

**Finding Birds
in
Southwest Arizona**

**by
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Introduction

Why Southwest Arizona?

Southwest Arizona is a diverse area of desert, agriculture, riparian corridors, lakes, and urban areas. This book covers an area roughly bounded by Lake Havasu and Yarnell in the north, and by Yuma and Organ Pipe National Monument in the south. It's a land of dramatic landscapes with beautiful cacti and flowers, colorful reptiles, and unique mammals. The checklist identifies 431 bird species; a dedicated birder might find some 300 of these during the course of a good year. Most of the area is close to sea level, but a couple of mountainous locales at Yarnell and Organ Pipe NM add some great higher-elevation species.

The largest city in this area is Yuma, with some 200,000 residents in the winter months. It has all the requisite amenities for travelers. Within the city limits, the Yuma West Wetlands is a beautiful park that boasts a bird list of 200 species. It's a fine spot to look for residents like Ladder-backed Woodpecker and Crissal Thrasher, breeders like Costa's Hummingbird and Blue Grosbeak, and migrants like Willow Flycatcher and Western Tanager. Other larger towns in southwest Arizona which offer motels and dining are Parker, Wickenburg, Gila Bend, and Ajo.

The Colorado and Bill Williams Rivers, Martinez Lake, Lake Havasu, golf course ponds, feedlot waste ponds, irrigated agricultural fields, and sewage lagoons provide an unexpected watery habitat in this desert region. The lakes regularly turn up Common and Red-throated Loons, Barrow's Goldeneye, three teals, both scaup, and have yielded gems such as Black Scoter, Long-tailed Duck, and Yellow-billed Loon. Search for seven species of terns and seventeen gulls. Shorebird variety is even more exciting, with 28 species spotted most years. Vagrants such as Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Ruddy and Black Turnstones, golden-plovers, Red Knot, and Ruff show up on a regular basis.

Search the agricultural lands of the Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT), Vicksburg, Yuma County, and the Gila River Valley during the winter for a fine array of raptors. Especially in gopher-rich alfalfa fields, look for locally abundant Ferruginous Hawk and the occasional Golden Eagle. Prairie Falcons are joined by Peregrines, and some years see an influx of Merlins.

The deserts to the north, east, and south of Yuma are at their most beautiful following a wet winter when they are ablaze with purple sand verbenas, primrose, and white ajo lilies. Organ Pipe National Monument has an

equally impressive display of Arizona poppies, penstemons, and Mariposa lilies. Secretive LeConte's, Crissal, Bendire's, and Curve-billed Thrashers share this land with showy Scott's Orioles and noisy Gilded Flickers.

At the northern edge of the vast Cabeza Prieta NWR and Barry Goldwater Range (both part of the Sonoran Desert) are several oasis which pull in a spectacular variety of birds during migration. Dateland, the Aztec Feedlot, Spot Road Farm, and Palomas Ranch have seen an incredible array of vagrants. Keep an eye out for rarities such as Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Broad-winged and Harris's Hawks, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Sprague's Pipit, Wood Thrush, Varied Thrush, three longspurs, Hooded Warbler, Ovenbird, and Painted Bunting.

The weather is clear and warm most of the year, but it does get a trifle hot in the summer. Even though it really is a dry heat, sane birders head to the California coast or the mountains of northern Arizona from July through September. The rest of us look for juvenile seabirds and waders irrupting from the south, wandering boobies, and for vagrant shorebirds passing through from the north.

Seasonal Birding Calendar

- **January** – look for raptors and our first breeders
 - Falcons hunt in urban and agricultural areas.
 - Hawks are common in agricultural areas, especially south of Yuma, in the CRIT lands, in the Arlington Valley.
 - Resident hummingbirds and owls begin to breed.
 - Search for uncommon and rare waterfowl and gulls along the Colorado River, at Cibola NWR, and on Lake Havasu.
- **February** – thrashers sing; first migrants appear
 - This is the best month to find Crissal Thrasher (brushy areas along the Colorado River and the Yuma West Wetlands) and LeConte's Thrasher (east of Tacna and west of Buck-eye).
 - At the end of February and throughout March, look for migrating Sage Thrasher in the desert and sagebrush flats.
 - Watch for the first migrating Violet-green Swallows, especially along the Colorado River and at Organ Pipe NM.
- **March** – most waterfowl leave; migrants return
 - Look for migrating Swainson's Hawks in the agricultural fields south of Yuma and at Spot Road Farm.
 - Look for Scott's, Bullock's, and Hooded Orioles.
 - Western Kingbirds are back by mid-month.

