

## TURLOCK LAKE AREA

*Jim Gain*

**DESCRIPTION:** Situated along the eastern edge of Stanislaus County, Turlock Lake is surrounded by rolling grasslands habitat. The lake itself is largely devoid of trees, except for the area around the day use picnic grounds. The campground, however, is host to a stand of riparian woodlands, with valley oak, Fremont cottonwoods, California buckeye, willows, and an understory of poison oak and Himalayan blackberry thickets. There is an old oxbow lake by the entrance kiosk. There is some wetlands habitat around the oxbow lake and at Hall Pond.

**DIRECTIONS:** *Coming from Modesto or parts north:* from Highway 99, take the Briggsmore Avenue exit and go left over the freeway. Follow Briggsmore Avenue for 8.75 miles to its junction with Wellsford Road and turn right (south). At the first stop sign, turn left (east) on Dusty Road, continue 1.5 miles to Albers Road, and turn right (south). At the junction with Highway 132 (Yosemite Blvd.), turn left (east), and drive 12.6 miles (through Waterford) to Roberts's Ferry. Take Robert's Ferry Road south to Lake Road. *Coming from Turlock or parts south:* from Highway 99, take the Keyes Road exit and head east for 14.5 miles to Hawkins Road. Turn left and follow the road to its junction with Lake Road, and turn right.

**BIRDING THE SITES:** The Turlock Lake area is the most productive in the winter, but it can be visited at any season. The area has four main sites that are birded the most: Davis Road, the day use picnic area, the campground, and the Fishing Access Area.

**Davis Road** – This road parallels the outlet canal north from Lake Road and winds around the southeast portion of Turlock Lake. In winter, drive this road and check the outlet canal for Common Goldeneyes, Bufflehead, and Common Merganser. Barrow's Goldeneye can rarely be found here. Bird along the canal for Belted Kingfisher, Greater Yellowlegs, California and Ring-billed Gulls, and Least Sandpiper. Continue past the dam area and look at the sparrow flocks closely, as Sage Sparrow (Great Basin race) and Lark Bunting (rare) have been seen along the road. Burrowing Owl used to be seen frequently along this road, but lately much of the grasslands has been converted to orchard, and sightings of this owl have decreased. Winter

raptors such as Bald and Golden Eagles, Prairie Falcon, Merlin, Ferruginous and Rough-legged Hawks, and Short-eared Owl can all be found here with luck. Sage Thrasher has been seen here rarely, as well.

**Day Use picnic areas** – Turlock Lake State Recreation Area has a day use fee of \$10.00 per vehicle (\$5.00 for seniors) at the time of this writing. This area has three restroom stations, some of which have shower stalls. There are numerous picnic tables with BBQ stands. The nearest stores are in Waterford or La Grange.

Phainopepla and Yellow-billed Magpie have been seen next to the restrooms above the entrance kiosk. The trees near the other restrooms may have migrating passerines in spring and fall. Scope the lake from various vantage points to look for five grebe species (Eared, Clark's and Western, Pied-billed, and rarely Horned). Common Merganser, Bald Eagle, Osprey, and the occasional Common Loon can be found there, too.

**Campground** – The entrance to this area is just 1.1 miles east of the Turlock Lake entrance. This area has three restroom stations, some of which have shower stalls. There are numerous picnic tables with BBQ stands.

The proper procedure for day use access is to call the number on the park sign to ask for permission. If you get voice mail, leave your name and make of vehicle on the message, adding that you have paid your fee. Once you have paid the fee and affixed the stub inside your windshield, you may pull up into one of the parking spaces just past the kiosk. If the campgrounds are full, you must walk only on the paved road. Do not walk through a campground that has people or property on it! During winter, the campground is nearly empty, and it is much easier to bird the campgrounds. If you see the campground host, explain to him that you have called the park office and paid your fee.

This is a great riparian habitat, with an abundance of trees and understory along the cliff face. Summer is particularly good for nesting Bullock's Oriole, Black-headed Grosbeak, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Western Wood-Pewee, Phainopepla, and the occasional Yellow-breasted Chat. Spotted Sandpiper may be seen along the gravel bars on the river.

During spring and fall migration, look for Pacific-slope and Willow Flycatchers, as well as the rarer Dusky and Hammond's. Hutton's

Vireo is here year-round; Cassin's and Warbler Vireos may be seen migrating through. Warblers seen here include Yellow, Nashville, Black-throated Gray, Townsend's, Wilson's, MacGillivray's, and the occasional Hermit. Swainson's Thrush and Western Tanagers are possible during migration, too.

In the winter, this campground can be host to Cooper's, Sharp-shinned, and Red-shouldered Hawks. Red-breasted Sapsucker, Golden-crowned Kinglet, White-breasted Nuthatch, Townsend's Warbler, Hutton's Vireo, Phainopepla, White- and Golden-crowned Sparrows, and House Finches are fairly reliable. Less frequent are White-throated Sparrow, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, and Varied Thrush. At least one Pacific Wren has been spending most winters in the tangled underbrush between the underbrush and cliff wall.

**Fishing Access Area** – Drive another 2.7 miles east of the campground on Lake Road to the Fishing Access Area. There are restrooms, picnic tables, and a parking lot there. No fee is required. As you drive, notice the Osprey nests atop the transmission towers. In breeding season, you may see fledglings being fed by the parents, although you will have to be cautious and pull over on the narrow shoulder. There isn't much traffic on Lake Road, but what there is goes along at or above the speed limit.

Whether you park at the lot or drive down to the end of the gravel road, you will want to use a scope on this stretch of the lake. American Pelican is commonly seen here, along with a noisy flock of year-round Canada Geese. Western and Clark's Grebes are here, along with the Eared and the rarer Horned in winter. In the summer, Forster's Terns have a nesting colony on a small island near here, and the adults have been known to dive-bomb unwary birders who want to look too closely at the juveniles on the wooden pilings. (Caspian Tern is a more frequent migrant than the Black and Common Terns.) This is a reliable spot for Loggerhead Shrike, Least Sandpiper, Wilson's Snipe, American Kestrel, Northern Harrier, Killdeer, Horned Lark, and Western Meadowlark. All of the ducks that can be found in the main area of Turlock Lake can be seen here, as well. Long-billed Curlew roams over this area for most of the year, and a large flock has been seen foraging near the restrooms.

