

Birding McAllen, Texas

There are many well-known birding locations within the Lower Rio Grande Valley and most are within easy reach of McAllen. Check your closest Chamber of Commerce for free maps and booklets on birding. Different areas around McAllen can be very productive for birding and in some cases, the best spots for seeing certain species. There is a blend of urban habitat and open spaces within close proximity that can yield good birds.

McAllen is a leader in promoting nature tourism amongst neighboring cities and in Mexico. The McAllen Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitor's Bureau have been a force for creating new festivals in the Valley and in nearby Mexico and in supporting important conservation initiatives.

McAllen is not too far from the 100th meridian -- which is the line between the humid East and arid West. You would do well to carry a field guide that includes all birds of North America. A field guide to the birds of Mexico would also be handy in our area. Western Kingbirds, Couch's Kingbirds and Tropical Kingbirds can be found within blocks of each other. Long-billed Thrashers and Curve-billed Thrashers can be found on the same property, even though the first prefers thick brush and the latter lives in desert and scrub. Pay attention to flowering plants and flowering and fruiting trees. These will most likely be active with birds and insects.

"The Magic Valley" is a clever moniker used in the distant past to help bring in development and sell farmland. The Valley is really a rich alluvial flood plain, which was historically flooded by the cresting Rio Grande. The river no longer floods its banks and the old floodplain forest is mostly gone, except for some remaining and protected tracts of precious native habitat.

McAllen, The Texas Tropics, is in the center of the Valley's birding action. McAllen is an hour from the Gulf of Mexico to the east, within twenty minutes of the Mesquite Ranches and Sand plains to the north, an hour from the Chihuahuan Desert to the west, and about three hours from the Sierra Madre Mountains to the south in Mexico. The overlap of distinct habitats and our latitude make the Rio Grande Valley the most biologically diverse four-county area in the United States.

Fall, Winter & Spring usually has the most birding activity in the McAllen area. Summer is slower, at least for visiting birders, although the birding is great, mostly early or late in the day. Some of the most sought-after birds of our area are actually easier to see and hear in the summertime. Others like Groove-billed Ani, Red-billed Pigeon, or Brown-crested Flycatcher are more reliably seen in summer. April 14 to May 14 is the height of spring migration for neotropical species.

Always remember not to trespass onto private property. Folks in McAllen are friendly and are used to tourists and nature enthusiasts in our area.

WHERE TO LOOK: (WATER)

Drainage ditches and canals form borders around farm fields. Some are earthen, others concrete. Most are antiquated and in many cases leaking into surrounding areas. This keeps varied and beautiful shady trees thriving and provides habitat for birds and animals which otherwise would be homeless due to relentless urbanization. Raised irrigation canals work on the principle of gravity. Water is pumped from the Rio Grande at various Irrigation and Water District pump stations and sent by canals to city reservoirs. Water also has to be sent to farm operations for irrigation by canal. These canals serve as the conduit for water miles from the river itself.

Floodways: These deep drainages and ditches keep rainfall from flooding our towns. In the past, the Rio Grande would regularly crest and flood the mid and lower Rio Grande Valley, depositing tons of soil from the eastern edge of Starr County to the mouth of the river at Boca Chica Beach/Baghdad Beach in eastern Cameron County at Brownsville/Matamoros. The Arroyo Colorado begins in Mission, courses through McAllen, and eventually empties into the bay – called the Laguna Madre, or “Mother Lagoon” at Arroyo City.

McAllen Public Utilities South Wastewater Treatment Plant: City water treatment centers are another good place to search for bird species. While traveling south on Ware Rd. or 23rd St, turn west onto Idela St. until it ends. Get permission from the front office before exploring this area. Sometimes, low water attracts abundant shorebirds and ducks. This is a good spot for Tropical Kingbird and Groove-billed Ani.

