



Conservation and Community in Northern **Mexico**

The first time I visited Álamos, Sonora, it was August. The tropical deciduous forest of southern Sonora is usually miserably hot and humid that time of year, but somehow I lucked out. It was overcast and relatively cool: wonderful birding weather. We were there to lay the groundwork for a bird guide training workshop that we were coordinating later that fall.

It was my first visit to tropical deciduous forest. Tropical Kingbirds squawked outside my window. Mexican Parrotlets flew by noisily. Black-throated Magpie-Jays and Purplish-backed Jays jumped around in the trees. I was less than 500 miles south of Tucson, but in a different world.

Binational Bird Conservation: Migratory Bird Joint Ventures on the Border

The change in birdlife isn't the only difference across the border. Land ownership patterns, access to resources and conservation programs, and capacity to actually do conservation all look different depending on which side of the border you stand. And when you work in an ecosystem that spans the international border, that's a whole other issue.

How do you conserve birds in the U.S.–Mexico border region, where issues like immigration, border walls, and national security often trump conservation concerns? You begin by forging partnerships in unexpected places. As we've learned through experience, any conservation effort has to include the local community.

One of the most successful models for building community linkages for bird and habitat conservation in northern Mexico is the Migratory Bird Joint Venture program. Joint ventures are cooperative, regional partnerships among government agencies, nonprofit organizations, universities, industries, tribes, and private citizens that work together to conserve habitat to benefit birds, other wildlife, and people. Joint ventures cover all of the U.S. and Canada and extend into northern Mexico (learn more at mbjv.org).

Two joint ventures cover the boundary of the southern U.S. and northern Mexico. I work for the Sonoran Joint Venture in the southwestern U.S. and northwestern Mexico (sonoranjv.org), while the Rio Grande Joint Venture (rgjv.org) covers northeastern Mexico and parts of the southern U.S. These

■ The pink blossoms of an amapa tree (*Tabebuia impetiginosa*) set against the imposing profile of Cerro Redondo in Sonora's Reserva Monte Mojino. Photo © Richard Webster



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■ Young birders in the Wildlife Trackers of Monte Mojino eco-club.
Photo © Lydia Lozano Angulo



■ Military Macaws. Photo © René Valdés

border joint ventures are binational in every sense of the word. Our boards and technical teams have members from both countries; we publish in both English and Spanish; and, most importantly, when we consider conservation priorities, we think about the big picture. Birds don't recognize international borders. Neither can the people who are working to protect them.

Birding in Mexico

Interest in birding in Mexico is growing. Just a few years ago, if you asked about the challenges to bird conservation in Mexico, I'd have said that there just isn't

a strong birding culture in the country. But that is rapidly changing. According to the Mexican National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity, at last count there are 54 bird clubs in 22 states, plus Mexico City. Regular outings, lectures, and chances to meet other birders are connecting a growing community of birders in Mexico.

