

Sierra Vista OSP (Fall/Winter)

BY CHRIS JOHNSON

Sierra Vista OSP is in the **eastern foothills** of Santa Clara County. It is a good location to visit year-round, but especially in the **winter** when grassland loving sparrows and Ferruginous Hawk may be present. There are few crowds in the early morning and weekdays and the views are fantastic.

Key Birds: Golden Eagle, Ferruginous Hawk (Dec-Mar), Yellow-billed Magpie, Horned Lark, American Pipit

Trip Covers: Sept - March

How to Bird

It's best to start early in the morning, between 7 and 9 A.M., before the parking lot fills up and birds are scared away. Before hitting the trails, check out the parking lot and the area around the cattle corrals for bird activity such as **Red-winged** and **Brewer's Blackbirds** as well as **Brown-headed Cowbirds**. There is often water dripping from a faucet and this can attract birds throughout the day.



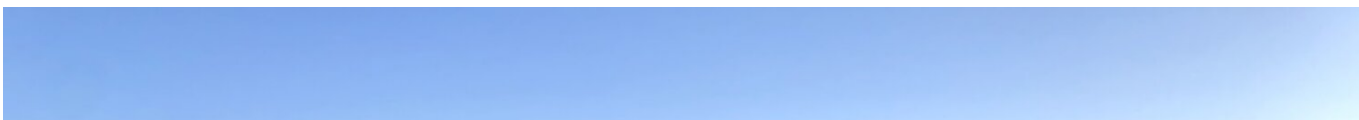
The cattle corrals and view from the Sierra Vista parking lot. Photo by Laura Coatney

Walking along the road can also be productive as the fences serve as perches for sparrows, **Yellow-billed Magpie**, and other birds in the early morning. I've found **Grasshopper Sparrow** (Apr-Oct), **Lark Sparrow** and **Horned Lark** this way. The rocky area just south of the parking lot often has one of the resident **Rock Wrens** and there are **Western Meadowlarks** here as well.



Yellow-billed Magpie in flight. Photo by Chris Johnson

Next, I take the Aquila Loop Trail (currently one way to promote social distancing) which is accessible across the road from the parking lot. This dirt-trail loop is a little over a mile and typically less crowded than the other trails and has scenic look-outs of the valley. Check for **Rock Wren** and **Burrowing Owl** around the rocky outcroppings at the start of the trail. There are usually **Yellow-billed Magpies** making noise down in the valley and they are often observed in large flocks.





Aquila Loop Trailhead. Photo by Laura Coatney.

The loop will take you through various grassland, scrub and oak habitats. While on your walk listen for the calls of **White-breasted Nuthatch**, **Oak Titmouse**, **Acorn Woodpecker**, **Northern Flicker** (fall/winter) and other oak specialists. **American Pipit**, **Say's Phoebe** and **Savannah Sparrow** are also common in fall and winter months on this trail.





Picnic table along the Aquila Loop Trail. Photo by Laura Coatney

Horned Lark can be seen anywhere around this area, but check for them as you near the end of the loop trail as this is a common area for them to forage for insects and seeds. They tolerate people quite well and are often just off the trail in a large group. Listen for their tinkling high-pitched calls as they fly overhead.

In winter, check the skies for rare or uncommon wintering raptors such as **Ferruginous Hawk**, **Prairie Falcon**, and **Merlin**. Ferruginous Hawk has been reported four of the last six winters while Prairie Falcon has been observed three of the last six years. Look for the Ferruginous Hawk's rusty colored wings (ferruginous means reddish-brown) and completely feathered legs that form a "V" in light morph individuals. Dark morphs will be mostly dark chocolate brown with light flight feathers, while all morphs have a large prominent head and wide gape. **Golden Eagle**, **Burrowing Owl**, **Northern Harrier** and other common raptors also become more numerous in the winter.



