Bird watching is a popular pastime in Custer County. It's suitable for all ages; little or no equipment is needed; and it's a fun activity whether one is a novice or an expert. One guy who knows Valley birds about as well as anyone is Leon Bright, past-president of the Arkansas Valley Audubon Society (AVAS) and a 50-year part-time resident of Custer County. According to Bright, the AVAS birding checklist for the Wet Mountain Valley shows there to be as many as 300 species that have been spotted here. The organization holds two formal bird counts every year here, one typically in August and one in December. The summer census usually identifies just under 100 species, with about half that number tallied in the winter.

This year’s summer birding event in the Wet Mountain Valley will be held on Saturday, Aug. 25. The Valley has several habitats that attract specific bird species: The high mountains; foothills; the Valley floor with its hay fields and shortgrass prairie; and riparian areas of lakes and streams.

One variety easy to spot are the “corvids,” Bright said Custer County has an unusually high number of corvids, which include nine in all: Gray Jay, Steller’s Jay, Blue Jay, Woodhouse’s Scrub-Jay, Clark’s Nutcracker, Piñon Jay, Black-billed Magpie, American Crow and Common Raven. But that’s just the beginning of the list. Bright says a sampling of types (families) of birds and number of species found in summer and fall include Waterfowl – 28; Birds of prey – 16; Shorebirds – 27; Hummingbirds – 4; Warblers – 24 and Sparrows – 22.

In addition, there are a number of bird species of note including the rare Grace’s Warbler, Pine Grosbeak and Dusky Grouse, as well as “charismatic” species like the Golden Eagle, the Lark Bunting (Colorado’s State Bird), and the Mountain Bluebird.

For birders who are moderately serious about the hobby, they’ll have greater enjoyment if they have binoculars or for more advanced birders, a spotting scope (which can be expensive. Also, it would pay to invest in a field guide (“bird book”) and to utilize a checklist. Among the field guide recommended by Bright are as follows:

The best for beginners is “All About Backyard Birds, Western North America,” Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 2017, $14.95. (There are many others—some too brief, some poorly designed. This one is the best for content compared to cost. Covers 120 species, good for beginners, but it will not have many species found in Custer County.) The best all-round is “Field Guide to the Birds of North America” (7th ed.) National Geographic, 2017, $40. (Covers 1,023 species, but because of its excellent organization it is beneficial even for beginners once they learn how to use it, which is not difficult.) For checklists, AVAS has a 2012 version specific to the Wet Mountain Valley, and there are plans to update it soon. The next best is AVAS’s Checklist of Pueblo Area Birds (2016) which can be on the website below.

Bird enthusiasts take part in one of the regular field trips offered by the Arkansas Valley Audubon Society.
Trib: Custer County Birding (summer)

AVAS’ WMV birding checklist shows about 300 species.

Habitats: High mountains
Foothills
Valley floor-- hay fields, shortgrass prairie
Lake
Streams

Bird species of note:
  Rare: Grace’s Warbler
  Pine Grosbeak
  Dusky Grouse
  Charismatic: Golden Eagle
  Lark Bunting (State Bird)
  Mountain Bluebird

Sampling of types (families) of birds and number of species found in summer and fall:
  Waterfowl - 28
  Birds of prey - 16
  Shorebirds - 27
  Hummingbirds - 4
  Warblers - 24
  Sparrows - 22
  There are several other families of birds I didn’t list. Custer County has an unusually high number of corvids. They are: Gray Jay, Steller’s Jay, Blue Jay, Woodhouse’s Scrub-Jay, Clark’s Nutcracker. Piñon Jay, Black-billed Magpie, American Crow and Common Raven—nine in all.

Equipment: Binoculars [important]
  Field guide (“bird book”) [very important]
  Checklist [useful]
  Spotting scope [for advanced birding, expensive!]

Field guide recommendations:
  Best for beginners: All About Backyard Birds, Western North America, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 2017, $14.95 (There are many others—some too brief, some poorly designed. This one is the best for content compared to cost. Covers
120 species, good for beginners, but it will not have many species found in Custer County.)
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Checklist recommendation: [We have a very few of our WMV 2012 checklists left, need to be updated.] Next best, AVAS’s Checklist of Pueblo Area Birds (2016). Can be copied from AVAS website below.

On-line resources:
Best site about birds and birding: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/ (Cornell Lab of Ornithology). Also very good: http://www.audubon.org/
Binoculars: http://www.audubon.org/gear/binocular-guide
Spotting scopes: http://www.audubon.org/gear/scope-guide

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