



# Quivira: Kansas' Salt Marshes

By L. Robert Pyle

**S**alty, brown waters lap gently on the sand. Thick, dark-green reeds sprout along the black banks. Shore birds scurry along the reach of the water, pecking at the sand and mud. It smells marshy; of salt air and rotting plants. The wind in the reeds whistles and the cheeps and squawks of a hundred hidden birds fill the air.

Movement high in the sky draws my eyes up. A dozen white spots high in the air resolve themselves into large, white birds floating gracefully earthward like enormous black-edged snowflakes. They swirl around the blue sky and then settle onto the murky water. Some of them swim in a slow, leisurely circle. Their large bills dip in the water. The baggy skin on the bottom jaw acts like a dipping net, capturing small fish. They will do this many times today; each bird scooping as much as four pounds of fish out of the salty brown water.

My mind drifts back to my youth on the shores of the Delmarva Peninsula: a memory of my father standing on the sand, watching the same type of bird, reciting a piece of doggerel, "Consider the marvelous pelican, whose beak can hold more than his belly can." Invariably he added (to the hilarious delight of his kids), "But I don't know how in the hellican."

Ah! The coastal salt marshes. But, wait! I am in Central Kansas! Have I been transported a thousand miles in some supernatural fluke?

No. It's just Quivira National Wildlife Refuge. Lying between Stafford and Sterling, KS, it is a 22,135 acre refuge in the transition region between the tall grass prairies of the east and the short grass prairies of the west. Because of this, it has a diversity of wildlife, and because it is on the Central Flyway, birding here is uniquely satisfying. What makes it so





streams have carved away the top layers to expose the ancient carbonaceous bottom of that sea – places like the Niobrara Breaks, Castle Rock, and Monument rocks further west. Around here, though, the sea left a different deposit when it withdrew. In places like Hutchinson, KS just to the southeast of Quivira, the evaporating remnants of the sea created thick layers of salt that are now deep underground. Caverns in these deposits are used to store natural gas and the salt mines still provide for a thriving commercial salt business.

unique? Salt water. Although there is an abundance of fresh water in the refuge and in the surrounding area (the Arkansas River runs through this region), there are two large salt lakes and many smaller ones in the refuge.

In some past geological era, the whole of the Great Plains was a shallow sea. After the land rose and the sea drained, dust storms and floods carried soil from the Rockies to bury the old sea bottom. In many places, the rivers and

At Quivira, the salt is not so far under the ground. Ground water percolates through it and rises into the lakes and streams. In the two big lakes on the refuge (logically named Big Salt Lake and Little Salt Lake) the salt levels are high enough to support salt-tolerant grass species but still fresh enough to support channel catfish and carp – supplying food for the



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wading birds and the pelicans.

Blue herons, snowy egrets, great egrets, pipers of many kinds, various species of ducks, American avocets and white-faced ibis all abound here. The birding checklist available online from the National Fish and Wildlife Service is over three pages long, printed in small font. Perhaps most spectacular of all of the visitors, though, are the white pelicans. During migration, they throng to the refuge filling the sky with their familiar forms – forms that are, though, most improbable in Central Kansas.

The white pelicans spend their summers in the northern United States and Canada. Like human snowbirds, they like their winters a little warmer and migrate to Florida or Mexico. The migration pattern takes them through Quivira in March-April and October-November.

These birds can weigh up to 30 pounds and have wing spans up to 120 inches, second only to the California condor. Around Quivira, flocks can number 30 or more birds, and 100 or more birds can be seen rafting on Little Salt Lake during the migration months.

Quivira is located 30 miles northwest of Hutchinson, KS and about 35 miles southeast of Great Bend, KS. Well-paved roads lead to the refuge and the dirt roads of the refuge are well maintained during the tourist season. The only exception to this is when the Snowy Plovers and Least Terns are nesting. In the nesting areas, the roads are not maintained from when the birds start laying until the chicks have grown, because they often build their nests on the road edge.

To be exposed to salt marshes and the great birding in those areas, it is not necessary for people in the central plains to travel all the way to Florida, Louisiana or Texas. The surprising salt marshes of Central Kansas will do just fine.



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