



Shaping the Future of the West

# SAN PEDRO RIPARIAN NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA



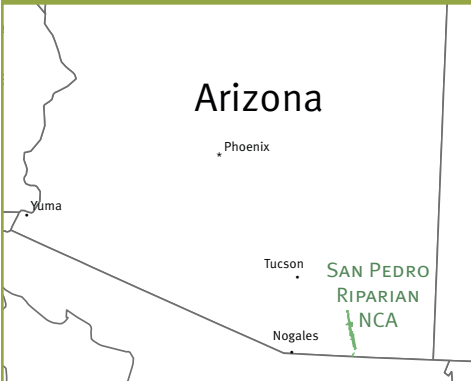
Ted Mouras, Friends guide for the San Pedro NCA

The National Landscape Conservation System includes 27 million acres of our most spectacular public lands, gathered together to conserve the essential fabric of the American spirit.

## LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

### Arizona

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[www.blm.gov/nlcs](http://www.blm.gov/nlcs)

## A Special Place

There is something miraculous about free-flowing water in the desert. On a blustery Saturday morning a group of visitors from around the United States are standing at the edge of the San Pedro River not far east of Sierra Vista, Arizona, and contemplating the quietly moving brown stream with a sense of awe.

Most have come to this spot for the bird-watching — the river is an internationally renowned birding site — but guide Ted Mouras, a member of the Friends of the San Pedro River, has spent the tour sharing the history of the river and the surrounding publicly owned lands. “We’ve got a lot of desert in the U.S. We’ve got a lot of riparian woodlands,” he observes. “What we don’t have is a lot of *desert* riparian woodlands. This is a special place.”

Over the next two and a half hours, Mouras makes that special place, the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area (NCA), come alive. He shares stories, not just about the profuse wildlife along the river’s banks, but of the prehistoric cultural sites that have been found nearby, the Apache bands that once raided from the mountains, the ghost towns that flourished and died, even the modern tale of the struggle to keep the San Pedro River healthy and flowing.

By the end of Mouras’s talk, the birders and everyone else are looking at the river and the landscape that extends from its tangled banks with a new appreciation. “The history, the different Native American cultures that have been here, it was fascinating,” says Cathy Urich, visiting with her husband, Joe, from Palos Park, Illinois.

It passes without notice amid the wildlife and scenic beauty, but the visitors are also witnessing something else important: a thriving partnership between local residents and the government stewards of the conservation area. The Friends of the San Pedro River have helped to build a series of private-public partnerships that benefit everyone and everything concerned: the unique and stunning landscape around the San Pedro River, the local communities, and visitors from all corners of the world.

"We're stewards  
of the river."

- Mark Rekshynskyj, San Pedro NCA manager

## A Thriving Partnership

The San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area was established in 1988 when more than 56,000 acres along the river, running from the Mexican border to the town of St. David about 40 miles north, were placed under the stewardship of the Bureau of Land Management. In 2000, the area became part of the National Landscape Conservation System, which was created to designate a collection of special areas that would be managed with an emphasis on the conservation aspect of the Bureau's multiple-use mission. The NLCS is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year.

The Friends of the San Pedro River was organized the year before the conservation area was established. The founders came mostly from Sierra Vista, home to the army's Fort Huachuca, and a popular retirement community. "Their motivation was simple, they love the river," said Mark Rekshynskyj, national conservation area manager. "We're stewards of the river."

Chris Long, president of the Friends, and her husband, Dwight, have been walking along the San Pedro for more than 25 years to enjoy its natural beauty and solitude. Dwight, like Mouras, first discovered southern Arizona through the military. Others, like Dutch Nagle and his wife, Pat, were drawn to the San Pedro because they were birders.

However they first fell in love with the San Pedro, the Friends have become a critical asset to the BLM. "They donate over 12,000 hours a year, which is equivalent to six full-time employees," says Rekshynskyj. "Quite honestly, we'd be sunk without them." In fact, the Friends of the San Pedro River have become the public face of the conservation area, handling almost all interaction with visitors. "We do all the walks," says Long, "all the hikes, the tours, the interpretation."

The BLM project office for the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area has only five employees, who are responsible for everything from administration to mending



### **Friends of the San Pedro:**

[www.sanpedroriver.org/fspr.shtml](http://www.sanpedroriver.org/fspr.shtml)

### **BLM site for the San Pedro NCA:**

[www.blm.gov/az/st/en/prog/blm\\_special\\_areas/ncaarea/sprnca.html](http://www.blm.gov/az/st/en/prog/blm_special_areas/ncaarea/sprnca.html)

### **National Landscape Conservation System:**

[www.blm.gov/nlcs](http://www.blm.gov/nlcs)





fences across more than 87 square miles of rugged country. The support of the Friends group “allows our employees to get out in the field and get our work done,” says Rekshynskyj.



