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Author(s): Musgrave, Maria A.

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Los Alamos Living Nature

What do Owls, Salamanders, Flycatchers and Cuckoos Have in Common?

By Maria Musgrave, LANL Wildlife Management Intern

Los Alamos National Laboratory sits on a beautiful and unique landscape that provides important protected habitat to many species, including a few that are federally-listed as threatened or endangered. These species are the Jemez Mountains Salamander, the Mexican Spotted Owl, the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo, and the New Mexico Meadow Jumping Mouse. Part of the job of the Laboratory's wildlife biologists is to survey for these species each year and determine what actions need to be taken if they are found. The Endangered Species Act was passed in 1973 with the intention of protecting species whose populations have fallen to an unsustainable number. For each plant or animal that is listed in New Mexico, wildlife biologists have to decide where there is suitable habitat to survey. Just because the habitat exists does not mean that the species

will be found there, so a biologist who has undergone training and obtained a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must complete presence/absence surveys.



Each spring, Mexican Spotted Owl Surveys are completed in six canyons within Laboratory property. The surveys occur at night: either just after sunset until midnight or a few hours after midnight until sunrise. The Mexican Spotted Owl call is played from a speaker at regular intervals for fifteen minutes while the team listens for a response. During the owl's breeding season, most work in the protected habitat is restricted until biologists have determined that the area is unoccupied. If an area is determined to be occupied,

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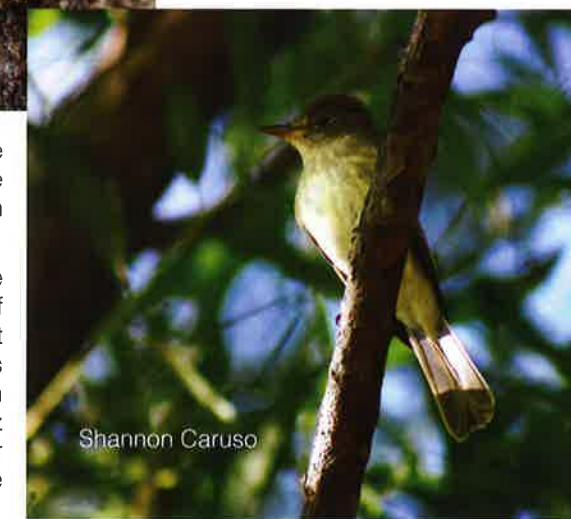
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During the bird breeding season, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher and Yellow-billed Cuckoo surveys are conducted by walking through the areas of potential habitat. The Southwestern Willow Flycatcher would be found in a wetland area, and the Yellow-billed Cuckoo would be found close to the Rio Grande. If a response is heard during breeding season, it could mean that the Laboratory is providing breeding habitat for an endangered species, but biologists have yet to document one during this time.



the restrictions in the area remain in effect until the end of the breeding season. Areas that contain the threatened owl will be checked later in the season to determine if nestlings are present.

Jemez Mountains Salamanders are unique creatures in that they spend the vast majority of their lives underground. When they do surface, it is typically after heavy rains when the ground is wet enough for them to continue breathing through their skin. For this reason, biologists perform Jemez Mountains Salamander surveys from mid-summer to beginning of fall each year in the hopes that the summer monsoons will provide good conditions.

Although many people may not know that there are wildlife biologists who do this kind of work at the Laboratory, surveying for and protecting threatened and endangered species is a crucial part of environmental stewardship. This work not only ensures that the Laboratory is complying with federal laws, but it also puts an emphasis on preserving the amazing ecosystems of Los Alamos.

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