

Site Guide Reprinted from the Central Valley Bird Club Bulletin

BIRDING IN KINGS COUNTY

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General Information: Kings County, a largely unknown birding destination for most California birders, is in the southwestern part of the San Joaquin Valley. Most of the county occupies the flat valley floor with some rolling hills along the western border. The County's primary industry is agriculture. The flat land in the south and west is under cultivation for row crops like cotton, wheat and alfalfa; that in the north and northeast has some orchards and a number of dairies. When there is ample water, the County is great for shorebirds and waterfowl, and interesting gulls seem to turn up regularly. Water level is also key to some roads, as the dirt roads turn to mush and the paved ones flood out in wet winters. If a road is muddy, my advice would be to go gently or not at all. There are three main **places to stay** in motels/hotels in Kings County: the county seat, Hanford, in the northeast, has several different hotels; the second largest city, Corcoran, in the southeast, has two; and Kettleman Junction, at Highways 5 and 41, has two as well.

The birding: I have arranged this guide in a clockwise fashion, beginning in the northeast. Note that I have omitted several hotspots that are on private property. **OBEY ALL SIGNS.** Although this is a relatively compact county, there are long stretches of road without gas or services, particularly in the southern half of the county, so **check those gauges**, and it is always a good idea to **bring lots of water**.

NORTHEAST

Burris Park (Off Clinton just W of 6th Ave.) This county park is a fine stand of mature deciduous, live oak and conifer trees. It is the best spot in the county for Acorn and Nuttall's woodpeckers, Bullock's Oriole, Bushtit, Wood Duck (summer), Belted Kingfisher, Northern Flicker, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Ash-throated Flycatcher. Red-tailed and Red-shouldered hawks nest here. It is also great for warblers (Orange-crowned, Nashville, Yellow, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Gray, Townsend's, Wilson's and Hermit) at the appropriate season. Other birds regularly found here in season include Lesser Goldfinch, House Wren, Western Tanager and Black-headed Grosbeak. Listen along the south edge of the park for California Quail. The park is closed from November to March; if you find the gate closed, you can bird the edges. Burris Park and all other Kings County parks are closed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

King's Row (W off 6th Ave ½ mile south of Clinton.) This seemingly abandoned road is the old entrance to Burris Park, and has many of the same birds. It is the best spot in the county for Black Phoebe, Oak Titmouse, California Quail, House Wren, Western Scrub Jay, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Fox Sparrow, Golden-crowned Sparrow, Spotted and California towhees. Lawrence's Goldfinch (rare) has been found here in May.

7th Avenue and Iona Ponds: (South of Houston Avenue). Winter can bring Ring-billed Gull and waterfowl in the hundreds. I had a Franklin's Gull here in 1997. Spring brings a smattering of shorebirds, plus Blue Grosbeak and Yellow-headed Blackbird. This is a good spot for some of the harder-to-find waterfowl such as Blue-winged Teal, Canada Goose and

American Wigeon. Black-necked Stilt and American Avocet nest here when there is water present, as do Gadwall, Ruddy Duck and Blue Grosbeak. A scope is helpful.

Nevada Avenue Ponds, also known as **Corcoran Reservoir** or the **Corcoran Irrigation District (CID)**: (North of Nevada between 6th and 4th) This is the most reliable spot in the county for Western and Clark's grebes, which nest here when water levels are right. It is also good for Gadwall and Cattle Egret (watch for flyovers, especially early in the morning), and I had a Common Loon here one May. A scope is key, as these ponds are huge. One of the most productive spots is the northernmost area of the ponds, accessible from 6th Avenue (park along the road and walk up to the dike). Gulls, terns, American White Pelican (sometimes), Cinnamon Teal (and the occasional Blue-winged Teal), Double-crested Cormorant and hundreds of American Coot abound in summer, and shorebirds are around in numbers if the water level is right. Horned Lark sing from the fields and fences along 6th Avenue. The land birding can also be very good, particularly to the east of the ponds along Nevada Avenue, where White-tailed Kite, Northern Harrier, and Loggerhead Shrike hunt in the grasslands, and Lincoln's Sparrow can be found. The ponds are also great for swallows.

SOUTHEAST

6th Avenue, also known as **Dairy Avenue**: (South of Corcoran). Depending on water levels, look for waterfowl in winter. Check the telephone poles for raptors, including Ferruginous Hawk (winter), Swainson's Hawk (summer) and Peregrine Falcon. This road is great when the agricultural fields are flooded, as the fields teem with shorebirds. Watch for American White Pelican overhead, and herons and egrets along the levees. About 2.5 miles south of Virginia Road (the road to Alpaugh), you can exit the road and drive on the levee parallel to the road to the west; this gives you sight access to a major holding pond, which, when it has water, has birds including Double-crested Cormorant and Forster's and Caspian terns, and the occasional Sandhill Crane.

