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# Our Diverse Mountain Bird Community – Evergreen Audubon

4-6 minutes

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Over 300 species of birds have been recorded along Bear Creek from the summit of Mount Evans at 14,271 feet down to the confluence with the South Platte River at 5300 feet. In that descent of almost 9000 feet, Bear Creek passes through a remarkable diversity of habitats in less than 35 miles, each with its own assemblage of birds. Here is a sampling of some birds from each group.

## Setting the stage – the main elevational habitat zones



Brown-capped Rosy-Finch (c) Bill Schmoker

In the highest snow-filled couloirs and **alpine tundra** of Mount Evans, flourish **Brown-capped Rosy-Finches**. Endemic to Colorado, southern Wyoming, and northern New Mexico, they

nest up to 14,200 feet, and even in the winter appear to prefer the highest elevations. It is only as a result of the most severe winter storms that we occasionally see them driven down to Red Rocks.

Descending across the tundra, we find **krummholz**, the stunted, wind-blasted upper limit of forest. In this interface of two highly different habitats, the song of the **White-crowned Sparrow** fills the air during breeding season, and **White-tailed Ptarmigan** take refuge here during the winter.

**Spruce-fir forest** can extend from timberline (locally about 11,500 feet) down to almost 9000 feet. During the summer, in this extensive, cool, moist forest, is heard the ethereal song of the **Hermit Thrush**, and one can occasionally find the beautiful, old-growth-loving **Golden-crowned Kinglet**.



Red-naped Sapsucker (c) Bill Schmoker

Dropping down a bit farther, things become more of a mosaic. **Limber pine, bristlecone pine, lodgepole pine, and aspen forests** can all occur from timberline down to 7500 feet. Limber

and bristlecone pines do not attract a wide diversity of birds, though **Clark's Nutcrackers** love the large limber pine seeds; and while lodgepole pine forest attracts a good diversity of species, including breeding **Audubon's Warblers**, the density of birds is low. However, it is the aspen groves and mixed aspen-conifer associations, coupled with a rich understory of shrubs and herbaceous plants, that result in a high diversity of such breeding birds as **Red-naped Sapsucker** and **Violet-green Swallow**.



Western Tanager (c) Rob Raker

Starting at about 9000 feet and dropping all the way down to “the other timberline” – the one where the semi-desert grassland of eastern Colorado begins due to the lack of precipitation – we pick up **Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine forests**. **Western Bluebird** and **Western Tanager** are just two of the colorful species breeding here.

Finally, moving out on to the **plains grassland** we find **Western Meadowlark**.

**That's not all – Just a few more habitats to really make things interesting**





Wilson's Warbler (c) Bill Schmoker

If we stay in close proximity to Bear Creek through this whole loss of elevation we discover a variety of **mountain riparian** habitats composed of lakes, ponds, wetlands, adjacent streams, and willow and alder thickets. **Wilson's Warblers** are at the upper end of this continuum, while **American Dippers** are the lower end. Then, as Bear Creek exits the foothills at Morrison we move into **lowland riparian**, which is dominated by plains cottonwoods. Many bird species use this rich habitat including **Bullock's Oriole** and **Yellow Warbler**.



Virginia's Warbler (c) Bill Schmoker

Scattered throughout the forested mountains are **montane meadows** where **Mountain Bluebirds** and **Vesper Sparrows** forage, nesting in adjacent shrubs and forest.

**Montane shrublands** occur in the foothills and can be dominated by members of the currant family at the upper end

and by mountain mahogany and Gambel oak lower down.

**Green-tailed Towhees** and **Virginia's Warblers** nest here.



Grenadiers (c) Chuck Aid

### **Conclusion**

Currently, about 500 species have been recorded in Colorado, and in our Evergreen backyard we have been able to find over 300 of them. The diversity of habitats is astounding and results in a truly incredible array of birds, and you only need to drive a couple of miles to put yourself in a completely different avian world; or, for that matter, just cross a valley and go from a north-facing slope to a south-facing slope and watch how different the bird species are between one side and the other, and, then, if you pause halfway across, in the riparian corridor at the bottom of the valley, there is still another group! **Incredible!**