



National Wildlife Refuges:

A Special Birding Treasure

by Noella Ballenger

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White-faced Ibis are wading birds with long curved bills. They use this long bill to probe the mud flats for tasty tidbits. They live and forage in colonies and when they fly, they fly in lines, but are constantly changing their position in the line.

Every year millions of birds make a journey from the far north to their special wintering grounds for breeding and to raise their young. And later in the year, they make their incredible journey back to their home territory. For some birds this route is a destination, for others it provides a resting place and for many more it is a permanent home. Migrating birds look for habitat that will provide them with food and shelter.

America is so fortunate to have several major flyways or migration corridors where birds can winter over or fly through. Along their flight paths America has been wise enough to preserve many of the precious wetland areas for the migrating flocks.

The National Wildlife Refuge System was started by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903 when he designated Pelican Island in Florida as the first wildlife refuge. Today the system of wildlife refuges number over 540, along with over 3,000 small waterfowl breeding and nesting areas in all 50 states and Guam and the Marshall Islands and Puerto Rico. They are managed by the Department of Fish and Wildlife. Most of these refuges are open to the public.

The best place to find information about the wildlife refuges is at the web



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Snow geese are fantastic and very noisy when they do their annual migration into California. Thousands of birds fly in v or u shaped formations and descend on refuge lakes and adjacent fields to feed and breed in large colonies. It is amazing to see formation after formation come into a field and even more exciting to see them suddenly all take to the air. The sky suddenly becomes filled with flapping wings and birds by the thousands. The sound alone is unforgettable.

[Complete Guide](#)) by Russell D. Butcher and then for region specific books, look at the [Audubon Guides to the National Wildlife Refuges](#).

Other areas to keep in mind--birds do not know boundaries, so adjacent fields and forest lands also offer expanded opportunities. Go to the Auto Club or other map sources and ask about county maps. They give the most detail about little side roads adjacent to many farm lands. But be sure to be respectful of the property rights of others. There is nothing that angers a farmer more than having trespassers coming across his land without permission. Put yourself in their place and understand that *No Trespassing* signs mean just exactly that. However, if you do happen to come across the owner of the property and nicely ask their permission, you may just get a wonderful offer to cross their property, as well as tips on where to find the migrating birds or other photo opportunities. Offering to send a "thank you" image (and following through on that promise) goes a long way toward making a friend and possibly getting a special opportunity for the following years.

site of the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife site](#). At that site you can click on a US map to find the refuges in your area. A map will come up showing all of the refuges in your state and if you click on one of those, you can get detailed information about that particular refuge, including what activities are available, the hours of operation and usually the time of year that is best for the various activities.

There are also a couple of books that offer great information. You might want to look at these because they are excellent references. First, [America's National Wildlife Refuges, 2nd Edition: A Complete Guide \(America's National Wildlife Refuges: A](#)

In California, our main flyway comes from Canada in the north and goes directly through our Central Valley's agriculture areas.



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The Tundra Swan (Whistling Swan) is the smallest of the swans but noticeably larger than a goose. They have beautiful white feathers, a black bill with a yellow spot on the lores (area between the bill and the eye) and black feet. They winter over in large flocks on ponds and rivers and marshes. They graze on agricultural fields frequently.

and understand their journey and it is a wonderful opportunity for bird photographers and enthusiasts.

One of the finest areas for birds is in the rice producing area of Northern California. There are a number of wildlife refuges that are adjacent to rice fields. In the winter these harvested rice fields become a favored feeding ground for migrating snow geese and sandhill cranes. Waterfowl such as ducks and swans crowd the permanent refuge ponds. Raptors and vultures patrol the air. Many birds use these areas as a resting and feeding stop on the way to their winter home, which may even be as far away as the southern portions of South America. It is quite incredible to see the birds



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Upper left: The Mallard duck is the most frequently seen species of duck. They feed mainly on seeds taken from the water. In the world of ducks, the male is usually the more colorful and especially at breeding time. The male can be identified by its striking green head, bright yellow bill and pale body. Identifying the female is more difficult. She has an orange and black bill, large body, orange legs and a prominent dark line through the eye.

Upper right: The Great Blue Heron is a stunning bird especially when in courting plumage as it is here. Nesting in trees, but feeding on fish, small mammals and other prey, it is the most frequently seen heron.

Middle: The Greater White-fronted Goose is also a visitor to some of the refuges in Northern California. They can be distinguished by their darkish head, orange legs and orange tipped beak. Even foggy mornings can be beautiful on the preserves.

Lower left: The Black-tailed Jackrabbit is a regular refuge dweller. It can be found all over the western states and is an important part of the food chain for many birds and mammals. They depend on their speed to outrun their enemies such as eagles, hawks, coyote, and bobcats. They hide among the reeds and grasses. They have extremely long ears, a black tail and dark area on their ears.

Lower right: The Great egret likes to wade and look for small fish and other aquatic prey. It is a stunning all white bird with bright long yellow beak and black legs. In flight it carries its very long neck tightly bowed.

