

Folsom Lake Area

Pioneer Express Trail from Rattlesnake Bar

This trail north from the Rattlesnake Bar park entrance to Avery Pond generally follows Folsom's lakeshore at an elevation of about 50-100 feet above the high water line. The hike to Avery Pond is 1.2 miles and mostly in shade, even in the heat of summer. Pack a picnic lunch, as there are several picnic tables at Avery Pond. The trail is narrow at times with numerous steep drop-offs to the lake. It also has several up and down spots and some rocky areas, so good hiking shoes are recommended. Families with elementary school-age children can do this hike, if the children follow instructions to stay away from the poison oak and steep drop offs.

The habitat is principally oak woodlands and chaparral with some streamside woodlands and one pond. Interior live oak, valley oak, scrub oak, blue and black oak, gray pine, white alder and Fremont cottonwood are some of the trees that will be encountered along the trail. Among the shrubs will be toyon, California wild grape, blackberry, star thistle, and many varieties of ceanothus and manzanita. The poison oak can grow quite robust, and may overhang some areas of the trail after a particularly wet spring.

Birding the site (winter): An afternoon hike in this area on a clear day in the middle of January will reward the birdwatcher with sunshine, green foothill grasses, early blooming manzanita and coyote bush, and over 60 common species of birds. This is also the best time of year for sighting Bald Eagles and Osprey soaring along the lake's shoreline.

Species easily seen at the edges of the oak woodland in winter include California Quail, Anna's Hummingbird, Northern Flicker, Acorn, Downy and Nuttall's Woodpeckers, Black Phoebe, Yellow-billed Magpie, Oak Titmouse, Bushy-tit, Bewick's Wren, Hermit Thrush, Western Bluebird, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Spotted and California Towhees, Lark Sparrow and crowned sparrows.

Harder to find but still present are Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks, Wild Turkey, Band-tailed Pigeon, Red-breasted Sapsucker, Wrentit, Phainopepla, Hutton's Vireo, and Purple Finch.

The boat ramp is a good place to scan the lake for Common Loon, Canada Geese, Horned, Eared, Western and Clark's Grebes, Common Goldeneye, Ruddy Duck, Lesser Scaup, Common Merganser and several types of gulls. Also check the water's edge for Spotted

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Sandpipers and Greater Yellowlegs. The granite outcrops between the water's edge and the high water line are reliable areas to find Rock Wrens.

Birding the site (spring and summer): The most distinct calls heard in spring are the Ash-throated Flycatchers and Bewick's and House Wrens. The best place for Rufous-crowned sparrows is just after passing mile marker 47 at the bottom of the hill, as nesting activity was recently observed here. Just before Avery Pond is a man-made rock trough filled with water from a natural spring. A small footbridge crosses over the dampest area. The abundant blackberry bushes and wild irises announce the closeness of Avery pond. This is often the best spot for hummingbirds and warblers catching mosquitoes.

At Avery Pond almost anything is possible, especially during spring migration. Check the willows and cottonwoods carefully. Birds found in the spring and summer include Belted Kingfisher, Green Heron, Wood Ducks, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Western Wood Pewee, Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Western Kingbird, Black Phoebe, Common Yellowthroat, Orange-crowned and Wilson's Warblers. Other animal species seen around the pond include bullfrogs, turtles, deer, dragonflies and damselflies.

Continue around Avery Pond and north another 0.2 mile to the Newcastle Power House structure to see the best display of swallows, soaring Turkey Vultures and hawks. On the other side of the Power House is another footbridge, which crosses Mormon's Ravine. Many locals also call this the "Whitewater Bridge," as high water releases can occur here. After this bridge, the trail continues another 8 miles to Auburn. The trail becomes drier, rockier, and much less wooded, causing a decrease in the variety of bird species and numbers.

For photographers and those who enjoy wildflowers, April is the best month to see the finest display. Most numerous are the many types of purple vetch and lupine, and the orange bush monkey flower. There is also a kaleidoscope of color from brodiaea, paintbrush, milkweed, glilia, Indian pink, buttercup, iris, globe and mariposa lilies, and violets. The hill around the Newcastle Power House also has an impressive display of purple Chinese houses.



If you can time your outing to return at dusk, you may also enjoy some of the nocturnal species of the foothills. Listen and look for Western Screech-Owls, Northern Pygmy-Owls and Great Horned Owls, as well as bats. In years past, Common Poorwills were observed from April through October, but there have been no reports in recent years.

Directions: From Interstate 80 East, take the Newcastle Road exit, which is 30 miles from downtown Sacramento. At the bottom of the off-ramp, make a right turn onto Newcastle Road. Follow this road east for 2.7 miles until it crosses Auburn Folsom Road. Continue straight on Newcastle Road for another 2 miles into the Rattlesnake Bar entrance to Folsom Lake State Park. The entrance fee is \$7 per vehicle. After passing the ranger check-in station, take the first left turn. Go 0.7 mile to the large paved boat launch parking area. Go to the far south end of the parking area for the non-boater parking spaces. There is some shade here, a port-a-potty and trash barrels.

At the north end of the parking lot, close to the boat launch ramp, there's a small footpath, which leads uphill. Look for a sign that says, "Area closed to Bikes and Motor Vehicles." This footpath goes uphill for 0.1 mile until it intersects with the Pioneer Express Equestrian and Hiking Trail. Turn right at this intersection and continue to follow it uphill. At the Pioneer Express Trail sign, note the mileage: traveling to the right for 1.1 miles leads to Avery Pond (it is nine miles to Auburn). Traveling to the left 0.8 mile leads to Rattlesnake Bar Assembly Area. The birding is best if you follow the trail to the right toward Avery Pond. It is now possible to get a cell phone signal in most of the areas described above.

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