- Warbling and Bell's Vireos, and White-winged Doves return by the end of the month.
- **April** – migrants peak and residents breed
 - Migration peaks during the last week--best places to check are riparian areas like the Yuma West Wetlands, Betty's Kitchen, 'Ahakhav, Quitobaquito Springs, and the Hassayampa River Preserve.
 - This is the peak of our local breeding activity. Check riparian washes and Kofa Queen Canyon for desert residents; Yarnell is the place to look for mountain breeders.
- **May** – migration still strong, especially during the first two weeks
 - Continue to check riparian areas like the Yuma West & East Wetlands, Mittry and Martinez Lakes, and Bill Williams NWR.
 - Empids are still on the move, including newly arriving Willow Flycatchers.
 - Especially towards the end of the month look for eastern vagrants like Ovenbird and Chestnut-sided Warbler in riparian areas, at watering holes, and at the eastern desert oases.
- **June** – last of the migrants and vagrants pass through
 - Brown-crested Flycatchers are common at Organ Pipe National Monument, along the Bill Williams River, and at Hassayampa River Preserve.
 - Look for the occasional Yellow-billed Cuckoo in Yuma County and for breeding individuals at the Bill Williams NWR.
 - Search for eastern vagrants early in the month, especially at desert oases like Dateland, Spot Road Farm, and Ajo 's Bud Walker Park.
- **July and August** – shorebirds and hummingbirds return south
 - Look for regularly occurring and rare shorebirds in flooded agricultural fields in the Colorado and Gila River Valleys, and at Paloma Ranch.
 - Check sludge/slop (cattle waste water) ponds at Aztec, in the Dome Valley, at Paloma Ranch, and at Vicksburg.
 - The feeders at the Hassayampa River Preserve and the flowering bushes at the Yuma West Wetlands are good for breeding and migrating hummingbirds.
 - Roseate Spoonbill, Tricolored Heron, and Reddish Egret are just a few of the vagrant waders to watch for in flooded fields, ponds, and waterways.

- **Late August and September** – fall migration
 - Return to the same riparian areas which were good for spring migration. The birds may not be as concentrated, since they tend to migrate over a longer time span, but the variety is often better.
 - Especially in late September, check Spot Road Farm and Dateland (and other dessert oases) for rare migrants and vagrants like Northern Parula, Palm Warbler, Varied Thrush, and Dickcissel. This is also a good time to scan for rare shorebirds.
 - In the middle of September, look for Sabine’s Gull at any of the area lakes, from Lake Havasu to the Aztec slop ponds.
- **October** – vagrants and returning winter residents
 - Continue to check the desert oases like Dateland and Ajo for vagrants like Rufous-backed Robin, Varied Thrush, Tropical Kingbird, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. And keep looking through shorebird flocks for vagrants.
 - Sapsuckers and other wintering birds return.
 - Huge flocks of migrating Swainson’s Hawk may stop for the gopher feast in agricultural fields south of Yuma and in the Palo Verde area.
 - Migrating scoters at Solar and Power Pond, and area lakes
 - Look for eastern warblers like American Redstart, Hooded and Black and White Warblers, Northern Waterthrush, and Northern Parula at Dateland, the Yuma West Wetlands, and at the Hassayampa River Preserve.
- **November** – waterfowl and raptors return; check out gulls
 - Check for Mountain Plover and Ferruginous Hawk in the alfalfa fields south of Yuma, at Spot Road Farm, and in the Parker (CRIT) Valley.
 - Look for uncommon and rare gulls along the Colorado River, at the Lower River Road Ponds, and at Lake Havasu.
- **December** – search for rare waterfowl; help out with a Christmas Bird Count
 - Look for Tundra and Trumpeter Swans in the Arlington Valley and at refuges (Cibola, Imperial, and Bill Williams).
 - Look for three species of scoters, Barrow’s Goldeneye, Greater Scaup, and four species of loons on Lake Havasu
 - Look for Gray Vireo and Long-eared Owl in lush desert washes in the Tinajas Altas range and at Kofa NWR
 - Join a Christmas Bird Count, which usually run from mid-December through early January.

Target Birding in Southwest Arizona

Visitors to a new area often wish to know where and when they can find a particular species. For example, where can I find that Black Rail, and when is the best time to look for it? The chart below indicates the most likely locations and seasons to find some of the more sought-after target species.

This checklist is in American Ornithological Society order (June 2021).

