

# Follow the Birds

Story and photos by Jan Vick

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, just outside our door, is part of the Pacific Flyway, and is critical to migratory birds: geese, ducks, cranes and more. There are several Wildlife Refuges throughout the Sacramento Valley that provide a place for these birds to rest and spend the winter before returning north to breed. This habitat is very important to the bewildering variety of birds that stop over. Habitat has decreased during the drought. Where flooded rice fields were once important stopping places, many farmers are unable to spare the water to flood fields.



The main attraction from October to March is the Sandhill Cranes, which can be found at many viewing areas. Sandhill Cranes are a majestic, large grey bird with a distinguishing red mark on its head. They are 4-5 feet tall, with a wingspan over 5 feet wide. In flight Sandhill Cranes can be distinguished from herons by their extended neck rather than the curved neck of herons. Sandhill Cranes spend their time feeding in freshwater wetlands and eat mostly plants and grains. They can live for 20 years or more and mate for life. Cranes often display, not just during mating season. They “dance” involving wing flapping, bowing, and jumping, sometimes seemingly just for fun.

During the time the cranes are in the Delta, they can be found in several areas. It is fun to “hunt” for cranes, trying to find where most of them are located. There are three main viewing areas:

However, the Delta area continues to provide this important habitat in the Yolo Bypass, Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge and Cosumnes River Preserve, all close to Rio Vista. They

all have less water than normal due to the



drought, but wildlife still abounds. The Cosumnes River Preserve particularly has some great viewing areas for all kinds of ducks, wading birds, herons and egrets, and particularly the Sandhill Cranes.

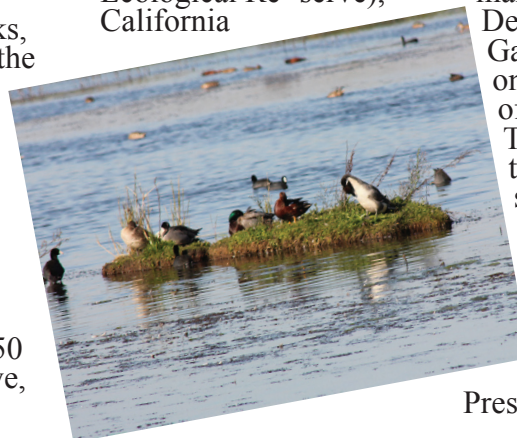
To get to the Preserve, travel north on Highway 160 through Walnut Grove to Twin Cities Road. Continue East over I-5 to the stop sign at Franklin Boulevard. Turn right into the Preserve (there are several signs). There are many trails, a boardwalk area, and a visitor’s center. The center has many displays describing the populations in the preserve during all four seasons. More than 250 species of birds have been recorded in the Preserve, particularly during the winter, including several nesting pairs of Swainson’s hawks, Ross, White-Fronted, Aleutian and Canada geese, tundra swans and many species of ducks.

1. The Cosumnes River Preserve near the Visitor’s Center on the Wetlands Walk trail and boardwalk, as well as along Desmond Road off Franklin Boulevard.



2. Staten Island south of Walnut Grove off Walnut Grove Road. The corn fields are flooded after harvest in early October just for the migratory birds, and cranes are plentiful. You might also see tundra swans, white-fronted geese and Canada geese. Please obey the “No Public Access” signs about 4 miles in. Do not walk into the fields as they are private property.

3. Isenberg Sandhill Crane Reserve (Woodbridge Ecological Reserve), California managed by the Department of Fish and Game. The reserve is on Woodbridge Road, off Thornton Road.



The best viewing time is just before sunset as the cranes fly in for the night in large numbers. You can pick up a good map with all the viewing areas at the Cosumnes River

Preserve Visitor Center.

So, take a day and follow the birds. Be sure you bring your camera and good walking shoes. A bird scope or binoculars are also helpful.