

Wildlife Viewing at Cottonwood Ranch

Peter Kaestner

Apart from the great experience of visiting a working ranch, with its super riding opportunities, a stay at Cottonwood can be productive for nature lovers from near and far. Since my area of expertise is birds, I will focus on them. Visitors from the east coast will marvel at the western species, and Nevada birders will have plenty of state birds to add to their lists. This report was based on five day's observations in late June 2004. Clearly, observations at other seasons will yield additional species.

The main lodge is perched at 6200 feet, on the edge of Cottonwood Creek, surrounded by mature willow trees. A large meadow, irrigated for forage, is a magnet for water birds. The main event, however, are the vast expanses of sagebrush and the Jarbidge Mountains that rise to the West of the ranch. County road 074 which passes in front of the ranch continues all the way up and over the Jarbidge mountains, giving easy access to high-altitude forest at over 9000 feet.

Common birds around the lodge include: Mourning Dove, Common Nighthawk (conspicuously perched on low, horizontal limbs of the willows), Red-naped Sapsucker, American Robin, Cliff and Barn Swallows, American Crow, House Wren, Western Wood Pewee (whose buzzy, descending call is often heard), European Starling, Yellow Warbler, Bullock's Oriole (nesting a few steps from the lodge's front door), Brown-headed Cowbird, Brewer's Blackbird, House Finch, and House and Song Sparrows. One mystery bird around the lodge is a flycatcher which I can only deduce is Least. Its rapidly delivered dry "che-bicx" call is easily heard in the tall, mature, willows around the homes and lodge. Getting a good look at it is another story, as it calls from the tops of the tall willows. Other, less common species around the lodge are, Turkey Vulture, Short-eared Owl, Say's Phoebe, Tree, Bank, and Northern Rough-wing Swallows, Fox Sparrow (the gray, Great Basin race), and Cassin's Finches.

The irrigated meadow harbors Killdeer, Wilson's Phalarope, Long-billed Curlew, Wilson's Snipe, Savannah Sparrow, Western Meadowlark, Red-winged Blackbird, and Bobolink. Along the edge of the meadow (downstream from the lodge) are smaller willows (10 to 20 feet high) that harbor Willow Flycatcher, Lazuli Bunting, and Song Sparrow.

The sage is alive with birds, though the species diversity is low. Two birds dominate, the Sage Thrasher and Brewer's Sparrow. Greater Sage Grouse are fairly common, and a female with five almost fully grown young were hanging out a couple of hundred meters west of the lodge in late June 2004. Lookout in the taller sage for Gray Flycatcher, one of the most easily identifiable of the genus *Empidonax*, with its grey coloration and long tail. Green-tailed Towhee are occasionally common, though I'm not sure what is controlling its patchy distribution. When the sage is more open, interspersed with grass, Vesper Sparrows and Western Meadowlarks appear, with Homed Larks populating areas where bare ground occurs. Overhead, American Kestrels prowl for prey along with Loggerhead Shrikes (mainly along the entrance road).

A trip up into the mountains will produce dozens of birds, with over 50 species possible in a short day. As the road climbs, look for Rock Wrens on the rocky outcrops, and Prairie Falcons and Golden Eagles flying over the cliffs. As the road winds up, it passes a couple of streams, with thick riparian vegetation. At the first, look out for Warbling Vireo, Yellow, Wilson's, Orange-crowned, and MacGillivray's Warblers, Lazuli Bunting, and Spotted Towhee. Over the highest pastures, near the ranger station, lovely Mountain Bluebirds hover in the breeze. Farther up, in the conifers, look for the rare Merlin, Williamson's Sapsucker, Townsend's Solitaire, Hermit Thrush,

Mountain Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Clark's Nutcracker, Western Tanager, Yellow-romped Warbler, Dark-eyed Junco, and Chipping Sparrow. If you are into challenges, work on the flycatchers, as Cordilleran, Dusky, and Hammond's all occur here. (One of the best field marks are the size and color of the bottom of the lower mandible, if you can see it.) In the high country, the American Crows are replaced by the Common Raven, and House Finches are replaced by the pinker Cassin's Finch. The Cassin's warbling song is quite similar to the widespread Warbling Vireo's, which live together at the upper levels.

What I didn't find at Cottonwood. The biggest misses in my mind were Buteos. There were none seen in the basin, and just one pair of red-tails up high in the firs. I would have expected at least Swainson's and maybe Ferruginous. Also, I did not see any quail. The staff at the lodge say that Grey Partridge and Chukar exist, but I never bumped into them. (Since I had six encounters with sage grouse, I find it odd that I never saw a quail.) Finally, high-altitude hummers eluded me. When I visited Jarbidge, I saw several hummingbird feeders, and a local there said that the hummers were absent this year. Finally, there are Black-capped Chickadees breeding in NE Nevada, but I did not see them.

