

**Rancho Seco Recreational Area and the Howard Ranch Trail**

The Rancho Seco Recreational Area consists of a reservoir lined with riparian vegetation and a campground and day use area with planted trees and lawn. It has the potential to serve as a migrant trap, since the surrounding habitat is open grassland. It also provides the only public access to the Howard Ranch—a 12,000-acre preserve of grasslands, vernal pools, and oak woodlands. It is a working cattle ranch that was purchased by the Nature Conservancy in 1999 as part of the Cosumnes River Preserve Project and sold to a rancher with a conservation easement precluding development.

Rancho Seco is 30 minutes southeast of downtown Sacramento. It is owned by the Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD) and is just east of the closed nuclear facility. The park is open year-round from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. The entrance gate is locked every night. For more information, check SMUD's Web site ([smud.org/about/recreation-rancho.html](http://smud.org/about/recreation-rancho.html)).

**Birding the site:** From the entrance kiosk, where a Sage Thrasher was found in October 2004, continue to the reservoir. Just before reaching the dam, there is a large parking area on the left where you can scan the lake for waterbirds. It is best on weekday mornings before crowds of people have flushed the birds.

For the Howard Ranch trail, go left before crossing the dam, and continue down the dirt track to the parking area at the trailhead (you might consider parking nearer the main road so that your vehicle is visible and less likely to be broken into). The trail is a seven-mile loop. The first portion goes along the lakeshore, providing views of the lake and access to the riparian vegetation, where sparrows and other songbirds may be found. Much of the trail goes through open grassland, so bird diversity is low. Ferruginous Hawks and other winter raptors may be present. Burrowing Owls have been found beneath the bridges. In early spring, there is a wonderful wildflower show, and Horned Larks and Western Meadowlarks are in full song—in spring Western Meadowlarks perform flight songs with extra flourishes to their already spectacular song. Unfortunately, the trail does not reach east into the oak woodlands, but it is good to know that this habitat has been protected from development. Be sure to close any gates you have to open on the trail, since cattle are grazing there from fall through spring. In the warmer months, beware that wasps are sometimes living in the gates.



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To reach the campground and day use area, drive across the dam. You might notice several oryx on your right at the animal sanctuary. Continuing toward the campground, check the rolling grasslands for raptors and the fences for sparrows. The trees around the campground may harbor interesting migrants or wintering birds. In the evenings in summer you may see Lesser Nighthawks foraging over the lake.

**Directions:** From Sacramento, take Highway 99 south of Highway 50/Capital City Freeway for 20 miles to the Twin Cities Road/Highway 104 exit. Go east on Highway 104 for 12 miles to Rancho Seco Park. Take the first right after passing the two towers and head to the entrance kiosk (currently a \$5 fee).

### Sherman Island and the Sacramento County Delta

This seldom visited portion of Sacramento County, including Sherman Island and Brannan Island, has a lot of potential. There can be thousands of waterfowl, and many raptors, shorebirds, sparrows, and blackbirds. Recent surprise finds have included Brant, Ruff, Cassin's Kingbird, and Common Grackle. It is typically most productive (and visited) in winter, but has potential year-round. As one would expect from an area popular with wind surfers, it is often very windy, which can impede birding. Other delta "islands" are worth exploring.

**Birding the site:** A good place to check on the way to Sherman Island is Korth's Marina on Brannan Island Road. After crossing the Mokelumne River, 10 miles from Interstate 5, turn right on Brannan Island Road (watch for "Delta Loop" signs). Follow the road south under the highway for 3.0 miles. Park and check the trees. This place has all the makings of a migrant trap, and is worth checking especially in migration and winter. Continue on the Delta Loop to reach Highway 160. Parking is limited, but check the San Joaquin River along the way.

If you skip the Delta Loop, Highway 160 is 15 miles west of Interstate 5 via Highway 12. Turn left. Brannan Island State Recreation Area (\$6) is 3.4 miles south on Highway 160. There is a good mix of trees, water, and open areas. Continuing south on 160, it is 6.5 miles south of Highway 12 to West Sherman Island Road. Turn right, and in 3.5 miles you will reach the county park (\$5). Along the way and at the park, there are good views of the Sacramento River. At the park, there have been breeding Yellow-breasted Chats. Backtracking to Highway 160, it is 1.5 miles south to Sherman Island X Rd. **Don't miss this road;** next stop is

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the Antioch toll bridge. Turn left and follow this up onto the levee, scanning fields, fence lines, and trees along the way. The levee road leads to Eddo's RV Park—another spot worth checking.

**Directions:** From Sacramento, head south on Interstate 5 for 32 miles to Highway 12. If you need gas, get it there. To reach Sherman Island, head west on Highway 12.

Chris Conard

