

### The Riverton-Crystal Basin Area

The region is one of the best montane birding areas within easy driving distance of Sacramento. It is particularly productive during the months of May and June when breeding birds are very active and vocal. Located on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, approximately 60 miles east of Sacramento, the area provides an excellent opportunity to view a large variety of interesting birds. The area ranges in elevation from approximately 3,500 feet to over 6,000 feet and offers a number of varied habitats for many species of birds. Easily accessible by paved road, the area extends over 30 miles in length and can readily provide a full day of active and exciting birding.

**Birding the site:** Specialty birds include Mountain Quail, Calliope Hummingbird, Red-breasted Sapsucker, White-headed Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, Hammond's Flycatcher, Dusky Flycatcher, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Cassin's Vireo, Townsend's Solitaire, Hermit Warbler, MacGillivray's Warbler, Lazuli Bunting, Green-tailed Towhee, Fox Sparrow, Purple Finch, and Cassin's Finch. A day's visit in late spring can easily produce a list of over 60 species.

The best time of year to bird this area is from the middle of May to late June. From compilations of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife breeding bird survey records dating back to 1975, over 85 species of breeding birds have been recorded along a set 24.5 mile course of this road during the period of late May and early June. There are many other species such as Common Nighthawk, Williamson's Sapsuckers and Northern Pygmy-Owls that have been seen along the route but never recorded during the strict three-minute counts done at each one-half mile interval. Visits at other times of the year can also produce additional species. The spring migration can produce Rufous Hummingbird, Western Kingbird, Vaux's Swifts, and Townsend's Warblers, species that do not breed here, but which pass through in good numbers. The fall migration may produce both south-bound migrants and higher elevation species descending to lower elevations.

Set your trip odometer to zero as you begin your drive up the Crystal Basin Road. A stop located 0.5 mile up the road is a good place to assemble birding gear and to stretch after the long drive or to meet up with friends. You can park on the left side of the road beside the concrete barriers. A cleared area overlooking the canyon below is what remains from a former log scaling station. Although the location is

compromised somewhat by the din of traffic below on Highway 50, it is still a good place to hear or see many birds including Cassin's Vireo, Black-throated Gray Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Black-headed Grosbeak, and Spotted Towhee.

Continuing your drive, round the sharp curve and stop at 0.9 mile, parking on the left near a power pole. The hillside above you provides a rich mosaic of black oak, ponderosa pine, incense cedar, and a dense understory of chaparral shrubs which in turn attracts an interesting mix of birds. Breeding species include Western Wood-Pewee, Bushy-tit, Nashville Warbler, Western Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak and Lazuli Bunting. In May of 2005 there was the unanticipated and pleasant surprise in the discovery of a male Indigo Bunting here.

Another productive location is at 2.1 miles. Rounding the corner, you can safely park on the right at the wide pullout. A broad vista provides excellent viewing opportunities, and a spotting scope can be useful. Scan the distant snags for raptors. Northern Goshawk has been spotted here in May, but Red-tailed Hawk and American Kestrel are more likely. The snags are also perches for Olive-sided Flycatcher and Western Wood-Pewee. The elevation is still low enough for Anna's Hummingbird, Acorn Woodpecker, House Wren, Bewick's Wren, and Bullock's Oriole. In recent years House Finches have become established. The moist ravines are likely to produce Dusky Flycatcher and MacGillivray's Warbler. Lazuli Bunting is regular at this location and the colorful males often perch on some of the tall standing snags to sing. These snags are a reminder of the Cleveland Corral Fire that swept through this area in 1992 and burned 25,000 acres of forest. Fully seven miles of road traverse this burn area. This profoundly changed the landscape and altered the composition of bird species, swapping species like Red-breasted Nuthatches and Black-throated Gray Warblers for House Wrens and Lazuli Buntings.

