

A "Jumping-Off Place" for the Gila Wilderness

Heart Bar Wildlife Area, Site 47

The upper Gila River has lulled area residents with its mellifluous murmurings since before recorded time.

In the 1200s, the Mogollon people erected cliff dwellings within earshot of the river, lived there a few decades, then abandoned their settlement as suddenly as they built it. In 1824, mountain men came to the river briefly, trapped beaver in its headwaters, then moved on. A young Apache boy who would later take the name of Geronimo grew to manhood along the Gila River's banks. Some years later, the Apache people were forced out as Anglos moved in. In the early part of the 20th century, an L-shaped, tin-roofed, adobe ranch house was built on high ground above the river that continued to flow on, changeless and melodious as ever.

Today, that ranch house is headquarters of the Heart Bar Wildlife Area, owned and managed by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. The on-site caretaker, recently retired New Mexico Department of Game and Fish biologist Marshall Conway, can hear the river from the kitchen window.

The 797-acre Heart Bar Wildlife Area includes 2.5 miles of uninterrupted riparian habitat along the Gila River as well as much surrounding land poised along the southern edge of the Gila Wilderness. Ochre-colored sandstone cliffs with knobby formations rise up sharply on the river's east side, while wooded rolling hills fall away to the west. Heart Bar is next-door neighbor to the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument. Side by side, they're literally "where the road stops," an hour north of Silver City on State Road 15.

A Riverside With Many Faces

As a visitor to Heart Bar, the first thing you notice about its riverside micro-habitats is that they occur in distinct bands, each higher in elevation as you move away from the river. After an expanse of sand and cobblestone at river's edge, there's a broad band of cottonwoods (predominately narrowleaf) and alders, dotted with the occasional Arizona sycamore. Growing under the cottonwoods is lush green grass that elk love to feed on, particularly on spring mornings when the grass is succulent and newly emerged.

Beyond the cottonwoods come willow thickets, which sometimes conceal and then reveal small pools of groundwater seepage. Next comes a ribbon of live oaks (Emory and gray) and mountain mahogany. (Be sure to watch for mule deer browsing on mountain mahogany, one of their favorite foods.) Since live oaks don't lose their leaves all at once, like most deciduous trees, but lose and replace them bit by bit, these small trees are handsome year-round in their dusty, reddish gray-green foliage. Above the live oaks, as

the elevation climbs, piñon and juniper eventually give way to Ponderosa and yellow pine.

A Birder's Hideaway

The river-bottom woodlands of Heart Bar make for a quiet, idyllic spot for watching typical Southwestern bird species. Spring avian migrants, like the western and hepatic tanagers and painted redstart, bring splashes of vivid color to the riverside bosque. The first thing birders may notice is an active great blue heron rookery, with 12 riverside nests in the cottonwood trees and a few others just across the road.

Other common species include Steller's and scrub jays as well as the familiar dark-eyed junco, canyon towhee, mourning dove, red-naped sapsucker, northern flicker (red-shafted), and western bluebird. Common blackhawks (which are anything but common) nest in the area, as well as the Say's phoebe, Virginia's warbler, and distinctive acorn woodpecker, easily identified by its "harlequin" face and white wing-flash.

Spring heralds the seasonal return of the yellow-breasted chat, as well as a waver of warblers: black-throated gray, yellow, Wilson's, and orange-crowned.

At Little Creek Pond along State Road 15, about a mile before you reach the Heart Bar river access drive, you may spot red-winged blackbirds and black-headed grosbeaks perched among the cattails. At the pond, look for pied-billed grebe, mallard, ringneck and cinnamon teal.

In spring and fall, migrating ospreys and bald eagles are sometimes seen along the river. You may also see mergansers flying low over the water and cliff swallows swooping to catch insects on the wing. In winter and early spring, you may see common snipe feeding along shallow backwaters where watercress grows.

