



A Bird Finding Guide to *Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge*

Recognized as one of the best birding spots in the United States, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge has more than 400 bird species on its checklist, the second highest total in the entire National Wildlife Refuge System. The most popular time to visit the Lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas is from late November through April, when temperatures are mild and the birding opportunities are excellent. From May until October, temperatures heat up and the crowds depart, but the birding remains outstanding year round.

Tips for an Enjoyable Visit

Most trails are less than two miles. Allow a minimum of two hours to look for birds. Carry a trail map if possible.

Call ahead to confirm scheduled interpretive programs, recent bird sightings, and other current events. Birds reported during the past week can be found at www.friendsofsouthtexasrefuges.org

Always bring water and sunscreen, and dress in layers. Take frequent rest stops and drink plenty of water as temperatures rise.

Always carry insect repellent, and remember to spray around your socks and waistband to discourage chiggers. Check yourself for ticks after you leave.

Wear sturdy and comfortable footwear. Trail surfaces generally are flat and there is little elevation change, but exposed roots can cause falls.

Santa Ana is best explored on foot. The thirteen miles of walking trails lead through a variety of habitat types, from arid brushlands to wetlands to subtropical riparian woodlands along the Rio Grande. Most of the best birding locations on the refuge are no more than a two mile round-trip walk from the visitor center.

For those who prefer to drive, there is a seven-mile wildlife drive open on weekends from May through October, 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

There is an entry fee of \$3.00 per vehicle, bicycle or pedestrian. Holders of a valid Federal Senior, Annual or Access Pass, or a Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp (Duck Stamp) enter for free. Purchasing Duck Stamps is an easy way for birders to contribute to habitat acquisition for the National Wildlife Refuge System. In the case of Santa Ana NWR, 94.9% of the land was purchased back in 1943 with Duck Stamp funds!

Santa Ana NWR Birding Hotspots

Visitor Center

Feeders outside the visitor center are filled from November through mid-April, attracting a number of Refuge specialty birds. Look for *Green Jay*, *Plain Chachalaca*, *Golden-fronted Woodpecker*, several species of doves, *Altamira Oriole*, *Long-billed Thrasher*, *Buff-bellied Hummingbird*, and *Olive Sparrow* competing for space with the always present *Great-tailed Grackles*, *Red-winged Blackbirds* and *House Sparrows* at the feeders. Check the trees surrounding the parking lots for *Great Kiskadee*, *Couch's Kingbird*, *Clay-colored Thrush* and other songbirds moving together in mixed-species flocks.

Chachalaca Trail/Willow Lake

This short (1/2 mile), accessible trail is an excellent introduction to Santa Ana NWR. The subtropical woodland and moss-covered trees provide habitat for forest-dwelling species. Birds commonly found year-round along the trail include *Olive Sparrow*, *Long-billed Thrasher*, *Great Kiskadee*, *Plain Chachalaca*, *Ladder-backed Woodpecker*, *Green Jay*, *Clay-colored Thrush*, *Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet*, *Common Pauraque*, and *Black-crested Titmouse*. In winter *Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher*, *Blue-headed Vireo*, *Ruby-crowned Kinglet* and *Orange-crowned Warbler* are often seen here and almost anywhere there are medium to tall trees.

Willow Lake is a shallow lake that Refuge staff actively manages, manipulating vegetative cover and water levels seasonally for different bird species. In winter, scan the lake for *American Coot* and *Common Moorhen*, *Northern*

Shoveler, *Gadwall*, *Blue-winged*, *Green-winged* and the occasional *Cinnamon Teal*, and *Mottled Duck*. *Tiny Least Grebes*, a south Texas specialty bird, are usually present year round, but populations fluctuate from year to year. Several kinds of herons and egrets are usually on the lake, and *Green Kingfishers* are sometimes observed here. Wintering *Eastern Phoebes* join *Common Yellowthroats* (year round) searching for insects on the lake borders.

