

Lake Nighthorse changing the game for annual bird count



New body of water affects birds' behavior

By Jonathan Romeo County & environment reporter

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Courtesy of Karel Buckley

A ferruginous hawk was seen at Durango's annual Christmas Bird Count, which has been held every year in December in Durango for the last 70 years.

Courtesy of Karel Buckley

Add a new major body of water to the landscape and expect to see different species of wildlife – that's the conclusion from an annual bird count in Durango.

Construction on Lake Nighthorse, just south of Durango, began in 2003, but it wasn't until around 2011 that the reservoir was considered full.

Now, volunteers with the National Audubon Society's annual bird count, which has been ongoing since 1949, say they are starting to see the impact the new body of water is having on different species of birds around Durango in winter months.



A red-tail hawk chases ferruginous hawk off a telephone pole perch during the annual Christmas bird count in Durango.

Courtesy of Karel Buckley

“Lake Nighthorse has created a different habitat,” said John Bregar, a member of the Durango Bird Club. “It’s attracting water fowl and fish-eating birds we didn’t use to get so much of before. It’s pretty cool to be monitoring that.”

Every December for the past 70 years, volunteers scour a 7.5-mile radius around Pastorius Reservoir on Florida Mesa within a 24-hour period, recording a count of birds and their species.

Lake Nighthorse, within the scope of the survey, is changing some birds’ behavior, Bregar said.

A group of about nine eared grebe, a water bird, which is a rare sight on the Christmas count, were spotted on Lake Nighthorse last year. Double-crested cormorant, a seabird, used to leave Southwest Colorado for warmer pastures but have taken up at the reservoir during the winter.

And two horned grebes, another water bird, which Bregar said were never recorded on a Christmas count and are not common in Southwest Colorado in general, are now wintering on Lake Nighthorse.

“It’s a rare bird for our area in general,” he said.



Volunteers with the National Audubon Society’s annual Christmas bird count say Lake Nighthorse is attracting water fowl and fish-eating birds during the winter months that were not common in the area before construction of the reservoir.

Jerry McBride/Durango Herald file

Bregar said aside from the rare finds, all kinds of birds take advantage of the waters and fish of Lake Nighthorse, such as bald eagles, loons and mergansers.

“It’s a deep body of water with a lot of fish,” he said, “so fish-eating birds are quite prevalent.”

In all, 31 volunteers counted 6,279 individual birds and 82 different species Dec. 15.

For reference, 2017 was seen as a good year for the bird count, with volunteers finding 85 species and 7,452 individual birds.

And in 2018, the count, which was conducted Dec. 16, found a strong number of diverse species – 82 – but the number of individual birds was down to 6,732.

But, bird counters are quick to note a number of factors can affect the amount of birds and the number of species spotted during the event, including weather, migration habits and even how many volunteers participate to help spot the feathered creatures.



Every year for the last 70 years in Durango, volunteers have scoured a 7.5-mile radius around Pastorius Reservoir to document birds and their species during the Christmas Bird Count. The records help researchers look for trends and bird populations.

Courtesy of Karel Buckley

Bregar, however, said part of the benefit of the bird counts, which occur countrywide, is that once all the counts across the U.S. are finished, researchers can look at the data and look for trends on how birds are behaving and migrating.

Bregar said Tuesday it's too soon to draw any conclusions from the 2019 count.

Some interesting observations from the count include:

- Bird counters noted a near record high number of northern harriers, a raptor, at 19. In a previous year, 20 were spotted
- The bird count broke the record for white-winged doves. Only twice before has the count recorded that species, and each time, it was just one dove. "This year we recorded six white-winged doves, five near the upper Animas River and one along Florida Road," Bregar said. "Durango has had a small population of white-winged doves hanging out in the northern portions of our city for years, but they seldom stray far enough south to get counted in our Christmas bird count."
- A flock of 21 snow geese was spotted flying above the skies in Durango. The birds usually are not seen in Southwest Colorado.
- The most abundant bird spotted was the Canada goose at almost 1,200. Second place goes to juncos, a medium-sized sparrow, at around 1,000.