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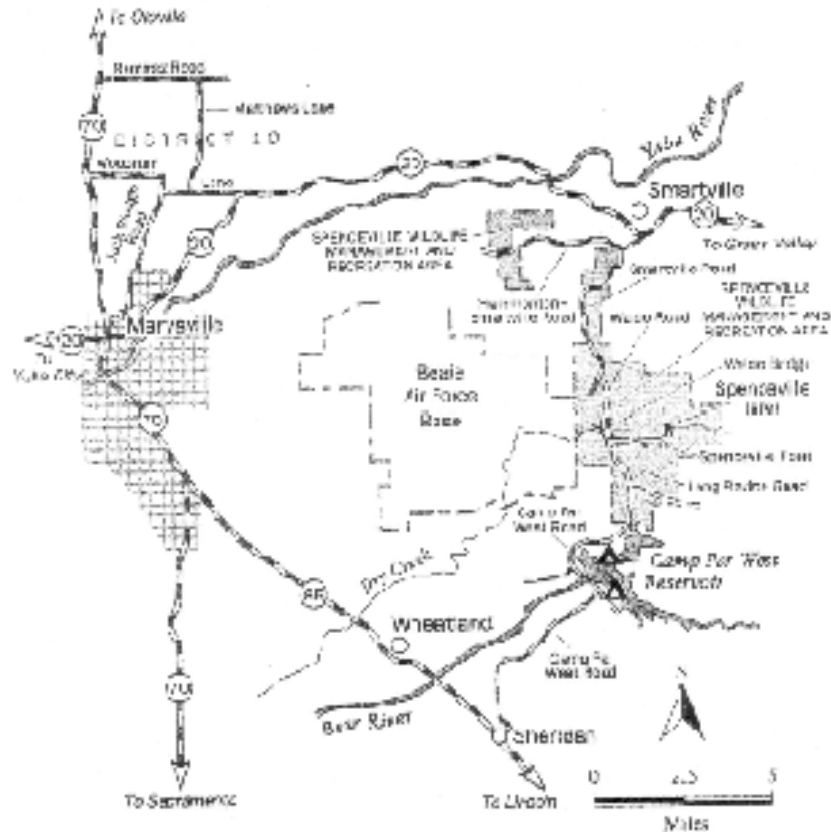
**SPENCEVILLE WILDLIFE AREA AND DISTRICT 10**

By John Kemper

General Information: These sites are a mix of two kinds of habitat: Rolling foothill country and flat rice fields. The two flow smoothly together into a bit of unspoiled rural California bordering the lower Yuba River floodplain.

Directions: To get to Spenceville Wildlife Management and Recreation Area from the junction of California Highway 70 and California Highway 20 in Marysville, go about 20 miles east on Highway 20 to a point 1.3 miles beyond Smartville, and turn south on Smartville Road at the sign for "Beale Air Force Base." After about 1 mile, turn left at the junction of Smartville Road and Hammonton-Smartville Road; after 4.5 miles, turn left again, on Waldo Road (gravel). Waldo Bridge (called by some the "Iron Bridge") is 1.8 miles from the turn, on Waldo Road. To reach Waldo Bridge from the south, at Sheridan on California Highway 65 turn east on Riosa Road, and turn north after going one block onto Camp Far West Road. Follow Camp Far West Road about 7 miles to the junction with McCourtney Road at Camp Far West Reservoir. Turn left to go across the top of the dam. Just after crossing the dam, you come to a junction at which Camp Far West Road appears to go both left and right, but you are now in a different county (Yuba County) than you were on the other side of the dam (Placer County), and the road called "Camp Far West Road" is not the same one you followed from Sheridan. Turn right, following Camp Far West Road around the reservoir, and continue about 3.9 miles beyond the dam (road changes to gravel), to a junction with Long Ravine Road. Continue straight ahead on Long Ravine Road 1.6 miles to a junction with Spenceville Road, keep left on Spenceville Road, and continue 0.5 miles to Waldo Bridge.

To get to the area know as District 10 (a name belonging to the local irrigation district) from the junction of Highway 70 and Highway 20 in Marysville, go about 6 miles north on Highway 70 to Woodruff Lane, and turn right. Follow Woodruff Lane, as it jogs right and then left, for about 3.4 miles, to where it joins with Matthews Lane. You can go north on Matthews Lane (narrow shoulders, poor parking) for about 3.5 miles to Ramirez Lane. From the junction of Woodruff Lane and Matthews Lane it is 1.6 miles east on Woodruff Lane to Highway 20. The entire rice-growing region in this area is known as "District 10."



### Spenceville Wildlife Area and District 10

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

The birding: **Spenceville Wildlife Management and Recreation Area** is an area of rolling foothills, grassy slopes, and oak savanna. It is delightful in its own right, especially in spring, but has become celebrated in birding circles because of its unusual population of Black Rails. Normally, one thinks of Black Rails in association with flatland marshes. In California, they were thought to occur only in scattered locations along the coast, around San Francisco Bay, in the Imperial Valley, and along the lower Colorado River. Thus, it was a surprise to discover, only a few years ago, that there was an apparently resident population in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, primarily in Yuba County. Since the rails require moist places, usually with cattails, they occur only in places that have a permanent source of water. In most cases, the necessary water is supplied by irrigation ditches that wind through the foothills. This situation has resulted in speculation that the rails have begun occurring here in reasonable numbers only since the ditches were constructed.

