

Sacramento County

Sacramento County—North

North Natomas

The Natomas area extends from the confluence of the Sacramento and American Rivers to the Sutter County line, and from the Sacramento River to the Natomas East Main Drainage Canal (changed back to its original name of Steelhead Creek). Natomas is the southern-most region of the Sutter Basin, originally a large area of riparian forest, marshes and grassland where elk, deer, bears and birds were plentiful. Many changes have occurred even since the last edition of this book was written. However, the best way to bird this area is still to cruise the farm roads and stop at promising fields and canals.

Birding the site: Because of its varied habitat, a large variety of birds may be seen. Swainson's Hawks are present from April through September and are best observed while on the Garden Highway from North Bayou Way to Elverta Road. Tricolored Blackbirds are known to nest near the East Levee Road just south of Riego Road. To find them, look for cattle and standing water in grassy areas with blackberry bushes growing on paddock fences. Scan every flock, as they travel with Brewer's Blackbirds and Red-winged Blackbirds.

Rice fields and canals attract many different species, including Black-crowned Night-Heron, Green Heron, Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, White-faced Ibis, Double-crested Cormorant, Cinnamon Teal, Pied-billed Grebe, Long-billed Curlew, American Coot and Common Moorhen. As you travel through the rice fields, be on the lookout for Black Terns. Perhaps you will be the first person in over 50 years to report a breeding pair in Sacramento County. In the winter, the fields host a large number of migratory ducks, geese and shorebirds, and weedy fields and roadside tangles host a variety of sparrows. Watch for Loggerhead Shrikes and, in summer, Western Kingbirds on the power lines.

The riparian area along the Garden Highway is rife with Oak Titmouse, Downy Woodpecker, and Nuttall's Woodpecker year-round, and migrant warblers, Western Tanagers, and other songbirds in spring and fall. Raptors common to the area are Red-tailed Hawks, Red-shouldered Hawks, American Kestrels, White-tailed Kites and Northern Harriers.

Going east on Elverta Road to the East Levee Road, scan the fields and irrigation ditches. Turn right on East Levee Road and stop where it is

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safe to view waterfowl, shorebirds and waders in Steelhead Creek. Continue south on East Levee Road to Elkhorn Boulevard. At the southeast corner of the intersection, you reach the gravel parking lot for the Ueda Parkway (see the next section).

On Elkhorn Boulevard, 0.5 mile west of East Levee Road (or 2.4 miles east of Highway 99), there is an old gravel road where you can park on the north side of Elkhorn Boulevard. As many as a dozen Burrowing Owls have been seen in this area on both sides of the road, although their numbers have declined.

Directions: Natomas can be reached via Interstate 5 or Interstate 80. The most direct route is to go north on Interstate 5 from downtown Sacramento (2.8 miles from Highway 50) and exit at the Garden Highway (the first exit after crossing the American River). Go right or west under Interstate 5. The Garden Highway is a narrow levee road, so caution is advised when driving. In 6.8 miles, the Garden Highway reaches Power Line Road. Heading north, Power Line Road crosses Elkhorn Boulevard, Elverta Road, and Riego Road. Highway 99, heading north from Interstate 5, also intersects these roads.

Carl Burke

Wolf Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary, Ueda Parkway

Wolf Ranch, formally open pasture in Rio Linda, was purchased by the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency (SAFCA), and used as a borrow pit and source of fill for the North Area Local Project Levee improvements. Approximately 800,000 cubic yards of soil were excavated, allowing for the creation of a 60-acre wetland complex with five habitat types ranging from open water and wetlands to upland forests. In 1997, SAFCA planted the site with wetland plants, native riparian shrubs and trees. As Wolf Ranch has continued to mature into a sustainable wetland and wooded upland, SAFCA biologists have seen a significant increase in bird species and diversity, increasing from 58 species in 2001, to 96 species in 2004.

Birding the site: From the parking lot, walk around the gate to Sorrento Road and head south. Granite Construction Company and a very large commercial parking area will be on your left, behind a cyclone fence. On your right, Steelhead Creek parallels Sorrento Road. Check the creek for Great Egret, Great Blue Heron, Snowy Egret, Greater Yellowlegs,

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Wilson's Snipe, and other wading birds and shorebirds. In winter, Savannah Sparrows are fairly common.



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At about one-half mile south on Sorrento Road, you will see another gate, a portable restroom, and the wetland restoration area. Follow the wide dirt path around the wetland in either direction—the total distance is about 1.5 miles on flat terrain.

Walking in a clockwise direction, you will eventually come to a drainage ditch along a railroad track. A careful inspection of this area may yield an American Bittern or other wading bird species. Continuing the loop around the wetlands, there are many opportunities for viewing open water and a variety of birds. In the winter look for Double-crested Cormorant, Canvasback, Northern Shoveler, Cinnamon Teal, and other waterfowl. Also keep an eye on the telephone poles and fence posts for Red-tailed Hawks, American Kestrels, and Loggerhead Shrikes. If you look closely in the trees and shrubs, you may also see warblers, kinglets, hummingbirds, and perhaps a Downy Woodpecker or two. Great-tailed Grackles are a possibility here in spring and summer.

Walking past the south end of the wetland you will eventually see the continuation of Steelhead Creek on your left, heading toward Sorrento Road and the parking area. The road on the south side of the site is flooded during the winter. The best birding is in winter and spring.

Directions: From downtown Sacramento, take Interstate 5 for 7 miles north of Highway 50. Take the Highway 99/Highway 70 exit (exit 525B) toward Marysville/Yuba City. In 1.1 miles, exit at Elkhorn Boulevard and go right. Continue 2.9 miles, cross Steelhead Creek, and make an immediate right turn into the parking lot at Elkhorn and Sorrento Road. You will see a sign for the Walter S. Ueda Parkway in the parking lot.

Brian Gilmore

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