Status codes:

C – Common, usually seen 3 out of every 4 visits

U – Uncommon, usually seen only 1 out of every 4 visits

R – Rare, usually not seen, and may be absent some years

SPECIES	LOCATION(S)	SEASON	STATUS
Cinnamon Teal	Imperial NWR, Mittry Lake	summer	U
Hooded Merganser	Cocopah RV Resort	winter	C-U
Ring-necked Pheasant	Southwest of Yuma	spring	U
Clark's Grebe	Martinez Lake, Mittry Lake	summer	C
Ruddy Ground Dove	Wellton, Palo Verde area	winter	R
Greater Roadrunner	Yuma West Wetlands	all year	C
Common Poorwill	Kofa NWR, Organ Pipe NM	summer	C
Costa's Hummingbird	Yuma West Wetlands, Organ Pipe NM	spring	C
Black Rail	Mittry Lake	spring	C
Ridgway's Rail	Mittry Lake, Bill Williams	spring	C
Sandhill Crane	Cibola NWR	winter	C
Mountain Plover	Spot Road Farm, Ag fields south of Yuma, CRIT lands	winter	U-R
American White Pelican	Martinez Lake, Bill Williams NWR	winter	U
Brown Pelican	Martinez Lake	summer	U-R
Least Bittern	Mittry Lake	summer	C
Neotropic Cormorant	Cocopah RV Resort	all year	U-C
Osprey	Colorado River and Mittry Lake	winter	C
Bald Eagle	Bill Williams NWR, Cibola	winter	U
Ferruginous Hawk	Ag fields south of Yuma, CRIT lands	winter	C
Elf Owl	Kofa Queen Canyon, Organ Pipe NM	spring	C
Burrowing Owl	Yuma, Spot Road Farm	spring	C
Red-naped Sapsucker	Mittry Lake, Ajo, Dateland	winter	U-C
Ladder-backed Woodpecker	Yuma West Wetlands	all year	C

SPECIES	LOCATION(S)	SEASON	STATUS
Gilded Flicker	Kofa Queen Canyon, Organ Pipe NM	spring	C
Merlin	Cibola NWR, Mittry Lake	winter	U
Peregrine Falcon	Yuma area, Cibola NWR	winter	U
Prairie Falcon	Spot Road Farm	winter	U
Gray Flycatcher	'Ahakhav Tribal Preserve	winter	R
Vermilion Flycatcher	Golf courses throughout	winter	C
Thick-billed Kingbird	Hassayampa Preserve	spring	R
Gray Vireo	Tinajas Altas, Kofa NWR	winter	R
Phainopepla	Kofa NWR, Organ Pipe NM, Mittry Lake	spring	C
Canyon Wren	Kofa Queen Canyon, Bill Williams NWR, Organ Pipe	spring	C
Bendire's Thrasher	Kofa NWR	spring	U
Crissal Thrasher	Yuma West Wetlands	spring	C
LeConte's Thrasher	Ave 50E east of Tacna	spring	U
Lawrence's Goldfinch	Spot Road Farm	Fall, winter	U-R
Rufous-crowned Sparrow	Kofa Queen Canyon, Organ Pipe NM	spring	U
Black-chinned Sparrow	Kofa Queen Canyon, Organ Pipe NM	spring	C
Sagebrush Sparrow	Tacna area	winter	U
Abert's Towhee	Yuma West Wetlands	all year	C
Hooded Oriole	Hidden Shores RV Resort Golf Course, Ajo	spring	C
Scott's Oriole	Organ Pipe NM, Kofa Queen Canyon	spring	C
Bronzed Cowbird	Hidden Shores RV Resort Golf Course, Ajo	spring	U
Summer Tanager	Bill Williams NWR, Hassayampa River Preserve	summer	C
Blue Grosbeak	Betty's Kitchen, Growler area	summer	C

Birding in the Desert

Be prepared. There are several sites in this book which are remote desert areas without drinking water—take 2 gallons of water per person per day. Let someone know your schedule, and realize that there is no cell phone coverage in many of these remote areas. Take a good map with you—the line drawings in this book do not show all roads and are not always to scale. You can take a passenger car to Palm Canyon and some sites in Organ Pipe National Monument, but for many desert sites you'll need high clearance or 4-

wheel drive. Understand that sometimes road conditions can change overnight if the road is crossed by flowing washes. If you break down, usually the best course of action is to wait by your vehicle for help.

Summer birding in the desert is best avoided, when daily temperatures often soar to 115° and the birds seem to have disappeared in the shimmering heat waves. Winter is generally beautiful, but always be prepared for cold weather—even snow at the highest elevations. Spring is ideal most of the time, but then you should be prepared for rain, heat, or cold. February and March are great for spring wildflowers after a wet winter. April is the best time for birding in the desert, with residents breeding and migrants moving through the washes and riparian areas.

Watch out for bushes, trees, and cacti with thorns. We have a cactus here called Teddy Bear Cholla—but don't pet it. Carrying a multi-tool is a good idea; it's the best way to remove cactus spines from boots, pant legs, and tender skin.