So, I've picked out my destination. Now I need to set my plan in action and decide on what equipment I want to take along. Some of the things I have in my camera bag are several digital cameras with lots of extra batteries, my battery charger and compact flash cards. I don't ever want to worry about running out of firepower or media. I have several lenses that I will use. Because of the distance I keep from many of the critters, I primarily use a 100-400mm lens with a 1.5 tele-converter. I also have a 100-300mm lens handy for the second camera and a wide-angle lens (18-24mm), so that I can get the broad picture ... the critter habitat as well.

For this trip I am going to pack my gear in a camera bag where I can get easy access at a moment's notice. I like that for this kind of trip rather than a backpack style bag. I want to be able to "reach and grab". I'll carry this bag open on the seat next to me held in place by the car seat belt. Just in case I stop quickly, I don't want the camera gear to end up on the floor.

A window pod can be a tremendous help for holding your camera steady. Just like a tripod, it has a quick release and can be fastened directly to the car window. If you don't have or don't want to get a window pod, then carry either a bean bag filled with rice (easy to replace the stuffing if you travel by plane to your destination) or some pipe insulation (available at the hardware store) to slip over the edge of the open window. Even though it doesn't steady the camera, it does make it easier to support the weight of the camera and lens and is more comfortable when hand holding the camera.

And for personal comfort, I always try to remember to take my warm gloves and a hat—not needed often in Southern California, but when I go up to Northern California to visit some of my favorite refuges, it's cold and I can be sitting for several hours at a time with the windows wide open.



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We spotted this Great Horned Owl watching dawn break just outside of the Sacramento

Oh, yes ... don't forget the alarm clock. Birds that fly during the day get up really early and birds that fly at night *tuck in* (land), usually, close to daybreak. If you are lucky you might just get to see some of these. I remember waiting at the edge of a refuge (some of them only open at daybreak) and watching the sky slowly begin to glow. As I could see more, I spotted a great horned owl sitting not far from where we were. While I was watching that one, another flew right over its head. They were both enjoying the sunrise with us. Nice!

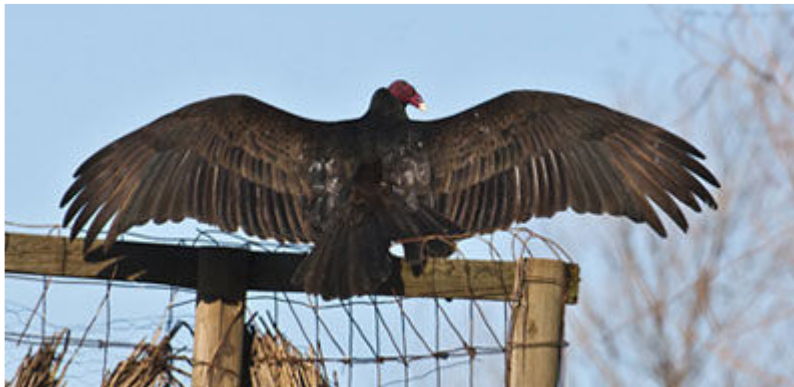
Here is a clue about watching and capturing those special bird

National Wildlife Refuge. We just had taken a couple of shots of the one at the tree top when another one flew by over head. It made a great start to our day's photographic adventures. The lesson here is to be prepared for the unexpected.

images....learn about the specific birds you might see. Pick up a couple of books to get you started--guides to identifying birds. If you have the time, study the species before your trip and then take the books along with you on the trip. They make great reading while you are waiting for the action to start.

When I see a bird I don't recognize, I use one of these books to identify it and give me a little information about their physical characteristics, when and where they like to "hang out", what they like to eat and what their voice or call is like. Those books are [The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Western North America](#) and [The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds \(Western edition\)](#). Depending on your destination, there are editions for other locations as well.

Many of the refuges have self guided auto tours on dirt roads. Go very slowly and observe the behavior of the birds. When you spot something interesting, pull over as far as you can to allow other vehicles to pass (most of the time there aren't many other cars). Sit and watch for a while and look for their behavior.



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Turkey vultures feed on carrion and are often seen flying along with wings in a dihedral (v shape) position looking rather tippy and unstable in flight. They are very large birds and dark in color with a small, naked red head. The sun had just burnt off a thick wet fog when we saw this turkey vulture spread its wings to "dry off". Turkey vultures are large birds with a wing span of around 5 feet. 7 inches.

Then, think about it from the bird's point of view. The first priority for most birds is safety, so don't look for the birds in really obvious places, although they are pretty easy to see in refuges. Their next priority is food and rest. So look in those areas where food, shelter and safety are available. Birds of prey, for example, aren't that concerned about safety, but are looking for food ... mice, small birds, etc. They sit up high so that they can see small movements. Waterfowl can get their food by diving or nibbling the tender green shoots in or near the water, but when danger

presents itself (such as a coyote) they rush to the deeper water and farther from shore locations. If danger comes from overhead, they rush into the reeds.

