



12-31-1956

Birds of the piñon association of the Kawich Mountains, Nevada

Ned K. Johnson

University of Nevada Museum of Biology, Reno

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/gbn>

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Ned K. (1956) "Birds of the piñon association of the Kawich Mountains, Nevada," *Great Basin Naturalist*: Vol. 16 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/gbn/vol16/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Western North American Naturalist Publications at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Basin Naturalist by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

BIRDS OF THE PIÑON ASSOCIATION OF THE
KAWICH MOUNTAINS, NEVADA

Ned K. Johnson¹

The Kawich Mountains of the central Great Basin, Nye County, Nevada have received attention from only four ornithologists as listed by Linsdale (Pac. Coast Avif. No. 23, 1935:17). Since none of these workers were there during the summer months, the breeding avifauna of the range remained unstudied until 1953, when a party from the University of Nevada collected there from June 10 to 18. In view of the fact that the area is contained within the vast Las Vegas-Tonopah Air Force Bombing Range and is therefore generally inaccessible for further study due to military restrictions, the information gathered during the June 1953 visit on the birds resident in the piñon (*Pinus monophylla*) zone is presented here. Species collected are marked by an asterisk. These specimens are preserved in the University of Nevada Museum of Biology. The reader is referred to a paper by Miller (Ecology, 27(1), 1946:54-60) discussing the birds of the piñon association of the Grapevine Mountains, also in Nye County, 80 miles south-southwest of the Kawich region.

Kawich Peak at 9500 feet elevation is the highest point in central Nye County for 55 miles in any direction. Between 6000 and 7000 feet the sagebrush growth of the alluvial fans surrounding the mountains is replaced by piñon and sparse juniper cover. On the best soils, especially at east-facing slopes near Breen Canyon on the west side of the range, the piñon woodland becomes quite dense. There the trees grow to thirty feet in height and to two feet in diameter at the ground. In such places the branches interlock to form an overhead canopy, allowing sparse undergrowth. In the vicinity of Eden Canyon, on the more moist east side of the mountains, the same situation as regards plant belts exists except that the piñon tracts are generally more dense, especially on the south-facing slopes. Above 8000 feet mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus ledifolius*) forms groves which continue to the crest of the range.

The *Scrub Jay (*Aphelocoma coerulescens nevadae*), Piñon Jay (*Cyanocephalus cyanocephalus*), *Bush-tit (*Psaltriparus minimus*), Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Poliophtila caerulea*), *Black-headed Grosbeak (*Pheucticus melanocephalus*), *Gray Flycatcher (*Empidonax griseus*), and *Black-throated Gray Warbler (*Dendroica nigrescens*), all species expected to be resident in the piñon zone, were subsequently found there. In addition several other species present deserve special comment. Small numbers of the Hairy Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos villosus*) and the *White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*) inhabited the best stand of climax piñon in Eden Canyon. Two juvenile nuthatches with soft bills were obtained. Apparently these species were attracted by the unusual dominance of the piñon, a situation paralleling that found by Miller in the Grapevine

1. University of Nevada Museum of Biology, Reno, Nevada.

area (*op. cit.* p. 56). At least two pairs of *Solitary Vireos (*Vireo solitarius plumbeus*) were established for breeding in the dense piñon at 8000 feet in Eden Canyon where a singing male with enlarged testes was collected. This station marks a significant extension of known breeding range for this race of Solitary Vireo in Nevada. Previous summer records of *V. s. plumbeus* in Nevada are from the Ruby and East Humboldt Mountains in the northeastern part of the state. Mountain Bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*), although most often seen at sagebrush-covered flats near 7000 feet, were met with sparingly in the piñon belt. One pair in particular had a nest in a woodpecker-excavated cavity in a dead piñon at 8000 feet. Piñon and juniper (*Juniperus* sp.) grew commonly at this station, although not in heavy groves, with the mountain mahogany sparsely represented. Mountain Chickadees (*Parus gambeli*) and Western Tanagers (*Piranga ludoviciana*) were noted at several of the well developed piñon stands, these species never being found where the piñon was scattered and mixed with sagebrush. Singing males of the latter species gave evidence of breeding activity. Two species, the Cassin Finch (*Carpodacus cassinii*) and the *Gray-headed Junco (*Junco caniceps*), lived at the ecotone of the piñon and the mahogany near 8000 feet. Several Clark Nutcrackers (*Nucifraga columbiana*) visited the piñon zone occasionally but were probably resident at higher altitudes in the mahogany. At Sumner Spring, in the southern part of the range, several *Scott Orioles (*Icterus parisorum*) occupied mixed piñon and juniper at 6700 feet on a large alluvial fan. Males of this species sang from tops of piñons, giving evidence of territorial establishment. This locality is near the northern breeding limits for the species in Nevada. Although not definitely proven to be nesting, the *Plain Titmouse (*Parus inornatus ridgwayi*) was present near Breen Ranch at 7500 feet, where a female was taken on June 12, and at Sumner Spring. Small groups were seen at each locality. On June 11, a vagrant *Eastern Kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*) with testis ten millimeters in length was collected at Breen Ranch. 7000 feet, providing the first specimen of this flycatcher from south-central Nevada.

Several species recorded from the piñon zone in the Grapevine region were probably overlooked in the Kawich Range. In this category would be the Bewick Wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*), Screech Owl (*Otus asio*), and possibly the Mountain Quail (*Oreortyx picta*). However, the Booming Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*), Sage Thrasher, (*Oreoscoptes montanus*), and Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*), all found in the Kawich Mountains associated with sagebrush and at least scattered piñon, were not recorded from the Grapevine area.

Dr. Ira La Rivers and Mr. Ernest A. Carl, the other members of the 1953 field party, also contributed ornithological information, although they were primarily collecting invertebrates and reptiles. Dr. Alden H. Miller of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, Berkeley, has kindly identified several of the specimens secured on the trip. January 7, 1956.