

Finding Birds
at the
Salton Sea
and in
Imperial County, California

by

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Front Cover Photograph: Yellow-footed Gulls and Black Skimmers

Back Cover Photograph: Mountain Plover

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Introduction to Birding in Imperial County

Why Imperial County?

Imperial County is situated in the southeastern corner of California. The largest city, El Centro, is 120 miles east of San Diego, CA, and 50 miles west of Yuma, AZ. It's a very large county, with 4,597 square miles of mixed agricultural, desert, and water habitat. Because the Mohave, Sonoran, and Yuha Deserts, and the Algodones Dunes surround much of the county, the Imperial Valley and the Salton Sea have become oases for birds seeking relief from these vast stretches of rock and sand. The variety and numbers of bird species that visit this county is truly remarkable.

The Salton Sea, 35 miles long and 15 miles wide, is the largest lake in California, and the prominent water feature in Imperial County. Over the years, this inland sea has attracted over 40 species of waterfowl, 29 species of gulls and terns, and 49 types of shorebirds. Even more remarkable are the numerous pelagics that have been identified on this inland body of water. The Salton Sea is home to a number of California "firsts", and an excellent location to bird for vagrants. In late summer, birds which breed in the Gulf of California fly north to feast at the Sea, and provide birders with an opportunity to see exotic birds like Yellow-footed Gull, Roseate Spoonbill, Wood Stork, Blue-footed Booby, and Magnificent Frigatebird.

The Colorado River forms the eastern boundary of Imperial County. In the riverside cottonwoods and brush you can find Brown-crested Flycatcher, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Bell's Vireo, and Crissal Thrasher. This riparian corridor is also a fine migrant trap that regularly turns up eastern vagrants like Eastern Phoebe, American Redstart, Northern Parula, and Black-throated Blue Warbler.

The desert is home to a different set of birds entirely, and birders come here to search for Le Conte's Thrasher, Verdin, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Rock Wren, and Black-throated Sparrow. When the winter rains release their precious moisture, the dunes and sandy plains are ablaze in early spring with purple sand verbena, showy birdcage primrose, and beautiful white ajo lilies.

Agricultural lands of the Imperial Valley provide a cold-weather home for a wide array of raptors, including Red-tailed and Ferruginous Hawks, Prairie and Peregrine Falcons, and White-tailed Kite. A good percentage

of all North American Mountain Plovers call the Imperial Valley their winter home. And no matter what the season, always be on the lookout for that charismatic little ground dweller, the Burrowing Owl.

Finally, the southwestern corner of Imperial County rises 4000' into the Laguna Mountains, providing an entirely different birding experience. Here you'll hear and see such colorful birds as California Quail, Scott's Oriole, and Lawrence's Goldfinch. And nowhere else in Imperial County can you find California Thrasher, California Towhee, and both Black-chinned and Rufous-crowned Sparrows.

The weather is clear and warm most of the year, with very hot summers. As illustrated below, there is no down time, and your day list of species may exceed a hundred species no matter what the season.

Seasonal Birding Calendar

- **January** – Look for raptors and our first breeders
 - Falcons and accipiters hunt in urban and agricultural areas
 - Hawks are common in the agricultural areas, especially in the Imperial Valley
 - Anna's and Costa's Hummingbirds perform display flights and Western Screech-Owls and Great Horned Owls call in preparation for breeding
- **February** – Thrashers are singing and breeding
 - This is the best month to find Crissal Thrasher (brushy areas along the Colorado River and southwest of Brawley) and Le Conte's Thrasher (Algodones Dunes)
- **March**
 - Waterfowl and Sandhill Cranes head north out of the area
 - Spring migrants begin to arrive from the south
- **April** – Peak of migrant and breeding activity
 - Migration peaks during the last week. Some of the best places to check for flycatchers, vireos, and warblers are riparian areas and parks like Picacho Recreation Area, Cattle Call Park, and cemeteries in Brawley and El Centro.
 - Shorebirds have molted into their breeding finery. Look for them at the edge of the Salton Sea along the "Sea Wall", at the end of Garst Road, and west of Davis Road.
 - Check the trees and mesquite scrub around Finney and Ramer Lakes for breeding Verdin, gnatcatchers, Phainopepla, orioles, and towhees.
- **May** – Migration still strong during first week

