

**Rayhouse Road**

The Blue Ridge area of Yolo County is a rugged mix of steep mountains, oak woodlands, patches of riparian, outstanding vistas, and a sea of chaparral. Early mornings in the spring are best, with opportunities for Common Poonwill and bobcats in the road in the predawn, as well as Mountain Quail (calling—hard to see), California Thrasher, Sage Sparrow, and Lawrence’s Goldfinch. The lower, more heavily forested portions of the road have produced numerous records of Pileated Woodpeckers. Band-tailed Pigeons have also been found here.

**The low water bridge has been closed to vehicles in recent years, but there is still great birding for those able to hike long distances.** ~~It is steep and rocky in places, but is not a four-wheel drive road—a vehicle with moderate clearance can make the trip.~~ When the road is closed, portions of it can be walked with good results. There are many miles of roads and trails to explore, but walking just the first mile can be productive.

**Birding the site:** As with the rest of life, you can’t be everywhere at once. If your targets are the chaparral birds, then heading quickly through the lower sections of road is probably your best bet. Early mornings are best for singing birds everywhere, but this is especially so with California Thrashers, Sage Sparrows, and Black-chinned Sparrows (very rare). Once the wind picks up or it gets warm, your chances of finding many of these birds drop precipitously. The expanse of the area and all it has to offer will probably draw you back for multiple trips. Exploring the oak woodlands and riparian habitat also has its rewards.

The low water bridge (not passable when the creek is running high) on Cache Creek often has Cliff Swallow nests, allowing for close views. American Dippers have been found here on rare occasions. Canyon Wrens can be found in the lower section of Rayhouse Road—most often from Cache Creek up a short distance to the barn on the right side of the road.

After crossing the low water bridge and climbing out of the creek channel, there is a gated road on your left and signs to the Blue Ridge Trail. You can park here and walk to the trailhead. There is nice woodland habitat to explore. The trail itself is extremely steep (a 2,100-foot climb in four miles, and most of the climb in just two miles!), but even a short excursion is worthwhile, and it doesn’t get really steep immediately. Details are at the Yolo Hiker Web site (yolohiker.org).

**Back to Rayhouse Road:** after passing some riparian habitat and oak woodland, the road climbs rather steeply. It is oak woodland for the first 3.3 miles from Highway 16, then it transitions to chaparral. The woodlands can be alive with migrants in season and have produced many Pileated Woodpecker reports. As you stop along the road, you may hear the “quark” of Mountain Quail, but you will be lucky to see one. When you reach the chaparral, look and listen for Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, California Thrashers, and Sage Sparrows. If you are very lucky, you might hear a Black-chinned Sparrow. Lazuli Buntings can be numerous. At 4.8 miles from Highway 16, turn left for 0.6 mile to Fiske Lake. This has been the most regular site for Lawrence’s Goldfinches. Back to Rayhouse Road, and another three miles will take you to Davis Creek Reservoir, where Bald Eagles have nested.

**Directions:** From downtown Sacramento, take Interstate 5 north for 21 miles, through Woodland, to the Esparto/Highway 16 exit (exit 541). Go west for 2.9 miles and make a right toward Esparto and the Capay Valley on Highway 16. Follow Highway 16 for 38 miles to Yolo County Road 40 and turn left. This is 5.1 miles past the small Capay Valley town of Rumsey. You will see a sign for the lower site of the Cache Creek Canyon Regional Park. Take Road 40/Rayhouse Road down the hill to the creek. The low water bridge is only passable when flows in Cache Creek are moderate. If the gate is closed but it is safe to walk across the bridge, there are many miles of roads and trails to explore on foot.

Road information is available at the Yolo County Web site (yolocounty.org/org/PPW/Roads.pdf).

*Chris Cornard*

For additional information, check Birding in Yolo County, CA (<http://www.tertia.us/yolobirds/yolo.html>) by Steve Hampton.



