

Delta Migratory Birds

The Great Annual Autumn Migration

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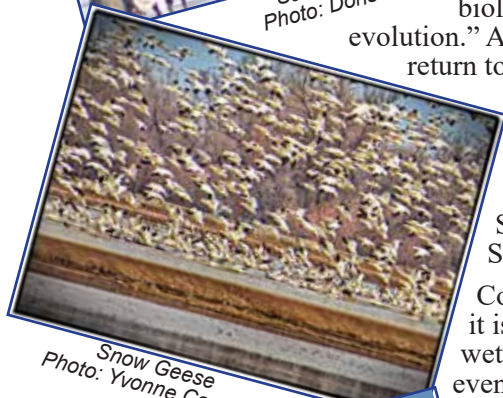


Sand Hill Cranes
Photo: Doris Noriega

More than one billion birds fly south each winter along the Pacific Flyway, according to the National Audubon Society, and about 4 million waterfowl make California's Central Valley their winter headquarters. The pattern of migration has continued for thousands of years, driven primarily by the availability of food and nesting resources. Our unique region offers flooded farm fields, wetlands and other marshy habitat of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, providing an ideal place for birds to spend the winter.

Locally, the Sandhill Cranes are the rock-stars of the winter migrants. Arriving as early as September and sometimes staying until March, these notable birds stand up to 5 feet tall with a wingspread of 6-7 feet. Their display includes a beautiful gray color with red caps.

The best viewing times are at dawn and dusk when cranes by the hundreds fly into shallow ponds and wetlands to roost for the night. Aldo Leopold, the father of wildlife biology, described the bugling cry of the sandhill as "the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution." Ancient birds, they trace their roots to fossils millions of years old. Cranes like to return to the same sites each year, so fortunately we can track the best viewing locations in the Delta, including Cosumnes River Preserve, Staten Island and the Woodbridge Ecological Reserve/Isenberg Crane Reserve in Lodi.



Snow Geese
Photo: Yvonne Camper

Other winter waterfowl visitors, often at the same ponds, include Tundra Swans, White Fronted Geese, Ross's Geese, a wide variety of ducks (including Coots, Shovelers, Pintails, Mallards and more) plus shorebirds such as the Black Necked Stilt, Long-billed Dowitcher and Curlew.

Cosumnes River Preserve, alone, is an ideal location for fall/winter birdwatching as it is home to over 250 species of birds. There are eleven miles of trails, a mile-long wetland boardwalk and a self-guided auto tour plus many other special event options.



White Egret
Photo: Doris Noriega

Around Rio Vista, watch for a Belted Kingfisher who often hangs out on Jackson Slough Road, and look for the beautiful Cedar Wax Wings that return to town each year. Keep your eyes open for White Faced Ibis, often seen in the nearby fields. And if you detect a subtle change of sunlight, or hear a special wild call, look up to see the streams of birds making their way through the area.

November is prime-time for watching birds locally and the season for the City of Lodi's Annual Crane Festival. Held on the first full-weekend in November, the event includes exhibits, tours, and informative presentations along with entertainment, food and wine-tasting. For details on this year's festival go to their website at www.cranefestival.com.

One of the best things about birdwatching is the friendliness of bird aficionados and the many free tours, guided walks and paddle trips available. When planning your visit to a local preserve, it is a good idea to call or visit their website to get directions and hours and to see what events are planned. For Cosumnes River Preserve, call (916) 684-2816 or visit their website at www.Cosumnes.org. Information on Staten Island is also available through the Cosumnes River Preserve. Woodbridge Ecological Preserve/Isenberg Sandhill Crane Preserve has guided tours through the State Department of Fish and Game website at www.dfg.ca.gov/delta/cranetour.



Ducks
Photo: Yvonne Camper

Be sure to take a look at this informative article from *Ride Chronicles* that includes descriptions and directions for a bike ride to Delta-Cosumnes River Preserve at ridechronicles.com/2016/12/13/delta-migratory-birds-staten-island-consumnes-river-preserve/. Another resourceful website is from The Sacramento Bee at sacbee.com/news/local/article5366184.html.

People visit the Delta from all over California to see the Sandhill Cranes and the rich variety of migratory fowl. Serious birders even travel from other countries to experience our beautiful gallery of Pacific Flyway Birds. During a solitary walk, a casual amble, or a planned family outing, the birds you may see will inspire your imagination and love of the environment.