

Birding 1+

Newsletter of the American Birding Association, Inc.



American Birding
ASSOCIATION

Vol. 15, No. 5

May 2003

Inside this issue:

- 5 Owl Research Institute
- 6 eBird
- 7 2003 Convention Conservation Grant
- 8 Crested Mynas Gone
- ABA Birdathons
- 9 News From ABA Sales
- 10 Books For Birders
Eric Salzman
- 11 Sightings From the Hotlines
Jan.-Feb. 2003
- 12 Classifieds
- Milestones
- 16 RBA Update

Center Insert

Proxy Card & Proposed By-law Amendments

Birding on DoD Lands: Vandenberg Air Force Base, California

By Ken Hollinga and Chris Eberly (Series Editor)



Editor's note: this article introduces an occasional series describing birding opportunities on some of the twenty-five million acres of land managed by the Department of Defense

(DoD). Vast portions of these areas remain undeveloped (and protected from development) to provide safety and security buffers around sensitive facilities or hazardous materials, or for the conduct of training exercises. Through participation in the Partners in Flight program and implementation of integrated natural-resource management plans, the DoD actively seeks to accommodate conservation and public access while carrying out its important defense functions. For an overview of bird management and conservation on DoD land, see "Defending the Steppingstones of Migration", by Chris Eberly, in Birding 34(5), October 2002.

California's Central Coast, bounded by Santa Barbara to the south and Morro Bay to the north, offers some of the finest birding in North America. Great weather, beautiful scenery, and terrific birding are the norm here year-round. In Santa Barbara County alone, 470 bird species have been documented, and Christmas Bird Count totals on the Santa Barbara and Morro Bay counts each consistently rank among the top ten in the country.

Right in the middle of this great birding area, Vandenberg Air Force Base occupies 98,000 acres of prime coastal real estate and thirty-five miles of pristine Pacific coastline. Originally established in 1941 as Camp

Cooke, an Army post for training armored and infantry troops, the base was renamed Vandenberg and converted to an Air Force base in 1957. It became the nation's first space and ballistic missile operational and training base. The base still actively conducts and supports space and missile launches. Images you see on televised weather reports most likely come from a Vandenberg-launched satellite.

The first base bird list, published around 1979, listed 228 species. Serious study of Vandenberg's rich bird life began in 1980, and since then observation by birders has steadily added to our knowledge the birds of the base and adjacent Pacific waters: the most recent Vandenberg checklist, published in 2000, contains 344 species. (Bird checklists for various military lands, including the latest edition of the Vandenberg list, can be found on the DoD Partners in Flight website, <www.dodpif.org/checklist.htm>.)

Vandenberg was recently identified by the American Bird Conservancy as a Globally Important Bird Area (IBA), and a formal designation ceremony is being planned. The extensive, mostly undisturbed landscape of the base provides significant breeding, wintering, and migratory stopover habitats for numerous land and water-related species. Key habitats include grassland, fresh and salt water marshes, estuary, chaparral, coastal sage and dune scrub, Bishop pine forest, oak woodlands, and riparian forest. Many California Bird Species of Special Concern and Partners in Flight Watch List species are

(continued on next page)



Oak Titmouse is a common year-round resident of the woods surrounding the ponds at the WRNA. Photo: Brian Small.

found on the base, including Brown Pelican, Peregrine Falcon, Western Snowy Plover, California Least Tern, Oak Titmouse, California Thrasher, Bell's Sage Sparrow, and Tricolored Blackbird. Additional information on Vandenberg's IBA status can be found at <www.dodpif.org/ibasites.htm>.

Although much of the base is closed to the public due to the sensitive nature of Vandenberg's missions, three excellent birding areas are generally accessible to birders; the Waterfowl Natural Resource Area, Ocean Park, and San Antonio Road East.

