

Wild at Sandia

Summer brings new life to Sandia, and sometimes visits from local animals

By Stephanie Holinka

Military bases often provide havens for wildlife. Bases such as Kirtland that are near metropolitan areas often are the largest tracts of sparsely inhabited land available. Few trespassers and limited development creates a *de facto* sanctuary for species looking for a quiet place to live and raise a family.

Sandia's wildlife biologists conduct species surveys of the reptiles, birds, mammals, and plants on the Labs' lands. They survey the local habitat, both the desert grassland terrain and the foothills and canyons of the Manzano Mountains. They also monitor camera stations that photograph wildlife at all hours of the day and night. The cameras are often located near on-site water guzzlers that constantly bubble out fresh water, attracting animal visitors of all kinds as summer progresses and water becomes more scarce.

The wildlife biologists sometimes conduct spotlighting surveys of nighttime animal activity. This summer, for example, they are planning to examine the base bat populations, which sometimes seek shelter in hidden caves and abandoned mines nearby, says wildlife biologist Stephanie Salinas (10331).

Lands at Kirtland serve as a permanent home for some bird species, such as burrowing owls whose unusual nests lay shallowly buried in sandy ground. Other migratory birds include the base in their stop-over plans. Several small seasonal ponds around the Tijeras Arroyo Golf Course provide habitat for wetland birds.

The largest animals exist in remote areas of the Labs, only occasionally crossing paths with those who work in the buildings closer to the public lands that border the Air Force base. In the remote areas such as Madera Canyon and Lurance Canyon, cameras have photographed black bear, mule deer, cougar (mountain lion), and golden eagle, among others.

But a few wild base residents are visible before you even enter the gate. Prairie dogs inhabit the fenced areas visible from the Gibson gate. "Prairie dogs are a big deal here because they provide burrows for other animals, including burrowing owls, and are indicators of grassland health," says Stephanie. On the front door to Stephanie's office is an overblown picture of a well-fed and happy-looking prairie dog.

Small mammals like rabbits, bats, and mice live in even the most populated areas of the Labs. And where there are cute little animals around, the snakes are sure to follow.

Wildlife biologists at Sandia

Stephanie and other members of Sandia's environmental groups respond to calls about unexpected wildlife encounters with Lab employees. They remove animals from work spaces, some as small as rabbits or as large as a Cooper's hawk that flew into an outlying building when the garage door was up.

Biologists at Sandia share data with biologists at



GIVING US THE EYE — A Northern Mockingbird stares intently prior to being released back into the wild. (Photo by Randy Montoya)

Kirtland, who conduct species and habitat research of their own. They coordinate surveys with Kirtland wildlife biologists and partner with other agencies like New Mexico Game and Fish on studies such as a current one examining the potential for black bear corridor use (Interstate-40) between the Manzano and Sandia mountains.

Currently Sandia wildlife biologists Steve Cox (10333) and Jennifer Payne, wildlife technologist Ann Marie Rader (10333), and summer intern Rachel Williams (10333) are participating in the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) program. The MAPS program uses a network of more than 500 public agencies, private organizations, and individual bird banders to monitor ecosystems across the country for the approximately 120 species of land birds in North America during the breeding season. Participants catch, band, and record critical data about birds in their

areas, which are then fed into a nationwide database, giving biologists a large view of bird populations, their health, and migration.

The data collected also helps Sandia maintain compliance with wildlife laws including the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Endangered Species Act, as well as conduct site planning for natural resource conservation.

Keeping the wild animals wild

Because not all the wild animals at Sandia avoid the human-inhabited areas, Sandia's wildlife biologists conduct informational meetings and seminars with building and facilities managers to advise them on issues such as unexpected office visits from bats and snakes, and about unexpected migratory bird nests.

"Usually," Stephanie says, "when animals are found in office buildings, they are relocated to a

more remote area and set free." But if birds build nests near business space at the Labs, she says, often those nests are left in place until the hatchlings leave the nest, and then the nest is removed by a trained wildlife biologist.

Stephanie points out that sometimes people at the Labs feed the cute furry animals near their offices, encouraging those animals to remain in people-populated areas. But an abundance of furry friends like these lead rattlesnakes and other predators into Sandia's populated areas, causing sometimes tense meetings between Lab employees and the locals. (See "Encourage wildlife to stay on the wild side" for tips on how to avoid encouraging animals to invade your work area.)

Encourage wildlife to stay on the wild side

Usually wild animals stay away from humans and try to avoid human contact. However, sometimes we unintentionally invite these animals into our work area. When wild animals can get to human food and refuse, they lose their fears and become comfortable around us, leading to conflict. Follow these tips to avoid encouraging animals to invade your work area.

• **Never feed wildlife**, including wild rabbits, who may attract rattlesnakes to work areas.

- **Never attempt to capture or touch wildlife.**
 - **Don't feed birds or feral cats.**
 - **Store your lunch and snacks inside a building or vehicle inaccessible to animals.**
 - **Close unattended storage spaces**, equipment, room doors, and trash bins.
 - **Put trash in appropriate cans and bins.**
- To report unusual behavior of wildlife within the developed areas of the site, call Telecon at 844-4571 or Stephanie at 845-7711.



A BANDING OF BIRDS — (clockwise from top left), Steve Cox (10333) inspects a mist net, used to catch birds for the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) program.

The small band on this Northern Mockingbird will allow researchers to track the bird's migration, longevity, and overall health if he's caught again.

Steve Cox, using a special tool, gently places a band on a bird's leg.

Jennifer Payne (10333) blows the feathers aside on this Crissal Thrasher to assess the bird for muscle mass, amount of fat, molt, and parasites.

Photos by Randy Montoya



The bottom row of photos are of various wildlife at Sandia. The center four photos are from motion sensor cameras in the foothills of the Manzano mountains at Sandia/New Mexico. The two outer photos were taken by Sandia employees Gary Bailey (left photo) and Randy Montoya (right photo).

