

North of Sacramento

Colusa County

Sand Creek Road

The area traversed by Sand Creek Road is a classic California landscape in remote Colusa County. You'll pass through a mix of habitats, including a broad open valley, oak woodlands, and chaparral. After 11 miles, you'll come to an overlook with a wonderful panorama of the Central Valley, the Sutter Buttes, the Capay Valley, the Coast Range, and, on a clear day, the Sierra Nevada.

This is the best site locally for Greater Roadrunners and among the best for Lawrence's Goldfinches. California Thrashers and Sage Sparrows are commonly heard and often seen in spring, and Black-chinned Sparrows are possible. Mountain Quail call in the spring. Night drives have produced Western Screech-Owls (common), Common Poorwills, bobcats, and gray foxes.

Spring is best, but fall has also been very productive. Winter visits are possible except after heavy rains, though there is the option of walking part of the route from the Yolo County side. Summer can be very hot, but has produced Greater Roadrunners and Lawrence's Goldfinches.

Birding the site: For the first few miles on Sand Creek Road, the country is quite open. Lesser Nighthawks have been seen in the early mornings near the beginning of the road. Yellow-billed Magpies are often plentiful, as are Common Ravens and Lark Sparrows. Golden Eagles are also regularly found.

At 3.6 miles, the road turns to gravel for a short stretch. The pavement picks up again, then disappears completely. The half-mile stretch after the first break in the pavement is prime Greater Roadrunner country. In recent years they have been seen on at least half of the visits reported—often right along the road. There have been additional reports from several locations in the next six miles until the road begins climbing through dense chaparral. In areas of oak savanna and open woodlands, Lewis's Woodpeckers have been found from fall through spring. Rock Wrens are also common near the rocky creek bed where the roadrunners are often seen.

The road crosses small creeks in a few places. These shouldn't pose a problem except shortly after a heavy rain. There is a "Y" in the road at 6.5 miles, where the main road goes left. There is another "Y" at 10.3

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miles, and the main road goes right. Both of these side roads can be explored, though they end at gates after a short distance.

In summer and fall, the remnant water in the creek beds can attract Lawrence's Goldfinches and other species to drink and bathe (learning the Lawrence's high "tee-too" flight call helps with detection). The best site has been at mile 9.9, where the road crosses a small creek. Many other species have been seen here, including thrashers, Sage Sparrows, and Purple Finches—often in the middle of the road.



After passing the "Y" at mile 10.3, the road climbs through dense chaparral. This and any areas of chamise and other chaparral should be checked for California Thrashers and Sage Sparrows. Knowing their songs is very helpful, though they are both often seen in spring. Mountain Quail can often be heard and occasionally seen in this area.

At mile 11, where the road tops out, there is a short road on the left to a convenient parking area. From here you will have outstanding views in all directions. If your primary targets are the chaparral species, you will want to arrive here early in the morning. This area is your best bet for Black-chinned Sparrow.

If the gate is open and the road is passable (**it hasn't been recently**), you can continue into Yolo County, where it is only four miles to Highway 16 at Rumsey. Some of the densest oak woodlands on the route are here, and Hairy Woodpeckers (uncommon) can be found. In 2.7 miles you will reach pavement. A gate here is closed in winter, but allows for walking access. Bobcats have been seen on several occasions between the county line and Highway 16. You will cross Cache Creek just before

reaching Highway 16. The riparian vegetation is worth checking, but beware of traffic and don't park on the bridge. With an early start, it is possible to spend a half day on Sand Creek Road and not see another vehicle.

Directions: From Sacramento, take Interstate 5 (47 miles north of Highway 50) to the Arbuckle/College City exit (exit 566). Turn left on Hillgate Road and go 4.8 miles to a 90 degree bend to the right. Go north from the bend for 0.4 mile to Sand Creek Road and turn left (the sign may be missing). Pavement ends after 3.6 miles, and it becomes a good quality gravel road, suitable for a passenger car as far as the Yolo County line (11 miles) unless there have been recent heavy rains. From the high point at the county line, road conditions vary with the season and recent weather. It is only four more miles to Highway 16. If the road is passable to Highway 16 (**it hasn't been recently**), you can turn left and get back to Interstate 5 at Woodland in 36 miles.



If road conditions are good, the route can be run in reverse, starting at Rumsey, in the Capay Valley. 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 33 miles to Yolo County Road 41. Turn right on Road 41 and cross Cache Creek. From Highway 16, it is 1.3 miles to a seasonally locked gate. If the road is closed, it is a steep 2.7 mile walk to the county line and the panoramic view. Information on road conditions is available at the Yolo County Web site (yolocounty.org/PPW/Roads.pdf).



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Bear Valley

A visit to Bear Valley can produce a bird list similar to that of Sand Creek Road. One big difference here, however, is the year-round water in Bear Creek. Late winter and spring can produce wonderful wildflower displays, and Walker Ridge to the west has unique serpentine-adapted flora. In summer you may see North America's largest dragonfly along Bear Creek—the giant darner.

Birding the site: From Highway 20, the first 6.5 miles wind along Bear Creek through oak woodland on a good quality gravel road. Keep an eye out for Greater Roadrunners. For the next 8 miles, the road opens into Bear Valley proper, and the avifauna changes from woodland to grassland species. At 14.2 miles from Highway 20, turn left on Brim Road. For 2.9 miles you will climb through oak woodland and chaparral. You will top out on Walker Ridge, a site known for its serpentine soils and endemic plants. McNab cypress and leather oaks are conspicuous. The bird list is similar to typical chaparral habitats. After exploring the ridge, you can go straight ahead for another 3.5 miles to Indian Valley Reservoir.

Returning to Bear Valley Road, you can backtrack to Highway 20 or go north on Bear Valley Road until it becomes Leesville Road. From Brim Road, it is 15 miles back to Highway 20 via Leesville Road. The route is paved, but slow and winding in places. It is scenic, with a mix of woodland and more open habitat. Once you reach Highway 20, it is 9 miles to Interstate 5.

Directions: From Sacramento, take Interstate 5 north (59 miles from Highway 50) to Williams. Exit at Highway 20 (exit 578) and head west for 18.5 miles. Turn right on Bear Valley Road (0.1 mile past Highway 16).

Alternately, for a more scenic route through the Capay Valley and Cache Creek Canyon, take Interstate 5 north from Sacramento 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 47 miles to Highway 20. Turn left and then make a right after 0.1 mile on Bear Valley Road.

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