

California: Birding Wine Country

With Naturalist Journeys

December 2 – 8, 2023

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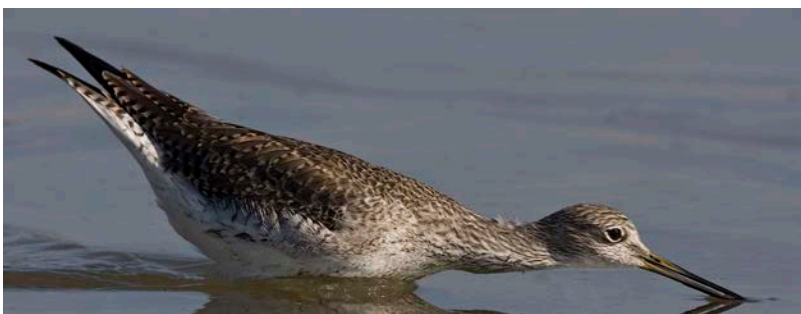
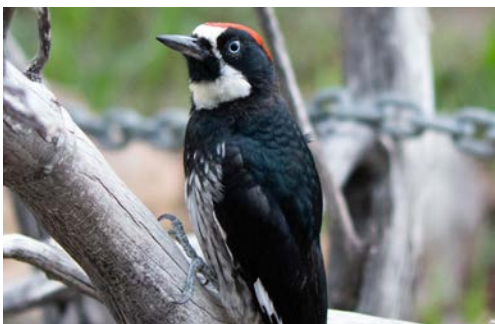
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at Naturalist Journeys, LLC



Join Naturalist Journeys and noted Central Valley birder David Yee on this winter California birding tour. Based out of just two hotels, we enjoy the luxury of settling in and exploring each day without frequent moves.

The Central Valley is world-famous for wetlands, waterfowl, and wine—and we enjoy all three! Be awed by clouds of Snow Geese and ponds filled with Sandhill Crane in active wetland habitat, search for rare shorebirds along rivers and dormant agricultural fields, and delight in Yellow-billed Magpie and Swainson’s Hawk in oak woodlands. On this Central California nature tour, we visit six of the region’s most renowned small vineyards, several of which have cultivated native habitat along with their grapevines and all of which welcome birders. Stay in a premier historic inn, located in Lodi, a delightful winegrowing hub.

Tour Highlights

- Relax in the historic Wine and Roses Hotel, surrounded by gardens and offering some of the best cuisine in Central California
- Bird premier National Wildlife Refuges and the Sacramento Delta for thousands of Blue, Snow, Ross’ and Tule Geese, Sandhill Crane and a huge range of ducks
- Enjoy iconic western species in extensive oak woodlands, where Yellow-billed Magpie, Acorn Woodpecker, and Swainson’s Hawk compete for your attention
- Get a taste of original California native open grasslands with Ferruginous Hawk, Prairie Falcon, Long-billed Curlew, and Burrowing Owl.
- Sip a wide variety of California wines in the gardens, patios, and tasting rooms of a sampling of Lodi’s best vineyards

Tour Details

7-Day / 6-Night Central California Wine and Birding Tour with David Yee

\$2990 DBL / \$3790 SGL from Sacramento

Airport is Sacramento International Airport (SMF)

Day-to-Day Itinerary

Sat., Dec. 2 Arrivals

Plan to arrive at the Sacramento International Airport in time for a 3:00 PM group departure. Have your binoculars handy to leisurely bird from the van for your first taste of western birds as we stop by flooded fields right off Highway 99, the access road to the centrally located town of Yuba City. Dinner tonight is at the delicious Marcello’s Italian Restaurant.

Accommodations at the Best Western Yuba City Inn (D)

Sun., Dec. 3 Sacramento & Colusa National Wildlife Refuges

After breakfast today we visit Sacramento and Colusa National Wildlife Refuges (both close to Yuba City) for a wintering waterfowl extravaganza! Both refuges are extremely birder friendly with plenty of photo opportunities for those with a camera. We drive the roads in both refuges, with opportunities to visit viewing platforms and take short walks. The Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge was established

in 1937 to provide refuge and breeding habitat for migratory birds and protect habitat, and currently supports over 250 species of bird. We are awed by huge numbers of Snow Goose at the Refuge, with Blue Snow Goose individuals commonly found and guaranteed wintering Bald Eagle in many plumages. Marsh species include Gallinule, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Marsh Wren, Song Sparrow, Loggerhead Shrike, Tri-colored Blackbird and, if we are lucky, a wintering Road Runner may also make an appearance.

We then seek out seasonal specialties in a local cemetery (known for wintering vagrants), and other special hot spots. By mid-winter, all of the rarities have been staked out, and there are usually many in the Sacramento Valley. Last winter, highlights included Vermilion Flycatcher, Plumbeous Vireo, and Northern Shrike.

