

## **Site Guide Reprinted from the Central Valley Bird Club Bulletin**

### **Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area: A birding hotspot in the making**

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A new addition to California's State Wildlife Areas, the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area (YBWA), is just waiting to be discovered by birders. YBWA is a developing birding hotspot covering over 2,500 acres of permanent and seasonal wetlands, with an additional 1,200 acres of riparian and upland habitats. The focus of the largest wetlands restoration project west of Florida, it required 7 years and a major cooperative effort from concept through construction. The YBWA, now managed by the California Department of Fish and Game, opened in November 1997, and has already proven to be a rich and diverse area. The site has qualified as "Globally Important" in the American Bird Conservancy's United States Important Bird Areas Program.

As its name suggests, the YBWA is located totally inside the Yolo Bypass, a flood control system that receives water from the Sacramento River in periods of heavy flows. The land surrounding the YBWA is agricultural, although in winter fields are fallow and often flooded. Occasional heavy flooding turns the bypass into an inland sea, which attracts rafts of ducks and other waterbirds. Just north of YBWA are other wetland areas which reinforce wildlife interest in the region. Conaway Ranch has developed extensive wetland habitat to support breeding waterfowl and the City of Davis has recently established a 400-acre wetlands site. Duck clubs to the south of the wildlife area also provide winter habitat. Unfortunately, most of these areas of the bypass are currently closed to the public. Thus, the YBWA provides the best public access to the wide variety of wildlife-viewing opportunities in the area.

### **VISITING THE WILDLIFE AREA**

The YBWA is conveniently close to two major California crossroads: Interstates 5 and 80. Located alongside I-80, the wildlife area is just 7 miles west of the I-5 junction with Business I-80. To get there from I-80 going east, exit at East Chiles Road, about halfway between Davis and West Sacramento, just west of the west levee of the Yolo Bypass. If you are going west on I-80, take the first exit to the north at the end of the Yolo Causeway. This frontage road (officially known as Road 32A, but still marked simply as an "exit") curves east and under the freeway to join East Chiles Road. The entrance to the wildlife area is up a gravel road over the west levee of the Yolo Bypass on the south side of I-80. Turn left at the top of the levee and follow the road down to the first parking lot. The YBWA is open to the public from dawn to dusk and has no entrance fee. The area is closed when the bypass floods.

During hunting season, approximately mid-October to mid-January, check in at the hunters' check station and tell them you are birding. They will hand you a map of the non-hunted Northwest and Causeway Units of the Wildlife Area. At other times of the year, stop at the bulletin board to check the map for road conditions or for additional information, then take the six-mile, auto tour route around the northwest portion of the wildlife area (see map).

There are lots of pullouts which should be used to stop and look for birds. There are also several good walks along the seasonal and permanent ponds on the west side of the YBWA, some leading to the eight-acre, three-year-old riparian restoration area, just west of parking lot D. An additional riparian area of 5,000 trees and shrubs, planted in October 1998, is just north of the Yolo Causeway. Access to this area is by foot, with bicycle trails planned for the future. In non-hunting season, walking trails to the east are available, and vehicles can park in lots E and F. This eastern side of the bypass is lower than the west side and stays moist longer after the rest of the area dries out. Because the YBWA is new, habitats are still developing and constantly changing. This presents a chance to learn and discover for yourself. Due to this area's central position on the Pacific Flyway, just about anything could turn up tomorrow. For those wanting to visit the YBWA as part of a group, the Yolo Basin Foundation sponsors monthly trips to the wildlife area led by birders from Yolo Audubon Society (530-758-1018).

Summer seems to be the slowest season, but some interesting local breeding species, including Snowy Plover (England 1998), Horned Lark, and Savannah Sparrow (Hampton 1998), have recently been documented. Grasshopper Sparrow has been recorded. Summer is a good time for Blue Grosbeaks, Common Yellowthroats, and with increasing frequency, American White Pelicans. Lazuli Buntings are reliable, along with many nesting Bullock's Orioles, in the riparian area north of the freeway. Birds from nearby nesting colonies of White-faced Ibis, Tricolored Blackbird, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Snowy Egret and Cattle Egret also visited the area in 1998.

Seasonal wetlands are flooded in September in preparation for incoming winter waterfowl. Both shallow, seasonal ponds for the dabblers and deeper, permanent ponds are present. Eared Grebes appear among the ever present American Coots. When appropriate habitat is present, shorebirds use the wildlife area. Sandhill Cranes are frequently sighted overhead. Fall brings the start of large flocks to the area. For weeks, thousands of swallows gather; check them out for a Bank Swallow. Blackbirds of a variety of species cluster by the thousands, usually with some Yellow-headed Blackbirds among them. If you keep scanning the flocks you may eventually be rewarded with a sighting of Tricolored Blackbird.

Winter is a prime season for large flocks of swans, geese, ducks, and shorebirds. Raptors are often delightfully plentiful, with regular sightings of Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, Prairie Falcon and Rough-legged Hawk. Forster's Terns patrol the floodwaters. Fallow fields can turn up a longspur among the thousands of Horned Larks (a Chestnut-collared Longspur was reported here on the 1997 Sacramento Christmas Bird Count). Last winter the huge flock of sparrows in the SE corner of the riparian area included a Swamp Sparrow. January is the really great month for white birds; swans and white geese stage in large numbers to go north but thin out considerably in February. Travelers along Interstate 80 are treated to the sights of these wonderful birds flying over the causeway at dawn and dusk.

