

Stopover Sites

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Many species of birds have to travel for hundreds or even thousands of miles every spring on their migration routes from South or Central America up to the U.S. and Canada. These long and arduous journeys involve many dangers for the birds, including exhaustion, dehydration, overheating and other threats. These dangers make it all the more important for the birds to find a safe stopover site to rest along their migration route.

Because birds burn up so much energy on these long travels, they need to find places to rest and refuel along the way, just like we need to stop at gas stations for fuel and snacks on a long drive. Stopover sites are generally close to the migration route that the birds are taking anyway, so it's convenient to take a break there. These locations need several things to be effective stopover sites:

First, they need clean water. Birds (like all animals) need to hydrate, especially after that much exercise! Second, they need food. This can consist of berries, bugs, seeds, nectar, fish, or other food items, depending on which species are visiting. Third, they need shelter. Most bird species require trees, shrubs, or other plants to hide and rest in. Being out in the open on the ground leaves birds vulnerable to predators and overheating. So it's important that the site has plenty of vegetation and space to house many visitors.

Some stopover sites are so populated by birds, that they have become birding hotspots. Here along the Texas coast, Quintana is one such well-known site. Quintana is on the coast, which means that for many birds flying over the Gulf of Mexico, it is the first land they have seen since Mexico. Birds arrive exhausted, some having flown 20+ hours over the ocean, and in need of rest and refueling. At the height of spring migration, you can over a hundred of species on the island, including many that aren't normally seen in Texas during other times of the year.

This past week at Quintana, birders reported species like Baltimore Orioles, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Indigo Buntings, Summer Tanagers, and many more colorful birds. We hope to see even more species this week! For us bird nerds, there's nothing more exciting than seeing a rare, colorful new bird at the sanctuary.

If you're interested in seeing a stopover site and the migrating birds that use it, there are many places to choose from. Quintana Neotropical Bird Sanctuary and the neighboring Xeriscape park just added new trails and are hopping with birds. You can also visit High Island, which has a famously busy rookery that houses Roseate Spoonbills and other birds. And if you don't live near those places, take a look in your closest sanctuary- you never know who will be dropping in.

Just remember: these birds have traveled a long way to get here, and they deserve a break! Try not to disturb resting birds, especially ones that look exhausted. If you feel like feeding the birds, try seeds, oranges (cut in half), mealworms, or just plain fresh water. And if you want your yard to become a stopover site, be sure to plant native trees, shrubs and grasses. These little travelers are sure to appreciate it!

Photo by Mike Williams

Caption: A Summer Tanager enjoying the food and shelter of a stopover site.