

CRAIG STATE FISH HATCHERY, CENTERTON

DIRECTIONS: Centerton is located on Arkansas 102 about four miles west of I-540 (Bentonville is at 102 & I-540). At Centerton, look for the traffic light at the corner of E. Centerton Blvd (same as 102) and S. Fish Hatchery Rd. Turn south on S. Fish Hatchery and travel 0.5 miles to intersection of S. Fish Hatchery and W. Fish Hatchery. The hatchery's main gate is 0.25 miles W of this intersection. Just W is a second entrance gate and a parking area and picnic shelter.



The hatchery is operated by the Arkansas Game & Fish Commission. While the central purpose of the hatchery is fish production, it is also one of the region's premier birding places, especially if you are seeking unusual species. This is due, in part, to it's being a significant area with shallow water situated midst former Tallgrass Prairie. Arkansas Audubon has designated the hatchery as an Important Bird Area. The hatchery's 141 acres includes 16 spring fed ponds up to several acres in size.

The hatchery's two main entrances are roughly one-fourth mile apart. Each of these lead to distinctive birding areas: the eastern section (lower ponds) and the upper ponds of the western section. If the gate to the eastern area is open, birders are welcome to drive on

levees (a real benefit to those with walking limitations or on a rainy day), though please be careful and courteous to hatchery workers. The upper western ponds are always closed to driving. If the east gate is closed, birders are welcome to use the walk-in gate (and there is a walk-in on the west, too). Please don't block the roads or entrances to building.

The hatchery is good for most kinds of fish-eating birds, marsh birds and shorebirds. We still see Loggerhead Shrikes in the area. Savannah Sparrows, American Pipits, etc. are fairly common in winter. To find rails and bitterns, walk along as many wet grassy margins, ditches, and any ponds with dense emergent vegetation as you can stand. Soras are fairly common in migration, but the others are rare. Any drained fish ponds with mudflats or fine grassy vegetation are worth checking carefully for shorebirds. Sometimes there are hundreds of them. The large pond in the southwestern portion of the upper ponds area often attracts shorebirds, dabbling ducks and herons--especially when the other ponds are full.

The woodlot just south of the western section is good for migrant woodland birds. First, check with hatchery personnel about visits to this woodland. It is sometimes difficult to walk through because of copious amounts of briars and poison ivy.

Warbling Vireos usually nest in the trees along the northern border road and in the small grove near a low white building on the south edge of the lower ponds. Found at the hatchery with at least some regularity (though the word "rare" comes to mind for many): Yellow-headed Blackbird, American Bittern, Ruddy Turnstone and Hudsonian Godwit (spring); Buff-breasted Sandpiper, LeConte's Sparrow and Black-crowned Night-Heron (fall); Swainson's Hawk and Upland Sandpiper (both seasons). Some of the more unusual species that have been found here include *Plegadis* ibis, Tricolored Heron, Least Bittern, Peregrine Falcon, Cinnamon Teal, King Rail, Virginia Rail, Piping Plover, Wilson's Plover, Sanderling, Whimbrel, Red-necked and Red Phalarope, Herring Gull, Common Tern and Nelson's Sparrow. Arkansas's only Least Grebe record is from the hatchery.

Other ponds in the vicinity of the hatchery are also worth checking during your visit. There is one along 102/ E. Centerton Blvd at the corner of Sienna Drive that almost always has ducks during winter. There are also ponds, fields, and fencerows south of the hatchery always worth checking.

Just about one mile south of the hatchery are dairy farms in the Vaughn community. Swainson's Hawks have nested there (summer) and Great-tailed Grackles are often there in fall, winter, and spring. The big open former prairie fields attract American Golden-

Plovers, Upland Sandpipers, and others during spring migration.