



Audubon

Guided by Feathers: Avian Insights of Habitat in Recovery

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Your river, early light, what do you hear?

The meaning of returning flow

What can birds tell us about the resilience of rivers?

- May 2025, Lower San Juan River
- Reservoir retreating, the river returning
- A story of renewal, how life, especially birds, are responding



Clay Hills, Lower San Juan River. Photo: Abby Burk

Upstream – flowing river

Diverse multi-tier vegetation

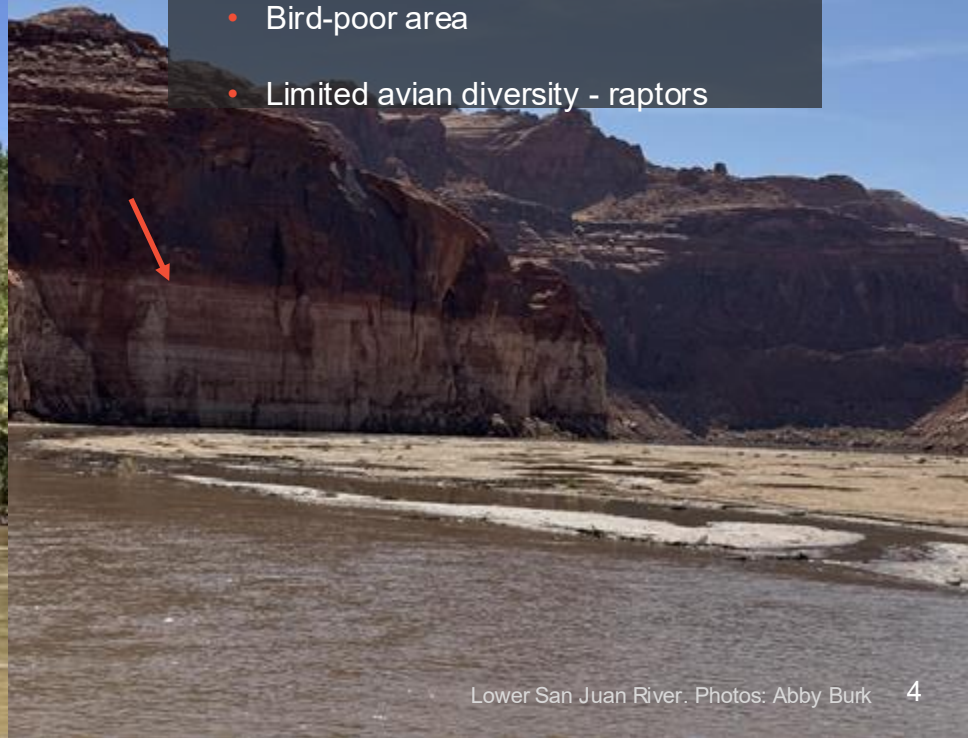
- Cottonwood – willow forest.
- Abundance and diversity of birds.



Downstream - delta

Minimal, if any vegetation

- Bird-poor area
- Limited avian diversity - raptors



Birds Observed — Lower San Juan River, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, May 2025

Bird Type	Species Observed	# of Species
Songbirds / Passerines	Yellow Warbler, Lucy's Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Bell's Vireo, Yellow-breasted Chat, Song Sparrow, Spotted Towhee, Gray Catbird, American Robin, Rock Wren, Canyon Wren, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Flycatcher (sp.), Say's Phoebe, Violet-green Swallow, Cliff Swallow, Tree Swallow, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Black-headed Grosbeak, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Raven, American Dipper	23
Waterfowl & Waterbirds	Mallard, Merganser, Canada Goose, White-faced Ibis, Great Blue Heron, Snowy Egret, Black-crowned Night Heron, Western Grebe, American Coot, Gull sp.	10
Raptors	Osprey, Golden Eagle, Bald Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Cooper's Hawk, Turkey Vulture	6
Upland Game Bird	Gambel's Quail	1
	Total Species Observed	40

Yellow Warbler

“An uncommon breeding resident along the Colorado River below Glen Canyon Dam. Although this species was a common breeding resident along the river prior to the construction of the dam, it apparently does not breed there currently, except along the Escalante River and at Clay Hills Crossing.”

Birds of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Utah and Arizona, 2011. John R. Spence, Charles T. LaRue, John D. Grahame



Black-crowned Night Heron

Observed multiple individuals in 2025

Historic information:

- An uncommon widespread migrant and rare summer straggler along the Colorado River and the Lake Powell shoreline at large shade trees
- The largest single group was 6 individuals on the Colorado River below the dam on 16 May 2010 (G. Nealon).

Birds of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Utah and Arizona, 2011, John R. Spence, Charles T. LaRue, John D. Grahame



Bell's Vireo

- Uncommon
- Dense riverside thickets
- Historically present downstream of RM 50 in Grand Canyon



Lower San Juan River, 1984

Data: Google Earth

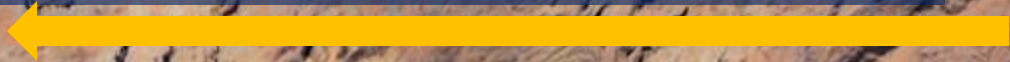
Lake Powell 3,702 feet above sea level, based on a Landsat 5 image from that year. This level was just below the lake's record high of 3,708.34 feet reached in July 1983



Data: Google Earth

Lower San Juan River, March 2020, Lake Powell was approximately 3,600 feet above sea level.

Age class of vegetation + bird abundance and diversity decreases closer to the reservoir delta



Lake Powell

From Glen Canyon to Basin-Scale Solutions

Linking Field Insights to Basin Vision

- What's unfolding in Glen Canyon mirrors the Basin—uncertainty, transition, and opportunity.
- **Post-2026 Vision:** Shift from crisis response to a reliable, adaptable framework for long-term resilience.
- **Integrate:** Tribal inclusion, natural infrastructure, and collaborative problem-solving.
- **Cooperative Conservation Alternative:** A flexible, nature-based approach to stabilize storage and sustain ecosystems and communities



Lower San Juan River. Photo: Abby Burk

A Cooperative Path Forward: From Birds to Basin Solutions

Birds remind us recovery is possible—with flow, flexibility, and cooperation.

- **Multiple Indicators** – Manage to real hydrology, not just reservoir levels.
- **Stewardship Targets** – Integrate ecological metrics.
- **Conservation Reserve** – Flexible, operationally neutral tool benefiting Tribes, habitats, and hydropower.
- **Delta Flows** – Keep binational cooperation alive.



**In Glen Canyon, we heard
the river sing again—
and the birds answered.**



Keep in Touch



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Cathedral in the Desert. Photo: Abby Burk