



U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Avi Kwa Ame National Monument

Birdwatching

Avi Kwa Ame National Monument supports a variety of birds. The Monument lies in the Mojave Desert north of the warmer and wetter Sonoran Desert, west of the higher elevations of the Colorado Plateau, south of the colder Great Basin Desert, and east of the Sierra Nevada. Habitats in the Mojave Desert are often characterized by dominant plant species and these plants are most influenced by elevation. When bird watching in the Monument, it's helpful to focus on the plant communities.

In the low-lying creosote flats, look and listen for Red-tailed Hawk, Loggerhead Shrike, LeConte's Thrasher, Horned Lark, Verdin and Black-throated Sparrow at any time of year. You may encounter Ash-throated Flycatchers in the spring and summer if there are yuccas present for nesting, Brewer's Sparrows pass through regularly during migration. Sagebrush Sparrows can be found in the winter in the sparsest-looking desert. At certain times of year, impressive numbers of sparrows sweep across the desert floor in mixed groups.



Moving higher up and into washes, you'll notice more catclaw acacias, mesquites and desert willows. Washes can be excellent places to look for Costa's Hummingbird, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Crissal Thrasher, Rock and Cactus Wren, Phainopepla, Verdin, Black-throated Sparrow and House Finch year-round. Various sparrows can be encountered throughout the year, though White-crowned Sparrow can be abundant during migration and winter. The Phainopepla is attracted to these washes because acacias and mesquites often host the parasitic desert mistletoe which produces berries that Phainopeplas

eat. Around steep canyons and slopes, look for high-flying White-throated Swifts and listen for the cascading song of the Canyon Wren.

Joshua Tree woodlands are exciting to go birding in. Although called trees, these are large yuccas are not technically trees; however, they function in the environment in similar ways. Many birds nest in them, including Red-tailed Hawks, Great Horned Owl, American Kestrel, Gilded Flicker and Ladder-backed Woodpecker. Various birds perch on them to survey their environment. Areas around Walking Box Ranch and the Wee Thump Wilderness Area are great places to bird in this habitat. Around Joshua Trees, also look and listen for Loggerhead Shrike, Cactus Wren, Verdin, Black-throated Sparrow and House Finch. Ash-throated Flycatchers can be common during the spring and summer. Small numbers of Bendire's Thrashers are known to breed in areas with higher densities of grass, including around Walking Box Ranch. Grassy areas also attract Chipping and Brewer's Sparrows in the winter months. Mountain Bluebirds may also favor this habitat during winter months.





At the upper elevations of the McCullough Range are the pinyon and juniper trees woodlands. Pinyon-Juniper woodlands support Red-tailed Hawk, Golden Eagle, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Bushtit, Juniper Titmouse, Crissal Thrasher and Spotted Towhee year-round. During the spring and summer, Gray Vireo, Black-throated Gray Warbler and Scott's Oriole can be heard singing and defending nesting territories. Thrushes like Townsend's Solitaires and bluebirds may visit fruiting junipers in the fall and winter. Pinyon Jays heavily rely on the cones of the pinyon pine for food. The pine, in turn, relies on the jays for dispersing pine seeds.

The biodiversity in these desert ecosystems is sometimes not so obvious. Much of life here is staying away from the heat of the day and conserving energy and water. You may need to be patient listening and looking for occasional movements. Pay attention and you will be rewarded.

Depending on the timing of your visit, birds may be obvious or they may seem few and far between. In general, birds are most easily observed for the first few hours after sunrise and again later in the afternoon. Birds of prey may be most visible mid-morning, when hot rising air gives them thermals to soar and glide in, saving them precious energy. Usually the hotter it is, the less time during the day that birds are active.

Birders visiting the Monument can adopt a landscape lens and look and listen for birds by walking through the habitat. It can be as easy as finding a safe, open place to park and setting out for a walk or listening.

By Alex Harper, Red Rock Audubon Society January 2024