

# Lower Gila Box

## Watchable Wildlife Site #72

'Footprints in the Sand': As a name, it may elicit in us a feeling, a memory, perhaps a place. To most people, this name calls to mind the title of a well-loved, inspirational poem. To a select few, however, 'Footprints in the Sand' may also trigger memories of a place, where footprints of many wildlife species cross and recross on a broad, sandy river bank in southwestern New Mexico. This place is the Lower Gila Box. Here, visitors will find footprints in the sand galore: insects and reptiles, birds and mammals, with the prints generally undisturbed and delicately intact.

### **A Place of Quiet**

Located northwest of Lordsburg, the Lower Gila Box is a quiet stretch of the Gila River where silence is broken only by birdsong and the rustling of wind in the trees. Now managed as a biological Area of Critical Environment Concern by the Bureau of Land Management, this secluded corner of New Mexico is dominated by a green ribbon of water and vegetation, winding through desert, occasionally coursing between cliffs, then heading west into Arizona.

Four components -- brown sugar-fine sand; the wide, slow-moving river; rocky cliffs; and lush vegetation of ancient trees -- come together in beautiful symmetry at the Lower Gila box. Look for Fremont cottonwood, white-trunked Arizona sycamore, willow species (seep, desert, and Gooding willows), netleaf hackberry, boxelder, false-indigo, velvet ash, Arizona walnut, western soapberry, and scrub oak (Emory and gray varieties). Shrub species cluster about the trees: desert spicebush, tarbush, honey mesquite, and creosote. In wet years, grasses such as burro, tobosa, Bermuda, knotgrass, and barnyard flourish in the Box.

### **Riparian Corridor**

The Lower Gila Box is part of what is termed the Gila Corridor riparian area. It provides a migration route for birds, following the length of the river. In the desert Southwest, riparian areas -- rivers and streams, springs and seeps, and playa lakes -- are of utmost importance to wildlife. These areas provide water, food, cover, and travel corridors for all species, but especially for neotropical migratory birds. The Lower Gila Box is a prime area for Southwestern desert birding. Approximately 170 different bird species are known to occur here throughout the year.

### **Birdlife at the Box**

Along the road to the Box, there's excellent viewing of Gambel's and Scaled Quail, Roadrunner, Mexican Jay, White-necked Raven, and White-winged Dove while, in the evening, you can catch the song (and perhaps a glimpse) of the Whip-poor-will. In the riparian zone, watch for Bell's Vireo, Cassin's and Western Kingbirds, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Bridled Titmouse, Verdin, Canyon Wren, Purple Martin, and Black-throated Sparrow.

Four handsome thrasher species can be seen inhabiting the scrub vegetation at the Box: Bendire's, Curve-billed, Crissal, and Sage. Also look for Blue-gray and Black-tailed Gnatcatchers. In willow thickets, keep an eye out for Yellow-breasted Chat, Wied's Crested Flycatcher, and the drab but very rare Southwestern Willow Flycatcher.

Hummingbirds thrive at the Box. Watch and listen for the flitting buzz of Black-chinned, Costa's, Broad-tailed, Rufous, Calliope, and Rivoli hummingbirds. Cliff swallows abound here. Large colonies of nesting cliff swallows occur at several locales throughout the Box.

Look for bright flashes of color in the trees -- the gold and black feathers of Bullock's, Hooded, and Scott's Orioles; the red of the Northern Cardinal, Painted Redstart, and Vermilion Flycatcher. By closely observing the Arizona sycamores or big cottonwoods, you may also spot the Gila Woodpecker.

Less flashy but more melodious are the wealth of warblers that migrate through the area, spring through fall: Black-and-white, Tennessee, Orange-crowned, Nashville, Virginia's, Lucy's, Yellow, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Gray, Townsend's, Grace's, and Cape May warbler species.

Along the river, watch for Green Heron standing motionless in vegetation, Mexican Duck along the riverside, and Common Merganser which nests in the area.

