

BIRD HABITATS AND MIGRATION CORRIDORS

Southeastern Arizona, including the Santa Cruz Valley, is unsurpassed among North American birdwatching, or birding, regions. A major birding magazine rated it second among bird watching destinations in the United States. The diversity and rarity of bird species in southeastern Arizona owes to the available range of elevations and habitats. The affinities of the region to the Sierra Madre Occidental of Mexico make it the northern extent of several Mexican species. Riparian areas harbor nesting neotropical migrants such as common black-hawk, northern beardless-tyrannulet, and broad-billed hummingbird. Mid-elevation deserts and grasslands host birds such as varied bunting, Cassin's sparrow, and Montezuma quail. Sky Islands draw buff-breasted flycatchers, magnificent hummingbirds, and elegant trogons. Of the 36 species of raptors (birds of prey) that nest in Arizona, 31 do so in the Santa Cruz watershed. The north-south trending Santa Cruz Valley is also a major migratory corridor for species that winter in the tropics and nest north of the Mexican border. Over 400 bird species are found annually in the Santa Cruz Valley, and the region has 20 of the 50 stops on the Southeastern Arizona Birding Trail.

Description of Theme

Important Birding Sites and Habitats

The three leading national books on birdwatching sites in the United States include as among the most exciting destinations to birding in the United States: Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, Madera Canyon, Mount Lemmon, the Patagonia area along Sonoita Creek (including The Nature Conservancy's Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve, Sonoita Creek State Natural Area, Patagonia Lake State Park, Patagonia Rest Stop, and Paton's Birder Haven), Sabino Canyon, Saguaro National Park (West), and Sycamore Canyon. Of the 50 recommended birding stops on the Southeastern Arizona Birding Trail, 20 are in the proposed National Heritage Area.

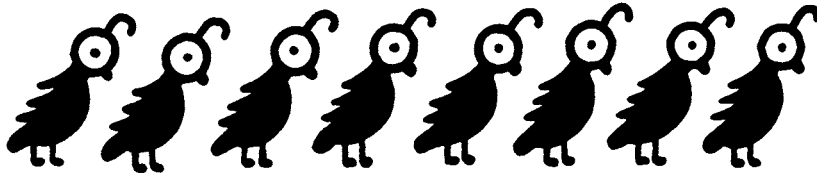
The Audubon Society, as the Partner Designate for Bird Life International, is working to identify a network of sites across the United States that provide critical habitat for birds. This effort, known as the Important Bird Areas Program, identifies those places that are critical to birds during some part of their life cycle (breeding, wintering, feeding, migrating). To date, nine sites have been identified in southeastern Arizona, and three of these are in the proposed National Heritage Area (Santa Rita Mountains, Sabino Canyon, and United States/Mexico borderlands of the upper Santa Cruz watershed). These are of national importance, because they include some of the most important bird habitats in the United States.

Southeastern Arizona provides birders with a list of specialty species that includes birds rarely or never found north of the Mexican border except in this region. The proposed National Heritage Area is a major destination for birders who want to include these on their life lists. Some of the most highly sought species on this list include the common black-hawk, gray hawk, Montezuma quail, whiskered screech-owl, cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl, buff-collared nightjar, violet-crowned hummingbird, broad-billed hummingbird, blue-throated hummingbird, magnificent hummingbird, elegant trogon, green kingfisher, gilded flicker, Arizona woodpecker, greater pewee, buff-breasted flycatcher, northern beardless-tyrannulet, dusky-capped flycatcher, tropical kingbird, thick-billed kingbird, sulphur-bellied flycatcher,

rose-throated becard, Mexican jay, bridled titmouse, painted redstart, red-faced warbler, rufous-winged sparrow, and yellow-eyed junco.

Migration Routes

The Santa Cruz Valley is a major north-south riparian flyway for birds and bats. Migrations occur in spring (late March-mid May) and fall (September-November). About 200 bird species migrate in the spring, including most of the hummingbirds (16 species), the largest number in the nation. Migration occurs over a broad front. Apart from the main flyway, which consists of large tracts of connected riparian habitat, there are oases that represent desirable but disjunct habitat. These include, among others, Harshaw Creek, Sabino Canyon, Sonoita Creek, Tanque Verde Creek, Agua Caliente Creek, Madera Canyon, Cañada del Oro Wash, Gardner Canyon, and Potrero Wetlands (Las Lagunas). With its rich riparian areas, unique desert habitats, diverse canyons, and extensive Sky Island landscapes, this area provides an important migratory corridor for millions of subtropical migrants and large numbers of wintering and migrating waterfowl.



Distinctiveness of Theme

No existing National Heritage Area has this as a theme. With over 300 days a year of sunny skies and mild winters, this is a birder's paradise. Over 400 bird species are found annually in the area, and some 30 of these can be seen here and virtually nowhere else in the nation. A recent study by the University of Arizona found that the top tourist attractions in the Tucson region are birdwatching and other nature-experience destinations, and a 2001 survey by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concluded that, "bird watching is bigger than golf as a tourism and economic impact in Southern Arizona." As the top nature tourism activity in the nation, birding fuels the economic viability of related items and industries such as subscriptions to birding magazines, books on birding, binoculars, clothes, maps, nature-catering lodgings (which provide early breakfasts, sack lunches, advice on destinations, bird feeders), bird food and feeders, and other local enterprises. The presence of publicly accessible resources such as national, state, county, and city parks, preserves, public camp grounds, designated trails, scenic landscapes, riparian areas, water bodies, nature-based museums and gardens, annual events, and other businesses and organizations all add to the attraction of visiting a birding designation, as well as to the economic growth of the region.

Related Resources

The Tucson Audubon Society has identified 37 top birding spots in the valley that are open to the public (see Chapter 3). Birding tourism in this region is both domestic and international in origin, with visitors coming from every other state, and many parts of the world. Inns and

bed-and-breakfasts that cater specifically to birdwatchers dot the landscape. They often offer special resources such as bird feeders, advice on destinations, early breakfasts, and sack lunches. Annual birding events in the region include the Fiesta de los Aves and Annual Christmas Bird Count in Patagonia, the Festival of Hummingbirds and Great Backyard Bird Count in Tucson, and the Tucson Audubon Birdathon throughout southeastern Arizona.

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