- Continue to check urban parks and neighborhoods
- Avocets and Black-necked Stilts will be breeding along undisturbed parts of the Sea
- **June** – Early in the month keep an eye out for eastern vagrants
 - Eastern vagrants (Baltimore Oriole, Northern Parula, American Redstart, etc.) show up along riparian corridors and in urban areas
 - Late in June the first Yellow-footed Gulls usually disperse from their breeding grounds in the Gulf of California and come north to the Salton Sea
- **July** and early **August** – Shorebirds and hummingbirds come south
 - Look in flooded agricultural fields in the Imperial Valley and along the Sea for a wide variety of shorebirds
 - Check flowers and feeders for Anna’s, Rufous, and Black-chinned Hummingbirds
 - Look for Wood Storks along the southeast portion of the Sea
- **Late August** and **September** – Fall migration
 - Look for passerines in riparian areas along the Colorado River, in green urban areas, and at Finney and Ramer Lakes
 - Shorebirds still streaming through in good numbers; check for rarities like Ruff
 - First ducks and geese return to the area
 - This is the best season to see wanderers from the Gulf of California like Roseate Spoonbill, Magnificent Frigatebird, and Blue-footed Booby
- **October** – Look for vagrants and returning winter residents
 - Sapsuckers, sparrows, and other wintering birds return
 - Search for eastern warblers like American Redstart and Northern Parula in the riparian and urban green zones
- **November**
 - Most Sandhill Cranes, Snow Geese, and waterfowl have returned
 - Mountain Plover feed in the burned or newly sprouting agricultural fields throughout the county
 - Ferruginous Hawks scour grassy fields for gophers and other rodents
- **December**
 - Check for rare gulls at Obsidian Butte, Red Hill Marina, and along the Sea wall
 - Look for Sprague’s Pipits in dry Bermuda Grass fields and for rare longspurs in short green grass fields

- Join the Christmas Bird Count to look for wintering regulars and rarities on the southeast side of the Salton Sea

Target Birding in Imperial County

Visitors to a new area often wish to know where and when they can find a particular species. For example, where can I find that Black Rail and the Yellow-footed Gull, and when is the best time to look for them?

The chart below indicates the most likely locations and seasons to find fifty of the more sought-after target species.

SBSSNWR = Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge

The checklist is in A.O.U. (7th Edition) order. Status codes:

C – Common, usually found 3 out of every 4 visits

U – Uncommon, usually located only 1 out of every 4 visits

R – Rare, usually not seen, and may be absent some years

SPECIES	LOCATION(S)	SEASON	STATUS
Fulvous Whistling-Duck	Finney and Ramer Lakes	all year	R
Tundra Swan	SBSSNWR - Unit 1	winter	R
Surf Scoter	Southeast Salton Sea	winter	R
Ring-necked Pheasant	Imperial Valley wheat fields trumpeting in early mornings	spring	C
Clark's Grebe	Ramer Lake	summer	C
Blue-footed Booby	- Obsidian Butte - End of Garst Road	late summer	R
American White Pelican	Southeast Salton Sea	winter	C
Brown Pelican	Southeast Salton Sea	summer	C
American Bittern	- SBSSNWR - Unit 1 - Wister Wildlife Area	winter migration	U
Least Bittern	- West Pond - SBSSNWR - Unit 1	summer	C
Roseate Spoonbill	Southeast Salton Sea, especially Bowles Road	late summer	R
Wood Stork	- Southeast Salton Sea - West of Davis Road	late summer	U
Ferruginous Hawk	Imperial Valley in short grassy fields	winter	U
Peregrine Falcon	Southeast Salton Sea shoreline	winter	C

Prairie Falcon	Imperial Valley agricultural areas, often on power poles	winter	U
Black Rail	West Pond	spring	U
Clapper Rail	- West Pond - SBSSNWR - Unit 1	spring	C
Sandhill Crane	- Carey & Dogwood Roads - SBSSNWR - Unit 1	winter	C
Snowy Plover	- End of Poe Road - West of Davis Road	all year	U
Mountain Plover	Imperial Valley short grass, dirt, and asparagus fields	winter	C
American Avocet	- Poe Road - West of Davis Road	all year	C
Stilt Sandpiper	- SBSSNWR - Unit 1 ponds - Bowles Road	winter	C
Gull-billed Tern	Southeast Salton Sea	summer	C
Yellow-footed Gull	- Obsidian Butte - Red Hill Marina	late summer	C
Lesser Black-backed Gull	- Obsidian Butte - Red Hill Marina	winter	R
Glaucous-winged Gull	- Obsidian Butte - Red Hill Marina	winter	R
Black Skimmer	- Red Hill Marina and Morton Bay - Rock Hill Trail	summer	C
Greater Roadrunner	Margins of fields and drains	all year	C
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	Picacho State Rec. Area	summer	U
Burrowing Owl	Imperial Valley dirt-lined drains	spring	C
Costa's Hummingbird	SW Imperial County in desert areas with blooming flowers and cacti	winter and early spring	U
Red-naped Sapsucker	Picacho State Recreation Area cottonwoods	winter	U
Ladder-backed Woodpecker	- Finney Lake - Picacho Recreation Area mesquites	all year	C
Gila Woodpecker	- Cattle Call Park, Brawley - Picacho State Rec. Area	all year	C
Vermilion Flycatcher	Cattle Call Park, Brawley	winter	C
Gray Flycatcher	Cattle Call Park, Brawley	winter	U
Cactus Wren	Cattle Call Park, Brawley	all year	C

