

Flying High

As bird watching gains in popularity, Texas leads the way with hundreds of species and a statewide trail system.



ORCHARD ORIOLE

Despite having more bragging rights than a 10-gallon hat can hold, Texas has another reason to strut. The state is birthplace to the ecotourism concept of birding trails, which in 15 years has galvanized birders nationwide and spilled over the border to Canada.

Simply put, birding trails are driving routes that string together sighting hot spots for migrant and resident birds. These hot spots can include parks, preserves, wetlands, gardens and even urban centers. The American Birding Association, a nonprofit conservation group dedicated to recreational birding, promotes the development and growth of the drives. Formal and informal routes crisscross North America.

Ideal for avid, casual and accidental birders, the stops vary in habitat offering and pursuit. Even non-birders find persuasion to pull over. Sightseeing, history tracking, wildlife watching, fishing, hiking, cycling, picnicking, camping and canoeing all cozy up with birding.

Bird watching is one of the fastest-growing outdoor pursuits in the nation, with backyard birding increasing its numbers. The most recent U.S. Fish and Wildlife survey indicates 47.7 million Americans watch birds. Doubters need only look at the hundreds of thousands of Internet hits on the nesting cams for hawks, eagles and owls to see that birding spans all walks of life.

In this hectic, technologically connected world, any chance to sit, be quiet and watch has enormous appeal.

In the Beginning

The Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail introduced the avian riches of the Lone Star State to thousands. In 1996, Ted Eubanks and Madge Lindsay pooled their respective expertise in nature tourism and wildlife to guide the Gulf Coast trail into existence.

Texas was a natural place for the concept to get its start. Situated on the Mississippi and Central flyways,

Texas boasts more bird species than any state in the nation. More than 600 species have been identified statewide; more than 450 species frequent the coast. Rare species make appearances, too, with birds normally unseen outside of Mexico and Central America showing up.

On the archetypal trail, boardwalks, garden paths, levees, fishing piers and gulf-washed shores invite discovery. In no time, Spotted Sandpipers, skimmers (the coastal drive's emblem), blue herons, Reddish Egrets, Crested Caracaras, Laughing Gulls, Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Willets, egrets, turnstones, warblers and Indigo Buntings show themselves. Changing seasons and seasonal migrations alter the canvas, sightings and counts.

Fueled by the success of the original trail, the Texas Birding Trails system has grown to cover the state corner to corner, region to region. Companion birding trail brochures and attractive, useful road signage ease point-to-point travel and suggest roadside stops and detours. Brochures identify sightings, seasons and facilities and provide tips and directions.

Hot on the Trail

On a recent trip through Texas, my husband and I plotted a loop from San Antonio Missions National Historical Park through the Hill Country, over to the Gulf Coast along the Rio Grande and then back to San Antonio. This put us on a collision course with three Texas trails: the Heart of Texas (both the east and west legs), Prairies and Pineywoods (west), and the lower portion of the Great Coastal. Whether navigating by personal travel plans or by official birding trails directions, we found our journey brightened by colorful and noisy feathered friends. Although birding wasn't the purpose of our trip, the activity soon invaded our postcard accounts.

My most seismic meeting—the Plain Chachalaca—



TEXAS BLUEBONNETS

BY RHONDA OSTERTAG



GREAT EGRET (ARDEA ALBA)



WHITE PELICANS

came at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. Heard before seen, this bird emits a calm-shattering squawk suitable for nothing smaller than a pterodactyl. With my cap tightened to my ears, I searched for the commotion. In the treetops sat an unassuming bird, no bigger than a partridge. Surely not this fellow, I thought, but another burst of vocals sealed its place in memory.

Green Jays, wild parrots, Scarlet Tanagers, cardinals, orioles and hummingbirds upped the Texas color palette. And alligators, deer and a bobcat also won binocular time. Without trying, I spied birds at San Antonio Missions, historic forts, formal gardens, LBJ Ranch and the Capitol building. Even Brownsville's Gladys Porter Zoo had its interlopers, with nesting egrets and Black-bellied Whistling Ducks. Among the bluebonnets and atop the naked pink granite domes of Enchanted Rocks State Natural Area, birds.

At several park campgrounds where we stayed, designated blinds and feeding stations attracted birds and true birders, who helped fill the gaps in my sorry knowledge base. Most birders were eager to share—and we didn't scare off the object of attention.

Birding Trails Near and Far

The ABA serves as central clearinghouse for birding trail information, maintaining on its Web site a list of trails by state and offering links to information. Like Texas, many states produce colorful companion brochures, and several team wildlife watching with birding. Brochures can be ordered online or picked up at area visitor centers. To find trails at home or places of travel, visit <http://aba.org/resources/birdingtrails.html>.

Planning Your Trip

For more information about Texas birding trails, call Texas Parks and Wildlife at (800) 792-1112 or visit www.tpwd.state.tx.us/hunt_wild/wildlife/wildlife-trails. For trip-planning assistance, contact a local AAA Travel agent or AAA.com/travel. H&A

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