Critter Creek Chronicle

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Critter Creek Chronicle

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CRITTER CREEK WILDLIFE STATION
WINTER OPEN HOUSE
SATURDAY, Dec. 13, 2025
11:00 AM until 2:00 PM

Gate will close at 1:30 pm to allow you enough time to tour. The Open House will be unguided, so the pace is leisurely offering more opportunities to take pictures. Our volunteers will be on hand to answer questions. Visit our gift shop where you'll find unusual handcrafted gifts for the holidays. Relieve the stress of the season with a visit to the foothills with family. Admission is by donation.

Call (559) 338-2415 for information or
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Be On The Lookout For Winter Birds

Winter in California is a season of quiet beauty filled with color and sound. Across the valleys, mountains, and coastlines, birds continue to bring life to the landscape even during the coldest days. The sight of a red-breasted robin on a frosty lawn or a white egret standing motionless in a misty wetland shows how much diversity the season holds.

Many of these birds stay through the entire winter, depending on local food and mild weather to survive. Others use California as a temporary refuge before returning north in spring.

The Dark-eyed Junco is one of the most recognizable winter birds in California, easily spotted thanks to its dark hood, white belly, and pinkish bill.



During the winter months, juncos gather in large flocks, often foraging on the ground for seeds scattered beneath trees or bird feeders. They hop quickly rather than walk and frequently flick their tails, revealing white outer feathers.

Dark-eyed Juncos prefer open woodlands, suburban yards, and coniferous forests, where they can find both shelter and food. In California, they are especially common in the Sierra Nevada foothills, urban parks, and gardens from late October through early March.

The White-crowned Sparrow is easily recognized by its bold black-and-white striped crown and gray face. Adults measure about 6 to 7 inches long with a slim build and long tail. These sparrows are ground foragers, often seen hopping beneath shrubs or scratching through leaf litter in search of seeds and small insects. They are sociable birds, sometimes forming loose flocks with other sparrow species during the winter months.



In California, White-crowned Sparrows are abundant from late September through early April, particularly along the coast, in farmlands, and suburban gardens. Their cheerful whistled song can often be heard even on cool winter mornings, brightening otherwise quiet landscapes.

The Yellow-rumped Warbler stands out with its bright yellow patches on the rump, sides, and crown, which contrast with its gray back and white throat. These medium-sized warblers measure around 5.5 inches long. In winter, they are among the few warbler species that remain abundant in California. Yellow-rumped Warblers can be seen flitting through trees, hedges, and open woodlands, often making short, darting flights to catch insects midair. They are active, sociable, and frequently visit birdbaths or suet feeders during cold spells. From late October to early March, these birds are widespread throughout California — from the coast to the foothills and even in urban parks. As temperatures warm, they begin migrating northward or upward into forested mountain regions to breed.



The Ruby-crowned Kinglet is one of California's tiniest winter visitors, measuring just about 4 inches in length and weighing less than a quarter of an ounce. Males have a hidden ruby-red crown that they flash when agitated or during courtship, while females lack this feature. These birds are energetic and rarely stay still. They flit through branches, flicking their wings rapidly as they search for insects, spiders, and eggs hidden in bark crevices. Their high-pitched calls are often heard before they are seen, especially in wooded parks and backyard gardens. They adapt well to cooler weather, relying on dense foliage for warmth and protection. Despite their small size, they are remarkably hardy and active even on chilly mornings.



The American Robin, with its bright orange breast and grayish back, is a familiar sight during California's winter months. Measuring about 10 inches long, robins are larger than most songbirds and have a confident, upright posture. Their clear, whistling call and cheerful demeanor make them easy to recognize. In winter, large flocks of robins can be seen foraging on lawns, berry bushes, and orchards across the state. They mainly feed on fruits, such as holly and toyon berries, when insects become scarce. In California, their numbers swell dramatically in winter as migrants from northern regions arrive to take advantage of the state's moderate temperatures and food supply.



The Cedar Waxwing is one of the most elegant winter visitors in California, recognized by its smooth, silky plumage, pointed crest, and yellow-tipped tail. Adults measure about 6 to 7 inches long, with a soft blend of tan, gray, and yellow feathers, and striking red wax-like tips on their secondary wings — the feature that gives them their name.



These birds are highly social and often move in flocks, gliding gracefully between fruiting trees. During winter, they feed almost entirely on berries such as toyon, mistletoe, and juniper. Their gentle, high-pitched calls can often be heard even before the flock is seen.

The Spotted Towhee is a striking bird with bold colors — a black hood and back, rufous-orange sides, and white belly. Males are more vividly colored than females, and both have piercing red eyes. Adults average 7 to 8 inches long, with a robust body and long tail tipped in white.



Towhees prefer dense thickets and brushy areas, where they scratch vigorously through leaf litter for seeds, berries, and insects.

The Western Bluebird adds brilliant color to California's winter scenery with its deep blue wings and orange-rust chest. Males are especially vivid, while females display softer blue-gray tones. They measure about 6 to 7 inches long and have a plump, compact body with a short, straight bill.



These birds often perch on fence posts or low branches, scanning for insects on the ground. In winter, their diet shifts more toward berries and fruits, and they often form small flocks that move through open woodlands and meadows.

Western Bluebirds are common across California during the winter months, particularly in the Central Valley, coastal regions, and foothills. They prefer open areas with scattered trees or nest boxes for shelter.

The Black Phoebe is a small, sleek flycatcher easily identified by its black upperparts, white belly, and habit of tail-bobbing while perched. Measuring about 6 inches long, it has a compact body, dark eyes, and a sharp, pointed bill suited for catching insects midair.



These birds prefer areas near water — ponds, creeks, and fountains — where they can hunt for flying insects. Even during the winter, they remain active, sallying out from low perches to snatch prey before returning to the same spot.

In California, Black Phoebes are abundant year-round, but their presence feels especially noticeable in winter when other insect-eating birds migrate south.
Their quiet "tsip-tsip" calls and rhythmic tail movements make them easy to recognize. They bring energy and life to quiet winter days, embodying California's mild climate and vibrant biodiversity.

The White-tailed Kite is a graceful raptor, pure white below with soft gray wings and distinctive red eyes. Adults measure about 15 inches in length, with long, narrow wings that allow them to hover effortlessly over open fields. Their buoyant flight and ghostly appearance make them easy to recognize from a distance.



These kites specialize in hunting small mammals, particularly voles and mice, which they spot from above while hovering in midair — a behavior known as "kiting." Once prey is detected, they dive swiftly, striking with precision.

In California, White-tailed Kites are found year-round, but they are especially visible during winter when populations from northern areas move southward. They favor open grasslands, marshes, and agricultural areas, often near wetlands or pastures.