Pintail Lakes Trail/Pintail Lake Complex

The two-mile Pintail Lakes Trail generally is the most productive birding trail at Santa Ana NWR. The sprawling Pintail Lake Complex consists of several different wetland habitats, including lakes, marshes, and moist soil units. *Great Blue Heron*, *Great and Snowy Egret*, *Tricolored* and *Little Blue Heron*, *White-faced Ibis* and *Black-necked Stilt* are relatively common all year. In winter, look for up to twelve species of ducks, grebes, coots and moorhens. Some combination of *Green*, *Belted* and *Ringed Kingfishers* is reported almost daily here. Most waterfowl species depart in the spring, but *Mottled Ducks*, *Least* and *Pied-billed Grebes*, and *Black-bellied Whistling Ducks* remain during the summer to raise their young. Summer also is the best time to look for *Least Bitterns* and *Purple Gallinules*. These secretive birds are tough to find, and your best bet is to walk along the lakes just after sunrise.

In winter, other birds to look for in or near the wetlands include *Wilson's Snipe*, *Long-billed Dowitcher*, *American Avocet*, *Stilt Sandpiper*, *Double-crested Cormorant*, *American Kestrel*, *White-tailed Kite*, *Harris's Hawk*, *Loggerhead Shrike*, and *Vermilion Flycatcher*.

Groove-billed Anis are late spring arrivals, and usually nest in trees surrounding Pintail Lakes. Occasionally the anis spend the winter at the Refuge in small to moderate numbers, but summer birders have a very good chance to find them in appropriate habitat.

When the trail is adjacent to the Rio Grande, there is the possibility to hear or see any of the three U.S. kingfishers, plus *Altamira Oriole*, *Green Jay*, and possibly a soaring *Hook-billed Kite* or *Gray Hawk*. Start or add to your Mexico life list, counting birds in two countries at once. For an enjoyable and interesting bi-national birding experience, consider taking a guided canoe trip on the Rio Grande. A partnership program between the Refuge and the nonprofit group Friends of Santa Ana NWR, the half-day canoe trips (offered December to April) offer a unique perspective of the Refuge, the Rio Grande, and the international border.

Tree Tower/Willow 1/Old Headquarter's Area

This small area, located 1/3 mile south of the visitor center, is well known among birders as a very productive birding location. The small pond (known as "Willow 1" – part of the Willow Lake Complex) doesn't hold water very often or for very long, but it and the surrounding areas often harbor *Clay-colored Thrush*, *Tropical Parula*, *Plain Chachalaca*, *Couch's Kingbird*, *Great Kiskadee*, *Green Jay*, *Altamira Oriole*, *Harris's Hawk*, *Great Horned* and *Eastern Screech Owl*, *Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet*, *Olive Sparrow*, *Buff-bellied Hummingbird*, *Brown-crested Flycatcher* (summer), *Black-crested Titmouse*, and *Golden-fronted Woodpecker*. Every few years *Rose-throated Becards* nest at Santa Ana, and Willow 1 is a known nesting location.

One of the newest birder-friendly structures at Santa Ana NWR is the Tree Tower (also known as our Fire Tower), located 1/3 mile south of the visitor center. The 40-foot tower was constructed for Refuge staff to monitor vegetation, conduct raptor surveys, and as a fire tower, but it is open to the public most days of the year for wildlife observation. September - October and March - April can be very productive for migrating raptors. Early in the morning and in the evenings are the best times to look for migrating hawks, falcons, kites and vultures, either lifting off for the day or setting down for the night. Soaring *Hook-billed Kites*, a tough bird to see in any season, is always a possibility to see from the tower during the mornings from 8:30 to 10 a.m.

A photo blind and feeding area is located a short distance from the tower. There is a water feature operating year round, and staff sets out fruit and seed during

the winter and early spring every morning. This is a good place to take pictures at close range of some of the specialty birds at Santa Ana.

