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Oklahoma's spring birding Eden

You'll find spoonbills, ibises, whistling-ducks, warblers, and lots of other great birds at Red Slough, the Sooner State's premier hotspot

by Gary Lantz

BY THE TIME SENSORY OVERLOAD SUBSIDED, it was apparent I'd found the perfect way to launch a late February morning.

Naturalist David Arbour and I were standing in Oklahoma's Red Slough Wildlife Management Area beside an old alligator nest strewn with leathery shells from last year's hatch. A Golden Eagle swooped low overhead, scattering flocks of Mallards, pintails, and snipe from a flooded marsh. A few yards away, a muddy slide creasing the bank of Push Creek was still damp from otter play. Then, as if on cue, a half dozen or more King Rails cranked up an unseen chorus from a dense tangle of green and brown bulrush.

It had been this way since sunup: thousands of birds — Sedge Wrens, Swamp Sparrows, Tree Swallows, Neotropic Comorants. And according to the man who keeps track, the slough was still weeks away from awakening to the busy season.

Arbour, a talented naturalist from nearby De Queen, Arkansas, and my tour guide for the day, continued on as if it were just another morning at the office. He pointed out a Hermit Thrush, Hooded Mergansers, a Marsh Wren, and a flock of Rusty Blackbirds rummaging along the shallows of a grassy lake. Flocks of pintails rooted amid dormant aquatic vegetation while Northern Harriers combed wet prairies on the slough's western border.

Arbour pointed out birds and named them before I could even bring binocular to eyeball. But then that's his job, one he has practiced since arriving here nearly 10 years ago. The 49-year-old wildlife professional serves several state and federal masters as a technician, guide, and point man in the effort to document the area's astonishing variety of birdlife. At the time of this writing, he had recorded 302 species. And considering that he surveys birds here at least once a week, chances are that by the time you read this, the number will have grown.

Word continues to spread concerning Red Slough's fame as prime birdwatching territory. Many birders do a double take, however, when they learn that this birding Eden is in Oklahoma and not somewhere along the Gulf coast.



Bill Drake/Rolf Nussbaumer Photography

STUNNER: The male Painted Bunting is the multicolored star of the Red Slough. You can find the bird there from April through mid-September.

Oklahoma's birdy southeastern corner

Red Slough Wildlife Management Area lies in the far southeastern corner of Oklahoma within Ouachita National Forest. The forest encompasses two large units, as shown here.

In the northern unit, you can visit the McCurtain County Wilderness Area, where a shortleaf pine upland habitat is home to a colony of endangered Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. In early May, the wilderness also hosts Brown-headed Nuthatch, Bachman's Sparrow, Scarlet Tanager, and Yellow-throated Vireo.

Between the forest's northern and southern units lies Little River NWR, the site of Oklahoma's largest population of breeding Swainson's Warblers. Other birds to see include Yellow-throated, Hooded, Prothonotary, and Kentucky Warblers, Louisiana Waterthrush, Northern Parula, vireos, and thrushes.



The wetland lies south of Idabel and borders the banks of the Red River. Geographically, it represents a coastline of sorts, one thriving just a few million years ago. The slough is situated at the tip of the Gulf Coastal Plain, a habitat type that was once part of the Gulf of Mexico. An ancient sea's northernmost shoreline dampened sands near the slough's modern boundaries, just a few miles west of the Arkansas state line and not much more than shouting distance from Texas. The landscape is flat, the annual rainfall averages around 50 inches, and the lowlands are prone to flooding. Bald cypress trees, alligators, and long-legged wading birds feel at home here. And so do birders.

Oasis of marshes, woods, and prairies

Until the 1960s, the slough was privately owned prime bottomland hardwood forest, accustomed to seasonal floods. Then the area was cleared, channelized, and converted to fields for rice, corn, soybeans, and milo. In 1996, the landowner enrolled the tract in the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Wetlands Reserve Program. The NRCS constructed 25 miles of dikes and 18 water-control structures in an effort to restore the original wildlife habitat lost to farming.

In 1997, the Conservation Fund purchased the heart of the property and turned it over to the U.S. Forest Service and the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. Its 6,000 publicly owned acres lie within the Ouachita National Forest and are managed by several agencies to maintain moist soil units, tracts for bottomland hardwood timber restoration, wet prairies, and reservoirs.

As a result, visitors find mudflats, emergent marshes, shallow and deep-water impoundments, brushy shrub and scrub patches,

grassy meadows — and the astounding variety of species attracted to such habitats.

