



# BIRDING SPANISH STYLE

Find a New Passion Through  
Our New Road Trip Series

By Carolyn Worthington



*“Paradise. That is the shortest description of Extremadura . . . a rollercoaster for every nature enthusiast. . . This makes the region into a must-see . . .”*

–Dirk Hilbers

If you think “bustard” is a misspelled curse, a “kite” as only something you flew as a kid, or a “tit” is an inappropriate word, then you are as ornithologically challenged as I am. But, like me, you may find enjoyment in the serenades of chirping, singing birds as you commune with nature, spot wildlife, or are mesmerized by the ever changing sky as the sun rises and sets.

The birds around the small farm where I live provide the orchestra for my appreciation of nature, but, sadly, I really don’t know each musician. I appreciate their concertos, but lack the knowledge to admire them except for the annual arrival of the swallows at the barn or the flock of turkey vultures that sometimes sit all in a row on our fence posts, wings spread to six feet, enjoying the sun.

This all changed recently when a trip to Spain transformed my two-dimensional world into three . . . and I was soon to learn that a Great Bustard, a Black Shouldered Kite, and a Great Tit were all birds to be admired.

My birding education came somewhat as a lark, so to speak. While planning a trip to Spain and making a decision on where to go and what to do off the beaten track, I became intrigued with the region of Extremadura. Like many travelers to Spain, I had already visited Madrid. This time I decided a road trip beyond the cities might be a good way to really get to know the country and learn more about its landscapes, culture, food, and history. Rather than just drive around, I decided to pick a new theme that seemed quite popular in Spain: Birding.

Of the 17 contrasting Spanish regions, it was hard to choose just one. However, Extremadura, southwest of Madrid, snuggled next to Portugal and just north of Andalusia, called to me. It seemed to offer all of the wonderful things I hoped for in a travel destination: Extraordinary landscapes, somewhat remote; special regional cuisine . . . and, birding.

The tipping point for me, however, was something very unusual. Perhaps, Dirk Hilbers, author of *Extremadura, Spain*, published by Crossbill Guides Foundation, says it best. His words captured my imagination and solidified my decision to do a “road trip” in Spain:

*Paradise.*

*That is the shortest description of Extremadura in spring. Old, majestic oaks in a rolling green carpet of pasture. Little lambs frolicking through endless orchards, their mothers standing knee-deep in wildflowers. In the pools, happy black pigs are up to their bellies in mud. Little ribbons of white flowers dangle from their snouts. A stork glides down to its nest on an old church, where it is greeted by its partner and the rest of the stork community, numbering a dozen or more. Welcome to Extremadura . . .*

*For a long time, it was scorned by the Spanish and disregarded by the rest of the world. But this attitude has taken a 180-degree turn since eco-tourism became in vogue. And with good reason, for the region has great things in store for all sorts of travelers.*

*If you enjoy bird watching, Extremadura offers you skies filled with eagles and vultures, and steppes alive with Little and Great Bustards.*

*Extremadura is a rollercoaster for every nature enthusiast, not only astonishing in its diversity but also in its genesis. If you have come to see a wilderness without a trace of human influence, you have chosen the wrong spot. The majority of Extremadura’s valuable natural areas evolved through the interaction between the land and its inhabitants. This makes the region into a must-see example of the way nature and culture can enhance each other.*



All Photos Extremadura Tourism



*Clockwise from top: The historic village of Guadalupe noted for the monastery of Santa María de Guadalupe; Hiking in Extremadura; Little bustard.*





**B**ird watching? A trip around watching birds? I headed off for five days to see what Dirk Hilbers described, guidebook in hand, and what the fascination of bird watching was all about.

Extremadura lies about a three-hour drive southwest of Madrid, an easy drive along the beautifully maintained highways. You quickly leave the city by car and are surrounded by gorgeous countryside at every glance.

