

## Searching for the most numerous bird

By Larry Hyslop



The house sparrow may be the most numerous bird species in both Elko and in the United States

As I sit at my desk, watching this winter's first real snowfall for this winter, I am feeling meditative. A friend had recently told me he sees more of those dang collared doves around Elko than any other bird. But what is the most common bird for the Elko area?

No agency or group conducts hard censuses on bird species, so I looked at the data coming from the yearly Elko Christmas Bird Count. This is not a final final answer since a bird must be a year around resident to be counted.

It is not good news. The four most common birds seen during the Christmas Bird Count are all introduced species. They are in order, House Sparrow, European Starling, Rock Dove (Pigeon) and the Eurasian Collared-Dove. Finally, down in fifth place is the native Canada Goose. Naturally, the most common winter bird would be my arch-enemy, the House Sparrow.

So I expanded the question to cover all of Nevada and went to a state-wide source of bird population numbers. The Great Basin Bird Observatory's Nevada Comprehensive Bird Conservation Plan estimates population numbers. I was one of 400 surveyors who went out and checked bird species and numbers in specific habitats to build data for these estimates. Again, this does not give a definite answer since their population data covers only 78 priority species.

First, some general statistics. Their overview states 480 species of birds have been recorded in Nevada, with 252 of those nesting in the state. A large percentage of these are shore and water birds, showing the importance of water sources in our dry state.

Looking through their counts and estimates, I tried to concentrate on bird species more indicative of Elko County's sagebrush landscape. The bird with the highest estimated population is a whopping 7.4 million Brewer's Sparrows. A bird often found nearby is the Sage Sparrow, estimated at 2.9 million birds. This is followed by 1.5 million Sage Thrashers. Other numerous birds that live in our type of habitat are 650,000 Gray Flycatchers and 428,000 Pinyon Jays.

After all the talk, meetings and plans to benefit the Sage Grouse, it is easy to forget that we have a lot of these large grouse. The 2006 estimated Nevada population was 68,000-88,000 birds. From another source, I found Elko County's 2007 population estimates was 37,000-45,000 of those birds. Of course, the worry concerns how their population has fallen by 33% during the last 30-40 years.

Still not satisfied, I did a search for the nation's most common bird. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology states the most common bird in the United States may be the Red-Winged Blackbird. But Marc Marrone, of BIRDTALK and BIRDS USA magazine, states that the most common WILD bird in the United States is the House Sparrow, with an estimated 8 billion. Oh, great!

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