

Chapter and State Work Toward Melrose Trap Agreement (CNMAS Burrowing Owl Vol. 49, No. 1 Spring 2020)

When you think of the best places on earth to see New World Warblers, your mind might wander to far-off locales, such as Magee Marsh, Ohio, or Cape May, New Jersey. While the sheer numbers of warblers you will see at those sites are enormous, three places have them beat for diversity of species, and one of the most diverse is right here in the Land of Enchantment: the Melrose Woods.

Ebird tells us that Magee Marsh and Cape May are both well represented, with 33 and 38 species of Warblers respectively. But the illustrious High Island, Texas, beats them with a remarkable 41, and two other sites stand above all others: the Farallon Islands in California and our own eastern New Mexico wonderland, Melrose Woods, which both boast an astonishing 44 species.

Melrose Woods is a nine-acre grove of white poplar and cottonwood surrounded by the short grass prairie of eastern New Mexico. More than 400 species of birds have been reported from the location, often using it as a place to refuel before they continue their flight. This small parcel on New Mexico State Land Office property is leased for ranching, and the rancher leaves the gate on State Highway 60 unlocked for birders.

The CNMAS Board has been working toward restoring Melrose Woods so that it remains viable for migrating birds for years to come. In 2011, a lightning caused grass fire burned into the woods, doing considerable damage to the cottonwood trees. In the years immediately following, then-CNMA President Raymond VanBuskirk recognized how important the site was for birds and produced a restoration plan, but the State Land Office could not reach an agreement with CNMAS in 2014. Then, last May, Christopher Rustay convinced the CNMAS board that the time was right to revisit the restoration plan with the new administration.

CNMA immediately arranged a stakeholders meeting on June 5th at the Randall Davey Audubon Center, where Rustay, President Perrienne Houghton, Sara Jayne Cole and Audubon NM Director Jon Hayes met with State Land Office representatives Howard Gross and Dana Vacker Strang. The results were excellent news for birders: the Land Office proved to be very motivated to

begin opening more New Mexico Land Trust sites to the public, and they saw Melrose Woods as the first of many such projects.

Restoring Melrose Woods will require some legal maneuvers and significant commitments by CNMAS. The Land Office recommended that CNMAS enter into a five-year business lease of the site, requiring the Land Office to make improvements according to a CNMAS Restoration Work Plan. CNMAS would be required to carry insurance, provide an interpretive kiosk, and monitor use. The rancher would continue to hold his agriculture lease and cattle water tank, which would provide water for new plantings.

As a reminder to all birders, while birding has been allowed on this property without a SLO permit thus far, camping has never been permitted here and crossing the fence at the north end of the property is still considered trespassing.

CNMAS and the Land Office have continued working over the past months to produce a plan, meeting twice at Melrose Woods to confirm a mutual understanding of how we would proceed. Robert Munro is the Melrose Restoration Coordinator for CNMAS and continues to work closely with New Mexico Land Office Recreational Director Craig Johnson as we move toward a signed lease.

As a proof of concept for opening trust lands to the public for birding and other recreational purposes, the Melrose Woods project is important not just for lovers of New World Warblers, but for the long-term future of birding on public lands in New Mexico.

If you would like to volunteer to work at this beautiful site, contact Robert@sevenclover.com. To donate to the Melrose Woods Restoration use the Donate Button on our home page, <http://cnmas.newmexicoaudubon.org>.