The meaning of “Extremadura” is not known but some speculate the etymology might stem from the extreme, or other side, of a river, the Duero, north of the region. Folklore has it that shepherds brought their sheep there during the winter to find lush pastures. Around the size of Denmark, Extremadura is a part of Spain that has not changed much in a very long time. If the explorer Herando DeSoto, the first European to explore what is now the United States, came back today to this region where he was born, the landscape would be quite similar.

As a non-birder, I knew I would be lost without a guide. I was fortunate to explore birding in Extremadura with the help of professional birder and guide, Martin Kelsey. Non-birders typically view bird watchers as a bespectacled person dressed in baggy clothes and floppy hat and carrying the ubiquitous binoculars. My image was soon to be shattered when I met Martin and a group of experienced “birders” who were athletic, highly technological with their several thousand dollar scopes, well-travelled, and very fun.

Martin, who bears a strong resemblance to an older Harry Potter with his round glasses and command of proper English, is virtually a walking, talking Google resource for ornithology. Like Potter, he is a wizard in his ability to make the activity of watching feathered creatures actually very exciting.

He began birding 60 years ago as a child at his home in Essex, England. His passion led him to study ecology at the University of East Anglia and the Edward Grey Institute for Field Ornithology in Oxford to complete a doctorate on the ecology of Marsh Warblers. He then spent three years studying birds in the Amazon rainforest with the British Ornithologists’ Union. There he met Claudia, who later became his wife.

“We met on the banks of the River Amazon where I was studying the birds in the national park and Claudia was completing her studies in tourism, helping to set up a visitors’ center there,” Martin told me.

Returning to the UK, he worked for BirdLife International for five years, before joining Save the Children UK, spending four years living in Colombia and then four years in India, as well as a short time in Ethiopia. Their son, Patrick, was born in India.

The passion to live and work in a paradise for birds then drew the family to Extremadura nine years ago. They now operate a country guesthouse for birders. Over the years, Martin and Claudia have painstakingly restored a traditional old house, typical of Extremadura. They are located at the edge of a little village beside the gentle hills of the Sierra de los Lagares, 10 minutes from the medieval town of Trujillo. Casa Rural El Recuerdo is an ideal base from which to explore Extremadura.

*Clockwise from top left: Hoopoe; Pin-tailed sandgrouse; European roller; Black vulture; Lesser kestrel; Blue rock thrush; Stone-curlew; Purple gallinule; Azure-winged magpie.*

*“Bird watching ignites a fire inside of me like nothing else can. Ordinary life can be rather dull, but when you travel for birds, you are constantly in a state of discovery and amazement.”*

–Laura Kammermeier

All Photos Extremadura Tourism





*Clockwise from top left: Balneario de Alange, a former 3rd-century Roman spa; Bee-eaters; Plaza Mayor, Trujillo; Medellín, birthplace of explorer Hernan Cortes; Torta del Casar, a cheese made from sheep's milk, and specialty of Extremadura; Iberian pigs in the dehesa.*

All Photos Extremadura Tourism





*“Birding persuades me to get out of the house into beautiful countryside, breathe the fresh air, and get some more gentle exercise.”*

–Frank Wharram

To watch birds with Martin is like taking a gastronomic tour through Paris with either of the French chefs Jacques Pepin or Alain Ducasse by your side. Not only is he a wealth of information, he willingly shares his lifetime of knowledge in an easy-to-understand fashion for us novices. With an ever-present smile on his face, he tackles even the silliest of questions.

As a bird watcher, Martin says of himself: “I am not the kind of bird watcher who likes to check off lists of birds I have seen. I prefer to learn about the birds, their history, their migration routes.” With his skill, he may or may not be fun to watch a movie with. He can spot a bird error instantly, like the one in the very British Mary Poppins’ “Spoonful of Sugar” scene in which a robin appears. “I immediately recognized the error,” he says, “the robin here has a brighter orange chest. That was an American Robin!”

With Martin’s guidance, looking through high-power scopes, standing in fields, alongside marshes and on mountaintops, I began to see, to really see, how exciting the details of the birds can be. If you are a professional birder or a newbie, Extremadura with its endless variety of species is definitely the place to immerse yourself.

