

Site Guide Reprinted from the Central Valley Bird Club Bulletin

Birding the Modesto Sewage Ponds

Harold Reeve, 1404 Bandera Lane, Modesto, CA 95355.

The Modesto sewage treatment ponds complex is one of the most productive birding areas in Stanislaus County, California. Of the 284 species of birds currently on the county checklist, 209 have been recorded from land owned by the city of Modesto including and surrounding the treatment ponds. Bird species observed include nearly all of the waterfowl, shorebirds, wading birds, gulls, and terns recorded from Stanislaus County, and a number of rarities to the Central Valley, including Long-tailed Jaeger, Western Gull, Wandering Tattler, Red Knot, Red Phalarope, Brant, Oldsquaw, and Indigo Bunting.

Located on the east bank of the San Joaquin River about eight miles southwest of the city of Modesto, the sewage ponds complex is the largest body of open water on the west side of the Central Valley floor between O'Neill Forebay in Merced County and Clifton Court Forebay in Contra Costa County. Expanded to more than 1150 acres of ponds and channels in 1985, it was then the second largest municipal oxidation ponds complex in the world. In addition to the sewage ponds, the city of Modesto owns about 2700 acres of agricultural land to the south which it irrigates with effluent water in order to reduce the amount of treated wastewater released into the San Joaquin River.

VISITING THE MODESTO SEWAGE PONDS

The Modesto sewage ponds are owned and operated by the city of Modesto, and the management has been willing to allow birders to enter the site provided that certain guidelines are followed. Please use good judgment and do not ruin a good birding spot by not following these guidelines.

1. You must sign a release form prior to birding the ponds, so your first visit must be on a weekday.
2. Always sign in and out at the office. There is a spiral notebook hanging on the back wall of the main room for this purpose. Signs along the entrance road instruct you to sign in at the composting facility office, but you only need to sign in at the sewage ponds office.
3. Drive slowly on the dikes. When you stop, leave room for other vehicles to pass by you. Usually the workers will take a different road if they see you.
4. Plant hours are typically 7:00 AM to 3:30 PM, but may vary from these times. Be absolutely certain that you know when closing time is and be out at least 30 minutes before that time. The gates leading to the ponds are usually closed early, and if you get locked in, AAA does not have a key!
5. Please limit your weekend visits. The gates are locked on weekends, but weekend visits can sometimes be arranged. Even with prior arrangement, access is not

guaranteed. The best plan is to join one of Stanislaus Audubon Society's field trips to the ponds. Dates and times are posted at the SAS web site at www2.ainet.com/sas

The Modesto sewage ponds are located at 7007 Jennings Road. To get there from Hwy. 99, take the Carpenter Road exit in Modesto and go south 6.5 miles to Grayson Road. Turn right on Grayson and go west two miles to a stop sign at Jennings Road. Turn left on Jennings and go south for two miles. The entrance to the ponds is through a gate on the right at a slight jog in the road, immediately after crossing a drainage slough.

To get to the Modesto sewage ponds from I-5 or I-580, take the Hwy. 132 exit and head east toward Modesto. Take Hwy. 33 south to the very small town of Westley. At the stop sign in Westley, take Grayson Road east about 7.5 miles to the stop sign at Jennings Road. Turn right on Jennings and proceed as above.

MODESTO SEWAGE POND HABITATS

Likely contributing factors to the diversity of species found at the Modesto sewage ponds include the large amount of open water present, the close proximity of the ponds to the San Joaquin River, and the wide variety of habitats available. The large size of the ponds serves as a visual attraction to high-flying birds, and any birds using the river as a flyway are almost certain to notice the ponds.

The river also contributes to the variety of habitats in the vicinity of the ponds. The riparian woodland along the city of Modesto property extends from a few tens to several hundreds of yards from the river, forming a broader riparian corridor than remains along much of the lower San Joaquin River. The riparian woodland is mostly valley oak, willow, cottonwood, and boxelder with button-willow and other shrubs mixed in.

The two storage ponds, which total 596 acres, average about 13 feet deep and provide deeper water than is found at most sewage treatment complexes. The oxidation ponds and recirculation channels average about five feet deep, but some areas fill with silt over time to provide very shallow habitats and even some exposed mud until they are dredged out. The dikes between the ponds are mostly graveled, and provide an area where shorebirds and waterfowl loaf. There are generally only small areas of mud and very shallow water available as shorebird habitat, so shorebirds generally congregate on the dikes and along pond margins. Several drainage sloughs add narrow corridors of marginal marsh habitat. The agricultural lands are a mixture of tilled cropland and irrigated pasture, broken up by drainage sloughs and adjacent rows of trees.

Currently oxidation pond 1 is drained in order to remove sludge pumped in from other ponds. In just over one year a forest of cottonwoods and willows has grown to more than 12 feet tall over much of the pond, and the open bottom provides increased habitat for shorebirds. The current situation is not likely to last much longer, but ponds are drained on occasion, increasing shorebird habitat and improving opportunities for birders. Shorebirds observed in drained ponds have included such rarities as Stilt Sandpiper, Solitary Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone, and Red Knot.

