

Bosque del Apache in the Year of COVID

Snow Geese Landing

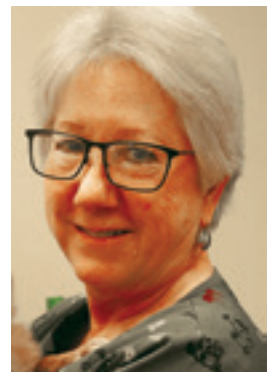
Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge near San Antonio, New Mexico has long been a November “Mecca” for bird and nature photographers. Picture the pre-dawn Flight Deck—a solidly-constructed observation platform extending over a flooded field—lined elbow-to-elbow with shivering shutterbugs hunched behind long lenses (and a few short ones), renewing long acquaintances and making new connections to the background music of thousands of snow geese and sandhill cranes honking, calling, and flapping as they prepare for their day. It has been estimated that well over a million dollars in camera gear sits over the water on the typical fall morning, and some days there must be hundreds of people waiting for the sun to peek between the distant hills.

Suddenly, in response to a signal known only to the birds, the air over the pond explodes as a thousand geese lift off in a synchronized eruption of flight. Shutters click, and human vocalizations are reduced to expressions of awe for a minute or two, before the birds rise out of camera range only to circle, regroup, and settle back on the water for another go. Observers chimp their images and reset exposures for the next opportunity.

Once the sunrise show is over, photographers

exit the main refuge *en masse* and cross the street to shoot several hundred cranes that overnight in a separate flooded field. The golden sun front-lights their morning warm-up and departure to feed in the refuge and surrounding fields. This is followed by morning hours (depending on weather and lighting) and later an afternoon of cruising the 12-mile dirt road with various habitat viewing opportunities, climbing onto any of a half-dozen viewing platforms, and/or strolling any of several hiking trails. Groups of photographers typically stand near hastily-parked vehicles, lenses aimed at fields of native grains as the birds fly in and out to feed. Locals chat with people who flew in from distant locations; photo-tour leaders exhort their students to check exposures, and techies extoll the virtues of the latest camera models and lens series. There is no place quite like it.

With over 50,000 acres, the refuge encompasses a diverse ecosystem with a wide range of terrain that attracts numerous species of birds and mammals. While geese, cranes and ducks predominate, I saw a flock of wild turkeys this year, a Northern Harrier frequented the park’s center, and a lone Bald Eagle owned a barren



By Lillian Roberts, PPSA

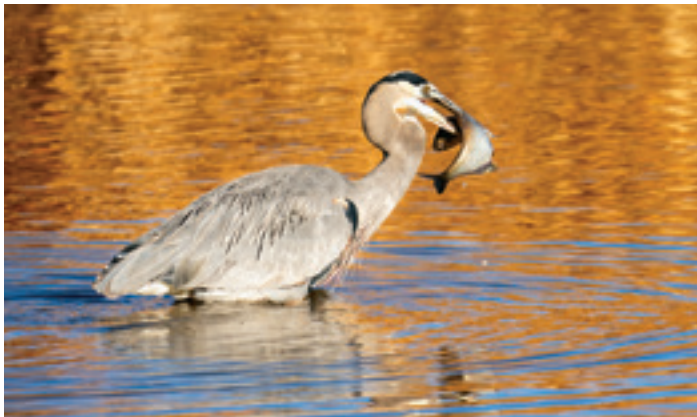
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Lillian Roberts, PPSA



Crane Over Hills

tree near the middle of the main pond. Flocks of blackbirds rival the geese in numbers. Coyotes prowl the edges of the fields hoping for a well-fed fowl for dinner, and various herons and osprey take advantage of the fish swimming in a few permanent ponds. Javelina, bobcats and other mammals are occasionally sighted as well. One local reported seeing a mountain lion not long before.



GBH with Fish Flopping



Two Cranes Taking Off

Sunset historically means another gathering of photogs at the “crane ponds” followed by a collective retirement to the various quite serviceable restaurants in nearby Socorro, and an evening of reviewing images from the day in a tidy, clean hotel room.

If you’re fortunate enough to be there for Thanksgiving, the crowd doesn’t thin much. A restaurant somewhere nearby will offer a delightful buffet of traditional holiday food and Arthur Morris offers a free “slide” show of images taken at Bosque and other birdie destinations over the past year. Photographers of every level discuss birds, camera gear, technology and travel destinations. I have fond memories of several Thanksgiving Days and weeks spent thus, beginning in the film days when I was first getting into wildlife photography. I hadn’t been since 2014, though, and decided it was time to go back.

But this year was different.

2020 will live in infamy for most of us, for so many reasons. As officials extorted the risks of travel for the Holiday (or any reason), flights were canceled, gatherings postponed. Restaurants in Socorro were uniformly closed, and everyone wore masks.

