

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

Second Edition
Completely Revised and Expanded

by
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&
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Front Cover Photograph: Burrowing Owl

Back Cover Photograph: Mountain Plover

All photos and illustrations by Henry D. Detwiler

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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.

When Bob Miller and I wrote the first edition of this book in 2011, the Salton Sea was 35 miles long and 15 miles wide. Even in its currently reduced state it continues to be 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. During some years, birds which breed in the Gulf of California fly north to feast at the Sea in the late summer, and provide birders with an opportunity to see exotic birds like Yellow-footed Gull, Roseate Spoonbill, Blue-footed Booby, and Magnificent Frigatebird.

Unfortunately, our thirst for water has exceeded what the Colorado River can provide. The river is the lifeblood for all farming done in the Imperial Valley; the runoff from this farming is the primary source which feeds the Salton Sea. A 2003 agreement between the County of San Diego, the Imperial Valley Irrigation and other water districts, and the Department of the Interior to purchase water rights from the farmers, means 200,000 acre-feet of river water are being diverted annually to San Diego. The resulting loss of run-off water to the Salton Sea will cause it to shrink into a body of water one quarter of its original size. Already, the shoreline has receded drastically in the south, and many shallow bays have dried up. Some of the birding sites recommended in our 2011 edition no longer exist. Fortunately, environmental mitigation has resulted in new birding sites, which are described herein.

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 birds may exceed a hundred species no matter what the season.

Habitats

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. And the river itself is a feeding and resting stop for waterfowl, waders, gulls, and terns.

The Alamo and New Rivers provide additional riparian habitats, flowing north from Mexico into the Salton Sea. Tamarisks, mesquites, and brush line the banks, providing cover for blackbirds, sparrows, and migrants. The water from these rivers has been diverted to create wetlands in some areas, the ponds and marshes home to Common Gallinule, Least Bittern, Black-crowned Night Heron, Marsh Wren, Common Yellowthroat, and a host of wintering ducks.

In addition to the Salton Sea, there are scattered lakes and reservoirs throughout Imperial County. Finney and Ramer Lakes are along the Alamo River, and are great for a wide variety of waders, waterfowl, Double-crested and Neotropic Cormorants, terns, gulls, and shorebirds. Wiest Lake and the Alamo Canal are excellent for waterfowl and water-loving birds. Willey, Young, and Bevin Reservoirs are three (of many) impoundments used by the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) to store water, and are usually good for geese, ducks, and gulls during the winter. And finally, don't forget the All-American Canal (AAC), an 80-mile canal which takes water from the Colorado River to the Imperial Valley. Deep and wide, it is an excellent home for wintering ducks, and it frequently hosts rarities like scoters, Long-tailed Duck, and Barrow's Goldeneye.

The desert is home to a different set of birds entirely, and birders come here to search for LeConte's Thrasher, Verdin, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Rock and Cactus Wrens, and Black-throated Sparrow. When the winter rains release enough of 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. Many 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.

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 LeConte's Thrasher (Algodones Dunes Wilderness).
 - Look for the first returning Cliff Swallows and migrating Violet-Green Swallows.
 - Ducks, geese, and Sandhill Cranes head north out of the area.
- **March**
 - Spring migrants like Wilson's Warbler and Warbling Vireo, and residents like Bullock's and Hooded Orioles, begin to arrive from the south.
 - Resident birds are singing and nest building. Late March and early April is an excellent time to visit the In-Ko-Pah area of the Laguna Mountains.
 - Almost all the waterfowl have left the Imperial Valley.
- **April** – Peak of migrant and breeding activity
 - Migration peaks during the last week of the month. 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 Unit 1 of the Salton Sea NWR, and in new mitigation ponds.
 - Check trees and desert scrub around Finney and Ramer Lakes for breeding Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Verdin, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Phainopepla, Bullock's Oriole, and Abert's Towhee.

- **May** – Migration still strong during first week
 - Continue to check urban parks and neighborhoods
 - Laughing Gull, Black Skimmer, Gull-billed Tern, American Avocet, and Black-necked Stilt will all be breeding at the Salton Sea NWR, at Morton Bay, and at Valley lakes.
- **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, Costa’s, Rufous, and Black-chinned Hummingbirds
- 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 and Curlew Sandpiper.
 - The 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.
 - Mexican vagrants are still on the move; check the larger bodies of water.
- **November**
 - Most Sandhill Cranes, Snow Geese, and waterfowl have returned.
 - Mountain Plover feed in freshly burned or newly sprouting agricultural fields throughout the county.
 - Uncommon Ferruginous Hawks scour grassy fields for gophers and other rodents.
- **December**
 - Check for rare gulls at Obsidian Butte, along the Salton Sea levee, and in flooded areas like the Neckel Road Ponds.