Seasonal Birding Calendar

WINTER (December – February)

Mild weather plus lots of birders equals great winter birding opportunities. Look for flocks of mixed wintering songbird species (warblers, vireos, kinglets and gnatcatchers) anywhere there is good tree cover; colorful residents such as *Altamira Oriole*, *Green Jay*, *Great Kiskadee*, *Golden-fronted Woodpecker* and *Plain Chachalaca* near feeding stations; and waterfowl, wading birds and three kinds of kingfishers in wetland areas. *Purple Martins*, which are among the earliest "spring" migrants, are first spotted in mid-February. Partly due to the large numbers of visiting birders, winter is often the best season to see rare Mexican and other tropical bird species, though rarities can turn up at any time of year.

SPRING (March – May)

Spring migration brings thousands of raptors, shorebirds, songbirds and waterfowl for brief stays, and summer residents move back to refuge breeding territories. Shorebirds and ducks start moving early in March, and several species of swallows fill the morning and evening skies searching for insects. The Santa Ana Hawk Watch operates daily (weather permitting), 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. from March 15 to April 15. Uncommon but resident *Hook-billed Kites* are occasionally counted on the spring Hawk Watch, along with up to 12 additional raptor species. *Swainson's Hawks* and *Turkey Vultures* begin migrating through in March, and *Broad-winged Hawks* peak in the first week in April, with 20,000 to 30,000 counted in a single day some years. Songbirds – vireos, flycatchers, warblers, thrushes, swallows, etc. - begin trickling through in mid-March, slowly but steadily increasing in number until they peak around the first week of May. Resident birds start nesting in earnest in late March, with most species nesting by May. Nesting birds that are usually easy to see in late spring include *Yellow-billed Cuckoo*, *Great Kiskadee*, *Clay-colored Thrush*, *Olive Sparrow*, *Brown-crested Flycatcher*, *Groove-billed Ani*, *White-winged Dove*, *Altamira Oriole*, and *Couch's Kingbird*.

SUMMER (June – August)

Resident birds complete their nesting season in summer, with many raising two broods. June is a good time of year to find *Clay-colored Thrushes*,

Tropical Parulas, *Couch's Kingbirds*, and *Northern Beardless-Tyrannulets*, singing on breeding territories. *Least Grebes*, *Purple Gallinules*, *Least Bitterns*, *Mottled Ducks* and *Black-bellied Whistling Ducks* tend to their young in Refuge ponds and marshes. *Groove-billed Anis* disperse on the Refuge in family groups, and young *Harris's Hawks* learn to hunt with their parents and older siblings. *Yellow-green Vireos*, a rare but annual visitor, are most often found in early to mid-June. Some shorebirds and a few songbirds return as fall migrants as early as late July and August.

FALL (September – November)

Fall migration can be very productive, but more protracted than in spring. Swallows and songbirds pass through Santa Ana during most of autumn, with different species on their own schedules. Shorebirds peak early, *Ruby-throated Hummingbirds* pass through in large numbers in mid-September, followed by the bulk of the *Broad-winged Hawks* during the last few days in September, and songbirds come through steadily all season. Ducks, grebes and coots start to arrive for the winter in October, and most have returned to Santa Ana NWR and the lower Rio Grande Valley by the end of November.

For Further Information

Call 956/784-7500 or visit www.fws.gov/refuges/birding and www.friendsofsouthtexasrefuges.org for current sightings, directions, maps and general refuge information.

