

Site Guide Reprinted from the Central Valley Bird Club Bulletin

COSUMNES RIVER PRESERVE

By John Trochet

General information: Cosumnes River Preserve is a mosaic of wetlands, agricultural fields, grasslands, and the best remaining valley oak riparian woodland in California. The Preserve has 35,000 acres under management by The Nature Conservancy, Bureau of Land Management, Ducks Unlimited, County of Sacramento, and the California Departments of Fish and Game and Water Resources. It has been designated as a Globally Important Bird Area by the American Bird Conservancy and the National Audubon Society. Most of the Preserve is not open for public visitation. Opportunities for the public are described below.

Directions: From the junction of Interstate 5 and Twin Cities Road about 22 miles south of Sacramento, go east 1 mile on Twin Cities Road to Franklin Blvd., and then south on Franklin Blvd. 1.3 miles to the parking lot for **Willow Slough Trailhead** on the left, 0.2 mile more to the parking lot for **Lost Slough Boardwalk** on the right, and then 0.2 mile more to the Visitor Center on the left. The Visitor Center is open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, and sometimes on holidays. Directions for a **Driving Tour** are given in the next section.

The birding: The **Willow Slough Trail** is a sampler of many of the habitats on the preserve, and is worth a visit at all seasons. It is, in my opinion, seriously under-birded. The trail makes a short descent from the parking lot, and is thereafter nearly level for the whole of its 3.3 mile length. Immediately adjacent to the trail on the west is an area, lined with willows, cottonwoods, ashes and valley oaks, that is particularly good in migration and winter. A Prothonotary Warbler was seen here in 1998.

Another fruitful spot is "the tunnel," where the trail goes through a tidal swamp dominated by willows and buttonwillows. Waterthrushes have been seen here. This low spot frequently floods in winter and spring, so an alternative route is under construction. Here and elsewhere at Cosumnes, you will need insect repellent.

Just after emerging from the swamp there is a managed wetland consisting partly of open water, with cattails farther to the south. Birds to expect are herons and waterfowl, plus American Bittern, Virginia Rail, Sora, and Common Moorhen. Just beyond numbered posts 6 and 7 is a stretch of willow-dominated vegetation that regularly harbors good numbers of Empidonaces in migration. A short way beyond, you come abreast of the open water of Middle Slough. Look for Pied-billed Grebe, Green Heron, Wood Duck, and Belted Kingfisher.

The trail then mostly leaves behind wetlands in favor of wooded habitats. At least one Black-and-white Warbler has turned up here. Where the trail crosses under the railroad trestle, the EARLY morning walker might be lucky enough to see a river otter.

Beyond the trestle, between posts 15 and 18, is the area called "the point," which is often the most productive part of the trail. Here, all the regular resident and migrant woodland birds of the preserve might be encountered in season, including those that are

less common on this trail, such as resident Wrentit and Hutton's Vireos, and winter visitors like Winter Wren and Varied Thrush. A number of scarce migrants, such as Blackpoll Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler, and Summer Tanager have been seen here. The return route initially passes through oak savanna. Look here for raptors perched atop the scattered trees and for grassland birds in the ground cover.

Lost Slough Boardwalk is best visited in fall, winter, and spring, and a scope is desirable. The parking lot and trail are closed both early and late in the day, to allow the birds to get ready for each new day and to settle in each evening with a minimum of disturbance. Lost Slough is frequently chock full of waterfowl in season, and, depending on water levels, shorebirds may be numerous. The best shorebird find here was a ruff one spring. The wetlands are good for rails and American Bittern, and eyes should be cast about for raptors. More Merlins have turned up here than anywhere else on the Preserve.

The **Driving Tour** covers Franklin Blvd., Desmond Road, and Bruceville Road (see map), and is most rewarding in autumn, winter, and spring. The portion of Lost Slough opposite Desmond Road and the fields near the intersection of Desmond and Bruceville Roads are likely to have shorebirds. I strongly encourage birders to use their vehicle like a blind. Stay in your car, or get out on the side opposite the birds, closing the doors quietly. This route produces more birds at first light than later in the day, particularly for raptors, cranes, and shorebirds. In recent years, the corner of Bruceville and Desmond has been good for cranes. In most winters, Eurasian Wigeons may be found by careful search. Bewick's and Trumpeter Swans have also been reported here. In some years, hundreds of Tundra Swans, Canvasbacks, and Ring-necked Ducks may be seen here as well.

