



Birds of Bernardo

New blinds, decks perfect for viewing cranes, waterfowl

By Tom Chilton

New viewing blinds, platforms and short hiking trails are among many improvements at the Bernardo Unit of the Ladd S. Gordon Waterfowl Complex, giving visitors more opportunities to watch and photograph birds in the Middle Rio Grande Valley.

The Bernardo area is part of a complex that includes the Belen, Casa Colorada and La Joya waterfowl areas. Bernardo is south of Belen, just north of U.S. 60, an easy stop off Interstate 25. Three elevated observation decks, built several years ago, now have roofs and screening that provide shelter from the elements without sacrificing viewing space. A three-mile auto loop and two short hiking trails also give visitors views of birds in fields and ponds.

Visitors are welcome at the Bernardo area from 1/2-hour before sunrise to sunset Sept. 1 through March 9, and from 7 a.m. to sunset March 10 through Aug. 31. The area is closed occasionally during hunting seasons, so visitors are encouraged to call before their trip. Please call Bernardo at (505) 864-9187, or the Department of Game and Fish Conservation Services Division at (505) 476-8101 for the area's current status.

Thousands of sandhill cranes and snow geese gather daily in the area's cultivated, dry fields. More than a dozen species of ducks rest and feed in flooded fields



Photos: Dan Williams

About 200 acres of corn are grown every year at the Bernardo Wildlife Area to provide food for as many as 12,000 sandhill cranes and 25,000 snow geese that visit the area every winter. Feeding the birds helps keep them off farmers' fields in the Rio Grande Valley. The area is open to visitors from 1/2-hour before sunrise to sunset Sept. 1 through March 9, and 7 a.m. to sunset March 10 through Aug. 31. The area is closed occasionally during hunting seasons, so visitors are encouraged to call call Bernardo at (505) 864-9187, or the Department of Game and Fish at (505) 476-8101 for the area's current status.

and ponds, taking to the air in the early mornings and late evenings. Visitors often see hundreds, sometimes thousands of cranes, geese and ducks in the air as they fly from one field or pond to another. The best times for birding are from mid-November to early February. Most years, more than 12,000 sandhill cranes and 25,000 snow geese find food and refuge at Bernardo. That's a lot of quacking, honking and action for bird lovers of all ages.

Planting for wildlife

Bernardo is one of three working farms in the Middle Rio Grande Valley that are

managed by the Department of Game and Fish. Of the 1,700 acres at Bernardo, about 450 acres are cultivated annually to provide winter feed for migratory and upland birds. Several fields are flooded during the fall to provide resting areas for migrating waterfowl. Because the landscape is a mixture of open water, fields and dense woods, it also attracts mule deer, coyotes, raccoons, pheasants, hawks, owls, quail and songbirds.

Corn is the most important crop at Bernardo because of its high nutritional value to waterfowl. About 200 acres of corn are planted in mid-May. Although corn is an ideal food for the birds, it cannot be planted year after year in the same field. If this were done, the soil would be depleted of nitrogen and the corn production would decline. To prevent this, alfalfa is planted every other year, because this plant, in combination with bacteria in the soil, replaces nitrogen absorbed by the corn.

About 400 acres of alfalfa are planted in the middle of April. Hay from this crop is harvested four to five times from the middle of May to the first freeze in October. Smaller acreages of milo and millet are also planted.

In the fall, corn stalks are mowed down so that birds can easily get to the grain. However, some corn rows are knocked with a pole so that the stalks are leaning over. In this position the corn is available mostly to the tall cranes and not to the shorter geese.



Photo: Marty Frentzel

Covered blinds give visitors to Bernardo Wildlife Area protection from wind and snow along with excellent views of the cranes and migrating waterfowl that use the area.

Sandhill cranes

Sandhill cranes are a big winter attraction at Bernardo. With a wingspan of 5 to 6 ½ feet and weights ranging from 6 to 16 pounds, these cranes are the largest flocking bird you will see at Bernardo. Their large size ensures that photographers will have frame-filling fun. The birds mate in the spring in the northern United States, Canada, Alaska and Siberia. The mating pairs will tilt their heads back and call together, singing a kind of duet. Throughout the year they also dance, run, and leap high in the air. They use their large wings to slow down and make parachute-like landings, which are enjoyable to watch and easy to photograph. The average lifespan of a sandhill crane in the wild is 20 years.

