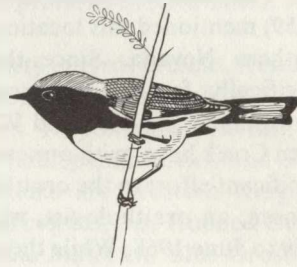


## Localities

### Corn Creek, Nevada — A Desert Oasis

M. VINCENT MOWBRAY

*Western observers have learned that "lost" migrants, far from their normal routes, often turn up at "oases" in the aridlands. Here is a profile of an oasis that is one of Nevada's finest*



Corn Creek, a field station of the Desert National Wildlife Range, is located 6.5km east of U.S. Highway 95 approximately 35km northwest of Las Vegas, Nevada. According to archeologists Corn Creek was used as a camping place by Indians for thousands of years. About 1900 a family of squatters settled there, and in 1916 they sold Corn Creek to a George Richardson from Utah. The Richardson family established a small ranch with a fruit and nut orchard, and constructed a pond at the junction of the flow from the three permanent springs on the property. They remained at Corn Creek until 1936, selling their produce for a living. The new owner ultimately sold Corn Creek to the Federal Government in 1939 for inclusion in the Desert Game Range which, in 1966, became the Desert National Wildlife Range.

Located at an elevation of approximately 900m in the valley between the Sheep Mountains and Spring Mountains, Corn Creek is a 14 hectare oasis surrounded by a large and arid expanse of shad-scale, creosote bush and Joshuatree desert. The nearest similar oases are 25km to the south and 32km to the north. At Corn Creek there are several dwellings with lawns, an assortment of elm, cottonwood, locust, Russian olive and mesquite trees, the remnants of the old fruit and nut orchard and a number of fruiting mulberry trees. About 5½ hectares of the area is used as a pasture. The entire area is irrigated by water from the three springs which now flows through a series of three ponds. The upper and middle ponds are surrounded by willows, phragmites and cattails while the third pond is still fairly open.

For some years a small number of Desert Bighorn Sheep were kept at Corn Creek for research purposes and for public viewing. Several years ago the research was terminated and the remaining sheep were given to zoos. In 1971 it was determined that the ponds at Corn Creek could provide an appropriate habitat for the Pahrump Killifish *Empetrichthys latos*, an endangered species of fish then found only in the Manse Spring in the Pahrump Valley northwest of Las Vegas. On 21 August 1971, 35 of the fish were released in the upper pond at Corn Creek. The fish have thrived, and at the present time it is estimated that there are more than 1200 fish, which have spread to all three ponds. The Manse Spring subsequently dried up so the killifish at Corn Creek are the principal remnant of this species.

Early ornithological activity in southern Nevada, as reflected by the writings of Van Rossem (1936) and Linsdale (1936 and 1951), centered about locations such as Ash Meadows, Indian Springs, Lake Mead, the Spring Mountains and Hidden Forest in the Sheep Mountains. Despite the fact that the road to Hidden Forest passed close to Corn Creek no observations at Corn Creek are mentioned in the earliest literature. Hardy (1949) provided the first vagrant record at Corn Creek by reporting the sighting of a Common Ground-Dove *Columbina passerina*; Gullion, Pulich and Evenden (1959) mentioned this location briefly while discussing a number of bird records from southern Nevada. Since the Desert National Wildlife Range was established specifically for the preservation of the Desert Bighorn Sheep in their natural environment, the Fish and Wildlife Service personnel who have resided or worked at Corn Creek have, with one exception, generally not had the opportunity to devote any significant effort to the ornithology of the area. The one exception was Dr. Charles G. Hansen, an ornithologist, who resided at Corn Creek during the period December 1959 to June 1968. While there Dr. Hansen did a considerable amount of banding and was able to make numerous observations on the birds of Corn Creek. The vagrants he recorded (some of which were reported in Banks and Hansen 1970) included a Purple Gallinule *Porphyrola martinica* which was killed by a Cooper's Hawk *Accipiter cooperii* shortly after arriving; a Black-throated Blue Warbler *Dendroica caerulescens* found in a parked car; and others such as Flammulated Owl *Otus flammeolus*, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher *Muscivora forficata*, Brown Thrasher *Toxostoma rufum*, Hooded Warbler *Wilsonia citrina*, Connecticut Warbler *Oporornis agilis*, and Orchard Oriole *Icterus spurius*.

