



Summit Valley partial list of bird species How many can you find?

Canada Goose
Ducks
Quail
Grouse
Hérons
Vultures
Osprey
Hawks
Eagles
Falcons

Thrushes
Towhees
Sparrows
Tanagers
Grosbeaks
Blackbirds
Finches
Wood Warblers



Plovers
Sandpiper
Pigeons
Owls
Nighthawks
Swifts
Hummingbirds
Kingfishers
Woodpeckers
Flycatchers
Jays and Crows
Swallows
Chickadees
Titmice
Nuthatches

The Birds

Van Norden is rich in bird life. It is one of the largest wetlands and wet meadow systems on the west slope of the Sierra making it one of the best Sierra birding areas. Of the more than 100 species of birds on Donner Summit, most can be found on or around the meadow. An early morning walk near the shoreline can be dramatic as the mists rise unveiling many different bird species floating placidly on the lake or flying overhead.

Ducks and geese stop over in summer, some resting during longer journeys and others taking up residence, building nests and hatching chicks. There are many "special status" species visiting the lake as well as the endangered Willow Flycatcher.

American White Pelicans rest on the way to and from Salt Lake. A lucky birdwatcher may get to see a flock spiral down to land on the lake.



Raptors of various kinds glide over the meadow on the hunt for meals. Osprey, Red-tailed Hawks, Golden and even Bald Eagles can be seen sailing overhead. An amazing experience is to see a Bald Eagle snatch a fish from the talons of an Osprey.

Coyote prowl the edges of the lake but birds are clever, placing their nests on the little islands or well hidden in the grassy tufts, shrubs and nearby trees.



Seen Here: Merganser and chicks, upper left; small songbird, left; Bald Eagle, and White Pelicans, above.

The Wildflowers

Among Summit Valley's riches are its many species of wildflowers. One reason for this richness is the diverse habitats or niches: the forests surrounding the meadow, the soggy meadows as well as the drier parts, the meandering stream banks, and the dry rocky habitats. Each habitat has its own variety of species, a display that unfolds as spring moves into summer. One very special spring wildflower is the Camas Lily (right), which blooms in very soggy sunny meadows. It was gathered by Tahoe's native people as a staple and enjoyed for the sweetness of its bulbs, which were eaten after being roasted in earthen ovens. Creeping Phlox is also an early bloomer. It carpets dry, rocky habitats with its white to lavender flowers.



Be sure to kneel down to inhale their sweet fragrance. During the summer the niches grow and shrink as the lake recedes, leaving less marshy areas drier to support other species. The Crimson Columbine (below), with its red and yellow flowers, nods gracefully in drying forest habitats, as well as in sunny wet meadows and on stream banks. Look closely and you may notice a tiny hole in the swollen tips of the flower. These are created by honey bees that bite the flower to sip its sweet nectar.

A fascinating exploration is to hike the Pacific Crest Trail from Donner Pass to the source of the Yuba River's south fork, which begins as a spring that seeps out of the ground below the west-side slope of Roller Pass, above the Sugar Bowl Ski Resort.



The Summit Valley's wildflowers are truly a gift. They attract insects, birds, and other wildlife as well as people of all ages, with their beauty and easy accessibility.

Wildflower photos here are courtesy of Julie Carville.

The Butterflies

Butterflies discovered the attractions of Summit Valley eons before the Native Americans, the wagon trains or the railroad. Donner Pass is a low pass with lots of ecological diversity, making it a good home for many species. There are 155 species of Sierra butterflies. 115 can be found on Donner Pass and almost all of them can be found in and around Summit Valley. The species present at any one time vary depending on which plants are flowering. Butterflies are heliothermic, needing the sun's heat to fly, so look in sunny areas.



Photo: Kim Davis & Mike Stangeland

Each species has been evolutionarily engineered. Their tongues and leg lengths match their host plants or "adult nectar sources."

One iconic Summit species is the Gray Blue Agriades Podarce (above). The males are gray blue and the females a rich brown. Its host is the Shooting Star, Dodecatheon Jefreyi. The plant can be found on the edges of streams meandering through the upper half of the meadow.

Best Sierra butterfly website: <http://butterfly.ucdavis.edu>.



The Incredible
Summit Valley
Beautiful, Diverse & Rich

2013
Set aside for public access in perpetuity.

Summit Valley is on Donner Summit just two miles east of the Soda Springs exit from I-80 on Donner Pass Rd.

SUMMIT VALLEY - OPEN FOR EXPLORATION

Summit Valley is exquisite. It is important biologically and historically. The geology is fascinating.

Native Americans occupied Summit Valley in summer for thousands of years. The first wagon trains to reach California with wagons came through Summit Valley as did the first transcontinental railroad, first transcontinental highway, first transcontinental telephone line, and the first transcontinental air route.

The public access to Summit Valley is the result of an extraordinary community effort raising \$10.5 million for the purchase of 2,900 acres of Donner Summit in just a few months. The entire Summit community joined in contributing: little kids sold cookies, there were public events such as the concert in the abandoned railroad tunnel, and there was good old-fashioned fund raising. The successful acquisition was completed by the Truckee Donner Land Trust in December, 2012.

Now that Summit Valley is open to the public in perpetuity, people can enjoy its riches: cross country skiing, birding, mountain biking, lepidoptery, hiking, wild flowers, photography, and history exploration.



This brochure is an introduction to Summit Valley.

Van Norden

Lake Van Norden was named for Charles Van Norden. His brother, Warner, had invested in the South Yuba Canal Co. and Spaulding Dam. The canal company supplied water and electricity to farmers, miners, and towns. Eventually the company had 450 miles of flumes, canals, and pipes along the CPRR route downhill to the Central Valley, as well as 30 reservoirs.

The Van Nordens were a wealthy New York family that could trace their American ancestors back to 1640 and were involved in many commercial ventures. Warner's brother, Charles, was a scholar, writer, student, philosopher, and litterateur of "more than ordinary ability." He was also a Congregational minister. In 1893 he came to California as the resident director of the canal company and president of Central California Electric Co.

In 1905 The South Yuba Canal Co. was sold to California Gas and Electric which became part of P. G. & E. in 1907.

There had been a dam on the Yuba River at Summit Valley as early as the late 1860's, perhaps for the steam engines that were soon to arrive with the railroad or for maintenance of the Dutch Flat Wagon Rd. which ran right through the valley. Lake Van Norden Dam was built in the summer of 1890 and enlarged in about 1915. The dam was eventually breached in 1976 because the cost of enlarging it and making it earthquake safe was too much for P. G. & E..

Thanks for the Help:

Dr. Ted Beedy, birds
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Hiking Tahoe's Wildflower Trails
Dr. Art Shapiro, butterflies

Can You Find the Ear(ie) Tree?



It's just off the old Lincoln Highway, the nation's first transcontinental highway, in Summit Valley.

39° 19.185'N
120° 22.019'W



Above: Pine Marten

Front Panel clockwise from top left: exploring the Emigrant Trail, White Pelicans, Metate or large Native American grinding slick, Summit Valley from Soda Springs Ski Hill, Osprey with fish, kayaking on the upper Yuba River, resident Beaver, Cupules (Native American rock art, possibly mystical each approx. 2" in diam.)



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Donner Summit Businesses Supporting this Introduction to Summit Valley