

Wild Life in Peril: Trump's Border Wall Puts Borderland Birds at Risk

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Global Research, September 17, 2019

[BirdWatching](#) 10 September 2019

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Environment](#)

From the wetlands of California's Tijuana Slough near San Diego to the lush Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge in South Texas, the U.S.-Mexico borderlands are a haven for hundreds of rare and beautiful bird species. This is a birding mecca.

Huge swaths of the border are so spectacular that they're protected by state, national, and international laws. Seven national wildlife refuges stretch from one end of the 2,000-mile border to the other, as well as dozens of state parks and wilderness areas, Big Bend National Park in Texas, and Arizona's Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument.

[More than 90](#) threatened and endangered species live in these richly biodiverse landscapes, crossing back and forth to feed, breed, and thrive. They include at least 16 species of birds, as well as jaguars, ocelots, and Mexican gray wolves.

Wildlife in peril

Border walls and militarization have taken a toll on animals in the borderlands for years. But President Trump's obsession to build hundreds of miles of wall before the next election places the region and its wildlife in the crosshairs like never before.

Under previous administrations, most border-wall construction avoided protected landscapes. Waist-high vehicle barriers allowed wildlife to move back and forth across the border.

But under Trump, those vehicle barriers are being replaced with 30-foot-tall steel bollard walls next to barren, brightly lit "enforcement zones." New wall construction is already under way on protected lands in Arizona and Texas that include some of the most biodiverse ecosystems on the continent.

Over the past year, I've been documenting new border-wall construction in Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico — and sharing the devastation on Twitter — as part of my work with the Center for Biological Diversity. Trump's wall is no longer just rhetoric; it's happening now.

HAPPENING NOW: First panels of Trump [#Borderwall](#) going up through Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument.

Endangered species, protected wilderness, Native American sacred sites, precious desert groundwater. So much is being destroyed, all for nothing. pic.twitter.com/zzee62P4Uz

— Laiken Jordahl (@LaikenJordahl) [August 27, 2019](#)

For birds and other wildlife, border walls could hasten their slide toward extinction.

In Arizona, walls are being built through [Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument](#), and construction is set to begin next month at [Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge](#), [San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge](#), the [San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area](#), [Coronado National Memorial](#), and numerous designated wilderness areas. Trump wants more than 100 miles of wall in Arizona alone.

In Texas, border-wall construction is imminent in the [Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge](#), near [Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge](#), the [National Butterfly Center](#), [Bentsen-Rio Grande State Park](#), and the historic [La Lomita Chapel](#).

[*Despite Congressional protection for Santa Ana, signs of wall construction found*](#)



A Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo in a bander's grip. The subspecies is listed as Threatened and stands to lose habitat to the wall. Photo by Mark Dettling/Point Blue Conservation Science

All along the border, Trump is speeding wall construction by waiving dozens of laws that protect clean air, clean water, public lands, and endangered wildlife. This includes critical laws like the Migratory Bird Treaty Act that protect birds and their habitat.

The Center and our allies have sued to [challenge](#) Trump's February emergency declaration, an end-run around Congress to swipe billions of dollars in military and other funds for border wall construction. The Center also has sued Trump to challenge border-wall construction in California, New Mexico, and [Texas](#). The Center's first border-related [lawsuit](#)— filed in 2017 in U.S. District Court in Tucson with U.S. Rep. Raúl Grijalva — seeks to require the Trump administration to do a detailed analysis of the environmental impacts of its border-enforcement program. Other conservation and human rights groups, and 20 state attorneys general, have sued to stop Trump's border wall.

These enormous barriers block wildlife migration and destroy and fragment habitat. Some birds will be able to fly over the taller walls, but many can't or won't. Wall construction includes the bulldozing of huge swaths of habitat, turning protected land into dead zones where birds, butterflies, and bees have no place to land.

This will prevent them from finding food, breeding and migrating —all essential to their survival.

Blasted with flood lighting, staked with sensors

Thousands of acres of habitat will be cleared for a 150-foot-wide "enforcement zone" running along each mile of border wall. This barren area will be blasted with 24-hour flood lighting, staked with sensors, and paved with a high-speed patrol road. For each mile of wall, an estimated 20 acres of habitat will be bulldozed for the enforcement zone alone.

In the Arizona desert, wall construction will suck up tens of millions of gallons of precious groundwater, diminishing flow to springs and seeps critical to the survival of birds and other wildlife.

Birds also collide with the wall itself, as well as the surveillance towers and light structures

built along the border.

Simply put, Trump's wall is a disaster for wildlife. The stunning birds that live across the borderlands demand and deserve our protection.

Here's a look at birds and wildlife habitat at stake in the four border states:

Arizona

Thirty-foot-high walls in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument will block movement of [Cactus Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls](#), cutting off populations in Mexico from those in the United States. Biologists say the border wall will impede the path of the rare, low-flying birds and threaten their recovery in Arizona and Mexico.

Organ Pipe was designated in 1976 as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, an effort to foster conservation and study the world's most pristine intact Sonoran Desert ecosystem.

Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge is home to endangered Sonoran pronghorns and lesser long-nosed bats, as well as more than 200 species of birds, including roadrunners, Elf Owls, and Vermilion Flycatchers. Organ Pipe and Cabeza Prieta compose the [Sonoran Desert Borderlands Important Bird Area](#).

More than 30 miles of walls under construction near Yuma will block people and wildlife from accessing the Lower Colorado River and harm habitat for the endangered [Yellow-billed Cuckoo](#), [Southwestern Willow Flycatcher](#) and Yuma Ridgway's Rail.

Texas

Border walls through the Rio Grande Valley will damage one of the world's top birding regions, home to more than 400 species of birds and a dwindling number of endangered ocelots.

Huge swaths of the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge will be destroyed by Trump's wall. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service describes the refuge as "one of the most biodiverse regions in North America."

In a region where [95 percent](#) of native habitat has been lost to development, the natural corridor along the Rio Grande River is the last ribbon of green for wildlife. The wall here will slice this tiny ribbon in two.

Among the rare and beautiful birds [at risk](#) are Aplomado Falcon and [Piping Plover](#). The area is also within historic jaguar habitat.

New Mexico

Earlier this year, the Trump administration built 20 miles of new bollard walls through the remote Chihuahuan Desert. Another 46 miles are under construction.

The new wall will sever a known migratory corridor for [Mexican gray wolves](#), among the rarest mammals on the continent. The area west of El Paso is also home to some of the last U.S. breeding grounds for endangered Aplomado Falcon, as well as kit foxes, bighorn sheep, and ringtails.

California

Recent border-wall construction in coastal San Diego County replaced barriers near wetlands, streams, and critical habitat for numerous endangered species, including the [Quino checkerspot butterfly](#) and [Coastal California Gnatcatcher](#). The area includes the Tijuana Slough and San Diego National Wildlife Refuges, which host rare birds including [Western Snowy Plover](#), Ridgway's Rail, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, and endangered [Least Bell's Vireo](#).

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Laiken Jordahl works at the [Center for Biological Diversity](#), focused on protecting wildlife, ecosystems and communities throughout the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. The Arizona-based Center filed lawsuits challenging border wall waivers in Texas, New Mexico, and California.

Featured image: A border wall in New Mexico with a wide cleared roadway alongside it. Photo by [Russ McSpadden](#) (Creative Commons)

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