

BIRDING

the Davis Mountains & Adjacent Communities



20 Birding Sites
in or near:

- Fort Davis
- Alpine
- Marfa
- Balmorhea
- Marathon
- Presidio



The Davis Mountains are a sky island, an isolated mountain range surrounded by desert. The town of Fort Davis at the foot of the Davis Mountains has an elevation of 5,000 ft. From that elevation, the sky island rises to 8,383 ft. As the elevation increases, average temperatures decline and precipitation increases, permitting an “island” of forest at higher elevations. As a result of these diverse habitat types, one can find more than 300 species of birds, many found nowhere else in the state! Be sure to drive the 80-mile long Scenic Loop through the heart of the mountains—a great way to experience the habitat diversity that surrounds Fort Davis. Most of the Davis Mountains are in private ownership, however there are many publicly assessable locations for birding. We share those sites with you here and remind you to respect all private property adjacent to the roadways (never drive through an open gate or cross a fence line). Comfortable lodging for your birding adventure is available in Fort Davis (fortdavis.com) and also in nearby Alpine (visitalpinetx.com).

Tip! This is a remote area with little cell service so be sure you prepare yourself and your vehicle for a long day of birding. Take along lots of drinking water, snacks, a good first aid kit, and a full tank of gas!



Greater Roadrunner

FORT DAVIS & SITES ALONG THE SCENIC LOOP

1. Jeff Davis County Courthouse

This site is open for day use only. No fee.
Located in the center of town on State Street (Hwy 118).

The lawn of this historic stone Courthouse is planted with a variety of native tree species found here in the Davis Mountains. These mature trees host an abundance of migratory birds in late summer and throughout the winter months where they can be observed feeding on fruits, seeds, and cones. In summer and fall watch for Acorn & Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, Bushtit, White-breasted Nuthatch, Canyon Towhee, Black-crested Titmouse, Curve-billed Thrasher, Northern Cardinal, and Pyrrhuloxia. In winter you may also see Cedar Waxwing, American Robin, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Chipping Sparrow. This shady spot is perfect for an afternoon stroll or a picnic lunch.



Pyrrhuloxia

2. Jeff Davis County Park

This site is open for day use only. No fee. Restrooms present.
Located 1 mile south of the Courthouse along Hwy 17 (the road to Marfa).

This small county park is a mostly open area with ballfields and grasslands, a great place to walk your dog, have a picnic lunch and soak up some sun but it is often a great spot to bird as well. The watered ballfields are favored by American Pipits, sparrows, and Eastern and Western Meadowlarks. While there be sure to scan the small trees around the circle drive for Chipping Sparrow and Vermilion Flycatcher. The dry grassy areas are good for Vesper Sparrow and the brush along the fence line typically has Cactus Wren, Greater Roadrunner, and Curve-billed Thrasher. Take the hiking trail all the way to the back of the park boundary where it is bordered by Chihuahuan Creek (mostly dry) to look for more brush species. This spot is always worth a quick check especially during spring and fall migration.

3. Chihuahuan Desert Nature Center

This site is open for day use only. An entrance fee is required. Restrooms present.
Located 4 miles south of Fort Davis on Hwy 118 (road to Alpine). The Center is one mile in from the highway.

Here you can roam through 507 acres of Davis Mountains foothills. The botanical gardens, a protected canyon with perennial springs, grasslands with mixed desert scrub, and seasonal tanks provide several habitat zones for birds and bird watching. Hummingbird feeders are maintained around the center and primarily attract Black-chinned, but Rufous, Broad-tailed and maybe the occasional Calliope can be seen in late summer. The center offers an excellent Bird Viewing Blind and well-marked hiking trails where you can find Ladder-backed Woodpecker, American Kestrel, Western Kingbird, Phainopepla, Woodhouse's Scrub Jay, Cactus Wren, Rock and Canyon Wrens, Lesser Goldfinch, Black-throated and Black-chinned Sparrows, House Finch, Canyon Towhee, Pyrrhuloxia, as well as spring and fall migrants.



Broad-tailed Hummingbird

4. Mountain Trails Lodge & Outdoor Learning Center

This site is open for day use only. Cabins available for rent, call (800) 403-3484.

Located 0.8 miles from the Jeff Davis County Courthouse on Hwy 118 South (road to Alpine).

The 10-acre campus of Mountain Trails Lodge & Outdoor Learning is home to several species whose nests can be found around the property and along the Nature Trail: Black-chinned Hummingbird, Say's Phoebe, Cactus Wren, and Curve-billed Thrasher. The natural setting attracts endemic and migrating species, and sightings include American Kestrel, Cassin's Kingbird, Scaled Quail, Canyon Towhee, and many finches and sparrows.

