

Willcox Playa/Cochise Lakes

IBA web pages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - http://www.audubon.org/important-bird-areas/willcox-playa-cochise-lakes - http://aziba.org/?page_id=712
Priority	Global
Qualifying Criteria	<p>A4i: ≥1% biogeographic (N. Am.) population of a waterbird simultaneously; ≥5% over a season (Sandhill Crane)</p> <p>D1: Site important to special-status avian species (Chestnut-collared Longspur, Swainson’s Hawk, Cassin’s Sparrow, Scaled Quail)</p> <p>D4v: Significant concentration of birds (Wilson’s Phalarope, Willet, Least Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher, Black-necked Stilt , American Avocet, Killdeer, Marbled Godwit, Spotted Sandpiper, Solitary Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs, Long-billed Curlew, Baird’s Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Red-necked Phalarope, Snowy Plover)</p> <p>D4Vi: Significant concentration of birds (Sandhill Crane)</p>
IBA Polygon Center Point (Latitude, Longitude)	32.15°N, -109.84°W
Size	47,343 acres
County	Cochise
Local Communities	Willcox
Description	The heart of this IBA is the massive Willcox Playa - a broad, alkaline lakebed fringed with semi-desert grassland (primarily saltgrass and sacaton) and mesquite. The playa is seasonally flooded to a shallow depth. Outlying this playa are the satellite lakes and wetlands of Cochise Lakes (aka Lake Cochise), alkali flats, and Willcox Playa Wildlife Area containing Crane Lake.
Mission/Goals	To support populations of breeding, year-round and migratory birds especially significant concentrations of waterfowl, shorebirds, and Sandhill Cranes.
Current Habitat Conservation, Planning, and Management Activities	The Playa itself includes 23,000 acres leased by the U.S. Army to support missions at Fort Huachuca. It is not actively managed, and trespassing is prohibited. On the upper east side of the playa is the 555-acre Arizona Game and Fish Department-managed Willcox Playa Wildlife Area. Management of the Wildlife Area prioritizes waterfowl habitat and provides hunting opportunities. Apache Station viewing area on the west side of the IBA is seasonally open.

<p>Land Cover Type¹ (%) and Associated Priority² Birds</p> <p>¹Southwest Regional Gap Analysis modified to align with ABBA/SWAP habitat types</p> <p>²AGFD SGCN and IBA Qualifying Species</p>	<p>99.15 Semiarid/Sonoran Savannah Grassland (<i>Golden Eagle, Ferruginous Hawk, Swainson's Hawk, Peregrine Falcon, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Burrowing Owl, Scaled Quail, Snowy Plover, Sprague's Pipit, Savannah Sparrow, Botteri's Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Cassin's Sparrow, Common Nighthawk</i>)</p> <p>0.67 Chihuahuan Desertscrub (<i>Golden Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Common Nighthawk</i>)</p> <p>0.11 Riparian/Open Water (<i>Sandhill Crane, Bald Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Wilson's Phalarope, Willet, Least Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher, Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Killdeer, Marbled Godwit, Solitary Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs, Long-billed Curlew, Red-necked Phalarope, Lincoln's Sparrow</i>)</p> <p>0.05 Urban and Residential</p> <p>0.02 Rock</p>
<p>Related Habitat Accounts*</p>	<p>Low Grasslands Lowland Riparian</p>
<p>Biological Description</p>	<p>Willcox Playa and Crane Lake, within the northern portion of the Sulphur Springs Valley of Southeast Arizona, supports the second largest over-wintering concentration of Sandhill Cranes in Arizona, typically 4,000 to 9,000 birds. Crane numbers are typically 5,000 to 8,000 birds using the Playa, and another 4,000 to 5,000 birds using Crane Lake. There are occasional years when crane numbers spike when a large number of birds (>13,000) from White Water Draw switch to roosting in this area. By the late 1940s the expansion of agriculture within the Sulphur Springs Valley (through the advent of groundwater pumping), provided the waste crop food base (corn) to attract Sandhill Cranes to over-winter in the valley.</p> <p>Both in spring and late summer, shorebirds can stop-over in very substantial numbers at both the playa and at Cochise Lakes (numbering 400-800 individuals at Cochise Lakes). Small numbers of some shorebirds occasionally breed within the IBA, including American Avocet and rarely Snowy Plover. In addition, large numbers of waterfowl pass through and use Cochise Lakes, many species of ducks and grebes over-winter on the lakes in large flocks. In rare very wet winters waterfowl are found in huge numbers (>15,000, half of which are Green-winged Teal) feeding and resting within the Playa.</p> <p>The alkaline (mud) lakes are important to feeding shorebirds, and so are the margins of the Playa and Cochise Lakes. Peregrine Falcon and Merlin are frequently in the IBA in the winter preying on the duck and shorebird community.</p>

