

# Site Guide

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## Fresno-Clovis Regional Water Reclamation Facility, Fresno County

*By Jeff N. Davis*

### **Description of Area:**

With more than 75 “freshwater” ponds, this site (also known as the “Fresno Wastewater Treatment Plant” and “Fresno Sewage Ponds”) ranks among the federal wildlife refuges and state wildlife areas in importance to waterbirds in the Central Valley. It hosts more than 10,000 shorebirds on peak days during migration and more than 5000 waterfowl during most of the year.

In fall, the ponds fill with molting Northern Shovelers—at times more than 20,000 birds—and the sky flickers with industrious Tree Swallows, which sometimes even outnumber the shovelers. In fact, the site, with its rich dipteran buffet, is a major staging area for post-breeding Tree Swallows. One morning in early August I estimated 30,000 swallows swooping over ponds and perching on power lines.

The dry uplands sustain one of the largest Burrowing Owl populations remaining in Fresno County (up to 10 pairs), and several ponds with emergent vegetation provide essential cover for one of the only breeding populations of Eared Grebes in the county.

### **How to Get There:**

Important: You must call the facility’s administrators to request permission to bird the site at least one day in advance of your visit: (559) 621-5100.

From Highway 41 on the south side of Fresno, take the Jensen Avenue exit. Go west on Jensen Avenue about 6 miles to the facility’s main entrance (if on a weekday). At the gate, pick up the phone and tell the receptionist who you are and that you called previously. You will be asked to sign a liability waiver in the administration building (to your right).

Drive southwest from here, through the maze of buildings, to any of several levees from which you can view the ponds. A smaller set of ponds are south of North Avenue (see map).

If visiting on the weekend, you’ll be asked to arrive via the North Avenue gate, which is reached by heading south 1 mile from Jensen Avenue on Cornelia Avenue, then west on North Avenue about 0.5 miles, and finally north on the entrance road to the gate. Identify yourself on the phone (as above) and proceed to the “Headworks,” which is the large building up and to the left, to sign the waiver.

### **Birding the Site:**

The site offers excellent birding year round, but spring (early April to mid-May) and fall (late July to mid-October) are the best seasons for numbers and variety. Expect to spend at least 3-4 hours here if you want to drive the entire levee system, carefully scoping each pond along the way. The majority of the ponds are on the north side of North Avenue, and this is where you'll want to spend most of your time. Watch the transmission towers for Peregrine Falcons and other raptors, primarily in fall and winter, and the canals for Blue Grosbeaks in spring and summer. Look for Burrowing Owls along the North Avenue fences that separate the northern and southern ponds.

Most ponds are drained and filled frequently, such that dabbling ducks, diving ducks, and shorebirds can always find suitable habitat. But the varying water levels mean that a pond with juicy mudflats one week may be bone-dry the next week. Some of the southernmost ponds, those along Cenral Avenue, are kept full year round. These support stands of cattails, bulrushes, and smartweed, which make good cover for nesting ducks, grebes, coots, and icterids including Yellow-headed Blackbird and Great-tailed Grackle.

As this site is not generally open to the public, and we are essentially guests of the facility's managers, please be especially courteous, drive slowly and cautiously, and always park in a way that allows another vehicle to pass you.

### **Target Birds:**

**Year-round:** Eared Grebe, Cattle Egret, White-faced Ibis, Burrowing Owl, and Loggerhead Shrike.

**Winter:** Peregrine Falcon, Mew Gull, and Thayer's Gull.

**Summer:** Swainson's Hawk, Blue Grosbeak, and Yellow-headed Blackbird.

**Migrant:** Blue-winged Teal, Greater Scaup, Lesser Yellowlegs, Willet, Whimbrel, Marbled Godwit, Baird's Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher, Red-necked and Wilson's phalaropes, and Black Tern.

**Rarities:** "Harlan's" Hawk, Pacific Golden-Plover, Red Knot, Sanderling, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Ruff, and Bank Swallow.

### **Facilities:**

There are restroom facilities in Headworks and some of the other buildings. Ask any on-site worker for directions to the nearest one. The nearest gas station and mini-mart are on Jensen Ave near Hwy 41. The nearest hotels and restaurants are along the Hwy 41/Hwy 99 corridor.

A trip to the "sewage ponds" can be combined with one to the nearby Mendota Wildlife Area for a full day of birding.

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