

The Texas Border Draws Frequent Fliers



Michael Stravato for The New York Times

The Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge draws bird-watchers.

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ELEVEN in the morning is not the best time of day to start [birding](#). But when my plane landed at that hour in the Rio Grande Valley, reputedly one of the best places for bird-watching in the country, I just couldn't wait.

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Driving 15 minutes from the McAllen airport to Edinburg Scenic Wetlands, I scored immediately, notching ringed kingfishers, blue-gray gnatcatchers, black-necked stilts, several varieties of herons, circling ospreys and ducks by the dozens before noon.

“I can easily get 50 to 60 species in a day,” Gabe De Jong, a park naturalist, told me inside Edinburg’s glass-walled interpretive center. The center, filled with wildlife exhibits, is a good place for a casual birder like me to get her bearings in south [Texas](#)’s birding mecca.

The Lower Rio Grande Valley is perhaps the last place where you might consider communing with nature. Where it isn’t plotted into RV parks serving northern retirees who come for the warmth and proximity to cheap prescription drugs in Mexico, the valley is sectioned into shopping malls or

grapefruit and onion fields. Among nonbirders, that same border is better known for illegal human migration than bird migration.

Nonetheless, this narrow green hem has become one of the nation's top spots for bird-watching. A strip of native riparian vegetation (only 5 percent of the original woodlands remains) is a vital flyway for an estimated 500 bird species, both resident varieties and those migrating between North and Central or South America.

In September the last of nine valley parks that comprise the World Birding Center opened on South Padre Island near the mouth of the Rio Grande. The center preserves over 10,000 acres for animals — from ocelots to orioles — via sites strung along the 120 miles of river between the town of Roma and South Padre. A partnership among Texas Parks and Wildlife, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the nine valley communities aims to promote [eco-tourism](#); already wildlife watchers account for \$125 million in commerce.

Most of those are birders. According to the Fish and Wildlife Service, one in five Americans is a bird-watcher, more than fishermen and hunters combined.

I discovered birding on a previous trip, as a hiker enchanted by the anthropomorphic kingdom of jays that are gloriously green instead of dull blue; fierce mohawk-coiffed kingfishers chasing mates along the riverbanks; screeching rooster-size chachalacas bullying in the brush; and black-masked great kiskadees that blow their cool by singing like squeaky toys.

With a rental car, some binoculars and the tenacity to look beyond the billboards advertising surgical weight-loss procedures, I staged a four-day road trip along the south Texas border in March, stopping at all nine of the World Birding Center sites — easily accessible along I-83 — with another wildlife preserve thrown in.

Though I traveled solo, I rarely bird watched alone. Birders are always eager to share their finds. At Estero Llano Grande State Park, the second World Birding Center I visited after Edinburg, I bumped into Colin Downey and Kharli Rose of Sarasota, Fla., staking out a hummingbird feeder. “We think

it's a buff-bellied," whispered Ms. Rose, a photographer, training her two-foot-long lens on the bird. They helped me identify Inca doves with feathers that look like scales and the more brilliantly colored ruby-throated hummingbirds. "Once you know what you're looking for, you'll find it everywhere," Ms. Rose said.

Except, that is, for the rose-throated becard, an elusive bird known to nest farther upriver near Roma, which is where I was headed the next morning. Once the westernmost steamboat port on the river, Roma has declined since the boats stopped running in 1907. Its old buildings are mostly vacant. The World Birding Center section here occupies one and includes a nearby deck on the riverbank bluffs 120 feet above the Rio Grande. There pelicans glided at eye level, three ospreys spiraled after prey and a couple of children splashed on the opposite bank in Ciudad Miguel Aleman, all under the watch of a Border Patrol agent in an observation post.

The United States Border Patrol is a constant presence along the river, and in light of the recent drug-related violence on the Mexican side, a welcome, if disquieting sight. An armed agent in full camouflage patrolling on foot was just one sighting on a Rio Grande canoe trip offered by the Roma birding center that began about 14 miles upriver and traveled back down for five. Strong headwinds challenged our group of 10 paddlers and two guides. The water was swift, cool, clear and quite shallow, requiring quick action to avoid sandbars and submerged rocks. Though we were assured no one had ever tipped, one canoe swamped within the first five minutes, forcing a pair of paddlers to complete the two-hour trip soaking wet.

"We don't advertise this as a birding trip," said Erv Nichols, a Fish and Wildlife Service volunteer who led us along a rural stretch of river past reedy banks, colossal Montezuma cypress trees, three kinds of kingfishers and a peregrine falcon poaching a blackbird midair for breakfast. "It's usually people who want to be on the water and see wildlife."

