Exploring San Diego’s Beautiful North County

Nature Centers, Parks, and Birding Resources

Buena Vista Audubon Nature Center
2202 South Coast Hwy – Oceanside
760-439-2473

Anstine - Audubon Nature Preserve
2437 Hutchison – Vista
Open Saturdays, 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.
Groups by appointment – 760-295-1548

Agua Hedionda Discovery Center
1580 Cannon Road – Carlsbad
760-804-1969

Batiquitos Lagoon Nature Center
7380 Gabbiano Lane – Carlsbad
760-439-2473

San Elijo Lagoon Ecological Reserve
12. Buena Vista Park
This hilltop urban park is a “sky island” of tall pines and eucalyptus. It attracts interesting birds in migration, as well as flycatchers, bluebirds, flickers.

11. Whelan Lake
A bird sanctuary featuring a small lake edged with willow riparian woodland, an oak grove, and adjacent grasslands. A good year-round spot for warblers and other species in migration, as well as flycatchers, chats, Swainson’s thrush, and wrens in season. Good for birding-by-ear enthusiasts. Bikes allowed. No facilities along trail.

10. Buddy Todd Park
This hilltop urban park is a “sky island” of tall pines and eucalyptus. It attracts interesting birds in migration, as well as flycatchers, bluebirds, flickers.

9. Guajome County Park
One of the jewels of inland North County birding, this park is generally uncrowded but well-developed recreational park. Offers a variety of wetland and upland habitats. Full facilities.

8. Oak Riparian Park
A nature center situated along a lovely riparian woodland, freshwater marsh, hillsides of dense chaparral, and the remains of an ancient volcano. The trails have scenic overlooks of the lake and links to nearby Oak Riparian Park. Good year-round for grebes, ducks, marsh birds, chaparral species, and raptors. No facilities.

7. Agua Hedionda Lagoon
This large lagoon, recently restored, is a major stopover site for many species of migratory birds. The lagoon is surrounded by a mix of wetland, riparian, and upland habitats. Full facilities.

6. Batiquitos Lagoon
A bird sanctuary located along a lovely riparian woodland, freshwater marsh, hillsides of dense chaparral, and the remains of an ancient volcano. The trails have scenic overlooks of the lake and links to nearby Oak Riparian Park. Good year-round for grebes, ducks, marsh birds, chaparral species, and raptors. No facilities.

5. Lake San Elijo
A nature center located along a lovely riparian woodland, freshwater marsh, hillsides of dense chaparral, and the remains of an ancient volcano. The trails have scenic overlooks of the lake and links to nearby Oak Riparian Park. Good year-round for grebes, ducks, marsh birds, chaparral species, and raptors. No facilities.

4. San Elijo Bluffs
A nature center located along a lovely riparian woodland, freshwater marsh, hillsides of dense chaparral, and the remains of an ancient volcano. The trails have scenic overlooks of the lake and links to nearby Oak Riparian Park. Good year-round for grebes, ducks, marsh birds, chaparral species, and raptors. No facilities.

3. San Dieguito County Park
An expansive urban park with landscaped grass expanses surrounded by hillsides of dense native chaparral. Many of the park’s birding hotspots are small, difficult to access, and not well-marked, but are popular haunts for birders in the know. The park is open daily from sunrise to sunset, and access is free. Picnic tables and drinking fountains available at Mancelona Picnic Area.

2. Carlsbad South Bay
A nature center located along a lovely riparian woodland, freshwater marsh, hillsides of dense chaparral, and the remains of an ancient volcano. The trails have scenic overlooks of the lake and links to nearby Oak Riparian Park. Good year-round for grebes, ducks, marsh birds, chaparral species, and raptors. No facilities.

1. Buena Vista Audubon Nature Center
This nature center located along a lovely riparian woodland, freshwater marsh, hillsides of dense chaparral, and the remains of an ancient volcano. The trails have scenic overlooks of the lake and links to nearby Oak Riparian Park. Good year-round for grebes, ducks, marsh birds, chaparral species, and raptors. No facilities.

279x890 Oceanside. From I-5 take Hwy 76 east 7.5 miles
243x316-24
243x649-760-722-4887. Birders welcome but arrangements
243x680-760-639-6151.
243x816-12. Buena Vista Park
243x833-This nine-mile trail follows the San Luis Rey River through
243x846-Oceanside. The levee trail offers elevated views of the wil
243x859-low canopy in the river channel, with occasional glimpses
243x872-through to the river. Raptors, warblers, least Bell’s vireo,
243x885-flycatchers, chats, Swainson’s thrush, and wrens in season.
243x898-Good for birding-by-ear enthusiasts. Bikes allowed. No
243x911-facilities along trail.
243x946-north on Benet Rd., Foussat Rd., Douglas Dr., College
243x972-picnic tables and drinking fountains available at Mance
243x1007-14. San Dieguito County Park
243x1025-An expansive urban park with landscaped grass expanses
243x1038-surrounded by hillsides of dense native chaparral. Many
243x1064-features two small duck ponds. Dense shrubs and flowering
243x1099-Direc
243x1112-Direc
243x1125-Direc
243x1138-Direc
243x1151-Direc
243x1162-Direc
243x1180-Direc
243x1203-Direc
243x1224-Direc
243x1246-Direc
Coastal North County

