

*Pete Dunne*



## San Pedro Morning

***The banks of San Pedro are open to birding right now; and the birding is exquisite, a Patagonia with the welcome mat out . . .***

**T**HE HUACHUCA MOUNTAINS OF southeast Arizona are beautiful in the early morning. Crowned with clouds, illuminated by sunlight that has yet to reach the desert floor, they tower over Sierra Vista and crowd a rear-view mirror. They almost blunt the anticipation of the Chiracahuas, the next stop on Arizona's birding circuit. Almost.

Highway 90 runs east across the desert and Sierra Vista dribbles away. Gas stations, convenience stores, and the host of White-necked Ravens thins out. Outlying enterprises and houses disappear. Soon, only a mobile home or two are left to challenge the mesquite and creosote bush for dominion over the earth.

Six miles out of town, just about the time you settle into the rhythm of driving, and just about the time you wish you'd gotten the 16-ounce cup of coffee instead, the road begins a long, sloping descent that leads to a low, green line. From two miles, it looks to be no more than a hedge. But as the distance narrows, the "hedge" grows and you realize that the bushes are mature cottonwoods and that what you are seeing is, in fact, a stunning riparian woodland running north to south.

The river that supports the trees, the San Pedro, actually flows from south to north. Its source lies in the hills east of Cananea, Sonora, Mexico. It flows north until loosing its water and its name to the Gila River. But before it does so, for 36 miles beginning at the Mexican border, the river

flows across the desert—the shimmering centerpiece of a tract newly acquired by the Bureau of Land Management—the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area. If you look sharp just before reaching the wall of trees, you will see a dirt drive and a sign inviting parking and "day time use." Don't make the mistake of not taking advantage of it.

Not many birders have sampled the wealth of this riparian treasure yet. Even some Arizona birders are just beginning to fit the San Pedro into their conceptual framework. Prior to 1986, the land was privately owned by the Tenneco Realty Development Corporation. A land swap between Tenneco, an intermediary, and the

Bureau of Land Management put the first 43,371 acres along the river in public ownership. The signing of the Arizona-Idaho Conservation Act on November 18, 1988, and subsequent acquisitions brought the current balance up to more than 56,000 acres.

The best news to taxpayers is that the acquisition did not draw a nickel from public coffers. Still, there were factions that figured the Bureau of Land Management "got took." The land that the Bureau of Land Management traded off near Phoenix commanded a higher market value than the San Pedro holdings.

Ah, but then the inestimable intangibles must be figured in. How do you measure the value of 40 pairs of Gray Hawks—about one third of all the Gray Hawks found in the United States. How do you put a dollar figure on Green Kingfishers, Vermilion Flycatchers, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks or any of the more than 350 species of birds that have been recorded along the San Pedro? What's the market value of 82 species of mammals, 12 species of fish, and more than 45 species of reptiles and amphibians?

And then there is that other commodity, as precious as life itself because without it there is no life. What about water? No, the land swap was anything but a loss.

After acquisition, there was a period when leases were allowed to wind down, environmental surveys were conducted, and public hearings were held to address the factional concerns



*Gambel's Quail (Callipepla gambelii).*  
Photograph/Brent R. Paull.

of “user groups” Two issues were particular heated.

One involved one of the American West’s most sacred cows—livestock. The practice of using public lands to support private livestock is widespread but is drawing more and more hostile fire. The Bureau of Land Management’s decision to place a fifteen-year moratorium on cattle grazing along the San Pedro was hotly contested by ranchers. But they lost.

The second Donnybrook involved hunting—another ticklish American totem only slightly less inviolate than open range. The Bureau of Land Management assessed that hunting along the narrow, 3-mile corridor constituted a safety hazard: too much lead flying in too tight a confine. The Arizona Fish and Game Department, which has jurisdiction over all decisions involving the state’s wildlife, sided with the hunters and that seemed to be the end of that.

But the Bureau of Land Management pulled a jurisdictional sleight of hand. Maybe they could not prevent hunting, but under their own management guidelines they *can* forbid the discharge of firearms. Therefore, hunting along the San Pedro is permitted. Discharging firearms is not.

Pretty neat, eh?

By May 6, 1986, when the formal dedication of the San Pedro Riparian

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National Conservation Area took place, the disputes had been settled. Within the next two or three years, there will be public camping, a recreational vehicle park, and a multi-million-dollar visitor’s center off Highway 90 just east of Sierra Vista. The time is not far off when San Pedro will be a household word with North American birders, right up there with Patagonia, Cave Creek, and Madera Canyon. But you needn’t wait until the site grows to the stature of a legend. The banks of the San Pedro are



*Female Least Bittern (Ixobrychus exilis). Photograph/Thomas Simmons.*

open to birding right now. And the birding is exquisite, a Patagonia with the welcome mat out to birders and no chiggers (yet) to mar your memory of the place.

We pulled into the drive, Cassin’s Sparrows trilled their melancholy songs from the cactus-studded grassland. A pair of light-phase Swainson’s Hawks tossed curious glances our way and then returned their gaze to the grasshopper-rich fields. A covey of Gambel’s Quail slept peacefully on the fence posts flanking the road, and Abert’s Towhees foraged in the shadow of a hedge.

