

### **Wetlands in a Dry Terrain**

If you happen to have grown up on the East Coast you might not, at first glance, be overly impressed by the Riparian Preserve. The first pond you encounter looks a bit like any town lake: plenty of mallards happy to swim up to visitors for food, turtles sunning on logs, a tangle of greenery around the shore. But spend any time here and you soon realize how rare and special this place is.

The town of Gilbert created this preserve in 1999, having made the commitment to reuse 100% of their effluent water. The preserve contains seven “recharge basins” (ponds) that are pumped with water in rotation, located on 110 acres of land also developed as a wildlife habitat. Only 10% of the riparian wetlands that existed in Arizona 100 years ago are still extant today. Migrating birds depend on these wetlands. The signage here is particularly well done, giving precise descriptions of the nine riparian sub-habitats, the many classes of birds (wading, migrating songbird, predatory, and so forth), and the five species of exotic dragonflies found here.

The paths that wind between ponds are fragrant with the daisy-like yellow flowers of bordering brittlebush shrubs. The wider paths are overhung with the branches of massive gnarled trees, but they're not oaks, they're honey mesquite. At the edge of one pond are desert willows that mimic their Eastern cousins, plus cottonwoods and white-barked sycamore that could be taken for thickened birches. This is Arizona doing its imitation of the lush East Coast, an imitation that almost works until you run across the occasional prickly pear cactus in bloom or a shaggy yucca tree.

It's springtime here and there are birds in profusion. Three hundred species have been identified here. All of them, whether migrating or local, seem to be feeling feisty

and entitled. They show no fear of visitors. Doves chase each other around, both on the ground and in the air. Two mallards doze under a tree. A Canadian goose comes walking up to within a foot of me, hoping for a handout. A crowd of avocets (a type of wading bird) are tussling out in the water. Their cries sound like tinkling bells. Walking across a picnic table is the second roadrunner I've ever seen in real life.

A few desert cottontails scamper around the bushes. Nearby is a slow moving stream that carries petals on its surface. This may not be paradise, but in a place as parched as Phoenix, in a world s frayed as it is by coronavirus fears, it's an idyllic green oasis that will do very nicely.