Spring migration of diving ducks begins in February with Lesser Scaup and Canvasback in large rafts if the bypass floods. Redheads and Greater Scaup are rare but regular. Some local birders think there is good possibility for even rarer diving ducks. As Spring progresses the water levels drop and shorebirds move in. On one day in April 1998, flocks of more than 6000 Dunlin, 1000 Least Sandpipers, and 200 Black-bellied Plovers were seen, along with 8 Snowy Plovers. A rare Blue-winged Teal and flock of Yellow-headed Blackbirds was seen the same day. A week later a flock of 110 Semipalmated Plovers were present. Calling American Bitterns punctuate the marsh. The riparian area is good for warblers, flycatchers,

and Swainson's Thrush in migration. Swirling groups of American White Pelicans and hundreds of northbound Greater White-fronted Geese are regulars for this time of year.

Recently, Congress renamed the YBWA in honor of Congressman Vic Fazio, who was a key figure in its establishment. The future title of the area is still unclear, but expect something along the lines of the Vic Fazio Yolo Wildlife Area. By any name, it's worth a visit. Come check it out!

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

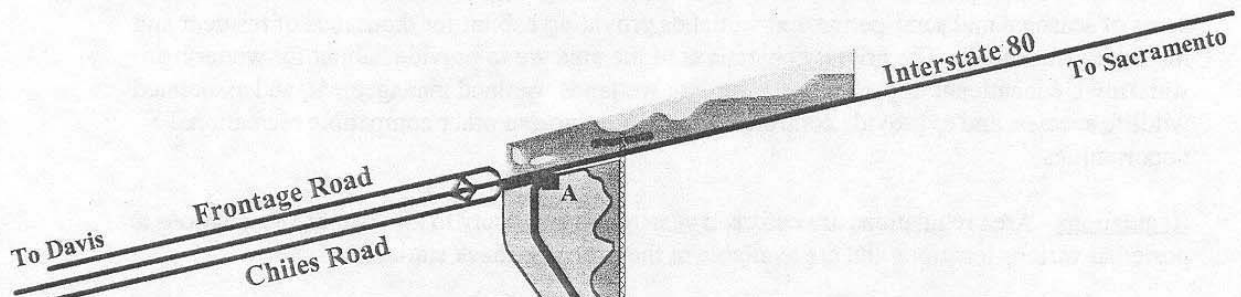
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#### LITERATURE CITED

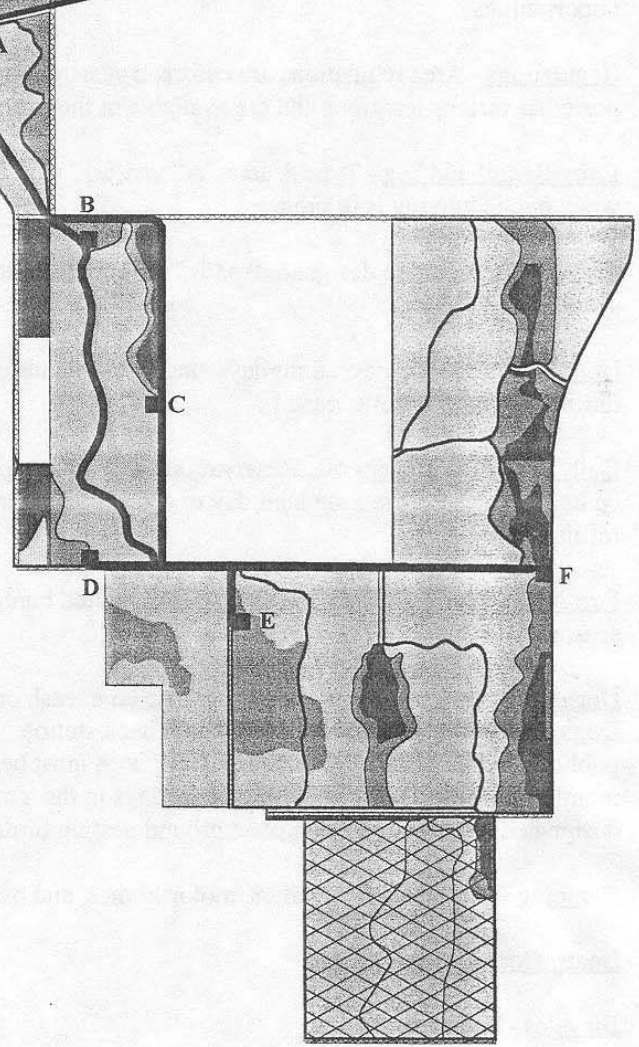
England, S.A. 1998. Snowy Plover nesting records from the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area, Yolo County. CVBC Bulletin 1:36-39.

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# Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area



Headquarters



- Parking lots (A, B, C, D, E, F)
- Automobile access
- Walking trails
- Canals
- ▨ Closed to all uses (Sanctuary)
- Permanent wetland (Caution-Deep Water)
- Seasonal wetland
- Grassland
- Riparian