We enjoy lunch at nearby Family Taco to sample some local cuisine. After lunch, expect amazing photo opportunities at Colusa NWF, where seasonal marshes, permanent ponds, and uplands were protected in 1945. This refuge has a different mix of species than we saw in the morning: waterfowl congregate where refuge personnel have installed gravel strips (which the birds need to help their gizzard work), including at areas close to a viewing platform. Featured species include the greatest number of wintering Eurasian Wigeon in the lower US, and all other expected species of ducks, including large numbers of Cinnamon Teal, Pintail, and shovelers. See terrific numbers of the Tule race of the Greater White-fronted Geese (Tule Goose); with less than 2K total individuals in the world, this is one of two populations in the Central Valley. Additionally, both Ross' Goose and the blue morph of Ross' Goose are usually present. Peregrine Falcon, a range of raptors, shorebirds including Greater Yellowlegs, Long-billed Dowitcher, Wilson's Snipe, and usually some rarities like Ruff are very possible. We return for dinner at Yuba City's popular Sutter Buttes Brewery.

Accommodations at the Best Western Yuba City Inn (B,L,D)

Mon., Dec. 4 Gray Lodge State Wildlife Area | Wine Tasting

After breakfast and check out from our Yuba City hotel, we visit Gray Lodge State Wildlife Area, just 15 minutes south of Yuba City on our way to Lodi. While similar to Sacramento NWR, this state wildlife area has a smaller loop that provides for more intimate viewing. The number of birds that winter in this relatively small area is impressive. We take the opportunity for very close looks at huge numbers of Snow Geese and other waterfowl. Good-sized populations of White-faced Ibis are easy to see, as are raptors, including Red-shouldered Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk in multiple plumages with likely looks at the very rare Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk. Merlin and Peregrine Falcon are regular visitors.

We have lunch nearby in the town of Live Oak, an agricultural hub of the Central Valley adjacent to the protected conservation stronghold of the picturesque Sutter Buttes. Afterwards, as we head toward Lodi, we go by the cities of Sacramento and Davis, where there are a multitude of birding opportunities in the wild lands surrounding both cities. Because of long-standing conservation efforts, the number of wetlands set aside are impressive, and the birding here all year-round has become almost legendary for Northern California. For example, at the Yolo Basin Bypass loop, we look for regular wintering species along with specialties seen in this year's Christmas Bird Count. Waterfowl are different than what we saw in the refuges the day before and an hour or two spent exploring wet riparian habitat

also gives us the chance to discover shorebirds like Lesser Yellowlegs, Long-billed Curlew, and Mountain Plover, along with our best chance for Rough-legged Hawk, Sora, and Virginia Rail.

This afternoon we visit our first wine-tasting spot to enjoy a key California agricultural product. Our hotel for the next four nights is the renowned Wine & Roses Hotel. There is plenty of time to unpack and relax before dinner in downtown Lodi at Pietro's Trattoria.

Accommodations at the Wine & Roses Hotel (B,L,D)

Wine & Roses

Nestled in the heart of the Lodi wine country, Wine & Roses Hotel is located on a seven-acre estate of towering trees, flowers, and herb gardens. Recognized as an historic site, the hotel features 66 beautifully appointed guest rooms and suites with amenities including botanical gardens, a modern fitness center, beautiful pool, relaxing jacuzzi, and unparalleled gracious hospitality. The Lodi Wine & Visitor Center is located on the grounds, so wine tasting information, maps, and advice is easily accessible. A green company, Wine & Roses offers environmentally friendly products and practices.

Lodi

Lodi is home to over 80 wineries. Minutes from Wine & Roses, Lodi Lake provides an area to swim, fish, or take a nature walk. Historic downtown Lodi provides a theatre, shopping, and dining. Cultural events and festivals occur throughout the year.

Tues., Dec. 5 Heritage Oak Winery | Mokelumne Fish Hatchery

We spend three full days centering around Lodi; our outings are filled with a combination of woodland/grassland birding in the morning, followed by wetland explorations in the afternoon, with wine tasting interspersed throughout. Well-known spots for tremendous populations of cranes and waterfowl are numerous. Each day we enjoy breakfast at the Towne Corner Café at the Wine & Roses Hotel. Lunches are catered picnics or at local restaurants near birding spots, and dinners are as noted below.

Today we spend the morning at Heritage Oak Winery where we bird the oak woodland and riparian areas next to the Mokelumne River. Heritage Oak is a popular and welcoming spot for birders. Apart from the numerous species that are attracted to the front patio and its adjacent garden, the vineyards, riparian woodland, and river itself provide habitat for hundreds of species including wintering Anna's Hummingbird, American and Lesser Goldfinch, White-crowned and Golden-crowned Sparrows, a Barn Owl roost, and forest wintering birds like Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, Varied Thrush, Western Bluebird, Oak Titmouse, and Bushtit. We return to the winery after a good morning of birding for a catered picnic under a towering fig tree or in a covered area accompanied by wine tasting.