Like many who are reading this, I’d had multiple travel plans altered or canceled already this year. As a single Californian with time off for Thanksgiving, but unwilling to share indoor space with other people, I decided to drive to Bosque—about 10 hours each way without stops. I took a cooler of food and a bottle of wine (OK, two bottles), and holed up alone for three days and four nights in a hotel room with pandemic-style “low-profile” housekeeping service.

My first morning in the refuge I was amazed to see only six people on the Flight Deck—more than enough space for social distancing. Only one other long lens was on display. I was impressed that everyone was wearing a mask despite being outside and well separated from each other. Of course, it was cold enough (21 F) that some of us would

have worn our balaclavas anyway! But the mask-up trend held for everywhere I went and all day long. Unfortunately, the distance and the masks made conversation with strangers daunting and sparse.

Following sunrise, I made my way to the crane ponds as usual to discover a shock – the ponds were gone! Due to severe draught, no water was available to flood the fields! A small group of cranes huddled near in one field as I pulled up, seemingly as baffled as I was to find a sparse, dry expanse in place of their traditional overnighting marsh. As I stood there with my camera, they approached within several feet before alighting one by one to go feed with the others.

Despite the cold, it was a sunny day so after spending an hour photographing a GBH fishing and grabbing a few flight shots of cranes, I explored some dirt roads outside the park, that I probably would have missed were I not on my own. To little end, however, so I headed back to my hotel room for my Thanksgiving “Dinner” of a deli ham-and-smoked-turkey sandwich (same thing I ate for lunch and dinner all three days I was there—the tradition of Thanksgiving leftovers was thus carried on). I texted “Happy Thanksgiving” messages to friends and coworkers. I checked my images from the morning and watched a couple of YouTube videos regarding camera settings and even purchased a “tips and tricks” video. I researched future travel options.

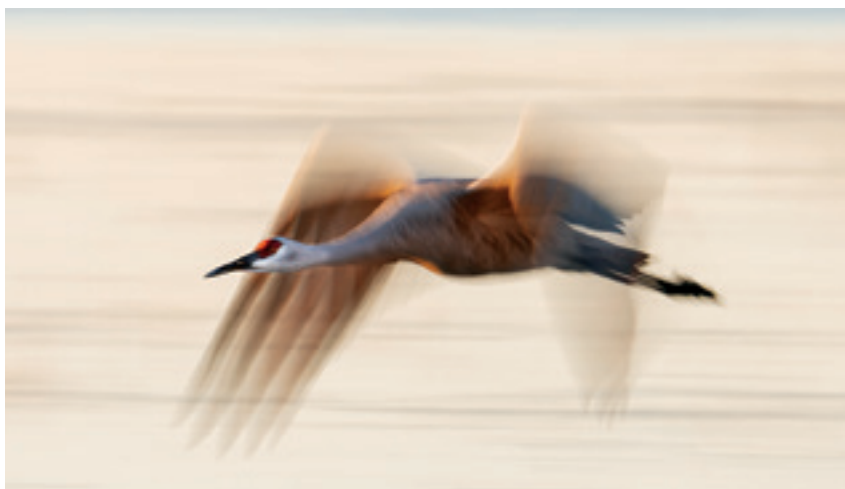
That was how I spent my days in the Bosque of 2020 – a strange parody of the pilgrimage I remember. The second morning I commented on the relatively few geese in residence. A local standing six feet away mentioned that the field hadn’t been flooded until much later than usual this year. The geese had gone to other wetlands in the state, but none so easy to access. Perhaps they missed the photographers and saw no reason to stay!

It rained that afternoon, a little, offering a stormy sky for afternoon flight photography. It snowed overnight on the hills – nice for a landscape photo or two and also to add a little cloud to the sunrise. The moon rose waxing and gibbous on the clear evenings, making for a challenging but attractive background for late-afternoon fly-bys. Saturday morning the Flight Deck was literally empty of people, though several lined up along the pond’s shore, aiming their lenses between trees as the geese tended to bunch at one end.

Most years past, my companion and I would have taken a side trip to the Very Large Array of radio telescopes, or White Sands National Park, or another of the interesting regional attractions. But in 2020 the VLA was closed and WSNP’s website was vague as to accessibility. Given my limited time, after a final sunrise, I headed straight home—still alone—on Sunday morning, through the strange new landscape of America’s Southwest during COVID-19. ■



Bosque Sparrow



Crane Sunrise Blur

Lillian Roberts, PPSA, has been an avid nature photographer since 1999, and is a past president of the Coachella Valley Desert Camera Club. She currently shoots a Sony system. Most of the photographs in this article were shot with either the Sony a9M2 or the A7Riv with a 200-600mm zoom lens.