

Site Guide

WESTERN KERN COUNTY

By Alison Sheehey

General Information: Birding in Kern County can be extremely rewarding. One of the most diverse counties in the state (as well as the third largest with an area of 8,172 mi²), Kern has five of California's six ecological bioregions. The county comprises the southernmost section of the San Joaquin Valley, the southern Sierra Nevada, the Tehachapi Mountains, and the westernmost Mohave Desert. The following are some of the better birding spots in the San Joaquin Valley and foothills, excluding the Bakersfield area. You can find more information about Kern County birds at www.NatureAli.com.

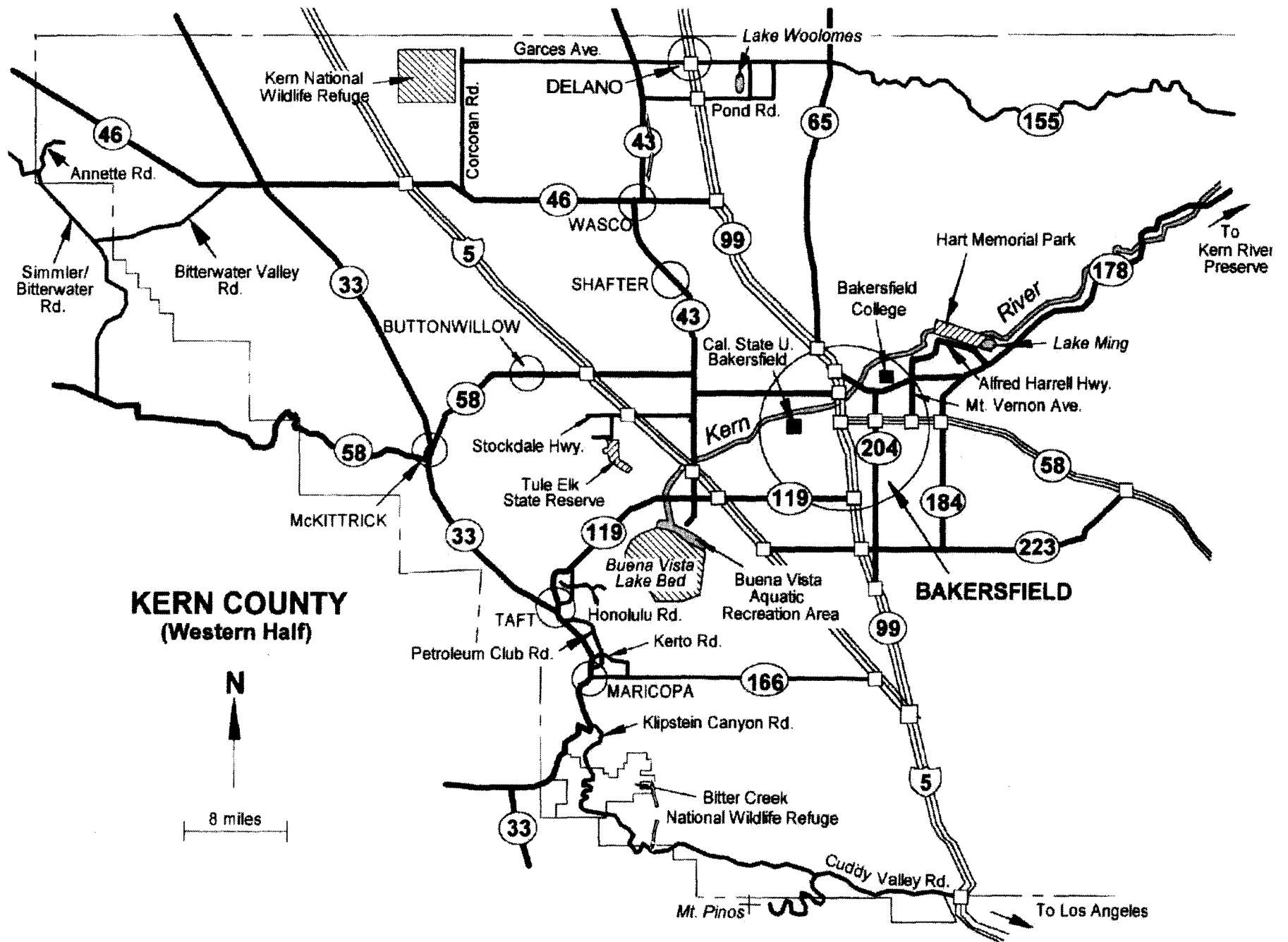
Unless otherwise directed, bird only from the road. Please respect private property. Let folks, especially vendors with whom you do business, know why you are visiting the area. Habitat destruction is often as economically harmful as eco-tourism is a major boon to many of the smaller Kern hamlets.

