



Winging It

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Outta Sight Birdwatchers of South Texas

BY ROY J. RODRIGUEZ

The Sparkplugs

At the age of fifteen, Glady Cruz began to lose her eyesight. Doctors told her that the tumor in her brain would end her life within a year. They were wrong. Ten years later, Glady still endures excruciating headaches and limited mobility, but she long ago dealt with the despair of losing her sight. At twenty-five, she is now one of a handful of blind students at the University of Texas-Pan American in Edinburg. Glady is also a birder. Her blindness has not got in the way of pursuing her degree, holding a job, or learning how to bird by ear.

Raul Reyes is also a birder. Once a migrant farm worker, he was a scoutmaster for fifteen years, president of the South Texas Voters Registration League, and a highly trained turbine technician. He was on the fast track to a master mechanic's career until he was accidentally blinded during eye surgery. His health deteriorated and depression took hold of him, but soon, he gathered himself together through his determination and his faith and followed his instinctual need to reach out to others.

Raul eventually began his own nonprofit, the DOVE Training Center for the Blind, to create support groups, mobility training, art and nature appreciation, and job skills training. He even made it onto the board of the National Federation of the Blind. Raul says, "There is something that needs to be done here. I can't help everybody, but I can help the people who live here in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Everyone wants to travel and work and

be a productive member of society." Not even diabetes and kidney failure stopped Raul—he just slowed down for a while. Now, though, Raul has a new kidney and renewed energy and enthusiasm. He reaches out to health providers and assisted living centers around the country to use birding as a tool for rehabilitation.

Glady and Raul are two of the thirty-thousand blind and visually impaired people in the lower Rio Grande Valley of south Texas, which includes some of the poorest counties in the US. Those of you familiar with South Texas birding may not have seen these people around. I know I haven't. Most of us have no idea how many of these folks are at home, laid low by depression and other debilitating medical conditions. Obviously, there is a need for a healthy outdoor activity that is readily available and affordable to people of all ages and abilities. Birding is an obvious choice.

If you have sight or hearing, you can be a birder!

Birding is more than a fun pastime and an excuse to get out and exercise. For this particular group, it has become one more path that leads to that elusive but attainable goal—**independence.**

What does it take to go birding blind? Well, you have to be able to use your sense of hearing. Birding is done 80% by ear, after all. Bird vocalizations are used by birders every day to clinch identifications of species that are hard to figure out otherwise. All of us know that learning the birds' songs helps us become better at field identification.

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Imagine a crowd of stumbling, disoriented strangers walking into traffic and bumping into trees while staring up at the sky. Blind birders? No, I'm describing us sighted birders, who depend so much on our vision that sometimes we can't see where we are going even with our eyes open. Try blindfolding yourself when you are out birding, or just sit with your eyes closed by your backyard feeder and identify the sounds near and far. Traffic, trains, insects, frogs, neighbors, pets, and birds can usually be "turned off." But if you have no sight, these sounds form a landscape of their own. Blind birders have refined their mobility methods and blended them seamlessly with our "sighted" birding techniques to produce a new and inspiring type of birding.

Blind Birding Central

Raul was searching for new activities for the blind just as the Chambers of Commerce in the Lower Rio Grande Valley were organizing ten different nature-oriented festivals. At the same time, The Rensselaerville Institute was looking for "human sparkplugs," people like Raul to start innovative programs for positive change with local and state mini-grant support. TRI, with funds from the Office of Border Health (Texas Department of Health) and Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, approached Raul about birding for the blind. It was state funding from these two vastly different entities that helped the blind birdwatchers take wing, so to speak.

It didn't take long for Raul to organize a meeting of twenty blind folks at the Edinburg World Birding Center. Amy Winters, former Director of the WBC in Edinburg, helped convince the City to allow the center to become a blind birding classroom. Today, the Edinburg World Birding Center is the only support and training center for blind birdwatching in Texas, maybe anywhere. Once a few trainers and volunteers jumped in, the fun began. The results have been outstanding:

The president of the local federally funded urban transport system offered the Blind Birders free one-on-one mobility training to get them to their closest bus stops. The blind birders also got the same transport system to make regular daily stops at various hotspots, including the Edinburg World Birding Center.

