

UPPER BUFFALO NATIONAL RIVER



INTRODUCTION “A protective attitude by human inhabitants for the entire watershed of the Buffalo River will be mandatory if it is to survive as a beautiful clearwater stream of national significance. That will mean restrictions on industry and certain types of agriculture in the area. Such modalities we must learn to accept and live with if there be places on this earth where our descendants can know and understand the wonders of creation.”

– from the epilogue in **The Battle for the Buffalo River** (1992) by Neil Compton

At approximately 95,000 acres, the Buffalo National River flows along 135 public land miles. During the nesting season, neotropical migratory songbirds like Scarlet Tanagers, American Redstarts, Cerulean Warblers add a lot of interest for a birding trip. Hundreds of rare and wonderful plant and animal species, tarantulas and timber rattlesnakes, Swainson's Warblers and canebrakes, add to soaring, heart-lifting landscapes. This could easily have all been buried under the reservoirs formed by two dams.

Arkansas Audubon Society opposed these dams, the first state wide organization to do so. In 1962, Dr Neil Compton, Ken Smith, Doug James and many others established the

Ozark Society as social network and battering ram in the crusade to stop the dams. Along the way they helped defeat a Democratic congressman who pushed dams and helped elect a Republican who opposed most government, including Buffalo dams. They gained critical backing from an Ozark native and popular Arkansas governor (Orval Faubus) now mainly remembered as a segregationist. Establishment of the Buffalo National River (1972) was natural, like paw paws and umbrella magnolias.

The fight to stop the dams is over, but since 60% of the Buffalo River watershed is privately owned, a protective attitude, as Dr Compton saw it, is required as clearing and development continue, including construction of large factory farms call confined animal feeding operations (CAFO) that threaten water quality throughout the watershed, including the national river.

Best book for Buffalo visitors: **Buffalo River Handbook** by Kenneth L. Smith, published by the Ozark Society Foundation (2004).

BIRDING IN THE UPPER BUFFALO INCLUDING CAVE MOUNTAIN



From Fayetteville, we usually drive Arkansas 45 to Hindsville and junction 412 E; 412 E through Marble to junction with Arkansas 21 S to Kingston and the Buffalo Valley at Boxley, intersection 21 & 43. It's about 39 miles to intersection 21S and 412E, 46 miles to Kingston, and 56 miles total to Boxley. Driving time is about 1 hour or so.

The directions for birding in the upper Buffalo valley will use the intersection of 21 & 43 as the starting point.

CAVE MOUNTAIN

Cave Mountain is south of the intersection of 21 & 43. Turn south (right) onto 21. The Boxley Baptist Church is on your right, at 0.5 miles. The bridge over the Buffalo River is at 1.2 miles. Take the gravel road just before the bridge (right turn). This is Cave Mountain Road. Public lands in this area include the Buffalo National River, the Upper Buffalo Wilderness, and the Ozark National Forest. There are private farms within a few miles. The popular hike out to the Hawksbill takes off from a Forest Service parking area along this road.

It doesn't take long to get an idea about the birds. Here are a couple of suggested stops. (1) Stop right along the Buffalo River after you turn off 21. This is good

riparian forest, the river, and adjacent edge along private farmlands. (2) From highway 21, travel 0.5 miles up Cave Mountain Road and stop in the small parking area for Cave Mountain Cave. Habitat includes mature forest, steep slopes, and the cave opening. (3) From highway 21, it's 0.8 miles up Cave Mountain Road to the intersection with a 2-track road on the right (north). This was once a farm road and there are regenerating oldfields and mature forest along the way. You can walk this all the way to where it comes to a closed gate (private property). It's a fine place to find mountain forest birds in this rough country. Also, the small older clearings (now heavily regenerating) have been good spots for Blue-winged Warblers. (4) From highway 21, the Cave Mountain bluff line starts at about 1.1-1.2 miles. There is a large boulder on the left (river side) for stopping. At miles 1.2-1.3 is an area I call the Cerulean Warbler overlook. There is a small pull off and a steep drop off. You can look out into the canopy here without really having to look up very much. You're coming out on the top of Cave Mountain at about mile 1.4-1.5.