WHEN, WHERE AND HOW TO BIRD THE PONDS

The best seasons to visit the Modesto sewage ponds are winter and during migration. Summers are very hot and bird numbers are much reduced, but nesting species and mid- and late-summer shorebird migration can add considerable interest.

From the entrance on Jennings Road, a 0.7 mile road runs due west to the ponds complex. On the north side of this road is the Westport Drain, a cattail-lined slough which is good for sparrows in winter, including many Lincoln's. Swamp and White-throated sparrows have been found here. Look for Blue Grosbeak and Lazuli Bunting in summer. On the south side is the city composting facility. Ignore the signs that urge you to sign in there and wait to sign in at the sewage ponds office beyond the second gate and the large, round reactors.

After signing in, a good place to start is the three oxidation ponds. All of the dikes have roads on them, making access easy, but beware of the gravel roads after heavy winter rains. In particular, it is best to stay off of the two dikes between the oxidation ponds after a rain due to the mud. These two dikes are often the best location for shorebirds, gulls, and thousands of loafing waterfowl, and should be driven from south to north to allow for better lighting conditions. Some of the more unusual shorebirds seen annually along the oxidation pond dikes in fall migration are Baird's and Pectoral Sandpipers, Willet, Marbled Godwit, and Short-billed Dowitcher. Sanderlings have been recorded during nine different months, and a Wandering Tattler was there in September 1986.

Often there will be a **large flock of Black-bellied Plovers** on one of the two dikes between the oxidation ponds, and it should be checked carefully for Golden-Plovers, a specialty of the Modesto sewage ponds. Several Pacific Golden-Plovers winter here annually, and it is one of the most reliable places in the valley to find them. Their plumage is often very bright gold and easily discernible from the larger, grayer Black-bellieds. During fall migration, **Pacific and American Golden-Plovers** may both be found, with Pacifics occurring more regularly and outnumbering Americans. Approach the flock slowly, using your car as a blind. The Golden-Plovers will often be found at the margins of the flock. Look the flock over carefully, then approach very slowly to cause only the closest birds to fly, giving opportunity to examine the next portion of the flock. Such efforts repeated throughout the flock often yield unobstructed views of the Golden-Plovers, increasing your chances of identifying the two species. If the birds fly before you get close, scan the flock for plovers with dark rumps to determine if any Golden-Plovers are present.

If the Plover flock is not on either of the dikes between the oxidation ponds, check the west end of the dike between the south recirculation channel and the irrigation forebay. A good way to view them here is to scope them from the paved road on the south side of the irrigation forebay.

The oxidation ponds often host many gulls in winter, which are usually found on the two dikes between the ponds. Large flocks are mostly California and Ring-billed, but when only one or two hundred gulls are present they are often mostly Herring Gulls. A very few Thayer's and Glaucous-winged gulls, mostly in first-winter plumage, are present each winter. There are at least four records of Glaucous Gull, about a dozen for Franklin's, and one each of Western Gull, Sabine's Gull and Long-tailed Jaeger.

The recirculation ponds surrounding the oxidation ponds are not particularly productive, but the north end of the east recirculation pond often contains large numbers of Lesser Scaup, and sometimes a few Greater Scaup, particularly from late January through early March. The only record of Tufted Duck in Stanislaus County is from this location. The

irrigation forebay also hosts many scaup, as well as Common Goldeneye and Bufflehead. The adjacent pre-chlorination pond and storage afterbay hosted a female Oldsquaw in 1996 and again in 1997. The storage forebay has also hosted two different Oldsquaws, as well as all three species of merganser and many shorebirds, including Semipalmated Sandpiper.

The inflow area of storage pond 1 hosted the county's first Red Phalaropes in 1997, but storage pond 2 generally contains larger numbers of birds. This pond has held more than 40,000 ducks some winters, mostly Northern Shovelers, and rarities have included Barrow's Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser, and Surf Scoter. A pair of Snowy Plovers successfully raised one young here in 1985 when the pond was drained for expansion.

Access to the riparian area is by way of a dirt ramp from the north end of storage pond 2 and by a road along the north side of the chlorine contact basin. A flood-control dike that separates the river and riparian vegetation from the ponds and agricultural land is topped by a well-maintained road and runs the length of the city property. If you leave your car to bird in the riparian area, be sure to park in a pullout area or far to the side so other vehicles can easily pass by. The riparian area is not heavily birded, but has produced such local rarities as Indigo Bunting on two occasions, probable nesting Lawrence's Goldfinch, and Lewis' Woodpecker.

I would like to thank Jim Gain and Sherrie Reeve for contributing to the guidelines for visiting the ponds and for commenting on a first draft of the manuscript.