5. Davis Mountains State Park & Indian Lodge

This site is open daily, and developed camping is available at the site. An entrance fee is required. Restrooms present.

From Fort Davis, proceed north on Hwy 118 for 4.1 miles and turn left onto Park Road 3.

A total of 365 bird species are known to occur within Jeff Davis County and Davis Mountains State Park provides a convenient location to see many of them. Cassin's Kingbird, Bewick's and Canyon Wrens, White-breasted Nuthatch, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Black-crested Titmouse, Acorn and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, and assorted Hummingbirds. Be on the lookout for migrants like flycatchers, vireos, and warblers (Virginia's, Yellow-rumped, Townsend's, Black-throated Gray, and Grace's). And if you are lucky Montezuma Quail and a roosting Elf Owl! The park offers 20 miles of hiking trails and features two particularly good Bird Viewing Blinds. The Primitive area of the park along Limpia Creek is especially good for birding.



Acorn Woodpecker

6. McDonald Observatory

This site is open for day use only. Restrooms at Visitors Center. Avoid residential areas.

From Fort Davis, travel Hwy 118 north 16 miles to Mt. Locke.

Birding and wildlife viewing is limited to daylight hours and along public roads on observatory property. Species commonly seen at elevation in the Davis Mountains can be seen on the observatory grounds, including Montezuma Quail, Western Bluebird, Green-tailed and Spotted Towhees, Scott's Oriole, and Hepatic Tanager. The Visitors' Center Café has hummingbird feeders for easy viewing by visitors. Commonly encountered hummingbirds during summer and fall include: Rufous, Black-Chinned, Calliope, and Broad-tailed. Birding and wildlife viewing is free; fees charged for astronomy programs.

7. The Nature Conservancy Madera Canyon Trail

This site is open for day use only. No fee.

Located along Hwy 118 approximately 24 miles from Fort Davis to the Lawrence E. Wood picnic area and trailhead (about 10 miles past the McDonald Observatory).

The 2.5-mile trail is a loop that begins and ends at the L.E. Wood picnic area's east side and is marked by a sign and wooden split-rail fence. The trail meanders through stands of stately ponderosa pines, pinion-juniper woodlands and grassy meadows. Birds to look for here include Woodhouse's Scrub Jay, White-throated Swift, Acorn and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, Montezuma Quail, Common Raven, Bushtit, Golden Eagle, White-breasted Nuthatch, Canyon Wren, Gray and Hammond's Flycatchers, and Black-chinned Sparrow in summer and fall. In winter look for Williamson's Sapsucker, Golden-crowned Kinglet, American Robin, and Townsend's Solitaire.

8. Lawrence E. Wood Picnic Area

This site is open for day use only. No fee.

Located along Hwy 118 approximately 24 miles from Fort Davis (about 10 miles past the McDonald Observatory on your left).

A great picnic spot under huge Ponderosa pines and next to Madera Creek, the birds found here are about the same as you would find on the Madera Canyon Trail adjacent to it. Check the trees for nesting flycatchers and Cooper's Hawk. Walk the grassy areas under the trees for a chance at finding Montezuma Quail, foraging Western Bluebirds and Wild Turkey. Be sure to walk along the parks back fence line that borders the creek bed to find a great variety of birds, especially if Madera Creek is running. Potentially good birding any time of year, this spot is best in summer and fall.

ALPINE AREA



Blue Grosbeak

1. Kokernot Lodge

This site is open for day use only. No fee.

In Alpine go east on Texas 223 (Harrison St.) to first turn on left (sign to Alpine Country Club), turn right and curve your way a half mile to the lodge parking area.

This historic 35-acre recreational area donated to Sul Ross University by the Kokernot family in 1930 is a wooded oasis created by the Charco Springs named for the Apache Chieftain who frequented the area decades before. Springs in the desert give life to ancient Cottonwoods that line the creek and attract a diversity of songbirds in spring and fall migration and many summer breeding birds can be found including Cooper's Hawk, Great Horned Owl, Acorn Woodpecker, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Cassin's Kingbird, Common Raven, House Finch, Lark Sparrow, Bullock's Oriole, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Blue Grosbeak and Summer Tanager. Wintering specialties include Belted Kingfisher, Black Phoebe, 3 species of Bluebird, American

Robin, Pine Siskin, Song and White-crowned and Lincoln's Sparrows.

2. Alpine Cemetery

This site is open for day use only. No fee. Please be respectful of locals visiting gravesites.

In Alpine (at blinking traffic light) drive east on Holland Ave 0.5 mile to S. Neville Haynes St (turn right), in half a mile turn left on Ave I (Cemetery Road) for 1 mile to 2nd Cemetery gate on left.