Other birding locations:

Jarbidge This historic mining town is nestled in the middle of the Humboldt National Forest at the end of a magnificent canyon. To get there, just follow the country road 074, which passes right in front of the ranch, and continues up and over the mountains. On the other side (in Idaho) you turn left at the "T" junction and follow the road all the way up to the town. The ride, which should take about two hours, is one of the prettiest in the area. At the turn in the road just below Murphy's Hot Spring (at the Forks picnic area) I found Black-throated Grey Warbler and Yellow-breasted Chat. Two Chukar flushed from the rocky roadside half-way up to the town. In the "mahogany" trees (a bushy deciduous tree that covers the middle slopes around the town of Jarbidge) I found Virginia's and Orange-crowned Warblers, Black-headed Grosbeak, and Western tanager. Along the river upstream from the town of Jarbidge I found American Dipper, one of the most interesting birds in North America. While I was watching, the bird plunged headlong into the torrent and foraged for invertebrates on the bottom of the stream bed.

Ruby Mountains. About two and a half hours SW of the ranch is the town of Elko, the jumping off point for a visit to the Ruby Mountains. This pleasant town is loaded with facilities and offers a nice stopping off point. There are two specialties for the area, Black Rosy Finch and Himalayan Snowcock. Both can be seen above Island Lake, an hour walk from the end of the Lamoille Canyon road. The strategy is to get as high as possible. The snowcock is seen when it flies to and from its roost, so an early or late visit is necessary. Since I don't count introduced birds, I concentrated on the finch, which obliged nicely. In the end, they came down to a bog that is about a 30-minute walk above the Island Lake.

Other wildlife:

In addition to birds, mammals are common and easily spotted. One of the pleasures of birding the sage habitat is the possibility of bumping into Pronghorn, the New World's only antelope. These diurnal speedsters are common in the area. I saw over a dozen in my short stay, usually solitary animals, or small groups. Mule Deer are less often seen, at least during the day, but can be found when spotlighting. I only saw one Coyote, running across the high altitude sage below (East) of the Pole Creek ranger station. Smaller mammals are harder to identify, but a few stand out. Yellow-bellied Marmots may be seen basking on the rocks in the higher levels. Near the second switchback (in a coniferous forest) beautiful Golden-mantled Squirrels are common and conspicuous. Ground squirrels are very common though identifying them to species is a challenge for a greenhorn like me. (I'm guessing that most were

Townsend's.) Rabbits are common, with Mountain Cottontail seen around the lodge, and both Black and White-tailed Jackrabbits common in the sage. At night, a tiny kangaroo rat was commonly seen scurrying across the dirt road (074) above the lodge. Finally, one afternoon as I was sitting in the clearing that holds the TeePee, I saw a Long-tailed Weasel come out in the open.

Birds Observed at Cottonwood Ranch, Wells, NV June 21-25, 2004 by Peter G. Kaestner

		1	2	3	4	5
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>			X		
Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas carolinensis</i>			X		
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	X		X		
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	X		X		
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	X		X		
Cinnamon Teal	<i>Anas cyanoptera</i>			X		
Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>			X		
Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	X				
Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	X	X		X	
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>			X		
Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>					X
Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>					X
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>					X
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>					X
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>	X	X	X	X	X
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>					X
Prairie Falcon	<i>Falco mexicanus</i>				X	
Greater Sage-Grouse	<i>Centrocercus urophasianus</i>		X	X		
Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>	X	X	X		
Wilson's Snipe	<i>Gallinago delicata</i>	X		X		
Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularia</i>			X		
Wilson's Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus tricolor</i>	X		X		
California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>			X		
Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>			X		
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>	X	X	X	X	
Great Horned Owl	<i>Bubo virginianus</i>					X
Northern Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>	X				
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>		X			
Common Nighthawk	<i>Chordeiles minor</i>	X	X			
Common Poorwill	<i>Phalaenoptilus nuttallii</i>		X			
Black-chinned Hummingbird	<i>Archilochus alexandri</i>	X				
Belted Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle alcyon</i>		X			
Williamson's Sapsucker	<i>Sphyrapicus thyroideus</i>					X
Red-naped Sapsucker	<i>Sphyrapicus nuchalis</i>	X			X	X
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides pubescens</i>					X
Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides villosus</i>					X
Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>	X			X	X
Western Wood-Pewee	<i>Contopus sordidulus</i>	X			X	
Willow Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax traillii</i>	X				
Least Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax minimus</i>	X				
Hammond's Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax hammondii</i>					X
Gray Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax wrightii</i>		X			
Dusky Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax oberholseri</i>				X	
Cordilleran Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax occidentalis</i>				X	X
Say's Phoebe	<i>Sayornis saya</i>	X				
Western Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus verticalis</i>				X	
Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	X	X	X	X	
Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>	X				
Violet-green Swallow	<i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>				X	X
Northern Rough-winged Swallow	<i>Stelgidopteryx serripennis</i>	X		X		

