

Migration Stations

Each year, millions of birds engage in a remarkable feat of endurance and hope as they fly from one continent to another. These six stopovers offer the chance to catch a glimpse of them as they rest during their journey.

BY LAUREL KALLENBACH

Bird migration is the Ironman of the avian world. Five-foot-tall whooping cranes and 3-inch hummingbirds alike arrive exhausted and ravenous at stopovers after flying full tilt for hundreds of miles. A champion is the 0.4-ounce blackpoll warbler, which wings more than 2,000 miles nonstop over the Atlantic Ocean from Canada to Venezuela.

Migrating birds make this epic journey twice a year, flying south in autumn to warmer climates and north in spring to summer nesting grounds.

“Migration is truly miraculous,” says Colette Dean of Baton Rouge, La., who birdwatches on the Gulf Coast. “I got teary the first time I saw a depleted red knot land,” she says. “I felt like calling, ‘Welcome, welcome!’”

Bird migrations instill “a sense of awe and reverence for nature” for

many birdwatchers like Joan Lamphier of Stinson Beach, Calif. She was inspired to volunteer for the Golden Gate Raptor Observatory, which works to protect hawk habitat. The greatest threat to birds is destruction of critical habitat by real-estate development, logging, highway construction, and natural disasters that are escalating with climate change.

Birdwatching takes you outdoors (often in early morning!), fine-tunes your senses, and hones your focus. (For more on its mental-health benefits, visit ELmag.com/birdwatching.)

Though dozens of species may vie for your attention, Lamphier recommends picking just one bird to observe. “Study the shape of its beak, the color of its plumage.” At day’s end, instead of a blur of wings, you’ll be well acquainted with the rainbow

feathers of the painted bunting or the clacking sound of the Ridgway’s rail.

You don’t have to be a bird expert to be wowed by migrating birds. Nor do you need to travel 9,300 miles, like the red knot (a sandpiper listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act), which flies from the Arctic to South America and back. Instead, find a nearby bird “hot spot” (see www.birdwatchingdaily.com/hotspots) or visit one of these six popular avian rest stops.



Learn More

To learn how to help birds migrate safely, visit ELmag.com/birdmigration.



Peveto Woods Bird and Butterfly Sanctuary

Louisiana Coast

Where do 2 million travel-weary birds go for fast food after they've flown 500 miles across the Gulf of Mexico? Under certain weather conditions, to the chenier, a unique coastal ridge of oaks in Louisiana's 40-acre Peveto Woods Sanctuary, where they devour seeds, berries, and insects.

Savvy birdwatchers also flock here, ambling along trails through woods and wetlands, sometimes circling back to discover goldfinches where towhees flitted two hours earlier. "At peak season, one wave of birds departs for the migration route and another arrives to replenish their depleted fat reserves," explains Dave Patton, a board member of Baton Rouge Audubon Society, which owns Peveto Woods.

Nearby is the Sabine National Wildlife Refuge, where you may spot white ibis, herons, and pelicans, as well as alligators.

Location: Southwest Louisiana coast, in Cameron Parish off Gulf Beach Highway
Best time to visit: Mid-March to mid-May
Birds you might see: Warblers, buntings, tanagers, thrushes, woodpeckers (pictured)



Cape May

New Jersey Coast

One of National Geographic's World's Best Destinations for Birdwatching, Cape May is a natural crossroads for migrating songbirds, shorebirds, raptors, seabirds, and marsh waders. New Jersey Audubon's Cape May Bird Observatory hosts the World Series of Birding, an annual fundraiser in which teams compete to identify the most bird species in 24 hours.

Everyone has a favorite time to visit. "One of the best places in the

universe is Cape May in fall," says Lamphier, who recalls witnessing a Cooper's hawk pluck a warbler off a branch with "surgical precision."

Naturalists are on hand at migration watch sites to record bird counts and help visitors identify species. The observatory also hosts spring and fall bird festivals, plus more than 300 educational programs, including guided bird walks.

Location: Southern tip of New Jersey
Best time to visit: Spring (March-May) or fall (September-November). For details, visit www.capemaytimes.com/birds/cape-may-birds-by-the-month.
Birds you might see: Gulls, terns, shorebirds, falcons, hawks, eagles, cormorants, gannets, loons, tanagers, warblers, finches (pictured)



Salton Sea

Mecca, Calif.

Shimmering like a mirage in the Southern California desert is the Salton Sea, a bird magnet located on the Pacific Flyway. Visitors from around the globe come to observe this ecosystem — part moonscape, green wetlands, mudflats, and expanses of water — which hosts more than 400 species of birds.