The U.S. Forest Service Information Area located at 2.9 miles is always a favorite stop. Here there is ample parking, and usually after late May there is an open restroom facility. A posted map outlines the Crystal Basin region and is useful in orienting one's self to the area. Also, any available campgrounds are listed. You will want to spend some time here as the birding can be very productive. A hummingbird feeder kept by the hosts at this site is worth checking. Usually Anna's Hummingbird is present but you may pick up a Calliope or, in migration, Rufous Hummingbird. Both Black Phoebe and California Towhee may be present here, but are rarely encountered farther up the road. Other birds

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to look for include Hutton's Vireo, Warbling Vireo, MacGillivray's Warbler, Green-tailed Towhee, and Chipping Sparrow. As the black oaks regain their former magnificence, Bullock's Orioles will again return to nest here. The south-facing slope across the road can have an interesting mix of birds. Yellow Warbler and Lazuli Bunting are common. For a few years following the 1992 fire, this hillside went through a recovery stage that attracted Black-throated Sparrow and Black-chinned Sparrow.

One-half mile past the Forest Service Rest Area (mileage 3.6) is a broad curve where parking is available on the left. A bushy draw with a flow of water is attractive to birds, and skulking MacGillivray's Warblers favor the dense undergrowth and are most easily detected by their song. Listen as well for Fox Sparrows. If a Fox Sparrow is perched up and singing its song, get to know the song well for it closely resembles the song of Green-tailed Towhees. The call notes, however, are quite distinctive. This thick-billed race of Fox Sparrow gives a metallic chip note quite similar to that of a California Towhee, whereas the Green-tailed Towhee gives a soft kitten-like mew note.

The next productive stop is at mileage 5.2. Upon rounding the corner, park on the right and check both the draw below and the snags on the hillside above. The excellent visibility here affords opportunities to spot Golden Eagle, Band-tailed Pigeon, and Common Raven. A sizeable list of other birds is usually obtained at this location due to a nice mix of habitat and the ease of viewing birds.

Just a bit farther at 5.6 miles is a little pocket of habitat that can be surprisingly good due to a water source and some willows growing here. A quick stop usually produces a good find. Mountain Aggregates Mine is just down the hill from this location.

Up the road again and just past the exit for Peavine Ridge Road is another good stop at mileage 6.6. This stop is tricky because it comes just after a big curve on Ice House Road. While looking for traffic, carefully cut across the road to the outside of the curve where you will find ample room to park. (The road here is wide enough to afford safe visibility for this maneuver, but be alert for oncoming traffic!) The stop here overlooks a big ravine providing a wide view. Rock Wrens and Mountain Bluebirds are sometimes found here. The location still shows the effects of the big 1992 fire, but as the area recovers, look for the return of Dusky Flycatchers, MacGillivray's Warblers, and Song Sparrows.

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Continuing a quarter-mile up the road to odometer reading 6.9 miles brings you to the Granite Springs Road which exits the main road to the right as you round the curve. Sometimes driving a few miles of this lightly traveled road will produce Mountain Quail. In the summer of 1997, several Black-throated Sparrows were a surprising discovery. They were found several hundred yards up from the junction with the main road and were on the upper hillside. For a couple of summers the species persisted until the area reverted back to pines. If you wish to further explore this area, continue on the Granite Springs Road for another three miles to the site of a recent burn. The Freds Fire in October 2004 burned nearly 8,000 acres. Those who knew this area from prior years will now find a significant change. The tall stands of Douglas fir, stately ponderosa pine, and sheltering incense cedar that provided habitat for Northern Goshawk and Spotted Owl are gone. But as the area begins its gradual transition to its former look, the changes that time brings will be interesting to observe. A situation, similar to one that favored the occurrence of Black-throated Sparrow, may develop. Any still standing tall snags may provide homes to many cavity nesting birds. American Kestrel, Northern Flicker, Red-breasted Sapsucker, Pygmy Nuthatch, Tree Swallow, and Mountain Bluebird are all likely to take up residence.

If staying with Ice House Road, a nice panorama of the Crystal Range appears as the road climbs. At mileage 7.6, shortly past a Department of Agriculture sign, you can stop to enjoy this vista while checking the distant, deep ravine below for Lewis's Woodpecker. The tall standing snags are sometimes used by these woodpeckers as they swoop out to fly catch. It also provides a full view of the sky where you might see soaring raptors or pick up Band-tailed Pigeons winging by. Anywhere along this road stretch you might find either Mountain or Western Bluebirds.

