



**V**ISUALIZE A FLOCK OF MASSIVE WHITE PELICANS, OUTLINED AGAINST A BLUE SKY OR SETTING SUN. THEIR WINGS STRETCH WIDE AS THEY RIDE THE THERMALS, DESCENDING TO THE EARTH WITH A SLOW, DELIBERATE GRACE. THEY TURN AS ONE, BECOMING FOR A MOMENT INVISIBLE AGAINST THE WHITE OF THE CLOUDS, THEN DROP INTO THE OPEN WATER OF THE WETLANDS.

Only when they land will you realize that you've been holding your breath.

How far do you have to go to see these surreal creatures—to the Atlantic or Pacific Ocean? Ah, no. Try the wetlands around Great Bend.

Cheyenne Bottoms, a state wildlife management area that's also the largest inland marsh in the United States, and the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge are prime rest stops of the Central Flyway. Flyways are the "interstate highways" of migrating birds, whose spring and fall commutes extend from Central and South America to as far north as Alaska. Thousands of diverse birds use these precious Kansas wetlands to rest and feed.

Many species fall under the generic term of "shorebirds," but visitors can find owls, woodpeckers, warblers and wrens, grosbeaks and orioles, finches and terns, 28 varieties of ducks, eagles, hawks, falcons, cranes and plovers, sandpipers and stilts, gulls, geese and grebes, herons, loons and ibises ... and more.

Forty-five percent of North America's shorebird population stops in Kansas when migrating north in the spring. This collective diversity inspired Wings &

Wetlands, a weekend of guided tours and workshops for birders ranging from beginner to experienced. The event attracts bird lovers from all over the United States as well as abroad, and is the perfect "starter weekend" for anyone who wants to get into bird watching.

"I didn't really know anything about birds my first time," says Machaela Whelan, assistant director of Hilltop Child Development Center at the University of Kansas. "But the fellowship and interaction with people who had so much more experience sparked my interest. Their enthusiasm was contagious. I was surprised how well-known Cheyenne Bottoms is as an important refuge for migrations."

Stephanie Turner, of California, loved the outdoors but knew little about birds when she first attended a Wings & Wetlands weekend. Having grown up in Great Bend, she was intrigued that these wetlands, often underappreciated by Kansans, attract biologists, wildlife photographers and ornithologists from all over the country.

"Everyone is generous with sharing what they know, and the learning process can be as relaxed or focused as you want," says Turner. "It was discovering how much I didn't know that really made me want to return."



Red-winged blackbird

PHOTOGRAPHS: (PREVIOUS PAGE) COURTESY OF THE GREAT BEND CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU. (CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT) COURTESY OF RUTH ANN SCHWART, SCHWART, COURTESY OF THE GREAT BEND CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU, SCHWART, SCHWART, GREAT BEND CVB.



A variety of birds can be found in the area including, from left, American white pelicans, dickcissel, whooping crane, young mallards, black-necked stilt.

“THE FELLOWSHIP AND INTERACTION WITH PEOPLE WHO HAD SO MUCH MORE EXPERIENCE SPARKED MY INTEREST. THEIR ENTHUSIASM WAS CONTAGIOUS.”

—MACHAELA WHELAN



ABOVE The Kansas Wetlands Education Center in Great Bend.

## THERE'S MORE THAN BIRDS

Stroll the Kansas Quilt Walk, a self-guided tour of patterns embedded into the sidewalks on the streets surrounding Great Bend's Courthouse Square. Then visit the Barton County Historical Museum and Village for more quilt history, as well as artifacts and history of the area. See the 13 murals throughout town that depict Great Bend history. Maps for both walks are available at the Great Bend Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The Brit Spaugh Park and Zoo, located off Main Street, has sections for different continents, with representative animals from each. By the entrance to the zoo is the Great Bend Raptor Center, focusing on medical rehabilitation of eagles, hawks, owls, falcons and vultures. Visitors can observe medical treatment through one-way mirrors or get up-close and personal at workshops and presentations.

Cemeteries tell stories of how settlers-to-grandparents lived and died, their struggles and culture. Use the Great Bend CVB Cemetery Tour Guide to explore some, including those of African-American homesteaders from the 1800s.

Learn more about the geology and production of oil and gas at the Kansas Oil and Gas Museum or see longhorn cattle at the Miller Longhorn Ranch. Experience a rural organic lifestyle at Heartland Farm, run by a small group of Dominican Sisters. From its solar ovens, showers and greenhouse to straw bale buildings and “green” renovations plus a herd of alpacas, Heartland Farm is place to retreat from the busyness of life for a few hours or a few days.

“Tours on a Tankful” feature detailed driving tours of the region, with suggestions for where to stop and what to see.

For more information, see [VISITGREATBEND.COM](http://VISITGREATBEND.COM).