Listen carefully--you'll be sure to hear it, especially in spring--for the unmistakable song of the canyon wren as it echoes melodiously off rock walls. (It sounds a bit like a cry Tinkerbell would make if she were falling off a cliff surprised yet sweet, with descending tones fading away. A silly simile, yes, but once you hear the canyon wren's song, you'll definitely concur.)

Heart Bar Wildlife

Evidence of beaver is everywhere along the river in the form of gnawed cottonwood trees, from saplings to broad-girthed patriarchs, some merely girdled, others felled in random patterns. Although beaver frequently build dams across portions of the river, these structures are just as frequently swept away by seasonally fluctuating waters or summer thunderstorms.

An early-morning wildlife watcher may frequently spot wild turkeys--common, if elusive, river-bottom residents by day that roost in hillside pines by night. Coyotes are also local residents. So are the white-throated woodrat, bobcat and mountain lion,

although they're most active by night and seldom, if ever, seen by casual visitors. Watch for the tufted-eared Abert squirrel in the pine trees and the bushy tailed rock squirrel and ubiquitous pocket gopher on the ground. In warmer months, keep an eye out for black-tailed rattlesnakes watch where you step.

Elk are commonly seen feeding on succulent spring grass by the river and, with a good eye, you might spot bands of mule deer as well. "It's not uncommon to see 20 in a group," said Conway. "In a half hour's time one late afternoon in March, I spotted 45 deer in two separate groups as I observed from the ranch-house yard."

A Timely Purchase

Why did the department buy the Heart Bar? Partly because it would make a good jumping-off place for district officers and other biologists to access the Gila Wilderness. Partly because of its unspoiled riparian habitat. But mostly because of the so-called Glenn Allotment that came as part of the purchase package--92,000 acres of prime Gila Wilderness country-- to retire it permanently from sheep and cattle grazing and keep it safe as a refuge for wildlife.

Although the Heart Bar had its origins in the 1930s as the TJ Ranch, it soon came under the ownership of two families, the Colemans and the Tabers. They were Oklahomans with oil money who aimed to run the ranch as a cattle operation (and also, not so incidentally, as a tax write-off). The big house--a long, one-story, L-shaped adobe with gray stucco walls and a tin roof--was built in the late 1930s as a two-family residence. The Colemans had one wing for private use, and the Tabers had the other, sharing the kitchen, dining room, and living room between them.

There's no information on how this cozy situation fared (especially between the Coleman and Taber wives), but eventually the families decided to sell out. The time came when the property could no longer serve as a tax write-off, coinciding with a request from the U.S. Forest Service that the families fence their entire property. At the same time, much of the property around the Heart Bar was being developed into small, private fishing and hunting getaways by land owners and developers Doc and Ida Campbell.

The Campbells, living legends and still residents of the area, urged former department director Elliott Barker to purchase the property for the department, which he did in 1951. After the purchase, the ranch house was occupied by a variety of department personnel, including Frank Smith, father of Quemado-based district officer Nick Smith, who later lived and worked there himself. Taking over as resident caretaker in December 1996, Marshall Conway has already begun renovation and major upkeep projects to maintain the ranch complex. He plans to monitor local wildlife closely as seasons change and years pass.

Directions

To reach the Heart Bar Wildlife Area, go north of Silver City on State Road 15 for 40 miles. The road is narrow and winding, so plan on at least an hours' drive. Near the end, as you pass the Gila Hot Springs store, go a little less than a mile to reach Little Creek

Pond on your right (the sign for Little Creek is on your left). You've now entered Heart Bar property.

Since the ranch complex is now a private residence, public access to the area is made available only at the pond and 2/10ths of a mile beyond Mile Marker 41, just down the road. Look for greenish, pressure-treated wood posts and an opening in the fence on your right. A dirt track leads down to the river. The area is day use only, with no fires and no camping. For more information about Heart Bar Wildlife Area, call the Southwest Area Office in Las Cruces, (505) 522-9796.

Jane Susan MacCarter wrote the New Mexico Wildlife Viewing Guide, available for \$8.95 at bookstores and the Department of Game and Fish, and she contributes detailed accounts to our magazine.