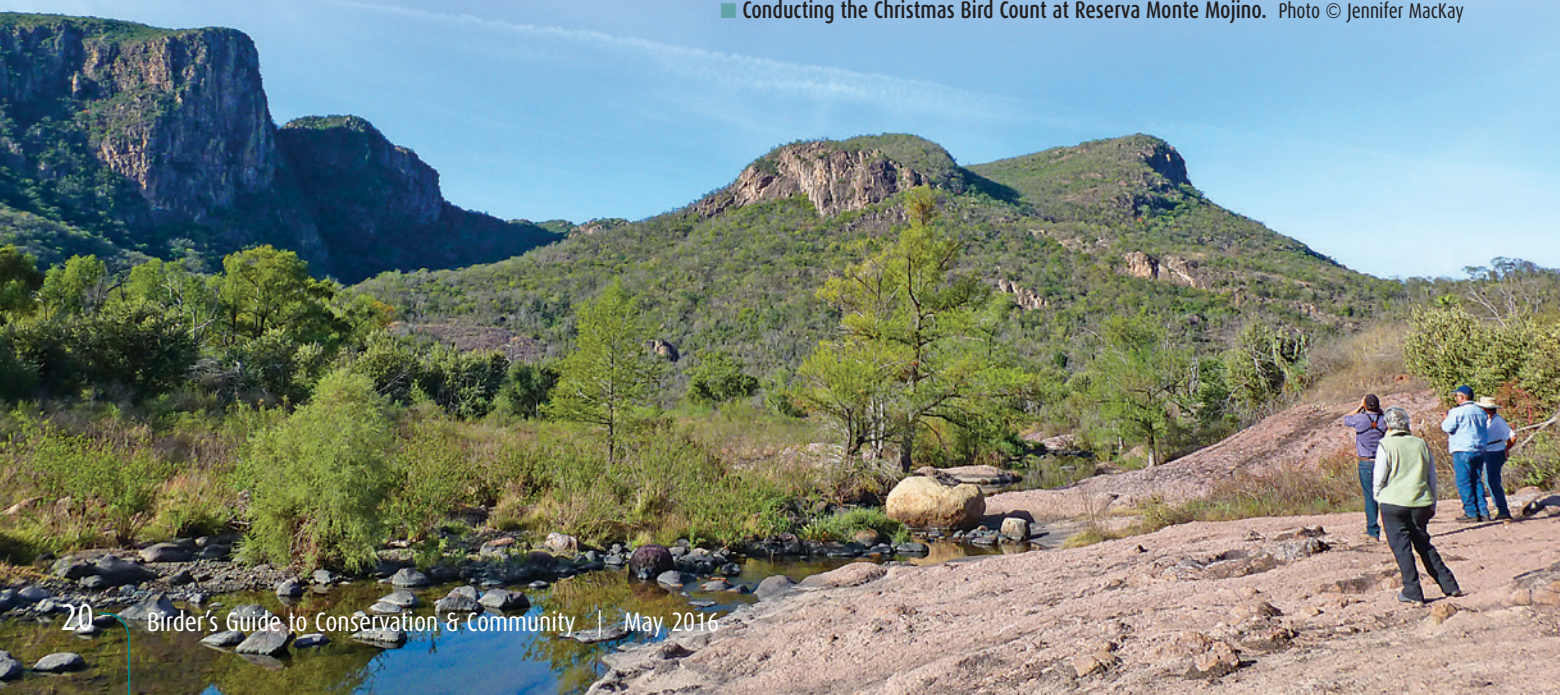
It isn't just about birding, though. From research and habitat protection to citizen science and community outreach and education, Mexican birders are making important contributions. Christmas Bird Counts, Breeding Bird Surveys—

they're all happening. Mexico even hosts a Spanish-language portal for eBird (averaves.org). As interest in birding in Mexico has increased, so has the capacity for involving communities in bird conservation work.

Community-based Conservation in Action: Reserva Monte Mojino

Reserva Monte Mojino (natureandculture.org/mexico) is located in southern Sonora, northeast of the city of Álamos. The reserve itself, a conservation project of Nature and Culture International and

■ Conducting the Christmas Bird Count at Reserva Monte Mojino. Photo © Jennifer MacKay



Naturaleza y Cultura Sierra Madre, A.C., is aimed at protecting tropical deciduous forest. It lies within the 93,000-hectare Sierra de Álamos–Río Cuchujaqui Federal Area for the Protection of Flora and Fauna and is part of the Sonoran Joint Venture region. The Cuchujaqui watershed of southern Sonora is important to many bird species of conservation concern for the Sonoran Joint Venture, including Military Macaw, Lilac-crowned Parrot, Laughing Falcon, and Rufous-bellied Chachalaca.

In 2010, the Sonoran Joint Venture partnered with the reserve and other groups to train local residents to be bird guides and give them skills to work as field technicians in conservation efforts. In the two-year program, participants learned bird identification, how to use field equipment, group management and leadership, birding ethics, and basic English. They also got involved in local conservation and education efforts, doing everything from habitat restoration to giving talks and leading bird walks for schools and local residents. In Álamos, this project resulted in one of Sonora's first bird clubs: Alas de Álamos (Wings of Álamos). Although this club is no longer active, it was a precursor for a thriving eco-club that connects young people from the communities in and around the reserve to birds and nature (read on to learn more).

The bird guide project formally ended in 2010, but the reserve hired several of the program graduates as park guards. The guards do habitat restoration and protection work, provide bird monitoring, and support and guide visiting researchers and birders. The reserve now has a year-round bird-monitoring program with support from the Sonoran Joint Venture, Tucson Audubon, and other partners.