The nice thing about joining a group of passionate birders with a guide like Martin is you learn first hand what they love about it. One birder in my group, Laura Kammermeier, is also a writer and the publisher of NatureTravelNetwork.com. She expressed her passion this way:

*Bird watching ignites a fire inside of me like nothing else can. Ordinary life can be rather dull, but when you travel for birds, you are constantly in a state of discovery and amazement. That feeds my soul, makes me smile, makes me nicer, happier, even more attractive due to the shine in puts in my eye. It also keeps me fit by taking me away from the desk, walking through all type of terrain. Sharing the birding experience with others on the road is even more interesting, because bird watching can turn strangers into trusted friends literally in an instant. I now have friends on every continent. The reason I watch and photograph birds is so that they may remain free while their wildness lives inside of me.*

Frank Wharram, who runs tours himself, told me:

*As an avid but aging hiker, climber, and cyclist, I now find that creaking knees no longer allow me to enjoy these pastimes to the full. I have always loved birds and always carried binoculars around but since the death of my wife two years ago I have now taken up birding more seriously. Why? Because birding persuades me to get out of the house into beautiful countryside, breathe the fresh air, and get some more gentle exercise. On top of this it takes me to places where I can see beautiful birds, which come in the most exciting and exotic colours but also inspire me by their devoted parenting and hard work in searching for food, and of course they love to show off their beauty and agility!*

For other birders, the reasons varied from the thrill of the quest, the spirit of the hunt without killing the prey, a way to understand the landscape, an opportunity for authentic travel, and a way to find an intimacy with a place.

As a group, we saw some 116 birds on the trip. Some of my favorites were spotted at the Monfrague National Park. The Griffen and Black Vultures were amazing to watch as they caught a lift from the wind and



All Photos Extremadura Tourism

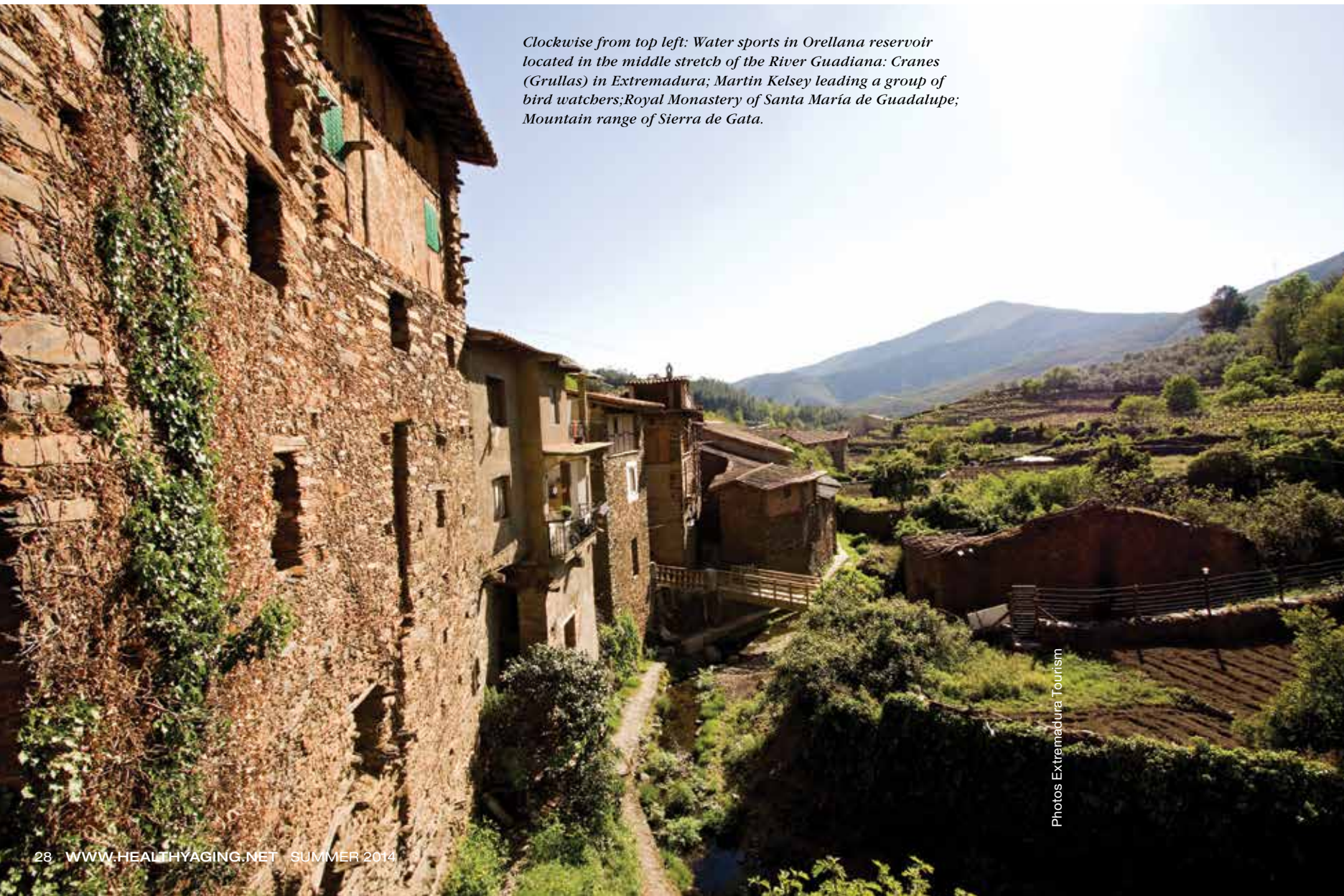
Top to bottom: Black stork; Cranes; Cranes.