Homeland Canal: At the intersection of 6th Avenue and the Homeland Canal, in dry weather you can drive west on the levee north of the Homeland Canal. A Brown Pelican (second county record) spent lots of time at this very intersection during the winter of 1998-99, so keep your eyes open. A several-mile drive up the levee road will yield gulls, herons and egrets, terns, Double-crested Cormorant, coots and some waterfowl. I found the county's first record of Glaucous-winged Gull along this levee in March 1999. At the intersection of the canal and 10th Ave. is the South Wilbur Flood Area, a massive water holding basin that is very productive for grebes, herons, ducks, Double-crested Cormorant (nesting in the trees), swallows (spring-summer-fall), American White Pelican, American Coot, shorebirds, gulls and terns.

10th Avenue: (North of Utica Avenue). This road, mostly dirt, traverses many fields which are often flooded in fall, winter and spring, with good waterfowl and shorebirds. The flooded fields on either side have yielded such interesting birds as Pectoral Sandpiper, Burrowing Owl, and Sabine's Gull (September 1997). Caspian Tern and interesting gulls (including sometimes Herring Gull) are along the canals.

Utica Avenue: (Exits off Highway 5 and runs east from there almost to the Tulare County line, about 19 miles.) Utica can be feast or famine, depending on water levels. It offers one of

the easiest, most accessible ways to see flooded agricultural fields and ponds, and there is a ditch along the south side of the road that is excellent for shorebirds in season. Driving Utica at night is a good way to catch tantalizing glimpses of Short-eared Owl as they fly through your headlights. Areas marked *Private Property* are often patrolled by people who are serious about the idea of private property, so obey all signs.

SOUTHWEST

Tar Canyon Road: This used to be the only public access to the foothills that was worth birding, but the county officially abandoned it in early 1998 and it is now blocked by a locked gate. A biker, or an intrepid hiker (it is about 6.2 miles to the end of where you used to be able to drive), would pick up Horned Lark, Says Phoebe (winter and nesting), California Towhee, and Lesser Goldfinch. At the higher reaches (mile 6.0), there are nesting Bullock's Oriole, Brewer's Blackbird, Loggerhead Shrike and Western Kingbird. Rock and Canyon wrens, both rare in the county, have been found here with some regularity (mile 5.6 at the rocky outcropping). The road is also a sparrow paradise in season. Grasshopper (sings from the hillside above the second gate in spring), Lark, Vesper, Rufous-crowned, Sage sparrows and more, though by the winter White-crowned Sparrow predominates. Roadrunner and Wrentit call in the spring from the upper canyons, along with California Thrasher. In the hills, watch for Prairie Falcon and Kestrel, in the flats watch for other raptors such as Ferruginous Hawk (winter) and Swainson's Hawk (spring and fall).

Highway 41 from Kettleman City to Stratford: This is a trafficky stretch, but you can see herons, egrets, Caspian and Forster's terns, coots, and the occasional duck in the canal to the right of the road as you go north. Double-crested Cormorant is around, and from spring to fall it is tough to miss Cliff Swallow.

NORTHWEST

Kent Avenue Ponds: (At the northwest corner of Highway 41 and Kent Avenue, extending for perhaps a mile north along the highway.) The best pond is the southernmost one, which also has a road around it (check the status of the mud before you attempt this -- even if everything looks dry, the section from the paved road up onto the levee has swallowed more than one birder's car -- walk it first). This is the best accessible place in the county for Eared Grebe (lots in winter), Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Wilson's Phalarope and Red-necked Phalarope (migration). It is decent for Black Tern and Bonaparte's Gull, occasionally has Yellow-headed Blackbird, and is the best spot accessible to the public for shorebirds such as Lesser Yellowlegs, Western Sandpiper and Dunlin. The ponds further north are generally less productive as they are deeper, but grebes and Ruddy Duck abound in season.

Grangeville Boulevard: (Goes west from Highway 41 and then turns north and northwest past the entrance to the Lemoore Naval Air Station.) There are several ponds on the left (heading west) that are great for Marsh Wren, American Coot, ducks and Lincoln's Sparrow. **BE CAREFUL PARKING HERE.** There is heavy traffic, the best birding spots are just around blind corners, and the shoulder is SOFT. It is best to drive further on to hard ground on a straight-away, and then walk back. The dairies along the part of Grangeville west of the air station entrance (north at 24th, for instance) are great for blackbirds, including Tricolored Blackbird.

