

Picacho State Recreation Area

Habitat

- Riparian areas
- Colorado River
- Small lake
- Marshes
- Mesquites and desert scrub

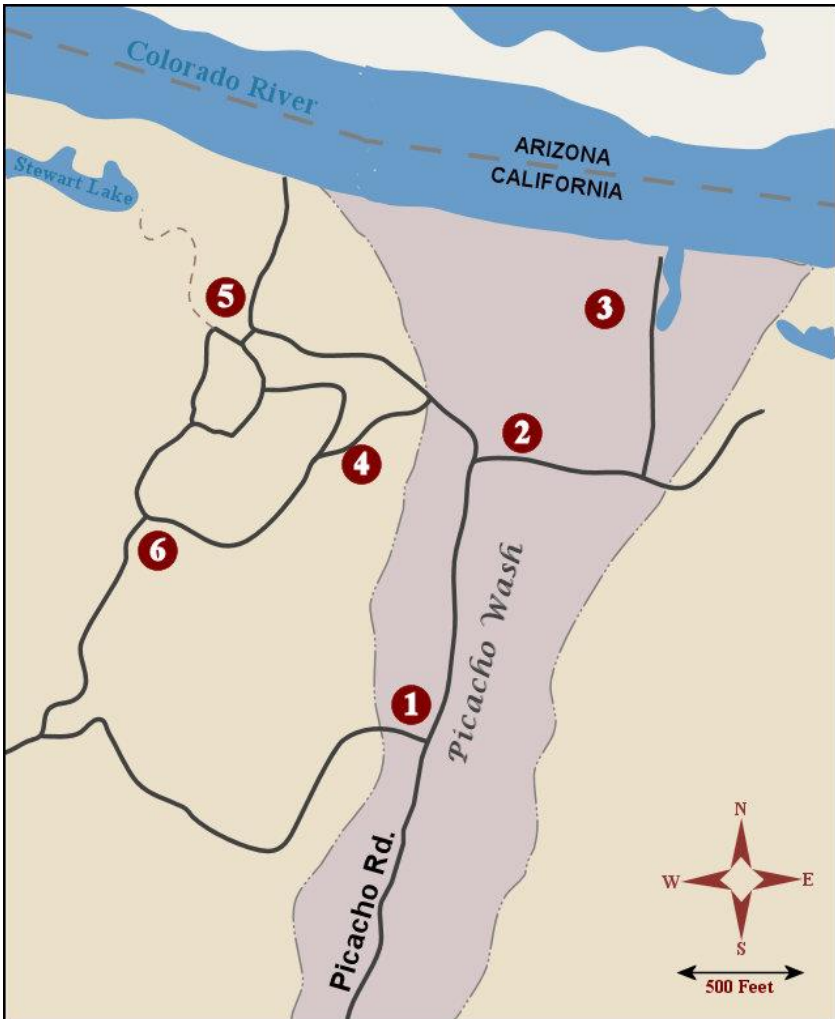
Target Birds

- Dabbling ducks and other waterfowl (fall and winter)
- **Yellow-billed Cuckoo** (uncommon-rare summer)
- Greater Roadrunner (resident)
- White-throated Swift (rare resident)
- Black-necked Stilt (resident)
- Golden Eagle (rare)
- Owls (resident): Western Screech-Owl and Great Horned
- Sapsuckers (winter): **Red-naped** (common), Red-breasted (rare), and Yellow-bellied (rare)
- Woodpeckers: Gila and Ladder-backed (resident), Northern Flicker (winter)
- Flycatchers: Western (common migration), Ash-throated (resident), and **Brown-crested** (summer)
- Western Wood-Pewee (common migration)
- Bell's Vireo (migration and summer, rare winter)
- **Loggerhead Shrike** (resident)
- **Verdin** (resident)
- **Phainopepla** (fall through spring)
- Gnatcatchers: **Black-tailed** (resident) and Blue-gray (winter)
- Wrens: Marsh (resident), Bewick's (winter), House (winter), and Rock (resident)
- **Crissal Thrasher** (resident)
- Thrushes: Townsend's Solitaire (irruptive), American Robin (uncommon winter), Western Bluebird (uncommon winter)
- Goldfinches: **Lesser** (resident), Lawrence's (irruptive) and American (rare winter)
- Sparrows: Brewer's (winter), Black-throated (resident), Dark-eyed Junco (uncommon winter), and Abert's Towhee (resident)
- **Yellow-breasted Chat** (summer)
- Warblers: Yellow (summer), Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned (winter), all Western warblers (migration)