C. Worthington

*Clockwise from top left: Water sports in Orellana reservoir located in the middle stretch of the River Guadiana; Cranes (Grullas) in Extremadura; Martin Kelsey leading a group of bird watchers; Royal Monastery of Santa María de Guadalupe; Mountain range of Sierra de Gata.*



Photos Extremadura Tourism







Top to bottom: Debesa, a managed landscape shaped over centuries, used for grazing as well as Holm and Cork Oak trees; Chestnut trees of El Temblar (Ambroz Valley).

All Photos Extremadura Tourism

took off on a glide in search of food. We saw the migratory Egyptian Vultures, part of the 20 to 30 pairs there, as they were arriving along with the smaller, Pena Falcon with its black and white tail. The Golden, Spanish and Imperial Eagles and the Binellis were just coming across the Straits of Gibraltar after wintering in Africa. There are 128,000 cranes in Extremadura, and we saw some of them.

Once you start zoning into watching for birds, you become more aware of them around you. Of course, some were hard to miss, like the storks that set up nests seemingly wherever they please and sometimes in the most unusual places, from the tops of church steeples to construction scaffolding. Or a stop at a lagoon

paid off with the sight of a flock of four-foot-tall pink flamingoes.

You can't help but be carried by the enthusiasm of a birder who has just seen a "hoopoe" with its magnificent crown of features, a flock of meadow pipits or a fantailed warbler making its zit-zit-zit sound. And that, as Martin would say, is a "jolly good" day.

I returned to our farm in Pennsylvania determined to better appreciate the calls and coloring of the robins, swallows, cardinals, hawks, buzzards, and woodpeckers that sing and flit about the property. Certainly a great sampling of American birds but nowhere near the variety and species of a very special place . . . Spain's Extremadura. ♦

## WHEN YOU VISIT EXTREMADURA

### GUIDES

Birding Extremadura  
Martin Kelsey  
[www.birdingextremadura.com](http://www.birdingextremadura.com)  
[www.casauralelrecuerdo.com](http://www.casauralelrecuerdo.com)

Grus Tours  
Emilio Peña  
[www.grustours.com](http://www.grustours.com)

Onaga Ambiental  
Marc Gálvez & José Guerra  
[www.onaga.es](http://www.onaga.es)

