Bird's Eye View: Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge

Known as one of the best areas for bird watching in Southern California, the Sonny Bono Salton Sea NationalWildlife Refuge makes an excellent afternoon trip for two or an educational and must-see stop as part of a family camping trip to the Salton Sea State Recreation Area. A short ride from Palm Springs, the Salton Sea lies 227 feet below sea level with more than 35,000 acres of salt marsh and 2,000 acres of pasture and freshwater marsh. SALTON SEA HISTORY An inland, saline lake— one of the world's largest—the Salton Sea was formed when, in 1905, the Colorado River burst through irrigation controls near Yuma, Arizona. The water flowed for 18 months into the Salton Basin, a remnant of the prehistoric Lake Cahuilla. By the time engineers stopped the flow in 1907, the Salton Sea had been formed. Forty-five miles long and 20 miles wide, the Salton Sea is frequented by bird-watchers, boaters, water skiers and anglers. BIRD WATCHING AT ITS BEST

Millions of birds migrate to the area each year, making the Salton Sea an important part of the Pacific Flyway, a major north-south route for migratory birds that extends from Alaska to South America. The Salton Sea region is particularly popular with bird-watchers—it has the most diverse bird species of any wildlife refuge in the West.

Established in 1930, the Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge offers two areas open daily from sunrise to sunset for extensive birdwatching. With more than 375 species noted in the Salton Sea and Imperial Valley regions, novice and experienced birders alike will have ample opportunity to witness beauty in flight. Visitors will find a bird exhibit and informational kiosks at the visitor center, which is open on Saturdays and Sundays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. during winter months.

A habitat for migrating and wintering waterfowl and endangered species, the refuge provides a feeding, resting and nesting habitat for a large number of shore birds and supports a diversity of wildlife species. Thousands of waterfowl and other birds winter at the Salton Sea, including Canada, Ross' and snow geese, American avocets, black-necked stilts, pintails, green-winged teal, eared grebes and a wide variety of other species. Endangered species like the Yuma clapper rail, southern bald eagle, California brown pelican and peregrine falcon may also be seen. BIRD WATCHING TIPS The best months for bird watching in the region are November through May. A good pair of binoculars is invaluable for viewing the variety of birds at the Salton Sea and can help distinguish the subtle characteristics of each species. A bird guidebook is also a great tool to help novice bird watchers identify particular species more easily. Expert birders can even plan a special weekend around a Burrowing Owl Consortium on February 14, 2008 and the 11th annual Salton Sea International Bird Festival, February 15 and 16, 2008. HOW TO GET THERE From Rancho Mirage, take I-10 East to CA-86 South toward Brawley/El Centro. Turn left on North Center Street/CR-S30/Forrester Road and follow CR-S30. Go straight to follow Gentry Road. Turn left on West Sinclair Road/Estelle Road. Drive one half mile to 906 West Sinclair Road, Calipatria, CA 92233. Driving Time: Approximately 1 hour and 35 minutes.

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