

Site Guide Reprinted from the Central Valley Bird Club Bulletin

BIDWELL PARK, CHICO

By John Kemper and Tim Manolis

General information: Bidwell Park is a huge city park of 3,600 acres, extending along Big Chico Creek for 10 miles from the heart of the city of Chico into the foothills. It has traditional city park areas, swimming beaches, a golf course, a nature trail, and miles of riparian habitat.

Directions: From the junction of California Hwy. 99 and California Hwy. 32 in Chico, go east on Hwy. 32 for 0.1 mile and turn left on Fir Street. Follow signs for "Bidwell Park Info Center." As you make the turn on Fir Street it becomes East Eighth Street. Go 0.8 mile on East Eighth Street to Bidwell Park Information Center and Chico Creek Nature Center.

The birding: The place to begin is at the **Bidwell Park Information Center** (closed Mondays). From there, if you come back out to East Eighth Street, return 0.1 mile toward Chico, and reenter the park, you will come to the **Cedar Grove Nature Trail**, which is also called the **World of Trees Nature Trail**. (Restrooms are available inside the nature center, and also near the nature trail about 150 yards west of the parking lot.) The World of Trees Nature Trail is about 0.5 mile round trip and is barrier free. Resident birds to expect here are Red-shouldered Hawk (uncommon); Anna's Hummingbird; Acorn and Nuttall's woodpeckers; Hutton's Vireo (uncommon); Western Scrub-Jay; Oak Titmouse; Bushtit; Spotted and California towhees; and House Finch. Rufous Hummingbird and Wilson's Warbler are likely in migration.

To get to the opposite side of Big Chico Creek, starting from the World of Trees Nature Trail, take South Park Drive (one way) to Manzanita Avenue, turn left to cross the creek, immediately turn left again on Vallombrosa Avenue, and after 0.3 mile turn left again onto **North Park Drive** (one way). This is an area of huge valley oaks and sycamores (and lots of poison oak). There are parking spots along the road, picnic tables, and trails leading through the woods. Look for Western Wood-Pewee, House Wren, Black-headed Grosbeak, and Bullock's Oriole in spring and summer, and for Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Fox, Lincoln's, Golden-crowned, and White-crowned sparrows in winter. Residents are Great Horned Owl, Downy Woodpecker (uncommon), White-breasted Nuthatch, Bewick's Wren, Song Sparrow, Brown-headed Cowbird, and American and Lesser goldfinches.

To get to **Upper Bidwell Park**, follow South Park Drive to Manzanita Avenue as described above, go northwest about 0.6 mile to Wildwood Avenue, go 0.3 mile and turn right onto Upper Park Road. It is about 1.3 miles to a gate (closed on Sundays and Mondays, but you can walk on the road any day) and a parking lot near **Horseshoe Lake** (chemical toilets). There may be waterfowl (including domestic stock) on the lake, but in the general area there also may be resident California Quail, Black Phoebe, Yellow-billed Magpie, Western Bluebird, Phainopepla, Rufous-crowned and Lark sparrows, and Western Meadowlark. Rufous-crowned Sparrows are best looked for in rocky areas with scattered brush and trees along the bluffs north of the lake. Common summer visitors are Tree, Barn, and Cliff swallows, and Western Kingbird. Watch for Green Heron around the lake or in the nearby creek during spring and summer.

Just past the gate, the road is very close to Big Chico Creek. At 0.4 mile from the gate, the **Yahi Trail** begins. This trail follows the creek through the Upper Park. Another 0.2 mile along the road brings you to parking lot F. **Alligator Hole**, a favorite swimming spot, is just upstream from here. From here to parking lot I (another 0.6 mile by road), a hike along the Yahi Trail is recommended. Some of the best riparian growth in the Upper Park lines the creek here, including sycamores, willows, alders, Oregon ash, and dense tangles of wild grape. Yellow-breasted Chat and Lazuli Bunting sing here in the summer (as well as elsewhere in the Upper Park along the creek). Watch for Purple Finch and Hermit Thrush in winter, and Cedar Waxwing and Western Tanager in the grapes in the fall. Band-tailed Pigeons might be seen flying overhead at any season. Other riparian species to be seen here are those described above for the Lower Park. A Gray Catbird was reported seen in a large grape tangle near parking lot I in fall 1998.

Above parking lot I (e. g., at **Bear Hole**, .4 mile up the road) riparian growth along Big Chico Creek more-or-less disappears as the creek cuts a spectacular, narrow gorge through a formation of black basalt. Canyon Wren, Rock Wren, and Rufous-crowned Sparrow should be looked for among the rock formations here, as well as at **Salmon Hole** (.6 mile by road) and **Devil's Kitchen** (another .6 mile). Northern Pygmy-Owl is perhaps best sought in wooded areas along the road and near parking lots in this stretch of the park. A Black Rail was recently detected calling in a spring seep along the road near parking lot L. The habitat here is fragile and unique, and Black Rail is a state-listed threatened species, so please refrain from trampling the habitat and disturbing potential breeding birds by playing taped calls.

The dirt road steadily deteriorates in quality as one climbs through the park, but is passable in a passenger car if driven carefully. At the end of the road (1.3 miles from parking lot O at Devil's Kitchen; 4.1 miles from the gate at Horseshoe Lake), Big Chico Creek is above the narrow gorge and is once again close by and readily accessible. Violet-green Swallows feed over the creek in summer. Lush riparian growth reappears here, as do Yellow-breasted Chats and Lazuli Buntings. Yellow Warbler may be heard singing here in summer. The surrounding area is clothed in a dense, tall forest dominated by oaks. This is a good area for Hutton's Vireo. You are almost up into the pine belt at road's end (the highest elevation in the park, near here, is 1520 ft.). On a recent mid-summer visit, Black-throated Gray Warbler and Western Tanager were noted at the turn-around point. American Dippers are resident along the creek, although perhaps a bit more numerous in winter. They might be seen or heard anywhere from Alligator Hole on up.

During spring and fall migration, all the typical western migrants (warblers, vireos, flycatchers, etc.) may be found in the Upper Park, especially in riparian areas. For the adventuresome and those with time to explore this vast "city" park, there are hiking trails along both north and south rims of the canyon. The **North Rim Trail** is more accessible and better developed. Exploring the **South Rim** may require a bit more "bushwhacking," but has produced some interesting observations in recent years (e.g., a Williamson's Sapsucker on the 1994 Chico Christmas Bird Count).

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