Waterfowl Natural Resource Area

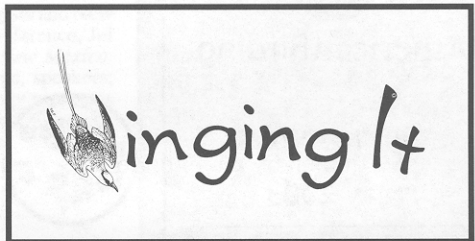
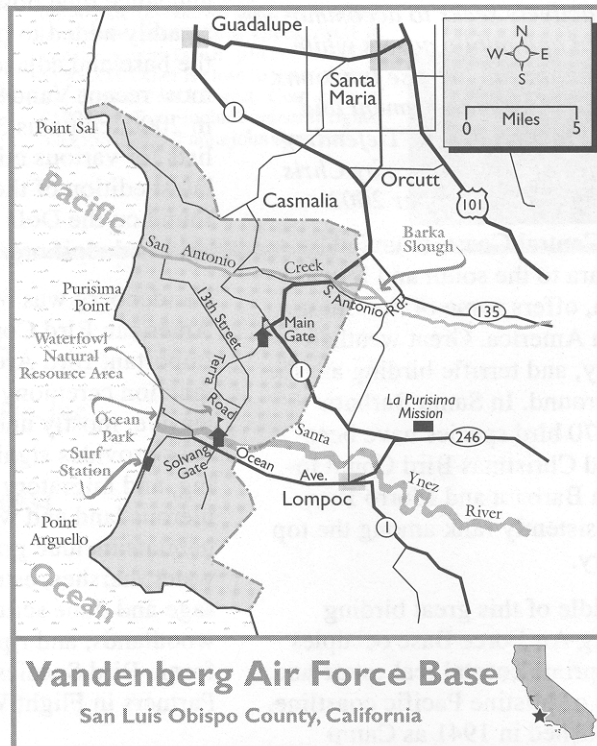
The Waterfowl Natural Resource Area (WNRA) is located within the restricted confines of the base, but officials generally allow birders to enter. Prior permission is mandatory and can be obtained by calling the Fish and Wildlife Office at (805) 606-6804 at least one working day in advance of your visit. Be aware that entry may occasionally be denied due to mission conflicts or increased security conditions. This area consists of a series of man-made ponds, willows, riparian vegetation, and scrub. Originally built as sewage settling impound-

ments in the 1970s, the ponds dried up when the treatment facility closed but were refurbished in 1993 through the cooperative efforts of Vandenberg AFB, the La Purisima Audubon Society, and the California Coastal Conservancy. Unfortunately, the ponds have never reached their full potential because of a lack of adequate water and the conse-

quent encroachment of tall reeds and other riparian vegetation. Most of the ponds are dry, but a couple of them have standing water with cattails, reeds, and other plants of interest to birds. Birding the wet areas can be difficult due to the high vegetation, but an observation tower in the center helps provide a view of the water. Levees around each pond provide easy access walking through the area.

Of equal or even greater appeal to the birder, however, are adjacent areas of willow and scrub and the bank of the Santa Ynez River, which can be accessed via a number of trails along the south side of the ponds. Birding is al-

ways interesting here, particularly in the spring and fall. Despite the area's relatively small size and distance from the ocean, 250 species have been recorded here since its restoration. Permanent residents include White-tailed Kite, California Quail, Virginia Rail, Anna's Hummingbird, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Black Phoebe, Hutton's Vireo, Western Scrub-Jay, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Oak Titmouse, Bushtit, Bewick's and Marsh Wrens, Wrentit, California Thrasher, Spotted and California Towhees, Purple Finch, and Lesser Goldfinch. They are joined during the nesting season by Allen's Hummingbird, Pacific-slope and Ash-throated Flycatchers, Cassin's Kingbird, Warbling Vireo,



Winging It (ISSN #1042-511X) (USPS 003-289) is published monthly by the American Birding Association, Inc., 720 W. Monument St., Colorado Springs, CO 80904-3624. Periodicals postage paid at Colorado Springs, CO, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to **Winging It**, PO Box 6599, Colorado Springs, CO 80934. (Individual membership: \$40 per year; includes \$10 for **Winging It** and \$30 for **Birding** magazine.)

