

WILD AMERICA

THESE DESTINATIONS OFFER ANIMAL ENCOUNTERS

BY ELISE MURRELL

You don't have to travel too far to find America's wild side. The United States' diversity of climates and terrains allows for a wealth of wildlife, some of which cannot be found in any other part of the world. What could be a better way to appreciate our nation's wealth of fauna than taking a tour to see nature up close?

Rather than visiting the nearest zoo, go straight to the source and see animals in their natural habitat. No need to fly halfway around the world to see exotic wildlife; you can appreciate a variety of amazing species here at home in the United States.

Whether you're looking for a family-type, an educational or a fun hands-on experience, these wildlife tours have you covered. The guides are well-trained experts in their fields and, in many cases, native to the community. Whether it runs, flies or swims, the wildlife speaks for itself on these tours, offering groups a chance to connect to nature in a personal and impactful way.



RAMSEY CANYON IS A SEASONAL HOME TO MIGRATORY HUMMINGBIRDS.

Courtesy Liz Sockness



WILD HORSES ON MARYLAND'S ASSATEAGUE ISLAND

Courtesy Assateague Explorer

— RAMSEY CANYON — HEREFORD, ARIZONA

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Located just nine miles from the Mexican border, Ramsey Canyon became a preserve of the Nature Conservancy in 1975 due in large part to the donation of land from a local family. The Huachuca Mountains within the Upper San Pedro River Basin, in which the canyon is situated, is characteristic of mountains south of the U.S. border. This means that its plant and animal life, including an array of migratory hummingbirds, is similar to that found in Mexico.

The preserve offers guided nature hikes that Brooke Gebow, the Southeastern Arizona Preserves manager, said would delight birders and family groups alike.

"The guides are volunteers but are very good birders and know the canyon like the back of their hand," she said. "The tours can last for hours. If the group wants to keep going, the guides keep going."

In the summer as many as 12 different hummingbird species, as well as rare birds like whiskered screech owls and sulphur-bellied flycatchers, can be seen. You may even see something unexpected, like a colorful trogon. March, April and August are the prime months for seeing hummingbirds, but Gebow noted that the canyon is beautiful in November as well, when the maple and sycamore trees turn colors.

Gebow hopes that visitors appreciate the beauty of the canyon and its biogeographical importance. The preserve is great for families and even offers a summer program for kids, and the staff works hard to help visitors young and old appreciate the beauty and importance of the natural area.

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— ASSATEAGUE ISLAND — NATIONAL SEASHORE OCEAN CITY, MARYLAND

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Many people have read "Misty of Chincoteague" by Marguerite Henry, a book based on the true story of a family that raises a wild horse on the island of Chincoteague in Virginia. Today, you can tour the local islands by boat or kayak and see the horses for yourself.

Captian Mark Coulbourne, a former Park Ranger for the National Park Service whose family has lived in the area since the early 1800s, directs the tours. Groups leave from his grandfather's dock and travel a short distance to the nearby island of Assateague where the horses roam. Locals believe that the horses came to America in the 1600s by way of a

Spanish shipwreck and have run wild ever since.

Coulbourn said the tours are special because they are on the water and far from the traffic of the road, offering a unique look at wild horses.

“Most people don’t get to see how family groups of horses live,” he said. “A stallion will have about 10 mares, and the foals are born in the summer. They move in their family groups and interact with each other.”

Coulbourn said the wildlife is what makes an impression on visitors. About 300 horses live on the island, and birders will appreciate the bald eagles, ospreys and shorebirds. Visitors may also see dolphins and stingrays in the water. Whether you choose to take a ride on one of the boats or kayak around the islands, you’ll see the animals in their natural habitats.

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— CUSTER STATE PARK — EAST CUSTER, SOUTH DAKOTA

3

Custer State Park in the Black Hills of South Dakota offers a glimpse of the West’s scenic terrain and wildlife. Groups can explore the granite peaks and open ranges of the second-largest state park in America on a guided jeep tour,

on horseback or on foot.