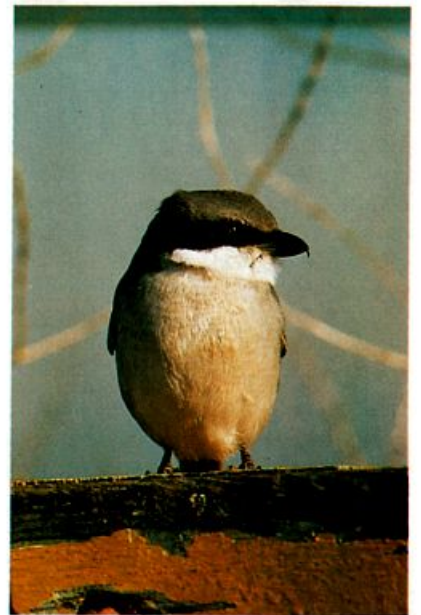
The drive opened into a vacant parking lot that could easily have swallowed a hundred cars. On one side there was a small white farmhouse. On the other side, a jumble of outbuildings. But the thing that catches and holds your eye is a great Fremont Cottonwood, a tree so massive that the girth of its main limbs would put the trunks of most trees to shame. Even the male Vermilion Flycatcher perched atop a nearby fencepost couldn’t distract us. I learned later that the tree is right up there in the world-class rankings, a record in girth and stature. This monarch among cottonwoods dwarfed a second cottonwood that mantled the farmhouse. The runt was merely stately.

Dave Kreuper, a Bureau of Land Management biologist, had agreed to meet us. Linda and I first met Dave 2

years ago, here on the San Pedro, on a day that produced, among other things, Green Kingfishers, a Painted Bunting, and a Least Bittern, all local rarities, and several Gray Hawks, which are merely local. The San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area was little more than a vision at that point. The reality was a muddy, overgrazed swale that produced a bumper crop of cow pies. Anything remotely vegetative had been chewed to stump and nub by range cattle. The Painted Bunting had taken shelter on a small grassy island in the middle of the river—the *only* standing grass to be found. Two years later, the wisdom of putting cattle off the land was plainly evident.

We followed a 400-yard horsetrail from the farmhouse down to the river. Flocks of Lark Buntings and Lark Sparrows foraged and fled, while Western Kingbirds and Western Meadowlarks alternately fed and ignored their food-begging and fully grown young. Two seasons were colliding on the banks of the San Pedro—a temporal multiple use on the banks of the Bureau of Land Management’s new treasure.

The river was higher than it had been in August of 1987, but no less muddy. The water roiled, a viscous, brown soup rolling out of Mexico. But that wasn’t the biggest change. What



*Loggerhead Shrike (Lanius ludovicianus). Photograph/Peter M. LaTourrette.*

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had been a denuded, overgrazed woodland was now a cool, grassy oasis. Lazuli and Indigo buntings sprouted from the grass. Cassin’s Kingbirds, Yellow-breasted Chats, and Loggerhead Shrike Slide chortled and scolded.

“There’s been a 500-percent increase in the number of Song Sparrows, chats, and Yellow-throats,” Dave Kreuper noted, numbers supporting the wisdom of keeping cattle away from the river. The area was rife with birds. Family groups of Vermilion Flycatchers dipped into the hordes of silver-winged insects. Wilson’s and MacGillivray’s warblers, Black-headed Grosbeaks, and Warbling Vireos foraged in the riverside growth. A Green-backed Heron squawked and flew upstream, flushing a Great Blue Heron that had defied our best efforts at detection. But Gray Hawks eluded us. Although a nest was not far away, the young had fledged some weeks earlier.

Looking at the water and the woodland, I thought of the thousands of acres of parched land stretching just beyond the trees. The importance of this place to nesting birds was obvious. But the significance of this arboreal oasis to migrating birds, *that* was inestimable. Linda and I had arrived in Arizona on August 5. We’d been here two weeks. We’d gone to many palces; we’d tracked and backtracked along the Arizona circuit. We’d found nothing to compare with the variety and numbers of birds that we encountered here along the San Pedro in the course of one morning’s birding.

We made our way back to the parking area and took Dave’s pickup down the road heading south out of the southwest corner of the parking lot. Green Kingfishers were said to be frequenting some nearby gravel pits. Maybe our luck would win us another look.

Areas like the San Pedro don’t just get protected because they are important and worth preserving. It would be nice if this were the case, but it’s not. There is always a story, and a struggle, and a host of unsung heroes. Efforts to secure the San Pedro involved many dedicated members of the Huachuca Audubon Society and goes back many years. The breakthrough, when it came, was surprising and sudden.

I think it was Archimedes who said: “Give me but one firm spot on which to stand, and I will move the earth.” Sometimes getting a piece of land protected is just a matter of finding the right place to stand.

It came to pass that the son of Dean Bibles, the state director of the Bureau of Land Management, conducted a study of San Pedro’s nesting Gray Hawks. The significance of the river did not escape him, and his father respected his son’s judgement. The rest, as they say, is history.

We searched one gravel pit for the kingfishers and settled for a tidy swarm of Blue Grosbeaks and buntings in several flavors. The second gravel pit was a winner. The male of Arizona’s only known nesting pair of Green Kingfishers made a brief appearance and a quick departure. We did likewise.

The Swainson’s Hawks were long since aloft. The quail had retreated to the shadows. The Huachucas shimmered in the afternoon heat and thunderheads threatened their flank. We’d lost the morning cool for traveling and the ride to South Fork would be a hot one.

But we figured the heat was a small price to pay for the privilege of getting a preview of a place destined to become one of North America’s premier birding spots. It might be a year before we come again, maybe two. One thing is certain. When we do, it’s certain that we won’t have the parking lot to ourselves. And it would be a shame if we did.

For information about the San Pedro National Conservation Area, contact:

San Pedro Project Office, Bureau of Land Management, Box 9853, RR 1, Huachuca City, AZ 85616, (602) 457-2265

or  
Safford District Office, Bureau of Land Management, 425 East 4th Street, Safford, AZ 08846, (602) 428-4040.

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