Cell phone coverage is good in urban areas, but is spotty or totally unavailable in many remote areas.

Especially in April you may encounter rattlesnakes in southwest Arizona. If bitten, seek immediate medical attention.

Rain

Rain is a wondrous occurrence in this area, but it can lead to unexpected hazards. Rarely, you may encounter a wash (rocky stream) that is flowing. Especially if you can't see the bottom, the safest course of action is to not attempt to cross it. Keep in mind that it takes only 6" of flowing water to sweep a man off his feet, and just 24" of water to move a car off its tracks.

Much more common than flowing washes are damaged roadways, levees, and farm roads. Water erosion can leave dangerous holes and washouts large enough to damage a tire or vehicle. Drive slowly on our many levees and farm roads, especially after heavy or extended rains.



*Black-tailed
Gnatcatcher*

Birding on Private Land

Some of the sites listed in this book are on private property. Just because I have described a site in this book does not imply or grant you permission to enter this property. Please bird from public roadways or ask permission to bird private property. Being courteous and asking first will smooth the way for continued access to some very productive sites.

Birding References

Most Arizona bird books focus on the bird-rich areas of southeastern Arizona (3 hours to the east). The best general reference for our area is *Birds of the Lower Colorado River Valley*, by Kenneth Rosenberg, *et al.*, 1991, University of Arizona Press. Although long in the tooth, this is still a great reference.

Of course eBird has a wealth of bird checklists from most of the areas mentioned in this book. And it's also a good resource to find new and interesting areas in which to go birding.

If you have any suggestions or comments about this guide, please send me an e-mail at henry_detwiler@yahoo.com.

Chapter Layout

Chapters within this book are organized in a roughly north to south order. Each chapter is organized in the same way, with descriptions of the most common habitats, target birds you might wish to search for, a general description of the area, one or more maps of the area with numbers that pinpoint birding locations, descriptions of the birding locations themselves, driving directions, and specific site notes for the area.

Under the "Target Birds" heading will be a list of birds which frequent this location that you may wish to search for. Specialty birds (**in bold**) are the more interesting species, often sought after by visitors to this area. Winter covers the months of December through February; spring is March through May; summer is June through August; fall is September through November. *Resident* means the bird is likely to be found at the location year-round, and usually breeds there. *Migration* means the bird is found at the site during the northern migration in March, April, or May, and/or during the southward migration in September, October, and November. *Winter* means the bird winters in the area from December through February.

Under the "Birding Suggestions" are GPS coordinates to the individual sites. If you plug these coordinates into the search box for Google Maps, you'll be taken directly to a map of the area. The descriptions offer ideas on how to

bird the individual sites, and the kinds of birds that frequent the sites in the different seasons.

Under the “Driving Directions” I’ve tried to be as specific as possible, and get you to the birding location in the most direct fashion. However, it is good practice to consult an official road or topographical map, use a car-based navigation system, or use a GPS. Google Maps and other mapping applications are quite useful. A few of the forest and levee roads are prone to wash-outs and flooding during storms, as are some of the bottomland farm roads.

Under “Site Notes” I’ve sometimes identified specific locations where gas, food, or other services are available. Please don’t take these as endorsements of fine dining or good service; they are mentioned here solely as a convenience.

Abbreviations

- Ag - Agricultural
- Ave - Avenue
- BLM - Bureau of Land Management
- BOR - Bureau of Reclamation
- CAP - Central Arizona Project
- CRIT - Colorado River Indian Tribes
- Hwy - Highway
- I-8 – Interstate 8
- I-10 – Interstate 10
- MCAS - Marine Corps Air Station
- NM - National Monument
- N - North, s - South
E - East, W - West
- NWR - National Wildlife Refuge
- P - Parking
- Rd - Road
- St or Str - Street

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Southwest Arizona Map



This map of southwest Arizona shows the general location of birding sites described in the book. Letters match site names in the Table of Contents.

Birding Sites

A – Lake Havasu
B – Bill Williams NWR
C – Parker Area
D – Alamo Lake
E – Date Creek
F – Yarnell
G – Hassayampa
H – Vicksburg Farm
I – Cibola NWR
J – Kofa NWR
K – Palo Verde & Arlington Areas
L – Gila Bend Area
M – Paloma Ranch

N – Spot Road Farm, Dateland,
and Aztec Feedlot
O – Growler Area
P – Gila River Valley and Dome
Valley
Q – Imperial NWR
R – Mittry Lake
S – Yuma Area
T – Raven Butte and Tinajas
Altas
U – Ajo Area
V – Organ Pipe Cactus NM