- Look for Sprague’s Pipit 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 some of our more sought-after target species.

SSNWR = Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge

This checklist is in American Ornithological Society (formerly AOU) order (7th Edition, 64th supplement, 6 July 2023).

<https://checklist.americanornithology.org/>

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
Barrow’s Goldeneye	Senator Wash	winter	R
Clark’s Grebe	- Wiest Lake - Salton Sea	summer	C
Greater Roadrunner	Margins of fields and drains	all year	C
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	Picacho SRA	summer	U
Costa’s Hummingbird	- Imperial County deserts with blooming flowers/cacti - Willard Ave., Calipatria	winter and early spring	U
Ridgway’s Rail	- Unit 1, SSNWR - Wister Unit, Imperial Wildlife Area	spring	C
Black Rail	North side of West Pond	spring	U
Sandhill Crane	- Unit 1, SSNWR - Carey Road	winter	C
American Avocet	- Unit 1, SSNWR - Wister Unit, Imperial Wildlife Area	summer	C
Mountain Plover	Imperial Valley short grass, dirt, and asparagus fields	winter	U-R

SPECIES	LOCATION(S)	SEASON	STATUS
Snowy Plover	- North shoreline, Obsidian Butte - Southeast Salton Sea	all year	U
Stilt Sandpiper	SSNWR - Unit 1 ponds	winter	C
Lesser Black-backed Gull	- Obsidian Butte - Neckel Road Ponds	winter	U-R
Glaucous-winged Gull	Obsidian Butte	winter	R
Yellow-footed Gull	- Obsidian Butte - Southeast Salton Sea	late summer	C-U
Gull-billed Tern	- Rock Hill Trail, SSNWR - Unit 1, SSNWR	spring	C
Black Skimmer	- Rock Hill Trail, SSNWR	summer	C
Blue-footed Booby	Obsidian Butte	late summer	R
American White Pelican	- Alameda Wetlands - Alamo Canal	winter	C
American Bittern	- SSNWR - Unit 1 - Wister Unit, Imperial Wildlife Area	winter migration	U-R
Least Bittern	- West Pond - SSNWR - Unit 1	summer	C
Roseate Spoonbill	Southeast Salton Sea	late summer	R
White-tailed Kite	- IID Wetlands - SSNWR	winter	U-R
Ferruginous Hawk	Imperial Valley in short grassy fields	winter	U
Burrowing Owl	Imperial Valley drains and canals	spring/ early summer	C
Gila Woodpecker	- Cattle Call Park, Brawley - Picacho State Rec. Area	all year	C
Red-naped Sapsucker	Picacho State Recreation Area	winter	U
Ladder-backed Woodpecker	- Finney Lake - Picacho State Rec. Area	all year	C
Peregrine Falcon	- Southeast Salton Sea shoreline - IID Wetlands	winter	R
Prairie Falcon	Imperial Valley agricultural areas, often on power poles	winter	U
Vermilion Flycatcher	Cattle Call Park, Brawley	winter	C

SPECIES	LOCATION(S)	SEASON	STATUS
Phainopepla	- Finney Lake - Picacho SRA	early spring	C
Cactus Wren	In-Ko-Pah area	all year	U
LeConte's Thrasher	Algodones Dunes	spring	U
Crissal Thrasher	- Picacho SRA - Bard area	spring	U
Mountain Bluebird	Irruptive in Imperial Valley in Bermuda grass fields	winter	U
Sprague's Pipit	Dry Bermuda grass fields	winter	R
Lawrence's Goldfinch	SW Imperial County	winter	R
Black-chinned Sparrow	In-Ko-Pah area	spring	U-R
Abert's Towhee	Cattle Call Park, Brawley	all year	C
Yellow-headed Blackbird	Neckel Road Ponds	spring	C
Bronzed Cowbird	- Rio Bend Golf Course - Niland school grounds	spring	U
Scott's Oriole	In-Ko-Pah area	spring	C-U
Blue Grosbeak	- Colorado River Valley - Fig Lagoon	summer	C

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



*Cactus
Wren*

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 in a remote area, the best advice is to wait by your vehicle for help.

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 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 I 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.

Chapter Layout

Chapters within this book are organized in a roughly east to west order. Each chapter is organized in the same way, with descriptions of the most common habitats, target birds you might wish to search for, a general description of the area, one or more maps of the area with numbers that

pinpoint birding locations, descriptions of the birding locations themselves, driving directions, and specific site notes for the area.