Ferruginous Hawk (light morph) by Chuq Von Rospach

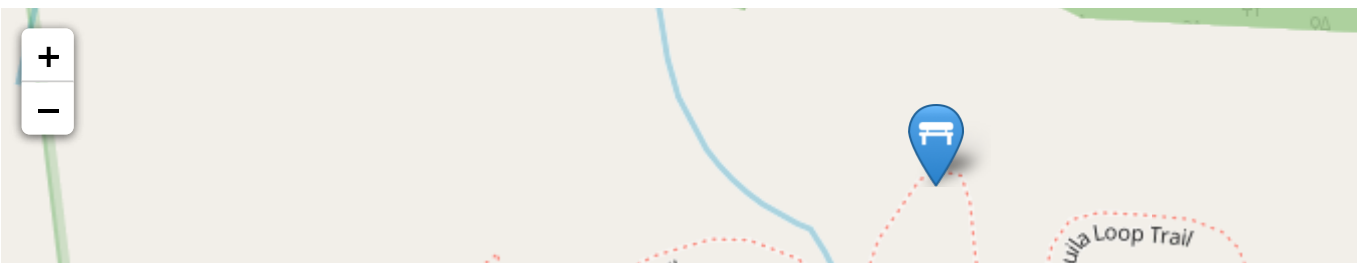


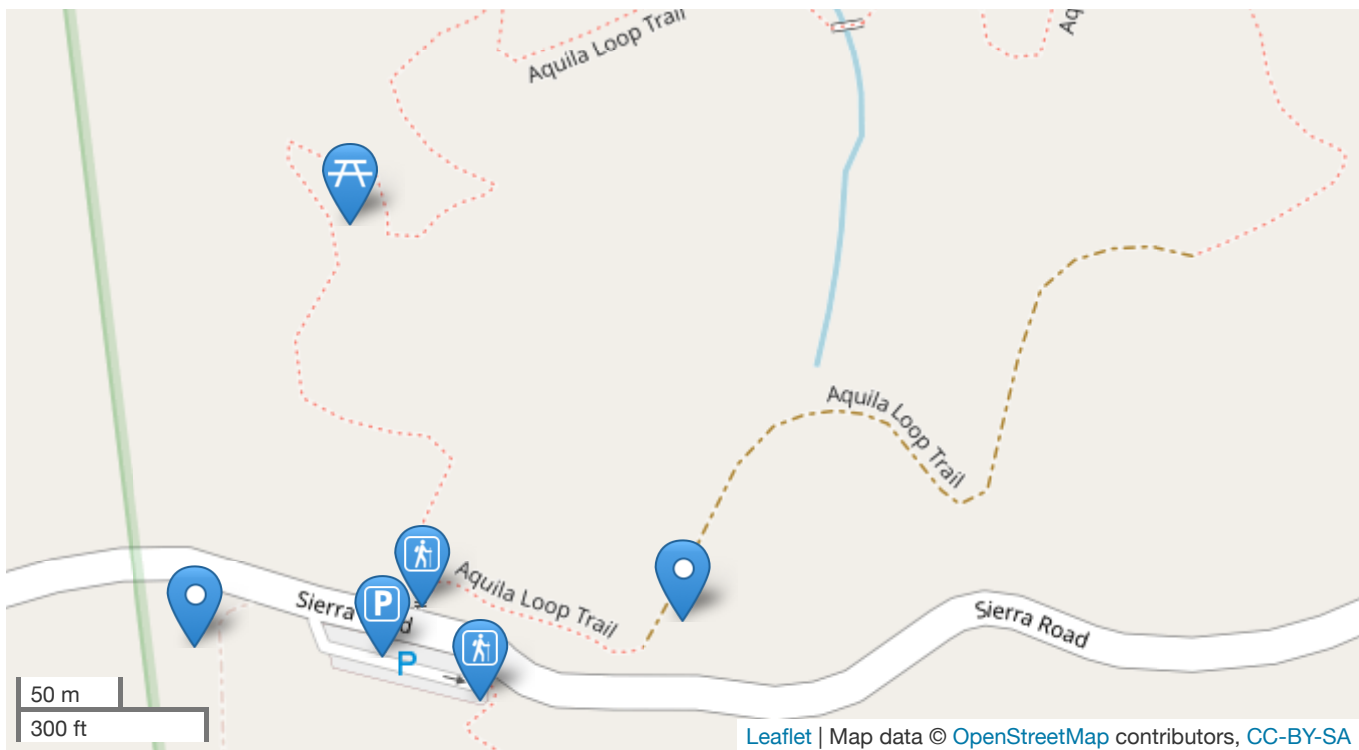
Northern Harrier on a snag along the Aquila Loop Trail. Photo by Laura Coatney

Ready for More? On the same side of the road as the parking lot you can access the Kestrel Trail which takes you to the Sierra Vista Trail. The hiking is more difficult and slightly more popular among visitors, but it's a good place to look for **Golden Eagles** as they hunt ground squirrels. Before you descend, scan the skies for Golden Eagles and check the rocky outcrops for **American Kestrels** and **Rock Wrens**. As you enter the treeline there will be more water and springs, which means better chances to see more birds. Check any wet areas as they are likely to host **Lincoln Sparrow**, **Hermit Thrush**, and more.

Come back to Sierra Vista in spring for good opportunities to spot **Western Kingbird**, **Grasshopper Sparrow** and **Bullock's Oriole**.

Interactive Map





Directions/Parking: From I-680 in San Jose, exit Berryessa Rd. Travel east towards the hills for a little over a mile. Turn left onto Piedmont Rd, then turn right onto Sierra Rd (be prepared for a curvy, uphill drive). The preserve parking lot is on your right in about 4 miles. Note that the parking lot is small and may fill up. There is no alternate parking area. **Address:** 5341 Sierra Rd, San Jose, CA 95132. **Google Plus Code:** “C55X+MG San Jose, California”. **Latitude/Longitude:** [37.409140, -121.801635](#)

Parking Fees: None

Public Transportation: No public transport

Park Hours: Currently 7 am to ½ hour after sunset. Hours vary with the season so check before you head out.

Facilities: No bathrooms or drinking water; consider using the facilities at the [Penitencia Creek Park](#) before heading up the hill.

Trail Conditions/Mileage: Aquila Loop Trail is 1.2 miles and currently one way to promote social distancing. The trail is dry in the dry season and can be muddy in the wet season (bring boots if going after heavy rains). There are often cattle grazing in the area so watch where you step. There is one picnic table and two benches along the trail. The hiking is easy to moderately difficult.

Accessibility: While the trail is not very accessible, the parking lot has great views and has good birding. There are benches in the parking lot but they are temporarily closed due to COVID. The trail entrance has a barrier so it may be inaccessible for some.

Dogs: Allowed on 6ft leash

More Information

Sierra Vista Open Space Preserve [Website](#)

Sierra Vista Open Space Preserve [Trail Map](#)

[PDF of guide](#) for printing or downloading

[PDF of interactive map](#) for printing or downloading

eBird hotspot: [Sierra Rd Summit](#)

All About Birds: [Ferruginous Hawk](#)

More Resources

For more trips like this one, visit [Self-guided Field Trips](#).

Visit the [SCVAS Birding Resources](#) page for more information on where to bird, our birding community, birding identification resources, and more.

Read “[What to Look for Now](#)” by SCVAS Executive Director Matthew Dodder.

Banner Photo Credit: Horned Lark by Chris Johnson

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