

DELTA BIRD WATCHING

By Linda Heune-Solomon & Viola Saima-Barklow Photos by Linda Heune-Solomon & Jan Vick

Interested in birding or not, you can't help but be fascinated by the sheer numbers and variety of birds overhead on a winter evening on the waterways and islands of the Sacramento River Delta.

Sandhill Cranes make their arrival in late October and some stay here through the winter while others fly on to the southern U.S. and northern Mexico. They are the largest of the migratory birds found here. Silver grey feathers droop over a curved rump, with long black legs and stately necks. A sharp black beak and a red marking on the crown with a contrasting white cheek make them unmistakable. They forage in harvested corn and alfalfa fields during the day and fly to flooded fields for protection from predators at dusk. This is the sight that draws birdwatchers from all over the world.

Sandhills come in two



Great Blue Heron

sizes, Greater and Lesser. The Lesser were thought to be rare, but here they have increased in numbers that almost equal their larger cousins. A few weeks ago a coyote was seen making his way across a pasture near a flock of Sandhill Cranes. They gathered together watching and pointing at the intruder. He went away empty handed having to settle for smaller prey.

Lodi hosts a Sandhill Crane Festival every year in early November, a not to be missed event. Some of the best viewing spots are on Staten Island Road off of Walnut Grove Road. From the grain elevators to the dirt road there are great spots where you can stop, take pictures, and watch with a good pair of binoculars. Isenberg Crane Reserve is a wildlife refuge viewing area on Woodbridge Road that is good for Sandhills and ducks. The Delta sky in late afternoon is filled with a variety of species. Tundra

Swans, with pure white bodies and black tipped wings, are hard to tell from Snow Geese at a distance. They tend to stay in the same ponds in very large numbers and their combined voices sound like a large and raucous party, minus the music. The Swans are larger with longer necks than the Snow Geese but both are a very



Canadian Geese

impressive sight flying or sitting.

Canada Geese make up the greatest population of geese here in the Delta. Some live here year round while others fly on for the winter. Large flocks of another large goose, the Greater White-fronted Goose, can also be seen. Look for the smaller-sized Ross's Goose among the flocks of Snow Geese.



Sandhill Cranes

DELTA BIRD WATCHING (CONTINUED)

Plentiful food and lack of predators make this area ideal either for a rest stop or a permanent home.

On your way to any viewing area you will see Great Blue Herons, Great and Snowy Egrets, and their smaller cousins, Cattle Egrets. Greats and Snowys tend to be more solitary while you may see larger groups of Cattle Egrets in the fields all over the Delta. Egrets usually nest in large communities in trees along waterways. They may be seen here year round as food is abundant and the weather rather mild. Great and Snowy Egrets were hunted almost to extinction in the early part of the 1900's for their showy feathers used in the fashion industry.

A variety of ducks such as Mallards, Common Mergansers, Ruddy Ducks and many more, including the common Coot or mud duck, make their home here

in great numbers adding to the spectacle of the dusk fly-in. Egrets and other large birds were once scarce in the area because of the spraying of DDT, which made the egg shells of most birds too fragile to survive. Many years have passed since that pesticide has been used and the birds have made an astonishing comeback.



Great Blue Heron

These are only a few of the species you will see here in the Delta. Keep a lookout for the occasional Osprey as you travel along the rivers. Take the time on a Sunday afternoon this winter to drive the country roads, stop for lunch in a quaint riverside village such as Isleton, Locke, or Walnut Grove, and then watch the fly-in at dusk at one of the wildlife reserves or from the side of the road on Highway 12, Woodbridge Road, Thornton Road or Twin Cities Road. You will not forget the experience.

DIRECTIONS TO VIEWING AREAS

Directions to reach the **Isenberg Crane Reserve** discussed in this article: Take Highway 12 east to I-5, go north to Turner Road. At the bottom of the exit, turn right to Thornton Road and turn left. Continue on Thornton until the stop sign at Woodbridge Road. Make a left hand turn and travel west for approximately two miles to the turnout and lookout point of the reserve on left hand side of Woodbridge Road. Contact information: Woodbridge Ecological Reserve, Galt. AKA Isenberg Crane Reserve; California Department of Fish and Wildlife (209) 234-3435, <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/Lands/Places-to-Visit/Woodbridge-ER>.

Here are some other nearby public-access locations for viewing a wide variety of waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors and sandhill cranes feeding in the flooded fields and marshy areas. Note: Check websites for docent-led nature walks offered on specified dates.

Consumnes River Preserve, Galt. The Nature Conservancy, (916) 684-2816, <http://www.consumnes.org/>.

Directions from Rio Vista: Take Highway 12 east to I-5, go north on I-5 to Twin Cities Road (Exit #498). Go east about one mile to the stop sign at Franklin Blvd. Turn south on Franklin and, driving through the preserve, watch for the Visitor Center, 13501 Franklin Blvd., to obtain information on riparian and wetlands trails.

Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area, Vic Fazio Unit, California Department of Fish and Game. Directions: Take I-80 east toward Sacramento. East of Davis, turn off at Exit #78 for East Chiles Road (32B). Proceed to the parking lot where an auto tour of the wildlife area begins near a kiosk with posted information. Roads around the ponds are gravel and may be muddy or even flooded due to recent rains. The Yolo Basin Foundation (<http://www.yolobasin.org/>) offers tours on specified dates. Call (530) 758-1018 if you have questions. (Please note: Duck hunting is permitted nearby on certain days of the week, generally Wednesdays and Saturdays, October-January.)