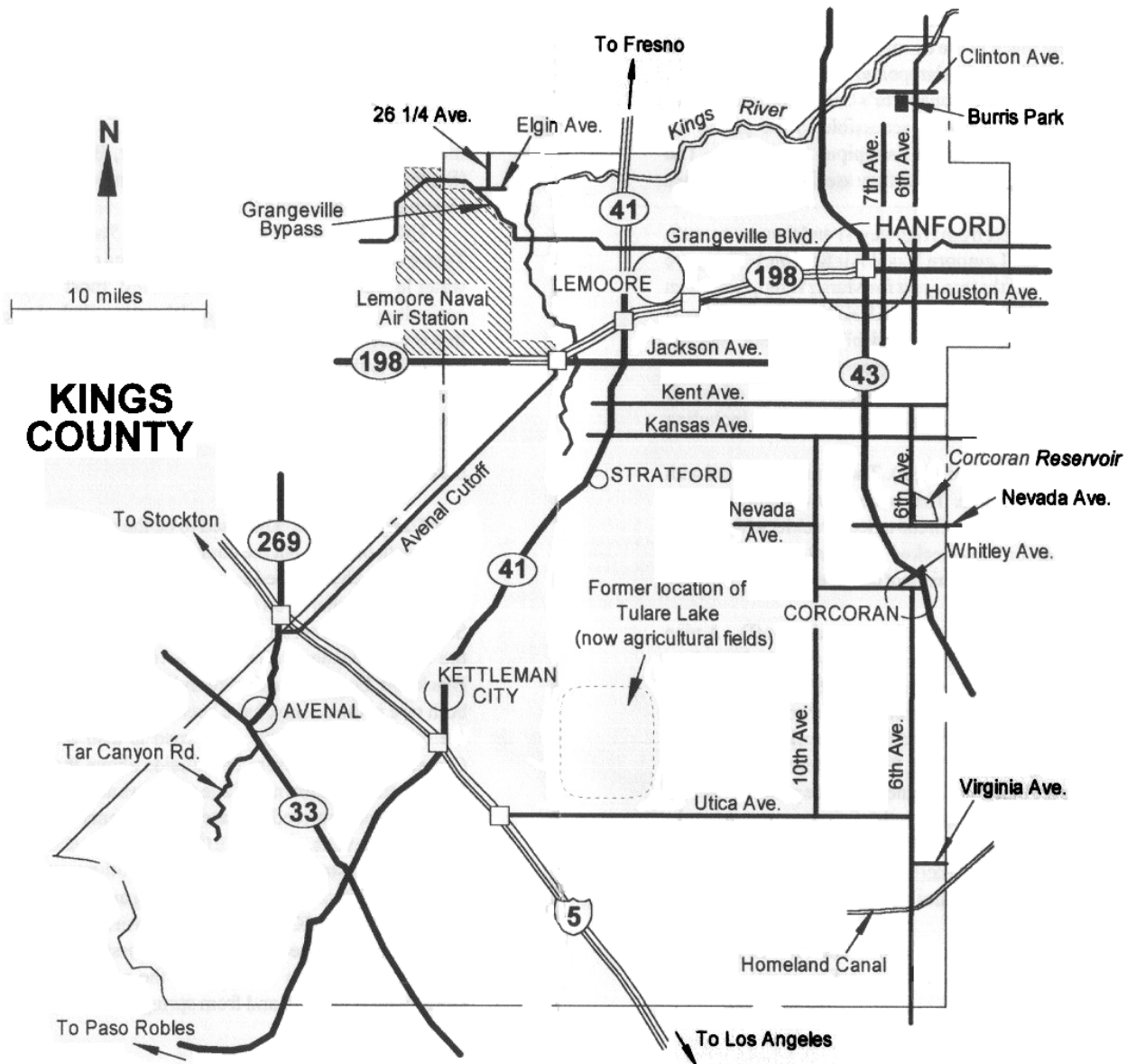
Boggs Slough: (Off 26 ¼ Avenue north of Elgin). There is a small pond with dead snags to

the right (east) of 26 ¼ Avenue. This is the most reliable spot I've found for Common Moorhen. It may also have Great-tailed Grackle, which is just now colonizing the county. Listen for Ring-necked Pheasant out in the fields, and watch for White-tailed Kite. In migration this spot can be excellent. Solitary Sandpiper has been seen here in spring.

Jackson Avene: (East of Highway 198 and the Avenal cut-off). A nice slough on both sides of the road where it crosses the Kings River is the best place in the county for Great-tailed Grackle, which nested here in 1999. Swallows are around in numbers in the summer, herons and egrets all year round.

General: Throughout the county you will find flooded agricultural fields, which change from week to week. Check them for shorebirds, waders and waterfowl. The numerous dairies are blackbird magnets, and the patient observer can find Tricolored Blackbird in among the thousands of more common blackbirds. Try dairies in the northwest especially (24th Avenue and Grangeville is a good spot). The fields in the northeast have American Pipit in winter, and fields anywhere can have Swainson's Hawk (sometimes in impressive concentrations) in migration (spring and fall).

See map below --



This guide is an abbreviated version of one found at Joe Morlan's County Birding pages in the Kings County section (<http://fog.ccsf.cc.ca.us/~jmorlan/kingbirding.htm>).