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2015 Fall Migration Bird Banding at Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area

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It was a different season of bird banding this year at Wildcat Hills State Recreation Area in Scotts Bluff County, Nebraska. Due to construction at the nature center, the banding station was moved farther down the road to one of the picnic shelters. The habitat remained mostly the same, with Ponderosa Pine and multispecies-shrub understory dominating the unique ridge landscape characteristic of Wildcat Hills. The new site provided more shrub understory, but lacked the running water of Turkey Creek and the bird feeders at the nature center. Bird Conservancy of the Rockies (formerly Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory) has been banding at Wildcat Hills for nine years now and this marks the first year the banding site was relocated.

This year we ended the season with a total of 364 birds of 34 species banded over a seven-week period. How does this stack up to previous years? On average, 509 birds are banded each year at Wildcat Hills, this year ranking the third lowest. However, annual captures have ranged widely, from a low of 227 birds in 2007 to a high of 915 birds in 2012. While the number of individuals banded this year was low the number of species banded was slightly above the average of 32

species annually. The number of species banded per year has ranged from 17 in 2007 to 41 in 2014. I reviewed the data and there is no apparent correlation between number of individuals and number of species banded. Possible influences on the seasonal variation might include weather and/or resource availability.

Moving the station this year provided an interesting opportunity to sample birds utilizing Wildcat Hills habitat away from the human presence surrounding the nature center. The change to a denser shrub and forest habitat proved more favorable to species such as Orange-crowned Warblers and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, both of which were captured in record numbers this year. Numbers of Orange-crowned Warblers increased dramatically, from an average of seven birds per year to 46 this year. Only six Ruby-crowned Kinglets were captured from 2007 to 2014, but 14 were captured this year. A record 76 Spotted Towhees also were captured this year, though this is only three more than the previous record from last year when the station was in its original location. This year saw an increase in Dark-eyed Junco numbers and presence of the previously-unrecorded Pink-sided subspecies. In the birding community, Wildcat Hills has been known for its high numbers of Red Crossbills, averaging 75 captures per year; 2015 proved to be the first year since 2008 when no crossbills were captured.

In contrast, captures declined noticeably for Chipping Sparrows, one of the most commonly captured species in previous years. I caught only 22 this year in contrast to an annual average of 150 with a high of 383 in 2012. This species likely prefers pine edge and more open habitat surrounding the nature center. Finch species were also down this year, including American Goldfinch, Lesser Goldfinch, Pine Siskin, and House Finch, which are usually drawn to the feeders at the nature center. This combined group averages 150 banded each year, but this year I caught only 13. While capture rate was markedly lower for Lesser Goldfinches, they were still observed almost every day of banding and continue to remain established in the area.

Rare birds for the season included a Dusky Flycatcher that was banded in early September. This is the second one ever banded here, and a notable record for the state of Nebraska. An exciting new station bird this year was a young Blue Grosbeak. Several birds returned this banding season, including a Black-capped Chickadee from 2010, a Red-breasted Nuthatch from 2012, and a Chipping Sparrow from 2011. The first Northern Saw-whet Owl ever banded at Wildcat Hills was in 2014; she made two return appearances this year, and I was pleased to see she is still doing well. Recapturing individuals from previous years at the new location suggests that at least some birds are utilizing multiple areas within Wildcat Hills. Getting recaptures of migratory species such as Chipping Sparrow shows the route fidelity of these birds. Bird banding continues to be an important technique for monitoring bird populations. Migration, particularly, is a key time to ensure these populations are healthy.

Here is the complete list of species and individuals banded for 2015:

Sharp-shinned Hawk	1
Mourning Dove	4
Western Wood-Pewee	1
Least Flycatcher	1
Dusky Flycatcher	1
Cassin's Vireo	1
Warbling Vireo	1
Red-eyed Vireo	1
Black-capped Chickadee	19
Red-breasted Nuthatch	10
Pygmy Nuthatch	6
House Wren	8
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	21
Golden-crowned Kinglet	1
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	14
Townsend's Solitaire	2
Swainson's Thrush	2
Hermit Thrush	6
Gray Catbird	1
Orange-crowned Warbler	46
<i>Audubon's</i> Yellow-rumped Warbler	3
<i>Myrtle</i> Yellow-rumped Warbler	1
Wilson's Warbler	13
Yellow-breasted Chat	2
Spotted Towhee	76
Chipping Sparrow	22
Lark Sparrow	2
<i>Gambel's</i> White-crowned Sparrow	5
<i>Oregon</i> Dark-eyed Junco	17
<i>Pink-sided</i> Dark-eyed Junco	10
<i>Slate-colored</i> Dark-eyed Junco	5
<i>Unidentified</i> Dark-eyed Junco	46
Blue Grosbeak	1
Lazuli Bunting	1
House Finch	6
Pine Siskin	1
Lesser Goldfinch	5
American Goldfinch	1