

# Nature: Viewing migratory birds in Sonoma County

by Rebecca Lawton

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As ducks and geese in V-formation drift like falling leaves into the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge, I pause on my southbound trip among the wetlands of the Central Valley. Dusk is settling.

Flocks of geese – white-fronted, Ross’s, snow, Canada – glide alongside dabbling and diving ducks on wet channels through the refuge’s dry, hummocky terrain. The birds flap their wings, displaying their growing migratory restlessness, or *zugunruhe*, a German word coined from *zug* (move) and *unruhe* (anxiety).

Taking the refuge’s dirt driving loop at a breakneck 6 mph, I follow the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s instructions to view wildlife from my car as if it were a rolling duck blind. Great blue herons and snowy egrets wade in search of prey as dragonflies mate midair in fused pairs, and long-billed curlews and willets slink along shorelines. Red-shouldered and red-tailed hawks, as well as the occasional peregrine in its dark executioner’s mask, hunt from the tops of yellowing cottonwoods. They’re as watchful as, well, hawks.

Soon I’m beside an American bittern, the wide, bright orb of its eyeball startled and alert. A striped heron, the bittern’s plumage acts as camouflage among the upright, browning stalks of cattails and fennel, easing the bittern into sight as the many little men in striped shirts become detectable with repeated inspection of *Where’s Waldo?*

From September through November, migratory birds pause to overnight along rivers and ponds, in fields and in forests on their journeys from summering grounds farther north. In Sonoma County, fall migration is marked by a funneling of raptors along coastal mountains and prairies. There’s hardly a bigger, cheaper thrill to be found in Northern California than to stand on a hilltop at Sears Point or the Jenner Headlands, watching a distant, fluttering

shape grow bigger until it becomes identifiable as a ferruginous hawk, American kestrel or black-shouldered kite.

Much bird migration, however, happens out of our sight. Swans, geese and ducks migrate in part by night, as do most songbirds. Studies beginning in the 1880s used lunar observation – viewing silhouettes of migratory species against the moon – to help clarify why some birds were here one day and gone the next. The snow geese I see resting at the refuge may fly tonight, gaining speeds of up to 55 mph, worthy of Interstate 5 just to the west.

Illumination throws off night fliers, who slow migratory speed, adjust liftoff and change direction in response to bright lights. The Swiss Ornithological Institute argues for the use of light beams on aircraft to prevent bird strikes and against the increasing use of night lighting for other purposes.

The National Audubon Society, through its Lights Out program, recommends turning off unnecessary lighting to aid the already herculean efforts of migrating birds. To be bird friendly, security lighting is best done with motion sensors. Recreational tree and area lighting should be sparingly used or not at all.

As dark deepens at the refuge, my own zugunruhe increases; best to minimize night travel, which I don't excel at as the geese do. Finishing the driving loop, I stop at a willow-ringed pond at the western end of the refuge. A great-horned owl calls, answered by another in a voice a half-octave lower. They cry and respond for many minutes, and I listen, until I'm restless to take to the highway to continue south.

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