- **Summer Tanager** (migration and summer)

General Description

Picacho State Recreation Area is a large park along the Colorado River about 25 miles north of Yuma, AZ. The drive generally takes about an hour, depending on the condition of the dirt and gravel road. Sonoran plant life carpets the desert mountains and washes, giving way to cottonwoods, willows, and marsh plants along the Colorado River. The remote setting, plentiful water, and the fact that it is a natural migratory path along the Colorado River ensure that there are numerous birds in this park at all seasons. During one spring visit we watched a Golden Eagle following the river north. Summer has the hardy breeders like Gila Woodpecker, Ash-



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throated Flycatcher, and Verdin; fall brings waterfowl like Ring-necked Duck and American Wigeon; winter brings White-crowned and Brewer's Sparrows; spring brings showy migrant passerines like Western Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak, and both Bullock's and Hooded Orioles. After dark and at dawn listen for resident Great Horned Owl and Western Screech-Owl. In addition to the bird life, look for a number of reptiles (both snakes and lizards) and mammals, especially in the evening and early-morning hours. Burros, bobcats, badgers, mule deer, and desert big-horn sheep are but a few of the mammals that call the park home. This location is definitely one of my favorite birding destinations in Imperial County.

Birding Suggestions

1) Picacho Wash

GPS Coordinates: 33.018687, -114.615189

Stop anywhere between the entry kiosk and the "T" intersection (Site 2) to look for desert denizens like Gambel's Quail, Ladder-backed and Gila Woodpeckers, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Phainopepla, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Verdin, and Black-throated Sparrow. Keep in mind that juvenile Black-throated Sparrows look a lot like Bell's Sparrows, which are not expected here during the breeding season. In migration and winter, the residents will be joined by Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned Warblers, and Brewer's and White-crowned Sparrows. This is also a favorite area for burros, which may appear almost tame.



Phainopepla

Directions

From the intersection of Hwy S-24 (Picacho Road) and Arnold Road (1 mile north of the Fort Yuma Health Care Clinic)

- Drive north on Picacho Road for 2.8 miles to the All-American Canal (AAC) Levee Road.
- Turn right on the levee road and drive northeast for 0.3 miles to the bridge crossing the canal.
- Turn left and take the bridge over the AAC. Follow the main gravel road in a general northward direction for 17.4 miles to the park.
 - At mile 9.6 Picacho Road makes a tight downhill curve and drops into a wash; from there it continues north.
 - From the start of this wash, another 1.9 miles takes you to the highest point on the route, and affords you a fine view of Picacho Peak and the surrounding desert mountains. This panorama is especially beautiful in the early morning hours as the sun's rays bathe the ruddy peaks.
 - In 1.8 more miles you'll see the old Picacho Mine on your left. This gold mine from the 1870s was the reason the town of Picacho was founded and settled on the Colorado River. The mine was last operated in the 1990s. Driving 0.5 miles downhill from the mine, Picacho Road enters Picacho Wash.
 - 1.6 miles farther on you'll see a large wash emptying into Picacho Wash from the west. If you drive up this wash (4x4 only) you'll reach the base of dramatic Picacho Peak (1430'), a favorite site of technical rock climbers.
 - A final 2.1 miles brings you to the entrance of the Picacho Recreation Area. Pay at the self-service station and pick up a map if it's helpful. As the wash takes you closer to the Colorado River, the plant life becomes ever denser, and the number of birds increases.

2) The "T" Intersection

GPS Coordinates: 33.022484, -114.614321

This area supports a thick growth of mesquite, ironwood, and palo verde, with several islands of Athel Tamarisk. Winter is an excellent time to bird here, and during some years you'll find Townsend's Solitaire (the most recent influx was during 2023), American Robin, and Western Bluebird. One winter a Black-throated Blue Warbler occupied a mesquite thicket. Early spring is the best time to see and hear singing Crissal Thrasher and Phainopepla. Birding in this spot during migration turns up most of the western flycatchers, warblers and vireos. It's also a prime spot to find resident Ladder-backed and Gila Woodpeckers.

Directions

From Site 1, Picacho Wash

- Continue north on Picacho Road for 0.3 miles to the “T” intersection.
- Turn right at the “T” and park alongside the road to bird this area.

