

Ramblings from a Hillsboro Naturalist

Harley Shaw

Citizens of a small town like Hillsboro need to contribute whatever knowledge and talents they might have to make it an interesting place to live. Having worked as a wildlife biologist in the southwestern United States for some 50 years, my contribution might be in helping folks see and understand their natural surroundings. I'd like to offer periodic writings about our wild creatures and wild landscapes. Don't expect tirades regarding endangered species and threatened landscapes. I may have opinions on some of these issues, but my purpose here is to encourage simple enjoyment of our unique natural surroundings. If you are looking for guilt trips or recreational rage over human behavior, read elsewhere.

Note that I'm calling myself a naturalist, not a biologist. Biology is a profession, which implies work. I'm at a stage in life where work is something I try to avoid. I want to take time I never had when gainfully employed to see, reflect, and enjoy the natural scene wherein I once spent my working year—without the responsibility of study plans, long technical reports, or “management” recommendations.

Doves and Pigeons

I've chosen to initiate my Hillsboro Natural History with a discussion of the wild doves and pigeons of Hillsboro, because of an incident that happened while Patty and I were moving from Arizona. On one of our many trips (14 trailer loads, to be exact), we arrived late one January night after a storm had passed through the area. Our old suburban, pulling an excessively wide trailer load, crunched half-foot deep frozen snow from Deming to Hillsboro. We were in four wheel drive after turning at Nutt, mainly to keep from slipping off the road. And sometimes we weren't quite sure we were on the road.

The next morning, I stepped out on the front porch as dawn broke. The date was January 4, 2001. Our outdoor thermometer registered four degrees Fahrenheit. Snow was still six inches deep. The first sound to reach my ears was the familiar “who cooks

for you” of a white-winged dove---a creature I’d studied for Arizona Game and Fish Department during the 1950s. Actually, I’d grown up hunting whitewings each September in the farmlands and desert southwest of Phoenix. I thought I knew a lot about whitewings. What I thought I knew was that they always migrated south by the middle of September. By October 1, you’d be hard-pressed to find a single white-winged dove in central Arizona, and certainly none would be trying to nest.

So a whitewing calling midwinter in Hillsboro got my attention and sent me to my library to see what was different about New Mexico. I found some surprising things, at least for me. Whitewings summer along nearly all of Arizona’s desert rivers and throughout the Sonoran desert, well into the northern half of the state. In 1929, J. Stokely Ligon, a biologist who wandered all over New Mexico from 1905 to 1961 wrote:

“The white-winged doves occur only in the extreme southwestern corner of the State—in the Gila River Valley as far up as Cliff and thence southward to the Mexican boundary. I have found them to be most abundant in the Cloverdale section of Hidalgo County, where they nest. These birds seem to confine their distribution in New Mexico largely to the stream courses and canyons along which grow the spreading Arizona Sycamores.”

This quote comes from WildLife of New Mexico—its conservation and management, written in 1929 for the New Mexico State Game Commission. Its not an easy book to find these days. According to this record, the whitewing didn’t visit the Hillsboro area back then.

By 1961, when Ligon’s Birds of New Mexico was published, he had expanded his idea of whitewing distribution. He says the bird summers from the south Rio Grande Valley west to Arizona and north to Glenwood, Cliff, Silver City, and San Lorenzo and is seen in Las Cruces and on the east side of the Guadalupe Mountains near the Texas line. He calls the bird migratory, so we have to assume it headed south for winter.

Of course, the whitewing ranges well up the Rio Grande valley and is fairly common around Albuquerque. Patty and I saw one three years ago at Hubbell Trading

Post on the Navajo Reservation. It has thus expanded its range northward New Mexico over the past 40 years. At some point it arrived in Hillsboro.

The tendency of whitewings to winter here is to me surprising. All of the early writers called it migratory and considered southern New Mexico summer range only. Many of the whitewings hatched around Hillsboro still migrate south, and by mid-August every year, flocks of 10-50 young of the year can be seen staging for their trip into Mexico and Central America. Only a small proportion of the total summer population stays for the winter. Interestingly, the young birds migrate ahead of the adults—apparently unguided on their first trip to winter range.

For those who haven't noticed, Hillsboro is blessed with five, rarely six, wild columbids. Columbids is collective term for pigeons and doves. They all belong to the family Columidae. For a small village like Hillsboro, such diversity is unusual. In addition to the whitewing, mourning doves are common, although these hang out in the desert shrubs and mesquites around town more than in the large trees in town. Mourning doves, too, are migratory, and banding studies over the years indicate that the group that summers here probably goes south in the winter, to be replaced by migrants who winter further north and consider southern New Mexico winter range. It is possible, of course, that a few mourning doves, like whitewings, are non-migratory and stay yearlong.

Another native columbid is the diminutive Inca Dove. This dove is perhaps a little smaller than a robin. It's feathers have buff tips that make it look as if it had fish scales covering its body. Its call is familiar around Hillsboro—a two note coo-coo, repeated over and over. It can often be seen on the ground seeking seeds and small gravel.

The fourth native columbid that occurs sporadically in town is the band-tailed pigeon. This is a larger bird, almost as big as a domestic pigeon. It nests in the conifer forests up on the Black Range and visits Hillsboro in flocks, especially when mulberries are ripe. These flocks come into town during daylight, feed, then usually fly back to the mountain to roost.

A little native dove that rarely shows up here is the Mexican ground dove. I've seen only one in the five years we've lived here. Its about the same size as the Inca dove and similar in color, but it has a stubby tale. Its call, which is rarely heard here, is more of a guttural growl than a coo.

The final wild dove that has become common in Hillsboro over the past decade is the Eurasian collared dove. This one looks like a pale version of the whitewing, or perhaps the bandtail, but it lacks the whitewing,s diagnostic lateral white crescents. Its call is a ongoing ryhmic ca-coooo-coo repeated many times. Its tone varies little and ends with a downward emphasis, which makes the bird sound depressed. This is an exotic that entered the U. S. in the Caribbean and has rapidly expanded its range. I don't remember seeing one until my second or third year in Hillsboro. It now rivals the whitewings in numbers in town.

So, to summarize, Hillsboro commonly has four native and one wild exotic columbid. These are:

White-winged dove. Gray. Adults have a royal purple cape. White repeated "who cooks for you."

Mourning dove. Fairly uniformly brown with black spots on back. Little other color. No wing marks. Call a elongated cooo (with rising inflection, coooo, coo, coo, coo (declining inflection).

Inca Dove. Smaller than either whitewing or mourning dove. Ruddy brown with "scales" over entire body. Call "coo-coo" repeated many times over.

Band-tailed pigeon. Larger than the whitewings. Blue-gray color with a dark band across the end of tail feathers. A narrow black crescent around back of head. Call seldom heard in town but fairly common in the forests above town. It is a guttural growl much like that made by a domestic pigeon.

Mexican ground dove. Seldom seen. Same size as Inca dove, but with a very stubby tail.

Eurasian collared dove. Common in Hillsboro. Intermediate in size to whitewing and band-tailed pigion. Usually paler in color than either, although

varies considerable in coloration. Has same black crescent around back of head as the bandtail. Call an ongoing, depressing, ca-cooo, coo.

A final point of interest is the apparent lack of domestic pigeons, a species that becomes a nuisance in most urban areas. You have to wonder why they haven't found us. Maybe the field is just too crowded for pigeon-like birds for the "rock dove" to make it hear. Let us hope so.