Here are some basic guidelines that will help you bring home some terrific images.

1. Be prepared and learn about the habits of the birds and animals you hope to see. Learn what attracts them to one location or another.
2. As you are driving, keep your eyes open. Look in the distance, but also look right along the edges of the road in the ditches or among closer reeds or at the top of telephone poles. Sometimes you get really interesting opportunities.
3. Birds can be spooked easily, so drive very slowly through the refuges.
4. Use your car as your bird blind. Get out of your car only in designated and permitted areas. Take advantage of places to stop and wait for the action to come to you.
5. Make as little noise as you can and sit quietly. If you are the driver and do decide to get out of the car, **PULL YOUR KEY OUT OF THE IGNITION**. I have blown off many opportunities just by not doing this and having the car *ding* to remind me to take my keys. It is more than frustrating. Another small tip: carry an extra set of keys on your person. Locking yourself out of the car is also very frustrating and more than a little embarrassing.
6. Keep your windows open and your camera ready to shoot--no lens cap, pre-focus and decide on your exposure settings ahead of time. Have your camera set on rapid fire so that you can follow any action.
7. Use a window pod if possible and if not, try using a sand bag, a bag of rice or pipe insulation to place on the edge of your window for more camera stability.
8. Take more than just one image. It is much better to take more and throw them out later than to miss a key shot. Sometimes just the direction or the look in the critter's eyes makes a big difference in the final image.
9. Anticipate the action, but be patient.
10. Keep your eyes and ears on alert. Sometimes there are other animals in the vicinity and they make wonderful additions to your portfolio of Wildlife Refuge images.



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Upper left: The Northern Harrier patrols fields, marshes and farmlands looking for small birds and mammals. They fly low pouncing on their prey from a low angle. These ground nesters can be identified by the white bar on the upper tail area.

Upper right: The American Bittern can be found in marshes hiding among the weeds and reeds. It really blends in but it has notable stripes on its neck and chest and frequently stands with its head pointing up. It feeds on fish and other aquatic animals. This is a good example of what you can find when you look in the less obvious places such as the small canals and ditches at the sides of the road.

Middle: Driving along a small country road we came to a small group of Sandhill cranes as they were doing a courtship dance. If I hadn't had my camera preset and ready I would have missed the action. As it was I only got about 10 shots off before they decided to fly to another field. Being prepared is essential!

Lower left: The Red-tailed hawk is one of the most commonly seen of all hawks. It perches on telephone poles, fence posts and high up in trees. This is a light juvenile that hasn't developed the color in its feathers yet, but when it matures the red tail will be striking.

Lower right: There are abundant deer in most California areas except the deserts. They forage both during the day and evening. My favorite deer shots are of behavior so take your time and watch them--here, the Pacific Black-tailed Deer. During the autumn rutting season the males are extremely aggressive in defending their mates during this time. Fawns are born during late April to mid-June.

For my California readers or those planning a trip to the state, I want to share a couple of locations with you that I have found wonderful in the past. I think you will enjoy these refuges.

In California's Central Valley, north of Bakersfield/Wasco area and south of Visalia are a couple of refuges. Kern National Wildlife Refuge has a wonderful auto tour. There are a number of stopping places and several hiking trails. Depending on the water levels, wildlife can be quite abundant. Since this is an area where hunting is permitted, the refuge is closed during hunting season on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Be sure to check with the park for dates when this happens. Nearby is the Pixley NWR and its grasslands boast of a population of Sand Hill Cranes during certain times of the migration.

Another remarkable refuge that I visit in the Central Valley is the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge just north of Los Banos. There are a number of roads within the refuge that provide great auto tour access and if you visit during the week, chances are that you will have most of the refuge entirely to yourself. It is rather amazing!



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The sunsets can be stunning at the Sacramento NWR and I always try to finish a busy day of shooting with a leisurely sunset drive around the refuge.

near a busy highway. The refuges are usually open until dusk and in the winter months the sunsets can be fantastic.

Also, it isn't a national wildlife preserve, but one of the California's state preserves that certainly deserves mention if you are in the area. Near Gridley is the Gray Lodge Wildlife Area. Gray Lodge is one of my favorite places with good walking areas and an excellent self guided auto tour and nature trail (wheelchair accessible). Again check with California Fish and

Further north, above Sacramento near the towns of Williams, Willow, Colusa and Marysville is an area that has a number of superb refuges and when the snow geese come in, many of the adjacent fields and lakes within the refuge are almost solid white with birds. Check out these refuges in the area: Sacramento NWR north of Williams and Delevan NWR just to the east of the Sacramento NWR. Near Colusa is the Colusa NWR--you'll be stunned to see this marvelous preserve right

Game for closures during hunting season. During the peak season they have said that frequently more than a million birds may be in temporary residence at any one time.

I hope you have enjoyed a few of my favorite images from the last several trips to some of the wildlife refuges in California. You too can have a wonderful time and come home with some terrific images.

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