



Sandhill Cranes by Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com

# A “City Boy” and World Traveler Responds to Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira

*Rob Prince*

I often find myself traveling east along the Arkansas River from La Junta to Lamar, Colorado, then approximately following the River to Great Bend, where the river arches north in an upside down “U.” This past April, passing through on my way east, water is flowing in the Arkansas River at La Junta. Yet by the time I get to Lamar, a mere 56 miles due east down US Highway 50, the flow has been reduced to a trickle, the riverbed virtually empty.

Makes me nervous.

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The wildlife areas where I am headed farther east of the Colorado state line in south-central Kansas both depend upon the waters of the Arkansas River to nurture their environments and sustain life. With 225 miles of irrigation-water-absorbing corn fields, and cattle and pig farms galore between Lamar and Great Bend — all dependent upon and in competition for the Arkansas River water — I’m concerned about the water situation where I’m heading, Great Bend, Kansas.

Just to the north of Great Bend lies a Kansas state-run wetland, Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area, a fresh-water natural geological depression where I’ll spend at least a full day, maybe more, poking around. Forty-five minutes south of Great Bend, there’s the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge — one of the nation’s

finest wildlife areas, an inland salt marsh that lies smack in the heart of one of the continent’s most important bird migratory highways — the Central Flyway. For the past three years I keep returning here from Denver where I live, twice a year, schedule permitting.

Taken together, Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira bring together one of the greatest concentrations of wildlife and bird life anywhere in the continental United States. To spend a few days here twice a year, however unrealistic it might sound, is to touch a moment in history when the Great Plains abounded in animal and plant life, the heart of an ecosystem that is fast disappearing.

It calls to me. In a world where harmony barely exists, whether it be among humans, or between humans and nature ... at least there is Quivira and Cheyenne Bottoms. I come relaxed and yet excited over what I am about to explore with life-long friends. Although I’ve never measured it, I am certain that on entering either place, my blood pressure drops precipitously .

Cheyenne Bottoms claims that nearly half (45%) of all of North America’s shorebird population visits there. Some 320 species of birds have been recorded, 25 species of ducks and geese. During the migration season the avian numbers have been known to exceed 600,000. Add to the birds an abundance of other animals — raccoons, deer, beaver, muskrats, and mink as well as a variety of reptiles.

Quivira, a unique inland salt marsh of 22,135 acres, a tad larger in area and a bit more remote than “The Bottoms” (nearly 20,000 acres), claims to have even more bird species — some 340 varieties — that include annual visits from endangered and



Willet by Bob Gress, BirdsInFocus.com

threatened forms including Whooping Cranes, interior Least Terns and Snowy Plovers.

On this most recent visit (April, 2019), despite high winds we observed White-faced Ibises, Black-necked Stilts, a slew of Ruddy Ducks, more Blue-winged Teal than I had ever seen, Yellow-headed Blackbirds in equally large numbers, Snowy Egrets and several groups of turtles sunning themselves. The previous autumn (October 2018) there were wondrous formations of American Pelicans, Greater Yellowlegs, Semipalmated Sandpipers, godwits, Cinnamon Teal, Franklin's Gulls, and non-breeding avocets.

Last October, with friends, we saw a kettle of hawks — different species— Swainsons, Ferruginous, Redtails, probably others, maybe fifty of them together, maybe more. Fattening up for their journey to points farther south, they were hunting and pecking at a field that local farmers were plowing. A special sighting, but then there are so many. In the fall of 2017, as the sun was setting, — a breathtaking sight — dozens of avocets at the northern end of Quivira's Big Salt Marsh engaged in a feeding frenzy beginning at dusk and proceeding well into the night.

I'm a city boy, New York City born and raised, having spent the better part of the past half century — literally — in Denver, Colorado. I have lived abroad too, again in cities virtually all of the time — Rouen, Tunis, Helsinki. Who would have thought that in my later years—I'll be 75 in a few months — that the most pleasurable moments, precious times and places that refresh my spirit so I can return “to face the darkness” would be spent in south-central Kansas looking at birds.

But it's a fact and it's become something of an obsession ... I can think of no places I'd rather be than in the wetlands north and south of Great Bend. My family and friends don't quite understand, and frankly, I'm not sure I do either. It's just a place I feel a sense of connectedness with ... well, with everything, and want to keep returning to.

There is something else — a tribute to someone I never met, who fought so that Cheyenne Bottoms would be maintained as a quality wildlife preserve, a woman named Jan Garton whose life ended too soon, and who showed us that people who care for the earth can make a difference. I think of her too each time I'm at Cheyenne Bottoms, of her organizing talent, her persistence, her humanity and of how the world needs more like her.

*Rob Prince is a retired Senior Lecturer in International Studies at the University of Denver's Korbel School of International Studies. For the past ten years, along with his colleague, Dr. Ibrahim Kazerooni, a Shi'ite Imam from Iraq, he has hosted a monthly radio program “Middle East Dialogues — Hemispheres” at KGNU, a public radio station in Boulder, Colorado. He is a former Peace Corps Volunteer and staff member in Tunis and Sousse, Tunisia. He is the first to admit he knows virtually nothing about birds.*