

Updated Chapter

A Birder's Guide to Southern California

Fifth Edition

The Antelope Valley

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Our apologies to our readers and particularly to chapter author Charles Hood for our error in publishing an unrevised version of his Antelope Valley chapter. This replacement chapter will print the same size as the guide.

THE ANTELOPE VALLEY

by Charles Hood

Located in the Mojave Desert about an hour's drive northeast of Los Angeles, the Antelope Valley hosts a few specialty species easier to find here than elsewhere. Once a mixture of Joshua Trees, junipers, prairie grasses, saltbush, and artesian springs, now it offers alfalfa farms, housing tracts, aerospace plants, and miles of abandoned fields. The water table has dropped drastically and the human population has soared—one reason there are no Pronghorns left in the Antelope Valley—but in many isolated places native habitat endures, offering new visitors their first California Poppies (the state flower), California Quail (the state bird), Cactus Wrens, Sage Sparrows (*Amphispiza belli canescens* here), and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers. In other places agriculture attracts wintering Ferruginous Hawks and Mountain Bluebirds, while terminally optimistic birders comb through thousands of Horned Larks each winter hoping to find a few Lapland Longspurs. This is also a test-flight area, so birders keeping a plane list should watch overhead for stealth bombers, stealth fighters, the B-2, and planes so secret nobody in Congress even knows they are being built.

As a general rule, fall and winter are the best times to bird. In these seasons rainfall is rare, seventy-five-mile views are common, and temperatures, while dipping below freezing in the morning, usually warm rapidly during the day. Spring from mid-April onward often means heavy winds, which can blow day and night without end. Unlike Arizona's deserts, the Antelope Valley receives virtually no monsoon thundershowers, so mid- and late-summer visitors should be prepared for daily highs of 100–115 degrees (and nil cloud cover: bring hat, canteen, and sunscreen).

Usual access is via Highway 14, a freeway connecting Los Angeles with US-395, the two-lane road that runs north through the Owens Valley past the eastern Sierra Nevada to Reno, Nevada. (*Birders continuing to Yosemite from Southern California may want to consider this route, as the Mono Lake and Tioga Pass areas reached from US-395 make a good circle route into the national park, with a return through the Central Valley or San Francisco.*) Access to the Antelope Valley from Palm Springs, Joshua Tree National Park, or Riverside is via Highway 138 off of Interstate 15. Highway 138 is also the same road to watch

for if you're headed into the Valley southbound on Interstate 5 from the Bay Area.

Once here, navigation is simple. Starting at the Kern County / Los Angeles County line, east-west avenues proceed alphabetically from Avenue A in Rosamond to Avenue S in Palmdale, with each letter spaced one mile apart. North-south streets are numbered and also grid out at mile intervals. Every ten digits equates to one mile (e.g., 10th Street to 20th Street is one mile in distance). Streets are divided into east and west components roughly in line with the freeway. If a street you're on ever dead-ends, just jog left or right to pick up a parallel route. Something is bound to go through. The accounts below *do not always list mileages*, as individual routes will vary. *You can always estimate distance by using the street numbers and letters as a guide.*

There is no standardized birding route; instead, people will visit species-specific sites depending on the birds they wish to find. Directions below describe places most of interest to visiting birders. Sites covered during the Lancaster Christmas Bird Counts (including sod farms, golf courses, small hunt clubs, and private stock ponds) that are not generally open to the public have not been listed. When birding from public roads, park off the pavement as much as possible, since local traffic may be going thirty miles an hour faster than the posted 55 mph speed limit. Yet you must also remember to test all berms first before pulling off, since the sand on some shoulders can be quite soft, especially after rain.

Motels, fast food, and gas stations can be found adjacent to the freeway on Avenues K, J, and I in Lancaster and at Palmdale Boulevard in Palmdale. Gas up before leaving town; you will not find services in the rural areas.

BIRDING SPOTS AND SPECIES LOCATIONS EAST OF THE 14 FREEWAY

Lake Palmdale is the large reservoir visible on the right from the 14 as you drop out of the mountains. Surrounded by cottonwoods, it is a private hunt club that does not welcome birders. *Do not trespass.* (It is listed here first only because it is the first spot most birders come to as they head out from Los Angeles.) To scope the lake for Western and Clark's Grebes, exit at Avenue S, go east a few yards to the first street (Calle Grillo), and turn right. Bird along the access road overlooking the lake. If that hasn't worked, go a bit farther east on Avenue S to the Park 'n Ride lot and scope from high ground by the signal-light. The grebes are a long way out, so you'll need a good telescope or a vivid imagination.