Arbour takes pride in the slough's diversity. During our tour, he pointed out prescribed burns he and his colleagues had performed in an effort to restore plant succession and native vegetation. We poked around amid a knee-high mini-forest of Sabal minor or dwarf palmetto, the northernmost native palm species. At the edge of a beautiful rush-lined lake grew a colony of sundew, a carnivorous plant benefiting from the slough's abundant insect life. Nearby stood a grove of native loblolly pine shading a vernal pool attracting breeding spotted salamanders.

Dragonflies are so numerous that visitors arrive with binoculars in hand to spy airborne bugs as well as birds. And the slough has an abundance of *mudbugs*, a local colloquialism for crayfish. But it's the variety of birds that keep people raving.

Arbour says that peak months for birding are May, June, and July. October seems to invite the uncommon. Sprague's Pipit, Sage Thrasher, McCown's Longspur, and Common Ground-Dove are among the unexpected birds that have lingered during October, a month that has proven best to observe Nelson's Sparrow and Yellow Rail as well.

The biologist believes geography is the key to the site's impressive species list. Rising just north are the pine-clad Ouachita Mountains. To the west, the bottomlands climb gradually into blackland prairie. Two miles south, the Red River descends to its distant junction with the Mississippi. The river serves as a conduit, Arbour says, pulling wetland species up

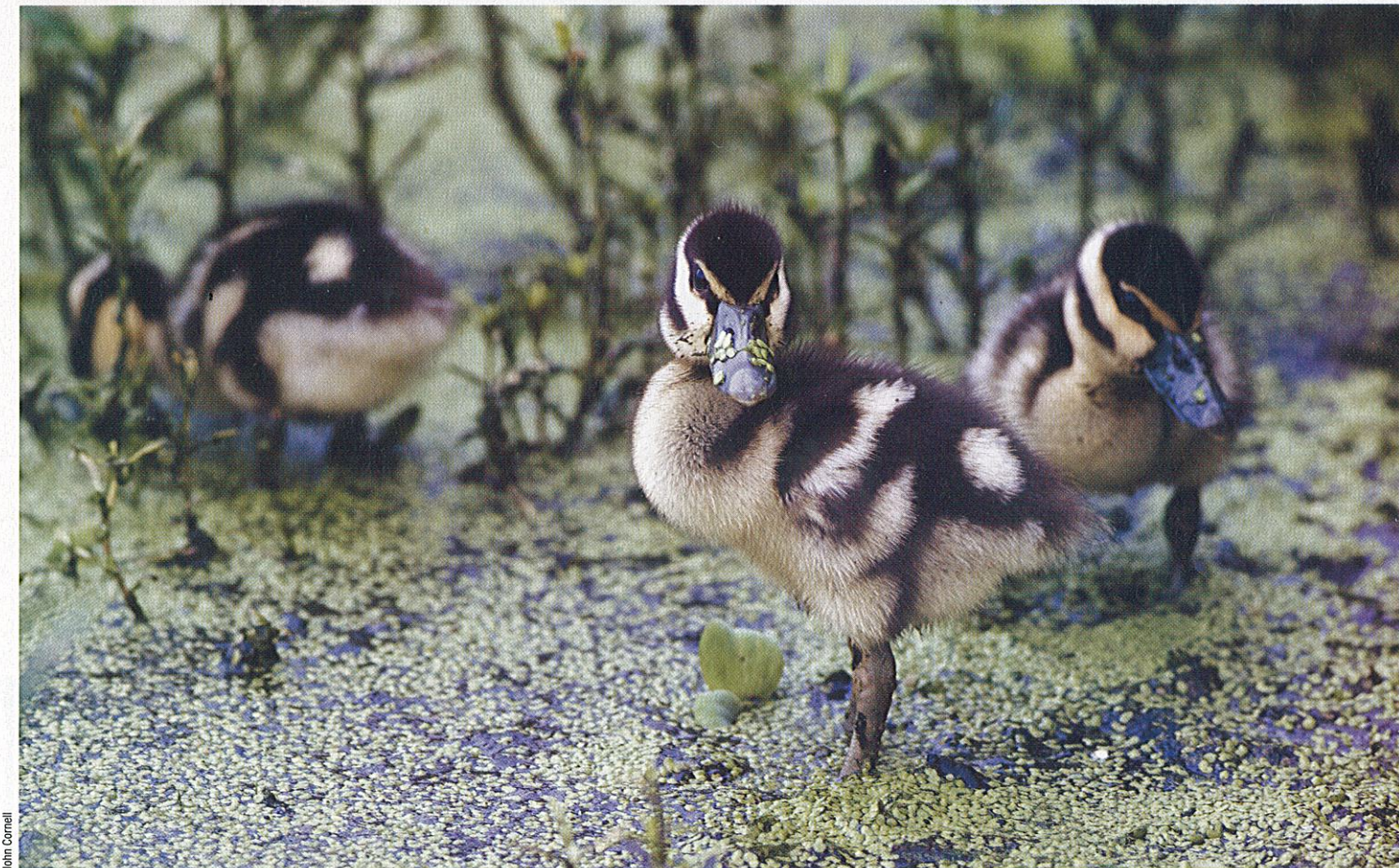
FUZZBALLS: Young Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks forage in a pond. The slough is near the northern edge of the whistling-duck's breeding range.

