

## Site Guide Reprinted from the Central Valley Bird Club Bulletin

### YOLO FARMLANDS

*By John Kemper*

**General Information:** Many rural areas in Northern California offer good birding on farmlands, and Yolo County is no exception. One thing to note in this particular region is that many of the crops are low-growing, and offer attractive foraging opportunities for Swainson's Hawk, listed as a Threatened species by the California Department of Fish and Game.

**Directions:** For general birding loop, from I-505, take exit for Road 29A and go east to Road 99. Go north on Road 99 to Road 27, and return west, to I-505. Roads 95 and 98 offer alternate connecting routes. See site descriptions below for other directions.

**The birding:** Roads 27, 29, 29A, 31, 95, 98, 99, and 102 (see map) all offer rural birding opportunities. However, Roads 31, 98, and 102 carry fairly heavy traffic, so the other roads are quieter, with better opportunities to see birds. Appropriate places to pull off and stop safely are scarce, so great care is needed when stopping.

**Swainson's Hawks** have been extirpated in much of their former range in California. They need nesting sites in tall trees, usually in riparian areas, and foraging territories nearby with low-growing plants. Their breeding range in California is now concentrated in the Central Valley, with disjunct populations in the northeastern part of the state, and in Inyo and Mono counties. In summer they are easy to find in Yolo County. In winter, almost the entire population migrates to Mexico and South America, except for a small group that has wintered in the Delta in recent years.

The lower Sacramento Valley is one of the major places in the U. S. for wintering Red-tailed Hawks, American Kestrels, and Western Meadowlarks, as shown by Audubon Christmas Bird Count records. White-tailed Kites are frequently seen, and Northern Harriers appear to be everywhere. A few Ferruginous Hawks, Rough-legged Hawks, Merlins, and Prairie and Peregrine falcons turn up every winter, although they are rare. There are also huge mixed flocks of blackbirds in winter, occasionally including Tricolored Blackbirds. Great and Snowy egrets are common residents, and the number of Cattle Egrets seems to be increasing. Also, these rural roads are good places to see Loggerhead Shrikes. Flocks of Horned Larks and American Pipits forage in the fields in winter, and Savannah and White-crowned sparrows are common in the weedy fencerows.

A place where **Mountain Plovers** have been seen (December to February) is near the intersection of Road 102 and Road 16. One must park well off the road (the traffic on Road 102 is fast and heavy) and scan the plowed fields, looking for clods of dirt that move. A scope is helpful. However, many people have gone to this location and failed to see the plovers, since they move around a lot, and may be out in the center of a field. It pays to search all the rural roads in this vicinity.

Populations of Mountain Plovers have seriously declined in the last 25 years, and the bird has been proposed for listing as a Threatened or Endangered Species. It is believed that

about 80 percent of the population spends the winter in California, with nearly a quarter of them in the Central Valley. In a census taken in 1998, 2,663 birds were counted, with the two largest flocks containing about 250 birds each. One of these flocks was found in the part of Yolo County described in this section; the other one was in the Imperial Valley.

