



Wildlife Observation and Photography. Waterfowl concentrations are present from mid-October to February. December is the best month to view duck concentrations, while geese are most numerous in January. San Luis Refuge is recommended to those seeking duck concentrations. Mallards, pintails, green-winged teal, gadwall, shovellers, and cinnamon teal are abundant and easily seen. Snow and Canada geese concentrations are readily observed on all three areas, but Merced is the best for seeing the small Ross' geese. Merced Refuge is also the best choice for those interested in seeing sandhill cranes.

The wonders of spring are at a peak during March, which is the best month for general sightseeing on the refuges. Wildflowers are most abundant during April, and most birds nest during April, May and June. San Luis, with its wooded sloughs, offers a variety of perching birds and raptors. Spring wildflowers are most spectacular at Kesterson, while San Luis is popular for its scenic landscape. Opportunities for photography are available all year and choice of season and area depends upon the photographer's subject interests.

Although each of the three areas has a variety of mammals, most are quite secretive in their habits and not as easily observed as birds. Exceptions are the blacktail jackrabbit and California ground squirrel which are usually not too difficult to observe. Early morning is best for seeing mammals and the reward for a little lost sleep might be a fleeting glimpse of a coyote or longtail weasel. Raccoons, opossums, striped skunks and badgers are also present, and the visitors who walk to the more secluded portions of the refuge increase their chances of seeing these species.



Hunting. Public waterfowl hunting is permitted on portions of all three areas. Pheasant hunting is also permitted on a portion of Merced Refuge. The hunting program is administered by the California Department of Fish and Game, in cooperation with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Each area is open to hunting on Wednesday, Saturday

and Sunday throughout the regular waterfowl hunting season. Daily hunter quotas are filled partially by a permit-drawing system and partially on a first-come-first-served basis.

Both Federal and State regulations apply to the refuges. Boats are not allowed. Hip boots or chest waders are essential. A good dog is a definite asset, and decoys are desirable. However, pass shooting is sometimes good—especially on windy days.

Details of the hunting program and applicable regulations are available from license agents, California Department of Fish and Game offices, and the Refuges' Los Banos office.



Fishing. Public fishing—during daylight hours—is permitted in designated areas on San Luis Refuge. The main species caught are channel catfish, bullheads, black crapple, largemouth bass, and carp. The best fishing is during February, March and April.

Night fishing, use of boats, and fishing during waterfowl hunting season are prohibited. All applicable State and Federal regulations are in effect.



Other Nearby Wildlife Recreation Opportunities. The San Luis Reservoir, O'Neill Forebay and Los Banos Creek Reservoir offer a variety of wildlife recreational opportunities. Some of the activities these areas provide are fishing, boating, picnicking and camping. There are also numerous streams and canals in the area accessible to those seeking wildlife oriented recreation.

Anyone desiring further information should contact the Merced County Chamber of Commerce for details.



CENTRAL SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Refuge bird lists, hunting and fishing regulations, and maps may be obtained at refuge headquarters. Refuge headquarters are located at 535 J Street, Los Banos, California. Phone (209) 826-3508.

Mailing address:

Refuge Manager
Central San Joaquin Valley
National Wildlife Refuges
P.O. Box 2176
Los Banos, California 93635



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CALIFORNIA



A RICH WILDLIFE HISTORY WITH SOME PROBLEMS

The San Joaquin Valley in Central California has a long history of wintering concentrations of ducks, geese and other migratory birds. From the time of earliest history, this section of California has been one of the principal wintering grounds for migratory waterfowl of the Pacific Flyway. Early accounts by the first Spanish explorers abound in descriptions of the vast marsh areas of the San Joaquin Valley and its great flocks of ducks and geese in numbers "Darkening the sky." The extensive marsh areas were formed by the overflow of water along principal rivers caused by fall and winter storms and continued into the summer by runoff from melting snow in the high Sierra Nevada Mountains. Vast "tulare" marshes encountered in the San Joaquin Valley by Juan de Anza, Pedro Font, and other explorers prevented their crossing the valley and forced them to turn back to Monterey.

The San Joaquin Valley contained very few people prior to 1850. Much of the land was taken up by Spanish land grants. The land in these grants was open grazing range where cattle were raised for their hides. The discovery of gold in California attracted great hordes of people, and the meat from cattle became important as a source of food. During the 1850's and 60's, cattle ranching was the major industry. It was also during this period that the great herds of tule elk, antelope and deer were slaughtered to feed the hungry miners. Ducks and geese were killed by the wagonload.