3) Eastern Riparian Cottonwood Grove

GPS Coordinates: 33.023929, -114.612181

If you've picked up a map at the pay station, this grove will be just west of the “Lower” Dock. Park in the area of Group Canoe Camp #2, and make your way over to the large cottonwood grove via burro trails through the washes. Wintering birds in the past have included Yellow and Nashville Warblers, Northern Parula (rare), Plumbeous Vireo, and Hermit Thrush, in addition to the more common Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned Warblers, and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. In winter Northern Flicker and sapsuckers share the trees with Gila and Ladder-backed Woodpeckers. In summer, look for breeding Yellow-billed Cuckoo (I spotted two here in July 2023), Brown-crested Flycatcher (uncommon), Summer Tanager, and Blue Grosbeak. In June 2010 Bob and I found an immature Zone-tailed Hawk there, roosting among a flock of Turkey Vultures.

Directions

From Site 2, the “T” intersection.

- From the “T”, drive east on the park road for 0.2 miles. Then follow the road as it turns left into the group picnic area and boat dock, and park at will. Rest rooms are also here.

4) Ranger Station

GPS Coordinates: 33.022609, -114.616660

The trees and brush in this area are good for sparrows, passerines, and wintering raptors like Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks. The large Athel Tamarisks also provide a winter home to sapsuckers—Red-naped is the most common, but is joined during some years by rare Red-breasted and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers.

Directions

From Site 2, the “T” intersection.

- From the “T”, drive west on the park road for about 350 feet to the first intersection.
- Turn left on this road and drive southwest 370 feet to the ranger station. Park along the road to bird the tamarisks and mesquites lining the road and behind the ranger station.

5) Western Riparian Grove and Stewart Lake

GPS Coordinates: 33.024807, -114.618147

This grove is more accessible than the eastern one (Site 3), but doesn't seem to have quite the diversity. Still, you'll find many of the same birds as at Site 3, and there have been some rarities spotted here, too, including Winter Wren and White-eyed Vireo. During the summer of 2023 I found Yellow-billed Cuckoo here. And, due to the high water level in the Colorado, a very nice seep-water pool had formed, which attracted Lesser Goldfinch, Blue Grosbeak, and Abert's Towhees.

From the western edge of the grove, at the northwest corner of the camping area, take the trail to Stewart Lake. It's often dry, but after a wet winter or spring the shallow pond can provide fine habitat for Green-winged Teal, Black-necked Stilt, American Coot, Sora, Common Gallinule, Common Yellowthroat, and Song Sparrow. In June 2010 I spotted an Indigo Bunting there.

Directions

From Site 2, the "T" intersection.

- From the "T", drive west on the park road for 0.3 miles to the Picacho Campground entrance.
- Turn left into the campground and then follow the road to the right, parking close to the kiosk for the Stewart Lake Trail. The trail heads out towards the west and the cottonwood grove is to the north.

6) Camping Area

GPS Coordinates: 33.022724, -114.618999

The campsites closest to the river are nestled among Athel Tamarisk trees, and provide good habitat for three varieties of sapsuckers. In January 2023 I located a hybrid Red-naped/Red-breasted Sapsucker here. The drier camps farther away from the river have more mesquites and are good for Ash-throated Flycatcher and seasonal sparrows. Spend the night and you may be serenaded to sleep by the calls of Western Screech-Owl and Great Horned Owl. Sometimes long-term campers feed the birds in the winter, which draws in a variety of finches, sparrows, and doves. In 2010, at one of these feeding stations Al and I spotted American and Lesser Goldfinches, Pine Siskin, and White-crowned, Chipping, and Black-throated Sparrows.

Directions

From Site 5, Stewart Lake Trail

- You can stay parked where you are and explore the campground areas on foot, or you can drive around, parking in areas you wish to bird. Keep a sharp look-out for feeders set up by campers.

Site Notes

Ownership

- California State Parks
- Bureau of Land Management

Vehicle Access

- The road leading to this park is usually graded and suitable for 2-wheel-drive cars. However, the road does become “wash boarded” and quite rough between gradings. And, if there have been recent rains, a high-clearance vehicle may be necessary for the final mile, which travels through a gravelly wash. Call ahead if you have any doubts.

Fees

- The daily park fee is \$10 per carload, \$9 for seniors (as of 2023)

Restrooms

- Throughout the park

Camping (fee)

- 54 family campsites plus several group campsites

Food

- Lots of choices in Yuma

Gas

- Yuma



Crissal Thrasher