Blind birders have traveled to the State Capital and Texas Parks & Wildlife Department to wrangle out rules for blind and blindfolded competitors during the Outta Sight Songbirder Tournament. In April 2005, they competed for the second time in the Great Texas Birding Classic, with corporate sponsorship from local businesses.

A story about blind birding appeared on the front page of the New York Times in 2004, and was later picked up by the Tapei

Times and other periodicals worldwide. During their first competition, Glady was interviewed by CNN. Talk about publicity!

Early this year, Glady visited Washington, D.C., at the invitation of the National Federation of the Blind to discuss job opportunities and new programs for the visually impaired.

Blind folks are doing radio and TV announcements recruiting volunteer drivers and other blind participants.

They have created a Blind Birders' Tip Sheet (*see below*), to teach sighted birders how to behave around the blind.

During this year's Texas Coastal Expo in Edinburg, blind birders Glady Cruz and Jessica Garza led dozens of blindfolded kids and their parents around the Municipal Park, identifying their surroundings by ear.

There have been canoe and kayaking trips on the Rio Grande, and guided trips through Valley refuges and state parks for Girl Scouts, elementary students, and of course, other blind birding novices.

A tour for the local rehabilitation center and young victims of traumatic brain injuries had a great effect on participants and care providers alike.

Information and tips are now available in three languages—English, Spanish, and Braille.

James Booker, a well-known and talented birder from California now working with Texas Parks & Wildlife Department at Bentsen State Park, consulted with the blind birders to outline a blind birding program exploring avian communication, the terminology used by birders to describe sounds, recording equipment and imitations to attract birds, and ways impaired birders can not just contribute but excel at their sport.

Information and tips are now available in three languages—English, Spanish, and Braille.

Not just a support group

Not all of the many blind or visually impaired people in this community are able to take advantage of the Texas School for the Blind in Austin. Most don't know the basics of cane technique and lack the mobility training to get around, to keep a job, or to maintain the skills they had before. Diabetes, rampant in Hispanic society, causes much adult blindness. The loss of mobility and independence that accompanies the loss of sight, whatever its cause, can be extremely difficult to accept; it is easier when it is shared with people who have experienced the same circumstances.

Getting up early, organizing people for field trips and class times, giving regular tours, spreading the word and seeking volunteer drivers and guides, preparing for competition: all have an incremental health benefit. One of the unforeseen benefits for Glady was that she did not have to take as much



The second-place winners with 32 birds: Team TweetyBirds of the Outtasight Songbirder Tournament give a cheer. Photo © Roy Rodriguez.



Former EWBC Director Amy Winters with Blind Birders Valerie Mercurio, Jessica Garza, Esmeralda Pesina, Paul Reyes, and Glady Cruz. Photo © Roy Rodriguez.

medication as before to get through her debilitating headaches. As a matter of fact, during the busy birding season, she feels much better and has abundant energy, taking less than half of her usual pain medications. Raul Reyes went from taking fourteen different medications per day to five or six; he is also feeling much better with a new kidney. His energy level is “through the roof,” and he is currently busy planning a birding club for his church—and he still hopes to see a school for the blind founded in the Valley.

My own experience in hanging around with these people has been just as profound. On every field trip, you see their enthusiasm and the gleam in their smiles. Their positive outlook is at once both addictive and humbling. Whenever I catch myself feeling petty and selfish, I think about Gladly and Raul and Jessica, and I soon get over it.

As a beginning birder, I was interested only in learning more about birds and adding new birds to my life list, and planning travels to places I would not otherwise go. Pretty soon, I joined my local Audubon club and subscribed to birding magazines, and joined the ABA a year after I started birding. Eventually, I found myself volunteering with students and teachers, city leaders, and state and federal agencies, even guiding tours. The point is that for most of us there is a natural progression from observer to participant to activist.

There is a lot that one person can do to motivate one other person. There is much more that can happen when people get together for a common goal. If you don't know a blind person, invite your co-workers, your city leaders, your family and neighbors to share your newfound (or lifelong) birding passion. Be the mentor that maybe you didn't have. You don't have to be an expert. You will learn to think new ways and see new ways. As Raul once said to me, “I can see more now without my eyesight than when I had true vision.”