Red Slough Birding Convention

You can book tours of the slough and other area birding attractions during the annual Red Slough Birding Convention. Tours emphasize birds, butterflies, dragonflies, and wildflowers.

Speakers include the photographer William Burt, who specializes in photographing rails and other elusive birds, and Swainson's Warbler researcher Mia Revels of Northeastern State University.

May 8-11, 2010
Mary H. Herron Community
Conference Center, Idabel,
Oklahoma
(580) 286-3616
redsloughconvention.com





Pale blue facial lines do not wrap around eye

Dark eyes

Dark slate facial skin

SPIT AND POLISH: A Glossy Ibis twists its neck to preen. White and White-faced Ibises also occur at Red Slough.

Mary Curtis



UP IN ARMS: Black-necked Stilts squabble in a pond. The long-legged waders prefer shallow marshes.

Bill Drake/Rolf Nussbaumer Photography

Birds worth going for

- Black-bellied Whistling-Duck
- Mottled Duck
- Neotropic Cormorant
- Anhinga
- American Bittern
- Least Bittern
- Tricolored Heron
- White Ibis
- White-faced Ibis
- Glossy Ibis
- King Rail
- Virginia Rail
- Sora
- Purple Gallinule
- Common Moorhen
- Black-necked Stilt
- Hudsonian Godwit
- Prothonotary Warbler
- Prairie Warbler
- Painted Bunting



Ron Austin

from the coast as well as dryland birds down from the plains. In other words, Red Slough represents ground zero for several merging life zones. Consequently, management efforts for the area reflect a desire to maintain biodiversity.

Duck hunters flock here in late autumn, and a portion of the refuge is closed to provide a resting area for migrating waterfowl. To the credit of the folks in charge, the preserve hasn't adopted the familiar "duck farm" management scheme featuring row-crop agriculture, reservoirs, and little else. The slough strives to be as natural as possible. And when moisture-loving oaks planted throughout the area mature and provide an annual acorn crop, Red Slough could begin to mirror its aboriginal past and feature an even greater résumé of species.

A hike, a stroll, or a drive

Dirt roads provide access to parking areas, but beyond the gates, it's foot traffic only. Fortunately, the checkerboard system of levees is well maintained and mowed, allowing access to elevated viewing platforms and points beyond. Several of Arbour's regulars walk a loop leading from shallow flooded marshes to reservoirs to seasonally dry grasslands, covering at least four miles while encountering many birds. Two foot bridges, one across Push Creek and another across a drainage ditch, allow visitors to tailor their experience to a long hike, a short stroll, or spotting-scope searches from a car window.

My day ended with a stop at Bittern Lake, where Arbour pointed to a spot where an alligator had lain, soaking up sun and flattening the soft green rushes. The 'gators come out to bask when the sun warms the slough, and this one had been enjoying 70° weather.

SITTING PRETTY: A female Swainson's Warbler sits on a nest made of dried leaves. The species nests in large numbers at nearby Little River NWR.

A Cooper's Hawk sped into a thicket of oak and elm, and Arbour reminisced about watching eagles hunt waterfowl. His most memorable raptor sighting: three Bald Eagles and one Golden feeding on a single carcass.

My day list included only the single Golden Eagle. It was up to plenty of mischief, spreading panic throughout the waterfowl community and scattering hundreds of shorebirds as well.

Enormous flocks of Greater Yellowlegs sped past, their cries both sad and musical, like flute music in a minor key. The yellowlegs were joined by equally impressive flights of Wilson's Snipe. We waited for the sun to warm the water so the early frog chorus could begin.

Geese brayed, sparrows twittered, and coots muttered their displeasure at our intrusion. Spring was weeks away, but it was evident the area would be drenched with life by the vernal equinox. I left wishing my stay had been a week rather than a day and vowing to return. The spell of any naturally functioning wetland is strong, but this one seemed exceptional. Driving west, I couldn't resist thinking that the words "build it and they will come" were right on target at Red Slough — a wetland brought back from the brink, truly a flooded field of dreams. ☪

Gary Lantz is a freelance writer who has specialized in natural-history reporting for nearly 40 years. He is the author of Buffalo Creek Chronicles: Diary of a Cattle Ranch on the Southern Plains (University of Arkansas Press, 2002). He wrote about the Lesser Prairie-Chicken in our June 2007 issue.