Avenue S has recently been widened, limiting habitat slightly. In the past, birds in the scrub around the fence have included the odd Say's Phoebe or two, White-crowned and occasionally Brewer's, Lark, and Sage Sparrows,

Brewer's Blackbird, House Finch, and if you're really lucky, a Greater Roadrunner with a snake in its beak or an accipiter flushing California Quail. You will also see Great-tailed Grackles, which have spread throughout the Antelope Valley. They especially like Wal-Mart parking lots.

Both Nuttall's and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers occur by the lake, and any thrasher seen will almost certainly be a California Thrasher, as Avenue S marks the edge of their range. Overhead will be the ubiquitous ravens and a steady flow of California Gulls going back and forth to a nearby landfill. Among the ravens will be a few crows. In years past the raven-to-crow ratio was 1000-to-1, but now is closer to 100-to-1. In winter there are ducks on the lake (including decoys) and an occasional loon. Sabine's Gulls are seen some falls, but are more reliable (and more easily seen) at the Lancaster Sewage Ponds.

Geologists may enjoy knowing that when looking at Lake Palmdale they are looking at (and standing on) the San Andreas Fault. Good photos of folded bedrock can be taken at the road-cut where the 14 slices through a small hill immediately north of Avenue S; this accordioned cross-section has been featured in several geology textbooks, although Caltrans improvements have recently made the face less sheer.

Palmdale Country Club (**Le Conte's Thrasher Site #1**) can be reached from the Avenue P / Rancho Vista exit of the 14 (by Wal-Mart). If *northbound*, go left from the freeway on Avenue P one-third mile, turn right (north) at the first street (10th Street West) for one mile, and then turn right onto Avenue O.

From the *southbound* lanes of the 14, exit at 10th Street West (by the Antelope Valley Mall), go left (north), and then right on Avenue O. Once on Avenue O drive less than half a mile and park on La Quinta Lane at the entrance to the Fairway Business Park. Cross the highway and walk toward the sandy wash to enter into the Joshua Tree woodland north and east of Avenue O. Here, as elsewhere, remember that you will be in fragile habitat—no matter how sere it may look—and the *ABA Code of Birding Ethics* exists for situations like this.

This area has become increasingly built-up (south side of road) and degraded (north side). For now, Le Conte's Thrashers occur still but further development may change that and the *For Sale* signs already are up. Certainly these elusive birds are missed more often than seen. *Do not use tapes; this is a heavily visited site.* (Try not to trample the low vegetation, also.) February can be better because sometimes they sing then; if the thrashers are not singing, then you'll have to walk them out. Look low, between shrubs—you are watching for a mockingbird-sized grayish bird with tan undertail coverts running away lickity-split. Sometimes it helps to imagine that you're looking for a mouse, not a bird.

In winter the nearby country club's grounds may harbor sapsuckers (all three possible, but Red-naped most likely), along with large flocks of White-crowned Sparrows (watch for the odd Golden-crowned among them) and other montane species (Dark-eyed Juncos, for example). You can cross over to the boundary fences from Avenue O by walking through vacant plots of the business park. Look over the fence into the grounds, but do not trespass. If there is even the slightest chance of flashfloods upstream, stay out of the newly rechanneled sandy wash.

Le Conte's Thrasher Site #2 is some distance from town and is equally iffy but at least offers a quiet desert walk if you're tired of sitting in the car. From Avenue P / Rancho Vista Boulevard and the 14 (see above) head east on P to 50th Street East. Go left (north) to Avenue O, turn right (east), and drive to 145th Street East. Turn right (south) and, at the T-intersection with Avenue Q, park. Walk in the wash north, watching the brush along the sides. You may need to walk a mile. *Do not use tapes.* As with the above site, this can be hit or miss; in recent years birders have enjoyed a higher success rate looking for Le Conte's Thrashers in Jawbone Canyon, Kern County. One of the mysteries of this bird is why it isn't more common, when so much habitat seems suitable. It is currently listed as a California species of special concern. At both this and the previous site, also watch for Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Verdin, Black-throated Sparrow (mainly April–September), and Scott's Oriole (March–August). Never enter the wash if rain is possible upstream; this site regularly floods.