Bank Swallow	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	X					
Cliff Swallow	<i>Petrochelidon pyrrhonota</i>	X		X			
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	X					
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus calendula</i>					X	X
Rock Wren	<i>Salpinctes obsoletus</i>	X				X	
House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>	X				X	
Sage Thrasher	<i>Oreoscoptes montanus</i>		X				
Mountain Bluebird	<i>Sialia currucoides</i>					X	X
Townsend's Solitaire	<i>Myadestes townsendi</i>						X
Hermit Thrush	<i>Catharus guttatus</i>					X	X
American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X
Mountain Chickadee	<i>poecile gambeli</i>					X	X
Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>					X	X
Loggerhead Shrike	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>	X					
Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>	X					
Clark's Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga columbiana</i>						X
American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	X	X	X			
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			X	X	X	
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	X					
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	X					
Warbling Vireo	<i>Vireo gilvus</i>					X	X
Cassin's Finch	<i>Carpodacus cassinii</i>	X				X	X
House Finch	<i>Carpodacus mexicanus</i>	X					
Pine Siskin	<i>Carduelis pinus</i>					X	X
American Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis tristis</i>	X					
Orange-crowned Warbler	<i>Vermivora celata</i>					X	
Yellow Warbler	<i>Dendroica petechia</i>	X		X	X		
MacGillivray's Warbler	<i>Oporornis tolmiei</i>					X	
Wilson's Warbler	<i>Wilsonia pusilla</i>	X				X	
Western Tanager	<i>Piranga ludoviciana</i>					X	X
Green-tailed Towhee	<i>Pipilo chlorurus</i>		X				
Spotted Towhee	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>	X				X	
Chipping Sparrow	<i>Spizella passerina</i>						X
Brewer's Sparrow	<i>Spizella breweri</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X
Vesper Sparrow	<i>Poocetes gramineus</i>	X	X				
Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>	X					
Fox Sparrow	<i>Passerella iliaca</i>	X				X	
Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>	X				X	
Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>						X
Lazuli Bunting	<i>Passerina amoena</i>	X				X	
Bobolink	<i>Dolichonyx oryzivorus</i>	X					
Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>	X					
Western Meadowlark	<i>Sturnella neglecta</i>	X				X	
Yellow-headed Blackbird	<i>Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus</i>				X		
Brewer's Blackbird	<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X
Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>	X					
Bullock's Oriole	<i>Icterus bullockii</i>	X					

97 SPECIES

1. Cottonwood Ranch--Lodge and Meadow
2. Cottonwood Ranch--Sage
3. Cottonwood Ranch--Reservoirs on road in
4. Jarbidge Mountains--Low Foothills
5. Jarbidge Mountains--High

From Wikipedia~

Peter G. Kaestner is an [American diplomat](#) and amateur [ornithologist](#) currently serving as a senior inspector in the Office of Inspector General of the U.S. State Department. From 2006 to 2009 he was the consul general of the American Embassy in [New Delhi, India](#). As consul general, he oversaw consular operations in New Delhi and the U.S. Consulates General in Mumbai (Bombay), Chennai (Madras), Hyderabad, and Kolkata (Calcutta).

Born in [Baltimore, Maryland](#), Kaestner entered the Foreign Service in 1981, and has been assigned in the past to [India](#), [Egypt](#), [Brazil](#), [Guatemala](#), [New Guinea](#), the [Solomon Islands](#), [Colombia](#), [Malaysia](#), and [Namibia](#). An avid [birder](#), he has taken advantage of his position as an international diplomat to follow his hobby more avidly than is normally possible. By 1986, he had become the first birder to see a representative of each bird family in the world, though the list of bird families recognized by science has changed considerably since then. In 1989, while on a birding expedition in Colombia, he discovered a species new to science, the [Cundinamarca Antpitta](#) (*Grallaria kaestneri*). (See [Formicariidae](#).)

With a life list above 8,200 birds, Kaestner remains one of the most prolific birders in the world, surpassed only by very few, such as Hugh Buck and Jon Hornbuckle and the late Phoebe Snetsinger.