Editor: Matthew L. Pelikan

Editorial address: PO Box 2272, Oak Bluffs, MA 02557; phone/fax (508) 696-9359; winging@aba.org. Copyright © 2003 by the American Birding Association, Inc. All rights reserved. The opinions expressed by authors do not necessarily represent the views of this publication or of the ABA.

The American Birding Association aims to inspire all people to enjoy and protect wild birds.

The American Birding Association represents the North American birding community and supports birders through publications, conferences, workshops, tours, partnerships, and networks.

The ABA's education programs promote birding skills, ornithological knowledge, and the development of a conservation ethic.

The ABA encourages birders to apply their skills to help conserve birds and their habitats, and we represent the interests of birders in planning and legislative arenas.

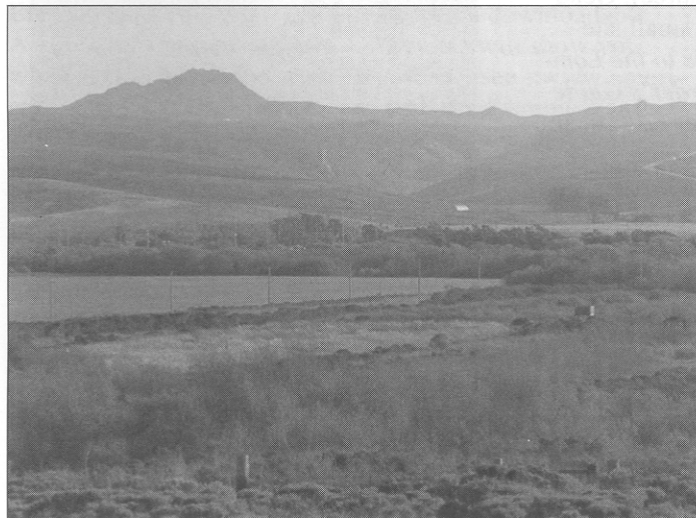
ABA Sales, the ABA's for-profit subsidiary, supplies birders with tools, equipment, and accessories to make their birding more enjoyable.

We welcome all birders as members.

You can join the ABA, learn more about us and our programs, or access a wide range of birding links on our web site, <www.americanbirding.org>.

Swainson's Thrush, Yellow and Wilson's Warblers, Black-headed Grosbeak, and others. In spring and fall, the area attracts western migrants such as Cassin's Vireo; Orange-crowned, Black-throated Gray, Townsend's, and Hermit (uncommon) Warblers; Western Tanager; and Bullock's Oriole. Sparrows are abundant in the weedy areas in winter, with good numbers of Lincoln's and Golden-crowned among them. The WNRA also serves as a trap for eastern vagrants; among such species documented in recent years have been Broad-winged Hawk; Yellow-throated and Red-eyed Vireos; Brown Thrasher; Tennessee, Black-throated Blue, Blackburnian, Prothonotary, Worm-eating, and Hooded Warblers; Dickcissel; and Orchard and Baltimore Orioles. In the "how lucky can you get" category, Brad Hines found a Dusky Warbler here in the fall of 1995; the bird remained for several days and was seen by a number of birders. A Garganey spent the winter here in 1995-1996.