Focal Bird Species	<p><u>IBA Qualifying Species</u></p> <p>Global: Sandhill Crane</p> <p>State: Chestnut-collared Longspur, Swainson’s Hawk, Cassin’s Sparrow, Scaled Quail, Wilson’s Phalarope, Willet, Least Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher, Black-necked Stilt , American Avocet, Killdeer, Marbled Godwit, Spotted Sandpiper, Solitary Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs, Long-billed Curlew, Baird’s Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Red-necked Phalarope, Snowy Plover, Sandhill Crane</p> <p><u>AGFD Species of Greatest Conservation Need</u></p> <p>Tier A: Sprague’s Pipit, Peregrine Falcon, Bald Eagle</p> <p>Tier B: Grasshopper Sparrow, Golden Eagle, Burrowing Owl, Ferruginous Hawk, Snowy Plover, Common Nighthawk, Lincoln’s Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Botteri’s Sparrow</p> <p><u>USFWS Birds of Conservation Concern</u></p> <p>National – Bald Eagle, Swainson’s Hawk, Peregrine Falcon, Snowy Plover, Solitary Sandpiper, Long-billed Curlew, Marbled, Godwit</p> <p>USFWS Region – Bald Eagle, Golden Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Snowy Plover, Long-billed Curlew, Burrowing Owl, Grasshopper Sparrow</p>
NABCI Bird Conservation Region	34: Sierra Madre Occidental
Ownership	U.S. Department of Defense (Administered by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) and the Arizona Game and Fish Department
Conservation Land Status**	A small portion on the northeast side of the playa is a State Wildlife Area.
Human Population Density	Rural
Legislative District(s)	Arizona Congressional District 2 and State Legislative District 14
NRCS Major Land Resource Area	53: Southeastern Arizona Basin and Range
Visitation, main access, and permits needed	The majority of this IBA is posted “no trespassing”. Cochise Lakes are open to public access and a viewing platform is located at the smaller pond. The Apache Station viewing platform on the west side of the IBA is open seasonally. The annual Wings Over Willcox birding festival is held in mid-January. For more information about visiting the

	Willcox Playa Wildlife Area, which is located seven miles south of Willcox. https://www.azgfd.com/wildlife/viewing/wheretogo/wilcoxplaya .
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*References available written narratives (located on the SJV website) for general habitat types occurring within the IBA.

**Identifies whether the IBA or portions of the IBA have a special land management designation such as: wilderness, primitive area, wildlife area, refuge, park, monument, designated conservation area, conservation easement, or other similar designation

IBA Activities:

Issue or Activity	Priority	Description	Actions
Sandhill Crane Winter Count	H	Annual survey coordinated by AGFD	Provide volunteers
AZ IBA Surveys	M	eBird	TAS lead- Encourage eBird entries
IBA Signage	M	Install signs identifying the site as an IBA	Installed at Cochise Lakes
IBA Dedication	Done	A formal recognition event	Completed January 2013
Willcox WA	M	Updated management opportunities related to Southline powerline mitigation	Coordinate with AGFD Tucson office Habitat Program
Water for Cochise Lake	H	Wastewater flows are changing	Coordinate with Willcox water department.

Partners:

Name	Role(s)	Contact Information	Actions
Arizona Game and Fish Department	Willcox Wildlife Area Manager and Wings Over Willcox partner	Region V 555 N. Greasewood Rd. Tucson, AZ 85745 520-628-5376	Management of Willcox WA.
City of Willcox	Owens land at Cochise Lake and provides wastewater supply	Willcox City Hall 101 South Railroad, Willcox, AZ city@willcox.org and 520-384-4271	Maintain wastewater supplies to Cochise Lake
Arizona Electric Power Cooperative (AEPCO)	Owens site of Apache Station viewing platform	Apache Generating Station 3525 N. Highway 191 Cochise, AZ 85606 520.384.4256	Maintain seasonal access and O&M for viewing platform

Name	Role(s)	Contact Information	Actions
Willcox Chamber of Commerce & Agriculture	Wings Over Willcox	1500 N. Circle I Road Willcox, AZ 85643 520-384-2272	Organizes annual birding festival
Tucson Audubon Society	IBA Steward	300 E University Blvd # 120, Tucson, AZ 85705 (520) 629-0510	Primary contact for birding and bird conservation activities and volunteer opportunities.

Conservation Targets:

These are species, communities, or ecological systems that represent and encompass the full array of biodiversity found in this IBA.

Conservation Target	Current Condition
Sandhill Crane	Very Good
Waterbirds and Shorebirds	Good
Waterfowl Birds	Good
Grassland and Upland Birds	Good

Conservation Challenges:

Conservation challenges are primarily human activities that immediately affect what we are trying to conserve. Through a Miradi process, it was found that conversion of grain farm lands, groundwater extraction (over pumping), habitat fragmentation, and prolonged drought pose the greatest threats to birds within this IBA.

Challenges	Upland and Grassland Birds	Waterfowl	Sandhill Crane	Waterbirds and Shorebirds	Summary Rating
Grain Farm Abandonment	Low	Medium	Medium	Low	Low
Groundwater Extraction	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
Drought	Medium	High	Medium	High	High
Habitat Fragmentation	High	High	High	High	High
Summary	Medium	High	Medium	High	High

**Important Bird Areas: Mini Conservation Plan
Willcox Playa/Cochise Lakes**

**Updated
March 2020**

Willcox Playa / Cochise Lakes	Severity (1-3)	Scope (1-3)	Permanence (2-4)
Threats on National Database			
Abandonment Agriculture	Farm abandonment 7	2	3
Industrialization/Urbanization	Habitat Fragmentation 8	2	4
Water Diversions (incl. impact dikes/dams)	Groundwater extraction 7	2	3
Natural Events	Drought (Climate Change) 9	3	3