



Pipe Dreams

Audubon groups are saving birds from open-ended PVC mining stakes.

By Jane Braxton Little

LAUREN ABRAMS STANDS in a sea of sagebrush, gloved hands wrapped around a white plastic pipe sticking four feet out of the high-desert dirt. She tugs on the end and out spills loose soil, dead bees, and a carcass with prominent beak and reddish feathers. “Probably a northern flicker,” Abrams mutters.

This is the 162nd uncapped pipe she and her crew of volunteers have pulled on this sweltering August day from the dry hills 230 miles east of Reno, Nevada. Every one they knock over saves lives.

Used for decades by prospectors to mark mining claims on public lands, the open-ended PVC pipes have killed thousands—perhaps millions—of birds, lizards, and insects. Mistaking them for natural hollows, ash-throated flycatchers and dozens of other species are drawn to them for nesting, roosting, and conserving body heat. Once they enter the four-inch openings, the smooth interiors trap them inside. Death by dehydration or starvation soon follows.

Not every pipe has a dead bird, but some have as many as 15, says Ali Chaney, a biologist and member of Lahontan Audu-

bon in Reno. The widespread entrapment of mountain bluebirds is driving a statewide campaign to eliminate uncapped mining stakes. “No one wanted the demise of the Nevada state bird on their hands,” says Chaney.

She worked with Bristlecone and Red Rock Audubon and state mining officials on legislation that gives miners two years to mark their claims with substitute materials, and then allows anyone to pull them up. The partnership between Audubon and the Nevada Mining Association was so effective that the 2009 bill passed unanimously. “It’s a mining-related issue and we all want it fixed,” says Tim Crowley, president of the association.

State wildlife officials wasted no time after the miners’ two-year deadline ended in November. Crews working throughout Nevada have already removed more than 8,000 plastic mining stakes. “It feels good to get out on the ground and make a difference,” says Christy Klinger, a state Department of Wildlife biologist coordinating the post-pulling program in southern Nevada.

With more than an estimated 3.4 million uncapped pipes remaining on public lands throughout the West, the work ahead is daunting. For birders, hunters, and hikers venturing into the remote backcountry where miners stake their claims, there’s immense satisfaction that comes from eliminating one more death trap by knocking down a marker.

TRUE BLUE

Roger Tory Peterson once said that the most impressive avian spectacle was along the Connecticut River, where hundreds of thousands of tree swallows congregated. Recent news would make him proud: The Connecticut River watershed has been named America’s first National Blueway. The designation recognizes and supports exemplary river system stewardship that includes abundant conservation, environmental education, recreation, and economic opportunities. Coursing 410 miles and encompassing 7.2 million acres in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire, the



watershed includes the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge, sub-boreal forests, floodplains, and a globally recognized important wetland. The region, a major migratory pathway, also encompasses 20 Important Bird Areas. “You have habitat for everything from Bicknell’s thrush and blackpoll warbler all the way down to hooded warblers and cerulean warblers,” says Patrick Comins, Audubon Connecticut’s director of bird conservation

and chair of Friends of Conte, a coalition that helped develop the Blueways concept. Says Comins, “Nowhere else in America are there so many people living within such a beautiful and natural landscape.”—*Julie Leibach*

HOLY SHIFT

Warmer springs seem to be linked with changing bird behavior. The Eastern Pennsylvania Phenology Project, led by 2010 Together-Green fellow Diane Husic, is tracking this seasonal change. Husic, a professor, and her students analyzed spring arrival dates of 17 bird species using 40 years of data from citizen scientists (including numbers from eBird) and

found that some species arrive up to three weeks earlier. As a result, there will be “a newer combination of birds that are together at the same time—a new mix for competition” for space and food, she says. Researchers from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology also found that some species have trouble adapting when temperatures prove too hot. Using Christmas Bird Count data, they observed that 59 birds took an average of 35 years to find cooler habitats, explains lead author Frank La Sorte. Changing climates force birds to fly farther, he found. Results from the studies suggest that species benefit from conserved corridors that accommodate early birds.—*Anna Sanders*