

A Paradise for Bird Watchers In the Verde Valley

On a clear spring morning, a group of birders sets out for the Verde River Greenway. Just minutes up the trail they spot a fiery northern cardinal sitting on a branch. Later, they see mourning doves, a ladder-backed woodpecker, vermilion flycatchers, a red-winged hawk, great blue herons, summer tanagers, a Scott's oriole and, through a scope, an American kestrel eating a lizard.

Although birders have discovered southeastern Arizona, the bird-watching paradise in Sedona and the Verde Valley is still a well-kept secret. The area, which encompasses the communities of Camp Verde, Clarkdale, Cornville, Cottonwood, Page Springs, Jerome and Sedona, offers abundant year-round opportunities for bird watching. Its mild, four-season climate and many miles of riparian habitat along the Verde River Watershed attract nearly a third of the 900 species of birds in the United States and Canada—from the miniature hummingbird to broad-winged raptors.

According to the Northern Arizona Audubon Society, the Verde Valley area offers “tremendous birding opportunities in an extremely compact area. Over a hundred and thirty species of birds are typically seen on one day excursion in May - and all in a traveling distance of less than 50 miles!”

“Most of the neotropical migrants are seen between April 1 and October 1,” notes Virginia Gilmore in her classic book *Birding Sedona & The Verde Valley*. “Verde Valley wintering species typically include species of waterfowl and sparrows, also juncos, kinglets, hermit thrushes and yellow-rumped warblers.”

The Northern Arizona Audubon Society has identified two “important birding areas,” the 76 acres of prime wildlife habitat at Lower Oak Creek in Page Springs and Tavasci Marsh, one of the few fresh-water marshes in Arizona. The marsh adjoins Tuzigoot National Monument and Dead Horse Ranch State Park

Other excellent birding sites in the area include:

- Beasley Flat, a lush riparian area just a few miles south of the town of Camp Verde.
- Camp Verde Riparian Preserve, 125 acres owned and managed by the Salt River Project “to provide habitat for the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher and the yellow-billed cuckoo.” Many other species also flock to the site.
- Dead Horse Ranch State Park, a 423-acre park, which is an oasis for wildlife and includes the Verde River Greenway with its cottonwood-willow habitat along the Verde River.

- Mingus Mountain, an easily accessible high-altitude home for bluebirds, white-breasted nuthatches, olive warblers and other species.
- Montezuma Well, a riparian habitat that attracts water birds and open-country species, such as flycatchers, vireos and thrashers. It is a nesting home for hawks, cuckoos and canyon and rock wrens. Many species can also be spotted south of the well at Wet Beaver Creek, Bull Pen Ranch Campground and the West Clear Creek campground.
- Oak Creek Canyon, a diverse riparian area and the state's second most popular canyon. The canyon is home to Slide Rock State Park and many trails, including the popular West Fork Trail. Possible sightings range from the black-chinned sparrow and bridled titmouse to peregrine falcons, hummingbirds, tanagers, towhees, vireos and other species.
- Red Rock State Park, a 286-acre nature preserve and environmental education center, with both riparian and high-desert habitats. The park offers many special programs, including early-morning guided bird tours on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Times change throughout the year.
- Sycamore Canyon, where black-hawk and bald eagles nest and there are possible sightings of other birds such as hawks, doves, herons and migrating sparrows. The canyon is accessible by hiking and the Verde Canyon Railroad.

“I've been birding the Verde Valley and Flagstaff area for 13 years now and know it to be a wonderful spot where anyone can turn up a real gem at any time,” says Tom Linda, a birder and popular guide at the Verde Valley Birding & Nature Festival.

Box:

Annual Verde Valley Birding Festival

The annual Verde Valley Birding & Nature Festival takes place at Dead Horse Ranch Park in Cottonwood, Arizona, during the last weekend in April. It is an easy way to begin bird watching or to deepen one's appreciation of the Verde Valley's resident birds and visiting migrants. It is common to see more than 150 species of birds during the weekend, including grebes, tanagers, flycatchers, shrikes, warblers, egrets, herons, orioles, cardinals, woodpeckers, quails, sparrows and hawks. In 2007, 178 different species were spotted during the festival.

In addition to seeing, identifying and learning about birds in on-site programs, the festival offers field trips and tours by expert guides who take festival attendees to the area's birding hot spots. Participants can also sign up for other nature-oriented workshops, hikes, field trips and activities—from biking and canoeing to archeology and nature photography. All the programs are organized around small groups. New trips and

programs are added every year. An exhibit tent is staffed by vendors who offer an assortment of birding merchandise. For more information, go to www.birdyverde.org.