

Our Rivers, Our County

# 'ONCE IN A LIFETIME'

## Gila River's Middle Box Home To Rare Species, Experiences

By Kendra Milligan

**U**pstream from Red Rock can be found the Gila Middle Box, one of the most majestic and diverse regions the Gila River has to offer. With towering cottonwoods, willows and sycamore running the length of the riverbank, the greenery and tranquility of the box canyon is a perfect day-trip escape for everyone, even non-athletic hikers.

Besides being home to six threatened or endangered species, the Middle Box includes a stunning riparian area that has "once-in-a-lifetime sightings" of wildlife, according to Lisa Field, Vice President of the Southwest New Mexico Audubon Society.

I know this is true, having seen an animal I despaired ever to behold in the wild during my lifetime, the elusive coatimundi. Its fluffy tail was at first mistaken for a fox until it strode past our hiking group at the Middle Box. Ambling toward the river, it stopped, striped tail bobbing until it turned to glare at us through its little black bandit-masked eyes set in a russet-furred face. Unmistakable and breathtaking, and that was on my first hike there.

On the same hike down Forest Trail 746, we saw a soaring common black hawk, which "isn't so common and only found in riparian areas," according to Lisa.

As part of Billings Vista Bird Sanctuary, the area is also habitat for the yellow-billed cuckoo and the Southwest willow flycatcher, both of which are endangered species.

"The Middle Box is special for me, because if you take time to go there and observe, you see so much of what a wild area looks like," Lisa says.

Reptiles and fish also abound in the area, and again the Box offers a home to the threatened northern Mexican garter snake, the narrow-headed garter snake and the federally endangered loach minnow and spike dace.

Besides the wildlife, this segment of the Gila River is one of the few areas that offer Class 3 white-water rapids for rafters during the seasonal floods through the steep and narrow box canyon walls. Beware, rains and melting snow raise the river level and can make it hazardous to cross.

As Lisa so eloquently puts it, from the ever-changing landscape due to the floods, "you can see what that river has done in all of her stages, at power and rest."

Forest Trail 746 is easy to follow, with gentle inclines and panoramic views of the river it parallels. The trail is mostly shaded by trees with side trails that lead to and from the banks of the river. Bring plenty of water and your binoculars to better view the birds and other wildlife without disturbing them.

According to New Mexico Wild's Nathan Newcomer, even the federal government acknowledges the uniqueness of the area. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recognized the Gila Middle Box as a Wild and Scenic Study River and included this section in its Mimbres Resource Management Plan from way back in 1993.

As a grassroots organizer, Nathan has accompanied numerous community volunteers, like Lisa, while they conducted an "inventory" of the Gila Forest and river, cataloging the biodiversity and geological features for future conservations efforts.

The Middle Box is one of several oases in the desert to be found along the Gila River, a reminder that such beauty is available right in our backyard and, as Lisa says, a place of "the river telling us about herself and her work." ~

*This bimonthly feature highlights sections of the rivers that traverse Grant County. Water is one of our most precious and finite resources in southwest New Mexico. We hope to remind residents and visitors alike of the beautiful waterways and soothing riparian areas available in what amounts to a "desert." If you have a river section you would like to suggest be featured, contact [kendra@insilvercitynm](mailto:kendra@insilvercitynm).*

**Directions:** Take U.S. 180 toward Chinle, then left onto Mangus Valley Road, which has a sign for Bill Evans Lake. Where the road forks, take the left fork (Red Rock Road) leading away from the river to Bill Evans Lake. At this fork, stay straight ahead and enter the Gila National Forest. After going another 4.5 miles, the road leads to a designated and marked birding area with access to the Gila River. Continue driving south, parallel to the river, on the dirt road to where it dead ends at the Billings Vista Birding Area and the trailhead for Forest Trail 746. From Silver City, this trip is roughly a 51-mile drive, about an hour and 45 minutes travel time.

(Press Staff Photo by Kendra Milligan)