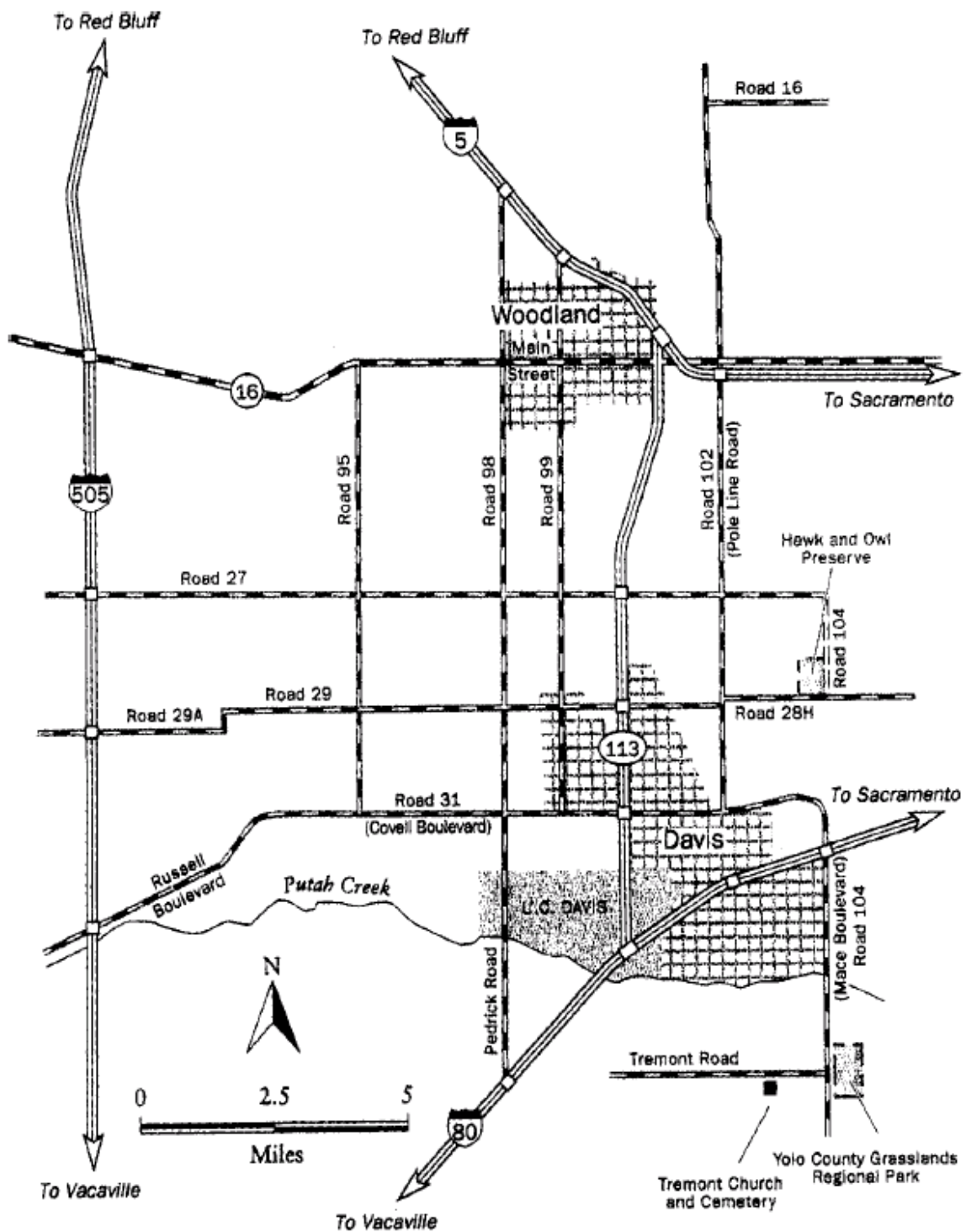
Short-eared Owls can often be seen at dusk in winter at the **Hawk and Owl Preserve**, managed cooperatively by the Hunt-Wesson Cannery and Yolo Audubon Society. The preserve is on the north side of Road 28H, 2 miles east of Road 102, at the junction of Roads 28H and 104. There are a couple of places where it is possible to park well off Road 28H, which gets lots of traffic, or along Road 104, which is gravel and less traveled than Road 28H. The Hawk and Owl

Preserve is a large grassy area with many sprinkler heads, where the Hunt-Wesson Cannery disposes of its waste water. The water causes the grass to grow, which attracts rodents, and the rodents attract raptors, especially White-tailed Kites, Northern Harriers, and Barn and Short-eared owls. In winter, just after sunset, the owls can often be seen flying about like huge moths. There is also a large population of Ring-necked Pheasants at the preserve, and in the surrounding region. Since the Yolo County Landfill is right next door, there are many gulls in this vicinity, mostly Ring-billed, California and Herring gulls. Look for rarer species such as Thayer's, Glaucous-winged, Glaucous, and Western gulls in winter.

At the time of this writing, the Hunt-Wesson Cannery has been closed. The future of the Hawk and Owl Preserve depends on actions taken by subsequent owners of the property.

Burrowing Owls can often be seen at **Yolo County Grasslands Regional Park**. From the junction of I-80 and Mace Boulevard east of Davis, go south on Mace Boulevard (which becomes Road 104) 3.8 miles to the park entrance on the left (east). Turn into the park and go 0.2 mile, to a sign which says "Home of the Sacramento Valley Soaring Society-- Burrowing Owl Habitat -- Do Not Disturb." (No fee, chemical toilet). Park near the sign and look about 100 to 150 yards to the northeast where there is a patch of disturbed earth surrounded by mown grass. There are usually a couple of Burrowing Owls, plus many ground squirrels, near the disturbed earth. They are more likely to be visible in the early morning or late afternoon, but sometimes are out in the middle of the day. There are more Burrowing Owls in the surrounding fields but they are harder to see because of the tall grasses and weeds. Tremont Road, which is directly opposite the entrance to the regional park, leads to the **Tremont Church and Cemetery**, 0.5 mile, on the left. Barn Owls sometimes roost in the dense cypress trees in the cemetery. Horned Larks are in the adjoining fields in winter. **Yellow-billed Magpie** is one of the few true endemic birds in California, and the Central Valley is their stronghold. In driving the rural roads of Yolo County you are virtually certain to encounter them. In particular, look along Road 98 both north and south of Road 31 for a mile or two. While traveling the roads, watch for swallows in spring and summer, especially Tree, Northern Rough-winged, Barn, and Cliff swallows.

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## Yolo Farmlands

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