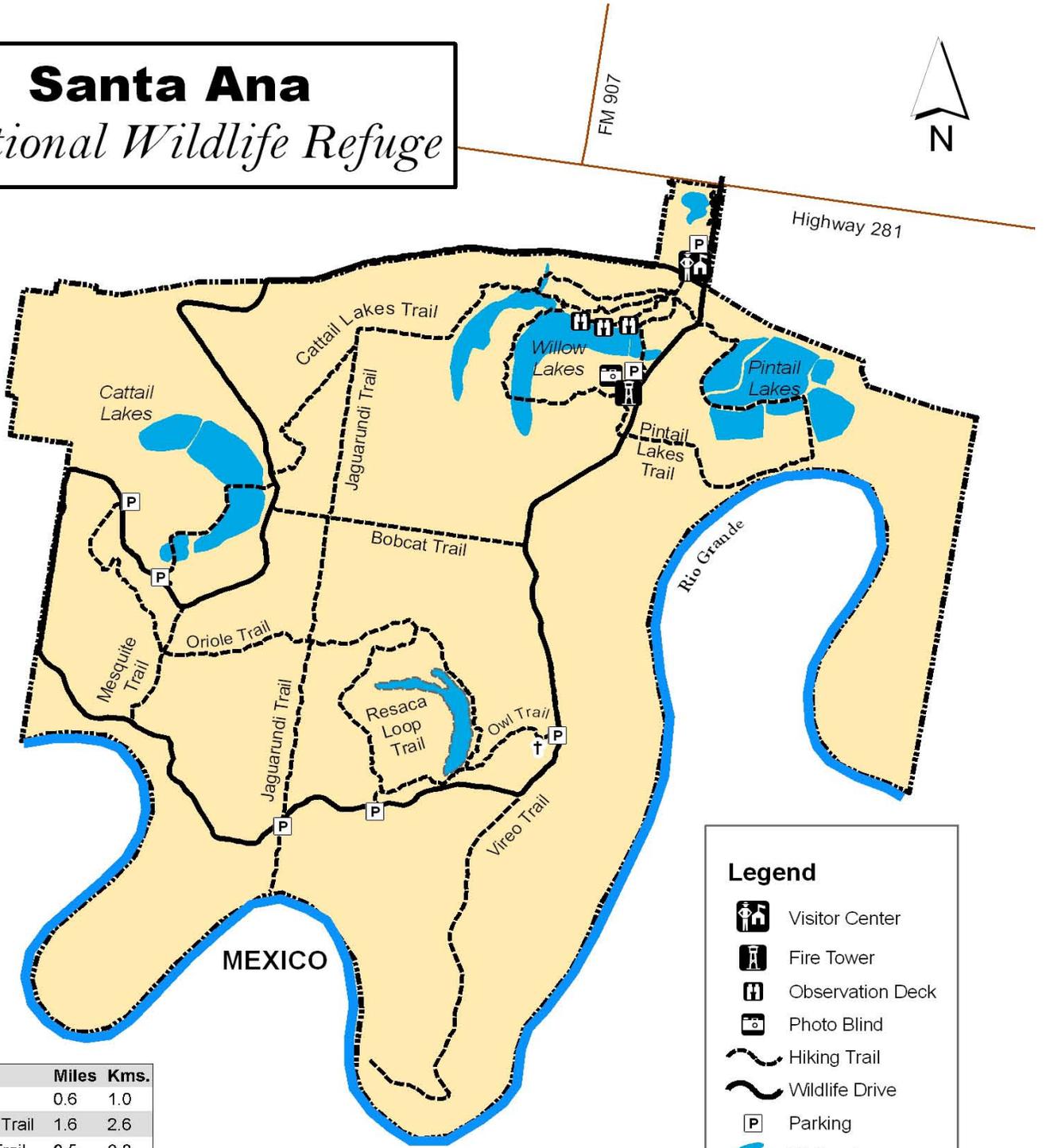
Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge
Route 2, Box 202A
Alamo, TX 78516
956/784-7500

November 2008



Santa Ana

National Wildlife Refuge



Legend

- Visitor Center
- Fire Tower
- Observation Deck
- Photo Blind
- Hiking Trail
- Wildlife Drive
- Parking
- Wetlands
- Cemetery

Trail Name	Miles	Kms.
Bobcat Trail	0.6	1.0
Cattail Lakes Trail	1.6	2.6
Chachalaca Trail	0.5	0.8
Jaguarundi Trail	1.5	2.4
Mesquite Trail	0.4	0.6
Oriole Trail	1.2	1.9
Owl Trail	0.3	0.5
Pintail Lakes Trail	2.0	3.2
Resaca Loop Trail	1.4	2.3
Tour Loop	7.0	11.3
Vireo Trail	1.1	1.8
Willow Lakes Trail	1.6	2.6