In late April or early May, a predawn stop opposite the gated driveway at 6500 Desmond Road may be rewarding. The wetlands beyond the gate are closed to visitation, but Least Bittern has been audible from this point a few times in recent years. As far as we know, it is a migrant in the Preserve.

Some of the resident birds to be found in the preserve are Red-shouldered Hawk, California Quail, Mourning Dove, Great Horned Owl, Nuttall's and Downy Woodpeckers, Black Phoebe, Yellow-billed Magpie, Oak Titmouse, Bushtit, White-breasted Nuthatch, Bewick's and House Wrens, Common Yellowthroat, Spotted and California Towhees, and American Goldfinch. In the breeding season, one may encounter Green Heron, Cooper's and Swainson's Hawks, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Western Wood-Pewee, Pacific-slope Flycatcher (perhaps the only valley floor site for nesting), Ash-throated Flycatcher, Black-headed and Blue Grosbeaks, Lazuli Bunting, and Bullock's Oriole. Regular winter visitors include Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Hermit Thrush, Orange-crowned and Yellow-rumped Warblers, Fox Sparrow (both Slate-colored and Sooty types are regular, and one to two Red Fox Sparrows are seen almost annually), Lincoln's, White-crowned, and Golden-crowned Sparrows. Spring and fall transients include Red-breasted Sapsucker, Olive-sided, Willow, Gray, Hammond's, and Dusky Flycatchers, Cassin's and Warbling Vireos, Swainson's Thrush, eight kinds of warblers, Western Tanager, and Purple Finch.

Depending upon season and water level, some additional species that might be expected are Eared Grebe, American White Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant, White-faced Ibis, Osprey, White-tailed Kite, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, plovers, American Avocet, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Long-billed Curlew, peeps, dowitchers, Common Snipe, Wilson's and Red-necked Phalaropes, three species of terns, swallows, Marsh Wren, Loggerhead Shrike, and blackbirds.

Some uncommon or rare birds that have been reported (not all yet reviewed by the local records committee) are Clark's Grebe, Garganey, Tufted Duck, Bald Eagle, Harlan's Hawk, Black Rail, Red Knot, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Townsend's Solitaire, Sage Thrasher, Bell's and Plumbeous Vireos, Swamp Sparrow, Bobolink, and Evening Grosbeak.

