

Birding sites in Bay County –Beaches area

The best areas for birding west of the Hathaway Bridge are St. Andrews State Park, Panama City Beach Conservation Park and Camp Helen State Park. They are on opposite ends of the beach. If you go to St. Andrews State Park, get a map and bird list at the gate. You will want to stop at Buttonbush Marsh, just down the main road. There is an observation area there and you should be able to spot a few species if you are patient. Stop next at Gator Lake, which also has an observation platform overlooking the lake. You should be able to see herons and egrets roosting on the island in the spring and summer. If you have a spotting scope, look for the black-crowned night herons and bitterns (rare). There is also a trail there where you can find some perching birds. This is particularly good in the spring. Scan the power lines for unusual birds like western kingbirds and scissor-tailed flycatchers. Next, go to the big parking lot at the beach and walk out to the pavilion up on the hill. That is a good place to scan for shorebirds, gulls, terns, the occasional gannet, gulls and terns. This is a good place for the occasional rare bird, including a great cormorant which was spotted on the jetties. You can walk down the beach if you want, but this isn't usually productive unless you get there early. You will want to drive back to the boat ramp/picnic area on the bay side, walk out on the pier there and look for ducks, grebes, loons, etc. The trail by the turpentine still is a nice scenic walk through wet areas and pine flatwoods as well as oak hammocks. A walk through the camping area can be good at times. There are spots you can scan the bay and get out and walk around.

Driving west on Hwy 98, Camp Helen State Park is also a good place for birds. There is a nice system of trails that wind through oak hammocks and end up on the beach. Be sure to walk the boardwalk on the north side of the park too. Walk to the gulf beach then proceed to the left where the lake empties into the gulf, at times. There are usually groups of gulls and terns there. You should be able to see Forsters, Royal and possibly other terns like sandwich, common and maybe even a Caspian. Look also for piping and snowy plovers and other shorebirds. Be mindful of roped-off nesting areas.

The Panama City Beach Conservation Park is a large 2900-acre wastewater reclamation area where habitat restoration is taking place along with created wetlands that attract birds. There are 24 miles of trails and boardwalks that birders, hikers and bikers can explore. This is an excellent area in the spring and summer months but is good year-round too. We conduct 4 bird walks for the public there every year. To get there, go west from Hwy 79 1.2 miles to Griffin Blvd, which becomes Conservation Drive. Turn right and go all the way down to the end of the road where the parking areas and rest rooms are. Possibly the best trail for birding is the Baxley Homestead Trail, which is a dirt road along the east side of the park, starting at the parking area and going north. About 1.2 miles up the road is a large created wetland where you should see a wide variety of birds, including black-bellied whistling ducks and purple gallinules. Up to 5 species of woodpeckers can be seen on the way up to the wetland.