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BIRDING IN LAKE COUNTY
A POPULAR PASTIME FOR VISITORS AND RESIDENTS ALIKE

LAKE COUNTY, CA — Located along the Pacific Flyway, Lake County hosts more than 300 species of birds, and the Clear Lake Area is designated an “Important Bird Area” by Audubon California because of the diversity of birds and valuable bird habitats. With diverse landscapes encircling Clear Lake — the largest natural freshwater lake in California and possibly the oldest in North America — birds and other wildlife make Lake County their home throughout the seasons.

Lake County’s resident birds include the great blue heron, green heron, Clark’s and western grebes, osprey, double-crested cormorant, and black-crowned night heron. As is the trend in other birding areas, a wider variety of birds are present during the winter and early spring months.

The great blue heron’s white head and gray-blue body can stand up to four feet tall. Nesting in close proximity to others in its colonies, the great blue heron can live around both fresh and salt water and eats fish, frogs, crayfish, and snakes. The black-crowned night heron is the most widespread heron in the world. When disrupted, it can disgorge the contents of its stomach, which is often filled with aquatic invertebrates, lizards, rodents, snakes, fish, and amphibians. Even smaller in size, the green heron — despite its ability to blend in well when still — does a good job of making its presence known by its loud squawking. To attract its prey, the green heron is one of few birds that uses bait when fishing.

Clark’s and western grebes are very similar in appearance except for slight differences in crown and beak colorations. Also, western grebes are best known for what is often referred to as their “rushing ceremony” or “dance” — a mating ritual in which a pair of courting grebes run side by side across the water’s surface for up to 20 meters. The osprey, sometimes known as a “fish hawk,” hovers in flight just over the water’s surface while looking for prey. When prey is sighted, the osprey splashes into the water and carries the fish head-first to its dining location. The double-crested cormorant — the most abundant North American cormorant — is a large,

dark water bird with a long body and neck that builds its bulky nests from sticks and materials like rope, deflated balloons, plastic debris, and other detritus.

For best viewing, birdwatchers should head out before 9:00 a.m. – the perfect time of day for spotting birds as they are out gathering food. The Redbud Audubon Society recommends binoculars with a 7 x 35 or 8 x 42 magnification.

Popular Viewing Spots

Anderson Marsh State Historic Park & McVicar Preserve, 8825 Highway 53, Lower Lake, CA

According to the Redbud Audubon Society, more than 151 different species of birds have been identified in the park. For a close-up look at grebes, herons, marsh wrens, coots, mallards, great egrets, and many other water and birds, a creekside boat trip is the recommended form of travel. A long hike is another way to see a myriad of these species, including possibly a phainopepla or Lewis's woodpecker. Following a trail through the wildlife preserve, McVicar, hikers may take a rest or have a bite at the picnic table area. During the winter, bald eagles often are seen flying over the marsh. Other birds to spot include white-tailed kites, acorn and Nuttall's woodpeckers, western bluebirds, white-breasted nuthatches, Oregon juncos, northern harriers, ruby and golden-crowned kinglets, yellow-rumped warblers, and a variety of sparrows.

Boggs Mountain Demonstration State Forest, off Highway 175, Cobb, CA

While forest birding is more challenging, birders who enjoy hiking are encouraged to head up to the mountainous terrain early in the daytime in the spring or summer for a look at orange-crowned, Nashville, yellow, and black-throated gray warblers, as well as Cassin's and warbling vireos. Year-round hikers can expect to spot pileated woodpeckers, pygmy, white-breasted and red-breasted nuthatches, chestnut-backed chickadees, and Hutton's vireos.

Borax Lake, off Lakeshore Drive, Clearlake, CA

A great birding spot for winter watchers, visitors may pull off any turnout to view the flocks of American wigeon, northern shovelers, green-winged teal, ruddy ducks, scaups, and buffleheads. Eared grebes also are commonly sighted. Migrating fall shorebirds include semipalmated plovers, greater yellowlegs, short-billed and long-billed dowitchers, Wilson's red-necked phalarope, dunlins and pectoral, western, and least sandpipers.

Clear Lake State Park, *5300 Soda Bay Road, Kelseyville, CA*

Crossing either of the foot bridges in the park, Clark's and western grebes are prevalent, as well as green herons, black-crowned night herons, and belted kingfishers. Along the bed of Cole Creek, killdeer may be spotted. Land birds include the California quail, brown towhees, western scrub jays, oak titmice, northern flickers, white-breasted nuthatches, acorn woodpeckers, and sometimes California thrashers. During the winter months, American robins are commonly sighted, as well as the varied thrush. During the summer, nesting ospreys — well-known on Clear Lake — can be easily spotted circling above; red-tailed as well as red-shouldered hawks also are a common summer sight. Visitors are encouraged to hike one of the designated paths for an even more thorough birding experience.