Mountain Bluebird	Irruptive in Imperial Valley in Bermuda grass fields	winter	U
Crissal Thrasher	- Picacho State Rec. Area - Carter and Fites, Brawley	spring	U
Le Conte's Thrasher	Algodones Dunes	spring	U
Sprague's Pipit	Imperial Valley in dry Bermuda grass fields	winter	R
Phainopepla	- Finney Lake - SW Imperial County	spring	C
Abert's Towhee	Cattle Call Park, Brawley	all year	C
Rufous-crowned Sparrow	SW Imperial County	spring	U
Black-chinned Sparrow	SW Imperial County	spring	C
Indigo Bunting	Bard area	winter	U
Blue Grosbeak	- Bard area - Fig Lagoon	summer	C
Bronzed Cowbird	- Cattle Call Park - Brawley lawns - Niland school grounds	spring	U
Scott's Oriole	SW Imperial County	spring	U
Lawrence's Goldfinch	SW Imperial County	winter	U

Birding in the Desert

Be prepared. There are several sites in this book which are remote desert areas without drinking water—take along 2 gallons of water per person per day. Let someone know your schedule, and realize that there is no cell phone coverage in some of these remote areas. Take a good map with you—the line drawings in this book do not show all roads and may not be to scale. Take the appropriate type of vehicle, and be aware that road conditions can change overnight during heavy rains. If you break

down, the best advice is to wait by your vehicle for help.



Cactus
Wren

Summer birding in the desert is best avoided, when daily temperatures often soar above 110° and the birds seem to have disappeared in the shimmering heat waves. Winter is often beautiful,

but always be prepared for cold weather—even snow in southwestern Imperial County. Spring is usually beautiful, but even then it can be hot, rainy, or cold. February and March are great for spring wildflowers after a wet winter. April is the best time for birding in the desert, with residents breeding and migrants moving through the washes.

Watch out for bushes, trees, and cacti with thorns. Carrying a multi-tool is wise; it's a good way to remove cactus spines from boots, pant legs, and tender skin.

Birding around the Sea

There are always great birds around, but keep in mind that summer can be hot, humid, and unpleasant. If you're going to search for those late-summer boobies, and frigate birds, be prepared for 110-degree-plus temps with high humidity, lots of flies, and some pretty strong odors. As in the desert, don't leave home without plenty of drinking water, and always let someone know your schedule.

The dirt farm roads which provide such wonderful access to the Salton Sea's shoreline and other areas become very muddy and slippery after it rains. Remember, you'll waste lots of excellent birding time if you get stuck! Please drive slowly on dry farm roads to keep the dust down—dust damages the growth and value of crops, and creates poor air quality.

Birding on Private Land

Some of the sites listed in this book are on private property. Just because we have described a site in this book does not imply or grant you permission to enter this property. Please bird from public roadways or ask permission to bird private property. Being courteous and asking first will smooth the way for continued access to some of these very productive sites!

Birding References

The two best references for Imperial County are *Birds of the Salton Sea*, by Michael A. Patten, Guy McCaskie, and Philip Unitt, 2003, University of California Press and *Birds of the Lower Colorado River Valley*, by Kenneth V. Rosenberg, Robert D. Ohmart, William C. Hunter, and Bertin W. Anderson, 1991, The University of Arizona Press.

Our website at www.southwestbirders.com has trip reports for many of these birding locales and will have updates to the sites listed in this book.

If you have any suggestions or comments about this guide, please send them to:

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Imperial County Map

This basic map of Imperial County shows the relative locations of the birding sites described in this book. The letters match the chapter and site names, and are listed in the Table of Contents. For driving directions to each of these sites, refer to the site descriptions.

