

Site Guide Reprinted from the Central Valley Bird Club Bulletin

LAKE SOLANO AND PUTAH CREEK

By John Kemper

General information: Lake Solano lies west of the town of Winters, right at the edge of the Central Valley. The section of Putah Creek described herein extends about five miles upstream from Lake Solano to the foot of Monticello Dam, which holds back Lake Berryessa. Because of regular releases from Monticello Dam, this section of creek is a live, year-round stream as far as Lake Solano, which acts as a diversion reservoir for Solano County. A lawsuit is currently under appeal, regarding the provision of sufficient flows downstream from the diversion reservoir to maintain the creek in its natural condition.

Directions: From the junction of Interstate 505 and California Highway 128, go west on CA 128 to Winters, then 4.1 miles beyond Winters to the junction with Pleasants Valley Road. Lake Solano County Park lies just across the bridge to the south. The day-use area is to the left (east) of Pleasants Valley Road (fee, parking, restrooms), and the campground is to the right (west). To get to the Putah Creek Fishing Accesses (fee), when coming from Winters, continue straight ahead on CA 128.

The birding: Park in the lot next to the day-use area at **Lake Solano County Park** (fee), and bird the grassy area downstream. There will be an abundance of people on weekends, but during the week in the off-season, you will almost have the place to yourself. There is a lot of mistletoe in the trees, and this attracts Phainopeplas, resident here in small numbers. Double-crested Cormorants roost in the trees directly across the creek, and Yellow-billed Magpies are common in the nearby orchards. Common Goldeneyes and Common and Hooded Mergansers can often be spotted in winter on the quiet waters downstream from the day-use area. A scope is useful.

After birding the day-use area, cross the road to the campground and take the **Putah Creek Nature Trail**, which runs along the creek about 0.7 mile. Cooper's Hawk; Nuttall's Woodpecker; Red-breasted Sapsucker; Black Phoebe; Oak Titmouse; Bushtit; Western Bluebird; California and Spotted Towhees; and American Goldfinch are often found here. Green Herons are sometimes in the creek, and in the winter there may be Hooded Mergansers, Barrow's Goldeneyes, and Wood Ducks on the water. Beavers are present in the creek but are seldom seen, although river otters are sometimes spotted.

During the Audubon Christmas Count of 1995, the Putah Creek area gained national prominence (of a sort) when it produced the highest count of Western Scrub-Jays (848) of any area in the nation. The area also has produced the highest national counts for Northern Pygmy-Owl (1995) and Lesser Goldfinch (1996, 1997). (Pygmy-Owls, when present, are generally found upstream, at fishing accesses 1, 2, or 3.)

To get to a different part of Lake Solano, from the park entrance go south on Pleasants Valley Road 1 mile to Putah Creek Road. Turn left (east) on Putah Creek Road and go about 1 mile to a large dirt parking area on the right-hand side. The broad reach of Lake Solano lies just across the road. In the winter, many species of ducks take up residence here, including Hooded Mergansers and Wood Ducks. Also, keep your eyes open for Ospreys. At times when the water is low, extensive mudflats are exposed that attract shorebirds such as Greater Yellowlegs and Common Snipe in winter.

To continue up Putah Creek, from the junction of Pleasants Valley Road and CA 128, go west on CA 128. There are five public fishing accesses along the next 4 miles, some with picnic tables and chemical toilets (fee). Some of the fishing accesses are closed in winter, but you can park along the road and walk in, unless they are flooded.

The best accesses for birding are numbers 3, 2, and 1. These lie 2.5 miles, 3.3 miles, and 3.4 miles, respectively, from the junction with Pleasants Valley Road. Common resident birds are California Quail, Great Horned Owl, Acorn and Nuttall's Woodpeckers, and lesser Goldfinch. Less common residents are Red-shouldered Hawk, Golden Eagle, Western Screech-Owl, and Northern Pygmy-Owl. Lewis's Woodpecker and Varied Thrush have sometimes been present in winter, but are irregular. Golden-crowned and White-crowned Sparrows, and Ruby-crowned Kinglet are abundant in winter. Pacific-slope and Ash-throated Flycatchers, Black-headed Grosbeak, and Bullock's Oriole are fairly common summer breeders. Yellow-breasted Chat is a rare breeder.

Just after crossing the bridge over Putah Creek (4.7 miles from Pleasants Valley Road) there is a large dirt area to the right (a part of Putah Creek Wildlife Area), which is the parking area for Monticello Dam (no fee, no restrooms). The western edge of the parking lot is bordered by Cold Canyon Creek. If the water is not too high, you can pick your way down the steep bank, rock-hop across the creek, and climb the other side. Watch for rattlesnakes and loose rocks. From here, a broad, easy path extends for about 0.2 mile and ends below Monticello Dam. Common Mergansers and Common Goldeneyes are often in the quiet water below the dam. If the flow from the dam is not too powerful, there may be Rock and Canyon Wrens among the rocks on either side of the creek. Check the dry rocky slopes for Rufous-crowned Sparrow. In most winters, an American Dipper takes up residence under the nearby highway bridge.