WHAT TO EXPECT: (WATERBIRDS)

Year round birds found near water: Pied-billed Grebe, Least Grebe, Anhinga, Neotropic Cormorant, Great Egret, Great Blue Heron, Tricolored Heron, Black-crowned Night Heron, Green Heron, White-faced Ibis, Mottled Duck, “Mexican” Duck, Fulvous & Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Common Moorhen, American Coot, Black-necked Stilt, Laughing Gull, Green Kingfisher, Ringed Kingfisher, Barn & Cave Swallows, Red-winged Blackbird

Migrant birds and winter visitors: Double-crested Cormorant, Red-shouldered Hawk, Blue-winged teal, Green-winged Teal, Cinnamon Teal, Northern Pintail, American Widgeon, Northern Shoveler, Lesser Scaup, Ruddy Duck, American Avocet, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Spotted Sandpiper, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Baird’s Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher, Stilt Sandpiper, Sora, Common Snipe, Wilson’s Phalarope, Belted Kingfisher, Swamp Sparrow

WHERE TO LOOK: (URBAN HABITATS)

Some of the more common Valley native trees planted among McAllen neighborhoods include: Anacahuita (Wild Olive), Fresno (Rio Grande Ash), Huisache, Texas Ebony, Sugar Hackberry (Palo Blanco), Tepeguaje (Great Leadtree), Honey Mesquite, Black Willow, Cedar Elm, Montezuma Balcypress and Retama. Other Texas native trees which are also used in local yards but do not grow locally on their own are Pecan (official Tree of Texas) and Live Oak. Of course, there are plenty of ornamentals that round out the interesting flora.

Quinta Mazatlan, McAllen World Birding Center: This 8-acre parcel of land off of South 10th Street has an abundant array of both native and ornamental plants and trees. Most of the sought-after specialty birds can be seen on this tract. Your visit to McAllen and the surrounding urban habitats would be incomplete without a visit to Historic Quinta Mazatlan.

There are many oak neighborhoods leading south of Bus 83 and east of McColl Road that offer many great birding opportunities on foot. The neighborhoods around Dallas and Mockingbird Streets have been reliable for Red-Crowned Parrots and Green Parakeet. This area has recorded the rare Green-breasted Mango (Hummingbird) visiting local feeders.

Downtown: Directly across the street from the McAllen Chamber of Commerce is the tallest building in the Valley, the Chase Bank. Check the “Chase” logo letters on the north and west face of the building for Peregrine Falcons (except for summer). Archer Park and the surrounding neighborhoods have large trees and attract many birds that are easy to observe and approach.

McAllen Walking trails: On 2nd Street (Col. Rowe Blvd) and on Bicentennial Blvd, McAllen has an extensive hike/bike trail established. There is parking available and the trail itself will be expanded to downtown and other parts of the city. This will also give the visiting birder a good chance at seeing some great birds that run the gamut from waterbirds to grassland species. McAllen Country Club Golf Course is another good spot to see many of the regular occurring birds.

WHAT TO EXPECT: (Urban Birds)

Year round URBAN

Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Great Horned Owl, Barn Owl, Eastern Screech-owl, Plain Chacalaca, Killdeer, Rock Pigeon, Mourning Dove, White-winged Dove, Eurasian Collared Dove (exotic), Inca Dove, Common Ground-dove, White-tipped Dove, *Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Red-crowned Parrot, Green Parakeet, Common Nighthawk, Parauque, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Buff-bellied Hummingbird, *Purple Martin, *Barn Swallow, *Cliff Swallow, *Bank Swallow, Cave Swallow, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Groove-billed Ani, *Western Kingbird, Couch's Kingbird, Tropical Kingbird, Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Vermilion Flycatcher, *Brown-crested Flycatcher, Great Kiskadee, Clay-colored Robin, Long-billed Thrasher, Curve-billed Thrasher, Northern Mockingbird, Green Jay, Black-crested Titmouse, Bewick's Wren, Carolina Wren, White-eyed Vireo, Tropical Parula, Common Yellowthroat, Lesser Goldfinch, Northern Cardinal, Great-tailed Grackle, Bronzed Cowbird, Brown-headed Cowbird, Hooded Oriole, Altamira Oriole, European Starling, House Sparrow. (*breeding migrants – Spring & Summer)

Migrant birds and winter visitors URBAN:

Broad-winged Hawk, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Peregrine Falcon, Chuck-will's-Widow, Whip-poor-will, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Rufous Hummingbird, Chimney Swift, Tree Swallow, Eastern Kingbird, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Eastern Phoebe, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Least Flycatcher, Acadian Flycatcher, Alder Flycatcher, Willow Flycatcher, American Robin, Hermit Thrush, Veery, Swainson's Thrush, Gray-cheeked Thrush, Wood Thrush, Gray Catbird, Cedar Waxing, House Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Yellow-throated Vireo, Blue-headed Vireo, Philadelphia Vireo, Warbling Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Yellow Warbler, Prothonotary Warbler, Wilson's Warbler, Hooded Warbler, Northern Parula, Canada Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Magnolia Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Black & White Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, Louisiana Waterthrush, Worm-eating Warbler, Kentucky Warbler, Mourning Warbler, American Redstart, Scarlet Tanager, Summer Tanager, Indigo Bunting, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Lincoln's Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, Clay-colored Sparrow, Field Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, American Goldfinch, Brewer's Blackbird, Baltimore Oriole, Bullock's Oriole, Orchard Oriole

WHERE TO LOOK: (OPEN FIELDS AND FARMLANDS)

The International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) levee system runs along the historical flood plain of the Valley and is found about a mile or more from the actual river itself. The levee system protects the cities from catastrophic river flooding. The City of Hidalgo, just south of McAllen, is on the river and is the gateway to Reynosa, Tamaulipas Mexico. Although the Valley has not felt the effects of a major hurricane for many years, flood damage among the riverside communities of the Valley is a very real possibility. The levee system in South McAllen borders the floodway, but most of the land found between levees is open fields and farmlands. This is an excellent spot to search for grassland bird species. Other locations to explore are south of Expressway 83, between South Ware Road and 10th street all the way to Military Road and the Foreign Trade Zone. Check the water towers for Peregrine falcons from fall to spring. Search the fields between the levees in winter to find Burrowing Owls and Short-eared Owls. North Jackson Road still has farm fields and open lands which have not been developed and is reliable for Harris' Hawks.

WHAT TO EXPECT: (FIELDS & GRASSLANDS)

Year round FIELDS & GRASSLANDS:

White-tailed Hawk, Crested Caracara, Harris's Hawk, Black Vulture, Turkey Vulture, White-tailed Kite, Bobwhite, Cattle Egret, Common Nighthawk, Lesser Nighthawk, *Ash-throated Flycatcher, Vermilion Flycatcher, *Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Northern Mockingbird, Loggerhead Shrike, Horned Lark, Eastern Meadowlark, Cassin's Sparrow, Lark Sparrow

(*breeding migrants – Spring & Summer).

Look for Cactus Wren, Verdin, Black-throated Sparrow, Blue Grosbeak, Painted Bunting and Pyrrhuloxia in patches of arid land or cactus mixed with scrub.

Migrant birds and winter visitors FIELDS & GRASSLANDS:

Swainson's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Harrier, Mississippi Kite, American Kestrel, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, Short-eared Owl, Burrowing Owl, American Golden-plover, Long-billed Curlew, Upland Sandpiper, Say's Phoebe, Eastern Bluebird, American Pipit, Sprague's Pipit, Western Meadowlark, Dickcissel, Savannah Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow

Links:

www.southtexasnature.com

www.rgvnaturecoalition.org

<http://listserv.uh.edu/archives/texbirds.html> TEXBIRDS Archive

<http://www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/laguna.html> Laguna Atascosa NWR

<http://www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/santana.html> Santa Ana NWR

<http://www.alamoinsuites.com/index.html> Alamo Inn - Keith Hackland

<http://www.valleynaturecenter.org/> Valley Nature Center - Martin Hagne

<http://fin2feather.com/nwa/> Fins2Feathers Island Tours - George & Scarlet Colley

<http://www.losebanospreserve.com/> Los Ebanos Preserve

Diverse habitats:

Cameron County and Gulf Coast: Deepwater/Pelagic waters of the Gulf, beach and dune community, salt marsh, coastal prairie

Riverside/Mid and lower Valley: Alluvial flood plain, river delta

Ranch Country: N. Hidalgo/Willacy/Kenedy Cos. Sand plains, grasslands, mesquite forest

Upriver to Starr and Zapata Cos. Riparian riverside forest, Tamaulipan thorn scrub, desert scrub:

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