

Site Guide Reprinted from the Central Valley Bird Club Bulletin

SAN LUIS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE COMPLEX AND THE GRASSLANDS ECOLOGICAL AREA

By John Kemper and Dennis Woolington

General information: The San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex includes the San Luis and Merced NWRs, and is located in the northern San Joaquin Valley in what is known as the Grasslands Ecological Area. This 160,000-acre area contains a third of the wetlands remaining in the Central Valley of California, and includes the Los Banos, Volta, and North Grasslands wildlife areas (California Dept. of Fish and Game), Great Valley Grasslands State Park (California Dept. of Parks and Recreation), and over 100 privately-owned duck clubs. Each winter, the Grassland wetlands host thousands of ducks, geese, and Sandhill Cranes, and during the spring, support the largest concentration of shorebirds in interior California.

Directions: All directions are given from the junction of California Highway 33/152 and California Highway 165, in the center of Los Banos. For the **San Luis Unit** of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, go 6.2 miles north on CA 165, turn east on Wolfsen Road, then go 2.3 miles to the entrance of the San Luis Unit (parking, restrooms). For **Los Banos Wildlife Area**, go 3 miles north of Los Banos on CA 165, turn east on Henry Miller Road and go 0.7 mile to entrance. For **Merced National Wildlife Refuge** (NWR), go 3 miles north of Los Banos on CA 165 and turn east on Henry Miller Road. Drive 6.9 miles to Turner Island Road, and turn north. Follow the right-angle turns, keeping to the main road each time, as the road names progressively become Sand Slough Road, Nickel Road, and Sandy Mush Road. The entrance to Merced NWR (parking, restrooms), is on Sandy Mush Road, 10.5 miles from the junction of Henry Miller and Turner Island roads. To get to the southern end of the **Santa Fe Grade Road**, go 3.2 miles north on CA 165 from Los Banos, just beyond Henry Miller Road, and turn left.

The birding: Most birders come to the San Luis NWR Complex for the abundant waterfowl in the winter. Virtually all of the usual wintering ducks will be found here. Mallard, Northern Pintail, and Green-winged Teal are especially abundant in the winter. Greater White-fronted, Ross's, and Snow geese are commonly seen, especially in late winter. Look for the rare "blue morph" forms of both the Snow and Ross's geese.

During the summer, common breeders are Wood Duck, Gadwall, Mallard, and Cinnamon Teal. Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, and Ruddy Duck are uncommon breeders.

As you drive from Los Banos to the San Luis Unit, scan the fields for egrets, ducks, and shorebirds in the wet areas, and (in season) Western Kingbird, Horned Lark, American Pipit, and Savannah Sparrow in the drier areas. Be especially alert for Sandhill Crane and White-faced Ibis, both of which often feed in the fields by the hundreds. Also watch for Tricolored Blackbird, which could be with mixed blackbird flocks anywhere in pasture lands, especially in flooded fields. One good possibility for Tricoloreds is in cattle feedlots, such as the one near the intersection of Edminster Road and California Highway 140. They may be in with cattle, along with Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and House Sparrows.

At the **San Luis Unit**, stop at the visitor kiosk near the entrance to view a marsh and overlook and pick up refuge brochures, then proceed on the **Waterfowl Tour Route**, a gravel road that gives a sampling of the refuge. After 1 mile, the route splits, with the Tule Elk Tour Route going to the left and the Waterfowl Tour Route to the right. Major features of the Waterfowl Tour Route include the **Chester Marsh Trail**, a one-mile walking loop around an attractive marsh; the **Sousa Marsh Trail**, a 1.8 mile walking loop complex along permanent wetlands, tree-lined sloughs, and seasonal marshes; and the **Winton Marsh Trail**, a half-mile walk along permanent and semi-permanent marsh. The Sousa Marsh Trail has a barrier-free elevated platform with telescope, overlooking the sanctuary marsh, while Winton Marsh has a smaller viewing platform. Whether driving or walking, look for waterfowl plus marsh birds such as American Bittern, Sora, Virginia Rail, Marsh Wren, Song Sparrow, Common Moorhen, and American Coot. Western Meadowlark and Black Phoebe may be anywhere, and White-tailed Kite is fairly common. In summer look for Blue Grosbeak, and in winter for Golden-crowned, White-crowned, and Lincoln's (uncommon) sparrows. Also, where there are trees and bushes, look for Ash-throated Flycatcher (summer), and Spotted and California towhees (residents).

Returning to the **Tule Elk Tour Route** at the split in the routes, go to the left for a tour of about 3.5 miles around the elk enclosure. There is a barrier-free observation platform about halfway around the loop, and the elk herd, numbering 40 to 50, can usually be seen somewhere. Keep your eyes open for birds such as Northern Harrier, Loggerhead Shrike, and Yellow-billed Magpie.