Snow geese

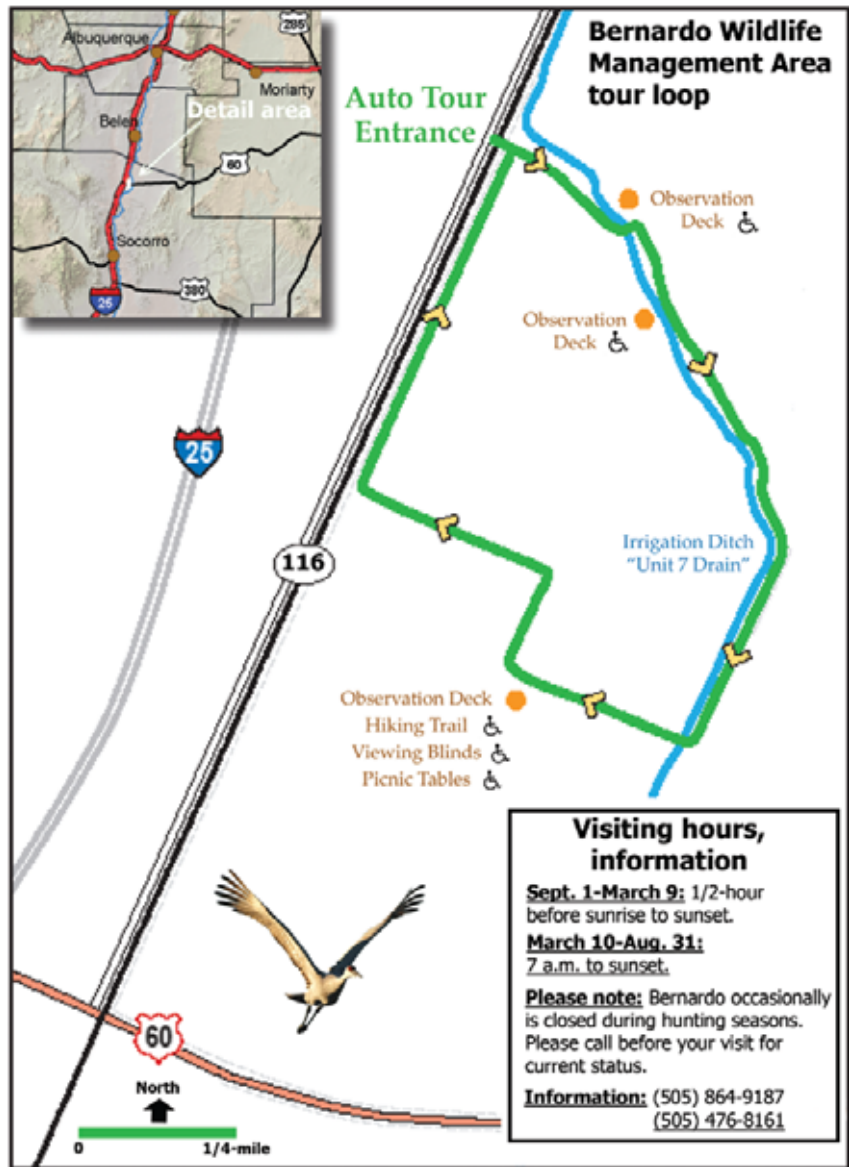
Each fall more than 6 million snow geese migrate from northern Canada to marshes, bays, fields and wet grasslands in the western United States. Up to 60,000 of these birds come to this part of New Mexico to spend about three months in the croplands and wetlands along the Rio Grande. They travel up to 3,000 miles in huge, honking flocks – a snowstorm of big, white birds with five-foot wingspans. From a distance, snow geese appear to be all white. However, their black wingtips are easy to see when they fly.

A feeding flock of several thousand geese may look like chaos, but family groups and pairs stay together, moving through the flock as distinct units. You can see this behavior most easily from one of the elevated platforms at Bernardo. Each group keeps an area around it clear of other geese so that competition for food is reduced. The adult male makes sure that other geese do not come too close.

In early February, the geese begin their return trip north, where they will gather and breed in colonies that have between 1,000 and 150,000 pairs. The majority of the snow and Ross's geese migrating from New Mexico breed on Bank's Island and the Queen Maud Gulf region in north-central Canada.

Watchable wildlife

The observation platforms are excellent places to view all kinds of wildlife, especially shy animals that are more active at dawn and dusk. Watch along the edge of the woods. In most ecosystems, an edge between two habitats is where you will see the most wildlife. As the sun goes down, animals such as mule deer leave the woods



to graze on grain in the fields. Coyotes emerge to scout the crop furrows for rodents. Listen for the flutter of wings, the drumming of a woodpecker or the call of a coyote.

Tracks are easy to find in the mud along the pond edges and in the soft dirt of the birding tour road. There are other clues to wildlife if you look closely. Look for droppings, feathers, bones, eggshells and little bits of fur. Bernardo's two short hiking trails go through deep woods where you

may see nests and other wildlife signs.

Water for waterfowl

Most of the water in the ditches and ponds at Bernardo comes from the Rio Grande. Near Isleta, about 30 miles north of Bernardo, water is diverted from the Rio Grande into a network of canals and ditches that are accessed by farmers and ranchers throughout the Rio Grande Valley. The primary irrigation channel in this network flows from Isleta, through Bernardo, down to Socorro, where it rejoins the Rio Grande.



Photos: Dan Williams, above, Marty Frentzel, right

Platforms overlooking cultivated fields of corn and milo are perfect spots to watch as many as 25,000 snow geese that visit the Bernardo Wildlife Area south of Belen every winter.