Kern National Wildlife Refuge — Kern NWR has a 6.5 mile auto tour route through the wetlands; most of the rest of refuge is open to hiking. The refuge is open 7 days a week from dawn to dusk. Hunting season closures to birders are Wednesdays and Saturdays from October through January. There is no restriction on access to the tour route during the remainder of the year. Birding is best from November to April. Summer birding is also rewarding, although extreme temperatures can be uncomfortable. Waterfowl species to look for include Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Cinnamon and Blue-winged teal, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Redhead, and Canvasback. Refuge staff are working hard to keep many ponds shallow for shorebirds. White-faced Ibis and Great Blue Heron nest on the refuge. Watch for Peregrine Falcon and Bald Eagle in winter, and Yellow-headed and Tricolored blackbirds throughout the year.

Directions: From Interstate 5 take Highway 46 east for five miles to Corcoran Road. Turn left (north) on Corcoran Road and drive 10.6 miles until you reach the refuge entrance, on the left side of the road at the intersection with Highway 155 (Garces Highway). If you are coming from Highway 99, exit at the Garces Highway and drive west for 19 miles to the refuge entrance. For information on riparian tour reservations contact Dave Hardt, Refuge Manager (e-mail: dave_hardt@fws.gov; phone [661] 725-2767).

Annette area — This northwestern grassland offers unique birding opportunities for county listers. This is the only area where Yellow-billed Magpie has occurred in the county. In the winter the area offers Rough-legged Hawk and Vesper Sparrow. In summer the area is visited by Cassin's Kingbird, Western Kingbird, and Grasshopper Sparrow.

Directions: From Highway 46, 3 miles west from the intersection with



Highway 33, take Bitterwater Valley Road 12 miles southwest. Turn right on Simmler/Bitterwater Road (you are in San Luis Obispo County at this point) and drive 7.5 miles, then turn right on the unmarked Annette Road, back into Kern County. There is an abandoned building at the intersection signed Greensberg General Store. Annette Road continues as a no-outlet road to the intersection with Davis Road. Davis Road offers two more miles of Kern County birding before reaching the county line.

Santa Maria Valley/McKittrick — There is good birding along Highway 58 from the town of McKittrick to the Kern County line. This quiet drive through upland scrub, savanna, and oak woodland habitats gives rise to an interesting assortment of birds. Find Phainopepla in the oak/juniper woodland and a significant number of wintering raptors in the grassland. Along the road you should see Loggerhead Shrike, White-tailed Kite, and Western Meadowlark. East of this area is the oil town of McKittrick. Just south of town along Highway 33, tar seeps catch significant numbers of wildlife; bones of recent victims are readily seen. Highway 58 west of the county line leads to the Carrizo Plain, over 100,000 acres of mostly undisturbed valley habitat.

Tule Elk State Reserve — The reserve is located at the northern edge of the mouth of the Kern River. There is an entrance fee (\$3 on the honor system). The elevated elk-viewing area is also good for birdwatching, as an artificially-watered marsh is just beyond the fence. Yellow-headed, Tricolored, Red-winged and Brewer's blackbirds can be seen here. House, Bewick's and Marsh wrens, as well as rails, inhabit the marsh. Peregrine and Prairie Falcon have been seen over nearby alfalfa fields. Swainson's Hawk successfully nested here in 2002 for the first documented Kern County nesting in many years.