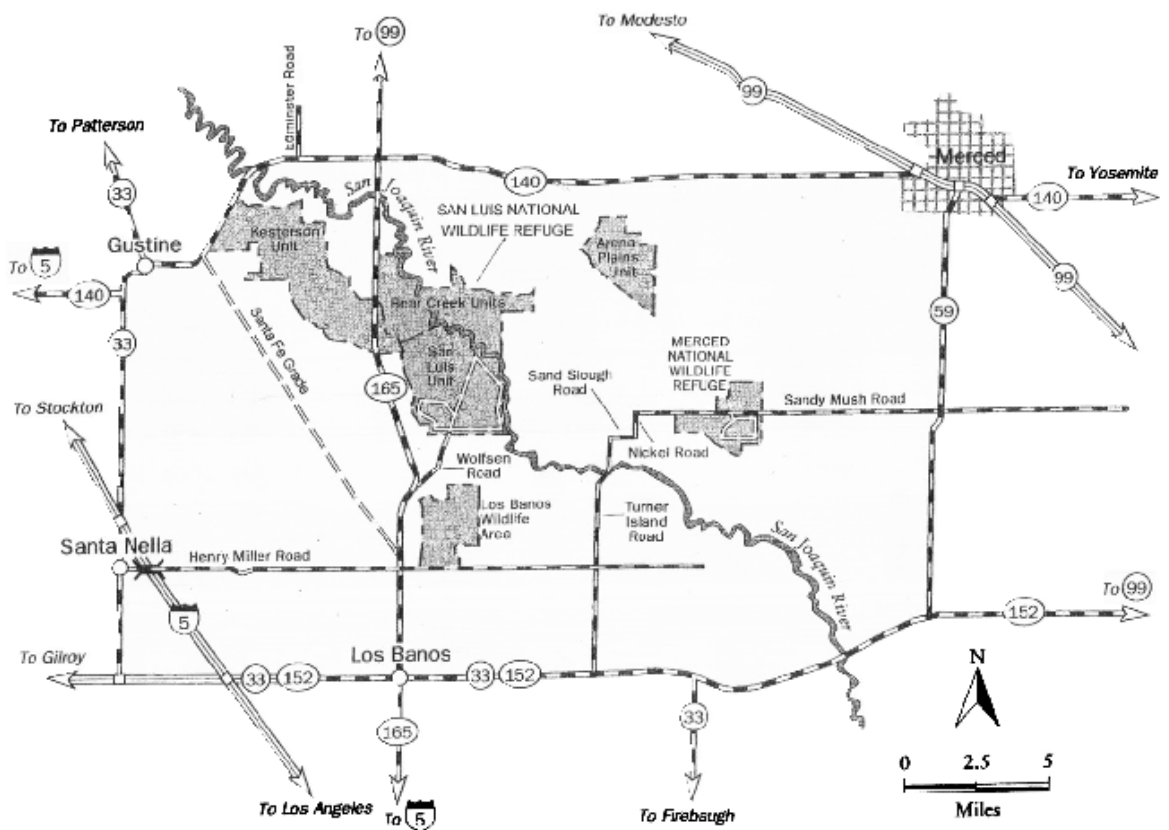
The **Los Banos Wildlife Area** has about 5 miles of public access roads (gravel), marshes, and lakes, with birds similar to those at the San Luis Unit.

The **Merced National Wildlife Refuge** is one of the best places to see Snow and Ross's geese, Sandhill Crane, and shorebirds (parking, restrooms, barrier-free observation platform). Here, the auto tour route (about 5 miles round trip) takes you next to the ponds and fields, where there may be thousands of white geese in addition to the hundreds of cranes feeding in the fields. American White Pelican and Double-crested Cormorant might be seen in fall and winter. The observation platform overlooks shallow wetlands, giving views of wintering

shorebirds such as Black-bellied Plover, Greater Yellowlegs, Long-billed Curlew, Dunlin, Long-billed Dowitcher, and lots of peeps. Common Snipe is uncommon the fall and winter, and American Avocet and Black-necked Stilt are residents.

Santa Fe Grade Road provides a sampling of the privately owned wetlands within the Grasslands Ecological Area. It is 13.5 miles from the southern end, at CA 165, to the northern end at CA 140, and the road is mostly gravel. The traffic is light, and the road is surrounded along most of its length by shallow wetlands, containing all of the usual wetland species of the area. In some places the cattails along the roadsides are so thick they form a visual barrier, but there are many open spots that provide good views.

*This article has been adapted from **Birding Northern California**, by John Kemper, copyright 1999 by Falcon Publishing Co., Inc.*



San Luis Refuge Complex

Map reproduced from "Birding Northern California" by John Kemper Copyright 1999 by Falcon Press