Lakeside County Park, *1985 Park Drive, Lakeport, CA*

The yellow-headed blackbird makes its way to Lakeside County Park during the early- and mid-spring season. It's easily identified by its brightly colored yellow head and its vocalization — a song that features low, raspy notes ending in a buzz and a call that resembles a horse croak. Visitors also may see red-winged blackbirds, pied-billed grebes, American coots, herons, and Clark's and western grebes.

Highland Springs Recreation Area, *3600 E. Highland Springs Road, Kelseyville, CA*

On the Highland Springs Reservoir, birders may spot buffleheads, coots, mallards, and other waterfowl. Continuing up the Highland Creek canyon, past the reservoir, sage sparrow and rufous-crowned sparrow can be found. During the spring and summer, Lazuli buntings, ash-throated flycatchers, and Nashville warblers often are seen flitting around the oak woodland.

Rodman Slough, *Nice-Lucerne Cutoff, Nice, CA*

Rodman Slough, off the northwest edge of Clear Lake, is a great experience by kayak, especially for viewing a variety of gulls and Caspian terns — a more recent finding. In late fall and early winter, American white pelicans settle into the slough. Winter months usually provide good views of large flocks of common mergansers, double-crested cormorants, and occasionally a bald eagle. Wilson's snipe and killdeer can be found along the muddy edges of the Slough.

Events

Heron Festival, *Kelseyville*

April 25-26, 2009

This fun, family-oriented weekend features pontoon boat tours, birding and nature walks, nature talks and exhibits, and children's activities. The event and admission to the park is free. The Wildflower Brunch will be held on Saturday in conjunction with the festival from 9:00 a.m. to noon. Reservations are requested; cost is \$15. Ninety-minute pontoon boat bird-watching excursions will be held between 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday. Reservations are required; donation is \$15. The Clear Lake State Park Visitor Center will be open from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. with interpretive displays of Lake County's natural and cultural resources. Speaker presentations, slide shows, and videos on local birds and wildlife will be held at the Visitor Center Auditorium. Presented by the Redbud Audubon Society and the Clear Lake State Park Interpretive Association. 5300 Soda Bay Road. For more information or for reservations for brunch or pontoon boat rides, call (800) 525-3743 or visit www.heronfestival.org

Guided Bird and Nature Walks, *Lakeport*

Saturdays, year-round

The Lake County Land Trust hosts guided bird and nature walks at the Rodman Slough Preserve on Saturdays. The walks, which last 90 minutes, begin at 9:00 a.m. September – May, 8:00 a.m. June – August. Free admission. 6350 Westlake Road, off Highway 29, near the Nice-Lucerne Cutoff. (707) 279-0923, (707) 994-2024, www.lakecountylandtrust.org

Bird and Nature Walks, *Kelseyville*

Second and Fourth Saturdays, year-round

Clear Lake State Park Interpretive Association offers alternating bird and nature walks on the second and fourth Sunday of each month. Meet at the Visitor Center ramp at 8:30 a.m. Clear Lake State Park, 5300 Soda Bay Road. Free park entrance for walks. Rain cancels. Call (707) 279-2267 for any change in schedule.

Guided Bald Eagle Viewing Hikes, *Cache Creek Natural Area*

Mid-January through mid-February

Bureau of Land Management natural resource specialist will lead guided four-mile hikes. Enjoy the scenes of Cache Creek canyon where eagles, osprey, tule elk, and other wildlife may be seen. The first mile consists of a 600-foot climb. All participants should wear sturdy hiking boots and dress for cold weather. Bring water, lunch, and binoculars. Reservations required. (707) 468-4000, www.blm.gov/ca/st/en/fo/ukiah/cachecreek.html

Resources

Many groups around Lake County provide not only their expertise but also offer hikes, walks, and tours of Lake County and its unique birds and other wildlife. For more information on parks, lands, and birds, contact the following organizations:

Lake County Parks & Recreation

(707) 262-1618, www.co.lake.ca.us/Government/Directory/Parks_and_Recreation.htm

Anderson Marsh State Historic Park

(707) 994-0688, www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=483

Redbud Audubon Society

(707) 263-8030, www.redbudaudubon.org

Clear Lake State Park Interpretive Association

(707) 279-2267, www.parks.ca.gov/default.asp?page_id=21897

Lake County Land Trust

(707) 995-1398, www.lakecountylandtrust.org

Located in beautiful Northern California, Lake County is just two hours by car from the San Francisco Bay Area, the Sacramento Valley, and the Pacific Coast. Lake County is home to Clear Lake, the largest natural freshwater lake in California and possibly the oldest lake on the continent. Visitors to Lake County experience the state's cleanest air basin, spectacular scenic beauty, fine wines, headliner concerts, and unsurpassed recreational opportunities — from hiking, biking, golf, and off-road adventures to boating, fishing, kayaking, birding, and even rockhounding. The local area code is 707. For visitor information, contact the Lake County Visitor Information Center at (800) 525-3743 or www.lakecounty.com

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