

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.

At 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 a newly constructed boardwalk before you get there on the right that overlooks the marsh, where you should be able to spot several species. Stop next at Gator Lake, which also has an observation platform overlooking the lake. You should be able to see herons, egrets and anhingas roosting and nesting on the island in the spring and summer. If you have a spotting scope, scan the shoreline for American and least bitterns in the winter. There is also a trail there where you can find some perching birds. This is particularly good in the spring during migration. 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 look for shorebirds, gulls, terns, or the occasional gannet offshore. This is a good place to look for the occasional rare bird. 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. There is a nice trail on the east end of the parking lot that goes through the pine flatwoods and oak scrub.

Update: the park recently made the main road a one-way drive, so you will have to turn right after entering the park and drive to Gator Lake. From there you will go to the boat ramp/picnic area next, then to the overlooks at Buttonbush Marsh before leaving the park.

Driving west on Hwy 98, **Camp Helen State Park** is also a good place for birds. There is a scenic 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. There are usually groups of gulls, terns and shorebirds 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 such as black-necked stilts and avocets. 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. 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 to the parking areas and restrooms. 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 wetland where you may 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 walk up to the wetland. In winter months, a vermillion flycatcher can sometimes be seen there.