RIO SAN PEDRO
ONE OF THE LAST GREAT PLACES

TEXT BY ROBERT C. DYER • PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTY CORDNAO
slowly gathering itself from an array of rivulets and washes in Mexico, south of the Huachuca Mountains, the unpretentious, southerly-flowing stream called El Arroyo Las Nutrias seems an unlikely candidate for greatness.

But, after changing both its direction, to the north, and its name, to Rio San Pedro, and crossing the border unremarkably from Sonora into Arizona, it has kept a date with destiny.

If that seems a heavy burden for the San Pedro River, modest to insignificant in size compared with many rivers holding less promise, consider the following:

- When The Nature Conservancy, a conservation bridge between public and private sectors, set out a few years ago to identify a short list of "Last Great Places" — entire functioning ecosystems that can still be preserved — the San Pedro River emerged as one of the initial dozen in the Western Hemisphere.

- The American Bird Conservancy last year designated a short stretch of the San Pedro as the first "Globally Important Bird Area" in the United States.

- An Arizona coalition spearheaded by the Southwest regional office of American Rivers, a national conservation organization, has proposed part of the San Pedro for designation by Congress as a "Scenic River" in the wild and scenic system. In Arizona, only a portion of the Verde River has been so designated.

When the Last Great Places program was inaugurated, the San Pedro watershed was combined with New Mexico's 40,000-acre Gray Ranch in a model designated as Southwest Ecosystems. Only 11 other bioreserve sites were on the initial list, including the Florida Keys, the barrier islands of the Virginia Coast, and the Mbaracayu subtropical forest in Paraguay. The roster has been expanded greatly since then.

The interdependence of environment and the local economy is recognized along the San Pedro as in other sites, some of which accommodate farming, grazing, ecotourism, even low-density housing and mining. In the Upper San Pedro, tourist railroad traffic along the old Southern Pacific line paralleling the river is considered desirable, not an intrusion. Ranching and farming continue around the lower San Pedro, and development of the river's tourism potential is welcomed by conservationists, private owners, and governmental agencies.

In particular, says The Nature Conservancy, the San Pedro project "recognizes and promotes the importance of natural history tourism for the regional economy." The current buzzword is "ecotourism," which Dan Campbell, director of the conservancy's Arizona chapter, wryly admits is "a sort of phony word." Whatever the term, it is an important contributor to the economy of southeastern Arizona, prompting to be even more so. Already birders spend at least $10 million a year in Cochise County.

Economics aside, what is so great about the San Pedro?

Flowing northward makes it highly unusual, but not unique. The Santa Cruz, roughly paralleling it to the west, does that. The big difference is that human development along the Santa Cruz has irreversibly changed that valley, while the San Pedro has many pristine qualities that still lure Nature's untamed best into an easy cohabitation with mankind.

"The San Pedro is like a lovely antique in a yard sale," says Campbell. "It's marred in some way, but it's still the best of the heritage in our state. We're fortunate to find it before it's all used up."

Only 140 miles long from the Mexican border southeast of Sierra Vista to its confluence with the Gila River near Winkelman, the San Pedro still is one of the longest undammed watersheds in the American Southwest. Prehistoric mammoth-kill sites, near the crossings at Hereford and Charleston, prove that it has supported human life for at least 11,000 years.

Some of the best habitat along the San Pedro is in Mexico, where generations of large-scale ranchers have protected grasslands and cienegas. Land stewardship there has been fairly enlightened, says Andy Laurenzi, director of protection for The Nature Conservancy's Arizona chapter. Centro Ecologico de Sonora, a Mexican state agency, is studying ways to keep it that way.

To migrating, nesting, or roaming wildlife, the San Pedro Valley is a welcoming avenue of green. Rare cottonwood-willow forests are nesting sites for 60 to 70 percent of the remaining U.S. gray hawk population. Arizona is about their northern limits; generally they range from Mexico to Costa Rica.

The upper river, administered by the Bureau of Land Management, has more than 50 adult gray hawks, including 20 or so nesting pairs which produce 18 to 25 fledglings annually. Downstream, the Mississippi kite — most of Arizona's population — nests in towering cottonwood trees, foraging for cicadas emerging in the salt cedar growth below.

"It's important that the San Pedro has no reservoirs," says Rich Ginska of the Arizona Game and Fish Department. Ginska once planned as part of the Central Arizona Project would have ruined the river as bird habitat, according to Ginska. Now, periodic flooding recharges the water table and removes debris from the channel, diminishing fire danger and the potential loss of the cottonwoods.
Glinski rates the San Pedro as Arizona's best raptor area and one of America's most diverse (12 nesting species).

"Alaska is great for bald eagles and peregrine falcons, Texas and Florida have some glamorous species," he says. "But if I had two hours to show birds of prey to someone from another country, we would go to the San Pedro."

Increased human activity on the Santa Cruz and Colorado rivers has diverted more migratory birds to the San Pedro, says Dave Krueger of the BLM. Now it is the second-most important inland migratory corridor in North America. Flying at night to avoid predators, migratory birds make an easy hop of 40 to 50 miles from the Rio Sonora over intervening desert until dawn's light reveals the lush greenery of the San Pedro. From there they may go on to the Gila River, Mogollon Rim country, even as far as Alaska.

Southeastern Arizona is known as one of the nation's greatest areas for bird sightings. Not as well known is that all the bird species regularly occurring in North America, more than half can be seen in the San Pedro corridor. The total number of species increased to 381 in recent years with sightings of the yellow-throated vireo, a native of southeastern deciduous forests, and the yellow grosbeak, from southern Sonora.