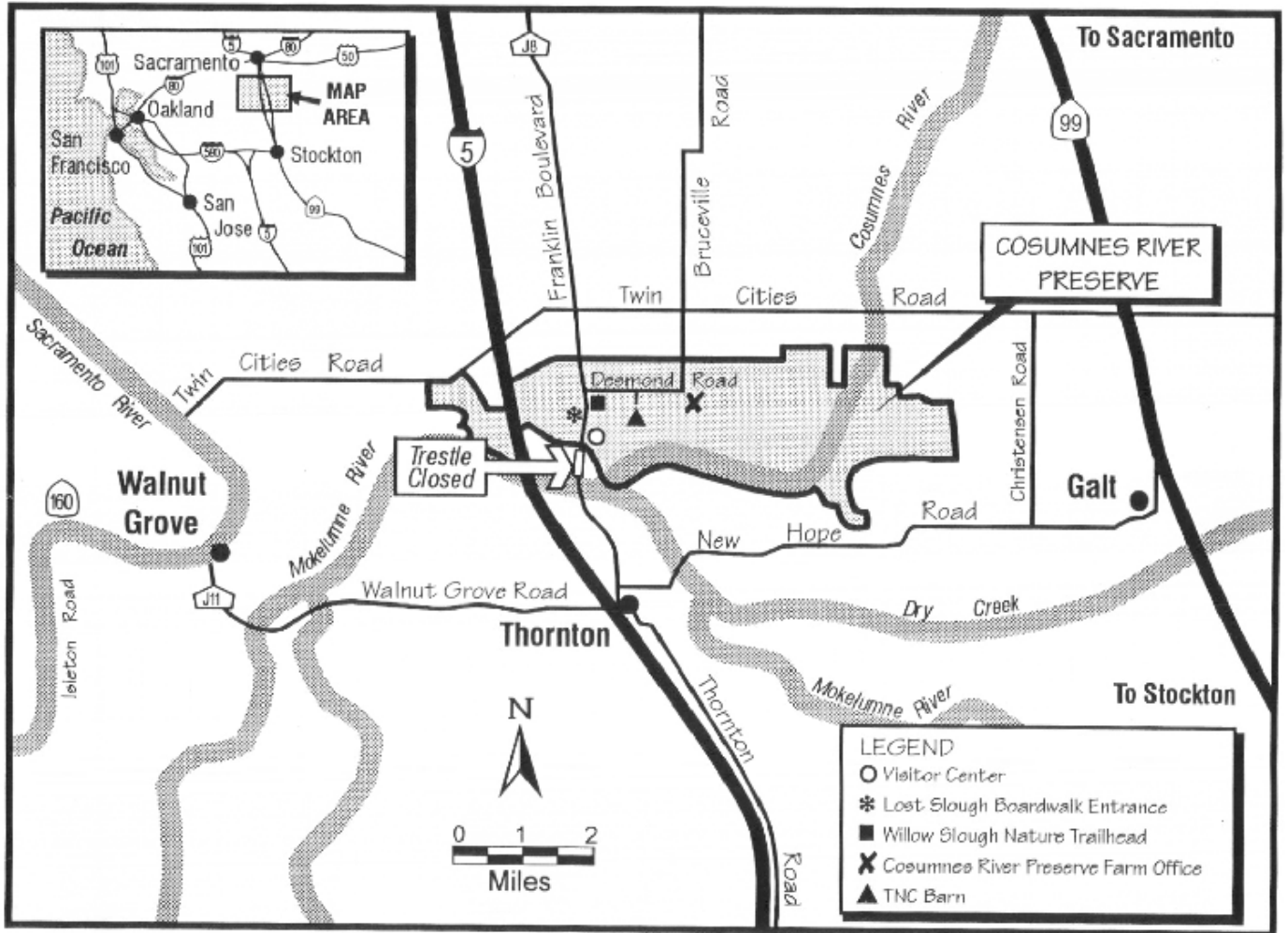
Surveys of the preserve are made monthly, and the surveys along the **Willow Slough Trail**, and through the **Tall Forest** are open to all. The Willow Slough survey usually takes place the second Saturday each month; the Tall Forest bird walk follows one week later, meeting at the corner of Bruceville and Desmond Roads about 30 minutes before dawn. You should call (916-684-2816) to make sure meeting time and place are unchanged, and that footwear requirements are acceptable. (I regularly lead folks into the forest in hip waders during minor flooding.) Be on time. I ordinarily do not wait beyond the appointed hour.

The Tall Forest is truly something special, an opinion that is not mine alone. I have been told it is the finest woodland habitat for breeding birds remaining on the floor of the Central Valley. It is a forest mainly of valley oaks, but portions of the canopy are dominated by Oregon ashes on the east side and Fremont cottonwoods on the south. Box elder forms a subcanopy in several places. Almost everywhere wild grape and poison oak climb into the crowns of trees, and the ground is covered thickly with both native and exotic blackberries, poison oak, beggars tick, wild rose, mint and saplings of the native trees. A few patches of exotic trees, mainly figs and pears, dot the forest.

The Willow Slough trail is well maintained, but in the Tall Forest the "trail" is a mix of well-trodden paths and difficult-to-follow animal traces. Crawling over fallen trees, going through blackberry patches, and ducking under low limbs is usual. It is worth all this to see a patch of woods bearing some resemblance to the "green hells" that valley riparian woodlands were thought to be by some mid-nineteenth century diarists. It is also worth it to see and hear 70 to 80 species on an average morning, and 90 to 100-plus on good days.

Additional information may be found on the Preserve's website, at www.cosumnes.org, or call 916-684-2816.

This article has been adapted in part from Birding Northern California, by John Kemper, copyright 1999 by Falcon Publishing Co., Inc.



LEGEND	
○	Visitor Center
*	Lost Slough Boardwalk Entrance
■	Willow Slough Nature Trailhead
×	Cosumnes River Preserve Farm Office
▲	TNC Barn