Mountain Plover, Mountain Bluebird, and wintering raptors can usually be found from November to February somewhere in the agricultural areas between 40th Street East and 90th Street East, and Avenue K and Avenue N. If present, the plovers can be on bare earth or in alfalfa stubble; the bluebirds prefer irrigated alfalfa. Longspurs (in order of probability, Lapland, Chestnut-collared, and McCown's) are possible, but rare. Raptors could include Northern Harrier, Red-tailed, Ferruginous, and Rough-legged (rare) Hawks, Golden Eagle (uncommon), American Kestrel, Merlin, Prairie Falcon, and Turkey Vultures can be abundant migrants in spring and fall. Swainson's Hawks have nested, but generally are seen only as migrants. Great Horned and Barn Owls are widespread but uncommon permanent residents. Long-eared Owls winter, but rarely in the same places twice. Dense, isolated Tamarisk or other tree clusters (such as one finds around abandoned homesteads) are preferred. If this bird is a goal, check every stand of trees like this in the entire valley. Eventually you might find one (or even six or seven, since in winter they sometimes roost communally).

Saddleback Butte State Park at 170th East and Avenue J has camping, hiking, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Verdin, Cactus and Rock Wrens, Black-throated Sparrow, and a few Scott's Orioles (March–August).

BIRDING SPOTS AND SPECIES LOCATIONS WEST OF THE 14 FREEWAY

Westside Raptors and Burrowing Owl Site. The same raptors from the east side list can be found on the other side of the Antelope Valley along Avenue D (here also called Highway 138) between 60th Street West and Interstate 5; it can be productive to explore north and south from here as well. Burrowing Owls were formerly widespread throughout the Antelope Valley, but feral cats, habitat destruction, and a reduced insect fauna have caused the population to crash. Some occasionally are seen around 120th Street West and Avenue I (which becomes Lancaster Road), or at the homestead ruins at 110th Street West and Avenue G. (They also have recently been found right in urban Palmdale in a large vacant lot, so surprises still happen.) Sometimes Mountain Plover and Mountain Bluebird are found here in winter, while Horned Larks can be extremely abundant. This also is a good place to keep an eye out for Prairie Falcon and Golden Eagle. If you notice somebody out here unloading an old sofa at the end of a dirt road or target shooting at abandoned cars, pay no mind—they're just engaging in the local Antelope Valley custom of trashing the environment. If you're wondering where all the vegetation went that originally grew in this area, the answer is a five-letter word: sheep.

The Antelope Valley California Poppy State Reserve (on Lancaster Road between 130th West and 170th West) is managed to maximize the reproduction of the native California Poppy. April is the best month; although densities vary, every year there are always at least some fields of poppies. In peak years the hillsides are ablaze with carpets of orange flowers visible from across the entire valley. The poppies are not limited only to the preserve; sometimes they even grow along the freeway berms. For current reserve information, call 661-724-1180.

Good Scott's Oriole habitat occurs at **Ripley Desert Woodland State Park** at 205th West and Lancaster Road, just west of the aqueduct. California Quail, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Verdin, and Cactus Wren are permanent residents. Equally good is the section 0.5 mile north on Lancaster Road. This is what the Antelope Valley used to look like.

Holiday Lake (see inset on chapter map) often hosts breeding Tricolored Blackbirds, if the water company which manages this pond has not done one of its periodic brush and cattail clean-outs. This is private property, but public access remains unrestricted so far. From Highway 138 between Gorman and Neenach watch for La Petite, a small street on the north side of the road 0.5 mile west of the aqueduct. From La Petite go right on Elise (0.7) (which will become 255th Street West), go right on B-8 (1.1), and left on Calcot (0.2). Park by the gate and walk the circle around the pond. In addition to quail, migrant warblers, and winter ducks, you might see an owl

(Great Horned or Barn, and very rarely Long-eared or Burrowing). Check among the Lesser Goldfinches to be sure that none are Lawrence's—advice that applies everywhere in the Antelope Valley. This is a pleasant place to check if passing by on Highway 138 but not a prime destination by itself. Mountain Plovers have been found in the fields around 100th Street West and Gaskell Road, north of Avenue A, but are not reliable there.