Clockwise from top:

■ **Graduates of the Álamos bird guide training program.** Photo © Jennie Duberstein

■ **Practicing bird identification and field guide use with the *Kaufman Guía de Campo a las Aves de Norteamérica*.** Photo © Jennie Duberstein

■ **The staff and gorgeous landscape of Reserva Monte Mojino.** Photo © Rosario Jorge Saucedo Nieblas

■ **A local youngster selling bread in El Sabinito Sur, the community that neighbors Reserva Monte Mojino.** Photo © Jennifer MacKay



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Several of the park guards live in the nearby community of El Sabinito Sur, about 10 miles east of Álamos. El Sabinito sits amid tropical deciduous forest inside the reserve. The people of El Sabinito are a wealth of knowledge about the forest, the Río Cuchujaqui and its tributary arroyos, and the backcountry. Working with residents of El Sabinito, as well as other communities, is an important part of the reserve's conservation strategy.

Supporting rural economies helps the reserve accomplish its conservation goals. In an area where mining and cattle are traditional income sources, finding new, sustainable ways to make money can make a real difference for conservation. One of the ways that the reserve does this is by encouraging artisans of El Sabinito, who

do embroidery work and weave baskets and mats out of the native sabal palm. The wives of reserve park guards take a special interest in doing embroideries of native birds, mammals, and plants. The reserve makes an effort to showcase this handwork and basketry and provide opportunities for the women to sell their crafts.

Inspired by the Alas de Álamos bird club model, the reserve developed a successful eco-club program, Wildlife Trackers of Monte Mojino. With the support of the Disney Conservation Fund, they created a program that is enthusiastically attended by 45 children from three schools in the Álamos region. They produced a manual, along with other educational activities, to increase club members' understanding and appreciation of the biodiversity and wildlife within the reserve, especially the jaguar.

And it isn't just children who benefit from the eco-club. Families also take part in activities and outings. When the eco-club made trips to the reserve to set up camera traps and explore the natural world, parents helped transport children and par-



Top to bottom:

■ El Sabinito crafts inspired by birds and nature. Photo © Jennifer MacKay

■ Rufous-bellied Chachalaca. Photo © René Valdés

■ The Wildlife Trackers of Monte Mojino is a local youth eco-club. Members are pictured here in a box canyon within the reserve. Photo © Adolfo Zayas Yepiz



Top to bottom:

■ **Purplish-backed Jay.** Photo © René Valdés

■ **Reserve staff teaching youngsters about birds in Álamos.** Photo © Lourdes María Alcantar

■ **Eared Quetzal.** Photo © Michael Retter

ticipated in the activities. Many had never been to this area, even though it is only 12 miles from town. Family participation made the reserve's education impact even stronger and increased attendance at other outreach events for the wider community.

Education is a vital part of conservation, and the reserve has supported efforts to improve access to education for El Sabinito Sur residents. For example, a staff member—together with community members—organized a fundraising drive to overhaul the local kindergarten building. It was a small, tin-roof shack sided with pine shakes and chicken wire that was hot in the summer, cold in winter, and flooded when it rained. The drive quickly secured enough money to purchase building materials and educational supplies. According to the latest update, “The structure will be made in the traditional style of the region—with local, sustainable adobe and wood. It will be cool and dry in the summer and warm in the winter. And it will have big windows looking out on the beautiful tropical dry forest in their backyard. The children in this community are the future guardians of the tropical dry forest on their doorstep. Let's give them a place to start their education!”

The reserve has been so successful because of community involvement at many different levels. From hiring local residents to work in the reserve to addressing some of the social challenges that the community faces, this project has found creative solutions that lead to conservation of birds and habitats.

How Can You Support These Efforts?

One of the best ways birders can support and encourage community-based conservation in northern Mexico is by going there, hiring a local guide, and supporting locally-owned businesses. Check out the Sonoran Joint Venture's



“Mexico Birding Trail” to learn more about the birds and conservation issues in the Álamos region and elsewhere in northwest Mexico, plan an itinerary for a trip, and connect with local guides at mexicobirdingtrail.org and facebook.com/MexicoBirdingTrail.

Volunteering for Christmas Bird Counts or Breeding Bird Surveys is another way to contribute. For example, Reserva Monte Mojino does a Christmas Bird Count every year and is expanding monitoring efforts throughout the year, which offer many opportunities to get involved. You can get in touch via its website: natureandculture.org/mexico

Since that first visit to Álamos, I have returned multiple times. And, yes, I eventually got to experience the heat and humidity of the Álamos summer in its full glory—hot and humid—but the birds were still spectacular. It's been interesting to watch events unfold, from the initial idea of training bird guides to the transformation of participants in those first workshops into skilled field biologists and conservation leaders. It goes to show: A small drop can have a huge ripple effect, especially when conservation comes from the community.

Acknowledgments

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