As only birders know, old cemeteries in communities can be some of the best places to bird -especially in desert areas where these spots are often heavily wooded with a variety of mature evergreen trees. As such they are frequented by a great variety of birds that change with the seasons. Alpine cemetery offers good birding anytime of year but especially in migration and in winter. Year-round birds include White-winged Dove, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Cactus Wren, House Finch, and Chipping Sparrow. In summer and fall look for nesting Black-chinned Hummingbird, Vermillion Flycatcher, Cassin's and Western Kingbirds, Barn Swallow, Curve-billed Thrasher, Lark Sparrow and Bullocks Oriole. Winter offers many more species like Kinglets, Cassin's Finch, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Harris's Hawk, Red Crossbill, Dark-eyed Junco, Wilson's Warbler and Lark Bunting. Always worth a quick stop, this site can produce an exciting bird list.

MARFA AREA

1. Sunset Park - Downtown Marfa

This site is open for day use only. No fee.

Located along Hwy 17 (Highland Street) in Marfa. The park is near the corner of Oak Street and Highland Street on the east side, behind the U.S. Post Office. It runs most of the length of Oak Street between Highland Street and Russell Street.

Mature trees attract birds and other wildlife to this downtown park. Possible birds for the park found in summer include Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Cassin's Kingbird, Curve-billed Thrasher, and during migration season migrant warblers and tanagers use the trees in the park as stopover habitat. Chihuahuan Raven is common in town during migration and in the surrounding grasslands throughout the year.

2. Marfa Lights Viewing Area

This site is open for day use only. No fee. Restrooms present.

In Marfa drive east Hwy. 90 (towards Alpine) for 9 miles. The park is on the south side of the Hwy.

While most travelers visit this site at sunset with a hope of seeing the elusive Marfa Lights -or Marfa Mystery Lights, as some call them – this is a good place to look across the expansive desert grasslands for summering and wintering grassland birds. Easy to spot birds here are Say's Phoebe, Cassin's Sparrow, Northern Harrier, American Kestrel, Prairie Falcon, Loggerhead Shrike, Cactus Wren and pipits and longspurs in winter. If you go at dusk listen for Common Poorwill and watch for Short-eared Owl coming off their day roost in the tall grasses.



Cactus Wren

BALMORHEA AREA



*Black-throated
Sparrow*

1. Balmorhea State Park

This site is open daily. Fee required.

Camping and lodging available. Restrooms present.

Located on Hwy 17 North, 34 miles from Fort Davis.

Balmorhea State Park boasts a 1.75-acre spring-fed pool and 5 acres of desert wetlands. The abundance of fresh water and large trees are a virtual bird magnet. Common nesting birds during spring and summer include Orchard and Bullock's Orioles, Painted Bunting, Blue Grosbeak, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Ash-throated Flycatcher and Western Kingbird. Birds seen during spring migration include Western Tanager, Spotted Sandpiper, and several species of warblers. Year-round residents include Black Phoebe, Sora, Green Heron, Greater Roadrunner, Black-throated

Sparrow, Curve-billed Thrasher, Scaled Quail, Pyrrhuloxia, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, and Lesser Goldfinch. Winter residents include Belted Kingfisher, Snowy Egret, many species of ducks, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Pine Siskin, American Goldfinch, and Green-tailed Towhee.

2. Balmorhea Lake

This site is open daily, and developed camping is available at the site. Fee required.

Restrooms present.

From Hwy 17 (North Main St.) in Balmorhea (42 miles from Fort Davis), turn south on Houston St. and travel 2 miles.

Balmorhea Lake is a 500-acre reservoir built in 1917 to capture water from San Solomon Springs. The lake in winter attracts large numbers of waterfowl including Snow and Ross's Goose, 17 species of duck, loons, mergansers, 5 species of grebe including Clark's and Western Grebes, American White Pelican, herons, and gulls. This is one of the few locations in the Trans-Pecos to observe shorebirds, although it takes some effort to carefully comb the shoreline. The desert scrub that surrounds the lake is a good place to look for Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Verdin, Crissal Thrasher, and Scaled Quail in summer, and in winter Sage Thrasher, Lark Bunting, Sagebrush Sparrow, and many other sparrow species. Birds can be found here any time of year but best time to visit is in fall migration and winter. Many of the region's rare birds have been found at the lake.

3. Sandia Springs Wetlands

This site is open for day use only. No fee.

From Balmorhea, head 2.5 miles east on Hwy 17 to Reeves CR 313, then 0.8 miles south on CR 313 to the site.

Located on a private ranch, Sandia Wetlands' five acres are designed to attract migrant birds during spring and fall. This managed wetland attracts waterfowl, shorebirds, and waders that normally stop at Balmorhea Lake. Due to the smaller size of the wetland, birders are able to enjoy a closer look from the Bird Viewing Blind. The wetland provides shallow water and mudflats throughout the year. A Dragonfly Pond is the newest addition to this site and offers naturalists' a great opportunity to see and photograph unique desert dragonflies and damselflies. Grassy edges adjacent to the wetlands also harbor many species of sparrows and wintering Sora Rail.