Apollo Park (50th Street West and Avenue G, east of the airfield) is a public park where the artificial ponds are stocked with fish; fall and winter are the best times to bird. Once in a while the water attracts something out of the ordinary such as a Pacific Loon or a Ross's Goose or a pair of White-winged Scoters. Most gulls here are California's, with a few Ring-billeds and the occasional Herring. Cactus Wren and Brewer's Blackbird are permanent residents. Trees around the perimeter can be good for migrants. If rushed for time, skip this spot, which can often be dead.

BIRDING SPOTS AND SPECIES LOCATIONS IN THE NORTH-CENTRAL VALLEY

You can't bird the Antelope Valley without noticing rampant and uncontrolled construction, and construction means houses and houses mean toilets. That waste ends up at a processing plant in the north end of the Valley. (And from there, water flows into Piute Ponds, detailed below.) The **Antelope Valley Sewage Ponds** can be worth a stop, but if time is limited or key species are on one's target list, keep trying elsewhere.

In years past, with more earthen ponds and quieter surroundings, the sewage ponds have attracted a long list of good birds, including California's only Gray-tailed Tattler. Modernization has come, and ponds now have changed. Shorebird habitat is less and water levels often high. Even so, local birders check here when time allows, ready for the next mega-rarity.

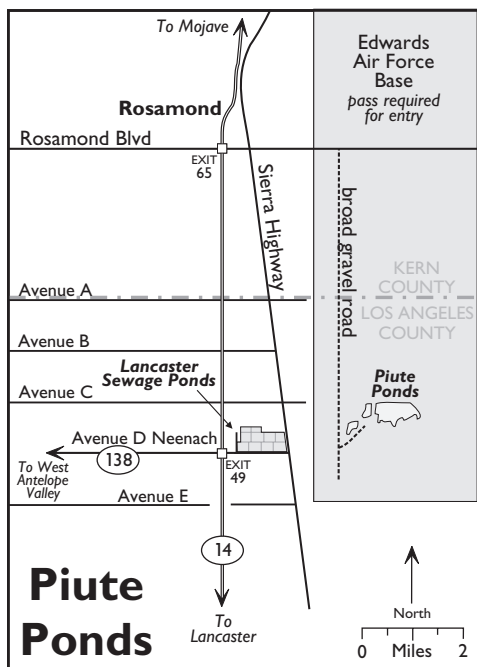
This site is located at the 14 Freeway and Avenue D / Highway 138, just to the east of the northbound side of the freeway. Depending on construction restrictions, the site is open 7 AM–3 PM seven days a week. Nominally, permission is required. To sign in, turn north up the obvious entrance adjacent to the freeway (passing a small trailer on the left that monitors the pumping of septic tank trucks) and stop at the new gate. If it is open, proceed forward. If it is closed, it has a call-box that should be answered by somebody in the office who will activate the gate. Drive several hundred yards parallel to the 14 to a cluster of buildings on the right. After the first processing tanks, and before coming to a maintenance shed, there is a small tan unmarked office on the corner of a minor intersection. A flagpole marks the building. Try the door closest to the intersection as you turn right; there is a sign-in log inside. Sometimes the office is unstaffed, so that you have to hunt for folks to get permission from. Once permission has been granted, drive the dikes

(carefully!), stopping to scope the ponds. In the past, the northernmost pond on the freeway side was the most productive, but it recently has been reconfigured, so this may change. Red-necked and Wilson's Phalaropes stop over during spring and fall migrations, and in winter hundreds of Northern Shovelers and other ducks fill the impoundments. Migrant shorebirds include Snowy and Semipalmated Plovers, Killdeer, Whimbrel (spring), Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwit, and even Ruddy Turnstone, as well as Western, Baird's, and Least Sandpipers. A few California Gulls are always around, with an occasional spring Franklin's Gull, a passing flock of Bonaparte's Gulls or Black Terns, or (in September) a few juvenile Sabine's Gulls. Look for American Pipits along the perimeter. In high winds the sewage ponds forms whitecaps and sloshes over the sides of the dikes, adding an aromatic yet maritime aspect to desert birding. The adjacent unit of the sewage ponds (east of Sierra Highway) is usually closed to birders, which is probably why it always looks like it has all the birds in it. Construction and expansion may make these notes out of date—good luck.