## **Raptors**

Two dark-feathered species often spotted here are the Common Black-hawk, which is actually uncommon, and the Zone-tail Hawk, native to the desert Southwest. Although the Turkey Vulture is the most often seen raptor to soar above the Box, Golden Eagles are also common. Red-tailed Hawk and American Kestrel are glimpsed as well. Here the Lesser Nighthawk (not a raptor, despite its name) also ventures out on erratic, twilight flights, 'whirring' as it stoops to devour insects on the wing. Elf Owl and Pygmy Owl may be glimpsed, peering from their cool, secure, underground burrows.

## **Mammal Watching**

Not only is deep dusk a serenely beautiful time at Lower Gila Box, it's when the handsome ring-tail comes out to forage, as well as the black-and-white hooded and hog-nosed skunk species. Dusk is also when 12 different bat species take flight here to feed.

Woodrats come out at night, too, but they're seldom seen by visitors; their untidy dens are common daytime sights.

During the day, squirrels scamper in the brush. In addition to the common rock squirrel, you may spot an Arizona gray squirrel or even a Harris' antelope squirrel, known by its horizontal white stripe, and dainty furred tail. Except for family groups of collared peccary, other large wildlife of the Box usually keeps to itself. Mountain lion and bobcat are year-round residents but rarely seen by visitors.

### **Reptiles and Amphibians**

The desert country surrounding Lower Gila Box is prime habitat for reptiles. You're almost sure to see whiptail lizards, including the Western and Gila Spotted varieties, as well as larger lizard species such as the Collared and Plateau. With patience and luck, you may also spot other varieties, including the Texas Horned and Clark's Spiny lizards. Along the river, watch for Spiny Softshell turtles.

Naturally, snakes thrive here too, including the common Coachwhip and Gopher snakes; less-common species such as the Desert Kingsnake, Striped Whipsnake, and Desert Patchnose snake; and regional species of the familiar garter snake (Black-necked and Checkered).

Keep a careful lookout for rattlesnakes, especially May through October. Western Diamondbacks are common in the area, active, and quite frequently large. Prairie rattlesnakes are also abundant. The Blacktail species is less often encountered, but it's definitely in evidence, as well as the tiny but deadly Arizona coral snake. Watch your step and where you put your hand. . .

### **Management - Today and Tomorrow**

Since 1990, the BLM has excluded livestock from grazing along eight miles of the Gila River. Since this restriction has been enforced, signs of positive change are everywhere: new young trees sprouting by the river, new 'meanders' and ox-bows occurring along the river, new areas of vegetation flourishing where none grew before.

Not only is this portion of the Box designated as a Wilderness Study Area, it's an Area of Critical Environmental Concern, with guaranteed instream flows as soon as State law permits. It is closed to vehicle use; sand and gravel excavation/sales; oil and gas exploration; and rights of ways.

The BLM has plans to develop the Box as a primitive recreation site with designated parking areas and hiking trails. Besides the primitive camping, there is also hiking; bird watching; canoeing or rafting at certain times of the year; fishing for catfish; and hunting in season. Check out the new hiking trails, from the canyon rim to the river, at Fisherman's Point and Spring on the Bluff. NOTE: Best visiting time is October through

May. Summer visitation is strongly discouraged, due to extremely high temperatures and lack of potable water.

### **Directions**

CAUTION: Before you head out, be sure to fuel up, bring water, and provisions. The Lower Gila Box is in a highly remote location, and there are no services beyond Lordsburg. To reach the Box, travel north of Lordsburg on US Highway 70 for 2 miles and turn right on NM Highway 464. Travel 14.1 miles on NM Highway 464 to a point 50 feet south of the Grant County/Hidalgo County boundary sign. Turn left (west) on the only dirt road in the vicinity (Nichols Canyon Road). Drive 3.6 miles and turn right (north) at the first gravel crossroad. Continue another 4.9 miles to the BLM sign for the site. Continue 0.8 miles to the river and park in the designated parking area.

The site is managed by the Bureau of Land Management, (505) 525-4300.

For more information about specific access to the Lower Gila Box, contact the Las Cruces Area Office of the Bureau of Land Management, (505) 525-4300.