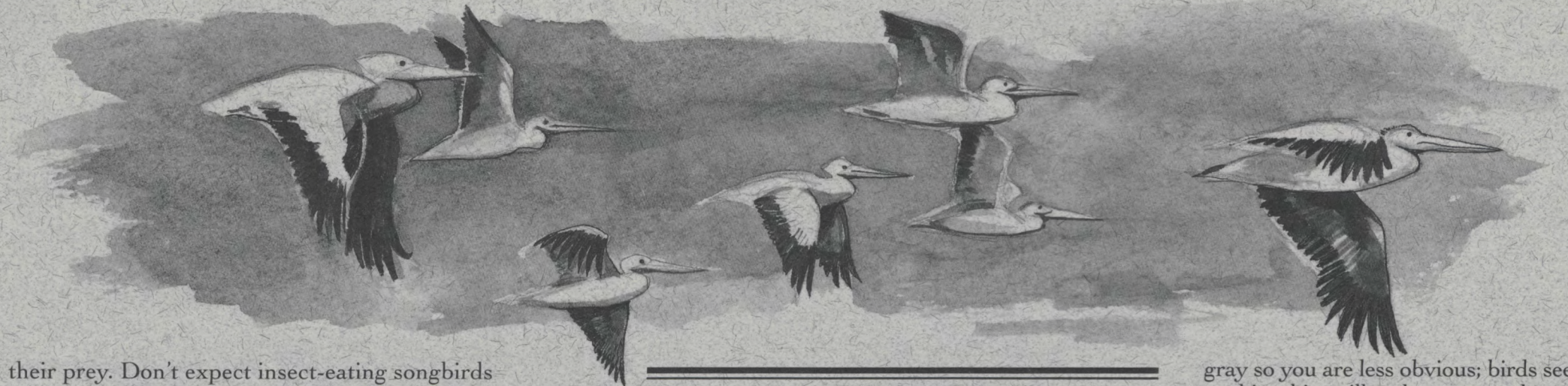
gray so you are less obvious; birds see color well and a white shirt will make you stand out like a flag.

Watch for sound and movement. Once you spot a bird, keep your eyes on it and lift your binoculars into your line of vision. Don't burden yourself with trying to instantly identify every bird. Instead, note its size in relation to familiar birds—is it the size of a sparrow, a robin, a crow? Note basic shape and posture, if it has a long tail or a thick beak. Notice its color and any specific patterns, stripes or other field marks. Some birds are easy to recognize, while identifying others will take adding up everything you noticed, plus habitat and range (where it is found in the country), then making an educated guess.

THE ART OF BIRDING

There is sometimes a tendency among birders to become obsessed with lists, to compete with each other, to pursue only the unusual and unexpected. But what matters in birdwatching is not how many birds you see but that you enjoy yourself. You may have seen a chickadee a thousand times, but observing some bit of behavior that clues you to its private life is wonderfully rewarding. If you're a beginning birdwatcher, it's easy to be overwhelmed by all the information. You may think, "I'll never learn all these species!" but you will, over time. Guided bird walks are a great way to jumpstart your birding career, but beware spending too much time with experienced birders who call out a bird's identity, precluding your need to work it out yourself. You'll learn better by gathering your own information and puzzling things out on your own. It takes time to acquire a body of birding knowledge, but then a novice pianist doesn't perform Chopin the first time at the piano either.

Birding is an art, not a science. Don't be afraid to be wrong. You don't have to know every bird by name to admire it and take pleasure from watching. Most importantly, just get out there, look through your binocs and enjoy the birds.



BOOK REVIEW

THE STOKES GUIDE: Good Bet for Beginners

by Bob Hernbrode

As a long-time birdwatcher, I have used my share of field guides. Each has its strengths and its weaknesses. But the new *Stokes Field Guide to Birds*, published in 1996, has some features that make it a good choice for beginning birders. It is a two-book set, but the "Western Region" volume is the one for use in Colorado.

Why do I think the Stokes guide is a good choice? First, the pages are color-tabbed by family so you can flip quickly to the appropriate section. The color tabs are indexed inside both front and back covers, with color bars corresponding to the page tabs. It has another unique feature particularly helpful for beginners. Learning pages address, with pictures and text, identification of bird groups that are particularly problematic—hawks in flight, shorebirds, gulls, flycatchers, warblers and sparrows. Most importantly, each page has more information on physical identification, natural history, behavior, habitat, calls and range than most other guides. One drawback to this guide is the use of photos rather than illustrations. Subject to great variation in light, shadow, posture and focus, photos are not as good as illustration for identification. However, beginners seem to prefer photos, perhaps because they seem more realistic.

I've tried this guide out on several novice birdwatchers. With a little looking through the book, they've been able to locate and identify birds quicker than using other field guides. I credit this to the combination of information—pictures, narrative, habitat, range, but by using the Stokes guide, with its data on distribution, description, range, habitat and voice all in one place, I've had better success than before.

There are many beginning bird guides out there, but this one offers some extra features that I think make it a good bet.