To try for Sage Sparrow, take a walk in the saltbush flats anywhere in the general area. The sparrows often can be found here (especially in winter), and even if you don't find any on your visit, you now know what habitat they like. Look for a gray sparrow with a long tail, running among the low brush, or teed up singly on its tops. As with Le Conte's Thrasher, this bird is widespread but

often hard to find, making one wonder why they are not more abundant. If you're going to Galileo Hill for migrants and/or Chukars, there are Sage Sparrows there, too. The *canescens* race (species?) breeding in the Antelope Valley is supplemented by *nevadensis* birds in winter.

Birders check **Piute Ponds** during shorebird migration to study Baird's and other sandpipers. (Rarities have included Red-necked Stint, Sharp-tailed and Curlew Sandpipers, and Ruff.) This is an artificial marsh on Edwards Air Force Base property. The water currently enters via an open trench from the sewage plant, a flow which is



supposedly going to be maintained even after the sewage plant is reconfigured. The Cinnamon Teal, Redheads, Clark's Grebes, White-faced Ibis, Northern Harriers, and Yellow-headed Blackbirds that breed are easier to see than the Virginia Rails, Soras, and Muskrats also found here. Burrowing Owl, Le Conte's Thrasher, and Sage Sparrow are possible; large numbers of ducks over-winter. This is the single birdiest spot in the Antelope Valley. *Permission to visit this site must be requested in writing several months in advance*; give the number of people in your party, ask for specific dates and times, and list alternate dates in case the marshes are closed for test flights or hunt days. *Under no circumstances give in to a temptation to trespass*—security personnel armed with automatic weapons patrol regularly. To request a day-use permit, write to the Environmental Management Office, 5 East Popson Avenue, Edwards AFB, CA 93523. Request their checklist of birds when you write for permission. If you need more information, call the office at 661- 277-1401. You can also apply by e-mail, writing to either Mark Hagan or Wanda Deal, whose e-mails are *mark.hagan@edwards.af.mil* and *wanda.deal@edwards.af.mil*. It may be best to give alternate dates in case your desired visit falls on a hunt day, and also they will need to know how many people will be in your group. Generally, photography is verboten. This is an active military base.

To reach the main ponds, exit Highway 14—pass in hand—at Rosamond Boulevard and turn right (east), heading toward the base. A quarter-mile past the *Welcome to Edwards Air Force Base* billboard look for a broad gravel road on the right, just past a row of utility poles. Take this road south five miles and watch for a small spur road going left. Park and walk the dikes. Le Conte's Thrashers favor sandy washes here, too, as elsewhere, but have been seen from the access road. They may be slightly more common on the base than in the rest of the Valley.

When finished birding the Antelope Valley you can continue north on Highway 14 sixteen miles past its intersection with Highway 138 to Mojave and the Eastern Kern County loop, travel to the mountain loops by following Highway 138 east from Palmdale to Littlerock, turning south on the N6 road to the San Gabriel Mountains route, or continue to Interstate 15 south to reach the San Bernardino route.

Camping is available at Saddleback Butte State Park, and motels are numerous in Palmdale and Lancaster.

GREAT HORNED OWLS FOR NON-BIRDERS

If you want to show grandma or the kids Great Horned Owls, for 15+ years there have been successive pairs resident at Antelope Valley College at 30th West and Avenue K. The campus has a birdlist of 116 species and may be interesting in migration but its primary attraction is the owls. They are moderately habituated to humans and can be very easy to see, verging on extremely cooperative for long scope views. (Other times, not. They are wild, after all.) Here's what you should do.

- Come in winter, when the deciduous trees are not in leaf.
- Come in the evening, half an hour before sunset, on a windless night on a weekend. On weeknights the night classes often cause too much commotion (and there's no parking anyway).
- Bring a scope, a flashlight, and a tape.
- Park anywhere on campus (e.g., lots F or C), buy a one-day permit for 50 cents (look for the yellow vending kiosks), put it on the dashboard, and head to the library in the center of campus. If the kiosks are covered with trash bags, classes are not in session and no permit is required.

The owls will probably be in the pines but can be on the satellite dish atop the library or quite low down in bare trees. If you don't see them, try playing a brief snippet of tape. Be ethical and judicious in this. Look for pellets to see which trees they have been roosting in recently. If there has been recent nesting, the juveniles will be around too, sometimes as many as three in a row. Campus security may be inquisitive, as their posts require, but almost everybody knows about the "AVC Owls", so you should not have trouble. If you get a good scope view, be sure to let the guards look too. Good luck!