BOXLEY VALLEY AND THE MILL POND

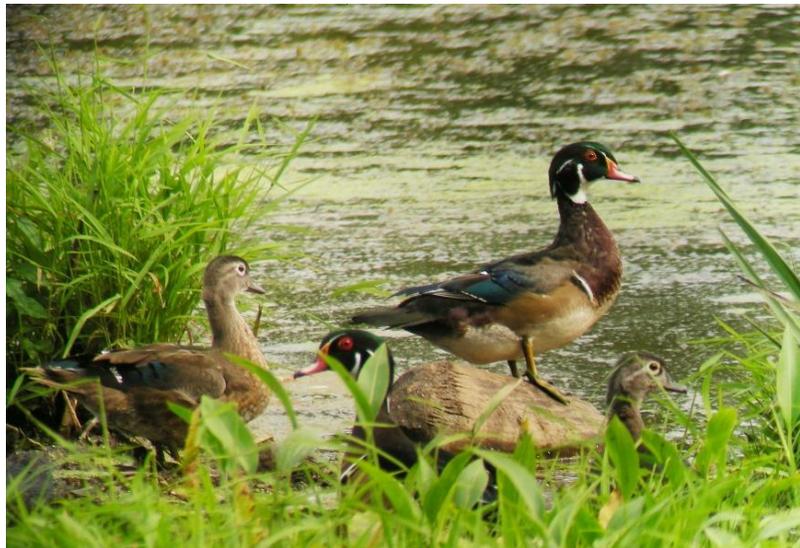
From the intersection of 21 & 43 turn left (north), the lower end of the justifiably famous Boxley millpond is at about mile 0.5-0.7. Except for the highway right-of-way, none of this is public land. Look for a safe place to pull completely off (the shoulder is relatively wide and relatively solid in a couple of places). The entire length of the pond is worth birding and keep a good eye on the mountain slope across the highway and the trees & bushes on the far side of the pond.

LOST VALLEY

From the intersection of 21 & 43, go north (left turn) on 21 & 43 to the turn off to Lost Valley at mile 3.3-3.4. Bird the road edge in as well as the Lost Valley hiking trail.

PONCA LOW WATER BRIDGE

From the intersection of 21 & 43, go north (left turn) on 21 & 43 4.3-4.4 miles to the turn off to "Ponca Access," which is the old low water bridge. Bird the bridge over the Buffalo River. Trailheads for the Buffalo River hiking trail are across the bridge providing access to a 2 mile hike to Steel Creek area or up Leatherwood Creek and mountain.



ELK EDUCATION CENTER, PONCA

We often stop here because Arkansas Game & Fish keeps the bird feeders full and there is a long stretch of the creek that can be viewed from the grounds. There are books, bathrooms, water, and lots of good information about the area here, too. Finally, and obviously, you can get the whole low down on elk in the area.

STEEL CREEK

Right after the turn off to Ponca Access/low water bridge is the junction of highways 43 & 74; take 74 toward Jasper. The turn off (and rapid road drop off) into the Steel Creek area is less than 2 miles away. The big fields and bluff lines are productive. Established trails allow access to upland shortleaf pine/mixed hardwood on slopes above the campground. The trail up Steel Creek itself provides access to this perennial stream. After crossing the creek, it heads high up on the slopes above the Buffalo, providing more opportunity for upland forest birds.

louisiana AND waterthrush

When those two words: louisiana AND waterthrush come up, what lights up are rushing streams, boulders, pawpaw trees, and forested slopes, pleasures over the years of hiking, camping, bird watching, fun times in clean cool water with my daughter Ariel and her friends.



In technical jargon, Louisiana Waterthrushes are long-distance, forest-interior, neotropical migrants. They occur in quite a few places along streams in northwest Arkansas, but I always enjoy them especially during trips over to the upper Buffalo. I was thinking about that while reading an email from Judith Griffith at Ninestone Land Trust in Carroll County. March has not even turned to April and she already has a Louisiana Waterthrush, 1 of

9 banded there during the course of Leesia Marshall's research! Ninestone is another special place, period, and especially if you have waterthrushes on the mind.

As pollution problems have become more complex, there has been a growing interest in how water quality is impacted by human land use and especially how some species might serve as biological indicators. Leesia's PhD is entitled, "Territories, territoriality,

and conservation of the Louisiana Waterthrush and its habitat, the watershed of the Upper Buffalo National River."

What Leesia found was that as water in Buffalo tributaries became more polluted, nesting territories for waterthrushes became longer; some disappeared. Some of this problem has to do with the impact of pollution on aquatic insect communities. So waterthrushes may be good indicators of biological integrity. As for a host of other neotropical migratory songbirds – how about Kentucky Warbler here -- it is reasonable to infer negative impacts for other native avian insectivores if pollution and general levels of habitat degradation increase in the Buffalo and its tributaries.

Protection of the Buffalo and such places should be a slam dunk, but in fact only 40% of the Buffalo watershed is part of the national river or under other state and Federal ownership. That leaves 60% of the watershed where land clearing and confined animal feeding operations (CAFO; like the hog factory under construction at Mt Judea in Newton County) increase incompatible negative impacts, even when state environmental rules are followed.

That's always the rub: millions visit the Buffalo who don't live there but do pay local, state, and Federal taxes and therefore own a legitimate stake in the park, its biological integrity, and its future. Local folks who live in the watershed have to have a way to make a living and not all of them can make it off the recreation industry. In terms of conflict and drama, it's a made-for-Hollywood script, ready for prime time.



And it is always the same, whether it involves attempts to protect tropical forests from illegal logging or save elephants from ivory hunters -- or in our case, protect this beautiful, native bird-rich, free-flowing river in the far away Ozarks of Arkansas.

-- Joe Neal March 2013