Lunch for the chachalacas, vibrant green jays and orange-hooded Altamira orioles consisted of peanut butter smeared on feeders at Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, about 47 miles back downriver from Roma. The 760-acre

state park is off limits to cars, but trams ferry visitors to various trailheads, bird blinds and sites like the two-story hawk viewing tower. On my circuit a baby javelina suckled its mother as she scavenged birdseed, and several cyclists reported seeing a mother bobcat and cub streaking across the road.

The presence of bobcats, shy around humans, indicates just how wild this site really is. Others are urban parks, including the 20-acre Quinta Mazatlan, the preserve in McAllen, where the airport control tower is visible beyond the fence. Despite the proximity of civilization, a tangle of native trees that make up the Tamaulipan thorn forest and regular feeding stations drew an array of colorful birds, including a shy white-tipped dove, with a bluish head, pink stockings and a soft call that sounds like blowing on a Coke bottle.

“You’ve got the airport and the mall right across the street,” said the Quinta Mazatlan manager, Colleen Hook, as a golden-fronted woodpecker drilled away on a palm trunk over our heads. “We’re a sanctuary surrounded by cement.”

As rewarding as the [World Birding Centers](#) are, one of the wildest places in the valley remains the unaffiliated [Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge](#), a 2,088-acre riverfront reserve in nearby Alamo, where I stopped one evening to catch the sunset from the levee. Like the Rio Grande canoe trip, there’s more to admire here than birds. The riparian forest for one, with Spanish moss draping cedar elm, Texas ebony and Mexican ash trees. The moss tendrils give the forest a magical quality, compounded by the collie-size bobcat that I glimpsed 20 yards up a trail.

The newest center, the South Padre Island World Birding Center, straddles the developed world and the wild. It faces the expansive Laguna Madre Bay, the inland waterway that separates the barrier island from the mainland, but neighbors the island’s waste water treatment plant. The utility discharges fresh water into the center’s wetlands, drawing waterfowl and migrants coming and going over the Gulf of Mexico.

Famous for its spring break scene, South Padre thrives on tourism, but the eco-minded view the outpost as a way to reach broader audiences. “We’re trying to capture the interest of the general population, get them hooked on

birding and be a gateway to other centers,” said the manager, Cate Ball, whose facilities include a milelong boardwalk over the marshes and along the bay. “Aside from the learning aspect, the boardwalk provides a spiritual place to be, to get away and think.”

That proved true in my case. After a quick trip up the five-story observation tower for Gulf-to-bay views, I hustled back before the building closed at 5 p.m. Between then and sundown about 90 minutes later, I walked a slow, engrossing mile along the boardwalk. An inky blue heron fished at my feet below a pier. Clusters of roseate spoonbills upstaged the cattails. A fluffy snowy egret was near enough to fill the frame of my camera without zooming the lens.

“You can get so close to the birds here,” marveled a fellow birder, Jane Krisher, a retiree from Berea, Ohio, who pointed out a reddish egret. “He’s a clown. When he gets something he dances around.”

Back at the McAllen airport the next day, a Transportation Security Administration agent searched my carry-on, evidently suspicious of my binoculars, which were swiped, peered through and run again through the X-ray machine.

“So you’re a birder,” the agent concluded. “Where do you see birds around here?”

IF YOU GO

American Airlines, Continental, Delta and United offer connecting service to McAllen-Miller International Airport in McAllen, Tex. A rental car is about \$85 for four days from Budget.

The 16-room Alamo Inn (801 Main Street, Alamo; 956-782-9912, alamoinnsuites.com), with rates from \$45, is operated by Keith Hackland, a [birding](#) guide, and houses a birding-focused bookstore.

On South Padre Island, the six-room bed-and-breakfast Redfish Inn (207 West Aries Drive; 956-761-2722; redfishinn.com), with rates from \$125, offers

wildlife tours by boat as well as excellent birding from the porch of the waterfront inn.

World Birding Center headquarters are at Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park (2800 South Bentsen Palm Drive, in Mission; 956-584-9156; worldbirdingcenter.org). Most of the centers charge fees of between \$3 and \$5. Both Bentsen-Rio and Resaca de la Palma State Park, a site near Brownsville, offer bikes for rent for \$5 for four hours.

Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge is on Highway 281 in Alamo (956-784-7500; fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas). Admission is \$3.