After lunch we go upstream to the Mokelumne Fish Hatchery and adjacent scenic riparian woodland habitat for Osprey, Common Merganser, California Quail, Phainopepla, and Lewis's Woodpecker. This should be our best day for Wood Duck. Mammals seen today could include Black-tailed Deer, Gray and Red Fox, Raccoon, native Western Gray Squirrel, which is on the decline, and River Otter. We enjoy dinner tonight back in Lodi at Casa Flores.

Accommodations at the Wine & Roses Hotel (B,L,D)

Wed., Dec. 6 Oak Grove Regional Park | Woodbridge Road

Today after breakfast we head further south to Oak Grove Regional Park in Stockton to search for iconic Central Valley birds including Yellow-billed Magpie, Acorn Woodpecker, Hermit Thrush, Spotted Towhee, Kestrel, and the wintering Swainson's Hawk that makes this area famous. Few know that the Central Valley is known for hybrid Flickers—while the Northern Flicker (Red-shafted) is common, we also see Red and Yellow-shafted hybrids, as well as the rare wintering true Yellow-shafted Flicker. Nuttall's Woodpecker and Downy Woodpecker, wintering Tree Swallow, and White-throated Swift round out the array of species expected.

We take a break to enjoy a delicious lunch and wine tasting at the Michael David Wine Cafe (home of the "7 Deadly Zins") along with birding in their spacious gardens. This afternoon, travel to the Sacramento River Delta's famous Woodbridge Road for swans and Sandhill Crane, where both Greater (breed in lower 48) and Lesser (breed only in the Arctic) Sandhill Crane winter side by side. In addition, there are plenty of shorebirds and deeper-water ducks including Blue-winged Teal and diving species like Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, and Greater Scaup. If weather conditions are favorable, we see tens of thousands of cranes fly-in against the sunset before dinner. Tonight, we enjoy dinner at one of Lodi's best breweries, the Lodi Beer Company.

Accommodations at the Wine & Roses Hotel (B,L,D)

Thurs., Dec. 7 Sierra Foothills | Staten Island

Today we have a raptor morning, traveling east about 45 minutes to visit a spot in Sierra Foothills. Explore birds of the open grasslands of the eastern Central Valley and get a taste of what the whole valley used to look like before it was settled for agriculture. Key species include Ferruginous Hawk, Prairie Falcon, Merlin, Golden Eagle, Northern Harrier, Burrowing and Short-eared Owl, along with Horned Lark, Long-billed Curlew, and American Bluebird.

We enjoy lunch in the town of Linden, then head back towards Lodi for a final afternoon in the Delta. At Staten Island, we see numerous Aleutian Cackling Goose (an Endangered Species Act success story—from the verge of extinction, down to less than a couple of thousands, the population has now grown to 50 thousand birds, larger than it was originally, and is fully delisted); plus more Sandhill Crane, swans, gulls, wintering Swainson's Hawk, American Pipit, Western Meadowlark, Say's Phoebe, Great Horned Owl, Turkey Vulture, American Kestrel, Loggerhead Shrike, and many species of blackbirds: Red-winged, Tricolored, and Brewer's. Coyote are very possible as well. To celebrate a great week of birding, we gather this evening for a farewell dinner at Wine & Roses Town House Restaurant.

Accommodations at the Wine & Roses Hotel (B,L,D)

Fri., Dec. 8 Departures

After a light breakfast at the hotel, we depart at 7:00 AM; please plan your flights from Sacramento International Airport to leave no earlier than 9:00 AM (or you can arrange for alternative transportation earlier or later by Uber or airport shuttle, \$60-100 least expensive options; hotel check out is 11 AM.) (B)

Guide David Yee



David started birding at the age of 10. By high school, birding was his passion. He went to college at UC Santa Cruz, majored in biology, and bird science was always his focus. David went on to become a full-time chemist, but birding remained his passion, and according to his wife, his obsession. He has authored the Annotated Checklist of the Birds of San Joaquin County. He was the Regional Editor of North American Birds, Northern California Region. He has travelled extensively, and enjoys guiding throughout the US, Mexico, Central America, and Southeast Asia.

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Please note, starting in January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Travel Information

The airport for this tour is Sacramento International Airport (SMF). Please plan to meet David Yee no later than 3:00 PM on December 2. Please plan on departures after 9:00 AM on December 8.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the main journey is \$2990 DBL / \$3790 SGL, based on double occupancy, from Sacramento, California.

Cost Includes:

Accommodations for six nights, meals as specified in the itinerary (B=breakfast, L=lunch, D=dinner), land transportation during the journey, professional guide services, park and other entrance fees, and miscellaneous program expenses.

Cost Does Not Include:

Round-trip airfare to and from Sacramento, items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone, drinks from the bar, and gratuities for luggage handling or personal services.

Photo Credits

Sandhill Cranes, Greg Smith (GS); Burrowing Owl, GS; Acorn Woodpecker, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); Cinnamon Teal, Hugh Simmons Photography; California Quail, Steve Wolfe; Cranes at Sunset, GS; Greater Yellowlegs, NJS; Long-eared Owl, GS.

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