



A Bird Finding Guide to Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas

Recognized as one of the best birding spots in the United States, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) 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:

Although walking trail lengths typically are less than two miles, allow a minimum of two hours to look for birds. Most birders spend at least a half-day here, which allows for an easy pace on the trails, with ample time to rest and watch birds. Carry a trail map if possible. Call ahead to confirm scheduled interpretive programs, recent bird sightings, and other current events.

Even in winter, the climate can feel warm for visitors from other parts of the country. Always bring water and sunscreen, and dress in layers to be prepared for temperature changes. Don't overexert yourself; take frequent rest stops and drink plenty of water as temperatures rise. And please don't feed the mosquitoes or chiggers, which are active all year. Always carry insect repellent, and remember to spray around your socks and waistband to discourage chiggers from hitching a ride out of the Refuge.

Wear sturdy and comfortable footwear. Trail surfaces generally are flat and there is little elevation change, but exposed roots or erosion can damage trails and cause falls for unsuspecting visitors.

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 River. At 2,088 acres, Santa Ana is small but provides wonderful bird habitats. 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 and grounds surrounding the parking lots for Great Kiskadees, Couch's Kingbirds, Clay-colored Robins and 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 Robin, 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. Common Yellowthroats (year round) join wintering Eastern Phoebes 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 of the waterfowl departs in the spring, but Mottled Ducks, Least and Pied-billed Grebes, and Black-bellied Whistling Ducks remain during the summer to raise their young. Also in summer; Pintail is the best place at the Refuge 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, 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 near 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 even more enjoyable and interesting bi-national birding experience, consider taking a guided canoe trip on the Rio Grande. Offered as 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 River, and the international border, which is always an interesting topic of discussion among many different stakeholders.

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 area often harbor nesting Clay-colored Robins, Tropical Parula, 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, 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 observation structures at Santa Ana NWR is the Tree Tower, located 1/3 mile south of the visitor center. The 40-foot tall tower was constructed for Refuge personnel 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. Fall and spring migration seasons on the tower can be outstanding times to watch 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 or setting down for the night. Year round, the tower provides an interesting perspective for bird watching, as birders are able to observe behavior looking down on the birds, instead of straining one's neck looking up at them.

Just around the corner from the Tower is a photo blind and feeding area. 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): Winter birding at its finest. Mild weather plus lots of birders equals great birding and sharing of information. Look for flocks of mixed wintering songbird species (warblers, vireos, kinglets and gnatcatchers) in any place with 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 migrants, are first spotted in mid-February, signaling the beginning of spring at the Refuge. Partly due to the large numbers of visiting birders (more eyes and skilled birders equal more bird sighting and reports), 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 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. Swainson's Hawks and Turkey Vultures begin migrating through in March, and the Broad-winged Hawks peak in the first week in April, with 20,000 to 30,000 counted in a single day not uncommon. Songbirds begin trickling through in mid-March, slowly but steadily increasing in number until they peak in 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 May include Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Groove-billed Ani, White-winged Dove, Altamira Oriole, and Couch's Kingbird.

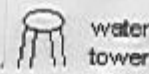
SUMMER (June – August): Resident birds complete their nesting season in summer, with many raising two broods. June is the easiest time of year to find Clay-colored Robins, Tropical Parulas and Northern Beardless-tyrannulets, singing on breeding territories. Least Grebes and Mottled and Black-bellied 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 in late July and August.

FALL (September – November): Fall migration is in full swing, but more protracted than in spring. 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.

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

US 281

FM 907

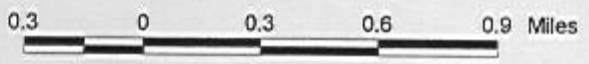
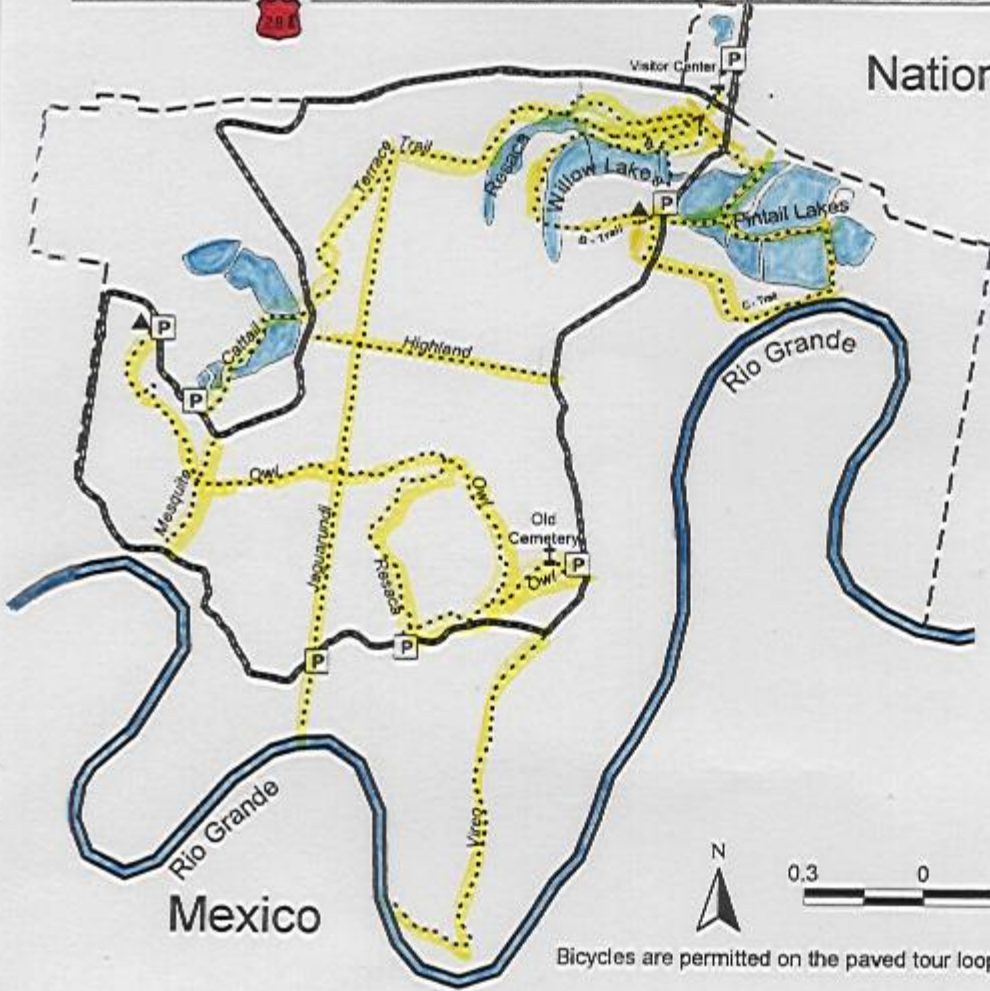


Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge

Legend

- Photo Blind
- Refuge Boundry
- Parking
- Tour Loop
- Foot Trail

	Distances	
	Miles	(KM)
Refuge Drive	7.0	11.2
"A" Trail (Handicap Access)	.5	.9
"B" Trail	1.6	2.5
"C" Trail	2.0	3.2
Cattail	1.5	2.5
Highland	.6	1.0
Jaguarundi	1.4	2.2
Mesquite	.3	.5
Owl	2.0	3.2
Resaca	1.0	1.6
Terrace	.8	1.3
Vireo	.9	1.4



Bicycles are permitted on the paved tour loop only and are not allowed on the trails