Since 1967 several Las Vegas birders have made frequent trips to Corn Creek and have added over 40 species to the list for the area including a dozen which, at the time, were new to the Nevada state list as well. These observations have, for the most part, been reported in *American Birds*. However, some of our more memorable experiences at Corn Creek are worth retelling:

A Wood Stork *Mycteria americana*, one of the few ever recorded in Nevada, made a remarkable sight as it perched on top of a tall willow in early July.

In the late fall and early winter of 1972 a massive invasion of Corvids moved into the lowlands of the Southwest, and Corn Creek was visited by numbers of Steller's Jays *Cyanocitta stelleri*, Scrub Jays *Aphelocoma coerulescens*, Black-billed Magpies *Pica pica*, Pinyon Jays *Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*, and Clark's Nutcrackers *Nucifraga columbiana*; Mountain Chickadees *Parus gambeli* and Red-breasted Nuthatches *Sitta canadensis* joined in the invasion and were recorded at Corn Creek also.

The fall of 1974 was the most spectacular season in history for eastern vagrants in some areas of the West, including southern Nevada. During October of that year 21 species of vireos and warblers were recorded at Corn Creek alone; these included Yellow-throated Vireo *Vireo flavifrons*, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler *Dendroica fusca*, Chestnut-sided Warbler *D. pensylvanica*, Blackpoll Warbler *D. striata*, Palm Warbler *D. palmarum*, and Ovenbird *Seiurus aurocapillus*.

Although we might have expected that Nevada's first Cape May Warbler *Dendroica tigrina* would have been an immature arriving in fall, the first state record was actually provided by an adult male that appeared

at Corn Creek in late July of 1977.

As of this writing, the most recent addition to the Nevada state list was Mississippi Kite *Ictinia mississippiensis*: on 15 May 1979, two individuals visited Corn Creek, and were photographed for documentation.

The Corn Creek bird list presently stands at 280 — not at all bad for an area of 14 hectares — and includes 60 species of water birds, 16 of raptors, 18 of flycatchers, 38 of vireos and warblers, and 47 of fringillids.

Outside the migration season there is not a great variety of birds present. Resident species include Gambel's Quail *Lophortyx gambelii*, Common Gallinule *Gallinula chloropus*, Verdin *Auriparus flaviceps*, Bewick's Wren *Thryomanes bewickii*, Le Conte's Thrasher *Toxostoma lecontei*, Phainopepla *Phainopepla nitens*, and Sage Sparrow *Amphispiza belli*. Among the summer residents are Western Kingbird *Tyrannus verticalis*, Ash-throated Flycatcher *Myiarchus cinerascens*, Hooded Oriole *Icterus cucullatus*, Northern (Bullock's) Oriole *I. galbula bullockii*, Blue Grosbeak *Guiraca caerulea*, Black-throated Sparrow *Amphispiza bilineata*, and Brewer's Sparrow *Spizella breweri*.