En Ruta  
José Luis Garcia  
[www.rutaspormonfrague.es](http://www.rutaspormonfrague.es)

**PLACES TO STAY**  
Hotel Rural Vina las Torres  
[www.vinalastorres.com](http://www.vinalastorres.com)

Casa Rural Las Canteras  
[www.casaural.net](http://www.casaural.net)

BlueCity Merida Palace Hotel  
[www.hotelmeridapalace.com](http://www.hotelmeridapalace.com)

La Posada del Rincon  
[www.posadadelrincon.com](http://www.posadadelrincon.com)

Hotel Palacio Carvajal Girón  
[www.vivedespacio.com/palaciocarvajalgiron](http://www.vivedespacio.com/palaciocarvajalgiron)

### OPTICAL EQUIPMENT

You will enjoy birding more if you have binoculars or a scope. Binoculars are good for relatively close-up sightings. Scopes are the way to go for longer distances and really seeing the details. This piece of equipment is pricey, though. Entry level scopes begin around \$400 and climb all the way up to the big daddies in the thousands of dollars. Brands to check out are Carl Zeiss,

Swarovski, Nikon and Leica. Then if you really want to have fun, you can "digiscope" by placing the lens of the camera on the scope, or better yet, purchase an adaptor for your camera phone and connect to the scope for amazing photos.

### PLACES TO BIRD AND FOR NATURE LOVERS

MONFRAGUE NATIONAL PARK  
Designated a Special Protection Area for bird-life, the over 44,000 acre preserved area is in the center of the province of Caceres and provides a unique bird sanctuary for birds.

VILLUERCAS IBORES  
JARA GEO PARK  
Noted for the mountain ranges, massive rock folds and fault lines, with rock formations dating back to 650 to 400 million years ago.  
[www.geoparquevilluercas.es/en](http://www.geoparquevilluercas.es/en)

SIERRA DE SAN PEDRO  
The jewel of this area is the Spanish Imperial Eagle. Not to miss is the stag rutting season, generally at the end of August and in September.  
[www.sierradesanpedro.net](http://www.sierradesanpedro.net)

ARROCAMPO  
ORNITHOLOGICAL PARK.  
The Arrocampo reservoir, north-east of Caceres, cools the nearby nuclear power plant. A byproduct of this use is a warm water haven for unusual birds that are often hard to see inland in the peninsula.  
[www.saucedilla.es](http://www.saucedilla.es)

DEHESAS OF JEREZ  
One of the largest and best-conserved forests of Holm and cork oak trees in the Iberian Peninsula.

LAKES AND PLAINS OF LA ALBUERA  
The diverse community of aquatic birds that reside in this series of wetland areas make this a must see.

### A REGION OF HISTORY

Visit three World Heritage Site cities, as designated by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as of special cultural or physical significance, Caceres, Merida and Guadalupe for a taste of the Medieval and Renaissance eras.

### CULINARY HIGHLIGHTS

Extremadura is noted for its superior quality Iberian ham from free-range pigs that graze on acorns in the forest. Other specialties are local honey, sausage and cheese, smoked paprika, cherries, lamb and chocolate covered figs.

### RESTAURANTS

Tabula Calda  
[www.tabulacalda.com](http://www.tabulacalda.com)

Bocados Del Geoparque  
[www.rutasgeoparquevilluercas.com/bocados-del-geoparque](http://www.rutasgeoparquevilluercas.com/bocados-del-geoparque)

### WINERY

Bodegas Toribio.  
[www.bodegastoribio.com](http://www.bodegastoribio.com)

### RESOURCES

Birding in Extremadura  
[www.birdinginextremadura.com](http://www.birdinginextremadura.com)

Extremadura Tourist Board  
[www.turismoextremadura.com](http://www.turismoextremadura.com)

Tourist Office of Spain  
[www.spain.info](http://www.spain.info)



# WHERE TO WATCH BIRDS IN THE U.S.



Our sun-drenched coast is a popular resort area for a variety of feathered visitors and year-round residents. Grab your binoculars and hit the trail to discover why this place is for the birds.