At about mileage 8.5, the road clears the burn area from the 1992 fires, and the habitat changes. The first aspens appear, and at mileage 8.9 there is an excellent birding area. If only one or two cars are being driven, park on the right where an old logging road is blocked by two large boulders. If more cars are involved or you miss this location, park 200 yards farther down on the left where there is ample room by the road leading to Silver Creek Campground (another good birding area!) and walk back to the old logging road. Follow the old road down to a small stream and the aspen grove. This is a delightful spot, and the birding here can be terrific. With a little exploration, Green-tailed Towhees and Calliope Hummingbirds can be found. The aspen grove supports a number of cavity nesters. Williamson's Sapsuckers are rare at this

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location in the Sierra, but they have been found in some years. White-headed Woodpeckers are more likely. Yellow-rumped Warblers are common at this elevation, and both MacGillivray's Warbler and Wilson's Warblers are present. Check the tops of tall standing snags for an Olive-sided Flycatcher, a vocal species easily detected by its distinctive calls. It is worthwhile to make a loop walk here by hiking up along the creek and carefully checking the tops of willow clumps for the highly territorial male Calliope Hummingbirds. Dusky Flycatchers are found in this habitat and often nest in the aspens. After reaching the upper portion of this wet area, cut to the left to traverse the hillside. A few trails can be followed that will help you skirt the edge of the hillside while you try to sort out the subtle differences in the songs of Fox Sparrows and Green-tailed Towhees which are common here. The area is also good for Mountain Quail, particularly in late summer when family groups are scurrying about. A grassy meadow and marsh is encountered as you complete your circuit. The area of wet grasses and adjacent shrubs is home to a pair of Lincoln's Sparrows. Coming back to your starting point, be alert for Red-breasted Sapsuckers that nest in the aspens. Other birds to look for here are Western Wood-Pewee, Mountain Chickadee, Cassin's Vireo, Purple Finch, and Pine Siskin. Two hours is not too long to spend at this delightful location.

Ice House Store is at the 9.3 mileage mark. Food, drinks, and gasoline are available in addition to restrooms. Barn Swallows nest under the eaves. The parking area attracts blackbirds and cowbirds—one of the few places you are likely to encounter these species along this route. A number of species of birds are attracted to this location, but remember this is private property and always ask for permission before venturing out behind the store or to the cabin area to bird.

Once past Ice House Store, the habitat and birding changes significantly. Hammond's Flycatcher, Mountain Chickadee, Brown Creeper, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and Hermit Warbler become more common. Continue to mileage 10.3 (or about one mile beyond the Ice House Store), park on the right by an old logging road. This is an excellent area for Hammond's Flycatcher, and walking down the logging road a short ways is likely to produce other species of interest including White-headed Woodpecker, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Cassin's Vireo, and Hermit Warbler. Keep an ear peeled for Pileated Woodpecker which inhabits the area too.

Continuing another half-mile, at mileage 10.8, brings you to an intersection with Big Hill Lookout Road. Exploring the area along this

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side road can be interesting. A short walk up this road enables one to sample a mature fir and pine forest on your right and a logged area on your left with some standing snags. White-headed Woodpeckers, Mountain Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Golden-crowned Kinglets, and Hermit Warblers are common here, and a little looking should help you find a beautiful Western Tanager. It is also good habitat for Hammond's Flycatcher. Be sure to listen for the call of the Olive-sided Flycatcher. (Its distinctive, three-noted call comes across as "Macpherson!" to some, "What peeves you?" to others, as well as the classic "Quick, three beers!") With still some tall trees remaining in this area, enjoy the large sugar pines. Some are said to be over 600 years old. In this old growth forest, Pileated Woodpeckers occur and Spotted Owls have been heard in the period between late April and early July. After birding this area, return to the intersection with the Crystal Basin Road. To reach Loon Lake and complete the rest of this birding route, continue up the main road from the intersection.