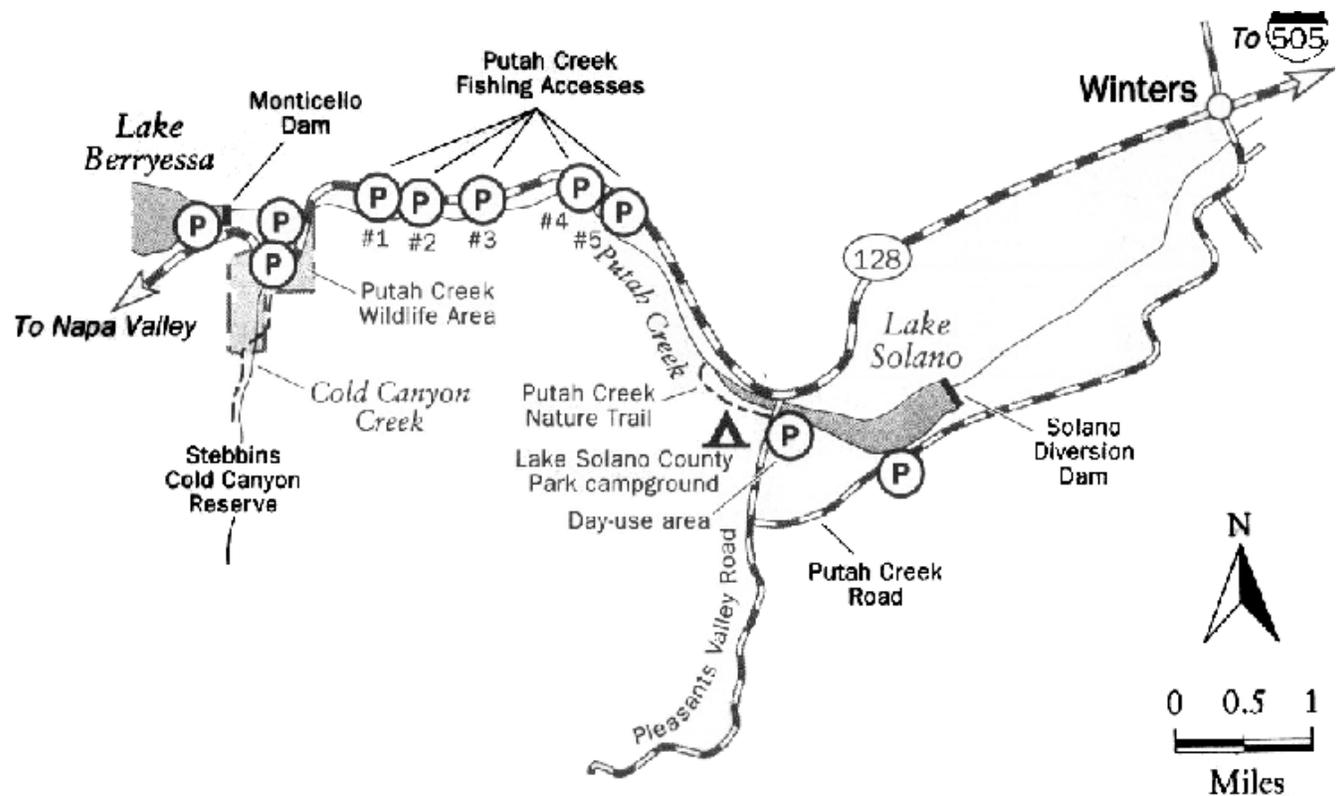
Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve parking area is 0.1 mile farther along CA 128, and is really just a wide place on the right side of the road. Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve is one of the units of the University of California Natural Reserve System (no fee, no restrooms). It is open to the public, which makes it unusual, since most U.C. natural reserves are open only to researchers and student classes.

From the parking area, cross the road (taking care, because this is a curve with restricted visibility), go to the gate on the opposite side, and take the path upstream. The path crosses a portion of the Putah Creek Wildlife Area, and then enters Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve. Be sure to sign in. The trail goes upstream for a mile or so, but is difficult in places because of landslides. Also,

watch for poison oak. The birds are typical of oak/chaparral habitat, such as California Thrasher, Spotted and California Towhees (all resident), and Black-headed Grosbeak (summer). You are almost guaranteed to hear Wrentits in this chaparral country.

Many people continue on up CA 128 to Monticello Dam, where there are parking areas close to the top. White-throated Swifts can frequently be seen from here, especially in spring and summer. They often nest in the cliffs above the parking area.

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