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## [Guide to birding in Marana](#)

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By Janine Spencer

*Environmental Projects Manager*

*Town of Marana*

### **Why is Birding So Good in Marana?**

Birding (i.e. bird-watching) has become an increasingly popular recreation in the United States. Southern Arizona is known as one of the premier bird hot spots in the U.S. People visit Arizona from around the world to view the great variety of species here. Southern Arizona is located at the junction of the Sonoran Desert, Chihuahuan Desert, and the mountain ranges from Northern Mexico and the Southern U.S. This great coming-together of such a variety of habitat types means that we have bird species associated with all of those habitats here in Southern Arizona.

There are several different micro-habitat types within the Town of Marana, each with its own suite of bird species. The Tortolita and Tucson Mountains are located in the Upper Sonoran Desert Scrub, where golden eagles and other species nest. There are lush patches of riparian vegetation for wading birds and ducks along the Santa Cruz River, and the irrigated farmlands provide habitat for hawks, burrowing owls, and other species.



### **Where the Birds Are in Marana?**

This article describes four good sites to view birds in Marana.

- El Rio Open Space is a fairly easy walking area where one can see riparian and grassland species, as well as views of raptors soaring above the nearby Tucson Mountains.
- The Crossroads Park River Walk along the Santa Cruz River is great for spotting riparian species, including many warblers, and during summer evenings bats emerge in vast numbers near the Ina Road Bridge.
- There are several good hiking trails Tortolita Mountains, with opportunities to see hawks, eagles, and many other species.
- The irrigated farm fields in Marana are especially of interest for locating raptor species.

### **El Rio Open Space / Coachline Gravel Pit**

This site is listed in *Finding Birds in Southeast Arizona*, Revised 8th Edition (2015) edited by Ken Kaufman. It is also advertised on the Tucson Audubon Society website, is mentioned periodically on the Arizona-New Mexico Birding Listserv site, and is part of a survey route for an Important Bird Area. El Rio Open Space was also featured in the April-June 2013 edition of the *Tucson Audubon Society Vermilion Flycatcher* magazine. This site is an excavated pit where sand and gravel were removed for construction of Interstate-10. It is bounded by the Santa Cruz River to the east and the northern terminus of the Tucson Mountains. Tucson Audubon Society has worked on riparian restoration, planting native vegetation here.

During rainstorms, the gravel pit fills with water, stays wet for months, and becomes a great spot to easily view waterfowl and shorebirds. Some birds encountered here have included: Belted Kingfisher, Pied-billed Grebe, White-faced Ibis, Great Blue Heron, Black-necked Stilt, several duck species, and more. The birding remains interesting even when the pond is dry; during the summer months, Bell's Vireos nest in the tamarisk, Gilded Flickers, Lazuli Buntings, Gambel's Quail, Greater Roadrunners, an Eastern Phoebe, and many other species have been sighted. Even sandhill cranes stop by in the late fall, presumably on their way to the Wilcox Playa.

Hawks and falcons take advantage of the updrafts along the ridge of the Tucson Mountains, where you can spot Red-tailed Hawks, Peregrine and Prairie Falcons, Cooper's Hawks are commonly sighted. A Black Hawk was once sighted during migration. The Sonoran Desert, with saguaros and prickly pear, directly adjoin the El Rio Open Space – so there are opportunities to spot Rock Wrens, Canyon Wrens, Black-tailed Gnatcatchers, Verdins, Gila Woodpeckers, and hear the occasional downward trill of the Canyon Wren.

**Directions:** To get to the El Rio Open Space, exit Interstate 10 at Twin Peaks Road. Go west about one mile and turn right on Coachline Boulevard. Take Coachline Blvd north of Twin Peaks Rd. Park at the parking lot just before N. Turquoise Moon Way.

### **Crossroads Park River Walk (between Cortaro and Ina Roads)**

This is a mile-long walk one way, on a paved pathway along the Santa Cruz River, between Cortaro and Ina Roads. Riparian vegetation along the river is lush with cottonwoods, willows, cattails, and tamarisk. The path is used by birders, walkers, and cyclists. Native upland vegetation has been planted along the entire length of the path

Birding is best here during breeding season when Yellow Warblers, Bell's Vireos, Orange-crowned Warblers, Wilson's Warblers, Lucy's Warblers and Common Yellowthroat are present. Other common or year-round residents include Red-winged Blackbirds, Spotted Sandpipers, Killdeer, Gila Woodpeckers, Black Phoebes, Say's Phoebes, Verdins, Abert's Towhees, Song Sparrows, Great-tailed Grackles, Gambel's quail, and Lesser Goldfinches. Raptors include Cooper's Hawks, Red-tailed Hawks, Northern Harriers, and American Kestrels. Black-necked Stilts and several species of ducks (including an occasional wood duck) are common during the winter months. About 70-80 species can be seen here regularly, with rarities showing up at times.

Besides birds, you can also watch hundreds to thousands of bats emerge from the Ina Road Bridge on summer evenings. Mexican free-tailed bats are the most numerous occupants under the bridge.

Some overwinter in Arizona, but many go to Mexico for the winter and return to Southern Arizona in the summer.

**Directions:** Take Interstate-10 to the Cortaro Road exit and go west on Cortaro Rd. Turn south on Silverbell Road and turn in at the Crossroads District Park sign. Drive toward the library and turn left into the parking lot by the volleyball courts. Walk east toward the tall swath of greenery along the river. There is a paved trail you can follow to the south to the Ina Road Bridge.

### **Tortolita Mountains**

The Tortolita Mountains are located on the northwest edge of the Tucson Valley. The Tortolitas are a small, rocky, rugged mountain range near the Pima/Pinal County border. There are large, healthy stands of saguaro cactus and a few junipers in the higher areas. Elevations range from approximately 2,500 ft to 4,200 ft. There are several crested saguaros visible from the trails in the Tortolita Mountains. Vegetation is Upper Sonoran Desert palo verde, mixed cacti, and Southwest riparian deciduous forest and woodland.

Cactus wrens, Rock Wrens, Roadrunners, Phainopepla Black-tailed Gnatcatchers, Cardinals, Brown-crested Flycatchers, Gila Woodpeckers, Mockingbirds, Bell's Vireos, Anna's Hummingbirds, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Ravens, Turkey Vultures, Red-tailed Hawks, and more occur in the Tortolitas. You may also catch a glimpse of the wild horses that inhabit the area, as well as Sonoran Desert Tortoises or Gila Monsters.



**Directions:** Drive north of Tucson on Interstate-10 and take the Twin Peaks Road exit, heading northeast. Go several miles and as you cross Tangerine Road, Twin Peaks becomes Dove Mountain Boulevard. Follow this road to its end (through the gates for the Ritz Carlton Resort). There will be a Marana parking lot on your right a short distance after the entrance gate to the Ritz Carlton. There are several trails in the Tortolita Mountains; you can obtain a map at the Marana Parks & Recreation Department. These hikes vary in difficulty so be aware to bring water and be well-prepared to hike.

### **The Farm Fields of Marana**

There are a variety of species that can be viewed from public roads along the irrigated farm fields in Marana. Species range from waterfowl and shorebirds to burrowing owls and hawks. Some birds that are frequently viewed in the flooded farm fields and along irrigation ditches include: White-faced Ibis, Great Egrets, Red-winged Blackbirds, Horned Larks, and ducks. Between March and July, Burrowing Owl families live in burrows along the irrigation ditches. If you look carefully, you may see the youngsters peeking out of their hole, while a parent stands by watchfully. Some of the owls stay all winter, so it's worth a drive any time of year.