Note: if you do wish to visit Ice House Reservoir and campground, drive (east) across the intersection and continue one mile to the entrance to the campground. The reservoir is usually crowded with people, and the birding is only fair. A much better alternative is to turn left from the entrance to the campground and drive 8.5 miles to the Wright's Lake Road. The road is paved the entire distance. Upon reaching Wright's Lake Road, turn left and continue for 2 miles to the Wright's Lake Campground and park at the picnic area. Birding in the vicinity of Wright's Lake can be very productive. Specialty birds include Blue Grouse, Northern Goshawk, Black-backed Woodpecker, Williamson's Sapsucker, Pine Grosbeak, Cassin's Finch, and Evening Grosbeak. This area is particularly attractive in late summer when many warbler species have ascended to high elevations and have formed loose flocks prior to migration. When leaving Wright's Lake, continue back down the road past the previous intersection and proceed ahead 8 miles more to Highway 50. This will complete the loop and a full day of birding for returning to Sacramento.

If you are continuing on the Crystal Basin Road to Loon Lake, the next several miles from the intersection with Big Hill Lookout Road are your best bet for Pileated Woodpeckers. Stop frequently to look and listen. You should find Golden-crowned Kinglets foraging high in the tops of the conifers. Check the trunks for Brown Creepers working up the trees. Hermit Thrushes are sometimes heard in the distance. You have also reached the primary area for Hermit Warblers. They are common at this elevation, and nearly every stop should put you in earshot of these

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beautiful warblers which sing from the upper levels of the conifers. They often sing three thin, high, lispings notes followed by two abrupt lower notes.

At mileage 12.5 you will pass by the Crystal Basin Ranger Station on your right. The next 6.5 miles to the Union Valley Reservoir overlook should be checked carefully for White-headed Woodpeckers, Hammond's Flycatchers, Golden-crowned Kinglets, Hermit Thrushes, Hermit Warblers, and Cassin's Finches. Sometimes Evening Grosbeaks can be found and, in some years, Red Crossbills.

To view Union Valley Reservoir, continue driving until the road passes under some power lines at mileage 19.5. You will note large-diameter water pipes that feed into the reservoir. This location provides one of the better views of the reservoir although the water itself never seems to have many birds. Keep viewing the skies, however, as Bald Eagles have nested along the shores of this lake near Yellow-Jacket Campground. Also, check the sky at this location for Vaux's Swifts. Although not a confirmed breeder here, the species has been noted here during the breeding season.

Turning away from the reservoir, note on the hillside the black oaks interspersed with the chaparral. In this interesting mixture you may again find Black-throated Gray Warblers and Black-headed Grosbeaks, species quite different from the norm of the past several miles through pine and fir forest. Acorn Woodpeckers, rather unusual for being so high in the Sierra, have sometimes been seen at this location. This south-facing exposure favors trees and shrubs partial to a drier, warmer environment and illustrates how a particular habitat is coupled with its own distinctive set of birds.

Continuing another two miles brings you to a summit at mileage 21.4 and an elevation of 5,760 feet. Look for a sign that reads "Cheese Camp Road, Van Vleck Ranch 5," side roads ripe for exploration. There is plenty of room for parking here, and it is still a fairly good area to bird although selective logging has removed some of the larger trees that were favored by Pileated Woodpeckers in the past. Incense cedar, ponderosa pine, and a sprinkling of black oak make this area an attractive habitat for many species including Townsend's Solitaire and Hermit Thrush.

By this point and time of day, you may have seen most of the birds you are looking for and be ready to head back. But individuals wanting to

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continue to Loon Lake can do so by driving to mileage 24.6 where the main road forks. This is well-signed and after five additional miles the road reaches Loon Lake, elevation 6,400 feet. The lake really does not live up to its name since loons are really quite rare here and are not to be expected even in migration. One might find, however, a few species of waterfowl including Canada Goose and Common Merganser. Sometimes a California Gull is seen patrolling the lake which is actually a reservoir operated by Sacramento Municipal Utility District (S.M.U.D.) for electrical power generation. There is camping and fishing available, but the birding here is rather slow.

There are many places along this route that are not mentioned which you might wish to explore. Bear in mind that while much of the land along the road is public land, there are a number of large parcels owned by Michigan-California Lumber Company. Some of this land is posted, so please respect private property rights. Be advised that logging operations may be under way in some areas and consequently your safety becomes an issue; likewise, logging trucks roaring down narrow dirt roads compel one to stay clear of such areas!