Short, round wings
with dark bands on
Tail



This little hawk is
The size of a robin

COLORADO BIRDING ORGANIZATIONS

• National Audubon Society Regional Office, 4150 Darley Ave., Ste. 5, Boulder, 80303

• Aiken Audubon Society, P.O. Box 7616, Colorado Springs, 80933

• Arkansas Valley Audubon Society, P.O. Box 11187, Pueblo, 81001

• Black Canyon Audubon Society, P.O. Box 1371, Paonia, 81428

• Boulder County Audubon Society, P.O. Box 2081, Boulder, 80306

• Denver Audubon Society, 3000 So. Jamaica Ct., Ste. 100, Aurora, 80014

• Ft. Collins Audubon Society, P.O. Box 271968, Ft. Collins, 80527

• Grand Valley Audubon Society, P.O. Box 1211, Grand Junction, 81502

• Platte & Prairie Audubon Society, P.O. Box 3413, Greeley, 80633

• Roaring Fork Audubon Society, P.O. Box 971, Glenwood, 81601

• San Juan Audubon Society, P.O. Box 2716, Durango, 81302

• Evergreen Naturalists Audubon Society, P.O. Box 523, Evergreen, 80439

• Denver Field Ornithologists, Glenn Hageman, 448 So. Leyden, Denver, 80224

• American Birding Association, 1-800-634-7736

• Colorado Bird Observatory, 303-659-4348

• Colorado Rare Bird Alert, 303-424-2144



White stripes
on head, seed-eater's bill



This busy
guy
travels
head first
down the
tree trunk



Saw
This bird impale
an insect on a
fence barb

Looks like a
sparrow,
but has an
odd-shaped bill

This one
travels up
the tree
trunk



These very large birds
look like flying dinosaurs

COLORADO BIRDING EVENTS:

Christmas Bird Count—Each year between mid-December and January 1, birders nationwide count the birds they see in one day. Contact your local Audubon chapter.

International Migratory Bird Day, May 10, 1997—Various birdwalks, bird bandings and festivals around the state celebrate the spring return of the birds. Contact Dick Coe, 1070 Pine Knoll Dr., Estes Park, 80517, 970-586-4518.

International Dawn Chorus—On May 4, join a group and venture out to hear the dawn chorus of birds. Call the Denver Museum of Natural History at 303-370-8299 for times and places.

They're poking in the mud with
down-curved bills



A wading bird
with an
up-curved bill



This sandpiper keeps
bobbing and
teetering



CAN YOU IDENTIFY THE BIRDS IN THIS ISSUE?

Cover - spotted towhee
Pages 1 & 2 - American white pelicans
This page, from top to bottom - sharp-shinned hawk, white-crowned sparrow, white-breasted nuthatch, loggerhead shrike, red crossbill, brown creeper, sandhill crane, American avocet, white-faced ibis, spotted sandpiper

DOW WORKING FOR WILDLIFE

Monitoring 2000

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Bureau doesn't just count heads, it gathers all sorts of demographic information about economic status, numbers in household, occupation and much more. *Monitoring 2000*, a project supported by the Division of Wildlife, seeks to do the same thing for birds.

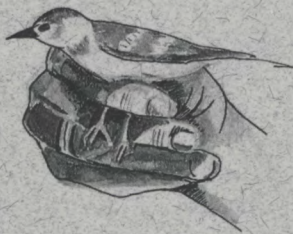
With Great Outdoors Colorado funds, provided through DOW, the Colorado Bird Observatory (CBO) seeks to monitor all regularly breeding bird species in the state by the year 2000. "We have valuable data from bird counts at the continental scale," says Colorado Bird Observatory Executive Director Mike Carter, "but we need more detailed demographic information on Colorado birds—how well do they survive winter, how long do they live, how many young do they produce, how many fledglings live to produce their own young—to really know what's going on with them."

Carter's organization, a non-profit group whose mission is the conservation of Rocky Mountain and Great Plains birds through research and public education, is gathering such demographic information. Since knocking on doors, clipboard in hand, and interviewing residents doesn't work to census birds, teams of researchers are using other methods. In 1996,

Every 10 years, the U.S. government conducts a census of the American population. The Census

Bureau doesn't just count heads, it gathers all sorts of demographic information about economic status, numbers in household, occupation and much more. *Monitoring 2000*, a project supported by the Division of Wildlife, seeks to do the same thing for birds.

CBO operated 12 bird monitoring stations in eight different habitats throughout the state, using a number of techniques. Researchers peered in nests to count numbers of eggs, nestlings and fledglings (young that leave the nest). They also counted how many nests were abandoned, attacked by predators or parasitized by cowbirds (which lay their eggs in other birds' nests). They caught birds in mist nets to see, over a period of time, how well both fledglings and their parents survived. By catching previously-banded birds over successive years, researchers are also gaining clues to the quality of the habitat where migratory birds spend the winter. If few birds return to nest, it may indicate problems with their wintering grounds. Finally, the study continues to count birds, providing good information on overall survivorship of particular populations and species.



One goal of *Monitoring 2000* is to assess whether particular breeding areas are "sink habitats" or "source habitats." Sinks (think of going down the drain) are poor habitats where the number of young hatched can't keep up with the mortality of adults. These habitats continue to be re-colonized by new birds, but the result is a continual downward spiral for the population. Source habitats produce more than enough young to replace the adults that die.

Information from the study will help managers determine how local habitats can be altered to improve sites and turn sinks into sources.

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Wildlife Program**

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