A lifelong hunter and fisherman in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Roy J. Rodriguez is a professional birding guide, working in the US & Mexico. He is committed to fostering awareness and appreciation of wildlife among the culturally and economically diverse communities of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. He can be reached at rjrodz@aol.com, 956/787-7739.

CONTACTS:

- Texas Department of Health, Office of Border Health, Austin, TX. <http://www.tdh.texas.gov/>
- Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Austin, TX. <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/>
- The Rensselaerville Institute, Rensselaerville, New York. McAllen, TX office: 956-686-686-5653. <http://www.rinstitute.org/>
- Edinburg World Birding Center. Marisa Oliva, Manager 956-381-9922. <http://www.worldbirdingcenter.org/>
- Great Texas Birding Classic: <http://www.gcbo.org/gtbc.html>
- National Federation of the Blind: <http://www.nfb.org/default.htm>
- Raul Reyes, Edinburg, TX. 956-381-1931
- Gladly Cruz, Edinburg, TX. 956-383-4306
- James Booker, Mission, TX Program Consultant. Generalredbird@cs.com

Blind Birders' Tip Sheet

This Tip Sheet was prepared by the Rio Grande Valley Blind and Visually Impaired Birders to aid two groups of people: Experienced birdwatchers who want to share their sport with blind and visually impaired people, and blind and visually impaired people who want to benefit from this fun and educational outdoor activity.

If you have never worked with the blind and do not know how to connect with them, the National Federation of the Blind, www.nfb.org, and your local chapter of Lions Clubs International (in your phonebook) can help you locate blind people near you.

When interacting with a blind individual:

- Introduce yourself so the blind person will know your presence.
- Never hesitate to offer your help at any time.
- Don't be ashamed to use the word “blind” or to make references to seeing; it's unavoidable and won't hurt anyone's feelings.
- To get a blind person's attention, call the individual by name.
- It is okay to tap them on the shoulder as a hint to get their attention
- Words like “Hey, Hey you,” are not polite, and have no meaning for blind people.
- It's important to signal a blind individual when you are done with a conversation and when you are pulling away, using words such as “Well, now I will be going.” Otherwise, they are likely to continue talking, believing you are still standing there. Very embarrassing.

When walking with blind people:

- To guide a blind individual, offer your elbow and he or she will use a “milk glass” grip to walk by your side and slightly behind. This lets the blind person judge for him/herself when you are stepping up or down.
- Never pull an individual to make him or her walk. It's a very insecure feeling to be pulled rather than led.
- While walking, describe the terrain: open areas, objects, turns, etc., on the way to your destination. It is helpful to describe the paths as you approach them: bricks, pebbles, bumpy, uneven surfaces, etc.
- When approaching a chair or a bench, you can tap on the object loud enough for the individual to hear so that she or he can find it and take a seat.
- Warn blind individuals when approaching low objects that might trip them, or when you are about to encounter limbs or branches, so that they can protect their face.
- When calling blind people to join you, talk to them (“keep coming”) until they reach you. Be as specific as possible (“ten feet more,” “walk straight,” “turn left ninety degrees,” and so on).
- It is **not** helpful to call out “come here,” “over there,” “turn there,” etc.

Birding with the blind:

- When observing birds, orient the group of blind people in single file facing the same direction.
- Use the hours of the clock to identify the position of a bird's call (“Did you hear that kiskadee at 3 o'clock?”).
- Describe the bird's colors using color references: “blue as the sky,” “green as the grass,” “yellow as the sun.” This is particularly helpful for people who have been blind from birth and have no other frame of reference.
- Describe other characteristics of the bird: “small as a mouse” or “big as a chicken.”
- Detailed descriptions will help individuals create an image in their head, particularly those with previous vision (“this is a medium-sized, yellow-colored bird with black-and-white stripes on its head”).

If you have further questions about working with blind or visually impaired people, just ask them. We know that's why you're there, and we want you to feel comfortable learning about us..