The Off-Road Buffalo Safari Jeep Tour allows groups to go where no car can. Guides take visitors as deep into the buffalo herds as possible, where the animals — especially burros, or small donkeys — sometimes become interactive with the group. Birds and prairie dogs can also be spotted along the way.

See the park from a new perspective by taking the trail ride, a guided tour on horseback.

“You see so much more [than on a car ride] — it’s so peaceful,” said Gina Konechne, a concessionaire on the reserve.

Horses make it is easier to see creeks, scenery, animals and places normally hard to reach by vehicle. A group might encounter bighorn sheep or even elk licking salt.

Konechne said people love how they can get away from their hectic modern lifestyles when at the park. “You can get back to the basics, away from all of the crazy schedules, cellphones and technology.” Groups can also stay overnight at lodges in the park, right in the heart of the action — you might see a herd of buffalo run by right where you’re dining.

The best part of the park, according to Konechne, is that anyone can appreciate its natural beauty and that of the animals.

“It doesn’t take an expert to get to awe-inspiring locations,” she said.

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BUFFALO ROAM AT CUSTER STATE PARK.



Courtesy South Dakota Tourism

4

VISITORS TO HAWAII
CAN SNORKEL WITH
SEA TURTLES.



Courtesy Wild Side Specialty Tours

5

AN ALLIGATOR SUNNING AT
HONEY ISLAND SWAMP



Courtesy Honey Island Swamp Tours

— WILD SIDE SPECIALTY TOURS —
OAHU, HAWAII

4

Wild Side Specialty Tours on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, offers year-round group tours in paradise. You can swim with dolphins, watch whales and snorkel with sea turtles, as well as encounter tropical fish, seals, birds and coral reefs. The intimate tours focus on what each group would like to see that day.

Tori Cullins, the resident marine biologist and an environmental sciences graduate, started the business with her husband. What began as a research project on the local wildlife grew into a business when the pair discovered they could invite tour groups to work with them. Today, in addition to seeing amazing wildlife, groups have the opportunity to help see and identify new species and contribute their photos to the Cascadia Research Collective's Hawaii marine mammal identification catalogs.

"We like to heighten [visitors'] awareness of what the animals' lives are like," Cullins said. Sometimes we drop in a hydrophone [underwater microphone] to listen to the whales sing. Hawaii is a fragile environment. Once you encounter something, you're more likely to take care of it."

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Courtesy Honey Island Swamp Tours

— HONEY ISLAND SWAMP —
SLIDELL, LOUISIANA

5

Nature lovers have trekked to Honey Island Swamp in Louisiana for alligator tours since 1982. Part of the Nature Conservancy's First Louisiana Nature Preserve, the swamp is an ideal place to see the ecology and natural history of the swamp because it is still in near-perfect condition.

Native, professional guides take groups on two-hour tours. The small boats allow for groups to travel deep into the moss-draped cypress tree swamp. Guide Jack Sessions said people love the tours because "you never know what you're going to encounter." Alligators, waterfowl, minks, red wolves, deer and turtles are just some of the animals regularly spotted, and a few have even boasted a Big Foot sighting.

By making alligator calls, the guides lure the reptiles close to the boats and reward them with marshmallows. Sessions said in addition to liking the sweet taste, the alligators are attracted to the white color. Groups love to take photos of the wildlife and natural environment while on the tour.

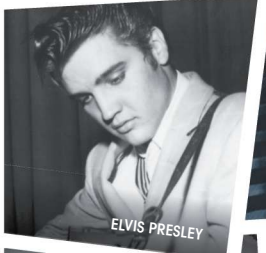
"People love our camaraderie and how we take care of them," Sessions said. "We get people from all over the world. There are lots of warm hearts that come here."

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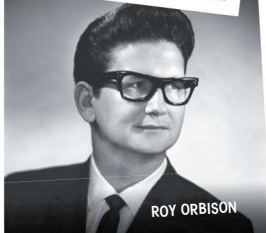
GROUPS CAN SEE ABUNDANT WILDLIFE DURING A TOUR OF HONEY ISLAND SWAMP.



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