Under the “Target Birds” heading will be a list of birds which frequent this location that you may wish to search for. Specialty birds (in bold) are the more interesting species, often sought after by visitors to this area. Winter covers the months of December through February; spring is March through May; summer is June through August; fall is September through November. Resident means the bird is likely to be found at the location year-round, and usually breeds there. Migration means the bird is found at the site during the northern migration in late winter or spring, and/or during the southward migration in the late summer or fall. Winter means the bird winters in the area from December through February.

Under the “Birding Suggestions” are GPS coordinates to the individual sites. If you plug these coordinates into the search box for Google Maps, you’ll be taken directly to a map of the area. The descriptions offer ideas on how to bird the individual sites, and the kinds of birds that frequent the sites in the different seasons.

Under the “Driving Directions” I’ve tried to be as specific as possible, and get you to the birding location in the most direct fashion. However, it is good practice to consult an official road or topographical map, use a car-based navigation system, or use a GPS. Google Maps and other mapping applications are quite useful. A few of the desert, farm, and levee roads are prone to washouts and flooding during storms.

Under “Site Notes” I’ve sometimes identified specific locations where gas, food, or other services are available. Please don’t take these as endorsements of fine dining or good service; they are mentioned here solely as a convenience.

Abbreviations

- AAC - All-American Canal
- Ave - Avenue
- BLM - Bureau of Land Management
- BOR - Bureau of Reclamation
- CBC - Christmas Bird Count
- Hwy - Highway
- I-8 - Interstate 8
- IID - Imperial Irrigation District
- NM - National Monument
- N - North, S - South
E - East, W - West
- NWR - National Wildlife Refuge
- P - Parking
- Rd - Road
- RV - Recreational Vehicle
- SRA - State Recreation Area

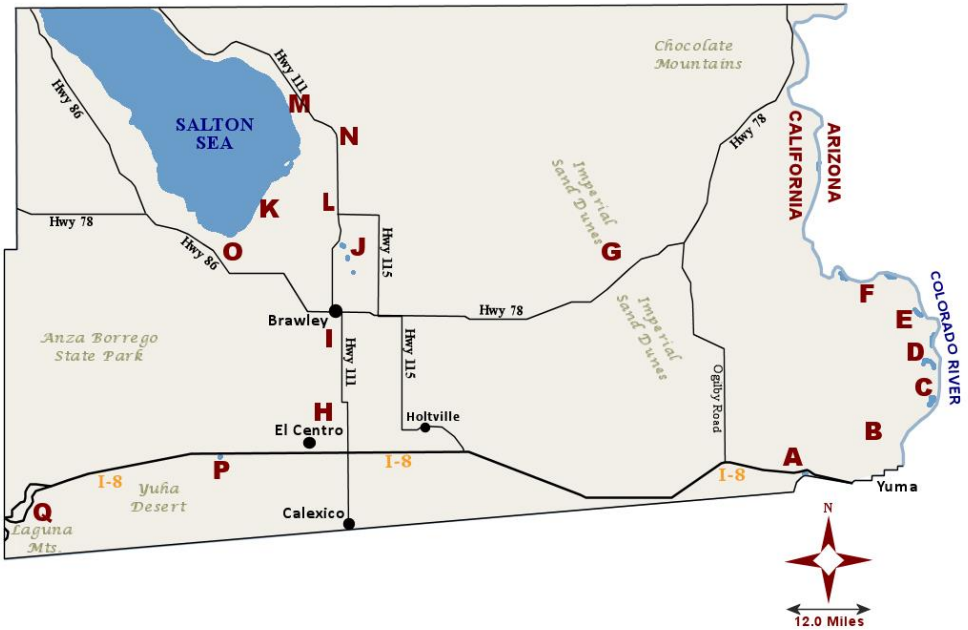
Thanks

Thanks to Guy McCaskie for his edits and suggestions to improve both the book's content and the Imperial County checklist, and thanks to Brian Johnson for his helpful edits and suggestions.

If you have any corrections, suggestions, or comments about this guide, please send them to henry_detwiler@yahoo.com.

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.



Imperial County Birding Locations

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| A – Andrade | J – Ramer, Finney, and Wiest Lakes |
| B – Bard | K – Southeast Salton Sea |
| C – Laguna Dam | L – Calipatria |
| D – Senator Wash | M – Wister Unit, Imperial Wildlife Area |
| E – Ferguson Wash | N – Niland |
| F – Picacho SRA | O – Unit 1, Salton Sea NWR |
| G – Imperial Sand Dunes | P – Fig Lagoon |
| H – Imperial and El Centro | Q – In-Ko-Pah Park Roa |
| I – Brawley | |