"Every year, I wait for the snow geese to arrive," says volunteer Karen Nelson, who leads bird walks in winter. "I stand, amazed, as 5,000 geese surround me."

Home to the endangered Ridgway's rail, Salton Sea itself is disappearing.

The waters are becoming so salty that fish are dying, which accounts for the declining numbers of fishing birds (pelicans, cormorants). Insect-eating waterfowl and shorebirds, however, are still plentiful.

Amid this eco-emergency, Audubon California organizes monthly bird counts and invites volunteers to help. "You'll be contributing to this cause and learning to tell a marbled godwit from a whimbrel," says program associate Ryan Llamas. (Both shorebirds have long bills; the godwit's beak turns up, the whimbrel's down.)

Location: Three-hour drive southeast from Los Angeles or northeast from San Diego
Best time to visit: Winter (daytime temps are generally in the mid-70s). The Salton Sea Bird Festival is in January.

Birds you might see: Ruddy ducks (pictured), green-winged teals, northern shovelers, Ridgway's rails



Head Out



Rowe Sanctuary

Gibbon, Neb.

Sitting in a wooden shed with cut-out windows in March on the Nebraska flatlands may sound cold and boring, yet people say witnessing sandhill cranes along the Platte River is akin to a religious experience.

“When cranes take to the sky, everyone in the blind exclaims, ‘Oh my God!’” says Donna Royer of Albuquerque, N.M. “Cranes are elegant and magical, the way they bow and dance together.”

By day, tens of thousands of these majestic birds forage for food in farm fields; at night they roost in the shallow Platte, safe from coyotes. The moment they take flight in unison is astounding. “I stood on a bridge over the river, and as the sun rose, a cloud of birds lifted and flew downstream, the orange sunrise behind them,” recalls Rob Ahlschwede, of Olympia, Wash. “Their wing-beats vibrated the air; they seemed so close I could reach up and touch them.”



Location: 20 miles east of Kearney, Neb., via Interstate 80

Best time to visit: March to mid-April. Sunrise or sunset viewing from outdoor blinds: \$40–\$250. Online registration opens January 2; tickets and hotels sell out quickly.

Birds you might see: Sandhill cranes (pictured), whooping cranes



Antelope Island State Park

Great Salt Lake, Utah

With 250 bird species, plus roaming buffalo and pronghorn, Antelope Island State Park often boggles visitors’ minds. Brian Ferguson of Brigham City, Utah, was greeted by thousands of migrating waterbirds as he drove the seven-mile Davis County Causeway to Antelope Island in the Great Salt Lake. “The water was covered with eared grebes as far as I could see,” he says.

The causeway is also a great place to watch the quirky Wilson’s phalarope as it creates a whirlpool to stir up brine shrimp, says assistant park

manager Wendy Wilson.

The variety of habitat — grasslands, rugged mountains, freshwater streams — makes Antelope Island one of the most important bird stopovers in the western United States. “There’s a bird for every hour of the day,” says Wilson. “The western meadowlarks sing in the morning, and burrowing owls are active both day and night.”

Ferguson, who leads tours during the Great Salt Lake Bird Festival, says people often ask him, “When’s the best time to visit Antelope Island?” “The answer is ‘The day you’re here!’”

Location: 41 miles northwest of Salt Lake City. Take the Davis County Causeway from Syracuse.

Best time to visit: Fall (August–November)

Birds you might see: Eared grebes, chukars, burrowing owls (pictured), Wilson’s phalarope, shrikes, pelicans, herons



Hawk Mountain Sanctuary

Kempton, Penn.

From craggy ridges in Pennsylvania’s Appalachians, visitors watch hawks, eagles, vultures, and falcons through binoculars. A century ago, locals on the same promontories sighted the birds through rifle crosshairs. The annual raptor slaughter ended in 1934 when suffragist Rosalie Edge bought the land and founded Hawk Mountain, the world’s first sanctuary for birds of prey.

“Witnessing the migration connects us with the natural world,” says Rosalie’s granddaughter, Deborah

Edge of Washington, D.C. “Nothing beats Hawk Mountain’s North Look-out, where hundreds of birds swoop around you at eye level, sometimes just 30 feet away.”

For decades, Hawk Mountain scientists have monitored migrating raptors and shared data with researchers worldwide. (In her 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson cited declining numbers of bald eagles at Hawk Mountain as evidence of the insecticide DDT’s environmental destruction.) 🦅

Location: Eastern Pennsylvania, 33 miles west of Allentown

Best time to visit: Mid-August to mid-December; bring a cushion for rock sitting.

Birds you might see: Hawks, harriers, vultures, kestrels, falcons (pictured)



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