Most of the known Black Rail locations are either on private property or at sensitive research sites. However, there is one site where they might be observed without causing undue intrusion. Park at Waldo Bridge on the north side (wide shoulders). Squeeze through the gate to the east (this is public land) and follow the horse trail about 200 yards east, to a small tributary that flows into Deer Creek from the north. The tributary is essentially a narrow band of marsh, extending perhaps 0.7 miles upstream, and surrounded by a fence to keep out cattle. There is a rough, informal trail running near the tributary on the slope above the marsh, and by following this trail you can easily see into all parts of the marsh. Experts on Black Rails recommend that you do not actually walk into the marsh, because predators such as raccoons and coyotes tend to follow human trails to see where they might lead. Great care should be taken at this site so that birders are not responsible for driving away the few rails that are believed to breed here.

Your chance of actually seeing a Black Rail is close to zero. Even researchers who spend a considerable amount of time investigating these birds seldom see them, because they are small and skilled at remaining hidden. However, you might be able to hear one. They sometimes call spontaneously in the month of June, either early in the morning or just before sunset, and during the day as well as at night, contrary to what some field guides say. The common call is usually described as a rapid “kik-kee-doo,” the first two notes on a higher pitch. Another common call resembles a harsh grating or “grring” sound. Since the Black Rail is classified as “Threatened” in California, it is contrary to the ABA Code of Birding Ethics to use tape recordings to attract them.

Quite aside from the Black Rails, Spenceville has other birding attractions. You can squeeze past (or climb) the gates anywhere it is posted as public land, and wander across the foothills. An especially attractive place is at the end of the Spenceville Road. From the Waldo Bridge, go south 0.5 miles on Waldo Road to its junction with Spenceville Road, then east on Spenceville Road 2 miles to its end, adjacent to the site of historic Spenceville.

Spenceville is marked by its mine tailings, large piles of rock. You can cross Dry Creek here on an old concrete bridge, and walk in either direction along an old dirt road, now closed to vehicles. There is another old road at the east end of Spenceville that skirts the fence surrounding the site and leads north into attractive habitat. Or at the end of Spenceville Road, where it is blocked by huge boulders, you can cross Dry Creek on an old wooden bridge (decaying, and with at least one hole large enough for a person to fall through) and continue on Spenceville Road (closed to vehicles) upstream along Dry Creek.

Some of the common resident birds are Cooper’s and Red-shouldered hawks, Western Screech-Owl, Anna’s Hummingbird, Acorn and Nuttall’s woodpeckers, Hutton’s Vireo, Yellow-billed Magpie, Oak Titmouse, Bushtit, White-breasted Nuthatch, Bewick’s Wren, Western Bluebird,

Rufous-crowned and Lark sparrows, Western Meadowlark, and Lesser Goldfinch. Wild Turkeys have been introduced, and are widespread in the area.

Common summer visitors are Black-chinned Hummingbird, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Western Kingbird, Violet-green Swallow, Orange-crowned Warbler, Black-headed Grosbeak, Lazuli Bunting, and Bullock's Oriole. Lawrence's Goldfinch is an uncommon summer breeder.

In migration, look for Rufous Hummingbird, Hammond's Flycatcher, and Wilson's Warbler. Some common winter visitors are Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Fox and Lincoln's sparrows. Some uncommon winterers are Red-breasted Sapsucker and Say's Phoebe. Lewis's Woodpecker is sometimes seen in winter, but is rare and irregular. Once in a while a Long-eared Owl has been found nesting in live oak woodlands.

**The rice fields of District 10**, when flooded, attract immense concentrations of ducks and geese in winter, and this in turn attracts Bald Eagles. Watch for them not only overhead, but perched in trees or even sitting on one of the low levees surrounding the rice fields. Northern Harriers are common residents. Other wintering raptors to watch for include Merlin and Prairie and Peregrine falcons.

Wintering shorebirds such as Greater Yellowlegs and Dunlin also frequent the flooded fields. White-faced Ibis are increasingly common in this area and may show up at any time of year, although they have not nested in the area recently.

District 10 is perhaps best known for the large numbers of Tundra Swan that visit the area in winter. Those who bird the district on a regular basis say the swans are an annual presence in the area in November and December. Bewick's, Trumpeter, and once, even Whooper, swans have been found in the large Tundra Swan flocks in recent years.

*This article has been adapted from *Birding Northern California*, by John Kemper, copyright 1999 by Falcon Publishing Co., Inc. and was published in the *Central Valley Bird Club Bulletin*. For more information, visit [www.cvbirds.org](http://www.cvbirds.org).*