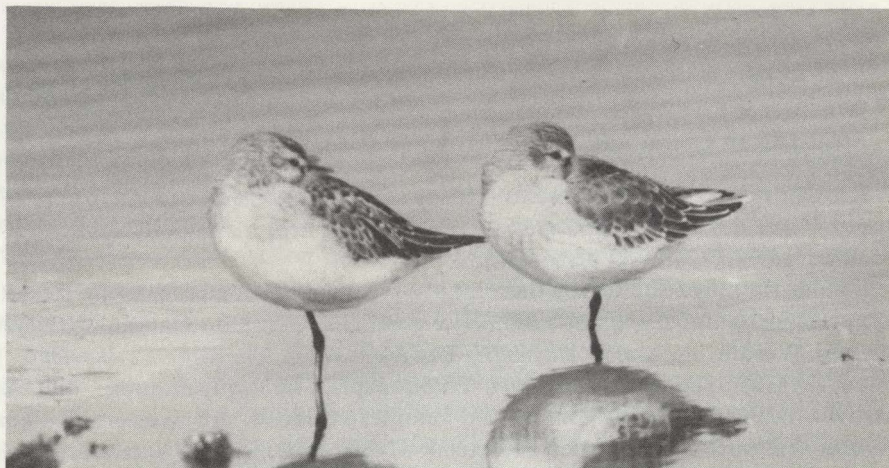
Corn Creek is at its most interesting during the migration seasons: April-May and particularly September-October. The species of migrants that stop there regularly are too numerous to list here. The great concentrating power of this oasis is illustrated by the fact that the following species, which are rare in Nevada as a whole, could almost be considered regular at Corn Creek: Hutton's Vireo *Vireo huttoni*, Black-and-white Warbler *Mniotilta varia*, Tennessee Warbler *Vermivora peregrina*, Northern Waterthrush *Seiurus noveboracensis*, Bobolink *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*, Indigo Bunting *Passerina cyanea*, and Swamp Sparrow *Melospiza georgiana*.

Birders are welcome at Corn Creek (be sure to register). For the best results cover the ponds, orchard, pasture and the surrounding desert, as well as the spring located about 200 meters to the north, several times. When there is fruit on any of the trees, especially the mulberry trees, check them closely as many species present will be feeding there. On a May morning it is not unusual to observe 55 species in less than two hours. Some portions of Corn Creek are posted as "closed" and should not be entered without first obtaining permission from Fish and Wildlife Service personnel.

I wish to thank Bob Yoder, Manager of the Desert National Wildlife Range, and his staff for allowing me access to the records for Corn Creek and for providing related information.

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Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* and Dunlin *C. alpina*. Photographed 1 October 1978 at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, Queens Co., New York, by Thomas H. Davis.

When this photograph first appeared on the back cover of the April issue, the problem was stated approximately thus: during an October shorebirding trip, your companion spots a Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* — always a sought-after rarity — standing next to one of the omnipresent Dunlins *C. alpina*. But by the time you look through your friend's telescope, both birds are asleep, with heads tucked under wings. Can you tell which is the Curlew Sandpiper?

## Answer to Snap Judgment 2

THOMAS H. DAVIS

The Curlew Sandpiper is standing on the left, as discerned most quickly by structural rather than plumage characters. Although the Curlew's body size is hardly larger than the Dunlin's, it possesses proportionately longer legs, and thus stands 'taller' as this shot illustrates.

In a table below wing, bill, and tarsus measurements are given for Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, and Red Knot *Calidris canutus*. Red Knot is included since Curlews often occur in association with this species on the Atlantic coast of North America, especially in August. At this season adult Curlew Sandpipers are often 'lost' among flocks of knots since they may be equivalently colored below and stand as tall, even though knots are larger, 'chunkier' birds with straight bills.

	Sex	Wing	Bill	Tarsus
CURLEW SANDPIPER	M	125-136 (131.0)	33-39 (36.0)	27-32 (29.3)
"	F	125-136 (131.1)	35-42 (39.4)	29-31 (29.7)
DUNLIN (N. ALASKA)	M	116.5-126 (121.8)	30.1-39.8 (33.8)	M 25.5-27.5 F 26.5-27.5
"	F	121-129 (125.1)	30.8-41.2 (36.6)	
" (CANADA)	M	115-127 (119.7)	33.0-41.4 (36.3)	
"	F	117.5-128 (121.9)	35.6-42.4 (39.0)	} 29-33 (31.7)
RED KNOT	M	160-176 (167.9)	29-36 (32.6)	
"	F	167-177 (170.5)	31-37 (34.2)	