Directions: From Interstate 5 take the Stockdale Highway exit and go west approximately 3 miles to Morris Road, turn left, and then turn right on Station Road. Behind-the-scenes tours of the reserve can be arranged. For more information, or to arrange a tour, call (661) 764-6881.

Buena Vista Aquatic Recreation Area — The 34,000-acre Buena Vista Lake was historically home to thousands of nesting and wintering waterfowl and pelicaniforms. In 1953, Lake Isabella Dam was completed, destroying the last vestiges of this major southern valley nesting habitat. In 1973, an artificial lake was created by Kern County Parks and Recreation to serve boaters and fishermen. Many of the former nesting birds returned as wintering populations. During winter, Lake Evans, at the west end of the recreation area, is the best place in the county to have close encounters with American White Pelican. Because of the mild winter climate in this area, seemingly out-of-season breeding may be encountered. On the 1992 Buena Vista Christmas Bird Count I found Western and Clark's grebes sporting nestlings upon their backs and Mourning Dove nesting. Other wintering species of note, usually seen on the larger lake present at the site, Lake Webb, include: Double-crested Cormorant, Great Egret, Green Heron,

Osprey, Cinnamon Teal, Green-winged Teal, Bufflehead, Common Merganser, Wilson's Snipe, thousands of gulls, and Great-Horned Owl. Make sure you let the park staff know why you are there, so the park administration will get the message that birding creates revenue (there is an entrance fee of \$5 for 1-10 people in a vehicle).

Directions: From Interstate 5 take the Taft Highway 119 exit and drive west toward Taft. Turn left (south) at Highway 43 (Enos Lane) and drive approximately 2 miles south to the entrance to the recreation area.

Taft/Maricopa area — This is LeConte's Thrasher country. Interspersed throughout the saltbush scrub this elusive thrasher can be found early in the morning singing from the bush tops. The males are most vocal in spring. Several good spots to find the birds are along Kerto Road, Petroleum Club Road, and Honolulu Road off of Airport Road. The California Thrasher is also in this area and I have seen some very strange thrashers here (hybrids?). Sage Sparrow is found here as well. During winter, Peregrine Falcon, Ferruginous and Rough-legged hawks soar above the valleys. Burrowing Owl, Golden Eagle, American Kestrel, and Prairie Falcon may be observed all year. Greater Roadrunner is ubiquitous.

Directions: If you are approaching Taft from the north on Highway 33, proceed through the town to the intersection with Highway 119 and turn left. Then turn right on Airport Road. If coming from Interstate 5, drive 18 miles to Taft on Highway 119 and turn left on Airport Road before entering town. Once on Airport Road, drive to the summit of the hill and turn onto Honolulu Road. Drive to the end of the paved road and turn around, checking for thrashers along the road. To get to Petroleum Club Road, go back to Taft and take Highway 119/33 south towards Maricopa. Turn left onto Petroleum Club Road (across from a wooden derrick) and stop at washes to listen for singing thrashers. Recently, a good area in which to look for thrashers has been along Kerto Road, in particular, the site of the Lakeview Gusher. Take Highway 166 to Maricopa from Highway 99 or Interstate 5, turn right on Highway 33, and drive 1.3 miles to Kerto Road. Turn right. At the intersection of Kerto and Petroleum Club roads, park along the road. Walk up the wash to the northeast towards the railroad tracks, watching for thrashers in the bushes ahead of you. The best time to see LeConte's Thrasher is in April, when males are singing.

Wind Wolves Preserve — Private funding purchased this 100,000 acre ranch between Maricopa and the Grapevine. A major foraging area for California Condor, it also supports raptors and many upland passerine species. A wide variety of habitats include lowland scrub and grassland at lower elevations, leading all the way to some conifers at the apex of this magical preserve.

Directions: Take Highway 166 west from Highway 99 or Interstate 5 to Landslide Lease. The Wildlands Conservancy education program extends visits to thousands of school children every year. Visits are by appointment only. Contact David or Sheryl Clendenen at (661) 858-1115.