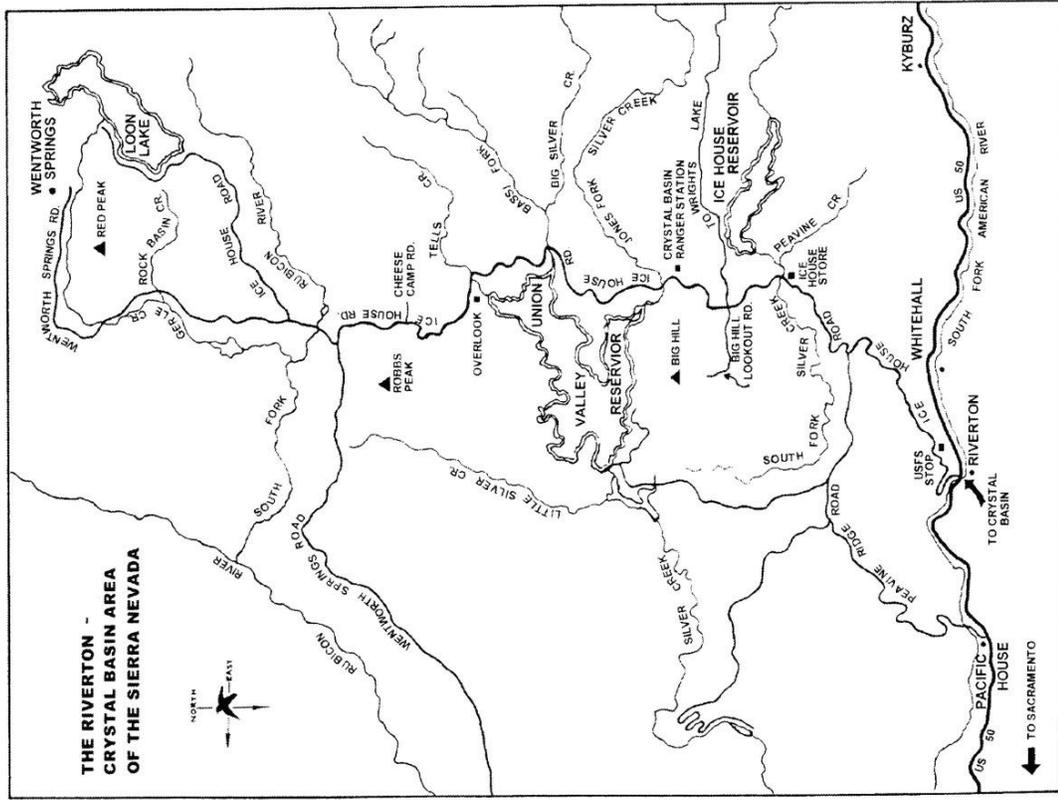
Over the years, the Ice House Road has experienced an increase in traffic, but you can still find many safe pullouts to park and bird. When you see a unique looking habitat and a safe pullout, stop and see if you can anticipate the birds you will encounter. Doing this, you will learn much about the birds of the area in addition to generating a good day's list of birds. From this modest start using these suggested birding locations in the Crystal Basin, one can further explore new stops and pursue locations reached by side roads and trails. It is an exciting area to cover, and there will be surprises waiting for you as well as discoveries you can make. One visit to this area with its fine speciality birds will provide you with plenty of incentive to return again and again. Enjoy your birding.

**Directions:** Ice House Road begins at the former settlement of Riverton, roughly a one-hour drive east from Sacramento. To reach the Riverton area, take Highway 50 east. From Placerville, continue east an additional 20 miles to the point where Highway 50 narrows from four lanes to two lanes and crosses the South Fork of the American River. Just beyond the bridge, both a sign and a left turn lane direct traffic to Ice House Road and the Crystal Basin Area. Be careful in making your left turn, however, as speeding west-bound traffic rounding the curve ahead can pose a hazard. As you begin driving up the hill, you begin a 30-mile route on paved road that passes through a variety of habitats containing

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chaparral, black oak, ponderosa pine, incense cedar, aspen, and fir. The road takes a northerly course paralleling the Crystal Range and climbs to Loon Lake, elevation 6,400 feet.

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