MARATHON AREA

1. Gage Gardens

This private site is open for day use only. No fee. Restrooms present.

From Fort Davis take Hwy 118 south to Alpine, in Alpine go east on Hwy. 90 to Marathon. In Marathon drive south on Post Road (in center of town) over the railroad tracks. You will see the Gage Gardens (look for the tall evergreen trees) on the left at the 1st intersection.

This shady garden filled with a variety of trees and water features is small but very good birding any time of year. Lots of unexpected "eastern" bird species have been found here. It is a reliable spot for Inca and White-winged Doves, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Black Phoebe, Ash-throated and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, Bewick's Wren, Curve-billed and Brown Thrashers, American Robin, Lesser and American Goldfinch, orioles, warblers and Painted Bunting.

2. Fort Pena Colorado Park (The Post)

This site is open for day use only. No fee. Restrooms present.

From Fort Davis take Hwy 118 south to Alpine, in Alpine go east on Hwy. 90 to Marathon. In Marathon drive south on Post Road (in center of town) over the railroad tracks. Continue 6 miles to the end of the road and you will have arrived at the Park.

Bird under the big cottonwoods for Summer Tanager, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Vermilion Flycatcher, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Bullock's and Hooded Orioles, and even day roosting Great Horned Owl in summer. This park is also a go-to birding spot during spring and fall migration. Often the spring-fed pond is a good place to look for Black Phoebe, swallows, plus waterfowl and shorebirds during migration.

3. Marathon Prairie Dog Town

This site is open for day use only.

No fee.

From Marathon drive east on Hwy. 90 to the intersection with US 385. Drive NE on 385 about 8 miles to a highway pullout. Stop here and watch for the Prairie Dog Town on both sides of the road.

There are several Hwy pull outs along this stretch and you can see Prairie Dogs and birds at all of them. It can be good to just stop on occasion and scan the prairie for Burrowing Owls, Golden Eagles, Northern Harrier, Swainson's Hawk and in winter, sparrows, and longspurs.



Zone-tailed Hawk

PRESIDIO AREA

1. Fort Leaton State Historical Site

This site is open for day use only. Entry fee is required. Restrooms present.

From Fort Davis take Hwy 17 south to Marfa. In Marfa take Hwy 67 to Presidio -81 miles. In Presidio take FM 170 east 3.5 miles to Fort Leaton.

Fort Leaton offers picnicking areas, guided tours, plus exhibits on the history from 15th century, and archaeological history of the area. This is the best place for easy, low desert birding. Birds to expect include Gambel's and Scaled Quail, Black Vulture, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Say's Phoebe, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Bell's Vireo, Verdin, Black-throated and Rufous-crowned Sparrows, and Pyrrhuloxia. In winter see the above species plus a host of wintering sparrows including Clay-colored and Brewer's. The large grove of cottonwood trees in the back courtyard is an excellent spot for spring and fall migrants such as Summer Tanager, Yellow-breasted Chat, Blue Grosbeak, Painted Bunting, and many warbler species.

2. B.J. Bishop Wetlands

This site is open for day use only. No fee.

From Fort Davis take Hwy 17 south to Marfa. In Marfa take Hwy 67 to Presidio - 81 miles. In Presidio take FM 170 east 4.4 miles. Take the unpaved road to the right to get to the Wetlands, park and walk the perimeter of the wetlands.

The B.J. Bishop Wetlands is located 0.5 miles east of Fort Leaton State Historic Site and west of Big Bend Ranch State Park. Fed by water from the City of Presidio wastewater treatment plant, the Wetlands have become a sanctuary for hundreds of migrating birds who pass through the Presidio Valley annually. Waterfowl and shorebirds can be seen most anytime of year, also look for Gambel's Quail, Herons and Egrets, Least and Pied-billed Grebes, Common Gallinule, Black-necked Stilt, Killdeer, Black Phoebe, Western Kingbird, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Verdin, Common Yellowthroat and Painted Bunting. If you are lucky you may even find Harris' Hawk and Peregrine Falcon!

This Bird Finding Guide is brought to you by Trans-Pecos Bird Conservation (TBC). Located in Fort Davis, the volunteers at TBC provide education, outreach and funding for the conservation of regional bird-life, and hosts the biennial Davis Mountains Hummingbird Celebration. See DavisMountainsHummingbirdCelebration.com.

Scaled Quail





Fort Davis, Texas
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Front Cover: Montezuma Quail
Back Cover: Rufous Hummingbird

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