To reach the WNRA, take Highway 246 (Ocean Avenue) west about eight miles from the intersection of Ocean and H in the center of Lompoc (pronounced LAHM-poke) until you see Vandenberg AFB entry gates on both your left and right. If you were advised when you checked in by phone that a liability waiver would be required, you can obtain this waiver at the Fish and Wildlife Office. Turn left toward the south gate, and this office

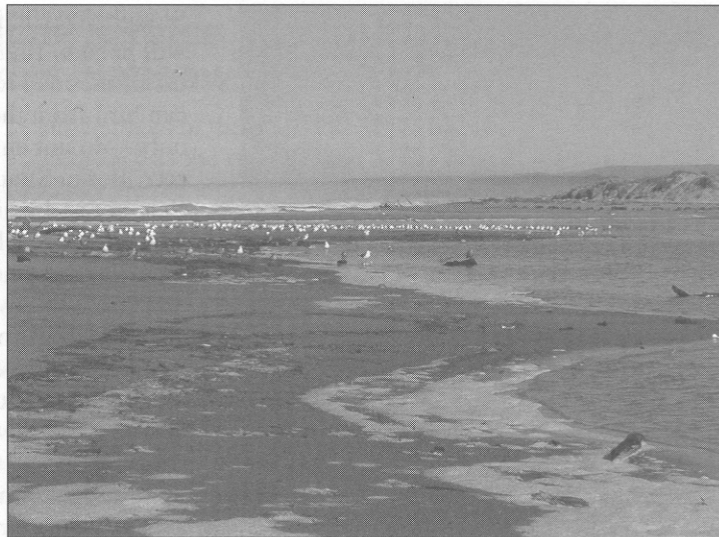


This overview of the WNRA shows the four ponds surrounding the observation tower and the densely wooded areas that adjoin the ponds on three sides. Photo: John Ayres.

is on the right just before the entry gate. To continue to the WNRA, proceed north across Ocean Avenue to the Solvang Gate. After clearing with the guard, continue north over the Santa Ynez River to the first road, which is Terra. Turn left and proceed 0.8 mile to a pull-off on the right and a sign on your left marking the WNRA. There is a sign-in sheet and a list of recent bird sightings posted at the entrance. One cautionary note: poison oak is a fairly common plant here, and if you are not familiar with its appearance, it's best to avoid touching any vegetation.

Ocean Park and Surf Station

Ocean Park, maintained by the County of Santa Barbara, provides public access to the Santa Ynez River estuary. While the park itself is open year-round, the beach and river mouth portions are open to the public only during the late fall and winter months. Vandenberg's beaches host a significant breeding population of threatened Western Snowy Plovers each summer, and for their protection, beach entry is prohibited from 1 March to 30 September. Even if the beach is closed, there is much to see here at any season. A scope is helpful (though not essential) for birding here. The parking area provides an excellent vantage point from which to scan the entire lower portion of



Large numbers of shorebirds, gulls, and terns typically congregate at the Santa Ynez River mouth. Photo: John Ayres.

the estuary, much of which is *Salicornia* marsh. Water levels vary with the season and winter rains, but there is always excellent habitat for loons, grebes, herons, waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls, and terns. A short walk under the railroad trestle leads to a paved area from which the outer part of the estuary can be observed. During late fall and winter, you can continue past this point and walk another couple of hundred yards out to the surf.

Regularly occurring or seasonal species of interest include Western and Clark's Grebes; Cinnamon Teal; White-tailed Kite; Peregrine Falcon; Snowy Plover; Whimbrel; Long-billed Curlew; Heermann's, Mew, and Glaucous-winged Gulls; and Elegant Tern, among many others. In fall and winter, Ocean Park can be a good place to look for loons, shearwaters, scoters, and jaegers just offshore. Black-vented Shearwaters are often visible in October and November. The list of unusual birds seen here over the years is extensive: Spotted Redshank, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Little and Black-headed Gulls, and Red-throated Pipit are among the rarer species that have been observed. Other unusual species seen here or just offshore have included Black Storm-Petrel; Ross's Goose; Eurasian Wigeon; Long-tailed Duck; Swainson's Hawk; Black Rail; Sandhill Crane; Laughing, Franklin's, and Sabine's Gulls; Gull-billed and Arctic



Nearly 250 threatened Western Snowy Plovers breed on Vandenberg's unspoiled beaches; about 500 winter there. Photo: Brian Small.