Overgrazing of the land, drought, and lower prices reduced the wealth found in cattle grazing. In 1870, the San Joaquin Valley entered into its present era of intensive agriculture. The encroachment of agriculture and other industry gradually reduced waterfowl habitat, and the vast marshes and great cattle herds of the past gave way to intensive farming.

CONSERVATION OF DECLINING WETLANDS AIDS MIGRATING BIRDS

Although most of the wetlands in the valley have been drained and converted to agricultural use, the migration patterns of migratory waterfowl have not changed. The birds continue to fly their ancient routes and crowd into the remaining wintering habitat in the San Joaquin Valley. The San Joaquin Valley is so important to migratory waterfowl as a migration stopover and wintering area, that three national wildlife refuges have been established here to provide food and protection and to preserve the wetland habitat. Waterfowl concentrations in excess of 500,000 birds are common during the winter months. These concentrations usually include approximately 200,000 pintail, 100,000 green-winged teal, 100,000 shovellers, 65,000 mallards, 50,000 gadwall and 10,000 geese.

Large concentrations of sandhill cranes winter on the refuges and on adjacent farmland. The peak number on the refuges usually occurs during October and November when approximately 4,000 birds are present. Most of these birds are lesser sandhill cranes, but as many as 50 of the central valley population of greater sandhill cranes have been observed.

Spring and fall migrations witness many species of shore birds passing through. Among those visiting the refuge are phalaropes, yellowlegs, dowitchers, sandpipers and long-billed curlews.

Summer residents on the refuges include nesting mallards, gadwall and cinnamon teal. Avocets, black-necked stilts, American bittern and several species of herons and egrets find family-rearing conditions favorable. Many hawks and songbirds use water-edge woodlands.

Among the mammals regularly seen are striped skunks, badgers, muskrats, long-tailed weasels, opossums, raccoons, coyotes, California ground squirrels, cottontails, and black-tailed jackrabbits.

MERCED NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Merced Refuge, established in 1951, contains 2,561 acres. This relatively small refuge was acquired under the Lea Act which authorized the Secretary of Interior to purchase land at suitable locations in California for the management and control of migratory waterfowl to prevent depredation of agricultural crops. The problem of waterfowl feeding on farm crops is most acute from the latter part of August until mid-November when huge flocks of pintail and other ducks migrate from the north.

The water supply for this refuge is pumped from deep wells. Since the operation and maintenance of these pumps is very expensive, water is only pumped during the summer in sufficient amounts to irrigate waterfowl food crops. Cropland and marsh areas are flooded from September through March to attract and hold wintering waterfowl.

Ringnecked pheasants are abundant on the area. These birds feed in the refuge grain fields and nest in the adjacent cover. The fall population of pheasants usually numbers around 1,200 birds. Cottontail rabbits are abundant. Since they are not hunted or molested, they are quite tame and can usually be observed at very close range.

Merced Refuge can be reached by driving eight miles south of Merced, California, on State Highway 99 and then west on Athlone Sandymush Road.



SAN LUIS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

San Luis Refuge was acquired in 1966. This 7,340-acre refuge was established under the migratory Bird Conservation Act and purchased with duck stamp funds.

Tree-lined Salt Slough and the meandering San Joaquin River nearby enclose the lush grasslands of this refuge. Swales and depressions collect water and form a refuge-wide maze of ponds and marshes. Canals and water-control structures take advantage of the natural topography to produce year-round wetlands. A small tract is farmed to produce additional food for wildlife.

Few areas in California's San Joaquin Valley retain the flavor of early settlement days, when wildlife was abundant, the air fresh, and the landscape pleasant and pastoral. San Luis National Wildlife Refuge is such a place, a remnant of past times contrasting with today's great cities, crowded highways, and mechanized farmlands. Located within a few hours' drive of over six million people, this refuge promises to become one of the most important wildlife viewing and conservation education sites in the country.

San Luis Refuge is approximately ten miles north of Los Banos, California. From Los Banos, take County Road J-14 (North Mercy Springs Road) north eight miles, then northeast two miles on Wolfson Road to the refuge.

KESTERSON NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

The 5,900-acre Kesterson Refuge, established in 1969, is the newest of the San Joaquin Valley refuges. Future development plans include restoration and enlargement of the seasonal marsh and the establishment of some permanent marsh.

Located approximately 18 miles north of Los Banos, California, the area can be reached by driving 4 miles east of Gustine on Highway 140.