BirdFest – October 2-4, 2014

Fall Bird Banding – October 4-11, 2014

[www.AlabamaCoastalBirdingTrail.com](http://www.AlabamaCoastalBirdingTrail.com)

**Alaska:** From the frenetic tufted puffin tucked into a craggy rock in Resurrection Bay to the melancholy call of the rare-bristled-thighed curlew to the thousands of eagles that flock to Haines each November, Alaska is a birder's paradise.

[www.travelalaska.com](http://www.travelalaska.com)



© State of Alaska / Frank Flavin

**Arizona:** Birding is the number-one attraction in Southern Arizona, especially at places like Ramset Canyon Preserve and its surrounding national forest, where visitors come from all over the world for a chance to see more than 170 species of birds.

[www.arizonaguide.com/things-to-do/nature/birding-wildlife/arizona-birding](http://www.arizonaguide.com/things-to-do/nature/birding-wildlife/arizona-birding)

**California:** Over 600 species of birds can be seen in California.

[www.visitcalifornia.com](http://www.visitcalifornia.com)

**Florida:** Birding in Florida is second only to beach-related activities as a form of outdoor recreation for both visitors and residents.

[www.visitflorida.com](http://www.visitflorida.com)

**Idaho:** With over 400 known species, Idaho has become a gathering spot for birdwatchers of all experience levels.

[www.visitidaho.org/birdwatching](http://www.visitidaho.org/birdwatching)

**Ohio:** Are you a bird lover? From birding trails to sanctuaries to a National Park, Northern Ohio offers the bird lover many areas to discover its flying wildlife.

[www.northernohiotourism.com/Ohio\\_birds.htm](http://www.northernohiotourism.com/Ohio_birds.htm)

**Oregon:** Home to more than 500 bird species, Oregon hosts thousands of birds during fall and spring migrations under the Pacific Flyway.

[www.traveloregon.com/see-do/recreation/birding](http://www.traveloregon.com/see-do/recreation/birding)

**Nebraska:** Nebraska's Platte Valley annually hosts the largest concentration of sandhill cranes occurring anywhere in the world and is a stopover point for whooping cranes between their wintering and breeding grounds.

[www.nebraskabirdingtrails.com](http://www.nebraskabirdingtrails.com)



Nebraska Tourism

**New Jersey:** New Jersey is a haven for sites that offer great views of migrating fowl.

[www.visitnj.org/birding](http://www.visitnj.org/birding)

**North Dakota:** Six birding drives will take you to remote birding hotspots amid sweeping grasslands, rolling woodlands, wooded draws, and diverse marshlands.

[www.ndtourism.com/listings/birding](http://www.ndtourism.com/listings/birding)

**Texas:** The Texas Coast and the Rio Grande Valley are two of the hottest birding areas in the U.S. Corpus Christi was recently named America's Birdiest City for the seventh year in a row, and the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge is home to one of the rarest birds of all, the whooping crane.

[www.stxmaps.com/go/birding-sites-in-south-texas.html](http://www.stxmaps.com/go/birding-sites-in-south-texas.html)



Audubon Texas/Sean Fitzgerald

**Space Coast Birding:** Strategically located on the Eastern Continental Flyway, a major bird migration corridor, the region provides prime stopover habitat for many migrating shorebirds, waterfowl, raptors, and passerines.

[www.spacecoastbirding.com](http://www.spacecoastbirding.com)

They'll never outgrow the moment. They'll outgrow their clothes, their teachers and maybe even their friends. But there are moments, priceless and precious, that will be unburdened by time. Moments when you can be their hero, their protector and provider. So protect them from the ordinary. Provide them a memory that they'll tuck away in the corners of their mind and bring out to dust off in times of trouble and doubt. Give them a little moment of the good life while on vacation right here in Nebraska. Wouldn't that be nice?

Visit Nebraska. Visit Nice.



[VisitNebraska.com](http://VisitNebraska.com)