Lagoons and Wetlands

Along the North County coast in San Diego are a series of small valleys with natural lagoons where creeks flowing from the east meet the Pacific Ocean. These wetlands historically provided a mixture of salt and fresh water marsh, sand dunes, mudflats, intertidal basins, riparian corridors, and upland slopes of coastal sage scrub and mixed chaparral. Today they are collectively recognized as an “Important Bird Area” (IBA), linked together by foraging and dispersing waterbirds that utilize the IBA for breeding, migration, refueling, and wintering. A number of endangered species enjoy these resources, including light-footed clapper rail, snowy plover, California least tern, California gnatcatcher, Belding’s savannah sparrow, and peregrine falcon.

1. San Luis Rey River/Oceanside Harbor

A wide sandy beach at the mouth of the San Luis Rey River is a natural gathering spot for a large number of gulls and terns. A little north, the rocky breakwaters of the harbor are attractive for surfbirds, turnstones, and an occasional block oystercatcher. The harbor and boat basin often produce several species of gulls and loons, and gulls, herons and cormorants congregate at the bait barge near the boat landing.

Directions: From I-5, take Harbor Drive west. Access the river mouth, beach, views of the channel, and rock jetties by circling the harbor on Harbor Drive South. From the river mouth, the Oceanside Pier can be reached by driving south on Pacific Street. Walking out on the pier can be productive for surf scoters, grebes, and pelagic birds.

2. Buena Vista Lagoon

This ecological reserve has been managed as a fresh water reservoir for over 60 years. The possibility of restoring it back to a salt water marsh and estuary has been well studied, but there is no approved plan at this time. A variety of ducks can be seen during winter months, and egrets, herons, grebes, and other waterbirds are present year-round. The BVAS Nature Center is located on the north shore of the lagoon at 2202 South Coast Hwy. in Oceanside, and offers birding information, a gift shop, full facilities, and a short nature trail. BVAS holds a Beginning Birders Class at the Lagoon Landing on the last Saturday of each month.

Directions: Carlsbad. From I-5, take I-78 east, take Jefferson St. exit, turn right on Batiquitos Dr., and turn right on Gabbiano Rd. Drive to the trailhead at the end of the road.

3. Agua Hedionda Lagoon

Birding access at Agua Hedionda Lagoon is somewhat restricted at present. Kayaking is allowed at this lagoon with a permit, and birders looking for a unique experience may wish to try this out. Gulls, loons, and other shorebirds frequent the beach and rocky inlet jetty, while diving ducks, grebes, pelicans, and cormorants utilize the deep water basin.

Directions: Carlsbad. The Discovery Center located east of I-5 on Cannon Road, on the south side of the lagoon, provides a good overview of the reserve and access to some nature trails.

4. Batiquitos Lagoon

The broad and level trail along the north shore of Batiquitos Lagoon also offers nicely-spaced benches where visitors can sit and look out over the lagoon. This lagoon attracts a nice assortment of diving ducks, grebes and shorebirds. Cord grass has taken hold throughout the reserve, and rails have moved in to take advantage of this preferred habitat. A small but active Visitor Center is located near the western end of the trail. During the summer months, endangered least terns and snowy plovers nest on two islands of dredged sand across from the visitor center and near the mouth of the lagoon at Pacific Coast Hwy.

Directions: Carlsbad. From I-5, go east on Poinsettia Lane, turn right on Batiquitos Dr., and turn right on Gabbiano Lane. Drive to the trailhead at the end of the road.

5. San Elijo Lagoon

With a bird list of over 300 species, the 1000-acre San Elijo Lagoon Ecological Reserve provides a unique mix of plant and animal communities in very close proximity. This is a good place for out-of-state visitors to get a nice assortment of west coast endemics. A Visitors Center and short loop trail is located on Manchester Ave., one mile west of I-5. The main birding trails are located on the south side of the lagoon, and provide good exposure to the varied habitats.

Directions: Solana Beach/Encinitas. Rios Trailhead – From I-5, go west on Lomas Santa Fe about one mile. Turn right on Rios Ave. and drive to the trailhead at the end of the road. Santa Helena Trailhead – From I-5, drive east on Lomas Santa Fe one block. Turn left on Santa Helena and drive to the trailhead at the end of the road.

6. San Dieguito River Park

This newly restored wetlands offers excellent intertidal habitat for a wide variety of shorebirds and water fowl. Upland birds are plentiful in the coastal sage scrub along the trails in Crest Canyon.

Directions: Solana Beach/Del Mar. Access the trails and lagoon overlook east of I-5 by going east on Via de la Valle. Turn right on San Andreas Dr. and park along road. Access the trails of Crest Canyon and overlooks of the deep water lagoon basins west of I-5 by driving east on San Dieguito Drive from its intersection with Jimmy Durante Blvd.