Terns; Tropical Kingbird; and "Large-billed" Savannah Sparrow. To reach Ocean Park from the WNRA, return to Ocean Avenue and turn right (west). Continue about two miles and turn right just before the road starts uphill. Continue west for about a mile to where the road dead-ends at the parking area.

Nearby Surf Station, an Amtrak stop located just south of the estuary, is also worth visiting. Here, from a higher vantage point, you can scope for the offshore species mentioned above. A portion of this beach is accessible Friday through Monday even in the summer, and the beach is open all winter, allowing access to the same surf and dune habitats found at the Ocean Park river mouth. To visit Surf Station from Ocean Park, return to Ocean Avenue, turn right and drive 1.2 miles to the station parking area on your right. Both of these areas are generally open to the public at all times (except as noted), although on rare occasion Ocean Park has been closed temporarily in winter due to flooding of the entry road. Both locations are subject to infrequent temporary closures during missile launches from Vandenberg.

San Antonio Road

San Antonio Road East is a public road on base property that runs along the southern edge of Barka

Slough. Traffic is light, but you will need to find a place to pull off of the road to park, and you can bird from the road edges only—do not enter base property. Barka Slough was once a rich wetland which eventually became encroached with willows, nettles, and other native and non-native vegetation. Breeding birds of interest here have included Warbling Vireo, Swainson's Thrush, Wilson's Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Blue Grosbeak, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Lazuli Bunting. A brush fire completely ravaged this area in the fall of 2001 and no doubt had an adverse effect on at least some of these species. The area is beginning to recover, however, and is still worth checking if you have time some morning, especially during the spring breeding season. This area can be reached by taking Highway 1 north from Vandenberg's main gate. San Antonio Road East is a right turn at the bottom of a very long hill 3.2 miles from the main gate.

If you go

An excellent birding resource for this entire area is *A Birder's Guide to Southern California*, by Brad Schram, in the ABA Birdfinding Guide series (ABA Sales item #123). Paul Lehman's *The Birds of Santa Barbara County, California* (1994) is excellent but unfortunately out of print (try a used book source). Gene Lynch has written three small site guides: *A Birder's Guide to the Lompoc Valley* (1999), *A Birder's Guide to the Santa Maria Valley* (2000), and *A Birder's Guide to the Santa Ynez Valley* (2003). His booklets can be ordered on the Central Coast Birding Trail (CCBT) web site, <www.lpas.westhost.com/CCBT/index.htm>. Details and a photo gallery for each of the locations mentioned in this article, suggestions for other area birding sites, information on discounts at local motels and restaurants, and other regional information can also be found on this site. Lompoc and other nearby towns and cities have ample lodging and numerous restaurants.

There is much to see and do while in the area: wineries, historic missions, and a lot more. Contact the local Chambers of Commerce or Visitors Bureaus for details.

We thank Nancy Read Francine and Allan Naydol, whose management of Vandenberg's natural resources has made this article worth writing. Thanks also to the following individuals who reviewed the article and provided helpful comments and/or photographs: John Ayres, Dave Compton, Brad Hines, Becky Hoban, Jack Hokanson, Mark Holmgren, Paul Lehman, and Brian Small.

Ken Hollinga, ABA's Conference and Convention Manager, completed nearly thirty years of service in the Air Force, ten of them stationed at Vandenberg during two separate tours of duty. **Chris Eberly** is Program Manager for the DoD Partners in Flight program. He works (and birds) with natural resources managers at military installations around the country.



Help Us Get the Word Out!

Many ABA members probably know and even regularly work with people employed by newspapers, television and radio stations, and other media outlets who are sympathetic to issues concerning birds and bird conservation. The ABA needs their contact information for our press list database. Please send their contact information to the ABA's Director of Publications, Allan Burns, at <aburns@aba.org>.

Broader exposure in the media will help raise the profile of the ABA, making it easier to recruit new members and promote our bird-related conservation and education efforts. Your help in this matter is much appreciated!