Mammals, too, are showing up in greater abundance since Congress set aside the 40-mile stretch of the river from the Mexican border to near St. David as the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area. (See Arizona Highways, April '89.)

White-tailed deer have increased tremendously, says Greg M. Yunecevich, former conservation area manager. With more birds and small mammals as prey, the Mexican ocelot may feel more encouraged to drift northward along the river corridor. Some have been sighted through the years.

Cooks Lake, owned jointly by the Bureau of Reclamation and USARCO, is an important water source and habitat for many birds in the San Pedro conservation area. Access is by permission only.
one was trapped near Winkelman about 1980. Mountain lions, kit and gray foxes, ring-tailed cats, and coatimundis are among the animals that call the San Pedro home.

The channel has changed immensely through the years and will continue to change. Tombstone's mining boom consumed some 400,000 cords of wood from the San Pedro; a 1935 aerial photo shows the area practically denuded of cottonwoods. After 300 years of grazing, cattle were removed from the upper San Pedro at the end of 1987, and the effects are apparent. The channel has deepened, banks are building up, and vegetation has spread.

The BLM also has banned off-road vehicle use, which was degrading washes and stream banks, discontinued agricultural groundwater pumping, which tended to dry up the river, and eliminated sand and gravel operations. Yoncevich believes that on its own, the river will tend to go back to what it was pre-1900 — more marshy and more vegetation, including more young cottonwoods.

The number of visitors to the conservation area has doubled to 60,000 annually in the last four years, and BLM is planning for 100,000. Most visitors approach the upper river at State Route 90 east of Sierra Vista, at Hereford Bridge, or at Fairbank. At State 90, Friends of the San Pedro River volunteers operate The San Pedro House in the shade of one of Arizona's largest cottonwood trees, estimated to be 100 to 125 years old. There, if enough private funds can be raised, the BLM hopes to build a $3 million interpretive Riparian Center.

Some visitors fish in a nearby onetime gravel pit. Others follow old deer trails well trodden into Nature walks. Even the sedentary may be rewarded by sights of a pair of green kingfishers, hummingbirds attracted by many feeders at the site, coyotes mousing in the underbrush, or a family of Gambel's

(RIGHT) A baby coyote left its den to explore along the river's edge. In the same area, our photographer encounters a checkered garter snake and a Ferruginous hawk.

May 1996
qual. Here the gallery forest along the river has a rich diversity of birds, from the summer visitor to winter's green-tailed towhee.

The Nature Conservancy already had deep-rooted interests in the area through its noted Ramsey Canyon Preserve in the eastern Huachuca Mountains and its role with the BLM and the Forest Service in the Muleshoe Ranch Cooperative Management Area. Ramsey Canyon's varied hummingbird population (15 species) makes it an important part of the San Pedro watershed's wildlife diversity.

Aravaipa Canyon, Ramsey Canyon, and the streams within Muleshoe Ranch are among the San Pedro's main tributaries. While the San Pedro has lost many of its native fish, Aravaipa remains home to seven species, one-fourth of all the native fish species ever known in Arizona.

Since the "Last Great Places" listing, land transactions have benefited both riparian conservation and private ownership. Jack and Norma Hughes, who had protected a half mile of the wooded lower San Pedro for more than 30 years as part of their ranching operation, swapped 305 acres and water rights for grazing land with no critical riparian habitat. The transaction was more complicated than that, but the net result includes continued protection of the river and the addition of 15 acres to tax rolls.

In another transaction, the Nature Conservancy bought the 205-acre McDowell-Craig Farm on the river, resold most of the land to the BLM for addition to the riparian conservation area, then sold the balance to a buyer who has opened the San Pedro River Inn at Hereford. Acreage went on the tax rolls at a higher rate, an environmentally friendly business enterprise was established, and wildlife habitat is protected. Campbell says these are "the kinds of market solutions that can serve as models elsewhere."

Private owners and government agencies have joined in coming to the San Pedro's rescue. Since the 1930s, the Brophy family, ranching near Elgin, has worked to preserve Babocomari Cienega. At Fort Huachuca, believed to have the greatest biodiversity of any U.S. military installation, the Army has closed part of botanically significant Garden Canyon to motor vehicles and set up interpretive Nature programs. Moving on from there, the Army is participating in efforts to save the dwindling Ramsey Canyon leopard frog population and cooperating in research on grass fires, stream flow, and groundwater hydrology.

The City of Sierra Vista set up a pilot program of wetlands construction, using clean water from a wastewater treatment plant, and is seeking means of expanding it.

Hundreds of historical and cultural sites exist up and down the river, and the BLM plans interpretive programs for some. At Presidio Santa Cruz de Terrenate, three miles north of Fairbank, a loop trail for visitors now interprets the story of this Spanish colonial fort, active from 1776 to 1780.

The BLM has these goals for the San Pedro River: (1) protecting the water; (2) protecting wildlife habitats, especially for endangered, sensitive, and threatened species; (3) preserving the cultural history from Clovis Man through the Spanish explorations and early-day mining and ranching; and (4) interpreting the significance of the San Pedro ecosystem through educational and recreational programs.

For the Nature Conservancy, Dan Campbell puts it this way: "Don't try to take the San Pedro back to pre-Indian days. Maintain the ecological process. Keep intact the wildlife, the people, and the economies that are here now. Sustain the human economies, most are not harmful."