Much of the Friends’ recent activity has centered on the ghost town of Fairbank, which includes a restored 1920s schoolhouse. The group has hosted a series of “Fairbank Days” that feature local music and other attractions, including historic re-enactments and an art show. “The January event drew more than 350 people,” says Long. “They just keep growing.”

The Friends of the San Pedro River also manage and staff the bookstores in Fairbank and at the main San Pedro visitor center. They help with the BLM’s annual survey of river conditions and other research, and they work with local schools to educate students about the natural and historical wonders around the San Pedro. The Friends host field trips, speak to classes and provide a wealth of materials to teachers. Over the years these have included 1,400 DVDs of riparian corridor wildlife filmed by Mike Foster, a dedicated local videographer.

Gaylyn Barkdull, a third-grade teacher at Palominas Elementary School in Hereford, Arizona, has brought her students to the conservation area three years in a row. “The kids love it. I’m always amazed at how many of them haven’t been down to the river when we live right here, and this is a great opportunity for them to learn about their area and nature,” she says. “The people who do it are volunteers, but they put a tremendous amount of effort into it.”

The Friends have built public awareness of the conservation area both locally and nationally, especially among birding groups. A study by two University of Arizona economics professors found that just two popular birding sites, the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area and Ramsey Canyon, a nearby preserve

### THE SAN PEDRO RIPARIAN NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA INCLUDES:

- More than 56,000 acres of public lands.
- The last perennial stretch of river in Arizona.
- More than 350 species of nesting or migrating birds.
- Eighty-plus species of mammals, two native fish species and more than 40 different amphibians and reptiles.
- The ghost towns of Charleston, Millville and Fairbank.
- The remains of the 18th-century Presidio Santa Cruz de Terrenate.
- Native American petroglyphs and late Ice Age Clovis people sites.

### THE FRIENDS OF THE SAN PEDRO RIVER AT A GLANCE:

- About 150 members, including 86 volunteers.
- Provides 12,000 volunteer hours annually.
- Conducts over 200 events a year.
- Hosts thousands of visitors on tours and special activities.
- Guides field trips for around 600 schoolchildren annually.
- Provides a wealth of educational materials to area schools.





managed by the Nature Conservancy, bring as much as \$16.9 million in tourist spending to the area each year and generate up to 590 jobs in southern Arizona.

The San Pedro, however, is an endangered resource, fed by an aquifer that also provides water for towns and farms in the surrounding area. The riparian area is subject to stress from a variety of factors, and the river's flow is greatly diminished; now only about 22 miles flow year-round.

But that challenge has spurred another public-private partnership, this time between 15 different entities, including the BLM, other federal, state and local agencies, an investor-owned water utility and local environmental groups. The Upper San Pedro Partnership is working to balance the demands for water in the area while halting the drawdown of the aquifer. "The partnership is to save the river," says Rekshynskyj, "utilizing a whole range of methods."

There are many reasons to treasure the San Pedro. The river, one of the few in the United States to flow from south to north, has the last stretches of perennial stream in Arizona. Once there were several such rivers, but as the state's population has swelled and demand for water has increased, all but the San Pedro have become intermittent.

The river supports a remarkably rich ecosystem, including towering cottonwoods, bushy mesquites and wild sunflowers. More than 350 bird species either nest in or migrate through the corridor. Animal life proliferates; there are more than 25 species of bats alone, along with beaver, whitetail deer, bobcats and the occasional mountain lion. The river is even home to the white-nosed coati, a tropical relative of the raccoon found as far south as Argentina.

**"There's just value in beauty. You walk these trails, you've got the water, you've got the birds singing, the cottonwoods. It's just a beautiful place."**

- Chris Long, president of the Friends of the San Pedro River

Humans have been part of the ecosystem for at least 13,000 years. The Friends lead cultural tours to four different locations: Fairbank; Murray Springs, a site inhabited by the late Ice Age Clovis people; the remains of the Presidio Santa Cruz de Terrenate, a Spanish fort established in 1776; and the Millville/Petroglyph Trail, which takes in Native American rock carvings and the ruins of several silver mills built during a 19th-century mining boom. "San Pedro has always been known as a birding place," says Chris Long, "but we also want people to know it as a place of history."

That history is ongoing, and the Friends of the San Pedro River are an important part of the current chapter. The benefits of the partnerships they have forged are manifold: economic, educational and environmental. But in the end, the organization's members seem equally driven by a different measure of worth. "There's just value in beauty," Chris Long says, standing beside the river. "You walk these trails, you've got the water, you've got the birds singing, the cottonwoods. It's just a beautiful place." ■ ■ ■



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